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POLITY AND GOVERNANCE

Champai quits to make way for Hemant's return



Jharkhand Chief Minister Champai Soren has resigned, paving the way for his predecessor, Hemant Soren, to reclaim the position. Hemant Soren, son of Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM) supremo Shibu Soren, had resigned as Chief Minister in January shortly before he was taken into custody by the Enforcement Directorate in a money laundering case linked to an alleged land scam. Following his release on bail in late June, Hemant Soren was unanimously elected as the new leader by legislators from the JMM-led alliance during a lengthy meeting in Ranchi. The change in leadership was supported by alliance partners from the Congress, including Ghulam Ahmad Mir and State Congress chief Rajesh Thakur, who were present at the legislative meeting. Hemant Soren, who has served as Chief Minister of Jharkhand twice before, is likely to take oath for the third time following a reduction in the JMM-led alliance's strength in the 81-member Jharkhand Assembly to 45 MLAs after recent parliamentary elections.

PARTY STRENGTH IN JHARKHAND ASSEMBLY

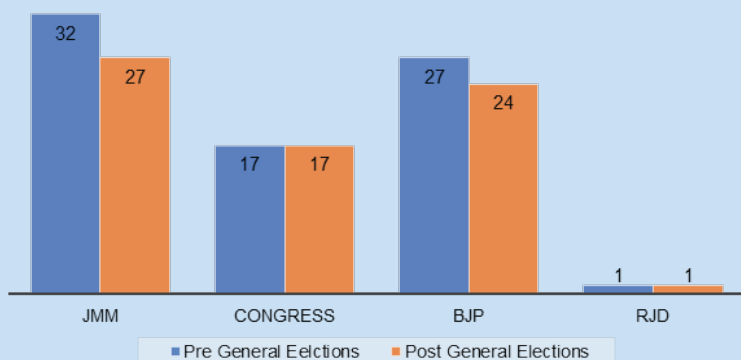


FIGURE: Column chart representation of the strength of political parties in Jharkhand Legislative Assembly

POLITY AND GOVERNANCE

We must rise above politics for peace in Manipur, says Modi

Prime Minister Narendra Modi addressed the Manipur conflict in Parliament for the first time since the violence erupted a year ago in his reply to the debate on the Motion of Thanks to the President's address. Modi acknowledged the deep-seated social tensions in the state and emphasized ongoing efforts to restore peace. Modi highlighted that over 11,000 FIRs have been filed and 500 arrests made. Comparing the current situation to past unrest in 1993, he stressed the importance of transcending politics for stability. He called for an end to actions exacerbating the conflict and welcomed contributions towards peace-building, contrasting his approach with historical precedents of President's Rule in Manipur during previous administrations.

POLITY AND GOVERNANCE

Avoidable tragedy

A tragic stampede occurred at a religious gathering in Hathras, Uttar Pradesh, resulting in over 120 deaths, primarily among economically vulnerable women and children seeking spiritual solace. The event, led by preacher Suraj Pal, attracted an overwhelming crowd of around 2.5 lakh people to a venue meant for 80,000. Reports suggest causes such as overcrowding and a rush to collect soil from the preacher's feet contributed to the chaos. The response from local health services highlighted the state's inadequate preparedness, with distressing scenes of bodies outside morgues and insufficient medical support. Criticism extends to the preacher and aides leaving the scene amid the crisis. This tragedy underscores the recurring failure of authorities to anticipate and manage large gatherings effectively, despite past incidents. Calls for stringent action against those responsible and fair compensation for victims' families emphasize the need for improved crowd management protocols and accountability from organizers and officials alike.



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POLITY AND GOVERNANCE

Trials, medical ethics and the orbit of power

On January 10, 2021, Rashida Bee, Nawab Khan, Rachna Dhingra, and Nausheen Khan wrote a letter to Prime Minister Narendra Modi and then Health Minister Dr. Harsh Vardhan accusing People's Hospital in Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh, of irregularities and ethical violations in conducting the clinical trial for Bharat Biotech's Covaxin, alleging exploitation of vulnerable participants. They demanded the trial's immediate cessation, punishment for those responsible, and compensation for the affected individuals.

The letter also highlighted serious breaches of ethics guidelines in the Covaxin clinical trial, such as inadequate informed consent procedures, inclusion of vulnerable populations as study participants, failure to report adverse events, and insufficient monitoring and follow-up of participants. The authors urgently requested the trial's cessation at People's Hospital in Bhopal and called for an independent investigation. The outcome of the letter and any subsequent actions remain undisclosed. Notably, the Indian drug regulator, Central Drugs Standard Control Organisation (CDSCO), had granted approval for Covaxin under a "Restricted Use of Covaxin under Clinical Trial Mode," a term not formally recognized in India's Drug Regulatory Framework outlined by the Drugs and Cosmetics Act and Rules of 2019. This approval occurred prior to completing recruitment for the Phase III study of the vaccine candidate.

Ethics committees and whistle-blowers

Dr. Jacob Puliyel, a member of the National Technical Advisory Group on Immunization (NTAGI), filed a writ petition in the Supreme Court of India regarding concerns about the functioning of clinical trial sites and their ethics committees. The Supreme Court responded by emphasizing the importance of transparency in clinical trials. It ruled that relevant data required to be published under India's statutory regulations and the World Health Organization's guidelines on clinical trials should be made accessible to the public promptly, while ensuring the protection of individual subjects' privacy.

The book titled "The Occasional Human Sacrifice – Medical Experimentation and the Price of Saying No" by Carl Elliott, a bioethicist and philosopher who is also a whistle-blower at the University of Minnesota, explores the complex challenges surrounding the development of medical therapies. The author delves into historical cases from the Western world, including notorious studies like the Tuskegee Syphilis Study and the Willowbrook Hepatitis Study. The book highlights the critical role played by conscientious insiders and outsiders who possess unique knowledge of these violations, shedding light on the ethical dilemmas faced in medical research and the consequences of speaking out against wrongdoing.

In his book, Carl Elliott examines additional cases of ethical breaches in medical research, such as Protocol 126 at the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Center and the radiation study at the Eugene Sanger Radioisotope Laboratory, Cincinnati Medical Center. Motivated by personal experiences, particularly the tragic suicide of Dan Markingson at his university, Elliott explores profound questions about the motivations behind whistleblowing. He delves into complex ethical issues surrounding dissent, integrity, honour,

respect, guilt, and shame through the narratives of whistle-blowers. The book underscores the challenges faced by those who choose to speak out against misconduct, highlighting the common repercussions such as legal threats and personal destruction, as recounted by whistle-blower Nancy Olivieri in her review.

The deeper issues which we should, but do not wrestle with are: understanding group think and organisational wrongdoing, loyalty to the ivory tower, fear of retribution, social conformity, status hierarchies and exercise of power that are so ingrained in us as a society. Unless we study these traits among us as a society, we will never understand why someone chooses to be an Anand Rai, the whistle-blower who exposed the Vyapam scam.

Innovative therapies and ethics

The development of life-saving medicines in India faces significant challenges, despite a strong generic drug manufacturing industry. Innovating new therapies requires navigating complex risks and benefits, often with limited data. Medical doctors, while qualified in clinical practice, may lack specialized expertise in drug development, which is a distinct field. This gap sometimes leads to ethical lapses, such as inappropriate projections during public health crises like the COVID-19 pandemic. Regulatory bodies and expert committees occasionally approve terms like "emergency use authorization in clinical trial mode," illustrating breaches in medical ethics. These issues underscore the need for stronger oversight and specialized knowledge in drug development to ensure ethical standards are upheld.

Indian patients and clinical studies

In India, a significant concern in clinical studies is the frequent and longstanding disregard for informed consent when enrolling patients. There is substantial evidence suggesting that vulnerable populations, particularly those who are poor and less educated, are often recruited into studies without being adequately informed about the potential risks associated with the experimental treatments being tested. Oversight for preventing such ethical violations falls upon institutional ethics committees mandated by regulations. However, these committees are often inconsistent and ineffective in their operations, despite their formal existence and regulatory mandates.

The publication by Gayatri Saberwal et al. in PLOS Global Public Health (2022) reviewed 1,359 Phase II or III interventional studies registered in India's Clinical Trials Registry. The study identified numerous issues with the functioning of ethics committees, including instances of trials proceeding without any ethics oversight and cases where multiple sites were approved by a single ethics committee. This highlights a systemic failure in the regulatory framework meant to safeguard medical ethics in India. The analysis does not critique the competence of ethics committee members but points out significant lapses, exemplified by controversies such as the development of Coronil during the COVID-19 pandemic. The misuse of regulations by certain sectors, notably those endorsed by the Ministry of AYUSH, is criticized for conducting poorly designed and unmonitored studies that merely provide a semblance of scientific legitimacy to their products.



"If you invest more in your education, then you are likely to get more interest in it."

–Benjamin Franklin

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

An overview of the French elections



French President Emmanuel Macron called for early parliamentary elections after dissolving parliament prematurely, citing the need for a clear majority to govern effectively. The first phase of elections, held on June 30, saw the far-right National Rally (RN) leading with 33% of the vote, followed by the left-wing New Popular Front with 28%, and Macron's centrist bloc with 20.7%. Macron's decision came after his bloc suffered a significant defeat in European Parliament elections against the RN. Despite hopes of consolidating support against the far-right, Macron's gamble appears uncertain as opinion polls had predicted RN's lead without an absolute majority, while Macron's approval ratings plummeted to 36%. The second phase of elections is scheduled for July 7. The sudden call for elections and the high stakes involved in the race has energised the electorate, with the Interior Ministry stating that 59.4% of registered voters had cast a ballot as of 5 p.m. on June 30, as compared to the 39.4% at the same time two years ago.

How are elections in France conducted?

There are 577 seats in the French parliament, which include 13 overseas districts and 11 constituencies that represent French citizens abroad. So, to hold an absolute majority in parliament, a party needs 289 seats. The French parliamentary elections of 2024 are structured in two phases: the first phase acts as a qualifying round where candidates must secure at least 12.5% of locally registered votes to advance. Winning outright with over 50% of votes in the first round secures immediate victory. Candidates meeting the threshold proceed to the second phase. 'Horse-trading' among parties is common, involving alliances and strategic withdrawals to consolidate support against rivals. The election features a competitive three-way contest between the far-right National Rally and its allies, the left-wing New Popular Front encompassing Socialists, Greens, Communists, and France Unbowed, and President Emmanuel Macron's Ensemble bloc.

What is at stake?

The National Rally (RN), formerly known as the National Front (FN), was founded by Jean Marie Le Pen as a reaction to events like the Algerian War, the creation of the Fifth French Republic, and the protests of May 1968. Under Marine Le Pen's leadership, the party has undergone rebranding efforts aimed at distancing itself from its fascist origins and her father's controversial statements. Renaming the party to RN and softening its stance on leaving the EU and the euro currency were part of this strategy. The RN has also distanced itself from Vladimir Putin since the Russia-Ukraine conflict and energy crisis.

However, the RN maintains far-right policies such as 'national priority', which favours French citizens over immigrants in housing, employment, and social benefits—a policy at odds with the French Constitution. The party strongly opposes immigration, advocating for the deportation of 'illegal' immigrants, strict border controls, and criticizes immigrants as threats to the 'European way of life'. Additionally, the RN pledges to abolish birth right citizenship for children born to foreign parents.

The rise of the National Rally (RN) in French politics is fuelled by concerns over cultural conflicts, a rising cost of living, and dissatisfaction with President Macron's policies, such as increasing the retirement age. The party significantly increased its parliamentary seats from seven to 89 in 2022 and aims to further expand to between 240 and 300 seats. RN's appeal extends to provincial areas, particularly in southern France, where blue-collar workers feel marginalized by Parisian elites.

President Macron's decision to dissolve parliament as a political manoeuvre risk potentially ushering in France's first far-right government since World War II. This scenario has triggered social unrest, including reports of increased racist attacks and anti-far-right protests in Paris on June 30, some escalating into violence and arson. The uncertain political climate has heightened anxiety among immigrants and minority communities, particularly Muslims, who have been frequent targets of RN's policies and rhetoric.

What happens next?

Over 200 candidates aligned with centrist and left-wing alliances have withdrawn from the upcoming elections to consolidate votes against the National Rally (RN). This strategic move mirrors the historical "republican front" strategy, reminiscent of the 1936 Popular Front, where Socialists and Communists united against far-right movements. The newly formed New Popular Front aims to prevent right-wing parties from gaining power by pooling support behind fewer candidates. However, the effectiveness of this alliance is uncertain, particularly due to the presence of Jean-Luc Mélenchon, a leftist leader accused of anti-Semitism, which could potentially undermine cohesion within the coalition.

Jordan Bardella, the president of the National Rally (RN) and its Prime Ministerial candidate, has rejected forming alliances with other political blocs. Instead, he aims to become a 'cohabitation Prime Minister' under the French Constitution. In a cohabitation scenario, where the President and Parliament are from different parties, domestic policies are overseen by the Prime Minister and Cabinet, while the President manages defence and foreign affairs. Bardella pledges to prioritize French citizens by lowering VAT on essential items like fuel and food to increase purchasing power. His stance aligns with the RN's agenda focused on national interests and economic relief for citizens.

INTERNAL SECURITY

Rajinder Khanna is Additional National Security Adviser

Rajinder Khanna, former chief of India's Research & Analysis Wing (RAW) and Deputy NSA (T&I) since 2018, has been promoted as Additional NSA, a new position within the National Security Council Secretariat (NSCS). Pavan Kapoor, previously Secretary (West) in the External Affairs Ministry, has been appointed as Deputy National Security Adviser (NSA). Recent changes at the National Security Council Secretariat (NSCS) have introduced new appointments while ensuring continuity.

These appointments come amid broader changes, including Vikram Misri's upcoming role as Foreign Secretary and T. V. Ravichandran's appointment as Deputy NSA, replacing Mr. Khanna. These adjustments bring the total of Deputy NSAs to three under NSA Ajit Doval, alongside continuing Deputy NSA Pankaj Kumar, formerly of the Border Security Force.

These shifts highlight both continuity and adaptation within the NSCS leadership structure, prompting attention to upcoming appointments such as the UN Permanent Representative and Ambassador to the U.S., which are currently vacant or soon to be vacant.

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Return Indians stuck in Ukraine war zone: Jaishankar to Lavrov

External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar expressed serious concern about Indian nationals involved in the conflict in Ukraine during his meeting with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov in Astana. The meeting took place on the side-lines of the SCO Council meeting in Kazakhstan. Jaishankar emphasized the need for ensuring the safe and prompt return of these individuals to India. Following the meeting, Jaishankar posted on social media about raising these concerns and discussed broader topics including India-Russia bilateral relations and global strategic issues. This meeting occurred shortly before Prime Minister Narendra Modi's scheduled visit to Moscow for the annual bilateral summit with Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Earlier, on June 25, families of six individuals from the same village in Haryana, stranded in the war zone, travelled to Delhi to urge government action. These individuals were among many who had been misled into believing they were securing jobs in Russia. Despite efforts by the Indian government to address the situation, including crackdowns on recruitment agencies and appeals to the Russian government, progress has been slow. The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs acknowledged the meeting between Jaishankar and Lavrov but provided no further details or response regarding the Indians affected by the conflict.

POLITY & GOVERNANCE

Centre issues advisory for ads on food and health products only

The Ministry of Information & Broadcasting has issued a new advisory requiring advertisers and advertising agencies in the food and health sectors to submit an annual self-declaration certificate. This requirement supersedes all previous advisories and applies specifically to these sectors. Advertisers must upload the certificate on designated platforms: the Broadcast Seva Portal for TV/radio ads and the Press Council of India's portal for print media/internet ads. The move aims to enhance transparency and compliance in advertising related to food and health products and services.

Accordingly, in view of the Supreme Court order dated May 7, 2024, and in suppression of the previous advisories dated June 3, 2024, and June 5, 2024, the advertisers/advertising agencies issuing advertisements for products and services related to food and health sectors have been advised to upload an annual self-declaration certificate on these platforms, as applicable.

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Air pollution spikes may raise death rates in cities with cleaner air, says study



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A study published in Lancet Planet Health analyzed air pollution and death data across ten Indian cities, including Delhi and Bengaluru. It found that spikes in air pollution in cities with typically cleaner air, like Bengaluru, could result in higher death rates compared to cities with higher baseline pollution levels, such as Delhi. Despite lower average exposure levels in Bengaluru, a smaller increase in pollution could have a proportionately larger impact on death rates there. Overall, air pollution was responsible for 7.2% of annual deaths across these cities, with Delhi experiencing 11.5% and Bengaluru 4.8% attributable to air pollution. The study highlighted that even short-term exposure to PM 2.5 pollution significantly increased daily death rates in these urban areas.

A spike in air pollution in Indian cities that have cleaner air may raise death rates higher than in cities that have higher pollution loads. Thus, the same increase in air pollution in, say, Bengaluru, can raise death rates more than in Delhi, which has much higher background levels of air pollution.

Overall, however, cities that had high pollution loads saw a greater fraction of annual deaths attributable to air pollution, with 11.5% of Delhi's annual deaths attributable to air pollution, and 4.8% in Bengaluru. The latter's population had 30% the exposure to daily air pollution that an average Delhi resident is subjected to, says a first-of-its-kind multi-city analysis in India that studied the health effects of short-term exposure to air pollution, published in the peer-reviewed Lancet Planet Health on Thursday. The scientists analysed pollution and death registry data from Ahmedabad, Bengaluru, Chennai, Delhi, Hyderabad, Kolkata, Mumbai, Pune, Shimla, and Varanasi.

Nearly 30,000 deaths, or 7.2% of the annual deaths in the 10 cities, were due to short-term PM 2.5. The total daily deaths in these cities rose by 1.42% for every 10 microgram per cubic metre increase in the average PM 2.5 exposure over a two-day period, the study found.

The passage discusses findings from a study published in Lancet Planet Health comparing air pollution-related mortality across ten Indian cities from 2008 to 2019. It highlights that Delhi had approximately 12,000 air pollution-related deaths annually, while Shimla had the lowest at 59 deaths per year, and Bengaluru had 2,102 deaths over the same period. The study found that mortality risk increased more sharply at lower levels of PM 2.5 pollution but plateaued as pollution levels increased. Even on days when PM 2.5 levels were below India's national air quality standard of 60 micrograms per cubic meter, mortality risk remained high at 2.65%. Similar studies in other countries, such as China, Greece, Japan, and Spain, showed varying mortality rates with different baseline pollution levels.



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INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

India to host 46th UNESCO heritage panel session

CONTEXT: India is set to host the 46th session of the UNESCO World Heritage Committee from July 21-31 at Bharat Mandapam in New Delhi. The event will gather over 2,500 delegates including representatives from State Parties, advisory bodies, diplomats, heritage experts, scholars, and researchers from 195 countries. Organized by the Archaeological Survey of India, the session is expected to be inaugurated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The committee, comprising representatives from 21 State Parties elected by the General Assembly, will discuss various matters outlined in the provisional agenda released by UNESCO.

ECONOMICS & DEVELOPMENT

'States GST kitty to rise 13-14% this FY'



India's top 18 states are projected to see their revenues grow by 8%-10% in the current fiscal year, reaching approximately ₹38 lakh crore. This acceleration from a 7.5% increase in the previous year is largely driven by higher collections from the Goods and Services Tax (GST), according to CRISIL. These states, including Maharashtra, Gujarat, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Uttar Pradesh, Telangana, West Bengal, and Rajasthan, contribute over 90% to India's Gross State Domestic Product (GSDP). GST collections and tax devolutions from the Centre constitute about half of these states' total revenue. Specifically, GST collections are expected to grow by 13%-14% this fiscal year, building on an 18% growth seen in the previous year.

CRISIL forecasts that central tax devolutions to Indian states will increase by 12%-13% in the current fiscal year, up from around 19% in FY24. These devolutions, determined by the Finance Commission, are linked to the Centre's gross tax collections, expected to grow robustly due to rising income tax and GST revenues. Meanwhile, states' own revenues from taxes on liquor and petroleum are expected to remain stable, with modest growth anticipated. Liquor taxes, contributing 10% to state revenues, are projected to rise by 5%-7%. Sales tax collections from petroleum products, constituting 7%-8% of state revenues, are forecasted to grow by 3%-4% due to increased fuel consumption despite a relatively unchanged tax structure.



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