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GS Paper II – Polity

Justice Varma resigns amid proceedings for removal

Ishita Mishra

NEW DELHI

Justice Yashwant Varma, of the Allahabad High Court, who was facing a parliamentary motion for removal, submitted his resignation to President Droupadi Murmu on Thursday.

His resignation came amid reports that a panel, appointed by Lok Sabha Speaker Om Birla under the Judges (Inquiry) Act, 1968, was set to look into the allegations of burnt currency being recovered from his official residence in Delhi during a fire in March last year.



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An alternative to Viksit Bharat Shiksha Adhishthan Bill

The Viksit Bharat Shiksha Adhishthan (VBSA) Bill proposes to statutorily take forward the implementation of National Education Policy (NEP 2020) that the Union government adopted during the COVID period without consultation with State governments. The Bill is under examination of a Joint Parliamentary Committee (JPC), which offers an opportunity to teachers, students, State governments, and civil society to submit their amendment proposals. The Bill, as it stands, is a constitutional overreach. Entry 66 of the Union List gives limited and specific legislative power to Parliament only for coordination and determination of standards in higher education institutions (HEIs). Now, the VBSA Bill gives sole discretionary power to Union government-controlled councils to determine standards, conduct inspection, and exercise independent, unlimited powers and functions. Under the Bill, the Education Ministry has usurped the authority of allocating funds to HEIs.

The Bill does not envisage participation of higher education institutions in decision making. Bureaucratic overreach is written into each provision of it. Bureaucrats have been given the charge of transforming higher education. The Bill dilutes the University Grants Commission (UGC)'s consultative requirements. Section 13 of the UGC Act provides for inspections for the purpose of ascertaining the financial needs of a university or its standards of teaching, examination, and research. The UGC is statutorily required to undertake inspections only after consultation with the university. The VBSA Bill, which covers Central and State-funded universities as well as private universities, takes away the autonomy of the governing bodies of Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs), Indian Institutes of Management (IIMs) and Inter-University Centres.

In the name of "Bhartiya Knowledge", the Bill seeks to sow the seeds for Hindutva ideologies. It explicitly undermines the multi-cultural character of Indian knowledge. It allows bureaucratic control, centralised ways of prescriptive regulation, determination of standards, and accreditation process. The Bill seeks to promote hyper globalisation and to regulate based on outputs legitimised in global rankings. It does not seek outcomes for national innovation, self-reliance, and social justice. The Bill has been brought in to allow the Centre to withdraw from the obligation to promote education as a public-funded enterprise for common good and push dependence on loans for higher education. It does not provide for the enforcement of affirmative action and reservation to SCs/STs and OBCs. It does not seek



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inter-institutional, inter-State and inter-regional justice.

Justice to States

The National Research Foundation (NRF) was proposed in the NEP 2020 to provide research funds to State universities (SUs). As of now, it has no provisions to provide block grants to SUs for integrated scholarship (teaching, research, and outreach). The State Higher Education Councils (SHECs) need to be represented on the councils envisaged under the VBSA Bill. The Councils should provide for consensual decision making to pursue a jointly strategic direction. The SHECs should also have a clear mandate and space for influencing the future of HEIs. The Bill should explicitly affirm the role and contribution of associations of students, teachers, and non-teaching staff in the governance of higher education by involving HEIs' senates and academic councils in gathering feedback on planning and progress.

Under the Bill, the Regulatory Council (Viniyaman Parishad) is envisaged as the primary enforcer of governance and institutional norms. The Bill should not give the Centre a free hand and responsibility for formal recognition, authorisation, and closure of institutions. It now provides for graded financial penalties for regulatory violations. No institution should be closed without getting the consent of the government of the State where it is located. Under the Bill, the accreditation council will outsource the task of accreditation to a network of third-party accrediting institutions to circumvent the deliberative process and sideline the desirable outcomes that the society expects the HEIs to contribute to. The Accreditation Council (Gunvatta Parishad) provides for technology-driven quality assessment. The approach to regulation should be deliberative and process-oriented; it cannot be prescriptive.

Output-based evaluation (patents and publications), focussed on assessment of institutions based on educational outputs (learning levels and employability), may not have much to do with the desirable outcomes. Evaluation should be outcome- and impact-centric. The Standards Council (Manak Parishad), sitting in Delhi, cannot be expected to define standards and attributes for all types of higher education. The standards will have to be shaped industrial sector- and State-wise.

Constitutionally speaking, education is a subject under the Concurrent List. The VBSA Bill's provisions are applicable to all State governments. The State governments should have a role in the determination of standards,

accreditation, and regulations. The determination of standards, accreditation, and regulations cannot be a top-down affair. Currently, States fund their higher education systems. The Bill does not offer social and inter-regional equity. Under it, private sector higher education institutions do not provide for equity and social justice. The State governments can and should be expected to take care of priorities such as contribution to school education, environment, climate, local resources rejuvenation, and local economic development.

The amended Bill must give 50% weightage each to SHECs and the Union government's councils in the process of regulation, accreditation, and determination of standards, so as to focus on the goals of space for inter-regional equity, linguistic and cultural autonomy, social justice, innovation, fundamental science, new technologies, and global excellence. The Bill should also consider incorporating a provision for regional councils to accommodate emerging ecological and socio-technical aspects in their deliberations.

The amended Bill should provide for an alternative framework for governance of higher education as a shared responsibility to build enabling mechanisms into the structures to be developed for transformative governance. The Bill must have a separate Higher Education Grants Council (HEGC) to disburse the funds available to the Ministry of Education for the integration of teaching, research, and outreach. The HEGC will have to provide not only regular funding to Central institutions but also generous funding to laggards run by the States to bridge the historical discrimination, structural gaps and voids, and deficits arising out of lack of support for research and outreach.

SHECs' role and contribution should be legislated to realise the vision and strategy of joint implementation of standards, accreditation, and regulation through the proposed verticals in the form of three separate councils. The councils for regulation, accreditation, and standards determination should be maintained by academics and professionals and have their own separate budgets. The SHECs should be duly funded by the HEGC to enable the process to become a shared responsibility. All the cesses that are presently provided for the implementation of the shared responsibility should be at the disposal of the HEGC. Who should regulate what should be explicitly stated in the amended Bill. The public purposes of higher education should be specifically mentioned to disburse allocations for the outcomes proposed for consideration.

State Higher Education Councils should be represented on the three councils envisaged under the Bill



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Turning up

Voter enthusiasm is a sign of a healthy democracy

Assam and Puducherry recorded historically the highest, and Kerala close to the highest, turnout in Assembly polls held on April 9. In Assam, 85.91% of the electorate turned up to vote, while in Puducherry it was 89.97% and in Kerala, 78.27%. It is hazardous to pinpoint the reasons for high turnouts and treacherous to read meanings into them. However, some reasons are objectively identifiable and some meaningful conjectures can be made. The Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of the electoral rolls in Puducherry and Kerala culled considerable numbers of names – 7.5% and 3.2%, respectively. In Assam, given that a process for the creation of a National Register of Citizens for the State is underway, it was a Special Revision which is a less rigorous updating of the rolls that led to its shrinking by less than 1%. The smaller size of the denominator – the size of the electorate – is one reason why the turnout percentages are high. Ghost voters and duplicate entries may have been eliminated in the process. Another reason for the higher turnout is that due to intense concerns regarding potential disenfranchisement around the SIR/SR, voters may have taken a keener interest in turning up at the booth. In Assam, for instance, large numbers of migrant voters travelled home to vote. In Kerala, anecdotal reporting suggests that its migrant voters from West Asia who travel during polling season could not do so this time due to the ongoing war.

The Election Commission of India, which is facing flak on various issues, took pride in the high turnout. CEC Gyanesh Kumar termed it a “historic testimony not only for India but for the entire democratic world.” Chief Ministers of all three States hailed the voter enthusiasm as a mark of popular support for the continuation of their governments, while the Opposition in all three sought to interpret it as a bugle of change. That dispute will be settled when the votes are counted on May 4, but regardless of the outcome, voter enthusiasm is the sign of a healthy democracy. That precisely is the reason why the ECI should take on board in an enabling rather than a restrictive manner all the disputes regarding the SIR. While the SIR can clean up the voter rolls, it should never become a case of throwing the baby out with the bathwater.



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GS Paper III – Environment

Draft master plan for Great Nicobar Island projects tourism as primary growth driver

Abhinay Lakshman
NEW DELHI

The draft master plan for developing the Great Nicobar Island (GNI) under the Centre's ₹92,000-crore mega-infrastructure project has proposed to focus on tourism as the "primary economic driver" of growth, noting that it also intends to get the "population to settle here", through both permanent and temporary jobs that are expected to be created.

The plan has been drafted for a projected population of 3.36 lakh by 2055. By that time, the master plan is expected to achieve an annual inflow of more than a million tourists. Of the projected 3.36 lakh,



The draft notes that it intends to get 'population to settle' in the Great Nicobar Island through job creation. FILE PHOTO

the local Nicobarese population is expected to grow to about 11,500 from the current 7,500.

Tribes challenge plan

The project, which received Stage-1 clearance in 2022, includes an international container transship-

ment port, an airport, power plants, and a township. However, soon after the clearance, the local Nicobarese population withdrew its consent, alleging that their forest rights had not been settled. The Calcutta High Court is currently hearing a challenge to

the project's clearances.

Under "future development", the draft hints at possible development of the Pemmaya buffer area on the western flank of Galathea Bay, where "tribal settlements" may be permitted.

However, this appears at variance with a separate draft relocation plan to shift local Nicobarese tribes further north to Pulothabi. While the draft master plan has been notified for public consultation, suggestions, and objections for 30 days, the notification does not mention when the plan was made public.

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GS Paper III – Environment

‘Migratory birds pose huge risk to flights’: wildlife body rejects greenfield airport plan in Puri

Satyasundar Barik

BHUBANESWAR

The Wildlife Institute of India (WII) has recommended against the establishment of a greenfield international airport in Puri, citing that migratory birds pose a huge risk to flights and the proposed location is in close proximity to the Chilika Lake, a Ramsar site and a wetland of international importance.

The Odisha government had proposed construction of the Shree Jagannath International Airport at Puri on the ground that there is not enough land for further expansion or extension of runways at the Biju Patnaik International Airport in Bhubaneswar. The Airport



The proposed site is close to the Chilika Lake, a Ramsar site and wetland of international importance, the WII said.

Authority of India and the State government jointly pushed for the project.

The Ministry of Civil Aviation had already issued site clearance certificates for the airport. The project was proposed to come up on 471.401 hectares at Sipasurubali village of Brahmagiri tehsil in Puri.

Of the total required land, 443.514 hectares is non-forest land and the remaining 27.887 hectares fall under the Puri Wildlife Division's jurisdiction.

As per the recommendation of the Environment Ministry's Forest Advisory Committee (FAC), the Commerce and Transport Department in 2025 sought the opinion of the WII. "Keeping in view the concerns raised with regard to the migration routes, threats, and conservation requirements of Olive Ridley turtles, Irrawaddy dolphins along the Puri coast and migratory birds coming to Chilka Lake, the State shall seek the recommendations of the WII on the matter," the FAC had said.



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GS Paper III – Economics

Govt. examining compliance burden on MSMEs due to war

MSME exporters don't have the resources to keep on top of constantly changing tariffs, penalties, and procedures brought on by shipping disruptions and delays, say exporters, industry bodies

T.C.A. Sharad Raghavan
NEW DELHI

The government on Friday announced that it had held two inter-ministerial meetings to discuss the various issues being faced by exporters in light of the West Asia crisis.

According to exporters, Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) in India are especially struggling under not just the financial impact of the war in West Asia, but also due to a significant increase in their compliance burden and paperwork due to shipments being rerouted or returned to India.

"The situation that is arising in the Middle East, there's a lot of chaos in the system right now because you are not getting clarity on a number of things," Imtiyaz Khatib, Vice-President of Product Management at Avalara India, a compliance solutions provider lamented.

One of the government's meetings was under the chairmanship of the Commerce Secretary and another was co-chaired by the Secretary in the Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways (MoPSW) and the Commerce Secretary.

Both were attended by senior officials, port authorities, shipping agencies, export promotion councils (EPCs), industry representatives, and other stakeholders. "If routes are getting

Triple whammy

There are three different types of disruptions MSMEs face due to the West Asia conflict



- When a cargo is diverted back, it has to be stored in a warehouse or taken back to the factory
- When shipments get routed to a different port, it is left to the exporter to figure out the next step
- Many destinations have tariff quotas for particular products which get filled within the first day itself

deviated and shipments delayed, then what kind of excise duties, tariffs, and penalties do you have to pay," Mr. Khatib asked. "So, you're not getting a complete idea of what your total landed cost would be and that's where there's a lot of complications and challenges, which our MSMEs are trying to overcome to stay compliant within the system."

A large part of the problem is that MSMEs don't have the resources to hire large compliance teams or use specialised software.

"Unlike large companies, MSMEs do not have dedicated compliance teams," K.E. Raghunathan, National Chairman of the Association of Indian Entrepreneurs, explained.

"The entrepreneur is now burdened with navigating regulatory uncertainty, leading to higher costs, delayed shipments, and severe working capital stress."

"If this continues, India risks losing export compet-

itiveness at the MSME level, where agility should have been our biggest strength," Mr. Raghunathan added.

Mr. Khatib further explained that most MSMEs use Microsoft Excel spreadsheets for their work because they cannot invest in systems that have everything inbuilt, including invoice and HS code management, master lists of all the duties and taxes, etc. "MSMEs mostly rely on fragmented systems that they're managing in different places," he said. This, he added, makes tracking changes and making corrections a time-consuming, error-prone, and tedious affair.

Pankaj Chadha, the chairman of the Engineering Exports Promotion Council of India (EEPC India) and an affected exporter himself, explained that there are three different types of disruptions MSMEs are facing due to the war in West Asia.

The first kind of issue is

when the cargo is diverted back to India. It has to then either be stored in a warehouse or the exporter has to then begin the 'back-to-town' procedure and take it back to their factory.

"Now, that procedure itself can be quite challenging and imposes quite a compliance burden," Mr. Chadha said. "Remember, also, for back-to-town cargo, you get nothing under the RELIEF scheme [announced by the government]."

The second kind of issue exporters are facing is when their shipments get routed to a different port due to safety concerns.

"The shipping company says its job is done, and that it is for the exporter to figure out how to take the cargo from there to the destination," Mr. Chadha said. The third factor is that many destinations, especially in Europe, have tariff quotas for particular products, such as steel.

These quotas open once every quarter, such as on April 1, July 1, October 1, and January 1. Those quotas get filled within the first day itself, Mr. Chadha said.

"So, if a shipment reaches those ports even a few days late, then they have to wait nearly 90 days before the quota is opened again," he explained.

"All of this again means warehousing, which is not only a huge economic cost, but is also a compliance burden."



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GS Paper III – Science & Technology

ISRO completes second airdrop test for Gaganyaan

The Hindu Bureau

BENGALURU

The Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) on Friday completed the second Integrated Air Drop Test (IADT-02) at the Satish Dhawan Space Centre in Sriharikota, Andhra Pradesh.

In this test, a simulated Crew Module (the capsule in which astronauts sit during a human flight during re-entry and landing), was lifted by an Indian Air Force Chinook helicopter to an altitude of about 3 km and released over a designated drop zone in the sea, near the Sriharikota coast.

The simulated Crew Module weighs about 5.7 tonnes, that is equivalent to the mass of the Crew Module in the first uncrewed Gaganyaan mission (G1).

ISRO said that 10 parachutes of four types were deployed in a precise sequence during the descent of the Crew Module, gradually reducing the velocity for safe touchdown.

“Subsequently, the sim-



Second Integrated Air Drop Test (IADT-02). ANI

ulated Crew Module was successfully recovered in co-ordination with the Indian Navy. The IADT-02 test validated the parachute-based deceleration systems in the Crew Module,” ISRO stated.

Union Minister of State for Science and Technology Dr. Jitendra Singh announced the accomplishment of the IADT-02 in a post on X. “Congratulations #ISRO for the successful accomplishment of Second Integrated Air Drop Test (IADT-02) for #Gaganyaan, India’s first Human Space flight scheduled next year. The second Integrated Air Drop



This test marks another significant step towards the readiness for the Gaganyaan G1 Mission, with active support and participation from the Indian Air Force, Indian Navy, and DRDO

ISRO

Test (IADT-02) was successfully conducted at Satish Dhawan Space Station Sriharikota. This marks an important milestone towards the readiness for the Gaganyaan mission,” the Minister posted.

“This test marks another significant step towards the readiness for the Gaganyaan G1 Mission, with active support and participation from the Indian Air Force, Indian Navy, and Defence Research & Development Organisation (DRDO),” ISRO said.

On August 24, 2025, ISRO accomplished first Integrated Air Drop Test for Gaganyaan in Sriharikota.



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GS Paper III – Science & Technology

Bolstering deterrence through submarine dominance



In April 3, the word 'Aridhaman' found mention in Indian Defence Minister Rajnath Singh's cryptic post on X. This prompted widespread speculation that it signalled the quiet commissioning of INS Aridhaman, the third submarine in the Indian Navy's SSBN (nuclear ballistic missile submarine) programme. Launched in 2009, the Indian Navy commissioned its first SSBN, INS Arihant, in 2016, followed by the second submarine, INS Arighat, in 2024. Speculation about the commissioning of INS Aridhaman assumed momentum since last year after Admiral Dinesh Tripathi, Chief of Naval Staff, confirmed that the submarine was in the final stages of its trials. The next submarine in this series, which is of the Arihant class as well, is likely to be commissioned next year.

Compared to its predecessors, INS Arihant and INS Arighat, INS Aridhaman has greater firing power and marks a gradual upgrade in the series of SSBNs commissioned by the Indian Navy. It is a larger 7000-tonne vessel, which can reportedly carry up to 24 K-15 Sagarika missiles, and up to eight nuclear-tipped K-4 or K-5 missiles. In contrast, the previous submarines in this series hold the capacity for carrying 12 K-15 Sagarika missiles and four K-4 missiles.

Through the commissioning of INS Aridhaman, India appears to have further emboldened its nuclear triad, which refers to New Delhi's capability to launch strategic nuclear delivery systems from land, sea, and air. Importantly, apart from India, the P5 countries - the U.S., Russia, China, France and the U.K. - possess the nuclear triad capabilities. In addition to this, the commissioning of the submarine further enhances India's deterrence capabilities in the maritime domain. Strengthening of



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Given the changing nature of warfare, it is essential to strengthen deterrence capabilities across land, air, and sea

sea-based deterrence is seen as especially critical, given that it has rapidly emerged as a key imperative in bolstering India's nuclear capabilities. To be sure, India's nuclear outlook is anchored on its 'no first use' policy. However, the strategic environment in the Indian Ocean is continually worsening, led by increasing Chinese presence in the region by way of research and survey vessels which possess dual-use technologies and run the risk of being deployed for the purpose of intelligence gathering. Sea-based deterrence is indeed critical to forestall adversarial manoeuvres by China and even Pakistan.

Notably, the Indian Ocean has for long remained dormant due to the lack of any significant maritime security conflict. However, in today's time, the changing nature of warfare, which possesses the possibility of swift transition from one domain to the other, makes it essential to strengthen deterrence capabilities across all domains - land, air, and sea. More recently, the evolving conflict in West Asia serves as a crucial reminder of how modern warfare is not limited to a single domain anymore. What started as American and Israeli air campaigns against Iran has quickly assumed a critical maritime character, whereby the Strait of Hormuz has now emerged as the epicentre shaping much of the future of this war. Furthermore, last year, Operation Sindoor, India's measured counter-terror response against Pakistan, too demonstrated that a naval dimension to the campaign could have indeed been a possibility. Wars in this era do not belong with different domains in silos but rather remain susceptible to spilling over to other domains as well. This complexity of modern warfare underlines why

possessing nuclear triad capabilities, especially bolstering deterrence, will continue to remain a key priority for India's national security apparatus.

Furthermore, the SSBN project has significantly boosted India's defence establishment's quest for self-reliance in defence production. With active conflicts persisting in different strategic pockets of the world, a strain in defence supply chains appears to be on the horizon. For India, the prolonged Russia-Ukraine war has spurred momentum in strategies to work towards self-reliance in defence production given Moscow's importance for India as a traditional defence partner.

In addition to this, plans to soon induct a fourth vessel of the Arihant class is likely to guide India's SSBN programme going forward. Importantly, New Delhi also seeks to commission India's first fully indigenously designed nuclear attack submarine (SSN) by 2036, with the commissioning of the second in the programme in 2038. The rapid strides taken by the Indian Navy is building its nuclear-powered submarine programme signals that submarine dominance is fast emerging as a key component in scripting New Delhi's strategy to bolster deterrence.

Going forward, the key challenges confronting the Indian Navy in this domain are likely going to emanate from how efficiently New Delhi balances spending its resources on upgrading its submarines programme with how it inducts new technologies such as Artificial Intelligence and autonomous systems in design and production of these vessels. At a time when the roster of the Indian Navy's assets is continually compared with that of China, it will be critical for New Delhi to keep pace with Beijing.