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FOREWORD

We, at Team Vedhik is happy to introduce a new initiative - "Vedhik - Daily News Analysis (DNA)_The Hindu" compilations to help you with UPSC Civil Services Examination preparation. We believe this initiative - "Vedhik - Daily News Analysis (DNA)_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 Haameed 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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Risks and rewards

Jallikattu should not incentivise risk-taking by participants, spectators

The deaths of five men in Tamil Nadu in as many events of *jallikattu* and *manjuviratu* – in Madurai, Tiruchi, Sivaganga, Pudukottai and Karur districts – and injuries to dozens of persons this week, though unfortunate, are no surprise. Ever since the event resumed in January 2017 after a three-year ban and a massive agitation, participants and spectators alike have been its victims. According to the Animal Welfare Board of India, between 2008-14, there have been 43 deaths and thousands of injuries. As of now, zero human casualty remains an elusive goal, not to speak of the plight of the animal. The Supreme Court of India has reserved its judgment on a batch of petitions questioning the validity of the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (Tamil Nadu Amendment) Act of 2017. Organisers of *jallikattu* events must note the observation made in late November by the Constitution Bench, which heard arguments over the amendment, that the sport of *jallikattu* as such might not be brutal but the “form” in which it was being held in the State might be cruel. Proponents of *jallikattu*, who view the event as a sport, argue that the logic that is applied to football or boxing, where the probability of injury is high, should be extended to *jallikattu* too. Also, just as the occurrence of mishaps does not trigger the demand for a ban on these two sporting activities, the same yardstick should hold good for *jallikattu*, which is also justified in the name of culture, tradition and valour. But, what is overlooked is that in football or boxing, or even car racing, the whole game centres around humans, unlike in *jallikattu*.

At the same time, regulation and safety are being given greater importance. It is comforting that the authorities have tightened the rules. In Madurai district, which has 21 venues, an online registration system allowed bull owners to choose only one out of the three high-profile venues – Avaniapuram, Palamedu and Alanganalur. In Tiruchi, no more than 700 bulls can be released at each event. Of course, elaborate guidelines were issued by the State Animal Husbandry, Dairying, Fishing and Fishermen Welfare Department in late December, on the duties and responsibilities for each stakeholder. Though fairly extensive, the rules should also have stringent penal provisions. The authorities should focus on preventing deaths, at least among spectators, who should be behind impregnable barricades. Also, the government should end the practice of having fancy prizes, such as cars and motorcycles, to draw in youth. After all, *jallikattu* was originally meant to showcase strength and valour, and the rewards should not be seen as an incentive to overlook the risks to life and limb.

NCM chief claims Jains pacified by govt. decision on Sammed Shikhar

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

The Union and the Jharkhand governments have jointly decided that Sammed Shikhar will remain a place of pilgrimage, National Commission of Minorities (NCM) Chairman Iqbal Singh Lalpura said on Wednesday, adding that the decision has brought peace among the Jain community.

Reacting to the NCM's statement, members of the Vishwa Jain Sanghathan (VJS) said that they were neither happy nor satisfied with the developments so far.

"The Government of India and the Jharkhand government told us during the hearing held on Tuesday that the Sammed Shikhar will remain a 'religious



Massive strike: Members of the Jain community participating in a protest in Hyderabad for saving the Parasnath hills. NAGARA GOPAL

place,'" Mr. Lalpura told presspersons. The decision of the governments has pacified the Jain community, he said.

'Objections remain'

Reacting to this, VJS president Sanjay Jain told *The Hindu* that the Jain community would continue its

protest until the government not just declared the Sammed Shikhar and Madhuban hills as a 'religious place' but also removed it from the ecosensitive zone. "The commission has asked us to give our objection in a week. We will give the same," he added.

Meanwhile, the NCM

chief also said that the commission would be sending a team to Haldwani to meet the protesting people who have been asked to vacate the land, said to be owned by the Railways.

"The NCM team will speak to the people from minority communities in Haldwani's Gafoor Basti who have been asked to vacate their homes by the Railway authorities. After taking stock of the situation, we will talk to the government about what can be done on the ground," said Mr. Lalpura, adding that the government must ensure that no one goes homeless.

In the past one month, the National Commission for Minorities has received 168 petitions, out of which 73 have been disposed of.

The futility of underbalancing China

One of the most disquieting puzzles the Indian strategic community has been confronted with since 2020 are the sources of New Delhi's underbalancing behaviour towards China. A lot has been written, not without reason, about the domestic political compulsions behind the BJP-led government's chaotic China policy. And yet, does the answer to India's underbalancing behaviour lay solely in domestic political considerations?

More so, how exactly should we characterise India's underbalancing behaviour vis-à-vis the China threat? Does it amount to buckpassing (hoping someone else will deal with it), appeasement of the source of the threat itself (China), hiding from the threat altogether, or is it a combination of all these? Will going easy on China moderate China's aggression? Or does New Delhi think that ignoring the China threat will make it disappear eventually?

India's response to threat

To begin with, there is a growing consciousness within the government and the larger strategic community in India that China is a threat to India's national security. There has been a clear shift of focus from the Line of Control (LoC) to the Line of Actual Control (LAC) and the consequent force redeployment has been considerable. There has also been some decisive effort to curtail India's tech-coupling with China. And yet, there doesn't appear to be a comprehensive assessment of the China threat, and an evaluation of potential Indian responses. What is missing is an unambiguous political commitment to meet the China threat. New Delhi's China strategy is akin to closing one's eyes and pretending it is dark around.

Needless to say, that the heart of the Indian approach is based on the belief that balancing China is fraught with risks. To begin with,



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India needs clarity on how its key strategic partnerships and defence agreements will come to its aid in the event of an escalatory situation with China

it is neither possible nor desirable for India to actively man the entire LAC with China. Secondly, responding to China could potentially spread the fight, thereby creating more flashpoints on the LAC, something New Delhi wants to avoid. Thirdly, India's underbalancing behaviour is also a result of the uncertain outcomes of a military escalation with a superior power.

And yet, there are also significant risks in the current strategy of underbalancing China. For one, given the absence of active Indian responses, a far more powerful China is likely to increase the tempo of its territorial pursuits. More so, underbalancing China also entails a lack of political clarity regarding the China threat and the articulation of redlines to meet that threat. This, in turn, leads to an uncertainty about what India's friends and partners could or would do for India if there is a standoff with China.

There seems to be a strong strand of thinking in New Delhi that we should wait to build our capability to take on the China threat. But such a strategy of 'threat postponement' is based on misplaced optimism as China will continue to grow stronger than India. And by the time India catches up, if ever, it would be too late to take back the lost territory.

There may be some merit in the hypothesis that if there is no clear political articulation, China could exploit the policy confusion in New Delhi and keep probing the borders. But does unambiguous political articulation of the China threat and setting redlines by New Delhi help? Theoretically yes, but doing so is not without dangers.

The most important problem with clarity and articulation is an unavoidable commitment trap – if you do not follow through, your threats are hollow, thereby further emboldening China. But the most challenging part of articulating the source of threat and setting redlines is the danger of escalation. So New Delhi's dilemma is this: while escalation is

replete with uncertainty, non-escalation comes with slow but certain loss of territory.

India's options

In other words, while domestic political calculation might be prompting the government to insufficiently acknowledge the China threat, there are also other 'understandable' reasons behind the current strategy of underbalancing China. So, what indeed are New Delhi's options in order to deal with the China threat?

One, potential strategy is calibrated escalation. New Delhi could employ a tit-for-tat strategy and consider occupying unmanned areas on the Chinese side. This is doable, but India must be prepared for similar actions from the Chinese side. Two, New Delhi could further raise the economic costs for China by reducing high tech Chinese imports in select areas. Three, it is perhaps an opportune moment for New Delhi to consider nuclear modernisation and perhaps even develop low yield weapons. Why not retest its thermonuclear weapons to strengthen its nuclear deterrence, thereby sending a message to Beijing?

Four, notwithstanding the accuracy of the argument that India's growing strategic partnership with the U.S. is the reason behind China's aggression, China's aggression is indeed a good reason for New Delhi to strengthen its strategic partnership with the U.S. and the West. We must become more open and forthcoming about it. There must be more clarity on how India's key strategic partnerships and defence agreements will come to its aid in the event of an escalatory situation with China. That Beijing will go easy on New Delhi if the latter goes slow with Washington is a dangerous expectation in the garb of a lazy argument. Underbalancing China has not helped, and it is now time to devise strategies to balance the China threat.

Signals of a slow return to peace in Syria

As Syria enters the 13th year of its lethal civil conflict, a bomb explosion in Istanbul on November 13, that killed six persons, seems to have accelerated a diplomatic process which could bring peace to that tormented land. Turkish authorities immediately blamed Kurdish militants in Syria, represented by the People's Protection Units (YPG, in its Kurdish acronym), for the bombing, and even arrested a Syrian woman who confessed to her affiliation with Kurdish organisations in Turkey and Syria.

From November 20, Turkey initiated "Operation Claw-Sword" with a series of bombings on Kurdish targets in both Syria and Iraq. Turkish attacks are directed at the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) that includes the YPG and, under American protection, controls large parts of northeast Syria. It has close ties with its domestic Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which is viewed by Turkey as a terrorist organisation.

Since May last year, Turkey has been threatening to launch a military invasion against Kurdish positions in Syria. This has been postponed on Russian insistence, giving Turkey an opportunity to consider diplomatic options to serve its security interests.

The Russia-Turkey-Syria engagement

At the end of November, the Turkish President, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, after an earlier conversation with Russian President Vladimir Putin, proposed a re-engagement with Syria, starting with meetings of Defence and Foreign Ministers, and culminating with a summit of the three leaders. With Mr. Erdoğan facing elections in June, there are domestic considerations in play as well. A tough anti-Kurd posture appeals to Turkey's nationalists, while improved relations with Damascus will facilitate the return of 3.7 million Syrian refugees whose presence has caused considerable unhappiness among the general Turkish population.



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It is being shaped by developments in Turkey and in Syria

The meeting of Defence Ministers took place in Moscow on December 28 – the first Minister-level meeting between Syria and Turkey since 2011. However, the complex issues that divide Syria and Turkey have become quickly apparent. Syrian media reported that Turkey had agreed to withdraw from territories that its forces occupy in northern Syria, and replaced by Syrian government forces. But Turkey has immediately clarified that while it has no designs on Syrian territory, its troops will withdraw only when there is no terrorist threat – a clear reference to the SDF.

Regional diplomatic implications

Amidst the Ukraine war, Turkey has continued its balancing act between the United States and Russia: it has supplied drones to Ukraine; but it has also facilitated agreements relating to grain supplies through the Bosphorus and has refused to join the Western sanctions on Russia.

Turkey and Russia continue to work closely together in Syria, though differences remain. On the question of the Kurds, the Russian and Syrian priority is to detach the Kurds from the U.S., curb their separatist aspirations, and ensure the integrity of Syria. They hope to address Turkey's demand for a 30-km "security zone" across the Syria-Turkey border by replacing Kurdish militia with Syrian government troops. However, Turkey has not disengaged itself so far from the extremists of the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) that control the northern Idlib province, a crucial Russian and Syrian demand.

Some progress on the Kurd issue is apparent: in the face of Turkey's threats to invade Syria in November, the U.S. quickly evacuated its diplomatic personnel from the region, viewed as signalling little interest in protecting the Kurds. It is in this background that the leader of the SDF, Mazloum Abdi, has spoken publicly about the importance of Syrian unity and the need for

"coordination with the Syrian army to prevent a Turkish occupation of Syria".

Outlook for Syria

Syria believes it has a much stronger hand than earlier. Syria is being increasingly included within the Arab fold: besides the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain having opened embassies in Damascus, in early December, a Syrian-Saudi dialogue took place in Riyadh over four days on combating extremism. Symbolically, the Syrian flag flew on Riyadh's streets during Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit (December 7-9). The kingdom has encouraged this rapprochement with Syria to ensure that Arab interests are not diluted under Turkish and Iranian influence.

The U.S. remains firmly opposed to the Russia-sponsored tripartite talks and the improvement of the regional states' ties with Syria. But it has little capacity to oppose Turkish initiatives in Syria or to provide effective support to the beleaguered Kurds. It retains 900 troops in northeast Syria, but has no idea regarding what purpose they are to serve. Again, Russia and Iran remain strong supporters of Syria's crucial interests – the eradication of HTS extremists at Idlib, the dilution of Kurdish aspirations for autonomy and the incorporation of the Kurds within the Syrian state, and the exit of the rump U.S. military presence in the northeast. Hence, Syria has so far shown no overt enthusiasm about high-level engagements with Turkey, hoping to obtain more firm Turkish guarantees relating to its interests. This is perhaps being facilitated by Iran: Iran's Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian met Mr. Erdoğan and his Turkish counterpart during his visit to Ankara on January 17, while the latter has said he could meet the Syrian Foreign Minister in early February.

These trends suggest that the coming year, after more than a decade, could see the slow return to peace in Syria.

Admonishments that endanger the Constitution

Come April and it will be 50 years since the Supreme Court of India delivered its verdict in *Kesavananda Bharati vs State of Kerala*. The judgment is widely recognised as a milestone in India's history. In holding that Parliament's power to amend the Constitution was not plenary, that any change that damages the document's basic structure would be declared void, the Court, it was understood, had helped preserve the essence of our republic.

In the years since the verdict – if not in its immediate aftermath – its importance has been recognised by successive governments. During this time, most criticism of the doctrine has been confined to the manner of its application rather than its legitimacy. But last week, India's Vice-President Jagdeep Dhankhar launched a salvo of attacks at the Supreme Court, by calling into question the ruling's correctness. Faced as we are with far greater issues of civic concern, this debate might well be regarded as tedious, if only the arguments made against the judgment were not part of what appears to be a concerted effort at undermining the judiciary's importance.

Collegium as target

Over the course of the last few months, not a day has gone by without one member or the other of the political executive excoriating the Court over its apparent excesses. Much of this criticism has been aimed at the functioning of the collegium – a body of senior judges that makes binding recommendations on appointments and the transfer of judges. The Union Minister of Law and Justice, Kiren Rijju, and indeed Mr. Dhankhar, have repeatedly doubted the Court's judgment in 2015, in which it struck down efforts to replace the collegium with a National Judicial Appointments Commission (NJAC). That criticism has now turned sharper, with the Vice-President's diatribe against *Kesavananda*.

In his maiden address to the Rajya Sabha in December 2022, Mr. Dhankhar claimed that the striking down of the NJAC had no parallels in democratic history. A "duly legitimised constitutional prescription," he claimed, "has been judicially undone." Speaking on January 11 at the 83rd All India Presiding Officers (Assembly Speakers) Conference in Jaipur, Rajasthan, he said that "in a democratic society, the basic of any basic structure is supremacy of people, sovereignty of parliament...The ultimate power is with the legislature. Legislature also decides who will be there in other institutions. In such a situation, all institutions must confine to their domains. One must not make incursion in the domain of others."



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To suggest that the basic structure doctrine is by itself unsanctioned is to place the Constitution at the legislature's whim

Mr. Dhankhar then heightened his criticism by doubting the legitimacy of the basic structure doctrine. The correctness of the Court's view, he said, "must be deliberated...Can Parliament allow that its verdict will be subject to any other authority? In my maiden address after I assumed the office of Chairman of Rajya Sabha, I said this. I am not in doubt about it. This cannot happen."

To be sure, genuine criticism of both the Collegium's functioning and the Court's judgment upholding the body's legality ought to be welcomed. But seeing as the Government, as Mr. Rijju confirmed in Parliament last month, has no plans to implement any systemic change in the way we appoint judges, and given that the Government itself has done little to promote transparency in the process, the present reproach is, at its best, unprincipled, and, at its worst, an attempt at subverting the judiciary's autonomy. That it is likely the latter is clear from the fact that the Vice-President has now carried his denunciation to a point where his admonishments are reserved not just for the collegium but also for the ruling in *Kesavananda*.

The foundation of the Constitution

Were we to begin with the elementary premise that India's Constitution, as originally adopted, comprises a set of principles that together lend it an identity, we will see that the *raison d'être* for the basic structure doctrine is not difficult to grasp. On any reasonable reading of constitutional history, one can see that the Constitution is a product of a collective vision. That vision was built on distinct, if interwoven, ideals: among others, that India would be governed by the rule of law, that our structure of governance would rest on Westminster parliamentarianism, that the powers of the legislature, the executive and the judiciary would be separate, that the courts would be independent of government, and that our States would have absolute power over defined spheres of governance.

Now, ask yourself the following questions: what happens when an amendment made to the Constitution harms one or more of these principles in a manner that alters the Constitution's identity? Would the Constitution remain the same Constitution that was adopted in 1950? Should Parliament amend the Constitution to replace the Westminster system with a presidential style of governance, would the Constitution's character be preserved? Or consider something rather more radical: can Parliament, through amendment, efface the right to life guaranteed in Article 21? Would this not result in the creation of a document of

governance that is no longer "the Constitution of India?"

It is by pondering over questions of this nature that the majority in *Kesavananda* found that there was much that was correct in the German professor Dietrich Conrad's address in February 1965 at the Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi. There, Conrad had pointed out, that "any amending body organized within the statutory scheme, howsoever verbally unlimited its power, cannot by its very structure change the fundamental pillars supporting its constitutional authority".

As the Court would later explain in *Minerva Mills vs Union of India* (1980) – and incidentally at stake there was the very survival of the idea that fundamental rights are inviolable – "Parliament too is a creature of the Constitution". Therefore, it can only have such powers that are expressly vested on it. If those powers are seen as unlimited, Parliament, the Court found, "would cease to be an authority under the Constitution"; it would instead "become supreme over it, because it would have power to alter the entire Constitution including its basic structure". In other words, the principle that Parliament is proscribed from changing the Constitution's essential features is rooted in the knowledge that the Constitution, as originally adopted, was built on an intelligible moral foundation.

On this construction, it is possible to see the basic structure doctrine as implicit on a reading of the Constitution as a whole. But it is also deductible, as Justice H.R. Khanna wrote in his controlling opinion in *Kesavananda*, through an interpretation of the word "amendment". The dictionary defines "amendment" to mean a "minor change or addition designed to improve a text". As Justice Khanna saw it, when the Constitution that emerges out of a process of amendment as stipulated in Article 368 is not merely the Constitution in an altered form but a Constitution that is devoid of its basic structure, the procedure undertaken ceases to be a mere amendment.

Since its judgment in *Kesavananda*, the Supreme Court has identified several features that are immutable. There is no doubt that on occasion, the Court's interpretation of these features has suffered from incoherence. But to suggest that the basic structure doctrine is by itself unsanctioned is to place the Constitution at the legislature's whim. When taken to its extreme, accepting the Vice-President's claims would mean that, in theory, Parliament can abrogate its own powers and appoint a person of its choice as the country's dictator. Consider the consequences.

Check, do not cross

Government should work towards systemic reform; not attack the judiciary

There is something rude and unpleasant in the way the Government is going about the task of demanding a big say in the appointment of judges in constitutional courts. The latest salvo is from Union Law Minister Kiren Rijiju, who has written to the Chief Justice of India to request that the executive be given a role in the appointment process, which now is being handled by a Collegium of judges. Reports say that the Minister wants the formation of a search-and-evaluation committee, with Government representatives, to suggest names to the collegiums in the High Courts and the Supreme Court for appointments. He is also understood to have asked for a representative of the Union government in the Supreme Court collegium, and a State government's representative in the High Court collegiums. The letter comes as the latest in a series of official fulminations against the judiciary. Mr. Rijiju has been at the forefront of this attack, frequently questioning the collegium system by rightly highlighting some of its acknowledged flaws. There is little doubt that the Government's anger is towards the 2015 judgment of a Constitution Bench striking down the formation of a National Judicial Appointments Commission (NJAC). While few would disagree that the Collegium system needs reform, the Government's motive in carrying on a campaign against the judiciary in the name of seeking reform in the appointments process is questionable.

The answers to some of the issues raised by the Government are quite simple, and has been repeatedly pointed out by the Court, as well as the political opposition. It can address the need for a more transparent and independent process by making a fresh legislative effort to establish a neutral mechanism that does not impinge on the independence of the judiciary. Until such an exercise to amend the Constitution achieves fruition, it has to abide by the law of the land, that is, the present system of appointments through the Collegium. It is difficult to avoid the impression that the Government's tactics are bordering on veiled warnings: deliberately delaying action on recommendations; ignoring reiterated names even after multiple reconsiderations; and carrying on a campaign to delegitimise the institution. It is surprising that it seeks to rein in a judiciary that has been quite accommodative of the Government's concerns on the judicial side in recent years. The only conclusion is that the current regime wants absolute control over who gets to be a judge in this country. A system of checks and balances that prevents any one branch gaining the upper hand is essential for democratic functioning.

Centre alone cannot determine fake news, says Editors Guild

The Hindu Bureau

NEW DELHI

Expressing concern over a draft amendment made to the Information Technology Rules, 2021 by the Ministry of Electronics and IT (MeitY), which empowers the Press Information Bureau (PIB) to “fact-check” content and direct social media platforms to take down anything deemed “fake”, the Editors Guild of India (EGI) on Wednesday sought its removal.

It also urged the Ministry to initiate consultations with press bodies, media organisations and other stakeholders, on the regulatory framework for digital media, “so as to not undermine press freedom”.

‘Authority to PIB’

The EGI said the draft rule would give authority to the PIB to determine the veracity of news reports and anything termed ‘fake’ would have to be taken down by online intermediaries.

“...determination of fake news cannot be in the sole hands of the government and will result in the censorship of the press. Already multiple laws exist to deal with content that is found to be factually incorrect. This new procedure basically serves to make it easier to muzzle the free press, and will give sweeping powers to the PIB, or any other agency authorised by the Central government for fact checking, to force online intermediaries to take down content that the government may find problematic,” it said.

The EGI said the words “in respect of any business of the Central government” seemed to give the government *carte blanche* to determine what was fake or not with respect to its own work.

“This will stifle legitimate criticism of the government and will have an adverse impact on the ability of the press to hold governments to account,” it said.

Report flags widening learning gaps

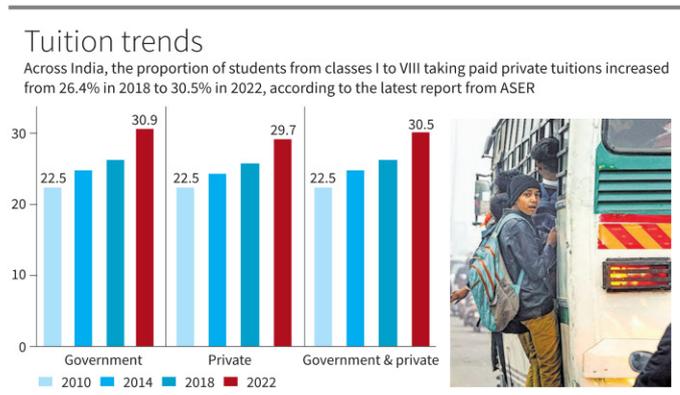
The ASER 2022 report shows that government schools saw a sharp rise in enrolment for the first time in 16 years; basic literacy levels of children have taken a big hit, with their reading ability, as compared with numeracy skills, worsening much more sharply and dropping to pre-2012 levels

Jagriti Chandra
NEW DELHI

As schools reopened after nearly two years of closure due to COVID-19, student enrolments increased to more than pre-pandemic levels, but the learning gap widened for foundational skills in reading and arithmetic, reversing several years of improvement, finds the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) 2022, released by Pratham, a non-governmental organisation, on Wednesday.

The national-level study shows that despite school closures during the pandemic, the overall enrolment figures, which have been above 95% for the past 15 years for the six-to-14 age group, increased from 97.2% in 2018 to 98.4% in 2022.

The ASER is a household survey conducted across 616 rural districts covering 6.9 lakh children in the three-to-16 age group to record their schooling status and assess their basic reading and arithmetic skills. The report is being brought out after four



years and records the impact of school closures in 2020 and 2021, as well as the return to school of children in 2022. The proportion of children in the three-to-16 age group who are not currently enrolled dropped to its lowest level ever from 2.8% to 1.6% in 2018, when the last full-scale ASER survey was conducted.

Government schools have seen a sharp increase in children enrolled from 65.6% in 2018 to 72.9% in 2022, reversing another trend of a steady decrease

in student enrolments seen since 2006, when it was at 73.4%. Children's basic literacy levels have taken a big hit, with their reading ability compared with numeracy skills worsening much more sharply and dropping to pre-2012 levels.

The percentage of children in Class 3 in government or private schools who were able to read at the level of Class 2 dropped from 27.3% in 2018 to 20.5% in 2022. This decline is visible in every State, and for children in both government and private

schools. The States showing a decline of more than 10 percentage points from the 2018 levels include those that had higher reading levels in 2018, such as Kerala (from 52.1% in 2018 to 38.7% in 2022), Himachal Pradesh (47.7% to 28.4%), and Haryana (46.4% to 31.5%). Large drops are also visible in Andhra Pradesh (22.6% to 10.3%) and Telangana (18.1% to 5.2%).

Nationally, the proportion of children enrolled in Class 5 in government or private schools who can at

least read a Class 2-level text fell from 50.5% in 2018 to 42.8% in 2022. The States showing a decrease of 15 percentage points or more include Andhra Pradesh (from 59.7% in 2018 to 36.3% in 2022), Gujarat (from 53.8% to 34.2%), and Himachal Pradesh (from 76.9% to 61.3%).

Basic reading ability

The drops in basic reading ability are smaller for Class 8 students, where 69.6% of children enrolled in government or private schools who could read at least basic text in 2022 falling from 73% in 2018.

Class 3 students who were able to at least subtract dropped from 28.2% in 2018 to 25.9% in 2022. While Jammu and Kashmir, Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh maintained or improved slightly over 2018 levels, steep drops of more than 10 percentage points are visible in Tamil Nadu. The proportion of children in Class 5 across India who can carry out division has also fallen slightly from 27.9% in 2018 to 25.6% in 2022.

The performance of

Class 8 students in basic arithmetic is more varied. Nationally, the proportion of children who can do division has increased slightly, from 44.1% in 2018 to 44.7% in 2022. This increase is driven by improved outcomes among girls as well as among children enrolled in government schools, whereas boys and children enrolled in private schools show a decline from the 2018 levels. Children in Class 8 in government schools did significantly better in 2022 than in 2018 in Uttar Pradesh (from 32% to 41.8%) and Chhattisgarh (from 28% to 38.6%), but were worse off in Punjab (from 58.4% to 44.5%).

While families withdrew students from private schools to save money on fees, they invested in private tuitions, which increased as the proportion of such students rose from 26.4% in 2018 to 30.5% in 2022 in private and government schools. This may be the reason learning gaps are sharper in reading because students typically choose to study maths and science in tuition classes.

'Oil demand may see high on China's COVID-19 reopening'

Two wild cards dominate this year's oil market outlook – Russia and China, says IEA; agency points out driver of 2023 GDP, oil demand growth will be timing, pace of China's recovery

Reuters
LONDON

The lifting of COVID-19 restrictions in China is set to boost global oil demand this year to a record high, the International Energy Agency (IEA) said on Wednesday, while price cap sanctions on Russia could dent supply.

"Two wild cards dominate the 2023 oil market outlook: Russia and China," the energy watchdog said in its monthly oil report. "Russian supply slows under the full impact

All eyes on China

Russian supply slows under the full impact of sanctions, while China will drive almost half the global demand growth



- Weak industrial activity and mild winter helped cut oil demand in OECD countries

- Main growth in oil supply is set to come from the U.S.

- Output from the OPEC+ producer group will decline, led by Russia

of sanctions (while) China will drive nearly half this global demand growth even as the shape and speed of its reopening re-

main uncertain."

Weak industrial activity and mild weather helped cut oil demand by close to a million barrels per day in

OECD countries in the last quarter of 2022. But despite likely mild recessions in Europe and the U.S., China's expected reopening is set to fuel rebounds in nearby Asian economies and see it take the lead from India as the leader in oil demand growth.

"The pre-eminent driver of 2023 GDP and oil demand growth will be the timing and pace of China's post-lockdown recovery," the IEA said.

The main growth in oil supply is set to come from the U.S. as output from the OPEC+ group will decline.

The conflict behind eco-sensitive zones

What mandate does the Forest Rights Act give gram sabhas? What is the difference between reserve forests, protected areas, community forest resource and ecologically sensitive zones? What were the problems with the implementation of ESZs? Why were there protests in Kerala against ESZs?

EXPLAINER

C.R. Bijoy

The story so far:

Ecologically sensitive zones (ESZ) are intended to safeguard 'protected areas' – national parks and wildlife sanctuaries – by transitioning from an area of lower protection to an area of higher protection. However, the creation of these zones has provoked protests in Kerala and some other regions, in a precursor to what is likely to emerge in other parts of the country.

What are protected areas?

Protected areas cover 5.26% of India's land area as 108 national parks and 564 wildlife sanctuaries. They are notified under the Wildlife (Protection) Act 1972. Protected areas do away with even those activities permitted in 'reserve forests', where the rights of forest-dependent communities – those residing on and/or accessing forest land – are extinguished, unless specifically allowed.

However, this rights-negating 'fortress conservation model', has come under repeated criticism from conservation scientists, bringing in the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act 2006 which is also known as the Forest Rights Act (FRA). FRA recognises the customary and traditional rights (both individual and collective) of forest-dwellers on forest land, including in protected areas.

How is the FRA being implemented?

By bringing in the FRA, lawmakers were trying to undo a historic injustice done to the forest dwelling community of India. The Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate Change (MoEFCC) reckoned in 2009 itself that doing so would mean handing over at least four lakh sq. km – more than half of India's notified forest area – to village-level institutions. But as of June 2022, only 64,873.70 sq. km – or 16% – has come under the FRA. (The actual area is likely smaller as some areas have been counted multiple times for different rights.)

However, this has been achieved in only a decade and a half, compared to no improvements in the six decades before. This is attributed to the gram sabhas which took over the power to determine rights through open democratic process from government officials. These gram sabhas are now the statutory authorities empowered to conserve, protect and manage forests, wildlife and biodiversity lying within the traditional village boundaries. These areas under gram sabhas are to be a new category of forests called 'community forest resource' (CFR). Gram sabhas have to integrate their CFR conservation and management plan into the 'working plan' of the Forest Department, with the required modifications.

What are ESZs?

Surrounding protected areas is a region of more than 1,11,000 sq. km – or 3.4% percent of the country's land – which falls under the ESZ regime. Governments have notified 341 ESZs in 29 States and five Union territories, while another 85 ESZs are awaiting notification. Together, protected areas and ESZs cover 8.66% of India's land area.

The ESZs span notified forests outside protected areas, most of which could also come under gram sabhas' jurisdiction under the FRA. The extent of ESZs from the boundary of a protected area ranges from 0 to as much as 45.82 km (in Pin Valley Na-



Extra protection: Amboori and Kallikkad Panchayat residents demanding the exemption of the Panchayats from the proposed ESZ zone, in Thiruvananthapuram in May, 2022. MAHINSHA.S

tional Park, Himachal Pradesh). Fifteen States have ESZs exceeding 10 km.

What is the problem?

Significantly, parts of the ESZs in ten States – Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Odisha, Rajasthan and Telangana – fall within the Scheduled Areas notified under the Fifth Schedule of the Constitution. Such Scheduled Areas cover over 11% of the country's land area and are thickly forested and mountainous. They are preponderantly populated by Scheduled Tribe groups and are notified by the President under Article 244 where the Provisions of the Panchayat (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act (PESA) 1996 apply. The PESA recognises habitation-level gram sabhas to be competent to safeguard and preserve community resources on forest and revenue lands in Scheduled Areas.

However, the MoEFCC has shown no inclination to amend the Indian Forest Act 1927, the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972 and the Environment (Protection) Act 1986 (under which ESZs are notified) to comply with the PESA and FRA. In fact, in the Forest Conservation Rules, compliance with the FRA, recognition of forest rights and the gram sabha's consent were preconditions for considering proposals to divert forest land for non-forestry purposes – until the MoEFCC did away with them in 2022. The Ministry has also overlooked demands by the National Commission for Scheduled Tribes to restore the erstwhile FRA compliance procedure.

How exactly were the ESZs implemented?

The 2002 Wildlife Conservation Strategy envisaged lands within 10 km of the boundaries of protected areas to be notified as ecologically fragile zones under Section 32(v) of the Environment Protection Act 1986 and its Rules 5(viii) and (x). The MoEFCC was to take steps to protect the environment by regulating and (if required) prohibiting industries, operations and processes. Rule 5(I)(vi) provided for environmentally compatible land-use in areas around protected areas.

In 2005, the National Board for Wildlife decided to delineate site-specific ESZs to regulate specific activities instead of prohibiting them. Therefore, in May 2005, the MoEFCC asked the States and UTs to propose ESZs.

The MoEFCC guidelines for ESZs stated that based on the forest rangers' inventory of land-use and wildlife corridors within 10 km of each protected area, a committee consisting of the Wildlife Warden, an ecologist, and an official from the local government was to determine the extent of each ESZ, the nature of environmental concerns to be addressed and ways to address them. The Chief Wildlife Warden was to then list the activities that were to be prohibited, to be restricted with safeguards and to be permitted.

After this process, the State government would submit this list, the geographical description of the area and the biodiversity values, the rights and entitlements of local communities, and their economic potential and implications for their livelihoods, as a proposal to the MoEFCC for notification. The guidelines also outlined a general indicative list of activities to be prohibited, regulated or permitted and information to be incorporated in the proposal.

Within two years of notification, the State government is required to draft a Zonal Master Plan for each ESZ in consultation with a number of departments. However, there has been no information to the public on a Zonal Master Plan since 2012, when ESZs first began to be notified.

Additionally, to monitor compliance with the various provisions of each notification, a State had to set up a monitoring committee for each ESZ. The committee is required to report the actions taken, to the Chief Wildlife Warden every year.

Unfortunately, the institutional mechanisms and procedures prescribed in the guidelines and the ESZ notifications disregarded many legal facts and statutory requirements. They set aside the habitation-level gram sabhas in Scheduled Area and CFR forests and the Panchayat-raj institutions entrusted with soil conservation, water management, social forestry,

etc., even though those activities fall squarely within the scope of ESZs. In effect, what ought to have been a location, community and ecology specific plan, arrived at through people's informed participation, became a 'one size fits all' notification.

What has led to the protests?

On June 3, 2022, the Supreme Court gave further directions on ESZs. First, the Court said that the MoEFCC guidelines are also to be implemented in the area proposed in the draft notification awaiting finalisation and within a 10-km radius of yet-to-be-proposed protected areas. The Court also allowed States to increase or decrease the minimum width of ESZs. Secondly, the Court vested the powers to ensure compliance with the guidelines with the Principal Chief Conservator of Forests (PCCF) and the Home Secretary of the State/UT. The PCCF was to make a list of all structures within the ESZs and report it to the Supreme Court within three months (this is yet to be done). The Court also ordered that no new permanent structure could come up for any purpose within an ESZ.

This effectively meant that all the activities permitted by the guidelines and which are already being carried out can continue only if the PCCF grants permission, and that too within six months of the court's order. This period has already expired. Additionally, the Court's directions have put the lives of many people in the hands of the PCCF – whose authority now extends beyond the forest to revenue lands falling within an ESZ. This has led to protests in Kerala.

The new structures that are banned could include electric poles, buildings, walls, roads and bridges. Millions of forest-dwellers living on forest land and on the fringes of forests are the most affected. After having been denied forest rights, they are now also denied better public infrastructure. The government and the judiciary need to reconcile laws, reaffirm democratic governance, and protect the environment and as well as livelihoods.

C.R. Bijoy examines resource conflicts and governance issues.

THE GIST

Ecologically sensitive zones (ESZ) are intended to safeguard 'protected areas' – national parks and wildlife sanctuaries – by transitioning from an area of lower protection to an area of higher protection.

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However, the ESZs span notified forests outside protected areas, most of which could also come under gram sabhas' jurisdiction under the FRA. The extent of ESZs from the boundary of a protected area ranges from 0 to as much as 45.82 km (in Pin Valley National Park, Himachal Pradesh).

Spot-bellied eagle owl spotted in A.P.'s Seshachalam forest for the first time

The Hindu Bureau

TIRUPATI

A wildlife team recently stumbled upon a spot-bellied eagle owl (*Bubo Nipalensis*) for the first time in the Seshachalam forest, and for the third time in Andhra Pradesh.

The bird's habitat, found on large trees in thick forests, is spread across the Indian subcontinent. But it was sighted only twice in the State earlier, and both the times it was at Nagarjunasagar Srisailem Tiger Reserve (NSTR).

A team, comprising ornithologist K. Karthik Sai, wildlife photographer Gopi Lakkala and Bhakarape-



The Mottled wood owl, and, right, the spot-bellied eagle owl sighted in Chamala forest and Seshachalam forest, respectively.

ta Forest Range Officer Datatreya, spotted the bird on January 7 when it ventured into the Talakona forest



area. The bold predatory bird, measuring 20-25 inches in length and weighing between 1.5 kg and 2

kg, feeds on small rodents and lizards.

"The bird makes a strange scream similar to humans and it is hence called the 'ghost of the forest' in India and 'devil bird' in Sri Lanka," Mr. Karthik Sai told *The Hindu*.

The team also spotted a 'Mottled wood owl' (*Strix Ocellata*) last weekend in the fields abutting Chamala forest on the Tirupati-Annamayya inter-district border. Though both are labelled as 'least concern' in terms of population stability, the development assumes significance in view of their maiden sighting in the verdant Seshachalam ranges.

'Objectives of SIMI against basic fabric of Constitution'

SIMI aims to mobilise students/youth in the propagation of Islam and obtain support for jihad, the Centre tells Supreme Court in its affidavit, while listing reasons for banning the organisation

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

The Students Islamic Movement of India (SIMI) is mobilising Muslim support to create a "caliphate", it wants to replace Indian nationalism with an "international Islamic order" and considers idol worship a "sin", the Union Home Ministry has listed objectives before the Supreme Court for banning the organisation.

A petition seeking to revoke a July 2019 ban on SIMI as an unlawful association under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, 1967 came before a Bench led by Justice Sanjay Kishan Kaul on Wednesday. The court adjourned the hearing.

The Home Ministry, in an affidavit, said the objectives of SIMI was against the basic fabric of Constitution.



"SIMI aims to mobilise students/youth in the propagation of Islam and obtain support for jihad. The organisation also emphasises on the formation of *Shariat* based Islamic rule through *Islami Inqalab*. The organisation does not believe in nation-state or in the Indian Constitution, including its secular nature. It further regards idol worship as a sin, and propagates its 'duty' to end such practices," the affidavit said.

The Centre said the financial situation of SIMI

 SIMI is influenced by and used by various fundamentalist Islamic terrorist organisations operating *inter alia* from the State of J&K

CENTRE'S AFFIDAVIT IN SUPREME COURT

was "sound", with donations and memberships from Gulf countries. The funds received within the country can be broadly classified in two different heads; *jhakat*/donation and funds by robberies and dacoities.

Wide reach

"SIMI through its members has contacts in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, Bangladesh and Nepal. Being an organisation for students/youth, SIMI is influenced by and used by various fundamentalist Is-

lamic terrorist organisations operating *inter alia* from the State of Jammu & Kashmir," the affidavit said.

Terrorist organisations such as Hizb-ul-Mujahideen (HM) and Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) have successfully managed to penetrate into the SIMI cadres to achieve their anti-national goals. It is active in States including Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Uttar Pradesh, Delhi, Gujarat, Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Rajasthan and West Bengal.

It has regrouped under names such as 'Wahadat-e-Islami' in Tamil Nadu; 'Indian Mujahideen' in Rajasthan, Karnataka, Gujarat, Andhra Pradesh and Delhi; 'Ansarullah' in Karnataka; 'Muslim Muttahida Mihaad' in Uttar Pradesh; 'Wahadat-e-Ummat' in Madhya Pradesh; and 'Nagarik Adhikar Suraksha Manch' in West Bengal, it said.

General Studies Paper I	
A	History of Indian culture will cover the salient aspects of art forms, literature and architecture from ancient to modern times;
B	Modern Indian history from about the middle of the eighteenth century until the present-significant events, personalities, issues;
C	Freedom struggle-its various stages and important contributors / contributions from different parts of the country;
D	Post-independence consolidation and reorganization within the country;
E	History of the world will include events from 18 th century such as industrial revolution, world wars, re-drawing of national boundaries, colonization, decolonization,
F	Political philosophies like communism, capitalism, socialism etc.-their forms and effect on the society
G	Salient features of Indian Society, Diversity of India;
H	Effects of globalization on Indian society;
I	Role of women and women's organization;
J	Social empowerment, communalism, regionalism & secularism
K	Salient features of world's physical geography;
L	Geographical features and their location- changes in critical geographical features (including water bodies and ice-caps) and in flora and fauna and the effects of such changes;
M	Important Geophysical phenomena such as earthquakes, Tsunami, Volcanic activity, cyclone etc.
N	Distribution of key natural resources across the world (including South Asia and the Indian subcontinent);
O	Factors responsible for the location of primary, secondary, and tertiary sector industries in various parts of the world (including India);
P	Population and associated issues;
Q	Urbanization, their problems and their remedies
General Studies Paper II	
A	India and its neighbourhood- relations;
B	Important International institutions, agencies and fora- their structure, mandate;
C	Effect of policies and politics of developed and developing countries on India's interests;
D	Bilateral, regional and global groupings and agreements involving India and/or affecting India's interests.
E	Indian Constitution, historical underpinnings, evolution, features, amendments, significant provisions and basic structure;
F	Comparison of the Indian Constitutional scheme with other countries;
G	Functions and responsibilities of the Union and the States, issues and challenges pertaining to the federal structure, devolution of powers and finances up to local levels and challenges therein; Inclusive growth and issues arising from it;
H	Parliament and State Legislatures - structure, functioning, conduct of business, powers & privileges and issues arising out of these;
I	Structure, organization and functioning of the executive and the judiciary, Ministries and Departments;

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

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