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Trump survives assassination bid at U.S. poll campaign rally



Former U.S. President Donald Trump was shot at during a campaign rally on Saturday after a major security lapse. Mr. Trump, 78, had just begun a campaign speech in Butler, Pennsylvania, about 50 km north of Pittsburgh, when shots rang out, hitting the former President's right ear and streaking his face with blood. The FBI identified 20-year-old Thomas Matthew Crooks of Bethel Park, Pennsylvania, as the suspect. He was fatally shot at by Secret Service agents, after he opened fire from the roof of a building about 140 metres from the stage where Mr. Trump was speaking.

U.S. President Joe Biden on Sunday appealed for the country to "unite as one nation" and said he was ordering an independent security review of the lead-up to the attack. Mr. Biden delivered brief remarks from the White House after receiving a briefing on the investigation in the Situation Room. He said he has directed the probe to be "thorough and swift," and asked the country not to "make assumptions" about the perpetrator's motives or affiliations.

Gun recovered

An AR-15-style semiautomatic rifle used in the shooting was recovered near the shooter's body. Authorities identified a rally attendee who was shot and killed as Corey Comperatore, 50. Law enforcement officials said they had not yet identified a motive for the attack. The shooting occurred less than four months before the November 5 election, when Mr. Trump faces an election rematch with Democratic President Joe Biden. Most opinion polls including those by Reuters/Ipsos show the two locked in a close contest. Mr. Trump said he will be travelling to Milwaukee for the GOP convention on Sunday afternoon after the assassination attempt.

POLITY & GOVERNANCE

Restoring a verdict

INDIA bloc parties won 10 of the 13 Assembly seats across seven States where by-polls were held on July 10 and the results were announced on July 13. In Himachal Pradesh, the Congress won two of the three Assembly seats which fell vacant after three independent legislators joined the BJP after resigning their seats. The Sukhvinder Singh Sukhu Government had teetered on the brink in February after six Congress MLAs, along with these three independents, had voted in favour of a BJP candidate in a Rajya Sabha contest. They were later disqualified from the Assembly after Congress candidate Abhishek Manu Singhvi lost the Rajya Sabha poll. This had brought down the party's tally to 34 in the 68-member House. With its victories in Dehra and Nalagarh, the Congress has returned to its original strength of 40 MLAs. The Sukhu government had won a majority on June 4 when the Congress won four of the six seats that had by-polls along with the 2024 Lok Sabha election. By restoring the numbers of the Congress, the electorate of Himachal Pradesh has rejected the opportunism of the defectors and the overreach of the BJP.

In Uttarakhand, the Congress retained the Badrinath seat. Rajendra Singh Bhandari, the sitting MLA from Badrinath who defected to the ruling BJP was defeated by Congress's Lakhpat Singh Butola. In Madhya Pradesh, Kamlesh Pratap Shah, who had switched sides to the BJP, won a tough contest against his former party, Congress. While the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam's win in Tamil Nadu's Vikravandi seat further reinforced its position, in West Bengal, the Trinamool Congress (TMC) continued to reign supreme by wresting three seats from the BJP, in Raiganj, Ranaghat Dakshin and Bagda. In all the three seats, MLAs of the saffron party had switched sides to the TMC, which is the ruling party in the State. The TMC also retained the Maniktala seat. In Punjab, the Aam Aadmi party got its pound of flesh from the BJP as it trounced the sitting MLA in Jalandhar West who had defected to the BJP and sought a re-election.

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"Education is the ability to listen to almost anything without losing your temper or your self-confidence." - Robert Frost

POLITY AND GOVERNANCE

Unprincipled alliances

The adage that there are no permanent enemies and no permanent friends, only permanent interests in politics could explain many a twist in shifting political alliances across the democratic world. But it would only be an understatement in Nepali politics, where the art of coalition making has for long been a farce. On Saturday, incumbent Nepal Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal of the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist Centre) predictably lost a trust vote, after only 63 of the 275-member House of Representatives backed him, while 194 lawmakers voted against the motion of confidence. The loss was a foregone conclusion after the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist) led by Khadka Prasad Oli — he has been made the Prime Minister again — withdrew support from the CPN(MC)-led government and joined hands with the opposition Nepali Congress, led by Sher Bahadur Deuba. Mr. Dahal had managed to hold his post for close to two years, and after surviving three trust votes — all necessitated by his decision to change partners. The CPN(MC) had formed the government after the November 2022 elections, despite finishing a distant third and Mr. Dahal had managed to do so by exploiting the differences between the Deuba-led NC and the Oli-led CPN(UML). These two parties won 89 and 78 seats, respectively, in 2022, and have now formed a coalition government with the arrangement that Mr. Oli and Mr. Deuba will share the post of Prime Minister, each for half of the remaining term.

Ever since Nepal transitioned from an absolute monarchy to a constitutional one in 1990, and then to a full-fledged republic in 2008, its democratic polity has been marked by instability and constant changes in power, leading to poor governance. Despite the institution of constitutional reforms related to federalism and guaranteed representation for marginalised forces following a civil war and the overthrow of the monarchy, the outcomes have been a perpetuation of the country's status as a "least developed country". It is quite evident that the leadership of the three major parties have shown more interest in sticking to power by any means irrespective of whether they are driven by pre-poll coalitions or not. Besides, the inherent instability in a parliamentary system that reflects social fissures in the country has led to a form of coalition politics that is driven less by ideological or principled considerations and more by a hankering towards power. Such instability and an unprincipled pursuit of power will only result in more disillusionment among the Nepali people with the democratic process. Nepal can perhaps be better off with a presidential system that allows for a directly elected head of state.

POLITY & GOVERNANCE

The problem with the Karnataka gig workers Bill

The draft Karnataka Platform-based Gig Workers (Social Security and Welfare) Bill, 2024, seek to provide social security and welfare measures for platform-based gig workers in the State. The government shared the draft on July 9. In the recent past, a similar law was also enacted by Rajasthan called the Rajasthan Platform Based Gig Workers (Registration and Welfare) Act, 2023.

The Karnataka Bill has a distinct similarity with the Rajasthan legislation in the sense that both are based on a welfare board model. This model does not address employment relations as such and is more appropriate for self-employed informal workers. In the case of gig work, addressing employment relations is the need of the hour.

The rise of gig work versus work issues

The number of gig and platform workers is on the rise, more so in the last decade with developments in the app-cab and retail delivery sectors. In its working policy paper on the gig economy, NITI Aayog has made projections of the gig workforce expanding to 23.5 million workers by 2030. Given the overall depressed employment generation scenario, gig work is one sector that is providing a livelihood to an increasingly large number of job-seekers. Such trends are also visible in other countries.

In the recent past, India has seen protests and agitations by gig workers on the issue of revenue sharing, working hours and various other working conditions and terms of employment. It is difficult to solve these issues within the existing legal framework as employment relations in the gig economy are non-existent at worst or complicated at best. The legal framework in labour laws is inherently based on employer-employee relation.

However, in the gig economy, employment relations are subject to demystification as well as complication. Those who run the platform prefer to call themselves as aggregators and consider gig workers as independent contractors/workers. Aggregators believe that they are providing the technology and bringing together independent workers and consumers. Independent workers are masters of their own work, according to aggregators.

On the other hand, workers in the gig economy consider aggregators as their employers as the conditions of service and terms of employment are set by the aggregators. For example, in an app-cab operation, the price of the ride is determined by the app/aggregator and the entire ecosystem of working conditions and terms for the ride are decided by the app company only. In this context, gig workers seek fair treatment, improved working conditions, and access to social security as legal entitlement.

U.K. ruling

In a similar kind of a situation, in Britain, the United Kingdom Supreme Court ruled that Uber is an employer and that the existing labour laws of the U.K. do apply to Uber drivers. In India, gig and platform workers are included in Code on Social Security 2020 as a kind of informal self-employed workers but no mention of such workers has been made in the other three new labour codes, namely Code on Wages, Industrial Relations Code and Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions Code. The Rajasthan and Karnataka pieces of legislation are recent additions to this legal landscape.



Like the Rajasthan Act, the Karnataka Bill has also skirted the issue of defining employment relations in gig work. It has preferred the term 'aggregator' for app companies rather than employer. Without the recognition of employment relations, protective labour laws that ensure a minimum wage, occupational safety and health, working hours and leave entitlements, and the right to collective bargaining cannot be applied. These important issues remain unresolved in gig work.

There is no guarantee on minimum earnings from gig work even when a worker is available for the greater part of the day. There is no regulation on working hours also. There are regular incidents of overworked app cab drivers being involved in accidents late in the night or early in the morning, jeopardising their own lives along with that of passenger.

Employment relations do exist in gig work, and regulations should acknowledge this. Aggregators are the de-facto employers as they set the terms and conditions of employment. While they may present the platform as a tool connecting workers and consumers, they are responsible for designing it and establishing its terms. The platform is merely a tool, and is not an independent entity, making the aggregators the actual employers.

Core issues

The welfare board model adopted by Rajasthan and Karnataka provides some welfare schemes for gig workers, but it does not replace institutional social security benefits such as provident fund, gratuity, or maternity benefits, which regular workers are legally entitled to. Historically, welfare board models have been poorly implemented, as evidenced by the Construction Workers Welfare Act of 1996 and the Unorganized Workers Social Security Act, where funds were available but inadequately used.

The Karnataka Bill does not address the issue of minimum wages or working hours for gig workers. Section 16 discusses income security regarding payment deductions but does not guarantee a minimum income, wage entitlements, or revenue sharing between aggregators and gig workers. Section 16(2) only requires weekly payments, without specifying a minimum amount.

The proposed Karnataka Bill, like the Code on Social Security, 2020 and the Rajasthan Act 2023, fails to address the employment relationship in the gig economy. This oversight confuses employment relations and absolves employers of legal obligations, making it difficult to fully protect workers' rights.

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INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

On the jurisdiction of the CBI

The Supreme Court on July 10 upheld the maintainability of the West Bengal government's suit accusing the Union government of "constitutional overreach" by employing the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) to register and investigate cases in the State despite its withdrawal of general consent on November 16, 2018. A Bench comprising Justices B.R. Gavai and Sandeep Mehta rejected the Centre's preliminary objections that it was wrongly made a defendant in the suit as it did not control the CBI, which was an "independent agency." Perusing various provisions of the Delhi Special Police Establishment (DSPE) Act, 1946, under which the CBI functions, the Bench concluded "the very establishment, exercise of powers, extension of jurisdiction, the superintendence of the DSPE [Act], all vest with the Government of India." Accordingly, the Court ruled that the suit discloses a valid cause of action and must be heard on merits. It posted the next hearing on August 13.

What is general consent?

Under Section 6 of the DSPE Act, the CBI is required to obtain consent from the concerned State government before initiating an investigation within its jurisdiction. This permission is crucial since "police" and "public order" are subjects that fall within the State List under the seventh schedule of the Constitution. However, no such prior consent is necessary in Union territories or railway areas. General consent is given by States to facilitate the agency's seamless investigation into corruption charges against Central government employees in their territories. However, since 2015, several States such as Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Kerala, Mizoram, Punjab, Rajasthan, Telangana, Meghalaya and West Bengal have revoked their general consent alleging that the Centre is misusing the federal agency to unfairly target the Opposition. "In the absence of such an omnibus consent, the CBI will be unable to register any fresh cases in these States without the explicit permission of the respective State governments," P.D.T. Achary, former Secretary General, Lok Sabha told The Hindu.

What does the case filed by the West Bengal government allege?

In August 2021, the West Bengal government filed an original suit under Article 131 of the Constitution arguing that the actions of the Union government and the involvement of the CBI in the State infringed upon its sovereignty. The suit highlighted that despite the withdrawal of general consent for CBI investigations by the Trinamool Congress government on November 16, 2018, the agency proceeded to register 12 new cases. Deeming this to be a "constitutional overreach," the State sought the annulment of these 12 cases and a restraint on the agency from lodging any further cases.

The framers of the Constitution envisioned such conflicts between the Centre and the States owing to the existing quasi-federal structure and dual polity. As a result, they conferred original and exclusive jurisdiction upon the Supreme Court to address such disputes, under Article 131. For a suit to be maintainable under this provision, two conditions have to be satisfied — it should relate to a dispute between the Government of India and one or more State Governments (or) between one or more State Governments, and it must involve a question of law or fact crucial to the determination of legal rights.

In State Of Karnataka vs Union Of India (1977), the Supreme Court observed that Article 131 is a feature of federalism

and should be “widely and generously interpreted” to advance the intended remedy. Similarly, in *State Of Rajasthan & Ors. vs Union Of India (1977)*, the top Court cautioned against taking a very “restrictive or a hyper-technical view of the State’s rights.”

What was the Union government’s argument?

Solicitor-General Tushar Mehta, appearing for the Union government, pressed the Court to dismiss West Bengal’s suit by raising preliminary objections to its maintainability. He pointed out that original suits under Article 131 of the Constitution exclusively involve the Union and States as parties. “It is the CBI which has registered the cases in question. But the CBI is not a defendant in this suit, and it cannot be made one, as the CBI is not a ‘State’ under Article 131,” Mr. Mehta contended.

He further argued that the CBI was an “independent agency” since it did not function under the direct control of the Union government. “The Union does not supervise the registration of offences or investigation or closure or filing of chargesheet or conviction or acquittal of cases by the CBI,” he reasoned. However, later in the proceedings, Mr. Mehta finally conceded that the agency cannot initiate any investigation without the express authorisation of the Union government under Section 5 of the DSPE Act.

On the contrary, senior advocate Kapil Sibal highlighted that the case extended beyond the Centre’s control over the CBI to the fundamental question of whether the agency could disregard a specific notification issued by the West Bengal government in 2018, withdrawing its consent. Mr. Sibal asserted that once a State grants and then withdraws its consent, the CBI lacks jurisdiction to exercise its powers within that State.

What did the verdict state?

The Court observed that a bare perusal of the provisions of the DSPE Act reveals that right from the constitution of the CBI, the classes of offences which are to be investigated by it, to its administration and powers, it is the “Central government that it is vitally concerned with.”

“Under Section 4 of the DSPE Act, except the offences under the Prevention of Corruption Act, in which the superintendence will be with the Central Vigilance Commission, the superintendence of the DSPE in all other matters would vest with the Central government,” Justice Gavai, who authored the verdict, noted. The judge also reminded the Centre that Section 6 of the DSPE Act mandates the prior consent of the State government to a CBI probe within its jurisdiction.

While the Court recognised that the CBI would always be entitled to investigate offences independently, it underscored that this autonomy “would not water down” its administrative control and superintendence that vests with the Centre. It thus proceeded to conclude that the Solicitor General’s argument that the CBI is an “independent agency” holds no water.

The verdict, however, clarified that these observations were only made to meet the preliminary objections raised by the Union government and would not have any bearing on the merits of the suit.

What are the implications?

According to Mr. Achary, if the CBI is permitted to initiate investigations in States that have revoked their general consent, it would be an affront to federalism. “This could strain Centre-State relations, particularly since the police is a State subject under the Constitution. Allowing the CBI to register cases would effectively

confer upon it the same powers as the State police forces,” he adds. While the Supreme Court has so far only addressed the preliminary objections to the maintainability of West Bengal’s suit, the constitutional expert pointed out that the final ruling on its merits will have a significant bearing on other similar pending cases.

Another Bench of the top Court is tackling a similar question of law related to the State of Tamil Nadu in the case of Ankit Tiwari, an Enforcement Directorate (ED) officer against whom the Tamil Nadu Directorate of Vigilance and Anti-Corruption had launched a criminal prosecution for bribery. A Bench of Justices Surya Kant and K.V. Viswanathan had recommended judicial oversight over the cross-fire of criminal cases filed between Central agencies like the ED and the police in Opposition-ruled States to protect innocents from prosecution.

ECONOMICS & DEVELOPMENT

The Union government’s rein on financial transfers to different States

On July 11, Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M.K. Stalin alleged that the Union government was withholding funds for the State’s Metro rail completion and other vital projects. In this article, dated February 7, 2024, J. Jeyaranjan and R. Srinivasan explain how the government’s tax policies reduce aggregate financial transfers to States, weakening cooperative federalism.

Ever since the start of the Fourteenth Finance Commission award period (2015-16), the Union government has been reducing financial transfers to States. This is particularly strange given that the Fourteenth Finance Commission recommended devolving 42% of Union tax revenues to States, which is a clean 10 percentage points increase over the 13th Finance Commission’s recommendation. The Fifteenth Finance Commission retained this recommendation of 41%, excluding the devolution to Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) and Ladakh, which were recategorised as Union Territories. If we include the shares of J&K and Ladakh, it should be 42%. The Union government not only reduced the financial transfers to States but also increased its own total revenue to increase its discretionary expenditure. The discretionary expenditures of the Union government are not being routed through the States’ Budgets, and, therefore, can impact different States in different ways.

Some basic math on tax revenue

The Finance Commissions recommend the States’ share in the net tax revenue of the Union government. The difference between the gross and the net tax revenue includes collection costs, tax revenue to be assigned to Union territories, and cess and surcharges. Though the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Finance Commissions recommended 42% and 41%, respectively, of the net tax revenue to be the shares of States, the share of the gross tax revenue was just 35% in 2015-16 and 30% in 2023-24 (Budget Estimate). While the gross tax revenue of the Union government increased from ₹14.6 lakh crore in 2015-16 to ₹33.6 lakh crore in 2023-24, the States’ share in the Union tax revenue increased from ₹5.1 lakh crore to ₹10.2 lakh crore between these two years. In other words, the gross tax revenue of the Union government more

than doubled while the share of States just doubled. Grants-in-aid to States is another statutory grant recommended by the Finance Commission. The grants-in-aid to States declined in absolute amount from ₹1.95 lakh crore in 2015-16 to ₹1.65 lakh crore in 2023-24. Thus, the combined share of the statutory financial transfers in the gross tax revenue of the Union government declined from 48.2% to 35.32%.

One of the reasons for the States' share in gross revenue declining during this period is that the net tax revenue is arrived at after deducting the revenue collections under cess and surcharge, revenue collections from Union Territories, and tax administration expenditure. Among the three factors, revenue collection through cess and surcharge is the highest and increasing. The cess and surcharge collection in 2015-16 was 5.9% (₹85,638 crore) of the gross tax revenue of the Union government, and this ratio increased to 10.8% (₹3.63 lakh crore) in 2023-24. This calculation is excluding the Goods and Services Tax (GST) cess that is collected to compensate for the revenue loss of the States due to implementation of GST till June 2022. The Union government is increasing tax collection under cess and surcharge categories mainly to implement its own schemes in specific sectors, and at the same time, the revenues so raised need not be shared with the States.

More centralisation of public expenditure

When the financial transfers to States either as tax devolution or grants-in-aid decline on the one hand, or do not increase at least proportionately to increase in gross revenue of the Union government on the other, the resultant effect is the availability of larger discretionary funds for the Union government to spend. This could affect the equity in distribution of financial resources among States. The Union government has two other routes of direct financial transfers to States, that is, Centrally Sponsored Schemes (CSS) and Central Sector Schemes (CSec Schemes). The Union government influences the priorities of the States through CSS wherein the Union government provides partial funding and another part is to be committed by States. In other words, the Union government proposes the schemes and States implement them, committing their financial resources as well. Between 2015-16 and 2023-24, the allocation for CSS increased from ₹2.04 lakh crore to ₹4.76 lakh crore through 59 CSS. Thus, the Union government compels the State to commit more or less an equivalent quantum of financial resources. Moreover, the actual financial transfers to States under CSS is only ₹3.64 lakh crore (2023-24), retaining nearly ₹1.12 lakh crore of CSS allocation for other expenses.

An important aspect of CSS shared schemes is that the States that can afford to commit matching finances from the State budgets alone can avail of the matching grants. This creates two different effects in terms of inter-State equity in public finances. Wealthy States can afford to commit equivalent finances and leverage Union finances inwards through the implementation of CSS. Less wealthy States will have to commit their borrowed finances in these CSS, thus increasing their own liabilities. These differential trajectories of the public finances of States accentuate inter-State inequality in public finances, the major reason being CSS.

The CSec Schemes are fully funded by the Union government in sectors where the Union government has exclusive legislative or institutional controls. The allocation for CSec Schemes increased from ₹5.21 lakh crore in 2015-16 to ₹14.68 lakh crore in

2023-24 to implement more than 700 schemes. Thus, it is clear the Union government allocates a larger share of the finances to CSec Schemes. It is quite likely that the Union government can allocate financial resources with a motive to benefit specific States or constituencies through the CSec Schemes. Since the CSec Schemes are directly implemented by the Union government, only ₹60,942 crore is devolved to States under this scheme in 2023-24. The combined allocation for CSS and CSec Schemes in 2023-24 is ₹19.4 lakh crore and only ₹4.25 lakh crore is devolved to States.

Scope for anti-federal fiscal policies

The financial transfers through CSS and CSec Schemes are non-statutory transfers as they are based on neither any legal provisions nor any formula determined by the Finance Commission. This non-statutory grant forms 12.6% of gross tax revenue. Together with statutory grants, the total financial transfers as a proportion to gross tax revenue were only 47.9% in 2023-24. Further, the non-statutory grants are tied grants, that is, they have to be spent on specific schemes for which the grants are allocated. This reduces the freedom of States in conducting public expenditure. In addition to retaining more than 50% of gross tax revenue, the Union government incurs a fiscal deficit to the extent of 5.9% of GDP. Thus, the Union government wields enormous financial powers with limited expenditure responsibilities.

Further, the Fifteenth Finance Commission noted that the Union government had argued for the downward revision of States' share in Union tax revenue from 42% and the Commission retained the share at 41%. Citing higher expenditure commitments, the Union government may repeat the argument before the Sixteenth Finance Commission. So much for cooperative federalism!

AGRICULTURE AND RELATED ISSUES

A celebration of indigenous seeds sows change in the farm landscape



A popular movement to preserve indigenous seed varieties — many on the verge of extinction — in the tribal-dominated regions of southern Rajasthan is helping to promote not just crop diversity but also climate resilience. Thousands of tribal people, from nearly 1,000 villages and hamlets in the tribal belt at the tri-junction of Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, and Gujarat, took part in a series of Beej Utsavs, or seed festivals, held in the last week of June. Some 90 such events were held, giving participants a chance to learn the techniques of preserving indigenous seeds for use in

different crop seasons. Beej Utsav forms part of our campaign to promote the use of seeds matching the local environment and presenting it as a practice that can be replicated elsewhere. Indigenous seeds are an important legacy preserved by tribal communities in the midst of the increasing influence of multinational companies in the agriculture sector. Indigenous seed varieties were "inherently compatible" with the local farming conditions and were economically practical and environmentally more sustainable. Over 50 indigenous seed varieties were displayed at the Beej Utsav events, catalogued as grains, pulses, vegetables, and others. Those farmers who have diligently worked to preserve seeds in their respective areas were honoured as Beej Mitra and Beej Mata.

DISASTER MANAGEMENT

Three die of asphyxiation at illegal coal mine in Gujarat



Three labourers died of asphyxiation inside an illegal coal mine in Surendranagar district of Gujarat on Saturday. It is the fourth such incident reported this year in which a total of 10 people had lost their lives while digging for low-grade coal in illegal mines found in several parts of the district. The coal is used to fuel factories in the State and elsewhere.

The deceased have been identified as Lakshman Dabhi, 35, Khodabhai Makwana, 32, and Viram Keraliya, 35. They were working in a mine near Bhet village in Thangadh taluka without helmets, masks, or any other safety equipment, said officials. The police have registered a case of culpable homicide not amounting to murder against four people, but are yet to make any arrests.

The first information report (FIR) said the accused failed to provide essential safety gear to the labourers, who died after inhaling toxic gas in the mine. In February, three workers had died after inhaling toxic gas that emanated after a blast triggered by gelatin sticks during an illegal mining operation in the district. As per the details, the workers were digging a pit for an illegal coal mine in Devpara village. All of them hailed from Rajasthan. In January, three labourers died after being buried due to unstable soil conditions, while one labourer died last month.

Revenue and police officials in the district are silent about the involvement of local politicians of the ruling party but privately admit about the nexus between the mining operators and local politicians.

There have been frequent incidents of deaths in Surendranagar district where illegal mining of coal is rampant with involvement of local politicians of the ruling party," Gujarat Congress spokesman Manish Doshi said. On Sunday, AAP leaders held a press conference in Surendranagar, demanding strict action against those responsible for running illegal mines in the district.

Sources said the proliferation of unregulated coal mines has become a death trap for impoverished workers who get paid ₹500-₹700 a day to work in pits that are 80 to 100 feet deep to extract coal using gelatin sticks for blasting.

POLITY & GOVERNANCE

Product information made mandatory on bulk packages

The Department of Consumer Affairs has decided to amend the Legal Metrology (Packaged Commodities) Rules, 2011 to ensure mandatory declaration of all information on pre-packaged commodities used for retail sale. The decision comes in the wake of information that packaged commodities above 25 kg are available for retail sale without mandatory declarations on the packages.

The Centre said on Sunday that the amendment will bring clarity among manufacturers, packers and importers of packaged commodities of any quantity to make declarations if these are for retail sale. The rules, however, are not applicable to the packaged commodities meant for industrial or institutional consumers.

Promoting fairness

"This revised provision will help in establishing uniform standards/requirements for packaged commodities, promoting consistency and fairness across different brands and products and will help consumers in making informed choices," the Centre said in the release. The department has also invited comments from stakeholders on the amendments, which they can send up to July 29.

The Legal Metrology (Packaged Commodities) Rules, 2011 mandate declaration of information such as name and address of the manufacturer, packer and importer; country of origin; common or generic name of the commodity; net quantity; month and year of manufacture; maximum retail price; unit sale price; best-before or use-by date; and consumer care details on all pre-packaged commodities.

Packages of commodities containing quantity of more than 25 kg or 25 litres; cement, fertilizer, and agricultural farm produce sold in bags above 50 kg; and packaged commodities meant for industrial consumers or institutional consumers are exempted from this Rule. "It is observed that the packaged commodities above 25 kg are available for retail sale, which is not as per the intention to make all declarations on pre-packaged commodities meant for retail sale," the Centre said.

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SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY

Which topics are India's researchers publishing papers on?

Hot topics

The charts are based on data collated from the Web of Science, a scholarly publication database



Chart 1 | The chart ranks the five topics under which the highest number of papers were published (2004 - 2023) in select nations

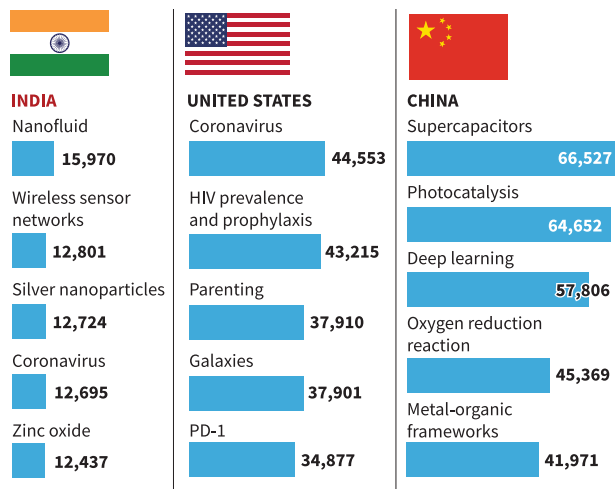
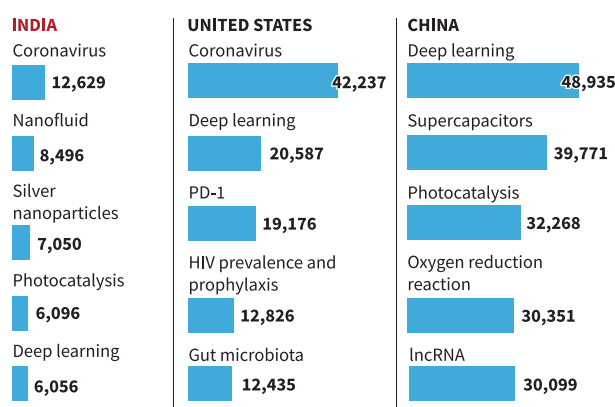


Chart 2 | The chart ranks the five topics under which the highest number of papers were published (2019 - 2023) in select nations



Research publications are widely used as a measure of scientific and technological progress. A brief comparative study of the most researched topics in the Web of Science, a scholarly publication database, over the last 20 years and the last five years highlights the research focus of scientists in different countries.

The chart-topper

'Coronavirus' was the most published research topic in the world in the last five years and in the last two decades. The sheer volume of papers on this subject shows the capacity of the global scientific community to produce relevant scientific knowledge that will help people respond quickly to a crisis. 'Coronavirus' was the most researched topic in India in the last five years and among the top five research topics in the last two decades. It was the most published research topic in the U.S. over the last five years and in the last two decades. But it was conspicuously absent from China's top research topics. This is surprising for two reasons: the SARS-CoV-2 virus was first reported from this country in late 2019; and China, which has emerged as a global scientific superpower in the last two decades, has been contributing an increasing share of the world's papers on several research topics.

Some of the other topics that are widely researched are deep learning, and clean and green energy topics such as photocatalysis, supercapacitors, and oxygen reduction reactions. Deep learning refers to a class of artificial intelligence (AI) algorithms characterised by the use of multiple 'layers', where each layer transforms and/or manipulates the input data in specific ways. Engineers have built facial recognition on phones, speech recognition in digital assistants, and recommendation engines on streaming services using deep learning.

The focus on AI-related research worldwide corresponds to the increasing importance of AI technologies in various sectors. Chinese researchers have produced more than twice as many papers on the topic of AI as have researchers in the U.S., and more than 45% of the world's research output on this subject in the last five years. India's share remains low even if the topic features among the country's top five.

Photocatalysis refers to the acceleration of chemical reactions using light. Scientists are studying it to make new materials and generate clean energy; a particularly important contemporary focus area is green hydrogen. Supercapacitors are energy storage devices that trap and hold energy as electrostatic charge. In contrast, conventional batteries store chemical energy.

Supercapacitors are super-powered batteries that can store much more energy and also release it faster. Their applications include electric vehicles, where fast charging is required, and the renewable energy sector. The oxygen reduction reaction is an important process in electrochemistry with a starring role in next-generation energy conversion devices such as fuel cells and metal-air batteries. Research on these topics is evidently driven by researchers in China.

Comparing the U.S. and China

Overall, China has focused significantly on high-impact technological fields and on the development of new materials. In contrast, the U.S. appears to be facilitating a more diverse approach, addressing health and social well-being

through research on topics such as parenting, the human immuno-deficiency virus, the SARS-CoV-2 virus, gut microbiota, and programmed cell death (PD-1). Research on PD-1 has the potential to revolutionise how we treat cancer and other diseases by understanding, and then manipulating, the immune system's response. The U.S. National Institute of Health provides more funding for life science and health research than all other civilian research funding agencies of the country. U.S. researchers are also devoting attention to astronomy and astrophysics, presumably because they enjoy greater access to the data produced by NASA missions.

India's nano focus

India's significant focus on nanotechnology is a sign of a concentrated allocation of resources in areas that may not directly address the immediate needs in health or climate change — at least not yet. Policymakers may examine the agenda-setting process in Indian research or, alternatively, guide nanotechnology towards solutions more closely related to India's Sustainable Development Goals and energy-transition targets.



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