

● POLITY

● ECONOMICS

● TECHNOLOGY

● ECOLOGY

POLITY AND GOVERNANCE

SC PUTS MAHARASHTRA SPEAKER ON DEADLINE
OVER DEFECTION PLEAS

CONTEXT: The Supreme Court on Monday directed Maharashtra Assembly Speaker Rahul Narwekar to decide disqualification petitions filed under the Tenth Schedule (anti-defection law) of the Constitution against the Chief Minister Eknath Shinde camp in the Shiv Sena dispute by December 31, 2023.

A three-judge Bench led by Chief Justice D.Y. Chandrachud ordered the Speaker, in his capacity as a tribunal under the Tenth Schedule, to decide the disqualification petitions against the breakaway faction headed by Deputy Chief Minister Ajit Pawar in the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) dispute by January 31, 2024. The court took matters into its hands after the Secretary, Maharashtra Legislative Assembly Secretariat, filed an affidavit that the Speaker could only decide by February 29, 2024. There are 34 disqualification petitions pending before the Speaker in the Shiv Sena case and nine in the NCP matter.

Solicitor-General Tushar Mehta urged the court to give the Speaker time till January 31, 2024, taking into account the intervening Deepavali holidays and the Assembly's shift to Nagpur for the 15-day Winter Session in December.

Senior advocates Kapil Sibal and A.M. Singhvi, appearing for the Uddhav Thackeray and Sharad Pawar loyalist camps which were part of the Maha Vikas Aghadi government overthrown by the Eknath Shinde-BJP alliance in the State, said any ambiguity in the deadline or any further delay would "subvert the anti-defection proceedings".

The Speaker had disregarded the court's order on September 18 to prepare a schedule to complete the disqualification proceedings under the Tenth Schedule against the Shinde camp. The Bench had at the time given Mr. Narwekar a week to prepare the timeline and submit it in court.

ECOLOGY AND ENVIRONMENT

RESEARCHERS IDENTIFY A NEW MUSHROOM SPECIES
FROM THE WESTERN GHATS

CONTEXT: A tiny, fragile-looking mushroom sporting a honey-yellow 'cap' found on the campus of the Jawaharlal Nehru Tropical Botanic Garden and Research Institute (JNTBGRI) at Palode in Thiruvananthapuram has been identified as a new species.



Candolleomyces albosquamosus

Researchers at the JNTBGRI identified and described the new species as belonging to the genus *Candolleomyces*. A paper by C. K. Pradeep, Principal Scientist, Microbiology Division, and P. K. Nayana, Research Student, of JNTBGRI

highlighting the findings has been published in the scientific journal *Phytotaxa*. The new species has been named *Candolleomyces albosquamosus* - 'albosquamosus' for the white woolly scale-like structures on its pileus or cap. Delicate in build, the mushroom grows to a height of just about 58 mm. Seven species of the genus *Psathyrella* reported earlier from India are now recognised as *Candolleomyces*. The discovery of a new species of the genus *Candolleomyces* in India is special given that there are only 35 species in this genus worldwide.



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POLITY AND GOVERNANCE**ELECTORAL BONDS PROMOTE AND HELP DONATE CLEAN MONEY TO PARTIES: A-G**

CONTEXT: Attorney-General of India R. Venkataramani has backed the government's electoral bonds scheme in the Supreme Court, extolling it as a measure which promotes contribution of "clean money" to political parties.

Mr. Venkataramani, Attorney-General of India argued that citizens could not have a "general right to know anything and everything without being subjected to reasonable restrictions [Article 19(2)]". Attorney-General of India's submissions come shortly before a Constitution Bench headed by Chief Justice of India D.Y. Chandrachud is scheduled on Tuesday to hear petitions which claim the electoral bonds scheme legalises the anonymous flow of funds to party coffers. Petitioners have argued that there is a complete blackout of the identities of donors, Indian or foreign, and the individual amounts they have donated to political parties. They said the scheme promoted corruption, favouritism, and even criminalisation of politics in a democracy.

But Mr. Venkataramani said the right to know should be to serve "specific ends" and not for the benefit of "too over-broad" an idea like the "general health of democracy". He said petitioners could not claim a "general right to know anything and everything for undefined ends" in the scheme. Mr. Venkataramani said the scheme was a step towards the regulation of political donations. He said the scheme "extends the benefit of confidentiality to the contributor" and did not violate any "existing rights".

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS**LOST VOICE**

CONTEXT: India has explained its decision to abstain at last week's vote at the UN General Assembly (UNGA) for a ceasefire in the Israel-Palestine conflict as its way of protesting the omission of any "explicit condemnation" of the heinous October 7 terror attack by Hamas militants on Israel.

Every other country in the neighbourhood, in the extended BRICS grouping and much of the developing world, was part of the 120 countries that voted for the UNGA resolution on Friday. Regardless of its reasoning, New Delhi had other options which it overlooked or ignored. The resolution at the emergency special session entitled "Protection of civilians and upholding legal and humanitarian obligations" does include a paragraph "condemning all acts of violence aimed at Palestinian and Israeli civilians, including all acts of terrorism and indiscriminate attacks".

India could have played a prominent diplomatic role with countries proposing the resolution to ensure clearer mention of the October 7 attacks, including during Prime Minister Narendra Modi's recent conversation with Jordan's King Abdullah bin Al

Hussein about the conflict. India's leadership of such an amendment may have fared better than the Canadian proposal that failed to secure two-thirds of the UNGA membership present.

Alternatively, India could have voted for the motion, while recording in its Explanation of Vote (EoV) that it regretted the omissions of the specific references to the October 7 attacks, which is what France did. In its EoV, India did not itself name Hamas for the terror attacks, nor has it so far designated Hamas as a terror group, leaving some doubt about the explicit mentions that New Delhi had wanted. On the other hand, if India wanted to convey a strong line on fighting terrorism, it could have voted against the resolution, along with the U.S., the U.K. and Israel.

India's abstention indicates a shift in the Modi government's stand, seeking a 'safe' position, rather than taking a stand on the violence in Israel and Palestine. This is a departure from India's UNGA vote in 2018 that called for Israel to cease "excessive force" in retaliatory strikes on Gaza at the time, and is more in line with its decision to abstain on votes at the UN in 2021 on resolutions critical of Russia's war in Ukraine.



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SOCIAL JUSTICE

THE COVID-19 DEATH TOLL IN INDIA, GETTING IT RIGHT

CONTEXT: The COVID-19 pandemic extracted a heavy mortality toll across the world during 2020 and 2021, and this has been a huge global public health concern. The international public health community emphasised the need to measure pandemic impact in terms of excess mortality, derived by comparing observed mortality during the pandemic with expected mortality based on pre-pandemic trends. Ideally, excess mortality estimation requires robust population-based mortality data from death registration systems.

India faced a big challenge in estimating excess deaths directly due to COVID-19 as death registration in India is still about 70%, which further varies widely across States and districts. Pandemic severity was particularly observed in India during the second wave in April-June 2021. India's death registration data also does not give weekly or monthly mortality data which is essential for excess death calculation.

To assess the mortality toll, independent investigators compiled mortality records from local offices of the government Civil Registration System (CRS) in 14 States and nine cities across India from January 2018 to May 2021. Various scientific teams utilised these and other available mortality data from the Sample Registration System (SRS) and household surveys to develop modelled excess mortality estimates for India.

COVID-19 related death estimates varied widely from one to another study — the highest was 4.7 million excess deaths in India during 2020-2021 using available local data as inputs for mortality models. There has been intense debate and controversy around the likely plausibility of various mortality estimates for India, which have focused on the statistical methods and data assumptions employed for estimation. However, most of these studies could not overcome some crucial biases in the input data for the modelling exercises, as well as in the assumptions applied to fill data gaps. Some studies are based on insufficient samples while others have information bias at various levels. It is very likely that the COVID-related excess deaths in India may have been overestimated.

The official CRS report for 2021 is scheduled for release shortly, and holds much promise for providing the best possible primary evidence. However, it may also lead to new debates if variations such as improvements in reporting, delayed registration, and remaining deficiencies in data completeness across States by sex and age are not considered and appropriately accounted for, while inferring from this data. Therefore, it is necessary that the government should convene a task force of national experts in this field to attend to this matter. This task force could be provided access to all the microdata from the CRS, SRS, and other relevant data sources as necessary.

Once equipped with all the available and required information, the task force will be enabled to conduct a thorough analysis using standard statistical methods that utilise empirical data, to provide measures of excess mortality by sex and age at national, State and district levels.

Going forward, the imperative for accurate district-level mortality measures is urgent, for evidence-based health action to tackle the quadruple burden from maternal and child health conditions, infectious diseases, non-communicable diseases and injuries. Hence, while the outputs of such a detailed analysis would complete the debate on pandemic mortality in India, the analytical operations will establish capacity for subnational mortality measurement, and also inform interventions to strengthen local data quality.

Concomitantly, there is also an urgent need to strengthen attribution of causes of death, either through medical certification for physician-attended deaths, or through the use of retrospective interview methods for household events. Taken together, the activities of the National Task Force for data analysis, along with proposed initiatives for data quality improvement, will vastly enhance the utility of the CRS for routine local and national mortality measurement in India.

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PUTTING THE '70-HOUR WORK WEEK' IDEA INTO PERSPECTIVE

from \$ 2 per hour to \$ 9 in the same period. As shown in **Chart 3**, when compared to Germany and Japan, Indians spend less time on sports and other leisure activities. Indians spend more time sleeping and doing housework than the other two nations. While opinions are divided over Mr. Murthy's suggestion, it is

imperative to ask whether India has enough statistical tools at its disposal to accurately measure labour productivity given that 89 % of the workforce is engaged in informal employment compared to just 4.2 % in Germany and about 8 % in Japan (**Chart 4**).

POLITY AND GOVERNANCE

EASING THE TRANSPORT OF CARGO BY RAILWAYS

CONTEXT: The Railways has been one of the cheaper modes of transportation for moving bulk cargo. The government has therefore realised that it needs to be supported with reduced overall logistics costs and schemes to improve green mobility.

Identifying infrastructure investment in the sector as a key thrust area, the Government of India has formulated two policies — the PM GatiShakti (PMGS) policy for a National Master Plan (NMP) and the National Logistics Policy (NLP). The PMGS aims to bring synergy to create a seamless multi-modal transport network in India, with the NMP employing technology and IT tools for coordinated planning of infrastructure. The NLP focuses on building a national logistics portal and integrating platforms of various ministries.

Not many major policy components and details are available in governmental websites on PMGS. In reference to the Indian Railways (IR), the Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade's website mentions three things: integration of postal and railway networks, one station – one product and the introduction of 400 Vande Bharat trains without anything about increasing the IR share in moving cargo.

The IR has taken some initiatives in the bulk cargo arena. It relaxed block rake movement rules to provide a facility to load from/to multiple locations, permitted mini rakes, introduced private freight terminals (PFTs) and relaxed conditions in private sidings. The Gati Shakti Terminal (GCT) policy has eased the stipulations for the operation of these terminals and progressively all PFTs and private sidings are being converted into GCTs. The IR has also partnered with freight operators in recent years, encouraging them to invest in wagons for movement of their cargo thus helping in the induction of more than 16,000 privately-owned wagons to facilitate specialised traffic like automobiles and fly ash.

While it is early to judge the impact of these initiatives, the IR's share in bulk cargo continues to decline. Some decline is expected as production becomes more decentralised and the IR's cost advantage diminishes. To offset this, IR should reduce non-price barriers and distribute transaction costs associated with it to as many customers as possible.

A railway siding is a capital-intensive high-cost proposition and only large industries can manage them with others having to cover large distances to load their cargo. This

increases the logistics costs and hence the reluctance to patronise the IR. For example, in the cement sector in 2017-18, thirty-three plants with less than one million tonne (MT) annual capacity had a production share of 6.5% but their share in rail loading was 3.8% whereas plants with more than 2.5 MT annual capacity with a production share of 57%, the rail share was 69.5%. Similar is the picture for many private mines, mini steel plants, agricultural markets etc.

There is an immediate need to develop common-user facilities at cargo aggregation and dispersal points in mining clusters, industrial clusters and large cities. The knowledge of these clusters rests with the States and not the IR or other central ministries, and thus collaboration with State governments is a sine qua non. The relationship of the IR with State governments has been a sort of patron-client relationship as many States regularly demand rail lines in their areas. A change in this attitude is necessary in order for the Railways to participate in the planning of industrial clusters and mines in cities/regions if it has to increase its share in the movement of cargo.

The IR must also look at new commodities like fly ash. The Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF) started issuing notifications since 1999 for the complete utilisation of fly ash; in 2021 the production was 232 MT and utilisation was 214 MT. The IR never realised the potential and approved many power plant sidings without fly ash loading facilities rendering it to be a minor player in its transportation, and it must proactively correct this wrong. Another necessity is for the IR to encourage and liberalise the design of new wagons amenable to higher and efficient loading to deal with new commodities.

Finally, environmental considerations are constraining loading by the IR. As per recent government regulations, environmental clearance for rail loading/unloading facilities has been made mandatory but the same has not been imposed on road loading/unloading facilities. These restrictions have made some users move cargo by road due to high transaction costs involved with environmental clearances. Such instructions should be mode-agnostic, based on the quantity of cargo loaded and the potential for environmental degradation. Otherwise rail loading will be hampered giving fillip to more environmentally polluting road transport.

“Doing nothing is very hard to do. You never know when you're finished.”—Leslie Nielsen



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