

DIA, DEOGHAR IAS ACADEMY

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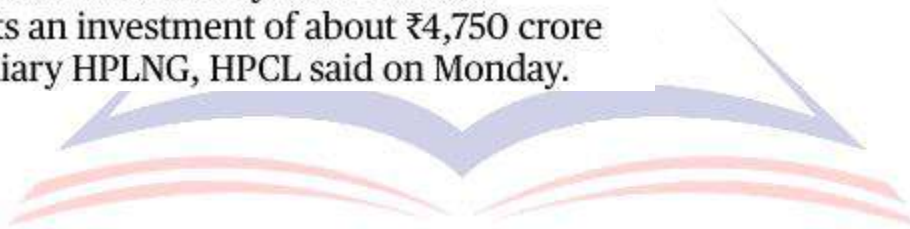


INBRIEF



HPCL commissions ₹4,750-cr. LNG regasification terminal

Hindustan Petroleum Corporation Ltd. (HPCL) has commissioned a 5-million tonne liquefied natural gas (LNG) regasification terminal in Chhara, Gujarat. LNG carrier Maran Gas Coronis berthed at the terminal on January 6 and discharged the commissioning cargo into the onshore tanks on January 12. The auxiliary units will be operational shortly. The terminal represents an investment of about ₹4,750 crore by subsidiary HPLNG, HPCL said on Monday.





In vain: Efforts underway to rescue the labourers trapped inside an illegal rat-hole coal mine, in Dima Hasao district, Assam, on January 9, 2025. PTI

Rat-hole mining: why the practice continues in spite of its hazards

Labourers mainly from Assam, Nepal, and adjoining Bangladesh risk the hazards of rat-hole mining – asphyxiation because of poor ventilation, collapse of mines due to lack of structural support, and flooding – to earn thrice or four times as much as working in farms or construction sites

Rahul Karmakar

On January 6, 2025, nine workers were trapped in a flooded coal mine in Assam's Dima Hasao district. Bodies of four of the workers have been recovered, and rescue work is still ongoing. In this article, dated November 29, 2023, Rahul Karmakar explains the dangers of rat-hole mining.

The story so far:

An oral question from the Supreme Court to the Union government continues to remain unanswered even as rescue workers recover bodies of workers who died trapped in a flood rat-hole coal mine at Dima Hasao district in Assam. On January 11, 2019, the top court had asked whether rat-hole mines could possibly operate in the northeast hills without the “connivance” of officials. “Lives are lost due to illegal mining. What about the officials who allowed this to happen?” the court had asked the government.

What is rat-hole mining?

Rat-hole mining, of two types, is so named as it involves digging tunnels 3-4 feet deep, barely allowing workers to crawl in and out. They have to squat while extracting coal with pickaxes. The side-cutting type of mining is usually done on hill slopes by following a coal seam – dark brown or black banded coal deposited within layers of rock – visible from the outside. The second type called box-cutting entails digging a circular or

squarish pit at least 5 sq. metre in width up to a depth of 400 feet. Miners who drop down in makeshift cranes or using rope-and-bamboo ladders dig horizontally after finding the coal seam. The tunnels are dug in every direction from the edge of the pit, resembling the tentacles of an octopus. Some workers from Assam lost their lives in the coal mines of Meghalaya, dug using this crude method, before and after the National Green Tribunal (NGT) banned it in April 2014.

Why is such mining banned?

The government has little control over the land in Meghalaya, a Sixth Schedule State where the Coal Mines Nationalisation Act of 1973 does not apply. The landowners are thus also the owners of the minerals beneath. Coal mining boomed after Meghalaya attained statehood in January 1972. However, the terrain and expenses involved discouraged mine owners from employing advanced drilling machines. So, labourers mainly from Assam, Nepal, and adjoining Bangladesh risked the hazards of rat-hole mining – asphyxiation because of poor ventilation, collapse of mines due to lack of structural support, and flooding – to earn thrice or four times as much as working in farms or construction sites. Apart from issues of safety and health, unregulated mining led to land degradation, deforestation, and water with high concentrations of sulphates, iron, and toxic heavy metals,

low dissolved oxygen, and high biochemical oxygen demand. At least two rivers, Lukha and Myntdu, became too acidic to sustain aquatic life. These factors led to the NGT banning rat-hole mining in Meghalaya in 2014 while observing: “...there is umpteen number of cases where, by virtue of rat-hole mining, during the rainy season, water flooded into the mining areas resulting in the death of many...” Illegal mining and transportation of coal, as mentioned in the interim reports of a one-man committee appointed by the High Court of Meghalaya, has continued despite the ban and the loss of lives. At least 17 miners were drowned in an illegal mine in the East Jaintia Hills district's Ksan in December 2018 after water gushed in from a river.

What led to the NGT ban?

Environmentalists and human rights activists began flagging the hazards of rat-hole mining in Meghalaya two decades ago. The campaign intensified after Impulse, a Meghalaya-based NGO, began addressing the issue of human trafficking and child labour in such mines.

Three reports prepared by the NGO, first with the Nepal-based Esther Benjamin Trust in May 2010, the second with Aide et Action in December 2010, and the last with Human Rights Now in July 2011, estimated that about 70,000 children mostly from Bangladesh and Nepal were employed in these mines

because they were the right size to work in them. The State's Department of Mining and Geology refuted the claim but, under pressure from the National Human Rights Commission, admitted in June 2013 that 222 children were employed in rat-hole mines, specifically in the East Jaintia Hills district. The NGT ban came a year later.

What is the way forward?

Unlike in Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand, coal seams in Meghalaya are very thin. This, miners say, makes rat-hole mining more economically viable than opencast mining.

The State has an estimated reserve of 576.48 million tonnes of low-ash, high-sulphur coal belonging to the Eocene age (33-56 million years ago). The stakes for a section of locals have been so high that the State government has been under pressure to facilitate the resumption of mining legally.

In May 2023, Meghalaya Chief Minister Conrad K. Sangma said the Coal Ministry approved mining leases for four of the 17 prospective licence applicants. This would lead to the commencement of ‘scientific’ mining ensuring minimal environmental impact through sustainable and legally compliant extraction procedures. Anti-mining activists, who are assailed by miners off and on, said that ‘scientific’ would eventually be a fancy tag in a State where profit has driven coal mining.

The way forward for PM-KISAN

The scheme, which started off strong, has been providing assistance to fluctuating numbers of farmers over the past six years

DATA POINT

T. Ramakrishnan

The Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi (PM-KISAN), which provides yearly income support of ₹6,000 to eligible farmer families in three instalments, has been through highs and lows both in terms of coverage and payout. It became operational from December 2018.

Originally intended for small and marginal farmers, the scheme, which was launched in February 2019, was later extended to all farmers who owned land when the National Democratic Alliance retained power in May 2019. The government made it clear in Parliament that there was no proposal to expand the scheme further to bring in tenant farmers under the fold. At the time of expansion in 2019, the scheme was expected to cost ₹87,217.5 crore to the public exchequer for 2019-20 with the total number of beneficiaries being around 14.5 crore. However, in the last six years, neither did the amount disbursed exceed ₹70,000 crore during any year, nor did the number of beneficiaries touch the 14.5-crore mark.

As Table 1 shows, allocation for the scheme in the beginning of 2019-20 and 2020-21 was ₹75,000 crore each. But in both years, the expenditure on account of disbursement ranged from around ₹49,000 crore to ₹61,000 crore. The year-on-year growth rate for 2020-21 was close to 25% while it moderated to around 10% next year. However, it was in that year (2021-22) that the absolute figure of payout was the highest (around ₹67,150 crore). With the authorities tightening coverage of the scheme, the annual aggregate amount disbursed began going down and saw a 13% dip in 2022-23. Last year, the amount was ₹62,000 crore.

Table 2 gives an account of the varying number of beneficiaries at the time of payment of instalment

at a given time. Since the scheme was inaugurated, the government has made payments 18 times. The last payment was made in October 2024. The number of beneficiaries started rising in the second year of implementation and this trend continued until the fourth year. Since then, governments, both at the Centre and in States, have been weeding out ineligible persons. At the same time, they have been taking steps to "saturate the scheme with all eligible farmers."

A "major saturation drive" commenced on November 15, 2023 to include more than 1 crore farmers. Another round was carried out from June 2024 and more than 25 lakh farmers were made beneficiaries. At the all-India level, the total number of beneficiaries, at the time of the release of the 18th payout, was approximately 9.59 crore. Of them, farmers from Scheduled Castes (SCs) accounted for 12% and those from Scheduled Tribes (STs) accounted for 9%. While women constituted a little more than 20% of SCs and others, their share among STs was around 29%. In December last year, the government informed the Lok Sabha that it did not maintain any separate data for Other Backward Classes, who were included in the category of "others."

A perusal of the data, as given in Table 3, on the year-wise distribution of funds in 10 States reveals that all of them have experienced ups and downs. For instance, Tamil Nadu, an important rice-producing State, had 44.6 lakh beneficiaries in 2020-21; now it has 21.9 lakh. The amount disbursed rose only to go down – from around ₹2,594 crore during 2020-21 to ₹1,439 crore during 2023-24. In Manipur, the number of beneficiaries decreased by about 70% between 2022-23 and 2023-24.

Farmers have been demanding a hike in the annual payout. While considering this, the government should incentivise those who efficiently use water, electricity, and other inputs during production.

PM-KISAN: Highs and lows

The data for the charts were sourced from Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha replies and Budget documents



Table 1: The table shows the allocation for the scheme and the amount transferred since 2018-19

Year	Allocation	In ₹ crore	
		Revised Estimate	Amount transferred
2018-19	0	20,000	6,005.5
2019-20	75,000	54,370.15	49,196.4
2020-21	75,000	65,000	60,989.9
2021-22	65,000	67,500	67,147.4
2022-23	68,000	60,000	58,253.8
2023-24	60,000	60,000	61,895.5
2024-25*	60,000	N.A.	41,687.3*

*After the 18th instalment (Aug-Nov 2024)

Table 2: The table shows the number of beneficiaries at the time of select instalments of payment

Instalment	Number of beneficiaries
1st (Dec 2018-Mar 2019)	3,16,19,876
5th (April 2020 - July 2020)	9,26,93,619
9th (Aug 2021 - Nov 2021)	10,34,41,242
13th (Dec 2022 - Mar 2023)	8,12,34,383
16th (Dec 2023 - Mar 2024)	9,04,27,479
18th (Aug 2024 - Nov 2024)	9,58,97,635

Table 3: The table shows the year-wise distribution of funds in 10 States from different regions of the country. Since the scheme came into effect in December 2018, the table shows numbers from 2019 as it was the first full inaugural year

State	Amount disbursed in ₹ crore			
	2019-20		2023-24	
	Number of beneficiaries	Amount disbursed	Number of beneficiaries	Amount disbursed
Andhra Pradesh	49,90,936	2,710.5	44,88,790	2,813.79
Assam	12,29,262	1,396.4	16,54,726	1,358.68
Bihar	62,03,177	2,921.7	80,59,752	4,891.74
Karnataka	50,68,281	2,789.8	51,66,182	2,963.36
Maharashtra	91,29,512	4,898.9	96,94,408	5,888.33
Manipur	2,74,496	86.7	1,06,768	74.63
Punjab	23,10,245	1,262.7	10,26,631	582.67
Rajasthan	55,76,237	3,382.8	70,19,074	4,103.84
Tamil Nadu	36,84,641	2,130.9	23,21,564	1,438.76
Uttar Pradesh	1,98,83,400	11,006.6	2,26,33,008	13,808.24



Resisting transparency, eroding public trust

Last year, presiding officer Anil Masih was caught on CCTV camera manipulating votes in the Chandigarh mayor elections to help the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) secure victory. The incident underlined the importance of infusing transparency in the electoral process to detect and prevent election fraud. It is ironic then that even before the year ended, the Central government brought an amendment to Rule 93(2) of the Conduct of Election Rules, 1961, to restrict public access to election-related records.

The amendment came days after the Punjab and Haryana High Court directed the Election Commission of India (ECI) to provide information under Rule 93(2) of the Conduct of Election Rules. Copies of Form 17C and CCTV footage of the Assembly elections in Haryana were among the records sought by the petitioner.

Rule 93 of the Conduct of Election Rules provides a framework for people to obtain information related to elections. Rule 93(2) originally stated that other than the records specifically exempt under Rule 93(1), all papers relating to elections shall be available for people to inspect and take copies of. The amendment to Rule 93(2) narrows the scope of people's right to information by adding a qualification that only "papers as specified in these rules relating to the election shall be open to public inspection". Records related to the electoral process, including Form 17C, video recordings and CCTV footage, will potentially get caught in the cross hairs of the new amendment.

Delays that led to doubts

The role of the ECI in the matter is particularly disconcerting. One of the safeguards in the Representation of the People Act, 1951, to prevent the ruling party from arbitrarily misusing its power to frame rules is that the rules can be made only "after consulting the



Anjali Bhardwaj

Transparency activist associated with the Satark Nagrik Sangathan and the National Campaign for Peoples' Right to Information



Amrita Johri

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The amendment to Rule 93(2) of the Conduct of Election Rules, 1961, to restrict public access to election-related records, has no place in a democracy

Election Commission". It is baffling why the institution vested with the responsibility of ensuring free and fair elections is opposed to transparency, especially at a time when serious questions have been raised about the sanctity of the electoral process.

In the general elections of 2024, the ECI did not put out voter turnout figures in absolute numbers after the completion of voting in the initial phases. This, coupled with an unusually high revision of 6% in voter turnout in some phases of the election, without any explanation, prompted a public demand for disclosure of Form 17C. Part I of this Form is filled by the Presiding Officer of each polling station at the close of voting and is submitted to the Returning Officer of the constituency. It contains information on the voter turnout and the number of votes recorded in the Electronic Voting Machine (EVM). Part II is filled on the day of counting by noting the votes secured by each candidate as recorded in the EVMs. The documents reveal whether or not voter turnout tallies with the votes polled and counted.

Several political parties also sought copies of Form 17C after the general elections, claiming an abnormally large increase in voter turnout between the figures declared by the ECI at the close of polls on the day of voting and the final turnout declared a few days later. For instance, an ally of the BJP, the Biju Janata Dal (BJD), claimed a massive increase between the two figures in some constituencies in Odisha, raising doubts about the integrity of the election process. In the Assembly elections held in Haryana and Maharashtra, similar concerns were raised and applications were again filed seeking copies of Form 17C and other election records.

Refusal to disclose information

Unfortunately, all these requests were stonewalled by the ECI. In a petition to the ECI, the BJD complained that even its

candidates were denied copies of Form 17C, despite making requests under the Representation of the People Act and the Right to Information Act, 2005.

Further, when the matter of proactive disclosure of Form 17C was agitated in the Supreme Court, the ECI opposed it on the specious grounds that there is no legal mandate to share Form 17C with anyone other than the candidates and political parties through their designated polling agents. In fact, it claimed that there is a "one-to-one relationship between each Form 17C and its possessor" and its unrestricted disclosure is amendable to mischief as people may morph the images. Further, it argued that there is no technical facility to scan the documents.

The ECI's reluctance to share copies of Form 17C is inexplicable. Copies of Part I of Form 17C are given to polling agents who are present at the booth and there is no prohibition on their further dissemination. In Digital India, the claim that Returning Officers don't have the technical facility to scan and upload a couple of thousand pages is scarcely credible.

On December 26, 2024, more than six months after the general elections, the ECI released a set of 42 statistical reports terming it a "Treasure Trove for stakeholders including academicians, researchers, election watchers worldwide". This too had no data from Form 17C, which would conclusively resolve the vexed issue of difference between votes polled and counted.

Transparency is key to ensure public trust and participation in the electoral process. In 2024, the Supreme Court struck down the electoral bonds scheme as being violative of a voter's fundamental right to information. A challenge to the new amendment has already reached the apex court. Rather than wait for the verdict of the judiciary, the ECI and the BJP would do well to realise that this amendment has no place in a democracy and withdraw it.

Indians abroad

Absence of opportunities remains the main driver of migration

At the inauguration of the 18th edition of the Pravasi Bharatiya Divas (PBD) last week, Prime Minister Narendra Modi described the Indian diaspora as India's "ambassadors to the world", having "seamlessly assimilated" into the local society, served the community, and contributed to India's growth and prosperity. The strength of the India-origin community worldwide of over 35 million – about 15.85 million NRIs and 19.57 million PIOs, who are foreign nationals – is their ability to adapt and thrive in different fields, including in politics, where Indian-origin people have become leaders of more than 30 other countries. Where they retain their Indian passports, the diaspora is known for its distinguished services in many professional spheres. The PBD's purpose is to celebrate this success and discuss issues of importance; President Droupadi Murmu handed out about 27 Pravasi Bharatiya Samman awards. The event, which was first held in 2003, is organised around January 9, when Mahatma Gandhi returned to India from South Africa in 1915. The latest event, held in Bhubaneswar, Odisha, brought more than 3,000 delegates from across 70 countries, with much of the focus on how the diaspora can help in developing India (Viksit Bharat programme).

The achievements of the Indian diaspora are, no doubt, a matter of pride for all Indians, but it is important that the event is not limited to a simple self-congratulatory or laudatory exercise. The issues for the diaspora, particularly for those who are still Indian nationals, are more acute now. The increase in far-right populist governments, particularly in the West, is making visa and entry conditions for Indians more difficult, and it is important for the government to address such issues. Intractable global conflicts, especially in West Asia where more than nine million Indians live and work, are also putting lakhs of Indians in peril, and the PBD engagement would benefit from discussions between the community on how best to increase awareness and enhance safeguards for them. Given the broad spread of the diaspora, it is necessary to ensure that India's ties with its diaspora be inclusive, and non-partisan on political issues. Recent actions by the government to deny or revoke OCI cards for those perceived to be critical of the government bely this necessity. Above all, it is important to acknowledge that one of the biggest drivers of Indians migrating is the lack of economic opportunities within India. While there are no easy fixes for this, the loss to India of some of its most talented people must be counted, even as the country celebrates their incredible success and impact on the global stage.



The Trump card, global politics and outcomes for India

Who is Donald Trump? Dissecting the psychology of the next U.S. President is a popular pastime. His bold, disinhibited speaking style, his outspokenness, his focus on deal-making, his real estate background that defines his coercive leadership and politics, cast him very differently from his predecessors. He is a polarising figure, wading constantly into controversy, stubbornly resilient, a master of populist rhetoric, presenting himself as the voice of the “common people” arraigned against an out-of-touch political establishment.

It's 'America first'

What is Mr. Trump's approach to the “rules-based international order”? We know from his first Presidency, that he expounds an “America First” doctrine. He debunks multilateralism in global politics, and he trashes international agreements that he believes do not favour the United States. He prefers bilateral agreements over multilateral ones: witness his approach to the Paris Climate Agreement (from which he withdrew and is likely to withdraw again) and to trade agreements such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership. He is dismissive of international institutions like the United Nations and regional bodies such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, saying that these disproportionately benefit other nations at the expense of the U.S. To the delight of his acolytes, he places American sovereignty over global governance.

In the Trumpian worldview, strategy revolves around the bully pulpit, strong personal branding, a willingness to take risks, unconventional deal-making, winner-take-all in place of win-win. Practical outcomes rather than theoretical constructs are emphasised.

Donald Trump's transactionalism is legend. His MAGA (“Make America Great Again”) policy will have implications influencing global geopolitics. This will entail a rise of protectionism in global trade (free trade is an anachronism in this scheme of things), escalating tariffs and trade wars and increased economic uncertainty. Intensified competition with China where Beijing is clearly framed as an economic and ideological adversary will affect global stability, particularly in the Indo-Pacific.

Mr. Trump's scepticism about global institutions will inspire adventurism in global politics and nationalisms that override international law. Polarisation in global politics will be increasingly in evidence, and debates on



Nirupama Rao

a former Foreign Secretary and Ambassador of India

free trade, immigration and globalisation will become increasingly fractious. Climate policy and action will be downgraded. Instability in global markets will affect nations, whether developed or developing, across the board. The world is in for “interesting” and tumultuous times.

American isolationism under MAGA (since Mr. Trump has clearly signalled opposition to U.S. direct involvement in external conflict), can encourage powers such as China and Russia already united in their opposition to the U.S.'s power and influence, to expand their global footprint, using both economic and military means. MAGA could be synonymous with disruption beyond American shores and power realignments.

Ties with India, the line for New Delhi

The strategic outlook for India-U.S. relations under a second Trump Presidency is mixed. Relations between the two countries have witnessed a steady evolution and multi-faceted growth over the last two decades across partisan divides. That trend is expected to continue especially since Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Mr. Trump have a warm friendship. India has stressed constructive engagement with the U.S. as a key strategic partner. India's growing geopolitical clout and a mutual interest with the U.S. in countering China (particularly because of the over-assertive Chinese military posture and transgressions across the Line of Actual Control) provide a strong impetus for a growing strategic partnership. India-U.S. defence cooperation will continue to strengthen together with partnerships in critical technologies (provided the new administration does not use export controls as pressure points) and business. Trade frictions could, however, be a complicating factor.

The countering of Chinese influence in the region by the incoming U.S. administration suggests that groupings such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (the Quad or the U.S., Australia, India, and Japan), where India is an important constituent, will be strengthened. The maintenance of the balance of power in the Indo-Pacific requires the continued involvement of the U.S., even though India is cautious about an over-reliance on America and seeks to ensure its very own strategic autonomy. India's Indo-Pacific vision stresses regional cooperation, multilateralism and multipolarity.

India would do well to continue to emphasise its own strategic priorities, as shaped by history,

geopolitics, national security, its economic interests and civilisational identity. Its border security, a strong defence posture, military modernisation, intensified counterterrorism efforts through strengthened intelligence, anti-radicalisation, and a continued focus on fighting cross-border terrorism, remain of central concern.

The compulsion of economic growth is central to its strategic outlook. India's energy security, diversification of energy sources, building renewable energy and the maintenance of stable relationships with key energy suppliers are vital. Peace and stability in South Asia are important, as also vigilance about containing and neutralising destabilising influences in the region, particularly from China and Pakistan. Security of the Indo-Pacific as a key maritime and economic passageway is a strategic priority. India's partnerships with Japan, Australia, with the European Union and with The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries, apart from the U.S. are essential to the balancing of China's rise, to ensure India's access to key technologies, to defence preparedness, and for its trade and economic development.

Key for its strategic future are its digital transformation, space exploration, artificial intelligence, cybersecurity for its digital infrastructure and building resilience against cyber threats from hostile nations and non-state actors. India's priorities should incorporate a deployment of soft power in an emphasis on democratic and constitutional values, pluralism, humanitarian engagement and diaspora outreach. The relationship with Russia must continue to be in focus because of the complex and diversified nature of India's strategic partnership with that country, and because of the counterweight it provides to the growing Sino-Russian alignment in Eurasia and the Indo-Pacific.

On Trump again

The reality of the second Trump Presidency, and Mr. Trump's victory in the elections, indicate that established patterns of history and geopolitics that served as guides to the future may no longer apply as the positioning system for a global order that will instead be disruptive, polarised and unstable. Global politics, all said, may never be the same. As the American analyst, Ian Bremmer, recently noted, a G-Zero world has arrived, and the law of the jungle may provide the new global playbook.

The world is in for ‘interesting’ and tumultuous times with the Trumpian worldview to take effect soon





Anti-tank guided missile Nag Mk-2 tested successfully

The Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) on Monday announced that the indigenously developed third-generation fire-and-forget anti-tank guided missile, Nag Mk-2, and the entire system was ready for induction into the Army following successful field firing trials. Field evaluation trials of Nag Mk-2 were successfully conducted recently at the Pokhran Field Range in the presence of senior officers of the Army, the DRDO said in a statement. “During the three field trials, the missile systems destroyed precisely all the targets - maximum and minimum range, thus validating its firing range,” it said.



A 'degree' of stand-off prevails along the LAC, says Army chief

Gen. Dwivedi terms situation 'sensitive but stable', says Army's deployment is 'balanced and robust'; on disengagement, he says 2 rounds of verification patrolling completed; on 1971 painting row, adds new one is reaching out to newer generations

Dinakar Peri
NEW DELHI

Stating that a "degree" of stand-off prevails along the Line of Actual Control (LAC), Army chief General Upendra Dwivedi said on Monday that he had authorised all Corps Commanders to handle issues at the ground level with respect to patrolling and grazing so that these trivial issues can be resolved at the military-level itself. He termed the situation along the LAC "sensitive but stable", and said the Army's deployment along was "balanced and robust".

"All the Corps Commanders have been empowered to go through the patrolling and grazing issues and wherever you can harmonise relations between the two sides, you should be able to do. When Special Representative talks took place a press release was given. So we are also looking at Kailash Mansarovar *yatra* to resume, some trade points to be resumed. So similarly, we are also looking at, if we can have



Straight talk: Army chief General Upendra Dwivedi addressing the annual press conference in New Delhi on Monday **R.V. MOORTHY**

some kind of understanding please go ahead. That kind of delegation has been given to Division Commanders and Corps Commanders. They will come back to us... as far as we are concerned, from my side it is approved," General Dwivedi said in response to a question on whether an understanding had been reached with China not to block their patrols in the Yangtse area in Arunachal Pradesh.

He was addressing the annual press conference ahead of the Army Day on Wednesday.

On the recent disengagement from Depsang and Demchok in eastern Ladakh, he said two rounds of verification patrolling had been completed by both sides.

"There is nothing called as buffer zone," he said, terming them "temporary moratorium". "Where you feel that the nature or the degree of violence can be high and the fuse is short, you create some distances," he said.

"So when we carried out these negotiations over a period of time, some places were declared as a temporary moratorium. It means that both sides will remain back and will not go to the common areas because we still feel that if we meet at those places the violence level may go high."

After April 2020, the trust between the two countries has to have a new definition, he remarked and therefore, there is a requirement for

us to sit together and come to a broader understanding of how we want to calm down the situation and restore the trust.

On the situation along the Line of Control with Pakistan, the ceasefire understanding reached in February 2022 is holding on, but the terror infrastructure across remains intact and infiltrations attempts continue. "The violence level is being orchestrated by the epicentre of terrorism that is Pakistan... If the support is not forthcoming the way India is looking at it, this kind of terrorist infiltration will continue to be there," he said.

They have inducted 15,000 additional troops in 2024 and that is why the violence level has gone down and they have been able to neutralise 73 terrorists out of which 60% were from Pakistan. "The parliamentary elections and the State Assembly elections both had nearly 60% voting... All indicators show that people of J&K are shunning violence and it is being fully orchestrated by our adversary."

On the Siliguri corridor, also referred to as the Chicken's neck, and the Chinese infrastructure

near Doklam, the Army chief said that is the strongest point. "As far as Chicken's neck is concerned, I would like to put it in a different perspective. That is our strongest point, because all the forces which are there in West Bengal, in Sikkim, all the forces which are there in North-east, from all the three sides our forces can congregate there," he said.

To a question on the shortcomings in the performance of women officers as Commanding Officers as revealed by a recent letter by a Corps Commander to the Eastern Army Commander, Gen. Dwivedi firstly noted that the letter should not have been leaked and an inquiry has been ordered. Women officers are doing "exceedingly well" and one kind of example cannot be taken as a yardstick. "Wherever I have seen, women officers have been very mature, considerate, kind... and up and above," he said.

To a query on the row over the 1971 painting, he described the new one as depicting India's civilisation connect and modern technology as also reaching out to the newer generations.



Prime Minister inaugurates Z-Morh tunnel in J&K; remains silent on Statehood

Peerzada Ashiq
SONAMARG (GANDERBAL)

Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who inaugurated the strategic Z-Morh tunnel in Sonamarg area of Ganderbal on Monday, remained non-committal on the timeline of restoration of Statehood to Jammu and Kashmir. But he said the new network of roads and railway lines in the Union Territory has bridged the distance between J&K and New Delhi.

Amid freezing conditions, Mr. Modi inaugurated the state-of-the-art 6.5-kilometre tunnel built at a cost of ₹2,700 crore. The tunnel has made tourist hotspot Sonamarg a round-the-year destination. Mr. Modi said the Z-Morh tunnel and the upcoming Zojila tunnel, connecting Kashmir with Ladakh, will ease the lives of the people in Kargil and Leh.

Referring to the militant attack of October 20, 2024 that left seven workers dead at the construction site, Mr. Modi said, "I salute the dedication of workers who braved harsh weather conditions and even risked their lives to complete this project."

Describing J&K as a destination with the "distinction of having the highest rail and road bridges and rope ways", Mr. Modi said, "The engineering of the Chenab bridge has amazed people across the world. Passenger train trials were completed last week on the bridge. The projects of the Chenani-Nashri tunnel, the Udhampur-Srinagar-Baramulla railway link and the rope ways at the Shankara-



Grand launch: Prime Minister Narendra Modi during the inauguration of a key tunnel in J&K on Monday. IMRAN NISSAR

charya temple, Shiv Khori temple and Baltal-Amar-nath shrine are underway. In all ₹42,000-crore of connectivity projects are being executed in J&K, which include the Katra-Delhi expressway, four national highway projects, two ring roads and 14 Sonamarg-like tunnels. J&K will be the most connected region. Tourists can now reach untouched destinations."

PM's promises

Referring to the upgraded connectivity, the Prime Minister said Viksit Bharat was only possible when all the regions of the country were well developed.

"J&K is the crown of the country and has to be beautiful and strong. I assure you Modi will walk the talk. Any hurdle in your dreams will be removed. 'Dilli ki doori' is already over now. We have to work together to fulfil dreams and have to take pledges together," the Prime Minister added.

Earlier, Mr. Abdullah, in his speech, made a case for

fulfilling the promise of restoration of Statehood. "On his previous visit to Kashmir on International Yoga Day, Prime Minister talked about three promises, which included eliminating the 'Dil ki doori aur Dilli ki doori' [Distance of hearts and distance between Delhi-Srinagar]. People have started trusting you. You [PM Modi] have already fulfilled the promise of holding Assembly elections [in J&K], where no rigging or misuse of official machinery was reported. However, the third promise of Statehood is yet to be fulfilled," Mr. Abdullah said.

In response to Chief Minister Omar Abdullah's speech, where he referred to the Statehood demand, Mr. Modi remained silent on divulging any timeline. "When Modi makes a promise, he fulfils it. Every time has its right time. Right things will take place at the right time," he said.

NC MOBILISES PEOPLE
» PAGE 4

Inflation falls to 4-month low in December

Food inflation eases marginally to 8.4% from 9.04% in November, but some critical items report sharper price rise; inflation of edible oils and fats hit a 33-month high; latest figures put Consumer Price Inflation averaging at 5.63 in the third quarter of 2024-25, just a tad under RBI's projection of 5.7%

Vikas Dhoot
NEW DELHI

India's retail inflation eased a bit to a four-month low of 5.22% in December from 5.5% in November, with food inflation cooling marginally from 9.04% in November to 8.4% last month, the National Statistics Office said on Monday.

Overall consumer prices were 4.6% higher in December for urban residents compared with 4.9% in November, while rural consumers faced a steeper price rise of 5.8%, just marginally below the 5.95% recorded in November.

With December's inflation print, India's Consumer Price Inflation has averaged 5.63% in the third quarter of 2024-25, just a tad under the Reserve Bank of India projection of 5.7%.

While the RBI expects inflation to cool to 4.5% in this quarter, the latest up-

tick gives it little room to initiate interest rate cuts in its early February monetary policy review, even as the slowdown in growth has spurred sharp calls from government and industry to fast-track reductions.

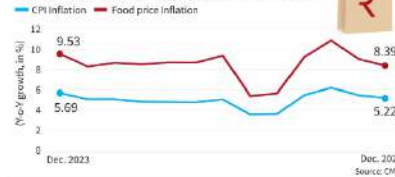
Faster upticks

While food inflation had also cooled to a four-month low, marking the second month of deceleration from October's 15-month high of 10.9%, some critical food items reported faster upticks in prices, including edible oils and fats whose prices rose at a 33-month high pace at 14.6%, up from November's 13.3% rise.

Vegetables inflation moderated mildly from 29.3% in November to 26.6%, but some items like peas and potatoes saw prices shoot up sharply, while fruit prices accelerated again by 8.5% after easing to a 7.7% pace in No-

Subtle relief

Consumer price rise eased to a 4-month low of 5.22% in December 2024, on a marginal dip in food inflation



ember. Cereals inflation stood at 6.5% in December, from 6.9% in the previous month.

Pulses prices rose 3.8%, relative to 5.4% in November, marking the slowest inflation in over two years.

However, other protein sources such as eggs (6.85%) and meat and fish (5.3%) reported higher inflation in December, while milk price rise was virtually unchanged at 2.8%.

"The top five items showing highest year on year Inflation at All India

level in December 2024 are Peas (89.12%), Potato (68.23%), Garlic (58.17%), coconut oil (45.41%) and Cauliflower (39.42%)," the NSO pointed out.

Among non-food items, personal care and effects' inflation eased a tad to 9.7% from 10.4% in November, while education inflation was unchanged at 3.9%. Health inflation inched up fractionally to 4.05% in December.

Seven of the 22 States (including the erstwhile State of Jammu and Kash-

mir), for which the NSO calculates monthly inflation rates, recorded a price rise of over 6% or beyond the central bank's upper threshold for inflation targeting.

In November, just six States were over this mark. In all, 10 States reported inflation higher than the national average.

Highest in Chhattisgarh

The highest inflation was reported in Chhattisgarh for the second straight month, of 7.63%, followed again by Bihar (7.4%) and Odisha (7%). Kerala's inflation quickened to 6.36% from 6.3% in November, while it eased marginally for Uttar Pradesh to 6.3% from 6.6% in the preceding month.

Delhi recorded the lowest inflation yet again at just 2.5%, compared with 2.65% in November, while other States that witnessed the lowest price rise included Telangana (3.14%),

Maharashtra (4.2%), Andhra Pradesh (4.3%), Rajasthan (4.44%), Jharkhand (4.5%), and West Bengal (4.8%).

Major hurdle

"Elevated food inflation for rate cuts as it keeps the headline inflation high and household inflation expectations elevated," Crisil's principal economist, Dipti Deshpande, said, adding that non-food inflation, including fuel, is also likely to rise in this quarter.

On a month-on-month basis, the Consumer Price Index (CPI) was down 0.56% in December, while the Consumer Food Price Index (CFPI) was 1.5% below November's number. Urban consumers saw a much more marked decline here as well, with a 0.62% dip in their CPI and a 1.73% fall in the CFPI. By contrast, the rural CPI was down 0.5% and food prices dipped 1.3% sequentially.

