

NEWSPAPER HIGHLIGHT

A tiny snail with a striking, pellucid, golden yellow shell found in the Edappally canal in Kochi has been flagged as an invasive species that could play havoc with native ecosystems. Having spotted it during a biodiversity impact assessment study, researchers of Cochin University of Science and Technology (CuUSAT) identified it as the acute bladder snail *Physella acuta*, globally branded as highly invasive.

The killing of civilians in a botched ambush by the armed forces in Nagaland's Mon district and its violent fallout have put the spotlight on the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act of 1958. Viewed as a draconian law in Northeast India, a region troubled by extremism, the AFSPA gives the armed forces the power to maintain public order in "disturbed areas". It gives the armed forces the authority to use force or even open fire after warning a person found to be in contravention of the law. The AFSPA also lets the armed forces arrest a person and enter or search premises without a warrant and ban the possession of firearms if "reasonable suspicion exists". In the northeast, the AFSPA is in force in Assam, Nagaland, Manipur, the Tirap, Changlang and Longding districts of Arunachal Pradesh and areas falling within the jurisdiction of eight police stations of the State bordering Assam. For Jammu and Kashmir, the Armed Forces (Jammu and Kashmir) Special Powers Act, 1990, is in force.

The Supreme Court stayed the local body election in seats reserved for Other Backward Class (OBC) in Maharashtra. "Election programme(s) can proceed for other reserved seats (viz., other than OBC), including general seats," said a Bench led by Justice A.M. Khanwilkar. The order came in a petition challenging a Maharashtra Government ordinance which introduced 27% reservation for OBC category in local elections. The State Election Commission had subsequently issued notifications to give effect to the ordinance. However, the SC ordered the SEC to "desist from proceeding with the election programme already notified in respect of reserved seats for 'OBC category only' in the local bodies concerned".

Anirban Roy Choudhury, editor and

ARCS FOR AGRICULTURE SECTOR

1.To improve recovery of bad loans in the agriculture sector, leading banks have made a pitch for setting up an Asset Reconstruction Company (ARC) specifically to deal with collections and recovery of farm loans. With a government-backed ARC having been recently set up to deal with bank NPAs to the industry, this idea has acceptability among banks.

2.**About the Asset Reconstruction Company (ARC):** It is a specialized financial institution that buys the Non Performing Assets (NPAs) from banks and financial institutions so that they can clean up their balance sheets.

3.**Need of ARC for Farm Loans:** NPAs of Banks: As per the latest Financial Stability Report, June 2021, banks' gross NPA ratio for the agriculture sector was at 9.8%, whereas for industry and services it was at 11.3% and 7.5%, respectively, At March-end 2021.

4.**Availability of Funds:** First and foremost, the requirement of the ARC is to have sufficient availability of funds to match the huge amount of the NPA market. It will be welcomed if the government establishes ARC with an equity contribution from the government itself and the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) to strengthen its capital base. Thus ARC will have sufficient funds to deal with the NPA problem.

THE NEED TO REOPEN ANGANWADIS

1.Anganwadis perform a crucial role in contributing to life outcomes of children across India. India must invest robustly in the world's largest social programme on early childhood services.

2.**Importance of Anganwadis**-As part of the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), Anganwadis play a crucial role in supporting households, particularly from low-income families. It provides childcare, health and nutrition, education, supplementary nutrition, immunisation, health check-up and referral services. Early childhood (till 5 years) is a crucial developmental window. As platforms for early childhood education and nutrition support, Anganwadis can play an important role for children to achieve their potential. Sending younger children to Anganwadis will free up women's time, including for economic activities.

3.**Impacts of closing Anganwadis during pandemic**-Their closure has significantly impacted service delivery and weakened an important social safety net. Increase in work load for women- A recent study estimates that the time women spend on unpaid work have increased by 30% during the pandemic. In our COVID-19 rural household surveys across 8 states shows 58% of women cited home-schooling as the biggest contributor to increase in unpaid work.

4.Studies in Odisha and Andhra Pradesh (and globally) have found that home visits have significantly improved cognition, language, motor development and nutritional intake while also reducing stunting. A study in Tamil Nadu shows that reaching out to women during pregnancy has increased the likelihood that their children use ICDS services. A recent study in Tamil Nadu found that an additional worker devoted to pre-school education led to cost effective gains in both learning and nutrition.

DEFINE LIMITS OF SEDITION, SAYS SUPREME COURT

1.The Assam Police have charged the editor and co-owner of a local news portal in the Barak Valley with sedition (under 124A) for an editorial deemed to promote enmity between the Assamese and Bengali-speaking people of the State. The Barak Valley is dominated by Bengalis and the Brahmaputra Valley by the Assamese speakers.

2.**What is sedition**-Section 124A of the IPC states, "Whoever, by words, either spoken or written, or by signs, or by visible representation, or otherwise, brings or attempts to bring into hatred or contempt, or excites or attempts to excite disaffection towards, the government established by law in shall be punished with imprisonment for life, to which fine may be added, or with imprisonment which may extend to three years, to which fine

co-owner of a news portal in southern Assam who was slapped with sedition charge, was released on a personal recognisance (PR) bond. The police in Silchar town had charged him with sedition on the basis of a first information report (FIR) by local businessman.

Defence Minister Rajnath Singh highlighted the challenges faced by India due to what he termed 'unprovoked aggression' on the northern border. Addressing the first India-Russia 2+2 ministerial meeting, Mr. Singh said: "I had the opportunity to discuss in detail the emerging challenges India is confronted with and the enhanced requirement of India for closer military to military technical collaboration with Russia. The pandemic, the extraordinary militarisation and expansion of armament in our neighbourhood and unprovoked aggression on our northern border since early summer of 2020 has thrown in several challenges."

Germany's Parliament will officially elect Olaf Scholz as the country's next Chancellor, bringing the curtain down on Angela Merkel's 16-year reign and ushering in a new political era with the centre-left in charge.

The Supreme Court held that the RBI's ban on exporting PPE kits during the second wave of the pandemic was a "legitimate aim", which was of sufficient importance to override the constitutional right of freedom to conduct business.

India would further "expand and deepen" ties with Bangladesh, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said, marking Maitri Divas that commemorates the day when India recognised Bangladesh as an independent country in 1971.

The Compensatory Afforestation Fund Management and Planning Authority (CAMPA) has so far disbursed ₹48,606 crore to 32 States, according to a response by the Environment Ministry in the Lok Sabha. The Compensatory Afforestation Fund (CAF) Act 2016, which came into being more than a decade since it was devised, established an independent authority — the Compensatory Afforestation Fund Management and Planning Authority — to execute the fund. However, it was not until last August that the rules governing the management of the fund were finalised.

The junta in Myanmar jailed ousted leader Aung San Suu Kyi for four years for incitement against the military and breaching COVID-19 rules, the first of a series of

may be added, or with fine."

3. Need for a proper definition—The sedition law has been in controversy for far too long. Often the governments are criticized for using the law — Section 124-A of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) — against vocal critics of their policies. Therefore, this Section is seen as a restriction of individuals' freedom of expression and falls short of the provisions of reasonable restrictions on freedom of speech under Article 19 of the Constitution. The law has been in debate ever since it was brought into force by the colonial British rulers in 1860s. Several top freedom movement leaders including Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru were booked under the sedition law.

4. Relevant Supreme Court judgements—The Kedar Nath Singh vs State of Bihar case (1962): While dealing with offences under Section 124A of the IPC, a five-judge Supreme Court constitutional bench had, in the Kedar Nath Singh vs State of Bihar case (1962), laid down some guiding principles. The court ruled that comments—however strongly worded—expressing disapprobation of the actions of the government without causing public disorder by acts of violence would not be penal.

WITHDRAWAL OF UTTARAKHAND'S CHAR DHAM ACT

1. Uttarakhand government has announced the withdrawal of the Char Dham Devasthanam Management Act. The decision will lead to the abolition of Uttarakhand Char Dham Devasthanam Management Board, which has been facing protests from priests and other stakeholders of four shrines

2. Environmental Concerns About the Project: The project may destroy about 690 hectares of forests with 55,000 trees and evacuate an estimated 20 million cubic metres of soil. Ruthless harvesting or uprooting of vegetation in the widening of roads can prove to be perilous for the biodiversity and regional ecology.

3. What is Chardham Project—The project comprises improvement as well as the development of 889 km length of national highways. The project will connect Badrinath Dham, Kedarnath Dham, Gangotri, Yamunotri, and part of the route leading to Kailash Mansarovar yatra.

4. Role in National Security: This project can act as the strategic feeder roads which connect the India-China border with the Army camps in Dehradun and Meerut where missile bases and heavy machinery are located.

5. Supreme Court views on the project: Supreme Court (SC), in November 2020, had spoken of the need to balance national security concerns with environmental issues in the context of the Army's request to expand the Char Dham Project (CDP) roads leading to the Indo-China border.

INDIA-RUSSIA 2+2 SUMMIT

1. Russian president, Vladimir Putin's visit to India for India-Russia 2+2 Summit must be utilized to reset the India-Russia relationship amidst a series of differences. How has the relationship evolved over the years? Historically - For the past 70 years since Independence, Russia have been a time-tested ally and major defence supplier for India. During the cold war, the relationship was very strong and even gave rise to U.S. suspicions that India was an unofficial part of the Soviet camp. Notably, this was despite New Delhi's affirmations that it was a leading member of the "Non-Aligned Movement" (NAM).

2. India's Shift - India has traditionally sought to maintain a balance between superpowers and refrained from joining groups for preserving its sovereignty. But in recent years this position appears to have shifted in favour of finding new allies, with changing power structures and security concerns. This change was amply displayed when India actively pursued the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (involving US, India, Japan, and Australia). Notably, this has been conceptualised as security alliance with a vision of ensuring freedom of navigation in the Indo-Pacific region (targeted at China).

3. Russia's Shift - In parallel to these creeping changes, Russia's interest towards Pakistan and China has increased and warmth with India decreased. Russia-Pakistan relationship is on an upward trajectory, with Russia signalling support for Pakistan's candidature to the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG). Joint military exercises between Russia and Pakistan held in 2017, is another major concern as Russia is a long-time trusted military partner for India.

4. What differing opinion has been a concern? Difference of opinion over Af-Pak region Differences over America's Indo-Pacific strategy Continuing conflict between the Kremlin and the

possible sentences that could see the Nobel laureate imprisoned for decades.

The U.S. said it will not send government officials to the 2022 Winter Olympics in Beijing, after China pledged unspecified “counter-measures” against any such diplomatic boycott. President Joe Biden said last month that he was considering such a diplomatic boycott amid criticism of China’s human rights record, including what Washington says is genocide against minority Muslims in its western region of Xinjiang.

West Absence of a thriving commercial relationship between India and Russia- India-Russia annual trade in goods is stuck at about \$10 billion India’s closeness with the US and Russia’s embrace of China.

5.How does the US-Russia relation affect India? The Cold war era dispute has been a cause of concern for India till today and the Biden administration recognises the importance of ending this permanent crisis in US-Russian relations. The Biden administration, which is focused on winning the intensifying strategic competition with China, values a stable relationship with Russia. There have been fears over the US sanctions on the purchase of S-400 missiles by India. A less conflictual relationship between Washington and Moscow will be a huge relief for India. Delhi hopes that Washington appreciates its assessment that Russian neutrality is critical in balancing China in the east.