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12/24, Muthurangan Muthali St, West Tambaram, Chennai - 600045

<https://www.evastaliniasacademy.in/>

Contact Number - +91-8678969915, +91-9940332851

## Attackers of two merchant ships will face justice soon: Rajnath

**The Hindu Bureau**  
NEW DELHI

"India's growing power has filled some forces with jealousy and hatred, and the perpetrators of the attacks on merchant vessels *Chem Pluto* and *Sai Baba* will soon be brought to justice," Defence Minister Rajnath Singh said on Tuesday. He was speaking at the commissioning of the P-15B class stealth guided missile destroyer *INS Imphal*, the first warship to be named after a city in Northeast India, at the Naval Dockyard in Mumbai.

"India plays the role of a net security provider in the

entire Indian Ocean Region. We will ensure that maritime trade in this region touches greater heights. For this, together with our friendly countries, we will keep the sea lanes secure. We have full confidence in the ability and strength of our Navy," he said.

### 'Island country'

Mr. Singh said that with the Himalayas in the north and the hostile behaviour of Pakistan in the west, most of India's goods trade came through the sea, which made it an "island country from the trade perspective".



**Ready to sail:** *INS Imphal* anchored at the Naval Dockyard in Mumbai after its commissioning on Tuesday. REUTERS

Navy chief Admiral R. Hari Kumar said the Navy had four destroyers of Project 15B and 15A class de-

ployed to counter pirate and drone attacks on merchant shipping. The P8I and Dornier aircraft, the

Sea Guardian unmanned aerial vehicles, helicopters, and Coast Guard ships were deployed to counter the threats.

*INS Imphal* is the third of four indigenous Visakhapatnam class destroyers, designed by the Navy's Warship Design Bureau and built by Mazagon Dock Shipbuilders Limited, Mumbai. The first two destroyers of this class *INS Visakhapatnam* and *INS Mormugao* were commissioned into the Navy in 2021 and 2022, respectively. Admiral Kumar exuded confidence that the fourth ship, *Surat*, will be commissioned in 2024.

The ship measures 163m in length, 17m in breadth, with a displacement of 7,400 tonnes, and is propelled by four powerful gas turbines.

### 'Quick pace'

"The time taken to build *INS Imphal* and undergo trials has been the shortest for any indigenous destroyer. The ship successfully completed the first-ever test-firing of extended range BrahMos missile prior to its commissioning, making it 'weapon-ready'," the Defence Ministry said in a statement.

*INS Imphal* has enhanced stealth features re-

sulting in a reduced radar cross-section, achieved through efficient shaping of hull, full beam superstructure design, plated masts, and the use of radar transparent material on exposed decks.

The ship features about 75% indigenous content, the statement noted, and the indigenous equipment includes the combat management system, rocket launcher, torpedo launcher, integrated platform management system, automated power management system, Helo traversing system, close-in weapon system, and the bow-mounted sonar.

## 'Fiscal deficit may breach 5.9% target'

**Vikas Dhoot**  
NEW DELHI

India's fiscal deficit may breach the 5.9% of GDP target for this year and could hit 6%, though tax collections have been buoyant and may offset a wide shortfall in disinvestment outcomes, due to the likelihood of revenue spending exceeding the Budget Estimate by about ₹2 lakh crore, India Ratings and Research said on Tuesday.

The Union government has recently secured parliamentary approval for the first supplementary demand for grants this year, involving an additional

### Overshooting target

India's fiscal deficit could hit 6%, exceeding Budget Estimate of 5.9% by 10bp in FY24, according to India Ratings & Research



\*BE= Budget estimate | \*F=Forecast

cash outgo of ₹53,378 crore, lifting its total spending commitment for 2023-24 to ₹45.6 lakh crore, including about ₹35.6 lakh crore of revenue expenditure and ₹10.1 lakh

crore of capital expenditure.

"However, India Ratings believes, like in the past, there will be a second supplementary demand for grants, as a result of which

the revenue expenditure is expected to increase to ₹37.1 lakh crore, over ₹2 lakh crore higher than budgeted for the year," its economists noted.

"Higher-than-budgeted revenue expenditure triggered through the first and likely second supplementary demand for grants in combination with lower-than-budgeted nominal GDP will push the fiscal deficit to 6% of GDP," they said. A major reason for the increased expenditure would be higher expenditure by few Ministries and recouping of over ₹28,000 crore to the Contingency Fund of India, they said.

## Returning my Khel Ratna, Arjuna Award: Vinesh Phogat

**Press Trust of India**  
NEW DELHI

World Championship medallist Vinesh Phogat on Tuesday said she is returning her Khel Ratna and Arjuna Award to the government protesting against the election of Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh-loyalist Sanjay Singh as the Wrestling Federation of India (WFI) president, the wrestler wrote in a letter to Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

Ms. Vinesh's decision comes days after Olympic medallist Bajrang Punia and Deaflympics champion Virender Singh Yadav returned their Padma Shri awards.

"I am returning my Ma-



Vinesh Phogat

jor Dhyanchand Khel Ratna and Arjuna Award," Ms. Vinesh announced through a letter that she posted in her X account.

On Thursday, Sanjay Singh was elected as the president of the WFI after the panel led by the close aide of Brij Bhushan won 13 of the 15 posts. The wres-

ters had demanded that no close associate of Brij Bhushan should enter the WFI administration.

Following the election, Rio Olympics bronze medallist Sakshi Malik announced that she would quit the sport.

However, the Sports Ministry had later suspended the newly-elected panel for not following the provisions of its own constitution while taking decisions and also asked the IOA to constitute an ad-hoc panel to manage the affairs of the sports body.

In suspending the panel, the government cited its "hasty announcement" of organising the U-15 and U-20 nationals "without following due procedure".



# Confusion over implementation of newly enacted criminal laws

Despite Gazette notification, officials cite the need for clarity; they say in absence of required infrastructure on the ground and adequate training for police, it may take several months for the new legislation to replace British-era laws to be effective

**Vijaita Singh**  
NEW DELHI

**A** day after the three new criminal laws received Presidential assent and were notified in the Gazette, confusion prevailed at police stations and courts on Tuesday regarding their implementation, said several police officials.

The three Acts replace the British-era laws, but in the absence of the required infrastructure on the ground and adequate training of police officials, it will take several months for them to be effective.

Union Home Minister Amit Shah said in Chandigarh on December 22 that the framework to implement the laws in all the Union Territories would be ready by December 2024.

"By December 2024, the work of infrastructure, software, training of human resources and complete computerisation of courts will be done for implementation of these three laws in all the Union



**Seeking clarity:** Minister Amit Shah has said that a framework to implement the laws will be ready by December 2024. PTI

Territories," Mr. Shah said. He added that a meeting in all the Union Territories would be held before January 31 to fully prepare them to implement the laws by December 22, 2024.

#### 'Not on different dates'

A senior government official said the laws would have to be simultaneously implemented in the States and the Union Territories and there could not be dif-

ferent dates. The Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS) replaces the Indian Penal Code, 1860; the Bharatiya Sakshya (BS) the Indian Evidence Act, 1872; and the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita (BNSS) the Code of Criminal Procedure, 1898.

The December 25 notification said the laws "shall come into force on such date as the Central government may, by notification in the Official Gazette, ap-

point". "Several magistrates asked on Tuesday why the police are still registering cases under the IPC when the new laws are in place. Till now, no training of officials has been held nor there is a change in the software used to register the cases," a Delhi Police official said.

#### Common software

At present, over 95% police stations across the country register first information reports (FIR) through a common application software under the Crime and Criminal Tracking Network and Systems (CCTNS), a project started in 2009.

Out of 17,379 sanctioned police stations, as many as 16,733 police stations are linked to the CCTNS, which is under the ambit of the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB).

"The format for FIRs, Integrated Investigation Form (IIF) among others will have to be changed under CCTNS. That has not been done so far. In some

States, the FIR is registered in local language, that link will have to be established since the names of the Acts are in Hindi," said another official.

The official added that there is confusion regarding supplementary chargesheets too.

"What will be the fate of supplementary chargesheets for cases filed under the IPC after the Sanhita is implemented. All this requires further clarity," the official said.

M.S Khan, a lawyer specialising in terror cases, said police officials would have to be properly trained.

"Though there are no substantial changes in the three legislation, some offences might be overlooked due to lack of application of provisions by investigating agencies. It will take three-four years to train the police officials as BNSS requires time-bound investigation and mandatory audio visual recording [of search and seizure etc]," Mr. Khan said.



# India is now playing a key role in solving global problems, says Modi

'This is India's time, the next 25 years will showcase India's capabilities,' says PM; the world took notice of India's heritage the time 'we started giving our heritage its due respect', he says

**The Hindu Bureau**  
NEW DELHI

**P**rime Minister Narendra Modi on Tuesday said India was shedding its mentality of slavery and was playing a key role in tackling global problems of economy, science, research, sports, and diplomacy.

Addressing the "Veer Baal Divas" celebrations here, marking the martyrdom of the sons of the last Sikh Guru, Guru Gobind Singh, Mr. Modi said the world kept India among the foremost lands of opportunities.

India, the Prime Minister said, is playing a key role in solving global problems of economy, science, research, sports and diplomacy. "This is India's time, the next 25 years will showcase India's capabilities."

"The coming 25 years are bringing huge opportunities for our youth. The youth of India, irrespective of which region or society they are born in, have li-



**Big win:** Prime Minister Narendra Modi, along with Union Ministers, attends the 'Veer Baal Divas' celebration programme. ANI

mitless dreams. To fulfil these dreams, the government has a clear road map and a clear vision."

## Global celebrations

Terming "Veer Baal Divas" a celebration of the heritage of the Sikh Gurus, the Prime Minister said the courage and ideals of Guru Gobind Singh and his four 'Sahibzades' (sons) embolden every Indian even today.

He expressed happiness

that the event is now being celebrated internationally in the U.S., the U.K., Australia, New Zealand, the UAE, and Greece.

Mr. Modi said that the world had taken notice of India's heritage the time "we started giving our heritage its due respect".

"Today, when we are taking pride in our heritage, the world's viewpoint has also changed", he added.

On India becoming the

third largest economy, the Prime Minister said this would benefit the youth the most and meant better health, education, opportunities, jobs, quality of life and quality of products. He told the young audience about the nationwide campaign of linking youth with the dreams and resolution of 'Viksit Bharat' (developed India).

## PM advises youth

The Prime Minister advised the youth to give top priority to their health as it is crucial to achieving the desired results in life. He suggested making some rules for themselves and firmly adhering to them such as physical exercise, digital detox, mental fitness, adequate sleep, and including millets in diet.

He also touched upon the menace of drugs in society, and stressed that it could be tackled by coming together as a nation and society.

Mr. Modi flagged off a march-past by youth in Delhi.

# Ministry sends social media firms advisory to regulate deepfakes

**The Hindu Bureau**  
NEW DELHI

The Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology said on Tuesday that it had sent another advisory to social media firms to comply with the Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021. The advisory is aimed at getting social media firms to crack down more forcefully on fabricated 'deepfake' clips of people made with artificial intelligence. A similar advisory was first sent to social media platforms early in November.

## **'Communicate to users'**

"The advisory mandates that intermediaries communicate prohibited content, particularly those specified under Rule 3(1)(b) of the IT Rules, clearly and precisely to users," the IT Ministry said in a press release.

The advisory caps a month of discussions with social media platforms, during which Prime Minister Narendra Modi also made a remark on deepfakes during a Deepavali interaction with supporters.

IT Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw said in Novem-

**The advisory is aimed at getting social media firms to crack down more forcefully on fabricated 'deepfake' clips of people**

ber that rules would soon be formulated to regulate deepfakes. However, no draft has emerged.

The government said instead that further IT Rules amendments would follow "if and when required". The IT Ministry did not share a full copy of the advisory sent to the social media platforms.

"Content not permitted under the IT Rules, in particular those listed under Rule 3(1)(b) must be clearly communicated to the users in clear and precise language including through its terms of service and user agreements," the Ministry wrote in the advisory, according to an excerpt shared by the government.

## **Four arrested**

The government's action on deepfakes follow a viral fabricated clip of actor Rashmika Mandanna, who publicly called out the video.

The Delhi Police arrested four individuals.



# ICMR initiates steps for non-invasive testing method to tackle anaemia

**Bindu Shajan Perappadan**  
NEW DELHI

While accepting that anaemia continues to be a major public health problem in India despite the comprehensive Anaemia-mukt Bharat (AMB) programme, the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR), Delhi, has now invited Expression of Interest (EoI) from the eligible organisations, companies and start-ups manufacturing non-invasive haemoglobinometer useful in effective screening of anaemia.

## Acceptable to all

While companies are to respond by January 5, the ICMR noted that testing and treatment of anaemia, using digital methods and point-of-care treatment, with a special focus on pregnant women and on school-going adolescents, is one of the key AMB strategies.



**New strategies:** Students being screened for iron-deficiency anaemia as it continues to be a major health concern. FILE PHOTO

tegitic interventions.

"The test and treat strategy, for its effective implementation, requires a simple, easy-to-use non-invasive haemoglobinometer which will be acceptable to all, especially young children. Over the past few years, several 'Make in India' non-invasive haemoglobinometer devices have become available. However, these devices need to

be validated to establish the accuracy, bias, and precision of the non-invasive point-of-care methods before their use can be recommended in the programme," it explained.

In India, the prevalence of anaemia among six groups as per the National Family Health Survey 5 (2019-21) is 25% in men (15-49 age group), 57% in women (15-49), 31.1% in ado-

lescent boys (15-19), 59.1 % in adolescent girls, 52.2 % in pregnant women (15-49) and 67.1% in children (6-59).

"Research on interventions for mitigation/detection of anaemia is, therefore, ICMR's health research priority. Considering its national importance, ICMR intends to carry out a validation study of such non-invasive haemoglobinometer devices followed by health technology assessment for evaluating its suitability for the AMB programme," the ICMR organisation said in its EoI.

Explaining its role in the programme, the ICMR said that it would conduct a hospital based clinical study to validate the promising non-invasive hemoglobinometers devices against the gold standard method of haemoglobin measurement.

## A case of revanchism

Courts should not stray from the constitutional vision of secularism

**T**he judiciary should not be seen as legitimising recurring, communally motivated attempts to change the status of places of worship. In yet another order that may end up expediting the project of converting a mosque into a temple by indirect means, the Allahabad High Court has ruled that a set of suits filed in 1991 for a declaration that a part of the site of the Gyanvapi Mosque in Varanasi as the property of Lord Vishweshwar is not barred by law. The court has decided, as it had done earlier on a 2022 suit by a group of Hindu worshippers, that the old suits are not barred by the Places of Worship (Special Provisions) Act, 1991, which invalidates legal proceedings that may lead to altering the status of any place of worship as it stood on August 15, 1947. In what seems to be specious reasoning, the court has held that the Act is not applicable as the "religious character" of the structure is yet to be determined. In other words, instead of nipping the cunning piece of litigation in the bud, the court has allowed a full civil trial to decide whether the structure in the Gyanvapi compound is a mosque or a temple and stated that unless this status is determined based on evidence, it cannot be called a temple or a mosque. Such an approach may only end up driving modern society into a revanchist mindset seeking to avenge medieval depredations.

In the case of the 2022 suits by women worshippers, the court had noted that the proceedings were aimed at asserting a right to worship the deities on the mosque precincts, and not to convert it into a temple. However, the 1991 suits explicitly seek a declaration that the main part of the site is a mosque and also want the mosque administrators to remove all their religious effects. Despite this explicit relief being sought, the court has chosen to treat it as a suit that is maintainable and not barred by the Places of Worship Act. The order has also upheld the order for a survey of the premises by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), but asked for the ASI survey done on the basis of the 2022 suits for the purpose of deciding the 1991 suits also. It has provided for a further survey, if necessary. What is disconcerting in the High Court order is that it claims that the dispute raised in the case is "of vital national importance". This is an astounding claim for a judicial institution to make while adjudicating litigation between two parties. The judiciary must stay committed to the constitutional vision of secularism and enforce the statutory bar on converting or reconverting the status of places of worship.

## Law of numbers

The government should not use its majority to rush through legislation

**T**he 18-day winter session of Parliament that was adjourned *sine die* on December 21 marked a new low in India's parliamentary democracy as the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party refused to engage with the Opposition, evaded executive accountability and passed a battery of Bills with far-reaching consequences for the country while a majority of the Opposition members remained suspended. In the final count, a total of 146 Members of Parliament (MP) from the Opposition bloc were suspended – 46 of the Rajya Sabha, and 100 of the Lok Sabha, as they clamoured for a statement by Union Home Minister Amit Shah on a breach of security that involved protesters gaining entry into the chamber of the Lok Sabha on December 13. The rift lingers, as Leader of Opposition in the Rajya Sabha Mallikarjun Kharge has written to Vice-President of India and Rajya Sabha Chairman Jagdeep Dhankhar, terming the suspension of Opposition MP as "predetermined and premeditated" by the government. The absence of any application of mind was evident, Mr. Kharge has written, recalling that an MP who was not even present in the Lok Sabha, was among those suspended. The Chairs of both the Houses could not ensure smooth conduct of the session. Attempts made by Mr. Dhankhar and Lok Sabha Speaker Om Birla lacked the requisite imprimatur of impartiality.

It was in the absence of a majority of the Opposition members that the government passed new laws that rewrite the criminal code of the country, regulation of telecommunication and the appointment of the Election Commission of India. The common feature of these laws is an unprecedented increase in the power of the executive, and it is not a coincidence that they were passed without a meaningful parliamentary debate that took on board conflicting views. The government refused even the Opposition demand for a statement on the security breach, in a show of obstinacy that equates numerical majority with logical and moral infallibility. The government has blamed the Opposition for bringing the suspensions upon itself, and this position has been echoed by the Speaker and the Chairman. The case of the alleged mimicry of Mr. Dhankhar by an Opposition MP was a distraction that was convenient for the ruling party. Mr. Dhankhar himself told the Rajya Sabha that the alleged mimicry was an insult to his community, a dismaying correlation to be made by anyone, let alone a legal luminary such as himself. It is another matter whether the Opposition should have invested so much time and effort in asking for a debate on the security breach by a few misguided youths. The effect, if not the objective, of it all was to derail parliamentary functioning and obtain a free pass for the executive.



# Are graduates facing unemployment?

What historical patterns or socio-economic changes might have contributed to the consistently higher unemployment rates among highly educated individuals in India since the 1990s? How does the rise in the percentage of graduates in the labour force impact the unemployment rates and the job market?

## ECONOMIC NOTES

Rahul Menon

In 1932, the famous engineer and statesman M Visvesvaraya pointed to the high prevalence of unemployment amongst the educated, pointing out that "...the educated men of this country...[are] suffering most from lack of employment." Ninety years later, the actions of those involved in the Parliament breach have brought the question of youth unemployment to the fore once more. While Rahul Gandhi holds the present government responsible for rising youth unemployment, official data seems to indicate the opposite. The unemployment rate, which hit a high of 6.1% in 2017-18, has reduced to 3.2% in 2022-23, according to the latest data from the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS).

Even though unemployment rates are low and have been falling since 2017-18, there exist significant disparities in the experience of unemployment. The highest rates of unemployment are faced by those who should face bright prospects in a growing economy: young highly educated workers. This is not a problem that has arisen recently but seems to be a structural feature of the Indian economy. The economy faces problems in generating employment for young graduates, with the situation exacerbating in recent years.

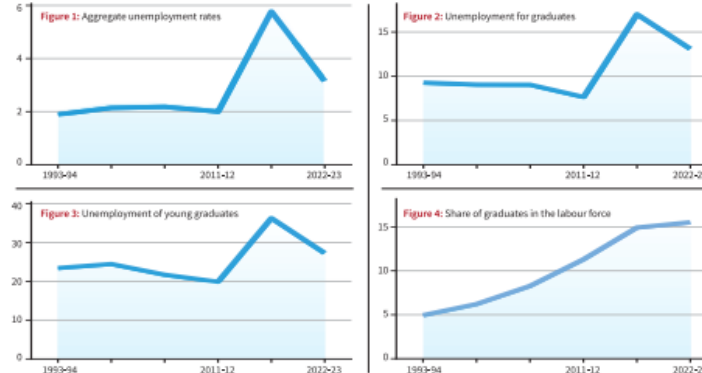
This analysis looks at employment data from the 50th Round of the NSSO surveys - covering the period 1993-94 - to the PLFS surveys of 2022-23. Workers are classified according to the UPSS, which classifies individuals as employed or unemployed based on their labour force activity over the previous year. This analysis only focuses on individuals aged 18 to 65.

### Education and unemployment

Figure 1 outlines the unemployment rates for the aggregate labour force of individuals aged 18 to 65. Unemployment

## Career disparity

Persistent high unemployment among educated Indian youth reveals structural challenges in job creation despite overall declining unemployment rates



rates had always been low since the early 1990s, jumping to a historical high of 5.77% in 2017-18. By 2022-23, the unemployment rate showed signs of reducing, falling to 3.15% for this cohort. While unemployment rates are currently higher than in previous decades, it has shown a reduction compared to 2017-18.

Individuals with higher education have always faced higher unemployment rates than the rest of the population, a situation that has characterised the Indian economy since the 1990s. Figure 2 outlines the unemployment rates for those with graduate degrees. From roughly 9% in the 1990s, the rate fell to 7.66% in 2011-12, before rising to 17% in 2017-18 and then 13% in 2022-23. Figure 3 shows the unemployment rate for young workers aged 18 to 29 with a graduate degree. From 1993-94 to 2004-05, almost a fifth to a quarter of all young individuals

with graduate degrees faced long unemployment spells of 6 months or more. The rate dropped to 20% in 2011-12, before rising to a staggering 36% in 2017-18. The rate has been reduced by 2022-23 with 27% of young graduates facing long spells of unemployment.

Earlier, these high rates of unemployment were concentrated amongst a relatively small section of the labour force were graduates, as shown in Figure 4. However, with the expansion of higher education, the share of graduates in the labour force has risen to around 15% by 2022-23. Thus, overall unemployment rates remain low even though graduates face high unemployment because the share of educated workers in the labour force is low. As enrolment rates continue to rise, the share of graduates in the labour force

will increase, leading to increases in the aggregate unemployment rate. The problems of young job-seekers are not an aberration, but a worrying feature of the Indian labour market.

The problem of youth unemployment is a serious issue. Much more work is required to outline the exact factors causing unemployment amongst the highly educated - be it the inability of the education system to impart the requisite skills, or the inability of the growing economy to generate enough jobs for the increasing numbers of educated job-seekers entering the labour force each year - to ensure that the aspirations of the youth are not thwarted and the potential of the demographic dividend is properly harnessed.

(Rahul Menon is Associate Professor in the Jindal School of Government and Public Policy at O.P. Jindal Global University)

## THE GIST

Official data shows a decline in the national unemployment rate from 6.1% in 2017-18 to 3.2% in 2022-23.

Despite a decline in overall unemployment rates, highly educated youth face disproportionate challenges in securing employment, remaining a consistent structural issue in India's economy.

The analysis spanning from 1993-94 to 2022-23 demonstrates that individuals with higher education face consistently higher unemployment rates, notably reaching 13% in 2022-23 for graduates.

Young graduates aged 18 to 29 encountered particularly high unemployment rates, with around 36% facing long spells of unemployment in 2017-18, declining to 27% by 2022-23 but still higher than previous periods.

# What does China's 2024 economic policy look like?

How does the shift towards a domestic demand-led growth strategy align with China's long-term economic goals, and what are the anticipated challenges in transitioning away from export-led growth?

Anushka Saxena

### The story so far:

The 2023 Chinese Central Economic Work Conference (CEWC) recently concluded, highlighting a stability-focused pathway for the nation's 2024 economy. Key directives include shifting from export-led to domestic demand-led growth, enhancing high-quality production, striving for tech self-reliance while cooperating with trade partners, and maintaining financial discipline. While echoing previous goals, this agenda emphasises the need for structural reforms, necessitating a departure from entrenched Chinese party-state practices to shape the country's economic future.

### How is China strategically addressing the challenges?

The first key area is dual circulation. As global demand has continued to decline amidst heightened sentiments of protectionism and 'de-risking', the

country is now looking inwards to boost domestic consumption and only allow for a complimentary relationship with international demand. Chinese President Xi Jinping has referred to this as the "New Pattern of Development," and is an ambitious structural reform for a country known as the world's manufacturing hub.

### What specific measures are being implemented?

China prioritises "high-quality" economic growth focused on addressing the imbalance between development and people's increasing demands for a better life. This shift emphasises domestic demand, specialised self-reliance, and sectors like high-tech and sustainable manufacturing. Agriculture receives attention for its contribution to GDP and growth, aligning with goals of rural revitalisation and food security, supported by the establishment of "agriculture innovation centers."

Self-reliance in core technologies has continued to be a repeated and explicit

goal for the revival of the Chinese economy in the backdrop of intensifying tech-related export controls placed by the U.S. and its issue-based and treaty-based allies (such as the Netherlands and Japan respectively) against China. Although, the language of the CEWC readout has changed from "self-improvement" in high-technology in 2022 to "strength" in 2023. China maintains a "prudent monetary policy" and a "proactive fiscal policy," focusing on financial stability. The latter was also reiterated at the Central Financial Work Conference that took place just a month ago and has now become part of the implementational mandate of the newly established Central Finance Commission. Under 'proactive fiscal policy', in the past year, China has mobilised tools such as tax rebates for medium and small enterprises, as well as interest rate discounts for local governments. This is to enable them to alleviate some of the debt stress and continue to invest either in keeping employees on a regular payroll or in the

unhindered development of infrastructure. Fiscal tools like tax rebates and interest rate discounts aid small enterprises and local governments in managing debt and sustaining infrastructure development. Efforts to ease local government debt include a special bond issuance for post-disaster recovery. However, the local authorities are warned to embrace frugality and stricter financial discipline due to escalating debt burdens, reaching around \$60 trillion. The emphasis is on "fiscal sustainability" rather than bailouts. Monetary policy aims for stabilised liquidity levels, avoiding infusion despite past promises of an economic boost. Economic challenges like currency depreciation, income insecurity, rising unemployment, and capital outflows suggest injecting more liquidity won't improve investment and borrowing sentiments.

To address economic concerns, China aims to promote balanced trade to increase international demand. This move signals a willingness to open its market to key trade partners, potentially creating more balanced trade relations without favoring China excessively. This approach aligns with China's goal of "opening up," supporting high-quality growth, focusing on self-reliance, especially in areas like technology and food security, amid ongoing U.S.-China geopolitical competition. (Anushka Saxena is a research analyst with Takshashila Institution's Indo-Pacific Studies Programme)



# Do shortened TB treatment plans offer the solution for India's TB burden?

Tuberculosis treatment poses challenges due to long, difficult medication regimens; recent studies suggest shorter-duration treatment approaches, showing effectiveness in both adults and children; urgent adoption of these innovative treatments by India is crucial to enhance TB management

Vidya Mave  
Aarti Kinikar  
Sanjay Gaikwad

**T**uberculosis is a dreadful disease with a high mortality and has consistently been a global health concern. India accounts for around 27% of TB cases worldwide - which is the world's highest country-wise TB burden - thanks in part to its population of 1.3 billion. In the last decade, the National Tuberculosis Elimination Programme (NTEP), along with the private sector, has successfully found and treated 17.14 million people with TB, including an estimated 1.4 million children. However, the COVID-19 pandemic adversely affected TB care and has threatened to reverse the gains made in reducing India's burden. Additionally, the growing problem of drug-resistant TB also threatens the progress we have made in basic disease management.

## Child unfriendly

TB is curable but treatment is challenging. For drug-sensitive TB, a patient must take the medication for six months, and this is a long period for most people. The treatment also includes three or four drugs that can have side effects and are difficult to swallow at times.

This is particularly difficult when the patients in question are children, who need to abide by a fixed drug regimen under the NTEP. The size and the taste of the tablet are not child-friendly. The NTEP presently recommends a daily dose of

medicines under direct observation for six months, which can be tiring for families as well.

It is not surprising that many paediatric as well as adult TB patients discontinue taking treatment due to its long duration and side effects. Sometimes, they feel better and assume that completing treatment is optional. This puts families and other people who are in close contact with a TB-affected person at risk of infection. Stopping treatment prematurely can also contribute to the TB bacteria becoming drug-resistant.

How can we address this issue? One critical way, especially in countries with a high TB burden like India, is to explore new treatment approaches for TB and to integrate them into national plans.

## Shorter regimen

The effort to make TB medicines easier to take is underway worldwide, as well as in India. Recent studies in adults who have TB in their lungs considered using a combination of new drugs and existing ones that are currently used for other diseases. The results of these studies are promising, showing that the length of time patients need to stay on their regimen can be reduced from six months to four months.

The SHINE trial, conducted with 1,200 children from four countries (India, Zambia, Uganda, and South Africa), also found that based on the drugs available with the NTEP, children with non-severe TB can be effectively treated in four months instead of six.

Shortening the duration for TB

medication to cure the patient faster is transformational and also makes TB programme implementation more feasible.

Both studies had participants from India and their results have been included by the World Health Organization, in its TB treatment guidelines. However, India itself is yet to adopt the revised four-month treatment guidelines. There is, in fact, another study that reported recently that a two-month treatment course could be effective as well.

With a growing political commitment to India's battle against TB, the Indian government must embrace innovation and new approaches to treating this disease.

As it happens, the identification of safe and effective four-month and two-month regimens is the first significant advance in treating the most common form of TB in almost 40 years, and is a monumental achievement. It is also encouraging that more than 30 new chemical compounds that can fight the TB bacterium are in the pipeline.

At this time, it is up to researchers to identify the best combinations of these new drugs that are highly efficacious, the least toxic, and can be easily implemented in programmatic settings.

For this kind of research, a highly concerted effort needs to take place that involves both global and local researchers, funders, and regulatory authorities, with firm national and international political support.

Costs are a determining factor but they can be mitigated as well. Global

experience in costing has shown that the prices of newer drugs come down when there is political will and when community charters, funders, and the leaders of national programmes negotiate prices with drug manufacturers. Lower costs can in turn motivate the global adoption of newer, shorter-duration, and less toxic drug combinations for diseases like TB.

India's aim to eliminate TB by 2025 is ambitious. The theme for World Tuberculosis Day (March 24) in 2023 was "Yes, we can end TB", which reflects the worldwide desire to eliminate the disease by 2030.

To (re)invigorate this fight, and to align with the vision of being "TB Free" ahead of the global target, India must consider active screening and case detection along with new guidelines for shorter TB treatment. Policymakers must also consider moving to a shorter treatment course for treating TB at the earliest. If we delay, we stand to lose the fight as well as millions of lives to an ultimately curable disease.

(Vidya Mave, MD, MPH is director of Centre for Infectious Diseases in India and B.J. Government Medical College-Johns Hopkins University Clinical Research Centre, Pune. Aarti Kinikar, MD, is professor and head of Department of Paediatrics, B.J. Government Medical College and Sassoon General Hospital, Pune. Sanjay Gaikwad, MD is professor and head of Department of Pulmonary Medicine, B.J. Government Medical College and Sassoon General Hospital, Pune. The views expressed are the authors' own)

# Dry weather, export curbs to hit 2024 global supply of staples

Reuters  
SINGAPORE

High food prices in recent years have prompted farmers worldwide to plant more cereals and oilseeds, but consumers are set to face tighter supplies well into 2024, amid adverse El Nino weather, export restrictions and higher bio-fuel mandates.

Global wheat, corn and soybean prices - after several years of strong gains - are headed for losses in 2023 on easing Black Sea bottlenecks and fears of a global recession, although prices remain vulnerable to supply shocks and food inflation in the New Year, analysts and traders said.

"The supply picture for grains certainly improved in 2023 with bigger crops

in some of the key places which matter. But we are not really out of the woods yet," said Ole Houe, director of advisory services at agriculture brokerage Ikon Commodities in Sydney.

"We have El Nino weather forecast until at least April-May, Brazil is almost certainly going to produce less corn, and China is surprising the market by buying larger volumes of wheat and corn from the international market."

## El Nino impact

The El Nino weather phenomenon, which brought dryness to large parts of Asia this year, is forecast to continue in the first half of 2024, putting at risk supplies of rice, wheat, palm oil and other farm pro-



Half full: South American corn, wheat and soybean output, however, is expected to improve. REUTERS

ducts in some of the world's top agricultural exporters and importers.

Traders and officials expect Asian rice production in the first half of 2024 to drop as dry planting condi-

tions and shrinking reservoirs may cut yields.

World rice supplies tightened this year already after the El Nino weather phenomenon cut into production, prompting India,

by far the world's biggest exporter, to restrict shipments.

While other grains markets were losing value, rice prices rallied to their highest in 15 years in 2023, with

quotations in some Asian export hubs gaining 40%-45%. India's next wheat crop is also being threatened by lack of moisture, which could force the world's second-largest wheat consumer to seek imports for the first time in six years as domestic inventories at state warehouses have dropped to their lowest in seven years.

## Farmers in Australia

Come April, farmers in Australia, the world's No. 2 wheat exporter, could be planting their crop in dry soils, after months of intense heat curbed yields for this year's crop and ended a three-dream run of record harvests.

This is likely to prompt buyers, including China and Indonesia, to seek large

er volumes of wheat from other exporters in North America, Europe and the Black Sea region.

"The (wheat) supply situation in the current 2023/24 crop year is likely to deteriorate compared to last season," Commerzbank wrote in a note.

"This is because exports from important producer countries are likely to be significantly lower."

On the bright side for grain supplies, South American corn, wheat and soybean production is expected to improve in 2024, although erratic weather in Brazil is leaving some doubt. In Argentina, abundant rainfall over farming heartlands is likely to boost production of soybeans, corn and wheat in one of the world's largest grain ex-

porting nations. According to Argentina's Rosario grains exchange (BCR), 95% of early planted corn and 75% of soybeans are in "excellent to very good" conditions, thanks to rains since the end of October across the country's Pampas region.

Brazil is set for near-record farm output in 2024, although the country's soybean and corn production estimates have been reduced in recent weeks due to dry weather. Global palm oil production is also likely to fall next year due to dry El Nino weather, supporting cooking oil prices that dropped more than 10% in 2023. "We see more upside price risk than down," said Cofank, a leading lender to the U.S. agriculture sector.