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INTERNATIONAL

WHY US PRESIDENT CAN'T SERVE BEYOND 2 TERMS: TRADITION THAT BECAME LAW

A week after returning to the White House, President Donald Trump floated the idea that the two-term limit for American Presidents could be negotiable. The development came while Trump spoke to House Republicans during their annual retreat in Florida.

- The 22nd Amendment to the US Constitution, which was ratified in 1951, says that no one can be elected more than twice as President. It was enacted after President Franklin D Roosevelt had been elected four consecutive times, from 1932 to 1944.
- Setting term limits on a President was a hotly debated subject among the framers of the US Constitution. Most of them did not favour a term limit as they wanted the country to have flexibility during an emergency, according to a report by NPR.
- However, this did not settle the debate about the issue. Just 14 years after the Constitution came into effect, the first proposal to limit presidential tenure was introduced in Congress in 1803. The resolution was rejected in a vote. Then, “in 1824 and again in 1826, the Senate approved resolutions calling for a two-term limit, but they died in the House,” Stephen W Stathis, an analyst in American history, wrote in his paper, “The Twenty-Second Amendment: A Practical Remedy or Partisan Maneuver?” (1990).
- While Congress was mulling over the subject of term limits, a tradition was established which would last more than a century-and-a-half. “In 1796, President George Washington’s refusal to run for a third term “received such official sanction that it became an almost unwritten law, virtually as sacred as any provision of the Constitution.”” Subsequently, Thomas Jefferson, who served as President between 1801 and 1809, also refused to run for a third term. This further promoted the two-term tradition.
- It only came under threat in 1872 after the reelection of Ulysses S Grant to a second term. Grant’s allies and some newspapers began to push the idea of his candidacy for a third term. This became a topic of discussion, especially during the 1894 midterm elections. “Grant did not comment on his intentions, which — combined with a lagging economy, white resistance to Reconstruction in the South and ethics scandals — led to Republicans losing a whopping 94 seats that year,” the NPR report said. As a result, Grant subsequently announced that he would not accept a nomination “if it were tendered”.
- In 1875, the House of Representatives passed a resolution which sought to promote the two-term tradition. It said that breaking the tradition would be “unwise, unpatriotic, and fraught with peril to our free institutions.” However, the resolution did not legally bar a president from trying to get reelected for a third term. Notably, Grant attempted to run for President again in 1880 but failed.

Do You Know:

- The 22nd Amendment—According to the amendment, “No person shall be elected to the office of the President more than twice”. Moreover, if a Vice President becomes President during the term of their predecessor, they can still serve two full terms as long as they serve less than half of their predecessor’s remaining term.



—For example, Lyndon Johnson, who was John F Kennedy’s Vice President, first served less than two years — 14 months — as President after Kennedy was assassinated in 1963. The next year, Johnson won the Presidential election himself. Although he did not run in 1968, Johnson could have served four more years if he had and won, taking his total time in office to a little over nine years.

- Roosevelt was the first (and remains the only) President to break the two-term norm. He was in office between 1933 and 1945 — the year he died. His supporters argued that he had to be the President for four consecutive times due to “the need for consistent leadership through World War II,” the NPR report said.

- In 1947, the 22nd Amendment was finally passed by Congress after lengthy negotiations, especially over whether the limit should be two four-year terms or one six-year term. This prohibited Presidents from being elected for a third time.

US WITHHOLDS CO-SPONSORSHIP OF UN MOTION BACKING UKRAINE

he U.S. is refusing to co-sponsor a draft U.N. resolution marking three years since Moscow’s invasion of Ukraine that backs Ukraine’s territorial integrity and again demands Russia withdraw its troops, three diplomatic sources told Reuters, in a potential stark shift by Ukraine’s most powerful Western ally.

- Washington has also objected to a phrase in a statement the Group of Seven nations was planning to issue next week that would condemn Russian aggression, two other sources told Reuters.

- The U.S. refusal to agree to language that has been regularly used by the U.N. and G7 since February 2022 comes amid a widening rift between Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskiy and U.S. President Donald Trump.

- Trump is trying to rapidly end the war in Ukraine and sent a team to hold talks with Russia this week in Saudi Arabia without the involvement of Kyiv.

- Ukraine’s allies have used the previous two Feb. 24 anniversaries of the war to reiterate their condemnation of Russia’s invasion but this year it is unclear how the United States will approach it.

- At the U.N. countries can decide to co-sponsor a resolution up until a vote. The 193-member General Assembly is due to vote on Monday, diplomats said. General Assembly resolutions are not binding but carry political weight, reflecting a global view on the war.

Do You Know:

- On Apr 3, 2008, NATO’s Bucharest Summit Declaration said “NATO welcomes Ukraine’s and Georgia’s Euro-Atlantic aspirations for membership in NATO. We agreed today that these countries will become members of NATO.”

- On Feb 12, 2025, United States Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth told the Ukraine Defense Contact Group in Brussels that “...The United States does not believe that NATO membership for Ukraine is a realistic outcome of a negotiated settlement [of the war]...”

- The possibility of Ukraine becoming part of NATO has been Moscow’s declared casus belli. Though the US and its European allies have never committed to when Ukraine might join the



alliance, the statements by Trump and Hegseth mark a fundamental shift in America's Ukraine policy.

- The expansion of NATO presents Russia with a classic “security dilemma”, a situation in which the actions of one state to make itself more secure tends to make another state less secure, and prompts them to respond in ways that result in a spiral of hostility.
- Article 5 in the NATO Charter of 1949 establishes the principle of collective defence, such that “an armed attack” against any NATO member is to be considered as “an attack against them all”, and all NATO members would be obligated to defend the one who has been attacked.
- Putin's Russia sees NATO as a tool of Western hegemony, and its expansion eastward appears as the US creeping up on its Cold War enemy, which Moscow perceives as a threat to its national security.

RUSSIA RESET

The talks between U.S. and Russian officials in Riyadh, their first major diplomatic interaction since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, marks the beginning of a reset in ties between the two former Cold War adversaries. Led by U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio and Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, the two sides agreed to restore staffing at their respective embassies, explore closer economic cooperation, and set up a high-level team to start talks to end the Ukraine war. U.S. President Donald Trump has signalled that he might meet his Russian counterpart, Vladimir Putin, later this month and secure the deal, which is a decisive shift in America's policy towards Russia. Under the former Biden administration, the U.S. had emerged as Ukraine's biggest military and financial backer. The U.S. had also led global efforts to weaken Russia's economy through biting sanctions. Mr. Trump has thrown away the Biden policy and adopted a new approach of rapprochement with Russia, something reminiscent of Henry Kissinger's historic outreach to Mao Tse Tung's China at the height of the Cold War and America's disastrous war in Vietnam.

Mr. Trump's push for stability with Russia is rooted in a sense of realism. He does not see Russia, a pale shadow of what the Soviet Union used to be, as America's main challenger. It is unrealistic, as Pete Hegseth, U.S. Defence Secretary, put it, to expect Ukraine to turn around the war. Mr. Trump is also opposed to further American aid for Ukraine. He wants to focus America's resources on China, while building a better predictable relationship with Russia — a reverse Kissinger approach. While this is the broad strategic framework of Mr. Trump's Russia reset, the victim in the battlefield is Ukraine, which has already lost over 20% of its territories and thousands of its men. The U.S., which offered Ukraine NATO membership in 2008, now says such an outcome is not practical. The Trump administration has also ruled out security guarantees to Ukraine, passing that responsibility to Europe, which stands divided. So, Ukraine today does not even have a seat at the table when Russia and America talk. When great powers quarrel and reset, smaller countries that get caught in proxy conflicts often suffer. But excluding Ukraine and Europe from any settlement that would determine both Ukraine's future and Europe's security architecture would be wrong, morally and practically. If Mr. Trump wants to build his reset on a strong foundation, he should strive towards a settlement that is acceptable to all parties — the U.S., Russia, Europe and Ukraine.



WHAT MINERAL RESOURCES DOES UKRAINE HAVE – AND CAN THE US TAKE THEM?

US President Donald Trump has accused Ukraine of “breaking” a deal over the use of its mineral resources. While the deal had never been signed, Trump on Wednesday (February 19) told reporters, “They broke that deal.”

- He claimed that when US Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent travelled to Kyiv last week, the Ukrainians “agreed to it more or less” but then Bessent “was treated rather rudely because essentially they told him no.”
- The US has proposed that it be allowed access to 50 per cent of Ukraine’s important mineral resources in return for support against Russia. While Ukraine’s President, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, is open to the deal, he wants more favourable terms.
- While the details of the deal are not in public domain, broadly, while Ukraine sees the deal as a means to secure future assistance, Trump wants payment for the help the US has already provided.
- According to a Financial Times report, Trump has said the US is owed \$500 billion worth of Ukraine’s resources (including mineral deposits, fuel, and infrastructure such as ports) in exchange for military assistance provided against Russia. “That is significantly more than the total \$69.2bn in military assistance Washington has given since 2014, according to State Department statistics,” the report says.
- American officials have said that if the US were to get economic stakes in Ukraine — like a mining licence or other arrangements to extract minerals — that in itself would be a security guarantee, as the US would defend its interests against an attack. However, Zelenskyy wants a more concrete assurance of military and economic aid.

Do You Know:

- Ukraine has rich resources of minerals that are critical in manufacturing a variety of products, from high-end weapon systems to clean energy solutions like Electrical Vehicles to electronic gadgets and semiconductors. These minerals are not found widely and are also difficult to extract, making them valuable. What makes them even more important for the US and the West is that China has large sources of them. Mineral resources are part of the reason Trump wants to buy Greenland, too.
- Two classifications are important when talking about these resources — rare earth elements, and critical minerals. There are 17 rare earth elements, including 15 Lanthanides (atomic numbers 57 — which is Lanthanum — to 71 in the periodic table), Scandium (atomic number 21) and Yttrium (39).
- Minerals are defined as ‘critical’ by countries based on their needs, broadly using two parameters: their importance for economic development and national security, and their lack of availability. India in 2023 identified 30 critical minerals.
- According to a report by Ukraine’s Ministry of Environmental Protection and Natural Resources and the Ukrainian Geological Survey, “Ukraine holds 22 of the 50 strategic materials identified by the US as critical, and 25 out of the 34 recognised by the EU as critically important. Particularly,



Ukraine holds very competitive positions in five key ones: graphite, lithium, titanium, beryllium and uranium.”

HOW HAVE BIG TECH COMPANIES BACK-TRACKED ON THEIR DEI GOALS?

The story so far:

When U.S. President Donald Trump returned to the White House, million-dollar donations poured in from Big Tech companies and their CEOs. During Mr. Trump’s inauguration, some prominent figures included his adviser and major donor Elon Musk, Meta CEO Mark Zuckerberg, Amazon founder Jeff Bezos, Apple CEO Tim Cook, OpenAI CEO Sam Altman, and TikTok CEO Shou Zi Chew. As Trump settled into his role for the second time, notable U.S. companies including Google, Meta, and Amazon announced (or quietly made) changes to their existing DEI initiatives. They either rolled back ongoing programmes and goals, or decided to stop pursuing new DEI plans.

What is DEI?

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) refers to a wide range of principles and practices aimed at enriching a space by making sure all groups of people are represented (diversity), provided with measures to ensure equality by repairing past harms (equity), and given the support they need to thrive alongside their peers (inclusion). DEI reminds employers and employees alike that workplaces of the past often lacked equal rights for all or excluded talented individuals due to factors such as sexism, racism, religious hate, casteism, ableism (discrimination against people with disabilities), queerphobia, or other forms of bigotry.

In the U.S., the 2020 murder of George Floyd by a white police officer triggered nationwide outrage and a need to reflect on the inequality affecting Black people across all levels of society. However, some tech companies championed global diversity efforts long before 2020.

DEI schemes such as hiring diverse individuals, funding their training, or reserving specific opportunities for them are meant to improve the representation of different communities in the workplace, so that a company’s products and services can better reflect their general buyers or users.

Why do people oppose DEI?

Critics of DEI initiatives come from a range of political backgrounds. While some believe that corporate DEI measures are band-aids on a bullet wound that fail to address systemic injustice, others are convinced that DEI hiring processes unfairly reject talented individuals from majority groups.

Mr. Musk, for example, is a vocal critic of DEI. He has frequently used the phrase as a slur as he claims that DEI kills art, promotes racism across industries, and even puts unqualified people in critical/life-saving positions. “DEI means people DIE,” he has posted on X in January, despite recently expressing his strong support for the H1B visa category.

Which tech companies are getting rid of DEI measures?

Support for DEI initiatives is frequently perceived as a left-wing or even communist stance, which has alienated many leaders or institutions trying to closely align themselves with U.S. President Donald Trump’s right-wing government. Mr. Trump in fact issued an executive order titled,



‘Ending Radical And Wasteful Government DEI Programs And Preferencing,’ where DEI initiatives were referred to as “illegal and immoral discrimination programs.”

Amazon is stopping diversity and inclusion programmes, while a senior executive said that the company still wanted to “foster a more truly inclusive culture,” reported Bloomberg. The e-commerce giant noted on its website that it was still supporting its employee-led groups, such as ‘Amazon People with Disabilities,’ ‘Black Employee Network,’ and ‘Glamazon’ for all those interested in LGBT+ issues.

Meanwhile, Meta has scrapped its fact-checking programme, and loosened limits around sensitive topics such as gender/immigration while Mr. Zuckerberg has publicly complained about a lack of ‘masculine energy’ in the workplace. Meta is also getting rid of DEI programmes for employees and diversity efforts for suppliers, apart from ending representation goals for women and ethnic minorities, reported Axios, citing an internal memo. “Instead of equity and inclusion training programs, we will build programs that focus on how to apply fair and consistent practices that mitigate bias for all, no matter your background,” said Meta’s memo, per Axios.

For its part, Google is no longer working to meet its diversity hiring goals, even though Alphabet CEO Sundar Pichai previously committed to hiring more leaders from underrepresented communities, reported WSJ. The news outlet also noted that Alphabet’s annual report left out a line about its DEI commitments. Furthermore, Google’s Calendar removed references to Pride Month and Black History Month, noting that users could add these in if they specifically wanted to.

Other tech companies that have edited their DEI policies, or their wording, include Disney, Comcast, GE, Intel, PayPal, and Regeneron, according to NPR.

Which companies still support DEI?

Despite Apple CEO Tim Cook’s attendance at Mr. Trump’s inauguration, Apple in its 2025 annual meeting notice strongly criticised a think tank’s potential proposal to “consider abolishing its Inclusion & Diversity program, policies, department and goals.” Apple called the proposal unnecessary and said it was an equal opportunity employer. “The proposal also inappropriately attempts to restrict Apple’s ability to manage its own ordinary business operations, people and teams, and business strategies,” said the iPhone-maker.

Meanwhile, McKinsey’s Global Managing Partner Bob Sternfels stated in an employee memo in February that the consulting firm would continue to pursue diversity as well as a system that rewards merit. “The answer is yes. We will continue to boldly pursue both, because these two things together — our diverse meritocracy — is what makes us distinctive and has defined who we are over our nearly 100 years,” he was quoted as writing, per Bloomberg.

Other companies that have committed to DEI in spite of popular pressure against it, include Costco, Microsoft, and Pinterest.

“We continue to believe it’s the business of Microsoft to be diverse and inclusive so we can build products, services, and a workforce that empowers the world. The business case for D&I is not only constant but stronger than ever,” wrote Microsoft’s Chief Diversity Officer and Corporate Vice President of Talent and Learning, Lindsay-Rae McIntyre, on December 20, 2024, in a LinkedIn post.



What does DEI in tech look like?

Countless tech workers — and their families, by extension — receive numerous benefits from DEI measures already in place at their work. These benefits include visa sponsorship for foreign job applicants (which Mr. Musk himself supports), company cafeteria menus that cater to a range of diet restrictions, wheelchair-friendly elevators and toilets, hybrid work mode for caretakers/parents, remote work options for people with disabilities or medical conditions, and even corporate protection from inappropriate questions about one's body, religious beliefs, sexual orientation, or marital status.

DEI measures are meant to protect Alphabet CEO Sundar Pichai from racism, Meta CEO Mark Zuckerberg from antisemitism, and OpenAI CEO Sam Altman from queerphobia and antisemitism, not to mention their employees.

On the flip side, DEI does not guarantee a workplace where everyone feels equally respected or protected. For example, many companies which commit to DEI hiring principles on paper, may automatically turn down immigrants or refugees who need visas.

Furthermore, sweeping DEI measures in one location may fail to take into consideration lesser-known forms of discrimination present in other cultures, such as colourism or casteism. The presence of DEI programmes can also lead to meritorious women, ethnic minority workers, or LGBTQIA+ employees facing more discrimination as others assume they were hired due to their identities, rather than their skills.

While numerous debates rage around DEI in the U.S., what is certain is that a tenuous tech market is set to become even more unstable in the future for those who do not fall neatly into the majority.

MINI-ARAB SUMMIT SEEKS UNITED POSITION ON GAZA CRISIS

In a bid to convey a united position regarding the Trump administration's plans for Gaza, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman on Friday hosted the leaders of the six Gulf Cooperation Council member states and Jordan and Egypt. Riyadh has been decked up with Saudi flags on the occasion of the Saudi Founding Day that will be marked on February 22 and the summit is being presented as a sign of carrying forward Saudi commitment to peace and regional stability.

The meeting was announced by Bader Al Asaker, head of the private office of the Crown Prince.

Prior to the summit, Saudi Arabia carried out a flurry of diplomatic outreach targeting key stakeholders in the region. Saudi Foreign Minister Faisal bin Farhan on Thursday briefed his counterparts of the G20 countries regarding the peace initiatives that Riyadh launched in consultation with other Arab countries after President Trump on February 5 put out his statement on solving the Gaza crisis through relocation of the Palestinian population to neighbouring states. Mr. Faisal met Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, Australia's Penny Wong, British Foreign Secretary David Lammy, and French Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs Jean-Noel Barrot. He also met External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar during the same outreach. Other countries too were doing similar outreach including the Emir of Qatar, Tamim Bin Hamad, who visited India and Iran before flying into Riyadh for Friday's discussion.

Earlier, the official Saudi Press Agency had announced that the "informal brotherly gathering" was aimed at "enhancing cooperation and coordination among the GCC states (Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, and the UAE), Jordan and Egypt". Crown Prince Mohammed came out swiftly



with a statement reiterating the “two-state” solution for resolving the Palestine crisis after President Trump called for a “take over” of the Gaza Strip. Earlier, King Abdullah of Jordan, who met President Trump on February 11, also sent an “urgent message” to the White House about the regional implications of annexing Gaza Strip.

On February 19, Saudi Interior Minister Prince Abdulaziz bin Saud bin Nayef met King Abdullah to brief the Jordanian side about the Saudi initiatives on Gaza and the Ukraine crises. Amman’s official news outlet Jordan News Agency reported that during the discussion with the Saudi team, King Abdullah rejected President Trump’s proposal to “own” Gaza Strip which would lead to displacement of Palestinians from Gaza Strip and possibly also from West Bank.

RUBIO LEAVES TRUCE ON SHAKY GROUND BY CALLING FOR ERADICATION OF HAMAS

U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio on Sunday fully endorsed Israel’s war aims in the Gaza Strip, saying Hamas “must be eradicated” and throwing the future of the shaky ceasefire into further doubt.

Mr. Rubio met with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in Jerusalem at the start of a regional tour, where he is likely to face pushback from Arab leaders over U.S. President Donald Trump’s proposal to transfer the Palestinian population out of the Gaza Strip and redevelop it under U.S. ownership.

Mr. Netanyahu has welcomed the plan, and said he and Mr. Trump have a “common strategy” for Gaza’s future.

Echoing Mr. Trump, he said “the gates of hell would be open” if Hamas does not release dozens of remaining hostages abducted in its October 7, 2023, attack that triggered the war.

Their remarks came just two weeks before the first phase of the ceasefire is set to end.

The second phase, in which Hamas is to release dozens of remaining hostages in exchange for more Palestinian prisoners, a lasting truce and the withdrawal of Israeli forces, has yet to be negotiated. Mr. Rubio said Hamas “cannot continue as a military or government force.”

“As long as it stands as a force that can govern or as a force that can administer or as a force that can threaten by use of violence, peace becomes impossible,” Mr. Rubio said. “It must be eradicated.” Such language could complicate efforts to continue talks with Hamas, which, despite suffering heavy losses in the war, remains intact and in control of Gaza.

In another sign of the two allies closing ranks, Israel’s Defense Ministry said it received a shipment of 2,000-pound (900-kilogram) MK-84 munitions from the United States.

The Biden administration had paused a shipment of such bombs last year over concerns about civilian casualties in Gaza.

Pressure Arab states

In a radio interview last week, Mr. Rubio indicated that Trump’s proposal was in part aimed at pressuring Arab states to come up with their own postwar plan that would be acceptable to Israel, which says Hamas can have no role in Gaza.

He also appeared to suggest that Arab countries send in troops to combat Hamas.



EXPERTS PUSH TO RESTORE SYRIA'S HERITAGE SITES AFTER MORE THAN A DECADE OF CIVIL WAR

Experts are returning to Syria's war-ravaged heritage sites, hoping to lay the groundwork for restoring them and reviving tourism, which they say could provide a much-needed boost to the country's decimated economy after nearly 14 years of war.

Once-thriving landmarks like the ancient city of Palmyra and the medieval Crusader castle of Crac des Chevaliers remain scarred by years of conflict, but local tourists are returning to the sites, and conservationists hope their historical and cultural significance will eventually draw international visitors back.

One of Syria's six UNESCO World Heritage Sites, Palmyra was once a key hub to the ancient Silk Road network linking the Roman and Parthian empires to Asia. Located in the Syrian desert, it is renowned for its 2,000-year-old Roman-era ruins. It is now marked by shattered columns and damaged temples.

Before the Syrian uprising that began in 2011 and soon escalated into a brutal civil war, Palmyra was Syria's main tourist destination, attracting around 1,50,000 visitors monthly, Ayman Nabu, a researcher and expert in ruins said. Dubbed the "Bride of the Desert," he said "Palmyra revitalised the steppe and used to be a global tourist magnet."

The ancient city was the capital of an Arab client state of the Roman Empire that briefly rebelled and carved out its own kingdom in the third century, led by Queen Zenobia. In more recent times, the area had darker associations. It was home to Tadmur prison, where thousands of opponents of the Assad family's rule in Syria were reportedly tortured. The Islamic State (IS) group demolished the prison after capturing the town.

IS militants later destroyed Palmyra's historic temples of Bel and Baalshamin and the Arch of Triumph, viewing them as monuments to idolatry, and beheaded an elderly antiquities scholar who had dedicated his life to overseeing the ruins.

Between 2015 and 2017, control of Palmyra shifted between IS and the Syrian army before Bashar al-Assad's forces, backed by Russia and Iran-aligned militias, recaptured it. They established military bases in the neighboring town, which was left heavily damaged and largely abandoned. Fakh al-Din al-Ma'ani Castle, a 16th-century fortress overlooking the city, was repurposed by Russian troops as a military barracks.

At the theater, the Tetracylon, and other ruins along the main colonnaded street, Mr. Nabu said they documented many illegal drillings revealing sculptures, as well as theft and smuggling of funerary or tomb-related sculptures in 2015 when IS had control of the site. While seven of the stolen sculptures were retrieved and put in a museum in Idlib, 22 others were smuggled out, he added. Many pieces likely ended up in underground markets or private collections.

Inside the city's underground tombs, Islamic verses are scrawled on the walls, while plaster covers wall paintings, some depicting mythological themes that highlight Palmyra's deep cultural ties to the Greco-Roman world.

"Syria has a treasure of ruins," Mr. Nabu said, emphasising the need for preservation efforts. He said Syria's interim administration, led by the Islamist militant group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, has decided to wait until after the transition phase to develop a strategic plan to restore heritage sites.



Matthieu Lamarre of the UNESCO, said the agency had since 2015, “remotely supported the protection of Syrian cultural heritage“ through satellite analyses, reports, and documentation and recommendations to local experts, but it did not conduct any work on site.

Perched on a hill near the town of Al-Husn, with sweeping views, Crac des Chevaliers, a medieval castle originally built by the Romans and later expanded by the Crusaders, was heavily bombed during the Syrian civil war.

Hazem Hanna, an architect and head of the antiquities department of Crac des Chevaliers, pointed to the collapsed columns and an entrance staircase obliterated by airstrikes. Damage from government airstrikes in 2014 destroyed much of the central courtyard and the arabesque-adorned columns, Mr. Hanna said.

“Relying on the cultural background of Syria’s historical sites and their archaeological and historical significance to enthusiasts worldwide, I hope and expect that when the opportunity arises for tourists to visit Syria, we will witness a significant tourism revival,” he said.

TRUMP’S MCC FUNDS FREEZE A SETBACK FOR NEPAL’S DEVELOPMENT ASPIRATIONS

Three years ago, Kathmandu was caught in the crossfire of Washington-Beijing tensions over the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC), a multi-million American grant for Nepal.

While the United States warned of reviewing its overall ties with Nepal should Kathmandu fail to ratify the MCC-Nepal Compact from Parliament, Beijing referred to the grant as a “Pandora’s box.”

Within Nepal, politics was sharply divided, with some sections, particularly those holding extreme left and nationalist views, opposing the parliamentary ratification of the MCC. They argued that along with the MCC money, American boots would land in Nepal.

Signed in 2017, the U.S., under the compact, committed \$500 million in grants for building electricity transmission lines and upgrading roads in Nepal. Fast forward to 2025, a month after Donald Trump returned to the White House, Nepal’s Ministry of Finance (MoF) announced that it had been informed about the MCC funds freeze.

In a statement, the Ministry said the Nepal government was informed by the MCC that payment-related activities funded under the Nepal Compact had been halted in compliance with a 90-day freeze imposed by an executive order of the U.S. President on January 20.

When Mr. Trump froze USAID funds earlier in January, it was largely expected that the MCC, which the U.S. and Nepal signed during the American President’s first term in 2017, would continue.

Analysts now warn that if the funding is completely withdrawn, there will be broader implications for Nepal — not just in terms of infrastructure and development efforts, but also geopolitically, with respect to India and China.

Million-dollar question

With the U.S. fund freeze for the largest infrastructure assistance, the immediate question is: Who will fill that void, and how will it impact Nepal’s development efforts?

The natural answers could be China or India, Nepal’s two next-door neighbours and the second and fifth largest economies, or Nepal itself.



Sanjay Upadhyaya, a U.S.-based author and analyst, argues that neither India nor China has the capacity or readiness to fill a vacuum of this scale and scope. “We lack the resources to ensure the continuity of the projects,” he said.

Even if attempts are made, such projects take years of negotiations. The MCC itself was signed in 2017 after years of discussion.

Electricity transmission lines are one of Nepal’s major infrastructure projects, as the country aims to exploit its hydropower potential with a view to selling it to India, the biggest market in the south.

Mr. Upadhyaya suggests that Mr. Trump’s decision significantly impacts Nepal’s infrastructure initiatives and overall development efforts.

“With the construction of the transmission lines and the enhancement of Nepal’s road network under the Compact now on hold, uncertainty looms over their future,” Mr. Upadhyaya said. “This situation may postpone Nepal’s infrastructure development plans and result in costly contractual issues for the country.”

In June 2023, Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced that India would import 10,000 MW of electricity from Nepal. Accordingly, in January of the previous year, Nepal and India signed a power trade agreement for Nepal to export 10,000 MW of hydroelectricity to India over the next 10 years.

Given the hullabaloo over the parliamentary ratification of the MCC three years ago, analysts say the fund freeze represents a setback for both the donor and the recipient.

Binoj Basnyat, a strategic analyst and retired Major General of the Nepal Army, explains that the decision may erode trust in the U.S., which has been the biggest bilateral aid provider to Nepal since 1951.

“Nepalis may wonder what policy the U.S. is going to pursue with regard to Nepal,” said Mr. Basnyat. “But simultaneously, a review by the U.S. also gives Nepal, as a recipient, a chance to rethink its aid policy.”

The MCC is the largest American infrastructure grant for Nepal in history. Through USAID, the American assistance to Nepal since 1951 amounts to over \$1 billion. In 2022, USAID and Nepal signed a five-year Development Objective Agreement worth \$659 million. While the USAID fund pause will affect sectors like health, education, agriculture, climate, and women’s and children’s empowerment, the MCC halt directly affects the infrastructure area.

Difficult position

“The funding freeze places both countries in a difficult position. Nepal feels vulnerable about its control over its future,” said Mr. Upadhyaya. “The U.S. has experienced a blow to its reliability and standing. Nepal took the political risk of accepting it, the U.S. has now stepped back. This sends a contradictory message to other countries considering American aid.”

According to him, the freeze in funds could further polarise Nepal. “Opponents feel vindicated,” he said. “It may become increasingly challenging for Nepal to negotiate other international agreements.”



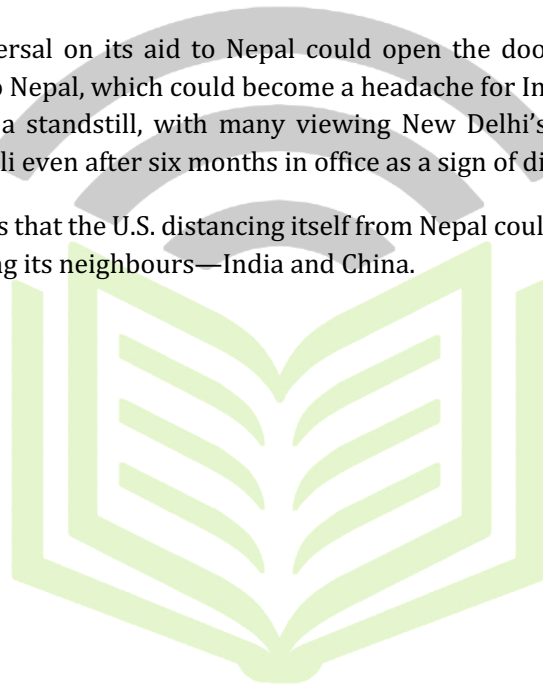
Beijing was suspicious of the MCC from the outset, believing it was Washington's ploy to counterbalance the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), to which Nepal signed up the same year the MCC compact with the U.S. was signed. Only recently, in December last year, Nepal and China signed a BRI framework deal, paving the way for investment and cooperation in Nepal under the Chinese scheme after both sides agreed on "aid assistance financing."

According to Mr. Upadhyaya, China now has an opportunity to reaffirm its narrative that U.S. commitments are unreliable and that it is the most reliable partner. "While Beijing capitalises on a propaganda victory, Nepal could potentially risk further assistance from China," he said.

India, Nepal's traditional development partner in the region, remained conspicuously silent when Nepal signed up to the MCC and BRI.

Some say the U.S. reversal on its aid to Nepal could open the door for Beijing to make more aggressive inroads into Nepal, which could become a headache for India. Ties between Nepal and India appear to be at a standstill, with many viewing New Delhi's reluctance to invite Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli even after six months in office as a sign of displeasure.

There are also concerns that the U.S. distancing itself from Nepal could pose a bigger challenge for Kathmandu in balancing its neighbours—India and China.



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NATION

CLOSER THAN EVER

The visit of the Qatari Amir, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani, a decade after his last visit to India, has led to a reaffirmation of the deep ties between two countries. While they do not always share the same worldview, both countries recognise each other's importance on the regional and global stage. For Qatar, India is a globally connected power, maintaining a balance with all players in the West Asian region including Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Iran and Israel. Indian expatriates are often seen as the backbone of Qatari economic activity. For India, Qatar is a Gulf power, a huge source of remittances and a partner with a major geo-strategic role. Qatar also provides 45% of India's LNG needs, which makes up about half of the bilateral trade of \$15 billion between the two countries. While Qatar is home to a U.S. military base, which houses the U.K. and Australian air forces, it has also hosted groups such as the Hamas and the Taliban, and maintains ties with regional militia groups. In its recent decision to broaden its engagement with the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, the Narendra Modi government has leaned on the Qatari leadership. In addition, the Qatari Amir's decision to pardon eight former Indian naval personnel, reportedly accused of spying and handed the death sentence in 2023, has helped forge a closer understanding. It is fitting and long overdue, therefore, that after the talks in Delhi, India and Qatar decided to upgrade ties to a strategic partnership, given that India already has strategic partnerships signed with the Gulf Cooperation Council including the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Oman and Kuwait. They also signed a double taxation avoidance agreement and MoUs in areas including sports and youth affairs. They agreed to double bilateral trade by 2030, and Qatar is to invest \$10 billion in India in infrastructure and manufacturing sectors and other areas.

While the joint statement and readouts dwelt on the bilateral bonhomie, the geopolitical undertones of their summit cannot be ignored. The Qatari Amir's visit comes amidst turmoil in the Gulf region over the Israel-Gaza conflict and U.S. President Donald Trump's outrageous plan to clear two million Palestinians from their homeland in the name of regional peace. Every country in the Gulf region has voiced its opposition to the Trump announcement, and New Delhi's relative silence has been noted. While the joint statement said that both sides conveyed their respective positions on the "Israel-Hamas issue", it did not detail those positions. As Arab, GCC and OIC members meet this week to discuss the challenge from developments in Gaza, the India-Qatar talks may have delivered the opportunity for both sides to bridge that divide between them, even as Delhi and Doha committed to a much stronger, forward-looking bilateral partnership.

TRANSACTIONAL TURN

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Washington last week was brief but packed with headline-generating developments. The visit came less than a month after U.S. President Donald Trump was sworn in, making Mr. Modi the fourth world leader to hold bilateral meetings with him, following the leaders of Israel, Japan, and Jordan, all close U.S. allies. The joint statement issued afterwards outlined a range of substantive discussions. While many announcements focused on India's purchases of American goods and investments in the U.S., they managed to avoid some of the tough measures many had anticipated. Both sides launched 'Mission 500' (\$500 billion in bilateral trade by 2030) and initiated discussions on a free trade agreement, with phase one of the draft expected this year. Mr. Trump announced an increase in Indian purchases of U.S. energy, oil, and defence equipment, moves expected to help balance the \$45.7 billion U.S. trade deficit within the total \$130 billion goods trade. Additionally, there was agreement on a new umbrella framework,

4TH FLOOR SHATABDI TOWER, SAKCHI, JAMSHEDPUR



COMPACT, or Catalyzing Opportunities for Military Partnership, Accelerated Commerce & Technology for the 21st Century, to streamline cooperation across key sectors. They also rebranded the Biden-era Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technologies (iCET) as Transforming the Relationship Utilising Strategic Technology (TRUST), focusing on semiconductors, quantum computing, and AI, with a commitment to developing an AI infrastructure road map this year. A significant moment came when Mr. Trump announced his approval of the extradition of Tahawwur Rana, involved in 26/11 attacks, to India for trial.

Once the dust settles on Mr. Trump's unconventional remarks and Mr. Modi's rare engagement with the media in this format, India must assess the broader takeaways from this visit. The positive optics and their camaraderie signal a strong foundation for India-U.S. relations over the next four years. There is also clear continuity in key areas of strategic partnership, including Indo-Pacific engagement and the Quad, with Mr. Trump's planned visit to Delhi for the Quad Summit later this year expected to reinforce these commitments. However, economic discussions, trade, energy, nuclear cooperation and defence are likely to dominate the India-U.S. agenda, giving the relationship a transactional turn reminiscent of Mr. Trump's first tenure. There is not much evidence that Mr. Modi's visit significantly softened Mr. Trump's stance on imposing counter-tariffs and reciprocal taxes or influenced a more humane approach to the deportation of undocumented immigrants aboard military flights. These could present challenges for the Indian government going forward. As India engages with the new U.S. administration, it must carefully assess its own interests, assert its position where necessary, and push back when required to safeguard its strategic and economic priorities.

MOST DEPORTEES FROM THE U.S. ARE FROM PUNJAB, HARYANA AND GUJARAT

Of the 332 undocumented Indian immigrants who have been deported from the U.S. in 2025, people from Punjab accounted for the highest share (38%), followed by people from Haryana (33%), and Gujarat (22%). The remaining deportees were from Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh, and other States and UTs.

A recent research paper published by Johns Hopkins University also found that between October 2001 and November 2022, 66% of those who sought asylum in the U.S. were Punjabi speakers. Nearly 14% were Hindi speakers, 8% were English speakers, and 7% were Gujarati speakers. The paper showed a sharp spike in asylum seekers in the U.S. from India after 2016, with Punjabi speakers making up the majority.

In fact, all the three flights carrying Indian deportees from the U.S. this year landed at the Amritsar International Airport, leading to a controversy. Punjab Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann alleged that the Centre is doing this intentionally to defame the State. The Centre argued that Amritsar is the closest international airport for flights entering India from the U.S.

While the latest wave of deportations has grabbed headlines since the deportees were handcuffed and chained during their journey, this is not a phenomenon that has emerged after U.S. President Donald Trump's renewed crackdown on illegal immigrants. Since 2009, 15,897 undocumented Indian immigrants have been deported from the U.S.. Most deportations occurred in 2019 (2,042), followed by 2020 (1,889), and 2024 (1,368). It is also important to note that the number of Indians attempting to enter the U.S. illegally has surged in recent years. A decade ago, U.S. border authorities stopped not more than 1,500 Indian illegal migrants. This figure rose sharply to 96,917 in 2023 and 90,415 in 2024.



News reports have also highlighted how most Indian immigrants were deceived by fraudulent agents who promised them better prospects in exchange for hefty sums of money. The sum paid by Indians to illegally enter the U.S. ranged anywhere between ₹20 lakh and ₹1.25 crore.

A total of 3,042 illegal agents have been identified till June 2024, with the highest number of agents in Andhra Pradesh, followed by Uttar Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, and Maharashtra. In the last four years, 4,361 complaints have been lodged against illegal agents for luring Indians with false recruitment offers.

Interviews with the deportees have shed light on the perilous journeys they undertake in search of a better life. A popular way of getting to the U.S. is through what is known as the “donkey route”. This refers to the arduous journey across countries, forests, and seas, often without proper food and water. A section of the immigrants end up at the south-western border of the U.S. after travelling across dangerous routes such as the Darien Gap between Panama and Colombia, while others go via the northern border of the U.S.

Indians prefer both the Canadian (northern) and south-western (Mexican) borders to enter the U.S. illegally. A New York Times report shows that the sharp spike in illegal crossings from the Canadian border was majorly fuelled by Indians.

Apart from those attempting to enter the U.S. illegally, there are also many who have overstayed their visas after being admitted into the U.S. either for business, studies, or other purposes. While such overstays have declined after the pandemic, close to 17,000 people overstay every year, with most of them having entered the U.S. for business or pleasure.

MYANMAR, MANIPUR, AND STRAINED BORDERS

Northeast India has experienced prolonged spells of insurgency. However, over the past few decades, large parts of the region have remained free of insurgencies. This relative peace has allowed for the operationalisation of massive infrastructure projects. But, as the violence in Manipur attests, the gains made are experiencing increasing stress because of the political developments in Myanmar.

The military coup in Myanmar in February 2021 has encountered widespread disapproval from the people of that country. The civil disobedience movement against military rule subsequently evolved into armed resistance by the People’s Defence Forces (PDFs). The coordinated attacks by the PDFs and the Ethnic Armed Organisations (EAOs) pushed the Myanmar military (Tatmadaw) to cede control over large parts of the country. In a futile attempt to regain territory, the Tatmadaw resorted to indiscriminate use of force. There were instances when civilian areas were subjected to aerial and artillery bombardment by the Tatmadaw. The Sagaing Region, Chin and Kachin States — bordering Northeast India — often witnessed heavy fighting between resistance forces and the Tatmadaw.

Movement of refugees

In Northeast India, there are many ethnic groups, such as the Mizo-Chin-Kuki, that inhabit both sides of the India-Myanmar border and share strong community and familial ties. Recognising these ethnic interactions, the governments of both countries instituted a Free Movement Regime (FMR) after Independence, for people living within 40 kilometre on either side of the India-Burma border, which was subsequently reduced to 16 km. The FMR allowed people in the designated areas to move across the border without being subjected to cumbersome paperwork such as visas.



Additionally, a wide range of economic activities, such as Border haats were established to encourage local cross-border trade and promote livelihoods.

However, these attempts to convert border zones into launch pads of economic engagement received a setback after the recent violent conflict in Myanmar, which resulted in a large-scale refugee movement into India. The movement of refugees has negatively impacted India's border management strategies.

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees estimates, as of December 31, 2024, approximately 95,600 refugees from Myanmar had moved into India. Of these, about 73,400 refugees reportedly reached India after the recent military coup. However, given the porous border, it is difficult to accurately estimate the number of Myanmar refugees in India. The influx of Myanmar refugees has generated diverse responses in India's Northeastern States. In Mizoram, various civil society organisations and the State government have shown considerable empathy for the refugees due to their shared ethnic identity.

On the other hand, in Manipur, there are concerns that the influx of refugees is disturbing the fragile ethnic balance and has become an important variable in the Meitei-Kuki conflict. Responding to such concerns, last year, the Union Home Minister announced that the FMR would be abolished to maintain internal security and "to maintain the demographic structure of India's Northeastern States bordering Myanmar." However, it is not certain if India's Ministry of External Affairs has formally communicated to its Myanmar counterpart about the withdrawal from the Agreement on the Land Border Crossing. Meanwhile, in December 2024, a new framework was operationalised, which would allow people living within 10 km of the border, including in Manipur, to cross the India-Myanmar border with a permit at designated entry/exit points.

Rather than expanding the FMR to facilitate greater economic engagement between India's Northeast and Myanmar, it is being increasingly constricted. Moreh in Manipur, once a bustling border trade town, has borne the brunt of recent violent developments. The decline in the border trade meant that Moreh's emergence as India's gateway to Southeast Asia may not materialise anytime soon. Plans to improve the India-Myanmar-Thailand trilateral highway have also taken a back seat.

Along with India, China is also experiencing negative spillovers due to political instability in Myanmar. To prevent the unauthorised movement of people, China has fenced a few critical sections of its border with Myanmar. Beijing has strong relations with some EAOs in Myanmar and deployed them to tackle the criminal/drug syndicates operating from there. China deploys considerable economic resources and is a member of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), which gives it greater space to engage with diverse actors in Myanmar with relative ease.

Unlike China, India is not a member of the UNSC and must operate within the liberal democratic framework. Yet, India must craft a more calibrated and comprehensive response to developments in Myanmar lest Manipur will continue to fester.

Urgent requirements

To ensure peace in the region, the consolidation of unhealthy relationships between Indian insurgent groups and armed groups across the border needs to be arrested. Therefore, it becomes imperative to engage various ethnic organisations in Myanmar. There is also an urgent need to provide increased humanitarian relief and, in the long run, develop health care and educational infrastructure in Myanmar near the border with Manipur and Mizoram in India. These measures



would ensure that the population seeking basic needs does not have to make strenuous efforts to enter India. Further, India, in collaboration with select neighbours of Myanmar, must nudge all the stakeholders in that country to move towards a more federal democratic polity.

With political uncertainty in Bangladesh and the civil war in Myanmar, the prospect of Northeast India's enhanced external economic engagement is dim at the moment. Therefore, the Indian government will have to spend more resources to maintain economic growth in the region. Despite the current security situation along the borders, including in Manipur, the long-term objective of border management practices in Northeast India should be to increase economic interactions with Southeast Asian countries. The policy framework should be geared to achieve such an objective at the first available opportunity.

WHY IS A NEW BILL ON FOREIGNERS COMING?

The story so far:

The Union Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) is all set to introduce the Immigration and Foreigners Bill, 2025 in the second half of the Budget session that begins on March 10. The Bill repeals all four existing legislations — The Passport (Entry into India) Act, 1920, The Registration of Foreigners Act, 1939, The Foreigners Act, 1946, and The Immigration (Carriers' Liability) Act, 2000 — that deal with immigration and the movement of foreigners.

What are the significant provisions?

The Bill has six chapters comprising 35 clauses and bunches of existing laws into a single document. It clearly defines the functions of the Immigration Officer, the requirements of passport and visa, and matters relating to foreigners and their registration. Though the Bureau of Immigration (BoI) already exists, the Bill seeks to provide legal backup for immigration functions, the Immigration Officer and the BoI.

It defines provisions relating to the obligations of universities and educational institutions, hospitals, nursing homes, and medical institutions to admit any foreigner. Earlier, foreigners were asked to register with the Foreigners Regional Registration Office (FRRO). Presently, it is mandatory for hotels and guest houses to share the passport details of foreigners with the police.

The Bill also has provisions relating to foreigners whose movements are restricted, the power of civil authority to control places frequented by foreigners and the provisions relating to the liability of carriers and their obligations. The Bill retains the provision on the "burden of proof" to prove that a person is not a foreigner on the person.

What is the provision for entry and stay of foreigners?

The Bill introduces the clause — "threat to national security, sovereignty and integrity of India and relations with a foreign State" — among the grounds to refuse the entry or stay of a foreigner in the country.

The proposed law states, "... no foreigner shall be allowed to enter into or stay in India if he is found inadmissible to do so on account of threat to national security, sovereignty and integrity of India, relations with a foreign State or public health or on such other grounds as the Central Government may specify," adding that the decision of the Immigration Officer shall be final and binding. Earlier too, many foreigners and persons of Indian origin have been denied entry based



on executive orders. According to Foreigners Order, 1948, a foreigner may be denied entry if he or she is a threat to public safety, if the foreigner carries an infection or is affected by mental illness, if the passport or visa is invalid, faces extradition or has been previously denied entry into the country. The Bill mentions the power of the Centre to issue orders for the removal of foreigners, to delegate and exempt. Presently, Section 3 of the Foreigners Act 1946 empowers the Central government to prohibit, regulate or restrict the entry of foreigners into India or, their exit or stay. Section 5 of the Passport Act 1920 also has the provision for the removal of a foreigner who has entered without documents or a visa.

What are the penal provisions in the Bill?

The penalty for entering India without a passport or travel document in the proposed legislation is imprisonment for five years or a fine up to ₹5 lakh or both.

Using or supplying forged or fraudulently obtained passports or other travel documents or visas shall be punishable with imprisonment for a term not less than two years, but may extend to seven years, and a fine of not less than ₹1 lakh but which may extend to ₹10 lakh, the Bill proposes.

Overstaying beyond the visa limit shall be punishable by three years and a fine up to ₹3 lakh.

Does the Bill allow States to detect and deport undocumented migrants?

Yes. The Ministry of Home Affairs informed the Jharkhand High Court last year that since the “Central Government does not maintain a separate federal police force exclusively dedicated to the task of detection and deportation of foreigners staying illegally, action in this regard has been entrusted to the State police.”

According to guidelines issued on April 24, 2014, and July 1, 2019, a foreigner can be deported after completion of the sentence/court proceedings by the State government if he/she has a valid travel document/passport and no other court case pending. In case the foreigner does not have a valid travel document, it should be obtained from the embassy or High Commission.

What about detention centres?

The Bill does not use the term ‘detention centres’. Clause 13 says foreigners are “required to reside at a place set apart for the residence under supervision.” The Centre may regulate access to places in India where foreigners whose movements are restricted are lodged. In 2019, following a Supreme Court directive, the MHA finalised the “Detention Centre Manual” for restricting the movement of foreign nationals who are awaiting deportation due to non-possession of valid travel documents and to ensure that they are physically available at all times for expeditious repatriation and deportation. The manual notes that States require “no specific approval” from the Home Ministry to set up “detention centres /holding centres/camps.” It lays down that centres should be set up outside the jail premises and their numbers and size should be decided by the States keeping in view the actual number of foreigners to be housed as well as the progress in deportation proceedings.

What are the other mechanisms in place to track the movement of foreigners?

The MHA has asked States to constitute two committees to identify foreigners who entered India pre- and post-January 1, 2011, and have stayed on beyond the visa period. The details of foreigners who entered legally and are said to be flouting visa regulations are uploaded on the e-FRRO portal, which can be accessed by the local police. Their details are also shared with government



departments running flagship welfare schemes, driving licence, and PAN databases so that action can be taken if documents have been obtained fraudulently. The MHA asked the Unique Identification Authority of India to create a negative list of Aadhaar cards if a police investigation shows that they were procured fraudulently.

The MHA has also operationalised a Foreigners Identification Portal, which is accessible by the State police to upload the biometrics and other details of “illegal foreigners.” The purpose of the portal is to enable the States to identify illegal migrants for deportation and to prevent them from procuring documents such as Aadhaar.

Do You Know:

- The Immigration (Carriers' Liability) Act, 2000 was enacted to make the carriers liable in respect of passengers brought by them into India in contravention of the provisions of the Passport (Entry into India) Act, 1920 (34 of 1920) and the rules made thereunder and matters connected therewith.
- The other relevant Acts relating to foreigners and immigration are the Passport (Entry into India) Act, 1920 and the Registration of Foreigners Act, 1939, (16 of 1939). These two Acts were enacted to take power to require passports of persons entering India; and to provide for the registration of foreigners in India.
- The acts, namely the Passport (Entry into India) Act, 1920, the Registration of Foreigners Act, 1939, and the Foreigners Act, 1946, are not only of the pre-Constitution period but also, they were brought into extraordinary times of first and second world wars. While there is an underlying continuity and commonality of objectives among the four Acts, there are some overlapping provisions among the said laws.”
- In view of the reasons mentioned in the preceding paragraphs, there is a necessity to repeal all the aforesaid four Acts and to enact a new comprehensive legislation, namely the Immigration and Foreigners Bill, 2025,” the Statement of Objects and Reasons says.

IS THE LAW ENCROACHING ON RIGHTS? HOW LABOUR ACTIVIST'S CASE LED TO SC TEST

On August 10, 1942, the British declared the Congress Working Committee, the All India Congress Committee and the four Provincial Congress Committees as “unlawful associations” under the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1908.

- The colonial law, a precursor to many later-year laws meant to prosecute terrorist and unlawful activities, allowed the arrest of members of an ‘unlawful association’, so declared by the provincial government.
- Less than a decade later, in March 1950, the same law was invoked by the Congress government in Madras to declare the People's Education Society, a cultural society, as an “unlawful association” for being a “danger to public peace” and “carrying on propaganda on behalf of the Communist Party”.
- The society's secretary, V G Row – a veteran trade unionist and co-founder of the renowned Row & Reddy, a Madras-based law firm that continues to champion the rights of workers — challenged the constitutionality of the law, first in the Madras High Court and later in the Supreme Court, and



argued that the ban infringed upon the fundamental rights conferred on him by the new Constitution.

- On March 31, 1952, a four-judge bench of the Supreme Court led by then Chief Justice of India M Patanjali Sastri struck down the law.
- The law to declare unlawful associations has appeared in several draconian avatars since the ruling — from the Terrorist and Disruptive Activities (Prevention) Act, 1987, to the Prevention of Terrorism Act of 2002 or the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, 1967 – but the VG Row ruling set a landmark precedent that a law must only impose “reasonable restrictions”. While doing so, the court introduced a test to determine if a law excessively limited citizens’ freedoms.
- The ‘test’ that the court laid out would in later years evolve into the “structured proportionality test” which is now used to test legislation that encroach on fundamental rights. This test essentially requires the state to show that its action, restricting a fundamental right, is proportional to its goal. This is a guard against arbitrary action that could completely wipe out a right in the garb of pursuing even a “legitimate state interest”.

Do You Know:

- Born in 1907, Vombatkere Gurunandan Row was the son of Justice Vombatkere Pandrang Row, an ICS officer who was transferred briefly as a judge of the Madras High Court. It was while he studied law that Row took to Communist ideology, influenced by his maternal uncle Sundar Bhat Kasargod, a “red-hot leftist” and a doctor in London. In 1931, Row was called to the Bar at Gray’s Inn, London, but the Barrister-at-law returned to practice in India.
- A few years later, he set up Row & Reddy. Row’s partner at the firm, ADV Reddy, left early on, when he became a magistrate in 1946 and later a judge of the Andhra Pradesh High Court. Later, A Ramachandran joined the firm as the new partner, but the name on the board stayed put.
- “Many of the early constitutional cases that the Supreme Court heard came from Madras, particularly from Row & Reddy,” says 88-year NGR Prasad, the managing partner at the firm.
- The case challenging the preventive detention of Communist leader A K Gopalan – the first constitutional case that the Supreme Court would hear – was also the firm’s brief. It was Row who spotted M K Nambyar, a young advocate arguing a death row case in the Madras High Court and had him argue for Gopalan.

WHAT IS THE ‘RAREST OF RARE’ DOCTRINE?

The story so far:

On January 22, two separate murder convictions resulted in sharply contrasting verdicts, highlighting how the Indian courts apply the death penalty. While one case led to capital punishment, the other saw the accused sentenced to life imprisonment, reigniting questions about the judiciary’s approach to the ‘rarest of rare’ doctrine, which till now does not have a statutory definition.

What were the cases?

On August 9, 2024, a second-year female postgraduate trainee doctor, who was on duty, was raped and murdered inside a seminar room at Kolkata’s R.G. Kar Medical College and Hospital. Sanjay



Roy, a civic volunteer, was arrested and convicted on January 20, based on forensic evidence linking him to the crime. During sentencing, the Additional district and sessions judge said, “this doesn’t fall into the category of rarest of rare” crimes, and Roy was sentenced to life imprisonment with a fine.

In contrast, the Sharon murder case, did invite the death penalty, the courts decided. Sharon Raj, a 23-year-old student from Kerala, was poisoned on October 14, 2022 by his partner, Greeshma, who mixed poison in an Ayurvedic concoction that she offered him to drink. Eleven days later, Sharon succumbed to multiple organ failures. The Neyyattinkara Additional Sessions Court, imposed the death penalty, and classified it as one of the “rarest of rare” cases.

What are the origins of the doctrine?

The debate on the discretion given to judges to award the death sentence dates back to 1972, when the Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of the death penalty in *Jagmohan Singh versus State of U.P.* The petitioner argued that the death sentence puts an end to all fundamental rights guaranteed under Article 19 and, therefore, the law with regard to the capital sentence is unreasonable and not in the interest of the general public. He also pointed out that judges have no clear guidelines for deciding between the death penalty and life imprisonment, which he believes is an unfair delegation of power. Lastly, he argued that the lack of clear rules for judges violates Article 14 of the Constitution, which guarantees equality before the law.

However, the court disagreed, explaining that the accused is aware of the potential for a death sentence, and during the trial, all relevant facts, including mitigating circumstances, are considered. The court dismissed the appeal and affirmed the death sentence was constitutional under Article 21. At this stage, there were no clear guidelines on when the death penalty should be used, which meant judges had wide discretion to decide.

In 1980, the Supreme Court in *Bachan Singh versus State of Punjab*, established the ‘rarest of rare’ doctrine, marking a turning point. A five-judge Bench heard the case, and held that the death penalty should be used only in exceptional cases. However, it did not embellish what the ‘rarest of rare’ meant, leading to further confusion. It was finally in *Machhi Singh versus State of Punjab (1983)*, that the Supreme Court provided a framework for the ‘rarest of rare’ doctrine.

The court identified five categories of crimes where such a punishment is justified.

The criteria are — a) manner of committing the murder; when the murder is committed in an extremely brutal and dastardly manner so as to arouse extreme indignation within the community, b) motive of the murder; when the murder is committed for a motive which reveals total depravity, c) socially abhorrent nature of the crime; that is when a murder occurs of someone belonging to a minority community and is committed not for personal reasons but in circumstances which arouse social wrath, d) magnitude of the crime, and e) personality of the offender; when the victim of murder is a child, a helpless woman, a person rendered helpless by old age or infirmity etc.

Were there any revisions?

Despite the framework set in *Machhi Singh versus State of Punjab*, the Supreme Court in 1983, in *Mithu versus State of Punjab*, struck down Section 303 of the Indian Penal Code (IPC), which prescribed mandatory death penalty for anyone who commits murder while serving a life sentence. The court ruled that it was against Articles 14 and 21 of the Constitution. Hence, all the



cases regarding murder shall be dealt with as per Section 302 of the IPC which says whoever commits murder shall be punished with death, or imprisonment for life, and shall also be liable to a fine.

In September 2022, the Supreme Court, referred to a Constitution Bench on the question of how to provide a “meaningful, real and effective” hearing on mitigating circumstances in cases that attract the death penalty. When this is suo motu taken up, the court may set out a uniform approach to giving an opportunity to the accused to present mitigating circumstances in the trial stage itself before their crime is deemed one which is “rarest of rare”.

The application of the death penalty in India remains complex and controversial. While the Supreme Court has given a certain framework, the unclear, universally agreed-upon definition for what qualifies as ‘rarest of rare’ continues to leave room for judicial discretion.

JUDGES’ DILEMMA

The Lokpal’s ruling that High Court judges are amenable to its jurisdiction and the Supreme Court order staying it on its own motion raise more than a mere question of law. The issue concerns both the independence of the judiciary and its accountability. That the Court, government law officers and senior advocates found the Lokpal’s decision disturbing is understandable, as many believe that judicial independence will be undermined if judges of constitutional courts are made answerable to the Lokpal, even though they fall under the definition of ‘public servant’ under the Prevention of Corruption Act. The Lokpal view appears to be prima facie incorrect. There is nothing to suggest that superior court judges were ever considered to be under its remit. Last month, the Lokpal, headed by former Supreme Court judge, A.M. Khanwilkar, rejected a corruption complaint against a former Chief Justice of India (CJI) on the ground that the Lokpal Act, 2013, did not concern apex court judges and that its reference to “persons” who are members of any body or authority created by an Act of Parliament cannot be applied to the Supreme Court, an institution established by the Constitution. However, in respect of High Court judges, it said High Courts established by statutes creating the respective States were statutory bodies, and their judges were “persons” within the meaning of Section 14 of the Lokpal Act.

The independence of the judiciary was the foremost consideration when the Court held in *K. Veeraswami vs Union of India* (1991) that no case can be registered against them without consulting the CJI, even though it also said judges were public servants under the Prevention of Corruption Act. Based on this principle, the Lokpal has referred the complaint to the CJI. While the Lokpal ruling is set to be reviewed, the time may have come to address the issue of accountability in the rare event of a credible corruption charge arising against a judge. The matter is now dealt with by the Court through an in-house procedure, initiated only if the Chief Justice of a High Court, or the CJI or the President receives a complaint. If the charges appear true, asking the judges concerned to resign, denying them judicial work or recommending their removal through Parliament are the options available. Some judges are transferred from one High Court to another, but whether a corruption charge is the reason is never disclosed. The Court should see if the present mechanism is enough or it needs to be expanded to include credible follow-up action such as an independent prosecution under its supervision. Both accountability and independence ought to be equally important for the judiciary.



TIME AND TIMING

Once again, the manner of appointment of the Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) and Election Commissioners (EC) has become controversial, with the government going ahead with the process laid down in its December 2023 law, which is under challenge before the Supreme Court. Last week, the Court had deferred the hearing to February 19, while observing that if there was any development in the interregnum, it would meet the consequences of a subsequent decision on the validity of the Act. Ignoring a request from the Leader of the Opposition (LoP), Rahul Gandhi, the panel elevated Gyanesh Kumar as the CEC and inducted Vivek Joshi as the third member, following the retirement of CEC Rajiv Kumar. The question is whether the Act of 2023 goes against a 2022 Constitution Bench verdict that put in place a committee comprising the Prime Minister, the LoP and the Chief Justice of India (CJI) to select the persons to helm the Election Commission of India (ECI). The Act, however, includes a Union Minister in the committee instead of the CJI. The government argues that the Court's panel was only an ad hoc measure until Parliament came forward with its own law, as required in the Constitution. The petitioners maintain that the thrust of the 2022 judgment is that the appointment process should be insulated from executive interference so that its functioning will be truly independent.

Whether the CJI should be part of the selection committee is debatable, but there is little doubt that the 2:1 majority vested in the executive renders any selection vulnerable to the criticism that those chosen in that manner would not be seen as independent. The BJP-led government has been making appointments in the midst of court hearings. The Court has been declining to interfere in time, leading to such appointments becoming a fait accompli. The government had appointed Arun Goel as an EC in 2022, in the middle of the Constitution Bench hearing, and two ECs in March 2024 in the run-up to the general election to replace Mr. Goel, who had resigned, and another EC who had retired. Few will disagree that the public perception of the ECI as a fearless and fiercely independent institution has been on the decline. If elections are to be seen as free and fair by the whole electorate and not merely followers of the winners, the Court should not delay this matter any further. It has to adjudicate the question of whether the procedure set out in the law falls short of the level of independence envisaged in the Constitution Bench verdict for members of the ECI.

ARTICLE 101(4)

Incarcerated Khadoor Sahib MP Amritpal Singh on Wednesday (February 19) moved the Punjab and Haryana High Court to attend the ongoing Parliament session, lest he lose his seat because of his prolonged absence from the House.

- Amritpal, who faces charges under the stringent National Security Act, has been detained in Dibrugarh since April 2023. He contested and won the 2024 Lok Sabha election from prison, but thus far has an attendance of only 2%, according to PRS Legislative Research data.
- Past leave application reports list illness — their own or some relative's — as the most common reason for MPs being granted leave. That said, members have requested and been granted leave on the count of being imprisoned as well.
- In 2023, then Ghosi MP Atul Rai of the Bahujan Samaj Party sought permission to remain absent on 23 consecutive sittings of Parliament as he was in jail. His application was granted.



- Even if an MP is absent for more than 60 days, the House has to “declare” the seat vacant, meaning the matter has to be put to vote. This makes it even less likely that Amritpal will end up losing his seat simply because he is unable to attend proceedings.

Do You Know:

- “If for a period of sixty days a member of either House of Parliament is without permission of the House absent from all meetings thereof, the House may declare his seat vacant,” Article 101(4) says. The 60 days, however, do not account for “any period during which the House is prorogued or is adjourned for more than four consecutive days”.
- Effectively, the period of absence is only calculated based on the actual sittings of Parliament. Amritpal, for instance, only attended one sitting of the Lok Sabha — the one in which he was sworn in last July. Since then, he has remained in detention in Assam. This has amounted to nearly 50 absences thus far.
- However, as former Lok Sabha Secretary General P D T Achary told The Indian Express, he does not recall a single instance in which Article 101(4) was invoked, and an MP lost her seat as a result.
- The operative term in Article 101(4) is “without permission of the House”. For long absences, MPs write to the ‘Committee on Absence of Members from the Sittings of the House’, the parliamentary panel that deals with this issue.
- The committee makes recommendations on each leave application, which are then ratified by the House concerned. In practice, however, applications are seldom rejected. “Amritpal as an MP has every right to write to the panel and request permission to be absent on the grounds that he is in jail and is not getting bail,” Achary said.

EXPRESS VIEW ON SC GAG ORDER ON RANVEER ALLAHBADIA: SUCH RESTRICTIONS CAN EMPOWER ARBITRARY STATE ACTION

In 2022, while granting bail to Alt News co-founder Mohammed Zubair, the Supreme Court had rejected the imposition of a ban on his social media activities. “Gag orders have a chilling effect on the freedom of speech,” it had said. This week, the Court appears to have turned the clock back on a right it had stoutly defended once. In prohibiting podcaster-influencer Ranveer Allahbadia — whose comments on a YouTube show set off a controversy earlier this month — and his associates from airing content on social media until further notice, the Court has set a troubling precedent for free speech.

The Court has expressed strong disapproval of Allahbadia’s comments, asserting that such language could bring shame to families and society. It granted relief to Allahbadia, in the form of protection from arrest, besides allowing the FIRs against him to be clubbed together. Yet, the imposition of prior restraint in the form of a gag is concerning. The Court must ask itself if it wants to give further ammunition to a political class that has, in the past, been quick to clamp down on anything it deems offensive, with an alacrity that cuts across party lines. Its order also goes against the spirit that animated the Court’s earlier defence of freedom of speech, notably in *Shreya Singhal v Union of India* (2015), in which the SC emphasised that vague restrictions on online speech can lead to a “chilling effect”. This logic has been upended in the Allahbadia order. The speaker is now expected to anticipate legal red lines. Such restrictions can empower arbitrary state action and incentivise frivolous complaints, creating an environment in which free expression becomes a privilege of the powerful, not the right of the people.

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It is also worrying that when hearing another matter, the Bench referred to the Allahbadia case and sought the government's response on whether it is considering addressing the regulatory "vacuum" in online content. Already, the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Communications and Information Technology has asked the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology to look at bringing online platforms under legal scrutiny. While regulation to prevent genuinely harmful content is necessary, it must be balanced against the fundamental right to freedom of speech. Over-regulation or vague guidelines, as the Court itself had warned in Shreya Singhal, could lead to self-censorship. As the case proceeds, the Court must reconsider these directives. In an era where digital platforms are the new public square, the judiciary must remain vigilant against tools of suppression, however benign their guise and well-meaning their intention.

SEX AND VIOLENCE

A recent ruling by the Chhattisgarh High Court, which held that "unnatural sex" by a husband in marriage is not an offence, heavily relies on the presumption of consent within a marital relationship. The case involved a 40-year-old man from Bastar district who had been convicted by a sessions court in connection with the death of his wife in 2017. The sessions court found that the wife, in her 30s, fell ill and subsequently died following a forced physical relationship. However, on appeal, the High Court acquitted the husband. At the core of any discussion on marriage, or any relationship, must be the principle of consent. When physical harm occurs, especially leading to a tragic death, it cannot be excused under the presumption of marital consent. The issue at hand is not about the nature of the sexual act but the absence of consent and the use of force. The High Court relied on Exception II of Section 375 of the Indian Penal Code, which does not recognise marital rape as an offence unless the wife is under 15 years old — the Supreme Court of India raised this age to 18 in the Independent Thought vs Union of India & Anr. case (2017) — to justify acquitting the husband. This overturned the sessions court's verdict, which had sentenced him to 10 years of rigorous imprisonment.

The ruling once again brings attention to the ambiguous legal terrain surrounding sexual violence in marriage. In October 2024, the Supreme Court deferred hearings on pleas to criminalise marital rape. In previous judgments, it had indicated that the responsibility lies with the legislature to introduce laws on this issue. The Union government has also stated that criminalising marital rape could "undermine the institution of marriage". India remains one of the few countries where marital rape is not a criminal offence. Yet, data from the National Family Health Survey 5 (2019-2021) reveal that 32% of ever-married women aged 18 to 49 years in India have experienced physical, sexual, or emotional spousal violence, with only a small percentage seeking help. This stark reality should serve as a wake-up call for lawmakers, law enforcement, and society at large to take urgent action in ensuring women can live free from violence and fear. While constitutional safeguards on life, liberty, equality, and dignity exist, and laws are in place to protect women, true change requires a shift in societal attitudes and mindsets. No relationship, marriage included, should provide immunity for violence.

Do You Know:

- Section 375, which criminalises rape, states that the provision does not extend to "sexual intercourse or sexual acts by a man with his own wife," when the wife has attained the age of majority (18 years old). However, Section 377, which outlaws "carnal intercourse against the order of nature with any man, woman or animal", does not contain this exception as it was originally drafted to criminalise homosexuality.



- IPC Section 377, now omitted in the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS), is often the only legal recourse for married women in cases of non-consensual sex in a marriage. The HC ruling effectively takes away that recourse, echoing the same concerns that legal experts had when the BNS omitted the provision entirely.
- There is no equivalent for Section 377 in the BNS. Numerous experts have argued that this is an issue as the deletion of the law leaves men and LGBTQIA+ individuals without meaningful protection against sexual offences.
- In November 2023, a Parliamentary Standing Committee tasked with recommending changes to the BNS (before it was enacted) said in its report that Section 377 remained applicable “in cases of non-consensual carnal intercourse with adults”. By deleting it from the BNS, it noted that “no provision for non-consensual sexual offence against male, female, transgender and for bestiality has been made”.

CONCEPT OF SEXUAL EQUALITY MUST BE PART OF SYLLABUS: SC

The Supreme Court on Friday told the Centre that the concept of sexual equality and moral and ethical training of how men should behave with women respectfully must become a part of school syllabus.

“Moral and ethical training, etiquette must be made part of the school syllabus. There must be a module to inculcate this in schools at a very early age for children... Now, schools do not have moral education. Certain schools have it, but the class is usually cancelled and some other subjects are taken,” Justice B.V. Nagarathna, heading a Bench comprising Justice S.C. Sharma, observed.

Justice Nagarathna said equality between daughters and sons must start at home. But, instead, discrimination starts at home with the parents.

“Parents are more focused on restraining their daughters and not their sons. The word ‘discrimination’ must go from our vocabulary,” the judge said.

The court was hearing a writ petition filed by petitioner-in-person and senior advocate Aabad Ponda, who said the root cause for the surge in rape cases and incidents of crimes against women was the lack of education at the basic level about equality among the sexes.

‘Tremendous strain’

“Fifty per cent of our population, women, are living under tremendous strain and insecurity. There is a rise in the misogynistic and barbaric attitude towards women. Education must start at the smallest level to change the attitude towards women,” Mr. Ponda submitted.

Justice Nagarathna agreed that many social circles still believed that a woman neither belonged to her parents’ home nor the in-laws’ home after marriage.

Awareness that a woman was independent, her own person, and commanded respect and equal treatment in society must be inculcated in society, the judge noted.

Justice Nagarathna said environmental science started being taught in schools as a subject on the orders of the Supreme Court. Likewise, moral education must become a part of the school syllabus.



The court ordered the government to place on record any measures taken by it so far to include the concept of sexual equality in school syllabus.

Mr. Ponda's plea also recommended using advertisements and the visual media for conveying zero tolerance to rape.

"Awareness of the stringent laws against rape must be advertised in cinema halls and in the media. There is no point if the person knows about these laws after he is sentenced to 20 years or is about to be hung to death," Mr. Ponda argued. He said knee-jerk reactions like making punishments harsher after a gruesome crime was hardly a solution.

Efforts to bridge the gap

The petition said efforts have to be made to bridge the gap between the law and the understanding and dissemination of the law to the public.

"The need of identifying the real cause of this crime is the first requirement. Once this is done, the next step would be to try to find measures to revolutionise the male mindset in the country amongst a large portion of the populace and instil in them the fear of the law," it said.

APPOINTED UNDER TN CASTE REFORM, 2 PRIESTS ALLEGE TEMPLE DISCRIMINATION

Two non-Brahmin priests at a Tamil Nadu temple, appointed under a landmark caste-inclusive reform by the state government, have accused hereditary priests there of barring them from entering the sanctum sanctorum. With a major religious ceremony approaching, they have now sought the intervention of the state authorities.

- The priests, S Prabhu and Jayapal, appointed in 2021 under the Tamil Nadu government's initiative to open priesthood to all castes, alleged that they have been restricted to performing rituals only in secondary shrines at the Kumaravayalur Subramania Swamy Temple in Tiruchirappalli.
- They said they have never been allowed to enter the inner sanctum of the temple's main deity, Lord Murugan, despite serving for over three years.
- In a formal petition addressed to Chief Minister M K Stalin and the Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments (HR & CE) Department, Prabhu and Jayapal detailed their plight, complaining that their exclusion has persisted despite legal and administrative backing for their role.
- Tamil Nadu's decision to appoint non-Brahmin priests in 2021 was a significant shift from a centuries-old tradition where temple priesthood remained largely hereditary and Brahmin-dominated. The policy, an extension of the Dravidian movement's long-standing push for social justice, aimed to break caste barriers in religious spaces. However, its implementation has faced persistent resistance.

Do You Know:

- The debate over the appointment of temple priests in Tamil Nadu stems from various government and judicial actions.



—In 1971, the DMK government of Chief Minister M Karunanidhi amended the Tamil Nadu Hindu Religious & Charitable Endowment (HR & CE) Act to abolish the hereditary appointment of priests, and to allow individuals from all castes to be priests.

—In 2006, the government declared all qualified persons eligible to be priests. The Supreme Court struck this down in 2015

— it underlined the adherence to Agama Sastras, while ensuring that constitutional rights were not violated.

- In 2009, Madras High Court ruled in favour of a woman priest from Usilampatti, Madurai, who was facing opposition from male priests regarding her inherited right to conduct puja at the Arulmigu Durgai Amman temple.

- In the Guruvayoor Devaswom case (2004), the SC upheld the appointment of non-believers to the temple trust board. In the N Adithayan (2002) case, the SC ruled that no custom pre-existing the Constitution could exclude non-Brahmins from performing puja in temples if they were otherwise trained and qualified.

- Despite Constitutional provisions and the abolition of hereditary priest appointments in Tamil Nadu, the Agama tradition persists in temple administrations.

SOUTHERN DISCOMFORT

With less than a week for the UGC's deadline to submit feedback on its draft regulations on the appointment and promotion of university teachers and Vice-Chancellors (V-C), States ruled by parties other than the BJP have ratcheted up their opposition. At a conclave in Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Telangana and Karnataka challenged the regulations, saying they would undermine the federal structure, diminish the powers of State legislatures, and weaken the autonomy of State universities. This is the second such conclave, with a previous meeting in Bengaluru including the governments of Himachal Pradesh and Jharkhand, and expressions of solidarity from Punjab. In Tamil Nadu and Kerala, the main Opposition parties are also supportive of the stances of the ruling parties there; some regional parties that belong to the BJP-led NDA have reportedly expressed their concerns in private. A key concern is the UGC's proposal to play an enhanced role in the selection and appointment of V-Cs of State universities. Under the new regulations, the search-cum-selection committees will comprise nominees of the Chancellor (usually the Governor in State universities), the UGC Chairman, and the University syndicate or senate, neatly cutting out State Higher Education departments which were responsible for setting up these expert panels. The Chancellor will appoint the V-C from the list of three to five names shortlisted by the selection committee. UGC chairman M. Jagadesh Kumar has argued that the proposed structure "eliminates ambiguity and ensures a more transparent process", but States oppose the centralisation of power, leaving many State universities leaderless, especially in Tamil Nadu.

Apart from the allegation that the new regulations will dilute academic standards, increase commercialisation and politicisation, and reduce access to higher education for poor and disadvantaged students, the States have asked why they are being sidelined in university administration even while they continue to bear most of the financial costs for State-run higher education. Beyond higher education, there is a larger constitutional issue of Centre-State relations at stake: can delegated legislation such as the rules and regulations framed by the Union



government and its agencies in the executive branch under a central law override the provisions of a plenary State law passed by a State legislature? The opposing States plan to send a high-level delegation to the Union Education Ministry and challenge the regulations in court, indicating a political and legal escalation of the issue. The UGC must not ignore this plethora of concerned voices and should remove anti-federal provisions from its draft before notifying the new regulations.

ERODING FEDERALISM

By withholding Tamil Nadu's central share of Samagra Shiksha funds for rejecting the National Education Policy (NEP 2020), the Union Government is flexing its muscles to coerce States into submission. This move also undermines the intent of the Samagra Shiksha scheme (2018-19), which consolidated the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan, and Teacher Education programmes. The scheme was designed to ensure equitable access to quality education for all schoolchildren. Since last year, Tamil Nadu has repeatedly flagged the non-disbursal of ₹2,152 crore, warning that the funding shortfall has severely strained its school education infrastructure, affecting nearly 40 lakh students and 32,000 staff members. Union Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan has explicitly blamed the State for the impasse, declaring that the funds will be released only if Tamil Nadu implements the NEP in "letter and spirit". Adding fuel to the fire, he has insisted that the State adopt the three-language formula, mandating Tamil, English, and a regional language in schools. This stance disregards Tamil Nadu's long-standing opposition to the trilingual system, dating back to 1937, and its firm commitment to a two-language policy of Tamil and English since 1968. Going a step further, Mr. Pradhan has accused Tamil Nadu's leadership of being divisive and politically motivated. He even suggested that the State needs to "come to terms with the Indian Constitution" and adhere to the "rule of law", implying, quite unwarrantedly, that the State was not being run in line with the statute.

Unsurprisingly, the response in Tamil Nadu has been swift and sharp, especially on the language issue, which remains non-negotiable for most political parties in the State. Chief Minister M.K. Stalin has rightly questioned which constitutional provision mandates the three-language policy and warned that such blatant coercion will not be tolerated. While the NEP claims it does not "impose Hindi", successive Union Governments have, until now, respected Tamil Nadu's autonomy over its language policy. Policies governing subjects in the Concurrent List of the Constitution require flexibility and dialogue to ensure successful implementation across diverse regions. A rigid, one-size-fits-all approach risks undermining cooperative federalism and fostering resentment among States, which are equal stakeholders in central schemes. A more pragmatic approach would be to delink Samagra Shiksha and the Pradhan Mantri Schools for Rising India (PM SHRI) scheme from the NEP and instead tie funding to generic performance indicators. At the same time, Tamil Nadu would do well to finalise and roll out its long-pending State Education Policy as a viable alternative to the NEP, ensuring academic continuity and stability for its students.

THE DEEPER MEANING OF DECLINING SCHOOL ENROLMENT

As the world's most populous country, India hopes to reap its demographic dividend due to its burgeoning youth population. Demographers and policy planners always knew that this window of opportunity would remain open, but only for a limited time. Declining school enrolment over the past decade marks the beginning of the end of this period. This means that India may become older even before becoming rich.



It is no wonder that the Unified District Information System for Education Plus (U-DISE+) data for 2022-23 and 2023-24, which was released by the Ministry of Education on December 30, 2024, caused much consternation as it showed a 15.5 million drop (6%) in school enrolment since 2018-19.

The official line versus the reality

Official sources have attributed the decline in enrolment to improvements in data collection. They explain that seeding Aadhaar numbers with enrolment eliminates multiple enrolments. This may sound plausible because it has long been suspected that some children are enrolled in multiple schools.

However, an analysis of decade-long data (2014-15 to 2023-24) on enrolment and its correlation with different independent variables, including the changes in the population in the age groups relevant to schooling, tells a different story. In fact, it shows a rather grim picture. The needle points toward the beginning of the end of the era of reaping the demographic dividend.

It is a matter of concern that school enrolment has plummeted by 24.51 million, or 9.45%, over the past decade, with elementary-level enrolment registering a rather pronounced fall of 18.7 million (13.45%). Up to this level, education has been free and compulsory under the Right to Education (RTE) Act since 2009.

In comparison, secondary-level enrolment declined by 1.43 million (3.75%), whereas senior secondary-level enrolments have increased by 3.63 million (15.46%) over the decade. This means that the decline began only recently.

Government and private schools

The data further show that enrolment in government and government-aided schools, which account for more than 65% of the total school enrolment (and the mainstay of the poor and marginalised sections of society), recorded a significantly higher decline: by 19.89 million (13.8%) and 4.95 million (16.41%), respectively.

In these schools, too, the decline in enrolment at the elementary level has been rather pronounced: 21.78 million (18.31%) in government schools and 3.85 million (24.34%) in government-aided schools. They have also experienced lower enrolment at the secondary level, albeit at a lower rate.

Private unaided schools have been an exception, as their total enrolment increased by 1.61 million, or 2.03%. Notably, however, they registered only a marginal increase in elementary and secondary level enrolment, though their senior secondary-level enrolment surged by 1.41 million (15.55%). These schools seemingly bucked the trend but did not remain entirely unaffected.

Enrolment has declined across the board and persisted since 2014-15, particularly at the elementary levels. They can neither be ascribed to methodological changes nor dismissed as a one-off temporary event. They reflect a systematic transition. The nation is at the cusp of a paradigm shift, and one does not have to go too far to prove this point.

It may not be a coincidence that the country's school-going population in the age group of 6-17 years has also declined by 17.30 million (5.78%) over the past decade. The decline in the population in the age groups of 6-13 and 14-15 years, relevant to enrolment at the elementary and secondary levels, has dropped by 18.7 million (9.12%) and 2.17 million (4.35%), respectively.



Delving deeper, the data discern a statistically significant strong positive correlation between school enrolment and the estimated population in the relevant age group, so much so that the decline in the population of the relevant age group explains the 60.36% decline in enrolment.

The finding is further corroborated by the fact that the number of schools in the country has also declined by 79,109, from 1.55 million in 2017-18 to 1.47 million in 2023-14, a decline of 5.1%. These are in sync with the fact that India's fertility rate declined to 2.01 in 2022, which is far below the replacement level of 2.10. The persistent plummeting of school enrolment is mainly due to demographic changes, which do not augur well for the country.

The social impact

A burgeoning youth population is necessary for enrolment growth, which India has been experiencing until recently. It has now entered the phase when the population bulge is shifting to the right. Since the process began only recently, it is reflected rather sharply in elementary-level enrolment. The effect will gradually but firmly be felt in secondary and senior secondary-level enrolment, and will finally impinge on higher education.

As is already the case in most developed countries, we will soon face the transition to a shrinking working-age population. This is disconcerting because it is happening sooner than expected.

Ideally, a country must reap as much demographic dividend as possible to generate much-needed income and wealth to support and sustain the burden of an ageing population. India will likely see its population age even before becoming rich.

Declining school enrolment has less to do with the change in data collection method than a shift in the demographic bulge to the right. Unless the 2021 Census, which is yet to begin, presents a different demographic trend, it could mark the beginning of the end of the demographic dividend for India.

EXPRESS VIEW ON CAMPUS RAGGING: BREAK THE CYCLE

A first-generation college goer from Assam whose IIT dream ended in an unresolved tragedy on campus; a young doctor from the Bhil Tadvi community who died by suicide following alleged caste-based harassment by seniors in her hostel room. These are only two of the 78 deaths on campus between January 2012 and October 2023, the very real consequences of the dark undertow of campus life — ragging. An investigation by this newspaper has revealed a worrying trend: A despairing lack of justice and closure for the victims of ragging, the young and the vulnerable. From physical abuse to mental harassment, many students find themselves trapped in an unrelenting cycle of violence that often culminates in extreme consequences, including physical harm, irreparable damage to mental health and death by suicide. The investigation shows that victims are often those already on the margins — students from underprivileged backgrounds or historically oppressed communities, first-generation learners who face a difficult adjustment to life in a new, unfamiliar, often intimidating, environment, youngsters who are less equipped to face the physical and emotional trauma of this brazen violation of dignity.

In 2009, setting up guidelines to combat ragging in educational institutions, the Supreme Court had called for strict monitoring of cases of bullying on campuses, the creation of anti-ragging committees, and institutional mechanisms to investigate grievances and deal with offenders. The University Grants Commission (UGC) had also instituted a dedicated helpline to address complaints and spread awareness. However, despite these legal frameworks and explicit

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mandates, more than a decade later, institutions remain mired in inertia. The UGC chief has flagged weak enforcement of regulations; authorities speak of “frivolous” complaints and difficulties in determining what constitutes ragging. Across the divide, many youngsters fear the repercussions of speaking out — peer pressure, institutional apathy, and, in some cases, the reluctance of families to pursue protracted legal battles for justice. All these allow the problem to fester.

As the recent instance of ragging at a government nursing college in Kottayam has shown, it is rarely a rite of initiation, more a weapon of intimidation. Ragging is about power and control, humiliation and oppression, a spillover of the violence and rage woven into the architecture of daily life. To deal with this culture of brutality, a mere tightening of regulations is unlikely to work. It will require the more difficult task of creating an environment of genuine inclusivity, where respect, empathy and accountability are not mere catchphrases that are bandied about but put to actual practice at home and outside of it. Where an unlearning of prejudices is complemented by mental-health services that are readily available, confidential, and equipped to deal with the needs of diverse communities. Most of all, it will require ensuring that in places meant to foster diversity, there is no room for impunity. Today’s fresher, the ragging victim, is tomorrow’s senior, the ragging perpetrator. Campuses need to understand and address this to meet the very promise of education — a safe space for learning, growth, and equality for all.

EXPRESS VIEW ON STUDENT SUICIDES: INDIA NEEDS KINDER, GENTLER CAMPUSES

Two separate instances of death by suicide – of a woman student from Nepal at Kalinga Institute of Industrial Technology (KIIT) in Odisha and an undergraduate student at Ashoka University in Haryana — highlight once again the mental-health challenges across India’s higher education institutions. It also indicates the importance — and inadequacy — of these institutions in keeping pace with the changing needs and aspirations of a multi-ethnic student body. According to reports, the 20-year-old engineering student at KIIT had filed a harassment complaint against a male student on campus. The university had apparently offered counselling to both and let matters rest. This response, as it turns out, was not enough.

The diversity in Indian universities — the classroom today has representatives from different regions, economic divides, even nationalities — demands that institutions have in place support structures that can help students cope with the challenges of what is one of the most demanding phases of their young lives. As an increasingly diverse student body swells the ranks of both public and private universities, it is imperative that institutions too grow to meet their often complex needs. According to the KIIT website, the university accommodates around 40,000 students from across India and 2,000 international students. Around 40 per cent of the latter are from Nepal. And yet, for many outstation or international students, especially those from African nations or from the Subcontinent, the reality is a far cry from the idealised image of a “global campus”. Cultural shock, alienation and discrimination are common experiences. Facing protests after the girl’s death, for instance, KIIT directed students from Nepal to vacate the campus. The way staff members interacted with the protesting students, crude and intimidating, is a textbook example of how not to interact with students. and staff members. These indicate an urgent need for more intensive awareness and sensitivity training across the board.

As the share of students in higher education increases, fundamental to this change is the need to ensure an inclusive environment that makes students feel heard and valued. More so when in many cases students are young adults moving to campuses and cities far from home, without the reassuring networks of family and friends. That’s why a one-size-fits-all approach to support,



whether academic, social, or related to mental health, is unlikely to work. Instead, a more nuanced and personalised engagement with campus life is imperative. Investigations into a spate of student suicides on the IIT-Madras campus between 2022 and 2023, for instance, led its administration to come up with unusual solutions, including a sports quota for athletes. In other centres, a supernumerary quota for women was introduced to tackle gender imbalance. The entire community stands to gain from a campus culture that is collaborative and empathetic, kinder and gentler to tomorrow's talent.

EXPRESS VIEW ON PRIVATE UNIVERSITIES IN KERALA: OPENING A DOOR

For decades, Kerala's education system has been marked by a paradox: Even as school education thrived — and was held up as a source of the state's pride — the limitations of its higher education system led many students to leave the state in pursuit of better options and greater opportunities. Last week's decision by Kerala's Left Democratic Front-led government to ratify a draft bill that would permit private universities to operate in the state has the potential to change this predicament, stem the outflow of students and, going forward, perhaps even transform the state into an education hub.

The draft bill marks a welcome shift in policy, especially in light of the CPM's historical opposition to opening up the higher education sector to private players. The issue has, indeed, long been contentious. There have been massive protests against previous attempts to open up higher education, most notably in 1995 when, during an agitation against the Congress-led United Democratic Front government's opening of a medical college in the co-operative sector, five Democratic Youth Federation of India workers were killed in police firing. The CPM had also vehemently protested against the AK Antony-led Congress government's decision in 2001 to start self-financing engineering and medical colleges to address the issue of students migrating to other states for higher education, as well as the 2014 decision by the Oommen Chandy government to grant autonomy to reputed arts and science colleges in the state. There has since been a softening of its stance. As Higher Education Minister R Bindu pointed out last week, this was inevitable at a time when competition has sharpened. The decision taken last year to institute a four-year undergraduate format at all universities was also a step in that direction. Among the changes introduced were a uniform academic calendar and greater flexibility for students in choosing subjects, allowing them to design their own curriculum.

The latest move is yet another acknowledgement of the growing demand for greater institutional diversity, enhanced research opportunities, and world-class infrastructure. However, its success will depend largely on the regulatory framework that governs these universities. Kerala must now take care to ensure that private universities enhance, rather than undermine, the state's academic ethos. This is an opportunity to be built on: Private universities can bring fresh investment, global collaborations, and interdisciplinary research that strengthen Kerala's academic ecosystem. They can ensure that the ambitions of Kerala's students, and also those of aspirants from other parts of the country, are met.

NEW LINE IN DELHI

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)'s appointment of a first-time Member of the Legislative Assembly, Rekha Gupta, as the new Chief Minister of Delhi, is in line with its preference for relatively junior and fresh faces in leadership positions. Ms. Gupta has risen through the ranks of the Sangh Parivar and won Delhi University Students Union and municipal elections, before being



elected to the Assembly from Shalimar Bagh. She has held positions in the party and its frontal organisations. Now, entrusted with the position of the Chief Minister, Ms. Gupta, 50, has her task cut out. She has to balance community and sectional interests within the party, command authority over the bureaucracy, and balance multiple power centres within the unique and complex governance architecture of Delhi. All levels of the government in Delhi are now under the control of the BJP, which might improve governance in the city. Ms. Gupta is the fourth woman Chief Minister of Delhi, the second woman Chief Minister of Delhi from the BJP, and the only woman among the party's 14 Chief Ministers across India. A woman in the top post allows the BJP to deflect other factional claims in the party, and possibly boosts its popular image. Ms. Gupta also represents the trader bania community which has been a bedrock of the BJP's politics in Delhi for decades. The new leader ticks many boxes for the party, and her success depends on how she grows into the challenging role.

The BJP has tried to balance caste and community representation in the new Council of Ministers. In Parvesh Sahib Singh Verma, the party has found someone to represent the Jat community, in Manjinder Singh Sirsa, the Sikh community, in Ashish Sood, the Punjabi Hindu community, in Ravinder Indraj Singh, Dalits, in Kapil Mishra, Brahmins, and in Pankaj Kumar Singh, the Purvanchali community. The new government has a multitude of governance challenges awaiting it. The problems of air and water pollution are issues that need a solution that go beyond the boundaries of Delhi; issues such as law and order are under the purview of the Union Home Ministry. Ms. Gupta's experience of being a three-term municipal councillor could help, as would the fact that the neighbouring Haryana and Uttar Pradesh also have BJP governments. The BJP has returned to power in the national capital after 26 years, having offered the electorate a raft of welfare schemes to achieve that. There are the issues of unemployment and underemployment, and affordable housing and infrastructure that require the government's attention.

EXPRESS VIEW ON HIMANTA SARMA'S ALLEGATIONS AGAINST GAURAV GOGOI: SELF-DEFEATING STRATEGY

Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma is an astute politician who has been a part of the state government across dispensations. For much of this year so far, his focus has been on the Advantage Assam 2.0 summit, meant to attract investors to the state. Sarma has met foreign dignitaries and travelled to multiple countries to promote the event. Yet, the BJP leader seems not to realise that the push for FDI sits uneasily with a politics that stokes spectres of the "foreign hand".

Over the last several days, Sarma has strenuously peddled allegations that Congress leader Gaurav Gogoi is involved with Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) and other foreign agencies, through his wife, a British national. The Assam Police have filed an FIR against Pakistani climate policy expert Ali Tauqeer Sheikh — Sarma's political rival's wife's colleague — which includes charges under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA). The apparent basis for this — along with the CM's rash accusations from the pulpit — is a series of tweets by Sheikh on Assam's treatment of minorities. It is difficult not to see the controversy as contrived for political ends. Even in the deeply polarised political conversation of the day, it is rare to see families and spouses dragged through the mud in this manner.

There was a sense recently that Sarma was looking to frame a politics that went beyond conspiracies and communal dog whistles. His focus on the Advantage Assam summit, highlighting the Rs 2,700-crore semiconductor plant by the Tatas and the push towards dealing with infant



and maternal mortality, appeared promising. It seemed that the CM could envision a politics beyond “land jihad”, “fertiliser jihad”, “flood jihad” and the spectres of illegal migration. Through this divisive rhetoric, he may be aiming for political capital, but this strategy is self-defeating. First, it takes a pessimistic view of what the voter wants. Second, such a pitch often delivers diminishing political returns, and comes in the way of establishing a reputation for governance. Third, a climate of parochialism and fear is not conducive to kindling the animal spirits of entrepreneurs and investors. Sarma is free to take on his political rivals, including Gogoi. But Sarma would do well to desist from giving the impression that he is weaponising the law and police in a witch hunt.

HOW DOES A PRESIDENT’S RULE FUNCTION?

The story so far:

On February 13, four days after Manipur Chief Minister N. Biren Singh’s resignation, the Union government announced that President’s rule has been implemented in the violence-hit State. A notification from the Ministry of Home Affairs stated that President Droupadi Murmu was satisfied that “a situation has arisen in which the government of that State cannot be carried on in accordance with the provisions of the Constitution.”

Why has it been imposed?

The violence between the Meitei and Kuki-Zo communities, ongoing since May 2023, has claimed above 250 lives and displaced over 60,000 people. The conflict originated from the Meitei demand for Scheduled Tribe (ST) status, which the Kukis opposed, fearing loss of job opportunities and other affirmative actions meant for STs. A political crisis erupted in the State after Mr. Singh resigned on February 9, and the State BJP leadership struggled to reach a consensus on his successor.

What does the Constitution say?

Emergency provisions, inspired by the German Constitution and outlined in Part XVIII of the Indian Constitution, protect India’s sovereignty, unity and security. They empower the Central government to address extraordinary crises by temporarily assuming control to ensure stability and safeguard the democratic framework. The Constitution provides for three types of emergencies — national (Article 352), State (Article 356) and financial (Article 360).

In Manipur, the President has proclaimed a “state emergency” — popularly known as “President’s Rule” or “Constitutional Emergency” — by exercising powers under Article 356. This fulfils the Union’s obligation under Article 355 to protect States against ‘external aggression’ and ‘internal disturbance’ (such as separatist or sectarian violence or calamities beyond a State’s control) and to ensure that State governments operate as per the Constitution. When a State’s “constitutional machinery” fails due to non-performance or malperformance, Article 356(1) empowers the President to issue a proclamation— upon receiving a report from the Governor or otherwise — if she is satisfied that the State government cannot function constitutionally. This effectively transfers all executive functions of the State to the Centre and legislative functions to Parliament while leaving the High Court’s (HC) powers unaffected. Additionally, Article 365 provides that if a State fails to comply with any Union directions under constitutional provisions, the President may declare a “Constitutional Emergency.”

As per Clause 3 of Article 356, the proclamation must be laid before each House of Parliament, and unless approved by a ‘simple majority’ in both Houses, it ceases after two months. Once approved,



it remains effective for six months from the proclamation date, with further six-month extensions requiring additional Parliamentary approval. Renewal beyond one year is allowed only if two conditions are met — an Emergency has been declared in the country or any part of the State, and if the Election Commission certifies that President's rule is necessary due to difficulties in conducting State elections. However, in no case can the proclamation remain effective for more than three years, and the President may revoke or vary it at any time by a subsequent proclamation.

How is a 'constitutional emergency' different from a 'national emergency'?

Article 352 governs the proclamation of a "national emergency," which has been invoked thrice — during the 1962 India-China war, the 1971-armed conflict with Pakistan, and in 1975 on grounds of "internal disturbance." In 1975, then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi declared the emergency after the Allahabad High Court, in *The State of Uttar Pradesh versus Raj Narain* (1975), found her guilty of "electoral malpractices" and debarred her from holding any elected post.

Unlike a "State emergency," proclaiming a "national emergency" requires that the President be satisfied that India's security — or any part of its territory — is threatened by war, external aggression, or armed rebellion. The 44th Constitutional amendment (1978) introduced multiple safeguards to prevent misuse. It replaced "internal disturbance" with "armed rebellion", mandated a written recommendation from the Cabinet (rather than just the Prime Minister), and shortened the parliamentary approval window from two months to one month. It also clarified that Articles 20 and 21 cannot be suspended, and that the President must revoke the proclamation if the Lok Sabha passes a resolution disapproving it. Crucially, the amendment restored judicial review of the President's satisfaction in proclaiming an emergency, a safeguard removed by the 38th Constitutional amendment (1975).

Unlike a "constitutional emergency" (which can last up to three years), a "national emergency" has no time limit. Additionally, while the President's rule (Article 356) requires a 'simple majority' for parliamentary approval, a national emergency needs a 'special majority'. In a national emergency, the State executive and legislature continue to function, whereas under President's Rule, the State executive is dismissed, and the legislature is suspended or dissolved. However, the Manipur Assembly, which has a tenure till 2027, has not been dissolved but is placed under "suspended animation". This means that the Assembly is temporarily "paused", allowing its revival if 'political stability' is restored.

Does it affect fundamental rights?

President's rule does not affect citizens' fundamental rights, unlike a national emergency, where under Article 358, freedoms under Article 19 become inoperative, and the President may suspend other fundamental rights, except Articles 20 and 21. Under President's Rule, the President acquires extraordinary powers, with the Governor, on her behalf, administering the State with assistance from the Chief Secretary or advisers appointed by the President. Additionally, Article 357 allows Parliament to confer legislative power on the President and authorise delegation to another authority while also giving the President power to sanction expenditure from the State's Consolidated Fund.

What has the SC said about the use and misuse of President's rule?

For a long time, courts upheld the Centre's frequent unusual imposition of President's rule. However, the landmark *S.R. Bommai versus Union of India* (1994) judgment redefined these



powers. Referencing the Sarkaria Commission's recommendation that Article 356 be used only as a last resort, the SC observed, "The Constitution of India has created a federation but with a bias in favour of the Centre. ...But that does not mean that States are mere appendages of the Centre" ... It also highlighted the Commission's points that "constitutional machinery" could fail due to political crises, internal subversion or fiscal breakdown, among other factors.

Further, the SC held that the President's power under Article 356 is conditional, not absolute, and that any proclamation is subject to judicial review. Both the SC and HCs can strike it down if found mala fide or based on irrelevant or extraneous grounds. The top court further clarified that the President cannot dissolve the assembly without Parliament's approval and that the Centre must first issue a warning notice to the erring State, seeking an explanation. Once proclaimed, the State government has to go, as two governments in one sphere is impermissible. Moreover, the SC clarified that President's rule must be invoked only for breakdowns of "constitutional machinery" (distinct from ordinary law-and-order failures) and never for political gains.

WHEN CAN PRESIDENT'S RULE BE IMPOSED?

The story so far:

Four days after Manipur Chief Minister N. Biren Singh resigned, the State was put under President's Rule on February 13. Though the ruling BJP still holds a majority in the Manipur Assembly, the party was unable to find a consensus Chief Minister candidate. The State has also been wracked by ethnic violence since May 2023, and Mr. Singh faced criticism for his handling of the conflict from many sides, including from within his own party. This is the 11th time that President's Rule has been imposed in Manipur, the highest in any State.

What is President's Rule?

President's Rule is a provision under Article 356 to be imposed in case of the failure of the constitutional machinery in a State. In such situations, based on a report by the State's Governor or other inputs, the President can issue a Proclamation taking over the functions of the State's government and Governor — effectively transferring them to the Union government — and transferring the powers of the State Assembly to Parliament. The President cannot, however, assume any of the powers vested in a High Court. The President's proclamation must be laid before Parliament, and will expire in two months unless both Houses ratify it. It may be renewed by Parliament every six months, for a maximum period of three years. After the first year, renewal can take place under certain conditions, of an Emergency being declared in the country or the State, or the Election Commission declaring that State elections cannot be held.

Article 356 does not list the various specific circumstances under which President's Rule can be imposed, leaving it to the judgment of the President (and the Union Council of Ministers advising her) to satisfy herself that "a situation has arisen in which the Government of the State cannot be carried on in accordance with the Provisions of this Constitution". A comprehensive assessment of President's Rule published by the Lok Sabha Secretariat in 2016 listed situations in which it has been imposed, apart from militancy and law and order: defections by MLAs, break-up of coalitions, passing of no-confidence motions, resignations of Chief Ministers, absence of legislatures in newly formed States, and public agitations leading to instability. The Supreme Court's judgment in the 1994 S.R. Bommai vs Union of India case also listed the circumstances in which President's Rule could and could not be imposed, though it made it clear this was not exhaustive.



What are some previous instances of the imposition of President's Rule?

Though Dr. B.R. Ambedkar hoped it would remain a “dead letter,” President's rule has been imposed nearly 134 times across 29 States and UTs since the Constitution took effect in 1950, reflecting its dual role as both a crisis-management tool and a politically contentious measure.

President's Rule has been imposed 135 times, in 35 States and Union Territories, including some that no longer exist. The first instance was in June 1951, in Punjab, when the State's Chief Minister Gopi Chand Bhargava resigned due to internal differences in the Congress party. In all, Punjab has been under Central control for well over a decade. The only State which has spent more time under Central control is J&K, which has had President's Rule imposed for almost 15 years (including in the Union Territory of J&K), with the longest continuous stints of more than six years each from 1990 to 1996 and from 2019 to 2024. After Manipur, the most frequent imposition of President's Rule has been 10 times in Uttar Pradesh.

There have also been several instances of Article 356 being applied in cases where the same party is in power at both Centre and State, including in Andhra Pradesh in 1973, Assam in 1981, Gujarat in 1974, Karnataka in 1990, and now in Manipur in 2025.

In 1977, the newly elected Morarji Desai government imposed President's Rule on nine Congress-ruled States at one go, claiming that they no longer held the confidence of the electorate which had voted out the Congress at the Centre. When Indira Gandhi returned to power in 1980, she returned the favour, imposing President's Rule in nine States for the same reason. The Supreme Court at the time refused to interfere in the matter.

Why has it become less frequent?

A few decades later, the Bommai judgment marked a shift in the court's stance. The nine-judge Bench said that courts could review the President's proclamation by “examining whether it was issued on the basis of any material at all or whether the material was relevant or whether the proclamation was issued in the mala fide exercise of the power,” former Attorney-General late Soli Sorabjee had said in a critique of the 1994 judgment. “This means the proclamation can be struck down if found to be unconstitutional. This is a clear deterrence to the government,” said P.D.T. Acharya, a former Lok Sabha Secretary General.

Between 1950 and 1994, President's Rule was imposed 100 times, an average of 2.5 times a year. In the three decades since, it has been imposed 30 times or about once a year. In fact, the imposition in Manipur is the first since Puducherry in February 2021, almost four years ago. Since the Narendra Modi-led NDA government came to power in 2014, President's Rule has been imposed 11 times, including four times in J&K. Of these, the courts have struck down the proclamation twice, in Arunachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand.

What does it mean to keep a legislature in suspended animation?

Though Manipur has been placed under President's Rule, its Assembly has not been dissolved. Instead, it has been kept under suspended animation. When the Assembly is placed under suspended animation, it can be revived whenever it becomes possible to form a popular government after revoking President's Rule.



PRESIDENT'S RULE AND THE ROAD AHEAD

The Narendra Modi-led BJP government at the Centre has finally done the inevitable by imposing President's Rule in Manipur on February 13, after dragging its feet for over 21 months, and four days after N. Biren Singh resigned as Chief Minister. The change in political gear stems not from the BJP's first-order-of-preference, but as an escape route to avoid an imminent fall of its government and an impending constitutional crisis in the State. However, this crisis, along with the belated imposition of President's Rule, presents both challenges and opportunities for the BJP-led central government and for various stakeholders in Manipur's violence to restore normalcy and establish trust and legitimacy in the Indian State and its institutions.

The BJP's last resort to President's Rule to avert a constitutional crisis has busted the myth around BJP's electoral USP of a double-engine sarkar, which has been projected as the hallmark of efficiency, stability, and strength. The most formidable challenge is therefore to creatively use President's Rule as an opportunity to reverse this and establish what Michael Mann, the eminent political sociologist calls the 'infrastructural power' of the State. This is premised on the assumption that the biggest casualty in over 21 months of violence has been the erosion of trust and legitimacy of the State and its institutions.

Crucial, but not enough

Extensive reports show how the complicity and partisan role of the State government and its police forces during this violence have not only ruptured shared territorial space but have also drastically eroded citizens' trust in the State government. Under Mr. Singh's populist leadership, the State government is seen to have capitulated to the Meitei ultranationalist and majoritarian agenda. This point is brought into sharp relief by a recent forensic report by Truth Labs submitted to the Supreme Court, which confirms a 93% similarity between the YouTube voice samples and the alleged audio of Mr. Singh in a leaked tape, where he allegedly made self-incriminating claims about his role in starting and perpetuating the violence.

Seen against this context, the imposition of President's Rule must be seen as a necessary but not sufficient step towards establishing the State's 'infrastructural power' to restore normalcy and constitutional order in Manipur. If the capacity of the State to autonomously regulate State-society relations is the hallmark of this power, then it must not recapitulate to powerful ultranationalist and majoritarian agendas of social forces and populist leaders. These leaders harvest the insecurity complex of the gullible public to falsely project themselves as messiahs who will restore an elusive, glorious indigenous past to secure the survival of the community and the State from the unwanted 'others'.

It is worth underscoring how Friedrich Ratzel's idea of lebensraum was weaponised during Nazi rule in Germany in the 1930s when the unwanted Jews 'others,' were violently targeted to protect the purity of the German Aryan race and the Third Reich. That this has unusual resonance with the militant ultranationalist and populist drive to restore Manipur's indigenous past should shudder us and affirm our resolve not to feed these politics anymore.

This is not to suggest the permanent inseparability between reviving one's glorious past and violent targeting of the 'unwanted' others to secure one's survival. The 'ideological apparatus' of the State can play a crucial role in detoxifying militant ideas and reorienting our political culture and political socialisation in ways that promote our connected and shared past. The present and future pathways of communities and the State must be built on the principles of justice, mutual



trust, respect, and recognition of each other's distinctiveness. Along with this, it is imperative that the State must be seen to uphold the rule of law and the constitutional order to secure not only equality of all citizens before the law but also equal protection of the law.

'Building legitimacy'

Outsourcing law and order to vigilante and armed groups, using them as proxies to further ultranationalist and majoritarian agendas, randomised stereotyping, and selectively targeting a community, among others, must be stopped. They must be firmly dealt with, in accordance with relevant provisions of the law without fear or favour.

Only when the State rises above partisan interests and insulates itself from powerful forces can it effectively regulate State-society relations in Manipur, to promote trust and legitimacy of the State and institutions. As M. Sajjad Hassan, a former bureaucrat-turned-academic-activist with extensive field experience in Manipur and Mizoram, has reminded us, identity crisis and its attendant violent conflicts stems primarily from a 'legitimacy crisis' of the State and not the other way round. For Mr. Hassan, 'building legitimacy' of State institutions is the most critical challenge in deeply divided places if social order, peace, and stability were to be preserved.

Once the infrastructural power of the State is established, concerted attempts must be made to demobilise and disarm armed groups across the divide. Accountability must be fixed expeditiously for the atrocious crimes committed during this violence to deliver justice.

Establishing normalcy and durable peace in Manipur, which has witnessed protracted armed insurgency, requires a negotiated political solution and not merely a law-and-order approach.

Declaring Manipur as a 'hill State' is one such solution offered by certain quarters to neutralise a separate administration demand by the Kuki-Zomi-Hmar groups. Although a plausible proposition, its implications on extant sub-State constitutional asymmetry under Article 371 C must be carefully assessed. Behind this prescription lies a political project to arraign the hills-valley institutional binary, and a refusal to acknowledge the systemic manipulation and persistent refusal to devolve meaningful autonomy to the tribal people, as a source of structural violence.

Flattening and homogenising institutional arrangements in ways that dissolve the extant sub-State constitutional asymmetry and the protective discrimination enjoyed by the tribal groups on matters pertaining to representation, jobs, and land rights is the surest means to perpetuate an oppressive and assimilationist structure. Couched in the language of civilisational unity, this may cohere with and be particularly appealing to the BJP's nationalist agenda. However, it is grossly insensitive to the distinct and autonomous societal cultures of the valley and hill tribal communities.

Any attempt to use President's Rule as a ruse to centralise powers and dissolve extant sub-State constitutional asymmetry as a facade to perpetuate the oppressive rule of the dominant community is unlikely to secure Manipur's 'territorial integrity'. On the contrary, it may further bolster and legitimise the Kuki-Zomi-Hmar groups' demand for a separate administration.

Balancing power fairly

Given the longstanding historical foundations of distinctive sub-State constitutional asymmetry and protective discrimination, securing durable peace in Manipur impels an affirmation, not dissolution, of the existing institutional regime. Disrupting the already lopsided power balance



between the hill tribal and valley communities in favour of the latter is only a recipe for disaster, as it will normalise structural oppression and injustice against the former.

The current spell of President's Rule must leverage a sincere and objective audit of institutions in the State to decentralise, rather than centralise power. Rectifying the existing gaps in representation, and effective redistribution of goods and services to all communities must be the corollary. The opacity and inadequacy in how institutions represent, redistribute, and give voice to diverse communities have spawned a vicious cycle of mistrust, democracy deficits, and violence in Manipur. The challenge is to recalibrate existing institutions in ways that strengthen sub-State constitutional asymmetry to effectively cater to the legitimate needs and demands for distinctive recognition, representation, and redistribution within and between groups.

Any misguided attempt to pander to the majoritarian whims and fancies which perpetuate oppressive rule and threaten to disrupt and endanger our constitutional foundations and values must be avoided, and resisted, at all costs.

IN PURSUIT OF CONTROVERSIES

Neither Tamil Nadu nor its Governor Ravindra Narayan Ravi is a stranger to controversies. However, the last three-odd years of the tenure of the 72-year-old Governor, a retired IPS officer of the Kerala cadre (1976 batch), has all along been full of controversies.

As an officer of the Intelligence wing in the police initially and an interlocutor subsequently for the Naga peace process for seven years, Mr. Ravi, who was also Nagaland Governor during August 2019-September 2021, must have used his diplomatic skills greatly. This could be seen from the fact that he, as the Union government's representative, signed a framework agreement with one of the rebel Naga groups in New Delhi on August 3, 2015. It was another matter that he later courted one controversy after another as the Governor of the northeastern State.

But, in the case of the southern State, the trouble began more than 40 months ago even before Mr. Ravi became the 26th Governor of Tamil Nadu. The then chief of Tamil Nadu Congress Committee, K.S. Alagiri, questioned the motive behind Mr. Ravi's shift and recalled how another retired police officer Kiran Bedi, as Lieutenant Governor of Puducherry (May 2016-February 2021), and the former Congress government, headed by V. Narayanasamy, had fractious ties.

Sign of trouble

The first sign of trouble between the Governor and the DMK government, led by M.K. Stalin, was visible over the issue of clearance to the legislation seeking exemption from the National Eligibility-cum-Entrance Test (NEET) for admission to undergraduate medical courses. The latter gradually found that Mr. Ravi was not acting as a facilitator for sending the Bill to the President for assent. It was then — January 2022 — that the DMK began making its demand for his ouster. After Mr. Ravi sent back the Bill on the ground that it was against the interests of students from rural areas and economically weaker sections, the State Assembly in February 2022 re-adopted it and returned it to him. Eventually, the Governor had referred the Bill to the President, leaving the matter pending. On many other Bills, the State government had to seek remedy from the Supreme Court, which, in November 2023, described as a "serious concern" the "constitutional deadlock" created by Mr. Ravi. On February 7, 2024, the top court asked whether the Governor referred to the President 10 Bills re-passed by the State legislature only to avoid having to give consent to them.



Mr. Ravi is in no way different with regard to higher education where he has a direct role to play in the form of Chancellor of State Universities, six of which have not been having Vice Chancellors (VCs). For the purpose of selecting VCs, he is pushing for the implementation of the UGC's 2018 Regulations, which stipulates the formation of a panel of 3-5 persons, including a nominee of the UGC chief. But the DMK government is citing an order passed by its predecessor AIADMK government in January 2021, which did not accept the stipulation.

Mr. Ravi also raised many eyebrows in May-June 2023 vis a vis Electricity Minister V. Senthilbalaji. After the Supreme Court cleared the decks for the law enforcement authorities to proceed against the Minister in a case of alleged corruption, the Governor initially suggested to Mr. Stalin to drop him from the Cabinet. Later, he rejected the Chief Minister's recommendation for retaining him as a Minister without portfolio, immediately after the Minister's arrest. He had unilaterally "dismissed with immediate effect" Mr. Senthilbalaji from the Cabinet, only to retract later in the day.

Mr. Ravi's refusal to toe the line of the State government during the Governor's customary address to the Assembly has become an annual feature. The Governor has also emerged as a bitter critic of the political philosophy of the Dravidian movement. It is for no reason that Mr. Stalin, who had once wanted him to be axed, is urging the Centre not to disturb Mr. Ravi, who is remaining in his office informally on a borrowed time, as the Chief Minister contends that the Governor's continuation has helped the DMK grow further in the State.

UTTARAKHAND TO STOP OUTSIDERS FROM BUYING FARM LAND IN 11 OF 13 DISTRICTS

The Uttarakhand Cabinet Wednesday approved a new draft law banning people from outside the state from buying agricultural and horticultural land in 11 of the state's 13 districts. The new draft law will be tabled in the ongoing Budget Session of the Assembly.

- Under the new draft law, people from outside the state — except for Haridwar and Udham Singh Nagar — will not be allowed to purchase horticultural and agricultural land, and district magistrates will no longer have the authority to approve land purchases.
- Under the new draft law, a dedicated portal will be created for land transactions in the state, where all purchases made by outsiders will be recorded. Moreover, the new draft law stipulates that people from outside the state must submit an affidavit before purchasing land "to prevent fraud and irregularities".
- If passed, the new draft law will repeal all provisions of Trivendra Singh Rawat's government in 2017, which had lifted the ceiling of 250 sq. m on land purchase outside municipal areas. Following a wave of protests, the Dhamsi government reinstated the ceiling after the 2022 assembly polls.
- According to government sources, under the new law, land within municipal boundaries can only be used according to designated land-use regulations.

Do You Know:

- Purchase of land by non-residents has been a contentious issue in Uttarakhand since its formation in 2000, with a section of its population allegedly seeking stricter land laws to stem "demographic changes".



- In 2003, then Chief Minister ND Tiwari from the Congress introduced the first-ever limit on land purchases in hilly areas by non-Uttarakhand residents, capping it at 500 sq. m. Under the BJP-led government of BC Khanduri, this limit was reduced to 250 square metres. Rawat, also a BJP leader, later entirely lifted this restriction.
- In Himachal, non-agriculturists cannot freely purchase agricultural land. However, with government permission, land can be acquired for specific purposes such as industry, tourism, or horticulture.

STUBBLE BURNING CONTRIBUTES ONLY 14% PM2.5 IN DELHI-NCR: STUDY

Based on field measurements, air mass trajectories, and particle dispersion and chemical transport model simulations, a study published in January 2025 has found that there is no linear correlation between stubble-burning events in Punjab and Haryana and fine particulate matter (PM_{2.5}) concentration in Delhi-NCR. The study also underscores that crop residue burning in Punjab and Haryana contributes only about 14% of PM_{2.5} and is therefore not a primary source of particulate matter concentration in Delhi-NCR. The concentration of PM_{2.5} in Delhi-NCR remained fairly stable and constant despite the stubble-burning events in Punjab and Haryana declining by over 50% from 2015 to 2023, the study found. The results of the study were published in the journal *Climate and Atmospheric Science*.

High-quality measurements of fine particulate matter began at the U.S. Embassy in New Delhi in 2015. The number of stubble-burning events in Punjab and Haryana declined by 31% and 37%, respectively in 2023 compared with 2022. Yet, there was a 20% increase in PM_{2.5} at the U.S. Embassy in 2023, thus highlighting the absence of a linear correlation between stubble-burning events in the two States and PM_{2.5} concentration in Delhi-NCR. A network of 30 sensors was established in August 2022 in rural and urban regions in Punjab, Haryana, and Delhi. Data from the sensors located in Delhi-NCR are in close agreement with the instrument at the U.S. Embassy.

Stubble burning almost ceases after November. However, the air quality index in the Delhi-NCR region has stubbornly remained in the “very poor” to “severe” category since 2016 during the winter months — December to February — due to stagnant winds, lower mixing heights, and inversion conditions, resulting in high pollution. This once again suggests that sources other than stubble burning significantly contribute to air pollution in Delhi-NCR.

There is a link between stubble burning and PM_{2.5} concentration in Delhi-NCR when there is strong wind.

Data of PM_{2.5} and carbon monoxide (CO) were recorded during the day and night by the network sensors. Data from selected sensor sites showed a persistent build-up of fine particulate matter and CO in Delhi during the night, which suggests emissions from localised sources. If stubble burning in Punjab and Haryana was the major source of air pollution in Delhi-NCR, the CO levels would have remained stable and not increased during the night, the authors say. “Carbon monoxide in Delhi-NCR is predominantly emitted from fossil fuel combustion or local biomass burning, independent of the diurnal cycle in PM_{2.5} emission sources,” they write.

As per the study, the day-night differences in PM_{2.5} are about 20% in Delhi-NCR, while the average CO concentration is about 67% greater in the night compared to the day in 2023, and about 48% in 2022. In contrast, in Punjab and Haryana, a clear day-night variation is observed only during the intense stubble-burning periods.



Since the day-night differences in fine particulate matter are greater than CO in the areas with predominant stubble burning, the higher CO emission at night in the Delhi-NCR region points to sources other than stubble burning.

Major contributor

According to Dr. Sachchida N. Tripathi from IIT Kanpur, who is not associated with the study, at 30%, the major contributor to fine particulate matter is the transport sector, followed by local biomass burning at 23%, 10% by the construction industry and road dust, while cooking and industry contribute 5-7%, and 10% is unaccounted. In contrast, stubble burning in Punjab and Haryana contributes only about 13%, and that too only during October and November.

HOW DID A DDOS ATTACK CRIPPLE KAVERI 2.0?

The story so far:

In January, web-based portal Kaveri 2.0, which streamlines property registrations in Karnataka, faced sporadic, crippling server outages. On investigating the outage, the Revenue Department and E-Governance Department concluded that it was not due to “technical glitches” but a “motivated Distributed Denial of Service (DDoS) attack” on Kaveri 2.0, which was launched in 2023 to reform land registration.

What happened after the attack?

Following the incident, K. A. Dayananda, Inspector General of Registrations and Commissioner of Stamps (IGR & CS) lodged a complaint with the cyber-crime police. The Cybercrime, Economic offences, Narcotics (CEN) police registered a case under the Information Technology Act, 2000, against the unidentified miscreants. “The Kaveri 2.0 faced some performance issues during December 2024. Upon analysis and inputs from the Centre for Smart Governance [CSG], it was found that these issues were caused by a malicious DDoS attack using automated tools or bots,” the FIR said.

What is a DDoS attack?

A DDoS attack is a malicious attempt to disrupt the normal functioning of a targeted server, service, or network by overwhelming it with a flood of internet traffic. Unlike a Denial of Service (DoS) attack, which typically involves a single source, a DDoS attack leverages multiple compromised systems, often infected with malware, to generate the traffic. These compromised systems are collectively known as a botnet. Such attacks may be aimed at saturating the bandwidth of a particular site, exploiting weaknesses in the network protocol stack, or targeting specific weaknesses in applications or services. DDoS attacks can lead to service downtime, which render services unavailable, leading to a disruption or potential loss of revenue. While DDoS attacks do not directly steal data, they can be used as a distraction while other forms of cyberattack, such as data breaches, are executed. Organisations that fall victim to DDoS attacks may suffer reputational damage, as customers and partners question their ability to protect against cyber threats.

What happened to Kaveri 2.0?

The Kaveri 2.0 portal experienced performance issues in December 2024 and January 2025. Fake accounts were created, and entries were made into the database using these accounts,



overwhelming the system. The attack involved 62 email accounts originating from 14 IP addresses, highlighting the distributed nature of the assault. In January 2025, a similar attack occurred, with extremely high traffic observed from citizen-side users for Encumbrance Certificate (EC) searches, which was eight times more than usual. At one point, the portal received 6.2 lakh requests in just two hours from malicious users using random keywords to perform searches. This surge in traffic crippled the portal, reducing the number of registrations.

How can such attacks be mitigated?

To protect against DDoS attacks, organisations implement advanced traffic filtering mechanisms to distinguish between legitimate and malicious traffic. Monitoring tools can help identify unusual traffic patterns and take pre-emptive actions. Enforcing rate limiting can control the number of requests a user can make in a given time frame, preventing the system from being overwhelmed. Bot detection technologies, such as CAPTCHA challenges and behavioural analysis, can identify and block automated tools or bots. Additionally, robust authentication mechanisms and regular security audits can strengthen the security of online services and prevent unauthorised access. Organisations can also work closely with cybersecurity agencies to help investigate attacks and identify perpetrators. They can share information and collaborate on mitigation strategies to prevent future attacks. This will include having a dedicated team to monitor and respond to security incidents. For the user, knowing about the risks of phishing and other social engineering attacks can help prevent account compromises.

What next for Kaveri 2.0?

The cyberattack crippled the Kaveri 2.0 portal, and registrations fell significantly on February 1 and 4. While the portal was restored on February 5, the DDoS attack should serve as a wake-up call for organisations, particularly government agencies, to prioritise cybersecurity and implement robust mitigation strategies.

What are other major DDoS attacks?

There are several such attacks, but most recently Elon Musk-owned X was targeted in August 2024. Mr. Musk reported that the platform experienced a massive DDoS attack, which caused delays and disruptions. This attack occurred just before his scheduled conversation with U.S. President Donald Trump, highlighting the vulnerability of even high-profile platforms to cyber threats.

In another occasion, in 2015, Microsoft-owned code repository GitHub was targeted by a China-based botnet. The attack specifically aimed two GitHub projects that provided tools to circumvent Chinese censorship. The attack involved injecting malicious JavaScript code into the browsers of visitors to Baidu, China's most popular search engine, and other sites using Baidu's analytics services.

ON BUILDING RESILIENT TELECOM INFRASTRUCTURE

The story so far:

The Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure (CDRI), a multilateral organisation launched by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2019, put out a report earlier this month studying Indian telecom networks' preparedness in the event of disasters. The report suggests ways in which State governments can better prepare for calamities that may impact telecom networks.



Why is it important?

Telecom networks are crucial to handling disasters, because they allow the State and National Disaster Management Authorities to communicate quickly with local municipalities and the State and Union governments; something that is important when lives and property are at stake. Telecom networks are particularly vulnerable, as they comprise cabling that may not be fully underground, towers that may not be able to withstand high wind speeds, and because they rely on a steady flow of electricity, which is frequently disrupted by disasters like cyclones and earthquakes.

How are they impacted in disasters?

On top of towers being hit by high-speed winds, overland cables — as opposed to underground ones, which can be protected from many disasters — can snap. Coastal regions face elevated risks, as that is where undersea cables connect India with the global internet. If the landing stations of these cables are impacted, there can be massive network disruptions as telecom operators try to reroute traffic through other cables.

The lack of power during disasters remains a major issue. “When I first joined here, I did my own analysis of data of telecom outages since 2016, and found that the real issue was power,” Sanjay Agrawal, deputy director general of disaster management at the Department of Telecommunications said.

What can be done?

Severed undersea cables have a time-consuming repair process that involves a repair vessel arriving near the coast and rejoining the cables. However, since much of the disruption is attributable to power failures, much can be accomplished during a disaster by maintaining or restoring power supply to telecom towers and the network operating centres to which they’re connected. Telecom operators have typically never deployed towers assuming 24/7 power supply — with the possible exception of Mumbai — and have battery as well as fuel backup.

Pradeep Kumar Jena, former Chief Secretary of Odisha, said, “sometimes a tower operator may not have enough power available at a time of disaster for whatever reason — one can’t [pass around] blame at that point of time,” and when this happens, “we decide, let’s give every telecom operator 50 litres of fuel.” Even if the fuel is wasted, the ₹50 lakh spent on it goes a long way in keeping networks online, he said. This is complemented with information from the DoT. “We get data from all telecom operators on damages to their assets for every disaster,” Mr. Agrawal said. “We have software to monitor in real time what telecom assets are down.” As such, resources can be deployed quickly to bring sites back online.

How can networks be protected?

The CDRI report recommends a few measures to develop a resilient telecom network. These include greater data collection and more coordination among officials, a more robust power infrastructure (resilient power infrastructure is also an area where CDRI focuses an enormous amount of effort on), and requiring cell towers to withstand higher wind speeds, especially in coastal States and districts where hurricanes make landfall. The CDRI also advocates for a dig-once policy, which recommends building as much underground civil infrastructure, like water and gas supply lines, drainage and fibre optic cables simultaneously, reducing the risk of cables being



damaged when other infrastructure is built. Existing damage to underground cables can greatly exacerbate disruptions when other parts of a network go down.

“The short- to medium-term roadmap suggests the need to update disaster damage and loss data format, mainstream disaster risk modelling into telecommunications infrastructure planning across all miles, strengthen telecommunications asset design based on local and regional hazard vulnerability profiles,” and other steps to plan ahead, the report says. There are also commercial interventions that the report touches on. A key one is parametric insurance, a system where telecom operators are not left to bear the commercial burden of a disaster all by themselves, and are thus financially incentivised to bring networks back online rapidly (and presumably to nudge them to disaster-proof their infrastructure well enough to keep premiums down).

Telecom resilience comes down to a mix of both massive interventions as well as small investments that can have an outsize benefit. For instance, during heavy rains, diesel generators can stop working even at knee-level flooding. One simple intervention that can go a long way in keeping towers online is by simply installing the generator a little higher up the tower, so that the backup power can kick in even during flooding.

THE DAWN QUAKE IN DELHI

Delhi is no stranger to earthquakes, but the one that occurred before dawn on Monday was slightly different.

- Mostly, the tremors experienced in Delhi from time to time are from earthquakes that originate elsewhere, sometimes as far away as Afghanistan. Monday’s magnitude 4 earthquake was located in Delhi itself, somewhere close to the Dhaula Kuan area.
- In fact, it was the strongest earthquake to have originated in Delhi in at least five years, data from the National Centre of Seismology showed.
- Another earthquake of similar magnitude occurred a couple of hours later near Siwan in Bihar. Magnitude 4 earthquakes are not very strong, and do not result in much damage. There were no reports of any damage due to Monday’s earthquakes.

Do You Know:

- Delhi lies in a seismically active area, and thus an earthquake originating here is not a surprise. In the last five years, areas in and around Delhi have produced several small earthquakes, with magnitudes ranging between 2 and 3 or lower. These are barely noticed, except by seismometers.
- India’s official earthquake hazard map puts Delhi in Zone 4, the second highest classification of areas based on their susceptibility to shaking experienced during an earthquake.
- Zone 4 in India includes areas that are expected to experience MSK-8-level intensity during an earthquake. The MSK, or Medvedev-Sponheuer-Karnik scale is a measure of intensity, rather than strength, or energy released, which is described by magnitude.
- The MSK scale measures the susceptibility of an area to an earthquake. Based on the local geology and other factors, two places can feel, and be impacted by, a quake very differently, even if they are equidistant from its epicentre.



- Delhi falls in a region that has high susceptibility to quakes. MSK-8 means the area is vulnerable to major damage being caused to buildings and other infrastructure. Zone 5, the most vulnerable areas in India, correspond to MSK-9 levels of intensity or higher.

DID THE IRON AGE ON INDIAN SOIL START FROM TAMIL NADU?

The story so far:

Releasing a report on the antiquity of iron, Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M.K. Stalin proclaimed that the iron age began on “Tamil soil”, placing the date 5,300-odd years ago (4th millennium BCE), and that the “history of Indian subcontinent could no longer overlook Tamil Nadu”.

What had research said till now?

The usage of iron is one of the most important technological innovations in human history. The genesis of iron in India has seen several explanations, including its supposed arrival with immigrants from the West. Experts and scholars, around the middle of the last century, traced its origins back to 700-600 BCE. However, subsequent radiocarbon dating and research pushed it further back. Technical studies on materials found at several places suggested that iron smelting in India could have begun as early as the 16th century BCE.

Furthermore, in the backdrop of the results of the excavations at Uttar Pradesh two decades ago, former Director-General of the Archaeological Survey of India, Rakesh Tiwari, had highlighted in his paper, ‘The origins of iron-working in India: new evidence from the Central Ganga Plain and the Eastern Vindhyas’ that by the early 13th century BCE, iron smelting was “definitely known in India on a bigger scale”. Iron artefacts, furnaces, and tuyeres, carbon-dated between 1800 and 1000 BCE, were found during the excavations conducted by the U.P. State Archaeological Department at Raja Nala-ka-tila (1996- 98), Malhar (1998-99), and Dadupur (1999-2001), among others. In Malhar, especially, the presence of tuyeres, slags, and finished iron artefacts, hinted at a large-scale manufacturing of iron tools. Collating all the evidence, it was said that iron smelting and manufacturing of iron artefacts were well known in the eastern Vindhyas, and iron may have been in use in the Central Ganga Plain at least from the early second millennium BC.

What about Tamil Nadu?

As for Tamil Nadu, several excavations have been underway. In 2022 — before the recent report released by Mr. Stalin pushed back the antiquity of iron — Mayiladumparai in Krishnagiri district came under the limelight after the Chief Minister placed the introduction of the iron age at 4,200 years ago (third millennium BCE) in the State. He cited the findings of the State Archaeological Department’s report titled ‘Mayiladumparai- Beginning of Agrarian Society; 4,200-year-old Iron Age Culture in Tamil Nadu’, resulting in experts pointing out that this placed the iron age in the State in the same timeline as the copper or bronze age in other parts.

The recently released report by the State Archaeology Department, ‘Antiquity of Iron: Recent radiometric dates from Tamil Nadu’, attests to this and has pointed out that when cultural zones to the north of Vindhyas experienced the copper age, those in the south might have entered into the iron age already, owing to the limited availability of commercially exploitable copper ore. Target-oriented excavations were initiated by the State Archaeology Department, the Archaeological Survey of India, and others in recent years across places such as Sivagalai, Adichanallur, Kilnamandi and Mayiladumparai in the State to arrive at a panoramic view of the nature of Tamil Nadu’s iron age. “Based on the findings, we have placed the date at 3,345 BCE to

4TH FLOOR SHATABDI TOWER, SAKCHI, JAMSHEDPUR



2,953 BCE. On taking the mean age of this, we can arrive at the conclusion that iron age on Tamil soil started in the first quarter of the 4th millennium BCE,” an archaeology scholar told The Hindu, while reiterating that this, however, need not pave the way for assertions that the iron age originated from Tamil soil itself.

With this, the doors of further research into Tamil history and culture have opened up.

CLEAN YAMUNA IN 3 YEARS: L-G ROLLS OUT 4-STEP PLAN

A four-pronged strategy is at the heart of a plan, which has been rolled out by Lieutenant Governor Vinai Kumar Saxena, to clean Yamuna in three years.

- With trash skimmers, weed harvesters, and a dredge utility craft, the cleaning operation started on Sunday, according to the L-G House. This came a day after Saxena met Chief Secretary Dharmendra and the Additional Chief Secretary (ACS), Irrigation and Flood Control (I&FC), and asked them to start work immediately, said officials.
- Under the four-pronged strategy, the authority concerned first starts with the trash, garbage, and silt in the river stream. Simultaneously, cleaning operations in the Najafgarh drain, supplementary drain, and all other major drains begin.
- “At the same time, a daily watch on the existing STPs (sewage treatment plants) in terms of their capacity and output will be maintained, and a time-bound plan in terms of construction of new STPs/DSTPs (decentralised (sewage treatment plants) to meet the actual shortfall of treating about 400 MGD (million gallons a day) of sewer will be put in place and operationalised,” said the L-G House.
- The L-G House said that execution of this plan, which targets cleaning the river in about three years, will require seamless coordination between various agencies and departments that include the Delhi Jal Board, I&FC, Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD), Environment Department, PWD, and the Delhi Development Authority.
- To complete the work on time, the work will be monitored at the highest level every week, said officials. In addition to this, the Delhi Pollution Control Committee (DPCC) has been directed to keep a strict vigil on the discharge of untreated effluent into the drains by Industrial Units in the Capital.

Do You Know:

- The Supreme Court of India has already taken suo motu cognizance of pollution of Yamuna in 2021. The court directed CPCB “to submit a report identifying municipalities along the river Yamuna, which have not installed total treatment plants for sewage as per the requirement or have gaps in ensuring that the sewage is not discharged untreated into the river”. It also asked CPCB to “highlight any other source of prominent contamination within the limits of Municipalities” and to “submit priority-wise list of Municipalities, river stretches adjacent to which have been found to be most polluted”.
- The Supreme court in 2021 pointed out that Article 243W of the Constitution vests municipalities and local authorities with the performance of functions and implementation of schemes as may be entrusted to them, including those in relation to the matters listed in Twelfth



Schedule — Item 6 of the Schedule includes “public health, sanitation conservancy and solid waste management”.

- In the 2017 Paryavaran Suraksha Samiti v. Union of India case, it was directed that “norms for generating funds, for setting up and/or operating the ‘Common Effluent Treatment Plant’ as well as ‘Sewage Treatment Plants’ shall be finalised, on or before 31.03.2017, so as to be implemented from the next financial year of that date. It was directed that for the purpose of setting up these plants, the state government will prioritise such cities, towns and villages, which discharge industrial pollutants and sewer directly in rivers and water bodies”, the court said in 2021.

WATERING DOWN

Official estimates suggest that around 45 crore visitors, nearly a third of India’s population, have already been to Prayagraj for the Maha Kumbh Mela, which began in mid-January. With such a massive influx, even a small percentage of individuals who carry microbes could trigger extensive chains of disease transmission. The Ganga at Prayagraj, where devotees not only have ritual baths but also drink the water, inevitably becomes a complex receptacle of microbiomes. The Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB), which is responsible for monitoring and controlling air, water and land pollution, has been assessing water quality at Prayagraj since the festival began. Its reports, which are publicly accessible, present a mixed picture. On January 14, which was Makar Sankranti, one of the most auspicious bathing days, faecal coliform levels, a key indicator of contamination from human and animal waste, were at a high — nearly 11,000 units at the Sangam Ghat, which is more than four times the permissible limit of 2,500 units. At the Old Naini Bridge Ghat, along the Yamuna, the count was even higher, at 33,000 units. However, on other days, these numbers dropped to as low as 200 and 780 units. Similar fluctuations were observed for other parameters of water quality such as biochemical oxygen demand (BOD) and dissolved oxygen (DO). A CPCB report submitted to the National Green Tribunal on February 3 stated that the water quality on January 12-13, 2025 was not fit for bathing, let alone drinking, despite bathing having a higher tolerance limit. However, the report also noted a reduction in organic pollution due to freshwater intrusion upstream. It further observed that the sheer number of people bathing in the river during the Maha Kumbh Mela, particularly on auspicious days, led to an inevitable spike in faecal contamination.

These fluctuations are not exclusive to the Kumbh Mela. Routine monitoring of water quality by the CPCB has consistently recorded similar patterns, reinforcing the fact that, regardless of what the festival may be, water in the Ganga at Prayagraj is not fit for consumption, whether as a few drops or bucketful. The river’s suitability for bathing fluctuates based on water flow and dilution. Considering these adverse findings, Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath’s dismissal of this scientific data as “baseless” is misleading. The National Mission for Clean Ganga is based on a sustained effort to restore the river’s health, and Uttar Pradesh, its largest beneficiary, must prioritise continuous cleanup efforts instead of undermining legitimate pollution concerns. The Kumbh Mela highlights the urgent need for long-term solutions, not denialism. Science can come to the aid of the faithful; it is in no one’s interest to undermine scientific findings in the name of encouraging a spiritual journey.

MELA AND MELEE

The Maha Kumbh Mela that is ongoing in Prayagraj, Uttar Pradesh, has showcased the gaping maw between the Centre’s and the State’s plans for such a large event and what they believe are



sufficient resources to conduct it. Ahead of the mela, Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath, and their cabinet colleagues had touted the special arrangements made for the mela, including a surveillance system equipped with artificial intelligence to track crowds, water filters to keep the rivers clean, a makeshift town replete with hospitals and special-purpose trains and buses. But they have not sufficed. There have been numerous reports of people being frustrated at the venue and during journeys to and from there. The mela's under-management, simmering just below the surface, was transformed to outright mismanagement by the deaths of people in a crowd crush on January 29. The confused response by the Indian Railways to another crush at the New Delhi railway station, on February 15, indicated the Centre's unwillingness to countenance the disaster, on the back of an expense of ₹7,500 crore for the mela and its various hi-tech preparations. Such preparations, however, cannot make up for changes that need to be made over time, such as redeveloping a local railway station.

Officials were reluctant to confirm that people had died even as local hospitals were confirming deaths. In one particularly unfair statement, a Deputy Commissioner of Police (Railways) blamed "unnecessary" rush at the New Delhi railway station for the "catastrophe". The consensus among fire safety experts worldwide is that such events occur when there is external cause for a group to panic, whether lacking the money to buy another ticket should they miss a train or suffering injuries due to unsafe pedestrian conditions. A preliminary probe revealed that the Railways had sold 2,600 additional tickets, and an announcement at the station of the arrival of a different train rendered this confused mass of passengers to attempt to reach the wrong platform. The Railways has now said that special trains for the mela will depart from one fixed platform at the station. Such interventions that are already well known to experts — including clear, multilingual communications, restricted ticketing, and proactive crowd control — could have mitigated the tragedy. Many less prominent gathering places still lack attention vis-à-vis public safety. Both the Centre and States should eliminate these risks, post-haste, if the Centre's plans to increase footfall at places of worship are not to lead to more catastrophe. While encouraging spiritual tourism, the hype around hosting 45 crore people at the Maha Kumbh Mela, absurdly impossible as it sounds, should be toned down so as not to feed a political frenzy. The governments must be careful that the cost of fulfilling political aspirations is not paid for in terms of human lives.

EXPRESS VIEW ON NEW DELHI RAILWAY STAMPEDE: AN INTOLERABLE TOLL

The lives of at least 18 people have been snuffed out in the second Kumbh-related tragedy in less than three weeks. Railway officials have attributed the calamitous stampede at New Delhi Railway Station to a combination of factors — the delay of two trains, an inordinate number of travellers waiting on one platform, an announcement of a special train, which led to a crowd surging towards the ill-fated area. There are also administrative lapses and failures. The Railways has ordered a detailed investigation into the incident, which will, no doubt, shed more light on the disaster. But one thing is already clear: The two tragedies should be eye-openers for the authorities that had drawn out extensive plans for the safety of Kumbh devotees. The loss of nearly 50 lives in these incidents should lead to a hard reckoning on what went wrong. It's well known that railway stations and bus depots record a higher than usual footfall during pilgrimage season. Like their colleagues at venues of religious gatherings, officials at these transport hubs should be alert to anything that can trigger panic or anxiety. But, by all accounts, the authorities at the New Delhi Railway Station were caught off guard on Saturday. The inquiry should not only pinpoint the immediate trigger or cause of the commotion, it must also fix accountability for the failures and omissions that led to the horrific stampede. The probe and the subsequent action must be fair and transparent.



Crowds are inevitable. Be it a rock concert or a religious gathering, the challenge of managing them is admittedly difficult when attendance exceeds initial estimates. In 2013, a study published in the International Journal of Stampede Reduction pointed out that religious gatherings and pilgrimages account for nearly 80 per cent of the stampedes in the country. That year, a stampede at the Allahabad (now Prayagraj) Railway Station during Kumbh claimed 42 lives. Since then, the National Disaster Management Authority has framed detailed guidelines for crowd management. Yet, authorities at large congregations do not always act promptly to ensure that crowds keep moving calmly. In recent years, experts have advocated the use of technology — drones, for instance — to help law enforcers and event organisers to monitor crowd density and swiftly identify any source of pressure or disturbance. Technology was reportedly used at the Kumbh venue this year. However, the two tragedies should drive home the need to scale up the deployment of state-of-the-art crowd control methods at pilgrimage sites as well as at transit junctions for devotees.

Most railway stations are busy places even on normal days. Conversations on railway safety and technology upgradation must be made more expansive and address the well-being and security of passengers at these stations. The imperative should be to ensure that pilgrims, migrants, workers, tourists and vacationers who use this mode of transport are safe, at the station and during the commute. The most sincere tribute to the victims of Saturday's calamity would be to learn lessons from it — and to ensure that stampedes, and the toll they take, become a thing of the past.

WHAT IS THE ARAVALI SAFARI PARK PROJECT?

The story so far:

The Haryana government's ambitious 3,858 hectare Aravali safari park project spread across Gurugram and Nuh — which was one of the poll promises of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party last year — is envisaged to be the world's largest safari park. However, the project has faced stiff opposition ever since it was first mooted.

What is the project?

As per the tender invited by the Haryana Tourism Department, the proposed Aravali safari park will have animal cages, guest houses, hotels, restaurants, auditoriums, an animal hospital, childrens' parks, botanical gardens, aquariums, cable cars, a tunnel walk with exhibits, an open-air theatre and eateries. The project has now been transferred to the forest department and an expert committee has been set up to oversee it. Of the total 3,858 hectares proposed in the tender, 2,574 will be spread across 11 villages in Gurugram and the remaining 1,284 in Nuh, across its seven villages.

Why is there opposition?

The hills in the southern districts of Gurugram and Nuh are a part of Aravali, the oldest fold mountain range in the world. It runs diagonally across Rajasthan extending from Champaner in Gujarat in the southwest to near Delhi in the northeast for about 690 km. It is ecologically significant as it combats desertification by checking the spread of the Thar Desert towards eastern Rajasthan, and performs the role of an aquifer with its highly fractured and weathered quality rocks allowing water to percolate and recharge the groundwater. It is also a rich habitat to a wide spectrum of wildlife and plant species.



A group of 37 retired Indian Forest Service officers have written a letter to Prime Minister Narendra Modi seeking to scrap the project arguing that the project's aim is to simply increase tourist footfall and not conserve the mountain range. The "primary purpose of any intervention in an eco-sensitive area should be 'conservation and restoration' and not destruction", the letter said. The increased footfall, vehicular traffic and construction will disturb aquifers under the Aravali hills which are critical reserves for the water-starved districts of Gurugram and Nuh (the groundwater level in the two districts has been categorised as "over-exploited" by the Central Ground Water Board). Additionally, the location of the project falls under the category of "forest", which is protected under the Forest Conservation Act, 1980. Besides, Haryana has very low forest cover of 3.6%, and therefore, the State needs rewilding of natural forests and not destructive safari projects, the letter said.

What are the laws protecting Aravali?

Of the approximately 80,000 hectare Aravali hill area in Haryana, a majority is protected under various laws and by orders of the Supreme Court and NGT. "The most widespread protection to the Aravalis comes from the Punjab Land Preservation Act (PLPA), 1900. The Special Sections 4 and 5 of the Act restrict the breaking of land and hence deforestation in hills for non-agricultural use....Recently around 24,000 hectares has been notified as Protected Forest under the Indian Forest Act, as a proposed offset to forest land diversion in the Nicobar islands.... Similarly, the T.N. Godavarman Thirumulpad judgment (1996) extends legal protection to forests as per dictionary meaning — which should cover the remaining Aravali areas that are not notified as forest....the Regional Plan-2021 for the National Capital Region also offers crucial protection, designating the Aravalis and forest areas as 'Natural Conservation Zone' and restricting the maximum construction limit to 0.5%," said Gurugram-based forest analyst Chetan Agarwal. Mr. Agarwal suggested that instead of a safari park, the government should declare a national park or sanctuary in the Aravalis.

AI-ENABLED CAMERAS IN SIMILIPAL TIGER RESERVE SEND POACHING PLUMMETING

"Last year, we lost two of our men to poachers," Samrat Gowda, deputy director of the Similipal Tiger Reserve in Odisha, said. "Every time we come across them, the poachers are armed with a loaded gun."

But such encounters have become much less common of late. As part of an early alert system called TrailGuard AI, the Similipal Tiger Reserve was fitted with 100-150 cameras loaded with an artificial intelligence (AI) model. The cameras relay images of people and wildlife entering the forest to the model, which looks for poachers among them.

"Earlier, we didn't know when poachers entered. Now we have clear information about the area the poachers are in, so our people are prepared," Gowda said.

In the last 10 months, TrailGuard AI has helped wildlife officials at Similipal arrest 96 poachers and seize more than 86 country-made guns. In December alone, the team arrested over 40 poachers.

"House raids based on photo identification have given very good results," according to Gowda. "If this trend continues, I'm hopeful poaching can be reduced by at least 80%. Once that happens, naturally, our people will be safer, along with the forest and wildlife."



Proactive enforcement

The AI-enabled cameras are tucked away in the reserve's thick vegetation. They operate on a low-power mode by default but switch to a high-power mode when they sense movement, and capture an image. The camera then performs AI inference on the edge, meaning it uses the chip inside to sort between various object classes such as 'animals', 'humans', and 'vehicles' in the image. If the AI deems it necessary, it autonomously transmits an image using the cellular system attached to the camera to an end-user in 30-40 seconds.

"We have set up a control room in our headquarters, with a big screen, where we are alerted whenever there is a photo update," Gowda said. "We then immediately transmit the information on our WhatsApp groups and VHF radio."

Catching poachers in the forest still isn't straightforward. Wildlife officials use intelligence sources to identify the poachers caught on camera. These sources include their regular staff, who go undercover with poachers to collect information about who they are, the villages they hail from, and other details.

"Once we get 100% confirmation that these are the people that entered the forest, we will raid their house or village and arrest the person and forward them to the court with proper documentation," according to Gowda.

He also stressed the importance of proactive enforcement mechanisms backing up the inputs provided by TrailGuard. "Getting photos is the easy part, but after that what you do is most important. We are actively going and raiding [houses] and bringing people in. So both the technology and our on-ground efforts complement each other to give us good results," he added.

According to the latest department report, the arrests in 2024 led to one conviction, obtained within six months — fast, according to Gowda. His colleagues are hoping for two or three more convictions soon.

Smaller, cheaper, durable

TrailGuard AI was conceived and made by Nightjar Technologies, a social impact enterprise in Gurgaon that develops remote surveillance devices for conservation settings.

But one result of this surveillance is that many villagers have stopped going into the forest for fear of being mistaken for poachers and arrested. Their ability to collect firewood and other non-timber forest products has concomitantly declined.

"We are discussing with the [local] people and are facilitating safer ways to access the forest, because it shouldn't be that because of one poacher everyone is restricted," Gowda said.

A RECORD 6.5 LAKH OLIVE RIDLEY TURTLES REACH ODISHA BEACH FOR MASS NESTING

Wildlife enthusiasts are thrilled as a record 6.5 lakh Olive Ridley turtles have arrived at the Rushikulya beach in Ganjam district of Odisha for mass nesting after a gap of two years.

"During 2023-24 and 2024-25, only sporadic nestings were noticed along Rushikulya. The last major congregation was recorded in 2022-23," Prem Kumar Jha, Principal Chief Conservator of Forests (Wildlife), said. "It is heartening to note that 6.5 lakh turtles have congregated at



Rushikulya beach to lay eggs this year. This has so far been the highest number of turtles arriving along Rushikulya beach,” he said.

“Following the usual pattern, the mass congregation of Olive Ridley turtles at the Gahirmatha mass nesting site along Odisha’s Kendrapara coast typically occurs about a week after nesting begins at Rushikulya. We hope Gahirmatha will witness a similar congregation this year as well,” Mr. Jha said.

Coast Guard help

The Indian Coast Guard said its patrolling vessels were regularly monitoring the protected areas to prevent human interference – either from seaward poaching or leisure activities. The Coast Guard, in coordination with the fisheries and forest departments, is conducting ‘Operation Olivia’ from November 1 last year to protect the turtles. It will continue till May 31. “The operation has yielded positive results,” the agency said.

SHORT NEWS

INDIAN OCEAN CONFERENCE

- The 8th Indian Ocean Conference was organised by India Foundation in association with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Oman on February 16-17, 2025 in Muscat, Oman.
- It was started by the India Foundation in 2016 in Singapore, with participation from 30 countries. The theme for this year of the Conference is Voyages to New Horizons of Maritime Partnership.
- The objective of the conference is to bring critical states and principal maritime partners of the region together on a common platform to deliberate upon the prospects of regional cooperation for Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR).

SOUL CONCLAVE

- Prime Minister Narendra Modi inaugurated the School of Ultimate Leadership (SOUL) conclave 2025 at Bharat Mandapam in the presence of Bhutan Prime Minister Tshering Tobgay.
- The SOUL is a privately funded leadership institution, located on the periphery of GIFT City in Gandhinagar, aimed at enabling leaders to become a positive force for societal benefit by adopting a new paradigm of leadership.
- It aims to bring together leaders from across various fields to share their life experiences, successes and failures with the youth to foster young leadership for a vibrant public life in diverse fields.

MUNICH MEET: JAISHANKAR AND UKRAINE FOREIGN MINISTER DISCUSS CONFLICT, TIES

A day after Prime Minister Narendra Modi met US President Donald Trump at the White House and said that India is on the side of peace in the Russia-Ukraine war, External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar met Ukrainian Minister of Foreign Affairs Andrii Sybiha in Munich and discussed efforts towards resolving the conflict.



NOT ALL DISPUTES SUITED FOR COURTS, MEDIATION MODE FOR REDRESSAL: CJI

Chief Justice of India (CJI) Sanjiv Khanna said on Saturday that not all disputes are suited for courtroom litigation, and mediation is a “mode of redressal that opens doors to creative solutions” beyond “simple yes or no answers”. Emphasising the importance of choosing mediation, CJI Khanna said that it “not only resolves conflicts efficiently but also strengthens relationships between people and businesses”.

NARI ADALATS

— Recently, the Women and Child Development Minister Annpurna Devi has informed that the government has written to states inviting proposals to establish ‘Nari Adalats’.

— 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.

— The Scheme 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 released a little over `20 lakh each to the two states to implement the scheme.

— Nari Adalat is the component of the Mission Shakti. Mission Shakti was formulated by the WCD ministry as an umbrella scheme for the safety, security, and empowerment during the 15th Finance Commission period from 2021-22 to 2025-26. It has two main verticals: Sambal (for safety and security) and Samarthya (for empowerment).

— **Mission Shakti**, as mentioned on the ministry’s website, aims to provide all women and girls, including those who are differently-abled, socially and economically marginalized, and from vulnerable groups in need of care and protection, with short-term and long-term services and information for their holistic development and empowerment.

BHARATMALA PARIYOJANA

— The Ministry of Road Transport and Highways (MoRTH) informed that no further projects are being taken up under Bharatmala Pariyojana due to delays and cost overruns.

— The Project, Bharatmala Pariyojana Phase-1, which received Cabinet approval in October 2017, entails a total length of 34,800 km in 31 States and Union Territories, and covers over 550 districts.

— It looked to improve connectivity, particularly on economic corridors, border areas and far flung areas with an aim of quicker movement of cargo and boosting exports.

COMPENSATORY AFFORESTATION FUND MANAGEMENT AND PLANNING AUTHORITY (CAMPA)

— A CAG report on the functioning of the CAMPA in Uttarakhand in the 2019-2022 period showed that Rs 13.86 crore was diverted for various activities other than compensatory afforestation.



— Compensatory Afforestation seeks to ensure that forest lands getting ‘diverted’ for non-forest purposes, like industrial or infrastructure development, is mandatorily accompanied by afforestation effort on at least an equal area of land.

— While the plantation exercise on new lands cannot be compared with the fully grown forests getting diverted, compensatory afforestation — made a legal requirement through the Compensatory Afforestation Fund Act of 2016.

— The law acknowledges the fact that newly afforested land cannot be expected to immediately start delivering the range of goods and services that the diverted forests were providing. As a result, project developers are also asked to pay for the Net Present Value (NPV) of the forests being cleared, based on a calculation decided by an expert committee.

— All this money is meant to be spent solely on increasing, or improving the quality of, forest cover in the country, or on works that help this objective. The money is parked in special funds created for this purpose at the Central and state levels. CAMPA is constituted to manage this money, and to use it for the designated purposes.

MAJORANA 1

— Microsoft has announced the arrival of Majorana 1, a new quantum chip that produces more reliable and scalable qubits than its predecessors. Qubits are the building blocks of quantum computers.

— Microsoft’s purported breakthrough revolves around engineering a new type of particle known as Majorana. These Majorana particles have been fabricated using topological conductors and they exist in a topological state, which differs from traditional states of matter such as solid, liquid, and gas.

— Topoconductors are made by combining indium arsenide (a semiconductor) and aluminium (a superconductor). When cooled to near absolute zero and tuned with magnetic fields, the semiconductor is married with superconductivity.

IN A FIRST, DARJEELING ZOO GETS BIOBANK TO COLLECT CELL, TISSUE SAMPLES

As part of a national programme, the country’s first ‘bio bank’ in a zoo is up and running at Padmaja Naidu Himalayan Zoological Park, better known as Darjeeling Zoo, officials said. Officials pointed out this is the first time in the country that such a facility has been set up at a zoo.

In collaboration with the Centre for Cellular and Molecular Biology (CCMB), under the Ministry of Science and Technology, the facility collects and preserves cell and tissue samples from endangered animals, as well as reproductive cells from deceased animals. These can be used for future research and potentially even bring back critically endangered species that have gone extinct or are on the verge of extinction.

WHALES

— A 23-year-old Venezuelan kayaker, Adrián Simancas, was briefly swallowed by a humpback whale. The video of the incident shows the whale surfacing, engulfing Simancas and his yellow kayak for a few seconds before letting him go.



- There are mainly two families of whales: baleen whales and toothed whales.
- There are 14 species of baleen whales including blue whales, humpback whales, and grey whales. Instead of having teeth, these whales have baleen, which is essentially a filter-feeding system inside their mouth.
- Baleen is made of keratin — the same protein that makes up human hair and fingernails. Baleen whales use this system to filter small prey such as krill, plankton, and small fish from the water.
- Toothed whales have teeth. There are more than 70 species of these whales including sperm whales, beaked whales, killer whales, and dolphins.
- Both baleen whales and toothed whales cannot swallow humans. Sperm whales are an exception to this. They are the only whales in the world that have large enough throats to swallow a human.

CHHATRAPATI SHIVAJI MAHARAJ

- Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Jayanti is marked on February 19, the birth anniversary of Shivaji. He was born on February 19, 1630.
- The celebration of Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Jayanti began in 1870 after discovering his tomb at Raigad Fort. It was further elaborated by freedom fighter Bal Gangadhar Tilak, to bring Shivaji Maharaj's contributions to public consciousness during India's struggle for independence.

KASH PATEL

- The US Senate has confirmed Kash Patel as the new Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) director.
- Kashyap Pramod Patel or Kash Patel was born to Gujarati-Indian parents in New York's Long Island. He was raised a Hindu and has described a "very deep connection" with India.

BBC INDIAN SPORTSWOMAN OF THE YEAR

- Olympian Manu Bhaker has been announced as the winner of the BBC Indian Sportswoman Of The Year (ISWOTY) Award.
- Avani Lekhara won the BBC Para-Sportswoman of the Year for her historic achievements in para-shooting.

BOURBON:

The Indian government has notified a significant tariff cut on bourbon, a barrel-aged American whiskey made primarily from corn. According to US law, for a whiskey to be labelled bourbon, it must be made in the US; have a "mashbill" — the combination of grains used — comprising at least 51% corn; be aged for at least 2 years in brand new barrels made of white oak, and charred on the inside; be bottled at 80 to 125 proof (40% to 62.5% alcohol by volume); and contain no additional colour or flavouring.



BUSINESS & ECONOMICS

WHY ARGENTINA'S PRESIDENT IS IN HOT SOUP OVER A CRYPTO PROMOTION

Argentina's President Javier Milei last week promoted a crypto meme coin — Libra — on his social media platform, only for the currency to implode in a few hours, which saw Milei backtracking, retail investors losing out, but promoters of the coin cashing tens of millions of dollars.

- In a now-deleted post on social media platform X, Milei wrote: “This is a private project dedicated to encouraging the growth of the Argentine economy,” along with a Solana contract address linked to the Libra token.
- The coin, developed by KIP Protocol and Hayden Davis, could be obtained by accessing a link that directed users to a website called vivalalibertadproject.com, referring to the well-known phrase with which Milei closes speeches and messages on his social media.
- Milei, who claims to have no connection with the coin or its promoters, joins the list of world leaders like Donald Trump to get associated with promoting meme coins.
- Lawyers in Argentina have filed fraud complaints against Milei for his involvement in promoting the Libra meme coin, the Associated Press reported. Jonatan Baldiviezo, a lawyer and one of the plaintiffs, told the AP that they saw an illicit association to commit “an indeterminate number of frauds” in the episode. “Within this illicit association, the crime of fraud was committed, in which the president’s actions were essential,” he said.

Do You Know:

- \$LIBRA is a token issued by entrepreneur Hayden Davis, who is also the CEO of a crypto investment firm called Kelsier Ventures, according to a report by Bloomberg. KIP Protocol, a Web3 company building a decentralised AI framework, reportedly played a role in the launch of \$LIBRA as well.
- Memecoins are a bizarre blend of internet humour and cryptocurrencies. They are often inspired by online memes and do not hold any intrinsic value. Despite their value being purely based on hype and public perception, memecoins can be used to build a large following and attract significant investment.
- Meme coins are highly volatile cryptocurrency inspired by popular internet or cultural trends. They carry no intrinsic value but can soar, or plummet, in price. They are generally seen as indicators of retail investors’ interest in cryptocurrency. It is usually a marker of investors’ risk appetite at any given point in time.
- As per industry analysis, the Libra meme coin hit a peak market cap of \$4.5 billion, but within three hours of launch, insiders who may have promoted the coin are believed to have cashed out more than \$87 million. A few hours later, Libra erased more than \$4.4 billion in value, effectively pulling the rug from under unsuspecting retail investors.
- Since the victory of Trump in the United States Presidential elections, the crypto market has picked up, responding to signals that Trump could go easy on the virtual currency.



- It was also anticipated that Trump having Elon Musk — who has long been an advocate for cryptocurrency — as a key adviser could further bolster investors' belief in bitcoin and other digital virtual assets, even if concerns around conflict of interest remain.

AGRICULTURAL PROTECTIONISM PUSHES UP INDIA'S IMPORT TARIFF

Tariffs levied on imports into India are five times higher than what the United States levies on its imports. The average duty levied by India was 17% in 2023, compared to 3.3% levied by the U.S. Also, the average tariff levied by India was the highest among comparable economies, especially BRICS countries. India was followed by Brazil (11%), and South Africa and China (more than 7%). The average tariff levied by Russia was 6.6.% and that by the European Union was 5%.

Despite the difference in the average tariffs levied by India and the U.S., the number of products subject to tariffs remains comparable in both countries.

India's higher average was mostly due to high tariffs on agricultural products to protect domestic producers. "While tariffs on agricultural goods are really high, it is not so on manufactured products," explains Biswajit Dhar, Distinguished Professor, Council for Social Development.

The average tariff levied by India on non-agricultural goods was less than 15% between 2018 and 2023. The duty on agricultural goods, however, has always been more than twice the duty on non-agricultural products, and exceeded 38% in all years except in 2020.

Dhar argues that the reason why India continues to levy high agricultural tariffs is to protect food security and livelihoods. He points out that since investment in agriculture is low — just about 6% of the total investment in the country — the sector remains significantly inefficient by global standards. "Agricultural tariffs cannot be brought down easily. The U.S. has very high subsidies on agricultural products. If there are many subsidised U.S. agricultural products floating about in the market, it is very difficult for us [India] to reduce our tariffs," he says. Unless the government decides to pull up this sector by the bootstraps, it will not be able to stand up to international competition, Dhar adds.

A closer look at product-wise tariffs shows that agricultural, dairy products, beverages, and tobacco continue to attract more than 30% as import duty. Duty on transport equipment, cotton, and textiles came down between 2018 and 2023. Tariffs on electrical machinery, leather/footwear, and some manufactured goods increased in the same period.

U.S. President Donald Trump recently drew attention towards tariffs levied by various countries. He suggested that the U.S. would impose "reciprocal tariffs" on countries which, he believes, have treated the U.S. "unfairly". While the finer details and the math of such tariffs are not clear yet, his remarks have caused considerable unease in India. Amid this criticism from the U.S., India has recently reduced tariffs on bourbon whiskey from 150% to 100%.

India is increasingly exporting more to the U.S., widening its trade surplus with the U.S. Goods exported to the U.S. from India have crossed \$53 billion in FY25 (April-November) and exceeded 18% of India's total exports from about 15% a decade ago.

"Tariffs are being imposed to block imports from partner countries into the U.S. But reciprocal tariffs could mean pressure on India to reduce agricultural tariffs. Because at the end of the day, the U.S. wants India to import more from them. And what better opportunity to do that than to force India to reduce its agricultural tariffs? This is going to be part of the bilateral trade



agreement that they will be negotiating. India has maintained that negotiating tariffs on agricultural products, such as cereals, is off the table for Free Trade Agreements. But that will not be the case for India-U.S. bilateral negotiations,” Dhar adds.

KEY SHIFT IN INDIA-AFGHANISTAN TRADE SINCE TALIBAN TAKEOVER IN 2021: EXPORTS SLUMP, IMPORTS SURGE

India’s trade equation with Afghanistan has witnessed a shift after the Taliban’s return to power in August 2021, with imports touching a record \$642.29 million in 2023-24 and exports slumping to a 16-year low, creating an unusual trade deficit, reveals Ministry of Commerce data.

- This shift gains significance as New Delhi has initiated its highest-level contact yet with the Taliban regime and the latter too has expressed interest in strengthening political and economic ties with India, calling it a “significant regional and economic power”.
- The recent talks between India’s Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri and Taliban Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi reportedly focused on expanding trade and leveraging Iran’s Chabahar port, which India has been developing to bypass Pakistan’s Karachi and Gwadar ports.
- According to government data, in 2020-21, before the Taliban takeover, the value of exports to Afghanistan stood at \$825.78 million and imports at \$509.49 million. India’s exports fell sharply to \$554.47 million in 2021-22, \$437.05 million in 2022-23 and \$355.45 million in 2023-24.
- Before this, the last time India saw a trade deficit (\$0.73 million) with Afghanistan was in 2000-01.
- In 2023-24, the top items India imported from Afghanistan were mainly agricultural produce — figs, asafoetida, raisins, apples, garlic, saffron, fennel seeds, almonds, apricots, onions, pomegranates and walnuts. India’s exports to Afghanistan include mainly medicines, vaccines, soybean meal, and garments.
- “India-Afghanistan trade reflects a blend of economic cooperation and strategic priorities, underlining India’s focus on regional stability. Despite Afghanistan’s political challenges and reliance on alternative routes like the Chabahar Port in Iran, trade continues, supported by India’s investments in projects like the Salma Dam and Afghan Parliament. Initiatives like the 2017 air freight corridor and duty waivers on Afghan imports have eased trade and strengthened goodwill through humanitarian aid,” said Ajay Srivastava, founder, Global Trade Research Initiative (GTRI), a trade research body.

Do You Know:

- Afghanistan’s geopolitical significance goes beyond India and Pakistan. It is a multi-ethnic, landlocked country positioned at the crossroads of Central Asia, the Middle East, and South Asia. This strategic location has historically drawn the interest of major global and regional powers, making Afghanistan a focal point in global politics. Acknowledging Afghanistan’s significance, India has carefully crafted its policy towards the country.
- In the first high-level bilateral engagement with the Taliban regime, Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri met Afghanistan’s acting Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi in Dubai on 8th January. This meeting was particularly noteworthy, as it involved an Indian official at the level of foreign secretary, a step up from previous engagements, which were conducted by joint secretaries. This



change signals an upgrade in official interactions from the Indian government. A statement from the Ministry of External Affairs said the two sides discussed various issues pertaining to bilateral relations as well as regional developments.

- India's investments in Afghanistan: India has constructed essential infrastructure, including roads, dams, electricity transmission lines, substations, schools, and hospitals in Afghanistan. The value of India's development assistance is now estimated to exceed \$3 billion. Unlike in some other countries where India's infrastructure projects have struggled to gain traction or have been hindered by local politics, these initiatives have successfully been implemented in Afghanistan.

A 14-FOLD JUMP IN SOYABEAN OIL IMPORTS FROM NEPAL TRIGGERS RED FLAGS IN INDIA

Soyabean oil imports saw a sharp 14-fold surge from neighbouring Nepal during the April to November period in 2024 compared to the previous year, even as Kathmandu remains a marginal producer of the commodity, an analysis of data from the Commerce and Industry Ministry has shown.

- This comes as overall soyabean oil imports in India are showing a rising trend, with a 19 per cent overall surge in the April to November 2024 period to nearly \$3 billion compared to \$2.5 billion in 2023. However, during the comparable period, Brazil — one of the top producers of the commodity — registered a drop in exports.

- The import surge has triggered some concerns in India's policy circles, with trade experts maintaining that the trend could be a result of the possible flouting of rules of origin by Nepal and the tariff arbitrage that the country enjoys due to zero-duty access for its products into India under the Nepal-India Treaty of Trade signed in 2009.

- "A number of Customs officials have visited Nepal in the last seven years to check breaches of the rules of origin. Nepalese industries, which are primarily composed of Indian businesses, have set up refining industries there, but the low Nepalese consumption vis-à-vis its imports suggests that the industry largely exists to take advantage of the FTA duty structure with India," a person aware of the issue said.

- Notably, refined palm oil, refined soya oil, and refined sunflower oil attract a duty as high as 35.75 per cent.

- New Delhi had raised the basic customs duty on these items by 20 per cent in September last year to protect Indian oil seed farmers. The duty prior to the change was still high at 13.75 per cent.

- The steep revision in duty in September last year is one of the reasons why soyabean oil imports skyrocketed in November 2024 to \$23.46 million compared to \$1.42 million in November 2023. During the April to November period, imports cumulatively surged to \$38.15 million compared to just \$2.81 million in the previous year.

Do You Know:

- An International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) report in 2023 suggested that Nepal's edible oil imports consist primarily of crude edible oil from producing countries (98 per cent of imports) and that Nepal refines the crude oil domestically before exporting it to India.



- Under the Nepal-India Treaty of Trade signed in 2009, duty-free access into the Indian market for all Nepali-manufactured goods is provided on a non-reciprocal basis, except for a short negative list (including cigarettes, alcohol, and cosmetics).
- Annual quotas had been prescribed only for duty-free exports to India for four sensitive items – vegetable fats (100,000 metric tonnes), acrylic yarn (10,000 metric tonnes), copper products (10,000 metric tonnes), and zinc oxide (2,500 metric tonnes).
- Incidentally, India-Nepal bilateral trade takes place in Indian rupees. Nepal's central bank also maintains a list of items that can be imported from India in dollars using a Letter of Credit. The Indian rupee is convertible in all banks and financial institutions in Nepal. The exchange rate has been maintained at NRs.1.6 per Indian rupee.

KARNATAKA TOPS IN DEVOLUTION INDEX RANKING OF PANCHAYAT RAJ SYSTEM

Karnataka tops the overall Devolution Index (DI) ranking of the Panchayat Raj system among States in India, while Kerala and Tamil Nadu are in the second and third spot, respectively.

The report titled 'Status of Devolution to Panchayats in States—An Indicative Evidence-Based Ranking' (2024) released by the Centre on February 13 says that Karnataka tops the chart in the DI and in the key sub-indices of 'finances' and 'accountability'. Overall, the State has commendable performance across nearly all identified metrics.

States/UTs were ranked according to the overall panchayat DI and six key dimensions of framework, functions, finances, functionaries, capacity enhancement, and accountability. The Union Ministry of Panchayati Raj and the Indian Institute of Public Administration, New Delhi, prepared the report.

Overall score

The report notes that Karnataka ranks first with an overall index score of 72.23 followed by Kerala (70.59), Tamil Nadu (68.38), and Maharashtra (61.44). While BJP-ruled Uttar Pradesh ranks fifth (60.07), Gujarat is ranked sixth (58.26). Bihar along with the north-eastern and hilly States of Assam, Sikkim, and Uttarakhand emerged as moderate scorers but with values above the national average of 43.89.

In the 'Framework' dimension, Kerala ranks first with a score of 83.56 followed by Maharashtra (74.74), Karnataka (74.43), and Haryana (73.3). This dimension includes legal requirements such as holding regular panchayat elections, reserving seats for women, SCs, and STs, and establishing State Election Commission and State Finance Commission (SFC).

In the 'functions' dimension, Tamil Nadu tops with an index value of 60.24. Karnataka (57.62), Odisha (57.46), and Rajasthan (56.13) are marginally separated from each other. This criterion stipulates States to assign local functions to panchayats, enabling them to act as institutions of self-government. Karnataka delegates a significant number of functions to panchayats and GPs enjoy maximum power to levy taxes and non-taxes, it said.

Under the criterion of 'Finances', Karnataka has secured the top place with a score of 70.65 followed by Kerala (62.89), Tamil Nadu (55.78), and Rajasthan (54.56). In this indicator, States have been evaluated based on the release of funds in time under the 15th Finance Commission. It



is found that most States are not serious about the constitution of the SFCs and implement their recommendations.

Accountability category

Karnataka has topped in the 'Accountability' dimension with the highest score (81.33) in the indicators of 'social audit' and 'gram sabha'. Karnataka is followed by Kerala, Maharashtra, and Uttar Pradesh with the score of 81.18, 80.36, and 76.07, respectively. Criteria adopted in this category are accounting and audit of panchayats, social audit of panchayats, functioning of gram sabha, transparency and anti-corruption, panchayat assessment, and incentivisation. Overall, the GP system in Karnataka has served as a vital institution for promoting local self-governance, participatory democracy, and sustainable development in rural areas, the report noted.

In the 'Functionaries' dimension, Karnataka has one of the maximum number of panchayat officials working as per the sanctioned positions prescribed by the State. Gujarat tops the list with a value of 90.94, followed by Tamil Nadu (84.25), and Kerala (82.99).

Among top 10 States

In the 'Capacity building' dimension, Karnataka is among the top 10 States. Key indicators included in this category are training institutions, and training activities of elected representatives and officials. Telangana has secured the first rank (86.19) followed by Tamil Nadu, and Gujarat, with the score of 84.29 and 83.96, respectively.

IS CONSUMPTION ENOUGH TO DRIVE GROWTH?

An economy's growth is like sailing on two boats tugged to each other. On one side is the supply or the production of goods and services. GDP, or gross domestic product, is the value the production process adds. On the other side, there is demand or expenditure for purchasing these goods and services from the market. Both the supply and the demand boats must move in tandem. If supply proceeds slower than demand, prices rise, leading to inflation. If demand falls behind, firms will be left with unsold inventories, which may lead to cuts in future production, job and income losses, and a worsening cycle of demand and growth slowdown.

The demand or aggregate expenditure in an economy comes from four sources. First is private consumption, which is the sum of expenditures by all individuals on items such as food, clothing, and mobile phones. Second is private investment, which is the amount spent by firms and households on installing new machines and constructing new factories or residences. Third is government expenditure, for consumption and investment. The former refers to the money spent on day-to-day government operations, including paying salaries to officers, teachers, doctors and others attached to public institutions. Fourth is net exports or exports minus import of goods and services while engaging in trade with the rest of the world.

Investment and its multipliers

Among the sources of demand, investment stands out for its ability to create 'multiplier effects'. That is, an increase in investment of ₹100 could increase the economy's overall demand and GDP by more than ₹100 — let us say by ₹125, with the multiplier being 1.25. Consider, for instance, public investment in building a new highway network. The incomes received by workers and firms involved in the road construction project will generate fresh demand in the economy. But that is not all. The highways will trigger the establishment of new shops and create opportunities



for new industries, all of which translate into a much bigger expansion of aggregate demand. The multiplier effect will depend on the nature of the investment and the state of the economy. The multiplier from an investment in a railway line is likely higher in an underdeveloped district than in a region with a well-developed transport network.

Compared to investment, the multiplier effect arising from increased consumption is much weaker. If incomes increase, consumption expenditures also increase, but the relation does not work strongly enough in the reverse direction. A rise in consumption cannot lift incomes as much in the rest of the economy. Therefore, according to Keynesian economists, consumption is a passive component of aggregate demand.

Indian and Chinese experiences

In the early 1990s, the per capita incomes of India and China were almost the same. Both countries were equally poor, with the average income of an Indian or Chinese resident being approximately 1.5% of the average income of an American. But by 2023, China's per capita income has grown to five times as high as the Indian level (2.4 times as high if purchasing power differences between the two countries are considered). As a proportion of U.S. levels, the per capita incomes of China and India were 15% and 3%, respectively, in 2023. The speedy growth of incomes in China has been led by investment.

China's investment rates have been significantly higher than India's from the 1970s onward. In 1992, investment as a share of GDP was 39.1% in China compared to 27.4% in India, even though the per capita incomes of the two countries were nearly equal. The gap in investment rates between India and China narrowed during the first half of the 2000s, with India's investment rate climbing to 35.8% in 2007. However, the two countries responded to the global financial crisis of 2007-08 and its aftermath in starkly different ways. The investment rate took a big hit in India, especially after 2012. However, China battled its economic challenges with considerable expenditure, primarily through its state-owned enterprises, in areas such as infrastructure, advanced manufacturing, renewable energy, and artificial intelligence. By 2013, the investment rate rose to 44.5% in China but dropped to 31.3% in India. In 2023, these rates were 41.3% and 30.8%, respectively, for China and India.

India's economic growth over the last decade has been driven mainly by expanding domestic consumption expenditures. In 2023, consumption as a share of GDP was 60.3% in India compared to 39.1% in China. The dominance of consumption in India's GDP structure is mainly due to the weaknesses of the other components of aggregate demand in the country. The shares of investment and government consumption expenditure are relatively low. India also has a trade deficit, with its import of goods and services being larger than its exports, reducing domestic demand.

Economic growth driven by consumption is not only slower than investment-led growth, but it also aggravates inequalities. The growth of jobs, incomes, and consumption has remained depressed for many Indians, and they will be left behind.

There has been a stagnation in the growth of investment by the public and private corporate sectors in India (it is too early to say if the marginal improvement in investment in 2022-23 is here to stay). The only segment that has shown some vitality is household investment, especially in residential buildings, and that too during the early 2010s. The continued reluctance of private capitalists to spend more in the economy is a sign of their sagging 'animal spirits'. In times like



these, the government needs to step in with its investments, particularly in critical sectors, to boost private sector confidence and help spread the benefits of growth to the broader population.

However, the government has not shown its resolve, including in the latest Union Budget, to provide an investment boost to the Indian economy. Instead, the tax concessions and the unwillingness to significantly raise government spending indicate a preference for a low-growth trajectory pulled by the consumption of the middle and upper classes.

INDIA'S MIDDLE CLASS 2.0

The top 5 IT firms (TCS, Infosys, Wipro, HCL and Tech Mahindra) employ more Indians today than the Railways or the armed forces. Similarly, private sector banks have more employees compared with their state-owned counterparts. But India still has a major job challenge beyond services.

- Employment in the public sector stood at 194.7 lakh and that in the organised private sector only at 80.6 lakh as on March 31, 1995. The former — employees in the central and state governments plus quasi-governments (public sector undertakings) and local bodies — fell to 176.1 lakh and the latter rose to 119.7 lakh by March 31, 2012.
- The Ministry of Labour & Employment doesn't seem to have compiled or released statistics on organised public and private sector employment after 2011-12 (April-March). Even the data last published in the Finance Ministry's Economic Survey for 2018-19 stops at 2011-12.
- But it is fair to assume that the trend of organised employment shifting from the public to private sector — especially post the economic reforms of 1991 — has gathered pace after 2011-12.
- One indicator of that is the number of regular employees with the Indian Railways. Between 1990-91 and 2022-23, these plunged from 16.5 lakh to 11.9 lakh. Even after accounting for the increase to 12.5 lakh last fiscal, the drop from the 1990-91 peak works out to 4 lakh or almost a quarter. Still sharper is the reduction in employment with Central public sector enterprises: From 22.2 lakh in 1990-91 to just over 8.1 lakh in 2023-24 (see chart).

Do You Know:

- In 1991-92, scheduled commercial banks in India had a total employee strength of about 9.8 lakh. Public sector banks had a lion's share of nearly 8.5 lakh or 87% in that. The latter number registered a decline to 7.7 lakh by 2020-21, but still exceeded the 6 lakh employees in private sector banks.
- Simply put, liberalisation and globalisation opened up new industries and opportunities for private enterprise.
- The private sector-led Middle Class 2.0's expansion happened just when the post-Independence government-created Middle Class 1.0 started shrinking with the initiation of reforms.
- Official Periodic Labour Force Surveys (PLFS) show the farm sector's share in India's workforce decreasing from 64% in 1993-94 to 48.9% in 2011-12 and further to 42.5% in 2018-19, but subsequently going up to 46.2% in 2023-24.



EXPRESS VIEW ON NEW INCOME TAX BILL: EASE OF TAXPAYING

The recently presented Budget for 2025-26 will go down as one that provided India's income tax payers — meagre as their number is, relative to the size of the overall population — a massive relief, with the government taking a hit of Rs 1 lakh crore in revenues foregone. But an arguably more substantive move — an economic and regulatory reform as well as an initiative towards improved governance — is the introduction of the new Income Tax Bill in the ongoing Budget session of Parliament. The new Bill, which is now being scrutinised by a select committee of Lok Sabha, intends to contemporise as well as simplify the existing statute that dates back to 1961. It is in line with the Narendra Modi government's move to abolish over 1,500 obsolete laws while updating and amending others.

The new Bill is just half the length of the existing law as it cuts the total chapters from 47 to 23, even as it has more tables, sections and schedules. This has been made possible by omitting outdated provisions, restructuring related portions, and simplifying the language. For instance, now there will be a single and separate schedule dealing with all the exemptions applicable to non-residents; as such, a taxpayer will find it easier to read the law. Language has been improved with a view to prevent misinterpretation. For example, “notwithstanding” has been replaced by “irrespective” at several places, and “deemed”, which often led to litigation, has been replaced by “treated” in key places. Perhaps the most eye-catching change that will resonate the most with the taxpayer is the dropping of the phrase (and concept of) “assessment year” since it routinely created confusion, replacing it with the concept of “tax year”. The new Bill also brings cryptocurrencies under the capital assets' umbrella. It will enable tax authorities to call for information from “virtual digital space”, such as online investments and trading accounts etc.

This new Bill is not as substantive a change as the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita replacing the Bharatiya Danda Sanhita, the original intent of the Bill was only to make the Act “concise, lucid, easy to read and understand”. But given that complicated laws are difficult to read and easy to misinterpret, they lead to numerous and unending litigations and do more harm to the ease of doing business and ease of everyday living than high levels of taxation per se. The simplification has been done carefully and in a manner that won't upend the existing jurisprudence — something that could have led to more litigation.

WHAT ARE INDIA'S SOVEREIGN GREEN BONDS, AND WHY IS DEMAND FOR SUCH BONDS WEAK?

- While green bonds help governments raise capital for clean energy and infrastructure, India's issues have struggled to secure a meaningful ‘greenium’— lower borrowing costs typically associated with such bonds. As a result, planned allocations for key schemes, including grid-scale solar, have been slashed.
- With muted investor interest, India is relying on general revenue to bridge funding gaps. Addressing liquidity issues, improving reporting transparency, and exploring sustainability bonds could help boost demand and expand green finance in the country.
- Investors in green bonds often seek stable, long-term returns, and may also have internal or external mandates to allocate a portion of their funds to green financing. Despite their potential, green bonds constitute a small part of the debt market and overall climate financing, as governments strengthen reporting practices and introduce incentives to attract investors.

**Do You Know:**

- 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. The framework defines “green projects” as those that encourage energy efficiency in resource utilisation, reduce carbon emissions, promote climate resilience, and improve natural ecosystems.
- Since 2022-23, India has issued SGrBs eight times, and raised almost Rs 53,000 crore. Each year, the government uses roughly 50% of proceeds from SGrBs to fund production of energy efficient three-phase electric locomotives through the Ministry of Railways.
- For 2024-25, the revised estimates for allocations to schemes eligible under SGrBs include Rs 12,600 crore for electric locomotive manufacturing, roughly Rs 8,000 crore for metro projects, Rs 4,607 crore for renewable energy projects, including the National Green Hydrogen Mission, and Rs 124 crore for afforestation under the National Mission for a Green India.

DEFENDING RUPEE: RBI FORWARD DOLLAR SALES TOUCH \$67.93 BN AS OF DEC 31

The Reserve Bank of India's (RBI) outstanding net forward sales of the dollar have surged to \$67.93 billion as of December 31, 2024, as the central bank intensified its efforts to stabilise the rupee. This marks a significant increase in outstanding forward dollar sales of \$14.58 billion just three months ago in September 2024, and a substantial rise from \$541 million during the year ended March 2024.

- The high forward dollar sales position indicates that the RBI has been actively selling dollars in the forward market to defend the rupee amid concerns over US trade policies, sluggish domestic growth, and FPI outflows. In the spot market, the RBI's dollar sales stood at \$45 billion in the third quarter—\$15.15 billion in December 2024, \$20.22 billion in November and \$9.27 billion in October—while it bought dollar worth \$9.63 billion in September 2024, according to RBI data.
- The RBI also conducted a dollar-rupee buy/sell swap for \$5 billion on December 31, with the transaction set to be reversed on August 4. This move aims to manage the impact of the RBI's spot market interventions on rupee liquidity.
- However, while higher dollar sales in the forward market may not impact the forex kitty immediately, it can lead to a decrease in forex reserves subsequently since the RBI is expected to repurchase the dollars in the forward market on the prescribed dates. By selling more dollars in the forward market, the RBI is effectively reducing the demand for dollars in the spot market, which helps to stabilise the rupee.
- The rupee depreciated by 1.5 per cent month-on-month (m-o-m) in January 2025, in line with movements in most major currencies, amid growing global uncertainties. It had fallen to a low of 87.95 earlier this month.

**Do You Know:**

- A rising US dollar and FPI outflows from emerging market economies (EMEs) amid growing global uncertainties exerted significant pressure on emerging market currencies during January 2025.
- In an environment of heightened global market turbulence, the rupee exhibited relatively low volatility. In terms of the 40-currency real effective exchange rate (REER), the INR depreciated by 2.2 per cent (m-o-m) in January 2025, due to depreciation of the INR in nominal effective terms and negative relative price differentials, the RBI said in its 'State of the economy' report released on Wednesday.
- As of February 7, 2025, India's foreign exchange reserves stood at \$638.3 billion, providing a cover for 10.8 months of imports and 89.7 per cent of external debt outstanding at end-September 2024. The RBI noted that strong macroeconomic fundamentals and improvements in various measures of external sector vulnerability have helped India navigate the ongoing wave of global uncertainty.

WHAT IS DEPOSIT INSURANCE COVER, AND HOW WILL RAISING IT HELP YOU?

The government is considering increasing the insurance cover for bank deposits from the current limit of Rs 5 lakh, Financial Services Secretary M Nagaraju said on Monday (February 17).

- The deposit insurance cover is offered by the Deposit Insurance and Credit Guarantee Corporation (DICGC), a specialised division of the Reserve Bank of India (RBI).
- Asked what the government was doing in the matter of the New India Co-operative Bank against which the RBI took action last week, Nagaraju said that a proposal on "increasing (deposit) insurance" was "under active consideration", and "as and when the government approves, we will notify it".
- RBI has imposed several restrictions on the Mumbai-based bank, including superseding its Board of Directors for 12 months, citing supervisory concerns and "poor governance standards".
- The RBI directed the loss-making bank to not grant or renew any loans and advances; make any investment; incur any liability including borrowing funds and accepting fresh deposits; or disburse or agree to disburse any payment without prior written approval. The restrictions came into effect after the close of business on February 13, and will be in force for six months.
- New India Co-operative Bank has 30 branches in Mumbai, Thane, Navi Mumbai, and Pune, and in Surat in Gujarat. At the end of March 2024, the bank had a deposit base of Rs 2,436 crore, and it had posted losses of Rs 22.78 crore in 2023-24 and Rs 30.74 crore in 2022-23.

Do You Know:

- The objective of the DICGC is to protect "small depositors" from the risk of losing their savings in case of a bank failure. The insurance cover of Rs 5 lakh per depositor is for all accounts held by the depositor in all branches of the insured bank.
- DICGC insures all commercial banks, including branches of foreign banks functioning in India, local area banks, regional rural banks, and cooperative banks. However, primary co-operative societies are not insured by the DICGC.



- Savings, fixed, current, and recurring deposits are insured. The DICGC does not provide insurance for deposits by foreign, central, and state governments, and for inter-bank deposits.
- The premium for deposit insurance is borne by the insured bank. DICGC collects premiums from member financial institutions at a flat or differentiated rate based on the bank's risk profile.
- DICGC has said it will make payments to eligible depositors of the bank as per Section 18A of the DICGC Act, 1961, subject to the submission of a claim list by the bank within the statutory timeline of 45 days.
- In 2021, a new Section 18A was inserted in the DICGC Act, 1961, which enabled depositors to get interim payment and time-bound access to their deposits to the extent of the deposit insurance cover through interim payments by DICGC, in case of imposition of restrictions on banks by the RBI.
- At present, the DICGC offers insurance cover on bank deposits up to Rs 5 lakh within 90 days of imposition of such restrictions. Since the DICGC insures both the principal and interest amount held by a depositor in a bank, this is how the cover works:

NEW LAW EMPOWERS CREDIT FIRMS TO COLLECT DATA WITHOUT USERS' CONSENT, RBI TELLS SUPREME COURT

The RBI defended the collection of financial data of banking users by credit rating companies to prepare credit scores and submitted before the Supreme Court that it was precisely the purpose behind Parliament enacting the Credit Information Companies (Regulation) Act, 2005 and companies do not need consent from the borrowers for this.

- Petitioner Surya Prakash, a Bengaluru-based entrepreneur and educational trainee, had moved the top court accusing the Credit Information Companies (CICs) of “illegally” collecting people's financial information “by forced consent” and “selling the data to their members”. The plea also accused the CICs of “blatant abuse and violation of right to privacy”.
- The plea also said that the Centre and the RBI have an “unholy and unethical alliance” with the CICs to undermine citizens rights.
- In a separate affidavit, the Indian Cyber Crime Coordination Centre (I4C), under the MHA, said, “in response to the averment made by the petitioner regarding data theft, I4C has requested the nodal officer of cybercrime units in all States/UTs vide letter... dated 14.08.2024 seeking information regarding FIR/case registered against credit information companies and fintech companies. However, the response is awaited.”
- In its counter affidavit on December 23, 2024, the RBI said that the plea raises “baseless, unfounded and speculative issues in complete ignorance of the provisions of the CICR Act and regulations”.
- The RBI said that the law “expressly empowers the credit information companies to collect, store and maintain as well as process the credit information of the borrowers and as such with the enactment of the CICR Act, the requirement of consent from the borrowers has been rendered otiose.”
- On apprehensions that the data might end up in the wrong hands, the affidavit said that under the Act, “every credit information company is bound to provide credit information to its specified

4TH FLOOR SHATABDI TOWER, SAKCHI, JAMSHEDPUR



user on receipt of a request from him and... the credit information cannot be disclosed by credit information companies to any person other than its specified user.'

Do You Know:

- The RBI said that the CICR Act “was brought in as part of risk mitigating policy of the Government... to arrest accretion of fresh NPAs in the banking sector” and provides “for setting up the CICs for collecting, sharing, processing and collating as well as disseminating the credit information of clients/ borrowers/ prospective borrowers in the manner provided in the CIC (Regulation) Act so as to enable the lenders like banks and other financial institutions to take an informed decision while lending money to borrowers.”

MOSPI TO RELEASE NEW CAPEX SURVEY, MONTHLY LABOUR FORCE DATA FROM FY26

Amid a focus on increasing the frequency of economic data release, a new survey report on private sector's capex intentions will be released by the government on April 30 this year.

- Monthly labour force surveys and a new release date for factory output data to reduce the time lag in the release are also in the offing by the government's statistics ministry, Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI) from the upcoming financial year.
- The timeliness for data releases is in focus by the statistics ministry, which will help the government as well as the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) to look at updated data before policy formulations.
- Beginning April, the factory output data, compiled through the Index of Industrial Production (IIP), will be released on a new date of 28th of every month instead of the 12th of every month at present. Officials said the intent is to reduce the time lag in the release of the industrial output data from 42 days at present.
- A deferment in the release date by over a fortnight would mean that IIP data hereon would be for the latest month. For instance, on February 12, IIP data was released for the month of December whereas retail inflation data, released on the same day, was for January. The new release date for the IIP from April onwards will help the ministry to issue data for the immediate preceding month.

Do You Know:

- The all-India IIP is a composite indicator that measures the short-term changes in the volume of production of a basket of industrial products during a given period with respect to the base period. It is a key figure to measure the general level of industrial activity in the economy on a monthly basis and also forms a crucial input for compilation of Gross Value Added (GVA) of manufacturing sector in Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of the country on quarterly basis.
- The ministry has also lined up the new private capex survey report for release in April. The forward-looking survey on private sector capex investment intentions is aimed at measuring the capital investment intentions of the private corporate sector covering non-financial and financial corporations through collection of information from major enterprises.
- The survey will compile information on capex expenditure incurred during the last three years and projected capex for the next two years including breakdown of capex by type of assets and industries.



- The National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) under MoSPI had launched PLFS in April 2017. Quarterly bulletins provide details of labour force indicators such as Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR), Worker Population Ratio (WPR), Unemployment Rate (UR). At present, the MoSPI releases rural PLFS data on an annual basis and urban PLFS data on a quarterly basis along with an annual report which combines data for both urban and rural on an annual basis. Other employment surveys such as the survey by the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE) comes out on a weekly and monthly basis.

SLIGHT DIP IN UNEMPLOYMENT RATE IN URBAN AREAS: SURVEY

The unemployment rate in urban areas of the country was 6.4% for the period of October to December in 2024 for persons of age 15 and above, says the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) released by the Statistics and Programme Implementation Ministry here on Tuesday.

For men, the unemployment rate was 5.8%, and for women, 8.1%.

In 2023, during the corresponding quarter, the unemployment rate for the cohort was 6.5%, while in the July-to-September 2024 quarter, it was 6.4%. The female unemployment rate last year was 8.6%.

Himachal tops the list

Among the States, Himachal Pradesh had the highest unemployment rate of 10.4% and Gujarat the lowest 3%. The female unemployment rate too was the highest in Himachal Pradesh at 24%. The lowest was 1.3% in Delhi.

The PLFS defines unemployment rate as the percentage of unemployed persons in the labour force in current weekly status (CWS) — the number of persons either employed or unemployed on an average in a week.

The Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR), the percentage of population in the labour force, was 39.6% for people of all ages. It was 39.2% in the corresponding quarter last year. The LFPR for women has increased by 0.1 percentage point to 20% from last year's 19.9%. However, the LFPR decreased from last quarter's figure of 20.3%.

The lowest LFPR for all people and for women was in Bihar at 30.7% and 9.9%, respectively. The PLFS was done among 1,70,487 people in 45,074 households.

Increase in WPR

The Worker Population Ratio (WPR) in urban areas among persons of age 15 and above has increased from 46.6% during October to December of 2023, to 47.2% in October to December in 2024.

The WPR for males of age 15 and above for urban areas increased from 69.8% in October to December of 2023 to 70.9% during October to December in 2024.

The workers are classified into three broad categories according to their status in employment such as self-employed, regular wage/salaried employee and casual labour.

Within the category of self-employed, two sub-categories have been made as own account worker and employer combined together and unpaid helper in household enterprises.



In these categories, 39.9% were self-employed, 49.4% were regular employees and 10.7% were casual labourers. As much as 5.5% of the workers were in agriculture sector, 31.8% in the secondary sector, including mining, and 62.7% in the tertiary sector that includes service sectors.

EXPRESS VIEW ON IMPORT OF YELLOW PEAS: PULSES NEED PRIORITY

Food and Consumer Affairs Minister Pralhad Joshi has said that the Centre may stop duty-free imports of yellow peas (matar) after February. This comes even as Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman, in her latest budget speech, announced a six-year Mission for Aatmanirbharta (self-reliance) in pulses with a special focus on tur (pigeon-pea), urad (black gram) and masoor (red lentil). It also comes at a time when India's pulses imports, at \$3.28 billion during November 2024, were 56.6 per cent higher than for the corresponding period of the previous year, and are set to cross a record \$5 billion in the 2024-25 fiscal. The domestic crop was poor last year because of drought in Maharashtra and Karnataka, leading to a spike in consumer prices. But with retail pulses inflation easing to 2.6 per cent in January, from double digit levels through much of last year, the Centre probably does not feel the need to import much now.

India, incidentally, achieved some degree of self-reliance in pulses, especially from 2018-19 to 2022-23. That period saw a significant drop in imports, particularly of matar and chana (chickpea). This was enabled by increased domestic production, mainly of chana and moong (green gram), where scientists bred shorter-duration varieties requiring one irrigation at most. In moong, farmers are today taking as many as four crops a year, thanks to varieties that are short-duration as well as photo-thermo insensitive, making them amenable to growing anytime and anywhere. The Modi government also helped through some concerted efforts at minimum support price (MSP)-based procurement of chana and moong. There is definitely a case to extend the success story in the two to other pulses – more so in tur and urad. For that, primacy has to be accorded to breeding. The existing tur varieties have a duration of 160-180 days. Farmers need varieties that mature in 120-130 days, can be mechanically harvested and are resistant to insect pests and diseases.

Pulses are cultivated largely in lands prone to moisture stress. While there is recognition of their being a source of protein, less water-guzzling than rice, sugarcane or wheat and also harbouring rhizobium bacteria that fix atmospheric nitrogen, pulses remain victims of policy ambiguity. Tur is now selling below its MSP. It could be the same with chana when the new crop, likely a bumper one, is harvested in over a month's time. Pulses growers lack the one thing that rice, wheat and sugarcane farmers have – assurance of their crop being procured at or fetching an MSP. They deserve as much if not more.

PRIME MINISTER DHAN-DHAANYA KRISHI YOJANA: SCHEME'S NEED, AIMS

Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharman while presenting the Union Budget on February 1 announced the launch of the Prime Minister Dhan-Dhaanya Krishi Yojana (PMDKY).

- “Motivated by the success of the Aspirational Districts Programme (ADP), our government will undertake a PMDKY in partnership with States,” Sitharaman had said while announcing the programme.

- According to the Finance Minister, the program has the following five objectives:

- Enhancing agricultural productivity;



- Adopting crop diversification and sustainable agriculture practices;
- Augmenting post-harvest storage at the panchayat and block level;
- Improving irrigation facilities; and
- Facilitating availability of long-term and short-term credit.

Do You Know:

- Aspirational Districts Programme (ADP) was launched by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in January 2018. The programme aimed to quickly and effectively transform 112 of the most under-developed districts across India, based on 3 Cs — Convergence (of Central and State schemes), Collaboration (of Central and State level nodal officers, and District Collectors), and Competition (among districts through monthly delta ranking).
- PMDKY will cover 100 districts based on three broad parameters: low productivity, moderate crop intensity, and below-average credit parameters, Sitharaman had said. As per sources, the Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers' Welfare has been collecting data of these parameters, based on which the districts will be identified.
- Cropping intensity is a measure of how efficiently land is used, and it is defined as the percentage of the gross cropped area to the net area sown. In simple words, the cropping intensity indicates the number of crops grown on a piece of land in an agricultural year (July-June).
- Sources also said that the Ministry has requested the Department of Financial Services and NABARD to share the data on district wise farm credit.

DreamIAS



LIFE & SCIENCE

GLIMPSES OF VIOLENCE AROUND MILKY WAY'S CENTRAL BLACK HOLE

NASA's James Webb Space Telescope is providing the best look yet at the chaotic events unfolding around the supermassive black hole at the centre of our Milky Way galaxy, observing a steady flickering of light punctuated by occasional bright flares as material is drawn inward by its enormous gravitational pull.

Webb was launched in 2021 and began collecting data in 2022, allowing astronomers to observe the region around the black hole, called Sagittarius (Sgr) A*, for extended periods for the first time.

The region around Sgr A* was seen as bubbling with activity rather than remaining in a steady state. In particular, the researchers observed a constant flickering of light from the swirling disk of gas surrounding the black hole, called an accretion disk. This flickering appears to be emanating from material very close to the event horizon, the point of no return beyond which everything is dragged into oblivion.

There were also one to three large flares over any 24-hour period with smaller bursts in between.

Sgr A* possesses roughly four-million-times the mass of our sun and is located about 26,000 lightyears from the earth.

While the events observed around Sgr A* are dramatic, this black hole is not as active as some at the centres of other galaxies.

The new findings were based on a total of about 48 hours of observations of Sgr A* made by Webb over a year, in seven increments ranging from 6 to 9.5 hours, as the researchers obtained continuous measurements of the brightness around the black hole.

A PLANET ON THE EDGE: ARE SATURN'S RINGS OLDER THAN THEY LOOK?

A debate about the age of Saturn's resplendent rings has been raging for a few decades now, with no end in sight. A new study by researchers at the Institute of Science Tokyo and the Paris Institute of Planetary Physics has fresh spin to offer now that could recast the conversation.

Saturn's rings are an arresting sight even through modest telescopes. The planet is made mostly of hydrogen and helium, whereas the rings are billions of pieces of mostly bright-white water ice and rock. Some of these pieces are as small as a grain of salt; others are as big as a house.

Four spacecraft have visited Saturn thus far, all launched by NASA: Pioneer 11 and the twin Voyagers 1 and 2 flew by it while Cassini orbited Saturn from 2004 to 2017.

Unusually clean

Cassini in particular found the rings to be squeaky clean, with very little dirt. This is unusual because everything in the Solar System, including the earth, is constantly bombarded by dark pieces of dust, each finer than a grain of sand. These particles are fragments of larger chunks of rock in space. Most of this debris burns up in the earth's atmosphere when they get too close and never reach the surface. Around Saturn, astronomers expected this dark dust to be omnipresent in the rings, but this is not the case.



Based on this, scientists hypothesised that Saturn's rings are relatively new, only around 100 million years old — too young to have accumulated the dust. This was a simple explanation, which is good, but there is a catch: scientists do not know how the rings could have formed so recently.

In the new analysis, Hyodo's computer models showed that when dust particles collided with ice in Saturn's rings, they evaporated and dispersed into hundreds of even smaller flecks, which Cassini had also observed.

CAN'T STOP SHAKING

Q: What is an earthquake swarm?

A: An earthquake swarm occurs when multiple seismic events of comparable intensity strike a small area in relatively quick succession.

A state of emergency has been declared on Greece's Santorini and the nearby islands of Ios, Amorgos, and Anafi after a swarm of undersea earthquakes this month, sometimes every few minutes, prompted thousands of people to move to the mainland.

Greece's chief seismologist has said the frequency of earthquakes affecting the area has eased in recent days, but that the outlook for continued tremors in the coming weeks remains uncertain.

Swarms have been reported in peninsular India. After heavy rain, water seeps into small fractures in underground rocks. A 2008 study estimated that for every 10 metre's rise in the water table, the pressure inside the rocks increased by almost 1 atm, and which is released in earthquake swarms.

WHY ARE MARRIAGES IN CHINA ON THE DECLINE?

The story so far:

There has been a major decline in the number of couples who are registering to marry in China. As per the Chinese Ministry of Civil Affairs, in 2024, across China, only 6.1 million couples registered, a drop of 20.3% compared to 2023 figures. This is the lowest number of registrations since 1986. As the general cost of living and urban unemployment has risen, with almost 44% of urban women not wanting to marry, marriages in China are declining.

What is the problem?

While stand-alone this may not appear as a very pertinent challenge, coupled with the consistent decline in population, it gets compounded. China's population has been declining consistently for the last three years and in 2022 the number of deaths exceeded birthrates. The primary reason for this is the one-child policy, introduced in the 1980s and implemented with great zeal. Chinese President Xi Jinping has tried to reverse the trend by introducing the two-child policy in 2016, which was later modified to a three-child policy in 2021. However, the policy shift has failed to have any major impact. Furthermore, the desire for a male child has led to an unbalanced sex-ratio as well.

Does China have an ageing people?

The declining population has now become a demographic challenge for Mr. Xi. As a result of these policies, China has witnessed a steady decline in the number of working age people (19-59 years).



People above 60 years make up 22% of the Chinese population today and maybe 50% by 2050. This has also intensified the pension pressure, as the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) predicts that the pension fund may run out by 2035. In order to postpone such reality, the government has increased the retirement age from 60 to 63 for men and to 55 for women. This would be a temporary solution because if the gap continues to rise, it will provide only a limited respite. The falling birthrates have also increased the demand for care giving and healthcare, while a lot of kindergartens have been shutting down.

The reducing population and the challenges which this leads to directly impacts the economic future and stability of the Chinese government. Even though the government has been attempting to lure people with financial support, the cost of raising a child is proving an insurmountable deterrent to the people.

What is Chinese government doing?

Rather than accepting the reality of the situation and its far-reaching impact, the Xi government is still attempting to resolve this with policies and diktats. Such an approach showcases that the government is still looking for ways to change ground realities with the help of top-down processes without acknowledging that these issues need to be accepted as social reality, and thus need people-centric solutions which echo with Chinese society today.

For example, while delivering a speech at the Women's Federation of China, Mr. Xi called on the women to, "actively cultivate a new culture of marriage and childbearing and strengthen guidance on young people's view on marriage, childbirth and family". This statement underscores the gap between the Communist Party of China (CPC) and society in China today. The CPC has a long history of interfering in the lives of Chinese women, with the most prominent example being the one-child policy. The CPC under Mr. Xi is still looking at ways to control and command society. It strongly believes that the people should undertake tasks which are commanded by the party with the premise that it knows what is best for the nation. These policies seem to be directed towards safeguarding the power of the party, and not to the needs of the larger society.

WHY GLOBAL SEA ICE COVER HAS DIPPED TO RECORD LOW — WHAT THIS MEANS

- Over the five-days leading up to February 13, the combined extent of Arctic and Antarctic sea ice dropped to 15.76 million sq km, down from the previous five-day record low of 15.93 million sq km in January-February 2023, according to BBC analysis of data from the US National Snow and Ice Data Centre (NSIDC).
- Experts suggest that the 2025 low could be due to a combination of warm air, warm seas and winds breaking apart the ice, the BBC reported.
- Antarctic sea ice is particularly vulnerable to ice-breaking winds. Unlike Arctic ice, it is surrounded by the ocean instead of continents and is thus more mobile, and also comparatively thinner. The situation has been made worse this year due to warmer air and warmer waters towards the end of the southern hemisphere summer (December to February).
- Higher air temperatures led to the melting of the edges of the Antarctic ice sheet — also known as ice shelves — which extend over the ocean. "[The] ongoing ocean warming is setting the backdrop to all of this," Tom Bracegirdle, research scientist at the British Antarctic Survey, told the BBC.



- Less sea ice cover means that more water is getting exposed to the Sun and more heat (solar radiation) is getting absorbed, leading to a further rise in temperatures. Notably, sea ice keeps temperatures down in the polar regions, as its bright, white surface reflects more sunlight back to space than liquid water. The loss of sea ice cover could be one of the reasons why the polar regions are getting warmer at a faster rate than the rest of the world.
- Studies have found that melting sea ice is also slowing down the flow of water through the world's oceans. This is happening because freshwater from melting ice enters the ocean, and reduces the salinity and density of the surface water, thereby diminishing that downward flow to the sea's bottom. A slowdown of ocean overturning can severely impact the global climate, the marine food chain, and the stability of ice shelves.

Do You Know:

- Sea ice refers to the free-floating ice in the polar regions. While it generally expands during the winter and melts in the summers, some sea ice remains year-round. Note that this is different from icebergs, glaciers, ice sheets, and ice shelves, which form on land.
- Sea ice plays a crucial role in cooling the planet by trapping existing heat in the ocean, and thus precluding it from warming the air above. Therefore, a reduction in sea ice cover can have disastrous consequences for Earth.
- Currently, Arctic sea ice is at its lowest recorded extent for the time of year. Meanwhile, Antarctic sea ice is close to a new low, based on satellite records going back to the late 1970s. But given historical trends, this is not all that surprising. Since the late 1970s, NSIDC has estimated that some 77,800 sq km of sea ice has been lost per year.

Between 1981 and 2010, Arctic sea ice extent in September — when it reaches its minimum extent — shrunk at a rate of 12.2% per decade, according to the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA).

- In the Antarctic, the situation is a bit different. Until 2015, the region actually witnessed a slight year-on-year increase in sea ice. Between late 2014 and 2017, however, the Antarctic lost two million square km of sea ice — an area equivalent to roughly four times the size of Spain, according to the Copernicus Marine Service. Sea ice levels again increased in 2018.
- In 2023, maximum Antarctic sea ice reached historically low levels. Sea ice cover was more than two million sq km lower than usual — an area about 10 times the size of the UK.
- Last year, the cover was higher than in 2023 but still 1.55 million sq km below the average maximum extent from 1981-2010.

CARBON CAPTURE: A PRICEY FIX?**WHAT IS IT?**

Global warming is the result of certain greenhouse gases — but especially carbon dioxide (CO₂) — building up in the air and preventing the planet from cooling as quickly as it would without them. Although some natural processes emit these gases, their build-up to dangerous levels is entirely due to emissions from human industrial activity, including the combustion of fossil fuels like coal and petrol.



The human response to climate change has two prongs: adaptation and mitigation. Adaptation deals with how the world, its people, and their activities can adjust to an increasingly warming world. Mitigation is concerned with reducing CO₂ emissions.

An important type of technology that straddles both these efforts is carbon capture and sequestration (CCS). Here, a device sucks carbon or CO₂ out of an emission source, like the chimneys of a power plant, or the atmosphere itself, converts it to a different form, and stores it in a sealed container.

CCS has been controversial: among others, researchers have said it could create more 'room' to pollute by removing CO₂ from the air.

A study published on February 9 in the journal Environmental Science & Technology has now reported that deploying CCS technologies will also be more expensive than switching to renewable energy. According to the paper, policies that promote CCS "to reduce or offset CO₂ emissions" in 149 countries will incur 9-12-times the social cost of those countries switching entirely to wind, water, and solar power.

EXTREMOPHILE

How does Antarctica's only native insect species survive extreme winter?

Flightless Antarctic midge (*Belgica antarctica*) is the only known insect native to Antarctica that is able to survive the extreme climate. Researchers have uncovered a part of the mystery of how the Antarctic midge copes with freezing temperatures. They found that the midge deals with the seasons during its two-year life cycle by undergoing quiescence in its first year and obligate diapause in its second. Quiescence is a form of dormancy in immediate response to adverse conditions, and when conditions improve, the organism becomes active again. Quiescence enables a swift transition between active and inactive lifestyles, making it possible to maximally exploit periods when temperatures exceed a certain threshold. The Antarctic midge larvae usually grow to their second instar by the first winter and undergo quiescence so that they can quickly resume development at any moment when it suddenly becomes warmer.

LOGGERHEAD TURTLES USE GEOMAGNETIC FIELD TO NAVIGATE LARGE DISTANCES

The loggerhead turtle can learn and remember the magnetic signature of an area and does a 'turtle dance' when in a location that they associate with food, a study in Nature reports. The research presents mechanisms of how migratory species navigate using the magnetic field of the Earth.

Sea turtles are renowned for their long-distance migrations and often return to feeding sites, even after seasonal journeys and displacements. Precisely how such species navigate remains undetermined, but growing evidence suggests the animals use the magnetic field of the Earth as a map and compass.

To determine whether turtles can learn the magnetic signatures of geographical areas, Dr. Kayla M. Goforth from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, North Carolina and others housed juvenile sea turtles in tanks in which magnetic signatures related to specific geographical locations were recreated. The juveniles spent an equal amount of time in two magnetic fields but were fed in only one of them. When in the area associated with feeding, the turtles start to dance in anticipation. This finding presents strong evidence that turtles can learn to distinguish between magnetic fields, creating an internal 'magnetic map'. The authors



discovered this sense relied on a separate mechanism to the magnetic 'compass' of the turtle, implying that turtles have two distinct geomagnetic senses to facilitate navigation.

ONLY SECOND ANIMAL TO FIND ITS WAY BY POLARISED MOONLIGHT FOUND

Many nocturnal animals, including insects such as ants and bees, follow the moon's position to find their way when they go foraging. But the moon waxes and wanes in a cycle and can be obscured by clouds or overhanging tree canopies, so the animals cannot always directly track its position.

Now, for the first time, scientists at Macquarie University, Sydney, have found that two nocturnal bull ant species (*Myrmecia pyriformis* and *Myrmecia midas*) make their way at night with the help of polarised moonlight, which, while being dimmer even than moonlight, contains unusual patterns that can point the way.

This is also only the second instance of an animal being found to use polarised moonlight to orient itself.

Returning late

Seen from the ground, both sunlight and moonlight contain characteristic polarisation patterns. The way these patterns are oriented in the sky, rather than the location of the light source alone, allows animals to use it as a compass.

The study found the nocturnal bull ants were able to detect and use polarised moonlight throughout the lunar cycle for foraging, even under a crescent moon when moonlight is 80% less intense.

The polarisation patterns in moonlight are also a million-times dimmer than in sunlight. So while many animals are known to use the latter, very few use the former. The first animal found to use polarised moonlight was the dung beetle.

Scientists already knew *M. pyriformis* and *M. midas* ants used polarised sunlight to navigate, but this light fades as the sun sets. The study's researchers were also aware most of the foraging *M. midas* ants returned overnight while the night-time activity of *M. pyriformis* ants increased on full-moon nights.

THE QUEST TO RESCUE NEARLY EXTINCT NORTHERN WHITE RHINO THROUGH IVF

Two rhinos munch serenely on grass as the sun rises over Mount Kenya, oblivious to the massive global endeavour to prevent them from being the last of their kind.

Najin and her daughter Fatu are the only northern white rhinos left on Earth. The clock is ticking before they become the latest in a long line of animals that humans have poached to extinction. But a recent breakthrough means this could be the year the world celebrates a new northern white rhino foetus. It would be an unprecedented comeback for the subspecies, declared functionally extinct after the death of the last male, Sudan, in 2018.

Uterus problems mean neither Sudan's daughter Najin nor his granddaughter Fatu can carry a pregnancy to term. But Fatu still produces viable eggs, making her a candidate for in-vitro fertilisation (IVF).



For years, scientists have been collecting her eggs at the Ol Pejeta Conservancy in Kenya. The eggs are sent to Europe where they are fertilised in a lab with sperm from dead male northern whites. There are now 36 fertilised eggs — or embryos — ready to be implanted, said Jan Stejskal, project coordinator for BioRescue, the most prominent of numerous such initiatives worldwide.

A year ago scientists announced a breakthrough: a surrogate was pregnant with a male southern white foetus, the first time IVF had worked for rhinos. But like so much about this long and difficult process, the joy was “mixed with sadness”, Ol Pejeta head of research Samuel Mutisya said.

By the time the 6.4-centimetre, 70-day-old foetus was discovered, the surrogate had already died from an unrelated bacteria infection. Worse still, a sterilised male who had played the role of “teaser bull” — to help identify when the female is ready for impregnation — also died from the infection, and finding a replacement has proved tricky.

The team is determined to try again.

MICE AND THE ORIGINS OF HUMAN LANGUAGE

Take two infants, have them brought up in a remote place by a shepherd who’s not allowed to talk in their presence, and see if they start speaking on their own — if so, in what language. Ordered by the Egyptian Pharaoh Psammetichus, this is the earliest known (likely legendary) experiment to try to trace the origins of human language. It’s a question that has always fascinated humankind, and similar stories are told of many rulers, from the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II to Akbar. Now, a scientific study may have found one piece of the puzzle. It involves not the speech of men, but the squeaks of mice.

NOVA1, a gene that produces a protein, is found in most mammals, but modern humans have a unique variant; one different from the version found in our closest relatives, Neanderthals and Denisovans. For this experiment, scientists used CRISPR gene editing to replace the NOVA1 variant found in mice with the human version. The result: The mice with the human variant squeaked differently. Baby mice produced different distress calls from their littermates when isolated from their mothers. And, particularly complex chat-up squeaks ensued when adult males saw females in heat.

This is likely just one of the many building blocks of the figurative Tower of Babel, together with other genes, parts of the brain involved in speech and more. The findings come at a time when genetic studies are expanding the frontiers of the understanding of language itself as well as the history of individual languages. It’s all very exciting — especially if you’re an adult male mouse.

SEX WORK DRIVES MPOX CLADE IB OUTBREAK IN DR CONGO

Genomic and epidemiologic data suggest that the rapid spread of mpox clade Ib in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) was majorly (83.4%) linked to sex work within densely populated areas. Overall, 200/751 (26.6%) of the professional sex workers were infected during the study period. “The outbreak appears to be driven by sexual activity with professional sex workers linked to bars supporting the previously undocumented model of heterosexual transmission,” notes a study. The study has been accepted for publication in the Nature Medicine.

The mpox clade Ib outbreak in DRC began in September 2023 in South Kivu. Though the study was limited to 670 cases during the period September 2023 to June 2024, the outbreak is still continuing. As of January 5, 2025, more than 9,500 laboratory confirmed cases have been notified

4TH FLOOR SHATABDI TOWER, SAKCHI, JAMSHEDPUR



with an estimated case fatality rate of 3.4%. Most cases belong to clade 1b, which is highly transmissible and more virulent than the clade 2 virus.

WHAT IS THE CANCER VACCINE RUSSIA IS OFFERING?

The story so far:

In December last year, Russia announced that it had developed a new, mRNA-based personalised 'vaccine' for cancer which would be available free for patients by early 2025. Media reports state that Andrey Kaprin, General Director of the Radiology Medical Research Center of the Russian Ministry of Health, spoke to Radio Rossiya about the vaccine. Reports also say that Alexander Gintsburg, Director of the Gamaleya National Research Center for Epidemiology and Microbiology, said the vaccine's pre-clinical trials had shown that it suppresses tumour development and potential metastases.

What is an mRNA cancer 'vaccine'?

mRNA or messenger RNA vaccines provide genetic information that teaches the body's cells to produce an antigen (protein or other substance that triggers an immune response), training the immune system to produce antibodies against it. When these antigens are detected on cancer cells, the immune system can potentially launch an attack against them.

How do these 'vaccines' work?

An mRNA cancer 'vaccine' is a form of immunotherapy. "Cancer cells often develop mechanisms to avoid being detected and destroyed by the immune system. This immune evasion mechanism has now been understood, and the idea of immunotherapy, therefore, is to boost the body's immune system to find and destroy cancer cells, preventing their spread. The advantages of this treatment are that, unlike chemotherapy, only the cancer cells are killed, and the side effects are lowered," said M. Manickavasagam, professor and head of medical oncology, Sri Ramachandra Medical College, Chennai.

While 'vaccines' are one form of immunotherapy, others include the use of antibodies, CAR T cell therapy, immune checkpoint inhibitors, etc.

The mRNA cancer vaccines therefore, are not meant for healthy patients to prevent disease like other vaccines; they are meant to be used in patients who already have cancer, in order to target and treat the tumours,' says Arvind Krishnamurthy, professor and head, surgical oncology, Cancer Institute, WIA, Chennai.

This treatment is tailored to target specific antigens that each patient's tumour has, making them personalised and potentially more effective. Unlike, say, the COVID-19 mRNA vaccine that targets one antigen, the cancer mRNA 'vaccines' may also be designed to target multiple antigens.

Is Russia's the only research into a 'vaccine' for cancer?

No, it is not. Last year, the U.K.'s National Health Service launched the Cancer Vaccine Launch Pad, a trial programme, to "speed up access to mRNA personalised cancer vaccine clinical trials for people who have been diagnosed with cancer" and "accelerate the development of cancer vaccines as a form of cancer treatment," according to its website.



In the U.S., global biopharmaceutical company CureVac announced in September last year that its CVGBM cancer vaccine showed promising immune responses in a phase 1 study in patients with glioblastoma (brain cancer).

Currently, more than 120 clinical trials are underway in various parts of the world.

What does it portend?

Doctors stress that unlike infectious diseases, since cancer, in general, is not caused by a single organism, the use of the word 'vaccine' may be misleading. In terms of prevention of cancer, the Human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccine can prevent cervical cancer since over 90% cases are known to be caused by this virus, says Prasad Eswaran, senior consultant, medical oncology, Apollo Proton Cancer Centre, Chennai.

Also, the Hepatitis B vaccine that is given to prevent the Hepatitis B viral infection, may have a protective role in the prevention of liver cancer, says Dr. Manickavasagam. "Patients must understand that these immunotherapy treatments are not preventive in nature," he emphasised.

At the moment, there is very little information available about the Russian treatment being offered. Any new drug goes through multiple stages of clinical trials, a process that takes years, before it can finally reach the market. Without all of this data being available publicly, it is difficult to say what stage this treatment is at and how safe and effective it will be, Dr. Prasad points out.

While immunotherapy has shown promising results for certain cancers, it may not be suitable for all kinds of cancers or for every cancer patient. Research is ongoing, and time will tell how effective this may be, say doctors.

CALORIES IN, GUILT OUT

Calories in, calories out. When Bertrand Russell said that mathematics contains not only truth but also supreme beauty, he couldn't possibly have known how burdensome the seemingly simple maths of weight loss would be for the health-conscious individual today. From calculating how many more steps one needs to walk in order to lose X number of calories to weighing out the exact quantity of protein needed after a gym session, numbers have taken on terrifying new dimensions. Not helping matters, arguably, is the Delhi Metro Rail Corporation (DMRC), which has put "calorie counters" on the staircases in five Metro stations in the capital in an effort to promote "healthier commuting habits and environmental consciousness".

The DMRC, no doubt, means well. Climbing stairs certainly burns more calories and uses less electricity than taking the escalator or elevator would. In a country that is battling pollution while labouring under the growing burden of non-communicable, lifestyle-related ailments like diabetes and heart disease, the numbers pasted on a Metro station staircase could well prompt a shift to better habits. But at a time when the pressure to lose weight is everywhere, from "fitspiration" articles to Instagram reels, and when even restaurant menus display calorie counts alongside prices, a gentle reminder could well become an admonition that causes shame and guilt.

The commute is an exhausting fact of everyday life. Yet, the minutes, even hours, spent getting from point A to point B can open up room to breathe, or to plop down and pull out one's phone or book, or to simply allow the mind to drift. Metro stations symbolise this much-needed pause in the daily bustle. One can choose the lazier, less healthy option, or scarf down a kachori or samosa while at it. In other words, calories in, guilt out.