




# CURRENT AFFAIRS FOR UPSC

9TH TO 15TH FEBRUARY 2024

DREAMIAS





## INTERNATIONAL

### ENGAGING RUSSIA

President Donald Trump has opened the door to negotiations with Russian President Vladimir Putin over ending the war in Ukraine, in equal measure spurring hopes for peace and fears that Moscow would use the opportunity to manipulate the situation to its advantage against a beleaguered Kyiv. While Mr. Trump wrote on social media that on the 90-minute call both leaders concurred on their desire to “stop the millions of deaths taking place...,” and that Washington and Moscow would “work together, very closely”, Russia noted that Mr. Putin had “expressed readiness to receive American officials in Russia regarding areas of mutual interest, including, of course, the topic of Ukrainian settlement”. Mr. Trump’s call, including specifics on a ceasefire and the possibility of their meet in Saudi Arabia, represents a break from the status quo, which, since Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022, has seen the Kremlin face diplomatic isolation and crippling western/NATO sanctions. Although Mr. Trump’s predecessor, Joe Biden, had in this context made his administration’s view on Mr. Putin clear when he described the Russian President as “murderous dictator” and a “pure thug”, Mr. Trump had promised, even during the campaign leading to the 2024 presidential election, that he would end the war within “24 hours” after being sworn into office.

On the one hand, if Mr. Trump’s efforts come to fruition, it would mark a breakthrough in terms of bringing Mr. Putin to the negotiating table, an outcome that has so far appeared impossible, given Moscow’s resolve to press on with its war plans. On the other, the terms of the negotiation hinted at so far by the Trump administration make it likely that Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelenskyy will have to accept an unpalatable outcome. This appears inevitable given that U.S. Defence Secretary Pete Hegseth suggested that no U.S. troops would be committed to Ukraine in any future security arrangement, that Ukraine would not be invited to join NATO, and that the option of Ukraine reverting to pre-2014 borders, prior to Russia annexing Crimea, would be virtually ruled out. Indeed, Mr. Zelenskyy would not be wrong to assume that the U.S.’s promise to sustain NATO support for Ukraine “for as long as it takes” has been unequivocally betrayed by the Trump administration’s stance on the subject. This denouement is likely to have a profound — and damaging — impact on the security and economy of not only Ukraine but also of the EU, given that the White House has de facto made Russian territorial aggression a European problem, and sees Mr. Putin as a less concerning threat than undocumented migration and trade deficits.

### TRUMP, PUTIN DISCUSS ENDING UKRAINE WAR, PRISONER EXCHANGE; AGREE TO MEET

President Donald Trump, in his second term, held what he described as a “lengthy and highly productive” phone call with Russian President Vladimir Putin on Wednesday, signalling the beginning of a US-backed negotiation to end the war in Ukraine.

- This marked their first confirmed conversation since Trump resumed office, as the President has prioritized finding a diplomatic resolution to Russia’s ongoing invasion of Ukraine.
- Trump characterized the call as laying the groundwork for future cooperation between the US and Russia, stating that discussions included a wide array of topics ranging from energy, artificial intelligence, and the US dollar to geopolitics in the Middle East.



- The announcement underscores Trump's desire to step into a mediating role in resolving the war, a goal he has made clear to his advisors since the beginning of his second term.
- Trump's negotiating team for the effort is expected to include Secretary of State Marco Rubio, CIA Director John Ratcliffe, National Security Adviser Michael Waltz, and Mideast envoy Steve Witkoff. Notably, Witkoff was recently involved in securing the release of Marc Fogel, an American schoolteacher imprisoned in Russia for over three years, and was in Moscow earlier this week.
- The US team's objective will be to facilitate peace talks between Russia and Ukraine, with the aim of putting an end to the conflict that has destabilized the region and had a significant impact on global markets and security.
- In Moscow, the Kremlin confirmed the details of the call. Kremlin spokesman Dmitri Peskov informed reporters that the two leaders spoke for approximately 90 minutes and discussed their mutual desire for stronger cooperation. Peskov added that Putin extended an invitation to Trump to visit Moscow, signalling an openness to further diplomatic engagement between the two powers.

**Do You Know:**

- The phone call, however, also underlines a nuanced shift in Trump's posture toward Russia. During his first term, Trump faced widespread criticism for his perceived leniency toward Putin and his public praise of the Russian leader. In 2022, following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Trump notably referred to Putin as a "genius," a remark that had sparked considerable backlash.
- While the phone call indicates an opening for diplomatic progress, significant challenges remain. Ukraine, under President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, has shown little willingness to negotiate with Russia on terms that would cede territory or compromise Ukrainian sovereignty.
- Trump has indicated that he plans to inform Zelenskyy of the US-Russian discussions and that both sides will "start negotiations immediately." However, Ukraine's position has been bolstered by substantial Western military and financial support, complicating the prospect of swift diplomatic resolutions.
- On 24 February 2022, Putin announced a "special military operation" to "demilitarize and denazify" Ukraine, claiming Russia had no plans to occupy the country. The Russian invasion that followed was internationally condemned; many countries imposed sanctions against Russia, and sent humanitarian and military aid to Ukraine.

**BALTIC STATES SWITCH TO EUROPEAN POWER GRID, ENDING RUSSIA TIES**

The three Baltic states disconnected their electricity systems from Russia's power grid on Saturday, the region's operators said, part of a plan designed to integrate the countries more closely with the European Union and boost security.

- Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania disconnected from the IPS/UPS joint network and, subject to last-minute tests, they will synchronise with the EU's grid at 1200 GMT on Sunday after operating on their own in the meantime.
- European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen will speak at a ceremony on Sunday to mark the switch to the EU system, her office said on Friday.



- “We’ve reached the goal we strived for, for so long. We are now in control,” Lithuanian Energy Minister Zygimantas Vaiciunas told a press conference.
- The operators successfully undertook frequency management trials on Saturday, testing the Baltic grid’s stability during interruptions, such as sudden shutdowns of power plants, Lithuanian grid operator Litgrid said on Saturday evening.
- Further trials on Sunday will test the Baltic grid’s ability to manage current. Immediately after disconnecting, Latvian workers used a crane to reach the high-voltage wires in Vilaka, 100 metres from the Russian border, and cut them. They handed out chopped wire as keepsakes to cheering observers.

**Do You Know:**

- Plans for the Baltics to decouple from the grid of their former Soviet imperial overlord, debated for decades, gained momentum following Moscow’s annexation of Crimea in 2014.
- The grid was the final remaining link to Russia for the three countries, which reemerged as independent nations in the early 1990s at the fall of the Soviet Union, and joined the European Union and NATO in 2004.
- The three staunch supporters of Kyiv stopped purchases of power from Russia following Moscow’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022, but have relied on the Russian grid to control frequencies and stabilise networks to avoid outages.
- The Baltic Sea region is on high alert after power cable, telecom links and gas pipeline outages between the Baltics and Sweden or Finland. All were believed to have been caused by ships dragging anchors along the seabed following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Russia has denied any involvement.
- For Russia, the decoupling means its Kaliningrad exclave, located between Lithuania, Poland and the Baltic Sea, is cut off from Russia’s main grid, leaving it to maintain its power system alone.
- The Baltic countries spent nearly 1.6 billion euros (\$1.66 billion) since 2018 to upgrade grids to prepare, while Moscow has spent 100 billion roubles (\$1 billion), including on the building of several gas-fired power plants in Kaliningrad.

## HOW WILL FREEZE ON USAID AFFECT THE WORLD?

**The story so far:**

On January 20, his first day in office for a second term, U.S. President Donald Trump put in place a 90-day freeze on foreign assistance. The executive order read, [There will be a] “90-day pause in United States foreign development assistance for assessment of programmatic efficiencies and consistency with United States foreign policy.” Consequently, personnel of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) were stopped from disbursing assistance across the world. By late last week, the website of USAID also wiped content, leaving just a message that all USAID personnel (about 10,000 globally) would be placed on administrative leave, with a few exceptions for mission-critical personnel. Shortly before the plans to scale back personnel were to take effect, a federal judge issued a temporary restraining order till February 14, but that does not extend to the freeze on funds disbursement.



## What is the USAID?

The U.S. Agency for International Aid was set up as an independent agency, through an Act of Congress in 1961. It was an attempt to align all U.S. efforts to administer civilian foreign aid and development assistance. Its mission is “to promote and demonstrate democratic values abroad and advance a free, peaceful, and prosperous world” while advancing the U.S.’s security and prosperity. In pushing this agenda, it provides financial aid across various sectors in over 100 countries worldwide. Broadly, it works in the sectors of economic development, health, education, food security, humanitarian assistance, climate change, and democracy and governance.

It works in partnerships with governments, NGOs, businesses, and other international organisations, primarily providing grants, technical assistance, and funding for development projects that are in sync with its goals. Notable among its flagship schemes are the President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), Feed the Future (addressing hunger and food security issues), Power Africa (expanding access to electricity across Africa) and Water for the World Act (improving water, sanitation, and hygiene services).

It receives funding allocated in the U.S. budget. In 2024, USAID received a total of \$44.20 billion, which is 0.4% of the U.S. federal budget for FY 2024 (as per the official website USAspending.gov). In the same year, the agency had distributed \$44.20 billion among its four sub-components. Media reports claim it contributed to nearly 42% of all humanitarian aid tracked by the United Nations in 2024.

## Allegations galore

To justify their actions, the trio has said the USAID’s functioning did not align with the President’s ‘America First’ policy.

A statement put out by the White House has criticised the agency’s \$1.5 million grant to an LGBTQ group in Serbia and \$2.5 million assistance to an electric vehicle manufacturer in Vietnam.

Separately, Mr. Trump has levelled allegations of corruption against the USAID. He also accused the USAID of shipping \$50 million worth of condoms to Gaza where they were being repurposed as bombs. A Guardian fact-check report found that the U.S. did not ship contraceptives anywhere in West Asia except for Jordan.

However, the fact of the matter is that the U.S. remains the largest contributor of the foreign aid, despite that amount not being the highest in terms of the fraction of a country’s annual budget (0.6% of \$6.75 trillion). The USAID is the primary source of that assistance. Of the \$68 billion spent by the country on international aid in 2023, the USAID accounted for \$40 billion.

The agency has operations in 130 countries. It takes care of the education of schoolgirls in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan while monitoring the Ebola outbreak in Uganda. It is also responsible for PEPFAR, an HIV/AIDS control programme that began under President George W. Bush in 2003 and is credited with saving more than 20 million lives in Africa.

Of late, the agency’s primary focus has been Ukraine where it buys produce from farmers and sells it in other parts of the world; it also provides prosthetic limbs to soldiers. It boasts a famine prevention programme that can predict crises in regions. In India, the agency works in areas such as health, education, sanitation and environment.



## Soft power

The USAID was established in 1961 by Democratic President John F. Kennedy during the Cold War era to counter Russian influence. While it functioned under the State Department initially, Congress made it an independent agency in 1998. Hence, experts say, the power to dissolve the USAID wrests with Congress.

The U.S. has benefited from this independent stature for it could maintain bridges with non-friendly nations such as Iran and North Korea, where the agency undertook humanitarian work. However, the public in the U.S., mainly Republicans, have always sided with slashing foreign spending.

As Mr. Musk and Mr. Trump chip away at the USAID with the acumen of two businessmen, 'cutting costs and trimming the flab', experts say China will step in to fill the void left by the agency. But China's priority has so far been 'visible programmes', or infrastructure projects it undertakes in the form of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). These can never supplant the USAID.

Sadly, the price for the Trump administration's domestic interests end up being paid by the deprived people across the globe.

### What has Elon Musk said?

Elon Musk, head of the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE), has threatened that the agency would be shut down, while Secretary of State Marco Rubio who is now the acting administrator of USAID, has talked about 'restructuring' it.

### How will this impact countries?

According to the official U.S. foreign assistance website, the top countries the USAID engages with are Ukraine, Ethiopia, Jordan, Somalia, Congo (Kinshasa), Afghanistan, Nigeria, Syria, Yemen and South Sudan.

The withdrawal of these funds, arising out of a decision born out of petulance, might severely impact the fortunes of these nations, as a number of projects will have to be dropped, in the light of aid being stopped. This will have an impact not only on the quality of life of beneficiaries of these schemes, but may even pose a danger to life in these nations. More than six million people could die from HIV and AIDS in the next four years if Mr. Trump's administration pulls its global funding for programmes, the United Nations AIDS agency said on February 7.

Media reports stated that while a freeze was ordered on the \$13.3 million in aid for Haiti, the U.S. State Department issued a waiver, allowing \$40.7 million in foreign assistance for the nation's police department. Also, the agency has said, in its note on the website, that exceptions would be made for "mission-critical functions, core leadership and specially designated programs", but no details are available yet on what these may be or the grounds for exception.

Meanwhile, foreign agency reports speculate that only 294 employees of the total of 10,000 would remain, including 12 in the Africa bureau and eight in the Asia bureau, because these are areas that are critical to combating poverty, disease, and conflict.

While Mr. Rubio has told the media that "this is not about ending foreign aid, but about structuring it in a way that furthers the national interests of the United States," there are not too many takers for this defence. Mr. Trump has made no secret of the fact that he has always advanced his point



of view of America, a stand his critics see as rendering the nation in isolation from the rest of the world. Even as a front-runner for the President's seat, he said: "We're rebuilding other countries while weakening our own. Ending the theft of American jobs will give us the resources we need to rebuild our military, which has to happen and regain our financial independence and strength." His trusted aide Mr. Musk poured vitriol over USAID, calling it a 'criminal organisation' and 'a viper's nest of radical-left Marxists who hate America'.

Andrew Natsios, former USAID administrator, in an interview with PBS News Hour, said USAID was one of the great humanitarian powers in the world, to protect the U.S. and people in the developing world from hunger and disease. "The programmes they are attacking now are Biden-era programmes," he said, hinting at political vengeance being the driving force behind the move. The withdrawal, he claimed, would be a "disaster for the U.S. and for the Global South".

### Will projects in India suffer?

In India, the quantum of funding has reduced over the years, with the government of India objecting to certain aspects of the conditions for the agreement for grants. In the last decade, India is said to have received around \$1.5 billion from USAID — about 0.2 % to 0.4 % of USAID's total global funding (as per the foreign assistance website).

The association between India and USAID began in 1951 when President Harry Truman signed the India Emergency Food Aid Act. Over the decades, USAID's role has evolved from food aid to infrastructure development, capacity building, economic reforms, and more. In the early years, the agency weighed in strongly in the education sector, immunisation and health care. While health remains the main sector where USAID has been involved in India (including HIV/AIDS, TB, maternal and child health, and immunisation programmes) with a funding of \$79.3 million in 2024, it also has interests in economy, energy, water supply and sanitation, and environmental health.

In this sense, pundits in the development sector feel that the withdrawal of USAID may not affect India in a major way.

However, it remains to be seen how these existing projects, particularly in healthcare fare now, and whether Central or State governments will be able to pick up the tab to keep these projects, and beneficiaries going.

Meanwhile, USAID has directed all organisations implementing projects in India to suspend operations for the time being.

## TRIBUNAL AT THE RECEIVING END

On February 6, 2025, U.S. President Donald Trump signed an executive order imposing sanctions on the International Criminal Court (ICC), warning of "tangible and significant consequences" for those behind investigations deemed a threat to U.S. national security and that of its allies, including Israel. This condemnation follows ICC Chief Prosecutor Karim A. Khan's decision to issue arrest warrants for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Defence Minister Yoav Gallant over alleged war crimes and crimes against humanity in the Gaza Strip.

However, this is not the Trump administration's first offensive against the ICC. In June 2020, it sanctioned then-ICC Prosecutor Fatou Bensouda and a senior court official after she launched an investigation into alleged war crimes by U.S. troops in Afghanistan. The Biden administration later



rescinded the sanctions. The latest sanctions have prompted key member states such as the U.K., France, and Germany to reaffirm their “unwavering support” for the court.

The ICC has always had a contentious relationship with the U.S. While President Bill Clinton’s administration played a pivotal role in the negotiations that led to the court’s creation, it remained wary of the emergence of an independent tribunal that Washington could not control through the UN Security Council. Although Mr. Clinton signed the Rome Statute, he did not send it to the Senate to be ratified, fearing scrutiny of U.S. actions and those of its allies.

When President George W. Bush took office, he launched a hostile campaign against the ICC. His administration pressured governments worldwide to sign bilateral agreements barring the surrender of U.S. nationals to the court. He also enacted the American Service Members’ Protection Act of 2002, which restricted the ICC’s jurisdiction over U.S. military personnel. The law even authorised military action against the court, earning it the nickname “The Hague Invasion Act.”

The U.S. position on the ICC softened during Mr. Bush’s second term when he recognised its potential to serve American interests, particularly in regions where U.S. nationals were unlikely to face prosecution, such as Africa. In 2005, his administration abstained from a UN Security Council vote granting the ICC jurisdiction over war crimes in Darfur, Sudan. This measured engagement continued under the Obama administration, with U.S. diplomats attending ICC conferences. However, cooperation remained conditional, as Washington made it clear that it would support only those investigations that aligned with American interests.

Under the Biden administration, Washington’s double standards in its purported commitment to the “rules-based international order” lay bare when it endorsed the ICC’s arrest warrant for Vladimir Putin while denouncing as “outrageous” the one issued for Benjamin Netanyahu.

#### **‘Low-hanging fruit’**

In the aftermath of the Second World War, the Allied powers established the Nuremberg Tribunal, the first international war crimes tribunal, to prosecute top Nazi officials. This gave birth to the idea of a permanent court to hold perpetrators accountable for the world’s most egregious crimes. Although the UN later created ad hoc tribunals to prosecute war crimes in the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda, many international law experts considered them inadequate deterrents.

In July 1998, the UN General Assembly adopted the ICC’s founding treaty at a conference in Rome. Unlike the International Court of Justice, which adjudicates disputes between states, the ICC prosecutes individuals. It complements national courts and intervenes only when they are unwilling or unable to act. A major challenge to its enforcement is the absence of its own police force.

Despite its mandate, the ICC has struggled to gain the membership of major powers, including the U.S., China, and Russia. Some nations have even withdrawn. Burundi left in 2017 after the court decided to investigate its crackdown on opposition protests. In 2019, Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte pulled out, rejecting the ICC’s inquiry into his war on drugs and insisting that domestic courts were sufficient to uphold the rule of law.

African nations, in particular, have expressed discontent towards the court’s tendency to disproportionately target the continent. It was not until 2016 that the court opened an investigation outside Africa — in Georgia — reinforcing perceptions of it being an instrument for





advancing Western political interests. The ICC has also been criticised for focusing on “low-hanging fruit” crimes — prosecuting warlords and rebel leaders while failing to hold senior political figures accountable.

### Challenges ahead

Perhaps the most damning criticism of the ICC is its perceived inability to hold the U.S. and its allies accountable. By refusing to ratify the Rome Statute, the U.S. has ensured that the court lacks jurisdiction over crimes committed on its territory or by its military personnel. As a permanent member of the UN Security Council, it can also veto any attempt to initiate a referral through the Council.

With the Trump administration in power, the court is staring down the barrel of four years of punitive measures from Washington. Whether it emerges as a meagre shadow of itself or a resilient tribunal will depend on the resolve of its member states.

Beyond external pressures, the court faces internal challenges that undermine its standing. Chief among them is the sharp decline in trials. This year, apart from delivering two verdicts, the court will oversee only a single ongoing trial, with no other cases expected to reach the trial stage. Its workload has also diminished significantly, with just 80 hearing days scheduled — a steep drop from the average of 369 annual hearing days recorded over the past eight years (excluding the COVID-related shutdown in 2020).

Further complicating matters is the cloud of sexual harassment allegations against the ICC’s chief prosecutor. In November 2024, the court’s governing body announced an external investigation into the claims, deepening concerns over the institution’s credibility. To preserve its legitimacy and public trust, the ICC must address these internal issues with unwavering transparency and accountability.

## TRUMP SUSPENDS FOREIGN BRIBERY LAW IN POSSIBLE REPRIEVE FOR ADANI, OTHERS CHARGED BY U.S. SEC

U.S. President Donald Trump on Monday signed an executive order pausing the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act (FCPA) of 1977 for a period of at least 180 days, until the Attorney General completes a review of the legislation.

The move may come as a reprieve to the conglomerate Adani Group, its billionaire founder Gautam Adani and other executives, who, in November, were charged by the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) and the U.S. Attorney’s Office for the Eastern District of New York in connection with an alleged bribery scheme. The law prohibits the bribing of foreign governments, political parties and others to secure business.

It is unclear how Monday’s order would impact any investigations into the Adani Group.

### New guidelines

While it pertains only to new investigations, enforcement actions already initiated would be subject to the new guidelines the Justice Department develops.

The order says the pause can be extended beyond the initial suspension of 180 days. During this time, Attorney General Pam Bondi, a Trump loyalist, is required to cease any new FCPA



investigations and review existing ones. After the new guidelines are in place, the Attorney General could institute “remedial measures” with respect to “inappropriate” investigations.

Charges for violating the FCPA were central to the allegations of bribery amounting to \$250 million (₹2,100 crore) that allegedly took place between 2020 and 2024. Mr. Adani, his nephew Sagar Adani and another executive Vneet S. Jaain, while not charged for violating the FCPA directly, were charged with conspiracy to commit wire fraud and securities fraud.

Five other individuals associated with the alleged bribery scheme were charged with conspiring to violate the FCPA.

The two companies at the heart of the allegations had raised funds from U.S. investors or had traded on the New York Stock Exchange during the alleged scheme.

Mr. Trump had objected to the FCPA during his first term as well. “It’s going to mean a lot more business for America,” he told reporters on Monday as he signed the order.

“The President’s foreign policy authority is inextricably linked with the global economic competitiveness of American companies,” the order read, adding that American national security depended substantially on U.S. companies gaining strategic business advantages in areas such as critical minerals, deep-water ports and infrastructure assets. FCPA enforcement against American citizens and businesses has been “overexpansive” and “unpredictable”, the order said. The FCPA has been “stretched beyond proper bounds” and was harming U.S. interests, the order noted.

The President has signed around 80 executive orders since he returned to power last month.

#### CHINA SUMMONS PANAMA AMBASSADOR FOR PULLING OUT OF BRI AFTER TRUMP’S THREAT

China has summoned Panama’s ambassador to the country for pulling out of the multi-billion-dollar Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), following US President Donald Trump’s threat to take back the Panama Canal.

- Assistant Foreign Minister Zhao Zhiyuan on Friday summoned ambassador Miguel Humberto Lecaro Barcenas over Panama’s decision to not renew the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on cooperation with China on the BRI, state-run Xinhua news agency reported.
- Panama recently announced the termination of the MOU on the BRI, to which the Chinese side expressed deep regret, Zhao said.
- Under the framework of the BRI, pragmatic cooperation between China and Panama has rapidly developed across various sectors and achieved a series of fruitful results, bringing tangible benefits to Panama and its people, Zhao said.
- The minister said more than 150 countries actively participate in the BRI, with achievements benefiting the people of various nations, including Panama.
- Under the BRI, a signature initiative of Chinese President Xi Jinping, China has made huge investments in various countries around the world to build major infrastructure projects by extending loans. The BRI projects attracted criticism of being debt traps as many countries struggled to pay back Chinese loans.

**Do You Know:**

- Panama Canal: The United States built the Panama canal in the early 1900s as it looked for ways to facilitate the transit of commercial and military vessels between its coasts. Washington relinquished control of the waterway to Panama on Dec. 31, 1999, under a treaty signed in 1977 by President Jimmy Carter. The canal depends on reservoirs to operate its locks and was heavily affected by drought during the past two years that forced it to substantially reduce the number of daily slots for crossing ships.
- Belt and Road Initiative (BRI): China's ambitious infrastructure funding project, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), was first outlined by President Xi Jinping. Spanning from Africa to Asia and seeing investments worth billions of dollars, it has also come under criticism over the years
- President Xi Jinping announced the Silk Road Economic 'Belt' during his visits to Kazakhstan in 2013. The 'Belt' plan was to revitalise a series of trading and infrastructure routes between Asia and Europe. Connectivity through Central Asia was a key element of the initiative.
- Initially, the BRI was based on five principles: (1) policy coordination (2) infrastructure connectivity (3) trade (4) financial integration and (5) people-to-people connections. Later, the sixth principle of 'Industrial cooperation' was also added. Basically through the BRI, China wanted to resolve two major concerns, viz capital surplus and industrial overcapacity. It was also about increasing Chinese political influence in broader regions.

**WHAT IS HAPPENING IN THE DRC?****The story so far:**

The crisis in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is back in the spotlight after the M23 militia, backed by eastern neighbour Rwanda, captured the mineral-rich city of Goma, which lies on the border between the two countries. UN estimates suggest that the fighting, which began in January, has taken the lives of more than 2,900 people, displaced close to 7,00,000 and injured many more. Since then, clashes have spread to the south of the border with the rebels eyeing Bukavu, the capital of the South Kivu province — another resource-rich region that is situated in the east of the DRC.

**What is the history of the region?**

While the root cause of the crisis is generally attributed to the 1994 Rwandan genocide, the region has been beset with conflict between the Hutus and Tutsis since colonial times; so much so that some 1,50,000 Tutsis had migrated to neighbouring countries even before Rwanda's independence from Belgium in 1962. Imperialist powers such as Germany and Belgium ruled over Rwanda through a Tutsi monarchy in which local administrative roles were occupied by members of the Tutsis, who were a minority there, ensuring better prospects for the group. This did not sit well with the Hutus who eventually called for a 'revolution' in 1959, costing the lives of some 20,000 Tutsis. Consequently, King Kigeli V fled, and a Hutu regime came to power. Further solidifying the group's grip on power were the elections of 1960 conducted by Belgian officials, in which Hutus emerged victorious in local communes. Two years later, the country proclaimed independence and got its first President in Grégoire Kayibanda.



### **What is the Rwandan genocide?**

With Hutus at the helm, there was systematic repression of the Tutsis. This led to the formation of the Tutsi rebel group, the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), which launched a civil war in 1990.

The war reached its inflection point in April 1994, when an aircraft carrying Rwandan President Juvenal Habyarimana and his Burundi counterpart Cyprien Ntaryinira — two Hutus — was shot down. Blaming the RPF for the attack, the Rwandan military and the Hutu Interahamwe militia went on a rampage, murdering almost 8,000 people per day. By the time the campaign ended 100 days later, some 8,00,000 Tutsis and a moderate number of Hutus had been killed. The genocide ended only after an RPF reprisal emerged victorious in July 1994. Paul Kagame, one of the leaders of the uprising, was elected President of Rwanda in 2000 and has occupied the post ever since.

### **What was the aftermath of the genocide?**

As a result of the killings, some two million Hutus, including the perpetrators, crossed into the eastern region of the DRC, then called Zaire. Today, the region comprises more than 120 armed groups such as the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR), claiming to fight for the Hutus, and the M23, which claims to represent the interests of the Tutsis.

After the genocide, Rwandan troops invaded Congo, first in 1996 and then in 1998 — dubbed Africa's World Wars. The war of 1996, called the First Congo War, resulted in the country being renamed the Democratic Republic of Congo and witnessed the overthrow of longtime ruler Mobutu Sese Seko. The next battle, known as the Second Congo War, came about as President Laurent-Désiré Kabila turned against allies Rwanda and Uganda. The fighting eventually ballooned into one of the biggest battles on the continent after nine countries and 25 armed groups joined in. It ended only in 2003 after having killed five million from battle, disease and starvation.

From then on, the DRC has been marked by disarray while Rwanda, under Mr. Kagame, has been identified as a force of stability in Africa. With ample help from Western nations, the President lifted the country out of poverty. Yet, Mr. Kagame's government has been accused of helping the M23 rebels.

### **Who are the M23 rebels?**

Formed in 2012, the M23 stands for Mouvement du 23 Mars — an abortive agreement signed on March 23, 2009, between the DRC government and the Tutsi-led National Congress for the Defence of the People (CNDP). According to the pact, the CNDP, which fought the government forces between 2006 and 2009, was to take the form of a political party and its fighters were to be absorbed into the DRC Army.

These soldiers broke off from the Congolese Army and came together to form the M23. It is led by Sultani Makenga and is based in the North Kivu province. Claiming to protect Tutsis, the group managed to capture Goma for the first time in 2012. Following a series of setbacks at the hands of the Congolese Army and UN forces, the group retreated after it was assured the protection of the Tutsis. A decade later, it resurfaced in 2022 citing failure to meet the promises. The group stands accused of war crimes by the UN.



### **Is the conflict only about ethnic tensions?**

Ethnic strife forms only one part of the story. The mineral-rich regions in the DRC's east, coveted by nations and armed groups alike, form the other part. The DRC is home to Coltan, the ore from which Tantalum is produced.

This blue-grey metal is used in smartphones and other electronic devices for it can hold a high charge over a range of temperatures, making it conducive for the manufacturing of capacitors that store energy.

While Coltan is also mined in Brazil, Nigeria, and Rwanda, almost 40% of the global supply comes from the DRC.

And the capture of Goma, a key trading and transport hub, will help M23 to a great degree.

### **How have regional players responded to the crisis?**

DRC President Felix Tshisekedi called the capture of Goma "an act of war". The winner of the 2023 election, which has been decried by activists, the loss of Goma leaves him on shaky ground.

Mr. Kagame, while never admitting to complicity in the M23's actions, has issued remarks time and again, that hint at the M23's legitimacy. The Rwandan leader wants the militant group to be made part of discussions.

The Tutsi-led country's actions are in the interest of the group living across the border and to prevent the spillover of a civil war, he says.

Neighbouring Burundi, a Hutu-majority country that shares hostile relations with Rwanda, has warned the Kagame administration about the M23's advance further south. "If Rwanda continues to make conquests," he wrote, "I know that war will even arrive in Burundi... One day he [Kagame] wants to come to Burundi — we're not going to accept that. The war will spread," President Evariste Ndayishimiye said.

Uganda is toeing a middle line by helping the Congolese troops hunt down militants with Ugandan origins tied to the Islamic State. It also allows the M23 to use its territory as a base, reports the UN.

## **PORT OF CONTENTION**

U.S. President Donald Trump has taken aim at many countries around the world in the first few weeks of his presidency — with Iran being perhaps the most predictable target, much as it was during his first tenure. So, while it came as no surprise when he issued a Presidential National Security Memorandum (PNSM-2) on February 4, calling for "maximum pressure" on Iran, as what he called the "world's leading state sponsor of terror", his decision to name the Chabahar Port in particular sent shock-waves through New Delhi.

Chabahar's Shahid Beheshti port terminal is after all India's first international port, its alternative trade route to Iran, Afghanistan, Central Asia and beyond, and part of its plans for regional leadership. So why does the tiny warm-water port in the Gulf of Oman, that does relatively little trade with the world compared to Iran's main Bandar Abbas port, merit a special mention in Mr. Trump's memo, and where could this lead?



India had an interest in developing a terminal for trade to bypass Pakistan's land route and Karachi port route. Chabahar not only provides a quick sea route from India's west coast, but the plan fits in with India's development assistance to the Afghan republic, especially through the construction of the Zaranj-Delaram highway in 2009, that could take Indian goods around the country.

In time, India could develop Chabahar as a counter to Pakistan's Gwadar port, that is funded by China. In recent years China showed its interest in Chabahar as well, as a part of its Belt and Road Initiative and signed a 25-year cooperation agreement in 2021 with a potential investment of \$300 billion.

Between 2010 and 2015, the U.S. encouraged India to increase energy contracts with Iran, to build up the Shahid Beheshti terminal at Chabahar and even to invest in a rail line connecting Chabahar to the Afghan border — as it wanted to use this as leverage in its high-stakes negotiations for the 6-nation Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) on Iran's nuclear capabilities. The thinking for the U.S. administration was that Indian investment would give Iran incentives to join the international mainstream with the JCPOA signed.

But the best-laid plans are often derailed by geopolitics. By the time Donald Trump was elected in November 2016, the U.S.'s relations with Iran had soured, and Mr. Trump walked out of the JCPOA, enforcing sanctions on any country importing oil or trading with Iran. India submitted to the sanctions on oil, stopping its imports of cheaper Iranian crude in 2018, but it lobbied hard to keep its stake in Chabahar alive.

#### **Addition of waivers**

In November 2018, the Trump administration decided to add waivers to the U.S.'s Iran Freedom and Counter-Proliferation Act (IFCA 144(f)), stipulating that all consignments through Iranian ports were subject to sanctions, except those meant for humanitarian aid for Iran, and for Afghanistan reconstruction. The waiver was welcomed by New Delhi, and it spurred a new round of interest in Chabahar.

Over the next few years, India's trade and aid through Chabahar grew. While the collapse of the Ghani government and the takeover by the Taliban reduced the U.S.'s engagement, India has tried to forge ties with the Taliban leadership through the supply of aid.

India also provided equipment worth \$25 million dollars, including six mobile harbour cranes, and developed the terminal at Chabahar during this time, albeit at a slower pace than Iran had hoped. In May 2024, even as India was in the throes of an election campaign, the Modi government sent Shipping Minister Sarbananda Sonowal to Tehran to sign a 10-year contract for Chabahar to invest approximately \$120 million in equipment for the port and a credit window of \$250 million. External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar extolled the agreement, indicating India wanted to connect its Chabahar port to the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) so as to trade with Central Asia and Russia. Reminding India of the Afghanistan aid stipulation, the Biden Administration said the plans carried the "risk of sanctions", but did not move on the implicit threat. Mr. Trump's latest memo brings the risk back into focus.

Given that the order came just days ahead of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's U.S. visit, South Block officials hope they can once again negotiate for an exception for India's plans for Chabahar port. The question is what kind of bargain Mr. Trump wants to strike, now that Chabahar is once again in U.S. cross-hairs.



## UN REPORT FINDS RIGHTS VIOLATIONS UNDER BOTH HASINA, INTERIM GOVT.

A report by the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) has held that the deposed Awami League government of Bangladesh carried out large-scale repression during July-August 2024. The report prepared by a fact-finding team also observed that violence against minority Hindus and indigenous communities of Bangladesh took place after the fall of the Hasina government when the interim government was in charge.

“Based on direct testimony from senior officials involved and other inside sources, the OHCHR was able to establish that the integrated and systematic effort using the entire range of police, paramilitary, military and intelligence actors, as well as violent elements linked to the Awami League, to commit serious violations and abuses occurred with the full knowledge, coordination and direction of the political leadership,” it said.

The report also pointed out that violence against minority Hindu community and the indigenous communities in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) took place soon after the fall of the Hasina government. “Violent mobs engaged in serious acts of revenge violence, including killings, targeting police and Awami League officials, especially early August onwards. Some Hindus, Ahmadiyya Muslims and indigenous people from the Chittagong Hill Tracts were also subjected to human rights abuses, including the burning of homes, and attacks on places of worship,” the report noted.

The Mohammad Yunus government has welcomed the report, but pointed out that the attacks by mobs against the Hindu community and the Ahmadiyya Muslims resulted from “intersecting motives”. “Different and often intersecting motives drove these attacks, ranging from religious and ethnic discrimination to perceived opportunities for revenge against Awami League supporters among minorities, local communal disputes, including about land and interpersonal issues.”

## EXPRESS VIEW ON ARSON AND VIOLENCE IN BANGLADESH: DHAKA MUST ACT

Six months after Sheikh Hasina’s ouster from power in Bangladesh and arrival in India following student-led protests, protesters reportedly demolished the homes of Awami League leaders and defaced murals of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in 20-odd districts on February 5. The unrest began with a call for a “bulldozer procession” towards Mujib’s residence, a symbol of the 1971 liberation, at Dhaka’s 32 Dhanmondi Road. At least 50 murals of Mujib and his family were destroyed, and eight Awami League offices set on fire. As Bangladesh’s founding leader and first president, Mujib remains a revered figure for many. If peace and reconciliation are the Muhammad Yunus-led government’s objectives, the destruction of Mujib’s home risks alienating segments of the population who might otherwise be sympathetic towards the current dispensation. The interim government’s equivocation on the violence — it has all but blamed Sheikh Hasina for it — is disturbing. A change of regime cannot erase a country’s history, or the figures that stand tall.

Sheikh Hasina has condemned the February 5 violence, saying that “history cannot be wiped out”. New Delhi, too, has reacted strongly, with the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) calling the incident “regrettable”. Diplomatic tensions have escalated as Bangladesh summoned India’s acting High Commissioner to formally protest Hasina’s “fabricated and provocative” remarks. Dhaka’s reaction is unwarranted. India and Bangladesh should aim to insulate the bilateral relationship from the ups and downs of short-term politics, not make it part of partisan agendas. Economic, strategic and cultural ties between the two countries need to be deepened for the

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



benefit of people on both sides of the border. The interim government in Dhaka must also remember that the country's liberation in 1971 is deeply tied to both Mujib and India. After Mujib's assassination in a military coup, the only survivors — Hasina and her sister Sheikh Rehana — found refuge in India.

The political milieu in post-Hasina Bangladesh is yet to firm up. Free and fair elections in the near future are imperative. Mahfuz Alam, a key advisor to Yunus, recently said that the Awami League would not be allowed to contest elections. Such statements do not bode well. Will the interim government enable rogue elements to sow chaos under the guise of “dismantling symbols of fascism” — is the question. Two days after the attacks, Yunus urged calm and spoke of the need to prevent further attacks on properties linked to Hasina's family and Awami League leaders. His words must be accompanied by concrete action on the ground. The rule of law must be upheld. Yunus's stature as a Nobel Laureate and development pioneer allows him to rise above the political heat and work for the long-term interests of his country.

### BANGLADESH REWRITES ITS HISTORY BOOKS TO SUIT NEW ORTHODOXIES

Bangladeshi high schooler Laiba is being educated for the future, but what she learns has been determined by the latest chapter in her country's battle over its past.

Last year, a student-led revolution overthrew the government of iron-fisted premier Sheikh Hasina when public anger over her increasingly autocratic rule boiled over.

Her ouster has prompted Bangladesh to do something that has followed every sudden change in national leadership: rewrite its history books to suit new orthodoxies.

“The tradition of altering history must stop at some point — the sooner, the better,” Laiba's mother Suraiya Akhtar Jahan said.

“Textbooks should not change every time a new government takes office.”

Radical changes to the school curriculum are routine in Bangladesh, where febrile political divisions dating back to its ruinous 1971 independence war against Pakistan have persisted.

Until this year, textbooks gave special exaltation to the country's first President Sheikh Mujibur Rahman for spearheading that liberation struggle.

But Mujib, assassinated in 1975 in a military coup, is also Hasina's father, and his daughter's disgrace and exile has dented the late leader's stature.

“The books had turned into one side's political manifesto,” AKM Riazul Hassan, head of the national agency tasked with reforming the curriculum, said.

#### **Revised curriculum**

New history books have expunged dozens of poems, speeches and articles penned by Mujib, alongside images of his daughter.

They instead now valorise the hundreds of people killed in the protests that ultimately toppled Ms. Hasina last summer, while bringing back from exile other previously erased heroes of Bangladesh's early history.





Among them is former army chief Ziaur Rahman — no relation to Mujib — credited with issuing the first public proclamation of Bangladesh’s independence during the 1971 war.

Zia had been left out of the curriculum during Hasina’s time because he founded the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), her chief opposition.

While the overhaul of Bangladesh’s official history gives clues as to the country’s future direction, critics say the new curriculum has its own litany of omissions.

Revised textbooks mention that militia groups were responsible for the murders, without mentioning that the militias were run by Jamaat.

Asked about the changes, Hassan said that the textbook commission he helms did not want to trap the nation’s youth “in an endless cycle of hatred”.

Other signs suggest the new textbooks have conceded several changes to hardline religious sentiment in the Muslim-majority nation.

The book also excise references to transgender Bangladeshis, a demand long held by Islamist groups.

### TRUMP’S AI AMBITION AND CHINA’S DEEPSEEK OVERSHADOW AN AI SUMMIT IN PARIS

The geopolitics of artificial intelligence will be in focus at a major summit in France where world leaders, executives and experts will hammer out pledges on guiding the development of the rapidly advancing technology.

It’s the latest in a series of global dialogues around AI governance, but one that comes at a fresh inflection point as China’s buzzy and budget-friendly DeepSeek chatbot shakes up the industry.

#### Event’s aim

U.S. Vice President J.D. Vance — making his first trip abroad since taking office — will attend the Paris AI Action Summit starting February 10, while China’s President Xi Jinping will be sending his special envoy, signaling high stakes for the meeting.

Heads of state and top government officials, tech bosses and researchers are gathering in Paris for the two-day summit cohosted by French President Emmanuel Macron and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The event aims to address how to harness artificial intelligence’s potential so that it benefits everyone, while containing the technology’s myriad risks.

European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen is attending, along with officials and CEOs from 80 countries, including German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, OpenAI CEO Sam Altman, Microsoft President Brad Smith and Google CEO Sundar Pichai.

Tesla CEO Elon Musk, who attended the inaugural 2023 summit at former codebreaking base Bletchley Park in England, and DeepSeek founder Liang Wenfeng have been invited, but it’s unclear if either will attend.

More than two years after ChatGPT’s debut, generative AI continues to make astounding advances at breakneck speed. The technology that powers all-purpose chatbots is transforming many aspects of life with its ability to spit out high-quality text, images or video, or carry out complex tasks.



The 2023 summit in the U.K. resulted in a non-binding pledge by 28 nations to tackle AI risks. A follow-up meeting hosted by South Korea last year secured another pledge to set up a network of public AI safety institutes to advance research and testing.

AI safety is still on the agenda in Paris, with an expert group reporting back on general purpose AI's possible extreme dangers.

Organisers are working on getting countries to sign a joint political declaration gathering commitments for more ethical, democratic and environmentally sustainable AI, according to Macron's office. But it's unclear whether the U.S. would agree to such a measure.

Another big goal is securing an agreement for a public-interest partnership for AI. Paris seeks to raise 2.5 billion euros (\$2.6 billion) for the public-private partnership involving governments, businesses and philanthropic groups that will provide open-source access to databases, software and other tools for "trusted" AI actors, Mr. Macron's office said.

### **Trump and AI**

U.S. President Donald Trump has spoken of his desire to make the U.S. the "world capital of artificial intelligence" by tapping its oil and gas reserves to feed the energy-hungry technology. Meanwhile, he has moved to withdraw the U.S. — again — from the Paris climate agreement and revoked former President Joe Biden's executive order for AI guardrails.

Mr. Trump is replacing it with his own AI policy designed to maintain America's global leadership by reducing regulatory barriers and building AI systems free of "ideological bias."

The U.S. position might undermine any joint communique, said Nick Reiners, senior geotechnology analyst at the Eurasia Group.

"Trump is against the very idea of global governance," Reiners said. "It's one thing to get countries to agree that AI should have guardrails and that AI safety is something worth caring about. But they've widened the scope to talk about the future of work and the environment and inclusivity and so on — a whole range of concepts. So it's hard to imagine getting a widespread agreement on such a broad range of subjects."

Chinese leader Xi is sending Vice Premier Zhang Guoqing, who's been elevated to the role of Xi's special representative.

It signifies that Xi wants China to play a bigger role in global AI governance as Mr. Trump pulls back, Mr. Reiners said.

DeepSeek's release last month stunned the world because of its ability to rival Western players like ChatGPT. It also escalated the wider geopolitical showdown between Beijing and Washington over tech supremacy.

Mr. Trump said DeepSeek was a "wake-up call" for the U.S. tech industry and his AI advisor David Sacks accused DeepSeek of training its model on stolen OpenAI data.

The DeepSeek chatbot app now faces investigations, and in some cases, bans in the U.S. and a number of other countries over privacy and security concerns.

Yet the rise of DeepSeek, which built its open source AI model at a fraction of the cost and with fewer chips, also puts China's interests in line with France's.



## NATION

### AVERTING ENGELS' PAUSE

Prime Minister Narendra Modi highlighted India's stance on the evolving Artificial Intelligence (AI) landscape at the AI Action Summit in Paris on February 11, stressing the need for "governance and standards that uphold our shared values, address risks, and build trust". This perspective is also reflected in the joint statement signed by India and over 50 other countries. Commitments to trust, safety, and universal access align well with India's efforts to advance AI technologies while mitigating risks. The nation's approach to AI will be crucial as the technology progresses and costs decline. Innovations such as Chinese firm DeepSeek's breakthrough reasoning models underscore the growing risks to labour markets. The IT and services sector constitutes a significant portion of India's economy but employs a relatively smaller workforce. AI-driven efficiency gains present an attractive business proposition, yet the potential for job losses or stagnant wage growth in this sector poses serious risks. The Prime Minister rightly pointed out that technological advancements historically create new employment opportunities. However, as noted in the Economic Survey, there is a valid concern regarding an Engels' pause, a phase where firms reap the benefits of new technology while real wages stagnate. India cannot afford even a brief period of such economic strain, making proactive policy responses essential.

The summit's emphasis on sustainable AI growth and energy efficiency is equally timely, given global climate imperatives. The United States produces more than twice the electricity of India, despite having just a quarter of its population. A growing share of this energy is now consumed by data centres, which power AI training and deployment. As AI-driven energy demand surges, ensuring that this growth is powered by renewable sources is critical. Commercial AI success remains elusive, with substantial investments flowing into top market players but offering limited financial returns. While India may not replicate this high-investment, low-return model, developing foundational AI models that are tailored to Indian needs is imperative. Leveraging emerging efficiencies and maximising AI's potential must remain central to India's strategy. The IndiaAI Mission's initiatives, such as subsidised access to Graphics Processing Unit (GPU) clusters and funding for promising projects, are encouraging steps toward this goal. Looking ahead, integrating AI education and skills training at scale will be essential. Even if a significant share of top AI talent moves abroad, India must ensure that its domestic industry retains sufficient expertise to remain competitive. AI will undoubtedly reshape industries, and preparing a robust talent pipeline will be key to ensuring that India not only adapts but also thrives in this transformation.

### PM VISIT: PARIS AI MEET, US TRADE, TECH TIES

"I believe that France cannot continue to be France if it leaves its role in the world by the wayside", French President Emmanuel Macron wrote in his memoir, *Revolution*, in 2017.

- In early January, India accepted France's invitation to co-chair the AI Action Summit on February 10 and 11 in Paris. This summit will be the third of its kind, following meetings focussed on AI safety in the U.K. (2023) and South Korea (2024). In addition to AI safety, the agenda at Paris is to focus on innovation, public interest AI, future of work, and AI governance issues — presenting India an opportunity to continue its global engagement on AI safety and also amplify the voice of the Global South on broader AI issues.



As chair of the Artificial Intelligence (AI) Action Summit in Paris on February 11, the President would be trying to fulfil this obligation. And he has invited Prime Minister Narendra Modi to co-chair the Summit, offering India an important part in the effort to make and shape the rules for technologies on the next frontier.

- Back in 1998, speaking in New Delhi's Vigyan Bhawan, President Jacques Chirac first proposed the idea of "a partnership for the 21st century" with India, "a global partnership grounded in our complementarities and our common interests". The two countries have travelled a significant distance on that high road since then

**Do You Know:**

- The invitation to India to co-chair the AI Summit is being seen as a recognition of New Delhi's approach to AI, and its expanding role in the domain of new and emerging technologies. While China is a global leader in this breakthrough technology, the choice made by Paris signals the importance it attaches to shared values and convergences.
- India's Strategic Partnership with France is its oldest, and the two countries have stood together in addressing a range of global issues.
- In 2015, they launched the International Solar Alliance on the sidelines of the Paris climate conference, and they are co-chairs of the Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure (CDRI). Together, they have made significant contributions to writing the code for a green and sustainable planet; they are now collaborating to mark the contours of development in the digital world.
- The Summit, which is likely to be attended by United States Vice President J D Vance, Chinese Vice Premier Zhang Guoqing, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, and German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, will provide India with a platform to contribute towards the development of AI in an inclusive, responsible, and equitable manner, and to address associated risks and issues of ethics, governance, and accessibility.
- The Paris Summit will seek to build on the two summits held in the United Kingdom in November 2023 and South Korea in May 2024.
- The Bletchley Park Declaration signed at the AI Safety Summit, which was attended by 28 countries, affirmed that AI should be designed, developed, deployed, and used in a manner that is safe, human-centric, trustworthy, and responsible.
- The Seoul Summit, co-hosted by the UK, was attended by 27 nations. The Seoul Declaration reaffirmed their commitment to international cooperation on AI, and to addressing the challenges and opportunities presented by the new technology. The Seoul Summit also proposed a network of AI Safety Institutes.
- India will be putting forward the example of the IndiaAI Mission. The Rs 10,371 crore program of "Making AI in India and Making AI for India" aims to democratise AI innovation and ensure that its benefits are equitably distributed to all citizens.
- The Prime Minister's visit will be an occasion to further deepen the India-France strategic partnership. The PM shares a warm personal equation with President Macron, and the two leaders met thrice in 2024, with the President attending the Republic Day celebrations as Chief Guest.



## AI RACE: WHAT INDIA SHOULD DO

Just a fortnight back, the US committed billions to semiconductor investments with the Stargate initiative, laying the groundwork for its technological future. The aim was to create 1,00,000 jobs and secure pole position for the US in AI. In another part of the world, an open-source AI model emerged in DeepSeek, shaking the foundations of proprietary systems with its unmatched cost-efficiency and performance.

- OpenAI CEO Sam Altman, who previously called India's efforts to develop its own AI models "totally hopeless", has made a complete about-turn and said that India should take a leadership role in the AI space. The global AI race has begun.
- With its young population and a well-established Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI), India needs to rapidly develop capabilities to lead the next phase of the AI revolution.
- The government's commitment is unequivocal; its IndiaAI Mission is a clear declaration of intent. Our developer community is the second largest in the world, behind only the US. India has 240-plus Gen AI startups, of which 70 per cent cater to industry-specific challenges in sectors such as healthcare, education, BFSI, and agriculture.
- For instance, Sarvam AI is working on building a foundational model with Indian languages. Niramai is a health-tech startup using AI to detect early signs of breast cancer in women. With such a vibrant ecosystem of innovation, we have the necessary foundation to catalyse both the pace and scale of a new wave of digital transformation.
- First, look at what we have achieved in financial inclusion — we took bank-account penetration from 30 per cent to over 80 per cent in just seven years. econd, examine the scale of digital payments — \$568 billion in monthly UPI transactions, with India handling 49 per cent of global real-time payments.
- India must take decisive steps to build and fortify the hardware backbone powering AI systems, ensuring that they deliver unmatched efficiency, reliability, and scalability.
- Investments in AI hardware will create jobs and attract significant capital, while also sparking a ripple effect of innovation across industries. By developing robust hardware ecosystems, India can position itself as an indispensable partner in global supply chains, amplifying its influence on the international stage.
- To maintain our sovereignty in technological advancement and lead from the front, we must not allow ourselves to become a technological colony of the US and China.
- This requires us to do the following. One, India must innovate in a nimble, less energy-consuming, cost-effective manner. We must do more for less like ISRO. Two, open source is the way forward, but we must create an environment that encourages brilliant and clever engineering.
- Three, we must build sovereign frontier models that are based on our data sets and do not have any inherent biases. Four, since India has 22 recognised official languages and a vast number of local dialects, we must build multilingual and multimodal foundational models.



- Five, as a Quad partner, India should secure its position among Tier-I countries in the realm of AI diffusion, and not be subjected to any restrictions or controls. Six, there must be a sense of great urgency and a mission-driven approach.

**Do You Know:**

- DeepSeek's technological achievement has stunned the world, from Silicon Valley to the global AI stage. However, China's growing dominance in AI raises critical questions about India's position, especially given the lack of an AI lab or startup that rivals the capabilities of OpenAI or DeepSeek.
- Amid questions over India's place in the global AI race, the government said that the country will develop its own Graphics Processing Unit (GPU) in the next three to five years, and a domestic foundational AI platform can be expected in the next 10 months.
- Last year, the Union Cabinet approved the IndiaAI Mission with an outlay of Rs 10,372 crore for the next five years, under which the government will allocate funds towards subsidising private companies looking to set up AI computing capacity in the country, among other things.

**SHARED UNDERSTANDING**

During his visit to France this week, Prime Minister Narendra Modi stated that India and France could be a force for "global transformation". This statement carried significant geopolitical context for both him and his host, French President Emmanuel Macron. The visit took place just before Mr. Modi's scheduled trip to Washington, where the Trump administration's unpredictability has reshaped global dynamics. This was Mr. Modi's sixth visit to France as Prime Minister, while Mr. Macron has travelled to India three times, fostering their visible rapport. In Paris, they co-chaired the AI Action Summit, before travelling to Marseille. There, they inaugurated a new Indian consulate, visited a multilateral thermonuclear reactor project, and toured a shipping company. Their discussions focused on strengthening the defence partnership, reviewing deals on missiles, helicopter and jet engines. India also offered Indian-made rocket launchers. Days after the Modi government announced amendments to India's nuclear liability laws, both countries agreed to develop small modular reactors and advance the long-stalled civil nuclear deal. The leaders discussed global conflicts, including those in Ukraine and Gaza. They also reaffirmed their commitment to advancing the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor, an initiative in which both countries play a key role that is contingent on West Asian stability. Mr. Macron referred to India and France as two great powers that are closely aligned, emphasising that while they seek stronger engagement with the U.S. and China, neither wishes to be dependent on any one power.

Beyond bilateral ties, Mr. Modi's visit had broader strategic implications. The leaders addressed global challenges such as climate change, trade disruptions, and the evolving risks posed by AI. However, a key issue both sides remained discreet about was on how to navigate relations with Washington. While both leaders seek to maintain positive ties with Mr. Trump, they are wary of his unpredictable policies, including his approach to tariffs, economic measures, and his unilateral stance on global conflicts. Mr. Macron, in an interview after Mr. Modi's departure, did not hold back in criticising U.S. policy on Gaza, asserting that what is needed there is a humanitarian operation, not a "real-estate operation". Mr. Trump's independent dealings with Russia and China, often made without consulting key allies in Europe or the Indo-Pacific, and his disregard for the multilateral order, could become a longer-term subject of discussion between Mr. Modi and Mr.



Macron. In the months ahead, India and France will likely find greater alignment in their shared understanding of global challenges and their pursuit of collaborative solutions.

#### N-REACTORS, MISSILES, ENGINES: INDIA AND FRANCE DEEPEN TIES

India and France Wednesday agreed to jointly develop modern nuclear reactors, boost defence cooperation with procurement of missiles, submarines, engines for aircraft and helicopters, and jointly work on projects in third countries.

- These were the outcome of bilateral discussions between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and French President Emmanuel Macron on board the Presidential aircraft while flying from Paris to Marseille.
- Describing the decision to travel together on the Presidential aircraft “an exceptional gesture by President Macron, emblematic of deep personal trust between the two leaders, and remarkable confidence they have in each other”, Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri said India-France “ties literally touched new heights”.
- The two leaders, Misri said, reviewed the bilateral cooperation in areas of defence, space and civil nuclear cooperation, health and people-to-people ties. AI was a “major area” of the discussion, he said.
- According to the joint statement, Prime Minister Modi and President Macron stressed that nuclear energy is an essential part of the energy mix for strengthening energy security and transitioning towards a low-carbon economy. Both leaders acknowledged the India-France civil nuclear ties and efforts in cooperation on the peaceful uses of nuclear energy, notably in relation with the Jaitapur nuclear power plant project.
- President Macron welcomed the decision to include India as an observer to the Eurodrone MALE (medium altitude long endurance) programme managed by OCCAR, which is another step forward in the growing strength of our partnership in defence equipment programmes,” the joint statement said.
- On cooperation in third countries, it said that they hailed the launch of the “India-France Indo-Pacific Triangular Development Cooperation, aiming to support climate- and SDG-focused projects from third countries in the Indo-Pacific region”.
- Both leaders announced the inauguration of the India-France Year of Innovation in New Delhi in March 2026 by launching its logo.

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

- PM Modi recalled how during the First World War, Marseille was an important base for Indian troops. This city, he said, had a close link with Veer Savarkar as well.
- Vinayak Damodar Savarkar was arrested in London in March 1910, on charges of anti-state acts and abetment of Nashik magistrate A M T Jackson’s murder. While being brought to India for trial onboard the commercial ship SS Morea, Savarkar tried to escape from custody in Marseille.
- According to the records of the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA), on July 8, 1910, Savarkar, who was being closely guarded, sought permission to use the washroom. He then bolted the toilet from inside, jumped out of the ship’s porthole, and swam ashore.



- However, Savarkar was soon apprehended by a brigadier of the French maritime gendarmerie, who handed him over to guards from the ship after mistaking him for a crew member. Savarkar's escape, however, sparked a dispute between France and Great Britain, which was settled by the PCA.

#### KEY TAKEAWAYS FROM THE MODI-TRUMP MEETING

- **Transforming Relationship Utilizing Strategic Technology (TRUST) initiative:** Taking forward the Biden administration's Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technologies (iCET), India and the US decided to rename it and launch the US-India TRUST initiative.
- It aims to catalyse collaboration among governments, academia and the private sector to drive innovation in defence, artificial intelligence, semiconductors, quantum computing, biotechnology, energy and space.
- **Autonomous Systems Industry Alliance:** It refers to India-US cooperation in the area of underwater domain awareness technologies. The US has offered a few co-production and co-development opportunities for UDA technologies, on a commercial basis. India is the very first country with whom US defence industry has offered to work with on these sensitive technologies.
- **US-India COMPACT** (Catalysing Opportunities for Military Partnership, Accelerated Commerce & Technology) for the 21st century: Under this initiative, they committed to drive transformative change across key pillars of cooperation – defence, investment and trade, energy security, technology and innovation, multilateral cooperation, people to people connection.
- **INDUS-Innovation:** It an innovation bridge modelled after the successful INDUS-X platform, that will advance US-India industry and academic partnerships and foster investments in space, energy, and other emerging technologies.

#### US-INDIA 123 CIVIL NUCLEAR AGREEMENT

- India and the US signal their commitment to “fully realise” the US-India 123 Civil Nuclear Agreement.
- The bilateral “Agreement for Co-operation between the Government of India and the Government of the United States of America concerning Peaceful Uses of Nuclear Energy” has been done because of the requirement for the US side under Section 123 of its Atomic Energy Act 1954. Hence it is also popularly known as the 123 Agreement.
- The 123 Agreement aimed to enable full civil nuclear energy cooperation between India and the US by providing for “full civil nuclear energy cooperation covering nuclear reactors and aspects of the associated nuclear fuel cycle including enrichment and reprocessing”.

#### PLAN TO AMEND NUCLEAR LIABILITY LAW MAY ENTHUSE AMERICAN, FRENCH FIRMS

Ahead of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Paris and Washington from Monday, the Union government's announcement that it would amend the Civil Liability for Nuclear Damages Act (CLNDA), 2010, and the Atomic Energy Act, 1962, is likely to enthuse American and French nuclear power companies, whose projects have been deadlocked due to legal concerns for more than 15 years. However, experts who welcomed the decision, called for more clarity on the amendments.

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





The announcement, which marked a sharp U-turn from the government's position in 2015, was made in the Budget speech on February 1. In particular, it is meant to help progress the Electricite de France (EDF) MoU to build six EPR1650 reactors at Jaitapur in Maharashtra that was signed in 2009 (with Areva), and American Westinghouse Electric Company's (WEC) MoU, signed in 2012, to build six AP1000 reactors at Kovvada in Andhra Pradesh.

In addition, it is expected to help India tap into new nuclear power technologies, particularly for small modular reactors (SMR), now gaining popularity in developed economies.

"For an active partnership with the private sector towards this goal, amendments to the Atomic Energy Act and the Civil Liability for Nuclear Damage Act will be taken up," Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman had said in the speech, calling for "at least 100 GW" of nuclear energy by 2047, and making an outlay of ₹20,000 crore for the development of five SMRs to be operationalised in India by 2033. India has a nuclear power capacity of 6,780 MW from 22 reactors, and the only foreign operator in India is Russia's Rosatom.

### High liability

Western nuclear power companies have, however, said clauses in the CLNDA are unacceptable as they mandate a high degree of liability for suppliers and contradict the international Convention for Supplementary Compensation for Nuclear Damage (CSC) which focuses only on the liability of operators of the plant. The clauses were inserted in 2012, following heated debates in Parliament, where the then-in-Opposition NDA members had accused the government of letting Western companies off from liability, citing the Union Carbide-Bhopal gas leak case that killed thousands in 1984 and the Fukushima nuclear leak in Japan in 2011.

"This law was amended by the government just to satisfy the Opposition at the time, even though it was clear that the international operators legal liability clause would create problems down the road," Shyam Saran, former Foreign Secretary, who was the Prime Minister's Special Envoy for Nuclear Affairs and Climate Change at the time, told The Hindu, adding that the amendments now being planned must be made in consultation with international partners and ensure the liability issue was dealt with in contracts signed.

The External affairs Ministry declined to comment on what the proposed amendments would entail. Officials aware of discussions on the issue said that while the CLNDA would be amended to separate operator's liability from supplier's liability to bring it in line with the CSC, the Atomic Energy Act would liberalise investment in power projects in India.

### Legal standard

"The pragmatic way out is to break the deadlock by amending the CLNDA to bring it on par with international conventions to which India itself is a party — so that there is a clear legal standard in our domestic legislation aligned with international standards and is applicable to international partners and domestic industry," said Venkatesh Verma, former Ambassador to Russia, who was part of negotiations for all India's civil nuclear agreements and led the External Affairs Ministry's Disarmament and International Security Affairs desk. With the Trump administration keen to encourage U.S. energy exports, for both oil and LNG, as well as nuclear power, and France and India negotiating deals for SMR projects, the issue will be on the agenda as Mr. Modi travels to France and the U.S. this week. It remains to be seen whether the government's plans to amend the laws will finally forge the breakthrough required, two decades after India signed civil nuclear deals with the U.S. and France.



Significantly, in a “Frequently Asked Questions” memorandum issued by the Ministry after the Republic Day visit to India by U.S. President Barack Obama in February 2015, the government had said that there was “no proposal to amend the Act or the Rules”, and that U.S. officials had reached a “general understanding that India’s CLND law is compatible with the [International] Convention for Supplementary Compensation for Nuclear Damage (CSC)”. However, the “understanding” did not result in any serious contracts for nuclear power.

**Do You Know:**

- India was the second Asian nation to build a nuclear power plant in 1969 at Tarapur — just after Japan and long before China. It also built up an impressive nuclear research and development programme in the 1950s and 1960s with significant assistance from its Western partners.
- At the peak of nuclear optimism in 1970, India hoped to generate 10,000 MW of atomic power by 2000. Twenty-five years after that deadline, India’s nuclear power sector is limping along at about 8,200 MW. China’s installed nuclear capacity today is about 58,000 MW. South Korea has 32,000 MW. China and South Korea are now major exporters of nuclear reactors. The UAE, which launched its nuclear power programme less than a decade ago, has 5,200 GW of nuclear capacity, centred around South Korean reactors.
- The NPT froze the number of nuclear-weapon states at five (those who had already tested atomic weapons before 1967) and began to impose restrictions on the transfer of nuclear technologies to the rest of the world.
- If India’s nuclear adventure flourished in the era of atomic internationalism, it began to wilt under external pressures from the 1970s. If India had done a nuclear test before January 1967, it would have been on the right side of the nuclear divide. But the inability or unwillingness to become a nuclear-weapon power put it on the wrong side. (There are reports that US President John F Kennedy had offered to help India conduct a nuclear weapon test in 1963, but Nehru had turned him down.)

**THE H-1B PARADOX**

As India’s growth flounders, the lack of a coherent national development strategy is becoming more acute. India’s aspirations of becoming a global power rest on increasingly shaky ground, seemingly based more on our size than our achievements in science, technology, art or other innovation. Nowhere is this strategic vacuum more evident than in the discourse around H-1B visas.

- The Indian government’s efforts to preserve the status of H-1B visas for skilled migrants in the United States are framed as a matter of national interest. While the personal anxieties of Indians on H-1B visas are understandable.
- In the US, the H-1B debate is entangled with broader immigration policies, often coloured by economic and racial anxieties that sometimes manifest as bigotry.
- For India, however, the focus from a national development perspective should not be on preserving the H-1B pipeline but on questioning why a country capable of producing globally competitive talent fails to provide opportunities for this talent at home, such that 75 per cent of H-1B visa holders are Indians.



- The H-1B system represents a clear case of brain drain, with costs borne disproportionately by India. While it may appear advantageous on the surface — generating remittances, building global networks, and enhancing India’s soft power — a closer examination reveals a troubling imbalance.
- India invests heavily in selecting and nurturing talent through publicly-funded institutions like the IITs without reaping direct benefits from this training, while the US gets to cherry-pick top Indian talent without bearing the cost of training it. Moreover, those Indians who go abroad must trade-off political rights for economic prosperity.
- The H-1B narrative has become fundamentally a story of class privilege. Celebrating individual success stories obscures systemic barriers and perpetuates the myth that talent naturally finds its way to success. In reality, structural advantages — access to elite institutions, networks, and resources — play a decisive role in determining who gets ahead.
- Proponents argue that lucrative opportunities abroad through H-1B visas spur education domestically and that brain drain is overstated. While the connection between overseas opportunities and educational aspirations is valid, this argument is incomplete.
- While opportunity abroad may spark widespread aspiration, access to quality education remains severely limited, as evident from the intense competition, exam paper leaks, corruption and suicides among our youth. Consequently, only a small percentage benefits while the vast majority — particularly in rural and underprivileged communities — are left behind.
- The true cost of this talent exodus extends beyond the immediate brain drain. It perpetuates an outward focus that weakens the urgency for domestic reform, allowing the state to neglect its responsibility to create equitable opportunities and an environment conducive to growth and innovation.
- Consider why India, with its abundant talent pool, has produced relatively few globally competitive companies or Nobel laureates. The issue isn’t individual capability but the absence of robust institutional frameworks: Stable governance, transparent regulations, accessible capital, and consistent rule of law.
- India’s real challenge is to transform its aspirational energy into a movement for systemic reform. Over-indexing on the diaspora for remittances, investments, and prestige risks undermining the development of domestic institutions. Instead of celebrating the exodus of its brightest minds, India must focus on creating conditions that make staying more attractive than leaving.
- This requires a fundamental shift in priorities. Improving the quality of education, expanding access to infrastructure, streamlining governance, and fostering an environment conducive to innovation are critical. True “atmanirbharta” (self-reliance) cannot be achieved without universal access to opportunities that enable every Indian to achieve their potential within the country’s borders.
- National progress is not measured by how many citizens succeed abroad or by how many billionaires India has but by how many can fulfill their aspirations at home.

**Do You Know:**

- The International Organisation for Migration (IOM) has released the biennial World Migration Report 2024. According to the report, India received over USD 111 billion in remittances in 2022,

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



the largest in the world, becoming the first country to reach and even surpass the USD 100 billion mark. India is also the origin of the largest number of international migrants in the world, with large diasporas living in countries such as the United Arab Emirates, the United States and Saudi Arabia.

- The H-1B visa program allows American employers to hire immigrant workers in occupations that require “a high level of skill” and “at least a bachelor’s degree”, according to the US Department of Labour.
- The program was started in 1990, with the intention of helping “employers who cannot otherwise obtain needed business skills and abilities from the US workforce by authorising the temporary employment of qualified individuals who are not otherwise authorised to work in the United States”.

## TROUBLED WATERS

In the latest chapter of the long-standing fisheries dispute in the Palk Bay region, the Sri Lankan Navy arrested 14 fishermen from Tamil Nadu’s Ramanathapuram district on February 8 for alleged poaching in waters north of Mannar. Two trawlers were also impounded. On January 27, the Navy had fired at an Indian boat near Delft Island, injuring two fishermen. With these arrests, the total number of Indian fishermen detained this year has risen to 77. Just last week, a Sri Lankan court had released nine fishermen from Karaikal, Puducherry, but one other person received a six-month prison sentence. Additionally, Sri Lankan courts have been imposing hefty fines, complicating their release. Government data over the past decade, based on responses in Parliament, show that in 2024, the number of Indian fishermen arrested in Sri Lanka crossed the 500-mark for the first time in 10 years (528). There were 787 arrests in 2014.

In a letter to External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar on February 3, Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M.K. Stalin said that 97 fishermen and 216 fishing boats were still under the custody of Sri Lanka. Unlike in the past, when they were quickly released, recent years have seen rising convictions for violations of the International Maritime Boundary Line (IMBL) and unlawful fishing. While Tamil Nadu and Puducherry fishermen often cross the IMBL, their counterparts in Sri Lanka’s Tamil-speaking Northern Province, who are still recovering from the civil war, oppose their fishing methods, particularly ecologically destructive bottom trawling. Northern Sri Lankan fishermen are seeking a sustainable solution that protects their waters from over-exploitative fishing. Indian fishermen have repeatedly sought a fresh round of talks with their Sri Lankan counterparts, with the last meeting having taken place in November 2016. The issue was also raised in the most recent Joint Working Group meeting in Colombo last October. However, the Anura Kumara Dissanayake-led Sri Lankan government appears reluctant to negotiate. New Delhi and Colombo must recognise that a fresh approach is required to break the deadlock rather than continuing with a business-as-usual mindset. Unlike the cases of Indian fishermen detained in Pakistan, Bangladesh, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar, the arrests in Sri Lanka are significantly higher. New Delhi must introduce incentives to encourage Palk Bay fishermen to move away from trawling. While this shift will take time, both governments must facilitate immediate discussions between their fishing communities to find interim solutions. It is only through proactive diplomacy and sustainable fishing policies that this ongoing conflict can be addressed effectively.



## FOR SECOND YEAR, NO DEATH PENALTY PASSES SC TEST

REFLECTING A divergence in decision-making on death penalty at different levels in the judiciary, the Supreme Court — for the second consecutive year — did not confirm a single death sentence in 2024 while trial courts awarded 139 such verdicts, according to a report by Project 39A, a criminal justice programme at the National Law University Delhi.

- The SC heard six appeals in 2024 — it commuted five death sentences to life imprisonment while one was acquitted.
- “In a continuation of past year trends since 2021, the Court relied on reports pertaining to the accused’s life history, jail conduct and mental health evaluations in its death penalty decisions,” the report stated.
- ‘Death Penalty in India: Annual Statistics Report 2024’, accessed by The Indian Express, states that at the end of 2024, there were 564 death row prisoners in jails across India, the highest number since 2000.
- In 2024, of the 139 death sentences awarded by trial courts, 87 (62%) were imposed in murder cases and 35 (25%) in cases of murder involving sexual offences. This is a reversal from the previous year, when more death sentences were imposed in cases of murder involving sexual offences (59) than in simple murder cases (40).
- In 2023, the trial courts had awarded 122 death sentences.

### Do You Know:

- Under Section 366 of the Criminal Procedure Code, 1973, and Section 407 of the Bharatiya Nyaya Suraksha Sanhita, 2023, death sentence proceedings must be forwarded to the High Court for confirmation before they can be executed. In 2024, High Courts decided 87 cases whereas trial courts imposed 139 death penalties.
- High Courts confirmed the death sentences of 9 convicts, the highest since 2019 (26). Of the 9 confirmations, 5 were in cases of murder involving sexual offence, 3 in simple murder and one in a case of kidnapping with murder.
- In High Court cases as well, the report states that the “death penalty appeals were disposed of without seeking information about the accused including mitigation reports, jail conduct reports and psychiatric evaluations”. Aside from confirmations, the High Courts commuted the sentence of 79 convicts, acquitted 49, and sent the case of one convict back to the trial court in 2024.

## SC: FAILURE TO INFORM GROUNDS OF ARREST WILL MAKE IT ILLEGAL

The requirement under Article 22(1) of the Constitution to inform an arrested person about the grounds of arrest is not a formality but a mandatory constitutional requirement, and failure to do so will render the arrest illegal, the Supreme Court ruled on Friday.

- It is the fundamental right of every person arrested and detained in custody to be informed of the grounds of arrest as soon as possible. If the grounds of arrest are not informed as soon as may be after the arrest, it would amount to a violation of the fundamental right of the arrestee guaranteed under Article 22(1). It will also amount to depriving the arrestee of his liberty.”



- Justice Oka said, “the reason is that, as provided in Article 21, no person can be deprived of his liberty except in accordance with the procedure established by law. The procedure established by law also includes what is provided in Article 22(1). Therefore, when a person is arrested without a warrant, and the grounds of arrest are not informed to him, as soon as may be, after the arrest, it will amount to a violation of his fundamental right guaranteed under Article 21 as well.
- The judgment said that “when an arrested person is produced before a Judicial Magistrate for remand, it is the duty of the Magistrate to ascertain whether compliance with Article 22(1) has been made...
- Explaining why the grounds of arrest must be communicated to the friends or relatives or persons nominated by the arrested person, Justice Singh said it “is to ensure that they would be able to take immediate and prompt actions to secure the release of the arrested person as permissible under the law.

**Do You Know:**

- Article 22 prescribes protection against arrest and detention but has a major exception. It says in Article 22 (3) (b) that none of those safeguards apply “to any person who is arrested or detained under any law providing for preventive detention.” The remaining clauses — Article 22(4)-(7) — deal with how preventive detention operationalises.
- First, the state, which would be the district magistrate, would issue an order to detain a person when it is necessary to maintain “public order.” The state can delegate this power to the police as well.
- If the detention ordered is for more than three months, under Article 22(4), such a detention requires the approval of an Advisory Board. These Boards are set up by states and normally consist of retired judges and bureaucrats. A detainee is generally not allowed legal representation before the Board. If the Board confirms the detention, the detainee can move Court challenging the detention order.

**SC TO POLL PANEL: DON'T ERASE EVM DATA WHILE IT'S BEING VERIFIED**

The Supreme Court Tuesday asked the Election Commission of India (ECI) to ensure that polling data is not deleted from the Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs) while these are being verified.

- The bench of Chief Justice of India Sanjiv Khanna and Justice Dipankar Datta said this while seeking the ECI's response to a plea by NGO Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR) which alleged that the ECI's procedure for verification of EVMs was not in accordance with the April 2024 order of the Supreme Court.
- On Tuesday, Advocate Prashant Bhushan, appearing for ADR, said the ECI only does mock polls for verification of the EVMs. “What we want is that somebody should examine the software and hardware of EVM to see whether they have any element of manipulation or not,” he said.
- Senior Advocate Devadatt Kamat, appearing for another petitioner, too echoed the concern and said what is done is only a mock poll and the charge is Rs 40,000. Concerns were also expressed that the previous data gets deleted during reloading.
- CJJ Khanna clarified what the court said was that verification can happen if anyone has a doubt.



**Do You Know:**

- ADR, an independent elections watchdog, has argued that the SOP does not provide for actual verification of the microchips installed in the EVMs and VVPATs. They had argued that if a candidate seeks verification, then an engineer should examine the software and hardware of the EVMs.
- After the court order in April 2024, the EC came out with its SOP for checking and verification in July that year. The EC also decided to charge Rs 40,000 plus GST for each request.
- As per the Supreme Court order, the candidates who come second and third in any constituency can apply for checking and verification of up to 5% of the EVMs and VVPATs per Assembly segment.
- The EC's technical SOP states that a mock poll of up to 1,400 votes per machine will be conducted and the result tallied with the VVPAT slips. If the results match, the machines would be considered to have passed the test.

**GOVT INVITES PROPOSALS FROM STATES FOR SETTING UP NARI ADALATS**

The government has written to states inviting proposals to establish 'Nari Adalats', Women and Child Development Minister Annpurna Devi said on Tuesday. The ministry intends to extend the scheme, already running on a pilot basis in Assam and J&K, to other states, said the minister.

- The Nari Adalat scheme under the WCD Ministry entails groups of women at the gram panchayat level resolving grievances of women who have been denied their rights.
- The members of the Nari Adalat – around seven to 11 members called 'nyaya sakhis' – are nominated by the gram panchayat. It is running in 50 gram panchayats each in J&K and Assam, where it began on a pilot basis in 2023. In 2023-24, the WCD Ministry had released a little over `20 lakh each to the two states to implement the scheme.
- Anil Malik, Secretary, WCD Ministry, wrote to officials in other states and UTs last month, requesting them to send proposals to set up Nari Adalats in at least 10 panchayats in states or five panchayats in the UT. Proposals from Bihar and Karnataka have already been accepted by the Ministry, Malik wrote.

**Do You Know:**

- The Government of India implements 'Mission Shakti' – an integrated women empowerment programme as umbrella scheme for the safety, security and empowerment of women for implementation during the 15th Finance Commission period across the country aimed at strengthening interventions for women safety, security and empowerment.
- 'Mission Shakti' comprises of two sub-schemes 'Sambal' and 'Samarthya' for safety and security of women and empowerment of women respectively. The schemes of One Stop Centres (OSC), Women Helplines (181-WHL), Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (BBBP) and Nari Adalat are part of 'Sambal' sub- scheme; while the components of Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana (PMMVY), Palna, Shakti Sadan, Sakhi Niwas and Hub for Empowerment of Women are part of 'Samarthya' sub scheme.



- The Government has decided to implement the component of “Nari Adalat” in a phased manner under Mission Shakti.

—In the first phase, the State of Assam and the Union Territory (UT) of Jammu & Kashmir (J&K) have been selected by the Ministry to implement the component of Nari Adalat.

—In UT of J&K it is being implemented in two aspirational districts i.e. Kupwara and Baramulla selected by the UT.

#### EXPRESS VIEW ON ATTACKS ON INTER-FAITH COUPLES: NO IMPUNITY

The plight of two interfaith couples — one in Madhya Pradesh’s Bhopal and the other in Uttarakhand’s Udham Singh Nagar — tells a story of the odds stacked against young people who follow their heart when prejudice is allowed free play in a climate of impunity. In the first instance, members of right-wing outfits beat up a Muslim man inside a district court in Bhopal when he went to register his marriage with his Hindu partner under the Special Marriage Act (SMA). Despite the incident being caught on camera, it is bizarre that the only arrest made was of the youth — on charges of “forced conversion”. In the second, personal details of the couple were put online, resulting in harassment and opposition not just from the girl’s family but also from conservative groups. Together, the incidents show the disturbing work of the spectre of “love jihad”, kept alive by the state’s increasing intrusion into the private lives of citizens through provisions such as Section 378 of Uttarakhand’s Uniform Civil Code (UCC), which seeks to regulate live-in relationships, and by its tacit support for non-state actors to enforce ideological agendas.

As recently as December 2024, the Home Minister emphasised in the Rajya Sabha the Centre’s plans to implement the UCC in BJP-led states. In the name of “protection” and “equality” of women, cultures or communities, some of the provisions of the Uttarakhand UCC have been weaponised against individual freedoms. Likewise, provisions of the SMA, which require the couple to give a month’s notice to make room for public objections, can also be used to target interfaith couples. Reports in this paper have shown how vigilante networks sprang into action as soon as both couples tried to access legal mechanisms meant to safeguard them and their rights.

These travails of the young in a country that makes much of the youth, or demographic, dividend are disquieting. From the gaps that stretch between aspirations and opportunities to the infantilisation of their choices — they are, all too often, denied the autonomy and agency that they require and deserve to realise their potential and seize their opportunities. The incidents in Bhopal and Udham Singh Nagar also frame the toll taken by a shunning of all that is ameliorating about a plural, multi-cultural society – the opening up of spaces, and the enriching of possibilities. The state must take cognisance and uphold the rule of law. It must show that it is committed to protecting, in words and deeds, every citizen’s right to choose their partners without fear of retribution, discrimination, or violence.

#### J&K HC BACKS 29-YEAR-OLD WHO WAS DENIED PASSPORT: ‘CONDUCT OF APPLICANT, NOT KIN, SHOULD FORM BASIS’

Citing Article 21 of the Constitution, the Jammu and Kashmir High Court has said that the conduct of the applicant — and not his relatives — should form the basis for accepting or rejecting a passport application. Politicians cutting across party lines welcomed the order.





- Issuing an order on a petition filed by Amir Malik, a 29-year-old from Ramban, Justice MA Chowdhary said Tuesday, “It should have been the activities of the petitioner which should have formed the basis either for permitting or rejecting the request for issuance of passport in his favour”.
- In his petition, Malik claims that he was denied a passport despite waiting for a year, citing authorities’ objections to his family’s alleged links to the Hizbul Mujahideen.
- The judge noted that the petitioner apprehends that his case has been “deliberately delayed” by the authorities “in order to carve out a false ground, and the reason for denying the passport to the petitioner is that one of the brothers of the petitioner, namely, Late Mohd Ayaz Malik, was killed by the security forces in an encounter in a militancy related incident” in April 2011. His father has also been named as an overground worker (OGW) of the Hizbul Mujahideen.
- The ruling also notes objections from the Additional Director General of Police (CID) J&K in Jammu, who says that given the family’s “history of affiliation” to the Hizbul Mujahideen, “the possibility of the applicant coming under duress, influence or extraneous pressure of anti-Indian, terrorist/separatist/secessionist outfits of elements of hostile foreign agencies has been assessed to be of very high probability”.
- In his order, the court said that the argument “deserves to be rejected”, and added that the petitioner cannot be deprived of his fundamental right under Article 21 of the Constitution of India. It also said that non-recommendation of the petitioner’s case is based on material that can be said to be “nothing but in the realm of speculation”.

**Do You Know:**

- The denial of passports and travel documents to local residents due to relatives’ “militancy-related antecedents” has been a cause for concern in Kashmir and was also an election issue in last year’s Lok Sabha as well as Assembly polls.
- According to Soli J. Sorabjee, the right to travel abroad and return to one’s country has been spelt out from the expression “personal liberty” in Article 21 of the Constitution. The Court has also ruled that right to education until the age of 14 is a fundamental right emanating from the all-pervasive Article 21.

**DRAFT AMENDMENT TO ADVOCATES ACT PROPOSES COURT BOYCOTTS’ BAN, CENTRE’S NOMINEES IN BCI**

The Union government proposed an amendment to the Advocates Act, 1961, which, among other things, would prohibit advocates from boycotting and abstaining from courts’ work, and have three members nominated by the central government in the Bar Council of India.

- The draft Advocates (Amendment) Bill, 2025 was published by the Law and Justice Ministry Thursday to seek comments until February 28.
- The draft amendment introduces a new Section 35A: “No association of advocates or any member of the association or any advocate, either individually or collectively, shall give a call for boycott or abstinence from courts’ work or boycott or abstain from courts’ work or cause obstruction in any form in courts’ functioning or in court premises.”



- Any violation of this would be treated as misconduct and will be liable for disciplinary action under the Act and regulations, it says. However, the draft does provide for an exception. “Provided advocates may participate in a strike only when it does not impede the administration of justice such as strikes intended to bring attention to legitimate concerns about professional conduct, working conditions, or administrative matters and may include symbolic or one-day token strikes, as long as they are conducted in a way that does not disrupt court proceedings or violate clients’ rights,” it says.

- Another new Section, 49B, that is proposed to be added pertains to the “power of Central government to give directions”, which says that “the Central Government may give such directions to Bar Council of India as may appear to the Central Government to be necessary for carrying into execution any of the provisions of this Act or of any rule or order made thereunder.”

**Do You Know:**

- The draft amendment also expands the definition of a law graduate and a legal practitioner. So far, a law graduate is defined as anyone who obtains a Bachelor’s law degree from any university established by law in India.

- According to the proposed amendment, a law graduate means a person who has obtained a “Bachelor’s degree in law of three or five years or such other duration as prescribed, from any Center of Legal Education or University established by Law or a college affiliated to any university and recognized by Bar Council of India.”

- The definition of a legal practitioner is proposed to be changed to include corporate lawyers as well as those working with foreign law firms.

- The draft amendment increases the punishment for illegally practising in any court, that is anyone other than an advocate, from the existing six months’ imprisonment to one year imprisonment and/or a fine of up to `2 lakh.

- In its notice inviting comments, the Law Ministry said the draft amendment was a part of the government’s ongoing reform agenda.

**SC SLAMS POLL FREEBIES: ‘ARE WE NOT CREATING A CLASS OF PARASITES?’**

Coming down heavily on the announcement of freebies by governments and political parties before elections, the Supreme Court Wednesday asked “are we not creating a class of parasites”, and said freebies are disincentivising people from working and, in states like Maharashtra, drying up the labour force.

- When the bench of Justices B R Gavai and A G Masih was hearing a plea regarding shelter homes for the homeless, a petitioner said policies are only designed for the rich.

- Justice Gavai took exception to the submission that compassion is only for the rich, and cautioned him not to make political speeches. “Don’t make a speech (like) at Ramlila Maidan in this court. In court, restrict yourself to the argument. If you are espousing the cause of someone, restrict it (to that). Don’t make unnecessary allegations. Don’t make a political speech here. We will not allow our court hall to be converted into a political platform,” he said.



- Advocate Prashant Bhushan, who was appearing for another petitioner, sought to explain that the submission had been made because some of the shelters had been removed for beautification of the area.
- Justice Gavai said an affidavit filed in the matter mentioned the facilities to be provided. “So, rather than promoting them to be a part of the mainstream of society by contributing to the development of the nation, are we not creating a class of parasites?” he said.

**Do You Know:**

- This was not the first time Justice Gavai had flagged the issue of freebies. On January 7, while hearing a matter related to payment of salaries and pensions of judicial officers, he said, “The states have all the money for people who don’t do any work. When we talk about financial constraints, we also have to look at this. Come elections you declare Ladli Behna and other new schemes where you pay fixed amounts. In Delhi, we have announcements now from some party or the other saying they will pay Rs 2500 if they come to power.”
- Incidentally, the Supreme Court is seized of petitions challenging freebies by political parties ahead of elections, but it is yet to start hearing the matter in detail.
- A two-judge bench had, in the Subramaniam Balaji case in 2013, held that the “state distributing largesse in the form of distribution of colour TVs, laptops, etc. to eligible and deserving persons is directly related to the Directive Principles of State Policy” and warrants no interference by the court.
- On August 26, 2022, a bench, headed by the then Chief Justice of India, referred petitions seeking a ban on freebies to a three-judge bench which it said would look into prayers for reconsidering the judgement in the Subramaniam Balaji case.

**ARE FREEBIES AND WELFARE SCHEMES DIFFERENT?****The story so far:**

All three major political parties in the Delhi Assembly elections, won by the Bharatiya Janata Party, unveiled a barrage of freebies or subsidies to woo voters. The Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) pledged a ₹2,100 monthly allowance for all women, an additional ₹21,000 for pregnant women, and subsidised LPG cylinders at ₹500 for those from impoverished backgrounds. The BJP followed suit, offering ₹2,500 per month to women from low-income families, and ‘free electricity’ through its solar energy initiative. The Congress too joined the fray.

**Were these electoral sops or welfare politics?**

The core challenge in this debate is the absence of a clear consensus on what constitutes a freebie. Some argue that freebies amount to bribery and discourage voters from making informed choices. Others, however, claim that such a narrative strips voters of their agency and delegitimises welfare politics. “What some perceive as a freebie may be regarded as welfare by others. For instance, while one segment of society may view free transport as an unwarranted concession, for another, it constitutes a vital welfare measure. Ironically, those who criticise free transport as a subsidy often benefit from the availability of cheap labour. Affordable transport enables people to travel in search of work, making such labour possible,” Dr. K.K. Kailash, Professor at the Department of Political Science, University of Hyderabad, told The Hindu.



The National Food Security Act, enacted by the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government in 2013, transformed key welfare schemes such as the mid-day meal, the Public Distribution System, and child development services into legal entitlements. According to data released by the Centre, the law's beneficiaries include 75% of the rural population and 50% of the urban population — roughly 800 million people in total.

A 2023 study by the Centre for Financial Inclusion (CFI) found that carefully designed cash transfer programmes, which channel funds directly to women on behalf of their households, not only empower women but also help mitigate the risks of intimate partner violence.

#### **Where does one draw the line?**

According to Dr. Kailash, welfare provisions — unlike freebies — enhance human capabilities and freedoms, aligning with the “capability approach” to development propounded by Nobel laureate Amartya Sen. “For instance, access to nutritious, free food through mid-day meal schemes strengthens immunity, and enables individuals to lead dignified lives. In contrast, poor health not only causes personal suffering but also burdens public resources by increasing the demand for hospitals and medical treatment. Investing in nutrition from an early age yields significant long-term benefits for both individuals and society,” he explained.

Cash transfer schemes have recently found electoral success in Maharashtra, Jharkhand, and Haryana, cementing their role as a staple of electioneering. However, Dr. Kailash cautioned that while such schemes stimulate market activity by boosting consumer spending, they ultimately fall short of creating genuine economic opportunities. Freebie-driven politics poses a serious fiscal threat, particularly to heavily indebted State governments. The RBI's latest report on State finances highlights how such measures have led to a sharp increase in subsidy expenditure. It further urges States to rationalise these subsidies to ensure they do not displace critical investments.

Radhika Pandey, Associate Professor at the National Institute of Public Finance and Policy (NIPFP), cautioned that the growing reliance on freebies will inevitably deepen the revenue deficit for States. “Delhi reported a revenue surplus of ₹14,457 crore in 2022-23. In 2023-24, this figure was budgeted at a significantly lower ₹5,769 crore, with revised estimates reflecting a further 13.9% decline. For 2024-25, the projected surplus stands at just ₹3,231 crore — a sharp 35% drop from the previous year's revised estimates. With the rising fiscal burden of freebies, the revenue account is likely to slip into deficit unless States substantially scale up their revenue generation,” she told The Hindu. She further pointed out that the wide array of freebies promised — including cash transfers for women, pensions for senior citizens, and subsidised electricity — would increase annual revenue expenditure by ₹10,000-₹12,000 crore. In the long run, this could result in higher taxes and reduced consumption among the middle class.

#### **Does the judiciary have a role?**

In August 2022, the Supreme Court referred a series of petitions challenging the constitutional validity of electoral freebies to a three-judge Bench. The lead petition, filed by BJP leader Ashwini Upadhyay, contended that such populist measures undermine the constitutional guarantee of free and fair elections.

During the proceedings, a Bench led by former Chief Justice of India (CJI) N.V. Ramana even suggested forming an expert panel to solicit recommendations from key stakeholders. This marked a significant departure from the Court's earlier position. In *S. Subramaniam Balaji vs*



Government of Tamil Nadu (2013), the Supreme Court ruled that such matters fell within the domain of legislative policy and were beyond judicial scrutiny. It further underscored that such expenditures could neither be deemed unlawful nor characterised as a “corrupt practice,” particularly since they sought to advance the Directive Principles of State Policy. However, there has been no effective hearing in the challenge since November 23, 2023.

According to senior advocate Sanjay Hedge, there is little that courts can do to distinguish welfare measures from populist sops and pre-election inducements. “It is the legislature’s prerogative to rein in unchecked competitive populism. The judiciary should not intervene in the choices made between voters and their elected representatives,” he said.

## MASS REVENGE

The outcome of the Delhi Assembly elections is less about the expansion of the BJP and more about the dramatic collapse of the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP). The BJP has returned to power after over 26 years, while the AAP, a political force that rose spectacularly in 2013, has been swept away. However, this shift does not signify a sudden change in Delhi’s political landscape. Since 2014, the BJP has maintained significant control over governance through the Lieutenant Governor, municipal corporations, the Union Urban Development Ministry, and the Delhi Police (Union Home Ministry). Additionally, it has won all seven Lok Sabha seats across three general elections. AAP’s rise was rooted in its appeal to Delhi’s middle class, transitioning from an anti-corruption movement into a political entity that initially captivated voters with its fresh rhetoric against the traditional political establishment. However, its governance style soon became synonymous with reckless populism, a cynical approach to politics, and an increasingly coarse political discourse. While it sought to consolidate power through unchecked welfarism, the effectiveness of governance declined, and its credibility began to erode. The final blow came when serious corruption allegations surfaced, culminating in revelations that Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal had spent approximately ₹52.7 crore of public funds to refurbish his official residence. This exposed the contradiction between AAP’s founding ideals and its actions while in power, leaving its integrity in tatters.

For the BJP, this decisive victory presents fresh opportunities. The party can now focus on improving infrastructure, civic amenities, and governance, areas that could help it score quick wins. Its grip on the Hindi heartland is now reinforced as Delhi’s political and economic dynamics are tied with those of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and Haryana. Meanwhile, Mr. Kejriwal’s ambitions of positioning himself as a national alternative to Prime Minister Narendra Modi have suffered a severe setback if not a complete collapse. His strategy of securing Muslim voters as a captive support base has also faltered. More broadly, AAP’s downfall has implications for the non-BJP Opposition. The assumption that the 2024 general election results signalled a fundamental shift against the BJP now appears unfounded. The Opposition parties must reassess their strategies if they hope to challenge the ruling party effectively. The Congress, despite drawing a blank, might be encouraged by AAP’s defeat, but it could also face challenges to its helming of the INDIA bloc as it faces criticism for not helping build a common front against the BJP.

## SHOULD CONVICTED PERSONS CONTEST ELECTIONS?

### The story so far:

The Supreme Court is hearing petitions filed by Ashwin Upadhyay and others, seeking a life time ban on convicted persons from contesting elections.

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



### **What are the legal provisions?**

Section 8(3) of the Representation of the People Act, 1951 (RP Act, 1951), provides for the disqualification of a person convicted of a criminal offence and sentenced to imprisonment for not less than two years. Such a person is disqualified from contesting elections for a further period of six years from the date of release. Section 8(1) further stipulates that a person convicted under criminal laws for heinous crimes like rape; the Protection of Civil Rights (PCR) act for preaching or practice of untouchability; UAPA for unlawful association; Prevention of Corruption Act etc., will be disqualified irrespective of the period of their sentence and six years after release.

### **What were past decisions?**

The Supreme Court has delivered notable judgments in favour of the decriminalisation of politics. In the Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR) case (2002), it mandated the disclosure of criminal records of all candidates contesting elections. In the CEC vs Jan Chaukidar case (2013), it upheld the creative interpretation of the provisions of the RP Act, 1951 by the Patna High Court. One of the qualifications as per the act to contest elections is that a person should be an 'elector.' Section 62(5) stipulates that a person in jail is not eligible to vote in elections. The court interpreted that persons who are under trial prisoners, therefore cease to be 'electors' and hence not qualified to contest elections. However, the Parliament amended the act in 2013 to overturn this judgment allowing under trial prisoners to contest elections. In Lily Thomas (2013), the court struck down section 8(4) of the RP Act, 1951, that allowed a sitting legislator to continue as a member even after being convicted if they filed an appeal, as unconstitutional and against political justice. After this judgment, a sitting legislator is disqualified immediately after the sentencing for a conviction.

It is pertinent to note that Section 11 of the RP Act, 1951 provides that the Election Commission (EC) may remove any disqualification or reduce the period of disqualification of a convicted person. It utilised this power in September 2019, to reduce the disqualification period of Prem Singh Tamang, incumbent Chief Minister of Sikkim, from six years to 13 months which allowed him to contest and win a byelection.

It was a questionable decision of the EC to have reduced the disqualification period of a person convicted under the Prevention of Corruption Act, considering its various recommendations to curb criminalisation of politics.

### **What is the current petition?**

The current petition seeks a life time ban on convicted persons from contesting elections. The petitioners argue that if a convicted person is not eligible for even a junior-grade government job, how could they become law makers six years after serving their sentence. However, the Central government in an affidavit filed before the court in 2020 had mentioned that MPs and MLAs are not bound by any 'service conditions' unlike government servants, and hence the present disqualification period of six years after serving the sentence is adequate.

The Supreme Court has again sought the response of the Central government and the EC on the current petition.

### **What can be the way forward?**

A report by ADR states that 251 (46%) of the 543 elected MPs in 2024, have criminal cases against them, and 171 (31%) face serious criminal charges including rape, murder, attempt to murder



and kidnapping. It added that chances of winning for a candidate with a criminal background was 15.4% as against just 4.4% for a candidate with a clean background. The Law Commission in 1999 and 2014, and the EC on various occasions have highlighted the need to curb the criminalisation of politics. They have recommended that even persons against whom charges are framed by a competent court for an offence that entails punishment of more than five years should not be allowed to contest elections.

However, there has been no consensus on this recommendation amongst political parties considering the risk of its misuse. As regards the current petition, there may be convictions that do not involve moral turpitude for which permanent disqualification would be inappropriate and disproportionate. With respect to convictions for heinous crimes and under statutes like the Prevention of Corruption Act, there may be a case for life time disqualification as it is directly linked with probity in public life.

Meanwhile, the powers vested with the EC for reducing or removing the period of disqualification of a convicted person should be reviewed by the court for its constitutional validity.

#### EXPRESS VIEW ON FURORE AROUND WAQF AMENDMENT BILL: SENSITIVE LEGISLATION MUST NOT BE RUSHED

Even though unresolved issues persisted around the management and governance of waqf properties after the Waqf Act of 1995, the Waqf Amendment Bill (2024) came under a cloud because it was seen to be formulated without consultation with stakeholders, including and especially the All India Muslim Personal Law Board. The decision to refer the Bill to a Joint Committee of Parliament was, therefore, welcome. It was hoped that this would ensure a diversity of voices and inputs. In this context, the furore as the panel's report was tabled on February 13 — the Opposition insisted that its dissenting remarks had been redacted from the report; the Treasury benches issued a strong denial — is unfortunate. It threatens to derail debate on an issue that needs to be discussed seriously and openly in the country's highest deliberative forum.

The Waqf Bill has national significance for at least three reasons. First, Waqf Boards control/own a vast amount of land and property. Second, a large number of waqf properties — private holdings donated for charitable and pious purposes — face encroachment issues and are marked by unclear ownership. Finally, and perhaps most significantly, many of the proposed amendments — such as allowing non-Muslim members on Waqf Boards, making the executive the final arbiter in cases of properties disputed by the government and giving the power to the Centre to order an audit of “any Waqf at any time” — have stoked apprehensions. There are fears that the cultural and religious rights of the Muslim minority may be undermined. The issue is emotive, given that many waqf properties are mosques, madrasas and graveyards.

The way forward is to balance the need for reform with respect for minority rights. Questions of eminent domain over religious, charitable properties cannot be resolved if the process by which the law is passed is opaque. Given the disputes around Muslim places of worship and the sometimes disturbing rhetoric on minority issues from people associated with the ruling party, the fear of unilateral change in the character of religious properties must be addressed.



### Opp protests redaction of dissent, corrigendum restores its noting's

The tabling of the report of the Joint Committee on The Waqf (Amendment) Bill, 2024, led to disruptions and chaos in both Houses of Parliament Thursday with the Opposition alleging that its dissent notes had been deleted, and the government rejecting the charge.

- Amid the ruckus, Union Home Minister Amit Shah, speaking in Lok Sabha, said some members of the Opposition had said that their “disputes” had not been fully included in the report. He said his party had no objection to whatever the Opposition wanted to include if the Speaker felt it appropriate as per Parliamentary procedure.
- In Rajya Sabha, BJP MP Medha Vishram Kulkarni, who had tabled the report in the House in the morning, placed a corrigendum to Appendix 5 of the report in the post-lunch sitting. The chapter is said to contain the notes that were redacted in the report tabled earlier. As she tabled the corrigendum, an Opposition MP said it proved the House had been misled earlier.
- Mallikarjun Kharge, Leader of Opposition in Rajya Sabha, said the dissent remarks had been deleted from the report on the Bill. Calling it condemnable and anti-democratic, Kharge urged Chairman Jagdeep Dhankhar to reject the report and send it back. He said statements of non-stakeholders were not included in the report.

#### Do You Know:

- According to PIB, Waqf refers to properties dedicated exclusively for religious or charitable purposes under Islamic law, and any other use or sale of the property is prohibited. —Waqf means that the ownership of the property is now taken away from the person making Waqf and transferred and detained by Allah. — ‘Waqif’ is a person who creates a waqf for the beneficiary. —As Waqf properties are bestowed upon Allah, in the absence of a physically tangible entity, a ‘mutawalli’ is appointed by the waqif, or by a competent authority, to manage or administer a Waqf. —Once designated as waqf, the ownership is transferred from the person making the waqf (waqif) to Allah, making it irrevocable.
- The Waqf (Amendment) Bill, 2024 changes the composition of the Central Waqf Council and Waqf Boards to include non-Muslim members. —The Survey Commissioner has been replaced by the Collector, granting him powers to conduct surveys of waqf properties. —Government property identified as waqf will cease to be waqf. Collector will determine ownership of such properties. —Finality of the Tribunal’s decisions has been revoked. The Bill provides for direct appeal to the High Court.
- Waqf properties in India are governed by the Waqf Act, 1995. However, India has had a legal regime for the governance of Waqfs since 1913, when the Muslim Waqf Validating Act came into force. The Mussalman Wakf Act, 1923 followed. After Independence, the Central Waqf Act, 1954, was enacted, which was ultimately replaced by the Waqf Act, 1995.

### SANSKRIT INTERPRETATION IN LOK SABHA SPARKS DEBATE

The Lok Sabha on Tuesday witnessed sharp exchanges between Speaker Om Birla and Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam MP Dayanidhi Maran over the inclusion of Sanskrit in the list of languages for which simultaneous interpretation was being made available in the Parliament.





Mr. Maran charged that taxpayers' money was being wasted by providing interpretation in a language that was "not communicable". Noting that it was not the official language of any State, he cited the 2011 population survey to say that Sanskrit was spoken by only 73,000 people.

This prompted Mr. Birla to respond that in "Bharat", the primary language has been Sanskrit. He added that efforts were on to provide interpretation in all 22 official languages, and not Sanskrit alone.

Union Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan also hit back. "Dayanidhi Maran's unwarranted remarks on Sanskrit are not only in bad taste but also reveal DMK's selective outrage, hypocrisy, and propaganda when it comes to India's linguistic heritage."

## WILFUL VIOLATION

The Supreme Court of India's probing questions to the Tamil Nadu Governor, R.N. Ravi, have exposed a pattern of wilful violation of constitutional duty on his part. The questions related to the lawfulness of Mr. Ravi's act in referring to the President of India a set of Bills for which he had earlier "withheld assent", but was constitutionally bound to grant assent after their adoption for a second time by the State Assembly. The Bench was speaking on behalf of everyone when it asked whether Mr. Ravi had referred these Bills to the President only to avoid granting assent, as required by the first proviso to Article 200 of the Constitution. The earlier understanding that the withholding of assent puts an end to the life of a Bill was altered by the Court's judgment in 2023, holding that whenever Governors opt for that course of action, they should return the Bill to the legislature, as required in the proviso; and if passed again by the House, they were bound to grant assent. Faced with queries, the Attorney-General of India (A-G) raised the issue of possible repugnancy with central law. He argued that the Governor had rightly referred these Bills to the President due to an apparent conflict with UGC Regulations, as these Bills seek to change the manner in which university vice-chancellors are appointed. The A-G also maintained that when the Governor had earlier withheld assent, the Bills ceased to exist and the Assembly had presumed that these had been "returned" by the Governor and adopted them a second time. In a related contention, he has also argued that the requirement to return a Bill does not hold good if the issue of repugnancy is noted.

These arguments may appear fascinating in determining the right course of action to be followed by Governors in dealing with Bills, and the Bench, which has reserved its judgment, may come up with answers. However, the fact that the Governor has been using his powers to scuttle legislation is quite obvious. He had not acted on some of these Bills for a year or two or expressed his reservations relating to the repugnancy aspect while withholding assent. Also, he ignored the fact that he was bound to grant assent when the Bills were presented to him a second time, but referred them to the President. Even in a 2023 hearing, the Court had questioned whether a Governor, having chosen to withhold assent, could exercise another option by referring the same Bill to the President. Mr. Ravi appears bent on scuttling any law that does not suit his world view. It is time the Union government took note of the challenge his continuance in office poses to constitutional governance in Tamil Nadu.

## CONCERNS EMERGE AS MAHARASHTRA TAKES EGGS OFF SCHOOL MEALS

The Maharashtra government's recent decision to withdraw ₹50 crore in funding for eggs and millet-based sweet dishes in State-run schools under the Mid Day Meal Scheme has sparked criticism.

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



“Egg pulao and sweet khichdi/naachni satya... are being given in alternative form. The management committee should try to provide the benefits of the two recipes and the sugar required for other recipes through public participation. No additional funds will be provided by the government,” a Government Resolution dated January 28 had stated.

An analysis of data from the State budget for 2024-25 shows that Maharashtra is estimated to spend only 0.04% of its total expenditure of ₹6.12 lakh crore on the Pradhan Mantri Poshan Shakti Nirman Scheme (PM-POSHAN), which provides nutritious food to schoolchildren.

The Maharashtra government’s spending on PM-POSHAN, including Central grants, has been less than 1% of the total expenditure over the last four years. This share has been steadily on the decline.

The National Food Security Act, 2013 mandates a daily protein intake of 12 gm for primary-level students and 20 gm for upper primary-level students. The midday meal scheme was envisioned to bring children to school by providing them lunch, thereby encouraging enrolment while solving the problem of malnourishment. The scheme was later merged with the PM-POSHAN programme, a Centrally-sponsored initiative, in which the Union government bears 60% of the costs and the State government covers the remaining 40%. Nearly 16 States have eggs on the midday meal menu.

#### **Halted after a year**

In Maharashtra, eggs were added to the midday meal menu only in November 2023, nearly two decades after the programme was implemented in the State. Just over a year later, the State decided to discontinue funding for it.

Maharashtra’s decision to cut costs comes amid maintaining a fiscal deficit to Gross State Domestic Product (GSDP) ratio below the 3% legal mandate over the past five years, according to data from PRS Legislative Research. The State government had a fiscal deficit to GSDP ratio of 1.9% in 2022-23, the year eggs were introduced in school meals, which was the lowest in five years.

Anna Adhikar Abhiyan, an NGO working on food and nutrition issues, argued that “financial constraints” cannot justify the decision and it is “ironic” that one of the wealthiest States would cut funding for a critical scheme.

#### **Activists pointed out that even the existing funding is “grossly insufficient”.**

Data from NITI Aayog’s fact sheet on the State’s nutrition situation show that as of 2019, about 35% of children under the age of five are underweight and 36% stunted. These numbers have stayed more or less the same since 2015-16.

For poorer households, purchasing eggs for children can be a significant expense, especially considering the rising trend in food prices. Barring two months, monthly consumer food price inflation has exceeded 8% between November 2023 and December 2024, according to National Statistics Office data.

The Opposition has condemned the decision, with Atul Londhe, spokesperson of the Maharashtra Congress, calling it a clear indication of “financial and mental bankruptcy”.

Aaditya Thackeray, Shiv Sena (UBT) MLA from Worli, echoed this sentiment. “For most students, the midday meal is the only source of nutrition. Once again, this clearly proves that the



government belongs to the greedy politicians elected by EVMs. It doesn't belong to the people, especially the children in schools who have no vote, no voice," he said.

## PEACE IMPERATIVES

In Manipur, with the Bharatiya Janata Party unable to identify a successor to N. Biren Singh for the post of Chief Minister and the Assembly also not having been convened even six months since its last sitting, President's Rule was imposed in the State with the Assembly under suspended animation. Since mid-2023, in any case, a number of central forces have been deployed, with the Union Home Ministry in control over law and order even as the strife that began as an ethnic conflagration in May 2023 has shown no signs of easing. With President's Rule being declared — even if it was for expedient reasons and showcased an inability of the BJP and its allies in government to overcome the ethnic differences within the legislature and in the polity — the Union government now has an opportunity to ease the tensions. It can also work on pressing issues such as the persisting displacement of over 60,000 people. Reports suggest that many among them still experience severe trauma and a loss of livelihoods, which must be tackled by the government with alacrity. President's Rule also allows for the possibility of talks between representatives of the two communities in the conflict, especially those who are committed to peace. The legislators can also play a role in this exercise of reconciliation.

The other major issue is the militarisation of civil society, with the burgeoning of armed groups among the two communities, who have termed themselves as "village volunteers", brandishing arms looted from constabularies. Earlier attempts to retrieve these weapons and bring the looters to face justice have not borne fruit. The militarisation in the new ethnic conflict has also been complicated by the expanded role of insurgents who were fighting the Indian state or were engaged in the Myanmar civil war. It would take a concerted effort by the government, armed forces and civil society actors to identify the "village volunteers", disarm them by using a firm hand and with incentives, and then work on ways to tackle the insurgents. The Biren Singh regime was incapable of doing this because of the perceived bias in leadership and Mr. Singh's tendency to stigmatise the Kuki-Zo community as a whole, leading to complete distrust. Efforts must be taken to distance the government from this coloured legacy and the Home Ministry should work on a war-footing to restore peace. Ideally, Assembly elections would have been necessitated immediately considering the deep ethnic divisions within the legislature and its failures. But, first, it is imperative to extinguish the climate of fear and reprehension from violent groups and restore the rule of law before elections.

## EXPRESS VIEW ON ANTI-MAOIST OPERATION: CHHATTISGARH MUST NOT LOWER ITS GUARD

Since December 2023, when it assumed office in Chhattisgarh, the Vishnu Deo Sai government has mounted a concerted offensive to neutralise Maoist insurgents. According to the state government's records, nearly 280 militants have been killed by security forces, more than 1,000 Maoists have been arrested and 925 insurgents have surrendered. In the latest crackdown on Sunday, the security forces targeted a Maoist stronghold inside the Indravati National Park in Bijapur district. Thirty-one insurgents were reportedly killed in the operations, which made use of police camps in the vicinity of the forest. In the past year, the security forces have used these base camps as launchpads for attacks on Maoist strongholds. These have ended the security vacuum in parts of Bastar and restricted the movement of insurgents in their erstwhile strongholds, including their headquarters in Abujmarh and South Bastar.



The recent operations have been enabled by greater coordination between the security forces from the state and the Centre, including the BSF, CRPF, and ITBP. The fact also is that in the last 15 years or so, left wing extremism has been running out of steam. From being “the greatest internal security threat to our nation” — as the then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh described it in 2009 — Maoism is today restricted to a few pockets in Chhattisgarh and adjoining areas of Maharashtra. The number of Maoist-affected districts has come down from more than 220 in the early 2000s to less than 40, with violence largely being reported from about 20 districts.

The Maoist movement is no longer much of a force in its erstwhile strongholds in Telangana, Andhra Pradesh, Jharkhand, and Bihar. South Chhattisgarh’s geography — a forested area bordering Maharashtra, Odisha and Telangana, with poor transport and communication facilities — and the economic deprivation of the people did allow the insurgents to gain some foothold. However, here too, their constant recourse to violence and failure to recognise the strength of democratic institutions worked against the insurgents. In the last five years, the cadre base of the Maoists has shrunk sharply.

Chhattisgarh has been a late entrant in anti-Maoist operations. In the first decade of this century, the state wasted precious time on civilian militias like the Salwa Judum before course correcting to train its police force and reaching out to people with welfare measures. The state government must not lower its guard. But even as it turns on the heat against insurgents, it must take care to ensure that civilians are not in harm’s way. Failure to take such precautions could mean playing into the hands of the Maoists.

#### FIR IN ASSAM, PROBE IN MUMBAI OVER ALLAHBADIA’S ‘JOKE’; HE ISSUES APOLOGY

Two days after the video clip featuring Allahbadia’s remarks drew considerable flak, the episode of the show, which was shot in November and was premiered last week, was removed from Youtube.

- The comment triggered a row after it went viral on social media on Sunday, following which the Assam Police registered an FIR against five people, including the duo on the panel.
- The Mumbai police also began a probe into the matter, following a written complaint filed by Mumbai lawyers on Monday who claimed obscene comments were made against parents, women, and their body parts.
- Samay Raina’s online show ‘India’s Got Latent,’ known for its dark humour, is at the centre of the controversy where content creators Ashish Chanchlani, Jaspreet Singh, Apoorva Mukhija, along with Youtuber-podcaster Ranveer Allahbadia, were invited as panelists. Notably, the comedy show has provoked uproar on social media earlier on multiple occasions.
- A clip of his joke caused a stir on social media on Sunday, with several prominent figures criticising Allahbadia and the other panelists.
- Moreover, Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma, following the uproar, took to social media to announce that an FIR in the matter had been filed. The FIR in Assam was registered on the basis of a complaint by Alok Boruah from Guwahati. Boruah complained that the remarks caused “serious harm to public decency”.



- The case was filed with the Guwahati Crime Branch under sections of the IT Act and Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act, 1986 as well as section of the BNS pertaining to insulting a woman's modesty and "obscene acts".
- Following two days of heavy backlash, the entire episode of Samay Raina's show was removed from Youtube on Tuesday. Initially exclusive to members only, the episode is now unavailable in India following a government directive.
- The controversial segment was first edited out after Allahbadia had apologized for his remark on social media and also requested the show's makers to take it down. However, YouTube has now removed the entire episode.

**Do You Know:**

- The Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act, 1986 is an Act of the Parliament of India which was enacted to prohibit indecent representation of women through film, web series, advertisement or in publications, writings, paintings, figures or in any other manner. If any OTT platforms presented women as a sex object or showing nudity and obscenity towards women in its shows, then it would be a punishable offence and this may lead to banning of the series or its OTT platform
- The right to freedom of speech and expression is not absolute. Article 19 of the Constitution of India, which guarantees the right also provides for reasonable restrictions on various grounds, including that of decency and morality. This means that free speech has to be balanced against the contemporary community standards of morality when it comes to penalising obscene acts or content.

#### NATIONAL COMMISSION FOR SAFAI KARAMCHARIS GETS 3-YR EXTENSION

The Union Cabinet on Friday approved the extension of the tenure of the National Commission for Safai Karamcharis (NCSK) for a period of three years up to March 2028. The financial implication for the extension would be around Rs 51 crore, a government note said.

- The Commission was set up as a statutory body in 1994 under the National Commission for Safai Karamcharis Act, 1993. After the lapsing of the Act in 2024, the Commission is non-statutory, however, its scope expanded after the enactment of The Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and Their Rehabilitation Act, 2013.
- Its key mandate includes, among other things, recommending to the Centre specific programmes of action towards elimination of inequities in status, facilities and opportunities for safai karamcharis, study and evaluate implementation of programmes and schemes relating to social and economic rehabilitation of safai karamcharis, and scavengers in particular.
- Further, it also has the mandate to investigate the non-implementation programmes and schemes for safai karamcharis, and provisions of any laws in its application to safai karamcharis and take up such matters with the relevant authorities.

**Do You Know:**

- Over the past 15 years, a total of 94 people have died while cleaning sewers in Delhi. However, among the 75 cases for which records are available, only one has led to a conviction in court, as



revealed by an investigation conducted by The Indian Express using data obtained under the Right to Information (RTI) Act.

- Manual scavenging is the practice of removing human excreta by hand from sewers or septic tanks. India banned the practice under the Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act, 2013 (PEMSR). The Act bans the use of any individual for manually cleaning, carrying, disposing of or otherwise handling in any manner, human excreta till its disposal.
- In 2013, the definition of manual scavengers was also broadened to include people employed to clean septic tanks, ditches, or railway tracks. The Act recognizes manual scavenging as a “dehumanizing practice,” and cites a need to “correct the historical injustice and indignity suffered by the manual scavengers.”
- The lack of enforcement of the Act and exploitation of unskilled labourers are the reasons why the practice is still prevalent in India. The Mumbai civic body charges anywhere between Rs 20,000 and Rs 30,000 to clean septic tanks. The unskilled labourers, meanwhile, are much cheaper to hire and contractors illegally employ them at a daily wage of Rs 300-500.

#### SPACE CAMERAS TO PAINT: A SLICE OF ISRO MISSION TECH IN DAILY LIVES

The Indian National Space Promotion and Authorization Centre (IN-SPACe), an independent body under the Department of Space to regulate and promote private space industry in India, has identified at least 166 technologies developed for various ISRO missions that can be shared with industry to be utilised for other purposes.

- While some materials and sensors are already being utilised by space start-ups in their own launch vehicles or satellites, several technologies have been offered to industries like automotive and construction.
- “All these technologies have been developed by ISRO for its own utilisation, whether in launch vehicles or satellites. Now, they can be used in other fields. For example, the camera, software and algorithms used for Chandrayaan-3 landing can be used by the automotive industry to prevent collisions. Or the pressure sensors that are used to keep a check on propellants during a launch can be used to determine when airbags should open,” Rajeev Jyoti, director, technical directorate, IN-SPACe, tells The Indian Express.
- So far, 79 memorandums of understanding — all non-exclusive — have been signed with private companies for transfer of such technology. Since all these agreements are non-exclusive, this technology can be shared with multiple companies, though ISRO continues to hold the intellectual property rights.

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

- Over the years, space exploration has led to the development of technologies that have improved daily lives. Daily-use items like cell phone cameras, air purifiers, memory foam mattresses or reflective blankets used in emergencies all came from research by the United States-based National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) for its own missions.



- While IN-SPACe recently showcased its technologies to the automotive industry, director Jyoti says several other industries, like construction, logistics and electrical, could benefit from their use too.
- One of the technologies on offer is the 3D LiDAR (Light Imaging Detection and Ranging) camera, developed by the Space Application Centre for navigation in space. The camera generates a 3D image with information on the depth of various objects in the frame. The camera provides this information by correlating the light reflected from these objects. This technology could have multiple uses, including detection and counting of people in heavily crowded places like markets, measurement of parcels before they are posted, near-terrain flight assistance for helicopters and hazard or pedestrian detection to avoid collisions.
- In the field of healthcare, body measurements, like waist and hip size, done using the 3D LiDAR camera could be used to predict the risk of lifestyle diseases. This technology may also have an impact in the field of home devices, including gesture recognition in mobile phones, televisions or gaming platforms.
- The space agency will also transfer its technology on developing cost-effective lithium-ion (li-ion) batteries. It will help in greening the transportation systems as li-ion batteries are essential for upcoming sectors like electric vehicles.

#### TIRUPATI LADDU ADULTERATION: CBI ARRESTS 4

The CBI has arrested four people in connection with the Tirupati laddu adulteration case.

- The Telugu Desam Party (TDP) government had claimed last year that Tirupati's Lord Venkateswara Temple's prasadam, which is offered to believers in the form of laddu, was adulterated with animal fat, creating a countrywide uproar. A five-member team, including two officers from the CBI, two from the Andhra Pradesh government and one from the Food Safety Standards Authority of India, has been probing the case.
- Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanam (TTD), which manages the temple, uses 15,000 litres of ghee for the preparation of laddus. AR Foods from Tamil Nadu secured a tender to supply the ghee at Rs 320 per kg. When eight tankers carrying the ghee arrived at TTD, four were sent to labs for testing adulteration.

#### Do You Know:

- Geographical Indications of goods refer to the place of origin of a product. Such tags are accorded as they convey an assurance of quality and distinctiveness, attributable to the fact of its origin in a specific geographical locality, region or country. In India, the Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade, Ministry of Commerce and Industry, awards GIs.
- A GI registration is given to an area, not a trader, but once a product gets the registration, traders dealing in the product can apply to sell it with the GI logo. Authorised traders are each assigned a unique GI number. If any unauthorised trader tries selling the product under that name, they can be prosecuted under The Geographical Indications of Goods (Registration and Protection) Act, 1999.



- A marker of authentic products, the GI tags also help protect the interests of the local growers and artisans by preventing duplicity of the products and sale from unauthorised traders. Consumers, through the tags, can know which goods are certified.

#### MP DAM PROJECT CAN SUBMERGE CRITICAL TIGER CORRIDOR: NTCA

The National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA) warned the construction of the Morand-Ganjal Irrigation Project in Madhya Pradesh would destroy tiger habitats and disrupt ecological connectivity between the Satpura and Melghat Tiger Reserves.

According to NTCA's analysis, based on the National Tiger Estimation 2022, the proposed project site is a vital tiger-occupied habitat. The project, which will involve the construction of dams on the Morand and Ganjal rivers, is expected to submerge forested areas crucial for tiger movement between reserves. The NTCA has cautioned that this could affect "genetic exchange and population stability."

- "Any disruption to this ecological connectivity will likely have long-term detrimental impacts on the viability of tiger populations and the broader wildlife community within this landscape," the NTCA stated. The authority also noted that both the Satpura and Melghat Tiger Reserves are in a recovery phase, with tiger populations increasing due to voluntary village relocations. It warned that losing this corridor could reverse those gains.
- The Environment Ministry's Forest Advisory Committee (FAC) discussed a proposal to divert 2,250.05 hectares of forest land for the project in a meeting on January 27. The project involves building two dams on the Morand and Ganjal rivers to improve irrigation in Hoshangabad, Betul, Harda, and Khandwa districts of the state.

#### Do You Know:

- The Morand-Ganjal Irrigation Project, originally proposed in 1972, received approval from the Madhya Pradesh government in 2017. It aims to provide irrigation facilities to 211 villages across the districts of Hoshangabad, Betul, Harda, and Khandwa, covering over 52,000 hectares of land.
- According to the project proposal, the construction of the dams and related infrastructure will displace 644 families, including 604 tribal families, who rely on the forest for their livelihood. Over seven lakh trees will be affected at full reservoir level, with 5.75 lakh trees marked for felling.
- The region is home to Endangered species such as leopards, wolves, wild dogs, hyenas, and several herbivores. The habitat loss could have severe ecological consequences, the FAC noted.
- It has recommended that a sub-committee conduct a site inspection before making a decision. The sub-committee will include representatives from the environment ministry, NTCA, and soil conservation experts.
- The NTCA's analysis, based on the National Tiger Estimation 2022, shows that the project site is part of a critical tiger-occupied habitat.





## HUMAN-WILDLIFE CONFLICT CLAIMED 460 LIVES IN KERALA IN 5 YEARS, RS TOLD

As Kerala's Wayanad district grapples with the deaths of four people in 48 hours due to elephant attacks, the Union environment ministry has informed the Rajya Sabha that the state recorded 460 deaths and 4,527 injuries due to human-wildlife conflict in the 2020-2024 period.

- Palakkad district, with 101 deaths, had the highest mortality rate in the state due to conflicts with animals, followed by Thrissur with 56, Malappuram with 45 and Wayanad with 26.
- The ministry's written response came in reply to a question from the Indian Union Muslim League's P V Abdul Wahab, who enquired about mortalities and injuries linked to animal attacks in Kerala.
- Kerala recorded 82 such deaths in 2024, 100 each in 2023 and 2022, and 104 and 74 in 2021 and 2020, respectively. In 2024 alone, 926 people were injured in conflicts with animals. Last week, the ministry said that 102 people had died due to elephant attacks in the state.
- The issue of human-wildlife conflict has been raised in the Rajya Sabha by members of Kerala's Opposition Congress as well as the ruling CPM. Both parties are advocating amendments to the Wildlife Protection Act 1972 to prioritise human safety.

### Do You Know:

- The human-wildlife management issue has also been discussed by the National Board for Wildlife, India's premier body on wildlife conservation. In the board's last meeting on December 21, 2024, Kerala's chief wildlife warden and top wildlife officials from other states suggested that a national policy should be developed for managing human-wildlife conflict.
- A 2018 study by Dehradun's Wildlife Institute of India and the Periyar Tiger Conservation Foundation in Kerala, held to form a strategy to reduce human-animal conflict, has found two major drivers of human-animal conflict in the state.
- First is the decline in the quality of forest habitats, largely due to the cultivation of alien plants — mainly acacia, mangium and eucalyptus — in forest tracts for commercial purposes. With 30,000 hectares of forest land in Kerala being used for cultivation of these species, animals are deprived of their natural habitat and food sources. Moreover, these water-guzzling species also strain the forest's natural water resources. Elephants are among the worst-affected species due to this. Invasive species such as lantana, mikania and senna, planted by forest department over decades, have also hindered growth of natural vegetation in forests.
- While the Kerala forest department banned the cultivation of acacia and eucalyptus in forest tracts in 2018, the process of regenerating natural forests, such that animals do not face shortage of food and water, will take time. So far only 1115 hectares of forest could be reconverted into natural habitats through eco-restoration process.

## ASIAN ELEPHANTS CHANGE SCIENTISTS' MINDS ON WHY THEY TRUMPET

Vocal communication plays an outsized role in how social animals survive in the wild.

A loud cry from a baby attracts the attention of a parent. A scream can warn others of a predator lurking nearby.



Humans have developed thousands of languages, spoken and signed, to share information, ideas, and emotions — yet they're not alone among the earth's life forms in communicating in complicated ways and out loud.

Elephants live long lives, up to around 70 years, and in this time their herds often split and merge. To navigate these changes, these giants have developed a complex system of sounds, from low-frequency rumbles and roars to high-frequency squeaks and chirps, to stay in touch with each other.

Most of what we know about elephants' use of sounds to communicate comes from studies of African elephants (genus *Loxodonta*). We don't know much about Asian elephants (genus *Elephas*), the species native to India and other tropical and subtropical forests of Asia.

Understanding the differences in vocal communication between elephant species is nontrivial because African and Asian elephants aren't just distant cousins roaming different lands. They are entirely different species with unique habits, habitats, and adaptations.

#### ELECTRIC ELEPHANT BREAKS COVER

The ancient Kombara Sreekrishna Swami Temple, located near Irinjalakuda in Thrissur district, recently witnessed a rare sight. While the temple was adorned with festive floral decorations and hosted a vibrant Panchari melam (traditional orchestra) with numerous artists, the star attraction, Kombara Kannan, was not a living elephant but a mechanical marvel.

Since 2015, the temple has refrained from using live elephants in its rituals and festivals due to the exorbitant costs and the suffering endured by captive elephants, which are chained and often made to take part in long and tiring processions. Ravi Namboothiri, the temple president, says, "In honour of our decision to never hire or own a live elephant for our temple rituals and festivals, we are absolutely thrilled to accept a mechanical elephant. All of God's creations deserve love and respect."

Standing about three metres tall and weighing 800 kg, Kombara Kannan was gifted to the temple by the People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) and sitarist Anoushka Shankar.

These mechanical elephants, constructed using rubber, fibre, metal, mesh, foam, and steel, are powered by five motors. Powered by electricity, they mimic the natural movements of elephants — shaking their heads, swishing tails, flapping ears, and spraying water. Mounted on wheelbases, they can be easily manoeuvred during processions and rituals via remote control or even manually.

The installation of Kombara Kannan made headlines in Kerala, coinciding with reports of three human deaths caused by live elephants on a single day. Recent court interventions have also intensified scrutiny over the use of elephants in festivals. Animal rights activists have long highlighted the suffering of captive elephants used in festivals. Kerala's elephant-related death statistics are alarming: from 2012 to February 2023, wild elephants killed 202 people, while captive elephants caused 196 deaths between 2011 and 2023.



## ₹500-CRORE FUND GIVES AUTONOMY FOR NATIONAL MISSION ON MANUSCRIPTS

Steps have been initiated to make the National Mission for Manuscripts (NMM) autonomous, with the Centre allocating nearly ₹500 crore over the next six years separately to the institution through a Special Finance Committee.

The NMM was established in February 2003 by the Ministry of Tourism and Culture. A unique project in its programme and mandate, the Mission seeks to unearth and preserve the vast manuscript wealth of India.

From this year, the NMM has been again put under a Central sector scheme. For Central sector schemes, all initiatives are wholly sponsored and implemented by the Central agencies. The NMM was till now functioning as a part of the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA). But for January to March, the funds for the institution were routed through the Sahitya Akademi.

### Budget proposal

The Special Finance Committee has allocated an amount of ₹491.66 crore to the body till 2031.

However, sources said it was not yet clear whether the new 'Gyan Bharatam Mission' for manuscripts, announced in the Union Budget last week, would be a part of the NMM or be a separate entity. According to the Budget document, the Gyan Bharatam Mission intends to cover more than one crore manuscripts.

It would undertake the "survey, documentation and conservation" of India's manuscript heritage lying with academic institutions, museums, libraries, and private collectors, Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman said in her budget speech on February 1.

The Hindu had reported last October that the Union Culture Ministry was set to "revive and relaunch" the NMM, and was mulling the formation of an autonomous body to help preserve ancient texts.

According to the Ministry, the NMM has documented around 5.2 million manuscripts across the country. It has conserved 90 million folios of manuscripts and digitised 3.5 lakh manuscripts that contain 3.5 crore pages.

## HOW THE RAMAYAN TV SHOW HELPED SHAPE A SINGULAR NATIONWIDE HINDU IDENTITY

Ahmed, Resuf, Paul Brimble, Akhila Kovvuri, Alessandro Saia, Dean Yang. 2025. 'Ancient Epics in the Television Age: Mass media, Identity, and the Rise of Hindu Nationalism in India.' National Bureau of Economic Research, Cambridge, MA. Working Paper 33417.

The broadcast of the Ramayan television series happened at a pivotal moment in India's media and cultural history. It aired from January 1987 to July 1988. This was a time when television signal reception was expanding but still limited. So for a substantial mass of the population, their very first exposure to this novel medium was the televised adaptation of the ancient Hindu epic. Combined with a gigantic viewership and the religious dimension, it caused the serial to have an outsized impact on its audiences.



Exploiting this aspect — the “geographical and over-time variation in television signal strength” — to identify “the causal effects of exposure to the Ramayan TV show, the authors of this paper pose the question: “Can exposure to religious narratives through mass media shape cultural identities and, in turn, influence political landscapes?”

There already exists a body of research that says ‘yes’. For instance, it is not a matter of debate that the Ramayan broadcast aided the rise of Hindu nationalism. It did. This study, by “examining the long-term effects of the Ramayan broadcast on cultural, social, and political outcomes,” seeks to bridge the “several interconnected strands” of this literature. Its unique methodology hinges on leveraging variations in TV signal strength across India to track how “exposure” to the Ramayan serial “affected cultural norms, communal relations, and voting behaviour in the years that followed.”

#### **How the show affected cultural behaviour**

The paper offers three key findings. First, areas with “higher Ramayan exposure (higher TV signal strength in 1987) experienced significant changes in cultural practices indicating a strengthening of religious identity.” This study tracked two cultural practices — naming of new-borns, and diet in lower-caste households — and both revealed significant changes. “Hindu parents became more likely to give their newborn sons common Hindu names, and lower-caste households showed increased adherence to orthodox Hindu dietary practices (a substantial increase in vegetarianism).”

Secondly, areas with higher exposure to Ramayan witnessed a “short-term” increase in Hindu-Muslim communal violence through 1992.

And finally, the study found a “long-term” effect (through to 2000) on electoral outcomes, with the Hindu nationalist BJP gaining an increase in its probability of winning assembly elections in areas that had higher Ramayan exposure.

In this context, one question automatically comes up: how do we know if the effects attributed to Ramayan exposure are not also an outcome of the Ram Janmabhoomi movement, which was gaining steam around the same time? The authors isolate the ‘Ramayan effect’ using a control variable “measuring proximity to the travelling mobilisation rallies known as the Ram Rath Yatra (held in 1990)”. By doing so, they found that the “estimated effects of exposure to Ramayan starting in 1987 do not appear to be confounded by exposure to the Ram Rath Yatra, the key event in advancing the Ram Janmabhoomi movement.”

#### **Consolidating a singular identity**

Pointing out that prior to Ramayan’s introduction, there had never been a TV show in India with a religious theme, the paper notes that the Ramayan series “represented a step-function in religious TV content”. To document this quantitatively, the authors “collected data on all 176 television serials broadcast on Indian public networks since 1980”. There were zero religious shows prior to 1987. This was another factor that amplified Ramayan’s unique impact, given that its viewership, too, was “unprecedented in India”, with an estimated 80 million people tuning in to watch each episode.

At its peak, over 100 million viewers were watching Ramayan simultaneously at a time when there were only 30 million television sets in India. This is explained by the phenomenon of “community viewing” wherein people gathered in “large groups around a single television set, often in public



spaces or at homes of neighbours who owned TVs”. As a result, “for the first time, all Hindus across the country saw and at the same time listened to the same thing”. The serial “introduced a congregational imperative into Hinduism” and “provided a unifying narrative that transcended local differences”.

In a way, the mass dissemination of a standardised story of Ram, an avatar of the Hindu god Vishnu, couldn’t have come at a better time for the advocates of Hindutva, as it helped prime a diverse Hindu population brought up on regional and linguistic variations of the epic, for the unitary ideology of the Ram Janmabhoomi movement. Interestingly, as the paper underscores, the political impact of the series was likely unintended by the government. “At the time of the broadcast, the national government was led by the Congress party and not the BJP” and the “primary motivation for airing Ramayan was to increase advertising revenue for the state-owned television network.” In fact, the show’s creator Ramanand Sagar had to contend with much scepticism from officials and lobby extensively to get the show approved for broadcast.

Based on their findings, which revealed a strengthening of Hindu religious identity as indicated by shifts to popular Hindu names for new-borns, switching to vegetarianism, and changes in long-term political preferences, the authors contend that “the content of mass media can have far-reaching consequences beyond mere entertainment, potentially shaping the cultural and political landscape of a nation for years to come.”

This empirical study is an important intervention at a time when the Indian media landscape, especially news television, is marked by the perverse phenomenon of polarising communal rhetoric beamed out to millions on a daily basis. It also opens up avenues for future inquiry.

For instance, given the rising trend of majoritarian propaganda films coming from Bollywood, how does a certain “narrative structure, character portrayal, and symbolic imagery activate particular social identities?” And how does the mode of consumption — viewing such content as a “communal experience” in a cinema hall or multiplex versus individually — affect its impact on beliefs and group identity? Such investigations could illuminate the mechanisms through which sustained media exposure to particular kinds of cultural and religious content shapes personal identity and political alignments.

As the paper concludes, “The story of the Ramayan broadcast serves as a powerful reminder of the responsibility that comes with the power to shape narratives and, by extension, the cultural and political future of a nation.”

## SHORT NEWS

### TRUMP MUST DECIDE IF U.S. JEANS WILL STILL BE MADE IN AFRICA

The factory may be in East Africa, but the Wrangler and Levi’s jeans rolling off the production line are pure Americana, destined for U.S. stores like Walmart and JCPenney.

The United Aryan factory, on the outskirts of Kenya’s capital Nairobi, exists for one reason: the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA), a 25-year-old U.S. law that gives duty-free access to thousands of goods made on the continent, particularly clothes. But AGOA will expire in September unless President Donald Trump agrees to extend it—a decision putting hundreds of thousands of African livelihoods on a knife-edge. One hope, is that Mr. Trump will see AGOA as a way of countering Chinese influence in the continent.



## CORRUPTION PERCEPTIONS INDEX (CPI)

- India, with a score of 38, ranked 96 out of 180 countries on the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) for 2024, according to the Transparency International report.
- The index, which lists countries by their perceived levels of public sector corruption, ranked Denmark at the top, followed by Finland, and Singapore.
- The index uses a scale of 0 to 100, where 0 is highly corrupt and 100 is corruption clean. The rank tells the country's position relative to other countries in the index.
- In 2023, India's overall score was 39 while in 2022, it was 40. There is a decline in the score of India on CPI.
- The report has highlighted that corruption is strongly intertwined with climate change. The funds intended to help those suffering from the consequences of global heating are stolen or misused due to corruption in the system.
- Denmark held on to first place with an unchanged 90 points, followed by Finland with 88 and Singapore with 84. New Zealand dropped from third to fourth, shedding two points to 83. South Sudan slid to the bottom of the index with just eight points, displacing Somalia although the latter country's score dropped to nine.

## BRICS

- Brazil has announced that the next BRICS summit will be held in Rio de Janeiro on 6-7 July.
- The country, which will lead the bloc of developing economies throughout 2025, aims to focus on global governance reform and strengthening cooperation among Global South nations, according to a government statement.
- BRICS stands for Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa, the original five members who were large, non-Western economies in 2009.
- In January this year, Indonesia officially joined the BRICS as a full member taking total membership to 10. Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, and the United Arab Emirates are also part of the bloc. The organisation now represents almost half the world's population and almost one quarter of the world's economy. Saudi Arabia has also been invited to join.

## UNITED KINGDOM-INDIA YOUNG PROFESSIONALS SCHEME (YPS)

- The ballot for this year's United Kingdom-India Young Professionals Scheme (YPS) will open next week. The scheme offers both British and Indian nationals the opportunity to live, study, travel, and work in the other country for up to two years.
- The scheme was launched in February 2023 and provides for UK and Indian nationals aged from 18 to 30 to live, study, travel, and work in another country for up to two years. It is part of the Migration and Mobility Agreement that the two countries signed in 2021, capping the number of young professionals admitted to either country at 3,000 per year.



— YPS is not extendable unless the regular work visas which are valid for five years can be extended. The scheme also does not allow any dependent children to accompany the applicant.

#### GROSS DOMESTIC KNOWLEDGE PRODUCT (GDGP)

— In a revival of an idea that had been shelved in 2021, the government is looking to capture the knowledge economy through GDGP, as a metric to supplement the Gross Domestic Product (GDP).

— GDGP was discussed earlier in 2021 when NITI Aayog made a presentation on the concept note. The National Statistical Commission had pointed out then that the concept note did not provide the methodology for capturing the data and computation of GDGP.

#### SOVEREIGN GREEN BOND

— Like several emerging markets, India also turned to sovereign green bonds to help fund its transition to a low-carbon economy, but investor demand remains weak.

— Green bonds are debt instruments issued by governments, corporations, and multilateral banks to raise funds for projects that reduce emissions or enhance climate resilience.

— Issuers typically offer green bonds at lower yields than conventional bonds, assuring investors that the proceeds will be used exclusively for green investments. The difference in yield — known as the green premium, or greenium — determines the cost advantage of green bonds. A higher greenium allows issuers to raise funds at lower costs, making green investments more attractive.

— Sovereign green bonds (SGrBs) are those that are issued by sovereign entities, like the Government of India, which formulated a framework for issuing such bonds in 2022.

#### UNION GOVT SETS UP COMMITTEE TO TACKLE 'MISLEADING' ADVERTISEMENTS ON PROCESSED FOODS

The Centre has formed a 19-member committee, headed by Union Minister of Food Processing Industries Chirag Paswan, to counter misleading publicity about processed food.

#### AERO INDIA 2025

— The 15th edition of Aero India 2025 was held from February 10th to 14th February at Yelahanka Air base in Bengaluru. It is a biennial event that was first held at Yelahanka Air Force Station, Bengaluru, in 1996. The theme of this year is 'The Runway to a Billion Opportunities'.

#### AROGYAPACHA (TRICHOPUS ZEYLANICUS)

— A member of Kerala's indigenous Kani tribal community, who had been instrumental in unveiling the medicinal properties of Western ghat plant arogyapacha (*trichopus zeylanicus*) to the scientific world, was found dead at a cave in the forest.

— The plant grew in the Western Ghat regions of Thiruvananthapuram and the Kani community had been familiar with the medicinal values of the plant. The discovery of the properties of the plant for the modern scientific world was accidental in 1987.



---

#### TULSI GABBARD

- Tulsi Gabbard has been appointed as the head of the National Intelligence in the US by the Trump administration. She is the first Hindu member of the US House of Representatives.
- Despite frequent assumptions about her Indian heritage, Gabbard is not of Indian origin. Her mother converted to Hinduism and gave all her children Hindu names—her siblings are named Bhakti, Jai, Aryan, and Vrindavan.

---

#### KALLUR BALAN

- Kerala's green man Kallur Balan, an exceptional conservationist who planted around 20 lakh tree saplings over the last 25 years, died in Palakkad.
- Balan alias A V Balakrishnan, a native of Mankara in Palakkad, had devoted his life to biodiversity conservation, which included feeding birds, wild animals and adding greenery to barren hills of Palakkad.
- He embarked on his conservation mission in 2000 and was conferred with the state forest department's vanamitra (friend of the Forest) award in 2011 for his contributions.

---

#### INTERNATIONAL POTATO CENTER (CIP), AGRA

- The decision to set up the CIP-South Asia Regional Centre (CIP-SARC) in Agra was taken last year. However, the UP government has pointed out that despite transferring 10 hectares to the National Horticulture Board for the International Potato Center's (CIP) South Asia Regional Center, no work has begun yet.
- The CIP, headquartered at Lima in Peru, was founded in 1971 as a research-for-development organisation with a focus on potato, sweet potatoes and Andean roots and tubers. The potato crop is native to the Peruvian-Bolivian Andes in South America.
- In 2017, the CIP set up its first Asia centre in China, the world's top potato producer and consumer.
- China is the top potato producer and consumer in the world, followed by India. In India, Uttar Pradesh (15 million tonnes), West Bengal (15 million tonnes), and Bihar (9 million tonnes) were the top three potato producers in 2020-21.
- The proposed CIP-SARC will be the second major international agricultural research institute in India. In 2017, the Agriculture Ministry supported the establishment of a regional centre of the Philippines-based International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) in Varanasi.

---

#### MAZARGUES WAR CEMETERY IN MARSEILLE, FRANCE

- Prime Minister Narendra Modi and France President Emmanuel Macron paid tribute to fallen Indian soldiers at the Mazargues War Cemetery in Marseille on February 12.
- The cemetery commemorates 1,487 soldiers who fell during World War I (1914-18), and 267 from World War II (1939-45), a majority of whom — 998 — were Indians fighting for the British.





## BUSINESS & ECONOMICS

### SWITZERLAND, LIECHTENSTEIN PUSHING FOR BILATERAL INVESTMENT TREATY WITH INDIA

Two of the four-member European Free Trade Association (EFTA) countries—Switzerland and Liechtenstein—are pushing for a bilateral investment treaty (BIT) with India after the regional trade organisation signed a trade agreement with India in March last year, committing to a \$100 billion investment over 15 years.

- Initially, a BIT was not part of the discussion, but two of the EFTA countries, Switzerland and Liechtenstein, are now advocating for a treaty after India unilaterally cancelled its old BITs, two people familiar with the development told The Indian Express. Switzerland is the largest trading partner of India among the countries in the EFTA region.
- The push for a BIT assumes significance amid a tax-related concern involving Switzerland-headquartered Nestlé. In December last year, Switzerland suspended the Most-Favoured-Nation (MFN) clause in the Double Taxation Avoidance Agreement (DTAA) originally signed between India and Switzerland in 1994.
- This decision followed a ruling by the Indian Supreme Court last year, which determined that the DTAA cannot be enforced unless it is notified under the Income Tax Act. As a result, Swiss companies such as Nestlé face higher taxes on dividends

#### Do You Know:

- Notably, India had annulled BITs based on older model texts framed in 1993 after receiving adverse judgments in multibillion-dollar disputes in international courts. To prevent this, the model BIT included the clause “exhaustion of local remedies,” emphasising state rights over investor rights. To be sure, India has now signalled that better protection for foreign investors is on offer for its trade partners as it begins the groundwork to revamp the conservative 2016 model Bilateral Investment Treaty (BIT), which favoured the state over investors in investor-state disputes.
- A revamp of the 2016 model BIT was mentioned in the Union Budget after multiple Western trade partners cited burdensome norms during ongoing treaty negotiations. India is currently in talks with the UK and the European Union for an investment treaty.

### DON'T GO IT ALONE

A recurring demand from a section of Indian farmers is that India should exit the World Trade Organisation (WTO). They believe WTO rules hinder their ability to secure a legal guarantee for a minimum support price (MSP).

- Under the WTO's Agreement on Agriculture (AoA), MSP is categorised as a trade-distorting subsidy. The rationale is that if countries are permitted to provide such subsidies to their farmers, it would give them an unfair advantage in the global market, rendering agricultural products from other countries uncompetitive. As a result, trade-distorting subsidies like MSP are subject to specific limits.



- The AoA has significant imbalances. The external reference price (ERP) — an average price established based on the base years of 1986-88 against which MSP is compared to determine trade-distorting subsidies — has not been revised in decades. Consequently, the gap between the MSP and the fixed ERP has widened dramatically due to inflation.
- India has been negotiating diligently at the WTO to rectify this issue but without success. Exiting the WTO, which can be accomplished by providing a six-month notice under Article XV of the WTO agreement, would legally allow India to set any MSP for as many crops as it wishes.

**Do You Know:**

- It is important to note that the WTO encompasses more than just agricultural trade. It plays a crucial role in international trade law, aiming to create a level playing field for all countries by safeguarding their goods and services against discrimination in export markets.
- If India were to leave the WTO, its exports would lose national treatment (ensuring no discrimination between imported and domestic products) and most-favoured-nation treatment (which ensures no discrimination between trading partners).
- India would then need to negotiate numerous bilateral or free trade agreements (FTAs) — a process that would be complicated, elevate bureaucratic costs, and harm businesses excessively.
- FTAs typically present more stringent terms than those of the WTO, particularly when they involve a developing country negotiating with a developed country.
- Another critical aspect of the WTO is that it provides a relatively sophisticated mechanism for resolving trade disputes.
- The WTO is currently facing a significant crisis, especially with the US turning its back on it. A weakened WTO will enable the US to act unilaterally to confront the economic challenges posed by China. During such a critical time of rising trade protectionism, India should not withdraw but instead work to strengthen the WTO.

#### AI BULLS PIN HOPES ON 'JEVONS PARADOX' AFTER DEEPSEEK ROUT

Artificial intelligence bulls in Europe are dusting off a 160-year-old economic theory to explain why the boom in the sector's stocks may have further to run, despite the emergence of China's cheap AI model DeepSeek.

Tech stocks worldwide plunged on Jan. 27 after the launch of DeepSeek—apparently costing a fraction of rival AI models and requiring less sophisticated chips—raised questions over the West's huge investments in chipmakers and data centres.

At the heart of the selloff was U.S. advanced chipmaker and AI poster-child Nvidia, which lost 17% of its value, or close to \$600 billion, in the largest one-day drop in market capitalisation for any listed company on record.

Since then, tech stocks have rebounded, with European markets hitting new highs, and a 19th century economic theory is suddenly on everyone's lips: the Jevons Paradox.



Named after English economist William Stanley Jevons, it posits that when a resource becomes more efficient to use, demand can increase—rather than decrease—as the price to use the resource drops.

## TRUMP TO IMPOSE 25% TARIFFS ON STEEL, ALUMINIUM IMPORTS

President Donald Trump has said the U.S. will impose 25% tariffs on all steel and aluminium imports, including from Canada and Mexico, as well as other import duties later in the week.

“Any steel coming into the United States is going to have a 25% tariff,” he told presspersons on Sunday on Air Force One as he flew from Florida to New Orleans to attend the Super Bowl. When asked about aluminium, he responded, “aluminium, too” will be subject to the trade penalties.

### Reciprocal tariffs

Mr. Trump also reaffirmed that he would announce “reciprocal tariffs” — “probably Tuesday or Wednesday” — meaning that the U.S. would impose import duties on products in cases in which another country has levied duties on U.S. goods.

“If they are charging us 130% and we’re charging them nothing, it’s not going to stay that way,” he said. Mr. Trump on Sunday did not offer any details about the steel and aluminium duties, or the reciprocal tariffs.

Mr. Trump’s comments are the latest example of his willingness to threaten, and in some cases to impose, import taxes. Tariffs are coming much earlier in his presidency than during his previous four years in the White House, when he prioritised tax cuts and deregulation.

Mr. Trump, a Republican, has alternately said he sees import taxes as tools to force concessions on issues such as immigration but also as a source of revenue to help close the government’s budget deficit.

Mr. Trump said he would also delay the tariffs on the millions of small packages — often from fast-fashion firms such as Temu and Shein — until customs officials can figure out ways to impose them. The small packages have previously been exempt from tariffs.

Mr. Trump’s latest remarks stirred immediate worry from some global trading partners.

### S. Korea in worry

South Korea’s acting President, Choi Sang-mok, called a meeting with the country’s top foreign policy and trade officials on Monday to examine how Mr. Trump’s proposed tariffs on steel and aluminium would affect its industries.

The office of Mr. Choi, who also serves as the country’s Finance Minister, said officials discussed the potential impact and Seoul’s possible responses, but specific details of the meeting were not disclosed.

### Note:

Of the more than 75 countries with which the U.S. maintains trade relations, China accounted for 18% of all of its imported services between 2018 and 2023, which is the highest share, followed by Mexico (14%) and Canada (13%).



The U.S. imported goods worth \$17,000 billion between 2018 and 2023. Of these, electrical machinery and equipment accounted for 15%, vehicles and their parts accounted for 11%, and nuclear machinery and appliances, 9%.

China accounted for the highest share of imported iron or steel, plastics, and clothing (20-30%); furniture (about 40%); and toys (nearly 80%). It also contributed the second highest share in the imports of measuring instruments, organic chemicals, and rubber.

Mexico contributed to the highest share of imported vehicles and measuring instruments. It was also among the top three countries exporting electrical and nuclear machinery, furniture, iron or steel, and rubber to the U.S.

Canada contributed to almost half of the mineral imports to the U.S., as well as high shares of plastic, vehicles, and iron or steel.

## WHAT WILL BE THE IMPACT OF TRUMP'S TRADE WAR?

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

U.S. President Donald Trump has sought to deliver, in the early days of his second term in office, on his most vociferous campaign promise — to slap a range of the U.S.'s trading partners with significant tariffs in a bid to tamp down on undocumented migrant and illicit drug inflows, while presumably incentivising companies to favour creating jobs on U.S. soil. His administration's initial action in the space, to use executive orders to impose a 25% tariff on Canadian and Mexican goods and a 10% tax on energy products from Canada and a wide range of goods from China, roiled stock markets across the world, especially in Asia.

### **What followed the announcement?**

As Beijing vowed to file a lawsuit with the World Trade Organization against the U.S. for “wrongful practice” and Ottawa and Mexico City announced plans for retaliatory tariffs, Mr. Trump appeared to back down from his position. Following discussions with Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum and Canadian officials, Mr. Trump said the White House had agreed to “pause” the tariff action for a month in the wake of Mexico committing 10,000 National Guard troops to man its northern border and a longer-term bilateral deal in the works. Similarly, a 30-day pause on tariff action would be applied to Canada given its Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's commitment to “work together” as his government sought to appoint “a fentanyl czar, list Mexican cartels as terrorist groups and launch a Canada-U.S. Joint Strike Force to combat organised crime, fentanyl and money laundering.”

While the tariffs on Chinese goods are in force, Mr. Trump temporarily exempted small-value packages imported from there after the U.S. postal service was plunged into chaos as it struggled to deal with new regulations.

### **What is the broader context for the tariffs?**

Although in the traditional macroeconomic policy context, tariffs are imposed to rectify trade imbalances due to artificial price barriers, the justification given by the Trump White House for their tariff plan was that it would address the “national emergency” resulting from “the extraordinary threat posed by illegal aliens and drugs, including deadly fentanyl.”



This expansive reasoning for imposing tariffs across the board potentially risks blowback from other nations' inevitable retaliatory tariffs. The resulting trade war could seriously dampen world trade at a precarious time for global economic growth prospects. The irony is that escalating tit-for-tat tariffs will likely exert strong upward pressure on the prices that U.S. consumers pay for imported products, and ignite a broader inflationary trend through higher input prices across industries.

The second cause for concern of the Trump administration's tariff plan is that it tacitly endorses the weaponisation of tariffs as a countermeasure against unrelated inter-country disputes — in this case the inflow of unsanctioned migration and illegal drugs — rather than rely on traditional law enforcement activity to ensure less porous borders.

#### **How have Mexico and Canada responded?**

According to the White House, Mexican drug trafficking organisations have an “intolerable alliance with the government of Mexico”, and that the latter has “afforded safe havens for the cartels to engage in the manufacturing and transportation of dangerous narcotics, which collectively have led to the overdose deaths of hundreds of thousands of American victims.”

The Trump administration has also said that there is a “growing presence of Mexican cartels operating fentanyl and nitazene synthesis labs in Canada,” with a recent study recognising Canada's “heightened domestic production of fentanyl, and its growing footprint within international narcotics distribution.” These facts, according to Mr. Trump's administration, suggest that this is an alliance that endangers the national security of the U.S., requiring the eradication of the influence of these “dangerous cartels.”

Perhaps emboldened by his success in forcing Colombia to accept deportees from the U.S. flown to Bogota via military aircraft, Mr. Trump has used tariffs to bring Mexico and Canada to the negotiating table, even if his proposal violates the terms of the U.S.-Mexico-Canada free trade pact. Mexico has now already deployed most, if not all, of the promised troops to surveil and protect the U.S. border from unauthorised crossings. Reports also suggest that Mexican authorities have seized 20 million doses of fentanyl since Ms. Sheinbaum's term began in October.

Mr. Trudeau initially responded with greater defiance, announcing retaliatory tariffs on \$106 billions' worth of imports from the U.S. However, despite reportedly being told that “Canada could avoid tariffs by becoming the 51st member of the U.S.”, he revived a border security package said to be worth \$900 million, announced last year, and promised to appoint a “fentanyl czar”.

#### **Where does China stand?**

Mr. Trump's 10% tariff levy on Chinese products is relatively modest compared to the 60% tariff rate that he had earlier threatened to hit Beijing with. Nevertheless, China was quick to announce a 15% counter-tariff to be levied upon imports of U.S. coal and liquefied natural gas, crude oil, agricultural machinery and certain cars — measures that are set to kick in on February 10.

In a more expansive counterattack, the Chinese government further opened an antitrust probe into Google, placed several top U.S. fashion and biotech companies on an “unreliable entities” list, and set limits on exports of critical minerals for high-tech products.

Nevertheless, analysts suggest that both sides have refrained from excessive or knee-jerk reactions, even though the 10% U.S. tariff on China adds to pre-existing levies imposed by Mr.



Trump during his first term, and this leaves room for manoeuvre in negotiations that may follow when Mr. Trump meets Chinese President Xi Jinping in the near future.

However, with Mr. Trump promising stringent tariff action against the EU and other “reciprocal” tariffs against all trading partners of the U.S. in the days ahead in his mission to level the playing field, the risk of trade skirmishes derailing global growth prospects remains high.

## SELF-INFLICTED INJURY

Economic estimates from United States President Donald Trump’s first term suggest that the sweeping tariffs his administration imposed on nearly \$400 billion worth of goods hurt the American economy. They also resulted in a net loss in real (inflation-adjusted) Gross Domestic Product (GDP), a decline in annual household income, and job losses in the manufacturing sector. A 2019 discussion paper by the Federal Reserve Board, ‘Disentangling the Effects of the 2018-2019 Tariffs on a Globally Connected U.S. Manufacturing Sector’, found that industries most exposed to tariff increases saw relative reductions in employment. The negative effects of rising input costs and retaliatory tariffs outweighed the benefits of import protection, leading to a net decline in manufacturing jobs, an estimated 0.6% loss, or about 75,000 fewer jobs than would have existed without the tariffs. Similarly, a 2019 report from the Congressional Budget Office (CBO), ‘An Update to the Budget and Economic Outlook: 2019 to 2029’, projected that trade barriers would reduce U.S. economic output. By 2020, the CBO estimated a 0.3% decline in real GDP and a \$580 reduction in average real household income (in 2019 dollars).

The 25% tariff on iron and steel imports by Mr. Trump, in his second term, mirrors a similar policy from March 2018. In his first term, Canada, Mexico and the European Union were initially exempted until June 2018, after which retaliatory tariffs followed until a truce was reached in May 2019 through a revised North American trade agreement. Economists have pointed to these tariffs, which continued to a large extent under the Biden administration, being one of the factors that contributed to high inflation in recent years. In 2023, China dominated global steel production with 1,019 million metric tons per annum (mmtpa), accounting for 54% of global output, followed by India (140.8 mmtpa, 7%) and the U.S. (81.4 mmtpa, 4%). Despite its domestic production, the U.S. relies heavily on imports from Canada, Mexico, and Brazil. Steel is a critical material across industries, including automotive, construction, appliances, and oil and gas. While the American steel industry has welcomed the new tariffs, imports are unlikely to decrease immediately, as a global surplus, driven by China, keeps prices competitive. Even a slight increase in steel prices could ripple across the economy, raising costs for consumers struggling with affordability. If history is any indication, Mr. Trump’s tariffs may be the start of another round of self-inflicted economic damage for an already strained U.S. economy, albeit still the world’s largest.

## WOULD TRUMP BREAK THE CAPITAL CONTROLS TABOO WITH A TOBIN TAX?

Investment barriers have long been taboo among U.S. policymakers, for fear that a mere mention could spook the world’s biggest financial market. But the idea of taxing or frustrating inward investment is now being openly discussed by investors as Donald Trump’s sweeping economic agenda rewrites all the rules.

The macroeconomic worldview that underlies much of the president’s agenda is based on international trade accounts and zero-sum rivalry. If the U.S. is running large and chronic deficits in goods, so the thinking goes, then it must be because trading partners are systematically



undervaluing their currencies against the dollar to uncut American business, suppressing their domestic consumption and, in the process, “stealing” U.S. manufacturing jobs.

These countries then flow the savings created by these huge trade surpluses back into U.S. assets. And that, in turn, pushes the dollar’s value higher, lowers the U.S. cost of capital and enables Americans to consume ever more overseas goods.

Tariffs on imports, Mr. Trump’s economic weapon of choice during his first month back in office, are one way to push back against this perceived global slight against American workers. But there’s an obvious flip-side to this view.

America’s large and rising current account deficit, which captures U.S. net trade flows in goods and services as well as net investment income, has to be matched by an equal and opposite capital account surplus to balance the nation’s books.

These cumulative capital surpluses have been driving the dollar higher for years, juicing American’s stock portfolios and reducing U.S. businesses’ cost of capital.

At last count, the net international investment position (NIIP—or the net overseas holdings of U.S. assets less U.S. ownerships of non-U.S. securities—was a mind-boggling \$23.6 trillion, roughly 80% of annual U.S. GDP.

As Societe Generale’s Kit Juckes wrote last week: “President Trump doesn’t like the size of the U.S. trade deficit, but would he be happy to see the savings that finance that deficit go home?”

#### **Chicken or egg?**

This national accounts approach suffers from the ‘chicken or egg’ syndrome, of course.

It’s not at all clear which comes first—U.S. ‘exceptionalism’ in market scale, growth, innovation and liquidity, which attracts foreign capital, or the flood of capital itself, which results in a chronically overvalued dollar that makes U.S. exports uncompetitive worldwide?

But either way, the Trump team’s current plan for dealing with the issue—taxing imports—is flawed for two key reasons.

First, tariff threats have, thus far, mostly lifted the dollar even more, exaggerating the trade competitiveness problem. The second problem is that import tariffs do little to address the relentless demand for U.S. assets—the other side of this equation.

To deal directly with that, some experts think you might need to “throw sand in wheels” of cross-border flows, a phrase coined by Yale economist and Nobel Laureate James Tobin almost 50 years ago when positing a “Tobin tax” on currency transactions to tame capital flows.

To be sure, Trump officials have not yet started publicly discussing capital controls—or taxes on foreign investment. But economists and investors sympathetic to the administration’s policies are freely batting around the option.

Currency hedge fund manager Stephen Jen at Eurizon SLJ wrote last week that taxing inward investment would be preferable to tariffs if the goal is to raise revenue, as tariffs would never bring in enough revenue to be a true alternative to the income tax.



Mr. Jen suggested that widening the scope of taxation to international capital flows—in effect a ‘Tobin tax’ on currency transactions—could widen the potential ‘external’ revenue base to 50 times that of the trade in goods.

“There are, of course, obstacles and trade-offs in such taxes on capital flows, but in our view, they are no more daunting or negative than those associated with import tariffs.”

Conceivably, a fractional tax could be the sweet spot if the administration is focused primarily on raising revenue. Applying Tobin’s idea of a 0.0005% tax on currency transactions in a global market that turns over \$7.5 trillion every day could raise huge amounts of revenue and likely wouldn’t reduce the transactions or flows.

But is raising revenue really the goal of the Trump administration or is it altering supposedly “unfair” trading relationships? If it’s the latter, then the capital controls would necessarily need to be disruptive to be effective.

And they could be very disruptive indeed. Even the possibility that the U.S. would think about deterring overseas investment could be devastating in an already frothy market. Not only might the dollar fall sharply, but it could take the entire U.S. stock and bond market with it.

So capital controls are an obvious option if Mr. Trump truly seeks to upend the global balance of trade—but they would also be the nuclear option.

#### INDIA’S OIL & GAS COMPANIES LOOK TO INCREASE LNG IMPORTS FROM US

With the new Donald Trump administration in the United States looking to push American energy production and exports, India’s public sector oil and gas companies, including GAIL, Indian Oil Corporation (IOC), and Bharat Petroleum Corporation (BPCL), are in active discussions with American suppliers to import more liquefied natural gas (LNG) from the US.

- Higher LNG purchase may feature in deliberations between India and the US during Modi’s US visit. Discussions between US and Indian companies on potential long-term LNG contracts are also expected to take place on the sidelines of the India Energy Week in Delhi.
- After taking charge last month, Trump lifted the Joe Biden administration’s ban on export permits for new US LNG projects, which could further solidify Washington’s position as the world’s largest LNG exporter.
- According to industry watchers, apart from securing more LNG for India’s growing natural gas consumption, higher energy imports from the US could signal a reduction in New Delhi’s trade surplus with Washington amid Trump’s hard talk and tariff threats. A few other countries have already signalled that they are interested in buying more LNG from the US, evidently in a bid to balance their trade with Washington.
- Currently, GAIL has term contracts for US LNG totalling 5.8 million tonnes per year. The bulk of India’s long-term LNG volumes come from Qatar. LNG prices under the term contracts with Qatar are linked to crude oil prices, while supply contracts for US LNG are usually linked to the Henry Hub prices, a benchmark for LNG prices in the US.





**Do You Know:**

- India is already among the top LNG importers in the world. The government wants the share of natural gas in India's primary energy mix to grow to 15 per cent by 2030 from a little over 6 per cent at present. Given limited domestic production of natural gas, the growth in gas consumption is expected to be driven by higher LNG imports. Over the years, India has been expanding LNG import and regasification capacity to support higher imports of the fuel.
- When cooled to minus 162 degrees Celsius, natural gas becomes a liquid that can be transported by special ships. Non-liquid natural gas, in comparison, has been traditionally transported by pipelines, which are costly and often tie particular sellers and buyers together.
- Liquefaction facilitates trade of gas, and makes the gas market more global, flexible, and accessible. So, while the security situation in Afghanistan and Pakistan makes a pipeline to India from West Asia unfeasible, India imports large quantities of the supercooled fuel gas.

**AS PM MODI LANDS IN U.S., MUSK'S STARLINK STEALS A MARCH INTO BHUTAN**

Even as all eyes are on Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Washington for talks with U.S. President Donald Trump and his key advisors, Elon Musk's Starlink has stolen a march into South Asia by setting up in neighbouring Bhutan first.

The announcement came as the U.S. satellite-based services company Starlink updated its product availability map on February 12, making Bhutan the 121st country in the world to join its footprint.

India has thus far not provided Starlink permission to operate, mainly over security and privacy concerns, as well as pricing issues and concerns from the local telecom and satellite industry.

As PM Modi arrived in Washington for a 24-hour visit, officials said the future of Starlink's plans for India could come up for discussion.

Thus far, telecom officials have said they are reviewing the "security arrangements in place for the ground stations" from which Starlink traffic would flow to users in India, and regulatory processes remain underway.

"While optical fibres would be the primary medium for global connectivity, with geographical interconnection difficulties and Bhutan being landlocked, it is important for us to have alternative channels and technologies for global connectivity. Starlink opens that possibility to be globally connected and we are excited to have the Starlink connection in Bhutan," Bhutan's top tech innovator, Ujjwal Deep Dahal, CEO of Druk Holding and Investments Ltd., the Bhutanese Government's commercial arm told The Hindu in Thimphu.

However, Mr. Dahal, who is also on the board of local telecom major Bhutan Telecom, indicated that it would be necessary to ensure that Bhutan's national communications infrastructure remained sustainable.



## TRUMP'S LATEST TARIFF THREAT BRUISES EURO, AUSTRALIAN AND CANADIAN DOLLARS AMID RISK OF GLOBAL RETALIATION

Fresh threats of tariffs from U.S. President Donald Trump put pressure on the euro and the Australian and Canadian dollars in early Monday trading, though moves were less dramatic than last week's tariff-driven swings.

Mr. Trump said he would announce new 25% tariffs on all steel and aluminium imports into the U.S. later on Monday, as well as reciprocal tariffs on Tuesday or Wednesday that will be applied to all countries and matching the tariff rates levied by each nation.

The latest salvo adds to jitters over a global trade war, with China's retaliatory duties on U.S. goods due to take effect on Monday.

The Canadian dollar was among the biggest fallers among developed market currencies, with the dollar up 0.33% at C\$1.4347. Canada is a major exporter of steel and aluminium to the U.S.

The currency is still well off the C\$1.4792 to the dollar that it touched a week ago in the aftermath of Mr. Trump's plan—since postponed—to impose 25% tariffs on all Canadian goods. That rate was its weakest in over 20 years.

The euro dipped nearly 0.5% at one point in Asia trade, but was last at \$1.03125, 0.14% weaker, and the Australian dollar, likewise pared early losses to last trade down 0.13% at \$0.6269. The euro dropped as low as \$1.0125, a two-year low, last Monday at the height of that day's tariff fears, and the Aussie to a near-five year low of \$0.6086.

## RUPEE FALL: OVERSEAS LOANS TURN DEARER FOR INDIAN COS

The weakening rupee has started impacting Indian corporates that have gone for foreign currency borrowings, compounding concerns at a time when trade wars and economic slowdown are casting a shadow over global growth prospects.

- The five per cent depreciation in the rupee since April 2024 has directly increased the rupee equivalent of debt repayment for companies relying on external commercial borrowings (ECBs) by the same percentage, pinching the corporate sector.
- There could be more trouble in the offing as there are clear indications from the RBI that it may not be averse to the idea of a steady depreciation in the rupee in line with other currencies.
- RBI Governor Sanjay Malhotra last week said the RBI's interventions in the forex market focus on smoothening excessive and disruptive volatility rather than targeting any specific exchange rate level or band.
- When the interest rate differential between the US and India was nearly 5 per cent in 2020, foreign loans were more attractive than rupee borrowing. However, that's not the case now.
- With the U.S. Federal Reserve hiking rates and the dollar appreciating, this advantage has eroded and the foreign loans have started haunting Indian firms which have failed to hedge the risk.
- As the rupee has depreciated by 3.2 per cent in the last three months, a company which has borrowed Rs 2,000 crore overseas – mostly unhedged – will see the slide squeezing them hard of



late. If the loan of this company is five years old, the depreciation burden will shoot up by over 22 per cent in addition to the interest of 6.6-7 per cent per annum.

**Do You Know:**

- The depreciation of the Indian rupee has a dual impact on the economy, presenting both advantages and disadvantages. On the downside, a weaker rupee increases the cost of imports, particularly crude oil, leading to higher production costs and inflationary pressures.
- Foreign Institutional Investors (FII) have been on a selling spree in Indian markets since October 2024. Net sales of \$11 billion by FIIs in the third quarter of FY25 have exerted additional pressure on the Indian rupee. Furthermore, the widening trade deficit, which has reached \$188 billion in the current fiscal year to date and is expected to increase by 18 per cent over FY24, has also contributed to the downward pressure on the currency.
- The rupee has depreciated by 3.6 per cent over the past 10 months.
- In response, the Reserve Bank has adopted a more measured approach to intervention, selling foreign exchange reserves at an average of \$3.3 billion over the past seven weeks.

## IS PRIVATE INVESTMENT EXPECTED TO RISE?

**The story so far:**

With the government providing a tax stimulus through income tax breaks to boost consumer spending and the RBI cutting interest rates for the first time in nearly five years, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman on Saturday said she was quite optimistic of the tide turning on private investments in the months to come. Addressing the media, she said, “anecdotal evidence suggests a pick-up in investment activity.” Ms. Sitharaman said that she had heard from different sources that orders for Fast Moving Consumer Goods (FMCG) for the period April to June were already getting booked, and that “industry is clearly seeing the signs of a possible recovery of consumption.”

**Why was there a concern?**

Private investment in India, which has been on a downward trajectory for more than a decade, showed further signs of weakening in the latest quarter. Private investment plans dropped by 1.4% in the December 2024-2025 quarter even though investments overall increased by 9.9% due to a significant rise in public investments by the Centre and State governments, which grew by 11.8% and 34.6%, respectively.

Private investment matters because it helps build physical, human, and other forms of capital that ultimately help increase the amount of goods and services produced in an economy. It should also be noted that private investment is generally considered to be more efficient than public investment, which is undertaken by the government. This is because private investors are subject to the discipline of profits and losses in the marketplace, which ensures that capital is allocated towards the most urgent needs of consumers. Public investments are not subject to the same degree of market discipline. But notably, public investment is viewed as a major reason behind the high growth numbers reported by India in recent years.



### What determines private investment?

It is generally believed that money deposited as savings in banks by ordinary citizens is loaned out to fund large-scale investments. But in reality, private investment depends not on savings levels in the economy but on the pace at which loans are created by the banking system. This is because banks can create loans electronically through simple accounting entries that deposit money in borrowers' accounts even without savings to back these loans. So, there is a strong positive relationship between bank credit growth and the level of private investment, with healthy bank credit growth driving private sector investment higher. In fact, bank credit growth averaged about 22% between 2005 and 2014 when economic growth was high, before dropping precipitously to just around 9% between 2014 and 2021 when the economy began to slow down.

### Why has private investment been sluggish?

Many economists have blamed the lack of sufficient consumer demand for the lack of strong private investment in the country. They argue that unless the government does something to increase the amount of money that consumers have in their hands to spend, investors would be unwilling to take the risk of investing in business projects. Given this backdrop, making incomes up to ₹12 lakh tax-free is seen as an attempt to put more money in the hands of individuals to boost consumer spending and spur private investment. However, over the decades, there has been an inverse or negative relationship between private investment and consumer spending.

Private final consumption expenditure stood at a high of 90% of GDP way back in 1950-51, from where it dropped gradually over the decades to hit a low of 54.7% of GDP in 2010-11. At the same time, private investment as a percentage of GDP rose from around 10% in the decades between independence and economic liberalisation to around 27% in 2007-08. Interestingly, from around the time when private investment hit a peak in 2011-12, private consumer spending has actually risen, not fallen. In other words, over the last decade or so, consumer spending has actually risen at the same time that private investment has dropped from its peak. This suggests that the negative relationship between private investment and consumer spending could simply be due to the fact that the money in an economy that is not invested is spent on consumption, and vice-versa. Given this, policy uncertainty and unfriendly government policies are cited as the major reasons behind the slowdown in private investment. Many analysts have pointed to the drop in the pace of economic reforms as discouraging private investors from undertaking long-term capital-intensive investment projects.

## ELIMINATING ELITISM IN MENTAL HEALTH

The Ministry of Labour and Employment, in its year-end review report for 2024, stated that all States and Union Territories are expected to complete the process of harmonisation and pre-publication of draft rules for the new Labour Codes by March 31, 2025. This provides an efficient window for the government to consider the incorporation of provisions that create a liability-based framework to ensure the mental health of workers, especially those in the blue-collar category.

In 2024, for the first time, mental health was acknowledged as an 'impactful driver' for individual and national development in the Economic Survey. The Survey also noted that, 10.6% of adults in India suffered from mental disorders, with the treatment gap ranging between 70% and 92% depending on the specific condition (National Mental Health Survey 2015-16). The World Health Organization, in its fact sheet on mental health at work, outlined several risks, including excessive



workloads or rapid work pace, long unsocial and inflexible hours, unsafe or poor physical working conditions, job insecurity, inadequate pay, and conflicting home/work demands. These risks primarily impact blue-collar workers due to their demanding jobs, unsafe work environments, and a lack of adequate legislative and policy protections. The time has come for the government to address the challenge of increasing elitism in the field of mental health and the well-being of workers, highlighting the significant disparity between blue-collar and white-collar employees concerning legislative and policy frameworks.

### Challenges

First, in the Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions Code (OSHWC), 2020, the concept of occupational safety is limited to physical safety in the course of employment. This implicitly excludes mental well-being and safety norms of a preventive nature. For instance, Section 6(1)(d) uses the phrase 'as far as reasonably practicable' while creating a mandate for the employer to provide a working environment that is safe and without any health risks. Defining the ambit of this phrase is left to the Central government, which will notify it from time to time. Moreover, its conjoint reading with Sections 23 and 24 of the OSHWC provides a narrow connotation of 'health,' confining it to physical well-being and excluding mental health.

Second, as per the definition of 'employment injury' under Section 2(28) of the Code on Social Security (CSC), 2020, read with the third schedule, the employee can claim compensation under Section 74 of the CSC only if personal injury is caused by an 'accident or an occupational disease arising out of and in the course of employment'. The third schedule nowhere enlists diseases arising out of mental strain attributed to the course of employment. Moreover, it tends to create a legislative mandate upon the victim to establish a direct link between the injury and the occupation before the adjudicating authority. In contrast, the Bombay High Court in *Laxmibai Atmaram v. Chairman and Trustees, Bombay Port Trust (1953)* expanded the scope of 'occupational injury,' observing that even if the employment is merely a contributory cause or an accelerating mechanism, the disease-employment combination shall be deemed to be established.

Third, some major companies are making substantial efforts to enhance the well-being, work-life balance, and mental health of their white-collar employees. The HALE (Health Assistance and Lifestyle Enrichment) Program by Infosys, Wipro's 'Mitra' initiative, and the Employee Assistance Program by Tata Consultancy Services are some examples. In contrast, the Central government's praiseworthy Tele Manas initiative bridges the gap between its callers and mental health professionals, but its functionality requires beneficiaries to voluntarily make the distress call to the helpline number. The lack of awareness about such initiatives among blue-collar workers, coupled with their inherent hesitation to take any such step, dilutes the objective of these initiatives.

### The way forward

To realise the goal of 'Satyamev Jayate to Shramev Jayate,' as the Prime Minister envisioned in 2014, mental health of blue-collar workers ought to be given due precedence. First, a rights and duty-based legislative framework that balances the employer's right to get the job done with the concomitant duty to provide a safe and healthy work environment ensuring both the physical and mental well-being of workers would be a progressive step. Second, the list of 'occupational diseases' under the third schedule of the CSC calls for a legislative attempt to provide holistic coverage of diseases arising from mental strain attributed to employment and working conditions, thereby leaving less room for judicial interpretation on a case-by-case basis. Third, the upcoming



Labour Codes have the opportunity to create a tripartite relationship between employers, blue-collar workers, and mental health specialists. Fourth, amidst multiple statements made recently by reputed CEOs regarding 70 to 90-hour workweeks, emphasising quantity over quality and well-being, the government must take steps towards forging a sustainable work environment for blue-collar workers. Fifth, creating awareness regarding governmental initiatives such as Tele Manas must be statutorily imposed on employers. Lastly, blue-collar workers also need to be acknowledged as stakeholders in the mental health discourse before this becomes a case of lost opportunity.

## WHAT'S NEW IN I-T BILL, 2025

The Income-tax Bill, 2025, which was introduced in Lok Sabha on Thursday, intends to simplify India's six-decade-old structure of direct taxation by streamlining provisions, removing obsolete references, and creating a crisper and simpler legal framework.

- In FAQs released on Thursday, the Income Tax Department said the Bill is straightforward, clear, and easier to understand, with more than 57 tables compared to 18 in The Income-tax Act, 1961. Details that are of direct interest to taxpayers, including deductions, TDS/ TCS rates, and exemptions have been provided in tabular form.
- It is shorter — all provisos (about 1,200) and explanations (about 900) have been removed, the word count almost halved to 2.60 lakh from 5.12 lakh, and all redundant provisions, including those for capital gains, deductions, and dispute resolution that have seen amendments over the years, omitted.
- There is no major change in the direct taxation structure, ensuring continuity and stability. The Bill differs from the existing Act in one significant way: while it specifies deductions for rent paid, life and health insurance premia, contribution to provident fund, and home loan among others, it does not provide a table for the tax rates for the old tax regime. Tax slabs in the new tax regime are provided in tabular format.

### Do You Know:

- The Bill is 622 pages long, about 24% shorter than the 823-page Income-tax Act (updated until 2024). There is a focus on simpler language.
- There are 23 chapters, fewer than half the 47 chapters in The Income-tax Act. There are 16 schedules, two more than in the Act.
- The Bill introduces the concept of “tax year”, which has been defined as the 12-month period beginning April 1.
- In case of a business or a newly-set-up profession, the tax year will begin from the date it was set up, and will end with the said financial year. Income tax will be levied on the basis of the economic activity and income earned in a tax year.
- At present, income tax has the concept of “assessment year” (AY), which assesses tax on income earned in the “previous (financial) year”. For instance, income earned in the financial year (FY) 2024-25 (April 1, 2024 to March 31, 2025) is assessed in AY 2025-26 (beginning April 1, 2025).
- Prior to 1989, the concepts of “previous year” and “assessment year” were there because taxpayers could have different 12-month previous years for each source of income.

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



From April 1, 1989, the previous year was aligned to the FY in all cases. However, AY continued to be used for various proceedings under the Act. Thus, a taxpayer had to track two different periods, the previous year and the AY, the FAQs say.

### BIFURCATING ONE OF THE HIGHEST REVENUE-GENERATING ZONES OF RAILWAYS: WHAT WILL CHANGE?

Around a month after Prime Minister Narendra Modi laid the foundation stone of the headquarters of South Coast Railway in Visakhapatnam, Andhra Pradesh, the Union Cabinet Friday gave the ex-post facto approval for the plan to create South Coast Railway Zone.

- The new railway zone has been created as per Andhra Reorganization Act. It will be the 18th zone of the Indian Railways, whose jurisdiction has been carved out from parts of the East Coast Railway and South Central Railway zones.
- The Cabinet also divided Waltair Railway Division, which was till now in East Coast Railway, into two parts and renamed it as Visakhapatnam Railway Division under new South Coast Railway, citing that Waltair was a colonial name.
- The other part of the Waltair division will be converted into a new division with headquarters at Rayagada under East Coast Railway. The Waltair division is among the highest revenue-generating areas of the Indian Railways.

#### Do You Know:

- As per item 8 of Schedule 13 (Infrastructure) of the Andhra Pradesh Reorganization Act, 2014, Indian Railways was required to examine establishing a new railway zone in the successor State of Andhra Pradesh.
- It was announced on February 27, 2019 that the central government has decided to create a new railway division, which will be one of the strategic hubs for operations in Andhra Pradesh. The decision was taken to improve operational efficiency and provide focused service to the growing passenger and freight demands in the region.
- Now around six years later, it is being implemented with some modifications of a cabinet decision dated 28.02.2019. The jurisdiction of South Coast Railway will cover a significant portion of Andhra Pradesh, including parts of Telangana and Tamil Nadu. Its key divisions include Vijayawada Division (from South Central Railway), Guntur Division (from South Central Railway) and parts of Waltair Division (from East Coast Railway) i.e Visakhapatnam.
- Waltair division is among the highest revenue-generating areas of the Indian Railways, primarily because of its freight traffic, which is linked to the mining and steel industries. These lines run through the mineral-rich regions of Odisha and Chhattisgarh.
- According to the data released by the Ministry of Railways, East Coast Railway (ECoR) surpassed all records of Indian Railways in Freight Loading in the Financial Year 2023-24. From April 1, 2023 to March 25, 2024, ECoR loaded 250 million tons of freight, surpassing the earlier record of highest Freight Loading of 2022-23 fiscal.



## UP, MAHARASHTRA & BENGAL LEAD RLYS PUSH FOR STATION MAKEOVERS

An ambitious plan to turn railway stations across the country into city centres has got an impetus in the recent Union Budget, with the Centre setting aside over Rs 12,000 crore towards it in the financial year 2025-26.

- Of the 1,337 stations identified for a makeover, Uttar Pradesh has the most (157), officials told The Indian Express, followed by Maharashtra (132), West Bengal (101), Bihar (98), Gujarat (87), Rajasthan (85), Madhya Pradesh (80), Tamil Nadu (77), Andhra Pradesh (73), Karnataka (61), Odisha (59), Jharkhand (57) and Assam (50).
- Work is finished on six – Madhya Pradesh’s Rani Kamalapati Station, Gujarat’s Gandhinagar Capital Station, Karnataka’s Sir M Visvesvaraya Terminal Station, Uttar Pradesh’s Ayodhya Dham Railway Station, the first phase of Gomti Nagar Railway Station in Uttar Pradesh, and the second entry of Odisha’s Cuttack Railway Station.
- Apart from air-conditioning and modern amenities, the intent is to give each station a local touch. For instance, the three-storeyed Ayodhya Dham Junction Railway Station — renamed after it was redeveloped at a cost of more than Rs 240 crore and inaugurated in 2021— boasts of a temple-like façade, depictions from the Ramayana and other motifs in the halls and railway platforms.

### Do You Know:

- The Indian Railways spent Rs 8,000 crore on the project in FY 2023-24 and allocated Rs 12,993 crore in FY 2024-25.
- Estimated to cost the government Rs 1 lakh crore, the project envisions airport-like facilities such as executive lounges and business centres, food plazas and retail shops, and free WiFi, peppered with local art and culture, to come up at these select railway stations.
- According to officials, most stations are being redeveloped through the Engineering, Procurement, and Construction (EPC) model, under which a contractor handles a project from start to finish. However, 20 projects — such as Pune, Delhi junction, Vijayawada, and Chennai Central — are being implemented in a Public Private Partnership Mode, an arrangement between government and private entities for public assets or services.
- The scheme was designed after taking “learnings from earlier schemes that could not achieve its objective”, a senior official from the Railways Ministry said.





## LIFE & SCIENCE

### REGION ON THE MOON WHERE INDIA'S CHANDRAYAAN-3 LANDED IS 3.7 BILLION YEARS OLD: ISRO STUDY

A study by scientists of the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) has estimated the age of the region where the Chandrayaan-3 landed on the moon is located to be 3.7 billion years — an age that coincides with the period when primitive microbial life first emerged on Earth.

- A team of scientists from Isro's Physical Research Laboratory (PRL), Ahmedabad, has performed morphological and topographic analysis within the Chandrayaan-3 landing site, now known as the Shiv Shakti point.
- On August 23, 2023, India became the first country to successfully achieve a soft landing on the moon's south pole. With the help of data generated by the Pragyan rover housed inside the Vikram lander onboard Chandrayaan-3, Indian scientists have been uncovering new interpretations and insights into the moon's evolution.
- PRL scientists deployed high-end imaging techniques, such as the Lunar Reconnaissance Orbiter wide-angle camera and terrain camera, to gather crater and rock distribution data from the lunar surface near Shiv Shakti. They noted that the Pragyan rover encountered several rock fragments (over 1 cm in size) at the landing site.
- The chains of secondary craters and crater ejecta rays were used to infer the potential source of materials within the landing area. Numerous craters with three distinct terrain types were studied: high-relief rugged terrain, high-relief smooth plains, and low-relief smooth plains.
- The latest study, published in the *Advances in Space Research*, described the regional geography around the Shiv Shakti point. The Chandrayaan-3 landing site is enclosed between multiple large-impact craters: Manzinus (diameter about 96 km, age about 3.9 billion years) to the north, Boguslawsky (diameter about 95 km, age about 4 billion years) to the southeast, and Schomberger (diameter about 86 km, age about 3.7 billion years) to the south.
- Further interpretations by the PRL scientists now suggest that these large impact craters would have spewed massive ejecta in the area surrounding the landing site. Previous geological mapping had revealed significant influence of Schomberger crater secondary cratering on the terrain, about 35 km south of the landing site.

#### Do You Know:

- The Moon is believed to have formed as a result of a collision between a massive asteroid and Earth approximately 4.2 to 4.3 billion years ago.
- The Moon is believed to have been composed of magma during its early life. As it cooled over millions of years, heavier silicon and magnesium-rich minerals such as Olivine and Pyroxene sunk and created the Moon's interior layers. The outer layer was made up of lighter minerals containing calcium and sodium compounds.
- The Chandrayaan-3 mission was India's third lunar mission and second attempt to make a soft landing on the surface of the Moon. It was launched by Launch Vehicle Mark-III (LVM3).



- The propulsion module carried the lander and rover configuration to a 100 km lunar orbit. The propulsion module had a Spectro-polarimetry of Habitable Planet Earth (SHAPE) payload to study the spectral and Polarimetric measurements of Earth from the lunar orbit.
- Objectives of the Chandrayaan-3 Mission: According to ISRO, the mission's three objectives were:
  - i. to demonstrate a safe and soft landing on the lunar surface,
  - ii. to demonstrate a Rover roving on the Moon and
  - iii. to conduct in-situ scientific experiments.
- The success of the Chandrayaan-3 mission is of great significance to India, as it established India's reputation as a serious player in planetary exploration. It consolidated India's position as a space power.
- Compared to other countries, India has a comparatively low-budget aero-space programme. But the efficiency and cost-effectiveness with which ISRO carries out its projects have helped in building a formidable brand name for the space agency. Chandrayaan-3 was accomplished at a cost of Rs 615 crore (a fraction of the cost of an Airbus).

## EINSTEIN RING

The European Space Agency's (ESA) Euclid space telescope has discovered a rare ring of light, known as an Einstein ring, around a galaxy nearly 590 million light-years away from Earth.

- Photos, which were taken by Euclid in September 2023 but released on Monday, of the Einstein ring show a bright ball of light in the centre with a bright, cloudy ring around it. The ring was discovered around NGC 6505, a galaxy that was first found in the 19th Century.

- These rings help scientists investigate dark matter, which has never been detected but is believed to make up 85% of the total matter in the universe.

- Conor O'Riordan, a postdoctoral scholar at the Max Planck Institute for Astrophysics (Germany), told CNN, "This dark matter does not interact with light, but it does have a gravitational effect... Gravitational lensing therefore is sensitive to the presence of this dark matter, allowing us to indirectly detect it."

- Moreover, Einstein rings enable scientists to learn about distant galaxies, which otherwise might not be visible. They can also provide information about the expansion of the universe as the space between the Earth and other galaxies — both in the foreground and the background — is stretching, according to NASA.

### Do You Know:

- An Einstein ring is a ring of light around a form of dark matter, galaxy or cluster of galaxies. It is essentially an example of gravitational lensing. Gravitational lensing is a phenomenon which occurs when a massive celestial body — such as a galaxy or cluster of galaxies — creates a gravitational field which distorts and amplifies the light from distant galaxies that are behind it but in the same line of sight, according to a report on the website of National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA). The body causing the light to curve is called a gravitational lens.



- In the case of the recently discovered Einstein ring, NGC 6505 was the gravitational lens. The nearer galaxy distorted and amplified the light coming from a distant unnamed galaxy, located 4.42 billion light-years away. A light-year is the distance light travels in one year, which is 9.46 trillion kilometres.

#### EARTH'S INNER CORE MAY HAVE CHANGED SHAPE: WHAT NEW STUDY SAYS

THE INNER core of the Earth may have noticeably changed shape over the past few decades, according to a new study. The change in shape could have happened at the inner core's outer boundary, the analysis said.

- The study, 'Annual-scale variability in both the rotation rate and near surface of Earth's inner core', was published in the journal Nature Geoscience on Monday.
- John Vidale, a professor of earth sciences at the University of Southern California and co-author of the study, told The New York Times, "The most likely thing is the outer core is kind of tugging on the inner core and making it move a little bit."
- Geophysicists have previously reported that the inner core does not spin at exactly the same rate as the rest of the Earth. They also showed that the pace of rotation changes — the inner core appeared to be spinning slightly faster than the outer layers a couple of decades ago, and now it is spinning slightly slower.

#### Do You Know:

- Scientists study the inner core as it helps generate the Earth's protective magnetic field and is even linked to the length of days. The inner core is the deepest of Earth's geological layers. The crust — the layer where humans live — is just a few kilometres thick. Below that is the mantle, which is soft enough in places to flow up and down and generate the forces that push the continents around. Between the mantle and the inner core is the liquid outer core.
- Scientists observe the Earth's insides with the help of the vibrations generated by earthquakes. The speed and the direction of the seismic vibrations change depending on the density and the elasticity of the rocks.

#### NEW ZEALAND VOICES 'CONCERN' AS COOK ISLANDS SEEKS PARTNERSHIP WITH CHINA

New Zealand's Foreign Minister voiced "significant concern" on Sunday as close Pacific partner the Cook Islands prepared to sign a cooperation deal with China.

Cook Islands Prime Minister Mark Brown will make a state visit next week to Beijing, where he is expected to sign a "joint action plan" for a "comprehensive strategic partnership" with China.

The visit comes at a sensitive time as China vies for diplomatic, economic and military influence in the strategically important Pacific, challenging the historic regional sway of the United States, New Zealand and Australia.

#### 'Kept in the dark'

A spokesman for New Zealand Foreign Minister Winston Peters said Mr. Brown had kept the New Zealand government in the dark.



“We therefore view the Cook Islands as having failed to properly consult New Zealand with respect to any agreements it plans to sign this coming week in China,” the spokesman said in a statement.

#### **Lack of consultation**

“This lack of consultation is a matter of significant concern to the New Zealand government,” the statement read.

Cook Islands is a small, self-governing Pacific nation that has a “free association” pact with New Zealand. Wellington provides budgetary support and help on foreign affairs and defence to the former dependent territory, whose 17,000 people have New Zealand citizenship.

New Zealand has said that it should be consulted on international agreements that have significant strategic and security implications.

Seeing the proposed deal would allow New Zealand to “verify” whether it “presents risk to our core national interest”, Mr. Peters’ spokesman said.

Mr. Brown defended the visit on Thursday, saying it was aimed at expanding economic opportunities “while ensuring our sovereignty and national interests remain at the forefront”.

### WHY IS HAWAII IDEAL FOR RAINBOWS?

#### **Q: Where is the ‘rainbow capital’ of the world?**

Hawaii’s regular sunshine, short rain showers, and clean air come together to create some of the planet’s best conditions for viewing rainbows. They’re such a frequent sight that a University of Hawaii professor calls the state the “rainbow capital of the world.”

Rainbows form when raindrops refract sunlight into a spectrum of colours. The brighter the sun, the clearer the rainbow. Look for them when it is both sunny and raining at the same time. They will appear opposite the sun. They will seem larger and higher in the sky in the early morning and late afternoon, when the sun is lower on the horizon.

Steven Businger, professor of atmospheric sciences at the University of Hawaii at Manoa, says the archipelago’s trade winds bring many small showers with enough blue sky between them for the sun to shine through.

Hawaii’s clean air also helps. Other places tend to have more air particles from dust, pollen, and cars. Conditions improve further during the rainy season from October to April.

When Kimberly Carlson was a professor at Manoa, she saw a rainbow outside her apartment window that made her wonder how climate change would affect them. Now a New York University environmental studies professor, she’s studied the impact over the next century.

Her team’s analysis, published in a paper two years ago, predicts Brazil, the Mediterranean and parts of Central Africa will have fewer rainbows by 2100. They found places that currently get lots of snow but that will instead receive more rain will likely see more rainbows.



## IS GLOBAL WARMING ACCELERATING?

The world warmed to yet another monthly heat record in January, despite an abnormally chilly US, a cooling La Nina, and predictions of a slightly less hot 2025, according to the European climate service Copernicus.

The surprising January heat record coincides with a new study by a climate science heavyweight, former top NASA scientist James Hansen, and others arguing that global warming is accelerating. It's a claim that's dividing the research community.

January 2025 globally was 0.09 degrees C warmer than January 2024, the previous hottest January, and was 1.75 C warmer than it was before industrial times, Copernicus calculated. It was the 18th month of the last 19 that the world hit or passed 1.5 C above pre-industrial times. Scientists won't regard the limit as breached until global temperatures stay above it for 20 years.

By far the biggest driver of record heat is greenhouse gas buildup from the burning of coal, oil, and natural gas, but the natural contributions to temperature change have not been acting as expected, said Samantha Burgess, strategic lead for climate for the European weather agency.

The big natural factor in global temperatures is usually the natural cycle of changes in the equatorial Pacific Ocean waters. When the central Pacific is especially warm, it's an El Nino and global temperatures tend to spike. Last year was a substantial El Nino, though it ended last June, and the year was the hottest on record.

El Nino's cooler flip side, a La Nina, tends to dampen the effects of global warming, making record temperatures less likely. A La Nina started in January after brewing for months. Just last month, climate scientists were predicting that 2025 wouldn't be as hot as 2024 or 2023, with the La Nina a major reason.

But Hansen, the former NASA scientist now at Columbia University, said 2025 could break 2024's records. In a study in the journal *Environment: Science and Policy for Sustainable Development*, Hansen and colleagues said the last 15 years have warmed at about twice the rate of the previous 40 years.

"I'm confident that this higher rate will continue for at least several years," Hansen said in an interview.

There's been a noticeable temperature rise even when taking out El Nino variations and expected climate change since 2020, Hansen said. He noted recent shipping regulations that have resulted in reduced sulphur pollution, which reflects some sunlight away from the earth and effectively reduces warming. And that will continue, he said.

University of Michigan environment dean Jonathan Overpeck, who wasn't part of the Hansen study. "There seems little doubt that global warming and the impacts of climate change are accelerating."

But Princeton's Gabe Vecchi and University of Pennsylvania's Michael Mann said they disagree. Vecchi said there's not enough data to show that this isn't random chance. Mann said that temperature increases are still within what climate models forecast.



## XPRESS VIEW ON GLOBAL CLIMATE RISK INDEX: IT'S NOT ALL GLOOM AND DOOM

Last month, the World Economic Forum's Global Risks Report ranked extreme weather events as the second-most difficult security threat after armed conflicts and war. Now, one of the world's longest-running climate impact indexes has quantified the toll taken by the crisis in the past three decades. More than 9,400 extreme weather events were recorded between 1993 and 2022, notes the latest edition of the Global Climate Risk Index (CRI). It reckons that floods, heatwaves, and cyclones claimed more than 7,65,000 lives in this period. The survey, conducted regularly since 2006 by the international think tank German Watch, estimates that the economic losses due to these extreme weather events amounted to more than \$4 trillion (inflation-adjusted). The report's findings are sobering for India — one in 10 climate casualties between 1993 and 2022 was from the country. It was the sixth worst-affected country in this period.

"There are clear indications that the world is entering an unpredictable phase of climate change," says the report. The delayed onset of La Nina and its inability to cool global temperatures is the latest example of this phenomenon. Last month was the warmest January globally with the world recording an average surface temperature of 13.23 degrees Celsius, 1.75 degrees Celsius above the pre-industrial levels. While all parts of the world are vulnerable to weather vagaries, the report sounds a note of warning to policymakers in the hotter regions of the world, "where heatwave impacts are felt most acutely." Climate change makes "early heat in India and Pakistan 30 times more likely," the CRI points out. It lists the Subcontinental neighbours amongst the top nine heatwave-prone countries.

The picture painted in the CRI is, however, not uniformly grim. It makes a special mention of climate adaptation projects such as Ahmedabad's Heat Action Plan. However, the report underlines the inadequacy of global efforts in building climate resilience. In addition to the well-known deficits in finance, it speaks of inadequate technology transfers from the North to the South. For long, the issue of climate adaptation has been left to UNFCCC-anchored negotiations. Building safeguards against floods, droughts, cyclones and heatwaves also requires engagement at other fora — at the G-20, or between neighbouring countries, for instance. The intensification of the climate crisis makes such cooperation imperative.

## EXPRESS VIEW ON MISSED PARIS PACT DEADLINE: A CLIMATE LETDOWN

The most important part of the Paris Climate Pact is that every country must renew its pledge, or the Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC), every five years. All stocktakes have shown that the last set of NDCs were inadequate to meet the treaty's target of keeping global temperature rise to 1.5 degrees above pre-industrial levels. Last year, a UNFCCC study showed that the combined NDCs would bring down temperatures only by 2.6 degrees by 2030. Countries were slated to submit their new pledges by February 10. However, only 12 countries have adhered to this deadline. Most G20 countries have missed out — the UK, Brazil, Japan and the US are among the notable exceptions. However, the US's document is largely academic given that President Donald Trump has withdrawn his country from the Paris Pact.

The sluggish response from more than 90 per cent of the signatories of the Paris Pact reflects a lack of political will to tackle the climate crisis. Countries should now use the extra time to draft responses that reflect substantially elevated ambitions compared to their first NDCs. More importantly, the NDCs should have detailed road maps of how the Paris Pact signatories plan to translate their words into action. These should not be a replica of the Net Zero plans of the



Western world. A frequent — and valid — criticism of some of these plans is that they are short on details on ways to reduce emission. Critics have also pointed out that the overwhelming reliance on carbon credits — companies can “buy” such credits by funding projects that theoretically offset their emissions — will undermine direct action to reduce emissions. A large number of Net Zero plans rely on technologies such as carbon capture and storage, whose efficacy has been called into question by scientific agencies such as the IPCC.

A new reckoning of the global warming challenge will have to factor in the disruption caused by the US President. Given the impetus in the US behind green technologies, the country’s emissions trajectory may not change for some time. However, the absence of the world’s second highest polluter from climate negotiation will require other countries to do more. The question is will they have the resolve to do so, keeping the imperatives of climate justice in mind, especially since the tariff barriers erected by the US President have added to the global economic uncertainties? The record-breaking temperatures of January are a warning that the window is closing fast.

### WILL THE BABY BE A BOY OR A GIRL? SRY GENE CLAIMS TO HAVE THE ANSWER

Will the baby be a girl or a boy? What decides the outcome? These might well be among the earliest questions asked by our ancestors. We can now offer a fairly comprehensive two-line answer. The SRY gene, located on the Y chromosome, triggers development along the male pathway. In its absence, development proceeds along the default female pathway.

Exceptional instances of females possessing the SRY gene have been reported three times in the medical literature. Two were in 2024 itself: one from researchers at the Renato Dulbecco University Hospital in Italy, in the journal *Genes*, and the other from researchers at the Cincinnati Children’s Hospital Medical Center, USA, in *Molecular Genetics and Genomic Medicine*.

These exceptions further strengthen the SRY gene’s claim to the primary role in male development.

#### The SRY gene

All eggs are alike but all sperm are not. All eggs contain one copy of each of our chromosomes (numbered 1-22) plus one copy of the sex chromosome (called X). Sperm cells also contain one copy each of chromosomes 1-22. But only half of them contain the X chromosome: the other half contain the other sex chromosome, Y.

The fusion of a sperm cell and an egg cell produces the zygote cell, from which the baby develops. Thus, the baby has two copies of chromosomes 1-22, plus either two Xs (XX) or an X and a Y (XY). Those with the Y chromosome develop into males. Those with two X chromosomes develop into females.

After a baby grows to become an adult, depending on their sex it will be their turn to make eggs/sperm. Only one chromosome of each of the 23 pairs is transmitted to the eggs and sperm. Again, the eggs and sperm contain one copy each of chromosomes 1-22. All eggs contain an X, while half of the sperm contain the X and the other half the Y.

The Y chromosome, which leads to the development of maleness, contains the SRY gene. An XY embryo that receives an SRY gene rendered non-functional by a mutation develops ovaries, which produce the female hormone oestrogen and lead to the development of other female sexual characteristics.



### **SRY in an XX individual**

Very rarely, a mutation can occur that transfers the SRY gene from the Y chromosome to the X. These mutations are called translocations. When a sperm bearing a translocation X chromosome fertilises an egg, an XX baby is born with the SRY gene.

In most cases, XX individuals with the SRY gene develop testes and become biological males. The testes produce the male hormone testosterone and initiate the development of other male sexual characteristics. However, they don't produce mature sperm because other Y chromosomal genes required for sperm formation are absent. Since these males are sterile, the translocation is not transmitted to future generations.

Consider, however, the exceptional XX biological females found to possess the SRY gene. The Italy group identified four healthy biological females in three generations of a family, all with the SRY gene. Their discovery has shown it's possible for an SRY-bearing translocation X chromosome to be passed through generations via fertile females. The individuals bearing the translocation showed no evidence of any abnormalities.

The researchers from the Cincinnati hospital reported the discovery of a different SRY-bearing X translocation in an otherwise typical female foetus. The foetus went on to develop into a healthy female baby. But after the baby's birth, the family didn't accede to follow-up studies.

What is it about these two translocation chromosomes that led to the development of healthy females instead of infertile males?

The answer seemed to lie in a detail both groups spotted: both translocations occurred in parallel to the loss of a small portion of the X chromosome, which did away with one or more genes required for viability. The translocations that produced infertile males didn't have these deletions.

### **Random v. biased inactivation**

During female development in mammals, one of the two X chromosomes is inactivated in all the body's cells. This makes the effective 'dosage' of X chromosome genes the same in XY males and XX females. The X chromosome's inactivation also promotes female development by lowering the levels of maleness genes located on the X chromosome.

In some cells, the inactivated X chromosome is the one inherited from the father, and in other cells it is the one received from the mother. Thus, female mammals effectively have two types of cells: those that express the paternally- or the maternally-derived X.

In the exceptional SRY-positive females, however, the translocation X chromosome that had become inactivated. Had the inactivated chromosome been the non-translocation X, the cell wouldn't have survived because essential genes missing from the translocation X wouldn't be expressed. The 'biased' X inactivation resulted in silencing the SRY gene, allowing for typical female development.

That only a silenced SRY gene can persist in a biological female's genome underscores its significance in triggering male development.

The Cincinnati researchers expressed their concern that low-level expression of the translocated SRY gene in later life could lead to disorders in sex development. Surveilling this possibility would





require long-term follow-up through puberty. Unfortunately, the family wasn't available for postnatal follow-up studies.

The two studies highlight the importance of examining translocation chromosomes for associated deletions that selectively inactivates the X chromosome. The genome sequences of thousands of biological females are now available. Knowing how many of them carry cryptic SRY-bearing translocations could in future help genetic counsellors make more informed personal and medical decisions.

#### FOETUS IN FETU: A TWIN MYSTERY

In January 2025, doctors at the Buldhana District Women's Hospital in Maharashtra detected a rare case of "foetus in fetu" in a pregnant woman. This condition occurs when a malformed foetus develops inside another foetus. The rare congenital anomaly was detected during a regular sonographic assessment of a 32-year-old pregnant woman.

'Foetus in fetu' is a foetus-like mass that develops within the body of the other foetus in a monozygotic twin pregnancy. Basically, one twin is very underdeveloped and enwrapped inside the body of the other twin, so much so that the pregnancy is considered a singleton pregnancy. The presence of a twin inside the body of the other twin may go undetected for years. In this case, the condition was discovered during a routine pregnancy scan itself. The woman delivered the baby by a C-section. Doctors performed a surgery on the newborn to remove the undeveloped foetus wrapped in the infant's body. Both the mother and baby recovered well. Also known as cryptodidymus, this is a rare congenital disorder that affects about one in 500,000 births. Less than 200 cases have been reported worldwide, with about 10 to 15 cases in India.

The exact cause is not fully understood, but it's believed to result from an anomaly during the development of monozygotic or identical twins. About 10 to 15 days after conception of monozygotic twins, the cell mass of the embryo may be split unevenly, due to which one twin is smaller and incompletely formed with the other twin fully developed. The smaller twin gets trapped within the larger twin. The trapped twin is considered "parasitic," it draws its blood supply and nutrients from the other "host" twin. The trapped or "parasitic twin" has some morphologic features of a normal foetus such as an umbilical cord-like structure, a bag of membranes surrounding it, and blood vessel connections to the host twin. It may have a vertebral column, limbs, and a few organs but lacks vital organs like the brain, heart, or gut. Despite having "living tissue," the parasitic twin has no prospects of independent existence outside the host twin.

The presence of the parasitic twin affects the health of the host twin, who has to "feed" the former from the nutrients received over a single umbilical cord. In addition, enlargement of the trapped parasitic twin may compress vital organs in the host.

Generally, the parasitic twin is found in the abdomen. Rarely, it may be found in other places like the brain or chest. Most of the cases reported have presented in childhood as abdominal mass causing gut obstruction and swelling. X-rays and CT scans have confirmed the presence of foetal structures like digits, limbs, spine, etc. Treatment is surgical excision of the mass — parasitic twin — with special attention being given to the foetus' blood supply.

Foetus in fetu is considered a mystery of twinning for a number of reasons: the exact mechanism of how one twin becomes enclosed within the other is not fully understood. This needs greater insight into early embryologic processes. While some cases show well-defined body structures,



others may only present as a mass with poorly developed organs, making diagnosis challenging. The age of presentation is variable, with some cases diagnosed only when the host twin is 40.

## CROSS-BLOOD TRANSPLANT PERFORMED ON A PATIENT WITH BOMBAY BLOOD

It was in his blood that the 30-year-old male should create history. Literally.

In mid-2024, the patient underwent a kidney transplant. Though he was relatively young for a transplant, that's not where he stands unique. He had the extremely rare Bombay blood group, which prevented him from receiving organs or even blood transfusions from anyone who didn't have the same blood group running through their veins.

But then that's exactly what he did: his mother donated her kidney, though she did not have the Bombay blood group. Doctors at MIOT International in Chennai, who had performed cross-blood transplants for close to two decades, were willing to cross the Rubicon into a sector with no precedence whatsoever: no one had attempted a cross-blood match on a Bombay group patient ever before.

### A sheer miracle

In a recent paper published in the peer-reviewed journal *Kidney International Reports*, the team that worked on the transplant — Rajan Ravichandran, Yashwanth Raj T., and Kanakaraj Arumugam — chronicled for posterity how a team of doctors in Chennai pulled off what not long ago might have been put down as a sheer miracle. "It was impossible for Bombay blood group patients to receive blood or organs from another blood group, until it was not," senior nephrologist Dr. Ravichandran explained.

The story he believes begins nearly two decades ago, when he was trained in Japan to perform cross-blood transplants, referring to the transplantation performed when donors and recipients have different blood types. In 2010, he and his team at MIOT Hospitals used a kidney from a donor with B blood group on a recipient with O blood group, successfully. Using a special procedure called double filtration plasmapheresis (DFPP) developed by the Japanese, the team had the patient discharged in a week and back at his software job in three months' time.

"The most essential requirement in transplantation is a blood group match — ideally, the patient's own blood group, or in the event it is not available, any group for which his blood does not carry antibodies," Dr. Ravichandran explained.

Antibodies are used by the body to detect and neutralise foreign bodies, while antigens are proteins or carbohydrates found on the surface of red blood cells, white blood cells, and platelets, and they determine blood type.

### The Bombay blood group

The Bombay, a.k.a. HH, blood group is a rare blood group first discovered in Mumbai in 1952 by Y.M. Bhende. The key differences between the Bombay blood group and the common ABO blood groups lie in the presence (or absence) of the H antigen, which is the fundamental building block for the ABO blood group system.

In normal individuals, the H antigen serves as the base structure for building A and B antigens. In Bombay blood group individuals, the gene responsible for producing the H antigen is mutated or absent, so neither A nor B antigens can be formed.



Therefore, these people cannot receive blood transfusions from any ABO group, including type O, which has the H antigen. They can only receive blood from another Bombay blood group donor. Its prevalence is about 0.0004% (one in 4 million) of the total human population. While it drops to one in a million in the European population and one in 10,000 in Mumbai, the act of finding a donor is still daunting.

### **Clinical challenges**

It was daunting for this index patient as well. The issue was not to find a donor for a kidney; his mother was eager to donate hers; the nub was that his body would reject it outright because they had differing blood groups. “We decided that it was time to use the principles of cross-blood matching that we use for the ABO type here as well. We assumed it was a similar situation and decided to use the Japanese technique of DFPP,” Dr. Ravichandran said.

“Once you identify the Bombay blood group, you know he has anti-H antibodies. Firstly, we measure anti-A and anti-B antibodies in the blood as we do in the case of ABO cross-blood matches. Here, additionally, you have to measure the levels for anti-H antibodies too, and titrate the levels. The next step is to give a monoclonal antibody injection to the patient to deplete B cells that produce antibodies,” he said.

As the authors detailed in the paper, the clinical challenges in such a scenario, even among those with rich cross-blood transplant experience in ABO, include determining a safe anti-H antibody titre cut-off, sufficient enough to stop the body from rejecting the organ from the donor.

Notably, there is no precedence for this, so one had to, again, assume a safe level of antibody concentration. There is a high risk of hyper-acute rejection as anti-H antibodies are more potent than anti-A or anti-B antibodies.

“After determining the titre (levels) of antibodies, we started plasmapheresis, which again removes the antibodies in the blood, lowering the chances of rejection. This was combined with immunosuppressive IVIG [intravenous immunoglobulin] to further suppress antibodies, thereby preventing hyperacute rejection of the organ.”

### **A new hope**

At what was assumed to be a safe, no-rejection antibody titre, the transplant surgery was performed. The team scoured the State for units of Bombay blood group units, just in case the patient might need it during transplant surgery, since cross-blood transfusion is not possible. However, he did not need it. The surgery was a breeze, and there were no complications during or after surgery, the team said.

While there is no published literature regarding accommodation of anti-H antibodies by the graft, as it had not been tested before, in this patient the doctors seemed to have achieved a no-rejection antibody titre status, and there was no rejection. The first two weeks, which are also crucial to decide if the organ will be rejected, also passed without incident, the doctors said.

Six months later, the patient is well and able to resume his pre-transplant activities, grateful at how the impossible became possible for him — and hopefully, for others in the Bombay blood group as well, if they are ever to require a transplant.



## CHALLENGES OF MALARIA VACCINATION, AS ELIMINATION BECOMES ACHIEVABLE

The WHO's recent declaration of Georgia as the 45th country to eliminate malaria is a significant milestone. Yet, even as we celebrate this achievement, a lingering question remains: if smallpox has been eradicated, why does malaria persist, and why is its vaccine far less effective than those for viral diseases? Despite decades of global efforts, malaria still causes over 240 million cases and more than 600,000 deaths annually.

The discovery of malaria's transmission was a fragmented journey, like a non-linear movie where different revelations come together to complete the puzzle at the end. Malaria was believed to be caused by miasma or foul air from swamps. This misconception persisted until Alphonse Laveran, a military doctor, identified the Plasmodium parasite in 1880, proving malaria was caused by a living organism. However, the question of how the parasite entered humans remained unanswered. In 1891, Patrick Manson hypothesised that mosquitoes played a role in transmission, though he lacked experimental proof.

Giovanni Grassi later confirmed that only female Anopheles mosquitoes carried the parasite, but the full cycle was still unclear. The final breakthrough came in 1897 when Ronald Ross in India demonstrated that Plasmodium completed its life cycle in mosquitoes, proving they were malaria's vectors. This scientific triumph had far-reaching consequences, allowing European colonial powers to survive in tropical Africa, where malaria had previously limited their expansion. In 1870, only 10% of Africa was under European control, but by 1914, nearly 90% of the continent had been colonised. Ironically, instead of liberating the populations most affected by malaria, the discovery of its transmission pathway paved the way for their subjugation, reinforcing colonial rule rather than dismantling it. Progress in science does not always translate to moral or equitable outcomes.

### Understanding parasites

Knowing the parasite's life cycle is essential to understand the difficulty in developing vaccines. The cycle begins when an infected Anopheles mosquito bites a human, injecting Plasmodium sporozoites that are highly infective, into the bloodstream. These parasites first travel to the liver, invading liver cells and multiplying undetected by the immune system. After this phase, they re-enter the bloodstream, infecting red blood cells and causing malaria's characteristic fever and chills. As the parasite multiplies asexually within RBCs, some develop into sexual forms known as gametocytes, which are then taken up by another mosquito when it bites an infected individual. Inside the mosquito, these gametocytes undergo sexual reproduction, maturing into sporozoites that migrate to the mosquito's salivary glands, making the mosquito infectious to new human hosts.

Viruses are simpler in comparison, consisting of only genetic material (DNA or RNA) encased in a protein shell, and are relatively straightforward compared to parasites. Plasmodium is a protozoan parasite and eukaryotic organism with multiple stages of development, each featuring different surface antigens. Plasmodium species that infect humans — *P. falciparum*, *P. vivax*, *P. ovale*, *P. malariae*, and *P. knowlesi* have unique characteristics, adding to the challenge of vaccine development.

The malaria parasite masters deception, outmanoeuvring the human immune system. Its greatest strength is antigenic variation, where it frequently changes its surface proteins, making it difficult for immune cells to recognise it and respond. Plasmodium follows an intracellular lifestyle, hiding



within the liver and RBCs, shielding itself from immune surveillance. This ability to evade detection weakens the body's ability to develop long-lasting immunity, making reinfection common. Adding to the challenge, malaria's life cycle spans multiple stages across two hosts—humans and mosquitoes—requiring any potential vaccine to target several phases simultaneously. So when a vaccine is developed, the parasite's genetic adaptability enables it to evolve resistance. Fighting malaria is like trying to corner a cunning politician who changes allegiance and ideology, senses the public sentiment, and always stays ahead of the game to remain in power. Plasmodium has been perfecting this trick for 30 million years, adapting and evolving to ensure its survival. When scientists find a way to combat one strain, the parasite shifts tactics, altering its proteins and genetic structure to bypass immunity. The adaptability makes it difficult to develop a universal and long-lasting vaccine.

### **Malaria vaccines**

The RTS, S malaria vaccine became the first to receive WHO approval for large-scale rollout in endemic regions after 60 years of research. It targets the liver stage of the parasite's life cycle by inducing an immune response against the circum-sporozoite protein (CSP) found on Plasmodium sporozoites. This stage infects the liver after a mosquito bite. However, its efficacy is limited, reducing malaria cases by approximately 36% after four doses over four years in children. It is significantly lower than the 90-95% efficacy in vaccines for diseases like measles. Protection is also inconsistent, varying across age groups and transmission settings, and its effectiveness declines over time. RTS, S requires multiple doses, posing logistical challenges ensuring widespread distribution and coverage in resource-limited regions.

Researchers are now developing second-generation malaria vaccines. One promising candidate is the R21/Matrix-M vaccine, which enhances the immune response with a stronger adjuvant and has shown 77% efficacy over 12 months. The PfSPZ vaccine, a whole-parasite vaccine, attenuates sporozoites to stimulate immunity against the liver stage of infection. RH5-based vaccines prevent Plasmodium from invading red blood cells and target the blood stage after symptoms. Meanwhile, transmission-blocking vaccines aim to halt the spread of malaria by preventing mosquitoes from becoming carriers, targeting proteins like Pfs25 and Pfs230, essential for parasite development within the mosquito.

### **Research underfunded**

Malaria vaccine research has long suffered from underfunding. Since malaria primarily affects low-income countries in Africa and parts of South Asia, funding for research and healthcare infrastructure has remained limited. The availability of treatments for malaria has reduced the immediate urgency for vaccine development. Compounding this, the complexity of the parasite itself has discouraged pharmaceutical companies from investing in malaria vaccines, as the cost of research is high, and potential returns on investment remain uncertain. Countries are now facing a resurgence of the disease due to shifting mosquito habitats. An effective malaria control strategy will require a combination of more efficient vaccines, mosquito control & improved treatment options. The road to a malaria-free world is long, but it is an achievable goal.

## **DOCTORS FLAG GUT CONCERNS OVER WEIGHT LOSS DRUGS**

In July last year, a 32-year-old businessman from Agra visited a hospital in Ahmedabad complaining of nausea and severe loss of appetite, saying he could even smell the food he had



consumed a day before. Doctors advised the patient, weighing 105 kg, an endoscopy and found his gastrointestinal (GI) tract clogged with undigested food from 48 hours before.

The craze for weight loss began with Ozempic, a diabetes drug by Novo Nordisk, whose active ingredient, semaglutide, was FDA-approved in 2017. Soon, doctors started prescribing it off-label for obesity as it reduces appetite, calorie intake, thereby supporting weight loss.

- As celebrities and influencers flaunted their dramatic transformations, the frenzy intensified with Eli Lilly's Zepbound, FDA-approved for weight loss in November 2023. This came after the success of its diabetes drug, Mounjaro.

- "However, these drugs can become life-threatening if not used in consultation with an endocrinologist as everybody needs a different dosage and protocol," says Dr Parag Shah of the Gujarat Endocrine Centre, who has been seeing many such cases.

- Tirzepatide, found in Mounjaro and Zepbound, mimics both GIP and GLP-1 hormones to activate insulin production. Semaglutide, found in Ozempic and Wegovy, mimics only GLP-1. Notably, the oral semaglutide Rybelsus is approved only for diabetes in India but is used off-label for weight loss.

**Do You Know:**

- "Stomach paralysis, medically known as gastroparesis, is a condition where the stomach muscles are weakened or unable to function properly, leading to delayed emptying of food into the small intestine," said Dr Prakruti Shah, associate consultant, department of gastroenterology, Paras Hospital, Gurugram.

- It disrupts the normal digestive process and can result in symptoms including nausea, vomiting, bloating, early satiety, and abdominal discomfort, said Dr Avinash B, HOD and consultant, department of medical gastroenterology, Ramaiah Memorial Hospital.

- Gastroparesis can occur for several reasons. According to Dr Shah, one of the most common causes is damage to the vagus nerve, which controls food movement through the digestive tract. "This damage is often seen in individuals with diabetes, particularly if blood sugar levels have been poorly managed over time. Other potential causes include viral infections, certain medications that affect digestive muscle function, such as opioids or antidepressants, and underlying neurological conditions like Parkinson's disease or multiple sclerosis. In some cases, however, the cause may be idiopathic, meaning no specific reason can be identified," said Dr Shah.