

VEDHIK
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ANALYSIS
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FOREWORD

We, at Team Vedhik is happy to introduce a new initiative - "Daily Current Affairs_The Hindu" compilations to help you with UPSC Civil Services Examination preparation. We believe this initiative - "Daily Current Affairs_The Hindu" would help students, especially beginners save time and streamline their preparations with regard to Current Affairs. A content page and an Appendix has been added segregating and mapping the content to the syllabus.

It is an appreciable efforts by Vedhik IAS Academy helping aspirants of UPSC Civil Services Examinations. I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Dr. Babu Sebastian, former VC - MG University in extending all support to this endeavour. Finally I also extend my thanks to thank Ms. Shilpa Sasidharan and Mr. Shahul Hameed for their assistance in the preparing the compilations.

We welcome your valuable comments so that further improvement may be made in the forthcoming material. We look forward to feedback, comments and suggestions on how to improve and add value for students. Every care has been taken to avoid typing errors and if any reader comes across any such error, the authors shall feel obliged if they are informed at their Email ID.

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'Glacier changed track 20,000 years ago'

Scientists say it fused into an adjacent glacier in present-day Pittoragarh

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI

Nearly 20,000 years ago, a five-kilometre-long Himalayan glacier "abruptly" changed course and over time fused into an adjacent glacier in present-day Pittoragarh, Uttarakhand. This is the first time, say scientists who have described the findings in a peer-reviewed journal this week, that such a turn in glacier's course has been recorded in the Himalayas. Change in climate along with tectonic movement probably caused this to happen.

Based on remote sensing and an old survey map, the study, which appears in the *Journal of Geosciences*, assessed that the glacier had been affected by active fault



Risky heights: The study adds to evidence of the inherent instability of the Himalayan region. ■ FILE PHOTO

and climate change.

The glacier, which does not have a name and lies in an extremely inaccessible region, was large enough that it formed its own "valley" and the accumulated debris that accompanies the formation of glaciers probably

caused it to turn from a north-eastern direction to a south-eastern course, said Manish Mehta of the Wadia Institute of Himalayan Geology (WIHG), a Department of Science and Technology institute, who is among the authors of the study.

The study adds to evidence of the inherent instability of the Himalayan region, among the youngest mountain ranges in the world due to which the underlying tectonic plates that support it are not stable but are jittery and frequently trigger earthquakes and landslides.

The event had "similarities" to the February disaster in Rishiganga valley, Uttarakhand, in which a large mass of rock and debris detached from a glacier and hurtled down the Rishiganga river.

"This event that we have described is a much larger event. However, that the Himalayan region is ecologically fragile and prone to events such as these is certain," Mr. Mehta added.

India, U.S. commit to linking economies across sectors

Indian grapes, U.S. cherries could be early winners as Trade Forum revives

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI

The United States and India committed to integrating their economies across sectors to harness the untapped potential of the bilateral relationship, at the Trade Policy Forum convened after a gap of four years on Tuesday.

Co-chaired by Commerce and Industry, Textiles, Consumer Affairs and Food & Public Distribution Minister Piyush Goyal and U.S. Trade Representative, Ambassador Katherine Tai, the Forum resolved to take economic ties between the two countries to the 'next high level' and exchanged views on 'potential targeted tariff reductions'.

The two sides decided to activate working groups of the Trade Policy Forum (TPF) on agriculture, non-agriculture goods, services, investment, and intellectual property to meet frequently and address issues of mutual concern in a mutually beneficial manner. The idea is to deliver tangible benefits to farmers and businesses of both countries by resolving

Bolstering ties | The Indo-U.S. Trade Policy Forum decides to take economic ties to the 'next high level'



MARKET ACCESS

India seeks easier market access for its mangoes, grapes and pomegranates; U.S. seeks quid pro quo for cherries, pork products and alfalfa hay



ACTION PLAN

Working groups on agriculture, non-agriculture goods, services will meet frequently



HOPE FOR IT WORKERS

India, U.S. to restart talks on agreement to help professionals in both countries move statutory social security contributions back home



POST-COVID PLAN

Both sides to work with allies to secure pharmaceutical manufacturing base



Minister of Commerce and Industry Piyush Goyal with U.S. Trade Representative Katherine Tai in New Delhi. ■ SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

outstanding market access issues.

Mutual market access

Specifically, the Forum has decided to forge an agreement to facilitate U.S. market access for mangoes, grapes, and pomegranates, pomegranate arils from India, and reciprocate with similar access in the Indian market to cherries, pork/pork products and alfalfa hay for animal feed from the United States.

Discussions will also be held on enhancing market

access for products such as distillers' dried grains with solubles from the U.S. and resolving market access concerns for water buffalo meat and wild caught shrimp from India.

'Restore GSP benefits'

The Indian side has sought restoration of the GSP (Generalized System of Preferences) benefits by the U.S. and said this would help industries from both sides in integrating their supply chain efficiently. The United States noted it 'for suitable consid-

eration', an official statement said.

The Forum also agreed on the significance of negotiating a Social Security Totalization Agreement in the interest of workers from both sides, and pursuing further engagements for reaching such an agreement.

The agreement, being pursued for over a decade, would allow workers from both countries to move their retirement savings.

India to release 5 mn barrels of oil from reserves to cool prices

The U.S. had asked oil consumers including China and Japan to act in concert

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
NEW DELHI

India will release 5 million barrels of crude oil from its emergency stockpile in tandem with the U.S., China, Japan, and other major economies to cool oil prices, the Centre said on Tuesday.

This is the first time ever that India, which stores 5.33 million tonne or about 38 million barrels of crude oil in underground caverns at three locations on the east and west coast, is releasing stocks for such purposes.

“India strongly believes that the pricing of liquid hydrocarbons should be reasonable, responsible and be determined by market forces,” the government said in a statement. “India has repeat-



Question of price: This is the first time that India, which stores 38 mn barrels, is releasing stocks for such purposes. ■ REUTERS

edly expressed concern at the supply of oil being artificially adjusted below demand levels by oil-producing countries, leading to rising prices and negative attendant consequences.” While the government specified no date, an official said the

stock could be released as early as 7-10 days.

Supply to MRPL, HPCL

The stocks will be sold to refineries of Mangalore Refinery and Petrochemicals Ltd. (MRPL) and Hindustan Petroleum Corp. Ltd. (HPCL),

which are connected by pipeline to the strategic reserves.

The U.S. had last week made an unusual request to some of the largest oil-consuming nations, including China, India and Japan, to consider releasing crude stocks in a coordinated effort to pare global energy prices.

This after the Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) and its allies rebuffed repeated requests to speed up production increases.

India has been the most forceful about flexing its muscles as a major oil consumer, cutting shipments from Saudi Arabia by about a quarter after OPEC+ extended production cuts.

Indian bonds, rupee weaken on Powell's new term at Fed

‘Bolsters chance of quicker start to U.S. policy tightening’

REUTERS
MUMBAI

Indian bond prices fell while the rupee weakened on Tuesday, as investors raised bets that the U.S. Federal Reserve would stay on course for policy tightening in the middle of 2022 after the announcement of a second term for its chairman Jerome Powell. The rupee was trading at 74.51/52 per dollar by 0600 GMT, after touching 74.5725, its weakest since November 11, earlier in the session. It had closed at 74.3950 on Monday.

The benchmark 10-year bond yield rose as much as 3 basis points to 6.38%.

The dollar was near a four-and-a-half-year high against the yen while stocks and currencies in Asia's



emerging markets were mostly down, after Mr. Powell's renomination for a second term as the Fed chief bolstered bets of a possibly quicker start to policy tightening in the U.S.

“The key theme over the coming quarters would be policy normalisation and there is arguably greater clarity under Powell,” economists at DBS wrote in a note. “He has turned incrementally hawkish since

June's FOMC meeting and kicked off taper in November,” they added.

For domestic bonds, the movement in global crude oil prices will also be crucial, due to its impact on inflation. Traders expect bond yields to broadly remain in a 6.3-6.4% range until the RBI's monetary policy review in early December.

Oil fell on Tuesday, reversing gains from the previous session, on growing talk the U.S., Japan and India will release crude reserves to tame prices.

“Oil prices are muting the impact of Powell's reappointment but a surge in oil could easily push the 10-year yield out of the current 6.3%-6.4% range,” a senior trader at a private bank said.

India, U.S. commit to linking economies

The absence of such an agreement particularly affects Indian IT workers in the U.S., who lose billions of dollars in U.S. social security contributions that they cannot repatriate home.

With the WTO ministerial meeting coming up next week, India and the U.S. also discussed collaboration and constructive engagement in various multilateral trade bodies, including the WTO and the G20 for achieving a shared vision of a transparent, rules-based global trading system

among market economies and democracies. The Forum also decided to find mutually agreed solutions on outstanding WTO disputes between the two countries.

Ms. Tai and Mr. Goyal directed the TPF working groups to develop plans of action for making substantive progress by March 2022. The plans would include identifying specific trade outcomes that could be finalised for an inter-sessional TPF meeting to be held by mid-2022.

U.S. warship transits Taiwan Strait after Biden-Xi summit

Voyage demonstrates the U.S. commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific: Navy

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
TAIPEI

A U.S. warship sailed through the strait separating Taiwan and China on Tuesday, the Navy said, the first such passage since leaders from the two rival superpowers held a video summit.

The passage through the Taiwan Strait by the Arleigh Burke-class guided missile destroyer *USS Milius* was a routine transit, the U.S. Seventh Fleet said.

The voyage, the 11th declared freedom of navigation exercise of the year, “demonstrates the U.S. commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific,” it said in a statement.

The latest transit came after U.S. President Joe Biden and China’s Xi Jinping traded strong warnings on the future of Taiwan at a virtual summit earlier this month.

Chinese state media reported after the summit that Mr. Xi cautioned Mr. Biden



Naval strength: U.S. warships periodically conduct freedom of navigation sailings through the strait. ■ REUTERS

that encouraging Taiwanese independence would be “playing with fire”.

U.S. warships periodically conduct freedom of navigation sailings through the strait, often triggering angry responses from Beijing, which claims Taiwan and the surrounding waters as its own territory.

The United States and many other countries view the

route as international waters open to all.

A growing number of U.S. allies have transited the route as Beijing intensifies its military threats towards Taiwan and solidifies its control over the disputed South China Sea.

British, Canadian, French and Australian warships have all made passages through the Taiwan Strait in

recent years, sparking protests from Beijing.

‘U.S. playing with fire’

China’s Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian slammed the latest transit as a “deliberate attempt to disrupt and undermine regional peace and stability”.

“The U.S. should immediately correct its mistake, stop stirring up trouble, crossing the line and playing with fire,” he warned.

Collin Koh, a research fellow at Singapore’s S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, said western navies see the transits “as routine passage in the exercise of high seas freedoms and rights through the waterway”. “These days, these transits are routinised and publicised simply to emphasise the above mentioned established facts of how maritime user states exercise such freedoms and rights,” he said.

Breaking the ice

Reviving the U.S.-India Trade Policy Forum is a chance to break vicious cycle in economic ties

On her maiden visit to Asia, U.S. Trade Representative Katherine Tai held bilateral meetings with Commerce and Industry Minister Piyush Goyal and relaunched the U.S.-India Trade Policy Forum (TPF). A lot has transpired in the Indo-U.S. economic partnership in the four years since the TPF was last convened – from machinations towards a free-trade agreement to the failure to even reach a mini-trade deal towards the latter half of the Donald Trump administration days. Instead of progress, there were setbacks, including raised import tariffs and the withdrawal of benefits to Indian exporters under the U.S.'s Generalized System of Preferences (GSP) which triggered retaliatory trade barbs. That marquee American businesses (Harley-Davidson and Ford) have left India has not helped optics, even if their motivations may not have been solely linked to difficult trade norms. With the Joe Biden administration shutting the door on new trade pacts and being cold to restoring the GSP status, India must be ruing the hard stances that scuttled the chances of sealing a deal in the Trump era. Ms. Tai's visit offers a fresh reset chance. GSP restoration, she has said, could be considered, while nudging India to set targets for tariff reductions and easing market access across sectors. The TPF statement also outlines the sectors and goods and services that need quick attention.

Whatever misgivings may have existed at the beginning of the Biden administration, Ms. Tai's visit, that follows trips by key U.S. Secretaries, indicates U.S. interest in engaging with India in significant spheres. That it looks at India as a key partner in rebuilding critical supply chains in a post-pandemic world seeking to cut its dependence on China, is clear from its desire for integration in areas such as health, medical devices and pharma. India's pharma exports account for 40% of the U.S.'s generic drugs supply and Ms. Tai has assuaged its concerns about delays in U.S. regulatory inspections of pharma units. Her plain-speaking that Indo-U.S. trade never really lives up to its potential and references to India's unpredictable regulatory shifts, tariff- and non-tariff barriers as her priorities, suggests these talks have begun from a place more grounded in realism. This should serve as a wake-up call for the Government about its trade posture and spur a more open approach towards a market that will remain the most critical, irrespective of the trade deals it is seeking with other nations. While America's stance on India's proposal on IPR waivers for the COVID-19 vaccine and medicines will be watched at the upcoming WTO ministerial, India must seize this fresh initiative with the U.S. to cement its place in the new supply chains being envisaged. For starters, it must pro-actively steer away from the protectionism that is leading the globalised world adrift.

U.S. to release 50 mn barrels of oil to ease soaring prices

'Coordinated move along with China, India, Japan and U.K.'

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
WASHINGTON

President Joe Biden announced on Tuesday he has ordered the release of 50 million barrels of oil from the U.S. strategic reserves in a coordinated attempt with other countries to tamp down soaring fuel prices.

"This release will be taken in parallel with other major energy consuming nations including China, India, Japan, Republic of Korea and the United Kingdom," the White House said.

A senior administration official told reporters this was "the first time we've done something like this in parallel with other" countries.

As the world emerges from the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdowns, oil production has not kept pace with rocketing demand, pushing prices up.

In the United States, an associated rise in gasoline prices is one of the main cul-



Average fuel prices at filling stations are \$3.41 a gallon, the highest level since 2014.

prits in a surge of inflation.

Mr. Biden's announcement comes as Americans prepare for the holiday season, when travel ramps up. Average fuel prices at filling stations are \$3.41 a gallon, the highest level since 2014, according to latest figures from the AAA motorists' association. This represents an increase of \$1.29 over gasoline prices a year ago.

The U.S. reserves, held in underground depots in Texas and Louisiana, are the largest emergency supply of oil

in the world. A senior administration official said the releases would start in mid-to late December, and that further intervention was possible to steady the market, "responding to a once-in-a-century pandemic".

"As the President has said, consumers are facing pain at the pump right now," the official said. "The President stands ready to take additional action if needed and is prepared to use his full authorities, working in coordination with the rest of the world, to maintain adequate supply as we exit the pandemic."

As output rises, oil prices are already down nearly 10% in the past few weeks. But officials echoed Mr. Biden's repeatedly stated concerns that despite easing of crude values, prices of gasoline for drivers have only gone up.

This has hurt ordinary Americans, while driving a sharp dive in Mr. Biden's approval ratings.

A closer look at the draft Data Protection Bill

Does the JPC adopted bill fail to protect individuals against Government agencies?

RISHAB BAILEY

The story so far: The Joint Parliamentary Committee (JPC) constituted to examine India's proposed data protection law, the Personal Data Protection Bill, 2019, released its report on Monday. It contains a number of suggestions that could strengthen the final law, among others, a recognition that promotion of the digital economy cannot take precedence over the protection of citizen rights. However, it falls significantly when dealing with a critical issue – that of protecting individuals vis-à-vis the State.

What is the State exempt from?

The State is one of the biggest processors of data, and has a unique ability to impact the lives of individuals, not least due to its monopoly over coercive powers as well as its obligation to provide welfare and services. However, as demonstrated by the Pegasus case or indeed the instances of privacy violations concerning COVID-19-related interventions, the current frameworks for protecting citizens from arbitrary and intrusive State action lack robustness.

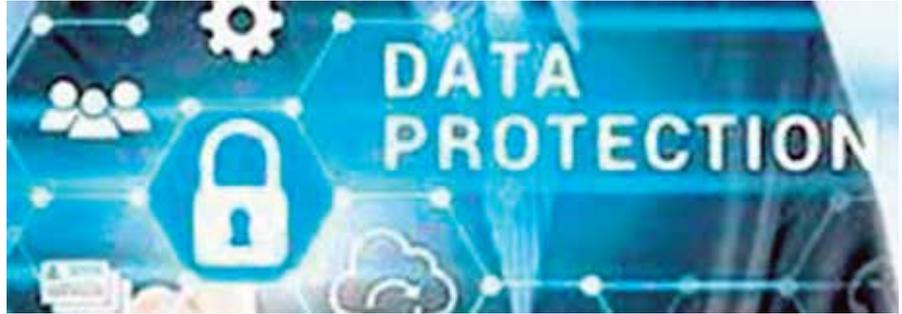
This is particularly relevant when one considers that not all processing by law enforcement entities need directly concern their law enforcement functions.

For instance, Section 35 of the Bill, permits the Central Government to exempt any agency of the Government from the provisions of the law, if it is satisfied that it is necessary or expedient to do so, subject to procedures, safeguards, and oversight mechanisms to be prescribed by the Government. This is a very wide power that enhances the significant asymmetry in the relationship between the citizen and the State.

In comments to the JPC, co-authored by Vrinda Bhandari, Smriti Parsheera, Faiza Rahman and myself, we point to numerous problems with the provision.

Why is it problematic?

First, the use of this provision on grounds of expediency is an extremely low bar for the Government to meet. Second, there is no requirement for an exemption order to be proportionate to meeting a particular State function. Third, there is no scope for



oversight over the executive's decision to issue such an order or any safeguards prescribed for this process. The provision also lacks any oversight mechanism or periodic review of the need for and scope of such an exemption. Fourth, there does not appear to be sufficient reason for government agencies to be exempted *in toto* from basic provisions of the Bill such as the need to put in place data retention norms, appoint data protection officers, or ensure security safeguards, etc. This is particularly relevant when one considers that not all processing by law enforcement entities need directly concern their law enforcement functions.

What are the best practices followed in the world?

The JPC recognises that balancing privacy interests with those of public needs (such as that of State security) is difficult. However, it falls short of engaging with international precedents. For instance, the JPC notes that the European GDPR (General Data Protection Regulation), commonly seen as the pinnacle of data protection regulation worldwide, exempts from its ambit certain types of processing carried out in public interest (such as for law enforcement purposes). It, however, ignores the fact that first, EU law typically does not engage with issues concerning national security (implying that armed forces and intelligence

agencies are usually not regulated by EU law), and second, that the EU has in place a separate law (Directive 2016/680) that deals with the processing of personal data by law enforcement agencies. Accordingly, countries do put in place regulations concerning processing of personal data by law enforcement agencies. For example, the U.K.'s Data Protection Act dedicates Part 3 to dealing with law enforcement processing and in this context, liberalises certain obligations while at the same time ensuring that data protection rights are also protected.

What are the other exemptions granted to the state?

As noted in our comments to the JPC referred to previously, Section 12 permits non-consensual processing by the "state" in various circumstances. However, the term "state" is of extremely wide import. It has been interpreted by courts to encompass a range of state entities such as state electricity boards, research and educational institutions and statutory corporations such as the LIC. This implies that a host of entities will be permitted to exercise the option of non-consensual processing in a range of circumstances (where providing a "service or benefit" or engaged in a "function of the state"). This not only threatens privacy rights of individuals, but also creates different regimes for private and public

sector entities providing similar services (such as related to education and health).

Similarly, Section 36(a) of the Bill provides for an exception in situations where personal data is being processed in the interests of prevention, detection, investigation and prosecution of any offence or any other contravention of any law. However, the provision is not restricted in its application only to law enforcement entities. This implies, for example, that any private entity could set up CCTV cameras in a public place under the guise of preventing any criminal activities. The provision could therefore encourage vigilantism or enable privatised surveillance.

As with Section 35, this section too lacks any mention of oversight or proportionality.

What lies ahead in Parliament?

While the JPC did solicit comments from the public, academia and civil society were largely excluded from committee hearings. However, a number of Opposition MPs have submitted dissent notes to the report highlighting these lacunae (amongst others). The Bill now will be debated in Parliament, where one can only hope that adequate time and attention is given to finding a better balance between competing interests.

Rishab Bailey is a technology policy researcher at the National Institute of Public Finance and Policy, New Delhi.

New Crypto Bill seeks to ban private players

When Prime Minister Narendra Modi chaired a meeting on November 13, to assess the regulatory prospects for cryptocurrencies with the top brass of the central bank and the Ministries of Home Affairs and Finance, a consensus was reached to stop 'attempts to mislead the youth through over-promising and non-transparent advertising'. It was also resolved that unregulated crypto markets cannot be allowed to become avenues for money laundering and terror financing. A close watch and pro-active steps are necessary for the sector, the Government had determined.

Last Monday, when the Standing Committee on Fi-

nance met cryptocurrency stakeholders, industry representatives agreed with the need for regulation of the crypto market but were unable to answer several questions raised by parliamentarians.

Apart from the proposed cryptocurrency law, the government has also listed a Bill to repeal the three contentious farm laws of 2020, as promised by Prime Minister Modi last Friday, after they had triggered an year-long protest from a section of farmers. The Government has also listed the Electricity (Amendment) Bill, 2021, which seeks to remove all cross-subsidies and make all consumers pay the actual cost of supply.

New Crypto Bill seeks to ban private players

Exceptions for underlying technology

SOBHANA K. NAIR
NEW DELHI

The Union Government will introduce a Bill to regulate cryptocurrency and ostensibly ban all private cryptocurrencies, along with 25 other pieces of legislation, in the winter session of Parliament that begins on November 29.

The Cryptocurrency and Regulation of Official Digital Currency Bill, 2021, which is yet to be officially approved by the Cabinet, seeks to create a facilitative framework for creation of the official digital currency to be issued by the Reserve Bank of India.

Pilot project

The central bank is looking at launching a pilot project for an official digital currency soon.

“The Bill also seeks to prohibit all private cryptocurrencies in India. However, it allows for certain exceptions to promote the underlying technology of cryptocurrency and its uses,” according to the stated purport of the Bill in a Lok Sabha bulletin and the tentative list of the govern-



The RBI plans to launch a pilot project for an official digital currency. ■REUTERS

ment’s legislative business for Rajya Sabha.

So far, the precise contours of the Bill are not in the public domain and no public consultations have been held.

The Finance Ministry has been tight-lipped on the Bill, which had been readied for the Cabinet’s approval as early as August.

No details

Media queries about who would be held responsible if investors betting on crypto assets that are liberally advertised, were to make heavy losses, have been met with silence.

CONTINUED ON ► PAGE 8

The road to a Himalayan blunder

In its current form, the Char Dham road project goes against all environmental safeguards



MALLIKA BHANOT
& C.P. RAJENDRAN

The Char Dham road project, inaugurated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2016, is an ambitious attempt to widen nearly 900 kilometres of hill roads at the cost of ₹12,000 crore. The project, which will be executed by the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways (MoRTH), aims to provide all-weather connectivity to the four major shrines of Yamunotri, Gangotri, Kedarnath and Badrinath. In the enthusiasm for an infrastructural project that will increase pilgrimage tourism from the Indian plains and provide attendant local economic dividends, the government has ignored the facts proven by the many tragic incidents in the hills of Uttarakhand over decades. Rampant construction and its complex interaction with climate change has led to massive landslides and floods in the fragile Himalayan range.

Timeline of the case

The project began as a road connectivity project for pilgrim tourists. Now the government argues that it is essential to back up troop and arms movement towards the India-China border. The case is in the Supreme Court. The Attorney General argues that wide roads are necessary for the sake of national security in the Garhwal region. The petitioners, residents of the valleys in the Garhwal region, stress on the need for a regulated and narrower intermediate road width with a walking footpath.

Let's look at the timeline of the case. In 2018, the road-expansion project was challenged by an NGO for its potential impact on the Himalayan ecology. The Supreme Court constituted a high-powered committee (HPC) to examine the issues. In an order in September 2020, the Court said that the carriageway width of the roads cannot exceed 5.5 metres. The Court went by March 2018 guidelines issued by the MoRTH for mountain highways, which set a standard specification of a carriageway width of 5.5m with two-lane



V.V. KRISHNAN

structures (7m). In doing so, the Court upheld the minority recommendation of the HPC. In November 2020, the Ministry of Defence (MoD) filed an appeal in which, quoting the MoRTH Affidavit, it asked for "a double-lane road having a carriageway width of 7m (or 7.5m in case there is a raised kerb) with 8-10m formation width" to "meet the requirement of the Army". On December 15, the MoRTH amended its 2018 circular and raised the 5.5m width limit to 10m. The new circular read: "For roads in hilly and mountainous terrain which act as feeder roads to the Indo-China border or are of strategic importance for national security, the carriageway width should be 7m with 1.5m paved shoulder on either side." Why did MoRTH amend the circular way beyond the requirement placed by the MoD?

These wide roads are being sought to be built in Uttarakhand, which has been a victim of several disasters in the last two decades. It is crucial to note that the terrain of the Himalayas in Uttarakhand is different from the terrain in Ladakh. Valleys in Uttarakhand are narrow and close-ended with steep slopes of 60-70 degrees. On the other hand, the valleys in Ladakh have a slope elevation of 30 degrees. Just this year, we saw how the floods in the Dhaulti Ganga, Rishi Ganga and Alaknanda rivers claimed over 200 lives. During the monsoons, owing to the massive hill-cutting for the Char Dham road project, several landslides have occurred in the region. Such is the condition of the State that the national highways of the Char Dham project, including

ones leading to the border, were closed repeatedly and sometimes for months this monsoon season.

And so, the question is, why did the MoRTH enter such a fragile terrain with this massive, ambitious project without even doing a basic environment impact assessment, as is mandated? Violations of the intermediate road width of 5.5m were said to be happening even after the Supreme Court reprimanded the MoRTH. Then, the MoD was brought in to justify the demand for double-lane paved shoulder roads.

When reprimanded, the MoRTH informed the Supreme Court that the project had been taken up under a different category which is why the 2018 circular was not being followed. Such a bizarre submission should be – and was – rejected by many. However, some toed the line of the government and agreed to the double-lane paved shoulder road width. Later, it was revealed that the project proponents intend to install toll booths along the Char Dham roads, and that is feasible only with the double-lane paved shoulder road width. Is it the intent of the government to levy a tax on Char Dham yatis?

In its November 2020 appeal, the MoD had requested a 7m carriageway width with 8-10m formation width. This was supported by the MoRTH in its affidavit. The petitioners and the small minority within the Supreme Court-appointed committee recommended an intermediate road width of 5.5m tarred surface which facilitates easy bilateral movement, with a 1.5m walking footpath, which pilgrims and residents of the

valley need. The formation width of this design is the same as that proposed by the MoD (8-10 m) with the only difference being a walking footpath. What then is the difficulty? When the judges raised this question, the government had no answer. Several violations of the MoRTH came tumbling out and the fact that the MoD was being used to justify the new road width became clear.

It is often argued that landslides are a natural consequence of the construction of roads and can be mitigated. Similar arguments were made in court about this project too. However, the rainfall this year showed that the mitigation measures are no match to nature's fury. Prevention and regulation of activities seem to be the only effective way of mitigation in these fragile mountains.

Desecrating the Himalayas

Disaster-resilient, safe and stable infrastructure is the only solution for commuting by road in the hills. But double-lane paved shoulder roads are excessively wide and render the slopes vulnerable. The unique Himalayan landscape with steep slopes and sharp gradients is not amenable to human engineering. Any human-induced change beyond the Himalayas' carrying capacity will have an impact on stream run-offs and erosional or depositional processes. Considering such vulnerabilities, we need to keep the scale of human-induced disturbances to the minimum level possible. The Char Dham project in its current form goes against all environmental safeguards.

If the government does not desist from widening the roads under this project, it will be a Himalayan blunder. It will significantly reinforce mass wasting processes and erosion rates given the steepness of the slopes, earthquake activity and erosivity of increased monsoonal precipitation. The Himalayas need to be preserved as a nature reserve for future generations. That is why they are known as the 'abode of Gods'. So, why desecrate them?

Mallika Bhanot is a member of Ganga Ahvaan, a citizen forum working towards conserving the Ganga and the Himalayas; C.P. Rajendran is an adjunct professor at the National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bengaluru and author of a forthcoming book 'Earthquakes of the Indian Subcontinent'



FROM THE ARCHIVES

MSP – the factoids versus the facts

The debate on agricultural issues must take into account the changed geography of procurement and the seller's profile

THE GIST

■ The MSP is the price at which the Government 'promises' to buy from farmers if market prices fall below it. It has been announced for 23 commodities.

■ According to three popular factoids, only few (6%) farmers benefit, only large farmers benefit, and only farmers of Punjab and Haryana (to some extent, western Uttar Pradesh) benefit from the MSP and Government procurement policies. The authors argue against these assumptions.

■ It is also widely believed that the farm laws allow farmers to sell outside the Agricultural Produce Market Committee (APMC). On the contrary, the demand for the MSP originates because the prices paid outside the *mandi* tend to be much lower.

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Bharatiya Kisan Union spokesperson Rakesh Tikait said on Monday that withdrawal of the three contentious farm laws was not enough and that farmers have a host of problems that need to be addressed by the Government. The primary demand is a law for guaranteed minimum support price (MSP). In this article on MSP dated December 19, 2020, Reetika Khera, Sudha Narayanan and Prankur Gupta show how the share of farmers benefiting from procurement policies is not significant, where procurement is concentrated, and which kinds of farmers have benefited. Edited excerpts:

According to one definition, a factoid is "an item of unreliable information that is reported and repeated so often that it becomes accepted as fact". After the passage of the three controversial farm laws, the Minimum Support Price (MSP) – not mentioned in the laws – has gained a lot of attention. The predominance of factoids about MSP and procurement has meant that the debate has yielded more chaff than grain.

The MSP is meant to set a floor below which prices do not fall, and is announced by the Government for 23 commodities. It is the price at which the Government 'promises' to buy from farmers if market prices fall below it. In fact, however, Government procurement is heavily concentrated on wheat and rice, with other crops barely being procured.

According to these popular beliefs, few (6%) farmers benefit, only large farmers benefit, and only farmers of Punjab and Haryana (to some extent, western Uttar Pradesh) benefit.

More States under MSP

In a forthcoming paper, we use data on State-wise procurement from the Food Corporation of India (FCI) and agricultural household data for 2012-13 from the National Sample Survey (NSS), after which these data are not available, to set the record straight on these three factoids.

One, the 6% figure from the NSS data 2012-13 relates to paddy and wheat alone. Even here,

however, among those who sold any paddy/wheat, the numbers are higher – 14% and 16%.

Two, the Government of India has made a systematic effort to expand the reach of MSP to more States, via the Decentralized Procurement (DCP) Scheme. Introduced in 1997-98, it was not very popular in the initial years and began to be adopted by States in earnest only around 2005. Under the DCP scheme, the responsibility of procurement devolved to the State Governments which were reimbursed pre-approved costs. FCI data suggest that by July 2015, as many as 15 States had taken up this programme, though not all were implementing it with equal enthusiasm. Largely

In fact, procurement has benefited the small and marginal farmers in much bigger numbers than medium and large farmers.

on account of it, procurement began moving out of 'traditional' States (such as Punjab, Haryana, western Uttar Pradesh). Until 2000, barely 10% of wheat and rice was procured outside the traditional States. By 2012-13, the share of the DCP States rose to 25.35%.

In the case of paddy, Chhattisgarh and Odisha have been the star performers. These States today contribute about 10% each to the total paddy procurement in the country. For wheat, decentralised procurement has taken off in Madhya Pradesh in a big way, accounting for approximately 20% of wheat procurement. That only Punjab and Haryana farmers have benefited from the MSP is now truly a thing of the past.

Which farmer benefits

Three, as per the factoid, only large farmers have benefited. In fact, procurement has benefited the small and marginal farmers in much bigger numbers than medium and large farmers. At the all-India level, among those who sold paddy to the government, 1% were large farmers, owning over 10 hectares of land. Small and marginal farmers, with less than 2 hectares accounted for 70%. The

rest (29%) were medium farmers (2-10 hectares).

In the case of wheat, 3% of all wheat-selling farmers were large farmers. More than half (56%) were small and marginal farmers.

In Punjab and Haryana, the share of small and marginal farmers is not insignificant (38% and 58%, respectively, among paddy sellers). In the non-traditional States that adopted the DCP scheme, the overwhelming majority of farmers who sell to State procurement agencies are small and marginal. In Chhattisgarh and Odisha, for example, small and marginal farmers comprise 70-80% of all sellers to government agencies. Similarly, in Madhya Pradesh, nearly half (45%) of those who sell wheat to government agencies are small or marginal farmers.

The true picture

We have picked three factoids of many as an illustration of how little we know about how the MSP works. The range of claims made regarding, for example, the consequences of the MSP on diversification need to be examined as well.

Among Punjabis who cultivated any crop, 21-37% did not grow paddy and wheat. Among all agricultural households including those which did not cultivate a crop (indicating more diversified sources of agricultural income), a larger proportion (58 and 48%, respectively) stayed away from paddy and wheat, suggesting that procurement in Punjab may not have prevented diversification to the extent we imagine.

Similarly, confusion reigns about other areas of interest from the point of view of the new farm laws. It is widely believed that for the first time, the new laws allow farmers to sell outside the Agricultural Produce Market Committee (APMC). Even for commodities for which MSP is announced, the proportion of sales via the *mandi* range is only between 10-64%, the demand for the MSP originates because the prices paid outside the *mandi* tend to be much lower. Countrywide, sales to *mandi* or Government procurement agencies fetched on average 13.3% higher prices for paddy and 5.8% for wheat.

The debate, popular or political, must take into account the changed geography of procurement and the profile of the seller.

DAC approves AK-203 deal with Russia

Inter-Governmental Agreement was signed in 2019; a JV was set up in U.P. for manufacturing them

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NEW DELHI

The Defence Acquisition Council (DAC) which met under the Chairmanship of Defence Minister Rajnath Singh on Tuesday approved the long-pending deal for the manufacture of 6.71 lakh AK-203 assault rifles in India, according to a defence source.

This comes ahead of Russian President Vladimir Putin's visit to India early next month for the India-Russia annual summit. Mr. Putin is scheduled to visit India for the summit on December 6, when the two sides will also hold their inaugural 2+2 ministerial dialogue.

The two countries had signed an Inter-Governmental Agreement (IGA) in February 2019 following which a joint venture, Indo-Russian Rifles Private Ltd. (IRRPL), was set up at Korwa in Uttar Pradesh for manufacturing



Defence ties: The Russian anti-aircraft weapon system S-400 Triumf. India has started taking delivery of its components. ■ GETTY IMAGES

the rifles.

The JV is between Ordnance Factory Board (OFB) from the Indian side and Rosoboron Export and Kalashnikov on the Russian side. The Army had also appointed a Major General as the Chief Executive Officer (CEO)

of the IRRPL to ensure timely execution and deliveries.

The Ministry of Defence has already floated a Request For Proposal (RFP) to the JV for the supply of 6.71 lakh rifles, but the final deal has been held up over the high cost for each rifle.

As reported by *The Hindu* earlier, with repeated delays in the deals for procurement of AK-203 assault rifles, India had signed a deal in August for 70,000 AK-103 assault tickets to be procured off the shelf. The deliveries would begin within three months

once the first payment is made and would be completed in six months.

Another deal likely to make progress is for Iгла-S Very Short Range Air Defence (VSHORAD) systems. The Ka-226T utility helicopter deal is unlikely to be cleared, according to official sources.

Air Force satellite

The DAC approved a proposal for the procurement of the GSAT-7C communication satellite for the Indian Air Force (IAF) at a cost of ₹2,236 crore, a Defence Ministry statement said.

Induction of the GSAT-7C satellite and ground hubs for Software Defined Radios (SDRs) will enhance the ability of the armed forces to communicate beyond Line of Sight (LoS) among one another in all circumstances in a secure mode, the Ministry statement said.

General Studies Paper I

A	History of Indian culture will cover the salient aspects of art forms, literature and architecture from ancient to modern times;
B	Modern Indian history from about the middle of the eighteenth century until the present-significant events, personalities, issues;
C	Freedom struggle-its various stages and important contributors / contributions from different parts of the country;
D	Post-independence consolidation and reorganization within the country;
E	History of the world will include events from 18 th century such as industrial revolution, world wars, re-drawing of national boundaries, colonization, decolonization,
F	Political philosophies like communism, capitalism, socialism etc.-their forms and effect on the society
G	Salient features of Indian Society, Diversity of India;
H	Effects of globalization on Indian society;
I	Role of women and women's organization;
J	Social empowerment, communalism, regionalism & secularism
K	Salient features of world's physical geography;
L	Geographical features and their location- changes in critical geographical features (including water bodies and ice-caps) and in flora and fauna and the effects of such changes;
M	Important Geophysical phenomena such as earthquakes, Tsunami, Volcanic activity, cyclone etc.
N	Distribution of key natural resources across the world (including South Asia and the Indian subcontinent);
O	Factors responsible for the location of primary, secondary, and tertiary sector industries in various parts of the world (including India);
P	Population and associated issues;
Q	Urbanization, their problems and their remedies

General Studies Paper II

A	India and its neighbourhood- relations;
B	Important International institutions, agencies and fora- their structure, mandate;
C	Effect of policies and politics of developed and developing countries on India's interests;
D	Bilateral, regional and global groupings and agreements involving India and/or affecting India's interests.
E	Indian Constitution, historical underpinnings, evolution, features, amendments, significant provisions and basic structure;
F	Comparison of the Indian Constitutional scheme with other countries;
G	Functions and responsibilities of the Union and the States, issues and challenges pertaining to the federal structure, devolution of powers and finances up to local levels and challenges therein; Inclusive growth and issues arising from it;
H	Parliament and State Legislatures - structure, functioning, conduct of business, powers & privileges and issues arising out of these;
I	Structure, organization and functioning of the executive and the judiciary, Ministries and Departments;
J	Separation of powers between various organs dispute redressal mechanisms and institutions;

K	Appointment to various Constitutional posts, powers, functions and responsibilities of various Constitutional bodies;
L	Statutory, regulatory and various quasi-judicial bodies;
M	Mechanisms, laws, institutions and bodies constituted for the protection and betterment of these vulnerable sections;
N	Salient features of the Representation of People's Act;
O	Important aspects of governance, transparency and accountability, e-governance- applications, models, successes, limitations, and potential;
P	Citizens charters, transparency & accountability and institutional and other measures;
Q	Issues relating to poverty and hunger,
R	Welfare schemes for vulnerable sections of the population by the Centre and States, Performance of these schemes;
S	Issues relating to development and management of social sector / services relating to education and human resources;
T	Issues relating to development and management of social sector / services relating to health
General Studies Paper III	
A	Indian Economy and issues relating to planning, mobilization of resources, growth, development and employment;
B	Effects of liberalization on the economy, changes in industrial policy and their effects on industrial growth;
C	Inclusive growth and issues arising from it;
D	Infrastructure Energy, Ports, Roads, Airports, Railways etc. Government budgeting;
E	Land reforms in India
F	Major crops, cropping patterns in various parts of the country, different types of irrigation and irrigation systems;
G	Storage, transport and marketing of agricultural produce and issues and related constraints;
H	e-technology in the aid of farmers;
I	Issues of buffer stocks and food security, Public Distribution System- objectives, functioning, limitations, revamping;
J	Food processing and related industries in India – scope and significance, location, upstream and downstream requirements, supply chain management;
K	Issues related to direct and indirect farm subsidies and minimum support prices
L	Awareness in the fields of IT, Space, Computers, robotics, nano-technology, bio-technology;
M	Indigenization of technology and developing new technology;
N	Developments and their applications and effects in everyday life;
O	Issues relating to intellectual property rights
P	Conservation, environmental pollution and degradation, environmental impact assessment
Q	Disaster and disaster management
R	Challenges to internal security through communication networks, role of media and social networking sites in internal security challenges, basics of cyber security;
S	Money-laundering and its prevention;
T	Various forces and their mandate;
U	Security challenges and their management in border areas;

V	Linkages of organized crime with terrorism;
W	Role of external state and non-state actors in creating challenges to internal security;
X	Linkages between development and spread of extremism.
General Studies Paper IV	
A	Ethics and Human Interface: Essence, determinants and consequences of Ethics in human actions;
B	Dimensions of ethics;
C	Ethics in private and public relationships. Human Values - lessons from the lives and teachings of great leaders, reformers and administrators;
D	Role of family, society and educational institutions in inculcating values.
E	Attitude: Content, structure, function; its influence and relation with thought and behaviour;
F	Moral and political attitudes;
G	Social influence and persuasion.
H	Aptitude and foundational values for Civil Service , integrity, impartiality and non-partisanship, objectivity, dedication to public service, empathy, tolerance and compassion towards the weaker sections.
I	Emotional intelligence-concepts, and their utilities and application in administration and governance.
J	Contributions of moral thinkers and philosophers from India and world.
K	Public/Civil service values and Ethics in Public administration: Status and problems;
L	Ethical concerns and dilemmas in government and private institutions;
M	Laws, rules, regulations and conscience as
N	sources of ethical guidance;
O	Accountability and ethical governance; strengthening of ethical and moral values in governance; ethical issues in international relations and funding;
P	Corporate governance.
Q	Probity in Governance: Concept of public service;
R	Philosophical basis of governance and probity;
S	Information sharing and transparency in government, Right to Information, Codes of Ethics, Codes of Conduct, Citizen's Charters, Work culture, Quality of service delivery, Utilization of public funds, challenges of corruption.
T	Case Studies on above issues.