

The Hindu

Front Page

Amid 99% polling, Murmu bags a few Opposition votes (Page no. 1)

(GS Paper 2, Polity and Governance)

The Presidential election held on Monday was “peaceful and orderly”, with more than 99% members of the electoral college voting to elect the 15th President of the country.

The contest is between the ruling National Democratic Alliance’s (NDA) Droupadi Murmu and the Opposition candidate Yashwant Sinha. Though there was no whip, a few Opposition members claimed to have voted for Ms. Murmu in various States.

Talking to reporters after the polling, Returning Officer and Secretary General of the Rajya Sabha P.C. Mody said the poll was conducted in a peaceful and orderly manner in all the designated voting centres all over the country.

Out of the 736 electors comprising 727 MPs and nine MLAs who were registered to vote in Parliament House, eight MPs did not exercise their right to vote. “The total electoral turnout was 99.18%.

Sealed ballot boxes will reach Delhi from Monday evening itself. Parliament security service is coordinating with the Delhi Police, Airport authorities and other security forces to ensure smooth transition of the ballot boxes to Parliament from various centres.

The Election Commission (EC) said in a statement that the polling concluded successfully in a free, fair and transparent manner at the Parliament House and in each of the 30 places of poll in State Legislative Assemblies, including the Legislative Assembly of NCT of Delhi and Union Territory of Puducherry.

The polling took place at 31 locations between 10 a.m. and 5 p.m. A total of 4,796 electors were eligible to vote, as two members (Anant Kumar Singh and Mahendra Hari Dalvi) were not eligible due to disqualification under the Representation of the People Act, 1951, and five Rajya Sabha seats and six State Assembly seats were vacant.

“As per reports being received, out of a total of 771 Members of Parliament entitled to vote (5 vacant) and similarly out of total 4,025 Members of the Legislative Assemblies entitled to vote (6 vacant and 2 disqualified), over 99% cast their votes.

However, 100% voting by MLAs was reported from Chhattisgarh, Goa, Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, Kerala, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Manipur, Mizoram, Puducherry, Sikkim and Tamil Nadu.

States

SC extends time for audit of Padmanabhaswamy temple (Page no. 5)

(GS Paper 1, Art and Culture)

The Supreme Court on Monday extended the time for completion of the special audit of 25 years of accounts of Sree Padmanabhaswamy temple and its trusts to August 31, 2022.

A Bench led by Justice U.U. Lalit said the time to finish the auditing exercise had been extended in the "interest of justice" on a request made by the temple's administrative and advisory committees. The court ordered a compliance report to be filed before it after the audit was over.

On February 10, the court had similarly extended the time till June 30. The court recorded this fact in its order on Monday.

The court, in a judgment in July 2020, while upholding the Travancore royal family’s claim of shebaitship of the properties of the Sri Padmanabha, the chief deity of the famed temple in Thiruvananthapuram, had ordered the special audit of the temple, Sree Padmanabhaswamy Temple Trust, and allied trusts. The temple is reportedly one of the richest in the country.

The court had also accepted the royal family’s submission that the Padmanabhaswamy temple was a “public temple”. It had issued a slew of directions for its transparent administration in the future, including the formation of a temple administrative committee with the Thiruvananthapuram District Judge as the chairperson.

The other members of the committee include a nominee of the trustee (royal family), the chief ‘thantri’ of the temple, a nominee of the State and a member nominated by the Union Ministry of Culture. This committee panel would take care of the daily administration of the temple.

It had also ordered a second committee to be constituted to advise the administrative committee on policy matters. Both committees should start functioning within the next two months and an executive officer should be appointed without delay.

The primary duties of the committees would be to preserve the treasures and properties. They would take a call on whether to open Kallara B, considered to be the richest among the temple vaults, for inventorisation.

The committees would ensure that rituals and religious practices are conducted as per custom and on the advice of the Chief 'Thantri'. The court said the committees would ensure that income to the temple would be used to augment its facilities.

Editorial

The five-day work week might be fading away (Page no. 6)

(GS Paper 3, Economy)

A three-day weekend is not beyond anyone's dream, and it may soon be a reality. The idea of a four-day week against the usual 40-hour, five-day work week has been mooted for decades.

The call for fewer work hours itself is older than the Great Depression. After the reduction of working hours in the 1920s and 1930s led by Henry Ford, from more than 60 hours a week to the current 40, the notion of fewer working hours for the same productivity aided by higher technology grew prevalent.

The noted English economist, John Maynard Keynes, predicted that his grandchildren would only work about 15 hours a week.

Even though the prediction seems a little far-fetched right now, the direction of change seems about right as companies from all over the world toy around with the idea of fewer working hours.

The most recent and widespread adoption of a four-day work week was a trial run by Microsoft in Japan in 2019. The trial was conducted with a typical eight-hour work day for four days and a three-day weekend but a five-day week pay cheque.

Microsoft was happy with the result as it saw a 40% increase in worker productivity, presumably due to increased job satisfaction and lower burnouts.

Microsoft Japan also reported that a shorter work week led to higher efficiency in the form of lower office costs. It saw a massive 23% dip in electricity costs and a 60% fall in the number of pages printed in the office.

Perpetual Guardian, a New Zealand trust management company, also reported a 20% increase in worker productivity after a similar trial in 2018.

Most trials of a four-day work week seem to increase or at least keep constant worker productivity. Gains in productivity also depend on the kind of work.

The idea of increased productivity due to a fall in working hours has been carried along since Henry Ford. However, an increase in a worker's productivity in a manufacturing firm with a decrease in work hours would not mean a similar increase in productivity for an employee in the service sectors such as education or health.

OPED

India's climate imperative (Page no. 7)

(GS Paper 3, Environment)

In the absence of COVID-19, climate change-induced disasters would have been India's biggest red alert in recent years. The heatwave that scorched Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat, and New Delhi this year; torrential downpours in south India in 2021; and the super cyclone Amphan that battered West Bengal and Odisha in 2020 are symbols of man-made climate change.

But India, like elsewhere, still attributes these catastrophes to the wrath of mother nature rather than anthropogenic global warming.

Temperatures over the Indian Ocean have risen by over 1°C since the 1950s, increasing extreme weather events. India is the fourth worst-hit in climate migration.

Heat waves in India have claimed an estimated 17,000 lives since the 1970s. Labour losses from rising heat, by one estimate, could reach ₹1.6 lakh crore annually if global warming exceeds 2°C, with India among the hardest hit. India needs a two-part approach: one, to adapt to climate impacts by building resilience against weather extremes, and two, to mitigate environmental destruction to prevent climate change from becoming more lethal.

Extreme heat waves hit swathes of India. Heatwaves are aggravated by deforestation and land degradation, which also exacerbate fires. Agriculture, being water-intensive, does not do well in heat wave-prone areas.

A solution is to promote agricultural practices which are not water-intensive and to support afforestation that has a salutary effect on warming. Financial transfers can be targeted to help farmers plant trees and buy equipment — for

example, for drip irrigation that reduces heavy water usage. Insurance schemes can transfer some of the risks of extreme heat faced by industrial, construction and agricultural workers to insurers.

Climate-resilient agriculture calls for diversification — for example, the cultivation of multiple crops on the same farm. There will need to be more localised food production. Weather-based crop insurance would help.

Floods and storms are worsened by vast sea ingress and coastline erosion in the low-lying areas in the south. Southern States need stronger guidelines to avoid construction in locations with drainages.

It is vital to map flood-risk zones to manage vulnerable regions. Environment Impact Assessments must be mandatory for commercial projects.

Explainer

The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and its stature in the modern world (Page no. 8)

(GS Paper 2, International Relations)

Iran and Belarus could soon become the newest members of the China and Russia backed Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO).

“In the Samarkand summit [in September], we expect the leadership to adopt a document on the obligations Iran must fulfil to gain membership.

The legal procedures of Belarus’s accession are about to start. We need to build consensus on the acceptance of Belarus. According to him, the suggested expansion would exhibit the collective’s rising international influence and its principles being widely accepted.

Founded in June 2001, it was built on the ‘Shanghai Five’, the grouping which consisted of Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. They came together in the post Soviet era in 1996, in order to work on regional security, reduction of border troops and terrorism.

They endowed particular focus on ‘conflict resolution’, given its early success between China and Russia, and then within the Central Asian Republics.

Some of their prominent outcomes in this arena entail an ‘Agreement on Confidence Building in the Military Field Along the Border Areas’ (in 1996) between China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, which led to an agreement on the mutual reduction of military forces on their common borders in 1997.

It would also pitch in to help the Central Asian countries resolve some of their boundary disputes. In 2001, the ‘Shanghai Five’ inducted Uzbekistan into its fold and named it the SCO, outlining its principles in a charter that promoted what was called the “Shanghai spirit” of cooperation.

The charter, adopted in St. Petersburg in 2002, enlists its main goals as strengthening mutual trust and neighbourliness among the member states; promoting their effective cooperation in politics, trade, economy, research and technology, and culture.

Its focus areas include education, energy, transport, tourism and environmental protection. It also calls for joint efforts to maintain and ensure peace, security and stability in the region; and the establishment of a democratic, fair and rational new international political and economic order.

The Pakistan and IMF talks: What lies ahead? (Page no. 8)

(GS Paper 2, International Relations)

On July 14, the staff level talks between Pakistan and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) concluded for the seventh and eighth review under Extended Fund Facility (EFF).

The talks were originally aimed at releasing a tranche of \$900 million. The talks, which began on March 4, were expected to conclude by March 16; however, it took five months to reach the staff level agreement.

Finally, last week, the IMF team reached an understanding with Pakistan to release \$1.17 billion, subject to the board’s approval. This brings the total disbursement under the current EFF to \$4.2 billion so far, to support policy actions under FY 2023 budget, power sector reforms, and monetary policy to restrain inflation.

The latest IMF press release maintains it would consider an extension of the current EFF to end June 2023 and augment the fund amount to \$7 billion.

The 39month EFF between the two was signed in July 2019 to provide funds amounting to Self-Drawing Rights (SDR) — \$4,268 million. The EFF was signed by Pakistan to address the medium term balance of payment problem, and work on structural impediments and increase per capita income.

The IMF placed demands including fiscal consolidation to reduce debt and build resilience, the market determined exchange rate to restore competitiveness, eliminate ‘quasi-fiscal’ losses in the energy sector and strengthened institutions with transparency.

The decision to freeze the fuel prices by the then Pakistani President Imran Khan in February 2022 was considered a major deviation under the EFF benchmarks.

Mr. Khan's government, that gave tax amnesties to the industrial sector, impacted the tax regime and a structural benchmark for fiscal consolidation. Loans under Kamyab Pakistan Program were another point of contention. The IMF insisted on its demands before approving any release of the tranche.

News

Stalemate in India-China talk continues (Page no.10)

(GS Paper 2, International Relations)

The stalemate in the talks between India and China to end the standoff in Eastern Ladakh continues with no breakthrough in the 16th round of Corps Commander talks held on July 17.

In the interim, the two sides agreed to maintain the "security and stability" on the ground in the Western Sector along the Line of Actual Control (LAC), a joint statement issued late on July 18 said.

"The two sides agreed to stay in close contact and maintain dialogue through military and diplomatic channels and work out a mutually acceptable resolution of the remaining issues at the earliest," the statement said. The talks were held at Chushul-Moldo border meeting point on the Indian side and lasted for over 12 hours.

Building on the progress made at the last meeting on March 11, 2022, the two sides continued discussions for the resolution of the relevant issues along the LAC in the Western Sector in a "constructive and forward looking manner.

Stating that they had a frank and in-depth exchange of views in this regard, in keeping with the guidance provided by the State leaders to work for the resolution of the remaining issues at the earliest.

The two sides reaffirmed that the resolution of remaining issues would help in restoration of peace and tranquility along the LAC in the Western Sector and enable progress in bilateral relations."

While an agreement for disengagement from Patrolling Point-15 was close by in the last few rounds of talks, China's refusal to discuss other friction areas, Demchok and Depsang, maintaining that they are not part of the current stand-off, has stalled any progress. India has been insisting on comprehensive disengagement and de-escalation to end the ongoing standoff in eastern Ladakh.

Since the stand-off began in May 2020, the two sides have so far held 15 rounds of senior military commander talks with disengagement undertaken from both sides of Pangong Tso in February 2021, and from PP 17 in the Gogra-Hot Springs area in August, in addition to Galwan in 2020 after the violent clash. The 15th round of Corps Commander talks took place on March 11, 2022.

Shortly after the 15th round of talks in March, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi had visited India. Also, he and Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar met last week on the sidelines of the G20 foreign ministers meeting in Bali where they discussed the situation along LAC.

Panel on MSP, natural farming set up (Page no.12)

(GS Paper 3, Economy)

The Centre has finally constituted a committee headed by former Union Agriculture Secretary Sanjay Agrawal here on Monday to look into the issues of minimum support price (MSP), as promised to the Samyukt Kisan Morcha (SKM) earlier in January.

The panel has three unfilled posts for representatives of the SKM, which will be filled as and when the Centre receives the recommendations from the umbrella body of farmers.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi had said while announcing the decision to repeal the three farm laws that a committee will be constituted to promote zero budget-based farming, to change crop patterns keeping in mind the changing needs of the country, and to make MSP more effective and transparent.

He had said the committee will consist of representatives of the Central and State governments, farmers, agricultural scientists and agricultural economists.

Apart from Agrawal, NITI Aayog Member (Agriculture) Ramesh Chand, agricultural economists CSC Shekhar and Sukhpal Singh, award-winning farmer Bharat Bhushan Tyagi, members from other farmer organisations Gunwant Patil, Krishnaveer Choudhary, Pramod Kumar Choudhary, Gumi Prakash and Sayyed Pasha Patel, IFFCO chairman Dilip Sanghani, CNRI general secretary Binod Anand, senior member of the CACP Naveen P. Singh, agriculture experts P Chandrashekhar, J.P. Sharma and Pradeep Kumar Bisen will be members of the panel.

Secretaries of Departments of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare, Agricultural Research and Education, Food and Public Distribution, Cooperation, Textiles and Director General ICAR will represent the Centre in the panel. Representatives of State governments, and the member-secretary of the panel will be Joint Secretary (Crops).

SKM leader Hannan Mollah said the SKM will take a decision on the government's offer to be part of the committee soon. "At the moment, we are holding nationwide protests against the policies of the Centre. We do not know the brief given to this committee. The SKM will take a final decision," Mr. Mollah said.

The "subject matter of constitution" of the committee, according to a gazette notification, include suggestions to make MSP available to farmers by making the systems more effective and transparent. "Suggestions on practicality to give more autonomy to Commission for Agricultural Costs and Prices (CACAP) and measures to make it more scientific," the notification added.

It also says that the committee will discuss methods to strengthen the Agricultural Marketing System as per the changing requirements of the country to ensure higher value to the farmers through remunerative prices of their produce by taking advantage of the domestic output and export.

On natural farming, the committee will make suggestions for programmes and schemes for value chain development, protocol validation and research for future needs and support for area expansion under the Indian Natural Farming System through publicity and through involvement and contribution of farmer organisations.

Business

Crypto law needs global teamwork: FM (Page no.14)

(GS Paper 3, Economy)

The Reserve Bank of India has recommended a ban on cryptocurrencies citing 'destabilising effects' for the country's monetary and fiscal health, but a law to regulate or ban cryptocurrencies can only be effective once there is some form of international agreement in place.

Cryptocurrencies are by definition borderless and require international collaboration to prevent regulatory arbitrage, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman said in a written reply on Monday to a question from Lok Sabha MP Thol Thirumavalavan asking about the government's plans to legislate restrictions on such instruments.

Any legislation for regulation or for banning can be effective only after significant international collaboration on evaluation of the risks and benefits and evolution of common taxonomy and standards.

The Minister's comments assume significance as they suggest a legislation for reining in activity in cryptocurrencies, which had been included in Parliament's list of business for two sessions last year, is off the table till a global compact of some form can be firmed up.

Informing the Lok Sabha about the RBI's concerns over the adverse effects cryptocurrencies could have for the economy, Ms. Sitharaman said: "RBI mentioned that cryptocurrencies are not a currency because every modern currency needs to be issued by the central bank or Government.

Further, the value of fiat currencies is anchored by monetary policy and their status as legal tender, however the value of cryptocurrencies rests solely on the speculation and expectations of high returns that are not well anchored, so it will have a destabilising effect on the monetary and fiscal stability of a country.