

## Amended forest, biodiversity laws



The seamless passage of the Biological Diversity (Amendment) Bill, 2021, and the Forest Conservation (Amendment) Bill, 2023, in the Lok Sabha and the Rajya Sabha, effectively undermining regulatory powers contained in the parent laws, namely, the Biological Diversity Act (BDA) 2002 and the Forest Conservation Act (FCA) 1980.

the BDA amendments were pushed through rejecting all but one of the 21 recommendations proposed by the Joint Parliamentary Committee (JPC) that reviewed the Bill. The implications of these amendments on the country's socioeconomic and ecological securities are immense and deeply worrying.

In the case of the BDA, criminal prosecution of violators has been done away with, which is likely to encourage biopiracy; the National Biodiversity Authority, which was originally established as an autonomous regulator, is now a body consisting of 16 Central government officials and four officials from State biodiversity boards, ending the possibility of it functioning independently; the unclear rendering of the term 'benefit claimers' and non-specification of 'codified traditional knowledge', a term that is repeatedly used, open up a Pandora's box on the implementation of the access and benefit-sharing protocol'; and exempting AYUSH practitioners from complying with the law will, in all likelihood, make biodiversity management committees mere window dressing in the regulatory schema.

The new FCA removes the protection accorded to "deemed forests" by the 1996 Godavarman judgment, opening up as much as 25 per cent of the nation's forests to urbanisation, mining, polluting industries, and infrastructure development. This is likely to prevent millions of tribal people and other forest-dwelling communities in such regions from securing their rights

under the Forest Rights Act 2006 (FRA). It opens up all forested areas 100 km from the borders, or Line of Control, or Line of Actual Control, for “strategic project of national importance and concerning national security”—with serious implications to the rights of communities who live there, especially in the north-eastern region and the trans-Himalayan region, desert ecosystems, coastal areas, and islands. It also allows for large permanent security establishments to come up in forested areas dominated by left-wing extremism, opening the door for weaponizing of forest laws. And it allows zoos and ecotourism projects to come up as forest activities while further weakening the power of State governments in deciding the future of forests.

## **Russia and CTBT**



Russia’s President Vladimir Putin has revoked his country’s ratification of the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), a move he says is designed to bring Moscow in line with the United States.

The 1996 treaty outlaws all nuclear explosions, including live tests of nuclear weapons, though it was never effective because some key countries did not ratify it.

Moscow on October 6 announced its intention to withdraw from the treaty to “mirror” the position of the US, which has signed, but not ratified the treaty.

With the abandonment of the CTBT, the last remaining bilateral nuclear weapons treaty between Washington and Moscow is New START, under which the two nations used to regularly inspect each other’s nuclear facilities and limit warheads. Russia suspended the

treaty in February. It is due to expire in early 2026. Russia has indicated it will remain a member of the CTBTO Preparatory Commission.

The treaty established a global network of observation posts that can detect the sound, shockwaves or radioactive fallout from a nuclear explosion.

Post-Soviet Russia has not carried out a nuclear test. The Soviet Union last tested in 1990 and the United States in 1992. No country except North Korea has conducted a test involving a nuclear explosion this century.

The Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, adopted in 1996, is the first international treaty to ban all nuclear tests. It has 187 states which have signed, and 178 which have ratified, but has not entered into force yet because of the failure of eight states, upon whose ratification the entry into force of the treaty depends: China, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Egypt, India, Iran, Israel, Pakistan and the United States.

The Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) is the only international treaty in force with a categorical ban on nuclear testing (Article 1(a)).

### **Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement (CECA) with Australia**



India and Australia have mutually identified 15 new areas for negotiations under their comprehensive free trade agreement. These areas include collaboration in space, mining, and sports. This marks the first time that these segments will be included in the trade pact currently being negotiated by India.

The CECA will seek to expand on the framework of the India-Australia Economic Cooperation and Trade Agreement (ECTA). Under the interim trade pact, Australia offers India zero-duty access to its market for about 96.4 percent of exports (by value) from the day the agreement is in effect. Meanwhile, India grants Australia preferential access to over 70 percent of its tariff lines, including raw materials and intermediaries like coal, mineral ores, wines, etc.

In the area of mining, India and Australia have formed a strategic partnership to secure the critical mineral supply chain. They will jointly invest \$3 million each in five exploration projects in Australia. The objective is to enhance exploration and extraction efforts, ensuring a stable supply of critical minerals to meet India's industrial demands and technology advancement.

Australia's International Space Investment (ISI) initiative supports strategic space projects that foster partnerships with international space agencies. In 2022, an expansion of the initiative was announced, specifically targeting India. This expansion aims to provide support for Australian organizations to collaborate on joint space projects and establish valuable commercial connections with the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) and the wider Indian space sector and provides grants to eligible projects.

Other recent developments that facilitate bilateral trade include the pilot initiative called MATES (Mobility Arrangement for Talented Early-professionals Scheme) to be introduced with an annual limit of 3,000 spots applicable for a period of four years.

MATES aims to establish a fresh pathway for Indian graduates and early career professionals who possess expertise and skills in specific areas of study, allowing them to reside and work in Australia for up to two years. Graduates with student visas can apply for work without support from a sponsor for a period of eight years.

## Electoral bond case



A five-judge Constitution bench of the Supreme Court starts hearing petitions challenging the validity of electoral bonds used to fund political parties. Electoral bonds provide anonymity to the donors and were introduced to curb the influence of black money in politics. But the bonds have been targeted for infusing opacity in the political-funding system.

The government implemented the electoral bonds in 2018. A press release by the Ministry of Finance in January 2018 said the government had notified the scheme to cleanse the system of political funding.

The concept behind these bonds was to reduce the influence of black money in politics and to provide a legal and transparent mechanism for individuals and corporations to contribute to political parties.

The Finance Ministry said in 2018 that electoral bonds would be a bearer instrument. In case of bearer instruments, generally, no ownership information is recorded and the holder of the document is assumed to be the owner.

The proponents of electoral bonds argue that they promote transparency by ensuring that political parties receive donations through formal banking channels, which can be audited by government authorities. Furthermore, the identity of the donors remains confidential, reducing the risk of retaliation or intimidation for their political affiliations.

However, since their inception, electoral bonds have been a subject of significant controversy, with many questioning whether they have achieved their intended goals or have instead facilitated opacity in political financing.

One of the main criticisms of electoral bonds is the lack of transparency regarding the source of funds. The donor's identity is not disclosed to the public or the Election Commission, which makes it difficult to track the origin of political contributions. This opacity has led to concerns that electoral bonds could be used to launder illicit money into the political system.

Electoral bonds were introduced with the intention of bringing transparency to political funding in India. However, the controversy surrounding them persists. While electoral bonds have made it possible for political parties to receive funding through formal channels, concerns about their impact on transparency and accountability have yet to be adequately addressed.

A report by the Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR) earlier this year found that more than 55% of the funding for political parties came through electoral bonds. In fact, for some parties, these bonds have become the only source of contributions.

## **Vocal for local**



The idea of the slogan vocal for local is to promote local industries and consume local wherever possible so that the long term effects of an increase in demand can be used to develop the domestic industries and make them gradually self reliant. This will help in the upscaling of production, and eventually, make India a manufacturing centre for the world.

Vocal for local gives unequivocal importance to the domestic industries and the small-scale shops and stores. In the times where we are struggling to maintain liquidity and regular cash flow, the vocal for local movement can also be seen as an impetus to reawaken demand and hence, to throw a lifeline to the small and marginal domestic industries.

If demand shifts in favour of domestic companies, then the advantage is three-fold. First, it will reduce dependence on foreign products, and hence, cut down on the import pressure. Second, it will give a fighting chance to domestic companies to survive through the crisis period. Third, it will fit in with the economic backlash against China, and place India in a strategic position to emerge as the new manufacturing centre of the world.

Also, the slogan vocal for local does not only mean that the products should be 'made in India', but the promotion of those products should take place to make those products competitive.

### **India potential investment site for new Irish sovereign wealth fund**



India is a potential investment destination for a new sovereign wealth fund created by Ireland to cope with digitalisation and climate change, even as the European Union (EU) member state eyes Indian firms for investments in technology, research and innovation.

The Future Ireland Fund is one of two new funds unveiled in Ireland's latest budget, and the government plans to put aside 0.8% of the country's GDP into this fund every year between now and 2035. The fund is designed to meet future costs from changing demographics, an ageing population, digitalisation, and the impact of climate change.

India figures prominently in trade and investment plans under a new Asia-Pacific strategy unveiled at the Global Ireland Summit in Dublin. The Irish government is looking to expand

its footprint in the region as part of its plans to secure 800 new investments and 50,000 new jobs in Ireland during 2023-26, according to the strategy.

Ireland's target of €100 billion in annual two-way trade with Asia-Pacific by 2025 has already been exceeded, and the Irish government is now looking to countries such as India, Indonesia and Japan to further drive trade.

## **Gaganyaan**



Gaganyaan project envisages demonstration of human spaceflight capability by launching crew of 3 members to an orbit of 400 km for a 3 days mission and bring them back safely to earth, by landing in Indian sea waters. Named after the Sanskrit word for craft or vehicle to the sky, the Gaganyaan project has been developed at the cost of ₹90 billion. If it succeeds, India will become only the fourth country to send a human into space after the Soviet Union, the US, and China.

The project is accomplished through an optimal strategy by considering inhouse expertise, experience of Indian industry, intellectual capabilities of Indian academia & research institutions along with cutting edge technologies available with international agencies. The pre-requisites for Gaganyaan mission include development of many critical technologies including human rated launch vehicle for carrying crew safely to space, Life Support System to provide an earth like environment to crew in space, crew emergency escape provision and evolving crew management aspects for training, recovery and rehabilitation of crew.



Various precursor missions are planned for demonstrating the Technology Preparedness Levels before carrying out the actual Human Space Flight mission. These demonstrator missions include Integrated Air Drop Test (IADT), Pad Abort Test (PAT) and Test Vehicle (TV) flights. Safety and reliability of all systems will be proven in unmanned missions preceding manned mission.

The Gaganyaan project plans to demonstrate human spaceflight capability by launching a crew (of around three members) to an orbit of 400 km in space on a three-day mission. The mission aims to bring the human crew back to earth safely by landing in Indian sea waters.

### **Same sex couples – verdict SC**



A five-judge bench of the Supreme Court that was headed by Chief Justice of India DY Chandrachud, unanimously ruled against legalising same sex marriage in India. The bench also ruled in a 3:2 verdict against civil unions for non-heterosexual couples.

In his opinion, the CJI has left it to the Parliament to decide on the issue. The CJI and Justice Kaul batted for civil unions for non-heterosexual couples. The CJI added that the SC cannot strike down the provisions of the Special Marriage Act (SMA) or read words differently. The focus of the petitions filed is the gender-neutral interpretation of the SMA. It is a secular legislation designed to facilitate inter-caste and inter-faith marriages. The petitioners have sought a broader interpretation of the SMA to include same-sex marriages too.

Justice Kaul said the legal recognition of civil unions for non-heterosexual couples represents a step towards marriage equality. But all five judges agreed that there is no fundamental right

to marry and in a majority verdict, the court has ruled against same-sex marriage. The majority view is that the legislature or Parliament must decide on bringing in same-sex marriage.

The top court had heard the arguments over 10 days in April and May. Arguments ranging from the right to equality to the right to privacy, the legal privileges and rights bestowed by marriage, and the impact of same sex marriages on children were made. Those opposing the petitioners included the Central government, the national child rights body NCPCR, and the Jamiat-Ulama-i-Hind, a body of Islamic scholars.

“All five judges agree there is no fundamental right to marry and in a majority verdict, the court has ruled against same-sex marriage. The majority view is that the legislature must decide on bringing in same-sex marriage. Justice Hima Kohli says she agrees with the view of Justice Ravindra Bhat, as does Justice Narasimha. The CJI and Justice Kaul had spoken in favour of introducing civil unions for non-heterosexual couples”.

### **Cabinet hikes MSPs for rabi crops**



The MSP for five other rabi crops — barley, gram, lentil (masur), rapeseed & mustard and safflower — have been increased in the range of 2.65 per cent to 7.08 per cent.

In absolute terms, the highest MSP increase as compared to the current year has been approved for lentil (masur) – at Rs 425 per quintal. It is followed by rapeseed and mustard (Rs 200 per quintal), safflower (Rs 150 per quintal), wheat (Rs 150 per quintal), barley (Rs 115 per quintal) and gram (Rs 105 per quintal). The MSP for barley has been fixed at Rs 1,850 per quintal, which is Rs 115 or 6.63 per cent higher than the current MSP of Rs 1,735.

Rajasthan is the top producer of rapeseed & mustard followed by Madhya Pradesh, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal. Two of the five poll-bound states – Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan – are among the top five wheat producing states in the country. The other three are Uttar Pradesh, Punjab and Haryana.

The hike in wheat MSP — by Rs 150 per quintal or 7 per cent — is significant as it is the second largest crop after paddy in terms of area coverage. In the crop year 2022-23, the area under wheat in the country stood at 318.25 lakh hectare, while production is estimated to be 110 million tonnes.

### **Foodgrain output is at record high: Govt**



The agriculture and farmers welfare ministry said that final estimates for food grain output in 2022-23 stood at a record 329.68 million tonne, up 4% or 14.1 million tonne higher than a year ago.

Official data showed that food grain output has consistently grown over the last decade from 257.1 million tonne in 2012-13 to 315.6 million tonne in 2021-22. Food grain production in 2022-23 is 30.8 million tonnes higher than the previous five years' average, the ministry said. It is reported that along with food grains, horticulture is also continuously reporting record production in the country.

As per this, total production of rice in 2022-23 is estimated at a record 135.75 million tonnes, up by 6.28 million tonnes from previous year's output. Rice output is also 15.36 million tonnes more than the last five years' average production of 120.39 million tonnes.

Production of wheat during 2022-23 is estimated at record 110.55 million tonnes. It is 2.8 million tonnes more than previous year's wheat production. It is also an improvement of 4.8 million tonnes compared to the average wheat production of 105.73million tonnes.

Total pulses production during 2022-23 is estimated at 26 million tonnes which is higher by 1.4 million tonnes compared to the last five years' average pulses production of 24.6 million tonnes. Oilseed production in the country during 2022-23 is estimated at a record 41.35 million tonnes, up by 3.39 million tonnes compared to the previous year's output

The ministry also said citing horticulture production estimates that output of fruits, vegetables, plantation crops, flowers and honey is also expected to have increased on year. Fruit production is estimated to have touched 108.34 million tonnes in the year 2022-23 as compared to 107.51 million tonnes in the year 2021-22.

The production of vegetables is estimated to be at 212.91 million tonnes in the year 2022-23 compared to 209.14 million tonnes in the year before.

### **Plan for \$30tn economy goal in govt focus**



The government is set to finalise a draft roadmap for India to become a \$30-trillion developed economy in about two decades for a projected 1.65 billion population.

The plan, work on which began in December, 2021, takes into account eight emerging key global challenges, including a “more affluent but polarised world”. The roadmap is in its final stages and is expected to be completed by the end of this year after another round of stakeholders' consultations.

The long-term roadmap will require structural and institutional reforms, a bridging of regional disparities, re-engineering of processes, developing excellence in certain specific areas, the recalibration of international engagements, the creation of human capital, and having a crop of global leaders.

Progress on the work will be evaluated at multiple reference points – India’s position in 2030, 2040 and then 2047. the proposed measures should boost India’s gross domestic product (GDP) to \$6.69 trillion in 2030, \$16.13 trillion by 2040 and \$29.02 trillion by 2047.

The projections for per capita GDP at current prices, based on the blueprint, is \$4,418 by 2030, \$10,021 by 2040, and \$17,590 by 2047, and the exports targets are \$1.58 trillion by value in 2030, \$4.56 trillion by 2040, and \$8.67 trillion by 2047.

In order to have a comprehensive and cohesive plan, the cabinet secretary on December 17, 2021 formed 10 sectoral visioning teams of secretaries covering rural and agriculture; infrastructure; resources; social vision; welfare; finance and economy; commerce and industry; technology; governance; and security and foreign affairs.

Each Sectoral Group of Secretaries (SGoS) was tasked to prepare vision document for respective sectors after extensive stakeholders’ consultations.

### **IT cos see 1st fall in headcount in 25yrs**



Nine of India’s top 10 software services firms, employing more than two million engineers, have seen their workforces shrink in the six months to September 30, the first time in more

than 25 years, as clients in the US and Europe cut spending amid rising economic and geopolitical risks.

The year-ending March 31 may, as a result, mark the first instance of Indian IT companies ending the year with fewer employees than at the beginning of the fiscal year.

With the six months to March typically softer for IT companies than the first half because of fewer working days, the year ending March 31 may mark the first instance of Indian IT companies ending the year with fewer employees than at the beginning of the fiscal year.

The IT services industry has been grappling with slowing growth as clients cut back on discretionary spending amid high interest rates and military conflicts in Ukraine and West Asia. Simultaneously, the rise of disruptive technologies such as generative artificial intelligence (AI) has raised fears that much of the work done by engineers now will be automated, posing an existential threat to the country's \$245 billion outsourcing industry.

The slowdown has been in the making for at least a year. By the end of September last year, headcount peaked for TCS, Wipro, Tech Mahindra Ltd and LTI Mindtree. The companies, together, have seen a 3.6% decline in their workforce since peak headcount, implying a net reduction of 77,578 jobs in the past 15 months.

## **Abraham Accords**



The Abraham Accords are a series of treaties normalizing diplomatic relations between Israel, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco, facilitated by the U.S. Administration between August and December, 2020. In the span of five short months, these four Arab states joined Egypt and Jordan in making peace with Israel. The agreements were called “The Abraham Accords” in honor of Abraham - the patriarch of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

**The Abraham Accords began with the groundbreaking Israel-UAE agreement in August, 2020.**

- The UAE and Israel have never fought militarily, but the UAE did participate in the Arab League boycott against Israel, which had been in place since Israel’s establishment in 1948.
- The agreement was the result of shared interests regarding threats posed by Iran’s regime and years of quiet/secret cooperation.
- Israel opened an international diplomatic office in UAE in 2015. Mossad chief Yossi Cohen made several secret trips there, and the two governments cooperated to fight the coronavirus pandemic.
- Both countries are interested in diversifying their economies and engaging with each other to achieve that goal.
- Israel agreed to freeze its plans for annexation/application of sovereignty in the West Bank as part of the deal.
- The agreement has led not only to diplomatic ties, but also cultural exchanges and grassroots cooperation between people in both countries. Since the accords were signed in September, 130,000 Israelis have visited Dubai and trade between Israel and the UAE has reached 1 billion AED.
- In a move widely seen as tied to the Abraham Accords, the U.S. agreed to sell advanced F35 warplanes to the UAE. This raised concerns among Israeli security officials that these planes could be used to threaten Israel in the future. U.S. and Israeli officials have discussed the issue and seem to have reached an understanding about ensuring Israel can effectively defend itself.

### **Israel and Bahrain announced a similar agreement in September, 2020.**

- They initially signed a declaration of peace, agreeing to normalize diplomatic relations, negotiate a formal peace treaty, and not antagonize each other. Officials from the two countries then began working together on the details of how they would cooperate in various areas.
- Like the UAE, there was longtime quiet cooperation between Israel and Bahrain. The King of Bahrain denounced the Arab League boycott of Israel in 2017. In 2020, Bahrain hosted the “peace to prosperity” conference which was led by the U.S. Administration and boycotted by Palestinian leaders.
- The UAE and Bahrain have since announced they would cooperate with Israel to present a unified front to the U.S. regarding the Iran nuclear deal and the Iranian regime’s ballistic missile program.

### **Israel and Sudan signed a normalization agreement in October, 2020.**

- This agreement is more complicated than the others because Sudan's government is going through a transition with the stated goal of becoming more democratic.
- There are some difficulties in implementing a normalization agreement, namely that Sudan must first repeal a domestic law that prohibits relations with Israel. Progress has also been slowed by opposition from some groups in Sudan and a precarious transition in the government.

### **Israel and Morocco announced a normalization agreement in December, 2020**

- Morocco had quiet diplomatic relations with Israel prior to open normalization. This was partly based on the long history of Jews in Morocco, many of whom fled the country to Israel. The Moroccan government has made efforts to preserve Jewish history and welcome Moroccan Jews who visit the country.
- The U.S. recognized Morocco’s claims to the disputed territory of Western Sahara, as an incentive for the Moroccan government to normalize relations with Israel. This was a controversial decision and it is unclear if the Biden Administration will adopt the same stance.



Recent military activities in the region puts a question mark on the future of Abraham accords and stability of the region.

### **What causes clean air fight to fail?**



Under the National Clean Air Programme (NCAP), the central government had approved the clean air plans of more than 100 cities in 2019. The programme aims to cut down pollution levels in these cities by 20-30% by 2024 (with 2017 as the base year). But there are serious questions about NCAP's effectiveness.

The Delhi-based Council on Energy, Environment and Water (CEEW) and Urban Emissions conducted an analysis of NCAP plans by 102 cities to find that there is no legal framework for reviewing and updating plans. The plans also lack a clear delineation of responsibilities. 45% of activities planned under NCAP have more than one responsible agency.

The other big drawback with the city planning approach is its limited scope. As roughly 30% of air pollution is contributed by sources outside the city, it warrants an airshed approach or regional coordination among cities and states, similar to what is being planned for Delhi-NCR.

Transport emissions typically garner the greatest attention in most plans followed by industrial emissions and dust. These are indeed major contributors to air pollution across most cities. However, the share of each polluting source varies across cities, and most city plans miss out on these local differences. Barely one-fourth of city plans had data on their local emission sources.

Around three-fourth of activities committed under the city plans fall under planning, monitoring, training, and related activities. Less than 25% of activities require on-ground action. Economic measures such as congestion pricing receive scant attention in these plans. Planned investments in building physical infrastructure such as installing pollution monitors also remain limited.

The lopsided pattern of the plans could be because of limited budgetary allocations as well as limited planning abilities at local levels. India's fight against air pollution needs much greater focus and year-long commitment than what we see today.

### **The National Cooperative Export Limited (NCEL) launched**



India's first multi-state cooperative society for exports, the National Cooperative Export Limited (NCEL), will promote the country's organic products and share half its returns with farmers. The NCEL will provide services to boost overseas shipments of organic produce. The NCEL will connect relevant ministries and Indian embassies to enhance market linkages and supply chains for exports. At least 50% of the profits generated by the NCEL will be given to farmers.

Nation's first multi-state cooperative society for exports will provide a global platform for the country's organic products and share half its returns with farmers.

The National Cooperative Export Limited (NCEL), being positioned as a premier enterprise, will extend a range of services to ramp up overseas shipments of organic produce.

Under the Constitution's Seventh Schedule, which divides responsibilities between the Centre and states, state governments have jurisdiction over cooperatives. However, the Centre has control over policy-making for cooperatives that operate in more than one state, known as multi-state cooperatives, such as the NCEL

The Parliament had passed The Multi-States Cooperative Societies (Amendment) Bill, 2022, which will govern NCEL. The law was brought in as part of a broader push by the Modi government to modernize the country's 115-year-old cooperative sector.

A cooperative society is a business jointly owned by members who share both profits and losses. Cooperatives are collective enterprises jointly owned by participating members who share profits and losses.

NCEL will connect the ministries of commerce and industry, external affairs and Indian embassies to boost market linkages and supply chains for export of farm produce, Shah said. NECL will develop into a "complete export ecosystem", covering procurement, storage, processing, marketing, branding, labeling, packaging and certification.

NCEL is launched in the cooperative sector with six objectives of increasing exports, enriching farmers, changing the crop pattern, providing global market for organic products, gaining a place for India in the global market for biofuels, and strengthening the cooperative sector.

