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POLITY AND GOVERNANCE

Fifth phase today; shed 'urban apathy', says EC

CONTEXT: On the eve of the fifth phase of the Lok Sabha election, the Election Commission (EC) on Sunday said it was geared for the polls in 49 seats across eight States and Union Territories, many of them in urban areas such as Mumbai, Lucknow, Hooghly, Howrah and Thane.



Voting in 35 Assembly constituencies in Odisha will be held simultaneously in this phase. Polling will be held in politically important constituencies for the Congress in Uttar Pradesh such as Rae Bareilly and Amethi.

Keeping in mind the low turnout in the previous phases, the EC urged the voters to come out in greater numbers and vote with responsibility and pride. "Until now, the Lok Sabha election 2024 has seen the voter turnout at polling stations of about 66.95%. Around 451 million people have already voted during the first four phases," the statement said.

Elections will be held in Bihar, Jammu and Kashmir, Ladakh, Jharkhand, Maharashtra, Odisha, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal. Cities such as Mumbai, Thane and Lucknow are also going to the polls in this phase, and the EC said these cities had in the past suffered from "urban apathy" in voting. "The commission specially calls upon these city dwellers to erase the stigma by turning out in higher numbers," the statement said.

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Search on for Iran President after helicopter 'accident'

CONTEXT: A helicopter carrying Iran's President Ebrahim Raisi was involved in "an accident" amid poor weather conditions on Sunday, state media reported, with a search under way and no news yet on his condition.



Rescue teams were headed to the area to locate him and other officials, state media in the Islamic republic reported, adding that Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian may also have been aboard the aircraft. "The harsh weather conditions and heavy fog have made it difficult for the rescue teams to reach the accident site," state TV said. In a speech carried on state TV, Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei urged Iranians to "not worry" for the country. "The Iranian people should not worry, there will be no disruption in the country's work," Mr. Khamenei said.

The accident happened in the mountainous forest area of Dizmar near the town of Varzaghan, according to the official IRNA news agency. Mr. Raisi, 63, was visiting the province on Sunday where he inaugurated a dam project together with his Azeri counterpart, Ilham Aliyev, on the border between the two countries. His convoy included three helicopters, and the other two had "reached their destination safely. Later, Interior Minister Ahmad Vahidi said one of the helicopters "made a hard landing due to bad weather conditions". He added that it was "difficult to establish communication" with the aircraft.



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INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Talking peace

CONTEXT: Two years after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Switzerland has stepped in to organise a peace conference, making a special effort to broaden global consensus on the war by enlisting those who have not joined the western coalition thus far.

As a close partner of Russia, a member of the BRICS and SCO groupings, a leader in the Global South, and an aspirant to world leadership, India is, no doubt, at the top of the list. And the Swiss Foreign Secretary Alexandre Fasel's visit to Delhi this week, following closely those of two Swiss Ministers, and the Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba over the past few months, is evidence that the invitation to India at the head of state/head of government level is a priority. Of the 160 or so countries that invitations for the conference have gone to — it is to be held in the resort town of Bürgenstock on June 15-16 — about 50 have confirmed their attendance, mostly from the European Union, NATO alliance, G-7 countries and U.S. allies such as Japan, South Korea and Australia. Russia has not been invited, and Mr. Fasel made it clear that their diplomacy was hoping to bring over 'BICS' leaders (BRICS minus Russia) so they could convey the outcomes to Moscow, with a view to inviting Russia to a future round of talks. With Brazilian President Lula indicating that he would not attend, and South Africa's citing its general elections on May 29 to formally decline the invitation, all eyes are on whether Chinese President Xi Jinping, and Prime Minister Narendra Modi, if he is re-elected, or official nominees would attend.

Convincing the rest of the world to attend a platform that appears stilted towards Ukraine remains a tall order for the organisers. While Switzerland prides itself on its "neutrality", it has already chosen sides in the current conflict by imposing sanctions on Russia. Another venue may have appeared more impartial. The agenda for the conference is to build a framework for or road map to peace, and to discuss issues such as ensuring food security and freedom of navigation, nuclear safety and humanitarian issues. It seems unlikely that much headway can be made on any of these issues without both parties to the conflict at the table. It is also hard to foresee what else can be achieved as long as Russia and Ukraine believe they can make or consolidate more gains on the battlefield — a real negotiation begins when either one or both sides believe they have exhausted military options.

If the aim of the conference then is, as Russian President Vladimir Putin says, to "pressure" Russia into announcing a ceasefire or ceding territory it has won, then it is hardly likely to succeed, given the UN General Assembly's failure to bring such pressure through multiple resolutions. New Delhi, that has thus far refused to join any statement that is overtly critical of Russia, and has not diluted ties with Moscow, may thus find it easier to hedge its bets, and only show its hand once a truly balanced and more inclusive peace effort gets under way.

POLITY AND GOVERNANCE

A minor girl victim support scheme that loses its way

CONTEXT: On November 30, 2023, the Ministry of Women and Child Development notified the "Scheme for Care and Support to Victims under Section 4 & 6 of the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, 2012". The objective is to provide integrated support and assistance to minor pregnant girl child victims "under one roof" and facilitate immediate emergency and non-emergency access to services for long-term rehabilitation.

Oversights and inconsistencies

While it was for only abandoned or orphaned pregnant girls, initially, the scheme has now been expanded to include all pregnant girl victims under the mentioned sections of the POCSO Act. Therein lies the rub: besides some cosmetic inclusions, the scheme has not been redrafted to reflect the new inclusiveness, and many of the commiserate changes warranted have been left out.

The misleading nomenclature, either by oversight or deliberate, results in confusion (a constant feature that runs through the scheme), on two counts. It is important to note that victims under Sections 4 and 6 of the POCSO Act could be of any gender. Second, when the scheme is precisely for all pregnant girls/victims under 18 years, is it to obfuscate while acknowledging tacitly in its introduction that a disproportionate number of these girls are between 13-18 years and "In many of these cases, girls become pregnant", the empirically established fact that adolescent sexuality is a stage of human development in which adolescents experience and explore sexual feelings, which would then put the onus on government to be proactive and provide sexual and reproductive health (SRH) information and services to youth rather than being reactive? The law has not, certainly, as indicated by sociological, medical and judicial data, proven to be very effective, largely because many of these cases involving pregnant girls arise out of marriage and non-exploitative, explorative sexual activity among young people. But this is in no way obscures the fact that there are cases of pregnancy because of sexual violence and exploitation, which also highlights the need for the government to step up its efforts in promoting and setting up safeguarding systems for children and adolescents, promoting SRH information and ensuring abuse prevention education for the entire community.

While ostensibly seeking to serve "every minor pregnant girl child victim", the only definite categories are now those who continue, by choice or default, with their pregnancies and those who were not permitted by the court to undergo a medical termination of pregnancy (MTP). The scheme remains silent on whether the benefits will continue to be provided if the victim of a reported case opts for an MTP or has a miscarriage.

So also with a girl who may have attained 18 years subsequent to the case being reported and the pregnancy confirmed, or if her personal circumstances change in the course of time which may be up to 23 years of age and till when benefits of Mission Vatsalya ("a road map to achieve development and child protection priorities aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals") can be accorded. It would be disappointing if this scheme meant for a very vulnerable group discriminates and actually leaves them short-changed.

The scheme is fraught with glaring oversights and inconsistencies with prevailing legislations, rules, orders and

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—Benjamin Franklin

guidelines.

For instance, it is wrongly stated that Section 27, POCSO Act, 2012, which actually refers to the medical examination of a child, is to be taken into account to decide on the placement of the minor pregnant girl in institutional care/non-institutional care. It also erroneously implies that the Child Welfare Committee (CWC) can consent for the sexual assault medical examination of any child below 12 years of age, whether or not her parents/guardian are present.

Further, it is mentioned that in case of an MTP, the district magistrate, on advice of the district chief medical officer, shall order for an MTP to a government facility or registered medical practitioner. When every minute matters in these situations, this delaying stipulation is redundant and superfluous, and is not in consonance with the MTP Act.

It is also puzzling that the reference to MTP is reduced to two sentences that have been inserted at random in the 21-page document. Surely, keeping in mind the circumstances within which the pregnancy has occurred, conversations on the choices of discontinuing it or not must be facilitated at the outset.

Contrary to the rules

Victims under the POCSO Act, including those who are pregnant, do not automatically qualify as Children in Need of Care and Protection (CNCP). Benefits can be extended to them without categorising them as CNCP if the family or guardian is able to provide necessary care and protection. However, as indicated in the scheme, to avail its benefits, all pregnant girls will need to be considered as CNCP. This is contrary to Rule 4(4), POCSO Rules and Section 2(14), Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015 (JJ Act) and will entail in their unnecessary production before the CWC and the observance of all other attendant procedures under these legislations.

The scheme needs to unequivocally clarify whether all the entitlements for the girls who opt for institutional care listed in the “Process Flow of the Scheme”, also apply to those in non-institutional care, i.e., for girls who prefer to live with their family.

If the young mother chooses to surrender the baby, “the newborn may be placed in the designated SAA till the girl child victim attains the age of 18 years. Thereafter, she will be informed of the process of surrender as per Section 35 of the JJ Act”. This is contrary to the Adoption Regulations overseen by the Central Adoption Resource Authority (CARA) which does not have any age thresholds for a mother to surrender the infant. The scheme now condemns the infant to an unnecessarily long period of institutionalisation (perhaps for a few years, as, in some cases, the mother may be a young teenager).

Monetary implications

Finally, given the ignominiously high position India occupies in the ranking of child marriages and teenage pregnancies, the burden on the exchequer, proposed by the scheme, is going to be multifold. To avail the scheme, each child who fulfils the new criteria — every reported case booked under the POCSO Act, 2012 of a pregnant girl under 18 years — would be given an initial payment of ₹6,000 and a monthly payment of ₹4,000 as stipulated in Mission Vatsalya up to the age of 21 years with possible extension of up to 23 years. With the prevailing mandatory reporting provision in the POCSO Act, 2012, pointing to an exponential increase of cases being reported by health authorities at the time of delivery or pregnancy-related hospital visits, a thorough analysis of health data

and police data needs to be undertaken to plan, budget and provide for the scheme.

As gleaned from an RTI reply, 1,448 girls below 18 gave birth from January 2021 and October 2023 in a southern district. Even as a sample hypothetical working, if the average age of these young mothers at the time of delivery was 16 years, and taking into account that Mission Vatsalya allows support until the age of 23 years, the direct financial outlay for each mother as per the scheme would be ₹6,000 (a one-time payment)+₹4,000X84 months = ₹3,42,000. For 1,448 girls and their babies, it would work out to ₹49,52,16,000.

To avoid the roiling confusion that is bound to happen if the scheme is implemented in its present form — it is a hotchpotch now — it is imperative for the Ministry of Women and Child Development to rectify it, bearing in mind the provisions of the various prevailing legislations, rules, guidelines and protocols with which it will integrate and intersect. Data which can substantiate many of the aspects put forth will further give it the backing of solid evidence.

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Renew the generalised system of preferences

CONTEXT: In the pantheon of obscure international trade terminology, the “generalised system of preferences,” or GSP, has a special place. GSP refers to an approach that has been adopted by nearly all developed countries for roughly the last half-century to offer incentives for economic reform in developing countries through lower tariffs.

Each developed country has customised its own GSP programme to identify qualification criteria it deems important in economic reform, although all ensure that their programmes are constructed to avoid harm to domestic production. In short, it is the oldest and most far-reaching approach to “aid for trade” in the modern multilateral trading system, embodied in the World Trade Organization.

Renewing GSP

What is unique about the GSP programme in the U.S. is that its authorising legislation periodically expires until Congress sees fit to renew the programme. New legislation is never an easy proposition, especially in a polarised environment, making bipartisan legislation a herculean endeavour. That is the case with GSP now. The U.S. programme expired in 2020 and despite repeated assurances of bipartisan support, it remains in limbo.

GSP can play a vital role in establishing stable market access for developing countries that otherwise struggle to tap into global trade flows. It can be especially valuable for small businesses and women-owned enterprises, thus helping to empower them beyond limited domestic markets. More recent analysis suggests that GSP is vital in offering alternatives to Chinese imports and providing an advantage to suppliers in trusted developing country markets. GSP criteria promote reforms on labour and environmental sustainability and intellectual property rights protection. GSP imports also help reduce the tariff bills paid by American companies, many of which are small- and medium-sized enterprises.

The coalitions of support in the U.S. are diverse. Last November, a bipartisan group of Florida members of the House

penned a letter expressing their strong support for GSP renewal on an urgent basis, highlighting its importance in sourcing away from China and lowering the tariff bill for Florida's consumers and manufacturers. In an era of friendshoring and nearshoring, GSP can be an effective tool in pursuing new supply chain objectives. Surprisingly, there is even strong bipartisan support for restarting GSP talks with India.

U.S.-India trade relationship

While there should be no need to offer additional arguments in favour of renewing GSP without further delay, the U.S.-India trade relationship may help to put support over the top. It is accepted wisdom that GSP renewal would offer an avenue for wide-ranging U.S.-India trade negotiations that can help in vaulting the bilateral trade relationship from the \$200 billion it is presently at to a much higher level. It is clear there needs to be higher ambition on trade in order to take the U.S.-India strategic relationship even further.

Before the expiration of the GSP programme in 2020, negotiations between the Office of the U.S. Trade Representative and the Indian Ministry of Commerce and Industry had come close to sealing a wide-ranging deal. Estimates at the time suggested that an unprecedented bilateral trade agreement between the U.S. and India might cover as much as \$10 billion in trade, including medical devices, several agricultural commodities, corn-based ethanol used for fuel, and information technology products.

The U.S. and India have already come a long distance in their trade relationship. Yet the tools they have available to achieve this increase in trade are limited. Even though India has gone into overdrive in negotiating free trade agreements (FTAs) with a wider circle of trading partners, including the European Union, the U.K., the European Free Trade Association, Australia, and the UAE, the Biden administration is clear that the U.S. will not negotiate FTAs with any country for the moment. There are several trade dialogues between the two, but these lack the leverage for a hard-nosed trade negotiation that can shoot for ambitious results. The private sectors in both countries are teaming up to increase investments in high-profile sectors across critical and emerging technologies from smartphone manufacturing to semiconductor production, but they lack the stability in regulatory certainty and ease of doing business that a strong, enforceable trade agreement can bring.

This is where GSP should come into the picture. Each side would have much to gain through negotiations on India's GSP benefits when the U.S. Congress acts to renew the programme. Short of a change in U.S. administration policy on negotiating FTAs again, no other trade tool or policy could be more effective with India than GSP. Depending on what qualification criteria the Congress includes in the final renewal legislation, a GSP negotiation could cover trade in goods and services, protections for internationally accepted labour rights and restrictions on child labour, enforcement of environmental laws, and provisions on good regulatory practice and other areas relevant to ease of doing business.

As the U.S.-India strategic partnership continues to grow and the two countries play critical, collaborative roles in the Indo-Pacific, they should aim much higher in their trade relationship. GSP is not the full answer to comprehensively achieving this, but it would be a strong statement of their mutual desire to be on this path.

POLITY AND GOVERNANCE

Why was Purkayastha's arrest invalidated?

CONTEXT: On May 15, the Supreme Court ordered the release of the online portal NewsClick's founder Prabir Purkayastha from custody after concluding that his arrest and remand under the draconian Unlawful Activities Prevention Act, 1967 (UAPA) by the Delhi Police were "invalid in the eyes of law".



A Bench of Justices B.R. Gavai and Sandeep Mehta pointed out that neither Mr. Purkayastha nor his designated counsel were provided the grounds for his arrest in writing, which is "sacrosanct and cannot be breached under any situation". The ruling emphasises the need for law enforcement agencies to adhere to proper procedure and due process, especially in stringent UAPA cases where there is a reverse burden of proof on the accused. This makes obtaining bail extremely difficult in such cases.

Why was the arrest 'illegal'?

As per the arrest memo, Mr. Purkayastha was arrested on October 3, 2023, at 5.45 p.m. by invoking stringent UAPA provisions on the ground that he had allegedly received funds through Chinese firms to spread pro-China propaganda. Earlier on August 17, 2023, an FIR was lodged by the Delhi Police envisaging serious offences under Sections 13 (unlawful activities), 16 (terrorist act), 17 (raising funds for terrorist acts), 18 (conspiracy), and 22(C) (offences by companies, trusts) of the UAPA, and Sections 153A (promoting enmity between different groups) and 120B (criminal conspiracy) of the Indian Penal Code, 1860 (IPC).

During the proceedings, senior advocate Kapil Sibal, appearing on behalf of Mr. Purkayastha, contended that the FIR was neither made available in the public domain nor was a copy supplied to him until his arrest and remand, in violation of the fundamental right guaranteed under Article 22(1) of the Constitution. Further, the Court was apprised that on the morning of October 4, 2023, Mr. Purkayastha was produced before the remand judge at his residence without intimating his designated lawyer Mr. Arshdeep Khurana. He was instead represented by a legal aid lawyer whom he had never engaged before.

Mr. Purkayastha's lawyer was finally informed about the remand proceedings at 7.07 a.m. through a WhatsApp message — after

the remand order granting seven days of police custody had already been passed. However, two sentences were subsequently inserted in the remand order to give the impression that the lawyer had been heard before the passing of the order. This, Mr. Sibal argued, violated the Supreme Court's verdict in *Pankaj Bansal versus Union of India and Others (2023)* wherein it was held that to give effect to constitutional safeguards, "it would be necessary, henceforth, that a copy of such written grounds of arrest is furnished to the arrested person as a matter of course and without exception."

On the other hand, Additional Solicitor-General S.V. Raju, appearing for the Delhi Police, pointed out that the ratio of *Pankaj Bansal* applied only to money laundering cases under the Prevention of Money Laundering Act, 2002, (PMLA), and not those under the UAPA. The law officer argued that the UAPA required the police to only "inform" the accused of the reasons for arrest, without needing to provide them in writing to him.

What does Article 22 stipulate?

Mr. Purkayastha's case is based on the constitutional safeguard provided under Article 22(1) of the Constitution, which dictates that no person who is arrested can be detained in custody without being promptly informed of the grounds for their arrest. It further stipulates that an arrested person cannot be denied "the right to consult, and to be defended by, a legal practitioner of his choice."

Notably, both the PMLA as well as the UAPA contain similar provisions, which mandate the intimation of the grounds of arrest to an accused. Under Section 19 of the PMLA, the Enforcement Directorate (ED) officer should not only have material with him giving him "reasons to believe" that a person is guilty of an offence under the law but such reasons should also be "recorded in writing before effecting arrest of any person." Further, these written grounds of arrest must be communicated to the accused for a valid arrest to take place. This, according to the Supreme Court's verdict in *Pankaj Bansal*, affords an opportunity to the arrested person to prove before a trial Court that there are grounds to believe that he/she is not guilty of such offence, to avail the relief of bail. Similarly, Sections 43A and 43B of the UAPA mandate the furnishing of the grounds of arrest to an accused at the earliest.

Mr. Sibal had pointed out that the language of both the statutory provisions is *pari materia* (upon the same subject matter) and thus the law laid down in *Pankaj Bansal* squarely covers Mr. Purkayastha's case.

What was the Delhi High Court's verdict?

In a verdict delivered on October 13, 2023, Justice Tushar Rao Gedela of the Delhi High Court agreed with the Delhi police that the ratio of *Pankaj Bansal* would not apply to the facts of Mr. Purkayastha's case. He underscored that the verdict in *Pankaj Bansal* was delivered purely in relation to PMLA provisions and that it cannot "by any stretch of imagination, be made applicable, *mutatis mutandis*, to the cases arising under UAPA."

Justice Gedela also noted that the offences alleged in the NewsClick case directly impact "the stability, integrity, and sovereignty of the country" and bear significant national security implications. He further reproduced Solicitor General Tushar Mehta's submission that the email exchanges between Mr. Purkayastha and other entities indicated an attempt to portray Jammu and Kashmir and Arunachal Pradesh as "disputed territories."

However, the Court added that considering the stringent provisions of the UAPA, it would be advisable that the investigating agencies, henceforth, provide grounds of arrest in writing, after redacting what in their opinion would constitute "sensitive material."

What about the Supreme Court?

The top Court ruled that there is "no significant difference" in the language employed in Section 19(1) of the PMLA and Section 43B(1) of the UAPA which can support the Delhi Police's contention that the law laid down in *Pankaj Bansal* should not be applied to an accused arrested under the UAPA.

"...The requirement to communicate the grounds of arrest is the same in both the statutes. As a matter of fact, both the provisions find their source in the constitutional safeguard provided under Article 22(1) of the Constitution of India," it reasoned. Thus the judges emphasised that the "salutary and sacrosanct" requirement of informing the arrested person of the grounds of arrest in writing will henceforth apply to all UAPA cases as well. It will not suffice to convey them orally only. This, according to the Court, is the "only effective means" for the arrested person to consult his lawyer, oppose the police custody remand and seek bail.

It further asserted that the mere fact that a charge sheet has been filed "would not validate the illegality and the unconstitutionality committed at the time of arresting the accused and the grant of initial police custody remand to the accused." The Bench also differentiated between the meaning of the terms 'reasons of arrest' and 'grounds of arrest'. While the former relates to general parameters based on which a person had to be arrested, the latter requires the police to list out specific facts necessitating the arrest of the individual concerned, so that he/she could effectively oppose the plea for remand or seek bail, it said.

Notably, the judges expressed serious reservations that Mr. Purkayastha's lawyer was not informed about the remand proceedings despite the Delhi police having access to his phone number. The Court further remarked that the "charade of informing" the NewsClick founder's lawyer after the remand order had already been passed was an exercise in futility.

The judges also pointed out that the two sentences inserted in the remand order to give the impression that Mr. Purkayastha's lawyer Arshdeep Khurana was heard before its issuance was an afterthought. "A bare perusal of the remand order is enough to satisfy us that these two lines were subsequently inserted in the order because the script in which these two lines were written is much finer as compared to the remaining part of the order and moreover, these two lines give a clear indication of subsequent insertion," the Bench underscored.

What happens next?

After the pronouncement of the verdict, Mr. Raju sought a clarification from the Bench as to whether the ruling would preclude the police from exercising its "correct powers of arrest" in the case in the future.

In response, Justice Gavai said, "We have not said anything about that. Whatever you are permitted under the law, you can do."



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

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Why is the European Union probing Facebook and Instagram?

CONTEXT: The European Union has opened fresh investigation into Meta's Facebook and Instagram over suspicions that they are failing to protect children on their platform, a violation that could result in fines of up to 6% of their annual worldwide revenue.



What led to the investigation?

The 27-nation bloc has said it is concerned that Facebook and Instagram's recommendation engine could "exploit the weaknesses and inexperience" of children and stimulate "addictive behaviour". The bloc's executive arm further said that these systems could reinforce the so-called "rabbit hole" effect that leads users to watch increasingly disturbing content. As part of the probe, the commission will look into Meta's use of age verification tools to prevent children under the age of 13 from accessing Facebook and Instagram. And also find out whether the company is complying with the bloc's Digital Service Act (DSA) and enforcing a high level of privacy, safety and security for minors.

What does the DSA mandate?

The bloc's DSA came into effect in February. It stipulates very large online platforms, which have over 45 million users in the EU, to provide an option in their recommender systems that is not based on user profiling and share their data with the Commission and national authorities to assess compliance under the law.

The platforms are also required to take measures to protect minors from content that may impair their physical, mental or moral development. Additionally, platforms must take targeted measures to protect the rights of minors, including age verification and parental control tools that are aimed at helping minors signal abuse or obtain support. Facebook and Instagram have more than the stipulated number of users, and so are designated as very large platforms, bringing them under the law's purview.

The EU regulator will now carry out an in-depth investigation as a "matter of priority" and gather evidence by sending additional requests for information, conducting interviews and inspections. The commission can also accept commitments made by Meta to remedy the issues raised during the investigation.

What has Meta done to protect children on its platforms?

Earlier this year, Meta announced it was testing an AI-driven "nudity protection" tool that would find and blur images containing nudity that were sent to minors on the app's messaging system. Additionally, the company said it would roll out measures to

protect users under 18 years of age by tightening content restrictions and boosting parental supervision tools

This is not the only investigation Meta's platforms are facing in the EU. In April, the regulator opened an investigation, accusing Meta of having failed to tackle deceptive advertising and disinformation in the run-up to the European Parliament elections. The antitrust regulator's move against Meta stemmed from the platform being used as a potential source of disinformation by Russia, China and Iran to influence voters in EU.

Are these platforms under scrutiny of other countries outside the EU?

Even before the DSA was implemented in the EU, Meta's Instagram faced backlash in the U.S. after a report by the Wall Street Journal, published in June 2023, said the platform "helps connect and promote a vast network of accounts openly devoted to the commission and purchase of under age sex content".

At the time, the company said it was working on "improving internal controls", and that it had eliminated 27 paedophile networks in addition to removing 4,90,000 accounts that breached its kid safety regulations in just one month.

What are the general practices of protecting minors online?

With children growing up in an increasingly digital world, it has become increasingly difficult for parents and caregivers to ensure their online safety

Parents are advised to ensure they are up to date with online risks and have set up safeguards to protect their child's digital experience. These could include setting up of kid's profiles, choosing age-appropriate apps and games and setting up child-friendly sites and search engines, and ensuring age restricted content is inaccessible on the devices and platforms they are using. Parents are also advised to supervise and spend time with their children online to ensure they do not engage in harmful activities or fall prey to online predators.

And minors using social media platforms must ensure they know how to report and "block" accounts with offensive material and foster open conversations to ensure an adult is available if something doesn't feel right.

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SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

Critical priority pathogens continue to pose threat: WHO

CONTEXT: Critical priority pathogens present major global threats due to their high burden, and ability to resist treatment and spread resistance to other bacteria, noted the latest Bacterial Pathogens Priority List (BPPL) updated by the World Health Organization (WHO).

The list features 15 families of antibiotic-resistant bacteria grouped into critical, high, and medium categories for prioritisation. This includes gram-negative bacteria resistant to last-resort antibiotics, and Mycobacterium tuberculosis resistant to the antibiotic Rifampicin.

Seven years since it published the last such list, the WHO stated that high-priority pathogens, including salmonella and shigella, are of particularly high burden in low- and middle-income countries, along with Pseudomonas aeruginosa and Staphylococcus aureus, which pose significant challenges in healthcare settings. Antimicrobial Resistance (AMR) occurs when bacteria, viruses, fungi, and parasites no longer respond to medicines, increasing the risk of disease spread, illness and deaths. "AMR is driven in large part by the misuse and overuse of antimicrobials," the document says.

Other high-priority pathogens such as antibiotic-resistant Neisseria gonorrhoeae and Enterococcus faecium, present unique public health challenges, including persistent infections and resistance to multiple antibiotics, necessitating targeted research and public health interventions.

"By mapping the global burden of drug-resistant bacteria and assessing their impact on public health, this list is key to guiding investment and for grappling with the antibiotics pipeline and access crisis. Since the first Bacterial Priority Pathogens List was released in 2017, the threat of antimicrobial resistance has intensified, eroding the efficacy of numerous antibiotics and putting many of the gains of modern medicine at risk," Yukiko Nakatani, the WHO's Assistant Director-General for Antimicrobial Resistance ad interim, said.

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Indians form largest share of foreign students in Israel

CONTEXT: Amid the clouds of war over West Asia, Israel is one of the favourite destinations for Indian students to pursue higher studies.

The Ministry of External Affairs had estimated the number of Indian students in Israel at 1,218 in 2022. However, data compiled by Israeli authorities after the COVID-19 outbreak put the number of students enrolled in Israeli universities at 1,691 during academic year 2021–22. The official Israeli data reveal that Indian students make up the biggest share in the foreign students category, surpassing China, which stands second with 842 students.

India had officially estimated the number of students abroad at 13.24 lakh in 2022. According to Bureau of Immigration statistics, the number of Indian students who went abroad was 7.5 lakh in 2022 and 4.44 lakh in 2021. According to Tammy Ben-Haim, Consul-General of Israel to South India, the good academic cooperation between Indian and Israeli scientists and the willingness of both countries to foster academic exchange and research collaboration play a pivotal role in attracting Indian students to Israel.



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