

● POLITY

● ECONOMICS

● TECHNOLOGY

● ECOLOGY

COWIN VACCINATION DATA OUT, GOVT. DENIES BREACH

NEW DELHI

After an alleged data leak of COVID vaccination beneficiaries, including several politicians, the Union Health Ministry on Monday said such reports were "without any basis and mischievous in nature". The CoWIN portal was completely safe with adequate safeguards for data privacy, it maintained. Among those whose personal details were allegedly leaked are CoWIN chairman Ram Sewak Sarma (ID submitted for vaccination), senior BJP leader Meenakshi Lekhi and Congress general secretary K.C. Venugopal (location at which they got vaccinated), and Kerala Health Minister Veena George (the mode of registration).

As per reports, the data breach is possible if the mobile number of a person is entered — details such as the identification number of the document submitted (Aadhaar, passport, PAN and so forth), gender, date of birth, and the centre where the vaccine was administered, are provided as reply in an instant by the messenger bot in question.

These details could be accessed even if the Aadhaar number was entered instead of the phone number. The passport numbers of those who had updated the CoWIN portal for travel abroad were also leaked.

'CoWIN still safe'

Rajeev Chandrasekhar, Union Minister of State for Electronics, and Information Technology, clarified that the data being accessed by the bot from a threat actor database seems to have been populated with previously breached data. "It does not appear that CoWIN app or database has been directly breached," he tweeted, adding that the database was other than CoWIN.

Further, he tweeted that a Telegram Bot was throwing up CoWIN app details upon entry of phone numbers. "The national data governance policy has been finalised that will create a common framework of data storage, access and security across all of government," he said.

However, what is more worrying is the fact that CoWIN, which serves the functions of registration, appointment scheduling, identity verification, vaccination, and certification of each vaccinated member, has also been integrated in the Aarogya Setu and UMANG Apps.

UMANG (Unified Mobile Application for New-age Governance) is developed by the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY) and National e-Governance Division (NeGD) to drive mobile governance in India. UMANG provides a single platform for all Indian citizens to access pan India e-Gov services.

Internal exercise

The Union Health Ministry, however, said it requested the Indian Computer Emergency Response Team (CERT-In) to investigate this issue and submit a report. In addition, an internal exercise has been initiated to review the existing security measures of CoWIN. "CERT-In, in its initial report, has pointed out that back-end database for the Telegram bot was not directly accessing the APIs of CoWIN database," the Ministry said.

In safe hands?

The CoWIN portal, according to the Health Ministry, has adequate safeguards for data privacy

Vaccinated beneficiary data for CoWIN app is available at three levels, as below:

■ **Beneficiary dashboard:** A vaccinated person can have access data using registered mobile number with OTP authentication

■ **CoWIN authorised user:** The vaccinator can access data of vaccinated beneficiaries using authentic login credentials, though CoWIN system logs every authorized access



■ **API based access:** Third-party apps with authorised access of CoWIN APIs can access data of beneficiaries through beneficiary OTP authentication

Union IT Ministry says breached data were previously stolen but not from CoWIN portal; Indian Computer Emergency Response Team (CERT-In) set to investigate the issue and submit a report

The bot (a programme that behaves like a normal chat partner with additional functions) on Telegram is also giving details of individuals and several Opposition leaders' data including Rajya Sabha member Derek O'Brien, former Union Minister P. Chidambaram, Congress leaders Jairam Ramesh, Rajya Sabha Deputy Chairman Harivansh Narayan Singh, Rajya Sabha members Sushmita Dev, Abhishek Manu Singhvi, and Sanjay Raut, among others.

While there have been multiple questions about the leaks, health authorities have maintained that CoWIN has state-of-the-art secure infrastructure and has never faced a security breach and even maintained that the data of the citizens are safe. This is not the first time that such a leak has been reported. In June 2021, a hacker group named 'Dark Leak Market' claimed that it had the database of about 15 crore Indians who registered themselves on the CoWIN portal. Health authorities had rubbished the claims then.

RETAIL INFLATION COOLED DOWN TO 4.25% IN MAY

Cooling down

India's retail inflation decelerated to 4.25% in May from 4.7% in April. Retail inflation has been below RBI's upper threshold of 6% and is now closer to RBI's medium-term target of 4%



NEW DELHI

India's retail inflation eased further in May to a 20-month low of 4.25%, from 4.7% in April, with price rise in food items faced by consumers moderating to 2.91%. This is the third successive month that inflation has remained below the Reserve Bank of India's (RBI's) upper tolerance limit of 6% after a prolonged streak above it.

Base effects from May 2022 when retail inflation was over 7% also played a role in lowering the inflation rate this May. On a month-on-month basis, however, price levels continued to firm up, with the Consumer Price Index (CPI) rising 0.51% for the second successive month, while the Consumer Food Price Index (CFPI) ticked up 0.7%, compared to 0.6% in April.

Urban consumers faced slightly higher inflation at 4.27% than their rural counterparts (4.17%).

However, food inflation was lower in urban areas, easing significantly to 2.43% from 3.7% a month earlier. In comparison, rural food price rise moderation was less benign, cooling to 3.2% in May from 3.9% in April.

Among food items, vegetables and edible oils contributed the most to the cooling inflation pace, with prices falling 16% and 8.8% from May 2022 levels, respectively. At the same time, inflation in cereals (12.7%), pulses (6.6%), milk (8.91%) and spices (17.9%) remained areas of concern.

Key factors to watch

Economists said the delayed onset of the monsoon and the El Nino factor are key factors to watch to ascertain the trajectory of food prices and overall inflation. They expect inflation to average below the central bank's 4.6%

projection in the first quarter of 2023-24 even if June's inflation print inches up. Bank of Baroda chief economist Madan Sabnavis said 6%-plus inflation in household goods, personal care and health was a cause of some concern as it signals companies were still in the process of passing on higher input costs to consumers. While May's inflation print is an endorsement of the RBI Monetary Policy Committee decision to hold interest rates again this month, ICRA chief economist Aditi Nayar believes rate cuts are still distant.

RBI PERMITS BANKS TO SETTLE WILFUL DEFAULT, FRAUD ACCOUNTS

MUMBAI

To ensure maximum recovery from distressed assets, the Reserve Bank of India has allowed banks to go for compromise settlement of fraud accounts and wilful defaults.

All regulated entities will be required to put in place board-approved policies for undertaking compromise settlements with borrowers as well as for technical write-offs laying down the process to be followed, the RBI said in a notification.

U.S. DECIDES TO RETURN TO UNESCO'S FOLD

PARIS

The UN cultural and scientific agency UNESCO announced on Monday that the U.S. plans to rejoin — and pay more than \$600 million in back dues — after a decade-long dispute sparked by the organisation's move to include Palestine as a member. U.S. officials say the decision to return was motivated by concern that China is filling the gap left by the U.S. in UNESCO policymaking.

APRIL INDUSTRIAL OUTPUT GROWS 4.2%, RISES FROM 5-MONTH LOW

Electricity generation contracted for the second month in a row; manufacturing and mining grew about 5% while consumer durables continued to shrink for the fifth month in a row, sliding 3.5%

NEW DELHI

Industrial output grew 4.2% in April, rising from a five-month low in March, with electricity generation contracting for the second month in a row, even as manufacturing and mining grew about 5%.

April's industrial growth still reflected the second slowest uptick in six months, even as the National Statistical Office revised the Index of Industrial Production (IIP) for March to show that production had grown 2.3% instead of the earlier estimate of 1.1%. Electricity, which contracted 1.6% in March, shrank 1.1% in April, possibly due to unseasonal rains subduing demand. Consumer durables dipped 3.5%, shrinking for the fifth month in a row. Bank of Baroda chief economist Madan Sabnavis said this was surprising as demand usually picks up the post-Rabi harvest season. The manufacturing uptick was led by infrastructure and construction goods, which surged 12.8%, and consumer non-durables that grew 10.7%. Capital goods grew 6.2%.

"Industrial recovery is still uneven; just 4.5% higher in April than the pre-COVID level of February 2020," said Sunil Sinha, principal economist at India Ratings and Research.

Hesitant climb

April's growth still reflected the second-slowest uptick in 6 months, even as the NSO revised upwards March's IIP estimates



- Electricity contracted 1.6% in March after shrinking 1.1% in April
- Unseasonal rains likely impacted power demand
- Consumer durables dipped 3.5%, shrinking for the fifth month in a row

INDIA, UAE TARGET \$100 BN IN NON-OIL TRADE BY 2030

An India-UAE CEPA council will be set up, says Piyush Goyal.

NEW DELHI

India and the UAE on Monday set a target to increase the non-oil trade from the current \$48 billion to \$100 billion by 2030.

The goal to achieve \$100 billion in non-oil trade was set during the first meeting of the Joint Committee of India-UAE Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA).

"We have a mutually agreed (for a) target of \$100 billion in bilateral trade by 2030," Commerce and Industry Minister Piyush Goyal told reporters after the meeting.

The target of \$100 billion will not include the oil trade. It was also agreed to set up certain sub-committees and councils.

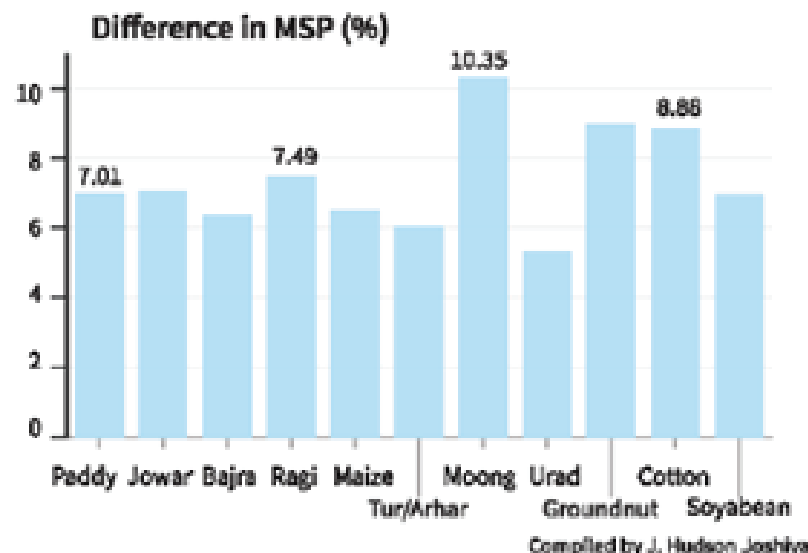
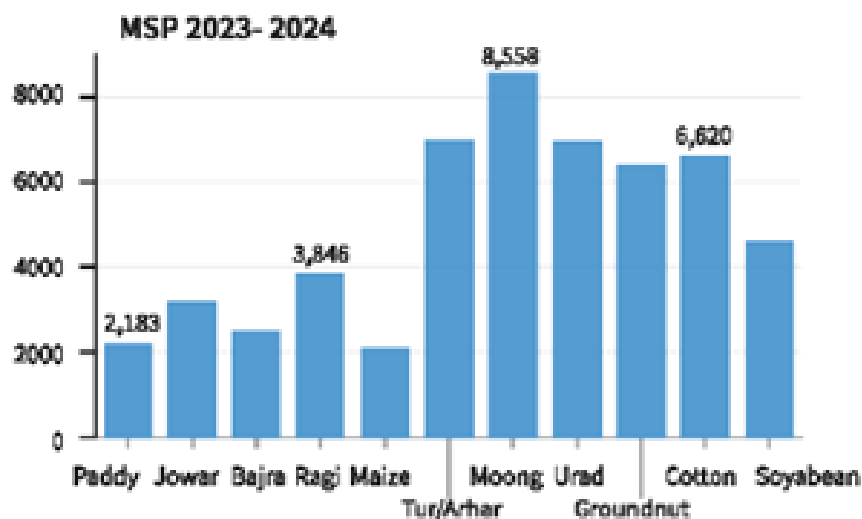
In the meeting, it was also decided to set up a new sub-committee to handle issues related to services trade. Mr. Goyal said an India-UAE CEPA council will be set up to further facilitate the implementation of the agreement.



WILL A HIKE IN MSP HELP FARMERS?

Benchmark rises

In the latest minimum support price (MSP) announced by the Centre, there has been a 5-10% hike in prices for kharif crops from the last season. A look at the (MSP) for select kharif crops for marketing season 2023-24 and their difference from the last season



Last week, the Centre announced the Minimum Support Price (MSP) for this year's summer (kharif) season crops, hiking prices between 5-10% from last season, "to ensure remunerative prices to growers for their produce and to encourage crop diversification." A section of farmer representatives have expressed unhappiness over what they term as a 'meagre' hike in the MSP, defeating the government's intent of securing a "remunerative price". On the other hand, agriculture domain experts believe that an increase in the MSP may give a slight respite to growers, but argue that in the absence of any dependable or assured market mechanism of procurement-purchase for crops on the MSP in most parts of the country, the purpose of encouraging "crop diversification" gets defeated.

How does the MSP work?

The MSP, which is a part of the government's agricultural price policy, is the price at which the government offers to procure farmers' produce during the season. It works as a tool to stabilise production and to control consumer prices, yet farmers across the country have been facing problems of selling their produce at the MSP. Delays in establishing procurement centres, exploitation at the hands of commission agents, who most of the time buy the produce from farmers below the MSP, and a lack of awareness about the MSP among a large section of farmers, are some of the challenges growers have been facing for years now. Against this background, farmers have been demanding a 'legal status' to the MSP. The government, including the Centre and States, ought to come up with a system to set up an 'assured market mechanism,' point out farmers. The MSP has little meaning unless farmers' produce is procured/purchased at the assured price.

What is the government's announcement?

On June 7, the government announced the MSP for 17 'kharif' crops, like paddy, pulses (moong, arhar, urad), oilseeds like groundnut and soyabean and cotton, for the marketing season of 2023-24. These were approved at a meeting of the Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs (CCEA). According to the government statement, the increase in MSP is in line with the Union Budget 2018-19 announcement of fixing the MSP at a level of at least 1.5 times the all-India weighted average cost of production, which aims at a reasonably fair remuneration for the farmers. Food Minister Piyush Goyal said the increase in MSP of kharif crops for this year is the highest compared to previous years.

Why are farmers worried?

Several farmers' outfits have expressed their discontentment over the latest MSP for the summer crops, terming it as insufficient. According to the All India Kisan Sabha, the declared MSP is "unfair, belies the hopes of the farmers and inflicts huge losses in their incomes." Rising input costs coupled with unfair MSP will push large sections of farmers, especially the small, marginal, and middle-level farmers, as well as tenants into indebtedness, says Ashok Dhawale, president of AIKS. The longstanding promise made by the Bharatiya Janata Party

in 2014 that the MSP will be given according to the Swaminathan Commission recommendation of C2+50% (C2 or comprehensive cost of production) remains an unfulfilled election promise, he adds.

The Bharatiya Kisan Union (Ekta-Ugrahan), one of the largest farmer unions in Punjab and a member of the Samyukta Kisan Morcha (SKM), the umbrella body of around 500 farmer outfits, has dismissed the MSP hike, saying that the government's notion of ensuring 1.5 times the cost of production on crops does not help in addressing the farmers' plight as it does not provide remunerative price. "It's merely an eyewash," says the outfit leader Sukhdev Singh Korikalan, as he adds that MSP should be based on the Swaminathan Commission's formula of C2+50%. "Also, the government needs to make MSP a statutory right of the farmers. Farmers need to have an assurance that their crops will be purchased at the MSP to survive in the otherwise economically-unsustainable agricultural sector," he points out.

What are agriculture experts saying?

Noted economist Dr. Ranjit Singh Ghuman, currently a professor of eminence (Economics) at Guru Nanak Dev University in Amritsar, points out that the past track record shows that only three to four crops (mainly wheat, paddy and cotton and at times some pulses), were being procured at MSP while the remaining crops were being procured at much below the MSP.

"This is mainly because the farmers are left at the mercy of market forces and the private players. Non-implementation of MSP and below-MSP-procurement of a large number of crops, inter alia, has been one of the major hurdles in 'crop diversification' which is so vital for Indian agriculture and in saving the environment. Ineffective implementation of MSP and 'non-procurement' of all the crops at the MSP is also one of the main concerns of farmers. Such a scenario builds a strong rationale for giving 'legal status' to MSP as it is the floor or reference price. This does not imply that the government should procure all those crops but would certainly bind the private players to procure those crops at least at the MSP. While facilitating crop-diversification it would raise farmers' income which is being propagated by the government," he says.

What about foodgrain stock?

As per third advance estimates for 2022-23, total foodgrain production in the country is estimated at a record 330.5 million tonnes which is higher by 14.9 million tonnes compared to 2021-22. This is the highest increase in the last five years, according to government data. The total stocks of rice and wheat held by Food Corporation of India (FCI) and State agencies as on May 1, 2023, was 555.34 lakh tonnes comprising 265.06 lakh tonnes of rice and 290.28 lakh tonnes of wheat.

Former professor at the Ludhiana-based Punjab Agricultural University, M.S. Sidhu, asserts that the delay in monsoon would impact cropping in non-irrigated regions of the country. "Around 51% area in the country is

rain-fed, so if rains are delayed some impact is bound to be seen. But the country's foodgrains stocks are at a comfortable level, there's nothing to worry as of now," he adds.

What lies ahead?

The MSP attempts to strike a balance between the interest of growers and consumers. The government's price support policy attempts to provide a fair return to farmers while keeping in view the interest of consumers in a way that

prices of food and other agricultural commodities are kept at a reasonable level. Farming over the years, for the majority, especially small and marginal farmers, has not turned out to be remunerative. A rise in their income could be the long-term answer to farmers' financial distress. To ensure this rise in income, the government should focus on setting up an effective system to provide assured purchase and returns to farmers for all major crops at the MSP, as is done in the case of wheat and rice or extend subsidies on input costs.

COVID, GEOPOLITICAL TENSIONS AFFECTED DEVELOPMENT: MODI

Development in the global south was impacted by "geopolitical tensions" and the COVID-19 pandemic, said Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Monday. Inaugurating the G-20 Development Ministers' meeting in Varanasi, Mr. Modi called for "inclusive and fair" attempts to achieve global developmental goals, and said India is following a "women-led" development model. Speaking on the occasion, External Affairs Minister (EAM) highlighted the requirement to deal with supply chain disruptions and reminded the developed economies that "cherry-picking" is not an effective approach to deal with collective challenges.

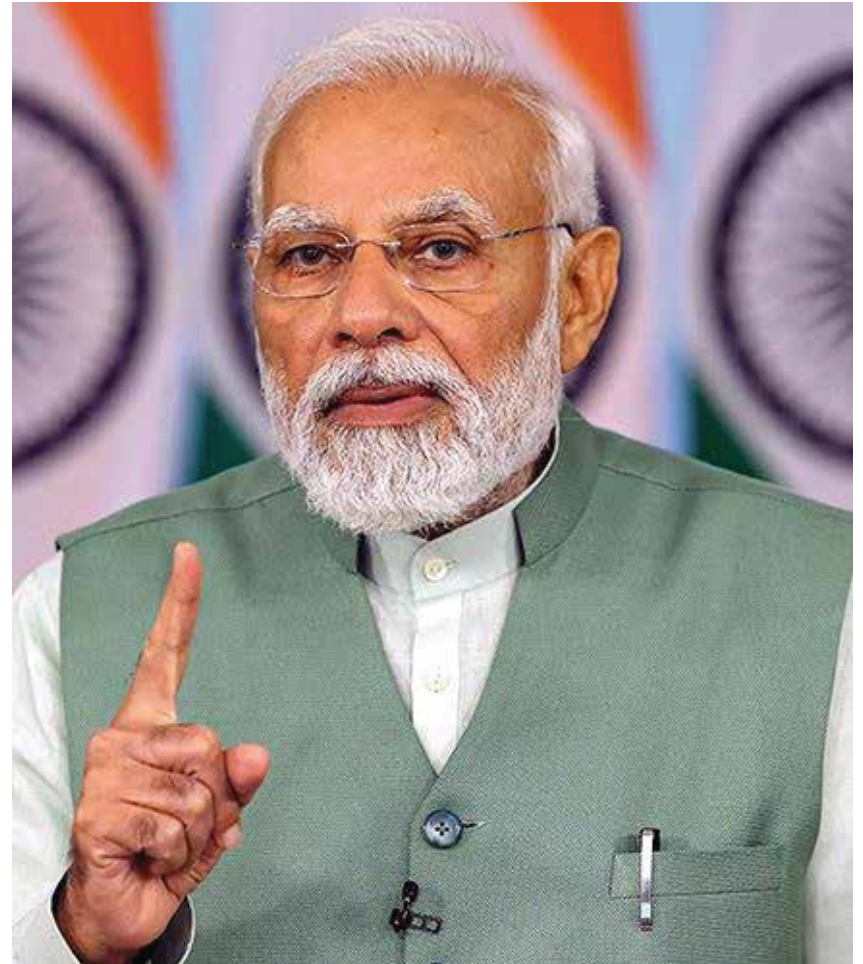
"Development is a core issue for the Global South. The countries of Global South were severely impacted by the disruptions created by the Global COVID pandemic. And, the food, fuel and fertilizer crises because of geopolitical tensions have delivered another blow. We must ensure that no one is left behind," said Prime Minister Modi in a video message that was played at the beginning of the event. India, the current Chair of the G-20, is hosting the G-20 Development Ministers' Meeting in Varanasi with a focus on supply chain disruptions, food and energy security challenges, climate change and post-pandemic recovery. In his speech, Mr. Modi did not make a clear mention of the Ukraine crisis that has featured prominently in all the G-20-related events that India has hosted so far.

The issue, however, featured in the "Outcome Document & Chair's Summary" of the meeting that informed that the members discussed the conflict during the deliberations. "Most members strongly condemned the war in Ukraine and stressed it is causing immense human suffering and exacerbating existing fragilities in the global economy," the Outcome Document stated.

Overcome challenges

In his remarks PM Modi urged the G-20 to overcome challenges posed by "data divide" and said "high quality" data is critical for development goals and said, "Technology is being used as a tool to empower people, make data accessible, and ensure inclusivity. India is willing to share its experience with partner countries."

Mr. Modi further said that women are setting the developmental targets and urged for the G-20 to adopt the Action Plan for Women-led Development.



Narendra Modi

ASSAM CM PLACES CENTRE'S PEACE PLAN BEFORE KUKI INSURGENT GROUPS



People walk past the charred remains of houses following fresh violence in Manipur on Monday. ANI

Meeting held in Guwahati; plan is to deploy Central forces in zones between Kuki and Meitei settlements; tribal man dies after being hit by bullet, three injured in another clash; two prominent personalities withdraw from peace committee

NEW DELHI/ IMPHAL

Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Sunday met Kuki militant groups offering them a peace plan on behalf of the Union government.

The armed groups had signed a suspension of operation (SoO) pact with the Centre and the Manipur government in 2008 for a political settlement of their demands for self-governance.

On Monday, a 22-year-old tribal man identified as Muansang was killed after he was hit by a bullet at Loilaphai village on the boundary of Churachandpur and Bishnupur districts in Manipur. "The exact circumstances of the attack are not known. There was no State police or Central police force in the area at the time of the incident. The place is not among the identified vulnerable areas," Karthik Malladi, Superintendent of Police, Churachandpur, told The Hindu.

The Indigenous Tribal Leaders' Forum (ITLF) accused Meitei separatist groups for the killing.

In another incident, at least three Meitei villagers were injured in an exchange of fire between two groups on Monday morning in Imphal East.

In his meeting with the groups under SoO in Guwahati, Mr. Sarma is learnt to have conveyed that the Central Armed Police Forces will be deployed in the "buffer zones" or foothills, the areas at the junction of Kuki and Meitei settlements, in two to three days. Most incidents, gunfight and arson have been reported from these zones since the ethnic violence erupted on May 3 that has claimed over 100 lives.

The SoO groups assured Mr. Sarma that the armed village guards deployed at the foothills to defend villages from attack by Meitei groups will be withdrawn as soon as the Central forces are deployed, a SoO member who attended the meeting told The Hindu.

Mr. Sarma, who was sent to Imphal last week by Home Minister Amit Shah to carry forward the peace negotiations, had met Meitei civil society groups where the Centre's peace plan was discussed.

Committee nominees

Meanwhile, two prominent personalities of theatre and literature — Ratan Thiyam and Makkonmani Mongsaba — who were in the 51-member Peace Committee announced by the Centre, have sent their resignation letters to the Governor, citing work commitments. However, sources close to them told The Hindu that they were not pleased as their names were included in the committee without even informing them.

The influential Coordinating Committee on Manipur Integrity (COCOMI), a civil society group in Imphal, also withdrew from the peace committee.

THE SECOND BEST

India, after a hectic IPL, seemed unprepared for the WTC final

India's title drought in ICC events continued as the dust finally settled at London's Oval. Sunday's 209-run defeat against Australia in the World Test Championship final meant that India yet again finished as second best. In 2021, New Zealand had humbled Virat Kohli's men in the summit clash that concluded at Southampton. Cut to the present, it was Rohit Sharma's men who suffered a loss; cumulatively, it extended India's long gap in winning ICC silverware, with the last title being the 2013 ICC Champions Trophy. If South Africa choked in the past at vital moments, India seems to be the natural successor in doing the hard yards while always being short of breath at the finish line. This time however the hopes were centred on India's better record against Australia, both at home and away. There was a recency bias at play too as since the 2018-19 season, India always prevailed over Australia in the longer format. However, Australia with a better record in ICC events starting from winning the 1987 World Cup at Eden Gardens, proved too tough an opponent. India's pursuit of a miracle on the fifth day wilted as a poor first innings and a bowling unit struggling to strike had left Rohit's men with too steep a mountain to climb.

Having flown in from the Indian Premier League, the Indian Test squad

was under-cooked. To shed the Twenty20's frenzied spirit and slip into a Test's battle of attrition proved tough. The think-tank, influenced by overcast skies and some grass on the surface, stepped in with four seamers and the lone spinner in Ravindra Jadeja, while off-spinner R. Ashwin was inexplicably overlooked. It was a selection call that went awry as the weather stayed clear and the surface offered enough for both speedsters and spinners as evident in the performances of Aussies Scott Boland and Nathan Lyon. While Steve Smith and Travis Head posted hundreds, the Indian batters flickered despite Ajinkya Rahane's fine show in the first outing. That Rohit, Kohli, Cheteshwar Pujara and Rahane are all on the wrong side of the thirties has dragged in ageism and transition blues. Bowlers need runs to defend and exert pressure and it is a luxury that has largely eluded the current unit. The selectors along with coach Rahul Dravid and skipper Rohit have to find a way. The ICC ODI World Cup later this year in India is another significant milestone and there has to be absolute clarity about team compositions be it for Tests, ODIs or T20s even if it means that hard measures have to be implemented.

WRESTLERS' PROTEST AND THE SHRINKING SPACE FOR DIS-

Zoya Hasan is Professor Emerita, Centre for Political Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University

Public protests have long served as a catalyst for social and policy change in India, allowing individuals, classes and communities to voice their grievances and advocate for their rights. Over the past few years, protests have risen with bewildering rapidity. Protests had opened up space for a new era of social activism in the decade that the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government was in power. The Bharatiya Janata Party-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government too has faced considerable opposition from a range of groups but has treated it very differently from previous governments.

From Nirbhaya to the present

In December 2012, people around the world watched as thousands took to the streets in the Central Vista of New Delhi following the brutal gang rape of a 23-year-old physiotherapy student (Nirbhaya). The protests became so intense and the public outrage was so great that the UPA government was compelled to address issues of sexual violence at the policy level, through the introduction of the new Criminal Law (Amendment) Act 2013 to bring stricter punishments and broaden the scope of offences.

Fast forward to May 2023. Medal-winning wrestlers, who have brought honour to the country, have been on the streets for nearly four months to demand the arrest of the Wrestling Federation of India (WFI) chief and Kaiserganj Member of Parliament (MP), Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh, of the BJP, who they have accused of sexually harassing women wrestlers and a minor. But the authorities did not respond for weeks. It took the Supreme Court of India's intervention for Delhi Police to file two first information reports (FIRs).

The wrestlers have held negotiations with the Home Minister and Sports Minister, but no agreement was reached on the key demand of arresting him. That the ruling party MP faces no political censure in the face of serious allegations recorded in FIRs, clearly indicates that the institutional system has failed these remarkably brave wrestlers fighting for justice in the face of tremendous state pressure.

But what about civil society and the public at large? The protest has found some support from civil society, especially organisations representing workers, farmers, women, students, and youth, but it is very small when

compared to the public support for other protests under this regime or previous ones. There have been no rallies, no demonstrations or marches that defined protests against sexual violence in the UPA era. People have not been stirred by the images of wrestlers being dragged by the police. Despite the potential for mass mobilisation, these protests have failed to garner significant support from the middle classes and women's groups, which were in the forefront of the Nirbhaya protests in 2012.

Protests under the current regime are, no doubt, difficult as they are immediately branded as 'anti-national'. Also, activists might feel the futility of protests against a government that does not listen; but the fact is that this regime has been forced to respond to some protests even if it has done so for reasons of political expediency. The withdrawal of the controversial farm laws and the back-tracking over the contentious National Register of Citizens (NRC) and the Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA) are two recent examples where the government had to back down.

The context of class politics

The Indian women's movement has had a long history of organising around sexual violence against women. They have in the past organised direct action on the streets. But this time, except for Left groups and the All India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA), women's groups have been largely missing in action, even though it is an issue of gender justice. But it is not just about gender justice; it is about the wider issues of dissent, dignity and social justice. Moreover, in the Nirbhaya case, it was not only women who were mobilising but also a broader swathe of civil society that included men. The massive public mobilisation had virtually blocked the India Gate area for weeks, but this time, nothing of the kind has happened.

Wrestling is deeply ingrained in Indian culture and has a long history, particularly in the rural areas. However, traditional wrestling has not received the same level of attention and support as other sport in India, such as cricket. The protesting wrestlers mostly come from modest economic backgrounds; sports has helped them to achieve a measure of social and economic mobility. The lack of interest in this agitation must be seen in the broader context of class politics. The active participation of the middle classes in the Anna Hazare Andolan

FALL FROM GRACE

The refusal of Boris Johnson to go quietly can damage the Tories

Four years ago, Boris Johnson won an election for the Tories with an 80-seat majority, their biggest victory since 1987. But his fall from grace has been so steep that he is not even an MP today. The Conservative leader, who quit as British Prime Minister in July last year amid an inner-party revolt, announced his resignation as a lawmaker last week after a House committee probing the 'Partygate' scandal found that he had misled Parliament. Mr. Johnson, when Prime Minister, had attended a host of parties during the COVID-19 lockdown, breaking the rules imposed on the public by his own government; he then told the House of Commons that "all guidance was followed completely in No 10 (Downing Street)". Last year, a report by Sue Gray, a senior civil servant, had offered details of the social events he had attended during the lockdown. The MPs panel apparently recommended his lengthy suspension from the House, and he announced his resignation before the report was made public. Mr. Johnson, a former journalist-turned-politician whose hyperbole conservatism and hardline nationalism helped him rise to the top of the Conservative Party during the chaotic Brexit years, did not go quietly. He accused the committee, which has Labour, Liberal and Conservative MPs as its members, of a "witch hunt" and slammed the report as "revenge for Brexit".

One of the biggest highlights of Mr. Johnson's political career, as Prime

Minister or a back bencher, was his abject disregard for accountability. He neither took responsibility for violating lockdown rules nor repented lying to Parliament. Even while exiting the House, Mr. Johnson attacked an imagined racket of Remainers rather than coming to terms with the mess he left behind in the Conservative Party. His continued attack on Prime Minister Rishi Sunak, whose rebellion against Mr. Johnson as a member of his Cabinet quickened the Tory leader's fall as Prime Minister, sounds more political than a constructive assessment of the government's performance. Mr. Johnson's resignation leaves Mr. Sunak facing a tougher situation. Three Tory MPs, including Mr. Johnson, have quit recently, and Labour expects to win all three seats in by-elections. Faced with back-to-back setbacks in by-elections and local votes, the Tories, whose public support is around 30% against Labour's 40% in opinion polls, are already under pressure. Mr. Johnson has dropped hints of a comeback. There are talks in political circles about forming a right-wing party. It is not clear what he will do next. But he has already done enough damage to the Tories. Any attempt at a political comeback will further destabilise the party and rupture Britain's conservative political landscape that is caught between Brexit isolationism, a battered economy at home and an unrealistic quest to "make Britain great again".

E-EDUCATION PLATFORMS, THEIR GENERATIVE AI CHAPTER

Damodaran is Distinguished Professor, Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations (ICRIER)-Prosus Centre for Internet and Digital Economy, ICRIER, New Delhi

Salman Khan flourished even at the peak of the world economic crisis of 2008. The Khan Academy's online education videos attracted thousands of learners that year. It has gone from strength to strength since then. Khan's not-for-profit enterprise is funded by the likes of the Gates Foundation, Google and Elon Musk. Today, the academy has 130 million learners from across the world, ranging from school-goers to graduate-level learners. Such is the enduring popularity of online education.

Scaling up

As the world recovered from its economic setback by 2011, a new genre of online courses titled 'Massive Open Online Courses' (MOOCs) made their entry, driven by reputed institutions of learning. Though MOOCs have been around since 2008, their institutional origins can be traced to three free online courses offered by Stanford University in 2011. Peter Norvig, Sebastian Thrun, Jennifer Widom and Andrew Ng conducted these courses. Buoyed by the large turnout of learners for these 'pilot' courses, Thrun launched his online education outfit, 'Udacity', in late 2011 as a for-profit company. A year later, Andrew Ng and Daphne Koller followed suit with their venture 'Coursera', which was also registered as a 'for-profit' company.

Not to be left behind, MIT and Harvard joined forces to create 'edX' in May 2012, as a non-profit MOOCs Company. Anant Agarwal, the visionary founder of edX, is widely credited with open sourcing and internationalising the company's 'open edX tech stack'. Although edX was acquired by the for-profit EdTech company, '2U', in November 2021, the company continues to follow 'non-profit considerations when it comes to servicing its open-source stack.

All the three outfits succeeded in launching MOOCs on a global scale, in partnership with the world's leading universities and institutions. As far as India is concerned, the Indian Institute of Technology Bombay and the Indian Institute of Management Bangalore have been the early movers. Both institutions offer a variety of MOOCs courses through the edX platform.

As of 2021, there existed nearly 35 MOOCs Learning Management Systems (LMS) spread across North America, Asia and Europe. The list of large LMS platforms from the developing world includes India's 'Study Webs of Active-Learning for Young Aspiring Minds' (SWAYAM) launched in 2017 by the Ministry of Education, Government of India. It is one of the world's largest learning e-portals. According to 'Class Central', the number of MOOCs learners in the world (excluding China) was 220 million in 2021. Coursera accounted for 97 million learners, while edX and India's SWAYAM had enrolments of 42 million and 22 million, respectively.

Why Generative AI?

Despite their seemingly high enrolment numbers, the financials of

MOOCs platforms are fragile. The operating expenses of a MOOCs platform are high, partly due to maintenance expenses associated with the LMS tech stack, and partly due to steep marketing costs incurred for enlarging the learner base. On the revenue side, the practice of offering entry-level courses gratis (or at low fees) aggravated the financial crunch faced by these platforms. Although MOOCs platforms, by and large, rely on degree-earning courses to earn revenue, such courses have few takers. A key metric that determines learner enrolments for MOOCs is the probability of potential learners discovering LMS platforms through web-based search engines. Even when a learner stumbles on a platform of her choice, she would still struggle to locate courses that suit her needs from the crowded portfolios of Coursera, edX and Udacity. What compounds the problem is the high rate of dropouts by entry-level learners. In turn, drop-outs reduce the catchment of learners for degree granting programmes.

These factors perhaps explain why Coursera, edX and Khan Academy have gone in for regenerative AI. edX's Chat GPT plug-in helps aspiring learners to successfully locate platforms and courses that suit their requirements. The Khan Academy's chat box 'Khanmigo' challenges learners with thought-provoking questions, while edX's 'edX Xpert' and Coursera's 'AI Coursera Coach' function as virtual assistants that answer queries, provide feedback on assignments, generate quick summaries of voluminous content, and swiftly turn out exam scores. As learning gets interesting and engaging, drop-outs are bound to come down, resulting in more learners progressing to degree granting programmes.

In India

India's SWAYAM has yet to spell out its approach to AI. However, the platform is in for interesting times. The SWAYAM-user community will drastically scale up by 2025, when India's active Internet users become 900 million strong. This rapid scale up will necessitate the utilisation of AI-based learning and teaching services by institutes affiliated to the platform. Unlike the United States and Europe-based platforms, SWAYAM is publicly funded and is driven by the National Education Policy's tenets of inclusivity and cross-disciplinary learning. Indeed, in the coming years, the drift of SWAYAM courses is more likely in the direction of cross-disciplinary course offerings that utilise unstructured data. SWAYAM is thus ideally positioned to derive benefits from the evolving semantic web.

Time will tell whether regenerative AI tools will really shore up the economic fortunes of online education platforms. What is clear at the moment is that global online education brands will not shy away from experimenting with regenerative AI tools.



VEDHIK

IAS ACADEMY

The New Learning Mantra

START YOUR JOURNEY WITH THE BEST

**INDIA'S
TOP MOST
CIVIL SERVANTS
FOR COACHING**

www.vedhikiasacademy.org

Head Office:
Vedhik IAS Academy
Mercy Estate,
MG Road, Ravipuram,
Ernakulam-682 015,

Corporate office:
Vedhik IAS Academy
Samkalp Bhawan, Plot No.15,
Sector 4, Rama Krishna Puram,
New Delhi, Delhi-110022

Regional office
Vedhik IAS Academy
202, Raheja Chambers, 12,
Museum Road. Bangalore -
560001. Karnataka, India.

GCC Office:
Bobscoedu,
Bobsco Trading & Contracting Co. W. L . L
Office 22, Dream Tower 1,
Road: 2701, Adliya, Kingdom of Bahrain
www.bobscoedu.com