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SC overrules 1967 verdict on AMU's minority tag

POLITY & GOVERNANCE



CONTEXT: A seven-judge Bench headed by Chief Justice of India D.Y. Chandrachud in a 4:3 majority judgment declared that an educational institution established by a minority community will not lose its identity once it is recognised through a statute.

The majority judgment authored by the Chief Justice was based on petitions seeking minority status for the Aligarh Muslim University (AMU). Chief Justice Chandrachud held that an institution established by a minority community was indeed a minority educational institution. The court returned the case to the regular Bench to examine the question of AMU's minority status, based on Friday's verdict.

The petitioners had challenged the five-judge Bench judgment in the 1967 case of *S. Azeez Basha versus Union of India*, which had held that AMU was a Central university and cannot be considered a minority institution. The seven-judge Bench overruled the 1967 verdict that had held that religious minorities did not have the right to administer educational institutions not established by them, and cannot claim protection under Article 30(1) of the Constitution. Article 30(1) upholds the right of religious and linguistic minorities to establish and administer educational institutions.

The minority status of the AMU, established in 1875, was then restored by Parliament through the AMU (Amendment) Act in 1981. In January 2006, however, the Allahabad High Court struck down the provision of the 1981 law by which the university was accorded minority status. The issue was referred to a seven-judge Supreme Court Bench in 2019. The petitioners had argued that upholding *Azeez Basha* would jeopardise the minority status of several educational institutions, including recognised minority institutions such as St. Stephen's College, Delhi and Christian Medical College, Vellore. The Chief Justice classified Article 30(1) as both an anti-discriminatory as well as a 'special rights' provision in favour of religious and linguistic minorities. A legislation or an executive action which discriminates against religious or linguistic minorities in establishing or administering educational institutions is ultra vires Article 30(1). This is the anti-discrimination



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Centre announces successful trial run of new pension system

ECONOMICS & DEVELOPMENT

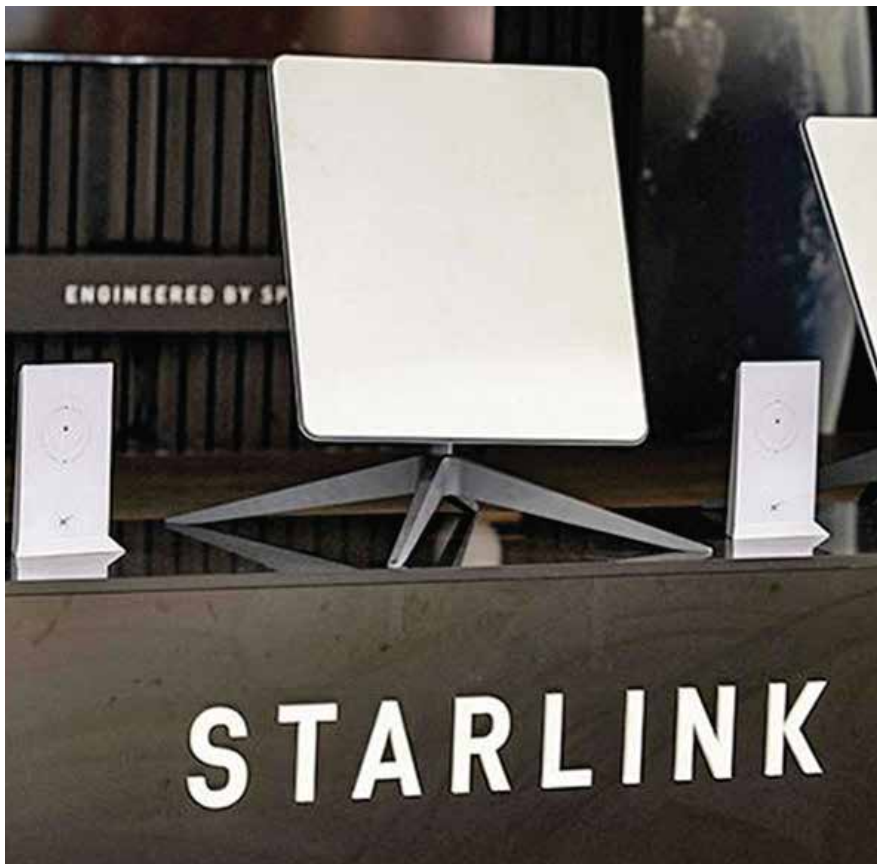
CONTEXT: The Union Labour Ministry announces successful pilot run of the proposed Centralised Pension Payments System (CPPS) under the employees' pension scheme (EPS) of the Employees Provident Fund Organisation (EPFO). Pension worth more than ₹ 11 Cr. was disbursed to 49,000 EPS pensioners of Jammu, Srinagar and Karnal Regions for October, 2024, under the new system. Announcing the success of the trial of Centralised Pension Payments System (CPPS), Union Labour Minister Mansukh Mandaviya said the pilot run was completed on October 29 and 30. The new system, to be implemented nationwide by January 2025, will help more than 78 lakh EPS pensioners to receive their pension from any bank, any branch, anywhere in the country.

The initiative addresses long-standing challenges faced by pensioners and ensures a seamless disbursement mechanism. This is a crucial step in our ongoing efforts to transform the EPFO into a more robust, responsive, and tech-enabled organisation, committed to serving the needs of its members and pensioners better.

The CPPS system would ensure disbursement of pension throughout India without any need for transfer of Pension Payment Orders from one office to another even when the pensioner moves from one location to another or changes his bank or branch. This would be a great relief to pensioners who move to their hometown after retirement.

Telcos cast satellite Internet as a threat to terrestrial networks

SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY



CONTEXT: Telecom operators and satellite Internet operators on Friday engaged in an occasionally contentious discussion on regulating services like SpaceX's Starlink and Amazon's Kuiper satellite Internet, as part of an open house discussion by the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India.

Telecom operators cast doubt on the wisdom of freely allowing satellite Internet services to operate in India, and the latter defended their operations. The Telecommunications law does not automatically exempt satellite internet services players like Starlink from participating in a spectrum auction. Parnil Urdhwareshe, a SpaceX executive, flagged "frankly unfortunate and entirely false allegations of possible predatory pricing" levelled against satellite internet operators.

Concern over capacity

The public numbers which Starlink tells would mean around 35,000 satellites. There would be around 500 to 600 satellites always over India, and up to 3,000, if multiple satellite constellations served the country, leading to more ground stations. India accounts for 0.6% of the world's surface area, which is an important factor in Non-Geostationary Orbit (NGO) systems which are global.

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Manila signs laws to demarcate South China Sea territories

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

CONTEXT: Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. signed two laws on Friday reaffirming the extent of his country's maritime territories and right to resources, including in the South China Sea, angering China, which claims the hotly disputed waterway almost in its entirety.

China's Foreign Ministry summoned the Philippines Ambassador to China to lodge a "stern protest". The ministry condemned the move as an attempt to "solidify the illegal ruling of the South China Sea arbitration case through domestic legislation."

Grand ceremony

The laws, called the Philippine Maritime Zones act and the Philippine Archipelagic Sea Lanes act, were signed by Mr. Marcos in a nationally televised ceremony attended by top military and national security officials. They further cement Manila's rejection of China's claims to virtually the entire sea passage, and stipulate jail terms and stiff fines for violators.

India moots discussions with various groups in Myanmar

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

CONTEXT: The Ministry of External Affairs consulted with "various groups" of Myanmar that will contribute to 'Myanmar-owned' and 'Myanmar-led' solution to the current conflict in Myanmar.

The Indian Council of World Affairs hosted delegates from Myanmar saying that India has been holding such consultations "on regular basis". There have been over a period of time interactions with various stakeholders in Myanmar. On 5th and 6th November the Indian Council of World Affairs organised a workshop on Indian experience and constitutionalism where they invited various segments of Myanmar society. It is our understanding that such interactions will contribute to developing Myanmar-led and Myanmar owned solutions to address the country's challenges.

A 17-member delegations representing the military junta, civil society and representatives of various political parties with ties to the junta had reached New Delhi on November 4. A similar delegation consisting of the Ethnic Armed Organisation (EAOs) and the rebel NUG representatives are also expected to reach New Delhi for the second round of consultation. The hosting of the Myanmar's ethnic representatives have coincided with the visit of junta Chief General Min Aung Hlaing to China.

Lokpal seeks response from SEBI chief Buch on conflict of interest allegations

POLITY & GOVERNANCE

CONTEXT: Anti-corruption watchdog Lokpal sought an explanation from the chief of India's stock market regulator, Madhabi Puri Buch, on the conflict of interest charges levelled against her in three separate complaints that cited a recent report from the U.S.-based short seller firm, Hindenburg Research.

The order, issued by a Bench led by Lokpal chairperson Justice A.M. Khanwilkar, stressed that this was only a procedural direction and does not explicitly name Ms. Buch. However, it implies that Ms. Buch is required to file an affidavit within four weeks from the receipt of the order, and the Lokpal Bench will take up the matter for further consideration on December 19.

Hindenburg Research, which had alleged malfeasance and stock price manipulation by the Adani group of companies in early 2023, published a report this August stating that the Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI) had drawn a blank in its probe into the Adani group due to a reluctance "to follow a trail that may have led to its own chairperson"; apart from regulatory "conflict or capture".

Following the research firm's report, SEBI, as well as Ms. Buch and her spouse Dhaval Buch, who was also named in the report, had issued separate statements in a bid to clarify those charges. A complaint was filed in the matter with the Lokpal on August 13, 2024, naming the public servant [Ms. Buch] against whom action was sought under the Lokpal and Lokayuktas Act for allegedly having committed an offence punishable under the Prevention of Corruption Act. Another plaint was submitted with similar charges on September 11, followed by a third one on October 14.

Having gone through the complaints, the Lokpal issued an order on Friday, stating: "For the present, without expressing any opinion on the relevance and admissibility of the allegations/contents of the complaint(s) and the explanatory affidavit(s), including about the correctness of the plea taken therein by the respective complainant, we deem it appropriate to call upon the said RPS (respondent public servant) to offer explanation qua the allegations made against her in the respective complaint..."

The BRICS journey — gaining heft while in transition

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

CONTEXT: Russia's President Vladimir Putin made only a brief digital appearance at the BRICS 2023 summit in Johannesburg, despite host South Africa's decision to provide him diplomatic immunity against an ICC-issued arrest warrant linked to the Ukraine war.

Survival and a rejuvenation

The summit in Kazan, Russia (October 22-24, 2024) was the sixteenth in a series that began in 2009. Only four countries — Brazil, Russia, India and China — participated in the first two summits. South Africa joined the group at the third summit in 2011, giving it its present name, BRICS. The first decade recorded several accomplishments, but the second decade began on a difficult note. The outbreak of COVID-19 put China on the defensive; then the bloody clash between Chinese and Indian troops in the Galwan Valley in June 2020 brought ties between two member-states to a new low; finally, Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 triggered Moscow's confrontation with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. All this made the grouping vulnerable.

The 15th summit's decision on expansion led to five new members: Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Iran, Egypt, and Ethiopia. A disclosure by Mr. Putin that 34 more nations are desirous of joining the grouping signifies that BRICS is headed upwards. Post-summit, the Russian projection was that this grouping represents the 'Global Majority.' This transition trajectory needs to be factored in while assessing the outcomes of the Kazan summit and their broad implications for the world. BRICS does not strive to create a new world order. It just wants to reform the present one so that it works for everyone. The grouping is driven by "the BRICS spirit", which is imbued with eight specific characteristics: mutual respect and understanding; sovereign equality; solidarity; democracy; openness; inclusiveness; collaboration, and consensus. It is committed to promoting intra-BRICS cooperation under three verticals: political and security; economic and financial, and cultural and people-to-people cooperation.

BRICS, initially a grouping of emerging economies, is now primarily a platform for Emerging Markets and Developing Countries (EMDCs). It is a combined grouping of the east and the south, juxtaposed to the Global North. There are notable anti-western tendencies within the BRICS, but its moderate members are committed to safeguarding its non-western orientation.

Pushing for comprehensive United Nations reform, the grouping devised at Johannesburg a careful formulation to support the aspirations of countries from Africa, Asia and Latin America, "including the BRICS countries" (meaning India, Brazil and South Africa) to play a more significant role in the UN, including its Security Council. This remained unchanged at Kazan; no further improvement was registered in favour of the three aspirants. None was expected as China's reluctance to go beyond this formula is an open secret.

Another significant element was the grouping's call for the elimination of unilateral economic sanctions. It depicts them as unilateral measures, aptly highlighting that they are contrary to international law and have far-reaching implications for human rights.

Verticals and their focus

On the first vertical relating to peace and security, the summit focused on the conflict in West Asia, to which several paragraphs were devoted in the declaration. Paragraph 30 has scathing criticism for Israel's actions without any reference to the October 7 terrorist attack by Hamas. The grouping has called for an immediate and comprehensive ceasefire, unconditional release of all hostages, and the establishment of an independent 'State of Palestine'. Israel, whose military dominance of the region continues, was not impressed. Its response came in the form of a direct air attack on Iran, a member of BRICS.

Russia as the chair of BRICS, the grouping said much less about the continuing war in Ukraine. Members were content with reiterating their national positions and calling for the end of war through dialogue and diplomacy while underlining the need to address "the root causes" of conflicts.

On the second vertical of economic and financial cooperation, the common currency issue received maximum attention. The decision taken was along expected lines. The use of local currencies in financial transactions between BRICS countries and their trading partners will be facilitated further. However, the issue of deeper financial and banking cooperation will continue to be studied by the Finance ministries of the member-states.

With Saudi Arabia still hesitant about joining BRICS fully, initial expectations of a massive capital injection into the New Development Bank remain unfulfilled. Therefore, the leaders restricted themselves to suggesting further improvement in the bank's workings and expressing their commitment to develop it into "a new type of MDB in the 21st century."

The third vertical aims to strengthen people-to-people exchanges for social and economic development. Cooperation involving sports, culture, parliaments, civil society, business, and think tanks could have a beneficial long-term impact. Finally, a crucial decision related to the grouping's expansion. The outreach session was held on the last day, with the participation of 34 states. Having approved the guidelines and criteria, a new category of 'partner state' was created. Thirteen countries have been invited to join the grouping as partner states. Latin America: Cuba and Bolivia; Eurasia: Belarus and Türkiye; Africa: Algeria, Nigeria, and Uganda; Southeast Asia: Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, and Vietnam; and Central Asia: Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. Clearly, the third expansion will further augment the BRICS family's share of the world population, international trade and GDP. Between now and the next summit in Brazil in 2025, most of these states may be included as partners, but they are expected to clamour for their early elevation as full members. Hence, the transition may continue for some more time.

From India's lens

From India's perspective, BRICS figures among the top six plurilateral groupings today — G-20, Quad, BRICS, BIMSTEC (The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation), G-7 (where India has a nearly permanent guest status), and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). BRICS helps India to promote multipolarity in the world, exercise its strategic autonomy, deepen its relations with Russia, and effectively advocate the interests and agenda of the Global South. In addition, the latest summit served as a useful platform for the first meeting in about five years between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President Xi Jinping. Bilateral negotiations resulted in an agreement on border patrolling arrangements and disengagement. Hence, this meeting, held on the summit's sidelines, heralded the beginning of a rapprochement between New Delhi and Beijing. As China-India relations improve, the strategic space for India to deal with its western partners may also expand.

India attaches a high degree of importance to making BRICS an effective instrument for international cooperation. This nation has made a tangible contribution in this direction and is eager to continue doing so. Initial caution over expansion has now been replaced by a sober calculation that increased membership, if handled properly, will enhance the influence of this plurilateral grouping. Above all, BRICS allows India to serve as a bridge between the west and the east and between the north and the south, thus turning New Delhi into a geopolitical sweet spot today.

Staying cool, but with clean tech, global collaborations

ECOLOGY & ENVIRONMENT

CONTEXT: On September 21, 2024, the Quad nations (Australia, India, Japan, and the United States) issued the Wilmington Declaration, which underscores the Quad's commitment to sustainable energy solutions, particularly focusing on high-efficiency cooling systems. This aligns with the earlier joint statement by India and the U.S., which detailed a road map for building resilient and secure global clean energy supply chains, placing a special emphasis on clean cooling technologies. Both statements highlight the urgent need to deploy affordable and energy-efficient cooling systems in climate-vulnerable regions while advancing global climate goals.

India's leadership in these efforts is particularly noteworthy. As part of the Quad's clean energy initiatives, India has pledged significant investments in solar and cooling infrastructure across the Indo-Pacific region. Along with the U.S. and India's joint plan to expand manufacturing capacities for high-efficiency air-conditioners and ceiling fans, these developments could significantly reduce the climate impact of cooling systems.

Cooling-related emissions

The broader relevance of these international efforts can be seen through the lens of the Montreal Protocol and its Kigali Amendment (2016), which already set a precedent for collective global action on cooling-related emissions. As global temperatures rise, increasing demand for cooling makes it imperative for the world to adopt the lessons of these frameworks, reducing harmful emissions while transitioning to sustainable alternatives.

The Kigali Amendment expanded its scope to target hydrofluorocarbons (HFCs), potent greenhouse gases used in cooling appliances. Left unchecked, HFCs could contribute to 0.52°C of warming by 2100. Maximising the Kigali Amendment's impact requires aligning the HFC phase-down with energy efficiency improvements. More efficient cooling systems could deliver about two-thirds of total greenhouse gas reductions by cutting electricity consumption. This would reduce emissions, lower air pollution from fossil fuel power plants, and save costs for manufacturers and consumers.

Climate change has heightened two critical threats related to cooling: the indirect emissions from inefficient air-conditioning and refrigeration systems powered by fossil fuels, and the direct emissions from harmful refrigerants. However, many countries still lack integrated energy efficiency and refrigerant standards. High-efficiency air conditioners using climate-friendly refrigerants are available, but inefficient models using outdated refrigerants still dominate many markets. Without stronger regulations, developing nations risk becoming dumping grounds for these inefficient appliances, exacerbating climate and energy challenges.

Having a mission-mode approach

In 2024, parts of India experienced temperatures over 50°C, underscoring the need for cooling to ensure thermal comfort, preserve food, medical supplies, and industrial processes. India, one of the most climate-vulnerable nations, faces increasingly severe heatwaves that endanger millions. By 2030, an estimated 160 million to 200 million Indians could face deadly heatwaves annually. The country's workforce, heavily exposed to extreme heat, risks significant declines in productivity, health, and food security. Cooling demand is expected to surge, with air conditioner sales rising 16% for every degree over 30°C. By 2050, India may have the world's highest cooling demand, with over 1.14 billion air conditioners in use. India ratified the Kigali Amendment in 2021, committing to reduce HFCs by 85% by 2047. The India Cooling Action Plan (ICAP) targets a 20%-25% reduction in cooling demand, 25-40% in energy consumption, and a shift to low-global warming potential (GWP) refrigerants, demonstrating leadership in climate-friendly cooling. A mission-mode approach is needed to tackle these challenges. A national mission for sustainable cooling would require focused leadership, cross-sectoral collaboration, and coordinated efforts across ministries. Establishing an inter-ministerial working group, planning a launch event, and allocating an initial budget are essential. National capacity-building initiatives and dedicated budget lines must follow for long-term success.

COP29 and the momentum of COP28

International commitments to clean energy cooling are encouraging, but technologies must remain affordable. The U.S.-India partnership and the Quad's initiatives emphasise deployment and local manufacturing of high-efficiency cooling systems. The challenge is in ensuring equitable access, particularly in developing regions where cooling needs are the greatest. Rising global temperatures require scaling up energy-efficient solutions without straining fragile electricity grids or leaving vulnerable populations behind.

India's proactive approach to cooling challenges, especially through the ICAP, positions it as a global leader in sustainable cooling. The country can protect its population from heat while leading the global fight against climate change, ensuring thermal comfort for all.

At COP28 (Dubai), 63 countries pledged to reduce cooling emissions by 68% by 2050. The Global Cooling Pledge, though non-binding, could provide cooling access to 3.5 billion people by 2050 and save \$17 trillion in energy costs. However, global action must accelerate to make this a reality. COP29 must build on the momentum of COP28 by expanding cooling commitments. This includes increasing participation in the Global Cooling Pledge and enhancing partnerships across sectors and nations.

The Musi's clean-up

POLITY & GOVERNANCE

CONTEXT: The first Congress Chief Minister of Telangana, A. Revanth Reddy proposed an ambitious plan to redevelop Hyderabad's Musi riverfront, with high rises, promenades, shopping complexes, and multiple bridges, in an attempt to replicate London's Thames riverfront.

Much like Chennai's Cooum, Kolkata's Hooghly and Delhi's Yamuna, the Musi meanders through what was once the heart of Hyderabad; the ugly centre of an urban sprawl. Like most rivers in India's urban agglomerations, and indeed globally, the Musi has for long been the city's cesspool, carrying about 2,000 million litres of sewage a day, over 60% of which is untreated. There is also a large volume of industrial effluents flowing into the Musi, mainly from the city's bustling generic drug industry, making the river toxic. Yet, about one lakh people live along the riverbanks, some of them on parts of a dry riverbed and others on the flood plains, called the buffer zone that stretches about 50 metres on either side of the river.

They have lived there for generations. And many more downstream depend on the river for farming.

Therefore, it was unsurprising that Mr. Reddy would face stiff resistance from the evictees when the government began demolishing 15,000-odd structures, mostly houses, on October 1, along what is colloquially called the Old City — the part of Hyderabad where the iconic Charminar is located. This area is home to many of the city's blue-collar workforce — ragpickers, and conservancy and construction workers, several of whom have long held land titles, power connections and have even been paying taxes. The government had proposed a rehabilitation plan of high-rises for the evictees, but these were in far flung places, affecting livelihoods. This is not a new phenomenon in India. This was seen in Chennai following the tsunami in 2004, when the government sought to rehabilitate several fishermen communities who have lived for generations along the coast. But even before this, there have been attempts to evict those living along the Adyar river that runs through Chennai. However, the problem with such beautification plans, including the Musi's, is that they are executed without consulting those who would be most affected. While Mr. Reddy's government says it was done, the evictees disagree. Moreover, the 'revitalisation plan', as the government likes to call it, is a cosmetic change — the eyesore disappears in the hope that it is replaced with a romanticised riverfront bustling with commercial activity. But it has not addressed the elephant in the room: permanently fixing the Musi's sources of pollution from chemical effluents and untreated sewage.

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