



# CURRENT AFFAIRS FOR UPSC

23rd to 29th June 2024



## INTERNATIONAL

### BIDEN-TRUMP DEBATE: TRUMP SCORES AS TWO AGING WHITE MEN HARDLY ENTHUSE

Over the last many decades, the US presidential debate has emerged as the gold standard for intense political argument at the highest levels during elections in democratic societies. By that exalted standard, the first debate between incumbent president, Joe Biden and his challenger, former president Donald Trump has been a disappointing one. Part of the reason was the debate's format. To avoid disorderly interventions, CNN chose to mute the microphones of the candidate going beyond his stipulated time and interjecting when the other was speaking. CNN also did away with the live studio. As a result, the "debate" was more like a press conference with each side making its points, irrespective of the question asked, and taking regular potshots at the other. The two ageing old White men have not, in any case, enthused the American electorate.

The expectations of success for either candidate were also rather low. Trump's supporters were pressing him to be less aggressive and more agreeable; Biden's were hoping that the President will dispel concerns about his age – at 81 he is the oldest president in the history of the United States. By those metrics at least Trump, 78, appears to have come out better. Although the fact checkers are having trouble with many of his claims, Trump was restrained and looked vigorous in contrast to the incumbent. Biden's supporters have become despondent with the president's lack of energy and focus. Biden's several stumbles during the 90 minute standoff have triggered speculation that Democrats might want to replace him as their presidential candidate. While this might be easier said than done, the debate that was to lift Biden's fortunes has cast a dark shadow not only over his own candidacy but also the prospects for the Democratic Party as a whole during the election. A third of the Senate and the entire House of Representatives is up for re-election in November.

What happens in America, of course, does not stay within America. Given the global salience of the US policies, America's friends and rivals alike are playing close attention to US elections and the arguments between Biden and Trump. Foreign policy did not figure too prominently in the debate that was focused on domestic issues such as economy, inflation, social security, illegal immigration, and abortion rights. To the extent they did, both Biden and Trump were strong in their support for Israel and tough on China. Trump accused Biden of mismanaging the crisis in Ukraine and promised to settle the issue in the few weeks between the election in the first week of November and the swearing in during the third week of January 2025. Delhi believes that India will face no major challenge from the potential change of political guard at the White House. After all, India has seen its relations grow under both the presidents. As Republicans gain an edge over Democrats after the first debate, Delhi must, however, prepare itself for a more muscular and utterly transactional Washington in the second term of President Trump.

### FREE MAN

Julian Assange did what journalists do in free societies. He published troves of secret documents exposing the conduct of America's wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and of its diplomacy. And for that, he was denied his freedom for more than 14 years. The hounding of Mr. Assange is a rare modern story of western democracies across the Atlantic, which take pride in their freedoms, working hand in hand to punish a journalist, publisher and whistle-blower. The WikiLeaks founder was first arrested in Britain in 2010 on a European warrant over sex crime allegations reported in Sweden — those charges were later dropped. While on bail, he took asylum in the Ecuador

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embassy in London, where he was holed up until 2019. He was kicked out of the embassy, and Britain rearrested him and put him in the high-security Belmarsh prison. After five years of life in jail, where he was largely confined to a solitary cell, the U.S. entered into a plea deal with Mr. Assange, that would set him free. The 52-year-old will plead guilty in the espionage case before a U.S. federal judge in Saipan, the capital of the Northern Mariana Islands, a U.S. Commonwealth territory in the western Pacific. According to U.S. and British media, Mr. Assange is expected to be sentenced for about five years, the time he has already served in Britain. He will then go to Australia, his native country.

While Mr. Assange's release, which brings his years-long ordeal to an end and is a reprieve for those who have been fighting for him, is welcome news, the road towards this day was not smooth. The way he is being released still raises concerns. The classified documents WikiLeaks published were handed to Mr. Assange by Chelsea Manning, a U.S. military analyst. Ms. Manning was sentenced to 35 years in prison after being convicted of violating the Espionage Act. U.S. President Barack Obama commuted her sentence, allowing her to go free in 2017, but Mr. Assange remained unfree. The Trump Justice Department indicted him in 2019 on 18 counts. And the Biden administration continued to push for his extradition, which he fought doggedly. Last year, Australia's Labor Prime Minister Anthony Albanese urged the U.S. to conclude the case, while lawmakers there passed a resolution this year calling for Mr. Assange to be allowed to return home. In recent years, the case has also become a public relations disaster for Joe Biden's Democratic administration. So when Mr. Assange agreed to plead guilty, all sides found a deal to conclude the case that would get the U.S. a conviction which it had been seeking and Mr. Assange his freedom. Yet, the fact that Mr. Assange would be convicted for publishing state secrets is a setback for free speech. And the pursuit of a whistle-blower for over 14 years would remain a blot on western democracies, especially the U.K. and the U.S., forever.

#### NATO NAMES DUTCH PM MARK RUTTE AS NEXT CHIEF

NATO's 32 nations on Wednesday appointed outgoing Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte as the alliance's next head, handing him the job at a crucial moment with Russia on the march in Ukraine and U.S. elections looming.

Mr. Rutte will take over from Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg on October 1 after major powers — spearheaded by the United States — wrapped up his nomination ahead of a summit of NATO leaders in Washington next month.

The seasoned Dutch leader, whose 14-year tenure in charge of the Netherlands is set to end within weeks, is seen as a safe pair of hands capable of stewarding NATO through perilous times.

His appointment was welcomed by leaders across the 75-year-old alliance, including British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak and German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, who called it "a good choice for freedom and security".

The 57-year-old faces the spectre of a possible return by former U.S. President Donald Trump to the White House.

After staking a claim for the NATO post following the collapse of his coalition last year, Mr. Rutte had to use all his diplomatic skills to win over reluctant allies Turkiye and Hungary. He finally clinched the race last week when his sole challenger, Romanian President Klaus Iohannis, dropped out.



## DEBT TRAP

The Kenyan President's decision to rush through Parliament an IMF-backed finance Bill that sought to increase taxes on everything from imported sanitary pads and tyres to bread and fuel backfired, with protesters storming a section of the Parliament on Tuesday. After the protests, which rights groups said had left at least 23 people killed and 200 injured, President William Ruto announced that he would not sign the Bill. The Kenyan government could have avoided this bloody confrontation had it paid more attention to the public mood. The government's plan was to raise an extra 200 billion Kenyan shilling (some \$1.55 billion) in taxes. Earlier this year, the country had reached a deal with the IMF to secure \$941 million in additional lending. In subsequent talks in Nairobi, they agreed to reforms, including tax increases, to stabilise the country's debt-battered financial situation. The IMF deal triggered street protests. But the government still went ahead with the plan to impose additional taxes on the country of 54 million people, a third of whom still live in poverty.

The government argues that its hands were tied as the country struggles to repay its huge debt burden — domestic and foreign debt was a staggering \$80 billion last year, accounting for nearly three-fourths of its GDP. The government spent more than half of its revenue servicing debts last year. The crisis is an indictment of the development model Kenya and several other countries in the continent follow. Kenya, one of the fastest growing countries in Africa, has borrowed heavily from multinational lenders such as the World Bank and the IMF as well as bilateral partners such as China, to finance its infrastructure projects. But growth tanked and expenses rocketed during the COVID-19 pandemic years. The Ukraine war has led to a spike in global food and energy prices, hitting African economies. When the advanced countries increased interest rates to fight inflation, the payment burden of debt-ridden countries ballooned. In Africa, Zambia and Ghana defaulted on their payments, and then reached agreements with their creditors to restructure debt. Mr. Ruto, who came to power in 2022, has promised to address the debt problem. But he has been unimaginative and conventional, letting the unpopular IMF dictate one-sided policy measures. Now that the Bill has been withdrawn, he will have to tread carefully. He has yet to spell out his next measures, besides saying that austerity measures would be rolled out. He will have to strike a balance between his people's needs and Kenya's creditors. Multinational and bilateral lenders should help the debt-laden countries in Africa come out of this trap without punishing their poor populace.

## BOLIVIAN GENERAL ARRESTED AFTER FAILED COUP ATTEMPT

Led by a top general vowing to “restore democracy”, armoured vehicles rammed the doors of Bolivia's government palace on Wednesday in what the President called a coup attempt, then quickly retreated — the latest crisis in the South American country facing a political battle and an economic crisis.

Within hours, the nation of 12 million people saw a rapidly moving scenario in which the troops seemed to take control of the government of President Luis Arce. He vowed to stand firm and named a new Army commander, who immediately ordered the troops to stand down.

Soon the soldiers pulled back, along with a line of military vehicles, ending the rebellion after just three hours. Hundreds of Mr. Arce's supporters then rushed the square outside the palace, waving Bolivian flags, singing the national anthem and cheering.



The soldiers' retreat was followed by the arrest of Army chief Gen. Juan José Zúñiga, after the Attorney General opened an investigation. Government Minister Eduardo del Castillo said that in addition to Gen. Zúñiga, former navy Vice Adm. Juan Arnez Salvador was taken into custody.

The government said on Thursday that 17 people, including active and retired military personnel and civilians have been arrested in the case.

"What was this group's goal? Their goal was to overturn the democratically elected authority," Mr. del Castillo told presspersons.

#### **Under control**

Late on Wednesday, Defence Minister Edmundo Novillo said "everything is now under control". Surrounded by the new military chiefs appointed by Mr. Arce, Mr. Novillo said Bolivia lived a "failed coup".

The apparent coup attempt came as the country has faced months of tensions and political fights between Mr. Arce and his one-time ally, former leftist president Evo Morales, over control of the ruling party. The clashes have paralysed the government's efforts to deal with the economic crisis.

Mr. Zúñiga referenced that paralysis during the rebellion, telling reporters the military was tired of the infighting and was seeking "to restore democracy".

The incident was met with a wave of outrage by other regional leaders, including the Organisation of American States, Chilean President Gabriel Boric, leader of Honduras, and former Bolivian leaders.



# DreamIAS



## NATION

### ESTONIA LOOKS AT INDIAN PARTNERSHIP TO BEEF UP CYBERSECURITY INFRASTRUCTURE

Estonia, one of the world's most advanced digital countries, is looking to partner with India to collaborate on strengthening the two countries' cybersecurity infrastructure, multiple officials from the Baltic country's government said.

Estonia, courtesy its vicinity to Russia, faces a barrage of cyberattacks from the country, more so because of the former's stance on the war between Russia and Ukraine. India, meanwhile, faces a similar threat from its neighbour China.

Estonia, with a population of about 1.3 million, was a former member of the Soviet Union, and faced one of the largest cyberattacks on its digital infrastructure in 2007 by means of a distributed denial of service (DDoS) attack. At the time, the attack took place in the backdrop of riots by ethnic Russian Estonians, prompted by the removal of a Soviet war memorial from the centre of the country's capital, Tallinn.

Since the war between Russia and Ukraine, the country has experienced similar threats from Russian actors, government officials said. Government officials in India have previously said that New Delhi faces much of a similar challenge from Beijing, where a group of independent, and state-backed actors have increased attacks on critical infrastructure in New Delhi. China's army of hackers is part of the country's information warfare apparatus and its aim is to access information and primarily hold it as ransomware, said Mart Noorma, director of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence, told reporters. Ransomware attacks are where a cyber-actor gains access to sensitive information of an entity and encrypts, with the condition of decrypting the data only after receiving a payment.

The NATO (CCDCOE) is a NATO-accredited knowledge hub, which was established in 2008, and offers an interdisciplinary approach to the most relevant issues in cyber defence. It has a group of international experts from the military, government, academia and industry from 39 countries.

The ties between Estonia and India are increasingly growing. An Indian contingent was, for the first time, observers in an NATO-run cyber security exercise in Estonia last month. The exercise was the largest of its kind in Europe, Tiit Riisalo, Estonian economic affairs and information technology minister, said. It involved 32 NATO countries and a handful of invitees.

Although, it is worth noting that the Estonian security establishment does not view favourably the fact that India has become one of the largest purchasers of Russian oil since the war began. The Indian Express had earlier reported that India's Russian oil imports climbed to a 10-month high in May as low Russian refinery capacity use due to Ukrainian drone strikes made more of Moscow's oil available for the export market.

Estonian defence minister, Hanno Pevkur, said that the northern European country and India have worked together on cybersecurity issues previously and could further that collaboration not just from government engagements, but by involving the two nations' private sector as well.

The Estonian Secretary General Vsevirov said that European countries are keen to diversify their bases in various industries over concerns emanating from over-reliance on specific countries, especially those with authoritarian regimes. In this context, Estonian officials highlighted, India could emerge as a potential partner for Europe and Estonia, despite the significant population and



size differences between the countries. Courtesy of its NATO membership, Estonia has also become a crucial market for a number of Indian start-ups in the defence space as well.

There's another key similarity between Estonia and India – both the countries possess a ubiquitous national identity system, e-ID in the former, and Aadhaar in the latter, which are tied to a number of government services. In fact, in the early days of Aadhaar, when the system was being worked upon, Indian officials had closely studied Estonia's system, a former official at the Unique Identity Authority of India (UIDAI), said.

## INDIA SLAMS 'DEEPLY BIASED' U.S. REPORT ON RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

India on Friday slammed the U.S. State Department's report on International Religious Freedom for 2023 as "deeply biased" and said it reflected "one-sided projection of issues".

During the weekly press briefing, External Affairs Ministry spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal said the report questioned the "integrity" of certain legal judgments of the Indian courts and highlighted the United States's own record in handling domestic hate crimes.

"The exercise itself is a mix of imputations, misrepresentations, selective usage of facts, reliance on biased sources and a one-sided projection of issues. This extends even to the depiction of our Constitutional provisions and duly enacted laws of India. It has selectively picked incidents to advance a pre-conceived narrative as well," Mr. Jaiswal said.

On Wednesday, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken unveiled the annual report on international religious freedom and pointed at a number of countries for failing to protect religious rights of minority groups and basic human rights. He noted that a wide array of violence against religious minorities were taking place in India and said, "In India, we see a concerning increase in anti-conversion laws, hate speech, demolitions of homes and places of worship for members of minority faith communities. At the same time, people around the world are also working hard to protect religious freedom."

In nearly 69 pages dedicated to the state of religious freedom in India, the report elaborated on apparent complicity between the law enforcement agencies and the majoritarian groups and flagged a number of factors like the campaign for Uniform Civil Code (UCC) as well as the campaign for creating a "Hindu Rashtra" in India.

Responding to the criticism, Mr. Jaiswal raised the law and order situation in the U.S. and highlighted the crimes committed by racially motivated individuals against Indians and other coloured communities. "In 2023, India has officially taken up numerous cases in the U.S. of hate crimes, racial attacks on Indian nationals and other minorities, vandalism and targeting of places of worship, violence and mistreatment by law enforcement authorities, as well as the according of political space to advocates of extremism and terrorism abroad," he said.

Mr. Blinken had focused on Pakistan, India, and other countries that also included the U.S. for growing threat against religious minorities and said, "In India, for example, Christian communities reported that local police aided mobs that disrupted worship services over accusations of conversion activities or stood by while mobs attacked them and then arrested the victims on conversion charges."



The U.S. report also referred to the drive for the UCC and observed that “ various personal laws, instead of a uniform civil code, apply to members of different religious communities in matters of marriage, divorce, adoption, and inheritance based on religion, faith, and culture”.

Referring to the remarks regarding Indian legal provisions, Mr. Jaiswal said the report appeared to intrude into the legislative affairs of India. “In some cases, the very validity of laws and regulations are questioned by the report, as are the right of legislatures to enact them,” he said.

## WHERE DOES INDIA STAND WITH RESPECT TO G-7?

### **The story so far:**

Leaders of the Group of Seven, the U.S., Canada, Germany, France, Japan, the U.K. and Italy, met in Italy’s Apulia region from June 13-15, along with the European Union leadership, for a summit to discuss a host of issues. India has been invited to the outreach 11 times, with Prime Minister Narendra Modi attending it for the fifth time.

### **What was the G-7 summit hoping to achieve?**

Bridging differences between the “West and the Rest”, finding new ways to fund support for the Ukraine war, investing in Africa and grappling with migration, climate change and artificial intelligence challenges, were all on the agenda for G-7 leaders. They agreed to make \$50 billion more available for Ukraine, carving it out from frozen sovereign wealth funds of Russia, held a special “Energy for Growth in Africa” summit to spur investments in clean energy, attacked China for coercive trade practices, and met with leaders of 10 countries, including India, and multilateral organisations, as part of the “G-7 Outreach”, to discuss the concerns of the Global South. Apart from substantive issues, the G-7 grouping has also been trying to battle its own image, as a tired set of countries representing the old world of the ‘western elite’.

It was also widely commented upon that apart from Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, whose party did well in this month’s European Parliament elections, all other G-7 leaders are battling tough election campaigns with sagging approval ratings.

### **How important is India to the G-7 process?**

India has been an important part of the G-7 process for several years now, coming to the grouping’s attention in the 2000s for its steady growth figures during the global financial collapse. India is not only a key member of the Global South, and has hosted the “Voice of Global South” conference since 2023, it is also a member of the G-20 troika, along with Brazil and South Africa. Besides, Prime Minister Modi is a central figure at such outreaches, though India is not a member of the G-7.

Other countries whose leaders attended the outreach were Algeria, Argentina, Brazil, Jordan, Kenya, Mauritania, Tunisia, Türkiye and the United Arab Emirates, along with heads of the African Development Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the United Nations and the World Bank.

### **Is it an important platform for India?**

For India, the outreach session of the G-7 meeting, that follows a day after the main G-7 deliberations, has always been an important platform to showcase its achievements and outlook to the world. The importance of the event and India’s participation can be gauged from the fact

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that Ms. Meloni called Mr. Modi during the election campaign to ensure his participation, and he travelled to Italy just four days after his swearing-in and even before he had proven his majority in Parliament. During the outreach session, Mr. Modi spoke about the importance of the Indian elections, which he called the “victory of the democratic world”, and the importance of harnessing technology and artificial intelligence to bridge global inequality, as well as a roadmap to fight climate change. He said it was important to pay heed to the Global South’s concerns, as it bears “the brunt of global uncertainties and tension”, a reference to how the developing world looks at unilateral sanctions as well as food, fertilizer and energy security. Mr. Modi spent most of his time in bilateral meetings and held talks with U.K. Prime Minister Rishi Sunak, French President Emmanuel Macron, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, Japan Prime Minister Fumio Kishida and Ms. Meloni. He also met with Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, who was a special invitee, and after the photo-op with all the leaders, he spent a few minutes with U.S. President Biden.

He released a less cordial photo of his exchange with Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, reflecting the poor state of bilateral ties, but the G-7 outreach gave him the opportunity to meet global leaders and set priorities for his new term in office.

### **What is the future of G-7?**

The G-7 is increasingly under attack for being an elitist, non-inclusive group, that doesn’t include three of the world’s top 10 economies, China, India and Brazil, or representation from the rest of the world, like the G-20 does, for example. In addition, the G-7, which has not increased its membership (in fact, it decreased it, by dropping Russia in 2014), is increasingly being challenged by a grouping like BRICS, that has now doubled its size from the original Brazil-Russia-India-China-South Africa grouping to include other countries and energy majors like the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Iran, as well as Egypt and Ethiopia. That the G-7 has been unable to change the course of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, or stop Israel’s devastating bombardment of Gaza, or deterred China from its inroads into global connectivity and infrastructure and economic influence, is raising more questions about its relevance.

It remains to be seen how the G-7, which may have a different composition of leaders, given impending elections in the U.K. and the U.S., stands up to the challenge to re-invent itself as an effective grouping. It will next convene for the annual summit in Canada’s Alberta region in 2025; the question is whether India will continue to accept a spot on its margins.

## **INDIA, PAK. DELEGATIONS REACH J&K TO INSPECT POWER PROJECTS UNDER INDUS WATER TREATY**

Nearly 40 people reached Jammu on Sunday evening and flew to Kishtwar this morning for inspection of various under-construction power projects in the Chenab valley region, the officials said.

This is the first visit by a Pakistani delegation to Jammu and Kashmir in more than five years under the dispute settlement mechanism of the 1960 treaty.

India and Pakistan signed the IWT after nine years of negotiations, with the World Bank being a signatory of the pact which sets out a mechanism for cooperation and information exchange between the two sides on the use of waters of a number of cross-border rivers.

A three-member Pakistan delegation inspected the Pakal Dul and Lower Kalnai hydroelectric power projects under the provisions of the IWT for the last time in January 2019.

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Immediately after landing at an Army camp, the delegation visited the National Hydroelectric Power Corporation (NHPC) headquarters, the officials said, adding that they left for the 85-MW Rattle hydroelectric power project site at Drabshalla for dam inspection. They will also visit the 1,000-MW Pakal Dul hydroelectric project on the Marusudar, a tributary of the Chenab, and other power projects in Kishtwar, the officials said.

#### INDIA-BANGLADESH TIES: A SHARED VISION

Prime Ministers Sheikh Hasina and Narendra Modi have been relentless in advancing the bilateral relations between Delhi and Dhaka over the last decade and turning India and Bangladesh into valuable partners of each other. It is entirely appropriate that Delhi hosted Sheikh Hasina over the weekend for the first state visit by a foreign leader during PM Modi's third term. That Hasina was in Delhi barely two weeks earlier for the swearing-in of Modi and that the two PMs have met 10 times over the past year underlines the intensity of the engagement. The productive consequences of the two leaders' commitment to overhaul ties have been hailed as marking a "golden chapter" ('sonali adhyay' in the history of bilateral relations. The "vision for a shared future" unveiled by the two leaders on Saturday promises to build on these advances and turn the "extraordinary relationship" of the last decade into a "transformational partnership".

The two countries have promised to focus on the unfinished agenda of connectivity that includes the easing of visa procedures, freer movement of goods, cross-border energy and electricity flows, and the building of digital bridges. Bangladesh has also emerged as one of India's most important trade partners. Delhi and Dhaka now propose to commence the long overdue negotiations on a comprehensive economic partnership agreement (CEPA). Free trade across India's longest frontier to the second-largest economy in the Subcontinent is an urgent regional imperative amidst the breakdown of the global trading order. As one of the world's fast-growing economies, Bangladesh is a natural partner for India in rearranging of the South Asian regional economic order. The transformation of the India-Bangladesh economic relationship lays a solid foundation not only for the sub-regional integration of the eastern Subcontinent but also for the Bay of Bengal littoral and the eastern Indian Ocean.

Hasina and Modi have also outlined the ambition to modernise the bilateral defence relationship that has fallen behind the pillars of commerce and connectivity. This would involve wide-ranging collaboration between the armed forces of the two countries, defence industrial partnership, and Delhi's support for the modernisation of Dhaka's armed forces. A substantive bilateral defence partnership will contribute to maintaining stability in the wider Indo-Pacific region through collaboration on disaster mitigation and building resilient infrastructure. Expanded regional and international collaboration between Delhi and Dhaka will also help promote the Global South's collective interests. The last decade in the Indo-Bangla bilateral relations has seen two strong leaders overcome the Partition's bitter legacies in the eastern subcontinent. While some issues like river water management remain to be sorted out, the shared vision for the future articulated by Hasina and Modi raises hopes for realising the full potential of the bilateral relationship.

#### NET DAMAGE

The resumption of fishing off India's eastern coast including the Palk Bay, after the annual 61-day ban on fishing, has led to the death of a sailor from the Sri Lanka Navy. The Sri Lankan Navy had carried out an operation on June 25 morning to "chase away a cluster of Indian poaching trawlers" in Sri Lankan waters off Kankesanthurai, near Jaffna. A trawler-vessel was impounded and 10



fishermen apprehended, of whom eight were from Tamil Nadu and the rest from Andhra Pradesh. There have also been several cases of Indian (Tamil Nadu) fishermen dying too. The Tamil Nadu Chief Minister, M.K. Stalin, sought the intervention of the External Affairs Minister, S. Jaishankar, in releasing the vessel and the men. In his reply sent to the Chief Minister on Thursday, Mr. Jaishankar said the Indian High Commission had been seeking the early release of 34 fishermen in judicial remand and six others who were serving sentences.

This is an opportunity for the two countries to revive the negotiation process, exclusively to deal with the fisheries dispute, which became aggravated in the wake of the 1974 and 1976 bilateral agreements to demarcate their maritime boundary lines. Mr. Stalin has done well to remind Mr. Jaishankar to convene a meeting of the Joint Working Group, last held (virtually) over two years ago. The acts of Indian fishermen crossing the international maritime boundary line are clearly illegal; factors relating to protection of livelihood opportunities cannot be delinked from the importance of the preservation of the marine ecosystem. A gradual replacement of bottom trawlers being used by the Tamil Nadu fishermen is a must, but the fisherfolk require time to prepare for diversification — deep sea fishing, marine cage farming, seaweed cultivation and processing, and sea ranching. The experiences of the deep sea fishing project, being executed by the Union and Tamil Nadu governments, are clear enough to conclude that it is a failure. After nearly seven years of implementation, only 61 deep sea fishing vessels have been handed over to beneficiaries, with 19 more under construction. It would be thoughtful if the Union government clubs the project with an all-India programme, where the unit cost of a deep sea fishing vessel is ₹40 lakh higher, at least to get a better response even at this stage. The unit cost of a deep sea fishing vessel under the Central-State project is ₹80 lakh. New Delhi and Colombo can devise additional schemes to help the Northern Province's fishermen even more. But what is more important is that the two countries, representatives of the fishing community and officials from Tamil Nadu and the Northern Province should meet soon to find a way out of the dispute.

## HUMAN DIGNITY VERSUS RELIGIOUS PRACTICES

On May 17, the Madurai Bench of the Madras High Court allowed the resumption of “annadhanam” (offering free food) and “angapradakshanam” (circumambulation) at the final resting place of Nerur Sathguru Sadasiva Brahmendral on the eve of his Jeeva Samathi day. The practice of doing ‘angapradakshanam’ by rolling on the plantain leaves left behind by devotees after eating food from them, in the belief that it would offer spiritual benefit, had been in vogue for over 100 years. However, it was halted by a Division Bench order in a public interest litigation (PIL) petition in 2015.

Nine years later, Justice G.R. Swaminathan reinstated the practice by invoking Article 25(1) of the Constitution that guarantees the right to freely profess, practise, and propagate religion. The judge linked the belief of the devotees, who claim to derive spiritual benefit from such practice, to the right to privacy, a fundamental right under the Constitution. He argued that if the right to privacy includes “gender and sexual orientation”, it also includes “spiritual orientation”. “It should not affect the rights and freedoms belonging to others. So as long as this Rubicon is not crossed, it is not open to the State or the courts to impinge on one’s action,” he said.

The judge overlooked the people’s movement that culminated in the judicial decisions that recognised sexual orientation, which cannot be equated with a spiritual orientation, especially as angapradakshanam on the plantain leaves left behind by devotees is customary and religious rather than spiritual. He cited the Mahabharata to support his decision, arguing that spiritual benefits are conferred by rolling on leftover food. He sums it up by holding that the customary



practice is protected as a fundamental right under Articles 14, 19(1)(a), 19(1)(d), 21 and 25(1) of the Constitution.

Justice Swaminathan overruled the Division Bench's order on the ground that the devotees and the trustees of the Adhistanam, who were the necessary parties in the PIL petition, were neither included as parties nor heard and held the order to be a fallacy as it suffered from an egregious breach of the principles of natural justice.

The Division Bench order noted that all devotees irrespective of their castes indulged in the practice of rolling on the leftover plantain leaves. It concluded that such religious and customary practices affect human dignity and violate the rights of equality and life under Articles 14 and 21 of the Constitution. Despite the voluntary acts of the devotees, the court ordered the practice to be stopped immediately in 2015. The Division Bench relied on a case from Karnataka that is pending in the Supreme Court, where a similar practice was performed at the Kukke Subramanya temple in Dakshina Kannada district. The Supreme Court stayed the practice in December 2014 and directed the respondents therein not to allow anyone to roll on leftover plantain leaves.

Justice Swaminathan negates the Supreme Court order noting that the Karnataka case involved only Brahmins' leftovers that persons of other communities rolled over, while in the present case, all devotees participated irrespective of their community. He observed that "in fact, the custom on hand points to communal amity and social integration". The reasoning is due to the erroneous understanding of the facts in the Supreme Court case, which arose on an appeal from the Division Bench of the Karnataka High Court. Before the Division Bench, the respondents agreed that the rolling on plantain leaves ceremony would be open to all persons, and said that they would discontinue the practice of the Brahmin community alone eating the food offered to the deity as 'naivedyam'. They also said that the food served on the plantain leaves would not have been tasted or partially eaten. It would be placed in the outer yard over which willing devotees could perform the ritual. The appeal in the Supreme Court was by the State of Karnataka which was stayed as the rituals were against public order, morality, and health, which are the restrictions on the right to worship under Article 25(1) of the Constitution.

Justice Swaminathan's judgment focused on the devotee's rights to continue with the ritual under the pretext of protection of their fundamental rights. However, it failed to examine the duty of every citizen to develop a scientific temper, humanism and the spirit of inquiry and reform enshrined in the Constitution.

#### **Existing conflict**

At the heart of the judgment is the conflict between cultural relativism and universalism. The universalists argue for adoption of human rights standards, whereas the cultural relativists rely on customary laws and practices and religious beliefs. The judge has chosen the relativist argument and has moved away from the norms in international instruments, where the Preamble of the Charter of the United Nations and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights mention human dignity. The judge failed to recognise that traditional and religious practices are steeped in superstitious beliefs and are the refuge of the ignorant and fearful, who guard against the challenge to their privileges.

It is the duty of the state to change religious and customary practices, such as rolling over leftovers, that are unhealthy, harmful, and strike at human dignity. While an outright rejection of such practices may open up a Pandora's Box, the State could educate the believers through reason



and rational discussions and pave for a community that is humane and prone to the spirit of inquiry.

## WHAT IS ENEMY AGENTS ORDINANCE, TOUGH LAW APPLICABLE IN JAMMU AND KASHMIR?

Jammu and Kashmir Director General of Police (DGP) R R Swain on Sunday said those found assisting militants in J&K should be tried by investigating agencies under the Enemy Agents Ordinance, 2005. The law is more stringent than the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA) and has the punishment of either a life term or a death sentence.

“The fighters can’t be brought under the realm of investigation, they should be shot dead. Those who support them, if we are talking of investigation there, I’ve said somewhere that they will be treated as enemy agents,” DGP Swain said.

### **What is the Enemy Agents Ordinance?**

The J&K Enemy Agents Ordinance was first issued in 1917 by the then Dogra Maharaja of J&K. It is referred to as an ‘ordinance’ since laws made during the Dogra rule were called ordinances.

According to the ordinance, “whosoever is an enemy agent or, with an intent to aid the enemy, conspires with any other person to any act which is designed or likely to give assistance to the enemy or to impede the military or air operations of Indian forces or to endanger life or is guilty of incendiarism shall be punishable with death or rigorous imprisonment for life or with rigorous imprisonment for a term which may extend to 10 years and shall also be liable to fine”.

After Partition in 1947, the ordinance was incorporated as a law in the erstwhile state and was also amended.

In 2019, when Article 370 of the Constitution was repealed, J&K’s legal framework also underwent several changes. The Jammu and Kashmir Reorganisation Act was passed, which listed out state laws that were to continue while several others were repealed and replaced with Indian laws.

While the security laws such as Enemy Agents Ordinance and Public Safety Act remained; the Ranbir Penal Code was replaced with the Indian Penal Code. Other laws including The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006 or Forest Act, and The Scheduled Caste and the Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989 were extended to J&K as well.

### **How are trials conducted under the ordinance?**

The trial under the Enemy Agents Ordinance is conducted by a special judge who is appointed by the “government in consultation with the High Court”. Under the ordinance, the accused cannot engage a lawyer to defend herself unless permitted by the court.

There is no provision for appeal against the verdict, and the decision of the special judge can only be reviewed “by a person chosen by the Government from the judges of the High Court and the decision of that person shall be final”.

The ordinance also bars any disclosure or publication of the case tried under it. “Any person who, without the previous authorisation of the Government, discloses or publishes any information with respect to any proceedings or with respects to any person proceeded against under this



Ordinance, shall be punishable with imprisonment for a term which may extend to two years, or with fine, or with both,” according to the ordinance.

#### **Has anyone been tried under this ordinance?**

There are scores of Kashmiris who are or have been tried and sentenced under the Enemy Agents Ordinance. Jammu Kashmir Liberation Front founder Maqbool Bhat, who was hanged in Tihar Jail in 1984, was charged under the ordinance.

### WHY BOMBAY HC HELD CHEMBUR COLLEGE HIJAB BAN WAS IN ‘LARGER ACADEMIC INTEREST’

The Bombay High Court on Wednesday (June 26) dismissed a plea by nine students of Chembur’s N G Acharya and D K Marathe College challenging the institute’s dress code banning hijabs, and held that the decision was “in larger academic interest”.

It relied on, and expressed “full agreement” with, the 2022 judgement of the full Bench of the Karnataka High Court that validated the state government’s hijab ban in government colleges.

Here is all you need to know.

#### **The dress code**

The Chembur college issued a new dress code in May this year, which was to come into effect in the academic year beginning in June. This came after the college saw controversy last August, when several junior college girls wearing hijabs were denied entry for alleged non-compliance with the prescribed uniform.

The new dress code clearly stated that burqas, niqabs, hijabs, or any religious identifiers such as badges, caps, or stoles, will not be permitted inside the college. The dress code prescribed half and full shirts with trousers for boys, and “any Indian/ western non-revealing dress” for girls.

#### **Students’ contention, administration’s response**

Nine aggrieved women students approached the HC, terming the college’s instructions “arbitrary and discriminatory”. They claimed the college had “no power and authority” to issue such restrictions, and argued that the niqab and hijab were an “essential religious practice” as per the Quran and Hadith, integral to their religious belief.

The students said that the college’s restrictions are “impeding their access to education” and violating their fundamental rights under Article 19(1)(a) (Right to Freedom of Expression) and Article 25 (Right to Freedom of Religion) of the Constitution. They also claimed the decision was in violation of University Grants Commission (Promotion of Equity in Higher Educational Institutions) Regulations, 2012 meant to increase access to higher education for SC,ST, OBC and minority communities.

The college administration, however, argued that the dress code was applicable to all students, across religious and community lines. It said that the objective behind the rules was to not reveal students’ religion, and relied on the 2022 judgement of Karnataka High Court which stated that donning the hijab or niqab was “not an essential religious practice” for women professing Islam. The college also said that this was an internal matter, and a part of its right to maintain discipline.



### **Bombay HC judgement**

A division Bench of Justices Atul S Chandurkar and Rajesh S Patil held that the dress code issued by the college was in “larger academic interest”, and “[did] not suffer from infirmity so as to violate provisions of Article 19(1)(a) and Article 25 of the Constitution”.

“The object behind issuing the same is that the dress of a student should not reveal his/her religion, which is a step towards ensuring that the students focus on gaining knowledge and education which is in their larger interest,” the bench stated.

The Bench also rejected that the “donning of a hijab or niqab is an essential religious practice of petitioners”, saying that except for the English translations of Kanz-ul-Iman and Sunan Abu Dawud (Collection of Hadith), there is no material was placed to support the claim.

The Bench held that since the instructions issued were “applicable to all students irrespective of their caste, creed, religion or language”, they did not violate UGC guidelines. It held that between competing rights of a student to choose a dress of her choice, and an institution to maintain discipline on its premises, an individual cannot seek to impose her rights against the ‘larger rights’ of the college.

“This is for the reason that students are expected to attend the educational institution to receive appropriate instructions for advancement of their academic careers. The insistence for following the dress code is within the college premises and the petitioners’ freedom of choice and expression is not otherwise affected,” the Bench said.

### **Agreement with Karnataka HC judgment**

Justice Chandurkar, who authored the judgement, expressed “full agreement” with the view expressed by the full Bench of the Karnataka High Court in 2022, which stated that the “prescription of a dress code is intended to achieve uniformity amongst students in the school/college so as to maintain discipline and avoid disclosure of one’s religion.”

The Karnataka HC had held that “the dress code when prescribed for all students was intended to treat them as one homogeneous class so as to serve constitutional secularism”.

This verdict, however, is currently under challenge at the Supreme Court. In October 2022, a two-judge Bench had delivered a split verdict in the case, which has now been referred to a larger Bench. The Bombay HC verdict too is likely to be contested before the Supreme Court in due course.

## **LIMIT AND EXCESS**

The Patna High Court judgment striking down enhanced reservation for various communities in employment and education marks yet another instance of the strict application of the 50% ceiling on total reservations by the judiciary. The verdict has invalidated the Nitish Kumar regime’s decision of last year to amend its quota law to raise Backward Classes (BC) reservation from 12% to 18%, that of Extremely Backward Communities (EBC) from 18% to 25%, and those of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes from 16% to 20% and 1% to 2%, respectively. This took the total reservation level to 65%. Applying judicial precedents that have now crystallised into a legal bar on reservations exceeding 50%, the court has inflicted a huge blow to the Bihar government’s plan to utilise its Caste Survey findings to expand its affirmative action programme.



The government may have erred in its policy approach — armed with caste-wise population numbers — when its preamble to the amending law said it aimed to achieve “proportionate equality”. The court agreed with the petitioners challenging the increased quotas on a key point: that adequate representation does not mean ‘proportionate representation’, as clarified in the famous nine-judge verdict in Indra Sawhney (1992). If any attempt to raise the quota level earmarked for any section to be in proportion to the State’s population results in the total reservation percentage exceeding the permissible limit, it is liable to be unconstitutional.

However, it is unfortunate that the court was so zealous about the reservation ceiling, that it rejected the State’s argument on the existence of special circumstances. Indra Sawhney did allow the quota ceiling to be exceeded in “extraordinary situations”. It suggested that the population living in remote or far-flung areas may require to be treated in a different way. The court seems to have taken that geographical remoteness is the only special situation to justify an enhanced quota and denied the benefit to Bihar. It is difficult to believe that a State which is backward in most parameters of human and social development should be denied the use of its executive and legislative power to expand its social justice programme. The court surely saw merit in the argument that there was no in-depth study before enhanced reservation was implemented. This raises the question whether the survey was indeed quite exhaustive when it gave a caste-wise break-up of the population and their economic conditions. While there may be a case for pruning the BC or EBC list based on the progress made over the last few decades, it might not be just to stymie every attempt to enhance the numerical representation of historically deprived sections on the ground that it exceeds the quota ceiling.

#### 18TH LOK SABHA SESSION BEGINS TODAY: HOW DO MPS TAKE OATH? WHAT HAPPENS IF AN MP IS IN JAIL?

The first session of the 18th Lok Sabha will start on Monday. Before the House can begin its legislative functioning, the newly elected members will have to take the oath of Members of Parliament (MP), which is provided in the Constitution.

The day will begin in Rashtrapati Bhavan, where Bhartruhari Mahtab — who has been elected for the seventh consecutive time from Cuttack, Odisha — will be the first one to take the oath of a Lok Sabha MP in front of President Droupadi Murmu.

The President has entrusted him with the duties of the Speaker (pro tem) under Article 95(1) of the Constitution till the election of the new Speaker. Mahtab will preside over the House as his colleagues take oath.

#### **When does the term of an MP begin?**

The five-year term of a Lok Sabha MP begins when the Election Commission of India (ECI) declares the results according to Section 73 of the Representation of the People Act, 1951. From that day onward, MPs are eligible for certain rights as elected representatives. For example, they start receiving their salary and allowances from the date of ECI notification — after the 2024 general elections, the ECI declared results on June 6.

The start of their term also means that if MPs change their party allegiance, their political party can ask the Speaker to disqualify them from Parliament under the anti-defection law.





**If the term of an MP has started, why is the parliamentary oath significant?**

Winning the election and starting the term does not automatically allow an MP to participate in House proceedings. To debate and vote in Lok Sabha, an MP has to take her seat in the House by making and subscribing to an oath or affirmation prescribed in the Constitution (Article 99). The Constitution also specifies a financial penalty (the only one in the document) of Rs 500 if a person participates or votes in House proceedings without taking an oath (Article 104).

However, there is an exception to this rule. An individual can become a minister without being elected to Parliament. They have six months to secure a seat in either Lok Sabha or Rajya Sabha. During this time, they can participate but not vote in House proceedings.

**What is the parliamentary oath?**

The Constitution's third schedule contains the text of the parliamentary oath. It reads, "I, A.B., having been elected (or nominated) a member of the Council of States (or the House of the People) do swear in the name of God / solemnly affirm that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the Constitution of India as by law established, that I will uphold the sovereignty and integrity of India and that I will faithfully discharge the duty upon which I am about to enter."

**How has the oath evolved over years?**

The draft Constitution prepared by the drafting committee, chaired by Dr B R Ambedkar, did not invoke God in any oaths. The committee stated that the person taking the oath solemnly and sincerely promises to bear true faith and allegiance to the Constitution. When the Constituent Assembly members were discussing the draft, the question cropped up regarding the President's oath. Members like K T Shah and Mahavir Tyagi moved amendments to add God to the oath.

Shah said, "When I perused the Constitution, I was left with the feeling that there was a void in it. We had forgotten, I do not know why, to invoke the grace and blessing of God." Tyagi argued that "those who believe in God will swear in the name of God and there will be liberty for those agnostics, who do not believe in God, only to solemnly affirm, so that there will be freedom for one's faith." But there was also disagreement on adding God to the oaths.

Ambedkar accepted the amendments. He believed that "To some people, God is a sanction. They think if they take a vow in the name of God, God being the governing force of the Universe, as well as of their individual lives, that oath in the name of God provides the sanction which is necessary for the fulfilment of obligations which are purely moral and for which there is no sanction provided."

The last change in the oath was the Constitution (Sixteenth Amendment) Act, 1963, which added that the oath-takers would uphold India's sovereignty and integrity. The amendment was made on the recommendations of the National Integration Council.

**How do MPs take the oath?**

Before being called upon to take the oath or affirmation, MPs must submit their election certificate to the Lok Sabha staff. Parliament added this safeguard after an incident in 1957, in which a mentally unsound individual posed as an MP and took the oath on the floor of the House. After the verification, MPs can subscribe to the oath or affirmation in English or any of the 22 languages specified in the Constitution.



Roughly half the MPs take their oath in Hindi or English. In the last two Lok Sabhas, Sanskrit has also been a popular language in which MPs have taken oaths. In 2019, 44 MPs and in 2014, 39 MPs took oath in Sanskrit.

MPs must use the name mentioned in their election certificate and adhere to the text of the oath. In 2019, Lok Sabha BJP MP Sadhvi Pragya Singh Thakur added a suffix to her name while reading the oath. The presiding officer ruled that only the name on the election certificate would go on record. In 2024, when Rajya Sabha MP Swati Maliwal ended her oath with “Inquilab Zindabad”, the Rajya Sabha Chairman asked her to retake the oath.

Oaths and affirmations are a matter of personal choice for MPs. In the last Lok Sabha, 87% of MPs swore in the name of God, and the other 13% affirmed their allegiance to the Constitution. MPs have sometimes sworn in the name of God in one term and affirmed in another.

#### **Can MPs in jail take the oath?**

The Constitution specifies that if an MP does not attend Parliament for 60 days, their seat can be declared vacant. Courts have used this ground to allow MPs in jail to take an oath in Parliament.

For example, in June 2019, during the oath-taking for the last Lok Sabha, Atul Kumar Singh, MP from Ghosi in Uttar Pradesh, was in jail for serious criminal charges. The court allowed him to take oath in Parliament in January 2020, and Singh affirmed his allegiance to the Constitution in Hindi.

### **DECODE POLITICS: WHAT IS THE DEPUTY SPEAKER’S ROLE AND HOW OFTEN HAS IT BEEN AN OPPOSITION MP?**

With the Opposition’s increased strength in Lok Sabha, its members are hoping to get the post of Deputy Speaker. There was no Deputy Speaker for the entire duration of the 17th Lok Sabha (2019-24). M Thambi Durai of the AIADMK, a BJP ally at the time, was Deputy Speaker of the 16th Lok Sabha (2014-19).

Congress MP Rahul Gandhi said on Tuesday that the Opposition was willing to support the NDA’s candidate for Speaker provided the government followed parliamentary convention and gave the Deputy Speaker’s post to the Opposition.

The Opposition had the post of Deputy Speaker continuously from 1990 through 2014.

The government has sought support from the Opposition for Om Birla, its candidate for Speaker, but has been unwilling to extend any assurances on the post of Deputy Speaker. The INDIA bloc has, therefore, forced a contest by nominating K Suresh of the Congress as its candidate for Speaker. It is unclear, however, whether the Trinamool Congress will support Suresh.

#### **What does the Constitution say about the Deputy Speaker?**

According to Article 95(1), the Deputy Speaker performs the duties of the Speaker if the post is vacant. The Deputy Speaker has the same general powers as the Speaker when presiding over the House. All references to the “Speaker” in the Rules are deemed to be references to the Deputy Speaker as well for the times when he or she presides.

Both the Speaker and Deputy Speaker must be appointed “as soon as may be”. Article 93 states that “The House of the People shall, as soon as may be, choose two members of the House to be respectively Speaker and Deputy Speaker”.



Article 178 contains the corresponding provision for the Speakers and Deputy Speakers in the state Assemblies.

**Is it mandatory under the Constitution to have a Deputy Speaker?**

The Constitution does not specify a time frame for making the appointments. It is this gap in the provision that allows governments to delay or avoid appointing a Deputy Speaker.

However, constitutional experts have pointed out that both Article 93 and Article 178 use the words “shall” and “as soon as may be” – indicating that not only is the election of the Speaker and Deputy Speaker mandatory, it must be held at the earliest.

**What are the rules for the election of the Deputy Speaker?**

The Speaker / Dy Speaker is elected from among the Lok Sabha members by a simple majority of members present and voting.

Generally speaking, the practice in both the Lok Sabha and state Assemblies has been to elect the Speaker in the first session of the new House — usually on the third day, after the oath-taking and affirmations have taken place over the first two days.

The election of the Deputy Speaker usually takes place in the second session, even though there is no bar on having this election in the first session of the new Lok Sabha or Assembly. But the election of Deputy Speaker is generally not delayed beyond the second session unless there are some genuine and unavoidable constraints.

In the Lok Sabha, the election of Deputy Speaker is governed by Rule 8 of the Rules of Procedure and Conduct of Business in Lok Sabha. According to Rule 8, the election “shall be held on such date as the Speaker may fix”. The Deputy Speaker is elected once a motion proposing his or her name is carried. Once elected, the Deputy Speaker usually continues in office until the dissolution of the House.

Under Article 94 (and Article 179 for state Assemblies), the Speaker or Deputy Speaker “shall vacate his office if he ceases to be a member of the House of the People”. They may also resign (to each other), or “may be removed from office by a resolution of the House of the People passed by a majority of all the then members of the House”.

**Has a Deputy Speaker ever had to fill in for an absent Speaker?**

After the first Speaker, G V Mavalankar, died in 1956 before his term ended, Deputy Speaker M Ananthasayanam Ayyangar filled in for the remaining tenure of Lok Sabha from 1956 to 1957. Ayyangar was later elected as Speaker of the second Lok Sabha.

Again, after G M C Balayogi of the Telugu Desam Party (TDP), the Speaker in the 13th Lok Sabha, passed away in 2002, Deputy Speaker and Congress MP P M Sayeed became acting Speaker for two months until Manohar Joshi of the Shiv Sena was elected Speaker.

**How often has the Opposition had the post of Deputy Speaker of Lok Sabha?**

During the Congress-led UPA-I (2004-09) and UPA-II (2009-14) governments, the Deputy Speaker’s post was with the Opposition — first with Charanjit Singh Atwal of the Shiromani Akali Dal, and then with Kariya Munda of the BJP.



When Atal Bihari Vajpayee was Prime Minister from 1999 to 2004, P M Sayeed of the Congress held the post. Sayeed was also Deputy Speaker during the short-lived BJP government from 1998 to 1999.

There was no Deputy Speaker during the year-long United Front government led by I K Gujral from 1997 to 1998. Between 1996 and 1997, the BJP's Suraj Bhan held the post when H D Deve Gowda was Prime Minister.

In the 10th Lok Sabha (1991-96), when P V Narasimha Rao was Prime Minister, S Mallikarjunaiah of the BJP was Deputy Speaker.

When Chandra Shekhar was Prime Minister (1990-91), Shivraj Patil (Congress) served as Deputy Speaker.

AIADMK's Thambi Durai first became Deputy Speaker in the 8th Lok Sabha (1984-89) when Rajiv Gandhi was Prime Minister. The DMK's G Lakshmanan held the post from 1980 to 1984 in the Indira Gandhi government. Each of these parties was a Congress ally at the time.

Godey Murahari of the Congress held the post from 1977 to 1979 when the Janata Party government was in power. Between 1969 and 1977, G G Swell of the All Party Hill Leaders Conference served as Deputy Speaker.

## WHAT ARE THE DUTIES OF A SPEAKER?

### The story so far:

The President has appointed seven-time MP Bhartruhari Mahtab as the 'Speaker pro tem' of the 18th Lok Sabha. The election of the full-time Speaker is scheduled for June 26. There are also reports of the Deputy Speaker being offered to one of the allies of the ruling National Democratic Alliance (NDA), a post that has been held by the Opposition since the 10th Lok Sabha (1991).

### Who is Speaker pro tem?

Article 94 of the Constitution states that the Speaker of the Lok Sabha shall not vacate his/her office until immediately before the first meeting of the Lok Sabha after its dissolution. This is to ensure that the office of the Speaker is never left vacant. Hence, Om Birla who was the Speaker of the 17th Lok Sabha continues in that post till June 24 when the first meeting of the 18th Lok Sabha is scheduled. Article 95(1) of the Constitution provides that when the post of Speaker and Deputy Speaker is vacant, the President shall appoint a member of the Lok Sabha to perform the duties of the Speaker. This would be the situation when the first meeting of a new Lok Sabha commences.

Hence, the President appoints 'Speaker pro tem' under this provision till the full-time Speaker is elected. The term 'pro tem' means 'for the time being' or 'temporary'.

This term is not found in the Constitution or rules of Lok Sabha but is a conventional term which finds mention in the 'Handbook on the working of Ministry of Parliamentary affairs.' As per tradition, one of the senior-most members of the Lok Sabha is selected by the government, who is then administered oath by the President. The Speaker pro tem administers oath of office to other MPs and presides over the election of full-time Speaker. In the 18th Lok Sabha, Bhartruhari Mahtab of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has been appointed as Speaker pro tem.



### **How are the Speaker and Deputy Speaker elected?**

Article 93 of the Constitution states that the Lok Sabha shall choose two members to be its Speaker and Deputy Speaker. The election of the Speaker is held on a date fixed by the President. All the Speakers in independent India have been elected unopposed. The election of Deputy Speaker is held on a date fixed by the Speaker.

### **What is the role of the Speaker?**

Apart from the conduct of business, the Speakers perform two important constitutional functions of certifying a Bill to be a Money Bill (over which the Rajya Sabha has limited role), and deciding on disqualification under the Tenth Schedule for defection. In discharging these roles in the past, the Speakers have invariably favoured the ruling dispensation, something that should be avoided.

The Lok Sabha rules provide the Speaker with the powers of referral of Bills introduced to Standing Committees and suspension of members for grave disorder up to a maximum of five days. Referral of Bills to committees have declined from 71% during 2009-14 to 16% during 2019-24. With the return of a coalition government, it is expected that the Speaker would refer important Bills to Standing committees for scrutiny. There were also large-scale suspensions of Opposition MPs during the winter session of 2023. Such suspensions affect the robust functioning of Parliament and should be carried out with restraint.

### **What are the conventions?**

In Britain, the Speaker once elected to his/her office, resigns from the political party to which he/she belonged. In subsequent elections to House of Commons, he/she seeks election not as a member of any political party but as 'The Speaker seeking re-election'. This is to reflect his/her impartiality while presiding over the House. Somnath Chatterjee, who was the Speaker of the 14th Lok Sabha acted independently by not resigning from the post despite his party's (CPM) direction after it had withdrawn support from the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government during a confidence vote in 2008. While the Tenth Schedule allows a Speaker to resign from their political party on being elected to their office, it has never been done by any Speaker till date. Resignation from their political parties on being elected as Speaker could be a first step towards demonstrating independence.

The Deputy Speaker is an important constitutional officer who steps in during the vacancy or absence of the Speaker. The convention of offering the post of Deputy Speaker to the Opposition started in the year 1991. Thereafter, till the 16th Lok Sabha this has been followed without a break. It was a travesty of the Constitution that no Deputy Speaker was elected in the 17th Lok Sabha.

The healthy convention of the post being held by Opposition should return in the current Lok Sabha.

## **FROM THE FIRST LOK SABHA TO THE 18TH, A SNAPSHOT OF SPEAKER ELECTIONS**

The hard-fought, polarised election continues to inform the first session of the Lok Sabha with the election to the Speaker's post being contested by two candidates, Om Birla of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) who was the Speaker in the 17th Lok Sabha, and K. Suresh, eight-term MP from the Congress.



This is, however, not the first instance that the Speaker's post has seen a contest, with at least three previous occasions witnessing voting on the floor of the House, while in two other instances, the Opposition parties put up a candidate but the Speaker's election was held on the basis of a voice vote.

According to Ravindra Garimella, former Joint Secretary (Legislation), Lok Sabha Secretariat, the first time an election for the Speaker's post took place was in the first Lok Sabha of 1952, when G.V. Mavalankar defeated Shantaram More.

Then again, in 1967, Neelam Sanjeeva Reddy of the Congress won against Tenneti Viswanathan, whose candidature was supported by former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, then an MP.

And finally, in 1976, during the Emergency, in the fifth Lok Sabha, Baliram Bhagat was elected Speaker against a competing claim by Jagannath Rao Joshi of the Jana Sangh.

"In 1976, the election of Baliram Bhagat was necessitated by the fact that the previous Speaker had been made a Cabinet Minister in the then Congress government," Mr. Garimella said.

There were two other instances when competing candidates were put up, in the 10th and 12th Lok Sabha, respectively, but since the government's candidates were elected via a voice vote, other motions were considered lapsed.

These instances shine light on the fact that despite the vicissitudes of coalition politics, it has been a while since voting has taken place in a contest to elect the Speaker.

The BJP, reduced to 240 MPs in the 2024 Lok Sabha election, and at the head of a coalition government, is keen to demonstrate its dominance of the House and the stability of its coalition.

The effort, say sources in the party, is to register a comprehensive number backing their candidate, over and above the NDA's numbers, for which four YSRCP MPs have also pledged their support to the NDA.

Minister for Parliamentary Affairs Kiren Rijiju stressed that the Lok Sabha Speaker was above party lines and it was a desirable aim that his or her election to the post should be unanimous and without rancour.

For the Opposition, contesting would be an opportunity to demonstrate the consolidation of the anti-NDA bloc.

#### WHAT IS THE ROLE OF THE LOK SABHA LEADER OF OPPOSITION?

Rae Bareli MP Rahul Gandhi is Leader of Opposition in Lok Sabha, a position that lay vacant for 10 years because no party had numbers equalling a tenth of the strength of the House, which has been by practice a requirement to lay claim to the post.

The Congress, the largest opposition party, won 44 and 52 seats in the 543-member House after the elections of 2014 and 2019 respectively. The party has almost doubled its 2019 tally to 99 seats in this election.

In 2014, Mallikarjun Kharge — who is now Congress president and Leader of Opposition in Rajya Sabha — was recognised Leader of the Congress party in Lok Sabha. In 2019, this position went



to then Baharampur MP Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury. Both Congress leaders were part of panels to select candidates for high positions that required the presence of the Leader of Opposition.

#### **Who can serve as Leader of Opposition in Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha?**

The position of Leader of Opposition was officially described in The Salary and Allowances of Leaders of Opposition in Parliament Act, 1977.

The Act describes the Leader of Opposition as a “member of the Council of States or the House of the People, as the case may be, who is, for the time being, the Leader in that House of the party in opposition to the Government having the greatest numerical strength and recognised as such by the Chairman of the Council of States or the Speaker of the House of the People”.

In an article written for The Indian Express in May 2017, former Lok Sabha Secretary General PDT Achary said: “The law is clear that the Speaker is required to recognise the leader of the numerically largest party in opposition as the leader of opposition. The option of not recognising him/ her is just not available.”

Achary, however, rejected the conventional understanding that to get the post of Leader of Opposition, a party must have at least 10% of MPs in the House. He wrote:

“A mysterious rule is often quoted by some self-styled experts, which requires a party to have at least 10 per cent of the members of the House for the Speaker to recognise someone as the Leader of the Opposition. There is no such rule. Yes, there is direction 121 issued by the Speaker for recognising a party or group for the purpose of providing certain facilities in the House... This direction relates to the recognition of a party, not the Leader of Opposition.”

Before the BJP in 2014 and 2019, the Congress, which had 415 members in Lok Sabha in 1984, had denied the TDP, which had 30 MPs, the post of Leader of Opposition.

Leader of Opposition in Lok Sabha: the position, role, responsibilities

#### **What position does the Leader of Opposition have in the House?**

The Leader of Opposition sits in the front row to the left of the Chair, and enjoys certain privileges on ceremonial occasions like escorting the Speaker-elect to the rostrum. The Leader of Opposition is also entitled to a seat in the front row during the Address by the President to both Houses of Parliament.

The main duty of the Leader of Opposition is to serve as the voice of the opposition in the House. An official booklet on Parliament published in 2012 says the Leader of Opposition in Lok Sabha “is considered as a shadow Prime Minister with a shadow Cabinet, ready to take over the administration if the Government resigns or is defeated on the floor of the House”.

Since the parliamentary system is based on “mutual forbearance”, the Leader of Opposition lets the Prime Minister govern and is, in turn, permitted to oppose. “His/ her proactive role in facilitating smooth functioning of the business of the House is as important as that of the Government,” the booklet says.

#### **Theory apart, what practical role and responsibility does the Leader of Opposition have?**

Most importantly, the Leader of Opposition is the opposition’s representative in the high-powered committees headed by the Prime Minister for appointment to key posts such as the Director of



CBI, the Central Vigilance Commissioner and Chief Information Commissioner, the Chairperson and Members of the National Human Rights Commission, and the Lokpal.

As the Leader of the Congress in Lok Sabha from 2014 to 2019, Kharge had alleged that the government repeatedly tried to keep the opposition out of the selection of the Lokpal on the ground that there was no Leader of Opposition.

In order of precedence, the Leaders of Opposition in Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha come at No. 7, along with Union Cabinet Ministers, the National Security Advisor, the Principal Secretary to the PM, the Vice-Chairperson of the NITI Aayog, former PMs, and Chief Ministers.

## DECODE POLITICS: WHO ARE THE TWO PASI ICONS INVOKED BY NEW MP FROM AYODHYA IN HIS OATH

While taking oath in the Lok Sabha earlier this week, Awadhesh Prasad, the newly-elected Samajwadi Party MP from Faizabad, invoked 'Veerangana' Uda Devi and 'Maharaja' Bijli Pasi, two prominent personalities of the Pasi (Dalit) community. Prasad himself belongs to the Pasi community, who number over three lakh in the Faizabad Lok Sabha constituency and who are believed to have voted en masse to elect him over his BJP opponent.

### Who was Uda Devi?

Born in Ujirao, Lucknow, Uda Devi was part of the royal guard of Begum Hazrat Mahal of Awadh, and participated in the 1857 Mutiny. She is credited with having mobilised people to take up arms against the British.

On November 16, 1857, Uda Devi was among the soldiers who clashed with the British regiment stationed near the Gomti River in Lucknow. It is said that she killed at least three dozen British soldiers from atop a tree before she was spotted and killed.

On November 16 every year, events are organised to commemorate the martyrdom of Uda Devi at various places, mostly in central Uttar Pradesh. She remains an icon especially for the Dalits.

### Who was 'Maharaja' Bijli Pasi?

The stories of Bijli Pasi are popular among the Pasis of central UP districts such as Lucknow, Rae Bareli, Barabanki, Bahraich, Sultanpur and Allahabad.

While there are many prominent Pasi faces from here such as brothers Daldev, Baldev and Kakoran, Bijli Pasi is among the most prominent, having ruled over some parts of UP in the medieval period. The ruins of the fort from where he ruled still stand in Lucknow, while a statue has been put up of the Pasi icon in the state capital.

The Yogi Adityanath-led BJP government in UP has announced plans to renovate and redevelop Bijli Pasi's fort as a tourist destination.

### How significant are the Pasis?

The Pasis make up around 7% of UP's Scheduled Caste population, making them the largest Dalit group in the state after the Jatavs. While the Pasis also have significant presence in other states, their largest population is in UP.





In the recent Lok Sabha polls, in a boost to the SP that is largely seen as a Yadav-Muslim-centric party, five Pasi candidates fielded by the SP won, compared to three of the BJP.

Earlier, the community was largely seen as a supporter of the BSP. As the BSP's base increasingly shrunk and became confined to the Jatavs, the community shifted its allegiance to the BJP, prompted by the BJP's aggressive wooing of SCs.

#### **How has the SP managed to woo over the Pasis?**

Apart from Faizabad, Pasi candidates fielded by the SP from Mohanlalganj, Kaushambi, Machhlisahr and Lalganj Lok Sabha constituencies won in the recent polls. R K Chaudhary, who raised the demand to replace the sengol sceptre in Parliament with a replica of the Constitution, is the SP's Mohanlalganj MP. The win from Faizabad was the sweetest for the SP as the constituency includes Ayodhya, the site of the grand Ram Temple inaugurated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi earlier this year.

As part of its efforts to expand its base among the Pasis, the SP has been organising a programme at its headquarters on the death anniversary of Uda Devi, to honour her contribution during the 1857 revolt.

Mithai Lal Bharti, president of the SP's Dalit outfit Samajwadi Babasaheb Ambedkar Vahini, said that the party has always honoured great personalities of all communities when in power, including Uda Devi and Bijli Pasi. If the SP returns to power in UP, more steps will be taken in this direction, Bharti said.

#### **BJP's waning vote-bank**

The SP's Chaudhary won from Mohanlalganj defeating another prominent Pasi face, former Union minister Kaushal Kishore of the BJP.

Kishore claimed that the SP had managed to win Pasi support courtesy "false propaganda" on the Constitution and reservations. The INDIA parties said that if the BJP returned with a brute majority, it would change the Constitution and take away reservations.

Jai Prakash Rawat, the new BJP MP from Misrikh, said, "After taking oath, I too had raised the slogan "Pasi samaj ki jai". I spoke about all Pasis. He (Awadhesh Prasad) only mentioned the names of Uda Devi and Bijli Pasi, possibly to send some message. We (BJP) too respect both icons. There are more great leaders from our community. If I had taken all of their names, it would have taken more time. So I mentioned the entire Pasi samaj instead."

Rawat also accepted that the number of Pasi MPs of the BJP has fallen this time, adding that anti-incumbency could be a factor behind this.

The three Pasi leaders of the BJP who won the recent Lok Sabha elections are Ashok Kumar Rawat (Misrikh), Jai Prakash (Hardoi), and Kamlesh Paswan (Bansgaon). Paswan has been made a Minister of State (MoS) in the Union government.

### **EXPLAINED: BEHIND KERALA ASSEMBLY'S DEMAND TO RENAME STATE AS KERALAM**

Kerala Assembly on Monday (June 24) unanimously passed a resolution urging the Centre to rename the state as "Keralam" in the Constitution. This is the second time in the past year that such a resolution has been passed.



### The resolution

The resolution, moved by Kerala Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan states: “The name of our state in Malayalam is Keralam... However, the name of our state in the first Schedule of the Constitution has been written as Kerala. This Assembly is unanimously requesting the Union Government to take immediate steps under Article 3 of the Constitution to change the name of the state to Keralam.”

A similar resolution was passed on August 9 last year. The Chief Minister said that it needed reintroduction due to some technical issues. The previous resolution sought amendments to the First Schedule of the Constitution (list of various states). It also meant to seek an amendment to the Eighth Schedule (list of official languages). But on further examination, it was realised that the wording did not include the latter demand. Hence the resolution was modified and reintroduced,” Vijayan told the Assembly.

### Why Keralam

Kerala is the English word for the Malayali Keralam. There are several theories regarding its etymological roots. The earliest mention of the word can be found in Emperor Ashoka’s Rock Edict II, dated to 257 BCE. The edict reads: “Everywhere in the dominions of King Priyadarsin, Beloved of the gods, as well as those of his frontier sovereigns, such as the Chodas [Cholas], Pandyas, Satiyaputra, Ketalaputra [Keralaputra]...” (translated by epigraphist D R Bhandarkar).

Keralaputra, literally “son of Kerala” in Sanskrit, refers to the dynasty of the Cheras, one of the three main kingdoms of southern India. German linguist Dr Herman Gundert noted that the word ‘keram’ is Canarese (or Kannada) for ‘cheram’, which is used to refer to the coastal land between Gokarna (in Karnataka) and Kanyakumari (Tamil Nadu, India’s southern tip). The origin of the term could possibly be from ‘cher’, which means to join in Old Tamil.

### Story of statehood

The demand for a united Malayalam-speaking state first gathered momentum in the 1920s, and aimed to integrate the princely states of Travancore and Cochin, and the Malabar district of the Madras Presidency.

After independence, on July 1, 1949 the two Malayalam-speaking princely states were integrated to form the state of Travancore-Cochin. The state of Kerala was finally created after the State Reorganisation Commission’s recommendation creating states on linguistic-bases. The Commission under Syed Fazl Ali recommended the inclusion of the district of Malabar and the taluk of Kasargod to the Malayalam-speaking people’s state. It also recommended the exclusion of the four Southern taluks of Travancore viz Tovala, Agastheeswaram, Kalkulam and Vilayankode together with some parts of Shenkottai (all these taluks now part of Tamil Nadu).

The state of Kerala came into being on November 1, 1956.

**AFTER 20 YEARS OF RESISTANCE, NAGALAND TO VOTE IN CIVIC POLLS WITH 33% RESERVATION FOR WOMEN TODAY**

Of the 16 districts in the State, the civic polls will be held in 10 because of the non-participation of the communities in six eastern districts where the Eastern Nagaland People’s Organisation (ENPO) exercises its clout. Nagaland has three municipal councils — Dimapur, Kohima, and



Mokokchung — and 36 town councils. Six of the 19 wards in Kohima, eight out of 23 wards in Dimapur, and six out of 18 wards in Mokokchung have been reserved for women.

#### **Elected unopposed**

State Election Commission officials said 64 candidates were elected unopposed while the fate of 253 will be decided by the voters on June 26. The ruling Nationalist Democratic Progressive Party (NDPP) had the most candidates (45) winning unopposed followed by its ally Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) with seven, the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) with five, the Congress with three, and the Naga People's Front (NPF) and Independents with two each.

The Nagaland Municipal and Town Council Act was passed in 2001 without the provision of reserving 33% of the seats for women, as required under Article 243T of the Constitution. This was amended in 2006.

#### **Stiff opposition**

The first election under the Act was conducted in 2004 without the reservation of seats for women, except in Mokokchung, as it was deemed to undermine the special provisions granted to Nagaland under Article 371A of the Constitution.

Efforts to hold the urban local bodies polls with a 33% quota for women after 2004 met with resistance from social and apex tribal groups.

The decision to hold the elections in 2017 triggered violent protests, claiming two lives while government properties were damaged across the State.

The 60-member State Assembly passed the Nagaland Municipal Act of 2023 on November 9 last year, following which the Supreme Court directed the State government to complete the electoral process for the urban local bodies by April.

### **ALTER THE STATUS QUO**

More than a year since an ethnic conflagration flared up, resulting in 221 deaths and the displacement of nearly 50,000 people, something remains rotten in the State of Manipur. The conflict has now spread to hitherto peaceful districts such as Jiribam even as the Imphal valley and other areas have seen rising extortion and abductions. The increase in armed militias in both the valley and hill areas, who are armed with weapons looted from constabularies, has contributed to this situation. For the past year, the Union government has sought to maintain a tenuous peace by subjecting the State to a de facto imposition of the provisions of Article 355 of the Constitution, without officially announcing them, even as it continues with the same political leadership so as to provide a fig leaf of power to the Chief Minister who is from the Bharatiya Janata Party. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has been barely involved even to seek a humanitarian pause in the conflict and to work towards a peaceful resolution, while Home Minister Amit Shah routinely calls up security briefings, but to little avail. In the latest meeting with a host of security and administrative officials, the Chief Minister was not invited. The Union government's indecisive vacillation and the State government's inability to rise above its leadership's ethnic biases have ensured that the Manipur conflict remains on a slow burn even as the electorate in the State has already given a strong message on this situation. In the general election, the Opposition Congress party scored a decisive win in the Inner and Outer Manipur constituencies, despite the blatant intimidatory tactics by the militias to deter voters, especially in the valley.



The writing on the wall is clear. The persistence of the status quo is doing little to resolve the conflict and is only furthering the ethnic divide. The Union and the State governments must heed the people of Manipur's call for change. A change in leadership is now inevitable at the helm of affairs of government but a mere shifting of chairs will not suffice. There must be a renewed attempt to curb the antisocial militias and to disarm them in the hill areas and in the valley, while simultaneously ensuring that civil society actors, who are committed to peace and amity cutting across ethnic sections, are empowered to talk to each other and work out the modalities of bringing back normalcy. The representatives of the governments in the neighbouring States and the newly elected parliamentarians can also help in bringing about a reconciliation between the hostile ethnic groups. But all this can happen only if there is a decisive change in the current state of affairs in Manipur.

#### LIP SERVICE

The Emergency, imposed on June 25, 1975 by the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, and which lasted 21 months till March 21, 1977, remains a blot on the history of democratic India. The rule by decree, the suspension of civil liberties and free speech, the arbitrariness of government actions, and the indiscriminate arrests of dissenters and Opposition figures using draconian preventive detention laws, among other measures, continue to haunt Indians who experienced it in all its vicious forms. The traumatic episode is a reminder of the responsibility of democratic institutions in always safeguarding the freedoms and rights of citizens. When freshly elected and returning Lok Sabha Speaker Om Birla read out a resolution, on Wednesday, "condemning the imposition of Emergency" and termed it as an attack on the Constitution, one could have considered this as a note of caution about the perils of suspending civil liberties, and as a pledge that this would never be allowed to happen again. But seen in the light of Mr. Birla's actions, when, as Speaker in the 17th Lok Sabha, he indiscriminately used his powers to suspend several Opposition MPs, and the executive's use of draconian laws to stifle dissent from civil society, the polity and the media, the resolution seems not much more than lip service against the Emergency. It seems more a political ploy to target the Congress party. Indeed, the ruling BJP in the recent past resorted to similar excesses without even the fig leaf of a declaration of Emergency.

If the government of the day is truly committed to undo the damages of the Emergency and not repeat its grave errors, it would have not taken recourse to the same measures in the recent past, seen in the attack on the free press, the use of enforcement and investigative agencies to selectively target Opposition representatives, and draconian preventive detention laws to keep political prisoners, activists and journalists in jail without trial, including by the foisting of charges against them. The BJP's authoritarian actions are one reason why its electoral representation in the 18th Lok Sabha has been trimmed to below the majority mark. The 2024 general election verdict might not have been a decisive rejection of the ruling party — as it was in 1977 — but it is no less significant as it empowers those in responsible positions in Indian democratic institutions to resist authoritarianism. A more thoroughgoing Opposition in Parliament that questions ruling party high-handedness; a vigilant judiciary that ensures justice to the many unjustly held dissidents; and a civil society that pushes for the withdrawal of draconian preventive detention laws and a ruling party that coheres with these — only such substantive steps will enable India to decisively move on from the dark period of the Emergency.



## EXPLAINED: THE STORY OF THE EMERGENCY

On June 25, India entered the fiftieth year of the imposition of the Emergency, an extraordinary 21-month period from 1975 to 1977, which saw the suspension of civil liberties, curtailment of press freedom, mass arrests, the cancellation of elections, and rule by decree. The Emergency, which was vigorously opposed by The Indian Express, was a dark chapter in modern Indian history that left a wide-ranging and lasting impact on Indian politics.

### **What is meant by the Emergency in the modern political history of India?**

The Emergency refers to the period from June 25, 1975 to March 21, 1977, during which the government of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi used special provisions in the Constitution to impose sweeping executive and legislative consequences on the country.

Almost all opposition leaders were put in jail. Fundamental rights, including the freedom of speech and expression guaranteed under Article 19(1)(a), were curtailed, which led to pre-censorship of the press.

The declaration of Emergency converts the federal structure into a de facto unitary one, as the Union acquires the right to give any direction to state governments, which, though not suspended, come under the complete control of the Centre.

Parliament may by law extend the (five-year) term of Lok Sabha one year at a time, make laws on subjects in the State List, and extend the Union's executive powers to the states. The President can modify, with parliamentary approval, constitutional provisions on the allocation of financial resources between the Union and states.

### **What legal and constitutional sanction did the Emergency have?**

Under Article 352 of the Constitution, the President may, on the advice of the Cabinet headed by the Prime Minister, issue a proclamation of emergency if the security of India or any part of the country is threatened by "war or external aggression or armed rebellion".

In 1975, instead of armed rebellion, the ground of "internal disturbance" was available to the government to proclaim an emergency. In its press note, the government said certain persons were inciting the police and armed forces to not discharge their duties — an apparent reference to Jayaprakash Narayan's call to police not to follow orders that were "immoral".

This was the only instance of proclamation of emergency due to "internal disturbance". The two occasions in which an emergency was proclaimed earlier, on October 26, 1962, and December 3, 1971, were both on grounds of war.

This ground of "internal disturbance" was removed by The Constitution (Forty-fourth Amendment) Act, 1978 by the Janata government that came to power after the Emergency.

Article 358 frees the state of all limitations imposed by Article 19 ("Right to freedom") as soon as an emergency is imposed. Article 359 empowers the President to suspend the right of people to move court for the enforcement of their rights during an emergency.



**What were the political and social circumstances in India in the months leading up to the Emergency?**

Early in 1974, a student movement called Navnirman (Regeneration) began in Gujarat against the Congress government of Chimanbhai Patel, which was seen as corrupt. As the protests became violent, Patel had to resign and President's Rule was imposed.

Navnirman inspired a students' movement in Bihar against corruption and poor governance, and the ABVP and socialist organisations came together to form the Chhatra Sangharsh Samiti. On March 18, 1974, the students marched to the state Assembly. There was arson, and three students were killed in police action. The students asked Jayaprakash Narayan, a Gandhian and hero of the Quit India Movement, to lead them. He agreed with two conditions — that the movement would be non-violent and pan-Indian, and aim to cleanse the country of corruption and misgovernance. Thereafter, the students' movement came to be called the "JP movement".

Meanwhile, in May 1974, the socialist leader George Fernandes led an unprecedented strike of railway workers that paralysed the Indian Railways for three weeks.

On June 5, during a speech in Patna's historic Gandhi Maidan, JP gave a call for "Sampoorna Kranti", or total revolution. In August, he toured the Bihar countryside, and in November, he fell injured to the ground as police lathicharged protesters. By the end of the year, JP had got letters of support from across India, and he convened a meeting of opposition parties in Delhi.

He travelled across the country in January and February 1975. On March 6, he addressed a huge rally at Boat Club in Delhi, and another in Patna on March 18. JP's rallies invoked the power of the people with the rousing slogan, "Sinhasan khaali karo, ke janata aati hai (Vacate the throne, for the people are coming)".

On June 12, 1975, Justice Jagmohanlal Sinha of Allahabad High Court delivered a historic verdict in a petition filed by Raj Narain, convicting Indira Gandhi of electoral malpractice, and striking down her election from Rae Bareilly. On appeal, the Supreme Court gave the Prime Minister partial relief — she could attend Parliament but could not vote.

As demands for her resignation became louder and her aides in the Congress dug in their heels, JP asked the police not to follow immoral orders.

Late on June 25 evening, President Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed signed the proclamation of Emergency. Power was cut off to Delhi's Bahadur Shah Zafar Marg where most newspapers had their offices. The Cabinet was informed about the decision the next morning. Since no newspapers could be printed, people got the news from Indira's address on All India Radio.

**What happened to opposition leaders, mediapersons, and political dissenters during the Emergency?**

Almost all opposition leaders, including JP, were detained. About 36,000 people were put in jail under the Maintenance of Internal Security Act (MISA).

Newspapers were subjected to pre-censorship. UNI and PTI were merged into a state-controlled agency called Samachar. The Press Council was abolished. More than 250 journalists, including Kuldip Nayar of The Indian Express, were jailed. While most newspapers bent, some like The Indian Express resisted the Emergency, fought the regulations in court, and printed blank spaces when their stories were pre-censored. The Indian Express proprietor Ramnath Goenka led the resistance of the Fourth Estate.



Indira's son Sanjay Gandhi pushed a "five-point programme" that included forced family planning and clearance of slums. In April 1976, bulldozers moved to clear the slums near Turkman Gate in Delhi on the orders of DDA Vice Chairman Jagmohan. As local people protested, police opened fire and killed many. Sanjay gave officials at the Centre and in the states family planning targets, leading to forced sterilisations. On October 18, 1976, police fired on people protesting against forced sterilisations in Muzaffarnagar, UP, killing 50.

#### **What legal changes were pushed through by Parliament and in the courts during the Emergency?**

With the opposition in jail, Parliament passed The Constitution (Thirty-eighth Amendment) Act that barred judicial review of the Emergency, and The Constitution (Thirty-ninth Amendment) Act that said the election of the Prime Minister could not be challenged in the Supreme Court.

The Constitution (Forty-second Amendment) Act made changes to a range of laws, taking away the judiciary's right to hear election petitions, widening the authority of the Union to encroach on State subjects, gave Parliament unbridled power to amend the Constitution with no judicial review possible, and made any law passed by Parliament to implement any or all directive principles of state policy immune to judicial review.

In the famous case of *ADM Jabalpur vs Shivkant Shukla*, 1976, a five-judge Bench of the Supreme Court ruled that detention without trial was legal during an emergency. The sole dissenter to the majority judgment was Justice H R Khanna.

#### **What prompted Indira Gandhi to lift the Emergency, and what happened afterward?**

For no apparent reason, Indira decided to lift the Emergency early in 1977. In his book *India After Gandhi*, historian Ramachandra Guha listed the various theories offered to explain her decision: that IB reports had convinced her that she would win the elections, that she needed to match similar action by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto in Pakistan, and even that she missed connecting with the common people.

As it happened, the elections of 1977 led to a comprehensive defeat for Indira. The Janata Party, formed by a merger of the Jana Sangh, Congress (O), the socialists and Bharatiya Lok Dal, emerged as a formidable force, and Morarji Desai became India's first non-Congress Prime Minister.

#### **What efforts were made by the Janata government to undo the damage caused by the Emergency?**

The Janata government reversed many of the constitutional changes effected by the 42nd Amendment Act of 1976. It did not do away with the provision of the emergency, but made it extremely difficult to impose for the future. It made judicial review of a proclamation of emergency possible again, and mandated that every proclamation of emergency be laid before both Houses of Parliament within a month of the proclamation. Unless it was approved by both Houses by a special majority — a majority of the total strength of the House and not less than two-thirds of the members present and voting — the proclamation would lapse.

The 44th Amendment removed "internal disturbance" as a ground for the imposition of an emergency, meaning that armed rebellion alone would now be a ground, apart from war and external aggression. However, the 44th Amendment left the words 'secular' and 'socialist', inserted in the Preamble by the 42nd Amendment, untouched.



The Shah Commission, constituted by the Janata government to report on the imposition of the Emergency and its adverse effects, submitted a damning report that found the decision to be unilateral, and adversely affecting civil liberties.

#### **How did the Emergency change Indian politics?**

The Janata experiment gave India its first non-Congress government, but its collapse also demonstrated the limits of anti-Congressism. The Emergency gave India a crop of young leaders who would dominate politics for decades to come — Lalu Prasad Yadav, George Fernandes, Arun Jaitley, Ram Vilas Paswan, and many others.

The post-Emergency Parliament saw the coming together of the social forces behind the Jana Sangh and the socialists — Hindutva upper caste, and the Lohiaite agrarian and artisanal castes — and increased the representation of OBCs in Parliament. The Janata government appointed the Mandal Commission to look into OBC quotas, which would go on to make the rise of the OBCs in North India irreversible.

The Emergency became a template of how not to do democratic politics. It dented the Congress' reputation of leading the struggle for civil liberties against the colonial state. The Emergency has remained in the political vocabulary, with every perceived act of high-handedness by a government being attributed to an "Emergency mindset". Even the critics of Prime Minister Narendra Modi sometimes refer to his government as one of an "undeclared Emergency".

#### **HOW SANJAY GANDHI LED EMERGENCY-ERA 'NASBANDI' CAMPAIGN**

Overpopulation has long been a concern for the Indian intelligentsia, which largely agreed with the classic Western perspective on the matter which associated overpopulation with economic underdevelopment.

In 1951, when India's population was approximately 361 million, ace demographer R A Gopalswami estimated that it would rise by roughly 500,000 every year. At this rate, he believed that India would perennially struggle to meet its food demand, even after millions of tons of imports. Gopalswami's solution: mass sterilisation, something no other country had previously tried, certainly at this scale.

Paying heed to its top demographer, the government launched the National Family Planning Programme in 1952, which introduced awareness campaigns and monetary incentives for getting sterilised. But in a country where superstition was rife, vasectomies proved to be a hard-sell. While some believed that they led to a loss of sex drive, others feared death on the operating table.

#### **Sanjay's quick fix**

The years preceding the Emergency had been rough for the Indian economy — below average rainfall in 1972 and 1973 had led to food shortage, the oil crisis of 1973 was draining India's humble forex reserves, inflation was at an all-time high even as industrial production declined, and unemployment wreaked havoc.

Population control was seen as being crucial to addressing these challenges. And with civil liberties suspended during the Emergency, the government could push much harder than before.





For Sanjay Gandhi, who had quickly become very influential in the government despite holding no official position, this was a big personal mission — the lynchpin of his 5-point programme which also included afforestation, abolition of dowry, removal of illiteracy, and slum clearance.

“Of Sanjay Gandhi’s five points... the other four were humdrum, unglamorous, hardly the stuff to build charismatic leadership credentials on. But family planning was. Here was a Herculean project, the solving of which, everyone acknowledged, was vital if the nation hoped to survive, let alone prosper,” historian Ramachandra Guha wrote in *India After Gandhi* (2008).

Sanjay wanted results in a year — and the whole government and party apparatus were mobilised to this end. Sterilisation camps were set up, and ambitious targets were set.

According to Prajakta R Gupte, Sanjay “allocated quotas to the chief ministers of every state that they were supposed to meet by any means possible... Nothing mattered when it came to meeting the targets” (“The Emergency and the Politics of Mass Sterilization” in *Demographics, Social Policy, and Asia*, 2017).

### Dark legacy

In Guha’s words, Sanjay “catalysed a competitive process” when it came to sterilisation, competition which percolated down to district officials and “led to widespread coercion”.

“Lower government officials had to submit to the surgeon’s knife before arrears of pay were cleared. Truck drivers would not have their licences renewed if they could not produce a sterilisation certificate,” Guha wrote. Kamble, for instance, was threatened with dismissal from his job in Barshi’s sanitation department.

In many cases more direct force was also deployed. Journalist Maseeh Rahman wrote for *The Indian Express* in 2015: “In January 1976, Barshi’s municipal council was told to organise a 10-day campaign to sterilise 1,000 people... Hardly anyone volunteered in the first two days. So, for the next eight days, two trucks prowled around town to achieve the target... Hundreds of farmers visiting Barshi were dragged from the streets and forcibly sterilised. Some were unmarried... some were already sterilised, and some were very old. It made little difference. Many became septic, at least one died, all were badly traumatised.”

The word *nasbandi* (vasectomy) became synonymous with the excesses of the Emergency. “In order to avoid sterilisation, villagers often hid in their fields for several days and nights,” Gupte wrote.

If citizens protested, things could turn deadly. Journalist Kuldip Nayar wrote about several such cases in his 1977 book, *The Judgement: Inside Story of Emergency in India*. For instance, in Narkadih in UP’s Sultanpur, villagers gathered for sterilisation camps attacked the police, who opened fire in retaliation — at least 13 people were killed.

There is no accurate data regarding the true scale of the campaign, most estimates put the number of sterilisations between 6-8 million in 1977, and lower in 1975 and 1976. Whatever the scale might have been, *nasbandi* was undoubtedly a pivotal contributor to Indira Gandhi’s 1977 defeat. Congress’ vote share tanked in northern states like UP and Bihar where the campaign was most vigorously implemented, while it did much better in the south which, by and large, did not face its brunt.



As Guha wrote: “There was a burning hatred against forced vasectomies; this extremely emotive and explosive issue had become the focus of all pent-up frustrations and resentment”.

## A TORRID CRISIS

Northern India has been bearing the brunt of the longest stretch of heatwaves in the last 15 years. The minimum day temperatures in some States have consistently remained above 45° C and those in the relatively cooler ones, at least 3°-6° C above what is usual for this time of the year. Even night temperatures have consistently been 3°-6° C above normal, a consequence of the near-absence of moisture and rain. To add to this, the monsoon has been sluggish. After an early start, the monsoon has stalled since June 12 and is stuck in central India. Before its onset over Kerala, the India Meteorological Department had forecast the rainfall in June over India to be ‘normal’. It has now updated that estimate to be ‘below normal’ or, in quantitative terms, a minimum 8% shortfall over the month’s expected quantum of 16.69 cm. This update, however, is not useful as it does not give an insight into the progress of the monsoon. The normal dates of the monsoon’s arrival over the northwestern and northern States are those spanning the June 25-July 1 timeframe. Whether the monsoon’s current hiatus will push these dates even further remains to be seen. A prolonged hiatus could mean an even greater load on the infrastructure in these States.

On June 17, the Power Ministry said that demand in northern India had surged to 89 GW (89,000 MW) — the highest in a single day. To meet this power requirement, nearly 25%-30% had to be “imported” from the other four regions — south, west, east and north-east — and possibly Bhutan. A precise break-up was not provided. Though the Ministry claimed credit in meeting the demand, it indirectly reveals the strain on the infrastructure. The installed power capacity in northern India is 113 GW (1,13,000 MW) and if the northern grid still needed to import power, it suggests an inability to utilise its full capacity. Delhi’s international airport had a half-hour blackout on the same day and it stands to reason that prolonged heatwaves and demands on cooling are only going to further strain the grid. Compounding this is the water crisis that has gripped Delhi. While water pilferage is a common woe, the heat has exacerbated demand, and Haryana, a key source of water for Delhi, has refused to increase supply citing its own constraints. It is high time that politics is set aside and the prolonged summer is holistically addressed by the Centre and States as a natural disaster.

## DESPITE A ROCKY START, WITH THE MONSOON COMES A SEASON OF CHANCES

Kharif plantings are still to really take off, partly reflected in the Agriculture Ministry not releasing data on the area sown under different crops so far. The reason is the poor progress of the southwest monsoon, despite its arrival over Kerala and northeast India on May 30, two days and six days before their respective normal dates. The country received 3 per cent overall surplus rains till June 10. But the monsoon hasn’t advanced much thereafter, with the all-India area-weighted rainfall during June 1-23 being 18.1 per cent below the historical average for this period. Also, while the southern peninsula has recorded a cumulative surplus of 10.5 per cent, the rains have been 25 per cent deficient in central and 58.2 per cent in northwest India. The Met department expects the countrywide rainfall for June now to be “below normal” (less than 92 per cent of the long period average), a downgrade from its “normal” (92-108 per cent range) forecast issued on May 27.

That isn’t a great start to the monsoon season (June-September). Nor is it what a government beginning a fresh term would like — at a time of elevated retail food inflation (8.7 per cent year-



on-year in May) and rural consumption under continuing stress. The monsoon will, hopefully, revive by the month-end. June, in any case, accounts for hardly 19 per cent of the season's total rainfall. The bulk of it happens in July (32 per cent) and August (29 per cent); these are also the peak months for the sowing and vegetative growth phase of the kharif crops. Most global weather models are pointing to the development of La Niña conditions during July-September and persisting through November-February. La Niña is known to bring copious rains to India and also colder and prolonged winters, which are good for both the kharif and the succeeding rabi crops. This is opposite of the just-ended El Niño, which contributed to last year's patchy monsoon and hotter temperatures in the months that followed.

What should the government do? It can wait and watch, but certainly plan. Some of the measures it has taken — allowing import of most pulses and edible oils at zero/low duty — are sensible. So is the hike in the minimum support prices of kharif pulses and oilseeds announced last week. These send the right signals to farmers to plant more area under these crops. But the government needs to also scrap the 40 per cent import duty on wheat, considering its own 16-year-low stocks and uncertainty over the next paddy crop. While the immediate focus has to be on augmenting domestic availability — preferably through freeing imports than curbs on exports and the trade — this is also the time to draw a long-term plan for the agriculture sector.

## ARE HEATWAVES NATURAL DISASTERS?

### The story so far:

North India has been bearing the brunt of the longest stretch of a heatwave in the last 15 years. Figures from the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare suggest that at least a 100 have died from heat-related illnesses from March 1 to June 18 across India though this is likely to be significantly under-reported. The high number of deaths have revived discussions on labelling heatwaves as a natural disaster.

### Are heatwaves a natural disaster?

The National Disaster Management Act (NDMA) is the key piece of legislation governing the roles of the Centre and States in responding to a natural disaster. The Ministry of Home Affairs is the nodal body that governs the execution of this Act. Several disaster management authorities draw their powers from this legislation and they define which natural calamities qualify for state-backed compensation. The legislation is also the genesis of special funds — at the State-level and the Centre — that can be drawn upon for a disaster. As of now, 12 disasters are notified in the Guidelines on Constitution and Administration of the State Disaster Response Fund (SDRF) and National Disaster Response Fund (NDRF), namely cyclone, drought, earthquake, fire, flood, tsunami, hailstorm, landslide, avalanche, cloudburst, pest attack, frost and cold waves. Heatwaves are yet to be included and this has to do with a government body that is unconnected to institutions under the NDMA.

### Which is this body?

The 15th Finance Commission, the constitutional body that decides upon the revenue sharing between the Centre and States, had in its report “observed” that the list of notified disasters eligible for funding from SDRF and NDRF covers the needs of the State to a large extent and thus did not find merit in the request to expand its scope. States have appealed to the Finance



Commission to expand the scope of natural calamities that can be considered a disaster as this makes them eligible for more funds.

However, in terms of the aforesaid guidelines, a State Government can use up to 10% of the annual fund allocation of the SDRF, with certain caveats, for providing immediate relief to the victims of natural disasters, other than the aforesaid 12 disasters, that they consider to be 'disasters' within a local context in the State. Thus, compensation awarded to those confirmed by State authorities as having succumbed to heatwaves comes from these tranche. The 16th Finance Commission headed by economist Arvind Panagariya may review fresh requests by States.

#### **Are heatwave deaths rising in India?**

Heatwave deaths in India decreased from 1,127 in 2017 to 374 in 2021, according to data from the National Crime Records Bureau, though these are classified as 'accidental deaths'. In 2022, 33 deaths were reported, in 2023, none, and this year at least a 100 have been confirmed. While these are fewer than the 1,100 deaths in Andhra Pradesh in 2016, longer spells of heatwaves are becoming more frequent. State health departments are tasked with furnishing information to the Centre on heatwave-related illnesses and deaths. A challenge with classifying deaths due to heatwaves is that in several cases people succumb under the combined impact of high temperatures and existing co-morbidities such as cardiovascular disease or hyper tension. Secondly, there are varying definitions of a heatwave. While temperatures above 45 degrees Celsius are considered to have heatwave-like conditions, it can also mean temperatures that are 4.5 degrees or more above what's normal for any place. Several places in the Himalayan States with temperatures in the mid-30s have reported heatwaves, because it is several degrees above normal. There have been no official reports of heat-related deaths in these places. In most years, Andhra Pradesh, Odisha, Telangana, Gujarat, Rajasthan are the States that report most casualties from heat. There are medical guidelines to help doctors declare, or rule out, suspected cases of heatwave illness but these are often applied unevenly.

#### **What measures do States have in place?**

With the frequency of heatwaves rising, State, district, and cities have prepared heat action plans (HAPs). The NDMA and the India Meteorological Department are working with 23 States to develop HAPs. HAPs provide a snapshot of a region's heat profile, including information on the number of past heatwave events, yearly trends in the summer maximum temperature, land surface temperature, and so on, followed by a vulnerability assessment which maps out regions that require immediate attention and a response plan.

### **MOODY'S WARNING AND WHY INDIA MUST PAY HEED**

India's persistent water crises and increased vulnerability to climate change could dent its sovereign credit strength, at a time when the country is gearing up to be the world's third-largest economy. The rare use of this non-economic metric is especially pertinent given the difficulties people face in several cities and towns this summer. With meteorologists warning of more exacting heat waves in the coming years, water security would be critical to the country's economic ambitions. Any drop in water supply could disrupt operations in farms and factories, Moody's has said. This, the firm, has cautioned can precipitate a rise in food prices and lead to a decline in people's real incomes. The agency identifies coal-fired power generation and steel production as the industrial sectors most vulnerable to water stress.



According to government estimates, per capita water availability in the country is likely to fall from an already low 1,486 cubic metres — much below the Ministry of Water Resources' benchmark of 1,700 cubic metres — to less than 1,400 cubic metres by 2030. India's historical inclination to address water-related deficits by focusing on supply-side parameters has led to uneconomical use of this resource, especially the overutilisation of groundwater. Water pricing mechanisms do not adequately account for the perilous state of the country's aquifers. In 2019, the Water Resources Ministry launched the Jal Shakti Abhiyan for rainwater harvesting and water conservation. Metros such as Delhi, Bengaluru and Mumbai do have laws on using rainwater. But, by all accounts, these have remained on paper. India's metros do not have any data on buildings with water-harvesting structures. State governments and municipal corporations do very little to either incentivise housing societies — by linking rainwater harvesting with tax regimes such as property taxes, for example — or penalise builders who do not factor water efficiency in construction projects.

In the next 20 years, India will likely add more than 270 million people to its urban population, intensifying the competition between businesses and households for water. Conversations on water audits are at a nascent stage in industry. The Moody's report could occasion such discussions. For instance, as the International Energy Agency has pointed out, 70 per cent of India's projected electricity generation for 2040 will come from plants not yet commissioned. Technologies — dry cooling and non-fresh water cooling, for instance — to reduce pressure on water resources are available today. Moody's warning should push policymakers to arrive at innovative ways for ensuring sustainable use of water.

## ANALYSING MAHARASHTRA'S WATER CRISIS

### The story so far:

After the deficient monsoon last year, the Maharashtra government declared many parts of the State to be drought-hit. The impact of the deficiency manifested across the region this summer as wells ran dry and officials brought tankers to provide drinking water and water for irrigation. This situation is in sharp contrast with the State's coastal areas, where rainfall has often been in excess, leading to severe flooding. Marathwada's predicament is shaped by its location, topography, soil type, agricultural practices, and crop choices.

### What is the rain-shadow effect?

Marathwada lies in the rain-shadow region of the Western Ghats. When moist winds from the Arabian Sea encounter these mountains, they rise and cool, causing heavy rainfall (2,000-4,000 mm) on the western side. But by the time these winds cross the Ghats and descend into Western Maharashtra and Marathwada, they lose most of their moisture, leaving Marathwada much drier (600-800 mm).

A 2016 study by IIT Gandhinagar researchers said climate change is worsening the situation in central Maharashtra. The region has experienced an increasing trend in drought severity and frequency of late. As a result, Marathwada and North Karnataka have emerged as the second driest regions in India after Rajasthan.



### How does this affect crops?

Marathwada's agricultural practices are not well suited to its low rainfall. A major contributor to the region's water crisis is sugarcane cultivation. Sugarcane requires 1,500-2,500 mm of water in its growing season. While pulses and millets require four or five irrigations across their crop life, sugarcane needs to be irrigated almost every day. The area under sugarcane increased steadily between the 1950s and the 2000s, plateauing in the last decade. Today, the crop occupies 4% of the total cropped area in the region and consumes 61% of the irrigation water. As a result, the average river outflow in the upper Bhima basin has almost halved. Long-standing government support for sugarcane pricing and sales has expanded sugarcane irrigation, restricting the irrigation of more nutritious crops. Since December 2023, the government has been promoting sugarcane-juice-based ethanol production, which may be unwise for this water-starved area: 82% of the sugar grown in Maharashtra comes from low-rainfall areas. The Maharashtra Water and Irrigation Commission in 1999 recommended that sugarcane should be banned in areas that receive less than 1,000 mm of rainfall a year, yet production has increased.

### How do soil, topography matter?

Marathwada has predominantly clayey black soil, locally called "regur". It is fertile and retains moisture well. However, it has a low infiltration rate: when it rains, the water is either logged or runs off, but doesn't percolate down to recharge groundwater. To capture this high run-off, Maharashtra has been building many dams — such that it is today the State with the most large dams in the country (1,845). The soil also has low hydraulic conductivity and holds on to the water for a long time after rains. WELL Labs' work in the region has found that farmers face crop loss as a result.

Even within Marathwada, water scarcity is not uniform. The area has parallel tributaries of the Godavari and the Krishna flowing southeast. Each tributary flows in the valley and is separated by a gently sloping hill. The valleys have perennial groundwater while the uplands have seasonal groundwater. This is because groundwater slowly moves underground from upland areas to the valleys. The wells in upland areas dry up a few months after the monsoons, and is where the water scarcity is most acute. They are at a natural disadvantage and deserve special support.

### Can Marathwada be water-resilient?

Supply-side solutions are about making the most of available resources. They include classical watershed management work (such as building water-conserving structures like contour trenches, earthen bunds, gully plugs, etc.). Second, rainwater that runs off agricultural fields carries the very soil that doesn't allow the water to percolate. So many of these structures accumulate silt. Funds under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme could be used to design silt-trapping mechanisms and organise training programmes for farmers on periodic desilting.

In a low-rainfall region, managing water demand includes practising water-efficient irrigation, cultivating drought-resistant crops, and diversifying livelihoods. Marathwada must also shift to other high-value, low-water-using crops, while sugarcane production must move to Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and West Bengal.



## THE ROW OVER DELHI'S WATER CRISIS

### The story so far:

Amidst a heat wave in several parts of north India, the national capital has been struck with an acute water shortage over the past couple of weeks sparking a battle in the Supreme Court with its neighbouring States including Haryana and Himachal Pradesh. The Aam Aadmi Party (AAP)-led Delhi government has alleged that Haryana is blocking water to Delhi and has asked them to release it.

### Why is there water shortage in Delhi?

Delhi depends heavily on its neighbouring States of Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Punjab, Haryana, and Uttar Pradesh to fulfil its drinking water needs. The capital's raw water supply comes from four sources with approximately 40% of it coming via Yamuna through Haryana. The raw water is treated in Delhi's Water Treatment Plants (WTPs) and sent across through its pipelines that covers over 15,000 kilometres.

In the past couple of weeks, the Delhi government has blamed the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) for blocking Delhi's share of water through the Munak Canal, which is one of the primary sources of water for the capital. The canal, which falls under the Haryana government, starts from Haryana and enters Delhi with raw water. If there are any problems, the Delhi Government is responsible for notifying the issue and financing the problem. Delhi's Water Minister Atishi has claimed that Haryana is purposely blocking water, in an already difficult situation due to the heat, which is resulting in the residents of Delhi being forced to go waterless for days.

However, the Lieutenant Governor's (L-G) office has maintained that Haryana and other neighbouring States are releasing adequate supplies of water, and that the shortage is due to a leakage in the Munak Canal, and the lack of cleaning of pipelines and WTPs. Additionally, the L-G office has claimed that the presence of privately run tankers which are finding illegal sources of water and selling them at high rates is adding to the issue.

### What is happening in the SC?

The Delhi government had moved the Supreme Court to seek a direction to Haryana to supply more water to the crisis-hit national capital on May 31. The AAP government in Delhi has told the top court that the water demand in the city has risen significantly due to heatwave conditions, and that Haryana be directed to release extra water for a month. The Supreme Court on June 3 directed the Centre to hold an emergency meeting of its Upper Yamuna River Board (UYRB) with the States of Delhi, Haryana, and Himachal Pradesh to address water scarcity in the national capital amid soaring temperatures. On June 6, the Congress-led Himachal Pradesh government agreed to share water resources with the capital in the Supreme Court, promising to release 137 cusecs of water through the Hathnikund barrage in Haryana into the Wazirabad barrage in Delhi. However, Haryana, through which the water must pass to reach Delhi, raised objections. And later on, even the Himachal Pradesh government went back on its statements, stating that water was already flowing in the Yamuna, and that it had made an incorrect statement of being able to spare Delhi 137 cusecs of water.



### What has been the court's response?

The SC has now bowed out of the row, stating that it does not want to interfere with the proceedings of the UYRB. The Bench headed by Justice P.K. Mishra said it did not want to either violate or tinker with the MoU settled among the States by even passing an interim order. "The issue should be left to be considered by the Upper Yamuna River Board, a body constituted with the agreement of parties in the MoU of May 12, 1994," the Bench observed in its order. The board was directed to hold a meeting with stakeholders and was asked to take a call on the matter. Delhi MLAs have since written to Jal Shakti Minister C.R. Patil seeking help on humanitarian grounds. The main function of the UYRB is to regulate the allocation of available flows amongst the beneficiary States.

### What is next for Delhi?

With an acute water shortage in Delhi, the powers in the capital need to focus beyond politics, be it the Centre or the State government, Rajendra Singh, a water conservationist who is popularly referred to as the 'Waterman of India' said. He explained that Delhi must focus on three solutions to the problem. "First, drinking water in the capital needs to be made its top priority; water for irrigation and other works needs to be redirected for drinking water."

He further stated that "Delhi needs to thoroughly re-examine its water resources and work on the principles of 'retreat, recycle and reuse'." The capital needs to look closely at its WTPs and build successful models to sustain its needs. The water flowing through Delhi needs to go into the cycle of reuse.

Additionally, instead of depending on other States, Delhi should investigate its harvesting methods. The spaces in Asola Bhatti mines can be made into water harvesting structures, Mr. Singh suggested. Ground water resources used to be recharged in Delhi by the water in the Aravalli belt, but that is not the case anymore which is leading to wastage. The Aravalli belt should be modelled into a water sanctuary and the Yamuna flood plain banks into a water bank.

## MOST INDIANS WANT STRONGER CLIMATE ACTION, FINDS SURVEY

The results of the 2024 People's Climate Vote survey, conducted by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the University of Oxford's Department of Sociology, and GeoPoll, were published on June 20. They show a general trend worldwide of the people of most countries wanting stronger climate commitments to address climate change.

Around 33% of those surveyed in India said they think about climate change every day; more than half worry about it more relative to the previous year. Only 26%, however, think India is addressing climate change "very well."

The survey comes right after north and central India suffered from an intense heat wave, with extreme temperatures recorded at various locations in the country.

At the same time, thousands of trees in Uttar Pradesh are likely to be felled to make way for the annual 'Kanwar yatra,' a Hindu pilgrimage. According to an affidavit submitted in May to the National Green Tribunal by the special secretary of Uttar Pradesh Public Works Department in response to a news report, fewer than 33,776 trees will be felled for the construction.





The Upper Ganga Canal Road (Right Bank) has been proposed to counter heavy traffic flow on National Highway 58 which passes through Ghaziabad, Meerut, and Muzaffarnagar, and chokes during the Kanwar yatra period in the Hindu month of Shraavan when almost one crore pilgrims take part in long processions. The affidavit listed a district-wise detail of how many plants and trees will be impacted.

“That it is further submitted that the actual felling of trees will be less than 33,776 as the felling of trees will be done only in width of 15 meters where height of embankment is less, The calculation of affected trees (33,776) was initially done on the basis of 20-metre width,” the affidavit said.

Another extensive tree-felling project has been improved under the Union government’s ambitious ₹72,000-crore Great Nicobar Project, where 9.64 lakh trees are expected to be cut to make way for a transshipment port, an international airport, a township, and a 450-MVA gas and solar power plant on Great Nicobar island.

## THE NITI AAYOG’S PROJECT IN GREAT NICOBAR

### The story so far:

On June 17, the Congress party demanded an “immediate suspension” of all clearances granted to NITI Aayog’s mega project on Great Nicobar island in the light of “violations of due process, legal and constitutional provisions protecting tribal communities, and the project’s disproportionate ecological and human cost.” The party also demanded a “thorough impartial review of the proposed project, including by the parliamentary committees concerned.” Other political parties have also raised concerns about the project. In its 2024 election manifesto, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) promised to “scrap the environmentally disastrous and pro-corporate Islands Development Plan for Andaman and Nicobar”. The Tribal Council of Great Nicobar and Little Nicobar and a host of environmentalists, wildlife conservationists, and tribal rights groups have also opposed the project.

### Where is Great Nicobar and which are the communities living there?

The island of Great Nicobar is the southernmost tip of India and a part of the Andaman and Nicobar archipelago that comprises 600-odd islands. It is hilly and covered with lush rainforests that are sustained by around 3,500 mm of annual rainfall. The rainforests and beaches host numerous endangered and endemic species including the giant leatherback turtle, the Nicobar megapode, the Great Nicobar crane, the Nicobar crab-eating macaque, and the Nicobar tree shrew. It has an area of 910 sq km with mangroves and Pandan forests along its coast.

The island is home to two tribal communities — the Shompen and the Nicobarese. The Shompen, around 250 in total, mostly live in the interior forests and are relatively isolated from the rest of the population. They are predominantly hunter-gatherers and are classified as a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group within the list of Scheduled Tribes.

The Nicobarese community practises farming and fishing. It has two groups: the Great Nicobarese and the Little Nicobarese. They use different dialects of the Nicobarese language (the Shompen have their own unique language). The Great Nicobarese lived along the island’s southeast and west coast until the tsunami in 2004, after which the government resettled them in Campbell Bay. Today, there are around 450 Great Nicobarese on the island. Little Nicobarese, numbering around 850, mostly live in Afra Bay in Great Nicobar and also in two other islands in the archipelago, Pulumilo and Little Nicobar.



The majority on Great Nicobar comprises people who settled on the island from mainland India. Between 1968 and 1975, the Indian government settled retired military servicemen and their families from Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, and Tamil Nadu, among a few others, here. Around 330 households were given around 15 acres of land across seven revenue villages on the island's east coast: Campbell Bay, Govindnagar, Jogindernagar, Vijaynagar, Laxminagar, Gandhinagar, and Shastrinagar. Campbell Bay is also an administrative hub that includes local offices of the Andaman and Nicobar administration and the panchayat. There were also short-term and long-term migrations of fisherfolk, agricultural and construction labourers, businesspersons, and administrative staff comprising foresters, engineers, teachers, etc. from both the mainland and the Andaman Islands. The construction contractors came after the 2004 tsunami. Overall, the population of settlers on the island today is around 6,000. All population data is an approximation provided by researchers who have worked in Great Nicobar.

### **What is the NITI Aayog project?**

In March 2021, NITI Aayog unveiled a ₹72,000 crore plan called 'Holistic Development of Great Nicobar Island at Andaman and Nicobar Islands'. It includes the construction of an international transshipment terminal, an international airport, a power plant, and a township. The project is to be implemented by a government undertaking called the Andaman and Nicobar Islands Integrated Development Corporation (ANIIDCO).

The plan states: "The proposed port will allow Great Nicobar to participate in the regional and global maritime economy by becoming a major player in cargo transshipment. The proposed airport will support the growth of maritime services and enable Great Nicobar Island to attract international and national visitors to experience the outstanding natural environment and participate in sustainable tourism activity." Although NITI Aayog put forth the project in its present form, it has a long history. Plans for developing a port in Great Nicobar have been around since at least the 1970s, when the Trade Development Authority of India (now called 'India Trade Promotion Organisation') conducted techno-economic feasibility studies. The core aim has persisted since then — a port located near one of the world's busiest international sea routes (the Malacca Strait) which will allow increased participation in global maritime trade.

### **Why is there opposition?**

The mega project has been heavily criticised for its ecological costs and for potential violations of tribal rights.

The project requires the diversion of about 130 sq km of forest land and the felling of around 10 lakh trees. In January, 2021 the Indian government denotified two wildlife sanctuaries — the Galathea Bay wildlife sanctuary and the Megapode wildlife sanctuary — to make way for the project. In the same month, the government released a 'National Marine Turtle Action Plan' that lists Galathea Bay as a marine turtle habitat in India.

The transshipment terminal is expected to be developed at Galathea Bay, one of the world's largest nesting sites for the giant leatherback turtle. Both this species and the Nicobar megapode are listed in Schedule I of the Wildlife (Protection Act), 1972 — the highest level of protection for wild animals under Indian law (numerous species, especially endemic ones, are likely yet to be documented in Great Nicobar given the limited number of surveys conducted so far). In November 2022, the Tribal Council of Great Nicobar and Little Nicobar withdrew the no-objection certificate (NOC) it had provided for the project stating the administration had concealed important



information about the use of tribal reserve lands and that they had obtained tribal communities' consent in a rushed process.

Some of the land classified as “uninhabited” in NITI Aayog’s plan is also part of the Great Nicobarese’s ancestral land. Since their post-tsunami resettlement, they have repeatedly sought to return to these lands — only to be met with administrative apathy. Today, the mega project also stands in the way of their demands to return.

As for the Shompen, one of the biggest threats is disease. Since the Shompen have had little contact with the outside world, they haven’t yet developed immunity to infectious diseases that affect India’s general population. Some Shompen settlements also overlap with the areas the NITI Aayog has proposed to be used for the transshipment terminal.

Earlier this month, the local panchayat of Campbell Bay raised concerns over the social impact assessment process for land acquisition for the airport. Researchers who work on disaster management have also raised concerns that proponents of the mega project have failed to adequately assess earthquake risk. The Andaman and Nicobar archipelago is located in the “ring of fire”: a seismically active region that experiences several earthquakes throughout the year. According to some estimates, the region has experienced close to 500 quakes of varying magnitude in the last decade. The area is in category V: the geographical zone with the most seismic hazard.

#### NICOBAR TRIANGLE

The Union Tribal Affairs Ministry will be looking into the forest clearance paperwork of the ₹72,000-crore infrastructure project on Great Nicobar Island, a major initiative of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government, Tribal Affairs Minister Jual Oram told this newspaper. This is a significant step for the government, in its third term, as it brings to the surface the contentious and difficult choices that governments face while addressing the trilemma of infrastructure development, preserving pristine biodiversity respect and, being sensitive to the rights of the indigenous inhabitants, and tribals. The Great Nicobar Project involves developing a trans-shipment port, an international airport, township development, and a 450 MVA gas and solar-based power plant on the island. The project area is expected to cover over 130 sq. km. of pristine forest, and has been accorded a stage-1 environmental clearance — one of the mandatory prerequisites — by an expert committee. The government told Parliament in August 2023 that 9.6 lakh trees could be felled and ‘compensatory afforestation,’ for the loss of this unique rainforest ecosystem, had been planned, thousands of kilometres away, in the vastly different ecological zone of Haryana. The Galathea Bay in the Nicobar islands hosts multiple rare species including the leatherback turtle, and the project imperils their future.

The government contends that its motive is to leverage the strategic location with the Great Nicobar Island located only 90 km away from the western tip of the Malacca Strait, an important shipping route between the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea. However, critics and some of the government’s policy advisers suggest that tourism is a key imperative for the exercise. The Environment Ministry, which is a regulator of environmental policy, has opted to be secretive about the project. Details on the environmental clearance process and the appraisal process, usually a public document, have been kept under wraps. There also seems to be haste on the part of the island administration to proceed while ignoring the rights of the local tribes — the Shompen in particular — regarding consent. The National Commission for Scheduled Tribes, a constitutional body, has demanded an explanation from the district administration on these



grounds. The National Green Tribunal had tasked a committee, headed by the Secretary of the Environment Ministry, to submit a report on the approval of forest clearances. This too is not public. Without transparency, it would be foolhardy for the government to attempt such a massive upheaval of the islands and it should, with its new mandate, immediately correct course.

## WHY INDIA NEEDS TO BUILD DISASTER RESILIENCE IN ITS CRITICAL INFRASTRUCTURE

This past month, amidst relentlessly high temperatures, electricity demand in Delhi repeatedly broke records. The unusually high demand also led to frequent power cuts in Delhi and neighbouring areas. Several places in central and eastern India faced similar or worse situations. The lack of electricity, combined with abnormally high night temperatures, made lives miserable, and could have even contributed to several heat-related deaths.

The unprecedented surge in electricity demand is just a glimpse of the kind of stress that critical infrastructure faces from extreme weather events and resultant disasters. Power systems are not the only ones that are vulnerable. Telecommunications, transportation, health services, and even cyber systems face disruptions due to disasters, complicating an already difficult crisis situation. The breakdown of essential and emergency services not only hampers relief, rescue and recovery, but also amplifies the risks and sometimes adds to the devastation.

Making critical infrastructure resilient to extreme events and disasters is, thus, a crucial component of climate change adaptation.

### **Mounting losses**

While early warnings and quick response have significantly reduced human casualties in disasters, economic and other losses from extreme weather events and disasters have been rising. This is mainly due to the increase in frequency and intensity of such events. Government data show that in the five years between 2018 and 2023, states together spent more than Rs 1.5 lakh crore on dealing with the aftermath of disasters and natural calamities.

This is just the immediate expenditure. Long-term costs, in terms of livelihood losses for example, or because of a reduction in the fertility of agricultural land, are much bigger and projected to worsen over time. A 2022 World Bank report projected that the decline in productivity due to heat-related stress could take away around 34 million jobs in India by 2030. Just the food wastage, on account of transporting food items in non air-conditioned trucks and containers, was already worth about \$9 billion annually, the report said.

The damage caused to critical infrastructure like transportation, telecommunications, and power supply by disasters and extreme weather events is often not counted in government figures, particularly when these services are privately owned. But this damage causes massive disruptions and makes the disaster worse.

### **Incorporating resilience**

Almost all the infrastructure sectors now have disaster management plans in place to prepare and respond to these events.

For instance, hospitals in disaster-prone areas are equipping themselves with backup power supplies, airports and railways are taking steps to avoid, or quickly drain out, waterlogging, and



telecommunication lines are being taken underground. But progress on this front has been slow and a bulk of India's infrastructure remains extremely vulnerable to disasters.

In the first of its kind exercise in any Indian state, the Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure (CDRI), an international organisation set up on India's initiative, carried out a study of the electricity transmission and distribution infrastructure in Odisha, a state at high risk from cyclones. It found that the state's infrastructure was extremely fragile.

The study, which was published last week, revealed that more than 30 per cent of the distribution substations were located within 20 km of the coastline, and 80 per cent of the electricity poles were susceptible to high wind speeds. Also, more than 75 per cent of distribution lines were installed more than 30 years ago, and do not have the capacity to withstand cyclonic winds. The situation is unlikely to be very different in other coastal states.

CDRI, as the name makes it evident, was created in 2019 with the express objective of making critical infrastructure resilient to natural disasters. An international body headquartered in India, CDRI is supposed to develop into a knowledge hub for implementing these transitions. More than 30 countries are now part of this coalition and are working with CDRI to strengthen their infrastructure. But only a few states in India have so far sought the expertise and collaboration of CDRI.

India is still in the process of developing its infrastructure. Most of the infrastructure that has been proposed to stand in India by 2030 is still to be built.

It is much easier, and cost-effective, to incorporate disaster resilience at the time of building than to retrofit these features at a later stage. All the upcoming infrastructure projects need to be climate smart — not just sustainable and energy efficient, but also resilient to disasters.

Having taken the initiative to create CDRI to serve the entire world, India needs to build the right templates for the most resilient infrastructure, ones that can withstand multi-hazard disasters.

#### INDIA AMONG A SELECT FEW COUNTRIES THAT HAVE NOT CONDUCTED THE CENSUS

The last census conducted in India was in 2011 and the decennial counting measure has been postponed indefinitely since 2021. Census numbers play a vital role in identifying beneficiaries for a myriad welfare schemes which could include specific ones such as building schools for tribal children to the large Public Distribution System (PDS). The absence of the census is bound to have grave consequences.

The BJP-led government has repeatedly asserted, including in Parliament, that Census 2021 had to be postponed due to the pandemic. But India stands only among a select few countries that have not conducted the latest Census — 44 of 233 nations. Of the 189 (81%) that managed to conduct their latest rounds, 143 did so after March 2020, the period when COVID-19 started playing havoc across countries. India shares the dubious distinction of not conducting the census with conflict-ridden countries such as Ukraine (invaded by Russia), Yemen, Syria and Myanmar — impacted by civil wars, the Taliban-ruled Afghanistan, the economic crisis-affected Sri Lanka besides several sub-Saharan African countries that have also undergone turmoil.

The year in which the census was last conducted in 233 countries.



- Among the ten most populous countries, India and Nigeria are the only two yet to conduct a census. China, the U.S. and Indonesia were able to conduct their latest census round in 2020. Pakistan, ranked fifth, conducted its census in March 2023.
- Among BRICS nations (originally defined), only India has not conducted the census with others having done so during or after the pandemic — Brazil (August 2022), China (November 2020), South Africa (February 2022), Russia (October 2021). Among neighbours, Nepal, Maldives, Bhutan and Bangladesh have conducted censuses.

An excerpt from The Office of Registrar General and Census Commissioner, published in 2011, emphasises the need for a census. "... India is a welfare State. All these (welfare schemes) require information at the grassroots level... (Census) is the only source of primary data at village, town and ward level..."

The consumption survey 2022-23, which collects data on the consumption of goods and services to understand expenditure patterns and standard of living, used the 2011 census for sampling. The National Family Health Survey 2019-21, which highlights districts where health services are inadequate, also depended upon the 2011 figures. Schemes such as the National Family Security Act, which identifies beneficiaries, who are entitled to receive subsidised food grains, are still being implemented using 2011 figures. Calculations by economists Jean Drèze, Reetika Khera and Meghana Mungikar estimate that at least 100 million people have been excluded from the scheme as coverage is still based on the 2011 census.

Even a relatively smaller scheme such as Eklavya Model Residential School (EMRS), which aims to provide quality education for ST children, will miss out on many areas. In 2022, every block with more than 50% of the ST population was targeted to have an EMRS school. As this calculation was done based on 2011, many blocks that fit the criteria in 2022 may have missed out. Similarly, blocks which fit the criteria earlier but did not in 2022, will get an EMRS school which they may not need now.

## WILL THE AGNIPATH SCHEME BE REVAMPED?

### The story so far:

The recruitment of soldiers into the armed forces as Agniveers under the Agnipath scheme has been a major issue in the recent general election. After the election results, NDA allies, the Janata Dal (United) and Lok Janshakti Party (Ram Vilas), raised the issue of Agnipath and called for a discussion on it. The government is open to changes and discussions are on, officials in the know said.

### What is the Agnipath scheme?

The Agnipath scheme for recruitment of soldiers, sailors and airmen into the three services was announced on June 14, 2022 doing away with the earlier process of permanent recruitment. Under the new scheme, Agniveers are recruited for four years on the completion of which, up to 25% would be selected into the regular ranks on a permanent basis. The age bracket for new recruits was fixed at 17 and a half to 21 years of age and till 2026 the overall intake has been capped at 1.75 lakh. Subsequently, the Army is inducting 40,000 Agniveers per year and the Navy and Air Force are recruiting around 3,000 Agniveers each. Agniveers during their tenure can get class 12 certificates or a Bachelor's degree in addition to other skill certificates and when leaving



after four years will get a lumpsum amount but are not eligible for pension. Defence Minister Rajnath Singh had termed it a transformative initiative and a win-win situation for all.

The government has stated that the Agnipath scheme would bring down the average age of the armed forces from 32 to 26 years in line with the age profile of major armies worldwide. And that when Agniveers return to society, they will contribute to nation-building.

#### **What are the concerns?**

One of the biggest concerns for the armed forces, especially the Army, is the accentuating shortage of personnel in the 'below the officer's rank' cadres. There was no recruitment during the COVID-19 period for over two and half years which created a deficiency. For context, around 60,000 soldiers retire from the Army every year, while 40,000 are being recruited every year. So effectively the shortage is adding on year by year. Additionally, the low conversion rate of 25% from Agniveers to regular soldiers is going to further accentuate the shortfall. Given the short duration of four years, the training schedules have also been compressed accordingly.

With the huge demand for recruitment into the Army in some parts of the country, the scheme became a political issue as well as a campaign issue during the election. The country was rocked by violent protests when the scheme was announced. Several parties have demanded that it either be scrapped or the concerns addressed.

There is anger among "certain sections" on the Agnipath scheme, said JD(U) leader K.C. Tyagi amidst talks within the NDA on government formation. "The Agnipath scheme should be reviewed clause by clause," he said.

#### **What is the current status?**

As reported by The Hindu earlier, as the Agnipath scheme completes two years of implementation, the Department of Military Affairs (DMA) in the Defence Ministry headed by the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) has sought feedback from the forces on the scheme. This, officials said, is in line with the regular practice in the armed forces of reviewing any major scheme introduced or any weapon platform inducted to make required changes based on a detailed assessment.

Broadly, recommendation for enhancing intake numbers, increasing the permanent recruitment from 25% to at least 50% are among the suggestions. Also, there is a proposal to increase the age limit for entry through the technical route from 21 to 23 years to attract enough technically qualified individuals. This is not a new proposal but also existed in the recruitment process earlier.

Defence officials have stated that Navy and Air Force have compiled the feedback to be sent to the DMA. However, the Army is still in the process of compilation and will take some more time, multiple officials confirmed. The DMA will compile all the recommendations and send it to the Defence Ministry.

### **PUSHPAK, ISRO'S REUSABLE LAUNCH VEHICLE, CLEARS TEST**

The Indian Space Research Organisation successfully completed the third reusable launch vehicle landing experiment (RLV LEX) at the Aeronautical Test Range in Chitradurga, Karnataka on Sunday.



The third and final test in a series was conducted at 7.10 a.m.

“Following the success of RLV LEX-01 and LEX-02 missions, RLV LEX-03 re-demonstrated the autonomous landing capability of the RLV under more challenging release conditions and more severe wind conditions,” the ISRO said.

On Sunday morning, Pushpak, the space agency’s winged vehicle, was released from an Indian Air Force Chinook helicopter at an altitude of 4.5 km.

The ISRO said that from the release point 4.5 km away, Pushpak autonomously executed cross-range correction manoeuvres, approached the runway, and performed a precise horizontal landing at the runway centre line.

“Due to this vehicle’s low lift-to-drag ratio aerodynamic configuration, the landing velocity exceeded 320 kmph, compared with 260 kmph for a commercial aircraft and 280 kmph for a typical fighter aircraft. After touchdown, the vehicle velocity was reduced to nearly 100 kmph using its brake parachute, after which the landing gear brakes were employed for deceleration. During this ground roll phase, Pushpak utilises its rudder and nose-wheel steering system to autonomously maintain a stable and precise ground roll along the runway,” it said.

The space agency said this mission simulated the approach and landing interface and high-speed landing conditions for a vehicle returning from space, reaffirming its expertise in acquiring the most critical technologies required for the development of an RLV.

“Through this mission, the advanced guidance algorithm catering to longitudinal and lateral plane error corrections, which is essential for the future Orbital Re-entry Mission has been validated,” it said.

The ISRO said that the LEX used sensors such as an inertial sensor, radar altimeter, flush air data system and NavIC. Notably, the LEX-03 mission reused the winged body and flight systems from the LEX-02 mission without any modification, demonstrating the robustness of the ISRO’s capability of design to reuse flight systems.

ISRO Chairman S. Somanath congratulated the team for its efforts in maintaining the success streak in such missions. S. Unnikrishnan Nair, Director, Vikram Sarabhai Space Centre, emphasised that this “consistent success boosts ISRO’s confidence in the critical technologies essential for future orbital re-entry missions”.

### CHANDRAYAAN-4 PARTS TO BE SENT IN 2 LAUNCHES, ASSEMBLED IN SPACE: ISRO CHIEF

Chandrayaan-4, which is supposed to bring back samples from the Moon, would not be launched at one go and instead, different parts of the spacecraft would be sent into orbit through two launches, and the spacecraft would be assembled in space before proceeding to the Moon, ISRO Chairman S Somanath said Wednesday.

— Docking of spacecraft modules on the return journey from Moon is a fairly routine manoeuvre. A part of the spacecraft detaches from the main spacecraft and makes a landing while the other part remains in the Moon orbit. When the landing part leaves the Moon’s surface, it docks and links up with the orbiting part, becoming one unit again.

— ISRO has so far not had any need to carry out a docking operation in space, and Spadex (Space Docking Experiment) mission would be its first opportunity to demonstrate this capability.

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— The Vision 2047 has envisioned India building its own space station by 2035 and sending humans to the Moon by 2040. India's space station, named Bharatiya Antariksh Station (BAS), would also be set up by carrying different parts of the infrastructure in multiple launches.

**For Your Information:**

— ISRO is in discussion with NASA and the European Space Agency to build a common interface between the Indian space station and that of these countries. This interface will make joint work possible, said Somanath, indicating the possibility of collaborating with these countries for the space station.

## HOW WELL IS INDIA TAPPING ITS ROOFTOP SOLAR POTENTIAL?

**The story so far:**

India's installed rooftop solar (RTS) capacity increased by 2.99 GW in 2023-2024, the highest growth in a year. As of March 31, the total installed RTS capacity in India was 11.87 GW, according to the Ministry of New and Renewable Energy. To meet rising energy demand, India needs to double down on its efforts to expand its RTS potential.

**What is the RTS programme?**

India launched the Jawaharlal Nehru National Solar Mission in January 2010. Its main objective was to produce 20 GW of solar energy (including RTS) in three phases: 2010-2013, 2013-2017, and 2017-2022. In 2015, the government revised this target to 100 GW by 2022, including a 40-GW RTS component, with yearly targets for each State and Union Territory. In December 2022, India had an installed RTS capacity of 7.5 GW and extended the deadline for the 40-GW target to 2026. While financial incentives, technological advances, awareness, and training have improved RTS installation numbers, there is a long way to go. India's overall RTS potential is approximately 796 GW. To meet India's target of installing 500 GW of renewable energy capacity, with a solar component of 280 GW, by 2030, RTS alone needs to contribute about 100 GW by 2030.

**How are States faring?**

As of March 31, 2024, the RTS capacities of Gujarat, Maharashtra, and Rajasthan had taken big strides while some others were behind the curve. An installed RTS capacity of 3,456 MW in Gujarat is the result of its government's quick approval process, a large number of RTS installers, and high consumer awareness. Similarly, Maharashtra, with an RTS capacity of 2,072 MW, is one of the top-performing States owing to its robust solar policies and conducive regulatory environment.

Thanks to its land area and high solar irradiance, Rajasthan boasts of the highest RTS potential in the country: 1,154 MW. Its efforts to streamline approvals, provide financial incentives, and promote RTS through public-private partnerships have spurred this growth.

Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and Karnataka, with respective installed capacities of 675, 599, and 594 MW, have also performed reasonably well. However, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and Jharkhand, among others, are yet to fully explore their RTS potential. Their challenges include bureaucratic hurdles, inadequate infrastructure, and lack of public awareness.

The 'Pradhan Mantri Surya Ghar Muft Bijli Yojana' is a flagship initiative to fit one crore households with RTS systems and help them get up to 300 units of free electricity every month. An average system size of 2 kW for targeted households will result in a total RTS capacity addition

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of 20 GW. The scheme has a financial outlay of ₹75,021 crore, which includes financial assistance for consumers (₹65,700 crore), incentives for distribution companies (₹4,950 crore), incentives for local bodies and model solar villages in each district, payment security mechanisms, capacity building (₹657 crore), and awareness and outreach (₹657 crore). The scheme also encourages the adoption of advanced solar technologies, energy storage solutions, and smart grid infrastructure.

#### How can we ensure RTS growth?

Creating awareness is key to getting consumers on board. In addition, RTS needs to be economically viable for households. While government subsidies are helping, multiple low-cost financing options are required. The number of banks and non-bank financial companies providing RTS loans has increased of late. Access to low-cost RTS loans should be as easy as getting a bike or car loan.

Promoting R&D in solar technology, energy storage solutions, and smart-grid infrastructure can lower costs, improve performance, and enhance the reliability of RTS systems. Investments in training programmes, (like the 'Suryamitra' solar PV technician programme initiated in 2015), vocational courses, and skill development initiatives will help build a skilled workforce.

As the scheme's implementation enters full swing, net-metering regulations, grid-integration standards, and building codes should be reviewed and updated to help address emerging challenges and facilitate smooth implementation.

### BROKEN PAVEMENTS, LACK OF SAFETY: A BIG REASON WHY INDIANS STRUGGLE TO STAY FIT

Alarm bells about the growing burden of non-communicable diseases in India have been ringing for a few years now. Study after study has found that obesity and lifestyle-related illnesses are claiming more lives than ever, and are no longer solely prevalent in urban areas. They have begun to affect rural populations as well. Bringing the big picture of ill-health into sharper focus is new data published in the Lancet Global Health this week, according to which an alarming 57 per cent women and 42 per cent men in India fail to meet the World Health Organisation's guidelines for sufficient physical activity. Should this trend remain unchecked, it is estimated that by 2030, about 60 per cent of India's adult population would be at risk of diseases like cardiovascular ailments, diabetes and even dementia and cancer of the breast and colon.

While there is certainly a greater awareness of the link between exercise and other physical activities and good health, a combination of sociocultural, economic and physical infrastructure-related factors is responsible for the sedentary lifestyle of a large number of Indians. Research on the impact of social and cultural attitudes is limited, but the handful of region- and city-specific surveys that do exist indicate that these form a significant barrier, especially for women and girls. A 2018 study of physical activity among adolescents in New Delhi found that social censure was a key obstacle. Another study from 2015, looking at barriers to exercise among women in Thiruvananthapuram, found the prevalence of the belief that household chores alone can count as sufficient physical activity. That a mindset change is needed has been recognised by, among others, the Union government which, in 2019, initiated the Fit India movement to "promote fitness as easy, fun and free" and "spread awareness...through fitness-focused campaigns".

The limitations of this approach, however, are evident in its failure to recognise the most formidable hurdle facing Indians who want to be fitter — the lack of a conducive, physical



environment in which to be more active. While gyms and fitness centres are not affordable options for a vast majority of Indians, the simple activity of walking too is not without obstacles, with broken pavements, open sewers, erratic traffic and lack of safety discouraging many. Addressing this, as the head of the WHO Unit for Physical Activity has pointed out, requires “a whole-of-society” approach, one which sees open spaces, pothole-free roads and pavements, safety and low pollution levels as crucial to the goal of a fitter citizenry. More than words of encouragement, what this calls for is policy intervention and investment in building the right environment and infrastructure.

## THE FERTILITY MYTH

The latest National Family Health Survey, 2019–20 (NFHS-5), conducted by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MoHFW), shows that many states have already attained a replacement level of fertility, and there is a steady decline in India’s total fertility rates (TFR).

— According to the NHFS-5 data, the TFR in India is 2.0 children per woman up until 2021, which is slightly lower than the replacement level of fertility of 2.1 children per woman.

— The Economic Survey 2018-19 and the Sample Registration System (SRS) data from 2017 also had similar findings about the deceleration of India’s population growth.

— Another recent analysis taking into account the drop in fertility and the rate of decline in population growth found that the drop in Hindu fertility was five per cent less than the drop in Muslim fertility in the last two decades, where Muslim population growth declined at a faster rate than that of Hindus. This analysis suggested that there may be “absolute convergence” in Hindu-Muslim fertility rates by 2030.

— Data from the NFHS shows that the fertility rates of all religious communities have declined over the past two decades. The sharply decreasing family size of Muslims, particularly, is evident since the fertility rate for Muslims has decreased by almost half from 4.4 in 1992–93 to 2.4 in 2020–21.

— The Population Foundation of India observed that education, healthcare, and socio-economic development significantly impact fertility rates, with states like Kerala and Tamil Nadu showing lower TFRs than Bihar, which had less access to these resources.

### **For Your Information:**

— The NFHS 5 data also shows that the higher the level of the mother’s education, the lower the fertility. Across religious groups, Muslims are the most disadvantaged economically, with poorer education and health levels — evident from their lower enrollment levels in higher education.

— The Sachar Committee Report in 2006 emphasised such socio-economic disparity among Muslims. Thus, the population growth debate should focus on investments in education, economic development, livelihoods, food, nutrition, healthcare, sexual and reproductive health services, and gender justice.

— The rhetoric about the fertility of the Muslim community directly affects Muslim women’s right to have or not have children. This not only violates Muslim women’s right to life and dignity but also affects their subjectivities.



## ARE YOUR PREGNANCY COSTS BEING COVERED BY INSURANCE? HERE'S ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW BEFORE PLANNING A BABY

If your insurance company agent is trying to convince you that the policy would cover 30 days pre-delivery and 60 days post-delivery costs, hospitalisation charges and delivery expenses, including pre and post-natal services, you would be mistaken. The reality is that the reimbursement may not be enough to take care of delivery, pregnancy-related complications or a medical condition that the newborn might have. Even policies that advertise themselves as providing a full maternity shield fall short of providing any meaningful coverage. That's because they come with sub-limits — monetary caps on certain covers as a percentage of the total sum insured — that are not enough to take care of bills in big cities like Mumbai or Delhi. Most insurance policies fall short of the very basics and cover just two births in a lifetime. They do not include consultation fee and diagnostic tests, provide for in-vitro fertilisation (IVF) procedures or cover the cost of supplements like vitamins and tonics either. Most importantly, they do not have anything for pregnant women over the age of 45.

### KNOW YOUR WAITING PERIOD

If you're planning on starting or extending your family, buy your maternity insurance well in time. There is a 24-month waiting period for hospital admissions. Since babies can also come early, factor in premature births as well. "The waiting period can range from nine months to six years. The standard now, however, is about two years. Maternity benefits rarely come in-built and are given as add-ons," says Tejas Jain, founder of BimaKavach, a platform that helps in choosing insurance policies. You cannot wait for pregnancy to secure your cover because policies consider it as a pre-existing condition and disqualify you from claiming benefits within the waiting period.

### WHAT ARE EXCLUSIONS?

Most general health insurance policies exclude maternity care, except ectopic pregnancy, a high-risk condition when the fertilised egg attaches itself outside the uterus, most often the fallopian tube that carries the egg to the uterus. A policy by a big insurance provider covers the expenses of a delivery as well as the pre- and post-natal check-ups only up to limits mentioned, but "subject to a maximum of two deliveries in the entire lifetime of the insured person." Points to keep in mind while getting a maternity insurance scheme Points to keep in mind while getting a maternity insurance scheme The sub-limit is meagre. The policies pay up to Rs 20,000 for C-section deliveries for a Rs 5 lakh coverage, Rs 40,000 for a Rs 7.5 lakh coverage and a maximum of Rs 1 lakh on policies for Rs 50 lakh and above. The amount covered in the most commonly purchased policies of Rs 5 lakh and Rs 7.5 lakh is unlikely to cover expenses at nursing homes in big cities like Delhi and Mumbai. At bigger hospitals, even the sum of Rs 1 lakh may not be sufficient for mothers who need multidisciplinary care. "The cost of maternity care in cities like Delhi and Mumbai can range anywhere between Rs 30,000 and Rs 40,000 for an uncomplicated delivery in small hospitals and nursing homes. In bigger, tertiary care hospitals, the cost is likely to be upwards of Rs 1 lakh, more if the person opts for suites and additional services. The cost also goes up in cases where the mother might have other conditions for which a multi-disciplinary team of doctors is required," says Dr Suri.

### WHAT ABOUT IVF AND ADD-ONS?

Although infertility is a growing concern, existing insurance does not cover assisted reproductive technologies such as IVF and surrogacy. Harvesting and storing stem cells are not covered either.



There is a provision for add-ons for a more comprehensive care but again, the limits offered are very little. One such add-on that covers all antenatal check ups, delivery, and even assisted reproductive technologies provides an annual maternity cover for Rs 5,000 a year for a Rs 5 lakh policy, Rs 12,000 for a Rs 10 lakh policy and Rs 25,000 for a Rs 50 lakh plus policy. Any sum that is not used gets added to the next year's kitty. This is a good thing because for the cheapest variants, the policy has a waiting period of four years for maternity benefits. Some add-ons provide a Rs 10,000 support for tests conducted on a child at the time of adoption, yet others offer a discount of up to Rs 25,000 on maternity packages available at a select network of hospitals. While some websites advertise stem cell preservation, there's no clause specifying it.

#### **IS THERE A COVER FOR COMPLICATIONS?**

Since policies do not cover maternity care, they do not cover complications arising from it, except ectopic pregnancies. "A complication leads to longer hospital stays and an increased expenditure by way of doctor fees and medicines — all of which are necessary clinically. Yet these are kept out of the purview of insurance," says Dr Suri. In fact, she finds maternity policies offered by large corporate houses and PSU companies providing the most holistic coverage. These are likely to cover termination of pregnancy in cases where the foetus has certain genetic defects or the mother is at risk.

#### **IS YOUR NEWBORN PROTECTED?**

Most policies offer coverage to newborns only 90 days after birth. This means there is no protection during the crucial period when a newborn with health issues might need to be admitted to the neo-natal intensive care unit (NICU). Parents would need to pay nearly Rs 10,000 a day for a NICU bed in addition to medicines, consumables and doctors. A few policies include newborn benefits from Day 1. However, there are sub-limits up to 25 per cent of the sum insured. That means you get only about Rs 1.25 lakh for a Rs 5 lakh policy.

Clearly, there are gaps that need to be addressed and worked on, considering maternal and child health are foundational benchmarks of a nation's public health status. "Maternity care was never covered by insurance policies until about a few years ago because maternity is not considered a disease. It was only when private companies entered the market that a need for maternity coverage was felt and such add-ons were introduced," says Jain. However, with couples investing big amounts, we might see companies in a race to tempt them with special packages.

### **PROLONGED EXPOSURE TO COAL MINING CAUSES RESPIRATORY, SKIN DISEASES IN WORKERS: STUDY**

Prolonged exposure to pollutants from coal mining has resulted in widespread respiratory and skin diseases among mine workers and other inhabitants of six districts in India where coal extraction is a major occupation, says a survey of 1,200 households published by the National Foundation for India, an organisation that works on social justice issues. The six districts are Koriya and Raigarh (Chhattisgarh), Dhanbad and Ramgarh (Jharkhand), and Angul and Jajpur (Odisha).

#### **Medical expenses**

At least 65% of the participants interviewed reported health issues such as chronic bronchitis, asthma, and skin ailments such as eczema, dermatitis and fungal infections. On an average, a household in these districts spent ₹300 to ₹1,000 on monthly medical bills.

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The average annual hospitalisation expenses in Dhanbad were the highest at ₹28,461 for a household. The survey, on an average, spanned 18 to 20 villages in each district.

People living closer to the mines are relatively more vulnerable. Dhanbad and Ramgarh, which have more people living in such zones, have higher incidence of lung and breathing-related diseases and skin infections.

## TRANSITION AWAY FROM COAL POWER POSES GRAVE CHALLENGES TO MARGINALISED GROUPS: REPORT

From working irregular jobs with poor wages to facing grave health conditions, people from the Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward Classes are likely to bear the maximum impact as India transitions away from coal, a new report by the National Foundation of India (NFI) has said.

— It was found that 81.5 per cent among those surveyed belonged to the marginalised SC, ST, and OBC communities and the rest were from the general category.

— The survey found lower levels of income and educational attainment among SC and ST groups compared to OBC groups, and their higher representation in low-paying, irregular jobs in coal-dumping yards, coal sidings, coal loading, coal transport, coal washeries and other informal work.

— This disparity, the report said, indicated the challenges that marginalised groups will face as India gradually phases down coal use, resulting in significant job losses and economic downturns in coal-dependent regions. This will not only impact coal miners and workers directly but also the broader local economy.

— The survey-based study found a clear correlation between caste and educational attainment. Households with primary education or no education were more prominent among SCs, STs and OBCs.

“Dhanbad (Jharkhand) and Koriya (Chhattisgarh) are solely reliant on coal production, and reported lower incomes than the more diversified industrial districts like Angul (Odisha),” she said in a press statement.

### **Renewable energy**

While India has committed to source nearly 500 GW of electricity — nearly half its projected installed capacity for 2030 — from renewable energy sources, coal is expected to be the mainstay of power generation in India for decades.

Nearly half of India’s installed power generation capacity, or about 205 GW, are coal-powered thermal plants.

Change, however, is in the air as renewable energy accounted for 71.5% of the record 13.6 GW power generation capacity added by India for the first time in the January-March quarter this year, while coal’s share, including lignite, of the total power capacity dropped below 50% for the first time since the 1960s.



**For Your Information:**

— The staggering levels of power demand have become a formidable challenge for India. As a result, it has doubled down on its coal production. It spiked from 778 million tons in 2021-22 to 893 million tons in 2022-23, a 14% growth, according to the coal ministry. India has also set a target of 1.31 billion tonnes of coal production for 2024-25 and aims to increase it to 1.5 billion tons by 2030.

**INDIA'S LARGEST LEOPARD SAFARI OPENS AT BANNERGHATTA**

South India's first and the country's largest leopard safari was inaugurated by Karnataka Environment Minister Eshwar Khandre on Wednesday at the Bannerghatta Biological Park.

As per Central Zoo Authority guidelines for safaris, an area of 20 hectares has been demarcated and fenced for the safari. Eight leopards have been released for the safari in the open forest area. According to park officials, Bannerghatta is home to a good population of free ranging leopards (*Panthera pardus*), and highlighting these predators is vital.

The facility has been created at a cost of ₹4.5 crore. The leopard safari area is made up of undulating terrain with natural rocky outcrops and semi-deciduous forest. This whole area is covered with a vertical chain-link mesh which is 4.5 metres high, and MS sheets have been placed at a 30 degree inclined angle of 1.5 metres.

The officials added that owing to increasing human-animal conflict in recent times, the park receives many leopard cubs rescued across the Karnataka. "These cubs will be raised and shifted to the leopard safari to help visitors learn about these big cats, the reasons for the growing human-animal conflicts, and the ways to protect the animals," said the officials.

The officials added that four acres within the safari area have been separated, using a solar fence, to help the animals acclimatise to their new environment.

**ANTELOPE-LIKE MAMMAL FROM BHUTAN RECORDED AT LOWEST ELEVATION IN WESTERN ASSAM**

A team of scientists recorded a lone mainland serow (*Capricornis sumatraensis thar*) at 96 metres above the mean sea level at the Raimona National Park in western Assam. Also, the elusive animal has been found for the first time within a radius of 1 km from a human habitation.

The finding with photographic proof was published as a scientific paper in the latest issue of the Journal of Threatened Taxa.

According to the International Union for Conservation of Nature, the mainland serow inhabits areas at altitudes of 200 metres to 3,000 metres. Its habitat is across the border in the Phibsoo Wildlife Sanctuary and the Royal Manas National Park in Bhutan.

**GI TAG FOR DODOL: MOVING BEYOND THE AUTHENTICITY DEBATE**

Dodol, with its rich, caramelly sweetness, may not be as well-known outside Goa as its multi-layered distant cousin Bebinca, but that may just change with the state government's application to get the dessert a Geographical Indication (GI) tag. The All Goa Bakers and Confectioners Association, which has filed the application, hopes that the GI tag will help standardise the recipe

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and technique for preparing Dodol, safeguard its cultural identity as a “unique” dish of Goa and ensure its “authenticity”. This is certainly a worthwhile goal from the perspective of those in the business of making and selling the sweet, but it also brings up questions about what terms like “authenticity” and “cultural identity” mean when it comes to something as migratory and adaptable as food.

The idea of GI, in the original European sense, is connected to the idea of “terroir” — a term most often used in the context of wine, but which broadly means that a food grown or developed in a particular region draws its unique flavour and texture from the natural environment (soil, water, climate) of its origin. The GI lens thus becomes a helpful way of tracing the provenance of certain kinds of comestibles, like wine and cheese. But what this approach, with its narrow focus on the idea of “origin”, often misses is that food, like language, grows richer at the intersections where different cultures meet, whether now or in the past.

Take Dodol: The sweet — even the word “Dodol” itself — can be traced all along the route from South to Southeast Asia, popping up in India, Sri Lanka, Malaysia and Indonesia. Who took it where? How? One food, in other words, has so much to say about the currents of history and the people, words and food that travelled on them. Food as a product is served well by things like GI tags, but food as culture needs a wider lens.

#### SRINAGAR GETS TAG OF ‘WORLD CRAFT CITY’, FOURTH FROM COUNTRY

Srinagar has become the fourth Indian city to be recognised as a ‘World Craft City’ by the World Craft Council (WCC), three years after it was designated as part of the UNESCO Creative City Network (UCCN) for crafts and folk arts.

“Heartiest congratulations to Srinagar for being recognised as a World Craft City by the World Crafts council,” J&K’s L-G Manoj Sinha posted on X. “This prestigious honour celebrates the rich heritage, craftsmanship and vibrant culture of our beloved Srinagar.”

Jaipur, Malappuram and Mysore are the other Indian cities that have previously been recognised as World Craft Cities.

“We have been an international craft destination for a long time..., but our craft industry has been on the back burner for the last three decades,” Director of Handicrafts and Handlooms Mahmood Ahmad Shah told The Indian Express. “After this, we can again promote Srinagar as a craft destination,” he said.

In April this year, a three-member independent panel of craft specialists of the World Craft Council visited Srinagar.

The J&K administration had applied for the recognition of Srinagar as World Craft City in 2021 together with recognition as UNESCO Creative Cities Network.

As of now, at least 10 different forms of craftsmanship survive in Srinagar and its suburbs, including papier-mâché, walnut wood carving, carpets, Sozni embroidery and Pashmina and Kani shawls.





## BUSINESS & ECONOMICS

### INDIA ACHIEVES 'OUTSTANDING OUTCOME' IN FATF EVALUATION

The Mutual Evaluation Report of India, which was adopted at the FATF plenary held in Singapore from June 26 to 28, places India in the “regular follow-up” category, a distinction shared by only four other G-20 countries.

“This marks a significant milestone in the nation’s efforts to combat money laundering (ML) and terrorist financing (TF),” read a Press Information Bureau release.

In a statement, the FATF said the plenary concluded that India had reached a high level of technical compliance with its requirements. The country’s anti-money laundering (AML), countering the financing of terrorism (CFT), and counter-proliferation financing (CPF) regime was achieving good results, including international cooperation, access to basic and beneficial ownership information, use of financial intelligence, and depriving criminals of their assets.

However, the FATF observed that improvements were needed to strengthen the supervision and implementation of preventive measures in some non-financial sectors. “India also needs to address delays relating to concluding ML and TF prosecutions, and to ensure that CFT measures aimed at preventing the non-profit sector from being abused for TF are implemented in line with the risk-based approach, including by conducting outreach to NPOs [Non-Profit Organisations] on their TF risks,” it said.

Among other things, the FATF has recognised the efforts made by India on the issue of mitigating the risks arising from ML/TF, including the laundering of proceeds from corruption, fraud, and organised crime, and the effective measures implemented by India to transition from a cash-based to a digital economy to reduce ML/TF risks.

“This recognition is a testament to the rigorous measures implemented over the last 10 years to safeguard the financial system from ML/TF threats,” the government said.

### A FRESH START

The Goods and Services Tax (GST) Council was convened last week for the first time in nearly nine months. With 11 new State Ministers on board and a recalibrated NDA government at the Centre, the Council began afresh with a loaded agenda of clarifications, tweaks, forbearances, and other procedural changes, based on industry feedback and vetted by officials, that awaited its nod. Acknowledging that it could not conclude deliberations on all that had accumulated on its plate, the Council has resolved to meet again in August to take up the rest of the items. Yet, it is quite creditable that the Council could, over an afternoon preceded by Union Budget consultations with States, arrive at a consensus on a flurry of issues aimed at easing the lot of taxpayers, reducing litigation, and even providing tax relief on some items. To help students, hostel accommodation costing up to ₹20,000 a month has been exempted from GST altogether, along with railway services availed by passengers. A uniform 12% rate has been approved for packing cartons, milk cans, and solar cookers, doing away with confusing classification differences based on material or technologies.

Apart from several industry-specific measures, a few of which will kick in with retrospective effect, the Council also opted to waive interest and penalty on tax dues for the first three years of



GST, provided they are paid by March 2025. Moreover, it lowered the stipulated pre-deposits for filing appeals, including those that will be filed with the upcoming GST Appellate Tribunals, and approved a new form for taxpayers to correct errors or oversights in previous returns. Beyond nitty-gritties, the Council also signed off on ending the anti-profiteering clause that required firms to pass on any tax cut gains to customers, and mandating biometric-based Aadhaar authentication for all GST registrations in a phased manner across India. The former will quell a difficult-to-implement industry irritant, and one hopes the latter will effectively ease the registration process that some say has become cumbersome in recent times, while curbing fraud perpetrated through fake invoicing. The ground-level impact of these moves may depend on the fine print that may follow, but the intent to simplify and declutter the seven-year old indirect tax regime is clear. It is refreshing that the Council also plans to take stock of the 2021 plan to rationalise the multiple-rate GST structure, that has been in cold storage for a while, when it meets next. The apex GST body must not only revive and expedite GST rate reforms but also incorporate a road map to bring excluded items such as petroleum and electricity into the GST net while rejigging tax rates.

### DOES INDIA REALLY NEED STOCKING LIMITS ON WHEAT?

If the Union Agriculture Ministry is to be believed, Indian farmers have harvested an all-time-high wheat crop of 112.93 million tonnes (mt) this time, surpassing last year's record output of 110.55 mt. Against this background, the Narendra Modi government's decision to impose stock limits on the cereal with effect from June 24 and applicable until March 31, 2025, "in order to manage the overall food security and to prevent hoarding and unscrupulous speculation" is inexplicable. Wholesalers and big-chain retailers will not be allowed to hold more than 3,000 tonnes, with the corresponding stock limits set at 10 tonnes for individual stores and at 70 per cent of the installed milling capacity for processors. All these entities have been directed to declare their stock position and update them regularly on the department of food and public distribution's portal created for this purpose.

The stocking limits on wheat were first clamped in June last year, with these fixed at 2,000 tonnes (for wholesalers/big retailers), 10 tonnes (single outlets) and 75 per cent of installed capacity (processors), before being progressively lowered to 500 tonnes, 5 tonnes and 60 per cent respectively by February 2024. The limits were lifted from April 1 with the commencement of the new harvesting season, though the private trade was informally told to "avoid" buying any wheat brought by farmers at least for a month. That was meant to enable the government to shore up its own stocks. But now, with the marketing of the harvested crop completed, the stock controls have been formally reinstated. The reasons are probably three-fold. The first is retail cereal inflation ruling at 8.69 per cent year-on-year in May. The second is wheat stocks in government godowns, which, at 29.91 mt on June 1, were the lowest in 16 years for this date. The third is a not-so-great monsoon so far, which going forward can impact the production of rice as well, notwithstanding its reasonable stocks position for now.

The question to ask then is: How do stocking controls, along with restrictions and even bans on exports of non-basmati rice and wheat respectively, reconcile with official estimates of back-to-back record cereals output? The Modi government cannot be projecting one thing through the agriculture ministry (bumper crops) and another through the ministry of consumer affairs, food and public distribution (curbing hoarding). Why should cereal inflation be elevated, in spite of production touching new highs, and curbs on exports and stock limits placed on the domestic trade? If the government feels that the supply situation isn't as comfortable as its production



estimates suggest, it should simply scrap the 40 per cent duty on wheat imports. With elections over and farmers already selling their produce, there isn't any political reason not to do so.

#### WHY GOVT MUST CREATE A BUFFER STOCK OF ALL MAIN FOOD ITEMS

Open market sales of wheat and chana have helped prevent runaway cereal and pulses inflation. Extending buffer stocks to other staples makes sense amid increasing climate-driven supply shocks and price volatility.

Inflation, based on the official consumer price index (CPI), stood at 8.69 % for cereals in May, and almost twice as much (17.14%) for pulses.

These rates would probably have been higher, but for the sales from buffer stocks, especially of wheat and chana (chickpea), built by government agencies during surplus production years.

Take wheat. In 2022-23 (April-March), 34.82 lakh tonnes (lt) of the cereal was offloaded from the Food Corporation of India's (FCI) stocks in the open market to boost supplies. Such sales, mainly to flour millers at market prices determined through e-auctions, rose to a record 100.88 lt in the following fiscal. That included 6.73 lt processed into flour and sold under the 'Bharat Atta' brand at a maximum retail price of Rs 27.5/kg.

The FCI's open market sale scheme brought down retail inflation in cereals and wheat, from their respective highs of 16.73% and 25.37% in February 2023 to 8.69% and 6.53% in May 2024. While not-so-good crops in the last three years had depleted wheat stocks in government warehouses from their peak of 603.56 lt on July 1, 2021 to 285.10 lt and 301.45 lt on the same date of 2022 and 2023, these were enough for the FCI's open market intervention.

#### How buffer in chana helped

Prices of pulses have been on fire, with retail inflation in double digits since June 2023.

According to the department of consumer affairs, the all-India modal (most-quoted) retail price of split chana dal currently stands at Rs 90 per kg, as against Rs 70 a year ago. Prices of tur/arhar (pigeon pea) have risen even more (Rs 120 to Rs 170), while urad (black gram) and moong (green gram) have seen a lesser rise (Rs 110 to Rs 120), and prices for masur (red lentil) have been flat (Rs 100/kg).

But things would have been worse had the National Agricultural Cooperative Marketing Federation of India (NAFED) not bought large quantities of the bumper 2021-22 and 2022-23 chana crops. These purchases, during April-June of 2022 and 2023 respectively (also the marketing season for wheat, mustard, masur and other rabi winter-spring crops), amounted to 25.56 lt and 23.53 lt. They were made at the government's declared minimum support price (MSP) of Rs 5,230 and Rs 5,335 per quintal for the two crop years, when chana was wholesaling at Rs 4,400-4,800 in the agricultural mandis of Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh.

In the current season, with open market prices Rs 6,000 or more, way above the MSP of Rs 5,440/quintal, NAFED could procure just over 43,000 tonnes of chana. However, it had stocks of 37.21 lt on July 1, 2023 accumulated from the last two years' procurement. These stocks proved useful in checking inflation in pulses, resulting from an El Niño-induced patchy monsoon and poor 2023-24 crop.



“Our procurement operations enabled chana farmers to reap the benefits of MSP when open market prices were low, and, more recently, insulate consumers from dal inflation,” S K Singh, additional managing director of NAFED, told The Indian Express.

Since July 2023, NAFED has sold 14.06 lt of chana through open market e-auctions, 16.09 lt as ‘Bharat Dal’ at Rs 60/kg, 2.91 lt as discounted supplies to state governments and 0.57 lt as allocation to the armed forces. In the process, its stocks have come down to 4.01 lt now.

### **The case for a buffer policy**

Overall CPI inflation, at 4.75% year-on-year in May, was the lowest in 12 months. It would have been lower had retail food inflation not stayed elevated at 8.69%.

The inherently volatility and unpredictability of food prices, exacerbated by climate change — fewer rainy days and extended dry spells, interspersed with intense precipitation, and also shorter winters and heat waves — has made it difficult for the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) to consider any monetary easing or cutting interest rates. The government, too, is forced to resort to undesirable measures such as restricting exports, or imposing produce stock limits on traders and processors.

One possible way out of the conundrum would be to build a buffer stock of all essential food items, by procuring these from farmers during years of surplus production, and offloading the same in times of crop failures to moderate market prices.

The MSP procurement by government agencies is confined to rice, wheat and a few pulses (chana, tur/arhar, moong and masur) and oilseeds (mustard, groundnut and copra). The latter procurement, unlike for rice and wheat, also happens only in some years.

There’s scope to not only expand procurement of pulses and oilseeds, but extend it to staple vegetables and even skimmed milk powder (SMP). The onion, potato and tomato procured can be stored in dehydrated/processed form such as paste, flakes and puree for sales to hotels, restaurants, canteens, and other institutional buyers. This would ensure that both households and bulk buyers do not compete to drive up prices during shortages.

SMP prices have crashed to about Rs 210 per kg, from Rs 315-320 levels during February-March 2023 that saw unprecedented milk shortages. This crash — forcing Maharashtra dairies to slash procurement prices for cow milk (containing 3.5% fat and 8.5% solids-not-fat) to Rs 27-28/litre, from Rs 37-38 — is an opportunity for the government to create a buffer stock of powder. It can be used for recombining into milk in the next scarcity cycle.

The fiscal cost of maintaining buffer stocks of essential food items may not be that much: the stocked commodities are not meant to be given out free and, instead, offloaded during scarcity/inflationary periods at near-market prices.

Buffer stocking can be an instrument for curbing excessive volatility in food prices, similar to the RBI’s foreign exchange reserves vis-à-vis the currency market. Increasing climate-driven price volatility — ultimately helping neither consumers nor producers — only strengthens the case for a food buffer policy.



## INDIAN GOVERNMENT BONDS IN JP MORGAN INDEX FROM JUNE 28: HOW MUCH FUNDS COULD FLOW INTO INDIA?

In September last year, JP Morgan had announced that it would include Indian Government Bonds (IGBs) to its emerging markets bond index from June 2024. The decision was taken after the 2023 index governance review, it had said.

“India will be included in the GBI-EM Global index suite and all relevant derivative benchmarks (including custom indices), starting June 28, 2024,” JP Morgan said. The inclusion of Indian bonds will be staggered into the GBI-EM Global Diversified Index (GBI-EM GD) over 10 months from June 28, 2024, through March 31, 2025, it said.

### **What would be India’s weight in the index?**

India is expected to reach the maximum weight of 10 per cent in the GBI-EM Global Diversified Index (GBI-EM GD). A higher weightage will prompt global investors to allocate more funds for investment in Indian debt. Analysts expect \$ 2-3 billion flows to India every month.

### **How many Indian Government Bonds are eligible for inclusion?**

JP Morgan said there are 23 IGBs that meet the index eligibility criteria, with a combined notional value of approximately Rs 27 lakh crore or \$330 billion.

Only IGBs designated under the Fully Accessible Route (FAR) are index-eligible. In March 2020, the RBI, in consultation with the government, introduced a separate channel, called the FAR, to enable non-residents to invest in specified Government of India dated securities.

As per the index inclusion criteria, eligible instruments are required to have notional outstanding above \$1 billion (equivalent) and at least 2.5 years remaining maturity, JP Morgan said. “At the start of the inclusion on June 28, 2024, only FAR-designated IGBs with a maturity date after December 31, 2026, will be assessed for eligibility,” it said.

Any new index-eligible FAR-designated IGBs issued during the phase-in period will also be included.

### **What amount of flows can come to India?**

According to estimates by some economists, India is likely to receive \$2 billion to \$2.5 billion every month during the 10-month period starting June 28. Overall, it is expected that \$20 billion to \$25 billion of flows would come into India due to the inclusion.

An HSBC report said IGBs have already seen inflows of \$10.4 billion since the inclusion announcement on September 21, 2023. A large part of inflows is yet to materialise and this is likely to be led by benchmark issues, it said. So far in 2024, foreign portfolio investors have purchased \$8.06 billion of Indian debt, according to National Securities Depository Ltd (NSDL) data.

### **What would be the impact of the bond inclusion?**

According to Madhavi Arora, Lead Economist, Emkay Global Financial Services, the move could lead to fresh active flows in the debt market, which remains underpenetrated on external financing.



It will not only result in lower risk premia, but will also help India to finance its fiscal and current account deficit (CAD), as well as enhance the liquidity and ownership base of government securities (G-secs; debt instruments issued by the central government to meet its fiscal needs), Arora said in a report in September last year.

The country's current account balance recorded a surplus of \$5.7 billion, or 0.6 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP) in the January-March 2024 quarter, as against a current account deficit of \$1.3 billion, or 0.2 per cent of GDP, in the year-ago quarter.

Global rating agency Fitch Ratings said that the inclusion of certain Indian sovereign bonds in key emerging-market bond indexes managed by JP Morgan will support a diversification of the investor base for Indian government securities.

It could help lower funding costs slightly, and support further development of domestic capital markets, but direct positive effects on India's credit profile will be marginal in the near term.

#### **Will higher inflows be a concern for RBI?**

While higher inflows will boost the rupee, inflation is likely to come under pressure. When the RBI mops up dollars from the market, it will have to release an equivalent amount in rupees, putting pressure on inflation.

RBI Governor Shaktikanta Das has said the central bank has several instruments to manage surges in flows on account of bond inclusion. "We have managed it in the past. We will manage it this time also," Das told reporters earlier this month.

#### **Are Indian government bonds going to be included in any other global index?**

After JP Morgan, Bloomberg announced this March that Indian government bonds will be included in the Bloomberg Emerging Market (EM) Local Currency Government Index and related indices from January 31, 2025.

Indian FAR bonds will be included in the Bloomberg EM Local Currency Government indices with an initial weight of 10 per cent of their full market value on January 31, 2025, Bloomberg said.

The indices in the scope for inclusion include the Bloomberg EM Local Currency Government Index, the Bloomberg EM Local Currency Government Index 10% Country Capped Index, and all related sub-indices.

### **WHY THE RECENT SPECTRUM AUCTIONS SAW A MUTED RESPONSE FROM TELECOM COMPANIES**

The first spectrum auction under the newly formed Central government saw a feeble response from telecom companies, fetching just over Rs 11,340 crore to the exchequer — a mere 12 per cent of the government's reserve price of Rs 96,238 crore.

This was the third-lowest mop-up since competitive bidding for spectrum began in 2010, but came on the back of the country's biggest-ever 5G auction process in 2022.

All the available spectrum in 800 MHz, 900 MHz, 1800 MHz, 2100 MHz, 2300 MHz, 2500 MHz, 3300 MHz, and 26 GHz bands were put to auction. However, the auction only saw activity in the 900MHz, 1800MHz, 2100MHz and 2500 MHz bands.



### **Why are spectrum auctions held?**

Devices like mobile phones and wireline telephones require signals to connect. These signals are carried on airwaves, which must be sent at designated frequencies to avoid interference.

In India, the Central government owns all airwaves. To expand the existing telecom services and maintain their continuity, the government routinely conducts auctions for airwaves through the Department of Telecommunications under the Ministry of Communications. These airwaves are called spectrums, which are subdivided into bands having varying frequencies. All these airwaves are sold to telecom companies or telcos for a certain period, generally around 20 years.

### **Who bought what this time**

The auction started on June 25 at 10 am and concluded on June 26 at 11:45 am after seven rounds. No bidding took place in the 800MHz, 2300MHz, 3300MHz and 26GHz bands. Of the 533.6 MHz airwaves up for grabs, 141.4 MHz or 26.5 per cent was bought by telecom companies.

Bharti Airtel was the biggest spender, bidding for airwaves worth Rs 6,856 crore. The company picked up spectrum in the 900 MHz, 1800 MHz, and 2100 MHz bands.

Vodafone Idea came in at the second spot, picking up airwaves in the 900 MHz, 1800 MHz, and 2500 MHz bands worth Rs 3,510.4 crore. Reliance Jio had a very muted auction, as the telco only bought spectrum worth Rs 973.6 crore in the 1800 MHz band. This auction signals two key things.

First, telecom companies had acquired a large amount of spectrum during the previous auction in 2022 and the recent bidding was a way to ensure expansion and continuity of services.

Secondly, it shows that 5G monetisation has been an issue for telcos, given that the high-speed technology is yet to show a promising end-user use case. Therefore, they are being cautious to not acquire a large quantity of such spectrum until they figure out a monetisation path.

### **How the 2022 auction marks a contrast**

In August 2022, India saw its biggest-ever spectrum auction, receiving bids upwards of Rs 1.5 lakh crore coming in after seven days of bidding spread over 40 rounds.

At the time, Reliance Jio emerged as the largest spender in the 5G spectrum auction, acquiring almost half of all the airwaves sold for more than Rs 88,000 crore. It was also the only one (among the four applicants Jio, Airtel, Vodafone Idea and Adani Group) to have acquired spectrum in the premium 700 MHz band. The band is best suited for coverage in high-density areas and is ideal for data networks and consumer-led services.

A total of 51.2 GHz of spectrum was sold of the 72 GHz up for grabs — close to 71%. Bharti Airtel had shelled out Rs 43,084 crore, whereas Vodafone Idea spent Rs 18,799 crore.

The auction also saw bidding by Adani Data Networks Limited, a subsidiary of the Adani Group that had applied to participate in the auction amid a chorus of disruption in the telecom sector. It acquired spectrum only in the 26 GHz band and spent Rs 212 crore.

The company had earlier clarified that it was participating in the race only to offer solutions to private networks for business verticals like airports, ports, power generation and logistics, and not to enter the consumer mobility space.



## POWER MARKETS IN INDIA: THEIR WORKING, ADVANTAGES, AND THE ROAD AHEAD

To meet peak power demand during the unusually hot summer, the government has allowed the trading of surplus electricity generated from “linkage coal” in the country’s power markets.

Coal linkages are typically made by the government to thermal units against long-term power purchase agreements (PPAs) with distribution companies (discoms). Power markets offer a flexible, reliable, and transparent alternative to PPAs, enabling generators to respond swiftly to demand fluctuations and sell surplus power at market-determined prices.

### PPAs and power markets

To sell their electricity, generation units in India have traditionally used long-term PPAs that typically span 25 years. These agreements commit generators to supply power to buyers, usually public utilities, at fixed rates. PPAs are gradually losing favour due to their inflexibility in adapting to dynamic market conditions, and their tendency to lock in significant generating capacity.

Power markets, on the other hand, allow generators to respond to short-term demand fluctuations and sell surplus power independently of PPAs at market prices. The flexibility is particularly beneficial for generators of renewable energy, who may produce excess power during the off-peak hours. Instead of curtailing generation, the surplus can be traded on the market.

Price-based demand response involves multiple parties, and typically results in greater reliability and transparency in trading compared to bilateral contracts. This market-driven approach enables generators to optimise their output and revenue, while helping utilities meet variable power demands more efficiently.

### How power markets work

Buyers make bids for the purchase of electricity, and sellers make offers. The market clearing price — the price at which electricity is traded — is determined by the equilibrium of demand bids and supply offers.

Power markets are categorised on the basis of electricity delivery timing and duration of contract.

The spot market includes the real-time market (RTM) for near-immediate delivery and the intraday market for same-day trades hours before delivery. Contract markets, on the other hand, facilitate longer-term trades.

The day-ahead market (DAM) deals with closed auctions for 15-minute time blocks for the following day, while the term-ahead market (TAM) handles trades from 3 hours to 11 days in advance.

The renewable energy certificates (REC) mechanism allows utilities to meet renewable purchase obligations (RPOs) by buying RECs, each representing 1 MWh of renewable electricity. This system benefits states that lack sufficient renewable capacity, and enables them to purchase RECs for green energy generated elsewhere.

Utilities that exceed RPO targets can trade extra RECs to allow other utilities to meet their targets.





### Power exchanges in India

Power markets are hosted on a power exchange. Exchanges facilitate competitive pricing, improved resource allocation, and greater market liquidity in the power sector.

Power exchanges were first introduced in Europe in 1990-91, and they now operate in about 50 countries around the world. The Electricity Act of 2003 established the framework for exchange operations in India, and exchanges commenced in 2008.

The spot market was introduced in 2020, which further enhanced the flexibility and responsiveness of the power trading system.

India has three major power exchanges regulated by the Central Electricity Regulatory Commission (CERC), where generators, utilities, and large consumers trade electricity. The Indian Energy Exchange Ltd (IEX) dominates with more than 90% market share, followed by Power Exchange India Limited (PXIL) and Hindustan Power Exchange Ltd (HPX).

In FY 2023-24, IEX traded about 110 billion units (BU) of electricity, growing 14% year-on-year. This represents almost 7% of India's total power demand, which reached 1,626 BU in FY24. The government has recently amended various regulations to encourage and incentivise participation in power exchanges, reflecting their growing importance in India's electricity market.

### Road ahead for exchanges

Indian regulators are exploring market coupling and capacity markets as the next evolutionary step for the country's power markets.

Market coupling is a process that matches bids from all power exchanges to discover a uniform market clearing price, which also acts as a reliable reference price for policymakers. The concept, first introduced in CERC's Power Market Regulations, 2021, could lead to more efficient price discovery, reduced price disparities across regions, and increased market stability.

Capacity markets, on the other hand, would allow generators to be paid for their available capacity, not just for the electricity they produce. This mechanism is aimed at ensuring long-term grid reliability by incentivising investment in generation capacity, particularly for peaking power plants that may not run frequently but are crucial during high-demand periods.

Only a few countries, including the United Kingdom, parts of Australia, and South Korea, have developed capacity markets. The introduction of these advanced market structures would align India's power markets more closely with mature international markets, potentially attracting more investment and fostering greater competition in the sector.

## GOVERNMENT OFFERS TEN NEW CRITICAL MINERAL BLOCKS, UNVEILS FRESH INCENTIVES FOR EXPLORATION

The Ministry of Mines led by Mines Minister G Kishan Reddy launched the fourth tranche of critical minerals auction, offering a total of 21 blocks across fourteen states, including 11 blocks that are being reoffered from the second tranche after failing to secure the mandatory participation of at least three bidders. At the launch on Monday, the ministry also unveiled an incentive scheme for reimbursing up to Rs 20 crore in exploration expenses incurred by licence holders.



The preferred bidders for 6 blocks that were successfully auctioned off in the first tranche in November were also announced- notably, the licence to further explore the lithium block in Chhattisgarh's Katghora has been granted to Kolkata-based Maiki South Mining Pvt Ltd. Moreover, Cuttack-based Agrasen Sponge Pvt Ltd won the licence to mine two blocks in Odisha holding graphite resources of around 4.6 million tonnes (MT).

The ministry's fourth tranche brings the total critical mineral blocks offered to 48. The auction journey has been mixed: the first tranche offered 20 blocks, with 6 successful auctions and 13 annulments due to low bidder interest. The second tranche saw 18 blocks offered but 14 annulled. All 7 blocks in the third tranche were re-offers from the first tranche. Now, the fourth tranche presents 10 new blocks alongside 11 previously annulled from the second tranche. In total, 24 of the 48 blocks have been annulled once, but the ministry remains hopeful about successful re-auctions.

### **What are critical minerals?**

Critical minerals are raw materials essential for economic and national security, often used in high-tech industries and renewable energy technologies. They are typically rare, difficult to mine and substitute, and often vulnerable to supply chain disruptions due to limited global production and geopolitical factors.

"We are hoping for good results from the third tranche. In the current tranche, there are 10 fresh blocks and 11 blocks are repeated. We will intensify our roadshows and we will try to convince [investors] that some of the blocks that have not been picked up are good blocks," the Mines Secretary VL Kantha Rao said during a media briefing. The newly announced exploration reimbursement incentive aims to boost investor interest in critical mineral blocks. Under this scheme, exploration licence (EL) holders can claim up to Rs 20 crore in reimbursements for key activities such as geophysical investigations, exploratory drilling, and chemical and petrological analysis.

If an EL holder successfully hands over a block for grant of mining lease within three years from the execution of the EL, they will be eligible for further reimbursements. Previously, some mining companies were hesitant to bid for exploration licences, knowing the block would be re-auctioned for mining after exploration. The latest financial incentive is expected to mitigate risks, encourage more thorough exploration efforts, and potentially lead to increased mineral discoveries.

"The law of the land is that whoever does exploration, the ultimate mining rights will be given only through a process of auction. Therefore, in an exploration licence regime, the person can never get the block unless they bid again. We have a provision where the same company that does exploration can also bid, but it will be a transparent bidding," Kantha Rao said. During the media briefing, the Mines Secretary said that almost 100 critical mineral blocks have been identified by the government and will be offered in tranches over time. He also added that 10 blocks have been identified for offshore mining and will be announced alongside an offshore minerals action plan in the next 100 days.



## LIFE & SCIENCE

### WHY THE SUCCESS OF CHINA'S SAMPLE RETURN LUNAR MISSION MATTERS

China's Chang'e-6 on Tuesday became the first spacecraft to bring back samples from the far side of the Moon — the part that the Earth never gets to see.

The lander descended on the Moon's surface on June 1, and spent two days collecting rocks and soil from one of the oldest and largest of lunar craters — the 2,500 km-wide South Pole-Aitken (SPA) basin — using a robotic arm and drill.

The lander then launched an ascent module that transferred the samples to the Chang'e-6 orbiter that was orbiting the Moon. On June 21, the orbiter released a service module that brought back the samples to Earth.

#### **Is this the first time a spacecraft has brought lunar samples to Earth?**

No. Back in July 1969, the US Apollo 11 mission brought 22 kg of lunar surface material, including 50 rocks, to Earth. In September 1970, the Soviet Luna 16 mission — the first robotic sample return mission — too, brought pieces of the Moon to Earth. In recent years, Chang'e-5, the predecessor of Chang'e-6, brought back 2 kg of lunar soil in December 2020.

All these samples, however, came from the near side of the Moon. Difficult terrain, giant craters, and the difficulty in communicating with ground control made it technically challenging to land a spacecraft on the side that never faces the Earth. The Moon is tidally locked with Earth; thus we see only one side of our nearest space neighbour.

Chang'e-4 overcame these difficulties in 2019, putting the Yutu-2 rover on the far lunar surface. Now, Chang'e-6 has not only landed on the far side, but also returned with samples from there. "This is a great achievement by China... Recovering any samples from the Moon is difficult, but doing so from the far side, where communications are particularly difficult, is a step taken by no other agency. A real technological feat," Martin Barstow, a professor of astrophysics and space science at the University of Leicester, told The Guardian.

#### **But why are sample return missions significant in the first place?**

A sample return mission such as Chang'e-6 aims to collect and return samples from an extraterrestrial location like the Moon or Mars to Earth for analysis. The sample can be rocks or soil — or even some molecules.

In situ robotic explorations — in which landers, orbiters, and rovers carry out experiments in space or on heavenly bodies — can carry only miniature instruments that are not very sophisticated or accurate, and answer only certain types of questions. For instance, they can't determine the origin or age of a rock.

If the samples can be brought to Earth, on the other hand, scientists can examine them using extremely sensitive laboratory instruments. They can study the "chemical, isotopic, mineralogical, structural, and physical properties of extraterrestrial samples from the macroscopic level down to the atomic scale, frequently all on the very same sample," Lori S Glaze, director of NASA's planetary science division, wrote in January 2020.



Also, returned samples can be preserved for decades, and can be examined by future generations using ever more advanced technology. The samples brought back by the Apollo missions in the 1960s and 1970s are still being studied by scientists, who are extracting information on the history of the Moon, Earth, and the inner solar system.

India's Chandrayaan-4 mission, which is currently under development by the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO), will also be a sample return mission. Chandrayaan-3 landed about 600 km from the South Pole of the Moon last year.

#### **What can the lunar samples brought by Chang'e-6 reveal?**

The lunar far side is geologically different from the near side. It has a thicker crust, more craters, and fewer plains where lava once flowed. But scientists do not know why the two sides are so different — and an examination of the Chang'e-6 samples could throw up some answers.

Samples collected from the SPA basin can also reveal the timeframe for lunar cratering. The collision that created the basin may have excavated enough material from the Moon's lower crust and upper mantle, which could give insights into the Moon's history and, possibly, its origins.

The samples can also suggest ways to use lunar resources for future lunar and space exploration. For instance, lunar soil could be used to produce bricks to build future lunar research bases through 3D printing. Scientists are also interested in the potential presence of ice at the Moon's poles. Ice can be harvested for water, oxygen and hydrogen — and the latter two can be used in a rocket propellant.

#### **Why is there a new 'race' to the Moon?**

In 2023, India, China, Japan, the US, and Russia launched lunar missions. By 2030, more than 100 Moon missions by both governments and private companies are expected, according to the European Space Agency.

Countries such as China and the US also want to put astronauts on the Moon by 2030. The success of Chang'e-6 is seen as an important step towards achieving this goal by China.

However, unlike the US-USSR space race of the 20th century, which aimed for technological and intellectual superiority, today's lunar missions are about exploring ways to stay for long on the Moon and to use its resources in situ. It is also expected that the Moon can be used in the near future as a launch pad to travel deeper into space and to other extraterrestrial bodies.

### **FRANK DUCKWORTH DIES: HOW HIS DLS METHOD WORKS**

Frank Duckworth, 84, passed away on June 21. It is not a stretch to say that he, along with fellow statistician Tony Lewis, has had a greater impact on cricket than many who have actually played the game.

The duo co-invented the Duckworth-Lewis method, used to fairly determine results and set targets in rain-truncated matches. First used in international cricket in 1997, the method was fully adopted by the ICC in 1999. In 2014, the DL method became the DLS (Duckworth-Lewis-Stern) method in 2014, after Australian statistician Steven Stern made some crucial updates to better reflect modern scoring trends.



## IS THE EUROPEAN UNION'S 'CHAT CONTROL' LAW UNDERMINING ONLINE PRIVACY?

### The story so far:

The European Union's proposed 'chat control' law has become a bone of contention between members of the bloc. First proposed by the European Commissioner for Home Affairs Ylva Johansson in May 2022 as part of the bloc's push to combat child sexual abuse online, the framework of the bill has now come under fire, earning itself a derisive term "Chat Control". France, Germany and Poland have particularly refused to accept a clause that allows for mass scanning of private messages by breaking end-to-end encryption. Some tech companies, along with trade associations, and privacy experts have all vehemently opposed the regulation. On the other hand, the Interior Ministers of Spain and Ireland have supported the proposal. Separately, a network of organisations and individuals, advocating for children's rights in Europe, have lashed out at EU leaders for failing to tackle child sexual abuse online.

### What are the concerns of those against the proposal?

Scanning end-to-end encrypted messages has remained a controversial issue. That's because there is no way to do this without opening risky backdoors that can be accessed by third parties who can exploit the vulnerability, in turn ending the promise of end-to-end encryption.

Tech firms that have tread the encryption bypassing path have often been made to retreat. In 2021, Apple announced NeuralHash, a feature that could automatically scan iCloud photo libraries of individual devices for Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM). Employees and activist groups expressed concerns over the loss of privacy. A year later, Apple said it had abandoned the initiative. Another looming issue the iPhone maker recognised in the process was how authoritarian governments could potentially misuse the feature by using it as a tool to target individuals who oppose the regime.

Erik Neuenschwander, Director of user privacy and child safety at Apple, admitted this in a note saying, "It would [...] inject the potential for a slippery slope of unintended consequences. Scanning for one type of content, for instance, opens the door for bulk surveillance and could create a desire to search other encrypted messaging systems across content types."

When bringing in a similar clause through the U.K.'s Online Safety Bill, lawmakers attempted to make way for client-side scanning of private and encrypted messages. The proposal was postponed after receiving pushback from encrypted messaging app owners like WhatsApp and Signal. The duo threatened to leave the U.K. if such a law was passed. In its final stages, in September, 2023, the House of Lords considered the potential security threat that the clause would bring saying it would not implement scanning until it was "technically feasible."

### What is the status of the EU's chat control law?

On June 30, a new draft of the proposal is set to be reviewed. Legislators have left the idea of scanning text messages and audio, and are instead targetting shared photos, videos and URLs with an adjustment to appease the naysayers.

Another tweak in the making could be people's consent in sharing material being scanned before being encrypted. But this compromise has been largely called out as a farcical one. A report by Euractiv which has been confirmed by internal documents shows that if a user refuses the scanning, they will simply be blocked from sending or receiving images, videos and links hardly



leaving them with a choice. Despite these measures, EU's enforcement of such regulations have seen exemptions to the rule. In November 2023, the European Commission reportedly published a proposal to amend the regulation on a temporary derogation of the E-Privacy Directive against CSAM. Under the regulation, specific online communications service providers were allowed to sift through or scan messages to detect, report and remove online CSAM and content that solicits children. The regulation is set to expire in early August. The initial plan on the table was to simply extend this regulation for another three years. But, according to media reports, plans for further extensions were stalled in February this year.

Meredith Whittaker, President of Signal app called the measures to assuage concerns as "cosmetic", and has signed a joint statement along with a group of over 60 other organisations like Mozilla, Proton, Surfshark and Tuta, voicing out her concerns. Ms. Whittaker has echoed her earlier warning saying Signal will leave the U.K. rather than undermine end-to-end encryption.

A blog, co-authored by Riana Pfefferkorn, a research scholar at the Stanford Internet Observatory and Callum Voge, director of government affairs and advocacy at the Internet Society, notes, "If government surveillance is a concern in an established democratic entity like the EU, what hope is there for beleaguered democracies like Turkey, India and Brazil, much less autocracies?"

## THE BIRTH AND GROWTH OF MUSIC

The annual world music day was held on June 21, 2024. It is an occasion to look back at how music and rhythm have evolved from ancient times. As the study by Hattori and Tomonaga points out, when a rhythmic piece was played to a group of chimps, they began to dance in tune! However, their vocal cords have not evolved to singing; they can only grunt: and listen to them. So, we humans not only owe many of our genes and our blood groups to the apes but also our sense of rhythm!

So then, when did we humans start singing and playing music on instruments? Researchers have established that we began speaking during the Old Stone Age (2.5 million years ago and continued until 10,000 BCE), and 'singing' a little later. That we could sing and play instruments came about 40,000 years ago, when it was discovered that a flute was made using an animal bone, with seven holes in it to play 'in tune'. It is well worth clicking on this site National Museum of Slovenia and enjoying it fully.

### Benefits of music

When you listen to music, your health appears to improve. It does not matter whether it is prayer, vocal or instrumental, classical or traditional, popular and film songs. The Johns Hopkins University site says that if you want to keep your brain young, play or listen to music. Learning to sing or play an instrument improves attention, memory, mood and quality of life. This is particularly important for school and college students. Some sources have even suggested that music learning or even listening helps elderly people avert age-related problems. India has several music academies across the country, which hold periodic festivals, where we listen to both established musicians and prominent youngsters singing and playing instruments in Carnatic, Hindustani and Western styles. Let us attend them and enjoy!



## SELF-MEDICATION

A new study has found that chimpanzees appear to consume plants with medicinal properties to treat their ailments. The researchers combined behavioural observations of wild chimpanzees (*Pan troglodytes*) with pharmacological testing of the potentially medicinal plants they eat. They monitored the behaviour and health of 51 chimpanzees in the Budongo Central Forest Reserve in Uganda. They collected plant extracts from 13 species of trees and herbs in the reserve that they suspected the chimpanzees might be using to self-medicate, and tested them for their anti-inflammatory and antibiotic properties. They found that 88% of the plant extracts inhibited bacterial growth, while 33% had anti-inflammatory properties. The researchers observed a male Chimpanzee with an injured hand seek out and eat fern leaves, which may have helped reduce pain and swelling. The results suggest that chimpanzees seek out specific plants for their medicinal effects.

## COMPLEX PTSD: WHEN TRAUMA PERSISTS...

### WHAT IS IT?

Around 4% of the world's population has suffered post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) at some point, according to the World Health Organisation (WHO).

PTSD is often associated with war veterans, survivors of sexual violence and typically anybody who has lived through a life-threatening situation. They often experience anxiety, flashbacks, and nightmares.

But health workers have also recorded PTSD symptoms among people who have suffered repeated bullying, emotional abuse, and/or neglect. These individuals include children bullied or gaslighted since a young age and someone who has suffered domestic abuse for many years. They are said to have complex PTSD, or cPTSD.

For these individuals, flashbacks and nightmares are only the tip of the iceberg of symptoms. As a result of the lack of a nourishing living environment, they have been known to develop a crippled sense of self. Apart from anxiety issues rooted in a negative self-image and/or issues with self-confidence, they also display a difficulty trusting other people and trouble maintaining friendships or romantic relationships.

cPTSD was listed as a standalone diagnosis in the 11th edition of the International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems, or ICD-11, in 2018. In 2019, the WHO also recognised cPTSD as a separate mental health disorder.

We don't yet know how prevalent cPTSD is in the general population. Researchers have estimated it is 1-8%.

## DEATH BY OXYGEN DEPRIVATION

### Q. How does potassium cyanide cause sudden death?

A: Potassium cyanide when consumed causes death by gradually arresting the supply of oxygen to our body's cells by forming complexes with haemoglobin and cytochrome (a protein which helps in the respiration of cells), depriving them of their capacity to transport or exchange oxygen.



Normally, oxygen is carried to different parts of the body from the lungs by the blood using haemoglobin — the iron-containing, oxygen-carrying molecule of the red blood cells.

Haemoglobin is made up of a globular protein and four heme groups. The iron (in ferrous state) present in these heme complexes can bond to either an oxygen molecule or a water molecule or exchange one for the other without much difficulty. It is because of this ability that haemoglobin is able to pick up oxygen from the lungs, carry it to the cells, and bring water in return.

Cells respire oxygen with the help of myoglobin (haemoglobin-like proteins present in the cells) and cytochrome, which carries electrons. Specific forms of cytochrome and haemoglobin also cause sudden death when poisoned by cyanide.

When potassium cyanide is consumed, it splits into a potassium ion and a cyanide ion. The cyanide ion has a greater affinity for the ferrous ion than. As a result it occupies the site meant for oxygen in haemoglobin. This process is irreversible and prevents the transfer of oxygen.

One form of cytochrome, designated cytochrome-a, also binds with the cyanide ion and stabilises the iron to such an extent that it does not take part in the electron transfer to the cell. This prevents oxygen intake by the cell.

The symptoms of cyanide poisoning are giddiness, headache, and bluish tinge of the skin. If not treated immediately, unconsciousness and death will follow.

#### SOUTH AFRICAN RESEARCHERS TEST USE OF NUCLEAR TECHNOLOGY TO CURB RHINO POACHING

**MOKOPANE:** Researchers in South Africa have injected radioactive material into the horns of 20 rhinos as part of a research project aimed at reducing poaching.

The idea is that radiation detectors already in place at national borders would detect the horns and help authorities arrest poachers and traffickers.

The research, which has included the participation of veterinarians and nuclear experts, begins with the animal being tranquilized before a hole is drilled into its horn and the nuclear material carefully inserted. This week, researchers at the University of the Witwatersrand's Radiation and Health Physics Unit in South Africa injected 20 live rhinos with these isotopes. They hope the process can be replicated to save other wild species vulnerable to poaching — like elephants and pangolins.

"We are doing this because it makes it significantly easier to intercept these horns as they are being trafficked over international borders, because there is a global network of radiation monitors that have been designed to prevent nuclear terrorism," said Professor James Larkin, who heads the project. "And we're piggybacking on the back of that."

According to figures by the International Union for Conservation of Nature, an international conservation body, the global rhino population stood at around 500,000 at the beginning of the 20th century. It now stands at around 27,000 due to continued demand for rhino horns on the black market.

South Africa has the largest population of rhinos with an estimated 16,000, making it a hotspot with over 500 rhinos killed yearly.





The country experienced a significant decline in rhino poaching around 2020 at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, but the numbers increased when virus lockdown restrictions were eased.

"We've got to do something new and something different to reduce poaching. You know, you'll see the figures they've already started going up," said Larkin. "During Covid, they all went down but post Covid we are now starting to see those numbers go up again."

While the idea has received support from some in the industry, the researchers have had to jump many ethical hurdles posed by critics of their methodology.

Pelham Jones, chairperson of the Private Rhino Owners Association, is among the critics of the proposed method and doubts that it would effectively deter poachers and traffickers.

"(Poachers) have worked out other ways of moving rhino horn out of the country, out of the continent or off the continent, not through traditional border crossings," he said. "They bypass the border crossings because they know that is the area of the highest risk of confiscation or interception."

Professor Nithaya Chetty, dean of the science faculty at Witwatersrand, said the dosage of the radioactivity is very low and its potential negative impact on the animal was tested extensively.

#### FLATULENT COWS AND PIGS WILL FACE A CARBON TAX IN DENMARK, A WORLD FIRST

Denmark will tax livestock farmers for the greenhouse gases emitted by their cows, sheep and pigs from 2030, the first country in the world to do so as it targets a major source of methane emissions, one of the most potent gases contributing to global warming.

The aim is to reduce Danish greenhouse gas emissions by 70 per cent from 1990 levels by 2030, said Taxation Minister Jeppe Bruus. As of 2030, Danish livestock farmers will be taxed 300 kroner (\$43) per ton of carbon dioxide equivalent in 2030.

The tax will increase to 750 kroner (\$108) by 2035. However, because of an income tax deduction of 60 per cent, the actual cost per ton will start at 120 kroner (\$17.3) and increase to 300 kroner by 2035. Although carbon dioxide typically gets more attention for its role in climate change, methane traps about 87 times more heat on a 20-year timescale, according to the US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

#### Fullscreen

Levels of methane, which is emitted from sources including landfills, oil and natural gas systems and livestock, have increased particularly quickly since 2020. Livestock account for about 32 per cent of human-caused methane emissions, says the UN Environment Program.

"We will take a big step closer in becoming climate neutral in 2045," Bruus said, adding Denmark "will be the first country in the world to introduce a real CO2 tax on agriculture" and hoped other countries would follow suit.

New Zealand had passed a similar law due to take effect in 2025.

However, the legislation was removed from the statute book on Wednesday after hefty criticism from farmers and a change of government at the 2023 election from a center-left ruling bloc to a center-right one.



New Zealand said it would exclude agriculture from its emissions trading scheme in favor of exploring other ways to reduce methane.

In Denmark, the deal was reached late Monday between the center-right government and representatives of farmers, the industry, unions, among others, and presented Tuesday.

Denmark's move comes after months of protests by farmers across Europe against climate change mitigation measures and regulations that they say are driving them to bankruptcy. The Danish Society for Nature Conservation, the largest nature conservation and environmental organization in Denmark, described the tax agreement as "a historic compromise."

"We have succeeded in landing a compromise on a CO2 tax, which lays the groundwork for a restructured food industry -- also on the other side of 2030," its head Maria Reumert Gjerding said after the talks in which they took part.

A typical Danish cow produces 6 metric tons (6.6 tons) of CO2 equivalent per year. Denmark, which is a large dairy and pork exporter, also will tax pigs although cows produce far higher emissions than pigs.

The tax is to be approved in the 179-seat Folketing, or parliament, but the bill is expected to pass after the broad-based consensus.

According to Statistic Denmark, there were as of June 30, 2022, 1,484,377 cows in the Scandinavian country, a slight drop compared to the previous year.

### HAWAII SETTLES CLIMATE CASE WITH YOUNG LITIGANTS: WHAT WAS THE LAWSUIT — AND THE SETTLEMENT?

The government of Hawaii on Thursday (June 20) settled a lawsuit with 13 children and teens who had sued the state's Department of Transport over its use of fossil fuel that contributes to climate change. The settlement includes an ambitious requirement to decarbonise Hawaii's transportation system over the next 21 years.

The lawsuit, which was filed in 2022, is the world's first youth-led constitutional climate case addressing climate pollution from the transportation sector, according to the activists and lawyers involved in the case.

The settlement is the latest in a series of victories in climate-related cases by young plaintiffs across the world.

#### **What was the lawsuit?**

The lawsuit, *Navahine v. Hawaii Department of Transportation*, argued that Hawaii's Department of Transport had violated the plaintiff's constitutional right to a clean and healthful environment by implementing transportation policies and prioritising infrastructure projects that use fossil fuels.

The lawsuit also cited "Hawaii's constitutional pledge to "conserve and protect Hawaii's natural beauty and all natural resources" and pointed to the fact that Hawaii's transport sector is projected to make up 60 per cent of the state's emissions by 2030," according to a report by Al Jazeera.



The burning of fossil fuels such as oil, gas, and coal is the primary reason behind the soaring global temperatures. It results in the release of greenhouse gases (GHGs) like carbon dioxide and methane, which trap the heat in the atmosphere, leading to warming. Warmer temperatures have had severe consequences including worsening of extreme weather events such as droughts and floods across the world.

For instance, according to the lawsuit, heavy rainfall and droughts due to climate change in Hawaii are threatening one of the plaintiff's ability to continue her family's tradition of farming the root vegetable taro.

#### **What is the settlement?**

According to the settlement, Hawaii needs to achieve zero GHG emissions across all transportation modes, including ground transportation and sea and air interisland transportation by 2045.

The state also has to publish a greenhouse gas reduction plan within a year.

Pedestrian, bicycle, and transit networks need to be completed within five years, while allotting at least \$40 million to expand the public electric vehicle charging network by 2030.

Additionally, the state of Hawaii will be accountable to a judge who will enforce the agreement in case disputes arise.

#### **What are the challenges?**

Hawaii's Democratic Governor Josh Green has called the settlement "groundbreaking" and said it "informs how we as a state can best move forward to achieve life-sustaining goals."

However, meeting the ambitious goal of net zero will not be a cakewalk for Hawaii's Department of Transport. For instance, the department "oversees the state's airports, and there are currently no feasible ways to power passenger jets without fossil fuels," according to a report by The New York Times.

It also manages Hawaii's harbours, where container ships and cruise ships also use fossil fuels.

### **ABRAHAM LINCOLN'S MELTING STATUE: ANOTHER WAY TO INTERACT WITH ART**

Climate change spares no one, not even the giants of history. This weekend past, a six-foot-tall wax statue of former US President Abraham Lincoln melted in parts, thanks to the ongoing heat wave in Washington DC. The wax Lincoln was installed in the Garrison Elementary School, the site of Camp Barker — a refuge for formerly enslaved people during the American Civil War. It is part of a series of artworks by artist Sandy Williams IV that explores forgotten Black histories in America.

### **A PLAYBOOK TO HANDLE GESTATIONAL DIABETES BETTER**

After a series on menopause in March, The Lancet has launched another series that looks at neglected areas of women's health. This time it deals with gestational diabetes, which refers to hyperglycaemia or high blood sugar levels first diagnosed during pregnancy. A common medical disorder in pregnancy, it reportedly has a global prevalence of 14%. The series offers insights and evidence into pathophysiology, screening, management, and prevention, besides suggesting new models of care that could protect both women and their children.



Age, family history of diabetes, and high BMI are major risk factors, so it comes as no surprise that rates are rising alongside a broader crisis of non-communicable diseases, such as obesity and cardiometabolic disorders, among women of childbearing age. Helmed by an editorial, the series talks of the increased complications associated with gestational diabetes its long term impact on the mother and infant, its rising incidence, the need to detect it earlier than is being done currently, modern treatment methodologies, and the need for a lifestyle approach to prevent onset of GDM and complications.

Gestational diabetes is associated with an increased risk of pregnancy complications, but it also threatens serious long-term complications for both mother and baby. Up to 31% of type 2 diabetes cases in parous women are attributable to gestational diabetes. Babies born to women with gestational diabetes are at increased risk not only of short-term perinatal morbidity and mortality but also of long-term complications, such as type 2 diabetes, obesity, cardiovascular diseases, and neurodevelopmental disorders. Experts from across the world pitched in as part of the series.

### SCREEN ALL PREGNANT WOMEN FOR GESTATIONAL DIABETES WITH POINT-OF-CARE TEST, SAY EXPERTS

Researchers from India, London, and Africa have proposed that the oral glucose tolerance test (OGTT) used to determine if a pregnant woman has developed gestational diabetes be replaced by an HbA1c test that can also be used at the point of care. They have recommended that this be administered in early pregnancy, during the first trimester itself.

In a paper published in *The Lancet Diabetes and Endocrinology*, authors argued that HbA1c offers a simple screening test for gestational diabetes, allowing those at highest risk to receive early intervention and greatly reduces the need for OGTTs. Researchers used the results from STRiDE, a prospective cohort study, set up in seven centres in south India and seven in western Kenya. Participants were also included from the PRiDE cohort in the U.K.

The proposal is significant for India. More than 90% of gestational diabetes cases are estimated to occur in low-income and middle-income countries. Currently, guidelines recommend that mothers take an OGTT, which is a concentrated 75 g oral solution at fasting, and then wait two to three hours to do a follow-up, at the 24 to 28-week stage. This throws up a lot of challenges, particularly in screening women who are in far-flung rural areas and in hard-to-reach areas. In such situations, a trained health care worker can instead be given a point-of-care testing kit and, with just a drop of blood, test the woman for HbA1c at her own home.

The study concluded that in India, an HbA1c result of 4.9 rules out diabetes, while women who have a score of 5.4 or above can be 'ruled in' for gestational diabetes. If the risk score classifies them in the lowest risk group, they would not have to take an OGTT; only those in the intermediate group between these two values would have to do the more complicated test. "We roughly estimated this will be around 25% of all pregnant women," explained P. Saravanan, professor at the Warwick Medical School in the U.K.'s University of Warwick, and one of the authors of the study.

"This would be particularly useful for women living in rural areas and hard-to-reach terrains where OGTT will be impossible to do. Although the direct cost of this is roughly double that of OGTT, if you include the cost of travel, lost wages, etc, it will be cost neutral. Moreover, HbA1c is currently more expensive partly because it is not used routinely. However, more usage will also bring the costs down," he added.