

DIA, DEOGHAR IAS ACADEMY

Daily News Feed

D.N.F

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**Sabaijor Complex, Near Jamunajor Pul, Castair Town
Deoghar, Mob:-9162500508**





Question Corner

Squirrels and voles

Are ground squirrels strictly granivorous?

A new study provides the first evidence that California ground squirrels also hunt, kill and eat voles. Researchers have for the first time chronicled widespread carnivorous behaviour among squirrels. The study changes our understanding of ground squirrels. It suggests that what was considered a granivorous species is an opportunistic omnivore and more flexible in its diet. Through videos, photos and direct observations at the regional park, the researchers documented California ground squirrels

of all ages and genders hunting, eating and competing over vole prey between June 10 and July 30 this year. The squirrels' carnivorous summer behaviour peaked during the first two weeks of July, coinciding with an explosion of vole numbers at the park reported by citizen scientists on iNaturalist. This suggests the squirrels' hunting behaviour emerged alongside a temporary increase in the availability of prey, the study said. The scientists did not observe the squirrels hunting other mammals.

Readers may send their questions / answers to
questioncorner@thehindu.co.in

Journal retracts the discredited hydroxychloroquine paper

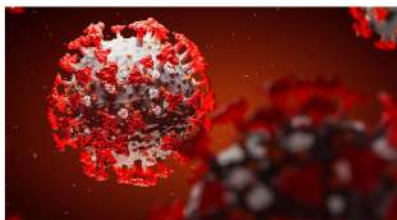
The Hindu Bureau

More than four-and-a-half years after the highly questionable "study" by a French researcher Didier Raoult and others claiming that hydroxychloroquine monotherapy and hydroxychloroquine in combination with azithromycin was "significantly associated with viral load reduction/disappearance in COVID-19 patients" was published on March 20, 2020, the paper was finally retracted on December 17 this year. The paper published in the *International Journal of Antimicrobial Agents* was withdrawn because of concerns about the ethical approval for the research. The paper that was submitted to the journal on March 16, 2020 was accepted for publication the very next day.

Three days after the paper was published, ICMR approved the use of

hydroxychloroquine as a prophylaxis by healthcare workers and those caring for COVID-19 patients. The drug was also granted an emergency use authorisation by the U.S. FDA on March 28, 2020, which was revoked about once-a-half months later. The publication of the paper and the FDA approval raised a lot of attention globally and contributed to a demand for the drug despite appropriate evidence of its benefit. The drug was also strongly backed by the then U.S. President Donald Trump.

On April 3, a fortnight after the paper was published, the journal publisher – the International Society of Antimicrobial Chemotherapy (ISAC) – which co-owns the journal with Elsevier, expressed concerns saying that the "article does not meet the Society's expected standard". An independent re-



Tall claim: The authors claimed that hydroxychloroquine significantly reduced the SARS-CoV-2 viral load. GETTY IMAGES

view commissioned by the journal also concluded that the trial had "several major methodological issues, including the design, outcome measure and the statistical analyses". Yet, the journal did not retract the paper until a few days ago.

Addressing the concerns about the peer-reviewing process, the ISAC statement said that despite being the Editor-in-Chief of the journal and an author of the paper, "Jean-Marc Rolain had no involvement

in the peer review of the manuscript and has no access to information regarding its peer review".

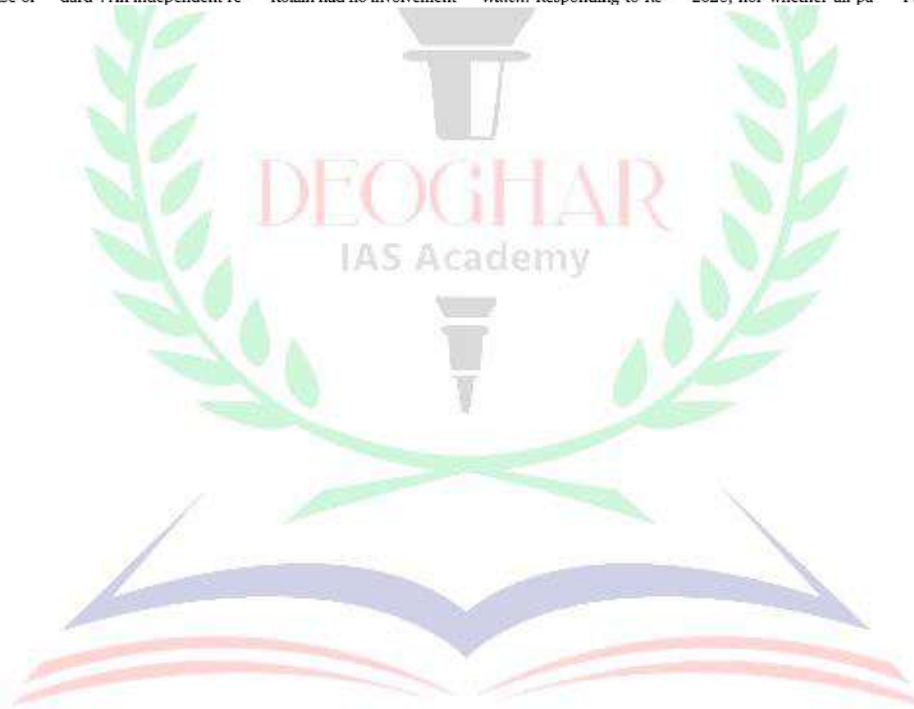
The paper came under investigation again a few months ago when three authors of the paper contacted the journal saying that they had "concerns regarding the presentation and interpretation of results" and no longer wanted to be associated with the article, as per documents seen by *Retraction Watch*. Responding to *Re-*

traction Watch, a spokesperson for the journal said that the "journal was reopening the previously closed investigation after receiving the authors' requests".

Ethical approval for the study was granted on March 6 and as per the paper, the follow-up of the participants was supposed to last for 14 days. But with a "submission date of March 16, the timeline becomes seemingly impossible", Elisabeth M Bik, an independent research integrity researcher wrote on PubPeer in March 2020. In the retracted notice, the journal addresses this concern saying: "The journal has not been able to establish whether all patients could have entered into the study in time for the data to have been analysed and included in the manuscript prior to its submission on the 20th March 2020, nor whether all pa-

tients were enrolled in the study upon admission as opposed to having been hospitalised for some time before starting the treatment described in the article."

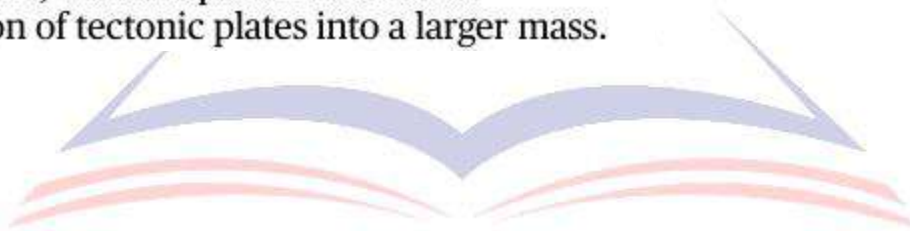
As per the details available in the EU clinical trials register, the secondary objective of the trial was to evaluate the "clinical effectiveness of treatment on time to apyrexia, normalisation of respiratory rate, and average length of hospital stay and mortality". The results of the secondary objective are not available in the paper. While the primary objective of the study was to shorten the period of virus carrying and thus contagion, the secondary endpoint is "very important for determining whether patients may have clinical benefit and not only a reduced risk of infecting others", a researcher wrote on PubPeer.





Denali Fault tore apart ancient joining of landmasses

A study shows that three sites spread along the Denali Fault located in the southern half of Alaska were once a smaller united geologic feature indicative of the final joining of two land masses. That feature was then torn apart by millions of years of tectonic activity. Historical reconstruction of 483 km of horizontal movement on the Denali Fault found that the three locations at one time formed a terminal suture zone, which represents the final integration of tectonic plates into a larger mass.



Does 2022 H5N1 bind, replicate better in the respiratory tract?

Based on lab studies, researchers found the currently circulating H5N1 clade 2.3.4.4b virus attaching better in the human respiratory tract than a well-characterised 2005 H5N1 clade 2.1.3.2 virus

R. Prasad

Since the first case of H5N1 clade 2.3.4.4b in a farm worker in Texas was reported in April this year, the number of confirmed H5N1 cases in humans as of December 20 has shot up to 64 in the U.S., with 34 cases in California alone. Yet, despite H5N1's high fatality of 52% since 2003, there have been no deaths so far. While 63 cases in the U.S. have been mild, on December 18, the CDC reported that a patient in Louisiana had been hospitalised with a severe case of H5N1 infection. While the B3.13 genotype of H5N1 clade 2.3.4.4b, which is spreading in dairy cows, has caused infection in 63 people, the Louisiana patient has been infected by the D1.1 genotype of H5N1 clade 2.3.4.4b, which has been detected in wild birds and poultry.

The Louisiana case is similar to Canada's British Columbia teenager whose condition rapidly progressed to acute respiratory distress syndrome, requiring intensive care. The British Columbia teenager too was infected by the D1.1 genotype found in wild birds and poultry.

The H5N1 clade 2.3.4.4b has retained the specificity for avian receptors, thus explaining why most human cases have been mild. The specificity for avian receptors also explains why human-to-human transmission has so far not been reported. For the H5N1 clade 2.3.4.4b to cross the species barrier and infect humans and spread from one person to another, the virus requires to efficiently

Increased potential risk of human infections

To infect humans and spread among humans, the virus has to efficiently infect the epithelial cells in the upper respiratory tract

THE NEW ENGLAND JOURNAL OF MEDICINE



There have been 64 confirmed human cases of H5N1 clade 2.3.4.4b in the U.S. as of December 20

- Despite H5N1's high fatality of 52%, there have been no deaths in the U.S. so far, and the infection has been mild. One patient in Louisiana, U.S. is hospitalised due to severe infection
- The condition of Canada's British Columbia teenager rapidly progressed from conjunctivitis to severe disease requiring intensive care
- The British Columbia teenager and the Louisiana patient were infected by the D1.1 genotype of H5N1 clade 2.3.4.4b, which is currently circulating in wild birds and poultry. This is different from the B3.13 genotype that is spreading in cattle herds in the U.S.
- The study found H5N1 clade 2.3.4.4b attached to and replicated more efficiently in the respiratory epithelium than the 2005 H5N1 clade 2.1.3.2.
- The receptor binding repertoire of 2022 H5N1 virus has expanded to attach to receptors in the human upper and lower respiratory tracts
- Better attachment to and replication contributed to more robust innate immune response in human respiratory epithelial cells
- There is increased risk of human infections with the currently circulating 2.3.4.4b H5N1 virus

infect the cells in the respiratory epithelium of the upper respiratory tract. In a study posted in a preprint server, which is yet to be peer-reviewed, researchers have found that H5N1 clade 2.3.4.4b attached to and replicated more efficiently in the respiratory epithelium than the 2005 H5N1 clade 2.1.3.2.

"As per the study, the increased replication efficiency was noted in nasal epithelial cells. Independent evaluation of the polymerase activity in cells suggested there was no significant virus polymerase activity. This would mean that the replication efficiency in the cells could be contributed by cellular fac-

tors, which remains unknown," Dr. Vinod Scaria, senior consultant at Karkinos Healthcare, Bengaluru told *The Hindu*. "The wild bird to human spillover was estimated with 50% fatality, but we don't really know the denominator, since screening especially in asymptomatic is not typically done."

"The data suggest that there might be an increased risk of human infections with the currently circulating 2.3.4.4b H5N1 viruses, which might facilitate opportunities for human adaptation," the authors caution. As per a paper published in the journal *Science*, studies carried out in a lab showed that a single mutation at one he-

magglutinin site – 226L – was sufficient to change the specificity of receptors from avian to human. "In nature, the occurrence of this single mutation could be an indicator of human pandemic risk," the Editor's summary notes.

The researchers of the preprint study found that the H5N1 virus that has been spreading since 2022 "attached more abundantly to and replicated more efficiently in cells of the human respiratory tract compared to the 2005 H5N1 and seasonal H3N2 viruses". Influenza A virus is endowed with the ability to attach to and replicate in the upper respiratory tract can lead to infection and

transmission of the virus, while the ability to attach to cells in the lower respiratory tract is associated with its ability to cause severe respiratory disease. The study found that the currently circulating H5N1 virus attached to a moderate number of epithelial cells in the upper respiratory tract, while the 2005 virus showed no capability.

While avian influenza A viruses prefer to bind to sialic acids present in the avian digestive tract as well as in the human lower respiratory tract, human influenza viruses preferentially bind to sialic acids that are abundantly present in the human upper respiratory tract. "So for efficient infection of and transmission among humans, influenza A viruses need to overcome the differences between avian and human receptor repertoires in order to attach to and replicate in cells in the human upper respiratory tract," they write.

Based on lab studies, the researchers found that the currently circulating clade 2.3.4.4b H5N1 virus attached better in the human respiratory tract than a well-characterised 2.1.3.2 clade H5N1 virus. "Our data show abundant attachment of 2022 H5N1 virus to upper and lower respiratory tract tissues, which contrasts with 2005 H5N1 virus. This suggests that the receptor binding repertoire of the 2022 H5N1 virus has expanded to attach to receptors in the human upper and lower respiratory tracts." The efficient attachment of H5N1 virus clade 2.3.4.4b in the human respiratory tract was also associated with more efficient replication.

Why are some packaged foods under a cloud?

What did the nutritional profiling of some convenience foods reveal? Are labelling regulations being flouted?

Zubeda Hamid

The story so far:

A study of 432 convenience food products, in five categories – idli mixes, breakfast cereals, porridge mixes, beverage mixes, soup mixes – and extruded ('puffed' or 'expanded') snacks, has found that a majority of these ready-to-eat packaged food products are high in carbohydrates.

Who conducted the study?

The study, 'Assessment of front and back of pack nutrition labels of selected convenience food products and snacks available in the Indian market' by Shobana Shanmugam *et al*, was published in *Plus One*. Researchers with Chennai-based Madras Diabetes Research Foundation, the Indian Council of Medical Research National Institute of Nutrition and the University of Reading, the U.K., were involved. It aimed to evaluate the nutritional profiles and claims of selected convenience food products and snacks in the Indian market and also measure their healthiness.

The nutritional profiling of the foods was conducted based on the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) claims regulations, after evaluating the nutritional information on the front and back of pack labels of the selected food items. Only the nutritional content claims related to protein, dietary fibre, fat, sugar and cholesterol were evaluated in this study. The healthiness was assessed using a nutritional traffic light system.

What did the study find?

In essence, the study found that while most of the products could fall under the 'healthy' or 'moderately healthy' categories, except extruded snacks, most of the products provided over 70% of the energy from carbohydrates, while extruded snacks provided over 47% of the energy from fat. The energy distribution from protein was found to be less than 18%.

Experts say warning labels must be specific. For instance, those with hypertension can avoid food labelled as 'high sodium,' while those with diabetes can avoid high sugar foods.

All convenience food products that the study tested were rich in carbohydrate content. While beverage mixes had the highest carbohydrate content (35.5g to 95g/100g), extruded snacks had the highest total fat content (mean 28.2±7.5 g/100g), and the highest saturated fatty acid (SFA) content (mean 11.0±4.5 g/100g). The beverage mixes were found to be high in sugar content. The soup mixes had high sodium levels with poor protein and dietary fibre content. The idli mixes had high protein content and were largely sugar free. The study also found that despite FSSAI's packaging and labelling regulations requiring products to display the minimum nutritional information for energy, protein, carbohydrate, sugar, and total fat as "per 100 g" or "100 ml" or "per serving" of the product on the label, only certain breakfast cereals and some beverages widely disclosed the concept of per-serving information. Further, some products that claimed to contain whole grains did not display them in the ingredient list and these claims may be misleading to the consumer, it noted.

What are the issues around food labelling?

For years, activists have been advocating for front-of-pack labelling that has warning labels indicating high fat, sugar and sodium. "We want the warning labels to be specific, so, for instance, a customer with hypertension can avoid food labelled as 'high sodium' or a customer with diabetes can avoid high sugar foods," said Vandana Prasad, a public health professional. Lead author of the paper and senior scientist at Madras Diabetes Research Foundation Dr. Shanmugam said the present labelling system was not uniform, and customers could find it hard to understand.

How are changing diet patterns affecting health?

As per the household consumption expenditure survey 2022-23, Indians are now spending more on processed food, beverages, and refreshments.

Experts have highlighted this changing diet is a huge contributing factor to the staggering burden of non-communicable diseases in the country. The Economic Survey of India this year, citing the Indian Council of Medical Research's dietary guidelines, noted that 56.4% of the total disease burden in India is due to unhealthy diets.

Not only do excessive carbohydrates in the diet place a strain on the pancreas, therefore increasing one's risk for type 2 diabetes, but other chemicals in processed food can increase the risk of ailments such as fatty liver, as well, said Nihal Thorax, senior professor, Department of Endocrinology, Diabetes and Metabolism, Christian Medical College, Vellore. R.M. Anjuna, managing director of Dr. Mohan's Diabetes Specialities Centre, Chennai, who was part of the study, reiterated the importance of reading food labels and avoiding processed food as much as possible.



What are India's plans for a quantum satellite?

What is its function? When is it expected to be launched? Which are the fields in which this communication device will help? What about security issues? What is quantum cryptography? What are the pros and cons of quantum key distribution?

Vasudevan Mukunth

The story so far:

In December 13, Ajai Chowdhry, chairman of the Mission Governing Board of the National Quantum Mission, said India plans to launch a quantum satellite in "2-3 years for quantum communications".

What is the National Quantum Mission?

The National Quantum Mission (NQM) is a Department of Science & Technology programme to accelerate the use of quantum physics to develop advanced communications and sensing systems.

The development of computers changed the course of human history from the mid-20th century onwards. Advances in this sector gave humankind satellites, telecommunications, weather forecasts, drug-discovery programmes, etc.

But these advances are reaching a saturation point because the physics phenomena on which they are based, called classical physics, are hitting a performance upper-limit. So scientists around the world are developing new technologies to solve the same problems but using phenomena of quantum physics. Because the rules of quantum physics allow for the outcomes of classical physics as well as new 'bonus' ones, the new devices are expected to be more versatile problem-solvers.

The Union Cabinet approved the NQM in April 2023 at ₹6,000 crore, to be implemented from 2023 to 2031. The planned quantum satellite is part of this package.

What is a quantum satellite?

A quantum satellite is a term for a

Quantum physics has paved the way for new forms of data protection, and quantum satellites are expected to facilitate them

communications satellite that uses quantum physics to secure its signals.

Communications is a broad term that refers to technologies that send and receive signals. An important part of these technologies is security: preventing bad actors from intercepting a message being transmitted across large distances, through multiple networks.

The advent of quantum computers threatens the technologies currently being used to secure messages. Fortunately, quantum physics has also paved the way for new forms of protection, and quantum satellites are expected to facilitate them.

How are messages secured?

Say two people, Anil and Selvi, are standing at two ends of a playground and wish to speak to each other. They could shout or wave their hands. However, Anil composes his message, encrypts it, and writes the encrypted text on a piece of paper. He ties it to the foot of a messenger pigeon and sends it to Selvi. If Selvi knows how Anil encrypted the message, she can decrypt it to access the original text.

Encryption is the task of concealing information. The manner is called the cipher. A simple example is the Caesar cipher, where the letters of the alphabet are offset by a fixed number. If the number is 5, the words BIRDS FLY AWAY become GNWIX KQD FBFD.

Say there is a third person, Kaushik, standing in the middle of the ground and trying to eavesdrop on the conversation. If he intercepts the pigeon, he can't crack the text unless he knows the manner of encryption.

This security paradigm is called cryptographic security. It works by hiding the secret code, or key, behind an extremely difficult mathematical problem. A bad actor like Kaushik can solve the problem with a powerful computer to reveal the code – but the harder the problem, the more time (and/or more computing resources) he will need.

Even the most powerful supercomputers have difficulty cracking the best Advanced Encryption Standard ciphers in use today – but quantum computers may be able to do better.

How can quantum physics protect messages?

Quantum cryptography uses the tenets of quantum physics to secure messages. Its most famous type is quantum key distribution (QKD).

In the example before, Anil used a key to encrypt his message and Selvi, who knew the key, used it to decrypt the message. QKD is concerned with sharing this key with both Anil and Selvi such that if Kaushik is eavesdropping on the transmission, everyone will find out and

the sharing will be aborted.

Quantum physics can protect against eavesdropping in different ways. One is quantum measurement – the act of measuring the properties of a quantum system, like a photon (the particle of light). According to the rules of quantum physics, a quantum measurement changes the state of the system. If information about the key is encoded in a stream of photons and Kaushik traps and measures them to look for it, the state of the photons will change and Anil and Selvi will know the key has been compromised.

Another way is to use quantum entanglement: when two photons are entangled, any change to one particle will instantaneously change the other. (This is a simplistic description.)

Has QKD been implemented?

Ravindra Pratap Singh of the Physical Research Laboratory, Ahmedabad, wrote in 2023 that standards for different QKD implementations are still a decade away. This said, China currently operates the world's largest QKD network with three quantum satellites and four ground stations.

Experts are also trying to implement QKD across longer distances. Since the early 1990s, the distance of reliable transmissions has increased to several hundred kilometres, either through fibre-optic cables or free space.

In an October 2024 study, researchers at the Raman Research Institute, Bengaluru, reported the Indian Astronomical Observatory in Hanle, Ladakh, offers the best atmospheric conditions through which to transmit data for a satellite-based QKD system. The paper's lead author Satya Ranjan Behera said the beam distance would be 500 km.

Does QKD have drawbacks?

QKD on paper can be different from that in the real-world. This is why the U.S. National Security Agency has recommended the use of post-quantum cryptography rather than quantum cryptography. Its criticism is focused on five technical limitations: "QKD does not provide a means to authenticate the QKD transmission source"; "since QKD is hardware-based", QKD networks can't be upgraded or patched easily; "QKD increases infrastructure costs and insider threat risks" that "eliminate many use cases from consideration"; "the actual security provided by a QKD system is not the theoretical unconditional security from the laws of physics... but rather the more limited security that can be achieved by hardware and engineering designs"; and since eavesdroppers can cause a transmission to stop, they can deny the use of a transmission by its intended users (a.k.a. a denial-of-service attack).

The no-cloning theorem of quantum physics also disallows quantum information from being amplified to compensate for losses during transmission.



GETTY IMAGES

Phase I of Maritime Museum in Gujarat to open next year

Sarbananda Sonowal says the project is anticipated to have a daily footfall of up to 25,000 and will create a total of 22,000 jobs; Phase 1A of the project has achieved 65% progress currently

Sreeparna Chakrabarty
NEW DELHI

The first phase of the National Maritime Heritage Complex in Lothal, Gujarat, will be completed and opened for the public from September 2025, Union Ports, Shipping and Waterways Minister Sarbananda Sonowal has said.

“While the entire project, which would be the largest maritime museum in the world, is expected to be completed by 2029, the Phase I would be open to people from September 2025,” Mr. Sonowal said in an interview to *The Hindu*.

He said that international collaborations with more than 20 countries has been proposed for development of the complex. These collaborations will bring in Joint Maritime Research Activities, Preservation of Maritime Heritage, Exchange of Information, Artefacts, Technical know-how among other things.

“This (NMHC) would be



Engineering marvel: A Sea Harrier 609 fighter jet, which will be on display at the maritime museum in Lothal. PTI

centre for learning and study and research globally on maritime issues,” he said. The Minister said that the project is anticipated to have a daily footfall of up to 25,000 and would create 22,000 jobs. “At present, 65% physical progress for the Phase 1A of the project has been achieved.”

Excavations have revealed the world’s oldest known artificial dock,

which was connected to an old course of the Sabarmati river in Lothal, located 80 km from Ahmedabad. The site has been nominated to be enlisted as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Archaeologists believe that the city was a part of a major river system on the ancient trade route from Sindh to Saurashtra in Gujarat, according to the Gujarat Tourism website.

The Union Minister said

that the discovery of the dry dock has proved that India used to be one of the largest shipbuilders and also had world-class ship repair facilities. “The high-quality ships were being built in India and as a result Indian ships were able to complete successful voyages across the world. And this has not only integrated the world community through trade and commerce but also through cultural exchanges and pilgrimages.”

The Union Cabinet in October gave its nod to the project. It also accorded in-principle approval for Phases 1B and 2 of the project, as per the master plan, by raising funds through voluntary resources or contributions. It mandated that a separate society will be set up for development of future phases, to be administered by a Governing Council headed by the Minister of Ports, Shipping & Waterways, under the Societies Registration Act, 1860.



Madan B. Lokur

Madan Lokur is UN Internal Justice Council chief

The Hindu Bureau

NEW DELHI

Former Supreme Court judge Justice Madan B. Lokur was appointed Chairperson of the United Nations Internal Justice Council for a term ending on November 12, 2028.

In a communication to Justice Lokur, UN Secretary-General António Guterres said the retired judge would head the council which also comprises other distinguished jurists.

Born in 1953, Justice Lokur was appointed a judge of the Supreme Court on June 4, 2012.

He demitted office on December 30, 2018, upon attaining the age of superannuation.



25% of India's total area under green cover, says survey report

The Hindu Bureau
CHENNAI

India's forest and tree cover has reached a quarter of the country's total geographical area, according to the India State of Forest Report (ISFR) 2023, released by the Government of India on Saturday.

The increase of 25.17% breaks down to 21.76% of forest cover (7.15 lakh sq. km) and 3.41% of tree cover (1,289 sq. km).

The Forest Survey of India (FSI) defines "forest cover" as land with tree canopy density exceeding 10% and covering at least

one hectare. Thus "forest" in ISFR includes plantations. The FSI counts trees outside forests towards the 'tree cover' if they occupy less than one hectare and if they also lie outside reserve forest areas. FSI Director-General Anoop Singh said bamboo cover is also included in the tree cover.

Union Environment Minister Bhupendra Patel Singhvi said the report's finding that India has augmented its carbon sink by 2.29 billion tonnes over 2005 levels.

India's Nationally Determined Contributions to-



Sea of green: The India State of Forest Report 2023 was released by the Government of India on Saturday. M. SATHYAMOORTHY

wards the Paris Agreement's targets require it to create an additional carbon sink of at least 2.5 bil-

lion tonnes by 2030.

The FSI's inclusion of plantations in "forests" has been controversial, howev-

er, as they lack the deadwood and underground biomass development that also sequester carbon.

The FSI has been assessing forest cover since 1987 and tree cover since 2001. The current report estimated green cover using data from the Resourcesat series of satellites operated by the Indian Space Research Organisation.

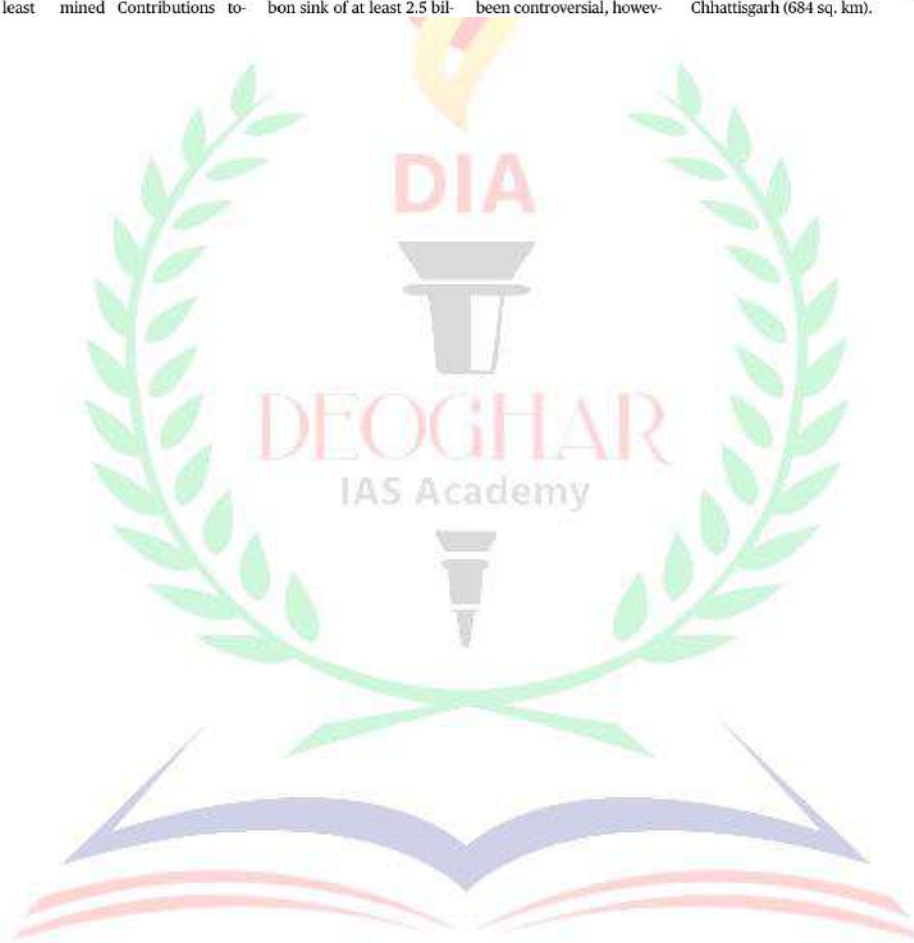
Since 2021, Madhya Pradesh has had the largest area under forest and tree cover (85,724 sq. km).

The largest increase in forest and tree cover in this period was recorded in Chhattisgarh (684 sq. km).

The overall increase in tree and forest cover means a net gain after accounting for losses. Among other places, losses have been recorded in the Western Ghats and Eastern States Area (58.22 sq. km less forest cover) and the Northeast (327.30 sq. km less forest cover) – both highly biodiverse regions.

Likewise, while "very dense" forests expanded by 3,465.12 sq. km, 'moderately dense' and 'open' forests have shrunk by 1,043.23 sq. km and 2,480.11 sq. km, respectively.

(With agency inputs)



Govt. amends rule to restrict access to polling footage

New changes

The Centre has amended Conduct of Election Rules to restrict public access to a section of poll documents

■ The Election Commission says the rule mentions election papers and does not specifically refer to electronic records. In order to remove this ambiguity, the rule has been amended to safeguard misuse of CCTV footage from inside the polling stations

■ The move comes after a recent direction to the EC by the Punjab and Haryana High Court to share all documents related to Haryana Assembly Elections, including CCTV footage



Sreeparna Chakrabarty
NEW DELHI

The Centre has amended the Conduct of Election Rules to restrict public access to a section of poll documents. This was brought into effect through a notification issued by the Ministry of Law and Justice on Friday following a recommendation by the Election Commission (EC).

Rule 93(2)(a) of the 1961 Conduct of Election Rules had earlier stated that “all other papers relating to the election shall be open to public inspection”. After the amendment, it reads, “all other papers as specified in these rules relating to the election shall be open to public inspection.”

The move follows a recent direction to the EC by the Punjab and Haryana High Court to share all documents related to Haryana Assembly polls, including treating CCTV footage also as permissible under Rule 93(2), to a petitioner named Mahmoud Pracha.

According to a senior EC official, “The rule mentioned election papers. The election papers and

documents do not specifically refer to electronic records. Considering the serious issue of violation of secrecy of vote and potential misuse of CCTV footage of inside of the polling station, the rule has been amended.” He said, “Sharing of CCTV footage may have serious repercussions, especially in sensitive regions like naxal-affected regions, etc., where secrecy is important. All election papers and documents are otherwise available for public inspection.”

‘Transparency affected’

However, RTI activists have said it was a setback to transparency. “Huge setback for transparency! Modi government amends Rule 93(2) of Conduct of Elections Rules to restrict people’s right to access election related records after High Court orders disclosure! Applications we filed in May 2024 under Rule 93(2) for copies of Form 17C are still pending,” transparency activist Anjali Bharadwaj said.

ERODES INTEGRITY: CONG.

» PAGE 4



GST review on life, health insurance deferred

At its 55th meeting, the apex body in charge of the indirect tax regime raises taxes on used cars, including electric cars, and exempts gene therapy, long-range surface-to-air missiles; Council proposes setting up a ministerial group to examine tax levies imposed by disaster-hit States, gives more time for group examining Compensation Cess levies

Vikas Dhoot
NEW DELHI

The much-anticipated review of the Goods and Services Tax (GST) levies on life and health insurance premiums was put off by the GST Council, the apex body in charge of the indirect tax regime, at its 55th meeting on Saturday, as some members sought more discussions on the matter before taking a final call.

A Group of Ministers under Bihar Deputy Chief Minister Samrat Chaudhary is now expected to meet afresh to deliberate on the insurance levies once more before coming back to the Council with its recommendations. Moreover, suggestions on rate rationalisation pertaining to about 150 items, including

a price-based differential levy for garments, and 5% levies for packaged drinking water, and bicycles priced under ₹10,000, were also put off till the Council's next meeting.

The Council, chaired by Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman, which met in Jaisalmer, also decided to grant more time to a ministerial group tasked with suggesting a road map for dealing with the GST Compensation Cess levies on several items that are scheduled for a March 2026 sunset.

The Council did agree on some rate changes, including exempting gene therapy and long-range surface-to-air missiles (LRSAMs) from the tax, raising the levies on used car sales, including electric vehicles, to 18% from 12%.

Playing safe

At the GST Council's 55th meeting, members agreed to some changes in the indirect tax regime, while deferring a decision on many broader issues



D-day: Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman chairs GST Council meeting in Jaisalmer, Rajasthan

SETTLED		NOT SETTLED	
	Popcorn taxation - Savoury to attract 5% or 12% GST, 18% levy on sweetened varieties		Levy on fortified rice kernels to be reduced from 18% to 5%
	Gift vouchers are not taxable		Tax on used cars, including electric ones, raised from 12% to 18%
			Review of the GST levied on health and life insurance premiums
			Future of Compensation Cess levies after March 2026 sunset
			Plan to tax Floor Space Index (FSI) charges for real estate firms
			Rate Rationalisation - GoM proposals made for rate changes on about 150 items not taken up

"Gene therapy that is now critical for dealing with life-threatening diseases, so have been totally

exempted [from GST]. LRSAM systems are very important in defence, so we have decided to extend

the exemption on the systems, sub-systems, equipment, parts, sub-parts, tools, test equipment and

software meant for their assembly or manufacture from Integrated GST levies," she conveyed after the Council's meeting.

A ministerial group would be set up to examine tax levies by States hit by natural disasters. "On the request of State of Andhra Pradesh, the Council recommended that a GoM be constituted to examine the legal and structural issues, and recommend a uniform policy on imposition of levy in case of a natural disaster in the State," the Finance Ministry said in a statement.

The council has decided to levy a tax of 18% on sweetened or caramelised popcorn, and levy 5% on the salty and spicy varieties that are not pre-packaged and labelled, and 12% for labelled and pre-pack-

aged savoury popcorn.

A proposal to levy GST on charges collected by municipalities for granting Floor Space Index to builders, presented to the Council on Saturday, was put off at the Centre's behest. It was also agreed upon by Council members that gift vouchers are not liable to attract GST nor are penal charges imposed by banks and non-banking finance companies on borrowers failing to comply with loan conditions.

Ms. Sitharaman announced that the Council had agreed to reduce the GST on fortified rice kernels from 18% to 5% as these are supplied with an intent to pass them on the public distribution system.

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