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Is India prepared for re-opening of schools amidst the prediction of a third wave?

- Disha Palkhiwala, Rhea Varghese & Surabhi Srivastava

The State Governments have given their respective decisions regarding the reopening of schools when the third wave of Covid-19 is right around the corner. According to the Ministry of Health and Welfare, India is registering an average of 43,000 Covid-19 cases daily. This number poses a threat to the students of Bihar, Telangana, Gujarat, Delhi, Tamil Nadu, Madhya Pradesh, Punjab, Haryana and Assam, among others where schools are all set to reopen in the coming days of September. Reflecting upon the ground reality, most of the parents, students and teachers have polarizing views about resuming offline schools.

Shubham Srivastava, a class 12 student from Bihar talks about his views on the same. "The situation in my state is normal with approximately 100 active cases as of now. We don't see a threat in reopening of schools," he says. On the other hand Malini Reddy, mother of a 14-year-old from Telangana, expressed her concerns regarding the safety of her child since the number of active cases are close to 5000 in the state.

Since the situation is disparate across states, authorities in the education sector are well aware of the challenges posed by each mode of learning and therefore several states have decided to adopt the hybrid mode of learning. Indore is one such city to implement this scheme whereby, students of classes 11 and 12 need to attend school twice a week while students of classes 9

and 10 will be called once a week.

In a recent conference concerning the resumption of schools in Delhi, the Deputy Chief Minister of Delhi, Manish Sisodia announced that no child would be forced to attend school against their parents' wish, and proper decorum, as far as the Covid guidelines are concerned will be maintained.

Yogeeta Gautam, a lecturer from Government Girls Senior Secondary School in Delhi, informed that the schools will be operating in two shifts with 50 percent attendance in each shift with an hour's gap between the two. However, the condition in Gujarat is completely opposite. Schools are running six days a week.

Many parents showed apprehension towards reopening of schools since the fear of the ongoing pandemic along with the prediction of a third wave haunted them most of the time. A child psychologist, Dr. Sujatha Muthuswamy from Madurai was quoted in Times of India, saying that several parents consulted her for their children who faced erratic behaviour, panic



Image Source: Indian Express

attacks, depression, and anxiety. She advised them to concentrate on the mental health of children rather than stressing over their academic performance.

The future of schools in the country is highly unpredictable. Only the ongoing vaccination drive and theories regarding the third wave will further determine the course of offline classes.

Energy Independence for India by 2047: Which technology will lead the way?

- Ashish Chandra & Debomita De

In his independence day speech, Prime Minister Narendra Modi emphasised the lack of energy self-sufficiency. India imports around 80 percent of its petroleum demands and 53

One of the pioneer missions aiming towards clean electricity is the National Hydrogen Mission (NHM) introduced in the union budget for 2021-22 which identified hydrogen as a major force to transform transportation in the country. Although most of the hydrogen produced in India is from fossil fuels which is also known as 'grey' hydrogen, a shift towards 'green' hydrogen produced from renewable energy and electrolysis is anticipated.

According to the TERI 2020 report titled 'The Potential Role of Hydrogen in India', nearly 80 percent of India's hydrogen production will be green by 2050. According to the report, the cost of hydrogen produced from renewables will fall by more than half, bringing it on par with the cost of hydrogen produced from fossil fuels.

The Prime Minister stated that a CNG network and a gas-based economy can be critical policies toward achieving energy independence. India is the fourth-largest LNG importer. Mukherjee, on the other hand, says that creating such a massive network is extremely difficult. He further said, "Pipelines are very expensive. Most of our CNG ports are located on the west coast, and building this network in Eastern India would be a huge undertaking."

The 2021 budget provided a capital amount of Rs. 1000 crore to Solar Energy Corporation India (SECI) and Rs. 1,500 crore to the Indian Renewable Energy Development Agency (IREDA). This will give a boost to funding for renewable energy projects in India and increase liquidity in the sector. But massive investments are a challenge for India right now considering the country's poor social infrastructure.

According to data from the Ministry of New and Renewable Energy, biofuels produce 32 percent of primary energy and are used by more than 70 percent of the population.

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Another Coronam passes by in Kerala

- Meenakshi Maidas, Riya Ashok Kumar & Suramyia Sunilraj

The annual harvest festival of Onam turned into 'Coronam' for the second time in the state of Kerala. To add to their disappointment, majority of the Keralites did not receive the promised 'Onam food kits'.



Image Source: Manorama

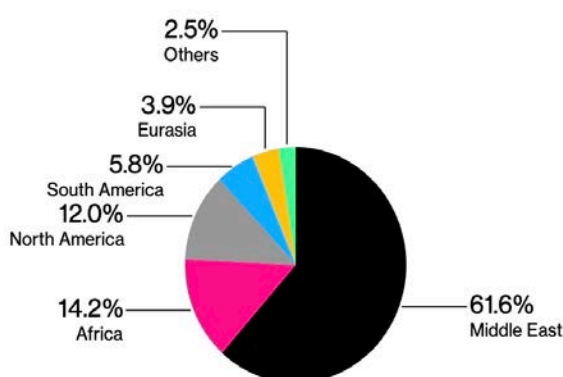
Taking in consideration the current situation of the people because of the pandemic, the Food and Civil Supplies Department of Kerala launched a statewide programme on July 31st.

At the end of the 10-day long festival, a sadya or big feast is prepared. For those with an unstable income, an Onam kit is a huge relief. The kit consists of all ingredients that go into the making of sadya, however, for many people, these food kits are yet to be received from the ration shops. Amongst a total of 90.96 lakh ration cardholders in the state of Kerala, only 11.24 lakh people have received the food kits so far.

Rajini Rani, a 'Kudumbasree' member (women empowerment programme by Government of Kerala) said, "When we went to collect our kits, we were told that they had run out of them. On returning the next day, I received one but it did not have as many items as there should have been for the pink cardholders."

Usually, the kits are distributed in the order of cardholders but problems arose when different cardholders did not show up to receive their kits on time. Antyodaya Anna Yojana (AAY) cardholders (yellow) were given first preference from July 31st to August 3rd as the concerned people fell below the poverty line.

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Petroleum Planning & Analysis Cell, India
Import data from April 2020-Feb. 2021

Image Source: Bloomberg

percent of its natural gas. The energy imports amount to Rs. 12,000 crore on an annual basis.

For India's prosperity, energy independence is crucial. Keeping this in mind, the PM has called for self-reliance in energy generation by 2047, which marks 100 years of India's independence. But the question is, which technologies will lead the way if India is to meet this goal?

Promit Mukherjee, a researcher based in The Energy and Resources Institute (TERI), New Delhi, believes that the future of energy lies in shifting from "oil to electricity". He raises concerns regarding the cleanliness of the grid during production, considering almost 70 percent of electricity in India is generated using coal.

Jharkhand government drops Hindi and Sanskrit from its new employment policy, stirs row

- Sangam & Nishit Navin

Ranchi | The government of Jharkhand, led by Hemant Soren, revised the list of mandatory languages in its new employment policy, which was released earlier this month. The state commission has availed 12 languages to the applicants, nine of which are tribal. Mundari, Kharia, Ho, Santhali, Khortha, Panchpargania, Kurmali, Nagpuri, Kurukh, along with Urdu, Bangla, and Odia have made it to the list.

Hindi and Sanskrit are no longer a part of the language options for candidates appearing for Jharkhand Staff Selection Commission (JSSC) exams under the new policy. Only employees in grades three and four will be compliant with the new rules. In the new pattern, the two-stage examination has been reduced to single-stage where candidates must score a minimum of 30 marks in any of the 12 language papers. This action sparked a political altercation in the tribal state, with the opposition BJP accusing the Chief Minister of playing the tribal-vs-non-tribal and minority appeasement politics.



Image Source: Times of India

In response to the controversy, Mritunjay Sharma, the BJP Jharkhand's social media in-charge, stated, "The government's decision to include Urdu for JSSC Mains exams while excluding Hindi, Sanskrit, and English is a blatant attempt at appeasement. It is worth noting that Hindi is the official language of the state as well as the language of instruction in

all state government schools. It defies logic to exclude the most widely spoken language in the state." Members of the Hindi-speaking community, which account for approximately 62 percent of the state's population, are concerned about this move toward social exclusion.

On the other hand, a section of tribal groups has long complained about Hindi's dominance in public and social spheres. They have demanded that their languages be prioritised in the state created for them. Numerous tribal political outfits, such as the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM), the Jharkhand Vikas Morcha (JVM), and the All Jharkhand Students Union (AJSU), have banked on this public sentiment to ensure their political future.

"The state government has also tried to selectively disadvantage people who speak languages such as Bhojpuri, Magadhi, and Angika by excluding them. The government, on the other hand, has gone ahead and included languages such as Bengali and Odiya. This is a clear attempt at dividing a wedge amongst the Jharkhandi people," Mritunjay added.

Ayush Prakash, a Panchayat Sachiv exam aspirant from the state said, "The government's decision to exclude Hindi comes as an absolute shocker for students like me who have been preparing to write the exams. I was born and brought up in Dhanbad, so have no exposure to any of the tribal languages. The exclusion of Hindi and English makes it impossible for us to clear the paper."

Despite the backlash, the ruling JMM has defended the move, claiming it is in the state's best interests. Pride on linguistic grounds is a notion deeply entrenched in Jharkhand's tribal groups. Due to linguistic differences from Bihar, a separate tribal state was demanded from the State Reorganisation Commission (SRC) in 1955 by the 34 Jharkhand Party MLAs. The demand was rejected due to the multiplicity of languages among the tribals. Jharkhand is home to 32 different tribal groups, Mundari, Santhali, Kharia, and Ho are the

most commonly spoken and have been designated as second languages by the state government in 2010.

In 2016, the JPSC recognised Nagpuri, Mundari, Kurukh, Santhali, Kurmali, Khortha, Panchpargania, and Ho. The state, since then, has witnessed a rising demand for the inclusion of tribal languages in the Staff Selection Commission (SSC) exam as well. Earlier, the former BJP government headed by Raghubar Das had similarly reserved the grade three and four in 11 districts solely for tribals hailing from the respective districts. The controversial decision was struck down by the Jharkhand High Court in 2018.

Microplastics flowing down in tap water in Goa

- Navamya G. Acharya & Meenakshi Maidas

According to an academic study titled, 'Clean Drinking Water: A pipe dream?' microplastics were found in tap water in Goa. They were found in 11 samples — five collected from Panaji, Mapusa, Margao, Marcel, and Cancona, and six from water treatment plants at Opa, Assonora, and Selaulim. The study reportedly showed the presence of 288 microplastic particles.

Microplastics are small plastic fragments that are less than five mm in length. From cosmetics to synthetic clothing to plastic bags and bottles, microplastics can be found in a wide range of products.



Image Source: Marine Conservation Society

"There is no doubt that there is plastic everywhere; not just in the oceans, rivers, lakes, and other water bodies but also in our drinking water. By the rate at which we are going, we will soon be consuming more plastic than food or water," said Nikita Bragança, a social and environmental Activist.

The study was carried out by Delhi-based research and advocacy organization Toxics Link and CSIR-National Institute of Oceanography. The study showed the presence of microplastics in all the tap water samples that were collected. This is a serious concern as tap water is consumed daily by residents.

The presence of micro plastics was more in the pre-treated water as compared to the post-treated water sample. This suggests that contamination may be during the process of transportation since most of the water lines are made of PVC pipes. Plastic pipes in drinking water distribution systems may be an important source of microplastics.

"Microplastics have been considered a serious pollutant that has affected the environment over the decades," said Mithila Prabhudesai, a medical student. She continued saying, "This is dangerous to the marine ecosystem as well as human health considering we use that water for consumption."

The CSIR (Council of Scientific and Industrial Research) - NIO (National Institute of Oceanography) stated in a report that the study conducted was only a preliminary one and needs a more comprehensive study in the future. In addition to this, the study couldn't be conducted in other cities due to lockdown issues and this won't be just confined to Goa.

"As there is no hard evidence proving that microplastics are harmful to human health, we don't feel a threat from it as of now," says Dr Prakash Usgaonkar, a retired doctor. Even though there is no documented evidence to date stating that ingesting microplastics can directly harm human health, the potential threat of daily consumption of microplastics cannot be ignored.

Assam-Mizoram border conflict: Why should the rest of India be concerned?

- Anand Singha, Ashish Chandra & Yagnoseni Das

Assam and Mizoram recently witnessed a security flare-up along the border. Six Assam police personnel were killed and over 60 injured in a clash with their Mizoram counterpart on July 26 in Vairengte, Mizoram.

According to Hrijoy Kanunga, a Cachar based journalist with Bartalipi Newspaper, and one of the firsts to reach the spot, "4000 Assam police commandos were already deployed at the borders under CM Himanta Biswa Sharma's orders by the time he reached there." Hrijoy stated that the residents of Vairengte had confirmed that they heard gunshots on the day of firing.

A middle-aged couple Kadar Ali and Raina Begum had alleged that their son, Imtiaz Ali was killed by a group of Mizos. "As we live near the border, we face adversities regularly. One morning our boys went to fetch bamboo but did not come back. We, the villagers, organised a search party for them, however, we got a report in the evening that they had been kidnapped by the Mizos from our side of the border. The boys were later beaten to death, and their bodies were returned to us after three days," said Ali. However, there was no proof of this allegation and it couldn't be verified.

One of the immediate reactions from the people of Assam was the unofficial economic blockade of Mizoram. The residents blocked National Highway 306 considering the landlocked nature of the state. Vanilla Chakma, a Mizo student of Royal Global University based in Guwahati said she was concerned about her parents back home, and had requested them to stock ration and food supplies for at least a month.

However, another Aizawl based student, Dennis O' Tanpuiya, said "It did not create that big of a problem since we have been getting supplies from Tripura and Manipur, and to some extent, from Myanmar as well."

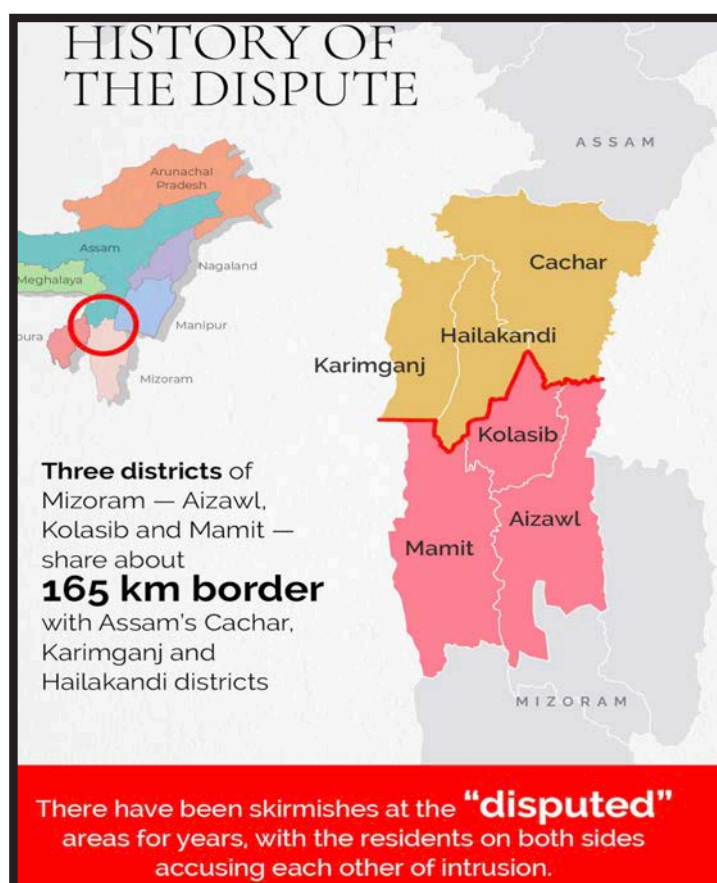


Image Source: News18

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GENDER INCLUSIVITY IN THE INDIAN ARMY

Female NDA aspirants ready to take the leap

- Sneha Mothey & Samrah Attar

New Delhi | The Supreme Court issued an interim order on August 18, 2021, lifting the 67-year-old ban on women's admission to the National Defense Academy (NDA) in Pune, allowing female candidates to appear for their entrance exam. Currently, women can only join the armed forces through the Officer's Training Academy and the Indian Military Academy. On September 8, the Centre informed the Supreme Court that it had decided to admit women to the National Defence Academy, which had previously been a male bastion for Armed Forces recruitment.

"The new verdict is a landmark victory in terms of women's rights. As women who live in India, we know what a great triumph it is to make even one step forward in the path of women's equality. So, I think it is a great achievement for women aspirants wanting to get into the army at an early stage and not having to go through the entire graduation and then appear for UPSC. It is something they should have introduced a long time ago," said Noyonika Roy, an engineering student who aspires to join the police force one day.

Many factors motivated young women to pursue their dreams and aspirations, and the court amendment actively encouraged them to do so. "My first inspiration would be my father, and what inspires me the most to pursue this path is listening to his stories about the daring adventures he has undertaken. After the provisional verdict was announced, my sister, who is also a defence aspirant, has been assisting me in preparing for my future in the armed forces," said Sanvi Shukla, a 13-year-old NDA aspirant.

Though the underlying issue of women wanting to join the NDA has been debated for a long time, a step forward has

only recently been taken. Many older aspirants expressed their delight at the prospects that will be available to future young cadets. "If I had the opportunity to give the exam when I was eligible, no doubt, I'd have given it. I would give my best shot" said Shreya Shukla, who has already taken the Air Force Common Admission Test twice and the Combined Defence Services Examination once, is determined to succeed.

Women are allowed to join the military through the OTA and IMA, but they are only guaranteed a five-year service commission (which can be extended up to a certain limit). Passing the NDA, on the other hand, guarantees the candidates a permanent commission as well as a pension and other benefits commission processes. As a result, these potential benefits will entice even more women, who are often reluctant to work in such demanding jobs.

"With the announcement of the final verdict, a permanent commission is ensured. Short-service commissioned officers are currently fighting cases for their rights. It will now be crystal clear. They will also have more chances to serve the country. My seniors had six months of training, I had a year, and now

they will have three years in the NDA, so the training period will be extended," explained a female officer who requested anonymity.



Image Source: News18

"A slight amount of modification is required, but I don't believe that will be an issue. The most significant changes are required in the Armed Forces. If a female officer commands a unit of troops, the troops may not take her as seriously as they would a male officer. As a result, this issue of gender discrimination must still be addressed," says Shreya Shukla.

"I don't see why we need to make changes for women, especially when it comes to curriculum and education," another aspirant added, "I think the training and education should be the same."

Following the court's decision, the NDA exam will be held on November 24th, with women candidates competing for the first time. We can only hope that this is the first of many decisions that will help to eliminate gender disparities. Such decisions may also pave the way for women in the country to gain the same level of respect and opportunities as men in the defence field.

NDA opens doors for women, experts speak

- Asmita Pant, Damini Solanki & Mansi Verma

In a landmark statement, the Union Government on September 8, submitted in the court that "the highest level of forces and government" have agreed to women being "inducted for Permanent Commission through the National Defence Academy (NDA)". The decision comes after the interim order passed by the Supreme Court on August 18 allowing women candidates to sit for the NDA entrance examination administered by the Union Public Service Commission (UPSC). The examination which was previously scheduled for September 5 has now been rescheduled for November 14.

Expounding "gender discrimination" as the basis of the policy, the bench comprising Justice Sanjay Kishan Kaul and Justice Hrishikesh Roy had passed the order after a Delhi High Court lawyer, Kush Kalra filed a writ petition in the apex court.

The Indian Army recruits officers through NDA, Indian Military Academy (IMA), and Officers Training Academy (OTA). Before this interim order, women were only allowed admission through the IMA and OTA for Short Service Commission (SSC).

The Indian Army first started inducting women in 1992 through the SSC. Initially, women could serve for a maximum tenure of 10 years, which was later extended to 14 years. Since they could not opt for Permanent Commission unlike their male counterparts, they either had to stay in the staff roles or retire without a pension after that duration. On February 17, 2020, the Supreme Court, in the Secretary, Ministry of Defence v. Babita Puniya case, ruled that women should be given commanding positions and should be granted Permanent Commission, equivalent to their male counterparts.

Additional Solicitor General, Aishwarya Bhati had filed a counter affidavit in the court, against Lawyer Kalra's peti-

tion, on behalf of the Union of India, which read, "because girls are not allowed to enter into NDA does not mean there is any difficulty in the progression of their career." However, a former instructor at OTA, Colonel K.K. Sharma (retd), disagrees. He said, "The training through SSC is just for nine months. The three-year-long NDA training tends to make the officers more skilled and dedicated."



Image Source: Citizen Matters

Lesser women joining the tri-forces, especially the Indian Army, remains a grave issue, and can be traced back to policy differences for men and women candidates. As per the data published by Press Information Bureau (PIB) in February 2021, there are 1.4 million troops in the Indian Army, out of which women constitute a minuscule of 0.56 percent. The corresponding figures of the Indian Air Force and Indian Navy are 1.08 and 6.5 percent, respectively.

The common explanation still given for the lack of women in the armed forces remains their vulnerability to sexual harassment, physical limitations, lack of infrastructures such as dedicated hostel facilities, toilets, and male subordinates' inability to take orders from a female. Tanu Shree Pareek, BSF's first woman combat officer, however, has different opinions. She stated that a woman in uniform, trained to defend herself, is

one of the strongest when it comes to sexual harassment cases.

Upon insubordination, Pareek said, "Subordinates go through training, conditioning them to respect and take orders from their superiors. I was a superior, not a woman. I have never faced a disciplinary issue from my juniors in the past five years. One needs to be professionally sound and qualified in what lies on their shoulders." Concurring with Pareek's opinion, Isha Janamejaya, an Education Officer in the Indian Air Force, said, "It is your rank that matters, not your gender. I or any of the other women officers I have interacted with have never faced any such gender bias."

Furthermore, busting popular beliefs on infrastructural bottlenecks, Pareek said, "In a civilized society, tap water supply and a toilet with a working flush is a basic need of every human being, regardless of their gender. It is an illogical assumption that men can litter around anywhere and sanitation facilities are infrastructural privileges required only by women."

The army fraternity seems to possess conflicting opinions on the order. Colonel Luv Sharma (retd) said, "Women are working in all fields today. They are pilots and doctors, among other professions. Then why not the Indian Army? We can deal with infrastructural issues with targeted decisions." While Colonel Viren Kumar (retd), begs to differ. He maintains that "in the fighting arm women certainly have solid limitations."

The petitioner in person, Senior Advocate Chinmoy Pradip Sharma underlined the need of the hour and said, "We can not say, let us first have the infrastructure, and then we will include women in the forces. I am sure the government will bring this up, but my counter argument will be that the efforts have to be time-bound. The administration needs to set a deadline and comply with it." Describing the implications of the long-awaited order, Advocate Sharma added, "This is definitely a step forward and will put women at par with their male counterparts, eventually."

Covid's 'Cave Syndrome': A new phenomenon causing social apprehension

- Riya Ashok Kumar, Suramy Sunilraj & Vishal U

The vaccination drive in the country is gaining momentum. According to the Health Ministry, around 15 percent of the country's population is fully vaccinated and more than half of the population has had their first jab. With the reopening of schools, colleges and offices, a sense of normalcy is being reinstated. However, most people have found it difficult to make this choice.

After spending over a year trying to ingrain the Covid-appropriate behaviour, people are finding it difficult to readapt to the pre-pandemic lifestyle. 47 percent of employees agree to the fact that flexible work-from-home arrangements allowed them to work more productively. The idea of returning to large social environments for work and education is causing anxiety in a certain section of people. After having spent the previous year and a half with switched off cameras and bandwidth issues, in-person interactions feel like a meddlesome ordeal.

It is becoming more common to confine oneself to known spaces out of fear of contracting the virus despite being fully vaccinated. This psychological phenomenon is known as the Covid 'Cave Syndrome' (also known as Caveman Syndrome). Due to this some people are unwilling to return to the offline mode of work. They would rather quit than go back to their offices.

Having taken both doses of vaccine, Chintalapudi Sriram, an employee at Amazon's product placement department says that "After having worked for about 2 years on the online space, being called back feels very unappealing. What is worse is that I don't feel comfortable with the idea of going to a closed space

with air conditioning and spending 8-10 hours, six days a week. I am anxious and have requested a delay in rejoining work from the office."

The situation is the same even for college students, who instead of feeling excited about rejoining college, dread the idea altogether. Ramya Rupa, a second-year college student at Malla Reddy Institute of Engineering said, "I am against the idea of college reopening and don't wish to put myself at risk. I don't want to find myself caught up in a huge social sphere. After having bonded online and gained a sense of comfort with those people, I will not be able to carry that forward in-person. I am not sure I can handle in-person conversations anymore. I already feel stressed out by the thought of it". Pushpendra Bomareddy, an outgoing 24-year-old, spoke similarly about this sense of dread.

Upon asking about the Covid 'Cave Syndrome', Dr Varun Krishnan said, "People felt that life without social activities and gatherings in the form of work, education and leisure was impossible. This pandemic and the drastic changes it brought about in everyone's lives has made them see that most of these activities can be pulled off from remote spaces. This coupled with the severity and unpredictability of the virus has brought about this change in people's mindset."

He feels that it is possible to overcome this condition by gradually unlearning everything that had to be learnt forcefully



Image Source: BBC

in the past year. "The key is to not rush into things but to slowly regain the confidence to step out, one activity at a time," Dr Varun added.

The suddenness and gravity of the Covid 19 pandemic has rattled the lives of many. Given the circumstances, it is natural to feel tense and anxious about stepping out into the world and live normally. This can be overcome with consistent effort and understanding the importance of unchaining oneself from the mental prison of scepticism. At the end of the day, humans are social beings and are bound to return to their interactive lives sooner or later.

Another Coronam passes by in Kerala

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The priority households (pink) had the dates from August 4 to 7, non-priority subsidy card-holders (blue) from August 9 to 12, and non-priority non-subsidy cardholders (white) from August 13 to 16. But things took a turn when the non-priority cardholders came early to get their food kits. The others were left with incomplete kits or worse, none at all.

"Those with the white cards, who were the non-priority non-subsidy cardholders and were supposed to be the last ones to receive the kits, were provided with the kits before any other category such as those under the AAY," said Arun P from Trivandrum, a construction contractor who has not yet received the kit.

According to the statement given by Supplyco, Kerala State Civil Supplies Corporation, there was a sufficient supply of items required for the kit but the public's failure to adhere to the days allotted for various cardholders resulted in the low rate of the distribution of Onam kits in 2021.

Energy Independence for India by 2047: Which technology will lead the way?

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Most of these are produced using food grains, first-generation biofuels, and have high social costs considering the still prevalent poverty in the country. Mr. Mukherjee believes that shifting towards second generation biomass, sourced from waste biomass, will revolutionize the energy sector as "India has abundance of biomass and this source of energy is completely independent of imports".

Jitendra Singh, Minister of State for Department of Atomic Energy, last year, in Lok Sabha announced the plan to increase the share of nuclear energy in India's energy grid from current 6,780 MW to 22,480 MW by 2031. However, Mukherjee pointed out the social and environmental impact of establishing a nuclear plant is too huge citing the example of Kudankulam, Tamil Nadu.

One of the biggest beneficiaries of India's march towards energy independence will be the country's foreign policy, considering the bulk imports that come from the Gulf countries. According to Mukherjee, while India may never achieve total independence in terms of energy, especially in a globalised world, we can still diversify its imports, particularly rare-earth minerals similar to what China has done. He further said that achieving 70-80 percent energy independence by 2047 will be a huge accomplishment for a country our size.

Rural Bengal's transgender community on the brink of starvation due to Covid-19

- Divya Shree, Souvik Saha & Yagnoseni Das

Kolkata | A group of 38 transgender people from Cooch Behar in West Bengal represents Koch Rajbongshi's old civilisation. Living in a leased one room-kitchen home in the middle of the rice fields in Bairangi Hatt, Matha-Bhanga block for the past 20 years, the last meal they truly enjoyed was right before the first lockdown. Their primary source of income is through performing the Jatra — an Assamese and Bengali folk theatre, that has its performers singing devotional songs like Bishohara and Satyapir in different areas of the district.

For the first time in their lives, they are struggling to pay their rent. "The landlord is gracious enough to let us stay," said Swapna Roy, 42, affectionately known as *Didi* in the community. "Drinking water was the sole way of keeping our stomachs filled," she continued. According to her, last year, they had to beg their neighbours for assistance and were provided with rice, lentils, and potatoes. However, this year seems bleak for them as they had to make do with the vegetable debris that was thrown out by the neighbours.

Manasi Dutta, another member of the community, was accosted and forced into prostitution by a local moneylender after she failed to return his money. "I was threatened with prostitution because I was unable to return the money and felt helpless. Eventually, I was forced to prostitute myself even though I did not want to," she revealed.

In July 2015, the West Bengal Transgender Development Board was formed by the state department of women and child development and social welfare to address the challenges and extend the advantages of all developmental initiatives. Hunger exacerbated the community's ongoing problems during the pandemic which only increased due to the lack of government measures. Even though the government acknowledged the third gender in 2014, only a few ration cards were issued during the pandemic in 2020, out of which, many of them are yet to access the cards.

"We have already scheduled a meeting with the local Gram Panchayat for a permanent solution of their ID Cards, which would ease out their procedure of collecting rations," said Soumya Sankar Bose, General Secretary of International Human Rights Organization, West Bengal. We will also contact the West Bengal Transgender Development Board," he added.

In an attempt to curb the situation, Rudrani Bose, the president of the Mahila Unnayan (Women's Welfare Association) said, "We have been fighting for women's rights and we learned about this unfortunate scenario." She assured that the association is collaborating with other NGOs to take the required measures to support this community.



Image Source: TOI

TALIBAN TAKEOVER: AFGHAN IN SHAMBLES

Future of Afghan women hangs in balance

- Shreya Gautam & Oshi Saxena

History is repeating itself after 1996 as the capture of Afghanistan by the Taliban has once again threatened the freedom of the country's female citizens. Recently, with the US forces departing from Afghanistan after the peace talks with the Taliban, the 20 years of democratic development in the country is falling in a backward spiral.

In their reign from 1996 to 2001, the Taliban banned women from:

- Working professionally
- Going to schools and studying
- Getting out of their homes without a male guardian accompanying them
- Showing their skin in public
- Visiting and accessing healthcare from male doctors
- Being actively involved in politics or even speaking publicly

Now, after 20 long years of slow but steady progress in terms of female empowerment, Afghan females are fleeing the country or going into hiding to save their lives amidst the wave of attacks under Taliban rule, specifically the women who were working in the fields of journalism, law enforcement, and healthcare. After the Taliban's takeover of Kabul on August 15, many media outlets immediately removed their female anchors.

Even the attempts of contacting an Afghan journalist were rendered futile when her husband conveyed that she's in hiding, both of whom wished to remain anonymous.

"My 19-year-old sister, who has worked with the UN along with major women-centric organizations in Afghanistan is just as helpless in this situation and even I am struggling to do something for my family while being here in India", said Fiza (name changed), an Afghan student from Pune University. Her family went into hiding after receiving death and rape threats.

With the world watching, the extremist organizations tried to vow on keeping women safe with their rights intact, but this act was immediately disregarded given their past actions along with the upcoming accounts of child brides, female rapes, and killings. As the Taliban is retaking territory, female students are reportedly being sent back and working women have been to go home and send a male family member in their place if they want.

Ayesha (name changed), an Afghan refugee living in Lajpat Nagar, Delhi expressed her fear, "No organization or leaders have been able to help the women of my country and I am always tense about receiving bad news." Even in the absence of the Taliban, Ayesha's childhood in her home.



Image Source: BBC

had ample struggles. After takeover, she is desperately trying to arrange visas and related documents for her family to come safely here. The participation of women in the country's politics has also been negligible even after 20 years of democracy. "That is the country's ground reality. With the new Taliban regime in power, I don't think women will ever get a place in Afghan politics; maybe symbolic, but not the real power," stated Jalees Andrabi, India Correspondent, Agence France Presse (AFP).

When the newly appointed acting minister of higher education in Afghanistan, Shaikh Abdulbaqi Haqqani, announced that education will be imparted in accordance with Sharia Law and that co-education will be discontinued, the Taliban publicly revoked girls' right to education as well.

Afghan refugees in India lose hope of a return to their homeland

- Shriya Handoo & Nishit Navin

Farhad (name changed), an Afghan refugee who moved to India in 2011, was very young when he and his family had to flee his country due to the fear of the Taliban. All his recollections of Afghanistan are based on the stories his parents have told him as his family decided to escape in 1996 after the Taliban took power for the first time.

Like Farhad, over 2 million people escaped from the Taliban rotten Afghanistan in 1996, seeking asylum in neighbouring countries. Farhad and his family migrated to Pakistan in the same year and stayed there for 12 years. Although they were safe from the threat of the Taliban, asylum seekers in Pakistan were constantly subjected to oppression and subjugation. Police forces demanded ransom from families of refugee that refused to comply, thus leading to torture and even illegal detentions.

"When things normalized in 2008, we returned to Afghanistan assuming we could rebuild our lives in our homeland. We could only stay there for three years as the government failed to provide even basic safety to the citizens," says Farhad. Now, with the avenger of Taliban the second time around, like Farhad, many other Afghans have given up on their hopes of returning one day.

For many, the brutal images of Taliban rule of over 20 years ago haunt them to date. Mashqoor (name changed), a 63-year-old refugee recalls, "Every day on my way to work, I used to witness a few bodies hanging on poles at public squares. The Taliban used to keep the executed hanged till 3 to 4 days for people to witness and take a warning from."

Those who live far away from the terrors of the Taliban are still concerned for their loved ones who are stuck in Afghanistan. They fear that though they survived the extremist outfit the first time, they might not be so fortunate the second time around.

Samim, a relative of Mashqoor, is trying to escape Kabul with his family. He has applied for a visa in India, Pakistan, and Turkey. But with the Taliban's grip growing strong around the Kabul airport, the escape looks highly unlikely with each passing day. "For those who lived through the first Taliban regime, the second coming is nothing short of hell," Samim said. "We are worried about our future, our lives. Will we even be able to live with dignity under Taliban rule?" He added.

With the Taliban regaining power, many Afghan refugees believe that they might never rehabilitate in Afghanistan again. Within India, the Afghans may have found a safety net, but the uncertainty of their future still lingers. Fahad says that without Indian Citizenship, the refugees are barred from many facilities. "UNHCR issues an identity card for the recognized refugees that allow us to avail basic facilities. But without an Adhar card, we are refused access to necessary benefits like a bank account or hotel check-in as many people are unaware about the legitimacy of the refugee card."

As of 2021, there are over 15000 Afghans that have taken refuge under the protection of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

Most of these refugees have been living in India for over ten years since fleeing their homeland. They hope to obtain Indian Citizenship one day. But with the controversial Indian law of Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) in place that expedited the citizenship process only for non-Muslims, their chances of obtaining Indian Citizenship in the near future is grim.



Image Source: Hindustan Times

Chaos engulfs Afghan students enrolled in Indian universities

- Atreya Raghavan, Saloni Dhumne & Pradyumna Kalagi

There are over 10,000 Afghan students currently pursuing their higher education in India. Indian Universities have traditionally, for years, at least till the pandemic hit, been a safe haven for these students belonging to the conflict-ridden nation.

After the recent takeover by the Taliban, the future of these students hangs in the balance. The Taliban, understood to be an extremist regime has typically had a regressive stance on education, the most recent example of which being banning co-education in schools. Although the Taliban has shown interest in making their policies more progressive towards education,

their past actions prevent many from believing that these policies will see the light of day. Consequently, many Afghan students have raised their concerns regarding the same.

Ahmed, a 23-year-old student from Jamia Millia Islamia currently resides in the Balkh province of Afghanistan. He is an Economics major who went to Afghanistan during the lockdown last year. After having lost a year, he who assumed he would return to India to continue his studies, says, "The situation here is very fragile. Taliban soldiers are patrolling around every day. Shops and banks are shut. We are scared to even leave our homes. In a situation where we fear for our very survival, education hardly appears in our list of priorities."

He acknowledges the promises made by the Taliban concerning education but he believes that they will be confined to paper. "In my area, boys will be allowed to study only till the 6th grade and girls will be denied education. The Taliban is not consistent with their promises everywhere in the country.

There is a real possibility that they might resort to their medieval tactics and deny us the kind of education which we could afford when the Taliban was not in power."

Ahmed says the Taliban has a special hatred against those who study abroad. "They look upon people who study abroad as traitors, and against Islam, and will go to the extent of killing such students." Ahmed has hidden all his documents fearing if the Taliban finds them, he would most likely be stoned to death.

He believes that the advent of the Taliban would accelerate the brain drain which has plagued his country for many years. "Afghan students are very talented. But many, like me, choose to go abroad because we find the educational atmosphere in other countries more conducive. With the Taliban in power now, I fear more people will try to escape, if they are lucky enough, that is." Ahmed expects the global community to support Afghan civilians with their basic rights.

Based out of Kabul, Fahim is a student currently enrolled in Delhi University. He shares similar apprehensions as Ahmed and says that the Taliban may not harm or kill existing students, but at the same time fears that they might be forcibly recruited into the army. "We might not have the freedom to do the jobs we wanted to. They may use the skills we have learnt for advancing their military propaganda, ultimately destroying our dreams."

He adds that he does not have a problem with the Taliban if they follow the Islamic rules correctly and give the citizens the kind of freedom they deserve in the 21st century. "We are not a developed nation and we will need well-educated, talented Afghans to stay here for us to get out of poverty," he concludes.

Full body paralysis to a paralympic silver medal: Yogesh's journey of perseverance

- Suramya Kaushik & Anuran Sadhu

Tokyo | Yogesh Kathuniya, India's ace discus thrower creates history in the Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games after clinching silver in his debut tournament.



Image Source: Hindustan Times

After being diagnosed with a rare neurological disorder at the age of nine, Yogesh Kathuniya's journey has been one of sheer willpower and determination to become a silver medalist at the Tokyo Paralympics 2020. Yogesh, 24, held the tricolour in his hands, wiped his tears, and thanked his mother profusely on August 30 after winning the silver medal in the men's discus throw in the F56 classification.

Kathuniya saved his best for last, finishing second behind Claudiney Batista dos Santos of Brazil with a throw of 44.38m in his sixth and final attempt (45.59m). But, as Yogesh's father, Gyanchand Kathuniya, highlighted, none of this would have been possible without the unwavering support of his mother, Meena Devi.

Yogesh was diagnosed with Guillain-Barre syndrome in 2006, a condition in which the body's immune system attacks nerves. Yogesh's hands and legs were paralysed within 24 hours of the attack, and he spent the next three years confined to a wheelchair. "Yogesh's mother was determined to get him back on his feet, and she succeeded," said Gyanchand, an Army officer. She learned physiotherapy to support Yogesh, and he was back on his feet within three years.

Yogesh turned his attention to para-sports in 2016 while he was pursuing a B. Com degree from Kirori Mal College, Delhi. He began by trying his hand at javelin throwing but later added discus throwing to his repertoire. Every day, Yogesh's mother, Meena Devi, would get up at three o'clock in the morning and drive him to the Jawaharlal Nehru Stadium to train, returning at 3:30 PM. "She even bought a scooter to tie Yogesh up with her and take him to his training arena," Gyanchand said. "His mother had a solution to every problem Yogesh faced. She is largely responsible for our son's success," Yogesh's father added.

Yogesh was visibly disappointed after making three foul shots and missing out on an Olympic gold medal. However, a defiant Gyanchand stated, "Every medal is a gold medal for us." In addition, the former world championship bronze medalist has promised his father that he will bring home the elusive gold medal at the upcoming Asian Games and World Championships.

"Prime Minister Narendra Modi called and congratulated Yogesh. Personally, this is an emotional time for me. "My son represented India, and people will recognise me as Yogesh's father from now on," Gyanchand said proudly. He was also overjoyed that Yogesh won his Olympic silver medal on Janmashami, an auspicious day.

Including Yogesh's silver, India has made a record at Tokyo Paralympics 2020 by bagging a total of 19 medals - five gold, eight silver and six bronze. Avani Lekhara (Shooting 10m), Sumit Antil (Javelin), Manish Narwal (Shooting), Pramod Bhagat (Badminton) and Krishna Nagar (Badminton) shined the brightest at Tokyo, winning a gold medal each.

Bhavaniben Patel (Table Tennis), Nishad Kumar (High Jump), Yogesh Kathuniya (Discus Throw), Mariyappan Thangavelu (High Jump), Singhraj Adhana (Shooting), Praveen Kumar (High Jump), Suhas Yathiraj (Badminton) and Devendra Jhajharia (Javelin) bagged silver medals, while Sundar Singh Gurjar (Javelin), Singhraj Adana (Shooting), Sharad Kumar (High Jump), Avani Lekhara (Shooting 50m), Harvinder Singh (Archery) and Manoj Sarkar (Badminton) clinched a bronze each.

Assam-Mizoram border conflict: Why should the rest of India be concerned?

Contd. from page 2

Many fear a change in relation between the two sister states. "This will obviously change the dynamics between the two states, and I fear that the people of Assam will start having a sense of hostility against the people of Mizoram. Many Mizo students have spent a huge part of their life studying in Assam. Both states depend on each other," Chakma said.

Internal security of the North-Eastern states is a huge concern for India. With the police of both the states now aiming guns at each other, the Central Government stepped in. Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) was deployed along the two states' borders to

maintain peace and North Eastern Space Applications Centre (NESAC) was asked to map the area via satellite for a scientific demarcation of the border.

The history of Assam-Mizoram dispute dates back to the formation of Mizoram in 1972. The root cause of the issue are the two notifications released under the British colonial rule.

While Assam complies with the 1933 notification which declared the boundary between Manipur and Mizoram, Mizoram accepts the 1875 notification which demarcated the border between Lushai hills and Cachar plains.

The Hundred: A step towards gender parity in cricket with a little impetus

- Rupesh Kumar

The inaugural edition of the Hundred, a 100-ball franchise cricket tournament, reached its zenith with both the women's and men's finals at Lord's on Saturday 21 August, billed as a step towards gender equity.

The international tournament featuring both male and female teams officially started with a women's game for the first time in cricket history. The tournament did begin with a game at the Kia Oval between the Oval Invincibles and the Manchester Originals.

The goal of having a women's game as the tournament opener was to dispel the notion that women's cricket is inferior to men's cricket and to elevate cricket as a sport towards gender parity.

The Hundred's total prize money was £600,000, which was split equally between the Men's and Women's teams. The men's tournament was won by the Southern Brave, who was conferred a total of £150,000 for their victory, while the runners-up (Birmingham Phoenix) were awarded £ 75,000. Similarly, the women's competition winner, Oval Invincibles, received £ 150,000 in prize money, while the runners-up (Southern Brave) received £ 75,000.

The Hundred set the record in several ways, including being the first tournament in the UK to hold both men's and women's competitions concurrently, thereby elevating both men's and women's cricket to the same tier.

"I see tournaments like the Hundred as an enormous step towards ensuring gender equality in cricket wherein we don't usually see equality in terms of prize money distribution. It was heartening to see that the tournament kicked off with a standalone women's game," stated Shubhlakshmi Sharma, Indian cricketer.

"Tournaments like the Hundred and the idea of gender parity behind its inception will inspire young girls to take up the sport and dream big," added Shubhlakshmi.

The England and Wales Cricket Board's concept behind the Hundred is to make cricket a gender-balanced sport and to introduce it to newer audiences regardless of their age bracket.

The England and Wales Cricket Board's concept behind the Hundred is to make cricket a gender-balanced sport and to introduce it to newer audiences regardless of their age bracket. "It was encouraging to see the ECB (England Cricket Board) and broadcasters

give so much prominence to the Hundred Women's competition and the excellent attendances and tv ratings showed that audiences are eager to watch.

This was also evident when Cricket Australia introduced the WBBL (Women's Big Bash League)," said Melinda Farrell, a freelance sports journalist and sports anchor.



Image Source: Sky Sports

The tournament, which was promoted as a step toward gender parity, used gender-neutral language throughout, such as 'batter' instead of 'batsman,' and heroes of the match instead of man or woman of the match.

With all of the discussion about the Hundred being a critical step towards gender parity, there is a flaw that calls its momentum into question.

The individual contracts offered to the players reflect a discrepancy in the earnings of players of both genders. Female players earned between £ 3,600 and £ 15,000, while male players earned between £ 24,000 and £ 100,000.

"There is still a significant gap in earnings and a long-term goal of cricket boards should be to reduce that, particularly when they can see the direct returns in live and tv audiences and consider the new markets opening up as a result," said Farrell.

"A tournament like the Hundred can help bring about pay equity among its men's and women's cricketers as long as the tournament walks the talk," said Annesha Ghosh, a sports journalist at Espncricinfo.

"With the ECB announcing a hike in salaries of the women's cricketers for the next edition of the Hundred, based on the record audience figures for the inaugural season, the women's game can hope to make further strides towards pay parity through the 100-ball competition," added Ghosh.

With everything said and done about the Hundred, it can't be overlooked that the tournament has a huge gap to fill, but the fact that it promises to turn the tide in women's cricket and change it for the better can't be missed either.

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