

Weekly Newsletter

JANUARY EDITION - I



Third-wave in India

~Antara Keswani



India added close to 1.8 lakhs Covid-19 cases on Monday, 10th January, the highest since late May bringing the active cases tally of the country to 7.23 lakhs. The test positivity rate stood at 13.29%, which meant for every 100 tests done, 13 are positive for coronavirus. Mumbai, Delhi, Kolkata, Bengaluru, and Chennai are the major urban centres adding significantly to the daily case count. Between 4th to 8th January, Mumbai saw a 150% increase in infections while Delhi saw a 350% rise. Bengaluru administered close to 25,000 cases, a whopping 400% increase from the previous day's count.

A professor from IIT Kanpur said on Monday that Covid-19 cases in India will peak by the end of January and are likely to cross the number of cases seen during the second wave last year. However, by March, the peak will be almost over.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has urged people to follow Covid-appropriate behaviour, avoid mass gatherings and maintain social distancing. The Centre has asked states to review infrastructural preparedness including the re-establishment of makeshift hospital facilities to avoid any shortage of beds in case of a surge in the number of hospitalizations.

India also began administering a third precautionary dose to health care and frontline workers, and to those aged above 60 with comorbidities. According to the Centre's directions, the third dose will be of the same vaccine as the first two jabs and will be given to those who were vaccinated nine months ago. Over 150 crore vaccine doses have been administered until now. According to Health Ministry officials, over 91% of the adult population has received at least one dose while over 66% has been fully vaccinated against coronavirus.

The World Health Organization has called for strict implementation of Covid-19 safety protocols. It said that though the Omicron variant appears to be less severe, people should not dismiss it as “mild”, as the variant is driving the third wave of Covid-19 pandemic across the world.

NEET Counselling delay and EWS fiasco

~Aakarshan Singh



The Supreme Court accepted the recommendation of the Ajay Bhushan Pandey Committee on Friday, under the bench of Justices D Y Chandrachud and A S Bopanna. It allowed the start of the counselling process for NEET-PG and NEET-UG admissions for 2021-22 based on the existing 27 percent quota for Other Backward Classes (OBC) and 10 percent reservation for Economically Weaker Sections (EWS) in the All India Quota. The Court maintained the validity of the OBC reservation of 27 percent. In terms of the criterion used to determine EWS (a cut-off of Rs. 8 lakhs in gross yearly income), the Court permitted the existing criteria to be used for the current admission year to avoid further delaying the admission process. However, the future use of EWS criteria, as specified in the Office Memorandum of July 2019, will be under the results of the outcome of the petitions as lodged. Counselling for the NEET (National Eligibility Cumulative Entrance Test) under-graduate and post-graduate programs had been halted because the government had informed the Court that it would not proceed with it while a batch of petitions challenging the July 29, 2021 notification prescribing the quota for EWS and OBC students was pending.

The petitioners said the Rs 8 lakh cap was set without any research. The Court had requested that the Centre explain how the income requirements were determined. The Centre informed the Court on November 25, 2021, that it would reconsider the criteria and requested four weeks to finish the procedure. The government subsequently created a three-member committee, which included former Finance Secretary Ajay Bhushan Pandey, and suggested in a report that the limit of annual financial influx may be retained as it is; however, a few changes in the application of the rule is mandated. Resident Doctors in Delhi went on strike early in December to protest NEET-PG counselling. They began their protest at the end of November and paused it for a week on

December 9. They renewed their protest on December 17 until calling it off on December 31, after the administration assured them that the procedure would be expedited.

Pravasi Bhartiya Divas

~Akanksha Singh



January 9 is celebrated in India as the Pravasi Bhartiya Divas or the Non-Resident Indian Day to celebrate and acknowledge the contribution of the Indian community staying overseas in the development and growth of the country. It usually involves a grand celebration and seeks to strengthen the Indian government's engagement and ties with the Indian diaspora across the world.

The date January 9th is significant as this was the day back in 1915 when Mahatma Gandhi, often regarded as the greatest Pravasi, returned to India from South Africa and headed India's freedom struggle which eventually succeeded in garnering independence for the country.

The principal objective behind the celebration of this day is to provide a platform for NRIs to express their opinions and perceptions about India and to create a network of NRIs in all the countries of the world and connect the younger generation with immigrants. It is held in New Delhi since 2003, with many grand events being organized by the Pravasi Bhartiya Divas Convention. In 2015, the format of the event was altered to be held once every two years instead of the annual celebration. Theme-based conferences are also held since the change with participation from policymakers, stakeholders and overseas diaspora experts, among others.

This year, keeping in mind the pandemic, the Union Minister of State for External Affairs, V Muraleedharan addressed a virtual youth conference with the theme being 'the role of Indian diaspora with regard to innovation and new technologies'. Prime Minister Narendra Modi also took to twitter to mark the auspicious day wishing the Indian diaspora well and expressing the pride the latter have brought to our country through their accomplishments.

Security Lapse in PM Modi's visit in Punjab

~Manvi Vohra



On January 5, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's proposed event at Ferozepur in Punjab was cancelled after his convoy was stuck on a flyover for 15-20 minutes when a group of protesting farmers obstructed the route near the National Martyrs Memorial in Hussainwala. There was a report that the route plan of PM Modi was leaked to Protesters.

This was a serious issue as the country lost many prominent leaders due to a casual approach to security issues. Instead of taking cognizance of this issue, the state government has converted this into political whataboutery. This also shows the level of political discourse in India, where even serious security concern is subject to political scrutiny.

There are many responsible voices among the oppositions who have criticized the lacklustre attitude of state police on PM security. But the ruling party of Punjab and some other leaders of Congress have tried to link it with political issues. The Congress party is itself the victim of the same issue, and its two topmost leaders have been killed in the terrorist attack.

In political discourse, it is expected from all the political groups that they will rise from their political interest on certain issues like National Security, National Integrity etc. But from sometimes, it has been observed that these understandings have been gone that's why political parties have raised voices over Surgical Strike and Balakot strike, which cannot be considered a good sign for democracy.

Assembly Elections 2022: Timeline announced in 5 states

~Antara Keswani



The Assembly Elections in Goa, Manipur, Punjab, Uttarakhand, and Uttar Pradesh will be held over seven phases from 10th February 2022 to 7th March 2022 as announced by the Election Commission of India last weekend. Uttar Pradesh will vote in each of the seven phases - on February 10, February 14, February 20, February 23, February 27, March 3, and March 7. Punjab, Goa, and Uttarakhand will vote on February 14, while Manipur will vote in two phases on February 27 and March 3.

A total of 690 Assembly constituencies will vote over the next two months, with the maximum in UP (403 seats) followed by Punjab (117), Uttarakhand (70), Manipur (60), and Goa (40). The counting of votes for all 690 constituencies across these five states will be held on March 10. Approximately 18.34 crore citizens are eligible to vote.

As of Friday, 95.8% of those eligible to vote had received both doses of vaccine in Goa, 82.39% in Uttarakhand, 52% in Uttar Pradesh, 45.6% in Punjab, and 44.8% in Manipur. In total, more than 15 crore people in the five states had received at least one dose of the vaccine while 9 crores had received both doses.

Chief Election Commissioner Sushil Chandra has assured voters that “there was no need to panic” as adequate safety measures and protocols would be set up at polling booths and all election and polling staff would be fully inoculated. The decision to hold the assembly elections was taken after much deliberation and careful analysis, said Chandra. Stating that any postponement of assembly elections would deny citizens of the States the right to elect an accountable government every five years, the Commission decided to go ahead with the elections.

The Election Commission of India has banned roadshows, *padyatras*, cycle or bike rallies, vehicle rallies as well as physical rallies till January 15 owing to the rising covid cases across the country. The Commission would review the situation on January 15 and take a decision to allow physical campaigning post that.

Bulli Bai Application Case

~Manvi Vohra



On January 6, Police arrested Niraj Bishnoi, a 21-year-old student who is named as the main conspirator behind the online application Bulli Bai that was used to “auction” hundreds of Indian Muslim women. Hundreds of Muslim women in India, including journalists, social workers, and other notable figures, discovered their photographs and insulting comments about them on the mobile app “Bulli Bai” on New Year's Day. The app, which was built on the GitHub hosting platform, provided an online “auction” of Muslim women.

This app is an example of online trolling, and it was the second time that an app like this emerged in India in six months. Last year a similar app called “Sulli Deals” had surfaced during June. Like the Bulli Bai app, Sulli Deals featured photographs of hundreds of prominent Muslim women and offered them for “auction”. However, no arrests were made in the Sulli Deals case, but GitHub took the app down.

When people discuss these issues, it has come into the public domain that several SM pages target Hindu women on Twitter and Meta. The telecom Ministry has taken cognizance of the same, but it also shows that the online world is dominated by anti-women sentiment. The said app has been taken down, and the perpetrator is in custody, but casual sexism against it has become part of SM. Recently ace shuttler Saina Nehwal has faced misogynist comments from an actor named Siddharth. She has faced this because she has raised the issue of PM security.

Women have become the immediate target of political reactions. In the past, women MPs and public representatives have faced the same thing. It is good that the app makers have been caught, but the focus should be to make SM more accessible to women users.

Women throughout India have expressed concerns over using apps and social media platforms to spread hate and target women groups. Women believe that the app is part of routine harassment they face on social media in an increasingly politically polarized environment. Several people have condemned those who created the app.

Iran-Saudi Arabia to restore ties?

~Aamiya Dhand



The greatest rivals of West Asia: Iran and Saudi Arabia, are witnessing signs of thawing. A conflict that has persisted over a thousand years appears to be on the cusp of resolving. Iran has indicated that it is ready to resume diplomatic relations with Saudi Arabia. The objective is to send representatives to the OIC headquarters as soon as possible. In an interview with Al Jazeera, Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian described the dialogue with Saudi Arabia as "positive and constructive," adding that Iranian representatives to the Organization of Islamic Cooperation will return to Jeddah shortly, which he described as a "positive step." He further underlined that Tehran believes that to tackle the region's problems, a broad regional dialogue involving Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Turkey is necessary, stating that Saudi Arabia wants a dialogue with Tehran that primarily focuses on bilateral relations.

After a group of outraged demonstrators attacked and ransacked Saudi Arabia's embassy in Tehran in January 2016, the kingdom severed diplomatic ties with Iran. The attack on the embassy came after the government decided to execute prominent Shia preacher Nimr al-Nimr earlier that month for allegedly meddling in Saudi affairs. Riyadh accused Tehran of failing to effectively secure its diplomatic property, and the kingdom withdrew its diplomatic mission. Iran has been trying to mend relations with the United States in recent years, and the two countries are said to have held talks on the issue. However, the US thwarted one of Tehran's attempts to restore relations in 2020, when its drones killed prominent Iranian commander Qassem Soleimani after he arrived in Iraq with the mission of passing Iran's proposal to Saudi Arabia through the Baghdad government.

The Middle Eastern Cold War?

The Iran–Saudi Arabia proxy conflict, often known as the Middle Eastern Cold War, is a persisting conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia for influence in the Middle East and other Muslim regions. In surrounding conflicts, like as the civil wars in Syria and Yemen, as well as disagreements in Bahrain, Lebanon, and Qatar, the two countries have supplied varying degrees of support to opposing factions. Other regions affected include Nigeria, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and other parts of North and East Africa, South Asia, Central Asia, Southeast Asia, the Balkans, and the Caucasus.

The conflict is contested on multiple levels involving geopolitical, economic, and sectarian influence in pursuit of regional hegemony in what has been termed as a cold war. The proxy battle has been portrayed as a front in what former Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev has termed as the "New Cold War," with American support for Saudi Arabia and its allies and Russian and Chinese support for Iran and its allies drawing analogies to Cold War dynamics. Today's competition is primarily a political and economic struggle exacerbated by religious differences. Both countries manipulate sectarianism for geopolitical interests as part of a more significant conflict. Iran is predominantly Shia Muslim, whereas Saudi Arabia is primarily Sunni Muslim.

The tension emanates from the 1979 Iranian revolution, which saw the pro-western ruler Shah Muhammad Reza Pahlavi deposed and replaced by Ayatollah Khamenei, the so-called supreme leader. From a Yemeni missile attack to the assassination of the supreme commander Qassim Soleimani, the political, ideological, and religious differences between Iran and Saudi Arabia are taking the path of confrontation. Rather than being geostrategic or geopolitical, the ongoing struggle between the two major Shiite and Sunni powerhouses is intellectual and theological. Back when Saudi Arabia backed Saddam Hussein against the United States of America, Saddam's and his autocratic regime's demise was a certain conclusion. As a result, Iran and Saudi Arabia have emerged as the most powerful, strategic, and influential political forces in the world. Back when Saudi Arabia backed Saddam Hussein against the United States of America, Saddam's and his autocratic regime's collapse was a foregone certainty. As a result, Iran and Saudi Arabia have emerged as the Middle East's most powerful, strategic, and influential political actors. When Iranians stormed the Saudi embassy in 2016 as a demonstration against the assassination of a Shia cleric, tensions rose to the point where scuffles were nearly inevitable. Diplomatic ties were severed, and turmoil and uncertainty reigned supreme.

This cold war has a lot of similarities to the first one. Because, like the actual cold war, it is fuelled by a mix of ideological conviction and brute force politics, but unlike the actual cold war, the middle eastern cold war is multi-dimensional and more prone to grow. Saudi Arabia and Iran have been fighting proxy warfare for decades. Yemen and Syria are the two battlegrounds, fuelling the Iran-Saudi tensions.

Iran has been accused of providing military assistance to the rebel Houthis, targeting Saudi territory. It is also accused of attacking the world naval ships in the strait of Hormoz, something Iran vehemently denies. This rivalry has dragged the region into chaos and ignited the Shia-Sunni conflict across the middle east. The violence in the middle east due to this perennial hostility also has dire consequences for the economy of the war-torn nations. Amid the global pandemic, when all the economic activities are halted, the tensions between the two arch-rivals will prove hazardous and yield catastrophic results. The blockade of the shipping and navigation in the Gulf, attacks on international ships, and the rising concerns of the western powers regarding this issue have left Iran as an isolated country with only Russia supporting her.

When Iraq retaliated again for assassinations of Qassim Soleimani, the skirmishes in Iraq prompted worries of a larger conflict. The issue could have grown worse if the US president had not given an olive branch. The OIC, which is made up of 57 Muslim countries, has also been unable to bring about steps to de-escalate the rising tensions. Saudi Arabia has long strived to empower its ideology in the OIC, where it enjoys an authoritarian type of rule while raising the catch cry of being a sacred country to Muslims. In light of the high tensions and ideological and religious rivalries, international communities such as the United Nations and neighbouring countries should play a positive and crucial role in de-escalating these tensions.

Now, what explains this turn of events?

Riyadh and Tehran are trying to bury their differences or find a compromise at the very least. The attempts have been underway for quite some time, yielding significant dividends. Last month diplomats from both countries held a significant dialogue in Jordan. A week into 2022, Iran says it's ready to restore its relations with the kingdom.

The reasons are economical; these sanctions are crushing its economy, stopping it from tapping into its full potential. Restoration of ties with the second-largest economy in West Asia will bring several incentives. It will help Tehran broaden regional trade and also help to reach out to Sunni majority countries.

For Saudi Arabia, the reasons are both economic and political. Crown Prince Mohammad is trying to diversify the economy to change his country's image. The de-escalation with Iran would end proxy wars in Syria, Yemen, and Iraq. This could help in attracting investment for Crown Prince's much-publicized vision 2030.

China-Lithuania Rift

~Akanksha Singh



Ties between China and Lithuania saw a steep drop recently, with China imposing sanctions on import from the Baltic country, recalling its ambassador from Vilnius, its capital, and downgrading diplomatic ties as well. In a classic wolf warrior diplomacy move, the country is pressurizing companies like German car parts giant, Continental, to stop utilizing Lithuanian-made components in its manufacturing process. It has also blocked entry of cargos from the country into its borders.

These decisions by China are in retaliation to Lithuania's recent opening of a Taiwanese representative office in Vilnius. The country made the announcement last year itself. Lithuania's use of the name 'Taiwan' has irked China given that it claims Taiwan to be a part of its territory. Usually, countries prefer using the term 'Taipei' to avoid conflict with China and this is also in line with the European Union's long held one-China policy which seeks to recognize the People's Republic of China as the sole representative of China but also allows keeping unofficial ties and cooperation with Taipei. However, the specific nomenclature used by Lithuania in the present conflict has led to escalation of the rift.

Beijing was also already unhappy with Lithuania when it withdrew from China's 17+1 platform back in May 2021. The platform is a China-led initiative founded in 2012 with an aim to expand cooperation between China and the Central and Eastern Europe countries. Lithuania termed the platform as 'divisive' and quit. In the growing conflict, the European Union has stood in solidarity with Lithuania. The trade bloc has plans to roll out a new trade weapon called 'anti-coercion instrument' to retaliate in similar situations. The United States has also taken a stand to support Lithuania with the Secretary of State affirming the country's pledge to work with its allies and partners to stand up against such intimidation.

In order to reciprocate, Taiwan has been quick to respond with the Taiwan Tobacco and Liquor Corp buying 20,000 bottles of Lithuanian rum that was originally bound for China. Taiwan has

also stated that it plans to invest 200 million dollars in Lithuania in order to provide some respite to the country in wake of China's pressure.

Lithuania is being lauded by the world for its brave stand against China. Most major countries have affirmed their support to the small Baltic country and have criticized China for its sanctions and coercive measures. However, China does not seem to be wavering and with its massive global manufacturing influence, it might take more than mere offers of support for the country to change its mind.

Kazakh Oil Crisis

~Aakarshan Singh



The price increase occurred when the government completed a phase shift to electronic trading for LPG to cease state subsidies for fuel and let the market determine the price. Despite the government's announcement on Tuesday that fuel prices will be dropped to levels lower than before the hike and President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev's dismissal of his cabinet on Wednesday, the demonstrations continue. The gasoline market reform, initially proposed in 2015, went into force at the beginning of the month. It aimed to lift state price limitations on butane and propane, which are sometimes referred to as "road fuels for the poor", owing to their cheap cost while ensuring that the domestic market was sufficiently supplied. When prices were fully liberalised on 1st Jan (Saturday), the government expected that supply to the domestic market would increase, helping to alleviate persistent shortages. The plan, however, backfired, with prices virtually doubling overnight to 120 tenges per litre. Over the weekend, popular rage erupted in western Kazakhstan, an oil-rich region. By Tuesday, it had enslaved the whole country. The public was already angry due to growing inflation, which was approaching 9% year on year - the highest in more than five years - prompting the central bank to boost interest rates to 9.75 per cent. A million people are expected to live below the poverty line in the 19-million-strong resource-rich country. The demonstrations have not yet ended. Initially triggered by outrage over an increase in fuel prices, the demonstrations swiftly grew to include broader opposition to President Tokayev's

predecessor, Nursultan Nazarbayev, who kept substantial status as "Leader of the Nation" after stepping down in 2019 after almost three decades in office. Nazarbayev, 81, is primarily regarded as the most powerful political figure in Nur-Sultan, who carries his name. His family controls a significant portion of the country's economy, the largest in Central Asia. Since the demonstrations began, he has not been seen or heard from. On social media, footage surfaced of demonstrators yelling beneath a massive bronze monument of Nazarbayev hung with ropes, which they subsequently took down.

Nazarbayev, who Tokayev deposed from his strong position, persists to be in the good books of the Russian premier Vladimir Putin. This might still be a contentious bone for Tokayev. Kazakh authorities declared a state of emergency and dispatched military forces to combat what Tokayev called "terrorists." Tokayev has the authority under the state of emergency to impose a curfew, prohibit protests, and limit internet access to silence Kazakhstan's unusual display of opposition. According to NetBlocks, a London-based monitoring outfit, there was an internet blackout across the country by Wednesday following a day of mobile internet outages and partial limitations. The intervention is the Kremlin's second significant step in as many years to bolster up an ally in trouble. President Vladimir Putin intervened in 2020 to support Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko's suppression of widespread protests, which attracted sanctions from the US and its allies. The Kremlin has often criticised public protests in the former Soviet states, disregarding them as just mere attempts by the West to assert dominance in the region. Tokayev claims that the protests were sparked by "terrorists" with foreign support, even though no identifiable leaders or organisations have been. In a statement on Sunday, his administration claimed that the detainees included "a substantial number of foreign citizens," but provided no further specifics. As of 9th Jan, how many of those held remained in detention was unknown. The former director of Kazakhstan's counterintelligence and anti-terrorist service has been jailed on allegations of attempting to topple the government. Karim Masimov's arrest, reported on Saturday, comes days after Tokayev fired him as chairman of the National Security Committee. Russia is facing "systemic insecurity on both flanks," according to Alexander Baunov, a senior scholar at the Carnegie Moscow Center and thereby needs to analyse stringently.

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