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FOREWORD

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

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

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

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India set to beat China in population: UN report

‘This will challenge economic growth’

REUTERS
NEW DELHI

India is set to surpass China as the world’s most populous country in 2023, with each counting more than 1.4 billion residents this year, a United Nations report said on Monday, warning that high fertility would challenge economic growth.

The world’s population, estimated to reach 8 billion by November 15 this year, could grow to 8.5 billion in 2030, and 10.4 billion in 2100, as the pace of mortality slows, said the report released on World Population Day.

India’s population was 1.21 billion in 2011, according to the domestic census, which is conducted once a decade. The government had deferred the 2021 census due to the pandemic.

The world’s population was growing at its slowest pace since 1950, having fallen below 1% in 2020, UN estimates showed.

In 2021, the average fertility of the world’s population stood at 2.3 births per woman over a lifetime, having fallen from about 5 births in 1950.

“This is an occasion to celebrate our diversity, recognise our common humanity, and marvel at advancements in health that have extended lifespans and dramatically reduced maternal and child mortality rates,” UN Secretary-General António Guterres said in a statement. Still, a growing population was a reminder of a shared responsibility of care for the planet and to “reflect on where we still fall short of our commitments to one another,” he said.

The UN said more than half of the projected increase in the global population up to 2050 will be concentrated in eight countries – Congo, Egypt, Ethiopia, India, Nigeria, Pakistan, the Philippines and the United Republic of Tanzania.

India's imports of Russian oil said to surge to record

Russia accounts for 20% of shipments

REUTERS
NEW DELHI

India's oil imports from Russia surged to a record of about 9,50,000 barrels per day (bpd) in June, accounting for almost a fifth of overall imports by the world's third-largest oil consumer, data provided by trade sources showed.

Indian refiners have been snapping up Russian oil sold at hefty discounts to Brent and West Asia staples after some Western companies and countries shunned purchases from Moscow following its invasion of Ukraine on February 24.

West Asia share drops

India shipped in about 4.8 million bpd of oil in June, down 3.8% from May but



about 23% higher than a year earlier, the data showed. Last year, India's oil imports were low as fuel demand was hit by a second deadly coronavirus wave.

Oil imports from Russia rose 15.5% in June from May, while those from Iraq and Saudi Arabia dropped by 10.5% and 13.5%, respectively, dragging the share of West Asia to 56.5% from 59.3%, the data showed.

EXPLAINER

Twitter's petition on Section 69A of the IT Act

What is main point of contestation between the microblogging platform and the Central government?

THE GIST

■ On July 5, Twitter moved the Karnataka High Court seeking to set aside multiple blocking orders of the Central government as well as to alter their directions to identify specific violative content than imposing a blanket ban on individual accounts.

■ Section 69A of the IT Act empowers the government to restrict access to any content in the interest of sovereignty and integrity of the country. Twitter holds that the government has allegedly not shown why the restrictions were necessary in the interest of public order or for any other reason.

■ The disparity in assessment of what constitutes 'free expression' and harm to public order among the two entities is the premise of the entire contestation.

SAPTAPARNO GHOSH

The story so far: On July 5, microblogging platform Twitter moved the Karnataka High Court seeking to set aside multiple blocking orders of the Central government as well as to alter their directions to identify specific violative content than imposing a blanket ban on individual accounts. According to Twitter, the blocking orders were "procedurally and substantially" non-compliant with Section 69A of the Information Technology Act (IT Act).

What has happened so far?

The U.S.-headquartered tech company had been speaking to the Ministry of Electronics & Information Technology since May about a reconsideration of some of the blocking orders. However, in June the Ministry gave it a last opportunity to comply with the orders, setting out serious consequence for non-compliance. *The Hindu* learnt from a source privy to the development that it was owing to the seriousness of these warnings that Twitter filed the current writ petition challenging several of the blocking orders. Responding to the development, Minister of State for Information and Technology Rajeev Chandrasekhar stated that while all foreign intermediaries have the right to judicial review, they also have the unambiguous obligation to comply with Indian laws.

What is the legality behind blocking content?

Section 69A of the IT Act empowers the government to restrict access to any content in the interest of sovereignty and integrity of the country, security of the state, friendly relations with foreign states or for public order. All directions to restrict information or content in circulation must be recorded in writing. Social media intermediaries failing to comply with the regulations are liable to be monetarily penalised along with an imprisonment term which may extend up to seven years. The procedures for executing the provisions of the act are enlisted in the

Information Technology (Procedure and Safeguards for Blocking for Access of Information by Public) Rules, 2009. It entails that a government-designated officer along with an examination committee assess the content in question within 48 hours of receiving the takedown request. It must enable an opportunity to the author or originator of the content to provide clarifications. The recommendations are then sent to the Secretary of the Dept of Information Technology for approval to forward a request to the social media intermediary for restricting access.

Emergency provisions stipulate that the clarification be sought after the content has been blocked for specified reasons, but within 48 hours. They can be revoked after due examination. Internet advocacy groups have been particularly critical of Rule 16 that suggests strict confidentiality be maintained on all requests and actions taken thereof – often attributed to be the cause for lack of transparency. The mentioned legislations are to be read under the purview of Article 19 of the Indian Constitution guaranteeing freedom of speech and expression. However, Clause 2 of the article permits the state to impose 'reasonable restrictions' for the same reasons as those for Section 69A.

What is Twitter's claim?

The microblogging platform states that it respects user expression while also taking into consideration applicable local laws. The disparity in assessment of what constitutes 'free expression' and harm to public order among the two entities is the premise of the entire contestation. Twitter restricts access to an allegedly violative content only based on a "valid and properly scoped request" from an authorised entity. However, the curtailment is limited to the jurisdiction that has issued the legal demand. Its policies stipulate that the author of the content must be informed if such a request is received or acted upon.

As per its transparency report for January to June 2021, India accounted for 11% of the

overall legal requests received globally by the micro-blogging platform for moderating access to certain content. Moreover, during the period, internationally it received 43,387 legal demands to remove content specifying 1,96,878 accounts – the greatest observed spike since it started writing the transparency reports in 2012. It attributed the spike in accounts withheld to blocking orders issued under the IT Act. Its petition points to two structural problems, firstly, the absence of a case-specific rationale for blocking content and accounts, and secondly, not according the originators of the content the mandatory hearing.

What procedural issues has Twitter described?

Twitter holds that the government has been merely reproducing the words of Section 69A as reasons for blocking URLs and accounts. The government has allegedly not shown why the restrictions were necessary in the interest of public order or for any other reason. The Supreme Court's ruling in *The Superintendent, Central Prison, Fatehgarh vs Ram Manohar Lohia* (1960) had held restrictions made in public interest must possess reasonable connection to the objective being achieved. They need to be set aside should the co-relation be "far-fetched, hypothetical or too remote", in other words, bearing no proximity to public order.

The concerns are further aggravated when the directions are aimed at blocking individual accounts (in other words, temporary or permanent revocation of an individual's presence on the platform) and not the specific content. Therefore, the contestation now extends to interrogating if the scope of the legislation is restricted to already-existing content or content that could be potentially generated in the future (by the censored individual). One of the prime reasons why the Supreme Court had upheld the constitutionality of Section 69A in *Shreya Singhal vs Union of India* (2012) was its adherence to accord a hearing to the



author of the content as well as the intermediary. It is guaranteed under Rule 8 of the procedural norms but Twitter stated that the government has neither provided any notice nor any hearing.

What kind of content has fallen under the purview of Section 69A?

Between February 2, 2021 and February 28 this year, Twitter received directions to block 1,474 accounts and 175 tweets in India. Of these, it is challenging 39 URLs with its latest petition. Several of these URLs had journalistic or political content. Previous judgments of the Supreme Court have suggested the content must be viewed from the standards of a "strong-minded, firm and courageous" person. The assessment must not be from the standpoint of a "weak" and "vacillating" individual who may sense danger in every hostile point of view. It is in this light that Twitter has argued the blocked content does not meet the "threshold" for restricting access. Twitter has also argued that the vast majority of people who consume the content under scrutiny are necessarily literate and can reasonably perceive the full context of the content.

Bring a new Act on bail, SC asks Union govt.

‘No space for police state in democracy’

KRISHNADAS RAJAGOPAL
NEW DELHI

Asking the Centre to bring a new Act exclusively to simplify and streamline bail, the Supreme Court on Monday observed that investigating agencies are showing a mindset which leans more towards the draconian power of arrest rather than the protection of individual liberty. A Bench of Justices S.K. Kaul and M.M. Sundresh said jails were overflowing while conviction rates remained an abysmal low. “Jails in India are flooded with undertrial prisoners. The statistics placed before us would indicate that more than two-thirds of the inmates of the prisons constitute undertrial prisoners. Of this category of prisoners, majority may not even be required to be arrested...” Justice Sundresh observed.

Many of these undertrial prisoners are the illiterate, poor and even women.

Their social circumstances compel them to “inherit a culture of offence”. Added to this is the fact that investigating agencies fail to use the power of arrest sparingly. “In a democracy, there can never be an impression that it is a police state,” the court said.

In a series of directions, the court asked the Centre to consider bringing a separate and comprehensive law to deal with bails, especially to make it a simple procedure. “The Government of India may consider the introduction of a separate enactment in the nature of a Bail Act so as to streamline the grant of bails,” the Bench said.

The court referred to the Bail Act of the United Kingdom which had come into existence as an antidote to the humanitarian of clogged prisons. The court also asked the government to have a relook at the Code of Criminal Procedure.

PM unveils National Emblem atop new Parliament building

The sculpture made of bronze weighs 9,500 kg and is 4.34 metres wide

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Monday unveiled a 6.5-metre-tall National Emblem on the roof of the under-construction Parliament building here.

The emblem, which is made of bronze, weighs 9,500 kg. A steel structure of 6,500 kg was made to support the weight of the emblem, the Prime Minister's Office said in a statement.

"The concept sketch and process of casting of the National Emblem on the roof of New Parliament Building has gone through eight different stages of preparation from clay modeling/computer graphic to bronze casting and polishing," it added.

After the ceremony, Mr. Modi interacted with the workers building the new Parliament, which is scheduled to be completed by



Imposing figure: A view of the National Emblem on top of the new Parliament building in New Delhi on Monday. ■ R.V. MOORTHY

October. In a tweet, Mr. Modi said: "I had a wonderful interaction with the *Shramjeevis* who have been involved in the making of the Parliament. We are proud of their efforts and will always remember their contribution to our nation".

The emblem was created by Sunil Deore from Aurangabad and Laxman Vyas from Jaipur and the fabrication was carried out in Au-

rangabad, Jaipur and Delhi, the government's consultant for the project, HCP Design, Planning and Management Ltd., told *The Hindu* last week. It had taken nine months to complete the 4.34-metre-wide sculpture, HCP said.

'Norms violated'

Reacting to the photos of the ceremony released by the government, AIMIM presi-

dent and Hyderabad MP Asaduddin Owaisi said in a tweet: "Constitution separates powers of Parliament, govt & judiciary. As head of govt, @PMOIndia shouldn't have unveiled the National Emblem atop new Parliament building. Speaker of Lok Sabha represents LS which isn't subordinate to govt. @PMOIndia has violated all constitutional norms".

BJP chief spokesperson and Rajya Sabha member Anil Baluni said the allegations by the Opposition were politically motivated. "Opposition parties questioning the unveiling ceremony should understand the administrative process. Right from its design to funds and constructions supervision, entire work is being done by the urban development department. Even the foundation laying was done by the Prime Minister," he said.

The new guidelines to prevent unfair trade practices

Why has the Central Consumer Protection Authority issued new guidelines? How do they protect consumer interests?

G.S. BAJPAI
MEHAK BAJPAI
SANGEETA TAK

The story so far: On July 4, the Central Consumer Protection Authority (CCPA) announced five guidelines to prevent unfair trade practices and to protect consumer interests regarding the levy of service charges in hotels and restaurants. The guidelines are in addition to the Centre's 2017 guidelines which prohibit the levy of service charges on consumers by hotels and restaurants, and terms the charging for anything other than "the prices displayed on the menu card along with the applicable taxes" without "express consent" of the customer as "unfair trade practices".

What are the powers of the CCPA?

The CCPA has been established to regulate matters related to the violation of the rights of consumers. Under the Consumer Protection Act (CPA), 2019, the authority was established to regulate violations of consumer rights, unfair trade practices, and false or misleading advertisements that are prejudicial to the interest of the public.

The CCPA has authority under section 18 of the CPA, 2019 to protect, promote and most importantly enforce



the rights of the consumers and prevent violation of their rights under the Act. It also seeks to ensure that no person engages in unfair trade practices. It is also empowered to issue guidelines to enforce the rights of the consumers laid down in the Act. The authority has issued a letter to the Chief Secretaries of the States on service charge imposition, asking them to ensure compliance with the new guidelines on service charges. It has also been said that the State should instruct all the district magistrates to take appropriate action against violations of the guideline.

What is a service charge?

A service charge is a tip or a direct transaction between the customer and the restaurant staff, specifically the wait staff.

It is a fee collected to pay for services associated with the purchase of a primary product or service. It is collected by hospitality sectors and food and beverage industries as a fee for serving customers.

What do the new guidelines specify?

As per the new guidelines, hotels or restaurants are prohibited from levying extra charges automatically or by default in the bill or by any other name. Also, they are not allowed to force service charges, and must clearly inform the consumers that service charges are voluntary, optional, and at their discretion. Most importantly, hotels and restaurants are no longer allowed to restrict entry or services based on the collection of service charges. Furthermore, hotels cannot add service charges to their bills and charge GST on the total.

The point here is that any tip, donation, token, gratuity, etc., is no longer permitted to be charged and shall be considered as a separate transaction between the consumer and the staff of the hotel and restaurant. It is entirely up to the consumer to decide whether or not to tip. If a consumer enters a restaurant or orders something, the restaurant policy cannot

require them to tip. Therefore, consumers cannot be forced to pay a service charge without having the choice to decide whether they want to do so.

Why were new guidelines issued?

The CCPA has taken cognisance of various grievances that were registered on the National Consumer Helpline (NCH) related to the unnecessary levying of service charges in the bill. Usually, this charge is levied in addition to the total price of the food items mentioned on the menu and applicable taxes, often in the guise of some other fee. The said guidelines now consider charging a customer other than the price of food items displayed on the menu along with applicable taxes, as an 'unfair trade practice' under the CPA.

In general, the price of any product covers both the cost of the product and the cost of the service. This implies that the price of food and beverages served in the hotels and restaurants includes the price of the 'service'. There is no restriction on hotels or restaurants to set the prices at which they want to offer food or beverages to consumers. Placing an order involves consent to pay only the prices of food items displayed on the menu along with applicable taxes. Charging anything other than the

said amount would amount to 'unfair trade practice' under the Act.

What are the redressal mechanisms?

If any consumer finds that a hotel or restaurant is levying a service charge in violation of these guidelines, they may request the concerned hotel or restaurant to remove the service charge from the bill or may lodge a complaint on the NCH, which works as an alternate dispute redressal mechanism at the pre-litigation level by calling 1915 or through the NCH mobile app. A complaint may also be filed against unfair trade practice with the Consumer Commission electronically through edaakhil.nic.in for its speedy and effective redressal.

As a result of these new guidelines, consumers will no longer be subject to involuntary payments under the heading of 'service tax'. However, it will be interesting to observe the effective compliance of these guidelines by restaurants since levying a service charge has become an 'accepted trade practice' in India.

G.S. Bajpai is Vice-Chancellor, Rajiv Gandhi National University of Law, Punjab where Sangeeta Tak is Assistant Professor. Mehak is a research scholar at National Law University, Delhi

THE GIST

■ On July 4, the Central Consumer Protection Authority (CCPA) announced five key guidelines to prevent unfair trade practices regarding the levy of service charges in hotels and restaurants.

■ Service charge is a fee collected to pay for services associated with the purchase of a primary product or service. It is collected by hospitality sectors and food and beverage industries as a fee for serving customers.

■ If any consumer finds that a hotel or restaurant is levying a service charge in violation of these guidelines, they may lodge a complaint on the NCH by calling 1915 or through the NCH mobile app. A complaint may also be filed through edaakhil.nic.in for effective redressal.

MPs' panel oppose Mediation Bill

The Bill proposes to establish Mediation Council and give powers to court

A. M. JIGEESH
NEW DELHI

The Parliamentary Standing Committee on Law and Justice, headed by BJP leader Sushil Kumar Modi, has recommended substantial changes to the Mediation Bill, meant for institutionalisation of mediation and establishment of the Mediation Council of India. The panel cautioned against making pre-litigation mediation compulsory, and warned the Centre against the provision to give higher courts the power to frame rules for mediation.

Sources in the panel confirmed after a meeting here on Monday that the members deliberated upon 20 key issues in the Bill, including the “mandatory and coercive nature of pre-litigation mediation.”

A member on the panel told *The Hindu* that making pre-litigation mediation mandatory may actually result in delaying of cases and may prove to be an addition-



Parliamentary Panel of Law and Justice Chairman Sushil Kumar Modi

al tool in the hands of truant litigants to delay the disposal of cases.

“We felt that not only pre-litigation mediation should be made optional but also be introduced in a phased manner instead of introducing it with immediate effect for all civil and commercial disputes. As a starting point, the challenges faced in implementing pre-litigation mediation under the Commercial Courts Act, 2015, should be studied before

mandating it across other case categories,” he said.

Clause 26 of the Bill provides that court annexed mediation including pre-litigation mediation in court annexed mediation centre shall be conducted in accordance with the practice, directions or rules by whatever name called by the Supreme Court or the High Court. But the panel objected to this.

“We noted with concern that provisions of Clause 26 is against the spirit of the Constitution. In the countries which follow common law system of jurisprudence, it is healthy tradition that in the absence of any specific statutes, the judgments or decisions taken by apex courts has the same bearing as that of a statute. But the moment any law is made on the subject, that becomes the guiding force. Here, the Bill proposes a clause giving the powers to court to make rules for ‘court annexed mediation’, which is unconsti-

tutional. Hence, we recommended that specific provisions should be made about court-annexed mediation in place of existing provisions of clause 26,” the member added.

The members questioned the non-applicability of the provisions of the Bill to disputes/matters of non-commercial nature involving the Government and its agencies. The member said the panel will insist that the Chairperson and full time Members to have ‘shown capacity’ and ‘knowledge and experience’ in ‘mediation.’ According to the provisions, people dealing with problems relating to ‘Alternative Dispute Resolution’ can become members and chairman of the council. “We have also decided to recommend that the appointment of the Chairperson and Members of the Mediation Council of India should be made by a selection Committee constituted by the Centre,” the member said.

The new 'normal' of political splits and shifts

Parties are more closely aligned with the state; the party bond exists only as long as it ensures a legislator's success



K.K. KAILASH

Political parties sometimes break up like marriages, and like remarriages, individual legislators switch parties. In both cases, the consequences can be severe. When individual legislators or a group decide to leave a party, form another party, or join another party, it could have repercussions in terms of government formation, maintenance, and termination. In Maharashtra, recently, and in Madhya Pradesh, a while ago, splits in the ruling party and a subsequent realignment of legislators inaugurated new governments.

Distinct waves

Splits and switches are commonplace in legislatures across the globe, and India has witnessed at least three distinct waves. The first wave occurred towards the latter half of the 1960s when challengers to the Congress attempted to displace it in the States. There was literally great shoving and pushing and a quick turnover of governments due to the free movement of legislators across political parties.

The next phase was inaugurated with an attempt to end the free movement and regulate the behaviour of legislators through the anti-defection law. While the law discouraged individual movement, it incentivised a collective movement of legislators since it laid down specific numbers to legitimise and validate party switches. When legislators switch in groups, the costs are shared, and the move also appears less opportunistic, which in many ways defeats the purpose of the legislation. Though the law has placed hurdles before splits and switches, the activity has continued. To make matters

worse, the implications of the law now influence the strategies of legislators and parties.

The third phase was inaugurated in 2014 with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) on the ascendance when already-dominant parties began to use splits and switches to weaken and destroy their competitors. Aided by friendly Governors, the BJP, like the Congress did earlier, benefited from a string of governmental changes, including Arunachal Pradesh (2016), Bihar (2017), Karnataka (2019), Madhya Pradesh (2020), and Maharashtra (2022), which were brought about by legislators switching sides. In Puducherry (2021), switches led to fresh elections, bringing a BJP alliance to power. In Goa (2022) and Manipur (2017), though the Congress was returned as the single-largest party, it was outmanoeuvred by the BJP soon after. It was only in Uttarakhand that a Supreme Court of India intervention saved the Congress government.

A regional example

It is not the BJP alone, as around the same time, ruling parties had a field day in Telangana and Andhra Pradesh. In Telangana (2014), the Telangana Rashtra Samithi (TRS) decimated the Congress and the Telugu Desam Party (TDP) by encouraging shifts. In 2018, the Congress again crumbled under pressure. Likewise, in Andhra Pradesh, first, the TDP did the same to the Yuvajana Shramika Rythu Congress Party (YSRCP) after 2014, and subsequently, when the YSRCP came to power in 2019, it paid the TDP back in the same coin. In all these cases, the ruling party already had a comfortable majority of its own and did not necessarily need additional support.

Therefore, the current phase is bizarre when compared to the past because dominant parties appear to be actively cheering splits and shifts and having no respect for the basic rules of the game. The anti-defection law and control of institutions are now weaponised by dominant parties to inter-



GETTY IMAGES

vene in the internal working of Opposition parties, and sometimes make and break them. Furthermore, legislators are switching support even if it does not count to the making or maintenance of governments.

A perspective

So what do we make of the splits and switches? Much of our discussion is dominated by the morality of splits and switches, and this revolves around the damage it causes to the foundations of representative democracy. And these are undoubtedly reasonable arguments. First, switchers violate the trust relationship with their constituents as voters get something other than what they bargained for. Second, assuming voters vote for parties and not candidates, the argument is that uncohesive parties make it difficult for voters to draw definitive lines of responsibility. Consequently, it is difficult for voters to hold party governments accountable for their actions during elections.

Despite sound arguments about the despicable nature of splits and switches, they continue to happen routinely. The question then arises: Why do legislators split from and switch parties without fearing the negative connotations? We cannot answer this question as long as our perspective of political parties is dated.

While we keep track of party system change, we ignore the point that the component parts, parties which make up the system, too change and transform. Our conceptualisation of parties is stat-

ic and is drawn from an era long gone by. Parties constantly adapt new modes to sustain and find success for themselves.

Our popular image of a party is that of the classical mass party, which rises from societal movements and is essentially internally democratic. They are linked to mass organisations and groups that share a common goal encompassing different dimensions of societal life. The leadership comes from the organisation, is accountable to it and is committed to the goal. Our normative posturing comes from this ideal type. This is what even the Election Commission of India imagines a party should be since many of its guidelines lay stress on the 'democratic spirit' and the need for transparency and participation in internal decision-making.

However, in reality, parties are anything but this. While they mobilise and compete around identity and group solidarity issues such as mass parties, the internal democracy element is missing, and their links with society and mass organisations are at best tenuous. Today's parties are centralised vote-getting machines which primarily work to ensure the return of political leaders to office. Mass inputs and ideas do not matter, and it is the central leadership that counts. All party activities begin and end with elections.

In this model, it is not surprising that paid professionals occupy a central place. They pick strategies, run campaigns and are sometimes involved in ticket distribution. New forms of communication and campaign methods have displaced traditional campaign modes. Consequently, the vast pool of voluntary unpaid labour which traditionally formed the backbone of parties and linked parties with the grass roots are no longer as closely involved as they were in the past.

Leaders are "elected unanimously" and party conferences are choreographed events where ordinary members meet and greet

leaders. These events are used to enhance the profile of the leadership elite and are indeed not a forum for intra-party debate and discussion. Since parties are mainly concerned with electoral success, anyone who enjoys the confidence of the top leadership and can help increase the seat share is likely to get a ticket. Moreover, we now know that parties prefer candidates who bring in their own money, fund other candidates and raise resources for the party. All this puts the party on the ground in the shade.

New alignment

Finally, the most significant change is that parties are more closely aligned with the state rather than civil society. Parties exchange material and psychological rewards, and goods and services the state provides for electoral advantage. Voters also see parties as a supplier of services. This connection pushes legislators and parties to be in government or at least close to the government. This was one of the most common reasons for Members of Legislative Assemblies who switched parties in the two Telugu-speaking States. As a corollary to this shift, the party has become a shadow of what it once was and has been reduced to an instrument to defend policies and programmes of the government.

On the supply side, the party on the ground no longer calls the shots; parties are election vehicles and a supplier of services. The party bond exists only as long as it ensures success for the legislator. On the demand side, the voter does not appear to have any problem, whether it is 'A' or 'B', as long as "services" are available. Consequently, splits and switches are not seen as objectionable by legislators and are not punished by voters as well. Legislators will, therefore, be willing to do anything if the benefits exceed the costs.

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The scam faultline is damaging Indian banking

More steps to prevent frauds are needed which include tightening the internal and external audit systems of banks



BRAJESH KUMAR TIWARI

The biggest banking scam in India has come to the forefront in the midst of celebrations of 'Aazadi Ka Amrit Mahotsav'; in this case, Dewan Housing Finance Corporation Limited (DHFL) has hoodwinked a consortium of banks driven by the Union Bank of India to the tune of ₹35,000 crore through financial misrepresentation. The DHFL case was not an isolated case. In February this year, ABG Shipyard Limited of Surat had already taken a loan of about ₹23,000 crore in a fake manner.

Taking a hit

On February 1, 2019, a consortium of banks had held a meeting to take cognisance of the serious allegations of loan repayment default against the DHFL. Subsequently, a core committee of seven of the largest banks – the State Bank of India (SBI), the Bank of Baroda (BoB), the Bank of India, Canara Bank, the Central Bank of India, Syndicate Bank and the Union Bank of India (UBI) – was formed. KPMG (a 'global network of professional firms providing audit, tax and advisory services') was roped in as the evaluator to lead a unique survey review of the DHFL for the period April 1, 2015-March 31, 2019.

The Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI), in its first information

report, has shown that the State Bank of India was the most badly hit with a non-performing asset (NPA) base of ₹9,898 crore the very sum the DHFL acquired from it. Essentially, the Bank of India and Canara Bank have been plundered to the tune of more than ₹4,000 crore each by the DHFL. Also, more than ₹3,000 crore each has been supposedly cleaned up by the DHFL from the Union Bank of India and the Punjab National Bank.

The banking system of any country is the backbone of its economy. Excessive losses to banks affect every person in the country because the amounts deposited in banks belong to the citizens of the country. The NPAs that banks incur are mainly due to bad loans and scams.

Data by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) show that around 34% of scams in the banking industry are on account of inside work and due to poor lending practices by and the involvement of the junior and mid-level management. The data by the RBI also show that one of the fundamental problems in the way of the development of banking in India is on account of rising bank scams and the costs consequently forced on the framework. Strangely, as in a Global Banking Fraud survey (KPMG), the issue is not just for India alone; it is a worldwide issue.

An NPA projection, a list

In a Financial Stability Report released by the RBI in December 2021, there is a projection of the gross NPAs of banks rising from 6.9% in September 2021 to 8.1% of total assets by September 2022



(under a baseline scenario) and to 9.5% under a severe stress scenario. Frauds in the banking industry can be grouped under four classifications: 'Management', 'Outsider', 'Insider' and 'Insider and Outsider' (jointly). All scams, whether interior or outside, are results of operational failures. Research by Deloitte has shown that limited asset monitoring after disbursement (38%) was the foremost reason behind stressed assets and insufficient due diligence before disbursement (21%) was among the major factors for these NPAs.

There are news reports every few weeks of some fresh/new bank scam or the other which is breaking the trust of the common man in the banking system. There are many examples of bank scams: the Nirav Modi and Mehul Choksi scam involving the Punjab National Bank (₹11,400 crore), the case of businessman Vijay Mallya (₹9,000 crore) involving nearly 13 banks, the Andhra Bank fraud (₹8,100 crore), the PMC scam (₹4,355 crore), the Rotomac Pen scam (₹3,695 crore), the Videocon case (₹3,250 crore), the Allahabad Bank fraud (₹1,775 crore), the Syndicate Bank scam (₹1,000 crore), the

Bank of Maharashtra scam (₹836 crore), the Kanishk Gold Bank fraud (₹824 crore), the IDBI Bank fraud (₹600 crore), and the R.P. Info Systems Bank scam (₹515 crore) to name just a few.

A high NPA also reduces the net interest margin of banks besides increasing their operating cost; these banks meet this cost by increasing the convenience fee from their small customers on a day-to-day basis.

According to the RBI data, corporate loans account for nearly 70% of these bad loans, while retail loans, which include car loans, home loans and personal loans, account for only 4%. A study by the Indian Institute of Management Bangalore has shown that poor bank corporate governance is the cause behind rising bank scams and NPAs.

Steps that need consideration

Over time, bad loans lead to higher NPAs. So, banks have to exercise due diligence and caution while offering funds. The regulation and the control of chartered accountants is a very important step to reduce non-performing assets of banks. Banks should be cautious while lending to Indian companies that have taken huge loans abroad. There is also an urgent need to tighten the internal and external audit systems of banks.

The fast rotation of employees of a bank's loan department is very important. Public sector banks should set up an internal rating agency for rigorous evaluation of large projects before sanctioning loans. Further, there is a need to implement an effective Management Information System (MIS) to

monitor early warning signals about business projects. The CIBIL score of the borrower (formerly the Credit Information Bureau (India) Limited) should be evaluated by the bank concerned and RBI officials. This must also include the classification and responsibilities of the lending and recovery departments.

Financial fraud can be reduced to a great extent by the use of artificial intelligence (AI) to monitor financial transactions. However, the adoption of digitisation beyond a point may have limits as AI provides quantitative information but does not take into account the qualitative aspects.

While the Government of India and the RBI have taken several measures to try and resolve the issue of scams in the banking industry, the fact is that there is still a long way to go. Rather than having to continuously write off the bad loans of large corporates, India has to improve its loan recovery processes and establish an early warning system in the post-disbursement phase. Banks need to carry out fraud risk assessments every quarter.

Only establishment of National Asset Reconstruction Company Ltd. (NARCL) or the 'bad bank' is not a real solution. These measures can help only after a loan is bad but not the process of a loan going bad.

Brajesh Kumar Tiwari, the author of 'Changing Scenario of Indian Banking Industry', is Associate Professor, Atal Bihari Vajpayee School of Management and Entrepreneurship, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. The views expressed are personal

RBI sets up system to settle international trade in rupees

Move to aid trade with nations under sanctions: EEPIC India

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT
MUMBAI

The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has put in place a mechanism to facilitate international trade in rupees (INR), with immediate effect.

Banks acting as authorised dealers for such transactions would have to take prior approval from the regulator to facilitate this.

“In order to promote growth of global trade with emphasis on exports from India and to support the increasing interest of global trading community in INR, it has been decided to put in place an additional arrangement for invoicing, payment, and settlement of exports / imports in INR,” the



RBI said in a notification.

“The RBI’s move... would facilitate trade with countries under sanction like Iran and Russia,” said EEPIC India Chairman Mahesh Desai.

“As a result of the trade facilitation mechanism... we see payment issues with Russia easing. The move would also reduce the risk of

forex fluctuation specially looking at the Euro-rupee parity. We see this as a first step towards 100% convertibility of rupee,” he said.

Trade under the facility may be denominated and invoiced in rupees and the exchange rate between the currencies of the two partner countries may be market determined, RBI said.

‘To strengthen rupee’

“Amid ongoing rupee weakness, the RBI announced steps which appear to be aimed at reducing demand for foreign exchange, by promoting rupee settlement of trade flows,” said Rahul Bajaria, MD and Chief India Economist, Barclays.

Safety in the sky

The DGCA should have no tolerance for laxity among airlines seeking to cut corners

Bird hits, cracked windshields, component failures, engine compressor surges and blade failures, flight deck indicator and system-related warnings, flight diversions, mid-air engine shutdowns, pressurisation problems, and a case of severe turbulence in the monsoon – these aviation-related occurrences in Indian skies in recent months, reaching a crest over the last 30 days, with most of them affecting one airline, have raised concerns about air passenger safety. In its ‘show cause notice’ issued recently to SpiceJet, the carrier in focus, the Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) has highlighted some of the reported events. In its tersely worded observations on the low-cost airline’s operations – a fleet of narrowbody jets and turboprops – the aviation regulator has pointed to a ‘degradation of safety margins’, and touched on ‘poor internal oversight’ and ‘inadequate maintenance actions’. Further, the DGCA has added, a financial assessment (September 2021) could point to a shortage of spares and, therefore, the ‘invocation’ of flying with a minimum equipment list. In its initial response, the airline management has put forward a defence of being an IATA Operational Safety Audit (IOSA) air carrier. And, second, given the scale of flight operations in India – according to Ministry of Civil Aviation data, there were 5,268 aircraft movements in the domestic sector, on July 10 – such incidents are not an aberration. It has even cited an average of 30 such episodes a day, which some official sources have backed, though feebly.

The metric is problematic – even aviation experts concur on this. There is no comparison with a global standard, or even a category breakup. Even worse, and dangerous, is not having the acknowledged root causes addressed. In the DGCA’s Annual Safety Review 2020, edition V, for example, under ‘Deficient maintenance’ (the objective is to improve the maintenance of Indian registered aircraft), for a target of 2.16 for incidents involving component/system failure per 10,000 flight hours, the achieved performance is 2.39. Similarly, under the number of maintenance errors per 10,000 flight hours, for a target of 1.43, the performance is 1.46. Repeated snags are a red flag, pointing to faults in the safety oversight system. In an ideal ecosystem, issues with safety would be analysed in terms of the rate of occurrence using tiered categorisation, with the goal of reduction to the minimum level. Troublesome too is how an airline continues its operations despite a ‘show-cause notice’ and during the monsoon. With passenger numbers climbing back to pre-COVID-19 levels, the entry of new airlines, the existing players indicating aggressive fleet expansion plans, and an international safety audit that is happening once too often for India, the regulator needs to be nimble and more vigilant. The industry watchword – safety – cannot be glossed over.

AI-based Mandarin translation devices for Army

Union Defence Minister unveils 75 AI-based products and technologies at defence symposium

DINAKAR PERI
NEW DELHI

Indian soldiers patrolling on the Line of Actual Control (LAC), when they come face to face with Chinese soldiers, will soon be able to understand Mandarin and reply instantly, with the help of a 600gm Artificial Intelligence (AI) based device developed by an Indian start-up and currently under advanced trials with feedback from the Army.

This was one of the 75 AI-enabled products and applications unveiled by Defence



With the help of an AI-based device, the Indian Army will be able to understand Mandarin. ■SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Minister Rajnath Singh at the 'AI in defence' symposium on Monday. "It is an offline hand-held language translation system which works

based on AI. It has been tested in the forward areas and Army has given lot of assistance. Its performance will improve as more and more

data comes from the field," said Anuroop Iyengar, co-founder and Managing Director of the Bengaluru-based start-up Cogknit. We are currently working make it making it smaller and wearable on the wrist and also increase its range, he said showcasing the product at the exhibition.

It is bidirectional with a range of 5-10 feet and gives converts Mandarin to English. We are also working on hindi and trying to enhance the range upto 20 feet, Mr. Iyengar said. They are being

supported by Kalyani Group, he said. The first demonstration was done in 2017 and since have done several demonstrations and trials.

Mr. Iyengar said, "We have requested them to place orders with start-ups quickly." The exhibition had also several other AI enabled products like robotic mine detector, intrusion detection system and integrated command fusion, remote weapon station, rail mounted robo, sensors for under water domain awareness, swarm drones among others.

EXPLAINER

The search for dark matter

What are distance scales? How do they help in proving the existence of dark matter?

THE GIST

■ Dark matter is made up of particles that do not have a charge. So, these particles are “dark”, namely because they do not emit light, which is an electromagnetic phenomenon, and “matter” because they possess mass like normal matter and interact through gravity.

■ There is strong indirect evidence for dark matter, and this evidence is reflected at various levels (or distance scales, as physicists would explain).

■ As of today, the most sensitive dark matter detector experiment in the world is LUX-ZEPLIN (LZ) in South Dakota in the U.S.

SHUBASHREE DESIKAN

The story so far: Many physicists strongly believe that the entire visible part of the universe forms only 5% of all matter in it. They believe the rest is made up of dark matter and dark energy. Once this was convincingly demonstrated through various indirect observations and calculations, experiments started being set up to hunt for these elusive particles. The latest to hit the news in the field of dark matter is a dark matter detector experiment named LUX-ZEPLIN (LZ) in South Dakota in the U.S. As of today this is the most sensitive dark matter detector in the world. To give an idea of the degree of difficulty in measuring evidence of a dark particle, it is said that the chamber of this LZ detector, can contain only one gram of dust if it is to detect a dark matter particle. This is the extent to which researchers have to go to rule out unwanted signals coming from other entities.

What is dark matter and why is it so elusive?

All interactions in the universe are a result of four fundamental forces acting on particles – strong nuclear force, weak nuclear force, electromagnetic force and gravitation. Dark matter is made up of particles that do not have a charge – which means they do not interact through electromagnetic interactions. So, these are particles that are “dark”, namely because they do not emit light, which is an electromagnetic phenomenon, and “matter” because they possess mass like normal matter and hence interact through gravity.

Gravitational force, besides not being fully integrated and understood by particle physicists, is extremely weak. For one thing, a particle that interacts so weakly becomes rather elusive to detect. This is because interactions from other known particles could drown out signals of dark matter particles.

If we cannot see it and have not detected it yet, why do physicists believe strongly that dark matter exists?

There is strong indirect evidence for dark matter, and this evidence is reflected at

various levels (or distance scales, as physicists would explain). At the shortest distance scale, consider the rotation of galaxies. If you look at stars all the way from the centre of any galaxy to its rim, the way the velocities of the observed stars change may be plotted. In the lab this same function may be plotted on a graph by assuming the visible matter is all that exists. There is a marked difference between the observed plot of star speeds and the calculated value as you move from the inner part of the galaxy towards its rim. Now if you assume there is a certain fraction of matter which exerts a gravitational pull on the rest of the stars in the galaxy, for it cannot be seen in any other way, and recalculate the plot, it fits in with the observed value. This means that there is a definite amount of dark matter in the galaxy.

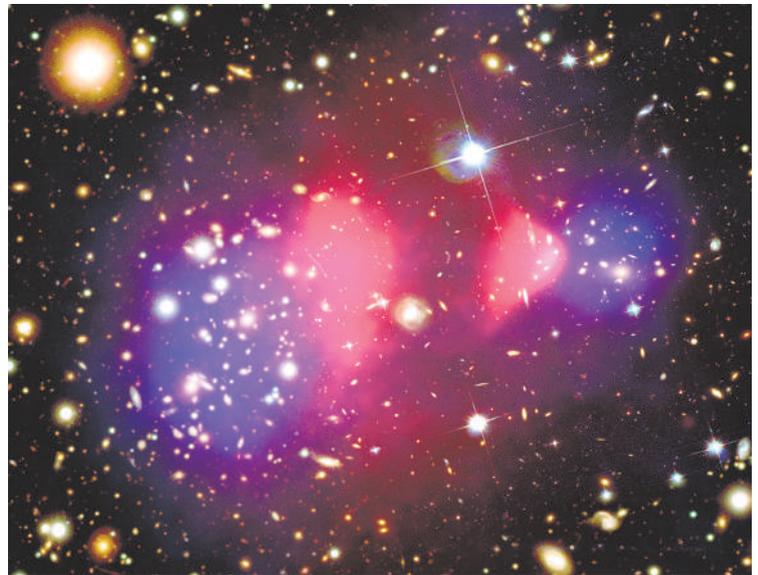
One may argue that it is the model that is at fault and there is some other way to reconcile this discrepancy between the calculated and observed value of velocities in rotating galaxies. This is where evidence from other distance scales comes up.

What are the evidences from other distance scales?

The universe can be observed at various levels – at the level of electrons and nuclei or atoms, or galaxies, or galaxy clusters, or even larger distances where the entire universe can be mapped and studied. Cosmologists, people who study the physics of the universe, typically work in the last mentioned three scales, and particle physicists study the lowest and even smaller scales.

Dark matter is made up of particles that do not have a charge – which means they do not interact through electromagnetic interactions

In this context, the second evidence came from observations of the so-called Bullet cluster of galaxies. The Bullet cluster is formed through the merging of two galaxy clusters. Physicists found from their calculations that the way these mergers took place could not be fully explained if we believed that the visible universe were all



that existed. Therefore, there should be something like dark matter as well as an estimate of how much dark matter there should be in the universe.

Similar arguments exist from mappings of the universe such as the Sloan Digital Sky Survey and studies of the filamentous nature of the universe at a closer look. While fixing the model could help explain away one of these discrepancies, not all of them can be explained in the same manner. Hence physicists now take the concept of dark matter very seriously.

What are the candidates for dark matter particles?

“The neutrino would have been an excellent

candidate if it had been more massive,” says Shrihari Gopalakrishna of The Institute of Mathematical Sciences, Chennai, who has worked on the theory of dark matter. However, being too light, it doesn’t fit the bill. Other postulated entities include the supersymmetric partner of the Z boson, a particle that mediates the electro-weak interaction. Yet other explanations talk about “hidden sector particles” and Axions, a boson and a condensate of dark matter. There are many other theories.

The search is on to find one of these candidates, for the story is one that spins together gravity, supersymmetry, hidden worlds and is the stuff of which science fiction is made.

This composite image shows a Bullet cluster formed after the collision of two large clusters of galaxies. • NASA/CXC/M. WEISS - CHANDRA X-RAY OBSERVATORY



At constant odds: People from tribal villages fishing in rain water flowing from the Eastern Ghats at Kasipatnam on June 11 in Visakhapatnam, Andhra Pradesh. ■FILE PHOTO

FROM THE ARCHIVES

Failing the forest

Both human and wildlife rights groups have not used the Forest Rights Act as a conservation tool

THE GIST

■ There is a sharp binary between the human rights and wildlife rights-based groups. The wildlife groups argue that implementation of the FRA could lead to 'encroachments' and fresh clearance of forestland for human dwellings. The human rights groups have argued that the FRA was passed by Parliament and is aimed at correcting historical injustices to traditional forest dwellers.

■ The first myth that needs to be busted for the wildlife lobby is that when a right is recognised of a forest dweller/Adivasi on a piece of land, it doesn't mean that he/she will cut down all the trees in that area. Recognising rights on forestland is not the same as clear-felling that forest.

■ Both groups have been so locked in ideological debates that they have failed to protect the forest. The FRA was meant for forest dwellers, but it could have also been a powerful tool for conservation.

BAHAR DUTT

On June 28, the Environment Ministry notified the Forest (Conservation) Rules, 2022 under the Forest (Conservation) Act to replace the earlier rules. Rajya Sabha member and Congress politician Jairam Ramesh lashed out against the Centre stating that the government is trying to dilute the Forest Rights Act, 2006 with the new conservation rules. Union Environment Minister Bhupender Yadav clarified that the new rules "do not dilute or infringe on" the provisions of the FRA. But has the FRA ever been a tool for forest conservation? In this article dated March 4, 2019, Bahar Dutt explains how the FRA has mostly been used as a weapon by NGO lobbyists to evict/retain forest dwellers.

On February 13, the Supreme Court ordered the eviction of more than 10 lakh Adivasis and other forest dwellers from forestland across 17 States. The petitioners, mainly wildlife NGOs, had demanded that State governments evict those forest dwellers whose claims over traditional forestland under the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006, known simply as the Forest Rights Act (FRA), had been rejected. On February 28, the court stayed its controversial order and asked the States to submit details on how the claims of the dwellers were decided and the authorities competent to pass final rejection orders.

While the Supreme Court has now made it clear that there will be no forcible eviction, what the order has succeeded in doing is resuscitating a sharp binary between the human rights- and wildlife rights-based groups that have for decades tried to swing public opinion in their favour.

The wildlife groups who went to court argue that implementation of the FRA could lead to 'encroachments' and fresh clearance of forestland for human dwellings.

The human rights groups have argued that the FRA was passed by Parliament and is aimed at correcting historical injustices to traditional forest dwellers who, since colonial times, have been subject to a cycle of evictions.

Since colonial times, as governments asserted their control over forests, India's forest history has become a cycle of evictions from forestland and

rebellions by forest dwellers.

A fundamental difference

Now, here's the problem. Both groups have been so locked in ideological debates – whether in the courtroom or on social media – that they have failed to protect what could potentially have been beneficial to their respective interest groups: the forest. The FRA was meant for forest dwellers, but it could have also been a powerful tool for conservation. Sadly, both sides have propagated misinformation to garner support for themselves.

Since colonial times, as governments asserted their control over forests, India's forest history has become a cycle of evictions from forestland and rebellions by forest dwellers

The first myth that needs to be busted for the wildlife lobby is that when a right is recognised of a forest dweller/Adivasi on a piece of land, it doesn't mean that he/she will cut down all the trees in that area. This is often the strongest note of dissonance between the two groups – the implication that recognising rights on forestland is the same as clear-felling that forest. Therefore, to argue that the rights of millions of forest dwellers have been recognised through the Act does not mean that the forest is a pie to be divided. On the other hand, when forestland is 'diverted' for big development projects, like mining or highways or roads, it is actually clear felled or submerged. If this fundamental difference between 'recognition of rights' and 'diversion' were accepted, the groups at loggerheads would in fact find grounds for commonality.

It is in fact the Supreme Court that paved the way for this commonality in 2013 when it asked the gram sabhas to take a decision on whether the Vedanta group's \$1.7 billion bauxite mining project in Odisha's Niyamgiri Hills could go forward or not. It thus affirmed the decision-making power of the village councils of Rayagada and Kalahandi under the FRA. All 12 gram sabhas unanimously rejected mining in the hills.

Again, in 2016, it was the FRA that was invoked by the National Green Tribunal (NGT) when the

people of Lippa in Himachal Pradesh were given the powers to decide whether or not they wanted a hydel power project in this area. The project would have led to submergence of forestland and also caused heavy siltation in the river.

When wildlife groups point towards the thousands of 'bogus claims' that are being filed and that should be rejected, what should not go unnoticed is that the state in fact is not always keen to recognise the rights of people in forest areas (even if it may get them votes) as it becomes tough to 'divert' land for big projects. A case in point is the Maphithel Dam that is under construction in Manipur. Once commissioned, it will submerge 1,215 hectares (ha) of land, 595 ha of which are under forest cover. In 2015, the NGT had asked for the state to seek forest clearance for the project. To obtain forest clearance, the State government would have to prove that the rights of the tribal people and forest dwellers would not be affected. However, the State government refused to recognise the rights of the people living there since it was keen to construct the dam.

There have been hundreds of cases that offered both these divergent groups the opportunity to come together for the cause of the environment and communities. Can the two groups put down their metaphoric swords and use their powers to fight the battle that needs to be fought?

Correcting historical injustice

Likewise, could not the same wildlife NGOs which filed this petition in the Supreme Court have joined hands with the local communities and used the FRA to challenge big development projects coming up on forestland instead? Human rights groups too cannot be absolved of blame. Most of them have been quick to respond when the judiciary steps in, but have been missing when it comes to the tedious groundwork of working with the gram sabhas and ensuring that genuine claims are filed. The same human rights groups did not come forward to fight cases that could have helped conservation as well as the people who live in those areas. Both groups have failed the forest. There is a chance to correct the historical injustice has been inflicted on the people and to India's forests. And it is through the FRA that India can achieve that aim.

Bahar Dutt is an environment journalist

‘Amarnath-like events unpredictable’

Flash floods were due to ‘sudden’ cloud formation: Ministry of Earth Sciences

JACOB KOSHY
NEW DELHI

The flash floods in the vicinity of the Amarnath caves that cost 16 lives already were not due to a cloudburst but an ‘extreme event’ that could not be forecast in advance. The consequences of global warming are that events such as these are likely to be frequent, said M. Ravichandran, Secretary, Ministry of Earth Sciences (MoES).

The MoES is the parent Ministry of the India Meteorological Department (IMD).

On the sidelines of an event on July 11 to announce a clean-up of beaches in coastal States in September, Mr. Ravichandran said the floods were due to a “sudden” cloud formation and predicting them in advance was not yet possible because both the science as well as sophisticated instruments necessary for forecasting were insufficient.

IMD meteorologist Sonam Lotus, who heads the centre



ITBP personnel carry out rescue operation following the flash floods near the Amarnath cave shrine last week. ■PTI

at Srinagar, in an interview to news site *Kashmir Files*, said rainfall registered at the Amarnath cave was around 2.5-3 cm an hour. Though that was not a substantial amount in the plains, in hilly regions it could mean a large volume that could inundate and overwhelm temporary habitations.

July has seen the monsoon revive over many parts

of the country, including Jammu and Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand. Moisture laden easterly winds have been travelling from lower levels, reaching up to western Himalayas. These winds have been colliding with the westerly winds flowing across the upper levels. Convergence of the winds flowing from opposite directions led to for-

mation of cumulonimbus clouds over the Kashmir region.

In the hills, clouds don't easily dissipate and can get trapped over a certain area, bringing torrential showers and even a cloud burst. Monsoons in previous years too have seen similar short torrents that have caused immense damage.

Kedarnath tragedy

A 2013 cloudburst-like event in Kedarnath triggered massive floods that caused close to 6,000 deaths.

There have also been incidents of rock debris and ice breaking off glaciers and causing floods such as the 2021 avalanche in Chamoli, Uttarakhand that claimed at least 200.

A 2020 report by the Union Ministry of Earth Sciences noted that there was rise in high intensity rain episodes along the west coast of India and along the foothills of western Himalayas between 1969 and 2015.

Far apart

China seems to want to test India's resolve to sustain its forward deployments

The July 7 meeting between External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar and his Chinese counterpart Wang Yi, on the sidelines of the G20 Foreign Ministers' meet in Bali, served as a reminder of the curious state of affairs in India's relations with China. That the two Ministers had their second meeting in four months – Mr. Wang was in New Delhi in March – indicates both sides see value in continued engagement and remain dissatisfied with the current low level of relations. The problem, however, is that the commonalities appear to end there. Mr. Jaishankar reiterated India's stand, conveyed to China on numerous occasions since the start of the LAC tensions in 2020, that normalcy would not be possible without a resolution of the boundary crisis and full disengagement from all friction areas. The MEA said the External Affairs Minister called for an early resolution of all outstanding issues, and reiterated the need to sustain the momentum to complete disengagement from all the remaining areas.

It is, however, clear that Beijing does not appear to share that view. On the contrary, recent actions suggest Beijing has no desire to resolve the row immediately, which India reasonably sees as a prerequisite for restoring normalcy in relations. Indeed, the official Chinese readout of the Bali talks failed to make a single mention of the LAC crisis, suggesting it is not a priority for Beijing. Instead, it emphasised Beijing's current interest in engaging with India on multilateral groupings such as BRICS and the SCO, which China and Russia see as valuable platforms to counter the West, and to promote, as Mr. Wang put it, "a fairer international order". The Chinese military, meanwhile, has dragged its feet in responding with dates for the 16th round of military talks, marking the longest pause since the talks began. At the last round, that was held as long as four months ago on March 11, both sides failed to achieve a breakthrough to disengage at Patrolling Point 15 in Hot Springs. Depsang and Demchok also remain unresolved. There is little expectation in New Delhi for an imminent breakthrough, particularly with domestic politics in China on edge before the Party Congress this fall when Xi Jinping will begin a third term and the military leadership will also see sweeping changes. The Chinese Foreign Minister, in Bali, said both countries "should push for the early return of bilateral relations to the right track". That aspiration, however, contrasts sharply with Beijing's continued unwillingness to restore the status quo of April 2020. The apparent goal appears to be aimed at testing India's resolve to sustain its forward deployments and to force New Delhi to accept a new normal at the LAC. Until that changes, the stalemate along the borders, and in the relationship, is likely to endure.

EXPLAINER

The ongoing dialogue between Pakistan and the TTP

Why is the TTP adamant on the reversal of the merger between FATA and the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province? Is a peace agreement possible?

ABIGAIL MIRIAM FERNANDEZ

The story so far: On June 29, Mufti Noor Wali Mehsud, chief of the Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) during an interview on YouTube said that the group would not back down from its primary demand for reversal of the merger of the erstwhile Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) with the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) province in 2018. This statement comes amid ongoing negotiations between the government of Pakistan and the TTP in Kabul with the Afghan Taliban's interim government facilitating the negotiations. On June 2, the TTP announced an "indefinite ceasefire" given the "substantial progress" made in talks with the government during a round of meetings. This announcement came a day after a 50-member jirga (tribal council) comprising elders of major tribes and clans from KP visited Kabul and held talks with the TTP leaders.

What has been the history of Pakistan and TTP negotiations? Negotiations between the TTP and the Pakistan government have been held since 2007. However, the talks have failed to bring stability and peace. The first round of negotiations with the TTP took place in May 2007 when a nine-point peace deal was reached wherein the TTP agreed to stop attacks on security forces and government installations. They stated that they would not disturb peace



Pakistan troops observe from a hilltop post in Khyber district, Pakistan. •AP

in the region. Similar talks took place in 2008, 2011, 2013, and 2014 during which the TTP agreed to denounce militancy and condemned the elements involved in attacks on state institutions, police and other law-enforcement agencies.

What has been the focus of current talks?

The latest round of talks began in 2021 after Pakistan President Dr. Arif Alvi suggested that the government could consider giving amnesty to those members of the TTP who have not remained involved in "criminal activities" and who lay down their weapons and agree to adhere to the Constitution. Following this, the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) government under Imran Khan announced that they were

holding talks with the TTP so that its members may surrender and reconcile in order "to be able to live like ordinary citizens."

During the talks, aside from the TTP's primary demand for reversal of the merger, it is also insisting on the withdrawal of security forces from the tribal districts, amnesty for its fighters and the enforcement of Sharia in the Malakand Division. Conversely, the government has maintained that all negotiations would take place within the framework of the Constitution.

Why is the TTP stubborn on certain clauses?

The TTP's main demand has been the reversal of the merger of FATA with the KP province. The TTP has been persistent because of many reasons. Despite the fact that the TTP is not a monolithic group, the most powerful factions within it have been the Mehsud Group which consists mostly of Pashtuns, an ethnic group present mostly in FATA and the KP regions of Pakistan. Thus, the FATA regions give the TTP recruitment and operational leverage due to the concentration of indigenous and migrant Pashtuns whose unique political grievances the TTP exploits. Secondly, the FATA region offers the TTP operational leverage due to its trans-national operational potential and its ability to use Afghanistan as a safe haven by exploiting its cross-border, trans-national linkages with

ethno-militant groups such as the Haqqani Network.

So, where does it leave Pakistan?

The state's endgame involves convincing the TTP to agree to a long-term cease-fire as well as dissolving its organisation so that they may join mainstream politics. It is for this purpose, the state has once again reopened channels of communication. The negotiations with the TTP have been carried out largely by the Pakistan military and intelligence services.

The military has been authorised to hold talks with the TTP and report back on the progress of the talk, following which the issue will be debated in Parliament. The previous PTI government had a softer approach while negotiating with the TTP, however, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif's ruling coalition has taken a harder stance. The next phase of the negotiation would be shaped by the domestic politics at play in Pakistan. However, with the TTP setting impossible conditions, the state is once again posed with a challenge on how to reach an understanding.

Does the civil society approve talks with the TTP?

Civil society and experts have argued that militant groups should not be allowed to dictate how the state and its security forces operate. Moreover, they raised questions as to whether the state is willing to forgive a group that has the

blood of thousands of citizens on its hands. The initial round of negotiations initiated by Imran Khan was heavily criticised due to the lack of accountability and the secrecy around the talks. Additionally, the people remain apprehensive about the TTP's willingness to give up completely given that the group has been responsible for some of the most atrocious acts of terrorism in Pakistan. Moreover, civil society has demanded more transparency in the talks with the TTP.

What has been the role of the Afghan Taliban?

The Afghan Taliban has played the role of a mediator in the ongoing negotiations. They have maintained that they will not act against the TTP on Pakistan's wishes and that if a deal was to be made with the group, Islamabad would have to make significant concessions. The Taliban's role in the negotiations stem from Pakistan's pressure to bring the TTP to the negotiating table and its long-standing support for the TTP, which is appreciated for its contribution in fighting alongside the Taliban against the U.S. and the former Afghan government. However, the Taliban's position remains unclear as siding with the TTP's demands while beneficial could also pose a threat if the TTP controls the entire territory it is demanding.

The author is a Research Associate at the National Institute of Advanced Studies (NIAS), Bengaluru

THE GIST

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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.