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ECOLOGY AND ENVIRONMENT

THE INDIAN HIMALAYAN REGION NEEDS ITS OWN EIA

CONTEXT: Teesta dam breach and Himachal floods highlight urgent need to evaluate environmental impact of development.

BACKGROUND: The Teesta dam breach in Sikkim and recent Himachal Pradesh floods highlight the environmental toll of our development model, especially in mountain regions. Evaluating the environmental impact of major projects is crucial to safeguarding our ecosystems.

THE BASIS OF THE EIA

- EIA Purpose: United Nations Environment Programme defines EIA as a tool to analyze environmental, social, and economic impacts before project implementation.
- Historical Background: EIA in India began in 1976-77 for river valley projects, leading to the 1994 notification making Environmental Clearance (EC) mandatory.
- EIA 2006 Notification: Introduced decentralization, allowing state governments to issue EC in certain cases, with subsequent amendments fine-tuning the process.
- Public Concerns: Draft EIA 2020 faced criticism for being industry-oriented, compromising ecological concerns, creating public controversy about its effectiveness and fairness.
- Uniform Thresholds: EIA 2006 categorizes projects uniformly nationwide, lacking differentiation for regions like the ecologically fragile Indian Himalayan Region (IHR), causing potential issues.
- IHR Neglect: Despite IHR's vulnerabilities, the EIA process does not consider its special needs, leading to an absence of tailored regulations for this sensitive ecological region.

FLAWS IN THE GRADED APPROACH

- Graded Approach: India's regulatory system tailors environmental conditions based on the ecological significance of the impacted habitat, varying from protected forests to critical tiger habitats.
- IHR Neglect: The Indian Himalayan Region (IHR), despite its ecological importance and vulnerability, is not differentiated in environmental standards, posing a problem.
- Himalayan Vulnerability: The Himalayas are prone to extreme weather and seismic activity, worsened by climate change, necessitating unique environmental standards.
- Devastation Consequences: Frequent extreme weather events in Himalayan States indicate the region's suffering due to this lack of differentiation.
- EIA Enhancement: Addressing the needs of mountainous regions, especially the IHR, through tailored EC requirements can be integrated into all stages of the EIA process for better environmental protection.

The absence of a national-level regulator for independent project assessment, combined with a financially biased Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) process, hampers the effective mitigation of environmental impacts. The EIA often lacks anticipation of cumulative effects, and in the ecologically sensitive Indian Himalayan Region (IHR), these shortcomings are exacerbated. Policymakers should consider alternatives like strategic environmental assessments to better address the IHR's unique requirements.

ECONOMICS AND DEVELOPMENT

SOME RUSSIA-OIL PAYMENTS SAID TO BE HELD UP OVER YUAN ISSUE

CONTEXT: The Indian government's discomfort over letting state-controlled refiners pay for Russian oil imports with Chinese currency has held up the payment for at least seven cargoes.

Russian firms such as Rosneft continuing to supply state-controlled Indian refiners, who are seeking alternative ways for settlement. India emerged as the top importer of Russian seaborne oil this year, with refiners snapping up the crude sold at a discount after some western nations suspended imports over Ukraine invasion.

Refiners often face problems in settling oil trade with Moscow after the U.S and the European Union imposed a price

cap of \$ 60 a barrel on Russian oil, forcing buyers to use alternatives such as Emirati dirhams for cargoes that have gone above the cap as oil prices have risen. Indian refiners began using yuan to pay for some oil from Russian sellers in July.

The Centre has become uncomfortable with using the yuan for settlement. It is unclear if the Centre instructed state refiners to stop paying in yuan, but New Delhi's disapproval is plain. "It is not banned and if a private firm has yuan to settle trade, the government will not stop it, but will neither facilitate the trade.

SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

CONFRONTING THE LONG-TERM RISKS OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

CONTEXT: Risks evolve with societal shifts and technology; Ex Machina illustrates changing perceptions of AI risks.

BACKGROUND: In the digital age, sharing personal information has evolved from being risk-free to fraught with dangers due to cyberattacks and data breaches. The film "Ex Machina" serves as a cinematic example of shifting perceptions of AI risk, highlighting the need to identify both short-term and long-term risks as AI technology advances.

News Highlights

- **Long-term AI Risks:** Concerns about AI and biotech fusion altering human emotions and existential risks raised by AI professionals due to AI's role in critical infrastructure.
- **Potential Catastrophes:** Malfunctions or malicious AI could disrupt vital services, posing existential risks, leading to AI as a catalyst for dire outcomes.
- **AI Advancement Challenges:** The challenge lies in aligning AI with human values, as rapid advancement often neglects safety considerations.
- **Lack of Unified Global Approach:** The absence of international collaboration in AI regulation may lead to competitive edges, misaligned AI systems, and destabilization.
- **Race to the Bottom:** A lack of global standards could result in nations sacrificing safety for competitiveness, compromising AI's global safety and ethics.

The dangers of military AI

- **Technology and Warfare:** The merging of technology and warfare escalates long-term risks, emphasizing the need to address military AI dangers.
- **Global Norms:** Drawing parallels with nuclear and chemical weapons treaties, establishing global norms for AI in warfare is a vital, achievable goal.
- **AI Restrictions:** Nations should clearly define where AI deployment in warfare is unacceptable and enforce these norms to manage AI-related risks.
- **Ever-Evolving Landscape:** In the continually changing AI risk landscape, decisions made today will significantly impact the world's future.
- **Crucial Choices:** The international community must recognize the significance of their choices today in shaping the world's tomorrow.



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SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

GAGANYAAN'S TEST FLIGHT TO COMMENCE AT 7 A.M. ON OCT. 21

CONTEXT: Gaganyaan mission's TV-D1 test flight to showcase Crew Escape System performance on October 21, 2023.

BACKGROUND: The Gaganyaan mission's Flight Test Vehicle Abort Mission-1 (TV-D1) is set for October 21, 2023, at 7 a.m. to 9 a.m. from the Satish Dhawan Space Centre in Sriharikota, according to the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO). This test flight aims to showcase the performance of the Crew Escape System.



News Highlights

- **Crew Module (CM) Purpose:** The CM houses astronauts during the Gaganyaan mission in a pressurized earth-like environment.
- **Development Stages:** The Gaganyaan mission CM is in various development stages.
- **Unpressurized Version:** The TV-D1 CM, in an unpressurized form, has completed testing and is ready for shipment.
- **CM Components:** It contains systems for deceleration and recovery, including parachutes and avionics for navigation and telemetry.
- **Recovery Process:** The CM will be retrieved from the Bay of Bengal post-landing using a dedicated Indian Navy team and vessel for data evaluation.

ECONOMICS AND DEVELOPMENT

WHOLESALE PRICES STAYED ALMOST FLAT IN SEPTEMBER

CONTEXT: India's wholesale prices stayed in deflationary mode for the sixth month in a row this September, albeit only fractionally with inflation at -0.26 % compared to -0.52 % in August.

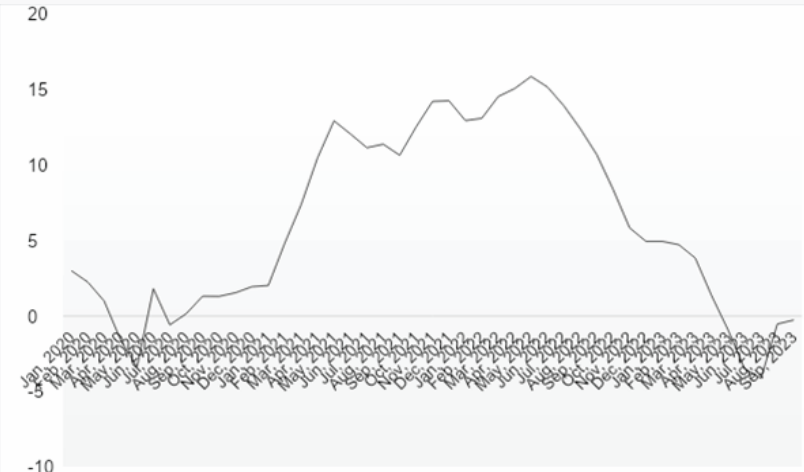


FIGURE: Line chart representation of wholesale price index-based inflation rates.

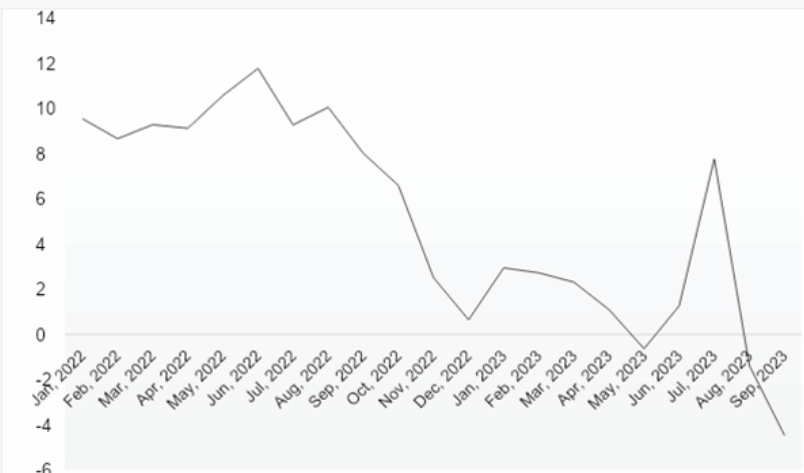


FIGURE: Line chart representation of wholesale food price index-based inflation rates.

Wholesale price inflation had been 10.55% in September 2022, creating a high base effect. Price rise in primary articles and food items eased sharply to 3.7% and 1.5%, respectively, from 6.34% and 5.62% in August. However, within food items, the price rise in onions accelerated to cross 55% from 31.4% in August, while inflation in pulses sped to 17.7% from 10.45% in the previous month.

Milk inflation hit a three-month high of 8.6%. Vegetables' prices, which had risen a sharp 67.6% and 48.4% in July and August, slid 15%, bringing some relief, but the price rise in cereals and wheat hardened to 7.3% and 6.3%, respectively.

The surge in global oil and gas prices led to a sharp rebound in crude petroleum and natural gas inflation which hit an 8-month high of 15.6% from -1.9% in August. Despite a sequential rise in food prices so far this month, rating agency ICRA expects overall wholesale prices to remain in deflationary territory in October as well.

SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

TWO LABORATORIES IN INDIA TAKE MAJORITY OF COUGH SYRUP SAMPLES FOR TESTING

CONTEXT: Of the 15 Central and State-run laboratories engaged in cough syrup sample testing, the Central Drugs Standard Control Organisation (CDSCO) reported one Central and one State are analysing the bulk of cough syrup samples brought in for testing before they are exported.

The Union government issued a notification early this year making it compulsory from June 1 for cough syrup manufacturers to secure a certificate of analysis from government-approved laboratories. The order came following a World Health Organization product alert in cases of syrup products being exported from India. India is the world's third largest maker of drugs by volume after the U.S. and China.

According to the CDSCO, the number of batches of cough syrup samples received for testing in Central/ State drug testing laboratories in two centres — CDTL, Mumbai; and the Food and Drug Laboratory, Gujarat — is 176. This is part of the 328 batches being tested in various centres currently.

The CDSCO and the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare have brought in various measures to maintain the standard of drugs being exported from India. A senior Health Ministry official noted that regulatory measures that have been undertaken include amending the Drugs and Cosmetics Rules, 1945.

"The amendments include mandating that before the grant of a manufacturing licence, the manufacturing establishment is to be inspected jointly by the drugs inspectors of the Union government and State government. Also, the number of sanctioned posts in the CDSCO has been significantly increased in the last 10 years, and an amendment has also been brought in, making it mandatory for applicants to submit evidence of stability, safety, etc. to the State licensing authority before the grant of manufacturing licence by the authority," the official added.

ECONOMICS AND DEVELOPMENT

INDIA AND U.K. DISCUSS INDO-PACIFIC AND TRADE

CONTEXT: India and the U.K. discussed the situation in the Indo-Pacific region reaffirming mutual commitment to maritime freedom. The discussion was held here during the inaugural "2+2" Foreign and Defence Dialogue.

The two sides also discussed possibilities for further collaboration in trade and investment, defence, critical and emerging technologies, civil aviation, health, energy, and strengthening peoples connect. They discussed ideas regarding counterterrorism, HADR and maritime security. The Indian delegation was led by Piyush Srivastava, Joint Secretary, Ministry of External Affairs, and Vishwesh Negi, Joint Secretary, Ministry of Defence, and the U.K. delegation was co-chaired by Ben Mellor, India Director, Indian Ocean Directorate, FCDO and Lt. General Rob Magowan, Deputy Chief of Defence Staff.

POLITY AND GOVERNANCE

SUPREME COURT'S DECISION ON 26-WEEK PREGNANCY TERMINATION PLEA

Court's Ruling and Ethical Considerations

The Supreme Court's recent decision to deny a married woman's plea for a medically terminated 26-week pregnancy has sparked debate. The court's stance is rooted in ethical concerns, as it expressed reluctance to instruct doctors to stop the fetal heartbeat, despite medical reports suggesting the fetus's viability.

Legal Interpretation of the Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act

In this case, the Supreme Court's interpretation of Section 5 of the Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act is a crucial factor. The court examined the implications of this interpretation on the woman's plea and the broader implications for reproductive rights.

The Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act, under Section 5, allows for medical termination if the pregnancy is deemed "immediately necessary to save the life of the pregnant woman." Chief Justice Chandrachud pointed out that the term 'life' used in this provision should not be equated with the broader meaning of 'life' as used in Article 21 of the Constitution, which upholds an individual's fundamental right to a dignified and meaningful life.

He further explained that Section 5 uses 'life' in the context of a life-and-death situation, permitting abortion only when the pregnancy poses an actual, physical, and immediate danger to a woman's life and health, as determined by medical experts.

Debate Over Reproductive Autonomy

The court's concern expanded beyond the pregnant woman to encompass the rights and well-being of the unborn child. The hearing began with the woman's counsel asserting her physical, emotional, mental, financial, and medical incapacity to carry, deliver, or raise a child. He noted that she was already a mother of two and had experienced post-partum depression after the birth of her second child in September the previous year.

The legal proceedings featured a heated debate over the concept of reproductive autonomy. The woman's counsel argued that she should have the absolute right to terminate her pregnancy, citing physical, emotional, mental, financial, and medical reasons. The government's response, represented by Additional Solicitor-General Aishwarya Bhati, highlighted the woman's exceeding the 24-week abortion limit and framed the situation as a difficult "Hobson's choice." Senior advocate Colin Gonsalves entered the discussion, arguing for the woman's absolute right to terminate the pregnancy, and the court pondered the implications of such rights even in later stages of pregnancy.

The Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act, 1971 and The Medical Termination of Pregnancy (Amendment) Act 2021

The Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act, 1971, known as the MTP Act, was enacted to keep up with advancements in

medical science that made abortions safer. To enhance women's access to comprehensive abortion care and promote universal access to reproductive health services, India made significant changes to the MTP Act in 2021.

The Medical Termination of Pregnancy (Amendment) Act 2021 broadens the availability of safe and legal abortion services based on therapeutic, eugenic, humanitarian, and social reasons. It aims to ensure that comprehensive care is universally accessible. Key provisions of the MTP Amendment Act, 2021 include:

Termination due to Contraceptive Failure: Under the amended Act, married women can terminate pregnancies up to 20 weeks in cases of contraceptive method or device failure. This right is also extended to unmarried women.

Opinion Requirements for Pregnancy Termination: The Act mandates one Registered Medical Practitioner (RMP) opinion for pregnancy termination up to 20 weeks of gestation. For pregnancies between 20-24 weeks, two RMP opinions are required. In cases of substantial fetal abnormalities after 24 weeks, the opinion of a State-level medical board is essential.

Extended Gestation Limit for Special Categories: The upper gestation limit for special categories of women, including rape survivors, victims of incest, and other vulnerable women (like differently-abled women and minors), is increased from 20 to 24 weeks.

Confidentiality: The Act ensures that the details of a woman who terminates her pregnancy remain confidential, except as authorized by applicable laws.

Significance: These changes align with global efforts to reduce maternal mortality and improve access to sexual and reproductive health. They contribute to achieving Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 3.1, 3.7, and 5.6, focusing on maternal mortality reduction and universal access to sexual and reproductive health and rights.

Issues: There are differing opinions on pregnancy termination. Some argue it is a woman's reproductive right, while others contend the state has an obligation to protect fetal life. Different countries set varying conditions and time limits for abortions based on fetal health and risks to the pregnant woman.

Not Allowed Beyond 24 Weeks: The Act permits abortion after 24 weeks only when a Medical Board diagnoses substantial fetal abnormalities. In cases requiring abortion due to rape after 24 weeks, the only recourse is through a Writ Petition.

Abortion Performed by Specialized Doctors: The Act requires abortions to be conducted only by doctors specializing in gynecology or obstetrics. However, there's a 75% shortage of such doctors in rural community health centers, making it challenging for pregnant women to access safe abortion facilities in these areas.



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