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POLITY & GOVERNANCE

NEET counselling from July third week: govt.

The Union Government has announced that counselling sessions for eligible NEET-UG candidates will commence in four phases starting from the third week of July. Meanwhile, the Supreme Court has postponed the hearing of the case to July 18. The government's latest affidavit relies on a report from IIT-Madras to refute claims of widespread cheating in the exam. Chief Justice of India D.Y. Chandrachud, leading a three-judge Bench, granted the lawyers' request to adjourn the hearing. The Centre and the National Testing Agency (NTA) submitted their counter-affidavits late on Wednesday, leaving little time for review.

Chief Justice Chandrachud informed the gathered lawyers about the CBI's submission of a status report. In the previous hearing on July 8, the court commented that the integrity of NEET had been unquestionably compromised. However, Chief Justice Chandrachud expressed hesitation about ordering a re-test, viewing it as a measure of last resort.

The NTA, which holds the exam, has rubbished the allegation that 67 candidates scored perfect marks as "fallacious and incorrect". The total number of actual candidates whose final scores reflected perfect 720 marks was 61. Out of these 61, 17 candidates spread across 16 centres in 15 cities had obtained 720/720 based on provisional answer keys and 44 on account of the revision in one answer key of Physics.

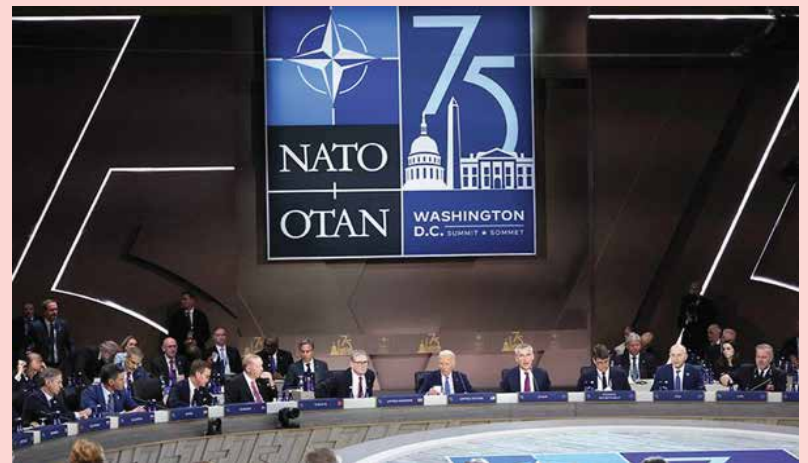
The Centre said that candidatures of students found to be beneficiaries of any malpractices would be cancelled at any stage during the counselling process or even afterwards. It said the counselling process could be manoeuvred around such cancellations. The Government explained that the allocation of seats would depend on the timing of the cancellation of seats if certain candidates were found to be beneficiaries of malpractices. Candidates are usually allowed to change seats in the first and

second rounds of counselling as per the options exercised by them. Cancellation would not have any impact on the overall counselling process and allocation of seats if done before the third round, which is expected to start in the second week of September.

If candidature is cancelled after the third round, the vacant seats could still be offered in the subsequent round. Candidates who have already been allocated seats in the earlier rounds would not be able to participate in the subsequent round. In case the candidature of any candidate is cancelled after the conclusion of four rounds, the vacated seats could be put up for additional rounds of counselling, the Centre submitted.

The apex court is dealing with nearly 40 petitions alleging irregularities such as students receiving different marks on their scorecards compared to their OMR sheets; unprecedented inflation of cut-off and average marks resulting in an unprecedented 67 candidates achieving perfect 720 marks. Many of these petitioners have sought a direction from the court to scrap NEET-UG 2024 and hold fresh exams.

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

China 'decisive enabler' of Russia's war, says NATO

Leaders of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) nations on Thursday looked to bolster ties with Asian partners after slamming China as a "decisive enabler" of Russia's war, before holding talks with Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy at the end of a summit in Washington. The 32-nation alliance has used the pomp-filled set piece in the U.S. capital to showcase its resolve against Moscow and backing for Kyiv.

After spending the bulk of the summit focused on bolstering Ukraine, NATO shifted attention eastwards by welcoming the leaders of Australia, Japan, New Zealand and South Korea.

A declaration from NATO released on Wednesday called Beijing a "decisive enabler of Russia's war against Ukraine" through

its supplies of dual-use goods such as microchips that can help Moscow's military. China "cannot enable the largest war in Europe in recent history without this negatively impacting its interests and reputation," it said.

Beijing hit back by warning NATO to "stop hyping up the so-called China threat and provoking confrontation and rivalry". China presents itself as a neutral party in the conflict, but it has however offered a critical lifeline to Russia's isolated economy, with trade booming since the conflict began.

The United States has been pushing its European allies for years to pay closer attention to the challenges posed by China. The Washington summit is the third such gathering attended by leaders from the four Asia-Pacific partners.

The U.S. announced it would begin "episodic deployments" of long-range missiles to Germany in 2026. The White House said it would eventually look to permanently station them in Germany, and the missiles would "have significantly longer range" than current U.S. systems in Europe.

'Bringing chaos to Asia'

China accused NATO of seeking security at the expense of others and told the alliance not to bring the same "chaos" to Asia. "NATO hyping up China's responsibility on the Ukraine issue is unreasonable and has sinister motives."

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

During conflict, there is no such thing as strategic autonomy: U.S. Ambassador

There is no such thing as "strategic autonomy" during a conflict, U.S. Ambassador Eric Garcetti said on Thursday, even as sources said that U.S. officials have raised concerns with Indian officials over Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Russia this week.

The comments, including a series of statements critical of the visit by the U.S. State Department, are the sharpest sign of tensions between the U.S. and India over the Putin-Modi summit, including the timing of the talks that came as Western leaders met in Washington for a conference of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), and a series of deadly Russian missile strikes across Ukraine.

The U.S. Ambassador was addressing a conclave on India-U.S. defence and security partnership, organised by CUTS International and U.S. Consulate-General, Kolkata. Mr. Garcetti continued, without specifically naming Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 or China's transgressions at the Line of Actual Control in 2020, but referring to countries that have "ignored sovereign borders" in the past three years.

India has consistently held that its ties with Russia are part of its independent bilateral relations and strategic autonomy, and has thus far not directly criticised Russia at the United Nations for the war in Ukraine. The U.S. officials have raised concerns directly over India's ties with Russia, including the surprise visit by Mr. Modi to Moscow this week, which had not been announced until recently.

India's Acting Ambassador in Washington, Sripriya Ranganathan, was "asked" to explain the reason for the visit and its

timing by the U.S. State Department officials. External Affairs Ministry officials did not deny the conversations, but an official downplayed their significance, saying that Indian diplomats are in "constant touch with the State Department and the White House". On Wednesday, U.S. State Department spokesperson Mathew Miller had confirmed that conversations had been held, without revealing the identity of the officials.

The External Affairs Ministry declined to comment on the latest remarks by the U.S. or on the U.S. statements of "concern" to Indian officials. On Tuesday, Mr. Kwatra had responded to questions about criticism from the U.S. and from Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelenskyy by repeating Mr. Modi's statement to Mr. Putin that there was "no solution on the battlefield" to the Ukraine conflict.

In other comments likely to raise eyebrows in South Block, Mr. Garcetti said India and the U.S. should be open to criticising each other, especially on issues of human rights and NGOs.

INTERNAL SECURITY

'No intrusion recorded on cameras on Jammu-Pak. border'



Amid a fresh wave of terror attacks in the Jammu division, a security audit by the Border Security Force (BSF) has not found any breach along the Jammu-Pakistan border. The BSF checked the footage of underwater and surface surveillance cameras installed along the 192-km International Border in Jammu but no suspicious movement has been recorded in the past few days. This year, at least five terror attacks have been reported in Jammu, in which eight security personnel have been killed.

Security forces are investigating if highly trained terrorists had infiltrated from the International Border as four attacks since June 9 have been reported in areas such as Kathua, close to the Jammu border. On July 8, five Army personnel were killed when terrorists opened fire at two Army vehicles from two directions at Jenda Nallah in Badnota village, around 124 km from Kathua town. The official said the possibility of terrorists using tunnels was also being looked into.

Till 2022, the BSF had detected at least five tunnels along the Jammu border. "As part of comprehensive border security, we have placed underwater cameras and sensors in the riverine patches. Live electric wires have also been laid down. If an infiltrator tries to cross the border, these devices can send an

alarm. This is in addition to BSF personnel who are also stationed there.

The International Border along Jammu is secured by the BSF, while the 740-km Line of Control, the effective border in the Kashmir Valley and parts of Jammu, is under the operational control of the Army. A special combing operation was done to detect the tunnels but no fresh construction has been found yet, all old tunnels were blocked earlier. At some places the underwater fencing had corroded, it has been repaired. On Thursday, officials from the BSF, the Jammu and Kashmir Police, and the Punjab Police reviewed the security scenario in Kathua.

POLITY & GOVERNANCE

Secular remedy

In holding that a divorced Muslim woman is not barred from invoking the secular remedy of seeking maintenance under the Code of Criminal Procedure (CrPC), the Supreme Court of India has done well to clarify an important question concerning the impact of a 1986 law that appeared to restrict their relief to what is allowed in Muslim personal law alone. The enactment of the Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Divorce) Act, 1986, was a watershed moment that is seen as having undermined the country's secular ethos by seeking to nullify a Court judgment in the Shah Bano case (1985), which allowed a divorced Muslim woman to apply for maintenance from a magistrate under Section 125 of the CrPC. Subsequently, the 1986 law was upheld by a Constitution Bench in 2001 after coming close to declaring its provisions unconstitutional for discriminating against Muslim women. The Act was declared valid after the Bench read it down in such a way as not to foreclose the secular remedy for Muslim women. Several High Court judgments took different views on whether Muslim women should avail of Section 3 of the 1986 Act or Section 125 of CrPC. The latest verdict by a Bench of Justice B.V. Nagarathna and Justice Augustine George Masih settles this question by holding that the codification of a Muslim woman's rights in the 1986 Act — including the right to maintenance during the Iddat period, provision for a dignified life until she remarries, and return of mehr and dowry — was only in addition to and not in derogation of her right to seek maintenance like a woman of any other religion.

Justice Masih, in his main opinion, concludes that both the personal law provision and the secular remedy for seeking maintenance ought to exist in parallel in their distinct domains. While the CrPC may be invoked by a woman if she was unable to maintain herself, the 1986 Act makes it a Muslim husband's obligation to provide for his divorced wife and her children up to a certain point. Justice Nagarathna, in her concurring opinion, looks at the social purpose behind the provision for maintenance in the CrPC, namely that it aims to prevent vagrancy among women by compelling the husband to support his wife. The 1986 Act codified the right available to a divorced Muslim woman in personal law. This right is in addition to, and not at the cost of, the rights available in existing law. The verdict is a great example of the Court using harmonious interpretation to expand the scope of rights as well as to secularise access to remedies. In the process, the Court has also neutralised the perception that the right of Muslim women to seek maintenance under secular provisions stood extinguished since 1986.

POLITY & GOVERNANCE

Can of worms

Trust can be everything, in governance. The can of worms that split open with the publication of results of the National Eligibility cum Entrance Test (NEET)-UG-2024 has elevated the entrance examination for medical (and dental) seats to a metaphor for distrust in the system, among the people. This year, dogged by accusations of paper leak, malpractices, and technical failures, besides the grant of grace marks to some students, NEET, which was conceived to homogenise selection on merit, has now morphed into a beast that is far removed from its original idea. The Supreme Court of India, on Thursday, rescheduled the NEET-UG hearing to July 18, to address complaints regarding irregularities and malpractices during the exam conducted by the National Testing Agency (NTA). A CBI investigation into the charges is ongoing. Meanwhile, the Centre has leaned heavily on a report, a data analysis, submitted by IIT Madras, examining the results to see if malpractices have occurred. The report's executive summary claimed that there was no abnormality that was discovered in a centre and city-wise analysis that was done for two years. The analysis was carried out for the top 1.4 lakh ranks in the country. It further stated that there was no evidence of either mass malpractice or a localised set of candidates benefiting. The overall increase of marks among students, a charge that was laid out initially, is attributed to the 25% reduction in syllabus, and it confirms that this occurred across multiple cities. However, outrage among student applicants on social media continues.

While NEET is no stranger to controversy, with States opposing it, the charges that have been levelled against it this year have had the effect of invoking distrust against the test among a larger subset of chary students across the country. The only way to move forward from here is to ensure that the issue is debated threadbare on public platforms and all doubt is removed, instead of trying to sweep the worms that have spilled out under the carpet. Loud denials of malpractice should be matched with the willingness to engage with those affected in a public forum and provide clarifications. Where errors have taken place, as is possible in an exercise of this scale, it behoves a proper acknowledgement and apology. When trust is violated, the reparation for it should sometimes be utter honesty. For the longer term, the government must introduce greater limpidity in the examination process, and make sure that the NTA and its line agencies remain committed to maintaining transparency. It might also be the opportunity to set right other issues raised about the conduct of the examination itself, including security checks on students.

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ECONOMICS & DEVELOPMENT

Should States get special packages outside Finance Commission allocations?



In the run-up to the Union Budget, Nitish Kumar and Chandrababu Naidu, the Chief Ministers of Bihar and Andhra Pradesh, respectively, who are in a position to decide the political fate of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government at the Centre, have demanded special financial packages for their respective States. These packages could potentially increase the fiscal burden on the Centre and also on other States. Should States get special packages outside Finance Commission allocations? Arun Kumar and Pinaki Chakraborty discuss the question in a conversation moderated by **Prashanth Perumal J.** Edited excerpts:

What is the basis on which the Finance Commission determines how much money is allocated to different States? Do you think there is a case for States such as Bihar and Andhra Pradesh to receive funds beyond what is being allocated to them through the Finance Commission?

Arun Kumar: The last Finance Commission had said that States should be given 41% of the divisible tax pool. Within that 41%, what does each State get? For that, there is a formula which is based on income, population, the area, forests and ecology, demographic performance, etc. If we look at the 15th Finance Commission, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar in 2020-21 got the largest amount of funds and Karnataka and Kerala saw the largest decrease in the share of funds. So, in other words, the criteria that the Finance Commission use can change the amount of funds going to different States.

Apart from the Finance Commission devolution, which is statutory, how the remaining amount is spent is determined by the Centre, and that is where political determination comes in; States which are closer to the Centre get more funds. Andhra Pradesh and Bihar are part of the NDA and their support is critical to the government. So, I suppose they will be able to draw more funds.

Pinaki Chakraborty: As far as transfers by the Finance Commission are concerned, the scope for discretion is very limited. Other Central transfers are also determined by certain principles of distribution across States. We can debate those schemes, their designs, etc., but those are certainly not arbitrary. So, that is the

overall framework of transfer.

When there is a specific demand by a specific State for higher transfer of resources for a specific purpose, constitutionally there is no bar on giving more money to that State. But generally, it is not done on a large scale because if that becomes the order of the day, fiscal prudence becomes a casualty. So, the possibility of large-scale discretionary transfers is limited.

Andhra Pradesh had a major fiscal shock after bifurcation and that was partly offset when the Finance Commission provided revenue deficit grants. Why Andhra Pradesh still requires Central support requires a careful analysis. But Bihar's case is different. Bihar's per capita development spending is less than 60% of the all-States average. So, Bihar has a serious fiscal capacity problem. This has not been fully offset by Finance Commission transfers or additional Central transfers.

What is the relationship between additional Central aid and the economic performance of States? Does the allocation of more funds to a certain State boost its long-term economic performance?

AK: There are several factors. The public and private sector together determine the development of a State. But with all other things remaining the same, higher allocations from the Centre to a State would boost the growth of that State. The major problem is the issue of governance — how well is the State governed and how well are the resources that are received by the State spent on development. Poorer States tend to have a greater amount of leakage of funds. But more importantly, the credit-deposit ratio of Bihar is much lower than the all-India average. This means that a large part of Bihar's savings is leaking out of the State to other States. So, even if you allocate more funds from the Centre, the leakage may be greater than the additional resources they get.

PC: If we look at revenue sharing, the part which is not within the purview of the Finance Commission has increased and that is also why we see an increase in centrally sponsored schemes. So, there is a larger political economy question which needs to be discussed. When we talk about resource flow to the richer regions of the country, it is much, much higher than the resource flow to the poorer regions of the country. This cannot be explained by governance differences alone. If there is a problem of resources, where a State is spending only 50% of the all-States average as public expenditure, this can't just be explained by differences in governance and quality of expenditure. We need to channelise more resources for higher capital investment in the poorer regions of the country for balanced regional development.

By taking away from States the power to tax their citizens, has GST (Goods and Services Tax) exacerbated competition among States to get more funds from the Centre? We also see that there is no longer tax competition between the States after the centralisation of taxation under GST. Is that good or bad?

PC: Because of this race to the bottom among States after liberalisation, States themselves decided to introduce a floor rate for sales tax in 2000-01. GST has resulted in significant loss of fiscal autonomy for the States because the States used to get two-thirds of their revenue from VAT (Value Added Tax). States also cannot set the tax rate, which is a key component of fiscal autonomy. So, there needs to be some flexibility somewhere within the GST structure so that the States don't feel that they are not able to tax to provide public services. We should discuss what kind of GST flexibility can bring an element of fiscal autonomy without compromising on the

fiscal harmonisation across States.

AK: GST has damaged federalism because States are very diverse. The problems of Assam are not the same as those of Gujarat. The States have different sources of revenue and expenditure requirements. What we require in India, a very diverse country, is greater decentralisation and it is the only answer to the problems we face. Across the country, greater centralisation that has come in with GST is perhaps not good. What has happened with GST is that it has benefited the organised sector at the expense of the unorganised sector. Even though the unorganised sector has been kept out of GST, the organised sector is the one that has been rising and that is why you see that GST collections have been rising post-pandemic. This decline in the unorganised sector, which is concentrated in the backward States, means that backward States will under-perform. So, GST needs reform. I recommend that the tax be collected at the last point instead of at each intermediate stage, which creates a lot of complications. There is a lot of corruption associated with input credit, there are fake companies, etc. Trucks are stopped by the police and implementing agencies and money is extorted. So, the black economy continues to flourish. We need to collect a lot more from direct taxes and reduce collections from indirect taxes, which are having a negative effect on the backward States as compared to the advanced ones.

We see that States with political weight usually get more funds from the Centre at the cost of other States. So, how fair and objective is Central aid to states? Is there any way to stop politics from influencing how Central funds are allocated to the States?

AK: Seventy per cent of the funds that the Centre spends is non-discretionary. But the remaining 30% are discretionary. The allocation of funds by the Centre to the States depends on politics or political considerations. Greater decentralisation and greater autonomy to the States is the only way to change that.

PC: The real problem of discretion is that if the Centre decides to introduce a new scheme and says that 60% of it will be funded by the Centre and 40% will be funded by the States, it is actually tying up State resources. So, we need deliberations at the national level involving all the stakeholders to understand which schemes the Centre should intervene in, and which it should leave to the States. The 14th Finance Commission had given an important framework for this, recommending that the Centre should intervene in schemes where there are large externalities or national priorities involved. But if the Centre wants to run a primary health centre in a remote village, that is not going to help. So, I think this discussion about political alignment is only of marginal importance. What is really discretionary is the Centre's complete autonomy in deciding which sector and where to spend.



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ECONOMICS & DEVELOPMENT

Future investments in India's EV space



According to media reports, the government is looking to expand the scope of its electric vehicle (EV) policy, announced in March, to include a retrospective effect. This means that the policy, that endeavours to prompt global players to localise production and invest in the domestic ecosystem, will now extend benefits to entities who have already made their investments. Earlier, entities were eligible for incentives only if they set up local facilities within three years of receiving approval. The revised policy is expected to be formally announced in August, the publications learnt from people familiar with the development.

What was the March policy's focus on investment and localisation about?

The policy announced in March aimed to provide Indian consumers with access to the latest technology and strengthen the EV ecosystem by encouraging healthy competition among EV players by attaining higher volumes of production, economies of scale and lower cost of production. All in all, better the electric vehicle economics for Indian consumers, and in a commercially viable manner for the ecosystem. The policy also mandated that half of the value addition in the overall manufacturing be done domestically within five years. To maintain commercial viability and retain a foothold in the Indian market, the import duty on EVs as completely built units (CBUs) with a minimum cost, insurance, and freight (CIF) value of \$35,000 was reduced from 70%-100% to 15%.

The policy document held India, being the third-largest automotive market in the world, could potentially "lead the global transition" from internal combustion engine (ICE) to decarbonised electric counterparts. Overall, the policy was potentially a recognition that import substitution for EVs would require a layered and longer-sustained approach. To this effect, for a commercially viable transition, it further provided mechanisms for manufacturers to address the imperative affordability paradigm of Indian consumers.

Why does the ecosystem need investment and intervention?

A NITI Aayog report in 2022 argued that purchasing a vehicle is a "major investment decision" for most Indian consumers. Thus, it was essential to ensure viable economics for owning, as well as maintaining and running the same – the total cost of ownership.

The report suggested that a sharper decline in costs would prepone the EV adoption timeline. It is essential to note that the report points to India's structural unit cost disadvantages in the production of select cell components such as CAM NMC (8-10%)

and electrolyte (2-3%). Furthermore, as per the report, certain cell components such as separators, copper foil and anode active material (AAM) require sizeable capital investment — about \$200-500 million for a 20-30 GWh plant. The commission thus recommended it was imperative to offset the dynamics and “create an enabling eco-system to attract large-scale capex investment vis-à-vis other geographies”.

The other essentiality for a comprehensive ecosystem stem from the observed experience of after-sales service. Bain & Company's India EV Report (2023), observing the two-wheeler EV segment, had pointed to after-sales service being a “big pain point” for EV customers. It also cast apprehensions about the scalability of business models that had OEMs partnering with standalone breakdown service providers (such as Ampere with ReadyAssist).

The report also held that India would require “significant investor support” to realise the \$100 billion-plus EV opportunity. As the landscape evolves, investors need to evaluate potential assets based on five criteria, namely, sustainable competitive advantages, go-to-market and distribution capabilities, customer feedback and brand perception, talent and culture as well as manufacturing and supply chain strategy.

Does all of it address the paradigm?

The EV policy announced in March shares similar priorities with those in the U.S., China and Europe, where incentives have been endowed on a case-by-case basis to different companies for setting up capacity for EV value chain manufacturing. They entail land and infrastructure, capital subsidies, financing support, fiscal incentives and subsidised utilities. However, unrelatedly, the International Energy Agency (IEA)'s Global EV Outlook for 2024 pointed out that electric cars remain 10% to 50% more expensive than combustion engine equivalents in Europe and the U.S., depending on the country and car segment.

Notably, Europe and the U.S. meet 20% and 30% of their EV battery demands through imports, according to the report. This also forms a case for the necessity for integrated production lines.

Dinesh Abrol, a retired professor at the Institute for Studies in Industrial Development and a long-time observer of industry and trade told The Hindu, that in a broader context, foreign investments have not always been known to deliver. He held that such policies should be able to dictate the type of production that must take place. It must not be restricted to de-risking and de-leveraging, he said.

If FDI is to reap its potential fully, the focus must be on ensuring that it is towards building a core country, such that the critical components are made here, there is the transfer of technology and local manufacturing is built here,” states Prof Abrol, adding, If FDI does not enable one to be a core country, you will not be to progress towards an enabling capacity to establish yourself as a core player. Instead, you shall stand inserted as a peripheral player in the larger supply manufacturing chain.” According to Mr. Abrol, the way forward is to strengthen the domestic players in the creation of capabilities for critical components and make the foreign automakers use the domestic suppliers' networks.

ECONOMICS & DEVELOPMENT

‘Food prices a worry but June inflation may not exceed 5%’

Base benefits

A favourable base effect is expected to help temper retail inflation over June through August period, economists reckon



■ Retail price rise eased to 4.75% in May, though food inflation stayed stuck at 8.7% for a second month

■ Heatwave, delayed start to monsoon likely pushed June's inflation to 5%: DBS Bank's Rao

■ Ms. Rao sees no interest rate cuts this year citing RBI's resolve to look through base effects

Volatile and high food prices remain a concern, but base effects may temper the retail inflation pace in June and possibly even cool it below 4% over July and August, economists reckon.

Retail price rise touched a 12-month low of 4.75% in May, even though food inflation stayed stuck at 8.7% for a second straight month. The NSO will release June's Consumer Price Index data on Friday.

The prolonged heatwave and a delayed start to the southwest monsoon likely pushed June's inflation to 5%, said Radhika Rao, ED and senior economist at DBS Bank. Vegetable prices began to rise sharply as the month progressed, while telecom tariffs were raised, she said.

With the monsoon regaining ground this month, vegetable prices are expected to moderate, and base effects will also push July-August inflation to sub-4%, she estimated. Ms. Rao, however, expects no interest rate cuts this year in light of the RBI's signal that they will look through base effect-driven swings and focus on sticky food prices.

In 2023, June inflation was 4.9% before it sped to 7.4% and 6.8% in July and August, respectively. India Ratings sees inflation easing to 4.5% in June.

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