

SC stays ASI survey at Gyanvapi mosque till tomorrow evening

Krishnadas Rajagopal

NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court on Monday ordered the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) to maintain status quo till 5 p.m. on Wednesday, giving the Gyanvapi mosque management "breathing time" to approach the Allahabad High Court against an order of the Varanasi District Court last Friday to conduct a scientific survey of the mosque premises located next to the Kashi Vishwanath temple.

A Bench headed by Chief Justice of India D.Y. Chandrachud asked the High Court registry to place the appeal, if filed by the mosque management, for hearing before an appropriate Bench before the stay order expired on Wednesday evening.

The court took note of the urgent oral mentioning of the management, repre-



Security personnel outside the mosque on Monday. PTI

sented by senior advocate Huzeifa Ahmadi, that the District Court had ordered the "scientific survey" at 4.30 p.m. on Friday. Mr. Ahmadi said the Allahabad High Court had earlier suspended a controversial archaeological survey of the premises to determine whether a Hindu temple was partially razed to build the 17th-century mosque.

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SC stays ASI survey at Gyanvapi till tomorrow

"The survey started on Monday. It has already begun. What is the hot haste now? This mosque has been a place of worship since the 1600s... They want to know if there was any pre-existing structure of a Hindu temple... No time was given for us to even file an appeal. The order specifically says scientific investigation/survey/excavation of the property in question... An excavation would amount to contempt of the Supreme Court orders in the case," Mr. Ahmadi submitted.

Mr. Ahmadi said the District Court's order to a "scientific survey/excavation" nullified the High Court order. Any excavation on the premises would run the risk of disturbing the Supreme Court orders to seal the *wazukhana* area. He questioned how the District Court could order collection of scientific evidence when even the oral evidence was only yet to commence in the suit under Order 7, Rule II (concerning the maintainability of a suit) of the Civil Procedure Code.

CM

Govt. approves 8.15% interest rate for PF deposits in 2022-23

The Hindu Bureau

NEW DELHI

The Centre on Monday accepted the recommendation of the Central Board of Trustees (CBT) of the Employees' Provident Fund Organisation (EPFO) to increase the interest rate of deposits in Provident Fund (PF) to 8.15%. The new rate will be applicable for last financial year.

The CBT had recommended an increase to 8.15% from 8.10% interest to the deposits on March 28, 2023. The Labour Ministry had forwarded the CBT's recommendation for the Union Finance Ministry's approval.

The EPFO, through an official order, has instructed its field offices to credit the interest into the accounts of members.

In the last financial year,



The interest will now be credited to the accounts of subscribers.

trade unions had complained of delay in crediting the interest into the accounts of employees. The EPFO had cited technical reasons for the delay. The unions had also complained that the rate of 8.10% was the lowest in recent past and had demanded an increase. In 2020-21, the rate was 8.5%.

VRDL gets NABL certification for molecular testing of SARS CoV-2 RNA

The Hindu Bureau
CHENNAI

The Viral Research and Diagnostic Laboratory (VRDL) of the Institute of Microbiology, Madras Medical College (MMC), has obtained National Accreditation Board for Testing and Calibration Laboratories (NABL) certification.

According to a press release, VRDL has been functioning since March 2020 with support from the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR). It started doing COVID-19 RT-PCR testing during the peak wave of the pandemic. So far, 23,54,898 samples were tested for COVID-19 by RT-PCR.

Chikungunya IgM, Dengue IgM, Epstein-Barr-virus IgM, Hepatitis A virus IgM, Hepatitis B virus, Rotavirus IgM, Japanese Encephalitis (JE) IgM and Dengue NS1 Antigen were tested by ELISA method, while Zika virus, influenza A virus (H1N1 and H3N2), influenza B virus, adenovirus, herpes simplex virus and dengue virus serotyping were tested by RT-PCR method.

MMC's VRDL applied for NABL accreditation in November 2022 with the support of National Health Mission for Molecular Testing of SARS-CoV-2 RNA qualitative and IgM Capture ELISA for chikungunya, dengue and JE. An assessment was done in April

2023 and certificate of accreditation issued in July.

There were 123 government and private approved RT-PCR laboratories. Of these, 48 government RT-PCR laboratories were approved by ICMR. MMC's VRDL is the first laboratory to get NABL accreditation among government medical college hospitals for molecular testing of SARS-CoV-2 RNA qualitative and IgM Capture ELISA for chikungunya, dengue and JE, the release said.

E. Thernirajan, dean of MMC, said earlier, MMC's pathology laboratory had obtained NABL certification. "Now, with VRDL also getting the certification, we are ensuring safety of

faculty, patients and quality of investigations. This puts standards in place and streamline timings," he said.

T. Sabeetha, laboratory director and professor of Microbiology, Institute of Microbiology, MMC, said already, government institutions did plenty of investigations. "Now, each and every investigation will have internal quality control and will be done methodologically. We will have internal quality control and external quality assurance. There will be periodical training for staff and internal audits. Competency of staff, quality of investigations and calibration are vital," she said.

Basic income scheme gives recognition for women's unpaid labour, says Chief Minister

The Hindu Bureau
DHARMAPURI

A little over three decades after the launch of the Self Help Group (SHG) Movement for Women in Dharmapuri in 1989, the district became the site for the launch of registration for yet another flagship programme of the DMK government, the *Kalaigiar Magalir Urimai Thogai Thittam* (women's basic income scheme) that provides a monthly financial assistance of ₹1,000 for eligible woman heads of families. Tamil Nadu Chief



Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M.K. Stalin speaking at an event held at Thoppur in Dharmapuri on Monday. N. BASHKARAN

Minister M.K. Stalin launched the registration camps for the scheme in Thoppur on Monday. The scheme of providing monthly rights grant for women beneficiaries is to

be rolled out on September 15, Dravidian stalwart C.N. Annadurai's birth anniversary. "This is the soil where the seeds for women's self-respect and self-reliance were sown through the

SHG movement in 1989 by *Kalaigiar* (late Chief Minister Karunanidhi), and this is from where the recognition of women's unpaid labour through an assured income of ₹1,000 per month shall also begin," Mr. Stalin said, opening the registration camps.

According to him, the scheme will, for the first time, recognise women's unpaid labour and make those on the margins self-reliant and economically independent.

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'Basic income scheme gives recognition for women's unpaid labour'

The scheme was being rolled out with a budgetary allocation of ₹7,000 crore this year, and this would be increased to ₹12,000 crore in the following year's Budget, the Chief Minister said.

Stating that the scheme, an election promise, was delayed due to the dire fiscal condition of the State when his government took charge amid the pandemic, Mr. Stalin said the scheme's objective flowed from the string of women-centric programmes that his government was implementing, starting with the free bus ride for women, which was one of the first files he signed in May 2021. "The free bus ride for women was implemented despite the Transport Department being the most cash-strapped of all departments. Today, over 36 lakh women are benefiting from it, and they have taken 283 crore free bus rides," he said.

"Studies have shown that women save ₹800 to ₹1,000 per month from free bus rides. This is the 'Dravidian Model' we learnt from Periyar, Anna, and *Kalaigarnar* [Karunanidhi]," the Chief Minister said.

Underlining that the basic income assurance of ₹1,000 for women was not a welfare measure but a right and an outcome of the recognition of historically unpaid women's labour, he said all eligible women who were in need of the money would get it. "Don't get taken in by malicious campaigns. All women who inhabit the socio-economic margins will get it. The money will go directly into their bank accounts, leaving nothing to chance," he added.

A total of 35,923 camps, run mainly by volunteers and SHGs across the State, have begun accepting applications for the scheme.

A feedback session, chaired by Mr. Stalin, was held at the registration camp in Thoppur.

Sripriya, an applicant who works as an agricultural labourer, said: "Work is hard to come by, and even when I find some, it barely lasts 10 days a month. I get paid ₹150 for half-a-day's work. But even such work is hard to find." This was where the free bus ride scheme had been useful for her, she said. "My daughter just finished Class XII, and I can fund her higher studies through the ₹1,000 monthly education assistance you have given us," she told the Chief Minister.



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'Must mobilise private finance for disaster risk reduction'



Sharing responsibilities: Dignitaries at the third meeting of the G-20 Disaster Risk Reduction Working Group in Chennai on Monday. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

The Hindu Bureau CHENNAI

Over the past few years, India has completely transformed the way disaster risk reduction is financed, said Principal Secretary to the Prime Minister, P. K. Mishra.

Speaking at the third meeting of the G20 Disaster Risk Reduction Working Group in Chennai on Monday, Mr. Mishra said India now has a predictable mechanism for financing not only disaster responses but also disaster mitigation, preparedness and recovery.

"Can we have analogous arrangements at the global level as well? Mobilising private finance for disaster risk reduction has been a challenge but without it, we will not be able to go very far in addressing all the disaster risk reduction needs," said Mr. Mishra.

Climate change

He said cities in almost the entire northern hemisphere have been in the grip of massive heat

waves. "The forest fires in Canada and the haze that followed affected cities in many parts of North America. Here in India, we have seen major cyclonic activity on both our east and west coasts. The impacts of climate change-related disasters are not out into the distant future. The challenge that the world faces today underlines the importance of this Working Group," he said.

"In the short span of four months, the Working Group has made a lot of progress and generated good momentum. We need transformation of local, national and global systems for preventing the creation of new disaster risks and effectively managing existing disaster risks," said Mr. Mishra.

Structured mechanisms

Stressing the need for disparate national and global efforts to actively seek convergence and maximise their collective impact, Mr. Mishra said, in the area of financing disaster risk reduction, it is important that

we pursue structured mechanisms at all levels for financing all aspects. "We cannot afford fragmented efforts that are driven by narrow institutional perspectives. We must be driven by a problem-solving approach. The UN Secretary General's 'Early Warning For All' initiative is an example of this approach," he said.

"It is good to note that G20 has identified 'Early Warning and Early Action' as one of the five priorities," he adds.

On 'Building Back Better' after disasters, there has been much practical experience over the past few years but we have to find ways to institutionalise some of these good practices, Mr Mishra said.

"Like 'preparedness for response' we need to have emphasis on 'preparedness for recovery' underpinned by financial arrangements, institutional mechanisms, and capacities," he said.

A BIG STEP
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A big step in reducing the risk of disasters

Disasters around the world are claiming more and more lives. The consequences of climate change are already on our doorstep. Ten days ago, three continents were gripped by heat waves. Massive forest fires have ravaged parts of Greece and Canada. Two weeks ago, the river Yamuna breached the highest flood level, recorded 45 years ago, and inundated parts of Delhi.

The cost of these disasters is yet to be determined. However, it is clear that the world needs to do more to prevent the risk of losses from all disasters, whether they are weather-related, earthquakes, or biological like COVID-19. For too long, countries have spent billions responding to disasters rather than paying a little upfront to prevent or reduce their impact.

We are at the midpoint of the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030, which is the global road map for reducing disaster risks and losses. While progress has been made, we are not where we need to be. However, with a renewed sense of urgency and a people-centred approach, we can significantly reduce disaster losses by 2030.

India's Initiative

One good news is that countries are finally coming around to the value of disaster risk reduction, which India has elevated as a priority for G20 through its presidency of the group. Specifically, India has established the first G20 Disaster Risk Reduction Working Group.

Countries that make up the G20 hold around 85% of the global GDP and about two-thirds of the world population. And as human vulnerability to disasters is strongly linked to economic decisions, the G20 is in a unique position to chart a new path of disaster risk-informed decision-making. This means not only considering the potential impact of economic decisions on disaster risks, but also leveraging economic tools to reduce existing risks and prevent new ones. This



Mami Mizutori
is Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for Disaster Risk Reduction and Head of the UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction



Kamal Kishore
is Member Secretary, National Disaster Management Authority, India

type of foresight is critical if countries wish to protect their people and grow their economies in the face of increasing and inter-connected risks.

That is why we welcome the priorities identified by the G20 Disaster Risk Reduction Working Group, which form the basis for the Communiqué being negotiated in Chennai. These are in direct support of the calls to action of the May 2023 Political Declaration of the UN General Assembly on the midterm review of the Sendai Framework. Of particular note are those around enhancing early warning systems, resilient infrastructure, and financing for disaster risk reduction.

Early warning systems

Expanding disaster early warning and early action systems is a top priority. Inclusive and multi-hazard early warning systems are among the most effective means of reducing disaster deaths and economic losses. During Cyclone Biparjoy, effective systems for end-to-end early warning and action helped achieve zero deaths from the event in India. Preparedness of the power sector helped reduce the disruption time in power supply in the aftermath of the cyclone.

The promise of disruptive technologies can help many countries leapfrog into a regime where they can use global capacity for forecasting to meet local needs. To that end, we are working to realise the goal of the UN Secretary General's Early Warnings for All Initiative, which seeks to create universal coverage for everyone by the end of 2027.

Enhancing the resilience of infrastructure to withstand climate and disaster risks is another global priority. From New Zealand, which saw the flooding of Auckland airport, to the U.S., where a pharmaceutical plant was destroyed by a tornado, every country can benefit from assessing and enhancing the resilience of its critical infrastructure.

Infrastructure has a long life cycle, and if built well, can lock in

resilience as opposed to risk. That same infrastructure also becomes the lifeline of recovery during a crisis. Hence, infrastructure, whether economic or social, is ultimately about people and it must lead to sustainable development outcomes for them.

That is why India launched with the UN in 2019 the Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure, to spur policy development and capacity support for disaster resilient infrastructure, especially in developing countries. We are currently collaborating to create a global methodology for conducting infrastructure resilience reviews and stress testing, based on the Principles for Resilient Infrastructure.

Failure to adopt an integrated perspective to understand risks to infrastructure, and its impact on development, has the potential to multiply losses, which disproportionately impact the poor, who subsequently take the longest time to recover.

Finally, developing a new approach to financing disaster risk reduction is needed to transform risk reduction plans into concrete actions. This effort must be led by finance and economy ministries in collaboration with the private sector because the current funding deficit for disaster risk reduction is too large for governments to manage alone, and many of the risks generated are by the private sector.

G20 nations like Indonesia and India have used risk metrics to allocate resources at the sub-national and local levels for disaster risk reduction. These need to be scaled and scaled.

Building on these areas of work, scaling up ecosystem-based approaches and enhancing national and local response capacities will be the responsibility of the next G20 presidents. To that end, we are delighted to hear that Brazil, which will assume the Presidency of the G20 in December, has committed to continuing the working group and building on what India has started.

The G20 must build on what India has started to prevent disasters

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ISRO to launch PSLV-C56 carrying Singapore's new imaging satellite

The launch vehicle is configured in its core-alone mode, similar to that of C55; it will launch DS-SAR, a 360 kg satellite into a near-equatorial orbit; the Synthetic Aperture Radar payload in the satellite will provide all-weather day and night coverage

The Hindu Bureau
BENGALURU

The Indian Space Research Organisation on Monday announced that the PSLV-C56 carrying Singapore's DS-SAR satellite will be launched on July 30 from Sriharikota.

The PSLV-C56 carrying DS-SAR satellite will be launched along with six other satellites. According to ISRO, the PSLV-C56 is configured in its core-alone mode, similar to that of C55. It would launch DS-



Space bound: Preparations on for the launch of PSLV-C56 carrying Singapore's DS-SAR satellite along with 6 other satellites. PTI

SAR, a 360 kg satellite into a near-equatorial orbit at 5 degrees inclination and 535 km altitude. It added

that the satellite is developed under a partnership between DSTA (representing the Government of Sin-

gapore) and ST Engineering. It will be used to support the satellite imagery requirements of various agencies within the Government of Singapore.

DS-SAR carries a Synthetic Aperture Radar payload developed by Israel Aerospace Industries. This allows the DS-SAR to provide for all-weather day and night coverage and is capable of imaging at 1m resolution at full polarimetry.

The other satellites are VELOX-AM, a 23 kg technology demonstration mi-

cro-satellite; Atmospheric Coupling and Dynamics Explorer (ARCADE), an experimental satellite; SCOOB-II, a 3U nanosatellite flying a technology demonstrator payload; NuLioN by NuSpace, an advanced 3U nanosatellite enabling seamless IoT connectivity in both urban and remote locations; Galassia-2, a 3U nanosatellite, which will be orbiting at low earth orbit; and the ORB-12 STRIDER, which is a satellite developed under an International collaboration.

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Bill likely to make Aadhaar authentication mandatory to register births and deaths

Vijaita Singh
NEW DELHI

A Bill to amend the Registration of Birth and Death Act, which is among the 21 new Bills listed to be introduced in the ongoing Monsoon Session of Parliament, is likely to make Aadhaar compulsory for registration of births and deaths for whoever has one.

On June 28, the Centre allowed the Registrar-General of India (RGI) to perform Aadhaar authentication during registration of births and deaths in the country. Currently, Aadhaar is not mandatory for such registration. The proposed amendment to the 1969 Act will give it legal teeth.

The Bill also requires the States to compulsorily share data on registered births and deaths with the RGI, which functions under the Union Home Ministry. The RGI will maintain its own register of births and deaths. The States are currently required to only

The Bill also requires States to share data on registered births and deaths with RGI

send annual statistical reports to the RGI.

A senior government official said almost all States have consented to the proposed amendments. As per the requirements of the amendment, the States will have to sign a memorandum of understanding with the RGI to share the Application Programming Interface (API) from where the data can be pulled out.

While all States are required to use the Civil Registration System (CRS) operated by the RGI to issue birth and death certificates, there are some States which have their own applications.

NPR database

The database will be used to update the National Population Register (NPR), the Bill proposes.

NPR is the first step to-

wards the creation of a National Register of Indian Citizens (NRIC) or NRC.

If the amendments are implemented, the Centre could use the data to update the NPR that was first prepared in 2010 and revised through door-to-door enumeration in 2015. NPR already has a database of 119 crore residents. The real-time update of the data on births and deaths will eliminate the requirement of such enumeration to a large extent.

The database will also be used to update the electoral register, Aadhaar, ration card, passport and driving licence databases.

The official said Census besides being a headcount exercise also contains more granular details on socio-cultural indicators and is conducted every 10 years, an aberration being the 2021 Census which has been suspended indefinitely post-COVID-19, but updating the population register will give a clear picture of population figures in real time.

ICMR argues for controlled human infection studies

New model for vaccine and treatment development promises to be efficient and cost-effective, it says; the technique involves exposing healthy volunteers to pathogens in a controlled environment

Bindu Shajan Perappadan
NEW DELHI

India has taken its first step to introduce controlled human infection studies (CHIS) that is used in many countries for vaccine and treatment development.

Riddled with ethical issues, CHIS has still now been a no-go area for India, but the Indian Council of Medical Research's (ICMR) Bioethics Unit is set to change this.

Outside India, this relatively new research model which involves intentionally exposing healthy volunteers to pathogens in a controlled environment, has been used to study malaria, typhoid, dengue, and so on.

The ICMR's Bioethics Unit has introduced a consensus policy statement which is now open for comment and argues the case for bringing in CHIS. The document talks about the need, benefits, and challenges associated with CHIS.

"This paper is aimed at addressing a variety of ethical issues so that research can be conducted in India without compromising on



ICMR's Bioethics Unit has introduced a consensus policy statement which argues the case for bringing in CHIS. FILE PHOTO

ethical principles while ensuring the protection of human participants," notes the ICMR.

Ethically sensitive

The ICMR notes that India has so far stayed away from CHIS, because regardless of the potential scientific benefits, these studies are ethically sensitive and raise concerns about contentious research ethics – issues like deliberate harm, possible disproportionate payment and hence inducements, third-party risk, withdrawal from the study and research with vulnerable participants.

"Hence these studies need a streamlined ethics review process with additional ethical oversight and safeguards to protect the study participants," it says.

The paper adds that the deterrents include technical, clinical, ethical and legal contentions, amid unique socio-cultural context.

High burden

India carries a high burden of morbidity and mortality from infectious diseases. They contribute about 30% of the disease burden in the country. Finding novel, efficient, and cost-effective

alternatives to existing methods of research in these diseases and their prevention is imperative to reduce this burden.

CHIS is a relatively new research model that helps provide unique insights into disease pathogenesis and can accelerate the development of novel medical interventions, said the ICMR.

It further states that CHIS offers accelerated, cost-effective, and efficient outcomes using smaller sample sizes in comparison to large clinical trials. Its social value includes potential contributions to public health response to diseases of concern, healthcare decision-making, policies and economic benefits, improved pandemic preparedness, and community empowerment.

The ICMR has also cautioned that CHIS is a highly complex area and may require collaborations at different levels between researchers, institutions, organisations and/or between different countries. Collaborations should be encouraged to get the right expertise which may not be available with one centre/research team.

What does India's first gig workers' rights Bill stipulate?

What are the provisions of the Rajasthan Platform-Based Gig Workers (Registration and Welfare) Bill?

Saumva Kalia

The story so far: On July 24, the Rajasthan government passed the Rajasthan Platform Based Gig Workers (Registration and Welfare) Bill, 2023. It is the first legislation of its kind in India outlining welfare schemes for the State's approximately three lakh gig workers.

What did the Bill propose? The Bill applies to "aggregators" (digital intermediaries connecting buyers and sellers) and "primary employers" (individual or organisations engaging platform-based workers). The Bill proposes a Welfare Board comprising State officials, five representatives each from gig workers and aggregators, and two others from civil society. The Board will "set up a welfare fund, register platform-based gig workers, aggregators and primary employers... facilitate guarantee of social security to

platform-based gig workers and to provide for matters connected therewith or incidental thereto." The Board will maintain a database of companies and workers and each worker will receive a unique ID which "shall be valid in perpetuity."

In their recommendations to the government, labour unions previously objected to vague terminologies in the Bill that may offer loopholes to companies.

Where will the funds come from? According to the Bill, the Board will create a "Social Security and Welfare Fund" comprising contributions made by individual workers, State government aids, other sources and a "welfare cess" – a cut from each transaction – which the aggregator is required to pay. The rate of the welfare cess will not exceed 2% nor fall short of 1% of the value of "each transaction," and aggregators are required to submit the amount within the first five days of a month. Unions objected to contributing to the fund, arguing that it

should be sourced only from aggregator companies and State funds, owing to the fluctuating and inadequate nature of pay.

Are workers' rights recognised? Under existing labour laws, gig workers who are named 'partners' by platforms are not 'employees' because theirs is not a "fixed term of employment" – marked by providing exclusive service to one provider for a specified duration. The Code on Social Security, passed in 2020 and yet to be implemented, carried "restrictive criteria" about eligibility which are done away with in the Rajasthan Bill, says Chiara Furtado, a tech and labour researcher with the Centre for Internet and Society. The Bill states any person has the right to be registered the minute they join an app-based platform, regardless of the duration of work or how many providers they work for.

The Welfare Board is expected to formulate schemes "for social security," listing only accidental insurance and health insurance, and "other benefits

concerning health, accident and education as may be prescribed." Unions have recommended that benefits available to gig workers be enumerated clearly in the Bill, expanding on the clause "other benefits." Another responsibility of the Welfare Board, unions say, should be to assist workers in negotiating contracts by developing standard formats and principles for aggregators.

What about workers' grievances? Gig workers "have an opportunity to be heard for any grievances" with "entitlements, payments and benefits provided under the Act." Per Section 15, a worker can file a petition physically before an officer or online through the web portal. The employer can object to the order within 90 days before an 'Appellate Authority'. Several reports have documented ineffective and unresponsive redressal mechanisms. Urban Company workers are currently protesting the "arbitrary" blocking of their accounts and a lack of support.

Are aggregators held accountable? An aggregator's duties under the Bill include: depositing welfare cess on time, updating the database of gig workers, and documenting any variations in numbers within one month of such changes. If they fail to comply, they will be fined up to ₹5 lakh for the first offence and ₹50 lakh for further violations; primary employers will pay up to ₹10,000 for the first offence and ₹2 lakh for subsequent violations.

THE GIST

On July 24, the Rajasthan government passed the Rajasthan Platform Based Gig Workers (Registration and Welfare) Bill, 2023.

The Bill proposes a Welfare Board comprising State officials, five representatives each from gig workers and aggregators, and two others from civil society.

An aggregator's duties under the Bill include: depositing welfare cess on time, updating the database of gig workers, and documenting any variations in numbers within one month of such changes.

Is there a rural bias in national surveys?

What is the debate on the methodology of national surveys? Do our national surveys suffer from a 'rural bias in terms of representation? What can be done to minimise random errors and mistakes? What lies before the new Pronab Sen Committee?

EXPLAINER

Aparajay Kumar
R. Gopinath

The story so far:

The Government of India recently appointed a panel under the chairmanship of Pronab Sen, former Chief Statistician of India to review the methodology of the National Statistical Organisation (NSO).

Why is there a need for review?

This happened in the backdrop of articles by Shamika Ravi and Bibek Debroy arguing that the usage of outdated survey methodology by national surveys such as the National Sample Survey (NSS), National Family Health Survey (NFHS) and Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS), have systematically underestimated India's development. According to them, this archaic methodology has failed to capture reality in the recent past as the "Indian economy has been incredibly dynamic in the last 30 years". On the other hand, P. C. Mohanan and Amitabh Kundu have reasoned that there is no systematic underestimation of development by these national surveys. Therefore, there is no need for restructuring and overhauling the survey methodology just because it doesn't suit certain narratives of development. However, they accept that there may be errors, which should be minimised. They also advocate the usage of appropriate sample weights to make the national sample adequately representative.

Why is it important?

National level data is a key resource for research, policymaking and development planning, so it is of utmost importance to understand and analyse both claims in the light of existing evidence. For this purpose, we will be taking a closer look at NFHS data, which is being conducted by



Urban composition across surveys

A closer look at the urban population estimates (in per cent) in the NFHS data. The NFHS survey is conducted by the Ministry of Health and Welfare.

Years	Unweighted sample	NFHS weighted estimate	Census projection	World Bank estimates	Difference (3)-(4)	(3)-(5)
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(3)-(4)	(3)-(5)
NFHS 5 (2019-21)	24.2	31.7	34.3	34.5	-2.6	-2.8
NFHS 4 (2015-16)	28.0	33.0	32.7	32.8	0.3	0.2
NFHS 3 (2005-06)	44.2	30.8	28.9	29.2	1.9	1.6
NFHS 2 (1998-99)	31.3	26.4	28.0	27.2	-1.6	-0.8
NFHS 1 (1992-93)	31.0	26.3	NA	26.0	NA	0.3

Source: NFHS, Census of India and World Bank

the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare for the last 30 years with the International Institute of Population Sciences (IIPS) as the nodal agency.

Does the NFHS have a rural bias?

Ms. Ravi and Mr. Debroy in separate articles have argued that one of the ways in which national surveys like the NFHS are underestimating Indian development is through "rural bias in terms of representation". In other words, the survey methodology, which depends heavily on the last Census data,

systematically overestimates the rural population. However, the examination of five rounds of NFHS data doesn't show any such systematic bias towards rural population. If we match the estimates of the urban population by the NFHS with the corresponding World Bank estimates and urban percentage projections from the Census figures of 1991, 2001 and 2011, it is clear that there is no evidence of any systematic rural bias (Table). On the other hand, there is evidence of rural population underestimation by NFHS 3. Overestimation of rural population seems

to have taken place by NFHS-2 and NFHS-5. Only NFHS-1 and NFHS-4 estimates seem to be really close to World Bank estimates and projections based on Census data. However, these errors seem random rather than systematic.

How can we minimise such errors?

Generally, there are higher percentages of no-response in urban areas compared to rural areas. However, this also does not seem to have any systematic relation with either rural or urban bias in estimation. For example, NFHS-1 with its near correct estimation of urban population had the lowest urban response rate at 94.5%, while NFHS-5 with its underestimation of urban population had the second lowest urban response rate of 95.6%.

Nonetheless, no response or not, there seems to be room for improvement in minimising the errors and the way sample weights are assigned. A cursory glance at the percentages of the urban sample in the unweighted sample indicates that assigning appropriate weights may help to correct the errors to a great extent. In NFHS 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 the unweighted percentages of urban sample were 31.0%, 31.3%, 44.2%, 28.0% and 24.2% respectively (Table). If the sample weights are appropriately assigned, after taking into account all possible sources of error, then underrepresentation of either rural or urban seems to get corrected to a large extent.

What next?

The Pronab Sen Committee needs to address these concerns to make the sample adequately representative rather than go for a complete overhaul of the survey methodology. In the name of removing systematic rural bias in survey methodology, which does not seem to exist in the first place, let us not import systematic urban bias rampant in policymaking, planning and financing to national level surveys. Let us remove the bias where it actually exists.
The writers are researchers in Development Economics.

THE GIST

The Government of India recently appointed a panel under the chairmanship of Dr. Pronab Sen to review the methodology of the National Statistical Organisation.

This happened in the backdrop of articles by Dr. Shamika Ravi and Dr. Bibek Debroy arguing that the usage of outdated survey methodology by national surveys, have systematically underestimated India's development.

National level data is a key source for research, policymaking and development planning.