

SC on GST law

- The Supreme Court, in a judgment championing the importance of “cooperative federalism” for the well-being of democracy, held that Union and State legislatures have “equal, simultaneous and unique powers” to make laws on Goods and Services Tax (GST) and the recommendations of the GST Council are not binding on them.
- The apex court’s decision came while confirming a Gujarat High Court ruling that the Centre cannot levy Integrated Goods and Services Tax (IGST) on ocean freight from Indian importers.
- “The recommendations of the GST Council are the product of a collaborative dialogue involving the Union and the States. They are recommendatory in nature... The recommendations only have a persuasive value. To regard them as binding would disrupt fiscal federalism when both the Union and the States are conferred equal power to legislate on GST,”
- The court emphasised that Article 246A (which gives the States power to make laws with respect to GST) of the Constitution treat the Union and the States as “equal units”.
- “It confers a simultaneous power (on Union and States) for enacting laws on GST... Article 279A, in constituting the GST Council, envisions that neither the Centre nor the States are actually dependent on the other.
- He said the Centre and States were “autonomous, independent and even competing units” while making GST laws.
- “The federal system is a means to accommodate the needs of a pluralistic society in a democratic manner... Democracy and federalism are inter-dependent. Federalism would only be stable in a well-functioning democracy. The constituent units of a federal polity checks the exercise of powers of one another to prevent one group from exercising dominant power,”

As per the government

- The Supreme Court verdict does not entail any changes ‘in any way’ to the functioning of the GST regime and the institutional mechanism for its operation
- Terming the GST Council ‘the finest example of collaborative and cooperative federalism’, the Finance Ministry said that the apex court had ‘only elaborated’ on its functional mechanism in its observations.

- The Council was a collaborative institutional mechanism, and the Centre and States follow its recommendations that are arrived at with consensus

As per States

- “Ever since the GST regime came into being, the Centre had been arbitrarily imposing its decisions on the States, affecting their revenue and forcing them to impose treasury restrictions,”
- “The Council was a only a recommendatory body and cannot supersede the State’s rights and power for enacting the laws with regard to GST,”
- Tax experts were tentative about the implications of the verdict.
- “This would have far-reaching implications on various other matters where the States are not in agreement with the decisions of the GST Council.

THE HINDU

Amendment in ethanol policy

The story so far:

- The Union Cabinet on Wednesday approved amendments to the National Policy on Biofuels, 2018, to advance the date by which fuel

companies have to increase the percentage of ethanol in petrol to 20%, from 2030 to 2025. The policy of introducing 20% ethanol is expected to take effect from April 1, 2023.

What does switching to E20 entail?

- A NITI Aayog Committee report of June 2021 lays out a comprehensive picture of ethanol blending, the challenges and a roadmap.
- India’s net import of petroleum was 185 million tons at a cost of \$55 billion in 2020-21.
- Most of the petroleum is used by vehicles and therefore a successful 20% ethanol blending programme could save the country \$4 billion per annum, or about ₹30,000 crore.
- To achieve such savings, the committee estimates an ethanol demand of 1,016 crore litres based on expected growth in vehicle population.
- Because electric vehicles are also likely to increase, this should partially offset demand for ethanol leading to a requirement of 722-921 crore litres in 2025.

How does this affect engines?

- When using E20, there is an estimated loss of 6-7% fuel efficiency for four wheelers which are

originally designed for E0 and calibrated for E10, 3-4% for two wheelers designed for E0 and calibrated for E10 and 1-2% for four wheelers designed for E10 and calibrated for E20.

- Car makers have said that with modifications in engines (hardware and tuning), the loss in efficiency due to blended fuel can be reduced.

What is the international experience?

- Flex Fuel Engine technology (FFE), or vehicles that run entirely on ethanol, are popular in Brazil and comprise nearly 80% of the total number of new vehicles sold in 2019. The cost of flex fuel vehicles (four-wheelers) could cost about ₹17,000 to ₹25,000 more than the current generation of vehicles.
- The two-wheeled flex fuel vehicles would be costlier by ₹5,000 to ₹12,000 compared to regular petrol vehicles.
- The global production of fuel ethanol touched 110 billion litres in 2019, or about an average growth of 4% year per year during the last decade.

What are the environmental costs of ethanol blending?

- Because ethanol burns more completely than petrol, it avoids emissions such as carbon monoxide.
- However, tests conducted in India have shown that there is no reduction in nitrous oxides, one of the major environmental pollutants.
- A report by the Institute for Energy Economics and Financial Analysis (IEEFA) says that for India to meet its target of 20% ethanol blended in petrol by the year 2025, it will need to bring in 30,000 additional sq km of land to come under maize cultivation.
- Half that land can be used more efficiently to produce clean electricity from solar energy, they contend.
- For India, sugarcane is the cheapest source of ethanol. On average, a ton of sugarcane can produce 100 kg of sugar and 70 litres of ethanol but that would mean 1,600 to 2,000 litres of water to produce 1 kg of sugar, implying that a litre of ethanol from sugar requires about 2,860 litres of water.

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South Asia biodiversity

- According to the Global Assessment Report on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services released in 2019 by the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) at the UNESCO headquarters in Paris, the main global drivers of biodiversity loss are climate change, invasive species, and over-exploitation of natural resources, pollution and urbanisation.
- The earth is under strain Because of our collective excesses, the ecological carrying capacity of planet earth has largely been exceeded.
- This trend needs to be redressed, with cleaner air, high quality drinking water, and enough food and healthy habitats to ensure that ecosystem services continue to benefit humanity without critically affecting nature's balance.

Biosphere reserves are key

- One of the best mechanisms that has been created is the World Network of Biosphere Reserves, created in 1971 by UNESCO.
- Biosphere reserves are places where humans live in harmony with nature, and where there is an effective combination of sustainable

development and nature conservation.

- They represent pockets of hope and proof that we are not inexorably headed towards a doomsday ecological scenario, provided we take appropriate action. In South Asia, over 30 biosphere reserves have been established.
- The first one was the Hurulu Biosphere Reserve in Sri Lanka, which was designated in 1977 and comprises 25,500 hectares within the tropical dry evergreen forest.
- In India, the first biosphere reserve was designated by UNESCO in 2000 within the blue mountains of the Nilgiris

Diverse systems

- South Asia has a very diverse set of ecosystems. To begin with, Bhutan, India and Nepal combined have thousands of glaciers, surrounded by lakes and alpine ecosystems.
- The Khangchendzonga Biosphere Reserve, established in 2018, is a good model.
- It includes some of the highest ecosystems in the world, with elevations up to 8,586 metres.
- The reserve is home to orchids and rare plant species. At the same time, more than 35,000 people live there.

- Their main economic activities are crop production, animal husbandry, fishing, dairy products and poultry farming.
- Bangladesh, India, the Maldives, and Sri Lanka all have extensive coastlines, with coral reefs and mangrove forests.
- These areas are exposed to extreme weather events (storms, floods, droughts), and sea-level rise.
- The Maldives are recognised as the lowest-lying country in the world, with a mere elevation of 1.5 metres above the high tide mark. Together with UNESCO,
- Run on science-based plans UNESCO Biosphere Reserves have all developed science-based management plans, where local solutions for sustainable human living and nature conservation are being tested and best practices applied.
- Issues of concern include biodiversity, clean energy, climate, environmental education, and water and waste management, supported by scientific research and monitoring.
- The aim is to detect changes and find solutions to increase climate resilience. All biosphere reserves are internationally recognised sites on land, at the coast, or in the oceans.
- Governments alone decide which areas to nominate. Before approval by UNESCO, the sites are externally examined.
- If approved, they will be managed based on an agreed plan, reinforced by routine checks to ensure credibility, but all remain under the sovereignty of their national government.
- The priority countries Bangladesh, Bhutan, and Nepal are on the priority list of UNESCO, because they do not yet have any biosphere reserves.
- Their governments are already working on their first nomination files.
- Our organisation also believes that it would be important to increase the number of biosphere reserves in India, the Maldives and Sri Lanka.

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Public health management cadre

- In April this year, the Union government released a guidance document on the setting up of a 'public health and management cadre' (PHMC) as well as revised editions of the Indian Public Health Standards (IPHS) for ensuring quality health care in government facilities.

- The 'public health and management cadre' is a follow up of the recommendations made in India's National Health Policy 2017.
- At present, most Indian States (with exceptions such as Tamil Nadu and Odisha) have a teaching cadre (of medical college faculty members) and a specialist cadre of doctors involved in clinical services.
- This structure does not provide similar career progression opportunities for professionals trained in public health.
- It is one of the reasons for limited interest by health-care professionals to opt for public health as a career choice
- The proposed public health cadre and the health management cadre have the potential to address some of these challenges.
- The COVID-19 pandemic changed the status quo.
- For months together, everyone was looking for professionals trained in public health and who had field experience; they were simply far and few.
- It became clear that 'epidemic' and 'pandemic' required specialised skills in a broad range of subjects such as epidemiology, biostatistics, health management and disease modelling, to list a few.
- A public health workforce has a role even beyond epidemics and pandemics. A trained public health workforce ensures that people receive holistic health care, of preventive and promotive services (largely in the domain of public health) as well as curative and diagnostic services (as part of medical care).
- A country or health system that has a shortage of a public health workforce and infrastructure is likely to drift towards a medicalised care system.
- The Fifteenth Finance Commission grant for the five-year period of 2021- 26 and the Pradhan Mantri Ayushman Bharat Health Infrastructure Mission (PM-ABHIM) allocations are available for strengthening public health services and could be used as catalytic funding which should be used in the interim as States embark upon implementing the PHMC and a revised IPHS.

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