

**G.K snippets...**



**Law, Policy and Governance**



[Daily snippets](#)

**1. [No further concessions to offer, govt. tells protesting farmers](#)**

- The negotiations between Central Ministers and farm unions came to a standstill with the government saying it had no further concessions to offer beyond the proposal to suspend the three contentious agricultural reform laws for 12 to 18 months. No date has been fixed for another meeting.

**2. [Riots: 'media trial should not destroy presumption of undertrial's innocence'](#)**

- "Presumption of innocence" should not be destroyed at the very threshold of justice process through media trial, a court said on a plea moved by former **JNU student leader Umar Khalid** alleging "vicious media campaign" against him in a north east Delhi riots case.
- While the press and the news media was described as the "Fourth Estate" in a democratic society, there existed a risk of prejudice being caused if they failed to do their duty with care and caution and one of such risks was that of 'media trial.'

**3. [CBI books Cambridge Analytica, another firm in data theft case](#)**

- The Central Bureau of Investigation has booked Cambridge Analytica (U.K.) Limited and Global Science Research Limited (U.K.) for alleged illegal harvesting of personal data of about **5.62 lakh Indian users** on Facebook through an application.

**4. [Perarivalan pardon plea to be considered in a week, says SC](#)**

- An altered order of the Supreme Court recorded that **Tamil Nadu Governor Banwarilal Purohit** will consider a plea for pardon filed by Rajiv Gandhi assassination case convict A.G. Perarivalan within a week. Earlier order said the petition would be looked into in four weeks. The latest order records that "the Solicitor General submitted

*that the application filed by the petitioner [Perarivalan] under Article 161 of the Constitution of India shall be considered within a period of one week from today”.*

- **What is Article 161?** The Governor of a State shall have the power to grant pardons, reprieves, respites or remissions of punishment or to suspend, remit or commute the sentence of any person convicted of any offence against any law relating to a matter to which the **executive power of the State extends**.

(<https://indiankanoon.org/doc/873751/>)

- The advocate of Perarivalan, has written to Tamil Nadu Governor Banwarilal Purohit, appealing to provide solace to the convict and his aged parents and alleviate their sufferings. In his letter, advocate on- record K. Paari Vendan said Perarivalan was suffering from multiple comorbidities.

## 5. [Police give nod for tractor parades in Delhi on RDay](#)

- Protesting farmers who have been camping at the borders of the national capital for more than two months now will be allowed to enter Delhi with their tractors on Republic Day, according to a compromise arrived at between the farm unions and the Delhi Police.
- Farmer leaders said the police had given them permission to hold tractor parades on five routes within the national capital on January 26. More than two lakh tractors are likely to participate in the parades.

## 6. [Allegations of misconduct against me false: Akbar](#)

- Former Union Minister M.J. Akbar reiterated before a Delhi court that the allegations of sexual misconduct made by **journalist Priya Ramani** against him were *“fabricated and false”*. Mr. Akbar through senior advocate Geeta Luthra during the final hearing in a criminal complaint filed by him against Ms. Ramani for allegedly defaming him by accusing him of sexual misconduct decades ago.

## 7. [Judges recall dark days of Emergency](#)

- Justices **N.V. Ramana** and **D.Y. Chandrachud** of the Supreme Court shared their personal experiences as students when the **Emergency was declared in 1975**, deeply affecting their lives. Justice Chandrachud narrated how the Emergency visited on the nation an *“unprecedented destruction of civil liberties in the garb of curbing internal disturbances”*. He said the Emergency served as *“harrowing reminder of State excess”*. Justice Ramana recounts flight from arrest on a lorry as a student in 1975.

## 8. [India proposes to expand research, tourism in the Arctic](#)

- India has unveiled a **new draft ‘Arctic’ policy** that, among other things, commits to expanding scientific research, *“sustainable tourism”* and mineral oil and gas exploration in the Arctic region.
- India expects the **Goa based National Centre for Polar and Ocean Research** to lead scientific research and act as a nodal body to coordinate among various scientific bodies to promote domestic scientific research capacities by expanding *“earth sciences, biological sciences, geosciences, climate change and space related programmes, dovetailed with Arctic imperatives in Indian universities.”*
- *“Arctic research will help India’s scientific community to study melting rates of the third pole, the Himalayan glaciers, which are endowed with the largest freshwater reserves in the world outside the geographic poles,”* the document notes. India launched its **first scientific expedition to the Arctic in 2007**.

## 9. [Mock trials of remote voting project soon: CEC](#)

- Chief Election Commissioner Sunil Arora said the trials of the Election Commission’s remote voting project would be carried out soon. The system being uses block-chain for two-way remote voting at designated centres.

*“Another significant change we can look forward to is grant of postal ballot facility to over- seas electors,”* said the CEC.

- In another development, electors will be able to download electronic versions of the elector photo ID card, or eEPIC. The eEPIC would be a non-editable PDF version of the EPIC that can be downloaded on the phone and stored on the DigiLocker app or printed from a computer.

#### 10. [UN rights body calls for release of Bhima Koregaon activists](#)

- The top human rights body of the United Nations has urged the Indian government to release the activists who are in prison for the **2018 Bhima-Koregaon case**, *“at the very least on bail”*.
- The Bhima-Koregaon case dates back to January 1, 2018, which marked the **200th anniversary of the Bhima-Koregaon battle**. The event was organised to celebrate the victory of the British army, which included a large number of Mahars, against Peshwa Baji Rao II’s army. One person was killed and several others were injured during the 2018 event. Several human rights activists, including Sudha Bharadwaj, Varavara Rao and Gautam Navlakha, were arrested during the course of the investigation.

#### 11. [Will digitise Affiliation system: CBSE](#)

- The Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) is restructuring the affiliation system for schools, and making the process completely digital and based on data analytics with least human intervention. The new system, which would come into effect from March 1, has been restructured as per various recommendations for systemic reforms laid down in the **new National Education Policy (NEP), 2020**.

#### 12. [Bombay HC overturns conviction under POCSO Act](#)

- The Nagpur Bench of the Bombay High Court acquitted a man of charges under the **Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act** and convicted him under a “minor offence” of the Indian Penal Code (IPC). The Bench said, *“There is no direct physical contact i.e skin to skin with sexual intent without penetration.”*
- The police filed an FIR under Sections of the IPC and Section 8 (punishment for sexual assault) of the POCSO Act. The special court framed charges under Sections 361 (kidnapping from lawful guardianship) of the IPC also. A single Bench of **Justice Pushpa Ganediwala** was hearing an appeal filed challenging an order sentencing the convict to three years of imprisonment.

#### 13. [‘Women farmers will be hit hard by farm laws’](#)

- Over 400 Indian women’s rights activists, women’s organisations and academics have penned an open letter to the government expressing their solidarity with protesting women farmers and underscoring that they are central to the farmers’ agitation as they are likely to be hit the hardest.
- If the three laws were not repealed, marginal and women farmers are likely to be hit harder as the dismantling of the APMC would mean farmers would not be able to negotiate prices.
- *“The contract farming envisaged under these laws would be that women dependent on small or marginal holdings, either as direct cultivators or tenants, would be highly disadvantaged in negotiating contracts. Shockingly, farmers or anyone representing them will also not have any recourse to the jurisdiction of appellate courts to challenge contracts that dupe them or force them into landlessness and penury.”*

#### 14. [‘WhatsApp treating Indian users differently is cause for concern’](#)

- The Centre told the Delhi High Court that the differential treatment by WhatsApp of Indian users compared with their European counterparts with respect to its privacy policy was a *“cause for concern for the government”*.

- *“While the privacy policy offered by WhatsApp to its European users specifically prohibits sharing of any information with Facebook, this provision is not present in the privacy policy offered to Indian citizens who form a very substantial part of WhatsApp’s user base.”*
- The submissions were made before Justice Sanjeev Sachdeva during the hearing of a petition by a lawyer against the new privacy policy of WhatsApp, which is owned by Facebook. Mr. Lal, in his petition, claimed that WhatsApp’s new privacy policy violated the **Right to Privacy** guaranteed under the Constitution.

#### 15. Respect right to vote, exercise franchise sincerely: President

- President Ram Nath Kovind said it was important to **respect the right to vote**, which was something that people around the world had struggled to achieve. The digital voter ID cards would be available for download by all electors with **valid EPIC numbers** from February 1, while new electors who applied for EPICs in November and December would be able to download their digital cards.

#### 16. Petition in Supreme Court seeks guidelines for electronic media

- The Supreme Court has decided to examine a petition seeking the **framing of guidelines** outlining the broad regulatory paradigm within which the right to free speech of broadcasters and electronic media can be judicially regulated. The plea has also sought the setting up of an **independent Media Tribunal** to hear and expeditiously adjudicate complaints against *“media businesses”* filed by viewers and citizens.
- A Bench, led by Chief Justice of India S.A. Bobde, has issued notices to the Centre and Press Council of India, among others. The plea said the right to life and dignity envisaged the right of citizens to *“free, fair and proportionate media reporting.”*

#### 17. Govt. conspiracy led to violence: farmers

- Farm unions have blamed the violence which took place during their Republic Day tractor parades on a conspiracy hatched by the government with one Punjab union, the Kisan Mazdoor Sangharsh Committee, and Punjabi actor Deep Sidhu, who has previously been linked to the BJP.
- The unions have **cancelled their plans to march to Parliament** on February 1, but have vowed to continue their agitation in a peaceful manner. Delhi Police Commissioner S.N. Srivastava said the unions had not followed the terms laid down for the parades, alleging that the farmer leaders made inflammatory speeches and were involved in the violence.

#### 18. SC stays Bombay HC order in groping case

- The Supreme Court stayed a controversial Bombay High Court verdict, which acquitted a man found guilty of assault under the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act on the grounds that he groped his victim over her clothes and there was no *“skin to skin”* contact between them.
- A Bench, led by Chief Justice of India (CJI) Sharad A. Bobde, took cognisance instantaneously after **Attorney General K.K. Venugopal** made a special mention in court, saying the single judge verdict would set a *“very dangerous precedent”* and cripple the **intention of the POCSO Act** to punish sexual offenders.
- The accused was sentenced to the minimum three years’ imprisonment under Section 8 of the POCSO Act. That was set aside by the High Court and his sentence was reduced to one year under Section 354 (assault of a woman to outrage her modesty) of the Indian Penal Code.
- *“Abuse and outraging the modesty of a child has been a matter of great concern. The POCSO Act was enacted to deal with evil and to impart speedy justice. Special courts were formed. The observations [in the January 19 judgment of the HC] have badly shaken the belief of the petitioners and like-minded people.”*

### 19. [Allahabad HC seeks response on farmers' bond amount](#)

- The Allahabad High Court has sought a response from the Sitapur district administration in Uttar Pradesh on the **“exorbitant” amount of personal bonds and sureties** asked of farmers, allegedly to prevent them from participating in the ongoing farm protests. A Division Bench of Justices Ramesh Sinha and Rajeev Singh sought the reply on a PIL plea filed by Lucknow-based social activist Arundhati Dhuru.

### 20. [No protection from arrest for Tandav team](#)

- The Supreme Court declined to pass an order to protect the makers and artists of the web series Tandav on Amazon Prime from arrest, even as it agreed to examine their plea to club the FIRs registered against them in various States on the charge of hurting Hindu religious sentiments.
- Justice M.R. Shah, on the Bench, said **free speech is not absolute and is subject to reasonable restrictions**. Senior advocate Mukul Rohatgi said the makers have come directly to the SC following the **precedent of the Arnab Goswami case** where multiple FIRs were filed in different States and the court agreed to club them.

### 21. [SC asks for timeline on appointments](#)

- The Supreme Court questioned the government about the **delay in clearing Collegium recommendations for judicial appointments** to various High Courts. A Bench of Chief Justice Sharad A. Bobde and Justices Sanjay Kishan Kaul and Surya Kant asked the Centre if there was a timeline for government clearance of such recommendations.
- The Bench noted how recommendations from the High Courts of Bombay and Allahabad dated back to May or June last year. It said 189 proposals for judicial appointments were still pending. The Bench served notice on the High Courts which were not party to the petition filed by Lok Prahari, an NGO, seeking the appointment of additional judges.

### 22. [Owaisi, Viswam file dissent on DNA Bill](#)

- **Asaddudin Owaisi, president of the All India Majlise-IttehadulMuslimeen (AI-MIM), and CPI leader Binoy Viswam** have filed dissent notes to the parliamentary standing committee's report on the **DNA Technology (Use and Application) Regulation Bill, 2019** on the grounds that it does not take into account their concerns over privacy violations. They say if enacted, the Bill will target Dalits, Muslims and Adivasis by way of **DNA sample collection and indefinite storage**. The fear is that the law could be used for caste or community based profiling.
  - The Standing Committee on Science and Technology, headed by Congress leader Jairam Ramesh, will meet on February 1 to discuss and adopt the final report. The Bill ran afoul with the standards set in the **Puttaswamy and Subramanian Swamy judgments** of the Supreme Court.
  - Mr. Ramesh has countered Mr. Owaisi's concerns. In a letter to Mr. Owaisi, he said the objective of the Bill was not overarching but limited to the establishment of a regulatory board to regulate the use of DNA technology in consonance with international standards. [What is the Bill about?](#)
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## National News/ Interventions



### Daily snippets

#### 1. Decision on Rajiv case convict soon, SC told

- **Tamil Nadu Governor Banwarilal Purohit** will take a decision “*as per the Constitution*” on a plea for release by **A.G. Perarivalan**, who is undergoing life imprisonment for the assassination of **former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in 1991**, **Solicitor General Tushar Mehta** orally informed the Supreme Court.
- Mr. Mehta’s submission came on the second day of hearing of a petition filed by Perarivalan, senior advocate Gopal Sankaranarayanan and advocate Prabu Ramasubramanian, highlighting the **long delay by the Governor to decide on the Tamil Nadu Cabinet recommendation**. Though the submission was made during the hearing of Perarivalan’s case, the Cabinet had made the recommendation to remit the life sentences of seven convicts, including Perarivalan, on September 9, 2018, Additional Advocate General of Tamil Nadu, Balaji Srinivasan, said.
- **Rajiv Gandhi assassination convicts**: On 21st May, 1991, **Rajiv Gandhi**, former Prime Minister of India, was assassinated as a result of a suicide bombing in **Sriperumbudur, Chennai, in Tamil Nadu**. At least 14 others were also killed. It was carried out by **Thenmozhi Rajaratnam**, also known as Dhanu, member of the **Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)**.
- In 1998, TADA Court gave death sentence to all the 26 accused, which was appealed in the Supreme Court. The convicts in the case - Nalini, Santhan, Murugan (Nalini’s husband), A.G. Perarivalan, Robert Payas, Jayakumaran, and Ravichandran —are serving life terms across various jails in Tamil Nadu. The convicts have been in jail for over 27 years.

#### 2. China defends new village in Arunachal Pradesh

- China said its **construction of a village across the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in Arunachal Pradesh** was “*beyond reproach*” because it had “*never recognised*” Arunachal.
- India’s Ministry of External Affairs said earlier this week it was aware of the construction “*along the LAC*”. This followed a report showing satellite images of the village, built between November 2019 and November 2020 and located a couple of kilometres across the LAC, beyond what India sees as the border separating Arunachal Pradesh and Tibet, on the banks of the Tsari Chu river in Upper Subansiri district in Arunachal. Indian officials said this area **has been under Chinese control since 1959**.
- The construction of the village has been seen by analysts as a **move to bolster China’s claim to the area**, and part of a broader recent **push by China to build civilian settlements in disputed frontier areas**, which it has also done with Bhutan.

#### 3. India to clear vaccine exports to Brazil today

- Brazil is set to receive the go ahead from the Indian government to collect two million doses of the **Covishield** vaccine made by the Serum Institute, two weeks after **Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro** requested Prime Minister Narendra Modi for their “*urgent*” clearance.
- Brazil had first turned to India for the Covishield vaccine earlier this month to tide over the gap in production of its own units amid an emerging health crisis. However, after India refused to give the “*technical clearances*” in time for the plane, Mr. Bolsonaro decided to go ahead with its vaccination programme using Chinese developed **Sinovac** that had been manufactured at a local institute.

#### 4. Smart cameras to help women in distress

- The police in the Uttar Pradesh capital are set to **install smart cameras in public places** that will automatically click the pictures of women in distress situations by reading their facial expressions and alert the nearest police vehicle. Five such artificial intelligence based cameras will be installed at each of the 200 “hotspots” identified by the police in the city, City Police Commissioner D.K. Thakur said. The hotspots would include areas from where most complaints have been received.

#### 5. We have not ‘functionally changed’ privacy policy: FB

- At a meeting of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Information and Technology headed by senior Congress leader Shashi Tharoor, Facebook, which owns the messaging platform WhatsApp, clarified that it has not “*functionally changed*” the privacy policy. Officials of Facebook and Twitter deposed before the committee on the subject of “*safeguarding citizens’ rights and prevention of misuse of social/online news media platforms*”.
- The Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MEITY) had recently written to **Will Cathcart, Global CEO of WhatsApp**, to withdraw the proposed changes to the privacy policy of the Facebook-owned messaging application for Indian users. The Ministry demanded that WhatsApp explain **if the metadata of users’ chat** will be shared with other Facebook companies.
- The committee also **questioned Facebook on data security and its monetisation**. The Facebook officials conceded that the revenue model of the platform is advertising driven, though the officials insisted that it does not share the user data with any of its advertisers.
- Members also asked **Facebook to explain whether it is a publisher or merely an intermediary**. Concerns were raised in the meeting that Facebook is governed solely by U.S. community laws since it is a U.S.-based registered company. BJP MPs flagged the recent ban of the U.S. President Donald Trump on Twitter. A section of BJP MPs criticised Twitter calling it a **violation of freedom of expression**. Another section flagged Twitter for not showing a similar responsiveness in India.

#### 6. Farmers reject proposal to suspend laws for 18 months

- Protesting farm unions rejected the Centre’s proposal to suspend the three farm reform laws for one and half years. They intend to continue their agitation until the laws are repealed, and a law **guaranteeing minimum support price** for crops is enacted. The decision was taken after a meeting of the full general body of the **Samyukt Kisan Morcha**, a joint front representing about 500 protesting groups, at the **Singhu protest site** on the **Delhi Haryana border**.
- Several protesters alleged that the proposal to suspend the laws for a certain period of time was the government’s tool to appease the farmers ahead of **Punjab Assembly polls in 2022**. In a parallel process, the Supreme Court appointed committee started its hearings on Thursday, reaching out to 10 farmer groups in eight States via video conference.

#### 7. Co-WIN platform gets upgrade

- The cumulative number of healthcare workers vaccinated against COVID-19 has touched 9,99,065. An enhancement in Co-WIN software has been introduced to cater to the creation of more session sites, more sessions per site, and a change in site location, which is now allowed.
- “*The enhanced version also allows planning and scheduling the sessions for the entire week and works for the enhanced safety of the beneficiaries, tagging of contraindications. These new features are being enabled in the vaccinator module,*” the Health Ministry statement said.

#### 8. Khelo India Youth games

- The **Khelo India Youth games** were launched in 2018 as a multidisciplinary grassroots event for under17 years and under21 years. Conducted annually, the best performers are given an annual scholarship of ₹5 lakh for eight

years to prepare for international sporting events. This year, the games are scheduled to take place at **Panchkula in Haryana**, in September-October, after the Tokyo Olympics.

- In a recent move, the Sports Ministry inducted four indigenous martial art forms - *Kalaripayattu of Kerala, Mallakhamb of Central India, Gatka of Punjab and Thang Ta of Manipur* - into the Khelo India Youth Games (KIYG).
- **Mallakhamb** is a traditional form of gymnastics performed with a wooden pole (made of wood from sheesham or Indian rosewood and polished with castor oil), a cane, or a rope. Madhya Pradesh declared Mallakhamb the State sport only in 2013. **Gatka** is a style of fighting with wooden sticks that originated in Punjab in the 15th Century. The **Thang-ta of Manipur**, combines ritual, demonstration and combat and involves a variety of dance forms and warrior drills. Thang-Ta has eight to 10 types of punching and 12 types of kick techniques.

#### 9. [Covaxin's efficacy against U.K. strain not proven yet](#)

- **Bharat Biotech's COVID-19 vaccine candidate Covaxin** can produce neutralising antibodies - a requirement to study its efficacy - against multiple coronavirus variants, but is **yet to demonstrate efficacy against the variant 'B.1.1.7' or the 'U.K. strain'** as the new virulent strain is commonly known.
- Covaxin and Covishield have been approved for emergency use in India. The former, though its efficacy was unknown, was approved because it relied on an established vaccine platform and, being a whole inactivated virus, was purported to be more effective against a wider family of coronavirus strains.
- So far, none of the available vaccine candidates approved anywhere in the world have been shown to be better than others in protecting against a range of strains.

#### 10. [Myanmar, Mauritius and Seychelles receive Covishield](#)

- Large consignments of Covishield vaccine doses were flown in special Indian aircraft to **Seychelles, Mauritius and Myanmar** on Friday. The shipments of the vaccine, manufactured by the **Serum Institute of India (SII) in Pune**, is part of the **Vaccine Maitri diplomacy** that the Ministry of External Affairs said will also cover Africa, which is in need of affordable COVID-19 vaccine doses. In the first round of supplies, special flights have already carried large consignments of Covishield vaccine doses to **Bhutan, the Maldives, Bangladesh and Nepal** during January 2021.

#### 11. [Call to maintain data of crimes against disabled](#)

- A group of over 90 disability rights organisations, activists and academics has written to **Union Home Minister Amit Shah**, urging that the **National Crime Records Bureau** maintain data of the violent crimes committed against persons with disabilities. The group said it was *"dismayed by the fact that despite the large number of reported cases of sexual assaults on disabled girls/ women, the NCRB does not maintain disaggregated data on such violence, as a separate category."*

#### 12. [Indonesia makes room for an Indian hero](#)

- **Biju Patnaik**, the former Chief Minister of Odisha, who was a skilled pilot, **flew several missions in 1947 to transport Indonesian leaders**, including the nation's tallest leader, **President Sukarno**, Vice President Hatta and Prime Minister Sutan Sjahrir out of Indonesia, at grave risk to himself.
- On the walls of the Biju Patnaik room are photographs, newspaper clippings and letters that document Mr. Patnaik's secret assignments to fly out the Indonesian leaders, as well as his relations with the Indonesian leadership. Eventually, Indonesia won back its freedom. In 1950, President Sukarno was the chief guest at India's first Republic Day, and India-Indonesia ties remained strong for the next decade.
- A letter in the Patnaik room also tells the tale of how **relations between the two countries soured after Indonesia didn't support India in the 1962 war with China**. Relations were revived only decades later, when in **2005, India and Indonesia signed a Strategic Partnership agreement**; military exchanges and trade ties have grown since.

### 13. 'Sukhoi helped maritime security'

- The resurrection of 222 Squadron at Thanjavur with **Sukhoi-30 aircraft** has paved the way for strengthening maritime security in the southern peninsula and maintaining Indian interests in the Indian Ocean region.
- The Air Force leadership expressed satisfaction over the induction of an additional indigenously built LCA (light combat aircraft) Tejas aircraft squadron at Sullur. The Air Force is in a highly accelerated growth stage and induction of indigenous systems is in tandem with the government's 'Make in India' initiative.

### 14. WHO chief thanks Modi for 'continued support'

- **World Health Organization chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus** thanked **Prime Minister Narendra Modi** for his continued support to the global COVID-19 response, saying acting together, including sharing of knowledge, will help in combating the novel coronavirus.
- On January 19, **India announced its assistance of vaccines to the neighbouring countries**. A day after, 1.5 lakh doses of vaccines were supplied to Bhutan and one lakh doses to the Maldives. Over 2 million doses of COVID-19 vaccines were provided to Bangladesh and 1 million doses to Nepal.

### 15. Draft policy to help grow nano, micro enterprises

- A new policy on the anvil, the **Udyog Sahayak Enterprises Network (USENET)**, may give a major fillip to the growth of stunted nano and microenterprises in India's informal sector. The proposed framework, whose draft was jointly put together by the **Azim Premji University**, the **Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI)**, and the **Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS)**, is aimed at providing a slew of growth driven services to over 62 million nano and micro enterprises that currently employ over 100 million people.
- By enabling scaleup, the draft claims, USENET can aid in the creation of an additional 10.3 million jobs over five years, going up to nearly 56.9 million jobs over 10 years. Report co-author and faculty member at Azim Premji University, Amit Basole, noted that rather than creating more nano entrepreneurs, the country has to help existing MSEs grow in size. The draft is currently under review by the group of ministers and the PMO.

### 16. Ban on Chinese apps will stay, says govt. notice

- The government has sent notices to Chinese apps, including TikTok, that the order to block them will be continued. The notice has been issued by the Ministry of Electronics and IT after reviewing replies of blocked apps.
- The government had blocked 59 Chinese apps in June and 118 more, including PUBG mobile game, in September. The **Ministry of Information Technology** had blocked the apps under **Section 69A of the Information Technology Act** after learning that they may be used for "*activities prejudicial to the sovereignty and integrity of India, defence of India, security of state and public order*".

### 17. Maharashtra to unlock history in prisons

- The Maharashtra government is set to launch "*jail tourism*" under which historically significant jails in Maharashtra, which are still being used as penal centres, will be opened to visitors to see the barracks where freedom fighters were imprisoned by the British. "**Pune's Yerawada Jail will be opened for first-of-its kind jail tourism from January 26,**" said Home Minister Anil Deshmukh.
- Freedom fighters including Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Sarojini Naidu, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, Motilal Nehru, Lokmanya Tilak and Subhas Chandra Bose were imprisoned by the British in different jails in Maharashtra during the freedom struggle. The **famous Poona Pact** between Dr. **Babasaheb Ambedkar and Mahatma Gandhi** took place beneath a mango tree at Yerawada jail. In 1899, the **Chapekar brothers** were given death sentence in the same jail.

### 18. Amid the pandemic gloom, a Republic Day parade like no other

- Unlike previous years, the **Republic Day celebrations are scaled down this year due to the pandemic**. It would be without the usual festivity and fervour, with rigorous restrictions and stringent protocols. Delhi Police has advised people to **watch the live telecast of Republic Day parade at home** due to COVID-19 protocols. Invitees attending the parade at Rajpath have to comply with the COVID-19 advisory that includes temperature check, use of sanitiser, mask and social distancing. This time, **there would not be a chief guest at the Republic Day parade**.

#### 19. **The Palk Bay conflict is exacting a high toll, and cries for early resolution**

- The tragic death of four fishermen from Tamil Nadu - one of them a Sri Lankan Tamil refugee living in India, allegedly when the Sri Lankan Navy was about to arrest them last week, is yet another instance of the **unresolved fisheries conflict in the Palk Bay** taking an unacceptable toll of lives.
- When the two sides decided to create a joint working group some years ago, they had agreed that there would be no violence or loss of life in the handling of the fishermen and that a hotline would be established between the respective Coast Guards. It is **unfortunate that the hotline is yet to be operationalised**, and deaths continue to occur.
- So far there has not been enough political resolve to end this conflict. A comprehensive solution, one that would severely curtail unauthorised fishing and help in an orderly sharing of and sustainable use of resources by fishermen from both sides, is long overdue.
- **Palk Bay** is a semi-enclosed shallow water body with a water depth maximum of 13m. It is located between the southeast coast of India and Sri Lanka

#### 20. **Terror groups in Pakistan/Kashmir switch to new messaging apps**

- Amid a raging *debate over data privacy* while using messaging platforms such as WhatsApp, terrorist groups and their handlers from Pakistan are switching to new applications, including one developed by a Turkish company, officials here said.
- The names of the messaging apps have been withheld for security reasons. While one of the apps is owned by a company based in the U.S., the second is from Europe. The latest is an app developed by a Turkish company frequently used by the handlers and their prospective recruits in the Valley.
- The new apps have the **ability to work with the slowest Internet connections using 2G technology**. All encryption and decryption happen directly on the devices, reducing third-party intervention at any point and **these apps use encryption algorithm RSA2048, which was adopted as the most secure encrypted platform**. The RSA is an American Network Security and Authentication company founded in 1982. One of the new messaging **apps used by terrorists to radicalise the youth in the Valley does not even ask for phone numbers or emails**, the officials said.

#### 21. **Sundarbans is home to 428 species of birds, says ZSI**

- The Indian Sundarbans, which is part of the **largest mangrove forest in the world**, is home to 428 species of birds, a recent publication of the **Zoological Survey of India (ZSI)** states. The publication, ***Birds of the Sundarban Biosphere Reserve***, released earlier this month by the ZSI, not only documents the avifauna of the Sundarbans, but also serves as a comprehensive photographic field guide, with detailed distribution and locality data for all the species from the region.
- The Indian Sundarbans, which covers 4,200 sq. km, also includes the **Sunderban Tiger Reserve** of 2,585 sq. km - home to about 96 royal Bengal tigers (as per the last census in 2020). It is a world heritage site and a Ramsar site (a wetland site designated to be of international importance). According to studies, India is home to 1300 species of birds in total.
- Scientists and nature lovers are observing the **125th birth anniversary year of Salim Ali**, the Birdman of India, the ZSI Director said birdwatching not only brings people closer to nature, but also creates awareness and livelihood opportunities for the locals.

## 22. [Padma Vibhushan for SPB, Abe](#)

- Legendary singer **S.P. Balasubrahmanyam** will get the **Padma Vibhushan**, the *second highest civilian award* in the country, posthumously. **Former Prime Minister of Japan Shinzo Abe**, Islamic scholar **Maulana Wahidud din Khan**, cardiologist **B.M. Hegde** and **B.B. Lal**, the archaeologist who claimed to have discovered temple remains at Ayodhya, will also get the Padma Vibhushan.
- **Singer K.S. Chithra**, former Lok Sabha Speaker **Sumitra Mahajan**, **Nripendra Misra**, former Principal Secretary to Prime Minister Narendra Modi, and former Chairman of the National Commission for Minorities **Tarlochan Singh** are among the **10 Padma Bhushan recipients**. The Padma Bhushan will be conferred posthumously on former Assam Chief Minister **Tarun Gogoi**, former Union Minister **Ram Vilas Paswan**, former Gujarat Chief Minister **Keshubhai Patel** and **Shia cleric Kalbe Sadiq**.
- The 1971 Bangladesh war veteran **Lt.Col. Quazi Sajjad Ali Zahid** and Bangladeshi artist **Sanjida Khatun** will get the **Padma Shri**. **Rajni Bector** of *Mrs Bector's Food Specialities*, a Punjab based company making biscuits and bakery products has been selected for the Padma Shri. **Sangkhumi Bualchhuak** from Mizoram will be given the Padma Shri in the social work category. **Sindhutai Sapkal** from Maharashtra, known to help orphans, will get the Padma Shri. **Professor C.L Sapru** from Jammu and Kashmir, who died last year, will get the Padma Shri posthumously.
- **Padma Awards**, one of the highest civilian honours of India announced annually on the eve of Republic Day, are given in three categories - **Padma Vibhushan** (for exceptional and distinguished service), **Padma Bhushan** (distinguished service of higher order) and **Padma Shri** (distinguished service).
- The award recognises achievements in all fields of activities or disciplines where an element of public service is involved. The Padma Awards are conferred on the recommendations made by the Padma Awards Committee, which is **constituted by the Prime Minister** every year. The Union Home Ministry said the President has approved **conferment of 119 Padma awards** - seven Padma Vibhushan, 10 Padma Bhushan and 102 Padma Shri.

## 23. [India, China troops clashed at Naku La](#)

- Indian and Chinese troops clashed at **Naku La in north Sikkim** last week, in what the Army termed a "*minor faceoff*", resulting in some minor injuries on both sides, it has been learnt.
- The clash occurred as the *People's Liberation Army (PLA)* troops attempted to intrude into Indian territory, there were some minor injuries on both sides, but the situation was resolved and under control. There was a clash at Naku La on the night of May 9 last, which also saw injuries on both sides. There was a **clash at Pangong Tso** also at that time as the nine-month-long stand-off began at several locations across eastern Ladakh.

## 24. [Jayati Ghosh appointed to UN advisory panel](#)

- Indian development economist **Jayati Ghosh** is among the 20 prominent personalities appointed by the UN to a high level advisory board that will provide **recommendations for the Secretary-General** to respond to the current and future socio economic challenges in the post-COVID-19 world. Dr. Ghosh, 65, is currently a **professor of economics at the University of Massachusetts Amherst**.

## 25. [Centre's prescription for SAM includes yoga, herbs](#)

- AYUSH Centres, yoga, medicinal herbs and indigenous traditional practices are part of the Central government's prescription for **severe acute malnourished (SAM) children**. The Ministry of Women and Child Development in its guidelines issued to various State governments has advised that a drive be conducted to identify such children and if necessary they should be referred to hospitals and AYUSH centres for treatment.

## 26. [Billionaires wealth rose 35% during lockdown : Oxfam](#)

- **Indian billionaires** increased their **wealth by 35% to ₹3 trillion** during the lockdown, ranking them behind their counterparts in U.S., China, Germany, Russia and France, says the "**Inequality Virus Report** " brought out by

Oxfam, a non-profit organisation. The report underscored the deepening inequalities due to COVID-19 where the wealthiest escaped the worst impact of the pandemic while the poor faced joblessness, starvation and death.

- The organisation recommended reintroducing the wealth tax and effecting a one-time COVID-19 cess of 4% on taxable income of over ₹10 lakh to help the economy recover from the lockdown. According to its estimate, a wealth tax on the nation's 954 richest families could **raise the equivalent of 1% of the GDP**.
- According to the report, only 6% of the poorest 20% have access to nonshared sources of improved sanitation, compared to 93.4% of the top 20%. As much as 59.6% of India's population lived in a room or less, which meant that protocols necessary to prevent the spread of COVID-19 cannot be followed.
- Oxfam India's survey across the five States said that close to **40% of teachers in government schools** feared that a third of the students would not return once schools reopened. It was estimated that out of school rates would double in a year. **Dalits, Adivasis and Muslims** were likely to see a higher dropout rate. Girls were also most vulnerable as they were at risk of early and forced marriage, violence and early pregnancies, it noted.
- **Unemployment of women** rose by 15% from a pre lockdown level of 18%, which could result in a loss of India's GDP of about 8% or ₹15 trillion.

### 27. Accelerated Vaccine drive soon

- The Union government is all set to accelerate the first phase of the COVID-19 vaccination drive by setting up additional vaccination sites and allowing walk-in vaccinations for those from the same group who have been registered in the Co-WIN system. The government rolled out the world's largest COVID-19 vaccination drive on January 16 and has so far **vaccinated nearly two million healthcare workers**. The government aims to **inoculate three crore healthcare and frontline workers** free in the first round of the vaccination drive.
- India has so far vaccinated 1.9 million healthcare workers 10 days into its vaccination drive. On Monday, 3,34,679 were vaccinated in 7,171 sessions. There were no deaths reported on Monday in those who had been recently vaccinated, with the tally so far remaining at 8. However, there were **348 reports on Adverse Events Following Immunisation (AEFI)**.

### 28. Tractor rally turns violent as farmers enter Capital

- Delhi witnessed chaotic scenes as groups of protesting farmers broke off from the planned Republic Day tractor parade routes and swarmed into the heart of the national capital, **hoisting a union flag and a Sikh religious flag inside Red Fort**. Police used tear gas, water cannons and lathicharge to stop the farmers at several locations in the city, including at ITO, where one protester died.
- The Delhi police said 83 personnel and one civilian were injured in the protests. By evening, the Home Ministry deployed additional paramilitary forces, and suspended mobile Internet services in several parts of the city. In a statement issued late in the evening, the Delhi police said the **protesting farmers had breached the agreement** with the unions and began their march before the scheduled time.

### 29. Yadav: I take responsibility, feel ashamed

- **Swaraj India president Yogendra Yadav** said he felt "*ashamed*" of the way the farmers' tractor parade turned out on Tuesday, and took responsibility for it. "*Being a part of the protest,*" he said, "*I feel ashamed of the way things proceeded and I take responsibility for it.*"
- "*Violence impacts any kind of protest in a wrong way. I cannot say at the moment who did it and who did not, but prima facie it looks like it has been done by the people that we kept out of the farmers' protest,*" Mr. Yadav said. "*I appealed continuously that we stick to whatever route was decided and not deviate,*" said Mr. Yadav.

### 30. Pursuing national interests, at the UN high table

- New Delhi's entry into the UNSC coincides with the **emergence of a new world order**, one marked by systemic uncertainty, little care for global commons, absence of global leadership, the steady division of the world into

rival blocs, and an age marked by unabashed pursuit of narrow national interests, putting even the rhetoric about a value based global order on the backburner.

- India's seat at the UNSC is also significant vis-à-vis China because the next two years will be key to ensuring **checking further Chinese incursions along the Line of Actual Control** and building up enough infrastructure and mobilising sufficient forces in the forward areas.
- Greater Indian alignment with the West at the UNSC, an unavoidable outcome, could, however, widen the **growing gulf between Moscow and New Delhi** given Russia's increasing dependence on Beijing in more ways than one.
- The **issue of terrorism** has been a major theme in the country's national security and foreign policy discourse for decades now, more so of this government. India must, however, **formulate its policy towards terrorism** with far more diplomatic finesse and political nuance especially given that it is chairing the Taliban sanctions committee while courting the very same Taliban.
- Perhaps more significantly, New Delhi's UNSC strategy should involve shaping the narrative and **global policy engagement** vis-à-vis perhaps one of the biggest grand strategic concepts of our time - **the Indo-Pacific**.
- **India as a permanent member of UNSC ?** India's past global engagements and efforts have often been contingent on the hope that it would one day be admitted to the UNSC given its irrefutable claim. But a cursory glance at the recent debates on UNSC reforms and the state of the international system today should tell us that bending over backwards to please the big five to gain entry into the UNSC will not make a difference. So New Delhi must focus its energies on what it can achieve during the short period that it would be in the UNSC rather than what it wishes happened.

### 31. [In the footsteps of the legendary Muktiyoddhas](#)

- As New Delhi and Dhaka celebrated the **50th anniversary of the 1971 Liberation War**, a **122-member triservice contingent of Bangladesh** marched on Rajpath at the Republic Day parade. It had soldiers drawn from the units of that year.
- Coinciding with the diamond jubilee of the 1971 war and also 50 years of the establishment of ties, New Delhi and Dhaka have agreed to hold a series of commemorative events throughout the year. It is these fraternal ties between the two countries that make the relations transcend even a strategic partnership.
- In 2017, when **Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina** honoured Indian soldiers who took part in the war during her visit to India, Maj. Singh said he presented a photograph of '**Bangabandhu**' (Sheikh Mujibur Rehman) taking the salute of their unit's parade in Dhaka in 1972.

### 32. ['Inclusive reforms must for UNSC to be effective'](#)

- India has said that the UN Security Council is finding itself unable to effectively address increasingly complex **issues of international peace and security** as it lacks inclusivity of those who need to be members of the powerful organ of the world body.
- **India, along with Brazil, Japan and Germany are pressing for urgent reform of the UN Security Council** and for a permanent seat in the reformed 15member top organ of the world body. *"It has been nearly 13 years since the Intergovernmental Negotiations (IGN) started,"* said **India's Permanent Representative to the UN, Ambassador T.S. Tirumurti**. *"The Security Council is being called upon to address increasingly complex issues of global security. Yet, it finds itself unable to act effectively, for it is lacking inclusivity of those who need to be there, and therefore lacking legitimacy and credibility,"* he added.

### 33. [Meghalaya government talks tough on illegal coal mining](#)

- Six miners, all from Assam, died after a crane collapsed into the pit in a forest, Sorkari, in East Jaintia Hills district on January 21. Insisting that action was being taken **against illegal rathole coal mining**, banned by the National Green Tribunal since April 2014, Deputy CM Mr. Prestone Tynsong said a few people have been picked up in connection with the mishap.

- The Meghalaya government has been facing flak from the Opposition Congress and ally BJP for failing to stop **illegal mining and transportation of coal**.

#### **34. School of Public health launched in Rajasthan**

- A new School of Public Health (SPH) has been launched to make policy intervention for **building public health capacity** and skills and bridge gaps between education and practices in Rajasthan. Named after **Indian Institute of Health Management Research (IIHMR) chairperson S.D. Gupta**, the school will provide technical support to health systems and render help to the State government in harnessing new technologies.
- IIHMR Dean (Research) D.K. Mangal said that the SPH has taken up a study on non-communicable diseases, climate change and antimicrobial resistance as its first project to identify priority areas in public healthcare. The study will examine the **scope for data analytics and artificial intelligence** as the key segments for the public health sector.
- Dr. Mangal said the major thrust areas for the school would be digital health technology and evaluation of surveillance mechanisms that could help the policy makers in identifying the challenges and bringing changes to ensure *“equity and inclusion”* in public health.

#### **35. Soren vows 75% jobs in private sector for locals in Jharkhand**

- Announcing a host of welfare measures on the Republic Day, **Jharkhand Chief Minister Hemant Soren** said his government will soon formulate a new domicile policy and reserve 75% jobs in the private sector for the people of the State. He also said that the government will recruit schoolteachers and police personnel.

#### **36. Col. Santosh Babu awarded the Maha Vir Chakra**

- **Galwan hero Col. Santosh Babu** was awarded the Mahavir Chakra on the 72nd Republic Day celebrations in Telangana. His spouse Bikumalla Santoshi was felicitated remembering her husband’s martyrdom in the 2020 India-China skirmishes in the Galwan Valley in June, and the Centre’s recognition of the sacrifice with **Maha Vir Chakra, the second highest wartime gallantry award**.
- The family however felt that the recognition with a Param Vir Chakra would have been more appropriate. *“Param Vir Chakra would have been more appropriate,”* Mr. Upender (father) said, adding, *“Santosh Babu’s team endured the harshest climate for some 13 months. They caused double the loss to Chinese troops, erased the opinion that India was inferior to China, and also inspired the youth of the country.”*

#### **37. Covaxin effective against U.K. virus variant, says study**

- **Bharat Biotech’s Covaxin** has been found to neutralise the **U.K. variant of the COVID-19 virus** with *“similar efficiency”* as the strain used for making the vaccine and hence *“dispels the uncertainty of possible neutralisation escape”* following vaccination, say results posted on the bioRxiv preprint server.
  - Preprints are yet to be peer reviewed and published in medical journals. The work was carried out by researchers from ICMR and Bharat Biotech, Hyderabad. The sera from people vaccinated with Covaxin were tested against the same strain used for making the vaccine, another strain found in India , and the U.K. variant.
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## International NEWS/Events/ Personalities

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### Daily snippets

#### 1. China calls for 'better angels' to prevail in reset with Biden's U.S.

- China congratulated the U.S. President Joe Biden on his inauguration and called for a **reset in relations between Beijing and Washington** after a corrosive period of diplomacy under Donald Trump. Beijing also welcomed news that the U.S. would rejoin the World Health Organization and the Paris climate accord.
- **US-China disputes:** The ever antagonistic Mr. Trump harangued China over trade, rights, the origins of the COVID-19 virus, tech and defence supremacy, prompting angry near-daily jousts between both countries' diplomats. The new U.S. President is expected to remain tough on the superpower rival but soften the tone and commit to international cooperation after Mr. Trump's divisive "*America First*" approach.

#### 2. Taiwan invited to inauguration in a rare shift

- Taiwan's de facto Ambassador to the U.S. was formally invited to President Joe Biden's inauguration in what Taipei said on Thursday was a precedent setting first since Washington switched recognition to Beijing in 1979. Taipei's Foreign Ministry said it was the first time in decades that a Taiwanese envoy had been "*invited*" by the inauguration committee.

#### 3. Google, French press ink copyright payments deal

- Google and French newspapers said they had signed an agreement aimed at opening the path to digital copyright payments from the online giant after months of heated negotiations. The accord signed with the **APIG alliance of French dailies** involves "*neighbouring rights*," which call for payment for showing news content with Internet searches, a joint statement said. News outlets struggling with dwindling print subscriptions have long seethed at Google's failure to give them a cut of the millions it makes from ads displayed alongside news search results.

#### 4. Sri Lanka reopens for tourists

- Sri Lanka on Thursday reopened its borders for foreign tourists after about 10 months, hoping to revive its pandemic-hit tourism sector. The Sri Lanka Tourism Promotion Bureau has set up what it calls a "*Safe and Secure*" bubble, mandating pre-departure PCR tests for tourists, restricting their stay to designated high end hotels and beach resorts, and allowing access to select tourist spots, to limit visitors from mixing with the local community. As per the arrangement, Sri Lanka does not require tourists to stay for a minimum number of days, while visitors are offered a "*quarantine free*" experience.

#### 5. Twitter locks account of China Embassy

- Twitter said it has locked the account of the Chinese Embassy in the U.S., over a tweet claiming Uighur women were no longer "*baby making machines*" after their minds had been "*emancipated*".

- A Twitter spokesperson told AFP it took action against the tweet for “*violating our policy against dehumanisation*”. More than one million Uighurs and other Muslim minorities are believed to be held in reeducation camps in the country’s northwestern Xinjiang region, where **China is also accused of forcibly sterilising women**.

## 6. On day one, Joe Biden signs 17 orders to undo Trump’s legacy

- **President Joe Biden** unleashed a full-scale assault on his predecessor’s legacy, acting hours after taking the oath of office to sweep aside former President Donald Trump’s pandemic response, reverse his environmental agenda, tear down his anti-immigration policies, bolster the sluggish economic recovery and restore federal efforts aimed at promoting diversity.
- Moving with an urgency not seen from any other modern president, **Biden signed 17 executive orders, memorandums and proclamations**. Among the steps the president took were orders to **rejoin the Paris climate accord** and **end Trump’s travel ban on predominantly Muslim and African countries**.

## 7. Biden orders aid to combat hunger crisis

- **President Joe Biden** is ordering an **expansion of government benefits for hungry Americans**, after the coronavirus pandemic ignited the worst hunger crisis the U.S. has seen in modern times. The decree, one of two executive orders the White House said he will sign on, is modest and far short of the actions the President has called for from Congress. Nonetheless, it represents one of Mr. Biden’s first actions since taking office on Wednesday, aimed at reviving the world’s largest economy, after COVID-19 caused mass layoffs beginning last year that have left many people scrambling to pay the bills.
- **Congress last month gave every American stimulus checks totaling up to \$600**, and Mr. Biden’s order calls for the Treasury Department to find ways to get that money to people more quickly, and help those who never received the first round of payments last Spring.
- It also asks the Labour Department to allow people who turn down jobs that could harm them, including potentially exposing them to COVID-19, to be allowed to claim unemployment benefits.
- Mr. Biden’s second order restores collective bargaining rights to federal government employees, and instructs agencies to do the preliminary work to allow him to issue a new order in coming weeks requiring federal **contractors to pay their workers a minimum of \$15 an hour** and provide them with paid emergency leave.

## 8. Austin becomes first Black Pentagon chief

- The U.S. Senate confirmed retired general **Lloyd Austin as the Secretary of Defense** on Friday, the second Cabinet nominee of President Joe Biden to gain approval and the first African-American to lead the Pentagon. Mr. Austin served in the military for four decades.

## 9. China hits out at EU over ‘gross interference’

- China hit back at an EU resolution condemning its crackdown on Hong Kong democracy activists, accusing European lawmakers of “*gross interference*” in its governance of the city. Members of the European Parliament on Thursday passed the resolution calling for “*targeted sanctions*” against Chinese and Hong Kong officials held responsible for recent arrests of activists.
- The lawmakers also said they “*regret*” the handling of a landmark investment deal with China pending ratification by MEPs, saying that talks over the deal should have been seized “*as a leverage tool aimed at preserving Hong Kong’s high degree of autonomy, as well as its basic rights and freedoms*”.

- But Beijing struck back on Friday and urged EU lawmakers to “*face up to the reality that Hong Kong has returned to China*”. Following pro-democracy protests in 2019, **Beijing imposed a draconian national security law** that effectively criminalised much dissent in a city.

#### 10. [Biden govt. to review U.S.Taliban deal](#)

- The Biden administration said it will review a landmark U.S. deal with the Taliban, focusing on whether the insurgent group has reduced attacks in Afghanistan, in keeping with its side of the agreement.
- Washington struck a deal with the Taliban in Qatar last year, to begin withdrawing its troops in return for security guarantees from the militants and a commitment to kickstart peace talks with the Afghan government. But violence across Afghanistan has surged despite the two sides engaging in those talks since September.

#### 11. [Taiwan reports Chinese air incursions](#)

- Eight Chinese bomber planes and four fighter jets entered the southwestern corner of Taiwan’s air defence identification zone, and Taiwan’s Air Force deployed missiles to “*monitor*” the incursion, the island’s Defence Ministry said. **China, which claims Taiwan as its own territory**, has conducted almost daily flights over the waters between the southern part of Taiwan and the **Taiwan controlled Pratas Islands in the South China Sea** in recent months, however, they have generally consisted of just one or two reconnaissance aircraft. The presence of so many Chinese combat aircraft on this mission - Taiwan said it was made up of eight nuclear capable H6K bombers and four J16 fighter jets - is unusual.

#### 12. [Hong Kong locks down thousands for testing](#)

- Hong Kong’s government locked down an area of Kowloon peninsula on Saturday, saying its 10,000 residents must stay home until all of them have been tested for COVID-19. The government said there are 70 buildings in the area and that it aims to finish the process in about 48 hours.

#### 13. [Iconic TV show host Larry King passes away](#)

- The iconic talk show host **Larry King**, one of the most recognisable figures on U.S. television as he quizzed everyone who was anyone over a career spanning 60 years, died Saturday at the age of 87. Mr. King’s long list of interviewees ranged from every U.S. President since 1974, world leaders Yasser Arafat and Vladimir Putin, and celebrities such as Frank Sinatra, Marlon Brando and Barbra Streisand.

#### 14. [ARMIN LASCHET- The man who may succeed Merkel](#)

- Last week, 59-year old **Armin Laschet** was elected the **chairperson of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU)**, Germany’s ruling party. The CDU, along with its Bavarian sister party, the **Christian Social Union (CSU)**, is in a grand coalition with Germany’s other major political formation, the **Social Democratic Party (SDP)**.
- Mr. Laschet’s election is a significant development for two reasons: **Germany goes to the polls in September**, and Angela Merkel, who has led the CDU for nearly two decades, won’t be running for chancellorship again.
- Indeed, Germany has seen a steady erosion of the centrist space. While the centre-right CDU is getting outflanked by the **far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD)**, the Greens have been gaining ground at the expense of the centre-left SDP.
- In this increasingly fragmented polity, Ms. Merkel’s successor faces two challenges: hold the CDU together by keeping both the conservatives and the liberals within the party happy; form an alliance with a suitable rival (mostly likely, the Greens) so that the CDU-CSU returns to power post-September.

#### 15. [Yemen’s rebels and revivalists](#)

- What **started as a religious revivalist movement** aimed at restoring the fading glory of the **Zaydi sect of Islam**, the Houthis, under the leadership of **Hussein al-Houthi**, were turning political. When the second intifada broke out in the Palestinian territories in 2000, the Houthis staged solidarity protests. They mobilised supporters against the U.S.'s war on Afghanistan in 2001. After the Iraq war, they adopted a new slogan, "*Death to America, death to Israel, curse upon the Jews, victory to Islam*".
- When protests broke out in Yemen in 2011 as part of the **Arab Spring protests**, the Houthis backed the agitation. By **January 2015, the Houthi-Saleh alliance** had captured Sana'a and much of northern Yemen.
- The **U.S. and Saudi Arabia accuse Iran of backing the Houthis**. In the past six years, the Houthis have launched multiple attacks on Saudi cities from northern Yemen in retaliation for Saudi air strikes. In 2019, the Houthis claimed the attack on two Saudi oil installations that knocked out, briefly, half of the kingdom's oil output.
- The **Houthis have established a government in the north**. The Supreme Political Council, headed by its President, **Mahdi al-Mashat**, is the executive branch of their rule. **Mohammed Ali al-Houthi**, Hussein's brother, leads the movement.
- Yemen, often dubbed the poorest Arab country, is now **divided into three parts** — the Houthi-controlled northern territories, the Southern Transition Council controlled areas in the south (which has the backing of the UAE) and the rest held by the internationally recognised government of President Hadi. All sides are trying to maximise their interests with attempts to find a political solution reaching nowhere. In the meantime, Yemen's suffering is mounting. **U.S. President Joe Biden's administration will quickly revisit the designation of Yemen's Houthi rebels as terrorists.**

#### 16. **K.P. Sharma Oli expelled from Nepal Communist Party**

- The ruling **Nepal Communist Party**, led by rebel leaders **Pushpa Kamal Dahal 'Prachanda'** and former Prime Minister **Madhav Kumar Nepal** expelled **Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli** from the party. The decision divided the party into two groups and sparked a dispute over the party symbol but the Election Commission declined to recognise either faction as the official party.
- The deepening **crisis emerged weeks after Mr. Oli dissolved the Lower House**, Pratinidhi Sabha, of Parliament on December 20, which was strongly opposed by Mr. Prachanda and Mr. Nepal who wanted the House to be restored.
- Soon after the dissolution of the Pratinidhi Sabha, Mr. Oli created a committee of his supporters, which indicated that he would launch a take over of the party in case of an adversarial action by the rebel leaders. The situation is being described as an **intense constitutional crisis as the Caretaker Prime Minister is left without any party affiliation** because of the EC's decision.
- Mr. Oli had declared that elections would be held in April-May, but in the current situation a lot will depend on the Election Commission and the Supreme Court which is examining the writ petitions filed against the dissolution of the Lower House.

#### 17. **On Iran, it is decision time for Biden**

- **Trump withdrawing from nuclear deal** : In May 2018, Mr. Trump unilaterally withdrew the U.S. from **the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)** - reached by the *five permanent members* of the UN Security Council, plus *Germany and the European Union* with Iran - and reimposed sanctions, especially on shipment of Iranian oil, to put '*maximum pressure*' on Tehran to force it to accept America's maximalist demands that went far beyond the agreement. After waiting a year for the European signatories of the JCPOA to persuade Washington to return to the agreement, Iran decided in 2019 to breach the limit for uranium enrichment imposed by the JCPOA.

- **Biden's administration under pressure** : Mr. Trump's policy of exerting maximum pressure had produced the exact opposite result, **bringing Iran closer to weaponization**. This outcome has generated additional pressure on the Biden administration to reverse course and bring Tehran into compliance with the JCPOA by renewing America's commitment to the agreement and lifting sanctions.
- **How Iran and US see the nuclear deal**: The U.S. sees a return to the JCPOA as the first step towards *curbing Iran's missile programme* as well as its *regional ambitions* that clash with those of the U.S. and its allies, especially *Israel and Saudi Arabia*. On the other hand, Iran considers the JCPOA as a stand alone agreement covering only Iran's nuclear programme.
- **Iran's mighty influence in the neighbourhood** : *Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps* has trained proxy militias that have played a major role in **helping the Assad regime in Syria** to turn the tide of war against U.S. supported opposition forces. Tehran continues to finance and arm the fiercely **anti-Israeli Lebanese Hezbollah** and is the principal supporter of the **Houthis in Yemen** who have not only fought Saudi Arabia to a standstill but also attacked major Saudi oil facilities with Iranian supplied drones and missiles. It also continues to train and arm **Shia militias in Iraq** and to checkmate American policies in that country.

#### 18. U.S. vows support to Taiwan as Chinese incursions enter Day 2

- A total of **15 Chinese aircraft**, including 12 fighter jets, entered the southwestern corner of Taiwan's air defence identification zone, the island's Defence Ministry said, the second day of incursions by China. A map provided by the Ministry showed the Chinese aircraft again flew in between the southern part of Taiwan and the **Taiwan-controlled Pratas Islands** in the South China Sea.
- The overflights were part of a long standing pattern of incursions aimed at **pressuring the government of President Tsai Ingwen** into caving to Beijing's demand that she recognise Taiwan as a part of Chinese territory.
- This comes on the heels of the U.S. President Joe Biden's inauguration, emphasising the island's enduring position amidst a host of divisive issues between Beijing and Washington that also include human rights, trade disputes and, most recently, questions about China's initial response to the pandemic.

#### 19. Indonesia seizes Iranian, Panamanian tankers

- Indonesian authorities said that they seized an **Iranian tanker and Panamanian tanker** suspected of carrying out the illegal transfer of oil in their country's waters. The statement said the tankers are suspected of a variety of violations, including *not displaying national flags*, shutting off their *identification systems*, anchoring illegally as well as the *illegal transfer of fuel* between ships and spilling oil.

#### 20. Scottish leader seeks 'legal referendum'

- Scotland's First Minister **Nicola Sturgeon** said she planned to hold a **legal referendum on independence from Britain** despite Westminster's opposition, as an opinion poll showed a majority would vote yes. If her **Scottish National Party (SNP)** wins a strong showing in regional elections in May, Ms. Sturgeon said she would seek a fresh referendum even though **Prime Minister Boris Johnson has said such a vote should only be held once in a generation**.
- A Sunday Times poll found 50% of Scottish voters wanted another referendum in the next five years and 49% would vote for independence, while 44% would reject it. A 2014 referendum saw 55% vote "no." The SNP says it will request a **Section 30 order from the British government** allowing the holding of another referendum. If this is refused it intends to push through its own legislation to prepare for a referendum and "vigorously" oppose a legal challenge from London.

#### 21. Johnson presses Biden for new trade deal

- **British Prime Minister Boris Johnson** made clear to **President Joe Biden** that he's eager to forge a new U.S.-U.K. trade deal. The push for a new deal came in a broad ranging call between the two leaders that touched on the global response to the coronavirus pandemic as well as the Biden administration announcing this week that the U.S. would rejoin the Paris climate accord and the World Health Organization, according to a statement from Downing Street.
- A **new trade agreement** between the allies is a higher priority for Mr. Johnson than it is for Mr. Biden. The U.K. regained control over its national trade policy at the start of the month following the end of a post-Brexit transition period.

## 22. [Italy to take legal action against vaccine makers over delays](#)

- Italy will take legal action against **Pfizer Inc** and **AstraZeneca** over delays in deliveries of COVID-19 vaccines to secure agreed supplies rather than seek damages, Foreign Minister Luigi Di Maio said. On Saturday, **Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte** said the delays in vaccine supplies were "*unacceptable*" and amounted to a serious *breach of contractual obligations*, adding that Italy would use all available legal tools.
- Italy will have to rethink its whole vaccination programme if supply problems persist, a senior health official warned. The cut in supplies announced by the two companies will put back vaccination of those aged 80 and above in Italy by about four weeks and the rest of the population by about 68 weeks, Deputy Health Minister Pierpaolo Sileri said.

## 23. [Can the Biden-Harris team save the planet?](#)

- While the **U.S.'s re-entry into the Paris Agreement** may be by the stroke of a pen, regaining political legitimacy on climate requires the government to take responsibility in causing and aggravating the global climate crisis; commit to technology and funds for poorer countries; take on bigger emission targets; not bend over for the fossil fuel lobby which funds Democrats and Republicans; clean up the role of lobbyists in climate regulatory and policy organisations within the U.S.; and recognise and break up elite networks that have benefited by sustaining climate myths.

## 24. [At Davos forum, Xi warns world leaders against 'new Cold War'](#)

- **Chinese President Xi Jinping** warned global leaders at an all-virtual **World Economic Forum (WEF) at Davos** on Monday against starting a "*new Cold War*", and urged global unity in the face of the coronavirus pandemic. Having largely curbed the spread of the pandemic within its borders, Mr. Xi wants to position China as a key player in a new multilateral world order as the U.S. remains crippled by the pandemic.
- The Chinese leader also reaffirmed **Beijing's ambitious climate pledges** to slash carbon emissions by 65% by 2030 and achieve carbon neutrality by 2060 - both significant commitments as China emits a quarter of the world's greenhouse gases.

## 25. [Moderna says vaccine is effective against variants](#)

- U.S. biotech firm Moderna said its vaccine should remain protective against key coronavirus variants while the unrelenting pandemic led to tightened border restrictions worldwide. In the face of deepening fears over new virus strains, Moderna offered some good news from lab studies of the variants first identified in the United Kingdom and South Africa. However, out of caution, Moderna will carry out more tests adding a second booster of its vaccine - to make three shots in total.

## 26. [Uganda High Court orders end to Bobi Wine's house arrest](#)

- Uganda's High Court ordered security forces to end their confinement of **presidential election runner up Bobi Wine**. Mr. Wine, whose real name is **Robert Kyagulani**, has been under *de-facto house arrest* at his home outside the capital, Kampala, since he returned from voting on January 14. He won 35% of the vote, according to official figures. Ugandan security forces have in the past disregarded court orders to release individuals or have immediately re-arrested people freed by the courts.

### 27. [As pandemic rages on, Italy PM Conte quits](#)

- **Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte** resigned in the hope of forming a new government after weeks of turmoil in his ruling coalition, leaving Italy rudderless as it battles the deadly coronavirus pandemic. He tendered his resignation to **President Sergio Mattarella**, the ultimate arbiter of Italian political crises, who invited him to stay on in a caretaker capacity pending discussions on what happens next.
- The uneasy coalition that has led Italy since September 2019 was fatally weakened earlier this month by the withdrawal of former premier **Matteo Renzi's small but crucial Italia Viva party**. Ahead of a key vote in Parliament this week that he looked set to lose, Mr. Conte informed his Cabinet that he would quit in what supporters said was a move to form a new government.
- **Italy was the first European country to face the full force of the COVID-19 pandemic** and has since suffered badly, with the economy plunged into recession and deaths still rising by around 400 a day. Parts of the country remain under partial lockdown, the vaccination programme has slowed and a deadline is looming to agree plans to spend billions of euros in European Union recovery funds.

### 28. [U.S. announces restoration of relations with Palestinians](#)

- U.S. President Joe Biden's administration announced Tuesday it was restoring **relations with the Palestinians** and **renewing aid to Palestinian refugees**, a reversal of the Donald Trump administration's cutoff and a key element of its new **support for a two-state solution** to the decadesold conflict agreed to by Israelis and Palestinians.

### 29. [Myanmar Army raises prospect of coup after voter-fraud claims](#)

- Myanmar's powerful military raised the spectre of staging a coup as it ramped up demands for an investigation into alleged voter fraud during last year's election, swept by **Aung San Suu Kyi's** ruling party. The **National League for Democracy (NLD)** won November's poll in a landslide, but has been much criticised by rights groups for its disenfranchisement of voters in conflict-wracked regions. The military-aligned opposition disputed the results, while the Army has for weeks alleged widespread voter irregularities, claiming to have found 8.6 million cases of fraud.

### 30. [Iran says Israel is waging a 'psychological war'](#)

- A top Iranian official on Wednesday said Israel was waging a "*psychological war*" after the Jewish state's Army said new "*offensive options*" were being drawn up in case they were needed against the Islamic republic.
- Mahmoud Vaezi, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani's chief of staff, also vowed that his country was ready and willing to defend itself. "*We have no intention of going to war, but we are serious about defending the country,*" he said. **Israel, a close U.S. ally, accuses Iran of seeking to build a nuclear bomb**, a charge Tehran denies.

### 31. [U.S. issues domestic terror alert](#)

- The U.S. Department of Homeland Security declared a **nationwide terrorism alert** on Wednesday, citing the potential **threat from domestic anti-government extremists** opposed to Joe Biden as President.

- The National Terrorism Advisory System Bulletin said a heightened threat of attack *“will persist in the weeks following the successful presidential inauguration,”* which took place on January 20. The alert said there had been mounting threats since last year from domestic violent extremists **motivated by COVID-19 restrictions, Mr. Biden’s defeat of Donald Trump** in the November election, *police brutality and illegal immigration.*

### 32. [Russia moots West Asia meet as U.S. resets Palestinian ties](#)

- Russia backed a Palestinian proposal for a West Asia peace conference, suggesting on Tuesday that it could be held at the ministerial level in spring or summer, as the U.S. said it would move towards renewing ties with the Palestinians under Joe Biden.
- The U.S. - which sided with Israel under the administration of Donald Trump - said it intended to *“restore credible U.S. engagement with Palestinians as well as Israelis”.*
- *“The roughly 10 participants would include Israel, the Palestinians, the four members of the West Asia diplomatic quartet (Russia, the UN, the U.S. and the EU), along with four Arab states - Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan and the UAE,”* Russia’s Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said.

### 33. [Russia gives nod to extend START treaty](#)

- Russian lawmakers on Wednesday quickly approved the extension of the **last remaining nuclear Russia-U.S. arms control treaty**, an action that comes just days before it’s due to expire. Both houses of Parliament voted unanimously to **extend the New START treaty for five years**. The Kremlin said it will soon complete the extension procedures.
- **START I (Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty)** was a bilateral treaty between the United States of America and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) on the **reduction and limitation of strategic offensive arms**. The treaty was signed on **31 July 1991** and entered into force on 5 December 1994.

### 34. [Pak. plans to hold Senate polls through open vote](#)

- The Pakistan Cabinet has decided to table a Bill in Parliament to amend the Constitution for holding the **Senate elections through open vote**. The decision was taken during the Cabinet meeting on Tuesday, presided over by **Prime Minister Imran Khan**.
  - *“The government wants the (Senate) polls to be held in a transparent manner and without horsetrading. This is why we want Senate polls to be held through an open ballot,”* Information Minister Shibli Faraz told the media after the meeting. He said that in the past, money was used in Senate elections and votes were bought making the House election a mockery.
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## Opinions and Analysis

### Analysis : Are courts encroaching on the powers of the executive

#### 1. Background

- On January 12, 2021, the Supreme Court stayed the implementation of three controversial farm laws passed in September 2020 and ordered the constitution of a committee of experts to negotiate between the farmers' bodies and the Government of India.
- Rather than deliberating on the constitutionality of the three laws, the court appears to be trying to move some of the parties towards a political settlement. Arguably, in doing so, it is wading into the domain of the government. Has the court in this case abdicated its constitutional duty mandated by the Constitution and is this a growing trend?

#### 2. What the procedure ought to be

- What's really striking here is that nobody asked the court to intervene in this particular manner, to break the deadlock. The Court does not take up any constitutional issues though these issues have been pleaded before the court by the farmers associations. The issues are of federalism, of agriculture being a State subject, as well as the manner in which the voice vote was passed in the Rajya Sabha, which was controversial. What is striking is that the court does not even set out clearly what the legal grounds of challenge are.
- Courts are, of course, competent to issue stay orders on parliamentary laws, but they need to set out legal reasons. What we see is that the court is actually abdicating its constitutional responsibility of **judicial review**. At the same time, it's acting in usurpation of executive and legislative powers, **going beyond the standard areas of judicial behaviour**.
- The classic justification for taking up these cases is to uphold the interests of a group which cannot prevail in a majoritarian system of elections, which are important but not the only concern of constitutional democracies.

#### 3. Conclusion

- In general that when we look at the court's role we have to think of it more institutionally, we have to think about how it grounds its decision in terms of its reasoning. And look at its politics somewhat expansively - not just in terms of outcomes and who it benefits, but also in terms of its process. And the process includes who it hears and how it hears but also how it decides in terms of its reasoning.

### Analysis : Defending liberty against political prosecution

#### 1. Background

- One of the oldest, most pernicious and widespread forms of abuse of state power in India involves the **police and enforcement agencies** selectively targeting political and ideological opponents of the ruling dispensation

ostensibly on grounds unrelated to their ideology or politics, while sparing comparably placed supporters and friends of rulers.

- A recent example would be the November 27, 2020 Supreme Court judgment granting TV anchor Arnab Goswami bail, not without considerable irony because of the personality involved.

## 2. Why the problem

- The illegality becomes plain when two legal questions are clearly distinguished and separated - *first*, the legality of the exercise of prosecutorial discretion in the selection of the accused for being investigated and prosecuted; and *second*, the merits of the criminal case filed against them. The two are independent legal issues and should not be wrongly conflated.
- On the first question, the applicable legal standard is that while the police and prosecutors in common law jurisdictions enjoy vast discretion in deciding who they may pursue and who they may spare, the choice of accused must not be based on grounds that **violate Constitutional rights**, including Article 14. The accused should not be selected, either explicitly or covertly, on constitutionally prohibited grounds. The illegal selection of accused based on grounds prohibited by the Constitution is called “**selective prosecution**”.
- When the choice of accused runs afoul of the Constitution, the entire criminal proceeding is vitiated, irrespective of the determination of the second issue, viz., whether the accused are convicted or acquitted on the charges brought against them. Once the proceedings fail under the first issue, **there is no legal basis** to proceed to the second issue, i.e., trial on the merits of the case. The theory is that the **Constitution cannot be violated to uphold the law** - such an approach would spell doom for the Constitution.

## 3. Where the courts stand

- Our courts have not recognised selective prosecution as an independent claim because of the erroneous assumption that the lawfulness of prosecution can only be taken up after the trial, if the accused is acquitted.
- The judgment of **Justice D.Y. Chandrachud** in the Goswami case is crucial in this regard. It provides a much needed and long awaited legal opening to strengthen the recognition and use of the selective prosecution claim in India to counter politically coloured prosecution unleashed by the state and defend our liberty.

### Analysis : Overzealous threat

1. The warning by the Bihar police of legal action being taken against users of social media for “offensive” posts targeting the government, its Ministers and officials, betrays both **hypersensitivity and ignorance of the law**.
2. The Economic Offences Wing, which also deals with cybercrime, has sent a circular to the department secretaries that they could inform the wing about such “*offensive posts*” so that it could act against them, terming such actions as “*against prescribed law*”. Even though the letter from the Inspector General of Police concerned makes no mention of any specific penal provision, it is a possible reference to **Section 66A of the IT Act**, as there is no other section that deals with “offensive” remarks.
3. The Act’s remaining penal provisions pertain only to other offences - sending obscene or prurient messages, hacking, stealing computer resources, identity theft, personation, and violation of privacy. There is nothing specific in the law that would *render strong, even offensive and intemperate, criticism of the government a cyber offence*. It ought to be remembered that the police cannot register FIRs for defamation, as the offence can only be dealt with by way of criminal complaints before magistrates, and **cannot be the subject of a police investigation**. The government would do well not to act on the police circular, lest it be seen as an attempt to suppress its critics and those who make allegations of corruption.

### Analysis : Pandemic and India : Snippets from the Oxfam Report

## 1. Background

- **Oxfam International's annual report** on inequality for 2021, aptly titled '*The Inequality Virus*', puts the uncomfortable but imperative spot-light on the obscene inequality between the few and the overwhelming majority.

## 2. How it has panned out till now

- Over two million people have died, and hundreds of millions of people are being forced into poverty while many of the richest, both individuals and corporations, are thriving. The pandemic saw hundreds of millions of people lose their jobs and face destitution and hunger. Globally, women are overrepresented in the sectors of the economy that are hardest hit by the pandemic.

## 3. India's standing

- India introduced one of the earliest and most stringent lockdowns in the face of the pandemic, whose enforcement brought its economy to a standstill triggering unemployment, hunger, distress migration and untold hardship. The **wealth of Indian billionaires increased by 35% during the lockdown** and by 90% since 2009. This is despite the fact that most of India has faced a loss of livelihood and the economy has dipped into recession.

## 4. The Oxfam report snippets

- The Oxfam report undertook a survey of 295 economists from 79 countries. Of the respondents, 87% expected that income inequality in their country was going to significantly increase as a result of the pandemic. These levels of inequality are not viable and will have a deeply harmful impact.

## 5. The way forward

- We must recognise that a radical and sustained reduction in inequality is the indispensable foundation for a just India, as envisioned in the Constitution. Four things could be done on priority. **One**, invest in *free universal healthcare, education, and other public services*. **Two**, the virus has shown us that *guaranteed income security* is essential. **Three**, reintroduce *wealth taxes and ensure financial transaction taxes* while putting an end to tax dodging. **Four**, we need to *invest in a green economy* that prevents further degradation of our planet and preserves it for our children.

## Analysis : Robustness of blockchain and voting

### 1. Background

- The Electronic Voting Machine has survived intense scrutiny over its use largely because of one strong reason - the fact that this standalone single chip device is not connected to any network. With the addition of the **Voter Verifiable Paper Audit Trail (VVPAT)** to the EVM, "auditability" was added to the process even as the machine has suffered glitches, which the Election Commission of India (ECI) has managed to tackle reasonably well.
- The announcement by **Chief Election Commissioner Sunil Arora** that the ECI is commencing trials of a "*remote voting project*" is sure to bring back scrutiny.

### 2. The need and safeguards

- Concept of remote voting : Remote voting, as an option, has gained some priority during the COVID-19 pandemic in order to **address social distancing**.

- The **blockchain method** implements an online public bulletin board that allows for a linear ordering of data to which a user can only further append data. The board itself is public and available for anyone to read and verify. The technology has been put in **use for cryptocurrencies** - the Bitcoin blockchain records a list of transactions that can be read to find out who owns which bitcoins **without any centralised authority**.
  - In the block chain based voting system, the voting authority will have to **authenticate this bulletin board** in which users sign in **using cryptographic signatures** to register their votes in a ledger. While this system, with its cryptographic features, **promises data security and verifiability**, the fact that it will depend upon a network and devices could introduce vulnerabilities that are present in any Internet based system. Beyond the vulnerabilities faced by any Internet based system, block chains also introduce **issues related to complexity and their management**.
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## Science & Technology and Environment

### Daily snippets

#### 1. India and Flash droughts

- **Flash droughts** are those that occur very quickly, with soil moisture depleting rapidly. Normally, developing drought conditions take months, but these happen within a week or in two weeks' time. Several factors including atmospheric anomalies, anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions play an important role.
  - In **1979, India faced a severe flash drought**, affecting about 40% of the country and taking a toll on agriculture. The big granaries of Uttar Pradesh and Andhra were affected, and the country suffered a loss of about ₹5,000 crores. The ongoing climate change has caused a significant increase in global temperature and this can lead to more and more flash droughts in the coming years. The frequency of concurrent hot and dry extremes is projected to rise by about five fold, causing an approximately seven fold increase in flash droughts like 1979 by the end of the 21st century. If we can meet the **'Paris Agreement' goals** and limit **global warming to well below 2 degrees C**, the numbers and frequency of the projected flash droughts may go down.
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## Economics and Finance

### Daily snippets

#### 1. GDP within striking distance of growth

- The economy is within striking distance of **attaining positive growth**, officials of the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) wrote, adding that the letter 'V' in the V-shaped recovery stood for vaccine. India's vaccination drive is backed by its comparative advantage of having the **largest vaccine manufacturing capacity in the world** and a rich experience of mass inoculation drives against polio and measles.
- Ecommerce and digital technologies will likely be the bright spots in the recovery. "Recent shifts in the macroeconomic landscape have brightened the outlook, with GDP in striking distance of attaining positive territory and inflation easing closer to the target," the paper observed.
- The economy shrank by 23.9% in the first quarter and 7.5% in the second quarter on account of the pandemic. The article's authors further said that in the first half of 2021-22, GDP growth will benefit from statistical support and is likely to be mostly consumption driven.

#### 2. NASSCOM welcomes Biden team's review of policy

- Tech industry association Nasscom welcomed President Joseph Biden's commitment to review and make necessary changes to '*harmful regulatory policies*' put in place by the Trump administration.
- A key challenge the tech sector faces is the lack of talent in science, technology, engineering and mathematics in the U.S., highlighted by the '*high degree of overall unemployment*' in the country. There were more than 750,000 technology job vacancies in the U.S. as of January. Despite the high degree of unemployment in the US, demand for high-tech skills continues to remain robust. The rules announced by the previous administration were thought of worsening the talent gap.

#### 3. Pandemic pushes states borrowings up by 82.5%

- States' borrowings during April-December 2020 were 82.5% higher compared with the corresponding period of the previous year, on account of the pandemic. Till December 11, 2020, the States netted ₹4.6 lakh crore through market borrowings.
- A perusal of data available on revenue receipts of 21 states reveals that while the states raised only 37% of the full year target during April October 2020, they generated 52% of their annual revenue in the corresponding period of 2019.

#### 4. Cybersecurity trends turned unpredictable after COVID

- The pandemic and the worldwide adoption of remote working resulted in cybersecurity undergoing years' worth of transformation in a matter of months and therefore it is **tough to understand the current cybersecurity landscape** and predict security trends, PwC India said. Considering the unprecedented events of last year, any predictions for the immediate future can not be definitive, the firm said.

- Rising **geopolitical tensions worldwide** have resulted in governments and enterprises increasingly focusing on cybersecurity to protect their assets from cyberattackers. In 2021, there will be an increased focus among countries on developing stricter cybersecurity regulations and efforts to build both defensive and offensive capabilities.

#### 5. [Telcom companies on NSD roll-out](#)

- Telecom firms have asked the government to clarify about the **entity that will be held liable** in the event of a security breach in the network post implementation of the **National Security Directive (NSD)** in the telecom sector. Telcos wanted the government to come out with clear guidelines as to who would be responsible for any breach in the network if the government is making a list of trusted products that have to be deployed in the network.
- Under the current rules, telecom operators are held responsible for any security breach in their network. In a bid to **tighten the security of the communications network**, the Centre had, on December 16, announced the **National Security Directive** for the telecom sector, which will mandate service providers to **purchase equipment from trusted sources**.

#### 6. [Green tax mooted for personal vehicles older than 15 years](#)

- Owners of old vehicles will have to pay the government a 'green' tax as a penalty for polluting the environment, which will be much steeper if you reside in one of the more polluted cities in India. Personal vehicles will be charged a tax at the time of **renewal of Registration Certification** after 15 years. The levy may differ depending on fuel (petrol/diesel) and type of vehicle.
- The proposal on green tax also includes a steeper **penalty of up to 50% of road tax** for older vehicles registered in some of the highly polluted cities in the country. A watered-down policy of **deregistration and scrapping of vehicles**, bringing only those vehicles owned by government departments and PSUs and are older than 15 years under its ambit has also been approved. The policy will come into effect from **April 1, 2022**.

#### 7. [Amazon moves to the Delhi High Court over Future-Reliance Deal](#)

- **U.S. online retailer Amazon** has filed a petition in the Delhi High Court seeking detention of Future Group founders, including CEO Kishore Biyani, and seizure of their assets as it sought to block Future Group from selling retail assets to Reliance Industries. In the petition, Amazon **sought enforcement of the Singapore arbitrator's ruling** in October against its partner Future's ₹24,713 crore deal with Reliance.
- Amazon, which wants the deal to **sell retail assets to Reliance** to be stopped, also asked the court for a direction for "*detention of the directors (of Future Group entities) in civil prison.*"

#### 8. [IRDAI mandates standard annuity plan](#)

- **Insurance regulator IRDAI** has directed all life insurers to mandatorily offer from April 1 a standard, individual immediate annuity product it has developed. The single premium, nonlinked, non participating plan, to be called **Saral Pension** with the insurer's name prefixed, will have **simple features and standard terms and conditions**.
- The product would make it easier for customers to make an informed choice, enhance trust between the insurers and the insured and reduce mis-selling as well as potential disputes. Noting that several **individual immediate annuity products** are marketed by life insurers, with each product having its own features, terms and conditions and annuity options, IRDAI said **a standard product will broadly meet** the needs of an average customer.

#### 9. [RBI open to the idea of digital version of fiat currency](#)

- Amid increasing popularity of virtual currencies in various parts of the world, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) said it was open to exploring the possibility of a digital version of fiat currency. "*The RBI is exploring the possibility as to whether there is a need for a digital version of fiat currency and in case there is, then how to operationalise it,*" the RBI said in a booklet.

#### 10. CII calls for a broadband infra fund

- The **Confederation of Indian Industry (CII)** pitched for a '*Broadband Infrastructure Fund*' with a token allocation of ₹5,000 crore by the government in the upcoming Budget. It said **rapid acceleration in the creation of digital infrastructure** would be an effective tool for inclusive digitalisation that would help boost **economic growth and employment**.

#### 11. Cairns threatens Indian asset seizures

- A month after it won an **international tribunal award of \$1.2 billion in damages against India** in the retrospective taxation case, U.K. based Cairn Energy Plc has threatened that it may be forced to begin attaching Indian assets including bank accounts in different world capitals, unless the government resolves the issue.
- Cairn's top leadership has said that the "*necessary preparations have been put in place*" for the tribunal verdict to be "*enforced against Indian assets in numerous jurisdictions around the world*" if India fails to discuss paying the amount awarded. The assets already under consideration could include Embassy bank accounts, non-diplomatic premises, Air India planes and state-owned ships in several places including the U.K., Holland, France, Canada and the U.S. The company maintained that it would **only consider this extreme option** if the Indian government did not respond, as it was under pressure from its shareholders who "*expect early resolution*".
- Cairn also cited clauses in the **U.K-India Bi lateral Investment Treaty**, the **UNCITRAL arbitration rules**, and the **New York Convention** to which India is a signatory, that would be breached if India fails to pay the dues, which reportedly include about **\$220 million** in accrued interest in **addition to the \$1.2 billion award**.
- The three member tribunal at the **Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) at The Hague** that had delivered its verdict on December 21, 2020 had held unanimously in favour of Cairn and against the Indian government, ruling that the tax levied fell afoul of the bilateral investment pact, and also **awarded Cairn \$1.2 billion in damages** for the tax authorities' decision to take by force and subsequently sell the company's shares, and freeze dividend payments as well as tax refunds, to recover the disputed tax dues.
- In a **similar arbitration case it lost against Vodafone**, the government has filed an appeal in a Singapore court to defend the retrospective tax demand on the telecom firm, and officials have stressed that the government's sovereign right to levy taxes cannot be questioned under bilateral pacts.

#### 12. GDP to contract 8% in FY21, FICCI survey shows

- India's GDP is expected to **contract by 8% in 2020-21**, according to the latest round of **FICCI's Economic Outlook Survey**. The annual median growth forecast by the industry body is based on responses from leading economists representing industry, banking and financial services sectors. The survey was conducted in January.
- "*The quarterly median forecasts indicates GDP growth to contract by 1.3% in the third quarter of 2020-21. The growth is expected to be in the positive terrain by the fourth quarter with a projection of 0.5% growth,*" estimates the survey.

#### 13. Budget likely to raise agri-credit target

- With the aim of **doubling farmers' income by 2022**, the government is likely to raise farm credit target to about **₹19 lakh crore in Budget 2021-22** to be presented on February 1, according to sources. For the current fiscal,

the **government has set a farm credit target of ₹15 lakh crore**. The government has been raising credit targets for the farm sector every year and this time too, the target is likely to be increased to around ₹19 lakh crore for 2021-22.

- The **agricultural credit flow** has increased consistently over the years, exceeding the target set for each fiscal. For instance, credit worth ₹11.68 lakh crore was given to farmers in 2017-18, higher than the ₹10 lakh crore target set for that year. Similarly, crop loans worth ₹10.66 lakh crore were disbursed in 2016-17, higher than the credit target of ₹9 lakh crore. **Credit is a critical input** in achieving higher farm output. Institutional credit will also help delink farmers from noninstitutional sources where they are compelled to borrow at usurious rates of interest.

#### **14. India set to grow 11.5% in 2021 : IMF**

- The IMF projected an **11.5% growth rate for India in 2021**, making the country the only major economy to register double digit growth this year amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. The International Monetary Fund's growth projections for India reflected a **rebound in the economy**, which is estimated to have **contracted by 8% in 2020** due to the pandemic.
- China is next with 8.1% growth in 2021 followed by Spain (5.9%) and France (5.5%). The IMF said that in **2020 China is the only major country** which **registered a positive growth rate** of 2.3%. India's economy, the IMF said, is projected to grow 6.8% in 2022 and that of China by 5.6%. **IMF Chief Economist Gita Gopinath** said that India had a somewhat faster pace of recovery, but cumulatively by the end of 2022, its GDP is expected to be **9% below its pre-pandemic projected level**.
- *"In fact, we are seeing a very strong decline in cases, which is again a bit different from other parts of the world. So, these factors, including what we're seeing in terms of high frequency indicators, point to [a] somewhat faster pace of recovery. But again, there is still some distance to go,"* she added. Earlier this month, **IMF MD Kristalina Georgieva** had said India *"actually has taken very decisive action, very decisive steps to deal with the pandemic and to deal with the economic consequences of it"*.

#### **15. Data privacy and non-price competition : CCI**

- Data privacy can take **the form of nonprice competition** and **abuse of dominance can lower privacy protection**, a study by the **Competition Commission of India(CCI)** has said. The study also made observations about **other non price factors** such as *quality of service (QoS), data speeds* and *bundled offerings*, which are likely to be the new drivers of competitive rivalry between service providers in telecom sector in addition to just price.
- CCI noted that an aspect of data in the context of competition in the digital communications market is the **conflict between allowing access and protecting consumer privacy**. Privacy can take the form of nonprice competition. Abuse of dominance can take the form of **lowering the privacy protection** and therefore fall within the **ambit of antitrust** as low privacy standards imply lack of consumer welfare.
- On **other non price factors of competition**, CCI found that consumers ranked *network coverage at the top* followed by *customer service, tariff packaging* and *lower tariff* as the most important factors for the preference of a particular network.

#### **16. China slams apps ban, urges India to 'correct discriminatory measures'**

- China on Wednesday called on India *"to immediately correct its discriminatory measures"* over the decision to extend a ban on 59 Chinese apps. The Indian government recently sent notices to Chinese firms, informing them that the ban, announced in June, would continue. India had banned the 59 Chinese apps including TikTok, We Chat and UC Browser, **citing national security concerns** in the wake of the standoff in Ladakh. Another 118 apps were banned in September and 43 more in November.

- *“These moves [are] in violation of WTO’s non-discriminatory principles and fair competition principles of a market economy and severely damage the legitimate rights and interests of Chinese companies, The Chinese side firmly opposes them,”* said Ji Rong, a spokesperson for the Embassy.

#### **17. High debt burden and stimulus**

- **India’s high government debt** could limit its ability to give a fiscal stimulus to the economy, Moody’s Investors Service noted in a **report on credit conditions in Asia**. *“In India, a high government debt burden will limit the extent of fiscal support, although the government has undertaken a number of measures to improve policy transmission and broader structural reforms,”* it pointed out.
- Moody’s expects **income and social inequality to widen** in 2021, while the number of people falling into poverty will rise significantly, erasing three to four years’ gains on poverty reduction. The ratings agency said the traditional emphasis on infrastructure spending to support growth may now have to **expand to include social spending on health care and pensions**.

#### **18. FDI inflows hit \$58.37 billion in April-November 2022**

- **Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) inflows** into the country hit a record high of \$58.37 billion in the first eight months of 2020-21, with equity inflows of nearly \$44 billion, the government said. *“FDI equity inflow received during April to November 2020 is \$43.85 billion. It is the highest ever for first eight months of a financial year and 37% more compared to the first 8 months of 2019-20 [\$32.11 billion],”* the Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade said.
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## Sports

### Daily snippets

#### 1. Thailand Open

- **Satwiksairaj Rankireddy** and **Ashwini Ponnappa** entered the mixed doubles semi-finals with a stunning win over the World No. 6 pair of Peng Soon Chan and Liu Ying Goh of Malaysia in the Toyota Thailand Open Super 1000 tournament. The Indian pair, ranked World No. 22, will be up against top seeds Dechapol Puavaranukroh and Sapsiree Taerattanachai of Thailand in the semifinals.
- **PV Sindhu** was defeated by Ratchanok Intanon, who rode on her precision and quality of strokes to outclass the Indian 21-13, 21-9 in just 38 minutes.

#### 2. Player Profile

- **Ankita Raina** : Ankita Ravinderkrishan Raina is an Indian professional tennis player and the current Indian No. 1 in both women's singles and doubles. Raina has won one WTA 125k in doubles, along with 11 singles and 18 doubles titles on the ITF Circuit. She entered the top 200 singles rankings for the first time, becoming **only the fifth player** representing India to achieve this feat. Raina has also won gold medals in the women's singles and mixed-doubles events at the 2016 South Asian Games, and won a bronze medal in singles at the 2018 Asian Games.

#### 3. Cricket Australia confirms racial abuse at SCG

- Cricket Australia (CA) confirmed India's players were subjected to racial abuse during the **third Test at the Sydney Cricket Ground** but cleared six spectators who were taken from their seats and questioned by police at the ground. The cricket board had launched an investigation with the police after **Jasprit Bumrah and Mohammed Siraj** complained of hearing racist slurs while fielding near the boundary rope.
  - *"CA confirms that members of the Indian cricket team were subjected to racial abuse,"* CA integrity chief Sean Carroll said in a statement. CA said it had submitted its report on the investigation to the International Cricket Council (ICC).
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