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## INTERNATIONAL

### PALESTINIAN STATEHOOD: UK, FRANCE SIGNAL GROWING FRUSTRATION WITH ISRAEL'S WAR IN GAZA

Over a century ago, the UK helped lay the foundation of the Israel-Palestine dispute with the 1917 Balfour Declaration, pledging support for a “national home for the Jewish people”, while promising to safeguard the “civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine”. The creation of an independent State of Israel in May 1948, and its success in fending off five Arab states, meant that the Declaration’s contradictory promises catalysed a conflict that continues to bring devastation to the West Asian region. Nearly 108 years later, the UK has said that it will recognise Palestinian statehood in September unless Israel agrees to a ceasefire, a two-state solution, and halts its de facto annexation of parts of the occupied West Bank. PM Keir Starmer has also set conditions for Hamas: A ceasefire, the release of hostages, withdrawal from governance, and disarmament. The UK’s move follows France’s announcement that it will recognise Palestinian statehood in September, as it joined Saudi Arabia in co-chairing a high-level UN conference in New York to push for the much-debated two-state solution.

The London and Paris announcements, which could make them the only two G7 nations to recognise the State of Palestine in less than two months, signal growing European frustration with Israel’s war in Gaza, where civilians are facing a humanitarian catastrophe under sustained bombardment and a blockade on aid — now easing under mounting international pressure. Yet, Starmer’s plan has contradictions of its own. If Israel meets all the conditions, would the UK then refuse to recognise Palestinian statehood, after all? Statehood should be framed not as a concession but an inalienable right of the Palestinian people. Britain’s stance appears to be a pressure tactic aimed at curbing the ongoing atrocities in Gaza. But if Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu refuses to stand down, Starmer may be compelled to follow through on his pledge come September.

Today, 147 of 193 UN member states have formally recognised the State of Palestine — a list that includes India. Speaking at the New York conference, India’s Permanent Representative to the UN, Parvathaneni Harish, noting that India was among the first to recognise Palestine in 1988, emphasised that global efforts must now focus on a two-state solution. France and the UK moving the needle marks the first significant step within the West towards a durable resolution of the dispute. Much, however, will depend on the US — both in the long term and when it comes to immediate pressure on Israel for humanitarian relief and a ceasefire.

### DANGEROUS TURN

President Donald Trump’s announcement that he has ordered “two nuclear submarines to be positioned in appropriate regions”, in response to the “provocative statements” by former Russian President Dmitry Medvedev, marks a dangerous turn in the U.S.-Russia relationship which the Republican leader had pledged to repair in the run-up to his election late last year. Mr. Medvedev, now the Deputy Chairman of Russia’s Security Council, had said that Mr. Trump’s threats of imposing tariffs on Russia were “a step towards war”. Mr. Trump did not specify whether he has moved submarines capable of launching intercontinental ballistic missiles with nuclear warheads, or nuclear-powered boats equipped with conventional weapons. In recent weeks, Mr. Trump has expressed growing frustration with his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin over the Ukraine war. Initially, he gave Mr. Putin a 50-day deadline to end the war or face American tariffs. On July 29,

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



this was shortened to 10 to 12 days. Mr. Trump has also threatened secondary “penalty” tariffs on countries that trade with Russia such as India and China.

Mr. Trump’s frustration is understandable. He pressured Ukraine into accepting a ceasefire proposal. His Defence Secretary publicly stated that Ukraine would not be taken into NATO. Yet, the most that he managed to extract from Mr. Putin was a limited truce in the Black Sea and a temporary pause in attacks on Ukrainian infrastructure. At the heart of the impasse are the divergent views in western capitals and Moscow on how to end the war. While western leaders insist on an immediate ceasefire, Moscow believes that this should be part of a comprehensive peace agreement addressing its core security concerns, including NATO’s eastward expansion. Russia also finds little incentive to de-escalate at a time when its troops have strategic momentum. Ukraine has carried out deadly drone attacks on several Russian cities, but on the battlefield, is struggling to hold the line. Besides, Mr. Trump’s decision to bomb Iran on behalf of Israel, at a time when Tehran was technically in talks with the U.S., appears to have hardened Russia’s position. Nevertheless, diplomatic setbacks are not an excuse for nuclear sabre-rattling. The last thing the world wants today is a direct conflict between the U.S. and Russia. Instead of escalating the crisis, Mr. Trump must reflect on why America’s current approach — combining sanctions against Russia with military support for Ukraine — has failed to deter Mr. Putin. His initial turn towards diplomacy was a step in the right direction. He must stay the course and narrow the gap between the western and Russian positions on ending the war.

#### WHAT TO EXPECT FROM TRUMP-PUTIN MEET

Currently, Russia is winning, and Ukraine will be unhappy under all circumstances. Although Russia is yet to fully capture the four oblasts (Luhansk, Donetsk, Zaporizhzhia, Kherson) that were constitutionally incorporated into Russia in 2022, most experts agree that if the current tempo of the war is sustained, they will get there by the end of the year.

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- After losing Crimea in 2014, Ukraine has lost another 20% of its territory, and may lose more land in the coming months. Ukraine has neither the economic power nor the human resources to turn the tide of the war.
- Russia may be challenged if NATO enters the war but that could lead to a quick escalation to the nuclear level. This is why NATO, while supporting Ukraine’s war efforts, has been very careful not to cross certain red lines. This is unlikely to change.
- Trump will hope to extract some kind of a promise from Putin — at the very least of a ceasefire that will halt the fighting. Trump believes he has the personality and the leverage to get Putin to agree to whatever he wants.
- But Russia’s President is unlikely to agree to any deal unless he is given guarantees that Ukraine will never become a member of NATO and will not receive any security guarantees from the West. Moreover, Putin will insist that the territories his forces have captured, including Crimea, be recognised as Russian.



**Do You Know:**

- The US President does not see Ukraine as a part of NATO, a grouping that he personally doesn't appear to be too invested in. Trump and members of his administration had also indicated that they were not averse to Ukraine ceding territory to Russia to end the war.
- Trump does not consider the war in Ukraine to be a legacy that he has to continue. Given that Ukraine is not that strategically important to the US, Trump does not see the war as a path to achieving American dominance in world affairs. In fact, he was trying to push Ukraine into accepting these demands, as his public bust-up with President Volodymyr Zelenskyy in the White House made clear.
- The Ukrainian President has been calling up various European leaders and trying to get himself invited to the Trump-Putin meeting. He is worried that Putin may be able to persuade Trump to accept some of the positions that Russia has been voicing from the beginning of the war — which the American President himself does not appear to be fundamentally against.
- India is caught in Trump's attempt to exert leverage on Russia. His "extra" tariffs have put India in a difficult position. To use a phrase used by former National Security Adviser J N Dixit, India will need to do a "complicated Bharatnatyam dance" to extricate itself from this situation.
- The US is our largest trading partner. It is also one of the few countries with which India has a trade surplus that offsets, at least partially, the deficit we have with China and Russia.

#### PEACE AGREEMENT BETWEEN AZERBAIJAN AND ARMENIA

— Azerbaijan and Armenia signed a US-brokered peace agreement on Friday (8th August) during a meeting with US President Donald Trump. The agreement includes exclusive US development rights to a strategic transit corridor through the South Caucasus that the White House said would facilitate greater exports of energy and other resources.

— Armenia and Azerbaijan have been at odds since the late 1980s when Nagorno-Karabakh – a mountainous Azerbaijani region that had a mostly ethnic Armenian population – broke away from Azerbaijan with support from Armenia. Both Armenia and Azerbaijan won independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. Azerbaijan took back full control of Nagorno-Karabakh in 2023 in a military offensive, prompting almost all of the territory's remaining 100,000 Armenians to flee to Armenia.

— Nagorno-Karabakh is a mountainous region officially recognised as part of Azerbaijan. But its 1.2 lakh population is predominantly ethnic Armenian, having close cultural, social, and historical ties with Armenia. It is an ethnic Armenian enclave in Azerbaijan. The Armenians are Christians, while Azeris are Muslims. The conclave is connected to Armenia through the 5-km Lachin Corridor.

#### HOW IS CHINA EXTENDING ITS POLICING NETWORK OVERSEAS?

**The story so far:**

On July 16, the Chinese Ministry of Public Security (MPS) announced that an eight-member police team was despatched to Croatia for a "joint patrol mission." This would be the sixth joint patrol under the 2017 China-Croatia Agreement on Police Cooperation.



### **What are these joint patrols for?**

As the MPS itself highlighted, officers from China and Croatia have formed mixed patrol units to address “the safety concerns of Chinese tourists in Croatia.” The Chinese Ambassador to Croatia, Qi Qianjin, said that in 2024, 2,50,000 such tourists visited Croatia, up 41% year-on-year. A similar patrol was launched this time last year, and they operated in Croatian cities such as Zagreb, Dubrovnik, Zadar etc. At the time, it was said that the patrols were to address the “safety-related concerns” of not just Chinese tourists, but also Chinese citizens and overseas Chinese people in Croatia.

### **What about other European nations?**

The Croatian project is not a one-off endeavour of the Chinese state. Under its 2014 Operation, ‘Fox Hunt’, and the subsequent 2015 umbrella project ‘Sky Net’, the party-state has developed extensive policing and surveillance networks both within and beyond China. As part of ‘Sky Net’, joint police patrolling initiatives have been launched with Serbia, Italy and Hungary. Three month-long patrols have already been conducted in Serbia in 2019, 2023, and 2024. In Hungary, the Qingtian County Public Security Bureau has gone as far as creating ‘police service centres’ in the country. Concerns surrounding the creation of Chinese ‘service centres’ led Italy to suspend joint police patrols.

### **What is China aiming for?**

The freedom accorded to Chinese police mobility in countries abroad has shown two things — first, that there is potential for officers to arrest Chinese dissidents abroad, and second, that their unchecked operations can lead to the establishment of police stations across the world.

It was discovered in 2023 that China operated two stations in the cities of Amsterdam and Rotterdam in the Netherlands. The-then Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson said that these ‘service centres’ were merely venues to assist overseas Chinese nationals to renew their driving licences and receive physical check-ups for that purpose. Around the same time, another media investigation said that the Chinese police service centre contacted a Chinese Dutch citizen who questioned Beijing’s version of the 2020 Galwan Valley clashes with India. If true, there has been an obvious effort by covert Chinese operatives to target dissidents.

In April 2023, the FBI arrested two operatives from a similar ‘service centre’ affiliated with the MPS in Manhattan’s Chinatown in the U.S. The Justice Department charged them with conspiracy to act as agents of the PRC government, and obstruction of justice for destroying evidence of their communications with an MPS official.

### **How are countries dealing with this?**

The crackdown on covert operations of the MPS abroad seems to directly correlate with a particular nation’s contemporary relations with China. In the U.S., Chinese espionage has been a topic of grave concern for a while. But as access to Chinese tourists, academics and officials visiting the U.S. has become restricted amid trade related tensions, the discovery of such covert operations has led U.S. authorities to take public action.

But in places like Mongolia, Serbia and Croatia, the policing programme, so far, has yielded no public investigations. These nations boast of enhancing economic and security ties with China. As long as ties with Beijing focus on resolving economic tensions and technological disputes, the issue



of transnational repression is likely to take a back seat — unless the degree of surveillance rises to the level that it harms national and/ or European security.

## WHAT IS THE STATUS OF THE 'RECALL' VOTE IN TAIWAN?

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

On July 26, Taiwanese citizens voted to recall 24 Kuomintang (KMT) opposition party lawmakers from parliament (Legislative Yuan), but in round one, all 24 members managed to retain their seats with people in their districts voting against their removal. The second round is slated for late August. The Great Recall vote, supported by the Bluebird Movement and the ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), accused KMT of being in cahoots with China and of threatening national security.

### **When did the movement begin?**

The movement started in 2024, as local protesters accused the opposition of blocking DPP bills and pushing controversial laws later declared unconstitutional. The movement failed to garner 25% support to recall opposition lawmakers in each district; DPP needed six KMT seats recalled to gain a legislative majority. Additionally, the second recall voting against seven seats of the KMT lawmakers will be conducted later this month. The DPP is pressured to get all seats in the upcoming recall vote. KMT, after its survival, is calling for a reshuffle of the cabinet.

### **What is the removal vote about?**

The Taiwan Public Officials Election and Recall Act is a rarely used constitutional instrument, permitting citizens to remove elected officials. The act has three stages of checks to successfully remove an office holder. The first step requires a petition signed by at least 1% of the electorate, the second stage needs 10% support from the electorate, and in the final stage, 25% of the district's eligible voters need to support the recall. After the Bluebird Movement, the DPP petitioned against KMT legislative lawmakers, accusing them of undermining national security by deferring to the Communist Party of China, and for passing bills without following procedural mandates. All 24 KMT lawmakers retained office by getting a majority of votes against their recall in their respective districts.

### **Why was the recall petition pushed?**

The recall is a consequence of a divided government in Taiwan, with two different political parties leading the executive and legislative branches of government. The structural imbalance in the composition of parliament made the ruling party obsolete in fulfilling its legislative duties. Taiwan follows the unicameral system with 113 seats in its Legislative Yuan. DPP under former President Tsai Ing-wen enjoyed a majority in both the executive and legislative branches. This changed in the 2024 elections. The DPP's presidential candidate William Lai Ching-te won with 40.1% vote. But DPP lost its legislative majority with 51 seats against KMT's 52 seats and its ally Taiwan People's Party's (TPP) 8 seats, bringing the opposition's total to 60. With this legislative majority, the opposition party blocked crucial bills proposed by the DPP. What ignited the civic movement was the hasty approval of controversial bills by the opposition.

The KMT introduced several bills and amendments that undermined the judicial and executive branches' power, while awarding extrajudicial powers to the legislature. The proposed legislative reform bills ignored parliamentary deliberation and directly sent the bill to the plenary session to



be passed. The Bluebird Movement, named after the street where the protest happened, was ignited by the egregious violation of the constitution. In May 2024, 1,00,000 protesters took to the streets of Taiwan calling against the violation of the law by the opposition.

#### **Has it further polarised Taiwan?**

The progressive recall vote, which empowered citizens to hold legislators accountable, has backfired by further polarising the parties and their support base. KMT's survival raised the question whether the recall was even necessary, and if the movement was politically motivated by the DPP.

### **ONE YEAR AFTER SHEIKH HASINA'S EXIT, WHERE IS BANGLADESH TODAY?**

On August 5, 2024, when the longest-serving prime minister of Bangladesh had to be airlifted from Dhaka to Hindon Air Force Station near Delhi, many of the student protesters who roared in celebration were looking forward, arguably, to a better future, a more democratic order. Yet, one year after Sheikh Hasina's uninterrupted 15-year rule was brought to an end during what is now known as the July Revolution, Bangladesh finds itself gripped by a politics far removed from the aspirations that fuelled her ouster.

Despite the promises of Muhammad Yunus, Chief Advisor to the Interim Government, the past year has witnessed a surge in religious extremism and a breakdown of the rule of law. While Awami League leaders have been jailed en masse, hundreds of individuals accused or convicted in militancy-related cases have been released, and many others have escaped from jail. The ancestral home of Bangladesh's founding president, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, along with other symbols of the old regime, was reduced to ashes. Bangladesh's pluralistic culture, too, has looked besieged. The Bangladesh Hindu Buddhist Christian Unity Council, the country's largest minority rights group, has repeatedly flagged violence against minorities on the watch of the Yunus government. The US Commission on International Religious Freedom, in its latest report, noted that "systematic pressure on religious minorities continued to generally worsen." In May, thousands of Hefazat-e-Islam supporters rallied in Dhaka to protest proposed recommendations aimed at ensuring equal rights for Muslim women. Government figures show that violent crime has increased. On top of this is an unstable economy, weighed down by slowing growth and mounting public debt.

There is no denying that the Hasina regime was flawed, characterised, especially towards its end, by its disregard for democratic values. But the rise of extremist forces under Yunus's watch strains the secular fabric of the Mujibist order. Only a free and fair election can show the way forward in Bangladesh. Yunus has announced that the election could be held in April 2026, and in his Tuesday afternoon speech, unveiled the July Declaration which affirms a commitment to "rule of law, human rights, and moral values". It is hoped that a newly elected government will embody these principles and fulfil the aspirations of the Bangladeshi people. Delhi, for its part, must keep communication channels with Dhaka open, engage all political actors, and work to insulate bilateral ties from the ebb and flow of domestic politics.



## NATIONAL

### INDIANS IN IRELAND URGED TO TAKE 'REASONABLE PRECAUTIONS'

Against the backdrop of racist attacks on foreigners in Dublin, the Embassy of India in Ireland has issued an advisory for citizens urging them to take “reasonable precautions”. The advisory came soon after an Indian national took to social media, on July 31, reporting that he became the latest victim of an attack by teenage gang members.

“There has been an increase in the instances of physical attacks reported against Indian citizens in Ireland recently. The Embassy is in touch with the authorities concerned of Ireland in this regard. At the same time, all Indian citizens in Ireland are advised to take reasonable precautions for their personal security and avoid deserted areas, especially in odd hours,” said the Indian Embassy in Ireland in the advisory. The announcement urged Indian citizens to contact 0899423734 in case of emergency.

The Hindu had earlier reported that an Indian employee working with Amazon was assaulted by teenage gang members on July 19. Indian Ambassador Akhilesh Mishra had said the incident had caused “widespread concern and fear” among the 90,000-strong Indian community in Ireland. The latest incident took place on July 31 when Dr. Santosh Yadav, a Multimodal AI Scientist, was assaulted, leaving him with a fractured cheekbone and other injuries. Dr. Yadav took to social network LinkedIn to share images of the injuries, and said, “This is not an isolated incident. Racist attacks on Indian men and other minorities are surging across Dublin.”

Ambassador Mishra has said the Indian mission is in touch with the wider Indian community. “The recurrence of attacks on innocent, highly qualified technical experts and professionals has caused widespread fear among the community all over Ireland. Well-being of the Indian community is a matter of high priority to the embassy and the Ministry of External Affairs. The matter has been taken up with the relevant Irish authorities in Dublin and also in Delhi.”

### MENDING TIES

The state visit of Philippines President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. to India that ends on Friday, and his meetings with Prime Minister Narendra Modi provided a hard power edge to the two countries, with historical-cultural ties between them, by signing a Strategic Partnership Agreement. On his first visit to India since taking office in 2022, Mr. Marcos has taken a strong position against Chinese incursions in the West Philippine Sea, and has been keen to engage India more closely. Coinciding with his visit, the Indian Navy held its first joint maritime exercises with the Philippine Navy in the South China Sea area. The drills were criticised by China. India has consistently supported the 2016 UNCLOS tribunal arbitration award in favour of the Philippines, calling on China to respect the multilateral order in the Indo-Pacific, and Mr. Marcos appreciated this. Moreover, while India has signed dozens of such Partnership Agreements worldwide, for the Philippines, India is only its fifth Strategic Partner — after Japan, Vietnam, Australia, and South Korea. The Philippines is also the first export destination for the BrahMos missile, and Mr. Marcos is understood to have expressed interest in buying more Indian military hardware. The two sides signed agreements to enhance strategic cooperation, including an exchange of Terms of Reference for all three services and the Coast Guard. They also agreed to free up visas and begin direct flights. There is no substantial bilateral trade at present — \$3.3 billion in 2024-25 — but investments are growing as technology and pharma companies have tied up in many areas.



The Marcos-Modi meetings sent out a more comprehensive message for India's ties with South East Asia. The Philippines is the incoming chair for ASEAN in 2026, and the coordinator for the ASEAN-India comprehensive strategic partnership. The invitation to Mr. Marcos was also a way of easing relations that have been riled by Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal's unnecessarily abrasive remarks in June, where he called many ASEAN countries the "B-team of China", and mocked the 2009 ASEAN-India Trade in Goods Agreement (AITIGA). The government has since moved to fast-track talks to revise the AITIGA, with talks in Delhi next week. India and the Philippines have separately discussed launching talks for a Preferential Trade Agreement (PTA), indicating India's intention to keep negotiating for a more liberalised trade regime globally even as it faces the brunt of the U.S.'s tariffs and penalties. The visit is a reminder that India's interest in peace and security in the Indo-Pacific is not restricted to the Quad grouping, and that it is mindful of strengthening ties with all the countries in the region, especially as it essays the current geopolitical turbulence with bigger global powers.

### SUPREME COURT'S REVERSAL ON ALLAHABAD HC JUDGE: A DEFENSE OF JUDICIAL BALANCE

On August 8, 2025, the Supreme Court of India rescinded its controversial August 4 order barring Allahabad High Court Justice Prashant Kumar from hearing criminal cases until his retirement in May 2029. The initial directive, issued by Justices J.B. Pardiwala and R. Mahadevan, also required Kumar to sit with a senior judge, citing his "erroneous" ruling in a criminal case as a threat to judicial dignity. The reversal, prompted by Chief Justice B.R. Gavai's intervention and protests from 13 Allahabad High Court judges, is a vital course correction that upholds judicial autonomy while exposing the delicate balance between oversight and interference.

The original order stemmed from Kumar's refusal to quash a criminal complaint in a commercial dispute, a decision the Supreme Court deemed "perverse" for conflating civil and criminal remedies. The harsh directive, which stripped Kumar of his criminal roster, sparked backlash for overstepping into the Allahabad High Court's administrative domain, where the Chief Justice holds roster authority. The collective dissent from Kumar's peers, urging a full court meeting, underscored the perceived affront to High Court independence.

The Supreme Court's retraction, deleting paragraphs 25 and 26 of the August 4 order, clarifies that it never intended to "embarrass" Kumar. Justices Pardiwala and Mahadevan emphasized their aim was to protect the judiciary's integrity, not to encroach on administrative powers. This move, while maintaining that Kumar's ruling was flawed, restores faith in the collegial system, acknowledging the Chief Justice of India's role in fostering dialogue.

Yet, the episode raises critical questions. The Supreme Court's swift pivot suggests a rare misstep, but its initial overreach risks chilling judicial independence at lower levels. High Courts, as the final arbiter for most litigants, must operate without fear of such sweeping interventions. This reversal is a win for institutional balance, but the judiciary must refine its oversight mechanisms to ensure errors are corrected without undermining trust or autonomy.

### JUDICIAL OVERREACH

The Supreme Court of India's recent handling of defamation charges against Congress leader Rahul Gandhi marks a troubling shift from established norms of free speech and jurisprudence on constitutional protections for political discourse. This became clear when the Bench led by Justice



Dipankar Datta, while staying the proceedings on Mr. Gandhi's remarks on the Galwan clash in 2020, made problematic oral observations. Among others, Justice Datta said that had Mr. Gandhi been a "true Indian", he would not have said what he did. The Court's primary function is to adjudicate on questions of law and constitutional principle rather than to prescribe standards of national loyalty. In a democracy, surely a 'true Indian' is one who fearlessly pursues the truth and holds the government accountable — not one who accepts official narratives without question. Mr. Gandhi's commentary, in which he questioned the government's border policies and drew attention to credible reports of Chinese intrusions, also fell well within the legitimate ambit of Opposition politics. This critiquing does not, and must not be seen to, undermine the nation. Such criticism is protected by the principles of free speech and is indispensable for a healthy public discourse. The Court's remarks, by implying otherwise, risk chilling legitimate dissent and setting an inimical precedent for future Opposition conduct.

Equally, Mr. Gandhi's statements regarding Chinese occupation of Indian territory and confrontations are not without backing in public and governmental sources. Open-source satellite imagery, parliamentary discussions, and journalistic reports have documented the aftermath of the Galwan Valley clash, including new Chinese activities along the Line of Actual Control (LAC). A parliamentary committee report has acknowledged the loss of access to certain patrol points in eastern Ladakh. Military officials and independent analysts have corroborated, at various times, the ongoing disputes and loss of patrolling rights over substantial stretches of territory, including parts of Ladakh's Galwan and Depsang areas. Local residents are also unable to access grazing lands. The loss of about 2,000 square kilometres, cited by Mr. Gandhi, is also based on estimates by independent defence experts studying China's LAC transgressions. The general thrust of Mr. Gandhi's remarks — i.e., China has altered the status quo to India's disadvantage and that the government's public statements have not always aligned with ground realities — is supported by public evidence. Thus, the Court must resist the temptation to offer moral or patriotic judgments and instead direct its considerable energies to the rigorous and impartial adjudication of legal questions. Only by adhering to this principle can the Court reinforce its legitimacy and protect the tenets of free and open public debate.

## RAPE AND PUNISHMENT

Powerful perpetrators are rarely made accountable for their actions, and in that backdrop, the conviction and life sentencing of Prajwal Revanna, former Janata Dal (Secular) Member of Parliament and grandson of former Prime Minister H.D. Deve Gowda, for a heinous crime comes as a relief. This is the first of the four cases of rape and sexual harassment against the 34-year-old Gowda scion. The former Member of Parliament had raped a 48-year-old domestic worker twice at the family's homes in Hassan and Bengaluru in 2021, and recorded it on his mobile phone. In April 2024, ahead of the general election, explicit clips of his sexual misdemeanours were leaked through pen drives strewn across public places in Hassan, the Gowda home town. In the videos, Revanna's face is not visible, only the women's, a gross violation of their safety and privacy. The former help and other women came forward with their complaints but their agony was far from over. Using political muscle, and aided by his parents, former Minister H.D. Revanna and Bhavani Revanna, he did his best to arm twist the system, threatening a survivor, trying to stop her from testifying. But a Special Investigation Team (SIT) worked with alacrity and he was finally arrested in May 2024. The SIT filed the first charge sheet in August 2024.

The video, where the domestic worker is seen pleading with Prajwal Revanna to spare her, DNA analysis and her testimony formed key evidence in the trial which began in May this year. The



Special Court of Sessions to hear criminal cases against former and present Members of Parliament and MLAs pronounced the verdict on August 1. The speedy trial and conviction will give hope to other survivors battling for justice in sexual assault cases. The court convicted Revanna on all charges framed against him, including under Sections 376(2)(n) (repeated rape on the same woman), 506 (criminal intimidation), 201 (disappearance of evidence) of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) and 66E (violation of privacy) of the Information Technology Act, 2000. Section 376(2) of the IPC states that a person convicted under it “shall be punished with rigorous imprisonment for a term which shall not be less than 10 years, but which may extend to imprisonment for life...” Often, even when multiple complaints are raised, leaders with political clout get away. The laws are in place. All that the government machinery needs to do is act swiftly and sensitively, and create a safe space so that survivors of sexual abuse can come forward without fear.

## WHY WERE THE MALEGAON BLAST ACCUSED FREED?

### The story so far:

On July 31, a Special National Investigation Agency (NIA) Court acquitted all seven accused in the 2008 Malegaon bomb blast case, including Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leader and former MP Pragma Singh Thakur and serving Army Lieutenant Colonel Prasad Purohit. Special Judge A.K. Lahoti observed that although the occurrence of the bomb blast was indisputable, the prosecution had failed to produce credible and admissible evidence establishing the accused’s involvement in the crime.

### What was the Malegaon blast case?

On September 29, 2008, during the holy month of Ramzan, a powerful bomb blast ripped through Malegaon, a communally sensitive town in Maharashtra. Around 9:35 p.m., an explosive device concealed in an LML Freedom motorcycle detonated near the Shakeel Goods Transport Company. The explosion killed six people, injured 95 others, and caused significant damage to surrounding property. An FIR was promptly registered and the investigation was initially undertaken by the Nashik Rural Police and Mumbai’s Anti-Terrorism Squad (ATS). In 2011, the case was transferred to the NIA. Of the 14 individuals arrested in connection with the blast, charges against seven were eventually dropped. The remaining seven, Pragma Singh Thakur, Colonel Shrikant Purohit, Ramesh Upadhyay, Sameer Kulkarni, Ajay Rahirkar, Sudhakar Dwivedi, and Sudhakar Chaturvedi, were put on trial. They were prosecuted under various provisions of the Indian Penal Code, 1860, along with charges under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA), 1967, and the Explosive Substances Act, 1908.

According to the ATS, conspiracy meetings had taken place across various locations allegedly under Ms. Thakur’s leadership. However, several witnesses, including serving Army officers, later retracted their statements in court, alleging that their earlier testimonies had been coerced. Many of the accused also claimed that their confessions were extracted under torture. The case also attracted widespread attention following the resignation of NIA special public prosecutor Rohini Salian, who alleged that she had been instructed to “go soft” on the accused and that the agency was deliberately weakening the case against the so-called “Hindu terror” network.



### Why were the accused acquitted?

The court held that Ms. Thakur was not in “conscious possession” of the LML Freedom motorcycle in which the explosive device was allegedly planted. The Judge further observed that there was neither eyewitness testimony nor circumstantial evidence to suggest that Ms. Thakur had handed over the motorcycle to the co-accused or was involved in assembling the explosive device. Instead, he noted that the explosive could have been hung, placed, or kept near the motorcycle, rather than fitted inside it. Judge Lahoti observed that the forensic expert who examined the motorcycle, on which the explosive device was allegedly planted, had admitted that it was merely his “guesswork” that led him to conclude the bomb was placed in the vehicle’s boot. No scientific test had been conducted to verify the placement of the explosive. Accordingly, the Judge held that in the absence of any primary forensic analysis, the expert’s testimony failed to inspire confidence. The ATS further alleged that the explosive used in the blast was RDX, claiming it had been procured by Colonel Purohit during his posting in Jammu & Kashmir. However, the court found no evidence establishing the source of the explosive or how it was procured or transported.

However, Judge Lahoti rejected Mr. Purohit’s claim that his association with fringe organisations like Abhinav Bharat was part of his official duties as an intelligence officer. He noted that documentary evidence clearly established Mr. Purohit’s role as a trustee of the Abhinav Bharat Trust. However, there was no material on record to suggest that his superiors had authorised him to join the trust or to collect and utilise its funds.

Moreover, the ATS, which initially investigated the blast, based its case primarily on the accused having participated in conspiracy meetings related to execution of the attack. Its key evidence comprised confessional statements recorded under the Maharashtra Control of Organised Crime Act (MCOCA), 1999. However, these confessions were rendered inadmissible after MCOCA was dropped from the case in 2016, when the NIA took over the investigation and flagged procedural lapses. The court concurred, noting that the sanction to invoke MCOCA had been granted without “application of judicial mind.” Judge Lahoti noted that Additional Chief Secretary of the Home Department, Mumbai, Chitkala Zutshi, had failed to consult the investigating officer before granting sanction under the UAPA. As a result, the statutory presumptions under the Act, such as the reverse burden of proof, could not be invoked against the accused, the court held.

### What happens next?

Advocate Shahid Nadeem, representing Nisar Ahmed Haji Sayyed Bilal, who lost his son in the blast, told the media that the case reflected “significant failures” on the part of the NIA. He added that the victims’ families intend to explore legal remedies by filing an independent appeal in the Bombay High Court. Meanwhile, political pressure is mounting on the Maharashtra government to file its own appeal, as it did following the acquittals in the 2006 Mumbai train blasts case.

## WHY IS NE ON EDGE ABOUT ASSAM EVICTIONS?

### The story so far:

The Assam government’s drive to evict encroachers from forestlands has sent alarm bells ringing in other States of the region. Now, States bordering Assam are taking measures to ensure that those evicted from Assam do not cross over.



### **When did the eviction drive start in Assam?**

The BJP came to power in 2016 by promising to secure jaati (race), maati (land), and bhethi (hearth). Based on a Gauhati High Court order to reclaim encroached forestlands, the first eviction drive was carried out in three fringe villages of eastern Assam's Kaziranga National Park in September 2016. Two people died at Gorukhuti in north-central Assam's Darrang district when the eviction drive resumed in September 2021, five months after the BJP retained power and Himanta Biswa Sarma became Chief Minister. The eviction drives, allegedly targeted at Bengali Muslims, resumed in June 2025, coinciding with charges of corruption against the BJP-led government, one of them involving the purchase and redistribution of Gir cows for an agricultural project at Gorukhuti, from where migrant Muslims were evicted.

### **What are the roots of the problem?**

Evicting encroachers from forestlands, wetlands, and government revenue lands is not a new phenomenon in Assam. However, the operation has been high on optics as the BJP and its sub-nationalist regional allies have accused the 15-year rule by Congress of having paved the ground for encroachment by the 'Bangladeshi', 'Miya', or 'illegal infiltrators' — pejoratives for Muslims with roots in present-day Bangladesh — for votes. This category of Muslims has long polarised electoral politics in Assam during and after the anti-foreigners Assam Agitation (1979-'85), which led to the signing of an accord prescribing a cut-off date — midnight of March 24, 1971 — for the detection, deletion (from electoral rolls), and deportation of "illegal immigrants" or Bangladeshi nationals.

### **Why is the drive overtly aggressive?**

The eviction drives have impacted non-Muslims as well, including 130 families whose houses were bulldozed to clear the Silsako Beel, a major wetland in Guwahati, of encroachment in 2022. Those against migrant Muslims, however, has garnered more attention for their scale and intensity, as it has led to the death of at least five people between 2016 and July 2025, when 1,080 families were evicted from 135 hectares of the Paikan Reserve Forest in Assam's Goalpara district. This aggression is also reflected in the rhetoric of the Chief Minister and other BJP leaders, who refer to the drive as a long-term exercise to save Assam from 'land jihad'.

Before the drive was launched this year, the Chief Minister said 15,288.52 bighas of satra (Vaishnav monastery) lands remain illegally occupied by people of doubtful citizenship across 29 districts. He also referred to the Union Environment Ministry's report to the National Green Tribunal that 3,620.9 square kilometres of forest area in Assam were under encroachment as of March 2024. The Chief Minister vowed to continue the eviction drive until Assam is encroachment-free in "at least 10 years", while clarifying that tribal people living in forest areas from before 2005 and covered by the Forest Rights Act would not be touched. This followed the fast-track resettlement of at least 12 Ahom families who were evicted along with migrant Muslims from village grazing reserves across four locations in northeastern Assam's Lakhimpur district.

### **Why are Assam's neighbours jittery?**

Assam's neighbours were passive as long as the eviction drives were in areas far from the interstate borders. NGOs in Nagaland stirred into action after the Assam government announced an anti-encroachment drive in Golaghat district's Uriamghat. They saw it as a move to push "illegal Bangladeshi immigrants" inside Nagaland under the agenda of usurping "ancestral Naga lands". Before the drive commenced, the police in Nagaland's Niuland district intercepted and turned 200



vehicles carrying “illegal migrants” back to Assam. A few days later, a conglomerate of extremist groups announced a task force to guard the Assam-Nagaland border against infiltrators. The governments of Manipur, Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh, and Mizoram followed suit. They issued orders to the authorities in areas bordering Assam to increase vigilance, prevent the evicted people from coming in, and make the issuance of the inner-line permit, a temporary travel document, stricter.

#### **How are border disputes linked to eviction?**

Although opposition political parties in Assam see the eviction drive against Bengali-speaking Muslims as a part of the BJP’s agenda of polarisation ahead of the 2026 Assembly polls, encroachment is at the core of the State’s boundary disputes with Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram, and Nagaland. These States were carved out of Assam between 1963 and 1972. In March 2025, the Assam Assembly was told that the four States have been occupying almost 83,000 hectares of land belonging to the State. These States have, off and on, driven migrant Muslims out to Assam, a State they accuse of having patronised “illegal immigrants” and made them settle along the borders as a ploy to claim disputed lands. More than 350 people have died due to the inter-State disputes, which Assam has partially resolved with Arunachal Pradesh and Meghalaya. On July 30, the Gauhati High Court directed these five States to constitute a high-level committee to facilitate a coordinated action to clear illegal settlements from forestlands.

#### **FIX THE FLAWS**

The Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha, Rahul Gandhi, has levelled serious allegations of “criminal fraud” against the Election Commission of India (ECI), by claiming that over one lakh fake votes were created in the Mahadevapura Assembly segment of the Bangalore Central Lok Sabha constituency in order to ensure a victory for the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in the 2024 general election. His detailed presentation outlining five categories of alleged electoral malpractices demands careful examination, not wholesale dismissal. The Congress leader’s documentation reveals troubling patterns: voters registered multiple times within the same constituency, identical Electors Photo Identity Card (EPIC) numbers across different States, and improbably large numbers of voters listed at single addresses. While identical EPIC numbers across different States are not a significant issue — the ECI addressed these anomalies earlier this year — his claim that party workers found booth slips showing multiple votes by the “same person” in a single booth represents a serious violation of the “one person, one vote” principle, if verified. Mr Gandhi claimed that these discrepancies were not limited to Mahadevapura but were part of a calculated modus operandi to help the BJP in marginal constituencies across the country. The Congress party had made similar allegations about massive increases in electoral registrations prior to the Maharashtra Assembly election, claiming that these had contributed to the unexpected victory of the BJP and its allies, though without elaborate proof of erroneous registrations as seen in Mahadevapura. Mr. Gandhi’s analysis stops short of proving that these discrepancies directly enabled the BJP’s victory. The BJP won the Mahadevapura Assembly seat in 2023 with a margin of approximately 44,500 votes. The increased margin, to over 1,14,000 votes, in 2024 happened even though the total accretions in the electoral roll were around 52,600 electors and the actual voter count increased only by around 20,000. Establishing a causal link between electoral roll errors and poll outcomes requires more than circumstantial correlation. The leap from documenting registration flaws to alleging deliberate fraud orchestrated by the ECI in collusion with the BJP remains unsubstantiated.



The ECI has adopted an unnecessarily defensive stance by demanding that evidence be submitted ‘under oath’ — a requirement that legal experts suggest may not apply in this situation — and attributing electoral discrepancies to the failure by political parties to raise concerns during registration. More problematic is the ECI’s practice of releasing voter information in bulky image PDFs rather than structured, searchable text formats, which hinders verification efforts by political parties and civil society organisations. The ECI’s approach to voter registration relies heavily on self-declarations and lacks robust verification mechanisms. The Mahadevapura controversy highlights the urgent need for comprehensive electoral roll reform through door-to-door verification, the most reliable method. The ECI’s Special Intensive Revision (SIR) exercise in Bihar appears to respond to critics about electoral roll problems. In theory, this should help maintain more accurate rolls. However, rushed implementation and problematic identity verification requirements risk creating new issues related to legitimate voter deletion. Data already show higher deletions among women electors than men in Bihar. Considering that most out-migrants are males, the higher deletion of women electors could indicate that marginalised electors — particularly those who are illiterate (literacy rate of women aged 15-49 years in Bihar was 55% in 2019-21, according to the National Family Health Survey) — have been erroneously excluded in the enumeration process for the draft SIR roll.

The broader challenge extends to multiple aspects of electoral administration: lax implementation of campaign finance regulations and the Model Code of Conduct, tallying VVPATs from only small samples rather than statistically significant proportions, inadequate technical safeguards for symbol loading in VVPATs, and the unwillingness to submit the EVM’s technical safeguards to independent expert verification. The ECI’s resistance to retaining CCTV footage from polling booths, delays in publishing final turnout figures, and evolution into an institution viewing criticism as an attack represent a troubling departure from democratic norms. The fundamental issue underlying current electoral controversies is the erosion of institutional trust. The ECI’s credibility depends not merely on technical soundness but also on public confidence in its impartiality and transparency. The process of appointing Election Commissioners needs to follow the Supreme Court’s recommendation to include the Chief Justice of India in the selection panel, currently side-stepped by the government. Mr. Gandhi’s allegations fall short of establishing deliberate fraud. But his party’s findings perform a valuable democratic function by highlighting systemic flaws. The appropriate response requires comprehensive voter roll auditing, enhanced transparency in data sharing, improved technical safeguards including comprehensive audit trails of EVM commands and security protocols for symbol loading, stronger enforcement of electoral regulations, and consultations with political parties. The ECI must embrace the principle that democratic institutions grow stronger through scrutiny. The alternative — continued erosion of confidence in electoral processes — poses far greater risks to democratic governance than any specific allegation of malpractice.

#### MORE WOMEN THAN MEN DELETED FROM BIHAR’S ELECTORAL ROLLS

An analysis of Bihar’s draft electoral rolls released on August 1, prepared after the completion of the special intensive revision (SIR) exercise, shows that more women than men have been deleted from the rolls.

A total of 3.82 crore male electors are part of the latest electoral rolls — about 25 lakh male electors fewer than the rolls prepared in January this year. A total of 3.41 crore female electors are part of the latest electoral rolls — about 31 lakh female electors fewer than the rolls prepared in January. Chart 1 shows the gender-wise number of electors in the January and August rolls.



In fact, in 37 out of Bihar's 38 districts, more women electors have been deleted from the rolls than men. In Gopalganj, the number of women electors fell from over 10 lakh in January to about 8.21 lakh in August — a 17.8% decline. In comparison, male electors in Gopalganj declined from over 10.37 lakh to 9.23 lakh — a drop of 11%. This means that deletions among women were 6.8 percentage points more than those among men (17.8% minus 11%) in the Gopalganj rolls. This was the highest among all districts. Map 2 depicts the district-wise gender-gap in deletion rates.

The gender-divide in deletions raises many concerning questions. According to the Election Commission, the electors who are not part of the August list have either died, or are registered in multiple locations, or have permanently migrated out of Bihar, or are untraceable.

Death rates between men and women are generally similar. Chart 3 shows male and female death rates in Bihar over the past five years. Except during the pandemic — when male death rates briefly spiked above those for women — the trend has largely remained nearly equal. The number of deletions due to duplicate entries or untraceable addresses is likely to be relatively smaller.

This leaves one other major factor: out-migration from Bihar. Both anecdotal evidence and data suggest that when it comes to migrating out, men vastly outnumber women. Chart 4 shows that, in 2020-21, for every 100 male migrants in India, 31.4 had migrated from another State and 65.6 within the same State. In contrast, among 100 female migrants, only 7.2 had migrated from another State, while 92.6 moved within their home State. This pattern holds true for Bihar as well and perhaps it is even more stark for men from the State.

If men outnumber women in out-migration by this huge a margin, then why did more women get deleted than men in the post-SIR rolls? Given that deaths, the other major factor, cannot explain such a variance. A plausible explanation is a gender gap in the submission of enumeration forms during the SIR exercise. As of 2019-21, only 55% of women in Bihar were estimated to be literate — the lowest female literacy rate in the country — compared to over 76% among men. Could such low literacy levels have hindered women from properly filling out and submitting the forms?

In yesterday's Data Point, we found that more deletions occurred in districts where more women than men turned out to vote in absolute numbers, even though there were more registered male electors. We had suggested that these districts had higher out-migration of men. But deletions have been more among women. This suggests that the method of self-enumeration could have affected women, among whom there is a lower literacy rate, leading to their higher deletion rates.

More analysis of the SIR exercise will follow in these columns.

## BIHAR ELECTORAL ROLLS AFTER SIR SHOW CONCERNING TRENDS

On August 1, the draft electoral rolls for Bihar, following the completion of the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) exercise, were released. A total of 7.24 crore electors are part of the latest electoral rolls — over 56 lakh electors fewer than the rolls prepared in January this year. According to the Election Commission of India, the voters who are not part of the August list have died, or are registered in two locations, or have permanently migrated out of Bihar, or are untraceable.

A district-wise analysis of the August electoral rolls shows that there was a tendency of a higher number of deletions from the rolls in districts with larger Muslim populations (2011 Census). Chart 1 plots the difference in the number of electors in the August rolls compared to the January rolls, on the horizontal axis. This serves as a measure of deletions from the January rolls. On the



vertical axis, we have plotted the districts' Muslim population share. In essence, we have plotted Muslim population against deletion in the SIR.

The chart shows a moderate positive correlation (Pearson correlation  $r \approx 0.43$ ), indicating that districts with a higher Muslim population generally saw more deletions. But confirming whether Muslims were disproportionately deleted in the revised rolls calls for a more granular analysis.

On the other hand, there is negative correlation ( $r \approx -0.46$ ) in the change in electors compared to the share of Scheduled Caste (SC) population, district-wise (Chart 2). That is, districts with a higher SC population tend to have lower number of deletions. However, the earlier note of caution applies to this case as well.

A district-wise analysis of the August electoral rolls also shows that, in general, the higher the possible number of out-migrants from a district, the more the number of deletions from the roll. This confirms one of the ECI's reasons for the deletions — out-migration.

We used female turnout relative to the electorate in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections as a proxy to measure district-wise out-migration in Bihar. We did this because, in 2024, Bihar stood out among the States that had a higher female-to-male voters ratio, despite having a lower female-to-male electorate ratio (Chart 3). This means that in Bihar, more women than men turned out to vote in absolute numbers even though there were more registered male electors. While there might be other factors explaining this gendered variation, the difference suggests that fewer men were available to vote despite being registered. Historically, Bihar is one of the largest sources of out-migration, which could explain the lower male turnout.

Chart 4 plots the district-wise 'out-migration index' on the vertical axis. This compares women's share among all voters (male plus female) to their share among all electors in the 2020 polls\*. A positive value indicates more women voters turned out to vote in comparison to men despite higher male elector registration numbers. This is what we use as a proxy for higher out-migration. Chart 4 also plots the difference in the number of electors on the horizontal axis. In essence, we plot out-migration against deletion in the SIR.

The trend line shows that there is a moderate positive correlation ( $r \approx 0.40$ ). This means that in districts with higher out-migration, there seems to be more deletion of electors. However, this does not mean that deletions occurred exactly along gender lines, to remove possible male migrants from the rolls. In a subsequent Data Point, we will examine the deletions further in light of these findings.

#### STUDY SHOWS CLERICAL ERRORS IN DOCUMENTS 'FATAL' FOR CITIZENSHIP

He failed to establish that his father Khurshed Ali, recorded in the electoral rolls in 1989, 1997, and 2010, was the same person as Furshed Ali, enlisted in the 1965 and 1970 rolls in Assam.

In 2010, the court noted "discrepancy" in the name of the father of Rajendra Das, enlisted in 1970 as Radha Charan and Radhacharan Das in 1966. And in 2019, Ibrahim Ali Mir was unable to establish that 'Late Nurul', listed as his father in the 1989 rolls, was the same person as Nurul Islam in the 1965 and 1970 lists of electors.

These are among several instances of inconsistencies in documents that have been "fatal" for the citizenship of many in Assam, driven by a "pervasive culture of suspicion", a study titled



“Unmaking citizens: The architecture of rights violations and exclusion in India’s citizenship trials” revealed.

The report by the Bengaluru-based National Law School of India University and the Queen Mary University of London, released on July 27, called for an urgent, fundamental rethinking of the legal structures governing citizenship in India, given the possibility of an Assam-like exercise to update the National Register of Citizens across the country. Mohsin Alam Bhat, Arushi Gupta and Shardul Gopujkar are the authors of the study.

The study elaborates on systematic violations of natural justice leading up to status determination, such as denying access to inquiry reports and shielding of officers, and systematic violations during the citizenship determination process by improper cross-questioning and evidence not read as a whole.

It further said the procedural defects are not corrected and are often reinforced by the court’s jurisprudence.

#### BOOK BAN IN KASHMIR REVEALS AN INSECURE ESTABLISHMENT

Less than five months after Union Home Minister Amit Shah posted on X that “under the Modi government, separatism is breathing its last, and the triumph of unity is echoing across Kashmir”, the Union Territory’s Home Department has issued a notification, by order of Lieutenant Governor Manoj Sinha, banning 25 books. It claims that they propagate a “false narrative and secessionism in Jammu and Kashmir”. And a day later, the police launched a drive across Kashmir to seize copies of the banned books. These include the works of A G Noorani, Arundhati Roy, Victoria Schofield and Ather Zia. What changed between March and August that an establishment which was congratulating itself for the progress made in Kashmir should display such heightened insecurity five months later that it should seek to banish books? Even in the aftermath of the Pahalgam attack — for which the Centre has held Pakistan responsible — the message of unity was underlined and emphasised by the politicians and people of the Valley. They stood with the rest of the country in a difficult moment, and shared the grief of the families who lost their loved ones in the terror strike. Kashmir has come far since the abrogation of Article 370 six years ago, and it now also has an elected government in place. That the Centre and its appointee, the L-G, still believe that banning books and curbing freedoms is an effective strategy against alienation and disaffection in the Valley, belies their claims of the distance covered. The ban on books is both disturbing and disheartening.

The banned books engage with the region’s complicated, and often tragic, history of conflict. That history cannot be wished away. Indeed, for peace to endure, it must be engaged with, and different perspectives must converse and even collide in an open space. Across the world, in societies moving towards a resolution of tangled histories, repressive acts like book bans have rarely contributed to lasting accommodation, or assimilation. By all accounts, the most effective tool to bring stability and combat disenchantment remains a deepening of democracy and institutionalisation of people’s participation in decision-making. The only way to combat a “narrative” the government disagrees with is to build its own in a manner that is inclusive and persuasive. Since the abrogation of Article 370, the Union government has highlighted the region’s economic development, underlining that Kashmiris have a stake in the larger India growth story. That promise must be bolstered by a renewed commitment to strengthening federal democracy and guaranteeing individual freedoms in the Valley.



Now that the UT of J&K has a chief minister and legislature, it is looking ahead to the return of statehood, a promise made by the Centre. Wednesday's draconian order, however, takes several steps backward. The J&K administration also seems to have forgotten the most basic principle of freedom of expression, articulated by then Chief Justice of the Madras High Court, S K Kaul, while quashing the criminal case against writer Perumal Murugan: "There is no compulsion to read a book. Literary tastes may vary — what is right and acceptable to one may not be so to others. Yet, the right to write is unhindered." So, too, is the right to read.

#### THOOTHUKUDI'S CASTE KILLING: A TRAGEDY THAT DEMANDS JUSTICE AND REFORM

The brutal murder of C. Kavin Selvaganesh, a 27-year-old Scheduled Caste youth, in Tamil Nadu's Thoothukudi district on July 27, 2025, is a chilling reminder of caste's enduring grip on India's social fabric. Hacked to death in broad daylight by Surjith, the brother of his girlfriend Subhashini from the Maravar (Most Backward Class) community, Kavin's killing over their inter-caste love affair has sparked outrage and grief. This tragedy, rooted in caste pride, demands not just justice but systemic reform to end such barbaric "honour killings."

Kavin, a successful IT professional, and Subhashini, a Siddha doctor, shared a bond forged in school, undeterred by caste barriers. Yet, Surjith's violent opposition, allegedly backed by his sub-inspector parents, Saravanan and Krishnakumari, culminated in a machete attack after Kavin visited Subhashini's clinic. The family's refusal to accept Kavin's body, demanding the parents' arrest and a CBI probe, underscores their distrust in local authorities, especially given the accused's police connections. The case's transfer to the CB-CID and Surjith's detention under the Goondas Act are steps forward, but the parents' delayed arrest fuels suspicions of bias.

This killing exposes the persistent scourge of caste-based violence in southern Tamil Nadu, where 51 such murders have been recorded since 2017 with a conviction rate below 1%. The Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act offers some recourse, but broader "honour killing" laws, as demanded by activists like A. Kathir, remain absent. The Madras High Court's 2019 call for special cells to protect inter-caste couples has gone unheeded, leaving lovers vulnerable.

Kavin's death is a call to action. Tamil Nadu must enact stringent anti-caste violence laws, ensure swift justice, and promote cultural shifts through education. Political parties, often complicit in fanning caste divisions, must prioritize humanity over vote banks. Only then can love triumph over hate, and tragedies like Kavin's become relics of the past.

#### TAMIL NADU UNVEILS STATE EDUCATION POLICY, COMMITS TO 2-LANGUAGE FORMULA IN DEPARTURE FROM NEP

In a departure from the National Education Policy (NEP), Tamil Nadu on Friday launched its own State Education Policy, with Chief Minister M K Stalin describing it as "a vision document for the future" tailored to the state's "unique character".

- Tamil Nadu has become the first state to formally adopt its own comprehensive school education policy in direct contrast to the Centre's NEP — an act seen as both pedagogical and political.
- The 230-page policy document was developed by a 14-member committee headed by retired Delhi High Court Chief Justice D Murugesan.



- The policy scraps board examinations for class 11 with immediate effect — a move that reverses a 2017 decision by the then-AIADMK government.
- The policy sets a target to ensure that all students complete school and move into higher education. Stalin noted that 72% of students who passed class 12 this year had already enrolled in higher education.
- According to the document, at the heart of the new policy lies a commitment to social equity, academic excellence, and holistic development.
- The policy is structured across key thematic areas — foundational literacy and numeracy, curriculum reform, teacher training, safe and inclusive schools, digital learning, and sustainable infrastructure. The government's flagship Ennum Ezhuthum Mission remains central to its literacy goals.
- Under the policy, special attention is given to Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, minorities, first-generation learners, and children with special needs, with measures ranging from inclusive curriculum and barrier-free infrastructure, scholarships and targeted mentoring.
- The Centre's push to implement the NEP across all states has faced resistance from several quarters. Tamil Nadu has fiercely resisted it, citing its emphasis on Hindi and the three-language formula.
- The policy also includes a structured push toward 21st-century skills and digital literacy.

**Do You Know:**

- 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 only provides a broad direction and is not mandatory to follow. Since education is a concurrent subject (both the Centre and the state governments can make laws on it). The incumbent government has set a target of 2040 to implement the entire policy.
- The three-language formula, dating back to 1968, means students in Hindi-speaking states should learn a modern Indian language, apart from Hindi and English and, in non-Hindi-speaking states, Hindi along with the regional language and English.



## WHY SYLHETI, SPOKEN BY MILLIONS IN NORTHEAST, IS NOT A 'BANGLADESHI LANGUAGE'

Amid a roiling controversy triggered by a Delhi Police letter seemingly referring to Bengali as the “Bangladeshi national language,” a social media post by BJP leader Amit Malviya has sparked an outcry in Assam’s Barak Valley.

- In his defence of the letter, Malviya claimed it was referring to “a set of dialects, syntax, and speech patterns that are distinctly different from the Bangla spoken in India”, and gave the example of “Sylhelti” as being “nearly incomprehensible to Indian Bengalis”.
- Sylheti is spoken on both sides of the border, in the Sylhet Division of Bangladesh as well as the Barak Valley Division of southern Assam. There is also a sizable presence of Sylheti-speakers in neighbouring Meghalaya and Tripura.
- The primary argument for referring to Sylheti as a dialect of Bengali — and not a language in its own right — is mutual intelligibility, that is, speakers of both tongues understand each other. However, there is scholarly disagreement on the matter.
- “The claim of mutual intelligibility by some speakers of both Sylheti and Bengali may be more an effect of the speakers’ exposure to both languages,” linguists Candide Simard, Sarah M Dopierala, and E Marie Thaut wrote in their paper ‘Introducing the Sylheti language and its speakers’ (2020).
- “Sylheti-speaking areas of Bangladesh and India are characterised by diglossia, where standard Bengali is the language of education and literacy and Sylheti is the vernacular variety used in everyday interactions,” the linguists wrote.
- Speakers on both sides of the border nonetheless have a strong affinity to the Bengali language, and often identify as Bengali themselves.

### Do You Know:

- Tapodhir Bhattacharjee, a former vice-chancellor of Assam University Silchar and a Bengali literary theorist, said that the primary difference between the Sylheti dialect and standardised Bengali is phonetic, while the two are almost identical in morphology and syntax.
- While Bhattacharjee recognises that there was once a Sylhet-Nagri script — the existence of a unique system of writing is often seen as a marker of a language — he refers to it as an “esoteric script”.
- Historian Ashfaque Hossain refers to Sylhet as historically being “a frontier of Bengal”.
- The present-day Sylhet Division in Bangladesh, comprising the districts of Habibganj, Sunamganj, Sylhet, and Moulvibazar, was made a part of Assam soon after it was split from Bengal in 1874.
- Geographically contiguous with Cachar in the Bengali-majority Barak Valley, between 1874 and 1947, Sylhet witnessed a sustained churn over the question of whether it should be a part of Assam or Bengal. “On one side, this was a matter of Bengali versus Assamese, and on the other, Hindu versus Muslim,” Hossain wrote.



- Historian Anindita Dasgupta wrote in 'Remembering Sylhet: A Forgotten Story of India's 1947 Partition', "... the Hindus of Sylhet demanded for a return to the more "advanced" Bengal, whereas the Muslims by and large preferred to remain in Assam where its leaders, along with the Assamese Muslims, found a more powerful political voice..."
- The story of Sylheti migration to parts of present-day Assam, Meghalaya and Tripura, however, is even older. Dasgupta wrote about "Sylheti Hindu bhodrolok" who were "economic migrants" across the region.
- Malviya's claim of the dialect being "a shorthand for the linguistic markers used to profile illegal immigrants from Bangladesh" has thus drawn strong reactions not only from the BJP's political opponents in the Barak Valley but from within the party.

## HOW WILL RAILWAY TO SAIRANG HELP IN REGIONAL CONNECTIVITY?

### The story so far:

The Indian Railways recently commissioned the new 51.38 km track to Sairang, 18 km short of Mizoram's capital Aizawl. It raises hopes for India's ambitious Act East Policy which envisages rail and road links with Southeast Asia.

### When did the Mizoram project start?

Mizoram had 1.5 km of metre gauge railway track connecting Bairabi in the State's Kolasib district to Assam's Silchar before the gauge conversion project, sanctioned in 2000, was undertaken. The extension of this project to Sairang, which entailed laying a 51.38 km track, began in 2008-09, but the progress was slow due to inclement weather, a difficult and landslide-prone terrain, manpower shortage, and issues with transporting construction materials. The project was part of the Indian Railways' plan in the early 2010s to connect all the northeastern State capitals to the country's rail network, although the Sairang railway station is 18 km short of Mizoram's capital, Aizawl. The Bairabi-Sairang section, which received safety clearance in June 2025 and awaits formal inauguration, has 48 tunnels with a total length of 12.85 km and 142 bridges. The project cost more than ₹5,020 crore and the lives of 18 workers when the bridge with the tallest pier collapsed during construction in August 2023.

### What is its significance?

Landlocked Mizoram's fastest access to the rest of the country is through air travel. The Aizawl-Silchar highway, also via Sairang, is the second-fastest option that consumes at least five hours. Trains, including a proposed Rajdhani Express, from the Sairang railhead will slash this travel time to 1.5 hours and the cost of transportation considerably. Railway officials say the biggest gain for the State will be in tourism, trade, and transportation of goods, reducing the dependence on trucks to a large extent. They said the Sairang railhead is strategic vis-a-vis the Act East Policy, envisaging rail and road connectivity to improve trade with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and other East Asian countries, deepen diplomatic engagements, and build stronger security cooperation. Sairang is also expected to be vital for transshipment of goods from the India-funded Sittwe Port in Myanmar.



### What is the Act East Policy?

The Act East Policy, announced by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2014, was a more ambitious version of the Look East Policy initiated during the Congress government in 1991 with the key objective of transforming the northeastern region into India's gateway to the ASEAN bloc. Official data show that the Centre increased the budgetary allocations for the region by 300% from ₹36,108 crore during the 2014-15 fiscal to more than ₹1,00,000 crore during 2024-25. More than 10,000 km of highways and 800 km of railway tracks were built, eight new airports established, and several inland waterway projects undertaken during this period. Vital to linking Southeast Asia by rail are the 82.5 km Dimapur-Zubza (near Kohima) project in Nagaland, the Imphal-Moreh plan in Manipur, and the Asian Highway 1 from Assam to Moreh via Kohima and Imphal. While the Nagaland project is on track, the ethnic conflict in Manipur has affected the proposed railway line between Imphal and Moreh.

The connectivity projects to link the northeast with Southeast Asia have not progressed beyond India's borders due to the unrest in India's neighbourhood. The Act East Policy ran into the civil war in Myanmar following a military coup in February 2021, followed by the fall of the Sheikh Hasina government in Bangladesh in August 2024. The Agartala-Akhaura railway project, which would have provided Tripura faster access to Kolkata through Bangladesh and connectivity to the Chittagong Port, has been stalled. The biggest setback has been the delay of the ₹2,904 crore Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project in Myanmar, which would have reduced the distance between Mizoram and Kolkata by 1,000 km.

### ARMY OVERHAUL: DRONES TO BE IN ACTION AT BATTALION LEVEL

The Indian Army is set to undergo a significant organisational overhaul that will include integrating Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) and counter-UAV as standard weapon systems at the battalion level across most of its arms, The Indian Express has learnt.

- The transformation will also involve establishing light commando battalions, creating integrated brigades, and developing specialised artillery regiments and batteries tailored for future warfare, sources told this newspaper.
- These plans, under discussion for several months, have gained pace after Operation Sindoor in May, following the Pahalgam terror attack. Some of the changes will be drawn from lessons obtained during this operation, the sources said.
- One of the initiatives is to incorporate UAVs and counter-UAV systems into infantry battalions, as well as armoured and artillery regiments. While current battalions possess drones, they are often utilised as secondary systems in addition to established weapons and tasks. As a result, personnel are diverted from primary responsibilities to operate the UAVs.
- The new objective is to create a dedicated outfit within each unit that will be tasked primarily with operating drones. Each arm has been directed to draw up a structure that allows a select number of personnel to focus and train on this front, the sources said.
- In the infantry, for instance, plans are underway to introduce several surveillance drones at the platoon and company levels.



#### Do You Know:

- Op Sindoor in May revealed the increased use of military drones in new-age operations. Inducting a variety of drones as standard weapons at battalion levels will enable better training, procurement and maintenance.
- The Army will also establish Rudra brigades, which will consist of an all-arms brigade along with UAVs and other logistical elements. This will involve restructuring existing infantry, armoured and artillery brigades, which will allow Rudra brigades to function independently across various sectors as integrated units for future warfare.
- For the Regiment of Artillery, establishing two batteries with an increased number of guns each, as well as adding a third drone battery equipped with surveillance and combat drones, are being considered. Currently, each artillery regiment consists of three batteries, each with six guns.
- Divyastra artillery batteries are being created with next-generation long-range guns and loitering munitions capable of conducting surveillance and identifying and engaging targets in depth areas. They will be equipped with anti-drone systems for self-defence and area protection.
- Currently, there is a reconnaissance platoon responsible for navigating and leading units to their targets alongside three squadrons/ companies in Armoured/ Mechanized Infantry battalions. The recce platoons will be enhanced with surveillance and strike drones. Discussions are also underway to have two expanded squadrons/ companies instead of three, converting the third into a drone-based squadron/ company or integrating attack drones as part of tank squadrons.

### IAF'S UNENDING FIGHTER CONUNDRUM

#### The story so far:

After over six decades in service, the MiG-21 fighter jets are set to be retired from the Indian Air Force (IAF) in September this year. The formal ceremony is scheduled to be held at Chandigarh where the jets were first inducted in 1963. With this the fighter strength of the IAF will dip from 31 to 29 squadrons, against the sanctioned strength of 42 squadrons. A fighter squadron typically has 16-18 jets. The IAF is awaiting deliveries of the Light Combat Aircraft (LCA)-Mk1A, which is expected to begin in the next few months after repeated delays. All this at a time when the Chinese Air Force and Navy have fielded around 1,900 fighters including more than 1,300 fourth-generation aircraft, not including trainers, as per a 2024 U.S. Department of Defence report. China has also deployed two Fifth Generation Fighter Aircraft (FGFA), recently unveiled two more advanced jets, and is likely to supply 40 J-35s stealth jets to Pakistan.

#### What has been the legacy of MiG-21s?

Contracted from the erstwhile Soviet Union after the 1962 war with China, the MiG-21s heralded the onset of supersonic aviation in the IAF and was also its first non-western fighter. A total of 872 MiG-21 aircraft have been inducted in the IAF, a bulk of them licence-manufactured by the state-owned Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL). The MiG-21s remained the mainstay of the IAF for several decades and a spate of accidents in the early 2000s earned them the name 'flying coffins'. Over the six decades, there were over 450 accidents involving the jet.

The jets played a key role in the 1965, 1971 wars, the 1999 Kargil conflict, and more recently in the aerial dual with Pakistan on February 27, 2019, a day after the Balakot air strike. During the



attack, Group Captain (then Wg Cdr) Abhinandan Varthaman's MiG-21 was shot down and fell in Pakistan Occupied Kashmir after he shot down a Pakistani F-16, according to the IAF.

In fact, in the absence of an Advanced Jet Trainer (AJT), before the Hawks were inducted in 2008, the MiG-21s were used for stage III training of young pilots for a long time as it was the "most suitable" fighter even though it was considered "sub-optimal" as a trainer.

The MiG-21 is also among the most successful fighter jets globally with over 6,000 jets of 12 types flown by over three dozen countries. Currently, there are two MiG-21 Bison squadrons in service — the No. 23 'Panthers' and the No. 3 'Cobras'. Incidentally, the No. 3 Squadron has the distinction of being the first to get the upgraded MiG-21 Bisons still in service and will now be the first to get the LCA-Mk1A. With the MiG-21s out, the MiG-29s are the last of the MiG series in service which together with the SU-30MKI remain the last of Russian-origin fighters.

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

Besides the MiG-21s, a majority of the current inventory, that is the early variants of the Jaguars, Mirage-2000s and Mig-29s, will start going out by the end of the decade. This leaves the SU-30MKI in service, the LCA variants planned to be inducted, and the Medium Role Fighter Aircraft (MRFA) while the indigenous FGFA, the Advanced Medium Combat Aircraft (AMCA) is under development.

The IAF currently operates two squadrons of the LCA-Mk1, which undertook maiden flight in January 2001 and was inducted in 2016. A more capable variant, the Mk-1A, which is to be inducted in large numbers, had been delayed initially due to development issues and later due to non-delivery of engines by General Electric (GE) Aerospace citing supply chain difficulties.

#### **How did it get delayed?**

The Defence Ministry had signed a ₹48,000 crore contract with HAL for 83 Mk1A jets, and deliveries were to start in March 2024 with at least 16 planes to be delivered to the IAF every year. However, not a single Tejas Mark-1A has been delivered so far. In August 2021, the HAL placed an order for 99 F-404 engines with GE Aerospace at a cost of ₹5,375 crore for the 83 Mk1A jets. The first engine arrived in India only in April this year after a delay of one and half years and the second engine was delivered early this month. Additionally, a deal for 97 additional jets, estimated to ₹67,000 crore, is expected to be concluded in the next few months. HAL has assured to scale up production to 24 jets a year.

Amid these delays, an Empowered Committee for Capability Enhancement of the IAF headed by the Defence Secretary R. K. Singh identified key thrust areas and made recommendations for medium- and long-term measures in the report submitted to Defence Minister Rajnath Singh in March.

As per the IAF, the LCA Mk2, larger and more capable than the Mk1 variants, is meant to replace the Mirage 2000, MiG-29 and Jaguars. It is expected to take first flight in 2026. In February 2025, IAF Chief Air Chief Marshal A. P. Singh said that they need to add 35-40 jets every year to make up for the shortage in numbers. Both these programmes, LCA-Mk1A and Mk2, are extremely critical to shore up fighter numbers of the IAF over the next 10-15 years. In an interview to PTI in June, HAL Chairman and Managing Director D. K. Sunil said that GE Aerospace is expected to supply 12 engines in the current fiscal and that the jets would be delivered to the IAF.

Moreover, India has procured 272 Su-30MKIs from Russia of which around 260 remain in service. Last December, the Ministry of Defence signed a ₹13,500 crore deal with HAL for 12 Sukhois to



replace those lost in crashes. A major upgrade programme for the Sukhoi's has been lined up to be undertaken by HAL. The upgrade of 84 jets in the first batch has already been approved. Meanwhile, by early 2040s, some of the earlier batch of SU-30MKIs will go out.

#### **What is the way forward?**

The IAF has drawn up an ambitious plan to induct more than 600 jets over the next two decades, a large number of them being LCA variants. This includes 180 LCA-Mk1A, over 120 LCA-Mk2, 114 MRFA and at least 120 AMCA. A Twin-Engine Deck Based Fighter for the Navy's aircraft carriers is also on the drawing board. However, all this hinges on timely production and deliveries.

Mr. Singh said in an interview recently that they are talking to partners for the likely import of a small number of fifth gen fighters as an interim measure while the AMCA development continues. The option is between the Russian SU-57 and American F-35. These are sensitive negotiations, Mr. Singh said adding, "When it reaches a tangible stage, whether it is an Acceptance of Necessity (AoN), a Request For Proposal or ultimately through a contract that is when the media will come to know."

Ultimately, it is the fifth gen AMCA that is the way forward while the LCA variants and MRFA fill numbers and add strength in the medium term. The Aeronautical Development Agency (ADA) that is developing the aircraft has floated an AoN inviting private sector participation for the production. Even HAL has to bid for it, unlike the nomination in the past. "I imagine it will take 3-6 months to reach the contract award stage", Mr. Singh said. "Thereafter the project itself of development and an AMCA prototype to actually take to the skies, it would be a 10-year program, I would imagine."

On the engine front, the F414 engine to power the LCA-Mk2 is to be licence manufactured by HAL for which commercial negotiations with GE are underway. The AMCA development is envisaged in two phases — MK1 development and couple of squadrons with the GE414 engine, and AMCA-Mk2 with a more powerful 110KN engine that is to be co-developed with a foreign partner for which talks are underway.

All this leaves the MRFA deal, for which the Request For Information was issued to global aircraft manufacturers in April 2019, but there has been no progress since. Given the huge cost involved, the long timelines and various other programmes already in the pipeline, it has to be seen how it can be taken forward.

### **IN FIRST 6 MONTHS OF 2025, OVER 29K KILLED IN NATIONAL HIGHWAY ACCIDENTS, MORE THAN 50% OF LAST YEAR: DATA**

Accident deaths on national highways this year appear to be on track to exceed the previous year's figure, shows data tabled by the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways in Lok Sabha on Thursday.

- According to the data, 29,018 people died on national highways in the first six months of this year — this is more than 50% of the total fatalities of last year. National highways in India account for over 30% of road accident deaths, even though they comprise only 2% of the total road network.



- The data shows 67,933 accidents took place on national highways up to June 2025. In 2024, 53,090 people died in 1,25,873 accidents across national highways. In 2023, 53,630 people died in 1,23,955 accidents.
- The data is based on information sent by states and Union Territories to the Electronic Detailed Accident Report (eDAR) portal — a central repository for reporting, managing and analysing road accident data.
- The total number of road accident deaths in 2023 was more than 1.72 lakh. The Union government has set an ambitious target to halve such deaths by 2030.
- Road Transport and Highways Minister Nitin Gadkari said the ministry is undertaking both short-term and long-term remedial measures to reduce such deaths. These include road markings, signage installations, crash barriers, raised pavement markers, geometric improvements, junction redesigns, spot widening of carriageways and construction of underpasses or overpasses, among other measures.
- The government has identified road engineering as one of the biggest factors of accident deaths.

**Do You Know:**

- There are no clear-cut answers. But there are three broad schools of thought.—Indians simply don't care about their safety: The most commonplace response is to blame the consumers and argue that Indians do not care for safety. For example, in the current example, what would have caused Mistry to not wear a seat belt?
- Indians are too poor to afford road safety equipment: Recently The Indian Express reported that “The Centre’s plan to mandate six airbags across all cars from October 1 is likely to be deferred amid discussions within the government on its fallout in the small-car market and a pushback from the industry.” Earlier this year, the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways had announced the minimum six-airbag rule for vehicles that can carry up to eight passengers.
- In one of the more prominent papers, titled “Traffic fatalities and economic growth (2003), Elizabeth Kopits (University of Maryland) and Maureen Kropper (World Bank) explain the underlying logic of this hypothesis: When countries are poor, growth in income is closely tied to increase in motorization, which leads to higher exposure to road traffic injuries.
- According to Kopits and Kropper, the turning point came at a particular level of per capita income. “The income level at which per capita traffic fatalities peaks is approximately \$8,600 in 1985 international dollars,” they calculated. As such, “...if developing countries follow historic trends, it will take many years for them to achieve the motor vehicle fatality rates of high-income countries. Provided that present policies continue into the future, the traffic fatality rate of India, for example, will not begin to decline until 2042”.

## SLEEPING DISASTERS

The disaster in Uttarkashi district of Uttarakhand serves as a reminder of the permanent risk of destabilisation in the Himalayas. At least four persons were killed and at least 60 people are feared washed away after a mass of water, debris and muck triggered by torrential rain hit the Kheer Ganga river on Tuesday afternoon. The flood hit hotels and residential buildings in Dharali town, situated 8,600 feet above sea level, where video footage recorded by residents showed giant



waves of water gushing through the area, engulfing people and homes. Several Indian Army personnel are also feared dead, according to preliminary reports.

The proximate cause of the disaster is the extremely heavy rainfall from August 3 to 5, with some parts of the district reporting nearly 30 cm of rainfall over a single day due to the monsoon and its active phase over North India. The fury and the volume of the water that gushed through the town seemed to suggest that this was a sudden event, prompting State officials to categorise it as a 'cloudburst'. However, this has a very specific meaning in how the India Meteorological Department (IMD), the official forecaster, defines it. A large volume of rain, of at least 10 centimetres in an hour over 10 square kilometres, is what usually qualifies as a cloudburst. The lack of weather radars at those altitudes means that the IMD is incapable of such a computation. Therefore, it could very well be that continuous heavy rain over the past 48 hours may have loosened the soil and combined with the craggy, undulating terrain, unleashed large volumes of silt along with copious amounts of water. Whether it was a sudden event or the result of a gradual build-up might seem only of academic interest, given the loss of life, livelihood and property. The knee-jerk categorisation as a 'cloudburst' allows state authorities to claim helplessness. Once it is projected as a freak phenomenon, the event only elicits social media commiseration from public authorities in the form of 'prayers' and 'deep sadness' and a pre-defined token sum as disbursement. The recent past shows that these are anything but outliers. Climate change has increased the probability of extreme rainfall events and, therefore, the numerous infrastructure projects undertaken in the hills and the resulting debris act as latent explosives that are triggered from such rainfall. Following relief operations, the State government must — as soon as conditions are conducive — review debris and silt accumulation at critical points in the State to buffer the inevitable damage from climate change.

#### WARNING BELLS, UNHEARD

As avalanches and floods devastate the Bhagirathi valley, it is time India confronts the deadly consequences of unsustainable development in the fragile Himalayas.

- Three climate-related catastrophes devastated a short scenic stretch of the upper Bhagirathi (Ganga) river valley in Uttarkashi district on August 5. They devastated Dharali — a pretty Himalayan town along the Bhagirathi about 20 km before Gangotri, a portion of Harshil, six kilometres downstream, known for its apple orchards, and some nearby settlements, according to initial reports.
- In the evening, the Central Water Commission released a brief disaster report. It described the first incident, around 1:00 pm, as a suspected cloudburst flood, "severely damaging" much of Dharali, sweeping away residential houses, shops and possibly affecting many people gathered in the town for a mela.
- A second cloudburst occurred around 3:00 pm in a small mountain stream valley, downstream of Harsil. A third flood, at 3:30 pm, submerged the Harshil helipad that could affect later relief efforts. About 100 Army personnel, assisted by The National Disaster Response Force (NDRF), State Disaster Response Force (SDRF), Indo-Tibetan Border Police (ITBP) and local police teams began prompt rescue operations.



**Do You Know:**

- In 2012, the Union government had notified the Gaumukh to Uttarkashi watershed of the Bhagirathi as an Eco-Sensitive Zone (BESZ). This was to preserve its pristine areas and regulate infrastructural activities in the region. Later central and state governments, however, have been lax in enforcing the regulations, despite the strenuous efforts by some members of an MoEF&CC appointed monitoring committee.
- With the governments ignoring the BESZ notification, the Union Ministry of Road Transport and Highways (MoRTH) prepared plans to widen the National Highway in the BESZ to accommodate Gangotri's summer tourist traffic.
- In 2020, Juyal, as a member of the Supreme Court directed High Powered Committee (HPC) to investigate the construction of the Char Dham highway, warned his committee colleagues, BRO engineers and senior Uttarakhand and central government officials of the high probability of repeated future avalanches due to global warming and climate changes.
- In 2020, in its final report to the Supreme Court, the HPC recommended that the sensitive slopes not be disturbed. To protect the BESZ, particularly to conserve the deodar forest stretch, it recommended that an elevated highway stretch closer to the riverside be considered as an alternative to widening the highway.

**POLLUTION BOARDS CAN SEEK DAMAGES, BANK GUARANTEES FOR FUTURE, SAYS SC**

In a significant decision aimed at empowering pollution control boards, the Supreme Court Monday held that they can seek compensation for restitution of damages already caused by polluting entities or demand bank guarantees to prevent any potential future environmental damage.

- A bench of Justices P S Narasimha and Manoj Misra set aside the Delhi HC Division Bench order which said the Boards are “not empowered to levy compensatory damages in exercise of powers under Section 33A of the Water (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act, 1974 and Section 31A of the Air (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act, 1981 on the ground.” The HC held that such levy can be made only by courts, after taking cognisance of offences specified under the Acts.
- The SC said, “having considered the principles that govern our environmental laws and on interpretation of Sections 33A and 31A of the Water and Air Acts, we are of the opinion that that the Division Bench of the High Court was not correct in restrictively reading powers of the Boards. We are of the opinion that these regulators in exercise of these powers can impose and collect, as restitutionary or compensatory damages, fixed sum of monies or require furnishing bank guarantees as an ex-ante measure towards potential or actual environmental damage.”

**Do You Know:**

- The Delhi Pollution Control Board had approached the SC against the HC judgement which quashed the show cause notices issued by the Board to some residential complexes, commercial complexes and shopping malls which were allegedly constructed and were operating without obtaining the mandatory “consent to establish” and “consent to operate” under the Water Act and Air Act.



- The SC judgment said, “The Board’s powers under Section 33A of the Water Act and Section 31A of the Air Act have to be read in light of the legal position on the application of the Polluter Pays principle... This means that the State Board cannot impose environmental damages in case of every contravention or offence under the Water Act and Air Act. It is only when the State Board has made a determination that some form of environmental damage or harm has been caused by the erring entity, or the same is so imminent, that the State Board must initiate action under” the provisions.

## UNDERSTANDING PROPHYLAXIS: THE ‘GOLD STANDARD TREATMENT’ IN HAEMOPHILIA CARE

Haemophilia is an inherited, rare bleeding disorder in which the blood fails to clot due to a lack or deficiency of clotting factors, most often Factor VIII in Haemophilia A.

That means even small injuries can cause excessive bleeding. But more seriously, spontaneous internal bleeding can occur, usually in joints and muscles, which is excruciatingly painful and can cause chronic permanent disability. A bleed can happen even in the brain, without any trauma, which can be very dangerous and even life threatening.

### Challenges in diagnosis

The difference between India’s estimated and actual diagnosed cases points to a large number of undiagnosed haemophilia patients. In India, the expected number of haemophilia cases is around 1 to 1.5 lakh, based on a prevalence of 1 in 10,000. In a population of 1.4 billion however, we have identified only about 29,000 patients: just 20% of estimated cases. This is due to lack of awareness, limited diagnostic facilities, and socio-economic barriers. It put patients at risk of bleeding after minor trauma or surgery, and makes them vulnerable to disabilities.

Alarmingly, each untreated bleed is estimated to reduce life expectancy by around 16 days. Imagine how debilitating this could be in patients who have chronic bleeds, and a high annual bleed rate.

Without early diagnosis, proactive care is a socio-economic challenge leading to school absenteeism, unemployment, and loss of productivity. Over the past few years, the landscape of haemophilia care has experienced a seismic shift. What started as a reaction to treating a painful bleed has now moved to proactively preventing bleeds entirely, with regular replacement therapy of the deficient clotting factors (prophylaxis).

Today, care is moving towards more advanced approaches to rebalancing the body’s clotting system, and eventually, to restoring it altogether. This change redefines what is possible with haemophilia treatment.

It takes us closer to a day when “zero bleeds” are not only a goal, they are an achievable reality, allowing individuals with haemophilia to live freely, lead more active lifestyles and overall, have better quality of lives.

Prophylaxis or regular replacement plays a revolutionary role in the treatment of haemophilia, specifically in enhancing patient outcomes and quality of life. In contrast to on-demand therapy, which is used to treat bleeds after they have happened, and already caused damage to the joint or muscle etc., in prophylactic treatment the aim is to give treatment to prevent a bleed from even happening.



This strategy can use frequent clotting factor intravenous injections or the newer, non-factor products by a simpler injection in the skin (subcutaneous route injection). This is the only way to ensure good joint health and prevent deformity and disability.

### Many advantages

Prophylaxis or regular replacement is regarded internationally as the gold standard treatment for haemophilia. This preventive method has numerous advantages over on-demand therapy.

It prevents joint damage. Recurrent unpredictable bleeds, particularly into joints, are a symptom of untreated or inadequately treated haemophilia. On-demand treatment permits bleeds to develop and gives treatment only afterwards, which makes it too late to avoid damage in many cases. With prophylaxis, clotting factor levels are continuously maintained, significantly reducing or even eliminating joint bleeds, thus maintaining long-term mobility and limiting disability.

The method enhances quality of life. Persons with haemophilia on regular replacement have fewer bleeds, less pain, and more independence in their daily activities. Children can go to school normally and engage in physical activities, whereas adults are able to keep up with work routines and social activities—something that is very difficult while under on-demand therapy as bleeding is unpredictable.

It also reduces burden on healthcare ecosystems. Prophylaxis reduces the number of spontaneous bleeds that need urgent care or hospitalisation. In the long term, this decreases healthcare demands both on patients and the system and reduces the overall cost of treatment when accounting for long-term complications.

Approximately 90% of persons with haemophilia are on prophylaxis in developed nations, resulting in near-normal life expectancy and uninterrupted day to day functioning. However, on-demand therapy is still primarily prevalent in India. However, some States have started regular replacement in children less than 10 years.

Ensuring awareness and wider access to prophylaxis through policy advocacy, and public education is critical to ending the crisis of under-diagnosis and avoiding preventable disabilities, while allowing haemophilia patients to live life free of fear and pain.

## RISE OF THE HERBICIDES

Crop protection chemicals are commonly known as “pesticides”. These are basically substances sprayed on crops to protect against insects (“pests”) that cause damage, whether directly (by feeding on them) or indirectly (by transmitting disease).

- India’s organised domestic crop protection chemicals market is valued at roughly Rs 24,500 crore.
- Take the white-backed plant hopper, a pest that both feeds on rice plants and also spreads the Fiji virus disease, resulting in their stunted growth. This “dwarfing” disease has been reported by many paddy farmers in Punjab and Haryana during the current kharif growing season. The vector insect here injects the virus while sucking the sap from mostly young plants.
- But crop protection chemicals aren’t limited to insecticides. They also include fungicides (to control fungal diseases such as blast and sheath blight in rice or powdery mildew and rusts in wheat) and herbicides (to kill or inhibit the growth of weeds).



- The largest segment within that is insecticides (Rs 10,700 crore), followed by herbicides (Rs 8,200 crore) and fungicides (Rs 5,600 crore). As the accompanying chart shows, it is the market for herbicides that's growing at the highest rate – over 10% annually.
- Much of that is controlled by multinational companies: Bayer AG (which has an estimated 15% market share), Syngenta (12%), ADAMA (10%), Corteva Agriscience (7%) and Sumitomo Chemical (6%). While Bayer is German, Corteva is from the US and Sumitomo is Japanese, the Basel (Switzerland) and Ashdod (Israel)-headquartered Syngenta and ADAMA respectively are both owned by the Chinese state-owned Sinochem Holdings Corporation.

**Do You Know:**

- Weeds, unlike insect pests and disease-causing pathogens, don't directly damage or destroy crops. Instead, they compete with them for nutrients, water and sunlight. Yield losses happen because the crops are deprived of these essential resources. Besides growing at their expense, weeds sometimes even harbour pests and pathogens inflicting further harm.
- Weed control has traditionally been through manual removal by hand or simple lightweight short-handled tools with flat blades such as khurpi. There are also power weeders with 3-10 horsepower engine capacity that can be run between rows of standing crops to remove weeds in and around those spaces.
- Farmers generally spray insecticides and fungicides only when they physical observe and assess the pest population or disease incidence to be significant enough to impact crop yield and quality/marketability.

**AYUSH MINISTRY AND FSSAI RELEASE A LIST OF 'AYURVEDA AAHARA' FOOD PREPARATIONS**

The Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI), in consultation with the Ayush Ministry, has released a list of Ayurvedic food preparations under the category of Ayurveda Aahara.

Ayurveda Aahara refers to foods developed according to Ayurvedic dietary guidelines, focusing on balance, seasonal suitability, and natural ingredients and herbs with therapeutic benefits.

With rising public interest in preventive health and sustainable living, Ayurveda Aahara is viewed as a trusted nutritional choice that combines tradition with modern dietary habits, noted a release issued by the Ministry.

"This move will bring India's traditional food wisdom into the mainstream, following the introduction of the Food Safety and Standards (Ayurveda Aahara) Regulations in 2022. These regulations recognise foods based on recipes, ingredients, and processes from authoritative Ayurvedic texts, and the new list brings clarity and confidence to consumers and businesses alike," explained an Ayush Ministry official, adding that the list, issued under Note (1) of Schedule B of the regulations, draws directly from classical Ayurvedic texts listed in Schedule A.

To facilitate future additions, FSSAI has established a process for FBOs to request inclusion of additional Category A products not yet listed and such requests need supporting references from authoritative texts in Schedule A.

Prataprao Jadhav, Minister of State for Ayush and Health & Family Welfare, urged citizens to incorporate Ayurveda Aahara into their daily lives to experience its long-term health benefits.

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



Vaidya Rajesh Kotecha, Secretary, Ayush Ministry, stated that the release of the list of Ayurveda Aahara aligns India's traditional knowledge systems with modern regulatory frameworks

**'BIO-FORTIFIED POTATOES WITH ADDED IRON TO HIT INDIAN MARKET SOON'**

The introduction of bio-fortified potatoes, enriched with iron and zinc, marks a transformative step in addressing global malnutrition. Led by the International Potato Centre (CIP) in Peru, these nutrient-packed varieties, such as Kallpa Yawri and Puka Yawri, are gaining traction in India and beyond, promising to combat "hidden hunger" without compromising taste or yield. As India prepares to roll out these potatoes, this innovation could redefine food security, but its success hinges on accessibility and acceptance.

Bio-fortification enhances crops' nutritional content through conventional breeding or biotechnology, targeting deficiencies like iron-deficiency anaemia, which affects over 50% of Indian women and children, per NFHS-5 data. A 2020 study in Peru's Huancavelica region showed that yellow-fleshed bio-fortified potatoes enabled women to absorb up to 30% of their iron content, potentially meeting half their daily needs with 500 grams consumed daily. Unlike industrial fortification, bio-fortification delivers nutrients naturally, making it cost-effective and sustainable for low-income communities where potatoes are a staple.

India's push, backed by CIP's collaboration with ICAR-Central Potato Research Institute, is timely. The Indo-Gangetic plains, the world's largest potato-producing region, stand to benefit from the CIP-South Asia Regional Centre in Agra, which aims to boost seed access and R&D. Yet, challenges loom: limited market incentives, low consumer awareness, and agro-climatic variations could hinder adoption. Farmers need assurances of profitability, and public campaigns must highlight these potatoes' benefits to drive demand.

This initiative is a beacon of hope in a world where 828 million people faced hunger in 2021, per WHO estimates. To succeed, governments must integrate bio-fortified potatoes into schemes like Mid-Day Meals and PDS, while investing in region-specific research. By making these nutrient-rich tubers a household staple, we can turn a humble crop into a powerful weapon against malnutrition, proving that small changes can yield big impacts.

**Governing committee**

The CIP regional centre would be governed by a coordination committee that comprises the Secretaries of Agriculture of India, Nepal, Bhutan, and Bangladesh.

**WORLD'S HIGHEST BIRD DEATH RATES AT THAR DESERT WIND FARMS**

A recent study by the Wildlife Institute of India (WII), published in Nature Scientific Reports, has exposed a grim reality: wind farms in Rajasthan's Thar Desert are causing the world's highest recorded bird mortality rates. Surveying a 3,000 sq. km area in Jaisalmer with 900 wind turbines, researchers found 124 bird carcasses, estimating 4,464 deaths per 1,000 sq. km annually—1.24 birds per turbine per month. This toll, far exceeding earlier studies in Kutch and Davangere, threatens biodiversity in a region teeming with 272 bird species, including the critically endangered Great Indian Bustard.

The Thar Desert, part of the Central Asian Flyway, is a vital migratory corridor. Raptors, making up nearly 40% of fatalities, are especially vulnerable due to their soaring flight patterns and slow reproduction, risking population declines. Collisions with turbine blades and power lines,

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



compounded by single turbines in flat terrains, drive these staggering numbers, as noted by WII's Yadvendradev Jhala. India's wind energy boom, adding 3.5 GW in early 2025, fuels this crisis, yet onshore wind farms face no mandatory environmental impact assessments (EIAs), a glaring policy gap.

Mitigation exists—painting blades for visibility, seasonal shutdowns, and tools like AVISTEP to avoid sensitive zones—but implementation lags. The government's push for renewable energy, aiming for 500 GW by 2030, must not sacrifice biodiversity. Mandating EIAs, funding ground-level studies, and enforcing mitigation are urgent. The Thar's wind farms power India's green ambitions, but without action, they risk becoming graveyards for its avian heritage. Balancing clean energy with conservation is not optional—it's imperative.

#### ATTEMPT TO SAVE RHINOS BY GIVING THEM RADIOACTIVE HORNS

A South African university launched an anti-poaching campaign on Thursday (July 31) with a unique approach – injecting radioactive isotopes into rhino horns. It claimed that the method is harmless for the rhinos and allows customs agents to detect trafficked horns.

- According to the IAEA, radioactive isotopes or radioisotopes are the unstable form of an element that emit radiation to transform into a more stable form. The radiation can be traced, and typically causes changes in the substance it falls upon.
- Through a non-invasive procedure, rhino horns are tagged with low doses of radioactive isotopes, allowing for their ready detection by radiation portal monitors (RPMs) already deployed at borders, ports, and airports worldwide to identify unauthorised nuclear materials.
- To test this system, the researchers used 3D-printed rhino horns with identical shielding properties to real keratin, which is the substance that makes up rhino horn. According to the university, the tests confirmed that individual horns could be detected inside full 40-foot shipping containers
- The university also announced the results of the pilot phase undertaken last June, when it injected radioisotopes into 20 rhinos at the Waterberg Biosphere in Waterberg, Limpopo, about 250 kilometres north of Johannesburg in South Africa. A team from Ghent University, Belgium, monitored the health and conducted cytological examinations on 15 treated rhinos, comparing these results with five untreated animals.

#### Do You Know:

- According to the International Union for Conservation of Nature, the global rhino population was estimated to be about 500,000 at the start of the 20th century. It has since dwindled to 27,000, owing to the burgeoning demand for rhino horns. These horns are trafficked to Asian markets where they are used in traditional medicine, and also as a status symbol.
- South Africa, home to the world's largest rhino population, had lost over 10,000 rhinos to poaching over the last decade, with 103 losses reported by the South African Ministry of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment in the first quarter of this year.
- While the project itself is not a cure-all or silver bullet to curb poaching, the researchers hope it will prove to be a great deterrent. It would certainly prove to be less disruptive to rhino behaviour compared to dehorning, in which rhinos' horns are removed to deter poaching. While a 2024 study



published in the Science journal showed that dehorning rhinos reduced poaching by 78 per cent over seven years on eight reserves, another study the previous year established that this measure impacted their ability to socialise with their peers and noted reductions in the sizes of their home ranges.

#### WAS JAISALMER EVER A PART OF THE MARATHA EMPIRE? HERE'S WHAT HISTORIANS SAY

A map showing the extent of the Maratha empire in 1759 in the new NCERT Class 8 social science textbook has run into a controversy. Chaitanya Raj Singh, scion of the royal family of the erstwhile princely state of Jaisalmer, on Monday (August 4) called the map, which shows Jaisalmer to be a part of the Maratha empire, “historically misleading, factually baseless, and deeply objectionable”.

- On Wednesday, Michel Danino, chairperson of the NCERT’s curricular area group for the new social science textbooks, responded to the objection, stating: “Further research is on to confirm that our map’s boundaries are incorrect; if they are, a revised map will be prepared based on the best information available, and submitted for future editions of the textbook.”

- In the first half of the 18th century, with the Mughal empire breaking up, the then Peshwa of the Maratha empire, Baji Rao I, “could not resist a Maratha drive” into the north, Stewart Gordon wrote in *The Marathas 1600–1818* (1993). By then, the Marathas were already collecting tribute from erstwhile Mughal dominions in the Deccan.

- The Marathas then pushed into parts of Rajasthan, the areas around Delhi and Punjab, and Bundelkhand, besides attacking parts of Orissa, Bengal, and Bihar, Gordon wrote. They established control over Malwa after the Battle of Bhopal. The Bengal raids were under Baji Rao’s successors.

- Rahul Magar, Assistant Professor at the History Department at Savitribai Phule Pune University, told *The Indian Express* that “the Marathas were collecting chauth and sardeshmukhi from the Rajput territories, but does that mean that they had political intervention in those states? No, they did not, in many cases.”

- He added that economic tribute and political authority should be treated as distinct: “These states, like Rajputana and even Orissa and Bengal, were paying financial tribute, but it is not necessary that they politically considered the Peshwa as their overlord.”

- Jaisalmer was under the Bhati clan of Rajputs. Gordon wrote of a tribute collecting expedition that Baji Rao I led in 1728 through western Malwa and into Rajasthan. Gordon also mentions the succession disputes like those in Bundi and Jodhpur, and the tribute that the Marathas claimed from these regions.

- Some regions were fully administered by the Peshwa’s men “and others only thinly administered, and populated by recalcitrant zamindars who managed to defy Maratha authority from behind walled strongholds.”

- Scholars have been divided over the nature of the Maratha polity and whether it was a confederacy.

#### Do You Know:

- According to the NCERT textbook of Grade 8, The Marathas often levied taxes called chauth (25 per cent) and sardeshmukhi (an additional 10 per cent to chauth) from provinces that were not



directly under them, including places in the Deccan and north India. In return, the Marathas protected those provinces and did not intervene in their internal administration.

- Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj (1630-1680) carved out an independent Maratha kingdom from various Deccan states in the 17th century. He was born to a general who served different Deccan Sultans throughout his life.
- Shivaji was keen on expanding his father's fiefdom of modern-day Pune into an independent Maratha state. During that time several Sultanates like Bijapur, Golkonda and Ahmadnagar and the Mughals were competing for the control of the Deccan.
- "Chhatrapati Shivaji established what he called a 'Swarajya', which means a kingdom in which the power was in the hands of the indigenous people," says author Uday S Kulkarni. He says that Shivaji carried out a commendable task of bringing together a large number of different castes under a common 'Maratha' identity.

#### REVISITING CHOLA GRANDEUR WITH EYES WIDE OPEN

Arup K Chatterjee writes: Once again, public discourse is abuzz with the legacies of the Cholas — thanks to Prime Minister Narendra Modi's recent visit to Gangaikonda Cholapuram, their erstwhile capital.

- The Cholas occupy a hallowed space in Indian imagination for their pioneering experiments in democracy, but one needs to look beyond their basilica-like monuments, gilded Natarajas and temple vimanas (the towering structure above the inner sanctum) piercing the skylines of Thanjavur, Gangaikonda Cholapuram, and Darasuram.
- Relatively forgotten by nationalists, the Cholas underwent an image makeover around the 1930s. Kanisetti says Sastri and Majumdar found romanticised examples of enlightened Chola imperialism to counter Britain's pride in its Roman past.
- Unsurprisingly, Kalki Krishnamurthy's novel Ponnaiyin Selvan (1950-54) edified Chola king Rajaraja I as an amalgamation of Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel and C Rajagopalachari.
- While most historians date the Cholas between the 9-13th century, ambitious ones have gone back to the Sangam period (between 350 BC and 1279 AD). In the latter periodisation, the Tamil confederacy was defeated by Kalinga in 155 BC, and re-emerged in 850 AD under Vijayalaya, who, with Pallava approval and Velir solidarity, seized Thanjavur.
- History enthusiasts are generally captivated by Chola polity's three-tiered system, constituted by nadu (supra-village), ur (village) and brahmadeya (Brahminical agrahara) assemblies, with nagarams (merchant-towns) governed by nagarattars. Simultaneously, Chola temples emerged as economic hubs endowed with devadana (land grants), and empowered as rheostats of irrigation and artisanal production.
- Much euphoria has revolved around the concept of Chola elections by kudavolai (lottery) among the local committees. These offered a democratic veneer, but the franchise remained narrowly circumscribed within clannish coteries, while state commissioners retained veto power.
- Chola patronage of merchant guilds (ayyavole and manigramam) forged expansive trade-relations with South-East Asia and Sung China, while ships requisitioned from those guilds



enlarged Chola warrior fleets. Revenues were reploughed for naval expansion in a commercial empire spanning over 2,200 miles — from Bengal to Sri Lanka and the Malay Archipelago.

- Chola naval ascendancy clubbed martial hegemony with mercantile collaboration, provisioning warships, recruiting mariners and amassing siege-equipment without democratic will. This was at odds with the dharmic ideal of righteous rule. Though 11th-century Chola navies realigned trade from the Persian Gulf to the Indian Ocean, their profits were not redistributed for the upkeep of coastal nagarams.
- The Cholas were not classical democrats. The real reason behind their return to public discourse is not democracy but the same political impulse that led Margaret Thatcher to turn to the Victorians, or the Victorians to turn to the Greeks.

**Do You Know:**

- Three royal temples – the Tanjore Brihadēśvara, Gangaikōṇḍacōḷapuram, and Darasuram Airavatēśvara – built between the 11th and 12th centuries CE, are the finest examples of the Cholas’ artistic brilliance. These temples were inscribed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site as the ‘Great Living Chola Temples’ in 1987. These state temples were laid out in a manner that they served as focal points of their capitals. These shrines not only outweigh the earlier shrines in terms of their spatial elaboration, but also in their overwhelming monumentality.
- Prime Minister Narendra Modi on July 27 unveiled a commemorative coin and inaugurated an exhibition on Rajendra Chola’s northern conquest. Rajendra I, the maritime monarch of the Chola dynasty, inherited a powerful kingdom from his father Rajaraja I and expansion of the Chola empire continued under him.
- To commemorate his successful northern expedition, Rajendra Chola, also known as Rajendra the Great or Gangaikonda Chola (the Chola who conquered Ganga), established Gangaikonda Cholapuram and ceremonially poured Ganges water brought back by his army into a vast man-made reservoir known as the Cholagangam tank, locally referred to as Ponneri.
- After establishing his dominance within India, Rajendra Chola I then led several successful maritime campaigns, extending the boundaries of his empire and the reputation of his dynasty as one of the foremost Naval powers of India. He has campaigns from the Ganga to Suvarnadwipa (an ancient term for islands in Southeast Asia, including Java and Sumatra) that turned the Cholas into a pan-Asian maritime empire.

**RAJULA SRIVASTAVA’S MATH TRIUMPH: A BEACON FOR WOMEN IN STEM**

Rajula Srivastava’s 2025 Maryam Mirzakhani New Frontiers Prize, awarded on April 5 in Los Angeles, is a landmark moment for mathematics and gender equity in STEM. As a Hirzebruch Research Instructor at the University of Bonn and Max Planck Institute, Srivastava’s groundbreaking work blending harmonic analysis and analytic number theory—specifically, counting rational points near smooth manifolds—earned her this \$50,000 honour from the Breakthrough Prize Foundation. Her journey from Bhubaneswar to global acclaim is not just a personal triumph but a clarion call for inclusivity in a field long dominated by men.

Srivastava’s research, rooted in the elegant interplay of waves and geometry, tackles complex problems like Diophantine approximation in higher dimensions. Her ability to use harmonic analysis tools to count lattice points near shapes like spheres showcases the beauty and utility of



pure mathematics. Beyond academic brilliance, her story, detailed in *The Hindu*, resonates deeply: a 15-year-old girl from a science-loving family in India chose math for its logic over memorization, later navigating alienation as a non-white woman abroad. Her 2023 AWM Dissertation Prize and upcoming tenure-track role at the University of Wisconsin-Madison highlight her meteoric rise.

Yet, her win, one of three awarded to women in 2025, underscores a persistent gap. Women remain underrepresented in mathematics, with only 26% of U.S. math PhDs awarded to women in 2023. Srivastava's plan to donate part of her prize to children's education in India reflects her commitment to breaking barriers, inspiring young girls to see math as a realm of possibility, not exclusion.

This moment demands action. Universities and funding bodies must amplify support for women and minorities in STEM, through scholarships, mentorship, and inclusive environments. Srivastava's success, celebrated at a star-studded gala, is a reminder that talent knows no gender or borders—but opportunity must be nurtured. Let her triumph light the way for a more equitable future in mathematics.

#### EXPRESS VIEW: DISHOM GURU SHIBU SOREN

On a winter day in 1957, a 15-year-old boy in Gola block in undivided Hazaribagh district in Jharkhand was waiting for his father, who never returned. School teacher Sobaran Manjhi was killed by moneylenders, and young Shivcharan's life changed forever. The teenager pledged to end the exploitation by moneylenders and to fight for his people, the Adivasis. In the coming decades, the young man who came to be known as Shibui Soren and later affectionately called Gurui became the fulcrum of Adivasi politics. Shibui Soren, 81, who died on Monday, leaves behind a legacy of inspiring political vision and indefatigable grit mixed with some persistent controversies.

After his father's death, Soren led a band of youth in Santhal Pargana and initiated a movement called Dhan Kati. The group encouraged Adivasis to harvest crops from lands that were illegally grabbed by moneylenders when they failed to pay off the debt. Soon, this movement became an organised struggle for the recognition of Adivasi rights over jal, jungle, zameen. In 1972, Soren, along with A K Roy, a Marxist leader, and Binod Bihari Mahato, founded the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM) and revived the movement for statehood. To bring the industrial workers, sadans, the non-tribal natives of Jharkhand, and Adivasis together was not an easy task. Soren realised that the dream of a separate Jharkhand would not be fulfilled without the participation of non-tribal communities. He sought to change the definition of Diku — for him, the term no longer only meant "outsiders", but referred to those who exploited Jharkhand's resources. His dream of a separate state materialised only in 2000.

Political instability, allegations of corruption and violence didn't let any of the CMs complete their tenure in the new state until 2014, when the BJP made Raghubar Das the first non-Adivasi chief minister. Soren's own political life was also shadowed by controversies. In 2004, within two months of becoming Union minister of coal and mines, he had to resign due to an arrest warrant for his alleged role in the Chirudih massacre of 1975, in which 10 people were killed. In 2008, a fast-track court acquitted him, citing lack of evidence. He faced allegations of taking bribes to save the minority government of P V Narasimha Rao in 1993. The SC in 1998 ruled that legislators enjoy impunity from criminal prosecution in bribery cases related to their votes and speeches in Parliament — the judgment was overruled in 2024. However, controversies could not take away from Soren's achievements. After Marang Gomke Jaipal Singh Munda, Dishom Guru Shibui Soren



was the leader who successfully reimagined Adivasi politics beyond the limits of identity, sub-nationalism and language.

**NANDU RAM, WHO BROUGHT 'LIVED EXPERIENCE' INTO MAINSTREAM SOCIOLOGY, SIGNIFICANTLY CHANGED DALIT DISCOURSE**

In *Silencing the Past*, Haitian anthropologist Michel Trouillot showed how diverse histories are silenced during the production and reproduction of mainstream history. These undocumented voices shape the folklore and the everyday narratives of the marginalised. In India, the historical silencing of Dalits, Adivasis, and other communities moved sociologist and former JNU professor Nandu Ram. He documented the unarchived histories — he published the five-volume *Encyclopaedia of Scheduled Castes in India* — and also brought “lived experience” into mainstream sociology, significantly changing Dalit discourse.

Ram, who died on July 13 aged 78, was born to a family of Dalit labourers in Uttar Pradesh. Having grown up in a village where his family was forced to live on the outskirts, he experienced both spatial segregation and inequality. These experiences, coupled with his understanding of ethnographic nuances, led to the publication of *The Mobile Scheduled Caste: Rise of a New Middle Class*, where he identified the emergence of a “Dalit middle class” that was the result of affirmative action and Ambedkarite resistance. His edited anthologies, like *Beyond Ambedkar: Essays on Dalits in India* and *Dalits in Contemporary India*, showed how Dalit politics could be read both through and beyond Ambedkar.

Though his works were sometimes criticised by scholars for failing to delineate Dalit-OBC relations, Nandu Ram was among the first sociologists who brought Ambedkar into mainstream sociological discourse. In his introductory address at the first Dr Ambedkar Memorial Annual Lecture, Ram said, “Both the left and right-wing historians of modern India... have almost siphoned the Dalit movement(s) in their writings.” He devoted his life to retrieving and restoring the balance.

**SHORT NEWS**

**LANCET COUNTDOWN ON HEALTH AND PLASTICS**

- The Lancet Report warned of a grave threat from plastics to human and planetary health, but said the harm can be mitigated through effectively implemented policies.
- The medical journal also launched a health-focused global monitoring system on the manufacture and use of plastics, called the Lancet Countdown on health and plastics. This is similar to the Lancet Countdown on Health and Climate Change it had launched to monitor the health impacts of climate change.
- Plastic is durable and persists for decades in the environment, an estimated 8 Gigatons of plastic waste – 80% of all plastic ever made – now pollutes the planet – a massive problem by any measure.
- Plastics contain more than 16,000 chemicals. These chemicals leak out of plastic products during use and get into people, especially children.



— It includes chemicals that are known to be human carcinogens, neurotoxicants, and endocrine disruptors, as well as many more that have never been tested for toxicity and whose dangers are still unknown.

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#### NEW PAPER ON DIABETES IN INDIA IN THE LANCET JOURNAL

— According to a new paper published in ‘The Lancet Global Health’ journal, “at least one in five people aged 45 and older had diabetes in India in 2019.

— Significantly, two out of five people with diabetes (or 40 per cent of those diagnosed) were unaware of their condition.

— 46 per cent of the people identified regained control of their blood sugar levels, 59 per cent achieved blood pressure control and six per cent took a lipid-lowering medication to reduce the risk of cardiovascular disease.

— The Lancet paper is based on the findings from the Longitudinal Aging Study in India (LASI) that surveyed nearly 60,000 adults in India aged 45 years and older between 2017 and 2019 to estimate the prevalence, awareness, treatment and control of diabetes.

— The study also provides updated evidence on the patterns of diabetes within India. States in southern India tend to have a higher rate of diabetes after adjusting for age, while others in central and northeastern India have a lower rate.

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#### NATIONAL HANDLOOM DAY

— The observance of National Handloom Day was inaugurated on August 7, 2015, by Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

— This year marks the 11th anniversary to be celebrated on 7th August 2025, with the theme “Weaving Innovation into Tradition.”

— This date was chosen to commemorate the launch of the Swadeshi Movement on August 7, 1905.

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#### AUGUST KRANTI DIWAS

— August Kranti Diwas, also known as the Quit India Movement Day, marks the historic Quit India Movement.

— It was launched on August 8, 1942, calling for the immediate withdrawal of British forces from the country under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi.

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#### INS GULDAR — WAITS TO BE SUNK

— INS Guldar, a decommissioned Navy warship, will soon be deliberately sunk — or ‘scuttled’ — to breathe new life into its metal bones, transforming it into an artificial reef and an underwater tourist attraction. It will be India’s first underwater museum as well.

— Though scuttled ships have been used to create artificial reefs elsewhere in the world, this is the first such attempt in India.

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



— Scuttling is usually a wartime tactic involving the deliberate sinking of a vessel — in case of an emergency or to prevent it from falling into enemy hands. It follows the Archimedes principle.

— The ageing INS Guldar, a Kumbhir-class landing ship designed for amphibious warfare and capable of beach landings, was once part of India's peacekeeping mission in Sri Lanka. Built at Poland's Gdynia Shipyard, INS Guldar was commissioned into the Indian Navy nearly four decades ago, in 1985.

#### **What is the Archimedes Principle?**

In physics, the Archimedes Principle refers to the law of buoyancy (the ability or tendency of something to float in water or other fluids).

According to the principle, when an object is completely or partially submerged in a fluid, whether gas or liquid, it is acted upon by an upward force (buoyancy) equal to the weight of the fluid it has displaced.

The force acting downward on the object is the weight of the object. The upward force is the one given by the Archimedes Principle. The difference between the two forces is the net force acting on the object.

If the buoyant force is more than the weight, the object rises; if it is less, the object sinks. If the net force is zero, the object remains in place, and neither rises nor sinks.

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#### **RUDRASTRA – INDIA'S LONGEST FREIGHT TRAIN**

— On August 7, the national transporter successfully operated "Rudrastra," a long freight train formed by combining six empty BOXN rakes, from Ganjkhwaja station of the Pandit Deen Dayal Upadhyay (DDU) Division.

— This freight train is about 4.5 km long, and is the longest freight train of Indian Railways till date.

— The initiative, undertaken by the DDU Division of the East Central Railway (ECR), is aimed at boosting freight capacity.

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#### **SATYA PAL MALIK**

— Former Jammu and Kashmir Governor Satyapal Malik passed away on 5th August. He was 79.

— Malik, who hails from the Baghpat district of Western UP, first served as an MLA in the state Assembly in 1974-77, having been elected on a ticket of Chaudhary Charan Singh's Bharatiya Kranti Dal.

— He was later appointed as a Member in the Rajya Sabha by Lok Dal in 1980, but joined the Congress party in 1984. He was once again appointed to the Rajya Sabha in 1986.

— In 2017, Satya Pal Malik was appointed as the Governor of Bihar and was transferred to Jammu and Kashmir in 2018. During his tenure as the J&K Governor, the Centre scrapped Article 370.



#### MOSQUE–CATHEDRAL OF CÓRDOBA

- Recently, a fire broke out at La Mezquita, the historic mosque-turned-cathedral in Córdoba, Spain, but the monument was saved after firefighters quickly contained the blaze.
- Built between the 8th and 10th centuries under Abd al-Rahman, an emir of the Umayyad dynasty, La Mezquita is regarded as a masterpiece of Islamic architecture.
- It was constructed on the site of an earlier church and served as a mosque until the Christian reconquest of Córdoba in the 13th century under King Ferdinand III of Castile.

#### 2025 WORLD SCHOOLS TEAM CHAMPIONSHIP

- India's Velammal MHS School claimed the gold medal at the 2025 World Schools Team Championship in Alexandria, Virginia after winning all eight of their matches.
- The World Schools Team Championship 2025 was organised at Episcopal High School, located in the historic city of Alexandria, just outside Washington, D.C, from 2nd-7th August, 2025.
- Kazakhstan's National School of Physics and Mathematics ultimately clinched the silver medal, finishing on the same number of match points as The Harker School (USA), but edging them out on tiebreaks.
- The Harker School took a well-deserved third place, just ahead of Astana 2 RSPM, who narrowly missed the podium.

#### WORLD'S SMALLEST SNAKE REDISCOVERED IN BARBADOS AFTER 20 YEARS

The Barbados threadsnake — the world's smallest-known snake, measuring just 10 cm — has been rediscovered after nearly two decades without a confirmed sighting. Connor Blades of the Barbados Ministry of Environment found the coin-sized reptile in March while searching under rocks near a rare jack-in-the-box tree. The snake, which is blind and feeds on termites and ants, had long eluded scientists due to its tiny size and secretive, burrowing lifestyle. First identified in 2008 by biologist S. Blair Hedges and named *Tetracheilostoma carlae*, the species is endemic to Barbados and critically rare, having been seen only a handful of times since 1889. Its rediscovery, announced by conservation group Re:wild on July 23, is seen as a major ecological milestone for the island.



## BUSINESS AND ECONOMY

### WHY IS HONG KONG REGULATING AND LICENSING STABLECOINS?

#### The story so far:

Hong Kong is taking a decisive step forward in regulating certain types of cryptocurrencies, as it prepares to enforce the Stablecoins Ordinance from August 1. The new regulations come amidst an explosion of interest in stablecoins and their promising applications in both personal finance and international business. While crypto users who support official regulation are excited, the authorities have advised caution.

#### What is the new stablecoin licensing system in Hong Kong?

The Hong Kong Monetary Authority announced that the Stablecoins Ordinance will come into effect from August 1 this year. This means it will be illegal for people to “offer any unlicensed fiat-referenced stablecoin (FRS) to a retail investor, or actively market the issue of unlicensed FRS to the public of Hong Kong,” according to Eddie Yue, Chief Executive of the Hong Kong Monetary Authority (HKMA).

Furthermore, companies that want to legally issue stablecoins to users in Hong Kong will have to obtain a licence from the Monetary Authority as well as meet set requirements when it comes to managing reserve assets and redemption, asset stabilisation, and processing user requests. In addition to this, they will have to comply with the applicable regulations that prevent money laundering and terrorist financing, thus making sure that their assets are properly disclosed and audited.

The HKMA warned that the regulations are not a red carpet for interested parties to begin issuing stablecoins, and that in the beginning it would “at most grant a handful of stablecoin issuer licences. In other words, a large number of applicants will be disappointed,” per Mr. Yue in an official statement.

#### What are stablecoins?

Stablecoins are a class of cryptocurrencies, with their values linked to assets. Unlike better known cryptocurrency coins such as Bitcoin (BTC) and Ether (ETH) or even tokens such as Shiba Inu (SHIB), whose values can wildly rise and fall due to investor sentiments and other factors, stablecoins are designed to maintain relatively steady prices. Hence, their name.

This so-called stability is achieved through the process of “pegging” the stablecoin to an asset such as fiat currency (like U.S. Dollars, EU Euros, Hong Kong Dollars, etc.), a commodity (like gold), other cryptocurrencies (such as Bitcoin), by regulating their value via computer algorithms, or by mixing multiple strategies. While the price of Bitcoin might rise or fall in the coming years, a USD-pegged stablecoin should ideally remain around \$1.

Stablecoins are different from CBDCs, or Central Bank Digital Currencies, which are digital currencies officially issued and controlled by a government’s central bank. Meanwhile, stablecoins can be privately issued and can also be pegged to foreign currencies.



### **Why do stablecoins require regulation?**

Stablecoins play an important role both within and outside the crypto ecosystem, even if they might not balloon in price like Bitcoin. Crypto investors often use stablecoins to facilitate easy trading on crypto exchanges. Others around the world have used stablecoins to maintain the value of their savings when their native currencies are depreciating, or to save money on cross-border transactions. Argentina, Turkey, and even Taliban-occupied Afghanistan are some places where stablecoins are not just for trading, but a way to make daily life possible.

The numbers tell a compelling story as well. Tether (USDT), the fourth largest cryptocurrency by market capitalisation and the largest stablecoin, per CoinMarketCap, has a circulating supply of 163.75 billion USDT. Meanwhile, more than \$250 billion worth of stablecoins are estimated to be in circulation worldwide.

Naturally, more governments are concerned about whether the highly engineered use of stablecoins could one day affect the value of the original fiat currencies or commodities backing them up. Furthermore, what is the guarantee that every stablecoin pegged to the dollar, euro, pound, or peso is actually backed up by its issuer? Currently, it is largely up to stablecoin users to audit their issuers' reserves and make sure that their stablecoins are adequately backed. When a stablecoin issuer suddenly adds millions of dollars in assets, it naturally raises questions about where the money to back this is coming from, or whether it really exists. This is where regulation comes in.

### **Do stablecoins exhibit volatility despite being pegged to currencies?**

Despite their name and their backing, stablecoins can also exhibit volatility. In response to both technical factors and world events, stablecoins sometimes come unpegged and their prices may rise or fall beyond the usual range, with sudden drops triggering panic amongst investors. For example, USDT, which is pegged to the U.S. Dollar, has in the past fallen to prices as low as around \$0.92.

Stablecoins have also collapsed entirely. In May 2022, Terra's cryptocurrency LUNA and its linked algorithmic stablecoin UST both lost most of their value in a matter of hours. Panicking investors who no longer trusted these assets quickly sold them off to minimise losses, and the prices fell close to zero. Billions of dollars were wiped from the crypto sector and the ensuing liquidity crunch triggered asset freezes across global crypto exchanges and fintech platforms.

### **Have other countries started to regulate stablecoins?**

U.S. President Donald Trump in July signed the GENIUS Act that is designed to regulate stablecoins and protect the U.S. dollar, much to the joy of his pro-crypto supporters.

As per the White House, the GENIUS Act requires 100% reserve backing with liquid assets like U.S. dollars or short-term Treasuries for stablecoins. Those issuing this asset will also have to make monthly, public disclosures of the composition of their reserves, apart from complying with marketing rules.

Other countries that have started to regulate stablecoins include Japan and Singapore, per AFP, while multiple other jurisdictions have more generic regulations that cover stablecoins along with other cryptocurrencies.



Though the Chinese government heavily restricts crypto-related activities in its jurisdiction, some of the country's tech giants hope that Hong Kong's upcoming regulatory regime will provide an outlet for their own stablecoin ventures.

### TRUMP'S DRUG PRICE CRUSADE: BOLD PROMISES, UNCERTAIN PATH

President Donald Trump's aggressive push to slash U.S. prescription drug prices, marked by his July 31, 2025, letters to 17 major pharmaceutical companies, is a bold gambit to fulfil a campaign promise. Demanding prices match the lowest in developed nations under a "most-favoured-nation" policy, Trump gave firms like Pfizer and Eli Lilly until September 29 to comply or face unspecified federal action. While the move taps into Americans' frustration with drug costs—three times higher than in peer nations, per a 2024 RAND report—it risks overpromising and underdelivering in a complex system.

Trump's strategy, rooted in a May 12 executive order, calls for Medicaid patients to access drugs at global minimum prices and encourages direct-to-consumer sales at these rates. Early signs suggest impact: AstraZeneca and GSK have signalled price cuts after talks with the administration. Yet, Trump's claim of slashing prices by "500% to 1,500%" defies logic—implying companies would pay consumers to take drugs. Such rhetoric, echoed on X posts, inflates expectations while ignoring practical hurdles. Drugmakers argue that deep cuts could stifle innovation, and legal challenges, like those that blocked a similar 2020 policy, loom large.

The deeper issue is systemic. High U.S. prices stem from a fragmented healthcare system, powerful middlemen like pharmacy benefit managers, and limited competition. Trump's focus on foreign price parity sidesteps these root causes, risking temporary fixes or higher costs elsewhere. His threat of tariffs or drug imports adds geopolitical tension but may falter against global trade realities and industry lobbying.

Americans, with 55% worried about drug affordability per a 2024 KFF poll, deserve relief. Trump's pressure on Big Pharma is a step, but sustainable change demands broader reforms—curbing middlemen, boosting generics, and supporting R&D without price gouging. Bold promises must yield to pragmatic solutions, lest this crusade become another unfulfilled vow.

### EASY TO LOSE, HARD TO RESTORE: U.S. DATA TRUST ON THE LINE

Donald Trump's move to fire the head of the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics has put trust in U.S. data reporting mechanisms on the line just as demand for reliable diagnoses of the health of the world's largest economy is bigger than ever. Examples from elsewhere show credibility is easily lost and hard to restore. A first test will be the choice to replace Erika McEntarfer, accused without evidence by Mr. Trump of manipulating U.S. job numbers after weaker-than-expected growth and large downward revisions were reported last week.

"Imagine if one of your concerns is that there's a lackey in charge of the agency and the numbers are fake," said Michael Strain, director of economic policy studies at the conservative American Enterprise Institute, of an appointment Mr. Trump has said to expect within days. "That's a whole other level of problems."

#### 'Data dependent'

Policymakers, businesses and investors are scrambling to understand how Mr. Trump's attempt to up-end the global trade system will affect prices, employment and household wealth. Central

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



banks, which once tried to guide market bets on rate moves months down the line, now say decisions are “data-dependent.” The rub is that data collection is proving to be harder. Debt-laden governments have, as Ms. McEntarfer experienced, cut resources in their data departments; phone surveys, the go-to method for much macro research, are struggling to produce adequate samples as many households do without fixed lines.

Mr. Trump’s implicit accusation of partisanship by “this Biden Political Appointee” adds the troubling factor of a political dimension usually indicative of countries dogged by wider doubts over their democratic checks and balances. The key lesson from past examples of loss of data confidence is that it can take years for trust to be restored.

### **Man-made numbers**

When Argentina last year reported its first single-digit inflation in months, sceptics questioned the data and recalled the massive under-reporting of inflation in the 2000s and 2010s for which it was censured by the International Monetary Fund.

Turkey has changed the head of its TUIK statistics institute four times since 2019, with opposition parties arguing the changes were political. Roger Marks, fixed income analyst at asset manager Ninety One, said the result for investors has been a “gradual erosion of our trust in the numbers.”

For Greece, whose efforts during the 2000s to conceal mounting public deficits fed that decade’s sovereign debt crisis, it has been an equally long haul back to credibility.

It required the overhaul of its ELSTAT statistics agency in 2016 and the creation of an international panel of experts to appoint its chief statistician - steps that have meant its hard-fought efforts to improve its budget are now unquestioned. It also prompted European governments to grant the Eurostat statistics arm of the European Union powers to check suspect national statistics reported to it.

Longstanding doubts over the accuracy of Chinese statistics with even former Premier Li Keqiang acknowledging in 2007 the country’s output figures were man-made — have obscured genuine efforts to improve data quality, such as a new measure of youth unemployment excluding students that was released early in 2024.

“There were genuine methodological reasons for the change, but because of the history around Chinese data a lot of people, particularly foreign investors, just didn’t really trust that,” Julian Evans-Pritchard, an analyst with Capital Economics.

“That underscores to me that once you undermine confidence in the data, it is quite hard to restore that confidence.”

## **HOW MUCH INDIA SHOULD TRADE WITH RUSSIA MUST NOT BE GUIDED BY WESTERN DIKTAT**

Between 2020-21 and 2024-25, India’s imports from Russia have soared from \$5.5 billion to \$63.8 billion, much of it on account of mineral fuels (\$2.1 billion to \$56.9 billion). Out of the 244.5 million tonnes (mt) of crude petroleum that India imported last fiscal, Russia’s share was over 87.5 mt, making it the country’s top supplier. It’s this trade that US President Donald Trump is now targeting by threatening to levy a “penalty”, on top of the 25 per cent general tariff on Indian goods imports that he announced on Wednesday. By not specifying how much that additional penalty



would be, he is basically nudging India to cut down, if not stop, energy (and defence) purchases from Russia. This comes just over two weeks after NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte warned India, China and Brazil of secondary sanctions if they continued to do business with Russia and help sustain its current war spending against Ukraine.

Whatever be the quantum, if at all, of the penalty — a new bill introduced in the US Congress seeks to impose a 500 per cent duty on all goods and services imports from countries “that knowingly engage in the exchange of Russian-origin uranium and petroleum products” — one thing is certain: The Western sanctions noose is tightening. For India, too, buying Russian oil cannot be business as before. The Narendra Modi government has so far — rightly — not been defensive over massively stepping up sourcing of Russian crude that is available at a discount relative to global benchmark prices. It has cited both the need to prioritise the energy security of India’s people as well as the fact that the ban on imports of Russian oil by the US or European Union is not covered under any United Nations sanctions. That argument — about the purchase of this oil being well within India’s legitimate and moral rights — still holds.

Pragmatic and matter-of-fact considerations have informed its expanding trade with Russia, even at the risk of Western displeasure, but at the same time, there are geopolitical costs. Those costs could significantly go up, as the EU and US (the Trump administration seems to have closed ranks) increasingly strike at Russia’s war machine by targeting its energy revenue streams. That nearly 36 per cent of India’s crude imports come from a single country isn’t good in the best and safest of times. Prudence demands — and this is important from the standpoint of securing the country’s long-term energy security — that costs beyond the immediate also be factored in. That would mean diversifying the sources of oil supply, similar to de-risking trade with China. Whether and how much India should trade with any country must be guided by its own national interest.

## BULLYING TACTICS

After months of considerable forbearance, the statement by the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), on Monday, pushing back against the U.S. and the European Union (EU) for “targeting” India is significant. The statement came two hours after Mr. Trump had announced penalty tariffs against India, “substantially” above the current 25% rate set to go into place this week, for importing, processing and selling Russian oil. A day earlier, a senior Trump aide had accused India of “financing” Russia’s war in Ukraine. And on July 18, the EU had announced sanctions on India’s Vadinar refinery (partially Russian owned), and secondary sanctions that will affect Indian refiners. The MEA spokesperson said that the measures were “unjustified and unreasonable” as the U.S. and the EU continue to trade with Russia for goods including LNG, critical minerals and nuclear fuel requirements. The statement also said that it was the U.S. that had encouraged India to keep buying Russian oil to stabilise global markets, something the Biden administration had confirmed. The government said that in comparison to the western countries, India’s Russian oil purchases are a “vital national compulsion” as a result of the conflict in Ukraine, adding that India would “... safeguard its national interests and economic security”. The MEA’s statement is the first such clear response on the issue since the Ukraine conflict. Taken with Union Minister Piyush Goyal’s statement last week on the U.S. announcement of 25% reciprocal tariffs on India from August 7, Monday’s statement indicates New Delhi’s growing frustration with the U.S.’s increasingly offensive positions against India, including on immigration, trade negotiations, Operation Sindoor and Pakistan, and India’s BRICS membership. It is unclear how and to what extent the government is prepared to stand up to the bullying tactics of Mr. Trump. Mr. Trump said on Tuesday that India has not been a “good trading partner” — a possible reference to trade



talks and the failure of a mini-deal, ostensibly over India's resistance on agricultural market access, dairy products and GM foods.

While it is hoped that New Delhi will continue to engage Washington and Brussels to conclude their respective trade talks, the MEA statement is meant to make a larger point. Neither the U.S. nor the EU can decide which country India will partner or trade with. That message is being underlined in visits by Security Adviser Ajit Doval and External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar to Moscow, to prepare for the Russian President's visit to India later this year. India's sovereignty is non-negotiable and its foreign policy choices cannot be manipulated by other countries, no matter how significant their own ties with India are.

## HOW WILL TRUMP'S TARIFFS IMPACT INDIA?

### The story so far:

On July 30, U.S. President Donald Trump announced 25% tariffs on imports from India "plus a penalty". While this puts to rest months of speculation over what the tariffs would be on Indian imports into the U.S., it opens up fresh uncertainties with respect to a potential bilateral trade agreement between India and the U.S.

### What did Mr. Trump announce?

Taking to social media, Mr. Trump cited India's tariff and non-tariff measures on trade, and its dealing with Russia on energy and military equipment, as the main reasons behind imposing the 25% tariffs and the penalty. There is no clarity yet on what the penalty will look like, but Mr. Trump has in the past threatened a 10% additional tariff on BRICS countries. If this comes to pass, then effective tariffs on Indian imports would be 35%. There is also a legislation in the U.S. in the process of being passed that could see an additional 500% tariff on India, China, and Brazil for their dealings with Russia.

### What does it mean for India?

Tariffs are paid by importers. Therefore, tariffs on Indian imports would be paid by those in the U.S. that are importing Indian goods. That is, Indian goods will become more expensive for them. Therein lies the true problem for India.

On a macro level, the tariffs and the impact they will have on Indian exports are expected to only lower India's GDP by 0.2%, according to research by the Bank of Baroda. So, if India's growth forecast had been 6.6%, then these tariffs — if they are imposed — could lower growth to 6.4%. However, the issue arises in individual sectors. According to the Bank of Baroda, sectors such as garments, precious stones, auto parts, leather products, and electronics (although their inclusion is uncertain) could face the pinch and would have to rework their strategies. "The issue really is that some of the competing nations like Vietnam (20%), Korea (15%) and Indonesia (19%) have lower tariffs compared with India," the Bank of Baroda added in its research note.

### How did things come to such a pass?

While most trade deals are negotiated over years, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Mr. Trump in February 2025 announced that they would conclude the first tranche of a trade deal by fall. To put this in perspective, the recently-signed Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement between India and the U.K. took about three years to negotiate.



What made the announcement by Mr. Modi and Mr. Trump notable was that it came before the latter's big moves on reciprocal tariffs, which is what pushed other countries to start negotiating with the U.S. The announcement was thus a strong and positive commitment towards strengthening ties between the two countries. But then, on April 2, Mr. Trump announced his Liberation Day reciprocal tariffs. These included a 10% baseline tariff for all countries, and additional tariffs on a country-by-country case. For India, this total was 26%. However, just a week later, Mr. Trump announced a 90-day pause on these tariffs so that bilateral deals could be struck so as to reduce the U.S.'s trade deficit with most of its trading partners. The 90-day pause was to end in July, but Mr. Trump extended it to August 1.

### **What are the points of friction?**

It's hard to pinpoint any single recent development that has soured relations, but there have been several points of friction between the two countries in the past few months. The matter of India's tariffs and non-tariff barriers has been something Mr. Trump has been highlighting since his first term as President. It was no surprise that he would take up the issue in his second term.

Mr. Trump has brought up India's engagement with Russia, too, saying countries like India are partly financing Russia's war with Ukraine. India, however, has reiterated that it will secure its national and energy security, and if that means buying cheap Russian oil, then that is what it would do. Russia currently accounts for about 35-40% of India's oil imports, making it a significant partner. In addition, India has remained adamant about keeping core parts of its agriculture and dairy sectors out of trade deals, including with the U.S. This has upset negotiators on the U.S. side, but it is a 'red line' India will not cross. Opening up these sectors would expose India's relatively low-productivity farmers to global competition, which will likely have devastating impacts on their livelihoods.

Then, there is the fact that Mr. Trump has repeatedly stated that it was him, and his trade talks, that encouraged India and Pakistan to agree to a ceasefire following the launch of Operation Sindoor by India. The fact that the Indian government has refuted it has only further angered Mr. Trump. Mr. Trump's claims have irked the Indian establishment as well, since it has provided the Opposition a means to attack the government.

India has informed the World Trade Organization that it reserves the right to impose additional tariffs on imports from the U.S. to retaliate against its higher tariffs on items like steel, aluminium, and automobiles.

Taking these things together, Mr. Trump's tariff announcement comes as a confirmation that at least one, if not all of these factors, worked toward souring relations.

### **Will India continue paying these tariffs?**

Although there has been a lot of talk about a 'mini-deal' between India and the U.S. to walk back the reciprocal tariffs, Indian officials have been cagey about the date for such a deal. The tariff announcement by Mr. Trump confirms that such a deal is not coming.

However, the two sides have been remarkably consistent about their commitment of having some sort of trade deal finalised by the fall 2025 deadline. So far, negotiators from the two sides have met in New Delhi and Washington five times, including the first meeting in March where the Terms of Reference for the negotiations were finalised. The team from the U.S. will visit India in late August to take forward the talks. Things have, however, become trickier for Indian negotiators



because Mr. Trump has now directly linked India's dealings with Russia to India's trade relationship with the U.S.

The tariffs will come into effect soon. According to an Executive Order dated July 31, Mr. Trump said that his duties on India and other countries would come into effect "7 days after the date of this order".

#### **What about deals with other countries?**

Over the last month, Mr. Trump has concluded deals with the U.K., Indonesia, the Philippines, Japan, the EU, and South Korea. The deal with the U.K. does not specify a general tariff level, but it will see British car exports to the U.S. attract a 10% tariff, down from the earlier 27.5% and a removal of tariffs on aerospace exports to the U.S. Japan negotiated lower tariffs of 15% for its exports to the U.S., the same as the EU.

### **EXPRESS VIEW ON TRADE PACTS AND AGRICULTURE: CARRY FORWARD THE MOMENTUM**

Now that the India-UK Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA) has been sealed, the focus shifts to the more challenging deal with the US. A major stumbling block to inking even an interim free trade agreement before US President Donald Trump's August 1 deadline — to either sign or face so-called reciprocal tariffs of up to 26 per cent — is agriculture. India does not want to open up its market for American soyabean, corn (maize), ethanol and dairy products. What this defensive stance misses is the potential loss from the fact that India's agricultural exports to the US, at \$6.2 billion in 2024, exceeded its imports of \$2.4 billion. A 26 per cent tariff will definitely hurt Indian seafood exports to the US that alone was valued at \$2.5 billion. That loss would be a gain for the likes of Ecuador and Chile, slapped with only the 10 per cent baseline tariff.

On the other hand, the fear of US farm imports is more about perception than reality. Take dairy, where the US isn't as big an exporter of milk powder, butter and cheese as New Zealand and the European Union. Or soyabean, where India imported over \$5 billion worth of its oil during 2024-25. The bulk of that was from Argentina and Brazil, with the US share at just \$126.3 million. The US is, no doubt, cost competitive in corn and the world's biggest producer as well as exporter. But corn is basically a feed grain, also increasingly being used as a biofuel feedstock. Allowing imports would benefit India's dairy and poultry farmers grappling with rising feed costs, aggravated by the diversion of corn for fuel ethanol production. The sheer demand growth makes corn imports by India inevitable, whether from the US or elsewhere.

India needs a farm trade policy based not on import protection, but expanding and diversifying its exports. That happened during 2003-04 to 2013-14, when the country's agriculture exports soared from \$7.5 billion to \$43.3 billion and new markets were created in products from basmati rice and buffalo meat to frozen shrimps, guar gum meal, chilly and seed spices. Since then, exports have hardly grown to about \$52 billion in 2024-25. Even worse have been shipment curbs — on rice, wheat, sugar or onion — clamped at the slightest indication of domestic supply shortfalls. CETA has been a refreshing departure, with India successfully negotiating duty-free access for its exports of seafood, processed foods, spices, fruit and vegetables to the UK, while simultaneously offering to cut tariffs on imports of whisky, chocolates, soft drinks and salmon from the latter. A similar confident approach of export proactiveness rather than import defensiveness is required in deals with other countries — the US included.



## TIME FOR ACTION

The Reserve Bank of India's (RBI) Monetary Policy Committee was sensible to pause its rate cuts, as announced on Wednesday. RBI Governor Sanjay Malhotra rightly pointed out that the uncertainties surrounding tariffs are still evolving, and that the 100 bps of rate cuts implemented since February 2025 are still percolating through the system. Mr. Malhotra's statement was made before U.S. President Donald Trump approved an additional 25% tariff on imports from India, over and above the existing 25% reciprocal tariffs. However, his assessment that the matter is far from over was nevertheless accurate. India is still in the process of negotiating a Bilateral Trade Agreement with the U.S., and the final tariffs are far from decided. In the meantime, Mr. Trump has already indicated that similar additional tariffs — “penalties” for buying oil from Russia — may be imposed on other countries as well, which will impact India's comparative advantage. Leaving room for another rate cut later in the year when things might be clearer, thus, was the sensible thing to do. The other broad reason why the pause makes sense is that it allows the RBI to see whether such monetary measures are working. A 100 bps cumulative cut in rates over the last six months is significant, and the banking system needs time to pass that on to borrowers. The Governor also pointed out that there is ample liquidity in the system, which means the banks have the money to lend.

The question, however, is whether there is enough growth-related borrowing happening. RBI data show that, as of end-June, loans to purchase consumer durables had contracted about 3% compared to the previous year. Growth in housing loans slowed sharply to 9.6% from 36% a year earlier, while vehicle loans too slowed by five percentage points over the last year. In line with this subdued demand outlook, companies too seem to be slowing their borrowing. Loans to industry grew 5.5% in June 2025, down from 8.1% in June last year. Simply reducing rates, therefore, is not enough and that is something the Governor alluded to when he said stronger policy frameworks “across domains, and not just limited to monetary policy”, would be pivotal in achieving India's growth potential. The government has to intervene in a more focused manner than just increasing capital expenditure across the board. A lot can be done through tax. The Goods and Services Tax rate rationalisation, that was promised several times, is long overdue. A reduction in fuel prices in line with lower oil prices, too, will lift consumer sentiment. The RBI can, for the moment, afford to wait things out. The government does not have this luxury.

### Do You Know:

- Monetary policy essentially deals with the supply and cost (interest rates) of money in an economy. The RBI's MPC meets every two months to assess the state of monetary activities, and may tweak the repo rate — the interest rate at which the RBI lends to commercial banks — in a manner that reduces price fluctuations in the economy while keeping the inflation rate (the rate at which the general price level in the economy grows) at a reasonable level. According to RBI, there are several direct and indirect instruments that are used for implementing monetary policy:

—**Repo Rate:** The interest rate at which the Reserve Bank provides liquidity under the liquidity adjustment facility (LAF) to all LAF participants against the collateral of government and other approved securities.

—**Standing Deposit Facility (SDF) Rate:** The rate at which the Reserve Bank accepts uncollateralised deposits, on an overnight basis, from all LAF participants. The SDF is also a financial stability tool in addition to its role in liquidity management. The SDF rate is placed at 25



basis points below the policy repo rate. With introduction of SDF in April 2022, the SDF rate replaced the fixed reverse repo rate as the floor of the LAF corridor.

—**Marginal Standing Facility (MSF) Rate:** The penal rate at which banks can borrow, on an overnight basis, from the Reserve Bank by dipping into their Statutory Liquidity Ratio (SLR) portfolio up to a predefined limit (2 per cent). This provides a safety valve against unanticipated liquidity shocks to the banking system. The MSF rate is placed at 25 basis points above the policy repo rate.

—**Liquidity Adjustment Facility (LAF):** The LAF refers to the Reserve Bank's operations through which it injects/absorbs liquidity into/from the banking system. It consists of overnight as well as term repo/reverse repos (fixed as well as variable rates), SDF and MSF. Apart from LAF, instruments of liquidity management include outright open market operations (OMOs), forex swaps and market stabilisation scheme (MSS).

—**Reverse Repo Rate:** The interest rate at which the Reserve Bank absorbs liquidity from banks against the collateral of eligible government securities under the LAF. Following the introduction of SDF, the fixed rate reverse repo operations will be at the discretion of the RBI for purposes specified from time to time.

—**Bank Rate:** The rate at which the Reserve Bank is ready to buy or rediscount bills of exchange or other commercial papers. The Bank Rate acts as the penal rate charged on banks for shortfalls in meeting their reserve requirements (cash reserve ratio and statutory liquidity ratio). The Bank Rate is published under Section 49 of the RBI Act, 1934. This rate has been aligned with the MSF rate and, changes automatically as and when the MSF rate changes alongside policy repo rate changes.

—**Cash Reserve Ratio (CRR):** The average daily balance that a bank is required to maintain with the Reserve Bank as a per cent of its net demand and time liabilities (NDTL) as on the last Friday of the second preceding fortnight that the Reserve Bank may notify from time to time in the Official Gazette.

—**Statutory Liquidity Ratio (SLR):** Every bank shall maintain in India assets, the value of which shall not be less than such percentage of the total of its demand and time liabilities in India as on the last Friday of the second preceding fortnight, as the Reserve Bank may, by notification in the Official Gazette, specify from time to time and such assets shall be maintained as may be specified in such notification (typically in unencumbered government securities, cash and gold).

—**Open Market Operations (OMOs):** These include outright purchase/sale of government securities by the Reserve Bank for injection/absorption of durable liquidity in the banking system.

#### INDIA'S DIGITAL PAYMENT BOOM: A DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD FOR SMALL TRADERS

India's digital payment revolution, led by the Unified Payments Interface (UPI), has transformed commerce, with 1,500 crore transactions worth ₹22 lakh crore in July 2025 alone. Yet, this celebrated leap toward a cashless economy is fuelling anxiety among thousands of small traders, particularly in states like Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. As reports on X and news outlets like Businessworld reveal, many shopkeepers are ditching UPI QR codes, fearing tax scrutiny and financial strain from GST notices tied to their digital transactions.



Small vendors, from Bengaluru's kirana stores to Thoothukudi's street hawkers, face a harsh reality. UPI's transparency, while curbing black money, exposes their earnings to tax authorities. GST notices, often based on transactions as low as ₹20 lakh annually, have hit traders unprepared for compliance, with weak infrastructure and outdated thresholds—unchanged since 2017—adding to their woes.

This backlash threatens to reverse digital payment gains. Traders reverting to cash, as seen in Karnataka's markets, risk alienating customers accustomed to UPI's convenience, with 80% of urban Indians carrying minimal cash, per a 2024 RBI survey. The government's push for compliance must balance enforcement with education and simplified tax processes.

India's digital revolution is a global model, but its success depends on supporting its smallest stakeholders. Easing GST thresholds, providing tax literacy, and improving digital infrastructure can restore trust. Without these, the dream of a cashless economy risks becoming a nightmare for the very traders it aimed to empower.

## HOW SHOULD MONEY LAUNDERING BE TACKLED?

### The story so far:

A report submitted by the Finance Minister in the Rajya Sabha states that 5,892 cases were taken up by the Enforcement Directorate (ED) under the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA) 2002, since 2015. Of these cases, only 15 convictions have yet been ordered by special courts. The government claims that investigations have been initiated in more or less all cases, and that Enforcement Case Information Reports (ECIRs) have been issued to initiate proceedings. However, these figures raise two important aspects. First, that the number of convictions vis-a-vis total cases is far from satisfactory and secondly, that money laundering cases have been rising signalling that the government has not been able to check such financial crimes.

### What is a laundromat?

The term is said to have originated from the use of laundromats by organised crime syndicates in the U.S. as cover for their crimes and under-the-table dealings. A laundromat is an all-purpose financial vehicle. It may be set up by a bank or any other company engaged in providing financial services. However, it can also help clients launder the proceeds of crime, hide ownership of assets, embezzle funds from companies, evade taxes or currency restrictions and move money offshore.

### How is money laundered?

Money laundering, as defined under Section 3 of PMLA, is an act through which processes or activities connected to the proceeds of crime are concealed, possessed, acquired, or used and projected as untainted property or claiming to be untainted property.

In the first stage called placement, the launderer introduces money into the financial system which might be done by breaking up large amounts of cash into smaller sums (a process called smurfing). In the second stage, that is layering, money is shifted to other locations through investments and transactions. And finally in the integration stage, the laundered money is brought into the financial system through real estate, business or asset formation etc. The Supreme Court in *P. Chidambaram versus Enforcement Directorate* (2019) held that hiding the illegal source of money affects the financial system and also the sovereignty and integrity of the nation. Other impacts of money laundering include expansion of money supply which might prove detrimental to



monetary stability of the country ultimately impacting inflation. Moreover, it may also affect trading, according to the Financial Action Task Force (FATF).

#### **When about the PMLA?**

In line with the UN Political Declaration and Global Programme of Action (adopted by the UN General Assembly in February 1990), the law has been made to prevent money laundering and to confiscate the property involved or obtained. The most significant part of the statute is that the burden of proof is on the accused. Another feature is that the ECIR is sufficient to initiate proceedings which has also been reiterated by the Supreme Court in *Vir Bhadra Singh versus ED* (2017) — that no FIR is required to initiate proceedings under the Act. The only requirement as per the top court was that a scheduled offence (offence against the state) be essential for the offence of money laundering. However, despite being such a stringent law, the offence has become rampant.

#### **What are the issues to be addressed?**

The number of money laundering cases is seriously increasing, questioning the efficacy of the implementation of the law. Moreover, on many occasions, the law has been abused by authority which has been seen and referred to by the Supreme Court as well. In *Vijay Madanlal Chaudhury versus Union of India* (2022) the Court held that to initiate prosecution under Section 3 of the PMLA, registration as scheduled offence is a pre requisite but for initiating attachment of property under Section 5, there need not be a pre-registered criminal case. This view has been very often misused by authorities with politically motivated intentions.

It is important that the authorities follow the recommendations of the FATF and ensure that money laundering cases are handled with care and caution so that misuse could be checked, and genuine cases reported and investigated properly to enhance the rate of conviction. Money laundering is a serious offence as it has a direct linkage with terror activities and is a major source of terror financing. Instead of political motives, the law should be used to address the issues and concerns involved in a genuine manner. Though India has signed the Double Taxation Avoidance Agreement (DTAA) with about 85 countries, which helps to check money laundering, things are not yet in the right direction and much needs to be done. These agreements promote the exchange of financial and tax-related information between tax authorities of participating countries. This facilitates the enforcement of tax regulations and helps prevent illegal activities like tax evasion and money laundering.

### **DESPITE HC ORDER, RURAL EMPLOYMENT GUARANTEE SCHEME REMAINS STALLED IN BENGAL**

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), a lifeline for rural India, remains paralyzed in West Bengal despite the Calcutta High Court's June 18, 2025, order to resume the scheme by August 1. With over 25 million registered workers awaiting jobs and wages, the Central and state governments' failure to act, as reported by Down To Earth, is a stark betrayal of the rural poor. This deadlock, rooted in political and administrative inertia, threatens livelihoods and exposes systemic flaws in India's welfare framework.

The Centre halted MGNREGA funds in March 2022, citing irregularities in 31 of 63 inspected worksites, invoking Section 27 of the Act. The High Court, led by Chief Justice T.S. Sivagnanam, ruled that indefinite suspension violates the law's spirit, ordering resumption with stricter



oversight. Yet, as of August 2025, the Centre has not approved West Bengal's labour budget for 2025–26. Block offices in Purulia and Parganas have rejected 2,092 job applications, and activists from Paschim Banga Khet Majoor Samity face intimidation, signalling deliberate obstruction.

This impasse has dire consequences. West Bengal, with 75.97 lakh households employed in 2021–22, faces distress migration and stalled rural projects due to the funding freeze. X posts from @AITCofficial highlight ₹3,038 crore in pending dues, the highest among states, fuelling accusations of political vendetta by the BJP-led Centre against the TMC-ruled state. Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee's Karmashree scheme offers partial relief, but it cannot replace MGNREGA's scale.

Both governments must end this standoff. The Centre should release funds and approve the labour budget, while the state must ensure transparent implementation. The High Court's upcoming hearing, prompted by the Samity's plea for unemployment allowances, must hold authorities accountable. MGNREGA is a right, not a bargaining chip. Bengal's rural workers deserve action, not excuses, to restore their dignity and economic stability.

#### TCS LAYOFFS REFLECT THE CHALLENGES OF A SECTOR INCREASINGLY RELYING ON AI

On Sunday, Indian tech giant TCS announced its decision to lay off 2 per cent of its global workforce — around 12,000 jobs — over the year. Following this announcement, on Monday, TCS shares fell around 1.6 per cent during trading. Shares of other IT companies mirrored the decline. While the layoffs are being framed in terms of moving towards a “future-ready organisation” through “skilling and redeployment”, concerns over changes in the operating environment of tech companies are being raised. While the TCS decision is expected to hit mid- and senior-level employees the most, the question is whether the layoffs are the beginning of a larger churn in the Indian IT sector.

The IT sector in India has been a major source of employment, especially so in recent years. As per a report in this paper, in the big five IT companies — TCS, Infosys, Wipro, HCL Technologies and Tech Mahindra — employment went up from 11.5 lakh in March 2020 to 15.34 lakh by December 2024 as demand for IT services and digitisation surged post the pandemic. To put these employment figures in perspective, the Indian Railways employed more than 12.5 lakh regular employees as of 2023-24. But, these years have also witnessed two other developments — the advent of AI and Donald Trump's second term — which are reshaping the operating environment in unprecedented ways. The rapid adoption of AI and automation across the world has dramatically altered the business milieu. And not just in the IT sector, which has been affected, but others as well. Alongside, the economic uncertainty unleashed due to Trump's policies has impacted firms' investment and spending decisions. These have raised questions over the future of the Indian IT sector.

Cracks are already appearing in the sector's business model — a model that has relied on the country's educational institutions to churn out software engineers at scale and on wage arbitrage. The question is, if over the coming years, AI and automation make large swathes of IT jobs redundant, and the wage arbitrage with other economies reduces, then, where does India's competitive advantage lie? Considering that Indian IT firms do not allocate large sums of money for research and development — for instance, the consolidated R&D and innovation expenditure for TCS was Rs 2,630 crore in 2024-25 (around 1 per cent of its turnover), and the standalone R&D spending of Infosys was Rs 850 crore in 2025 (0.62 per cent of its revenue) — will firms be able to move up the value chain? And with companies drawing up plans for a future where AI and



automation play an increasingly large role, will the business model of IT companies change, and what will be the impact of these changes on the labour market in India? The IT sector will need to navigate these turbulent times carefully.

#### FEMALE APPLICANTS' SHARE RISES TO 41% IN ROUND-II OF INTERNSHIP SCHEME

A mismatch between internship opportunities and participation, and a significant gender imbalance in the first pilot round of the PM Internship Scheme earlier this year forced the government to tweak the norms of this flagship scheme.

- The gender imbalance with the ratio of male to female interns of 72:28 was one of the key concerns flagged by Parliament's Standing Committee on Finance to the government, as per a report of the Committee tabled in Lok Sabha on Monday.

—“While appreciating the Ministry (of Corporate Affairs) for taking all efforts to achieve the ambitious target of the scheme; the Committee urges the Ministry to act swiftly and decisively to overcome/address the key challenges faced during pilot phase viz. mismatch between the number of internship opportunities offered and actual participation; longer duration of internships; under-utilisation of funds; imbalanced gender ratio of male to female interns stands at 72:28; lack of alignment between candidates' interests and the roles offered,” the report stated.

- The government had responded by saying that the numbers picked up after the first pilot. “With reference to the observed gender imbalance among interns selected under the Scheme, it is submitted that in the Round I of the Pilot Project, 31 per cent of applicants were female candidates. The representation of females amongst the interns stands at 28 percent which is almost consistent with the representation of females at the application stage,” it said in response to the Committee.

- Low acceptance rate of the offers made under the Internship Scheme has been a key concern. Prospective applicants have also flagged some of the issues under the Scheme with the Ministry of Corporate Affairs earlier including a request to relax the age limit from 24 years to 25 years, employment prospects after internship and few openings in the IT sector in the ‘Candidate Open House for the PM Internship Scheme’ in March.

#### Do You Know:

- The scheme aims to provide internships to one crore youth in top 500 companies over five years. Under the scheme, an amount of Rs 4,500 will be provided per month by the Government of India through Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT) with an additional Rs 500 offset to be provided by the company's CSR (corporate responsibility) funds.

- The government will also provide a one-time grant of Rs 6,000 per annum for incidentals to cover miscellaneous expenses incurred by the selected candidate during the internship.

- The internship scheme was a part of the Prime Minister's Package for Employment and Skilling announced in FY25 Budget with an overall outlay of Rs 2 lakh crore.

- The package was allocated Rs 12,000 crore for this financial year, out of which Rs 10,000 crore was allocated to the Ministry of Labour and Employment for the three Employment Linked-Incentive schemes and Rs 2,000 crore was provided to the Ministry of Corporate Affairs for the internship programme.



- In the revised estimates for 2024-25, the amount allocated for the internship scheme was scaled down to Rs 380 crore. For 2025-26, an amount of Rs 10,831 crore has been provided for the internship scheme in the Budget, including Rs 59.77 crore of capital outlay.

## CARRIAGE OF GOODS BY SEA BILL CLEARS HOUSE

Rajya Sabha Wednesday passed the Carriage of Goods by Sea Bill, 2025, by voice vote, amidst protests by the members of the Opposition demanding a discussion on the Special Intensive Revision(SIR) of electoral rolls currently underway in poll-bound Bihar.

- The House was adjourned for the day, just half an hour after the afternoon proceedings began, soon after the Carriage of Goods by Sea Bill was passed.
- When the members of the Opposition tried to raise a point of order, the Chair, Bhubaneswar Kalita, said he would allow a point of order only when there was order in the house. He then asked all the members to return to their seats.
- Lok Sabha passed the Bill, which replaces the 1925 Indian Carriage of Goods by Sea Act, in March this year. The Bill aligns India's maritime law with international conventions and seeks to modernise provisions governing the transport of goods by sea.
- The Bill, which replaces the 1925 Indian Carriage of Goods by Sea Act, aligns India's maritime law with international conventions and seeks to modernise provisions governing the transport of goods by sea.

### Do You Know:

- The Carriage of Goods by Sea Bill, 2024 was introduced in Lok Sabha on August 9, 2024. The Bill seeks to replace the Indian Carriage of Goods by Sea Act, 1925. The Act establishes the responsibilities, liabilities, rights, and immunities in case of goods carried from a port in India to another port in India or any other port in the world. The Act is in conformance with the International Convention for the Unification of Certain Rules of Law relating to Bills of Lading of August 1924 (Hague Rules) and subsequent amendments to it.
- The Bill empowers the central government to:
  - i. issue directions for carrying out provisions of the Bill, and
  - ii. amend the schedule specifying rules applicable to bills of lading. A bill of lading refers to a document issued by a freight carrier to a shipper. It contains details such as the type, quantity, condition, and destination of goods being carried. The rules outline the responsibilities, liabilities, rights, and immunities of goods carriers.
- The bill adopts the Hague-Visby Rules, a globally accepted maritime standard also followed by countries like the United Kingdom. By replacing complexity with clarity, the legislation is expected to simplify maritime trade laws, reduce litigation risks, and enhance transparency and commercial efficiency in cargo movement by sea

## INDIA'S EV PUSH: AS CARS FALL BEHIND, CENTRE BETS BIG ON ELECTRIFYING TRUCKS

Over the past year, India's electric vehicle (EV) policy has undergone a quiet but significant pivot: electric cars are no longer centre-stage, while e-trucks have emerged as the new priority.

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



- The first major signal came in September 2024, when the PM E-DRIVE scheme was rolled out without any incentives for electric four-wheelers — unlike the preceding FAME subsidy. Earlier this week, the NITI Aayog reinforced this stance, arguing that measuring progress in e-mobility through cars is “not... the right metric” for India.
- Electric cars simply aren’t selling fast enough in India to move the needle — largely due to their relatively high cost and persistent range anxiety.
- In 2024, the share of electric cars in total four-wheeler sales — or EV penetration — remained low at just 2 per cent, according to New York-headquartered think tank Rhodium Group. In contrast, the EV penetration rate in the four-wheeler segment stood at 47 per cent in China, 23 per cent in Europe, 10 per cent in the US, and a striking 17 per cent in Vietnam — up from just 3 per cent in 2022.
- There’s another reason — “While 75% of Indian vehicles are two-wheelers, only 13% of these vehicles are cars... Hence, measuring progress in the transition to electric mobility by only looking at cars, as done in developed countries, would not be the right metric in a country dominated by two-wheelers,” the NITI Aayog report said.
- In addition to cars making up a smaller share of vehicles overall, large cars costing over Rs 10 lakh account for just 2 per cent of India’s vehicle fleet.
- That said, the government did launch the Scheme to Promote Manufacturing of Electric Passenger Cars in India in March 2024 — which many had seen as aimed at attracting Tesla — with guidelines released in June this year.
- As far as reducing emissions, particulate pollution, and dependence on energy imports is concerned, electrification of trucks will go a long way.
- In July, the Ministry of Heavy Industries launched an incentive scheme for e-trucks under PM-DRIVE, aiming to support 5,600 vehicles with a capacity of over 3.5 tonnes.
- China is already showing what electrification of trucking can do to oil consumption — with around 9 per cent of heavy-duty trucks now electric, it is displacing over 1 million barrels per day in implied oil demand, according to the Rhodium Group.

**Do You Know:**

- The report titled ‘Unlocking a \$200 Billion Opportunity: Electric Vehicles in India’ said it is “evident that continuation of incentives alone may not help” India reach the 2030 target. “As such it is time to give a stronger push for the shift by introducing some gentle mandates and disincentives which will help signal the required direction more firmly,” it said.
- On October 1, 2024, the government commenced the PM E-Drive electric vehicle subsidy scheme offering upfront incentives for purchase and supporting the installation of critical EV charging infrastructure.
- It is offering Rs 3,679 crore in subsidies and demand incentives to accelerate the adoption of electric two-wheelers, three-wheelers, e-ambulances, e-trucks, and other emerging EVs.



- It has replaced previous flagship initiatives such as the Faster Adoption and Manufacturing of Electric Vehicles (FAME) policy, which expired in March, and the three-month Electric Mobility Promotion Scheme (EMPS), which ended on September 30, 2024.
- India launched 'E-Amrit', a web portal on electric vehicles (EVs) at the COP26 Summit in Glasgow. Developed by NITI Aayog, the portal provides information on EV adoption, purchase, investment opportunities, policies, and subsidies.

#### INDIA'S ETHANOL BLENDING CONTROVERSY: GREEN GOALS VS. CONSUMER WOES

India's push for 20% ethanol-blended petrol (E20), achieved in March 2025, has ignited a firestorm of debate. Hailed by the government as a triumph for energy security and farmers, the policy has sparked outrage among vehicle owners who report slashed mileage and potential engine damage. This clash, amplified by social media posts on X, exposes a rift between environmental ambitions and the practical burdens borne by millions, demanding a more transparent and inclusive approach.

The Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas touts E20's benefits: ₹1.44 lakh crore in forex savings, 245 lakh metric tonnes of crude oil substitution, and a 30% emissions drop compared to E10, per a PIB release. Farmers, now "Urjadaatas," have earned ₹40,000 crore this year, with ethanol prices rising from ₹46.66 per litre in 2021–22 to ₹71.32 in 2024–25. Yet, consumers face a grim reality. Ethanol's 33% lower energy content cuts mileage by 5–15%, especially in pre-2023 vehicles not designed for E20, as noted by Cartoq. Reports of corroded fuel systems and degraded seals in older cars fuel fears of costly repairs, with warranties at risk, as Toyota warned on X.

The government dismisses these concerns as "misplaced," citing studies by IOCL and ARAI that claim marginal efficiency losses. But contradictory signals—Petroleum Minister Hardeep Puri denying plans for 27% blending while Nitin Gadkari pushes for it by August 2025—erode trust. Allegations of Gadkari's family ties to ethanol production, via CIAN Agro, further stoke perceptions of vested interests, as highlighted by Financial Express. With petrol prices unchanged despite ethanol's lower cost, consumers feel cheated.

India's green goals are vital, but foisting E20 on an unprepared public risks backlash. Clear pump labelling, phased transitions, and incentives for retrofitting older vehicles are essential. The government must bridge this trust gap with transparency and support, ensuring the ethanol revolution empowers all, not just a few.



## LIFE AND SCIENCES

### INTERVENTION BY INDIAN TEAM HELPED FIX KEY ISSUE BEFORE AXIOM-4 LAUNCH: ISRO CHIEF

Weeks before it finally took off, the Axiom-4 mission, which carried Group Captain Shubhanshu Shukla and three other astronauts to the International Space Station (ISS), was nearly cleared for launch despite a perceived minor oxygen leak — until an ISRO team insisted on further checks that revealed a potentially dangerous crack in the rocket, ISRO Chairperson Dr V Narayanan told The Indian Express.

- The Axiom-4 mission took off for space from NASA's Kennedy Space Center in Florida on June 25 after a series of delays since the initial launch date of May 29.
- The first launch was deferred to June 8 due to an electrical issue in the SpaceX Dragon spacecraft — the module where the crew was seated. But on June 8, when the engines were test-fired on ground, an oxygen leak was observed in addition to an anomaly in one of the actuators, used in controlling the direction of the rocket's thrust.
- Dr Narayanan told The Indian Express that the oxygen leak was deemed minor and unlikely to affect the launch, but the Indian team — 18 scientists including the ISRO chairman and the director of the Human Space Flight Centre — embedded with the Axiom-4 and NASA teams felt something was amiss and pushed for further checks.
- "Initially the team thought that there was a minor leak and the mission could proceed as planned. But, the Indian team insisted that proper checks be carried out even if it meant delaying the mission. And it was good that the tests were carried out because a crack was detected, allowing for repair. It was resolved before the mission took off," Dr Narayanan said.
- The crack was in the oxidiser line, which carries liquid oxygen to power the rocket — a serious safety risk, especially for a crewed mission.
- The crack and other issues were fixed, but on June 12 NASA announced it was working with Russian space agency Roscosmos to evaluate a leak in the Zvezda module, the Russian-built service module of the ISS that houses key life-support and docking systems. This further delayed the mission until the final launch two weeks.
- During the mission, the Indian team was present at both Kennedy Space Center in Cape Canaveral where launch operations took place and at mission control in Houston, Texas, where real-time flight operations are managed — from crew health monitoring and communications to emergency response.

#### Do You Know:

- Axiom-4 commander Peggy Whitson, a veteran astronaut, holds the record for the most number of days spent in space by an American or a woman — 695 days across multiple missions.
- India plans to build a sustained human spaceflight programme, with a space station targeted by 2035 and a human Moon mission by 2040. This will require setting up a permanent astronaut corps and regularly training new astronauts, like NASA and Roscosmos do.



- Shukla, who returned to Earth with a splashdown on July 15, is currently undergoing reconditioning in the United States. He is expected to remain in quarantine until the first week of August, after which he will participate in a debriefing with NASA and return home by mid-August.

## AI MAY MAKE NURSES MORE IMPORTANT THAN DOCTORS

One of the most effective prisms through which to understand how people and societies have changed since the Palaeolithic to the Anthropocene is to examine the relationship between tools and people. Simply put, humans make machines and machines, in turn, shape them. The last few centuries — a temporal blip in the species' history — have witnessed increasing degrees of abstraction. Numbers, the written word, money (increasingly less tangible) and now AI, are not just technologies. They shape what and who societies value. With machines able to remember and analyse information, and predict outcomes, a new set of values is in the offing. And for all the anxiety around AI, this change might not be all bad.

Demis Hassabis, Nobel laureate and CEO and co-founder of Google DeepMind, said that while AI and robotics may be able to replace doctors, especially in diagnosis, it will likely be unable to replace nurses. His statement flags a broader possibility: Professions based on knowledge and abstract skills could become increasingly obsolete, and tangible, emotional labour more valuable. AI will not be refilling the gas on the AC compressor any time soon. It will not comfort an ageing relative in a meaningful way, nor make sure that a child is loved when both parents are at work. In essence, the jobs that are often seen as less skilled today could well become the most valuable.

Hierarchies of labour have been papered over in the name of what the market, guided by an ethereal, invisible hand, demands. Now, as the most lucrative professions of today — doctors, investment bankers, software engineers, lawyers — face an impending existential crisis, perhaps it's time to value others. Not just economically, but socially. Teachers, nurses, nannies — those who cook in homes and raise other people's children, those whose skills keep homes functioning — AI might create a new elite. It's about time.

## INSTEAD OF 'ALPHA MALES', BE LIKE FEMALE GORILLAS

For too long, too much of culture has been in the grip of metaphor, based on a misunderstanding of how social dynamics operate among social mammals. Since at least the second half of the last century, a crass social Darwinism has wormed its way into pop culture, backed by pseudo-science. Boys and men have been sold the myth of the "alpha male" — aggressive, domineering and with predatory undertones — as being at the top of the social pyramid. Beta males, on the other hand, are weak creatures, more social than aggressive. These misconceptions were based on studies of wolves and, more importantly, simian cousins of homo sapiens such as chimpanzees and gorillas. As it turns out, primates were setting a better example all along.

Research based on 20 years of data on gorillas in Rwanda, published in the Royal Society Journal Proceedings B on August 6, shows how females, even when they move between social groups, search for and maintain friendships. Most primates change groups and locations, likely as a defence against inbreeding. New members are usually at the bottom of the hierarchy and can face aggression and ostracisation from more established, dominant females. Rather than aggression, however, they rely on past ties with other females, some of whom they have not seen since childhood. And the "friendly females" build more enduring ties and provide more safety than alpha males do.



This latest piece of research is of a piece with a growing body of work that shows that social skills, empathy, grooming, etc. are far more important in achieving status and success among primates. Bonobos, genetically as close to humans as chimps, are known as the “loving ape” because of how non-violent they are. Even among chimpanzees, the dominant male is often the one with the most social and political skills — with brains rather than brawn. Perhaps it’s time that humans emulate the reality of the friendly females rather than the myth of the alpha male.

## RUSSIA’S INTERNET CRACKDOWN: A DIGITAL IRON CURTAIN RISES

Russia’s escalating campaign to control the internet, intensified in 2025, is casting a long shadow over freedom of expression. With YouTube throttled, WhatsApp calls restricted, and a new law criminalizing searches for “extremist” content, the Kremlin is tightening its grip on the digital realm. This “death by a thousand cuts,” as Human Rights Watch’s Anastasiia Kruope aptly describes, threatens to isolate Russia’s internet, undermining access to information and stifling dissent.

Since the 2022 Ukraine invasion, Russia has blocked major platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, while targeting VPNs to curb access to restricted sites. A July 2025 law, signed by President Vladimir Putin, fines users for searching “extremist” materials—vaguely defined to include LGBTQ+ content or Navalny’s memoir—creating a chilling effect, as cyber lawyer Stanislav Seleznev notes. The state’s push for MAX, a heavily monitored “national” messaging app preinstalled on smartphones, aims to replace WhatsApp and Telegram, with over 2 million users by July, per Tass.

The Kremlin’s strategy leverages advanced technology, like the TSPU system, and consolidates control, with 25% of IP addresses managed by state giant Rostelecom. Mobile internet shutdowns, justified as anti-drone measures, disrupt daily life, from Vladivostok to Crimea. Yet, resistance persists—VPNs like Amnezia thrive, and independent media adapt, as Timur Olevsky of The Insider emphasizes the human drive for truth.

This digital clampdown violates Article 19 of the ICCPR, which protects free expression. The international community must support tools to bypass censorship and hold Russia accountable. Without action, the Kremlin’s vision of a “sovereign internet” risks plunging 146 million Russians into a censored abyss, where information is a state-controlled privilege, not a right.

## NEW DEPTHS

### How deep in the ocean does life exist?

Life often finds a way to survive even in extreme conditions. For example, in 1960, when Don Walsh and Jacques Piccard explored the bottom of the Challenger Deep in the Mariana Trench, they spotted a small fish at a depth of 8.1 km. On July 30, researchers exploring the Kuril-Kamchatka and Aleutian trenches discovered the deepest known communities of life powered by chemosynthesis, where organisms get energy from chemicals like methane and hydrogen sulphide instead of sunlight. The communities, dominated by worms called siboglinids and clams, thrived where chemical-rich fluids rose through geological faults. These fluids were created by microbes breaking down organic matter, producing methane that may form gas hydrates in the high-pressure conditions. Per the researchers, the finding suggests these ecosystems may be more widespread and highlights a potential new role for deep-sea microbes in the earth’s carbon cycle: storing methane underground instead of letting it escape.



## WHAT IS THE POTENTIAL OF BIOCHAR?

### The story so far:

With the Indian carbon market set to be launched in 2026, CO<sub>2</sub> removal technologies such as biochar are expected to play a crucial role. Biochar is a type of charcoal rich in carbon and is produced from agricultural residue and organic municipal solid waste. It offers a sustainable alternative to manage waste and capture carbon. However, to truly serve as a scalable pathway for negative emissions across sectors, biochar requires participation and support from multiple stakeholders.

### What is biochar's potential?

India generates over 600 million metric tonnes of agricultural residue and over 60 million tonnes of municipal solid waste every year. A significant portion of both is burnt openly or dumped in landfills, leading to air pollution from particulate matter and greenhouse gases such as methane, nitrous oxide, and CO<sub>2</sub>.

By using 30% to 50% of surplus waste, India can produce 15-26 million tonnes of biochar and remove 0.1 gigatonnes of CO<sub>2</sub>-equivalent annually. Byproducts of biochar production, such as syngas (20-30 million tonnes) and bio-oil (24-40 million tonnes), can generate additional electricity and fuels. Theoretically, utilising syngas could generate around 8-13 TWh of power, equivalent to 0.5-0.7% of India's annual electricity generation, replacing 0.4-0.7 million tonnes of coal per year. Bio-oil can likewise potentially offset 12-19 million tonnes (or 8%) of diesel or kerosene production annually, leading to lower crude oil imports and reducing more than 2% of India's total fossil-fuel-based emissions.

### How can biochar be a carbon sink?

Biochar can hold carbon in the soil for 100-1,000 years due to its strong and stable characteristics, making it an effective long-term carbon sink. Its application across different sectors provides scalable opportunities for reducing emissions.

In agriculture, applying biochar can improve water retention, particularly in semi-dry and nutrient-depleted soils. This, in turn, can abate nitrous oxide emissions by 30-50%. Notably, nitrous oxide is a greenhouse gas with 273-times the warming potential of CO<sub>2</sub>, making its mitigation a crucial benefit of biochar.

Biochar can also enhance soil organic carbon, helping restore degraded soils.

In carbon capture applications, modified biochar can adsorb CO<sub>2</sub> from industrial exhaust gases. However, its carbon removal efficiency is currently lower than that of conventional methods.

In the construction sector, biochar can be explored as a low-carbon alternative to building materials. Adding 2-5% of biochar to concrete can improve mechanical strength, increase heat resistance by 20%, and capture 115 kg of CO<sub>2</sub> per cubic metre, making building materials a stable carbon sink.

In wastewater treatment, biochar offers a low-cost and effective option to reduce pollution. India generates more than 70 billion litres of wastewater every day, of which 72% is left untreated. A kilogram of biochar, along with other substances, can treat 200-500 litres of wastewater, implying a biochar demand potential of 2.5-6.3 million tonnes.



### What hinders biochar's application?

Despite its theoretically substantial potential to capture carbon, biochar remains underrepresented in carbon credit systems due to the absence of standardised feedstock markets and consistent carbon accounting methods, which undermine investor confidence.

While research confirms biochar's technical feasibility for applications across sectors, deployments are hindered by barriers such as limited resources, evolving technologies, market uncertainties, and insufficient policy support. Viable business models are yet to emerge for large-scale adoption. Market development is further constrained by limited awareness among stakeholders, weak 'monitoring, reporting, verification' frameworks, and a lack of coordination across areas such as agriculture, energy, and climate policy.

To enable large-scale adoption, sustained support for R&D is essential to create region-specific feedstock standards and to optimise biomass utilisation rates based on agro-climatic zones and crop types. Further, biochar should be systematically integrated into existing and upcoming frameworks, including crop residue management schemes, bioenergy initiatives in both urban and rural contexts, and state-level climate strategies under the State Action Plans on Climate Change. Recognising biochar as a verifiable carbon removal pathway within the Indian carbon market will generate additional income for investors and farmers through carbon credits. Deploying biochar production equipment at the village level has the potential to create approximately 5.2 lakh rural jobs, linking climate action with inclusive economic development. The additional benefits of biochar, such as better soil health, lower fertilizer requirement (by 10-20%), and higher crop yield (by 10-25%), should be systematically integrated into policy and market frameworks to fully realise its potential.

In sum, although biochar is not a silver bullet, it offers a science-backed multisectoral pathway for India to achieve its climate and development goals.

### PLASTICS TREATY TALKS RESUME, LANCET REPORT SAYS NEED POLICY TO CURB HARM

As nations resume negotiations Tuesday for a global treaty on plastics, a new report published in The Lancet journal warned of its grave threat to human and planetary health but said the harm can be mitigated through effectively implemented policies.

- "Plastics cause disease and death from infancy to old age and are responsible for health-related economic losses exceeding \$1.5 trillion annually. These impacts fall disproportionately upon low income and at-risk populations," the report said.
- The medical journal also launched a health-focused global monitoring system on the manufacture and use of plastics, called the Lancet Countdown on health and plastics. This is similar to the Lancet Countdown on Health and Climate Change it had launched to monitor the health impacts of climate change.
- From Tuesday, ministers and negotiators from across the world are meeting in Geneva for the second round of the fifth session of what is known as the Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee, which has been negotiating a Global Plastics Treaty for the last three years. This treaty is meant to be an internationally legally binding agreement to tackle plastics pollution across its entire life cycle, though serious differences persist over the scope and nature of this agreement.



- The Lancet report said interventions such as an international agreement were necessary to reduce the dangers from plastics pollution.

**Do You Know:**

- Philip Landrigan, a paediatrician and epidemiologist, and Director of the Global Observatory on Planetary Health at Boston College, who is the lead author of the Lancet report, said that the new Countdown will identify and regularly report on a suite of scientifically meaningful and geographically and temporally representative indicators across all stages of the plastic life cycle.
- Landrigan said there were two factors that make plastic a huge threat for all countries at every level of income. First is the sheer magnitude of the problem.
- Second, plastics contain more than 16,000 chemicals. These chemicals leak out of plastic products during use and get into people, especially children. Landrigan said these include chemicals that are known to be human carcinogens, neurotoxicants, and endocrine disruptors as well as many more that have never been tested for toxicity and whose dangers are still unknown.
- Early studies have shown possible links between microplastic and nanoplastic particles (MNPs) and lung diseases, inflammatory bowel disease, liver cirrhosis, myocardial infarction and stroke. In the past 2–3 years, MNPs have been increasingly reported in human tissues and body fluids in the general population, including blood, breastmilk, liver, kidney, colon, placenta, lung, spleen, brain, heart, great vessels, meconium, and feces.
- Plastic production has surged from 2 million tonnes in 1950 to 348 million tonnes in 2017, with projections indicating a potential doubling by 2040. The proliferation of plastic waste has led to significant environmental challenges, including marine pollution and adverse effects on wildlife.
- In March 2022, the United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA) adopted a resolution to develop a legally binding treaty addressing plastic pollution across its entire lifecycle. The proposed treaty aims to encompass measures from plastic production and design to waste management, emphasizing a comprehensive approach to tackling pollution.

**EXPRESS VIEW ON ICJ VERDICT ON CLIMATE OBLIGATIONS: A WELCOME NUDGE**

Last week, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruled that countries are “obliged” to “prevent harm from climate change”. The Court was responding to a UN General Assembly request, triggered by a resolution backed by small island states, for an “advisory” to “ensure protection of the environment” from GHG emissions. In a process that stretched over two years, the ICJ consulted experts, including those from the IPCC, as well as representatives of nations and blocs such as the Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries, to affirm that “limiting global warming to 1.5 degrees C should be considered the primary temperature goal for nations” and that they are obliged to make “adequate contributions” to achieve this target. The advisory is not binding on governments, but it could breathe new life into the flailing global climate change negotiations. It could also have significant implications for environmental jurisprudence, enabling vulnerable groups and nations to push for stronger climate action.

Ten years after the Paris Pact set the roadmap for climate action, numerous inclement weather events all over the world have shone unflattering light on the absence of a collective resolve to decarbonise the world economy. The UN’s annual climate meet has taken important decisions to compensate countries for loss and damages due to global warming-induced disasters. Yet, these



meetings continue to be held hostage by decades-long differences over who should contribute how much to the mitigation efforts. Last year's UNFCCC meet at Baku, billed as the finance CoP, was a particular disappointment. Leaders of most major economies failed to turn up, and less than two months after the summit, the US President pulled his country out of the Paris Climate Pact for the second time in less than 10 years. The US did not face any legal challenge for pulling out of the treaty, and developed countries have, by and large, got away with not meeting their financial obligations. The ICJ advisory has not spelt out any consequences for defaulters. However, its strong endorsement of compensation to countries that suffer climate damage could trigger a wave of litigation for damages. In recent years, developed nations have reluctantly acknowledged that vulnerable countries require assistance to deal with climate disasters, but they have rejected any suggestion for reparations. The ICJ's opinion could move the needle forward.

The top UN court has also affirmed the salience of the principle of "common but differentiated responsibilities". As rich countries increasingly put pressure on emerging economies, such as India, to assume more global warming mitigation responsibilities, this founding tenet of climate negotiations has come under increasing strain. The ICJ advisory should jolt the historically high emitters and nudge them to fulfil their climate commitments.

#### SIMPLER TESTS COULD SLASH BIOSIMILAR COSTS, WIDEN ACCESS

Small molecule drugs also tend to have fixed structures that do not change for the duration of their use. In contrast, the complex molecules, which we call biologics, are produced in biological systems and therefore during their production slight variations in the structure may arise. However, these variations may have no impact on the stability of the molecule, its efficacy or its side effects.

##### **'No competitor'**

When a company produces a small molecule drug for the first time, it seeks patent protection for that drug. That is, no competitor may make that drug for several years. It is only when the drug goes 'off patent' that competitors may make it.

In the absence of competition, the originator company can price the drug very high.

Once there is competition, the competitor companies produce generics, which are copies of the original drug. They don't undertake the research and development to make the drug and they may not spend as much on marketing and sales, so the costs of generics are also much lower. Most of the drugs that you and I take are generics and are priced very cheaply compared to the originator drug. A good example is Sovaldi, a drug used to treat hepatitis C: it originally cost \$84,000 for a 12-week course in the U.S. but that dropped to \$1,000 once Indian generic firms started making it. Largely, it is generic drugs that keep us in India alive and well.

Since biologics made by a generic firm will be produced by different biological systems, they may not be identical to those made by the originator company. Thus, they are called biosimilars, not generics.

For many years, a debate has raged over how much proof is required for a manufacturer to prove that a given biosimilar will work as well as the original biologic drug. Therefore, whereas much simpler testing was required to show that a generic small molecule was working like the originator molecule, there are more elaborate and expensive tests for biosimilars.



Major drug regulators such as those of the U.S., the U.K., and in Europe have been working to determine how they can simplify the requirements for approving a biosimilar, in view of the availability of modern analytical techniques. For example, the U.K. has removed animal trials and the US has planned to replace them with more human-relevant methods (like using organoids). In India, this requirement has not yet been updated although there is a proposal to waive animal studies on a case-by-case basis. Some have also argued that India should follow the practices of the U.K. and the U.S. The same holds for the more expensive clinical trials, which in the U.K. are currently required only in certain cases.

#### More options

Biosimilars need to be made less expensively while ensuring efficacy and minimal adverse effects. The larger the number of affordable biosimilars, the more options we will have for our patients.

### OUR LOVE-HATE RELATIONSHIP WITH THE POTATO — AND WHERE IT ALL BEGAN

French fries and tomato ketchup may be a match made in fast food heaven, but the meet-cute that changed the world occurred nine million years ago in the freezing cold of the Andean slopes. A recent study published in *Cell* has traced the origin of the beloved potato to another pantry essential, the tomato, and its fling with a wild potato species known as the *Etuberosum*. The research conducted by a team at the Agricultural Genomics Institute at Shenzhen, China, solves a mystery that has long gripped the world of botany: How is it that the potato plant, which bears a strong outward resemblance to its wilder relative, is genetically closer to the tomato?

The discovery is exciting for at least two reasons. One, it shows that genomes can help solve the mystery of how much of today's flora evolved — a significant breakthrough considering the rarity of plant fossils (soft vegetative matter doesn't preserve as well as, for example, the hard shells of marine invertebrates like snails). Two, it shows how looking to a plant's past may help preserve its future; the potato, it turns out, could only evolve because a key gene in the tomato unlocked the tuber-producing gene in the *Etuberosum*, with the resulting hybrid growing a new starchy organ that resembles the modern spud. Given its importance to food security — potatoes only rank behind rice, wheat and maize in global production volume — there are already attempts to use tomato genes to create even hardier varieties of the tuber.

Despite its wholesomeness and endless flexibility, adding heft, texture and flavour to cuisines everywhere since the Spanish shipped it to Europe in the 16th century, the potato has all too often been reduced to playing a supporting role in meals. In a world obsessed with limiting carbs, it has been vilified and villainised, held responsible for ballooning weights and expanding girths. Could the discovery of the Miocene-epoch romance, a random encounter that led to the birth of a food that can feed billions of the Earth's hungry, help rehabilitate its image? The world says potayto, genetics says tomahto.

### POLIO REBOUNDS AS GAPS UNDERMINE ERADICATION DRIVE

For the past decade, Sughra Ayaz has travelled door-to-door in southeastern Pakistan, pleading with parents to allow children to be vaccinated against polio as part of a global campaign to wipe out the paralytic disease.



Amid rampant misinformation and immense pressure for the campaign to succeed, Ms. Ayaz said, some managers have instructed workers to falsely mark children as immunised. And the vaccines, which must be kept cold, aren't always stored correctly, she added.

The World Health Organization (WHO) and partners embarked on their polio campaign in 1988 with the bold goal of eradication. They came close several times, including in 2021, when just five cases of the natural virus were reported. But since then, cases rebounded, hitting 99 last year, and officials have missed at least six self-imposed eradication deadlines. Afghanistan and Pakistan remain the only countries where transmission of polio has never been interrupted. The worldwide campaign has focused most of its attention and funding there for the past decade. But in its quest to eliminate the disease, the Global Polio Eradication Initiative has been derailed by mismanagement and what insiders describe as blind allegiance to an outdated strategy and a problematic oral vaccine, according to internal materials. Officials have falsified vaccination records, selected unqualified people to dole out drops, failed to send out teams during mass campaigns, and dismissed concerns about the oral vaccine sparking outbreaks, according to documents.

#### OZEMPIC IS THROWING A NEW 'MINI'-CHALLENGE AT RESTAURANTS AND CUSTOMERS. THE SOLUTION MAY BE SIMPLE

If gluttony is the foundation on which the edifice of the modern restaurant industry was built, could the GLP-1 class of drugs be the wrecking ball that brings it all crashing down? From London to Dubai to New York City, eateries are faced with the newly shrunk appetites of customers, thanks to the "miracle" wrought by drugs like Ozempic and Wegovy. This has led to a scramble to design special "mini meal" menus, of smaller servings with appropriate pricing; after all, customers who push food around on their plates after just a few bites cannot be expected to stomach the prices for regular portion sizes.

That these so-called "mini" portions are closer to the actual recommended servings is, of course, what lends a tinge of irony to the restaurant industry's predicament. The finding of a 2016 study, published in the Journal of the American Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, that most restaurants' individual main courses alone exceed the recommended calories for a single meal, underscored the extent to which the culture of eating out has contributed to obesity and related illnesses. Other studies have highlighted the phenomenon of "portion distortion", showing how even restaurant plates have grown in size over the decades, contributing to the problem of overeating.

It appears that the hunger-curbing power of GLP-1 drugs may succeed where mere will-power has repeatedly failed (the cephalic phase of digestion in humans kicks in at the very sight and smell of food). Yet, even as restaurants recalibrate their business models for a future where burgers and fries are no longer "super-sized" and fewer and fewer customers order enough food for there to be a doggy bag, weight-watchers themselves might consider revisiting a hoary piece of advice: Eat more at home. It is both healthier and cheaper.