



# CURRENT AFFAIRS FOR UPSC

15TH TO 21ST JANUARY 2025

DREAMIAS





## INTERNATIONAL

### PERSISTENT INSTABILITY

German politics has been in turmoil ever since Chancellor Olaf Scholz lost his parliamentary majority last month, when the pro-market Free Democratic Party exited his three-way coalition. Mr. Scholz initially tried to cling on to power, heading a minority government, but amid criticism and concerns that delaying an inevitable snap election could further damage the chances of Mr. Scholz's Social Democrats, the Chancellor called for a vote of confidence on Monday. The outcome was known beforehand — his government collapsed the same day, pushing the country into early elections. The Scholz government, which was formed after the 2021 federal elections in which the Social Democrats won most seats, remained fractious from day one. While the Social Democrats and the Greens supported more public spending, the Free Democrats pushed for austerity. The government lacked coordination and what made the intra-coalition fighting worse was the financial crisis. Germany, once the engine of the European economy, has been in recession for two years. With no consensus within the coalition on how to tackle the financial crisis, the government's popularity plunged. In November, Mr. Scholz sacked his Finance Minister, Christian Lindner (Free Democrats), sealing the government's fate. President Frank-Walter Steinmeier will now call for elections, most likely in February 2025, seven months earlier than planned.

When Angela Merkel was in power, her conservative coalition managed to offer political stability, economic growth and a fine balancing between great powers. Even during the Russia-Ukraine tensions over the 2014 Crimean annexation, Ms. Merkel and the French leadership engaged with the Russians, which resulted in the two Minsk agreements. But two months after Mr. Scholz became Chancellor, Russia invaded Ukraine. Germany could do little to prevent the war, but it joined the West in imposing sanctions on Russia, which hit the European economies as well. The Nord Stream pipeline, built to bring Russian gas to Germany, was blown up, allegedly by the Ukrainians. The war worsened the West's energy crisis, in turn impacting the cost of living crisis. It then snowballed into a larger economic meltdown, triggering political instability. Germany is not the only country battling economic woes and political instability. In neighbouring France, a government collapsed in three months, and President Emmanuel Macron has appointed a new Prime Minister, who also lacks a majority in Parliament. Elsewhere in the continent, far-right parties with neo-Nazi views are resurgent. Mr. Scholz is likely to lead the Social Democrats in the elections but the conservative Christian Democrats are the frontrunners. A trial by fire awaits whoever wins.

### COSTLY GAMBLERS

When France's President, Emmanuel Macron, called a snap legislative election in June, he had two political objectives: secure a new mandate for his centrist coalition and arrest the surge of the far-right National Rally, which had just finished first in the European elections. But what he got was a hung parliament with the left-wing New Popular Front (NFP) emerging as the largest bloc. And what he did was to pick Michel Barnier, a conservative leader of the Republican Party, which had finished fourth in the elections, to form the government. It was a disaster foretold. The government collapsed within three months, leaving France without a budget for 2025. And now, as if he learnt nothing from his gambles, Mr. Macron has appointed François Bayrou, leader of the Democratic Movement party, which has just 33 seats in the 577-member National Assembly, as the next Prime Minister. Even if Mr. Macron's coalition, Ensemble, which finished second in the elections, and the Republicans come together, they do not have a majority (289 seats) to pass bills

**3<sup>RD</sup> FLOOR AND 4<sup>TH</sup> FLOOR SHATABDI TOWER, SAKCHI, JAMSHEDPUR**



in Parliament. The Socialist Party, which is part of the left-wing alliance, has already said it will not join the new government. This would mean that Mr. Bayrou's government would be at the mercy of Marine Le Pen's far-right National Rally, as Mr. Barnier's government was, for survival.

With rising unemployment and falling domestic consumption, France needs urgent policy interventions. It has seen a jump in fiscal deficit, to 6.1% of GDP, worse than Greece, Spain and Italy, the Eurozone countries hit hard by the 2008-09 debt crisis. France's debt has also ballooned to €3.2 trillion, more than 112% of its GDP. What makes the crisis worse is the absence of a stable government. Mr. Bayrou's immediate task is to get an emergency budget passed in Parliament so that essential services run. But this will entail painful negotiations with the far-right, which is opposed to any more cuts in social spending. This takes the political and economic situation back to square one. Part of the problem is Mr. Macron's refusal to accept shifting political dynamics. An anti-establishment constituency is gaining strength from economic agonies. While the far-right and the left are trying to mobilise the working population from different political platforms, Mr. Macron is trying to preserve the status quo (mis)using his presidential powers. By appointing unpopular leaders who lack a clear mandate as Prime Ministers, he is prolonging the crisis. If he was serious about 'institutional stability', a favourite Macronist mantra, he should have sought to build a coalition with the largest bloc, the Left, and helped them rule based on a consensus-driven political and economic programme.

## CRIME AND SHAME

The horrors will never go away, and Gisèle Pelicot has got only a semblance of closure after a French court sentenced her former husband to 20 years in prison for committing and orchestrating mass rapes of her for almost a decade. The 72-year-old Dominique Pelicot admitted in court that he had drugged Ms. Pelicot, 72, for years, before raping her, and recruiting strangers online to violate her as she was deeply asleep. In all, 51 people, aged between the late 20s and 70s, assaulted her as she lay in a drug-induced stupor, and have got away with punishment ranging from three to 15 years, less than the terms sought by prosecutors. The evidence, photographs and films, was stored in Dominique Pelicot's computer and shown in court to shocking disbelief; the crime itself unravelled in 2020 after he was being probed for another misdemeanour, filming women inappropriately. But in all this, Ms. Pelicot's brave stand — to waive anonymity and requesting a public trial — and boldly stating that "it is not us who should feel shame, but them", struck a chord. People all across France, and the world, have followed the over three-month trial, marched on the streets and held demonstrations to seek changes in law for sexual crimes against women, and also the overturning of societal perceptions and toxic patriarchal behaviour.

Ms. Pelicot said she had led the fight for her daughters and grandchildren and also "unrecognised victims whose stories often remain in the shadows". She hoped that by opening the doors of the trial, and despite her ordeal, "society could take hold of the debates that took place there". Her case has sparked fierce debates on abuse and the aftermath. Under French law, the maximum penalty for rape is 20 years, and rights activists have pointed out that the punishment is simply not enough for ruining a life. In a majority of cases, complaints of sexual abuse and rapes are not reported and prosecuted. France is not the only violator. The United Nations says violence against women remains one of the most prevalent human rights violations, and that globally, an estimated 736 million women have experienced physical and/or sexual violence. Gisèle Pelicot held out hope and confidence that society will "collectively seize a future in which each woman and man can live in harmony with respect and mutual understanding". But first, her words should be heeded, and rape charges must never be trivialised. She has helped break the silence and the shame around



rape; the onus is on society and law-makers to shatter the stigma and impunity attached to sexual abuse.

## WHY WERE ROMANIAN POLLS ANNULLED?

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

In an unprecedented ruling on December 6, Romania's constitutional court unanimously annulled the country's presidential elections, two days before the run-off ballot, amid allegations of Russian interference. Suspicions of foul play were fuelled when Calin Georgescu emerged frontrunner, securing 22.9% of the vote, after the first round of polling on November 24. A professor of environmental sciences who fought as an independent and had polled in single digits until then, Mr. Georgescu is an ex-honorary member of the far-right Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR) party. He has been portrayed as an admirer of Russian President Vladimir Putin, and a critic of Romania's membership of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union (EU). Mr. Georgescu was even suggested as the Prime Minister candidate by the AUR party, which came second in the legislative elections of December 1.

The Constitutional Court in Bucharest had ordered a recount in response to complaints by two of the contestants who were eliminated in the first round. Once the exercise confirmed the previous tally, the judges had given the go ahead for the knock-out round on December 8. However, the unfolding dramatic turn of events prompted the court to call off the elections altogether, concluding that the process was marred by multiple irregularities.

### **How serious are the allegations?**

Days before the aborted run-off, Romania's National Security Council declassified troves of documents from the Interior Ministry, detailing how the country had been a target of Russian cybercrimes, information leaks and sabotage. It said some 800 TikTok accounts created in 2016 were activated in support of Mr. Georgescu a month before the ballot and thousands closer to the polling date. More than 100 paid influencers with a few million followers were deployed to boost Mr. Georgescu's prospects. Romania's secret service (SRI) has claimed it has identified thousands of cyberattacks originating from Russian platforms, which routed their operations from several countries, and distorted the information presented to the public. The agency singled out Mr. Georgescu, who had claimed that he had no access to campaign funds, as having received preferential treatment from TikTok, because the platform owned by ByteDance did not label his video posts as political advertisement. TikTok has denied any wrongdoing and taken down thousands of disputed posts and promised full cooperation with the authorities. Telegram and Discord are the other channels Romanian authorities have blamed for involvement in these covert and coordinated operations.

### **What is the status of the probe?**

In a complaint filed with the EU regulator, Romania's media watchdog has alleged that TikTok's algorithms amplified Mr. Georgescu's content to the disadvantage of other candidates. Subject to available evidence, the commission could investigate the Chinese social media platform for potential violations under the EU's Digital Services Act (DSA). The law stipulates content moderation obligations on large online platforms to mitigate systemic risks, including the electoral processes and imposes penalties of up to 6% of global annual turnover. TikTok has



already been served an order under the DSA to preserve for scrutiny all its data relating to European elections.

#### **What explains Georgescu's appeal?**

The TikTok messenger that spectacularly propelled his victory does not detract from the resonance of Mr. Georgescu's ultra-nationalist message among an electorate disenchanted with the dominance of the mainstream Social Democratic Party and the National Liberal Party since the fall of communism. High inflation, a ballooning fiscal deficit and balance of payments challenges, not to mention rampant corruption in high places and contempt for the rule of law, have been weaponised by populist and extremist groups to peddle propaganda and conspiracy theories.

#### **How widespread are concerns of Russian meddling in the region?**

From orchestrating a so-called hybrid warfare of spreading disinformation, cyberattacks and sabotage, to paying off pro-Russian MEPs (Members of the European Parliament), Moscow's controversial role came into sharp focus during the European parliament elections in June.

In response, Belgium and the Czech Republic coordinated investigations that led, among other actions, Prague to impose sanctions on an oligarch close to Mr. Putin for promoting a pro-Russia narrative via Voice of Europe website, which has since been taken down.

While a German MP from the Alternative for Germany (AfD) party is under a probe for receiving money from a pro-Russia campaign, the Belgian government in April passed legislation to criminalise foreign interference in the political process.

In Moldova, the fragile post-Soviet republic, Moscow is accused of plotting to destabilise the pro-EU government, and interference in President Maia Sandu's re-election and the referendum on EU accession in October.

#### **What next?**

While a re-run of the presidential contest is expected next year, the Mayor of Bucharest has thrown his hat in the ring. The ultra-nationalist Mr. Georgescu has vowed to challenge the decision in the Supreme Court. Romanian tax authorities have launched financial investigations against the social influencers behind Georgescu's campaign, some of whom have since fled the country.

### **WHAT LIES AHEAD FOR SYRIA AFTER ASSAD'S EXIT?**

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

Bashar al-Assad, President of Syria for 24 years, has fallen. He and his family have taken refuge in Russia. Syria now has a transitional government, headed by the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), an Islamist militant group that was controlling the northwestern province of Idlib. Many Syrians are celebrating the collapse of Mr. Assad's dictatorial regime, but remain anxious about what is to come. Turkey, as the main backer of the HTS, sees an opportunity to expand its influence in West Asia, while Iran and Russia, the main backers of the Assad regime, have taken a setback. Israel, in the meantime, is exploiting the vacuum in Syria to grab more territories.



### **Why did the Assad regime fall?**

Mr. Assad held on to power for 13 years after the civil war broke out in 2011, only for his regime to collapse in 12 days. By 2017, the Assad regime had taken over most of its lost territories, with help from Russia, Iran and Hezbollah. But he hadn't defeated the militants. The strongest of them was the HTS, which was formerly called Jabhat al-Nusra, the al-Qaeda arm in Syria. Abu Muhammed al-Jolani, today the 'emir' of the HTS, was an al-Qaeda leader. The HTS-controlled Idlib emerged as a rebel stronghold. Jolani established a mini-administration in Idlib — the Syrian Salvation Government. He had been planning a large-scale offensive against the regime forces for months, if not years.

On the other side, a host of domestic, regional and international factors weakened Mr. Assad's position. Syria's economy is in a very bad shape. Its GDP shrank by 87% in the past 13 years, from \$68 billion in 2011 to just \$9 billion in 2023. Western sanctions stifled an already deteriorated economy further. The poorly paid soldiers of the Assad regime lacked motivation to preserve it. Syrian armed forces were also weakened by repeated Israeli air strikes, which picked up pace over the past year, after Hamas's October 7, 2023 attack. Mr. Assad was heavily reliant on his external allies for security. However, their priorities also changed in recent years. Russia's focus is now on the Ukraine war. Iran is involved in a hot and cold war with Israel. Hezbollah lost most of its leaders and thousands of fighters in its year-long war with Israel. The militants knew Mr. Assad was weak.

They launched an offensive on November 27 in the western outskirts of Aleppo, probably aimed at cutting the underbelly of his decaying regime. What happened next was a rapid collapse of the regime itself.

### **Who is in charge now?**

Syria today has roughly four militant coalitions. The first one is the HTS, led by Jolani. The HTS says it has broken its ties with al-Qaeda, and promises to respect Syria's ethnic and religious diversity. But its rank and file comprise transnational jihadists, who travelled to Syria from across the world, to fight "jihad" against the Assad regime. The HTS's main ally is the Syrian National Army (SNA), another northern militia. The core of the SNA is the Free Syrian Army, a Turkish proxy that was formed with defected Syrian soldiers and officers. The HTS and the SNA launched the November 27 offensive together.

The second group is the Southern Front, a loose coalition of dozens of militias in Syria's south (Daara and Quneitra). Some of them were backed by Jordan, which shares a border with southern Syria. When the HTS-SNA combine advanced towards regime-held cities from the north, the southern militias started an offensive from the south. And they reached Damascus first, on December 8. The third main group is the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). The core of the SDF is the People's Protection Units (YPG), the armed wing of Syrian Kurdistan. The SDF enjoys relative autonomy in the Syrian Kurdish region. The SDF was armed by the U.S. in the past in its fight against the Islamic State. The fourth group is the Alawite militias in the coastal region. Alawites are Mr. Assad's sect, who enjoyed power for over five decades in the country. The HTS, a Sunni Islamist group, had in the past targeted Alawites, who make up roughly 15% of Syria's population. The HTS has asked the Alawite community to cut ties with the fallen regime. Of these four, the HTS is the most powerful force now. The transition government in Damascus is a replica of the HTS Salvation government in Idlib.



### Why does geopolitics matter?

Syria has immense geopolitical significance. It hosts Russia's Mediterranean naval base in Tartus, its only naval base outside the former Soviet territory. Russia also has built an air base in Syria. For Russia to project force, from the Black Sea to the Mediterranean and then to the Atlantic, it is essential to retain access to the Tartus base. It could also be one of the reasons Russia made a military intervention in Syria in 2015, to protect the Assad regime. Now that the regime has collapsed, Russia's focus would be on protecting its bases. For Iran, a sworn enemy of America and Israel, Syria was its only state ally in West Asia. Syria was also a key conduit between Iran and Hezbollah, the Lebanese militia. The fall of the Assad regime could disrupt Iran's supply networks in the region, which could invariably weaken the country's deterrence.

Turkey, on the other side, appears to be stronger. For years, it had tried to pull down the Assad regime. When the Russian intervention made it immediately impossible, Turkey shifted its focus towards playing a long game with its proxies. Now that Mr. Assad is gone and the HTS-SNA coalition is in Damascus, Recep Tayyip Erdogan seems to have outwitted Vladimir Putin, and extended his influence from Ankara to the borders of Iraq, Jordan and Israel.

### Will the militants build a new Syria?

Many think the fall of a dictatorial regime would lead to a new dawn. For now, Syria's militants have made the right noises — about respecting the country's diversity and rebuilding its dilapidated institutions and welcoming back refugees. But Syria still remains a complex case — with or without Mr. Assad. Before Hafez al-Assad, Bashar's father, captured power in 1971, Syria had seen multiple coups and counter-coups. It was Hafez and his Ba'ath party that stabilised the country and built its modern institutions. Today, the challenge the militants face is to rebuild the country once again, by demobilising the militias. But the HTS neither has ideological clarity for an inclusive Syria nor the resources to demobilise other militias. The HTS is a Salafi-jihadist outfit, which wants to remake secular Syria and retain its tight grip over state institutions. If the HTS's rule in Idlib is an example, the group is not any less dictatorial than Mr. Assad. The southern militias, backed by Jordan, would want to get their due share of power. And in the east, the SDF, the Kurdish militia, wants to keep their hard-earned autonomy. But Turkey sees the SDF as a terrorist outfit, and Turkish-backed militias have already started attacking the SDF.

In Afghanistan, throughout the 1980s, the U.S. and Pakistan-backed Mujahideen fought together against the communist regime as well as the Soviet troops. But after the Soviet withdrawal and the collapse of the communist rule, Afghanistan fell into deeper chaos. In Libya, NATO made a military intervention in 2011 to "liberate" the country from Mohammed Gaddafi. After Gaddafi's regime, one of the most stable governments in Africa, was toppled and he was killed, the country fell into a bloody civil war — which is still going on. Iraq never recovered from the scars of America's regime change war of 2003. None of these examples are encouraging for Syria.

## US SANCTIONS ON PAKISTAN'S AEROSPACE, DEFENCE AGENCY FOR CONTINUING PROLIFERATION OF LONG-RANGE MISSILES

The United States on Wednesday slapped sanctions on four Pakistani entities, including the state-owned flagship aerospace and defence agency — National Development Complex (NDC) — on charges of them contributing to Pakistan's ballistic missile programme.



In light of the continuing proliferation threat of Pakistan's long-range missile development, the United States is designating four entities for sanctions which targets proliferators of weapons of mass destruction and their means of delivery, the State Department said.

In addition to the NDC, the three other entities are Akhtar and Sons Private Limited, Affiliates International and Rockside Enterprise. All three are based in Karachi, while the NDC is in Islamabad.

The NDC has worked to acquire items in furtherance of Pakistan's long-range ballistic missile programme — including special vehicle chassis intended to be used as launch support equipment for ballistic missiles and missile-testing equipment.

The United States assesses that the NDC is responsible for Pakistan's development of ballistic missiles, including the SHAHEEN-series ballistic missiles, the State Department said.

Akhtar and Sons Private Limited has worked for the NDC to supply a range of equipment to Pakistan's long-range ballistic missile programme. Affiliates International has facilitated procurement of missile-applicable items for the NDC and others in support of Pakistan's ballistic-missile programme.

Rockside Enterprise has worked for the NDC to supply a range of equipment to Pakistan's long-range ballistic missile programme, the State Department said.

All these entities "having engaged, or attempted to engage, in activities or transactions that have materially contributed to, or pose a risk of materially contributing to, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction or their means of delivery (including missiles capable of delivering such weapons), including any efforts to manufacture, acquire, possess, develop, transport, transfer or use such items, by Pakistan," State Department Spokesperson Matthew Miller said.

The NDC — which is responsible for Pakistan's ballistic missile programme and has worked to acquire items to advance Pakistan's long-range ballistic missile programme and Affiliates International, Akhtar and Sons Private Limited, and Rockside Enterprise worked to supply equipment and missile-applicable items to Pakistan's ballistic missile programme, including its long-range missile programme, Miller said.

**DreamIAS**



**NATION****MORE OF THE SAME**

Sri Lankan President Anura Kumara Dissanayake's visit to India, also his first overseas trip in keeping with tradition, marks a continuity in India-Sri Lanka bilateral relations. The joint statement, after his meet with Prime Minister Narendra Modi, covered aspects similar to the one subsequent to the visit of his predecessor, Ranil Wickremesinghe, in 2023. Mr. Dissanayake's assurance that Sri Lanka will not permit its territory to be used in any manner inimical to India's security and regional stability, on the face of it, appears to be a reiteration of Colombo's long-standing position, but it was significant in view of a perception that Mr. Dissanayake's Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) is a Left-leaning pro-China party. India viewed his observation as one that could have a bearing on the clearance for Chinese ships visiting Sri Lanka in the light of the Wickremesinghe government's one-year moratorium (after India's concerns) on all "foreign research vessels" visits ending next month. In the last 10 years or so, the frequent presence of Chinese ships became the main irritant in bilateral ties. It remains to be seen how far the dispensation will be sensitive to India's concerns — the Wickremesinghe's regime took a stand about six months ago that it "cannot only block China".

That the statements of the two leaders or the joint statement did not touch upon the status of projects by the Adani Group was expected. The joint statement talked of India's commitment to help Sri Lanka in areas such as agriculture and the digital economy. The proposal to have a joint working group on agriculture is a welcome development. There was a mention of the proposed Economic and Technological Cooperation Agreement — 14 rounds of negotiations have been held so far. On the fisheries dispute, the two sides apparently stuck to their stated positions but Colombo should help facilitate an early meeting between the fishermen's associations in both countries. More importantly, there seems to be a nuanced shift, going by the English version of Mr. Modi's statement at the joint press conference. There is no reference to the 13th Amendment to the Sri Lankan Constitution, which envisages a measure of autonomy to Provincial Councils, despite Mr. Modi covering matters such as reconciliation, the need for Sri Lanka fulfilling its commitments towards "fully implementing" its Constitution and conducting Provincial Council polls. The JVP ran a virulent campaign against the Amendment, an outcome of the 1987 India-Sri Lanka Accord. As the coalition that Mr. Dissanayake heads secured a massive mandate across the country in the November 14 parliamentary election, he is in a comfortable position to show a new direction to ties with India. It is an opportunity for both countries to resolve their differences.

**Do You Know:**

— India and Sri Lanka share a multifaceted relationship characterized by deep historical ties, economic cooperation, and strategic collaboration. The both nation continues to build upon their historical connections, focusing on economic development, defense cooperation, and cultural exchanges to foster a robust and mutually beneficial partnership.

— In September 2024, Anura Kumara Dissanayake was elected as Sri Lanka's President. Despite his party's historical scepticism towards India, Dissanayake has acknowledged India's crucial role in Sri Lanka's security and economic development. He has not indicated a preference for prioritizing relations with China over India, suggesting a balanced foreign policy approach.

— In July 2024, India and Sri Lanka unveiled a vision for deeper economic ties. Prime Minister Narendra Modi emphasized the importance of fulfilling the aspirations of the Tamil community in



Sri Lanka. The two countries agreed to conduct feasibility studies on a petroleum pipeline and land bridge connectivity, aiming to enhance trade and energy cooperation.

#### INDIA, FRANCE SIGN PACT FOR GRAND MUSEUM IN NORTH, SOUTH BLOCKS

India and France on Thursday signed an agreement towards the “adaptive reuse” of the North and South blocks for the ambitious new national museum project, dubbed to be the largest museum in the world. It is a part of the Central Vista Redevelopment Project and is set to span approximately 1.55 lakh square metre, overtaking The Louvre in Paris, presently the world’s biggest.

It will be implemented in two phases — the first comprising the retrofitting of North Block into a museum space, with an estimated deadline of June 2026 — officials told The Indian Express. The initial mapping of the building has already been done in consultation with officials from the France Museums Development, who will advise on best practices towards the reuse of heritage buildings without having to disturb its character, they said.

As part of the agreement, India and France are collaborating on a comprehensive feasibility study, encompassing museum case studies, interpretive planning, and building programming. “France’s expertise in museum development, exemplified by the Grand Louvre, will play a pivotal role in shaping this project,” said Union Culture Minister Gajendra Shekhawat.

##### **Adaptive reuse mirrors France’s ‘Grands Projets’ initiative**

Under the Central Vista plan, the North Block — which currently houses the offices of Ministries of Finance and Home Affairs — and the South Block are set to be moved to the Common Central Secretariat (CCS) buildings on Janpath. The North Block is likely to be vacated by March 2025, while the South Block, which houses the Prime Minister’s Office and Ministry of External Affairs offices, will be vacated and readied in due course, officials said.

Once it is vacated in the next three months, the Central Public Works Department (CPWD) will restore North Block to its original state by removing all the additions that were made over the years and repairing the high-use areas that have been worn down since the British inaugurated New Delhi in 1931. North Block had around 400 rooms to start with, but over the years, partitions were added and the number doubled. The CPWD will float a tender soon for the restoration of North Block.

Speaking on the occasion, External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar said that India and France see each other as important poles in this multipolar world, calling theirs a “very strong relationship”. “When you hear India and France talk about how we see the world in our way, not necessarily in terms of how others might want to define it, it’s our history and heritage that give us the confidence to take those positions. So when we deepen our cultural collaboration, we are also actually adding to a particular kind of relationship which we believe would create a new and more democratic world government,” Jaishankar added.

#### INDIANS IN GEORGIA: EXPONENTIAL RISE IN STUDENTS, VISITORS, AND FARMERS FROM PUNJAB

India was among the first countries to officially recognise Georgia after its independence from the erstwhile Soviet Union in 1991. Diplomatic relations were established a year later, in 1992, but it



was the visit of Georgian Foreign Minister Irakli Menagarishvili in May 2000, that firmed up India's ties with the small nation located at the crossroads of Eastern Europe and West Asia.

However, it's the people-to-people ties and the constant growing presence of Indian community – farmers, workers, students and now even tourists – that has put Georgia higher on Ministry of External Affairs' engagement agenda. There were merely 2,000 Indians in Georgia in 2016, half of them students, which has now increased 10-fold as per estimates, with 16,000 of them students.

In fact, as per the MEA, "There is a sizeable Indian community mostly from Punjab". In recent years, many Indians have brought investment from Gulf countries and started mid-size businesses such as restaurants and hotels, the ministry says. Consequently, this has also led to an increased number of Indian citizens being employed as workers on such establishments.

Among the 12 people who were tragically found dead due to suspected carbon monoxide poisoning at a restaurant in Georgia on Tuesday, 11 were Indian nationals. All of them hailed from the state of Punjab.

In fact, monthly consular camps are organized by the Indian Embassy in Tbilisi to address all the consular issues of Indian nationals; even as the Embassy was operationalised in July, there's yet to be a full-time ambassador. India's Ambassador to Armenia is still concurrently accredited to Georgia.

As per statistics, around 2,000 Indian citizens resided in Georgia as of July 2016, with almost half being students at the Tbilisi State Medical University. About 200 citizens were employed by Indian companies involved in the infrastructure sector till the time, while others are businessmen, agricultural farmers and workers.

Interestingly, some years ago, a group of Punjabi farmers who emigrated to Georgia noted that they could purchase 200 hectares of land there from the money made by selling just one hectare of land in Punjab. This led to a rush of sorts from the state, with around 150 of them presently owning about 1,500 hectares of agricultural land.

Agricultural land can be acquired on 99-year lease, which can be extended further, owing to the Georgian government's policy of encouraging migration of people with agricultural knowledge.

In 2021, when foreign minister S Jaishankar made his visit to Georgia and interacted with the Indian community, the number of Indian students in the country was roughly 8,000. However, there was an explosion post-2022, in the wake of the Russia-Ukraine war, with thousands of Indian medical students in Ukraine opting for Georgia, which is as economical.

As per the MEA statistics in August 2024, around 16,000 Indian students are studying there. "Georgia hosts more than 16,000 medical students studying in 25 universities (unofficial reports put the figure at 18,000). There are many transfer students from Ukraine as well," it said.

Most go there for medical studies at various universities including Tbilisi State Medical University, European University, Caucasus International University – with over two-dozen universities in the country now accepting Indian students.

With Georgia presenting itself as a more economically viable but equally picturesque alternative to other European countries, the number of Indian tourists is also gaining. As per statistics by the Georgian Embassy, the number of Indian tourists visiting Georgia has grown 64 per cent in six



months of this year compared to last year, which recorded 80,000 Indians visiting Tbilisi and ski resorts around the capital, which became the spot for the Tuesday incident.

Since Georgia is not a member of the European Union, the Schengen Visa doesn't apply there. But the cheaper and simpler eVisa comes in handy for Indian nationals, despite a relatively high rejection rate, say industry experts. While there has been a direct flight between New Delhi and Tbilisi since August 2023, plans are now afoot for a direct flight service from Mumbai as well.

#### OVER 78% OF TOP PAID H-1B APPLICANTS WERE FROM INDIA

In the last four years, more than 78% of the top paid H-1B applicants (whose proposed wage rate exceeded \$1 million per year) were from India. Among the Indians whose wage rate exceeded \$1 million per year, over 25% were women. Also, over 65% of these high-paid H-1B applicants from India were sponsored by relatively smaller companies in the U.S.

Moreover, the salary range of H-1B applicants whose sponsors were U.S.-based companies was in general higher than the salary range of H-1B applicants whose sponsors were India-based companies. The H-1B visa is a non-immigrant visa that allows U.S. companies to employ foreign workers in specialty occupations that require theoretical or technical expertise.

These conclusions are based on data obtained by Bloomberg from the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS). Each April, the USCIS conducts a random lottery to determine which H-1B applicants can proceed to submit visa petitions. Candidates may have multiple registrations submitted by different employers. Once selected, an employer can file an H-1B petition on behalf of the beneficiary. These petitions include details about the proposed job, such as salary and location, and form the basis of the conclusions presented in the story. Only about 1 lakh approved H-1B petitions, filed in the 2021-2024 period, for which all relevant data were available, were taken for the analysis.

While an approved H-1B petition is necessary for obtaining an H-1B visa, it does not guarantee one. After receiving approval from the USCIS, applicants may either apply for an H-1B visa at a U.S. consulate abroad or seek an Adjustment of Status with the USCIS if they are already in the U.S.

#### POSITIVE DIRECTION

The 23rd meeting of the "Special Representatives" (SRs) of India and China — National Security Adviser Ajit Doval and Chinese Foreign Affairs Minister and Senior Politburo member Wang Yi — was a milestone in the restoration of ties since October this year. Although the meeting of SRs is a stand-alone process, meant to look at the broader boundary dispute and resolve differences over the 3,500 kilometre-long Line of Actual Control (LAC), it had been paused since the military standoff in 2020. There were a few firsts too: the two men meeting in their capacities as SRs since 2019, although they have held talks in the interim; such a high-level visit to China and also Mr. Doval travelling to Beijing since 2020. This indicates that the decision to hold the SR talks, as mandated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President Xi Jinping during talks in Kazan in October, is a signal that with only LAC disengagement completed, New Delhi is willing to move ahead on other mechanisms for talks with Beijing, without waiting for the next processes of de-escalation and de-induction. The two sides have agreed to restart the Kailash-Mansarovar Yatra from India, border trade in Sikkim, and data sharing for trans-boundary rivers. Other suspended ties, including direct flights, business and student visa liberalisation, and journalist exchanges, are also understood to be under discussion. On the boundary question, the Doval-Wang talks yielded



what the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs termed as “six consensuses”, and the Ministry of External Affairs referred to as “positive directions” in its release. These involve continuing to implement the LAC de-escalation process; revert to the SR process on resolving the boundary issue according to the Eleven-articles set out in a 2005 agreement; strengthen Confidence Building Measures at the border and cross-border exchanges; enhance coordination of the SR process, and the Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination on India-China Border Affairs to follow up agreements and to hold the next Doval-Wang talks in 2025 in India.

The optics and the messaging of the SR meeting indicate a certain momentum in re-engagement after four years of serious military tensions, and the suspension of regular contact, although bilateral trade continued to thrive. The meeting comes just ahead of 2025, that marks 75 years of diplomatic relations, and a likely visit to China by Mr. Modi as it hosts the next SCO summit. While restoring the links is important, it is necessary to strike a note of caution so that the situation caused by the amassing of troops and LAC transgressions by the PLA in 2020 is not repeated. The government must also ensure more transparency in its conversations with Beijing over the future steps in normalising ties, the dismantling of buffer zones, restoration of status quo ante to 2020, and mechanisms for future deterrence against aggression at the India-China boundary.

## CRIMES AGAINST HUMANITY AND AN OBTUSE INDIAN STANCE

On December 4, 2024, the UN General Assembly (UNGA) adopted a resolution approving the text of a proposed treaty governing the prevention and punishment of crimes against humanity (CAH treaty). This marks the beginning of the negotiation process among states for the conclusion of a CAH treaty. This resolution comes five years after the International Law Commission submitted the draft text of the CAH treaty to the Sixth Committee — the primary forum for considering legal questions in the UNGA. This development is a landmark in the international community’s quest to combat impunity for CAH.

### **There is a gap in accountability**

Alongside genocide and war crimes, CAH are among the grave international crimes which the International Criminal Court (ICC), established under the Rome Statute, seeks to punish. Importantly, genocide and war crimes are also governed by dedicated treaties, i.e., the Genocide Convention of 1948 and the Geneva Conventions of 1949, respectively. However, CAH are governed only under the Rome Statute, which includes specific criminal acts such as murder, extermination, enslavement, deportation, torture, imprisonment, and rape committed as part of a ‘widespread or systematic attack directed against any civilian population, with knowledge of the attack’. CAH were first codified in the 1945 London Charter establishing the Nuremberg Tribunal to investigate and prosecute the crimes committed in connection with the Second World War, and later in the statutes of the International Criminal Tribunal for Yugoslavia, and Rwanda. However, there is no dedicated treaty for CAH yet, creating a gap in terms of accountability in the legal architecture of international criminal justice. There are three reasons justifying the need for a CAH treaty.

First, the jurisdiction of the ICC covers a limited number of states, making it challenging to punish perpetrators of CAH in non-member states. Second, the Rome Statute and the ICC only address individual criminal responsibility. A dedicated CAH treaty would allow for holding states accountable under international law for their failure to prevent the commission of CAH, as is the case with the Genocide Convention of 1948. For instance, in 2019, The Gambia filed a case before the International Court of Justice (ICJ) against Myanmar for alleged violations of the Genocide



Convention against the ethnic Rohingya population. A dedicated CAH treaty would create an obligation for state parties to adopt administrative, legislative, or judicial measures to prevent the commission of CAH. Failure to meet this obligation could become the basis for the ICJ's jurisdiction if the CAH treaty so provides. Third, a CAH treaty presents an opportunity to enlarge the scope of CAH to include, as suggested by various states in the Sixth Committee, starvation of civilian populations, gender apartheid, forced pregnancy, the use of nuclear weapons, terrorism, exploitation of natural resources, and crimes against indigenous populations.

#### **India's stand**

India is not a party to the Rome Statute and has consistently objected to the ICC's jurisdiction over issues such as the powers of the ICC prosecutor, the role of the UN Security Council under the Rome Statute, and the non-inclusion of 'use of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction' as a war crime. Further, India has argued that crimes committed only during armed conflicts — and not those committed during peacetime — should be considered CAH. Moreover, India does not favour the inclusion of 'enforced disappearance' as an act that can constitute CAH. Instead, India advocates for the inclusion of 'terrorism' as an act amounting to CAH. India's response to a CAH treaty aligns with its aversion to the Rome Statute and the ICC. For the last five years, since 2019, India has consistently argued for an 'in-depth study' and thorough discussion on the need for a dedicated treaty. India's stance at the UNGA reflects its scepticism that a CAH treaty might duplicate the already existing regime under the Rome Statute. Further, India takes issue with the exclusion of 'terror-related acts' and the 'use of nuclear weapons' from the definition of CAH in the proposed treaty. Most importantly, reiterating that it is not a party to the Rome Statute, India has stressed at the UNGA that national legislations and the jurisdiction of national courts are more appropriate fora for dealing with CAH and other international crimes.

#### **Lead the way**

Currently, India does not have domestic legislation prohibiting international crimes. In 2018, Justice S. Muralidhar of the Delhi High Court in *State vs Sajjan Kumar* observed that 'neither crimes against humanity nor genocide have been made part of India's criminal law, a lacuna that needs to be addressed urgently'. Nonetheless, there is little or no debate on the need for such laws in the domestic legal and policy spaces. The recent amendments to the criminal law were a missed opportunity to include these crimes in the penal law. This is inconsistent with India's own insistence on the primacy of national and territorial jurisdiction for dealing with CAH. India should incorporate CAH and other international crimes into its domestic law, even if it is not a party to the Rome Statute, and lead the way in ending impunity for grave human rights violations — a role that befits a true Vishwaguru.

### **PERMISSIVE NO MORE**

The Supreme Court's interim order halting the registration of fresh suits across the country regarding disputes of places of worship is a welcome departure from the permissive approach of the judiciary in recent times towards such motivated litigation. A Division Bench, headed by the Chief Justice of India, Sanjiv Khanna, has done well to stop the flow of litigation and interim orders, including those that allow 'surveys' of such sites and structures, while it deals with the challenges to the validity of the Places of Worship (Special Provisions) Act, 1991. The order signifies a deep understanding that this is not about a set of civil disputes but the future of the country's secular character. It is amply clear to right-thinking citizens that the law, which freezes the religious character of all places of worship in the country as they were on the day of Independence, would



want this legislation to remain on the statute book as a bulwark against elements that want to perpetuate the religious divide caused by such disputes. It is unfortunate, and even condemnable, that courts of law have failed to block these suits at a nascent stage by invoking the bar under this law. Instead, they have been allowing applications for surveys, either disregarding the Act and the Court's endorsement of its necessity in past judgments or ruling that the statutory bar does not apply to them.

In the name of reclaiming religious sites lost to invaders, several groups and purported devotees have been moving civil courts and obtaining questionable orders for surveying mosques for evidence that they may have been built on the ruins of destroyed temples. The success of the Ram Janmabhoomi movement was largely due to the political patronage enjoyed by its spearheads, and a final verdict from the Court, which handed over the disputed land to the Hindu litigants while condemning the demolition of the Babri Masjid mosque in December 1992. That the vandals involved in the demolition were acquitted, without any further appeal, added to the triumphalism that marks this movement for altering the status of mosques. This has given rise to further claims in Varanasi, Mathura, and, more recently, Sambhal, among other places that house mosques dating back to the 16th century. A notable feature of this permissive judicial attitude is the complete absence of any understanding of the history of the temple movement that was largely political in character. That judges could entertain obviously baleful and ill-motivated cases is a great cause of concern for those rightfully invested in the secular nature of the country. The criminal imprint on the nation's fabric left by political movements in a religious garb should not be forgotten.

#### FORMULATE POLICY TO MANAGE SACRED GROVES, SC TELLS GOVT.

The Supreme Court Wednesday asked the Centre to create a comprehensive policy for the governance and management of sacred groves across the country while underlining their ecological importance.

- The Supreme Court judgment came on applications dealing with the protection of sacred groves of Rajasthan.
- A bench of Justices B R Gavai, S V N Bhatti and Sandeep Mehta directed that as part of this policy the Union Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change "must also develop a plan for a nationwide survey of sacred groves, by whatever name they are identified in each State."
- "This survey should identify their area, location, and extent, and clearly mark their boundaries. These boundaries should remain flexible to accommodate the natural growth and expansion of these forests while ensuring strict protection against any reduction in size due to agricultural activities, human habitation, deforestation, or other causes."
- While pronouncing the judgement, the Supreme Court also cited a verse from the Bhagavad Gita to underscore the importance of the environment. "Nature is the source of all material things: the maker, the means of making, and the things made. Spirit is the source of all consciousness which feels pleasure and feels pain," the court cited Verse 20 from Chapter 13 of the Bhagwad Gita.
- Writing for the bench, Justice Mehta lauded the Piplantri village in Rajasthan's Rajsamand district, which under the leadership of its Sarpanch Shyam Sundar Paliwal, started the initiative to plant 111 trees for every girl child born.



**Do You Know:**

- Sacred groves, sacred woods, or sacred forests are groves of trees that have special religious importance within a particular culture.
- In India, sacred groves are scattered all over the country, and do enjoy protection. Prior to 2002, these forest regions were not recognized under any of the existing laws. But in 2002 an amendment was brought in Wildlife Protection Act, 1972 to include Sacred Groves under the act.
- “The Piplantri model has had many positive effects. Environmentally, over 40 lakh trees have been planted, which has helped raise the water table by 800-900 feet and cooled the climate by 3-4°C. These efforts have improved local biodiversity and protected the land from soil erosion and desertification.
- The Supreme Court recently said “The Piplantri model has had many positive effects. Environmentally, over 40 lakh trees have been planted, which has helped raise the water table by 800-900 feet and cooled the climate by 3-4°C. These efforts have improved local biodiversity and protected the land from soil erosion and desertification. Economically, the planting of indigenous species of trees like gooseberry, aloe vera, and bamboo has created sustainable jobs. Aloe vera processing, furniture making, and other businesses have increased local incomes, providing work, especially for women, through self-help groups,”
- The Supreme Court bench also pointed out that the model has helped eliminate harmful practices like female foeticide. “The village now has a rare distinction of a higher female population ratio i.e. 52 per cent and ensures that all girls receive education. Financial support through the Kiran Nidhi Yojna 18 has empowered girls and their families, creating a community that celebrates and rejoices on the birth of a girl child rather than resenting it,” the bench added.
- The bench said the Piplantri model “demonstrates how community-driven initiatives can effectively address social, economic, and environmental challenges in a cohesive manner.” “Active measures are required at the Governmental level to ensure that such ideas are implemented/replicated in other parts of the country to promote sustainable development and gender equality. The Central and State Governments should support these models by providing financial assistance, creating enabling policies, and offering technical guidance to communities,” added the bench.

**SC STAYS KERALA HIGH COURT DIRECTIVES ON ELEPHANT PARADES AT TEMPLE FESTIVALS**

Striking a balance between animal rights and temple customs, the Supreme Court on Thursday asked the Thiruvambady and Paramekkavu devaswoms to strictly adhere to the Captive Elephants (Management and Maintenance) Rules, 2012 during Thrissur Pooram while staying any directions issued by the Kerala High Court found contrary to the law.

The two devaswoms, which host the centuries-old annual festival of Thrissur Pooram, had approached the top court challenging the Kerala High Court’s back-to-back orders in November, which included directions that elephants paraded at the festival should maintain an exact distance of three metres from each other.

“How do you expect an elephant to maintain a three-metre distance? They will keep moving. This is impractical,” Justice B.V. Nagarathna, heading a Bench comprising Justice N. Kotiswar Singh,





addressed senior advocate Shyam Divan. He was appearing for V.K. Venkitachalam, a party in the High Court who opposed the devaswoms' appeal.

Senior advocate Kapil Sibal and advocate Abhilash M.R., representing the devaswoms, alleged that the High Court had overstepped judicial boundaries to issue extensive festival-centric directives over and above the 2012 Rules.

“The court cannot go on supplementing. There is a rule-making body. There were no complaints of violations in this case. Directions cannot be issued in vacuum,” Justice Nagarathna observed.

The management committees of the devaswoms and elephant owners have welcomed the stay imposed by the Supreme Court.

#### EXPRESS VIEW ON T M KRISHNA ROW: SC ORDER UNDERMINES ARTISTIC FREEDOM

The Supreme Court's decision to put on hold the recognition of Carnatic vocalist T M Krishna as the recipient of the Sangita Kalanidhi M S Subbulakshmi award until the appeal by M S's grandson V Shrinivasan is decided raises questions about the role of art, free expression, and institutional boundaries. Shrinivasan's contention has been two-fold: That Krishna has besmirched M S's legacy in his writings and that the conferment is violative of her will which forbade the institution of any award, grant or statue in her name. The first is up for debate, the latter only honoured selectively. What the court's interim order has done in the meantime is to needlessly draw the highest court into an arena that is not theirs, undermine civil society's decision to honour an individual and chip away at artistic freedom.

A prestigious honour in Carnatic music, the annual award is a tribute to a singer who transcends boundaries, social and musical, to become a cultural icon. Whether Krishna deserves the award can be debated endlessly — let the naysayers and the cheerleaders argue their case but that's not the point. To argue against his selection on the basis that his views detract from the sanctity of the art form and that his writing has done a disservice to M S's legacy is narrow-spirited and sets a precedent that can undermine any award. In a democracy where contestations in art are de rigueur, Krishna's advocacy for progressive ideals is a daring attempt to break down walls. It defies simplification in much the same way as M S's music did — building bridges, in Krishna's words, between the everyday and the exalted by “reorienting the aesthetics of her art” through a form of calibrated Brahminisation.

Indeed, the apex court, in its interim order, has clarified that the stay is not a reflection of Krishna's “stellar performance”. But the very fact of the stay and that the court has termed the matter “very important and sensitive”, undermines the spirit of artistic freedom and intellectual independence, fundamental to art and artists. Surely, the court's crowded roster doesn't need the extra burden of it playing the jury for award ceremonies. The award to Krishna, in its most meaningful form, is about celebrating the courage to innovate, to challenge, and to speak out. The court should, with all due respect, stay away.

#### COULD THE POSH ACT APPLY TO POLITICAL PARTIES?

The Supreme Court on Monday (December 9) heard a PIL stating that the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013 (POSH Act) should apply to political parties.



The court directed the petitioner, advocate Yogamaya M G, to first approach the Election Commission of India (ECI) as they were the competent authority “to prevail upon the recognised political parties for creation of an in-house mechanism to deal with complaints of sexual harassment” in a way that is consistent with the provisions of the POSH Act.

The POSH Act requires both public and private workplaces to set up an Internal Complaints Committee (ICC) to hear complaints of sexual harassment. The plea in question claims that when it comes to political parties “the presence of Internal Complaints Committees (ICCs) to address sexual harassment is inconsistent”.

This case has sparked a conversation on how the POSH Act applies — if at all — to organisations like political parties, which often lack a traditional workplace structure.

- On the subject of political parties, the court held that there is no “employer-employee relationship with its members” and political parties do not carry out “any private venture, undertaking, enterprises, institution, establishment, etc. in contemplation of a ‘workplace’ (under the POSH Act)”. As such, the court held that political parties “are not liable to make any Internal Complaints Committee”.

#### **Do You Know:**

- The POSH Act requires both public and private workplaces to set up an Internal Complaints Committee (ICC) to hear complaints of sexual harassment. The plea in question claims that when it comes to political parties “the presence of Internal Complaints Committees (ICCs) to address sexual harassment is inconsistent”.
- Section 3(1) of the POSH Act states that “No woman shall be subjected to sexual harassment at any workplace”. This immediately tells us how the POSH Act will apply — at the workplace, and only when the aggrieved party is a woman.
- The definition of “workplace” in the POSH Act is expansive. It includes organisations, institutions, and so on in the public sector which are “established, owned, controlled or wholly or substantially financed by funds provided directly or indirectly by the appropriate Government”, as well as organisations in the private sector, hospitals, nursing homes, sports venues, houses, and even covers locations visited by an employee “during the course of employment”.
- The Representation of People Act, 1951 (RP Act), governs how to register a political party. Under Section 29A “Any association or body of individual citizens of India calling itself a political party” must make an application for registration with the ECI. This application must provide details including the name of the party, the State where its head office is situated, the names of office bearers, details of local units, and number of members.

### **DISROBING OF WOMEN IS A BLOT ON THE CONSTITUTION: SC**

The Supreme Court on Thursday in a judgment said the disrobing, grievous assault and public humiliation committed on two women accused of witchcraft in rural Bihar in 2020 amounted to a blot on the constitutional spirit of equality and dignity.

A Bench of Justices C.T. Ravikumar and Sanjay Karol castigated the Patna High Court for staying criminal proceedings against the accused persons and the Bihar government for not pursuing the case to bring justice to the women.



“Witchcraft is deeply intertwined with superstition, patriarchy and social control, leaving it to no manner of surprise that such allegations were most often directed against women who were either widows or elderly. A variety of reasons are accepted to be the reasons for casting such aspersions — caste-based discrimination, retaliation for defying social norms, etc,” Justice Karol observed in a 19-page judgment.

The court held that each case of inhumane and degrading incidents against women accused of witchcraft potentially went against the spirit of the Constitution.

“Dignity goes to the very core of the existence of an individual in society. Any action which undermines dignity either by an act of another person or that of the State is potentially going against the spirit of the Constitution of India,” the court highlighted, reviving the trial against the accused.

“Incidents such as the one before us, as also many others that come across our desks, keep us alive to the on-ground reality that however much has been done by way of legislative, executive and judicial action to protect vulnerable sections of the society, in this context women, from exploitation, its effect has not permeated to the grassroot level,” the court said.

#### HOW SUPREME COURT, GOVT HAVE ATTEMPTED TO DEFINE IMPORTANCE OF RELIGION IN SC & OBC RESERVATIONS

On Monday (December 9), the Supreme Court orally observed that “Reservation cannot be on the basis of religion”. Justices B R Gavai and K V Viswanathan were hearing a challenge to the Calcutta High Court’s decision in May to strike down reservations granted to 77 classes — predominantly from the Muslim community — within the quota for Other Backward Classes (OBC).

Weeks earlier, on November 26, the Supreme Court refused to recognise the Scheduled Caste (SC) status of a woman after holding that she and her family had converted to Christianity.

Through these instances, the relationship between religion and reservations has once again been brought into focus. Since the Constitution of India came into force in 1950, both the Centre and the Supreme Court have attempted to define the extent to which religion can be considered for providing reservation benefits.

##### **Religion as criteria for OBC reservations**

No express bar exists against identifying religious groups as beneficiaries of OBC or Scheduled Tribe reservations, though efforts to include religious groups or communities within the scope of reservations have largely been in the OBC category.

Article 16(4) of the Constitution gives states the power to provide reservations “in favour of any backward class of citizens which, in the opinion of the State, is not adequately represented in the services under the State”. Kerala for instance, has provided reservations for Muslims within the OBC quota since 1956, and other states including Karnataka (in 1995) and Tamil Nadu (in 2007) have also offered OBC reservations for groups within the Muslim community.

Reservations for Muslims in Karnataka were provided after the Third Backward Classes Commission of the state, chaired by Justice O. Chinnappa Reddy, submitted its report in 1990. The commission found that Muslims “as a whole” could be considered a socially and economically backward class. The Justice Rajender Sachar Committee in 2006 — mandated by the Centre to



draft a report on the social, economic, and educational status of Muslims — found that the representation of Muslim OBCs was “abysmally low” in Central Government departments and agencies, suggesting the “benefits of entitlements meant for the backward classes are yet to reach them”.

The Supreme Court’s landmark judgment in *Indra Sawhney v Union of India* (1992) added a new dimension to the issue. The court stated that the purpose of OBC reservations was to address historical discrimination faced by different groups, and that “No class of citizens can be classified as backward solely by reason of religion, race, caste, sex, descent, place of birth, residence or any of them”. Essentially, the court held that religion and other group identities were relevant, but could not be the sole criteria to provide reservation within the OBC quota.

Based on this ruling, the Calcutta High Court on May 22, 2024, struck down OBC reservations provided to 77 classes — 75 from the Muslim community — stating the reservations were provided without using any “objective criteria” to determine the backwardness of these classes. It also held, “Religion indeed appears to have been the sole criterion for declaring these communities as OBCs”.

### **Religion as a barrier in SC reservations**

Article 341(1) of the Constitution gives the President the power to “specify the castes, races or tribes or parts of or groups within castes, races or tribes which shall for the purposes of this Constitution be deemed to be Scheduled Castes”. Shortly after the Constitution came into force, the President issued The Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order, 1950 (Scheduled Castes order) which contains a list of Scheduled Caste communities in each state.

Importantly, clause 3 of the order states that “no person who professes a religion different from the Hindu, the Sikh or the Buddhist religion shall be deemed to be a member of a Scheduled Caste”. The order was initially restricted to Hindus but was expanded to include SC Hindus who converted to Sikhism (in 1956) and Buddhism (in 1990).

The order was challenged in 1983 by a cobbler named Soosai, who belonged to the Scheduled Caste Adi-Dravida community but was denied access to a government scheme for SCs as he converted to Christianity. He argued that despite converting to Christianity, he was still a member of the Adi-Dravida community.

The court in *Soosai v. Union of India* (1985) did not answer whether a religious convert would retain their caste status after conversion but held this would not be “sufficient” to access SC benefits. Even after conversion, a person must prove that the “handicaps suffered from such caste membership... continue in their oppressive severity in the new environment of a different religions community”, the court said.

Following this decision, the momentum behind including other religious converts — primarily Hindus who converted to Christianity or Islam — within the scope of SC reservations has seen both surges and abrupt halts periodically. In 1996, the P V Narasimha Rao government introduced a Bill to amend the Scheduled Castes order to include Christian converts in the list; it was never tabled.

In 2007, the Ranganath Mishra Commission (created by the Centre in 2004) found that “By all available evidence we do find the caste system to be an all-pervading social phenomenon of India shared by almost all Indian communities irrespective of religious persuasions”. It recommended



that “once a person has been included in a Scheduled Caste list a willful change of religion on his part should not affect adversely his or her Scheduled Caste status”. However, the Centre has disputed the commission’s findings in recent years.

#### Questions for the Supreme Court to answer

There is also potential for change in the realm of SC reservations. In the case of Ghazi Saaduddin v. State of Maharashtra (pending since 2004), the constitutional validity of the 1950 order was challenged again. In 2011, the court delivered an order stating that it would examine its clause 3 and the constitutionality of not including Christians and Muslims alongside Buddhists and Sikhs.

In April 2024, despite objections from the petitioners, the court decided to delay hearing arguments in the case after noting that the Centre had created a commission to examine whether religious converts should retain their SC status. The Centre submitted that it had not accepted the Ranganath Mishra Commission’s 2007 report and created a new commission chaired by former Chief Justice of India K G Balakrishnan. The committee has conducted public hearings in various states and in November 2024 it received an extension till October 2025 to submit its final report.

The Supreme Court is also currently considering whether OBC reservations can be provided to a religious group as a whole. In 2005, the Andhra Pradesh government introduced a law to provide 5% reservations to Muslims within the OBC quota that was subsequently struck down by the AP High Court that same year. Similar to the Calcutta HC ruling, the court held that the government did not use “objective criteria” to label Muslims as a whole as a backward class. Though the SC stated it would hear the case after deciding the challenge to reservations for Economically Weaker Sections, which it did on November 7, 2022, there has been no movement on the matter.

## WHAT IS THE PROCEDURE FOR REMOVING JUDGES?

### The story so far:

Fifty-five MPs of the Rajya Sabha have submitted a motion, for removing Allahabad High Court Judge, Justice Shekhar Kumar Yadav, to Chairman of the Rajya Sabha.

### What is the procedure for removal?

Articles 124 and 217 of the Constitution provide that a judge of the Supreme Court/High Court shall be removed by the President, on the grounds of ‘proved misbehaviour’ or ‘incapacity’ after a motion is passed in each House of Parliament by a majority of the total membership of that House and by a majority of not less than two thirds of the members of that House present and voting (special majority) in the same session. The Constitution does not define the terms ‘proved misbehaviour’ or ‘incapacity.’ The Supreme Court has opined in various cases that wilful misconduct in office, corruption, lack of integrity or any other offence involving moral turpitude would constitute misbehaviour. Incapacity here means a medical condition that may include physical or mental incapacity.

The detailed procedure for removal is provided in the Judges (Inquiry) Act, 1968. It stipulates that a notice of motion for removal should be signed by not less than 50 members in the Rajya Sabha and 100 members in the Lok Sabha. The Chairman or Speaker may after due consideration and consultation admit or refuse to admit the motion. If admitted, a three-member committee will be constituted consisting of Supreme Court/High Court judges and a distinguished jurist. If the Committee, after investigation, absolves the judge of any misbehaviour or incapacity, the motion



pending shall not be proceeded with. If found guilty of misbehaviour or suffering from incapacity, the committee report will be taken up in the Houses of Parliament which would then need to pass the motion with special majority.

#### **What is the current issue?**

Justice Yadav made communally-charged remarks while speaking at an event organised by the Vishwa Hindu Parishad. He is reported to have said the country would be run according to the wishes of the majority. The 'Reinstatement of Values of Judicial Life' adopted by the Supreme Court in 1997, and followed by all the High Courts, mandates that behaviour and conduct of members of the higher judiciary must reaffirm people's faith in the impartiality of the judiciary. The judges should not commit any act of omission or commission that is unbecoming of the high office they occupy. Notably, though the Judges (Inquiry) Bill, 2006 was not passed by the Parliament, it defined 'misbehaviour' to include violation of code of conduct for the judges. This bill proposed imposition of 'minor measures,' like issuing warnings, public or private censure, withdrawal of judicial work for a limited time etc., for misconduct that does not warrant removal.

#### **What is required?**

The Blackstone's ratio in criminal jurisprudence that 'it is better that ten guilty persons escape than that one innocent suffer' can be applied even when it comes to the removal of judges. The stringent process with the requirement of special majority in both houses has resulted in the non-removal of judges even after having been found guilty of misbehaviour by the inquiry committee. This is nevertheless essential to protect the independence of judges while discharging their duties. The Chairman of the Rajya Sabha, against whom himself a notice of motion for removal has been submitted, is unlikely to admit the present motion. The Supreme Court has issued a notice seeking details of the controversial speech made by Justice Yadav. The Judge is likely to appear before the Supreme Court Collegium to explain his stand. It is cardinal that Judges display behaviour that behoves the high constitutional office they hold.

### **LOCKED IN COURT BATTLE, WHY SANGANER OPEN AIR JAIL IS SPECIAL**

A Supreme Court-appointed court commissioner will visit the Sanganer open prison, one of India's largest, on Thursday (December 12).

This is after a dispute arose over the Rajasthan government's plan to build a hospital over some of the land being used by the jail.

During the last hearing on November 25, the Supreme Court appointed the court commissioner to inspect the site and submit a report within four weeks.

#### **What is an open prison?**

The Model Prisons and Correctional Services Act, 2023, defines an open correctional institution, as a "place for confinement of eligible prisoners on such conditions, as may be prescribed under the rules, for giving them more liberty outside a regular prison for facilitating their rehabilitation after release".

Prisons being a state subject, state governments have over the years formed their rules in establishing open jails.



Most states have their own criteria to select convicts eligible for an open jail, usually depending on the nature of their crime, their behaviour and conduct in jail, and how much of their sentence have they completed. Open jails have minimum security and convicts are permitted to venture out for activities including agriculture.

They help in reducing overcrowding in jails and make it easier for prisoners to reintegrate into society once their term is over.

While some open jails are areas marked separately within the closed jails, with the difference being that prisoners here are permitted to venture out for activities, in some states, there are separate colonies set up where prisoners of an open jail live with their spouses but with their movement restricted.

#### **How many open jails are functioning in India?**

The first open jail in independent India was set up in 1949 in a prison in Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh. Similar open-air jails were established in 1952 in other parts of UP.

The All-India Committee on Jail Reform (1980-83), also known as the Justice Mulla Committee, states that it was in 1952 at the Hague Conference that the organisation of open-air camps was suggested. This was to allow prisoners to 'lead a near-community life' after completing a certain portion of their term.

The committee in 1980-83 said there were 28-30 open-air jails in India. It said that while such jails were in existence for nearly half a century, a legal framework on their establishment and function was not present in all states. At that time, only 13 states had included open jails in their rules.

The committee recommended using land near closed prisons for open jails. It also said that open-air jails are work-based, with most engaging prisoners in activities like agriculture and dairy-farming. In some states, prisoners were also engaged in work for private contractors. The committee suggested that such open-air jails should be set up close to public projects, like building of dams. It also said that inmates should have uniform wages, noting that while some states gave wages at par with the community, some were given just 'token wages'.

According to the Prison Statistics of India 2022 — the latest available — the country has 91 open jails in 17 states with a capacity of 6,043 inmates and over 4,473 prisoners lodged. Rajasthan has the highest number of open jails, 41, followed by Maharashtra which has 19, as per the report.

#### **What is special about the Sanganer open jail?**

The Mulla committee in its recommendations had said that open camps like Sanganer should be developed in each state government and union territory as the 'final stage in the open camp movement'. While the Sanganer open jail has undergone many changes since the committee's report, it remains one of the most unique across the world.

The Sanganer open jail or the Sampuranand Khula Bandi Shivir was opened in 1963, named after the former chief minister of Uttar Pradesh and ex-governor of Rajasthan. It has been in continuous operation, since unlike some others that were shut due to prison breaks and other issues. It is located about 15km from the capital city of Jaipur and houses 422 prisoners, including 14 women and their families. Here, prisoners can stay not only with their spouses but with their children as well, and it operates with minimum security.



The inmates pay for the water and electricity and venture out for jobs within the local community, such as running grocery shops. They make and renovate their own homes with money collected through their work.

The prison also has bandi panchayats, where prisoners have set up their own ways of self-governance, including conducting roll calls twice daily, to ensure that all the inmates are back at the end of the day in the open-air camp. They also have access to phones.

The complex has a primary school, which is open to children of nearby localities as well, anganwadis, and a playground.

Unlike other open jails, where prisoners with only a few years of their term left are chosen as inmates, here the criteria is a completion of term of 6 years, 8 months among other conditions, like conduct.

Based on the Sanganer open jail, 52 such open-air camps have come up in Rajasthan, the highest in the country.

#### **What is the dispute before the court?**

The Jaipur Development Authority (JDA) has allocated plots of land for construction of a hospital in Sanganer. On May 17, the Supreme Court had said that areas of open jails should not be reduced. In light of this, a contempt petition was filed by social worker Prasun Goswami, who had worked on opening a primary school at the open-air camp.

The petition claims that the government's plan will affect the entire ecosystem of the successful and one-of-its-kind experiment of an open jail in the country and that the allotted land of 21,948 square meters, is integral to the functioning of the jail.

The state government has said that there is no attempt to reduce the area of the open jail. It also alleged that jail authorities had 'unauthorisedly constructed' certain structures for the prisoners and that additional area will be allotted to the jail to move the prisoners into new shelters.

On November 25, the bench of Justice B R Gavai and Justice K V Vishwanathan said there has to be a balance 'between the needs of having the Open Correctional Home and also a Hospital, which shall cater to the needs of the citizens residing in the vicinity'.

#### **FROSTY AND BITTER**

The first winter session of 18th Lok Sabha ended on December 20 as one of the least productive and most acrimonious in history. The conflict between the government and the Opposition degenerated into a scuffle on the penultimate day, followed by absurd allegations and police reports. The Opposition sent a notice for a motion of no confidence in Rajya Sabha Chairman and Vice-President of India Jagdeep Dhankhar, which was rejected by the Deputy Chairman. The acrimony peaked with the Opposition turning a reference by Home Minister Amit Shah to Dr. B.R. Ambedkar into a stick to beat the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) with. Mr. Shah's misspoken remarks were taken out of context by the Opposition which feels that it is par for the course. After all, the BJP had made ridiculous allegations about the Congress party's supposed link with anti-India forces abroad to stall Parliament proceedings for several days earlier. Productivity in the Rajya Sabha was 40%, as it met for 43 hours and 27 minutes of the schedule. The Lok Sabha functioned for 54.5% of its scheduled time. Both the Houses witnessed protests from the treasury and





Opposition sides over issues such as the alleged interference of U.S. billionaire George Soros in Indian politics, and the U.S. government's actions against the Adani Group.

The session was scheduled to take up 16 Bills in the legislative business and the first batch of supplementary grants under the financial business. Of the 16 Bills, only one Bill, the Bharatiya Vayuyan Vidheyak, 2024, significant for the civil aviation sector, was passed in both Houses. The Rajya Sabha passed the Boilers Bill and the Oilfields (Regulation and Development) Amendment Bill, bringing major changes in the industrial laws governing large furnaces and boilers and the petroleum sector. Other than the Appropriation Bills as part of the supplementary demands for grants, the Lok Sabha discussed and passed the Banking Laws (Amendment) Bill, the Railways (Amendment) Bill and the Disaster Management (Amendment) Bill. The debates saw Opposition members asking the government to protect the public sector banking system, ensure the safety of rail passengers and employees and bring in transparency in the allocation of funds to States hit by natural calamities. The Constitution (One Hundred and Twenty-Ninth Amendment) Bill and the Union Territories Laws (Amendment) Bill, that aim to achieve simultaneous elections in the country, were introduced and referred to a Joint Committee of Parliament. External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar made statements in both Houses on India-China relations. The winter session demonstrated the need for an urgent restoration of parliamentary norms and basic decency in exchanges between political opponents.

#### DID OPPOSITION SCORE A 'WIN' AS GOVERNMENT INTRODUCED 'ONE NATION, ONE ELECTION' BILLS? WHAT THE RULES SAY

Amid strong objections from Opposition INDIA bloc members, the controversial Bills on implementing "One Nation, One Election" were introduced in the Lok Sabha on Tuesday after a division, in other words voting, which saw 269 members favouring their introduction and 198 opposing.

Union Home Minister Amit Shah and Parliamentary Affairs Minister Arjun Ram Meghwal told the House that the government was ready to refer the two Bills to a joint committee of Parliament for detailed consideration.

Several Opposition MPs had given notices opposing the introduction of the Bills. Clauses 72(1) and 72(2) of the Rules of Procedure and Conduct of Business in the Lok Sabha allow any member to give prior notices opposing the introduction of a Bill.

Congress MP Shashi Tharoor hit out at the government, saying voting at the introduction stage of two Bills showed the BJP did not have the two-thirds majority required to pass the Constitutional amendment.

"We (the Congress) are not the only ones that have opposed this Bill. The vast majority of the Opposition parties have opposed this Bill and the grounds are very many, it is a violation of the federal structure of the Constitution. Why should a state government fall if the Central government falls?" he told reporters on Parliament premises.

"My view is that this entire thing is a folly. In any case, the votes today have demonstrated that the BJP does not have the two-third majority required to pass a constitutional amendment," he said.

Though Opposition MPs claimed victory saying that the government could not secure a two-thirds majority for introducing the Bills, former Lok Sabha secretary general P D T Achary told The Indian Express that a special majority, which means a majority of more than 50% of the total



membership of the House and a majority of two-thirds of the members of the House present and voting, was not required for the introduction of a Constitution Amendment Bill. A reading of parliamentary rules shows that a Bill, even if it is a Constitution Amendment Bill, does not require a special majority at the stage of introduction or while being referred to a Select or Joint Committee. A special majority is required only in the subsequent stages.

Article 368 on Parliament's power to amend the Constitution says, "An amendment of this Constitution may be initiated only by the introduction of a Bill for the purpose in either House of Parliament, and when the Bill is passed in each House by a majority of the total membership of that House and by a majority of not less than two-thirds of the members of that House present and voting, it shall be presented to the President who shall give his assent to the Bill and thereupon the Constitution shall stand amended in accordance with the terms of the Bill."

M N Kaul and S L Shakhder's Practice and Procedure of Parliament also says "taking a strict interpretation of the constitutional provision, the special majority prescribed therein may be required only for voting at the third reading stage, but by way of caution the requirement for special majority has been provided for in the rules in respect of all the effective stages of the Bill, e.g., motion that the Bill be taken into consideration; motion that the Bill as reported by the Select or Joint Committee be taken into consideration; for passing of clauses and schedules to the Bill; and the motion that the Bill be passed. Thus, motions that the Bill be circulated for eliciting public opinion thereon or that the Bill be referred to a Select or Joint Committee are passed by simple majority only."

#### **What do the rules say?**

Rule 157 of the Rules of Procedure and Conduct of Business in Lok Sabha, in the chapter Bills seeking to amend the Constitution, clearly lays down the process. "If the motion in respect of such Bill is that: (i) the Bill be taken into consideration; or (ii) the Bill as reported by the Select Committee of the House or the Joint Committee of the Houses, as the case may be, be taken into consideration; or (iii) the Bill, or the Bill as amended, as the case may be, be passed; then the motion shall be deemed to have been carried if it is passed by a majority of the total membership of the House and by a majority of not less than two-thirds of the members present and voting," it says.

As for voting by division, Rule 158 says, "Voting shall be by division whenever a motion has to be carried by a majority of the total membership of the House and by a majority of not less than two-thirds of the members present and voting."

And "if the result of the voting shows that the majority of the total membership of the House and the majority of not less than two-thirds of the members present and voting are in favour of the motion, the Speaker shall, while announcing the result, say that the motion is carried by a majority of the total membership of the House and by a majority of not less than two-thirds of the members present and voting".

### **WHY SIMULTANEOUS ELECTIONS ARE IMPRACTICAL AND COMPLICATED**

The Winter Session of the Lok Sabha is currently underway. The introduction of the two Bills which would enable simultaneous elections in the country, mainly the Constitution (One Hundred and Twenty-Ninth Amendment) Bill 2024 and the Union Territories Laws (Amendment Bill) 2024,



have now been postponed to a later date. In this article, Gautam Bhatia, explains the problem with such a concept.

In recent weeks, there has been increasing discussion about the possibility of having national and State elections at the same time, popularly known as 'one nation, one election'. The formation of a committee, helmed by a former President of India, Ram Nath Kovind, to determine how this might be implemented, and what manner of constitutional changes might be required to make it a legal reality, have generated further debate. The primary arguments in favour of simultaneous elections are twofold: first, that it will decrease the costs of conducting elections (and of electioneering); and second, that it will free up political parties from being in 'permanent campaign mode', and allow them to focus on governance (and, for that matter, constructive opposition) for a five-year period.

### Point and counterpoint

Against this, critics have pointed out that when you crunch the numbers, the actual financial savings are relatively minuscule. Furthermore, it is a relatively recent pathology of the Indian political system that central government Ministers and politicians spend a significant amount of time campaigning in State elections: if the concern, therefore, is that frequent State elections hamper governance and the business of Parliament, then simultaneous elections seem a needlessly complicated answer when a simple one is available: that State elections should be primarily fought by State party units, while national politicians can get on with the task of governance. The reality, however, is that the increasingly centralised — and presidential — character of Indian election campaigns means that this is unlikely to be a reality in the near future.

Critics of simultaneous elections have raised a few other objections. First, the logistical nightmare of conducting simultaneous elections in a country of a little over 1.4 billion people, in a context where even State elections need to take place in multiple phases.

The second, and graver concern, is the incompatibility of a rigid election timetable with some of the fundamentals of parliamentary democracy: as is well-known, at the time of Independence, central and State elections were conducted simultaneously. This arrangement broke down towards the end of the 1960s because of the use of Article 356 of the Constitution, which authorises the Union to suspend (or even dismiss) State governments in a narrowly-defined range of circumstances; but also, and apart from that, the essence of parliamentary democracy is that at all times, the government must enjoy the confidence of the House, failing which it must step down, and go back to the people for a fresh mandate.

Consequently, it is obvious that even if, legally and practically, one is able to synchronise central and State elections for one cycle, this will break down the moment a government falls. To this, two solutions have been proposed, both of which tend to make the problem worse. The first is that President's Rule (that is, central rule) will be imposed in that State until the five-year-period is over. Needless to say, this will starkly undermine both federalism and democracy. The second is that elections will be held in that State, but the term of the new Assembly will only be until the next cycle (which could be in a year, or three years, or four years). Not only does this undercut both the justifications for simultaneous elections — cost and an avoidance of continuous campaign — but, rather, leads to perverse incentives (for example, how much 'governance' will a State government be able to do if elections are scheduled in a year?).



### The possibility of 'horse-trading'

The upshot of this is that there will be a strong push towards avoiding the fall of a government, even when it has lost the confidence of the House in the ordinary course of things. And, as we have seen in India, there is an almost institutionalised remedy for this: defections, or "horse-trading". It is, by now, clear that the Tenth Schedule's prohibition on horse-trading has been rendered more or less a dead letter, as politicians have found various ways to get around this (and courts have not been successful in stopping it). Thus, as was pointed out by lawyer and parliamentarian Kapil Sibal in an interview recently, simultaneous elections are likely to see an explosion of horse-trading, where the political parties with the biggest pockets will be the biggest beneficiaries.

While these intractable issues speak to the implementation of simultaneous elections, at a deeper level, there are two principled and interrelated arguments against the idea: federalism and democracy.

First, let us take federalism. Over the years, it has increasingly come to be accepted that Indian federalism is not simply a matter of administrative convenience but also a matter of principle that recognises the legitimacy of linguistic, cultural, ethnic, and other forms of collective aspiration, through the grant of Statehood. In this context, there is, of course, Indian democracy at the central level, but also, at the level of each State, democracy takes its own set of claims, demands, and aspirations. Simultaneous elections risk a blurring of these distinct forums and arenas of democracy, with the risk that State-level issues will be subsumed into the national (this is inevitable, given the cognitive dominance of the national, as well as the fact that national-level parties frequently campaign in a national register, for understandable reasons).

### Keeping absolute power in check

A related point is that in our constitutional scheme, the federal structure is an important check upon the concentration of power (buttressed by the existence of the Rajya Sabha at the central level).

The federal structure, in turn, is sustained by a plurality of democratic contests, and a plurality of political outfits, at the State level. Simultaneous elections, for the reasons pointed out above, risk undermining that plurality, and risk precisely the kind of concentration of power that federalism is meant to be a bulwark against.

Second, on democracy: despite the ringing words with which the Preamble of the Constitution begins, the "People" have very little space in the Constitution, especially when it comes to exercising control over their representatives. Unlike many other Constitutions, where public participation in law-making is a guaranteed right, along with other rights such as the right to recall, in the Indian constitutional scheme, elections are the only form of public participation in the public sphere. There is a different conversation to be had about why this is not enough, but given this framework, relatively regular and frequent elections allow for more extended public participation and debate; simultaneous elections would shrink this scope substantially, without any countervailing changes to deepen it in other domains.

Therefore, it is clear that the administrative benefits from simultaneous elections are overstated at best, and non-existent at worst. However, the costs, both in the implementation and in the concept itself, are significant, and create non-trivial risks when it comes to protecting and preserving the federal and democratic design of the Constitution. These, therefore, are good reasons why the idea is a bad one, and ought not to be acted upon.



## ELECTRONIC DISTRACTION

After consecutive electoral losses, in the Haryana and Maharashtra Assembly elections, the Congress has raised the tempo with regard to its concerns about electronic voting machines (EVM). While there are numerous issues related to the integrity of elections that the Election Commission of India (ECI) needs to come clean on, the risk of electronic tampering with EVMs is not among them. The Congress is barking up the wrong tree — that too selectively and only when it loses. Some of its party leaders have publicly expressed the view that there is no evidence that suggests the risk of manipulation, remotely or through pre-programming. At least two Opposition leaders, NC leader and J&K Chief Minister Omar Abdullah, and Trinamool Congress leader Abhishek Banerjee, have distanced themselves from the allegations. To assume that EVMs are so elaborately and precisely manipulated that the BJP wins in some States and loses in some others in a detailed conspiracy, defies logic. After all, the BJP ended up short of a majority in the 2024 general election. Moreover, all these results, particularly those of Haryana, Maharashtra and Jharkhand are well explained by the social and political dynamics at play.

By repeatedly raising the spectre of EVM manipulation, the real and serious questions of election integrity are being overlooked. Among them, the possibility of old style, manual capture of EVMs in booths dominated by one party and where polling agents of opponents are absent. This is pertinent against the backdrop of questions about a massive turnout recorded in many places in the closing hours of polling. This trend has not yet been satisfactorily explained by the ECI. Large-scale additions and deletions of voter names are now a pattern, and the ECI seems to be brazening it out. In Delhi, where elections are now due, allegations of the selective removal of Muslim voters have surfaced. In the Uttar Pradesh by-elections, partisan police actions that restrained voters expected to vote against the BJP have been controversial. The scheduling of elections is another serious question that the ECI has been less than transparent about. For a country that is preparing to conduct all elections in one go, it scheduled the three recent Assembly elections in two batches, and the BJP is the one party that gained the benefits. As is evident, some of these issues are local, some related to the vast capacity gap between the BJP and the Opposition while some others are squarely in the court of the ECI. The Opposition needs to focus on the real questions of election integrity, and an EVM scare should not act as a distraction.

## WHY THE LEGACY OF JAWAHARLAL NEHRU ENDURES EVEN NOW

At the end of a two-day debate on the Indian Constitution in Parliament, Prime Minister Narendra Modi critiqued previous Congress governments stating that former Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru started the “subversion” of the Constitution with his amendment to the fundamental right to expression. The External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar, in another venue, similarly critiqued Nehru saying that the current government was trying to correct the ‘Nehru foreign policy’. This article, dated December 4, 2021, by Neera Chandhoke tries to explain why Nehru is more important than ever now.

An otherwise ordinary ‘first’ speech given by India’s fourteenth President, Ram Nath Kovind, would have gone unremarked, except for one notable omission. The name of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, arguably the foremost leader of the freedom struggle, and India’s first Prime Minister, was spectacularly missing from the inventory of prominent Indians listed by the President. Though the government under Prime Minister Narendra Modi has gone to extraordinary lengths to eliminate references to the architect of democratic India, we expect the head of state to stand above partisan party politics. There is cause for disappointment.



A few days after Mr. Kovind's speech, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) published a largish booklet to celebrate the birth centenary of Deen Dayal Upadhyaya. In the section on great leaders of India, 'Mahapurush', the names of Nehru as well as Mahatma Gandhi are conspicuous by their absence. Almost 10 lakh senior school students in Uttar Pradesh are forced to study the booklet, appear for an exam, and be rewarded if they perform well. Many of the 'great men' listed in the booklet have never taken part in the freedom struggle, and never been jailed for combating colonialism, unlike Nehru and the Mahatma. But their names occupy pride of place in oral and written histories authored by the BJP. Leaders who fought for Independence are simply written off.

### **The historical perspective**

The belittling of Pandit Nehru is odd, because the standing of the current Prime Minister is not validated by writing out a previous Prime Minister from the annals of history. The future will judge both leaders on their own merit, their success or their failure in managing a complex and plural society, their credentials as democrats, and their political, economic, and strategic visions. Both have a place in modern India. What that place is, will be decided by history. The current dispensation should take the art of history writing seriously and not reduce it to pamphleteering. History is important for collective self-understanding, because it enables us to understand where we have come from, and how we got from 'there' to 'here'. Without competent histories that allow us to understand our collective past and present, and help us generate visions for the future, entire generations will lose their bearings.

What the philosopher Jürgen Habermas calls the 'public use of history' should be, for this reason, subjected to strong evaluations. Since the craft has a bearing on the human condition, we ought to distinguish between histories that inspire a democratic, critical sensibility to contain and challenge authoritarianism, from those that feed appetites for absolute power. History, of course, must narrate tales of tyrants and despots, so that we take care not to repeat the errors of the past. But it must also chronicle tales of the triumph of the human spirit, and inspire us to struggle against totalitarianism and suppression of individual freedom.

For the ruling class, history should be important, because it reminds them that absolute power, often won at the expense of human freedom, does not endure. Unexpected moments arise in the life of a society when its members clamour for change, when existing gods are brought down, and new ones erected in their place, condemned to wait for their own downfall. All of us should be wary of changing tides of fortune.

Fortune, wrote the 16th century political theorist of Florence, Niccolò Machiavelli, is unpredictable and inexplicable. She is an active sharer in man's making of history, she produces the unforeseen, and she will never be dominated, but will dominate men. That is why Machiavelli advised the Prince of Florence to study history. The public role of history is to remind rulers that fortune is fickle. After all, Nehru, who once led India to freedom, is vilified in his own country by the benighted cyberspace industry. This is short-sighted, because to unremember the man is to forget that there is an alternative to narrow and energy-consuming nationalism.

Despite all attempts, Nehru continues to be remembered by many for his contribution to the institutionalisation of democracy, establishing institutions of excellence, and his conviction that poverty and inequality in India cannot be tackled by the market. There is, however, more to a good society: solidarity with struggling people within and outside the country.

Nehru, as one of the most distinguished leaders of Third World solidarity, reached out to the rest of the colonised world, and forged a joint front against colonialism and a reinvented imperialism.



He was, by temperament and experience, a cosmopolitan. His frequent visits to Europe, his deep familiarity with the past, and his understanding of the contemporary ideologies of the day, from liberalism to Fabian socialism, to communist internationalism, had convinced him that the future of India was incomplete without the liberation of other colonies.

### **Role of intellectual journeys**

Nehru's commitment to the independence of the Third World had been shaped by intellectual journeys through history, as well as participation in a number of international conferences such as the Congress of Oppressed Nationalities in Brussels in 1927. He played a prominent role in the 1955 Bandung Conference, which set the stage for the emergence of a new bloc, and a new ideology in global affairs. Representatives of 29 countries from the global South, comprising well over a billion people, met to consider and debate on how they could help each other to neutralise the harmful effects of colonialism, and bring economic and social well-being to their people. Towering over leaders who had won their political spurs by piloting their countries to independence were Nehru, Kwame Nkrumah, the Prime Minister of Ghana, Gamal Abdel Nasser, the President of Egypt, Zhou Enlai, the Premier of China, and Ho Chi Minh, the Prime Minister of Vietnam. The agenda included every topic over which the colonised and the newly decolonised world had agonised for decades — religion, colonialism, sovereignty, and world peace. The Bandung meeting sparked off reflections on the distinct attractions of non-alignment, and of the strengths that a movement of the non-aligned could acquire in global forums.

### **A deep cosmopolitanism**

Interestingly, if one strand of anti-colonial nationalism focussed on the idea and the imaginaries of the nation, the second moved away from processes of closed identity formation towards other ways of being in the world. Nehru's cosmopolitanism acknowledged that our political identities are forged in and through conversations not only with people who are like us, but people who belong to other cultures, other countries, other societies, and other traditions, but who are like us in many ways.

Contemporary history has not treated this statesman kindly. This is a great pity because today's generation might know what globalisation is, but not what cosmopolitanism is about. Even as our society globalises at a frenetic pace, it has turned inwards and become claustrophobic. History must remember Nehru, he taught us to look outwards, to express solidarity, and to become, in the process, cosmopolitans. We must remember him because we have lost out on something that is rather important, teaching our children that our imaginations and our energies should be harnessed to the cause of the oppressed over the world, that closed-in societies lead to stagnation if not to certain death, and that such societies circumscribe imaginings and truncate visions.

We have, perhaps, become lesser human beings.

## **PM MODI RECALLS 1948 DEBATE ON UNIFORM CIVIL CODE: WHAT AMBEDKAR, KM MUNSHI SAID**

Prime Minister Narendra Modi renewed his pitch for a nationwide Uniform Civil Code (UCC) on Saturday (December 14), recalling the views of veteran leaders Dr BR Ambedkar and KM Munshi on the matter.

- During a discussion in Lok Sabha on the “Glorious Journey of 75 Years of the Constitution of India”, Modi said, “The Constituent Assembly engaged in a long and deep discussion on the UCC.

**3<sup>RD</sup> FLOOR AND 4<sup>TH</sup> FLOOR SHATABDI TOWER, SAKCHI, JAMSHEDPUR**



They decided that it would be good for the future elected government to... implement the UCC in the country. That is what they directed... Babasaheb Ambedkar greatly advocated for ending religion-based personal laws.”

- He added: “(Congress leader) KM Munshi described the UCC as being integral for national unity and modernisation.” The PM said that keeping in mind the sentiments of the people who drafted the Constitution, the government was exerting its full force to have a “secular civil code”.
- UCC refers to the idea of a common set of laws governing personal matters (succession, marriage, etc.), instead of the current system, where different religious communities in India come under different sets of personal laws. It has been debated since the inception of the Indian Constitution.

**Do You Know:**

- The debate in the Constituent Assembly on November 23, 1948, focused on a draft Article on the UCC, to be included in the “Directive Principles of State Policy”. This section included the broad ideas that the state ought to incorporate in policymaking, though it would not be legally bound to abide by them. Draft Article 35 said, “The State shall endeavour to secure for the citizens a uniform civil code throughout the territory of India” and was put to vote.
- During the debate, Munshi supported having a UCC and countered its criticism, about it being “tyrannical” to minorities. “Is it tyrannical? Nowhere in advanced Muslim countries the personal law of each minority has been recognised as so sacrosanct as to prevent the enactment of a Civil Code.”
- He also addressed the Hindus, saying, “I know there are many among Hindus who do not like a uniform Civil Code, because they take the same view as the honourable Muslim Members who spoke last. They feel that the personal law of inheritance, succession etc. is really a part of their religion. If that were so, you can never give, for instance, equality to women.
- Munshi also linked UCC with national unity. “There is one important consideration which we have to bear in mind – and I want my Muslim friends to realise this – that the sooner we forget this isolationist outlook on life, it will be better for the country. Religion must be restricted to spheres which legitimately appertain to religion, and the rest of life must be regulated, unified and modified in such a manner that we may evolve, as early as possible a strong and consolidated nation...”
- Ambedkar said during this debate that he would not discuss the merits or demerits of India having a UCC, but advocated for Article 35.

**EXPRESS VIEW ON BATTLE OVER AMBEDKAR: DEBATE HIS LEGACY, DON'T INDULGE IN SOUND-BYTE TOKENISM**

In the wake of Parliament’s spirited debate over what the Constitution means, the government and the Opposition have now grappled — even literally — in the name of B R Ambedkar. Two BJP MPs, Pratap Chandra Sarangi and Mukesh Rajput, are in hospital. The party alleges they were shoved by senior Congress leader Rahul Gandhi. The main Opposition party in Parliament, in turn, has accused BJP members of obstructing Opposition leaders from entering Parliament and injuring party chief Mallikarjun Kharge and other Congress members. At the centre of the row is Union Home Minister Amit Shah’s remarks in which he referred to B R Ambedkar and mocked





what he suggested was the Congress's lip service to Ambedkar. This criticism is par for the Parliamentary course but Shah, not exactly known for the lyrical flourish, crudely framed his critique unbecoming of his stature in a party that regularly invokes Babasaheb in its post-2014 zeal. "There is a fashion to keep repeating 'Ambedkar, Ambedkar'...if the Opposition had taken God's name so often, they would have reached heaven," he said calling out the Congress for not giving "Babasaheb his due". For the Opposition bloc, recently fractured over how to take on the ruling party after the Maharashtra debacle, Shah's remarks serve as an instant glue, at least for now; for the Congress, its outrage reinforces its new-found social justice plank.

Ambedkar wouldn't have minded. In the more than 30 years of his public life, he contested the ideas and actions of almost every major political stream of his times, including the Congress and the Jana Sangh and the Hindu Mahasabha. The Congress's ideological clashes with him are well known. As is the fact that the opposition of the BJP's forebears to the Hindu Code Bill pushed Ambedkar to resign from the Nehru cabinet. It's, however, a testament to his prescience that six decades after his death, nearly every political party in the country professes to embrace Ambedkar. The growing tide of social justice since the 1990s and the imperative of every party to reach out to the marginalised and oppressed, mean that Ambedkar's ideas today are part of the discourse on the Left, Right and the Centre. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has often said that without Ambedkar he would not have been in office and the BJP regularly invokes Babasaheb in its outreach to the Dalit and marginalised communities. Likewise, Congress today claims to speak for his legacy. In recent years – especially during the Lok Sabha elections — Rahul Gandhi has often referred to "Ambedkar's Constitution" to restore the party's fraying links with the Dalit constituency. The Opposition's campaigns for a caste census carry Ambedkar's name.

Clearly, his appeal and significance transcend his original constituency. That's why competitive populism, even posturing, co-exist with campaigns for constitutionalism, human rights and social justice in Ambedkar's name. The contesting claims to his legacy attest to the vibrance of democracy that he helped secure. Impassioned debates — even occasionally raucous ones — would have certainly made him proud but the unseemly push and shove and the deafening sound-byte tokenism don't do him justice.

#### DECODE POLITICS: FROM 'ALARM' TO 'ADORATION', HOW RSS, BJP EVOLVED IN THEIR VIEW OF B R AMBEDKAR

The showdown in Parliament between the BJP and the Opposition over Union Home Minister Amit Shah's remarks allegedly insulting B R Ambedkar has brought into focus the ruling party's embrace of India's first Law Minister who riled Hindu nationalists with his attacks on the caste system and his embrace of Buddhism towards the end of his life.

In recent decades, the BJP and the RSS's move towards celebrating Ambedkar, who was fondly called Babasaheb by his followers, has been driven by changing political and social imperatives. As it rose in a vacuum left by an increasingly weakened Congress, the BJP has attempted to bring all Hindu castes, including Dalits, under the fold of Hindutva — constantly redefining its position on Ambedkar.

#### **What was the relationship between Ambedkar and Hindu nationalists?**

B R Ambedkar alarmed Hindu nationalists by declaring at the Depressed Classes Conference in Bombay on October 13, 1935, that while he was born a Hindu, he would "not die in the Hindu religion". The following year, at a conference of Mahars (the Dalit community to which he



belonged), Ambedkar rattled the Hindu orthodoxy again by repeating his advocacy for changing religion.

Keith Meadowcroft of St Thomas University in Canada, in his 2006 paper “The All-India Hindu Mahasabha, untouchable politics, and ‘denationalising’ conversions: the Moonje–Ambedkar Pact”, captures the commotion Ambedkar’s renunciation of Hinduism caused among Hindu nationalists.

The paper reveals how N D Savarkar, younger brother of former Mahasabha president V D Savarkar, arranged a meeting between Ambedkar and “well-known Hindu religious preacher” Masurkar Maharaj. The Mahasabha’s 17th session, held in Poona a couple of months after Ambedkar’s threat in 1935, sought to strategise to checkmate the conversion threat.

Such was the antagonism against Ambedkar and his ideas that in early 1936, the Jat Pat Todak Mandal, a Lahore-based organisation associated with the Arya Samaj and the Hindu Mahasabha, rescinded Ambedkar’s “Annihilation of Caste” lecture in early 1936 because of objections from senior Punjab Hindu Mahasabhites, including Bhai Parmanand. Ambedkar went on to get his speech printed as a book, which to this day is regarded as a treatise on caste.

Mahasabha leaders had to swallow their antagonism and, in June 1936, deputed the outfit’s former president, B S Moonje, for negotiations with Ambedkar to settle the crisis.

Ambedkar, however, was in touch with one Mahasabha leader: V D Savarkar. The latter, while praising his work, also wanted some kind of collaboration but it did not materialise.

“Through his commentaries and articles, published in different newspapers, Savarkar backed Ambedkar’s initial agitations in Mahad and Nashik that argued untouchability was against the Hindu ethos and humanity. Ambedkar was aware of Savarkar’s work and activism in Ratnagiri district, where he was confined. At times, he even congratulated him — through personal correspondence and his periodicals — for his work. Yet, this never translated into a political alliance, and the 1951 manifesto of Ambedkar’s Scheduled Castes Federation clearly said the party would not have any alliance with ‘reactionary forces’ such as the Hindu Mahasabha and RSS,” says Prabodhan Pol of the Manipal Academy of Higher Education, whose doctoral thesis was on Ambedkar.

### **What happened when the Hindu Code Bill was brought?**

Hindu nationalists’ deep suspicion of Ambedkar continued after Independence, when, as Law Minister, he pushed for reforms in Hindu personal laws through the Hindu Code Bill. Bharatiya Jana Sangh founder Syama Prasad Mookerjee and the RSS saw the Bill as a “threat to Hindu culture”.

In a series of articles and editorials, the RSS-linked periodical Organiser launched a tirade against the Bill. “We oppose the Hindu Code Bill. We oppose it because it is a derogatory measure based on alien and immoral principles. It is not a Hindu Code Bill. It is anything but Hindu. We condemn it because it is a cruel and ignorant libel on Hindu laws, Hindu culture and Hindu Dharm,” said an editorial in Organiser in 1949.

In 1951, when Parliament stalled his draft of the Bill under pressure from Hindu nationalists and Congress conservatives, Ambedkar resigned from the Jawaharlal Nehru Cabinet. Even after the Jana Sangh wound up after its merger with the Janata Party in 1977, it did not invoke Ambedkar. However, Vajpayee did back Jagjivan Ram as Prime Minister when the Janata Party won the elections – something that, if accepted, could have given India its first Dalit PM.

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### **How did the RSS position on Ambedkar start to shift?**

The RSS always had Hindu unity as its vision but it took decades for it to fully accept institutional safeguards for disadvantaged groups. While the large-scale conversion of Dalits led by Ambedkar was a setback for this vision, it started invoking Ambedkar and Dalits after the Meenakshipuram incident in 1981, when hundreds of lower-caste Hindus in Tamil Nadu's Tirunelveli district converted to Islam.

In 1981, the Akhil Bharatiya Pratinidhi Sabha (ABPS), the highest decision-making body of the RSS, called for a special committee of "non-partisan social thinkers" to evaluate who should be included in reservation and for how long. The ABPS both endorsed reservation for the present and called for transcending it in the future.

The Sangh also started organising Hindu Samagams, or gatherings, in different places. At an event in Maharashtra on April 14, 1983, the RSS marked both the birthdays of Ambedkar and its founder K B Hedgewar. In 1990, the Sangh marked the centenary year of Ambedkar and Dalit reformer Jyotiba Phule and the ABPS passed a resolution saying "these two great leaders dealt deadly blows to the evil practices and conventions prevailing in Hindu society".

### **What was the political context in which this shift happened?**

It happened at a time when the Congress started weakening in north India. In 1989, V P Singh, supported by the BJP, came to power and his government started to project Ambedkar to wean away the captive Dalit votes of the Congress.

Ram Vilas Paswan, who was an influential minister in the V P Singh-led Janata Dal government, recounted how it took a series of steps in quick succession to recognise Ambedkar's legacy, including installing his portrait in the Central Hall of Parliament, conferring the Bharat Ratna posthumously, and bringing the SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act.

### **How does the BJP see Ambedkar now?**

The celebration of Ambedkar has continued on a large scale under the current government. The BJP's success in the Modi years is, to a large degree, due to its ability to keep together its core upper-caste base and provide greater representation to Dalits, Other Backward Classes (OBCs), and Adivasis. Central to this is the invocation that it upholds Ambedkar's legacy.

In the Lok Sabha on Saturday, Union Minister Kiren Rijiju said the Modi government "gave prominence to five teerth sthals (places of pilgrimage) related to Dr Ambedkar", including his birthplace in Mhow in Madhya Pradesh, the house in London where he lived, a Babasaheb Ambedkar International Memorial that has come up, and the development of the Chaitya Bhoomi in Mumbai. "A 430-foot statue of Ambedkar is coming up in Mumbai. It will be visible from 25-30 km away too," he said.

Almost a decade ago, during the 2015 Bihar elections, when RSS sarsanghchalak Mohan Bhagwat took the 1981 line and called for a review of reservation by a panel of "non-partisan observers", it was seen as damaging for the BJP. With two phases of polling over and another three phases to come, Bhagwat quickly course-corrected and praised Ambedkar in the RSS chief's traditional Vijayadashami address. He ended the speech with the slogan "Hindu-Hindu ek rahein, bhed-bhaav ko nahi sahein (All Hindus must unite, must not tolerate discrimination)".



On September 6 this year, Bhagwat said in Nagpur that reservation should continue for as long as there is discrimination in society.

#### DECODE POLITICS: MANIPUR SAYS 'PROTECTED AREA REGIME' BACK AFTER 13 YEARS. WHAT IT MEANS

The Manipur government announced Wednesday that the Centre has re-imposed 'Protected Area Regime' or 'Protected Area Permit' in the state as well as in Mizoram and Nagaland, all three of them bordering Myanmar.

The statement by the BJP government in Manipur said the move, bringing back the restrictions after 13 years, was necessitated in the light of security concerns over influx from neighbouring countries. The Manipur government has held alleged illegal immigration from Myanmar as one of the prime factors responsible for the ongoing conflict in the state.

The Manipur government said the Centre had reimposed PAR via a communication sent to Chief Secretaries of the three states, saying relaxations were being withdrawn "with immediate effect".

Incidentally, senior officials in both Mizoram and Nagaland told The Indian Express that they had not received any directions to this effect from the Union Home Ministry yet. "Whatever we know about this, we have only seen in media reports. We are still awaiting these directions," a top Home Department official from Nagaland said. A top official in Mizoram also said the same.

The Union Home Ministry is also yet to notify a change in the existing guidelines which exclude these three states from the PAR as of now.

According to the Union Home Ministry's guidelines, a foreign national is not allowed to visit a 'Protected Area', as laid down in the Foreigners (Protected Areas) Order, 1958, "unless it is established to the satisfaction of the Government that there are extraordinary reasons to justify such a visit". The guidelines also specify certain areas within the Protected Areas which can be visited by tourists with a permit. For grant of Protected Area Permits for reasons other than tourism, prior permission is needed from the Union Ministry of Home Affairs.

Prior permission from the Ministry is also required for permits for tourism in areas not opened for tourism.

Till 2011, this regime extended to all of Arunachal Pradesh, Sikkim, Manipur, Mizoram and Nagaland, and to parts of Jammu & Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh, Rajasthan and Uttarakhand, all of which are border states.

However, in 2010, this had been relaxed for the entire area of Manipur, Mizoram and Nagaland, first for a period of one year, and periodically extended after that. The PAR remains in place in the other areas.

This relaxation was made with an eye on boosting tourism in these states, with the UPA government in the Centre at that time stating that the lifting of the restrictions had been requested by the state governments.

But even with this relaxation, certain restrictions continued to be in place. For instance, citizens and foreign nationals of Afghanistan, China and Pakistan origins still needed prior approval from the Union Home Ministry for entry into these states.



Through the course of the ongoing conflict, the Manipur government and most sections of Meitei civil society have alleged that an uncontrolled influx of “illegal immigrants” from the Chin community — which shares an ethnic bond with the Kuki-Zomis and Mizos — from neighbouring Myanmar was one of the key reasons for the instability in the state and the present conflict.

The Manipur government earlier pressed upon the Union government to scrap the mutually agreed Free Movement Regime (FMR) with Myanmar, which allowed tribes living along the border on either side to travel up to 16 km inside the other country without a visa and to stay up to two weeks. In January this year, the Centre announced that the FMR was being cancelled, and that the entire length of the porous Indo-Myanmar which runs along Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh would be fenced.

While the Manipur government welcomed these decisions, they were stiffly opposed in Mizoram and Nagaland as the international boundary cuts through Naga and Kuki-Zo-Chin communities residing on both sides of it. The FMR had been conceived to protect their traditional rights of free movement across the border.

#### **Reintroducing the PAR would further restrict movement in these states.**

A former Manipur chief secretary criticised the decision to bring in the PAR again. “I do not think the existing situation warrants bringing this kind of a restrictive regime. If the concern is unregulated entry across the Myanmar border, this can hardly address that. It’s not like people crossing a border will apply for a permit to do that,” the former official said.

While Nagaland’s Tourism and Home Ministers did not respond to queries from The Indian Express, the state has been emphasizing its tourism. The recent Hornbill Festival, the state’s biggest tourist draw, drew 2.05 lakh visitors, 2,527 of whom were foreign tourists.

### HOW TO SECURE ENTRANCE EXAMS, STOP LEAKS: EXPERT PANEL’S IDEAS

A seven-member panel headed by former ISRO chairman K Radhakrishnan has made a set of 101 recommendations to the Ministry of Education for conducting national level entrance exams in a “transparent, smooth and fair” manner. The panel was constituted by the Ministry in June after the NEET-UG paper leak.

Here are some key recommendations made by the panel, categorised thematically.

#### **Limit NTA’s scope**

The NEET-UG and UGC-NET paper leaks has put the functioning of the National Testing Agency (NTA), which conducts these exams, under the scanner.

Noting that the NTA has “outstretched itself to accommodate diverse requests from many test indenting agencies” including taking up recruitment tests, the panel has suggested that the agency should primarily conduct entrance exams till its capacity is augmented.

Since it was established in 2018, the NTA has administered 244 tests, and the number of candidates registered for the tests has almost doubled from an average of 67 lakh per year during 2019-2021 to 122 lakh per year in 2022-23. In addition to entrance exams, the NTA currently conducts exams for recruitment in central universities.



The panel also noted the NTA's "high dependence" on service providers and outsourced agencies to conduct exams. The panel has recommended that the NTA Director General be assisted by two additional directors general, and directors assigned to specific tasks, and said that the agency should be staffed with "domain-specific human resources" and a "leadership team with domain knowledge".

#### **Involve state, district officials**

The panel has suggested involving state and district-level authorities "in the way elections are conducted". Specifically, it has recommended setting up coordination committees at these levels comprising officials of the NTA, the National Informatics Centre (NIC), police, and the Intelligence Bureau. These committees would prepare strategies to ensure transparent and fair exams, identify testing centres, and ensure safe transportation of question papers with security from the police or paramilitary forces.

The panel has suggested that test centres be sealed in the presence of district administration and police before an exam, and that these centres be guarded till they are de-sealed for the exam — much like polling booths. The panel has also recommended CCTV monitoring of testing centres.

Like polls have presiding officers, the panel has suggested having a "presiding officer" from the NTA to be the overall in-charge of the test in a centre.

#### **Improving testing process**

The panel has recommended multi-session testing, spread over a few days to a couple of weeks. For NEET-UG, it has suggested multi-stage testing (like JEE Main and Advanced).

To prevent "suspicious and unusual" allocation of testing centres, it has suggested adherence to a testing centre allocation policy in which candidates will be assigned a testing centre in their district. Each district should have a testing centre, with mobile testing centres for rural or remote areas, according to the panel.

For pen-and-paper exams, the panel's recommendations include setting more than three sets of question papers, and sending encrypted question papers to confidential servers at testing centres where they can then be printed. Another model suggested is delivering the question paper via computer to each candidate, with the candidates then recording responses in an OMR sheet.

To verify the authenticity of a candidate, the panel has suggested a "Digi-Exam" system, much like DigiYatra, where the primary data identifying the candidate is recorded at the application stage, and their biometrics are verified at the testing centre.

#### **Long-term measures**

The panel has suggested "harmonization and unification of tests" for admissions at the undergraduate level. This would include having a uniform eligibility and admission criteria, number of sessions, mode of testing, among other things.

The panel has also recommended the migration to "computer adaptive testing" — instead of the same set of questions being offered to everybody, in computer-adaptive testing a candidate is shown questions based on her ability, which is determined and updated based on responses during the test. With testees getting different combinations of questions, such a mode improves security and helps better assess individual capabilities.



Noting that computer-based tests (CBT) “has now become the preferred mode of examination and a sure way forward”, the panel has also recommended that the NTA collaborate with Kendriya Vidyalayas and Navodaya Vidyalayas to develop digital infrastructure that will allow them to serve as computer-based testing centres.

The panel has said that “a nationwide network of about 400-500 testing centres” be established “within a time frame of a year or so, which will provide about 2.0-2.5 lakh testing capacity for conducting CBT in one session nationwide”.

So far, the NTA has been conducting its exams in government-run schools and colleges, institutes recognised by the AICTE, and private centres where service providers conduct the exams. Setting up more computer-based testing centres is also expected to help lower the NTA’s reliance on service providers.

#### Do You Know:

- NTA will conduct only entrance exams for higher education institutions from 2025 and not recruitment exams, said Union Minister Dharmendra Pradhan in the Parliament on Tuesday. He further added that the government is looking at moving to computer adaptive test, tech-driven entrance exams in near future.
- National Testing Agency (NTA) has been established in 2017 as a premier, specialist, autonomous and self-sustained testing organization to conduct entrance examinations for admission/fellowship in higher educational institutions.
- President Droupadi Murmu gave the go ahead to The Public Examinations (Prevention of Unfair Means) Act, 2024, making it a law in February this year. It was passed by the Lok Sabha on February 6 and by the Rajya Sabha on February 9.
- The Act aims to prevent unfair means in the public examinations conducted by the Union Public Service Commission (UPSC), the Staff Selection Commission (SSC), the railways, banking recruitment examinations and the National Testing Agency (NTA) among others.
- The Act also has provisions for a minimum of three to five years of imprisonment to curb cheating. Those involved in organised crimes of cheating will face five to 10 years of imprisonment and a minimum fine of Rs 1 crore.

#### STUCK IN THE CLASSROOM — STUDENTS, TEACHERS, NEP 2020

Indian students in Higher Education (HE) are spending considerably more time in the classroom than their European Union (EU) and North American counterparts. Yet, they remain at risk of being relatively undereducated. There are primarily two reasons: higher proportion of teaching time in course credits and higher number of courses a semester under the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020.

#### A contrast and the academic impact

An average student in a university in the EU or North America takes approximately four courses a semester with a maximum of three hours of lectures a course a week. This brings the total classroom time to a maximum of 12 hours a week. On the other hand, Indian students enrolled in the new four-year undergraduate programmes in Indian universities must take five courses a semester with four hours of lectures a course a week. This amounts to 20 hours of classroom time

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a week. These extra eight hours in the classroom do not leave much time for essential academic activities outside the classroom such as self-study, reading, or working on assignments, most likely leading to exhaustion and reduced learning.

A casualty of this increased classroom time is the number of assessments that are actually feasible in a course. In the earlier version of the choice-based credit system in the three-year undergraduate programme, where students took only four courses a semester, there was relatively more scope for continuous assessment. Now, with increased classroom time, students find it difficult to work on anything more than two assessments a course. This could impact the diversity of assessments, privileging multiple choice questions-based assessments that are easily graded via phone apps over assessments such as a term paper or a reflective essay that requires more time and effort from students.

Thus, increased classroom time risks incentivising rote learning and perpetuating the school dynamics where teachers are owners of knowledge and students are passive recipients. At least at the university level, students need to be pushed to own their learning. This is possible only if they are allowed time to reflect, plan, and execute their learning, explore learning outside the classroom individually and with peers scaffolded by assignments such as reflective essays, group projects, and cross-disciplinary problem solving.

#### **The subject of continuous assessment**

Addressing this reduction in the number of possible assessments is important because NEP 2020 lays emphasis on continuous assessment. In this system, the final grade can be aggregated from three or four assessment components spread over the semester. Such a system provides an opportunity to design a mix of low and high stakes assessments, incentivising continuous effort and learning, rather than cramming up before one or two examinations. Continuous assessment allows considerable flexibility for faculty to tailor assessment frequency and type to meet the learning outcomes of their courses. It is also a way to receive continuous feedback for faculty to adjust teaching strategy and for the students to adjust self-study strategies.

The increased classroom time impacts the quality of teaching as well. The extra eight-hour a week in the classroom for Indian teachers eats into the time available for research, course revisions, development of new courses, and cross-disciplinary collaborations. This negatively affects the quality and currentness of teaching. The classroom time of two to three hours a course a week in the EU and North American universities, with a total teaching load of two to three courses a semester brings the average weekly classroom teaching load of a typical university teacher in these countries to nine hours. In contrast to this, an average Indian faculty is expected to teach 14-16 hours a week, with time spent in the classroom varying from eight-16 hours depending on how flexible the institutional administration is in interpreting University Grants Commission guidelines.

#### **The centres of learning**

Teaching a course as per the vision of the NEP 2020 includes designing the course, selection of reading materials, development and administration of assessments, as well as grading. This is in complete contrast to the earlier model where teachers were responsible mostly for classroom lectures with assessment and grading taken care of centrally by the affiliating university. The elite central universities, Indian Institutes of Technology, and the Indian Institutes of Management could be an exception to this with possibly fewer than eight hours a week in classroom teaching a faculty along with substantially higher resources. But it is important to note that the bulk of





teaching and learning in India happens in public universities and colleges, and not in these elite institutions.

Thus, to realise the vision of the NEP 2020 fully, a serious reconsideration of the number of courses and classroom time a course in the new four-year undergraduate programmes across India is necessary. Doing so will improve the teaching and learning outcomes for Indian students putting them on a par with their global counterparts. It will also get students out of the habit of rote learning, improve their self-learning skills, and ensure their readiness for further higher-level educational pursuits.

#### FOR SURVIVAL SKILLS

The Mumbai boat tragedy is a wake-up call for improving marine safety. A busy port, a naval dockyard, the Mazagon dockyard, fishing boats, and a popular tourist destination — the Gateway of India, a launching pad for tourist boat rides — are all located in the same area. Merchant ships and naval vessels jostle for space with tourist and fishing boats, creating a congested and potentially hazardous environment. Sea trials of a new craft involve testing it under the most stringent operating conditions to determine whether machinery and hull are safe and seaworthy. Typically, sea trials for merchant ships are conducted in open waters. However, the naval speed boat that collided with Neelkamal is typically housed inside a naval ship and launched only for operations. This means it must be tested for maximum speed and manoeuvrability in shallow waters, possibly ruling out open-sea testing. During sea trials, machinery and controls are often subjected to strenuous conditions, increasing the likelihood of failure. On Wednesday, such a failure likely occurred, leading to the collision. Neelkamal is an old-fashioned V-shaped wooden boat prone to capsizing if it takes on water, though it will not sink. When the accident occurred, pilot boats from the port rescued around 100 passengers, most of whom were wearing life jackets, which are a proven defence against drowning. Unfortunately, those who could not hold on to the capsized boat or were not wearing life jackets did not survive.

An inquiry will determine whether the boat was carrying more passengers than its capacity and if there were enough readily accessible life jackets. It is necessary to establish guidelines for life jackets that can be donned quickly and easily, even by panic-stricken individuals, without being prohibitively expensive. Tragedies such as the 2009 Thekkady boat disaster have raised significant awareness in Kerala about the importance of life jackets. However, this incident serves as a broader reminder that sea or water transport is fundamentally different from road and rail travel. The sea — and even deep freshwater bodies — remains an inhospitable domain for humans. Without assistance, drowning or hypothermia is likely. In Scandinavian countries, where the sea is an integral part of daily life, survival skills for the water are taught to everyone. It may be time for India to incorporate survival-at-sea training into schools and workplaces, alongside first aid and other life-saving measures, to foster greater awareness and preparedness.

#### EKLAVYA SCHOOLS STRUGGLE TO MEET 5% PVTG SUB-QUOTA; DROPOUTS ON THE RISE

About four years after the Centre introduced a sub-quota of 5% for the Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) in admissions to Eklavya Model Residential Schools for tribal students across the country, government data show that they are struggling to meet this quota. Just 3.4% of students in these schools now are from these communities.

The number of such students dropping out has been rising for three years in a row. Data obtained by The Hindu through the Right to Information Act show that of the 1,30,101 students enrolled

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into all 407 such functional schools as of October, 4,480 belong to PVTG communities, which amounts to about 3.4% of the total student population at these schools.

The data showed that States that had the most students — Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Odisha, and Gujarat — were struggling to meet the 5% quota. In Madhya Pradesh, PVTG students account for 3.8% of the total students, in Chhattisgarh, they make up 2.74% of the student population, whereas in Gujarat, just 21 students out of the total 10,688 belong to PVTG communities.

This comes even as government data tabled in the Lok Sabha on Thursday showed that more and more PVTG students had been dropping out of these schools for the past three years. Tabling this data in response to a question from DMK MP Kanimozhi, the Tribal Affairs Ministry said that in 2021-22, 10 PVTG students had dropped out. This had increased to 14 in 2022-23, and to 18 in the following academic year.

“Infrastructure gaps, teacher shortage, pressure to work for earning, quality of education, are some of the reasons for drop out,” the reply tabled by Union Minister of State for Tribal Affairs Durgadas Uikey said.

The provision to introduce a 5% sub-quota for PVTG students in admissions to these schools was introduced after their administration was centralised by setting up the National Education Society for Tribal Students (NESTS) in 2019. The first set of guidelines issued by the NESTS in 2020 accommodated this in the reservation matrix.

#### RAHUL GANDHI MENTIONS EKLAVYA: HIS STORY BEYOND THE THUMB-CUTTING, QUESTIONS OF ‘DHARMA’ IT RAISES

Expanding his social justice pitch, Congress leader Rahul Gandhi spoke of the Mahabharata character Eklavya in Parliament on Saturday (December 15), comparing him to the youth, small businesses, and farmers of the country.

Recounting the story of how the royal teacher Dronacharya made Eklavya cut off his thumb, Rahul Gandhi targetted the government, saying, “Like Dronacharya cut the thumb of Eklavya, you are cutting the thumbs of India’s youngsters.”

He added that favours to big businessmen “cut off the thumb” of farmers and small businessmen, while schemes like Agniveer and lateral entry into government jobs are akin to cutting off the thumb of job-seeking youth.

The broad story of Eklavya and how he lost his thumb are well-known. But what happened to him after the episode with Drona? What questions of ‘dharma’ and duty are raised by his story? We explain.

#### Who was Eklavya?

The basic version of Eklavya’s story goes thus: a brave Nishad boy, he went to Dronacharya, teacher to the Kaurava and Pandava princes, and asked to be his disciple. Dronacharya refused. Eklavya then made a clay idol of Drona, considering him his guru, and practised archery on his own, becoming greatly proficient.

One day, Drona was out hunting with his royal disciples, with their barking dog ahead of them. Suddenly, the dog is silenced. The guru and his disciples find the dog with arrows filling its mouth,



which made it go quiet, but did not hurt it at all. Everyone is impressed with this feat of archery, and the archer is discovered to be Eklavya.

When Drona asks about his teacher, Eklavya recounts how he regards Drona as his guru. Drona then asks for 'guru dakshina', the mandatory fee a disciple is to pay his teacher. He demands Eklavya's right thumb as his fee, which Eklavya promptly pays.

What is less known is where Eklavya was before this episode, and what happened to him once he lost his thumb.

Eklavya was the son of Hiranyadhanu, the king of Nishads. Nishads in the Mahabharata are tribes that live in the mountains or in forests, engaged in activities like hunting and catching fish. Another story goes that Eklavya was adopted by Hiranyadhanu, while his biological father was Devashrava, the younger brother of Vasudeva, Lord Krishna's father. It is unclear how Eklavya came to be adopted by Hiranyadhanu, but some versions of his legend say he was abandoned in the forest by his biological parents when saints, upon his birth, prophesied a dark future for him. He grows up in the forest, brave and strong.

The Udyog Parva and the Drona Parva in the Mahabharata mention Eklavya's life story, and his eventual killing by Lord Krishna.

Drona having his thumb cut off seems not to have affected Eklavya's fighting prowess much. Lord Krishna tells Arjuna that he still managed to fight in "leathern gloves", and was a fearsome sight to behold.

Hiranyadhanu, Eklavya's father, was a general in the army of Magadha king Jarasandha. Jarasandha was a sworn enemy of Lord Krishna, attacking his kingdom of Mathura numerous times.

"Eklavya was eventually killed by Krishna, though his death is not described in great detail," Jitmitra Das, senior preacher at the ISKCON temple in New Delhi's East of Kailash, told The Indian Express. "In the Mahabharata, Krishna tells Arjun that before the Kurukshetra War [the final battle between the Pandavas and the Kauravas] began, He killed off many mighty generals who would have sided with the Kauravas. Among these warriors killed was Eklavya," Das added.

#### ASHA MEETS AI: AIIMS STUDY SET TO MAP BREAST CANCER PATTERNS

ASHA workers, the backbone of India's primary healthcare system, will soon add another crucial task to their house calls. As the first point of contact for healthcare in remote villages and towns, these workers already handle tasks like vaccination and health reviews. Now, they will also conduct detailed conversations with families about their personal health status and family history of diseases, guided by a formatted questionnaire.

- The goal is to collect vital data that can help AI tools identify breast cancer risk factors and patterns specific to Indian women. This initiative is part of an ambitious project by AIIMS Delhi aimed at improving early breast cancer detection and reducing mortality, which remains among the highest globally.
- The project is one of the first under the government's flagship scheme to establish three Centres of Excellence (CoE) in AI, focusing on healthcare, agriculture, and sustainable cities. AIIMS has



secured ₹300 crore in funding to lead the healthcare CoE in partnership with IIT Delhi, working on various national programs to address non-communicable diseases.

- AI will help us on two fronts. First, it can interpret the data pool and identify which women may need mammograms — specialised X-rays to check for signs of breast cancer — while reassuring others with low-risk profiles.
- Second, the AI tool can read mammograms correctly, picking up even the smallest signs of cancer. “This allows advanced breast cancer screening in remote areas where there is a shortage of trained radiologists.
- Mammography is a very complex modality and a radiologist requires many years of experience to be able to read it correctly.
- The AI model will first scan a five-year database of women tested for breast cancer at AIIMS, NCI Jhajjar and PGI Chandigarh regardless of whether they were found clean or had developed cancer. Analysing them, it will predict the risk of developing breast cancer by combining a patient’s general test results with their lifestyle and family history data. This would then allow doctors to sift those at higher risk and recommend interventions.
- What about data protection, considering they cover a huge swathe of the population? “Data security will be our top priority and we will be building a mechanism so that our data is secured and encrypted.

#### **Do You Know:**

- A report released by the Indian multinational health care group, Apollo Hospitals, in April 2024 labelled the South Asian nation as “the cancer capital of the world.”
- The study revealed an alarming picture of declining overall health across the country, pointing to soaring cases of cancer and other non-communicable diseases nationwide.
- The report found that at present, one in three Indians is pre-diabetic, two in three are pre-hypertensive, and one in 10 struggles with depression. Chronic conditions like cancer, diabetes, hypertension, cardiovascular diseases, and mental health disorders are now so prevalent that they have reached “critical levels,” it added.
- The study projected the number of annual cancer cases to rise from almost 1.4 million in 2020 to 1.57 million by 2025. Breast, cervix, and ovarian cancer are the most common forms of cancer affecting women. And among men, they are lung cancer, mouth cancer, and prostate cancer.
- “Contributory factors to rising incidence are advancing age, unhealthy diets with ultra-processed foods stoking inflammation, exposure to air pollution laden with carcinogens and climate change with increased exposure to ultraviolet radiation,” he explained.

### **A CRISIS IN THE MAKING**

It is unlikely that a large population will strengthen our economy through high consumption — more likely a large population with low education/skills will increase unemployment, and have little disposable income for high consumption.



- India's population has reached its demographic prime. Around 67.3 per cent of our population is between 15-59 years of age, a demographic advantage which will persist for another three decades.
- By 2030, India's working age population will reach 68.9 per cent, with a median age of 28.4 years and a dependency ratio of just 31.2 per cent. In absolute numbers, India, with 1.04 billion working age persons, will constitute the largest workforce in the world.
- India will start ageing with each passing year after 2030 with the workforce population declining and the ageing population increasing. A growing skill-less, asset-less, ageing population in poor health can become India's greatest future burden.
- Medical science confirms that 90 per cent of a child brain development happens before the age of 5, and lays the physical, mental, and emotional foundations for future life.
- Optimal brain development therefore becomes the first casualty of the 88.7 per cent children under two, not receiving minimal and adequate diet.
- India's routine dietary deficit is well documented in national surveys. Not surprising therefore that the resultant under-nutrition, poor health and morbidity, prevents children and adolescents from achieving their complete cognitive and physical potential, and thereafter prevents them from acquiring the education and skills required for emerging higher end job market.

**Do You Know:**

- As per NFHS 5, among our present demographic dividend (15-49 years), only 41 per cent women and 50.2 per cent men have 10 years plus schooling; 57 per cent women and 25 per cent men are anaemic; and 18.7 per cent women and 16.2 per cent men have Body Mass Index below normal.

—Not surprising therefore, that despite several ongoing skilling programmes, employers are unable to find the skills they want, and unemployment rates of “educated” youth remain high.

- Our immediate demographic dividend, 15-19 years adolescent girls and boys, will constitute India's work-force for the next three decades.

—Among them, only 34 per cent girls and 35.9 per cent boys of age 15-24 have completed 12 years or more education; 59 per cent girls and 31 per cent boys are anaemic, and only 54.9 per cent girls and 52.6 per cent boys have normal BMI.

- The Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) (Rural) 2023, found that nationally, only 77 per cent in the 17-18 years category could read Class 2 textbooks, and 35 per cent could do division. Learning trajectory over Grades V, VI, VII and VIII was relatively flat, meaning that there was little difference in learning levels within these grades

- As per NFHS 5, 35.5 per cent children below five years are stunted, 19.3 per cent are wasted, 32.1 per cent are underweight; and 67.1 per cent children between 6-59 months are anaemic. (Figures for the two poorest quintiles are almost 50 per cent higher) But most shockingly, only 11.3 per cent children aged 6-23 months receive minimal adequate diet, improved from 9.6 per cent as in NFHS 4. The foundation of our demographic dividend for the next three decades lies here.



## WARDING OFF FIRE

There is no greater betrayal than when a sanctuary turns into a death trap. Fire accidents in hospitals that kill the vulnerable would fall squarely in this category. A massive fire that broke out at City Hospital, an orthopaedic specialty unit in Dindigul in south Tamil Nadu, last week caused the death of six people, including a child and two women. All the victims were trapped in the hospital lift and initial reports suggested they died of suffocation. Only one of the six persons, who was on a wheelchair, was an in-patient at the hospital; all the others were visitors. They were trapped, over half an hour, in the lift as the smoke poured in through the vents, all escape routes sealed. The fire, which reportedly started as a short circuit in the ground floor, swept up to the first floor, and smoke soon curled up to all the floors in the four-storey building, affecting patients. Initially, smoke was noticed in the outpatient department, after patient files caught fire. In response, the power supply was shut down, but six persons still entered the lift at the ground floor. In the melee that ensued, no one paid any attention to the lift, stuck in between two floors. Meanwhile, patients on the higher floors struggled to breathe, but for many, because of mobility issues, there was no opportunity to escape. Thirty-two patients were shifted to the nearby Dindigul government hospital for further treatment and three of them needed ventilator support.

The rash of fire accidents in hospitals in India, in recent times, and the lives lost are uncanny reminders that hospital infrastructure upkeep, in the private or public health-care sector, is astonishingly low priority across the country. One month ago, on November 15, 10 newborns died in a fire in Maharani Laxmi Bai Medical College and Hospital, Jhansi, Uttar Pradesh. In May this year, seven newborns were killed in New Born Baby Care Hospital, a private facility in East Delhi, after a fire broke out there. It is unconscionable that, as a nation, India pays little attention to fireproofing its hospitals, making sure all equipment in hospitals and the hospitals themselves are ready to act and limit damage if, and when, a mechanical fault was to cause a fire. The government should ensure that periodic renewal of fire licences stops being a travesty. Existing government fire safety regulations must be followed implicitly and spiritedly, without any slacking, with respect to hospitals and public places. If a hospital ever gets into the news, it must be for its healing prowess, not for being a towering inferno.

## WHY IS THE BJD OPPOSING THE POLAVARAM PROJECT?

### The story so far:

The Biju Janata Dal (BJD) has recently intensified its efforts to highlight the potential adverse impacts of the Polavaram Dam project, undertaken by the Andhra Pradesh government, on the tribal communities in Odisha's Malkangiri district. A delegation comprising BJD's Rajya Sabha members submitted a fresh memorandum to the Central Water Commission (CWC), the Ministry of Tribal Affairs, the National Commission for Scheduled Tribes and the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change stating that the impact of submergence due to 'unilateral' change in the design of the project has not yet been studied.

### What is the status of the project?

Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister N. Chandrababu Naidu has vowed to complete the Polavaram Project on River Godavari by 2027 as the interstate dispute involving mainly Odisha, Chhattisgarh and Andhra Pradesh has entered a crucial phase. The Union government has assured ₹15,000 crore in this year's budget for the completion of the project.



However, the BJD has alleged that the CWC had refused to conduct a backwater study for the revised design flood, despite the recommendations of experts and the Odisha Government's concerns regarding the safety of tribal populations. The BJD argued that various studies, including those by the Government of Andhra Pradesh and CWC, have shown different estimates for submergence levels. "A backwater study by AP in 2009 indicates that 50-lakh cusec flood will cause submergence up to 216 feet in Odisha, far exceeding the originally agreed maximum level of 174.22 feet. A report from IIT Roorkee in 2019 further estimates that a flood of 58 lakh cusecs would result in submergence levels of Reservoir Level of 232.28 feet in Odisha," it said.

#### **How did the project start?**

The Polavaram Irrigation Project on the river Godavari was conceived as a part of the recommendations of the Godavari Water Disputes Tribunal (GWDT). Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Odisha had entered into an agreement dated April 2, 1980, where the project was to be executed by Andhra Pradesh. As per the Andhra Pradesh State Reorganization Act (APRA), 2014, the Polavaram Irrigation Project was declared as a national project.

In response to an RTI query, the Ministry of Jal Shakti said that the maximum height of the concrete dam of Polavaram Project, measured from the deepest foundation level (-18.50m) to the top of bridge is 72.60 metre. The initial project cost was ₹10,151.04 crore in 2005-06 which reached ₹55,548.87 crore in 2019.

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

Though no comprehensive study has been carried out with regards to the likely submergence of the Malkangiri district by backwaters due to the Polavaram project, the Odisha State government in the year 2016 submitted to the NCST that the project was going to submerge 7,656 hectares of land, including forestland, and displace more than 6,800 people including 5,916 tribals in Malkangiri.

The Ministry of Jal Shakti said that as per the Water Resource Department of Andhra Pradesh, by providing remedial measures such as constructing protective embankments for a length of 30 kms along Sileru and Sabari River in Odisha, and 29.12 km along Sabari River in Chhattisgarh, the submergence in both Odisha and Chhattisgarh could be avoided completely. In August this year, the Ministry had asked the State Pollution Control Boards of Odisha and Chhattisgarh to conduct a public hearing for the construction of protective embankments without further loss of time as the project is in an advanced stage of construction. The Odisha State Pollution Control Board is yet to hold a public hearing. The Odisha government had earlier expressed its reservation over the high protective embankment saying it was not feasible. "The construction of an embankment requires the diversion of forestland and creates flooding in Odisha territory."

### **WHY IMAGING OF UNDERWATER HOT SPRING ACTIVE WITH MICROBIAL LIFE IS SIGNIFICANT FOR INDIA'S DEEP OCEAN MISSION**

In a first, Indian oceanographers have captured the image of an active hydrothermal vent located 4,500 metres below the surface of the Indian Ocean. This site holds potential for mineral exploration as part of the Rs 4,000-crore Deep Ocean Mission under the Ministry of Earth Sciences.

- The National Centre for Polar and Ocean Research (NCPOR) in Goa has performed multiple geophysical surveys along the Central and Southern Ridge of the Indian Ocean since 2012 on the



lookout for hydrothermal vents. In the process, they look for temperature anomalies and turbidity of water columns along potential areas where hydrothermal vents could be populated.

- In April this year, the NCPOR team, assisted by an automatic underwater vehicle (AUV), narrowed their search for a specific site along the Central Indian Ridge.
- A joint exploration team from NCPOR and the National Institute of Ocean Technology (NIOT) in Chennai carried out the high-resolution imaging. This collaboration focused on high-resolution deep-sea exploration and imaging of hydrothermal sulfide fields at the Central and Southwest Indian Ridges in the Southern Indian Ocean.
- Senior scientists John Kurian from NCPOR and NR Ramesh from NIOT led the hydrothermal exploration programme and the AUV campaign. During the recent observation campaign a few days ago, an Indian AUV launched from the research vessel Sagar Nidhi captured a historic image. The observations lasted for 12 to 15 hours.

**Do You Know:**

- Hydrothermal vents, largely found near tectonic plates, are underwater springs where cold water (about 2 degrees Celsius) prevailing near the seabed comes in close contact with magma (molten rock formed in very hot conditions inside the earth) in a tectonically active region. When this cold water trickles through cracks and fissures on the ocean crust and admixtures with magma, it gets heated up. It can turn into superhot water (up to 370 degrees Celsius) and later emerge as plumes, rich in minerals and gases, through chimneys and vents.
- The deposits from hydrothermal venting are generally rich in copper, zinc, gold, silver, platinum, iron, cobalt, nickel and other economically-beneficial minerals and metals. According to senior NCPOR scientist John Kurian, they could remain active from a few hundred years to as long as 30,000 years, making them vital.
- This discovery could significantly enhance India's Deep Ocean mission, especially the Samudrayaan mission, focusing on mineral exploration from inactive vents

## HOW DOES LA NIÑA AFFECT INDIA'S CLIMATE?

**The story so far:**

While the La Niña was expected to emerge by July this year, it is yet to. The India Meteorological Department now expects a La Niña to set in by late 2024 or early 2025, plus a milder winter due to this delay.

**What is La Niña?**

La Niña, a phase of the El Niño Southern Oscillation (ENSO), occurs when the region of the Pacific Ocean between Indonesia and South America is cooler than usual. Its counterpart, El Niño, represents a warming of the same region. These two phases significantly influence global atmospheric circulation and weather patterns. During La Niña years, India receives normal or above-normal rainfall during the monsoon season. Yet the same phenomenon causes droughts in Africa and intensifies hurricanes over the Atlantic Ocean. Conversely, the El Niño brings extreme summers and droughts in India while increasing rainfall in the southern U.S.





This decade began with three consecutive La Niña events (2020-2022), a rare occurrence known as Triple Dip La Niña, followed by an El Niño in 2023. Climate change may increase the frequency and intensity of both La Niña and El Niño events, as rising sea and land temperatures disrupt the Pacific's balance. This could also amplify extreme La Niña events, which generally lead to harsh winters in India.

#### **Will a La Niña emerge this winter?**

2024 is different; the La Niña has not emerged as expected. Historically, the La Niña has usually formed during the monsoon or the pre-monsoon period, and it has formed only twice between October and December since 1950. Global forecasts had also predicted its emergence this monsoon. But in December, there remains only a 57% chance of it forming in 2024. It will be weak if it still does but it could affect global weather.

The onset of La Niña or El Niño can be declared on the basis of many indices. For instance, the oceanic Niño index (ONI) compares the three-month average sea surface temperatures in the East-Central Tropical Pacific with the 30-year average. When the difference between the two is  $0.5^{\circ}$  C or higher, it is an El Niño, and when it is  $-0.5^{\circ}$  C or lower, it is a La Niña. Currently, it is around  $-0.3^{\circ}$  C. To be classified as a full-fledged La Niña or El Niño, ONI values need to exceed the thresholds at least five times consecutively.

#### **What is the meteorology?**

Cities in southern India like Bengaluru and Hyderabad are experiencing a colder than usual winter this year, while north India is witnessing a delayed winter with above-normal temperatures. Some reports have linked the southern chill to a La Niña, but the current ONI values suggest otherwise. Had a La Niña developed already, north India would likely be experiencing a colder winter than usual.

An analysis of meteorological data over 35 years by researchers at the Council on Energy Environment and Water, New Delhi, has revealed that while La Niña winters feature colder nights compared to El Niño, daytime temperatures tend to be higher. Meteorological parameters like wind speed and planetary boundary layer height (PBLH) — the lowest atmospheric layer directly influenced by land-atmosphere interactions — also vary during ENSO phases, affecting air quality.

The team found the average wind speed is higher throughout the day during La Niña winters. Faster winds help reduce air pollution by transporting pollutants away. They also found that the average PBLH is slightly lower during La Niña winters. If La Niña sets in, lower temperatures in north India may lead people to burn more biomass for heating, worsening air pollution. A lower PBLH could also trap more pollutants near the ground. But higher wind speeds could disperse the pollutants, potentially leading to better air quality.

#### **What about La Niña and monsoons?**

El Niño summers are relatively harsher, as was the case in April this year, when India experienced intense, record-breaking heat waves. If a La Niña arrives and persists into the summer of 2025, it may offer relief from high heat. Additionally, an El Niño often disrupts monsoons, with India historically receiving below-average rainfall during at least half of all El Niño years since 1871. But the same figures also indicate evolving patterns since 1980.

Both north and south India, for instance, have received less rainfall during more intense El Niño events while central India has been barely affected. A La Niña, on the other hand, promotes robust



monsoons as evidenced by the “normal” or “above-normal” rainfall in the La Niña years of 2020, 2021, and 2022. There were “below normal” rains in the El Niño year of 2023.

Thus it would be a welcome development if a La Niña forms now or early next year and continues until the monsoon season.

## RESIDENTS OF THE CAPITAL BURST FIRECRACKERS TO CELEBRATE DEEPAVALI

The Delhi government on Thursday imposed a ban on all forms of firecrackers throughout the year in the national capital.

“There shall be a complete ban on manufacturing, storage, selling (including delivery through online marketing platforms), and bursting of all kinds of firecrackers in the National Capital Territory of Delhi throughout the year with immediate effect,” an order issued by the government read.

For the past few years, the Delhi government has been imposing bans on firecrackers only for the winter months when air pollution rises in the city. This year, too, the government had imposed a ban from October 14 till January 1, 2025.

The Delhi government informed the Supreme Court that it had imposed an “all-pervasive, permanent” ban on firecrackers.

Appearing before a Bench headed by Justice A.S. Oka, senior advocate Shadan Farasat, representing Delhi, said the order was passed by the Principal Secretary, Environment, Government of Delhi, on December 19 pursuant to the top court’s orders. “We have banned it [firecrackers]... It is permanent, all-pervasive,” Mr. Farasat submitted.

The senior lawyer said the statutory order of ban was passed under Section 5 of the Environment Protection Act, 1986.

### ‘Need similar measures’

The Delhi government counsel, however, said its ban would become really effective only if the other National Capital Region (NCR) States of Rajasthan, Haryana and Uttar Pradesh enforce similar measures.

Meanwhile, advocate Rohini Musa, appearing for 150 firecracker dealers in Delhi, said the top court had directed the Delhi government to take a call on this issue in consultation with them. “There was no consultation, nothing,” Ms. Musa submitted in court.

The hearing saw Rajasthan submit that it had imposed a similar ban in its areas that are part of the NCR through an order on December 17.

This left the court to focus on Uttar Pradesh and Haryana. “We direct Uttar Pradesh and Haryana to impose a similar ban as Delhi,” the court ordered.

Previous hearings had seen the apex court press NCR States to impose a perennial ban on the manufacture, sale, and bursting of firecrackers in the region in a forceful bid to reduce not only toxicity in air but also noise pollution.



## NEW CHEMICAL PATHWAY WORSENS QUALITY OF AIR IN HARSH WINTERS

Shahzad Gani, of the Centre for Atmospheric Sciences in IIT Delhi, said the new study indexes a 'major shift' in our understanding of how the formation of secondary aerosols like hydroxymethanesulphonate 'can happen in fine particles even in extremely cold, dark conditions'

In winter, the temperature in Dras in Ladakh drops to  $-20^{\circ}\text{C}$ , making it the coldest place in India. On the other side of the world, Fairbanks, the capital city of Alaska, holds a similar record in the U.S., its temperature hovering around  $-22.4^{\circ}\text{C}$  in winter. But the two cities have drastically different air quality. Unlike Dras, where the air is remarkably healthy, Fairbanks is among the U.S.'s worst-performing cities. One estimate ranked it tenth in a list of the country's most air-polluted cities. Another ranked it first for particle pollution.

Particle pollution, also called 'particulate matter' (PM), is a mix of solid particles and liquid droplets suspended in the air. PM can be classified into two broad categories: PM<sub>10-2.5</sub> and PM<sub>2.5</sub>. PM<sub>10-2.5</sub> refers to particles whose diameter ranges between 2.5 and 10 micrometres (m, equal to one millionth of a metre), and PM<sub>2.5</sub> refers to particles that are less than 2.5m in diameter.

PM<sub>2.5</sub> particles are also called ultrafine particles. They are considered to be particularly dangerous: they enter the lungs through the nose and throat; once in, they reduce lung function, aggravate asthma, and — for people with lung or heart disease — pave the way for premature death.

### **Pollution and temperature**

In 2009, authorities from the Division of Air Quality in Alaska declared Fairbanks to be a "PM<sub>2.5</sub> nonattainment area": that is, the amount of PM<sub>2.5</sub> in the city exceeded the limit of 35g per cubic metre of air. The main sources of these pollutants were identified to be emissions from wood stoves, the burning of distillate fuel oil, industrial sources, and automobiles, all of which also emit a large amount of sulphur dioxide.

To bring PM<sub>2.5</sub> levels below the permissible limits, the Division in a 2022 directive banned the use of fuel with sulphur concentrations exceeding 1,000 parts per million in Fairbanks. Now, a study led by researchers from the University of Alaska Fairbanks and the Georgia Institute of Technology, both in the U.S., has found that the ban may not be entirely effective because the chemistry of PM<sub>2.5</sub> particles changes in cold weather.

In their study, published in the journal Science Advances on September 4, the researchers found that lower sulphate concentrations in the air combined with low temperatures (around  $-35^{\circ}\text{C}$ ) made the PM particles less acidic. This in turn increased the production of hydroxymethanesulphonate — another component of PM<sub>2.5</sub> — in the air.

## WROUGHTON'S FREE-TAILED BAT, A HIGHLY RARE SPECIES, SPOTTED IN DELHI'S YAMUNA BIODIVERSITY PARK

Wroughton's free-tailed bat, a highly rare species of molossus bat, has been spotted at the Delhi Development Authority (DDA)'s Yamuna Biodiversity Park, marking a unique sighting.



This bat species is primarily found in the Western Ghats, where there is only one known breeding colony. Small colonies have also been recorded in Jaintia Hills, Meghalaya, and a single individual was noted in Cambodia.

“It is a unique sighting for Delhi, which we found during the routine visit to the corridor of the Yamuna Biodiversity Park,” said Faiyaz A Khudsar, biodiversity expert and incharge scientist under the Biodiversity Parks Programme.

A statement by the DDA Biodiversity Park states that the species is easily recognisable to bat researchers. It is characterised by its large size, huge ears extending beyond the muzzle, and bicoloured velvet fur. The statement added that it typically roosts in caves or dark, damp, and slightly warm places in moderate colonies.

Wroughton’s free-tailed bat is ecologically important for regulating insect populations and is also known to assist in pollination. Until 2000, the species was considered critically endangered because of a single known population in the Western Ghats. Later, with discoveries in three different localities, the bat species was placed on the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List as data deficient.

According to Khudsar, despite its discovery a century ago, very little is known about the bat’s feeding ecology. The bat species has powerful flying capabilities, allowing it to forage long distances.

The sighting is significant for Delhi because it is known to be home to around 14 species, four of which have been considered locally extinct: the Indian false vampire, the black-bearded tomb bat, the Egyptian free-tailed bat, and the Indian pipistrelle.

According to the statement, “two decades of ecological restoration” have contributed to the establishment of “very specialized niches”. It also noted that the restored forest of the Aravali Biodiversity Park, managed by the DDA, has become the only known roosting site for the Blyth’s horseshoe bat in Delhi.

“...This is a testimony of a long scientific interventions facilitates rewilding of many species reclaiming their historical geographical ranges,” the statement added.

#### MP PLANS NEW HOME FOR CHEETAHS, RELOCATE LEOPARDS

Analysing the lineage of cheetahs to “create a strong genetic foundation”, relocating leopards from the predator-proof fenced areas, and augmenting the number of prey animals are part of the Cheetah Action Plan for Gandhi Sagar Wildlife Sanctuary in Madhya Pradesh, ahead of the plans to introduce a batch of cheetahs there next year, The Indian Express has learnt.

- According to an action plan devised by the National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA), the MP wildlife department and Wildlife Institute of India (WII), 6-8 cheetahs will be released into a 64 sq km predator-proof enclosure within the sanctuary’s West Range in the initial phase.
- Spread across 2,500 sq. km landscape straddling Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan, the Gandhi Sagar Wildlife Sanctuary’s mix of grasslands, dry deciduous forests, and riverine evergreen patches is meant to offer an ideal habitat for the cheetahs to thrive.
- This area, characterised by savannah grasslands, supports an “adequate” prey base, with chinkara populations reaching 7.4 individuals/sq m and nilgai at 4.4 individuals/sq km. The



sanctuary's other prey species include chital, wild pig, peafowl, and hare, although their densities are significantly lower.

- According to the action plan, the Gandhi Sagar Wildlife Sanctuary currently has a capacity of 10 cheetahs. "In order to sustain 6-8 cheetahs inside the predator proof fenced area, annual requirement is 1,560-2,080 prey animals per annum or 26-35 prey animals per sq km.
- According to the plan, the sanctuary has an estimated population of 70 leopards in the West Range, and they pose a significant threat to cheetahs, particularly cubs and juveniles, and compete for similar prey.
- This research aims to shed light on "resource separation amongst carnivore communities", which include hyenas, wolves, jackals, and sloth bears, the plan says. A network of 200 infrared camera traps will be deployed to monitor these populations, while scat analysis will provide insights into dietary preferences.
- A senior wildlife official says the translocation of leopards "is a crucial step in creating a safer environment" for cheetahs. "The competition with the stronger, more adaptable leopards could jeopardise the fragile population of the newly introduced predators," the official says.

**Do You Know:**

- Cheetahs are among the oldest of the big cat species, with its ancestors going back about 8.5 million years. It is listed as "vulnerable" by the World Conservation Union (IUCN) Red List of Threatened Species. Two subspecies, the Asiatic cheetah and the Northwest African cheetah, are listed as "critically endangered".
- A population of 12-14 wild cheetahs, including 8-10 males and 4-6 females, would be imported from suitable parks or reserves in African countries to establish a new cheetah population in India. These cheetahs would be selected from a "genetically diverse, disease-free, and reproductively viable age group". Behavioural suitability — such as being predator-wary, capable of hunting wild prey, and socially tolerant — would also be critical. The selection criteria would ensure minimal human imprinting while maintaining tolerance to human presence.
- To create a strong genetic foundation, the cheetahs' lineage and conditions would be evaluated in the source country to "avoid excessive inbreeding". Individuals would be chosen based on "known life histories and lineages monitored by supplying agencies, experts, or donors". These selections would consider ecological factors like "genetic relatedness, social behaviour, and overall compatibility with the population's needs".
- Genetic analysis of the cheetahs would be carried out using "micro-satellite and genomic" techniques, on all founder individuals to "establish a wide gene pool".
- Introducing cheetahs into Gandhi Sagar is expected to trigger ecological ripple effects, influencing prey species behaviour and habitat use. To anticipate and mitigate these impacts, key prey species such as blackbuck, chital, and nilgai may be supplemented as needed.
- Radio-collaring prey animals will provide additional data on how they adapt to the presence of a new predator. The fenced area "would be fostered as a cheetah source area to supplement populations of cheetah in areas outside after habitat restoration"



- Gandhi Sagar’s restoration is envisioned as part of a broader cheetah conservation initiative, with Rajasthan’s Bhainsroargarh Wildlife Sanctuary and Mukundara Hills Tiger Reserve also identified as potential sites for population expansion. These areas, like Gandhi Sagar, will undergo extensive habitat restoration and prey augmentation to support sustainable cheetah populations.
- There are currently 24 cheetahs, including 12 cubs, at Kuno National Park. After spending over a year inside protective enclosures, two cheetahs — Agni and Vayu — were released into the open forest area.

## 8-DAY SERENDIPITY ARTS FESTIVAL TO OPEN IN GOA TODAY

Nestled along the scenic Panjim waterfront, near the tranquil Mandovi river in Goa, the former Directorate of Accounts building has long captured the attention of passersby with its expansive verandas, majestic colonnade, and whispered tales of hidden tunnels. Originally constructed in the 1500s, the Portuguese-era building will now echo with the vibrant pulse of the arts.

Undergoing restoration for over two months, it is one of the several heritage venues hosting the Serendipity Arts Festival (SAF) being held in Goa from December 15 to 22. “Culture doesn’t always require infrastructure... Different venues serve different purposes and we hope to challenge the conventional boundaries of what culture can be, moving away from the idea of a ‘white box’ space,” says Smriti Rajgarhia, Director, SAF.

Since its first edition in 2016, the festival has grown manifold — from 53 projects spread over eight venues in the inaugural year to over 200 projects across 22 venues this year, and a jump in footprints from one lakh to one million-plus in 2023. “It has been quite an organic growth and a proud moment for us to see how it has come together,” says Rajgarhia.

## WHY HINDU GODS DANCE, AND THOSE IN OTHER RELIGIONS DON’T

Dance is an integral part of culture. It cannot be captured in a museum — except as photographs or videos. But as a performance, it is something that changes with time and space. Therefore, like music, it is an intangible heritage.

Hindu temple art shows gods dancing – Shiva dancing, Krishna dancing, Ganesha dancing. The dance of devadasi is how gods were entertained in temples. But we will never see images of Buddha dancing, the Tirthankaras dancing, the Islamic prophets dancing. In fact, dance is haram in orthodox Muslim traditions while in mystical traditions of Sufism, and the bhakti movement, dance is a tool to experience the divine.

In Europe, dance was linked to paganism and rejected by Christianity. Dance thus reveals the ideology of different faiths, different communities, and different tribes. For Hindus, it represented worldliness. For Buddhists, it represents temptation. Monotheistic faiths associated it with idolatry.

### Dance in ancient times

Evidence of Indian dance comes from ancient times. The earliest is the ‘wizard dance’ of Bhimbetka caves in Central India, where people wearing horns are seen dancing. This belongs to the Stone Age. In Harappa we see seals of seven people, dressed in the same clothes, dancing around a tree. It is an indicator of a form of tribal dance. Like in the Bhimbetka caves, the dancers wear horns.



In the Vedas, dance is not discussed as much as music — remember Vedas as “shruti”, to be heard. Sama Veda gave melodies to the hymns of Rig Veda. Yajur Veda introduces the idea of mudra (gestures) during ceremonies. This is said to have been the origin of dance.

Later, dance and song were used as entertainment during Vedic ceremonies to tell stories related to ancient kings, sages and gods.

Sculptures from the Mauryan period (321–185 BCE) at sites like Sanchi, Barhut, and Amaravati include representations of dancers. Similarly, Greek dancers in Gandharan Buddhist art imitate the followers of Bacchus/Dionysus (the Greek god of wine and ecstasy).

In the heavens, this was the domain of apsaras (celestial dancers). On earth, this was done by ganikas (courtesans). The dance manuals in classical texts such as the Natyashastra speak of abhinaya (expressions), mudra (gestures), and angika (postures). Movements follow the rules of geometry. There is much in dance to indicate it was the forerunner of yogic asanas (yoga postures).

### **Shastra and classical dance**

Sanskrit plays, and Puranic stories, refer to a dance competition between gods, apsaras and royal dancers. In Tamil temple lore, Shiva competes with Shakti in a dance competition, and wins by raising a leg which the goddess is too shy to do. Then there is the story of how Bhasmasura is asked by Mohini to dance with her. By following her movements, Bhasmasura touches his head and is reduced to ash.

Islam forbids dance. But Mughals who married Rajput women encouraged the tawaifs (courtesans) to perform in their courts. Thus dance was patronised in royal courts, reminding one of the dancing halls of temples, as well as the dance performed in the heavenly court of Indra. These dances continue even today in Bollywood films.

Shastra means a subject that is well documented, with details classified. Classical dance is a shastra because it has a long history, is documented in some formats and requires training to perform as well as appreciate it. India has seven classical dance forms, each with distinct styles and origins.

Kathakali and Mohiniattam are theatrical and performative. Bharatanatyam, characterised by its geometric and angular movements, is a modern refined version of the temple dances of the Devadasis. Kuchipudi dancers often dance on plates while Odissi is more soft and fluid, with the tribhanga pose — where the body bends in opposite directions at the neck, hips, and knees.

Then, we have Sattriya from Assam, the last dance form to be given classical status. In the North, we only have Kathak as a notified classical dance form, which was performed first in temples, and then in courts.

### **Folk dance**

Chhau, a masculine, almost military, dance form, is performed in Bengal, Odisha, and Jharkhand. Masks are an integral part of Purulia Chhau in Bengal and Jharkhand. In Odisha, masks are not worn. Although Chhau is not as refined as the classical dance forms, some consider it classical. However, this folk-classical distinction is a contentious issue and annoys many people.



Sometimes folk performances are also linked with rituals, like Karnataka's Bhoota Kola or Kerala's Theyyam. These performances reflect subaltern traditions, showcasing how they communicate with gods and relate to nature. In Ladakh and Shillong, one finds masked dancers enacting stories of Buddhist siddhas defeating demons and taming angry spirits.

The aim of folk dance is also to unite the community through synchronised dance with simple steps and a basic percussive beat. In tribal communities, dance is usually collective rather than individual. This gave rise to harvest rituals, like the Bihu dance of Assam, typically performed during harvest.

The tribes of the Northeast have many unique dances that symbolise their unique identity. Dance such as nautanki and lavani are meant for the entertainment of the masses. Thus dance can be a vehicle for politics, philosophy, festivals, rituals, identity, and entertainment.

### IDIOPATHIC PULMONARY FIBROSIS(IPF), WHICH LED TO ZAKIR HUSSAIN'S DEATH

As Zakir Hussain, tabla maestro and five-time Grammy Award winner, passed away on Sunday in San Francisco due to idiopathic pulmonary fibrosis (IPF), there are concerns as to how this happens and the age group vulnerable to it.

- According to Dr Deepak Bhasin, Senior Director, Pulmonology, Critical Care, Max Hospital, Mohali, "idiopathic pulmonary fibrosis (IPF) is a chronic, progressive lung disease characterised by scarring (fibrosis) of the lung tissue, leading to irreversible loss of lung function. The exact cause of IPF is unknown, so it is termed idiopathic."
- This scarring thickens and stiffens the lungs, reducing their ability to expand and take in oxygen. "Unlike many lung conditions, IPF specifically targets the interstitium, the tissue surrounding the air sacs (alveoli), making it harder for oxygen to move into the bloodstream. Over time, this leads to persistent breathlessness, fatigue, and reduced quality of life," adds Dr Mahavir Modi, pulmonologist and sleep specialist, Ruby Hall Clinic, Pune.
- The exact cause of the initial injury to lung tissue is unknown, which is why it is called "idiopathic" (meaning without a clear origin). "However, the body's healing process plays a critical role in scarring.
- When the lungs experience injury — due to environmental factors like dust, smoke, or infections, or possibly even from autoimmune responses — the body attempts to repair the damaged tissue. In a healthy response, this repair is controlled and temporary. However, in IPF, this repair process becomes dysregulated, and the body overproduces collagen and other fibrous materials.

- Fibrosis causes the lungs to stiffen, making breathing harder. "Symptoms include shortness of breath (dyspnea), dry cough, fatigue, and weight loss. Over time, oxygen levels in the blood drop, causing complications such as pulmonary hypertension, heart failure, or respiratory failure," says Dr Bhasin.

#### Do You Know:

- There is no specific treatment for IPF, says Dr Deepak Bhasin, Senior Director, Pulmonology, Critical Care, Max Hospital, Mohali. However, there are medications available that slow down the fibrosis, he says. "The rate of progression of the disease is not predictable as it varies from person to person. Depending on how much the disease has progressed, patients may need supplemental





oxygen. Some patients, who are eligible, may be recommended for a lung transplant. For others, pulmonary rehabilitation (exercises to help make breathing easier during day-to-day activities) are crucial," he says. Treatment for gastro-oesophageal reflux may also be prescribed. At present, estimates indicate that the five-year survival for patients of IPF is between 50 and 60%, he adds.

## SHORT NEWS

### INDIA STATE OF FOREST REPORT (ISFR 2023)

- The biennial India State of Forest Report (ISFR 2023) released by Environment Minister Bhupender Yadav reported a net gain of 156 sq km in India's forest cover and 1,289 sq km in tree cover since 2021. It also recorded a complete loss of 3,656 sq km of dense forests at that time.
- There is an increase of 1,445 sq km in the total forest and tree cover of the country.
- At 1,12,014 sq km, India's tree cover now extends over 3.41% of the land area and supplements India's 21.76% forest cover.
- The top four states that recorded the maximum increase in forest and tree cover are Chhattisgarh (684 sq km) followed by Uttar Pradesh (559 sq km), Odisha (559 sq km) and Rajasthan (394 sq km).
- The four states that recorded the maximum loss in forest and tree cover between 2021 and 2023 are Madhya Pradesh (612.41 sq km), Karnataka (459.36 sq km), Ladakh (159.26 sq km) and Nagaland (125.22 sq km).
- When it comes to gain in forest cover alone, Mizoram (242 sq km), Gujarat (180 sq km) and Odisha (152 sq km) topped the chart.
- There is a loss of 3,656 sq km of dense forests in two years.
- Since 2021, the country's mangrove cover shrunk by 7.43 sq km with Gujarat recording the biggest loss of 36.39 sq km.

### MARINE HEATWAVE

- A new study claims that a record-breaking marine heatwave nearly a decade ago caused the mass deaths of a species of Alaskan seabird known as the common murre.
- A marine heat wave is an extreme weather event. It occurs when the surface temperature of a particular region of the sea rises to 3 or 4 degree Celsius above the average temperature for at least five days. MHWs can last for weeks, months or even years, according to the US government's agency National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA).
- Another example is when high ocean temperatures in the tropical Atlantic and Caribbean in 2005 led to a massive coral bleaching event. A 2010 study showed that more than 80 per cent of surveyed corals had bleached and over 40 per cent of the total surveyed had died.
- Corals are very sensitive to the temperature of the water in which they live. When water gets too warm, they expel the algae known as zooxanthellae, living in their tissues, causing them to turn entirely white. This is called coral bleaching.



#### HYBRID AEROGEL

- A novel hybrid aerogel capable of easily extracting gold from electronic waste was developed by a group of researchers from Pune.
- Sujit Ghosh and team at IISER, Pune, have designed and synthesised aerogel : the sponge-like absorbents, light in weight and porous synthetic materials for this purpose.
- Aerogels are most preferred in environment and oil spill clean up, for insulation purposes and more.

#### JETSON ORIN NANO SUPER

- Nvidia unveiled the Jetson Orin Nano Super Generative AI supercomputer on December 17.
- It brings a lot more computing power in a tiny form factor. Owing to its enhanced performance, the supercomputer can help developers fuel innovation.

#### OM PRAKASH CHAUTALA

- Indian National Lok Dal (INLD) supremo and five-time Haryana chief minister Om Prakash Chautala passed away Friday on 20th December.
- Chautala was born to former Deputy Prime Minister Devi Lal and Harki Devi.
- Chautala holds the distinction of being Haryana's CM for the maximum times but his overall tenure was around six-and-a-half years. The only full term he could complete was from 2000 to 2005.

#### TULSI GOWDA

- Padma Shri awardee Tulsi Gowda, an environmentalist from Karnataka who is revered as the “tree goddess” by the Halakki tribal community at age 86.
- Known as the ‘encyclopedia of forest’, Gowda was born in Honnali village in Ankola taluk in Uttara Kannada district in 1944.
- Gowda has been credited with planting and nurturing over 1 lakh trees across Karnataka.
- In 2021, she was conferred the Padma Shri for her exceptional contributions to environmental conservation.

#### USTAD ZAKIR HUSSAIN

- Tabla virtuoso Ustad Zakir Hussain passed away at the age of 73 in the United States after complications from idiopathic pulmonary fibrosis.
- The percussionist received the Padma Shri in 1988, Padma Bhushan in 2002, and the Padma Vibhushan in 2023. He was the recipient of four Grammy awards in his career.
- In 1999, he received the United States National Endowment for the Arts National Heritage Fellowship, a testament to his global impact.



## BUSINESS & ECONOMICS

### PAKISTAN'S ECONOMIC CRISIS: WILL THE IMF'S \$7-BILLION BAILOUT STABILISE THE ECONOMY, STEM THE YOUTH EXODUS?

Amid fresh reports of the World Bank cancelling a \$500 million loan for a clean energy programme, Pakistan's cash-strapped economy continues to lurch from one crisis to the next as it waits for a bailout.

- In September, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif successfully secured a \$7 billion package from the International Monetary Fund (IMF). This deal was accompanied by a commitment to break Pakistan's long-standing reliance on bailout programmes that it has taken recourse to at least 20 times since 1958.
- A study by Karachi-based Pulse consultants said that close to a million workers have left Pakistan since 2008, and that exodus is only gaining momentum. ILO reports too flags alarming rate of unemployment.
- The IMF package could help Pakistan's economy stay afloat, at least temporarily. The World Bank, in its October update noted that the Pakistani economy is showing signs of recovery. Following the recession in FY23, economic activity bounced back in FY24.
- The IMF loan comes to Pakistan with an uncomfortable precondition: stopping Chinese investments. Pakistan has to stop all incentives to the investors from China, including tax breaks and subsidies to any new or existing special economic zones.
- As per the IMF deal, Pakistan must bring retail, agriculture and export sectors into normal tax regime by imposing tax hikes and abolishing exemptions.

#### Do You Know:

- Since June 2023, the Special Investment Fund Council (SIFC) — a federal government body and investment promotion agency that works under the Pakistan's PMO — is said to be looking after the major financial decisions. However, the involvement of the army in this context is taken with a pinch of salt.
- This year so far, Pakistan has achieved \$3.2 billion of IT exports with a growth of 24 per cent from the previous fiscal. PM Sharif wants to achieve \$25 billion in the next three years. However, the internet curbs, due to political instability, are not helping the cause.

### CHINA IS WORLD'S LARGEST DEBT COLLECTOR

Over 25% of the world's bilateral external debt was owed to China by the end of 2023, making the country the leading debt collector. Two decades ago, the country rarely lent money; Japan lent the highest amount, followed by Germany, France, the United States and the United Kingdom.

Further, over the last two decades, when China's external lending increased massively, the amount of bilateral external debt owed by countries surged exponentially too. In other words, China is majorly responsible for the rapid rise in external debt in many countries in the last 20 years.



Bilateral external debt is a country's debt to foreign governments. In this analysis, only bilateral debt is considered and not debt owed to agencies such as the International Monetary Fund and bondholders.

The external debt stock owed to all countries increased from \$49.5 billion to \$741.4 billion between 1973 and 2023. The external debt stock owed to China increased from \$1 billion to \$193.1 billion in the same period. In percentage terms, the share of debt owed to China remained around the 1% mark until 2003, surged to 16.6% by 2013, and to 26% by 2023.

By the end of 1973 and 1983, the U.S. was the top lender. The U.S. was later surpassed by Japan, which remained the top lender by the end of 1993, 2003, and 2013. External debt stock owed to the U.S. drastically reduced from 36% in 1973 to just 4% in 2023. Notably, by the end of 2023, the Netherlands was the third biggest lender after China and Japan.

Pakistan owed \$22 billion to China by the end of 2023, which is close to 60% of all the bilateral debt owed by the country. The farther a nation is to the right, the higher the share of its bilateral debt owed to China by 2023. The bigger the size of the bubble, the higher the debt owed to China in absolute terms.

Notably, many countries to which China loaned money were either in a financial crisis which then worsened or later descended into a financial crisis. For instance, Laos, one of the poorest nations in Asia, owed \$6 billion to China in 2023, which was over 75% of its bilateral external debt. The nation's economic situation turned difficult with persistent high inflation, currency depreciation, and slow growth. In 2021, China opened a high-speed rail line with Laos as a part of its Belt and Road initiative.

Angola, the second largest oil producer in sub-Saharan Africa, owed \$17 billion to China, which was about 58% of its external debt. In fact, 16 sub-Saharan nations owe over 50% of their external debt to China. According to the New York Times, 15 of the 19 cobalt-producing mines in the Democratic Republic of Congo were owned or financed by Chinese firms. The nation owes 88% of its bilateral debt to China.

Sri Lanka, which owes \$8 billion to China, about 50% of its bilateral debt, was struggling to repay its debt and handed over the major port of Hambantota to China in 2017.

## HOW WOULD A US BITCOIN STRATEGIC RESERVE WORK?

Bitcoin hit a record high above \$107,000 on Monday after President-elect Donald Trump reiterated plans to create a U.S. bitcoin strategic reserve, stoking the enthusiasm of crypto bulls. Here's how the plan could work.

### **What is a strategic reserve?**

A strategic reserve is a stock of a critical resource which can be released at times of crisis or supply disruptions. The best-known example is the U.S. Strategic Petroleum Reserve, the world's largest supply of emergency crude oil, which was created by an act of Congress in 1975 after a 1973-74 Arab oil embargo throttled the U.S. economy.

Presidents have tapped the stockpile to calm oil markets during war or when hurricanes hit oil infrastructure along the U.S. Gulf of Mexico.



Canada has the world's only strategic reserve of maple syrup, while China has strategic reserves of metals, grains and even pork products.

#### **How would a US strategic bitcoin reserve work?**

It is currently unclear whether Trump could use his executive powers to create the reserve, or whether an act of Congress would be necessary. Some have argued Trump could create the reserve via an executive order directing the U.S. Treasury's Exchange Stabilization Fund, which can be used to purchase or sell foreign currencies, and to also hold bitcoin.

This reserve could include bitcoin seized from criminal actors by the government. That stands at around 200,000 tokens, worth about \$21 billion at the current price, according to [bitcointreasuries.net](http://bitcointreasuries.net). Trump suggested in a July speech unveiling his bitcoin reserve plan that this stockpile could be the starting point.

Trump has not said if the government would add to that stockpile by buying more bitcoin in the open market. To do that, the government may have to issue debt, although some proponents of a bitcoin reserve say the United States could sell some of its gold reserves and use the proceeds to buy bitcoin.

#### **What are the benefits of a bitcoin reserve?**

In his July speech, Trump suggested a bitcoin reserve would help the U.S. dominate the global bitcoin market in the face of growing competition from China.

Other proponents argue that by holding a stockpile of bitcoin, which they say is likely to continue appreciating over the long term, the U.S. could reduce its deficit without raising taxes, strengthening the U.S. dollar.

A strong dollar would in turn give the United States more leverage over foreign adversaries like China and Russia, proponents say.

#### **What are the risks?**

Crypto sceptics say that, unlike most other commodities, bitcoin has no intrinsic use and is not crucial to the functioning of the U.S. economy.

Created in 2008, bitcoin remains too young and volatile to presume its value will continue to rise in the long term, while crypto wallets remain notoriously vulnerable to cyber attacks, they also argue. And given its volatility, any government purchases or sales could have an outsized impact on bitcoin's price.

### **EXPRESS VIEW ON US FED CUT: A SIGNAL TO RBI TO REWORK POLICY**

On Wednesday, in its last meeting of the calendar year, the US Federal Reserve cut interest rates by 25 basis points. This was expected. The target range for the federal funds rate is now at 4.25-4.5 per cent. The Fed's forward guidance was, however, distinctly hawkish — it has now projected only two rate cuts next year, down from its earlier projection of four cuts. In fact, Fed Chairman Jerome Powell acknowledged that the decision to cut rates was "a closer call" this occasion. He added that "from here it's a new phase and we're going to be cautious about further cuts".



Inflation has been stubbornly high. As per the projections accompanying the December inflation, as measured by the personal consumption expenditures, is now expected by Fed officials to be at 2.5 per cent in 2025, as opposed to earlier expectations of 2.1 per cent. In 2024, inflation is at 2.4 per cent. Assessment of future policy rates and the inflation trajectory will also have to factor in changes in policy under a new White House administration. There are expectations that Donald Trump will announce tariffs on major US trading partners — a move which will be inflationary — and will also cut taxes – which will raise the government deficit. If these fructify, it would force the Fed to keep rates high for long. In his comments, Powell did say that “some people did take a very preliminary step and start to incorporate highly conditional estimates of economic effects of policy into their forecasts at this meeting”. Fed officials now expect interest rates at 3.9 per cent in 2025, as against earlier expectations of rates being at 3.4 per cent.

Reverberations from the Fed’s actions were felt across markets — US bond yields rose, global stocks fell and the dollar strengthened. The S&P 500 ended the day down 3 per cent. Asian markets mirrored the decline with the Nikkei falling by 0.7 per cent, Hang Seng by 0.5 and Kospi by almost 2 per cent. The BSE Sensex was also down 1.2 per cent. The Dollar index rose to 108.26 — its highest level since November 2022. The Indian rupee breached the 85/dollar mark in early trade. There is now an expectation that the Fed will take a pause on rate cuts in its next meeting in January as it awaits greater clarity on the policies of the Trump administration. For RBI, the policy choices are narrowing as the pressure on the currency intensifies.

#### AFTER MEXICO, CANADA, AND CHINA, TRUMP TRAINS THE TARIFF GUN ON INDIA

Weeks after threatening to raise tariffs on America’s top three trade partners—Mexico, China, and Canada—US President-elect Donald Trump on Tuesday turned his attention to India, criticising its high tariffs and warning that Washington would impose reciprocal taxes on Indian products.

- This marks the first time Trump has threatened tariffs on Indian goods since winning the election in November. However, during his campaign, Trump frequently referred to India as a “very big [trade] abuser.” Trump is set to assume control of White House on January 20.
- Speaking to reporters at Mar-a-Lago, Trump criticised India’s tariff regime, pointing to 100 per cent tariffs on certain US products. “The word ‘reciprocal’ is important because if somebody charges us—India, for example—we don’t have to talk about our own. If India charges us 100 per cent, do we charge them nothing for the same? They send in a bicycle, we send them a bicycle, and they charge us 100 or 200 per cent,” Trump said.
- When asked about a potential trade agreement with China, Trump redirected the conversation to India and Brazil, both of which he accused of imposing high tariffs. “India charges a lot. Brazil charges a lot. If they want to charge us, that’s fine, but we’re going to charge them the same thing,” Trump said at the briefing.
- He further claimed that US products are heavily taxed by other nations, while American administrations have failed to respond in kind. “Reciprocal. If they tax us, we tax them the same amount. They tax us. We tax them. And they tax us,” he added.

#### Do You Know:

- The US remains India’s largest trade partner, with bilateral trade reaching nearly \$120 billion in FY24, slightly surpassing India’s trade with China. Unlike China, though, India enjoys a favourable trade relationship with the US, making it a critical source of foreign exchange.

3<sup>RD</sup> FLOOR AND 4<sup>TH</sup> FLOOR SHATABDI TOWER, SAKCHI, JAMSHEDPUR



- Think tank Global Trade Research Institute (GTRI) reported that India was the sixth-largest beneficiary of the US-China trade war, with a \$36.8 billion increase in exports driven by growth in electronics, pharmaceuticals, and engineering goods.
- Mexico's exports to the US increased by \$164.3 billion between 2017 and 2023, followed by Canada with \$124.0 billion, and Vietnam in third with \$70.5 billion. South Korea (\$46.3 billion) and Germany (\$43.0 billion) rounded out the top five.
- The fresh threats are particularly concerning as India lost duty-free access under the decades-old Generalised System of Preferences (GSP) programme in 2019, during Trump's first presidency. India, previously the largest beneficiary, saw tariff-free benefits on approximately \$5.7 billion worth of exports to the US.
- Currently, India's average tariff rate stands at around 17%, which is significantly higher than that of Japan, the US, and the EU — all of them have rates somewhere between 3% and 5%. However, when compared to emerging economies, India's tariffs are not that high. For instance, Brazil's average tariff rate is around 13% and South Korea's is 13.4%.

#### DOES THE ADANI BRIBERY ALLEGATION WEAKEN INDIA'S POSITION AT GLOBAL TRADE FORUMS?

With India becoming a signatory in September to the Indo Pacific Economic Framework's (IPEF's) Fair Economy pillar that mandatorily binds all 15 trade partners to "prevent and combat corruption, including bribery", the US indictment of Adani Group Chairman Gautam Adani and seven others in a \$250 million bribery case may expose New Delhi to scrutiny by any of the partners including the US.

Responding to a query on Adani's indictment and India's standing in IPEF during a press briefing on Monday, Commerce Secretary Sunil Barthwal said, "We have taken the same commitments which other governments have taken in the IPEF pillar. Whatever law is there in the country, that is going to be followed."

Under the Fair Economy pillar agreement, signed by India and 14 other trade members, including the US, India acknowledged that corruption—including bribery—and offences such as money laundering erode the foundations of a prosperous, inclusive, and stable economic order across the Indo-Pacific region. Member countries have committed to "implement, enforce, and accelerate progress on anti-corruption measures."

International trade experts said the indictment allows member countries to pressure India on several issues by calling for consultations. The agreement specifies: "If at any time a Party has concerns with another Party's implementation of a provision of this Agreement, the concerned Party may request consultations through a written notification."

A trade expert, speaking anonymously, highlighted that US law, specifically the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act (FCPA), applies to both US and non-US entities conducting business in the US, including raising financing. The IPEF agreement, however, places obligations on member states to take steps to prevent corruption and implement remedial measures.

"The vision behind any of the IPEF agreements was that formal dispute resolution mechanisms wouldn't be necessary, as actions could be initiated through consultative channels. While it is yet



to be fully operationalised, there is ample scope to initiate discussions and exert pressure on India,” the expert said.

The Adani Group had denied the allegations, terming them as “baseless”.

#### **States accountable under IPEF**

The Fair Economy pillar also encourages parties to “criminalise bribery” to “obtain or retain business” or gain other undue advantages in international business.

“The parties recognise that bribery intended to secure an advantage if a candidate takes public office undermines good governance. Each party affirms its commitment to enhance the effectiveness of law enforcement actions to prevent and address corruption offences,” the agreement states.

“The IPEF Fair Economy Agreement is between state parties, including the US and India, under which each party has taken on obligations to address corruption and financial crimes and improve tax administration. This includes measures to promote the active participation of the private sector in preventing and combating corruption, including bribery,” said RV Anuradha, Partner at Clarus Law Associates.

She said that states are accountable to each other under the agreement. If one party raises “concerns” about another’s implementation of obligations, consultations may be required to resolve such issues. “If asked by the US, therefore, India will need to engage in consultations,” she said.

“The implications of the bribery case is that IPEF members could pressure us to amend our laws. In a globalised world, you have to align domestic laws with global regulations,” said Biswajit Dhar, professor at Jawaharlal Nehru University. Dhar added that with Donald Trump set to take charge of the White House, such issues could be used against India in negotiations.

“If we think we can push this corruption issue under the carpet by excluding government procurement from multilateral agreements, we are mistaken. Global regulations are improving, and India will need to keep pace to do business with the world,” Dhar said.

#### **Provisions on asset recovery**

The IPEF agreement includes provisions for asset recovery as a remedial measure in corruption cases, aligned with international conventions.

The agreement stipulates that each party, consistent with the United Nations Convention against Corruption (UNCAC), should adopt measures to enable the “identification, tracing, freezing, seizure, and confiscation in criminal or civil proceedings of proceeds of crime derived from offences established in accordance with the UNCAC.”

India has also agreed to encourage the participation of non-government stakeholders in the recovery and return of proceeds from corrupt officials, to the extent allowed by its domestic law.

“Consistent with the UNCAC, each party intends to ensure transparency and accountability in the return and disposition of recovered proceeds of crime. Specifically, parties should consider making information publicly available on the transfer and administration of returned proceeds to both the transferring and receiving countries,” the agreement said.





According to a US court filing, Gautam Adani, his nephew, and six others were accused of offering bribes totalling approximately ₹1,750 crore (around \$228 million) to a high-ranking Andhra Pradesh government official. This was allegedly done in exchange for facilitating agreements requiring the state's distribution companies to purchase seven gigawatts of solar power from the Solar Energy Corporation of India (SECI) under a manufacturing-linked project.

The filings revealed that between July 2021 and February 2022, electricity distribution companies in Odisha, Jammu and Kashmir, Tamil Nadu, Chhattisgarh, and Andhra Pradesh signed power sale agreements (PSAs) with SECI. Andhra Pradesh agreed to purchase the largest amount, approximately seven gigawatts, under a PSA signed on December 1, 2021.

IPEF was launched on May 23, 2022, comprising 14 countries—Australia, Brunei, Fiji, India, Indonesia, Japan, the Republic of Korea, Malaysia, New Zealand, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam, and the US. Its aim is to strengthen economic engagement and cooperation among partner countries, advancing growth, economic stability, and prosperity in the region. The framework is structured around four pillars.

**NEW EASTERN ROUTE CUTS DOWN SHIPPING TIME & COSTS, PROMISES TO BOOST INDIA-RUSSIA TRADE**

Midway through 2024, as India surpassed China to become the largest buyer of Russian oil, the operationalisation of a new sea route – the Eastern Maritime Corridor – is beginning to play an increasingly significant role in boosting commodity trade between the two countries, especially crude oil shipments to India.

The new eastern route from Chennai to Vladivostok is translating into savings on two counts: shipment times between the two countries and thereby transportation costs. Trading of commodities such as crude, coal and LNG have already commenced via the new eastern route since early this year, while others products including fertilisers and containerised cargo that warrant longer-term commitment from both parties are also now being shipped.

- “With the operationalisation of the Eastern Maritime Corridor between Vladivostok and Chennai, ships carrying crude oil, metals etc are now coming to Indian ports. This new route has significantly reduced the transit time between the two countries,” Union Shipping Minister Sarbananda Sonowal told The Indian Express.
- According to Shipping Ministry data on cumulative shipments through 2024, the top import items in value terms were crude oil, project goods, coal and coke, vegetable oils and fertilisers. When it comes to exports to Russia, the top five products by value that were exported from India through this route were processed minerals, iron and steel, tea, marine products, tea and coffee.
- In terms of quantity, the import data showed that the top five commodities were petroleum crude, coal and coke, fertilisers, vegetable oil and iron and steel, while quantity wise, the top export commodities were processed minerals, iron and steel, tea, granite and natural stones, processed fruits and juices.

**Do You Know:**

- The Chennai-Vladivostok sea route covers a distance of about 5,600 nautical miles and is estimated to have reduced the time required to transport cargo between the Indian and Russian Ports of the Far East Region by up to 16 days. The time taken has come down to 24 days compared



to over 40 days that it takes to transport goods to India from the west of Russia via Europe. This traditional trade route between Mumbai and St Petersburg in Russia spans a distance of 8,675 nautical miles, and the time taken for transportation is 40 days or more.

- A large ship that travels at the normal cruising speed of around 25 knots (about 45 kilometres/hour) takes about 12 days to cover the distance between Vladivostok and Chennai, less than a third of the time taken through the traditional St Petersburg-Mumbai sea route.
- Vladivostok is the largest Russian port on the Pacific Ocean, and is located about 50 kilometres from the Sino-Russia border. On the Indian side, Chennai, and other eastern ports including Paradip, Visakhapatnam, Tuticorin, Ennore and Kolkata are being leveraged as docking points, depending on the cargo type and the eventual destination for the shipments.
- In July this year, India – world’s third-largest consumer of crude oil with a high import dependency level of over 85 per cent – had surpassed China as the largest buyer of Russian oil.

### THOMAS PIKETTY HAS THE RIGHT DIAGNOSIS, WRONG PRESCRIPTION

French economist Thomas Piketty is right that inequality isn’t a “rich country concern” and India shouldn’t wait to become richer before addressing what is definitely a serious issue. Whether inequality in India is widening is a moot point. Official household consumption expenditure surveys show a decline in the Gini coefficient between 2011-12 and 2022-23 for rural and urban areas. In other words, consumption inequality has reduced. The same may not be true with income and wealth inequality, which would well have gone up in the past decade or more. That, if so, isn’t good not just from a moral, social or political, but also economic standpoint. Leveraging the market potential of India’s large population cannot happen without incomes rising at the bottom of the pyramid. Less inequality and the aspiring poor having more money to spend is desirable even from a hard-nosed business perspective; ask any FMCG, two-wheeler or micro-finance company executive.

Piketty is equally right with his diagnosis. The real inequality is one of opportunity. A large part of India’s population suffers from a lack of access to quality education, health, nutrition and sanitation facilities. It makes them less productive. Incomes are ultimately a function of productivity — how much output and value a worker adds from economic activity. Incomes cannot rise without productivity improving. If the bulk of the workforce is, as Piketty notes, “stuck in a low productivity trap”, they cannot contribute to growth nor partake of its fruits. That’s all the more reason, then, why India needs to reduce inequality — in this case, of opportunity — early enough. It calls for increasing public investment in good schools, hospitals, provision of clean drinking water, human waste disposal and sewage treatment systems, and other physical and social infrastructure — much more than what the Centre and states are doing now.

Where Piketty, however, is wrong is in his prescription of taxing the wealth, and not just incomes, of the rich. Much of the Forbes billionaires’ wealth are held as shares in the companies promoted by them. This is paper wealth that can be realised only when the shares are sold. It’s one thing to tax incomes, capital gains from property or share sales, and goods and services transactions — which are all “flow” variables. Taxing unrealised wealth – which is a “stock” — is unnecessary. The tax reforms of recent times have helped broaden the base and reduce evasion. There’s enough scope to raise additional resources from the already existing avenues, including through better enforcement and advanced analytics. The last thing India needs is a new tax that will create more disruptions than revenues for funding essential public goods.



## MORE MONEY, LESS PROBLEMS

Arun Kumar Writes: The reason wealth tax failed earlier is because it was deliberately made complicated by allowing concessions, loopholes, etc. Now, with digital records, it should be easier to implement.

- As per the Union Budget 2024-25, the Centre's tax collection according to the estimated GDP would be 11.78 per cent with direct taxes contributing 7 per cent. Additional taxes are collected by the states and the local bodies, taking the total tax to GDP to around 17 per cent. This is low compared to most other countries, which means inadequate expenditure on social sectors like education and health leading to low productivity and low incomes for a majority, resulting in weak demand and slowdown of growth.

- Low tax collection is a result of black income generation. According to Oxfam estimates, the top 1 per cent on the income ladder earn 22 per cent of the national income. Projecting that further, the top 5 per cent may be earning about 40 per cent of the income. This means income tax collection from this 5 per cent should be about 10 per cent of GDP at an average tax rate of 25 per cent. Much more tax could potentially be collected if black income generation by the top 3 per cent in the income ladder could be checked.

- Despite tax reforms, there are only 90 million (6.5 per cent of the population) taxpayers. But, only about 15 million are effective taxpayers. About half of the 90 million file nil returns and the rest pay negligible tax. So, the tax base remains narrow and the distribution of income is highly skewed. Even if agriculture incomes are taxed, the numbers will not rise much. The real problem is the taxation of services — the dominant sector of the economy.

### Do You Know:

- According to Investopedia, a wealth tax is a tax based on the market value of assets currently owned by a taxpayer, as opposed to taxes on asset sales, income, or real estate. Some developed countries choose to tax wealth.

- According to Investopedia, a wealth tax, also called capital tax or equity tax, is imposed on the wealth possessed by individuals. The tax usually applies to a person's net worth, which is assets minus liabilities. These assets include (but are not limited to) cash, bank deposits, shares, fixed assets, personal cars, real property, pension plans, money funds, owner-occupied housing, and trusts.

- After Indian independence in 1947, the Indian Income Tax Act 1922 was the principal legislation governing the levy of direct taxes. With the Nehru-led Government in power, the trend in the economy in the initial years after independence was towards greater socialism.

—There was a progressive taxation regime with higher taxes being levied on the rich. There were many problems in the Indian direct tax system resulting in heavy tax evasion.

—The Government of India set up the Kaldor Committee in 1955 to rationalise the tax system and bring about affirmative reforms.

—Pursuant to the suggestions made by the Kaldor Committee, the Government delineated a plan for a composite and integrated tax structure to ensure that no income or wealth escaped assessment. —Thus, the Wealth Tax Act (WTA) was introduced in 1957 as a permanent measure.



It was abolished in 2015 due to several procedural difficulties such as extensive litigation, increased compliance burdens, heavy administration costs and generation of inadequate revenues.

## WHY THE GOVERNMENT COULD DISCONTINUE THE SOVEREIGN GOLD SCHEME

The government is considering discontinuing the sovereign gold bond scheme due to the high cost of financing the scheme. Officials are of the view that sovereign gold bonds were issued with the objective to boost investment in gold, but the recent announcement to cut the import duty on gold in Budget 2024-25 has already been made in line with that objective and has helped raise demand for gold.

Earlier in August this year, The Indian Express had reported the government was considering discontinuing the scheme given the high cost of financing the fiscal deficit through sovereign gold bonds.

### What is the Sovereign Gold Bond scheme?

The Government of India finances its fiscal deficit through various instruments, including dated securities, the National Small Savings Fund (NSSF), provident funds, and Sovereign Gold Bonds (SGBs). SGBs are debt securities issued by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) on behalf of the government, with each unit denoting a gram of gold. These bonds offer the flexibility of trading in the secondary market and the interest in SGBs is fixed at 2.5 per cent per annum on the amount of initial investment.

The quantity of gold for which the investor pays is protected, since he or she receives the ongoing market price at the time of redemption or premature redemption. Interest usually gets credited semi-annually to the bank account of the investor and the last interest is payable on maturity along with the principal.

However, the key attractive feature of SGBs is that, on maturity, gold bonds get redeemed in Indian rupees and the redemption price is based on a simple average of closing price of gold of 999 purity of previous three business days from the date of repayment, as published by the India Bullion and Jewellers Association Ltd (IBJA).

These bonds offer a better alternative to holding gold in physical form due to lower risks and costs of storage. Investors are assured of the market value of gold at the time of maturity and periodical interest. While the tenor of bonds is eight years, it can be redeemed after five years.

### What are the concerns regarding sovereign gold bonds?

The internal view in the government is that the cost of financing the fiscal deficit through SGBs is quite high and does not align with the benefits accruing to investors from the scheme.

Earlier, there used to be 10 tranches of SGBs in a year, then it came down to four and then to two. This has been a conscious way of seeing that the cost of financing fiscal deficit and the benefits accruing from physical gold collection are disjunct, officials said.

In July, the government had reduced the customs duty on gold from 15 per cent to 6 per cent — the lowest in over a decade. While this duty cut led to a decrease in gold prices, it also resulted in increased demand for the metal. Since it is not a social sector scheme but rather an investment option, the government is of the view that there are not many benefits in continuing the scheme.



Even though in the Budget presented on July 23, the government has reduced the gross SGB issuances to Rs 18,500 crore from Rs 29,638 crore in the interim budget of February 1, no issuance of sovereign gold bonds has been made so far in the current financial year 2024-25. Net borrowing through SGBs has been cut to Rs 15,000 crore from previously estimated Rs 26,138 crore.

SGBs issued under Series I of 2016-17, which were released on August 5, 2016, were due for redemption in the first week of August. These SGBs were issued at a price of Rs 3,119. The value appreciation was more than double as the price for final redemption on August 5 was announced to be Rs 6,938, in addition to the interest earned over the eight-year period.

SGB Series II bonds from 2016, which were redeemed in March this year, provided a return of 126.4 per cent over the investment value, along with the interest paid over the eight-year holding period. The RBI has also announced a window during October 2024 to March 2025 for premature redemption of the gold bonds issued between May 2017 and March 2020. Premature redemption of SGBs is permitted after five years from the date of issue of such bonds.

### THE NEW BOSS AT MINT STREET

December 9 began as a routine day for North Block mandarins, with questions pertaining to the Finance Ministry to be answered in the Lok Sabha. But for avid observers of the economy and financial markets, the big question of the day was neither starred nor unstarred. It revolved around the Governorship of the Reserve Bank of India (RBI). The incumbent Shaktikanta Das, in his sixth year at the RBI, had just delivered a monetary policy that disappointed a government rooting for an interest rate cut, particularly after GDP growth slipped to just 5.4% between July and September.

Mr. Das, whose tenure was to expire on December 10, said the growth-inflation balance was off but asserted persistently high inflation also hurt consumption and growth. By Monday, reporters who had been running stories about another extension for him, had changed course in the absence of any official communiqué, floating names of senior bureaucrats who may replace Mr. Das. None had an inkling that name would turn out to be Union Revenue Secretary Sanjay Malhotra.

They were not the only ones surprised — even Mr. Malhotra is learnt to have been informed just hours before his appointment was made public. The Rajasthan cadre, 1990-batch IAS officer is not the usual Finance Ministry insider picked for the top role at Mint Street. Like his predecessor, most such appointees had handled departments such as Economic Affairs, or held the Finance Secretary's role, like the late R.N. Malhotra, who was the 17th RBI Governor.

Mr. Malhotra, who has spent almost all his life in North India, is a computer engineering graduate from IIT Kanpur, with a Master's degree in Public Policy from Princeton University. His new role brings him to the heart of India's financial markets Mumbai for at least three years.

### EXPRESS VIEW ON RBI REPORT: STATE FINANCES HAVE IMPROVED, BUT THERE IS A LOT OF WORK TO BE DONE

During the pandemic, state governments had witnessed a marked deterioration in their debt-deficit position. In 2020-21, the combined fiscal deficit of all states had edged up to 4.1 per cent of GDP and their debt-to-GDP ratio had risen to 31 per cent. However, as the RBI's latest report on state finances notes, state governments have in the years thereafter stuck firmly to the path of fiscal consolidation, bringing down their debt to 28.5 per cent by March 2024 and their deficit to



2.9 per cent. Alongside, they have also managed to ramp up allocations for capital expenditure. Their total capital outlay has risen from 2.1 per cent of GDP in 2020-21 to 2.6 per cent in 2023-24, and is further budgeted to increase to 2.8 per cent in 2024-25. These are encouraging developments.

However, the report also flags several areas of concern. For one, the power sector. The losses of power distribution companies stood at a staggering Rs 6.5 lakh crore by 2022-23, despite many attempts to improve their financial metrics over the years. To put this loss in perspective — its equivalent is around 2.4 per cent of GDP. In recent years, states have also seen a sharp increase in subsidies, due to “farm loan waivers, free/subsidised services (like electricity to agriculture and households, transport, gas cylinder and cash transfers to farmers, youth and women”. The amounts involved are significant. According to an Axis Bank report, 14 states now have income transfer schemes for women with a spending of Rs 2 lakh crore. This amounts to roughly 0.6 per cent of GDP. Such forms of spending will limit the resources available to governments for expenditure on more productive avenues. Then there are contingent liabilities. As per the RBI report, state guarantees have witnessed a steady increase, rising from 2 per cent of GDP at the end of March 2017 to 3.8 per cent by March 2023.

As state debt remains considerably above the level recommended by the Fiscal Responsibility and Budget Management review committee, the RBI report calls for — rightly so — a “credible roadmap for debt consolidation.” In particular, it says that states with high levels of debt — these would include states such as Punjab, Bihar, Kerala and West Bengal — “may establish a clear, transparent and time-bound glide path for debt consolidation.” The report also calls for “next generation” fiscal rules which, while providing states the flexibility to deal with shocks such as the pandemic, would be guided by the objective of ensuring medium-term fiscal sustainability. These suggestions should generate more debate in the coming weeks and months.

#### LOAN WRITE-OFFS HELP BANKS TO SHOW LOWER NPAS

A massive loan write-off of Rs 9.9 lakh crore in the last five financial years has helped banks to show a big decline in non-performing assets (NPAs). Aided by this write-off, banks reported a 12-year low NPA ratio of 2.8 per cent of advances by March 2024.

- Total recoveries from write-offs were only 18.70 per cent at Rs 1,85,241 crore in the last five years, according to the Reserve Bank of India data. This means banks were not able to recover 81.30 per cent, or over Rs 8 lakh crore of the loan written off in five years, despite adopting various recovery measures.
- These loan accounts were mostly wilful defaults with promoters and directors of some of the companies even fleeing the country.
- As gross NPAs reported by commercial banks were Rs 4.80 lakh crore as of March 2024, the total NPAs would be over Rs 12.80 lakh crore including the loans written off.
- The Finance Ministry last week said that the gross NPA ratio for scheduled commercial banks witnessed a significant reduction to 2.67 percent in June 2024 from 11.18 percent in March 2018. It was 11.5 per cent in March 2018 and 9.3 per cent (Rs 9.4 lakh crore) in March 2019.
- Banks were able to recover to recover Rs 46,036 crore in 2023-24 from loans written off earlier as against Rs 45,551 crore last year. Total loan write-off was Rs 1.70 lakh crore in FY24, Rs 2.08



lakh crore in FY23, Rs 1.74 lakh crore in FY22, Rs 2.02 lakh crore in FY21 and Rs 2.34 lakh crore in FY20, RBI data from an RTI reply shows.

**Do You Know:**

- Once a loan is written off by a bank, it goes out from the asset book of the bank. The bank writes off a loan after the borrower has defaulted on the loan repayment and there is a very low chance of recovery. The lender then moves the defaulted loan, or NPA, out of the assets side and reports the amount as loss.
- A loan becomes an NPA when the principal or interest payment remains overdue for 90 days. Public sector banks accounted for nearly 63 per cent of the write-off exercise.
- The nature and purpose of write-offs by banks is governed by several considerations. Once an account becomes NPA, prudential norms require the creation of provisions and on the basis of the aging of the NPA as well as the realisable value of security, these provisions get augmented and reach a stage where the provisions equal the outstanding in the account.
- “Write-offs by banks is purely an accounting entry where an on-balance sheet item moves into off-balance sheet items and they are parked in typically what is known as ‘Advances Under Collection’ and there are specialised teams which follow-up for the recovery thereafter,” it said. The borrower’s liability to repay or the bank’s right to recover is not diminished in any manner, the RBI said.
- According to the RBI, this is purely a balance sheet management. “Banks and regulators focus on such accounts that are parked in a special account to ensure higher recoveries because such recoveries go into aiding the P&L account and then contribute to the financial wellbeing of the bank,” it said.

**TOP 100 DEFAULTERS ACCOUNTED FOR 43% OF TOTAL NPAs, OVER RS 4 LAKH CRORE IN TOTAL**

Over 43 per cent of the total non-performing assets (NPA) till March 2019 — Rs 4.02 lakh crore — was accounted for by just 100 companies and 30 of these borrowers accounted for over 30 per cent of the gross NPAs — Rs 2.86 lakh crore, an investigation by The Indian Express has revealed.

- India’s scheduled commercial banks (SCBs) had gross NPAs worth Rs 9.33 lakh crore as of March 31, 2019, the second-highest-ever bad loan amount recorded after 2018 in the history of India’s banking system.
- The investigation further shows that the top 100 bank defaulters, which includes some of the country’s biggest companies from across sectors run by prominent industrialists, had a total debt of Rs 8.44 lakh crore till March 31, 2019 and out of this nearly half was declared as bad loans, or NPA.
- A closer look at the list of the top defaulters also shows just 15 companies of three sectors — manufacturing, energy and construction — accounted for over 50 per cent (Rs 4.58 lakh crore) of the total debt on these 100 companies.
- The country’s top business giants from across the sectors — manufacturing, energy, construction, real estate, telecom, banking or financial intermediation — constitute the top 100 list of NPAs or banks defaulters.

**Do You Know:**

- All advances given by banks are termed “assets”, as they generate income for the bank by way of interest or instalments. However, a loan turns bad if the interest or instalment remains unpaid even after the due date — and turns into a nonperforming asset, or NPA, if it remains unpaid for a period of more than 90 days.
- The process of evergreening of loans is typically a temporary fix for a bank. If an account turns NPA, banks are required to make higher provisions which will impact their profitability. To avoid classifying a loan as non-performing asset (NPAs), banks adopt evergreening.

**INFLATION HAS EASED — BUT ONLY FOR SOME**

Inflation data released on Friday provided some relief for policymakers. India’s inflation rate (or the rate at which the general price level rises in a particular month as against the same month a year ago) in November came in at 5.5 per cent. While this is higher than the Reserve Bank of India’s target of 4 per cent, it is a sharp improvement over the 6.2 per cent rate in October. The main reason for the softening in the headline inflation rate as compared to October was the moderation in vegetable prices. Even so, it is noteworthy that vegetable price inflation stood at close to 30 per cent (year-on-year) and overall food price inflation came in at over 9 per cent (y-o-y). When one takes into account the situation last November — headline inflation of 5.6 per cent and food inflation of 8.7 per cent — it provides a clear picture of how sustained high inflation creates a cost of living crisis.

The relief in headline numbers hides wide variation across the geographies and economic classes. For instance, Delhi had the lowest inflation rate (2.7 per cent) among all states and Union Territories while bordering UP stood at 6.7 per cent and Haryana at 5.3 per cent. Further, an analysis by Crisil Research showed that the inflation rate was far more palatable for the urban rich — 4.6 per cent for those among the Top 20 per cent income segment of urban India — while considerably higher as one went down the income scale and from urban to rural India; inflation was at 6.1 per cent for those in the bottom 20 per cent of the income segment and living in rural India. This variation is because inflation is higher among essential items (such as food) that account for a greater share in the consumption basket of the relatively worse off.

In its latest policy review on December 6, the RBI stated that going forward, food inflation is likely to soften. Moreover, the appointment of the Revenue Secretary as the new RBI Governor has also prompted many to pencil in a rate cut in February. However, it is also true that in its last meeting, the RBI not only raised the inflation forecast for the full year but also provided detailed caveats highlighting the continuing risks to inflation. Clearly, there are no easy answers but as he was leaving office, outgoing Governor Shaktikanta Das reminded everyone of the age-old wisdom in this regard: Price stability is essential for sustained economic growth.

**TRADE SHOCKER**

This October’s foreign trade numbers had offered a sliver of hope for India’s generally weak export story over the past couple of years, as goods exports grew at a 28-month high pace of 17.2%. Any prospects of a sustained turnaround with better global demand for this Christmas season, have, however, come undone with November’s trade estimates released on Monday. In a double whammy of sorts, not only did the value of outbound shipments sink to the lowest in a little over two years at just \$32.1 billion but the import bill also hit a record high of \$70 billion, rising 27%





year-on-year which is the fastest uptick in more than two years as well. Relative to October, goods exports were 18.1% lower. Three of the last four months have now clocked record-breaking import bills, with \$64.3 billion in August and \$66.3 billion in October. As in August, November's import bill spike was led by gold imports that jumped 331.5% from last November to a whopping \$14.9 billion. Overall gold imports are now up 49% this year, and while higher prices and seasonal spikes for the festive and wedding season explain some of the uptick, this warrants some examination, especially as exports of gems and jewellery are sputtering, including in the employment-intensive businesses such as diamond polishing and gold ornaments. Gems and jewellery exports are down 10.2% between April and November, while imports have widened over 30%, with November seeing a record high deficit of \$14.4 billion in the segment.

The overall gap in merchandise trade also expanded to a fresh high of \$37.8 billion in November, perhaps the first time that the deficit is higher than the export tally. Apart from precious metals, petroleum also played a key part in this widening, with exports halving to \$3.7 billion while imports rose 7.9% to \$16.1 billion. Officials have sought to downplay concerns by linking the export slump to lower oil prices, but the same should also hold true for imports. It may well be that the discount gains on Russian oil India had capitalised on to ramp up its exports, are fading, and domestic demand is stronger than before, but economists are a tad puzzled at this phenomenon of recent months. The Commerce Ministry top brass has often argued that rising import bills are not a worry because India is growing faster than the world, much of the imports are directly correlated to, or are inputs for exported goods, and non-oil exports that are rising should remain the focus. But oil and jewellery remain among India's top tradables, and policymakers must glean a better sense of the dynamics behind this tumult, even if they are unfazed by the expanding trade deficit.

## A SMOKER CHECK

The Group of Ministers (GoM), set up by the GST Council has recommended a major revision of taxes, aligning them more closely with the critical and essential priorities of the common person.

— Essential items like bottled water, bicycles, and exercise books will see reduced levies. Simultaneously, there is momentum to reduce the GST on health and life insurance premiums, making these essential services more affordable. High-value luxury goods, including tobacco products, will face higher GST rates.

— Using tobacco products like cigarettes, bidis and gutka kills about half of the people who use them and takes 11 years off a life on average. In India, tobacco kills nearly 1.3 million people each year and makes millions more sick. These numbers are not just statistics; they represent families torn apart and enormous societal costs in terms of lost productivity and healthcare burdens.

— However, there is a proven way to reduce this needless death and disease — taxation. Raising taxes on tobacco products to increase their prices is the single most effective policy to reduce consumption. Higher prices discourage people from starting, encourage current users to quit, and prevent relapse among former users.

— This is particularly true for young people, who are highly price-sensitive. Many smokers would quit, many young people would never start, and hundreds of thousands of lives could be saved even in the short term.



— To add another big win, because consumption declines disproportionately less compared to the tax increase, these tax increases will lead to substantially higher tax revenues, which can be used to support health, education, and other policies that promote societal well-being.

— In this context, the proposal to place tobacco products in a higher slab of the GST at 35 per cent is an excellent policy for both public and fiscal health. It will also help to correct a somewhat rocky recent path for tobacco tax policies in India that began well when the GST was introduced.

— The Economics for Health programme at Johns Hopkins University Bloomberg School of Public Health evaluates countries' tobacco tax policies biennially on a scale of 0 to 5, with 5 being the top score. It evaluates the overall price, the tax share of price, the change in affordability, and the tax structure.

— India's overall score in the latest edition was 1.5 out of 5, which was below the global average of 1.99. India's tax share of prices of all the major tobacco products falls significantly short of the WHO's recommended minimum of 75 per cent.

— India continues to struggle on both tax structure and change in affordability. Like many of its South Asian neighbours, India maintains a tiered structure wherein excise taxes are lower on some brands. This means that when taxes and prices increase, there remain cheaper, similar products to which users can switch.

— Furthermore, bidis have much lower or even no tax and are therefore very inexpensive. Because of both the problematic tax structure and the lack of regular, significant tax increases, from 2016 to 2022, tobacco products like cigarettes, bidis and chewing tobacco products have become more affordable on average.

— A higher GST slab for tobacco products will not only save lives but also align with India's broader goals of creating a healthier, more productive population. The revenue generated can be reinvested in public goods, reinforcing the nation's commitment to universal health and social equity.

**Do You Know:**

— Lung cancer is the second most diagnosed cancer and the leading cause of cancer deaths globally, claiming around 1.8 million lives annually. Tobacco smoking is the primary culprit, responsible for over 67% of lung cancer deaths in 2019.

— In India, a report from the Indian Journal of Medical Research (2022) reveals that one in nine people are likely to face a cancer diagnosis in their lifetime, with lung cancer ranking highest among men, according to the National Cancer Registry Programme.

— A Lancet report cited lung cancer as the second most diagnosed cancer worldwide in 2020. In Southeast Asia, though it ranked third in new cases (185,636), it led in cancer deaths, causing 166,260 fatalities. In India, lung cancer accounts for 72,510 new cases and 66,279 deaths annually. Beyond tobacco, long-term exposure to air pollution, particularly particulate matter, is an increasingly recognised risk factor.

— The study raises a red flag, suggesting that banning the sale of cigarettes and other tobacco products to people born between 2006 and 2010 could prevent 40% of all lung cancer deaths in 185 countries by 2095.



## IS COCONUT OIL AN EDIBLE OIL OR A HAIRCARE PRODUCT? HERE IS WHAT SUPREME COURT RULED

After the judiciary at several levels pondered this question for more than 15 years, the top court has made its decision: coconut oil is an edible oil, and should be taxed at a lower rate. And it does not matter that coconut oil, like personal care products, is sometimes sold in small packets.

Edible oils currently attract a lower rate of Goods and Services Tax (5%) than hair care products (18%).

### **Tax on coconut oil**

Before 2017, when the GST regime was implemented, provisions of the Central Excise Tariff Act, 1985 (CET Act) were applied to coconut oil.

After 2005, when the CET Act was amended, coconut oil was included under Section III – “Animal or Vegetable Fats and Oils and their Cleavage Products; Prepared Edible Fats; Animal or Vegetable Waxes” – and carried an excise duty of 8%.

“Preparations for use on the hair” appeared under Section VI (“Products of the Chemical or Allied Industries”) of the Act, and carried an excise duty of 16%.

This was in line with the Harmonised System of Nomenclature (HSN), international taxation norms published in 1988 by the World Customs Organization, an intergovernmental body representing 186 customs administrations around the world.

In June 2009, the Central Board of Excise and Customs under the Department of Revenue of the Union Ministry of Finance, issued a circular classifying coconut oil sold in containers of less than 200 ml as hair oil, so it could be taxed at the higher rate of 16%.

The circular was withdrawn in October 2015 after rulings by Tribunals and courts to the effect that “just because the retail packs of coconut oil were in sizes of 200 ml or less, the same could not be presumed to be meant for use as hair oil”.

In the GST regime, coconut oil is taxed at 5%, while products under the “Preparations for use on the hair” category carry an 18% tax.

### **Case before the SC**

In 2007, central excise authorities issued show-cause notices to Madhan Agro Industries (India) Pvt Ltd, a company that sold coconut oil in packets of 5 ml to 2 litres, proposing to impose a higher tax, classifying the oil as a hair care product.

On Madhan Agro’s challenge, the Customs Excise and Service Tax Appellate Tribunal (CESTAT) in Chennai held that following the 2005 amendment to the CET Act, coconut oil was an edible oil and not a hair care product. The Tribunal passed similar orders in challenges involving several Puducherry-based companies that sold coconut oil in small containers.

The Commissioner of Central Excise, Salem, challenged these orders before the SC.

### **View of the top court**



In 2018, a Bench of Justices Ranjan Gogoi and R Banumathi delivered a split verdict – Justice Gogoi held that coconut oil should be classified as edible oil regardless of the package size; Justice Banumathi applied the “Common Parlance Test” and held that coconut oil sold in small packages is “understood in the market by dealers/ consumers as ‘Hair Oil’”, and must be taxed as such.

On Wednesday, a Bench comprising Chief Justice of India Sanjiv Khanna and Justices Sanjay Kumar and R Mahadevan held that the headings specifically provided under the law in line with international HSN norms “cannot be ignored while classifying goods”.

It also rejected the application of the common parlance test in this case, saying the test could only be applied “when a product is not clearly defined or specifically dealt with” under the law.

“The mere fact that coconut oil [can] ...also [be] use[d] as a cosmetic or toilet preparation, by itself, would not be sufficient to exclude [it] from the ambit of ‘coconut oil’ and subject it to classification as ‘hair oil,’” the court said.

Also, it said, “Small-sized containers are a feature common to both ‘edible oils’ [and] ‘hair oils’. ...There must be something more to distinguish between them for classification...other than the size of the packing.”

The court also noted that under the Standards of Weights and Measures (Packaged Commodities) Rules, 1977, edible oil can be packed in sizes of 50 ml, 100 ml, 200 ml, etc.

#### **What is the common parlance test?**

The test is employed when a good or product can be reasonably classified under two different taxing entries – the court will see what uses the market and the public generally tend to associate it with.

\* In May 2023, the SC held that homeopathic hair oil should be classified as a “medicament” and taxed at a lower rate under the CET Act, and should not be included under “Cosmetic or Toilet Preparations”.

\* In 2022, the SC considered whether anardana (dried pomegranate seeds) should be included under “Edible Fruit and Nuts” or “Oil seeds and Oleaginous Fruits; Miscellaneous Grains, Seeds and Fruit”. It held that ‘seeds’ fall under the latter heading because they are known to be used for sowing in common parlance, while pomegranate is consumed as a fresh fruit.

### **WHY SEBI MIGHT INTRODUCE CHANGES TO SME IPOS, WHAT NEW NORMS COULD SAY**

In its upcoming meeting scheduled for tomorrow (December 18), the Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI) is likely to revamp norms on initial public offerings (IPOs) of small and medium enterprises (SMEs).

The tightening of regulations would come in the wake of irrational exuberance witnessed in SME IPOs and, in some cases, the manipulation in pricing and instances of promoters diverting funds raised through such issues to shell companies. Besides, the market regulator in the board meeting may also review frameworks related to unpublished price-sensitive information (UPSI) and angel funds.



### Recent SME IPOs boom

There has been a surge in SME IPOs in recent years, particularly from 2022-23 onwards. Since the establishment of SME platforms, FY2023-24 witnessed the highest number of SME public issues and the highest SME fundraising, with 196 IPOs tapping the market to mobilise more than Rs 6,000 crore.

In the current financial year (till October 15, 2024), 159 SMEs went public, raising more than Rs 5,700 crore.

Prior to the recent surge, it is to be noted that in the past SME segment has witnessed growth in financial years 2017-2019, where in FY2017-18, 148 companies raised Rs 2,147 crore. However, between FY 2019-20 to FY2021-22, an overall sluggish trend was observed, mainly due to Covid-19, and therefore only 127 companies came out with SME IPOs.

### Bumper listing

As many as 29 out of 61 SME IPOs that came to the market witnessed oversubscription of over 100 times since September this year. Rajputana Biodiesel, which closed its IPO on November 28, was oversubscribed 718 times, Apex Ecotech 457 times, Lakshya Powertech by 573 times, Thinking Hats by 322 times, Sodhani Academy of Fintech Enablers Ltd by 438 times and Travels and Rentals by 608 times.

Several SME IPOs have gained ground by over 100 per cent after listing. Rajesh Power (listed on December 2) has gained 109 per cent, C2C advanced by 99.49 per cent (listed on December 3), Neelam Linens by 159 per cent, Danish Power by 168 per cent, and Sahasra Electronics by 136 per cent.

### Why are there concerns around SME IPOs?

With an increase in the number of SME issues, SEBI has noted that investor participation has also increased in such offerings. The applicant-to-allotted investor ratio increased from four times in FY2022 to 46 times in FY2023 and 245 times in FY2024.

SME listed entities are typically promoter-driven or family business companies with high concentration of shareholding among a few promoter or promoter group persons or entities. There is also limited presence of private equity investors or sophisticated investors, who act as a check on the promoter's influence, in such companies, a recent consultation paper released by SEBI said.

Sebi has observed diversion of issue proceeds to related parties, connected parties, shell companies and inflation of revenue by circular transactions through related parties, connected parties and shell companies. In some SME companies, the entity diverted money raised through the IPO and subsequent Rights Issue to shell companies controlled by the promoters.

It has also been observed in another entity that a company has booked fraudulent sales and purchases through circular transactions amongst related parties/ connected parties. By doing so, such companies try to create a positive sentiment to induce investors into purchasing such securities.



Sebi said that one out of two SME listed entities have undertaken related party transactions (RPTs) of more than Rs 10 crore and one out of five SME listed entities have undertaken RPTs of more than Rs 50 crore.

Earlier this month, the market regulator cancelled the SME IPO of Trafiksol ITS Technologies, whose issue was oversubscribed 345.65 times. It also asked the company to refund the money to the investors for alleged misuse of funds through a 'shell entity'.

#### **SME IPO norms overhaul**

The SEBI board is expected to revamp the rules for SME IPOs, amid concerns over various misconducts in such public issues. Some of the major changes that the SEBI board may bring in are:

\*Hike the minimum application size for an SME IPO to Rs 2-4 lakh from the present Rs 1 lakh.

\*Increase the requirement of minimum allottees for an SME IPO to 200 for such public issues to be successful, from the present 50 allottees.

\*Raise lock-in on minimum promoter contribution (MPC) in SME IPO to 5 years from the existing three years. This will ensure that a promoter of an SME company continues to have certain skin in the game.

\*Allowing an SME company to float an IPO only if the issue size is over Rs 10 crore and the operating profit is Rs 3 crore for at least any 2 out of 3 financial years preceding the IPO application.

#### **NEW UNDERSEA CABLES TO BOOST INDIA'S DIGITAL CONNECTIVITY**

With data use increasing year on year, India's undersea cable network is growing. Two new cable systems are set to be launched in the coming three months: the India Asia Xpress (IAX) and the India Europe Xpress (IEX), both connecting India with additional Internet links to the two continents. This comes even as India takes a more active role in discussions around submarine cable security and resilience.

Both cable systems, cumulatively over 15,000 kilometres in length, are owned by Reliance Jio, with a strategic investment from China Mobile. The IAX connects Chennai and Mumbai with Singapore, Thailand, and Malaysia in Asia, and the IEX connects them with France, Greece, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Djibouti. This adds to the dozens of cables landing in India, mainly in Mumbai and Chennai.

The cable expansions not only reflect growing traffic, but also increased geopolitical ambition, Jagannath Panda, head of the Sweden-based Stockholm Centre for South Asian and Indo-Pacific Affairs (SCSA-IPA) wrote recently. The new cable systems bolster India's "defence strategy in terms of the resilience of the cables against physical damages or digital disruptions from cyberattacks by state or non-state actors", Mr. Panda wrote in a paper for the Marine Policy journal.

"India is emerging as a strong maritime cable network player in the region," Mr. Panda said in an interview. "There will be focus in the Bay of Bengal and the South China Sea region, and India's proactive role will be closely watched, and India won't shy away from taking a leading role there," he said.



In March, three submarine cables connecting India to West Asia and Europe were disrupted, impacting traffic to India. While that incident had an impact on India's international bandwidth, traffic still flowed through alternate routes, with data centres within India itself also buffering against disruptions for key Internet services. The alarm over disruptions to connectivity has been felt worldwide, and India is no exception. Telecom Secretary Neeraj Mittal is part of the International Advisory Body for Submarine Cable Resilience established by the International Telecommunication Union. IT Secretary S. Krishnan asked at an event earlier this month, "Are we stable within the country that all services within this country can be offered even in the event of a disruption?"

### **Bangladesh connection**

The Bangladeshi government recently put on hold plans by Internet service providers in that country to sell bandwidth to Northeast India, according to reports from local media. This setback, however, has limited impact for India, said Suvesh Chattopadhyaya, an undersea cable industry veteran. Northeast States are already served by fibre laid on top of the Power Grid Corporation of India's transmission lines, and this fibre accounts for "hundreds of gigabits" per second of connectivity, Mr. Chattopadhyaya said, sufficient for current connectivity needs.

### **LACK OF GOOD JOBS PUSH YOUNG J&K WOMEN BACK TO THE FIELDS**

Over 50% of young urban women who are searching for jobs in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) are not finding any. Among those who are finding jobs, an increasing number of women are being pushed out of the service sector and into agriculture. This indicates distressed employment.

J&K's urban female unemployment rate (youth aged 15-29) of 53.6% in the July-September quarter this year was the highest in the country by a wide margin. This was more than 30 percentage points higher than the national average in this category (21%).

However, the Union Territory's female urban labour force participation rate (LFPR) among youth aged 15-29 at 30.2% was second only to Himachal Pradesh (34.9%) in the same quarter. Here, J&K's figure were more than 8 points higher than India's average (21.9%).

Simply put, a significant share of urban women in the UT are persistently searching for jobs but over half of them are unable to find any over an extended period.

This trend is not new. The region's female urban unemployment rate and urban LFPR have remained higher than most States since 2018.

In every developing economy, people move out of agriculture to other sectors but if the reverse is happening here, it is a clear sign of distress in the economy.

The government has introduced a host of schemes such as Hausla, Umeed, and Tejaswini to provide financial assistance to address this issue of unemployment in the region, predominantly for women.

### **LABOUR COMMITTEE ASKS CENTRE TO INCREASE MINIMUM PF PENSION**

The Parliamentary Standing Committee on Labour, headed by senior BJP leader Basavaraj Bommai, has recommended the Centre to increase the ₹1,000 minimum pension paid by the Employees Provident Fund Organisation (EPFO) under its Employees Pension Scheme (EPS). The



trade unions and associations of pensioners have been demanding an increase in the minimum pension. The panel noted in the report, which was tabled in Parliament on Monday, that over a decade has passed since the minimum pension was fixed as ₹1,000 a month.

**AVERAGE SPEED OF FREIGHT TRAINS IS ONLY 25 KM/HR, INCREASING IT IS OF PRIME IMPORTANCE: STANDING COMMITTEE REPORT**

The average speed of freight trains during last 11 years was only 25 kilometers per hours, the standing committee on Railways said in its latest report. The committee said that increasing the speed of the freight train is of prime importance to increase the earning of Indian Railway.

The Committee is aware that Indian Railways have taken up the construction of two dedicated freight corridors viz. the Eastern Dedicated Freight Corridor, from Ludhiana to Sonnagar (1,337 km), and the Western Dedicated Freight Corridor from JNPT (Mumbai) to Dadri (1506 km). The work on EDFC has been completed and 102 Km section remaining on WDFC from Vaitarna to JNPT is expected to be completed by December, 2025," said the committee which presented its report in Parliament on December 13, 2024.

Most of the earnings of Indian Railways comes from its freight services. In 2023-24, Indian Railways earned revenue of Rs 1,68,293 Crore and target to achieve Rs 1,80,000 Crore during 2024-25. The standing committee, which is being headed by Andhra Pradesh BJP leader CM Ramesh, also urged the ministry to expedite work on new DFCs.

The Parliamentary committee also expressed concerns over expansion of Kavach, an automatic train protection system, and said that it is slowly progressing.

"Kavach has so far been deployed on 1,465 route km of the South Central Railway and 80 route km on North Central Railway. The Committee are also aware that tender have been invited for Delhi-Chennai, Mumbai- Chennai and other important corridors. The Committee feel that there is urgent need to speed up Kavach related works and ensure faster penetration of Kavach across Indian Railway Network," said the Committee.

Union Minister of Railways Ashwini Vaishnaw in a written reply in Lok Sabha last month said that Kavach work is ongoing on approximately 3,000 route km and track side works on these routes have been completed on about 1081 Route km. Kavach aids the Loco Pilot in running of train within specified speed limits by automatic application of brakes in case Loco Pilot fails to do so and also help the trains to run safely during inclement weather.

The committee also looked into the Research & Development wing of Indian Railways i.e Research Design & Standards Organization (RDSO). It expressed concerns that the Railways have not been able to utilize even the limited fund allocation.

It said that the main reason behind the situation is low revenue from passenger segment and the ministry should review revenues with regard to AC classes to reduce losses in passenger segment.

"The Committee feel that Indian Railways need to make a comprehensive review of its passenger fares in different trains and classes. Committee feel that 'General class' travel must remain affordable for the masses but at the same time the Committee urge Indian Railways to review its revenues with regard to AC classes by aligning it with costs incurred to reduce losses in passenger segment.





## CENTRE SETS JUNE '26 DEADLINE FOR SOLAR FIRMS TO ADOPT INDIA-MADE SOLAR CELLS

In a step towards discouraging foreign imports of components used in solar panel manufacturing, the Ministry of New and Renewable Energy (MNRE) has set a deadline of June '26, after which solar companies must use only India-made solar photovoltaic cells in their panels to participate in government procurement programmes.

“With installed capacity of solar PV cells in the country expected to increase substantially in next year, it has been proposed to issue List-II of solar PV cells under ALMM, which shall be effective from 1 st June 2026,” says an office order from the MNRE, issued earlier this month.

‘List-II’ refers to a list of companies that make solar cells. Indian solar companies primarily rely on solar cells from China and Southeast Asia. Relying on domestic supplies is however likely to make solar power costlier.

Schemes such as the ₹75,000 crore PM rooftop-solar programme, PM Kusum programmes that part pay the cost of installing solar panels to urban and rural consumers, must source panels from domestic companies approved by the MNRE.

“The price of Indian solar cells are 1.5 time to twice that of those from China even after Basic Customs Duty. Such high prices can drive up the cost of capital cost of solar power projects by ₹5-10 million per megawatt. This will raise tariffs by 40-50 paise per unit,” Sehul Bhatt, Director-Research, Crisil Market Intelligence and Analytics, said in a statement.

So far, 92 gigawatt of solar capacity has been installed in India. Currently, India has installed solar-module manufacturing capacity of about 63 GW and solar-cell manufacturing capacity of about 5.8 GW. Government and industry estimates expect that 80 GW of module capacity will be added by 2027 and cell manufacturing capacity rise to 60 GW by FY27, with ₹30,000 crore in investments.

Earlier this year, the MNRE introduced a list of Approved List of Module Manufacturers. Those setting up solar installations and wishing to avail of government subsidies necessarily had to source modules only from these manufacturers. These lists are part of a larger government strategy to encourage domestic production of solar panels, however India still lacks the capacity to manufacture components used in cells such as wafers and ingots and will continue to depend on China and South east Asia for these.

## COMPOSITE LICENCE: ONLY PRIVATE INSURERS MAY BE ELIGIBLE

The government’s move to introduce composite licenses through an amendment in the Insurance Act is likely to put public sector insurers at a disadvantage vis-a-vis their private sector counterparts as only the latter will be eligible for these licenses under the proposed amendment.

Insurance sector experts have cautioned about this uneven level playing field for the PSU insurers which are already in a defensive mode against intense competition unleashed by their private sector counterparts in the domestic insurance markets.

On November 26, the Finance Ministry had proposed an Insurance (Amendment) Act, 2024 by amending various provisions of the Insurance Act, 1938, including raising foreign direct investment (FDI) in the insurance sector to 100 per cent, reduction in paid-up capital, and



provision for composite license allowing insurers to do life/general/health in single registration/insurance.

However, going by the ongoing plans, after suitable legislative changes, the composite licenses can only be availed by the private sector insurers and not by the PSU insurers, insurance sector officials said. This decision may hinder PSU insurers' ability to compete with private insurers, which will have the flexibility to offer a range of insurance products under a single license.

A composite licence allows an insurer to operate multiple lines of businesses like life, health and non-life insurance under one entity. This is not allowed as of now.

If the PSU insurers want to avail composite licenses, the government needs to amend the two existing Acts — The Life Insurance Corporation Act of 1956 and the General Insurance Business (Nationalisation) Act, 1972 (GIBNA). However, as per the Office Memorandum (OM) and the list of proposed amendments, no such provisions have been made in these documents.

The General Insurance Business (Nationalisation) Act, 1972 (GIBNA) is a legislation that nationalised the general insurance business in India and govern the operations of four PSU general insurance companies transacting general insurance business. The four PSU general insurance companies are: New India Assurance, United India Insurance, Oriental Insurance Company and National Insurance Company.

The Life Insurance Corporation Act of 1956 nationalised the life insurance business in India by transferring it to a corporation and establishing regulations for its control. The act was passed by Parliament in 1956 and established the Life Insurance Corporation of India on September 1, 1956.

Among the latest list of amendments, the government has suggested some changes in LIC Act, 1956 but there is no mention of any enabling clauses for allowing the corporation to go for composite in its business. The corporation, after it was formed in 1956 by merging several life insurers which were also doing non-life business, was undertaking non-life business and had a full department to run the business till some years ago.

The corporation's health insurance foray has nothing to do with the government's proposed plans to launch composite licenses in the industry as it doesn't need a composite license to tie up with a health insurance company. "Composite registration will be allowing insurers to do life/general/health in single registration/insurance company promoting operational efficiency for insurers having common brand across different lines of business," said one of the proposed amendments proposed by the Finance Ministry.

In this regard, a comprehensive review of the legislative framework governing the sector has been done in consultation with the IRDAI and the industry, the ministry note said. Such changes will help enhance efficiencies of the insurance industry, enabling ease of doing business and enhancing insurance penetration to achieve the goal of 'Insurance for All by 2047', it said.

The introduction of composite licenses aims to increase insurance penetration in the country by allowing insurers to operate multiple lines of business under one entity. The government's move is part of a broader effort to reform the insurance industry and make it more competitive. However, excluding PSU insurers from availing composite licenses may raise concerns about their long-term viability and ability to compete with private sector players.



## LIFE & SCIENCE

### HOW SCIENTISTS ARE EXPLORING WHAT EXTRATERRESTRIAL LIFE COULD LOOK LIKE

We have only one example of biology forming in the universe: life on earth. But what if life can form in other ways? How do you look for alien life when you don't know what alien life might look like?

These questions are preoccupying astrobiologists, who are scientists who look for life beyond earth. Astrobiologists have attempted to come up with universal rules that govern the emergence of complex physical and biological systems both on earth and beyond.

I'm an astronomer who has written extensively about astrobiology. Through my research, I've learned that the most abundant form of extraterrestrial life is likely to be microbial, since single cells can form more readily than large organisms. But just in case there's advanced alien life out there, I'm on the international advisory council for the group designing messages to send to those civilisations.

#### **Detecting life beyond earth**

Since the first discovery of an exoplanet in 1995, over 5,000 exoplanets, or planets orbiting other stars, have been found. Many of these exoplanets are small and rocky, like earth, and in the habitable zones of their stars. The habitable zone is the range of distances between the surface of a planet and the star it orbits that would allow the planet to have liquid water, and thus support life as we on earth know it.

The sample of exoplanets detected so far projects 300 million potential biological experiments in our galaxy — or 300 million places, including exoplanets and other bodies such as moons, with suitable conditions for biology to arise. The uncertainty for researchers starts with the definition of life. It feels like defining life should be easy, since we know life when we see it, whether it's a flying bird or a microbe moving in a drop of water. But scientists don't agree on a definition, and some think a comprehensive definition might not be possible.

NASA defines life as a "self-sustaining chemical reaction capable of Darwinian evolution." That means organisms with a complex chemical system that evolve by adapting to their environment. Darwinian evolution says that the survival of an organism depends on its fitness in its environment. The evolution of life on earth has progressed over billions of years from single-celled organisms to large animals and other species, including humans. Evolution is the process of change in systems. It can describe how a group of something becomes more complex – or even just different – over time.

Exoplanets are remote and hundreds of millions of times fainter than their parent stars, so studying them is challenging. Astronomers can inspect the atmospheres and surfaces of earth-like exoplanets using a method called spectroscopy to look for chemical signatures of life. Spectroscopy might detect signatures of oxygen in a planet's atmosphere, which microbes called blue-green algae created by photosynthesis on earth several billion years ago, or chlorophyll signatures, which indicate plant life. NASA's definition of life leads to some important but unanswered questions. Is Darwinian evolution universal? What chemical reactions can lead to biology off earth?



### Evolution and complexity

All life on earth, from a fungal spore to a blue whale, evolved from a microbial last common ancestor about 4 billion years ago. The same chemical processes are seen in all living organisms on earth, and those processes might be universal. They also may be radically different elsewhere. In October 2024, a diverse group of scientists gathered to think outside the box on evolution. They wanted to step back and explore what sort of processes created order in the universe — biological or not — to figure out how to study the emergence of life totally unlike life on earth. Two researchers present argued that complex systems of chemicals or minerals, when in environments that allow some configurations to persist better than others, evolve to store larger amounts of information. As time goes by, the system will grow more diverse and complex, gaining the functions needed for survival through a kind of natural selection.

They speculated that there might be a law to describe the evolution of a wide variety of physical systems. Biological evolution through natural selection would be just one example of this broader law. In biology, information refers to the instructions stored in the sequence of nucleotides on a DNA molecule, which collectively make up an organism's genome and dictate what the organism looks like and how it functions. If you define complexity in terms of information theory, natural selection will cause a genome to grow more complex as it stores more information about its environment.

Complexity might be useful in measuring the boundary between life and nonlife. However, it's wrong to conclude that animals are more complex than microbes. Biological information increases with genome size, but evolutionary information density drops. Evolutionary information density is the fraction of functional genes within the genome, or the fraction of the total genetic material that expresses fitness for the environment. Organisms that people think of as primitive, such as bacteria, have genomes with high information density and so appear better designed than the genomes of plants or animals. A universal theory of life is still elusive. Such a theory would include the concepts of complexity and information storage, but it would not be tied to DNA or the particular kinds of cells we find in terrestrial biology.

### Implications for search for life

Researchers have explored alternatives to terrestrial biochemistry. All known living organisms, from bacteria to humans, contain water, and it is a solvent that is essential for life on earth. A solvent is a liquid medium that facilitates chemical reactions from which life could emerge. But life could potentially emerge from other solvents, too. Astrobiologists William Bains and Sara Seager have explored thousands of molecules that might be associated with life. Plausible solvents include sulfuric acid, ammonia, liquid carbon dioxide, and even liquid sulphur. Alien life might not be based on carbon, which forms the backbone of all life's essential molecules — at least here on Earth. It might not even need a planet to survive.

Advanced forms of life on alien planets could be so strange that they're unrecognisable. As astrobiologists try to detect life off earth, they'll need to be creative. One strategy is to measure mineral signatures on the rocky surfaces of exoplanets, since mineral diversity tracks terrestrial biological evolution. As life evolved on earth, it used and created minerals for exoskeletons and habitats. The hundred minerals present when life first formed have grown to about 5,000 today. For example, zircons are simple silicate crystals that date back to the time before life started. A zircon found in Australia is the oldest known piece of earth's crust. But other minerals, such as



apatite, a complex calcium phosphate mineral, are created by biology. Apatite is a primary ingredient in bones, teeth, and fish scales.

Another strategy to finding life unlike that on earth is to detect evidence of a civilisation, such as artificial lights or the industrial pollutant nitrogen dioxide in the atmosphere. These are examples of traces of intelligent life called technosignatures. It's unclear how and when a first detection of life beyond earth will happen. It might be within the solar system, or by sniffing exoplanet atmospheres, or by detecting artificial radio signals from a distant civilisation. The search is a twisting road, not a straightforward path. And that's for life as we know it — for life as we don't know it, all bets are off.

#### WRITING BY HAND IS BETTER FOR LEARNING, MEMORY

Time was when we elders wrote our letters and other correspondence using pen and paper and sent them across through the post office. Today, other than sending greeting cards by post, we have even started using digital devices such as smartphones and digital computers, typing out the alphabet and numbers for sending applications, messages, and responses. Even today, when we are in the e-age, primary and secondary school children while learning to write lessons, do homework, answer tests, and write essays by hand, and once done, use their smartphones to talk to friends and use WhatsApp.

An article by Charlotte Hu, in the Scientific American citing some research publications says that writing by hand activates a wide range of interconnected brain regions responsible for learning and memory. Let me cite the findings of some of these publications. Studies in education research by a group of technologists from Trondheim, Norway, in the journal *Frontiers in Psychology* point out that handwriting but not typewriting leads to widespread brain connectivity. In other words, handwriting affects the brain in more positive ways than typing the same material on a keyboard. First, handwriting training not only improves spelling accuracy but also facilitates better memory and recall.

#### WHY AND HOW DID THE UNITED STATES ERADICATE 'MURDER HORNETS'?

The Northern giant hornet, nicknamed the "murder hornet", has been eradicated in the United States, the Department of Agriculture said on Wednesday. The insect was first spotted in Washington state near the Canadian border in 2019. Efforts quickly began to track down and get rid of the invasive species which poses a threat to bees and agriculture. Washington was the only state in the US that has had confirmed sightings of the northern giant hornets.

##### **What made 'murder hornets' a threat?**

The hornets, which can be 2 inches long and are an invasive species from Asia, first came under the spotlight in 2013 when they killed at least 42 people in China, and seriously injured 1,675, according to a report by the Associated Press.

The species poses a significant threat to insects and native pollinators. 'Murder hornets' can kill an entire beehive of honeybees in just 90 minutes.

"The hornets can enter a 'slaughter phase' where they kill entire hives by decapitating the bees. The hornets then defend the hive as their own, taking the brood to feed their own young," according to the Washington State Department of Agriculture. "They also attack other insects but are not known to destroy entire colonies of those insects."

3<sup>RD</sup> FLOOR AND 4<sup>TH</sup> FLOOR SHATABDI TOWER, SAKCHI, JAMSHEDPUR



Northern giant hornets can sting through most beekeeper suits, delivering almost seven times the amount of venom as a honey bee. Moreover, they have the ability to sting multiple times.

#### **How did the US eradicate ‘murder hornets’?**

State, federal, and international government agencies joined forces to eradicate northern giant hornets in the US.

The first task was to find the nests of hornets. This was a challenge as hornets usually build their nests in forested areas, often in an underground cavity, according to the US Department of Agriculture.

“In some cases, entomologists captured a live hornet, attached a radio tag to it, released it, and tracked the hornet back to its nest,” a report by CBS News said.

After locating a nest in a tree, entomologists “plugged the nest with foam, wrapped the tree in plastic and vacuumed out the hornets” the report said. They also used carbon dioxide to kill any of the remaining hornets.

The public participated in the process by helping entomologists track down hornet nests, and agreeing to place traps at their residences.

Dr Mark Davidson, deputy administrator at USDA’s Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, said in a statement, “By tackling this threat head-on, we protected not only pollinators and crops, but also the industries, communities, and ecosystems that depend on them.”

The eradication, however, does not mean that the hornet cannot return to the United States.

#### **HOW ‘SANTA ANA’ WINDS AND CLIMATE CHANGE ARE FUELING WILDFIRES IN MALIBU**

Fire crews continue to battle a wildfire in the wealthy coastal town of Malibu, California, which began on December 9. The so-called Franklin Fire has charred more than 4,000 acres and affected about 22,000 people.

- Evacuation orders and warnings have gone out to 20,000 Southern California residents Tuesday as firefighters battled a wind-driven wildfire in Malibu that burned near celebrities’ seaside mansions, horse farms and Pepperdine University, the sheriff’s department said.

#### **Do You Know:**

- Santa Ana winds blow when high pressure builds over the Great Basin — the area between the Rocky Mountains and Sierra Nevada (a mountain range in the Western United States) — and the pressure is low over California’s coast. The difference in pressure triggers the movement of powerful winds from the Basin’s inland deserts, east and north of Southern California, over the mountains toward the Pacific Ocean.

- As the wind comes down the mountains, it compresses and heats up. The wind’s humidity also drops, sometimes to less than 20% or even less than 10%. The extremely low moisture turns vegetation dry, making it ready to burn. This process helped fuel the flames in Malibu.

- Santa Ana winds usually occur from October to January. “Winter weather patterns allow high pressure to build near the surface of the Great Basin, which then interacts with low-pressure air



over the Pacific,” Rose Schoenfeld, a National Weather Service meteorologist in Oxnard, California, told Bloomberg.

- Santa Ana-driven wildfires are a natural part of California’s landscape. However, experts say the wildfire season in California has lengthened in recent years. For instance, a 2021 study, published in the journal Nature Scientific Reports, found that the state’s annual burn season has lengthened in the past two decades and that the yearly peak has shifted from August to July.

### WHY ARCTIC TUNDRA IS EMITTING MORE CARBON THAN IT ABSORBS, FOR FIRST TIME IN MANY MILLENNIA

Arctic tundra, a frozen treeless biome which has stored carbon for thousands of years, has now become a source of heat-trapping greenhouse gases (GHGs) which are the primary drivers of global warming, according to a new report by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration’s (NOAA).

- Increased wildfires and unusually high temperatures are the main reasons behind the dramatic transformation of this Arctic ecosystem.
- Arctic tundra emitting more carbon than storing it would have global consequences as this would exacerbate climate change, whose adverse impacts are already unfolding across the world.
- In a typical ecosystem, plants absorb carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) from the atmosphere through photosynthesis. These plants grow, die, or are eaten by animals which also grow and die. When they die, the carbon in their corpse feeds microorganisms such as bacteria or fungi which break down larger molecules and return CO<sub>2</sub> to the atmosphere, thereby completing the carbon cycle.
- However, in the case of Arctic tundra, the decomposition of organic matter is dramatically slowed down due to the cold climate. Plant and animal remains can stay trapped for thousands of years in a layer of permafrost — any ground that stays frozen for at least two years straight — thwarting CO<sub>2</sub> from getting released back into the atmosphere.
- In recent years, however, the Arctic tundra’s ability to emit less and absorb more carbon has taken a hit. The new analysis, which incorporated more data and better methods of examination, confirmed that the ecosystem has now become a source of CO<sub>2</sub> and methane (CH<sub>4</sub>) — a more potent GHG — emissions.
- That has happened for two main reasons. One is rising temperatures. The report said the Arctic is warming four times the global rate, and that annual surface air temperatures in the Arctic in 2024 were the second-warmest on record since 1900.
- As a result, the Arctic’s permafrost is thawing, meaning microbes in the soil are becoming active and breaking the organic matter down, releasing CO<sub>2</sub> and CH<sub>4</sub> into the atmosphere.
- Wildfires and rising temperatures together, between 2001 and 2020, caused the Arctic tundra to release more carbon than its plants removed from the air, probably for the first time in many millennia, the report said.
- The analysis said it is still possible to flip the Arctic tundra in the other direction, making it absorb more carbon than emitting it. The only way to do so is to reduce global GHG emissions.



• “With projected emissions from land-use change (such as deforestation) of 4.2 billion tonnes, total CO<sub>2</sub> emissions are projected to be 41.6 billion tonnes in 2024, up from 40.6 billion tonnes last year,” the study said.

**Do You Know:**

- The Arctic is warming at a rate four times faster than the global average, leading to an unprecedented loss of sea ice, as well as the thawing of permafrost. Continued Arctic change risks losing the North Pole’s “great white shield” and unleashing vast quantities of stored carbon, rivaling the cumulative emissions from the US at its current rate.
- This can trigger multiple catastrophic and irreversible climate tipping points. Protection of the Arctic is, therefore, crucial to protect the world from the worst effects of the climate emergency.
- Despite awareness about the importance of the Arctic, the climatic challenge is being exacerbated by rapid development and growing geopolitical tensions. Russia stretches over 53 per cent of the Arctic Ocean coastline and is pouring resources into commercialising and expanding trade channels along the Northern Sea Route, while continuing to use and transport high-polluting heavy fuel oil through Arctic waters.
- The Arctic Council is a group of eight countries (the US, Russia, Norway, Finland, Sweden, Canada, Denmark, and Iceland) with primary capacity for protecting or exploiting the vital ecosystem. The suspension of the Council due to the Russian invasion of Ukraine has made it more difficult to hold countries accountable and to monitor wider activity contributing to changes in the Arctic.
- India’s ability to traverse historical divides and develop aligned positions among the Global North and Global South, as evidenced at the G20 Summit, holds the potential to forge a united approach to safeguarding crucial global ecosystems, especially the Arctic.

#### MANY FEARED DEAD IN FRENCH TERRITORY MAYOTTE AFTER CYCLONE

Rescuers raced against time on Monday to reach survivors and supply urgent aid after the devastating cyclone Chido ripped through the French Indian Ocean territory of Mayotte, destroying homes across the islands, with hundreds feared dead.

Images from Mayotte, which like other French overseas territories is an integral part of France and ruled from Paris, showed homes reduced to piles of rubble.

The crisis, which erupted at the weekend the day after President Emmanuel Macron appointed Francois Bayrou as the sixth Prime Minister of his mandate, poses a major challenge for a government still only operating in a caretaker capacity.

The overwhelming majority of Mayotte’s population is Muslim and religious tradition dictates bodies must be buried rapidly, meaning some may never be counted.

Mayotte is France’s poorest region with an estimated third of the population living in shanty towns. Mayotte officially has 320,000 inhabitants, “but it is estimated that there are 100,000 to 200,000 more people, taking into account illegal immigration,” added the source.

Chido was packing winds of at least 226 km per hour when it slammed into Mayotte, which lies to the east of Mozambique.





## PRIVATE AVIATION IS RELEASING MORE THAN ITS 'FAIR SHARE' OF EMISSIONS

If the aviation sector were a country, it would be among the world's top 10 greenhouse gas-emitting nations. Air travel is one of the most polluting modes of travel for its relatively higher carbon dioxide and nitrogen oxide emissions and the effects of vapour trails and gases it deposits in the atmosphere.

But even within air travel, private jets and chartered planes have a higher carbon footprint per passenger. According to a 2021 report of the European Federation for Transport and Environment, private jets are five- to 14-times more polluting per passenger than commercial flights and 50-times more than trains.

A recent study in Nature reported emissions increased by 46% between 2019 and 2023, especially thanks to private aviation. The number of aircraft increased from 25,993 in December 2023 to 26,454 in February 2024 and is expected to grow further. According to the paper, "Private aviation contributed at least... about 3.6 tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> per flight."

### More millionaires in India

As of March 2024, 112 private planes were registered in India. According to the paper, India has very few aircraft per lakh population (0.01) compared to Malta (46.51), the U.S. (5.45), Switzerland (3.76), the U.K. (0.78), Brazil (0.43), France (0.36), and Russia (0.1). China has a comparable 0.02.

"But India is actually among the top 20 countries in terms of private aircraft ownership and the highest among low-middle-income countries," Ramya Natarajan, a research scientist at the Centre for Study of Science, Technology, and Policy (CSTEP), a think-tank in Bengaluru, said. "This isn't surprising because India, while still a developing country, has the third highest number of billionaires in the world and also has a rapidly growing millionaire population."

Despite nascent efforts to decarbonise the aviation industry, solutions like sustainable aviation fuels (SAFs), hydrogen, and electrification haven't been easy to implement at a large scale.

### Private flight usage

In the study, researchers from institutes in Sweden, Germany, and Denmark analysed flight data from the ADS-B Exchange platform and focused on five recent global events accompanied by international travel.

These events were the World Economic Forum in Switzerland; the Super Bowl in the U.S.; the COP28 climate talks in the U.A.E.; the Cannes Film Festival in France; and the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar. In many cases, the researchers found the same aircraft units were used for these events.

Some 47% of all these flights were for distances shorter than 500km. Around 19% were in fact for distances shorter than 200km; many of them were actually empty or used to deliver goods. About 5% of the flights spanned less than 50km — a distance otherwise easily covered by road or rail.

The study also reported that the use of private aircraft for leisure destinations like Ibiza in Spain and Nice in France peaked in June-August, which is summer in the northern hemisphere, and especially over the weekends.



### **Around 69% of private aviation was concentrated in the U.S.**

The researchers also estimated that another 8,500 jets will be delivered to private parties in the next 10 years, although how many will end up in India is unknown. “How many additional private flights might be added every year as India becomes a wealthier, developed country? Can India afford to take the U.S. route? What would the overall impact of such lifestyle choices be?” Natarajan asked.

### **Air travel and India’s emissions**

In the last decade, the Indian government launched the policies ‘Ude Desh Ka Aam Nagrik’ (UDAN) to enhance rural connectivity and ‘Nextgen Airports for Bharat Nirman’ (NABH) to increase airport capacity by more than five times.

Indian airplane operators have also been testing low-carbon fuels. In 2018, for example, SpiceJet operated a flight from Uttarakhand to New Delhi on aviation fuel blended with oil from seeds of the jatropha plant, to the tune of 25% by volume. In 2023, Air Asia flew a flight from Pune to New Delhi powered by SAF blended with aviation turbine fuel (ATF) based on indigenous feedstock and supplied by the Indian Oil Corporation, Ltd. But these attempts have not translated into the commercialisation of SAF due to its limited availability and efficiency. According to one April 2024 estimate, it also costs “at least 120%” more than conventional jet fuel for reducing emissions by at least 27%.

Apart from SAFs, both experts and lawmakers have discussed hydrogen and electrification as possible alternatives to kerosene, which is used in aviation for its high energy density. Hydrogen packs three-times more energy in the same mass but handling it is a nightmare. Engineers will need to redesign, remodel, and restructure aircraft bodies as well as the fuel storage, transportation, and fuelling facilities at airports to use hydrogen-based fuels in aviation. Likewise, electrification is currently a poor solution due to issues of battery weight, flight stability, and its dependency on other economies for its raw materials, industry experts have said.

“In India, the alcohol-to-jet pathway seems most likely in the medium term, given that we already have a good ethanol production supply chain,” Natarajan said. “However, this should be carefully planned to avoid negative land-use change and groundwater implications. A demand for SAF should not incentivise increased cultivation of sugarcane or maize. Instead, only surplus sugar should be used.”

However, Natarajan added, the work of her and her peers at CSTEP suggests there is hope. “If by the year 2050, only surplus sugar is converted to ethanol and ethanol is fully used to make aviation fuel, instead of blending with petrol as we do currently, then we can meet almost 15-20% of the aviation fuel demand of 2050,” she said.

## **HOW WOULD A CARBON MARKET FUNCTION?**

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

COP29, the ongoing climate conference in Azerbaijan’s capital Baku, has given a fillip to the idea of using carbon markets to curb carbon emissions by approving standards that can help in the setting up of an international carbon market as soon as the coming year.



### **What is a carbon market?**

A carbon market is a market that allows the buying and selling of the right to emit carbon into the atmosphere. Suppose a government wants to limit the amount of carbon emitted into the atmosphere. It can issue certificates called carbon credits that allow the holder of the certificate to emit a certain amount of carbon into the atmosphere. One carbon credit is equivalent to 1,000 kilograms of carbon dioxide. By limiting the number of carbon credits that are issued, governments can control how much carbon is released into the environment. It should be noted that anyone who doesn't hold carbon credits to their name would not be allowed to emit any carbon into the atmosphere. Carbon credits were first used in the 1990s in the U.S., which introduced the cap-and-trade model to control the emission of sulphur dioxide.

Individuals and firms that hold carbon credits but don't actually need them for any reason can sell their credits to interested buyers. The price at which these carbon credits are traded is determined by market forces, which in this case are the supply of carbon credits and the demand for these certificates. A carbon market can also include the trading of carbon offsets. In this case, a business that pollutes the environment for example, can purchase carbon offsets sold by an environmental NGO that promises to plant trees that suck a certain amount of carbon emissions out of the atmosphere for each offset that it sells.

### **What is good about carbon markets?**

Pollution of the environment and climate change caused by carbon emissions is a classic case of what economists call an externality. An externality is caused when the cost of an economic activity is not properly accounted for (or internalised) by the market price system due to the absence of well-defined property rights. For example, a business that uses raw materials such as iron will have to pay the supplier who owns the iron to be able to procure and use it, thus incurring a certain cost. But when the same firm emits carbon into the atmosphere, it doesn't usually have to pay any money to anyone. In other words, firms are generally able to emit their waste into the atmosphere for free. This of course leads to unhindered pollution of the atmosphere as firms in this case have no financial incentive to curb their carbon emissions. Carbon markets in which the right to pollute is traded for a price can solve the problem by imposing a certain cost on firms for polluting the atmosphere, helping to curb emissions in the process.

The intersection of standardised accounting frameworks and technological advancements has improved the ability of corporations to monitor and report their carbon emissions. While, this is difficult for the vast majority of small businesses in the developing world, particularly in accurately capturing supply chain emissions, ongoing developments, like real-time data tracking of the energy sector, continue to enhance the granularity and reliability of corporate carbon accounting. However, corporations have preferred a voluntary reporting system, like the Carbon Disclosure Project. They have been loathe to government interventions limiting carbon emissions, arguing that such budgeting may lead to output restrictions or rise in costs. They also point to varied production processes, some that might have diverse supply chains that might make it difficult to find the optimal carbon budget for their facilities. Large multinational corporations such as ExxonMobil and General Motors have advocated for carbon markets that allows free trading of carbon credits among firms at a price determined by market forces, that would allow these firms to purchase carbon credits from other firms, which don't need them as much. This they say, helps allocate carbon credits more efficiently than government diktat.



### What can go wrong?

Even when there is a functioning carbon market, a government that is not very keen on reducing emissions may increase the supply of carbon credits and drive down the price of the right to pollute, leading to no noticeable drop in emissions. Others may keep a strict cap on the supply of carbon credits but allow firms to cheat by allowing them to illegally emit carbon. The success of carbon offsets also depends on the degree of personal incentive that firm owners possess to care about carbon emissions, which may often be very little. Critics claim that firms that purchase carbon offsets often do it for the sake of virtue signalling and may have little incentive to ensure that their investments in these instruments are actually helping offset carbon emissions. Meanwhile, other critics have raised more fundamental questions regarding how exactly a government would be able to arrive at the optimum supply of carbon credits. They argue that politicians, who do not incur any personal economic cost when they legislate emission reductions, may restrict the supply of carbon credits more than what is really necessary, leading to slower economic growth.

### UN TALKS ON DROUGHT DEAL IN SAUDI FAIL TO PRODUCE PACT

Negotiators failed to produce an agreement on how to respond to drought at Saudi-hosted UN talks, participants have said, falling short of a hoped-for binding protocol addressing the scourge.

The 12-day meeting of parties to the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD), known as COP16, concluded early on Saturday morning, a day later than scheduled, as parties tried to finalise a deal.

Prior to the talks, UNCCD Executive Secretary Ibrahim Thiaw said the world expected negotiators “to adopt a bold decision that can help turn the tide on the most pervasive and the most disruptive environmental disaster: drought.”

But addressing the plenary session before dawn, Thiaw acknowledged that “parties need more time to agree on the best way forward.” A press release on Saturday said the parties — 196 countries and the European Union — had “made significant progress in laying the groundwork for a future global drought regime, which they intend to complete at COP17 in Mongolia in 2026.”

The Riyadh talks came after the partial failure of biodiversity talks in Colombia, the failure to reach a UN deal on plastic pollution in South Korea, and a climate finance deal that disappointed developing nations at COP29 in Azerbaijan.

Droughts “fuelled by human destruction of the environment” cost the world more than \$300 billion each year, the UN said in a report published on December 3, the second day of the talks in Riyadh.

Droughts are projected to affect 75% of the world’s population by 2050, it said.

A delegate at COP16 from a country in Africa, speaking on condition of anonymity to discuss private deliberations, said African nations had hoped the talks would produce a binding protocol on drought.

That would ensure “every government will be held responsible” for devising stronger preparation and response plans, the delegate said. “It’s the first time I’ve seen Africa so united, with a strong united front, with respect to the drought protocol.”



Two other COP16 participants, also requesting anonymity, said developed countries did not want a binding protocol and instead were pushing for a “framework,” which African countries deemed inadequate.

Indigenous groups also wanted a protocol to better monitor progress and develop response plans, said Praveena Sridhar, chief technical officer for Save Soil, a global campaign backed by UN agencies.

Yet the absence of a protocol from COP16 “shouldn’t delay progress,” as national governments can still allocate “budgets and subsidies to financially support farmers in adopting sustainable soil and land management.”

Ahead of the Riyadh talks, the UNCCD said 1.5 billion ha of land must be restored by the decade’s end and that at least \$2.6 trillion in global investments was needed.

The first week saw pledges of more than \$12 billion from national and regional institutions and the Riyadh Global Drought Resilience Partnership, which is meant to mobilise public and private money to help at-risk countries.

### CLIMATE CHANGE AND BIODIVERSITY LOSS ARE CONNECTED: KEY TAKEAWAYS FROM NEXUS REPORT

- The Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES), a global group of scientific experts, has released an Assessment Report on the Interlinkages among Biodiversity, Water, Food and Health – known as the Nexus Report.
- This is a first-of-a-kind report looking at the interconnections between these multiple crises.
- The group examined five major challenges — climate change, biodiversity loss, food insecurity, water scarcity, and health risks — and found that they were strongly interconnected.
- IPBES was established in 2012 to examine all the existing scientific knowledge on biodiversity and nature to make an assessment of their current state.
- The Nexus report highlighted the strong interlinkages between the five identified global challenges. Its key takeaway is that responses to all these challenges need to be harmonised so that positive actions taken on any one of these do not result in negative impacts on others. The report pointed out that more than half of the global GDP — about 58 trillion dollars worth of annual economic activity — was moderately to highly dependent on nature. Deterioration of natural ecosystems, therefore, could directly hurt productivity and adversely impact economic output.
- The Nexus report finds that there has been a 2-6 percent biodiversity decline per decade across all assessed indicators for the last 30-50 years.

### WHAT DID THE U.S. CONGRESSIONAL REPORT ON COVID ORIGINS FIND?

#### The story so far:

A U.S. Congressional committee led by Republican Brad Wenstrup has concluded that the COVID-19 pandemic was the result of the spread of a virus that likely leaked from a research facility in Wuhan, China.



The final report of the Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Pandemic, established in 2023, was published on December 2, 2024.

The report runs over 500 pages and, according to committee members, will serve as a roadmap for government action during future pandemics.

“A future pandemic requires a whole-of-America response managed by those without personal benefit or bias,” Mr. Wenstrup wrote. “We can always do better, and for the sake of future generations of Americans, we must.”

#### **What is the lab-leak theory?**

The report stated that SARS-CoV-2, the virus responsible for the COVID-19 pandemic, possibly emerged from a laboratory leak.

It based this conclusion on inferred or circumstantial claims made early during the pandemic.

It quoted an unclassified factsheet from January 2021 published by the U.S. State Department that said: “The U.S. government has reason to believe several researchers inside the WIV [Wuhan Institute of Virology] became sick in autumn 2019, before the first identified case of the outbreak, with symptoms consistent with both COVID-19 and common seasonal illness.”

The report itself does not directly prove the lab-leak theory, however.

The report also quoted statements by molecular biologist Alina Chan in June 2024 in support of the lab-leak hypothesis. In one statement, Dr. Chan said the virus emerged in Wuhan, which is also home to China’s “foremost research lab for SARS-like viruses”, and that Shi Zhengli, a senior virologist at WIV, “has been researching SARS-like viruses for over a decade and even initially wondered if the outbreak came from the WIV”. But at a conference in Japan on December 4, Dr. Shi reportedly refuted the claim that the viruses she was studying were ancestors of the SARS-CoV-2 pathogen.

She had earlier promised to sequence the genomes of 56 betacoronaviruses she and her team had collected between 2004 and 2021 and were studying. She presented the sequencing data and their analyses at the conference. (The latter have yet to be peer-reviewed.)

The Select Subcommittee report also noted an observation by Nicholas Wade, former science editor at The New York Times, in January 2024, that SARS-CoV-2 “possesses a furin cleavage site, found in none of the other 871 known members of its viral family, so it cannot have gained such a site through the ordinary evolutionary swaps of genetic material within a family.”

A furin cleavage is the process by which the furin enzyme breaks up specific proteins to activate them. The furin cleavage site in SARS-CoV-2 controls how it interacts with human cells to cause the disease.

A letter published in The Lancet in August 2023 by researchers from Cornell University refuted Mr. Wade’s idea and said the site could have evolved naturally, as opposed to being genetically engineered.

#### **What else does the report say?**

The report also said the U.S. National Institutes of Health (NIH) funded gain-of-function research at WIV.



Gain-of-function research refers to studies where researchers genetically alter organisms to give them additional functions, like enhanced transmissibility or infectivity.

## HOW CAN GENE THERAPY CURE HAEMOPHILIA A?

### The story so far:

Medical researchers at the Christian Medical College, Vellore have reported successfully applying gene-therapy to treat severe haemophilia A, a rare, hereditary condition that results from a faulty gene which triggers severe, spontaneous and fatal bleeding episodes.

### What is the usual treatment?

The primary approach to treating haemophilia is called replacement therapy. As the disease is a condition resulting from low levels of clotting factor — necessary to prevent bleeding — replacement therapy involves slowly dripping, or injecting into a vein, concentrates of clotting factor VIII (for haemophilia A) or clotting factor IX (for haemophilia B). Clotting-factor concentrates can be derived and manufactured from human blood, which must be properly tested and screened to prevent the spread of diseases, such as hepatitis. It is also possible to use clotting-factor concentrates that aren't made from human blood reducing, the albeit very small risk, of contracting diseases from injecting blood. These are called recombinant clotting factors and can be easily stored, mixed, and used at home. Haemophiliacs can regularly inoculate themselves with replacement therapy to prevent bleeding, and is meant to protect against unexpected bleeding episodes. Among the challenges with clotting factors is that the body's own antibodies can destroy the clotting factor before it has a chance to work and defeats the whole idea of replacement therapy. Other forms of treatment include desmopressin (DDAVP), a man-made hormone used to treat people who have mild haemophilia A. DDAVP isn't used to treat haemophilia B or severe haemophilia A. This hormone increases the level of clotting factor in the blood.

### What is gene therapy in haemophilia?

Among the emerging approaches to fix diseases such as haemophilia, which is due to a defective gene on the X chromosome, is gene therapy. Here copies of a 'corrected' gene are introduced into the cells of a patient, the idea being that this would result — in the case of haemophilia — normal expression of the necessary clotting factor. So far there is only one U.S. Food And Drug Administration-approved gene therapy for haemophilia. Called Roctavian, it is an adeno-associated virus vector-based gene therapy and approved only in 2023 for treating adults with severe haemophilia A, and that too only for those without pre-existing antibodies to adeno-associated virus. Roctavian consists of a viral vector carrying the necessary gene for clotting Factor VIII. The gene is expressed in the liver to increase blood levels of FVIII and reduce the risk of uncontrolled bleeding. The effectiveness of the treatment was established based on results from 112 patients followed up for at least three years after Roctavian treatment. Following the infusion, the mean, annualised bleeding rate decreased from 5.4 bleeds per year at baseline to 2.6 bleeds per year. The majority of patients who received Roctavian also got corticosteroids to suppress the immune system for the gene therapy to be effective and safe. Treatment response to Roctavian may decrease over time.

### How was the Vellore trial different?

The main difference in this approach is the use of a lentivirus as the vector, instead of an adenovirus. Because adenovirus infections are fairly common in people, the chances of having



antibodies are fairly high and this could actually be counter-productive to those using treatments such as Roctavian. Lentivirus infections being less common, it is expected that fewer people will have antibodies to them, making them more effective in treatment. Further the Indian approach relies on gene transfer into adult stem cells with the lentiviral vector that integrates with the body's cells instead of in vivo transfer to a hepatocyte, or a liver cell, through a non-integrating AAV vector. The advantage of this approach is expected to be a reliable, life-long production of the clotting factor in necessary quantities without side-effects. Though tested in only five patients in Vellore, none of them reported bleeding episodes over an average follow-up period of 14 months.

#### **Is haemophilia treatment affordable?**

A March 2024 research study in the journal Heliyon, estimates the per-patient cost of treating a haemophiliac in India to be \$3,00,000 over a 10-year period. Based on various estimates, there may be about 1,00,000 haemophiliacs with type A and type B conditions, with the former being more common. This is the reason why treatments can be expensive. Roctavian is also not cheap and costs nearly \$2 million. Whether the gene-therapy product tested in the India will be affordable remains to be seen, though that is the hope. "It is too early to talk about costs but in principle it will need to be something that will make sense in the Indian healthcare system," Dr. Alok Srivastava, Head, Haematology Research Unit, St John's Research Institute, Bangalore, told The Hindu. He led the trial at Vellore.

### **WHO SCIENTISTS ENDORSE WEIGHT LOSS DRUGS FOR CONTROLLING OBESITY: WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR THERAPIES?**

In a first, scientists at the World Health Organisation (WHO) have endorsed a new class of medicines known as GLP-1 receptor agonists, which mimic a hormone that regulates appetite and blood sugar levels, for managing obesity.

They argue that while current policies promoting healthy eating and physical exercise are scientifically sound, they have failed to curb the obesity pandemic. The new class of GLP-1 receptor agonists, that included drugs such as semaglutide and tirzepatide, "have the potential to be transformative," they say.

#### **Why is this significant?**

This endorsement comes at a time when patents for the popular drug semaglutide are set to expire over the next couple of years in several countries, including India and Brazil. In India, several manufacturers of generic compounds have already started bioequivalence trials for their products so that they can be ready for use once the patents expire. Bioequivalence trials are conducted to ensure that generic versions of the products are as safe and effective as the branded versions. Several new medicines in this category are also under trial globally.

Globally, one in eight people were living with obesity in 2022. There were 890 million adults and 160 million adolescents living with obesity in 2022. The prevalence of obesity has doubled in adults since 1990 and quadrupled in adolescents, according to the WHO. In India, there were 44 million women and 26 million men living with obesity in 2022. In the three decades between 1990 to 2022, the prevalence of obesity in women increased 8.6 percentage points and prevalence in men increased 4.9 percentage points. There has also been a significant increase in childhood obesity in the three decades. While 0.2 million boys and 0.2 million girls were obese in 1990, 7.3 million boys and 5.2 million girls were obese in 2022. WHO scientists say that global costs





associated with obesity are likely to reach \$3 trillion by 2030. In countries with 30 per cent prevalence of obesity, it could absorb up to 18 per cent of the national health expenditure. Scientists also argue that obesity adds to mortality — there were five million obesity-related deaths from non-communicable diseases in 2019. This accounted for 12 per cent of all deaths from non-communicable diseases worldwide.

#### **Will WHO also release guidelines for use?**

The WHO is currently in the process of drafting guidelines for the use of GLP-1 receptor agonists in adults with obesity to provide clarity on “clinical indications, application and programmatic considerations globally.” These guidelines are likely to be published in July 2025.

#### **What are popular diabetes cum weight loss drugs?**

Novo Nordisk’s Ozempic, originally approved in 2017 for type 2 diabetes, gained immense popularity as doctors prescribed it off-label for obesity, sparking a social media frenzy and supply shortages. In 2021, the USFDA approved Wegovy, another semaglutide-based drug from Novo Nordisk, marking the first chronic weight management treatment in a decade. Meanwhile, Eli Lilly’s Zepbound, approved in 2023, and its diabetes drug Mounjaro, also used off-label for weight loss, have joined the ranks of high-demand therapies for obesity care.

#### **WHO raised red flags too**

While the new therapies have shown to reduce body weight between 10 and 25 per cent, experts have said it should not be used by all as there are severe side effects such as gastroparesis (stomach paralysis), pancreatitis (inflamed pancreas) and thyroid cancer. Another important consideration is that a person is likely to gain weight when they stop using the medicine and it is yet to be seen whether the drug can keep working over several years.

Given the high costs of the products, the high demand and the production and supply challenges, scientists have also raised the issue of “counterfeit products” and grey markets. However, the medicines are likely to become more readily available as they get off patents.

### **NOT JUST HORMONES: HOW INDIAN SCIENTIST FOUND A LIPID THAT CONTROLS YOUR NEURO AND IMMUNITY FUNCTIONS**

How many times do we take the lipid profile test and think that cholesterol and triglyceride levels are all that matters? There is, however, another type of lipids. Called bio-active lipids, these can regulate various processes in the body. That’s why this year’s winner of Infosys Prize for Life Sciences, Dr Siddhesh Kamat, from the Indian Institute of Science Education and Research (IISER)-Pune, worked with one such lipid and its role in certain neuro-degenerative disorders in children and autoimmune diseases.

#### **How lipids control biological processes**

The bioactive lipids work in a way similar to hormones to control various processes in the body. Dr Kamat chose to research lipid lysophosphatidylserine, which impacts the functioning of the nervous and immune systems. “It has to be at an optimal level all the time. If its level goes up or down, there can be weird biological effects. The levels of such lipids, in turn, are controlled by various enzymes. If there is more of the enzyme that makes it and less of the enzyme that breaks it, the levels then accumulate. If this scenario is opposite, its levels fall,” he explained.



His research has shown that elevation of the levels of the lipid in the brain can exacerbate the neuro-inflammation associated with PHARC (Polyneuropathy, Hearing loss, Ataxia, Retinitis pigmentosa and Cataract), a rare and progressive genetic disorder, which affects people usually in their childhood or early teens.

The levels of the lipid in immune cell is linked to autoimmune conditions such as psoriasis, Grave's disease (a condition where too much thyroid hormone is produced), and Addison's disease (where the adrenal glands do not produce enough cortisol and aldosterone), among others. His research has also been able to show that the lipids also regulate critical processes in the immune system such as the clearance of pathogens via phagocytosis (a process where immune cells engulf foreign substances to destroy them) or release of histamine in response to allergens.



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