

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.

CONTENTS

- News - Yameen leads 'India Out' campaign in Maldives
GSP 02 A
- Editorials - A strategic bulwark
GSP 02 C
- News - Anti-conversion Bill gets Karnataka Cabinet's nod
GSP 02 E
- News - Lok Sabha passes Bill to link electoral rolls with Aadhaar
GSP 02 E
- News - Bill to link electoral rolls with Aadhaar passed
GSP 02 E
- News - Govt. blinks, sends two Bills for review
GSP 02 E
- News - Six additional seats for Jammu, one for Kashmir proposed Part 2
GSP 02 E
- News - 6 additional seats for Jammu, one for Kashmir proposed
GSP 02 H

CONTENTS

- News - Competition Commission approves Tata-Air India deal
GSP 02 K
- Editorials - Amid vaccine booster talk, context matters a lot
GSP 02 T
- News - MCA21 portal third version in the works
GSP 03 A
- News - PSBs recover Rs.5.49 lakh cr. in seven years
GSP 03 A
- News - The sustained attack on federalism
GSP 03 P
- News - Improvising COVID testing tools
GSP 03 L
- News - BIMSTEC working on joint disaster relief plans
GSP 03 Q

Yameen leads 'India Out' campaign in Maldives

Profoundly concerned by bids to propagate hatred towards India: Govt.

MEERA SRINIVASAN
COLOMBO

About a fortnight since Maldives's ex-President Abdulla Yameen walked free, after the Supreme Court overturned his conviction in a money-laundering case, the 'India Out' campaign in the island nation has intensified, with the former strongman now leading it.

Earlier this month, Mr. Yameen's Progressive Party of Maldives (PPM) said the leader would travel to the atolls to step up the campaign resisting "Indian boots on the ground" in the Indian Ocean Archipelago, even as the government denies any Indian military presence. Images of Mr. Yameen and his supporters, attired in a red T-shirt with 'India Out' printed in

bold font, are circulating on social media, along with the '#IndiaOut' hashtag.

In a statement on Sunday, the Government of Maldives said it was "profoundly concerned" by attempts to spread "misguided and unsubstantiated information to propagate hatred towards India". Calling India "one of the closest bilateral partners of the Maldives", the government attributed the campaign to a "small group of individuals and a few political personalities".

"Spreading hatred and making false allegations regarding bilateral ties with neighbouring countries not only tarnishes the relations with trusted allies who extend consistent support to the Maldivian people but al-



Abdulla Yameen

so affect the safety and security of their citizens in Maldives, and Maldivians living abroad," the government's statement said.

This is the second such statement issued by Male in recent weeks. On November 17, the government "strongly rejected" attempts to spread "false information" criticising its ties with India, its "closest ally and trusted neighbour".

India-Maldives ties dete-

riorated considerably when the Yameen administration was in power from 2013 to 2018. Significantly, tensions rose over Mr. Yameen's ultimatum to New Delhi to withdraw two Indian helicopters from Laamu and Addu atolls. Mr. Yameen's perceived China tilt at the time also made New Delhi apprehensive.

Following President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih's election win in September 2018, his government declared an "India first" foreign policy, resetting ties. In an open acknowledgment, Mr. Solih told *The Hindu* in a January 2021 interview that the Maldives "makes no apology" for close ties with India.

Speaker and former President Mohamed Nasheed, a party colleague of Mr. Solih and an influential voice in the Maldives, has earlier said India is the "single most important country" for the Mal-

dives, while accusing is political opponents of "xenophobia".

'Military presence'

Critics of the Government's India relations, however, said it was Indian "military presence" that they were wary of. Speaking to *The Hindu* from Male, opposition parliamentarian and PPM vice-president Mohamed Saeed said: "We are not against India or the people of India. Our people are heavily into Bollywood, we love Indian cuisine. That is not the issue. There are reports of Indian military presence in the atolls and the government is not clarifying this," he said, adding: "We oppose military presence of any foreign country – be it India, China or whoever else."

Observing that Mr. Yameen was only "giving leadership" to the "concerns"

of citizens, Mr. Saeed slammed the government over its Uthuru Thila Falhu (UTF) harbour development deal with India, signed in February 2021. "There is no transparency, and the government is reluctant to reveal the terms of the agreement in Parliament, despite having a majority in the House. The BJP leadership in India and the [ruling] MDP are messing up bilateral ties. We are not on the right course," said Mr. Saeed, who was Minister of Economic Development in Mr. Yameen's Government.

At the time of the signing of the UTF pact, Maldivian Defence Minister Mariya Didi termed the project "vital" to the "effective functioning" of the Maldivian Coast Guard. Ms. Didi has said that the relationship between the Maldives and India today is "stronger than ever".

Anti-conversion Bill gets Karnataka Cabinet's nod

Likely to be tabled in legislature today

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT
BELAGAVI

The Karnataka Cabinet on Monday cleared the contentious anti-conversion Bill, The Karnataka Right to Freedom of Religion Bill, 2021. It is likely to be tabled in the legislature on Tuesday, according to sources.

The Bill envisages stringent provisions for forced or induced conversion. It prohibits conversion from one religion to another by "misrepresentation, force, fraud, undue influence, coercion, allurement or marriage". It says that any aggrieved person, parents, brother, sister or any other person related by blood, marriage or adoption can

file a First Information Report against such an act. It has penal provisions that state that imprisonment will not be less than three years and can extend up to 10 years, and fine ranges from ₹25,000 to ₹10 lakh.

Earlier in the day, speaking at a convention of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad in the border city, Karnataka Chief Minister Basavaraj Bommai reiterated that the government was committed to stopping conversion by force or fraud. He claimed that innocent people across the State were being converted by some people who offered money and other inducements to the poor and the backward classes.

A strategic bulwark

India must redouble efforts towards Central Asia to counter the 'Great Game' rivalries

The third India-Central Asia Dialogue convened by External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar on Sunday is one in a series of timely connections to the region by New Delhi this year, spurred in some measure by events in Afghanistan. The dialogue has been held a month before leaders of all five Central Asian Republics (CARs) come to New Delhi as chief guests for the Republic Day celebrations, and a month after National Security Adviser Ajit Doval's "Regional Security Dialogue" with his CAR counterparts to discuss Afghanistan. Among the issues discussed on Sunday were extending "immediate" humanitarian aid to Afghanistan, increasing trade, and improving connectivity. It is significant that the CAR Foreign Ministers chose to come to New Delhi, an indicator that India's outreach to Central Asia, a region neglected by South Block for several decades, is being reciprocated. The joint statement, that they share a "broad regional consensus" on Afghanistan, is apt, given that, like India, all the Central Asian neighbours of Afghanistan worry about the threat of terrorism, radicalisation, narcotics, and refugees. However, unlike India, most of the CARs maintain bilateral talks with the Taliban regime; Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan have reopened missions there. Trade between India and Central Asia has long languished below \$2 billion, with all sides keen to grow this. In addition, India's \$1 billion Line of Credit for projects in Central Asia, and connectivity initiatives such as Chabahar port, the International North-South Transport Corridor and the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India gas pipeline were all part of the dialogue.

While the strengthening of India-Central Asia ties and a revival of their traditional, historical and cultural links are much needed, it is also important to recognise the geopolitical cross-currents that complicate such efforts. While Russia continues to wield influence in the CAR governments, China's Belt and Road Initiative and \$100 billion trade (by some estimates) have made it a central figure in the region. The U.S. has also been seeking a foothold in the region, especially after Afghanistan. Meanwhile, India's land connectivity to Central Asia is hampered by Pakistan which is building strong links and transit trade agreements with each of the CARs. The alternative route, via Iran's Chabahar, has received a setback after the Taliban takeover of Kabul, and the development of the Indian-managed Shahid Beheshti terminal there continues to suffer due to the threat of American sanctions. While India has strengthened ties with other parts of Asia, it must now redouble its efforts towards Central Asia if it is to counter the 'Great Game' rivalries playing out in the region, and reclaim its shared history with countries that are an important market, a source for energy, and also a bulwark against the threats of extremism and radicalisation.

Bill to link electoral rolls with Aadhaar passed

At the time of introduction, several members, including Manish Tewari and Shashi Tharoor of the Congress, Asaduddin Owaisi of the All India Majlis-E-Ittehadul Muslimeen and N.K. Premachandran of the Revolutionary Socialist Party, opposed the Bill.

The Bill allows electoral registration officers to ask for Aadhaar numbers of applicants who want to register as voters to establish the identity of the applicant. It also seeks to allow the officers to ask for the Aadhaar number from "persons already included in the electoral roll for the purposes of authentication of entries in electoral roll, and to identify registration of name of the same person in the electoral roll of more than one constituency or more than once in the same constituency".

At the same time, the Bill makes it clear that "no application for inclusion of name in the electoral roll shall be denied and no entries in the electoral roll shall be deleted for inability of an individual to furnish or intimate Aadhaar number due to such sufficient cause as may be prescribed".

People who cannot furnish their Aadhaar numbers will be allowed to present other documents to establish identity.

The Statement of Objects

and Reasons of the Bill states that Section 23 of the Representation of People Act, 1950, will be amended to allow linking of the electoral roll data with the Aadhaar ecosystem "to curb the menace of multiple enrolment of the same person in different places".

Qualifying dates

The amendment to Section 14 of the RP Act, 1950, will allow to have four "qualifying" dates for eligible people to register as voters.

As of now, January 1 of every year is the sole qualifying date. People who turn 18 on or before January 1 can register as voters. Those turning 18 after that have to wait for a whole year to register as voters.

Now, "January 1, April 1, July 1 and October 1 in a calendar year" will be the qualifying dates in relation to the preparation or revision of the rolls.

The amendment to Section 20 of the RP Act, 1950, and Section 60 of the RP Act, 1951, will allow the elections to become gender neutral for service voters.

It will also help replace the word "wife" with "spouse", making the statutes "gender neutral". This seeks to redress any discrimination against male spouses of women armed services employees.

Govt. blinks, sends two Bills for review

Scrutiny of women's age of marriage Bill hangs fire; LS passes Election Laws (Amendment) Bill

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI

Hours after leaders of the five Opposition parties snubbed the government's belated attempt at resolving the row over the suspension of 12 Rajya Sabha members by skipping the meeting with Parliamentary Affairs Minister Pralhad Joshi, the government on Monday referred two Bills to parliamentary committees. However, the demand to send the Election Laws (amendment) Bill to a standing committee was ignored.

Opposition's demands

The Opposition has also demanded that the Prohibition of Child Marriage (Amendment) Bill that seeks to increase the legal age for marriage for women from 18 to 21 be referred to a standing committee. As per informal



Mounting pressure: Opposition MPs protesting in the Lok Sabha on Monday. ■PTI

conversations between Opposition leaders and government managers, the Centre may be favourably inclined to the demand, but there is so far no official word.

Despite demands, the government did not send the

Election Laws (Amendment) Bill, 2021 that seeks to link voter IDs with Aadhaar.

As with several laws, the Bill was passed on Monday by the Lok Sabha amid sharp protests from the Opposition.

“The way the Union government rushed through the Election Laws Bill once again shows that they are undemocratic and authoritarian. Despite our demands, the Bill was not sent to a parliamentary committee,” Congress whip in the Lok Sabha Manickam Tagore said.

Investment in research

The two Bills sent for scrutiny are the Biological Diversity (Amendment) Bill and the Mediation Bill.

The first will allow for foreign investment in research in biodiversity but this investment will necessarily have to be made through Indian companies involved in biodiversity research. The Mediation Bill seeks to promote and facilitate mediation, especially institutional mediation, for resolution of disputes, commercial or other

wise and enforce mediated settlement agreements.

No meeting point

Mr. Joshi on Sunday evening had written to five Opposition parties to which the 12 suspended MPs belong, inviting them for a meeting. However, all five parties – the Congress, Trinamool Congress, Shiv Sena, CPI and CPI(M) – declined the invitation. The Opposition also skipped the Business Advisory Committee meeting for the Rajya Sabha called by the government at 5 p.m, with information about the meeting sent out at 4.45 p.m., just 15 minutes before the meet.

At a meeting on Monday morning, Opposition leaders decided to carry on with their protest against the suspension of Rajya Sabha members till the end of the winter session December 23.

Lok Sabha passes Bill to link electoral rolls with Aadhaar

Govt. says process will 'purify' voter lists; Opposition slams it for 'tearing hurry'

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI

Amid vociferous protests by Opposition members, the Lok Sabha on Monday passed a Bill to link electoral roll data with the Aadhaar ecosystem without any substantial discussion.

Union Law Minister Kiren Rijju, while moving the Election Laws (Amendment) Bill, 2021, told the House that the linking of the electoral roll with a person's Aadhaar was "voluntary", but went on to quote a report of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Law and Justice to assert that the process would "purify" the rolls.

The manner of passing the Bill, barely two hours after it was introduced in the Lok Sabha and in the midst of an uproar, led Opposition members to accuse the Narendra Modi government of "compromising" the authority of Parliament.

In a departure from the norm, even Congress leader in the House Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury was seen throwing bits of papers towards the Well of the House in protest.

BJP member Nishikant Dubey alleged that the Congress and Trinamool Congress members were opposing the Bill as they relied on "illegal Bangladeshis" as



The Opposition has not understood the objectives of the Bill. It will make the election process more credible ... The Bill is in consonance with the Supreme Court judgment. **KIREN RIJJU**, Union Law Minister

Aadhaar is not a proof of citizenship ... By linking it with the electoral process, we are potentially giving voting rights to non-citizens

SHASHI THAROOR
Congress leader



Linking Aadhaar with the election process will infringe on the right to privacy of citizens

N.K. PREMCHANDRAN, RSP leader

their vote banks. Hitting back at Mr. Dubey, NCP member Supriya Sule said the BJP should first clarify the allegation about a Minister in the present Council of Ministers being a Bangladeshi national.

Opposing the passage of the Bill, Mr. Chowdhury said, "What is the tearing hurry to pass the Bill? It

should be sent to the Standing Committee."

Responding to him, the Law Minister said the provisions were extensively discussed by the parliamentary panel on law and justice and it also gave a unanimous report. "We have not brought this in a dictatorial way," Mr. Rijju told the Opposition members.

While Trinamool members Kalyan Banerjee and Mahua Moitra were agitated over the government pushing through the Bill, parties that are friendly to the government – the Biju Janata Dal and the YSR Congress – also urged it not to pass the Bill in the din.

CONTINUED ON ► PAGE 8

Six additional seats for Jammu, one for Kashmir proposed

Delimitation panel meets BJP, NC MPs

PEERZADA ASHIQ
SRINAGAR

The Jammu and Kashmir Delimitation Commission on Monday proposed to increase six seats for the Jammu division and one for the Kashmir division, besides reserving 16 seats for the Scheduled Castes (SC) and the Scheduled Tribes in the Union Territory, triggering sharp reactions from the regional parties. The Kashmir division currently has 46 seats and Jammu 37.

The commission, headed by Justice Ranjana Prakash Desai (retd.), met the five associate members – two MPs from the BJP and three from the National Conference – in New Delhi on Monday. The National Conference had earlier boycotted the commission.

The commission has not specified the districts where the SC and ST seats would be reserved. It told the associate members that the 2011 census was the basis for carving out the new seats. According to the census, the population of the Kashmir division was 68.8 lakh and Jammu 53.5 lakh.

The draft proposal added that nine seats would be reserved for the Scheduled Tribes and seven for the



Justice Ranjana Desai (retd.), who heads the panel

Scheduled Castes. Jammu and Kashmir will now have a 90-member Legislative Assembly, up from the 87 prior to the Centre's decision to end the special constitutional position of the erstwhile State.

Unacceptable: Masoodi
NC MP Hasnain Masoodi, who attended the meeting, termed the proposal "unacceptable". "It is a matter of concern. We will submit our report in detail very soon, as the proposal is not acceptable at all," he said.

"There is already a Supreme Court ruling granting a status quo regarding delimitation, if the commission prepares the draft based on 2011 census. It will be unconstitutional. The commission assured the exercise will be carried out as per the ruling," he said.

CONTINUED ON ► PAGE 8

6 additional seats for Jammu, one for Kashmir proposed

NC vice-president Omar Abdullah said the distribution of newly created Assembly constituencies, with six going to Jammu and only one to Kashmir was not justified by the data of the 2011 census. "It is deeply disappointing that the commission appears to have allowed the political agenda of the BJP to dictate its recommendations rather than the data which should have been its only consideration. Contrary to the promised 'scientific approach', it's a political approach," he stated.

Mehbooba's charge

Peoples Democratic Party president Mehbooba Mufti said her apprehensions about the Commission weren't misplaced. "They want to pitch people against each other by ignoring the population census and proposing six seats for one region and only one for Kashmir," she observed.

The Commission had been created simply to serve the BJP's political interests by dividing people along religious and regional lines. The real game plan was to install a government in J&K that would legitimise the illegal and unconstitutional decisions of August 2019, she noted.

Sajad Lone, who heads the Peoples Conference, remarked, "The recommendations of the delimitation commission are totally unacceptable. They reek of bias. What a shock for those who believe in democracy".

CPI(M) leader M.Y. Tarigami termed it "unacceptable". "It's another step to further disempower Kashmiris politically. Despite the

matter of Reorganisation Act being *sub judice*, the Government of India is taking irreversible steps, which are harmful to the interests of J&K people," he said.

The three-member commission was constituted on March 6, 2020, specifically for J&K by virtue of the Parliament Act under the provisions of Part V of J&K Reorganization Act, 2019 and its term will end in March next.

In a statement, the Delimitation Commission said the Monday meeting was attended by all five associate members of the panel as well as the Chief Electoral Officer of J&K. Commission member and Chief Election Commissioner Sushil Chandra shared the commission's experiences of interacting with people during its visit to J&K.

"Associate Members appreciated the fact that this Commission visited the Union Territory of Jammu & Kashmir and met large number of people in person," the statement read.

The commission had categorised the districts into three categories.

"The Commission has also, for some districts, proposed carving out of an additional constituency to balance the representation for geographical areas having inadequate communication and lack of public conveniences. For the first time, in Jammu and Kashmir, nine seats are proposed to be allocated for Scheduled Tribes out of 90 seats on the basis of population. Seven seats are proposed for Scheduled Castes," it stated.

(With inputs from Damini Nath)

Competition Commission approves Tata-Air India deal

CCI's approval paves the way for completion of transaction

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI

The Competition Commission of India (CCI) has approved the Tata Group's proposed acquisition of debt-laden Air India and two of its units.

"The CCI approves acquisition of shareholding in Air India Ltd., Air India Express Ltd. and Air India SATS Airport Services Pvt. by Talace Pvt. Ltd.," the CCI said in a release on Monday.

The CCI's nod for the ₹18,000 crore-deal that entails Talace taking over ₹15,300 crore of debt, paves the way for completion of the transaction and the revival of the ailing carrier.

Talace Pvt. Ltd., a wholly



owned subsidiary of Tata Sons, emerged as the winning bidder in October. It will buy 100% stakes in Air India and Air India Express and 50% holding in Air India SATS (AISATS).

AISATS provides ground handling services at Delhi, Bengaluru, Hyderabad, Mangalore and Thiruvanan-

thapuram airports. It also provides cargo handling services at Bengaluru airport.

State-owned Air India has been incurring a monthly loss of over ₹600 crore.

Civil Aviation Minister Jyotiraditya Scindia, on December 14, said the Air India transaction was a "win-win situation" across the board and that taxpayers' money would now be more justifiably used for many more socially productive purposes rather than filling the deep losses of the airline.

"I am very confident at the turn of the New Year, you will have the transfer of Air India to its new owner," Mr. Scindia had said.

(With PTI inputs)

'MCA21 portal: third version in the works'

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
NEW DELHI

The development and testing of various modules of the corporate affairs ministry's MCA21 portal, which will leverage analytics, artificial intelligence and machine learning, is in progress, Union minister Rao Inderjit Singh told the Lok Sabha on Monday.

MCA21 is the key platform for companies to submit the required documents and filings under the companies law and the LLP Act. Besides, it provides public access to corporate information. An MCA lab would also be set up as part of the third version of MCA21 for improving data analytics, the Minister of State for Corporate Affairs said in a written reply.

Amid vaccine booster talk, context matters a lot

While discussions are essential, India should decide its COVID-19 booster dose policy based on local evidence and data



CHANDRAKANT LAHARIYA & GAGANDEEP KANG

Nearly four weeks since Omicron (B.1.1.529) was designated as a variant of concern (VoC), evidence points to its spreading faster than other variants. This is most likely as a result of the ability of the mutated spike protein to bind better to the receptor. It could also be because the virus is able to re-infect previously infected individuals, and infect vaccinated individuals better than other variants. The initial data indicate a lower severity of disease by Omicron. However, that remains to be confirmed as cases accumulate and we develop a better understanding of how the virus behaves in vaccinated and unvaccinated individuals.

Laboratory studies using samples from individuals vaccinated with vaccines made on different platforms, including mRNA, vectored and inactivated vaccines, have reported that the neutralising antibodies are 25 times or much greater times less effective against Omicron than the ancestral strain. Another study from the United Kingdom has reported that two doses of the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine (Covishield in India) have limited effectiveness for prevention of symptomatic infection by Omicron, but after a booster dose of an mRNA vaccine, effectiveness goes up to 71%.

Even before the emergence of Omicron, over 80 countries had introduced or planned to introduce booster doses, but the designation of Omicron as a VoC accelerated the process, with countries expanding booster doses for additional age groups or introducing a booster into the immunisation programme, the most notable being South Africa. Alongside, the vaccine manufacturers, particularly those with rapid-response platforms such as mRNA and viral-vectored vaccines, have already

begun the vaccine formulation targeted to provide better protection against Omicron.

In India, for the last few months, there has been a demand for COVID-19 booster dose for various population sub-groups. Government-appointed expert committees have been reviewing the need for a booster in India. The start of booster doses in many countries at intervals as short as three months since the start of COVID-19 vaccination in India – and a greater vaccine supply than demand are the arguments being made to support the introduction of booster doses in India. The demand has grown louder with the emergence of Omicron. However, does a new variant make a clear case for the introduction of boosters in India? The answer is not easy, if a scientific approach of basing decisions on data is followed.

The situation is similar to the use of convalescent plasma therapy (CPT) in India. In the early months of the pandemic, CPT was recommended based on plausibility but without any scientific evidence. Later, even when studies reported that it had no or a very limited role in COVID-19 management, it continued to be recommended, using anecdotal evidence from treating physicians or 'expert' opinion. There seems to be a similar push for COVID-19 boosters in India, playing out in newspapers and TV debates, but there is no evidence of waning immunity from India to support this approach. Often, selective studies/evidence are/is being quoted, to support the argument one wishes to make; 21 months into the pandemic, any decision on boosters should be based on cumulative scientific evidence examined comprehensively.

Effectiveness of vaccines

On the one hand, pre-print research papers – yet to undergo essential peer scrutiny as a standard part of the scientific process – are being used to argue the case for booster vaccination while on the other, there is a recognition that data from India on vaccines being used in India are very limited. Does the absence of evidence lead



GETTY IMAGES/STOCKPHOTO

waning of immunity with Indian vaccines really mean that vaccine immunity is not waning?

For all vaccinations, antibodies rise and then fall. They may fall to undetectable levels, but if they rose at all, then an immune response was made. Should there be a cut-off of the level of antibodies that exactly equated to protection from disease, that would be helpful for tracking the sufficiency of protection. But there is no such correlate of protection for SARS-CoV-2. Data indicate that in general, higher levels of neutralising antibodies indicate greater chances of protection from severe disease and infection, but there is no magic number above which there is assured protection. And this situation is further complicated by variants where antibodies may have different activity against each variant.

Neutralising antibodies are considered functional antibodies; they are the antibodies that block the virus from entering host cells, but there are also many other antibodies that can be found in binding assays that measure whether antibodies can stick to the cognate protein of the virus. The levels of some of these binding antibodies parallel neutralising antibodies, both high or both low, but again there is no cut off that predicts anything about whether the person with high antibodies is truly protected or not.

A recent report on Omicron has good news about another arm of the immune system, showing that T-cell immunity was largely maintained. The spate of laboratory studies further shows that natural infection and vaccination with two doses was approximately equivalent to two doses and a booster. Most of these data are from the mRNA and viral vectored vaccine combinations. We still have a lot to learn about Omicron and the per-

formance of other vaccines in different populations and subpopulations, particularly those in India. It does appear clear that without boosters, protection against infection is likely to be less, but in public health terms, how much this may matter for health-care systems in India remains unquantifiable and unpredictable at this time.

While the evidence on the benefit of boosters is emerging, we also need to worry about the populations that are unvaccinated or partially vaccinated in India and in the world.

A comparison

Offering booster doses will have individual benefit, to a variable extent against different variants. However, when at the global level, vaccines continue to be in short supply, this comes at the cost of a potentially larger benefit for more individuals who still await their primary two doses.

In this backdrop, the decisions on who gets boosters, when and with which vaccine has to be based upon a public health approach, determined by evidence and science.

Second, since every country needs vaccines and access is variable, global access to the first two shots need to be prioritised over boosters for healthy adults. Yes, boosters might ultimately be needed for everyone, but at the moment, we need to immediately consider boosters only for subgroups such as the immunocompromised (often referred to as additional dose as part of an extended primary immunisation schedule) and those at the greatest risk. In India, we must plan and execute real world effectiveness studies at scale in the general population, particularly for those vaccines that have been or will be used mainly or initially in India, so that we can develop an evidence base for decisions on boosters for the general population. This must happen in parallel with increasing the two dose coverage in all adults to the highest possible levels.

Third, we should not be surprised by reports of reinfections and breakthrough infections or of absence of antibodies after natural

infection and vaccination, particularly when commercial tests are used. This is expected both because of the design of the tests and as vaccines for mucosal infections, as for SARS-CoV-2, rarely prevent all subsequent infections, but generally continue to protect against severe disease for a longer period.

Fourth, in the context of Omicron, India has an opportunity to plan and implement testing and tracking that will enable an understanding of variant-specific and waning immunity with different vaccines, if we capture infection and vaccination history in people who are affected by this variant.

Fifth, this is an opportunity to review the performance of the vaccine programme and identify the population groups to be prioritised for completion of primary immunisation. It is time for the Government to analyse and use the integrated data from its multiple platforms for decision making.

Every setting is different

India needs a road map that includes COVID-19 testing, provision of care, financial protection, and enhanced science communication with the general public to ensure sustained adherence to COVID-19 appropriate behaviours, and other measures for protection against disease to decrease further disruption by the pandemic. Discussions on boosters are essential, but it is important that India makes its decisions based, as far as possible, on its own data. High seropositivity, as shown in the fourth round of the National Sero-Prevalence Survey, different vaccines from the rest of the world, a different experience with the variants, all indicate that India should not blindly follow the path adopted by other countries and it should determine COVID-19 booster dose policy for the general population based on local evidence and data. In epidemics and pandemics, context matters a lot.

Dr. Chandrakant Lahariya is a physician with advanced training in epidemiology, public health and vaccines and based in New Delhi. Dr. Gagandeep Kang is Professor of Microbiology at Christian Medical College, Vellore, Tamil Nadu

Priority for Bill on voter ID-Aadhaar link

Lok Sabha to take it up today; legislation seeks to link electoral rolls to UDI to establish identity

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI

The Election Laws (Amendment) Bill, 2021, which seeks to link electoral rolls to Aadhaar, has been listed for introduction in the Lok Sabha on Monday.

The Bill allows electoral registration officers to ask for the Aadhaar of applicants for registration as voters so as to establish their identity.

Main topic

According to government managers who spoke to *The Hindu*, priority has been accorded to this Bill over seven others mentioned by Minister of State for Parliamentary Affairs Arjun Ram Meghwal on Friday in Parliament as business for the last week of the winter session.

The Union Cabinet cleared the Bill on Wednesday when it met last.

It also seeks to allow the officers to ask for the number from “persons already



Overcoming flaws: The Bill allows officers to ask for details of persons already included in the electoral roll. ■ FILE PHOTO

included in the electoral roll for the purposes of authentication of entries in electoral roll, and to identify registration of name of the same person in the electoral roll of more than one constituency or more than once in the same constituency”.

The amendment Bill makes it clear that “no application for inclusion of name in the electoral roll shall be denied and no entries in the electoral roll shall be deleted for inability of an individual to furnish or intimate Aadhaar number due to such suf-

ficient cause as may be prescribed”.

People who cannot furnish their Aadhaar numbers will be allowed to present other documents to establish identity.

According to the Bill circulated to the Lok Sabha members ahead of its introduction, various Sections of the Representation of the People Act, 1950 and 1951 will be amended.

The Statement of Objects and Reasons says Section 23 of the RP Act, 1950 will be amended to allow linking of the roll data with the Aadhaar ecosystem “to curb the menace of multiple enrolment of the same person in different places”.

Four qualifying dates

Amendment to Section 14 of the Act, 1950 will allow to have four “qualifying” dates for eligible people to register as voters.

As of now, January 1 of ev-

ery year is the sole qualifying date.

People who turn 18 on or before January 1 can register as voters.

Those turning 18 after that have to wait for one whole year to register as voters.

Now, “the January 1, April 1, July 1 and October 1 in a calendar year” will be the qualifying dates in relation to the preparation or revision of electoral rolls.

Gender-neutrality

Amendment to Section 20 of the RP Act, 1950 and Section 60 of the RP Act, 1951 will allow the elections become gender-neutral for service voters.

It will also help replace the word “wife” with the word “spouse” making the statutes “gender neutral”.

This seeks to redress any discrimination against male spouses of female armed services employees, with “wife” being replaced as “spouse.”

The sustained attack on federalism

Steps by the Union government have undermined the principles of federalism, especially fiscal federalism



ARUN P.S.

B. Pocker Sahib, a Muslim League member from Kerala in the Constituent Assembly, was prophetic when he outlined his concerns about the possible impact of centralisation of powers. In 1948, he said: “Now after we have won freedom, to do away with Provincial Autonomy and to concentrate all the powers in the Centre really is tantamount to totalitarianism, which certainly ought to be condemned.” Today, amid the pandemic, some elements of this statement resonate quite strongly with the States with some of them raising complaints about the Union government’s anti-federal moves.

Prior to the pandemic, a series of steps by the Union government undermined the principles of federalism, especially fiscal federalism. This manifested in the increasing monetary share of the States in Centrally Sponsored Schemes (CSS), the terms of reference of the 15th Finance Commission, imposition of demonetisation without adequate consultation with the States, institutionalisation of the Goods and Services Tax (GST), outsourcing of the statutory functions under the Smart Cities Mission, a delay in transfer of GST compensation, ‘One Nation One Ration’, etc.

Pandemic and federalism

Besides tightening the purse strings of States, administrations also witnessed an onslaught on the principles of federalism during the pandemic. States were curtailed in aspects relating to COVID-19 management such as procurement of testing kits, vaccination, the use of the Disaster Management Act, and the unplanned national lockdown. Ironically, Union Ministers used the ‘health is a State subject’ argument to counter criticism when the second wave caught the government unprepared.

Several other policies initiated by the Union government in the recent past have also led to the weakening of States’ autonomy. These include the farm laws; the Banking Regulation (Amendment) Act of 2020; the



SHIV KUMAR PUSHPAKAR

Government of National Capital Territory Amendment Act, 2021; the Indian Marine Fisheries Bill, 2021; the Draft Electricity (Amendment) Bill, 2020; the Dam Safety Bill, 2019; the National Education Policy of 2020; and the Draft Blue Economy policy. The creation of the Ministry of Cooperation and the Reserve Bank of India directives on cooperatives are being perceived by the States as measures to strangulate a sector that is still struggling to recover from the devastation of demonetisation.

These coercive policies, coming on top of the pandemic-induced economic shock, have worsened the fiscal situation of State governments. The impact of COVID-19 on fiscal federalism deserves to be understood in greater detail, and tax collection is a good place to start. Enlarging the non-divisible pool of taxes in the form of cess in petrol tax and instituting the Agriculture Infrastructure and Development Cess have resulted in a situation where the Union continues to exclusively benefit from tax collection. As the economic commentator Vivek Kaul said, the share of non-divisible pool cess and surcharge in total taxes collected by the Union government jumped from 12.67% in 2019-20 to 23.46% in 2020-21. On December 6, 2021, the Union government informed Parliament that its share in the total contribution of the petroleum sector to the exchequer for 2020-21 was 68%, which left only 32% to the States. In 2013-14, the Union:State share was almost 50:50.

The story is the same with GST. During the pandemic, the Union government repeatedly violated the compensation guarantees to the States under the GST regime. Delay

in paying the States their due worsened the impact of the economic slowdown. The crisis was aggravated in July 2020, when the Union government proposed borrowing as an option to address the shortfall in GST compensation. Most States, forced by economic pressure, had to accept the proposal. In effect, this meant that they were not only getting the share of GST collections due to them, but were now forced into debt which they would have to service. The GST compensation period expires in 2022, and despite multiple requests from the States, the deadline has not been extended. The Comptroller and Auditor General found that the Union government, in 2018-19, wrongly retained ₹47,272 crore of GST compensation cess in the Consolidated Fund of India – money that was supposed to be transferred to the States. It is also pertinent to recollect that the 2021-22 Budget Estimates indicate that the States’ share of Union tax has reduced to 30% against the mandated 41% devolution prescribed by the 15th Finance Commission.

Cash-starved States have been seeking non-tax avenues to generate funds to sustain their programmes. And at this point, the Union government issued a clarification that funding to the Chief Minister’s Disaster Relief Funds will not be considered as CSR expenditure, unlike the case with PM-CARES. This was followed by decisions like the suspension and transfer of the Member of Parliament Local Area Development (MPLAD) funds to the Consolidated Fund of India. This led to a major crisis situation for most States and resulted in demands for increasing borrowing limits under the Fiscal Responsibility

and Budget Management Act (FRBM), from 3% to 5%. The Union government decided to increase FRBM borrowing limits, linking it to the performance of States in fulfilling certain conditions – implementation of the One Nation, One Ration policy, ease of doing business reforms, urban local body/utility reforms and power sector reforms – making it difficult for the States to perceive this as an addressal of their concerns.

Some solutions

These policy misadventures call for research and introspection on federalism. Is it time for another State-centric committee like the Rajamannar Committee to study Union-State relations? States should, as recommended by the National Commission to Review the Working of the Constitution, demand the creation of a formal institutional framework to mandate and facilitate consultation between the Union and the States in the areas of legislation under the Concurrent List. State governments could also consider deploying human resources to support them in preparing responses to the consultations initiated by the Union, especially with a focus on the federalism angle. Instead of reaching out to each other only during crisis situations, Chief Ministers should try to create forums for regular engagement on this issue. Former Kerala Finance Minister Thomas Isaac had rallied Finance Ministers from different States during the initial stages of discussion on the terms of reference of the 15th Finance Commission. Similar efforts are required. This would be crucial in the advocacy of major demands like the extension of GST compensation to 2027 and inclusion of cess in the divisible pool of taxes.

Federal flexibility – or the lack of it – is going to play a crucial role in shaping the future of our democracy. The Union government needs to invest resources towards facilitating effective consultation with States as a part of the lawmaking process. It is critical that the Union establishes a system where citizens and States are treated as partners and not subjects.

Arun P.S. is a Kerala-based public policy researcher and a recipient of the Smtu Kothari Fellowship. This article is published as a part of the Fellowship of the Centre for Financial Accountability, Delhi

Improvising COVID testing tools

CSIR-CCMB scientists working on primers to detect Omicron

V. GEETANATH
HYDERABAD

The Council of Scientific and Industrial Research- Centre for Cellular and Molecular Biology (CSIR-CCMB) is working on specific primers for improving the current COVID-19 testing methods like the RT-PCR where the emerging Omicron variant can be identified.

“We are working on a few sets of primers, but we have to test them extensively and validate them, before we can put them out so that a positive patient can know if it is the current dominant Delta variant or the new Omicron,” said director Vinay Kumar Nandicoori.

“As per the data available, Delta is still dominant across the country. Whether Omicron



CCMB Director Vinay Kumar Nandicoori (right) supervising the work at one of the institute's laboratories in Hyderabad.

will replace it, we will see in the coming days. We should know that in South Africa where it was first detected, the Delta wave was waning when this new variant took over, which shows better infectivity and naturally the unvaccinated are

prone to get infections than others,” he explained.

Dr. Nandicoori emphasised that vaccines do provide protection and the focus in our country should be on vaccinating the remaining 22% population with double doses.

‘PSBs recover ₹5.49 lakh cr. in seven years’

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
NEW DELHI

The government has taken comprehensive steps to reduce NPAs and to effect recovery, enabling public sector banks to recover more than ₹5.49 lakh crore over the last seven fiscal years, the Lok Sabha was informed on Monday.

In a written reply, Minister of State for Finance Bhagwat Karad said that with regard to the details of the recovery rate of non-performing assets (NPAs), the RBI had informed that it had not formally defined ‘recovery rate’ in the context of NPAs in the banking industry. “Comprehensive steps have been taken by the Government to reduce NPAs and to effect recovery,” he said.

BIMSTEC working on joint disaster relief plans

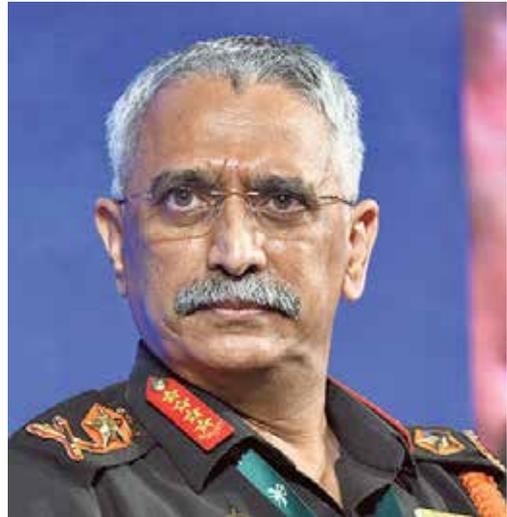
SOPs changed after COVID: Army chief

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

NEW DELHI

The COVID-19 pandemic had been a “black swan” event that overwhelmed national capacities, disrupted supply chains and brought people back to the drawing board, Chief of the Army Staff General Manoj Mukund Naravane said on Monday at the inaugural event of PANEX-21, a disaster management exercise of the multilateral grouping Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC).

“PANEX 21, therefore, is unique as it is for the first time that an exercise of this magnitude involving multiple agencies from multiple countries is being undertaken to review our Humani-



Gen. Manoj Naravane

tarian Assistance and Disaster Relief mechanism and streamline our response strategy in the backdrop of a pandemic,” he said, virtually addressing the event. “We have realised that our standard operating procedures, which had worked well in the past, are no longer effective, and would need transformative changes,” Gen. Naravane 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; Technology Missions; Economics of Animal-Rearing.
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.