

SC CLEARS DEPLOYMENT OF CENTRAL FORCES IN BENGAL FOR LOCAL POLLS



Governor C.V. Ananda Bose visits the Raj Bhavan control room to inspect the complaints received of violence over the polls. ANI

The Supreme Court on Tuesday upheld a Calcutta High Court decision to allow for Central security forces to enter West Bengal to ensure free and fair panchayat elections on July 8.

A Vacation Bench of Justices B.V. Nagarathna and Manoj Misra reasoned that West Bengal has a “history of violence” during polls and the upcoming local polls was a mammoth exercise involving elections to 75,000-odd seats. Polling would take place across 61,636 booths in just one day, requiring adequate security measures.

“Holding an election cannot be a licence for violence. There has been a history of violence...We appreciate that you are a State having a democratic set up right up to the grassroot level where elections are taking place, but, at the same time, elections cannot be accompanied by violence,” Justice Nagarathna addressed the State government.

The West Bengal Government lawyer said the entire State, and not just the polling booths, would come under a “blanket cover” of armed Central security forces.

The High Court order of June 15 had effectively taken away the State’s power to maintain law and order in its own jurisdiction.

Senior advocate Harish Salve, appearing for Suwendu Adhikari, the Leader of the Opposition in the West Bengal, belonging to the BJP, and other respondents, said the West Bengal government imagined the Union forces as an “invading Army”.

The Bench reassured the State that the Central forces were only meant to ensure the conduct of fair elections.

ASSAM RIFLES PLANS TO SECURE LIFELINES OF MANIPUR HILLS

The Assam Rifles has moved additional troops to secure a bridge on a National Highway in south Manipur, the only route for essential supplies to the tribal district of Churachandpur in the violence-hit State.

Roads blocked

A source said that additional columns were moved after security forces picked up chatter from Valley-based Meitei insurgent groups which were planning to damage the bridge at Sinzawl on National Highway 102 B, which connects Manipur with neighbouring Mizoram.

With highway blockades and the armed cadres of insurgent groups — both Kuki and Meitei — threatening free movement, the transport of essential supplies to people across the State has been endangered. On the one hand, Churachandpur, a Kuki-dominated area in the south of the State, has been getting essential supplies by road from Mizoram as protesters have blocked access from the northern Imphal regions.

This key road from Mizoram is now being threatened by Meitei insurgents. On the other hand, Kuki groups in the north have blocked the main supply route to the Meitei-dominated Imphal Valley, forcing a fall back on an alternative route.

In the southeast, the border areas of Chandel and Tengnoupal, primarily Kuki and Naga-dominated districts, are now dependent on Myanmar for the supply of essentials as they are blocked from the rest of Manipur.

On Tuesday, Mizoram Chief Minister Zoramthanga tweeted that 2,388.50 quintals of rice have been sent to “Zo ethnic tribes in troubled Manipur areas and internally displaced persons residing in Mizoram by Govt. Of



On guard: Local residents stay alert after fresh violence in Manipur’s Kanto Sabal in Imphal West on Tuesday. ANI

Reinforcements deployed to ring-fence a bridge key to supply essentials to tribal districts; both sides plan blockade of vital routes to the State

Mizoram, including other relief supplies”. A total of 11,785 internally displaced people from Manipur have taken shelter in Mizoram since the eruption of ethnic strife in Manipur, Mr. Zoramthanga said.

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PM MODI LANDS IN U.S., MANY EVENTS IN PIPELINE



Modi waves to supporters as he lands in New York. REUTERS

Prime Minister Narendra Modi arrived in New York in the early afternoon of Tuesday on his first state visit to the United States. He is scheduled to lead the International Day of Yoga at the United Nations on Wednesday before flying to Washington DC for the core of his state visit.

"Landed in New York City. Looking forward to the programmes here including interaction with thought leaders and the Yoga Day programme tomorrow, 21st June," Mr. Modi tweeted.

Mr. Modi was received in New York by India's Ambassador to the U.S., Taranjit Singh Sandhu, and India's Permanent Representative to the United Nations, Ruchira Kamboj.

Bilateral meetings

Meanwhile, in Washington, preparations for the visit were under way with officials on both sides racing towards finalising a joint statement from the bilateral meetings that are scheduled for Thursday.

"We're hosting India for an official state visit to put our cooperation on an inexorable trajectory as we support India's emergence as a great power that will be central to ensuring U.S. interests in the coming decades," John Kirby, who heads strategic communications for President Joe Biden's National Security Council, said at a press briefing.

Mr. Modi's visit is the third state visit of the Biden administration, which hosted French President Emmanuel Macron and South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol. Expected over the next few days are deliverables in global health cooperation, the fight against climate change, defence cooperation, emerging technology and space and in the area of people to people exchanges. The tangible outcomes of the visit are centred around the Initiative for Critical and Emerging Technologies (ICET), launched by the National Security Advisers of both countries in early 2023, to enhance and provide a framework for defence-industrial cooperation between India and the U.S.

A significant number of deliverables is expected from Mr. Modi's visit, including an agreement between General Electric (GE) and Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL) for the co-development and co-production of GE 414 jet engines in India, to fit the Indian Air Force's Tejas Mk-2 fighter jets. Also expected is the sale, to India, of 31 armed Predator MQ-9 Reaper drones at a price of over \$3 billion. To coincide with Mr. Modi's visit, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and Pentagon, along with the Ministry of Defence, is conducting an event in Washington, INDUS-X, to bring together actors in the defence and emerging technology space, to create some momentum for some of the programmes under the ICET.

India's increasing commitment to playing an international role in the Quad (a grouping of India, the U.S., Australia and Japan), Mr. Kirby said, signified New Delhi's growing willingness to join the U.S. in advancing a vision of a free and rules-based global order.

However, the Biden administration is being careful not to tie this visit to its position on China. Asked if Mr. Modi was being invited to the White House as a move to counter China, Mr. Kirby was quick to say, "No."

More sensitive topics, on which the Indian and U.S. governments do not see eye to eye are likely to come up during Mr. Modi's time in Washington. Ukraine is one such topic and the Modi government's human rights track record, the second, according to Mr. Kirby.

CHINA, PAK. INK NUCLEAR PLANT DEAL

China on Tuesday signed an agreement worth \$4.8 billion with cash-strapped Pakistan to set up a 1,200-MW nuclear power plant as a sign of increasing strategic cooperation between the two "all-weather allies".

Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif witnessed the signing of the deal under which Beijing would build the nuclear plant at Chashma in Mianwali district of Punjab. "We will kick start it without any further delay," Mr. Sharif said.

WHAT IS THE CONTENTION BETWEEN COAL INDIA AND CCI?

On June 15, the Supreme Court held that there was "no merit" in Coal India Ltd (CIL), a public sector undertaking, being excluded from the purview of the Competition Act. The Court was hearing the PSU's appeal against the Competition Appellate Tribunal's order which alleged the former of abusing its position.

What was the case about?

The chain of events goes back to March 2017 when the Competition Commission of India (CCI) had imposed a penalty of ₹591.01 crore on CIL for "imposing unfair/discriminatory conditions in fuel supply agreements (FSAs) with the power producers for supply of non-coking coal." In other words, CIL was found to be supplying lower quality of the essential resource at higher prices and placing opaque conditions in the contract about supply parameters and quality. The regulator contended that Coal India and its subsidiaries operated independently of market forces and enjoyed market dominance in the relevant market with respect to production and supply of non-coking coal in India.

What did the PSU argue in court?

Coal India argued that it operated with the principles of 'common good' and ensuring equitable distribution of the essential natural resource. With this objective, it was secured as a 'monopoly' under the Nationalisation Act, 1973 (more specifically, the Coal Mines (Nationalisation) Act, 1973).

The entity said that it may have to adhere to a differential pricing

mechanism to encourage captive coal production (referring to mines that are handed over to companies for specific and exclusive use through lease or any other route). Differential pricing, which may be inconsistent with market principles, was to ensure the viability of the larger operating ecosystem as well as for pursuing welfare objectives. Furthermore, coal supply also has a bearing on larger national policies, for example, if the government were to encourage growth in backward areas through increased allocation.

The PSU stated that it did not operate in the commercial sphere. It specifically pointed to 345 out of its 462 mines having suffered cumulative losses totalling ₹9,878 crore in 2012-13.

How did the CCI respond?

The respondents broadened the scope of the arguments. The Raghavan Committee (2020) report, put up for perusal by the respondents, had observed that state monopolies were not conducive to the best interests of the nation. They could not be allowed to operate in a state of inefficiency and should instead, operate amid competition. Furthermore, coal ceased to be an 'essential commodity' in February 2007 and the Nationalisation Act too was removed from the Ninth Schedule (laws that cannot be challenged in court) in 2017. It was also pointed out that Coal India was a fully-government owned entity until the disinvestment in 2010. The government's shareholding reduced to 67% with the rest held by private hands. Moreover, it was stated that the CIL directed 80% of

its supplies to power companies. The latter would then pass power generated using coal to discoms (distribution companies), who, in turn, would supply power to the final consumer. The continual supply of coal, adherence to the contract, reasonableness in the rates and quality of coal also serve a common good, the respondents contended. Coal constitutes about 60 to 70% of the costs for power generation companies. Thus, irregular prices and supply will have a significant bearing indirectly on consumers.

What were the SC's observations?

The court said there was "no merit" in the argument that the Competition

SC REFUSES URGENT HEARING ON PLEA SEEKING ARMY PROTECTION FOR KUKIS

The Supreme Court on Tuesday termed the Manipur ethnic violence, which has left nearly 100 dead, a "purely law and order issue", while "hoping" that courts will not be asked to deploy the Army or Central security forces.

A Vacation Bench of Justices Surya Kant and M.M. Sundresh refused to list a plea by the Manipur Tribal Forum Delhi (MTFD) for Army protection to the Kuki tribal people urgently, in a day or two. It listed the case for July 3, after the summer vacation, saying it was the earliest the case could be heard.

The Bench indicated that its intervention, one way or the other, now may tend to "aggravate" the situation in the State, which has seen clashes since May 3 between the dominant Meitei community and Kuki-Zomi tribes, and create "more problems".

The court chose to trust the administration to work to bring peace back to the State.

Solicitor-General Tushar Mehta, for Manipur and the Union governments, said, "Security forces are on the ground... they are doing their best."

Senior advocate Colin Gonsalves, for the MTFD, said violence and "killings" have continued despite the "solemn assurances" given by the government in the Supreme Court to protect the people.

"Tribal areas have been attacked. Tribals have been killed. I want Army protection," Mr. Gonsalves pleaded.

"We hope courts are not asked to pass these kinds of orders... that Army should be deployed, Central forces should be deployed... This is purely a law and order issue... let the administration look into it," the court replied.

"We have come to Your Lordships because you are the only institution now that can protect the tribals... It is a rampage... Solemn assurances were given to this court, yet tribals have been killed," Mr. Gonsalves said. Mr. Mehta said similar pleas had been filed before the vacation, but the top court had chosen not to intervene in the situation while posting them after the holidays. "Let the security situation become better, public interest petitions can wait," he said.

On May 17, the Solicitor-General had said the situation in the State had "improved a lot". He had said the State was "peaceful and quiet".

Immediate trigger

The MTFD application has sought "immediate directions to the Army to take full control of the law and order and public order situation in the districts of Churachandpur, Chandel, Kangpokpi, Imphal East, Imphal West and villages in Manipur to ensure with immediate effect that the killing of Kukis comes to an end". The immediate trigger for the violence has been a March 27 order by the Manipur High Court's Single Judge Bench of Acting Chief Justice M.V. Muralidharan, directing the State government to "consider the case of the petitioners for

Act would not apply to CIL because they are governed by the Nationalisation Act, and it cannot be reconciled with the Competition Act. "The novel idea which permeates the Act, would stand frustrated, in fact, if the state monopolies, the government companies and public sector units are left free to contravene the (competition) act," it stated. Separately, it said that entities cannot act with caprice, treat unfairly otherwise or similarly situated entities with discrimination. According to Anshuman Sakle, partner at law-firm Khaitan & Co, the judgment reinforced the principle of "competitive neutrality" — entailing that the Competition Act equally applies to public and private sector enterprises.



The top court lists the case for July 3 after the summer vacation, saying Manipur violence is a 'purely law and order issue' and it chooses to trust the administration to bring peace; it added that any court intervention may 'aggravate' the situation

inclusion of the Meitei/Meitei community in the Scheduled Tribe list, expeditiously, preferably within a period four weeks from the date of receipt of a copy of this order".

On May 17, a Bench led by Chief Justice of India D.Y. Chandrachud had orally indicated its inclination to stay the High Court order.

However, the State had urged the top court not to do so for the time being as a stay may further affect the situation on the ground.

The High Court has however issued notice in a petition filed by the Meitei Tribes Union to review its contentious March 27 order.

HARD TO RESTORE INTERNET WHILE BLOCKING SOCIAL MEDIA WEBSITES, MANIPUR TELLS HC

With the Manipur government telling the High Court in Imphal that it would be difficult to restore Internet access while blocking social media websites, a Bench of Justices Ahanthem Bimol Singh and A. Guneshwar Sharma has now sought a reply from Internet Service Providers regarding the matter.

The court was hearing a public interest litigation (PIL) petition seeking the restoration of Internet access in the State while blocking social media websites, in light of the difficulties faced by citizens. The Internet has been suspended in Manipur since May 3, when ethnic conflict broke out between the Meitei and Kuki communities.

During the hearing in this case, the State government submitted an affidavit before the court on June 16, saying that it would be difficult to ensure that social media websites were effectively blocked if the Internet was restored.

In the affidavit filed by the Home Department, the State government said that a meeting was held with the Chief Secretary, senior government officials and the Chief Technical Officers of Internet Service Providers (ISPs) on June 7, where this proposition was discussed.

Having discussed it with their technical teams, the service providers said, in their independent responses, that they would require the government to provide a list of static Internet protocol or IP addresses to be whitelisted or allowed, while everything else would be blocked. This can be made possible, the government said.

However, the ISPs also warned that even if social media websites were blocked, it would not be possible.

U.S. URGES CHINA FOR MILITARY TALKS DESPITE REBUFF TO BLINKEN



Eye to eye: Antony Blinken, left, meets with Xi Jinping in the Great Hall of the People in Beijing on Monday. REUTERS

White House says establishing military-to-military communications is essential to reduce friction between the two global powers; Beijing cites Washington's sanctions as an obstacle for dialogue

The U.S. on Tuesday pressed its call for military communication channels with China despite that request being rebuffed during Secretary of State Antony Blinken's trip to Beijing over the weekend.

Establishing military-to-military communications was essential to reduce frictions between the two global powers, Sarah Beran, White House National Security Council senior director for China and Taiwan Affairs, told reporters in a briefing about the trip.

"This is an absolutely critical way for us to manage competition, crisis communication, ensure that there is not miscommunication or misperception about each other's intentions," Ms. Beran said. "We remain willing and able at all levels to meet and call on China to respond appropriately to that."

During Mr. Blinken's visit, the first to China by a U.S. Secretary of State since 2018, the nations agreed to temper rivalries to avoid conflict but there were no breakthroughs.

China cited U.S. sanctions as an obstacle to military dialogue which Mr. Blinken said he had repeatedly raised with his hosts and would continue to push for. Chinese Defence Minister Li Shangfu has been sanctioned since 2018 over the purchase of combat aircraft and equipment from Russia.

Speaking at the same briefing call on Tuesday, the U.S. State Department's top diplomat for East Asia Daniel Kritenbrink said a successful and responsible management of the U.S.-China relationship will only be possible if it is a "two-way street".

CHINESE PREMIER HOLDS TALKS WITH GERMAN CHANCELLOR



Balancing act: Li Qiang, left, and Olaf Scholz arrive to brief the media following government consultations in Berlin on Tuesday. AP

Chancellor Olaf Scholz hosted Premier Li Qiang for talks on Tuesday, seeking to recalibrate cooperation between Germany and China after Berlin branded Beijing a "systemic rival".

Mr. Li is on his first trip abroad since he was named Premier in March. But unlike previous visits by Chinese dignitaries, when German leaders eager to expand business partnerships with the Asian giant rolled out the red carpet, Mr. Li's trip comes as Germany is rushing to diversify its trading partners.

Burned by its reliance on Russian gas and hurt by supply chain disruptions during the pandemic, Germany is intensifying its efforts to "de-risk" from China.

Berlin's security pact

When the two leaders sit down for talks, Germany's first national security strategy, published days ago, will set the tone.

The blueprint accused China of acting against German interests, putting international security "under increasing pressure" and disregarding human rights.

NaBFID EYES ₹60,000 CRORE LOAN BOOK BY MARCH 2024

Funding infra

Government-backed National Bank for Financing Infrastructure & Development has lent ₹8,000 crore already in the first quarter

■ Infrastructure lender listed its maiden ₹10,000 cr. bonds on the BSE on Tuesday

■ NaBFID's debt issuance received bids worth ₹23,629.50 cr. against a base issue of ₹5,000 cr.

■ The lender is banking on the institutional investor interest in the country's infrastructure



Infrastructure lender is also looking to sanction ₹1 lakh crore loans this fiscal, to both greenfield as well as brownfield assets in the key infrastructure space, says Managing Director Rajkiran Rai G

National Bank for Financing Infrastructure & Development (NaBFID) aims to disburse about ₹60,000 crore by the end of this fiscal, having lent ₹8,000 crore already in the first quarter, a top official said.

The government-backed infrastructure financier, which began operations less than a year ago, is also looking to sanction ₹1 lakh crore loans this fiscal to both greenfield as well as brownfield assets in the key infrastructure space, Rajkiran Rai G, MD, told PTI on Tuesday, after listing its maiden ₹10,000-crore bonds on the BSE.

Last week, the lender raised ₹10,000 crore through debt issuance, which received close to five times or bids worth ₹23,629.50 crore against a base issue of ₹5,000 crore.

NaBFID is offering 7.43% on the unsecured non-convertible debt securities of 10-year tenor. This is the largest debt issuance by a national-level institution.

"We had disbursed ₹18,000 crore last fiscal and... hope to close the year with around ₹60,000 crore of loan book," Mr. Rai said exuding confidence in the interest in the country's infrastructure.



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TELECOM REGULATORY SUGGESTS NORMS FOR UNDERSEA CABLES

The Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) issued recommendations on rules for undersea cables connecting Indian telecom networks to the global Internet.

The Department of Telecommunications had sought TRAI's inputs on a specific concern: whether Indian firms without a major stake in undersea cables, usually built by high-powered global consortia, be allowed to apply for clearances acting alone.

To this, TRAI recommended all Indian telcos operating undersea cables be required to submit proof that they own at least the part of undersea cables that is in Indian waters. TRAI also suggested drawing a distinction between a cable landing station and so-called 'points of presence' to which the station is further connected.

Owners of the latter type of facility wouldn't have to apply for several clearances, but would need to comply with lawful interception requirements. Permit 'dark fibre'

TRAI also submitted 'dark fibre' should be permitted on existing cable landing stations, and 'stubs' — short cables in Indian waters for potential future expansion — be permitted.

Finally, the regulator suggested undersea cables be notified as critical information infrastructure, and thus, benefit from protection by the National Critical Information Infrastructure Protection Centre.



A WELCOME STEP

The U.S. and China must continue to keep diplomatic channels open

The United States and China this week took a much-needed step towards repairing their relations as Antony Blinken visited Beijing, the first visit by a U.S. Secretary of State since 2018. The main takeaway from the visit, during which he met with Chinese President Xi Jinping, was their agreeing on the need for stability in ties. Mr. Xi told Mr. Blinken that the international community was "concerned" about the current state of relations and "does not want to see conflict or confrontation". Mr. Blinken said following the talks that "both agree on the need to stabilise our relationship". Differences, no doubt, remain, and the visit expectedly did not yield breakthroughs on contentious issues such as U.S. export curbs or Taiwan. But the very fact that Mr. Xi met with the visiting U.S. diplomat was a clear sign of progress given the cancellation of Mr. Blinken's visit in February and the rancour that followed the shooting down of the Chinese "spy balloon" over the U.S. As Mr. Blinken put it, the objective was to "strengthen high-level challenges of communication, to make clear our positions and intentions in areas of disagreement" and to explore areas where both "might work together on shared transnational challenges". Asked in Beijing how the Biden administration will continue with its attempt to fix relations with China as the domestic discourse likely worsens in the lead up to the 2024 elections, he argued

that continued engagement was the best avenue to protect U.S. interests, including on trade.

The challenge now is whether they can sustain this effort at arresting the slide and keep diplomatic channels open, even when the next crisis inevitably emerges and against the backdrop of increasingly heated domestic political rhetoric. As Mr. Xi told Mr. Blinken, countries do not want to "choose sides". This is especially true in the region, where nations continue to have deep economic linkages with China and close security ties with the U.S. That Beijing and Washington are appearing to agree on the need for stability should be welcomed, including by India. While shared concerns about China may be a binding factor, the India-U.S. relationship today has acquired a deeper and broader scope, which will be affirmed this week during Prime Minister Narendra Modi's state visit, in new agreements expected in the defence domain and in technology cooperation. In the not-too-distant past, high-level visits from Washington to Beijing may have evoked some unease in New Delhi, particularly during the short-lived "G2" phase during the Obama administration, but that is no longer the case.

EMBEDDED HATE

American culture's over-reliance on police to maintain order is problematic

A report on the findings of a sweeping, two-year investigation by the U.S. Department of Justice (DoJ) into violence and racial discrimination of the police in Minneapolis — where George Floyd, an unarmed African-American was murdered in May 2020 in police custody — found that officers had used excessive force, including "unjustified deadly force", and violated the rights of people engaged in constitutionally protected speech, particularly discriminating against African-American and Native American people and those with "behavioural health disabilities". The findings appeared to confirm a raft of citizen complaints about police conduct in Minneapolis in the wake of the Floyd murder, for which crime the officers involved were sentenced to prison terms. The report's salience is underscored by the outpouring of public anger and protests against racism and violent acts by police on minorities, which erupted across major cities, calling for police reforms. The inquiry not only found numerous examples of excessive force, unlawful discrimination, and First Amendment violations upon review of 19 police shooting incidents but it also noted that there was entrenched racism with regarding to police actions in the context of traffic stops and arrests and callous, violent treatment of some who suffered from mental health conditions. The scathing report concluded that the "systemic problems in MPD made what happened to George Floyd possible".

The DoJ report is a wake-up call to police institutions, most of which continue with their business-as-usual approach toward dealing with the nuances and social complexities of policing multicultural America. The review of police body-worn camera videos, incident and police reports, and hundreds of complaints filed against officers makes it clear that there is an urgent, glaring need for police reforms that address the most challenging issues of the use of excessive force, racial profiling, bureaucratic-militarisation of police culture, and an institutional lack of accountability for police misconduct. Many U.S. States have attempted transformative change, for example by restricting the use of chokeholds and setting up mechanisms for more effective reporting of use of force details. However, public safety, especially in the context of overzealous, armed, police officers using force against persons of colour and other minorities, will genuinely improve only by "limiting when and why police are called upon in the first place". American culture's over-reliance on the police to maintain order in public life has meant that the door has been opened to law enforcement officers responding to minor offences in a racially prejudiced manner, especially when in such instances, public health professionals or other service providers might be better able to address the situation.

A PEOPLE OF AN EMERALD ISLE, WAITING WITH DOOSRAS

Gopalkrishna Gandhi is a former administrator and diplomat who served in Sri Lanka over two spells for six years

George Bernard Shaw visited Ceylon in 1948, skipping India altogether. So much for the ego of the island's massive neighbour. But that was not all. In a letter to India's Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, the unpredictable playwright wrote: "I was convinced that Ceylon is the cradle of the human race because everybody there looks an original. All other nations are obviously mass produced." Anthropology was as far from Shaw's brain as the razor from his beard. But in this observation he had hit upon both a human truth and a Lankan verity.

The emerald isle's people have traditionally been seen in terms of ethnic groups. The categorisation has its uses, as, for instance, in understanding the demographic weight of sections of its population such as given in this latest figure (Census of 2012): Sinhalese 74.9%; Sri Lankan Tamil 11.2%; Sri Lankan Moors 9.2%; Indian Tamil 4.2%; others 0.5% ('Moors' being a quaint Lankan way of describing, a la Shakespeare and Othello, the island's Islamic population).

But identity-clustering can be very self-depriving for a nation.

Muthiah Muralitharan is one of the 4.2% of Sri Lanka's population called Indian Tamils. '...born in Kandy...to a Hill Country Tamil (Malaiyaha Tamizhar) Hindu family of tea plantation workers, the eldest of the four sons born to Lakshmi and to Sinnasamy Muthiah who runs a successful biscuit-making business, he is a grandson of Periasamy Sinnasamy who migrated from south India in 1920 to find work on Ceylon's tea estates.' But Murali is also the fast-bowling spinner of spinners who sends the ball as only he does, with a menacing sneer to match, and 'has taken more wickets in international cricket than any other bowler'. You cannot get more original than that.

The Sinnasamy family is part of the large group of agricultural labourers that began coming into the island from the drought-ravaged and poor districts in southern Madras over a 100 year period, from about 1830 to 1930. As the plantations and the island's export earnings from the plantations, especially tea, grew, the labourers' numbers grew too. Did their incomes and educational and health scores grow proportionately?

They did not. And here, the single-minded and unrelenting work put in by another 'original' Indian Tamil leader and head of the Ceylon Workers' Congress, the late S. Thondaman, made a difference. He was a 'fast-bowler' of his own kind. His ability to inspire and mobilise his people gave them voice, gave them self-respect. More than that, it made them feel they mattered as persons, individuals.

And there was the issue of citizenship. After 10, 25, 50, 100 years, were they Ceylonese or Indian or a bit of both? Nehru told India's Parliament on April 9, 1958, 'They are or should be citizens of Ceylon.' He had the moral authority to do so, given the Congress-led Parliament's record in the matter of affirmative action to ameliorate India's debasing caste system.

Today, all that is history. The Sirimavo-Shastri Pact of 1964 and the Sirimavo-Indira Gandhi Pact of 1974 saw the translocation of a large number of Indian Tamils to India, a procedure Nehru would have surely resisted. The repatriates are now part of the fluctuating fortunes of India's under-employed, self-employed and unemployed wage-searching masses. But the stateless and futureless situation of the Indian Tamils on Sri Lanka's plantations has ended. The bulk of Indian Tamils on Sri Lanka's plantations are now citizens of that country, with voting rights.

More and more of the young among the Indian Tamils now are seeking avenues of work outside the estates, like Murali's father did, with reasonable success. On-estate issues remain, in terms of deficits in housing, medical and educational standards. And in ergonomic norms. And, there are political aspirations of the Indian Tamils in Sri Lanka that call for remedial action as well. These, as identified by participants in a 'Malaiyaham200' event organised by the Katugastota-based Institute of Social Development include retention of the

proportional electoral system, power sharing at the central, provincial and local government levels, the re-vesting of human settlements in the plantations with the State (not the estates) and being recognised as villages so that government schemes and services as also land rights can flow equally to the community.

Changes that are needed

But casting a forward gaze, the Indian Tamils of Sri Lanka now need the following five important changes to be made by them and for them: First, to start being seen as distinct and equal Lankans with huge and unique professional expertise making a major, indeed critically important, contribution to their country's economic well-being.

Second, to have their land-based climate-dependent profession protected against the now almost certain threat of adverse and erratic weather conditions. This calls for urgent, in fact, emergency mitigation strategies not just in the interest of plantation labour but also of the plantations themselves, and therefore of Lanka's economy.

Third, to have their worksites, work-cycles and work-styles readied to face the real possibility of COVID-19's variants and other pandemics, especially zoonotically triggered ones, re-visiting the plantations. It is vital to obviate the crippling disruption that shattered plantation aspirations over the virus's two waves by dips in export, in prices.

Fourth, to ensure that this sector is not left vulnerable to policy-related adversities such as those that were created by the ill-conceived ban on chemical fertilizer some months ago which hit tea estates in the gut, and to make it creatively equipped to respond to the gradual but globally discernible change in tea tastes, away from the current black tea pattern towards green and herbal teas.

Fifth, and most important now, to recognise the global opportunities, and equally the challenge that Artificial Intelligence (AI) is opening for the community. The opportunities are, among others, helping predict weather and, using drones, help making planting, de-weeding and de-infesting near perfect if not zero-defect operations, and with algorithms, transform the future of the plantation sector. Authentication has been cited as one area where AI will confer a boon. Labels can and do misrepresent facts. Traditional methods can fail to see adulteration or to spot 'spent leaf' in bags of mixed tea. "100% X or 100% Y", may be only 10% or 20% so. AI will tell the true from the fake. Algorithms detecting fraud, calibrating flavour through sensor technology and chemometrics are going to transform the industry. But will AI cut employment on estates? Could AI, in a short space of a few months, displace hundreds of thousands now working on the island's hill-slopes? Will AI, in some unregulated brain and in some frenzy of corporate rivalry, tamper with tea or coffee preferences and generate a spasm of craving for something that replaces tea and coffee and makes the tea bush or coffee plant objects in museums of antiquated forest produce? This is not about science fiction, but about AI's flip side. Is anyone in Sri Lanka or elsewhere, thinking of this? Are plantation labour unions? They must.

If Sri Lanka's plantation workers, in a measured but audacious move, were to be made part of the creation and development of an AI university situated in the central highlands and specialising in algorithms for the plantation sector, their originality as individuals and genius as persons could work not for their own so much as for Lanka's good. The 4.2% have been generators of wealth for Sri Lanka, themselves remaining in want. The time has come for them to be harbingers of change, themselves leading — and regulating — the change. The author of Pygmalion was an AI drone buzzing over the island's future spotting not Eliza Doolittle like originals who could speak a zero-defect English but women and men spinning their individual destinies with doosras waiting to fly.

RAWALPINDI GAINS THE UPPER HAND IN TROUBLED PAKISTAN

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After the violent events of May 9 in Pakistan following former Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan's arrest in an alleged corruption case, the country's powerful military establishment has decided to decimate Mr. Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf (PTI). Negotiations are now off the table as the Army leadership swiftly dismantles the 'Imran Khan Project', which it had initiated with fanfare some years ago. Following his unceremonious removal last year, Mr. Khan and his PTI had targeted the military in an unprecedented manner. Mr. Khan's arrest on May 9 was possibly linked to him publicly accusing and naming a serving

Inter-Services Intelligence officer, Major General Faisal Naseer, for alleged assassination attempts on Mr. Khan's life.

Never before has a civilian leader, especially an Opposition leader, in Pakistan's 75-year history, challenged the Army in the manner that Mr. Khan has. The Pakistani military and its intelligence agencies are now avenging a year of public humiliation heaped on them by Mr. Khan and his party leaders. This episode has provided the military establishment further opportunity to tighten its grip over democratic institutions in Pakistan, win back public trust —



rather forcefully — and create a new political arrangement or “hybrid” regime. More importantly, the Chief of Army Staff (COAS), General Syed Asim Munir, sees this as an opportunity to move away from his predecessor’s shadow (General Qamar Javed Bajwa) and shape his own legacy. Before his retirement, Gen. Bajwa, in a speech last November, had claimed that the Army’s role in politics was “unconstitutional” and that it had decided to remain “apolitical”. Gen. Munir has also made similar assertions, but the brutal clampdown on the PTI is belying those claims.

During the May 9 protests, Mr. Khan’s supporters had breached the Army’s general headquarters in Rawalpindi, Pakistan’s power centre. For the very first time in Pakistan’s existence, civilians conducted a “symbolic coup” against the powerful military establishment, in a way telling them to stay in their barracks.

Expectedly, this muscle-flexing has backfired. PTI cadres allegedly involved in the May 9 violence will face trials in military courts under the Army Act and Official Secrets Act. Notably, this action of the Army has received support from the current Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) government. The Army is also running a well-crafted propaganda to portray itself as a “victim” of PTI-led “terrorism”.

The Army has not stopped. Nearly the entire senior leadership of the PTI has “officially” left the party after caving in to pressure from the military

establishment and to avoid imprisonment. The PTI is now struggling to survive, and Mr. Khan is fast losing his support base and the motivation to continue his fight for “Haqeeqi Azadi”, or ‘true independence’.

Political dynamics

However, Mr. Khan’s political woes go beyond this. The violence of May 9 has also resulted in the indefinite postponement of provincial elections in Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Mr. Khan and the PTI had long demanded elections in these provinces. Additionally, the likelihood of the PDM government holding country-wide general elections later this year has also diminished significantly. These dynamics will further exacerbate political instability and boost the military’s role in politics.

Under these circumstances, the military establishment may no longer require a coup d’état to exert control in the country. Traditionally, weak coalition governments and “hybrid” political setups such as Mr. Khan’s PTI government, have provided more room for the Army to assert its control. In fact, many analysts have labelled the present political arrangement in Pakistan as a “quasi-military dictatorship.”

The military is using Mr. Khan and PTI as an example to warn other political parties against crossing the red line. Moreover, it is believed that the ‘Imran Khan project’ posed significant threats to unity within the military, as there have been reports of internal divisions within the Army over this issue.

Consequently, the crackdown on PTI supporters and the proposed utilisation of military courts are also being carried out to target alleged dissenters within the security establishment. Reportedly, the Pakistan Army is set to take serious actions against its own officers who did not show expected resistance against pro-Khan protestors. For example, the former Lahore Corps Commander, Lt. General Salman Fayyaz Ghani, is under investigation for allegedly allowing PTI supporters to enter his house and carry out acts of vandalism on May 9. Media reports claim that Lt. Gen. Ghani’s wife is closely related to the Chief Justice of Pakistan, Umar Ata Bandial. The PDM government has targeted Justice Bandial for allegedly favouring Mr. Khan, demanding his resignation for causing “anarchy” and a “crisis”. It is worth noting that Mr. Khan’s support within the country’s judiciary has caused tensions between the judiciary and the military establishment.

This brewing civil unrest will further exacerbate the troubles facing Pakistan, which is already grappling with a severe economic crisis and numerous security challenges. The May 9 protests have given the Army ample justification to end Mr. Khan’s political career and to fragment the PTI. With the military establishment emerging stronger and civilian institutions getting weaker, the people of Pakistan will bear the brunt, facing food shortages, power outages and limited fuel supplies alongside skyrocketing inflation. The prospect of political and economic stability in Pakistan remains a distant dream.

THE CLIMATE LAWSUIT AGAINST DELTA AIRLINES

The story so far:

Delta Air Lines in 2020 marketed itself as the “world’s first carbon-neutral airline”, investing \$1 billion on reducing fuel usage and carbon removal techniques. However, the veracity of these claims is now under scrutiny. On May 30, California-based Mayanna Berrin filed a lawsuit against Delta arguing that the airlines’ assertions were bogus, misleading and false.

What does the lawsuit say?

The lawsuit accuses Delta of misleading customers with its sustainability pledges. Delta’s in-flight napkins read — “Carbon neutral since March 2020. Travel confidently knowing that we will offset the carbon emitted on your Delta flight.”

Delta relied on “carbon offsetting”, shorthand for a slew of ways companies can reduce or remove carbon emissions from the environment. Activities like planting trees, shifting to cleaner fuel and funding carbon capture techniques in theory balance out a company’s carbon emissions. A single round trip from Mumbai to L.A. generates 4.8 tonnes of CO₂, but the claim is that the carbon pollution from this trip can be absorbed by trees or carbon vacuums that Delta had supported. All the customer has to do is pay extra to participate in “green flying”. Delta’s carbon offset portfolio consists of “half renewables, mostly wind and solar projects in India,” as per a Bloomberg investigation. According to Delta’s latest ESG report, it was responsible for roughly 43.2 million metric tonnes of CO₂ emissions in 2022 — almost seven times Botswana’s CO₂ emissions from fossil fuels and industry in 2021. The lawsuit against Delta is based on reports that have found glaring loopholes in the carbon offsetting process. Criticism includes, “inaccurate accounting” of projects where reductions would have occurred regardless of carbon market involvement; failure to immediately offset emissions; relying on impermanent solutions such as building projects (like



Green flight: A Delta Airlines jet comes in for landing in New York City, U.S. on January 11. REUTERS

Why was the ‘world’s first carbon-neutral airline’ slapped with a lawsuit? What do the terms carbon offsetting, greenwashing and additionality mean with respect to climate claims? How do airlines select carbon offsetting options? Why do claims of climate consciousness of airlines ring hollow?

forests) that may be destroyed by natural hazards. A 2022 Bloomberg investigation found the reductions from the Los Cocos II wind farm project in the Dominican Republic which Delta Air Lines paid for would have happened regardless of Delta's involvement. The airlines has however, denied all allegations.

Have such cases happened before?

A Dutch court in April this year heard a "greenwashing" case against the Netherlands-based airline KLM. Rights group Fossil Fuel alleged that KLM's advertisements suggest flying with the airline is not directly hazardous to the environment, which violates Europe's consumer laws by misleading customers about sustainability initiatives. "The only manner to fly sustainably is to not fly or to fly less... Anything that KLM says differently...misleads consumers", Fossil Fuel's lawyer said. Misleading carbon-neutral claims in flying aren't rare — Ryanair urged customers to fly "Europe's Lowest Fares, Lowest Emissions Airline" which was found to be misleading by a U.K. body in 2019. A 2021 Guardian investigation found that the carbon offset systems of most airlines are "flawed". A June 2022 Greenpeace report found that seven of the biggest European airlines — including KLM and Lufthansa — were committing "quite offensive" levels of greenwashing. Another study which examined 37 airlines' claims on carbon offsets found that 44% of these airlines mislead customers and profited from "green" assertions.

What are the reasons for the controversy?

The offset market has been criticised for appealing to climate consciousness without real effort or impact. One line of scrutiny is about the efficacy of offsets in general — growing evidence shows reforestation as a

climate adaptation programme is ineffective and misleading. They failed to sequester the carbon in the first place, or the gains made were quickly reversed or inflated, a 2019 ProPublica investigation of Brazil's rainforests showed.

Another concern hints at the moral problem of greenwashing, where big polluters continue to use fossil fuels and opt for a cheaper route to cutting emissions by way of offsets, all while middle- and low-income nations struggle with climate realities. Experts also argue it lulls people into thinking they are contributing to the environment. One 2015 working paper found that global CO2 emissions would have been 600 million tonnes lower if countries had cut pollution at the source instead of buying offsets.

Offset programs work only when they remove or reduce carbon emissions that wouldn't have been eliminated otherwise, what is called "additionality". Paying to conserve rainforests that no one was planning to cut, doesn't amount to offsetting carbon emissions. Proving additionality is a structural challenge, for it is hard to track the genuine progress of activities on the ground. A 2021 paper analysed the "world's largest carbon offset program", the Clean Development Mechanism, and found "at least 52% of approved carbon offsets were allocated to projects that would very likely have been built anyway", amounting to "a substantial misallocation of resources".

What comes next?

Airlines should focus on decarbonising commercial aviation, with the help of sustainable aviation fuel (SAF), hydrogen, and full-electric propulsion techniques. But these avenues are predicted to face obstacles as air traffic continues to grow and innovative decarbonising technologies are far in the distance.

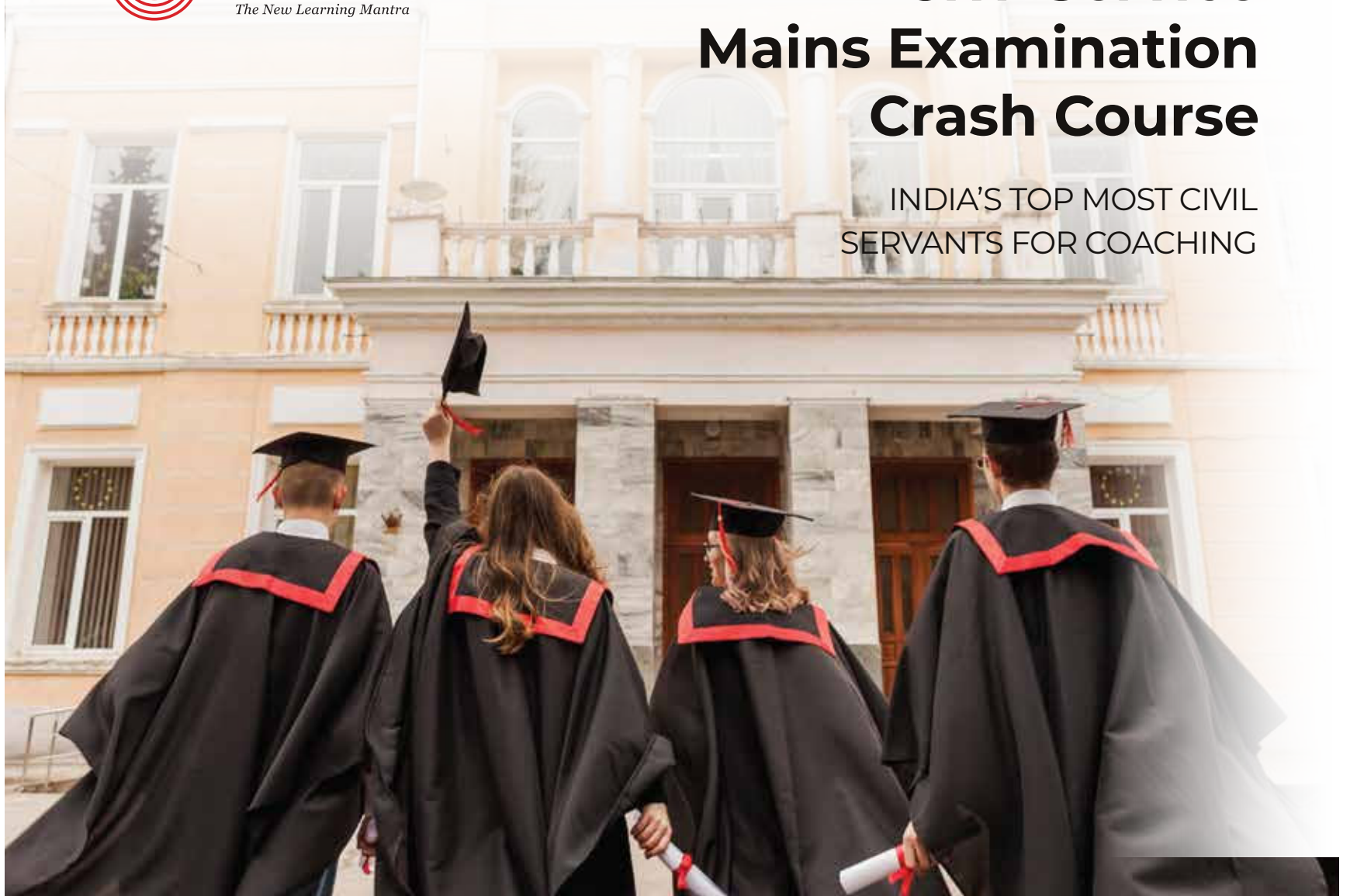
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