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SC BENCH SEEKS DATA ON ALTERNATIVES TO HANGING

If we have to relook death by hanging, we need better data... We want to know the impact of the sentence of death by hanging, the pain caused, the period of actual death and the availability of resources for hanging a person

D.Y. CHANDRACHUD
Chief Justice of India



See if there is a more 'humane' method of execution that would render the present practice unconstitutional, a Bench of Chief Justice D.Y. Chandrachud and Justice P.S. Narasimha asks govt.

The Supreme Court on Tuesday asked the Centre to provide data that may point to a more dignified, less painful and socially acceptable method of executing

prisoners other than death by hanging.

A Bench of Chief Justice D.Y. Chandrachud and Justice P.S. Narasimha even mooted the setting up of an expert committee to relook India's method of putting to death its criminals.

The Chief Justice said such a committee would have experts from the national law universities, professors of law, doctors and scientific persons.

The court indicated to the Centre, represented by Attorney General R. Venkataramani, that it needed some underlying data based on which it could examine if there was a more "humane" method of execution, which would render death by hanging unconstitutional.

"If we have to relook death by hanging, we need better data... We want to know the impact of the sentence of death by hanging, the pain caused, the period of actual death and the availability of resources for hanging a person," Chief Justice Chandrachud observed.

The Bench explained that it also needed to know what strides the fields of science and technology have made in suggesting "any other method of execution consistent with human dignity".

The court was hearing a petition filed by advocate Rishi Malhotra challenging the constitutionality of death by hanging as a mode of execution. Section 354 (5) of the Code of Criminal Procedure mandates that a person sentenced to death shall "be hanged by the neck till he is dead".

Mr. Malhotra said there is a need to evolve a "humane, quick and decent alternative". He termed hanging as "cruel and barbarous" compared to lethal injection, as used in the United States.

Justice Narasimha, however, noted that there was literature to suggest that "hanging is closest to painless".

IMF CLEARS \$3-BILLION BAILOUT FOR SRI LANKA

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) on Monday cleared a \$3-billion Extended Fund Facility (EFF) for Sri Lanka, potentially unlocking more loans for the debt-ridden island nation that is struggling to recover from last year's economic meltdown.

"The objectives of the EFF-supported programme are to restore macroeconomic stability and debt sustainability, safeguarding financial stability, and stepping up structural reforms to unlock Sri Lanka's growth potential," the IMF said.

Identifying corruption as a key issue, an IMF "governance diagnostic mission" has started assessing Sri Lanka's governance and anti-corruption framework in its first such exercise in Asia, IMF officials said on Tuesday.

The loan comes a year after Sri Lanka defaulted on its foreign debt.

Sri Lanka is "no longer a bankrupt country", President Ranil Wickremesinghe said in a televised address on Tuesday, adding that the IMF programme would "serve as an assurance to the international community that Sri Lanka has the capacity to service its debt".

The IMF package enables Sri Lanka "to access up to \$7 billion in funding from IMF & IFIs [International Financial Institutions]", he noted, while thanking Sri Lanka's partners.

India, Japan [as a member of the Paris Club group of creditors], and China — Sri Lanka's top three bilateral creditors — played a crucial role in unlocking the IMF assistance to the island, by providing financing assurances to the Fund.

In an open letter to bilateral creditors last week, Mr. Wickremesinghe promised that Sri Lanka would be transparent in the debt restructuring process.

Protesting hardships

Meanwhile, in anticipation of the Fund's assistance, Sri Lanka took a host of policy measures over the last year, including sharply increasing banking interest rates, floating the rupee, raising taxes, and increasing energy tariffs three-fold.



Big news: Wickremesinghe supporters celebrate, in Colombo, after the President announced the approval of the IMF loan. REUTERS

Reeling under high costs of living — and soaring electricity bills now adding to their burden — worker unions across sectors went on a strike recently, protesting economic hardships.

Asked about the IMF's engagement with the Sri Lankan government amid concern over the space for dissent, Peter Breuer, Senior Mission Chief for Sri Lanka, Asia and Pacific Department of the IMF, told a media conference on Tuesday that the IMF's ambit was "limited" to economic affairs, and the Fund did not have a mandate to interfere with how the government interacts with its citizens.

WE AIM TO INSPIRE YOU

AN OBJECTIVE LOOK AT A CHINA-LED FRAMEWORK

Don McLain Gill is a Philippines-based geopolitical analyst, author, and Director for South and Southeast Asia at the Philippine-Middle East Studies Association (PMESA)

In his keynote speech at the Lanting Forum in Beijing on February 21, Chinese Minister of Foreign Affairs Qin Gang highlighted the recently unveiled Global Security Initiative (GSI) Concept Paper. The GSI is presented as a China-led framework that seeks to restore stability and security, particularly in Asia. Accordingly, Mr. Qin outlined five major pillars to effectively implement the GSI, i.e., mutual respect; openness and inclusion; multilateralism; mutual benefit, and a holistic approach.

The substance of the narrative

While the promotion of such principles is timely and critical, given the current shifts in the international geopolitical landscape at the expense of the developing world, a practical assessment indicates that the GSI is tailored more to be an empty narrative to compete with United States leadership and dominant U.S.-led concepts. Consequently, with the war in Ukraine intensifying and diverging perceptions among developing countries vis-à-vis the West and the unfolding war, China is seeking to leverage these fault lines by promoting its vision as a capable alternative leader. However, an objective look at China's recent track record of external engagement paints a completely different picture of what to expect from Beijing's vision of a future security order.

The crux of the GSI's first principle centres on the need for countries to adhere to the United Nations Charter and international law while facilitating relations based on mutual trust and respect for each other's sensitivities. During these past few years, China has consistently demonstrated the exact opposite in terms of its relations with its neighbours. Along its southwestern border, China continues to ensure that its relations with New Delhi are provocative by not only unilaterally disregarding confidence building measures and bilateral agreements but also by constantly undermining India's territorial integrity and sovereignty. Similarly, China is also increasing its assertive manoeuvres in the South China Sea by greatly militarising the disputed maritime territory at the expense of the sovereignty and the sovereign rights of its Southeast Asian neighbours. Further, in its complete rejection of international law, particularly the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), China continues to assertively intrude and block the access of its neighbours within their respective Exclusive Economic Zones.

The second principle of the GSI lies in its openness to spearhead inclusive international engagements. While this position has been catalysed by the presence of U.S. treaty alliances in the Western Pacific, ironically, China also continues to engage in exclusionary policies in the East and South China Seas. Not only is this an outright rejection of freedom of navigation enshrined in international law but it is also a display of narrowly defined interests to consoli-

date its sphere of influence in the region.

On security cooperation

The third principle focuses on bilateral and multilateral security cooperation and consultations to address issues of concern with the parties involved. While China plays a prominent role in various multilateral institutions, its understanding of consultation can be seen through the prism of asymmetric power relations such as constraining members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations from pursuing collective actions against Beijing's assertion. Moreover, China continues to delay the establishment of a crucial Code of Conduct for the South China Sea as it continues to bolster its military power projection in the disputed territory and indulge in various grey zone strategies.

The fourth principle highlights the GSI's prioritisation of positive-sum cooperation, where parties involved can equally benefit. While in theory, China's Belt and Road Initiative is a much-needed cooperative framework given the significant infrastructure deficit in the developing world, it is its disregard for international macroeconomic stability by funding unsustainable projects for countries with low or non-existing credit ratings that creates more debt burdens for these countries. Moreover, as another illustration of Beijing's disregard for its neighbour's sovereignty and sovereign rights, China insisted on receiving a larger share in its bid for a joint exploration of resources with Manila in Philippine waters.

The 'holistic' line

The last principle of the GSI advocates a holistic approach towards traditional and non-traditional security threats, with an equal emphasis on eliminating any "breeding ground for insecurity". Throughout the years, the rise of China in a transitioning multipolar international system has resulted in power competitions with established and rising great powers (such as the U.S. and India, respectively) that seek to preserve and strengthen the established order. Rather than being holistic, China's engagements with these powers indicate a more narrowly defined goal for its power interests. In addition, China also continues to be a catalyst for insecurity in the non-traditional security realm, starting from its alleged lack of accountability regarding the COVID-19 pandemic to arming terror groups, such as in Myanmar.

Therefore, China's GSI is far from being a sustainable, equitable, and transparent solution to the growing insecurity that the world is facing, given an objective understanding of its track record in fulfilling its own principle requirements. Rather, the GSI indicates Beijing's attempt to counter U.S. leadership through narratives, regardless of whether it can effectively operationalise such initiatives on the ground.

XI HAILS 'GREAT NEIGHBOURING POWERS', VOWS TO STRENGTHEN TIES WITH RUSSIA



Intersecting paths: Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin attend a welcome ceremony at the Kremlin on Tuesday. REUTERS

Putin calls the talks 'meaningful and frank' and says Moscow, which has been largely cut out of European markets because of sanctions, would be able to meet China's 'growing demand' for energy; neither leader make any mention of Ukraine

Xi Jinping promised to strengthen coordination with Russia at a Kremlin summit with President Vladimir Putin on the Chinese leader's first visit to Moscow since the beginning of Russia's assault on Ukraine.

Both nations seek allies to counteract Western power and the two are expected to sign a raft of economic cooperation agreements.

Mr. Putin called the talks "meaningful and frank" and said Russia, which has been largely cut out of European markets because of sanctions, would be able to meet China's "growing demand" for energy.

"I propose strengthening our coordination and cooperation," Mr. Xi said between two rounds of talks in the Kremlin in footage shown on Russian state television.

Mr. Putin said he was "convinced that our multi-level mutually beneficial cooperation will strengthen further".

Neither leader made any mention of the conflict in Ukraine, although the Kremlin said they would discuss China's proposal to stop the fighting.

The Chinese leader's Moscow visit has been viewed as a boost for Mr. Putin, who is subject to an International Criminal Court warrant over accusations of unlawfully deporting Ukrainian children.

Mr. Xi earlier met with Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin and hailed Russia and China as "great neighbouring powers" on the second day of his visit to Russia. Beijing and Moscow's trade ties have boomed since Russia's Ukraine offensive, linking the nations more closely and raising worries in the West over how far the

ties will go.

On Monday, Mr. Xi and Mr. Putin held four-and-a-half hours of talks, calling each other "dear friend."

In a rare move, Mr. Putin escorted Mr. Xi to his car after the talks, and the two were seen smiling together.

During the meeting on Monday, the Russian leader said he was open to talks on Ukraine and praised Beijing's 12-point position paper on the conflict, which includes a call for dialogue and respect for all countries' territorial sovereignty.

CONFRONTING AN INTENSIFYING RIVALRY WITH THE U.S., XI IS TURNING TO OLD ALLIES

NEWS ANALYSIS

Arriving in Moscow on Monday on a visit laden with symbolism — the first of his third term as Chinese President — Xi Jinping hailed the China-Russia relationship as "a new model of major country relations".

"China and Russia are committed," Mr. Xi wrote in an article in the Russian Gazette published on the day of his arrival, "to no-alliance, no-confrontation and not targeting any third party in developing our ties. We firmly support each other in following a development path suited to our respective national realities and support each other's development and rejuvenation.

Mr. Xi's visit to Russia this week has underlined not just the growing closeness of a relationship described by both sides as having "no limits" and being "the closest in any period in history", but the emerging contours of what is likely to be the focus of the Xi foreign policy in his precedent-defying third five-year term.

If the last three years of Mr. Xi's second term hit the pause button on Chinese diplomacy largely due to the isolation fuelled by his "zero-COVID" regime, Beijing has now launched a new diplomatic push with the start of the new term, which has coincided with the reopening of China's borders.

'Severe challenges'

Confronting an intensifying rivalry with the U.S. — the abiding current focus for Mr. Xi, who in this month's annual National People's Congress, in a departure from the past, singled out the U.S. by name accusing it of "containing and suppressing" China leading to "severe challenges" — Mr. Xi is turning to old allies, from Russia and Pakistan to China's Central Asian neighbours.

Two key showpiece diplomatic events have been lined up for 2023 — a summit to be hosted by Mr. Xi with leaders of Central Asian countries, as well as the third Belt and Road Forum, which is likely to feature several leaders from South and Southeast Asia. Mr. Xi is doubling down on Chinese allies regardless of challenges in relations with them, from the Ukraine crisis for Russia to continuing political and economic instability in Pakistan.

One of the first foreign officials hosted in Beijing, days after the NPC, was Pakistan's Foreign Secretary Asad Majeed Khan. The new Chinese State Councillor and Foreign Minister Qin Gang told him "the iron-clad friendship between China and Pakistan has withstood the test of time and the changing international landscape" and pledged that Beijing would "strive for greater development of the building of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and bilateral cooperation across the board".

Mr. Qin, in his first press conference as Foreign Minister during the NPC, outlined the broad priorities for Mr. Xi's third term, saying Beijing "will take it as our mission to defend China's core interests and firmly oppose any form of hegemonism and power politics." "China has had a growing network of friends, made more and more new friends, and strengthened ties with old ones," he said. "We will offer more, better Chinese insight and solutions to help meet humanity's common challenges."

Global initiative

Against the backdrop of worsening China-U.S. relations, Mr. Xi is with increas-



ing frequency extolling what he calls "Chinese modernisation" as an alternative to Westernisation and liberal democracies.

Mr. Xi on March 15 unveiled what he called a "Global Civilisation Initiative" — the fourth such idea he has promoted, following the Belt and Road Initiative, the Global Development Initiative and the Global Security Initiative — which, he described when arriving in Moscow, as "part of China's response to the changes of the world".

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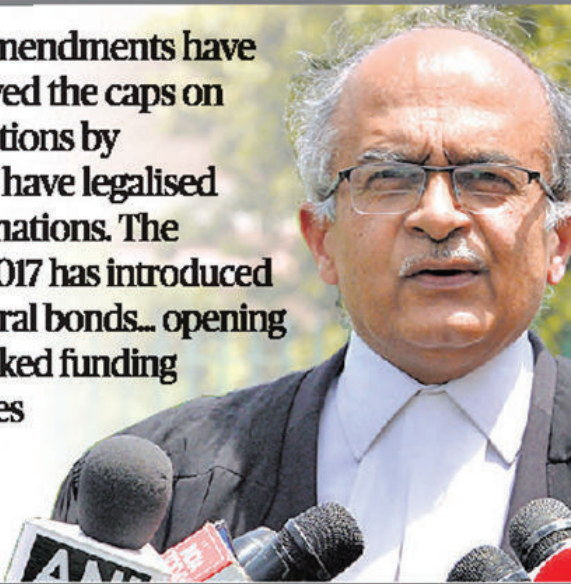
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SC TO EXAMINE IF POLL BOND PLEAS NEED TO BE REFERRED TO CONSTITUTION BENCH

The amendments have removed the caps on campaign donations by companies and have legalised anonymous donations. The Finance Act of 2017 has introduced the use of electoral bonds... opening doors to unchecked funding to political parties

PRASHANT BHUSHAN
Advocate



Bench led by CJI D.Y. Chandrachud fixes hearing on April 11 after the petitioners urge the court to take up the case before the Karnataka Assembly election, which is set to be held in May; the petitions have been in limbo for nearly eight years

The Supreme Court on Tuesday fixed April 11 to examine whether petitions challenging the validity of the electoral bonds scheme need to be referred to a Constitution Bench.

A Bench led by Chief Justice D.Y. Chandrachud was urged by senior advocate Dushyant Dave, advocates Prashant Bhushan, Shadan Farasat and Neha Rathi, all for the petitioners, to advance the next date from May 2 to April 11. Mr. Dave said the court should take up the case before the Karnataka Assembly election, which is scheduled to be held in May.

Mr. Farasat argued that the issue of election bonds raised cardinal and substantial questions of law affecting fair elections which are essential to democracy and need to be heard by a Bench of at least five Supreme Court judges.

The petitions, which have been in limbo for about eight years, allege that the scheme has opened the doors for anonymous donations to political parties days before polls are due.

Mr. Bhushan, appearing for petitioner NGO Association for Democratic Reforms, has argued that the amendments made through the Finance Acts of 2016 and 2017, both passed as Money Bills, have through the electoral bonds scheme, "opened the floodgates to unlimited political donations".

"The amendments have removed the caps on campaign donations by companies and have legalised anonymous donations. The Finance Act of 2017 has introduced the use of electoral bonds which are exempt from disclosure under the Representation of Peoples Act, 1951, opening doors to unchecked, unknown funding to political parties," Mr. Bhushan argued.

The Finance Act, 2016 has also amended the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA), 2010, to allow foreign companies with subsidiaries in India to fund political parties in India, effectively, exposing Indian politics and democracy to international lobbyists, the petitioners have contended.

Response received from the Department of Economic Affairs (DEA) on January 27 to a Right to Information (RTI) application filed by Commodore Lokesh Batra (ret'd) showed that electoral bonds were sold from March 2018 to December 2022 in 24 phases at a total cost of ₹10.23 crore to the taxpayer.

The expenses include ₹8.33 crore in bank commission and ₹1.90 crore in printing charges. While ₹6.74 lakh electoral bonds were printed, bonds worth ₹11,699.84 crore were sold, the RTI response showed.

This petition has sought the quashing of the November 7, 2022 notification issued by the Finance Ministry amending the electoral bonds scheme.

"An additional period of 15 days shall be specified by the Central government in the year of general elections to the Legislative Assembly of States and Union Territories with the legislature," the gazette notification said.

Earlier, a 30-day extra period for sale was allowed only in the Lok Sabha election year.

I-T DEMANDS ON BLACK MONEY ABROAD CROSS ₹15,000 CRORE

Demands for tax on undisclosed income overseas in first nine months of current fiscal slowed to ₹2,098 cr., from ₹7,055 cr. in FY21, ₹5,350 cr. in FY22, Finance Ministry reply to Rajya Sabha shows

The war against black money stashed abroad appears to have slowed down in the first nine months of FY23 compared with the previous two years, with just 59 assessment orders for tax demands totalling ₹2,098 crore being passed, Minister of State for Finance Pankaj Chaudhary's reply in Parliament shows.

In 2020-21, 120 such orders were passed under the Black Money (Undisclosed Foreign Income and Assets) and Imposition of Tax Act, 2015, raising demands for ₹7,055 crore. In FY22, 183 orders were issued for ₹5,350 crore tax.

Overall, assessments under this 2015 law have been completed in 408 cases, raising tax demands exceeding ₹15,664 crore. "As on December 31, 2022, 127 prosecutions have been launched under the" Act, Mr. Chaudhary informed.

Panama, Paradise leaks

In the Panama and Paradise Papers leaks cases, undisclosed income of more than ₹13,800 crore had been brought into the tax net by December 2022.

"More than 250 India-linked entities have been identified in Pandora Papers Leak," he added.

Taxing overseas stashes

Authorities have raised 408 tax demands for over ₹15,664 crore under the Black Money (Undisclosed Foreign Income and Assets) and Imposition of Tax Act, 2015



■ As on Dec. 31, 127 prosecutions had been initiated under the Act, says Mr. Chaudhary

■ More than ₹13,800 crore undisclosed income tied to Panama, Paradise Papers Leaks brought into tax net

■ More than 250 India-linked entities have been identified in Pandora Papers Leak

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INDIA TO BUCK GLOBAL SLOWDOWN, MAINTAIN EXPANSION: RBI OFFICIALS



Even as the global economy is set to slow down or even enter a recession in 2023 as financial markets worldwide face heightened uncertainty, the Indian economy is steadily gathering momentum, Reserve Bank of India (RBI) officials headed by deputy governor Michael D. Patra wrote in an RBI Bulletin article.

India had emerged from the pandemic years stronger than initially thought, they asserted.

“Unlike the global economy, India would not slow down — it would maintain the pace of expansion achieved in 2022-23,” the officials wrote, adding: “We remain optimistic... whatever the odds”.

The officials observed that the NSO’s end-February data indicated that the economy was intrinsically better positioned than many parts of the world to head into a challenging year ahead, mainly because of its demonstrated resilience and its reliance on domestic drivers.

However, they did flag price stability as a concern.

“Consumer price inflation remains high and core inflation continues to defy the distinct softening of input costs,” they observed.

Noting that the bank collapses in the U.S. in the first half of March were rippling through global financial markets, with the likely impact of the meltdown on economic activity appearing to be limited at present, they said markets were, however, bracing for tighter financial conditions.

“Fear is creeping back,” they wrote.

TROUBLE IN PUNJAB

The governments at the Centre and in the State must guard against separatism

The police action against violent separatists in Punjab is a case of better late than never. Religious fanaticism in the State has been raising its ugly head in recent years, and going out of control in recent months, with open calls for violence and threats to state functionaries including Union Ministers. On February 23, a mob overran a police station and freed suspects, which was a complete breakdown of law and order. The challenge appears to be daunting for the inexperienced Aam Aadmi Party government, and the situation needs more visible coordination and action by the Centre and the State. The violent campaign in the 1980s for a separate Khalistan, supported by Pakistan, had pulverised the State and claimed the lives of a sitting Prime Minister and thousands of innocents in a genocidal outrage targeting the Sikh community. That trauma should not be allowed to return and torment the community or India. Sikhs are a highly mobile and enterprising community, now spread around the world, but economic and social stagnation is taking its toll. Agriculture is facing a crisis, and drug abuse is rampant. Trouble-makers are smelling an opportunity to incite violence.

A wound that is allowed to fester will sicken the whole body. The looming trouble in Punjab is being inflamed by a mix of religious fanaticism, foreign-aided opportunism, and a societal crisis. The mobilisation of a section of the Sikh diaspora in the United Kingdom, Canada and Australia for the cause of separatism is also a worrying sign for India. The Centre has to work with Punjab and foreign governments to contain this malaise. Violent tendencies must be nipped in the bud and proponents of hate must pay a price. Also, there has to be a conscious effort to communicate with the Sikh community at large to isolate the toxic elements. To the world and to citizens, the message must be clear that India remains a multireligious and multicultural nation that does not tolerate or require separatism. A lack of trust between the farmers of Punjab and the Centre had derailed the agriculture laws that sought to reform the sector in 2021. A combination of strict force against violent elements and trust-building with the general public should be at the heart of the rhetoric and policy of the government. At any rate, no rhetoric from any quarter should be encouraged that causes more alienation.

DISCRIMINATION IN THE IITs IS SOMETHING TO WRITE ABOUT

Darshan Solanki, an undergraduate student of chemical engineering at the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Bombay, ended his life on February 12, 2023. He was a Dalit. The institute formed a 12-member committee to conduct an investigation, which submitted its report on March 2. The report said, “It appears from the marks obtained in various courses that the performance of Darshan Solanki deteriorated specifically in the second half of the autumn semester. His deteriorating academic performance could have affected him seriously.” The report further said: “Other than the statement of Darshan’s sister, there is no specific evidence of direct caste-based discrimination faced by him during his stay at IIT Bombay.”

A continuous process

Unlike the hard sciences, establishing causal links of discrimination is challenging. However, the lack of tools to establish causality does not negate the presence of discrimination. In thinking about marginalisation, the tendency is to sympathise with the most victimised. While that is understandable, it should not dilute the many forms of discrimination. What is needed is not sympathy or band-aid empathy for the most victimised but a constant engagement with the politics of assertion because discrimination is not necessarily a one-off, high-pitched melodramatic event of hurling abuses at somebody. It is a layered and continuous process that happens through everyday doses, steadily creating an atmosphere of “us” and “them”. It takes subtle, seemingly innocuous forms such as a smile combined with a frown, a wince, a hand gesture, or just silence. And, a discussion on discrimination at the IITs needs to be predicated on a discussion on merit as it is the embedded idea of merit that gives licence to discriminate.

The political philosopher, Michael Sandel, in the book, *The Tyranny of Merit*, presents a scathing critique of meritocracy as a societal ideal and argues

how hubris among the elites and a politics of humiliation are natural outcomes of meritocracy. This is not to suggest that every upper-caste student at the IITs discriminates or that every lower-caste student feels victimised. However, some upper-caste students at the IITs, knowingly or unknowingly, embody what Sandel calls “credentialist prejudice” as symptomatic of meritocratic arrogance. This happens, when elites tend to “look down on those who do not rise”. Such an approach “undermines social recognition and esteem for those who lack the credentials the system rewards”.

Variations of graded inequality and, consequently, discriminatory judgements about one’s so-called abilities are deeply entrenched within the veneer of merit at the IITs.

On campus

Soon after one enters IIT campuses, one steps into well-demarcated zones of hierarchy. The first level of hierarchy is whether you are an undergraduate or a postgraduate student. Intermingling of these two cohorts was an exception than the norm as undergraduates tended to feel superior to postgraduates. For undergraduates, one’s abilities are immediately tattooed in the minds of everyone based on one’s rank in the entrance exams. Much like the accident of birth, one’s branch of studies is an accident of one’s rank. This then becomes the unique identifier of this phantom called merit; then, slowly, the lines between being objective and objectifying get blurred.

The accident of the branch of studies results in disinterest and disillusionment among some students. But it plays out differently among students across caste. On average, for some upper-caste disinterested students, it becomes an opportunity to explore other facets, which then acts as a justification for bad academic performance in college. There is usually an implicit confidence among such students that they could be bailed out when needed, owing to their family

connections, affluence, cultural capital or social networks with 'successful' people. These act as cushions for them to take risks in college. Think of how and whom you would refer for a job in your company where you get a referral bonus. However, on average, even when some students on 'reservation' feel trapped in a branch not of their choice, they do not have the luxury to explore or take the same kind of risks as their upper-caste counterparts. More often, they lack similar connections, affluence or cultural capital as their upper-caste friends. An apprehension of being stigmatised for bad academic performance tends to amplify their anxiety and pressure. What these imply is that even the freedom to take chances is implicitly conditioned on one's rank and caste location. The buoyancy of youth is not equal for everyone. What merit completely fails to account for are the starting points, the trajectories, the social networks, the affluence, the prejudices, hardships and innumerable other factors that shape us. Contrary to what we were told, we realised that it was never a level-playing field. Metaphorically speaking, in a 100 metre race, people like us were running downhill, and many others from historically marginalised backgrounds were doing so uphill. In most cases, not only did our slopes differ but also that some of us were just running 50 m downhill while many others had to run 500 m uphill and the only metric to compare our abilities was the time taken to complete our races. This is what ranks or grades do. The argument of using rank or grades as a proxy for merit is like using a person's body temperature as a sole metric to assess health, ignoring one's age, gender or other pre-existing health conditions.

The principle of equal opportunity is only a corrective measure of historical injustice. It is not a sufficient principle to foster an equitable society devoid of discrimination. Sandel quoting British economic historian, R.H. Tawney, writes:

'social well-being depends upon cohesion and solidarity. Individual happiness does not only require that men should be free to rise to new positions of comfort and distinction; it also requires that they should be able to lead a life of dignity and culture, whether they rise or not.'

In perspective

We write this from the perspective of being alumni of two different branches from two IITs and societally identified with the privileged upper castes. This is neither a sentimental confession nor is this any grand theory of caste discrimination at the IITs. This is merely a reflection on what we saw and how we were occupants of the upper echelons by default and, on occasions, were either silent or ignorant about how discrimination operated on the pretext of merit. There is no denying that every student at the IITs has put in immense effort to get in but it has taken us a while to realise that calling it merit was erroneous. The tragic case of Darshan Solanki should serve as a reminder to lakhs of elite alumni from the IITs to pause and reflect on the blind spots of biases they may have had during their student days. Being key institutional collaborators, it is equally important for the faculty at the IITs to re-imagine classrooms as spaces free of meritocratic or discriminatory judgements. Building empathy and fostering a culture of equality, dignity, and fraternity cannot happen through short orientation programmes. These should be built-into the curriculum at the IITs and should become the DNA of campus life for learning spaces to be sanctuaries. These are not just moral imperatives but can play a huge role for a healthier and prosperous India.

Those in distress or having suicidal tendencies could seek help and counselling by calling helplines

HOUSE MATTERS

India cannot afford any shift in its balancing act on geopolitical issues

Since 2006, the Prime Ministers of India and Japan have exchanged visits for their "annual summit", a meeting that has steered the course of this bilateral relationship. However, it was not the India-Japan Special Strategic and Global Partnership that was at the heart of the Japan Prime Minister Fumio Kishida's mission during his quick "official visit" to Delhi this week. His focus was on two areas: coordinating the G-7 and G-20 agendas on food and energy security issues arising mainly from the Ukraine conflict as well as unveiling Japan's \$75 billion plan for a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP), to work with countries in the region on avoiding debt traps, building infrastructure, and enhancing maritime and air security. Mr. Kishida appeared to be emphasising the need for a global consensus, especially including India, in tackling the challenges from Russia and China, where Japan is aligned with western powers. In talks with Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Mr. Kishida is understood to have been "straightforward" about the need for India, as G-20 president, to come on board with the G-7's plans to address the Ukraine issue and call out "Russian aggression". While he did not name China directly, it is clear that Chinese actions in its neighbourhood have left Japan concerned, and his FOIP plan includes India as an "indispensable partner". The timing of his visit was also pointed, coinciding with Chinese President Xi Jinping's Moscow visit. And, as Mr. Xi met with Russian President Vladimir Putin in a show of strength on Tuesday, Mr. Kishida flew to Kiev to support

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, his first such visit since the war began.

For New Delhi, that has close ties with Tokyo, as bilateral and multilateral cooperation (the Quad), Mr. Kishida was a welcome guest. The two countries have many collaborations that include the Japanese loan for the much-delayed "Bullet train" project, and plans to work on infrastructure projects to link Bangladesh and India's northeast. As presidents of the G-7 and G-20, both nations have much to gain from synchronising priorities and ensuring that the Global South gets its fair share of the outcomes of both summits. An end to the Ukraine war and a pushback against China's aggression in its neighbourhood are also common goals. However, it would be wrong to assume that they share similar positions on them. Unlike India, Japan is part of the U.S.'s alliance. Japan has also joined sanctions against Russia, while India has refused to do so. India has been vocal about its concerns over China's actions at the Line of Actual Control (LAC) but reticent in directly criticising China's actions in the South China Sea, Taiwan Straits, etc. With Mr. Modi set to visit Hiroshima as a G-7 special invitee in May, and later host Mr. Xi and Mr. Putin at the Summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, any shift in New Delhi's tightrope balancing act on geopolitical issues would seem a stretch, even at the behest of a dear partner like Japan.

UNDERSTANDING WASTE-TO-ENERGY PLANTS



Cleaner cities: The waste collected from all over Kozhikode is heaped at Njeliyanparamba, where the waste to energy plant is proposed to be set up. K. Ragesh

What kind of waste do these plants use to generate electricity? Why is segregation of waste important? How is the Kozhikode municipality planning to implement the plant project? What are the various challenges such plants face?

EXPLAINER

The story so far:

The Kerala government recently announced the State's first waste-to-energy project in Kozhikode. The planned facility is expected to be built in two years and generate about 6 MW of power. There are around 100 waste-to-energy projects around the country but only a handful of them are operational, thanks to various production and operational challenges.

What do waste-to-energy projects do?

Waste-to-energy projects use non-recyclable dry waste to generate electricity. The process increases the State's power generation capacity and eases the solid waste management (SWM) burden.

Generally, solid waste in India is 55-60% biodegradable organic waste, which can be converted into organic compost or biogas; 25-30% non-biodegradable dry waste; and around 15% silt, stones, and drain waste. Of the non-biodegradable dry waste, only 2-3% — including

hard plastics, metals, and e-waste — is recyclable. The remainder consists of low-grade plastic, rags, and cloth that can't be recycled. This fraction of the non-recyclable dry waste is the most challenging portion of the present SWM system; the presence of these materials also reduces the efficiency of recycling other dry and wet waste.

It is this portion that waste-to-energy plants use to generate power. The waste is combusted to generate heat, which is converted into electricity.

What is the Kozhikode project?

Kozhikode has a population of about 6.3 lakh and generates approximately 300 tonnes per day (TPD) of waste. Of this, around 205 TPD is biodegradable and 95 TPD is non-biodegradable.

The municipality is currently using the biodegradable material to generate organic compost in various composting plants. Of the non-biodegradable waste, only about 5 TPD out of the 95 TPD is recycled; the remaining non-recyclable dry waste could be used to generate power at the waste-to-energy plant.

Why do waste-to-energy plants fail?

While waste-to-energy plants seem like a simple solution, they have several challenges en route to becoming feasible.

First is the low calorific value of solid waste in India due to improper segregation. The calorific value of mixed Indian waste is about 1,500 kcal/kg, which is not suitable for power generation. (Coal's calorific value is around 8,000 kcal/kg.) Biodegradable waste has high moisture content and cannot be used for power generation. The calorific value of segregated and dried non-recyclable dry waste is much higher, at 2,800-3,000 kcal/kg, sufficient to generate power. However, segregation (ideally at the source, if not at the processing plant) should be streamlined to ensure the waste coming to the facility has this calorific value.

Second is the high costs of energy production. The cost of generating power from waste is around ₹7-8/unit, while the cost at which the States' electricity boards buy power from coal, hydroelectric, and solar power plants is around ₹3-4/unit. While State electricity boards are considering purchasing power from newer renewable energy sources like waste-to-energy, the price of the power generated needs to halve.

Finally, many waste-to-energy projects have failed because of improper assessments, high expectations, improper characterisation studies, and other on-ground

conditions.

Waste-to-energy projects can consume only non-recyclable dry waste, which is about 25% of the waste; they are expected to only use segregated non-recyclable dry waste as well, which is the only type of waste with a sufficiently high calorific value. But often these projects are expected to manage all types of waste generated in the city which is not good.

How can the plant tackle challenges?

Kozhikode's projected population and waste generation rate could avail around 100 TPD of non-recyclable dry waste to generate power. The proposed plant could absorb another 40-50 tonnes of such waste from nearby urban local bodies (ULBs). But this quantity of material, around 150 TPD, will be available only when the people follow strict segregation practices and also process biodegradable waste. Typically, waste-to-energy projects consume 50 TPD of material to generate 1 MW of power. At this rate, the potential to generate power from Kozhikode's and other ULBs' waste is around 3 MW. A higher capacity than this, such as the planned 6 MW, will be risky because enough material may not be available.

Operating waste-to-energy projects also depends on parameters like the municipal collection efficiency, waste segregation, moisture content, and the operational efficiency of existing biodegradable-waste-processing plants. If these plants have operational woes (as is common), the nature of waste will change drastically to have high moisture content and low calorific value, which will compromise power generation. Setting up waste-to-energy projects is complex and needs the full support of the municipality, the State and the people. To overcome its various challenges, the municipality must ensure that only non-biodegradable dry waste is sent to the plant and separately manage the other kinds of waste.

Importantly, the municipality or the department responsible for SWM should be practical about the high cost of power generation, and include the State electricity department, perhaps as a tripartite agreement between the municipality, the plant operator, and the power distribution agency. It is also crucial to conduct field studies and learn from the experience of other projects.

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IS THE SARS-COV-2 XBB.1.16 LINEAGE A CAUSE FOR CONCERN?

Does this emerging lineage differ in clinical severity when compared to other Omicron lineages?

The story so far:

Over the past three years and multiple waves of infection, the SARS-CoV-2 virus continues to evolve by accumulating genetic variations.

What are recombinants?

Co-infection of multiple lineages of a virus could result in recombinations between genomes which can give rise to chimeric genomes, otherwise called recombinants. While most recombinations may not give rise to viable viruses, there is a rare possibility that recombination could result in the creation of a new lineage of the virus with better functional capabilities than either of the parent lineages.

Several recombinant lineages of SARS-CoV-2 have emerged during the course of the COVID-19 pandemic. Two such recombinant lineages are currently designated as Variants Under Monitoring (VUM) by the World Health Organization — XBB, a recombinant of Omicron sublineages BA.2.10.1 and BA.2.75, and XBF, a recombinant of BA.5.2.3 and BA.2.75.3 Omicron sublineages. The lineage XBB.1.5, a sublineage of the XBB, first identified in New York City in October 2022, is currently designated as a Variant of Interest (VOI) by the WHO.

What is the XBB.1.16 lineage?

First detected in SARS-CoV-2 sequences from India, the XBB.1.16 is a recombinant lineage of the virus and is a descendent of the XBB lineage. The lineage has been circulating predominantly in India. A significantly large number of the genomes from outside India, such as in the U.S. and Singapore, have been linked with international travel, mostly from India. The variant has to date been detected in at least 14 countries across the world. The lineage XBB.1.16 has a number of mutations in common with the VOI XBB.1.5. Additional key mutations including E180V and T478R in the Spike protein and I5T in ORF9b are present in the XBB.1.16 lineage. In contrast, the XBB.1.5 has the mutation T478K in Spike.

T478R is associated with immune escape, or the ability of the virus to evade antibodies generated from previous infections or vaccines. The ORF9b I5T mutation is also found in the lineage XBB.1.9 and has been widely believed to lend a growth advantage to the virus. Preliminary data also suggest that XBB.1.16 has a higher growth advantage over currently circulating SARS-CoV-2 lineages, including the XBB.1.5 lineage.

Why is XBB.1.16 a cause for concern?

Amid the ongoing increase in the number of seasonal influenza H3N2 cases, an uptick in COVID-19 cases is also being seen in India in the month of March, despite the low number of testing. The total number of active COVID-19 cases across the country has increased to over 6,000. The fast-spreading XBB.1.16 lineage is believed to be responsible for the recent spike in COVID-19 cases in India. Although data from systematic genomic surveillance in India is limited, XBB.1.16 today accounts for more than 30% of all the sequenced genomes in the month of March 2023, and its proportion has been seen to be increasing in the past few weeks. The States of Telangana, Karnataka, Gujarat and Maharashtra have reported the highest number of XBB.1.16 cases. However, this could be biased as not all States proactively sequence their samples. Based on preliminary data, there is no evidence to suggest that infections with the XBB.1.16 lineage differ in clinical severity from those caused by other Omicron lineages although the higher growth advantage and immune escape could lead to a higher risk of reinfection with XBB.1.16 compared to other circulating Omicron lineages. Protecting the vulnerable through time-tested means could therefore significantly blunt the rise in infections.

The authors are researchers at the CSIR Institute of Genomics and Integrative Biology in Delhi.



*I didn't fail the test,
I just found Hundred ways to do it wrong.*

- BENJAMIN FRANKLIN

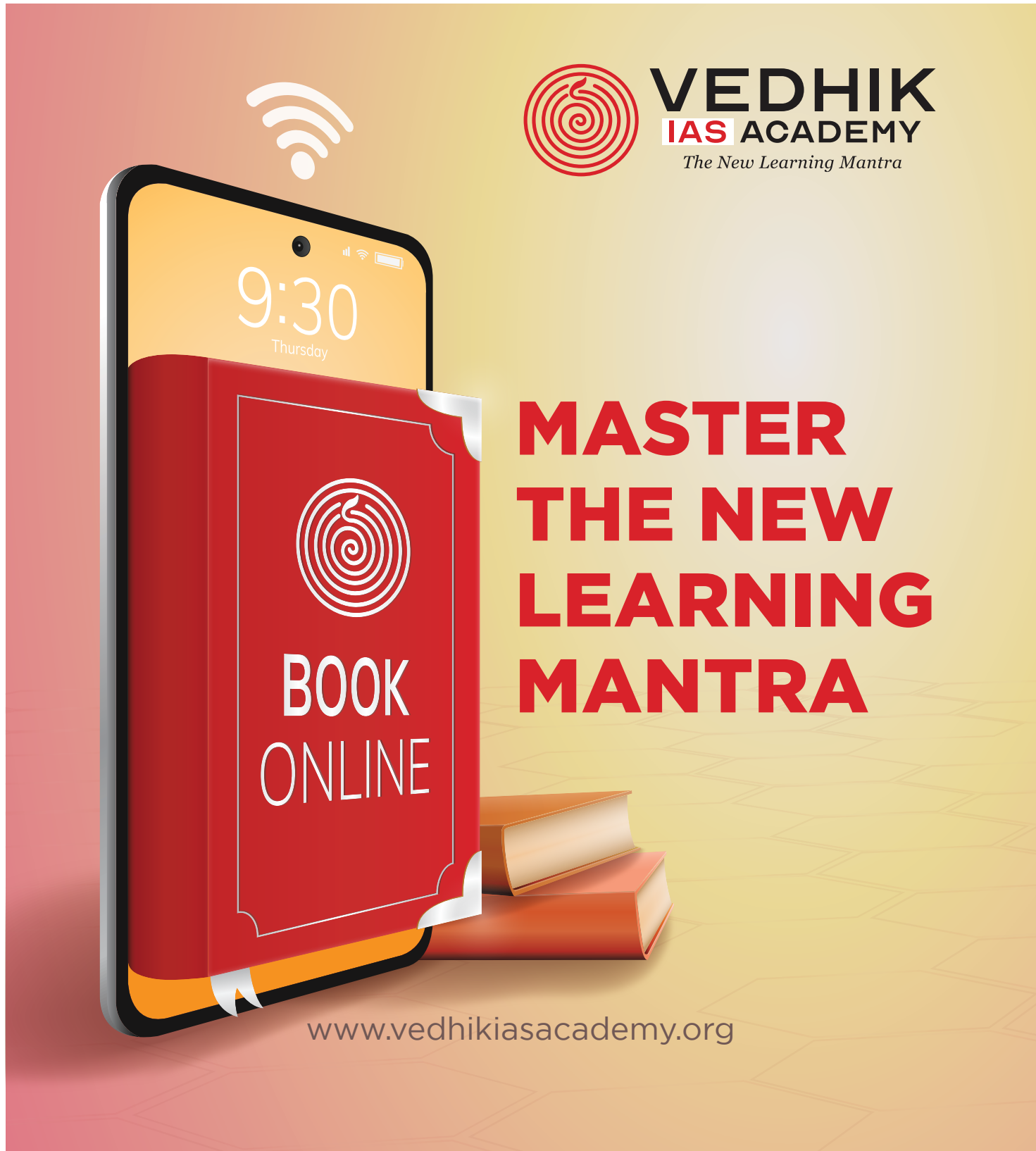
PANEL TO MOOT WAYS TO LURE INDIAN START-UPS BACK HOME

In a bid to woo Indian startups that are domiciled abroad to relocate to the GIFT City in Gujarat, the International Financial Services Centres Authority (IFSCA) on Tuesday constituted an expert committee headed by former Reserve Bank of India executive director G Padmanabhan to identify their concerns.

"Many Indian startups are domiciled outside India — despite having the majority of their market, personnel and founders in India. These 'externalized' or 'flipped' startups constitute a large number of India's unicorns," the IFSCA said. India, it said, has the world's third-largest startup ecosystem with 115 unicorns (firms with billion-dollar valuations). It is further estimated that Indian startups raised \$44 billion in 2021.

Finding solutions

"In order to better understand the nuances from regulatory, tax, legal and other perspectives and identify measures required to make India the preferred location, IFSCA has constituted an expert committee to formulate a roadmap to onshore the Indian innovation to GIFT IFSC," the authority said in a statement on Tuesday. The committee, which is expected to submit its recommendations within three months, includes representatives from leading venture capital funds, startups, fintechs, law firms, and tax firms as well as other domain experts. Apart from measures to encourage Indian fintechs and startups domiciled abroad to relocate to GIFT IFSC, the panel would also identify challenges and recommend measures for the development of International Innovation Hub at GIFT IFSC.



The advertisement features a smartphone with a red book cover on its screen. The book cover has the Vedhik logo and the text "BOOK ONLINE". The phone's screen also shows the time "9:30" and the day "Thursday". A Wi-Fi signal icon is visible above the phone. To the right of the phone, the text "MASTER THE NEW LEARNING MANTRA" is written in large, bold, red letters. Below this text, there are two stacked books. The Vedhik logo is also present in the top right corner of the advertisement.

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