

CURRENT AFFAIRS FOR UPSC

4th to 10th May 2025

DreamIAS



INTERNATIONAL

SOBER VERDICTS

The re-election of the centre-left Labor party in the Australian general election on Saturday is a shot in the arm for Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, who became the first Australian leader to win a second term in more than two decades. The centre-right Liberal-National coalition was trounced, with Labor winning 87 of the 151 seats in the Australian parliament's lower house, against its previously razor-thin edge of 77 seats. Welcoming Mr. Albanese's win, Prime Minister Narendra Modi congratulated him for an "emphatic mandate" and a commitment to take India-Australia bilateral ties and cooperation in the Indo-Pacific forward. Both countries signed an 'early-harvest' partial FTA (ECTA) in 2022, and have agreed to conclude a Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement (CECA) by the end of this year. India will host the Quad summit later this year, and Mr. Albanese is expected to discuss closer cooperation on trade, resilient supply chains, and critical mineral and technology partnerships. The geopolitical changes wrought by China and the U.S. signal the need for Indo-Pacific region countries to diversify their economic interests and shore up each other's strategic needs.

His re-election comes despite a rocky three-year term since 2022, as he faced low ratings on issues such as the economy, inflation and immigration; a recent poll said he would either lose or face a hung parliament. Given the timing of the turnaround, just after U.S. President Donald Trump took office, his win is seen as mirroring the results in Canada, where a dark horse centre-left Liberal party candidate, Mark Carney, won. As with the Conservative leadership in Canada, the Australian opposition's 'Liberal' candidate Peter Dutton was seen as a Trump policy admirer, and had taken a tough "anti-woke" stance, pillorying Mr. Albanese for allowing too many immigrants into the country, and vowing to stand with Israel on Gaza. However, as Mr. Trump unleashed a barrage of measures including tariffs on countries, his policies also appear to have had a negative impact on Mr. Dutton's chances. Despite being a staunch U.S. ally, Mr. Albanese's relatively tough stand against the tariffs was seen favourably by voters — much as Mr. Carney's tough stand against the U.S.'s tariffs and threats won him votes. Another election result this weekend, in Singapore, saw a win, albeit quite expected, for Lawrence Wong, whose party won its 14th term. Mr. Wong too made Mr. Trump's policies a rallying cry during his campaign, even suggesting that countries would simply "stop exporting to USA" if the tariffs were not taken down. In each of the wins, voters chose sober candidates seen as more rational at the wheel, and not those seen as tough leaders with strong rhetoric. This is a trend among America's closest allies, and Mr. Trump will have to pay heed to sane voices from outside his circle of advisers.

BETWEEN ISRAEL AND ISLAMISTS

Clashes first broke out in the southern outskirts of Damascus, Syria's capital, after an audio clip emerged on social media of a man criticising Prophet Mohammed. The audio was attributed to a Druze cleric (who later denied any role). Angry Sunni Islamists, aligned with the current government in Syria, started attacking Druze community members and armed Druze fighters fought back. Violence spread across Jaramana and Sahnaya near Damascus, and to Sweida, in southern Syria, the heartland of the Druze.

When Bashar al-Assad's regime fell in December, and the Islamist Hayat Tahrir al-Sham established its rule in Damascus, the Druze, like other minority communities in the country, called for their religious and political rights to be protected. Syria's new rulers promised that minority



rights will be respected. But those assurances did little in preventing the outbreak of sectarian clashes. As violence spread, Israel carried out multiple air strikes against pro-government groups in Syria “to protect the Druze”.

The Druze religion emerged out of Ismailism, which is an off-shoot of Shia Islam, in 11th century Egypt. But the Druze, a closely knit community for whom Arabic language and culture make the core of their identity, are not considered as Muslims. They recognise the major Abrahamic prophets, from Adam to Jesus and Mohammed, but also believe in reincarnation. The Koran is a sacred book, but the religious text for the Druze is Kitab Al Hikma (The Book Of Wisdom), which is a collection of books. The name Druze comes from one of the early preachers of Druze theology — Muhammad bin Ismail Nashtakin ad-Darazi.

Faith in reincarnation

The roots of Druze theology can be traced back to al-Hakim bi-Amr Allah, the 11th century Fatimid Caliph, who ruled from Cairo. A section of al-Hakim’s followers, including ad-Darazi, split away from Shia Ismailism, and started referring to al-Hakim as “a manifestation of God in His unity”. Hamza ibn Ali ibn Ahmad, who is considered the founder of the Druze sect, and the primary author of the Druze scriptures, proclaimed that God reincarnated as man in al-Hakim. The Caliph, who mysteriously disappeared in February 1021, is a central figure in Druze beliefs. He is addressed as “Our Lord” in Druze prayers.

The Druze do not allow conversion, and marriages outside the community are rare. But over the years, the tenets of the Druze were shaped by the influence of other eastern religions — from Abrahamic Prophet to the idea of reincarnation and rebirth derived from Hinduism — as well as Greek philosophy. After the cycle of reincarnations, the Druze believe, the soul reunites with ‘al-aaqal al kulli’, the Cosmic Mind (or God’s Will).

Hardcore Islamists see them as heretics, and the community has survived persecution during the late medieval era. But over the years, they have also emerged as an influential sect in the Levant region.

Today, roughly 1 million Druze people are scattered across Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Israel. In Syria, the Druze are concentrated in the southern suburbs of Damascus, the southern Sweida province and in the Golan Heights. When Israel captured most of the Golan Heights in 1967 and annexed it in 1981, the Druze community in the occupied region continued to live in their villages. Today, about 25,000 Druze are living in Golan — roughly 25% of them are estimated to be Israeli citizens. In total, there are about 1,50,000 Druze living in Israel.

During Syria’s civil war, Israel had reportedly helped the Druze groups in Syria’s south. After Islamists captured power in Syria, Israel has been more vocal about the protection of the Druze. Israel has also grabbed more Syrian territory in the Golan. By carrying out airstrikes in central Syria, Israel, whose ongoing war on Gaza has killed over 50,000 Palestinians — most of them women and children — are trying to position themselves as a protector of the Druze in the clashes-hit Syria.

For the Druze, the choice is between domestic Islamists and a foreign force that occupies parts of Syria. For now, they seem to lean towards the latter.



HELL ON EARTH

Gaza, as the Red Cross has put it, has already become “hell on earth”. In 19 months, Israeli forces have killed more than 52,000 Palestinians in the enclave, most of them women and children. Nearly all of Gaza’s 2.3 million residents have been displaced, many, multiple times. Tens of thousands have been wounded in a territory that lacks even basic medical facilities. Israel has imposed a renewed siege on the 365-sq.-km strip, deepening an already dire hunger crisis, and threatening, as the UN Human Rights Office warned, the viability of the Palestinians continuing to live in Gaza. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s government has decided to call up tens of thousands of reservists and launch an intensified ground offensive in the enclave, aimed at capturing and holding territory, and taking direct control of aid delivery. Israel has already reduced to rubble much of northern Gaza, and forcefully moved the over one million people who used to live there before the war began in October 2023. Now, Mr. Netanyahu says that as part of the new offensive, Palestinians would be moved again from their makeshift shelters and refugee camps. The Israeli government claims that “military pressure” is the only way to force Hamas to release the remaining hostages. But in the name of combating Hamas, Mr. Netanyahu has unleashed a relentless assault on the entire population of the Gaza Strip, even as the rest of the world watches passively.

Despite the use of callous, inhumane military tactics, which led the International Criminal Court to issue an arrest warrant against Mr. Netanyahu, Israel has faced little resistance from the most powerful nations. West Asia’s only nuclear power continues to receive weapons from its western allies. The Biden administration provided consistent military and diplomatic support throughout the war. And President Donald Trump, who once threatened to empty out the Palestinians from Gaza, appears to have given a carte blanche to Mr. Netanyahu. With no meaningful restraints, Mr. Netanyahu is now poised to make another grave mistake by expanding the offensive. Over the past 19 months of war, the best opportunity for peace was the implementation of the January 2025 ceasefire agreement. It required, in the second phase, Israel’s withdrawal from Gaza and Hamas releasing the remaining hostages. But Israel’s refusal and also Hamas’s refusal to hand over the hostages without Israeli pull-back led to the resumption of fighting. If Mr. Netanyahu proceeds with his plans, it will not just deepen the moral and humanitarian crisis but also deal a devastating blow to any attempt to end the conflict through talks. The world should show greater moral and institutional courage in confronting mass violence and forced displacements perpetrated by nation-states.

THE MONK WHO DEFIED THE MOB

The case against Chinmoy Krishna Das goes back to October when, against the backdrop of attacks against growing mob violence, which often targeted minority religious communities in Bangladesh, he provided leadership and direction to the Bangladesh Sammilito Sanatani Jagaran Jote, an umbrella organisation of the Hindu community in the country.

A case against Mr. Das was lodged on October 31, days after three separate rallies were convened under his leadership in different parts of the country, where the national flag was reportedly disrespected.

Mr. Das was arrested in dramatic circumstances on October 25 from Dhaka’s Shah Jalal International Airport, and the next day, while he was produced in a court in Chittagong, violent



clashes broke out between hundreds of political activists and the police that left a young lawyer dead.

Ever since, the allegations against Mr. Das have compounded as he was also accused of encouraging the clashes on the court premises.

Mr. Das first shot to the limelight with his fiery speeches demanding protection for the Hindu community in Bangladesh in the aftermath of the fall of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's regime on August 5, 2024.

Bangladesh has an old history of anti-minority violence, dating back to its days as East Pakistan, which found its worst manifestation in the Operation Searchlight of March 25, 1971, when the Pakistan military began killing Hindus and progressives in Dhaka and other parts.

The Hindus and Buddhists of East Pakistan had begun mobilising themselves in the 1960s, when Gen. Ayub Khan was in power, leading to the formation of the Bangladesh Hindu Bouddho Oikyo Samiti (BHBOS). The BHBOS survived the 1971 crackdown by the Pakistan military and emerged as a political force in the 1980s when it participated in the pro-democracy protests that eventually overthrew the military regime of Hossein Mohammed Ershad.

But in the subsequent years, the BHBOS faced criticisms for alleged inaction when violence against the minority communities flared up, from time to time. One such incident took place during the Durga puja season of 2022, when a number of puja pandals were violated in Comilla, Brahmanbaria, Chittagong and Rangpur.

Chinmoy Krishna Das was at this time the leader of ISKCON [International Society for Krishna Consciousness] in Bangladesh. He emerged as a strong voice that supported the mobilisation of the minority community. Mr. Das, whose real name is Chandan Kumar Dhar, has overshadowed the older community leaders such as Rana Dasgupta and Manindra Kumar Nath.

Rise of Islamists

Though in jail since October 2024, he remains a crucial figure in the post-Hasina Bangladesh where there is a spike in the activities of the fundamentalist Islamist movements. On Saturday, Hezat-e-Islam held a major meeting in Dhaka's Suhrawardy grounds as a show of strength even as the interim government continues to argue that the bulk of the attacks that targeted the Hindu community members in August-September 2024 were "politically motivated" and not communal in nature.

An appellate court in Dhaka will take up the case of Mr. Das on Sunday.

The High Court in Bangladesh granted Mr. Das bail on April 30 in the case of sedition and his advocate Apurba Kumar Bhattacharjee expressed hope that his client would be released within a week. But The Supreme Court stayed the High Court decision immediately and fixed Sunday for further hearing. One factor that has worked in favour of Mr. Das is that, despite the promise of an investigation into the activities of Mr. Das and the rallies and the violence of October 26, 2024, the interim government has not carried out any probe so far. Mr. Das had earlier applied for bail in the High Court after a lower court rejected his plea on January 2.

The decision on the Vaishnav monk will be keenly watched in the region as he has emerged as an important figure in the political terrain of Bangladesh that is getting ready for election later this year.



NATIONAL

STROKES OF JUSTICE

India carried out precision military strikes across nine locations in Pakistan and Pakistan-occupied-Kashmir early on Wednesday. Targets included Bahawalpur, the headquarters of the Jaish-e-Mohammed, and Muridke, a nerve centre of the Lashkar-e-Taiba — terrorist outfits bred by Pakistan to target India. India said the strikes were to destroy the camps used to train terrorists and to “pre-empt as well as deter” more such cross-border attacks following the terror attack in Pahalgam on April 22 in which 26 people were killed by terrorists who identified the targets by their religion. India’s military strikes were “measured, non-escalatory, proportionate, and responsible”, the government said. In 2019, India had carried out surgical strikes in Balakot in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in north Pakistan, after the Pulwama terrorist attack. The response this time has been sharper and more resolute. Muridke and Bahawalpur are in Punjab, the heartland of Pakistan’s ruling elite, that has been playing the double game on terrorism. Pakistan has, for decades, used terrorism as a low-cost instrument of war against India, under an umbrella of nuclear blackmail. India has been trying to figure out an appropriate response to this. With Balakot, and now Operation Sindoor, the point is clear — India can have an overt military response in the event of a terrorist attack against it, apart from economic and diplomatic measures. India has also underscored the point that there were no civilian, economic or military targets on Wednesday.

Overt military action in response to Pakistan-sponsored terrorism marks a change in India’s strategy under Prime Minister Narendra Modi. How this will change Pakistan’s behaviour remains uncertain. The strikes destroyed terrorist bases, but that setback may not be long term, considering the perennial supply of radicalised youths in Pakistan. Pakistan has not only raised terrorists who target India but also harboured Osama bin Laden, the most wanted terrorist for the West, even while it was claiming to be an ally in the war on terror. Pakistan’s character will have to change if it is to behave differently. India has reached out to other countries, and world powers must use their considerable leverage to coerce Pakistan to act responsibly. The retaliatory strikes apart, the investigation into Pahalgam should continue in full vigour and be taken to its logical conclusion. India should also watch out for escalatory moves by Pakistan and be prepared to respond militarily and diplomatically. The Centre on Wednesday pointed out that the terrorists wanted to disturb normalcy in Kashmir and create communal rift in the country. All political parties have supported the military operation. While strengthening the domestic political consensus on the issue, the Centre should also ensure that elements who try to create communal strife and play into the hands of Pakistan are restrained. Any missteps will carry a great risk.

FINDING SUPPORT

The international reaction to India’s strikes on terrorist infrastructure in Pakistan has been one of concern, but muted and non-recriminatory, indicating that for most world capitals, India’s actions in response to the Pahalgam attacks were more or less expected, and even understood. While there have been calls for restraint and resolution through dialogue and diplomacy, there has been little action taken by any country to bring about much pressure to avert the strikes. This can be chalked up to New Delhi’s briefings to envoys, and calls by the Prime Minister, Ministers and the National Security Adviser to counterparts around the world through this crisis, that began with the Pahalgam terror attack on April 22. New Delhi’s mature messaging has been that India is targeting terrorists that it hoped Pakistan would, especially after the “barbaric” nature of the

4TH FLOOR SHATABDI TOWER, SAKCHI, JAMSHEDPUR



Pahalgam attack. The Indian Air Force's operations on May 7, on targets identified with terror groups, were precisely planned, with India's assurance that no civil, economic or military locations would be hit. It was also impossible to escape the symbolism — details of the operations were delivered by two women officers of different faiths, sending out an image of progressive, pluralistic and resolute nation.

With further operations overnight, it is clear that tensions continue to rise. The U.K., the U.S., Russia, and the UN have reached out to New Delhi and Islamabad to try and defuse tensions, and the arrival of the Saudi and Iranian Foreign Ministers in India indicates some of those apprehensions. The government must be careful that its well-prepared response thus far is not derailed by an unplanned escalation, especially one provoked by Pakistan. While Pakistan has fewer friends, it is not without allies such as China, Türkiye and Malaysia, all of whom have backed its call for an "independent investigation", and the government would do well to keep its global message reasoned and rational. It could also offer to share evidence on the terror trail at the UN and other agencies in order to bring more pressure on Pakistan to act against the groups responsible. In doing so, New Delhi must avoid the pitfalls of being "hyphenated" with Pakistan, allowing bilateral matters to become internationalised, or needing mediation. To that end, the government may consider, if it has not already, opening a channel of communication, as the NSA had with Pakistani interlocutors, to de-escalate tensions after the misfiring of an Indian missile into Pakistan and to forge the LoC ceasefire agreement in 2021. While New Delhi's messaging, of fighting the scourge of terrorism, will always find it unequivocal support in every part of the world, an all-out war with Pakistan in an unstable neighbourhood is counter-productive and in no one's interest.

PAKISTAN IS ON THE PRECIPICE — CHINA CAN HELP IT GET BACK FROM THE EDGE, STOP UNREASONABLE AGGRESSION

In the days since the horrific attack at Pahalgam by Pakistan-sponsored terrorists, India has signalled clarity on two fronts: One, it would raise the level of deterrence that it put in place with the Balakot strikes after the attack in Pulwama, scale up the reprisals after every act of terror. Two, its response would be precise, calibrated, and proportionate. Operation Sindoor targeted terror infrastructure in Pakistan-Occupied Kashmir and Pakistan — it did not target government or military infrastructure or civilians. India did not step onto the escalatory ladder. It chose its targets carefully, and the ball is in Pakistan's court to dial down on its misbehaviour and transgressions. In sobering contrast, the military leaders at the Pakistan Army GHQ and the ISI have continued to blunder and overstep. The attempted drone and missile attacks on military installations in Indian cities — thwarted by Indian air defence systems, including the S-400 and indigenous Akash — ceasefire violations along the LoC and foiled attacks on Bikaner and Jaisalmer, are irresponsible provocations. In response, India has taken out the air defence system in Lahore, while continuing to refrain from targeting civilian areas.

In every communique and briefing by the Ministry of Defence and Ministry of External Affairs, India has underlined that its armed forces have only responded to attacks by Pakistan. India needs and wants nothing from Pakistan except an end to its support of terror on its soil. Even as it does not seek a military confrontation, however, it has made it clear that it will not shy away from responding to Pakistan's brazen provocations. Unfortunately, the garrison state of Pakistan has acted recklessly even by the low standards it has set for itself. After all, with its economy in shambles and its polity gripped by dysfunction, it has little to gain, and much to lose, from a prolonged conflict with India.



The shadow of war may arguably encourage General Asif Munir and the military establishment he leads to believe that they have gained a reprieve from the restiveness they have been facing on the domestic front. The jailed former PM, Imran Khan, continues to be popular, the puppets Rawalpindi has propped up in Islamabad enjoy little credibility and, in recent years, the army has had to bear the brunt of widespread protests. It confronts the Frankenstein's monster of extremist groups, while it deals with major insurgencies on the border with Afghanistan and in Balochistan. The US, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar, have asked for an end to the escalation with India. But that will not be enough. The world's capitals must send out a firm message — it is time they assign responsibility for the conflict where it belongs. China has the greatest leverage and highest stakes in Pakistan — it is the largest investor in the country, Pakistan is its client state. The unrest in Balochistan is already a thorn in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. Beijing has said that it does not want its neighbours locked in a prolonged conflict. If so, it should make that desire clearer to the country that fired the first shot and keeps its finger on the trigger.

BY ATTACKING TARGETS INSIDE PAKISTAN, INDIA SEEKS TO ESTABLISH A NEW NORMAL

On September 22, 1965, during a speech at the UN Security Council, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, who was then part of the Ayub Khan administration, declared that Pakistan “will wage a war for 1,000 years” against India. Years later, Gen. Zia-ul-Haq, who captured power in a 1977 coup by toppling Prime Minister Bhutto (who was later executed), turned Bhutto's ‘1,000 years of war’ into a ‘Bleed India through a Thousand Cuts’ doctrine — use low-intensity and sub-conventional warfare with militancy and infiltration to continue to bleed India.

Pakistan suffered a humiliating defeat in the 1971 war, which saw the creation of Bangladesh. The Pakistani military, having failed in conventional warfare, turned to this indirect approach. The doctrine gained traction after the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan. Pakistan, with support from the U.S. and Saudi Arabia, had successfully applied the ‘Thousand Cuts’ tactic in Afghanistan against the country's communist regime and its Soviet backers. Bled out by the Pakistan and U.S.-backed mujahideen's thousand cuts, the mighty Soviet troops withdrew from Afghanistan in 1989.

The same year marked the beginning of a surge in militancy in the Kashmir Valley. By the early 2000s, terror was exported to other parts of the country. India's Parliament was attacked in December 2001; and in 2008, Mumbai, the country's commercial hub, suffered a major terrorist assault. By then, Jaish-e-Mohammed and Lashkar-e-Taiba, two anti-India terrorist outfits with close links to Pakistan's security establishment, had built sprawling networks in Pakistan. The Pahalgam massacre of April 22, 2025, in which 26 people, mostly civilian tourists, were brutally gunned down by terrorists, was the latest sign that the ‘Thousand Cuts’ doctrine remains alive in Rawalpindi's strategic thinking. The attack came days after Pakistan's military chief Gen. Asim Munir said “Kashmir is our jugular vein”. The Resistance Front, which India believes is a front of Lashkar-e-Taiba, initially claimed responsibility for the attack, but later denied any role.

Until 2016, India's strategy for dealing with terrorist attacks linked to Pakistan largely relied on three measures: diplomatic efforts to isolate Pakistan internationally, economic penalties related to terror financing, and pressure on Islamabad to crack down on terror networks. This approach saw limited success as Pakistan was briefly put on the ‘grey list’ of the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), an intergovernmental body established to combat money laundering and terror financing, and was compelled to take some face-saving actions against terrorist entities. But India stopped short of taking direct military retaliation, because it did not want an all-out war between the two nuclear powers. India's diplomatic and economic responses did not stop attacks by Pakistan-



based terrorists. Islamabad-Rawalpindi continued to wage the Thousand Cuts campaign with low cost and high immunity. Both would change soon.

Doctrinal change

India adopted a doctrinal shift in its response strategy following the Jaish-e-Mohammed attack at the Indian Army Brigade headquarters in Uri in Jammu and Kashmir on September 18, 2016, which killed 19 soldiers. Ten days later, the Indian commandos conducted a cross-border operation targeting terror launchpads and safe houses in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir, according to the military. This marked a significant departure from India's earlier posture. In addition to the diplomatic and economic measures, India would also take direct military steps targeting terror infrastructure across the Line of Control in response to attacks.

This strategic shift did not immediately establish a strong deterrent. The Uri response did not prevent the deadly suicide bombing in Pulwama in February 2019. Similarly, the Balakot airstrike that followed Pulwama did not deter the attack on civilians in Pahalgam. Nevertheless, what is important is that by launching military operations inside Pakistan in response to terror attacks, New Delhi has effectively established a new normal in India-Pakistan relations.

Until recently, Pakistan's nuclear deterrent had constrained India from pursuing conventional military responses to terror attacks. India also came under high international pressure to de-escalate every time tensions flared because of the same nuclear angle. This allowed Pakistan's Generals to persist with the 'Thousand Cuts' doctrine with minimal cost. But that dynamic has begun to shift. With each flare-up, India has stepped up its response in both scope and scale. If the 2016 surgical strike was limited to Pakistan-occupied Kashmir, the 2019 Balakot strike was extended to Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. And this time, India struck nine locations, including Bahawalpur and Muridke in Punjab, Pakistan's heartland, marking its largest aerial operation on Pakistani soil since 1971.

Risks of new normal

India's evolving strategy carries significant risks. In 2019, following the Balakot strike, Pakistan scrambled its fighter jets, triggering an aerial dogfight in which an Indian aircraft was downed and its pilot captured (he was soon returned home, which helped de-escalate the crisis). After Operation Sindoor, as India's military response to the Pahalgam massacre is called, Pakistan chose to escalate by targeting what India's Ministry of Defence said "military stations at Jammu, Pathankot & Udhampur" with drones and missiles, which were "swiftly neutralised". India launched its counterattacks "in the same domain and same intensity as Pakistan", according to the Ministry. Pakistani media reported that India fired at least 77 drones in two days. In essence, the killings in Pahalgam by terrorists has brought India and Pakistan dangerously close to the brink of an all-out war.

Even if the current tensions subside, India-Pakistan relations have been fundamentally altered. India has established a new normal, one where it directly targets terrorist infrastructure within Pakistan in response to attacks. In turn, Islamabad-Rawalpindi's retaliatory responses are aimed at raising the costs of this strategy for New Delhi (and thereby protecting its Thousand Cuts campaign). This is a long game that will test the strategic endurance of both nations.

The emerging status quo is undoubtedly riskier. Pakistan could provoke India in the future with more terror attacks. Future Indian governments will likely come under greater domestic pressure to take direct military actions each time. But the message from New Delhi is clear: the era of



waging sub-conventional warfare against India under the protective cover of deterrence is over. India seems ready to play by the new rules it has set since 2016, even if doing so risks full-scale escalation. But can Pakistan — already grappling with Islamist militancy in its tribal regions, a separatist insurgency in Balochistan, a broken polity at home with the country's most popular politician being in jail, and an economy sustained by an IMF bailout — afford to fight “a thousand years of war” against India?

PAKISTAN'S COMPLEX WEB OF TERROR NETWORKS

The Soviet-Afghan War of 1979 was the inflection point when Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), backed by U.S. funding, systematically cultivated jihadi infrastructure that evolved into today's sophisticated terror network. This deliberate cultivation created fighters with diverse objectives — Kashmir-focused aggression, control in Afghanistan, sectarian violence, and ideological warfare. Recent data has confirmed a resurgence of Pakistan-sponsored terrorism across the region. This analysis examines Pakistan's entrenched terror ecosystem through OSINT, declassified records, and academic research.

Terrorist outfits which are said to have Pakistan support

A key outfit is the Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT). The LeT emerged in the 1990s as Pakistan's premier proxy organisation against India; it operates under Hafiz Muhammad Saeed — a designated terrorist operating in Pakistan despite international sanctions. Its rigid command structure includes Zafar Iqbal, Muhammad Yahya Mujahid, and Zakiur Rehman Lakhvi who was one of the masterminds of the Mumbai attacks in 2008 (he was 'arrested' but protected within Pakistan's judicial system).

LeT's infrastructure centres around its 200-acre headquarters complex, the Markaz-e-Taiba, near Lahore, with additional bases strategically positioned across Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK) and around urban centres including Lahore, Peshawar, and Karachi. Ideologically, the outfit adheres to the virulent Ahl-e-Hadith doctrine (a conservative faction with a strict adherence to the Koran) specifically targeting India, which it propagates through its network of 300+ madrassas across Pakistan. Intelligence confirms at least 16 documented training camps of the LeT across Pakistan and occupied territories. The group's operational sophistication is demonstrated through attacks such as the 2008 Mumbai attacks where 166 people were killed; the 2006 Mumbai train bombings (209 killed); and an indirect hand in the 2010 German Bakery bombing in Pune (17 killed), orchestrated by the Indian Mujahideen (SIMI). LeT maintains transnational reach with recruitment networks identified in 21 countries, with dedicated cells both in Bangladesh and Nepal facilitating operations against India. Its financial architecture combines direct ISI funding, estimated to be around \$25-50 million annually; gulf-based private donors from Saudi Arabia and the UAE; Pakistani diaspora contributions through Islamic charitable fronts; and business operations including commodity trading and real estate.

Then there is the Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM). Established in 2000 by Masood Azhar following his 'release' during the IC-814 hijacking, the JeM represents Pakistan's suicide terrorism capability. Azhar maintains direct control over the outfit along with his brother, Abdul Rauf Asghar, by handling operations through specialised wings — the Askari (military) wing for direct operations; Dawati (missionary) wing for recruitment and radicalisation; and the intelligence wing for reconnaissance.



JeM's infrastructure centres around its fortified headquarters in Bahawalpur, Punjab, with satellite facilities. It also has seven major training camps in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) province, four in PoK, and has recently re-established camps in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan. The Balakot training complex, targeted by Indian airstrikes in 2019 but subsequently rebuilt, specialises in suicide attack training. Its ideology combines Deobandi fundamentalism (a movement within Sunni Islam) with an apocalyptic worldview glorifying martyrdom operations.

JeM's operational history includes the 2001 Indian Parliament attack, and the 2019 Pulwama suicide bombing where 40 security personnel were killed. The group pioneered fidayeen (suicide) attacks in Kashmir and have demonstrated sophisticated capabilities with respect to vehicle-borne Improvised Explosive Devices (IED) and military installation infiltration.

JeM's financing includes the Al-Rehmat Trust front charity, which collects \$10-15 million annually; trading companies and commodity businesses; protection rackets in Bahawalpur and surrounding areas; documented ISI funding through intermediaries; and real estate holdings valued over \$30 million.

Supporting players and state support

Some of the less mainstream players in Pakistan's terror network include the Haqqani Network which operates as a semi-autonomous ISI extension along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. Led by Sirajuddin Haqqani — now Afghanistan's interior minister despite a \$10 million U.S. bounty — the network serves as both an ISI proxy in Afghanistan and a facilitator for anti-India operations.

Then there is the Islamic State-Khorasan (ISIS-K), which emerged from Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) defectors, with operational bases in eastern Afghanistan and Pakistan's tribal areas. Though ideologically opposed to Pakistani objectives, evidence suggests elements within Pakistan's security establishment tacitly allow certain ISIS-K operations.

The Harakat ul-Mujahidin (HUM) also functions as a specialised recruitment pipeline for Pakistani proxy groups, maintaining extensive networks within Pakistan's religious seminary system, with over 60% of recruits channelled to LeT and JeM operations.

Therein, Pakistan's relationship with terrorist organisations transcends allegations — it is documented through concrete evidence, defector testimonies, international intelligence assessments, and financial tracking. The ISI has operationalised terrorism as state policy through a three-tiered system — strategic direction and funding through specialised “S-Wing” units; operational support via retired military personnel; and by providing material assistance such as weapons, training infrastructure, and intelligence. Despite officially joining the ‘War on Terror’ post the 9/11 tragedy in the U.S., Pakistan has maintained a calculated policy distinguishing between ‘good terrorists’ (serving Pakistani interests) and ‘bad terrorists’ (targeting Pakistani assets). The consequences have been devastating — over 45,000 lives lost due to Pakistani hand in terrorism since 1990.

Pakistan's persistent appearance on the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) “grey list” (2008-2010, 2012-2015, 2018-2022) is international recognition of its systemic failure to dismantle terror financing networks. The most damning evidence comes from Pakistan itself — former President Pervez Musharraf openly admitted to training terrorists for Kashmir operations, while former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif confirmed state support for terrorist groups. Recently, the current Pakistani minister for foreign affairs said that they have been doing the “dirty work” for Western powers for a long time. A similar statement was also recently made by Bilawal Bhutto.



Funding and radicalisation

The funds sustaining this infrastructure operate through sophisticated mechanisms designed for plausible deniability. Religious charities serve as the primary collection points, with 40+ identified front organisations raising \$150-200 million annually. Other sources include state funding through classified budget allocations (estimated \$100-125 million annually); money laundering operations through hawala networks, with major hubs in Dubai, Karachi, and Peshawar; narcotics trafficking along the Afghanistan-Pakistan-India corridor generating an estimated \$75 million annually; and cryptocurrency, with inputs indicating \$15+ million moved through crypto channels in 2023.

Despite FATF pressure forcing some regulatory changes, Pakistan has preserved these financial pipelines by simply renaming organisations while maintaining core networks.

Apart from the financial infrastructure, Pakistan's terror network also relies on a sophisticated radicalisation apparatus. Pakistan has over 30,000 madrassas, with 10-15% of them directly linked to extremist organisations. Other modes through which terrorism is encouraged include curriculum in religious schools which often promote violent jihad, particularly against India; publications, websites, and social media channels disseminating extremist ideology; and a targeted recruitment of vulnerable youth from economically disadvantaged regions. This creates a self-sustaining radicalisation pipeline continuously replenishing terrorist ranks.

Evolution of the network

Pakistan's terror infrastructure demonstrates remarkable adaptability. It first made its appearance in the 1990s through direct insurgency in Kashmir through the LeT and HUM. Then by the early 2000s, the JeM had also emerged as a specialised suicide attack outfit.

However, post-9/11, operations of such terror groups became more sophisticated with greater plausible deniability; they started integrating cyber capabilities and information warfare. The Taliban's 2021 return to power in Afghanistan significantly emboldened this infrastructure. There has been a re-establishment of training facilities in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan; an increase in infiltration attempts along the Line of Control (2023-2024); and enhanced operational coordination between LeT, JeM, and Taliban-affiliated groups.

Thus, Pakistan's terror infrastructure represents a deliberate, state-supported system that has survived for decades through deep institutional support within Pakistan's security establishment, which views these proxy forces as strategic assets rather than terrorist threats. The April 2025 Pahalgam attack, killing 26 civilians and forensically linked to LeT operatives trained in Pakistan, demonstrates the enduring threat.

Such an infrastructure poses immediate danger to regional stability, particularly to India, which continues bearing the human cost of Pakistan's proxy warfare. This is not merely a bilateral issue but a global challenge which threatens the rules-based international order. Effectively addressing this threat requires unwavering international pressure on Pakistan to permanently dismantle — not merely rebrand or temporarily restrain — these terrorist organisations and the state apparatus that sustains them.



IMF CLEARS LOAN TRANCHE TO PAKISTAN; INDIA ABSTAINS FROM VOTE, REGISTERS 'STRONG DISSENT'

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) cleared a \$1-billion tranche for Pakistan as part of its \$7-billion Extended Fund Facility (EFF) lending program and \$1.3 billion tranche under the Resilience and Sustainability Facility (RSF) in its board meeting held Friday.

— India abstained from voting in the meeting as it raised concerns over the efficacy of IMF programmes for Pakistan given its “poor track record” and also on the possibility of “misuse of debt financing funds for state-sponsored cross-border terrorism”, an official release by the Ministry of Finance, Government of India said.

— India conveyed its “strong dissent” as the IMF reviewed the Extended Fund Facility (EFF) lending program (\$1 billion) and also considered a fresh Resilience and Sustainability Facility (RSF) lending programme (\$1.3 billion) for Pakistan.

— Each country of the 25-member IMF board has a vote but it is linked to the country’s economic size. In cases where a vote is required, the system does not allow a formal “no” vote. “Directors can either vote in favour or abstain. There is no provision to vote against a loan or proposal,” a source said.

— India opposed the frequent bailouts to Pakistan in the IMF board meeting, pointing out that such a track record calls into question either the effectiveness of the IMF programme designs for Pakistan or their monitoring or their implementation by Pakistan

— The Indian government also pointed out that Pakistan military’s deeply entrenched interference in economic affairs poses significant risks of policy slippages and reversal of reforms.

— Citing a UN report from 2021, the Indian government described military-linked businesses as the “largest conglomerate in Pakistan”.

— The IMF is financing a \$7-billion aid package to Islamabad that was approved in September 2024. The ongoing 37-month long Extended Fund Facility programme of the IMF consists of six reviews over the span of the bailout.

Do You Know:

— According to the official website of the IMF, the IMF works to achieve sustainable growth and prosperity for all of its 191 member countries. It does so by supporting economic policies that promote financial stability and monetary cooperation, which are essential to increase productivity, job creation, and economic well-being. The IMF is governed by and accountable to its member countries.

— The IMF has three critical missions: furthering international monetary cooperation, encouraging the expansion of trade and economic growth, and discouraging policies that would harm prosperity. To fulfill these missions, IMF member countries work collaboratively with each other and with other international bodies.

— Unlike development banks, the IMF does not lend for specific projects. Instead, the IMF provides financial support to countries hit by crises to create breathing room as they implement policies that restore economic stability and growth.



— The Board of Governors, the highest decision-making body of the IMF, consists of one governor and one alternate governor for each member country. The governor is appointed by the member country and is usually the minister of finance or the governor of the central bank. All powers of the IMF are vested in the Board of Governors.

S-400, AKASH MISSILES KEY TO IAF SHIELD AGAINST PAK MISSILES AND DRONES

India's flagship surface-to-air missile systems — S400 Triumf, Barak 8 MRSAM (Medium Range Surface to Air Missile) and the indigenous Akash — played a key role as the IAF activated its Integrated Counter UAS (Unmanned Aerial Systems) Grid and other air defence systems to thwart the attacks by Pakistan on 15 military bases and several cities Thursday (May 8).

- Sources told The Indian Express that the air defence shield set up by the IAF, using guns, radars, missiles and the counter-UAS grid to jam and spoof UAVs (Unmanned Aerial Vehicles), prevented the Pakistani drones and missiles from reaching Indian military installations.
- The sources said Pakistan launched a swarm of drones and missiles between 1 am and 1.30 am Thursday morning, with India's air defence systems immediately tracking the threats and destroying them. The debris is now being recovered from several locations.
- Responding to the Pakistani attack on Indian military installations, India also attacked their military targets, even taking out an air defence system in Lahore, using its latest loitering munitions such as the Israeli HAROPs and the HARPYS. These can "loiter" or hover in the air close to the designated target before self-destructing on impact.
- According to sources, India deployed the lethal S-400 in the northern borders facing Pakistan after receiving three squadrons of the missile system from Russia with more to be delivered by this year-end.
- Sources said most of the military installations targeted by Pakistan were of the IAF in locations such as Ludhiana and Awantipora — the Army's bases are co-located with these IAF bases. Aside from the S-400, sources said, India deployed a range of other surface-to-air missile systems across its northern and western borders as part of its air defence, including the S-125 Pechora and the indigenous Akash.
- Over the past few years, India has built up its arsenal with a range of drones, including a range of loiter munitions, with the IAF and the Army's artillery regiment.

Do You Know:

- Considered one of the most advanced and potent air defence systems in the world, S-400 Triumf has the capability to protect against almost all sorts of aerial attacks, including drones, missiles, rockets and even fighter jets. The system, intended to act as a shield over a particular area, is a long-range surface-to-air missile system.

—Named SA-21 Growler by NATO, and developed by Russia's Almaz Central Design Bureau, S-400 can engage intruding aircraft, unmanned aerial vehicles, cruise missiles, and ballistic missiles, a recent article in US Air Force's Journal for Indo-Pacific Command stated. It has "surfaced as an anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) asset designed to protect military, political, and economic assets from aerial attacks".



—S-400 detects an aerial threat approaching the air defence bubble (the area it has to protect), calculates the trajectory of the threat, and fires missiles to counter it. It has long-range surveillance radars that send information to the command vehicle. On identifying the target, the command vehicle orders a missile launch.

- The development of the Akash SAM was started by the DRDO in the late 1980s as part of the Integrated Guided Missile Development Programme. The initial systems trials and field trials along with the target neutralisation trials were conducted in the late 1990s and 2000s. These were followed by extensive user trials by the Indian Air Force and Indian Army. —Named after the original Sanskrit term for sky or space, Akash is primarily a Short Range Surface to Air Missile built to provide air defence cover to the vulnerable areas. The Akash weapon system can simultaneously engage multiple targets in group mode or autonomous mode. It has built-in Electronic Counter-Counter Measures (ECCM) features, which means that it has mechanisms on-board that can counter the electronic systems that deceive the detection systems. —The entire weapon system has been configured on a mobile platform. A full Akash missile system comprises a launcher, set of missiles, a control centre, an built-in mission guidance system and a C4I (command, control communication and intelligence) centres and supporting ground equipment along with a radar named Rajendra which accompanies each of the missile batteries.
- The MRSAM is a surface-to-air missile jointly developed by DRDO and Israel Aerospace Industries (IAI) for use by the Indian Army. The missile will replace the ageing Air Defence systems of the Army. The MRSAM weapon system comprises multi-function radar, mobile launcher system and other vehicles. It has Army, Navy and Air Force variants.

PRECISION GUIDED LONG RANGE WEAPONS IN INDIAN MILITARY'S ARSENAL

India has not revealed what weapons were used in Operation Sindoor early on Wednesday morning (May 7). The official statement said that the Indian Armed Forces carried out precision strikes, hitting terrorist infrastructure deep inside Pakistan and in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK).

- Twenty-one terror camps across nine locations were hit as part of the operation launched in retaliation for the attack by Pakistani terrorists on innocent civilians in Pahalgam last month.
- During Wednesday's official briefing, Wing Commander Vyomika Singh, a helicopter pilot with the IAF, said niche-technology weapons with carefully selected warheads were used to avoid collateral damage.
- Over the past several years, the Indian military has built up a formidable arsenal of new-age weapons that includes a range of precision-guided long-range weapons and drones, including loitering munitions.

Do You Know:

- HAMMER: The Highly Agile and Manoeuvrable Munition Extended Range (HAMMER) air-to-ground precision-guided weapon system for the Rafale fighter aircraft has a range of up to 70 km, and can also be fitted to bombs and various guided systems.

—Built by the French aerospace, defence, and security corporation Safran, the HAMMER weapon system is highly versatile, and can be used for precision strikes against a range of targets in medium-range tactical operations.



—According to the Safran Group, the system is autonomous and insensitive to jamming, and can be launched from a low altitude over rough terrain.

- **SCALP:** This is an air-launched cruise missile with stealth features, designed for long-range deep strikes. SCALP-EG (Système de Croisière Autonome à Longue Portée — Emploi Général), known as Storm Shadow in Britain, can be operated at night and in all weather conditions.

—The missile, manufactured by the European multinational MBDA, has a range of 450 km, and is difficult to detect due to its low-flying capability when fired from an aircraft.

—Its advanced and highly accurate navigation system, which uses Inertial Navigation System (INS), Global Positioning System (GPS) and terrain referencing, can penetrate bunkers and ammunition stores.

- **METEOR:** The Meteor is a new-generation Beyond Visual Range Air-to-Air Missile (BVRAAM) system which is effective in dense electronic-warfare environments. According to its manufacturer MBDA, the missile's solid-fuel 'ramjet' motor provides it with thrust all the way to the target intercept, and thus the largest 'No Escape Zone' of any air-to-air missile system.

- **BRAHMOS:** These supersonic cruise missiles, which have been operationalised in all three defence services, are built by BrahMos Aerospace, a joint venture between India's Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) and Russia's NPO Mashinostroyeniya. —BrahMos missiles operate at close to Mach 3 speed in the cruise phase, which ensures reduced flight time, lower dispersion of targets, and quicker engagement time and non-interception

- **LOITERING MUNITIONS:** They are used for surveillance and identification of targets, and can carry out precision strikes, autonomously or otherwise. The Armed Forces in the last few years have been procuring a range of drones, including loitering munitions.

Do You Know:

- A combination of the names of Brahmaputra and Moskva rivers, BrahMos missiles are designed, developed and produced by BrahMos Aerospace, a joint venture company set up by Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) and Mashinostroyeniya of Russia.

- Various versions of the BrahMos, including those which can be fired from land, warships, submarines and Sukhoi-30 fighter jets have already been developed and successfully tested in the past. The earliest versions of the ship launched BrahMos and land-based system are in service of the Indian Navy and the Indian Army since 2005 and 2007 respectively.

- BrahMos is a two-stage missile with solid propellant booster as first stage and liquid ramjet as the second stage. The cruise missiles like BrahMos are a type of systems known as the 'standoff range weapons' which are fired from a range sufficient to allow the attacker to evade defensive fire from the adversary. These weapons are in the arsenal of most major militaries in the world. The versions of the BrahMos that are being tested have an extended range of around 400 kilometers, as compared to its initial range of 290 kilometers, with more versions of higher ranges currently under development.

- **The land-based system:** The land-based Brahmos Complex has four to six mobile autonomous launchers, with each having three missiles on board that can be fired almost simultaneously.



Batteries of the BrahMos missile land based systems have been deployed along India's land borders in various theatres.

- The land attack version of BrahMos has the capability of cruising at 2.8 Mach speed and with the upgraded capability, the missile can hit targets at a range of upto 400 kilometers with precision. Advanced versions of range above 1,000 kilometers and speed upto 5 Mach are said to be under development.

CACTUS LILY TO BANDAR: INDIA'S OPS AGAINST PAK

Almost all past military operations by India against Pakistan have largely had conventional military names.

- By naming the operation to hit terrorist infrastructure at nine sites in Pakistan and Pakistan-occupied Kashmir as Operation Sindoor, the Indian defence establishment has made a marked shift – from the projection of military power to paying tribute to the victims of the Pahalgam terror attack.
- Government sources indicate the name of the operation was chosen by Prime Minister Narendra Modi himself and could be seen as a tribute to the women who lost their husbands in the April 22 attack at the Baisaran meadow that killed 25 tourists and a local.
- Almost all past military operations by India against Pakistan have largely had conventional military names to inspire confidence internally and send a message of strength externally. Sometimes names were chosen to maintain the secrecy of the operation, and, at times, names were even drawn from Indian mythology.
- In the past, India has used names such as Operation Riddle, Operation Ablaze, Operation Cactus-Lily, Operation Trident, Operation Python, Operation Meghdoot, Operation Vijay, Operation Safed Sagar, and Operation Bandar in conflicts with Pakistan.

→ Operation Riddle and Operation Ablaze (1965 Indo-Pak War): Op Riddle was the Indian military's response to the offensive launched by Pakistan under the code names of Operation Gibraltar and Grand Slam in 1965. Op Ablaze was the Indian Army's pre-emptive mobilisation plan in April 1965, following rising tensions and skirmishes along the India-Pakistan border, particularly in the Rann of Kutch area.

→ Operation Cactus Lily, Operations Trident and Python (1971 Indo-Pak War): Operation Cactus Lily, also known as The Meghna Heli Bridge or the Crossing of the Meghna, was an air assault operation conducted in December 1971 during the Bangladesh Liberation War. Operations Trident and Python was also in the context of the Indo-Pak War of 1971.

→ Operation Meghdoot (Siachen conflict): The Indian Army launched Operation Meghdoot in April 1984 to secure strategic heights on Siachen with the deployment of troops.

→ Operation Vijay (1999 Kargil conflict): It was the codename for the Indian military operation launched in May 1999 to reclaim areas occupied by Pakistani forces during the Kargil War.

→ Operation Bandar: The Balakot airstrike after the Pulwama terror attack by the Jaish-e-Mohammed on a CRPF convoy in February 2019, leading to the killing of 40 soldiers, was codenamed 'Operation Bandar.



COST OF DOCUMENTING PEOPLE'S STORIES OF RESILIENCE, HOPE

Kashmir has remained a challenging beat for a reporter for over three decades now. The fact that over 20 local journalists lost their lives in the line of duty only indicates the danger of reporting from and about Kashmir. The recent Pahalgam terror attack once again posed multiple challenges to reporters on the ground, both physically and emotionally.

A day after the attack, our team left early in the morning for the attack site of Baisaran, located in Anantnag's picturesque Pahalgam, which was known more for Bollywood shoots. Multiple checkpoints were set up on the way to Pahalgam to search, frisk and check the identities of commuters. Alert security paraphernalia following any major incident is a norm in Kashmir, and reporters follow all the security guidelines as access is granted to the attack site.

However, there was a shift in the security forces' approach towards the Press this time. Around 42 km from Pahalgam, Press vehicles were stopped by the security forces at the Khanabal bridge, the only main surface link, over the Jhelum river, to the terror attack site. We were given one option: "return to Srinagar". There were clear directions that neither tourists nor journalists should be given access to Pahalgam. One can understand the decision to deny entry to tourists, but a bar order for journalists remains inexplicable.

Forced to leave behind our vehicle, we hitchhiked on a two-wheeler and decided to drive through village after village on dusty and dirt lanes to avoid the highway. However, we were again stopped at Yanier, 20 km from the attack site.

This time, the message was delivered to us more forcefully: journalists are not allowed to visit Pahalgam for the next two days. "Leave the spot as soon as possible," the security men guarding the main road said.

Adamant to cover and document people's stories of trauma, resilience and hope, we decided to stay back till evening. Instead of two-and-a-half hours, it took us 10 hours to reach Pahalgam and then arrange meetings with the saviours and first responders and document their stories of valour and courage.

It was never this difficult in Kashmir to cover the aftermath of an incident, especially where people and eyewitnesses joined hands to condemn the violence against unarmed civilians. Even after two weeks of the incident, there is no formal statement made by any Minister or the civil administration or the security agencies on how many civilians were killed or injured in the incident. It's with the official records accessed unofficially that the numbers could be reported on that day. It's this approach that gives rise to speculation, exaggeration, and even under-reporting of the magnitude of the event.

The hardest part of the reporting was documenting the harrowing details of how male tourists were asked to step aside by the terrorists and were shot from close range in front of their children, wives and family members, who were left wailing and crying for help. Penning each case emotionally drains a reporter. Many times, it benumbs. The incident may be over, but the statements of victims and the imagery it left behind keep haunting the minds of reporters for a long time.

Reporting from Kashmir has seen different phases since the 1990s. It was highly dangerous at the peak of militancy when several journalists died in targeted killings, were kidnapped and faced parcel bombs. While it has always been risky to report from the ground, after 2019, journalists'



struggle is of a different kind: access to security officials for confirmation. Except for the elected political class that is available, top security officials and bureaucracy, reporting to the Raj Bhawan, remain reluctant to furnish the details the public has the right to know without any confusion or misrepresentation.

The more we create an information blackout, the greater the chances of misreporting. Reporters without official access to information cannot fight the menace of misinformation and disinformation.

SOME DEPORTED TO PAK SAY THEY ARE INDIAN VOTERS: WHO GETS A VOTER ID AND HOW?

Following a government order in the wake of the Pahalgam terror attack, hundreds of Pakistani nationals have left India this week. However, many of the deportees have claimed that they have valid Aadhaar cards, ration cards and even Voter IDs.

- One such deportee was Osama, who, in a video recorded by news agency ANI, claimed to have moved to Uri in Jammu & Kashmir's Baramulla district from Rawalpindi in 2008. He also said that he had voted in India despite holding the citizenship of Pakistan. On April 30, an FIR was filed regarding the matter on the orders of Baramulla's District Election Officer (DEO).
- According to the ECI's manual on electoral rolls, the ERO is responsible for making sure that no ineligible person is added to the electoral roll. However, usually, if there is no objection to a new elector's applicant, the check for citizenship does not come up.
- The manual says when a claim is presented before the ERO, the officer has to "satisfy himself that the applicant is, inter alia, a citizen of India". The ERO must consider all evidence the person concerned may tender in the course of the inquiry. The manual stresses that EROs must apply their minds independently, "without being influenced by extraneous considerations".
- "It must be remembered that there is a provision for appeal against the decision of the Electoral Registration Officer... The onus of proof of citizenship shall initially lie on the applicant who applies for inclusion of his name for the first time," the manual states. In the case of migrants from other parts of India, the ERO has to cross-check with the DEO of the district where the claimants have migrated from.
- In the case of married women, who have changed their address as a result of marriage, and who cannot produce documentary evidence as proof of citizenship, the ERO can rely on proof of being registered as a voter as an unmarried person. In such cases, the ERO can also rely on proof of marriage or certificates issued by headmen of both villages where the woman lived before marriage and after.
- In case there is an objection filed against an applicant for not being a citizen, the onus of providing the proof is on the objector, according to the manual. Here, the ERO "would be justified in requiring the person concerned to show evidence that he is a citizen of India".

Do You Know:

- Article 326 of the Constitution states that every Indian citizen aged 18 years or above has the right to vote in elections to the Lok Sabha and state/Union Territory Assemblies.



- Section 16 of the Representation of the People (RP) Act, 1950, expands on this, giving the reasons for which a person can be disqualified for registration in an electoral roll. The disqualification can happen if a person “is not a citizen of India”, if she is “of unsound mind and stands so declared by a competent court”, or if she “is for the time being disqualified from voting under the provisions of any law relating to corrupt practices and other offences in connection with elections.”
- The Form 6 — the Election Commission of India’s (ECI’s) form for registering new electors — requires the applicant to provide self-attested copies of age proof and address proof. Although the applicant does not need to present citizenship proof, the form includes a declaration of citizenship which needs to be signed by the applicant. In case the declaration is found to be false, the applicant can face action as per Section 31 of the RP Act which provides for a punishment with imprisonment of up to one year or a fine or both.
- Once the completed form is received, the Electoral Registration Officer (ERO) is expected to enquire into the claims and objections, issue notices of hearing where required, and take a final decision on the same. The Booth Level Officers (BLOs) appointed by the ERO are required to collect the claims and objections on behalf of the ERO or assistant ERO.
- ECI sources say cases of non-citizens getting voter IDs have been found in the past as well. Whenever the objections are found to be true, the electors concerned are struck off the rolls and action has been initiated against them.
- Notably, the ECI is currently in the process of linking Aadhaar with Voter IDs to ensure that only Indian citizens get the right to vote. However, in the case of non-citizens who have Aadhaar, that would not be enough to identify ineligible electors.

INDIA’S LARGE DAMS ON THE CHENAB

Water level in the Chenab river in Jammu’s Akhnoor area fell below waist level for the first time in years, prompting many surprised locals to gather on the riverbed on Monday.

- Sources said this followed the closure of all sluice gates of the Salal and Baglihar hydel power dams in Reasi and Ramban districts on Sunday morning. While there is no official word on the development, sources said the gates were closed to store water in the reservoirs of both dams, which had earlier been emptied as part of the desiltation process on Friday and Saturday.
- As reported by The Indian Express, following the Pahalgam terror attack, India has ratcheted up its diplomatic offensive against Pakistan – including curbing water flow through the Baglihar dam.
- The gates of the sluice spillways on the Baglihar dam have been lowered to restrict water flow to Pakistan’s Punjab as a “short-term punitive action,” a senior official had told The Indian Express.
- The Centre had earlier announced the suspension of the Indus Waters Treaty, which has governed the use of the Indus river and its tributaries between India and Pakistan since 1960.
- Built as run-of-the-river projects, the Baglihar and Salal dams enable India to regulate the timing of water release downstream. At the time of their construction, Pakistan had raised objections and sought the World Bank’s intervention. India had then agreed to keep the dam’s height at 143 metres, a decrease by 1.5 metres from the originally proposed height, thus reducing the water pondage capacity by 13.5 per cent.



- Sources said that though the dams cannot hold flow of Chenab waters to Pakistan for a long time, they provide India the capability to regulate timing of the release of water. While rabi harvesting, which is currently underway, does not require much water, farmers on both sides of the border do need it during paddy cultivation season, which will begin in one or two months.

Do You Know:

- Baglihar Dam also known as Baglihar Hydroelectric Power Project, is a run-of-the-river power project on the Chenab River in Baglihar road in the Ramban district of Jammu and Kashmir. The first power project executed by the Jammu and Kashmir Power Development Corporation, it was conceived in 1992 and approved in 1996, with construction begun in 1999.
- Salal Dam also known as Salal Hydroelectric Power Station, is a run-of-the-river hydropower project on the Chenab River in the Reasi district of the Jammu and Kashmir. It was the first hydropower project built by India in Jammu and Kashmir under the Indus Water Treaty.
- Run-of-river hydroelectricity (ROR) or run-of-the-river hydroelectricity is a type of hydroelectric generation plant whereby little or no water storage is provided. Run-of-the-river power plants may have no water storage at all or a limited amount of storage, in which case the storage reservoir is referred to as pondage.

HOW THE JUDICIARY MAINTAINS ACCOUNTABILITY

The recent comments by the Vice-President of India on the role of judges has caused much anxiety and is a matter of serious concern that needs to be analysed properly. It is a well-known fact that with power comes responsibility. The position of the Vice-President is second in the order of precedence in India and therefore, anybody holding such a post needs to be extremely cautious before speaking, as his views might send wrong signals to the people. The current Vice-President, Jagdeep Dhankhar, in the context of the Supreme Court setting deadlines for Presidents and Governors to clear Bills approved by the Union/State legislatures, has stated that judges are working as a 'super parliament'; that judges cannot give directions to the President; and that judges are not accountable because the law of the land does not apply to them.

Dissecting the claims

The term 'super parliament' does not have any significance as Parliament is the supreme body constituted by the free will of the people reflecting the icon of popular sovereignty. No agency including the judiciary can go beyond it. It is to be noted that in order to prevent any arbitrary exercise of power by an independent judiciary, the framers of the Constitution had placed all judicial powers in the Constitution itself. This has been reiterated by the Supreme Court in *L. Chandra Kumar versus Union of India* (1997) in which the Court held that although all judicial powers are vested in the Constitution, the independence of the judiciary is fully secured because of the principle of separation of powers. If at any time judges try to exercise their powers arbitrarily, crossing the boundaries of the separation of powers, it shall be a gross violation of Article 50 and the government which holds majority in Parliament may initiate a process for a removal of the judge concerned.

On the second issue, that the judiciary cannot give directions to the President, a perusal of his position in India needs to be explained. The President is the head of the State (it is clear when Article 52 is read with Article 1). Hence, he or she is elected according to the provisions contained in Articles 54 and 55 establishing India as a Republic. The President is the head of the Executive,



the head of the armed forces and also the head of Parliament under Articles 53(1), 53(2) and 79 respectively. Therefore, he is vested with powers according to his position. Giving assent to the Bills is the power of the President which is well within the limits of popular sovereignty. The President cannot and shall not go beyond this doctrine of popular sovereignty. In more simpler words, if the assent is delayed inordinately, it would undermine the people's power which in itself would be undemocratic. Hence, the judiciary setting a time frame for giving assent to Bills is consistent with the requirements of popular sovereignty. It in no way undermines the dignity of the head of the State. Since the people of India abide by the Constitution and believe in its supremacy, all authorities including the President and Governor shall abide by the provisions of the Constitution.

On accountability

The statement given by the Vice-President that the law of the land does not apply to judges is not at all rational because he himself, as the second highest constitutional authority, questions the rule of law in India. The rule of law flows from the doctrine of the supremacy of the Constitution; questioning its efficacy and limitations would undermine the Constitutional mandate. As mentioned above, all judicial powers have been vested in the Constitution itself, and judges are bound to work within that constitutional ambit. Once any of them go beyond it, he may be removed on the grounds of proved misbehaviour, which would include violation of the Constitution. Moreover, Parliament is empowered to set aside a decision of the Court, if required, by making a new law. This provision also signifies the people's power and popular sovereignty.

Last but not the least, the Constitution of India has given powers to the judiciary to review the actions of the State and its instrumentalities for the purpose of establishing the rule of law to protect the rights of the people. The exercise of the inherent power of the Supreme Court to do complete justice under Article 142 is worth mentioning. When there is no express constitutional provision or parliamentary law on a particular subject or issue at hand, the Supreme Court has been vested with the power to become the custodian and sole interpreter of the Constitution.

Conclusively, whenever the country faces large-scale turbulence in almost all sectors, constitutional authorities and citizens both need to look at the events with a liberal mindset and should avoid doing or speaking anything which might ultimately prove detrimental to democratic and constitutional sentiments.

RECONSTITUTED SC BENCH TO REVIEW ORDER WHICH GAVE UNBRIDLED POWERS TO ED

The Supreme Court has reconstituted a three-judge Bench to review a two-year-old judgment which gave unbridled powers to the Enforcement Directorate to arrest and summon individuals and search private properties under the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA).

The reconstituted Bench of Justices Surya Kant, Ujjal Bhuyan and N. Kotiswar Singh is scheduled to take up the case on May 7. Justice Singh replaces Justice C.T. Ravikumar, who retired on January 5.

Petitioners have alleged that the July 27, 2022 judgment deprived an accused of his basic rights.

Twin conditions

The 545-page judgment, authored by Justice A.M. Khanwilkar (now retired), had upheld the PMLA's controversial "twin conditions" for bail. These conditions provided that a PMLA-



designated trial court was required to give bail only if the accused could prove his innocence against money laundering charges. On the slim chance the accused did get bail, he also had to establish that he was “not likely to commit any offence while on bail”.

For an undertrial who is under incarceration, without access to ECIR, and with whom the ED has not shared the Enforcement Case Information Report, to prove that he is not guilty, to say the least, may prove to be a herculean if not an impossible task, the review petitions had argued. “The apex court had called the PMLA a law against the “scourge of money laundering” and not a hatchet wielded against rival politicians and dissenters.”

“This is a sui generis (unique) legislation... Parliament enacted the Act as a result of international commitment to sternly deal with the menace of money laundering of proceeds of crime having transnational consequences,” the judgment had said.

‘VEXED ISSUE’: SC SAYS IT CAN’T COMPEL ANY STATE TO ADOPT NATIONAL EDUCATION POLICY

The Supreme Court Friday said that while it can intervene if a state’s action or inaction related to the National Education Policy (NEP) violates any fundamental rights, it cannot issue directions under Article 32 of the Constitution compelling any state to adopt the policy.

— A bench of Justices J B Pardiwala and R Mahadevan said this while rejecting a PIL which sought court’s direction to Tamil Nadu and a few other states to implement the NEP. The bench said that it did not propose to examine the issue in the instant writ petition but may examine it in an appropriate proceeding.

— “Whether the States should adopt the National Education Policy 2020 or not is a vexed issue. The Supreme Court, through Article 32 of the Constitution, can issue directives to ensure that the rights of the citizens are protected. It cannot directly compel a State to adopt a policy like the National Education Policy 2020.” the Bench said.

— An NEP is a comprehensive framework to guide the development of education in the country. The need for a policy was first felt in 1964 when Congress MP Siddheshwar Prasad criticised the then government for lacking a vision and philosophy for education.

— The same year, a 17-member Education Commission, headed by then UGC Chairperson D S Kothari, was constituted to draft a national and coordinated policy on education. Based on the suggestions of this Commission, Parliament passed the first education policy in 1968.

— The National Education Policy, 2020 is the third national education policy of the country. The first came in 1968 and the second in 1986, under Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi respectively; the NEP of 1986 was revised in 1992 when P V Narasimha Rao was Prime Minister. The third NEP is released under the Prime Ministership of Narendra Modi.

— The NEP proposes sweeping changes including opening up of Indian higher education to foreign universities, dismantling of the UGC and the All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE), introduction of a four-year multidisciplinary undergraduate programme with multiple exit options, and discontinuation of the M Phil programme.

— The NEP says students until Class 5 should be taught in their mother tongue or regional language.



'TRIPLE TEST' TO DETERMINE OBC QUOTA IN JHARKHAND

Jharkhand has finished collecting data on the population of Other Backward Classes (OBCs) from all districts of the state, in order to determine quotas for OBCs in urban local bodies.

- The data collection is a part of the first step of the “triple test”, a three-step guideline laid down by the Supreme Court to ensure OBC quotas in local bodies are determined in a fair and constitutional manner.
- The following are the three steps of the so-called “triple test”.

—Setting up a dedicated commission to conduct a rigorous empirical inquiry into the nature and implications of the backwardness in local bodies; —Specifying the proportion of reservation required in local bodies in light of recommendations of the commission, so as not to fall foul of overbreadth; and —To ensure reservation for SCs/STs/OBCs taken together does not exceed an aggregate of 50 per cent of the total seats.

Do You Know:

- The “triple test” was outlined by the Supreme Court in the *Vikas Kishanrao Gawali vs State of Maharashtra and others* on March 4, 2021.
- Jharkhand set up a dedicated OBC Commission in June 2023. Members of the Commission, including administrative officials, toured Madhya Pradesh to study how the “triple test” was implemented there.
- Data collection began in December, with the deadline set for March. However, several districts missed their submission deadlines, and the complete data reached the Commission this week.
- In Jharkhand, OBCs are subdivided into more socially and educationally backward BC-I (Backward Class I), and the relatively better-off BC-II (Backward Class II) categories. While both BC-I and BC-II categories are eligible for reservations, the former typically receives a higher share in the pie to ensure equitable representation. Currently, there are 127 castes under the BC-I category, and around 45 under BC-II.
- OBCs make up roughly 50% of Jharkhand's population. The Kudmi community, a subgroup of the Mahato/Mahto caste, is the largest OBC community, accounting for 15% of the electorate, by some estimates.

STIRRING PASSIONS OVER WATER IS UNWISE. PUNJAB AND HARYANA SHOULD SETTLE THEIR DIFFERENCES

“Not a drop to share” — is the chorus in Punjab across party lines, as the state locks horns with neighbouring Haryana over water supply from the Bhakra Beas Management Board (BBMB). Members of the board decided to release 8,500 cusecs of water to Haryana — double of the 4,000 cusecs it had been receiving each month — at a meeting where representatives from Delhi, Haryana and Rajasthan stood on one side, Himachal Pradesh remained non-aligned, and Punjab dissented. The border state refused to back the plan to release more water to Haryana, arguing that Haryana had already drawn 103 per cent of its share for the year. Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann then rushed to Nangal with a minister, who physically locked the gates of the dam even as the BBMB transferred the protesting Punjab member. Now, even as the central government urges



both states to broker peace, the BBMB has gone to the Punjab and Haryana High Court, saying that Punjab Police has taken over the dam at Nangal. Political parties in Punjab participated in a special assembly session on Monday to discuss the way forward.

Water has always been an emotive issue in the two riparian states, which have a history of discord over river water distribution after Haryana and Himachal were carved out of undivided Punjab in 1966. The Dharam Yudh Morcha, launched in 1982 against digging of the Sutlej Yamuna Link (SYL) Canal that would divert Sutlej waters to Haryana, set in motion a series of events that snowballed into an armed militancy. That insurgency wracked the state for over a decade and cost the nation a prime minister, a chief minister, and thousands of innocent lives. Decades later, the canal remains a sore point. Former Chief Minister Captain Amarinder Singh famously abrogated the SYL accord during his 2004 tenure. The largely agrarian state has watched with envy as Haryana transformed into an economic powerhouse.

With over 70 per cent of its aquifers in the red, and dams running dry this season, Punjab's outrage stems from fear — but politics isn't far behind. The current war of words comes at a time when the nation confronts a shared threat from terror. Both states would do well to sit across the table and settle their differences. Stirring passions over water in a state where its division still evokes painful memories may offer fleeting political mileage — but it could have a heavy cost. The Centre must step in to guide and advise, while guarding against being perceived as biased towards one side.

SC RAPS PUNJAB FOR DENOTIFYING LAND ACQUIRED FOR SYL CANAL

The Supreme Court on Tuesday slammed the Punjab government's decision to denotify land acquired for the building of the Sutlej-Yamuna Link (SYL) canal, saying it was a "clear case of high-handedness".

- Presiding over a two-judge bench, Justice B R Gavai wondered if it was an attempt to defeat the decree of the court.
- Justice Gavai also pointed out to Singh that the court had in 2017 asked the state to maintain the status quo with regard to the land and other properties associated with the canal project. Singh said it is an emotive issue with the public in the state, and Punjab, being a border state, could not afford any unrest over the issue.
- The senior counsel also said that Haryana is already getting its share based on consumption, and its demand for additional water is before a tribunal. This prompted Justice Gavai to ask, "So according to you, this court has passed a decree without considering everything? You are attributing non-application of mind (to the court)."
- The court was hearing a suit filed by Haryana regarding the construction of the project for sharing the water of the Ravi and Beas rivers with Punjab. In 2022, the Supreme Court had directed that the canal be completed within one year. Two years later, in 2024, the Punjab government terminated its 1981 agreement with Haryana to share the river water.

Do You Know:

- The creation of Haryana from the old (undivided) Punjab in 1966 threw up the problem of giving Haryana its share of river waters. Punjab was opposed to sharing waters of the Ravi and Beas with Haryana, citing riparian principles, and arguing that it had no water to spare.



- At an inter-state meeting convened by the central government in 1955, the total calculated flow (read water) of the Ravi and Beas — 15.85 million acre feet (MAF) — had been divided among Rajasthan (8 MAF), undivided Punjab (7.20 MAF) and Jammu and Kashmir (0.65 MAF). In March 1976, a decade after the Punjab Reorganisation Act was implemented, and even as Punjab continued to protest, the Centre issued a notification allocating to Haryana 3.5 MAF out of undivided Punjab's 7.2 MAF.
- To enable Haryana to use its share of the waters of the Sutlej and its tributary Beas, a canal linking the Sutlej with the Yamuna, cutting across the state, was planned. On April 8, 1982, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi ceremonially dug the ground at Kapoori village in Patiala district for the construction of the 214-km Sutlej-Yamuna Link (or SYL) canal, 122 km of which was to be in Punjab, and 92 km in Haryana.
- A year earlier, Indira Gandhi had negotiated a tripartite agreement between Punjab (where Darbara Singh of the Congress was Chief Minister), Haryana (where Bhajan Lal, who had defected to the Congress from the Janata Party with a number of MLAs, was CM), and Rajasthan (where again the Congress was in power, with Shiv Charan Mathur as CM).
- On July 24, 1985, Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and Akali Dal president Harchand Singh Longowal signed the Punjab Accord, agreeing that a tribunal would verify the claims of both Punjab and Haryana on river waters — following which the Akali Dal agreed to withdraw the agitation. The Eradi tribunal headed by Supreme Court Justice V Balakrishna Eradi in 1987 recommended an increase in the shares of Punjab and Haryana to 5 MAF and 3.83 MAF respectively, while taking into account utilisable supplies of surplus water at base stations.
- In March 2016, Supreme Court started hearings into a presidential reference to decide on the legality of the Punjab Termination of Agreements Act, 2004. The presidential reference was made by the Centre days after the Punjab Assembly passed the Act. As the hearings resumed, the Solicitor General, appearing on behalf of the Centre, took a pro-Haryana stance, saying the Centre stood by the SC's orders asking Punjab to complete the work on SYL in its territory. The development has triggered a political storm in Punjab.

IT IS NOT A COURT'S DUTY TO TELL MEDIA TO DELETE OR TAKE DOWN CONTENT, SAYS SC

The Supreme Court, in a judgment on Friday, held that it is not the duty of courts to instruct the media to delete or take down content.

The verdict by a Bench of Justices A.S. Oka and Ujjal Bhuyan came in a challenge to a Delhi High Court order directing the takedown or deletion of online content related to a defamation case between news agency Asian News International (ANI) and Wikimedia Foundation and comments allegedly made by the Single Judge of the High Court hearing the dispute.

A Division Bench of the High Court had given Wikimedia 36 hours to take down a page on ANI hosted on its platform. The Division Bench order of October 16 last year prima facie decided that the content bordered on contempt and amounted to interference in court proceedings and violation of the sub-judice principle by a party to the defamation proceedings.

The apex court judgment, authored by Justice Bhuyan, found the direction to take down the content "disproportionate".



“We have no hesitation in our mind that such directions could not have been issued,” Justice Bhuyan concluded, setting aside the takedown order.

He said courts must not be seen to regulate or stifle the freedom of speech and expression. “It is not the duty of the court to tell the media: delete this, take that down... Both the judiciary and the media are the foundational pillars of democracy which is a basic feature of our Constitution. For a liberal democracy to thrive, both must supplement each other,” Justice Bhuyan observed.

‘Debate essential’

The judgment said introspection and robust debate are essential for the improvement of institutions, including the judiciary. “Courts, as a public and open institution, must always remain open to public observations, debates and criticisms. In fact, courts should welcome debates and constructive criticism,” it said.

Media can vigorously debate on sub judice or ongoing proceedings. However, criticism must be objective and constructive. The apex court reminded that judges have no means to respond publicly to personal criticism. A case of contempt would be made out if a publication scandalised the court or its judges.

The judgment said a court could opt for an order of preventive injunction against the Press only if there was reasonable ground to believe that publication would impair the administration of justice or the right to fair trial. The danger apprehended should be imminent and real. People at large have a right to know. The court must not obstruct this basic right in a free country.

Injunction on publishing matters relating to cases which are sub judice must be ordered only if it interfered with the due course of justice, Justice Bhuyan noted.

Similarly, courts can order the postponement of an article only when necessary to prevent real and substantial risk to the fairness of court proceedings. The court must keep in mind the important public role of the media in a democracy and subject a postponement order to the twin tests of necessity and proportionality.

A postponement order should operate only for a limited period and without disturbing the content of the publication. The media has a right to challenge such an order in a higher court. “A postponement order is a neutralising device to balance interests of equal weightage, that is, freedom of expression vis-a-vis freedom of trial,” Justice Bhuyan explained.

INDIA A PART OF WIDER TREND OF ERODING PRESS FREEDOM: REPORT

Indian media “has been shackled and subjected to a systemic strategy to cripple it”, according to the 23rd Annual South Asia Press Freedom Report 2024-25. The report, titled “Frontline Democracy: Media and Political Churn”, flags several concerning trends, including a “growing trust deficit in media outlets”, “choking of independent websites” and the extreme precarity of gig workers who are also having to contend with the challenges posed by Artificial Intelligence (AI).

The report reviews the state of press freedom in India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan and Maldives. Noting that Pakistan is “for all intents and purposes an authoritarian regime operating under the guise of democracy”, the study pointed out that it witnessed the “most violent year for journalists in the country in two decades with eight journalists killed in the period under review.” Highlighting that most governments in South Asia



have failed to reverse the “ever increasing levels of impunity for crimes against journalists”, the report reveals details of the “horrific murder of Mukesh Chandrakar in Bastar”, who was abducted, murdered and buried in a septic tank.

In a section titled “India: Propaganda and the Press”, the report flagged the proliferation of hate speech and disinformation with the “IT cells” of political parties playing a big role.

Self-censorship issues

Noting that “the legal environment for the press has become increasingly hostile in recent years”, the report pointed to the use of “defamation laws, sedition charges, the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA) and Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA)” to curb media freedom. “Journalists and media houses have faced legal challenges for publishing reports critical of the government, which has led to self-censorship within the industry, following a chilling effect,” it said.

“Every authoritarian effort is being made to crush those who seek to hold power to account — crackdowns on media houses; surveillance, intimidation and harassment of journalists, filing of police cases; arbitrary detentions; and the unleashing of raids by the Income Tax Department, and the Enforcement Directorate that oversees financial crimes,” the report stated, adding that “withholding government advertisements are routine avenues to harass media houses.” Further, the “ongoing mauling of freedom of speech and expression is being done on grounds of national security, maintaining public order, or preventing misinformation,” the report said.

It referenced the Global Risks Report 2024, which has found “manipulated and falsified information” to be the “most severe short-term risk the world faces”.

The report also dwells on other challenges facing the media, in India specifically and South Asia in general. These include the media workforce reeling under a “shrunk job market”, the “growing use of AI for content creation”, decline in advertisement revenue, new labour codes encouraging contract work, restructuring of corporate media houses because of mergers and acquisitions, and the worsening precarity of freelance journalism.

On the flip side, the report noted that the media’s digital transition has also presented new opportunities, especially for “growing alternative media as a counterbalance to the stagnating legacy media”.

EC DEVELOPING COMMON DIGITAL PLATFORM FOR VOTERS, OFFICIALS

The Election Commission on Sunday announced that it was developing a user-friendly digital interface for voters and other stakeholders such as election officials, political parties, and the civil society.

The new one-stop platform, ECINET, will integrate and reorient over 40 of the EC’s existing mobile and Web applications. It will subsume existing apps, such as the Voter Helpline app, Voter Turnout app, cVIGIL, Suvidha 2.0, ESMS, Saksham and the KYC app, which together had clocked over 5.5 crore downloads.

The EC’s new initiative comes amid allegations made by Opposition parties about voter roll manipulations, duplication of elector photo identity cards (EPICs), as well as abnormalities in updating voter turnout data.



‘Simple user experience’

The ECINET will have an aesthetic user interface and a simplified user experience by providing a singular platform for all election-related activities, the EC said.

This move is designed to alleviate the burden of users, who currently have to download and navigate multiple apps and remember different login details, the poll body said.

The new initiative is expected to benefit nearly 100 crore electors and the entire electoral machinery comprising over 10.5 lakh Booth Level Officers, around 15 lakh Booth Level Agents appointed by political parties, nearly 45 lakh polling officials, 15,597 Assistant EROs, 4,123 EROs and 767 DEOs across the country.

WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES FACED BY THE CIVIL SERVICES?

The story so far:

On the occasion of Civil Services Day (April 21), Cabinet Secretary T. V. Somanathan IAS, spoke about the importance of civil services in maintaining and strengthening democracy, the need for lateral entrants and greater transparency.

What is merit versus spoils system?

The merit system entails appointments to government posts after a rigorous selection process by an independent authority. In India, this commenced in 1858 when the British introduced the Indian Civil Service to select officers for administering the country. After independence, it is the Union Public Service Commission which conducts such exams. The merit system is aimed at building career bureaucrats who are expected to function without any political leanings and provide independent advice to the incumbent political executive. The spoils system works on the adage ‘to the victor belong the spoils.’ It is a system where the incumbent political executive appoints its supporters to various posts in the government. It has its origins in the U.S., and continued until 1883 when it was replaced largely by the merit system.

What is the role of the civil services?

The civil services have contributed significantly in the administration of our democratic system. As mentioned by the Cabinet Secretary, they have been instrumental in the conduct of free and fair elections, and ensuring smooth transfer of power both at the Centre and States. There have been numerous instances when States have been placed under President’s rule, with the civil services ensuring uninterrupted administration during such times.

On the development side, they are a repository of institutional knowledge. They provide advice to ruling governments in policy making and also implement the policies made by the political executive. The administrative tasks of public bureaucracy include executing and monitoring programmes, and laying down laws, rules and regulations. Civil servants have been the fulcrum around which governance activities like delivery of essential services, providing relief operations etc., have been carried out.

What ails the civil services?

But the civil services also suffer from significant challenges. First, neutrality as a trait is fast eroding among bureaucrats, resulting in political bias in discharge of critical functions. It is



pertinent to note that both the cause and effect of this phenomenon is the increasing political interference in all aspects of bureaucracy including postings and transfers. Second, career bureaucrats who are generalists, may lack the expertise needed to address technical challenges. Third, there is also significant corruption at all levels of the bureaucracy that often goes unpunished.

What reforms are required?

Some of the measures that need to be taken are summarised here.

In a democracy, the mandate is with the elected government and it needs to be respected. However, the neutral bureaucracy needs to be insulated from undue political interference to uphold the rule of law and constitutional values. To maintain a harmonious balance between the political and permanent executive, the autonomy of career bureaucrats is essential. This includes reasonable independence with respect to postings, tenures and transfers. Also, there needs to be a shift in the focus of bureaucrats from 'procedure' to 'outcomes.' Monitoring at present in the government is primarily through the measurement of outlays and at best through outputs. There is a need to move towards measurement of 'outcomes.' This reform can be hastened by hiring domain experts as lateral entrants, especially at senior levels. These reforms would uphold the essential traits of an effective civil service.

CBI CHIEF MAY GET EXTENSION AS CONSENSUS ELUDES PANEL

The incumbent chief of the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI), Praveen Sood, is likely to get a one-year extension, The Indian Express has learned. The possibility was discussed during a high-level meeting chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi to select Sood's successor, which was also attended by Chief Justice of India Sanjiv Khanna and Leader of Opposition in the Lok Sabha, Rahul Gandhi.

- According to sources, the three-member selection panel, which met at the Prime Minister's Office, deliberated on the names of a few senior IPS officers. However, no consensus could be reached on any of the suggested candidates, following which the members agreed to extend Sood's tenure by a year.
- The deliberations come ahead of the scheduled end of Sood's two-year fixed tenure on May 25.

Do You Know:

- Under the provisions of the Delhi Special Police Establishment Act, the CBI Director is appointed for a fixed term of two years by the central government on the recommendation of a committee comprising the Prime Minister, the Leader of Opposition in the Lok Sabha, and the Chief Justice of India. The process is intended to ensure transparency and shield the agency from political influence.
- The CBI, India's premier investigative agency, plays a critical role in probing cases referred by the central government, state governments, or the courts.
- The panel that selects the CBI chief consists of the Prime Minister, the Leader of Opposition and Chief Justice of India. The process of appointment was established by the Supreme Court's Vineet Narain judgement (1997), and the changes made to The Delhi Special Police Establishment (DSPE) Act, 1946 by The Lokpal and Lokayuktas Act, 2013.

**EX-CEA BOOK: UNION BANK ADMITS LAPSES; PUBLISHER GOT OVER `3 CRORE**

Union Bank of India is understood to have paid 50 per cent in advance to Rupa Publications for a bulk order worth around Rs 7 crore for 2 lakh copies of former Chief Economic Advisor Krishnamurthy V Subramanian's book 'India@100: Envisioning Tomorrow's Economic Powerhouse' — a contentious purchase that has raised questions of propriety, The Indian Express has learnt.

- On Tuesday, the bank acknowledged "lapses" in the purchase, and said it was examining the issue, even as its shares plummeted by 6.18 per cent to Rs 118.35 on the BSE. In a filing to exchanges, the bank said that it "has made the said procurement". "However, there were certain lapses in the procurement, which are being examined by the bank," it said.
- The Indian Express had first reported Sunday that one of the key reasons for Subramanian's recall last month by the Government as the International Monetary Fund's Executive Director, on its behalf, was an "alleged impropriety" related to the promotion of this book.
- Subramanian did not respond to requests for comment from The Indian Express.
- It is understood that apart from the bank's bulk purchase, the publishers may have also received other, smaller bulk orders for Subramanian's book. Industry sources said these orders were private and institutional in nature and "nowhere close" in scale to the bank's order.
- When contacted by The Indian Express, Rupa Publications said they had no comment on the purchase by the PSU bank.
- In publishing circles, Union Bank of India's order is being seen as a "fantastical" deal, although The Indian Express has learnt that seven months on, the publishers are yet to be paid the remaining 50 per cent for the bulk order.
- It is learnt that the publishers had "executed" the order within a month of receiving it — around September last year. The order is understood to have been sent to the publishing house through an email from the bank. Subsequently, it is learnt, several reminders for dues have been sent by the publishers to the bank's top management in New Delhi.

Do You Know:

- The Indian Express had reported that Subramanian was recalled six months before the end of his three-year term at the International Monetary Fund. Apart from concerns over the book, this newspaper had reported that there were reports of alleged violation of some "internal IMF protocols".
- An order, dated April 30, said that the Appointments Committee of the Cabinet had approved the "termination" of his services as IMF's Executive Director (India), "with immediate effect."

CAST OF CHARACTERS

For the first time since 1931, Census forms will record the caste of Indians, but questions remain on the extent of the impact that the data would have on India's affirmative action programmes. Decadal censuses, until now, have categorised citizens as SCs, STs and as per religion. In decades of reservation for SCs, STs, and OBCs, there have been concerns about which communities or



individuals within these groups are able to access the benefits. The demands for a creamy layer to eliminate the economically better-off sections from reservation quotas, and for sub-categorisation to ensure smaller or relatively more backward communities are not crowded out, have gained moral and political legitimacy. The Supreme Court of India, last August, cleared the way for sub-categorisation within SCs and STs and the Justice G. Rohini Commission in 2023 finished a study to examine sub-categorisation within OBCs. The Court's judgment was quick to draw a sharp fault line within SC and ST communities on the issue of sub-categorisation and the potential for upset in the Commission's report has forced the government to keep its findings closely guarded. Caste groupings continue to be a determinant of political and social life and empirical data on these are essential for more effective development planning. However, the search for increased representativeness through slicing and relabelling of social groups could be an infinite process, leaving some group or the other always dissatisfied.

The other challenge is the logistics of how caste enumeration should be conducted in a country where community-based claims are numerous. The understanding of what caste is, the difference between a sub-caste and a caste group, and the reconciliation of the understanding of caste names with their morphing according to linguistic and regional variations are issues. This gap in understanding caste was reflected in the SECC 2011 dataset as well, which yielded more than 46 lakh different "castes". Apart from the fact that there is no repository of all castes except for the lists of SCs, STs, and OBCs, the question of how to classify communities as castes, tribes, or socially and educationally backward classes continues to be litigated in High Courts and the Court in the form of countless petitions for inclusion or exclusion. The decision to enumerate caste can also be an opportunity to arrive at a consensus on these questions. The political diatribe that accompanied caste enumeration exercises in Bihar, Karnataka, and Telangana shows that this could be volatile. The Centre should build consensus on the details, now that all parties are in agreement with caste enumeration in principle. That will keep the integrity of its finding intact and beyond reproach.

THE IMPLICATIONS OF CASTE ENUMERATION

Numbers are the basis of governance; without them, the state loses confidence. In government offices, one may see that every item — electrical panels, fans, chairs — is meticulously numbered and logged, forming the foundation of administrative records. Thus, governments categorise and quantify all things. As Arjun Appadurai said, every commodity has its own social and political life — this principle also applies to the census of humankind.

Since the emergence of the modern state in India, populations have been enumerated. The first colonial Census conducted in 1872 generated statistical data, allowing the British to control India and regulate every aspect of Indian life. While the Census was seen as an administrative enumeration, a statistical activity more than a political act of a reorganisation of groups, the introduction of the caste Census by H.H. Risley made the Census into a political instrument in a way it had never been used before. Risley had a dramatic influence on the rise of caste organisations and the exploding production of literature about the caste system from all over the subcontinent.

Caste count pre-Independence

In the late 19th century, upper-caste Indian elites sought political reforms and representation from the British. The Census figures enabled the colonial government to reshape India's complex social and cultural fabric through revenue taxation, education, and new opportunities generated



in universities, public services and of course legislative bodies. This eventually led to the creation of a supporter base among upper-caste Indian elites for the British.

However, with time, subaltern communities also began seeking access to education and political representation. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's emergence after the 1930s, challenged upper-caste hegemony, creating space for Dalits or the Backward Classes, as they were known then.

While the Government of India Act, 1935 and the Indian Constitution brought dignity and equality to Dalits and Adivasis, thousands of Other Backward Classes (OBCs) were overlooked by the Constituent Assembly during this pivotal moment.

Defining the OBC category

In 1953, the Kaka Kalelkar Commission was established to identify OBC communities and propose welfare measures. In its 1955 report, the commission identified as many as 2,300 communities as OBCs. However, the report was not implemented due to vague criteria and lack of political consensus. In fact, the report received negative feedback from the then Congress Home Minister G.B. Pant, who thought that the emphasis on caste demonstrated "the dangers of separatism" and was "the greatest hindrance in the way of our progress toward an egalitarian society."

During this period, Dr. Ram Manohar Lohia articulated a contrarian but transformative vision — "We should follow a new principle that merit comes from opportunity. Sixty per cent of the high opportunities of the country should go to 90% of India's population — Shudras, Harijans, backward castes of religious minorities, women, and tribals. This principle should be applied to the most competitive exams and I reject the Prime Minister's (Jawaharlal Nehru) arguments, which rest on the deceptive foundation of merit and qualifications," as articulated in the Rammanohar Lohia Rachanawali, a compilation of the works of Ram Manohar Lohia.

After Lohia's intervention, the Mandal Commission in its 1980 report recommended a 27% reservation for OBCs in central government jobs and educational institutions, noting that OBCs constitute approximately 52% of India's population, on the basis of the 1931 caste Census data. In 1990, the V.P. Singh government allowed the partial implementation of Mandal Commission reports, generating much political heat across the country. However, the ensuing debate around reservations for the backward classes also raised the issue of a lack of new and more relevant data for more accurate policymaking, giving momentum to the demand for a caste census from this period on.

Incidentally, between the Kaka Kalelkar Commission and Mandal Commission, the Mungeri Lal Commission was set up by former Bihar Chief Minister Karpoori Thakur in Bihar, which also recommended reservations for the backward classes.

The impact of the Mandal report

The implementation of the Mandal Commission report has significantly changed the contours of OBC politics in the country, hastening the dominance of the backward castes, especially the intermediary castes. There is now not a single party in India which can oppose OBC reservations. Even in the 2024 parliamentary elections, reservation (or the perceived threat of its removal) was a key issue.

Since 2014, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, has been garnering strong support from OBC and Scheduled Castes within the broader Hindutva framework. To reclaim this support, regional parties have expanded their social and



electoral base, and have been tirelessly demanding for a Census where caste is also enumerated. In Uttar Pradesh, the Samajwadi Party led by Akhilesh Yadav, has created a fruitful alliance with backward classes, Dalits, and minorities, by emphasising on proportional representation for castes. The party secured 37 Lok Sabha seats in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections in Uttar Pradesh. Recently, Congress leader Rahul Gandhi admitted that the party failed to prioritise OBCs and other reserved categories in the past and that they are ready to amend it. As part of the INDIA alliance's Lok Sabha election agenda, he advocated for a Census where caste is enumerated, aiming to consolidate Congress's traditional voter base while also appealing to OBC, Dalit, minorities and Adivasi constituencies. This, he said, will be like a comprehensive "X-ray" of Indian society.

While there is a vast political leadership who came through the lanes of OBC politics and have reached high positions in political parties and legislative spaces, there are fault lines in it. There is a concentration of certain communities in these spaces, especially of intermediary and extremely backward castes. The new Census, with caste enumeration, could create a window of opportunity for the inclusion of those communities who have been left behind. This Census will extend beyond OBCs, encompassing other subaltern communities and minorities. It will also bring out the number of privileged castes. It will reveal demographic compositions, and, if economic data like land ownership is included, the social roots of India's economic inequality. For smaller Scheduled Castes and OBCs lacking prominent leaders, this Census will offer a vital opportunity for visibility and advocacy, as land reforms and economic equality efforts have failed, deepening caste-based oppression and marginalisation. It will also give voice to, and more importantly, numbers of denotified and nomadic communities.

An electoral agenda

If one looks at the recent victory of the BJP in Haryana, Rajasthan, Delhi, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Uttar Pradesh, one understands how the BJP has attracted small communities to its fold. Social scientist Badri Narayan has been highlighting this phenomenon for a long time now. In Bihar, where Assembly elections are due later this year, the BJP would want to use its recent decision to conduct a caste count in the upcoming Census, along with the symbolism of honouring Karpoori Thakur with a Bharat Ratna Award, to effectively mobilise the Extremely Backward Classes (EBC). This is to bolster its own social base and improve its political standing, taking the wind out of its ally Nitish Kumar, who has been basking in the glory of carrying out the caste survey in Bihar earlier and has been the beneficiary of EBC support so far. Through the proposed caste enumeration with the Census, the BJP will try to reshape the caste realities of India and consolidate its appeal among a largely untapped voter base. It will try to cement its presence in States where it was a non-dominant player at best. Other national and regional parties will likely pursue similar strategies, but their success to find a foothold in these realigned caste realities will depend on their leadership and party organisation.

NEERA PRODUCTION GETS BOOST IN BIHAR; TODDY TAPPERS TO GAIN

The production of Neera (palm nectar that ferments into sweetened toddy) has received a fillip in Bihar with the State government launching the Mukhyamantri Neera Samvardhan Yojana, which also aims to provide employment and financial aid to palm tree owners and toddy tappers.

Under the scheme, launched on April 30, two lakh palm trees have been identified for Neera production in Bihar. It will also benefit 20,000 toddy tappers, who will receive an incentive of ₹8 per litre of Neera produced through Direct Benefit Transfer.



The scheme is being implemented during the toddy season from April to July this year by the Prohibition, Excise, and Registration Department, and Jeevika, the Rural Livelihoods Promotion Programme under the Rural Development Department.

After the verification of tappers through Jeevika, licence for production of Neera will be issued by the Prohibition, Excise, and Registration Department. Nalanda, Gaya, Muzaffarpur, and Vaishali districts have the most number of toddy tappers and palm trees in the State.

The decision to promote Neera production comes two months after Leader of the Opposition and Rashtriya Janata Dal leader Tejashwi Yadav promised to make changes to the Bihar Prohibition and Excise Act, 2016 to keep toddy out of its ambit. Those engaged in toddy tapping in the State belong to the Pasi (Dalit) community and it is their only source of income.

After the government announced total prohibition in April 2016, Chief Minister Nitish Kumar had said Neera would be processed into a health drink and marketed across the State. However, the initiative failed to make a mark in the market and several Neera kiosks were shut down. Under the Prohibition Act, toddy is banned and the government has made alternative arrangements for people involved in its production and sale.

Incentives

To promote the production of Neera, those tapping 10 palm trees will receive ₹15,600, while the owner of those trees will get ₹5,850, both amounts will be transferred to their bank accounts by Jeevika.

For fewer than 10 trees, a proportional incentive will be given. Owners will also be given an incentive of ₹3 per litre, for up to 10 trees. Toddy tappers will receive an additional ₹30 per tree for marking them.

Neera sales centres have been set up to sell the drink, with a large number of them in Nalanda district. An official of the Prohibition Department said on Thursday, "The State government is promoting Neera as it has health benefits. It is rich in minerals like calcium, iron, potassium, sodium, and phosphorus. The antioxidants in it strengthen the immune system. It is a natural probiotic and helps increase haemoglobin levels."

DO PUBLIC R&D UNITS INNOVATE ENOUGH?

The story so far:

The office of the Principal Scientific Adviser to the Government of India, Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) and the Centre for Technology, Innovation, and Economic Research have released a detailed assessment of public-funded research and development in India. In all, 244 R&D organisations, affiliated to various ministries, participated in the study, 'Evaluation of Innovation Excellence Indicators of Public Funded R&D Organizations'. However, scientific institutions such as those belonging to defence research, space, and atomic energy research, which make up the dominant share of India's overall R&D spend, were excluded from the study, due to the "sensitive nature" of their work. Academic institutions and universities also weren't part of the study.

What was the purpose of this study?

The survey was administered via an online questionnaire and was designed to capture the contributions of public-funded R&D organisations in areas critical to India's growth. The key



question that the authors of the report sought to answer was whether these labs were largely engaged in curiosity-driven academic science, or geared towards developing products and new innovations that aligned with the demands of industry. The authors sought to “capture and evaluate” innovation indicators of public-funded R&D labs/institutes. “The analysis and recommendations in this report were meant to guide the public-funded R&D labs/institutes to increase their contributions meaningfully towards a number of Sustainable Development Goals and national priorities through their research capabilities, to help the nation navigate various challenges on the socio-economic front, from health challenges to ensuring a more diverse scientific base through opportunities for women scientists, and finally to contribute to skilling and creating meaningful employment by working alongside industry and startups,” the study noted.

How was it conducted?

These big-picture questions were broken down into 62 parameters. These included questions on the labs’ annual spend on R&D, number of young scientists, patents filed, technologies developed, participation of women scientists and their contribution to ‘national missions’ such as the ‘Deep Ocean Mission,’ ‘National Quantum Mission’ etc. Labs/institutes self-selected themselves as ‘Basic, Applied or Services’ or as ‘hybrid’ — a lab/institute whose research straddles more than one of the three research categories of basic, applied and services. All the data submitted by the labs/institutes were accompanied with the director’s sign-off indicating that the submitted data was authentic and valid.

What were the key findings?

A significant finding was that only about 25% of the labs surveyed gave incubation support to startups and only 16% provided support to ‘deep tech’ startups. Only 15% collaborated with industry overseas and only half of them opened their facilities to researchers and students from outside. About half the labs/institutes contributed to national policies and developing technologies targeting the ‘Make in India’ initiative. The Skill India Mission was being targeted by around 35% of the organisations while around 30% of the organisations said they were targeting the Swachh Bharat Mission. A large number of labs/institutes reported a decrease in the number of permanent staff in 2022-23 compared to the previous year and an increased reliance — from 17,234 to 19,625 — on contractual staff. The median share of young researchers increased in 2022-23 to around 58% from 54% in the previous year. The combined budget of 155 labs/institutes increased from ₹9,924 crore in 2017-18 to ₹13,162 crore in 2022-23. The total number of scientific staff and the share of women scientists within scientific staff remained stagnant across 2021-2023.

Does the report make recommendations?

As part of its recommendations, the report advocates that every lab should be “mandated to review their existing mandates” and align themselves to ‘Viksit Bharat.’ The mandate is to focus on “critical technologies” as directed by the government, and that public-funded R&D organisations must adopt this strategy on a “war footing”. They should work closely with industry, as well as each other. The report recommends setting up of Section 8 companies (non profit organisations registered under the Ministry of Corporate Affairs) to provide support to startups, opening research and testing facilities and, improving cross-linkages with higher educational institutes.



GAGANYAAN ALMOST READY, FIRST UNCREWED FLIGHT LATER THIS YEAR, SAYS ISRO CHAIRMAN

The first uncrewed mission of the Gaganyaan programme would be launched in the last quarter of this year, chairman of the India Space Research Organisation (Isro) V Narayanan said Tuesday.

- Gaganyaan, India's first attempt to put humans into space, involves three uncrewed missions before the astronauts are flown to an orbit of 400 km for one to three days.
- The crewed mission is expected to be launched in the first quarter of 2027, Narayanan said. Narayanan added that the Axiom-4 mission from the United States, which is carrying Indian astronaut Subhranshu Shukla to the International Space Station (ISS), is expected to be launched in the first week of June.
- The experience gained from the Axiom-4 mission, including from the experiments performed onboard, would feed into the preparations for the Gaganyaan programme, he said.

Do You Know:

- The Axiom-4 space mission from the United States, which is flying India's Shubhanshu Shukla among four astronauts to the International Space Station, has scheduled several experiments the results of which would help Indian Space Research Organisation execute its own manned spaceflight, Gaganyaan, two years later, ISRO chairman V Narayanan said.
- The Axiom-4 mission is being operated by a private US company Axiom Space, in partnership with NASA and SpaceX. Three other astronauts, one each from the United States, Poland and Hungary, would be travelling to the International Space Station (ISS) with Shukla who will be piloting the Crew Dragon spacecraft of SpaceX. The Indian participation in this mission is a result of an agreement between ISRO and NASA to carry an Indian astronaut to the ISS.
- Other than Shukla, the mission will fly former NASA astronaut and the director of human spaceflight at Axiom Space Peggy Whitson as the commander, Polish astronaut Sławosz Uznański and Hungarian Astronaut Tibor Kapu. All the three countries outside the US — India, Poland and Hungary — are sending their astronauts to space after a gap of 40 years.

A STEP UP

Amid a disturbing rate of deceleration in global development and a growing divide between the rich and the poor, India has inched up on the Human Development Index. In the 2025 Human Development Report, 'A Matter of Choice: People and Possibilities in the Age of AI', released on Tuesday, India ranks 130 out of 193 countries, from 133 in 2022. It registered an HDI value increase to 0.685 in 2023 from 0.676 in 2022. Coming on the back of two debilitating pandemic years, it can be said that India's recovery has been strong in the three fields HDI measures: "a long and healthy life, access to knowledge and a decent standard of living". India's life expectancy, at 72 years in 2023, is the highest level it has reached since the inception of the index in 1990 (58.6 years). Children, the report noted, are expected to stay in school for 13 years on average, up from 8.2 years in 1990; and Gross National Income per capita has risen from \$2,167.22 in 1990 to \$9046.76 in 2023. It gave a shout out to programmes such as MGNREGA, the Right to Education Act, the National Rural Health Mission and other initiatives for the improved status, but also



sounded a word of caution about rising inequality, particularly significant income and gender disparities.

The female labour participation rate may have risen to 41.7% in 2023-24, as the Economic Survey of 2024-25 pointed out, but a stronger ecosystem needs to be built to ensure women join the workforce and are able to retain their jobs. There is a lag in political representation of women as well with no indication yet when the constitutional amendments reserving one-third of legislative seats for women will come into force. Underprivileged girls and boys still struggle to get an education, and until this anomaly is corrected, India's HDI value will not rise. Though the report highlights that 13.5 crore (of India's population of 144 crore) "escaped multidimensional poverty" between 2015-16 and 2019-21, income and gender inequalities have pulled down India's HDI by 30.7%, "one of the highest losses in the region." The thrust of the HDR this year was on AI and how human beings may benefit from it on development parameters. India, it said, has been able to retain 20% of AI researchers, up from nearly zero in 2019. Going forward, India must leverage AI to deliver on many fronts from agriculture to health care, education to public service delivery. But it is imperative that proper policy and safeguards are in place to thwart the risk that AI may deepen existing inequalities.

CRISIS AT KALESHWARAM: WHY TELANGANA'S MASSIVE IRRIGATION PROJECT IS DISTRESSED

India's national safety regulator for large dams has found "irreparable damage" in the structure of three barrages that are part of the world's biggest multi-stage lift irrigation project.

- The Kaleshwaram Lift Irrigation Project (KLIP) on the Godavari river in Telangana's Jayashankar Bhupalpally district across the border from Maharashtra will supply water for irrigation, industrial, and domestic uses over a swath of northern Telangana.
- Work on KLIP began in June 2019. In February 2024, four months after an incident of flooding at the biggest of the project barrages, the state government asked the National Dam Safety Authority (NDSA), a statutory body set up under the National Dam Safety Act, 2021, for a thorough inspection.
- The Kaleshwaram project on the Godavari will be the world's largest multi-stage lift irrigation project. Work began on June 21, 2019, under Telangana's Bharat Rashtira Samithi (BRS) government.
- In lift irrigation projects, water does not rely on gravity to flow in canals from higher ground to lower; rather, water is lifted by means of pumps or surge pools to a main delivery chamber at the highest point in the project, from where it is distributed to beneficiary fields.
- The project sprawls over approximately 500 km in 13 districts, with a canal network of 1,800 km.
- According to the project master plan, of the 240 thousand million cubic feet (TMC) of water, 169 TMC, or more than 70%, is meant for irrigation. Thirty TMC is for the Hyderabad municipal area, 16 TMC for miscellaneous industrial uses, and 10 TMC is meant to provide drinking water to nearby villages.
- The vast bulk of this water — 195 TMC — will come from the Medigadda Barrage. Twenty TMC will come from the Sripada Yellampalli project, and another 25 TMC will be groundwater.



- On October 21, 2023, one of the pillars — No. 20 of block 7 — of the Medigadda Barrage sank, which led to flooding. An NDSA team examined the sunken pillar on October 25, and held an appraisal meeting with L&T, the company executing the project.

Do You Know:

- According to the Telangana government, the NDSA has asked for “rehabilitation of the design”, and “a comprehensive assessment of health and safety of the entire barrage”. It has sought “immediate stabilisation measures to arrest the ongoing distress”, “comprehensive geotechnical studies and advanced geophysical assessments to establish a reliable baseline of the ground conditions and structures for future interventions”.
- Also, there should be “hydraulic design aided by appropriate hydraulic model studies and structural design through appropriate mathematical modelling software”. In effect, the NDSA has recommended a full suite of actions from structural rehabilitation to strengthening of the barrages.
- The Kaleshwaram project, a brainchild of former Chief Minister K Chandrashekar Rao, was the “crown jewel” of the BRS government that ruled Telangana for almost 10 years after the state was carved out of Andhra Pradesh in 2014.

LET’S CELEBRATE INVISIBLE BIODIVERSITY: DBT SECY ON ‘ONE DAY ONE GENOME’

The Department of Biotechnology (DBT) has over the past five months released detailed graphical summaries, infographics, and other details of over 100 bacterial genomes as part of the ‘One Day One Genome’ initiative launched to harness the microbial potential of India.

- The initiative was announced in New Delhi on November 9, 2024, on the first foundation day of the Biotechnology Research and Innovation Council (BRIC), an autonomous body under the (DBT), Ministry of Science and Technology. It aims to make genomic data more accessible to researchers, students and the general public.
- BRIC-National Institute of Biomedical Genomics (NIBMG), a West Bengal-based institute under the DBT, is coordinating the ‘One Day One Genome’ mission and sharing a collection of bacterial genomes from 13 BRIC institutions, along with two autonomous institutions: International Centre for Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology (ICGEB) New Delhi and Regional Centre for Biotechnology (RCB) Faridabad.
- The BRIC-NIBMG team analyses these genomes and is showcasing a fully annotated bacterial genome, complete with a detailed graphical summary, infographics, and genome assembly/annotation details, on its website daily, making it freely available to researchers, student community and the general public. This release is complemented by social media posts designed to capture the imagination of the general public and students, educating them about the potential of bacterial genomic resources.
- For several years, Indian scientists have gathered genomic data of various Indian strains of microorganisms. The mission now aims to highlight the unique bacterial species found in India and emphasise their critical roles in the environment, agriculture, and human health.

Do You Know:



- Biotechnology Research and Innovation Council (BRIC) introduced the 'One Day One Genome' initiative to showcase the enormous microbial potential of India. In this initiative an annotated microbial genome will be publicly released every day to make microbial genomics data more accessible to researchers and directly benefit the community.
- The unique features of these microbes and their genomes will be highlighted. Common people will get the benefits of sophisticated technologies and cutting-edge genomic research. It will bring ground breaking transformation in environmental, agricultural and health research. This initiative will be coordinated by BRIC-National Institute of Biomedical Genomics (BRIC-NIBMG).

EXPRESS VIEW ON PRIVATE HOSPITALS' TREATMENT OF POOR PATIENTS: AN ABDICATION

Delhi hospitals that have received land from the government on concessional rates are required to provide free services to patients from Economically Weaker Sections (EWS). The percentage of reserved beds and OPD consultations varies according to the terms of the lease agreements. However, the breach of such contracts has been a persistent worry for healthcare planners in the capital. In 2018, the Supreme Court ruled that hospitals failing to comply with their EWS-related mandate could forfeit their lease. The order nudged some hospitals to clean up their act. However, by all accounts, accessing private hospitals remains a challenging proposition for EWS patients. A major Delhi hospital, Indraprastha Apollo, for instance, has been among the prominent defaulters of the EWS clause. In March, the Supreme Court warned that it would direct the All India Institute of Medical Sciences to take over the private hospital if it did not honour its land lease agreement. The deed, which it had signed in 1988 with the then Lt Governor of Delhi, enjoins Apollo to set aside 200 beds for EWS patients. As an investigation by this newspaper shows, the hospital has consistently fallen short of this commitment in the past 12 years.

Apollo got land at a symbolic lease amount of Rs 1 per month. But it has used technicalities to contest the clause related to providing free treatment to the poor. In 2000, a Delhi government committee found that only 20 beds in the hospital were used by EWS patients. Then, in 2003, a committee set up by the Delhi High Court highlighted "discriminatory" methods, including not maintaining proper records, in the treatment of the poor. The HC again censured the hospital six years later and directed it to treat EWS patients "free of any expenses in relation to admission, bed, treatment, surgery, including consumables and medicines". Apollo contested the verdict in the SC and argued that asking it to pay for consumables and medicines would "wipe out or reduce its dividend". This paper's investigation reveals that such claims are grossly ill-founded — in the past 12 years, the occupancy of EWS beds has never been more than a fifth of the stipulated figure.

In its latest order in the Apollo case, on March 24, the Supreme Court has asked the Centre and the Delhi government to set up a joint inspection team to check if the hospital has "grabbed land for private interest". The two governments should use this experience to put in place procedures that ensure hospitals follow EWS-related rules. That the judiciary has been called to intervene at least five times in the past two decades to ensure compliance with these rules speaks poorly of the government's monitoring mechanisms. Private hospitals in Delhi are among the chosen destinations for healthcare seekers from all parts of the country. A large number of these patients are from the poorer sections of society. They should not be forced to seek the Court's intervention to access facilities which are rightfully theirs.



WHY DID T.N. TAKE THE DECISION TO BAN MAYONNAISE MADE FROM RAW EGGS?

Last month, Tamil Nadu became the third State in the country after Kerala and Telangana to ban mayonnaise prepared from raw eggs for a year.

This decision, according to the State's Food Safety Department, was in the interest of public health. Mayonnaise made of raw eggs is a high-risk food as it carries a risk of food poisoning, especially from Salmonella bacteria, Salmonella typhimurium, Salmonella enteritidis, Escherichia coli, and Listeria monocytogenes.

A number of food business operators use raw egg for preparation of mayonnaise, and improper preparation and storage facilitates contamination by microorganisms create a public health risk, the notification said. Food safety officials clarified that only mayonnaise made from raw eggs was banned and not mayonnaise made of pasteurised eggs and vegetarian mayonnaise.

A. G. Saranya Gayathiri, managing director, Parikshan FSS Pvt Ltd says: "Spoiled eggs can produce many kinds of diseases. Normally, if an egg is broken, experts say that it should be processed within 20 minutes. It is that much highly perishable and a high risk item. In the preparation of mayonnaise using egg, it is not a hot food process as we use raw eggs. Once it is prepared, it should be used immediately or stored at a temperature of 0-5 C. Without proper awareness, food handlers keep it at room temperature, and so the chances of food spoilage becomes very high. That is why the government banned the product."

Kalarani. R, dietician, Rajiv Gandhi Government General Hospital, calls it a welcome move. "Microbial contamination remains a significant concern when raw eggs are involved, particularly when products are prepared in unhygienic environments or stored improperly. Unrefrigerated mayonnaise can become a breeding ground for harmful bacteria such as Salmonella, which poses serious health risks. Salmonella infection can cause symptoms ranging from diarrhoea, fever, and abdominal cramps to more severe outcomes such as bloody stools, high fever, and even life-threatening complications like bacteremia. These dangers highlight the importance of food safety, especially in products consumed widely across age groups," she says.

Venkatesh Munikrishnan, senior Consultant - Colorectal and Robotic Surgeon, Apollo Proton Cancer Centre, also agrees. "In order to safeguard public health, the government's decision to ban mayonnaise made from raw eggs is both appropriate and essential," he points out.

"A common ingredient in street foods like burgers and shawarmas, contaminated mayonnaise is a major contributor to food-borne illnesses like diarrhoea and nausea. Young people are especially vulnerable because they often eat food from outside without understanding how it is prepared or stored. This ban is an important step toward food safety because Salmonella can contaminate eggs internally before the shell forms," he adds.

FOR ORGAN DONATION, NEW REGISTRY WITH WAITING LIST WHICH PATIENTS CAN TRACK

The national regulator overseeing organ allocation and transplantation is working to develop a "more dynamic" real-time portal to register patients in need of organs and donors, track the allocation process, grant approvals and monitor the outcome, The Indian Express has learnt.



- Sources said the National Organ and Tissue Transplantation Organisation (NOTTO) is also conducting consultations to formulate a uniform policy for organ allocation as part of its broader efforts to enhance transparency and establish one national-level waiting list. These measures follow a “major national consultation” with experts held last year, the sources said.
- NOTTO is currently in talks with C-DAC, the autonomous computing agency, to create the new portal which, sources said, will lead to the creation of a “dynamic national registry and waiting list”.
- This is significant, sources said, because the portal will allow patients to check their position on the waiting list, as per recommendations of national-level experts. The portal also will connect all the 712 transplant centres, 31 state-level bodies and five regional bodies involved in the process.
- Asked about the new measures, NOTTO director Dr Anil Kumar told The Indian Express: “The portal currently in use allows hospitals to register their patients. However, there are some states from which we get aggregate data on the number of transplants but not the details of individual cases.”
- According to sources, with several instances of illegal organ trade coming to light in recent years, NOTTO will also make efforts to make the process of allocation more transparent, sources said.
- Besides, the portal will record all mandated processes for allocation of organs to ensure that protocols put in place separately for deceased and living donors are followed. Besides, it will attempt to capture data on the outcome of transplants with provisions for uploading health data of patients during follow-ups.

Do You Know:

- National Organ and Tissue Transplant Organization (NOTTO) is a National level organization set up under Directorate General of Health Services, Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Government of India.

It has following two divisions:

- “National Human Organ and Tissue Removal and Storage Network”
- “National Biomaterial Centre”

- “National Human Organ and Tissue Removal and Storage Network” has been mandated as per the Transplantation of Human Organs (Amendment) Act 2011. The network will be established initially for Delhi and gradually expanded to include other States and Regions of the country. Thus, this division of the NOTTO is the nodal networking agency for Delhi and shall network for Procurement Allocation and Distribution of Organs and Tissues in Delhi.
- Organs from deceased donors accounted for nearly 17.8% of all transplants in 2022 in the country. The number of transplants has increased over the years. The total number of deceased organ transplants climbed from 837 in 2013 to 2,765 in 2022. The total number of organ transplants – with organs from both deceased and living donors – increased from 4,990 in 2013 to 15,561 in 2022, according to data shared by the government. India conducts the third highest number of transplants in the world.



GREATER REGULARITY

The case of a 42-year-old woman in Kerala testing positive for Nipah virus on May 8 makes it the third such instance being reported from the State's Malappuram district in the last two years. The earlier cases were detected last year, in a 14-year-old boy on July 21 and a 24-year-old adult on September 15. With the latest detection of Nipah in the State, Kerala has recorded two outbreaks, in the years 2018 and 2023, involving human-to-human transmission, and four spillovers in the years 2019 and 2021, and two events in 2024. In the May 8 event, even though only one person tested positive for Nipah and seven close contacts tested negative, it is a bit early to call it a spillover. Unlike an outbreak, Nipah spillovers are restricted to a single case with no human-to-human transmission. One reason for the absence of human spread is the timely detection of the case and isolation of the patient. The other reason is the clinical presentation. In the case of Nipah virus spillovers, patients who tested positive for the virus had presented with acute encephalitis syndrome (AES), while in the Nipah outbreaks in 2018 and 2023, the index case and at least a few other infected people had presented with acute respiratory distress syndrome (ARDS). Compared with AES, patients with ARDS present with relatively severe conditions with lung involvement. Besides cough, patients presenting with ARDS have higher viral loads, which serve as a surrogate for disease severity. Immaterial of whether blood, urine or cerebrospinal fluid samples test positive or not, throat swab samples generally test positive if a person is infected by the Nipah virus, which again serve as an indicator of human spread in the case of patients with ARDS. The high viral load, the presence of virus in the throat and the tendency to cough make human spread possible. Greater disease severity in ARDS cases is also the reason for the Nipah deaths in 2018 and 2023. There were 17 deaths from 18 cases in the 2018 outbreak, and two deaths from six cases in the 2023 outbreak. A study by the ICMR-National Institute of Virology (NIV) Pune found that the 2018 Nipah virus had small genetic variations from the Bangladesh strain and was able to cause multisystemic disease in a Syrian hamster model resembling human infection.

The Nipah virus is capable of causing different clinical presentations and is endowed with the ability to cause human spread in some cases. This makes a strong case for a quick and thorough genetic study of the virus in humans and bats. With Nipah cases now a very regular occurrence in Kerala, the compulsion to routinely study fruit bats, which are natural hosts for Nipah, cannot be overemphasised. That even the 2018 virus showed small genetic differences from the Bangladesh strain makes it even more important to know whether the virus causing the spillovers without human spread has evolved further. Such studies can be done by more scientists only when the genetic sequences are shared in public databases without any delay.

SHORT NEWS

THE GLOBAL SPACE EXPLORATION CONFERENCE 2025

— The Global Space Exploration Conference (GLEX) 2025 was held in New Delhi for the first time from May 7 to 9, 2025, with the theme of "Reaching New Worlds: A Space Exploration Renaissance." It is jointly organised by the International Astronautical Federation (IAF), the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) as the host, and the Astronautical Society of India (ASI) as the co-host.

— GLEX 2025 is designed to encourage the sharing of programmatic, technical, and policy information, as well as collaborative solutions, challenges, lessons learned, and paths forward among all nations that desire to explore space.

4TH FLOOR SHATABDI TOWER, SAKCHI, JAMSHEDPUR



— On the sidelines of GLEX, the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) and European Space Agency (ESA) inked a Joint Statement of Intent on Human Space Exploration.

CASHLESS TREATMENT OF ROAD ACCIDENT VICTIMS SCHEME, 2025

— The Centre has notified a cashless treatment scheme for road accident victims. The accident victim shall be entitled to cashless treatment for an amount up to Rs 1.5 lakh at any designated hospital under the scheme, which came into force on May 5, 2025.

— The victim shall be entitled to cashless treatment at any designated hospital for an amount up to Rs 1,50,000 per victim for a maximum period of seven days from the date of such accident.

— It also says that the designated hospital has to administer medical treatment to the victim immediately after the victim is brought to the hospital.

— The State Road Safety Council has been designated as the nodal agency for the implementation of the scheme. According to MoRTH data, in 2023 over 4.80 lakh road accidents took place in the country which resulted in over 1.72 lakh people fatalities.

CIVIL DEFENCE MOCK DRILL- OPERATION ABHYAAS

— Amid rising tensions between India and Pakistan following the Pahalgam attack, the Centre has directed all states and Union Territories to conduct mock drills on May 7 and strengthen civil defence mechanisms across 244 categorised Civil Defence Districts in the event of a hostile attack. It is conducted under the Civil Defence Act of 1968. It is given the codename of Operation Abhyaas.

— Civil Defence Districts are demarcated areas or regions, including towns and districts, which the government designates for the implementation of civil defence programmes. These are demarcated on the recommendation of the Ministry of Defence.

— World over, civil defence refers to government programs which provide guidance and assistance in preparing for, responding to, and recovering from public emergencies due to conflict or natural disasters

— The Act has been suitably amended by the Civil Defence (Amendment) Act, 2009, by Notification No. 3 of 2010, to include disaster management as an additional function for the Civil Defence Corps.

MISSION SANKALP

— The operation, Mission Sankalp, began on April 21 and involves the mobilisation of 24,000 troops, including those from the Indian Air Force (IAF), to the inter-state border. It is still underway.

— “Mission Sankalp will bring an end to the six-decade-long menace of Left-Wing Extremism in Bastar and other parts of the country,” said Sundarraaj P, Inspector General of Police for the Bastar Range in Chhattisgarh.

— Under this mission, some 24,000 security personnel have surrounded the Karregutta hills along the Chhattisgarh-Telangana border to “end the menace of Left-Wing Extremism” in Bastar.

4TH FLOOR SHATABDI TOWER, SAKCHI, JAMSHEDPUR



— The Karregutta hills run for almost 60 km along the Chhattisgarh-Telangana border. They have particularly steep slopes, which pose difficulties in accessing the heights on both the Chhattisgarh and Telangana sides.

SONGAR DRONES

— Pakistan's attempted drone incursion in 36 military and civilian sites between the intervening night of Thursday (May 8) and Friday (May 9) likely involved Turkish-made Asisguard Songar drones, India said on Friday.

— It is designed and manufactured by a Turkey-based defence company, Asisguard.

— The drone has a width of 140 cm from rotor to rotor, and a maximum take-off weight of 45 kg. It has the ability to perform 35 minutes of duty without a payload.

— It can ascend to an altitude of up to 3,000 m above mean sea level and 300 m above ground level. The drone can be used for both day and night military operations.

— Songar drones use both Global Positioning System (GPS) and GLONASS navigation systems for communications during operations.

ABDALI WEAPON SYSTEM

— On 3rd May, Pakistan test-fired a ballistic missile called the Abdali Weapon System, as part of Ex INDUS.

— The Abdali is a ballistic missile — a missile that uses projectile motion to travel towards its target, and is powered by a rocket for only the initial, short duration of its journey.

CARBON BORDER ADJUSTMENT MECHANISM (CBAM)

— The UK's Carbon tax has emerged as a key sticking point in talks aimed at finalising the India-UK trade deal. As the UK remains unwilling to grant any concessions under its CBAM, India has suggested a "rebalancing mechanism" which would require the UK to compensate Indian industry for losses incurred due to the regulation.

— The EU came up with the CBAM in 2021, which was rolled out in 2023. CBAM taxes certain products coming in from other countries on the basis of their emissions footprint in their production process. For instance, if the imported steel was produced through a process that entailed higher emissions than the emissions standards for that product in Europe, it would be taxed.

— It allows industries in Europe to remain competitive while continuing to maintain high environmental standards. It prevents these industries from relocating their production to countries where the production might be cheap owing to less strict emission norms, a situation described as carbon leakage.

— The Indian government has called the CBAM, or carbon tax, an "unfair" measure and a violation of the "common but differentiated responsibilities" (CBDR) principle of multilateral climate negotiations.



GENOME-EDITED RICE VARIETIES

- The Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR) has developed the world's first genome-edited (GE) rice varieties with superior yields, drought and salinity tolerance, and high nitrogen-use efficiency traits. They are named 'Kamala' and 'Pusa DST Rice 1'.
- They have bred improved GE mutants of the popular Samba Mahsuri (BPT-5204) and Cottondora Sannalu (MTU-1010) varieties using CRISPR-Cas SDN-1 (Site-Directed Nucleases-1) technologies.
- Difference between genome-edited and Genetically Modified: The latter involves the introduction of genes from unrelated species into host plants. These could, for example, be genes from *Bacillus thuringiensis*, a soil bacterium, that code for the production of proteins toxic to various insect pests in cotton. GE, on the other hand, entails mere "editing" of genes naturally present in the host plant, leading to mutation or changes in their DNA sequence. No foreign genes or DNA are incorporated.
- The new GE line – called IET-32072 or 'Kamala' – is claimed to have recorded an average paddy (rice with husk) yield of 5.37 tonnes per hectare with a potential of 9 tonnes. This is higher than the corresponding average and potential yields of 4.5 tonnes and 6.5 tonnes/hectare from its parent Samba Mahsuri (BPT-5204) variety. It also matures in about 130 days (from seed to grain), 15-20 days earlier than Samba Mahsuri.
- The GE SDN-1 mutant line – called IET-32043 or Pusa DST Rice 1 – is claimed to have recorded an average paddy yield of 3.508 tonnes/hectare under inland salinity stress conditions, compared to 3.199 tonnes of the parent (MTU-1010) variety.

POPE LEO XIV

- Cardinal Robert Francis Prevost, 69, was elected the 267th pope after two days of deliberations at the papal conclave. He is the first American to be elected Pope. He chose the name Pope Leo XIV as he appeared at the Sistine Chapel balcony after his election.
- Pope Leo's election comes weeks after the death of Pope Francis. Francis was the first Latin American pope, led the Church for 12 years, and was known for his efforts to modernise the institution.
- Papal Conclave: It is the secret electoral process to elect a pope when "Sede Vacante" (meaning the Holy Chair is vacant) is incurred, following the demise of a pope or his resignation from the post.

PULITZER PRIZE

- Reuters won the Pulitzer Prize in investigative reporting for a series of stories that penetrated the international trade in the chemicals used to make fentanyl, the drug at the heart of a crisis that has killed some 450,000 Americans and counting.
- Other winners of the most prestigious awards in American journalism included the New York Times, which won four Pulitzers, and the New Yorker magazine, which won three, largely in recognition of their coverage of overseas wars. It was the 13th Pulitzer for Reuters, all since 2008.



BUSINESS AND ECONOMY

CAUTION AND OPTIMISM

The Free Trade Agreement (FTA) between India and the United Kingdom marks a strong step towards securing India's bilateral ties in an increasingly fragmented global trade environment. The key highlight for India is that 99% of its exports will attract no duties. Apart from being hailed by business leaders, industry associations representing sectors such as engineering goods, apparel, and gems and jewellery — each among the top Indian exports to the U.K. — have expressed strong optimism for future trade growth. Engineering exports, for example, are expected to nearly double to \$7.55 billion by 2029-30, according to the Engineering Exports Promotion Council of India. Overall bilateral trade is expected to double to \$120 billion by 2030. The other major win is that Indian workers temporarily working in the U.K. and their employers will be exempt from making social security contributions for three years. This is likely to ease the hiring of Indian workers in the U.K. The FTA also eases the movement of professionals and investors, which should go some way in reviving India's flagging foreign direct investment levels. On the flip side, India has agreed to cut its tariffs on 90% of the tariff lines imported from the U.K., with 85% of these to be reduced to zero tariff within a decade. While the reduction in automotive tariffs is unlikely to meaningfully change the price-conscious behaviour of Indians, the slashing of import duties on whiskey and gin will increase competition in India and perhaps slow the ongoing premiumisation trend.

Although the Modi government has been quick to criticise the FTAs signed by the UPA for putting India at a disadvantage, some of its own FTAs have faced the same issue. The India-UAE CEPA (2022), for example, has seen India's trade balance worsen over the years. The FTA with Australia, too, has not resulted in gains for Indian exports. Indian farmer organisations — opposed to the U.K. FTA since talks began — are up in arms over the reduced tariffs on lamb and salmon and other edible products. Here, too, the government must act to ensure that India's farmers, already in a low-income, low-margin situation, are not elbowed out. Then, there is the fact that trade experts agree that the India-U.K. FTA will be the template for future agreements with the EU and the U.S. India must be careful here. While the U.K. is a relatively small trading partner, the EU and the U.S. deals — when they happen — will have a more significant impact. India has already cut import duties on several food and auto products in line with U.S. demands. With a less than 2% contribution to global exports, Indian manufacturing needs to be helped, not undermined.

U.S. NOW TURNS CRITICAL MINERAL GAZE TO AFRICA

Away from the headlines around the minerals deal with Ukraine, the United States has pursued a potentially even more significant critical metals deal in the Great Lakes region of Africa. The government of the Democratic Republic of Congo reached out to the Donald Trump administration with a Ukrainian-style proposal in February in response to the rapid advance of the Rwandan-backed M23 rebel group in the east of the country,

The U.S. government has responded enthusiastically with a flurry of negotiations aimed at ending a decades-long conflict born out of the Rwandan genocide of 1994. The political momentum is building towards a potential peace deal between Congo and Rwanda as soon as May, to be accompanied by bilateral minerals deals between both countries and the United States.



At stake are the mineral riches of North and South Kivu provinces, a major but highly problematic source of metals such as tin, tungsten and coltan.

In early 2023, M23 rebels seized control of key cities in eastern Congo, including Goma and Bukavu, and advanced towards the Bisie tin mine. Bisie, a modernized and significant tin producer, was shut down and evacuated, causing tin prices to surge. This led to direct talks between the U.S., Congo, and Rwanda, resulting in M23's withdrawal. The mineral-rich North and South Kivu provinces have numerous artisanal mining sites, with a significant portion affected by armed interference.

AS TRUMP'S TARIFF POLICIES PLAY OUT, THE US FED TAKES A LONGER PAUSE

Actions of central banks around the world are increasingly diverging from those of the US Federal Reserve. In April, the European Central Bank had cut interest rates as it noted that "the outlook for growth has deteriorated owing to rising trade tensions". A few days prior to that, the RBI's monetary policy committee had lowered rates in India. And on Thursday, the Bank of England also reduced interest rates. In comparison, in its May meeting, the US Fed has kept rates unchanged for the third straight time, maintaining the federal funds rate in the 4.25-4.5 per cent range, as it noted that the risks of higher unemployment and inflation have risen.

The implications of US President Donald Trump's tariffs, which are "significantly larger than anticipated", are clear. As Fed Chairman Jerome Powell noted, "if the large increases in tariffs announced are sustained, they are likely to generate a rise in inflation, a slowdown in economic growth and an increase in unemployment". But, at the current juncture, the Fed's next steps are difficult to predict. In fact, Powell has also acknowledged that, saying that "it's really not at all clear what it is we should do". US GDP contracted by 0.3 per cent at an annualised rate in the first quarter of 2025 as imports surged by 41.3 per cent with consumers and firms trying to get ahead of Trump's tariffs. Inflation, though, has remained in the 2.5 per cent to 3 per cent range for several months now — the personal consumption expenditures price index was at 2.3 per cent in March, down from 2.7 per cent in February. The labour market also remains healthy. As per the US Bureau of Labor, non-farm payroll rose by 1,77,000 in April, surpassing expectations. The unemployment rate remained unchanged at 4.2 per cent. Powell has also noted that the US economy appeared healthy, and has said that (the effect) "just hasn't shown up yet". This provides the central bank the space to wait.

Higher tariffs will derail the economic momentum. There are already some indications of a souring of sentiment. Much will now depend on if, how quickly and to what extent trade deals are struck and tariffs are rolled back. On Thursday, Trump announced on a social media platform that the US and UK had reached an agreement on a trade deal, with "many other deals, which are in serious stages of negotiation, to follow". However, Trump is also reported to have said that he would not consider lowering tariffs on China ahead of talks — US and Chinese officials are slated to meet this week. In the weeks and months ahead, the incoming data will reveal the full extent of the impact of tariffs on the US economy.

EXPRESS VIEW ON DOMESTIC SUPPLY POSITION ON WHEAT: A GOLDBLOCKS MOMENT

When farmers harvest a good crop for which they get remunerative rates, there is ample grain to meet the requirements of private millers and traders, and the government also procures enough to replenish its depleted stocks, it translates into a Goldilocks situation. That's, indeed, the case with wheat. Last year, on April 1, stocks of the grain in government warehouses, at 7.5 million



tonnes (mt), were the lowest for this date since 2008. With neither the government nor the trade having much wheat, wholesale prices in Delhi crossed Rs 3,200 per quintal this January, as against Rs 2,500 a year ago. During 2023-24 (April-March), open market sales of wheat from public stocks topped 10 mt. In 2024-25, such sales totalled just over 4 mt. Instead of trying to cool open-market prices through offloading of its stocks, the Narendra Modi government did otherwise. It conserved its stocks and let prices rise.

That stratagem has seemingly paid off. While opening public wheat stocks this April have been higher at 11.8 mt, the new crop has also turned out quite bumper. Government agencies are set to procure 30 mt-plus of wheat in the current marketing season (April-June), the highest in four years. This, even as wheat prices in Delhi have eased to Rs 2,450-2,500 per quintal, which is an indicator of robust market arrivals. In most mandis of major growing states, wheat is trading at just around the government's minimum support price of Rs 2,425. That's a fair reward for farmers. They were enthused to plant more area under the crop by good prices (the MSP was itself hiked by Rs 150/quintal, with Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh offering Rs 150-175 bonuses on top) as well as adequate soil moisture and irrigation water availability. The absence of any significant weather shocks impacting yields further helped this time. Simply put, the precarious domestic supply position in wheat, since the March 2022 temperature spike-singed crop of that year, has changed to Goldilocks's "just right".

This unfortunately, isn't so with rice, where government stocks of 63.1 mt on April 1 were more than 4.5 times the required 13.6 mt for that date. Unlike wheat — where production is concentrated in a few northern and central states, and is also vulnerable to climate-induced shorter and warmer winters — India is structurally surplus in rice. The latter is grown across a wider geography in almost all regions of the country and is a water-guzzling crop to boot. The need to limit its cultivation and shift acreages to other crops that consume less water and are in relatively short supply — maize, oilseeds and pulses — has been emphasised time and again. Concrete policy action in this regard can brook no further delay.

'INDIA CONSIDERS TAX BREAKS FOR SAUDI ARABIA'S SOVEREIGN WEALTH FUND PIF'

India may offer a 10-year tax holiday and streamlined exemptions to Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund (PIF) to boost \$100 billion investments in infrastructure and energy. Proposals include benefits under Sections 10(23FE) and 80IA of the Income Tax Act for easier fund inflows.

- The Centre is considering tax reliefs for Saudi Arabia's sovereign wealth fund, as a means to facilitate the proposed \$100 billion investments by the West Asian Kingdom in the country's infrastructure and energy sectors.
- According to official sources, the proposals under consideration include a tax holiday of up to 10 years for Saudi Public Investment Fund (PIF) and further streamlining of procedures to make it easier for it to claim tax exemption on dividend, interest, and long-term capital gains (LTCG) on investments in infra-assets.
- PIF may be given a treatment similar to Abu Dhabi Investment Authority (ADIA), which gets specific tax benefits under the Income Tax Act.
- During Prime Minister Narendra Modi's recent visit to Riyadh, talks were held on the Gulf country's investment plans for India, as it steps up investments across the world, and diversifies into sectors other than petroleum.



- PIF, one of the largest sovereign wealth funds in the world, presides over assets worth \$925 billion. Despite being such a big source of long-term patient capital, its exposure to India is currently limited to a few ventures, including \$1.5 billion in Jio Platforms and \$1.3 billion in Reliance Retail Ventures Ltd.
- A High-Level Task Force (HLTF) was constituted in 2024 for promoting investment flows between the two countries. Saudi Arabia has shown interest in investing in India in multiple areas, including energy, petrochemicals, infrastructure, technology, fintech, digital infrastructure, telecommunications, pharmaceuticals, manufacturing and health.

Do You Know:

- Section 10(23FE) exempts SWFs and global pension funds from taxes arising on interest, dividends, and LTCGs related to infrastructure investments made in India during specified periods. ADIA and its wholly owned subsidiaries are specifically mentioned in the Act for the exemption. While PIF is also eligible under this section to get tax benefits like other SWFs, it wants a treatment similar to ADIA. So, PIF may be included under Section 10 (23FE) itself, which will cut down procedures for it to get tax exemption.
- The Public Investment Fund (PIF) of Saudi Arabia was established in 1971 and is that nation's sovereign wealth fund. It provides financing for productive commercial projects that are strategically significant to the development of the Saudi Arabian economy. The fund complements private sector efforts with additional experience and capital resources.

TEMPORARY RESPITE

India's Goods and Services Tax collection in April, since the indirect taxation framework was implemented in 2017, has consistently hit record highs. This April was no different — generally because of businesses tallying their books and completing their financial year-end tax commitments. The gross GST collected this time was about ₹2.37 lakh crore, marking an on-year growth of 12.6% from last April. After refunds, the central government netted over ₹2.09 lakh crore, an on-year rise of 9.1%. This also signifies a marked rise in GST compliance, also aided by faster refunds, which are crucial for small businesses as they work with thin working capital, and the mass adoption of fintech. The fintech adoption rate in India, at 87%, which is well above the global average, and aided by the insular COVID-19 years of 2020-21, has brought in millions from the MSME sector into the formal banking system, enabling better tax compliance and regulatory supervision. Wider compliance is also evident from April's GST collections from 2018 to 2025, which has more than doubled from ₹1.03 lakh crore to ₹2.37 lakh crore.

What is significant this April has been the 86% rise in refunds issued to exporters and the 20.8% increase in GST revenues from imports. This correlates with the 10-month high growth in the April print of HSBC India Manufacturing Purchasing Managers' Index (PMI). The PMI rose from 58.1 in March to 58.2 in April. The survey indicated a sharp rise in new business aided by greater international demand. Orders from abroad grew to the largest degree in over 14 years in the first month of the 2026 fiscal year, with demand led by Africa, Asia, Europe, West Asia and the Americas. This suggests that businesses have scrambled to get their orders in before the 90-day pause on tariffs by the U.S. ends on July 9. It also suggests a possible re-alignment in supply chains, with greater sourcing from India, as the U.S. tariffs on China appear to be more onerous and certain, with the possibility of transshipment goods from China being taxed, without a high value-add threshold. Apple has said at its January-to-March quarterly earnings call that it intends to



source 'most of its iPhones' for the U.S., its largest market, from India. This suggests a temporary respite for India's manufacturing sector, which witnessed a four-year growth low at 4% in the last fiscal. A more durable growth strategy would be to boost domestic consumption and wrangle favourable concessions for its manufacturing sector from the many ongoing trade agreements.

RBI ADDS OVER 57 TONNES OF GOLD TO FOREX RESERVES, BRINGS 38 TONNES BACK TO INDIA

The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) added 57.49 tonnes of gold to its foreign exchange kitty during the fiscal ended March 2025 with the value of the gold holding rising by 48.41 per cent amid the rise in the prices of the yellow metal.

- The country's central bank also brought 38.64 tonnes of its gold holding back to India from Bank of England and the Bank for International Settlements (BIS) in FY 2025. With this, the RBI has brought back 88.60 tonnes of gold to India in the last two years.
- The RBI held 879.59 metric tonnes of gold as of March 2025, of which 511.99 metric tonnes were held domestically. While 348.62 metric tonnes of gold were kept in safe custody with the Bank of England and the Bank for International Settlements (BIS), 18.98 metric tonnes were held in the form of gold deposits, the RBI said in its half-yearly report on forex management.
- In March 2024, the central bank held 822.10 metric tonnes of gold, of which 408.31 metric tonnes were held domestically. While 387.26 metric tonnes of gold were kept in safe custody abroad and 26.53 metric tonnes were held in the form of gold deposits.
- The value of gold held by the RBI rose by \$ 25.50 billion to \$ 78.17 billion as of March 2025 as against \$ 52.67 billion a year ago. In value terms (USD), the share of gold in the total foreign exchange reserves increased from 9.32 per cent as at end-September 2024 to about 11.70 per cent as at end-March 2025, the RBI said.
- According to the World Gold Council (WGC), central banks' insatiable appetite for gold reached a significant milestone in 2024. Having added 712 tonnes in the first three quarters of the year, central banks bought a further 333 tonnes in Q4 to bring the net annual total to 1,045 tonnes. "As a result, they have extended their buying streak to 15 consecutive years, and, remarkably, 2024 is the third consecutive year in which demand surpassed 1,000 tonnes – far exceeding the 473 tonnes annual average between 2010-2021, and contributing to gold's annual performance," WGC said.
- Among major gold holders, Germany leads with 3,351 tonnes of gold, followed by Italy 2,451 tonnes, France 2,437 tonnes and China 2,292 tonnes, WGC said,

Do You Know:

- India's gross foreign exchange reserves comprise foreign currency assets of the Reserve Bank, gold held by RBI and Special Drawing Rights (SDRs) of the Government of India. India's Reserve Position in the International Monetary Fund is not included as part of foreign exchange reserves as they may not be available on immediate demand, although some countries do include these balances as part of their reserves.



- Forex reserves are external assets in the form of gold, SDRs (special drawing rights of the IMF) and foreign currency assets (capital inflows to the capital markets, FDI and external commercial borrowings) accumulated by India and controlled by the Reserve Bank of India.
- The International Monetary Fund says official foreign exchange reserves are held in support of a range of objectives like supporting and maintaining confidence in the policies for monetary and exchange rate management including the capacity to intervene in support of the national or union currency. It will also limit external vulnerability by maintaining foreign currency liquidity to absorb shocks during times of crisis or when access to borrowing is curtailed.
- The Reserve Bank functions as the custodian and manager of forex reserves, and operates within the overall policy framework agreed upon with the government. The RBI allocates the dollars for specific purposes.

MARITIME HUB

The commissioning of the Vizhinjam International Transshipment Deepwater Multipurpose Seaport, developed by Adani Ports and Special Economic Zone Ltd (APSEZ) under a public-private partnership model with the Kerala government, marks a milestone in India's maritime history. For a country such as India, which relies heavily on foreign ports for handling around 75% of its inbound and outbound transshipment cargo, resulting in an annual revenue loss of approximately \$200 million-\$220 m, the port presents enormous economic opportunities. Its natural draft of about 20 metres, requiring minimal capital dredging, and its proximity to international shipping routes linking Europe, West Asia and the Far East — the east-west shipping axis — position it as a strong contender to become a transshipment hub. This could potentially bring home a significant portion of Indian cargo transshipment handled by the Singapore, Colombo, Salalah and Dubai ports. Ultra-large container vessels can berth without deviating from their route, thereby saving costs. As India's first semi-automated port equipped with remote-controlled quay cranes and an AI-powered vessel traffic management system, Vizhinjam will significantly reduce vessel turnaround times. India's container throughput capacity last year was approximately 20 million TEUs (twenty-foot equivalent units), contrasting with China's 330 million TEUs. This highlights the need for modern ports such as Vizhinjam along India's coastline.

Following the project's agreement in 2015, the Kerala government faced challenges, including protests from fisherfolk supported by the Latin Church, natural calamities and the COVID-19 pandemic. Commercial operations commenced in July 2024, with 265 ships, including large mother ships, having berthed so far. In the first phase, the Kerala government invested ₹5,595 crore, Adani Ports spent ₹2,454 crore, and the Union government provided a viability gap fund loan of ₹818 crore — a funding structure that sparked political debate. For Vizhinjam, an all-weather port, to become a game-changer in South Asia's maritime trade, the Centre and the State must ensure the timely completion of rail and road connectivity, which is crucial for leveraging the port's full potential. This will facilitate efficient cargo delivery to the entire hinterland of South India. The subsequent development phases, for which APSEZ and the Kerala government have signed an agreement involving an investment of around ₹9,500 crore by 2028, must also be implemented promptly. Warehousing, logistics, and industrial facilities are essential for the port to evolve into a thriving commercial maritime hub.



ISSUES RAISED BY COURT IN BHUSHAN POWER & STEEL REQUIRE CAREFUL EXAMINATION

In 2016, the Union government ushered in a new framework to deal with the resolution of bad loans — the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code. In June 2017, the Reserve Bank of India referred 12 large defaulters — among them, Bhushan Power & Steel Ltd — for proceedings under the IBC. In September 2019, the National Company Law Tribunal (NCLT) approved JSW Steel's resolution plan for Bhushan Power and Steel. The resolution process was stretched, and as reported in this paper, took 771 days, far in excess of what was envisaged under the code. Two years later, in 2021, JSW finally acquired BPSL. However, that was not the end of the case. Last week, roughly four years later, the Supreme Court rejected JSW Steel's bid and ordered the liquidation of Bhushan Power and Steel.

The Court has been critical of the various stakeholders, and in doing so, it has raised questions over the sanctity of the process itself. It said that JSW, which made misrepresentations, and showed a rosy picture, had “not complied with the terms of the said approved resolution plan for a period of about two years”. It noted that the resolution plan did not conform to the requirements in Section 30(2) of the IBC, and that the resolution professional had “failed to discharge his statutory duties”. The committee of creditors had “failed to exercise its commercial wisdom while approving the resolution plan”. This puts a question over the entire institutional apparatus. However, the decision to push the company into liquidation is questionable. It could lead to value destruction. Proceeds from liquidation also tend to be lower. As on December 31, 2024, in 2707 cases, the insolvency and resolution process was closed by commencement of liquidation. The liquidation value was just 6.3 per cent of the claims as per data from the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Board of India. In the case of BPSL, as per the resolution plan, financial creditors were to be paid Rs 19,350 crore as against admitted claims of Rs 47,157.99 crore, which translated to a recovery rate of 41.03 per cent.

While the parties involved may choose to appeal, this ruling will have wide-ranging implications for the insolvency and bankruptcy process. For one, considering that resolution plans can be challenged and rejected at multiple levels, this uncertainty will probably get priced into future bids in cases. This may lead to fewer bids and/or lower value, which could possibly reduce realisations for financial and operational creditors. The aspects highlighted by this case thus require careful examination. Over the years, the government has taken steps to streamline the functioning of the code. The issues raised in this case must inform its next steps.

HYDROGEN VERSUS BATTERY: THE COST OF CLEAN PUBLIC TRANSPORT

Nearly seven in 10 people in developing countries are expected to be living in cities by 2050 given rapid urbanisation. While urban growth provides greater access to jobs and essential services, it also brings challenges with it such as traffic congestion and air pollution, which significantly impact health.

In India, a Lancet study reports that from 2008 to 2019, short-term exposure to PM2.5 particles accounted for nearly 30,000 deaths annually across 10 major cities, representing 7.2% of all deaths. This includes around 5,100 deaths per year in Mumbai, 4,678 in Kolkata, and 2,870 in Chennai.

These alarming figures have prompted many cities, including Cairo (Egypt), Dakar (Senegal), Santiago (Chile), and Bogotá (Colombia), to explore cleaner public transport options. As a result, demand for electric vehicles (EVs) has risen globally. By 2023, there were 40 million electric cars



on the world's roads — a 35% increase from the previous year. However, EVs still represent only a small share of total global vehicles.

Over half of global sales took place in China, followed by Europe and the U.S., with other regions contributing a much smaller share.

While battery electric vehicles (BEVs) dominate the market, Fuel Cell Electric Vehicles (FCEVs) present an alternative with several advantages — they have a longer driving range due to higher energy density, can refuel in just 5-15 minutes, and are generally lighter than battery-powered vehicles. They are particularly suitable for long-distance travel, rugged terrain, and extreme cold.

However, FCEVs remain rare, with only 93,000 units globally — equating to just one hydrogen vehicle for every 330 battery-powered ones. This is largely due to their high initial and operational costs. Fuel cell buses and trucks cost 20–30% more than their battery-electric counterparts. Nonetheless, prices for both are expected to converge by 2030 as technology improves.

Operational costs, however, remain a concern. Diesel buses cost about \$0.27 per km, while electric buses cost only \$0.17, making them more economical despite their higher upfront cost.

In contrast, hydrogen fuel cell buses are significantly more expensive to operate. Blue hydrogen, produced from natural gas, costs \$0.84 per km, while green hydrogen, derived from renewable sources, costs \$0.91 per km. Experts predict that the initial cost of hydrogen vehicles will match that of battery-electric vehicles within the next five years. However, their operational costs are expected to remain high, even beyond 2030.

In India, the adoption of EVs is progressing at a steady pace. EVs accounted for approximately 5% of total vehicle sales in 2023. Electric car registrations rose by 70% year-on-year to 80,000 units compared to just a 10% growth in overall car sales. However, the most rapid growth was in the three-wheeler segment, where India accounted for nearly 60% of global electric three-wheeler sales. In fact, in 2023, India surpassed China to become the largest market for electric three-wheelers, with over 0.58 million units sold.

India also ranks as the world's second-largest market for electric two-wheelers, with 0.88 million units sold in 2023. But this figure is significantly lower than China's 6 million units. Notably, China, India, and ASEAN countries dominate the global market for electric two- and three-wheelers, while all other regions combined contribute less than 5% to global sales in these categories.

DO RESTAURANTS HAVE THE RIGHT TO CHARGE A SERVICE FEE?

The story so far:

The legal tussle over the legitimacy of service charges in restaurants has been fiercely contested for three years in the Delhi High Court, with both the Central Consumer Protection Authority (CCPA), representing consumer interests, and restaurant associations refusing to back down.

What is the issue?

At the heart of the issue is whether the service charge, typically ranging between 5% to 20% across restaurants, is a legitimate business practice or an unfair imposition on consumers.

Following a series of consumer complaints, the CCPA issued guidelines in July 2022 prohibiting restaurants from levying such charges by default. The National Restaurants Association of India



(NRAI), with over 7,000 restaurant members in India, and the Federation of Hotels and Restaurants Association of India (FHRAI) representing the interests of 55,000 hotels and 5,00,000 restaurants, challenged the guidelines in court.

A customer typically decides to give a tip, or gratuity, only after the meal is completed, when they are in a position to assess the quality of food and service. However, service charges are pre-fixed percentages added to the bill regardless of the service experience.

As far back as 1958, the Hotel Standards and Rate Structure Committee, chaired by late MP Diwan Chaman Lall, took note of the then-growing practice in India of levying a “service charge” on hotel bills. The committee took a strong stand against the solicitation of tips, terming it “injurious to the dignity of the worker and management” and a source of harassment for the customer. It, however, said a satisfied customer should be free to offer a tip voluntarily.

What is the consumer perspective?

For consumers, a mandatory service charge, especially when not disclosed upfront, feels like an unfair burden.

Complaints to the National Consumer Helpline indicate that diners discover this when the final bill is presented. Moreover, attempts to have them removed are frequently met with resistance.

In December 2016, the Ministry of Consumer Affairs issued a letter to all States and Union Territories flagging that the National Consumer Helpline was receiving a number of complaints from consumers of hotels and restaurants charging service charges, in lieu of tips. The Ministry clarified that service charges are voluntary, and a consumer can have them waived. In July 2022, the CCPA issued more stringent guidelines banning hotels or restaurants from adding a service charge automatically or by default to the bill. The guidelines also banned the collection of service charges from consumers by any other name.

The NRAI and FHRAI argue that service charges have been an industry norm for over 80 years, and there exists no law that prohibits them from charging the same. They contend it forms part of wage negotiations with staff and ensures the fair distribution of tips among all staff.

What have the courts said so far?

When the initial pleas were filed against the CCPA guidelines, the High Court, in an interim order in July 2022, stayed the guidelines, provided restaurants prominently displayed the inclusion of a service charge on menus.

On March 28, this year, the High Court ruled that service charges or tips are a voluntary payment by the customer, and it cannot be made compulsory or mandatory by hotels and restaurants. A fresh appeal against this judgment has now been filed before the High Court.

CCI NOTIFIES NEW DEFINITIONS TO CURB PREDATORY PRICING

In a further bid to check predatory pricing and ensure fair competition, the Competition Commission of India has notified new definitions for various costs it will use to judge whether a price charged by a company for a product or service is predatory or not.



According to the Competition Act 2002, predatory pricing is where a product or service is priced below its cost — which is to be determined through regulations like the one just issued — with the aim to reduce competition and eliminate competitors.

In February, the CCI had released a draft notification and had called for stakeholder comments. It is after reviewing these comments and incorporating some of the changes suggested that the final version has been notified.

According to the latest notification, the “cost of a good or service would be assumed to be its average variable cost”, which is the total variable cost divided by total output during a particular period. Here, the total variable cost refers to the total cost (including everything that goes into the production of that good or service) minus the fixed cost and fixed overheads attributable to the product. However, in line with one of the stakeholder comments, the CCI decided to avoid using sector-specific definitions of cost, and instead has decided to view them on a case-by-case basis.

“The Cost Regulations 2025 establish a sector-agnostic, cost-based framework that is flexible and adaptable to various industries, including the digital economy,” the CCI said in a supplementary note issued along with the notification.

“Therefore, rather than prescribing sector-specific metrics, the framework allows for case-by-case assessment, enabling the Commission to consider the unique features and evolving dynamics of digital markets when evaluating alleged predatory conduct.”

RULES FOR SATCOM COS: FOCUS ON DATA USE, LOCAL MANUFACTURING, NAVIGATION SYSTEMS

Local manufacturing, data localisation, domestic navigation system, blocking mechanism, and law enforcement cooperation – these are among the key requirements that India has framed for satellite communication companies including Elon Musk’s Starlink, Amazon’s Kuiper, Eutelsat OneWeb, and Jio to operate in the country.

- As per guidelines released by the Department of Telecommunications (DoT), satcom companies will have to share with the government a year-wise phased manufacturing plan aiming at indigenisation to a level of at least 20% of their ground segment of the satellite network that is established at the end of 5 years after launching commercial operations.
- The development comes as Starlink undergoes a security clearance for offering its services in the country, having already established retail partnerships with rivals Airtel and Jio. The Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) is currently finalising the contours of the satellite spectrum allocation.
- The companies should also ensure provisioning of NavIC based positioning systems in their user terminals on “best effort basis,” along with a transition plan to implement NavIC in a time-bound manner by 2029. NavIC is India’s regional satellite navigation system, similar to GPS, which is a global system developed by the United States.
- Companies will have to provide real time monitoring to ensure that no user traffic originating from, or destined for India is being routed through any gateway outside Indian territory. They will also have to submit an undertaking that they will not copy and decrypt Indian telecom data outside India.



- Operators would need to implement service restriction to “any individual, group of subscribers or certain geographical areas” during “hostilities,” the guidelines said. These companies will have to seek separate clearance (“from security angle”) for voice service and data service.

Do You Know:

- Special Monitoring Zones (50 kilometres within international border) along the territorial borders and along coastal borders covering Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ, which is 200 nautical miles) shall be demarcated for monitoring of user activities by designated law enforcement (LEA) and security agencies. Companies will have to provide real time information of foreign /unregistered user terminals hooking on to their network from within the Indian territory to such agencies.
- Data localisation relates to measures that result in restricting data flow within a jurisdiction’s boundaries.
- The draft Digital Personal Data Protection Rules, 2025, propose that the Central Government will specify the kind of personal data which can be processed by “significant data fiduciaries” subject to the restriction that such personal data and traffic data related to its flow is not transferred outside the territory of India. A committee, to be formed by the government, will determine such data.
- While data fiduciaries are companies and entities which collect and process personal data, “significant data fiduciaries” will be determined on the basis of the volume and sensitivity of personal data they process, and the risks they might have on sovereignty and integrity of India, electoral democracy, security, and public order. All major tech companies including Meta, Google, Apple, Microsoft, and Amazon are expected to be classified as significant data fiduciaries.

FUEL VS FEED DEBATE IN MAIZE

Diversion of maize for biofuel has turned India from a surplus producer and exporter to an importer of the feed grain. There is pressure now to even allow imports of genetically modified maize for ethanol production.

- After ethanol is produced from maize and separated through distillation, the wet fermented grain mash that remains is further dried. It results in what is called DDGS – distiller’s dried grains with solubles. This residual by-product is a protein-rich material that has emerged as an alternative livestock feed ingredient.
- Distilleries are currently selling DDGS from maize at around Rs 16,000-17,000 and that from rice at Rs 18,000-19,000 per tonne. This is as against ex-factory prices of Rs 31,000-32,000 per tonne for soyabean DOC, which has 45% protein. The DDGS quantities being produced by distilleries isn’t small. At 33% of grain weight, the DDGS from 12.7 mt of maize comes to 4.2 mt. The DDGS content is lower, at 25%, from rice. But even on the 4 mt of rice required for supplying the contracted 174.4 crore litres of ethanol from this source in 2024-25, the corresponding DDGS produce (at 430-440 litres per tonne of grain) would be 1 mt.
- DDGS from maize has 28-30% protein content. It’s even higher, at 45%, for DDGS that is a byproduct of ethanol made from rice grains. The protein source that livestock feed manufacturers normally use is the residual de-oiled cake (DOC) after extraction of oil from soyabean, mustard, cottonseed, groundnut or rice bran. But these are costlier than DDGS.



- All-India average prices of maize have surged from Rs 14,000-15,000 to Rs 24,000-25,000 per tonne in the last four years largely attributable to the ethanol-blended petrol programme.
- India now allows up to 0.5 mt of maize imports annually at 15%, with quantities beyond that attracting 50% duty. Also, it does not permit imports of genetically modified (GM) maize. Out of the 0.94 mt imported during April-January 2024-25, 0.51 mt was from Myanmar and 0.39 mt from Ukraine, which do not grow GM maize.
- Opening up imports of GM maize will benefit the world's top three exporters: United States, Brazil and Argentina. They mainly cultivate GM maize. The US, in particular, is looking for new markets after China – until recently the largest buyer of its maize and soyabean, which is also GM – has practically stopped imports from the country.

Do You Know:

- Till 2021-22, India's maize output, at 32-33 million tonnes (mt), exceeded domestic demand of around 28 mt. It even left a surplus for exports, which touched 3.7 mt in 2021-22.
- Out of the 28 mt demand, roughly 20 mt was from the livestock feed industry. That included 15 mt for poultry (both broiler chicken and egg layer birds) and 5 mt for cattle feed. Another 5 mt was for industrial starch production, 2 mt for direct human consumption, and 1 mt for seed and other uses.
- The situation changed with maize also becoming a feedstock for making ethanol, a 99.9% pure alcohol that can be blended with petrol. Maize grains contain 68-72% starch and 1-3% of other carbohydrates (sucrose, glucose and fructose).
- While carbohydrates are the principal energy source for livestock, they can be fermented into ethanol, too, using yeast. One tonne of maize gives some 380 litres of ethanol; the process involves milling the grains into flour, breaking down the starch into shorter carbohydrate chains and fermentable sugars, fermentation (to 15% pure alcohol), distillation (to 94% spirit) and dehydration (to 99.9% fuel ethanol).

FROM PLOUGHS TO PANELS, CULTIVATING A SOLAR-POWERED FUTURE FOR FARMERS

In 1981, German scientists Adolf Goetzberger and Armin Zastrow published a foundational paper arguing that dual land use for food and energy could bring significant benefits. They proposed elevating solar modules by about 2 m above the ground to allow crops to grow underneath, giving rise to the concept of agriphotovoltaics (APVs).

APVs integrate solar energy generation with agricultural production, offering a model that maximises land-use efficiency while augmenting farmers' income. With APVs, farmers will also be able to move energy back to the grid at a predetermined feed-in tariff, forging new streams of income alongside agricultural ones.

To accommodate APVs, the on-site solar infrastructure will have to be designed such that cultivation is possible between rows of solar panels, a.k.a. interspace orientation, and in the area available beneath the elevated panels, or overhead-stilted orientation.

There is a growing interest in APVs in India, but in practice it is mostly limited to demonstrative pilots by research institutes or private developer-owned and -managed APV systems.



A recent report by the Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations (coauthored by the authors of this article) examined an APV system in Najafgarh, Delhi. A farmer had leased his land to solar energy company Sunmaster for 25 years to establish an APV facility.

Before the APV plant was operational, the farmer's net income was typically ₹41,000 per acre a year from traditional crops like wheat and mustard. After the APV was installed, the income included an annual rent of ₹1 lakh per acre. The returns from the crop cultivation and energy sales went to the developer. The farmer said this rent-based income was a stable alternative that kept him from worrying about uncertainties in agricultural yield.

The report also explored a hypothetical scenario in which a farmer, in addition to receiving lease income, had negotiated to receive the agricultural revenue as well. If the farmer cultivated high-value as well as shade-loving crops like potato, tomato, and turmeric, the income could have been up to Rs 1.5 lakh per acre a year from crop cultivation in addition to Rs 1 lakh per acre in rent — a sixfold increase in income over traditional open farming alone and a testament to APVs' potential to boost farmers' earnings.

Also, in addition to the apparent gains in land-use efficiency, APVs may also create favourable microclimatic conditions that reduce water loss from and heat stress on plants.

Need for standards

Unlike many other countries, India lacks standardised norms for APVs, creating ambiguity in project design. Countries leading in APV adoption, including Japan and Germany, could offer valuable lessons in this regard.

Japan requires all APV structures to be temporary and removable, a minimum panel height of 2 m, and a maximum crop yield loss of 20%. The Japanese government reviews projects for renewal every three years based on their effects on the agricultural output.

Likewise, Germany has introduced a standardised framework called DIN SPEC 91434, which requires all APV systems to maintain 66% of the original agricultural yield (called the reference yield) and limits the amount of arable land lost to solar infrastructure to up to 15%. The standard ensures agriculture remains the top priority of APV development — even if the energy returns are high.

India can draw on these examples to define its national APV guidelines, including specifications on panel height, permissible yield loss, and land-use criteria. Such guidelines will be key to keep energy management from overshadowing agricultural interest, especially at scale.



LIFE AND SCIENCES

CAN CHATGPT'S SHOPIFY DEAL HURT GOOGLE'S SEARCH BUSINESS?

The story so far:

On April 29, the Microsoft- and Softbank-backed AI startup, OpenAI, announced that it is experimenting with a shopping feature that will visually display product details and pricing to users based on the context of their interaction with the bot. While the Sam Altman-led company did not reveal how the back-end of this feature works or whether it has formally tied up with online commerce platform Shopify to make this happen, some developers spotted a new code in ChatGPT's public web bundle a few days earlier that revealed a Shopify checkout link, along with fields for shopping, price, product ratings and purchasing. Tobi Lutke, CEO of Shopify, put rumours to rest on platform X, saying, "There is so much potential in this [integration]. The beginning of a totally new modality of shopping. Extremely excited."

How might this change online shopping experience?

Taking the cue from Mr. Lutke's post, this integration between Shopify and ChatGPT marks a turning point in the evolution of online commerce that could dramatically shift how consumers discover and purchase products. If the partnership unfolds as planned, it will usher in a paradigm shift in shopping, moving away from conventional browser-based searches and embracing a conversational, AI-driven shopping environment.

Historically, online commerce has relied heavily on search engines, social media platforms, and digital ads to funnel traffic to online stores. Shoppers typically start with a Google search, scroll through product listings, compare prices across sites, and then navigate through checkout flows that often involve multiple clicks and forms. This process, while familiar, is fragmented.

The ChatGPT-Shopify integration could potentially create a seamless, in-chat shopping model. For instance, a user searching for the "best running shoes" on a browser and clicking through 10 different links might switch to simply asking ChatGPT for a product recommendation. The bot would then suggest a curated set of products based on the query, user preferences, reviews, and possibly even previous interactions.

Most importantly, the user could complete the purchase within the chat interface, thanks to the 'check-out' part included in the public web bundle.

How might user behaviour change?

What we are witnessing with this type of integration is an entirely new, personalised way of shopping that could fundamentally change user behaviour, provided the integration is successful and the user finds value in the chatbot's recommendations.

In this model, ChatGPT will act as both the search engine and the storefront, blurring the lines between discovery, recommendation, and checkout. The bot's ability to play all these roles effectively will be put to the ultimate test, the result of which could disrupt the status quo in digital sales.

While consumers could find this method to be faster and more personalised, for merchants hosting their service through Shopify, the stakes are even higher. And this integration could



transform Shopify from a website-creating platform for merchants into a marketplace-like ecosystem, instantly giving its millions of merchants exposure to ChatGPT's user base, without extra marketing or integration work.

What are the challenges for sellers?

This type of paradigm shift raises new challenges. Chief among them is visibility. For instance, if an AI chatbot acts as the new gatekeeper, how can brands ensure their products are featured? Would ChatGPT favour brands with more data, better reviews, or existing popularity, in effect reinforcing existing hierarchies as smaller or newer merchants may struggle unless AI ranking mechanisms are transparent and inclusive?

Moreover, as chatbots summarise product descriptions in their own words, brands may lose control over how their products are represented. This could dilute brand identity and force companies to rethink how they communicate their value proposition, optimising not for human readers, but for AI comprehension.

Despite these concerns, the broader trend is hard to ignore. As consumers grow more comfortable with AI tools and expect faster, more intuitive digital experiences, chatbot-based product discovery is poised to gain ground.

What might happen to Google?

To set the record straight, Google is still a colossal player in the global tech landscape with nearly 90% of the market share in the global search business. Alongside its search dominance, Google's advertising empire, bolstered by Google Ads, YouTube ads, and display ads, generates a significant portion of its income.

However, the shopping feature in ChatGPT represents a looming threat to Google's dominance in this space. If consumers increasingly turn to AI chatbots for product discovery instead of browsing Google's search results pages, the Internet giant could see a significant disruption to its core business model.

In a traditional search flow, users enter keywords into Google's search bar, explore links, compare products, and click on ads. Advertisers pay Google when their ad is clicked, driving much of its revenue. But, if ChatGPT becomes the preferred method of product discovery, users might no longer engage with Google's search engine as much for product searches. Instead, they could rely on the AI chatbot to instantly offer tailored product recommendations, complete with checkout options, without ever leaving the chatbot interface.

The result could be a decline in click-through rates (CTRs) on Google ads for e-commerce-related queries, as users skip over traditional search results in favour of chatbot-driven, frictionless shopping experiences. Furthermore, if users no longer click through to external websites, Google's web traffic funnel, which supports a vast majority of its ad business, could shrink.

What is Google doing about this?

Google acknowledges the shift in the market and is enhancing its AI capabilities through AI Overviews, Gemini upgrades, and other AI features. Its AI chatbot has now surpassed others on the leaderboard, and the company is focused on becoming an integral part of conversational commerce. However, its ability to compete with in-chat shopping tools will depend on its ability



to innovate swiftly enough to deliver personalised and seamless customer experiences that consumers increasingly expect.

While OpenAI's partnership with Shopify could potentially impact Google's search business in the near term, Google can easily mitigate this damage by leveraging its robust user data stack. This data stack, which spans search intent, behavioural, location, commercial, and contextual data, provides Google with a deep understanding of its users. This knowledge enables the company to predict demand, target ads, and train its own AI models for a more holistic user experience. Ultimately, Google's data stack could tip the balance in its favour in the long run.

What other options does OpenAI have to compete against Google?

ChatGPT lacks a data stack that can compete against Google's. Additionally, Shopify, unlike Amazon, is merely a platform for sellers to build digital tools. Since the platform doesn't sell products, its data collection is limited to enabling merchants to sell, and it doesn't retain any customer data.

Given the nature of business Shopify is in, for OpenAI to compete against Google's search business with its Shopify integration, it must either own a browser or Shopify must become something like the Amazon app. Both of these changes are challenging to achieve.

In fact, OpenAI, in November, considered building its own Chromium-based web browser. According to some reports, the company even hired top Google engineers who were part of building Chrome for Google. It is unclear where that plan stands currently. But, the Sam Altman-led company's anxiety came to the fore on this theme in April when they expressed interest in buying Google's Chrome browser if the U.S. Judge Amit Mehta orders the Alphabet-owned company to divest Chrome.

AI AS 'NORMAL' TECHNOLOGY

It will take decades, not years, for artificial intelligence to transform society in the revolutionary ways that big developer labs and companies have been predicting, say AI researchers at Princeton University. AI, they argue, is a general-purpose technology like electricity which will not make human labour redundant.

- According to the Arvind Narayanan, AI being a 'normal' technology is the common-sense view. We hear about supposed AI breakthroughs every day, but how much of that is actually real? And even if the technology is advancing rapidly, our ability to use it productively is limited because there is a learning curve. If anything, stories about AI being adopted rapidly are even more exaggerated than stories about AI breakthroughs. When we peel back the curtain, AI does not look that different from other technologies — such as the Internet. This is not to say that it will not be transformative. But if it is transformative, that will happen over decades, not months or years.

According to the Sayash Kapoor, We do not think AI is different from other past technologies in its patterns of tech development and societal impact. We have attempted to outline a vision for the future where AI is neither utopian nor dystopian, and we can learn from how past general-purpose technologies impacted the world.

Do You Know:



- Artificial intelligence (AI) refers to the field of computer science which aims to make computer systems think, reason, learn, and act to solve a complex system like humans.
- This field of research was established in 1956 at a small workshop at Dartmouth College (New Hampshire, United States). It was organised by a young mathematician named John McCarthy, who had become intrigued with the idea of creating a thinking machine. He also persuaded Marvin Minsky of Harvard University, Nathaniel Rochester from IBM, and Claude Shannon from Bell Telephone Laboratories to help with the workshop. These four men are considered some of the founding fathers of AI.
- The term artificial intelligence was coined by McCarthy. “McCarthy later admitted that no one really liked the name — after all, the goal was genuine, not ‘artificial’, intelligence — but ‘I had to call it something, so I called it “Artificial Intelligence”,’” wrote Melanie Mitchell in her book, ‘Artificial Intelligence: A Guide for Thinking Humans’.
- To enable computer systems to imitate the way that humans learn, and perform tasks autonomously (meaning, without instructions), machine learning (ML) is used. ML is implemented by training (this term will also be explained in subsequent explainers) computers on data so that they can make predictions about new information.

SPAIN BLACKOUT HIGHLIGHTS THE GRID CHALLENGE FOR RENEWABLES

The cause of last week’s massive power outage in Spain and Portugal remains unclear, but it has shone a spotlight on solar and wind energy, which critics accuse of straining electricity grids.

The rise of renewables presents a challenge for power grids, which must evolve to adapt as countries move away from fossil fuels.

Grid operators must ensure that electricity is constantly balanced between demand and supply.

A metric of this balance is the frequency of the electricity flowing through the grid, set at 50 Hz in Europe and 60 Hz in the US. If that number drifts too far off, it can jeopardise the grid.

Historically, the electricity system has relied on conventional power plants — gas, coal, nuclear, and hydroelectric — that use spinning turbines to generate electricity. These machines keep the frequency stable.

If a power plant fails or if electricity demand increases too quickly, they help stabilise the grid by releasing the kinetic energy stored in their rotors.

Instead of spinning machines, solar and wind farms use electronic systems that feed power into the grid, making it harder to maintain that delicate balance.

Renewable energy will have to do more than provide carbon-free electricity in the future, said Jose Luis Dominguez-Garcia, an electrical systems expert at the Catalonia Energy Research Institute.

They will have to “assist the system with additional controls to support the grid, particularly in inertia terms,” he said.



Marc Petit, professor of electrical systems at top French engineering school CentraleSupélec, argued that moving away from fossil fuels would make hydroelectric and nuclear power plants “even more essential for stabilising the system” as they use rotating machines.

A range of technical solutions already exists to compensate for renewables’ lack of inertia and hence to support grid stability. These include gravity storage, cryogenic liquid air, compressed air, and concentrated solar power.

As it undergoes a transition away from coal, Britain is banking on flywheels, a tried and tested system. Surplus power from solar and wind farms is used to make the large wheels turn, creating kinetic energy. This stored energy can then be converted to provide electricity to the grid if needed.

Just before the massive blackout on April 28, wind and solar power provided 70% of Spain’s electricity output. But renewables are intermittent sources of energy as they rely on nature.

When the wind stops blowing or the sun is hiding, other sources have to step in within minutes, or there need to be adequate systems for storing and then releasing renewable energy in place.

Depending on the country, backup supply currently comes from mainly thermal power plants, nuclear reactors, or hydroelectricity. To handle the ups and downs of renewable power, countries must ramp up storage capacity. The most widespread method is pumped storage hydropower from water reservoirs.

But large stationary batteries, akin to shipping containers, are increasingly being deployed alongside wind and solar farms — a segment dominated by China.

IS ACADEMIC FREEDOM A MADE-UP CONCEPT?

In Satyajit Ray’s 1980 satirical fantasy film *Hirak Rajar Deshe*, literally “in the kingdom of the Diamond King”, the Education Minister of the king dictates what should be taught in school. Finally, the Minister closes the school. Is the story a true reflection of the contemporary world, to some extent?

The nature of education and how it shapes society can be examined in a variety of contexts, from the fictional kingdom of the Diamond King to real-life Donald Trump’s America. Given that Columbia, an Ivy League university, surrendered its academic freedom, and Harvard, the oldest and richest American university, has chosen to legally defend it, one would wonder what academic freedom is and what its scopes and limitations are.

When then President Pranab Mukherjee spoke at the “International Buddhist Conference” in Nalanda in 2017, he invoked Nalanda and Taxila, the ancient universities, to pitch for an atmosphere free from prejudice, anger, violence, and doctrines. “It must be conducive to free flow intellectual persuasions,” he stated.

A difficult path

However, it’s not so easy, always. Scholars who disagreed with church theology or behaved in ways the church deemed unacceptable risked persecution in medieval Europe. Then, philosopher Wilhelm von Humboldt created a new university in Berlin in the early 19th century. The fundamental principles of academic freedom – freedom of scientific inquiry and the unification of research and teaching – were institutionalised in and diffused to other countries by the



Humboldtian model of higher education. Today's seemingly made-up concept of academic freedom can be summed up as follows: students have the right to learn in an academic environment free from outside interference, and teachers have the right to instruct. The right of teachers to engage in social and political critique is another definition, though. In a 2022 paper published in the *Houston Law Review*, Yale Law School professor Keith E. Whittington stated that universities committed to truth-seeking and the advancement and dissemination of human knowledge essentially require "robust protections for academic freedom for scholars and instructors."

At the UNESCO-organised International Conference in Nice in 1950, the Universities of the World pledged for "the right to pursue knowledge for its own sake and to follow wherever the search for truth may lead." Academic freedom was then defined as "the freedom to conduct research, teach, speak, and publish, subject to the norms and standards of scholarly inquiry, without interference or penalty, wherever the search for truth and understanding may lead" at the first annual Global Colloquium of University Presidents held at Columbia University in 2005. But is defining and accomplishing academic freedom really that straightforward?

Tenure, promotions, pay hikes, research funding, and academic honours are all intimately correlated with research publications in the current academic environment. Thus, today's scholars are driven by the peer pressure of publishing. And the interest of funding agencies has a significant impact on academicians' research. Nowadays, universities are also concerned with their international rankings, which are largely based on research papers.

'Publish or perish' culture

How serious is today's "publish or perish" culture? Quite a bit, indeed. One significant exception was 2013 Nobel laureate British physicist Peter Higgs, well known for the Higgs Boson. He stated that he became "an embarrassment to the department when they did research assessment exercises" and that he would have most likely been fired from his job at the University of Edinburgh if he had not been nominated for the Nobel Prize in 1980. However, he thought that because he would not be deemed "productive" enough in today's academic system, no university would hire him. Thus, today's academic system doesn't even permit a future Nobel winner to peacefully conduct his own research without regularly generating research papers.

Nowadays, there's little scope for leeway in a pre-scheduled framework of university curriculum. Furthermore, as American biologist Jerry Coyne put it, a geology teacher who casually informs his students that the earth is flat is not exercising academic freedom but rather is failing in his duties. Compared to general freedom of speech, academic freedom of speech is more limited. For instance, a non-academic can criticise the effectiveness of vaccines, but they can only do it with academic freedom if they have the necessary academic credentials.

And, importantly, academic freedom may be as much as a country's politics and society at the time would have desired to offer academic institutions. For instance, several fields of research, including sociology and genetics, were outlawed as "bourgeois pseudoscience" in the Soviet Union in the 1930s.

What's the freedom of a flying kite, indeed? When a kite is flying high, it means that the person holding the spool has just let it soar. Without the monarchs' generous financing and allowing foreign scholars and students, would ancient Nalanda or Taxila have been able to exercise their academic freedom? What happens if that person believes the kite is behaving strangely? Of course, a democracy has checks and balances, such as the judiciary and periodic elections. Therefore,



academic freedom and political interference in it are continually being redefined by changing sociopolitical dynamics.

Academic freedom certainly sets up a protective umbrella over scholars' activities; however, this protection is neither absolute nor guaranteed.

PRINCE HARRY, THE PETULANT ROYAL

There are several reasons — excuses, really — that can be used to justify the extended adolescence of 40-year-old Henry Charles Albert David of the House of Windsor. “Prince” Harry, perhaps, does not realise that “royalty” is a carefully constructed fiction, an excuse to be rich and unemployed through decades of political and social reform, common law ideas of equality and redistributive justice, and even the welfare state. And that family drama and personal grievances — even when they garner national and international attention — do not entitle you to benefits at the exchequer's expense any more than the average soap opera or reality TV star. Especially when the prince chooses, as Harry did, to leave the family and what passes as their national responsibility.

The latest salvo in Harry's feud with his father and the rest of the royal family came in an interview with the BBC after a British court ruled that he, Meghan Markle and their children were not entitled to the same level of security as the senior royals who hadn't quit. The court had to tell Harry what most adults learn before age 40 — that “his sense of grievance” did not “translate into a legal argument”. Harry, petulantly, has questioned the motive behind the downgrade and said he cannot return to England because of security risks. He also said he would like to make up with his family, particularly his ailing and ageing father, King Charles. Cynics might say that the desire to make up with his family comes after many a failed Netflix special, and a career in California that hasn't exactly taken off.

The British Crown is part of a curious social contract: They get to keep their wealth and standing, and remain the symbolic sovereign. In return, they live in a gilded cage. Harry wanted to be free of his golden prison. Commendable, perhaps. But then, he can't keep asking for the gold.

POPE LEO XIV SPEAKS OF CHERISHED VALUES IN A POLARISED WORLD

The question that loomed over the papal conclave as it began on May 7 — indeed, the question that had preoccupied Catholics everywhere (and many non-Catholics) since the death of Pope Francis on April 21 — was what the Church under the next pontiff would look like. Would the new occupant of the throne of St Peter walk through the door opened by Pope Francis, and continue along the path of reform he had laid out? Or would he turn back towards the idea of the institution as envisioned by his predecessor's conservative critics?

On Thursday, the white smoke announcing a new pope cleared to reveal the election of Cardinal Robert Francis Prevost to the papacy. Prevost, who has taken the name Leo XIV, was born in Chicago, and is the first pontiff from the US. His election marks the end of the longstanding wariness towards having a pope from the superpower. It also marks a continuation with the reformist agenda of the last pope, one that prized the notion of a “missionary” and “synodal” (collaborative) Church — in his first address from the balcony of St Peter's Basilica, this is the very idea that Pope Leo XIV underlined. For progressives, indeed, there is a promise of a people-centric institution in the new Pope's choice of name: In his historic 1891 encyclical, the last pope named



Leo — Leo XIII — had provided the outline for modern Catholic social justice teaching, by championing the rights of the working class.

Many challenges lie before Pope Leo XIV, particularly ensuring that the centuries-old Catholic Church stays in step with the times. He will have to navigate the divides within the institution, and among the faithful, on issues like queer rights and the position of women. As he spoke to the crowd gathered in St Peter's Square in the Vatican, the Pope spoke of the need to build bridges. In an increasingly polarised world, his words are a much-needed beacon.

WHY ARE PIZZAS HUGE POPULAR EVERYWHERE IN THE UNIVERSE?

Last month, I visited the U.S. for six days. Within this brief period, I ate pizza three times. In Chicago, I feasted on Sicilian pizza for dinner. The toppings included anchovies and shrimp, and it was exquisite. The very next day, I ate a slice of the city's famous deep-dish pizza, which was delicious. Two days later, in Rochester Minnesota, my sister and brother-in-law took me out to their local pizza place, where I indulged on a wood-fired cauliflower crust pizza.

I could see pizza everywhere during my visit. And this is equally true of India, too — with a wide range of popular pizza brands such as Dominos, Pizza Hut and Smokin' Joe's. On food delivery platform Zomato, pizza featured second only to biryani last year, with more than 5.84 crore deliveries.

Nine factors

What has led to the overwhelming popularity of this food, which took birth way back in the 16th century in the Italian town of Naples as food for poor people? Here are nine underlying factors.

1. **Incredible taste:** There is science behind this — specifically, something called the Maillard reaction. When pizza is baked, its components — the sugars in the crust, the cheese and the toppings — react chemically with amino acids, creating hundreds of lovely flavours that fire up our taste buds. In addition, the soft dough, molten cheese and crispy crust create a beautiful contrast of textures.
2. **High on convenience:** Pizzas can be eaten easily virtually everywhere, particularly since they are dry food. They can be devoured hot or cold, by hand or by fork, in a fine dining restaurant or in front of home television.
3. **Instant comfort:** The high fat content of a pizza, as well as its umami flavour make it a lovely comfort food. The cheese and the meat toppings provide the fat. Tomatoes, which are used on most pizzas, are high on umami, a flavour that activates specific regions of our brain that are associated with pleasurable comfort. No wonder we feel so comfortably happy after eating pizza.
4. **Reasonably affordable:** Pizzas make for a fine meal, but are relatively affordable. In India, for instance, Dominos offers pizzas starting at ₹99 each, and there are several options available at price points below ₹200. This is quite reasonable in comparison to other foods. For instance, a rava masala dosa at a good hotel in Mumbai now costs upwards of ₹150.



5. High on nutrition: Unlike many other fast foods, pizzas are quite high on nutritional content. A single slice of chicken pizza contains 15-18 gm of protein. This is not to say that pizza is the healthiest food. But it has a good balance between nutrition and taste.
6. Portion control: Because pizzas come in slices and are even measured in inches, you can control your intake of portions quite easily — though this requires some self-control, for sure. I normally eat two slices of a 14-inch pizza, and then do my best to stop. It is difficult for me to exercise similar portion control with equal ease for other foods such as biryani or paneer makhani.
7. High on customisation: With such a wide range of toppings, pizzas are amongst the most customisable foods on earth. From grilled to Sicilian seafood to Chettinad chicken to banana curry, you can have the toppings of your choice. I asked Perplexity.AI this question, and it promptly told me that more than 500 types of pizza toppings have been documented across the world. Such extensive customisation may be difficult to achieve with idli, pancake or poha.
8. Food to share: Friends can gather around a large pizza and share it from a single plate. Sharing is always an emotionally appealing and uplifting way to eat with people whom you know well. On the other hand, burgers or dosas are typically eaten in individual portions.
9. Party food: Over the years, pizza has become linked to social events and parties. Often, kids' birthday parties are viewed as incomplete if pizza is not served. This mental association of pizzas with exciting parties has added to its appeal. If foods can have EQ (excitement quotient), then the EQ of pizzas would be very high! Would you like to add a tenth factor? With so many fundamental drivers of consumption, it is now quite easy to see why pizzas are today amongst the most popular foods on earth.

MITHRIDATISM: POISON AGAINST POISON

For millennia, there have been stories of people who tried to make themselves immune to poison by regularly ingesting small, non-lethal doses of it. The practice is called mithridatism after the Pontic king Mithridates VI (135-63 BC), who reputedly immunised himself to various poisons this way.

Mithridatism is no longer practised today because scientists have developed safer, surer ways to protect the body against many toxins. A famous example is vaccines, which work by exposing the body to, say, a weakened virus so that the immune system learns to fight a non-weakened virus.

On May 2, US researchers published a paper in Cell reporting that an American man named Timothy Friede had subjected himself to more than 200 snakebites and 700 injections of venom over 18 years to immunise himself against their deadly effects. Injuries and deaths due to snakebites are hard to prevent, especially in India, because they usually occur in areas with poor access to antivenoms and because each snake's venom requires a specific set of antibodies to fight.

Fortuitously, the researchers found that a combination of antibodies in Mr. Friede's blood and a drug called varespladib could shield mice against 13 kinds of venom and partially defend against six more. This is a step towards the long-sought broadly neutralising antibodies — drugs that can defend people against most, if not all, venoms.



KOREA'S HAENYEO DIVERS SHOW UNIQUE GENETIC ADAPTATIONS

A new study has presented evidence of both genetic adaptation and physiological changes among the Haenyeo, a unique group of women in South Korea's Jeju Island known for diving up to 10 m underwater and up to seven hours a day to collect shellfish.

"In a society where established traditions have historically shaped gender roles, the Jeju-Haenyeo culture has emerged as an exceptional phenomenon," the UNESCO said after including the community in its 'Intangible Cultural Heritage' list in 2016.

The genetic variant identified in the study may reduce pregnancy-associated hypertension risks, according to the researchers. The findings were published in the journal *Cell Reports*. The researchers explored whether long-term diving practice and natural selection have shaped distinct traits in this community, particularly with respect to bradycardia (the slowing of heart rate), blood pressure regulation, and genetic variants associated with cold tolerance and pregnancy-related cardiovascular stress.

The researchers studied 91 women divided into three groups: 30 Haenyeo divers from Jeju, 30 non-diving Jeju "controls," and 31 non-diving Seoul "controls." The physiological data collected included spleen volume (using ultrasound), haematological parameters like hemoglobin and hematocrit levels, and cardiovascular responses during a simulated dive (immersing one's face in cold water while holding breath).

Haenyeo divers were found to be more bradycardic during simulated dives than both control groups, which the researchers said suggested a robust diving reflex likely due to training. This said, the individuals' spleen sizes were not significantly different between Haenyeo and non-Haenyeo Jeju women — even though both groups had larger spleens than the participants from Seoul. This, the researchers argued, reflected regional factors rather than genetic adaptation.

The Haenyeo and Jeju controls also had higher diastolic blood pressure than the Seoul participants across the baseline, dive, and recovery periods. The difference persisted even after the researchers adjusted for confounding variables, indicating a potential adaptive feature that enhanced the force that pumped blood to the brain during dives. The systolic pressure remained unchanged, however.

With whole-genome sequencing of 84 individuals from the cohort, the researchers confirmed that Jeju Island residents — both Haenyeo and non-Haenyeo — are genetically distinct from mainland Koreans. They estimated the populations began to diverge around 5,000-7,000 years ago. Finally, the team used the tools of population genetics to identify several gene variants strongly associated with diastolic blood pressure during diving. One in particular, called rs66930627, was significantly more common in Jeju residents and was linked to lower diastolic pressure, a trait they may have evolved to reduce the risk of hypertension during pregnancy.

They also found that this variant correlated with changes in the expression levels of other genes with known roles in immune modulation and hypertension. This association supported their hypothesis that natural selection among the Haenyeo may have targeted the rs66930627 variant to reduce the risk of preeclampsia in diving pregnant women.

WHEN WARMER IS BETTER

Q: Why does our temperature go up when we are ill?

4TH FLOOR SHATABDI TOWER, SAKCHI, JAMSHEDPUR

Telegram: http://t.me/DreamIAS_Jamshedpur



A: The increase in core temperature observed during illness is commonly called fever and occurs in response to infection by a pathogen or certain types of physical injury. When a person becomes infected with bacteria, the white blood cells of the immune system recognise the incoming pathogen as foreign and initiate the first stages of the immune response: the acute phase.

In this reaction, white blood cells called monocytes release a variety of proteins called cytokines. They are central to the immune response. In particular, there is a predominance of two types of cytokine called interleukin-1 and tumour necrosis factor-alpha. These cytokines cause an increase in body temperature.

It is not clear how, but it is known that they also cause the production of other chemicals in the brain. The main group of chemicals here are the prostaglandins. They react very strongly with the hypothalamus area of the brain, which then sends a signal to the body to increase the temperature.

The mechanisms that the brain employs to effect this are not certain but are known to include increasing the metabolic rate and shivering. These two processes burn metabolic fuel faster than normal, and body heat is given off.

Experimental work shows that elevated temperatures can enhance certain aspects of the immune response. The growth rates of various types of bacteria are slowed at temperatures above normal body temperature.

FISHING LIMIT

What is the total allowable catch?

The total allowable catch (TAC) is a limit on the total quantity of fish that fishers can catch in a particular area. It's usual for agencies and governments worldwide that have jurisdiction over fisheries or fish stock in seas, oceans, lakes, etc. to impose a TAC to prevent fishers from catching and removing too many fish from the water body.

TACs are important so that the fish population in a water body can maintain a minimum size every year that allows it to sustain itself. Without a TAC, overfishing can remove too many fish, leaving behind too few for the population to sustain itself.

Another TAC was recently in the news in an escalating dispute involving the U.S. and Russia. Last month, a U.S. judge blocked the import of Patagonia toothfish caught in the South Atlantic Ocean. Since 2021, Russia has refused to admit a TAC for this species in this area set by the Commission on the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources. The rejection forced all other countries on the Commission to set their own limits.