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By saurabh Pandey



Why the Parker Solar Probe is trying to 'touch' the sun

On March 22, the probe made another attempt to get within 6 million km of the sun, considered a very small distance to be from the star; it was launched on a Delta IV rocket from Cape Canaveral in 2018. Once in space, the probe's maximum speed was an astounding 692,000 km/hr. It will spend 2,000 hours flying through the corona

Shamim Haque Mondal

Among the various places humans have aspired to visit in the solar system, the sun remains the most foreboding. On December 24, 2024, NASA's Parker Solar Probe arrived within 6.1 million km of the star's surface. This is a short distance to be from the sun: no spacecraft has ever made such a close approach. Even the Parker Solar Probe took seven years to get here.

The probe made another approach to the sun on March 22 and will do so again on June 19 this year.

Watching the sun

Sunlight is the main source of energy for earthlife. The sun's core produces this energy using nuclear fusion. The star also has strong, dynamic magnetic fields crisscrossing its surface, and sudden changes in the way they're arranged give rise to intense explosions called solar flares. Numerous electrons, protons, and heavy nuclei are spit out of the solar corona – the uppermost layer of the sun's atmosphere – at about 900 km/s.

These particles carry an enormous amount of energy and sometimes rush towards the earth at tremendous speed in an event called a coronal mass ejection. Their effects on the earth constitute a solar storm, including electric grid failures, loss of telecommunication channels, and damage to the ozone layer. They can also damage instruments onboard satellites.

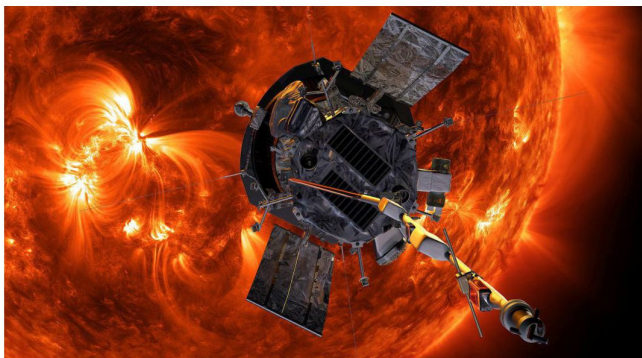
To understand the dynamics of the corona over time and their effects on the solar system at large, scientists need to observe the sun closely. This is also why the Indian Space Research Organisation launched and is currently operating the Aditya-L1 probe, stationed at about 150 million km from the star.

An able heat shield

Around six decades ago, a scientist named Eugene Parker predicted the existence of the solar wind: a stream of charged particles flowing out from the sun in all directions. NASA named the Parker Solar Probe in his honour.

The probe was launched on board a Delta IV rocket from Cape Canaveral in Florida in August 2018. Once in space, the probe's maximum speed was an astounding 692,000 km/hr.

To protect against the sun's intense heat, the probe has an 8-foot-wide, 4.5-inch-thick carbon-carbon composite material shield that can withstand up to 1,370° C while weighing only 73 kg. This shield was built by researchers at the Johns Hopkins Applied Physics



A 2018 artist's concept shows the Parker Solar Probe flying into the sun's outer atmosphere, called the corona, on a mission to help scientists learn more about the star. NASA

Laboratory. It consists of a carbon composite foam sandwiched between two carbon plates. Its sun-facing side is coated with white ceramic paint to reflect as much sunlight as possible instead of absorbing it.

Just a few metres behind the shield, in its shadow, the ambient temperature drops to 29° C, allowing the probe's scientific instruments to operate without special provisions to maintain the temperature. The probe also has two sets of solar power arrays: one in the shield's shadow that supplies power to the instruments and the other on the sun-facing side, which uses a special fluid pump to cool itself while powering the probe during its close approaches.

Touching the sun

Curiously, the first obstacle to the mission's success wasn't the sun's heat but its gravity. Since the probe flew through space at a very high speed, it had to decelerate significantly as it got close to the sun. If it didn't, the sun's gravity would have encouraged it to dive right into the star. This is why Parker's first mission profile had the probe fly towards Jupiter and swing around the gas giant to achieve an optimal speed to fly towards the sun. This idea fell out of favour because of the large travel distance.

The probe's final mission profile was more direct: to use the combined gravitational forces of the earth and Venus

Around six decades ago, a scientist named Eugene Parker predicted the existence of the solar wind: a stream of charged particles flowing out from the sun in all directions. NASA named the Parker Solar Probe in his honour

to slowly spiral closer to the sun's surface, in the process spending more than 2,000 hours flying through the corona and 24 times along the solar equator.

The probe has four scientific instruments: FIELDS, Integrated Science Investigation of the Sun (ISoIS), Solar Wide-Field Imager (WISPR), and Solar Wind Electrons Alphas and Protons (SWEAP). FIELDS measures the electric and magnetic fields of the sun's atmosphere; ISoIS observes the energetic particles that cause solar storms while SWEAP records their properties; and WISPR takes pictures as it passes through the corona.

A "sun-touching" event occurred in April 2021 when Parker moved closer to the sun than its Alfvén surface – the height beyond which the solar wind can't affect the star's surface – as ascertained by the FIELDS and SWEAP instruments.

A fifth instrument, called a Faraday cup, lies outside the shadow of the heat shield and measures the density of ions

and electrons in the solar wind. It is made of a molybdenum alloy with a melting point of 2,349° C.

Blowin' in the (solar) wind

Parker data has already revealed many new details about the sun. The solar system is ceaselessly coated in dust particles created when space rocks weather and scientists believed the dust ought to be everywhere. Yet Parker revealed dust-free pockets near the sun. The probe also detected magnetic switchbacks: parts of the solar wind where the magnetic field (created by the collective of charged particles) abruptly bent back on itself.

An important open question in solar astrophysics is why the sun's surface is only 6,000° C or so whereas the solar corona is 200-times hotter. Based on Parker's data of magnetic switchbacks and other related phenomena, scientists believe the answer to the mystery lies in Alfvén waves: an oscillation of ions in the plasma released by the sun, set in motion by forces in the surrounding magnetic field. During its close-approach on March 22, the Parker Solar Probe once again attempted to get within around 6 million km of the sun's surface. What did it find this time?

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THE GIST

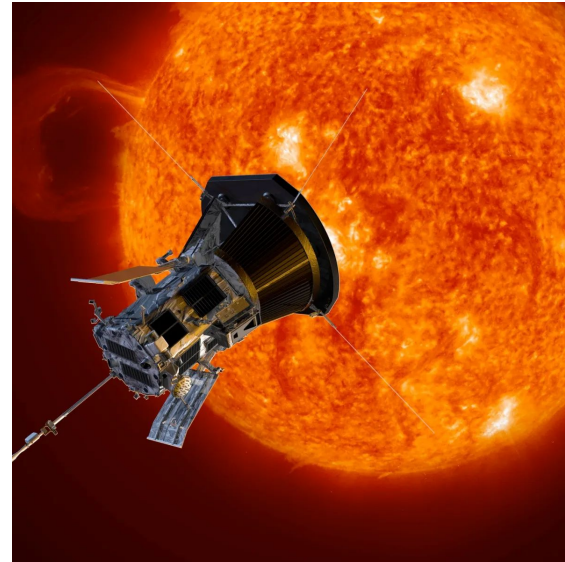
Changes in the sun's magnetic fields cause explosions called solar flares. Electrons, protons, and heavy nuclei are spit out of the solar corona. These cause solar storms – which trigger grid failures, loss of telecommunication channels, and damage the ozone layer

Parker data has revealed many new details. The solar system is coated in dust created when space rocks weather. Parker revealed dust-free pockets near the sun. The probe also detected magnetic switchbacks: parts of the solar wind where the magnetic field abruptly bent back on itself

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The Parker Solar Probe

The Parker Solar Probe was launched on August 12, 2018, with a mission to study the outer corona of the sun. As the closest spacecraft to the sun, it embarks on a daring journey, entering the sun's atmosphere to gather invaluable data. This unprecedented proximity allows scientists to study solar winds and their effects on space weather, which can have profound implications for Earth.



Historic Approaches to the Sun



Record-Breaking Approaches: The Parker Solar Probe has accomplished a series of record-breaking maneuvers, including its closest approach to the sun on Christmas Eve 2024.

Key Milestones: The probe has completed multiple close encounters, each revealing new insights into solar activity.

Significance: These historic approaches not only enhance our understanding of solar phenomena but also help in predicting solar storms that can affect satellites and power grids on Earth.

Discoveries and Findings



Unveiling Solar Secrets: The Parker Solar Probe has made groundbreaking discoveries, such as unexpected patterns in solar winds and insights into magnetic fields that surround the sun.

Enhanced Understanding: Findings from the probe are crucial for understanding solar flares and coronal mass ejections, which can disrupt communications and navigation systems on Earth.

Impact on Solar Science: The data collected is paving the way for advancements in solar science, allowing researchers to develop better predictive models for solar weather.

WHAT IS IT?

Centrifuge: getting to the good uranium

Vasudevan Mukunth

The enrichment centrifuge is a device used to extract uranium-235 isotope from a sample of natural uranium. U-235 is fissile and thus useful to generate nuclear power and to build nuclear weapons.

Natural uranium consists of 99.3% U-238 and 0.7% U-235. Nuclear power reactors need the uranium fuel to contain 3-20% U-235, depending on the reactor design. Nuclear weapons need U-235 to be enriched to around 90%.

The first step for both technologies is to enrich uranium in a centrifuge. This device is named for the centrifugal force: it contains a chamber attached to a rotor. When the rotor spins the chamber very fast, the centrifugal force acts on objects inside such that the denser ones are moved more outwards. The amount of this force is equal to the mass of the molecule multiplied by its distance from the centrifuge's centre and the square of the angular velocity ($F_c = m \times \omega^2 \times r$).

Uranium is converted to compound form (usually uranium hexafluoride, UF_6), then to gas, and flowed into



The Kursk Nuclear Power Plant (KNPP) in Kursk, Russia.
REUTERS

centrifuges. U-238 is slightly more dense than U-235, so as the centrifuges spin at 50,000 revolutions per minute, more U-235 collects towards the centre.

This mass is then diverted to more centrifuges to further separate U-238 out. Over multiple stages, the sample becomes more enriched in U-235.

The spinning part is made of some light yet strong material that doesn't disintegrate during such extreme motion, like carbon fibre.

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Understanding the Enrichment Centrifuge: A Key to Uranium-235 Extraction



What is an Enrichment Centrifuge?

Purpose: Extracts the uranium-235 isotope from natural uranium.

Significance: U-235 is fissile, crucial for sustaining a nuclear chain reaction.

The Basics of Uranium Isotopes

Natural Uranium Composition:

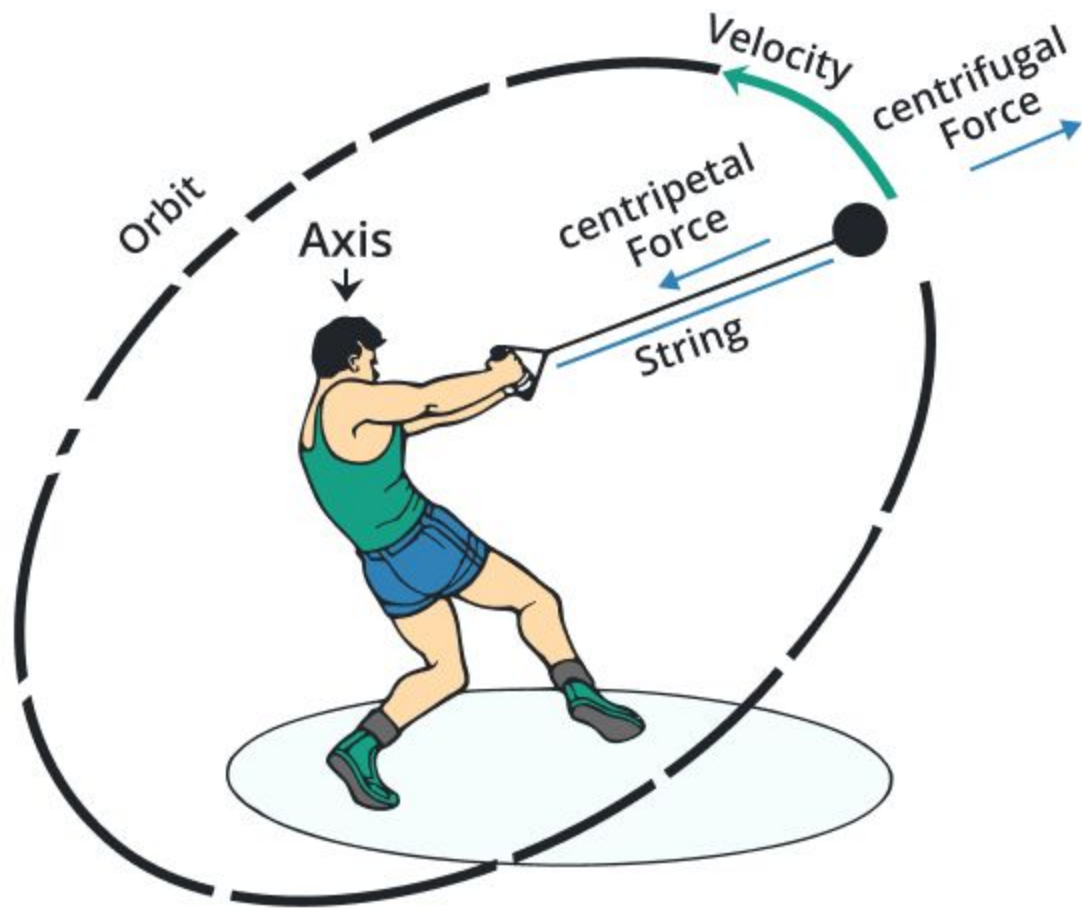
99.3% uranium-238 (U-238)

0.7% uranium-235 (U-235)

Importance of U-235:

Nuclear reactors: Require 3% to 20% U-235.

Nuclear weapons: Need around 90% U-235.



How Does the Enrichment Process Work?



Centrifugal Force:

Definition: Outward force on an object in a circular path.

Formula: $F_c = m \times r \times \omega^2$

Mechanics of the Centrifuge:

High-speed rotation: Up to 50,000 RPM.

Separation: Denser U-238 moves outward, lighter U-235 moves inward.

The Conversion Process

From Uranium to Uranium Hexafluoride (UF₆):

Importance: UF₆ can be easily turned into gas for centrifuge processing.

Gas Phase:

Role: Facilitates efficient separation of isotopes.

The Separation Process

Spin Cycle:

Collection: Lighter U-235 collects at the center.

Density Role:

Analogy: Similar to oil and water separation.

Multi-Stage Enrichment:

Process: Repeated stages increase U-235 concentration

Materials Used in Centrifuge Construction

Why Carbon Fiber?:

Properties: Lightweight and strong, ideal for high-speed rotation.

Applications of Enriched Uranium

Nuclear Power Generation:

Function: Controlled fission of U-235 generates electricity.

Nuclear Weapons Development:

Requirement: High levels of enrichment for nuclear explosions.

Conclusion

Role of Enrichment Centrifuge: Essential in nuclear power and weapons.

Process: Utilizes centrifugal force for isotope separation.

Importance: Highlights need for responsible management and regulation.

An IJS is an idea whose time has come

Over the past few days, social media has been awash with several memes. Of these, there is one that appears to be the best – “For the first time, a fire brigade has ignited more fire than what it extinguished.” The fact is the fire is still raging.

Disturbing incidents

There are no marks for guessing what the incident being referred to is – the recent and shocking discovery by the Delhi fire brigade of half-burnt currency notes while putting out a fire that broke out in the official residence of a Delhi High Court Judge. One hopes that the internal inquiry that has been ordered by the Chief Justice of India will be completed early and its findings made public. The judge in the eye of the storm has been repatriated to his parent High Court. Any other public servant would have faced a first information report followed by an investigation. Many may recall the case of a former CJI who included himself as a member of the inquiry committee that had been constituted to probe a complaint of sexual harassment that had been lodged by a court staff against the CJI. This led to such public outrage that the CJI had to opt out.

Whatever be the resulting convulsions and discomfort in the judicial system, this disturbing episode has drawn attention to an issue which everybody knew but maintained a discreet silence about for various reasons.

That this incident has happened just after two recent developments has not helped matters. In the first instance, the Supreme Court of India took objection to an order passed by the Lokpal taking cognisance of a complaint of corruption against a High Court Judge and referred it to the CJI. The Court has taken *suo motu* notice of this ‘disturbing’ order, as in its view, the Lokpal has no jurisdiction to act upon complaints against judges. The matter is before the Court.

Irrespective of the final verdict, it has once again sharpened the focus on judicial accountability, raising questions about the



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Ramasundaram**

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An exclusive all-India selection process will address the need to open the doors of the judiciary to meritorious candidates

effectiveness and the transparency of its internal inquiry mechanism.

The second instance happens to be a repulsive order passed by a High Court Judge wherein the Lordship was of the view that grabbing body parts of a minor girl and ‘breaking the strings of her pyjama’ were not enough to charge an accused with the offence of rape or attempt to rape. Mercifully, this obnoxious order has been stayed by the Supreme Court, due to its “total lack of sensitivity”.

What is the common factor in these three cases that involve High Court Judges? The answer is that all the judges have passed through the existing system of selection by the Collegium of Judges. This is a selection process that has drawn criticism on and off for many years, because of its opaque nature and the stranglehold of a few families over this system. Judicial dynasties sometimes result in the selection of incompetent and mediocre persons.

Have an Indian Judicial Service

All this has also led to the revival of the debate on the National Judicial Appointments Commission (NJAC) Act. This Act was passed by Parliament with the ratification of 16 State Assemblies and had the assent of the President of India in December 2014. But the Supreme Court chose to strike it down, although many were of the view that the Court could have gone in for a judicial review only to decide whether the legislation passed by the Parliament was in conformity with constitutional provisions.

While this debate may go on, a much simpler and immediate solution could be to have an exclusive all India service for senior positions in the judiciary on the pattern of the Union Public Service Commission’s highly competitive, transparent and merit-based selection process for the civil services such as the Indian Administrative Service, the Indian Foreign Service, the Indian Police Service and Indian Revenue Service.

Constituting an ‘Indian Judicial Service’ has been discussed in the past. This may be the right time to discuss its pros and cons and implement a transparent and merit-based system for the selection of judges. When State-level Judicial Service Officers are selected through a competitive examination, why not have the same process at the national level?

Will ensure course correction

There are several advantages in having an Indian Judicial Service. First, it would result in the higher judiciary becoming more inclusive and representative in character. At present, the higher judiciary is an elite club dominated by a few families. Women and the marginalised sections of society are very poorly represented. There is an urgent need to open the doors of the judiciary to meritorious candidates from all parts of India and all walks of life to compete for senior judicial positions.

Second, recruitment may be entrusted to the UPSC by the Supreme Court, stipulating the criteria and the method of selection for the senior judicial positions, in consultation with High Courts and legal luminaries. This process would also insulate the judiciary from any interference of the executive.

Third, a transparent selection process, with details in the public domain, is obviously much better than the closed-door meetings of the Collegium. Post-selection, a comprehensive training programme would ensure that those selected are well versed in the multiple branches of law. The Supreme Court may also evolve a system of oversight to ensure integrity and to initiate disciplinary action against those who lack integrity.

In this writer’s view, this will greatly help in restoring the faith of the people as well as the image of the higher judiciary in the largest parliamentary democracy of the world.

Have an Indian Judicial Service



Introduction to the Indian Judicial Service

- The concept of an Indian Judicial Service is gaining traction amidst debates on the National Judicial Appointments Commission (NJAC) Act.
- The NJAC aimed to enhance transparency in judicial appointments but was rejected by the Supreme Court, prompting discussions on alternative solutions.
- An Indian Judicial Service could provide a structured pathway for aspiring judges, akin to the UPSC exams for civil services, fostering a more diverse judiciary.

The NJAC Act: A Brief Overview

What is the NJAC Act?: Introduced to reform judicial appointments, replacing the Collegium system with a transparent mechanism.

Supreme Court's Stance: The NJAC was struck down due to concerns over judicial independence, sparking renewed discussions on appointment reforms.

The Need for an Indian Judicial Service

Current State of the Judiciary: Criticized for elitism and lack of diversity, with dominance by influential families.

Inclusivity and Representation: Underrepresentation of women and marginalized communities; an Indian Judicial Service could address these issues.

Advantages of Establishing an Indian Judicial Service



Merit-Based Selection Process: Ensures only qualified candidates are appointed to senior positions.

Role of the UPSC: Could oversee recruitment, maintaining integrity through consultation with legal experts and High Courts.

Transparency in Selection: Open processes restore public trust, unlike the Collegium's closed-door meetings.

Comprehensive Training Programs: Post-selection training ensures candidates are well-prepared for judicial responsibilities.

Addressing Concerns and Challenges

- Potential Resistance: Existing structures may resist change due to fear of losing power.
- Ensuring Integrity and Oversight: Establish robust mechanisms for monitoring integrity and accountability, including evaluations and disciplinary actions.

Conclusion

- Establishing an Indian Judicial Service could reform the judiciary by promoting inclusivity, transparency, and meritocracy.
- This reform would enhance the judiciary's credibility and restore public faith, opening doors to all deserving candidates.
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It is time to reform the Waqf



In the social and diverse fabric of India's religious and socio-economic landscape, the Waqf stands as one of the most significant, yet underutilised, institutions. This statutory entity, steeped in Islamic spiritual tradition, holds the potential to transform the socio-economic conditions of the Muslim community. However, despite its profound heritage and substantial landholdings, the Waqf has been hampered by inefficiencies, mismanagement, and a lack of transparency.

It is indeed paradoxical that the Waqf, as the third largest landowning entity in India, presides over a community that continues to struggle with issues of education, healthcare, and socio-economic upliftment. The very purpose of Waqf, which was established centuries ago, was to serve the welfare of Muslims through the creation and maintenance of public goods such as schools, hospitals, libraries, and other charitable institutions. The fact that such a vast resource base is not being leveraged effectively for the betterment of the community has been a cause for grave concern for many decades.

State of the Waqf

The proposed Unified Waqf Management, Empowerment, Efficiency, and Development (UMEED) Bill, also called the Waqf (Amendment) Bill, 2024, aims to address some of the long-standing issues that are plaguing the Waqf. These reforms are crucial, as they acknowledge the widespread consensus within the Muslim community regarding the misuse of Waqf properties by *mutawallis* (custodians), some members with zero credibility, and the inefficiencies that have prevented Waqf boards from maximising the value of these assets.

The current state of the Waqf is a reflection of the broader challenges faced by Muslims in India. The lack of accountability and transparency in the management of Waqf properties



Haji Syed Salman Chishty

Gaddi Nashin,
Dargah Ajmer Sharif
Chairman,
Chishty Foundation

By embracing reform and demanding accountability, we can ensure that the Waqf serves its intended purpose of benefiting the Muslim community and contributing to the broader society

has allowed for the perpetuation of inefficiencies and corruption.

One of the most glaring issues with the current Waqf system is the outdated rental structure for Waqf-owned properties. Many of these properties are rented out at rates fixed decades ago, often as far back as the 1950s. Not only are these rents absurdly low in today's market, but even the meagre amounts due are often not collected regularly. This situation is compounded by allegations of illegal sales and squandering of Waqf assets, which have significantly eroded the potential revenue that could have been used for community welfare. A classic example would be Jaipur's most central and famous shopping street known as M.I. Road, which runs from Sanganeri Gate to Government Hostel. Many may not know that M.I. stands for Mirza Ismail. Some of the properties located on MI Road have been donated to the Waqf board for the cause of community and religious work. The board can allot these properties on rent, but it cannot sell them to anyone.

Other such commercial properties of 100-400 square feet on MI Road that are fetching ₹300 a month would fetch close to ₹25,000 a month when the rent policies are updated. There are thousands of such cases of negligence across India in every State.

The Sachar Committee Report, 2006, estimated that the Waqf could generate an annual income of ₹12,000 crore from its properties. However, surveys by the Ministry of Minority Affairs reveal that the actual number of Waqf properties exceeds 8.72 lakh. Today, factoring in inflation and revised estimates, the potential income could be as high as ₹20,000 crore annually. Yet, the actual revenue generated remains a paltry ₹200 crore.

The potential for revenue generation and investment in community welfare is enormous. If managed efficiently, Waqf properties could fund the establishment of world-class

institutions – schools, universities, hospitals, and more – that serve not only the Indian Muslim community, but society at large.

This is where we, as Indian Muslims, must broaden our understanding of "welfare". Welfare does not mean free, run-down institutions that struggle to sustain themselves. Instead, we should aspire to create institutions that are self-sustaining, inclusive, and of such high standards that they become aspirational for all.

The final Waqf (Amendment) Bill, which we will see after the Joint Parliament Committee provides constructive suggestions, must offer a visionary commitment towards the righteous space and scope of Waqf development leading to the overall upgradation of the Muslim community. By overhauling the governance and administration of Waqf boards and the Central Waqf Council, the Bill seeks to create a more accountable and transparent system that can better serve the community.

Generating revenue is crucial

But reforms should not stop at governance. The credible administration of the Waqf board must also address the critical issue of revenue generation. Revising the rental structure of Waqf properties to reflect current market rates is essential for ensuring the Waqf's financial sustainability. Further, profits generated from these properties should be reinvested into Muslim community welfare projects, in line with the original mandate of the Waqf establishment.

The Waqf is too important an institution to fail. It holds the key to unlocking the potential of the Muslim community, not only in terms of socio-economic development but also in fostering a spirit of inclusivity and excellence. By embracing reform and demanding accountability, we can ensure that it serves its intended purpose of benefiting the community and contributing to the broader society.

Historical Significance of Waqf

Waqf has a long-standing historical significance in India, established centuries ago to support the welfare of the Muslim community.

Origins: The inception of Waqf can be traced back to the time of the Prophet Muhammad, where it was used to support public goods such as education, healthcare, and community services.

Modern Role: Today, Waqf has the potential to contribute significantly to the construction of schools, hospitals, and libraries, yet its true capacity remains unrealized.

Current State of Waqf in India



The current landscape of Waqf in India reflects broader socio-economic challenges faced by the Muslim community:

Mismanagement: Many *mutawallis* (custodians) lack the necessary expertise to manage Waqf properties effectively.

Accountability Issues: The absence of a transparent governance structure enables corruption and inefficiencies to persist, leaving the community underserved.

Underutilization: Despite being the third-largest landowning entity, Waqf properties often remain underutilized, perpetuating poverty and lack of access to essential services.

The Challenges Facing Waqf



The management of Waqf properties is hindered by several formidable challenges:

Mismanagement and Inefficiencies: Custodians often lack the credibility to manage these assets, resulting in neglect and degradation of properties.

Lack of Transparency: The opaque management practices foster an environment ripe for misappropriation of resources.

Outdated Rental Structures: Many Waqf properties are leased at rates set decades ago, leading to minimal income generation, with some rents established as far back as the 1950s.

The UMEED Bill: A Step Towards Reform



The proposed *Unified Waqf Management, Empowerment, Efficiency, and Development (UMEED) Bill* seeks to address the inefficiencies in Waqf management:

Overview: This bill aims to reform the governance and administration of Waqf boards, ensuring that only credible individuals manage these assets.

Addressing Misuse: By instituting accountability measures, the UMEED Bill aspires to maximize the value of Waqf properties, ensuring they serve their intended purpose.

The Economic Potential of Waqf

The economic prospects of Waqf in India are enormous, with potential revenues untapped:

Revenue Generation Opportunities: The Sachar Committee Report estimated that Waqf could generate an annual income of ₹12,000 crore, with updated expectations soaring to ₹20,000 crore. Currently, the actual revenue is a mere ₹200 crore.

Community Welfare and Development: Proper management of Waqf properties could fund world-class educational institutions and healthcare facilities, benefitting not only the Muslim community but society as a whole.

The Path Forward for Waqf

To realize the full potential of Waqf, several steps must be taken:

Governance and Accountability: The final version of the UMEED Bill must commit to a transparent governance framework, ensuring that Waqf serves its intended purpose effectively.

Reinvestment in Community Projects: Revising the rental structure to reflect current market rates is essential for sustainability. Profits generated should be reinvested into community welfare, aligning with the original mandate of Waqf.

Conclusion

The Waqf institution is crucial for fostering inclusivity and empowerment within the Muslim community in India. By embracing reforms and demanding accountability, it can transform from a relic of the past into a beacon of hope for future generations. The time to act is now—let's unlock the true potential of Waqf for the betterment of society.

What is the controversy over the Bodh Gaya temple?

Why are Buddhist monks protesting near the Bodh Gaya's Mahabodhi Mahavihara? What does the Bodh Gaya Temple Act (BTA), 1949 entail? When was a Hindu temple established?

Ziya Us Salam

The story so far:

Beginning February, nearly 100 Buddhist monks under the All India Buddhist Forum (AIBF) have been protesting, first at the Bodh Gaya's Mahabodhi Temple or Mahavihara, and later a little down the road, demanding a repeal of the Bodh Gaya Temple Act (BTA), 1949. The AIBF has support from prominent Buddhist bodies, and has submitted a memorandum to the Bihar government. The Bodh Gaya is one of the four sacred sites of Buddhism; the other three being Buddha's birthplace Lumbini, Sarnath where he gave his first sermon and Kusinagar where he attained parinirvana.

Have there been protests before?

In November 2023, Buddhist monks held a rally in Gaya and submitted a

memorandum to the Central and State governments. As it failed to have the desired effect, the monks scaled up the protest and held a rally in Patna last year to press for repealing the Act. Back in 2012, monks had filed a writ petition before the Supreme Court to repeal the Act. The petition is yet to be heard.

What is the Act?

The BTA established an eight-member management committee having equal number of Buddhists and Hindus. The Act made the local district magistrate an ex-officio chairperson of the committee. As the district magistrate hailed from the majority community, it translated to a Hindu majority on the committee, something which was resented by Buddhist bodies. Ever since then, various Buddhist bodies have been raising their voice intermittently for gaining autonomy over the Bodh Gaya temple, which they

call the Bodh Gaya Mahavihara.

What do the annals say?

Noted poet Edwin Arnold in his well-known poem, 'The Light of Asia' talks about Gautam Siddharth's enlightenment under the Bodhi tree. Bodh Gaya was then described as the Mecca of Buddhism, and in many ways popularised Buddhism in the West. However, Bodh Gaya's claim to fame goes much further back in time. In the third century, Mauryan Emperor Ashoka worshipped the Bodhi tree and built the temple there. From the time of Ashoka to be a Buddhist place of worship and a site of pilgrimage. Chinese traveller Hiuen Tsang visited it in 629 AD during the reign of Harshavardhana. Incidentally, Hiuen Tsang called it a Buddhist site, and is said to have found only Buddhist relics here save for a statue of Avaloktishvara.

Things changed with the invasion of Bakhtiyar Khilji in the 13th century. The invasion ended the Pala rule, and thus began the decline of Buddhism. During Akbar's reign, in 1590, a Hindu monk established the Bodh Gaya mutt. With this the temple lapsed into the hands of the Hindu community. Following Independence, the Bihar Assembly passed the BTA in 1949 and control of the temple was transferred from the Hindu head to the new management committee.

How has the government intervened?

The BTA was passed by the Bihar government to resolve a festering dispute between the Buddhist and Hindu heads of the Mahabodhi temple for control over the same. The Buddhist side was unhappy at the stipulation that the district magistrate, who was the ex-officio chairman, could only assume leadership if he was from the Hindu community. It changed in 2013 after the State government amended the rule and inserted a provision for the ex-officio chairman to be of any faith.

In the early 1990s, then Chief Minister of Bihar Lalu Prasad Yadav, drafted the Bodh Gaya Mahavihara Bill to replace the BTA. It was supposed to hand over the management of the temple to the Buddhist community. The Bill prohibited idol immersions near the temple and Hindu marriages inside the temple. However, the Bill went into cold storage.

THE GIST

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Buddhist Monks Protest for Autonomy Over Bodh Gaya Temple



Overview of the Protests


 Protest Initiation: Nearly 100 Buddhist monks have been protesting since February, primarily at the Mahabodhi Temple in Bodh Gaya.

 Objective: The protests aim to repeal the Bodh Gaya Temple Act (BTA) of 1949.

 Leadership and Support: The All India Buddhist Forum (AIBF) is leading the protests, with support from prominent Buddhist organizations.

Issues with the Bodh Gaya Temple Act



 **Management Committee:** The BTA established a management committee with equal representation of Buddhists and Hindus. However, the district magistrate's role as chairperson has led to a Hindu majority.

 **Memorandum Submission:** The AIBF has submitted a memorandum to the Bihar government regarding their demands for change

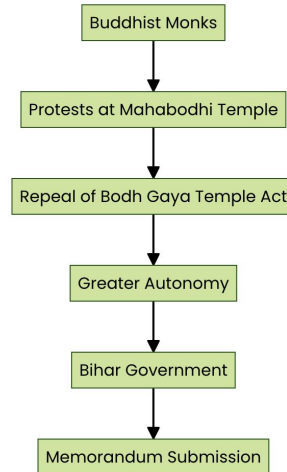
Significance of Bodh Gaya



📍 Sacred Site: Bodh Gaya is one of the four sacred sites of Buddhism, alongside Lumbini, Sarnath, and Kusinagar.

⚖️ Autonomy Advocacy: Buddhist bodies have been advocating for greater autonomy over the Bodh Gaya temple, referred to as the Bodh Gaya Mahavihara.

Timeline:



Is a revamped GST 2.0 on the cards?

What are the issues raised by the Public Accounts Committee on the working of the GST on collection of taxes?

Satya Narayan Ghosh

The story so far:
It is a report to Parliament, to Public Accounts Committee (PAC) has sought a comprehensive review of the Goods and Services Tax (GST) framework to eliminate "unnecessary procedures and requirements" that can complicate compliance. It called for a "revamped GST 2.0" to be considered after consultations with all stakeholders.

What has it observed about GST compensation to States?

The PAC observed that the absence of the mandatory CAG audit of the Compensation Fund Account for more than six years has "adversely affected" release of compensation to States. For context, GST's introduction back in 2017 had nullified loans among States about loss of local autonomy and centralisation of all collection to the Union, particularly those housing heavy manufacturing units in Tamil Nadu and Karnataka, among others. The GST (Compensation to States) Act, 2017 was instituted to compensate States for this loss of revenue. About the present lack of audit, the committee observed that it was due to the CAG not receiving the relevant information of the accounts in the appropriate format containing the quantum. The reported impact on MSMEs and exporters is due to the committee expressed concerns about ensuring cash flow requirements and MSMEs due to "complexity" of GST norms. The committee also criticised the Ministry's "lackadaisical" approach for not responding to the audit, seeking clarification on 2,447 inconsistencies that have kept a total of ₹32,57,773 crore in balance. This was based on an examination of 10,667 cases.

What are some of the other problems?

There are issues regarding the taxation process, which is either delaying the inflow to the government, or tax refunds to businesses requiring working capital. The audit came across instances of incomplete tax refund to businesses (owing to confusion over tax jurisdiction). The other significant part of the problem relates to cancellation of registrations. The GST Act provides that registrations cannot be cancelled without issuing a "show cause notice" to the concerned entity and providing it "reasonable opportunity" to reply in defence. The committee noted that of the 14,998 cases where cancellations were done, no such notices were not issued in 6,351 cases. The Finance Ministry argued the committee that this process has been automated. However, the committee said it was concerned about the alleged "lack of proper documentation" and the "effectiveness of the automated system". Bipin Kohli, partner at law firm Skellian & Co, told The Hindu that taxpayers are not given an option to withdraw or edit the application for registration. "In some cases, the application for registration is rejected without providing clarity on the reason for such rejection," he stated.

What about filing and refunds?

With respect to filing and refunds, the committee said existing mechanisms are "inadequate", pointing at prolonged waiting periods for refunds which could result in potential cash flow challenges to businesses. The Ministry, as per the report, indicated that efforts were being made to streamline the refund process. The committee has sought the refund processing system provide clearer timelines for processing claims and regular updates on their status. At the centre of all GST functions, such as filing, registration and cancellations or tracking, is the quality of reference data to ease scrutiny. The committee highlighted concerns about manual records not being maintained and a poor documentation figure. The Finance Ministry said that the "winning portal" would help in streamlining the procedure.

Who gets affected by such glitches?

The reported impact on MSMEs, medium and small enterprises (MSME) and exporters is noteworthy. The committee expressed concern about ensuring issues relating to exporters' cash flow requirements and MSMEs due to "complexity" of GST norms. Delay in processing of refund claims for ITU and complexities with export related documentation requirements can potentially create cash flow constraints. The committee then underlined a need to simplify the overall regime, pointing out that ITU claims be processed within a specified timeframe at priority. The committee said a total of 17,720 cases entailing tax implications of about ₹1.46 lakh crore were pending for investigation as of March 2022. Mr. Kohli observed that most of these cases were pending for more than two years. "The government must expedite the handling of appeals and establishment of the GST Appellate Tribunal so as to reduce pendency of cases," he stated.

PAC ON GST



The Goods and Services Tax (GST) was introduced in India in 2017, marking a transformative shift in the taxation landscape. It aimed to unify the indirect tax structure and simplify compliance for businesses. However, as time has unfolded, cracks in the GST framework have surfaced, necessitating a thorough reassessment.

Streamlining Tax Compliance: GST sought to eliminate the cascading effect of taxes, promoting a seamless tax structure.

Enhancing Revenue Collection: By broadening the tax base, GST aimed to enhance government revenue.

Challenges Emerge: Despite its noble intentions, the GST system has encountered several hurdles, from compliance complexities to compensation issues for states.

The Role of the Public Accounts Committee (PAC)



The Public Accounts Committee (PAC) serves as a watchdog, ensuring accountability in government expenditures. Recently, they have emphasized the urgent need for a comprehensive review of the GST framework.

Revamped GST 2.0: The PAC has called for a "revamped GST 2.0" to address inefficiencies and complications in the current system.

Consultations with Stakeholders: Their recommendations stem from consultations with various stakeholders, highlighting real challenges faced by businesses and state governments.

Observations on GST Compensation to States



One of the critical issues raised by the PAC revolves around the compensation framework for states.

Lack of CAG Audit: The absence of mandatory audits by the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) for over six years has raised concerns about transparency and accountability regarding the Compensation Fund Account.

Impact on State Finances: States like Tamil Nadu and Karnataka, crucial manufacturing hubs, fear losing fiscal autonomy due to centralization of tax collections. A staggering ₹32,577.73 crore remains pending due to unresolved inconsistencies in fund distribution.

Other Problems Identified by the PAC



Beyond compensation, the PAC has highlighted various other challenges plaguing the GST framework.

Taxation Process Delays: Delays in the taxation process hinder revenue inflow and delay tax refunds, creating cash flow challenges for businesses.

Inadequate Refund Mechanisms: Businesses face prolonged waiting periods for refunds, leading to significant financial strain. The PAC insists on clearer timelines and regular updates for the refund process.

Issues with Registration Cancellations: The PAC discovered that in many instances, the procedure for canceling registrations was not followed, raising concerns about fairness and due process.

The Call for Simplification of GST



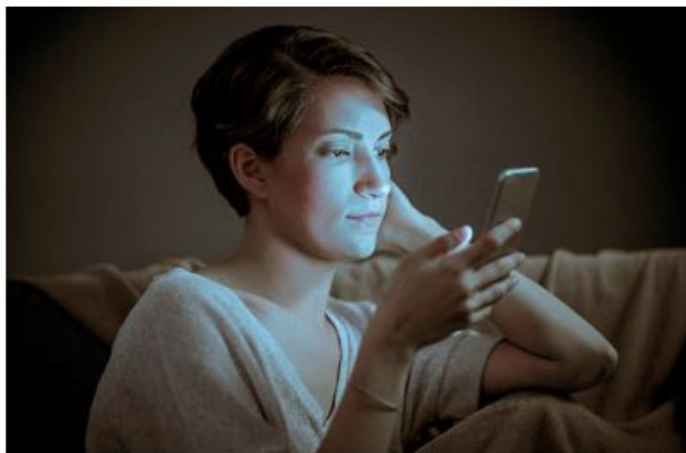
The PAC has underscored the urgent need to simplify the GST regime to alleviate the burdens on businesses.

Input Tax Credit (ITC) Claims: The committee recommends processing ITC claims within specified timeframes to reduce burdens on businesses.

Focus on MSMEs and Exporters: The challenges faced by micro, small, and medium enterprises and exporters are significant, and the PAC advocates for streamlined processes to support these sectors.

Conclusion

The PAC's report serves as a clarion call for the government to reevaluate the GST framework. With "revamped GST 2.0" on the horizon, there is hope for a more efficient and equitable taxation system that benefits all stakeholders involved



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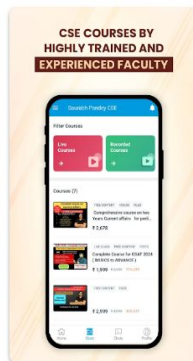
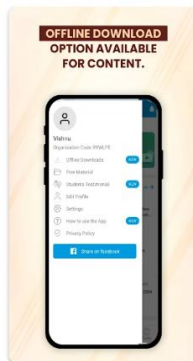
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