

27th March to 2nd April 2022

CURRENT AFFAIRS for UPSC

DreamIAS



INTERNATIONAL

SHIFTING SANDS

A conference in Israel of the top diplomats from the U.S. and four Arab countries would have been unthinkable a few years ago. But on Monday, in Israel's Negev desert, officials from the U.S., the UAE, Bahrain, Morocco, Egypt and Israel gathered to discuss security partnerships, Iran and other issues, signalling a decisive shift in West Asian geopolitics. Ahead of the summit, Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett went to Egypt to meet President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi and Abu Dhabi's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed. The UAE and Israel, which normalised relations as part of the Abraham Accords in 2020, have stepped up their economic and security cooperation ever since. The Abraham Accords signalled that Israel's continuing occupation of the Palestinian territories was no longer an Arab-Israel problem. Now, Arab-Israeli relations have gained a new dimension, with Mr. Bennet reportedly proposing a "Middle East defensive envelope" featuring Israel's advanced missile defence systems. The Negev conference signals a new era of security partnership between these erstwhile foes who are brought together by regional and global developments.

America's allies in the region face two challenges. One is the shrinking U.S. security umbrella. The bedrock of the partnership between the U.S. and its Gulf allies was America's security guarantees in return for the seamless flow of oil. But the U.S. security promises took a hit when Saudi Arabia's oil installations came under attack in 2019, for which the Saudis and the Americans blame Iran. Oil production was hit but the Trump administration chose to do nothing. Since then, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have come under multiple attacks by Yemen's Houthis and the U.S. has offered little help. Second, the Gulf kingdoms and Israel look at the Iran nuclear deal differently from the U.S. While Washington sees the revival of the nuclear deal — which would impose curbs on Iran's nuclear programme in return for lifting sanctions — as the best way to tackle Iran's nuclear ambitions, the Gulf kingdoms as well as Israel believe removing sanctions would eventually strengthen Tehran's standing in the region. Their worry is that if Iran is allowed to reach its natural economic potential, it would translate that economic might into conventional military capabilities and step up support for its proxies, from the Hezbollah to the Houthis. Faced with the U.S.'s declining security role and the possibility of a stronger Iran, these countries are coming together to write a new collective security model. There is nothing wrong in building partnerships based on pragmatic realism. But that alone might not bring peace. If lasting peace and security are their primary goals, Israel, West Asian countries and the U.S. should also seek some kind of detente with Iran.

U.S CUTS A DEAL WITH THE EU VIS-A-VIS LNG

The story so far: U.S. President Joe Biden struck a deal with the European Union to supply liquefied natural gas (LNG) to meet the continent's energy needs. The deal comes amidst efforts by European countries to wean themselves off Russian energy exports in the wake of the Russia-Ukraine war.

What is it?

Under the U.S.-EU LNG deal, the United States will supply 15 billion cubic meters (bcm) of LNG to the EU this year. Further, the EU will import additional LNG of at least 50 bcm until 2030 from the U.S.. This is expected to reduce Europe's dependence on Russian energy exports and thus



neutralise the Kremlin's influence on Europe to a significant extent. It should be noted that Europe has been at the mercy of Russian energy exports which has limited its response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine due to the fear that Russia could cut off its energy exports to Europe. Gas prices in Europe rose sharply even before the Russian invasion and a drop in supplies from Russia could make the situation even worse. This has left the EU vulnerable, so much that the West hasn't imposed sanctions on EU's energy imports from Russia.

Europe relies on Russian exports to meet about 40% of its natural gas requirements and about a quarter of its crude oil needs. Germany and many countries in Eastern Europe depend on Russia to meet more than 80% of their natural gas needs. In 2006 and 2009, Russia significantly increased the price of gas to Ukraine to punish the country's pro-Western government. Since Russian gas supplies to Europe pass through Ukraine, this caused disruptions in energy supplies to Europe. The EU came up with the Nord Stream 2 pipeline project to ensure direct supply of gas from Russia, thus bypassing Ukraine. While this project was stopped indefinitely since the Russian invasion of Ukraine, many analysts believed that it would still put Europe at the mercy of the Kremlin's geopolitical goals. So, earlier this month, the EU came up with a plan to cut down its reliance on Russian gas completely before 2030.

Can Europe end its reliance on Russia for energy?

The LNG deal with the U.S. is not likely to reduce Europe's heavy dependence on Russian energy immediately. Russia supplied over 150 bcm of gas to the EU last year, and the fresh supply of gas from the U.S. to Europe this year will amount to only 15 bcm. Further, while fresh supplies can lower gas prices in Europe from their current high levels, to grab hold of these supplies Europe will have to bid up the price of existing supplies sold to other buyers in the international market. This will increase the price of LNG to other buyers in the market. Over the long-run, if production from countries other than Russia rises to meet increased demand coming from Europe we could see LNG prices stabilise.

There are also logistical and production costs involved when it comes to LNG which make it a more expensive fuel when compared to natural gas delivered through pipelines. This is why Europe has traditionally opted to rely on gas imports from Russia that are relatively cheap. With greater reliance on LNG over natural gas due to changing geopolitical dynamics, Europeans may have to pay a higher price for energy going forward unless alternative suppliers boost production. Further, Europe will have to invest in building additional LNG terminals to process fresh supplies of LNG and this can take some time. However, the U.S.-EU LNG deal could mark the beginning of efforts by the EU to diversify its energy source to end its reliance on Russia. Even this year, Europe is expected to meet more than a third of its gas needs through LNG imported from non-Russian sources.

What lies ahead?

The EU has woken up from its long slumber and taken significant steps to rearm itself militarily since the invasion of Ukraine by Russian forces last month. Germany, for instance, upped its defense spending to deal with a belligerent Russia. The EU could make a similar shift in strategy when it comes to energy security even in the midst of Russian energy threats. Over the last two decades, the EU's production of natural gas has dropped by about two-thirds while it simultaneously increased its imports of gas from Russia. In fact, Europe's reliance on Russian gas rose even more after Russia cut off supplies running through Ukraine. Many consider former



German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, a prominent member in Russian energy company Rosneft's board, to have played a key role in deepening Germany's reliance on Russian energy.

Significantly, the EU last month declared nuclear energy and gas to be "green" sources of energy. This is seen by analysts as a compromise on the EU's commitment to its climate change goals. It should be noted that the EU's push to end the use of fossil fuels, as part of its agenda to tackle climate change, was seen by some analysts as a major reason for high energy prices last year.

The chief complaint made by critics was that renewable energy sources such as wind and solar energy are not as reliable as traditional fossil-based energy sources, particularly during winters. Now under pressure from external suppliers like Russia, the EU may be more willing to explore traditional fossil fuels as well as other banned energy sources such as shale.

THE RISE OF THE ROUBLE AMID THE UKRAINE INVASION

The story so far: The Russian rouble has staged an impressive recovery after it lost about half of its value in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The currency has recovered almost all of the losses it incurred following the invasion and has thus, surprised many who had predicted a further fall in its value.

What kind of sanctions were imposed in Russia?

Sanctions were imposed on the Russian economy by Western governments right after Russia invaded Ukraine in late February. These sanctions included cutting off many Russian banks from the SWIFT payments signalling system and also freezing the Russian central bank's foreign reserves held abroad.

Many western companies including oil majors such as British Petroleum and Shell also pulled out of Russia amid pressure from Western governments. Sanctions basically made it harder for Russian businesses to sell their goods abroad and also made it harder for ordinary Russians to purchase goods from abroad.

The freezing of the Bank of Russia's forex reserves held abroad also made it harder for the Russian central bank to use its foreign reserves to prop up the value of the Russian currency. Naturally, the rouble experienced a sharp hit right after these sanctions, thus leading many to believe that the Russian economy had been brought to its knees.

Surprisingly, however, the Russian currency has staged a remarkable recovery in the last three weeks. It took about 81 roubles to purchase a US dollar one day before Russian forces invaded Ukraine on February 24. A couple of weeks later, it took 151 roubles to purchase a US dollar, marking the rouble's low since the beginning of the war. This week, thanks to a significant rally from the lows of early March, it takes about 83 Russian roubles to buy a US dollar. The rouble has, thus, recovered pretty much all of the losses that it incurred in the aftermath of the war.

What's driving the rouble's sharp recovery?

It should first be noted that the price or exchange value of any currency is determined by the supply and demand for the currency. When Western governments imposed sanctions, it made it harder for dollars to flow into Russia, either in the form of investments or by the purchase of Russian goods. Sanctions on the Russian central bank also made sure that the Bank of Russia could not flood the currency market with US dollars to prop up the value of the rouble.



The demand for foreign goods and assets, however, remained stable and when combined with a drop in the inflow of dollars, it caused the value of the rouble to fall precipitously in the initial weeks of the war and the ensuing economic sanctions. The Russian central bank, it seems, was able to counter this negative trend in the forex market that had caused the rouble's value to plunge against the US dollar. It managed to do this primarily through capital controls that aim to increase demand for roubles and reduce the demand for dollars. For example, the Bank of Russia ordered Russian energy exporters, who still had access to US dollars, thanks to exceptions in Western sanctions to Russian energy exports, to use 80% of their forex holdings to purchase roubles. It has also ordered Russian brokers to not allow foreigners to sell their assets in Russia; this is to prevent the outflow of capital which would further depreciate the rouble as investors sell their roubles to purchase dollars.

The Russian central bank's decision to raise its benchmark interest rate to 20% could have also helped draw some foreign investment that propped up the exchange value of the rouble.

Lastly, peace talks between Russia and Ukraine have also perhaps helped in the rouble's recovery to some extent by raising hopes of a return to economic normalcy. Some analysts, however, see the bounce-back of the rouble as a temporary rally in what could be a far deeper correction over the long-run.

What lies ahead?

The remarkable recovery of the rouble should not be taken as a sign that the Russian economy is hale and hearty. Capital controls imposed by the Russian central bank, including the use of dollars earned by selling Russia's huge energy reserves to prop up the rouble, may help in shoring up the rouble but this respite for the rouble may be temporary. It should be noted that capital controls affect the free flow of capital and could have serious implications for Russia's future economic growth since investors are generally wary of investing in economies that do not allow the free exit of capital. It should also be remembered that the Russian economy is poorer due to the exit of foreign businesses and the boycott of the Russian economy by the West.

Further, there are limits to how long the Russian state can prop up the value of the rouble against the US dollar, even with the help of various capital controls. A significant drop in crude oil prices or a European boycott of Russian energy, for instance, could significantly reduce the flow of dollars into Russia and thus, the ability of the Russian central bank to prop up the rouble.

EXPLAINING SRI LANKA'S ECONOMIC CRISIS

The Sri Lankan economy has been facing a crisis owing to a serious balance of payments (BoP) problem. Its foreign exchange reserves are depleting rapidly. It is becoming increasingly difficult to import essential consumption goods. The country is unable to repay past debts. This article is an effort to locate the proximate causes of the current crisis and document the roles of different groups and organisations in its making.

One can, of course, trace the roots of the crisis to colonialism and Sri Lanka's post-war developmental pathway but let us stick to the last decade for our purposes. Even in the 21st century, Sri Lanka's economic fortunes continued to be tied to the export of primary commodities such as tea and rubber, and garments. It mobilised foreign exchange reserves through primary commodity exports, tourism and remittances, and used it to import essential consumption items including food.



When Sri Lanka emerged from a 26-year long war in 2009, it was expected that economic growth would revive. Possibly because of pent-up demand, Sri Lanka's post-war GDP growth was reasonably high at 8-9% per annum between 2009 and 2012. However, the economy was on a downward spiral after 2013 as global commodity prices fell, exports slowed down and imports rose. The average GDP growth rate almost halved after 2013. A counter-cyclical fiscal policy was ruled out, as the hands of the then Mahinda Rajapaksa government were tied by a \$2.6 billion loan obtained from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in 2009. During the period of the war, budget deficits were high. Further, the capital flight that accompanied the global financial crisis of 2008 drained Sri Lanka's foreign exchange reserves. The IMF loan in 2009 was obtained in this context, with the conditionality that budget deficits would be reduced to 5% of the GDP by 2011.

With no pick-up in growth or exports, and the continuing drain of foreign exchange reserves, the new United National Party (UNP)-led coalition government approached the IMF in 2016 for another US\$1.5 billion loan for a three-year period between 2016 and 2019. The IMF's conditionality was that the fiscal deficit must be reduced to 3.5% by 2020. Other conditionalities included a reform of the tax policy and tax administration; control of expenditures; commercialisation of public enterprises; flexibility in exchange rates; improvement of competitiveness; and a free environment for foreign investment.

The IMF package led to a deterioration of Sri Lanka's economic health. GDP growth rates shrank from 5% in 2015 to 2.9% in 2019. Investment rate fell from 31.2% in 2015 to 26.8% in 2019. Savings rate fell from 28.8% in 2015 to 24.6% in 2019. Government revenues shrank from 14.1% of the GDP in 2016 to 12.6% of the GDP in 2019. Gross government debt rose from 78.5% of the GDP in 2015 to 86.8% of the GDP in 2019.

New shocks to economy

In 2019, there were two further shocks to the economy. First, the Easter bomb blasts of April 2019 in churches in Colombo led to the death of 253 people. Consequently, the number of tourists fell sharply leading to a decline in foreign exchange reserves. The blasts dealt a severe blow to the prospects of economic recovery.

Secondly, the UNP-led government was replaced in November 2019 by a new government led by the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP), headed by Gotabaya Rajapaksa. The SLPP had promised lower tax rates and wide-ranging sops for farmers during their campaign. On the surface, these promises appeared divergent from the IMF package. However, in the absence of a concrete policy alternative to the IMF's neoliberal package, these promises were hollow.

Gotabaya Rajapaksa was quick to implement the ill-advised plan to slash taxes. In December 2019, the value added tax (VAT) rates were reduced from 15% to 8%. The annual threshold for VAT registration was raised from LKR 12 million to LKR 300 million. The annual income threshold for waiver of personal income tax was raised from LKR 500,000 to LKR 3,000,000. The nation building tax, the PAYE tax and the economic service charges were abolished.

Estimates show that there was a 33.5% decline in the number of registered taxpayers between 2019 and 2020, and close to 2% of the GDP was lost in taxes thus foregone. GST/VAT revenues were halved between 2019 and 2020.

The COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 made the bad situation worse. Exports of tea, rubber, spices and garments suffered. Tourism arrivals and revenues fell further. The pandemic also necessitated a



rise in government expenditures: the fiscal deficit exceeded 10% in 2020 and 2021, and the ratio of public debt to GDP rose from 94% in 2019 to 119% in 2021.

Sri Lanka annually spent about \$260 million (or about 0.3% of its GDP) on fertiliser subsidies. Most of the fertilisers are imported. To prevent the drain of foreign exchange reserves, the Gotabaya government came up with a novel, but thoroughly bizarre, solution in 2021. All fertiliser imports were completely banned from May 2021, and it was declared that Sri Lanka would overnight become a 100% organic farming nation. This policy, which was withdrawn in November 2021 after protests by farmers, literally pushed Sri Lanka to the brink of a disaster. Agricultural scientists were unanimous in warning the Gotabaya government of the potential losses from the organic farming policy. They wrote to the government that yields may drop by 25% in paddy, 35% in tea and 30% in coconut if chemical fertilisers were banned.

Fertilizer ban fiasco

The scientists were proven right. In February 2022, the IMF assessed that there was a “worse-than-anticipated impact of the chemical fertilizer ban on agricultural production”, which was likely to drag down the prospects of economic recovery. As agricultural production fell, more imports of food became necessary. But increasing imports was difficult in the face of foreign exchange shortages. Thus, inflation rose to 17.5% in February 2022. Also, a fall in the productivity of tea and rubber led to lower export incomes. And thus, the organic farming policy, which aimed to soften the pressure on reserves, ended up straining them even further.

The current Sri Lankan economic crisis, then, is the product of the historical imbalances in the economic structure, the IMF’s loan-related conditionalities, misguided policies of authoritarian rulers and the official embrace of pseudo-science. The future looks bleak too. The government might approach the IMF once again for a new loan with fresh conditionalities. With the global outlook appearing dim, a renewed push to such a deflationary policy would not just limit the prospects of economic revival, but also exacerbate the sufferings of the Sri Lankan people.

BIMSTEC AFTER THE COLOMBO SUMMIT

The fifth summit of the regional grouping, the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), held virtually in Colombo on March 30, has undoubtedly advanced the cause of regional cooperation and integration. But a dispassionate look at the grouping, composed of five South Asian countries and two Southeast Asian countries, is needed, especially as it celebrates its 25th anniversary in June this year. The member-states are: Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Myanmar and Thailand.

BIMSTEC is no longer a mere initiative or programme. The question to address is whether it is now capable of tackling the challenges facing the region. Representing a fifth of the world’s population that contributes only 4% of the global GDP, can this multilateral grouping trigger accelerated economic development?

Colombo package

It was clear that BIMSTEC first needed to strengthen itself — by re-defining its purpose and rejuvenating its organs and institutions. The much-needed process was launched at the Leaders’ Retreat convened by India in 2016. It gathered momentum, thanks to the outcome of a forward-looking summit held in Kathmandu in 2018. The eventual result is now seen in the package of decisions and agreements announced at the latest summit.



The package comprises, first of all, the grouping's charter. Adopted formally, it presents BIMSTEC as "an inter-governmental organization" with "legal personality." Defining BIMSTEC's purposes, it lists 11 items in the first article. Among them is acceleration of "the economic growth and social progress in the Bay of Bengal region", and promotion of "multidimensional connectivity". The grouping now views itself not as a sub-regional organisation but as a regional organisation whose destiny is linked with the area around the Bay of Bengal.

The second element is the decision to re-constitute and reduce the number of sectors of cooperation from the unwieldy 14 to a more manageable seven. Each member-state will serve as a lead for a sector: trade, investment and development (Bangladesh); environment and climate change (Bhutan); security, including energy (India); agriculture and food security (Myanmar); people-to-people contacts (Nepal); science, technology and innovation (Sri Lanka), and connectivity (Thailand).

Third, the summit participants adopted the Master Plan for Transport Connectivity applicable for 2018-2028. This approval was delayed, but its importance lies in the highest-level political support accorded to this ambitious plan. It was devised and backed by the Asian Development Bank (ADB). It lists 264 projects entailing a total investment of \$126 billion. Projects worth \$55 billion are under implementation. BIMSTEC needs to generate additional funding and push for timely implementation of the projects. Finally, the package also includes three new agreements signed by member states, relating to mutual legal assistance in criminal matters, cooperation between diplomatic academies, and the establishment of a technology transfer facility in Colombo.

Trade pillar needs support

Post Colombo, a quick look at the unfinished tasks and new challenges gives an idea of the burden of responsibilities on the grouping. The pillar of trade, economic and investment cooperation needs greater strengthening and at a faster pace.

Despite signing a framework agreement for a comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (FTA) in 2004, BIMSTEC stands far away from this goal. Of the seven constituent agreements needed for the FTA, only two are in place as of now. The general formulations of the Colombo Declaration instil little confidence about prospects of early progress. The need for expansion of connectivity was stressed by one and all, but when it comes to finalising legal instruments for coastal shipping, road transport and intra-regional energy grid connection, much work remains unfinished. On the positive side, however, there needs to be mention of the speedy success achieved in deepening cooperation in security matters and management of Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR). As security and economic development are interrelated, it is essential to ensure an equitable balance between the two pillars.

Statements by leaders at the summit gave important clues about the thinking on how to tackle the challenges. The Nepalese Prime Minister, Sher Bahadur Deuba, in a most candid speech emphasised the point that "with less than a decade left, our region is not on track to achieve any of the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030". He added that the COVID-19 pandemic "has further strained our development effort". The Thailand Prime Minister (and Defence Minister) Gen. Prayut Chan-o-cha, as the new Chair, expressed his resolve to work for 'a Prosperous, Resilient and Robust, and Open (PRO) BIMSTEC' during his tenure. As a co-founder and key driver, Thailand can contribute much, provided it marshals sufficient institutional and political resources.

It was left to Prime Minister Narendra Modi to offer an array of practical suggestions to strengthen the grouping. India was the only country to offer additional funding to the Secretariat and also to



support the Secretary General's proposal to establish an Eminent Persons Group (EPG) for producing a vision document. Other countries need to emulate this sincere matching of words with action.

Governments showed considerable creativity by agreeing to restrict Myanmar's participation in the summit to the Foreign Minister's level. This obviated diplomatic controversy. Thailand and India will need to be astute in managing Myanmar's engagement until the political situation there becomes normal. BIMSTEC should focus more in the future on new areas such as the blue economy, the digital economy, and promotion of exchanges and links among start-ups and Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs). Besides, three more suggestions deserve consideration.

The personal touch

First, the personal engagement of the political leadership should be stepped up. The decision taken in Colombo to host a summit every two years is welcome if implemented. But in the medium term, an annual summit should be the goal, with an informal retreat built into its programme.

Second, BIMSTEC needs greater visibility. India's turn to host the G20 leaders' summit in 2023 presents a golden opportunity, which can be leveraged optimally. Perhaps all its members should be invited to the G20 summit as the chair's special guests.

Finally, the suggestion to simplify the grouping's name needs urgent attention. The present name running into 12 words should be changed to four words only — the Bay of Bengal Community (BOBC). It will help the institution immensely. Brevity reflects gravitas.

COHESION, CO-OPERATION

The adoption of the Charter at the Fifth Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) summit promises to re-energise the 25-year-old grouping at a time of growing global uncertainties. The Charter is expected to help impart a more connected vision to the seven-member organisation. The Charter, and India's decision to lead the 'security pillar' out of the seven designated pillars of the revived BIMSTEC, has given India's regional aspirations a new orientation, away from the stalemated SAARC that has been unable to meet since November 2014. The new opportunity is also accompanied by its own set of problems. These inherent challenges were reflected in the time taken to finalise the Charter — one of the key factors was the Rohingya crisis that has weakened bilateral Bangladesh-Myanmar ties, with Dhaka seeking full repatriation of the refugees and Naypyidaw disinclined to respond positively to international pleas. Unlike SAARC, which is burdened by India-Pakistan hostilities, BIMSTEC is relatively free of sharp bilateral disagreements and promises to provide India with a co-operative sphere of its own. Given the complexity of domestic and geopolitical factors, this sphere will require sustained bilateral and group-level discussions to prevent problems such as the Rohingya crisis from becoming impediments to the smooth delivery of economic and security outcomes. India too will have to ensure equally sustained political engagement with partners such as Nepal, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh to prevent any domestic political spillover from affecting bilateral and group-level working relationships.

With his call for a BIMSTEC Free Trade Agreement, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has outlined India's vision to bolster trade connectivity in the grouping. An FTA spanning the maritime resource-rich members such as Myanmar and Sri Lanka could bring dramatic gains for all members. A 'coastal shipping ecosystem' and an interconnected electricity grid, in addition to the



adopted Master Plan for Transport Connectivity, have the potential to boost intraregional trade and economic ties. Having walked away from mega trade blocs such as the China-led RCEP, New Delhi's willingness to explore an FTA within the framework of a near-home regional grouping may provide greater accommodation for multi-party interests. The security- and trade-related lessons from the troubled SAARC and SAFTA experiences also ought to serve BIMSTEC well in the long run. Ultimately though, for the revived grouping to realise its trade and economic potential, India will have to take a leadership role in assuaging any apprehensions among the smaller members of intragroup power imbalances and strive to facilitate greater cross-border connectivity and flow of investments by lowering barriers to the movement of people and goods.

AFGHAN GIRLS WANT SCHOOLS OPENED

About two dozen girls and women chanting "open the schools" protested in the Afghan capital on Saturday against the Taliban's decision to shut their secondary schools just hours after re-opening them this week.

Thousands of jubilant girls across Afghanistan had flocked to learning institutions on Wednesday — the date the Education Ministry had set for classes to resume.

But just hours into the first day, the Ministry announced a shock policy reversal that left youngsters saying they felt betrayed and foreign governments expressing outrage.

"Open the schools! Justice, justice!" chanted protesters on Saturday, some carrying school books as they gathered at a city square in Kabul.

They held banners that said: "Education is our fundamental right, not a political plan" as they marched for a short distance and later dispersed as Taliban fighters arrived at the scene.

The protest was the first held by women in weeks after the Taliban rounded up the ringleaders of initial demonstrations held after they returned to power in August.

Afghan secondary school girls have now been out of education for more than seven months.

Prophet's wish

"Even the Prophet (Mohammed) said everyone has the right to education, but the Taliban have snatched this right from us," said youngster Nawesa at the demonstration, which was organised by two women's rights groups.

The Taliban had promised a softer version of the harsh Islamist rule that characterised their first stint in power from 1996 to 2001.

But many restrictions have still been imposed — if not at the national level then implemented locally at the whim of regional officials.

Some Afghan women initially pushed back against the Taliban's curbs, holding small protests where they demanded the right to education and work.

But the Taliban soon rounded up the ringleaders, holding them incommunicado while denying that they had been detained.

Since their release, most have gone silent.



EXPLAINED: NEPAL'S GRANT FROM THE US, AND WHAT IT MEANS FOR ITS EQUATIONS WITH CHINA

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi was in Nepal on a three-day visit last week, seen as a response to a series of developments that China sees as being against its interests.

Nepal's Parliament on February 27 ratified a \$500 million grant from the United States as part of the aid agency Millennium Challenge Corporation's Nepal compact. The funds are for road and power projects. While China had asked Nepal not to ratify it calling it a 'Pandora's box', the US had warned that failure to do so may lead to a review of their 75-year-old bilateral relationship.

Nepal ratified the deal a day before the February 28 deadline set by the US, a sign that China's influence on Nepal could be on the wane. And, in a sign of a growing bond with the US, Nepal at the United Nations General Assembly condemned Russia for its invasion on Ukraine — while India and China abstained. In 2014, Nepal had abstained from voting on Russia's annexation of Crimea.

Changing equations

While Deuba is considered close to the US, what would rankle with China is that none of the major communist parties — Maoist Centre led by Pushpa Kamal Dahal Prachanda, Unified Socialists led by Madhav Nepal, or Communist Party of Nepal-Unified Marxist Leninist led by former PM K P Oli — opposed the ratification. The first two voted with the government; the UML remained neutral.

Until last June, the three parties were in the Communist Party of Nepal, and China had acted openly to bring them together and consolidate the friendship between Chinese and Nepali communist parties. All that crumbled when the Communist Party split into three, resulting in Nepali Congress leader Deuba replacing Oli as Prime Minister in July.

During his first tenure as PM in 2015-16, Oli had signed a series of framework agreements with China on trade and transit with access to the sea route, ending a monopoly arrangement with India.

The warmth appeared to be missing when Wang visited. Nepal proposed revival of "joint committees" to take up border disputes. Four years after Nepal had signed up to be part of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), it showed less enthusiasm about it, demanding more grants in Chinese projects than loans that could lead to a debt trap.

But Nepal's politics is complex. The UML still favours the implementation of BRI projects, with Oli telling Wang these should be carried forward without delay. Oli, whose party is the biggest in Parliament, is seen as having strong prospects of returning to power when Nepal goes to polls by the year-end.

"Wang Yi's visit reflects China's sense of insecurity, but at the same time China chose to appear caring, concerned and condescending instead of demonstrating its disapproval," a senior executive of a think-tank said.

China's stakes

Among the offers Wang made to Nepal were a push for BRI projects including a railway line between Kerung and Kathmandu and transmission line (despite a lack of enthusiasm from Nepal), fulfilment of promises made by President Xi Jinping during his October 2019 visit, and support to development projects based on "Nepali people's aspirations". At the same time, he sent out a



message that China would get actively involved if there were any internally or externally inspired activities directed against China from Nepal's territory, but that China would stand by Nepal in defence of its sovereignty and right to self-determination on internal issues against any outside moves. Wang also promised Covid-19 vaccines and other help, while Nepal agreed to allow Chinese health workers to run health facilities and set up another large hospital in Kathmandu.

China has often presented itself as a pragmatic friend of Nepal. "In times of crisis, like the blockade from India in the late 1980s, China had told Nepal to mend fences with India as China was not yet ready to replace India," recalled a former commerce secretary.

China's presence in Nepal grew as the circumstances evolved after 2006 — enhanced presence of the US and European countries, changing equations with India, and exit of the monarchy. When Xi visited in October 2019, it was over two decades since the last visit by his predecessor. He promised investment in energy, trade and investment, post-earthquake reconstruction, and tourism and hospitality, as China competed with India in investment. China also took an interest in Nepal's politics, encouraging rival communists to come together in the parliamentary elections of 2018. It enhanced cooperation with government agencies including the Nepal Army, as well as with Left parties and influential leaders. And it has opened the door for thousands of Nepali students in its educational institutions, and opened Confucius centres in Nepal to teach Mandarin.

In a way, China is investing in the future leadership of Nepal. So its interest is long-term, and it seems determined to confront competitors, primarily the US and India.

EXPLAINED: WHAT'S BEHIND THE NEW ANTI-INDIA CAMPAIGN IN THE MALDIVES?

On March 23, the Maldivian Parliament accepted an emergency motion disallowing a planned opposition rally two days later in the capital Male. It had been called by former president Abdulla Yameen and his Progressive Party, and its ally, the People's National Congress.

The emergency motion was moved by Abdulla Jabir, a member of former president Mohamed Nasheed's Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP). It stated that the rally was endangering national security, and sowing discord between the Maldives and one of its neighbours. It asked the Maldivian National Defence Forces to stop the rally and other similar events.

The theme of the rally was "India Out", a slogan coined two years ago by protesters who claimed that the MDP government led by President Ibrahim Solih had "sold out" the Maldives to India.

The protest, a day before External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar arrived in the country, was not allowed to take place, with police cracking down on rallyists travelling to the event in Male from other parts of the country.

Political context in Maldives

A small country of about 500,000 people that won democracy only in 2005, and which lies at a strategic crossroads of the Indian Ocean, Maldives has been buffeted over the last decade or more by the geopolitical crosswinds in the region.

India and China have vied for influence in the Maldives over the last 10 years. Islamists have also found a hunting ground in the country, where Islam is the state religion. All this while, the country has experienced the political ups and downs that democracy has brought.



As the closest big neighbour, India has been Maldives first responder for decades in all sectors, the relationship cemented by the strongman former president Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, who was the unchallenged ruler of the country until the closing years of the 20th century. In a sensational South Asian moment of the time, India's National Security Guard thwarted a planned coup against Gayoom by a businessman who had hired Sri Lankan Tamil militant group PLOTE for firepower.

Over the last two decades, as political parties fought elections to win office, foreign policy has played a big role, tied as it is to the small country's economic development. The period coincided with China's rise and its projection of power in the region and beyond.

Beijing's outreach in a part of the Indian Ocean where India was the pre-eminent power has seen the geopolitical rivalry play out in the national politics of both Sri Lanka and Maldives. In the Maldives, the MDP, and its top leaders, especially Nasheed, are seen as pro-India, while rival Yameen is seen as a China proxy.

In the last presidential and parliamentary elections in 2018, the MDP was voted back to office. Nasheed could not contest because of a conviction under the Yameen government, and Ibrahim Solih became President. Yameen was convicted on corruption charges soon after.

With a friendly government in Male, India has been able to rebuild bilateral ties and regain some of its previous influence after a six-year gap during the Yameen presidency that saw relations dip to their lowest point.

Yameen's release in December 2021 from a long house arrest after the Maldives Supreme Court overturned his conviction, led to an immediate increase in the pitch and frequency of the anti-India rallies. Protesters carry posters of the politician, who is a half-brother of Gayoom's. Yameen has been present at some of these protest sites, and led some rallies.

The next presidential and parliamentary elections are in 2024, and Yameen is using the campaign to shore up his support base, by painting the MDP as a party that has enslaved the country to India.

Claims by "India Out" protesters

What began as a general protest at the Solih government's perceived India-friendly policies has now turned into an allegation that New Delhi has sent a large military contingent to the Maldives, a claim that the Solih government has repeatedly denied.

Attention has focused particularly on the co-operation between the two sides to develop a harbour on the Uthuru Thilafalhu (UTF) atoll for the Maldivian coast Guard. The Solih government has said there are no Indian military personnel in the Maldives other than a maintenance and flight crew operating three Dornier aircraft used for surveillance, and for rescue and air ambulance operations.

In a statement on March 13, the Maldives Defence ministry said there were no foreign military personnel on UTF, which is being developed as a dockyard for the Maldivian coast guard.

"Statements that allege UTF to be a foreign military base are simply untrue," the Defence Ministry said.



Security co-operation with India

In February 2021, India and Maldives signed an agreement for the development of the UTF harbour during Jaishankar's visit at the time. The Union Minister had tweeted at the time that the project would "strengthen Maldivian Coast Guard capability" and described the two countries as "partners in development and partners in security". During the same visit, India extended a \$ 50 million line of credit for defence purchases.

The defence Line of Credit would "facilitate capability building in the maritime domain", Jaishankar had said at the time. A joint statement said the two sides had agreed to strengthen coordination in enhancing regional maritime security, and focus on combating terrorism in "all its forms and manifestations".

Maldives is also part of the India-driven Indian Ocean mini-lateral Colombo Security Conclave, in which the other members are Sri Lanka, and the newly admitted Mauritius. Bangladesh and Seychelles are expected to join soon. The NSAs of these countries met in Male earlier in March to underline "shared security objectives" in a region where India sees itself as the net security provider. Last November, the Indian Navy, Maldives National Defence Force, and the Sri Lankan Navy conducted a two-day exercise in the Exclusive Economic Zones of the three countries in the southern Arabian Sea. Code-named "Focused Operation", it was aimed at "building understanding and interoperability" between the lead maritime security agencies of the three countries, according to an official release on the operation.

Maldives signed a defence pact with the United States in 2020. Last month, the Maldives signed an agreement to allow the US to open an embassy in the country, the first western nation to do so. At the moment, the US ambassador to Sri Lanka doubles up for the Maldives.

Domestic politics in the country

While Yameen hopes to use Maldivian nationalism to come back to power on an anti-India plank, the government has countered this by underlining that the country, which imports virtually all its requirements, is dependent on India for its security, including food security.

The MDP has begun its own "India First" campaign, and even drafted a legislation to criminalise anti-India protests as anti-national. The legislation was dropped, but the sentiment behind it led to the banning of the "India Out" protest in Male last week.

Yameen also hopes to politically leverage the differences between President Solih and Nasheed. The two have largely managed to keep these differences from coming in the way of the work of government, but last year's assassination attempt on Nasheed, traced to a local Islamist group, saw the former president come out openly against the government for not taking tough steps against such forces.

An MDP defeat in a local election saw the differences spill out into the open. Nasheed wants Solih to use the MDP's two-thirds majority in Parliament to change Maldives from a presidency to one in which a Prime Minister heads the government.



NATION

EXPLAINED: WHY INDIA'S PACT WITH SRI LANKA ON A MARITIME RESCUE CENTRE IS SIGNIFICANT

India and Sri Lanka have signed a Memorandum of Understanding for the Indian public sector Bharat Electronics Ltd (BEL) to set up a state of the art Maritime Rescue Co-ordination Centre (MRCC) in Colombo. The MoU was signed on March 28 during the visit of External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar to Colombo.

The agreement is significant as it enhances co-operation on maritime security between the two countries in a part of the Indian Ocean region where the India-China rivalry has taken centre stage over the last decade. Earlier this month, India also provided a naval floating dock to the Sri Lankan Navy, and two Dornier aircraft to the Sri Lankan Air Force.

Since March 23, an Indian Navy team has been training the Sri Lankan Air Force and Navy in helicopter operations. During the course of the training, the Sri Lankan pilots are being familiarised with India's Advanced Light Helicopter.

Further, the two navies conducted a joint exercise in the seas off Colombo. Indian Navy Ship Sharda was part of the exercise, along with Sri Lankan OPV Sayurala.

According to senior officials, the engagement between the forces of the two countries will augment interoperability and seamless maritime actions like carrying out anti-smuggling operations in the Indian Ocean Region.

Enhancing Sri Lanka capacity

MRCCs are part of an international network under the UN's International Maritime Organisation to monitor the sea lanes with the objective of swift response to emergencies, such as vessels in distress, rescue and evacuation of people, and prevention of and containing environmental disasters such as oil spills.

Each country is responsible for its own Search and Rescue Region. The work of MRCCs is co-ordinated by the Navy or Coast Guard in each country. In India, the Coast Guard is the co-ordinating agency. In Sri Lanka, it is the Navy.

The Bengaluru-based BEL has proposed enhancing Sri Lanka's small MRCC by setting up advanced software systems that will increase Sri Lanka's capacities for communication and co-ordination in its SRR in the Indian Ocean, where it is the first responder. The MRCC will be established with a grant of \$6 million from India.

The enhanced MRCC will work out of the Sri Lankan Navy headquarters at Colombo, with a sub-centre at Hambantota, where a Chinese state-owned company runs a deep water port that it helped to build, and which was controversially leased to it by Sri Lanka in 2016.

Seven other sub-units along Sri Lanka's coastline will make up the proposed new network. In situations in which regional assistance has to be mobilised, as happened with the two recent ship fires in Sri Lankan waters, this MRCC will be able to share information with its Indian counterparts.



SAGAR push

Sri Lanka's SRR is a wide swathe of 1,778,062. 24 sq kms of the Indian Ocean, and nearly 200 ships pass through these waters everyday.

The agreement appears to be part of India's SAGAR (Security and Growth for all in the Region) initiative in the Indian Ocean, which has also seen India, Sri Lanka and Maldives give a new push to their 2011 Colombo Security Conclave that now includes Mauritius.

The recent meeting of the CSC National Security Advisers identified "five pillars" of co-operation: maritime safety and security; countering terrorism and radicalisation; combating trafficking and transnational organised crime; cyber security, protection of critical infrastructure and technology; and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief.

Sri Lanka clarification

The MRCC has been controversial in Sri Lanka. Parts of the agreement were leaked to the Sri Lankan press last week after it received cabinet approval.

On Tuesday, the day after it was signed, Sri Lanka's Defence Ministry issued a clarification on the MRCC, as well as on recent agreements with India for a naval floating dock and Dornier aircraft. The clarification has provided more details about the agreements than have been in the public domain so far.

Excerpts from the clarification:

The recently signed maritime security pacts with the Government of India will neither result in hindrance nor threat to the national security of Sri Lanka, as misinterpreted by several print and electronic media.

The receipt of Floating Dock Facility from the Government of India at no cost has been projected to reduce the annual outlay of Rs 600 million for outsourced docking repairs and this proposal has been in the pipeline since year 2015.

The Dornier Reconnaissance Aircraft is basically deployed for maritime surveillance, search and rescue operations and to deliver information to various required platforms. The unavailability of this capability was the motive for bilateral dialogues between the Governments of India and Sri Lanka during the last couple of years and it was agreed upon to provide one Dornier Reconnaissance Aircraft to Sri Lanka free of charge.

Accordingly, during the period earmarked for manufacturing process of the said aircraft, the Government of India will lend a similar aircraft which will be piloted by Sri Lanka Air Force (SLAF) pilots. An Indian training team will also arrive and stay in the island until the SLAF gains required expertise. Thus, SLAF aircrew will receive an added qualification enabling the country to further strengthen its maritime security while cutting a large cost as a result of the pacts.

Further, with regard to the Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre in Colombo (MRCC), the Cabinet of Ministers has granted approval for the proposal to establish MRCC with a US \$6 million grant from the Government of India. The establishment of MRCC is highly essential to instantly respond to the search and rescue services of vessels in distress operating in the region and ensure safety of vessels in compliance to various international conventions. Sri Lanka Navy (SLN) is the



authority responsible for conducting Maritime Search and Rescue (SAR) operations for commercial ships around the island's SAR region.

Prior to the signing of aforementioned three pacts, the Ministry of Defence has followed the standard criteria and procedures while channelling it through the other mandatory state establishments including the Attorney General's Department.

Therefore, except economic and security gains embedded with infrastructure and personnel development, the Defence Ministry assures there won't be any kind of risk to the national security of Sri Lanka it is being a sovereign nation."

On Tuesday morning, amid the furore over the MRCC, the Sri Lankan Navy arrested four Indian fishermen from Rameshwaram fishing near Sri Lanka northern island of Nedunthivu and impounded their mechanised boat.

NO SERMONS PLEASE

All major powers are aware of, and act in accordance with, an axiom that governs international relations: In striking a balance between adhering to abstract and disembodied principles and maximising national interest, nation-states often find themselves tilting towards the latter. In this context, the responses by US Deputy National Security Advisor Daleep Singh and British Foreign Secretary Liz Truss to Delhi's position on the Ukraine crisis strike a jarring note. Singh's barely-veiled warning that there would be "consequences" for countries that do not adhere to the sanctions against Russia, and Truss's moral grandstanding about ending the UK's dependence on Russian energy supplies while "standing up for the people of Ukraine" appear to elevate the concerns of a particular group of nations to a universal moral position.

Delhi has been both careful and consistent in its position on the crisis in Eastern Europe: Dialogue, not military aggression, is the way forward in resolving territorial disputes. Singh and Truss, on the other hand, come dangerously close to a zero-sum, "with us or against us" approach. Singh, for instance, said that Russia would not come to India's aid if China breached the LAC, given that Moscow is a junior partner in the "no limits" friendship with Beijing. But why would Delhi expect it to? The understanding between mature actors on the global stage is that they build on mutual interests and values, while acknowledging that imperatives of foreign policy and developmental needs may mean that there are points of divergence. Moreover, as Foreign Minister S Jaishankar pointed out at a panel discussion with Truss, Russian oil imports form a minuscule part of India's energy basket, while the UK increased its already substantial purchase of Russian oil and gas between February and March — well after Moscow sent its forces into Ukraine.

India's strategic and economic relationship with the US in particular and the West as a whole has deepened in the last two decades. The shifting world order, the rise of a belligerent China on its borders and in vital sea lanes across the Indo-Pacific have played a part in this — as has shared support for democracy and dialogue. Other members of the Quad — Australia and Japan — too have taken a more strident stance on Russian aggression in Ukraine. But when their prime ministers held meetings with PM Modi last month, they did not insist that Delhi should strictly echo their position, focusing, instead, on strengthening the partnership. The US and UK could draw some lessons from that.



WOMEN JUDGES IN SC HAVE SHORT TENURES

Eleven women judges have adorned the Supreme Court, but a majority of them have a tenure of less than five years.

Only Justice Ruma Pal has completed a tenure of a little over six years between January 2000 and June 2006.

Justice B.V. Nagarathna, expected to be India's first woman Chief Justice in September 2027, has also a tenure of just over six years from August 2021 to October 2027. Justice Nagarathna's tenure as Chief Justice would however be only a little over a month before she retires from the court.

Both Justice Fathima Beevi, who was appointed the first woman Supreme Court judge in October 1989 nearly six months after her retirement from the Kerala High Court, and Justice Indu Malhotra, who was the first woman advocate to be directly elevated as Supreme Court judge, individually created history. But their time on the top court Bench was less than three years.

Quite short considering the fact that a little over five years is the average tenure for a judge in the Supreme Court.

Justices Ranjana P. Desai and Gyan Sudha Misra were judges for less than four years before retiring. Justices Hima Kohli and Bela M. Trivedi would also spend less than four years in the top court.

The entry of Justices Kohli, Trivedi and Nagarathna marked the first time three women judges were appointed at the same time in the Supreme Court.

Their presence along with that of Justice Indira Banerjee is the first time the Supreme Court has four serving women judges.

However, Justice Banerjee is due to retire in September 2022. She would have by then only spent less than four years in the top court, quite like Justice Sujata Manohar who served as judge between 1994 and 1999.

Not symbolic

In a recent speech, Chief Justice of India N.V. Ramana said the appointment of women judges should not be reduced to a mere "symbolic gesture". The CJI said the court would definitely benefit from the rich experience and nuanced understanding of the law women judges bring to the table.

Short tenures of office as judge in the Supreme Court likely reduces chances of being part of a Constitution Benches which decide important questions of law. Justice Banumathi, who served as judge for a little less than six years, was part of a nine-judge Bench combination scheduled to examine matters of religious freedom originating from the Sabarimala review verdict. But the pandemic and her retirement left the job unfinished. Short tenures may also mean not being part of or less time as a member of the powerful Supreme Court collegium.

"In High Courts, women judges constitute 11.5%. Here in the Supreme Court, we currently have four women justices out of the sitting 33. That makes it just 12%. Of the 1.7 million advocates, only 15% are women," Chief Justice Ramana revealed the huge absence of women professionals in law and justice.



SC SEEKS FOOLPROOF NORMS TO IDENTIFY STS

The Supreme Court wants to fix foolproof parameters to determine if a person belongs to a Scheduled Tribe and is entitled to the benefits due to the community.

The judiciary is no longer sure about an “affinity test” used to sift through anthropological and ethnological traits to link a person to a tribe. There is the likelihood that contact with other cultures, migration and modernisation would have erased the traditional characteristics of a tribe.

A Bench of Justices Hemant Gupta and V. Ramasubramanian has considered it best to refer the question of fixing the parameters to a larger Bench. The Bench emphasised that the issue was a “matter of importance” when it came to issuance of caste certificates.

According to the “Scheduled Tribes in India as revealed in Census 2011” by C. Chandramouli (Registrar-General & Census Commissioner, India, Ministry of Home Affairs), there are said to be 705 ethnic groups notified as Scheduled Tribes (STs). Over 10 crore Indians are notified as STs, of which 1.04 crore live in urban areas. The STs constitute 8.6% of the population and 11.3% of the rural population.

The Supreme Court’s decision to refer the question to a larger Bench for an authoritative decision came after it realised that the courts were faced with varied opinions about the efficacy of the affinity test.

On one side, a full Bench of the Bombay High Court in *Shilpa Vishnu Thakur v State of Maharashtra* accepted the “relevance and importance of the affinity test”. The full Bench, in a decision in 2009, held that the affinity test was an “integral part” of the verification process for caste certificates. Scrutiny committees could easily determine the authenticity of a claim by running an affinity test on the basis of ethnicity and anthropology.

The HC had said that the term ‘affinity’ meant the ‘association’ of the applicant for a caste certificate with a Scheduled Tribe into which he or she has been born.

However, two years later, in 2011, the Supreme Court adopted a cautionary note. It indicated that the affinity test may have run its course. The court in *Anand v Committee for Scrutiny and Verification of Tribe Claims* reasoned that affinity test may have been a determinative factor “a few decades ago, when the tribes were somewhat immune to the cultural development happening around them”.

However, with the migrations, modernisation and contact with other communities, these communities tend to develop and adopt new traits which may not essentially match with the traditional characteristics of the tribe. “Affinity test may not be regarded as a litmus test for establishing the link of the applicant with a Scheduled Tribe,” the court said.

“The claim by an applicant that he is a part of a Scheduled Tribe and is entitled to the benefit extended to that tribe, cannot per se be disregarded on the ground that his present traits do not match his tribes’ peculiar anthropological and ethnological traits, deity, rituals, mode of marriage, death ceremonies, method of burial of dead bodies etc. Thus, the affinity test may be used to corroborate the documentary evidence and should not be the sole criteria to reject a claim,” the apex court had warned.

**AN EXPERT EXPLAINS | HINDUS AS MINORITY: GOVT'S AFFIDAVIT IS CONSISTENT WITH THE CONSTITUTION**

The Supreme Court will on Monday (March 28) take up a petition seeking identification of minorities at the state level and granting minority status to Hindus in states and union territories where their numbers have gone below other communities.

What is the case about?

The petition by Advocate Ashwini Upadhyay has contended that the 2011 census showed that Hindus have become a minority in Lakshadweep (2.5%), Mizoram (2.75%), Nagaland (8.75%), Meghalaya (11.53%), J&K (28.44%), Arunachal Pradesh (29%), Manipur (31.39%), and Punjab (38.40%), but were being denied minority benefits that are currently being enjoyed by the respective majority communities in these places.

The plea relies on the Supreme Court's 2002 ruling in the TMA Pai Foundation case (TMA Pai Foundation & Ors vs State Of Karnataka & Ors) and the 2005 decision in the Bal Patil case (Bal Patil & Anr vs Union Of India & Ors).

In January 1947, Pandit G B Pant said in the Constituent Assembly: "A satisfactory solution of questions pertaining to minorities will ensure the health, vitality and strength of the free State of India... The question of minorities...has been used so far for creating strife, distrust and cleavage... Now it is necessary that a new chapter should start... Unless the minorities are fully satisfied, we cannot make any progress..."

This week, the Government of India submitted a detailed affidavit in the Supreme Court on the issue of who is a minority, and how minorities are defined in the Constitution. This affidavit complicates the claim of "minority appeasement" — after all, if Hindus too are a minority (in some places) as the affidavit rightly states, how can schemes of minority welfare be criticised as "appeasement"?

Government's affidavit

BJP has been talking of "justice for all and appeasement of none" to oppose minority rights. On the day she took over as Minister for Minority Affairs in May 2014, Najma Heptulla had said there were too many Muslims in India for them to be called a minority. The government has now had a welcome change of mind — it is not averse to granting minority status to Hindus in Kashmir, Ladakh, Punjab, a few Northeastern states, and Lakshadweep.

The government has sought the dismissal of the petition filed in 2020 by lawyer Ashwini Upadhyay — the affidavit says Hindus can be declared a minority in a few states, and minority welfare schemes are not in violation of Article 15 that prohibits discrimination "only on the basis of religion"; the schemes are for the benefit of the poorer sections among minorities, and the government has a duty under Articles 38 and 46 to protect the interests of the weaker sections of the people.

The government has also defended Parliament's jurisdiction to enact The National Commission for Minorities Act, 1992, and The National Commission for Minority Educational Institutions Act, 2005. The affidavit says minorities are defined both nationally and at the level of states.



In an earlier petition filed by Upadhyay in the same matter, the Supreme Court had referred the issue of grant of minority status to Hindus to the NCM. A subcommittee set up by the NCM had in 2019 rejected all the prayers, viz., declaration of Hindus as a minority in states where they are not in majority; declaration that the 1993 notification of Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Parsis etc. as minorities under The NCM Act, 1992, as ultra vires the Constitution; framing of guidelines for the declaration of minorities at the state level; and defining minorities in terms of the 1992 UN Declaration on Rights of Minorities.

The government's affidavit this week suggests it has now gone against the views of the NCM.

The definition of minority

"Minorities" (or "minority") appears at four places in the Constitution — in the headnotes of Articles 29 and 30, and clauses (1) and (2) of Article 30. The Constitution does not define "minority".

The most obvious definition of minorities (and majorities) is in terms of numbers — a minority is a group that is numerically smaller than the majority in a society. But the preponderance or the lack of numbers alone is not a guide to any authoritative definition. In apartheid South Africa, minorities exercised power and domination over the rest of the society.

In some countries, the numerical line dividing minority and majority is so thin that it may be impossible to delineate a minority group. Alternatively, a society may be composed of different groups, none of which forms a minority, numerically speaking. The criterion of numbers may be important, but it is not a sufficient condition for any definition of a minority.

A second component of the definition of minority is that the group must be non-dominant in society and the polity. A group can be conceptualised as a minority when its values and worldviews are either not reflected at all, or are insufficiently reflected in the public sphere and in the constitution of societal norms. These factors reinforce each other — marginalisation and exclusion are extremely important. Muslims satisfy both the tests, viz. numerical inferiority and non-domination. Their representation in Parliament and state Assemblies is at an all-time low.

But numerical size and non-dominance may not necessarily result in a minority/majority problem. A group may be numerically smaller than the others, and its values may be incompletely reflected in dominant political or social norms, but this may not lead to despondency or a feeling of exclusion. Parsis are a good example.

The Constitution talks of only religious and linguistic minorities. It does not recognise sexual minorities such as LGBTQ+. Also, the Supreme Court has accepted only the numerical inferiority test, i.e., less than 50% in a state's population, for a group to be recognised as minority under Article 30(1).

Supreme Court judgments

This author has long maintained that the PILs for the recognition of Hindus as minority were not required. These petitions have been filed to create needless public discussion on issues that have already been settled in authoritative judgments of the Supreme Court.

In 'Re: The Kerala Education Bill' (1958) a seven-judge bench explicitly rejected districts as a unit to determine the minority status of a group within the state of Kerala. The apex court took the "state" as a unit to determine the minority status of groups claiming themselves as minorities.



The 11-judge bench in ‘TMA Pai Foundation’ (2003) laid down that in the absence of any special definition of “minorities”, any community, religious or linguistic, which is numerically less than 50 per cent of the population of a state is entitled to the protection of minority rights.

The Supreme Court has consistently observed that minorities are to be defined at the level of states, which were carved out on linguistic basis, as Article 30 uses the words “minorities, whether based on religion or language”. This author has argued for years that Hindus are entitled to the status of minority community in Kashmir, Punjab and several Northeastern states. A Tamil Brahmin can set up a minority educational institution in a state other than Tamil Nadu — in fact, as linguistic minorities, Hindu groups are running hundreds of educational institutions.

Thus, Hindus are entitled to recognition as a linguistic minority in the whole of India, what to speak of just the seven states/UTs that this particular PIL mentions. The Centre’s affidavit mentions several linguistic minorities that the government of Karnataka recognises. The Supreme Court had held more than a half century ago in ‘DAV College’ (1971) that Hindus are a minority in the state of Punjab, on whom the Punjabi medium of instruction cannot be imposed.

Religious, linguistic minority

Article 30 gives the same rights to religious and linguistic minorities, but does not say that these minorities must necessarily be determined at the level of the state. In its 2019 report, the NCM said that under section 2 of the NCM Act, 1992, the Centre alone is entitled to notify a community as a religious minority. This was not consistent with the law laid down by the apex court, and the Centre’s March 25 affidavit has cited the example of the Maharashtra government under Devendra Fadnavis, which in 2016 recognised Jews as a minority in the state.

Two views are possible as to the recognition of minorities. One approach can be to define religious minorities nationally and linguistic minorities on the basis of the state. The Government of India under the NCM Act has already notified some religious groups as religious minorities for the entire country.

The second approach can be to accept the dissenting opinion of Justice Ruma Pal in TMA Pai Foundation. The learned judge had observed that whether or not a group is a minority must be determined in relation to the source and territorial application of the particular legislation against which protection is claimed. If a law of Parliament is being challenged, minorities must be defined nationally; if it is a state law, then minorities must be determined at the state level keeping in view numerical inferiority within the state concerned.

In an erroneous decision in 2005, the Allahabad High Court held that Muslims are not a minority as they are too many in number, and also quite powerful. The ‘threat of extinction’ test is not relevant here. The court also held that no one is a minority in India, and thus made minority rights irrelevant. In a controversial judgment, the Supreme Court had in ‘Bal Patil’ (2003) refused to recognise Jains as a minority. A three-judge bench not only went against larger bench judgments but also negated the constitutional vision of the preservation of distinctive identities.

The court said that no new religious group is to be recognised as a minority, and that the NCM must work towards reducing the list of religious minorities and finally do away with it altogether. This was a call for assimilation — but our Constitution wants integration, not assimilation. Article 25 does not give freedom of religion only in respect of existing religions. It does not bar the birth of new religions. New religions can come into existence, and such groups may be recognised by the government as religious minorities.



In 1930, the erstwhile Permanent Court of International Justice (PCIJ) had defined community not in terms of numbers, but in terms of shared religious, racial, and linguistic traditions, traditions that the group wished to preserve and perpetuate through rituals, education, and socialisation of the young. The existence of a community is not dependent upon recognition by law, the PCIJ observed. In *N Ammad* (1998), the Supreme Court rightly held that minority status is a matter of fact, and does not require state recognition or declaration.

THE MOVE TO EASE VOTING FOR OVERSEAS CITIZENS

The story so far: On March 25, Union Minister for Law and Justice Kiren Rijiju in response to a question in the Lok Sabha stated that the government was exploring the possibility of allowing online voting for non-resident Indians (NRI). The minister's statement on easing voting for NRIs comes in the wake of a proposal made by the Election Commission of India (ECI), that wrote to the Law Ministry in November 2020, to extend the facility of postal ballots to eligible NRIs for the various State Assembly elections to be held in 2021. The ECI then, had proposed amending the Conduct of Election Rules, 1961, in order to allow this facility. The postal ballots were to be sent to NRIs electronically after which they will send the ballots back, after choosing their candidate, via post.

How can overseas voters currently vote in Indian elections?

Prior to 2010, an Indian citizen who is an eligible voter and was residing abroad for more than six months, would not have been able to vote in elections. This was because the NRI's name was deleted from electoral rolls if he or she stayed outside the country for more than six months at a stretch.

After the passing of the Representation of the People (Amendment) Act, 2010, eligible NRIs who had stayed abroad beyond six months have been able to vote, but only in person at the polling station where they have been enrolled as an overseas elector.

Just as any resident Indian citizen above the age of 18 years is eligible to vote in the constituency where she/he is a resident, overseas Indian citizens are also eligible to do so. In the case of overseas voters, their address mentioned in the passport is taken as the place of ordinary residence and chosen as the constituency for the overseas voter to enrol in.

How has the existing facility worked so far?

From merely 11,846 overseas voters who registered in 2014, the number went up to close to a lakh in 2019. But the bulk of these voters (nearly 90%) belonged to just one State — Kerala. Of the 25,606 such voters who actually turned up, 25,534 were from Kerala (mostly from Kozhikode and Malappuram districts).

Clearly, a very low proportion of eligible overseas residents actually registered or turned up to vote. The Representation of the People Act, envisaged voters as only the "ordinary residents" in a constituency who will choose representatives to represent their local interests while mediating on larger issues in the legislature.

Some democracies that already allow absentee voting stipulate that overseas electors are eligible to vote provided they are not abroad for a specified period of time and/or if they mention an "intent to return".



Section 20-1A, Part III of the Representation of the People Act addresses this to some extent by qualifying “a person absenting himself temporarily from his place of ordinary residence shall not by reason thereof cease to be ordinarily resident therein” and in essence provides for NRIs who are temporarily staying abroad to be eligible to vote in their local constituencies.

Yet, the proviso of having to visit the polling booth in person has discouraged eligible voters from exercising their mandate.

In the winter session of Parliament in 2017, the government proposed to remove the restriction imposed by Section 20A of the Representation of the People Act, which required them to be physically present to vote in their constituencies.

The Bill provided for overseas voters to be able to appoint a proxy to cast their votes on their behalf, subject to conditions laid down in the Conduct of Election Rules, 1961.

The Bill was later passed in 2018, but lapsed with the dissolution of the 16th Lok Sabha. The ECI then approached the government to permit NRIs to vote via postal ballots similar to a system that is already used by service voters, (a member of the armed Forces of the Union; or a member of a force to which provisions of the Army Act, 1950 (46 of 1950) which is the Electronically Transmitted Postal Ballot System or ETPBS.

What is ETPBS and how does it function?

The Conduct of Election Rules, 1961 was amended in 2016 to allow service voters to use the ETPBS. Under this system, postal ballots are sent electronically to registered service voters. The service voter can then download the ETPB (along with a declaration form and covers), register their mandate on the ballot and send it to the returning officer of the constituency via ordinary mail. The post will include an attested declaration form (after being signed by the voter in the presence of an appointed senior officer who will attest it). The postal ballot must reach the returning officer by 8 a.m. on the day of the counting of results.

The ECI proposed to extend this facility to overseas voters as well. For this to commence, the Law Ministry has to amend the Conduct of Election Rules, 1961. In the case of NRI voters, those seeking to vote through ETPBS will have to inform the returning officer at least five days after notification of the election. The returning officer will then send the ballot electronically via the ETPBS. The NRI voter can then register her/his mandate on the ballot printout and send it back with an attested declaration in a process similar to the service voter. Except in this case, the senior officer would be appointed by the Indian diplomatic or consular representative in the resident country of the NRI. The ECI has not specified whether the voter should send in the ballot through ordinary post to the returning officer or drop it off at the Indian consular office/embassy, which will then send the envelopes constituency-wise to the returning officers.

Will this facility be available to all overseas voters across countries?

There were news reports that the ECI had indicated to the Ministry of External Affairs that it would want postal voting introduced on a pilot basis in non-Gulf countries. But ECI officials told The Hindu that the ECI had asked the Law Ministry to explore the possibility of extending postal ballots to overseas electors and not restrict it to any particular country.

In March 2021, the Ministry of External Affairs informed ECI that the implementation could require to overcome “huge logistical challenges” and needs “a realistic assessment of requirements”



Are postal ballots a viable means of voting?

The ETPBS method allowed for greater turnout among service voters in the 2019 Lok Sabha election. With increasing mobility of citizens across countries for reasons related to work, the postal ballot method has been recognised by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (an intergovernmental organisation that works to support democratic processes and institutions) as a means to allow overseas voters to exercise their right, subject to certain conditions normally related to the time spent abroad or the work carried out abroad.

A postal ballot mechanism that allows for proper authentication of the ballot at designated consular/embassy offices and an effective postal system should ease this process for NRIs, but rules must be clearly framed for eligibility on the basis of time spent away from the country.

THE ASSAM-MEGHALAYA BOUNDARY DISPUTE RESOLUTION

The story so far: Two months after signing a draft resolution on January 29, Assam and Meghalaya partially resolved a 50-year-old dispute along their 884.9 km boundary. An agreement in this regard, termed historic, was signed between Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma and his Meghalaya counterpart Conrad K. Sangma in the presence of Home Minister Amit Shah in New Delhi on March 29. The agreement is expected to pave the way for resolving disputes in the remaining sectors of the Assam-Meghalaya boundary and similar areas of difference between Assam and three other northeastern States.

How did the boundary dispute start?

Meghalaya, carved out of Assam as an autonomous State in 1970, became a full-fledged State in 1972. The creation of the new State was based on the Assam Reorganisation (Meghalaya) Act of 1969, which the Meghalaya government refused to accept. This was because the Act followed the recommendations of a 1951 committee to define the boundary of Meghalaya. On that panel's recommendations, areas of the present-day East Jaintia Hills, Ri-Bhoi and West Khasi Hills districts of Meghalaya were transferred to the Karbi Anglong, Kamrup (metro) and Kamrup districts of Assam. Meghalaya contested these transfers after statehood, claiming that they belonged to its tribal chieftains. Assam said the Meghalaya government could neither provide documents nor archival materials to prove its claim over these areas. After claims and counter-claims, the dispute was narrowed down to 12 sectors on the basis of an official claim by Meghalaya in 2011.

How did the two governments go about handling the issue?

The two States had initially tried resolving the border dispute through negotiations but the first serious attempt was in May 1983 when they formed a joint official committee to address the issue. In its report submitted in November 1983, the committee suggested that the Survey of India should re-delineate the boundary with the cooperation of both the States towards settling the dispute. There was no follow-up action. As more areas began to be disputed, the two States agreed to the constitution of an independent panel in 1985. Headed by Justice Y.V. Chandrachud, the committee submitted its report in 1987. Meghalaya rejected the report as it was allegedly pro-Assam. Following more disputes and resultant violence, the two governments agreed in January 1991 to jointly demarcate the border with the help of the Survey of India. About 100 km of the border was demarcated by the end of 1991, but Meghalaya found the exercise unconstitutional and refused to cooperate. In 2011, the Meghalaya Assembly passed a resolution for central



intervention and the constitution of a boundary commission. The Assam Assembly retaliated with a resolution to oppose the move. But the Centre made the two governments appoint nodal officers to discuss the boundary dispute to minimise the points of difference. In 2019, the Meghalaya government petitioned the Supreme Court to direct the Centre to settle the dispute. The petition was dismissed.

How was the ice broken?

In January 2021, Home Minister Amit Shah urged all the north-eastern States to resolve their boundary disputes by August 15, 2022, when the country celebrates 75 years of Independence. It was felt that the effort could be fast-tracked since the region's sister-States either had a Bharatiya Janata-led government or that of its "allergic-to-Congress" allies. In June 2021, the two States decided to resume talks at the CM level and adopt a "give-and-take" policy to settle the disputes once and for all. Of the 12 disputed sectors, six "less complicated" areas — Tarabari, Gizang, Hahim, Boklapara, Khanapara-Pilingkata and Ratacherra — were chosen for resolving in the first phase. Both States formed three regional committees, one each for a district affected by the disputed sectors. These committees, each headed by a cabinet minister, were given "five principles" for approaching the issue. These principles are historical facts of a disputed sector, ethnicity, administrative convenience, willingness of people and contiguity of land preferably with natural boundaries such as rivers, streams and rocks. The committee members conducted surveys of the disputed sectors and held several meetings with the local stakeholders. On January 29, the two governments signed a draft resolution prepared on the basis of the recommendations of these regional panels. This paved the way for the March 29 closure of the six disputed sectors.

Will the partial settlement impact border disputes elsewhere in the Northeast?

According to the partial boundary deal, Assam will get 18.51 sq. km of the 36.79 sq. km disputed area while Meghalaya will get the remaining 18.28 sq. km. There is no clarity yet on the villages or uninhabited stretches that would be divided, but some political parties and community-based groups in Meghalaya are unhappy about acceding any part of the disputed areas to Assam. Reactions are similar in Assam, where the opposition Congress and local organisations said the agreement boiled down to how much land Assam could save from "aggressor" Meghalaya. But officials in Assam said it was better to let go of areas where they did not have any administrative control rather than "live with an irritant forever". However, residents in the other six disputed sectors — Langpih, Borduar, Nongwah, Matamur, Deshdemoreah Block I and Block II, and Khanduli — feel the "give-and-take" template could spell disaster for them. The fear is more among non-tribal people who could end up living in a "tribal Meghalaya with no rights for us". The apprehension is similar for residents of Assam in disputed areas along the border with other States. According to a paper tabled in the Assam Assembly in August 2014, six neighbouring States control 77,531.71 hectares of Assam land. Apart from Meghalaya, the other States are Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura and West Bengal.

THE DEMAND FOR RESTORING THE OLD PENSION SCHEME

The story so far: On February 23, Rajasthan Chief Minister Ashok Gehlot announced restoration of the old pension scheme for the government employees, who joined the service on or after January 1, 2004. The announcement meant that the National Pension System (NPS) would be discontinued in the State. Following this, another Congress-ruled State, Chhattisgarh announced restoration of the Defined Pension Benefit Scheme (DPBS/OPS). In the recently concluded Uttar Pradesh assembly election, Samajwadi Party president Akhilesh Yadav had announced the



restoration of OPS, drawing the support of several government teachers and employees in the process. The BJP had maintained that restoration of the old system would cause an unnecessary financial burden on the government. The demand has resonated in other parts of the country. In the last week, protests were organised in J&K, Punjab, Andhra Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh. Trade unions across the country organised a two-day strike on March 28 and 29 and demanded scrapping of the old pension scheme. The Finance Ministry had earlier ruled out proposals by a federation of Central and State governments employees saying that the “changes will be financially untenable.”

What is the old pension scheme or the Defined Pension Benefit Schemes?

The scheme assures life-long income, post-retirement. Usually the assured amount is equivalent to 50% of the last drawn salary. The Government bears the expenditure incurred on the pension. The scheme was discontinued in 2004.

What is the National Pension System (NPS)?

The BJP-led Union government under Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee took a decision in 2003 to discontinue the old pension scheme and introduced the NPS. The scheme is applicable to all new recruits joining the Central Government service (except armed forces) from April 1, 2004. On introduction of NPS, the Central Civil Services (Pension) Rules, 1972 was amended.

It is a scheme, where employees contribute to their pension corpus from their salaries, with matching contribution from the government. The funds are invested in earmarked investment schemes through Pension Fund Managers. At retirement, they can withdraw 60% of the corpus, which is tax-free and the remaining 40% is invested in annuities, which is taxed. It can have two components — Tier I and II. Tier-II is a voluntary savings account that offers flexibility in terms of withdrawal, and one can withdraw at any point of time, unlike Tier I account. Private individuals can opt for the scheme.

What were the changes introduced in 2019?

In 2019, the Finance Ministry said that Central government employees have the option of selecting the Pension Funds (PFs) and Investment Pattern in their Tier-I account. The default pension fund managers are the LIC Pension Fund Limited, SBI Pension Funds Pvt. Limited and UTI Retirement Solutions Limited in a predefined proportion.

Who is the regulatory authority to manage the funds of government employees that are linked to the market?

The Pension Fund Regulatory and Development Authority (PFRDA) is the regulator for NPS. PFRDA was set up through the PFRDA Act in 2013 to promote old age income security by developing pension funds to protect the interest of subscribers to schemes of pension funds.

What is the subscriber base?

As on February 28, there were 22.74 lakh Central government employees and 55.44 lakh State government employees enrolled under the NPS.

What is the latest directive from the government on the pension system?

The Department of Personnel and Training (DoPT) informed Parliament on March 24 that there is no proposal to reintroduce the old pension scheme for Central government civil employees



under consideration of the Government of India. Union Minister Jitendra Singh said that the returns being market-linked is a basic design feature of the NPS. However, pension being a long-term product also enables the investments to grow with decent returns, despite short term volatility. "Further, the prudential guidelines stipulated by the PFRDA, the skills of the professional Fund Managers chosen through a rigorous process, and choice of asset allocation across various asset classes (Equity, Corporate Bond, Government Securities) enable the subscriber's accumulations to grow over the long term, riding over the short term volatility," he said.

What will be the number of government employees impacted when Rajasthan and Chattisgarh revert to the old system?

According to Rajasthan Karmachari Samyukta Mahasangh president Gajendra Singh, the move would benefit over 4 lakh employees. In Chattisgarh, the move will benefit over three lakh employees, who joined service after January 1, 2004.

OPEN IN DEED

On Saturday, NALSAR University of Law in Hyderabad announced that a floor in one of its hostels will be a gender-neutral space for students who self-identify as LGBTQI+. In doing so, it has become one of a minuscule number of educational institutions in the country that have tried to create inclusive, safe public spaces for gender and sexual minorities. In 2018, the Tata Institute of Social Sciences had established a gender-neutral space in its girls' hostel and Ashoka University inaugurated gender-neutral washrooms. NALSAR, however, plans to go further. The university plans to eventually set up a gender-neutral hostel — its vice-chancellor told this newspaper that more changes, applicable to student bodies, faculty members, support staff and academic curriculum and reading material, are on the cards.

NALSAR University's initiative is much-needed and enormously welcome. It demonstrates the kind of change that other educational institutions can also implement in order to create campuses that are safe and welcoming for all students. It also shows how, very often, the most important changes come not through top-down fiat, but through conversations and movements on the ground. At NALSAR University, active engagement with the student community led to the draft Policy on Inclusive Education for Gender and Sexual Minorities. Apart from ensuring students "reasonable accommodation in alignment with their preferred gender identity", the interim policy, which is currently in place to address concerns of LGBTQI+ students, also states that name and pronoun changes shall be available to anyone. In addition, self-identification would only require a self-attested declaration and would be the basis for recognition of gender identity and sexual orientation in the university. By thus honouring its students' wishes in relation to how they self-identify, and prioritising this over the rigid lines that are enforced elsewhere, NALSAR University shows a commitment to inclusivity that is still all too rare.

Following the NALSA v Union of India judgment of the Supreme Court in 2014, which recognised transgender people as the "third gender", the University Grants Commission had issued a circular in 2015 to the vice-chancellors of all universities that "TG-friendly infrastructure like washrooms, restrooms etc" be built. But movement even on the basic suggestions in this circular — which made no mention of gender-neutral accommodation — has been far too slow, raising concerns that "inclusivity", which is also one of the goals mentioned in the National Education Policy, remains, in many areas, a mere buzzword. By listening to its students, NALSAR University has set a good example of how promising words can be translated into meaningful action.



LIQUOR IN BIHAR

Pour yourself a stiff one before you hear this one. According to Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar, those who drink alcohol are “not Indians”. “They are mahapaapis,” he thundered in the state assembly. Now, if one could down a glass of mahua for every innocuous little thing that self-styled custodians of desi indignation have declared “un-Indian”, it would at least make for pleasant evenings. But to have a seasoned socialist leader, a six-time chief minister, join in this juvenile labelling is rather dispiriting. It suggests that even a Patiala peg of sobriety — arguably Nitish Kumar’s current choice of poison — might be injurious to health and reason.

The irony is that the Bihar CM’s rant came when the assembly was voting to amend the state’s harsh prohibition law, and to take its sting off for first-time offenders. A clear sign that even if Bihar’s prohibition policy began as a response to a constituency of women voters and its needs, it is now tottering on the ground. From bootlegging to hooch death tragedies to overburdened prisons and courts, it has left a trail of broken bottles and promises.

It’s hard to break a habit — drinkers know that best. Most also know that hurling moral indignation at a bottle of Old Monk doesn’t make it less tempting than before. Neither will calling those who enjoy their drink sinners salvage a failed social engineering experiment. Who knows, some enterprising chap might well be opening a branch of Mahapaapi Theka just to rub that in. So, what’s a man or woman to do? For starters, Nitish Kumar might stop channeling his inner WhatsApp uncle, and dial down on the moral panic. The long lines at liquor shops across the country should tell him that even hyper-nationalism — that most heady of intoxicants — isn’t going to come between a tippler and her drink. Let’s raise a toast to that.

UNACCEPTABLE TOLL

On Tuesday, sewer lines claimed four more lives in the city. Though the victims in northwest Delhi were not sanitation sector employees, the incident speaks of the many abdications that have imperilled work at sanitation sites in the country. Three telephone linesmen accidentally fell into an open septic pit below the overhead wires they were repairing. Much like the 340-odd sanitation workers, who according to government data, died while working at sewers and septic tanks between 2016 and 2020, the victims of Tuesday’s mishap were failed by their employers. They were not shielded by the protective gear mandated for such hazardous work by the safety laws of the country. An autorickshaw driver who jumped into the toxic cesspool to rescue the linesmen, was the fourth victim. The entangled wires and noxious gases in the pit that hobbled the rescue mission, are testimony to the unsafe working conditions at sewer lines that take a toll all too frequently.

Amongst the first important steps taken by Prime Minister Narendra Modi after he assumed office in 2014 was to end the culture of silence on matters related to sanitation. Unfortunately, however, the zeal that led to the accomplishment of most of the goals of the first phase of the Swachh Bharat Mission hasn’t translated into meaningful improvement in the working conditions of those who plumb sewage pits. Some local government agencies, including the Delhi Jal Board, did provide safety kits to the sewer cleaners and attempted to mechanise septic tank cleaning. Last year, the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) advised that sanitary workers should be treated as “frontline health workers for all purposes” and called for fixing responsibility for deaths at sanitation sites. However, municipalities and government agencies continue to subcontract work at sanitation sites to private contractors, many of whom are fly-by-night-operators, who do not



maintain proper rolls of their employees. The intertwining of work at sanitation sites with caste and the desperate poverty of some of the workers makes the problem even more intractable.

The NHRC has asked the Delhi government, the city's police commissioner and the chairman of the MTNL to submit a "detailed report" on the incident within four weeks. It has demanded action against the responsible officers. There is no doubt that accountability must be fixed. But for far too long, employers have paid short shrift to the dignity of workers at sanitation sites. It's high time this fundamental problem is addressed.

RACE TO THE BOTTOM FOR GIG WORKERS

The recent announcement by Zomato CEO Deepinder Goyal of its plans to deliver food to customers in 10 minutes has raised a small twitter storm, forcing the CEO to put out a clarification. This raises several questions on the nature of delivery platforms, and the impact on delivery workers.

Platform industry is all about grabbing market share. This is done by introducing innovations to increase "efficiency", which in the case of food delivery implies cost reduction and speed; both directly impact the platform worker, or "delivery partner" as he is euphemistically termed. It is the earnings of workers that represent the only variable cost element; cost reduction finally pinches his earnings. It forces him to "run twice as fast just to stay in the same place" to quote Alice in Wonderland.

Mr. Goyal in his clarification claimed, "We do not put any pressure on the delivery partner to deliver food faster."

Well, in the platform world where the customer is the king (or queen), it is the delivery partner who will face the wrath of the customer for late delivery. There are enough anecdotal experiences from platform workers of the wrath turning ugly with customers even refusing to pay leaving the partner at the mercy of the platform, which often is insensitive to the grievances of the workers.

The Member of Parliament from Tamil Nadu, Karti Chidambaram was probably the most articulate among the Twitter responses. In a follow-up letter, he raised, among other queries, average earnings of the gig workers employed in food delivery, and average daily hours worked. The Centre for Labour Studies at the National Law School of India University (NLSIU) addresses these very questions in a recently completed study on food delivery platform work in the city of Bengaluru.

Major problems

First, on earnings of the platform worker – the numbers generally put out by platforms are the potential gross earnings a worker might earn.

In a system where all costs are borne by the worker, including fuel, asset cost including cost of maintenance and depreciation, all taxes and levies, the real earnings are substantially lower. At a time when fuel prices have been skyrocketing, some attention has been given to the impact of fuel on earnings in this sector.

However, the other cost elements are generally not discussed in popular reports. Between the two big daddies of the food delivery sector, Zomato and Swiggy, they claim creating employment for



around five lakh “delivery partners”. They claim that these “partners” can earn a decent daily wage, with freedom to log on and off at will.

However, our study estimated that the net earnings for the worker was only around 40% of the total gross earnings from delivery pay-outs and incentives, with 30% eaten up by fuel costs and another 30% on various capital costs and levies.

What this meant was that the worker could make the platform worthwhile, with some money in the pocket after meeting all fixed cost obligations only if he stayed on the platform for really long hours. There was no question of the freedom to log on and off at will.

This leads to the second question of work intensity. Our study showed that over a window of a week, the worker averaged up to 13 hours per day, covering over 190 kilometres each day. Mr. Goyal, in his responses, explained the 8-principles around which Zomato was building its instant delivery platform — the seventh principle was delivery partner safety.

Well, at 13 hours and 190 kilometres travel on a two-wheeler through busy city traffic, it is surely impossible to ensure delivery partner safety.

Human value

Mr. Goyal was candid to state that innovation was the only way to survive and thrive in the food industry. His company has surely thrived, with current market prices giving the company market capitalisation of close to ₹1 lakh crore! The question is whether his “delivery partner” has been a partner in this prosperity? The contribution of the platform to technology and lifestyle improvement cannot be denied, particularly during the course of the pandemic. However, there is also the human involvement, providing the last link to make the platform an efficient delivery machine.

Surely this link is equally important to the ultimate success of the industry. Maybe the MP from Tamil Nadu can also get some answers to his queries through this study’s findings.

CONG MP TABLES BILL FOR REHABILITATION OF KASHMIRI PANDITS

ARGUING THAT “little effort” has been made “over the years” to undo the injustice that Kashmiri Pandits have suffered, Congress member in Rajya Sabha Vivek Tankha Friday introduced a private member’s bill in the House seeking to provide for social, political and economic rehabilitation of Pandits, protection of their property, restoration of their cultural heritage, ensuring their safety and security, and provision of rehabilitation and resettlement package to them.

The Bill, titled ‘Kashmiri Pandits (Recourse, Restitution, Rehabilitation and Resettlement) Act, 2022’, comes at a time when a controversy is raging over the exodus of Kashmir Pandits from the Valley over three decades ago in the wake of the release of the movie, The Kashmir Files, and its active promotion by the ruling BJP. Several BJP-ruled states have announced that the movie will be tax-free in their respective states.

The provisions of the Bill include grant of minority status to Kashmiri Pandits, declaring them as “victims of genocide”, changing their official nomenclature to ‘Internally Displaced Persons’ with immediate effect, and release of a white paper documenting all events in the Valley “pertaining to the atrocities and plight of the Kashmiri Pandits” starting from 1988 to be prepared by a high level committee headed by a retired Chief Justice of India and comprising two retired judges of the



Supreme Court, two MPs, two former MPs, four sitting or former Members of Legislature/Council of Jammu and Kashmir besides others.

WITHOUT SUFFICIENT CAUSE

The recent arrest of a 25-year-old Muslim woman at Mudhol in Bagalkot district of Karnataka for an innocuous message on Pakistan's Republic Day is yet another instance of the perverse misuse of the law by authorities. If it was the provision relating to sedition that was invoked mindlessly in the past, including once for a play enacted by primary schoolchildren, the latest one involves an alleged attempt at creating enmity among different groups. Kuthma Sheikh was granted bail on the same day of her arrest, but the incident is no less disconcerting as it indicates the ease with which members of the minority community can be arrested without sufficient cause, often at the behest of overzealous activists with a disproportionate clout in the administration. In this case, the madrassa student had said, "May God bless every nation with peace, unity and harmony" on March 23, but a local Hindu activist complained to the police that she was creating enmity among communities by wishing people on Pakistan Day. With unsurprising promptitude, the police booked her under penal sections relating to promoting enmity between different groups. As to how her wishes would have attracted either Section 153A or 505(2) of the IPC is something only the police can explain. The district police have claimed that the arrest was aimed at preserving peace and maintaining order, but it is quite apparent that they acted in a cavalier manner without ascertaining whether there was any substance in the complaint.

Ever since a controversy broke out over girl students wearing the hijab, there seems to be a tendency among right-wing groups to foment trouble targeted at Muslims. These groups have called for a ban on Muslim traders and vendors doing business as part of temple fairs. Even though the State government is citing a law that prohibits non-Hindus from getting property in the vicinity of the temple on lease, it is doubtful whether the rules cover temporary stalls on special occasions. It is regrettable that the State government is not doing enough to stem the impression that its administration is hostile towards minorities. Unwarranted arrests, especially for trivial reasons and on communally motivated complaints, result in unfair incarceration, ruined lives and immensely delayed justice. For a regime that takes strong exception to strident criticism about its human rights and religious tolerance record, the Union government should be equally concerned about the possible damage that such incidents may cause to its global image. The Centre may not have anything to do with law and order, but it may have to advise certain States to restrain the police from perfunctory use of the power to arrest to please majoritarian groups and individuals.

LIGHT IN THE CRACKS

Two BJP legislators in Karnataka have asked the state government to act against the "wrong" and "undemocratic" restrictions imposed on Muslim traders participating in temple festivals. In neighbouring Kerala, Sangh Parivar affiliates have termed the decision of the Koodalmanikyam temple administration to deny permission to a Bharatnatyam dancer for performing in the temple premises because she is a non-Hindu as against Hindu culture and tradition — ironically, the temple is administered by the CPM-led government's nominees. These two responses, which contradict the dominant or conservative party line or view, frame an important message — political parties are no monoliths and, in a diverse democracy, cracks are good. They can open up spaces for difficult conversations, and let in more light.



The dissenting voices in the Karnataka BJP are still a minuscule minority, of course. A H Vishwanath, a recent entrant in the BJP, was a Congress minister in the 1990s and later headed the Janata Dal (Secular) in the state. A senior OBC leader, he is now a marginal player in the BJP. The other leader who spoke out, Anil Benake, represents Belagavi North, a Muslim-dominated constituency in North Karnataka. However, the angry reaction of Vishwanath, who is close to former chief minister and senior BJP leader B S Yediyurappa — he called the ban on Muslim traders “madness” — could resonate with leaders who have been less strident in their style of politics and more accommodative of religious minorities in government. The marginalisation of Yediyurappa in the state BJP and the appointment of Basavaraj Bommai as CM can be said to have empowered the more conservative sections within Karnataka’s ruling party. Vishwanath and Benake may have flagged the disquiet in a section of the Karnataka BJP, therefore, over the rise of radical elements and agendas. A hint of a similar backlash against a more restrictive approach to Hindu customs and traditions is visible in the Kerala temple episode. In a bid to facilitate the Sanskritisation and codification of diverse Hindu faith traditions, a section of the Sangh Parivar leadership in Kerala has been speaking out against rituals and customs that they deem as regressive and violative of egalitarian values. This section had argued for removing gender discrimination at the Sabarimala Ayyappa shrine and, initially, supported the Supreme Court ruling, before falling in line with the populist, conservative view that favoured the continuation of the temple custom. The support for Mansiya VP, the dancer who was born in a Muslim household but now identifies as an atheist, has to be viewed in this context.

Irrespective of how it plays out, the tendency to challenge the conservative consensus must be welcomed. It facilitates debate, opens up possibilities of a middle ground. Politics, at its best, is a negotiation that allows multiple viewpoints to express themselves and to flourish, and forges consensus through dialogue. Dissent and difference may slow down the work of governance and politics, but they enrich the outcomes immeasurably.

RELIGIOUS DIVIDE WILL DESTROY INDIA’S IT LEADERSHIP: KIRAN MAZUMDAR-SHAW

In the first significant corporate voice of concern in India’s technology capital over efforts by hardline Hindutva groups to keep out Muslim traders from temple festivals in Karnataka, Kiran Mazumdar-Shaw, executive chairperson of Biocon Ltd, has urged Chief Minister Basavaraj Bommai to resolve the “growing religious divide” in the state. She warned that the country’s “global leadership” in tech and biotech was at stake.

Taking to Twitter on Wednesday, Shaw referred to a report published in The Indian Express Wednesday: “Unease grows, Karnataka temple committees, traders admit pressure”. “Karnataka has always forged inclusive economic development and we must not allow such communal exclusion — if IT/BT became communal it would destroy our global leadership,” wrote Shaw, who heads Asia’s leading biopharmaceuticals enterprise. In the tweet, she tagged Bommai and said: “Please resolve this growing religious divide.” In a subsequent tweet, she posted: “Our CM is a very progressive leader. I am sure he will resolve this issue soon.”

The Indian Express had reported how the campaign to blacklist Muslim vendors has spread in several temple towns shutting down many local businesses. Several temple committees organising the festivals have expressed their dismay over the curbs and say these hit at longstanding social relations. The curbs come after the hijab ban in the state’s government colleges that has been upheld by the High Court.



The report quoted the management committee head of the Durgaparameshwari temple, which is said to have been built by a Muslim merchant, as saying that he had turned down the VHP's demand to keep Muslim traders out, but that they had themselves stayed away due to the row. Over the past few weeks, groups like VHP and Bajrang Dal have sought to impose bans on Muslim traders at temple festivals in Dakshina Kannada and Shivamogga.

The Karnataka government in an official statement in the state legislature this week said the restrictions on non-Hindus conducting business within the premises of temples is as per a rule introduced in 2002 under the Karnataka Hindu Religious Institutions and Charitable Endowments Act, 1997. This rule, many vendors say, has been weaponised to turf them out.

The state said it would take measures to see that such restrictions on Muslim traders are not imposed outside of temple premises in public spaces.

CENTRALISING TESTS

The decision to conduct a Common University Entrance Test (CUET) for admission in undergraduate programmes in all University Grants Commission-funded Central Universities (CUs) from 2022-23 has triggered concerns. No doubt, the proposal is influenced by the National Education Policy, which advocates common entrance examinations by the National Testing Agency for undergraduate and graduate admissions and fellowships. The concept as such is not alien to the CUs. Over a dozen CUs admit students to undergraduate programmes using Central Universities Common Entrance Test (CUCET) scores. The proposed CUET, in 13 languages, seeks to make it mandatory for 45 CUs — there are 54 such institutions — to conduct admissions using a single national level test score. This would spare aspirants from taking multiple entrance tests and also eliminate unfair advantage gained from disproportionate scores in class XII. Critics are evidently viewing this development through the prism of the Narendra Modi government's obsession with pushing the 'one nation, one standard' maxim in different sectors. But as early as 1984, the Madhuri R. Shah Committee, looking into the working of CUs, recommended a national merit examination. In the instant case, the UGC has clarified the existing scheme of reservations in individual universities would not be disturbed.

Yet, the CUET may not qualify as a wholesome determinant of merit given the educational and regional disparities in India. While a vast majority study in State Boards, the test would be based on the NCERT syllabus, followed largely in CBSE schools. The policy limits the Class XII marks as a qualification benchmark and not a co-determinant of merit. With the test being introduced just ahead of an admission season, students, whose learning process was disrupted by COVID-19, may find it challenging. Education Ministers from Tamil Nadu, Meghalaya and Arunachal Pradesh have flagged some legitimate concerns. In the North-east, the argument about the test possibly affecting the interest of State domiciles to secure admission in a university in the region cannot be ignored. There are genuine apprehensions about CUET serving as a precursor to introducing a nationwide entrance test for all undergraduate courses — the UGC has said all institutions are free to use the test scores for admissions. It has been sufficiently demonstrated that common entrance tests spawn the coaching industry and induce cost-heavy hybrid courses from class VI onwards, creating a divide between the haves and have-nots. The country has miles to go in enabling access to entry-level higher education and bridging the gender and economic gap in its university portals. In such circumstances, it needs to be dispassionately examined if prescribing a single entrance test as a sole determinant of merit, either for CUs or for the higher education system as a whole, is pragmatic.



THE ERA OF AN UNEMPLOYED INDIA

Reports on and the visuals of the recent agitations by railway job applicants reveal a widespread problem of massive job insecurity among India's youth. Alarming figures of unemployment have been recurrent even before the huge dislocation unleashed by lockdowns imposed in 2020-21 in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. *Much before the pandemic, the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) reported a 6.1% unemployment rate in 2017-18*, the worst in over four decades. The picture has proved more dismal in the ensuing months since April-May of 2020.

For instance, *in December 2021, the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE) estimated that nearly 53 million Indians were unemployed, a large proportion of whom were women*. The unemployment rate was hovering at *7.91% in December 2021*, and though there has been some talk of *a dip in unemployment in January 2022, the figure still stands at a worrying 6.57%*.

Exposing claims

Percentages and data spun out by governmental agencies and policy think-tanks are open to contestation, but there are other indices of proof that seriously contradict the tall claims of employment generation. *One such index is the downward pressure unleashed by the influx of overqualified youth aspiring for middle and lower rung government jobs, which, despite their modest pay, are highly coveted given the greater job security ascribed to them.*

Expectedly then, *having advertised over 35,000 posts, the Railway Recruitment Board was swamped with over 1.25 crore applications; a significant proportion of which were postgraduate degree holders*. This created massive insecurity among a section of candidates who met the minimum eligibility but were being forced to compete with candidates having higher educational credentials.

With government jobs being limited, and reducing in number due to the contractualisation and outsourcing of several substantive posts, intense competition persists across various categories of jobs; a point brought to light yet again by the recent Railways' recruitment controversy. As clarified by the Railway Recruitment Board and Union Railway Minister, for the second stage of testing that stoked protests, *the huge number of aspirants for the lowest right up to the highest level of jobs advertised, eventually compelled the authorities to shortlist 20 times the number of candidates for all levels.*

Explaining the scramble

Shockingly, advertisements for even a handful of lower rung government jobs attract an overwhelming number of applications, leading at times to the withdrawal of such advertisements. *In September 2021, news reports highlighted that among 18,000 applicants for some 42 posts (peon, gardener and cook) in the Himachal Pradesh secretariat, there were hundreds of doctorate and other postgraduate applicants*. Earlier, in March 2021, *more than 27,000 candidates with degrees such as BA, BSc, MA, MSc, MCom, MBA, engineering, etc. had applied for 13 positions for a peon's job in the Panipat district court*. Likewise, *for 62 posts of messengers in the Uttar Pradesh police, in August 2018, there were a total of 93,000 applicants; 3,700 were PhD holders and 50,000 were graduates*. *This particular job vacancy required an education level of Class V and the selection criterion comprised a self-declaration that the candidate knew how to ride a bicycle.*

The desperate scramble for government jobs stems in no uncertain terms from the high job insecurity (easy hire and fire), poor basic pay, and long hours of work that characterise the bulk of jobs in the



private sector. Historically, only a small number of employer-employee work relations in India — associated mostly with the formal sector — have been subject to state regulation. However, *in recent decades, there has been a steady decline of state regulation of labour-capital relations in the formal sector.* This deregulation has been coupled with a concerted push toward *rapid privatisation of the public sector.* Together, these developments have contributed significantly to periodic unemployment among both skilled and less skilled workforces, in addition to reducing avenues of gainful employment for new entrants in the job market.

A spillover effect

The ramifications of this overall process are multifold. At one level, *enhanced deregulation of employer-employee work relations in the formal sector has triggered periodic unemployment of higher skilled workers, who have been spilling over into and crowding lower-skilled, informal sector jobs.* Likewise, the *spillover effect of periodic unemployment within middle-rung and higher-rung professional jobs in India's job market has pushed more qualified youth to crowd lower rung government jobs.*

This tendency itself has rendered a deep crisis for those with lower educational qualifications who strive for the more modest government jobs, and for whom such employment has traditionally been envisaged.

Reduced expenditure by the state on health, education and the social sector as a whole has also ensured inadequate employment generation, despite the fact that the demand for 'public goods' has been growing exponentially. For a country with growing educational needs, especially with large numbers seeking to escape inherited poverty through avenues opened up by education, the marked shortage of government schools and public-funded universities is alarming to say the least.

A closer look at the higher education sector itself reveals a steady increase in the number of student applicants. The scenario naturally calls for many more job recruitments of qualified teachers through the creation of new public-funded Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs) and an expansion of existing ones. However, successive governments continue to restrict and even delay recruitment of teachers to existing public-funded HEIs. For example, *in a large public-funded university such as the University of Delhi, a recruitment crisis has intensified over the years with over 4,500 teaching posts being filled by ad hoc teachers and appointments to permanent positions being stalled repeatedly.*

Antinomy of eligibility

This recruitment crisis is also the result of an inexplicable delay in the grant of the second tranche of teaching positions that was to accompany institutional expansion in the wake of implementation of reservations for Other Backward Classes (OBCs). A recipe for a complete disaster continues to unfold in such universities as a large, highly skilled workforce of serving teachers defensively holds on to insecure temporary job contracts as more eligible fresh candidates enter the job market. One of the contentious consequences of such heightened competition has been the enforcement of higher and higher qualifications for entry-level teaching jobs in public-funded HEIs.

In this way, another index of mounting job insecurity and unemployment is the arbitrary enhancement of educational qualifications stipulated for recruitment into better-paid government jobs, as well as new criteria for admission into professional training institutions. This



tendency has not only manifested itself in public-funded HEIs wherein entry-level teaching positions now mandatorily require a PhD degree in addition to a Master's degree and UGC-NET qualification. It is also evident in the barrage of common entrance tests for highly sought-after educational degrees such as in medicine (National Eligibility cum Entrance Test, or NEET), as well as centralised eligibility tests for recruitment into jobs such as school teaching (Central Teacher Eligibility Test, or CTET). *As the number of seats and vacancies fail to be augmented, we see a systematic effort to ruthlessly eliminate a growing number of aspirants using astute tests and arbitrary criteria.*

In the backdrop of a large number of skilled and overqualified people languishing in the throes of unemployment, the shrill rhetoric of 'Skill India' rings hollow. We will see more instances of frustration and agitations by the youth in response to rampant unemployment. For the scores of educated aspiring youth, transcending the prevailing logic of the economy is a crucial starting point for envisaging a world free of unemployment. *An economy that creates fewer jobs is one which overworks some while rendering large numbers unemployed. A tired India and an unemployed India are simply two sides to the same coin. The youth need to realise that their fulfilment of dignified employment cannot happen in isolation but is linked to how the sea of highly exploited labouring masses around them are also guaranteed their access to the basics — education, health and livelihood.* A transformation of circumstances awaits newer sensibilities and a sense of solidarities.

ANY MAGIC PILL FOR PROBLEMS FACED BY MEDICAL GRADUATES FROM ABROAD?

The plight of thousands of Indian medical students in Ukraine who were forced to flee leaving their course incomplete and the uncertainty over their future have once again brought alive the issues faced by foreign medical graduates in India.

The concerns of these graduates have not changed in almost two decades. Thousands of them who return to India are unable to practise or pursue higher studies because they fail to clear the screening test or qualifying examination, necessary to secure a registration.

The average Foreign Medical Graduate Examination (FMGE) pass percentage has never gone beyond 20-25% in all these years.

No help from NMC

With at least one lakh foreign graduates — many are still trying to clear the examination, some are pursuing non-medical options, some working away from the eyes of the law — in the country, questions are being raised on why neither the National Medical Commission (NMC) nor its predecessor, the Medical Council of India, has ever stepped in to redeem this situation.

“Such sheer wastage of human resource should not go unquestioned. If they have been consistently failing to clear FMGE, why are the regulatory bodies allowing 20,000-odd students every year to join some random medical schools abroad? Is it not the responsibility of the NMC to counsel students about the pitfalls of pursuing medical education abroad, especially with regard to universities and medical schools whose undergraduate courses might not be on a par with the ones in India,” a senior health professional asks.

The NMC, which replaced the MCI in September 2020, however, has refused to take any responsibility. The MCI at least provided a list of medical schools abroad for MBBS or equivalent courses (based on the information received from the Indian Embassies or High Commissions). The



NMC, on its website, says, "... the National Medical Commission does not endorse any list of Foreign Medical Institutions/Universities for MBBS or equivalent course."

The commission advises the public at large to seek all course details (the course should be commensurate with the MBBS courses in India) on their own from the university or institution.

"The NMC, which is guiding medical education in the country, cannot absolve itself of all responsibility in the case of students seeking medical education abroad. How are individual students expected to ascertain the credentials of a university abroad on their own," asks K.V. Babu, member, Standing Committee on Public Health, Indian Medical Association Headquarters.

NEET cut-off hurdle

Every year, the number of students appearing for the National Eligibility-cum-Entrance Test (Undergraduate), or NEET-UG, has been going up. In 2020, of the 13.66 lakh candidates who took the test, 7.71 lakh qualified. In 2021, it was 5.44 lakh and 8.7 lakh, respectively.

When the number of MBBS seats available in the country is just over 90,000 and those appearing for the exam crosses 15 lakh, there is no rationale in keeping the cut-off for NEET at the 50th percentile (40th percentile for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes) and declaring so many students as having qualified," experts say. Since May 2018, only those "qualifying" in NEET can seek medical education abroad.

The top score in NEET 2021 was 720 out of 1,200. For the reservation category, the cut-off was 108 marks.

"The NMC needs to take a more rational approach towards this cut-off for NEET qualification vis-a-vis the number of available MBBS seats in the country because year after year, lakhs of 'NEET-qualified' students are being left in the lurch. Of these, some 20,000 hopefuls will pursue their dreams of a career in medicine in some medical school abroad, which may or may not provide quality education and still end up in the unemployable pool," Dr. Babu says.

The NMC Chairman did not respond to queries from The Hindu.

The FMGE is a tough exam, and the students have to score 50% to secure a passing grade. There is no negative marking. The exam is held twice a year and any number of reattempts are possible.

The Association of MD Physicians (AMD), an organisation of foreign medical graduates, has been writing to the Union Health Ministry since 2020 that "the archaic practice of applying the percentage-based qualifying criterion (for FMGE alone) defies logic and fairness".

This is especially so when every other qualifying exam in the country — NEET-UG, NEET-PG and Super-specialty, IIT-JEE Advanced, IIM-CAT and NLU-CLAT (Law) — as well as internationally accepted examinations of SAT and GMAT are determined using the percentile system, Rajesh Rajan, AMD president and interventional cardiologist, says.

"We have never requested that they dilute the FMGE but we are seeking the intervention of the NMC and the Union Health Ministry so that the conduct of the FMGE is fair and transparent. The National Board of Examinations does not publish the answer keys nor does it offer a chance for revaluation. If the percentile system were to be applied, then students who score up to 35% will clear the exam," Dr. Rajan says.



Expensive process

But the NBE would rather keep the percentage system and fail the candidates so that for every reattempt, they will pay ₹7,200 to the NBE, he alleges.

He also points to the discrimination that is meted out to the foreign graduates at every turn. Except for the FMGE, the application fee for every other competitive exam in the country ranges from ₹2,000 to ₹4,200.

In Kerala, for instance, a foreign medical graduate who qualifies for internship has to pay ₹1.2 lakh to the government, while the internship fee for a student from a private medical college is only ₹60,000.

“When the government has allowed students to seek an MBBS degree abroad, why should they be discriminated against at every turn? These students are going abroad for MBBS not because they are rich but because they cannot afford the hefty fee charged by private medical colleges,” Dr. Rajan says.

With less than 25% of those pursuing MBBS studies abroad managing to clear the FMGE, what happens to those who do not qualify in the examination despite repeated attempts is also something the NMC should be concerned about.

These MBBS graduates end up as cheap labour for some private sector hospitals, working as “clinical assistants”, or clandestinely practise in some rural hospitals. At least 30,000 of them in the country are forced to do this, according to the AMD.

Dr. Babu has now written to the Union Health Ministry that the National Medical Commission be asked to provide students the details of the best medical schools and universities abroad.

Students who complete their MBBS in *Bangladesh, the Philippines and Nepal* seem to have a better pass percentage in the FMGE. The NMC should thus evaluate the performance over the years, ascertain which are the best colleges/universities that the students can opt for and counsel students, it is pointed out.

With the NMC planning to introduce the National Exit Exam as a single qualifying final exam for MBBS students from both Indian and foreign colleges, it would be interesting to see how big a leveller this would turn out to be.

NORMS REVISED: PHYSICS, MATHS A MUST TO PURSUE ENGINEERING, TECH UG COURSES

Admissions to most engineering and technology undergraduate degree programmes will require students to have mandatorily pursued Physics and Mathematics at the high school level, the All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE) announced on Tuesday, in what is being seen as a partial rollback of the eligibility norms it released last year.

The previous norms had left the question of mandatory subject combinations on the universities and engineering institutes, making it technically possible for those who may not have studied Physics and Maths at the higher secondary level to pursue UG degree courses in engineering and technology.

Last year, speaking to The Indian Express after the norms were issued, Principal Scientific Advisor K Vijay Raghavan and former head of Defence Research and Development Organisation V K



Saraswat had urged caution over the AICTE's move to offer flexibility to admit students without Maths and Physics in high school and offer them remedial bridge courses to cope in class. The issue had also come up at a meeting of NITI Aayog following which the AICTE had agreed to define the engineering branches to which this flexibility will be applicable.

According to the AICTE 'Approval Process Handbook' 2022-23 released on Tuesday, at least 18 out of 29 recognised engineering and technology degree courses – including Computer Science and Engineering, Electrical Engineering, Textile Engineering – at the UG level have Physics and Maths listed as “mandatory at 10+2 level” against their names.

Rethink on previous norms

The AICTE had defended its decision to revise the entry norms in engineering courses last year by describing it as a step towards encouraging interdisciplinarity. However, top scientific experts had reasoned against the move, terming it retrograde and a step in the wrong direction – observations which forced a rethink.

The third subject can be anything from among Chemistry, Computer Science, Electronics, Information Technology, Biology, Informatics Practices, Biotechnology, Technical Vocational subject, Agriculture, Engineering Graphics, Business Studies, Entrepreneurship.

As many as 15 courses require a student to have studied Physics, Chemistry and Mathematics in high school. However, a student who may not have studied Maths, but had Physics and Chemistry in school, can still pursue Agriculture Engineering, Biotechnology, Pharmaceutical Engineering and Printing Engineering under the revised norms.

Only UG courses in architecture, packaging technology, and fashion technology courses have no compulsory subject combination requirements.

The overall scores of the students in three subjects will still need to be at least 45 per cent (general) and 40 per cent (reserved categories) to be eligible for admissions.

Till the 2019-20 academic session, engineering aspirants should have cleared school with Physics and Mathematics as compulsory subjects. The third subject could have been one from among Chemistry, Biotechnology, Biology and Technical Vocational subject.

Last year, the AICTE attributed its move to do away with the mandatory subject combinations. It was also described as a push for interdisciplinary education that the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 envisages. NEP provision on multiple entry and exit in four-year B Tech or BE degrees has also been defined by the AICTE under the revised norms.

Among other highlights of the handbook is introduction of a supernumerary quota in polytechnic institutions for Covid-orphans covered under the PM-CARES scheme. Accordingly, two seats per institute will be reserved for applicants falling under this category.

EXPLAINED: WHAT ARE ARTICULATED ALL-TERRAIN VEHICLES, AND WHY DOES INDIAN ARMY NEED THEM?

The Indian Army has issued a Request For Information (RFI) for the supply of Articulated All-Terrain Vehicles to be deployed in Ladakh and Kutch.



What are Articulated All Terrain Vehicles?

Articulated All-Terrain Vehicle is a twin cabin, tracked, amphibious carrier for off road mobility. The special design of this equipment exerts low ground pressure on the soil and a pull-push mode of locomotion between two cabins facilitates mobility over varied terrains like snow, desert and slush. A ballistic protection in the cabin body ensures protection to troops travelling in it from small arms fire.

These vehicles are very useful to move troops or supplies in snow-bound terrains and in marshy/sandy environments. They can reach where wheeled vehicles cannot due to deep snow, slush or marshy terrain and can be very effective for patrolling and rapid deployment in operational situations.

Where does the Indian Army wish to use these vehicles?

As per the RFI issued by the Army on March 25, it requires 18 Articulated All-Terrain Vehicles. The RFI document specifies that 12 vehicles need to be supplied to Nimu in Ladakh and six to Bhuj in Gujarat. This shows that the Army wishes to use these vehicles in the snow-bound areas of Ladakh and in the marshy terrain of the Rann of Kutch.

What are the requirements of the Army from the vehicles?

As per the specifications in the RFI, the vehicle should be able to perform at heights of 18,000 feet in glaciated and snow bound conditions and in salty/dry marshes.

The vehicles should be able to seat 10 soldiers with full combat load (excluding the crew) and should have inbuilt ballistic protection. It should have an operating range of not less than 150 kms in cross country terrain in plains and at an altitude of 15,000 to 18,000 feet in the mountains. The vehicles should have a service life of at least 15 years.

Who manufactures such vehicles?

There are several Western manufacturers of Articulated All-Terrain Vehicles including Canada and Finland. The NASU vehicle of Finland is used by the Finnish, French, Belgian and US Armies among others.

The Bandvagn 206 is used by the Swedish Army and was developed by a Swedish Company which is now part of BAE Systems, Platforms and Services. The British and US militaries also use the Bandvagn 206. The Russian Army uses the DT-30 Vityaz vehicle and GAZ 3344 manufactured in the country.

EXPLAINED: MP QUOTA IN KENDRIYA VIDYALAYAS, AND WHY GOVTS HAVE TRIED TO SCRAP IT

Last week, Union Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan urged the Lok Sabha to collectively debate and decide whether the MP quota in Kendriya Vidyalaya admissions should continue or be scrapped. Following his appeal, Lok Sabha Speaker Om Birla had suggested that there could be an all-party meeting to deliberate over the matter.

We explain what the MP quota is and why the government is building a case for scrapping it.



What are the Kendriya Vidyalayas?

To understand the issue, we must first understand what Kendriya Vidyalayas (KV) are.

Earlier known as 'Central Schools', these are institutions administered and run by the Ministry of Education (MoE). They were started in 1963 on the recommendation of the Second Central Pay Commission for the children of transferable Central government employees, including Defence and paramilitary personnel. The objective was to ensure that the education of these children does not get hampered on account of frequent transfer of their parents. Currently, there are about 1,200 KVs in the country. A KV seat is considered coveted since these schools offer subsidised quality education and have maintained an excellent academic track record, especially in the CBSE Board results.

What is the MP quota in KV admissions and why was it introduced?

The Kendriya Vidyalaya Sangathan (KVS), the autonomous body under MoE that manages the schools, introduced a special scheme in 1975 allowing a fixed quota of admissions to each member of the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha. This was a means to give more discretionary powers to MPs to help them serve their constituents in a better way.

An MP can refer students for admission against this quota, but these recommendations are limited from Classes 1 to 9, and children whose parents belong to the member's constituency. The MP quota has undergone several changes, including being discontinued on at least two occasions. Earlier, an MP could recommend two admissions in an academic year, which was increased to five in 2011, six in 2012, and 10 in 2016. Currently, with 543 MPs in the Lok Sabha and 245 in the Rajya Sabha, 7,880 admissions are possible against this quota every year.

Apart from the MP quota, a separate "discretionary" quota allowed the Education Minister (earlier known as the Human Resources Development Minister) to recommend 450 students for admission in each academic year. Much like the MP quota, the discretionary quota, too, has also undergone several changes, before being abolished last year by Pradhan.

How do admissions take place under the MP quota?

Every MP sends a coupon to the KVS and MoE from his/her office with details of the child and parents, such as a postal address, phone number, and email address. The list of shortlisted candidates is put up on the KVS website. After a student's name appears on the list, the formal admission process begins. Students or their parents have to take a print-out of the coupon with other relevant documents, such as birth certificates, address proofs, transfer certificates, etc., and submit them to the school. The fee challan is then raised and once paid, he/she is formally admitted to the school.

Why have governments tried to scrap the quotas?

Admissions against both the aforesaid quotas are above the sanctioned seat strength across all KVs. Over the years, admissions have often exceeded the quota size since MPs and Ministers receive several requests, many of which, they claim, are hard to turn down. For instance, in 2018-19, 8,164 students were admitted against the sanctioned strength of 7,880 and 9,402 students were taken in against the Education Minister's quota of 450. Governments have argued that the excess admissions distort the student-teacher ratio in these schools and deprive meritorious students of an opportunity to study in a Kendriya Vidyalaya.



However, attempts to scrap the quotas have often run into a wall with MPs prevailing over the government to retain it. The MP quota was first scrapped in 1997 but reintroduced soon after in 1998 following the order of Murli Manohar Joshi, the then Human Resource Development Minister.

In March 2010, under the UPA-2 government, the then HRD Minister Kapil Sibal had suspended both the quotas. However, he, too, had to give into political pressure, and not only did he reinstate the MP quota, but also increased the size in 2011 and 2012.

However, the Education Minister's quota remained abolished until Smriti Irani took charge as the HRD Minister. The NDA government also increased the size of the MP quota from six to ten admissions each year in 2016. In August 2021, the incumbent Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan scrapped his discretionary quota of 450 admissions.

Why is the MP quota back in the news?

This discretionary power of the MPs is under the spotlight after the issue was raised by Congress MP Manish Tewari during the ongoing Parliament session. Tewari had argued that the ten-seat quota is not enough for an MP who is forced to turn down a large number of applicants and face public anger.

"Each of us represents 15-20 lakh people and each constituency has at least 35-40 lakh people...I want to humbly submit that it creates a lot of inconvenience for us. Because those who are denied get angry with us. I have a request: either you enhance the quota from 10 to 50 or do away with it," he had said.

Pradhan, in turn, went on to suggest that the government can work towards scrapping the quota if the House agrees. "We are people's representatives. We are not representatives of a few," the Minister had said. Following this, Speaker Om Birla had suggested an all-party meeting to decide over the issue. On Friday, BJP leader Sushil Kumar Modi had moved a zero-hour notice in the Rajya Sabha in favour of withdrawal of the MP quota.

DIGGING UP THE CHAMBAL

Along the periphery of Keoladeo National Park in Rajasthan, Lal Singh counts sand-laden tractor-trolleys returning from the Chambal. "I watch this every day. What effect has the Supreme Court's ban on sand mining had?" asks Singh, a former wildlife guide.

The 200-strong convoy makes its way onto the Jaipur-Agra highway, from where a criss-crossing network of roads ensures the illegally mined sand reaches all corners of the region, the NCR, and further. "They mine day and night. Everybody is hand in glove with each other," Singh says, pointing towards the Chambal Bridge near Dholpur, which forms the border between Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh and is the gateway to the Chambal River Safari.

Long believed to be cursed and born from the blood of a thousand animals according to mythological retellings, Chambal, once the haven of fearsome dacoits, is today a meek witness to the massive ecocide happening right under the noses of the police and forest authorities.

Breakneck speed

The National Chambal Sanctuary (NCS), a protected riverine area, spans Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh. Touted as the cleanest river of India, "away from all industrial

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



pollution”, by the Madhya Pradesh Tourism Department, the Chambal flows through the sanctuary, which is home to rare wildlife. The river harbours some of the most pristine sandbanks, which are the basking and egg-laying habitats for the critically endangered gharial, for the endangered Indian skimmer, the critically endangered red-crowned roofed turtle, and a host of other threatened and endangered species. India’s national aquatic animal, the endangered Ganges river dolphin, is also spotted here.

The area welcomes tourists and photographers from all corners of the country. Lately, however, instead of being treated to sights of wildlife, visitors are witness to convoys of tractor-trolleys, diggers and excavators destroying the sandbanks along the Chambal. Sources have reported illegal mining occurring at breakneck speed in recent months. During visits in January 2022, Indian skimmers, threatened river terns, mugger crocodiles and the red-crowned roofed turtles, of which less than 400 females are thought to remain in the wild, were observed in the immediate vicinity (within a 100-metre radius) of multiple sandbanks being mined. According to reports, rampant sand mining within NCS is forcing gharials to migrate to Kuno and Parbati rivers, tributaries of the Chambal, in search of safer egg-laying habitats.

Local menace

Coupled with habitat loss, the area is facing plastic and waste pollution as a result of the mining. “The disturbance caused by excavators and the trolleys is getting worse,” said a forest department employee wishing to remain anonymous. When pressed further, he said that the scale of unlawful mining had seen an increase over the past year. All this despite the presence of forest department personnel of Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh at Chambal Bridge, and police checkpoints on both sides of the State border.

Due to the lack of effective monitoring, either owing to resource constraints or safety concerns of investigators, the true scale of illegal sand mining remains unknown. However, satellite imagery clearly shows the gradual disappearance of depositional features that form over long time periods. Conservative estimates from an on-ground investigation in January 2022 suggested that some 40,000 cubic feet of river sand was being extracted from the Chambal Bridge site alone on a typical morning. If unlawful mining is brazenly progressing here, less accessible sites in the interior, away from the public gaze, are likely to be witnessing more devastation.

Conservation biologist Tarun Nair, who has reported on the ecological damage in the region, believes that ending illegal mining is a matter of administrative will. “We have repeatedly seen, most recently during COVID-19 lockdowns, that the government machinery is capable of enforcing restrictions. The reasons for not doing so here lie in the criminal-political economies of the sand mafia. That said, the ‘mafia’ is not an external evil but a home-grown, local menace,” he says.

Attempts to eliminate illegal sand mining continue to prove futile while it has often been suggested that operations are organised by politically well-connected individuals. Over the past two decades, several instances of activists, journalists, and officers being harassed, assaulted or even killed for taking an anti-mining stand have been documented. Widespread local support and participation in illegal mining ensure that activists face an uphill task and considerable personal risk.



Information blackholes

“This is also why there is little political will to stop illegal mining or why it is seldom part of the ‘promise package’ to legalise sand mining and de-notify protected areas during election campaigns,” says Nair. “In this case, the ‘innocent local vs. evil outsider’ dichotomy is false and does not reflect ground realities.”

The Rajasthan government’s recent decision to lease 60 sites across the State for ‘legalised’ sand mining is expected to come as some relief to protected areas. However, there is an information blackhole on details of these sites, which includes a lack of transparency on ecological assessments undertaken and made available in the public domain.

Such blanket clearances for projects set dangerous precedents, making statutory requirements mere formalities. Whether illegal sand mining will reduce remains to be seen, but the move serves as an invitation to imprudently destroy ecosystems without scrutiny. Further, since there are alternatives — and better ones at that — such as manufactured sand (M-sand), which has seen increased uptake in some parts of the country, it makes legalised sand mining all the more questionable.

HISTORY MAKER

Soon after S. Phangnon Konyak was elected unopposed Nagaland’s first woman Rajya Sabha member on March 24, Pradesh Congress Committee president Kewekhapse Therie was quoted as saying that Nagaland’s 60 legislators destroyed the image of “the Christian State”.

Mr. Therie was targeting the “Hindutva” BJP, Ms. Konyak’s party and minor partner in the coalition government headed by the Nationalist Democratic Progressive Party. But many attributed his statement to the general perception that women have no place in the State’s “money- and muscle-powered” politics. Nagaland has not had a single woman MLA since it attained statehood in December 1963.

Ms. Konyak, president of the BJP’s State Mahila Morcha, will be the first woman to represent Nagaland in the Rajya Sabha but not the first MP. The trendsetter was Rano M. Shaiza, who won the State’s lone Lok Sabha seat as a candidate of the United Democratic Party in 1977.

But the BJP leader’s elevation to the Upper House is seen as a bigger political statement, partly because she belongs to the Konyak community.

Thirteen of her tribesmen were killed in a botched ambush by an elite unit of the Army and subsequent violence at Oting on December 4 and 5, 2021. Another was shot in Mon, her hometown. Her election underlined the increasing clout of the BJP in the State with the allies deciding not to field their own candidates. It also made the BJP come across as a party that gives more space to women, who invariably outvote men in Nagaland’s elections. In the 2018 Assembly election, 86.04% of the women cast their votes as against 81.68% of men. In the 2013 election, the number of women electors was 2.24% higher.

Joining BJP

The BJP had named Ms. Konyak as its Rajya Sabha candidate a few days after the Nagaland government, directed by the Supreme Court, decided to conduct the elections to the urban local bodies (ULBs) with 33% reservation for women in keeping with the 74th Amendment of the



Constitution. This was perhaps coincidental for Ms. Konyak, who had joined the BJP in 2017 when the State government's bid to hold the ULB polls with the 33% quota for women triggered widespread violence.

Ms. Konyak, 44, hopes her election to the Rajya Sabha would encourage women in Nagaland to "achieve the impossible" and break one glass ceiling after another. She has "many areas to focus on" during her stint in Parliament, including following up on the investigation into the Oting incident to ensure the victims get justice.

Friends and acquaintances say Ms. Konyak's forte is patience, perhaps imbibed from her mother who retired as a teacher. She is also known to troubleshoot — a quality that came to the fore during her 16-year stint as the chief functionary of an NGO called Walo Organisation in Mon district — like her father, a retired administrative officer. Her activities with the NGO included creating awareness of, and undertaking intervention programmes concerning, health, education, gender parity and promotion of agriculture.

DEVIANCY AMPLIFICATION

Deviancy amplification is a theory that suggests that deviance in a society is the unintended consequence of police control, over-reaction and labelling by the mass media and popular reaction to deviant stereotypes. The term was originally coined by *Leslie T. Wilkins* who used the expression '*deviation amplification*' in his book *Social Deviance* (1967). The theory is an important element within the sociological critique of conventional criminology which was reluctant in understanding the context behind the concept of deviance and in understanding crime as a social construct.

What is it?

The act of going against the norms and laws inscribed by society is termed deviance. Violence among African-Americans is one of the examples where deviancy amplification is witnessed. For instance, when there are instances of robbery or gun violence in African-American neighbourhoods, the media tends to exaggerate the incident as a representation of the community instead of displaying it as an individual case of deviance. The neighbours in turn are projected as hostile leading to intensifying such deviant behaviour. In contrast, when a white individual shoots students and teachers in a white neighbourhood school, the incident is downplayed and represented as an individual incident, thus preventing any form of misinformation about the community from spreading through media and into the minds of people consuming it. Other examples of this include deviant behaviour among adolescents that tend to get exaggerated. Cases of drug use among a few adolescents, for instance, tend to be represented as an issue affecting adolescents across societies. This leads to paranoia among parents, which then leads to increased restrictions and prohibitions on teenagers. This then spirals down to provoking more children to use drugs either due to curiosity or as a counter-reaction to said restrictions.

The concept thus suggests that distorted information and ignorance about minorities in mass society produce inappropriate responses to perceived deviance. Small initial deviances for instance, through over-reaction especially by media coverage, leads to unnecessary attention given to the deviant behaviour giving the impression that the initial exaggeration was a true representation of the deviancy.



This distorting of knowledge results in further amplification of deviance. The concept of deviancy amplification has been useful in studies of police reaction to drug abuse, sexual offences, group-based violence, political protests among others.

Theory of labelling

The 'Labelling theory' states that people come to identify and behave in ways that reflect how others label them. Made popular in American sociology by sociologist Howard Becker, the theory takes an interesting approach to understanding deviant and criminal behaviour. It explains that no act is intrinsically criminal and explains how crime is a social construct whose definitions are established through formulation, interpretation and implementation of the law by police, courts and governments, controlled by those in power.

When public stigma and discrimination infiltrate the implementation of the law, unfair labelling takes place. For instance, while most children quarrel, pluck fruits from neighbouring houses and accidentally break windows while playing cricket, when done by children from poorer communities, they are looked at as young troublemakers. The theory suggests that when a person is labelled as a criminal due to a group he/she identifies with, it can cause society to treat the person poorly, which in turn results in the individual becoming deviant. Thus, stereotyping and labelling due to poor understanding of individuals and groups by those who have access to broadcasting information can lead to deviancy amplification.

Critique of the theory

Some critics argue that in trying to correlate labelling and deviance, factors such as differences in socialisation, attitudes, and opportunities that lead to deviance is ignored. They argue that there is no direct proof to show that labelling increases deviancy. For instance, though the possibility of an ex-con man going back to doing criminal activities after coming out of prison are high due to the ostracisation he faces from society, it could also be a result of the networks he created with other prisoners and his continued exposure to crime.

The theory has also been criticised by Jason Ditton's Controlology (1979). He points out the half-heartedness of labelling theory which attempts to extend Wilkin's model to the point at which control may be seen to be operating independently of crime (rather than within a mutually causal framework) on the basis that such liberation will constitute an adequate propositional basis for a fully-fledged labelling theory. He further critiques the theory for failing to show how these spirals are eventually terminated, diminished or abandoned.

The concept of deviancy amplification, despite critiques, is relevant in understanding that the media's coverage of incidents affects society's reactions towards targeted groups negatively. The blowing up of issues by the media can create panic among the masses leading to the ostracisation of an entire community due to the deviance of a few miscreants. When used tactically by the ones in power, this can be used as a method to distract the public from far more important issues in society.

RHINO POPULATION UP BY 200 IN KAZIRANGA

The population of the greater one-horned or Indian rhinoceros in the Kaziranga National Park and Tiger Reserve has increased by 200 in four years, the latest census of the World Heritage Site's flagship animal has revealed.



The last rhino census conducted in 2018 had put the number at 2,413.

Though the tiger reserve measures 1,355 sq. km, the census was confined to a rhino-bearing area of 864 sq. km. It was conducted from March 25 to 28 but the counting was done on the two days in between.

Fifty elephants were deployed to cover all the 84 compartments of the park, its addition areas and civil areas. Apart from 125 enumerators and independent observers, 252 frontline staff were involved in the exercise. "We estimated 2,613 rhinos, which indicates an annual increase of 50 rhinos since 2018. During this period, Kaziranga lost 400 rhinos due to natural causes while poachers killed three," Jatindra Sarma, Kaziranga's director, told The Hindu.

This year's census had a first — the use of drones for the recheck of 26 park compartments where the sample survey was done.

Of the rhinos estimated, 1,823 were adults, 365 were sub-adults, 279 juveniles and 146 calves. The females outnumbered the males by 183. The gender of 273 adults and sub-adults could not be specified.

A similar census was conducted in two more of Assam's rhino habitats earlier in March.

DIP IN CHILIKA LAKE'S DOLPHIN POPULATION

The dolphin population along Odisha's coast and in its waterbodies has increased but the number of Irrawaddy dolphins in Chilika lake has fallen.

Months after undertaking a census in different waterbodies and off the coast of Odisha, the Principal Chief Conservator Forest (Wildlife) has provided data, recorded across the State's Wildlife Divisions, on the number of dolphins, which have overall gone up from 544 in 2021 to 726 in 2022.

High sighting

The increase in the State's dolphin population is largely due to high sighting in the Mangrove Wildlife Division of the Rajnagar jurisdiction, where 540 dolphins were enumerated in 2022 compared with 342 in 2021. In Rajnagar, the number of bottlenose dolphins rose from 22 to 135 and humpback dolphins from 281 to 332 in one year.

A total of six species of dolphins — Irrawaddy, bottlenose, humpback, striped, finless and spinner dolphins — have been recorded.

The lake, which is a major tourist attraction known for its Irrawaddy dolphins, saw the numbers of its flagship aquatic animal drop sharply from 162 in 2021 to 151 this year. There has also been a fall in the number of bottlenose dolphins at Chilika, from 26 in 2021 to 16 in 2022.

In the remaining four Wildlife Divisions — Puri, Berhampur, Bhadrak and Balasore — dolphin sighting was negligible. The State has a total of 208 Irrawaddy dolphins.

The census for dolphins and other cetacean species included almost the entire coast of Odisha, where estimation was been carried out within a width of one kilometre from the sea beach using the line transect census method at a distance of 500 metres from the beach. Subsequently,



recording of dolphins sighted on either side of the line transect was completed. In all, 48 census units were established all along the coastline.

RECORD NESTING OF OLIVE RIDLEY TURTLES

As a record number of 4.92 lakh Olive Ridley turtles have crawled to the Rushikulya coast in Odisha, scientists have tagged more than 6,000 turtles to gather more information about their breeding behaviour and migration.

"On the Day 6 of arribada on the Rushikulya coast, we have recorded 4.92 lakh nests and are still counting. This is the highest nesting which has broken all records for the coast," said Divisional Forest Officer, Berhampur, Amlan Nayak.

During the nesting period, scientists of the Zoological Survey of India (ZSI) have tagged more than one per cent of turtles that have arrived on the beach.

Ministry's statement

On March 30, the Ministry of Environment, Forest, and Climate Change (MOEFCC) took note of both spectacular nesting at the Rushikulya rookery and the tagging of turtles. "The ZSI team is monitoring the nesting population, counting the arribada throughout the night since 26th March 2022... Around 1,200 turtles tagged every night, in the last three nights, more than 4,000 female turtles have been tagged by #ZSI," the MOEFCC had said in a series of tweets.

Arribada is a Spanish word meaning "arrival by sea" and refers to the mass nesting behaviour exhibited by Kemp's Ridley and Olive Ridley sea turtles.

Long distance travellers

"Before the tagging of the turtles, the information we had was that it was a migratory species. Now the tagging has revealed that the Olive Ridley turtles can travel up to Sri Lanka. Also, we came to know that the migratory turtle is present in the entire Bay of Bengal and even on the coast of Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu," Dr. Basudev Tripathi, scientist at ZSI, said.

GAHIRMATHA'S BEACH WITNESSES AN ARRIBADA

About 2.45 lakh Olive Ridley sea turtles crawled ashore on the Nasi-II beach of the Gahirmatha Marine Sanctuary along the Odisha coast for laying eggs, marking one of the largest opening day arrivals of turtles at the site.

Authorities of the State Forest and Environment Department have been apprehensive about the delay in annual nesting ritual of the species at Gahirmatha, the world's largest rookery for the endangered Olive Ridley sea turtles. When the annual spectacle began on Friday, it was a sight to behold.

"This year, the slope is in a perfect condition for turtles to climb up the beach. The blowing of the southerly wind makes the atmosphere conducive for turtles to congregate for laying eggs," Jagyandatt Pati, Divisional Forest Officer, Mangrove Wildlife Division, Rajnagar, said. Mr. Pati said the entire turtle congregation was noticed in the Nasi-II island of the Gahirmatha Sanctuary. Both Nasi-I and Nasi-II beaches are under the jurisdiction of the Defence Research and Development Organisation, which conducts missile tests from the nearby Wheeler Island. "It is a matter of great



satisfaction that Nasi-II is getting elongated due to natural processes over the past few years, which means there is more space for turtles to lay eggs,” Mr. Pati added.

Elaborate arrangements are in place to guard the eggs from dogs and hyenas, which are attracted to the mass nesting sites.

FEWER OLIVE RIDLEYS REACH GODAVARI SITE

Once known as a safe nesting ground on India’s east coast, a nearly 30-km coastline in the Godavari estuary has recorded a sharp fall in the arrival of Olive Ridley turtles (*Lepidochelys olivacea*) during the breeding season as large numbers of the endangered animals are trapped by high speed fishing boats.

The entire rookery, including the Coringa Wildlife Sanctuary, is part of the rare and ecologically sensitive Godavari mangrove system. According to official data, 1,061 turtles arrived at the Godavari estuary in the 2018-19 breeding season (January-April), in which a record number of 89,172 hatchlings were returned to the sea. But the number of turtles arriving started falling from the following season. In 2019-20, barely 640 turtles arrived at the estuary, and 2020-21 witnessed the lowest turnout of 471 turtles. In the ongoing season, 501 turtles have arrived so far and more are expected till mid-April.

“Mechanised boats equipped with speed engines beyond the permissible capacity are proving to be death traps for Olive Ridley turtles on the Andhra coast in recent years. The boats and their speed are the prime factors responsible for the death of the turtles along the coast,” Forest Range Officer (Wildlife-Kakinada) S.S.R. Vara Prasad told The Hindu.

CCTV surveillance

“Given the alarming rate of Olive Ridley turtle deaths, we are installing CCTV camera surveillance systems on fishing boats to monitor fishing and ensure turtle conservation activity during the breeding season,” he added.

DreamIAS



BUSINESS & ECONOMICS

INDIA-UAE TRADE DEAL: LIKELY IN FORCE FROM MAY, FOCUS ON BOOSTING SME JOBS

India and the United Arab Emirates on Sunday released the full text of the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) that was signed between the two countries in February.

The pact, likely to come into force on May 1, is expected to boost bilateral trade between the two countries to \$100 billion over five years as against \$43.3 billion in FY21. It covers goods, services, rules of origin, intellectual property rights, e-commerce and government procurement. The UAE is currently India's third largest trade partner.

Under the agreement, India will benefit from preferential market access provided by the UAE on over 97 per cent of its tariff lines which account for 99 per cent of Indian exports to the UAE in value terms, while offering the UAE preferential access to the UAE on 90 per cent of its tariff lines.

Key sectors that are set to benefit from the CEPA include labour intensive sectors like gems & jewellery, textiles, leather, footwear, sports goods, engineering products, medical devices, and automobiles. Annual exports worth about \$26 billion from India that currently attract a 5 per cent import duty in the UAE are set to benefit from the agreement.

The deal also provides for both countries to set up a technical council on investment, trade promotion and facilitation led by representatives of both governments that would promote and monitor trade and investment flows between the two countries.

Indian industry has noted that the agreement's emphasis on boosting opportunities for small and medium enterprises (SMEs) would help create more jobs in the sector. "A separate annexure on the pharma sector, emphasis on paperless trading with the cooperation in the area of digital trade would have significant positive impact on boosting bilateral trade and investment," said Chandrajit Banerjee, director general, Confederation of Indian Industry (CII).

The UAE has agreed to facilitate market access for Indian pharmaceuticals that have been approved in developed jurisdictions such as the US and EU within 90 days.

As per a government release, in the area of trade in services, the pact will give Indian service providers market access to 11 broad service sectors like business services, communications services, construction & related engineering services, educational services, financial services, and tourism & travel related services.

EXPLAINED: PUTIN'S DEMAND FOR TRADE IN RUBLES, AND HOW IT COULD WORK

On March 23, Russian President Vladimir Putin demanded that European countries must pay for all natural gas imports in rubles instead of the US dollar or the euro. The European Union imports 40 per cent of its natural gas requirements.

According to reports coming out of Russia, Putin said Russia would not accept natural gas payments in currencies that have "compromised". This list of currencies included dollars and euros. "I have decided to implement a set of measures to transfer payment for our gas supplies to unfriendly countries into Russian rubles," Putin is reported to have said. The list of unfriendly countries includes the EU nations, the US and the UK.



Predictably, in the immediate aftermath of this announcement, prices of both natural gas and its substitute crude oil spiked.

Why did Putin do this?

The move to accept payments only in rubles has been done to increase the demand for rubles in the international market.

The ruble had been weakening against the dollar in the weeks before Russia invaded Ukraine. It went from being around 75-to-a-dollar to around 85-to-a-dollar [meaning 10 more rubles were required to buy a single dollar in the international market] between the start of 2022 and Russia's invasion of Ukraine on February 24.

However, after the invasion, the ruble's value plummeted to almost 145 within a fortnight. Apart from chasing away every investor for obvious reasons of war and uncertainty, the key factor that punished the Russian currency was the set of sweeping sanctions that Western countries applied on Russia.

There were two essential aspects to these sanctions. One, they banned most exports, from luxury goods to military goods, out of Russia. Russian flights were banned over the US, UK, EU and Canadian airspace. Two, Russia was slapped with crushing financial sanctions. Russian banks were banned from the Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication or SWIFT mechanism, which enables banks around the world to move money quickly and securely. SWIFT is dominated by US and European banks.

The Russian central bank — the equivalent of India's RBI — was not spared either. Its foreign-currency assets, worth \$630 billion (or over Rs 48 trillion), were frozen.

The net result of these sanctions was a collapse of trade and trading mechanisms. This, in turn, resulted in a collapse of the ruble's exchange rate because no one wants to hold the currency of a country one can't trade with.

With this decision, Putin wanted to reverse the tide and create a demand for rubles.

Exchange rate: value of USD in rubles

Will it help the ruble?

On Tuesday, the ruble had recovered to 85-to-a-dollar. That's because the EU cannot reduce its dependence on energy imports from Russia overnight. To be sure, as the Wall Street Journal reported, even before this decision "Russia has already asked its companies that take payment in dollars and euros to swap 80% of their revenue into rubles".

While this, too, was a way to create demand for the ruble, the onus was on Russian firms. Under the new diktat, the onus to demand rubles is on the importing countries.

How will European companies get rubles, if they are to comply with Putin's demand?

Thanks to the sanctions, Russian firms no longer have any use for the dollar or the euro. As such, European firms will now have to find intermediaries — those that accept dollars and euros, convert them to rubles, and give them to the Europeans so that they can pay for the natural gas imports.



The key question is: If direct dollar/euro to ruble exchange is not possible, then which currency would be used as an intermediary? The most likely answer is the Chinese yuan. In such a scenario, dollars/euros will be exchanged for yuan and that, in turn, will be exchanged for rubles.

Could Putin's decision be counter-productive for Russia? What are the wider ramifications?

As far as the immediate impact is concerned, tracked by the dollar ruble exchange rate, the move could be seen as a masterstroke. But there are severe adverse long-term consequences for Russia as well.

For one, the west sees this move by Russia as a breach of contract. While it, in particular Europe, may not be able to react straightaway owing to the energy dependence on Russia, this move has already triggered the west to find alternatives. These could be both in terms of other forms of energy — say coal or renewable — and other energy producers, for example, Saudi Arabia.

The fact is, Europe's current dependence on energy imports from Russia works both ways because the earnings from the same energy exports are what fuel the Russian economy. If neighbouring Europe finds alternatives, even if that doesn't happen in a hurry, it would also hurt Russia eventually.

There is another fallout, which could hurt the US and undermine the dominance of the dollar as the go-to currency across the world. If the Chinese yuan replaces the dollar in trade with Russia — and typically daily trades would be worth billions of dollars — then it would lead to “de-dollarisation” (a term that implies the global financial system's reduced reliance on the dollar).

How is India affected?

Anindya Banerjee, Vice President, Currency Derivatives & Interest Rate Derivatives at Kotak Securities Ltd says that India's crude oil imports from Russia have significantly increased over the past month. That's because the Russian crude oil (Urals) is available at a deep discount to both the Brent and the West Texas Intermediate (WTI).

According to Banerjee, a rupee-ruble trade that is reported to be under consideration will essentially be benchmarked to the Chinese yuan. Benchmarking to yuan, instead of the dollar, would imply that instead of talking about oil prices in dollars per barrel, the price quoted would be in terms of yuan.

India used to have rupee-ruble direct trade since the early 1950s but at that time the exchange rate was not market-determined. Over time, Indian government incentives to exporters were linked to trade that happened in so-called “free” currencies — or the currencies whose value is determined freely by the market.

Since the ruble was not part of such currencies, exporters avoided such trade. Eventually, the direct rupee ruble trade was formally scrapped in 2005.

GST COLLECTIONS HIT NEW HIGH IN MARCH

India's gross Goods and Services Tax (GST) collections hit a record ₹1,42,095 crore in March, surpassing the January high of ₹1,40,986 crore and lifting the Centre's projected gross tax revenues for 2021-22 significantly above the government's revised estimates.



The March GST revenues, for transactions undertaken in February, were 15% higher than a year earlier and 46% higher than in March 2020. Revenues from import of goods were 25% higher and the revenues from domestic transactions, including import of services, were 11% higher than a year earlier.

The Finance Ministry said the record monthly receipts indicated that a faster recovery was underway in business activity, citing the fact that the number of e-way bills generated in February exceeded January's 6.88 crore figure by three lakh despite a 'shorter month'.

Monthly collections averaged ₹1.38 lakh crore in the last quarter of 2021-22, compared with ₹1.3 lakh crore in the preceding period. The average was significantly lower in the first and second quarters, at ₹1.1 lakh crore and ₹1.15 lakh crore, respectively. Apart from the economic recovery, the ministry said that 'anti-evasion activities against fake billers' had also helped lift collections.

"The record GST collections have also been aided by the strong sales activity of corporates in March, as they race to close the financial year with high growth," said M.S. Mani, partner at Deloitte India.

ICRA chief economist Aditi Nayar reckoned that GST revenues would rise further in April, on improved economic activity and year-end adjustments, adding that the March figure was in line with the rebound in e-way bill generation.

"Higher GST collections, in addition to customs duty revenues driven by the rebound in gold imports in February, combined with direct taxes, are likely to have pushed up the Government of India's gross tax revenues well above the revised estimates for the year," Ms. Nayar said, positing that actual collections would have likely 'overshot' the ₹27.6 lakh crore revised estimate by a tidy ₹2.25 lakh crore.

State trends mixed

Though revenues from domestic transactions and import of services grew 11% from March 2021 levels, the trends were mixed among major States. Revenues rose 26% in Odisha, 19% in Maharashtra, 17% in Haryana and 12% in Gujarat. West Bengal's GST collections grew just 2%, while they rose 6% in Uttar Pradesh.

Among the southern States, Andhra Pradesh's GST revenues increased by 18%, followed by 14% growth in Kerala, 11% in Karnataka and just 6% in Tamil Nadu. Telangana's kitty increased by a mere 2%.

BEYOND RECORD EXPORTS

The story so far: On March 21, the value of India's outbound shipments in the financial year 2021-22 hit \$400 billion, the highest ever. By the time the year closes this Thursday, another \$10 billion worth of goods is expected to be shipped out. This would translate into a growth of about 41% from the pandemic-hit year of 2020-21, making it India's fastest exports growth rate since 2009-10.

How significant is the attainment of India's \$400 billion exports target?

First, 2021-22 reflects the first time in several years that the country has met its exports target, but for greater context, India's trend line in exports before the COVID-19 disruptions was nowhere close to this year's performance. According to data from the Reserve Bank of India, outbound



merchandise trade had clocked \$303.5 billion in 2017-18, \$330.1 billion in 2018-19 before slipping to \$313.4 billion in 2019-20, when numbers were slightly dented due to the harsh national lockdowns imposed in the last week of that financial year. *While higher prices of commodities and oil helped drive up the value of exports, with petroleum products exports jumping over 141%, some of India's industrial sectors shone through as well. Engineering exports, for instance, have jumped 46.5% to cross \$100 billion for the first time, even as chemicals, cotton yarn, handloom products, and the apparel industry have done well.* India has managed to achieve its export target despite supply disruptions due to the pandemic, *the challenging shortages of shipping containers and surging freight rates.* Part of this could also be explained by the *world shifting its global procurement preferences to diversify their dependence on China following the outbreak of the COVID-19 virus.* Australia, which is in the midst of a shrill trade battle with China, has made way for India, taking exports up 94% so far this year. Shipments to the U.S. are also up 47%. India would hope to consolidate these gains and establish its credentials as a credible alternative to China, even as it could face stiff competition in some sectors from Asian peers such as Vietnam and Bangladesh.

What about imports and the trade deficit?

Even as exports may rise nearly \$120 billion this year, India's imports have shot up to record levels and could end up nearly \$200 billion over 2020-21's import figure of \$393.6 billion. The trade deficit for the year could be around \$190 billion, sharply higher than the \$102 billion recorded in the pandemic year. The monthly trade deficit has been spiking recently and had hit a record \$22.9 billion in November 2021, with *imports gaining greater momentum than exports.*

What are the risk factors for Indian exports in the coming year?

Although India's direct trade with Russia is not significant at about 1% of its trade basket, the Ukraine-Russia conflict may create some more opportunities for Indian farm produce exports, especially for crops like wheat and maize. But this would be offset by a sharp rise in India's energy import bill as well as an uptick in costs of importing edible oils like sunflower oil, whose production is dominated by the two nations at war. India imports 80% of its oil and demand is likely to grow as the economic recovery picks up pace, provided the pandemic doesn't resurface. This could translate into a 'term-of-trade' shock, with elevated trade and current account deficits and sustained pressure on the rupee even as *monetary tightening in the developed world may suck out dollars from emerging markets.* The RBI Governor Shaktikanta Das has pointed out that unlike the taper tantrum of 2013, the *country's foreign exchange reserves, adequate to cover more than 12 months of imports, are robust and can finance higher current account deficits if needed.* Most economists, however, expect the rupee to weaken over 2022-23, which in turn could be a minor perk for exporters.

While high shipping rates, container shortages and re-alignment of trade routes around the Black Sea will pose a challenge, timely actions on the policy front could help create more export opportunities. First, *a swift conclusion of Free Trade Agreement pacts being negotiated with countries like the U.K., Australia and Canada, could create easier market access in these large markets.* Second, exporters await a long-overdue revision of the Foreign Trade Policy for 2015-20, that has now been extended into the first few months of 2022-23 as well. Third, *a parliamentary committee has urged the government to include Special Economic Zones and sectors such as pharma, steel, and chemicals under the Remission of Duties and Taxes on Export Products (RoDTEP) Scheme, which finally kicked off last year after a significant delay.*



These could help balance out some of the bigger tectonic shifts in trading patterns from the European crisis, including a firming up of the COVID-induced inward-looking shift in nations' stance on globalisation.

FREE RATIONS SCHEME EXTENDED BY 6 MONTHS

The Union Cabinet, chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, on Saturday extended the *Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana (PM-GKAY)* by another *six months till September 2022*. The scheme was originally introduced in April 2020 a month into the first lockdown during the initial onset of the COVID pandemic.

This will be the sixth phase of PM-GKAY. The Phase-V of the scheme was to end in March 2022. The government has spent approximately ₹2.6 lakh crore so far and another ₹80,000 crore will be spent over the next six months till September 2022, taking the total expenditure under PM-GKAY to nearly ₹3.4 lakh crore.

In the recently concluded Assembly election in Uttar Pradesh, the scheme was lauded as one of the key reasons for return of the BJP.

In a campaign speech, Mr. Modi had acknowledged the significance of welfare measure by recounting a woman voter's story where she proclaimed her support for BJP because of "Modi Ka Namak" (Modi's salt).

Earlier in the day, U.P. Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath announced the extension of the scheme by three months. *The scheme covers 80 crore ration card holders across the country who are supplied 5 kg of rice or wheat and one kg of pulses per person per month.*

Apart from the Centre's supply of food grains, the Uttar Pradesh government spends ₹950 crore per month to supply a kilogram each of bengal gram or channa, oil and salt to the beneficiaries listed with the State.

The ration card portability has also helped in extending the schemes to the migrant workers, the government statement said.

"The benefit of free ration can be availed through portability by any migrant labourer or beneficiary under One Nation One Ration Card plan from nearly five lakh ration shops across the country. So far, *over 61 crore portability transactions* have benefitted the beneficiaries away from their homes."

THE STARTUP INDIA INITIATIVE

A research paper from Dublin City University in Ireland, reviewing India's entrepreneurial policy Startup India, affirmed its positive impact in reducing regional entrepreneurial disparities. However, it cited shortcomings in addressing the under-representation of women and marginalised caste groups in the national startup ecosystem. The paper was published in the Economic and Political Weekly in December 2021. Startup India was introduced in 2016 as a "clarion call to innovators, entrepreneurs, and thinkers of the nation to lead from the front in driving India's sustainable growth and create large scale employment opportunities."

Minister for Commerce and Industry Piyush Goyal informed the Lok Sabha the other week that the *entrepreneurial portal had more than 65,000 startups registered*. Of which, *40 attained the*



'unicorn' status in the last twelve months, bringing the total as of date to 90. He stated that India ranked third among global startup eco-systems.

Addressing regional entrepreneurial disparities

The evidence collated by authors of the research paper suggested that the networking, training and mentoring facilities provided by Startup India alongside entrepreneurship outreach campaigns in tier-2 and tier-3 cities, helped address regional entrepreneurial disparities in India. The program was aimed at scouting entrepreneurs from these cities and integrate them into the portal. *It would then facilitate a network between venture capital funds, angel networks, banks, incubators, accelerators, universities, legal partners, consultants and research & development institutions.*

The paper states the initiative helped redirect many State govts' policymaking in favour of startups. Quoting from Startup India's Report (2018), the researchers mention, only four States had dedicated startup policies prior to its launch. After its launch and as of December 2019, 23 States and two Union Territories had formulated a dedicated startup policy.

Heavy concentration in megacities

Despite the initiative, the researchers pointed out that entrepreneurship continued to be "highly concentrated" in three megacities, namely, Mumbai, Bengaluru and Delhi NCR. The three cities accounted for 93% of all funding raised between 2014 and 2019. The paper pointed out that India's venture capital industry is also clustered in and around these three cities.

The same notion was established by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) in its Pilot Survey on the Indian Startup Sector (2019). The research involving 1,246 participants stated nearly three-fourths of the participants were from Karnataka, Maharashtra, Telangana, Delhi and Tamil Nadu.

Quoting from recent studies, the researchers stated that such concentration can lead to increased economic inequality and hinder emergence of entrepreneurs from industries other than those belonging to the clusters. The spurt of industries (in this case, startups) *create employment opportunities, this furthers a demand for leisure and essential amenities among the populace.* In turn, this *furthers employment, economic activity and efficiency.* However, this takes place at the expense of another area having previously failed to enable a suitable supportive ecosystem.

According to results computed by the researchers in the paper, 30% of all States and Union Territories in India have an equal or higher proportionate share in the Dept for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade's (DPIIT) recognised start-up pool in relation to their share in the country population.

**LIFE & SCIENCE****THE FACEBOOK CLEAN-UP ATTEMPT ON POLITICAL MESSAGING**

The story so far: In a blogpost on March 27, Facebook's parent company Meta stated that *it can anticipate threats and help prevent interference in elections better than before*. It added that the platform's focus on strengthening *artificial intelligence and machine learning systems* among other tools made it *more effective at finding and removing abuse and fake accounts*. Further, to ensure a level playing field, Meta extended the use of all advertising tools, previously available only to large entities, to entities of all sizes.

What are the recent changes Meta has incorporated into its platform?

The Ad auction: Meta said ad pricing on its platforms vary as per the entity's targeting and bid strategy. It informed the auction does not make pricing decisions based on political viewpoints. "The assertion that any political party in India got discounted rates on ads because of their political affiliation is factually inaccurate," the blog stated. In January, Facebook decided to do away with some of its 'detailed targeting' options that let the advertisers refine their target audience. It informed that broad targeting along with customised and lookalike audience targeting options would continue to exist.

Disclaimers: Political ads on Facebook and Instagram are required to be mandatorily authorised and must include disclaimers as well. This enables users to note the name of the person or organisation running the ads. The advertisers are required to verify their *credentials* to increase their accountability. "For example, if we discover that the phone, email or website are no longer active or valid, we will inform the advertiser to update them. If they do not, they will no longer be able to use that disclaimer to run ads about elections or politics," the blog read.

Removing and demoting content: Meta announced that all political advertisements violative of their policies and standards, including those flagged by the Election Commission of India and scrutinised by them, will not be allowed to stay on their platforms. Separately, prior to the recently concluded State elections in five States of India, it had stated that if content, even though not violative of its standards but could potentially cause offline harm becomes widespread, it will be demoted so fewer people can see it.

Coordinated Inauthentic Behaviour: This refers to coordinated actions at a large scale aimed at influencing public opinions to achieve a strategic social or political goal. Fake accounts are usually central to such operations. Meta stated it accords focus on behaviour and not content when determining deceptive campaigns. "...in many cases the content shared by influence operations isn't verifiably false and may in fact be copied from authentic communities these deceptive campaigns are trying to mimic or reach," the blog stated. *The blog informed that it has been working on technologies to detect and block fake accounts, which are the source of a lot of inauthentic activity.*

Virality: Meta said it does not tweak its algorithms to suit a particular user. The feed is essentially shaped by choices and actions of the individual user. "It is made up primarily of content from the friends and family they choose to connect to on the platform, the Pages they choose to follow, and the Groups they choose to join. Ranking is then the process of using algorithms to order that content," the blog stated.



Language: Meta's blogpost stated that it has content reviewers in 20 Indian languages. There has been \$13 billion worth of investment which helped the company triple the size of its global team working on safety and security to over 40,000 including 15,000+ dedicated reviewers across 70 languages.

THE ROLE OF VRR FOR A FLAWLESS GAMING EXPERIENCE

The story so far: Google is said to be testing support for **variable refresh rates (VRR)** in the **Chrome OS 101 Dev Channel**, according to a report by About Chromebooks. The feature could improve gaming experience on Chromebooks. Several other device makers have used a form of the VRR in their products to provide superior experience, particularly in gaming.

What is VRR?

Refresh rate is the number of times a display is capable of refreshing in a second. It is measured in hertz (Hz). So, a 30 Hz or a 60 Hz display can refresh 30 or 60 times per second, respectively. *The higher the refresh rate, the better the quality of viewing experience. Displays with over 120 Hz can deliver a smoother and more comfortable viewing experience. This is necessary while playing video games or watching videos.*

VRR supports a wide range of refresh rates, allowing its refresh rate to change in real-time based on the frames-per-second (FPS) rate *coming from a source device such as a gaming console*. For example, *displays that support refresh rates from 10 Hz to 120 Hz, or 1Hz to 120 Hz, can adjust to different content styles for a seamless entertainment or gaming experience.*

How does the technology work?

VRR, which is *also termed as dynamic refresh rate or adaptive refresh rate* by different device makers, is designed to eliminate syncing issues that arise when the refresh rate of a display does not match with the FPS of the content from a source device. Issues such as screen-tearing, judder (wobbling effect) and lag are common when refresh rate and FPS are not synchronised.

This screen technology enables a monitor or a TV to communicate with a gaming console or a media streaming device much more effectively. Consequently, when the source device sends video frames as fast as it can, the display is able to adapt its own refresh rate continuously and seamlessly within its specific range to match that of the source.

VRR is provided by AMD's FreeSync, Nvidia's G-Sync, HDMI 2.1, Apple's ProMotion, and Qualcomm's Q-Sync to name a few. Among these, AMD and Nvidia's VRR have been used in PCs for a number of years, and also in PlayStation and Xbox gaming consoles.

Can it improve gaming experience?

Yes. It can improve gaming experience in both console and PC-based gaming. Once the console is connected to a monitor that supports one of the VRR solutions, it can eliminate judder and artefacts caused by mismatches in FPS. This in turn significantly improves image quality in games and videos. The higher the FPS the smoother the experience for gamers.

The makers of the latest gaming consoles offer a growing number of video games that play at 120 FPS and have optimised many popular older games to play at 120 FPS as well. Using a display that supports VRR technology, players can expect smooth and lag-free visuals in fast-paced games, giving them a greater advantage in first-person shooters, racing, or real-time strategy titles.



Besides, the screen technology can give players an important edge, especially in competitive multi-player games where split-second decisions are crucial for victory. Casual gamers will also be able to appreciate extra responsiveness in gameplay. One of the common problems gamers experience is screen-tearing when the FPS output from a source is higher than the refresh rate a display can handle, which results in the display showing two or more frames in its top and bottom halves. This syncing issue can be fixed with one of the VRR solutions.

Is it available in mobile devices?

Premium smartphones offer a kind of VRR solution. *Samsung first introduced VRR technology in its Galaxy Note 20 Ultra and later in the subsequent iterations of its flagship devices.*

The latest Galaxy S22 and S22+ feature adaptive refresh rate from 48 Hz to 120 Hz, whereas the more premium S22 Ultra offers adaptive refresh rate from 1 Hz to 120 Hz.

Apple's ProMotion has an adaptive refresh rate of up to 120 Hz on its new iPad Pro (10.5-inch) and iPad Pro 2nd generation (12.9-inch). Its latest iPhone 13 Pro models also feature an adaptive refresh rate from 10 Hz to 120 Hz.

In mobile devices, *a VRR solution can not only improve the gaming experience of users by keeping up with intense gameplay but also save battery power on them as the adaptive refresh rate does not run at the highest rate all the time and switches to a lower refresh rate during less graphic-intensive tasks.*

What does it mean for Chromebooks?

Earlier this month, Google said that it is working with Valve to bring Steam to Chrome OS. "We are very excited to share that we'll be landing an early, alpha-quality version of Steam on Chrome OS in the Dev channel for a small set of Chromebooks coming soon," it noted on a support page. Additionally, the search giant may introduce gaming-focused Chrome OS devices, with at least one of those devices featuring a full RGB keyboard, according to a report by 9to5Google.

Google's development of new devices for the gaming market, testing of the VRR technology, and collaboration with Valve can be looked at as positive indicators for Chromebooks.

DETECTING MICROPLASTICS IN HUMAN BLOOD

The story so far: *Microplastics are, as the name suggests, tiny particles of plastics found in various places — the oceans, the environment, and now in human blood.* A study by researchers from The Netherlands (Heather A. Leslie et al, Environment International, Published online 24 March) has examined blood samples of 22 persons, all anonymous donors and healthy adults, and found plastic particles in 17 of them. A report on this work, published in The Guardian conveys that about half of these were PET (polyethylene terephthalate) plastics, which is used to make food grade bottles. The size of the particles that the group looked for was as small as about 700 nanometres (equal to 0.0007 millimetres). This is really small and it remains to be seen if there is a danger of such particles crossing the blood cell walls and affecting the organs. Also, a larger study needs to be conducted to firm up the present findings.

What are microplastics?

Microplastics are tiny bits of various types of plastic found in the environment. The name is used to differentiate them from "macroplastics" such as bottles and bags made of plastic. *There is no*



universal agreement on the size that fits this bill — the U.S. NOAA (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration) and the European Chemical Agency define microplastic as less than 5mm in length. However, for the purposes of this study, since the authors were interested in measuring the quantities of plastic that can cross the membranes and diffuse into the body via the blood stream, the authors have an upper limit on the size of the particles as 0.0007 millimetre.

What were the plastics that the study looked for in the blood samples?

The study looked at the most commonly used plastic polymers. These were polyethylene tetrathalate (PET), polyethylene (used in making plastic carry bags), polymers of styrene (used in food packaging), poly (methyl methylacrylate) and poly propylene. They found a presence of the first four types.

How was the study conducted?

In the study, blood from 22 adult healthy volunteers was collected anonymously, stored in vessels protected from contamination, and then analysed for its plastic content. The size of the bore in the needle served to filter out microplastics of a size greater than desired. This was compared against suitable blanks to rule out pre-existing plastic presence in the background.

What are the key results of this study?

The study found that 77% of tested people (17 of the 22 persons) carried various amounts of microplastics above the limit of quantification. In 50% of the samples, the researchers detected PET particles. In 36%, they found presence of polystyrene. 23% of polyethylene and 5% of poly(methyl methylacrylate) were also found. However, traces of poly propylene were not detected.

They found in each donor, on average, 1.6 microgram of plastic particles per milli litre of blood sample. They write in the paper that this can be interpreted as an estimate of what to expect in future studies. It is a helpful starting point for further development of analytical studies for human matrices research.

Does the presence of microplastics in blood have health impacts?

It is not yet clear if these microplastics can cross over from the blood stream to deposit in organs and cause diseases. The authors point out that the human placenta has shown to be permeable to tiny particles of polystyrene (50, 80 and 24 nanometre beads). Experiments on rats where its lungs were exposed to polystyrene spheres (20 nanometre) led to translocation of the nanoparticles to the placental and foetal tissue. Oral administration of microplastics in rats led to accumulation of these in the liver, kidney and gut.

Further studies have to be carried out to really assess the impact of plastics on humans.

SMOKING CAUSES OVER SEVEN MILLION DEATHS A YEAR

As per the estimates of WHO (and the FDA of the US) 1.3 billion people (among the 7.9 billion across the world) who smoke, and 80% of them live in low and middle- income countries. Smoking is thus an epidemic and a great public health threat, killing over eight million people around the year. Over seven million of these people die due to direct tobacco use, and 1.2 million non-smokers who are exposed to second-hand smoke. And, as per the American Journal of Preventive Medicine, traditional cigarette smokers are 30% to 40% more likely than non-smokers to develop Type 2 diabetes.



A recent article by Dr. Smiljanic Stasha points out that 1) smoking causes over seven million deaths every year, 2) 5.6 million young Americans might die because of smoking 3) Second hand smoking causes 1.2 million deaths worldwide 4) Smoking is one of the world's leading causes of impoverishment, and 5) In 2015, 7 out of 10 smokers (68%) reported that they wanted to quit completely. *And a recent issue of Nature Medicine points out that after the WHO adopted the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control in 2003, it has been included as a Global Development Target in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (SD). If all the 155 signatory countries adopt smoking bans, health warnings, advertising bans and raise cigarette costs, this sustainable development is indeed possible.*

The Indian Scenario

India has graduated from a low-income country into a developed country, and is estimated to have 120 million smokers (out of a population of 138 crores), or about 9% of Indian people. A material called Cannabis was prevalent in India and neighbouring countries. Cannabis is a plant product that was (and still is) known by the local names marijuana, charas, hashish, ganja, and bhang. The user feels 'high' upon consuming (smoking) it. The active principle in Cannabis is a psychoactive molecule called *tetrahydrocannabinol*, which is responsible for its psychoactive and intoxicating effects. Even today, during the annual Holi festival, people in India smoke ganja or bhang, to feel "high".

Turning to tobacco

Turning to tobacco, its origin, use as a medicinal, ceremonial and intoxicant are extensively described by the Indian Council of Agricultural Research's (ICAR) Central Tobacco Research Institute at Rajahmundry, Andhra Pradesh.

The tobacco plant appears to have been cultivated in the Peruvian/Ecuadorean Andes in South America. The Spanish word for these intoxicating plants was 'Tobacco'.

It appears that the Portuguese explorer Christopher Columbus, during his voyage to the Americas found the natives would sniff powdered these dry tobacco leaves through their noses and enjoyed it. In order to do so, they would use a hollow forked cane. Columbus did so too, enjoyed it and carried it over to Europe.

The 'pipe' used by the Europeans for enjoying tobacco appears to have its origin from the forked cane of the Red Indians. *It was Columbus who introduced tobacco to Europe, and their colonies in India and South Asia.*

Entry in India

The Portuguese introduced tobacco cultivation in the north western districts of Gujarat, and the British colonials did the same in U.P., Bihar and Bengal. The Imperial Agricultural Research Institute was established in 1903, and began research on the botanical and genetic studies of tobacco. In effect, then, tobacco plant and its intoxicating effects were not known to India until it was brought in India and cultivated by the westerners. The active principle in tobacco is the molecule *nicotine*. It is named after Jean Nicot, who was a French Ambassador in Portugal. *He sent tobacco seeds from Brazil to Paris in 1560.*

Nicotine was isolated from tobacco plants in 1858 by W. H. Posselt and K. L. Reimann of Germany, who believed it to be a poison, and that it is highly addictive unless it is used in slow-release form. (Is this why filter cigarettes are used to bring the release slower?) Louis Melsens described its



chemical empirical formula in 1843, and its molecular structure was described by Adolf Pinner and Richard Wolffenstein in 1893. And it was first synthesized by Auguste Pictet and Crepieux in 1904. Recent research has also shown that regular smokers are prone to Type 2 diabetes.

Ban on tobacco products

India has about 12 crores of people who smoke. This needs to be drastically reduced, in light of public health.

The Indian Ministry of Health is set to prohibit the sale of cigarettes. India has become a party to the *WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control on February 27, 2005.*

In accordance with this Framework and SD Goals, our Health Ministry has completely banned smoking in many public places and workplaces such as in healthcare, educational and government facilities, and in public transport.

These are welcome moves and we the public must cooperate with them.

HOW MITOCHONDRIA ADAPTED TO LIVING WITHIN CELLS

An organism that has been around from 2 billion years ago has given biologists from Centre for Cellular and Molecular Biology, Hyderabad (CCMB), a clue as to how mitochondria became an inseparable part of animal and plant cells. The researchers, led by Rajan Sankaranarayanan, identify two key transformations, one in the molecule known as DTD for short and another in the transfer-RNA (tRNA).

“Our lab works on a molecule called D-aminoacyl-tRNA deacylase (DTD). We observed some unexpected biochemistry of eukaryotic DTD that could be explained based on endosymbiotic origin of complex eukaryotic cell organelles.” *Endosymbiosis is an intense form of symbiosis when one of the organisms is captured and internalized by the other.*

Today, mitochondria are well known to be integral parts of the eukaryotic cell. They are dubbed the *power houses of the cell*, because they help in generating energy in the form of ATP within the cell, powering it. But they were not always part of the animal and plant cells. Once, *about two billion years ago, a prokaryotic organism (without a nucleus) called archaea captured a bacterial cell. The bacterial cell learnt to live within the archaea as an endosymbiont.* How this happened has been an important question among biologists. “In the late 19th century, microscopists observed that organelles like chloroplast [and later mitochondria] undergo division inside eukaryotic cells that resembles bacterial division, which led them to suspect that these organelles might have arisen from bacterial endosymbionts,” say Jotin Gogoi and Akshay Bhatnagar from CCMB and the first authors of the paper published in Science Advances.

T CELL IMMUNE RESPONSES SEEN A YEAR AFTER INFECTION

Like in most countries where the Omicron variant had become dominant and caused a high spike in daily cases, the third wave in India propelled by Omicron caused a large number of reinfections in unvaccinated people and breakthrough infections even among the fully vaccinated. However, across the world, the Omicron variant was found to cause only mild disease in fully vaccinated people and in those with previous infection. This was real-world proof that previous infection and/or full vaccination with two doses provide protection against progression of disease to a severe form.



Protective effect

Laboratory studies undertaken in all countries have only studied the neutralisation ability of sera of people who have recovered from COVID-19 and people who have been fully vaccinated. This could only shed light on the ability of past infection and/or vaccination to prevent infection by highly transmissible variants with immune escape. But no studies have been done to evaluate the protective effect of memory T cell immune responses against severe disease 12 months after primary infection. A new study from Wuhan addresses this gap. The results were published in the journal The Lancet Microbe.

Independent of severity

The researchers found that neutralising antibodies were detectable even 12 months after infection in “most individuals”, and it remained stable 6-12 months after initial infection in people younger than 60 years. The researchers found that “multifunctional T cell responses were detected for all SARS-CoV-2 viral proteins tested”. And most importantly, the magnitude of T cell responses did not show any difference immaterial of how severe the disease was. While the ability of antibodies to neutralise was nearly absent against the Beta variant, it was reduced in the case of the Delta variant.

In contrast, the T cell immune responses were detectable in all the 141 individuals tested 12 months after infection and even when they had lost the neutralising antibody response. And the T cell responses were responding against the Beta variant in most of the 141 individuals.

Neutralising antibodies

“SARS-CoV-2-specific neutralising antibody and T cell responses were retained 12 months after initial infection. Neutralising antibodies to the D614G, Beta, and Delta were reduced compared with those for the original strain, and were diminished in general. Memory T cell responses to the original strain were not disrupted by new variants,” they write. “Our findings show that robust antibody and T cell immunity against SARS-CoV-2 is present in majority of recovered patients 12 months after moderate-to-critical infection.”

Robustness of antibodies

The study reveals the durability and robustness of the T cell responses against variants, including Delta, even after one year of infection. Most importantly, the robust and longstanding T cell responses were seen in people who have not been reinfected or vaccinated. This would mean even in the absence of vaccination, a person who has been infected by the virus even one year ago would have robust immune responses, which would offer protection against disease progressing to a severe form requiring hospitalisation. But the neutralising antibodies were found to diminish at the end of 12 months.

It might be recalled that except the Oxford vaccine (AstraZeneca), none of the trials evaluated the ability of the vaccines to prevent infection.

The endpoint of all vaccine efficacy studies was to evaluate if vaccinated people developed symptomatic disease or not. However, the booster doses are preventing infection. And even when the neutralising antibodies increase after a booster shot, they do drop after a few months. No studies have been done to evaluate if booster doses improve T cell immune responses.



In the case of neutralising antibodies, the researchers found that 121 (85.8%) were positive for neutralising antibodies at the 6 months while there was a slight reduction at the end of 12 months as only 115 (81.6%) were positive for neutralising antibodies. The neutralising antibody titres did not show any difference based on disease severity — mild or moderate — or in those younger than 60 years. However, the neutralising antibody titres declined in older people and in people with critical disease.

Response to strains

A year after infection, 115 of 141 (82%) individuals had neutralising antibodies against the original strain from Wuhan, China. “In contrast, only 68 (48%) had neutralising antibodies against D614G, 32 (23%) had neutralising antibodies against the Beta variant, and 69 (49%) had neutralising antibody responses against the Delta variant”, they write.

THE PHENOMENON OF CORAL BLEACHING

The story so far: The management authority of the world’s largest coral reef system, Australia’s Great Barrier Reef, confirmed on March 25 that the reef is experiencing a mass coral bleaching event. This is the sixth time that the coral reef system is being hit by a widespread and damaging bleaching event and the fourth time in six years that such an event has occurred. The bleaching event coincides with a 10-day UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) scientific mission currently underway in Australia.

What are coral reefs?

Corals are marine invertebrates or animals not possessing a spine. Each coral is called a polyp and thousands of such polyps live together to form a colony, which grows when polyps multiply to make copies of themselves.

Corals are of two types — hard coral and soft coral. Hard corals, also called hermatypic or ‘reef building’ corals extract calcium carbonate (also found in limestone) from the seawater to build hard, white coral exoskeletons. Soft coral polyps, however, borrow their appearance from plants, attach themselves to such skeletons and older skeletons built by their ancestors. Soft corals also add their own skeletons to the hard structure over the years and these growing multiplying structures gradually form coral reefs. They are the largest living structures on the planet.

Corals share a symbiotic relationship with single-celled algae called zooxanthellae. The algae provides the coral with food and nutrients, which they make through photosynthesis, using the sun’s light. In turn, the corals give the algae a home and key nutrients. The zooxanthellae also give corals their bright colour.

Australia’s Great Barrier Reef is the world’s largest reef system stretching across 2,300 km. It hosts 400 different types of coral, gives shelter to 1,500 species of fish and 4,000 types of mollusc.

What is coral bleaching?

Bleaching happens when corals experience stress in their environment due to changes in temperature, pollution or high levels of ocean acidity. Under stressed conditions, the zooxanthellae or food-producing algae living inside coral polyps start producing reactive oxygen species, which are not beneficial to the corals. So, the corals expel the colour-giving zooxanthellae



from their polyps, which exposes their pale white exoskeleton, giving the corals a bleached appearance. This also ends the symbiotic relationship that helps the corals to survive and grow.

Bleached corals can survive depending on the levels of bleaching and the recovery of sea temperatures to normal levels. If heat-pollutions subside in time, over a few weeks, the zooxanthellae can come back to the corals and restart the partnership but severe bleaching and prolonged stress in the external environment can lead to coral death. Over the last couple of decades, climate change and increased global warming owing to rising carbon emissions and other greenhouse gases have made seas warmer than usual. Under all positive outlooks and projections in terms of cutting greenhouse gases, sea temperatures are predicted to increase by 1.5°C to 2°C by the time the century nears its end.

The first mass bleaching event had occurred in 1998 when the El Niño weather pattern caused sea surfaces in the Pacific Ocean to heat up; this event caused 8% of the world's coral to die. The second event took place in 2002. In the past decade, however, mass bleaching occurrences have become more closely spaced in time, with the longest and most damaging bleaching event taking place from 2014 to 2017. This started with reefs in Guam in the Western Pacific region getting affected, to then affecting the North, South-Pacific, and the Indian Ocean. Global temperature in 2017, was the third-highest to ever be recorded. In the 2014-17 event, more than three times as many reefs were exposed to bleaching-level heat stress as compared to 1998.

A 2021 study by the Global Coral Reef Monitoring Network (GCRMN), which is supported by the United Nations, showed that 14% of the world's coral on reefs had been lost between 2009 and 2018, with most of the loss attributed to coral bleaching.

Why does it matter?

Coral reefs support over 25% of marine biodiversity, including fish, turtles and lobsters; even as they only take up 1% of the seafloor. The marine life supported by reefs further fuels global fishing industries. Even giant clams and whales depend on the reefs to live. Besides, coral reef systems generate \$2.7 trillion in annual economic value through goods and service trade and tourism. In Australia, the Barrier Reef, in pre-COVID times, generated \$4.6 billion annually through tourism and employed over 60,000 people including divers and guides. Aside from adding economic value and being a support system for aquatic life, coral reefs also provide protection from storm waves.

Dead reefs can revive over time if there are enough fish species that can graze off the weeds that settle on dead corals, but it takes almost a decade for the reef to start setting up again. The reefs which were severely damaged in 1998 did recover over time.

What is the current condition of the Great Barrier Reef?

The United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) released its report this month, which warned that the life of the Great Barrier is in grave danger. The report said that if temperatures continue to rise, bleaching events may occur more often and a large proportion of the remaining reef cover in Australia could be lost.

Just a couple of weeks after this warning, the Barrier Reef Authority confirmed a mass bleaching phenomenon affecting all pockets of the reef system.

The Authority said that it's a first that the current bleaching event has occurred during a La Niña weather pattern, when warm areas in the Pacific Ocean shift, giving more cloud cover, rain and creating cooler weather conditions over the reef. The Guardian quoted Dr. David Wachenfeld, the



chief scientist of the reef managing authority, as saying, "The climate is changing and the planet and the reef is about 1.5 degrees centigrade warmer than it was 150 years ago. Because of that, the weather is changing. Unexpected events are now to be expected. Nothing surprises me anymore." The Authority further stated that bleached reefs are affected at different levels from mild to severe, and while stressed, they are alive and could recover if temperatures moderate.

The 10-day UNESCO mission which is currently in Australia is supposed to assess how much the country's administration is doing to pull the reef out of danger. Climate activists have said that it is important that the scientists are shown the extent of the coral bleaching to give a true picture of the reef's condition, rather than just being shown the vividly coloured unaffected reef patches.

In July last year, Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison had managed to convince UNESCO to not list the Great Barrier Reef as being in danger, even as the Heritage agency had recommended such a listing earlier that year. In 2015, when UNESCO had threatened to downgrade the Barrier Reef's World Heritage Listing, Australia created a "Reef 2050" plan, putting billions of dollars into protecting it.



DreamIAS