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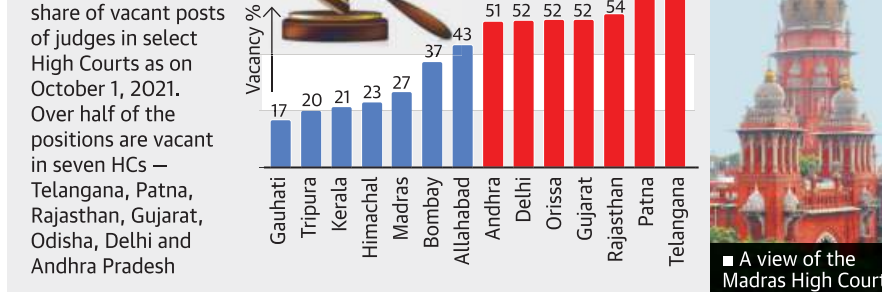
Centre to begin paddy procurement today CHANDIGARH On the day when farmers staged demonstrations in many parts of Punjab and Haryana against postponement of paddy purchase, the Centre on Saturday decided to start procurement in both the States from October 3. The Centre had postponed the procurement citing higher moisture content due to rain.

7 out of 106 names suggested as HC judges cleared so far: CJI

'Minister has agreed to process rest of the names recommended by Collegium'

KRISHNADAS RAJAGOPAL NEW DELHI Chief Justice of India N.V. Ramana on Saturday said the government had so far cleared seven of the 106 names recommended as High Court judges by the Supreme Court Collegium since May. Of the nine new Chief Justices of various High Courts suggested by the Collegium to the government from May, the latter has cleared one.

Empty seats



The chart plots the share of vacant posts of judges in select High Courts as on October 1, 2021. Over half of the positions are vacant in seven HCs — Telangana, Patna, Rajasthan, Gujarat, Odisha, Delhi and Andhra Pradesh. The CJI said the appointments, as they came through from the government side, would take care of the issues of pendency in the High Courts to some extent.

Cong. seeks to put Meghalaya house in order

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT GUWAHATI After suffering setbacks in Punjab and Goa, the Congress leadership has made a move to stem the rot within the party in Meghalaya. The Meghalaya unit of the Congress has been divided into two camps since the party leadership appointed Shillong MP Vincent H. Pala as its president a month ago. The dissident camp is said to be led by former Chief Minister and Congress Legislature Party leader Mukul M. Sangma.

Rajasthan govt. will complete term: Gehlot

Chief Minister dismisses speculation of Punjab-style change of guard in State

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT JAIPUR Facing demands from the rival faction in the ruling Congress for a power-sharing arrangement, Rajasthan Chief Minister Ashok Gehlot on Saturday said his government would complete its full tenure of five years and he would be active for the next 15 to 20 years. Mr. Gehlot said all speculation doing the rounds here after the change of guard in Punjab were "wrong and unfounded".



Ashok Gehlot State government's stability were apparently directed at both the Opposition Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the rival camp in the Congress led by his former deputy, Sachin Pilot. The two campaigns, 'Prashasan Shahron Ke Sang' and 'Prashasan Gaon Ke Sang', marked Mahatma Gandhi's birth anniversary celebrations. Mr. Gehlot thanked the people of the State for sending their wishes and prayers when he underwent angioplasty recent-

ly and urged them to go for heart check-ups after their recovery from COVID-19. The Chief Minister also took a jibe at the BJP for questioning him on working from home during the pandemic. "We should follow all protocols because we are still living in the middle of a pandemic. The BJP lost its leader [Rajshankar MLA] Kiran Maheshwari to the virus, but they are still not willing to learn," he said. Mr. Gehlot, 70, underwent an angioplasty at the Sawai Man Singh Government Hospital here on August 27. He has had health issues since he recovered from COVID-19 in May. No word on reshuffle The Chief Minister did not address the issue of Cabinet expansion and reshuffle as well as political appointments, which have been inordinately delayed, in his speech. He holds as many as nine portfolios, including Home and Finance. The Pilot camp has been anxiously waiting for inclusion in the Cabinet and political positions ever since an assurance was given by the Congress high command. Mr. Pilot was sacked both as the Deputy Chief Minister and the Pradesh Congress president after he, along with 18 MLAs, staged a rebellion against Mr. Gehlot in July last year. While Mr. Gehlot's loyalists have affirmed that the political situation in Rajasthan would not witness any major upheaval after the turmoil in Punjab, the Congress emissaries from New Delhi have been unable to convince him to carry out an early reshuffle. The State can have a maximum of 30 Ministers. At present, there are 21 members in the Council of Ministers, including the Chief Minister, and nine slots are vacant.

Vikrant to sail out for Phase 2 trials

Indigenous aircraft carrier likely to be commissioned in August 2022

DINAKAR PERI NEW DELHI The maiden sea trials of the indigenous aircraft carrier Vikrant have progressed very well and the second phase of trials are expected to begin by October-end, with the third phase planned in December, a defence official said.



On track: Vikrant was designed by the Directorate of Naval Design and built by Cochin Shipyard Ltd.

MiG-29K jet in service with the Navy, the official said. 'Extremely satisfactory' During the maiden sea trial in August, Vikrant's performance, including hull, main propulsion, power generation and distribution and auxiliary equipment, were tested. The results were ex-

remely satisfactory and the engine showed 100% performance and some issues that had come up were being addressed, the official said. Vikrant, designed by the Navy's Directorate of Naval Design and built by Cochin Shipyard Ltd., has more than 76% indigenous content. There are 14 decks, including

five in the superstructure and over 2,300 compartments designed for a crew of around 1,700 people, with separate accommodation for women officers. In the Phase 2 of the trials, the complete habitat, including each of the over 2,300 compartments, would be thoroughly checked, the official said. The Navy had floated a Request For Information (RFI) issued in 2017 to procure 57 twin-engine carrier-borne fighters and the responses are being evaluated. As reported by The Hindu earlier, the number was to be downsized from 57 to 36. A final decision is awaited and the number could be downsized further, it has been learnt.

India-China talks next week: Army chief

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT NEW DELHI

India and China are likely to hold the 13th round of Corps Commander-level talks next week aimed at resolving the stand-off in eastern Ladakh, the Chief of the Army Staff, General Manoj Naravane, said on Saturday. The focus will be on working out a plan for disengagement in the Hot Springs area. "The talks have been going on for more than a year now... We are hopeful to have the 13th round of talks very soon, perhaps as soon as next week, that is the second week of October," General Naravane told a news agency in Leh.

LJP factions can't use party name, symbol

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT NEW DELHI

The Election Commission on Saturday passed an order saying both factions of the Lok Janshakti Party (LJP), led by Union Minister Pashupati Kumar Paras and Lok Sabha MP Chirag Paswan, would not be allowed to use the party's name or symbol for the upcoming Bihar Assembly byelections on October 30. The interim order would cover the period of the byelections to the Kusheshwar Asthan and Tarapur Assembly seats and continue till the EC makes a final determination of the dispute, the order said. The two sides had staked claim to the LJP name and symbol, but with the last date for nominations of candidates for the bypolls being October 8, the poll panel said the "time available is not adequate to ensure due process". Mr. Paswan, in his oral submission on October 1, sought a decision before October 8, the order said.

Govt. notifies new rules to clear retro tax mess

Centre seeks to prevent future claims

Taxing times | A look at the genesis of the retrospective tax imbroglio: MAY 2007: Vodafone buys Hutchison Whampoa's controlling stake in Hutchison Essar for \$10.9 billion to a non-Indian company would not attract tax in India. MARCH 2012: Government introduces an amendment that allows it to tax such transactions retrospectively. SEPT. 2020: Vodafone gets a favourable ruling at the Permanent Court of Arbitration at The Hague. JAN. 2012: SC backs Vodafone, ruling that indirect transfer of shares

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT NEW DELHI

Firms such as Cairn and Vodafone disputing retrospective tax demands in India will not only have to withdraw all legal proceedings and waive all rights to claim costs or attach Indian assets but also indemnify the government on costs and liabilities from any action pursued by other interested parties in future. Setting the stage for a closure of the retrospective tax disputes over indirect transfer of assets situated in India, the Union government late on October 1 notified new rules under the In-

Chhattisgarh is no Punjab, asserts Baghel

ANUP DUTTA BHOPAL

Chhattisgarh Chief Minister Bhupesh Baghel on Saturday refuted speculation on a possible change of guard in the Congress-ruled State ahead of an impending visit by former party president Rahul Gandhi, the dates for which haven't been announced yet. Pressed by reporters at the Raipur helipad about the Bharatiya Janata Party drawing a parallel between Punjab and Chhattisgarh vis-à-vis dissensions within the Congress units in the two States, Mr. Baghel replied obliquely: "Chhattisgarh will always remain Chhattisgarh. It cannot become Punjab. The two States have only one similarity — both have numbers in their name. No other States have numbers in their name."

DETAILS PAGE 7

SHUBHRA RANJAN Always Ahead GS FOUNDATION PRELIMS CUM MAINS 2023 Offline Classroom / Live Tablet Batch STARTING FROM: 18th October 2021 COURSE FEATURES: COMPREHENSIVE COVERAGE OF THE ENTIRE SYLLABUS... SCHOLARSHIP TEST FOR GS PROGRAM TARGET 2023 Test Date: 3rd October 2021 PERSPECTIVE CURRENT AFFAIRS PROGRAM 2022 admissions open

A high life awaits liquor buyers

Come November 17, private vends promise a whole new experience

JAIDEEP DEO BHANJ
JATIN ANAND
NIKHIL M BABU
NEW DELHI

Empty shelves at 260 private liquor stores across the Capital greeted buyers wanting to stock up premium brands of their choice as the news about the vends downing their stutters from October 1 to November 16 created a buying frenzy last week.

The shops promise to reopen on November 17 in a new avatar, keeping with the guidelines of the Excise Policy 2021-22 brought in by the Delhi government, which plans to exit the sale of liquor. In the interim period (October 1 to November 16), over 500 government-run liquor shops will cater to the demand before closing down permanently.

Come November 17, as many as 844 new liquor stores – all private outlets – will open in the city with a promise to change the experience of buying alcohol. According to the new policy, all vends will be spacious (at least 500 sq. ft.), air-conditioned and have glass doors, allowing customers to walk-in and choose their brands. The owners will have to ensure there is no crowding outside the store and no dry snacks or cooked food outlets, that encourage people to drink and loiter, are run outside the premises.

“The current retail experience is like a jail. When you go to a liquor shop, there is a grill and people rush and throw money to buy liquor. There is no dignity,” Deputy Chief Minister Manish Sisodia had said in March while announcing the new excise policy. The government also hopes to generate more revenue from exiting the liquor business as the licence fee has been increased substantially. Mr. Sisodia estimated an additional revenue of ₹3,500 crore from imple-



Out of stock: Empty shelves greet last few buyers at a private liquor shop in New Delhi on September 30. • SANDEEP SAXENA

menting the new policy during the current financial year.

Super Premium Vends

To enhance the liquor buying experience further, five Super Premium Vends (SPV), of size not less than 2,500 sq. ft., will come up and sell products only above ₹200 in case of beer and above ₹1,000 for all other spirits. The SPVs can dedicate up to 10% of their space to sell ancillary products such as cigars, liquor chocolates etc., high-end artwork and high-value merchandise such as bottle openers, ice boxes, bar glasses etc.

The SPVs have been permitted to set up a tasting room – an enclosed area not visible from rest of the store – within the premises, where training and tasting sessions will be held. The government is yet to float tenders for the SPVs and they won't open on November 17.

Hoarding frenzy

The 47-day transition period, when only government-run liquor shops will remain open, triggered a hoarding frenzy in the city last week with buyers fearing overcrowding at the vends and shortage of premium brands. Private stores that were shutting down also made an at-

tempt to get rid of their stock.

Hearing of a possibility of liquor shortage and factoring in the upcoming festival season, Niketan Sabharwal, who runs a travel agency, decided to stock up from the liquor section at a west Delhi mall. He said he reached the mall slightly earlier than usual, only to find the entire section buzzing with activity at 9.30 a.m. “Most shops had moved a lot of their stock near the door. Not only were the sellers politely soliciting buyers but also offering discounts on bulk orders. I got almost half a crate of beer and an entire bottle of budget scotch at no extra charge,” he said.

Anwar Ali (name changed on request), who is employed at a private liquor vend in east Delhi, said his employer had tasked him with bringing buyers to the shop for the last 10 days. “I and a couple of my colleagues formed a chain to ensure that the customers come to our shop out of countless others near ours so we can finish our stock as soon as possible,” he said.

When contacted, the Delhi government spokesperson said that people did not need to hoard liquor as all government-owned shops will continue to function.

“Delhi is witnessing a transition phase in liquor man-

agement. Government-owned liquor shops have been instructed to make sure they have sufficient stocks to fulfil the demand during this period. The liquor shops have been directed to release payments on time to suppliers. We expect that in a situation where sufficient supply is maintained, crowding or any other incidents will not happen,” the spokesperson said.

Asked about the need to shut down private vends from October 1 to November 16, an official in the Excise Department said: “It is for the smooth transition to the new policy.”

Naresh Goel, president of Delhi Liquor Traders Association, said that the government did not give an explanation on why private liquor vends are being closed for so many days. He said it could be because the traders approached the Delhi High Court, opposing the new liquor policy and the closing of vends, and the legalities involved in the matter.

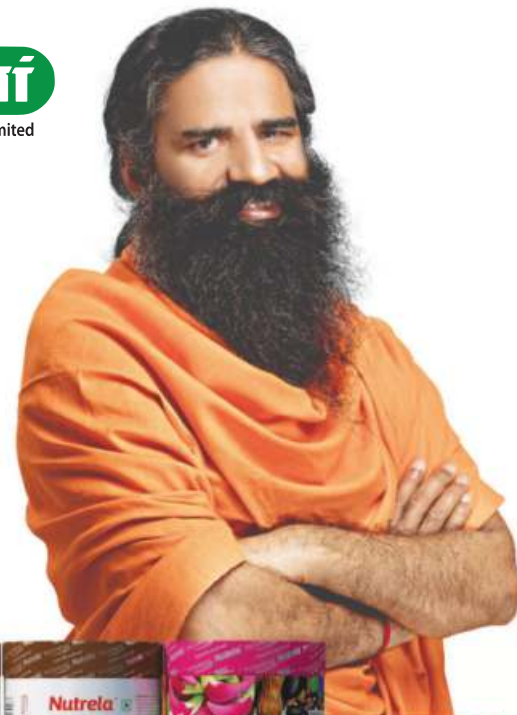
Under the new policy, the government has divided the city into 32 zones and allotted 849, including five SPVs, for equal distribution of liquor vends. Before this process, 79 of the 272 municipal wards in the city did not have a liquor vend and 58% of Delhi was either unserved or under-served, the government said.

Also, under the new excise policy, the legal age for liquor consumption in the city has been reduced to 21 from 25 years. Welcoming the move, Swati Gulati, 25, who works in the HR Department of a private firm, said: “Throughout my student years I found the drinking age limit ridiculous. The experience of buying alcohol has improved with shops opening up in malls and I feel the new shops will help women like me feel safer buying alcohol.”

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Orders violated: Firecrackers are not labelled with information on the person responsible for legal compliance. • GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO

Toxic firecrackers

Why has the Supreme Court clamped down on manufacturers? How are chemicals used harmful?

G. ANANTHAKRISHNAN

The story so far: The Supreme Court on September 29, 2021 observed that six major fireworks manufacturers had violated orders requiring them not to use prohibited chemicals such as Barium salts and to label the firecrackers in compliance with the law. In a warning to the manufacturers, the court felt that it had to take a balanced view of the production and use of firecrackers, because so much of it was being burnt, and people could not be allowed to suffer and die from pollution. It directed the Environment Ministry to serve a copy of an inquiry report of the CBI, which found violations after conducting a court-ordered probe. The case has been posted for October 6.

What did the Supreme Court rule three years ago?

Three years ago, the court ruled out a full ban on firecrackers and issued orders stipulating that only reduced emission and green crackers be allowed, with tight restrictions on timings when they could be burnt. The latest orders, in continuation of others, relate to a petition – Arjun Gopal and Others vs Union of India and Others – filed on behalf of three children in 2015, seeking measures to mitigate air pollution and asserting their right to clean air under Article 21 of the Constitution.

What is the controversy?

Firecrackers use fuel and oxidisers to produce a combustion reaction, and the resulting explosion spreads the material in a superheated state. The metal salts in the explosive mix get 'excited' and emit light. In an explanatory article on 'The chemistry behind

The petitioners argue that of about 2,000 manufacturers, only 120 had the capacity and inclination to work with the court to green the crackers

fireworks', University of Pennsylvania inorganic chemist Eric Schelter says the interaction between the firecracker fuel and the oxidiser releases energy. Metals in the mix, which have a varying arrangement of electrons in shells outside their nucleus, produce different wavelengths of light in this

reaction, generating spectacular colours. Barium compounds, for example, produce green light and Strontium and Lithium salts, red. But as many studies show, the burning of firecrackers is an unusual and peak source of pollution, made up of particles and gases. One study in Milan, Italy, quantified the increase in the levels of several elements in the air in one hour as 120 times for Strontium, 22 times for Magnesium, 12 times for Barium, 11 times for Potassium and six times for Copper. The Central Pollution Control Board conducted a study in Delhi in 2016, and found that the levels of Aluminium, Barium, Potassium, Sulphur, Iron and Strontium rose sharply on Deepavali night, from low to extremely high. For instance, Barium rose from 0.268 microgrammes per cubic metre to 95.954 mcg/m³. Similar episodic spikes have been recorded in China and the U.K. Pollution from firecrackers affects the health of people and animals, and aggravates the already poor ambient air quality in Indian cities. This has resulted in litigation calling for a total ban on firecrackers, and court orders to restrict the type of chemicals used as well as their volume. Many crackers also violate legal limits on sound.

Can green crackers make a difference?

The Central government says the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research, through its National Environmental Engineering Research Institute (CSIR-NEERI), Nagpur, has come out with firecrackers that have "reduced emission light and sound" and 30% less particulate matter using Potassium Nitrate as oxidant. These crackers are named Safe Water Releaser, which minimises Potassium Nitrate and Sulphur use, but matches the sound intensity of conventional crackers, Safe Minimal Aluminium, where Aluminium use is low and Safe Thermoite Crackers with low Sulphur and Potassium Nitrate. These crackers are to be identified using unique QR codes to guide consumers. The Supreme Court had also previously ordered that the Petroleum and Explosives Safety Organisation should certify the composition of fireworks only after being assured that they were not made of banned chemicals.

What is the state of the industry?

The petitioners argue that out of about 2,000 manufacturers, only 120 had the capacity and inclination to work with the court to green the crackers; the respondents, who are part of an industry that seeks light regulation because it provides jobs to many, must now present their case. Evidently, the new cracker formulations have not had many takers. Firecrackers are not labelled with information on the person responsible for legal compliance, as ordered by the court. At the recent hearing, the Supreme Court Bench of Justices M.R. Shah and A.S. Bopanna took on record the CBI report and noted that there had been a "flagrant violation" of previous orders. It took note of the large volume of crackers burnt almost every day and felt inclined to fix responsibility. "If liability is fixed on the Commissioner of Police, only then can this happen," it remarked.

Why is the government against caste census?

What are the reasons it has cited for being unable to carry out the exercise? How have those demanding a count reacted?

G. SAMPATH

The story so far: In an affidavit filed in the Supreme Court on September 23, the Union government has ruled out conducting a Socio-Economic Caste Census (SECC), stating that a caste census (except that for the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes done traditionally) was unfeasible, "administratively difficult and cumbersome". The affidavit was in response to a writ petition by the Maharashtra government seeking directions to the Union government to collect data on the Backward Class of Citizens (BCC) of rural India during the enumeration of the 2021 census. The petition also wanted the Centre to disclose the raw caste data on other backward classes (OBCs) collected during SECC-2011. Several political parties, and the Bharatiya Janata Party's Bihar ally, Janata Dal (United) led by Nitish Kumar, have urged the Centre to reconsider its decision.



Pressure mounts: Even the BJP's ally, JD(U) led by Nitish Kumar, wants the Centre to reconsider its decision. • PTI

What is the substance of the Centre's affidavit?

The government's affidavit covers three different aspects of the caste census issue, as reflected in the writ petition. It first explains why it cannot make public the caste data collected under the SECC-2011. Then it argues that the judiciary cannot direct the government to conduct a caste census because it is a "policy decision" not to do so, and the judiciary cannot interfere with government policy. And finally, it elaborates on why it is neither practical nor administratively feasible to attempt a caste census.

What is the status of the data collected under the SECC-2011?

In its affidavit, the government acknowledges that the SECC-2011's caste data of 130 crore Indians have been with the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment for five years. Due to flaws in the data, it was decided to form an expert committee headed by the then Vice-Chairman of the NITI Aayog, Arvind Panagariya. But since other members of the committee were not named, the committee never met, and as a result, no action was taken on the raw data to collate it into publishable findings.

Why won't the government make raw data public?

The flaws in the data stem primarily from the fact that no registry of castes was prepared before conducting the 2011 caste census. This resulted in mistakes by enumerators, who spelt the same caste in dozens of different ways. With no consistent way to aggregate or segregate same or similar castes with variant spellings, the number of caste categories ballooned. In Maharashtra, for instance, the existing SC, ST and OBC categories, as per government records, are only 494. But the 2011 caste census yielded 4,28,677 castes. While the State's population was 10.3 crore, about 1.17 crore (more than 11%) were found to be of 'no caste'. Also, 99% of the castes enumerated had a population of less than 100 persons. At the national level, whereas the total number of castes as per the last caste census of 1931 was 4,147, the SECC-2011 showed the presence of 46 lakh different castes. Since the total number cannot be "exponentially high to this extent", the government has said this entire data set is flawed and the census unreliable, rendering it

unusable for the purposes of reservations and policy. For these reasons, it has refused to make public even the raw caste data of the SECC-2011.

Why will castes not be counted along with the regular 2021 census?

The government has cited numerous administrative, operational and logistical reasons to argue that collecting caste data during the 2021 census – postponed to next year due to COVID-19 – is unfeasible and attempting it could endanger the census exercise itself. It begins by pointing to the difference in caste categories according to different lists. While the Central list contained 2,479 OBC castes, there were 3,150 OBC castes as per the lists of all the States and Union Territories taken together. If a caste-related question is included, it would "return thousands of castes as the people use their clan/gotra, sub-caste and caste names interchangeably". Since enumerators are part-timers with 6-7 days of training and "not an investigator or verifier", the affidavit states, "it would be difficult to meaningfully tabulate and classify caste returns."

In an affidavit to the Supreme Court, the government has cited numerous administrative, operational and logistical reasons to argue that collecting caste data during the 2021 census is unfeasible and attempting it could endanger the census exercise itself

Secondly, the preparatory work for a census starts three to four years earlier. As for the census, the questionnaires have already been finalised and field-tested. It is, therefore, not possible to add additional questions about caste now. Third, unlike in the case of the SCs and the Registrar-General and Census Commissioner, India, to provide the census figures of the OBCs and the BCCs. And lastly, it has cited the 2014 Supreme Court judgment setting aside two orders of the Madras High Court directing the Centre to conduct a caste census. As per this Supreme Court judgment, what information to collect in a census is a policy decision of the government, and while the court may find a certain policy untenable,

it was "legally impermissible" for the court to dictate to the government what policy it ought to follow.

What are the arguments of those demanding a caste census?

Political parties battling for the caste census cite the need for caste-wise data to justify the extension of reservations to various communities. On the other hand, there is also a large body of scholarly work, done by sociologists, political scientists and historians, which bypass the welfare argument to assert that India's fundamental mistake in its battle to overcome caste was not doing a caste census. According to these scholars, formal blindness to caste in a casteist society results in a denial of the web of caste-based privileges that continue to funnel opportunities to those at the top of the caste hierarchy. They point out that while the very term 'caste' has come to be associated with 'lower castes', the SCs or the OBCs, the upper castes tend to appear 'casteless'. They argue that in order to abolish caste, it is essential to first abolish caste-derived privileges, and in order to do that, the state must first map castes and their socio-economic status privileges/deprivations, which is what a caste census seeks to do.

Does a caste census enumerate only the OBCs or all castes?

The 2011 caste census collected data on all castes, and not just of the OBCs. Though the demands of the OBC-dominated political parties typically focus on expanding the socio-economic mapping of the census from the SCs and the STs to include the OBC castes, they want the caste census to cover the upper castes as well.

What next?

Opposition parties have criticised the government's stand, with three Chief Ministers – Bihar's Nitish Kumar, Jharkhand's Hemant Soren, and Odisha's Naveen Patnaik – reiterating their support for the caste census. The BJP does not want to be seen as opposing the caste census. So the Opposition, especially the regional caste-based parties, can be expected to keep reiterating their demands for a caste census, which has, in the electoral context, become inextricably mixed up with the question of OBC entitlements.

What are the concerns of digital health mission?

For the ecosystem to work, what are the fundamentals that need to be put in place first?

BINDU SHAJAN PERAPADDAN

The story so far: The Ayushman Bharat Digital Mission (ABDM), launched on September 27, aims to give every citizen a unique digital health ID which involves their health records being digitally protected and making health a "holistic and inclusive model". Under the mission, users can access and link personal records with their unique ID to create a longitudinal health history. "The model will stress preventive healthcare and, in case of disease, easy, affordable and accessible treatment," said the Health Ministry. Inaugurating the mission, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said it will not only simplify processes of hospitals but also increase ease of living.

How will it work?

In order to be a part of the ABDM, citizens will have to create a unique health ID – a randomly generated 14-digit identification number. The ID will give the user unique identification, authentication and will be a repository of all health records of a person. The ID can also be made by self-registration on the portal, downloading the ABDM Health Records app on one's mobile or at a participating health facility. The beneficiary will also set up a Personal Health Records (PHR) address for the issue of consent, and for future sharing of health records. The Ministry said the Digital Ecosystem will enable a host of other facilities like digital consultation, consent of patients in letting medical practitioners access their records, and so forth. It's also geared up to connect the digital health solutions of hospitals across the country with each other. The nationwide implementation of the digital health ID coincides with the third anniversary of the Ayushman Bharat Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana (PM-JAY).

Where was the pilot project launched?

The pilot project was announced by the Prime Minister during his Independence Day speech last year. So far, over 1 lakh unique health IDs have been created across select Union Territories as part of the pilot project. Now, the mission is looking at rolling out features that will support health ID creation with a PAN card or a driving licence. For those wanting ID creation through mobile or Aadhaar, the beneficiary will be asked to share details of name, year of birth, gender, address, mobile number and Aadhaar. The government has also allowed use of one's mobile number for registration, if a person doesn't have an Aadhaar card.



Miles to go: Lack of access to technology and poverty may hamper the mission. • GETTY IMAGES

What about privacy issues?

The citizen's consent is vital for all access. A beneficiary's consent is vital to ensure that information is released. Records are stored under retention policies and can be accessed only with the consent of users, said the Health Ministry. Besides, users can delete and exit the service any time they want. The account could be reactivated after which the user can share the ID at any health facility or share health records over the ABDM network. However, there are concerns according to experts. Dr. Sudarshan Ballal, chairman, Manipal Hospitals, said: "The introduction of a unique health identification card at the national level would be a game changer in monitoring, providing and managing healthcare for all citizens. But we will have to wait and see the implementation of the project while making sure that the privacy of an individual is maintained at all costs."

What are some of the challenges?

"India has been unable to standardise the coverage and quality of the existing digital cards like One Nation One Ration card, PM-JAY card, Aadhaar card, etc., for accessibility of services and entitlements. The data migration and inter-State transfer are still faced with multiple errors and shortcomings in addition to concerns of data security. The defence of data security by expressed informed consent doesn't work in a country that is plagued by the acute shortage of healthcare

professionals to inform the client fully. With the minuscule spending of 1.3% of the GDP on the healthcare sector, India will be unable to ensure the quality and uniform access to healthcare that it hoped to bring about," said K.R. Antony, paediatrician and a public health professional who served UNICEF and the State Health Resource Centre, Chhattisgarh.

He pointed out that personalised data collected at multiple levels are a "sitting gold mine" for insurance companies, international researchers, and pharma companies. "COVID-19 has taught us that the availability of the private sector is not homogeneous and it can't provide quality service which is charged transparently and is affordable to the common man. India's public health system has to be strengthened and rejuvenated much more before we bring in the fancy Digital Health Mission," he added.

Other experts add that lack of access to technology, poverty, and lack of understanding of the language in a vast and diverse country like India are problems that need to be looked into. "Just like we saw people reluctant to take COVID vaccination, here too people will accept the system only if it's tried and tested and is known to have some benefit," said another expert.

Meanwhile, for private hospitals wanting to be part of the system, "the National Health Authority certifies and empanels the private hospital. It has to be given access, integrate and test its software and get a nod from the NHA," according to the Health Ministry. It added that it would want all healthcare providers and allied services, including laboratories, to be part of the mission.

