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INTERNATIONAL

YALE APOLOGISES FOR ROLE IN SLAVERY: HOW THE SLAVE TRADE IN INDIA HELPED ESTABLISH THE UNIVERSITY

On February 16, Yale University issued a formal apology for its historical association with slavery. “Today ... we recognize our university’s historical role in and associations with slavery ... and we apologize for the ways that Yale’s leaders, over the course of our early history, participated in slavery,” the Ivy League school said in a statement.

This came alongside the release of the book *Yale and Slavery: A History*, which gives an account of Yale’s dark past, authored by Yale history professor David W Blight and the Yale and Slavery Research Project.

Among other things, the book talks about the Indian connection of Elihu Yale (1649-1721), after whom the university is named. Yale spent over a quarter of a century in India, mainly in Madras (now Chennai), and made a considerable fortune through various activities, including the slave trade.

DEATH OF DISSENT

The death of Alexei Navalny, who was serving sentences adding up to more than 30 years on various charges, in a remote prison in Russia’s Arctic region, is a chilling reminder of the status of dissent in the state Vladimir Putin has built. For years, Navalny was the Kremlin’s most prominent critic. He survived a poisoning attack in 2020 and was taken to Germany for treatment. He later returned to Russia to “fight for freedom”, only to be imprisoned again. The reason for his death is still unknown. After the poison attack, he did have several health problems. His lawyers had complained about his not getting proper treatment in jail and he had staged hunger strikes. His wife Yulia Navalnaya said Mr. Putin “killed my husband” and vowed to continue his fight. Whatever the reason for his death, the Russian state cannot absolve itself of this tragedy. Russian authorities were hell bent on destroying the political opposition that Navalny had built. In Russia’s managed system, there are opposition parties that the Kremlin tolerates and there are dissidents who are treated as enemies of the state. Navalny, who started his political activism as a far-right ethno-nationalist, fell into the second category. Boris Nemtsov, another opposition politician who also fell into the second category, was shot dead in 2015 in Moscow.

President Putin, who effectively has run Russia for 24 years, and has plans to extend it by six more years through this year’s election, did not face any major political threat from Navalny. Mr. Putin’s approval ratings remain high, according to independent polls such as those by the Levada Center. The election fray is tightly managed — two of the candidates who were critical of the Ukraine war were barred from contesting, while Mr. Putin’s rivals are actually praising his leadership. Navalny was sentenced for decades and there was no scope for organised protests. Still, the fact that he had to die like this in a prison suggests the extent of the state’s fear of voices of dissent. Three of Navalny’s lawyers are in jail, while two others are in exile. By keeping Navalny in jail, the state wanted to send a message to its critics — fall in line or face the consequences. And Navalny, who chose to go back to Russia even after the poison attack, paid the supreme price for his activism. The Kremlin is centralising more and more powers in its hands, while the country is fighting a prolonged war abroad. The state does not want any voices of criticism or organised protests. It



may have established order through fear as of now, but Russia's own history suggests that this is not a sustainable model of governance.

IS RUSSIA TESTING A NEW ANTI-SATELLITE WEAPON?

The story so far:

On February 14, the chairman of the House Intelligence Committee of the U.S. House of Representatives, Mike Turner, called the media's attention to "information concerning a serious national security threat" and urged President Joe Biden to declassify it so more experts could be recruited to mitigate the danger it allegedly posed. A flurry of news reports followed, quoting various sources and referring to some kind of Russian space-based weapon.

What do we know about the 'weapon'?

On February 15, a day after Mr. Turner's statement, U.S. National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby confirmed the claims referred to a space-based "anti-satellite weapon" of Russian provenance. Mr. Kirby also said Russia hadn't yet deployed the 'capability' in question — meaning the object wasn't yet in orbit — and that it would violate the Outer Space Treaty (OST), a multilateral agreement that prohibits the placement of weapons of mass destruction in earth's orbit. By this time, some news reports had also quoted anonymous sources saying that the Russian capability was either nuclear in nature or that the satellite bearing the capability would be nuclear-powered. Mr. Kirby's statements didn't directly address these concerns. However, since he said the capability would violate the OST, the nuclear concern isn't out of the question yet. (The OST is against nuclear weapons in space, not nuclear-powered satellites.)

On February 16, President Biden confirmed Mr. Turner had referred "to a new Russian nuclear anti-satellite capability" and added there were no indications what Russia had decided to do with it. However, the White House has refused to declassify information about it.

What are anti-satellite weapons?

Anti-satellite (ASAT) weapons are designed to debilitate and/or destroy satellites that are already in orbit and operational. ASAT weapons violate the OST through the latter's Article VII, which holds parties to the treaty liable for damaging satellites belonging to other parties, and Article IX, which asks parties to refrain from the "harmful contamination" of space.

Russia, in the form of the erstwhile Soviet Union, has had ASAT capabilities since at least 1968. While the Cold War motivated ASAT weapon tests on either side of the Atlantic, the respective programmes refused to dwindle once relations thawed. Most of these weapons are kinetic, meaning they destroy satellites in orbit by rocketing into them or detonating an explosive near them, and blowing them to pieces. Because of the low gravity and lack of an atmosphere, the resulting debris can stay in orbit for a long time depending on their size. This result violates Article IX of the OST.

Are there space-based nuclear weapons?

In a high-altitude test in 1962 called Starfish Prime, the U.S. detonated a thermonuclear bomb 400 km above ground. It remains the largest nuclear test conducted in space. A Thor rocket launched the warhead to a point west of Hawaii, where its detonation had a yield of 1.4 megatonnes. More importantly, it set off an electromagnetic pulse (EMP) much larger than physicists had expected,



damaging a few hundred street-lights in Hawaii, 1,500 km away. The charged particles and radiation emitted by the blast became ensnared in and accelerated by the earth's magnetic field, distorting the ionosphere and resulting in bright aurorae.

Starfish Prime was part of the U.S.'s high-altitude nuclear tests in 1962. The Soviet Union also conducted such tests around then with similar effects. For example, Test 184 on October 22, 1962, detonated a 300-kilotonne warhead 290 km above ground. The resulting EMP induced a very high current in more than 500 km of electric cables and eventually triggered a fire that burned down a power plant.

How will a nuclear weapon affect satellites?

The principal threats to other satellites from a space-based nuclear weapon are the EMP and the release of charged particles.

Starfish Prime itself temporarily knocked out roughly a third of all satellites in orbit at the time – and illustrates a failing relevant to the current context. An EMP from a nuclear weapon in space will affect all satellites around the point of detonation, including Russian satellites, those of its strategic allies (such as China), and of countries not involved in a particular conflict. It would also grossly violate the OST. Depending on the strength, location, and directedness of the explosion, it could also blow a large number of satellites to pieces, more than what a 'conventional' kinetic ASAT weapon might.

Scott Tilley, an amateur radio operator with a name for tracking down 'lost' satellites, wrote on X that "the damage is not immediate to most [satellites] but rather caused by new and intensified radiation belts". (However, researchers have been working on tamping down disturbances caused by space-based nuclear explosions in radiation belts around the earth through a process called radiation-belt remediation). Eventually, the result is more dud satellites and debris, raising concerns of the Kessler effect: when there is a certain level of debris in low-earth orbit, collisions among themselves as well as with other satellites could produce more debris, leading to a "collisional cascade" that rapidly increases the amount of debris in orbit. There is one more possibility. In 1987, the Soviet Union launched a rocket bearing a high-power laser that could target and destroy other satellites. The launch failed. But Marco Langbroek, a lecturer at Delft Technical University, the Netherlands, raised the possibility of the Russians launching a similar laser powered by a nuclear energy source.

What do the U.S.'s claims imply?

Modern civilisation depends heavily on satellites, which means they can be assets or vulnerabilities. But the inability to target a nuclear weapon in space — at certain satellites over others — mitigates its usefulness. This is why some security researchers have suggested that if the Russian capability is nuclear, it will be a weapon of last resort. Some others have said the 'nuclear' component is likely to be limited to the power source. "That Russia is developing a system powered by a nuclear source... that has electronic warfare capabilities once in orbit is more likely than the theory that Russia is developing a weapon that carries a nuclear explosive warhead," Daryl Kimball, executive director of the Arms Control Association advocacy group, told Reuters.

This said, Mr. Turner's comment, which alerted the world to the possibility, provoked sharp reactions in the U.S. His peers in the Republican Party accused him of attempting to drum up support for Ukraine and that he wished to have an "unreformed" version of the Foreign



Intelligence Surveillance Act passed, CNN reported. After the U.S. had warned its allies in Europe of the potential threat, the Kremlin called the claim a “malicious fabrication” and a ruse to allocate more funds for Ukraine.

RUSSIA CAPTURES AVDIIVKA: WHAT THIS MEANS FOR UKRAINE, THE WAR, AND EUROPE

As the second anniversary of its invasion of Ukraine draws closer, Russia has registered a big victory, capturing the town of Avdiivka. This is its most significant battleground gain after the city of Bakhmut in May last year. Ukrainian soldiers had held on to Avdiivka for four months, but had to evacuate on Saturday (February 17) as they were outnumbered and outgunned, even as Russia bombed the city to rubble.

The fall of the city comes as Western aid to Ukraine is stuttering, with a major aid package stuck in the US and European countries failing to provide the funds and ammunition it needs.

Why Avdiivka mattered

Located on the frontlines in the east of Ukraine, Avdiivka had been a major centre of resistance, blocking further Russian advance. It has seen war since 2014, when Russia staged a ‘military intervention’ in eastern Ukraine, and was thus heavily fortified. Capturing this well-defended city opens an easier path for Russia to the rest of Ukraine. As The New York Times noted in an article, “Without dominant hills, larger rivers or extensive fortifications of the kind it built around Avdiivka over the better part of a decade, Ukraine will probably have to cede more ground to hold back Russian units.”

Also, Avdiivka is close to the city of Donetsk, which Russia has occupied. Capturing Avdiivka, thus, gives a double advantage to the Russians — more Ukrainian cities are within its reach now, and Donetsk is safer from Ukrainian attempts to retake it.

The victory is also important for how it will affect the morale of Ukrainian soldiers, in a war that has been grinding on for two years now with mounting losses. “The Russian tactics in Avdiivka were a textbook punishment campaign, which they have orchestrated in Chechnya, Syria, Ukraine and even Afghanistan,” Seth G Jones, a military analyst at Washington’s Center for Strategic and International Studies, told The NYT. “It is designed to raise the societal costs of continued resistance and coerce the adversary and its population to give up.”

Ukraine’s key weakness highlighted

The Avdiivka campaign has also highlighted that Ukraine is running out of the kind of arms and ammunition it needs to keep the larger Russian military at bay.

Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelenskiy raised this issue at a global security conference in Munich last week. As reported by Reuters, he praised his troops for “exhausting” Russian forces in Avdiivka, and suggested the withdrawal was partly caused by a lack of weapons. “Now, (the military) will replenish, they will wait for the relevant weapons, of which there simply weren’t enough, simply aren’t enough,” he said. “Russia has long-range weapons, while we simply don’t have enough.”

Ukrainian Defense Minister Rustem Umerov said the loss in Avdiivka showed the need for sophisticated air defence system to prevent Russian forces from using guided bombs, reported Washington Post.



US President Joe Biden too has pointed out that Ukraine lacks the necessary firepower.

What has led to arms shortage

A key reason is that Republicans in the US House of Representatives are holding up a \$95 billion foreign aid package, which includes \$60 billion for Ukraine. In return for passing the aid package, the Republicans want stricter rules to keep immigrants out at the US-Mexico border. Some hardliners, like Marjorie Taylor Greene, want the US to stop financing someone else's war, and push Ukraine towards negotiations instead.

With flows from the US stuck, the rest of Europe has been unable to plug the shortfall for Ukraine.

Alarm bells in Europe

The fall of Avdiivka has also sent alarm bells ringing in the rest of Europe. For decades, European countries have not spent much on defence, enjoying decades of peace and banking heavily on the US for security, in the face of no serious threats. Now, as Russia looks increasingly belligerent and powerful, and as the US security guarantee looks less certain, many European countries are facing up to the fact that they need to allocate a larger portion of their GDP towards defence.

Even as Biden has remained steadfast in his assurance of support to Ukraine, lawmakers have tied his hands. Donald Trump, who is challenging Biden in the upcoming elections, has said outright he won't help those who are not spending enough on security, although it is not clear to what extent his words will translate into US policy if he becomes President again.

EXPRESS VIEW ON ISRAEL'S WAR IN GAZA: CEASE FIRE

Israel must listen to its friends." The anguish of the prime ministers of Australia, New Zealand and Canada in a statement demanding an immediate humanitarian ceasefire in Gaza expresses a broader sentiment within the international community. Israel has said that it will launch an offensive in Rafah in southern Gaza if Hamas does not release the hostages it holds in the next 10 days. Reports suggest that over 29,000 Palestinians have already been killed in the conflict. For civilians fleeing Gaza, Rafah is the last refuge — its population has grown by over six times since October 7. An offensive here would be catastrophic for the refugees. It is indeed time for Israel to listen to its friends — including India.

On Saturday, for the first time since Hamas's horrific attack and Israel's devastating response, Foreign Minister S Jaishankar said that Israel should be "mindful of civilian casualties". As he reiterated India's unequivocal condemnation of the October 7 attacks, he also underscored the urgency of a humanitarian corridor in Gaza and the long-term need for a two-state solution. Jaishankar also framed Israel's responsibility towards the principles of international law. The gist of his words and the three PMs' letter is this: Palestinian civilians must not continue to pay the price for the actions of the extremist wing of Hamas. Equally, a ceasefire cannot be one-sided — it will require Hamas to stop its violent actions. International pressure will have teeth and be far more effective, however, if it is championed by Israel's closest ally.

On Monday, a day after Israeli airstrikes killed at least 18 people, the US said it would block the Algeria-sponsored draft resolution at the UN Security Council, calling for a humanitarian ceasefire. The US has already vetoed several such resolutions at the UNSC and the White House has bypassed the legislature to supply arms to Israel. The justification offered by the American ambassador to the UN is that such resolutions run counter to Washington's efforts to end the fighting. If that is



indeed the case, it is time for the US to step up these efforts. President Joe Biden has been increasingly critical of the civilian casualties and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's maximalist positions, calling the former "over the top". The Netanyahu government — which was facing protests and a huge dip in popularity before the conflict began — must move beyond the rhetoric of revenge towards peace. The killing of civilians must stop. Medical and other aid must be allowed a way through. With the conflict already spreading to crucial commercial lanes like the Red Sea, a ceasefire is the only way to give the region a chance at peace.

WHY WAS THERE A POLITICAL DEADLOCK IN NORTHERN IRELAND?

The story so far:

Northern Ireland (NI) has finally developed a new government this month after a hiatus between the two main parties since the 2022 elections to the Stormont Assembly. The pro-Irish unity Sinn Fein party garnered the largest number of seats. This is the first time since the creation of NI that Stormont has its first nationalist Prime Minister in Michelle O'Neill. Emma Little-Pengelly of the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), staunchly committed to remaining in the U.K., is the deputy first minister.

Why did it take so long to form a government?

The DUP, a constituent of the Conservative-led government, was a signatory to Britain's 2020 withdrawal agreement from the European Union (EU). The party has nevertheless not reconciled itself to the internal trade border created between NI and the rest of Britain, and has hence boycotted Stormont institutions since the 2022 regional elections. The border in the Irish sea was necessitated by the Conservatives' insistence that the decision to leave in the 2016 referendum meant nothing short of a clean break with the EU. Following tortuous negotiations, the U.K. recognised that letting NI stay in the EU customs union was the only option to ensure that the north and south of Ireland remained border-free so as to protect the integrity of the 1998 Good Friday agreement and the EU single market. Thus, NI functions under the dual jurisdiction of the U.K. and the EU. That is to say, the region is uniquely both a territory within the UK, as well as governed by EU customs regulations and the single market in trade relations with Britain. The rest of the U.K. remains entirely outside the EU.

What is the new deal in Belfast?

The 2023 Windsor framework addressed NI's concerns over the U.K.'s withdrawal protocol and simplified the paperwork required to send goods to Great Britain from NI. The framework allowed a green lane to U.K. firms that joined the so-called Britain Trusted trader scheme to send goods to NI. Conversely, U.K. goods destined to Ireland and other EU countries are to be cleared via a red lane after a more stringent scrutiny of documentation.

A proposal announced in January, called the Command Paper, eases procedures even further. It replaces the "green lane," by simply exempting 80% of goods transported from Great Britain to Northern Ireland from checks, besides setting up a body to preserve the latter's status in the U.K.'s internal market. Still, the latest arrangement does not detract from the fact that companies from Great Britain sending goods to NI will continue to process more paperwork, relative to firms that trade between destinations within Great Britain. This is the price of NI's dual jurisdiction.



How will Sinn Fein and DUP cohabit?

Sinn Fein is counting on a clear victory in the upcoming Irish elections and thus occupying office on either side of the divide as a boost to future reunification. Ms. O'Neill, did hint at a referendum on Irish unification taking place a decade down the line. She was however careful to emphasise that her government would work for the prosperity of the whole region. Now that it has rejoined the government, the DUP must deliver for the people as a whole, given that the NI's economy has outperformed that of Britain's post-Brexit. The party may feel comforted by surveys that point to NI majority's preference for the constitutional status quo, even though the Catholics outnumber the Protestants as per the 2021 Census. At the same time, the DUP cannot overlook that 56% of people in NI rejected Brexit in 2016.

What are the challenges ahead?

The pressures exerted by Brexit will invariably persist until an unlikely reversal of the historic decision. But their resolution will not be helped by persistent political deadlock that has undermined the justifiable requirement for compulsory coalitions between the unionists and nationalists. The Irish Prime Minister has recently called for reform of the system he regards as no longer fit for the purpose. It may be time for a relook at the present arrangement.

EU MULLS SWEEPING FORCED LABOUR

The article discusses the challenges faced by German industries, particularly Volkswagen (VW) and BASF, in navigating the complex business environment in China while addressing human rights concerns related to the Uyghur Forced Labour Prevention Act (UFLPA). The UFLPA violations involve impounded VW-owned vehicles in the U.S. and allegations against BASF's Xinjiang petrochemical plant. Apple also faces criticism for lobbying to water down UFLPA provisions, with Lens Technology, an Apple supplier, accused of forced labor. The U.S. law, enacted in 2021, penalizes firms for human rights violations, especially those related to Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang. Companies must certify to the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) that their products are free from Xinjiang forced labor. The Chinese government initially denied internment camp existence but later downplayed them as vocational training centers. China's response includes relocating detainees, rerouting exports, and imposing restrictions on companies like Nike and H&M, leading to Chinese consumer boycotts. The corporate responses to allegations involve denial, distancing, and maintaining values, while the U.S. law faces industry backlash for its stringent provisions.

What is the status of the EU legislation?

Unlike the U.S. ban's focus on imports from Xinjiang, the European Union (EU) has proposed a more comprehensive law targeting all products reliant on forced labour, including those made within the 27-member bloc. There is concern that country-focused bans could be viewed as discriminatory measures under World Trade Organization (WTO) rules. The law aims to apply the International Labour Organisation (ILO)'s definition of forced labour and concentrate enforcement on large companies. The EU trade officials are sceptical that a ban on imports is the best way to prevent rights abuses.

Meanwhile, a separate EU-wide Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive, targeting social, environmental and human rights abuses in supply chains, has also stalled since 2022. The proposal would oblige companies to report and prevent abuses in the environmental and social



governance arenas, and even empower civil society groups to mount legal challenges against any adverse impact. France has enacted a national law on the subject. But Paris has called for banks not to be held liable for the shortcomings of clients in the EU Directive, a clause some European parliament members insist is much needed in the enforcement of greater accountability on investment decisions.

A German proposal for national legislation on supply chain sustainability met with fierce resistance from different Ministries and multinationals. But Berlin used its rotating presidency of the EU Council in 2020 to table a proposal for the entire EU. Predictably, domestic objections found an echo on the EU stage, with the Free Democratic Party, a constituent in the ruling coalition calling the measure a “self-strangulation.”

When the forced labour Regulation and the due diligence Directive are in place, the EU would set yet another precedent in establishing governance standards for world bodies to emulate. VW’s current woes are likely to provide a major push in that direction.

WHY HAVE FRESH PROTESTS ERUPTED IN SENEGAL?

The story so far:

On February 3, weeks before the end of his second and final term, Senegal’s President Maky Sall postponed Presidential elections due on February 25. Opposition legislators, who were dragged out of parliament by riot police, were furious that the vote was deferred on grounds of a dispute between the National Assembly (parliament) and the Constitutional Council over the manner of selection of candidates. The house thus packed with government lawmakers has effectively allowed Mr. Sall 10 more months in office by resetting the next election for December 15. Protests have emerged across the country, with the police cracking down on protestors through indiscriminate detentions and violence leading to the death of one of them. The unprecedented decision in Dakar has been decried as a Constitutional coup d’état by the government’s critics.

What is the background to the current crisis?

The current unrest is a repeat of the bloody violence witnessed on the streets of Dakar last year, the worst in decades, when more than 20 lives were lost and hundreds were injured, according to Amnesty International. The clashes followed a two-year prison sentence slapped on the leading opposition candidate Ousmane Sonko, a former populist tax inspector who targeted the country’s elites for corruption and resisted the influence of the former colonial power France. Mr. Sonko, leader of the banned African Patriots of Senegal for Work, Ethics and Fraternity was convicted in a trial for immoral behaviour against a woman. In the protests that erupted in 2021, security forces reportedly shot dead 12 persons. In January this year, the Constitutional Council barred Mr. Sonko from the Presidential race.

President Sall took office in 2012 riding a wave of popular resistance against his predecessor seeking a third term. Yet he asserted last March that he was legally permitted to run for a third term. Mr. Sall’s reasoning was that since the Presidential tenure was reduced from seven to five years during his first term, the new constitutional clock should be assumed as ticking from 2019, when he was re-elected under the new rule, thus entitling him to run for another term this year. The decision to delay polls has sparked speculation over Mr. Sall’s machinations to consolidate his position between now and the elections.

What has been Senegal’s recent democratic record?

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



Mr. Sall's retrograde decision to defer elections marks a break with the country's periodic and smooth transfer of power witnessed for decades under a multi-party democratic system. Unlike all of its neighbours, Senegal has never undergone a military coup or a civil war since it gained independence from France in 1960. This is a country viewed as a beacon of democracy in a region increasingly under the grip of military takeovers.

Moreover, President Sall has been instrumental in pushing military dictators in the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to facilitate a timely transfer of power to elected governments. In early 2017, Senegalese troops successfully led a regional mission to force out long-time leader Yahya Jammeh in the Gambia, when he refused to step down after losing elections.

Dakar has evidently abandoned this important regional role at a juncture when a number of west African states have recently descended into military dictatorships. The situation in Senegal raises the awful spectre of misrule, as in Guinea, where President Alpha Condé's controversial re-election for a third term in 2020 ended up in a coup the following year. Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger are already under military rule.

The return of military dictatorships in African countries has been a recurrent theme in the 2020s and a serious regression after the heroic liberation struggles they waged in the 1960s. The big powers must reconsider their traditional role in the region as a whole.

ARE INTERPOL'S NOTICES BEING POLITICALLY EXPLOITED?

The story so far:

The International Criminal Police Organization, more commonly known as Interpol, comprising 194 member countries, plays a crucial role as an information-sharing network to enable national police forces to combat transnational crimes. Concerns have been raised about the misuse of Interpol's notice system, especially the issuance of blue corner notices, which are less scrutinised than their red corner notices. Critics argue that countries often exploit existing protocols to target political refugees and dissidents. While efforts have been made to address this, questions remain about striking a balance between facilitating police cooperation and preventing misuse of this powerful tool.

What is a "blue corner" notice?

There are seven types of notices issued by Interpol — Red Notice, Yellow Notice, Blue Notice, Black Notice, Green Notice, Orange Notice, and Purple Notice.

A blue corner notice also known as an "enquiry notice" allows police forces in member states to share critical crime-related information such as obtaining a person's criminal record, and location and, having his or her identity verified among others. For instance, in January 2020, Interpol issued a blue corner notice to help locate fugitive self-styled godman Nithyananda.

How does it differ from a "red corner" notice?

A red corner notice is issued by a member state to arrest a wanted criminal through extradition or any other similar lawful action. Such notices are issued against persons wanted by national jurisdictions for prosecution or to serve a sentence based on an arrest warrant or a court decision.



The country issuing the request need not be the home country of the fugitive, Interpol acts even on the request of a country where the alleged crime has been committed.

While blue corner notices are issued prior to the filing of criminal charges, red corner notices generally follow criminal convictions. The concerned individual can be stopped and arrested while travelling through a member state. There will also be other detrimental consequences such as the closure of bank accounts. However, Interpol cannot compel law enforcement authorities in any country to arrest the subject of a red corner notice as the exercise of such powers is entirely discretionary.

In 2018, a red corner notice was issued against fugitive billionaire Nirav Modi in relation to the Punjab National Bank scam. However, in October 2022, Interpol rejected a second request by India to issue such a notice against Gurpatwant Singh Pannun, whom the Union Ministry of Home Affairs has listed as a “terrorist.” The agency said that India has failed to provide sufficient information to support its case and that his activities have a “clear political dimension.”

Is the notice system prone to misuse?

Although Interpol’s Constitution explicitly forbids any activities of a political character, activists have accused it of failing to enforce this rule. Much of this outrage is directed at Russia, which has repeatedly issued notices and diffusions for the arrest of Kremlin opponents. According to the U.S. rights organisation Freedom House, Russia is responsible for 38% of all public red notices.

International human rights groups have also accused China, Iran, Turkey, and Tunisia, among others, of abusing the agency’s notice system for authoritarian ends.

In response to the mounting criticism, Interpol toughened the oversight of its red notice system. However, vulnerabilities remain when it comes to the issuance of blue notices with experts flagging that such notices are less likely to be reviewed before publication. The agency’s data shows that blue notices have roughly doubled in number over the past decade.

But countries like Turkey argue that such restraint in the issuance of notices hampers police cooperation and that the West should not interfere with their internal affairs.

EXPRESS VIEW ON PAKISTAN ELECTIONS: CROWN OF THORNS

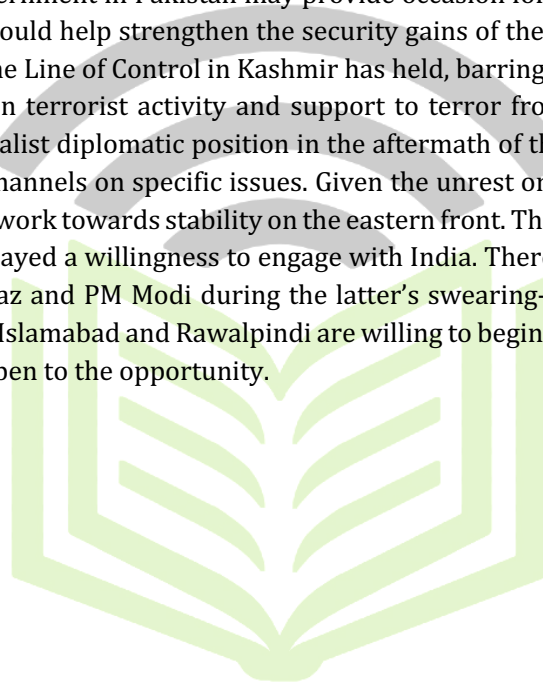
It’s a chronicle of a coalition foretold. Given the fractured mandate in the February 8 general elections in Pakistan, and widespread perceptions that the army “managed” the polls, it is no surprise that the constituents of the new government are the same players that made up the Pakistan Democratic Movement alliance, which took office after Imran Khan’s ouster in 2022. Shehbaz Sharif of the PML(N) is set to be prime minister once more, while PPP president Asif Ali Zardari will be president, with Rawalpindi’s invisible hand guiding the ship. The PPP also gets the Senate chairmanship and the Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa and Punjab governorships while the chief ministers and Speaker of the National Assembly will be from the PML(N). Nawaz Sharif will play the grand elder to the alliance. Significantly, the PPP has chosen not to join the government — reportedly, it will merely vote with the ruling party on no-confidence and spending bills. Given the fragile alliance and the challenges he faces in office, Shehbaz Sharif may not be celebrating his crown of thorns.

Pakistan is suffering from a prolonged economic crisis — since 2011, its external debt has nearly doubled and its domestic debt has increased six-fold, while growth has slowed. It is on the way to



a default on its debts, which will take the country even deeper into the abyss. Another IMF bailout, and even the economy's medium-term viability requires hard choices and serious reform. The PM-elect will face the brunt of the ire against this inevitable belt-tightening even as the PPP — historically against pro-market reforms — will likely sidestep responsibility. Pakistan also faces a severe security challenge on its western frontier with Afghanistan and insurgencies in Balochistan. Then there's the elephant that isn't in the room. Despite Imran Khan being jailed and his party being disbanded, independents contesting with the former PM's support have emerged as the single-largest block. Already, they are pointing to the "stolen mandate" and are likely to keep alive the new government's crisis of legitimacy. General Asim Munir and the army's support will be crucial for the government — both to manage internal differences as well as to govern.

For India, the new government in Pakistan may provide occasion for cautious optimism. Limited bilateral engagement could help strengthen the security gains of the past few years. For one, the 2021 ceasefire along the Line of Control in Kashmir has held, barring a few stray incidents. There has also been a drop in terrorist activity and support to terror from across the border. While Pakistan took a maximalist diplomatic position in the aftermath of the abrogation of Article 370, it is possible to open channels on specific issues. Given the unrest on its western flank, the army too has an incentive to work towards stability on the eastern front. The Sharifs, particularly Nawaz Sharif, have often displayed a willingness to engage with India. There was considerable personal warmth between Nawaz and PM Modi during the latter's swearing-in in 2014 and the surprise 2015 visit to Lahore. If Islamabad and Rawalpindi are willing to begin a conversation in good faith, New Delhi should be open to the opportunity.



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NATION

TIES ACROSS THE SEA

At first glance, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's UAE visit last week, might have seemed like any other bilateral visit he has undertaken. But this visit, Mr. Modi's seventh to the UAE since 2014 indicates the government's desire to signal more about the salience and prominence of the Emirates, than it has with any of the other country in the Gulf region. The timing may have been related to an invitation to address the 'World Governments Summit' in Dubai and to inaugurate Abu Dhabi's first Hindu temple, but the 10 bilateral agreements signed need a closer look. The speed with which India and the UAE concluded the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) in 2022 has been matched by last week's Bilateral Investment Treaty (BIT). This makes the UAE not only the first country the Modi government has signed these agreements with but also the only country that India has both a trade and an investment agreement with. The UAE is now India's third largest trading partner, India's second largest export destination, and fourth largest source of FDI. The inauguration of the Bharat Mart for Indian MSMEs is also expected to strengthen trade ties. A second raft of agreements dealt with technological ties including building digital infrastructure; R&D for energy security and trade focusing on green hydrogen and energy storage, and digital cross-payments. Third, the Agreement for an Intergovernmental Framework on the India-Middle East Economic Corridor paves the way for multilateral cooperation between the two countries, that also coordinate over the I2U2 initiative with the U.S. and Israel, and, from 2024, will cooperate within the BRICS framework, as the UAE is now a member. Finally, the discussions on the Israel-Gaza operations and the Red Sea attacks, indicate that in a region roiled by conflict, India considers the UAE to be a stable interlocutor.

India-UAE ties are also built on a bedrock of history and cultural engagement that includes centuries-old maritime trade and a diaspora contributing about 18% of India's global remittances. While India's technological prowess and the UAE's positioning as a trade and industry hub bring complementarities, the changes in their polity and societies bring possible friction points. As the UAE, a theocratic monarchy, seeks to democratise its governance and have a more pluralistic system, such as the decision on the temple in Abu Dhabi, it has expressed concern over the rise of majoritarian and sectarian forces in India. To that end, Mr. Modi's words in Abu Dhabi, where he rejoiced in the mutual values of tolerance and pluralism, and "shared heritage of humanity" may be the most significant bonds between the two countries separated by the Arabian Sea.

DELHI APPROACHES MOSCOW FOR EARLY DISCHARGE OF INDIAN 'ARMY HELPERS'

India has approached the Russian authorities for "early discharge" of Indians working as support staff with the Russian Army, the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) said on Friday, urging Indian nationals to stay away from the ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflict.

The comments by Ministry's spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal came after a February 20 report by The Hindu that at least three Indian citizens who were hired as security helpers by Russia were forced to fight alongside the country's forces along its border with Ukraine.

The Hindu subsequently reported that there are around 100 Indians who are said to have been hired by the Russian Army over the past year.



“We are aware that a few Indian nationals have signed up for support jobs with the Russian army. The Indian embassy has regularly taken up this matter with the relevant Russian authorities for their early discharge. We urge all Indian nationals to exercise due caution and stay away from this conflict,” Mr. Jaiswal said.

Owaisi’s plea

The issue was first flagged by AIMIM Member of Parliament Asaduddin Owaisi, who wrote to External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar on January 25 seeking their return. On Wednesday, Mr. Owaisi posted on X, “Sir @DrSJaishankar kindly use your good offices to bring these men back home. Their lives are at risk & their families are justifiably worried.”

Russia and Ukraine have been at war since February 24, 2022. While a few Indians volunteered to join the International Legion created to fight against Russian forces in Ukraine in 2022, the presence of Indians in a combat role on the Russian side has been reported and acknowledged for the first time.

MISPLACED PRIORITIES

A nation is defined not by the borders that demarcate it but by the people who live in it. This is not just an abstract adage but a vision of nation-building and sustenance, especially for a country that emerged out of colonial rule. The idea of neighbourly relations and borders was tied not just to the interest of national security for the post-colonial nation-state but also to the interests of the people in border areas and their imagined histories. When Home Minister Amit Shah announced that the “Free Movement Regime” (FMR) in place in Indian States bordering Myanmar from 2018 would be scrapped and that the India-Myanmar border be fenced, he was decidedly negating this idea. The ostensible reason for this demand and the need for fencing is because the porous border has served as a conduit for narcotics, besides helping insurgent groups in the north-east to establish bases within areas in Myanmar where the junta’s writ is relatively non-existent or weak. But these reasons are not convincing in themselves. Most insurgent groups have weakened substantially and successive Indian governments have been able to neutralise their threats through force or peace efforts, ongoing or completed. Besides, the drug trade is enabled not only by the border’s porosity but also by the relative lack of strong law enforcement with the cooperation of residents.

That the demand to scrap the FMR has been most vociferously endorsed by one section of the currently conflict-prone Manipur but has also been fervently opposed by Nagaland and Mizoram should provide a hint about the sentiments of the people in these States. Myanmar is in the throes of a civil war with civilians from its western regions and States such as Sagain and Chin State seeking refuge and humanitarian relief in neighbouring Mizoram and Manipur. The Mizos of Mizoram and the Kuki-Zo community in Manipur feel a kinship with the Chin community and have been organising relief for the refugees. The opposition to the FMR has come from Meitei majoritarian forces in the Imphal valley who have raised the bogey of Chin refugees entering Manipur as a case of illegal migration. The institution of the FMR, as a formalised regime of the movement of citizens across the sparsely populated border to within 16 kilometres of it, for trade and commerce, was a nod to India’s Act East policy. This was also an expression of the will of people of the region who share ethnic relations but are divided by colonially drawn boundaries. The reversal of this regime and the humongous exercise of fencing a border situated in rugged mountains and forests is a case of misplaced priorities and needs reconsideration.



WHY DID THE SC INVALIDATE ELECTORAL BONDS?

The story so far:

The Supreme Court has declared the Electoral Bonds Scheme as unconstitutional. Donor anonymity was the main feature of the scheme, which has been criticised for long by transparency activists. These bonds constituted an important means of funding political parties since 2018. The court found that the scheme violated the citizens' right to information about the sources of finances raised by political parties. It directed the full disclosure of all details of contributors, recipient parties and denominations.

What was the scheme?

An electoral bond is in the nature of a promissory note which shall be a bearer banking instrument that does not carry the name of the buyer or payee. Any citizen or company could buy these bonds in denominations of ₹1,000, ₹10,000, ₹1 lakh, ₹10 lakh, and ₹1 crore and donate it to a political party. It can be encashed only through a bank account with an authorised bank. The State Bank of India was the bank authorised to issue and encash these bonds.

What changes were made for the scheme?

Section 13A of the Income Tax Act earlier said political parties must maintain a record of contributions above ₹20,000. The Finance Act 2017 amended this to make an exception for contributions through electoral bonds. As a result, parties were not required to maintain any record of what they received through the bonds.

Section 29C of the Representation of the People Act (RPA), 1951, earlier said parties should prepare a report on contributions in excess of ₹20,000 from any person or company in a financial year. This was amended in 2017 to the effect that contributions through electoral bonds need not be included in the report. Under Section 182(3) of the Companies Act, companies were required to disclose details of contributions to a political party, including the amount and the party's name, in its profit-and-loss account. However, after the amendment, it was only required to reveal the total amount given to parties in a financial year.

How did the government defend it in court?

The government's main points in defence of the scheme was that it allowed any person to transfer funds to political parties of their choice through legitimate banking channels and helped prevent unregulated contributions through cash. The confidentiality assured to the donors is beneficial to them as it promotes contribution and clean money to political parties. The use of banking channels will curb the role of black money in election funding and anonymity ensures that the donors do not fear retribution or coercion from parties to which they have not contributed. In an interesting argument, the government claimed that citizens did not have a general right to know the funding of political parties. The right to know was not general in nature, but one evolved by courts for the specific purpose of enabling the voter's choice of electing clean candidates.

What did the SC rule?

In past judgments, the apex court has held that voters have a right to information that is essential for them to exercise their freedom to vote. The court, therefore, held that information about funding to a political party is essential for a voter to express the freedom to vote in an effective



manner. The Electoral Bond Scheme, to the extent that it infringes on this right to information by anonymising contributions through bonds, violates Article 19(1)(a), which pertains to freedom of expression.

As far as the purpose of curbing black money was concerned, the court applied a proportionality test, viz., whether the abridging of the voters' right to know through donor anonymity was achieved through the least restrictive means. It said alternatives such as funding through electronic transfer (for small contributions) and donations to an Electoral Trust (for larger amounts) were available. As the government was unable to establish that the scheme is the least restrictive means to balance the right of "informational privacy" to contributors and the right to information on political contributions, the amendments to IT Act and RPA were unconstitutional.

On the changes to the Companies Act, it ruled that the deletion of the disclosure requirement on details of contributions violated the voter's right to information. Also, the scheme allowed both profit-making and loss-making companies to make political contributions. Earlier, companies could only donate a percentage of their net profit. As the harm in the form of quid pro quo is much higher in the case of loss-making companies, the amendment was ruled manifestly arbitrary.

MAKING SENSE OF ELECTORAL BOND JUDGMENT THROUGH DATA

Data from the Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR), one of the petitioners in the case, shows that the share of unknown sources of income has only increased after the introduction of the electoral bond scheme, in direct contradiction to the government's claim. The ADR categorises the income of political parties into two primary categories: known and unknown. Known income is further divided into two subtypes — voluntary contributions over ₹20,000 with donor details provided to the Election Commission of India, and other known sources of income such as the sale of movable and immovable assets. The unknown income encompasses voluntary donations under ₹20,000 where donor details remain undisclosed.

The share of unknown sources of income for national parties increased from 66% between FY15 and FY17 to 72% between FY19 and FY22. The transition year FY18, the year in which the scheme was introduced, was not considered for analysis. The BJP's share of unknown income increased from 58% to 68% in the period, while the Congress' remained at around 80%.

ADR data shows that the BJP received a lion's share of corporate donations in the FY17 to FY22 period — ₹3,300 crores or 84% of them.

Over 90% of the electoral bonds sold in terms of value and over 50% sold in terms of numbers belonged to the ₹1 crore denomination. The share of other denominations — ₹10 lakhs, ₹1 lakh, ₹10,000 and ₹1,000 — in electoral bond sales, paled in comparison. The court observed that this data pointed to the influence of corporates in the scheme, as not many individuals can afford to donate in crores. Finally, the court also observed that a bulk of the donations from electoral bonds were done in favour of the BJP. ADR data shows that in the FY18-FY22 period, the BJP earned ₹5,272 crore through electoral bonds — 57% of the money donated to all parties in this route.



EXPRESS VIEW ON FALI SAM NARIMAN

The resignation of law officer number 3 made no impact, created no ripples, in the political waters in the capital. I was simply not important enough". This was how Fali Nariman recounted, in a piece he wrote for this newspaper in 2015, a moment in June 1975. That was when, having been appointed additional solicitor-general of India in May 1972, and reappointed for another three-year term in May 1975, Nariman resigned, taking a stand against the Indira Gandhi government's imposition of Emergency. But, of course, Nariman's decision mattered. What lay behind his resignation then — a fierce independence, unwavering integrity and staunch commitment to constitutional principle — set off many a ripple that picked up force in a career over seven decades long, raising the bar and setting an example for others. Now, his death, coming in a time when the space is shrinking for both individuals and institutions who stand against the current, when the Constitution needs all its upholders, leaves a void that is especially gaping. Nariman lived a long and full life in which he engaged deeply and widely with the public sphere from the time he started work as a young lawyer — incidentally, also the time that a young country was giving to itself a new Constitution. But it is impossible not to feel that he is gone too soon, his work was not yet done.

So much of what Nariman stood for, and argued and wrote about, will continue to shine a light after him. He argued the case for the court to appoint its judges, deeming that power to be essential to protect the independence of the judiciary — and yet he also did not hesitate to criticise the decisions of the Collegium that was established and shaped by the seminal cases he appeared in. In September 2023, he wrote in this paper against the Collegium's decision not to elevate S Muralidhar to the SC; and called out the SC's decision as "politically acceptable but constitutionally incorrect" on Article 370. Just as the judiciary as an institution needs to preserve its independence, he wrote, citizens need the reassurance of a system of judicial accountability. Another binding theme and concern was the right to dissent, which he believed was essential and non-negotiable, on the bench and outside the court too, in a country of great diversities. During the phase of coalition governments, he wrote in another piece in this paper, leaders changed for the better, "stepping down from the high ground, they became much less fractious and much more friendly...". Through it all, the Constitution, for Nariman, was a lodestar and a living thing — he appeared in the Golaknath case of 1967 in which the Supreme Court held that Parliament cannot make a law that infringes citizens' fundamental rights.

The country will miss a public intellectual, who spoke his mind, followed his conscience, admitted his mistakes, did the right thing. This paper will miss its friend and columnist, who wrote in often — along with his deeply insightful columns, delightful little letters to the editor that came as encouragement and affirmation, as gentle comment, or just to tell a small anecdote that illustrated and illuminated a large thing.

FLAGRANT FRAUD

It was an indirect election in which a mere 35 councillors could vote. Yet, the election of Chandigarh's Mayor has emerged as a microcosm of the sort of serious electoral malpractice that can undermine democracy. The Supreme Court of India, while declaring the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) candidate Kuldeep Kumar as the duly elected Mayor, has exposed a malaise that is not often recognised in the great Indian election scene: the role of officials in helping parties steal elections through fraudulent means during counting. The act of the Returning Officer, Anil Masih, in marking or defacing ballot papers, was not only captured on camera but was also proven to be a



ruse to declare invalid votes that were validly cast in Mr. Kumar's favour. Mr. Masih, a man with Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) affiliation, appears to have committed the illegality to help Manoj Sonkar, the BJP candidate, win the mayoral election, but it ultimately backfired on him, as the apex court has initiated the process to prosecute him for giving false information to the Court. Ever since he controversially declared Mr. Sonkar elected after ruling eight votes invalid, Mr. Masih had sought to brazen it out by claiming that the votes were invalid as they were defaced. His claim was shown to be false, as the Court found nothing on the ballots indicating defacement.

When Mr. Sonkar resigned from his post on the eve of the hearing, the Court was alive to the possibility that the BJP was looking for a reason to have a fresh election, as by that time, it had won over three AAP councillors to its side, a development that may impede the new Mayor's functioning. The Court warned against the democratic process being set at naught by "subterfuge". It was, therefore, logical that it did not order a fresh election, but decided to go ahead with the original votes, taking into account the valid votes illegally declared invalid. There is little doubt that the development is a setback to the BJP, which seems to have resorted to the fraud with the aim of subverting the cooperation between the Congress and the AAP, which are part of the Opposition INDIA bloc and had forged an alliance for the municipal election. BJP president J.P. Nadda had sought to use the election result to underscore the failure of both arithmetic and chemistry in the Opposition alliance, but will now have to deal with the party's loss of face. It was indeed a fit case for the Court to invoke its extraordinary powers to decide on fact who actually won the election. The prosecution of Mr. Masih should also establish at whose behest he had resorted to such flagrant fraud.

SC FLAGS HORSE-TRADING AFTER CHANDIGARH MAYORAL POLLS

The Supreme Court on Monday said it is "deeply concerned about the horse-trading taking place" post the controversial Chandigarh mayoral elections, and summoned the entire records and video of the polls held on January 30.

The court directive came after it observed that Returning Officer Anil Masih "has to be prosecuted" for interfering with electoral democracy by "defacing" eight ballot papers, which swung the results in favour of the BJP.

BJP's winning candidate Manoj Sonkar resigned as Mayor ahead of Monday's top court hearing. However, the Bench headed by Chief Justice of India D.Y. Chandrachud took note of media reports that three Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) councillors from Chandigarh had since then joined the BJP.

"This matter is very important. We are deeply concerned that this kind of horse-trading is taking place," Chief Justice Chandrachud observed.

The Bench ordered the ballot papers and video of the mayoral elections, which was sequestered by the Registrar General of the Punjab and Haryana High Court on February 5, to be produced before the Supreme Court on February 20 at 2 p.m.

The Registrar General would depute a judicial officer, who would be provided security during transit.

The Chief Justice refused Solicitor-General Tushar Mehta's request to postpone the hearing to February 21, saying that "we are keen because of this business of horse-trading which is going on".



Mr. Mehta, initially during the hearing, proposed fresh mayoral elections under a new Returning Officer deputed by the High Court. He said the polls could be videographed and records placed before the High Court.

'Recount ballots'

However, Punjab Advocate-General Gurminder Singh suggested an alternative. He said the votes were clearly cast on January 30 and there was no problem with the Chandigarh mayoral elections until the Returning Officer allegedly "defaced" the eight ballot papers. He, in turn, suggested a fresh counting of the ballots polled on January 30 rather than de novo elections.

"Please ignore the misdemeanour and take the elections to the logical end. Giving his [Masih] conduct a premium and ordering fresh elections would ensure that the person who would have won the elections that day would lose it now. This would not be in the interest of justice... Horse-trading has happened. That is why there is now a request for fresh elections," Mr. Singh submitted.

Mr. Mehta, however, said AAP's petition in the top court specifically sought fresh elections. Calling Mr. Masih, who was present, to the front of the courtroom, Chief Justice Chandrachud questioned him about his conduct caught on camera, reminding him that "you are not in a political contest, but in a court of law" and he would be liable for every word he said.

After the brief exchange, the Chief Justice turned to Mr. Mehta, remarking that "he [Masih] has admitted that he put the marks in the eight ballot papers. His answers show that. He has to be prosecuted. Interference with electoral democracy by Returning Officers is the gravest possible thing". The court ordered Mr. Masih to be present again on February 20. In the previous hearing, the Chief Justice had termed his conduct as that of a "fugitive" who made a "mockery of democracy".

THE ENORMITY OF THE INDIAN ELECTORATE AND ITS STATE-WISE VARIANCES

With 97 crore voters eligible to register their mandate in the general elections later this year, India will yet again go through a process confirming its status as the world's largest electoral democracy. The electorate will register a 6% rise this year in comparison to the number of eligible voters in 2019.

India's 28 States and eight Union Territories are home to a large number of voters comparable to some of the world's biggest nation-states. For example, the electorate size of Uttar Pradesh (14.6 crore) is comparable to that of the world's seventh most populous country — Brazil. Maharashtra's and Bihar's electorates match those of Mexico and the Philippines, respectively. Even Goa's electorate size compares well with that of Bahrain and Cyprus.

There is also significant variance State-wise in the number of electors that the winning Member of Parliament represented in the Lok Sabha from 2019 to 2024. While an elected MP from Delhi, on average, represented 20.5 lakh voters, an MP from Uttar Pradesh represented 18.3 lakh voters, from Andhra Pradesh 15.8 lakh voters, and Tamil Nadu 15.4 lakh voters, the corresponding numbers for Kerala and Tripura were 13.1 lakh each.

Telangana's Malkajgiri (31.5 lakh) and Karnataka's Bangalore North (28.5 lakh) had the highest number of electors.



The variance across States in the number of electors that each elected MP represents is also a consequence of the frozen delimitation exercise, last conducted after the 1971 Census, that has not updated the numbers corresponding to the one-person-one-vote principle. This was done to encourage States which controlled the population effectively. But the idea of delimitation in its present form is fraught with consequences. It could affect States that have worked hard to limit their birth and death rates, and who could see their total number of MPs being reduced if the Lok Sabha size is retained in a prospective delimitation exercise or a modest rise in an expanded House compared to some of the most populous States which have not addressed the birth and death rates to the same extent.

A recent paper (Vaishnav et al, Carnegie endowment) pointed to the fact that U.P. and Bihar might gain 11 and 10 seats each if the size of the Lok Sabha is retained as it is, while Tamil Nadu and Kerala will experience a net decrease of eight seats each. On the other hand, if the Lok Sabha size is increased to 848 based on the projected population in 2026, the increase in the number of MPs for U.P. and Bihar will be 63 and 39 each, in comparison to 10 and zero for Tamil Nadu and Kerala.

This is why experts have cautioned against a delimitation exercise that could result in a skewed federal representation hurting the numbers for States that have done the most to address the issue of population explosion. Various ideas ranging from continuing the freeze in delimitation to retaining the size of the Lok Sabha and its representation as it is nationally while increasing the size of the State Assemblies in respective States have been espoused.

ENDING DISCRIMINATION

The Supreme Court of India has come out heavily against another archaic idea with patriarchal overtones by observing that rules which penalise women employees for getting married are unconstitutional. “Terminating employment because the woman has got married is a coarse case of gender discrimination and inequality. Acceptance of such [a] patriarchal rule undermines human dignity, right to non-discrimination and fair treatment.” The observations were part of an order which upheld the rights of Selina John, a former lieutenant and Permanent Commissioner Officer in the Military Nursing Service, who was discharged from service in 1988 for getting married. A Bench headed by Justice Sanjiv Khanna directed the Union Government to pay Ms. John ₹60 lakh in compensation within eight weeks. The government had appealed in the top court against a decision of the Lucknow Bench of the Armed Forces Tribunal which had ruled in her favour in 2016. Pointing out that her dismissal was “wrong and illegal”, the Court noted that the rule against marriage was applicable only to women nursing officers. Women have been fighting a long and uphill battle for gender parity in the Army — they were granted permanent commission after judgments in 2020 and 2021. Words to the effect that the Indian Army is encouraging more women to join the forces have to be backed by deeds.

It is not that the civilian space is much better off, and women are often asked uncomfortable personal questions at job interviews. They are quizzed about future plans on marriage and motherhood. If labour participation of women in the workforce has to increase — in the latest Periodic Labour Force data (October-December 2023), India’s is at an abysmal 19.9% for women of all ages — then barriers in education, employment, and opportunities, not to talk of bullying mindsets, have to be broken down. It is a fact that many girls, especially among the poor, have to drop out of school for various reasons, from economic to lack of proper toilets. The UN’s Gender Snapshot 2023 had provided a grim picture of where the world is on gender parity, pointing out that if course correction measures are not taken, the next generation of women will still spend a disproportionate amount of time on housework and duties compared to men, and stay off



leadership roles. The schemes routinely announced by the government for girls and women will mean little on the ground if they have to abide by restrictive social and cultural norms. The Court's words that rules making marriage of women employees and their domestic involvement a ground for disentitlement are unconstitutional should be heard by all organisations so that the workplace becomes an enabler, and not a hurdle.

CALM ASSESSMENT

The Supreme Court of India has put on pause an ambitious effort by the Centre to amend India's Forest (Conservation) Act, 1980, that was brought in to check the wanton razing of forests for 'non-forestry uses'. According to the Centre, an estimated four million hectares of forest land had been diverted from 1951-75. Under the provisions of the Act, forests could no longer be diverted without adhering to a regulatory mechanism by the Centre. As a measure of its success, the Centre calculates that from 1981-2022, the average annual diversion of forest had reduced to about 22,000 hectares, or about a tenth of what it was from 1951-75. However, the provisions of this piece of legislation largely applied to forest tracts recognised as such by the India Forest Act, or any other State legislation. Illegal timber-felling in Gudalur, Tamil Nadu, triggered the landmark T.N. Godavarman Thirumulpad judgment that saw the Court take an expanded view of forest tracts worthy of protection. It also said that forests had to be protected irrespective of how they were classified and who owned them. This brought in the concept of 'deemed forests,' or tracts that were not officially classified as such in government or revenue records. States were asked to constitute expert committees to identify such 'deemed forests.' In the 28 years that have passed since the judgment, only a handful of States have constituted such committees or made public the extent of such 'deemed forests' within their territories.

The Centre's attempt to amend the Forest (Conservation) Act was ostensibly to bring "clarity" as there were large tracts of recorded forest land that had already been put to non-forestry uses, with the permission of State governments. There is apparently, the Centre says, a reluctance among private citizens to cultivate private plantations and orchards, despite their significant ecological benefits, for fear that they would be classified as 'forest' (and thus render their ownership void). India's ambitions to create a carbon sink of 2.5 billion-3 billion tonnes, to meet its net zero goals have required forest laws to be "dynamic" and, therefore, the rules have sought to remove 'deemed forest,' not already recorded as such, from the ambit of protection. This has triggered a slew of public interest petitions as, on the face of it, the amendments appear as an assault on the Act's ambition of forest protection. While a final judgment is pending, the Court's order to the Centre to compile and make public, by April, States' efforts at recording the extent of deemed forests is welcome. At this point it is mere conjecture on the part of the Centre that India's carbon sink is being impeded due to insufficient private initiative. Only a dispassionate assessment of ground realities can drive forward this very important debate.

EXPRESS VIEW ON THE BALANCE BETWEEN ENVIRONMENT AND INDUSTRY: GREENING GROWTH

Governments in developing countries face a dilemma, a political-economy conundrum that requires a fine balancing act. On the one hand, in light of climate change and the degradation of fragile and vulnerable ecologies, there is a need for regulation of projects that have a potentially adverse environmental impact. On the other hand, investment and infrastructure development are crucial for employment generation and poverty alleviation.



The provision of Environmental Clearance (EC) under the Environment Impact Assessment (EIA) rules — notified in 2006 under the Environmental (Protection) Act — was meant to strike the right balance between the imperatives of growth and development and the environment. The EC is meant to be mandatory for various projects, including mining, thermal plants, those in river valleys, and infrastructure and industrial programmes. Unfortunately, as a report in this newspaper has shown, the balance between environment and industry seems to be tilting far too much towards the latter.

In 2017, the government brought in a loophole to the EIA and gave a six-month moratorium to all the companies that had not complied with the requirements to receive an EC. This one-time window was made indefinite under the revised Standard Operating Procedures in 2021. The notification was challenged before the Madras High Court, which granted a stay order. The Centre, however, interpreted the order as applying only to Tamil Nadu. Then, in January 2024, the Supreme Court stayed the notification, and the Court's final decision is pending. In essence, between 2017 and 2024, over 100 projects — they include coal, iron and bauxite mines, steel and iron factories, cement plants and limestone quarries — have been granted ex post facto environmental clearance under the diluted EIA, their original lack of EC notwithstanding.

Environmental clearances for business and infrastructure projects have been a fraught issue for decades. Under multiple governments and environment ministers of varying ideological leanings, the pendulum has swung both ways: At different points, the Environment Ministry has been dubbed either “anti-business” or “anti-environment”. However, by any standard, the weakening of the EIA, and the National Green Tribunal, is a matter of deep concern that needs to be addressed urgently — in 2020, an Environmental Performance Index of Yale University ranked India 168 amongst 220 countries. Perhaps the only sustainable way to do this is to not see “environment” and “development” locked in an inevitably zero-sum game.

It's time to move to environmentalism as development and development as environmentalism. As climate change and sustainability increasingly become a part of the global business conversation, India has the opportunity to be a leader in this regard. This will, however, require a robust policy and regulatory framework, which while facilitating business, allows for a careful assessment of the adverse impacts of projects, and does not constantly search for and seize the loopholes.

EXPRESS VIEW: NO BAIL FOR MANISH SISODIA

On February 26 last year, the CBI arrested then Deputy Chief Minister of Delhi, Manish Sisodia, in a case related to alleged irregularities in a now-scrapped liquor policy. Two weeks later, the ED formally charged the senior AAP leader under the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA). Since then, on more than one occasion, the Supreme Court has told the two agencies that they cannot keep Sisodia “in jail indefinitely”. Yet in the past year, the judiciary has apparently stopped short of applying its impressive jurisprudence on civil liberties to Sisodia's case. His bail applications have been rejected by lower courts, Delhi High Court, as well as the Supreme Court itself. On Thursday, a Delhi court extended the AAP leader's judicial custody till March 12 and deferred, till March 2, a decision on whether it will take up Sisodia's “regular bail application”. It cited a procedural complication: A review petition challenging the SC's October 2023 decision to deny Sisodia bail is pending before the apex court.

The CBI is examining the criminal aspect of the liquor policy case and the ED is probing the money laundering dimension. Certainly, the two agencies must investigate all allegations of wrongdoing, and the law must take its course. However, the courts' reluctance to apply the SC's well-stated



position that “bail is rule, and jail is exception” — underlined eloquently as late as 2018 in *Dataram Singh vs State of Uttar Pradesh* — to Sisodia’s case invites questions. This is especially so given that, during hearings, a two-judge bench had come down heavily on the investigating agencies for not producing enough evidence against the former Delhi Deputy CM. On October 6 last year, it asked the ED if it had any proof other than the statement of a co-accused-turned-approver. The Court had reminded the agency, then, of the stringent evidence-related requirements under PMLA and observed that the case would “fall flat in two hearings”. Yet, less than a month later, on October 30, the apex court denied bail to Sisodia.

On December 14, the SC dismissed the AAP leader’s petition to review its bail verdict. However, on February 5, the Court admitted a new curative petition filed by Sisodia. When it hears the case again, the SC must keep in mind its own powerful words in *Gurbaksh Singh Sibbia vs the State of Punjab* (1980): “The act of arrest directly affects freedom of movement of the person, and... an order of bail gives back to the accused that freedom on condition that he will appear to take his trial.”

COMBAT MODE

The National Council Meeting of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in Delhi on February 17 and 18 has set the tone for the party’s Lok Sabha election campaign. Prime Minister Narendra Modi set the party a target of winning 370 seats in the Lok Sabha, compared to the 303 seats that it had won in the 2019 general election. The symbolism of the number is about Article 370, which his government invalidated in fulfilment of a fundamental principle of the party. The hollowing of Article 370 that provided a notion of autonomy to Jammu and Kashmir, and the construction of a Ram temple in Ayodhya were two of the three issues that have propelled the BJP’s rise. Having fulfilled them during his second term, Mr. Modi has staked claim to a third, which he said was crucial for the country. In fact, he has raised the stakes by setting a higher target of 370 seats and an additional 370 votes in every polling booth which, if met, can raise the party’s voteshare above 50%. Mr. Modi has also told the party leaders that only the symbol, and not the candidates, mattered. A lot many of the sitting Members of Parliament of the BJP are expected to make way for new candidates.

The peripherality of individual candidates of the BJP is also linked to the centrality of Mr. Modi in the election, which was clear at the conclave. The party will also focus on converting the raft of welfare measures that it has either launched or repurposed into votes. Alongside revving up its organisational engine, the BJP is also seeking to expand its footprint by the continuous induction of leaders from other political parties on the one hand, and tying up alliances with regional parties on the other. Union Home Minister Amit Shah’s sharp attack on the Opposition on the question of corruption and dynastic succession, indicated that the party will remain in offensive mode in the run-up to the general election. Its opportunistic alliances with leaders and parties that it has accused of corruption are shrouded by claims of good governance and transparency. The BJP manages to pull off this feat by wrapping its claims in strong communal identity terms. A resolution passed by the Council hailed the Ayodhya temple as a manifestation of Ram Rajya, an ideal type of just and fair governance. The party is trying to mobilise Hindu solidarity around the temple, and simultaneously present it as an emblem of a non-sectarian national agenda of development and progress. It is a hard act, but the BJP seems to manage this by keeping itself constantly in combat mode.

X FACTOR



That the use of Internet shutdowns and arbitrary curbs on free speech on social media have become a rampant tool for those in power is evident in the manner in which the Bharatiya Janata Party-led State governments of Haryana and Rajasthan and the Union government have dealt with the farmer protests. These State governments have used Internet shutdowns arbitrarily, and without adequate cause, using vague reasons related to the prospective breakdown of law and order and without any actual evidence to implement such shutdowns, thus failing the proportionality tests laid out in *Anuradha Bhasin vs Union of India*. The Union government, on the other hand, has used its oft-deployed device of issuing notices to social media companies such as X to block the accounts of those leading or even supporting the protests without even issuing the reasons to those who hold these accounts. In the past, X, when it was known as Twitter, did not accede to all blocking requests unless they ran afoul of its own rules or were not sufficiently issued with recorded reasons among other considerations. Twitter/X had also approached the Karnataka High Court to challenge several of the blanket blocking orders that were issued by the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology during the earlier round of farmer protests in 2020-21. The High Court had, in a problematic judgment by a single judge, dismissed X's petition, but later admitted an appeal by the firm and hearings are under way.

Unfortunately, X, ever since Elon Musk's takeover, has not been publishing its transparency reports that indicate the number of legal requests made by Indian state agencies to block, take down content or accounts. By admitting that it has decided to withhold accounts and posts flagged by the government, even if it disagreed with these actions, X was giving up any recourse for its users affected by these actions. This is not unexpected; X under Mr. Musk is no longer a thriving platform for free speech that strives to promote discussion, information-sharing and even critique of governments. It now takes its cue from the views and business interests of its owner. But it is even more worrisome that the extant judgment in the Karnataka High Court has given credence to the idea that government authorities enjoy a wide berth in issuing content blocking orders without the need to provide notices to the originators of the content or even seeking account-level blocking without valid reasoning. It is hoped that X's appeal in the High Court will definitively clarify the rights and obligations of social media companies over content on its platforms. As for the government, it does not seem to be concerned at all about what such actions mean to India's reputation as a free, open and democratic society, a key reason for social media companies to operate in the country, beyond just the presence of a large consumer base.

EXPRESS VIEW ON JINDAL UNIVERSITY AND FREE SPEECH: STAIN ON CAMPUS

University administrations — public and private — across the country have, in recent years, unfortunately not always stood up for academics and students when the latter have questioned the dominant ideas and powers that be. Teachers and students have been arrested, discussions, even movie screenings stalled or called off. Academics at prestigious private universities that claim to champion liberal values have been forced out and university authorities have not refrained from inviting the police on campus. In this milieu, OP Jindal Global University (JGU) seemed to have, quietly and without fuss, created a space even as others in its neighbourhood ceded it. However, the JGU administration's action against two students for "putting up posters and engaging in conversation" that involved "derogatory and provocative words" flies against its own record and stated principles. More importantly, it undermines the idea and promise of a university. It's a stain on the campus.

The action against the students was in response to posters and discussion on the Ram temple at Ayodhya. Reportedly, the framing of the discussion was critical of the dominant politics



surrounding the consecration. On February 10, the students were suspended for a semester and late that night, they were “evicted” from campus housing. According to the university’s Student Disciplinary Committee, the punishment was for “a serious violation of the student code of conduct”. This wasn’t a frightened university administration giving in to goons, this was the university punishing free speech.

JGU is an “Institution of Eminence” and, to the credit of its leadership, its law school has been ranked among the top 100 in the world. Its faculty includes a former Chief Justice of India, a former SC justice and social scientists. They could tell the JGU administration that ideas are tested through debate, and a campus can remain “excellent” only if it allows students to experiment with them. After all, a campus is the only place where you have the right to be wrong. There’s no evidence that the two students were fomenting violence or breaking a law. “At the core of JGU’s vision and mission”, according to its website, “is our aspiration to be a role model for excellence in higher education in India and among the leading universities of the world”. It also promises to remain sensitive to the “deepening of democratic traditions in India”. The university should revoke the suspensions, ensure that expressing an idea can’t be the reason for students to be evicted from a residential campus. Otherwise, JGU’s words on democracy will ring hollow, its global ranking a mere marketing number.

ON THE RIGHT TO MAINTENANCE FOR DIVORCED MUSLIM WOMEN

The story so far:

The Supreme Court has decided to examine if a divorced Muslim woman is entitled to a claim of maintenance under Section 125 of the Criminal Procedure Code (CrPC) from her former husband — reigniting the debate on whether secular laws should be given precedence over distinct personal laws. On February 19, a Bench comprising Justices B.V. Nagarathna and Augustine George Masih reserved its verdict in the case.

How has the law evolved?

The law governing maintenance for destitute wives, children, and parents has been codified under Section 125 of the CrPC. It stipulates that if any person “having sufficient means neglects or refuses to maintain” his wife, — then a magistrate of the first class may, upon proof of such neglect or refusal, order such a person to make a monthly allowance for the maintenance of his wife at a monthly rate as the magistrate thinks fit. The explanation to this provision clarifies that a “wife” includes any woman who has been divorced by, or has obtained a divorce from, her husband and has not remarried.

The Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Divorce) Act, 1986 (1986 Act), on the other hand, is a religion-specific law that provides a procedure for a Muslim woman to claim maintenance during divorce. Section 3 of the 1986 Act guarantees the payment of maintenance to a divorced Muslim woman by her former husband only during the period of iddat — a period, usually of three months, which a woman must observe after the death of her husband or a divorce before she can remarry. After the completion of the iddat period, a woman can approach a first-class magistrate for maintenance in case she has not remarried and is not in a position to take care of herself financially. A Constitution Bench of the Supreme Court in the Danial Latifi versus Union Of India (2001) case upheld the constitutional validity of the 1986 Act by extending the right of a Muslim woman to get maintenance till she re-marries. It, however, reduced the period of maintenance to the completion of iddat. In 2009, a Division Bench of the Supreme Court reiterated a divorced



Muslim woman's right to claim maintenance under Section 125 of the CrPC as long as she does not remarry. It highlighted that such a relief would be extended even after the expiry of the iddat period.

How did the proceedings play out?

The apex court pointed out that Section 3 of the 1986 Act begins with a non-obstante clause ("notwithstanding anything contained in any other law for the time being in force"), and thus it does not bar an alternative remedy under Section 125 of the CrPC. Senior advocate Gaurav Agrawal, the amicus, agreed with this observation. He also said that the question of whether the 1986 Act takes away the right under Section 125 of the CrPC was not dealt with in Danial Latifi and thus there is a requirement of an authoritative pronouncement in this regard.

"However, the observations in paragraph 33 of the judgment suggest that the 1986 Act has to be interpreted in such a manner that the divorced Muslim woman is entitled to all rights of maintenance as are available to other divorced women in the country. Consequently, the rights of divorced women cannot be taken away only from one section of divorced women of our country, lest it infringe Articles 14, 15, and 21 of the Constitution. Thus, the validity of the 1986 Act was upheld with this understanding that the 1986 Act does not seek to treat Muslim divorced women any less favourably than other divorced women," he elucidated.

Dismissing the petitioner's argument that the provisions of the 1986 Act reflect the Parliament's intent to debar Muslim women from seeking relief under Section 125 of the CrPC, the court asserted that if that were the case then the legislators would have explicitly given an overriding effect to the 1986 Act. "The Act does not say no petition under Section 125 shall be filed by Muslim women. They should have said that. In the absence of such a thing, can we add the restriction to the Act?" Justice B.V. Nagarathna emphasised.

EXPRESS VIEW ON SANDESHKHALI VIOLENCE: IN BENGAL, DEJA VU

For Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee, the situation in Sandeshkhali may well evoke a sense of deja vu. It also has a lesson she needs to heed. In 2006-7, the CPM government in West Bengal was as domineering, if not more, as the Trinamool Congress government is today. The protests, then, Banerjee leading from the front, against land acquisition for the Tata Motors factory in Singur and the SEZ in Nandigram — and the excesses of the party and state response to it — had marked the beginning of the end for "bam", the Left, in Bengal. In her third term as CM, Bam has been replaced by the Syndicate, a government-TMC-business nexus, and the same politics of violence and whataboutery continues to undermine the rule of law in the state.

Protests broke out in Sandeshkhali in North 24 Parganas district earlier this month with villagers demanding the arrest of TMC strongman Shahjahan Sheikh, zila parishad member Shivprasad Hazra and Uttam Sardar, TMC region president of Sandeshkhali panchayat — Hazra was arrested on Saturday. The protesters, many of them women, have accused the three men of land grabbing and sexual assault. Violence ensued with clashes between those allegedly backed by the TMC and BJP.

Sheikh is already absconding from the Enforcement Directorate: A group of his loyalists had attacked the ED team last month when it came to search his home. The government's initial reaction was disturbing. The ruling party insisted that the protesters had been "brainwashed" by the CPM and BJP and issued prohibitory orders under Section 144 of the CrPC, subsequently



overturned by the Calcutta High Court, which has also taken cognisance of the sexual assault allegations. Unfortunately, the BJP has tried to communalise the issue, while the CPM is holding protests of its own.

With the state police forming a “special team” to look into the allegations, it remains to be seen whether further arrests are made and how the law takes its course. But the government’s larger response has touched off apprehensions of a politicisation of the case. CM Banerjee has accused the BJP-RSS of “fomenting trouble” and riots in the area — her allegations ignore the structural issue of which Sandeshkhali seems but a symptom. The government and police must have a monopoly on violence — in Bengal, vital ground has been ceded to the Syndicate. Figures like Shahjahan Sheikh are seemingly beyond the law because they are the lynchpins, at the local level, of this warped system. The first step for the government must be to act — and be seen to act — against those within its own ranks who are undermining the rule of law.

IGNORING PROTESTS, ASSAM GOVERNMENT TABLES BILL AGAINST ‘MAGICAL HEALING’ IN THE ASSEMBLY

Seeking to instil a scientific temper among the populace, the Assam government tabled the Healing (Prevention of Evil) Practices Bill, 2024, in the 126-member State Assembly on Wednesday. Parliamentary Affairs Minister Pijush Hazarika introduced the Bill on behalf of Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma, who had earlier said ‘magical healing’ practices needed to be banned in order to curb evangelism.

With this, Assam becomes the second BJP-ruled State in the Northeast after Arunachal Pradesh to have taken measures against magical healing.

The proposed legislation “aims to bring social awakening in the society and to create healthy, science-based knowledge and safe environment to protect human health against the evil and sinister practices thriving on ignorance and ill health of people to eradicate the non-scientific healing practices with ulterior motives for exploiting the innocent people and thereby destroying the fibre of public health”.

The Bill’s tabling on Wednesday came a little over a week after the State Cabinet resolved to have it introduced and faced an immediate backlash from the Assam Christian Forum, an umbrella body of church organisations in Assam, which had slammed the Chief Minister for his “misguided and misleading” statement equating magical healing with proselytisation.

“Magical healing is a dicey subject used to convert tribal people. We are going to pilot this Bill because we believe the religious status quo is very important for a proper balance. Let Muslims remain Muslims, Christians remain Christians, Hindus remain Hindus. We want to curb evangelism in Assam and in this regard, the banning of healing is an important milestone,” Mr. Sarma had said.

According to the forum, the government’s assertion that Christians engage in magical healing was misleading. “We must recognise that invoking divine blessings is intrinsic to religious worship, whether in temples, mosques, or churches,” it said.

The Assam Christian Forum said, “Healing, in our context, is not synonymous with proselytization. It is a compassionate response to human suffering, irrespective of religious affiliations.” It insisted that labelling prayer as magical healing “oversimplifies the profound spiritual dimensions of faith and life”.



The forum said numerous dispensaries and hospitals run by the church or Christian organisations operate within the recognised medical frameworks, providing essential services to the sick. It pointed out that Article 25 of the Constitution guarantees the right to practise one's chosen religion and the accusation against Christians undermines this constitutional protection.

HAVING PANCHAYATS AS SELF-GOVERNING INSTITUTIONS

Three decades have passed since the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments Acts came into effect, which envisaged that local bodies in India would function as institutions of local self government. As a follow up, the Ministry of Panchayati Raj was constituted in 2004 to strengthen rural local governments.

When it comes to analysing the status of devolution, it is evident that some States have forged ahead while many lag behind. The commitment of State governments towards decentralisation has been vital in making panchayati raj institutions an effective local governance mechanism at the grass-roots level.

The constitutional amendment has set forth specific details on fiscal devolution which includes the generation of own revenues. Emanating from the Central Act, various States Panchayati Raj Acts have made provisions for taxation and collection. Based on the provisions of these Acts, panchayats have made efforts to generate their own resources to the maximum extent. Participatory planning and budgeting were the end result of such interventions by the Ministry.

That "Panchayats earn only 1% of the revenue through taxes", with the rest being raised as grants from the State and Centre was highlighted in a 'Datapoint' (Opinion page, The Hindu, February 5, 2024). It specifically points out that 80% of the revenue is from the Centre and 15 % from the States. This is an eye-opener for the proponents of decentralisation as the net result is that the revenue raised by panchayats is meagre even after 30 years of devolution initiatives.

Avenues for own source of revenue

The report of the expert committee constituted by the Ministry of Panchayati Raj on own source of revenue (OSR) of rural local bodies elaborates on the details of State Acts that have incorporated tax and non-tax revenue that can be collected and utilised by panchayats. Property tax, cess on land revenue, surcharge on additional stamp duty, tolls, tax on profession, advertisement, user charges for water and sanitation and lighting are the major OSRs where panchayats can earn maximum income. Panchayats are expected to establish a conducive environment for taxation by implementing appropriate financial regulations. This includes making decisions regarding the tax and non-tax bases, determining their rates, establishing provisions for periodic revisions, defining exemption areas, and enacting effective tax management and enforcement laws for collection

The huge potential for non-tax revenue includes fees, rent, and income from investment sales and hires charges and receipts. There are also innovative projects that can generate OSR. This covers income from rural business hubs, innovative commercial ventures, renewable energy projects, carbon credits. Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) funds and donations.

The role of gram sabhas

Gram sabhas have a significant role in fostering self-sufficiency and sustainable development at the grass-roots level by leveraging local resources for revenue generation. They can be engaged



in planning, decision-making, and implementation of revenue-generating initiatives that range from agriculture and tourism to small-scale industries. They have the authority to impose taxes, fees, and levies, directing the funds towards local development projects, public services, and social welfare programmes. Through transparent financial management and inclusive participation, gram sabhas ensure accountability and foster community trust, ultimately empowering villages to become economically independent and resilient. Thus, gram sabhas need to promote entrepreneurship, and foster partnerships with external stakeholders to enhance the effectiveness of revenue generation efforts

In several States, gram panchayats lack the authority to collect taxes, while in numerous others, intermediate and district panchayats are not delegated the responsibility of tax collection. When gram panchayats collect 89% of own taxes, the intermediate panchayats collect 7% and the district panchayats a nominal amount of 5%. There is a need to demarcate OSR for the entire three-tier panchayats to ensure equitable sharing.

There are several factors behind the general aversion towards generating own income. With the increase in the allocation of Central Finance Commission (CFC) grants, panchayats are evincing less interest in the collection of OSR. The allocation for rural local bodies from the 10th and 11th CFC was ₹4,380 crore and ₹8,000 crore, respectively. But in the 14th and 15th CFCs there was a huge increase by way of allocating ₹2,00,202 and ₹2,80,733 crore, respectively. The tax collected in 2018-19 was ₹3,12,075 lakh which diminished in 2021-2022 to ₹2,71,386 lakh. The non-tax collected for the same period was ₹2,33,863 lakh and ₹2,09,864 lakh. At one time, panchayats were in competition to raise OSR for their commitment to fulfil basic needs. This has now given place to dependency on grants allocated through central and State finance commissions. Some States have the policy of incentivisation by providing matching grants but which were sparingly implemented. Panchayats also have no need of penalising defaulters as they believe that OSR has not been regarded as an income that is linked with panchayat finance.

Overcoming the dependency syndrome

Despite every enabling factor to raise revenue, panchayats confront several impediments in resource mobilisation: the 'freebie culture' rampant in society is the cause for the antipathy in paying taxes. Elected representatives feel that imposing taxes would alter their popularity adversely. Here, the answer is clear. There is a need to educate elected representatives and the public on the significance of raising revenue to develop panchayats as self-governing institutions. Ultimately, the dependency syndrome for grants has to be minimised and in due course, panchayats will be able to survive on their own resources. Panchayats can only achieve such a state of affairs when there are dedicated efforts in all tiers of governance, which includes even the State and central level.

EXPRESS VIEW ON FARMERS-CENTRE TALKS: KEEP THE DOOR OPEN

Farmer unions have rejected the Centre's offer of assured minimum support price (MSP) linked to the cultivation of pulses, maize and cotton, which are less water-consuming crops than paddy, wheat and sugarcane. The unions' decision is disappointing. Farmers — not just in Punjab and Haryana, but even MP and Telangana — have a point when they say that they have little incentive today to grow maize, pulses, oilseeds or cotton in the absence of proper MSP procurement by government agencies. This is unlike in paddy and wheat, where the government has to procure in order to meet the requirements of the public distribution system. There's no similar outlet for most other crops, in which case the likes of Nafed and Cotton Corporation of India would have to



sell the procured produce in the open market. The losses booked, if any, would then have to be borne by the Centre. Alternatively, the Centre could simply pay the difference between the market price and MSP for these commodities, and credit this directly into farmers' accounts.

Either way, the idea — linking MSP to crop diversification and procurement with no quantity limitations — is welcome. But it hasn't helped break the ice between the government and the unions, which are seeking a "legal guarantee" for MSP in all crops. That's an unreasonable demand, not the least because national elections are less than two months away. Enactment of any law to make MSP mandatory can be made only by the next, not current, government. Secondly, the government can "guarantee" MSP only on the crops and the quantities it procures. It cannot force private traders to pay any price above the supply-and-demand determined rate. The very fact that the government is ready to undertake open-ended MSP procurement of pulses, maize and cotton is something the unions should view as an opportunity. India is short in pulses and needs to produce more maize (for both livestock feed and as bio-fuel) and cotton (for fibre, oil and meal). And yields of these crops would be higher when grown in Punjab and Haryana.

The use of MSP for crop diversification will work better if the Centre stops open-ended procurement of paddy and wheat, along with a phase-out of water, electricity and fertiliser subsidies. This newspaper has consistently advocated a minimum income support — MIS, not MSP — for farmers. This can be in the form of per-acre or per-farmer direct benefit transfer. MSP procurement should be deployed only for limited purposes such as supplying the PDS or encouraging the cultivation of specific crops. As a general tool of farmer welfare, it would be a fiscal disaster. The Centre needs to do more spadework to explain this to the farmers but the trust deficit doesn't help. That's why, after the breakdown of talks late Monday, the government needs to keep the door open, frame the negotiations in a manner that assures farmers their welfare is the key imperative of any change in policy. In the run-up to the elections, its task is cut out.

ISRO SUCCESSFULLY LAUNCHES INSAT-3DS WEATHER SATELLITE

The GSLV-F14 carrying INSAT-3DS meteorological satellite was successfully launched on Saturday from the Satish Dhawan Space Centre in Sriharikota. About 18 minutes after the lift-off from the spaceport's launchpad, the GSLV-F14 deployed the INSAT-3DS into the intended geosynchronous transfer orbit.

The INSAT-3DS satellite is a follow-on mission of the third generation meteorological satellite from geostationary orbit. The satellite is an exclusive mission designed for enhanced meteorological observations, monitoring of land and ocean surfaces for weather forecasting, and disaster warning.

The INSAT-3DS satellite will augment meteorological services along with the presently operational INSAT-3D and INSAT-3DR in-orbit satellites.

The primary objectives of the mission are to monitor earth's surface, carry out oceanic observations and its environment in various spectral channels of meteorological importance, provide the vertical profile of various meteorological parameters of the atmosphere, provide data collection and dissemination capabilities from data collection platforms, and provide satellite-aided search and rescue services.



ISRO'S LATEST LAUNCH: WHY IS THE GSLV ROCKET NICKNAMED 'NAUGHTY BOY'?

The Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) on Saturday (February 17) launched a new-generation meteorological satellite, INSAT-3DS, meant to carry out enhanced monitoring of the Earth's surface, atmosphere, oceans and environment. INSAT-3DS will augment the capabilities of the existing two meteorological satellites, INSAT-3D and INSAT-3DR, and boost India's weather and climate prediction services, early warnings, and disaster management services.

But more than the satellite, it was the rocket that was the focus of attention of this launch. The INSAT-3DS satellite rode on the GSLV-F14 rocket to reach its intended geostationary orbit. GSLV is one of the three main rockets used by ISRO for carrying its satellites, the other two being PSLV and LVM3 (earlier called GSLV-MkII). GSLV has had a rather patchy track record thus far, because of which it has been described as the 'naughty boy'. On Saturday, however, it made a flawless flight, and deposited the satellite in the desired orbit.

But why naughty boy?

GSLV had flown 15 times before this, and four of these had been unsuccessful, a very high failure rate for any rocket. PSLV, the rocket that ISRO has used the maximum number of times, has failed only twice in its 60 launches, including the first time it was tried way back in 1993. The LVM3 rocket has flown seven times and never failed.

GSLV's most recent failure was in August 2021, when it was attempting to carry an earth observation satellite EOS-03 into space. Five minutes into the flight, it deviated from the scheduled trajectory, lost the power to carry on, and fell somewhere in the Andaman Sea.

It did have a successful launch after that, in May last year, but the uncertainty over its performance had not dissipated completely. That is the reason why Saturday's launch was watched more keenly for the rocket than the satellite it was carrying.

What is the problem?

GSLV is a more powerful rocket than PSLV and can carry much heavier satellites. It can carry more than 2,200 kg to geostationary orbits, and over 6,000 kg to the low earth orbits.

Its problems have mainly been with the cryogenic engine that powers the third and final stage of the flight. Cryogenics is the science relating to the behaviour of materials at very low temperatures. Cryogenic engines use liquid hydrogen as the main fuel. Hydrogen, the most efficient rocket fuel, is very difficult to handle in its natural gaseous form, but manageable in liquid state. However, it liquifies only at very low temperatures, nearly 250 degrees Celsius below zero. The oxygen that is needed to burn this fuel also needs to be in liquid form. Oxygen is in liquid state at about 90 degrees Celsius below zero.

The GSLV uses a cryogenic engine that is reverse-engineered on a Russian design. The Russians had won a deal to supply cryogenic engines, and technology, to ISRO in the late 1980s, but that deal had come under pressure from the United States which claimed that it violated provisions of Missile Technology Control Regime, an international legal framework meant to stop the proliferation of missile technology.

The deal had to be thus called off. Russia did supply a few of those cryogenic engines but could not transfer the technology. India used those engines in some of its launches in the 2000s, and for



later flights, tried to reverse-engineer that engine on its own. It is this reverse-engineered engine, used in the GSLV rockets, that has caused a few headaches for ISRO.

What about indigenous cryogenic technology?

In the meanwhile, India has managed to develop its own cryogenic engine as well, a result of decades of research and development. This engine has an entirely Indian design, developed within ISRO, and uses a different process to burn the fuel. It is closer to the designs of the Ariane rockets that were used by ISRO till a few years ago to launch its heavier satellites.

This indigenously developed cryogenic engine is deployed in LVM3, ISRO's most powerful rocket so far, which carried the Chandrayaan-2 and Chandrayaan-3 missions, among others. LVM3 has had seven flights till now, without any trouble. ISRO scientists, not surprisingly, have a much better grip on this home-grown technology.

Saturday's successful launch has put away the question marks on the GSLV rocket for the time being, but a more crucial test awaits it in a few weeks' time when it gets ready to carry the NISAR (NASA-ISRO Synthetic Aperture Radar) satellite. NISAR, a first of its kind collaboration between ISRO and NASA, would be the most prestigious mission for the GSLV so far.

THE NEXT FRONTIER

Space used to be the final frontier but its increasing exploration has changed that, replacing a romantic notion with narratives with financial, socio-economic, and geopolitical implications. Space technologies and space flight are expensive, risky endeavours that only national agencies were suited to engage in for decades. This is no longer true as private sector players are increasingly expected to complement, augment, and/or lead the way by identifying market opportunities and innovating rapidly. India started on this path in 2020 with state-led reforms that opened its space sector to private companies, then releasing the 'Geospatial Guidelines' and later the 'Indian Space Policy', creating the Indian National Space Promotion and Authorisation Centre (IN-SPACe), and passing the Telecommunications Act 2023 that, among other departures from the Indian Telegraph Act, 1885, provided for satellite broadband services. On February 21, the government opened the door to 100% foreign direct investments (FDI) in the "manufacturing of components and systems/sub-systems for satellites, ground segment and user segment" — up to 74% in satellite-manufacturing, operations, and data products; and up to 49% in launch vehicles, space ports, and their corresponding systems. As such, by stepping out of the way and allowing substantial FDI via the automatic route, the government has taken the logical next step in spurring the contributions of private space flight operators, technology-developers, and application designers to the national space economy, in line with ambitions outlined in the Space Policy.

The decision gives India the ability to take advantage of its less vitiated foreign ties to catch up with China's more advanced position as a space power. While the Chinese programme benefits from not-inconsiderable private sector participation, its ability to attract foreign investments is hamstrung by its belligerent foreign policies and the Xi Jinping administration's plan to modernise the military by, among other things, adapting civilian technologies for military use, though other countries, including the U.S., have similar policies. According to IN-SPACe chairman Pawan K. Goenka, a "significant" slice of the \$37.1 billion that the space sector raised worldwide in 2021-23 went to space start-ups. Against this extended backdrop, new investments can add to India's space economy by improving start-ups' access to talent and capital; effecting a better balance between



upstream and downstream opportunities, versus the current skew in favour of the former; boosting local manufacturing; and improving investor confidence. Finally, to sustain these winds of change, the government must keep the regulatory environment clear, reduce red tape, increase public support, and ease Indian companies' ability to access foreign markets.

KASHMIR'S DRY WINTER

Kashmir recorded an unusual weather pattern this winter. Many saw it as a fallout of the global El Nino effect, which set off warmer weather patterns during winters in other parts of the world too. In Kashmir, the peak winter months of December and January mostly passed without heavy snowfall, especially in the plains of the Valley. The dry weather was unusual for the 40-day harsh Chila-i-Kalan, which usually starts from December 20. The dry spell disappointed tourists hoping for a snow wonderland, Gulmarg, in north Kashmir. Ski enthusiasts, from India and abroad, opted for slopes outside the country in December and January. It was only in the last week of January that the region experienced snow.

According to the meteorological (MeT) department, this January was one of the driest and warmest in the last 43 years for most of the weather stations of Jammu and Kashmir. The mean maximum temperature in Kashmir was about five degrees above the normal for the period, according to MeT figures.

The warm weather spurred early blooming of flowers and orchards, especially apples. Experts worry that early flowering of apple orchards could have an impact on apple industry this year, as the fruit's size and colour could be affected. The apple industry contributes 6.5% - 7% to the Gross State Domestic Product of Jammu and Kashmir, with over 35 lakh people dependent on it. Jammu and Kashmir accounts for 73% of the total apple production in the country at around 22 lakh tonnes. Many now fear a fall in production this year as they wait to see the effects of the disrupted winter.

EXPRESS VIEW ON AIR POLLUTION: EL NINO, LA NINA

A new study has linked air pollution over cities like Delhi and Mumbai to external factors like El Nino and La Nina, and climate change. This is the first time that such external phenomena have been noticed to have an impact over air quality in Indian cities. To be sure, these external factors do not generate any new sources of pollution. But they have the potential to influence the distribution of pollutants over different regions by altering meteorological conditions like wind patterns and temperatures.

The study found that the fact that Delhi air was cleaner than usual, and Mumbai air dirtier than usual in the winter of 2022 could, in part, be explained by the record-breaking La Nina event in the Pacific Ocean, which was persisting for the third consecutive year at that time. The study also suggested that under climate change scenarios, expected to exacerbate the strengths and frequencies of El Nino and La Nina kind of events, such external influences might have a bigger role to play in the distribution of air pollutants over Indian cities.

These influences are pretty weak as of now. As the study suggests, only very strong El Nino or La Nina events are likely to have any significant impact on the local meteorological conditions. But this could still have implications for India's efforts to clean up its air. The influences could potentially grow stronger under climate change scenarios as the study suggests, and that would mean that clean-up measures would face another hurdle that is completely beyond human



control. This could result in entirely unexpected scenarios, as was seen in Mumbai in the 2022 winter, something the cities are not prepared for.

Tackling the emissions of pollutants at source still remains the most effective way of addressing air pollution. Air in Indian cities is dirty because the baseload emissions are very high. Once in a while, favourable meteorological conditions might help in reducing the impacts, but there is no short-cut to cutting down on baseload emissions. Fancy, or quick fix, solutions like artificial rain or odd-even schemes are nothing more than window dressing, and quite ineffective at that. The study also recommends that the focus of the government must remain on long-term strategies to reduce emissions from the sources themselves and not rely on quick fix solutions. That would be a win-win solution for both air quality and climate change, it says.

CBSE'S OPEN BOOK EXAM PLAN: WHAT IS IT, WHY NOW, HOW IT CAN IMPACT STUDENTS

The Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) has proposed a pilot study to check the feasibility of open book exams for Classes 9 to 12.

The pilot will be held in select schools in November-December for subjects like English, Mathematics and Science for Classes 9 and 10, and English, Mathematics and Biology for Classes 11 and 12. The CBSE has proposed this form of assessment based on the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) released last year.

Through this pilot, the Board aims to study the time taken by students to complete such tests and gather feedback from teachers and students. The pilot test will be designed and developed by June, for which the CBSE has sought Delhi University's help.

What is an open book exam?

In an open book exam (OBE), students are allowed to refer to their books and notes to answer questions.

OBEs can be either of a restricted type or a free type. In a restricted open book assessment, only the study material approved by the exam-conducting authority is allowed during the exam. In a free type, students can bring any material they find relevant.

Unlike a closed book exam, the test questions in OBEs are structured in a way that students have to apply concepts, instead of just copying information from the available material. They aim to test whether a student understands the big picture and can apply analytical skills on the concepts learnt.

Is this a new concept for Indian students?

Contrary to popular assumption, open-book exams are not a new idea. In 2014, CBSE had introduced an Open Text Based Assessment (OTBA) to relieve the students from the burden of mugging up, and acquiring skills of information processing.

Back then, OTBA was introduced in Class 9 for Hindi, English, Mathematics, Science and Social Science, and final examination of Class 11 in subjects such as Economics, Biology and Geography. Students were allowed to refer to learning material provided to them four months ahead of the exam.



The Board, however, discontinued the practice in the 2017-18 academic year, because of its inability to cultivate “critical abilities” among students.

In higher education, OBEs are fairly common. In 2019, the All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE) allowed open book exams in engineering colleges based on the recommendation of an advisory body.

During the pandemic, several Central universities like Delhi University, Jamia Millia Islamia, Jawaharlal Nehru University and Aligarh Muslim University conducted an open book test to assess students. IIT Delhi, IIT Indore and IIT Bombay also conducted online OBEs.

More recently, Kerala’s higher education exam reforms commission recommended the open book format, but only for internal or practical examinations.

Are open book exams easier?

Contrary to popular opinion, open book assessments are not easier than the traditional form of examination. They are designed to test learning beyond facts and definitions.

For teachers too, setting up questions for an open book exam can be a challenge, as, unlike a traditional exam, the questions cannot be direct.

Why has CBSE proposed the open book exam now?

The CBSE’s proposal falls in line with the larger reforms planned in the school education system. While there is no mention of the open book examination per se in the National Education Policy 2020, one of the primary reforms it suggests is transition from rote memorisation to competency-based learning. For instance, a student should be able to not just learn the concept of photosynthesis but also demonstrate the process and the impact of sunlight on plants through a practical project.

Similarly, the National Curriculum Framework for School Education also highlights the need to reform the current assessment process, which is at its best “focused on measuring rote learning” and at its worst “creates fear”. The NCF SC suggests assessments that can accommodate different learning styles of students, provide constructive feedback, and support learning outcomes.

What does research say on open book exams?

According to a 2021 study conducted among medical students of All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) Bhubaneswar, open book exams have the benefit of being less stressful.

A pilot study, published in Cambridge University Press, was performed to check the feasibility and acceptability of online open-book examination in 2020. The study concluded that among the 98 students, 21.4% failed and 78.6% passed. “Only 55 students volunteered to give feedback; most agreed that the best advantage of this assessment was that it was stress-free,” the study report said. The disadvantage most students complained of was network connectivity issues.

A 2021 study conducted by Dhananjay Ashri and Bibhu P Sahoo on the use of open book exams for the students of DU stated that even though mean marks scored by the students in an OBE is higher than in a closed book exam, the university did not focus on developing the skills required for a student to crack an OBE. Another study conducted by Nirma University’s Nitin Pillai and Mamta Pillai, published in June 2022, stressed on the need to train students on how to write an



open book exam and developing the necessary skills of analysing concepts to get the benefits of OBE.

KEEP IT WHOLESOME

Health is seldom uni-dimensional, and it must not be seen as such. Government policy, particularly, must fathom the entirety of the issue, and assimilate multiple aspects in a field strategy, for optimum realisation of the intended goal. Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman's announcement during the presentation of the interim Budget that the government plans to encourage vaccination against cervical cancer for girls aged nine to 14, is no doubt a step in the right direction. While the scheme will be fleshed out post elections, it is also time to question if any programme to handle cervical cancer would be wholesome if it did not assimilate a screening aspect. Cancer of the cervix (literally, the neck of the womb) is unique among cancers because almost all the cases (99%, according to the World Health Organization) are linked to infection with the human papillomavirus (HPV), a common virus transmitted through sexual contact. While most HPV infections resolve spontaneously and the women remain symptom-free, persistent infection can lead to cervical cancer. It is the second leading cause of cancer-related deaths among women in India (over 77,000 annually), and is estimated to be the second most frequent cancer among Indian women between 15 and 44 years. While the good news is couched in the availability of a vaccine, the sobering fact is that the average national prevalence of cervical cancer screening hovers at just under 2% and outcomes depend on the stage of detection.

Ironically, cervical cancer can be easily diagnosed in a public health setting with minimal tools — the human eye, a dilution of white vinegar, and a dab of Lugol's iodine. These are known as VIA and VILI tests and help look for precancerous lesions and cancer, much before an advanced stage of the disease can be picked up with cytology. A simple, short procedure, cryotherapy, can then be done while the patient is awake, to destroy the abnormal growth. Given that it is easy to prevent, identify and treat cervical cancer, it is unacceptable that so many women are dying of the disease. As the government rolls out its vaccination programme, it must also mandate screening right at the primary health centre, and if abnormalities are identified, offer cryotherapy right then. It is unlikely that vaccination of young girls alone will have a far-reaching impact in the short and medium term. The only way to prevent deaths is to deploy the entire assembly of tools as part of a national cervical cancer control programme, accessible to all women, irrespective of age, education, affordability or social status.

DONOR GAMETES ARE ALLOWED: WHAT THE NEW RULE ON SURROGACY SAYS

The Centre amended the surrogacy Rules on Wednesday to allow couples to use donor eggs or donor sperm for surrogacy. This overturned a previous amendment made in March 2023 that banned the use of donor gametes.

The new notification states: "In case when the District Medical Board certifies that either husband or wife constituting the intending couple suffers from medical condition necessitating use of donor gamete, then surrogacy using donor gamete is allowed."

While the relaxation is for "intending couple", the notification said that if a divorced or widowed woman opts for surrogacy, the egg has to come from the mother: "Single woman (widow or divorcee) undergoing surrogacy must use self-eggs and donor sperms to avail surrogacy procedure."



What are the implications of this amendment?

Prior to the March 2023 notification — which insisted on the use of both eggs and sperm from the intending couple — surrogacy rules allowed the use of donor eggs, but not sperm.

The March 2023 notification was challenged in the Supreme Court by a woman with Mayer-Rokitansky-Kuster-Hauser (MRKH) Syndrome, a rare congenital disorder that affects the reproductive system and can cause infertility.

Experts said the new amendment will keep surrogacy open to older women as well as those who cannot produce eggs because of certain medical conditions. “The women who opt for surrogacy are likely to be older, having tried other methods of getting pregnant before considering surrogacy. This is the reason some of them would need a donor egg. This is a very positive decision,” Dr Anjali Malpani, an IVF specialist from Mumbai, said.

The quality and number of eggs go down with age, Dr Malpani said. While the decline accelerates after the age of 35 years, doctors recommend definitely using a donor egg after the age of 45 years.

Dr Nutan Agarwal, head of the department of gynaecology at Artemis Hospital, said the need for donor eggs and surrogacy will arise in very few women. “Surrogacy with donor egg will be required only for women who do not have a uterus — or have conditions that affect the functioning of the uterus — along with certain conditions affecting their ability to produce eggs,” Dr Agarwal, who was formerly a professor at AIIMS, said. “This happens mainly in women with gonadal dysgenesis — congenital conditions that affect the entire reproductive functioning,” she said.

Dr Malpani said: “Less than 1% of women dealing with infertility would require both a donor egg and surrogacy. As it is, surrogacy is required by very few — maybe 2 out of 100 patients who come to me.”

What are the contentions with surrogacy for single women?

The Act allows access to surrogacy only to two categories of single women — those who are widowed or divorced. Even in these cases, the regulations stipulate that the woman’s own eggs have to be used; this was underlined by the recent notification as well.

These provisions have been challenged in the Delhi High Court by a 44-year-old unmarried woman. The petitioner has questioned the association of marital status with eligibility for surrogacy. She has also challenged the provision mandating the use of the mother’s own eggs, stating that at her age, the use of donor eggs are recommended.

The restriction on access to surrogacy for single persons, live-in couples, and LGBTQ couples too have been criticised. Dr Malpani said: “These days we see many single women wanting to get pregnant and raise a child on their own. It is a shame that in this day and age they still do not have access to surrogacy if needed.”

In general, for which categories of women is surrogacy intended?

Surrogacy is mainly intended for women who have a missing or abnormal uterus, or have had the uterus surgically removed due to a medical condition. It can also be availed by women who have failed to conceive after multiple rounds of IVF, or women living with conditions that make it impossible for them to carry the pregnancy to term, or which make a pregnancy life-threatening.



Dr Malpani said: “Surrogacy is necessary for women who have a missing or abnormal uterus. It may also be required for women who have a thin endometrial layer. “If the endometrium is thinner than 8 mm, the woman will not be able to carry the pregnancy to term. It can be because of polyps that the body thinks of as foreign object or because of adhesions in the uterus. We usually see it in women who have undergone an abortion that is not done properly. Medicines can help, but if they don’t, these women would need surrogacy.”

According to Dr Malpani, the failure of multiple rounds of IVF may not medically necessitate surrogacy. The success of IVF — where the egg and sperm are fertilised outside the body and then implanted to the womb — is about 40% for women under the age of 35 years. “Hence, pregnancy can happen with three or four rounds. But the failure of IVF is not always because of a problem with the womb, and in such cases surrogacy is not medically necessary,” Dr Malpani said.

Dr Agarwal said: “Women should not opt for surrogacy unnecessarily. There are several complications with it such as the child inheriting the immune system of the surrogate and not receiving breast milk during the initial months. More importantly, the womb milieu — nutrition and hormones of the surrogate — determines the long term health of the child.

HOW VARIOUS COFFEE VARIETIES DIFFER IN TASTE

How did the word coffee come about? Coffee came from Ethiopia, where they called it qahve. Late Dr K.T. Achaya, in his book ‘A Historical Dictionary of Indian Food’ (Oxford University Press, 1998) mentioned that coffee seeds were brought to India by Arab traders for use by the gentry. Arabs introduced coffee plantations in South India and Sri Lanka. And a Sufi, Baba Budan, grew coffee plants around Chikamagaluru, Karnataka. Starting in 1830, British pioneers planted coffee estates in two varieties of coffee plants — Coffee arabica at high altitudes, and Coffee robusta in lower reaches. (Arabica, because Arab traders traded qahve to Europe; Robusta, as this variety from West Africa is more resistant to disease). As I had mentioned in my earlier articles on coffee (December 8, 2019, and May 28, 2023, on South Indian filter coffee), coffee is a healthy drink particularly when mixed with hot milk. Many Americans drink black coffee with no added milk.

In the city called Kumbakonam in Tamil Nadu, the residents who are fond of coffee, call their coffee Kumbakonam Degree Coffee. They claim that this is unmatched by any other rival in taste. They further say that this coffee is pure Arabica, and not mixed with chicory, which is usual when we buy coffee beans or powder in department stores and coffee shops. Likewise, the Coffee shop in Secunderabad from where I buy my coffee, offers pure Arabica, as well as Arabica mixed with chicory for those who want it that way.

What then is chicory? It too is a variety of coffee, and India is the third largest producer of chicory. In our country, it is grown in the Far Eastern states (Assam, Meghalaya, Sikkim). While some claim that chicory might be nutritionally better than Arabica, due to its lower content of caffeine. This molecule stimulates the central nervous system, but there is no conclusive evidence for it.

Andhra Pradesh is famous for its special coffee grown in the hilly region of Araku Valley, which they claim is the best coffee not only in India but also abroad. It is pure Arabica. Very good Arabica is also grown around the Shevaroy hills of Tamil Nadu and the Manjarabad Fort, Karnataka. Many youngsters in big cities across India buy and drink Starbucks coffee, and also at Café Coffee Day. Starbucks uses pure Arabica alone, while it is not clear whether Café Coffee Day uses pure Arabica or a mixture.



SAVIOUR OF THE SEA MERCHANT

From Ajanta Cave 1 in Aurangabad district, Maharashtra, comes the famous mural of a rather delicate-looking Avalokiteshvara Padmapani, a bodhisattva who holds a lotus flower in his hand and tilts his head to the side, as if trying to hear the cries of people in distress. More elaborate stone images of the lotus-bearing deity are in nearby Ellora Cave 7, or in Cave 90 of the Kanheri Caves in the western suburbs of Mumbai. At both these locations, he is surrounded by images of distress: fire, theft, demons, elephants, lions, snakes, monkeys and shipwreck. These are the eight great perils (ashta-maha-bhaya) that Avalokiteshvara rescued merchants from, making him a popular deity from around the 6th century CE, in almost all denominations of Buddhism.

The idea of the bodhisattva, the one who delays his liberation until he rescues all the afflicted people of the world, probably originated in Gandhara, around the 3rd century CE. The lotus-bearing Padmapani was often paired with the more fierce looking, weapon-bearing Vajrapani, guardian of the Buddha. If Padmapani granted prosperity to end suffering, Vajrapani granted security. This way of thinking was very different from the original tenets of Buddhism. Originally, Buddha emphasised outgrowing desire itself to end suffering. This bodhisattva, however, indulged that desire, until people were ready to take the tougher path. Inasmuch as this, he showed more compassion than contemplation.

By the 6th century CE, the image of the lotus-bearing one spread to South India, and from there to Southeast Asia, where he became renowned as the saviour god of Buddhist merchants. Strictly speaking, Avalokiteshvara is a deity of the later Mahayana school of Buddhism. However, he was popular across all schools of Buddhism owing to his compassionate and helpful nature. With his multiple heads and arms, it was easy to identify this formidable being.

Through the tempest

The story goes that Avalokiteshvara was so pained by the sorrow of people that his head burst into 11 pieces. The Buddha turned each piece into a head in itself. Thus Avalokiteshvara came to have 11 heads. The oldest stone expression of this is found in the Kanheri Caves. This happened 1,400 years ago indicating shifts in Buddhism, mirroring shifts in trading patterns.

Buddhism has mainly been a religion of merchants, who travelled across vast networks of trade routes in South Asia and beyond. That is why Buddhist sites are located at spots where merchants would halt to rest, to pray and even to strike business deals. The earliest Buddhist sites in Bharhut, Sanchi, even Mathura and Gandhara, are along trade routes stretching from the Ganga river valley to the north, i.e., the Himalayas (Uttara-patha), and to the south, i.e., the Vindhyas (Dakshin-patha).

Before the 5th century, India had trade relations with Rome: Roman coins and artefacts have been found on the western coast. After the 5th century, trade expanded to Southeast Asia. Ships from West Asia, taking advantage of the monsoon winds, sailed to ports such as Sopara near Mumbai and Muziris in Kerala. From here, goods were transported over the Western Ghats through the Naneghat pass, and then along the Godavari river to the Godavari delta on the eastern coast. Once here, ships would travel to Java, and from there to Cambodia and finally, China. They would avoid going around the southern tip of India due to the barrier of the Rama Setu. It was safer to travel over land across peninsular India using bullock carts and elephants. But this journey too was fraught with dangers and obstacles, and hence, the need for a saviour god.



Female manifestations

Older Buddhist sites show stories of Buddha and his previous lives on panels in stupas. Buddha is either aniconic or shown seated, with arms on his lap. Later images show bodhisattvas with many heads and many arms, that hear and help an infinite number of beings. Sometimes, Avalokiteshvara carries the image of Buddha on his head. This is not Gautama Buddha of the older Buddhism, but Amitabha Buddha of the newer Mahayana Buddhism that spoke of many Buddhas existing in different heavens, surrounded by their own bodhisattvas.

In Kanheri and Ellora, Avalokiteshvara sometimes has a female deity called Tara by his side, who also holds a lotus flower. This is the first time a female form is acknowledged as divine in the Buddhist realm. This inclusion happens over a 1,000 years after the Buddha's time. Some say Tara is the consort of Avalokiteshvara. But in many places, she becomes his female form.

To the east, in Odisha, at the Ratnagiri monastery on the banks of the Mahanadi, there is an 8th century image of Tara standing alone surrounded by the eight great perils, saving those who call out to her. Her cult would eventually spread from Odisha to Tibet, via Bengal. In China, Avalokiteshvara is worshipped as a goddess called Guanyin. Even today, the Chinese write letters asking her to help them solve problems.

JNANPITH FOR GULZAR, SANSKRIT SCHOLAR RAMBHADRACHARYA

Celebrated Urdu poet Gulzar and Sanskrit scholar Jagadguru Rambhadracharya have been selected for the 58th Jnanpith Award, considered by many to be the country's highest literary honour.

Sampoorn Singh Kalra, popularly known as Gulzar, is considered one of the finest Urdu poets of his generation. He is also known for his work in Hindi cinema. Rambhadracharya is a renowned Hindu spiritual leader, educator and writer of more than 240 books and texts, including four epics. He is the founder and head of Tulsi Peeth at Chitrakoot in Madhya Pradesh. "It has been decided to give the award (for 2023) to eminent writers from two languages: Sanskrit litterateur Jagadguru Rambhadracharya and well-known Urdu litterateur Shri Gulzar," the Jnanpith selection committee said in a statement.

The Jnanpith Award is presented by the Bharatiya Jnanpith, which was established in 1944. The award carries a cash component of ₹11 lakh, a statue of Vagdevi, and a citation. It is the second time that the award is being given for Sanskrit and the fifth time for Urdu.

Gulzar, born in 1934, received the Sahitya Akademi Award for Urdu in 2002, the Dadasaheb Phalke Award in 2013, and the Padma Bhushan in 2004. He has also won five National Film Awards. He penned the lyrics for the song Jai Ho from the film Slumdog Millionaire that received an Oscar in 2009 and a Grammy in 2010. He is known for his work in Maachhis, Omkara, Dil Se, Guru, and Aandhi. Gulzar has also directed classics such as Koshish, Parichay, Mausam, and Ijaazat, as well as the television serial Mirza Ghalib.

The Bharatiya Jnanpith, in a statement, said: "Gulzar has been setting new milestones in the field of literature. In poetry, he invented a new genre 'Triveni' which is a non-mukaffa poem of three lines. Gulzar has always created something new through his poetry. For some time now he has also been paying serious attention to children's poetry".



Rambhadracharya, a polyglot who speaks 22 languages, is one of the four Jagadguru Ramanandacharyas of the Ramananda sect and has been holding this position since 1982. A poet and writer in several languages, he received the Padma Vibhushan in 2015.

EXPRESS VIEW ON AMEEN SAYANI: VOICE OF A NATION

In a 1945 letter to Kulsum Sayani, an educationist who published the fortnightly newsletter *Rahber*, her mentor Mahatma Gandhi wrote, “Beti Kulsum, I like the mission of *Rahber* to unite Hindi and Urdu. May it succeed.” *Rahber*, since its inception in 1940, was published in Hindustani — an amalgamation of Hindi and Urdu — at a time when the conflict over the superiority of one language over the other was fomenting. Hindustani was Gandhi’s solution. Kulsum Sayani’s young son Ameen imbibed his first lesson on the power of language then — it could transcend the constraints of identity.

Soon after, since 1951, Ameen Sayani’s warm and charming voice entered Indian homes like a close friend with Binaca Geetmala, over boxy Murphy radio sets and Philips transistors. Sayani spoke in Hindustani while taking listeners on a journey through film music. What was interesting was the way he used Hindustani or what he called “bol-chaal ki bhasha” in a newly-independent country recovering from the scars of Partition. “I promised to myself: I was naye Bharat ka naya naujawan. I will speak in Hindustani,” he said in a 2016 interview to this newspaper.

In 1952, B V Keskar, then I&B minister banned film music on radio, calling it “erotic and vulgar”. Sayani began broadcasting his shows from Radio Ceylon in Sri Lanka. It was a radical idea — to not be stymied into silence — and the popularity of the show continued unabated. It was Aruna Asaf Ali, who after her conversation with Jawaharlal Nehru, brought the show back to India in the late ’50s. The show went on for 42 years and was revived in 2014 for an FM channel. With Sayani’s demise on Tuesday, India has lost not just a man who revolutionised radio presentation, but a voice that bound the nation together.



DreamIAS



BUSINESS & ECONOMICS

RED SEA BLUES

For the second successive month, India's goods exports grew last month, albeit with a mild 3.1% uptick from a 1% rise in December. This marks only the fourth month of growth in outbound shipments in 2023-24, and the overall value of merchandise exports this year is down 4.9% at about \$354 billion. While January's \$36.9 billion exports are above this year's monthly average, they are 4% lower than December's tally. To be clear, such sequential, post-Christmas demand dip is not unusual and all of the decline cannot be ascribed to the elephant haunting global trade corridors — the Houthi rebels' orchestrated disruptions of shipping lines' operations around the Red Sea hitting goods flow to the European and U.S. markets. January's trade numbers, to that extent, suggest that the impact so far is not overtly worrying, although a few key segments seem to be feeling some pain. Engineering goods' exports growth faltered to a little over 4% in January while the labour-intensive gems and jewellery slipped into a mild contraction, dropping 1.3%.

Apart from the lack of a broader discernible impact from the Red Sea shenanigans yet, the sharp decline in the goods trade deficit is notable as it hit a nine-month low of \$17.5 billion — just three months after touching a record high of nearly \$30 billion. The flip side is that the recent import bill compression has been driven by some slack in imports of items such as project goods and electronics which suggest weakening of investment and consumption impulses in the economy. The government has exuded confidence that India will match its record export performance of \$776 billion in 2022-23, this year as well, despite multiple global headwinds. On the goods front, though, attaining last year's \$451 billion tally looks difficult, especially with cooling commodity prices. Exports of services, reckoned to be up 6.3% this year, may still help bring the overall export figure for the year close to \$760-odd billion if they sustain this pace. The outlook for the coming year remains mired in uncertainty and risks. There are weak or mixed signals about demand trends from economies such as the U.S. and Germany, even as the U.K. recorded the sharpest sequential jump in retail sales since July 2020. Interest rate cuts remain elusive for now. Finally, despite the U.S.-led Operation Prosperity Guardian to protect commercial traffic through the Red Sea, shippers have warned that the Houthi factor could compel the use of longer routes for several more months. Longer delivery times apart, the spiked shipping rates and operational costs of exports could force some price hikes and deter already frail demand in some markets and make prospective buyers look for more competitive options for Indian wares.

ON FINANCIAL DEVOLUTION AMONG STATES

The story so far:

Recently various Opposition-ruled States especially from south India have claimed that they have not been receiving their fair share as per the present scheme of financial devolution. They have raised issues about their less than proportionate share of receipt in tax revenue when compared to their contribution towards tax collection.

What is divisible pool of taxes?

Article 270 of the Constitution provides for the scheme of distribution of net tax proceeds collected by the Union government between the Centre and the States. The taxes that are shared between the Centre and the States include corporation tax, personal income tax, Central GST, the



Centre's share of the Integrated Goods and Services Tax (IGST) etc. This division is based on the recommendation of the Finance Commission (FC) that is constituted every five years as per the terms of Article 280. Apart from the share of taxes, States are also provided grants-in-aid as per the recommendation of the FC. The divisible pool, however, does not include cess and surcharge that are levied by the Centre.

How is the Finance Commission constituted?

The FC is constituted every five years and is a body that is exclusively constituted by the Union Government. It consists of a chairman and four other members who are appointed by the President. The Finance Commission (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act, 1951, has specified the qualifications for chairman and other members of the commission. The Union government has notified the constitution of the 16th Finance Commission under the chairmanship of Dr. Arvind Panagariya for making its recommendations for the period of 2026-31.

What is the basis for allocation?

The share of States from the divisible pool (vertical devolution) stands at 41% as per the recommendation of the 15th FC. The distribution among the States (horizontal devolution) is based on various criteria.

The criteria as per the 15th FC can be briefly explained as follows. 'Income distance' is the distance of a State's income from the State with highest per capita income which is Haryana. States with lower per capita income would be given a higher share to maintain equity among States. 'Population' is the population as per the 2011 Census. Till the 14th FC, weightage was given for the population as per the 1971 Census but that has been discontinued in the 15th FC. 'Forest and ecology' consider the share of dense forest of each State in the aggregate dense forest of all the States. 'The demographic performance' criterion has been introduced to reward efforts made by States in controlling their population. States with a lower fertility ratio will be scored higher on this criterion. 'Tax effort' as a criterion has been used to reward States with higher tax collection efficiency.

What are the issues?

The Constitutional scheme has always favoured a strong centre in legislative, administrative and financial relations. However, federalism is a basic feature and it is important that States don't feel short-changed when it comes to distribution of resources. While there are always political differences between the Union government and Opposition-ruled States that exacerbate the problem, there are genuine issues that need to be considered.

Firstly, cess and surcharge collected by the Union government is estimated at around 23% of its gross tax receipts for 2024-25, which does not form part of the divisible pool and hence not shared with the States. To provide a perspective, the total tax revenue for the year 2022-23 (actual), 2023-24 (revised estimates) and 2024-25 (Budget estimates) of the Union government is ₹30.5, ₹34.4 and ₹38.8 lakh crore respectively. The State's share was/is ₹9.5, ₹11.0 and ₹12.2 lakh crore respectively, which constitutes around 32% of the total tax receipts of the Centre which is way less than the 41% recommended by the 15th FC. Cess like the GST compensation cess is for the repayment of loans taken to compensate States for the shortfall in tax collection due to GST implementation for the period 2017-22. Some of these amounts are also used for centrally sponsored schemes that benefit the States. However, the States have no control over these components.



Secondly, the amount each State gets back for every rupee they contribute to Central taxes shows steep variation. The industrially developed States received much less than a rupee for every rupee they contributed as against States like Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. This is partly due to the fact that many corporations are headquartered in these State capitals where they would remit their direct taxes. However, this variation can also be attributed to the difference in GST collection among various States.

Third, the percentage share in the divisible pool of taxes has been reducing for southern States over the last six FCs. This is attributable to the higher weightage being given for equity (income gap) and needs (population, area and forest) than efficiency (demographic performance and tax effort). Finally, grants-in-aid as per the recommendation of the FC varies among various States. As per the 15th FC, there are revenue deficit, sector-specific and State-specific grants given to various States as well as grants to local bodies that are given based on population and area of States.

What can be the way forward?

It must be noted that States generate around 40% of the revenue and bear around 60% of the expenditure. The FC and its recommendations are meant to assess this imbalance and propose a fair sharing mechanism. It is the responsibility of all States to contribute towards the more equitable development of our country. However, there are three important reforms that may be considered for maintaining the balance between equity and federalism while sharing revenue.

Firstly, the divisible pool can be enlarged by including some portion of cess and surcharge in it. The Centre should also gradually discontinue various cesses and surcharges it imposes by suitably rationalising the tax slabs. Secondly, the weightage for efficiency criteria in horizontal devolution should be increased. GST being a consumption-based destination tax that is equally divided between the Union and the State means that State GST accrual (inclusive of Integrated GST settlement on inter-state sales) should be the same as the Central GST accrual from a State. Hence, relative GST contribution from States can be included as a criterion by providing suitable weightage in future FCs. Finally, similar to the GST council, a more formal arrangement for the participation of States in the constitution and the working of the FC should be considered.

These are measures that need to be implemented by the Centre after discussion with all the States. It is also imperative that the States uphold principles of fiscal federalism by devolving adequate resources to local bodies for vibrant and accountable development.

EXPRESS VIEW ON INFLATION IN INDIA: A GOOD REPORT CARD

A report on the state of the economy, prepared by economists at the RBI, presents an optimistic assessment about India's growth prospects. Based on high frequency indicators, it says that the economic momentum observed in the first half of the year is likely to have continued in the months thereafter. Growth for the third quarter (October-December) has been pegged at 7 per cent. This is higher than assessments by some analysts.

Considering that the National Statistical Office has projected growth at 7.3 per cent for the full year, this would imply a growth of around 7 per cent in the ongoing quarter (January-March) as well. The report is also optimistic on the inflation front, terming recent developments as "favourable". Retail inflation moderated in January, after being elevated in November and December. This continuing combination of steady growth momentum and moderate inflation is welcome news on the macroeconomic front.



On growth, there are several notable points. While some analysts continue to express concerns over the state of the rural economy, the NielsenIQ data cited in the report shows that the gap between rural and urban areas is narrowing — FMCG companies observed a 5.8 per cent growth in rural volumes and a 6.8 per cent growth in urban areas in the third quarter. Other indicators of private consumption such as passenger vehicles and two-wheelers are also showing healthy growth in both urban and rural areas.

Alongside, real estate and construction continue to witness robust growth driven by household investments in residential real estate and public sector capital expenditure. The report expects investments by the private corporate sector to pick up and “fuel the next round of growth”. In his comments in the recent monetary policy committee meeting, RBI Governor Shaktikanta Das has also expressed optimism about private investments, noting that the “private capex cycle has turned up”. However, so far, investment activity has picked up only in a few sectors, and questions over more productive forms of job creation remain.

There is reason for optimism on inflation. In January, retail inflation fell to 5.1 per cent, down from 5.69 per cent in December. While there are upside risks to food inflation, Skymet, the private weather forecaster, has predicted a normal south-west monsoon. Economists at the RBI believe that “inflation expectations may stabilise and edge down.” As per the RBI’s own forecasts, inflation is expected at around 4.5 per cent in 2024-25. Jayanth Varma, member MPC, notes that these inflation projections translate to a real interest rate of 2 per cent, which may be considered high at the current juncture. However, Governor Das, and other members of the MPC, believe that the “job on the inflation front” is not over. Over the coming months, if inflation falls in line with the central bank’s projections, it could open up space for policy to pivot.

THE RECENT REPORT ON LOCAL FINTECH PLAYERS

The story so far:

In its report presented to Parliament on February 8, the Standing Committee on Communications and Information Technology has raised concerns about the dominance of fintech apps owned by foreign entities in the Indian ecosystem and recommended that local players be promoted. It mentioned that the Unified Payments Interface (UPI) commanded a 73.5% share of the total digital payments in terms of volume in FY 2022-23. However, its share in terms of value was only 6.67% in the same period.

What does the report infer about the existing ecosystem?

The Committee in its report emphasised that digital payment apps must be effectively regulated as the use of digital platforms to make payments in India is on the rise. It noted that it will be more ‘feasible’ for regulatory bodies such as the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) and the National Payments Corporation of India (NPCI) to control local apps, as compared with foreign apps, which operate in multiple jurisdictions.

The Committee observed that fintech companies, apps and platforms that are owned by foreign entities, such as Walmart-backed PhonePe and Google Pay, dominate the Indian fintech sector. PhonePe commands the leading market share in volume terms, followed by Google Pay, at 46.91% and 36.39% respectively. This is for the period between October to November 2023. On the other hand, NPCI’s BHIM UPI’s market share (in terms of volume) stood at a mere 0.22%. NPCI’s data for December last year show that a total of 5,642.66 million transactions were initiated by



customers using PhonePe, while another 4,375 million used Google Pay and only about 24.30 million used BHIM.

The Committee's recommendations are also largely in tune with the NPCI issuing a 30% volume cap on transactions facilitated using UPI, back in November 2020. That is, the total number of transactions initiated by any third-party app (like PhonePe and Amazon Pay) individually, could not exceed 30% of the overall transactions made using the interfaces cumulatively over three proceeding months. Apps exceeding the specified cap were given two years to comply with the directive in a phased manner. The regulator had stated that it would help "address the risks and protect the UPI ecosystem as it further scales up." However, the timeline for compliance was extended in December 2022 to December 31, 2024. Elaborating on the rationale, the NPCI said, "In view of the significant potential of digital payments and the need for multi-fold penetration from its current state, it is imperative that other existing and new players (banks and non-banks) scale-up their consumer outreach for the growth of UPI and achieve overall market equilibrium."

What are the concerns about fraud?

While examining the different modes used by scamsters to dupe people and park illegal money, the Committee observed that fintech companies were also being used for money laundering. It was apprised of one such example — an Abu Dhabi-based app called Pyppl. The app was being administered by Chinese investment scamsters, it noted. This made it difficult for Indian law agencies to track the trail of money collected through scams on the platform.

The fraud to sales ratio, which represents the total number of fraudulent transactions in comparison to the total number of transactions in a financial year, has largely remained around 0.0015%. The trend is notwithstanding the rise in volume of the payment mode in the last five years. In the ongoing financial year (till September 2023) the figure stood at 0.0016%. The percentage of users affected by UPI frauds stood at 0.0189%.

What does it mean for the ecosystem?

Vijay Mani and Munjal Kamdar, Partners at Deloitte India, pointed to local fintech players having a "natural advantage" when it comes to understanding the customer, various ecosystem participants, the digital public infrastructure and broader market infrastructure. While foreign fin-techs enjoy the same advantage with respect to new technologies, techniques and global connectivity. "A suitably balanced mix to serve the Indian ecosystem needs to be allowed to evolve, and this mix may well vary across different areas such as payments, lending, wealth management, insurance, etc," the partners stated, adding, "In relation to this balance, we also note that the regulator is stressing on the criticality of accountability and compliance with local laws."

Mckinsey's Global Payments Report (September 2023) observed that instant payments in India were only expected to contribute less than 10% of future revenue growth because no fees are charged for the interface (UPI). It however, noted that "although UPI generates minimal transaction fees, these revenues still represent an uplift from no-fee cash events, and the paperless process eliminates the hidden costs of managing cash transactions," adding, "the associated change in consumer behaviour has enhanced security and increased access to digital commerce channels". For perspective, printing and ensuring availability of cash too entails certain costs for the exchequer, thus, the analogous comparison with transaction costs for digital payments.



CORPORATE SECTOR MUST RELIEVE GOVT OF CAPEX HEAVY LIFTING: RBI ARTICLE

The growth momentum seen in the Indian economy during the first half of financial year 2023-2024 (FY24) continues and the next leg of growth is likely to be fuelled by the capital expenditure from the corporate sector, an article published in the Reserve Bank of India's (RBI) monthly bulletin said. Expectations for a fresh round of capex by the corporate sector to take the baton from the government and fuel the next leg of growth are mounting, it added.

"The corporate sector must get its act together to relieve the government of capex heavy lifting and take advantage of the space ceded in financial markets by a lower budgeted borrowing programme and the easing of borrowing costs that has already begun in response to the Interim Budget for 2024-25, driven as it is by capex and consolidation," the 'State of the Economy' article published in the RBI's February bulletin said.

In the Interim Budget for 2024-25, the government announced a lower market borrowing for FY25 compared to FY24. It announced gross and net market borrowings during the next fiscal of Rs 14.13 lakh crore and Rs 11.75 lakh crore respectively, compared to Rs 15.4 lakh crore and Rs 11.8 lakh crore, respectively during FY24.

"Now that the private investments are happening at scale, the lower borrowings by the central government will facilitate larger availability of credit for the private sector," Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman said in her Interim Budget 2024-25 speech.

During the February monetary policy announcement, RBI Governor Shaktikanta Das said that the investment cycle is gaining steam, aided by sustained thrust on government capex; increasing capacity utilisation; rising flow of resources to the commercial sector; and policy support from schemes, such as production linked incentive (PLI). Revival in private corporate investment is also underway, he said. The RBI's survey suggests that investment intentions of private corporates remain upbeat and both services and infrastructure firms are optimistic about overall business conditions, Das added. The State of the Economy article has been prepared by RBI Deputy Governor Michael Patra and other central bank officials. The RBI said the views published in the article are of the authors and not of the institution.

The article said that the balance sheets of corporate are healthy on the back of high profits, with leverage remaining constant or improving and the return ratio at a multi-year high.

"Overall inflation developments are also turning favourable, providing a stable environment for corporates to plan expansion strategies in anticipation of a pick-up in demand," it said. With consumer price inflation (CPI) coming off its November-December spikes in its January 2024 reading, inflation expectations may stabilise and edge down, although renewed pressures from cereals and proteins cannot be ruled out.

Retail inflation, or CPI, eased to a three-month low of 5.1 per cent in January from 5.7 per cent in December. However, it continues to remain above the 4 per cent target of the RBI. Core inflation is at its lowest since October 2019 and non-food wholesale price inflation remains in deflation. This should augur well for the input cost outlook and selling prices of manufacturing firms, the article said. It added the country's economy continues to sustain the momentum achieved in the first half of FY24, going by high frequency indicators.

The National Statistical Office (NSO) in its first advance estimate, released in January, projected the country's real gross domestic product (GDP) growth at 7.3 per cent in fiscal 2023-24. The NSO



will provide its second advance estimates of national income for 2023-24 and for the third quarter for the first time by the end of this month. Last month's State of the Economy article had projected real GDP growth at 7 per cent for the third quarter of FY2024.

Implicitly, real GDP would have to expand by 7 per cent in the fourth quarter for the annual estimate of 7.3 per cent to be realised, the article said.

BIMA SUGAM TO OFFER FREE SERVICES TO CONSUMERS: IRDAI

Bima Sugam, the ambitious insurance electronic marketplace which is being kicked off by the Insurance Development and Regulatory Authority of India (IRDAI), will offer free services to consumers through a not-for-profit structure.

The shareholding of the proposed company, which will develop, operate and maintain the platform, will be widely held among life insurers, general and health insurers with no single entity having controlling stake. The shareholders, as and when required, will contribute to the capital requirement of the company, IRDAI said.

"Consumers shall not be charged for availing the services of the marketplace," the regulator said.

Bima Sugam is a digital public infrastructure or protocol with open standards and interoperable platforms, enabling seamless integration with various services to facilitate purchase, sale, settlement of insurance claims, grievance redressal and servicing of insurance policies and other related matters as allowed by the authority under a single platform. All insurance companies will join the proposed platform.

Insurers will facilitate availability of their insurance products for sale and provide all services related to an insurance policy including settlement of insurance claims and grievance redressal on the platform on an ongoing basis.

The new company will seek prior approval of the IRDAI for appointment, reappointment, termination and change in the terms and conditions of the appointment of Chairperson and Chief Executive Officer. "The company will appoint key managerial persons with appropriate experience, a mix of skills, and the integrity necessary to discharge their responsibilities for the operation and risk management of the Marketplace and clearly specify the roles and responsibilities of the management," IRDAI said in its draft regulations.

IRDAI would nominate two members on the board of company. Alok Rungta, Deputy CEO and Chief Financial Officer, Future Generali India Life Insurance Company, said, "We are happy to witness the imminent launch of IRDAI's 'Bima Sugam'. This initiative represents more than just a digital platform... it's a transformative step in our ongoing commitment to empower policyholders and reshape the insurance landscape."

The company, through collaboration and innovation, is poised to enhance accessibility, affordability and transparency, he said. "With its not-for-profit structure and diversified shareholding, it is set to become the central hub for insurers, intermediaries, and consumers alike. This advancement aligns seamlessly with our industry's collective vision, propelling us toward the ambitious goal of 'insurance for all by 2047.' Bima Sugam isn't just a welcome development... it points to a future where consumers and industry advancements work together for the benefit of all," he said.



The proposed platform will be a not-for-profit entity established through a company formed under Section 8 of the Companies Act, 2013.

According to Tarun Chugh, MD & CEO, Bajaj Allianz Life Insurance, the draft regulations for Bima Sugam is a big step towards bringing this transformative initiative to fruition. “The regulations focus on making insurance easy to access and affordable for everyone. It’s towards streamlining the entire insurance value chain, from policy issuance to claim settlement, thereby promoting transparency and collaboration at every stage. These initiatives will play a huge role in driving penetration of insurance and enabling us achieve the vision of ‘insurance for all’ by 2047,” he said.

This platform will raise awareness about insurance and significantly enhance the overall customer experience in the industry, similar to the transformative impact that UPI has had on payments in India, said the CEO of an insurance firm. “It will contribute towards easy accessibility of insurance and making products more affordable,” he said.

EXPEDITE EFFORTS TO TRACE CLAIMANTS TO UNPAID POLICIES: IRDAI TELLS INSURERS

Concerned over mounting unclaimed amounts of policyholders with the insurers, regulator IRDAI wants insurance companies to redouble efforts in tracing the rightful claimants, including roping in e-commerce portals to locate them, if required.

“Engage with credit bureaus, account aggregators, common service centre/POS, e-commerce portals for tracing [such] consumers,” the Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority of India said, prescribing measures for insurers to reduce existing unclaimed amounts and to contain future accumulations.

From prompting policyholders to update their details such as mobile number, e-mail and address, to urging insurers to update KYC (know your customer) on an ongoing basis as well as re-KYC of minors on their becoming majors, the regulator wants agents, intermediaries, group master policyholders and other distribution channels to also be made accountable. “Make accountable the respective agents, intermediaries... involved in the solicitation for tracing of consumers and update the contact details, bank account details etc.,” it said, making a few amendments to its November 2020 master circular on the unclaimed amounts.

IRDAI said unclaimed amounts would mean any amount held by an insurer and payable to consumers, including income accrued, remaining unpaid beyond 12 months from due date.

NEW OFFER FROM AIR INDIA EXPRESS: HOW DO ‘HAND BAGGAGE-ONLY’ FARES WORK?

Air India Express has launched ‘cabin baggage-only’ fares, a fresh attempt after years by an Indian carrier to unbundle the check-in baggage service for lower fare categories.

‘Zero baggage’ or ‘no check-in baggage’ fares are offered by several low-cost carriers in North America, Europe, and Southeast Asia. But these fares never took off in India due to a combination of factors, including regulatory constraints that would have blunted their competitive edge.

While a regulatory limitation that effectively capped the additional charge for check-in luggage at Rs 200 for the standard 15-kg allowance was removed in 2021, airlines chose to wait and watch. Indian consumers were seen as habituated to the luggage allowance, and the carriers saw a gradual change of habit as a prerequisite for ‘no check-in baggage’ fares to become the norm.



But the introduction of this fare category by Air India Express could now nudge other Indian airlines, particularly no-frills carriers such as IndiGo, Akasa Air, and SpiceJet, to follow suit. Industry experts believe this could significantly change the structure of airfares in India going forward.

How does the unbundling of fares benefit airlines?

In theory, unbundling refers to dividing the product or service into multiple components, and selling each component at a different price. The idea is to stratify the market and appeal to price-sensitive consumers by offering more choices in terms of more combinations of individual offerings, instead of a single, all-inclusive offering.

Simply put, unbundling is the selling of the basic product and all its bells and whistles separately, and allowing the buyer to choose only the add-ons that she needs, rather than forcing her to buy a uniform product that costs more.

By delinking services like baggage and in-flight food and beverage services from air fares, airlines can maximise profits while attracting passengers who are willing to forego such services in order to fly for somewhat cheaper. Besides price-sensitive customers, such fares also suit corporate travellers on short work trips.

Lower luggage loads also help the airlines save on fuel costs. They can, in addition, use the available space in the cargo hold to generate ancillary revenue by hauling goods.

Unbundling is an established strategy among (mainly low-cost) airlines globally. Over the past few years, the success of low-cost airlines globally has nudged several full-service carriers in non-Indian markets to adopt the unbundling strategy. This allows them to keep basic airfares at levels that are comparable to those of a low-cost carrier, thus attracting price-sensitive flyers who may otherwise not even consider a full-service airline.

Interestingly though, a number of low-cost carriers that earlier offered only unbundled fares, have started offering bundled fares with inclusions like check-in baggage allowance and meals in order to attract passengers who may be less price-sensitive while looking for some extra comforts.

TATAS, TOWER APPLY TO SET UP CHIP FOUNDRIES IN INDIA: WILL THE COUNTRY FINALLY GET A SEMICONDUCTOR MANUFACTURING PLANT?

After initial hopes of finally securing a viable bid to set up a semiconductor fabrication facility in India tapered off owing to numerous challenges, a fresh wave of proposals have rekindled hopes yet again. Minister of State for Electronics and IT Rajeev Chandrasekhar recently confirmed that the Tata Group and Israeli chip company Tower Semiconductor have applied to set up foundries in the country.

If the proposals are cleared by the government's India Semiconductor Mission (ISM), it could pave the way for the country to finally have a fabrication plant after decades of failed attempts. Aside from boosting domestic job prospects, it will also offer India leverage in the chip wars by increasing its say in the geopolitics of technology that has so far been shaped by China and the United States.

India is competing with some of its key allies – the US and Europe – to attract chipmakers. It is offering a 50% capital expenditure subsidy to successful applicants at the central level under its



\$10 billion incentive scheme, with state governments sweetening the deal further at their own end.

What are the proposals currently on the table?

India's chip incentive scheme broadly covers three aspects of the ecosystem – full-blown foundries that can manufacture chips; packaging plants called ATMP facilities; and assembly and testing projects called OSAT plants. So far, US-based Micron Technology has cleared its proposal to set up a \$2.75 billion ATMP plant, with the facility coming up in Gujarat.



DreamIAS



LIFE & SCIENCE

SATURN'S MOON MIMAS MAY HAVE OCEAN UNDER ITS CRUST

A recent study published in the Nature journal suggests that Mimas, Saturn's smallest major moon, may have a liquid ocean located approximately 20-30 km beneath its heavily cratered ice shell. Despite its nickname "Death Star" due to its cratered surface resembling the space station in Star Wars, Mimas was considered an unlikely candidate for hosting an ocean.

Scientists analyzed Mimas's orbital motion using data from NASA's Cassini spacecraft. The moon's librations, or oscillations, indicated the presence of either an elongated silicate core or a global ocean. If Mimas were solid, its librations would depend on specific parameters, but calculations led to a dead end, prompting consideration of a subsurface ocean.

The study employed a theoretical approach to understand how an underground ocean would affect Mimas's movement, considering three deformed layers, gravity coefficients, and librations. The calculations suggested that the ice sheet covering the ocean would need to be 20-30 km thick, aligning with a previous 2022 study.

Estimates indicated that the heat released at Mimas's surface would be around 25 milliwatts per sq. m, leading to a reduction in the moon's eccentricity by a factor of two in 4-5 million years. Simulations suggested that Mimas's ocean might have formed 2-25 million years ago. The predicted surface heat also matched observations of Enceladus, another Saturn moon with a global ocean beneath its crust, hinting at a potentially hydrothermally active core in Mimas.

ASTRONOMERS FIND THE SMALL, HOT HELIUM STARS THEY WERE LOOKING FOR

Astronomers have successfully identified a unique class of stars they had been searching for over a decade. These stars, characterized as hot and relatively small orbs covered in helium, were predicted to be common, but locating them proved challenging. Led by Assistant Professor Maria Drout from the University of Toronto, the research team spent seven years cataloging thousands of stars and testing various assumptions to finally find these elusive stars.

The discovery supports existing astrophysical theories and has significant implications for understanding the diverse influences of stars on the universe, from the creation of heavy elements to the release of gravitational waves. The study involves analyzing stars in binary systems, where one star strips away the hydrogen layer of its companion, leaving behind a small, hot helium star with strong surface gravity.

The team used data from a telescope capable of detecting ultraviolet light, as helium stars are expected to emit more energy in the ultraviolet range. They identified 25 stars with varying speeds over time, indicating the presence of a companion restricting their movement. Further analysis of the optical spectra of these stars revealed distinct classes, with some having no hydrogen and being rich in helium (Class 1), while others possessed hydrogen (Class 2 and Class 3). The study concludes that Class 1 stars are hot, strongly gravitating, helium-rich, and hydrogen-depleted stars in binary systems.

These intermediate-mass hydrogen-stripped helium stars are expected to end their lives as hydrogen-poor supernovae, leaving behind neutron stars. The collision of these neutron stars may



result in powerful kilonova explosions, releasing gravitational waves, contributing to our understanding of cosmic phenomena.

UKRAINE'S STAR-CROSSED PARTNER

Hours before Russia invaded Ukraine on February 24, 2022, Moscow used a malware to disable routers of Viasat, a U.S.-based satellite company, crippling Ukrainian military's command system, and making it impossible to mount a defence.

Deputy Prime Minister Mykhailo Fedorov frantically reached out to Tesla CEO Elon Musk, via platform X, formerly Twitter.

Mr. Fedorov, in a tweet, requested the tech billionaire to activate his low-Earth orbit (LEO) broadband service, Starlink, in the country. In response, Mr. Musk said: "Starlink service is now active in Ukraine. More terminals en route."

Within a few days, Musk-owned SpaceX began shipping Starlink terminals to Kyiv. The rectangle-shaped receivers have since played a crucial role in assisting Ukraine's armed forces.

But recent reports suggest Kyiv is surreptitiously being outmanoeuvred by Moscow as Russia is allegedly procuring Starlink terminals indirectly from private sellers in Arab countries and using them in occupied Ukraine.

While both Russia and SpaceX have denied reports of buying or selling Starlink terminals to each other, such allegations underscore the rocky relationship between Ukraine and Starlink, a service owned by the world's richest man.

A swarm in space

In 2019, when Mr. Musk launched Starlink, a satellite swarm, his idea was to provide space-based Internet to people in remote parts of the world. Each LEO satellite in the network has a mass of about a quarter tonne, and they are positioned on the geosynchronous equatorial orbit, at about 550 km above the earth, surrounding the equator.

This positioning enables the satellite swarm to transmit data to the terminals located on the ground consistently, and during all weather conditions. The space company plans to deploy a total of 12,000 satellites in the short-term, and possibly increase the constellation size by another 30,000 LEO satellites in the long-term.

As on February 16, 2024, SpaceX has 5,459 Starlink satellites in orbit, out of 5,850 launched, per data maintained by space historian and astrophysicist Jonathan McDowell.

Starlink's constellation delivers high-speed Internet that supports streaming and video calls. Such capabilities, particularly on the battlefield, provide strategic advantage to the military by connecting defence forces to uninterrupted, secure communication channels and helping them deploy state-of-the-art weapon systems.

Ukraine said last year that about 42,000 terminals were being used in the country by the military, hospitals, and aid organisations. The military uses Mr. Musk's satellite Internet to connect drones, coordinate artillery fire systems and attack Russia's positions. Once when Moscow attempted to jam and cut Ukraine's access to the Internet service, SpaceX countered the sabotage effort by tightening its software.



Taking the tab

All this support comes at a cost, which per Mr. Musk's October 2022 estimate is about \$20 million a month. He also said his company could not support Ukraine's Starlink needs 'indefinitely' for free.

Mr. Musk's comment on who will foot Ukraine's Starlink bill came at a time when relationship between Kyiv and SpaceX owner was starting to sour as the billionaire's twitter post on urging Ukraine to seek a negotiated solution with Russia and cede Crimea for good brought him the ire of Ukrainians.

Mr. Musk later backtracked and said the company would pay for Starlink service. Eventually, in June 2023, the Pentagon signed a contract with SpaceX to supply Starlink service to Ukraine.

Starlink has played a pivotal role in helping Ukraine mount a strong defence against Russian invasion forces. But Mr. Musk's changing perspective on the war makes it difficult for Kyiv to call it a fully reliable service. Now with Russia allegedly gaining access to the terminals, Ukraine finds itself on the back foot once again.

HOW SPACEX BECAME INDONESIA'S LAUNCHER OF CHOICE

When a Chinese rocket malfunctioned shortly after launch in April 2020, destroying Indonesia's \$220 million Nusantara-2 satellite, it was a blow to the archipelago's efforts to strengthen its communication networks. But it presented an opportunity for one man.

Elon Musk, the owner of SpaceX, seized on the failure to become Jakarta's company of choice for putting satellites into space. Thus he managed to prevail over the Chinese state-owned China Great Wall Industry Corp. (CGWIC) which is known to make offers that are difficult to refuse.

The Chinese contractor had courted Indonesia, Southeast Asia's largest economy and a key space growth market, with cheap financing, promises of broad support for its space ambitions, and the geopolitical heft of Beijing. A senior government official and two industry officials in Jakarta familiar with the matter told Reuters the malfunction marked a turning point for Indonesia to move away from Chinese space contractors in favour of companies owned by Mr. Musk.

Nusantara-2 was the second satellite launch awarded by Indonesia to CGWIC, matching the two carried out by SpaceX at that time. Since its failure, SpaceX has launched two Indonesian satellites with a third in the works. China has handled none.

SpaceX edged out Beijing through a combination of launch reliability, cheaper reusable rockets, and a personal relationship Mr. Musk nurtured with Indonesian President Joko Widodo. Following a meeting between the two men in Texas in 2022, SpaceX also won regulatory approval for its Starlink satellite internet service.

The SpaceX deals mark a rare instance of a Western company making inroads in Indonesia, whose telecommunications sector is dominated by Chinese companies that offer low costs and easy financing. "SpaceX has never failed in launching our satellites," said Sri Sanggrama Aradea, head of the satellite infrastructure division at BAKTI, an Indonesian communications ministry agency.

The April 2020 incident makes it "hard" for Jakarta to turn to CGWIC again, he added. SpaceX, CGWIC and Pasifik Satelit Nusantara, a key shareholder in the Nusantara-2 project, didn't respond to questions.



The global satellite market was worth \$281 billion in 2022, or 73% of all space business, according to U.S. consultancy BryceTech.

China launched a record 67 rockets last year, out of 223 globally, according to a report by Harvard professor and orbital tracker Jonathan McDowell. The vast majority were launched by CGWIC. That put China only behind the U.S., which had 109 launches, 90% of which were done by SpaceX.

Washington and Beijing are also competing over satellite-based communications networks.

SHEEP ARE INSTINCTIVE SWIMMERS

Q: Do sheep swim? If so, how do they learn?

A: Yes, sheep do swim, said Edward Spevak, assistant curator of mammals at the Bronx Zoo. "It's basically instinctive, a life-saving device," he said. "They don't go swimming every day, but in case of flooding or falling into a river, in essence they know how to swim."

Sheep have never been known as big swimmers, and most of the habitat where they evolved does not have a lot of water resources, but swimming is part of their repertoire of skills, he told The New York Times.

First of all, like many animals, they float, Spevak explained. "Then, in struggling to keep their heads above water and to keep breathing, the method they use is basically fast walking, which constitutes a kind of dog paddle."

Other large mammals are swimmers, too, Spevak added. Cattle can swim when herded across a river, as Western movie fans know. Deer can swim as well. "The moose, the largest deer in the world, actually feeds in water and is a very good swimmer," he said.

VIRUS-EATING CELLS

Does the fluid-filled sac around the lungs function merely as a cushion from external damage?

It was long thought that the fluid-filled sac around our lungs function merely as a cushion from external damage. Turns out, it also houses potent virus-eating cells that rush into the lungs during flu infections. These cells are macrophages, which are immune cells produced in the body, and go into the lungs when there's an infection. Using a laser-based technique, researchers tracked macrophages going into the lungs of mice and found that the disease became worse with more lung inflammation when the macrophages were removed from the mouse. Once the protein signals have been identified, it may be possible to create drugs that boost either the number of macrophages or their activity. The results show that macrophages are recruited to the lung during an influenza A virus infection and contribute to recovery. The researchers have been able to identify the source of lung macrophages independent of monocyte recruitment and local proliferation.

ULTRADIAN RHYTHMS: THE CYCLES OF LIFE

WHAT IS IT?

We are told life is a cycle. These words could not be truer than when they are applied to the biological processes that support and help life survive on the earth. One such cyclical process is



the ultradian rhythm. We can observe these rhythms as physiological patterns that all living things — from single-celled creatures to humans — adopt to function properly.

While circadian rhythms such as the sleep-wake cycle follow a 24-hour cycle, ultradian rhythms are biological rhythms that recur more frequently than once every 24 hours. They govern various physiological processes, including heartbeat, breathing, hormonal release, and brain-wave activity. As such, ultradian rhythms play a vital role in orchestrating essential bodily functions.

One of the more better-known among them is the sleep cycle, characterised by alternating periods of rapid eye movement (REM) and non-REM sleep. Through the night, individuals cycle through these stages multiple times, with each cycle typically lasting around 90 minutes. During REM sleep, the individual dreams, while non-REM sleep is crucial for the individual to restore themselves physically and consolidate their memories.

Ultradian rhythms also influence patterns of hormone release, such as the pulsatile secretion of growth hormone, cortisol, and insulin. These hormonal fluctuations are essential for individuals to regulate metabolism, energy levels, and stress responses through the day.

STUDY FINDS RISE IN BLOOD CLOTS, HEART INFLAMMATION AFTER COVID VACCINATION

One of the largest assessments of its kind, spanning 99 million people and investigating reports of adverse reactions following COVID-19 vaccination, found that instances of Guillain-Barre Syndrome, myocarditis, pericarditis, and cerebral venous sinus thrombosis (CVST) were at least 1.5 times more than expected following inoculation with mRNA and ChAdOX1 vaccines.

This is in line with previous observations by the World Health Organization and the European Medicines Agency, and was what led to these being classified as rare side effects following the vaccination for COVID-19.

The data set did not include patients from India. However, a majority of Indians were administered the ChAdOX1, or Covishield, vaccines during the pandemic

The need for rapid development and administration of vaccines saw a range of new approaches to vaccination, namely the use of synthetic viral particles, or protein constructs being administered following shortened testing programmes.

Guillain-Barre syndrome is a disorder in which the immune system attacks the nerves. While rarely fatal, it can cause muscular damage and can require prolonged treatment. CVST refers to blood clots in the brain. Myocarditis and pericarditis are inflammation of the heart tissue. All of these are serious conditions and potentially fatal.

The Global Covid Vaccine Safety Project, which made the assessment, compiled electronic healthcare data on adverse events related to COVID-19 vaccines from participants across multiple sites, including Argentina, Australia, Canada, and Denmark.

The analysis involved computing the so-called OE ratios, or observed versus expected ratios. This means first healthcare providers, having a baseline 'expectation' of how many adverse events are likely given a certain number of vaccinated people, and comparing it with the number of events actually reported to health systems. Expectations are formed based on experience with the rates of vaccination, and reactions observed historically. Ratios greater than 1.5 or, in other words, 50%



more adverse-reaction reports than what is expected, are considered “potential safety signals”, or necessitating a thorough investigation.

“OE ratios >1.5 were observed for Guillain-Barré syndrome and cerebral venous sinus thrombosis (3.23) following the first dose of ChAdOx1 vaccine,” notes the study, published this month in the peer-reviewed journal *Vaccine*.

As on December 6, 2022, a total of 92,003 adverse events following immunisation have been reported in India since the start of vaccination, the Health Ministry told Parliament. This is about 0.009% of Indians who took COVID-19 vaccines.

WORLD’S RACE TO ERADICATE GUINEA WORM DISEASE NEARS THE FINISH LINE

The world is on the brink of a public health triumph as it closes in on eradicating Guinea worm disease. There were more than 3.5 million cases of this disease in the 1980s, but according to the World Health Organization’s (WHO) weekly epidemiological report, they dwindled to 14 cases in 2021, 13 in 2022, and just six in 2023.

At a time when medical advancements often headline with breakthrough vaccines and cures, the battle against Guinea worm disease stands out for its reliance on basic public health principles rather than high-tech interventions. Unlike many of its viral counterparts, this parasitic adversary has offered no chance for immunity, defied prevention by vaccines, and resisted most cures — yet the possibility of its eradication is closer than ever thanks to the triumph of human resilience and ingenuity.

Rewind to the 1960s, a period marked by two monumental achievements: humankind’s first steps on the moon and the eradication of smallpox. Fast forward to the present, and space exploration has bounded into new frontiers while smallpox remains the lone entry on the list of diseases (of humans) we have managed to banish entirely. This underscores not a failure of medical science but the complex nature of disease eradication.

Infection cycle

Guinea worm disease, also called dracunculiasis, is the work of the Guinea worm (*Dracunculus medinensis*), whose infamy dates back to biblical times, when it was called the “fiery serpent” and whose presence researchers have confirmed in Egyptian mummies. Individuals whose bodies the worm has entered first experience a painful blister, usually on a lower limb. When seeking relief, they may immerse the affected area in water, which prompts the worm to emerge and release hundreds of thousands of larvae, potentially contaminating communal water sources and perpetuating the infection cycle. While a worm by itself is not lethal, it debilitates those whom it infects and prevents them from earning their livelihoods. It manifests as a painful skin lesion as the adult worm — sometimes up to a meter long — emerges. This process, which can last weeks, often begins with a blister and develops into an ulcer from which the worm slowly exits the body. The symptoms involve intense pain, swelling, and sometimes secondary bacterial infections at the wound. Victims may experience fever, nausea, and vomiting.

Legs most susceptible

More than 90% of Guinea worm infections manifest in the legs and feet. The individual has an excruciating experience when the adult female worm emerges through the skin. The open sore left by its exit is also susceptible to secondary infections. The disease affects people of both sexes.



The struggle against Guinea worm disease is symbolic of a broader fight against the diseases of poverty and the self-fulfilling relationship between poverty and illness. The disease thrive where access to safe drinking water is a luxury, and health education and resources are scant.

India eliminated Guinea worm disease in the 1990s, concluding a commendable chapter in the country's public health history through a rigorous campaign of surveillance, water safety interventions, and education. The government of India received Guinea worm disease-free certification from the WHO in 2000. This accomplishment was the result of a collaboration between the Indian government, local health workers, and international partners. The strategy hinged on empowering local communities with the knowledge and tools — including filtering water before use and reporting cases to health authorities for immediate response.

The strategy that brought us to the brink of eradication was straightforward: intersectoral coordination, community participation, and a sustained focus on prevention through health education. Unlike many diseases that have been cornered by medical interventions, Guinea worm disease was and is being pushed to extinction using the fundamentals of public health: ensuring access to clean water (by applying a larvicide called Temephos), spreading awareness through community workers, and meticulously tracking cases and containing outbreaks. The WHO recorded only six cases of Guinea worm disease in 2023. Nations like South Sudan and Mali, where the disease was once more common, have made commendable progress, although the fight continues in Chad and the Central African Republic.

New reservoir

In 2020, researchers also discovered Guinea worms in animal reservoirs, particularly dogs, in Chad, casting a shadow of complexity over the final stages of eradication. This development is a crucial reminder of the disease's tenacity and, importantly, signals to countries where the disease was previously endemic, including India, to not let their guard down.

If the worm persists in this way, governments must stay vigilant and maintain adaptable public health strategies to ensure they don't lose the upper hand. This said, the significant progress made towards eradicating Guinea worm disease is also threatened by human and political factors, notably civil unrest and poverty. These challenges are not merely logistical but deeply entrenched in the socio-political fabric of the affected areas, where poverty exacerbates vulnerability to disease and conflict disrupts the basic infrastructure required to sustain public health campaigns. In fact, were such conflicts not in the picture, the global community may have crossed the finish line in the fight against Guinea worm disease a decade sooner. The interplay between health and peace is starkly evident in this context, where the absence of stability and security directly affects the fruits of eradication efforts.

Finally eradicating Guinea worm disease wouldn't just represent a victory over a single parasitic but a triumph of humankind at large. It will underscore a collective moral responsibility towards the most vulnerable, and demonstrate the profound impact addressing health disparities can have on communities. Getting rid of this disease will also be a much-needed testament to what we can achieve when global efforts converge to uplift communities from preventable afflictions.