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Why public health nutrition policies need precise targeting

A medley of nutrients prevents anaemia, and the whole diet works better than the sum of its parts. Therefore, rather than focusing on select nutrient deficiencies, it is time to diversify diets effectively

Anura Kurpad
Harshpal Singh Sachdev

Global Nutrition Targets (GNTs) were set by the World Health Assembly as key national indicators of the effect of public health policies in alleviating maternal and child malnutrition. Some of the targets were – to reduce stunting by 40% in under-5 children, reduce anaemia by 50% in women of reproductive age, and no increase in childhood overweight.

A recent evaluation of the global progress toward the achievement (or not) of the targets was published in *The Lancet*. This colossal analysis provided estimates of progress at a regional and national level in 204 countries from 2012 to 2021, with projections up to 2050. In general, there appeared to be slow and insufficient progress across countries. By 2030, it was projected that few countries (not India) would meet the targets for stunting, and none would meet low birthweight, anaemia and childhood overweight.

We are now in the last year of the first quarter of the 21st century. Fresh thinking is needed if the same sorry situation is to be avoided at the end of the next quarter of this century. The immediate questions are: why is there slow progress, and what next?

Slow progress can be blamed on poor programme implementation. However, other important aspects merit consideration too. For instance, the prevalence of anaemia has remained static in India for the last two decades. First,

How to reduce stunting, anaemia

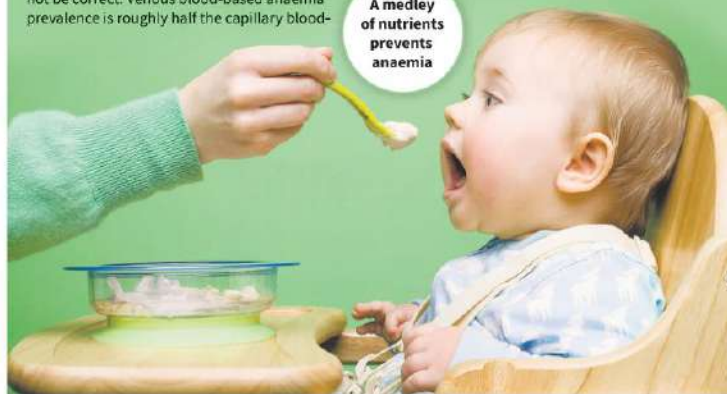
The prevalence of anaemia has remained static in India for the last two decades

- The cause of anaemia in India is presumed to be iron deficiency
- But large surveys reveal that iron deficiency accounts for only a third of anaemia. Unknown causes account for a third of anaemia
- Rather than focussing on select nutrient deficiencies, the focus should be to diversify diets effectively
- Measuring anaemia using capillary blood may not be correct. Venous blood-based anaemia prevalence is roughly half the capillary blood-

based prevalence

- Stunting actively occurs within the first two years of life. Stunting increases from about 7-8% at birth to near 40% at two years of age
- Energy intake is the driver of growth in the first two years. The most energy-dense food is oil
- Average fat intake of poor children in India is only 7 grams per day, versus the requirement of 30-40 grams per day

A medley of nutrients prevents anaemia



with no national surveys, we do not know the cause of anaemia in India. This is presumed to be iron deficiency, resulting in policies to improve dietary iron intake through fortification and supplementation. But recent large-scale surveys reveal that iron deficiency accounts for only a third of anaemia, while unknown causes account for another significant third. A medley of nutrients prevents anaemia, and the whole diet works better than the sum of its parts. Therefore, rather than focusing on select nutrient deficiencies, it is time to diversify diets effectively.

Second, the static anaemia prevalence begs the question of the metrics of measurement, which vary by context and method. In

India, a national survey of children showed that venous blood-based anaemia prevalence (as recommended by WHO) was roughly half the capillary blood-based prevalence in comparable national surveys. Third, the actual diagnostic cut-off for anaemia (true for stunting as well) is the subject of much science: one cut-off might not fit all populations. Accurate metrics are crucial for successful public health interventions.

The consequences

As for the sustained negligible progress in the target for stunting, the knee-jerk response might be to feed even more. But this has unintended consequences – children are more likely to grow fatter

rather than faster when overfed after two years of age. This is because stunting actively occurs within the first two years of life; in India, stunting increases from about 7-8% at birth to nearly 40% at two years of age. On average, children reach half their adult height in two years. If already stunted at two, it is difficult to un-stunt children by overfeeding in the hope of faster growth. Prevention in the first two years is most important, even though the global nutrition target refers to stunting in under-5 children.

Second, energy intake is the driver of growth in the first two years. The most energy-dense food is oil. It is disheartening that the average fat intake of poor

children in India is just 7 grams per day (NNMB reports), versus their requirement of 30-40 grams per day. But it is encouraging to note that the new POSHAN guidelines for feeding children aged under 3 with take-home rations now include oil, which was not specified earlier.

Finally, *The Lancet* paper showed that overweight had increased in children in almost all countries but was less than the prevailing undernutrition. This might mean that policy should continue to focus on undernutrition. But overweight does not capture the risk of 'metabolic overnutrition' in children. It has been shown that metabolic risk occurs in no less than 50% of Indian children aged 5-19 years, even in those stunted and underweight. Therefore, the burden of childhood overnutrition should be an important policy target.

The slow progress in GNTs on undernutrition, notwithstanding the considerations pointed out above and the hidden overweight burden, tells us that the need of the hour is to zealously and precisely focus on double-duty actions to simultaneously address the under- and over-nutrition burden. Else, ongoing efforts that are skewed towards undernutrition will continue to fuel overnutrition and related non-communicable diseases.

(Anura Kurpad is Professor of physiology and nutrition at St John's Medical College, Bengaluru. Harshpal Singh Sachdev is a senior consultant in paediatrics and clinical epidemiology, Sitaram Bharti Institute of Science and Research, New Delhi)

Why was the no-detention policy rolled back?

What led to the amendment of the Right to Education Act, 2009 Rules? What have schools been allowed to do? Is there something wrong with the appraisal system? What are some of the best ways to test a child's learning? Who should be made accountable?

Priscilla Jebaraj

The story so far:

The Union government amended the Rules of the Right to Education Act, 2009 in December 2024 to allow schools to detain students in Classes 5 and 8 if they are unable to meet the promotion criteria after a year-end examination. Students will be given a second chance re-examination after two months of extra teaching. This rollback of the RTE Act's vision of a no-detention policy was initially brought through an amendment of the law in 2019, following which 18 States and UTs have reinstated the option to detain students; the 2024 amendment now extends the option to Central government-run schools too.

What was the rationale behind the original no-detention policy?

When the RTE Act was passed in 2009, it included Section 16, which stipulated that "No child admitted in a school shall be held back in any class or expelled from school till the completion of elementary education [Classes 1 to 8]". "The spirit of a no-detention policy was to ensure that children can learn without unnecessary pressure. Detention is demoralising to children. There was also an understanding

'No detention became no testing, and in many schools, no teaching. It was a slippery slope'

that a single final year-end examination is not the best way to assess learning and decide on their progress," said Vimala Ramachandran, a former professor at the National Institute of Educational Planning and Administration. "But it was implemented very shoddily. No detention became no testing, and in many schools, no teaching. It was a slippery slope."

She noted that government schools in many States simply stopped testing in any form until Class 5, automatically promoting children without bothering to find out if they had acquired grade-specific skills and knowledge. Monitoring systems focussed on inputs or maybe indicators, rarely on outcomes.

Efforts to introduce a Continuous and Comprehensive Evaluation (CCE) programme instead, in coordination with UNICEF, were largely stymied by a lack of resources and training, and teacher apathy. In many schools, NCERT's CCE forms were simply filled en masse by teachers without an assessment of individual children's skills. A number of boards abandoned the model of multiple formative and summative assessments, retreating to the familiarity of a final year-end examination.

Why has it been rolled back?

Surveys conducted by both government and private entities in recent years have documented an alarming learning gap in India's schools.

The Annual Status of Education Report (ASER), a respected survey spearheaded by the NGO Pratham, found that only 42.8% of Class 5 students could read a Class 2-level text in 2022, a fall from 50.5% in 2018. Only 25.6% of them could do basic arithmetic problems in 2022, a slight drop from 27.9% in 2018.

Even more worryingly, ASER 2023 tested foundational skills in youth aged 14 to 18 years and found that a quarter of them still cannot read a Class 2 level text fluently in their regional language. More than half struggle with division (3-digit by 1-digit) problems, a skill taught in Class 3 and 4.

The Department of School Education's National Achievement Survey 2021 also showed clear declines as students moved up the school ladder. Out of a maximum 500, Class 3 students

scored an average of 323 in language and 306 in Mathematics. By Class 5, the scores dropped to 309 and 284 respectively, and to 302 and 255 by Class 8.

A government analysis of Classes 10 and 12 results across 59 State and national boards in 2023 showed that more than 65 lakh students had failed to clear their examinations, with a failure rate ranging from 12% in national boards to 18% in State boards.

"In the name of promoting all students in the younger classes, we are adversely affecting them in later life," said Joseph Emmanuel, who was academic director of the Central Board of Secondary Examination (CBSE) till a few months ago, when he took charge of the Council for the Indian School Certificate Examinations (CISCE). "There is a clear learning gap that was exacerbated by the COVID disruptions. This [rollback of the no-detention policy] is a good example of evidence-based decision making."

Dr. Ramachandran said the amendment represents a regression, and instead called for better mechanisms to assess children's learning and hold teachers accountable.

What is the way forward?

"Timely remedial action is needed at every stage. There must be regular assessment done at the school level in every class, not at the board level. Who is the best judge of a child's learning? It is their own teachers. We must trust teachers and equip them," said Dr. Emmanuel.

He noted that the Rules require the class teacher to "provide specialised inputs after identifying the learning gaps at various stages of assessment" and stipulate that the school Head personally monitor the progress of the children who are held back. "More accountability is being brought in," he said.

Dr. Ramachandran said the focus of accountability must change. "Instead of detaining and punishing the child for not doing well, we need a way to hold the teacher responsible and accountable," she said. Too many teachers only focus on the children in the front rows of their classroom, often discriminating against those from lower socio-economic backgrounds who may struggle more and are more likely to be detained. "Rigorous teacher appraisal is needed to ensure inclusive teaching. There must be some consequences for the teacher, not just the student, as well as incentives to ensure this," she urged.



New rules: Students appear for exams at a school in Gurugram in 2024. PTI



Why is rupee weakening against dollar?

What has caused the currency to depreciate? Why made the central bank to intervene?

Prashanth Perumal

The story so far:
In the last week of December, 2024, the rupee breached the 85 mark against the U.S. dollar, touching an all-time low of 85.81. The currency depreciated about 3% in 2024, continuing its long-term trend of gradually but consistently losing value against the dollar.

What causes a currency to depreciate?
The price of any currency in the foreign exchange market is determined by the demand for the currency vis-a-vis its supply. This is similar to how the price of any other product is determined in the marketplace. When the demand for a product rises while its supply remains constant, this causes the price of the product to rise in order to ration the available supply. In the other hand, when the demand for a product drops while its supply remains constant, this causes sellers to drop the price of the product in order to attract sufficient buyers. The only difference between the goods market and the forex market is that currencies are exchanged for other currencies rather than for goods in the foreign exchange market.

A currency depreciates against a foreign currency when the demand for it (in terms of the foreign currency) drops compared to its available supply in the market. When the currency's value depreciates, the value of the foreign currency automatically appreciates on the other side. This is similar to how the purchasing power of your money depreciates or appreciates when the price of goods in the marketplace rise or fall, respectively.

The value of India's foreign exchange reserves dropped to an eight-month low of \$640 billion as of the last week of December from over \$700 billion in September

There are various factors that determine the demand for and the supply of any currency in the foreign exchange market. One of the most important determinants of the supply of a currency in the market is the monetary policy of a country's central bank. A central bank adopting looser monetary policy compared with other central banks will cause the supply of its currency in the market (for both goods trade and investment purposes) to rise relative to other currencies, causing the currency's value to drop. Central banks adopting relatively tighter monetary policy, on the other hand, are likely to see their currencies appreciate in value.

A crucial factor that determines the demand for any currency, on the other hand, is the demand among foreigners for the goods and assets of the country. Since foreigners will first have to purchase the local currency before they can purchase a country's goods and assets, high demand for a country's goods and assets translates to high demand for its currency and which in turn leads to a rise in the value of the currency. A fall in demand for a country's goods or assets, on the other hand, will cause the value of its currency to fall.

What is behind the rupee's fall?
The current bout of rupee depreciation is seen as driven primarily by the exit of foreign investors from India, which has put pressure on the rupee.

Global investors have been shuffling their investments across countries as central banks recalibrate their monetary policies to varying degrees. High inflation in the aftermath of the coronavirus pandemic led to monetary tightening by central banks which is now being reversed as inflation comes more under control. This has pushed investors to withdraw money from markets like India and invest in more advanced markets.

Meanwhile, the longer term trend of the rupee's depreciation against the dollar is attributed to higher inflation in India than in the U.S. due to the Reserve Bank of India's looser monetary policy compared to the U.S. Federal Reserve. India's traditional demand for high-value imports such as crude oil and gold (which boosts demand for the dollar and weakens the rupee) to keep its economy going and its inability to boost exports (which can help boost demand for the rupee) have also contributed to the lackluster performance of the rupee. The RBI has been using its dollar reserves to prop up the value of the rupee by artificially increasing the supply of dollars in the foreign exchange market, and thus the dollar demand for rupees.

As a result, the value of India's foreign exchange reserves dropped to an eight-month low of \$640 billion as of the last week of December from over \$700 billion in September. Analysts believe the rupee's depreciation would have been far worse if not for the RBI's intervention to support the rupee against the dollar.

The RBI's traditional stance has been to manage the rupee's exchange value in such a way as to allow for a gradual depreciation in its value without too much volatility that could disrupt the economy.



Is India's forest cover growing enough?

What has the State of Forest Report, 2023 found? What do the findings signify? Which are the States that have increased forest cover, where has it declined? What does the report say on vulnerable areas such as the Western Ghats? Why is tree planting not a blanket fix?

**Priyali Prakash
Vasudevan Mukumth**

The story so far:

The State of Forest Report (SFR), 2023 was released by Union Environment Minister Bhupender Yadav at the Forest Research Institute, Dehradun, on December 21, 2024. The SFR is a biennial exercise the Government of India undertakes to track tree and forest cover, carbon stock, forest fires, and other parameters related to the country's green cover.

What did SFR, 2023 find?

According to SFR, 2023, 25.17% of India's area is under forest and tree cover. Of this, forests cover 21.76% of land and trees 3.41%. These figures represent marginal increases from 21.71% and 2.91%, respectively, as reported in SFR, 2021. In absolute terms, the increase is 1,445 sq. km. The National Forest Policy, 1988, which governs green cover in India, requires 33% of the country's geographical area to be under tree or forest cover. Chhattisgarh, Uttar Pradesh, and Odisha led the list of States that increased forest and tree cover while Madhya Pradesh, Karnataka, Ladakh (Union Territory), and Nagaland were the top four where forest and tree cover has dropped.

What is green cover?

Forest cover in India means an area of a hectare or more "with a tree canopy of more than or

Not all ecosystems are suited for trees, and damaging them by planting trees could be counter productive

equal to 10%, irrespective of ownership and legal status," per the report. Likewise, tree cover refers to all tree patches that exist outside of forest area and which occupy "less than one hectare in extent, including all the scattered trees found in the rural and urban settings, and [are] not captured under the forest cover assessment".

The SFR uses a mix of satellite data and details from the National Forest Inventory, plus ground-truthing to verify the information. Forest cover estimates come from satellite data and growing and carbon stock estimates from the Inventory. The 2023 report uses satellite data from October to December 2021 and NFI data from 2017 to 2022.

How have sensitive areas fared?

In 2014, the Union government first notified the Western Ghats Eco-Sensitive Area (WGESA) along the country's west coast under the Environment Protection Act, 1986 for special protection. According to SFR, 2023, the Western Ghats Area has lost 58.22 sq. km of forest cover in the last decade. While the cover of "very dense" forests increased, those of "moderately dense" and "open" forests fell. "Very dense" forests have a canopy density of at least 70%, "moderately dense" forests of 40-70%, and "open" forests of 10-40%.

The Nilgiris forests are part of the WGESA and a UNESCO biosphere. Between 2013 and 2023, they lost 123.44 sq. km of forest cover. Nilgiris district reported a fourfold increase in the number of forest fires from 2022-23 to 2023-2024.

Mangroves – tropical trees in the intertidal zones of coastal areas – are withdrawing as well. The report has estimated 0.15% of India's total geographical area as under mangrove cover following an overall decrease of 7.43 sq. km from 2021 alone. Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra increased their State-wise share but Gujarat's Kutch area reported a significant decrease. These trees stabilise coastlines, mitigate erosion, encourage biodiversity, shield coastal communities from sea-level rise, and temper the fury of cyclones.

The northeast occupies less than 8% of India's total land area but more than 21% of its tree and forest cover. Per SFR 2023, tree and forest cover in the region shrunk by 327.3 sq. km. There have been reports in the press that at least part of the decline is due to conversion of forests for agricultural use.

What is the SFR's applicability?

While the definitions are straightforward, what they include or exclude has prompted concerns.

For example, as trees became popular as a 'solution' for climate mitigation because of their ability to sequester carbon, many lawmakers as well as researchers began to tout tree-planting as a blanket fix.

In due course, two important problems emerged with this idea. First, not all ecosystems are suited for trees, and damaging them by planting trees could have repercussions that negate the original purpose of the exercise. Second, only native and mature species in the right environments can sequester carbon efficiently. Young trees or those unsuitable for their environs either wouldn't help as much or not at all. One direct analogue in the SFRs is that the definition of forests includes "orchards, bamboo, and palm". Divya Gupta, assistant professor of environmental studies and sustainable communities at the State University of New York, thus called the report's marquee finding a "celebratory statistic". "By including plantations, orchards, palms, and non-native ecosystems, it erases the distinction between natural forests and monocultures," she added. "This aggregation misrepresents forest health, obscures deforestation and degradation, and offers a distorted view of what we should truly prioritise."

"The share of actual increase in forest cover appears to be very minimal ... compared to the 1,445 sq. km of forest and green cover increase claimed in the document," Sudeep Budhaditya Deb, deputy conservator of forests at the Office of the Additional Principal Chief Conservator of Forests (North Bengal), said.

Is SFR related to climate action?

Exercises to understand how much carbon can be sequestered use the term carbon stock to denote all the carbon held in living and non-living biomass in an ecosystem. In a mature forest, for example, the carbon collects in the trees as they grow both aboveground and below, in the leaf litter surrounding the trees, in the deadwood, etc.

In 2022, India committed to increase its carbon stock by 2.5-3 billion tonnes "through additional forest and tree cover by 2030". The current stock of this variety is around 30.4 billion tonnes. According to SFR 2023, India increased its carbon stock by 81.5 million tonnes and the growing stock – the sum (by number or volume) of all the trees living/growing in forests – by 4.25% between 2021 and 2023.

But experts have said the report doesn't say anything about the quality of forests contributing to increases in forest cover nor provides data on the actual causes of forest degradation. "Key ecological indicators such as forest fragmentation and biodiversity health are missing, making it impossible to evaluate the true significance of the statistics reported," Ms. Gupta said. "Moreover, the report lacks mechanisms to track ecosystem losses caused by land-use changes and deforestation."



Green canopies: The Folding Hills and the Shola ecosystem are considered the heart of the Nilgiris biosphere reserve. SATHYAM/OORTHY M.

Chidambaram, doyen of nuclear programme, no more

Jacob Koshy
NEW DELHI

Rajagopala Chidambaram, 88, former Chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission who was involved in both of India's nuclear tests in 1974 and in 1998, died in Jaslok Hospital in Mumbai on Saturday. He was the longest serving Principal Scientific Adviser (PSA) to the Indian government with a tenure from 2002 to 2018.

An atomic energy scientist who spent his whole career with the Department of Atomic Energy (DAE) and its affiliated agencies, Dr. Chidambaram was the nuclear scientist whose professional history was intertwined with the history of India's nuclear ambitions.

In 1974, he was part of an operation, codenamed 'Smiling Buddha', which was carried out in great se-

crecy as a "peaceful nuclear test" at Pokhran, Rajasthan. This made India the sixth country to test a nuclear device, though it invited condemnation, particularly from Canada and the U.S. The plutonium for the test came from the Cirus reactor at the Bhabha Atomic Research Centre in Mumbai, which was supplied by Canada, and heavy water from the U.S.

Operation Shakti

In 1998, as the Chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission, he led a similar operation, again at Pokhran, to detonate four nuclear fission and one nuclear fusion bomb on May 11 of that year. Called Operation Shakti, this was a more explicitly military test and invited international sanctions, and led to six nuclear tests by Pakistan in the same month.



R. CHIDAMBARAM (1936 - 2025)

The second Pokhran test, which exploded bombs far more powerful than those in 1974, underlined India's credentials as a military nuclear power, but the denial of critical technologies needed for civilian programme has critics, to this day, debating its secondary impact. Nuclear sanctions following this were effec-

tively lifted only after the Indo-U.S. civil nuclear deal championed by the then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and U.S. President George Bush in 2008.

A recipient of the Padma Shri (1975) and Padma Vibushan (1999), Dr. Chidambaram contributed significantly to condensed matter physics, nuclear

energy, and strategic technologies. As Chair of the Scientific Advisory Committee to the Cabinet, he championed advancements in energy security, materials science, supercomputing, and nanotechnology, says a statement from the Office of the PSA.

'Visionary leadership'

"Dr Chidambaram's unparalleled contributions to India's scientific and strategic capabilities and his visionary leadership in science and technology will forever be remembered," the DAE said in a statement.

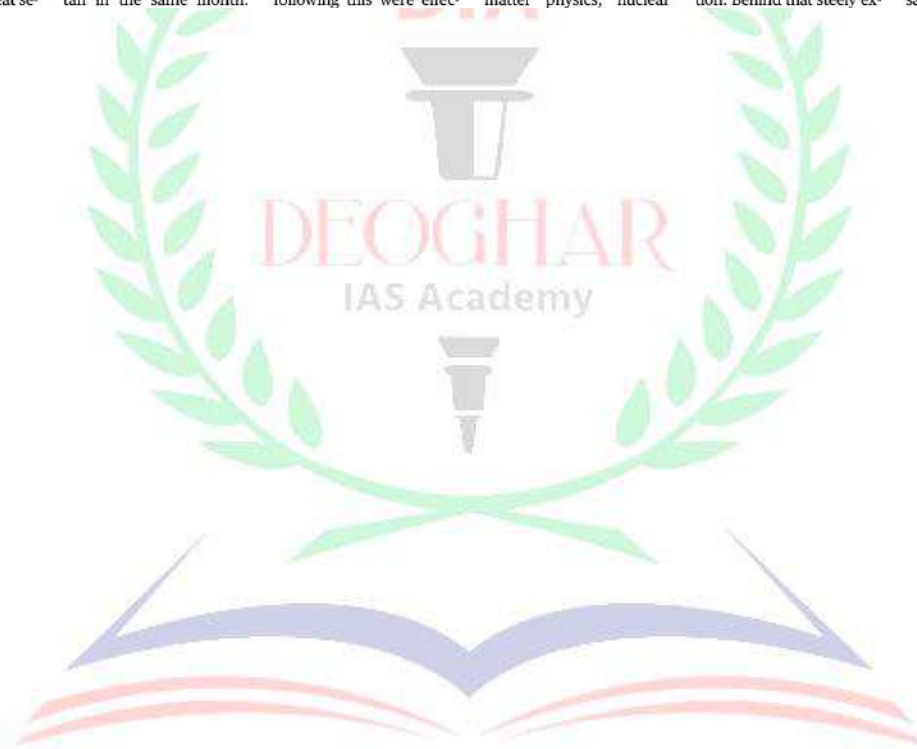
Congress leader Jairam Ramesh described him as among the titans of Indian science and technology.

"He was a man of great learning and erudition in diverse disciplines. Meeting and listening to him was always a deep education. Behind that steely ex-

terior, he had a wonderful sense of humour. Dr. Chidambaram was intellectually very active till his end. People like him are very, very rare," Mr. Ramesh said in a post on the social media platform X.

As the PSA, Dr. Chidambaram stressed the importance of combining basic research and technological applications through an approach called "directed basic research".

His tenure as PSA saw the launch of several initiatives, including the Rural Technology Action Group (RuTAG), which empowered rural communities through innovative technologies; the Society for Electronic Transactions and Security (SETS) to contribute towards advancing India's cybersecurity and hardware security infrastructure," a press note from the Office of the PSA said.



Naval vessel *Tarini* with two woman officers starts new leg of circumnavigation

Dinakar Peri

NEW DELHI

Indian Naval Sailing Vessel (INSV) *Tarini* left Lyttelton Port in New Zealand on Saturday morning at about 9.30 a.m. local time for Port Stanley in Falkland Islands in the third leg of the ongoing global circumnavigation journey by two woman Navy officers under *Navika Sagar Parikrama-II*.

This is the longest leg of the expedition with a distance of approximately 5,600 nautical miles (approximately 10,400 km) to cover. This will also be the southernmost transit of *Tarini* at about 56 degrees South, the Navy said in a statement. "With the frontal weather systems of the Southern Ocean, Team *Tarini* can expect to experience challenging seas with up to 50-60 knots (90-110 kmph) winds."

INSV Tarini had arrived in Lyttelton on December 22, completing the second leg of the double-handed



Miles to go: Lt. Cdr. Dilna K. and Lt. Cdr. Roopa A. have 5,600 nm to cover from Lyttelton Port in to Port Stanley. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

circumnavigation, which is being undertaken by two Indian Navy women officers – Lt. Cdr. Dilna K. and Lt. Cdr. Roopa A.

"During the period in Lyttelton, the crew undertook repairs and maintenance of the boat with particular focus on the next leg where the vessel will cross the South Pacific, pass through the treacherous Drake Passage, and cross Cape Horn to reach Port Stanley," the Navy said. "While in Lyttelton, the crew also interacted with the Indian community who were eager to visit

the boat and query the crew about various aspects of ocean sailing."

Members of Indian diaspora and various dignitaries turned up for the flag off ceremony of the vessel. Traditional Maori prayers for the crew by members of the Maori community were also undertaken during the ceremony.

The expedition was flagged off from Goa on October 2, 2024 by Navy chief Admiral Dinesh K. Tripathi. The circumnavigation will cover around 23,000 nautical miles in around 240 days.

Cowpea seeds sprout in space, and first robotic arm operated, says ISRO

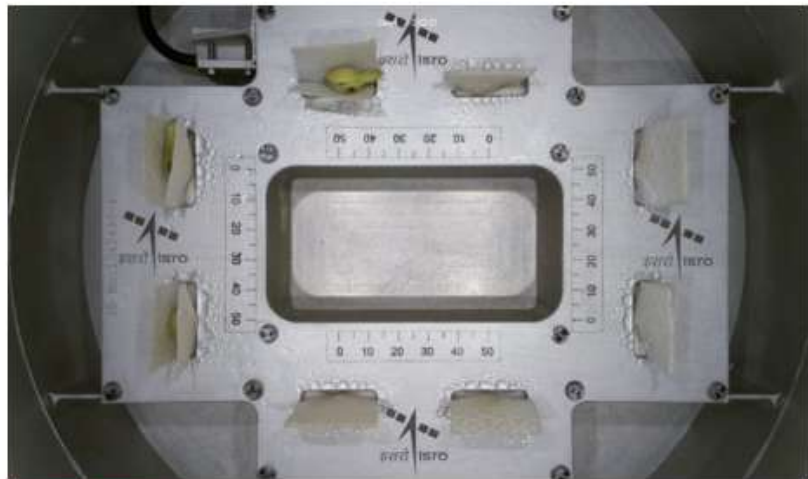
The Hindu Bureau

BENGALURU

A batch of cowpea seeds – better known as *lobia* in Hindi or *thattapayaru* in Tamil – have successfully sprouted in space, days after they were taken into orbit by an Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) mission. The space agency has also successfully operated India's first space robotic arm, it announced on Saturday.

The two experiments were part of the 24 payloads flown on the PSLV-C60 SpaDeX mission's PS4-Orbital Experiment Module (POEM-4) on December 30. In a series of posts on X, ISRO said, "Life sprouts in space! VSSC's CROPS (Compact Research Module for Orbital Plant Studies) experiment onboard PSLV-C60 POEM-4 successfully sprouted cowpea seeds in 4 days. Leaves expected soon."

"#RRM_TD, India's first space robotic arm, is in action onboard #POEM4! A



Sprouting up: The experiment plans to grow eight cowpea seeds in a closed-box environment with active thermal control. ISRO

proud #MakeInIndia milestone in space robotics. #ISRO #SpaceTech," the agency said in another post. "The Relocatable Robotic Manipulator-Technology Demonstrator (RRM-TD) a 7 Degree of Freedom (DoF) robotic arm that will perform relocation through 'inchworm walking' to defined targets on the POEM-4 platform."

Growing crops in space
The CROPS payload, developed by the Vikram Sarabhai Space Centre (VSSC), is envisioned as a multi-

phase platform to develop and evolve ISRO's capabilities for growing and sustaining flora in extraterrestrial environments.

"Designed as a fully automated system, a five- to seven-day experiment is planned to demonstrate seed germination and plant sustenance until the two-leaf stage in a micro-gravity environment," ISRO had said prior to the launch. The experiment plans to grow eight cowpea seeds in a closed-box environment with active thermal control.

Experts hopeful, but flag data localisation, parental nod plans

They find the draft as leaving the door open for government to restrict the overseas processing of Indians' data; the rules mandate that platforms verify parents' identity first for minors to sign up for online services, raising concern

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

Experts working with the tech industry tentatively welcomed the draft Digital Personal Data Protection Rules, 2025, issued on Friday. The draft rules document "gives broad direction to the industry to start preparing for compliance", Aparajita Bharti, a founding partner at TQH Consulting, which works with tech companies in complying with Indian laws, said in a statement.

"It is encouraging to finally witness progress on this front," Shreya Suri, senior partner at IndusLaw, said in a statement.

They highlighted gaps, but they hope that the ensuing consultation process will resolve them. Industry associations have so far not directly commented on the draft.

"The draft rules provide some clarity on framing and displaying notices [to users, or "data principals"]

Safeguarding information

The Digital Personal Data Protection Rules are still in draft form, and further discussion is expected to resolve any gaps

Data fiduciaries must obtain verifiable parental consent before processing data of minors. Methods include relying on identity details, virtual tokens, or digital locker services	Future government orders may define specific requirements for processing the data of Indians abroad	The public can submit feedback till February 18 through MyGov portal
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under the Digital Personal Data Protection Act, but they fall short in offering guidance on the mode of delivery or issuance – something well-defined under GDPR," Ms. Suri said, referring to Europe's General Data Protection Regulation.

"One key concern in the rules is potential room for bringing data localisation requirements for significant data fiduciaries as they mention that a committee may do so in the future," Ms. Bharti said, referring to the draft leaving the door open for the go-

vernment to restrict the overseas processing of Indians' data. Tech companies are likely to seek particular clarity on this front, as they usually store and process user data in servers around the world.

Parental consent

The draft rules around minors having to get parental consent to sign up for online services raised some eyebrows, as the rules mandate that platforms verify parents' identity first.

"How do you know if someone is a parent or not,"

Nikhil Pahwa, editor of the tech policy website MediaNama asked. This could mean that "platforms will have to verify EVERYONE," he speculated on X.

Ms. Suri opined that the government's "approach might rely on self-declaration by users, allowing them to indicate whether they are minors or adults," but hinted at broad data collection. "Depending on the implementation, this "could potentially lead to broader processing of parental or guardian data, which raises interesting considerations regarding the scale and scope of such data collection," she said.

Exemption concerns

The DPDP Act, 2023 already exempts government organisations from the law, and the Rules set out the "standards" for such exemptions.

However, Ms. Bharti said, "The draft rules also do not explicitly address exemptions, processing grounds, or other frame-

works specifically tailored for AI model training purposes."

The Internet Freedom Foundation flagged a lack of specificity in the draft, saying in a statement that terms such as "reasonable safeguards", "appropriate purposes" are used without adequate elaboration in the text. Since the Data Protection Board will not be a fully independent entity, the IFF added, "large parts of the implementation and enforcement will be administered by the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology raising apprehension."

"We want to ensure that in finality, the age verification process, complaints and enforcement are easier for people and not yet another burdensome run-around with no recourse where their data is illegally collected, used, shared and breached," Mishi Choudhary, founder of the New Delhi-based Software Freedom Law Centre said.



Telangana govt. to rope in IIT experts to study impact of A.P.'s Polavaram project

The Hindu Bureau

HYDERABAD

The Telangana government has decided to study the impact of the Polavaram irrigation project on the State with Chief Minister A. Revanth Reddy instructing the Irrigation Department authorities to get it done with the help of experts from the IIT-Hyderabad and prepare a comprehensive report in a month.

Directions were also issued to appoint a special officer to coordinate with the IIT-H in the matter on a regular basis.

The Chief Minister suggested that the impact study shall include the threat to the Bhadrachalam Temple upon the completion of the Polavaram project.

The authorities have brought to the notice of Mr. Reddy that most of the temple premises got submerged during the floods in the Godavari in 2022.



Dam of contention: The A.P. government plans to complete the Polavaram irrigation project on the Godavari by 2027. FILE PHOTO

It was also decided at the meeting held in Hyderabad on Saturday and attended by Minister for Irrigation and Civil Supplies N. Uttam Kumar Reddy, Advisor (Irrigation) Aditya Nath Das and others that the State would also raise its objection to the Godavari-Banakacherla link project, based on the surplus water, being planned by Andhra Pradesh government without any approvals and clearances.

The Chief Minister

asked the authorities concerned to take Telangana's objections to the project to the notice of Andhra Pradesh's Chief Secretary. He instructed the authorities to move the Godavari River Management Board and Ministry of Jal Shakti by taking the matter to their notice as part of protecting the interests of Telangana.

Recently, the officials showed a power point presentation to the Chief Minister on the new link project by Andhra Pradesh.

Villages will play a key role in realising dream of Viksit Bharat, says Prime Minister

The Hindu Bureau

NEW DELHI

In a dig at the Opposition, Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Saturday said that “some people” were working to “weaken the social fabric” of the nation by trying to “spread poison in society in the name of caste”, as he inaugurated the Grameen Bharat Mahotsav, 2025 at Bharat Mandapam in New Delhi.

With the Congress and other Indian National Developmental, Inclusive Alliance (INDIA) bloc parties raising the pitch on their demand for a nation-wide caste census since the results of the Lok Sabha elections were announced, Mr. Modi said these “conspiracies” had to be thwarted so that the common heritage of villages could be “preserved and strengthened”.

Stating that his government had been consistently in service of rural India since 2014, he highlighted a host of schemes and programmes that had benefited rural Indians in the past 10 years, and also cited a recent study by the State



Empowering rural areas: Prime Minister Narendra Modi visiting a stall at Grameen Bharat Mahotsav in New Delhi on Saturday. ANI

Bank of India to say that rural poverty had dropped below 5% in 2024, compared with 26% in 2012, and that his government was closing the urban-rural gap in consumption.

‘Deprived of necessities’

The Prime Minister said that these were achievements that previous governments could have made “but for decades after Independence, lakhs of villages were deprived of basic necessities”.

Inaugurating the Grameen Bharat Mahotsav, which will be held from January 4 to 9 with a focus on enhancing rural infras-

tructure, creating self-reliant economies, and fostering innovation within rural communities, Mr. Modi said that his government had been centring the development of villages since 2014, adding that villages would play a key role in realising the dream of a Viksit Bharat by 2047.

It will celebrate rural India’s “entrepreneurial spirit and cultural heritage”, a statement from the Prime Minister’s Office said, adding that its theme this year was “Building a resilient rural India for a Viksit Bharat, 2047” with a motto of “Nation will progress when villages do”.

Union Minister claims agriculture, allied sectors to grow at 3.5% to 4%

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

Union Agriculture Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan on Saturday chaired a virtual review meeting of various schemes being run by his Ministry with the Agriculture Ministers of States and Union Territories across the country, where he said the growth rate of the agriculture and allied sectors is likely to be between 3.5% and 4% this year.

“In the New Year with new resolutions, we will take forward the work of agricultural development and farmer welfare at a fast pace,” Mr. Chouhan said at the review meeting, according to a statement issued by the government.

The Union Minister went on to add that the government, under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, had designed a six-point strategy for farmer welfare and development in the agriculture sector, which includ-



Shivraj Singh Chouhan during a video conference on reforms in the agriculture sector, at his residence in New Delhi on Saturday. ANI

ed measures to increase production, reduce costs, raise incomes, pay attention to legalisation of crops, and promote natural farming, among others.

Continuous progress

Highlighting a host of schemes run by the Ministry, such as the PM Kisan Samman Nidhi, PM Crop Insurance Scheme, Minimum Support Price scheme, and Agri Infra Fund, and the progress made under them, Mr. Chouhan said, “There is

continuous progress in the agriculture sector and we are all constantly making efforts for it.”

He added that the meeting was primarily called to get inputs on suggestions for the upcoming Budget. He said, “For this, we have also talked to farmers and stakeholders. The Agriculture Ministers will be able to explain the problems of farmers in a better way. If there is any suggestion or amendment required in relation to the Budget and the ongoing schemes, then

give necessary suggestions in this regard.”

The Agriculture Minister further said that the Centre had now decided to assess crop losses through satellites i.e. remote sensing, as opposed to manual assessments, which he said will ensure “correct and accurate” assessments of crop losses under the crop insurance scheme.

Assuring that the Centre will put in its share immediately, Mr. Chouhan urged the States to do the same, adding, “If any insurance company delays in giving the claim, then it will have to pay 12% interest on the amount.”

He also said that in the case of tomato, onion, and potato crops, to bridge the price difference between the producer and consumer States during the peak time of harvesting, the government has decided to bear the cost of transportation and storage for the work done by the Central nodal agencies.



Ministry proposes cruise terminal and high-end tourism infra on Great Nicobar

Shipping Ministry also seeks 100 acres of land with seafront for shipbuilding, repair facilities, exim port; six-month-long running correspondence has no mention of security and strategic concerns earlier cited by Environment Ministry to deny RTI requests on further details of Great Nicobar project

Pankaj Sekhsaria

The Union Shipping Ministry is making ambitious plans for high-end tourism along with a shipbuilding and repair yard on Great Nicobar Island, according to a series of letters written to the Andaman and Nicobar administration and the Union Home Ministry over the last eight months.

The current ₹72,000-crore project already includes an international container transshipment port proposed at Galathea Bay, an airport, a power plant, and a massive greenfield township and tourism project to be spread over 130 sq. km of land that is now pristine tropical forest. The project is being implemented by the Port Blair-based Andaman and Nicobar Islands Integrated Development Corporation Ltd (ANIIDCO). The Stage I forest clearance for diversion of 130 sq. km of forest land was granted in October 2022 and followed in November 2022 by environmental and coastal regulation zone (CRZ) clearances.

In April 2024, Rajeev

Kumar, an Under Secretary in the Shipping Ministry, wrote to the Chief Secretary of the A&N administration, asking for 100 acres of land with a 500-metre seafront for ship repair and shipbuilding facilities in Campbell Bay, the administrative headquarters of Great Nicobar Island. In May, he wrote to the A&N Shipping Secretary, to enable Campbell Bay to be declared an exim port to import construction material from neighbouring countries for the transshipment terminal at Galathea Bay.

More recently, on September 18, Shipping Secretary T.K. Ramachandran wrote to the Home Secretary, noting that the vision was "to transform Great Nicobar island into a 'Global Port-Led City' with a strategic focus on establishing a 'sustainable and High-End Eco-tourism Destination'." He advocated for an international and domestic cruise terminal "to accommodate high-end and domestic tourists".

The responses, from the A&N Chief Secretary on October 23 and from an ANIIDCO general manager



Experts say that the project will open up Great Nicobar Island to foreign vessels and national and international tourists. GETTY IMAGES

the next day, indicate their reluctance to commit to these proposals. Their letters ask the Shipping Ministry to engage a specialised consultant on its own to explore the techno-economic feasibility of the cruise terminal and to discuss the exim port proposal with the Ministry concerned.

They also argue that ship repair will not be compatible with the purpose of the greenfield township and "could undermine the envisioned water front activities, particularly the tourism infrastructure envisaged for Great Nicobar Island". In an earlier response in July, ANIIDCO had also noted that the coas-

tlane comes under a coastal regulation zone (CRZ 1a) as it has coral reefs along almost the entire east coast and that this would be a constraint for ship repair activity.

Requests denied

Concerns have already been raised about the impact of the existing project but multiple requests for more details have been denied under Section 8(1)(a) of the RTI Act that invokes issues of sovereignty, integrity, security, and the strategic concerns of the country. In November 2022, Mumbai-based researcher Prasad Kale had filed an RTI application asking the

Environment Ministry for information related to the clearances granted to the project.

The Ministry refused, invoking Section 8(1)(a) and also relying on a Ministry of Home Affairs order stating that the proposed airport was a dual-use military-civil facility which will come under the operational control of the Indian Navy. This argument was upheld by the Central Information Commissioner in its June 2024 order.

"It is strange that information about these projects is being denied on grounds of sovereignty and integrity of India, and security and strategic interests," says Debi Goenka of the Conservation Action Trust, which has challenged the project before the National Green Tribunal. "At the most, information about the airport could have been excluded but there is no rationale for refusing to divulge information about the other three."

Given the Home Ministry's stance and the consistent denial of information on the grounds that the project required secrecy

because of its strategic location and security concerns, the Shipping Ministry's recent proposals stand out. There is no mention anywhere in the Ministry's six-month-long running correspondence about these strategic concerns that have been used to deny information about the environment and other risks. It also does not account for the fact that many of these activities – such as ship breaking, a cruise terminal and high-end international tourism – are themselves contrary to this strategic purpose. Emails sent to officials in the Shipping Ministry and ANIIDCO seeking their clarification in the matter did not receive any response.

These projects, Mr. Goenka notes, will open up Great Nicobar Island to foreign vessels and national and international tourists. "The policy followed since Independence of keeping Great Nicobar Island isolated from foreigners will be overturned," he warns.

(Pankaj Sekhsaria is an author and editor whose most recent work is *The Great Nicobar Betrayal*)

