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Farmers saved over Rs 50 lakh crore through five central schemes: PM Modi

AHMEDABAD: Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Friday claimed that farmers across the country had received or saved more than Rs 50 lakh crore through five major government schemes and policy decisions over the past few years.Addressing a large farmers' gathering in Banaskantha, Gujarat, he highlighted direct financial transfers, fertiliser subsidies, minimum support price (MSP) payments and crop insurance, while targeting previous governments for neglecting small farmers.Modi said his government had placed farmers, particularly small cultivators, at the centre of its policies. He said farmers with small landholdings account for more than 85 per cent of the country's farming population."Since independence, the needs of these small-scale farmers were never understood, and they were never even consulted," Modi said.Highlighting the financial assistance extended to farmers, the Prime Minister said the agricultural budget had increased more than fivefold compared with 2013-14. Under the PM Kisan Samman Nidhi, nearly Rs 4.5 lakh crore had been transferred directly to farmers' bank accounts, he said. On Friday, more than Rs 18,000 crore was released to nearly 10 crore farmers, including over 50 lakh beneficiaries in Gujarat.Taking aim at previous governments over fertiliser prices and MSP, Modi claimed that the Centre had spent nearly Rs 16 lakh crore to shield farmers from rising fertiliser costs. He further said wheat and paddy farmers had received Rs 24 lakh crore through MSP payments over the past 12 years.Under the PM Fasal Bima Yojana, farmers had received more than Rs 2 lakh crore in compensation for crop losses, he said. The PM-KUSUM scheme had provided around 12 lakh solar-powered pumps, reducing farmers' dependence on diesel and electricity.Beyond financial assistance, Modi highlighted the use of science and technology in agriculture, citing 26 crore Soil Health Cards and nearly 3,000 new climate-resilient seed varieties.He also emphasised animal husbandry as a driver of rural prosperity. Referring to a new research centre in Banaskantha, he said it would strengthen indigenous breeds such as Gir, Sahiwal and Kankrej through scientific breeding and modern reproductive technologies, including IVF.Modi said nearly 150 crore livestock vaccine doses had been administered under the nationwide vaccination programme, benefiting eight crore farmers. India's average daily milk yield had increased from less than five litres in 2013-14 to around eight litres, he claimed.The Prime Minister also highlighted the potential of bio-CNG, fisheries and beekeeping, saying honey production had doubled over 12 years.The event, which featured development projects worth more than Rs 14,000 crore, also marked 25 years of Modi's public service. Recalling his early days as Gujarat Chief Minister, he said he had held his first major public welfare event in Deesa in 2001 and described Banaskantha as the starting point of his political journey in the state.

'Did we use pellet guns': Sibal slams Rijiju for citing 2011 remarks on anti-UPA protest

NEW DELHI: Rajya Sabha MP Kapil Sibal on Friday hit back at Union Minister Kiren Rijiju after he shared a 2011 video of the senior advocate speaking about the right to protest, saying the Congress-led UPA government had never stopped people from protesting or used pellet guns and lathi-charge against demonstrators.Rijiju had shared the video on Thursday. In it, Sibal was speaking at a press conference during the India Against Corruption movement against the then UPA government."Right to protest is not the right to protest at the place of your choice," Sibal had said.Sharing the clip, Rijiju called Sibal a "Dimagi Naxal" and alleged that he had exposed the Congress's "secrets" and criticised Rahul Gandhi."Kapil Sibal is a 'Dimagi Naxal', but he's very skilled at exposing the Congress Party's secrets! He's thoroughly torn Rahul Gandhi to shreds. Now, Congress Party & Cockroaches will listen to the advice of their Legal Guru," he said.In another post on Friday, Rijiju asked journalists to question Sibal about whether laws governing protests had changed after 2014 or whether he had created a separate Constitution for himself and the Congress.Rejecting Rijiju's claim that the UPA government had opposed protests, Sibal asked whether the government had used lathi-charge or pellet guns against demonstrators.

Meddlesome and more

U.S. President Donald Trump has been entangled in a quagmire of his own making when, in a joint press conference in Helsinki, Finland, last week with Russian President Vladimir Putin, he refused to accuse Russia of meddling in the 2016 U.S. presidential election (despite allegations by all intelligence agencies in the U.S.). Widespread condemnation of his refusal to endorse the findings of U.S. intelligence agencies has compelled him to walk back his statements at Helsinki. Yet, critics of the President conveniently forget that it was only 15 years ago that these same intelligence agencies fraudulently claimed that Iraq's Saddam Hussain had weapons of mass destruction.

Two further points are lost in the firestorm of protests over the press conference. First, there is no instance that I can recall when journalists have accused one president especially a President of a state as large and powerful as Russia of interfering in the elections of another country in a joint press conference between the two Presidents. In joint press conferences, one head of government is not typically called on to label the other head of government a liar. Rather than discussing global issues, ranging from nuclear disarmament to conflicts in Syria and the Ukraine, journalists were focussed on a domestic issue in the U.S.

Of course, whether Mr. Trump should have gone to Helsinki to meet Mr. Putin at all amidst these allegations is another issue. Perhaps the closest parallel was the 1960 Paris summit between the leaders of France, the U.K., the U.S. and the USSR after the U.S. had lied that its spy plane that had been shot down over the USSR had been a weather plane. Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev's outburst there against U.S. President Dwight Eisenhower led to a collapse of the summit. Second, and more importantly, setting aside Mr. Trump's remarks at Helsinki, the moral outrage that Russia had subomed the democratic process in the 2016 election breathtakingly ignores the very many times the U.S. has interfered in the elections of other countries and even ousted democratically-elected governments.

In Russia itself when there was a fear that the Communist Party candidate, Gennady Zyuganov (who had received 32% of the vote in the first round of voting in 1996 to Boris Yeltsin's 35%), would win the presidency. U.S. President Bill Clinton pushed the International Monetary Fund to loan $10.2 billion some months before the election and sent a team of political consultants to help the Russian incumbent. Yeltsin's popularity had plummeted as he had implemented the 'shock therapy' advocated by the U.S. and other western advisers and this had led to the evaporation of social protections as deindustrialisation swept across that vast land and the life expectancy of men and women fell from 64 and 74 years to 58 and 71 years between 1991 and 1994.

In an interview with Megyn Kelly earlier this year, Mr. Putin said that U.S. officials did not even deny that they meddled in Russian elections because they said that they were "entitled" to do so as they were "spreading democracy" while the Russians were not. Indeed, Don Levin of Carnegie Mellon University had found that beginning with the Italian elections of 1948, the U.S. interfered in elections in other countries 81 times between then and 2000. In Italy, Mark Wyatt, a Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) operative admitted that they "threw everything including the kitchen sink" to help the Christian Democrats come to power and prevent a Communist Party victory. This included consultants to run political campaigns, subsiding "pork" projects, and threatening to end U.S. aid if the Communists were to come to power. And that was not the only instance of U.S. meddling in Italian elections.

Similarly, earlier this year, The New York Times quoted Loch Johnson, another CIA agent, saying that the U.S has been interfering in elections ever since the creation of the intelligence agency: "We've used posters, pamphlets, mailers, banners…We've planted false information in foreign newspapers. We've used what the British call 'King George's cavalry': suitcases of cash."

Some of the other more notable instances of U.S. meddling in foreign elections to say nothing of the overthrow of democratically elected governments like that of Mohammad Mosaddegh in Iran, Jacobo Árbenz in Guatemala or Salvador Allende in Chile have been in the Chilean elections of 1964, the failed 1986 attempt to defeat Jean-Bertrand Aristide in Haiti, in the Nicaraguan and Czechoslovak elections of 1990, the 2000 elections in Serbia, and the Afghan elections of 2009. Election meddling is nothing new. Mr. Levine's study also shows that the USSR/ Russia intervened at least 36 times in overseas elections between 1946 and 2000.

Indeed, the U.S. government today sponsors several agencies such as the National Endowment for Democracy to influence foreign elections. It granted $23,000 in 2006 to a political adversary of Mr. Putin and two years ago $6.8 million to anti-Putin organisations in Russia. Rather than allowing foreign populations to freely exercise their will, these interventions were designed to advance the foreign policy objectives of the U.S.

The current moral outrage in the U.S. of Russian meddling in elections stems also because since the end of the Cold War, mainstream broadcast media have largely balked at airing the viewpoints of foreign adversaries. Whereas in the 1970s and 1980s, Russians, Palestinians, even Iraqi officials in the run-up to the first Gulf War were regulars on U.S. television networks and news shows, now what passes for 'opposition' views is someone from the party not in the White House.

If such foreign voices had been given airtime, the alleged election interference by the Russians would have been placed in a broader context.

Recognising the long history of states meddling in elections does not of course mean that it should be accepted much less condoned. But it is not the meddling in elections that states have long practised that is at issue here. The indignation over Mr. Trump's refusal to accept the assessments of U.S. intelligence agencies stems primarily because he is undermining a foreign policy consensus in Washington to muscle into the power vacuum in Central and West Asia created by the demise of the Soviet Union.

In early 2014, transcripts of a phone call between then Assistant Secretary of State, Victoria Nuland and the U.S. Ambassador to the Ukraine, Geoffrey Pyatt in which they discuss the makeup of the Ukrainian government after the impending ouster of President Viktor Yanukovych were released on YouTube, presumably by Russian intelligence. That Mr. Obama's Assistant Secretary had previously served as U.S. Vice President Dick Cheney's chief foreign policy adviser and U.S. President George W. Bush's ambassador to the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation underlines a consensus between Republicans and Democrats on foreign policy and it is this consensus that Mr. Trump is now disrupting.

Mr. Trump's focus is on a trade war with China, the European Union, and with Canada and Mexico. This is what plays to his base supporters even though his argument that these states take away jobs from the U.S. is spurious. Nevertheless, the strategic counterpart of this policy is a détente with Russia. It is this fundamental policy difference that is being occluded by the outrage over Mr. Trump's apparent acceptance of Russian claims of innocence in Helsinki.

Looking for a new clarity

The Supreme Court, this past month, provided us with a useful reminder about its worth to our constitutional democracy. Its intervention in the imbroglio over government formation in Karnataka was flawless. The hearings conducted in the early hours of the morning may have been theatrical, but the court's ultimate decision certainly helped avert a subversion of the Constitution. Yet, much as its decision here deserves appreciation, we must be careful not to allow any ascription of credit to veil the deeper wounds that afflict it, for a litany of problems continues to strike at the court's independence.

Three of these are especially salient. The first involves the rejection by the government of the collegium's recommendation of K.M. Joseph, currently Chief Justice of the Uttarakhand High Court, for elevation to the Supreme Court. The second concerns the need for a systemic mechanism to deal with allegations of corruption in the higher judiciary. The third area of worry concerns the embroiled state of Chief Justice of India Dipak Misra, his position as the master of the roster, and the critical question of whether such powers ought to be vested in the hands of one individual.

At first glance, these issues might strike us as unique to the times that we live in, as examples of crises that will eventually pass. But, on closer examination, it becomes clearer that these are, in fact, recurring problems left unaddressed for decades. In trying to resolve the issues, therefore, we must ask ourselves how we got here. As A.G. Noorani recently wrote in Frontline magazine ("Crisis in Judiciary," May 11, 2018): "We have not reached the nadir all of a sudden. The decline was long in process."

In his seminal book, America's Unwritten Constitution: The Precedents and Principles We Live By, Akhil Reed Amar points to how the written constitution often invites us to heed what's unwritten, which in turn, he writes, "refers us back in various ways to its written counterpart. Like the Chinese symbols yin and yang, America's written Constitution and America's unwritten Constitution form two halves of one whole, with each half gesturing toward the other."

India's Constitution is possibly the longest written constitution in the world, but it too leaves much unsaid. Take, for example, Article 124. It states that judges of the Supreme Court shall be appointed by the President, after consultation with certain authorities, including the CJI. But it does not tell us how these consultations are to be made, or what criteria ought to be applied in deciding who becomes a judge.

Filling these voids, therefore, requires the building of conventions that nonetheless maintain a fidelity to the written word. In 1977, in Union of India v. Sankalchand Sheth, the Supreme Court sought to do precisely this, when it ruled that the word "consultation" can never mean "concurrence". But yet it held in the same case that the President can depart from the CJI's opinion, in making a transfer or an appointment, as the case may be, only in exceptional circumstances. And when the government does so, it must, wrote Justice V.R. Krishna Iyer, in his concurring opinion, be prepared to establish in court that it possessed "cogent and convincing reasons" for rejecting the CJI's advice. As a result, in a bid to secure judicial independence, the court, as H.M. Seervai wrote, had read into the Constitution "a requirement which is not there, but which is implicit in the whole object of providing for consultation with the Chief Justice of India."

Unfortunately, though, the court has in a series of cases rendered the verdict in Sheth nugatory. The informed wisdom of Justice Krishna Iyer has been replaced by the undemocratic excesses of the "collegium system". This method grants primacy to the judiciary (specifically to the CJI and his four most senior colleagues) in choosing its own members but allows government the power to reject recommendations on any ground whatsoever, with only one caveat: if the collegium were to re-recommend the same name, the government is obligated to accept the proposition.

Now, in the present environment, for the immediate purposes, there is no doubt that the collegium must re-recommend Justice Joseph's name, to protect at least a veneer of the court's independence. But this still begs the question, what happens if the government vacillates in conforming Justice Joseph's elevation even after such a re-recommendation?

In all of this, therefore, one thing has become abundantly clear: the collegium system is simply unworkable. Its ills are plain to see. It's not only opaque and inequitable, containing not a single constitutionally provided check or balance, but it has done nothing to either improve the judiciary's independence or provide a seamless system of elevating well-qualified persons to the bench.

Efforts to introduce a judicial appointments commission have already been scuttled, after the court struck down the 99th constitutional amendment. But the trend across liberal, constitutional democracies is towards such a commission. Hence, what we need now is a renewed debate on how to reshape the composition of a potential judicial appointments panel, which will preserve, in some regards, the judiciary's primacy (which the Supreme Court now enjoins us to do), while also divorcing its membership completely from the executive.

Simultaneously, as we make an endeavour to be rid of the collegium system, we must also work towards putting in place an independent mechanism to deal with allegations of corruption in the judiciary. The quandary on how to guard the autonomy of the court while ensuring judges remain accountable is age-old. The Roman satirist Juvenal famously asked, Quis custodiet ipsos custodes? (Who will guard the guardians themselves?) Impeachment, as Ronald Dworkin wrote in the context of American Presidents, is a "constitutional nuclear weapon". It ought to be restricted only to the grimmest of emergencies. But, in India, absent any other apparatus to inquire into a charge of judicial corruption, it becomes the only viable option. We must, therefore, strive to find a device that will straddle our concerns for the judiciary's autonomy with a necessity for greater fairness and transparency. Any claim made against a judge of dishonesty, howsoever trivial, must be investigated by a properly constituted panel, which ought to be granted a status separate from all three established wings of government.

Finally, the CJI's position as the "master of the roster" requires serious rethinking.

Slimming surgery puts women at risk of life-threatening condition

Ladies, you may want to rethink going under the knife as according to a recent study, liposuction puts you at the risk of developing a rare genetic condition that can lead to fat globules entering their lungs. Liposuction is a technique in cosmetic surgery for removing excess fat from under the skin by suction. According to researchers, the condition, known as fat embolism syndrome (FES), is a rare but very serious complication, in which fat travels through the body and blocks blood vessels, but it is notoriously difficult to recognise and diagnose.

The team found that a 45-year-old woman developed a serious life threatening condition after having liposuction. The authors stressed that liposuction is generally a safe procedure, but it is important for doctors to consider diagnosis of FES, especially in patients with underlying risk factors, such as high body mass index (BMI) and fluid retention (lymphoedema). Shortly after the procedure, the woman became drowsy and confused and had a high heart rate. Her condition worsened as she was transferred to intensive care where the doctors suspected that she had dangerously low oxygen levels in her body (acute respiratory distress syndrome).

After further tests, the doctors realised that her symptoms pointed to FES. The woman remained in hospital and was given oxygen and drugs to help with her heart rate and her breathing. "FES is a difficult condition to initially diagnose," the authors noted. "What makes it even harder is the lack of a standardised set of diagnostic criteria to assist the clinician in making the diagnosis," they explained. The research appears in the British Medical Journal Case Reports

Detecting prostate cancer through urine sample

Researchers at the University of Texas at San Antonio are working towards developing a non-invasive method to detect prostate cancer through urine sample. Since cells from the prostate are shed into urine naturally, the new method, which aims to make use of a novel microscope based on a photonic crystal bio-sensor, could offer a more accurate diagnosis. "The system we are developing utilises a sensitive bio-sensor, which allows us to distinguish cancer cells from normal cells based on a unique feature of the cells," said Jing Yong Ye, Professor of Biomedical Engineering at University of Texas at San Antonio (UTSA).

"If you can detect a cancer cell, you're starting from a more precise place and you can give a more accurate diagnosis," he added in a statement released by UTSA. To support the development of this non-invasive method of detecting prostate cancer, the US National Institutes of Health's National Cancer Institute has offered Ye a two-year grant of $354,617. The new method could significantly improve accuracy compared to the approach used in current clinical practice. Prostate cancer is the second most prevalent type of cancer, and the third leading cause of cancer-related deaths, in men. Early detection is key to survival, which is why doctors are required to screen all men over the age of 50 for the disease.

To screen patients for prostate cancer, medical professionals take a blood sample and look for prostate-specific antigen (PSA). If a high level of PSA is found, the patient is suspected to have prostate cancer and required to have a prostate biopsy. Unfortunately, PSA tests are far from providing satisfactory diagnoses and result in a large number of unnecessary prostate biopsies due to a high false-positive rate. This is because PSA elevation may also occur in men with infection and chronic inflammation or benign prostatic hyperplasia.

"False positive diagnoses are very common in prostate cancer tests," Ye said. "As a result, a patient may undergo a biopsy he doesn't need, which is painful and could cause an infection. Also, because prostate cancer is highly heterogeneous and even multi-core prostate biopsy only samples a few local areas, it can easily be missed by clinicians," he added. Since about 70 percent of men who go through the biopsy process are found to be cancer-free, Ye wanted to look for a better way. "We need to use every weapon in our arsenal to attack this disease," Ye said. "It's important to think outside the box and use innovation to address these critical issues," he added.

Eating dark chocolates may prevent diabetes

Love to gorge on dark chocolates? According to a study, compounds found in cocoa – the main ingredient of chocolate – can actually help prevent as well as treat diabetes. The findings showed that cocoa compound named epicatechin monomers helps the body release more insulin and responds to increased blood glucose better. When a person has diabetes, their body either does not produce enough insulin or does not process blood sugar properly, because of the failure of beta cells, which produce insulin. However, the study found that the increased presence of epicatechin monomers helped beta cells to remain stronger as well as enhanced their ability to secrete insulin.

"What happens is epicatechin monomers is protecting the cells, increasing their ability to deal with oxidative stress," said lead author Jeffery Tessem, assistant professor at Brigham Young University (BYU), US. "The epicatechin monomers are making the mitochondria in the beta cells stronger, which produces more ATP (a cell's energy source), which then results in more insulin being released," Tessem added.

For the study, published in the Journal of Nutritional Biochemistry, the team first fed the cocoa compound to animals on a high-fat diet. The results showed that by adding it to the high-fat diet, the compound would decrease the level of obesity in the animals and would increase their ability to deal with increased blood glucose levels. "These results will help us get closer to using these compounds more effectively in foods or supplements to maintain normal blood glucose control and potentially even delay or prevent the onset of Type-2 diabetes," said study co-author Andrew Neilson, assistant professor at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University.

Australia launches 'thunderstorm asthma' warning system

A year after a freak "thunderstorm asthma" outbreak killed nine and led to thousands being hospitalised in the southern Australian city of Melbourne, the Victorian state government on Sunday launched a world-first alert system to prevent a similar disaster in the future. On November 21 last year, a freak event occurred where heavy rain affected pollens in the air, killing nine asthmatics and affecting thousands more, forcing the government to spend more than Australian $15 million ($12 million) in developing a warning system.

On Sunday, Victorian Health Minister Jill Hennessy said the new system would keep authorities ahead of the threat, Xinhua news agency reported. "The great challenge with thunderstorm asthma and epidemic thunderstorm asthma was its scale, its severity, and the fact that we did not have a prediction system in place which would enable us to understand what was coming," she said . Meanwhile, Paul Holman, spokesperson for Ambulance Victoria, said that last year caught both asthma sufferers and authorities off-guard, and the new warning system - which takes data from five new monitoring locations - takes into account pollen levels across the city and weather conditions.

"We never envisaged being overwhelmed (last year), we never envisaged not having ambulances to send to emergencies, we never envisaged not being able to answer (emergency) calls," Holman told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) on Sunday. "We didn't have a process to tell people that we couldn't come and we couldn't attend and give them the right advice." "What we had in effect was a major hazardous material, a HazMat, a gas laden with toxic material hitting a whole range of people." The warning system will be active on a website and through a phone app, and will alert users to potentially devastating weather events before they occur.

A failure of governance

The publication of Mr. Gupta's allegations in a newspaper in March this year raised a storm. On March 28, the Chairman of ICICI Bank's Board, M.K. Sharma, issued a statement expressing the board's full confidence in Ms. Kochhar. In April, media reports said that Mr. Sharma had carried out an internal inquiry in 2016 itself and had found no evidence of wrongdoing on Ms. Kochhar's part. End of story, or so the ICICI Bank board would have liked. However, the controversy would not die down. Investors and media analysts have been relentlessly pressing the board for a better response. Following charges made by a whistle-blower, the board has now authorised the chairman of the Audit Committee to select an appropriate person to head an independent probe. Three questions arise. First, after having stood steadfastly by its CEO for over two months, why has the board opted for a probe now? Second, is a probe by an outsider required at all? Third, should Ms. Kochhar continue in office during the period of the inquiry?

Finally, finally, the board of ICICI Bank has ordered a probe into allegations levelled against its CEO, Chanda Kochhar. Does this call for a celebration? No, it doesn't. The probe comes rather late in the day. And the board is having to refer the matter to an outsider only because of its own inadequate response to the initial set of charges made nearly two years ago. These constitute lapses in governance at a bank that has been characterised as "systemically important" by the regulator.

On May 30, the board of directors of ICICI Bank announced that it had ordered an inquiry by an outsider into allegations made by a whistle-blower. These allegations are not to be confused with the ones made by an investor, Arvind Gupta, in 2016. Mr. Gupta had then written to the Prime Minister, with copies to the Governor of the Reserve Bank of India and the Chairperson of the Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI), among others.

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The decision to go in for a probe is clearly prompted by widespread dissatisfaction with the clean chit given by the Chairman last March. It is also possible that the board has been rattled by show-cause notices issued by SEBI on May 24. According to media reports, the notices relate to alleged violation of disclosure requirements on the part of both Ms. Kochhar and ICICI Bank. If the violations are established, the bank could be subject to monetary penalties and the associated reputational damage.

However, the key question, as one veteran banker pointed out to me, is whether an inquiry conducted by an outsider is at all necessary in such a case. Let us recount the salient facts in brief. In April 2012, ICICI Bank made a loan of ?3,250 crore to the Videocon group. Ms. Kochhar was the bank's CEO at the time. Mr. Gupta's letter to the PM had said that Ms. Kochhar's husband had had a business partnership with the Videocon group prior to the sanction of the ICICI loan. There would thus be a clear conflict of interest in Ms. Kochhar being party to the sanction of a loan to Videocon.

The issue at the heart of the controversy is simple enough: did Ms. Kochhar disclose the conflict of interest to the board and recuse herself from all matters concerning Videocon? If she did not do so, it is sufficient ground for the board to ask Ms. Kochhar to step down as CEO. It is not necessary to establish a quid pro quo in the relationship for the board to decide whether Ms. Kochhar should step down. That is a separate matter to be pursued by the law enforcement authorities. Non-disclosure of conflict of interest and non-recusal are grave enough lapses. The line that various people, including government officials, have been putting out "let us await the outcome of investigations" is sheer evasion.

No deep probe, no forensic analysis, no great legal expertise is required to answer the elementary question posed above. The board of directors is perfectly competent to answer it by having the relevant documents placed before it.

That is what the board should have done in March when the controversy erupted. The drama that has unfolded since is uncalled for and could have been avoided if only the board had done the right thing earlier.

Some of the other arguments made in defence of the CEO amount to a red herring drawn by interested parties. For instance, Mr. Sharma has defended Ms. Kochhar on the ground that ICICI Bank had assumed a share of only 10% of the total loan given by a consortium of banks and the loan itself had been made in accordance with the bank's norms. This does not wash. It is not that a conflict of interest arises only when a loan is made in violation of norms; the conflict does not go away even when the loan decision is in conformity with norms.

The conflict of interest does not end with the sanction of a loan. It extends to post-loan monitoring and the readiness of the lender to exit a relationship where problems are brewing. It applies also to recognition of a loan as a non-performing asset and steps taken to effect recovery. It was incumbent on Ms. Kochhar to have distanced herself from all matters related to Videocon.

When a fresh set of allegations surfaced this month, the board must have been in a bind. Since it had solidly backed its CEO thus far, any probe it chose to conduct by itself would have lacked credibility.

Perhaps, that is why the board has opted to entrust the probe to an outsider. It may well be that the whistle-blower has raised issues other than the loan to Videocon. However, it's hard to believe that any issue of impropriety is beyond the competence of a board. The board can always seek the assistance of outside experts where required. The resort to an outsider is a situation of the board's own making.

Now that the board has decided to have a comprehensive probe, one that could stretch over several weeks or months, Ms. Kochhar's status during the period is an important issue.

The board has denied having asked Ms. Kochhar to go on leave. It has said that her current leave had been planned in the normal course. Does this mean that she will continue to helm the company on her return from leave? If yes, it is a highly unsatisfactory state of affairs. Just think of the plight of those reporting to Ms. Kochhar and the morale in the organisation in general when its CEO is the subject of an extended probe. The correct and proper course would be to ask Ms. Kochhar to step down as CEO until the probe is completed.

The board has also denied that it has set up a search committee to find a successor to Ms. Kochhar. It is free not to set up one. But the board is certainly bound by regulations to have a succession plan in place. The board must ensure that it has a choice of candidates it can turn to in the event that Ms. Kochhar is required to step down.

It is not merely the Chairman and independent directors of ICICI Bank who have been found wanting in the controversy. The nominee of the government and the LIC nominee on the board too have been coy about getting a straight answer to the question of conflict of interest involved in this case. They have chosen to stay away from meetings where they had a fiduciary obligation to attend and pose the hard questions. Such behaviour is strange, to say the least, and it completes the story of a breakdown in governance at the bank. As one distinguished banker put it to me, "Would the government have shown the same indulgence to the CEO of a public sector bank?"

Preventing the next health crisis

In March, the government announced that it would release an annual "state of nutrition" report, detailing India's level of stunting, malnutrition and feature best practices for States to scale up nutrition interventions.

It is clear that India has a lot to do to tackle nutrition challenges 26 million children suffer from wasting (a low weight-for-height ratio), more than in any other country.

Yet, the country has the second highest number of obese children in the world 15.3 million in China and 14.4 million in India. While tackling undernutrition through assurance of adequate nutrition (usually interpreted as dietary calories), we need to ensure that it is also about appropriate nutrition (the right balance of nutrients). Our policy response has to move from "food security" to "nutrition security".

India must step up its efforts to fight overweight and obesity just as it has been doing with wasting and stunting. Between 1980and 2015, obesity doubled for children and tripled for adults; an additional 2.6 million children will be obese in India by 2025, a trend that will not reverse without action.

Rising obesity is putting pressure on already fragile health systems in India by posing a high risk of chronic diseases such as cardiovascular diseases, diabetes and some cancers (clubbed together as non-communicable diseases, or NCDs). Research shows that Indians have higher levels of body fat and lower levels of lean muscle when compared to many other populations. Therefore, the risk of cardiovascular diseases and diabetes operates even below global thresholds for defining overweight and obesity. Hence the urgency to take public health measures.

Apart from a high burden of premature mortality, these threats are something that India can ill-afford to ignore as it looks ambitiously toward a universal health coverage system where everyone can access quality health services that are free of financial burden.

The rise in obesity is deeply concerning because just as growing up underweight gives that person a lifetime of health problems so does a childhood of being overweight. The potent combination of Indian children eating more junk food while becoming increasingly sedentary puts them at an even greater risk. Research has shown that early warning signs for fatty liver disease can be found in children as young as eight if they had larger-than-advised waistlines when they were three.

Fortunately, this year is an ideal opportunity to tackle obesity as global health decision-makers are focussing on how to garner the political will to drive "best buys" such as sugar taxes and mass media campaigns on healthy diets (proven ways of bringing down obesity) while continuing to vigorously pursue efforts to prevent undernutrition. A high-level commission and a UN General Assembly meeting on NCDs are giving new life to existing evidence-based yet largely unimplemented plans of action.

Policy responses should include agricultural systems that promote crop diversity (to enable dietary diversity) as well as regulatory and fiscal measures (to decrease the availability, affordability and promotion of unhealthy foods, while making healthy foods more accessible). For example, taking the lead from a directive by the Delhi High Court, India should ban the sale of junk food in and around schools.

Legislators should also put into practice the results of a recent Lancet study on India. It showed that higher taxes on junk food can actually lead those on lower incomes to live healthier lives.

Even in clinical settings, counselling and care are needed. Instead of being downgraded as ways of managing "poor lifestyle choices", obesity management, prevention and treatment should be provided as essential health services targeted at a condition that undermines health in many ways. This would help reverse the stigma attached to obesity even by health professionals (which has also undermined the response to it).

Further, India should link obesity and undernutrition and treat them as twinned challenges to be jointly addressed under the universal health coverage umbrella. Universal health coverage is encapsulated in the idea that no one should have to suffer financial hardship in order to access essential health care. By tackling obesity through prevention and early care, financially debilitating NCDs can be avoided.

India will be in a better position to fulfil the promise of universal health coverage if it disrupts the cycle whereby poverty leads to NCDs and vice versa. There is compelling evidence that heart disease and diabetes impose high burdens of catastrophic health expenditure, result in a loss of livelihoods and crush people into poverty. With no insurance or personal savings, a heart disease diagnosis can compromise a person's wealth as well as health.

By making connections to both under- and over-nutrition, health advocates should make economic and social arguments to spur a 'whole-of-government' approach to these 'whole-of-society' problems. Tackling obesity benefits the economy and the environment, as healthy and sustainable diets are good for productivity levels and the planet. It is now time to get ahead of this unfolding health crisis and save lives and money in the process.

Sugary drinks with protein-rich meals may make you fat

Consuming a sugar-sweetened drink like fruit juices with a high-protein meal including lean meat, chicken, fish and dairy products may negatively affect energy balance, alter food preferences and cause the body to store more fat, according to a study. The findings showed that the inclusion of a sugar-sweetened drink decreased fat oxidation, which kick-starts the breakdown of fat molecules, after a meal by eight per cent. The combination will also increase the desire to eat more unhealthy junk food for hours after finishing breakfast.

"We were surprised by the impact that the sugar-sweetened drinks had on metabolism when they were paired with higher-protein meals. This combination also increased study subjects' desire to eat savoury and salty foods for four hours after eating," said lead author Shanon Casperson, from USDA-Agricultural Research Service Grand Forks Human Nutrition Research Centre in the US. If a sugar-sweetened drink was consumed with a 15 per cent protein meal, fat oxidation decreased by 7.2g on average, while with an intake of 30 per cent protein meal fat oxidation reduced by 12.6g on average. While having a sugar-sweetened drink increased the amount of energy used to metabolise the meal, the increased expenditure did not even out the consumption of additional calories from the drink, the researchers said, in the paper published in the journal BMC Nutrition.

New wearable e-skin sensor boosts health monitoring

Japanese scientists have developed a hypoallergenic electronic sensor that can be worn on the skin to monitor a person's health continuously over a long period. The wearable device, that can be worn for a week without discomfort, has elastic electrodes, made up of breathable nanoscale meshes, that lets the skin breathe, preventing inflammation. The electrodes contains a water-soluble polymer, polyvinyl alcohol (PVA), and a gold layer -- materials considered safe and biologically compatible with the body. "We learned that devices that can be worn for a week or longer for continuous monitoring were needed for practical use in medical and sports applications," said Takao Someya, Professor at the University of Tokyo.

The device can be applied by spraying a tiny amount of water, which dissolves the PVA nanofibers and allows it to stick easily to the skin. It gets conformed seamlessly to curvilinear surfaces of human skin, such as sweat pores and the ridges of an index finger's fingerprint pattern. In addition to nursing care and medical application the new device promises to enable continuous, precise monitoring of athletes' physiological signals and bodily motion without impeding their training or performance.

For the study, detailed in the journal Nature Nanotechnology, the team conducted a skin patch test on 20 subjects and detected no inflammation on the participant's skin after they had worn the device for a week.Furthermore, the device's mechanical durability was proved through the repeated bending and stretching, exceeding 10,000 times, of a conductor attached on the forefinger. Its readings of the electrical activity of muscles were comparable to those obtained through conventional gel electrodes, the researchers said. "It will become possible to monitor patients' vital signs without causing any stress or discomfort," Someya noted.

Ozone pollution tied to cardiovascular health: Study

Exposure to ozone, a powerful greenhouse gas and a widespread air pollutant in many major cities, may cause cardiovascular disease such as heart attack, high blood pressure and stroke, according to a new study of Chinese adults. Ozone is a pollutant formed through a chemical reaction that occurs when sunlight interacts with nitrogen oxides and other organic compounds that are generated by coal-burning, vehicle exhaust and some natural sources.It has long been associated with adverse health effects in children and adults, Xinhua reported on Monday.

"We know that ozone can damage the respiratory system, reduce lung function and cause asthma attacks," said study author Junfeng Zhang, from Duke and Duke Kunshan University. "Here, we wanted to learn whether ozone affects other aspects of human health, specifically the cardiovascular system."Zhang and colleagues studied 89 healthy adults living in Changsha City of China for one year.

They monitored indoor and outdoor ozone levels, along with other pollutants. At four intervals, the study team took participant blood and urine samples and used a breathing test called spirometry to examine a set of factors that could contribute to cardiovascular and respiratory disease.

The team examined inflammation and oxidative stress, arterial stiffness, blood pressure, clotting factors and lung function in participants. They noted blood platelet activation, which is a risk factor for clotting, and an increase in blood pressure, suggesting a possible mechanism by which ozone may affect cardiovascular health.

These effects were found with ozone exposure lower than that which affects respiratory health, and lower than current U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) air quality standards. "This study shows that standards for safe ozone exposure should take into account its effect on cardiovascular disease risk," said Zhang.

These findings, by a team from Duke University, Tsinghua University, Duke Kunshan University and Peking University, were published Monday in the US journal JAMA Internal Medicine. "This study provides mechanistic support to previously observed associations between low-level ozone exposure and cardiovascular disease outcomes," the study concluded.

Tweaking brain circuits may alleviate depression

In a ray of hope for people suffering from social withdrawal and helplessness behaviour, scientists from the University of California San Diego have linked specific wiring in the brain to distinct behavioural symptoms of depression. The team found brain circuits tied to feelings of despair and helplessness and were able to alleviate and even reverse such symptoms in mice. "We took an approach of studying depression in the sense that different brain areas and circuits of the brain might mediate or contribute to very discrete aspects of depression," said study first-author Daniel Knowland, a UC San Diego graduate student.

"For example, brain area A might contribute to loss of appetite, brain area B to social withdrawal and so forth," he added in the study published in the journal Cell. According to Assistant Professor Byungkook Lim, the results require much more study and evaluation to be applied to humans with depression but new research in animal models provides solid grounding. "This is one of the first studies providing clear evidence showing that different brain circuitry is involved in different types of depressive behaviour with specific symptoms," said Lim.

Each area of the brain is different with distinct cell types and connectivity. "If we can confirm that one area of circuitry is more involved in a particular symptom than another, we may eventually be able to treat a depression patient more efficiently than treating everyone the same way," Lim noted. For the research, the scientists identified two populations of neurons in the brain's ventral pallidum region (part of the basal ganglia) as key to underlying depressive behaviour.

Kriti is very protective about me: 'Filhall' girl Nupur Sanon



Nupur Sanon has followed her more illustrious elder sister Kriti Sanon into the world of glamour with her debut appearance in B Praak's new music video "Filhall", where she features along with Bollywood superstar Akshay Kumar. Nupur says Kriti is very protective about her, and acts like a mother to her, and added that apart from complimenting her for her efforts, Kriti is also quite honest about pointing out her flaws.

"Whenever Kriti compliments me about something, she also gives me some kind of negative feedback, because she is very protective and she is also like my chhoti mummy so," said Nupur about her elder sister, adding that she was scared about how Kriti would react to her debut work.

"I didn't contact her after the release of my video. I thought she would contact me after watching it because she has been away shooting in Mandawa. So, she sent me a long text message and there was nothing negative in it. She was like 'I loved the song and I am so proud of you'. I am really happy after reading her message," said Nupur, while interacting with the media at success press meet of the recently-released song along with singer B Praak and lyricist Jaani.

"Filhall" garnered more than 97 million views within five days of release.

Asked when she would debut as a Bollywood actress, Nupur said: "Hopefully soon. I am glad that I took my time to do my first music video because I never ever dreamt that I would work with superstar Akshay Kumar in my very first project. I am going to wait for right opportunities. I am in talks with a few people but I haven't signed anything as of now. A lot people have approached me after seeing the music video but I want to take things easy. This career for me is about longevity. I am in no hurry but I just want to be there for the longest time."

Talking about the audience response to "Filhall", Nupur said: "I am overwhelmed with the response to our song. We expected this kind of response because the song is good. B Praak has beautifully sung it and Jaani has beautifully written it so, we expected love from the audience. The kind of love we are getting is really special." Two decades after his big screen debut, Akshay Kumar has released his first music video that also features Nupur Sanon. The five-minute song "Filhall" is a romantic ballad that speaks of the pain of separation.

'MacGyver' extremely important in my career: Justin Hires



Actor Justin Hires says working on TV show "MacGyver" has opened more business opportunities for him in Hollywood. "I get to work with an amazing cast and crew every episode. Also, I've become such a better actor working on this show. I've had to do comedy, action, then cry all in one episode! It's really been a terrific challenge for me artistically and allowed me to hone my craft as an actor," Hires told.

The "Rush Hour" star said featuring in "MacGyver" has been an important move in his career. "The character has been extremely important for me in my career. I started growing a legitimate fan base- people from all over the world watch the show and playing this role has opened more business opportunities for me in Hollywood," he said.

"MacGyver", a reimagining of the classic 1985 series, stars Lucas Till in the title role and Hires in the role of MacGyver's roommate Wilt Bozer. The show is about an agent who improvises his way out of sticky situations using everyday items like rubber bands and chewing gum. The show premiered in 2016, and will get its fourth season in 2020. It is aired in India on AXN.

"I think the scripts and character development gets better and better each year. Peter Lenkov and the new co-showrunner, Terry Matalas, really do an exceptional job when it comes to delivering great back-stories for our characters, along with giving us exciting missions to tackle every episode," he said. How's the show is going forward? "The show will continue to deliver more action, science, heart, and surprises," he said.

Manushi Chillar to star opposite Akshay Kumar in 'Prithviraj'



Miss World 2017 Manushi Chillar is making her Bollywood debut opposite Akshay Kumar in the upcoming film "Prithviraj". Directed by Chandraprakash Dwivedi, "Prithviraj" is based on the life and heroism of the fearless king Prithviraj Chauhan. It stars superstar Akshay as Prithviraj while Manushi will play the role of the Sanyogita, the love of his life. Dwivedi said: "We auditioned a lot of young, fresh faces for the role because we were looking for a stunningly gorgeous Indian heroine. While Sanyogita was an incredibly beautiful person, she was also a strong, confident girl. We were looking to find someone who could match the magnetic persona of Sanyogita and we found that in Manushi."

The director said that Manushi auditioned "for the role a couple of times". "We wanted to be dead sure with this casting and she nailed it each time. She has been rehearsing six days a week since then and is being thoroughly groomed for the last nine months by Yash Raj Films (YRF)." Manushi said her life so far has been a fairy tale and she is now looking forward to her big debut.

"I'm thoroughly happy and thrilled about the learnings that I will have through this journey. My life, so far, has really been a fairy tale. From becoming Miss India and then Miss World to now getting such a big project as my debut film, it's like a new, exciting chapter of my life," she said. Manushi finds it a "huge responsibility" to play princess Sanyogita. "She was a powerful personality and she stood up for what is right and took the most important decisions of her life by herself. Her life is an extremely important chapter in Indian history and I will try my best to play her as accurately as possible," she added.



Abigail Spencer arrives at the 47th International Emmy Awards gala at the Hilton Hotel, in New York.

Telugu Heroine busy in different languages

Raashii Khanna, who is one of the fondest ladies on screen for the Telugu audience is now hitting the OTT screen with the web series 'Rudra: The Edge of Darkness'. She has been giving interviews in the process of promoting the series. When asked about online bullying, she replied, "I don't say anything because I was quite big for the mainstream that they have. And I did become fitter in time, not to please anybody.





Sakshi Agarwal pose during a photoshoot.

Hrithik Roshan: My mother watched 'Super 30' 9 times in theatre

Bollywood superstar Hrithik Roshan and math wiz Anand Kumar finally found time to get together to celebrate the success of the film "Super 30". The biopic released in July, has Hrithik playing out the life of Anand Kumar.

"It was a delightful evening. My mother has watched super 30 nine times in the theatres but never got the chance to meet Anand sir and his brother Pranav personally. Yesterday, we all sat and reminisced about the tough journey of 'Super 30' with smiles and laughter. Incidents and interactions that were devastating while shooting today seemed to make us laugh in victory. Good conversations over a good meal is the best way to celebrate anything and that's what we did yesterday," said Hrithik, who is basking in the glory of consecutive box-office successes "Super 30 and "War" this year.



Said Anand Kumar: "I am very grateful for Hrithik Roshan and the whole team of Super 30 for bringing this story to the public. He is as amazing as a person as he is an actor, and I wouldn't have anyone else to play the role. After that, seeing him in 'War' was mesmerising. The way he switched roles was shocking to say the least."

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