



VEDHIK

DAILY NEWS ANALYSIS

09 - APRIL 2022

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 - Shah pitches for Hindi use, Oppn. cries foul Part I GSP 02 E
- News - Shah pitches for Hindi use, Oppn. cries foul Part II GSP 02 E
- News - The people caught between two States GSP 02 G
- News - Closing the gaps in criminal justice GSP 02 I
- News - All adults to get precaution job GSP 02 T
- News - Centre sets up task force to promote animation, gaming GSP 03 A
- News - Public sector undertakings can cede inactive coal mines CCEA GSP 03 A
- News -RBI adds a standing deposit facility to 'normalise' liquidity GSP 03 A
- News -RBI holds benchmark interest rates GSP 03 A
- News -RBI to 'focus' on inflation, lifts estimates GSP 03 A
- News -Tax receipts surge 34 % to exceed ₹ 27 lakh cr. GSP 03 A
- News - Navy crew completes training on MH-60R helicopters GSP 03 M
- News - SC upholds new restrictions on receiving foreign funds Part I GSP 03 S
- News - SC upholds new restrictions on receiving foreign funds Part II GSP 03 S

Shah pitches for Hindi use, Opposition cries foul

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

NEW DELHI

Union Home Minister Amit Shah's statement that people from various States speaking different languages should communicate with each other in Hindi instead of English has triggered widespread criticism from Opposition leaders, who dubbed it "Hindi imperialism".

A statement from the Ministry of Home Affairs quoted Mr. Shah, the chairman of the Parliamentary Official Language Committee, as saying the time had come to make the official language an important part of national unity.

He said that when citizens of States who speak other languages communicate, it should be in the language of India. Hindi should be accepted as an alternative to English and not to local languages. In response, Congress leader Jairam Ramesh asked why the Minister did not learn a south Indian language instead of ramming Hindi down everyone's throat.

CONTINUED ON ► PAGE 8

Shah pitches for Hindi use, Oppn. cries foul

“Hindi is *raj bhasha* (language of rulers) and not *rashtra bhasha* (national language) as Rajnath Singh said in Parliament when he was the Home Minister. Hindi imperialism will be the death knell for India as we know it,” Mr. Ramesh added.

His colleague from Lok Sabha Shashi Tharoor said uniformity and unity are two separate things.

“Promoting a language that advantages one set of Indians over others is a recipe for division over diversity. Uniformity is not unity. Attempts to impose uniformity will undermine India’s unity,” Mr. Tharoor told *The Hindu*.

Presiding over the 37th meeting of Parliament’s Official Language Committee, the Home Minister said Prime Minister Narendra Modi had decided that the medium of running the government would be the Official Language and this would definitely increase the importance of Hindi.

However, politicians from the Hindi heartland too did not see any merit in Mr. Shah’s comments. Senior RJD leader and Rajya Sabha MP Manoj K. Jha said the Home Minister must not forget contemporary Indian history and language bat-

les. “It is sad to note that Home Minister of the country does not realise the position he holds and the sensitivity it requires to perform. He needs to remember that as a nation we underwent very difficult times in the 1960s on account of the precarious language question,” Mr. Jha said.

CPI leader Binoy Viswam urged the Mr. Shah to revisit the statement for the benefit of the country.

Mr. Shah’s comments drew angry reactions from Karnataka too. In a tweet, Congress leader D.K. Sivakumar said, “All Kannadigas are proud of our mother tongue but we do need a second language to be part of a globalised world. That second language is English. Without English, so many Kannadigas won’t be working across the world, and Bengaluru wouldn’t be India’s IT capital.”

Tamil Nadu MP Karti P. Chidambaram said Mr. Shah’s comments should be seen in the context on BJP’s commitment towards “Hindi-Hindutva” agenda.

“Everyone who believes in the idea of India will resist such attempts of imposing ‘one language-one religion’ agenda,” he added.

(With inputs from Sobhana K. Nair)

The people caught between two States

Villagers of six areas of dispute between Assam and Meghalaya were asked to give their consent for inclusion in either State towards ending a 50-year-old boundary dispute. An agreement between the States has led to friction between the 'Meghalaya supporters', mostly Garos, and the 'Assam supporters', mostly non-Garos, reports **Rahul Karmakar**

Malchapura did not have a reason since July 2021 to hold the *melkhol nok*, a kangaroo court that settles local disputes. This Garo tribal village had been too glued to a dispute far removed from its jurisdiction — along the Assam-Meghalaya border — km away — to handle petty issues all these months.

The opportunity to hold court came a week before Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma and his Meghalaya counterpart Conrad Sangma met Union Home Minister Amit Shah in New Delhi to seal a "historic" boundary deal. It was not to sort out any domestic or social issue, but to extract an apology from 65-year-old Stanson Marak for "selling his soul" to Assam.

The border settlement followed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) the two Chief Ministers had signed on January 29 to resolve six of the 12 disputed sectors along the 884.9-km border between the two States. Deemed to be less complicated, these six sectors were chosen to be resolved first when the two Chief Ministers and Shah met in the Meghalaya capital, Shillong, in July 2021 to end the boundary dispute hanging fire for five decades.

Let down by their own

Marak, 65, is one of the oldest residents of Malchapura, located about 85 km southwest of Guwahati. His belief that Malchapura's future lies with Assam had dragged him to the *melkhol nok*. "I was born in Assam and would like to die in Assam. I apologise to the people's court because some of our people wanted me to apologise for betraying the community by insisting on not agreeing to be part of Meghalaya," Marak said.

Winath Ch Sangma, who had egged the villagers on to hold the court, said Marak and a few elders misled the members of a government-appointed committee that came calling in October 2021 to seek the opinion of the villagers. "Time may have run out for us to be with Meghalaya, where we belong emotionally, ethnically and geographically. But we are not giving up," he said.

Malchapura and the adjoining Salbari village, in Assam's Kamrup district, are a part of Gizang, one of the six disputed sectors taken up for resolution in the first phase. Gizang is sandwiched between two other disputed sectors — Tarabari to the west and Hahim to the east. Many residents believed that the five principles the two States had considered for resolving the boundary dispute would automatically keep Malchapura and Salbari within the redrawn map of Meghalaya after the final settlement. The five principles are historical facts, ethnicity, administrative convenience, the willingness of people, and continuity of land preferably with natural boundaries.

"We were stunned when our Chief Minister (Conrad Sangma) told the State Assembly on March 16 that a majority in Malchapura want to go with Assam. As Garo people, it is but natural for us to be in Meghalaya where the Garos are one of the three principal tribes," Jewish Sangma, a Malchapura resident said.

Marak and a few elders were subsequently marked for "betraying the community". They had in October 2021 met the members of a regional committee, formed to study the disputed sectors and recommend solutions. Their opinion apparently swayed Malchapura and Salbari's chances of going to Meghalaya. Both States formed three such regional committees, each headed by a Cabinet Minister, tasked with preparing reports for the State governments to discuss and agree upon. Malchapura went to the Home Affairs Ministry. Each committee comprised stakeholders from the affected districts — Kamrup, Kamrup (Metropolitan) and Cachar in Assam, and West Khasi Hills, Ri-Bhoi and East Jaintia Hills in Meghalaya.

Divisions within

Malchapura is not the only village divided over the boundary issue. Clashes between the pro-Assam and pro-Meghalaya groups have been frequent at Malang Salbari nearby, also a Garo village. Members of one group have allegedly been destroying the shops and betel nut plantations of those belonging to the other in order to "teach them a lesson". The intra-tribe and inter-community distrust has reached such a level that people have invested in walkie-talkies to communicate with their "own" by often changing frequencies. Mobile phone connectivity is poor in most of the disputed zones.

Frylin R. Marak, an executive member of the Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council (RHAC), elected in 2019 from the Luki constituency, blames the division within the Garo villages and families of the *Jowains* (sons-in-law) from "the other side" of the boundary line. The Garos are a matrilineal society where a man stays with his in-laws after marriage. The divided sectors are within the RHAC, which has 36 constituencies and straddles the Rabha tribe-dominated areas of Kamrup and the ad-



Garo villagers gather for a meeting demanding that their village Malchapura be included in Meghalaya. (Below): The intra-tribe and inter-community distrust has reached such a level that people have invested in walkie-talkies to communicate with their "own" by often changing frequencies. Men with walkie-talkies in Gameraimura. • RITU RAJ KONWAR



joining Goalpara district of Assam to the west. The villages of the Christian Garos and the mostly Hindu Rabhas are scattered along the boundary with Meghalaya.

"There were no disputes in areas under my constituency all these decades. We don't want a single Garo village to go to Meghalaya, but the *Jowains*, who have a sentimental attachment to Meghalaya, are and are influenced by some vested interests from the other side, took advantage of the boundary settlement initiative to push for the exclusion of the villages from Assam. They are misleading their own people by claiming they will enjoy more rights in Meghalaya, a Sixth Schedule State with special provisions for tribal people," Frylin Marak said.

While many of the younger people have been rooting for the inclusion of their villages in Meghalaya, the older people think remaining in Assam is a better option. "Our people have been divided, so much so that last Christmas was celebrated separately by the two camps, a departure from tradition," he said. "What the misguided Garo people do not realise is that the district on the other side is the West Khasi Hills, where they will be second-class citizens to the Khasis (also a matrilineal community). On the other hand, Garos have their own panchayats and, like I did, get elected to constitutional bodies in Assam. A satellite autonomous council for the Garos is also on the cards, although it will be difficult to carve out areas from the RHAC," Frylin Marak said.

Since July 2021, there has been friction between the "Meghalaya supporters", mostly Garos, and the "Assam supporters", mostly non-Garos such as Rabha, Boro, Assamese and Gurkha. The strategic weekly market at Gameraimura, for instance, has split between the non-Garos and the Garos, who have set up a parallel market at Sildubi on the inter-State boundary about 3 km south. Gameraimura, about 5 km from Malchapura, is in the disputed Tarabari sector.

"The boundary dispute had never come in the way of local business until the two State governments decided to settle the issue once and for all. Two days after the two Chief Ministers met in Shillong last year, large groups of people from Meghalaya went on a painting spree. They began marking fresh boundaries with red paint, encompassing even non-disputed villages deeper inside Assam. Soon, most Garo people were made to pull out of Gameraimura market and set up stalls in Sildubi," Ni-

ten Rabha, the general secretary of the local unit of All Rabha Students' Union, said. "Business has been down since the two governments started the process of resolving the boundary. The Meghalaya supporters don't like to come to the Gameraimura market on Fridays, our people don't like to go to their new market on Wednesdays for fear of being abused or assaulted." Biren Rabha, head of the Gameraimura Bazaar Development Committee, said.

Members of the Sildubi market committee said they set up the new market to be self-dependent and not because of any agenda.

"Only give, no take"

Assam has boundary disputes with Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram and Nagaland besides Meghalaya — all carved out of it between December 1963 and January 1972. The issues cropped up because of conflicting reading of the demarcation of boundaries in the agreement for the creation of the new States (Union Territories in the case of Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram, which became States later).

Assam said the neighbouring States have dishonoured the "constitutional boundaries" to capture its land. The other States have stuck to their "traditional boundaries" to claim Assam was the aggressor. Meghalaya said the local chieftains and traditional bodies possess pre-1947 documents that prove their ownership of land that wrongfully went to Assam at the time of the creation of the new State through a "one-sided" Reorganisation Act of 1956. The chieftain of Nonglang in West Khasi Hills, for instance, has had control over Malchapura and Salbari villages for centuries, Meghalaya claimed.

Over the years, Assam and Meghalaya held at least 50 high-level meetings to resolve the border issues. Pressure from the Centre for putting an end to the dispute during the celebration of India's 75th year of independence made the two States push for a solution.

In 2021, Chief Minister Sarma said in the Assam Assembly that Meghalaya had encroached upon 53 areas of Assam. The Assam government later said 12 areas of differences evolved over time since 1993. The two governments



agreed that the disputes will be limited to these 12 areas based on a decade-old claim by Meghalaya and that no claim in new areas would be allowed in the future. They also agreed to start with six "less complicated" sectors — Tarabari, Gizang, Hahim, Boklapara, Khanapara-Pilingkata and Ratacherra.

"Meghalaya made an official claim in 2011 and gave maps of the areas it wanted in the State. Based on that, we decided to accept the decision of villagers who want to go to Meghalaya but refused to accept claims in areas that were not part of their original claim," said Kalish Karthik N., the Deputy Commissioner of Kamrup. He denied allegations that the district authorities had exerted pressure on the pro-Meghalaya villagers to be in Assam.

His counterpart in the adjoining West Khasi Hills district of Meghalaya, P.D. Sangma, also denied any coercion by the State authorities on pro-Assam villagers. "Some people are not happy to be included in Meghalaya, but there have been no law-and-order problems in the disputed sectors where the regional committees gave the locals the option to go either way," he said, declining to go into the details of the territorial split. The committees adopted a five-phase approach entailing the exchange of records, joint field visits, detailed deliberations, negotiations, and the preparation of the final recommendations. In each of the six areas, the committees took into account the composition of the local population and recommended that Assam would get 18.51 sq. km of the total of 36.79 sq. km of disputed areas, while 18.28 sq. km will be in Meghalaya's possession. The MoU was subsequently signed.

"We adopted the policy of give-and-take for a lasting solution to the boundary dispute that has affected so many lives all these years," the Assam Chief Minister had said. "There has been no take, only give." Nandita Das, the Congress MLA of Boko constituency, said. All three contiguous disputed sectors — Tarabari, Gizang and Hahim — are under her constituency, as is the "more complicated" Lampi to be taken up in the second phase of discussion. "The entire land belongs to Assam, and we have never made any claim on land belong-

ing to Meghalaya. The Survey of India map, which Meghalaya refuses to accept, makes this very clear. Their claim is illegal and our government must find a way of holding on to these stretches rich in natural resources and with tremendous tourism potential. Meghalaya has been inching forward strategically because past governments in Assam did not foresee a long-term design of grabbing more land," Das said.

"With a BJP government at the Centre, the BJP-led Assam government should have made Meghalaya understand that it is at fault. But what is more jarring is the silence of the RHAC, which will end up losing large swathes under its jurisdiction," she said.

RHAC's chief executive member Tanqueswar Rabha chose not to comment on a matter "taken up at the highest level".

Worrisome template
About 40 km east of Gameraimura, the Gurkhas of Lampi are worried that the 50-50 formula of settling a "manufactured dispute" would set a bad precedent for the remaining six sectors. Lampi (Meghalaya calls it Langpilo) has been a disputed place since 1974 when the Assam police personnel came face-to-face with their Meghalaya counterparts who had allegedly expelled some Gurkha grazers from the area. The area, a set of villages divided almost equally between the Khasis and the Gurkhas, has been on the boil since May 2010 when clashes broke out between the two communities. Four Khasi men were killed in police firing.

"The very idea of seeking people's consent is flawed. A village with a 1% Khasi population will not like to live in Assam and a village with 1% Gurkhas will be uneasy with the idea of living in Meghalaya, which has had a history of ethnic cleansing of non-tribal people. The encroachment of Assam land has been a long-term conspiracy and if we yield to an unjustified demand, our people will have nowhere to go," Arjun Chhetri, the executive member of RHAC's Jongkhalu constituency, said.

Lampi, a hill village unlike most others in the disputed sectors, is in Jongkhalu. "The give-and-take formula is dangerous. All the Gurkhas will be driven away within 24 hours if Lampi happens to be officially under Meghalaya. As it is we live constantly under stress. Our houses are often burnt down, livestock taken away," Biju Chhetri, a Lampi resident, said.

The past came to haunt the Gurkhas when Raj Baruah, the Boko circle officer, held a meeting at the Jongkhalu panchayat office on March 23 for taking the Jal Jeevan Mission programme forward. "We have insisted on getting water supplied from Assam through our main source of water, the Kupri Nalo, flows down from Meghalaya. But the officials want to revive a water conservation project on this stream that never took off in 1973," Lampi's Hemraj Sharma said.

"We are afraid that the stream will be poisoned if it becomes the source of our piped water," he added, recalling an incident in 1979 when miscreants had

sprinkled toxic substances in the stream and the village wells, killing 40 of his cows. The local unit of the Khasi Students' Union and members of traditional Khasi village said these are all claims aimed at maligning their community. In reality, they said, outsiders have occupied their ancestral lands.

Way forward

Regional political parties in Assam and Meghalaya have demanded revisiting the border deal in view of the protests it has triggered. They have been egging the aggrieved villagers to keep up the tempo of protest before the boundary deal is approved by Parliament and ratified by the Assemblies of both the States. The Asom Satra Mahasabha, the umbrella organisation of Vaishnav monasteries, said it was wary of two monasteries and nine nanghars or prayer halls going to Meghalaya if the boundary deal is sealed. "We will appeal to the people and local organisations to agitate to save our places of worship. We will also approach the court for staying the deal," the Mahasabha's general secretary, Kukum Kumar Mahanta, said.

The two monasteries — Matেশor and Netwajapa — are two centuries old and are in the Boklapara sector under the West Gauhati Assam constituency. Ramendra Narayan Kalita of the Asom Gana Parishad, who has been representing the border constituency since 1985, attributed the possible ceding of the areas to forest rules that have hindered the development of the villages along the Assam-Meghalaya boundary, prompting some fringe dwellers to side with Meghalaya.

"The Assam government can neither provide land deed in forest areas nor develop villages in forest areas due to the green laws unlike in Meghalaya, where forest rules are different. They can provide settlement, power connection and water supply to forest dwellers," he said.

Officials in the border districts of Assam admitted that Meghalaya has had administrative control in stretches that are easier to monitor from the other side. "We have had zero or partial control in several border areas. Take the case of Athiabari beyond Hahim. The place has been completely under the control of the Meghalaya police although constitutionally in Assam. It is not wise to keep fighting for territory and shedding blood," Karthik N. said.

The Chief Ministers of both States have been asking those opposed to the give-and-take policy to look at the bigger picture. "History matters and so does a future that eliminates the chances of more conflicts between two sister States. We have managed to find a win-win solution for all," the Meghalaya Chief Minister said. "Some people are feeling aggrieved but not solving the problem may lead to more such issues with reports of people from Meghalaya settling down in new areas. At the end of the day, this is not the India-China or the India-Pakistan border. It is a boundary involving our own people in our own country," Karthik N. said.

Closing the gaps in criminal justice

States could do better in incorporating the Supreme Court's crucial guidelines to overcome certain deficiencies



R.K. VIJ

Last year, the Supreme Court of India, while hearing a criminal appeal, took *suo motu* cognisance of certain deficiencies and inadequacies which occur during the course of criminal trials. As a result, it issued the necessary directions in *In Re: To issue certain Guidelines regarding Inadequacies and Deficiencies in Criminal Trials vs The State of Andhra Pradesh* (2021). These directions *inter alia* included presentation of site plan, inquest report and body sketches (in a post-mortem report) in a uniform manner, photographs and videographs of a post-mortem in certain cases, and separation of prosecution from the investigation. The High Courts and the State governments were, accordingly, asked to notify the draft "Rules of Criminal Practice, 2021" which all the States and the High Courts had agreed upon with minor variations, and make consequential amendments in their police and other manuals. The Guwahati High Court issued the essential notification and incorporated the necessary changes in January 2022.

Preparing a site sketch

The Criminal Procedure Code (CrPC) mandates that the officer-in-charge of a police station shall, on receiving information about the commission of a cognisable offence, proceed to the spot (of the crime) in person to investigate the facts and circumstances of the case. The general practice (on reaching the spot) is to prepare a site sketch that shows details of the crime scene and collect evidence which could connect the presence of the criminal. The Court has pre-

viously held that a site plan drawn on scale is admissible if the witnesses corroborate these statements of the draftsman that they showed him the places. The contents of the site map would not become admissible as evidence merely by its exhibition by the investigating officer.

The guidelines issued now say that the site sketch prepared by the investigating officer shall be followed by a scaled site plan prepared by a police draftsman, if available, or another authorised or nominated draftsman by the State government. Therefore, looking at the importance of a site plan (which captures the details of a crime scene and its surroundings) particularly in a case of suspicious death, the police need to develop its own cadre of draftsmen.

The guidelines mandate that every medico-legal certificate and post-mortem report shall contain a printed format of the human body (with both a frontal and rear view) on its reverse and injuries, if any, shall be indicated on such a sketch.

Testing veracity

The purpose of preparing an inquest report is to 'ascertain whether a person has died under suspicious circumstances or died an unnatural death and if so, what the (nature of) injuries are and the apparent cause of death'. However, if the evidence and materials collected during an inquest 'make it a *prima facie* case of any offence', a criminal case is registered and regular investigation taken up even without any formal complaint from anyone. It is settled law that the contents of the inquest report cannot be treated as evidence, but they can be looked into to test the veracity of the witnesses of the inquest. However, if the investigating officer himself observes and records evidence, it is treated as 'direct or primary evidence in the case and the best in the eyes of the law'.



GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO

Similarly, the post-mortem report is a 'document which by itself is not a piece of substantive evidence. It is the statement of the doctor in court, which has the credibility of substantive evidence'. The post-mortem report can only be used as 'an aid to refresh the memory of the doctor while giving evidence'. The significance of the 'evidence of the doctor lies *vis-à-vis* the injuries appearing on the body of the deceased person and the likely use of a weapon'.

For better scrutiny

The National Human Rights Commission, India (NHRC) has already laid down similar guidelines for cases of deaths in police custody. The importance of body sketches (in a uniform format) in an inquest report and a post-mortem report cannot be overemphasised. Their standardisation will not only help the court to better appreciate these reports and scrutinise the evidence, but will also help the investigating officers and doctors to refresh their memory with more clarity.

The Supreme Court has directed that 'in case of death of a person in police action or death in police custody, the magistrate or the IO [investigating officer] shall inform the hospital to arrange for photography and videography for conducting post-mortem examination of the deceased'. Similar guidelines, first issued by the

NHRC back in 1995 – and then revised from time to time – are being meticulously implemented by the enforcement agencies. The Supreme Court in *People's Union for Civil Liberties vs State of Maharashtra* (2014) issued similar guidelines for deaths in exchange of fire with the police.

The implementation of the scheme of having trained photographers at police stations (in accordance with Supreme Court's ruling of 2018 in *Shafiqi Mohammad vs the State of Himachal Pradesh*) is also under way in a phased manner so that scenes of heinous offences are videographed and photographed using digital cameras as a "desirable and acceptable practice", and their hash values taken to make the evidence tamper-proof.

The draft Code now provides that the investigating officer shall seize such photographs and videographs, preserve the original (separate memory card) and obtain certificate under Section 65B (regarding admissibility of electronic records) of the Indian Evidence Act, 1872.

The purpose of these guidelines is to ensure that there is uniformity of procedure in dealing with cases of death in police action or police custody without any tampering of evidence. Therefore, it will be appropriate for the police forces across the States to speed up implementation of the above scheme and have their own cadre of photographers so that expertise is maintained at the police station level.

On investigation

The Supreme Court has further directed that 'the state governments shall appoint advocates, other than public prosecutors, to advise the investigating officer during investigation'. Currently, in many States, a public prosecutor advises the investigating officer to check and make up for any deficiency in investigation before submitting

the charge sheet in the court.

Previously, there have been conflicting judgments by the Supreme Court on this issue. The Court in *R. Sarala vs T.S. Velu* (2000) held that as per the scheme of the CrPC, the investigation ends with the formation of an opinion by the police as to whether, on the material collected, a case is made out to place the accused for trial. The formation of the said opinion by the police is the final step of investigation, and this final step is to be taken by the police and by no other authority. The public prosecutor is an officer of the court and his role essentially is inside the court.

More recently, in *State of Gujarat vs Kishanbhai* (2014), the Court, while taking note of the many lapses in investigation, directed that 'on completion of the investigation in a criminal case, the prosecuting agency should apply its independent mind, and require all shortcomings to be rectified, if necessary, by requiring further investigation'.

Since, investigation and prosecution are two different facets in the administration of criminal justice, the three judge Bench of the Supreme Court has now rightly asked the States to separate the two wings. Chhattisgarh has sanctioned a cadre of law officers (who shall function independently of the public prosecutors and will have no role in the court) to assist the investigating officers in educating and improving investigation work. Other States should also follow suit. Similarly, while the creation of a cadre of draftsmen and photographers may take time, executive orders may be issued without further delay, followed by training of investigating officers and medical doctors, in order to implement the Supreme Court's directives.

R.K. Vij is a former Special DGP of Chhattisgarh. The views expressed are personal

All adults to get precaution jab

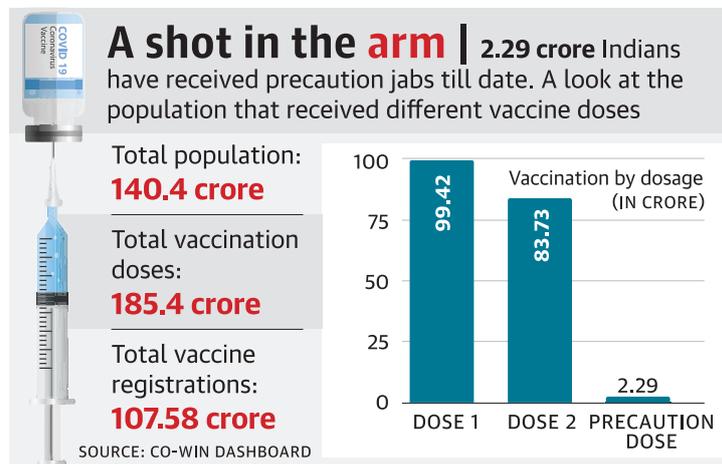
It will be available at private centres from tomorrow; nine-month gap mandatory

BINDU SHAJAN PERAPPADAN
NEW DELHI

The Union Health Ministry on Friday announced that the precautionary or third dose of COVID-19 vaccine would be made available to the 18+ population at private vaccination centres. It would be the same as the previous doses.

The administration of this dose would begin on April 10. All those who have completed nine months after the second dose would be eligible, it stated. Union Health Minister Mansukh Mandavija termed the extension of the vaccination drive an “extra layer of safety”.

The decision comes even as India logged 1,109 new coronavirus infections taking



the total tally of COVID-19 cases to 4,30,33,067, while the active cases dipped to 11,492, says the Health Ministry data on Friday.

Cases had dipped to triple digits but there's been an uptick in some States. Kerala has reported 2,321 cases in

the last week, accounting for nearly 30% of the country's new cases along with an increase in positivity (number of confirmed positives relative to tests) from 13.45% to 15.53%. This has prompted the Health Ministry to write to the State's Health Secre-

tary on Friday to monitor clusters of new cases, increase testing and take required measures in areas with high positivity and step up genome sequencing of samples.

CONTINUED ON ► PAGE 8

Centre sets up task force to promote animation, gaming

Move follows announcement made by Finance Minister

DEVESH K. PANDEY
NEW DELHI

The Information and Broadcasting Ministry has constituted an Animation, Visual Effects, Gaming and Comics (AVGC) promotion task force.

Headed by the I&B Secretary, the task force will submit its first action plan within 90 days. It has representation from the industry, academia and State governments.

Earlier, Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman, in her Budget speech, had announced the creation of AVGC promotion task force.

The body will frame a national AVGC policy; recommend national curriculum framework for graduation, post-graduation and doctoral courses in AVGC-related sectors; and facilitate skilling initiatives in collabora-

tion with academic institutions, vocational training centres and industry. It will boost employment opportunities and help in the promotion and market development activities to extend global reach. of the Indian industry; enhance exports and recommend incentives to attract foreign direct investment in the sector.

The I&B Ministry said the AVGC sector in the country had the potential to become the torch bearer of “Create in India” and “Brand India”. “India has the potential to capture 5% of the global market share by 2025, with an annual growth of around 25-30% and creating over 1,60,000 new jobs annually,” it said.

The task force comprises Secretaries of the Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship, Department

of Higher Education, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology, and the Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade.

The industry representatives are Biren Ghosh of Technicolor India, Ashish Kulkarni of Punaryug Artvision, Jesh Krishna Murthy of Anibrain, Keitan Yadav of Redchillies VFX, Chaitanya Chinchlikar of Whistling Woods International, Kishore Kichili of Zynga India, and Neeraj Roy of Hungama Digital Media Entertainment.

It also includes representation from Karnataka, Maharashtra and Telangana, heads of education bodies such as the All India Council of Technical Education, National Council of Educational Research and Training, and industry bodies.

Public sector undertakings can cede inactive coal mines: CCEA

Panel allows a one-time window without penalty

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI

The Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs (CCEA) on Thursday approved the Coal Ministry's proposal to give Central and State public sector undertakings (PSU) a one-time window to surrender non-operational coal mines without penalty, the government said on Friday. The CCEA, chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, had taken the decision at Thursday evening's meeting.

The government said in a statement that the PSUs would be allowed to surrender non-operational mines without giving any reason.

"This may release several coal mines which the present government PSU allottees are not in a position to develop or are disinterested and could be auctioned as per the present auction policy. Three months' time will be granted to the allottee government companies to surrender the coal mines from

the date of publication of the approved surrender policy," the government statement read.

The government said that after the Supreme Court order on cancellation of coal blocks in 2014, many of those blocks had been allotted to PSUs.

It added that the CCEA's decision would lead to the coal blocks being offered under the recently launched commercial coal mines auction policy.

RBI adds a standing deposit facility to 'normalise' liquidity

SDF rate to serve as the floor to LAF corridor, says Das

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
MUMBAI

The Reserve Bank on Friday took steps towards normalisation of liquidity management to pre-pandemic levels, with the introduction of the standing deposit facility (SDF) as the basic tool to absorb excess liquidity, and narrowing the liquidity adjustment facility (LAF) corridor to 0.50% from 0.90%.

Governor Shaktikanta Das said the SDF would be at 3.75%, i.e., 0.25% below the repo rate and 0.5% lower than the marginal standing facility (MSF) which helps the banks with funds when required. The SDF has its origins in a 2018 amend-



Shaktikanta Das

ment to the RBI Act and is an additional tool for absorbing liquidity without collateral.

By removing the binding collateral constraint on the RBI, the SDF strengthens the operating framework of monetary policy, he said, adding that it is also a financial stability tool. "The SDF will

replace the fixed rate reverse repo as the floor of the LAF corridor," he added.

"The LAF corridor will be symmetric around the policy repo rate with the MSF rate as the ceiling and the SDF rate as the floor with immediate effect," Mr. Das said, announcing the first policy review of FY23.

"At both ends of the LAF corridor, there will be standing facilities - one to absorb and the other to inject liquidity. Accordingly, access to SDF and MSF will be at the discretion of banks, unlike repo/reverse repo, OMO and CRR which are available at the discretion of the Reserve Bank," he said.

RBI holds benchmark interest rates

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

MUMBAI

The Reserve Bank on Friday held benchmark interest rates and retained its 'accommodative' stance, even as it emphasised it was pivoting to focus on 'withdrawal of accommodation to ensure that inflation remains within the target'.

The RBI raised its forecast for inflation in FY23 to 5.7% from its February projection of 4.5%.

The central bank also lowered its growth estimate for the current fiscal to 7.2% from the 7.8% forecast earlier.

FULL REPORT ▶ PAGE 11

RBI to 'focus' on inflation, lifts estimates

Central bank holds interest rates, lowers GDP growth forecast as war clouds India's economic outlook

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT
MUMBAI

The Reserve Bank of India's Monetary Policy Committee on Friday raised its estimate for inflation in FY23 to 5.7%, from the 4.5% forecast in February before Russia invaded Ukraine, and stressed that it would now turn its focus to the "withdrawal of accommodation to ensure that inflation remains within the target going forward".

"In the sequence of priority we have now put inflation before growth," RBI governor Shaktikanta Das said at a press conference after announcing the MPC's decision to hold interest rates at its first policy review of the new fiscal year. "For the last three years growth was ahead of inflation in sequence. This time we have reversed it be-



On guard: The stance continues to be accommodative but RBI is focussing on withdrawal of accommodation, says Das. ■PTI

cause we thought the time is appropriate," he added.

The RBI has also started withdrawing some of the accommodation it had provided in the last two years, though gradually.

"The stance continues to

be accommodative but we are now focussing on withdrawal of accommodation. So, gradually we are moving away from an 'accommodative' stance which has been there for more than two years," Mr. Das stressed.

Elaborating on the change in tack, RBI Deputy Governor Michael Debabrata Patra said, "We have taken the policy repo rate to an all-time low which is 4%. If you adjust it with the targeted inflation then the real rate is zero. That was ultra accommodation. The situation is changing and now we want to withdraw the ultra accommodation but there is scope to remain accommodative."

'War-induced factors'

Mr. Das said the MPC had decided to revise the inflation projections for FY23 upwards with the estimate for Q1 at 6.3%; Q2 at 5.8%; Q3 at 5.4%; and Q4 at 5.1% due to "war-induced factors".

He pointed to the sharp increase in crude oil, edible

oil and wheat prices, and the cost of feed – which has pushed prices of poultry, egg and dairy products – as reason for the higher estimates.

Earlier, the MPC voted unanimously to keep the policy repo rate unchanged at 4%.

Mr. Das said escalating geopolitical tensions had cast a shadow on India's economic outlook. As a result, real GDP growth for FY23 has been projected at 7.2%, compared with 7.8% estimated earlier.

Asked about the likely impact of any economic fallout due to India's ongoing trade with Russia, which is facing sanctions from western nations, Mr. Das said, "The government is seized of the issue... as far as RBI is concerned, we will not do anything that goes against the sanctions."

Tax receipts surge 34% to exceed ₹27 lakh cr.

Tax-to-GDP ratio rises to 11.7%

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI

India's gross tax revenues surged 34% in 2021-22 to exceed ₹27 lakh crore, lifting the tax-to-GDP ratio to an at least 23-year high of 11.7%, from 10.3% in the previous year, Revenue Secretary Tarun Bajaj said on Friday.

Tax collections were ₹5 lakh crore more than the Budget estimates, and surpassed the revised estimates by ₹1.87 lakh crore, with direct taxes surging 49% and indirect taxes rising by 20%.

"When we started the year, the Budgeted estimate was ₹22.17 lakh crore, 17% higher than the previous year," Mr. Bajaj said. "We are now close to ₹27.07 lakh crore, an increase of almost ₹5 lakh crore. These figures are tentative at the moment and are likely to change, and I hope that is on the upside," he added.

Corporation tax collections rose by 56.1% and personal income tax grew about 43%, taking overall direct tax growth to 49%, which Mr. Bajaj said was the 'highest in a long time'.

"The Customs duty collections went up by 48%, as reflected in our robust export-import data, while excise duty collections have actually contracted 0.2% and the Central GST, which was a challenge for us, has grown by almost 30%," the Revenue Secretary said.

Direct taxes boost

"Commentators have said India's tax-to-GDP ratio is very low. It was 10.3% in 2020-21 and has gone up to 11.7%, the highest since at least 1999. Direct taxes are 6.1% of GDP, and indirect taxes are 5.6%. So the criticism we faced last year, that our indirect taxes are higher



Tarun Bajaj

than direct taxes, has also been" addressed, he emphasised.

The Finance Ministry, in a statement, said the tax-GDP ratio was the 'highest' and the tax buoyancy ratio was 'very healthy' at 1.9. The tax buoyancy ratio, which measures growth in taxes relative to GDP growth, was 2.8 for direct taxes and 1.1 for indirect taxes in 2021-22. The ratio of direct to indirect taxes recovered from 0.9 in 2020-21 to 1.1 in 2021-22.

"This revenue growth has been propelled by rapid economic recovery after successive waves of COVID, supported by one of the largest immunisation programmes of the world run by the Government," the finance ministry said, adding that the revenues signalled a 'robust recovery' and were supplemented by better compliance efforts.

ICRA chief economist Aditi Nayar said a large portion of the upside in revenues was shared with the States. "The actual tax devolution to the State governments in 2021-22 stood at ₹8.8 lakh crore, a considerable ₹1.4 lakh crore higher than the revised estimates (RE). After removing payments related to past arrears, the aggregate devolution to States has overshot the RE by about ₹95,000 crore," she noted.

Navy crew completes training on MH-60R helicopters

The first batch of three choppers is expected to arrive in India by June, says a defence official

DINAKAR PERI
NEW DELHI

The first batch of Indian Navy aircrew successfully completed its training on the MH-60R Multi-Role Helicopters (MRH) at the U.S. Naval Air Station, North Island in San Diego last week.

“The 10-month course included conversion training and other advanced qualifications on MH-60R helicopter. The crew flew extensively from Helicopter Maritime Strike Squadron - 41 (HSM 41) and achieved day and night deck landing qualification onboard a U.S. Navy Destroyer,” the Navy said in a statement.

The crew will be responsible for inducting the versatile ‘Romeo’ into the Indian Navy, it stated.

The first batch of three helicopters are expected to arrive in India by June, a de-



Touching skies: Indian Navy's first batch of MH-60R air crew after completing their training in San Diego. ■PTI

fence official said.

This will be the first major induction of helicopters by the Navy in decades for deployment on ships.

The MH-60R helicopters will provide the Navy enhanced offensive role includ-

ing anti-submarine warfare, anti-ship strike, specialised maritime operations as well as search and rescue operations, the Navy added.

Three helicopters were handed over to the Indian Navy last July in the U.S. and

are being used for training Indian pilots at Pensacola, Florida and San Diego.

\$2.2 billion deal

India had signed a \$2.2 billion deal for MH-60R helicopters built by Lockheed Martin during the visit of then U.S. President Donald Trump in February 2020. Deliveries are expected to be completed by 2025.

The Navy is facing an acute shortage of helicopters on its frontline warships but procurement of new ones has been repeatedly delayed.

The MH-60Rs are a replacement of the Sea King 42/42A helicopters already decommissioned in the 1990s, and are envisaged to operate from the frontline ships and aircraft carriers providing them the critical attributes of flexibility of op-

eration, enhanced surveillance and attacking capability.

The third positive indigenisation list of 101 equipment and platforms released by the Defence Ministry on Thursday includes the long pending deal for Naval Utility Helicopters (NUH) which was earlier being processed through the Strategic Partnership route of procurement procedure.

The Navy is now in talks with the Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL) to acquire a variant of its Advanced Light Helicopter (ALH).

Another major requirement for 123 multi-role helicopters is also pending. To address the shortfall in the interim, last April, the Navy issued a Request for Information (RFI) for lease of 24 light helicopters.

SC upholds new restrictions on receiving foreign funds

‘Unbridled inflow may destabilise sovereignty of the nation’

KRISHNADAS RAJAGOPAL
NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court on Friday upheld amendments introducing restrictions in the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act (FCRA) while holding that no one has a fundamental or absolute right to receive foreign contributions.

In a judgment that may hit non-governmental organisations (NGOs) working at the grass-root level with no direct link to foreign donors, the court reasoned that unbridled inflow of foreign funds may destabilise the sovereignty of the nation.

The restrictions involve a bar on using operational FCRA accounts to get foreign contributions and mandatory production of the Aadhaar card for registration under the FCRA. They require NGOs and recipients to open a new FCRA account at a



The top court suggested that NGOs could look within the country for donors.

specified branch of the State Bank of India in New Delhi as a “one-point entry” for foreign donations.

The petitioners, including individuals and NGOs engaged in cultural, educational, religious activities, argued that the amendments suffered from the “vice of ambiguity, over-breadth or over-governance” and violated their fundamental rights. They said the new regime amounts to a blanket ban on the capacity of intermediary organisations in India to distribute foreign donations to

smaller and less visible NGOs. But the court countered that the amendments only provide a strict regulatory framework to moderate the inflow of foreign funds.

‘No absolute right’

“No one can be heard to claim a vested right to accept foreign donations, much less an absolute right,” a three-judge Bench led by Justice A.M. Khanwilkar, who authored the verdict, said.

Free and uncontrolled inflow of foreign funds has the potential to impact the socio-economic structure and polity of the country. “Philosophically, foreign contribution (donation) is akin to gratifying intoxicant replete with medicinal properties and may work like a nectar,” the ruling said.

CONTINUED ON ▶ PAGE 8

RELATED REPORTS ▶ PAGE 9

SC upholds new curbs on getting foreign funds

“However, it serves as a medicine so long as it is consumed (utilised) moderately and discreetly, for serving the larger cause of humanity. Otherwise, this artifice has the capability of inflicting pain, suffering and turmoil as being caused by the toxic substance (potent tool) – across the nation,” Justice Khanwilkar wrote in a 132-page judgment. The court said charity could be found at home. NGOs could look within the country for donors. “The presence/inflow of foreign contribution in the country ought to be at the minimum level, if not completely eschewed. The influence may manifest in different ways, including in destabilising the social order within the country,” it noted.

Unregulated inflow of foreign donations would only indicate that the government was incapable of looking after its own affairs and needs of its citizens, Justice Khanwilkar observed.

“The amendments do not prohibit inflow of foreign contributions, but are a regulatory measure to permit acceptance by registered persons or persons having prior permission to do so with condition that they must themselves utilise the entire contribution,” Justice Khanwilkar observed.

However, the court read down one of the provisions – Section 12 (A) – of the 2020 Amendment Act, which mandated the production of Aadhaar card for registration.

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