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GDP EXPANDED 6.1% IN 2022-23'S LAST QUARTER

Slow expansion

India's quarterly gross domestic product growth accelerated to 6.1% in the first three months of 2023, from 4.5% in the preceding quarter, while yearly economic growth for 2022-23 was 7.2%, compared with 9.1% in 2021-22, according to data released by the National Statistical Office



Full-year manufacturing GVA slid to 1.3% from 11.1%; only three of eight sectors, including farming and services, recorded higher GVA for FY23; despite Q4 uptick, consumption remained tepid

VIKAS DHOOT
NEW DELHI

India's GDP growth accelerated to 6.1% in the January to March 2023 quarter, lifting the economy's expansion in 2022-23 to 7.2% from 7% estimated earlier, according to the provisional national income data released by the National Statistical Office (NSO) on Wednesday.

The Gross Value Added (GVA) in the economy is reckoned to have risen 7% in 2022-23, compared with 8.8% in 2021-22. Manufacturing GVA growth slid to just 1.3% from 11.1% a year earlier, despite a 4.5% rebound in the final quarter after six months of contraction.

Economists noted that though several sectors delivered a positive surprise, especially in the last quarter of the year, consumption remained tepid and the

overall growth pattern remains uneven.

Farm, services growth

The farm and services sectors buoyed economic outcomes as just three of eight broad economic activity segments recorded higher GVA growth than in 2021-22.

The agricultural GVA grew 4%, up from 3.5% in the previous year. The financial, real estate and professional services sectors saw their GVA grow 7.1%, compared with 4.7% in 2021-22. The GVA of the trade, hotels, transport, and communication sectors, as well as services related to broadcasting grew 14%, marginally faster than in the previous year.

Revised GDP, GVA

The NSO also revised GDP and GVA numbers lower for the first half of last year but bumped up the third quarter figures slightly. The first quarter's GDP growth in 2022-23 is now pegged at 13.1%, followed by a 6.2% rise in the second quarter and 4.5% growth in the third, higher than the 4.4% estimated in February.

In GVA terms, the final three months of 2022-23 recorded a three-quarter high of 6.5%.

The growth estimates for the first and second quarters were pared to 11.9% and 5.4% respectively, while the third quarter GVA growth was revised higher to 4.7%, from the 4.6% reckoned earlier.

"While growth in private final consumption expenditure witnessed a slight uptick to 2.8% in Q4 from 2.2% in Q3, it remained muted, belying the uptick in consumer sentiments as per the RBI's consumer confidence survey," ICRA chief economist Aditi Nayar pointed out.

The higher-than-expected GDP growth last year could also temper growth expectations for this year, which the government and central bank expect to be around 6.5%, said Madan Sabnavis, the Bank of Baroda's chief economist. Amid a global slowdown, maintaining growth over 6% will be challenging, he reckoned.

Chief Economic Adviser (CEA) V. Anantha Nageswaran was more optimistic and said the growth momentum continued across agriculture, industry and services sectors. India's 6.1% GDP growth was the fastest among major economies, he asserted, adding that prospects look better for this year than they did four months ago.

"We are prepared to stick our necks out and say that the risks to a 6.5% growth projection for this year are more evenly balanced now, than at the time of the Economic Survey's presentation when we felt that downside risks dominate," Mr. Nageswaran said.

CHINA'S MILITARY DIPLOMACY IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

What is causing China's growing influence in Southeast Asia? How does the Global Security Initiative challenge the ASEAN countries? Why is the increasing proximity of the U.S. with the Philippines worrisome for China?

ANUSHKA SAXENA
EXPLAINER

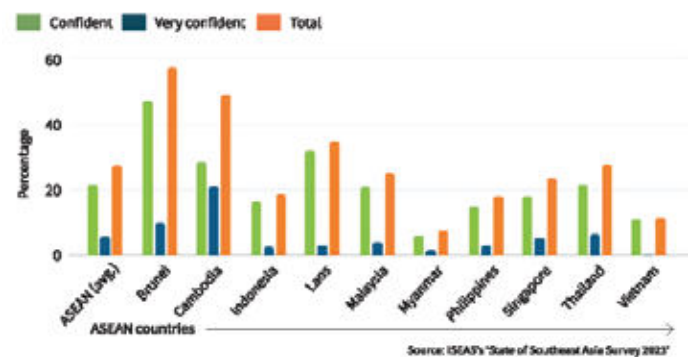
The story so far:

Due to its intensifying geopolitical competition with the U.S. and its own security interests in the region, China is expanding its military outreach to Southeast Asian countries. The Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA)'s global activities and influence campaigns are part of its broader reform process initiated by Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2015, and form a fundamental element of China's overall foreign policy. In this light, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has become a priority target for the People's Liberation Army's military diplomacy.

What is the People's Liberation Army (PLA) currently undertaking?

The PLA and the Laotian People's Armed Forces (LPAF) have recently concluded their bilateral military exercise, Friendship Shield 2023. The drills aim to foster interoperability to

How confident are you that the GSI will benefit the region?



effectively “counter transnational armed criminal groups based in jungles and mountains.” This week-long exercise comes on the heels of Laos’ Foreign Affairs Minister Saleumxay Kommasith’s visit to China last month. The PLA Southern Theatre Command (PLA STC) is leading a massive delegation to the LPAF’s Kommadam Academy for the exercise.

This includes 200 troops from the 75th Group Army’s combined-arms brigade, assault vehicles such as the 4x4 MRAP Dongfeng CSK141 (Mengshi), as well as equipment for maritime replenishment, mine clearance, explosive disposal, and epidemic prevention.

Before this, in 2023, the PLA STC conducted the ‘Golden Dragon’ drills with Cambodia from late March to early April. This too came on the heels of a high-level meeting held between Zhang Youxia, Vice-Chairman of the Chinese Central Military Commission (CMC) and the army commander of the Royal Cambodian Army, Hong Manai, in February this year.

The drills saw the participation of over 200 troops from the PLA STC’s Army, the Navy, and the Logistical Support Force, who arrived in Cambodia aboard a Type 071 comprehensive landing vehicle, Jinggangshan. The exercise entailed joint anti-terrorism and humanitarian aid operations.

A few weeks later, in late April, the PLA STC conducted a joint exercise with the Singaporean Navy. Both sides deployed minesweepers (PLA Chibi and RSS Intrepid) and frigates (PLA Yulin and RSS Punggol) for shore and sea operations.

All of these joint military endeavours were preceded by a visit from a working group of the Chinese Ministry of National Defence to Laos, Vietnam and Brunei, where the two sides discussed “the relationship between the two militaries and regional security issues of common concern”.

These are a few of the many instances of China’s military diplomacy with Southeast Asian countries. And in the past couple of months, the frequency of Chinese military drills with its ASEAN partners appears to have increased for two primary reasons. Firstly, Xi Jinping has put excessive emphasis on defence diplomacy under his flagship Global Security Initiative (GSI).

Second, China’s threat perception of expanding the United States military engagement with countries in the Asia-Pacific region, especially those countries that China has disputes with in the South and East China Seas region.

How does the GSI challenge the ASEAN’s cohesiveness?

The GSI invited varied responses from the ASEAN, which reflect the classic divergences in intra-association stances on bandwagoning and hedging between China and the U.S. First, in November 2022, during the ASEAN-China Summit in Cambodia, all parties cautiously agreed to “take note of the GSI proposed by China with core elements consistent with the principles and spirit of the Treaty of Amity,” and “looked forward to further details of the GSI.”

Over the past few months, the divergences have become visible. As per ISEAS’s ‘State of Southeast Asia Survey 2023’, on average, 27% of those surveyed in the 10 ASEAN place confidence in the GSI. However, of those surveyed in countries such as Cambodia and Brunei, nearly 50% are confident about the Initiative. On the other hand, of those surveyed in countries such as Indonesia, Philippines, Vietnam, Thailand and Myanmar, well over 50% place little to no confidence in it.

These figures, alone, however, are not enough to determine how ASEAN countries are responding to China’s expanding comprehensive national power. For example, China’s heavy Belt and Road investments have been welcomed by Indonesia. Moreover, despite tensions in the South China Sea, Indonesia has been proactively applauding Chinese support in the advancement of its vaccine programme and its high-speed rail network.

Similarly, despite Vietnam’s mistrust of the GSI, analysts suggest that it maintains a relatively neutral stance in its relations with China, which indicates

that there is neither rapid progress nor significant deterioration in bilateral relations. This may be because a cautious Vietnam may not want to invite hostility from a significantly larger power in its neighbourhood. Additional factors may include shared socialist values between the central committees of the Communist Parties of Vietnam (CPV) and China (CPC), as well as the success of the Sino-Vietnamese ‘Two Corridors and One Economic Circle’ Belt and Road project.

On the other hand, in Myanmar, despite a majority of observers placing little to no confidence in the GSI, China is making political, military and economic inroads. Since the takeover of the junta, the development of the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor has only accelerated, while new satellite imagery is showing China building a surveillance military base on Great Coco Islands in Myanmar. This also impacts India because the Great Coco Islands lie just 55 km north of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, and their militarisation by China poses a strategic threat to India’s national security.

Why is the Philippines’ tilt to the U.S. worrisome for China?

China continues to face competition from the U.S. in its bid to establish a sphere of influence over Southeast Asia. The increasing proximity of the U.S. with the Philippines, with whom China shares a disputed maritime border in the Luzon Strait in the South China Sea, is worrisome for China. What has perhaps recently irked China the most is the Philippines’ decision to provide the U.S. with access to four military bases in addition to the five bases the U.S. already had access to, under the 2014 Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement between the two sides.

China has accordingly structured the message around its exercises with Cambodia, Singapore, and Laos as a warning to the Philippines, with a Chinese military commentator Fu Qinghao saying that these exercises “make a model for other countries in the region, including the Philippines, which has been leaning toward the U.S.”

To add fuel to the fire, Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. said that “tensions across the Taiwan Straits seem to be continuing to increase, and so these EDCA sites will also prove to be useful for us should that terrible occurrence come about”.

Of course, in tandem with other leaders hedging in the ASEAN, Marcos has since clarified that Washington “cannot use bases in his country for ‘offensive action’ against China in the event of a conflict over Taiwan.” This does not, however, change the fact that the bases are advantageous for the U.S. during an offensive against China, as they help fulfil purposes such as refuel and resupply for warships, intelligence, reconnaissance and surveillance (ISR), and blocking Chinese trade through critical chokepoints in the South China Sea. To defend its claims and interests in the region, China is likely to pursue both aggressive military posturing and diplomacy in Southeast Asia. In early May, for example, Chinese surveillance vessel Xiang Yang Hong 10, accompanied by a contingent of eight other maritime vessels, attempted to intimidate the navies of India and ASEAN countries engaged in the first edition of a multilateral naval drill in the South China Sea. Satellite intelligence also shows China preparing a new naval base in the Ream region of Cambodia.

However, despite China’s military and economic inroads in the region, it needs to prove to ASEAN countries sitting on the fence that it has the capability to exercise restraint and act in accordance with the provisions of a Code of Conduct in the South China Sea (which is yet to come into force). This is also essential for it to win the ASEAN’s confidence for the GSI, which will otherwise, and for good reason, continue to cautiously hedge and balance between American and Chinese influence operations in the region.

(Anushka Saxena is a research analyst with Takshashila Institution’s Indo-Pacific Studies Programme)

UAE withdraws from U.S.-led maritime coalition in the Gulf

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

ABU DHABI

The United Arab Emirates has withdrawn from a U.S.-led maritime coalition tasked with securing tense Gulf waterways that are vital to the global oil trade, it said on Wednesday.

The UAE “withdrew its participation” in the 38-nation Combined Maritime Forces two months ago, a Foreign Ministry statement said, without giving reasons for the move.

“As a result of our ongoing evaluation of effective security cooperation with all partners, two months ago, the UAE withdrew its participation in the Combined Maritime Forces,” said the statement carried by the official WAM news agency.

The Bahrain-headquartered CMF was established in 2001, initially as a partnership between 12 nations. It is active in crucial but troubled Gulf waters where tankers have been seized and attacked in recent months.

A spokesperson for the Combined Maritime Forces said the UAE remains a partner nation, despite putting its participation on hold. “The CMF still includes 38 partner nations, of which the UAE is one,” Commander Timothy Hawkins said.

Iran seized two tankers in a week in late April and early May, including one empty ship that was travelling between the UAE ports of Dubai and Fujairah. Iran was also accused of launching a drone attack against an Israeli-owned tanker in November 2022, stoking tensions with the United States. Earlier this month, the U.S. said it was sending reinforcements to the Gulf, which carries at least a third of the world’s sea-borne oil, after what it called increasing harassment by Iran.

The commander of the US Navy’s Fifth Fleet, Vice-Admiral Brad Cooper, later transited through the Strait of Hormuz in a guided-missile destroyer along with British and French naval commanders.

'RISKS TO 6.5% GROWTH GOAL MORE EVENLY BALANCED NOW'



Sanguine outlook: CEA stresses the need to take the momentum from the last fiscal year into consideration. PTI

Sustained growth momentum across sectors, along with rising private investments and public capex spending offering buffers against external risks, says Chief Economic Advisor Nageswaran

THE HINDU BUREAU
NEW DELHI

Chief Economic Advisor (CEA) V. Anantha Nageswaran expressed confidence that the risks to India's projected GDP growth of 6.5% in 2023-24 were more evenly balanced now compared with a few months ago, as sustained growth momentum across sectors along with rising private investments and public capex spending would act as buffers against external risks.

"We are very pleased to have a story of both sustained economic momentum, combined with macro-economic and fiscal stability, and we look forward to another year of solid economic performance," Mr. Nageswaran said after the National Statistical Office released its first national income estimates for 2022-23.

While the CEA conceded that the "better than expected [7.2% GDP growth] numbers for 2022-23" would weigh on this year's growth, he stressed the need to take the momentum into consideration.

"We have seen enough information about the momentum in the purchasing managers' indices [S&P Global PMI], credit growth, private sector capital formation and the revenue collections... auguring well for its ability to maintain capital investment plans and so on," he said.

FISCAL DEFICIT NARROWS TO 6.4%, MEETS TARGET

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
NEW DELHI

The Centre's fiscal deficit narrowed to 6.4% of the GDP in 2022-23 from 6.71% in FY22, as anticipated by Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman in her Budget in February.

In the Union Budget, the government had said it aimed to further bring down the fiscal deficit — a key indicator of borrowing — during the financial year 2023-24 to 5.9% of gross domestic product (GDP).

The Controller General of Accounts (CGA) said the fiscal deficit in

absolute terms was ₹17,33,131 crore (provisional), marginally down from the amount projected in the Revised Estimates (RE) in the Budget.

CGA said the government received ₹24.56 lakh crore (101% of corresponding RE 2022-23 of total receipts) during 2022-23.

It comprised ₹20.97 lakh crore tax revenue (net to Centre), ₹2.86 lakh crore of non-tax revenue and ₹72,187 crore of non-debt capital receipts.

The Centre's total expenditure was ₹41.89 lakh crore (100% of corresponding RE 2022-23)

SEBI MOOTS TIGHTENING DISCLOSURES FOR FPIs



PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
NEW DELHI

Capital markets regulator SEBI came out with a proposal mandating enhanced disclosures from high-risk Foreign Portfolio Investors (FPIs) to guard against possible circumvention of the minimum public shareholding requirement.

This comes after SEBI observed that some FPIs have concentrated a substantial portion of equity portfolio in a single investee company. In some cases, the concentrated holdings have also been near static and maintained for a long time.

'Circumventing norms'

"Such concentrated investments raise the concern and possibility that promoters of such corporate groups, or other investors acting in concert, could be using the FPI route for circumventing regulatory requirements such as that of maintaining Minimum Public Shareholding," the regulator said.

Under the proposal, such FPIs need to make additional disclosures about the ownership, economic interest and control of such funds. Also, the regulator has suggested categorising FPIs based on risk.

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APRIL CORE SECTOR OUTPUT GROWTH SLOWS TO SIX-MONTH LOW OF 3.5%

VIKAS DHOOT
NEW DELHI

India's eight core sectors' output growth eased from 3.6% in March to 3.5% in April, marking the slowest pace in six months with half of the sectors, including electricity and natural gas, logging contractions.

Crude oil production shrank 3.5%, the 11th straight month of contraction. Natural gas output dropped 2.8% and refinery products slid 1.5%, the first such decline since November for both these sectors.

Cement, steel and fertilisers recorded strong upticks to offset the declines. Cement output rebounded from a 0.6% contraction in March to surge

11.6%, the fastest pace in five months.

Steel production grew 12.1% in April, the swiftest in three months, while fertiliser production accelerated 23.5%, marking the highest growth in more than a year. Coal output rose 9%, slowing from March's 12.2% pace.

Bank of Baroda chief economist Madan Sabnavis linked the slide in the oil products basket to lower demand, in addition to a tendency to prefer imports and curtail domestic crude output when global crude prices were benign. The 23.5% surge in fertilizer output was as expected in preparation for the kharif sowing season, he noted. Mr. Sabnavis said he expects the Index of Industrial Production (IIP) to have grown 2-3% in April.

UNCERTAIN SHOWERS

Farmers need to be given timely, accurate information on rainfall

The India Meteorological Department (IMD) earlier this week updated its monsoon outlook from April. The latest analysis from the weather models that the IMD relies on suggests near-certainty of the development of an El Niño, a cyclical phenomenon of warming in the Central Pacific that six in 10 years is linked to diminished rainfall in the west, northwest and western parts of central India, especially between July and August. However, despite the certainty of an El Niño, the IMD has chosen to retain its outlook of a 'normal' monsoon, at 96% of the 50-year long-term average of 87 cm. Anything below 96% would have been categorised as 'below normal'. Underlying its assessment is a calculation that another phenomenon, called the Indian Ocean Dipole (IOD) — a temperature swing between the western and eastern Indian Ocean — would favour rain development and offset the loss in rains from an El Niño. It is important to note that IODs are not as strongly linked to bountiful rains as the El Niño is to depressed rains. In 1997, India had a strong El Niño but received 2% excess rain because of a positive IOD. However, both have not appeared at the same time since that year, and this is the first time since then that both factors are expected to play out in the same monsoon season. The years India last reported a greater than 10% deficit in monsoon rainfall were 2014 and 2015 — both El

Niño years.

The IMD update also underlines that rainfed-agriculture zones of the country would be between 92%-104% of the average. While this technically qualifies as 'normal', it is also a very large variation and could mean long, dry spells followed by a period of incessant downpours. This might help meet the region's rainfall 'numbers' but will not be helpful for agriculture. While every monsoon has its own peculiarities whatever the models might say, it would be crucial to watch out for the monsoon's distribution, both spatially and temporally. Sharp deficits during July and August, particularly in central India, are likely to influence agricultural output. More accurate assessments of rain during this month are available through the IMD's extended range forecasts that give a fortnightly prognosis; and these can be quite dynamic. The monsoon is forecast to reach Kerala by June 4, and whether it sticks to this date or arrives a tad early or late has little bearing on the quantity of rain during the core monsoon months. This year, States and the Centre must redouble efforts to convey accurate, timely information to farmers, using all available information channels, down to the block level.

STATUS QUO IN TURKEY

Erdoğan must right the wrongs of the past and offer a new inclusive beginning

When Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power in 2002, riding widespread resentment against the establishment amid economic woes, he was a political outsider — an Islamist in a system dominated by Kemalist secularists. Twenty years later, Mr. Erdoğan is the establishment — the military, traditionally the guardian of the old order, is under his thumb, institutions are at his command and the AKP, with close links to the ulema, remains a hegemonic political machine. But the economic and political situation of 2023 is comparable with that of 2002. Faced with a deepening economic crisis and accusations of backsliding democracy and freedoms, there has been widespread resentment against his long reign. The Opposition united to capitalise on this anger and managed to deny him a first round victory on May 14, but in Sunday's run-off, he won 52.1% of the vote share, against Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu's 47.9%. Mr. Kılıçdaroğlu has accepted the outcome, but called the election process "the most unfair in years". He has a point. Mr. Erdoğan and his allies controlled the big media, shaping the information flow. State institutions, including the religious directorate (Diyamet), which controls mosques and appoints Imams, amplified the AKP propaganda. The President accused the Opposition of having ties with "terrorists" as a mainstream Kurdish party was backing his rival. Mr. Kılıçdaroğlu, a former bureaucrat from the minority Alevi

community, led a spirited campaign, but failed to overcome the AKP's Islamist populism.

Mr. Erdoğan, arguably the most powerful Turkish leader since Mustafa Kemal 'Atatürk', has reshaped the country's polity and society over the past 20 years. Kemal Atatürk, who abolished the Ottoman Caliphate and secularised Turkey, saw the clergy as a threat to his vision for the country. Tensions between Kemalism and Islamism have always been there in Turkey's modern history. But until Mr. Erdoğan's rise to power, no Islamist leader had managed to upend the system. While doing so, he amassed powers, rewrote the Constitution, turning it into an executive presidency, got himself elected as the all-powerful President, stifled dissent, stepped up the war against Kurdish rebels, and jailed political rivals. Yet, this election was his biggest challenge. That he had to go into the second round, and with a lead of just three points, should remind him that Turkish society remains polarised. The battered economy needs urgent attention. A new term is an opportunity for Mr. Erdoğan, whose legacy has already been marred by his authoritarian tendencies and mismanagement of the economy, to right the wrongs and offer a new inclusive beginning. But it is unclear whether Turkey's Islamist leader is ready for such a change.

A PARLIAMENTARY DEMOCRACY OR AN EXECUTIVE DEMOCRACY

Last week, a new Parliament building was inaugurated with both fanfare and controversy. In particular, the exclusion of the President of India — the formal head of the executive — from the inauguration, and the symbolism around the Sengol — a sceptre originally used to signify the transfer of power between Chola rulers — generated significant debate. Submerged beneath this debate, however, is an overlooked fact: the increasing subordination of the "Parliament" in India's "parliamentary democracy."

Parts of this story are familiar: we know that Bills are passed with minimal or no deliberation. We know that Parliament sits for fewer and fewer days in a year, and parliamentary sessions are often adjourned. We know that presidential ordinances have become a parallel if not dominant form of law-making.

By constitutional design

It is tempting to attribute all of this to unscrupulous or callous

politicians. What that misses, however, is the understanding that the growing irrelevance of Parliament is not because of individual actions but a matter of constitutional design. In other words, the Indian Constitution, by its very structure, facilitates and enables the marginalisation of Parliament, and the concentration of power within a dominant executive.

How does this happen? Consider the various safeguards that parliamentary democracies generally tend to put in place against executive dominance or abuse. First, in order to enact its agenda, the executive must command a majority in Parliament. This opens up the space for intra-party dissent, and an important role for ruling party parliamentarians — who are not members of the cabinet — to exercise a check over the executive. Occasionally, ruling party backbenchers can even join forces with the Opposition to defeat unpopular Bills (as was the case with various Brexit deals in the U.K. House of Commons between 2017 and 2019). Second, the Opposition itself is granted certain rights in Parliament, and certain limited control over parliamentary proceedings, in order to publicly hold the executive to account. Third, the interests of Parliament against the executive are meant to be represented by the Speaker, a neutral and independent authority. And fourth, certain parliamentary democracies embrace bicameralism: i.e., a second “Upper House” that acts as a revising chamber, where interests other than those of the brute majority are represented (in our case, that is the Rajya Sabha, acting as a council of states).

When these features function as they should, it becomes very difficult for the executive to ride roughshod over Parliament and, in turn, opens up space for Parliament to act as the deliberative and representative body that it is meant to be.

A dilution, erasure

In India, however, each of these features has been diluted or erased over the years.

First, the possibility of intra-party dissent within Parliament has been stamped out by virtue of the Tenth Schedule to the Constitution, popularly known as the “anti-defection law”. Introduced through a constitutional amendment in 1985, the Tenth Schedule penalises disobedience of the party whip with disqualification from the House altogether. Ironically, as recent events have more than amply demonstrated, the Tenth Schedule has failed to fulfil the purpose for which it was enacted, i.e., to curb horse-trading and unprincipled floor-crossing. What it has done, however, is to strengthen the hand of the party leadership — which, in the case of the ruling party, is effectively the cabinet/executive — against its own parliamentarians. Intra-party dissent is far more difficult when the price is disqualification from Parliament.

Second, right from its inception, the Indian Constitution did not carve out any specific space for the political Opposition in the House. There is no equivalent, for example, of Prime Minister’s questions, where the Prime Minister has to face direct questioning of their record from the Leader of the Opposition as well as by other politicians. In other words, the manner of proceedings in Parliament are under the complete control of the executive, with no real constitutional checks upon how that control is exercised.

BIODIVERSITY IS US AND WE ARE BIODIVERSITY

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The observance of International Biodiversity Day (May 22) was yet another reminder of the pivotal role our natural world plays in resolving the climate change crisis, which, along with the decline of biodiversity, poses an existential threat to our future. Biodiversity, the rich variety of life forms and their interconnections with each other and the environment, is everywhere: inside our bodies as ubiquitous microbiomes, in our backyards, villages, towns, and cities, and in remote wild places as well-organised ecological communities and ecosystems. Maintaining and enhancing biodiversity on land and in oceans is perhaps the least expensive mechanism to sequester carbon dioxide from the atmosphere so as to cool our land and oceans.

Mitigation of climate change is but one of the several benefits we derive from biodiversity. It also fulfils our basic needs for food, shelter, medicines, mental health, recreation, and spiritual enrichment. To face the continuing decline in the quality of our environment, we will need to rely more and more on solutions that draw upon biodiversity or nature, also called nature-based solutions to secure our future. It is biodiversity that will restore our degraded lands and polluted rivers and oceans and sustain our agricul-

Third, this is exacerbated by the fact that the Speaker, in our system, is not independent. The Speaker is not required to give up membership of their political party, and is not constitutionally obligated to act impartially. This has led to an increasing trend, at both the central and the State levels, of Speakers acting in a blatantly partisan manner in order to advance the interests of the executive over the interests of the House. Not only does this affect the quality of the deliberations in the lower house (as the Speaker has control over the conduct of the House) but it also has a knock-on effect on the Upper House: as has been seen of late, when the ruling party wishes to avoid effective scrutiny in the Rajya Sabha over Bills, the Speaker simply classifies the Bill as a “money bill”, thus depriving the Rajya Sabha of the right to make amendments. This was seen most vividly in the case of the Aadhaar Act, where Rajya Sabha scrutiny was avoided in this precise manner, and many important, rights-protecting amendments could not be passed.

Role of the Upper House

Fourth, the role of the Upper House is undercut not only by the Speaker’s misclassification of Bills but also by the constitutionally-sanctioned ordinance making power. An ordinance is nothing more than executive legislation; and while, in theory, it is meant to be used only for an emergency, while Parliament is not in session, in practice, it is used as a parallel process of law-making, especially when the executive wants to bypass the Upper House altogether, at least for a period of time, and create a *fait accompli*.

When we put all of this together, what emerges is a picture where the only effective check upon the executive is one where the electorate has thrown up a fractured mandate and the ruling party is forced to govern in a coalition with allies with whom it does not always see eye-to-eye. In such a scenario, coalition partners can exercise something of a check upon the executive in Parliament.

However, when there is a single, majority ruling party, whether at the Centre or in the States, there is very little that Parliament can do. The anti-defection law wipes out intra-party dissent. The political Opposition’s scope for participation depends upon the discretion of the executive. Partisan Speakers further ensure that the executive is insulated from public embarrassment at the hands of the Opposition, by controlling the debate. And the Upper House is taken out of the equation, either by the misclassification of money Bills or by the use of ordinance power.

It is no wonder, then, that the quality of parliamentary deliberations has declined: it is simply a mirror of Parliament’s own structural marginalisation under the Constitution. Instead, what we have is greater and greater executive power: a situation that resembles presidential systems with strong executives, but without the checks and balances and veto points that those systems have; in effect, the worst of all worlds.

Therefore, even as the new Parliament is inaugurated, the urgent question that we must ask is whether in formal terms, India can continue to be called a parliamentary democracy, or whether we have gradually morphed into an executive democracy. And if, indeed, we want to return to parliamentarianism, what manner of constitutional changes and reforms that it would require.

ture in the face of climate change. It is biodiversity that will form the basis of a new sustainable green economy. And it is biodiversity that will inspire our children to opt for a more humane, just, and hopeful future, which accords primacy to the living world.

Despite the importance of biodiversity that ultimately sustains all human endeavours, we have been poor stewards for caring and nurturing life on earth. Globally as well as in India, we have failed to adequately conserve and manage our precious, irreplaceable natural heritage. Biodiversity is declining worldwide, and our last remaining, largely isolated ecosystems are degrading due to changes happening around them, such as loss of species, climate stressors, and continuous human pressures.

In India, the Forest (Conservation) Amendment Bill will further weaken our resolve to sustain the remaining biodiversity.

Nurturing and managing biodiversity

In many ways, biodiversity is us and we are biodiversity. Thus, civil society must play a critical role in sustaining our biodiversity. A paradigm shift in the care of biodiversity, long overdue, must begin now, flowing from this International Biodiversity Day.

Let us first change the way we manage our biodiversity. Currently, the main custodian of the natural world is the Indian Forest Service. But the term

“Forest” to describe our immense and unique natural heritage is flawed. India’s biodiversity is not only on land but also in waterbodies, rivers, deltas, and oceans. A rich array of our ecosystems is in the form of grasslands, savannas, alpine pastures, deserts, and other types of ecological communities. Even in the 20th century, people had started to talk about living organisms and the interconnectedness manifested as ecosystems and ecosystem services in multifunctional landscapes dominated by humans. In the 21st century, the basic terms “forests” and “wildlife” have limited meaning or usefulness.

We must think of multifunctional landscapes, where aspirations, beliefs, traditional knowledge, and direct participation of local communities are central to the notion of conserving and sustaining life on earth. In 2006, policymakers in India enacted the Forest Rights Act, that called for an increase in the stake of indigenous groups in ownership as well as management of biodiversity. However, the Act largely remains on paper, yet to be implemented on the ground. Seventeen years later, it is time to even move beyond the Act’s steps to fundamentally alter the way we manage our biodiversity. If biodiversity is everywhere, as it is, we must mainstream it into our daily actions — in every development programme, in every government department, in every public and private institution. And it is time to decentralise the management of biodiversity by bringing together multiple stakeholders, especially local communities, through gram sabhas and biodiversity management committees.

Mainstreaming biodiversity

This very mainstreaming of biodiversity is the goal of the proposed

National Mission on Biodiversity and Human Wellbeing, an idea this writer has referred to in earlier columns. India’s leading conservation biologists, working under the umbrella of the Biodiversity Collaborative based in Bengaluru, conceptualised the idea and developed a road map for the Mission approved in principle by the Prime Minister’s Science, Technology, and Innovation Council.

The Mission will enable our country to meet critical challenges in climate change, natural and regenerative agriculture, and ecosystem and public health using biodiversity and ecosystem services — usually referred to as nature-based solutions. The ultimate goal is to enhance and conserve biodiversity to foster human well-being; more specifically, to meet the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals related to poverty alleviation, nutrition and health, and environmental protection, and support an era of new green economy.

People will be at the centre of the Mission, the goal of which is to have all citizens engaged in the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity, embed consideration of biodiversity in every development-oriented programme of the public and private sectors, and arouse curiosity about nature and a sense of responsibility for safeguarding biodiversity — and our very future — in the minds of every child and every student. Undertaking such a pledge would be a fitting celebration of our precious and irreplaceable natural world.

The views expressed are personal

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