The Big Picture – Pak team in Pathankot: New Beginning or strategic folly?

LINK

Summary:
The relationship between India and Pakistan has taken a new turn with the arrival of a joint investigative team from Pakistan to probe the Pathankot airbase attack which took place in January. The arrival of the team and the presence of it in the airbase has assumed new proportions as the opposition parties have attacked the government for allowing it. However, this decision has opened up new possibilities. The Indian government’s decision to allow the team apparently consisting of ISI and Military intelligence officials has surprised many. This decision gives rise to the following questions:

1. Why has this been done?
2. What is expected of this visit and how will it help the investigating agencies on the Indian side?
3. Whether such visits become reciprocal and will lead to diplomatic breakthrough?
4. Or is it some kind of blunder?

Background:
Soon after the attack the attack India had announced that it would allow Pakistan investigating agencies to visit India and modalities would be decided in advance. The recent visit is the consequence of this decision.
Why this is a good move?
Such events have not taken place earlier. It is a new beginning showing some signs of maturity and positivity in the relationship. Since the fallout of meeting between NSAs positive developments have been taking place. Due to some shared intelligence between the two countries, two terrorist attacks were also neutralized in Gujarat. So, same kind of reciprocity from Pakistan can be expected.

Why this would make a little difference?
However, according to some experts, there was no need for Pakistan probe team to visit India. DNA and telephone details have already been given. Some of the evidences collected at the site have also been handed over. So, it is being said that such tactics are often used to delay the investigation. It can be noted here that, after 26/11 attacks, despite the visit by a judicial team, nothing better was achieved. Also, no great insights can be gained by just a visit, say some experts. In the past too, Pakistan has failed to prove its credentials in combating terrorism. Hence, it is being felt that realism is being sacrificed in the whole event. And many are upset with the fact that the team consists of members from ISI. It is always claimed that most of the terrorist attacks are backed by the ISI.

Why, at this moment, it is difficult for Pakistan to control terror groups?
If it starts controlling now, there is a high probability that many of these terror groups would go and join the IS.

Conclusion:
While many are skeptical about the latest developments, some see it as a confidence building measure between the two countries. However, only time can tell about the seriousness of the investigation and its outcome.

The Big Picture - Uttarakhand HC decision: What does it mean?

Summary:
The Uttarakhand political crisis has assumed new legal dimensions now. After a single judge bench of High Court virtually stayed the President’s rule in the state and directed the CM to take a vote of confidence, a division bench stayed this order. Meanwhile till the next hearing of the division bench the order has been stayed. Meanwhile, the imposition of President’s rule by the Centre just a day before Rawat was to take a vote of confidence has raised a whole lot of legal and constitutional questions.
Background:
The political crisis in Uttarakhand started when nine Congress MLAs, along with 27 BJP legislators, met Governor K. K. Paul at the Raj Bhavan in Dehradun, and sought the dismissal of the Congress government led by Chief Minister Harish Rawat. Following which Mr. Rawat met the Governor and maintained that he enjoyed a majority in the 71-seat Uttarakhand Assembly. Governor K.K. Paul allowed Mr. Rawat to prove his majority in Assembly. However, before he could proceed further, President’s rule was imposed in the state.

What the Single Judge Bench order says?
The Single Judge Bench had ordered a floor test and had also allowed disqualified MLAs to take part in it. In effect, the order temporarily revived the Assembly for one day for the purpose of conducting the trust vote, and also appeared to be a partial stay on the Proclamation imposing President’s rule.

What the division bench said?
A Division Bench of Uttarakhand High Court has kept the previous order in abeyance till April 6. This decision is based special appeals filed by the Centre and opposition parties in Uttarakhand over ambiguities in the single judge bench order of the court where Mr.Rawat was permitted a floor test.

Why can’t floor test be taken now?
According to the centre, after the imposition of President’s Rule, the State legislature cannot function and all its functions can only be discharged by or under the authority of Parliament. Also, voting is not permitted under President’s rule.

How centre defends the imposition of President’s rule:
The Centre is of the view that continuance of the Rawat government was “immoral and unconstitutional” when the Speaker declared the Appropriation Bill “passed” in controversial circumstances.

Is the Centre right in doing so?
One does not dispute the fact that there may have been certain procedural issues arising from the passing of the Appropriations Bill in the State, but it has been constitutional convention for many years that the decision of the Speaker with regards to a procedural decision is often taken as final. Even so, if the Speaker’s decision went against established constitutional principles, there are mechanisms in place to remove the speaker.

- The power of the Central government under Article 356 is a most extreme power as it enables it to dismiss a State Government and place the Assembly in suspended animation or dismiss the Assembly if need be and call for fresh elections.
- However, according to some experts, there was no such situation brewing in Uttarakhand. There are constitutional mechanisms in place to remedy this situation, and one of them is a no-
confidence motion. If the Chief Minster had lost the vote, the Governor had a myriad of options at his disposal, including dissolving the House and call for fresh elections. What this proclamation does, however, is that it cuts short extensive constitutional machinery, designed specifically to deal with situations such as this and perhaps, at most, delay an inevitable early election. Seldom have state governments been dismissed because of procedural decisions by a Speaker concerning a bill being brought to the floor for a vote, even seldom still before a scheduled No-Confidence vote.

Conclusion:
Though the Centre’s position might be constitutionally correct, the single Judge Bench order apparently adheres to the letter and spirit of the SR Bommai judgment, which allows the court to evaluate the material on the basis of which the President’s decision was taken. In this particular case, according the Bommai judgment, the government’s majority can only be tested on the floor of the house.

The Big Picture – Tackling the NPA explosion: Privatisation or Bankruptcy bill

LINK

Summary:
India’s 95 trillion banking sector is under crisis. 29 state owned banks have written off as much as 1.14 lakh crore rupees of bad debts between financial years 2013 and 2015, much more than they had done in the preceding 9 years. The RBI says, “While bad debts stood at 15551 crores for the financial year ending March 2012, by 2015 this figure increased by 3 times.” All this prompted the Supreme Court to remark that “rich people take crores of rupees loans and declare insolvency, while poor farmers are suffering.” The RBI had submitted the list in a sealed cover with the request that the information be kept confidential or else it would have a serious impact on the economy.
The large figure indicates that many, who borrow, including big industrialists, are unable to pay their loans back and service them. Even the banks have lost the ability to collect and hence the lending has been very indiscreet.

Background:
The problem started when private banks were nationalized in 1969. Till then, banks were more used to sanctioning working capital and not term capital or investment banking. For investment banking the government then had created three separate banks. But their role ended in 2005 and that is when the nationalized public sector banks started lending tem loans. However, they couldn’t rise to
the occasion and hence lost the ability. Another problem was that they were raising short term money and lending long and this led to a mismatch. Besides, they also did not have credit assessment ability.

**Main reasons behind the rising debt:**

- Small loans given under many popular schemes are generally written off under political pressure.
- Few big loans, given under political pressure, are written off too.
- No proper restructuring.
- A major portion of bad debts arise out of lending to the priority sector, at the dictates of politicians and bureaucrats.
- Wrong lending decisions are also to be blamed.
- Another factor that can contribute to the low level of expertise in many big public sector banks is the constant rotation of duties among officers and the apparent lack of training in lending principles for the loan officers.
- Core sectors have also been underperforming.

**What’s the solution?**

- Reduce the government’s interference. Bring down government’s shareholding in the public sector banks.
- Professionalize the management in decision making.
- More public scrutiny and public discussions are also needed.
- NPA recognition has to be matched by adequate amount of recapitalization.
- Pressure on both borrowers and lenders should be built up.
- RBI should strictly enforce the existing regulations upon the banks.
- Banks should also strictly monitor the loans given.
- Willful defaulters should be punished.

**Conclusion:**

In the long run, however, we need long lasting solutions. In the absence of which, the banking sector will undergo a real crisis. Banks are also in danger of losing their market. Hence, it is time for the government and the RBI to come out with a smart option to resolve this issue that can no longer be put on the backburner.
The Big Picture – Crowd management in temples: Lessons from Kollam fire

Summary:
The recent fireworks accident at Puttingal Devi temple in the southern district of Kollam in Kerala was the deadliest in the state’s history. More than 100 people died and nearly 400 injured. While hundreds of families are struggling to come to grips with the enormity of the tragedy, a blame game is being played out on the sidelines.

Background:
Fireworks and accidents are part of Kerala’s temple festivities and they are only likely to increase because the number of temples and the scale of festivals are rising fast. As the Kollam tragedy and many other fireworks accidents show, it’s not just the people who are directly involved in them or those who are in the vicinity who get killed. Instead, people in the entire area are at risk.

Factors that intensified the impact:
* First, the temple and the surrounding were not disaster-proof. In Kollam, a lot of people died from heavy concrete debris that fell on them because the fireworks ignited a warehouse of explosives. If the devotees and people are to be protected from such disasters, the temples and their surroundings should be disaster-proofed, which in effect means that their scale and intensity have to be rationalised. The use of fireworks has to be either stopped or have to be managed with extreme safeguards.
* There was no permission for the fireworks for the Kollam temple as well. The situation could have been mitigated had the local authorities and festival organisers abided by the law. Both the fireworks manufacturers and the organisers need appropriate permissions according to the rules laid out by the Petroleum and Explosives Safety Organisation of the central government. There are also guidelines on where the fireworks can be held, how people should be evacuated from such sites, and what are the safe distances to be kept. Certain chemicals and combinations (e.g. sulphur and potassium chlorates) are banned across the country, and the Kerala high court has banned the production of certain types of native explosives because they are really dangerous. These things were not taken care of.
* The contractors in charge of the fireworks did not provide an adequate buffer zone between the area where the explosives were lit and the assembled crowd. Firework was staged in cramped space and people got as close as they can.
The most dangerous part was that different groups were competing with one another and made the event a test of their financial muscle and fire power. Banned substances were freely used and guidelines were flouted with impunity.

The district administration is also to be blamed. The district administration, with the help of the local police, could have taken action, but either they ignored the risks or were overcome by the popular interest. Had they inspected the sites, read the rules to the organisers and prevented unlawful manufacture of the explosives, the loss of lives and properties could have been avoided.

Way ahead:
Banning fireworks is an unpopular, and perhaps impractical, decision. The Kollam tragedy should be a reminder to all temple managements that the space available for holding events should be the primary concern while allowing crowds into festival venues. It is true that safety and health fears are not deterring many people from joining the swelling number of pilgrims to temple towns and festivals. Good sense would dictate that authorities then come up with ways to ensure that large crowds don’t concentrate in risk-prone areas.

The government should also come out with new and more robust disaster management plans in which prominent public spaces where people congregate in large numbers are mapped and all threats to them are identified.

The Kollam fire tragedy is a warning to officials and the citizenry that public safety must take precedence over all other interests.

Conclusion:
There are clear guidelines on the use and storage of crackers and other fireworks. But by all accounts, the administration is unable to enforce the rules. Powerful custodians of religious centres, aided and abetted by a political class that bypasses the local administration and due process, are to blame. Public safety must be a non-negotiable imperative but for that it is crucial that the process of the progressive emasculation of the local authority is reversed.
India’s World – India-US Logistics Support Agreement

India and the US have signed an in-principle agreement for sharing military logistics. The agreement will give two nations access to logistic support from each other besides refueling and birthing facilities. The US has also made it clear that if India wants transfer of high end technology, it needs to sign three foundational agreements. These agreements include:

1. Logistic Support Agreement (LSA).

Although the LSA agreement has been under negotiation for two decades now, the previous government was opposed to it. There was apprehension that the agreement would draw India into a de facto military alliance with the US. It should be noted here that this agreement does not involve giving away any bases. Also, India does not have any such agreements with other nations.

What is LSA all about?
Initially Logistics Support Agreement was called Access and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA) but later it was renamed Logistics Support Agreement. The LSA would require both countries to provide their bases, fuel and other kinds of logistics support to each others’ fighter jets and naval warships. Logistical support with regard to weapons facilities would involve non-offensive military equipment. This support will involve cashless transactions on a reciprocal basis. The LSA would be particularly beneficial at the time of disaster relief operations like the one India undertook in the wake of the Asian Tsunami in 2004.

Why it was opposed?
- There is an apprehension that this agreement would lead progressively towards a form of informal military alliance.
- This has politically sensitivity involved in it too.
- Some experts also believe that by signing this agreement India may become a party to the ‘wrong designs’ of the US military in the region and in the process, compromise India’s strategic sovereignty.

Benefits of this agreement:
- Whenever the ships of other countries visit our ports or air bases, they go through a very long process of clearances through MEA, MoD and other agencies. This agreement aims at cutting short these procedures.
• The exchange of logistics support facilities would further enhance bilateral defence cooperation as well as India’s strategic role, keeping in view the projected expansion of the Indian Navy’s role beyond the Indian Ocean Region (IOR).

• The absence of appropriate logistics support mechanism between the two countries would hamper such capabilities to effectively deal with the security challenges during emergency situations.

• Financially too the LSA makes good sense for India. According to some official estimates, with LSA in place, India would be able to save around US$20 million per war game, when Indian forces take part in any of the joint military exercises with the US on American soil.

**Things to be taken care of:**

• The logistics support should be limited to certain situations such as joint military exercises, interventions in disaster relief or any other situation mutually agreed upon.

• It should be taken care that the degree of autonomy in deciding what situation the agreement will apply is not lost.

• This agreement involves setting up of warehousing facilities in each other’s lands. It is worrying because such places have their own personnel guarding them.

• India should also make sure that it retains the ability to say no to access to logistics under exceptional circumstances.

**What about other two agreements?**

• CISMOA would allow US to provide India with its encrypted communications equipment and systems so that Indian and US higher commanders, aircraft and ships can communicate with each other through secure networks in peace and war.

• BECA would provide India with topographical and aeronautical data and products which will aid navigation and targeting.

• These are areas in which US is very advanced and agreement could definitely benefit India, although armed forces which use systems from many other countries like Israel and Russia are not comfortable with sharing information about their systems with US.

**Conclusion:**

The logistics support agreement is a mutually beneficial agreement. However, both sides need to make efforts to arrive at a consensus that is consistent with their national interests and policies. LSA should be limited to simplifying procedures. Also, the other agreements are not easy. They need larger consensus and greater discussions. The fundamental question is whether India possesses the political will to forge a closer relationship with the US, and at the same time have all its options open for any eventuality.
**The Big Picture – Uttarakhand: The way forward**

**Summary:**
The Union government suffered a major setback with Uttarakhand High Court quashing President’s rule in the hill state and directing ousted CM Harish Rawat to prove his majority on April 29. The HC had also upheld the disqualification of 9 rebel MLAs observing that they have to pay the price for constitutional sin of defection. But, in the latest development the SC has set aside High Court’s order and re-imposed President’s rule in the state.

**Background:**
The High Court’s judgement is based on previous Supreme Court judgements. The Supreme Court has clarified in several judgments that **Central rule was no substitute to testing a democratically elected government’s strength on the floor of the assembly.**

- In 1977, then Janata Party government asked CMs of nine Congress ruled states to resign or face dismissal through Article 356. This was challenged in the SC, which took a lenient view of the political manoeuvring. It said **judicial review of presidential proclamation was on a limited ground** and couldn’t touch political aspects.


- Here, the court said **floor test was the best method to judge an elected government’s majority.** It said, “The SC or HC can strike down the proclamation if it is found mala fide or based on irrelevant or extraneous grounds. When called upon, the Union of India has to produce the material on the basis of which action was taken. It cannot refuse to do so, if it seeks to defend the action.”

- In the **Ranmeshwar Prasad Vs Union of India case (2005)**, the supreme Court reiterated this position: “The President’s satisfaction has to be based on objective material. The objective material must vindicate that the government of the state cannot be carried on in accordance with the provision of the Constitution. That is a condition precedent before the issue of the proclamation.”

**Was it necessary to impose President’s rule in Uttarakhand?**

No, say few experts. It is because none of reports, submitted by the governor to the centre, spoke about the breakdown of constitutional machinery in the state. Instead, President’s rule was
imposed in the state by the President based on Centre’s advice. The centre’s argument is based on the way the appropriation bill was passed in the state.

**What the law says?**
The President can exercise powers under Article 356 ‘either on the report of the Governor or otherwise’. Here, the word ‘otherwise’ means the President may act even without the governor’s report. Article 356 says that if any piece of advice is given by the Centre and a state government does not comply with it, it shall be deemed that ‘there is breakdown of the constitutional machinery of the state’. It does not mean corruption or misuse of powers by the Speaker.

**Way ahead:**
Now, the Supreme Court of India; the final arbiter of the constitutional maters will decide the case. While doing so, it will definitely look back to the point when a judgement by their predecessors changed the course of federal politics in the country. While pronouncing its judgement in *S R Bommai* case, the constitutional bench of the highest court made the arbitrary use of **Article 356** of the Constitution very difficult. Now more than two decades after the Bommai case, apex court will once again deliberate upon the use and abuse of the Article 356. If Supreme Court overturns the high court order, it would raise serious questions about the ability of judges of lower courts in handling matters of constitutional crisis. The Supreme Court also needs to take a serious look at the current lacunae in the system like the Parliament approval within two months when a government is in minority in the Upper House.

**The Big Picture – Water Crisis: Why has it reached such proportions?**

**Summary:**
As the summer sets in, many parts of the country are said to face one of the worst water crisis in the history. Reservoir levels in many states have come down alarmingly. Also, drinking water situation in states like Maharashtra is equally alarming. Ganga, which was to provide water to 1/3rd population of the country, is witnessing lower and lower water levels every year. Ten states had declared drought last year and with depleting water levels in reservoir it’s getting worse. In 91 major reservoirs of the country water level is just 25% of the capacity with monsoon still two months away.
How bad is the situation?
This is one of the worst water crises in recent decades. The situation is acute in western parts of the country and equally concerning in southern states. Around 330 million people in India are affected by drought, according to the government.

- The Marathwada region in India’s western Maharashtra state is badly affected, reeling under the worst drought in decades. In Latur, Maharashtra, the looming fear that the survival instinct can turn lethal on account of the water crisis, has led authorities to invoke Section 144 of the Criminal Procedure Code that bars the assembling of more than 5 persons near wells and other water collecting sources.
- Currently, water levels in the 91 major reservoirs in the country have dropped to less than one-third of their capacity at 29%, as per the Central Water Commission’s report. This is considered the lowest in the decade.
- Also, agriculture is largely dependent on a mere 400 BCM (billion cubic metres) of groundwater, which is again fast depleting.
- Rivers are faring no better. The Ganga, regarded the lifeline of North India, catering to a quarter of India’s population, has been experiencing a much-reduced flow. To a great extent the river’s water level is determined by the groundwater reserves of the areas along its course. With the water table shrinking further over the years, and the delay in the melting of the Himalayan ice this year, the shortage is being acutely felt.
- In South India, while the Krishna River basin is badly affected, Cauvery and Godavari basins are facing deficiency.

Reasons behind the crisis:
A combination of factors apart from inadequate monsoons has led to this crisis. It has been caused by an amalgamation of natural and man-made factors. The rampant plundering of groundwater reserves for agricultural and industrial purposes, contamination of underground drinking water sources, the cultivation of water-intensive crops such as sugarcane in vulnerable areas, and the damming of rivers in the upper reaches have been instrumental for this catastrophe.

Also, the rapid growth of population and its growing needs has meant that per capita availability of fresh water has declined sharply from 3,000 cubic metres to 1,123 cubic metres over the past 50 years. The global average is 6,000 cubic metres. As water demand is expected to rise further, the pace of supply is expected to fall further.
Effects:
This situation has been in the making for several years, and will likely aggravate in the coming days.

- This is the worst time for agriculture and industries, with even power generation coming to a halt at the National Thermal Power Corporation’s station in West Bengal’s Farakka. This will affect also affect prices of cereals and other essential commodities. On the farming side, crop cycles tend to get affected as a result.
- Depleting groundwater levels are the biggest threat to rural livelihoods and food security. There’s been a 6% dip in share of groundwater wells within 10 metres below the ground. This depth is the threshold beyond which farmers have to start using deep-water equipment, which adds to their hardship.
- Mispricing of water has meant that large parts of Indian cities do not have access to regular water supply. Two of India’s 5 biggest cities are unable to meet the recommended quantities of water supply. Most of the water goes to privileged classes.

What needs to be done?
Land reclamation and efficient soil and water management, with well-planned seasonal crop mixes using short-duration varieties, should form part of a comprehensive strategy to protect and boost monsoon-dependent agriculture.

- India’s monsoon-forecasting models need to be supplemented with emerging methods in data science, irrigation and seed use, and evangelised with communication technology-driven extension methods.
- The stereotype of the Indian farmer needs to change from the haggard punter on rains to an Internet-savvy manager of nature. This needs fiscal and policy commitments. Agriculture is a state subject under the Constitution, and the kind of responsibilities required to overcome the monsoon’s challenges need active central intervention.
- Cooperative groundwater management should be accorded top priority. This involves government at all tires, empowering local groups with the understanding of the status of groundwater on a regular basis, so that extraction does not exceed the sustainable limit.
- Desalination and recycling are two other viable measures with strong support from experts. Recycling in addition to being cost-effective, also takes care of the problem of wastewater and is therefore, a much better long-term solution.

Conclusion:
At present 4 billion people worldwide are affected by the shortage for at least one month every year. Latest studies show that the impact of the crisis is most acutely felt by about 1.8 billion people for six months in a year. The World Economic Forum rates “water crises as one of the three greatest
risks of harm to people and economies”. What India needs is a permanent wake-up call, not a snooze button in the form of news reports of water crisis cropping up once in a few weeks or months. Measures such as those suggested above needs to be complemented by conservation efforts from the grassroots level.

The Big Picture – Patidar agitation erupts again: Reconciling social strife & investment

Summary:
The Patidar agitation for OBC status in Gujarat has witnessed a revival in the state following the impetus given by the Haryana government. The Haryana government recently gave into the Jats’ agitation and passed a draft bill granting them reservation. However, it is being said that (most) Patidars in Gujarat are not only economically affluent, but also socially and politically influential.

Why are patidars demanding a share of the OBC quota?
Quotas have meant that Patidar youth must do that much better in competitive examinations to land a government job or a seat in a government medical college. At present, youths from rural areas are at a double disadvantage due to their socio-economic background.

• Patidar community is infamous for its skewed sex ratio, and Patel youths, especially in the rural areas, find it difficult to get a bride. Parents of girls prefer a groom with a government job or business in a city to one with agricultural land in rural areas.
• Over the years, economic downturns and crop failures have led to a preference for government jobs over farming. Saurashtra, dominated by Patels, is a major cotton and groundnut belt, but farmers have not got good prices for their crops in the last two seasons.
• The stress has contributed to the perception that as Patels suffer, OBC youth, helped along by quotas, have been steadily improving their socio-economic situation.

Background:
The reservation policy which was initiated as a temporary provision (for 10 years) for Scheduled Castes(SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST) in our Constitution in 1950, has expanded its coverage and contents multifold over the past six to seven decades. It has now become an almost a permanent feature of the national policies.
Reservation was meant to repudiate the religiously sanctioned apartheid and oppression of caste society, and to establish the community of formal equals that is a precondition for nationhood.

In the constitutional view, reservation is explicitly and exclusively about redressing caste discrimination and inequality. By its very definition, reservation cannot promote the interests of the dominant castes; if anything, it would work against them.

However, now the reservation policy is being used mainly in vote bank politics played around the castes and has failed in including the people at the bottom in the mainstream economy and society.

**Present scenario:**
The original dimension of reservation has been forgotten, and today it is understood more as a means for redressing caste-linked discrimination and “backwardness”, and for enabling the inclusion of hitherto excluded and under-represented groups. Today, the main qualifications for getting reservation would be: an electorally significant population, and the skills needed to mobilise the community, manage the media and mount a successful campaign to coerce the state.

**Why demands for reservations are on rise?**

- Average landholding size most castes is reducing with every passing generation. Moreover, agriculture is not considered as lucrative now as it was some years back.
- As their traditional profession of agriculture loses its sheen, people are turning towards cities, and more specifically government jobs in cities.
- Also, many people, who do not have enough capital to start a business, have to look for jobs. Here these castes feel that they lose out to other castes, who have OBC status.

**Pros of reservation system in India:**
Reservations imply that economically and socially weaker sectors of the society get better opportunities to uplift their economic as well as social status. These reservations not only apply to job opportunities but also admissions in colleges, universities and government run educational institutions, which means that students belong to the backward classes have been given an extra advantage to come up with higher education. As a consequence, the reservation system opens new doors of opportunities for such people and gives them a chance to build a better future for themselves as well as their coming generations. It is also a step to remove the social and economic disparities in the country and take a step forward on the path of a balanced society.
**Cons of reservation system:**

Though the Reservation System works in favor of the backward castes of the society, at the same time, it has brewed up some controversies in the country too. It is believed that the system supersedes merit in certain circumstances, when meritorious candidates are deprived of the jobs or admissions so that candidates of backward classes can be accommodated as per the reservation system. Moreover, the system is confined to government institutions and firms, while those in the private sector are still beyond the reach of people belonging to the backward classes, either because they lack the skills needed to enter these firms or institutions or they are not financially sound enough to afford them. Some believe that the reservation system is a political tool to get hold of the backward class vote bank and it has an overall negative impact on the productive workforce of the country by ignoring the people with true potential and giving people opportunities on the basis of caste rather than merit.

**Why there is a need to reexamine our reservation policy?**

- Changed external conditions.
- Increased popularity of reservation system.
- Increased competition to get government jobs.
- Lack of data.

**What needs to be done now?**

- Conduct regular surveys to identify the beneficiaries who can claim the benefits under the reservation policy.
- Re-evaluate the eligibility of groups for inclusion in reserved categories every 10 or at least every 20 years.
- While caste will continue to be the mainstay of reservation policies, the benefits should flow to the vast majority of underprivileged children from deprived castes; not to a few privileged children with a caste tag.

**Conclusion:**

Clearly, the time has come to rethink our reservation policies. The radical rethinking on reservation should aim at:

1. Excluding the entire creamy layer from reservation.
2. Developing the capabilities of the deprived and excluded beyond offering them admission to higher education or jobs on a platter.

The underlying principle should be that all the poorest at the bottom get support and all the poorest — excluded socially and economically — get a preference.
The Big Picture – Fighting the drought: Is it all about funds?

Summary:
The country is facing one of its worst droughts in recent years. It is said that after the situation in mid 1990s this is for the first time that many states have faced shortage of rains for two consecutive years with the third year also likely to follow. 33 crore people living in 256 districts across 10 states which constitute almost one third of the population are said to be affected by the drought condition. Maharashtra, Karnataka and parts of UP are said to be the worst affected. Taking a serious note of the situation, the Supreme Court recently directed the centre to release the MGNREGA funds on time. The court also asked why some states had not been declared drought affected. Some states have also been slow in declaring drought affected. Meanwhile, the PM has held a series of discussions with CMs of drought affected states to devise a common strategy to tackle the drought.

Previous droughts were inevitably accompanied by a surge in food prices. This time’s drought has been unusual in this regard, as consumer food inflation has been relatively benign at 5.2-5.3% and there isn’t any evidence of hoarding by unscrupulous traders. Prices of many crops have actually fallen, making it a drought essentially for farmers. But since urban India hasn’t been affected as much, it has also not drawn attention of the kind that would have forced Parliament to take more than cursory notice.

Drought in 10 states is estimated to impact the economy by at least Rs 6,50,000 crore. There is also likely an impact on children and women health besides farm debt increase due to loss in livestock and farm economy in the drought-hit districts. The drought would create inflationary pressures making the food management an imperative challenge for the government and the policy makers.

Why the crisis has aggravated?
- Despite having prior information about the impending drought, governments did little or nothing to face the challenge.
- Unscientific and over usage of freshwater resources has aggravated the crisis.
- By putting the onus on states, the Centre washed off its hands.
- Some states have also been reluctant to declare a drought.
The crisis is also the result of failure to regulate water extraction, storage, wastage and patterns of use. The excessive use of deep borewells to extract groundwater has eroded the capacity of aquifers to replenish.

- Poor reservoir management has led to silt accumulation, among other issues limiting water storage.
- Lack of water harvesting and over-irrigation owing to cropping choices and patterns have depleted water tables.

What needs to be done?

- Agricultural practices should be made drought proof. Cropping pattern has to change. Water intensive crops should not be growth in arid areas.
- Water usage has to be judicious with new techniques such as drip irrigation. Better water management is particularly crucial because India’s water map is uneven.
- Sustainable water management also requires local solutions. Large-scale national projects like the National River Linking Project are simply too unwieldy to be effective. What we need is a drastic overhaul of farm and power policies and the promotion of new irrigation and harvesting techniques that need low capital investment and land.
- With nearly 33 crore people affected by drought, the need for a nationwide water pricing mechanism as well as a model water law that penalises over-exploitation of water is more urgent than ever.
- Preparation for drought and ipso facto for a deficit in annual rainfall must go beyond mitigation and include steps to address this man-made scarcity.
- A coordinated effort at all levels of government is required.

Supreme Court’s directions:

- It has directed the Centre to take proactive steps in drought mitigation as well as in assessment, planning and relief as mandated by the Disaster Management Act, 2005.
- Establish a National Disaster Response Force with specialist cadre in six months.
- Set up a Disaster Mitigation Fund within three months.
- Frame National Plan on risk assessment, risk management and crisis management in respect of a disaster.
- Update 60-year-old Drought Management Manual keeping in mind “humanitarian factors” like migrations, suicides, extreme distress, the plight of women and children.
For a water-scarce country like India, managing such a valuable resource is essential and immediate steps must be taken to fix lopsided priorities.