

Obesity among children peaks in India

Hyderabad: For a long time, public health specialists have focused on malnutrition among children. However, it turns out that in modern times, children in urban as well as rural India have unchecked and unregulated access to fast food and ultra-processed food items. Due to unbridled access to junk food, childhood obesity among children has now become a major challenge for parents, public health specialists and policy experts. In 2022, nearly 1.25 crore children in India (5 to 19 years) were overweight while in 1990, it was 4 lakh. Comprehensive National Nutrition Survey (CNNS) in 2016-18 indicated that 2.1 percent of children (5 to 9 years) and 2.4 percent adolescents (10-19 years) are already obese and 8.5 percent of children and 6.2 percent of adolescents were overweight.

About a year ago, Hyderabad-based Asian Institute of Gastroenterology (AIG), conducted an outreach program, which indicated that children are increasingly consuming fast food and ultra-processed food items. This alarming trend is not just confined to urban cities, even children in rural areas have free access to ultra-processed food

items. "The habit of consuming fast food, especially in children, causes a number of health issues, including inflammation and an increased risk of developing insulin resistance due to elevated Body Mass Index (BMI). Insulin resistance at a young age sets the stage for a lifetime of metabolic disorders, including type 2 diabetes and cardiovascular disease," says Dr Nageshwar Reddy, founder AIG Hospitals. In addition to children, the prevalence of obesity among adults in Telangana has also reached alarming levels, recent population-based study by researchers from Hyderabad-based National Institute of Nutrition (NIN) indicated.

The study reported that 47.7 percent of people in Telangana and 46.7 percent of people in AP were obese, which is a clear indication of the heavy burden of Non Communicable Diseases (NCDs) like diabetes, hypertension etc, among general population. PM's Mann ki Baat to address obesity

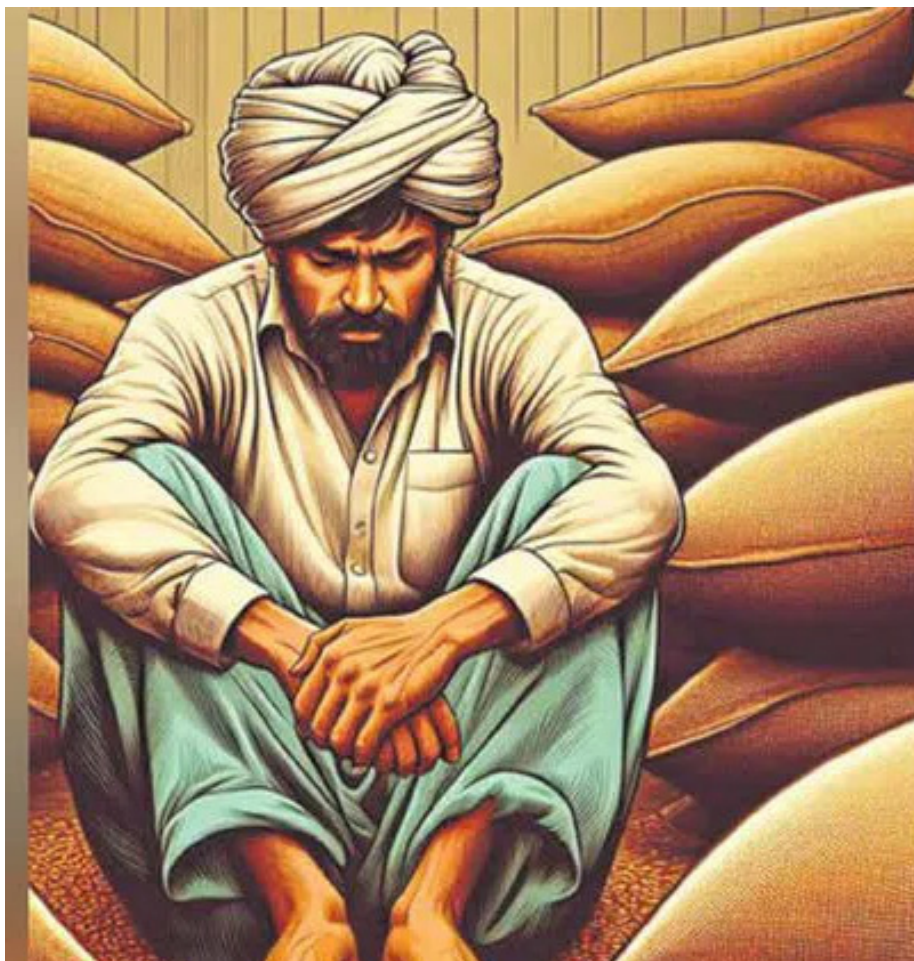
Prime Minister Narendra Modi's campaign to address obesity during Mann Ki Baat has attracted support from celebrities, influencers, public health specialists, emi-



nent personalities, doctors, sports persons and from all walks of life. On multiple social media outlets, especially X (formerly Twitter), physicians have attempted to engage with youth, in order to address childhood obesity. While celebrities and influencers are tagging each other to take the message of fighting obesity forward, physicians on their

part have started holding awareness meetings and utilizing their own reach on social media to talk about obesity. Noted physicians including Dr Nageshwar Reddy from AIG, senior management of Apollo Hospitals, Dr Devi Shetty from Karnataka, and many more are frequently touching upon the issue of obesity.

Farmer tries to end life as bankers threaten auction over 27-year-old loan



Nalgonda: Even agricultural cooperative societies, which are expected to support farmers by fulfilling their credit needs, are now adding to their despair, with one such society, pressured to meet recovery targets, acted ruthlessly and pushed a farmer to the brink. Venkanna, a physically challenged farmer, recently attempted suicide due to harassment by bank officials demanding repayment of a loan, which he claimed to have already repaid. Venkanna's father had taken a loan of Rs 40,000 from Edavelli Primary Cooperative Bank 27 years ago. At the time of partitioning family properties, Venkanna claimed to have cleared his father's loan borrowed against their four acres of land, but he failed to obtain a no dues certificate. Now, the bankers demand Rs

1.68 lakh with interest and have threatened to auction the property. Distressed by the bank's harassment, Venkanna consumed pesticide in a desperate attempt to escape his predicament. He is currently battling for his life at the Nalgonda Government Hospital. Four years ago, Venkanna and his wife Rani had availed an agriculture loan of Rs 1.90 lakh from the same bank for agricultural needs. Recently, cooperative bank officials marked their land placing red flags in a symbolic takeover of possession.

They claimed that the land now belonged to society and threatened to auction it if the loan, along with interest, was not repaid by March 19. This also added to his predicament, forcing Venkanna to attempt ending his life.

Inter officials get notices for transporting question papers in three-wheeler

Hyderabad: Instead of a car, they moved the intermediate examination material in an auto and ended up being slapped with a show cause notice. In Jagtial district, 20 officials – 10 chief superintendents and another 10 departmental officers – were found to have transported questions papers from the strong room to examination centres in a three-wheeler instead of the mandated four-wheeler. This incident happened on the first day of the intermediate examina-

tion on Wednesday. Now, the higher-ups have taken a serious view of the deviation from the prescribed transport mode for the examination material, and served notices to the officials involved. The notices were issued by Intermediate Education District Examination Committee convenor and District Collector B Satya Prasad and the officials were instructed to submit their explanation within one day, failing which action would be initiated based on the material available on the record.

NAAC accreditation: Addressing irregularities and implementing reforms for better quality education

The National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) is an autonomous body established by the University Grants Commission (UGC) in 1994 to systematically assess and accredit the Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs) in India, with the objective of quality assurance and improvement in the quality of education. Over the years, the NAAC rating has acquired a lot of significance, as it determines the eligibility for government funding, grants and academic autonomy such as approval for online programmes. In the absence of any other credible independent assessment body in India, parents and students rely on the NAAC rating for choosing the institution for studies. Moreover, many recruiting companies consider it as a benchmark for assessing the quality of the institution. This places pressure on the institutions to secure good NAAC rating. In the last 30 years, the NAAC accreditation system has undergone several revisions to address emerging challenges, incorporate global best practices, and enhance the credibility of the accreditation process. However, in the recent past, it has been mired in controversies and allegations of corruption, thereby denting its credibility and image. This article examines the issues and the reformative measures, proposed by the NAAC to remedy the situation and enhance the credibility of its ratings. Current assessment framework

As per the NAAC assessment framework that was launched in July 2017, which is in vogue today, a Self Study Report (SSR) is to be submitted online at NAAC portal, along with supporting documents, covering seven criteria. These are Curricular Aspects, Teaching-Learning and Evaluation, Research, Innovations and extension, Infrastructure and Learning Resources, Student Support and Progression, Governance, Leadership and Management and Institutional Values and Best Practices). Seventy percent of the total score is a System Generated Score (SGS) that is based on evaluation of the quantitative metrics through a Data Validation and Verification (DVV) process by an independent agency. Clarifications are sought wherever needed. The balance 30% of the score is obtained based on an assessment of the qualitative metrics by the Peer Review Team at the institution and the Student Satisfaction Survey score. On the basis of the Cumulative Grade Point Average (CGPA), secured by the institution, the final grade is assigned on a seven point scale from A++ to C. Grade "D" connotes non-accreditation.

Low participation of institutions As per the NAAC website, as of Feb. 23 2025, 491 universities and 8,226 colleges had been rated, which constitutes about 41% of the universities and 19% of the colleges. NEP 2020 envisages that by 2035, all the institutions should be accredited. It was found that a number of institutions have not been participating, for fear of securing a poor rating. Besides, most of the colleges lack adequate personnel, well trained in rating preparation. Accreditation participation rates vary significantly across the regions, with the southern states having higher participation compared to northern, eastern and north-eastern regions.

Remedial measures by NAAC The NAAC introduced a Revised Accreditation Framework (RAF) to simplify the process

and focus on outcome-based metrics. It also introduced digital platforms for data submission and IT systems to streamline the processes, including the allocation of peer assessors. Training programmes were conducted for assessors and institutional coordinators to improve the quality of evaluations. The NAAC has increased its outreach to institutions, particularly in underserved regions, to encourage participation. Besides, it also launched a mentoring system, wherein the best performing institutions serve as mentors to the aspiring institutions. Allegations of irregularities Despite the above measures, allegations of subjectivity and bias in the grading process have been raised by some institutions claiming unfair evaluations. Many say the assessment process lacks transparency, particularly about the peer review mechanism. Instances of institutions submitting falsified or inflated data to secure higher grades have been reported.

After studying the NAAC peer team assessment reports, the Comptroller and Auditor General of India (CAG), in March 2023, was reported to have pointed out glaring discrepancies in 29% of the 133 test checked cases, wherein a significant mismatch between the observations and the awarded scores was observed. The ICT audit conducted by a committee constituted by the Chairman, NAAC in September 2022 found that the IT system for allocation of assessors was compromised and assessors were allocated arbitrarily. During the recent CBI investigation into the irregularities in the case of a private university, it was reported that the list of inspection team members was "re-generated" by the system, confirming the earlier finding. A review of aberrations (grade jump of over 2 grades between two consecutive cycles) of about 400 institutions by the NAAC during July- Aug 2023 was reported to have resulted in downgrading the grades of about 50% of the institutions after the review. In Jan. 2024, the NAAC was reported to have put the grading process of 30 Institutions on hold due to grade inflation, wherein an inexplicable jump of five grades was noticed in a few cases between two successive review cycles. Re-Data Validation and Verification (DVV) by a new committee was reported to have led to the reduction of grades for some of the institutions. As a follow up on the tip-off from the recent CBI investigations on corruption, the NAAC is reported to have removed 900 assessors, constituting about 20% of the empanelled ones, from the peer review panel. Besides, the NAAC seems to be re-examining the assessment reports of the institutions that requested re-evaluation of the grades. All the above developments point to the erosion of moral values that form the foundation in a quality assessment system. Besides, they are likely to affect the morale of the right minded employees of the NAAC, as an organisation. More importantly, the image of the NAAC and the credibility of its ratings have been dented. Overarching committee for reforms in accreditation In order to address the alleged and observed irregularities, an Overarching Committee was constituted by the Ministry of Education, Government of India, in November 2022, under the Chairmanship of Dr K Radhakrishnan, former Chairman of ISRO. After studying the prevailing system, various reports on the alleged irregularities and the global rating systems, the committee pro-



posed reforms, aligned with the vision of NEP 2020. These include adoption of a simple, trust-based, data-driven and rationalised system for accreditation. To encourage more participation from unrated institutions, it recommended an adapted Binary Accreditation System, which is in line with the best global practices. In this system, status is announced as "Accredited" or "Provisionally accredited" (applied but not yet accredited) or "Not accredited" (not applied). Institutions can later move up to Maturity-Based Graded Accreditation (Level 1 to 5), as and when they are ready.

In view of the heterogeneity of the institutions, it is proposed to categorise them, based on their orientation/vision and heritage/legacy, and then seek information, that is appropriate for the category. A framework of 10 attributes, covering input, process, outcomes, and impact has been suggested.

In order to avoid duplication of efforts in data collection, a mechanism has been proposed to collect a superset of data from the HEIs, to serve multiple purposes, with an in-built design for collateral cross-checking to check authenticity of data. It is proposed to conduct the assessment with minimal peer review visits, which was the primary source of controversies. The committee submitted its report in January 2024 and the same was accepted by the Government of India. Progress in implementation of the proposed system The NAAC, in its meeting held on Jan. 27 2024, decided that the recommended reforms shall be implemented comprehensively before Dec. 2024, in two stages. In the first stage, the Binary Accreditation is to be implemented by May 2024 and no new applications will be accepted as per the earlier RAF methodology thereafter. The Maturity Based Graded levels (MBGL) were slated to be implemented by December 2024. As per the NAAC notification of 29 June 2024, it was stated that HEIs with valid accreditation as per the present RAF, whose validity expires between July 1 2024 and date of launch of Maturity Based Graded Levels (MBGL), shall be extended for a maximum period of three months after the launch of the MBGL. HEIs that are already accredited may apply for Maturity Based Graded Level, before validity expires, once the MBGL is announced. HEIs whose Institutional Information for Quality Assessment or SSR applications are under RAF may opt for binary accreditation or may decide to go ahead under the current RAF. Meanwhile, the NAAC

conducted regional consultation workshops with stakeholders in five regions and prepared manuals for different disciplines. After a gap of over seven months, the NAAC issued a notification on Feb. 10 2025, as per which, it is proposed to launch the Basic (Binary) Accreditation in April-May 2025, followed by the Maturity-Based Graded Levels (MBGL). However, details of the Basic Accreditation Framework and procedure have not yet been hosted on the NAAC website. The dates for launch of the MBGL have not been announced either.

Lack of clarity Though a lot of preparatory work seems to have been done by the NAAC to implement the new reformatory system, for some reason, documents like the details of Binary Accreditation Framework, procedures, manuals and so on have not yet been placed on the NAAC website. Though it has been over a year since the decision was taken to implement the new system in toto by Dec 2024, even the first phase of implementation is yet to be started. Those institutions interested to apply for the new Binary System have been waiting for over a year. It is not yet clear as to when the NAAC will be ready to start the second phase of implementation of MBGL. Until the MBGL is implemented, HEIs that are already accredited under RAF cannot shift to the new system. It will necessitate simultaneous operation of both the systems, which may be cumbersome for the NAAC.

It is also not clear how the NAAC will collect the data and validate it, without peer visits, which is the most critical part of the reform. Likewise, NAAC plans for data collection and validation using One Nation One Data (ONOD) Platform, so as to ensure integrity of the data, are also not yet clear. Meanwhile, recent press reports of last minute cancellation of earlier scheduled peer team visits to some colleges, as a part of an earlier system and plans to conduct verification totally online, were disappointing to the concerned colleges, as they had completed all the preparations for the visits and the procedure for online verification has not yet been published. The proposed NAAC reforms are in the right direction and will ensure achievement of the NEP-2020 goals on quality of education, provided they are implemented in the right earnest and quickly. It undoubtedly calls for a change in the mindsets of all the stakeholders and also needs concerted efforts from all the concerned.

Airtel Payments Bank Celebrates Women Business Correspondents Contribution to Financial Inclusion on International Women's Day

Hyderabad :Airtel Payments Bank is committed to empowering India with accessible and inclusive banking. With women at the heart of this mission, the Bank ensures that women are central to driving financial inclusion across the nation. This International Women's Day, Airtel Payments Bank celebrates the pivotal role women play in expanding financial access, particularly through the remarkable work of women business correspondents (BCs) who are bridging the gap between banking and underserved communities. The Bank honored the outperforming women BCs from Telangana during a special event organized celebrating the upcoming International Women's Day at Hyderabad. The event was graced by Mr Chiranjeevulu Togarla, Retired IAS Officer, who inspired the BCs with his encouraging words and motivating presence.

Over the years, Airtel Payments Bank has been taking banking services to the deepest rural pockets with its largest banking network comprising over 500,000 neighbourhood-banking points. These banking points are managed by BCs, who are trained and authorised to offer banking services. In Telangana, the Bank works with close to 15,000 banking correspondents and over 3,000 of these correspondents are women. Over 80% of these women BCs are working in unbanked and underbanked locations of Telangana. The Bank values the vital role these women BCs play in driving financial inclusion across the country. These women BCs serve customers with formal banking services including opening a bank account, cash withdrawals, money transfers, bill payments, buying insurance and other financial services. At the event, the Bank felicitated five women BCs who have out-



performed and gone the extra mile to enable customers in their locality. The five exceptional women at event are - Dannina Veena Kumari, Arelli Navya, Bommidi Kavita, Vemulapally Sowjanya and Donthula Divya Sree. Pinak Chakraborty, Chief Information Officer of Airtel Payments Bank, said, "At Airtel Payments Bank, we understand that empowering women within the workforce is

key to advancing financial inclusion and driving sustainable economic growth. Our women business correspondents play a critical role in delivering banking services in their neighbourhood. Most of these business correspondent work in towns that previously had no or distant access to nearest bank branch. I am proud to share that we collaborate with over 100,000 women BCs across India. This

International Women's Day, we reaffirm our commitment to providing them with the right training, resources, and opportunities to thrive." Through its expanding network of women-led banking correspondents, Airtel Payments Bank remains committed to bridging the financial gap, fostering economic participation, and empowering women across India.

Women Investors Embrace Mutual Funds: Key Insights from PhonePe Wealth

Hyderabad :This International Women's Day, PhonePe Wealth highlights the steady rise in women's participation in Mutual Funds on its platform, along with their growing commitment and contribution amounts. PhonePe Wealth analysed the investment patterns of 1 Lakh women investors from January 1, 2024 to December 31, 2024, and the data highlights that women are making strategic and substantial investments, taking steps toward securing their financial future. The data for the period mentioned above reveals that the average Systematic Investment Plan (SIP) contribution from female investors is approximately 22% higher than male investors, while their average lump sum investments surpass those of men by approximately 45%. This data provides a different perspective on women's approach to financial markets and risk. "We acknowledge the increasing participation of women investors and their evolving role in the financial landscape," said Nilesh D Naik, Head of Investment Products, Share.Market (PhonePe Wealth). He further added, "Our data shows that women investors are both participating and actively investing. Today, we believe that women investors are financially aware and

independent, diversifying their portfolios, and investing with a long-term vision and the notion of women being financially conservative is a thing of the past."

Key insights from a survey of 1,00,000 women investors of PhonePe Wealth Mutual Funds for the duration January 1, 2024 – December 31, 2024:

90% of women investors begin with Systematic Investment Plans, demonstrating preference for disciplined, long-term investing.

Women investors maintain an average SIP transaction value of ₹1300, approximately 22% higher than men.

Women exceed the average lump sum investment by approximately 45% as compared to male investors.

Women are playing a pivotal role in driving financial inclusion, with a prominent share from Maharashtra (20%), Karnataka (12%), and Uttar Pradesh (9%) leading the growth.

Approximately 72% of women investors come from B30 (Beyond Top 30) cities, highlighting the increasing reach of Mutual

Funds beyond major metros. Cities like Varanasi, Ranchi, Dehradun, Guwahati, and Vadodara are seeing increasing participation from women investors, highlighting their involvement in wealth creation.

Nearly 50% of women investors hold contra / value funds. Other popular investment categories are flexi-cap, mid cap, small cap, and thematic funds. This diverse fund selection reflects their understanding of portfolio diversification, strategic investing, and calculated risk-taking.

74% of women investors are 35 years or younger, with the largest segment (29%) aged 26-30 years.

Women largely invest between 9 AM and 4 PM, with 44% of transactions occur-

ring during this window. The evolving investment behavior of women is reshaping the financial industry, making it essential to pri-



oritize their needs. PhonePe Wealth supports this by providing resources and tools to facilitate investors to manage their investments and plan for the future.

Rotary Club of Sadashivpet Celebrates Charter Ceremony

Hyderabad :The Rotary Club of Sadashivpet, an esteemed addition to Rotary International District 3150, proudly marked its Charter Ceremony at Sri Saraswathi Shishu Mandir, Sadashivpet. The event signifies the official inception of a club committed to service, community development, and leadership, uniting individuals dedicated to making a positive impact. The ceremony was honored by the presence of Rtn. Sharath Choudary, District Governor of Rotary District 3150, who delivered an inspiring address. "The formation of the Rotary Club of Sadashivpet represents a vital step forward in our collective mission to serve humanity," said Choudary. "Together, we will harness our energies to uplift our communities and create lasting change." Rtn. Uday Pilani, the esteemed Guest of Honor, praised the new club's commitment to service. "Today, we embark on a journey where each member of the Rotary Club of Sadashivpet will play a crucial role in addressing the needs of our community," Pilani articulated. "Your collaboration and dedication will sow the seeds for numerous initiatives that will benefit those around us." Following the Charter Ceremony, members of the Rotary Club of Sadashivpet visited the Government Primary School in Kolkunda Village, Vikarabad District, where they undertook significant service projects. The club spearheaded a renovation of the school, which included the installation of a



new lift, a fresh coat of paint, and the provision of an RO water system to ensure access to clean drinking water for the children. Additionally, new furniture and Rotary bags were donated to enhance the learning environment. These initiatives reflect the club's

commitment to supporting education and improving infrastructure for the benefit of local youth. Mr. Prabhu Vodela will lead the Rotary Club of Sadashivpet as its President, alongside Mr. B. Ashok Kumar, who will serve as Secretary. Both leaders expressed

their enthusiasm for the impactful initiatives that lie ahead. "We are dedicated to the Rotary motto of 'Service Above Self' and look forward to implementing programs that foster growth and positive transformation in our community," Vodela emphasized.

Can Friedrich Merz get Europe out of its funk?

The man now all but certain to become Germany's next chancellor may not be anybody's first choice to share a krug of Oktoberfest lager with. Forget the back-slapping pol ready to banter about the Bundesliga; Friedrich Merz is a former corporate lawyer who wrote a book urging voters to "Dare for More Capitalism"—in 2008. German voters hardly flocked to the beanpole-shaped fellow, who first chased the leadership of the centre-right two decades ago, only to deliver for it the second-worst result in its history last month. But do not tell Europeans this. From Paris to Warsaw, Brussels and beyond, the impending arrival of a new man at the top of German politics is being met with giddy excitement. A continent in crisis on just about every front is in dire need of a reboot—and wants to believe a new Merz-mentum will bring it about. Can the new-chancellor-on-the-block live up to the hype?

The early signs are unexpectedly promising. The first step towards Mr Merz being effective on the European stage is for him to forge a coalition with the centre-left Social Democrats at home, a task expected to take several more weeks. But the agreement announced on March 4th was startling in its ambition. In a stunning reversal of fiscal austerity long espoused by the right—not least by Mr Merz himself—the putative coalition agreed to spend several hundreds of billions of euros on both defence and infrastructure. Once a conservative article of faith, the "debt brake" that has acted as a straitjacket on German fiscal policy by limiting deficits is in effect to be binned when it

comes to defence. The long-overdue splurge to come should help shake off an enduring recession. It also marks an end to the penny-pinching that left Germany unable to durably boost defence spending to levels needed to fend off a revanchist Russia unopposed by Donald Trump's America.

In part thanks to that agreement, Mr Merz will be the star-in-absentia of an emergency European Union summit in Brussels on March 6th, called to discuss the situation in Ukraine. (Olaf Scholz, the outgoing chancellor, will represent Germany, while Mr Merz is to attend a sidelines confab of his centre-right political family ahead of the actual summit.) The hopeful prediction is that Mr Merz will help improve the parlous state of the Franco-German relationship at the heart of the EU. For years the bloc's two biggest countries have been at odds, due largely to a frosty rapport between their respective leaders. Mr Scholz, and to some extent Angela Merkel before him, all but refused to engage with Emmanuel Macron, the French president who endlessly fizzes with ideas of how the continent can be built into a Europe-puissance, generally at Germany's expense. Mr Merz, an Atlanticist visibly shocked by America's shabby treatment of Europe, looks readier to collaborate with his French counterpart.

The two men make an odd couple, separated by 22 years in age and more than that many centimetres in height. Yet they have much in common. Both like to hint at vast intellectual hinterlands with public displays of admiration for impenetrable philosophers. Both worked in high finance before

landing top political jobs. Both rightly worry that, should they mess up, hard-right populists may succeed them in office. Both think of politics in national and European terms. Mr Macron stands just as proudly for the EU's anthem as he does for La Marseillaise; Mr Merz started his career as a member of the European Parliament in the age of Jacques Delors (Mr Scholz, in contrast, seemed to think of the EU as little more than a trading club). Both seem keen to include Poland as a necessary third partner in the Franco-German alliance, and both think Europe is over-regulated. They share a sense of gloom about the state of their home continent: Mr Macron warned last year that "Europe might die"; Mr Merz fretted on election night that it was "five minutes to midnight". What might this mean for Europe? Those who expect a burst of Euro-federalism are likely to be disappointed. If anything, Mr Merz's arrival will mark the end of the vacuum that gave the EU's central institutions, notably the European Commission, an unusual amount of influence. The incoming chancellor's vision of Europe is one where national leaders come together to make decisions, not outsource them to Brussels. A re-think of how the EU works may follow. Mr Merz was a protégé of Wolfgang Schäuble, a flinty finance minister who argued that Germany and France should forge ahead when others in Europe lacked the willingness to do so, resulting in "concentric circles" of EU integration. Expect more "coalitions of the willing" spearheaded by France and Germany—perhaps including Britain, too, on defence matters.



The improved vibes may, of course, dissipate after a brief honeymoon. Europe will still have to contend with German coalition politics, which has muddied its influence in Brussels. Mr Merz has never held executive office before; Mr Macron will be gone by 2027, and no longer fully controls the government. And for all the ideological alignment on Europe's place in the world, some fundamental disagreements remain. Germany is committed to free trade, which France merely tolerates. France would like some of Europe's defence needs to be paid for by an EU fund jointly borrowed by its 27 countries, a model used for the first (and only) time to fund the economic stimulus enacted in the wake of the covid-19 pandemic. That remains verboten in Germany. Nevertheless the mood in EU circles is cheerier than the challenges posed by American abandonment might suggest. Future Franco-German spats are inevitable. They might even help. When Mr Merz's vision does not align with Mr Macron's, as will undoubtedly happen, the two will clash. It is out of the sparks that compromises will be forged, and progress achieved. And that is exactly what Europe needs.

Empowering Women in the Mining Sector: A Pivotal Event Celebrating Inclusivity and Leadership

March 6, 2025: As a pre-event of International Women's Day, the "Celebrating Women in Mining Sector" was successfully organized by the Ministry of Mines in collaboration with CIL, marking a significant step in recognizing and empowering women in the mining sector. The event was graced by Hon'ble Minister of Coal and Mines, Shri G. Kishan Reddy, Hon'ble Minister of State for Coal and Mines, Shri Satish Chandra Dubey, and the Hon'ble Minister of Women and Child Development from Telangana. They expressed their commitment to ensuring that women have a stronger presence in the mining industry.

The event began with an auspicious lamp lighting ceremony, where the ministers invited women participants to light the lamp, symbolizing empowerment and progress in the sector. Following this, the Union Ministers and the Hon'ble Minister of Women and Child Development from Telangana felicitated 46 outstanding professionals for their exceptional contributions to the mining industry. Women from leading organizations like IBM, TATA, GSI, ADANI, Vedanta, and more than 10 private companies, NGOs, and several PSUs were honored for breaking barriers and driving progress in the industry. The participation of the women heads of the mining departments from Uttar Pradesh and Gujarat further highlighted the collaborative effort to enhance women's participation in mining.

In his address, Shri G. Kishan Reddy emphasized the importance of women in the mining sector, acknowledging their valuable contributions and encouraging further efforts to create equal opportunities in this traditionally male-dominated industry. Shri Satish Chandra Dubey highlighted the government's initiatives to promote gender diversity and provide a conducive environment for women professionals in mining. The Hon'ble Minister of Women and Child Development from Telangana reiterated the government's dedication to empowering women across all sectors, including mining, through supportive policies and initiatives.

Empowering Women in Mining: Panel Discussions

The event also featured two important panel discussions, with experts from across the industry sharing insights on the challenges and strategies for women's empowerment in mining.

Panel Discussion I: Women's Perspective on Inclusivity in Mining – Challenges & Way Ahead

This panel delved into the barriers women face in the mining sector and how inclusivity can be further promoted. The discussion was moderated by Shri Nirupama Kotru, JS & FA, who guided the conversation on the need for structural and cultural changes to ensure women's active participation and leadership in the sector. Panelists shared their personal journeys and offered practical solutions for creating a more inclusive and supportive environment.

Panel Discussion II: Empowering Women in Mining – Inclusivity, Need, Approach, and Way Forward

The second panel focused on strategies to empower women and the steps required to create a more inclusive mining sec-



tor. Moderated by Smt. Farida M. Naik, JS (FMN), the session explored the approaches needed to break down gender barriers and ensure that women have access to equal opportunities in mining. The panelists discussed the vital role of mentorship, leadership, and policy interventions in creating sustainable, inclusive opportunities for women to thrive in the industry.

Both discussions emphasized the cru-

cial need for collective action to ensure that women are not only represented but also empowered to excel in mining. From encouraging mentorship and skill development to implementing supportive policies, the event reflected a shared commitment to creating a more inclusive mining sector.

Their achievements are a testament to the growing presence of Naari Shakti in mining, inspiring future generations to step for-

ward and lead. The event reaffirmed the government's and the industry's resolve to continue creating opportunities for women and ensuring their growth and success in the mining sector. By highlighting the importance of empowerment, inclusivity, and leadership, the discussions served as a powerful reminder that women's contributions are vital to the continued progress and success of the mining industry.

Coal power is costing India up to 10% of its rice and wheat crops

According to new research led by researchers at Stanford University in the US, coal-fired power plants are quietly depleting India's rice and wheat output, destroying up to 10% of the yield in several states. The emissions from coal power plants include carbon dioxide, nitrogen oxides, sulphur oxides, fly ash, soot, suspended particulate matter, and other trace gases. These pollutants have been linked to smog, acid rain, eutrophication and various other environmental burdens. An elusive link in the new study, PhD student Kirat Singh and his colleagues turned the spotlight on the less explored consequences of nitrogen dioxide (NO₂) on crop productivity. The nitrogen oxides in general are an established side effect of India's coal dependence. They are phytotoxic, meaning they stress plants, and have been known to hinder cellular function and interfere with crucial enzymatic activities. The oxides also contribute to the formation of ozone, which in turn exacerbates crop damage and produces particulate matter that limits the amount of sunlight available for photosynthesis. "We know that coal-fired power plants contribute significantly to air pollution," Singh said. "And we also know from past studies that various pollutants, including NO₂, can negatively impact crop growth. But there hadn't been a study linking the two in a systematic way at the power-plant level, particularly in India." Tracking plant health to compensate for the lack of ground monitoring stations in agricultural areas, the researchers used data from satellite images to glean high-resolution insights into NO₂ concentration across India. Since multiple power plants contribute to NO₂ pollution across different distances, the researchers summed up all coal-attributable NO₂ emissions reaching each location instead of isolating individual sources. This approach gave them a comprehensive picture of the amount of pollution to which agricultural regions were exposed.

Then, to estimate how NO₂ from coal-fired power plants affected crop yield, the researchers turned to a satellite-derived vegetation index. They used a physical signal called near-infrared reflectance of vegetation (NIRv) as a proxy for plant health. NIRv measures greenness. Healthy crops are richer in chlorophyll, which can't be detected by visible light but is sensitive to near-infrared light. So a higher percentage of near-infrared light is reflected by leaves in healthy plants. Using pre-established coefficients, the researchers could link NO₂ levels, measured by the TROPOMI satellite, to changes in NIRv. They used India-specific coefficients of 0.0006 for monsoon rice and 0.0007 for winter wheat. For every 1 mol/m² increase in NO₂, for example, the corresponding drop in NIRv was 0.0006 and 0.0007, respectively. Prior research has already shown a linear relationship between NIRv and crop yield, allowing the researchers to directly estimate how much yield was lost due to pollution. They set a baseline NIRv of 0.007, representing zero crop growth, and calculated the percentage decrease in yield based on pollution-driven declines in greenness. This method helped them quantify the agricultural damage wrought by NO₂ without requiring physical field



measurements. Blowing in the wind They also analysed wind patterns to differentiate between pollution from coal plants from that from other industrial and environmental sources. This step helped the team unravel major differences in the effects of coal pollution across States.

For example, Chhattisgarh, a major hub for coal-fired power, had the highest share of NO₂ pollution from coal plants: about 19% of NO₂ detected in the monsoon season and 12.5% in winter came from coal plants. Surprisingly, Uttar Pradesh had high overall NO₂ levels but only a small portion of that came from coal power, while Tamil Nadu had relatively low NO₂ pollution but the bulk of it came from coal power. Coal's contribution to air pollution thus varied by region. Not all power plants have the same impact: those located near fertile farmland with a high emissions exposure caused the most agricultural damage, Singh said.

An overlooked loss Crop damage intensity — measured as monetised loss per gigawatt-hour (GWh) of electricity generated — for wheat and rice touched up to \$17,370/GWh (Rs 15 lakh on February 6, 2025) and \$13,420/GWh (Rs 11.7 lakh) respectively. About 20% of coal-fired electricity generation during the monsoon season accounted for half of all coal NO₂-related rice losses while 12% of total winter season generation was linked to 50% of wheat losses. This suggested that targeting a relatively small subset of highly polluting power stations could still have significant benefits for agricultural productivity. To wit, as per the study, the yield of 5.7% of cropland in West Bengal near coal-fired power stations could increase 5-10% while the gains of 1.66% could exceed 10%. Similarly in Madhya Pradesh, the yield in 5.9% of cropland could increase 5-10% yield gains and another 11.9% could gain by more than 10%.

To compare, the annual yield growth for kharif rice and rabi wheat has averaged just 1.7% and 1.5% respectively between 2011 to 2020. According to the study, India's rice production could gain \$420 million a year and wheat \$400 million a year, roughly Rs 7,000 crore in total. Expected yield gains from eliminating coal-attributable nitrogen dioxide concentrations in major rice- and wheat-producing states. Large tracts of cropland in all key states are expected to see yield improvements of 1% from eliminating coal-related NO₂. Data from 2019 growing seasons. Expected yield gains from eliminating coal-attributable nitrogen dioxide concentrations in major rice- and wheat-producing states. Large tracts of cropland in all key states are expected to see yield improvements of 1% from eliminating coal-related NO₂. Data from 2019 growing seasons. | Photo Credit: PNAS: 122 (6) e2421679122 India and coal As the 2025-2026 Economic Survey as well as energy experts have noted, coal power plays a crucial role in India's growth at the moment. The 2025-2026 Union Budget has allocated 255% more for the Ministry of Coal over revised estimates of FY 2024-2025. India's demand

for food is soaring as well. In 2024, the Global Hunger Index ranked India 105th out of 127 countries on food security. Rice and wheat are staple crops in India and in many parts of the world to which these grains are exported. Singh said he hopes to inform policy reforms that will allow the coal and agricultural sectors to meet in the middle. "When you're crafting policy around controlling pollution from the power sector, considering crop impacts alongside health and greenhouse gas emissions can help policymakers prioritise where that pollution control equipment should be installed," he said. "If you want to optimise the money that is being invested in installing all of this pollution-control equipment, you want to focus on power plants where it would bring the most benefit. Policymakers might find information in our research that could be helpful in terms of figuring out which power stations to prioritise," he added. Singh grew up in New Delhi and said its poor air quality motivated him to study the consequences of air pollution on human as well as crop health. In future, Singh is planning to further study how coal power plants affect agriculture at large in India, including the effects of other pollutants on crop productivity.

AI adoption top priority for 98% of Indian business leaders by 2025: Report

New Delhi: Artificial Intelligence (AI) has evolved from a mere buzzword to a crucial business strategy, with 98% of business leaders in India prioritizing AI adoption for 2025, according to a new report released on Thursday. The demand for technical skills such as software development and AI expertise continues to rise, alongside essen-

tial soft skills like communication and problem-solving. A LinkedIn report highlights that over 60% of HR professionals in the country believe AI-powered tools can streamline and expedite the hiring process. "AI is reshaping how we hire and develop talent, but the real unlock isn't just adopting AI — it's making it work for the business," said Ruchee Anand, India Country Head.

Why are PwDs worried about DPDP rules? | Explained

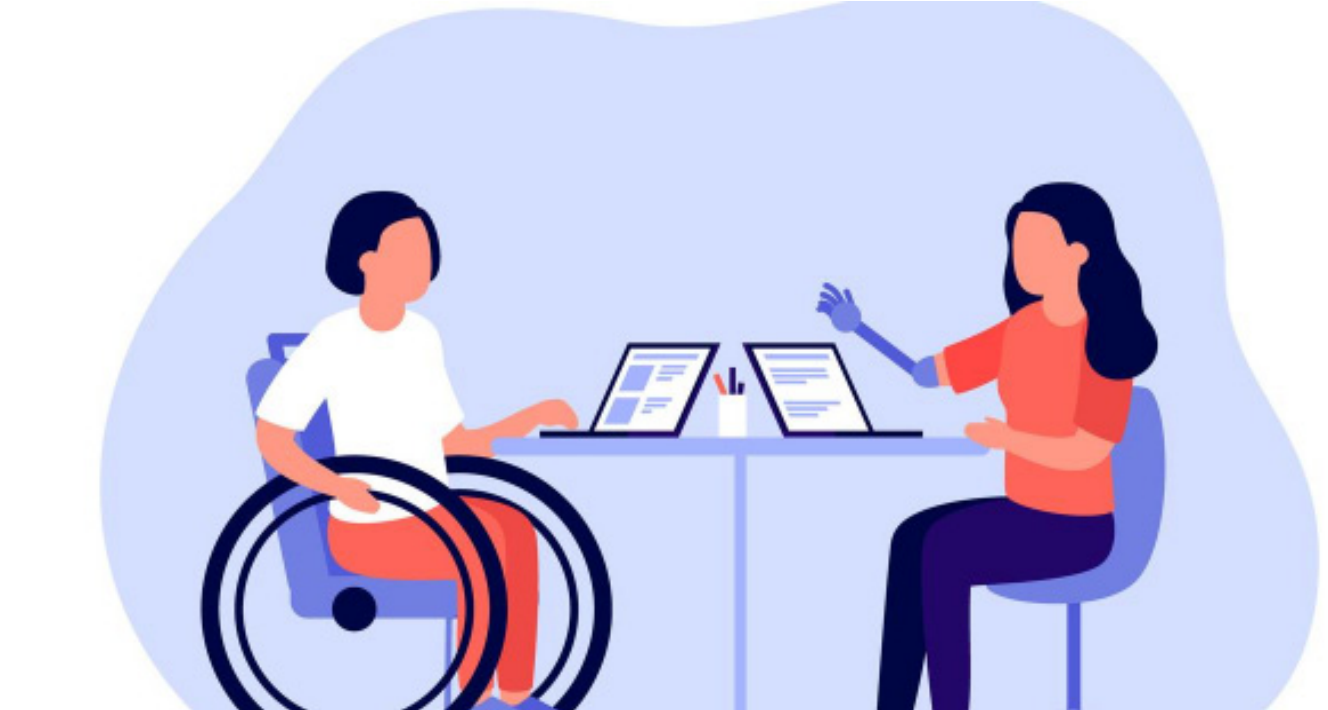
With the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY) looking to wrap up public consultations on the draft Rules for the Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023 by March 5, disability rights activists are trying to get a key provision of the Act amended or dropped, pointing out that it infantilises Persons with Disabilities (PwDs), negates their decision-making capabilities, and comes from a misunderstood notion of how guardianship works for PwDs.

What does this provision state?

Section 9(1), in clubbing children with PwDs, has mandated that even in cases of adult PwDs who have legal guardians, consent for use of any personal data must be obtained from the guardian concerned. While government officials have said that the draft Rules have tried to address the issue by limiting the number of disabilities the provision would apply to, activists and experts maintain that there remain significant challenges in its implementation.

What do the draft Rules say?

The Union government has said that it brought the DPDP Act, 2023 to govern the processing of digital personal data in a way that “recognises both the right of individuals to protect their personal data and the need to process such personal data for lawful purposes and for matters connected therewith or incidental thereto”. Section 9(1) of the Act says, “The Data Fiduciary shall, before processing any personal data of a child or a person with disability who has a lawful guardian obtain verifiable consent of the parent of such child or the lawful guardian, as the case may be, in such manner as may be prescribed.” The Act’s language defines data fiduciaries as those parties processing the personal data and data principals as the users whose data is being collected. But in Section 2(j)(ii), for PwDs, the Act has included “lawful guardian” within the meaning of data principal. In the draft Rules notified by the MeitY on January 3 this year, the government has proceeded to set out the rules that will govern the Act. In these Rules, Rule 10 deals with the governing of Section 9(1) of the Act. Rule 10(2) says, “A Data Fiduciary, while obtaining verifiable consent from an individual identifying herself as the lawful guardian of a person with disability, shall observe due diligence to verify that such guardian is appointed by a court of law, a designated authority or a local level committee, under the law applicable to guardianship.” In the next sub-section, the Rules provide for considering guardianship under the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 (RPWD Act) and the National Trust for the Welfare of Persons with Autism, Cerebral Palsy, Mental Retardation and Multiple Disabilities Act, 1999 (NT Act). It also goes on to define PwDs, for whom the consent clause of Section 9(1) would apply to, as: “(i) an individual who has long term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairment which, in interaction with barriers, hinders her full and effective participation in society equally with others and who, despite being provided adequate and appropriate support, is unable to take legally binding decisions; And (ii) an individual who is suffering from any of the conditions relat-



ing to autism, cerebral palsy, mental retardation or a combination of any two or more of such conditions and includes an individual suffering from severe multiple disability.” But while the Rule on how to take the consent of the parents of children contains detailed explanations in the form of illustrations that highlight different scenarios and how the consent procedure would work in each, there is no similar illustrations presented for the sub-section that deals with taking consent of the guardian of a person with disability. This has led disability rights activists and experts alike to question how the consent clause would apply to PwDs, details of procedures for different disabilities and degrees of severity, and whether it would apply uniformly to guardians appointed under different laws.

How do guardianships for PwDs work?

The legal guardianship for PwDs, while not mandatory, is governed by two laws in India — the RPWD Act, 2016 and the NT Act, 1999 — both of which mandate different roles for the guardians appointed under it for adult PwDs. The NT Act’s guardianship clauses apply to people who are “diagnosed with conditions related to autism, cerebral palsy, intellectual disability (previously categorised as mental retardation), or any combined occurrence of two or more of these conditions”. It provides for full guardianship of the PwD. In contrast, the RPWD Act’s guardianship clauses apply to people “experiencing long-term physical, mental, intellectual, or sensory impairments which, when interacting with various barriers, hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others”. This provides for a “limited guardianship”, which allows for support in making specific legal decisions when the individual’s capacity is deemed insufficient. While the NT Act goes against the principles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) by making “decision-making capacity” a metric for guardianship without adequately defining it, the RPWD Act, drafted to keep up with the UNCRPD, frames guard-

ianship as support to PwDs in exercising their own decision-making rights.

Where does the conflict arise?

A small survey among 91 PwDs by policy thinktank PACTA and Saksham Disability has shown that about 27.4% of them had legal guardians. Amongst those respondents who knew which law their guardianship was governed by, most said theirs were under the RPWD Act’s provision for “limited guardianship”. But despite this, the practicalities of guardianship are different, a report by Saksham and PACTA noted, adding that most of the PwDs with guardians maintained that their legal guardian ends up managing all their affairs. This report, released last month, noted that while the Act and the draft Rules are sound “in theory” if the guardianship is under the RPWD Act, the realities of how this guardianship works would mean that “a guardian is likely to deprive the autonomy and personhood of the individual”. On the other hand, in cases of guardians appointed under the NT Act, this would be in “direct conflict” with the autonomy of persons with disabilities under the UNCRPD, the report argued. The report noted that a plain reading of Section 9(1) of the DPDP Act “appears to presume” that just because a PwD might have a legal guardian, this in itself would be indicative of their “inability to take decisions in the digital sphere”. In addition, it said the law does not consider intersectionality of gender and disability. It cites a situation where a PwD woman may not be able to buy sanitary napkins from an online platform because it may now require their guardian’s consent for them to be able to access the platform itself. Nipun Malhotra, of the Nipman Foundation, who is leading efforts to lobby the government on these provisions, has said that Section 9(1) of the DPDP Act, 2023 itself has caused enough chaos on how it would apply, to whom, and under what circumstances. As for the government’s attempts to address the issue with the law by limiting the definition of PwDs in the draft Rules, Mr. Malhotra told

The Hindu, “Instead of simplifying how it would apply, the definitions have further complicated the issue.” Citing one example of the definition, he explained that “physical impairment” has been included. “But there is no provision for people with just physical disability to have legal guardians. This will only confuse people more.”

What are the concerns being raised?

Given the way the consent clause has been structured for PwDs in the DPDP Act, 2023 and the draft Rules, some of the principal concerns that have emerged include those of what legal obligations would the guardian of a PwD face; how the consent clause can be implemented in cases where guardianship law is in dissonance with the UNCRPD; and whether the legal guardian can opt out of consenting on behalf of the user with respect to specific platforms. Another issue highlighted by Saksham in their report has been that of concerns among PwDs about what the fate of their personal data will be. For instance, the rights body has posited that to comply with Section 9(1) of the Act, any data fiduciary would have to ask at least two questions: (i) Whether the user has a disability? (ii) Whether the user had a legal guardian. In cases where the answer to the first question is yes but the second is not, the platform will still have data on the person’s disability with no purpose to process it. Further, Saksham has questioned that if the definition of data principal includes the legal guardian of a PwD, would that then mean that they must take on the full legal responsibility and face penal consequences under the Act? It has been argued that if this is the case, the legal guardian may, at times, be acting in their own interest, instead of the PwD they are caring for. Moreover, experts working in the disability sector have pointed out that beyond all of this, the primary barrier to PwDs’ digital rights remains that of inaccessible platforms and applications. According to a 2023 accessibility evaluation conducted by the Vidhi Centre for Legal Policy of the 10 most used apps,

Why the south of India is no longer impervious to the saffron march

Trajectories of north and south Indian history have moved at different levels. Unlike north India, where history is often a recollection of invasions and wars, massacres and destruction, the south's has been more about accommodation, assimilation and affirmation. As recounted by historian Romila Thapar in her landmark work, *History of Early India*, "The Arabs settled permanently in the coastal regions of the west and the south from about the eighth and ninth centuries. They were welcomed, given land for trading stations and left free to practise their religion, as had been the convention with Christians earlier in south India.... Among the more interesting aspects of Arab settlements along the west coast is that each group adopted some of the customary law, and even some forms of worship, from the local community with whom they had the closest contact." It is in stark contrast to what happened in north India with the invasion of Sindh by Mohammed bin Qasim in 712 CE, and later the raids of Mahmud of Ghazni. The dichotomy continues to this day. For instance, while north India has been awash with resurgent Hindutva since the time of the Ayodhya dispute, and the consequent othering of fellow citizens of other faiths, large tracts of south India have consistently resisted the march of Hindutva forces. In the general elections last summer, the Bharatiya Janata Party failed to gain even one seat in Tamil Nadu, and won one seat in Kerala. 'A real force'

But the limited electoral success does not necessarily mean that the south is impervious to the saffron march. Arguing that Hindutva is a real force which needs to be contended within theoretical and empirical terms, journalist and writer Nissim Mannathukkaren and several other writers including Christophe Jaffrelot, T.T. Sreekumar, Anil M. Varughese, J. Devika and others examine the rise of Hindu nationalism in Kerala in a new book, *Hindu Nationalism in South India* (Routledge). Placing Kerala in the context of south India, several essays examine the rise of Hindutva in relation to the State's history, caste, culture, post-truth, ideology, gender, politics and the Indian national space. "Hindu nationalism appears 'more confident, proud, brazen and belligerent than ever before'," Mannathukkaren writes in the Introduction, quoting Edward Anderson and Arkotong Longkumer. But the expansion is not just electoral, it is also socio-cultural, he says. That is why despite the lack of comparable electoral success in Kerala and south India, "it is vital to map the tectonic changes that are happening at a discursive level across India," he writes. Mannathukkaren explains how despite the absence of seats on the electoral charts, the BJP's vote share has been on the upswing in Kerala, and to a lesser extent in Tamil Nadu.

"An electoral analysis of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) and the BJP in Kerala shows that they increased the vote share from 6.31% in 2009 to 10.83% in 2014, and further to 15.20% in 2019. While the increase in votes has not been enough to win any seats, the changes are very important considering that the Hindu population is only around 55% in the State," he notes. In the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, the BJP won one seat in Kerala with actor-turned-politician



Suresh Gopi winning from Thrissur, while the Congress-led United Democratic Front bagged 18 of 20 Lok Sabha seats. In Telangana, the BJP won four parliamentary seats in 2019. In the 2023 Assembly Elections, it increased its vote share from 6.9% (2018) to 13.90%, its total votes from 14.43 lakh to 32.51 lakh and its seats from one to eight. Effectively, every seventh voter had bought the BJP's narrative of Hindu nationalism. The saffron gains in the south are real, and could in the foreseeable future, be tangible too.

The most significant saffron gains have been in Karnataka where the BJP made an electoral breakthrough as early as 1991. According to Mannathukkaren, "South India as a whole cannot be generalised for there are regional variations among States, such as the significant advancement of Hindutva in Karnataka. But crucially, there are variations even within States (thus, there are frontiers within States); for example, in coastal Karnataka, the BJP has won all three seats since 2000. Unique demographic and socio-cultural factors gave rise to a virulent Hindutva much before many other places." But Kerala has drawn a lot of attention as it is perceived as a Left stronghold. Explains Mannathukkaren, "Arguably, no State in India in recent times has drawn the ire of Hindutva groups as much as Kerala. This has been amplified by traditional media as well as social media networks doing the bidding for the Hindutva dispensation. Thus, the Prime Minister compares Kerala with Somalia (in terms of development), prominent television channels refer to the State as 'Pakistan', WhatsApp forwards and Facebook posts talk of Kerala's 'killing fields' (of Hindutva activists) and its 'jihadi terror' factories...." A socio-cultural change is taking hold, as Jaffrelot points out in his essay: "It happens through a couple of processes: firstly, the denigration of secularism, religious figures wielding state power, new laws targeting conversion, a ban on beef, the Hinduisation of street/city names, the rewrit-

ing of textbooks, etc., which give legitimacy to Hindu nationalism, and secondly, the previously-covert-but now-visible forms of discrimination against religious minorities." While the rise of Hindutva politics has touched almost every part of the country, its roots go back all the way to the time of Jawaharlal Nehru. As Jaffrelot notes, "Nehru fought against all forms of communalism (whether Hindu, Muslim or Sikh), not against

religion per se... He never intended to separate politics and religion.... Nehru outlined his views on the subject in 1961, when he said, 'We talk about a secular state in India. It is perhaps not very easy even to find a good word in Hindi for 'secular.' Some people think it means something opposed to religion. That obviously is not correct. What it means is that it is a state which honours all faiths equally and gives them equal opportunities.'

Why is Central TB Division pushing an untested AI tool for screening?

Even as time is running out to meet Prime Minister Narendra Modi's goal of "eliminating" TB by 2025, the Health Ministry appears to be moving at glacial speed and is largely disinterested. A report submitted by the Health Technology Assessment of India (HTAI) committee in February 2024 on two indigenously developed solutions to screen people with presumptive and subclinical TB using AI-assisted chest X-ray interpretation was posted on the HTAI website only on December 6, 2024. The two indigenously developed solutions are qXR from the Bengaluru-based Qure.ai and Genki from Pune's DeepTek.

HTA assessment of a new technology or tool for cost-effectiveness and efficacy in terms of sensitivity and specificity is not mandatory. However, the Central TB Division (CTD) waits for the HTA report and approval by the Medical Technology Assessment Board (MTAB) chaired by Niti Aayog and involves stakeholders including itself before programmatic implementation of any new tool, technology or treatment regimen using novel drugs for TB. For instance, TrueNat for TB diagnosis was validated by ICMR's National Institute of Research in Tuberculosis (NIRT), Chennai before it was assessed by the HTA before it was included in the TB programme. Similarly, the BPaLM/

BPaL regimen for MDR-TB treatment was tested in a phase 3/4 trial by NIRT and then assessed by HTA before being included in the TB programme by the Central TB Division.

Surprisingly, despite the assessment and approval of the two AI tools by the HTA and MTAB, respectively, the Central TB Division has not included them for programmatic implementation. However, even in the absence of an HTA assessment, the CTD has "recommended for programmatic introduction" a similar AI tool — DeepCXR — developed by the Institute for Plasma Research, Gandhinagar. An ICMR expert committee had approved the AI tool for "use under the national TB programme".

Worse, CTD failed to officially communicate to the States that it was recommending the use of the DeepCXR tool in the TB programme. Instead, CTD informed the States in end-January this year to "consider utilising" the DeepCXR tool only when the States reached out to CTD seeking AI solutions to analyse chest X-ray images. And the 100-day TB elimination campaign began on December 7, 2024. As per CTD, the DeepCXR technology is available for free for use in the national TB programme. As per a January-February 2020 review paper in the journal *Neurology India*.