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Policy Perspectives Foundation (PPF) is a non-profit, apolitical think tank on matters of national interest. PPF's activities focus on complex and interconnected challenges to peace, stability and development in India in cognizance of the external dimension. PPF is committed to spreading awareness, building capacity and promoting resilience.

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From Cash to Clicks: Digital and Financial Literacy amongst Women in India

- Manika Malhotra

Digitisation and access to the internet have brought significant benefits to people around the world, but unfortunately, Indian women still face barriers in accessing these technologies. There is a significant gap in digital literacy between men and women in India. According to a report by the Internet and Mobile Association of India (IAMAI), as of November 2021, only 37% of internet users in India are women, compared to 63% of men.

This gender gap in internet usage is one of the highest in the world

There are several reasons why this gap exists. A common challenge however, is lack of digital infrastructure. According to the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO), only 15% of households in rural India have internet access resulting in limited access to digital infrastructure, which hinders their ability to access online education, healthcare, and employment opportunities. Further, according to the latest data from the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO), the literacy rate among women in India is 70%, compared to 84% among men resulting in women having



limited knowledge and skills to access and use digital technology. Another reason for the gap is the social and cultural barriers faced by women in India. Women may face restrictions on their mobility, have limited access to public spaces, or face social stigma for using digital devices. This can limit their ability to access digital technology and participate in the digital economy. Additionally, women in India are more likely to work in the informal sector or in low-paying jobs, which may not provide them with the financial resources to purchase digital devices or access digital services.

In today's digital age, many financial transactions and activities are conducted online, such as online banking, investment management, and shopping. Therefore, having digital literacy skills is essential to being financially literate. The digital literacy gap between men and women can lead to a financial literacy gap, especially in developing countries like India. Financial literacy refers to the knowledge and skills needed to make informed financial decisions, such as managing finances, saving, investing, and accessing financial services.

With the rise of digital banking and financial services, digital literacy has become a crucial aspect of financial literacy. Women who lack digital literacy skills may have difficulty accessing financial services and products that are primarily available online, such as digital payment systems, mobile banking, and online investment platforms. This further limits their ability to manage their finances effectively and make informed financial decisions.

Furthermore, women may face additional barriers to accessing financial services, such as lack of documentation or formal identification, making it difficult for them to open bank accounts or apply for loans. Historically, financial work in India has been

dominated by men, with women having limited access to financial institutions and services. This has led to a situation where men are more likely to have bank accounts, credit cards, and access to other financial products, while women are often excluded from these services. And in present times, even an educated, working woman refuses to take control of her money and depends on their father, husband or brother for the same. It's years of conditioning that men are traditionally responsible for managing the family's finances and women have been told that they do not understand money and should stay away from it.

Financial insecurity amongst women can stem from two reasons: Firstly, many women may handle their household finances and contribute to their family's income, but still delegate the investment of money to their spouses. This can lead to a lack of control and knowledge over their own financial assets and investments, which can leave them vulnerable in the event of divorce, death of their spouse, or other unforeseen circumstances. Additionally, women who are working may not regard themselves as primary providers, which can lead them to relegate themselves to passive roles when it comes to financial decision-making. Secondly, many women may not proactively seek information that is critical to their financial well-being in later life. This can include information such as whether they are nominees in investments, whether their husbands are insured, and how they will fend for themselves during retirement. This lack of awareness and planning can leave them financially vulnerable, particularly if they are non-working women who may not have their own sources of income.

It is a common belief that men are better than women when it comes to financial dealings. However, several studies have shown that

women can be just as successful, if not more successful, than men in financial investing. For example, studies have shown that women tend to take fewer risks and make fewer impulsive decisions, which can lead to better investment outcomes in the long term.

Despite these findings, many women still face barriers to becoming more involved in financial decision-making. To spur women into taking a more proactive role in their finances, it is important to address these barriers and provide them with the resources and support they need to feel confident and empowered in making financial decisions. This can include financial education programs, access to financial advisors and resources, and changes in societal attitudes towards women and finance. There are several government and private sector initiatives that offer financial literacy programs and workshops for women. Some of these programs include:

Mahila e-Haat - an online platform launched by the Ministry of Women and Child Development that provides a direct market link for women entrepreneurs to sell their products. It also offers financial literacy and entrepreneurship training programs for women.

Another government scheme that aims to promote financial inclusion by providing bank accounts, insurance, and pension schemes to women from low-income families is the Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana (PMJDY). The scheme also offers financial literacy and awareness programs to help women manage their finances better.

Leading financial institutions offer financial literacy programs and workshops for women, including "Women's Empowerment Series" which focuses on financial planning, investing, and managing money. Leading

schemes for women entrepreneurs offered by banks include the Mudra Loan for Women, Annapurna Scheme, Stree Shakti Yojana, Dena Shakti Scheme and many others.

Through various CSR initiatives, companies operating in India are working to promote digital literacy in the country. For example, the 'Digital Sakhi' program by Tata Trusts is a literacy program aimed at empowering women with digital and financial skills. The program covers basic computer skills, financial literacy, and entrepreneurship.

Several non-profit organisations (NPOs) that provide vocational training and digital literacy programs for women. NPOs like the Anudip Foundation offer courses on financial literacy and entrepreneurship, as well. A global nonprofit organisation that focuses on providing low-income women with access to financial products and services is Women's World Banking. They offer various financial education programs, including financial literacy workshops and online courses.

To address the financial literacy gap amongst women, it is important to address the underlying issues of digital literacy, gender inequality, and access to education and financial services. It is important that policymakers prioritise digital literacy, financial literacy and skill development programs for women. By providing women with the required skills, we can help to reduce the risk of job displacement and promote greater gender equality in the workforce. Financial literacy, further can help promote gender equality by empowering women to take control of their own finances and make informed financial decisions. This can help to break down traditional gender roles and expectations, and promote greater gender equity in society. Further, women who are not initially interested in managing finances, taking small steps to understand

financial instruments can help them make informed decisions, build financial independence and protect them from financial exploitation.

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Water Stressed India

- Akoijam Meitei

Water is a precious resource, a necessity to the existence of life, and a means to development. Water stress and scarcity are rising in India and leading to a crisis situation of not having enough portable water for inhabitants. The causal factors of water crisis are population growth, socio-economic development, mismanagement of available water etc. It puts pressure on life existence, livelihood, lifestyle, economic growth and social development.

According to the United Nations (UN) the capacity of a population to safeguard sustainable access to adequate quantities of acceptable quality water for sustaining livelihood, human well-being, and socio-economic development is defined as water security.

India's growing population exerts high water demand, upsurges gap in water supply and demand and encourages competition among consumers for clean and safe water. Many cities and urban areas in India are highly water stressed. Few Indian states are water surplus while many states are water scarce regions. India's uneven water distribution affects supplies in the cities and villages. Linking water stressed scenarios with growing population and uneven water distribution simply hints more crises will follow in India. It is likely to cost more national funds towards water

management; meeting demand; and dealing with competition in future. These are some of the potential challenges to water security.

As per Falkenmark Water Stress Indicator, per capita water availability of less than 1,700 cubic metres (m³) is termed as water stress condition, while per capita water availability below 1,000 cubic metres (m³) is termed as water scarcity condition.

As per the National Institute for Transforming India (NITI) Aayog's - Water Resources Sector Report, 2021, India is classified as a water-stressed country which recorded 1486 per capita water availability (m³/year/capita) in the year 2021. India's water stress condition is at critical level, with a probability of more water scarcity regions in the future. High water stress in the metropolitan cities puts more pressure on inhabitants and management.

Five out of the 20 world's largest cities under high water stress were in India. Among cities in India, Delhi is the top city under high water stressed conditions.

Growing population induces high per capita water demand and water stress conditions in India. India's total population is almost 1.42 billion with per capita water availability decreasing year after year.

The impact of water stress is immense and affects millions of inhabitants along major river basins of India. Nearly 820 million inhabitants in 12 major river basins of India are facing high to extreme water stress. Out of this, 495 million inhabitants alone belong to the Ganga River basin which generates nearly 40% India's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) as per the NITI Aayog's Composite Water Management Index (CWMI), 2019 report.

At global level, as per Water Resources Institute (WRI)'s 2019 report – 17 countries faced extremely high-water stress, India has three times more population than the population of other 16 countries with extremely high baseline water stress combined. India ranks 13th in the national water stress rankings of 164 UN member countries.

India's per capita water availability was 1545 billion cubic metres (BCM) in 2011 but reduced to 1486 BCM in 2021 and expected to reduce further at 1367 BCM in 2031 as per the Ministry of Jal Shakti, Public Information Bureau (PIB), per capita availability of water on 2nd March 2020. The NITI Aayog in 2021, also projected India's per capita water availability would be 1376, 1282, and 1228 BCM (m³/year/capita) in the year 2031, 2041 and 2051 respectively.

The total water demand by all sectors (irrigation, drinking water, industry, energy and other) in Agriculture accounts for 80% of India's water demand, but water is also critical to its energy sector, which currently draws roughly 30 billion cubic metres of water (bcm) (the volume of water removed from a source).

India is estimated to be (low-high) 694-710 billion cubic metres (BCM), 784- 843 BCM and 973 – 1180 BCM for the year 2010, 2025 and 2050 respectively as per Report of the National Commission for Integrated Water Resources Development (NCIWRD) Vol.1, MoWR in 1999 - Integrated Water Resources Development A Plan for Action.

Inadequate per capita water availability forces inhabitants either to access unsafe water and risk life or incur more cost to access clean and safe water. It leads to health hazards and could decline per capita income

growth. Inadequate water supply and distribution brings tensions to inhabitants, disturbs social cohesion and invites chaos in the society.

As per the NITI Aayog's CWMI, 2018 report, India is suffering from the worst water crisis in its history. Millions of lives and livelihoods are under threat. Suresh Kumar Rohilla et al., 2017 report - Urban Water Sustainability (Centre for Science and Environment) revealed that 8 million children (below the age of 14) living in the urban areas of India are at risk because of poor water supply.

In the NITI Aayog, CWMI, 2019 report, India is estimated to cost 6% of GDP by 2050 due to the water crisis. It is projected that in the year 2030, demand and supply gap for the domestic and agriculture sector would stand at 50 BCM and 570 BCM respectively. As a consequence of gaps, 74% and 65% land under wheat and rice cultivation would face water scarcity; and 40% of the population would have no access to drinking water; and water demand in India would exceed supply by a factor of two.

In many cities of India, water is not properly distributed. The mega cities like Delhi and Mumbai get 150-160 Litres of water Per Capita Per Day (LPCD) while other areas in India get 40-50 LPCD. Uttar Pradesh and Himachal Pradesh are water surplus states while Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, Rajasthan and parts of Gujarat are water scarce regions.

Water stress is further exacerbated by uneven distribution, affects quality and also causes crisis. Wide scale public participation, involvement, cooperation of government agencies, policy and programme implementation etc., are lacking. There is still

time to reverse the water crisis and India needs careful planning with reliable data, policy implementation and robust political wills.

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Discovery of Lithium Reserves in J&K and What it Means

-Prince Kumar Poddar

Lithium is a valuable mineral that has gained significant importance in recent years due to its use in manufacturing electric vehicle batteries, smartphones, and other electronic gadgets. The mineral is a key component in the production of lithium-ion batteries that power most electric vehicles. Lithium is primarily mined in a few countries, including Australia, Chile, Argentina, and China. These countries are responsible for the majority of global lithium production, with Chile being the largest producer. Lithium is extracted from the brine of salt lakes, such as the Salar de Atacama in Chile and the Hombre Muerto in Argentina, or from hard-rock mines, such as the Greenbushes mine in Western Australia.

India, being one of the fastest-growing automobile markets in the world, is also the largest importer of lithium-ion batteries. However, the country has recently discovered significant lithium reserves in the union territory of Jammu and Kashmir. The Geological Survey of India in its 62th Central Geological Programming Board (CGPB) meeting held on February 9, 2023 announced the discovery of the lithium reserves along with 50 other crucial minerals across the state.

Jammu and Kashmir, the northernmost union territory of India, is rich in mineral resources. The region has a vast potential for mineral exploration, and lithium is one of the minerals found in the Salal-Haimana area of Reasi District. As per the estimates, the region has lithium reserves of about 5.9 million tonnes. The lithium reserves in the region are present in the form of hectorite, a clay mineral, which has a high concentration of lithium. It is observed that the lithium found in the region is of highest grade. The discovery of lithium reserves in the region has opened up new opportunities for India to become self-sufficient in the production of lithium-ion batteries.

Potential of Li-ion in India:

The lithium reserves found in Jammu and Kashmir have significant implications for India's energy security and the transition to a green economy. India has set a target of achieving 100% electric vehicle sales by 2030, which requires a massive increase in the production of lithium-ion batteries. India's ambitious plan to achieve net zero by 2070 can increase the demand for EVs and lithium. Also, India potentially emerging as an alternate manufacturing hub for mobile phone and other electronic devices requires an uninterrupted lithium ion and other rare earth metal.

According to NITI Aayog, the total EV sales by 2030 could go up to 80 million from the 1.3 million sales reported till July 2022. A report from the Central Electricity Authority (CEA) claims that by 2029-30 India will have 2.700 Megawatt of battery storage capacity.

Given the demand -supply gap and global supply chain disruptions caused by COVID 19 pandemic, the discovery of lithium reserves in Jammu and Kashmir provides a unique opportunity for India to reduce its

dependence on lithium imports and become self-sufficient in the production of lithium-ion batteries.

India is currently importing all components of Lithium ion battery production which drastically increase the prices of equipment manufactured with it. If the lithium ion so required is locally produced, the battery cost could be reduced by 5-7%, according to Aditya Vikram, managing director of Renon India, a lithium-ion battery manufacturer from Gujarat.

Challenges and Opportunities:

The discovery of lithium reserves in Jammu and Kashmir provides a unique opportunity for India to become self-sufficient in the production of lithium-ion batteries. However, the exploitation of lithium reserves needs a balanced approach toward the benefits and costs it may incur.

J&K is a conflict-prone area, and the exploitation of natural resources in the region has always been a sensitive issue. The mining of lithium reserves in the region can trigger a new wave of conflicts and exacerbate the existing tensions. Moreover, the mining of lithium reserves can also have significant environmental impacts, such as soil erosion, deforestation, and water pollution. Moreover, India at the moment does not have technical know-how and any experience in lithium extraction.

The processing of lithium is a complex process that involves several stages of purification, which are energy-intensive and require large quantities of water.

Therefore, India needs to adopt a cautious

approach while exploiting the lithium reserves in Jammu and Kashmir. The government needs to formulate a comprehensive policy that balances economic development with environmental sustainability and social justice. The policy should ensure that the exploitation of natural resources in the region benefits the local communities and does not lead to their displacement.

One of the policy options available for India is to adopt sustainable mining practices that minimise the environmental impact of mining activities and ensure the equitable distribution of benefits. The government can work with mining companies to implement sustainable mining practices, such as reforestation, water conservation, and soil conservation. The adoption of sustainable mining practices can reduce the environmental impact of mining activities and ensure the long-term sustainability of natural resources in the region.

Another policy option available for India is to promote local value addition. India currently imports most of its lithium-ion batteries, which leads to the outflow of foreign exchange. The government can promote local value addition by encouraging domestic manufacturing of lithium-ion batteries. The domestic manufacturing of lithium-ion batteries will not only reduce India's dependence on imports but also create employment opportunities in the country.

To promote domestic manufacturing of lithium-ion batteries, the government can provide incentives to domestic manufacturers, such as tax breaks, subsidies, and low-interest loans. The government can also invest in research and development to develop new technologies and processes for the production of lithium-ion batteries. The investment in research and development will

not only enhance India's domestic manufacturing capacity but also make the country a global leader in the production of lithium-ion batteries.

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Anti-Caste Impulse of Inter-Caste Marriages: State Society and Beyond

Policy Perspectives Foundation (PPF) organised a talk on 'Anti-Caste Impulse of Inter-Caste Marriages: State Society and Beyond' on February 27, 2023. The speaker, JNU Doctoral candidate Khushbu Sharma began by explaining how the understanding of caste as a system of social stratification where different caste groups are placed in a structure of graded inequality is borrowed from Dr. Ambedkar's work, "1969 essay Caste in India, Mechanism, Genesis and Development and Annihilation of Caste 1936."

The term graded inequality can be understood with the example of a 'ladder.' The castes are placed as the steps of the ladder where except for the uppermost and lowermost caste rest all are both the oppressor and oppressed, for the caste below them and by the caste above them respectively. This is a fundamental principle of caste. The other fundamental principle of caste, which is beautifully explained by Dr. Ambedkar states that - in this entire structure of graded inequality one has an extending scale of reverence and distending scale of contempt.

Caste Endogamy:

The most important thing to maintain the

caste structure is to maintain the caste boundaries. There should be no intermingling between different castes. If we reduce caste then the common minimal principle would be maintenance of Caste endogamy. Thus, Caste endogamy is essential for maintenance of the entire caste structure. Ill practices such as honour killings or harassment of couples are generally done by the caste groups which are higher in the caste group because they have so much to lose such as the notion of purity, the control over material resources, the control over intellectual resources, threat of getting their caste lineage polluted from so called "external polluted blood" etc. It is seen that the matter of caste and gender is essentially connected in our South-Asian subcontinent.

Origin of Caste Endogamy:

According to Dr. Ambedkar, social groups with material and intellectual resources in order to maintain their privileges introduced the principle of caste endogamy and stated that "we will marry only with our own kind". Ambedkar states that, "some closed the doors and others found the doors closed". Due to this, the rest of them by following the law of imitation did the same which resulted in the non-inter-mingling of many castes. This is how the principle of caste endogamy is essential to the maintenance of the caste structure.

It is said that inter-caste marriages have become very common nowadays even when we do not have any proper data or statistics backing the same. According to Indian Human Development Survey II (2011-12) only 4.8% were inter-caste marriages in India.

National Crime Record Bureau (NCRB) after the year 2016 stopped publishing data on

honour killings stating they don't find the data reliable. Most of the honour killings cases go unreported or get settled outside of the courts due to which they do not appear in the NCRB data.

Honour killings are the extreme manifestation of the anger that grows out of anti-caste marriages. Apart from honour killings, there are multiple ways in which people who opt for inter caste marriage are discriminated against, segregated, and marginalised on an everyday basis. They are denied basic facilities, for example they do not get a house on rent, especially when the wife belongs to a caste higher in hierarchy than the husband. Apart from this, they suffer from discrimination from family, relatives and village panchayats and also from the new emerging institutions, who claim that what they have done is against the Indian culture due to which they suffer harassment on everyday basis. Along with all this, they are also discriminated against by the state, the state also discriminates against the people who undertake inter-caste marriages.

Role of Social and Political Power historically in Inter caste marriages:

According to Manu, any kind of intermixing between people belonging to different caste groups was essentially prohibited. King was given the authority to maintain social order and social structure, which is caste, gender, etc. The king had the power to punish the culprit but the punishment varied from caste to caste. There was a distinction between "hypergamy and hypogamy". When a man belonging to higher caste order marries a woman belonging to a lower caste order than him it is known as hypergamy. And hypogamy is just the opposite to it. Hypergamy was relatively

acceptable by the king and the society; it was also an indicator of the fact there was a reach of upper-caste men to the bodies of lower-caste women. But the sexuality of upper caste women was restricted for the lower caste men; they were denied all kinds of access whether physical or emotional. Punishment in the cases of hypogamy was essentially very harsh leading to the public execution of both the men and women. Sadly, this practice continued from ancient times till colonial times.

In the late 19th century, many reforms were seen against these social practices. "Satyashodhak Samaj", was started by Jyoti Rao Phule and Savitri Bai Phule in order to end the practice of "kanyadaan" which means donating a girl, and the idea of same caste marriage. The first Satyashodhak marriage was between Sita Ram Alhat and Radha Bai on 25th of December 1873 in Pune. It was a great political and social statement made by the Phule's in the late 19th century.

Later, we also see similar efforts made in South India by Periyar in the form of the "Self-Respect Movement". They believed that people should not be bound to marry in the same caste and along with it they also believed that some rituals in marriage are very patriarchal in nature and some of them are even caste-biased e.g., mangalsutra, sindoor, etc. as they indicate women's slavery. He believed that when two people are coming together, they should come as companions, not as the slave of the other. The Self-Respect Movement didn't support the authority of a priest in the wedding; they believed the fact that two people want to live together by marrying should be the only required condition; there shall be no need to get it solemnised by any religious or brahminical ritual. Later on, in 1967 C N Annadurai's government legalised this practice and it is still continuing in the state of

Tamil Nadu.

Political Domain:

The colonial government brought the ACT III of 1872 after the request from Bramho-Samaj to allow inter-caste marriage to bring change in the society. But this act received huge backlash from a group of conservatives which resulted in its amendment. Due to this, there was a binary that one can either undertake inter-caste marriage or one can be a Hindu, one cannot be both. This signified how fundamental caste structure is to the idea of Hinduism. This was a very significant entry point towards legislating more and more on the issue of inter-caste marriage.

Later on, it was also seen that judgement on the issues of inter-caste marriage in the courts were given as per the local customs, there was no prominent law for it. In 1954, after the coming of Hindu Marriage Act all inter-caste marriages became legal.

Present role of State in Inter-caste marriage:

Even in the present time when so many years have passed since the passing of the Hindu Marriage Act the state still tries to overwrite itself in so many instances in order to create hurdles or to stop such practices. Few instances are mentioned below.

In the Hindu Marriage Act it is nowhere mentioned that the couples registering their marriages need to show the registrar their wedding card or their picture along with their parents, etc. But the state institutions use all these techniques to delay or block the marriage process.

In the cases of the Special Marriage Act, it

is seen that the couples have to give thirty days' notice period during which their pictures are hung on the office notice board and even gets circulated, this raises the risk of the family or institutions who are against these types of marriages to stop it. This also gives rise to a security threat to the couples.

Many schemes encourage inter-caste marriages, especially Dr. Ambedkar Scheme for Social Integration through Inter-Caste Marriages 2013. Yearly 500 volunteers from Ambedkar Foundation give the sum of 2.5 lakhs either to males or females belonging to scheduled castes in order to make their life easier. This amount can only be given to them if they bring a letter of recommendation signed by their local representative. But this causes a threat to those who have eloped from their homes. The state should take situations like these into consideration as well. In a survey, it was found that many beneficiaries were targeted for caste-based reasons by the distributors of this aid. They alleged that the bureaucracy is very casteist. In terms of numbers in the year 2015-16 out of 500 only 19 people, in the year 2018-19 only 120 couples, in 2019-20 only 248 people, in 2020-21 only 353 people got this aid. It can be said that even after so many years the state is not able to achieve the vision of such schemes.

These things make states' constitutional legal mandates very problematic. State plays a very contradictory role in terms of inter-caste marriages. On one hand the courts say it is a fundamental right and people should be free to do it, there should be more and more shelter homes/protection homes for the vulnerable. There should be proper law against honour killing as its nature is very different from the cases of normal killing, etc. And on the other hand people undertaking inter-caste marriage have to go through a lot because of the state, for example hurdles

faced in the registrar's office, even in the court they have to face many challenges, cases of custodial violence is also not alien to us in such cases. All these factors are used to take away this fundamental right of inter-caste marriage.

Inter-caste marriages are a very essential condition for dismantling caste structures but they are not sufficient conditions. All of us need to think what more could be done towards dismantling the oppressive caste structure and how can it be eventually annihilated.

Global Rankings - Biassed Perspectives and 'Mind Games'

- Vaishali Basu Sharma

The 2023 'World Happiness Report' has been released and India has been ranked at 126th position out of 137 countries. Published by the Sustainable Development Solutions Network to the United Nations (UN) these rankings are based on data from the Gallup World Poll, which measures how happy citizens perceive themselves to be. Webster dictionary defines happiness as a state of well being and contentment so an obvious problem with measuring happiness is that it means something different to different people. Yet Finland, almost always, remains the happiest country in the world, followed by Denmark, Iceland, Netherlands Sweden, Norway, Switzerland, Luxembourg and Israel. Apparently crisis ridden Sri Lanka and inflation hit Pakistan are happier than India. As is in China despite the evidence of rare protests breaking out in multiple cities against the government's zero-covid policy. And oddly 'happiness'

even for countries at war, Russia and Ukraine, has been ranked higher than India in the World Happiness Report, with Russia ranked 70th and Ukraine ranked 92nd. During an event in Bengaluru, External Affairs Minister Dr S Jaishankar dismissed the report and said that he "does not understand the method" to find these indexes which are clearly "mind games."

A similar gloomy picture is painted by other international think tanks. Sweden-based Varieties of Democracy Institute (V-Dem) had said that India has joined the ranks of Afghanistan, Brazil and Myanmar in "witnessing the most dramatic increases" in political polarisation. V-Dem categorises India as one of the "worst autocratisers" of the last decade. The annual report by Freedom House, the Washington-based pro-democracy think tank and watchdog rated India 'partially free' its report for a third straight year, with a cumulative score of 66 out of 100, on parameters such as political rights and civil liberties. The Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), a division of UK's Economist Group categorised India as a "flawed democracy" in its 'Democracy Index.' Is there robust evidence that democracy is in decline in India? What is the measure of democracy?

Sociologist Dr Salvatore Babones of the University of Sydney believes that India is an 'extraordinarily successful democracy.' At the India Today Conclave in Mumbai in November 2022, he said that, "India is the world's biggest democratic success story. It is the only postcolonial well-institutionalised democracy." He has argued that in a statistical sense, India being the world's 'largest' democracy is irrelevant because democracy is unrelated to country size. The relevant factor for India is that it is the world's 'poorest' democracy. If we take peaceful transfer of power with free and transparent elections, as the most basic measures of democracy then

India can be categorised as a well institutionalised democracy. It is the only democracy in the world with a GDP per head of less than about \$10000. Other democracies at these levels of income exist in eastern Europe which became independent only about three decades ago, and had to become democratic in order to join the European union. Truly, unambiguously indigenously developed democracies then exist in the West. India is also the world's only post colonial state to remain a democracy throughout its entire 75 years of independence.

Indices have gained favour in the past two decades as indicators of regional and national growth of a country, and have become widely popular symbols of multidimensional welfare. These indices are built on a set of indicators using the most recent published articles. Data is then usually submitted for an handpicked 'expert' consultation to validate the ascribed rankings, but not necessarily alter them. Scandinavian countries Denmark, Iceland, Netherlands Sweden, Norway invariably top the indices. That poor, developing countries tend to be at the bottom of these rankings is no longer surprising. It becomes pertinent to ask whether these indices reflect generalisations based on a small number of widely published but non representative media articles?

Rankings have significant limitations when it comes to recognising the achievements of countries beyond the Anglosphere. For instance, the Global Hunger Index 2022 released by Concern Worldwide and Welt Hunger Hilfe, Non-Government Organisations from Ireland and Germany

respectively, has ranked India at 107 among 121 countries. The report chooses to deliberately ignore efforts made by the Government to ensure food Security for the population especially during the Covid Pandemic. Three out of the four indicators used for calculation of the index are related to the health of Children and cannot be representative of the entire population. The fourth indicator estimate of proportion of undernourished population is based on an opinion poll conducted on a very small sample size of 3000, in which respondents were asked questions like 'During the last 12 months, was there a time when, because of lack of money or other resources: You were worried you would not have enough food to eat? You ate less than you thought you should?'

Another example is the Climate Change Performance Index (CCPI) 2023 which has ranked India in 8th place. India is the only G20 country in the top ten climate change performers in this index the first three ranks were purposely kept left out as no country performed well enough to be placed as first, second or third, Denmark And Sweden were placed on fourth and fifth place respectively. Compare this to the Environment performance index 2022, measured by Yale and Columbia University which has ranked India at the very bottom of the list at 180, after Vietnam (178), Bangladesh (177), and Pakistan (176). The dichotomy in the ratings indicates a clear unscientific bias in the methodology.

Human Development Index for 2021-22 released by the UN developed program UNDP, India was ranked 132nd out of 191 countries. World Press Freedom Index, 2022 released by Reporters Without Borders ranked India at 150th out of 180 countries. Even Hong Kong, where Beijing has led a brutal crackdown to punish critics and silence dissenters, fundamentally altering the life for Hong Kongers, ranks above India at 148.

Organisations that build indexes are reluctant to share the data through which they arrive at their conclusions. The Union government tried to engage with the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) which has ranked India on the 53rd spot and as a 'flawed democracy' seeking details on the parameters used in the rankings. However, according to a report in the media, the EIU did not share the methodology adopted to deduce the rankings. Most of these rankings can be criticised on methodological ground with the need to improve indicators and the underlying calculative operations. There is a possibility that growth systematically mis-measured or measured less reliability for developing countries. For instance, growth is more volatile in countries where agriculture constitutes a large part of the economy. Numerous index designs have been put forward, yet little is understood about their reliability. Ideally an index construction involves decisions related to indice selection, scale of analysis, measurement errors, data transformation and weighting - each of which is imbued with uncertainty due to decisions made by the index developer.

Rankings hold interest for multiple audiences, and whether we think they should, or not it seems there is an appetite for them. Factors like culture, language and resources strongly influence the rankings and buttress the dominance of the global north. The only remarkable thing about

these global rankings is that they are so unremarkable, reinforcing our intuitive expectation that European, especially Scandinavian countries rank high, and countries from the global south figure lower.

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