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By Shridhant Joshi Sir

MD, Kautilya Academy



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Mob : 9425068121, 9893929541

What changes CBSE has proposed for Class 10 and 12, why

RADHIKA

NEW DELHI, FEBRUARY 4

THE CENTRAL Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) is planning significant changes to the academic framework of Classes 9, 10, 11, and 12 as part of its plan to implement creditisation, recommended by the 2020 National Education Policy (NEP).

The CBSE, The Indian Express reported last week, has proposed that Class 10 and 12 students study more subjects, especially more native Indian languages.

The plan was sent to all heads of CBSE-affiliated institutions late last year, to review and provide comments by December 5, 2023.

What is the credit system and why is CBSE rolling it out?

Creditisation aims to establish academic

equivalence between vocational and general education, facilitating mobility between the two education systems, as proposed by the NEP 2020. To implement this, the University Grants Commission – the higher education regulator – had come up with the National Credit Framework (NCrF) in 2022.

NCrF is a unified credit framework for the integration of training and skill development into schools and higher education. For a student in Class 9 to advance to Class 10, they will need to earn a specified number of credits. Eventually, the student will earn enough credits to be eligible to enrol in an undergraduate programme in a university. The credits earned by a student will be digitally stored in the Academic Bank of Credits and accessible through a linked Digilocker account.

To implement this in its affiliated schools, the CBSE formed a subcommittee in 2022 that suggested how the current academic framework should be redesigned to

align it with NCrF.

What changes has the CBSE subcommittee proposed?

At present, the standard school curriculum does not have a formalised credit system. As per the CBSE plan, an academic year would be made up of 1,200 notional learning hours, which would translate to earning 40 credits. Notional learning refers to a stipulated amount of time an average student would need to spend to attain specified outcomes. In other words, each subject has been allotted a certain number of hours so that, in a year, a student spends a total of 1,200 learning hours to be declared 'pass'. The hours will include both academic learning at school and non-academic or experiential learning outside the school.

The scheme of studies has accordingly

been tweaked to mention teaching hours and credits earned against each subject.

In order to operationalise this, the committee has proposed to add multidisciplinary and vocational courses to the list of existing subjects. So, in order to pass the final exams, students in Classes 9 and 10 must complete 10 subjects – three languages and seven core

subjects. Currently, students in these grades have to take five subjects: three main subjects and two languages.

Of the three compulsory languages, at least two should be Indian. For instance, students can choose a combination of Hindi, Sanskrit and English. That apart, math and computational thinking, social science, science, art education, physical education and well-being, vocational education and environmental education are the seven main subjects.

For Classes 11 and 12, the Board sug-

gested that students must study six subjects, consisting of two languages and four subjects with an optional fifth. At least one of the two languages has to be Indian. The current system requires passing five subjects – one language and four electives.

How will exams be conducted under the proposed system?

The credits earned will be independent of the marks students obtain in exams.

For Class 10 students, CBSE will conduct external (read: board) exams for the three languages, mathematics and computational thinking, social science, science and environmental education. Art education, physical education and vocational education would be a mix of internal and Board examination. But students would have to pass all 10 subjects to move on to the next grade.

In Class 12, all subjects will be categorised into four groups. The languages group is cat-

egorised as Group 1. Group 2 would consist of subjects of arts education (like dance, music, sculpting), physical education, and vocational education. Group 3 will have social science subjects (eg: history, geography, political science, economics etc) and interdisciplinary areas (such as environmental education and commerce). Group 4 has mainly subjects of mathematics and computational thinking and science.

Class 12 students will have to choose at least two languages from Group 1, and four main subjects (with an optional fifth subject) from at least two of the remaining groups. There will be an external exam for both languages and Groups 3 and 4 subjects. If a student chooses to study a subject from Group 2, she will be assessed based on a mix of internal and Board exams.

LONGER VERSION

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**EXPLAINED
EDUCATION**

Dealing with govt debt

Aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic has led to the Centre and states accumulating a mountain of debt. Bringing it down will be a challenge for the next government, when it is sworn in after the Lok Sabha polls



HARISH DAMODARAN

ALL NEW governments carry legacy burdens inherited from their predecessors. It will be no different for the next government taking over post the April-May 2024 national elections.

The Narendra Modi-headed National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government will end its second term with overall public debt in excess of 80% of India's gross domestic product (GDP) at current market prices.

According to International Monetary Fund (IMF) data, general government debt — the combined domestic and external liabilities of both the Centre and the states — touched 84.4% of GDP in 2003-04, the last year of the earlier NDA government under Atal Bihari Vajpayee.

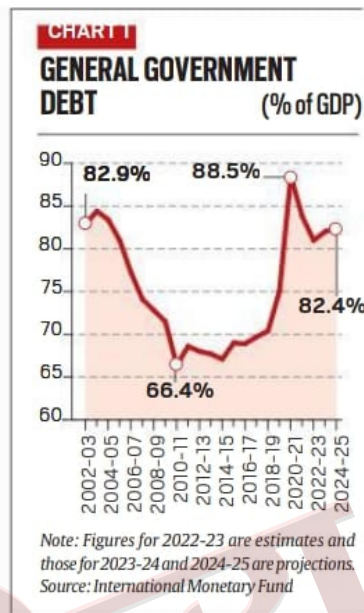
That ratio fell to a low of 66.4% in 2010-11 during the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) regime. It rose gradually to 67.7% in 2013-14 and 70.4% in 2018-19, at the end of the UPA's tenure and the Modi government's first term respectively.

The Modi government's second innings saw the debt-GDP ratio soar to 75% in 2019-20 and peak at 88.5% in 2020-21, before easing to 83.8% and 81% in the following two fiscal years (April-March). The IMF has projected the ratio at 82% in the current fiscal and 82.4% for 2024-25, which is still close to the high levels of the early 2000s (chart 1).

What does public debt entail?

Government debt is basically the outstanding domestic and foreign loans raised by the Centre and states — plus other liabilities, including against small savings schemes, provident funds, and special securities issued to the Food Corporation of India, fertiliser firms and oil marketing companies — on which they have to pay interest and the principal amounts borrowed.

As per the Fiscal Responsibility and Budget Management (FRBM) law, which the Vajpayee-headed NDA government had enacted in 2003, the general government debt



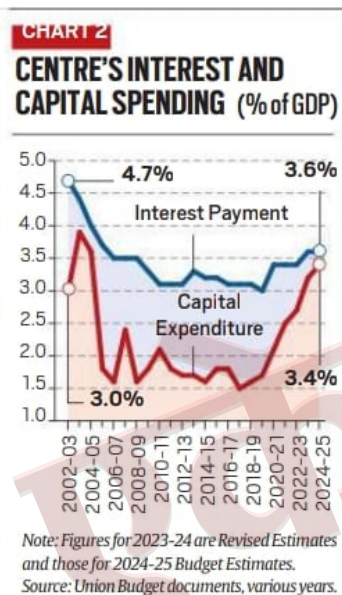
was supposed to be brought down to 60% of GDP by 2024-25. The Centre's own total outstanding liabilities were not to exceed 40% within that time schedule.

The Union Budget papers for various years, however, reveal the Centre's outstanding debt falling from 50.5% of GDP in 2013-14 to 48.1% in 2018-19 at the end of the Modi government's first term. Subsequently, it shot up to 50.7% in 2019-20 and 60.8% in 2020-21, before marginally dipping to 55.9% in 2022-23, 56.9% in 2023-24 and a budgeted 56% in 2024-25. That's well above the original 40% target.

In absolute terms, the Centre's total liabilities has more than doubled from Rs 90.84 lakh crore to Rs 183.67 lakh crore between 2018-19 and 2024-25. The previous doubling, from Rs 45.17 lakh crore in 2011-12, took seven years, one year longer.

The main result of debt levels building up is the Centre's interest payments: Chart 2 shows a decline in the interest-to-GDP ratio from a high of 4.7% in 2002-03 to 3.1% by 2010-11. The ratio more or less stabilised at 3-3.1% till 2019-20, before surging to 3.4% in 2020-21 and 3.6% in the current and ensuing fiscals.

Why has debt spiraled?



The most obvious reason is the Covid-induced disruptions that forced governments to borrow more — to fund additional public health and social safety net expenditure requirements — amid a drying up of revenues.

The combined gross fiscal deficit of the Centre and the states — the gap between their total spending and revenue receipts — went up from 5.8% and 7.2% of GDP in 2018-19 and 2019-20 respectively, to 13.1% and 10.4% in the next two fiscals. The Centre's fiscal deficit alone increased from 3.4% of GDP in 2018-19 to 4.6% in 2019-20, 9.2% in 2020-21 and 6.8% in 2021-22.

India was not alone, though. Most countries sought to mitigate the impact of the pandemic through fiscal stimulus and relief programmes. General government debt climbed from 108.7% of GDP in 2019 to 133.5% in 2020 and 121.4% in 2022 for the US; from 97.4% to 115.1% and 111.7% for France; from 85.5% to 105.6% and 101.4% for the United Kingdom; and from 60.4% to 70.1% and 77.1% for China during these years. Some had turned on the fiscal taps even after the 2007-08 global financial crisis; the US had a debt-GDP ratio of just 64.6% in 2007!

The Modi government, apart from spending more on income and consumption support schemes, also stepped up public invest-

ments in roads, railways and other infrastructure. The Centre's capital expenditure, as seen from chart 2, dropped from 3.9% to 1.5% of GDP between 2003-04 and 2017-18. It revived significantly thereafter to reach 3.2% in 2023-24 and 3.4% in the Interim Budget for 2024-25.

All these, of course, widened the deficits and only added to debt.

How can debt be reined in?

The FRBM Act envisaged limiting the Centre's gross fiscal deficit to 3% of GDP by 2020-21. That target, and also that of government debt, has since practically been thrown out of the window.

The Modi government has opted for a new broad "glide path" of fiscal consolidation. This one, announced in Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman's Union Budget speech for 2021-22, aims to attain a fiscal deficit-to-GDP ratio of "below 4.5%" by 2025-26. But given the high post-pandemic starting points in 2020-21 and 2021-22, the deficit ratios of 6.4%, 5.8%, 5.1% (budget estimate), and "below 4.5%" for the following four years amount to fairly sharp reductions.

While fiscal consolidation can ensure a check on borrowings and not too much being added to the stock of government debt relative to GDP — the IMF has warned against it crossing the 100% mark — there are two other routes as well for bringing the latter down. That would involve what one may call the denominator effect.

Government debt and fiscal deficits are usually quoted as ratios to GDP at current market prices. That being so, high nominal GDP growth — the denominator rising faster than the numerator — can go some way in solving the government's debt problem. GDP growth, in turn, can come from both real output increases and inflation.

The second and third way to drive down the government debt-to-GDP ratio is, then, to "grow" or "inflate" it away. This actually happened during 2003-04 to 2010-11 when general government debt, as already noted, plunged from 84.4% to 66.4% of GDP. That period, incidentally, also witnessed an average annual GDP growth of 7.4% in real and 15%-plus in nominal terms after adding inflation.

India probably needs a combination of both fiscal consolidation and growth (from output more than inflation) to deal with its current debt woes, which are no less a legacy of Covid.

FEBRUARY 5, 1984, FORTY YEARS AGO

NO TALKS ON ALIEN ISSUE

THE ALL ASSAM Students Union declined to hold fresh negotiations on the aliens issue saying that the atmosphere had been spoiled with the introduction of the Migrants Act, 1983. AASU president Prafulla Kumar Mahanta and general secretary Bhrigu Kumar Phukan said that the Act was passed to make Indians out of non-Indians. They said that from Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's speech, it was clear that she had no intention to solve the alien problem.

PM'S CALL FOR UNITY

PRIME MINISTER INDIRA Gandhi called for unity among all sections of the people of

Assam and other north-eastern states to bring about all-round development of the region. Mrs Gandhi urged the people to co-operate with the present government in the implementation of various schemes launched to help the poor. She said, "We should be united irrespective of caste, creed, language and religion to protect our sovereignty and strengthen the Centre."

KIDNAPPING IN UK

INDIAN DIPLOMAT RAVINDRA Mhatre based in Birmingham is said to be missing. It is suspected that he has been kidnapped by a group claiming to be a supporter of the Kashmir Liberation Front (KLF). A note slipped into the KLF office said that an Indian

diplomat had been kidnapped and that if by 19:30 GMT Magboot Bhat and other political prisoners were not released, the diplomat would be killed.

NCR'S DEVELOPMENT

A HIGH POWER officials' body to oversee and regulate development activity in the national capital region is being set up in a fortnight, the works and housing secretary Ramesh Chandra said. The body will be a forerunner of the statutory coordinating board, which will be set up at the central level for planning, monitoring and development of the region. The establishment of the statutory board has been held up for several years because UP, Rajasthan and Haryana had doubts.

NORTHERN IRELAND GETS NEW GOVT: THE DEADLOCK, AND THE RESOLUTION

YASHEE

NEW DELHI, FEBRUARY 4

NORTHERN IRELAND finally got a functional government on Saturday, two years after its Parliament was paralysed over new trade rules between the European Union and the United Kingdom, necessitated by Brexit.

New first minister Michelle O'Neill creates history, as she belongs to Sinn Féin, a political party linked to the paramilitary group Irish Republican Army, which has a long history of fighting the British.

The prolonged deadlock in governance had affected public services, while public sector employees had been protesting delayed salary hikes.

Unique position

Northern Ireland was created in May 1921 by partitioning Ireland. In 1922, the rest of Ireland gained independence from the British, becoming today's Republic of Ireland, with its capital in Dublin.

From the 1960s, Northern Ireland saw a bloody conflict between those who wanted to remain with the United Kingdom and those who wanted a free and united Ireland. Finally, on April 10, 1998, the Good Friday Agreement was signed to end the bloodshed, and gave Northern Ireland a unique system of governance.

Thus, unionists (the side loyal to the British Union) and nationalists share power in Stormont, the Parliament buildings in Belfast. Both sides have to cooperate for the government to work.

Collapse of 2022

After the UK (England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland) left the EU, Northern Ireland now shared a land border with an EU member, the Republic of Ireland. Since the EU and the UK have different product standards, border checks were necessary before goods could move from Northern Ireland to Ireland.



New First Minister Michelle O'Neill and Deputy First Minister Emma Little-Pengelly at Stormont in Belfast on February 3. Reuters

However, given the history of violence here, it was decided to leave this border alone, and checks were introduced between Great Britain (England, Scotland, and Wales) and Northern Ireland instead.

This system angered the unionists, who believed it undermined Northern Ireland's position with the UK. Thus, Sir Jeffrey Donaldson, leader of Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), refused to allow Stormont to function from May 2022.

The new deal

Various efforts were made to resolve the problem, including the Windsor Framework of February 2023, which introduced a system of green lanes for goods that would stay in Northern Ireland and red lanes (with more checks) for those that would go to the EU. However, for the DUP, these measures were far too little.

Now, a new deal has been reached. Its three main points, as stated on the UK's Institute for Government, include: The green lane is now the UK Internal Market channel, on which checks and customs paperwork have been reduced further; there's an "Internal Market Guarantee" which says that at least 80% of Great Britain to Northern Ireland goods will pass through this channel; and the UK government is extending a £3.3 billion package to help Northern Ireland's finances.

How secured credit cards help build credit score

By showcasing responsible credit management with secured credit cards, you can position yourself for a transition to unsecured credit cards

CREDIT PROFILE

Radhika Binani

A good credit score not only opens doors to multiple credit opportunities but also gives you the power to negotiate a better deal with lenders. However, individuals who are new to credit or those with a damaged credit score might face difficulty in getting approval for loans and credit cards. They would first need to build a good credit score to increase their chances of availing loans at a more favourable interest rate or a credit card that suits their needs. Secured credit cards could come as a valuable tool for such consumers to help build a solid credit profile.

Collateral needed

Issued against a collateral, generally a fixed deposit, secured credit cards require the users to make a deposit upfront. This serves as collateral, thus lowering the risk for the card issuer while offering a crucial chance for users to rebuild their credit. If the user defaults on credit card payments in future, the issuing bank has the right to use the deposit amount to cover their losses.

The deposit amount also determines the credit limit offered on the secured credit card. The issuer offers 80-90%, sometimes up to 100%, of the deposit as credit limit.

Apart from requiring a

Spend only as much as you can afford to repay, do not exhaust the entire credit limit and establish a strong repayment history

deposit, secured credit cards function the same way as unsecured credit cards. Cardholders can use it to make purchases online and offline, convert big-ticket expenses into EMIs and earn value-back on spends in the form of reward points or cashback.

Low/no fee

While most secured credit cards charge a very low or no annual fee and come with a basic rewards or cashback programme, some secured cards may also offer accelerated earnings on select categories.

For example, the IDFC FIRST WOW Credit Card offers up to 3X reward points on UPI spends and Kotak 811 Dream Different Credit Card offers 2X rewards on online spends.

You can maximise benefits with optimal use of the value-back programme on the secured credit card. You can use the card to earn accelerated rewards, discount deals and avail other limited period offers. However, you should not overspend just to earn more rewards.

Primarily, a secured credit card helps you rebuild a poor credit score or start your credit journey. Since

It is also important to regularly monitor the usage on your secured credit cards as well as your monthly credit score to see the impact

the activity on secured credit cards is reported to the credit bureaus, you can show responsible behaviour by making timely payment of credit card bills. Spend only as much as you can afford to repay, do not exhaust the entire credit limit and establish a strong repayment history.

If rebuilding credit is your primary concern, it is also important to regularly monitor the usage on your secured credit cards as well as your monthly credit score to see the impact and stay on track.

In addition to availing the benefits of a credit card, users will also earn interest on their deposit against which the card is issued. The rate of interest varies from issuer to issuer and also based on the fixed deposit tenure. With IDFC FIRST WOW Credit Card, for example, you can earn 7.5% interest on your fixed deposit. Hence, secured credit cards offer benefits in three ways:

- 1) You can avail general benefits of a credit card like EMIs, up to 50 days of interest-free period, reward points, etc.
- 2) You will earn interest on your deposit
- 3) With responsible us-

age, you can build or improve your credit score.

While selecting a secured credit card, you should compare different options and choose the one where the rate of interest on deposit is higher and, at the same time, the card offers benefits more aligned to your purchase patterns.

Making a transition

By showcasing responsible credit management with secured credit cards, you can position yourself for a transition to unsecured credit cards. Unsecured cards typically offer higher credit limits as well as better benefits. With an improved credit score and a history of responsible credit usage, you could be eligible for unsecured cards that better align with your spending habits and could help you save a substantial amount on your regular spends.

Card upgrade

Sometimes, card issuers take note of these financial habits and may offer an upgrade to their secured credit cardholders. However, if your card issuer is not offering an upgrade, you can consider applying for an unsecured card after using the secured card responsibly for at least 6 months.

Secured cards can prove to be the stepping-stones of building a positive credit profile by demonstrating disciplined usage, opening the doors to more credit opportunities.

(The writer is Chief Product Officer, Paisabazaar)

The scientists in Japan who scared flies to understand fear

To understand fear, researchers built a mini theatre for flies fit with lights, cameras, screens, and a scary movie. This study sought to find ways to treat psychiatric problems which have their root in exaggerated fear, such as phobias and anxiety disorders

Ravindra Palavalli Nettimi

Masato Tsuji has been observing insects since he was a child. He loves studying flies, so much so that he shows them horror movies and scares them - all to understand what happens in their brain when they're afraid.

"Our discovery may provide a clue to treat psychiatric diseases stemming from exaggerated fear, such as phobia and anxiety disorders," Dr. Tsuji, an assistant professor at the University of Tokyo, told this writer.

Do flies feel fear like we do?

It's easy to question our understanding of a fly's feelings. After all, the fly's brain and evolutionary history differ from ours. Fear is also a humanised emotional state. So we can't say for sure whether flies have feelings.

However, previous research has shown that flies exhibit defensive responses that resemble fear-like emotional states. The response leads to changes in the internal brain state. So flies offer an opportunity to study the neural and molecular basis of a fear-like state.

A horror movie for flies

To understand fear, researchers Dr. Tsuji, Yuto Nishizuka, and Kazuo Emoto built a virtual reality arena - a mini theatre for flies - fit with lights, cameras, screens, and a scary action scene.

What scares flies? A puff of air and a small black dot the size of a spider, their natural predator, moving around.

But first, the researchers had to get tiny fruit flies (*Drosophila melanogaster*) one by one into the mini theatre. It was a delicate task.

First, Dr. Tsuji tethered a sedated fly to a small rod with a dribble of glue on its back. Once it woke up, it would find itself on a small Styrofoam ball suspended over a thin layer of air created using an air compressor. The fly could rest or walk around on the ball.

After the fly became acquainted with the setup, the movie began on an LED screen in front. While the dot moved on the screen, a small nozzle over the fly blew puffs of air.

Flies avert their gaze

As the dot moved after an air puff, the flies started to walk on the ball, turning away from the dot. All flies responded to the dot only when paired with an air puff as well.

Some flies froze or jumped, but most turned and ran away from the threat.



Masato Tsuji, assistant professor at the University of Tokyo. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT. On right is the virtual reality arena to study fly behaviour. MASATO TSUJI.

According to Dr. Tsuji and his team's paper, published in the journal *Nature Communications* in July, a cluster of 20-30 neurons in the visual regions of the fly's brain is responsible for this behaviour.

The fear neurochemical

Dr. Tsuji's team took advantage of the variety of tools to genetically modify and study fruit flies to isolate a set of mutant flies. By manipulating and recording the activity of their neurons, they found that a neurochemical called tachykinin activated the flies' aversion behaviour.

That is, flies that had a mutation that deprived them of neurons that could release tachykinin didn't display the threat avoidance behaviour, even if they retained other visual and motor responses.

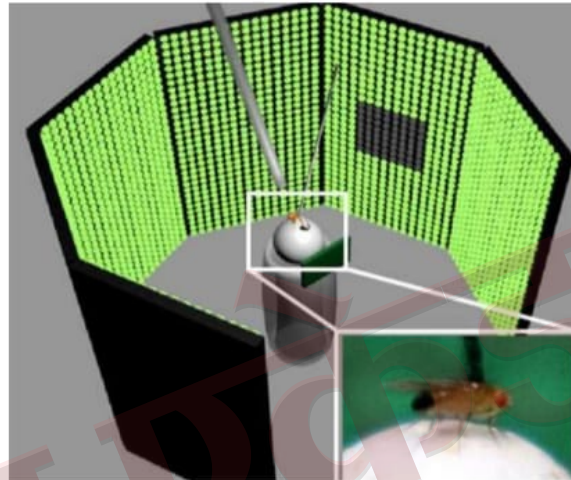
"This molecule causes anxiety-like symptoms in mice and humans," Dr. Tsuji said. "At the level of molecules or genes, perhaps the fear-like mechanism is preserved across animal species."

That could explain why we may look away from scary scenes in films or animals like snakes.

A neurochemical wave of fear?

Dr. Tsuji focused further on the finer details of the activity of tachykinin-releasing neurons.

Normally, an influx of calcium ions coincides with the electrical activity of neurons. More calcium in the neurons indicates an active neuron; less calcium shows an inactive neuron.



Flies exhibit defensive responses that resemble fear-like emotional states. The response leads to changes in the brain. So flies offer an opportunity to study the neural and molecular basis of a fear-like state

So a microscopy technique called calcium imaging helped Dr. Tsuji's team visualise how neural activity in fearful flies changes with time.

To their surprise, they found that the activity of the tachykinin-releasing neurons increased and decreased rapidly, as the amount of calcium in their neurons went up and down like a wave.

Such oscillating neural activity is rare for *Drosophila melanogaster*, though the evidence has been accumulating as the technology has developed to record such small and fast neural activity fluctuations.

When the team artificially generated the wave-like calcium activity patterns in their neurons, flies turned away from the stimulus. "That wave signal, we believe, is functioning as a fear-like command that drives the escape behaviour," Dr. Tsuji said.

An application

Neural activity oscillation occurs in the fly brain only during a fear-like emotional state. However, Dr. Tsuji speculated that

in the brains of the people with phobias and anxiety, the wave-like neural activity pattern could occur even in response to a neutral stimulus.

He expressed hope that their work would cast light on why phobic patients overreact to usually non-frightening stimuli. "If I can be speculative, one possibility is that humans have similar neural circuitry that drives the escape behaviour in the brain."

"If this possibility is true, perhaps we can intervene with such activity patterns in a targeted way to help alleviate the fearful symptoms," Dr. Tsuji added.

Mapping the fear circuit

The neurons regulating the aversion behaviour are in the visual region of the fly's brain, so the team wants to understand how they regulate vision. That is, how is visual information transmitted to elicit the fear response?

They are now working to reveal further details of fear and its effects on vision in flies. "We want to build a complete circuit diagram of how fear regulates vision," Dr. Tsuji said.

His curiosity as a child observing insects in his garden might one day help discover the intricate workings of their little brains sensing fear, and potentially benefit many patients suffering from phobic disorders.

(Ravindra Palavalli Nettimi is a project specialist at the Office of Research Strategy and Development at the University of Tokyo.)

THE GIST

Researchers found that a neurochemical called tachykinin activated aversion behaviour in flies

Flies that had a mutation that deprived them of neurons that could release tachykinin didn't display the threat avoidance behaviour, even if they retained other visual and motor responses

Neurons regulating aversion behaviour are in the visual region of the fly's brain, so scientists want to understand how visual information is transmitted to elicit the fear response

'Consensus with States and energy security are part of reforms'

Chief Economic Adviser says as the economy develops a momentum of its own, fiscal policy can go back to rebuilding the fiscal space which might be needed at some point in time in the future; he adds that it is a good idea to have a periodic review of decisions such as Goods and Services Tax and Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code and take a look at how effective they are, and what needs to be tweaked

INTERVIEW

V. Anantha Nageswaran

Vikas Dhoot

With the economy regaining momentum, it is time for the fiscal policy to step back, Chief Economic Adviser V. Anantha Nageswaran said, explaining the interim Budget. Identifying some of the next-generation reforms needed in the coming years, he said that recent changes, including the Goods and Services Tax, Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code, and direct taxes, also needed a periodic review. Edited excerpts:

This Budget largely stuck to a vote on account with some

signalling for the future, unlike the 2019 interim Budget. Was this based on the government's 10-year track record, which your recent Economic Review termed commendable?

That is the main reason. It's also important to articulate that you come up with a counter-cyclical fiscal policy when it is needed, and when the economy recovers, you must pull back the fiscal stimulus slowly in such a way that you rebuild the fiscal space for the next time it is needed. The problem in the world today, and part of the reason inflation was such a big surprise for many countries in 2022 and 23... is not because of the Ukraine-Russia conflict or supply chain disruptions; they might have added their bit. But the real issue was the stimulus that

stayed too much, too big, and for too long. The same thing happened in India in 2010-11 and 2011-12, when the crisis didn't affect us that much, but we still had a stimulus which stayed for too long. Then you have to deal with the aftermath. I don't think we want to repeat all of that.

At the same time, the government is not taking its eyes off the ball on financial inclusion and taking care of the poor. That's why the PM Gareeb Kalyan Anna Yojana was extended for five years.

So, this is the reason to stick to the framework of what a vote on account should be, and the projection of a 5.1% of GDP target for fiscal deficit. As the economy develops a momentum of its own, fiscal policy can go back to rebuilding the fiscal space which might be needed at some point in time in the future.



You had identified some priorities for future reforms, including health and learning outcomes, easier MSME (micro, small and medium enterprises) compliances, and the Budget mentioned next generation reforms.

Many reforms are not next-generation, but a continuation. We have been doing Direct and Indirect Tax re-

forms with State governments and stakeholders, because much of these lie in the realm of sub-national governments – States and below. Whether it is health or learning outcomes, skilling issues, land reforms, land conversions – the most important thing, and then the labour codes notification, which is key for employment generation.

All these things are predominantly State subjects or equally between the State and the Centre. I would consider those as the areas for next generation reforms. The other area is the energy security aspect in the context of energy transition. You can't do energy transition unless discoms are viable, which also falls in the realm of State governments.

Do we need a new prescription on discom

reforms after the UDAY scheme?

Ultimately, everything has to come down to – are you economically viable and able to recover user charges correctly? Packages can only take care of the legacy losses. But to move forward, we honour power purchase contracts and we charge an economically viable rate, which is not unaffordable and not unviable for power producers. Therein lies the answer. If you want to subsidise, you must be extremely transparent and provide some kind of targeted transfer of money to those households and businesses whose consumption you want to subsidise, so that it is not generalised.

How important are reforms like Goods and Services Tax rate rationalisation?

That is something the GST Council should look at. It's about seven years since the introduction and rates are being rationalised over time for different reasons. But I think you can take a look at it from a comprehensive perspective.

In the last Budget, the Finance Minister made a point about taking a look at the regulatory institutions, and frameworks and regulations in periodic intervals. A similar thing can apply to any policy decision that is in perpetuity. If it has a natural sunset clause, it's okay.

But for things that are there forever, it is a good idea anyway to have a periodic review and take a look at how effective they are, what needs to be tweaked or overhauled. Many of these things, like GST and Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code, come under that category.

French electronics major Thales to expand strategic collaborations with India

Dinakar Peri

NEW DELHI

French electronics major Thales is significantly expanding its investments as well as sourcing from India. A joint venture, Thales Reliance Defence Systems Ltd., in Nagpur is now the Group's global production centre for airport navigational aids, while Bharat Electronics Limited-Thales Systems in Bangalore manufactures high-tech products such as low-band receivers for the electronic warfare suite of Rafale jets. "We are trying to expand and strengthen our local footprint," said Ashish Saraf, vice-president and country director, Thales India.

India is currently negotiating the purchase of 26 Rafale-M jets for the Navy.

In addition, Thales will be establishing a maintenance, repair and overhaul (MRO) facility in the Delhi-National Capital Region with "multi-million-Euro" investment for its Indian airline customers focused



Ashish Saraf

towards avionics, Mr. Ashraf said in a written interview to *The Hindu*. "India is a strategic country for Thales with immense potential across our key markets including defence, aerospace as well as digital identity and security solutions. We take pride in our partnership with India built over the past seven decades," he said.

Elaborating on the MRO facility, he said that "combining the strengths of Indian civil aviation market with Thales's prowess in avionics", they are investing in an MRO set-up in India to provide "world-class service efficiency" to their airline customers. "In the

spirit of 'Make in India', we are also further building on our defence foothold by developing local services capacity to better support our Indian defence customers to achieve their operational readiness as well as provide all integrated logistics support in India, including maintenance, spare parts, and training," Mr. Ashraf said.

Stating that they have steadily built advanced in-country capabilities across manufacturing, critical systems, and services in India through local teams and collaborations, Mr. Ashraf said their objective has been "Make in India for India and for the world", enabling the local industry to play a greater role in worldwide markets. "We are investing in the larger supply chain ecosystem in India. Our purchasing volume in India in the last five years has been around €750 million. This supply chain ecosystem has led to creation of close to 2,000 indirect jobs in India," he said.

When taxman cometh for nuns' share

They have appealed to top court that by undergoing 'civil death' by becoming nuns, their income becomes that of their congregations; Kerala HC had said that canon law can't prevail over civil law

Krishnadas Rajagopal
NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court has decided to examine whether nuns earning salaries must pay income tax.

Christian missionary orders, from the Franciscans to the Carmelites, recently argued in the apex court that nuns and priests enter a state of "civil death" when they take their vow of poverty, and so need not pay tax.

Their "salaries" are not used for their personal expenses, but go to their respective congregations, they argued. The orders also contended that a nun takes the three sacred vows of obedience, chastity, and poverty after undergoing rigorous training.

Nuns, who live ascetic lives, cannot own property and will never marry. The income they earn becomes that of their congregations, which submit tax returns if necessary.



The Income Tax Department has directed educational authorities to deduct tax at source from members of congregations receiving salaries from the government. GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO

"Once a person takes the vow of poverty, she denounces all her earthly relationships with the natural family. She undergoes civil death. Even if the natural parents of a nun die intestate, the assets of the deceased parents do not devolve upon the nun," said one of the petitions, filed by the Sister Superior of the Franciscan Missionary of St. Clare, represented by advocate Romy Chacko.

The various

ecclesiastical orders have challenged a December 1, 2014 Income Tax Department directive to educational authorities and district treasury officers to effect tax deducted at source (TDS) from members of religious congregations receiving salaries from the government. The directive was challenged in the Kerala High Court, but without success. The High Court had concluded that canon law tenets that a religious

congregation has "overriding title over its members", but cannot prevail over civil law.

The appeal in the Supreme Court has now argued that a person who undergoes "civil death" cannot earn an income. However, the High Court had reasoned that a person who was in a state of "civil death" cannot be expected to carry on "regular activities" and enjoy fundamental rights.

"The High Court has wrongly mixed up civil death and suspension of fundamental rights... 'Civil death' only means the assessee cannot earn any income and she loses proprietary rights. Civil death does not mean suspension of fundamental rights or to lead a cloistered life. The point is not whether she can practice any profession but whether she does it as a part of charity without earning an income for herself," said the special leave petition filed in the Supreme Court.

WHAT IS IT?

Ergosphere: making a black hole work

Vasudevan Mukunth

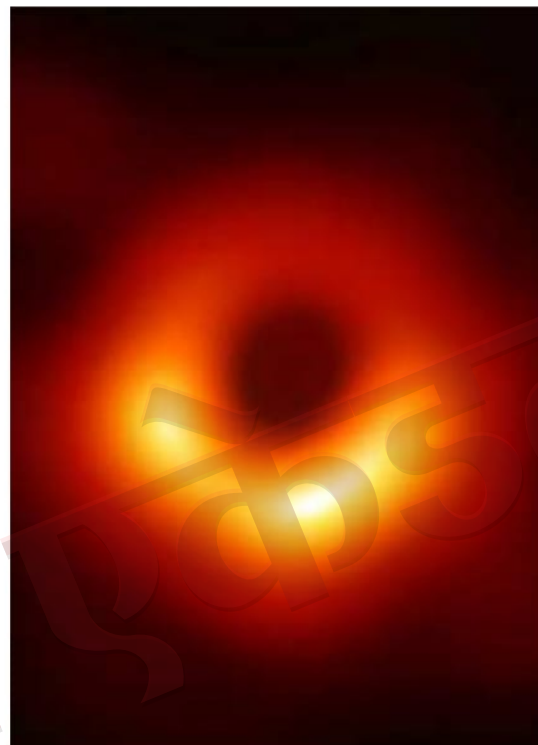
Rotating black holes (a.k.a. Kerr black holes) have a unique feature: a region outside their outer event horizon called the ergosphere. A black hole is formed when a really massive star runs out of fuel to fuse, blows up, leaving its core to implode under its weight to form a black hole.

The centre of a black hole is a gravitational singularity, a point where the general theory of relativity breaks down, i.e. where its predictions don't apply. A black hole's great gravitational pull emerges as if from the singularity.

The event horizon describes a sphere around the singularity: when anything enters this sphere, it can't escape unless it travels faster than light (which is impossible). Just beyond this sphere, a rotating black hole will also have an ergosphere – a bigger sphere that an object can enter and then leave if it's moving fast enough, but still less than the speed of light.

The label 'ergosphere' comes from 'ergon', the Greek word for 'work'. It is so named because it is possible to extract matter and energy from the ergosphere, but not from beyond the event horizon.

Some scientists have suggested using this possibility to send an object into the ergosphere and allow it to accelerate there along



An image of the black hole at the centre of the M87 galaxy, captured by the Event Horizon Telescope in 2017. EUROPEAN SOUTHERN OBSERVATORY

the black hole's direction of rotation, so that it comes out moving faster. This energy 'gain' will translate to the black hole losing some angular momentum.



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The importance of keeping personally identifiable information safe

PII is any data or information maintained by an organisation or agency that can potentially be used to identify a specific individual. Threat actors can gain access to exposed PII and misuse it to launch targeted attacks on individuals

Nabeel Ahmed

Recently, the Ministry of Corporate Affairs fixed a critical vulnerability in its online portal months after a cybersecurity researcher reported it to the Computer Emergency Response Team of India (CERT-In). The vulnerability reportedly exposed personal details – like Aadhaar, PAN, voter identity, passport, date of birth, contact number and address – of more than 98 lakh directors of Indian companies. The vulnerability also exposed the personal data of top industrialists, celebrities, and sports personalities in the country.

What is Personally Identifiable Information?

Personally Identifiable Information (PII) is any data or information maintained by an organisation or agency that can potentially be used to identify a specific individual. This could include information such as Aadhaar, PAN, voter identity, passport, date of birth, contact number, communication address, and biometric information. The constituents of PII vary depending on an individual's home country. However, non-PII in tandem with additional information can be used to identify an individual. Non-PII information includes photographic images (especially of the face or other identifying characteristics), place of birth, religion, geographic indicators, employment information, educational qualifications, and medical records.

All this information can be used to identify individuals accurately. And while access to one set of PII may be enough to compromise online security, access to multiple databases can be used to identify and target individuals.

What is the difference between sensitive and non-sensitive PII?

Non-sensitive PII is publicly available information and can be stored and transmitted unencrypted. This includes information such as zip code, race, gender, and religion. They cannot be used to accurately identify an individual.

Sensitive PII, when exposed, can be used to identify individuals and potentially cause harm. Some of the most important components that constitute sensitive PII are stored by employers, government organisations, banks, and other digital accounts used by individuals.

What are the risks of PII exposure?

Cyberattacks and weaknesses in digital infrastructure can lead to the exposure of citizens' PII. Threat actors can gain access to exposed PII and misuse it to launch targeted attacks on individuals. These attacks could range from phishing attacks with messages curated with PII information, to fraudulently opening bank accounts, and siphoning funds from accounts allotted to beneficiaries of government welfare programmes.

Threat actors may also use such information to obtain cellular connections, credit cards, and compromise the security of an

individual's digital accounts. Threat actors are also known to sell exposed PII information on the dark web.

What are the recent events where PII was compromised?

In 2023, reports emerged that a bot on Telegram was returning the personal data of Indian citizens who registered with the COVID-19 vaccine intelligence network (CoWIN) portal for vaccination purposes. A similar data breach was reported when an American cybersecurity company said that the PII of 815 million Indian citizens, including Aadhaar numbers and passport details, were being sold on the dark web. At the time, a cybersecurity company, Resecurity, said it contacted multiple victims who verified the validity of their data. The government of India denied allegations of a biometric data leak, as well as a breach in the CoWIN portal. It did, however, launch an investigation into the allegations that led to the arrest of a man in Bihar, along with a juvenile in June 2023. A data breach was also reported in the RailYatri platform in January 2023.

Additionally, 67% of Indian government and essential services organisations experienced over a 50% increase in disruptive cyberattacks, a report from Resecurity said. Furthermore, a survey of 200 IT decision-makers noted that 45% of Indian businesses experienced more than a 50% increase in cyberattacks.

How can one protect PII?

Individuals may not be able to prevent

leaks in databases of government organisations or service providers. However, they can take steps to ensure that their PII is not readily available to threat actors.

Look for HTTPS in URLs when visiting unknown websites. The "S" stands for secure and is used by legitimate websites to secure collected information from unsecured connections. Some browsers may also use a lock symbol in the URL bar to signify that a website is secure.

Use a VPN when accessing sensitive information using public networks. A VPN helps protect PII and other vital data by securing your online connection from prying eyes on public networks.

Keep a tab on your PII like Aadhaar, passport, PAN, Voter ID, and other important proofs of identity. Avoid sharing or accessing images or details of identity documents through unknown devices.

In case you do access them at a photocopy shop or devices owned by others, make sure to delete the documents even from recycle bins to ensure they are not misused.

Avoid sharing personal information on social media platforms.

In case your PII is leaked, be on the lookout for phishing attacks, that may use leaked information to convince you they are legitimate.

Keep a tab on your bank account transactions, credit cards, and credit score; a hit in the score could mean your PII has been misused to procure credit cards in your name.

Micro-credentials, the next chapter in higher education

Higher education institutes (HEIs) in India must play a much more active role in ensuring that students become employable by connecting them with the careers and job opportunities of tomorrow. This is because there is a gap between the knowledge that students acquire in HEIs and the knowledge they must have in order to become employable.

Micro-credentials are emerging as a disruptive way of bridging this gap to acquire 'just-in-time' modern skills and competencies. They are evolving as the new normal in higher education due to their flexibility, accessibility, and advantages. It must be noted that hiring practices are also changing, with a tendency to prioritise skills over degrees, and the endorsement of micro-credentials is on the rise.

The essence of micro-credentials

What are micro-credentials? They are short-duration learning activities with proof of specific learning outcomes that are validated through a standard and reliable assessment process. Micro-credentials are offered in online, physical, or hybrid modes at various levels, such as beginning, intermediate, or advanced. In contrast to micro-credentials, students must study for several years to obtain macro-credentials such as undergraduate degrees. In addition, micro-credentials can also be designed for life-long learners, i.e., working professionals who may not be able to attend a formal degree programme in a university.

Micro-credentials, as a path to life-long learning, are still developing. An obvious sign of this is how assorted terminologies, such as digital badges, micro-master degrees, nano-degrees, and online certificates, are being used for this short-duration learning.

Multiple players such as Atingi, Alison.com, Credly, Coursera, edX, FutureLearn, Google, LinkedIn, Microsoft, PwC and Udacity offer micro-credentials. Many universities in Australia, Canada, Europe, the United Kingdom and the United States are also engaged in providing



Mamidala Jagadesh Kumar

is Chairman, University Grants Commission (UGC) and was the twelfth Vice-Chancellor of Jawaharlal Nehru University

Higher education institutes in India can be the catalysts in integrating micro-credentials with existing academic programmes

micro-credentials. More organisations are expected to join this growing club.

In formal degree programmes conducted by HEIs, 'credits' are used to assign value to different forms of learning – lectures, tutorials, laboratory work, seminars, projects, internships and so on. In such macro-credential programmes, courses are generally designed to be of three to four credits, and one credit corresponds to one hour of lecture or two hours of lab work per week. Therefore, in conventional educational programmes, 'credit' is associated with the time spent in a classroom or a lab.

However, in micro-credentials, the trend is to associate the credit with the notional hours spent acquiring a defined minimum competency. As this makes micro-credential credits consistent with those in conventional higher education, they can be universally validated and recognised.

Regardless of this, what is required is clear quality benchmarking and a regulation of these micro-credentials to prevent significant divergences in learning outcomes and facilitate their easy endorsement in the workplace and higher education institutes.

India now has a National Credit Framework (NCrF), which spells out learning outcomes and corresponding credits a student should accumulate in order to progress to the next level of learning. One of the primary benefits of micro-credentials is that they are portable and stackable on a digital platform such as the Academic Bank of Credits (ABC).

Fostering trust is a key step

To ensure that micro-credentials denote a genuine acquisition of skills, they must be aligned with higher education standards in the areas of delivery, assessment, grading and the awarding of qualifications. Our capacity to devise reliable assessment methods is critical in fostering trust in micro-credentials, and in this task, the association of HEIs is of great importance.

For students in Indian universities, micro-credentials can open up opportunities in

integrating diverse skills as a part of their regular education, or they can store the credits on the ABC platform for redemption later or to get a separate certificate or diploma in addition to their macro-credentials. Depending on the duration and learning outcomes, micro-credentials can be given as between one to five credit short modules. Or, learners can accumulate multiple short modules to earn the total number of credits required to obtain a degree as specified in the NCrF.

There is much potential

As the NCrF is being implemented across the country, it is the right time for Indian HEIs to plan to develop micro-credentials in partnership with industry. The NCrF offers an opportunity for HEIs to examine the development of credit-based micro-credentials as a part of regular degree programmes. Broader deliberations must take place on the potential impact of micro-credentials and the additional value they can create in the tertiary education system.

Is there enough demand for micro-credentials in India? With the focus of the National Education Policy 2020 on providing skilled education to students right from school to the higher levels, and with employers looking for young employees with adequate skills and competencies to boost productivity, learners are increasingly viewing micro-credentials as a value-added advantage. Therefore, millions of students could be looking to earn micro-credentials either as stand-alone credits or as a component of their standard higher education.

Indian HEIs must serve as agents of transformation and consider introducing micro-credentials a vital element of their strategic institutional objectives. Further to this, regulators and HEIs must work towards harmonising micro-credentials with existing academic programmes by coming up with clear validation metrics.

Holding Israel accountable

The pivotal function of international law is to hold states accountable. The historic decision of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) against Israel must be seen in this light. This dispute arose after South Africa moved the ICJ, alleging that Israel's offensive military action in Gaza had resulted in the genocide of the Palestinian people, as defined in Article II of the Genocide Convention, 1948. While the ICJ is yet to rule on whether Israel is committing or has committed genocide in Gaza, it did indicate provisional measures, that is, issued an interim order to protect the rights of the parties under the Genocide Convention till the time it decides the issue on merits. At this stage, the ICJ has ruled that it was plausible that Israel was committing genocide in Gaza. Echoing how precarious things are, the ICJ said that the humanitarian situation in Gaza is "catastrophic", with more than 25,000 Palestinians dead.

Conditions to be satisfied

As Robert Kolb and others have argued, under Article 41 of the ICJ Statute, the court will indicate provisional measures if the following conditions are satisfied. First, the ICJ should have *prima facie* jurisdiction, that is, the act complained of should fall within the purview of the Convention under which the claim has been made. Second, there must be a link between the measures that the applicant requests and the rights to be protected. Third, the rights that the applicant wants to protect are plausible. Fourth, there should be a risk of irreparable prejudice if the plausible right is not protected. Fifth, materialising before the final determination or adjudication of the dispute.

All these conditions, in this case, are satisfied. The ICJ held that *prima facie*, it has jurisdiction over the dispute under Article IX of the Genocide Convention. It is



Prabhash Ranjan

teaches at the Faculty of Legal Studies, South Asian University. Views are personal

The ICJ's decision is momentous because it raises serious questions about how Israel has carried out its military operations, which Tel Aviv will have to answer

vital to remember that the ICJ's jurisdiction, in this case, is restricted to issues under the Genocide Convention. It has no jurisdiction over war crimes or crimes against humanity allegedly committed by Israel in Gaza. The court also held that South Africa has the standing to bring this claim against Israel because all countries that are parties to the Genocide Convention have a common interest in ensuring the prevention, suppression, and punishment of genocide.

The ICJ held that Palestinians appear to constitute a distinct national, ethnic, racial, or religious group and, therefore, are a protected entity within Article II of the Genocide Convention. Proving the crime of genocide requires establishing two elements: physical or *actus reus* and mental or *mens rea*. While the physical element focuses on aspects like killing or causing bodily harm to a particular group, the mental element, which is difficult to prove, is related to the intent to destroy at least a substantial part of the particular group. In the current case, given the massive death and destruction that the Israeli actions since October 7, 2023 have caused to Palestinians, the physical aspect is quite evident. On the intent part, the ICJ noted statements of several Israeli senior officials. For instance, the court took cognisance of the statement of the Israeli defence minister talking of a "complete siege" of Gaza with no electricity, food, and fuel. These dehumanising statements were sufficient to be plausibly read as implying the intent to commit genocide, as international lawyer Marko Milanovic has also argued.

Thus, the court found that some of the rights South Africa claims, and which it is seeking to protect under the Genocide Convention, are plausible. Subsequently, the ICJ held that there was a real and imminent risk of irreparable prejudice if it did not order provisional measures. This irreparable prejudice would

be caused to the rights found plausible under the extant proceedings, namely the right of Palestinians in the Gaza Strip to be protected from acts of genocide and the right of South Africa to seek Israel's compliance with the Genocide Convention.

Provisional measures

While the ICJ, unlike the Ukraine v. Russia case, did not order the ceasing of the military operations in Gaza, it did indicate six significant provisional measures. These measures require Israel and its military to take all measures not just to prevent the commission of genocide but also public incitement to commit genocide; ensure humanitarian assistance to Palestinians in Gaza; prevent the destruction of evidence related to allegations of genocide; and submit a report to the court on all the measures adopted within a month. As an obiter, the ICJ also said that all parties involved in the Gaza Strip conflict are bound by international humanitarian law.

The ICJ's decision is binding on Israel and constitutes part of its international legal obligations. If Israel continues its calamitous military actions, ignoring its obligations under the Genocide Convention, it will be a brazen violation of international law. Cynics might argue that none of this matters because the remedy for not complying with ICJ rulings lies with the United Nations Security Council, which has Israel's all-weather friend, the United States. But the ICJ's decision is momentous because it raises serious questions about how Israel has carried out its military operations, which Tel Aviv will have to answer. The decision also sends a clear message to several other world leaders craving for hot pursuit who often employ dehumanising rhetoric against their opponents. Israel must be careful of not just the courts of law but also the court of public opinion. Finally, South Africa deserves all accolades for showing the courage to bell the cat.



Please send in your answers to
dailyquiz@thehindu.co.in

THE DAILY QUIZ

On Cristiano Ronaldo's birthday, a quiz on one of the greatest footballers of all time

V.V. Ramanan

QUESTION 1

He was named after which famous world leader of whom his father was a big fan?

QUESTION 2

What is the nationality of Ronaldo and with which native club did he make his professional debut in 2003 before moving to Manchester United?

QUESTION 3

What connects Ronaldo to David Beckham, Eric Cantona, Bryan Robson, and George Best?

QUESTION 4

Which are the two major tournament titles that Ronaldo

has won with the senior Portugal side?

QUESTION 5

In 2009, Ronaldo moved to Real Madrid in a deal that was the most expensive association football transfer in history then. What was the amount involved?

QUESTION 6

If Ronaldo was C in the dreaded striking trio nicknamed BBC at Real Madrid, who were the two Bs?

QUESTION 7

Between 2008 and 2018, Ronaldo won five Ballon d'Or trophies. Apart from finishing runner-up to Messi on five occasions, to whom did he end up second-best in 2018?



Visual question:

What is the nickname given to this famous celebration when after scoring a goal he jumps into the air and does a mid-air pirouette? GETTY IMAGES

Questions and Answers to the February 2 edition of the daily quiz:

1. This Prime Minister never completed any of his three terms in office. In 2023, he returned to Pakistan after a self-imposed exile. **Ans: Nawaz Sharif**

2. This leader is remembered in India as the architect of the Kargil War. **Ans: Pervez Musharraf**

3. The first governor-general of Pakistan once called this leader "my right hand." **Ans: Liaquat Ali Khan**

4. This leader was the brain behind Operation Gibraltar. **Ans: Zulfikar Ali Bhutto**

5. This Pakistan Prime Minister was Speaker of Parliament. **Ans: Yusuf Raza Gilani**

Visual: Name the woman sitting next to Indira Gandhi. **Ans: Benazir Bhutto**

Early Birds: K. N. Viswanathan| Prashant Nain| Riya Virdi| Sadhan Kumar Panda

On Uttarakhand's uniform civil code

What was the debate surrounding the UCC in the Constituent Assembly? Can a State government implement a State-wide UCC? Why has the Supreme Court not given a definite order regarding the implementation of a UCC?

LETTER & SPIRIT

Aaratrika Bhaumik

The story so far:

The Uttarakhand Assembly is likely to pass the State's Uniform Civil Code (UCC) Bill during its four-day-long session this week. A State-appointed panel constituted to draft the UCC submitted its final report to Chief Minister Pushkar Singh Dhami on February 2. The report has also been passed by the State Cabinet. The introduction of a UCC was a key poll promise of the BJP in the run-up to the 2022 elections in Uttarakhand.

What does a UCC aim to do?

A UCC seeks to create a uniform set of laws to replace the distinct personal laws of every religion pertaining to subjects such as marriage, divorce, adoption, and inheritance. This stems from Article 44 of the Constitution which mandates that the state "shall endeavour to secure for the citizens a uniform civil code throughout the territory of India." The provision is a part of the Directive Principles of State Policy, which although not enforceable, play a pivotal role in governance.

Whether the provision should be included as a fundamental right or a directive principle was the subject of intense debate in India's Constituent Assembly. Opponents feared that it would dilute the rights of religious minorities in India and destroy its diversity. Member Naziruddin Ahmad from Bengal argued that it would come in the way of Article 19 of the draft Constitution (now Article 25) which guarantees the fundamental right to freedom of religion subject to reasonable restrictions such as public order, morality, and health. He also emphasised that such a uniform set of laws could not be implemented without securing the consent of the concerned communities. On the other hand, member K.M. Munshi contended that a UCC would not defeat the principle of freedom of religion since the state is empowered to make laws related to religious practices if they were intended for social reform. He highlighted various benefits such as promoting equality for women, since personal laws often prevent the elimination of discriminatory practices against women.

Taking a more ambivalent stance, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar said that although a UCC was desirable, it should remain "purely voluntary" during the initial stages. He stated that since the provision was merely recommendatory, it should not be imposed upon all citizens. The matter was settled by a 5:4 majority vote, with the sub-committee on fundamental rights headed by Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel deciding that establishing a UCC should not fall within fundamental rights.

What about the Uttarakhand UCC?

In June 2022, the Uttarakhand government constituted an expert committee headed by former Supreme Court judge Justice Ranjana Prakash Desai to examine ways for the implementation of a UCC. The move followed Mr. Dhami's promise that he would implement a UCC in the State if re-elected. The committee was supposed to submit its report in November 2022 but the deadline was extended multiple times despite the Chief Minister announcing in June last year that a draft UCC was ready.

Right from the start, the proposal has been met with opposition from rival political parties. Congress representatives from the State have alleged that the move is BJP's poll plank and that it wants to



Flatten out: UCC committee chairperson Justice Ranjana Prakash Desai hands over the UCC report to the Uttarakhand CM in Dehradun on February 2. ANI

keep the pot simmering to polarise voters ahead of the general elections. Pritam Singh, one of the two Scheduled Tribe (ST) MLAs of the State, pointed out earlier that the tribal community which comprises 2.9% of the State's population had not consented to the UCC. The Van Gujjar tribe, a Muslim nomadic tribe with a population of around 60,000, has also expressed apprehensions over the law.

What changes can be expected?

The draft UCC is set to focus on gender equality by introducing provisions that treat men and women equally, especially in matters pertaining to inheritance. It will also revoke practices governing marriage and divorce such as polygamy, *iddat* (mandatory period of waiting to be observed by women following the dissolution of a Muslim marriage) and triple talaq. The Code is also likely to extend an equal property share to Muslim women against the existing 25% share accorded under Muslim personal law. However, the minimum age for marriage for men and women is set to remain the same – 18 years for women and 21 years for men. Other issues such as divorce, marriage registrations, adoption, and social security for ageing parents will also be covered under the law. The committee has reportedly also prescribed the mandatory registration of live-in relationships.

Speaking to the media last year, Mr. Dhami clarified that the proposed UCC was not aimed at appeasing any particular community but was instead aimed at empowering all sections of society. "After its implementation, reservation of any class, marital rights, customs, etc will not be affected," he assured.

What has the Supreme Court said?

Over the years, the Supreme Court has deliberated upon the UCC in several judgments, but refused to issue any directive to the government since law-making falls within the exclusive domain of Parliament. In its 1985 judgment in the *Shah Bano Begum* case, the Court observed that "it is a matter of regret that Article 44 has remained a dead letter" and called for its implementation.

Such a demand was reiterated in subsequent cases such as *Sarla Mudgal versus Union of India* (1995), and *John Vallamattom versus Union of India* (2003) among others.

Reviving the push for a UCC, six petitions were filed in the Supreme Court between 2021-2022 seeking uniformity in divorce, maintenance, and alimony laws on the ground that they discriminated against women, thereby violating Article 14 (right to equality) and Article 15 (right against discrimination based on religion and gender) of the Constitution. Some of the petitioners included BJP leader and advocate Ashwini Upadhyay and former Chancellor of Maulana Azad National Urdu University Firoz Ahmed Bakht, among others. However, in March last year, a Bench headed by CJI D.Y. Chandrachud dismissed these petitions by observing that such issues fall within the exclusive domain of Parliament.

In January last year, the Court dismissed a petition challenging the Uttarakhand government's move to set up an expert committee on the UCC by highlighting that Article 162 permits the exercise of such powers. "Article 162 of the Constitution indicates that the executive power of a State extends to matters with respect to which the Legislature of the State has power to make laws. In view of the provisions of Entry 5 of the Concurrent List of the Seventh Schedule, the constitution of a Committee per se cannot be challenged as ultra vires," the order read. Entry 5 of the Concurrent List deals with "marriage and divorce; infants and minors; adoption; wills, intestacy, and succession; joint family and partition; all matters in respect of which parties in judicial proceedings were immediately before the commencement of this Constitution subject to their personal law."

What has the Law Commission said?

In 2016, the BJP government requested the Law Commission of India to determine how to formulate a uniform code given the existence of "thousands of personal laws" in the country. In August 2018, the 21st Law Commission headed by former Supreme Court judge Justice

Balbir Singh Chauhan submitted a 185-page consultation paper on "Reforms of family law" wherein it observed that the "formulation of a Uniform Civil Code is neither necessary nor desirable at this stage". The report stated that a unified nation did not necessarily need "uniformity," adding that secularism could not contradict the plurality prevalent in the country. It, however, recommended that discriminatory practices and stereotypes within existing personal laws should be amended.

However, on June 14 last year, the 22nd Law Commission headed by Justice (Retd) Rituraj Awasthi issued a notification to elicit views from various stakeholders – including public and religious organisations – on the UCC. As Chief Justice of the Karnataka High Court, Justice Awasthi had ruled in favour of the Karnataka government's order prohibiting hijab in educational institutions.

What happens next?

Following Uttarakhand's footsteps, two other BJP-ruled States – Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat – have appointed committees to initiate the formulation of a UCC. A similar proposal was also a part of BJP's election manifesto for the Karnataka Assembly polls where the Congress eventually secured a landslide victory.

Whether the Centre is likely to propose a UCC at a pan-India level is debatable. It will perhaps tread cautiously and await the outcome of the exercise undertaken by individual States first. The anticipated report of the 22nd Law Commission is also likely to be of persuasive value. However, in the recent past, there has been strong advocacy for the UCC by both Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Home Minister Amit Shah.

This renewed vigour towards a UCC is also likely to be affected by a pending query before the Supreme Court related to the "scope and ambit of the right to freedom of religion under Article 25 of the Constitution". The question was framed by a Constitution Bench of the Supreme Court in the *Sabarimala* case for reference to a larger bench. Despite the passage of three years, no progress has been made on it.

THE GIST

▼ The Uttarakhand Assembly is likely to pass the State's Uniform Civil Code (UCC) Bill during its four-day-long session in February.

▼ The draft UCC is set to focus on gender equality by introducing provisions that treat men and women equally, especially in matters pertaining to inheritance. It will also revoke practices governing marriage and divorce such as polygamy, *iddat* (mandatory period of waiting to be observed by women following the dissolution of a Muslim marriage) and triple talaq.

▼ Following Uttarakhand's footsteps, two other BJP-ruled States – Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat – have appointed committees to initiate the formulation of a UCC.

The path towards a pluralist civil society

During the inaugural session of the new Parliament, controversy erupted after Members were gifted copies of the Indian Constitution, wherein the Preamble appeared to have dispensed with the terms 'Socialist' and 'Secular'.

Interestingly, the civil society debate that followed remained hemmed in on whether either of these terms defined the true spirit of the Constitution. Without going into the merits of that debate, there is a largely unaddressed facet to point out; one which ought to comprise the basis of any such deliberative inquiry: the meaning of the opening words of the Preamble, 'We the People'.

The meaning or character of our popular sovereignty is often treated as a convenient myth or as a purely abstract assumption in our civil society discussions. Yet, as constitutional scholar Sarbani Sen argued in her book, *The Constitution of India: Popular Sovereignty and Democratic Transformations*, the revolutionary potential of the Constitution inheres in this very spirit of popular sovereignty. She looks at 'how the idea of popular sovereignty and its relation to constitutionalism developed as a result of inter-generational discourse in Indian political thought during the pre-founding colonial period'.

One can interpret the enactment of the Constitution as the culmination of a decades-long process of dialogue among contending political actors, wherein an important part of it focused on the character of the envisaged republic. The Preamble explicitly anchors the legitimising ends of the republic in terms of securing justice (social, economic and political), liberty (of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship), and equality (of status and of opportunity) to all Indian citizens.

When we reduce sovereignty of the "political community" to mere state sovereignty, we reduce the constitutional promises given above to vague aspirations floating in ether. The Constitution can only remain a living force in our democracy as long as the phrase, 'we the people', can somehow approximate to a discerning citizenry, which effectively discharges its agency as vigilant participants.

The elite versus non-elite spheres

The western tradition of civil society tended to grant such a watchdog function, of counterbalancing the state's drive to monopolise sovereign power, to an elite public sphere. Counterbalancing the state implies constraining the excesses of government power. This liberal public sphere (as described by theorists such as Jürgen Habermas), platformed the educated middle classes, held to be engaged in a rational discourse centred on individual autonomy and self-interest.

The English language arena in India, particularly in journalism and civil society activism, reflexively borrowed from this western discourse the directing role of a modernising elite. Further, the normative assumptions



Asim Ali

is a political researcher and columnist

The alternative is to have a civil society that functions as the handmaiden of an authoritarian state

underlying the question "who constitutes this modernising elite?" served to redouble the hold of the traditional elites on the public sphere. Broadly, the public sphere, tended to privilege the views of segments that skewed male, upper class and dominant castes.

Yet, this elite public sphere has largely remained inert in the face of severe challenges to prevailing constitutional governance.

Indeed, the more forceful democratic claims to the mantle of popular sovereignty have emanated from what we can term as the non-elite counter-sphere. This is the counter sphere of 'organisations and movements': social movements, farmers and labour groups, human rights activists, subaltern caste and tribal movements and their powerful examples such as the Una agitation by Dalits against caste-based violence; the Pathalgadi movement of tribals in Jharkhand; the farmers' movements of Punjab and Haryana; and the nation-wide protests by Muslims (led by women) against the Citizenship (Amendment) Act.

Often, the liberal public sphere, even while being empathetic towards these movements, seeks to cast them in the subordinate role of 'sectional movements' or emotional/irrational upsurges, which can at the most merit conditional support. Yet, if we refuse to accord these counter sphere political actors a position of complete equality within our civil society, we will lose the liberatory potential of these 'radically democratic' forms of popular assertions and mass protests.

Ambedkar's framing

B.R. Ambedkar had framed the Preamble in terms of heralding a "way of life, which recognizes liberty, equality, and fraternity as the principles of life and which cannot be divorced from each other: Liberty cannot be divorced from equality; equality cannot be divorced from liberty. Nor can liberty and equality be divorced from fraternity. Without equality, liberty would produce the supremacy of the few over the many. Equality without liberty would kill individual initiative".

Equally, he refused to harbour naive presumptions about the self-perpetuating character of these constitutional principles. In his essay, 'Buddha and the future of religion', he wrote, Buddha also "did not believe that law can be a guarantee for breaches of liberty or equality...In all societies, law plays a very small part. It is intended to keep the minority within the range of social discipline." Since the majority is constrained not by law but by morality, Ambedkar held that "religion, in the sense of morality, must therefore, remain the governing principle in every society".

It might be instructive to juxtapose Ambedkar's plea for a transcendent civil morality with Gandhi's conception of swaraj or 'self-rule'. In the monograph, *Unconditional Equality: Gandhi's Religion of Resistance* (2016), historian Ajay Skaria explains that 'Swaraj' for Gandhi did

not confine itself to a mechanistic self-rule, but a creative process of self-realisation through which one might reach out towards a more secure and substantive plane of freedom and equality. The means to achieve Swaraj was thus 'satyagraha' (defined as "truth force" and "love force"). "For him (Gandhi), sovereign power is not exemplified only in the state. Rather, every self is deeply fissured, and sovereignty is ubiquitous, always exercised everyday by the self," Skaria wrote.

Therefore, Gandhi's practice of 'ahimsa' cannot be divorced from his insistence on recognising a deeply fissured self. The politically fabricated wholeness or boundedness accorded to the self (whether 'Hindu Self' or 'Muslim Self'), mirroring the colonising Europe's axioms of national sovereignty, has led to much bloodshed in the subcontinent in the last century.

The folly of mimicking the imperialists' arrogance wrecked other countries as well, not least the militaristic Japan of the first half of the 20th century. The book, *Japan's Orient: Rendering Pasts into History* (1995), uncovers how Japanese violent militarism was built on the fundamental assumption of a perfected modern self. This construction of this supremely confident self necessitated the reflexive displacement of the western Orientalist category of a 'backward Other' from itself onto other subordinated peoples. According to Tanaka, Japan's historians constructed their own backward Orient, defined by the "Asiatic culture... Asiatic nature was characterized by its gentleness, moral ethics, harmony, and communalism; Japan's genius lay in its ability to adapt creatively only those Asiatic characteristics that were harmonious with its own nature; and Japan thus became the possessor of the best of Asia".

Having the right dialogue

It becomes clear that a progressive civil society in India can only be a plural civil society, if it is structured on the free and equal participation of every community. Regarding any particular community as socially backward or intellectually inferior (compared to any assumed authentic 'self') inevitably skids into perilously unexamined pride.

The path towards a pluralist civil society must, thus, be forged through honest and introspective dialogue. This is not the shallow but the commonplace mode of dialogue – a form of debate focused on achieving a framework of objectively correct knowledge. But the particular form of dialogue stressed by Gandhi, Ambedkar and modern theorists of deliberative democracy seeks to understand the position of the 'other'. It is through this empathetic engagement with the concerns and the world views of 'others' that we can build a stable foundation of mutual self-understanding, thus opening up possibilities for genuine solidarity. The alternative is a civil society with little self-knowledge beyond chauvinistic pride, and little agency beyond being the handmaiden of an increasingly authoritarian state.

Panchayats earn only 1% of their revenue through taxes

Most of their revenue comes from the Centre and the States as grants

DATA POINT

The Hindu Data Team

Only 1% of the revenue of panchayats was earned by them, with the rest being raised as grants from the State and the Centre, show data. Specifically, 80% of the revenue was from Central government grants; only 15% was from State government grants. Consequently, the revenue raised by panchayats formed a minuscule share of the States' own revenue.

Panchayats act on three levels – gram sabhas, panchayat samithis, and zila parishads. They are responsible for a variety of tasks including agriculture, rural housing, water management, rural electrification, healthcare, and sanitation. In some cases, zila parishads are also responsible for maintaining schools, hospitals, dispensaries, and minor irrigation projects.

However, due to dependence on the Centre and the State for their funds, most panchayats suffer from interference from the top two tiers of the system, according to news reports. In August last year, several panchayat heads protested in Chennai asking for independence of the Panchayati Raj. A news report from Telangana last year stated that the failure of the State government in releasing funds on time forced sarpanches to use private funds. The Standing Committee on Rural Development and Panchayati Raj said in March last year that 19 out of 34 State/Union Territories did not receive any funds under the Rashtriya Gram Swaraj Abhiyan scheme in FY23. The programme was started for building capacity and training elected representatives.

The recently released report by the Reserve Bank of India on the finances of Panchayati Raj Institutions for 2022-23 argues that one of the ways forward is to promote greater decentralisation and empower local leaders and officials. According to the report, pan-

chayats had recorded a total revenue of ₹35,354 crore in 2022-23 (Chart 1). Of this, just ₹737 crore was earned by their own tax revenue. Panchayats can earn this through taxes on profession and trades, land revenue, stamps and registration fees, taxes on property, and service tax.

Panchayats also earned ₹1,494 crore through non-tax revenue, which is mostly earnings from interest payments and Panchayati Raj programmes. In contrast, they earned ₹24,699 crore as grants from the Central government and ₹8,148 crore as grants from the State governments. Chart 2 shows these numbers per panchayat.

In 2022-23, each panchayat earned just ₹21,000 as its own tax revenue and ₹73,000 as non-tax revenue. In contrast, each panchayat earned about ₹17 lakh as grants from the Central government and more than ₹3.25 lakh as grants from the State governments. In essence, just 1% of panchayats' revenue comes from their own revenue (Chart 3).

When we look at the average revenue earned per panchayat in 2022-23, there are wide variations among States. In Kerala, the average revenue raised by each panchayat was over ₹60 lakh in 2022-23. West Bengal came a close second with an average revenue of ₹57 lakh per panchayat. The revenue was over ₹30 lakh per panchayat in Assam, Bihar, Karnataka, Odisha, Sikkim, and Tamil Nadu; and less than ₹6 lakh in Andhra Pradesh, Haryana, Mizoram, Punjab, and Uttarakhand (Chart 4).

Due to meagre revenue raising potential, panchayats' share in the respective State's own revenue was poor. For instance, in Andhra Pradesh, revenue receipts of panchayats formed just 0.1% of the State's own revenue. The revenue of panchayats in Uttar Pradesh formed 2.5% of the State's own revenue, the highest among States.

Chart 5 shows the revenue of panchayats as a share of State's own revenue in 2022-23.

Too top heavy

The charts are based on data collated from the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) report titled, 'Finances of Panchayati Raj Institutions'



Chart 1: The chart shows the revenue receipts of panchayats in 2022-23. Figures in ₹ crore

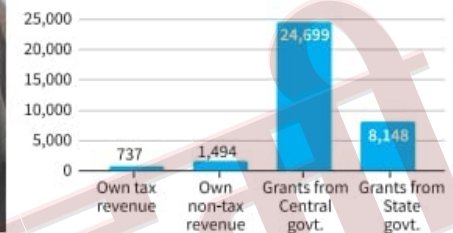


Chart 2: The chart shows the average revenue per panchayat in 2022-23. Figures in ₹ thousand

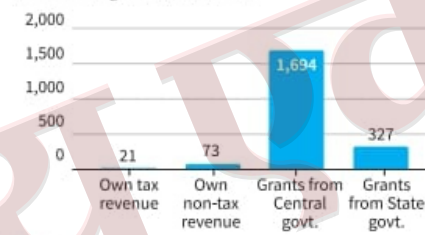


Chart 3: The chart shows revenue per Panchayat in percentage terms in 2022-23

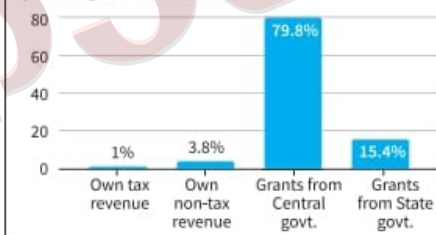


Chart 4: The chart shows the average revenue per panchayat across States in 2022-23. Figures in ₹ lakh

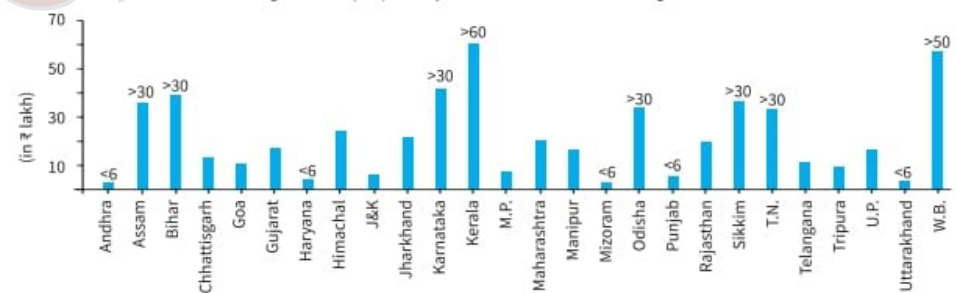
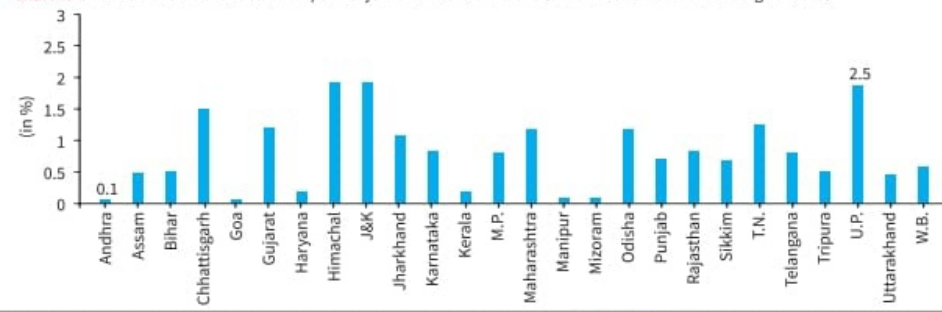


Chart 5: The chart shows the revenue of panchayats as a share of State's own revenue in 2022-23. Figures in %



U.S., U.K. hit Houthi targets in Yemen



A Tomahawk land-attack missile being launched by the U.S. against Houthi military targets in Yemen on Saturday. REUTERS

Reuters

WASHINGTON/ADEN/
BAGHDAD

The United States and Britain launched strikes against 36 Houthi targets in Yemen, in the second day of major U.S. operations against Iran-linked groups following a deadly drone strike in Jordan that killed three American soldiers last weekend.

The strikes late on Saturday hit buried weapons storage facilities, missile systems, launchers and

other capabilities the Houthis have used to attack Red Sea shipping, the Pentagon said, adding it targeted 13 locations across the country.

Houthi military spokesperson Yahya Sarea said the strikes “will not pass without a response and consequences”. The Houthis did not announce any casualties.

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IRAN ISSUES WARNING

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