



# CURRENT AFFAIRS FOR UPSC

7th to 13th September 2025

## DreamIAS

[vivekjsr20@gmail.com](mailto:vivekjsr20@gmail.com)



## INTERNATIONAL

### AFTER COLBERT, NOW JIMMY KIMMEL: TRUMP AND THE DEATH OF LATE NIGHT COMEDY IN THE US

When Stephen Colbert's Late Show was axed, I wrote that it was a warning. The indefinite suspension of Jimmy Kimmel's show this week proves there is now a pattern. The sharpest late-night voices on American television are being erased and the US President, who once raged at their jokes, is now gloating over their downfall, making it clear who this new wave of corporate caution really serves.

Kimmel, who was still willing to lob grenades at Trumpism and its cultish aftershocks, has been yanked off air indefinitely by ABC, a network owned by Disney. His crime was saying out loud what millions were thinking about the grotesque political theatre surrounding the killing of right-wing influencer and Trump ally Charlie Kirk.

Within minutes of Kimmel's show's suspension, Donald Trump celebrated as though he had personally ordered the hit. He derided Kimmel as "ratings-challenged," sneered that he had "zero talent," and egged on other networks to finish the job by sacking his peers Seth Meyers and Jimmy Fallon. This isn't just schadenfreude, it's revenge dressed up as victory. Trump has long fantasised of an American media landscape scrubbed clean of the comics who dared to lampoon him. Now, corporate America is obliging.

Kimmel's offence was not unlike Colbert's. He pointed out how Kirk's killing was being spun into propaganda. He mocked the lowering of flags, ridiculed the President's stage-managed grief, and reminded viewers that this was political charade, not mourning for a "friend". Unsurprisingly, the monologue stung politicians and the powerful. And in today's climate, truth delivered with bite is treated as liability, not public service. That's exactly what the network called Kimmel's comments: "not in public interest."

ABC defended its move with a familiar flourish of corporate jargon, saying the network will "move toward the resumption of respectful, constructive dialogue." But what exactly counts as "respectful" in this new order? If and when Kimmel returns, will he be handed a script of what he can and cannot say; his monologue reduced to a corporate-approved press release masquerading as comedy?

Networks hide behind business language, but strip away the euphemisms and the story is the same: Satire that unsettles the powerful is being punished. The Emmys and Hollywood may still applaud Colbert, give a nomination nod to Kimmel, too. Yet in the corporate suites, where advertisers and political alliances dictate decisions, dissent is being strangled slowly.

The deeper irony is that late-night comedy, once dismissed as fluff, has become one of the last bastions of accountability on American television. Jay Leno went after Clinton. Jon Stewart roasted Bush. Colbert torched corporate-political collusion. Satire is supposed to sting, not be safe. To say things polite society won't, to laugh at emperors with no clothes. To lose these acts of public reckoning is to lose a tradition of dissent that outlived presidents, scandals, and wars.

Hollywood still rewards dissent on stage. But backstage, the purge is well underway. Trump doesn't need to censor anyone directly. He just needs to jeer from the sidelines while corporations do the silencing for him.



Colbert was the warning shot, Kimmel the confirmation. Others are on Trump's fantasy firing line. If networks continue down this path, America will lose the very idea that comedy can challenge power and will be left with sanitised programming with applause tracks, stripped of its teeth — exactly the outcome Trump has always dreamed of.

## RECKLESS ESCALATION

Even by Israel's own standards, its September 9 attack on Qatar, targeting Hamas leaders, was a reckless escalation of the regional conflict — one that could make peace in Gaza even harder to achieve. Since Hamas's October 7, 2023 assault, Israel has bombed a number of Arab countries, besides devastating Gaza. Its strikes on Iran in June triggered a brief aerial war. Israel keeps attacking Syria, Lebanon and Yemen at will. But Qatar, a wealthy Gulf monarchy, is a U.S. ally that hosts America's largest military base in West Asia, and a crucial mediator in ceasefire talks between Israel and Hamas. Yet, none of this deterred Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who claimed "full responsibility" for the attack. Israeli jets targeted a house where Hamas leaders had reportedly assembled to discuss a ceasefire proposal. The strike drew sharp criticism and condemnation from across the world. Even U.S. President Donald Trump, Israel's greatest ally with whose blessings Mr. Netanyahu is carrying out his genocidal war on Palestinians in Gaza, said he was unhappy, while the White House has assured Qatar that there would be no more attacks.

Besides the flagrant violation of sovereignty, the Qatar strike risks setting back efforts to end the Gaza war. Qatar has long hosted Hamas's political leadership, with the tacit approval of the U.S. and other world powers, to keep channels of negotiation open. Last month, Hamas accepted a ceasefire proposal put forward by the mediators, but Mr. Netanyahu rejected it and vowed to press ahead with conquering famine-stricken Gaza City. Now, by attacking Hamas leaders in the mediator country, he has demonstrated his unwillingness to pursue peace. A ceasefire could threaten his government's survival — and he appears willing to prolong the war, even at the cost of more Palestinian lives. The strike also delivers another blow to the already fragile Arab-Israeli normalisation process. Saudi Arabia, which has walked back from normalisation talks since October 7, would find it harder to recognise an Israeli state that bombs its Gulf Arab neighbour. Israel's unchecked military aggression also exposes the failure of Mr. Trump, who has called himself a "man of peace" with claims of having ended even the India-Pakistan conflict of May 2025. But when it comes to Israel, which is facing serious allegations of war crimes and genocide, he seems either unable or unwilling to use the leverage at his disposal. India should be alarmed by Israel's move to expand the war to the Gulf, an energy-rich region where millions of Indians live. Prime Minister Modi has condemned the "violation" of Qatar's sovereignty without naming Israel. India should be more forthright in opposing Israel's regional war, and work with other regional and global powers to restore stability in West Asia.

## INDIA VOTES IN FAVOUR OF UNGA RESOLUTION ON PALESTINE STATE

On September 12, 2025, India voted in favor of a United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) resolution endorsing the "New York Declaration," which supports a two-state solution for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The resolution, introduced by France and co-sponsored by Saudi Arabia, was adopted with 142 votes in favor, 10 against, and 12 abstentions. It calls for a peaceful settlement of the Palestine issue, emphasizing an end to the Gaza conflict, cessation of Israeli settlement activities, and the establishment of a sovereign Palestinian state alongside Israel. The declaration also condemns the October 7, 2023, Hamas attacks on Israel and Israeli strikes on Gaza, which have caused significant civilian casualties and a humanitarian crisis. India's vote



aligns with its long-standing support for Palestinian self-determination while maintaining diplomatic ties with Israel, reflecting a balanced Middle East policy. The resolution faced opposition from countries including the United States and Israel, who criticized it as one-sided.

## WHY ARE EUROPEAN NATIONS NOW MOVING TO RECOGNISE PALESTINE?

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

In a significant diplomatic shift, several European nations, including Spain, Ireland, and Norway, have formally recognised the state of Palestine. The move has created a ripple effect, prompting major powers like France to clarify their own positions. French President Emmanuel Macron stated he is “totally ready to recognise a Palestinian state,” but stressed such a move “must come at a useful moment.” This wave of recognition is the culmination of overlapping geopolitical, moral, and domestic pressures that have reached a tipping point.

### **What makes recognition urgent now?**

The primary catalyst has been the war in Gaza following the October 7 attacks. The scale of the subsequent Israeli military response, resulting in widespread destruction and a humanitarian catastrophe, has shocked European sensibilities and made the previous status quo untenable. This has been compounded by the official stance of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s government, which has rejected the two-state solution, the foundational principle of decades of international diplomacy. The legal proceedings at the International Court of Justice, where South Africa has accused Israel of violating the Genocide Convention, have further intensified the pressure on European nations to take a definitive stance. For many governments, recognition is no longer a final reward for a settlement but a necessary act to preserve the very possibility of a two-state solution.

### **How has Ukraine reshaped Europe’s stance on sovereignty?**

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 forced Europe to adopt a principled stand on national sovereignty and the inadmissibility of acquiring land by force. However, this robust defence of international law has thrown Europe’s decades-long inaction on the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories into sharp relief. Intellectuals, media commentators, and civil society across the continent have increasingly pointed out this glaring hypocrisy, weakening the moral authority of European foreign policy. Governments now face immense pressure to demonstrate consistency. This “consistency gap” has become a significant liability, prompting a re-evaluation of their position. Recognising Palestine is thus partly an attempt to realign their policies and project a more coherent and principled stance on the world stage.

### **What are the domestic political pressures inside European countries?**

The foreign policy shift is also a direct response to roiling domestic politics. Across Europe, public opinion has shifted palpably. The European Parliament’s own Eurobarometer survey (2023) showed that 72% of Europeans support upholding international law in all conflicts — a principle increasingly seen as applying to Palestine as well. The harrowing images from Gaza have fuelled massive public demonstrations, student-led university encampments from Paris to Dublin, and relentless advocacy from human rights organisations. Youth and progressive constituencies, which form a crucial voter base for many ruling centre-left and green parties, are demanding concrete action beyond mere condemnation. For these governments, the political cost of inaction is rising steeply. Being perceived as passive is becoming a significant electoral risk, making



recognition a signal to the domestic audience that their government is aligned with the evolving moral consensus of its electorate.

#### **Why are some countries moving faster than others?**

The varied pace of recognition reveals the deep historical and political fault lines within Europe. Countries like Spain, Ireland, and Norway share a history of sympathy for the Palestinian cause, rooted in their own experiences with national struggle or a tradition of social democratic internationalism. Norway was host to the 1993 Oslo Accords; its recognition of Palestine in 2024 was seen as admitting that the negotiated path has collapsed, and new leverage is needed. In stark contrast, nations like Germany and Austria remain reluctant, constrained by the profound historical responsibility of the Holocaust, which has forged an ironclad commitment to Israel's security. Meanwhile, many eastern European countries, such as Poland and Hungary, recognised Palestine decades ago under Soviet influence. However, today these same countries tend to align their foreign policy closely with the U.S. and are hesitant to take a leading role on the issue, prioritising transatlantic unity.

#### **How are these moves coordinated at the European Union level?**

This patchwork approach is a direct consequence of the European Union's institutional structure. The European Union's Common Foreign and Security Policy requires unanimity among all 27 member states to form a collective position — a consensus that is currently impossible to achieve. As a result, the decision on recognition has been left to individual member states. However, these are not entirely isolated actions. The moves by Spain, Ireland, and Norway were deliberately coordinated to create a greater political impact. This "like-minded group" approach builds momentum; when one set of countries acts, it provides political cover and encouragement for others to follow. While a unified EU position remains distant, this state-by-state process is creating a de facto shift in Europe's collective posture. The war in Gaza, the intellectual contradiction exposed by the Ukraine conflict, and rising domestic political activism have forced a change.

This is a symbolic shift in how a growing part of Europe wants to project its values and power globally. While recognition itself does not end the occupation or the conflict, it signals unequivocally that many in Europe are no longer comfortable being passive spectators to the dismantling of the two-state solution.

### **DIFFICULTY OF DISARMING HEZBOLLAH, DESPITE ALL ITS WEAKNESSES**

The United Nations Security Council on Sunday (August 31) voted to begin an "orderly and safe drawdown and withdrawal" of the 10,000-strong UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) in 2027 after its extended mandate expires in December 2026.

— This decision comes after concerted pressure from Israel and the United States, who have long criticised UNIFIL for not only failing to disarm Hezbollah and also providing its positions with cover (an allegation that the UNIFIL has frequently denied).

— Since last year, when Israel invaded Lebanon and killed Hezbollah's top leadership, including longtime chief Hassan Nasrallah, the Lebanese militia has been left severely weakened. That said, continuing Israeli aggression has helped re-consolidate some domestic support.



— Hezbollah ('Party of God') was formed as an armed resistance force in Lebanon in response to Israel's invasion and occupation of South Lebanon from 1982 to 2000. Since 1992, Hezbollah has also been a formidable political actor with representation in the Lebanese Parliament.

— Given Lebanon's ethnic mix and history of civil war, the country has a tripartite governing system — a Maronite Christian President, Sunni Muslim Prime Minister, and a Shia Muslim Speaker. Over the years, Hezbollah has wielded influence on all three positions, and enjoyed popularity across geographic, religious and ethnic lines in Lebanon, beyond its core constituency in the Shia-dominated South.

— The group was cultivated by Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, and has inextricable ideological, political and military ties to Tehran which has supplied the militia's vast armory of missiles, rockets, and drones. Nonetheless, Hezbollah continues to assert its nationalist, Lebanese character.

— In fact, Hezbollah has consistently presented itself as a supplement to the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) who have a poor military record against the Israelis. In 1989, when the Taif Agreement disarmed most of Lebanon's armed groups to end a 15-year-long civil war, Hezbollah justified its continued armament through the need to resist the Israeli occupation.

— In 2000, when Israel withdrew from Lebanon, and then again in 2006, when Israeli forces and Hezbollah fought each other to a stalemate, the group successfully presented itself as the only Arab force to have affected strategic defeats on Israel. This allowed Hezbollah to further consolidate its domestic position by drawing support from Lebanon's Shia, Sunni, and Christian constituencies.

— In the last two decades, Hezbollah successfully leveraged its external *raison d'être* — the Israeli threat — to amass disproportionate internal influence in Lebanon's politics and economy, enabled by the inherent weaknesses of the Lebanese state.

— Since last October, Israel has maintained its occupation of at least five points in South Lebanon and struck targets across the country almost daily. This has forced Hezbollah to remain to the north of Lebanon's Litani river.

— Despite its losses, Israel's continued threat to Lebanon allows Hezbollah to consolidate support internally. Hezbollah now tactfully leverages Israel's aggression in Lebanon's neighbourhood to drive home suspicions regarding Israel's assurances of a phased withdrawal, and reaffirm its own role as a supplement to the LAF.

#### ETHIOPIA OPENS AFRICA'S BIGGEST DAM AMID PROTEST FROM EGYPT

On September 9, 2025, amid a cascade of fireworks and the rhythmic beats of traditional drums, Ethiopia unveiled what it proudly calls the crown jewel of its modern renaissance: the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD). Africa's largest hydroelectric project, perched on the Blue Nile in the remote Benishangul-Gumuz region, stands as a towering testament to Ethiopian ingenuity and national resolve. At 145 meters high and 1.8 kilometres wide, the GERD's reservoir dwarfs Greater London in size, with a capacity to generate over 5,000 megawatts of clean energy—enough to electrify vast swathes of the continent's second-most populous nation and export surplus power to neighbours like Kenya, Sudan, and beyond. Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, addressing a throng of dignitaries including Kenyan President William Ruto and Somali President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud, hailed it as "the greatest achievement in the history of the Black race,"

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



a symbol of unity forged from the ashes of ethnic conflicts and civil strife. Yet, as the turbines hum to life, this monumental opening casts a long shadow over the Nile Basin, reigniting a geopolitical tinderbox that pits upstream ambition against downstream fears.

The GERD's journey began in 2011, a bold stroke by the late Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, who dubbed it "Project X" to evade Egyptian scrutiny. Funded almost entirely by Ethiopian grit—91% from state coffers, the rest through citizen bonds, diaspora donations, and even schoolchildren's contributions totalling over \$30 million in recent years—it cost \$5 billion without a dime from foreign lenders like the World Bank, rebuffing Cairo's diplomatic blockade. Construction, led by Italy's Webuild Group, weathered civil wars, global pandemics, and relentless pressure, reaching 90% completion by early 2023. For Ethiopians, it's more than infrastructure; it's a narrative of self-reliance. In a country where 60% lack electricity, the dam promises to illuminate rural villages, power factories, and fuel a green industrial boom, potentially adding billions to GDP through exports. Already, a new town has sprouted nearby—complete with hospitals, schools, and bakeries—heralding social transformation in one of Africa's most rugged frontiers.

But the fanfare in Guba masked brewing storms downstream. Egypt, whose Aswan High Dam has long anchored its water security, views the GERD as an existential peril. The Blue Nile supplies 85% of the Nile's flow, vital for irrigating Egypt's arid farmlands and quenching the thirst of 100 million people. Cairo fears that during droughts, Ethiopia's reservoir—filled in phases since 2020—could choke the river, slashing water allocations by up to 25% and crippling agriculture. Sudan's anxieties compound the tension; its aging Roseires Dam, just 70 kilometers downstream, risks flooding or siltation from uncoordinated releases. Egypt's Foreign Ministry fired off a letter to the UN Security Council, decrying the inauguration as a breach of international law, while President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi vowed to deploy "all available means" to safeguard his nation's interests. Whispers of military escalation linger—Ethiopia has fortified the site with Russian Pantsir-S1 and Israeli SPYDER systems, a direct riposte to Cairo's saber-rattling.

At the heart of this rift lies a colonial ghost: the 1959 Nile Waters Agreement, which allotted Egypt 55.5 billion cubic meters annually—nearly two-thirds of the river—while granting Ethiopia, the source of most waters, a pittance. Addis Ababa dismisses it as imperial fiat, arguing the GERD is a hydroelectric endeavour, not a water-hoarding scheme, with spillways designed to minimize downstream harm. Independent experts, like those at Bahir Dar University, echo that the dam could mitigate floods and silt for Sudan while fostering regional integration through shared energy grids. Yet, stalled tripartite talks since 2015, marred by U.S. mediation under Trump (who bizarrely claimed America footed the bill), have yielded no binding treaty on filling or operations. Ethiopia's unilateral moves, including the 2022 reservoir filling, have only deepened the divide, with Egypt cozying up to rivals like Eritrea.

This impasse isn't just about water; it's a microcosm of Africa's postcolonial struggles. Upstream nations like Ethiopia, long marginalized, now leverage geography for equity, challenging the downstream hegemony enshrined by Britain a century ago. The GERD embodies the African Union's push for resource sovereignty, potentially catalyzing similar projects on the Congo or Zambezi rivers. For Ethiopia, it's a geopolitical masterstroke: national pride swells, ethnic fissures heal under a shared banner, and energy hegemony beckons, with ambitions to beam power across the Red Sea to Saudi Arabia. Yet, without dialogue, it risks "Africa's water war," as NPR dubbed it, where scarcity—exacerbated by climate change—could ignite conflicts displacing millions.



As turbines spin and lights flicker on in Ethiopian highlands, the GERD beckons a pivotal choice for the Nile Basin. Ethiopia's vision of a "shared opportunity" could illuminate a cooperative future, exporting not just megawatts but mutual prosperity. But ignoring Egypt and Sudan's legitimate alarms invites catastrophe. International mediators—from the AU to the UN—must revive talks, prioritizing data-sharing and equitable allocations over vetoes and vendettas. In an era of thawing glaciers and rising seas, the Blue Nile's fate isn't Ethiopia's alone; it's Africa's litmus test for whether shared rivers can bind rather than break. The dam is open, but the real engineering feat lies in bridging the chasm it has carved.

## WHY DOES PEACE SEEM SO ELUSIVE TO EASTERN DRC?

### The story so far:

Over the past eight weeks, the conflict in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) has seen two major developments. On June 27, Rwanda and the DRC signed a U.S.-brokered peace agreement in Washington, DC. On July 19, the Congolese government and M23 rebel group signed a ceasefire deal in Doha, mediated by Qatar. However, days after the U.S.-led peace agreement and Doha ceasefire, M23 resumed its offensive, undermining the peace objectives.

### What happened in the U.S. and Doha?

Washington brought the DRC and Rwanda to sign a peace agreement, committing to a cessation of hostilities, respect for territorial integrity, and an end to support for armed groups, including the M23. Both signatories agreed to establish a Joint Security Coordination Mechanism (JSCM) within 30 days to oversee conflict settlement and an Economic Integration Framework within 90 days to promote licit mineral trade and economic cooperation. The accord also calls for disengagement, disarmament, and conditional integration of armed groups into the Congolese forces. For the DRC, the U.S. entry meant an end to illicit mineral trade; security assistance; and U.S. investment. Rwanda has been accused by the UN and other Western countries of supporting the M23 rebels. The international pressure left Rwanda with no option but to sign the agreement.

Doha mediated directly between the DRC and the non-state armed group, M23. The DRC and M23 rebels signed a Declaration of Principles, agreeing to an immediate ceasefire and commitment to reach a comprehensive peace agreement by August 18. The M23 promised to withdraw from the regions it seized, and the DRC agreed to release M23 prisoners.

### What are the interests of the U.S.?

For the U.S, the deal would give them access to the DRC's \$24 trillion worth of critical mineral reserves. The country possesses 70% of global cobalt reserves, making it the world's largest producer. The region is also popular for its coltan, copper, diamond, gold and tin reserves. Further, U.S. entry into the region would mean an end to Chinese companies' monopoly in the DRC's mineral sector.

### Did the peace agreement last?

The Doha ceasefire did not hold for long. M23 continued its offensives in North and South Kivu provinces. The Human Rights Watch reported that the group killed more than 140 people in July. The ceasefire was violated when M23 and DRC failed to adhere to the terms of the agreement. M23 has not withdrawn from the regions it seized, nor has the DRC released M23 prisoners.



### What does it mean for the conflict?

The U.S.'s direct involvement and Qatar's mediation with armed groups have brought hope and opened a gateway toward trust and a lasting peace in eastern DRC. Although the ceasefire was violated, Qatar resumed re-negotiating with the warring sides on August 26. However, DRC's record of previously failed ceasefires and peace efforts signal that commitment and compliance from all actors can never be guaranteed.

Unlike previous peace initiatives, the U.S.-led peace agreement served the security, political and economic interests of the warring parties. The signing of the agreement conveyed an impression of a return to peace in the region, which is far from happening. The conflict in eastern DRC is rooted in unresolved history stemming from the Rwandan genocide of 1994, the subsequent Congo wars, and the tensions between more than a hundred ethnic armed groups, persisting over decades. Although the peace agreement successfully brought Rwanda and DRC to the bargaining table, the root causes of the conflict remain unaddressed. Therefore, for the agreement to succeed, it requires a comprehensive peace process and continued efforts.

### CHINA'S NEWEST AIRCRAFT CARRIER FUJIAN SAILS THROUGH TAIWAN STRAIT FOR THE FIRST TIME

In the choppy waters of the Taiwan Strait, where geopolitical fault lines run as deep as the ocean currents, China's newest aircraft carrier, the Fujian, has made its inaugural voyage. On 11 September 2025, the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) confirmed that the vessel, accompanied by two guided-missile destroyers—the CNS Hangzhou and CNS Jinan—sailed southwest from the East China Sea, transiting the strait en route to the South China Sea for "scientific research, testing, and training missions." This uncommissioned behemoth, China's third carrier and the first equipped with electromagnetic catapults, marks a quiet yet unmistakable escalation in Beijing's naval assertiveness. As the world grapples with the implications, one cannot help but ponder: is this a routine drill or a calculated flex of muscle in an increasingly volatile Indo-Pacific?

The Fujian, launched in 2022 and christened after the coastal province staring across the strait at Taiwan, represents a leap in Chinese maritime engineering. At 80,000 tonnes, it dwarfs its predecessors—the ski-jump reliant Liaoning (acquired from Ukraine in 1998) and the Shandong (commissioned in 2019)—and boasts a flat deck for efficient aircraft launches, capable of deploying up to 70 fighters, including the J-15 and the stealthy J-35. Unlike the nuclear-powered behemoths of the US Navy, such as the USS Gerald R. Ford, the Fujian runs on conventional propulsion, yet its electromagnetic system bridges a technological chasm that once seemed insurmountable. Experts like Ray Powell, a maritime analyst, note that while the carrier is 20 per cent smaller than American supercarriers, its deployment signals Beijing's closing gap in naval prowess. Spotted by Japan's Maritime Self-Defence Force some 200 kilometres northwest of the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands, the flotilla's path was no accident; the strait is the most direct route to the South China Sea, but also the most provocative.

From Beijing's vantage, the transit is "a routine arrangement in the carrier's construction process, not directed at any specific target." Senior Captain Leng Guowei, a PLAN spokesperson, echoed this, emphasising compliance with international law and domestic statutes. Yet, in the theatre of great-power rivalry, optics matter more than official briefings. China views the 180-kilometre-wide strait as its territorial waters, a stance that Taipei, Washington, and much of the international community reject, insisting it qualifies as an international waterway vital for global trade.



Taiwan's defence ministry tracked the Fujian closely, while US and Japanese forces—amid joint exercises on Okinawa involving the Typhon missile system—kept a vigilant eye, underscoring the razor's edge on which regional stability balances.

This is no isolated sail. Over the past half-decade, Beijing has amplified its military posturing around Taiwan, from encircling war games to frequent incursions by fighters and bombers. Just last week, the PLAN went on high alert after Canadian and Australian warships traversed the strait, branding their passage "provocative." The Fujian's timing—mere days after these foreign naval forays—feels less like coincidence and more like riposte. It evokes the Shandong's own strait-crossing in 2019, which preceded its commissioning by a month, hinting that the Fujian could join the fleet by late 2025 or early 2026. For a nation that has poured billions into its "blue-water" ambitions, this voyage is a milestone in projecting power beyond the first island chain, from the Senkakus to the Spratlys.

Yet, beneath the steel and radar arrays lies a deeper calculus. China's economy, battered by trade frictions and domestic headwinds, relies on the strait's unhindered flow—90 per cent of its energy imports snake through these waters. A blockade or conflict would be catastrophic, not just for Beijing but for the global supply chain that feeds everything from semiconductors in Taiwan to iPhones in California. The US, despite its "strategic ambiguity," has redoubled arms sales to Taipei—\$10 billion in agricultural commitments from Taiwan to Washington this week alone signal economic entwinement as deterrence. India, watching from afar, shares these stakes; its Andaman and Nicobar bases overlook the Malacca Strait, an alternative chokepoint, and New Delhi's QUAD partnerships with the US, Japan, and Australia are premised on countering coercion in these seas.

One must question the wisdom of such brinkmanship. President Xi Jinping's "rejuvenation" narrative hinges on Taiwan's "reunification," but polls show most Taiwanese favour the status quo, not absorption. Forceful posturing risks alienating allies and accelerating a regional arms race—Japan's defence white paper already flags the Fujian as a threat multiplier. Beijing's insistence on peaceful development rings hollow when carriers prowl disputed waters, yet escalation serves no one's interest. The strait is no one's private lake; it is a shared artery for 2 billion people.

As the Fujian steams towards its trials in the South China Sea—another flashpoint where China's "nine-dash line" clashes with claims from the Philippines, Vietnam, and others—the onus falls on diplomacy. The US and its partners must uphold freedom of navigation without provocation, while Beijing could temper its sails with transparency. For India and the Global South, this is a reminder: multilateral forums like ASEAN must lead, lest superpowers turn the Pacific into a powder keg. The Fujian's wake may fade, but the ripples of 11 September will lap at shores from Taipei to Tokyo for years. In an era of multipolarity, restraint, not resolve, is the true superpower.

## WHY WAS INDONESIA ROCKED BY PROTESTS?

### The story so far:

What started as a peaceful protest against Parliament members of Indonesia on August 25 in Jakarta, quickly snowballed into violent riots between civilians and the police/military when, on August 28, footage emerged of an armoured vehicle of the paramilitary police running over and killing a 21-year-old delivery worker. Since then, thousands have been arrested and at least seven have died in one of the most violent protests Indonesia has seen recently.



### **What happened?**

The initial protests, which were mainly composed of students and labour unions, were conducted outside the Indonesian Parliament, against the housing allowance accorded to legislative members which is almost 50 million rupiah (\$3,000) — 10 times the national average monthly minimum wage.

However, after 21-year-old Affan Kurniawan, a delivery worker, was run over and killed by a police vehicle, protests escalated and spilled out of the capital across the country against the 'corrupt elite' and Indonesian President Prabowo Subianto's government. The delivery driver's killing became the flame which ignited the long-repressed anger of the people at the various austerity measures of the President in the past year. Protestors attacked public buildings, burned down and looted houses of public officials, including the house of then Finance Minister Sri Mulyani Indrawati, and violent clashes were reported between protestors and the police.

### **How has the government responded?**

President Prabowo announced that the Parliament had come to a consensus to reduce housing allowance and foreign visits for Parliament representatives. He also assured that an investigation will be conducted into the killing of Mr. Affan, and that those responsible will be brought to book. However, he warned that while his government respected the right to peaceful assembly, looting and rioting would be punished and that the same bordered on "terrorism and treason". "I order the police and military to take the strongest possible action against destruction of public facilities and looting of homes and economic centres," Mr. Prabowo said.

At least 3,000 people have been arrested or detained by the police across the country, and hundreds have been injured, some of whom include police personnel. Rights groups have said that at least 20 people are missing since the protests began.

### **What about income inequality?**

The protests in Indonesia have generally been seen as an incitement of anger against the elites by a shrinking middle class. While the Gini co-efficient of Indonesia has been declining, the country still registers one of the highest levels of inequality in the Southeast Asian region.

As per an Oxfam report, Indonesia ranks sixth among countries with the greatest wealth inequality. The four richest people in Indonesia have a combined income of more than 100 of the poorest citizens in the country. Additional issues which plague the poor include low wages and job insecurity. Education also remains underfunded, with various barriers restricting higher education.

### **Is this the first time protests have emerged against the ruling party?**

Mr. Prabowo and his government came to power last year in October. And since then, his government has embarked on a cost-cutting drive to increase 'efficiency'.

In the beginning of this year, the Prabowo government announced a fiscal cut of 306 trillion rupiah (\$18.8 billion) from the country's budget. These cuts were justified by the government as being redirected to fund the 'free meal' programme in schools, which was one of the key election campaign promises of the ruling government. The programme was aimed at not only providing nutritious food to school students but also as a tool to build back the dilapidated schools of the country.



However, this reallocation has come at a great cost. The budgets of several government departments have been reduced significantly; for example, there has been a 70% reduction for public works, a 52% cut for economic affairs and a 40% reduction in investment. To cope with such budget cuts, regional governments increased local taxes, the most infamous of them being a 250% increase in property tax in Pati, a town in central Java. The higher education ministry's budget was also cut by 25%.

These cuts caused massive outrage among college students who stated that these reductions will make education expensive as well as cut scholarships. On February 17, thousands of students came out in protest of these budget cuts. The movement was dubbed 'Dark Indonesia' as opposed to the President's vision of bringing in a 'Golden Indonesia'. The movement reached its zenith on February 20 with hundreds of thousands of students taking to the streets in Jakarta and other cities. However, Mr. Prabowo slammed the protests and said that these cuts were necessary to fuel the economic future of the country.

#### What next?

In a bid to quell some of the public anger, one of the police officers behind the killing of Mr. Affan has been "dishonourably" fired. The Cabinet has also been reshuffled with five Ministers losing their job, including Ms. Indrawati. Parliamentary officials also met with at least 10 student unions whose demands included the release of demonstrators and detainees. Fitch Ratings has said that the unrest could harm Indonesia's sovereign credit profile.

#### EXPRESS VIEW: IN NEPAL, AFTER THE CRISIS

The implosion of institutions does not automatically pave the way for a democratic transition or renewal — that's why the coming weeks are going to be critical for Nepal. Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli resigned earlier this week after a ban on social media triggered widespread protests. For thousands of young Nepalis, online platforms are not only spaces for free expression but also critical lifelines for professional and financial growth. Nepal has long wrestled with domestic turmoil. A decade-long civil war abolished the monarchy and kindled hopes of a corruption-free Nepal. Yet since 2008, governments recycled the same set of leaders, and failed to deliver stability or prosperity. Rule of law was ignored, constitutional bodies were captured by political factions, and top leaders enjoyed immunity from corruption and other crimes. Even the investigative commissions envisioned in the 2006 Comprehensive Peace Accord were never taken seriously. The present crisis offers a chance for long overdue stabilisation and reform.

The constitution of Nepal has no clear provision for an interim prime minister who is not a member of parliament, which is, technically, still not dissolved. The youth leaders are reportedly looking for a way out of this crisis. They have made it clear that their protest is not against the constitution, but against the incumbent political class. The greatest challenge that Gen-Z faces is, arguably, the lack of a coherent agenda. A dozen representatives have met the army chief but divisions are already visible — some back former Chief Justice Sushila Karki as interim prime minister, others have reportedly put forward the name of Kulman Ghising, former head of the Nepal Electricity Authority. To carry the movement forward, all factions must agree on a clear path to elections and ensure they are conducted freely and fairly. The young protesters need to present a united front, even though their demands might be different, and secure meaningful representation in the political process.



The dangers of failure hardly need detailing. In neighbouring Bangladesh, a student-led movement was taken over by the entrenched political class. Hopefully, Nepal will manage to avoid that trajectory. Former Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal “Prachanda” has already issued a statement of solidarity, urging restraint and an independent judicial inquiry into the violence. Political parties that have lost the trust of the youth must not obstruct the transition; if they choose to participate, they should do so by consulting the younger leaders at every stage. In the interim, the priority should be not only elections but also the urgent revival of law and order, aided by the army. Arson, vandalism, and looting have spread fear among citizens, and escaped inmates are likely to exploit the prevailing chaos. Rogue elements must not be allowed to hijack the Gen-Z movement, even as all efforts are made to restore state authority.

#### PROTESTERS SPLIT, PRESIDENT LOOKS WITHIN, NEPAL WAITS FOR NEW GOVT

Uncertainty over the formation of an interim government in Nepal following the fall of the K P Sharma Oli government deepened Thursday with Gen Z protest groups divided on who should hold the temporary reins of power, and President Ram Chandra Poudel insisting that any solution to the current stalemate must be found under the existing Constitution.

— The President’s stance complicates efforts by Nepal Army chief General Ashok Raj Sigdel to ensure an interim dispensation takes charge soonest. A day earlier, General Sigdel had asked former Chief Justice Sushila Karki to step in as the interim Chief Executive, an offer that she accepted after much persuasion and a formal statement from some of the Gen Z groups.

— Nepal’s current Constitution does not allow any former Chief Justice or Supreme Court judge to become President or Prime Minister or hold any other political or constitutional post upon retirement. Karki retired in June 2017. President Poudel said a way out of the stalemate was possible under the existing Constitution, and must be pursued further.

— His assertion is being seen as a move to protect the existing political system and the Constitution in a highly polarised environment. At least four major parties – the CPN (Maoist Centre), Nepali Congress, CPN (UML) and Madesh-centric groupings – have endorsed his call.

— Poudel’s statement flies in the face of General Sigdel’s efforts to bring multiple Gen Z groups and other leaders to the table to facilitate the formation of a government not led by a leader of any existing political party.

— If the President’s move succeeds, the issue will return to Parliament where the coalition of the Nepali Congress and the CPN (UML) – the ruling alliance until Oli stepped down as Prime Minister two days ago following violent protests in which leaders were singled out and assaulted – enjoy a majority. This increases the chance of the return of Oli or his nominee since he has not yet resigned as leader of the parliamentary party.

— The move to save the Constitution and Parliament comes amid confusion and division within the Gen Z grouping – it does not have any formal structure or chain of command, and multiple groups are pushing forward different prescriptions.

— Oli also alleged that there could have been an external role against him. “I put Lipulekh, Limpiyadhura on our country’s map, where they actually belong. And I asserted Lord Ram was born in Nepal and I refused to yield to any pressure from outside,” he said.



— In May 2020, the Oli government, scaling up its row with India over territorial claims to the Lipulekh-Kalapani-Limpiyadhura triangle at the trijunction of Nepal, India and China (Tibet), brought a Constitution amendment Bill to give legal sanctity to Nepal's new map. It was published by the government after India inaugurated a new road via Lipulekh on the Mansarovar Yatra trail.

— Meanwhile, Kathmandu Mayor Balendra Shah 'Balen', who commands sizable support among the Gen Z groups, has backed the idea of dissolution of Parliament and appointment of former Chief Justice Karki as head of the interim government.

**Do You Know:**

— Kalapani, Lipulekh and Limpiyadhura are the disputed territories between India and Nepal.

— The Nepal-India border was delineated by the Sugauli Treaty of 1816, under which it renounced all territory to the west of the river Kali, also known as the Mahakali or the Sarada river. The river effectively became the boundary. The terms were reiterated by a second treaty between Nepal and British India in 1923.

— Nepal's case is that the river originates from a stream at Limpiyadhura, north-west of Lipulekh. Thus, Kalapani, Limpiyadhura, and Lipulekh fall to the east of the river and are part of Nepal's Far West province in the district of Dharchula.

— New Delhi's position is that the Kali originates in springs well below the pass, and that while the Treaty does not demarcate the area north of these springs, administrative and revenue records going back to the nineteenth century show that Kalapani was on the Indian side, and counted as part of Pithoragarh district, now in Uttarakhand. Both sides have their own British-era maps as proof of their positions.

— Lipulekh pass lies at an altitude of 5,115 metres, on the border between Uttarakhand and the Tibet Autonomous Region, near the trijunction with Nepal. It is an ancient passageway between the Indian subcontinent and the Tibetan Plateau, frequented by traders and pilgrims alike.

**NEPAL GETS ITS FIRST WOMAN PRIME MINISTER, SUSHILA KARKI**

Ending the political vacuum in Nepal following the fall of the K P Sharma Oli government after violent protests earlier this week, former Supreme Court Chief Justice Sushila Karki was sworn in as the interim Prime Minister on Friday night, making her the first woman to lead the country.

— Karki, 73, was administered the oath of office by President Ramchandra Paudel who also dissolved the House of Representatives. The interim government has been asked to hold elections to Parliament in six months.

— Karki is likely to expand the Cabinet on Saturday with Kul Man Ghising as the new Energy Minister. An engineer, Ghising, as Chief Executive Officer of the Nepal Electricity Authority, was credited with effective power management and distribution. He was later sacked by Oli.

— Within hours of Karki's swearing-in, India welcomed the formation of the interim government, saying it was hopeful that this would help in fostering peace and stability in Nepal.

— Earlier, on September 9, within hours of the fall of the Oli government in Kathmandu, Prime Minister Narendra Modi had chaired a meeting of the Cabinet Committee on Security to discuss the situation in Nepal and said the violence there was "heart-rending". He had also expressed



“anguish” that “many young people” had lost their lives in the protests. Underlining that “stability, peace and prosperity” of Nepal was of utmost importance, he had appealed to the people to “support peace”.

— Earlier in the day, Karki made it clear that she would head the interim government only if she was allowed a fair investigation into corruption in high places and excessive use of force by police that led to the death of at least 20 protesters.

— Leaders of the Gen Z protest groups and Kathmandu Mayor Balendra Shah had already endorsed Karki as chief of the interim government. The Gen Z leaders rejected the stance of the three major political parties and warned the President not to undermine them or the message of their movement.

— “No More Nepo Babies – We Demand Fair Opportunities!” read one banner at Nepal’s youth-led protests, which transformed into an expression of anti-establishment public anger over the past week.

— Even beyond Nepal, the practice of calling out nepotism has been enjoying an extended moment in the spotlight, be it the term “nepo kids” in India or “nepo babies” in the United States.

— The word originated in the mid-17th century from older European words — French *népotisme* and the Italian *nepotismo*, which came from the Latin *nipote*, meaning “nephew”.

— The word has equivalents across languages, such as *bhai-bhatijawaad* in Hindi (literally, rule of the brother and nephew). Most early societies were feudalistic, with little interest or incentive in practising the values of democracy and equality. Limited resources also meant that those who gained power would do their best to retain it.

## POPULAR PROTESTS ACROSS SOUTH ASIA ARE A WAKE-UP CALL FOR GOVERNMENTS IN THE REGION

In the last few years, the political landscape of South Asia has been notably turbulent. Leaders such as Gotabaya Rajapaksa in Sri Lanka, Sheikh Hasina in Bangladesh, and K P Sharma Oli in Nepal have faced public backlash, leading to their resignation from office. These outcomes once seemed unthinkable. The question that comes to everybody’s mind is what accounts for this sudden shift in the politics of these countries?

Firstly, South Asia, in demographic terms, is a young region. According to the World Bank, there are over 700 million youth under the age of 24 in South Asia, and more than one million youth in the region are expected to enter the labour force every month until 2030. As the demographic bulge is expected to peak around 2040, two things remain crucial for the story of South Asia: Good education and better employment opportunities for its youth.

As was seen in the recent Gen-Z uprising in Nepal, where the youth unemployment rate, according to the World Bank, is 20.8 per cent. This resentment towards the government in Nepal is understandable, especially in the context of the corruption cases that have come to light. The immediate catalyst for the protests was the government’s ban on social media, which many viewed as an infringement on free speech. When we examine the situation within the broader context of South Asia, a concerning pattern emerges. Typically, a populist government gains widespread support, only to later disappoint the masses. This disappointment often leads to significant uprisings and ultimately results in a change of regime. We saw this pattern during the



Aragalaya protests in Sri Lanka in 2022, the July Revolution in Bangladesh in 2024, and now the Gen Z protest in Nepal. Different characters, but similar script.

Secondly, there are a few ingredients that are unique to South Asia, which make a similar dish every time, no matter what the altitude, how salty the water or how humid the weather. The colonial struggle against the British in South Asia is distinguished by its mass participation. A brief exploration of the political history of Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Nepal reveals a strong awareness of rights among the people of these countries, and mass mobilisation is not a recent or unheard phenomenon. The protests and mass uprisings in South Asia are, therefore, more organic and palatable.

Finally, in the last decade, populist governments of these states were seen as more closed towards the general public. We can also understand these political uprisings by engaging with Barrington Moore's work, *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*. Moore argues that poverty and economic distress are not enough to spark a large-scale protest or transition into a democratic society. There should be a perception that suffering is unjust and avoidable, and the presence of an awakened class of citizens. Economic distress, poverty, and systemic inequality have plagued South Asia since the birth of its states, but people have placed their faith in the governments. However, their patience waned in recent years, and they decided to protest against the incompetence of the governments.

In Sri Lanka in 2022, out of a population of 22 million, it was mainly the youth who poured into the streets and raided the Presidential Palace. They were disgruntled with the government's mishandling of the economy, the rampant corruption, and the depletion of the forex reserves. The Sri Lankan youth became immensely disillusioned with the politics of the Rajapaksa family and thus decided to overthrow the regime. A similar disillusionment with institutions and contemporary politics was also seen in the Bangladesh protest in July 2024, wherein the quota system — which reserved 56 per cent of positions in government services, mainly for the descendants of people who fought in the freedom struggle of 1971 — became a massive impediment to the youth trying to get jobs while already struggling with unemployment. The question of the fairness of the election won by the Awami League in 2014, 2018, and then in 2024 agitated the youth, who were already on the brink, causing them to erupt. The corruption, nepotism, suppression of dissent, and violent clampdown on the protestors by the Awami League government were the ingredients of a similar concoction seen in Nepal this month.

For governments in South Asia, the way forward is not easy. With these successful uprisings, there will be enough pressure on every future government in these countries and beyond. Thus, two important measures can be of great help in meeting the aspirations of the people. The first is to promote greater transparency in the functioning of the government by strengthening the democratic institutions. The other relevant point is not only to maintain the economic growth but to translate it into economic development by creating more jobs in each of these countries. In this volatile economic world order, achieving better growth is a daunting task; however, it is not so difficult in the South Asian context. The region's unimpressive record of regional trade leaves a broader scope for improvement, aiding regional growth and helping governments across South Asia. The World Bank estimates that South Asia has the potential to increase its trade which "currently totals just \$23 billion — far below an estimated value of at least \$67 billion". In conclusion, regionalism can provide hope if the governments of the region recognise its value, overcome their political differences, and collaborate for the betterment of South Asians.



## NATIONAL

### A FLASHPOINT IN THE PALK STRAIT

Sri Lankan President Anura Kumara Dissanayake's recent visit to Katchatheevu, said to be the first by a head of state, drew attention on both sides of the Palk Strait. Attired in smart casuals — his trademark double-pocket shirt — the 56-year-old leftist leader, elected to office a year ago, is seen on a naval boat, flanked by Fisheries Minister and Jaffna MP Ramalingam Chandrasekar and other officials. He smiles gently before setting foot on the tiny, uninhabited island, 33 nautical miles off the Jaffna peninsula, on September 1. Seated in the shade of palm trees, Mr. Dissanayake listens intently while a Naval officer describes the 1.15 sq. km outcrop, pointing to a map.

Walking around briskly with officials in tow, Mr. Dissanayake pays respects at the St. Anthony's Catholic Shrine, the only permanent structure there, before returning to Jaffna, where at a public meeting earlier that day he pledged to safeguard Sri Lankan territory, resisting any "external force". The symbolism of the visit, with the accompanying visuals and messaging played well in Sri Lanka, comes days after Tamil actor-politician Vijay's demand in a political rally that India must retrieve Katchatheevu from Sri Lanka. The government subsequently announced it is also exploring the tourism potential of Katchatheevu, by making it more accessible from nearby Delft island, one of Jaffna's off-track tourist destinations.

The competing claims made from India [Madras Presidency, specifically] and Ceylon to Katchatheevu date back to the 1920s, during British colonial times. The neighbours settled the matter some five decades later, through two bilateral agreements signed in 1974 and 1976, delineating an International Maritime Boundary Line, whereby Katchatheevu is firmly on the Sri Lankan side. In return, New Delhi got sovereign rights over Wadge Bank, located near Kanniyakumari, known for its rich resources.

Katchatheevu is a barren island, with no drinking water or sanitation. Every March, Sri Lanka waives visa controls to allow fishermen from India to worship along with their Sri Lankan counterparts at the St. Anthony's festival. Around the annual two-day event, mobile toilets and drinking water booths are put up for pilgrims.

#### Political calculation

Bizarrely, though, half a century since India gave up its claim to Katchatheevu and recognised Sri Lanka's sovereignty over it, politicians in India periodically rake up the issue. The political calculation driving the frequent call is the assumption that it could boost voter support if pitched as a solution to the enduring fisheries conflict affecting Tamil Nadu's fishermen, a sizeable electoral constituency.

The fact that the Congress and the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) were in power, respectively at the Centre and in Tamil Nadu, in the 1970s has offered political ammunition to their rivals, especially on the eve of State polls next year. Ahead of general elections last year, Prime Minister Narendra Modi accused the Congress of "callously giving away" the island to Sri Lanka. External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar swiftly amplified this by blaming the two BJP rivals for compromising Indian fishermen's rights in the Palk Strait.

Both Dravidian parties [DMK and Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, or AIADMK], have demanded its retrieval. In 2008, former Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu Jayalalithaa, as General



Secretary of the AIADMK, petitioned the Supreme Court seeking a declaration that the 1974 and 1976 agreements were unconstitutional. Ahead of Prime Minister Modi's visit to Sri Lanka in April 2025, the Tamil Nadu Legislative Assembly unanimously adopted a resolution, urging the Union government to take steps to retrieve the Katchatheevu island. Subsequently, Chief Minister M.K. Stalin said the island's retrieval was "the only permanent solution" to the issues faced by the fishermen in the State.

Everyone calling for the island's retrieval in India must know well that it is a far-fetched ask from a mostly friendly neighbour. In 2013, the Union government informed the Supreme Court that the question of gaining Katchatheevu from Sri Lanka did not arise, as "no territory belonging to India was ceded nor sovereignty relinquished since the area in question was in dispute and had never been demarcated". In 2014, then Attorney-General Mukul Rohatgi submitted before the Supreme Court that if India had to retrieve an island belonging to Sri Lanka, "we have to go to war". The factors that keep the issue alive, despite diplomatic and legal resolution, are chiefly political, and in fact to do with the political economy of a depleting catch in a narrow stretch of water.

Fishermen of south India and northern Sri Lanka rely heavily on the resource-rich Palk Strait. However, with Tamil Nadu fishermen relentlessly resorting to bottom-trawling, a destructive fishing method that scoops out the seabed to maximise the catch and profits, this has severely affected the marine ecosystem. With the catch on the Indian side of the International Maritime Boundary Line diminishing over time, the Tamil Nadu fishing boats ventured into the Sri Lankan side, targeting a heavier net. Daily wage fishermen, working for wealthy boat owners in Tamil Nadu, periodically court arrest by the Sri Lankan Navy — over 230 arrests so far this year — a risk they take to secure their day's earnings.

#### **Bottom-trawling**

Tamil fishermen in northern Sri Lanka, still reeling from the impact of the civil war that ended 16 years ago, contend they have no real chance of rebuilding their destroyed livelihoods, unless their counterparts across the Palk Strait give up bottom-trawling — a practice banned in Sri Lanka.

In bilateral talks with fisher leaders through the years, or petitions to politicians in India and Sri Lanka, all they have been asking their fellow, Tamil-speaking brothers is that they stop the practice. In ministerial level talks between India and Sri Lanka in 2016, New Delhi acknowledged this and agreed to expedite the transition towards ending the practice of bottom trawling "at the earliest". But the practice continues.

Decades ago, fishermen from both sides used Katchatheevu as a resting point and a spot to dry out their nets. But in recent history, most arrests of Indian fishermen are made well past Katchatheevu, very close to Sri Lanka's northern shores. Policymakers on the Indian side know where the problem lies. And politicians know that Katchatheevu offers no real solution to it. But unwilling to confront a key electorate with a difficult question, they habitually invoke it to divert attention from their own failure to resolve the festering fisheries conflict.

### **IS A SHIFT UNDERWAY IN INDIA'S FOREIGN POLICY?**

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

Prime Minister Narendra Modi began the week in Tianjin, with a show of camaraderie with Chinese President Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin on the sidelines of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) summit on September 1. A photograph of the three leaders

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



together made headlines around the world. It also seemingly irked U.S. President Donald Trump, prompting a series of sarcastic statements, even as the U.S. doubled down on 50% tariffs, sanctions on India's import of Russian oil, and asking the European Union to do the same. By the end of the week, however, Mr. Modi and Mr. Trump appeared conciliatory.

#### **What happened in Tianjin?**

The week saw a series of high-level summits seen as a projection of power by China, beginning with the 10-nation SCO summit in Tianjin, where several other leaders including from Turkey, Nepal, Maldives, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Indonesia and Malaysia were invited. From there, the action moved to Beijing, where Mr. Xi led Mr. Putin and dozens of other leaders including North Korea's Kim Jong Un to a massive military parade commemorating 80 years since the end of the Second World War. The statements released included a number of counter-West elements, with Mr. Xi promoting a "Global Governance Initiative" and Mr. Modi pitching for a "civilisational dialogue" between SCO countries. The SCO declaration criticised "coercive, unilateral" economic measures, believed to be aimed at U.S. tariffs and European sanctions. During a photo-shoot for the SCO meet, Prime Minister Modi was seen purposefully leading President Putin down the red carpet to where President Xi was standing. A day before that, Mr. Xi and Mr. Modi held bilateral talks that had been cordial and possibly paved the way for the tri-leader photo.

#### **What happened at the bilateral meeting?**

This was Mr. Modi's first visit to China since 2018, and his first meeting with President Xi not in a third country since the military standoff and Galwan clashes in 2020, where both sides agreed to normalise ties. China appeared conciliatory, with Mr. Xi referring to India and China as "partners not rivals", while India appears to have climbed down from an insistence that the LAC situation be normalised before a resumption of ties in other spheres. They agreed to let the border situation be discussed between Special Representatives Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi and National Security Adviser Ajit Doval. Besides revival of flights, visa facilitation and the Kailash Manasarovar Yatra, they agreed to resolve the trade issues between them.

#### **How did the U.S. view the meetings?**

In Washington, the photograph of the Tianjin "troika", as well as subsequent images of the leaders of Russia, China, North Korea, Central Asian states, Iran, Pakistan and others, were seen as a challenge to the Western order, as well as proof that India had now "switched sides".

On social media, Mr. Trump posted a photo from the SCO summit saying that it looked like the U.S. had "lost India and Russia to deepest, darkest, China". The White House Trade Adviser Peter Navarro, seen as one of the officials driving tariffs against India, said it was a "shame" that India as a democracy was getting closer to Russia and China. There were a number of other comments criticising the Modi government, including calling the Ukraine conflict "Modi's war", which the Ministry of External Affairs rejected as "inaccurate and misleading". India will also participate in a BRICS online summit chaired by Brazil on September 8 to discuss a common response to the U.S. tariffs, which may send up more red flags.

Delhi-Washington ties have been fraught over many issues, including visa, immigration and trade policies, and Mr. Trump's repeated assertions of mediating the ceasefire in Operation Sindoor. But amid the tension, came yet another turnaround. Mr. Trump on Friday said that India and the U.S. have a "special relationship" and that he would "always be great friends with PM Modi". Mr. Modi,



who had not responded to any of the statements thus far, welcomed them and said he shared Mr. Trump's "positive assessment" of the partnership.

#### **What lies ahead?**

While many foreign policy observers may have faced whiplash from the perception that Indian policy had shifted from the "west to the east" and possibly back to the west, the shifts are less perceptible if you consider India's decades-old policy of strategic autonomy and balance. The visit to China for the SCO had been expected for months, after the Xi-Modi meeting in Kazan on the sidelines of the BRICS summit in October 2024 had restarted ties. While India had put SCO on the backburner for the past two years and PM Modi skipped the Summit in Astana last year, the visit to China was considered important. In that sense, the Modi-Xi meeting was simply an attempt to normalise ties after years of serious tensions, and the Modi-Xi-Putin chat, would have been more significant if followed by a revival of formal Russia-India-China talks.

India-U.S. relations have no doubt been impacted by months of tensions on a range of issues, but official exchanges and military exercises have not stopped. Much will depend on whether the U.S. and India can find a compromise over demands to cancel Russian oil imports or for India to open its agricultural and dairy sectors, and whether the U.S. reconsiders its 50% tariff on India. With Mr. Jaishankar headed to the U.S. for the UN General Assembly this month, talks about scheduling the Quad summit, where Mr. Trump is due to visit India later this year, will be closely watched.

#### **ON NEHRU'S CHINA TRIP, A SHARED CONCERN: THE US**

"Prime Minister Narendra Modi recently visited Tianjin, China, in what was his first trip to the country in seven years. Several commentators viewed the uncertainties brought on by the Donald Trump administration as having pushed the two nations to deepen their relationship. While not the only factor, the global political context becomes difficult to ignore when countries deal with one another, even when they are neighbours."

— "This was witnessed even in the first official visit by an Indian Prime Minister to China, where the Communists had come to power in 1949. Amid the emergence of Cold War rivalries, India was the first non-Communist nation to accord diplomatic recognition to China in 1950."

— "It was perhaps natural, then, for Jawaharlal Nehru to visit Mao Zedong in China in 1954, becoming the first non-Communist foreign leader to do so. The New York Times then quoted Nehru as saying that he regarded the trip "as the most important foreign mission of his life".

— "Nehru arrived in China on October 19. In his book, Nehru's Bandung, author Andrea Benvenuti wrote that Indira Gandhi also accompanied her father."

— "Mao and Nehru engaged in wide-ranging discussions about colonial rule (Britain in India, and China witnessing unequal European trade treaties and Japanese rule), Asian politics, the United States, and more."

— "On October 19, their first meeting was held at the Zhongnanhai, a complex in Beijing that houses government offices. Mao began by underlining their commonalities: "China was bullied by Western imperialist powers for over 100 years. Your country was bullied even longer, for more than 300 years... In spite of differences in our ideologies and social systems, we have an overriding common point, that is, all of us have to cope with imperialism."



— “He noted that several problems were yet to be addressed: “Taiwan is still in the hands of the US” and “the level of our industrial development is lower than that of India...”. Nehru concurred on the subject of colonisation and reiterated the need to follow the Five Principles (Panchsheel) on mutual respect for sovereignty and non-aggression. The agreement had been signed just a few months before their meeting, and was also invoked in Tianjin recently.”

— “While he had a more positive view of Europe than Mao, Nehru shared his critical assessment of the US...Nehru said, “The US is not mature. It is very difficult for the US to understand the many things that it dislikes and, at the same time, are happening in the world.”

— “In the meeting on October 23, another point of divergence emerged on the question of future global wars, which Mao viewed according to Communist principles: “If another war is fought, the bulk or whole of West Asia and Africa and the whole of Latin America will shake off imperialism.”

— “Nehru argued, “Sometimes the result of a war is good, such as leading to people’s liberation and testing people’s capacities for endurance. But it can also cause human beings to become more brutal and thus downgraded. Therefore, on every count, war has to be avoided by every possible effort.”

— “Finally, Mao said, “There is no tension between China and India. Our two countries do not wage psychological warfare...”.

— “It was not to last. An uprising against Chinese rule in Tibet led to the 14th Dalai Lama fleeing and seeking refuge in India in 1959, emboldening Chinese suspicions of India attempting to influence Tibet. The 1962 war further dealt a major blow, with Nehru criticised for not anticipating the threat from China. After 1954, the next visit by an Indian PM to China would only happen more than three decades later, with Nehru’s grandson Rajiv Gandhi.”

**Do You Know:**

— The Panchsheel Agreement, formally titled The Agreement on Trade and Intercourse with the Tibet Region, was signed on April 29, 1954, by N. Raghavan, India’s Ambassador to China, and Zhang Han-Fu, China’s Foreign Minister.

— The agreement’s preamble laid down five guiding principles, known as the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence:

1. Mutual respect for each other’s territorial integrity and sovereignty
2. Mutual non-aggression
3. Mutual non-interference in internal affairs
4. Equality and mutual benefit
5. Peaceful coexistence

— The aim was to boost trade and cooperation between India and China. It included:

- Establishment of trade centres in key cities of both countries
- A clear framework for bilateral trade
- Provisions for religious pilgrimages, including designated routes and passes for pilgrims



— Significantly, India formally recognized Tibet as the Tibet Region of China for the first time under this agreement.

#### BANGLADESH TO SEND 1,200 TONNES OF HILSA AHEAD OF DURGA PUJA

In a goodwill gesture, Bangladesh's interim government has announced that it will send 1,200 tonnes of hilsa fish to India ahead of Durga Puja later this month. An official notification issued on Monday said that a decision had been taken in this regard "in principle", and called for fish exporters to submit applications by September 11.

Bangladesh has determined that the hilsa, a prized fish during festivities in eastern Indian States, including West Bengal, Assam, and Tripura, will cost \$12.5, or around ₹1,100, per kg, which is significantly lower than the prevailing market rates for hilsa in India at present. Bangladesh has traditionally sent hilsa ahead of the Durga Puja season.

The consignment of 1,200 tonnes of hilsa is expected to reach West Bengal.

Though diplomatic sources said Bangladesh had attempted to send some additional consignments for Assam and Tripura, that initiative did not receive a response from local importers within the given time-frame.

The 1,200 tonnes is less than previous consignments for the season. In 2024, the interim government led by Muhammad Yunus had sent 3,000 tonnes of hilsa ahead of the Durga Puja season. A similar quantity was maintained during the Sheikh Hasina years.

#### VARANASI MEET: PM MODI ANNOUNCES SPECIAL PACKAGE FOR MAURITIUS

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Thursday announced a special economic package for Mauritius and underscored that India and the island nation are "not just partners but a family".

— Through the package, India will help Mauritius build hospitals, roads and deliver choppers. Seven MoU were signed between the two nations in a meeting between PM Modi and his Mauritius counterpart Navinchandra Ramgoolam in Varanasi.

— Calling the bond between the two countries an "investment in our shared future" and not a mere "assistance," PM Modi said, "At the same time, we will also advance projects such as the Chagos Marine Protected Area; the ATC Tower at SSR International Airport; as well as the expansion of highways and ring roads."

— Mauritius, a strategically located island nation in the western Indian Ocean, is an important neighbour for India. A key reason for the special ties is that people of Indian-origin comprise nearly 70% of the island's population of 1.2 million.

— Mauritius was among the first few countries with which independent India established diplomatic relations in 1948. Since its independence from the British in 1968, Mauritius has mainly been ruled by two major political families, the Ramgoolams (Seewoosagur Ramgoolam and his son, Navin) and the Jugnauths (Anerood Jugnauth and son, Pravind).

— Bilateral trade between India and Mauritius increased from USD 206.76 million in 2005–06 to USD 851.13 million in 2023–24, with Indian exports valued at USD 778.03 million and Mauritian exports at USD 73.10 million in the latest fiscal year. India's main exports include pharmaceuticals,



cereals, cotton, prawns, and meat, while Mauritius exports vanilla, medical devices, aluminium alloys, and refined copper.

— Mauritius has also been a major source of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) into India — USD 175 billion since 2000, accounting for roughly 25% of total FDI inflows. Although post-2016 Double Taxation Avoidance Convention (DTAC) reforms led to a decline (from USD 15.72 billion in 2016–17 to USD 6.13 billion in 2022–23), FDI rebounded to USD 7.97 billion in 2023–24, making Mauritius India's second-largest FDI source, with USD 3.21 billion in Q1 of 2024–25.

— A milestone in economic cooperation was the signing of the Comprehensive Economic Cooperation and Partnership Agreement (CECPA) on February 22, 2021, effective from April 1, 2021—India's first trade agreement with any African country. CECPA provides preferential access to 310 Indian export items and 615 Mauritian products, including specialty sugar, juices, alcoholic beverages, and medical devices.

## RELIEF FOR REFUGEES

The formulation of the Immigration and Foreigners (Exemption) Order, 2025, notified by the Union Ministry of Home Affairs on September 1, provides greater clarity on certain issues concerning India's immigration framework. It exempts a set of people from the requirement of a valid passport or other valid travel document and valid visa to enter, stay and exit the country. Apart from specified sets of Indian citizens, it covers nationals of Nepal and Bhutan; Tibetan refugees; six religious minorities from Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan, and Sri Lankan Tamils. A significant aspect is the reference to the Sri Lankan Tamil refugees, with many living in Tamil Nadu since 1990. The order protects them from forcible repatriation to Sri Lanka, the stipulations being that they should have taken shelter in the country as on January 9, 2015 and registered themselves. In the last 30-odd years, neither the Union government nor the Tamil Nadu government had drawn up any unilateral plan to send them back. In fact, after the end of the civil war in Sri Lanka in 2009, both the governments have been doing their bit to ensure their welfare. Yet, Sri Lankan Tamils were not included when the Union government amended the Citizenship Act six years ago to provide citizenship to the six non-Muslim groups from three Muslim-majority countries. Thus, the order gives Tamil refugees some relief.

However, there are unanswered questions. It is not clear whether the refugees will be able to shake off their "illegal migrants" tag. A hurdle in their applying for Indian citizenship — by registration under Section 5 of the Citizenship Act, 1955 or by naturalisation under Section 6 of the Act is that they are 'illegal migrants' as per the law. When the refugees are not considered eligible to apply for a Long Term Visa (LTV) it is doubtful whether they will be able to seek citizenship. LTVs will enable their gainful employment and higher education. In the run-up to the enactment of the Citizenship Amendment Act, 2009, the Ministry had justified their exclusion and had taken the stand that they were among those eligible for LTVs if they could prove that they had been "victims of oppression in their countries of origin...." The Centre would do well if it liberalised its stand on LTVs for the deserving among the Sri Lankan Tamil refugees. The certificate of identity for Tibetan refugees can be a model. It is also time that India and Sri Lanka took early steps for voluntary repatriation along with a scheme of structured assistance. Local integration is also an option to sort out the issue. Fundamentally, the stakeholders should adopt a humane approach.



## DENYING UPWARD MOBILITY TO CANDIDATES WITH DISABILITIES DEFEATS PURPOSE OF QUOTA: SC

The Supreme Court in a judgment on Friday asked the Centre to clarify whether talented candidates with disabilities whose performance allows them to qualify for the unreserved category are pushed up to make room for more people with disabilities to avail reservation benefits.

The top court asked the Union government to detail the steps taken so far to ensure the “upward movement” of such candidates.

“We consider it appropriate to require the Union of India to explain whether appropriate measures have been taken to provide the upward movement of meritorious candidates applying against the post/s reserved for persons with disabilities, in case such candidates secure more than the cut-off for the unreserved category. The same principle must also be applied to promotions,” a Bench of Justice Vikram Nath and Sandeep Mehta said, directing the Union government to respond by October 14.

The judgment, authored by Justice Mehta, said that candidates with disabilities continue to be restricted to seats or jobs allotted for the disabled category, instead of allowing them upward mobility.

“The direct consequence of not providing upward movement to meritorious candidates applying under the category of persons with disabilities would be that even when a candidate with disability scores higher than the cut-off for the unreserved category, such a candidate would invariably occupy the reserved seat, thereby denying the opportunity to a lower scoring candidate with disability to make a claim on the seat/post,” Justice Mehta reasoned.

Such stagnation of a candidate with disabilities defeats the very purpose of reservation under Section 34 of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act and “constituted a glaring example of hostile discrimination against persons with disabilities”, the court said. Justice Mehta pointed out that meritorious candidates who belong to backward classes are automatically moved up to the unreserved category, leaving reserved seats vacant for the less advantaged among them. However, the same measures are not taken in the case of persons with disabilities, who have been deprived by providence as against persons who face societal discrimination, he said.

The court said the government ought to see the larger objective of reservation, which is to open a window for people with disabilities to join the mainstream and equally share opportunities.

“Rather than viewing disability as a deficit requiring correction, the law must recognise it as a lens that reveals the true nature of legal, social, and institutional frameworks, illuminating whether they embrace human diversity or create barriers that exclude certain members of society, i.e., those who have been discriminated against by providence or who have suffered the disability factor in their lifetime,” Justice Mehta noted.

## PROPERTY RIGHTS, TRIBALS AND THE GENDER PARITY GAP

It is over a month since International Day of the World’s Indigenous Peoples was observed on August 9, but it is still not late to ponder over the rights of India’s indigenous population. The proposition becomes all the more topical following a judgment of the Supreme Court of India on



July 17, 2025. In *Ram Charan and Ors. vs Sukhram and Ors.*, the Bench of Justice Sanjay Karol and Justice Joymalya Bagchi equated the exclusion of daughters in ancestral property to be a negation of their fundamental right to equality. Thus, looking at the issue of a tribal woman's property rights through the lens of gender equality becomes significant. It is a matter of deep gender injustice that most tribal women (except in the north-east where there is matriliney in some tribes) do not have pieces of legislation giving them statutory rights in ancestral property.

### **Plea of equal share**

In this case, the appellant-plaintiffs were the legal heirs of Dhaiya, a Scheduled Tribe (ST) woman in Sarguja district, Chhattisgarh, who sought partition of a property that belonged to their maternal grandfather, Bhajju alias Bhajan Gond. Their mother (one of the six children — five sons and a daughter), they claimed, was entitled to an equal share. The cause of action arose in October 1992 when the defendant refused to make a partition. The appellant-plaintiffs approached the trial court seeking a declaration of title and partition of the suit property, which was dismissed on the ground that no such custom existed in the Gond tribe where female heirs are given rights in ancestral property.

After being rejected by the first Appellate court and Trial court, the plea then came before the Chhattisgarh High Court. In so far as the argument of the appellant-plaintiff that they had adopted Hindu traditions and so be granted such rights according to the Hindu Succession Act, it was held that since there was no evidence on record, the Trial Court and the First Appellate Court had rejected this contention. However, it granted Dahiya's legal heirs an equal share in the property stating that denying the female heir a right in property under the garb of customs only exacerbated gender discrimination — which the law should weed out.

In *Madhu Kishwar and Ors. vs State Of Bihar and Ors.* (1996), a petition had raised the issue of parity between female and male tribal members in the matter of intestate succession. This pertained to customary laws excluding women from inheritance of land or property. The majority judgment of the Supreme Court refused to strike down the provisions as violative of the right to equality, stating that this would cause chaos in the existing law.

### **Laws in Scheduled Five Area States**

In matters of marriage, succession and adoption, tribals in Scheduled Areas are governed by their customary laws. Despite women contributing more in farms than the men, none of the tribal customary laws prevalent in the Scheduled Five Area States (which also includes Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand and Odisha) give land inheritance rights to females in ancestral properties. The All India Report on Agriculture Census 2015-16 shows that 16.7% of ST women possess land when compared to ST men (83.3%).

It is also argued that in tribal society, land is a communitarian property, where there cannot be an individual owner. But, it rarely happens that money received against the sale or acquisition of tribal lands goes to the gram sabha of villages. The fear of tribal women marrying non-tribal men, leading to land alienation, is another reason for denying women land inheritance rights. The fact that the nature of land remains indigenous despite its transfer to non-tribal as it happens in forest land is to be understood before any such denial.

Any custom must pass the test of parameters such as antiquity, certainty, continuity, reasonableness and conformity with public policy in order to be transformed into a law. A court of law can verify the legality of a custom based on these. A similar situation arose in *Prabha Minz*



Daughter Of Late Saran Linda vs (A) Martha Ekka Wife Of Late Ajit Ekka (2022), where the Jharkhand High Court historically decided in favour of property rights of women of the Oraon tribe in the State as the defendant failed to prove that there was any custom in the Oraon community of Jharkhand where daughters have been continually deprived of inheritance rights in paternal property.

#### **A case for a separate act**

The Supreme Court took an affirmative stand on tribal women's property rights, in *Kamala Neti (Dead) Thr. Lrs. vs Special Land Acquisition Officer*, on December 9, 2022, which was one of the first steps towards celebrating the beginning of gender parity in property rights among the tribal women. If Section 2(2) of the Hindu Succession Act, 2005 excludes tribal women from its purview, why not have a separate Tribal Succession Act made for tribals? Codification of tribal laws on the lines of Hindus and Christians can also help resolve the issue substantially.

### MAN OF FAITH

C.P. Radhakrishnan, 68, who joined the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) as a teenager, has been elected as the Vice-President of India, marking another attempt by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to link its version of nationalist ideology with the Sangh Parivar agenda. Mr. Radhakrishnan was a member of the TN Jan Sangh executive committee by 1974 — a time when the Sangh Parivar's presence in Tamil Nadu was marginal and his political affiliation was clearly inspired by ideology than careerism. On September 9, 2025, he became the Vice-President of India, a reward for his ideological fealty on the one hand, and as a milestone in his journey of the RSS on the other. He secured 452 out of 752 valid votes, and defeated Justice B. Sudershan Reddy from the INDIA bloc by 152 votes. He was elected to the Lok Sabha twice, from Coimbatore in 1998 and 1999, as a BJP candidate supported by the AIADMK and then the DMK. He served on parliamentary committees and a special committee investigating a stock market scam. He also represented India at the UN General Assembly. From 2004 to 2007, as BJP State president, he undertook a 93-day "Ratha Yatra", advocating river linking, ending untouchability, countering terrorism, and promoting a Uniform Civil Code.

As the Governor of Jharkhand (2023) and Maharashtra (2024), Mr. Radhakrishnan expanded his administrative experience and enhanced his political stature, but his new role will be a different kettle of fish. As the V-P, he will also function as the Chairman of the Rajya Sabha, which will test his political acumen. He has spoken in support of federalism and smoother Centre-State relations in the past, but the general inclination of the BJP and the RSS is towards a centralisation of power. The role of Parliament has weakened in recent years even as the executive has expanded its power to unprecedented levels. The Rajya Sabha has been particularly undermined by arbitrary classification of Bills as finance Bills that do not require its approval. The concept of the Rajya Sabha as a council of States existed more in theory than in practice always, but its deliberate erosion is a recent development. The relationship between the government and the Opposition has become hostile and toxic in recent years. Even parliamentary committees have become battlegrounds of senseless rhetoric rather than platforms of thoughtful deliberations. Mr. Radhakrishnan has his task cut out. With his affable demeanour, he just might be able to nudge the government and the Opposition toward better cooperation and less combativeness.



## THE RTI'S SHIFT TO A 'RIGHT TO DENY INFORMATION'

The Right to Information (RTI) Act is founded on the principle that in a democracy, which is defined as “rule of the people, by the people, for the people”, all information held by the government inherently belongs to the citizens. The government acts as a custodian of this information on behalf of the populace. Citizens legitimise their representatives by electing them, who in turn legitimise the bureaucracy. Therefore, the default mode under the RTI is that all information must be shared with citizens.

However, the Act always included specific exemptions to protect certain interests, such as national sovereignty. One crucial exemption is the Act's Section 8(1)(j), which is on “personal information”.

The original Section 8(1)(j) was a detailed provision designed to balance the right to information with individual privacy. It stipulated that personal information could be denied if it had no connection to public activity or constituted an “unwarranted invasion on the privacy of an individual”, unless there was a larger public interest in its disclosure.

A key aspect of this original provision was a proviso which is an acid test. It said: “provided that the information which cannot be denied to the Parliament or a State Legislature shall not be denied to any person”. This meant that if information could not be denied to Parliament or a State Legislature it could also not be denied to an ordinary citizen.

The intent was to guide public information officers (PIOs) in discerning what constituted public activity, private activity, or an invasion of privacy, especially given the difficulty in definitively defining “privacy” (even Justice K.S. Puttaswamy (Retd) vs Union Of India acknowledged that it would evolve on a case-to-case basis). The government routinely collects information from an individual in the normal course of its duties, and such information is generally not considered to be an invasion of privacy and should, therefore, be shared. However, if it invades his privacy, it must not be taken routinely. Restrictions on the fundamental right to information should be within the limits set by Article 19(1)(2) of the Constitution. Here, there are only two words relating to privacy: ‘decency’ or ‘morality’. If disclosure violates decency or morality, it should be denied to Parliament and citizens.

### The ambiguity of ‘personal information’

The Digital Personal Data Protection (DPDP) Act amends Section 8(1)(j) of the RTI Act — a drastic alteration of Section 8(1)(j) that reduces its length to six words. This significant abbreviation makes it easy for most information to be denied. The core concern revolves around the interpretation of “personal information” itself.

One of the most pressing issues is the lack of a clear and consistent definition of “personal information” under the amended RTI Act, especially in its relationship with the new Data Protection Law. There are two conflicting views: the first is Natural Person Interpretation: One view holds that “person” should be understood in its general sense, referring to a “normal person” or natural person. The second is the DPDP Bill Definition. The other, equally valid view, interprets “person” as defined in the Digital Personal Data Protection (DPDP) Bill. The DPDP Bill's definition is expansive, including a “Hindu undivided family, a firm, a company, [and] any association of individuals and the State”.

If the latter definition is adopted, “almost everything is personal information”. A significant amount of information can be shown to be related to some person. Thus the law gives a handle to



deny most information. The RTI is transformed into a Right to Deny information. It becomes an 'RDI'. This broad interpretation poses a fundamental threat to the spirit of transparency. Adding to the complexity, the DPDP Bill contains a provision that overrides all other laws in cases of conflict. This is alarming because the DPDP Bill specifies strong penalties for violations which can be as high as ₹250 crore.

This creates an untenable situation for PIOs. As much of the government information is now digital, PIOs are apprehensive that a mistake in disclosing information could lead to severe financial penalties. This fear will incentivise PIOs to err on the side of information denial rather than disclosure, effectively creating a "right to deny information". The DPDP Act must not override the RTI Act, though it might be acceptable for it to override other Acts.

### **Facilitating corruption**

The practical implications of these amendments are dire for public accountability and the fight against corruption. Transparency is a crucial tool in this battle, especially when other anti-corruption mechanisms have proven to be ineffective.

The first is the loss of public monitoring. Citizens are the best monitors against corruption. If information is denied, this vital monitoring mechanism is severely hampered. India's multilayered government agencies such as vigilance departments, anti-corruption bureaus and the Lokpal, have abjectly failed to curb corruption.

The second is denial of essential information. The broadened scope of "personal information" means that even mundane yet crucial documents could be withheld — a citizen's own corrected marksheet could be denied as "personal". The example of Rajasthan sharing details of pension beneficiaries to combat "ghost employees" and "ghost cards" will cease. Even a simple order signed by an official could be denied as "personal information". It can result in over 90% of information being denied.

The third is unfettered corruption. The amendment "makes it the easy thing to be corrupt". Information relating to ghost employees or corruption charges falls under "personal information". It will be hidden, allowing corruption to 'flourish and continue unhindered'.

While the "larger public interest" clause still exists in the RTI Act (in Section 8(2)), its practical application is extremely rare and difficult. Citizens should not have to demonstrate "larger public interest" to access information as it is their fundamental right. This requirement only applies if information is already exempt.

There will be less than 1% orders where an exemption is accepted, but disclosure is based on larger public interest. This is because it is an incredibly challenging decision for any officer to make, weighing potential harm to an individual against the broader public benefit of disclosure. Therefore, relying on this clause to ensure transparency after the amendment is largely futile.

### **Apathy and a call to action**

Despite the gravity of these amendments, there has been a notable lack of public and media outcry when compared to previous RTI changes, such as those concerning Commissioner's salaries and tenures. This apathy may be due to the amendment being "under the guise of data protection", making it seem less threatening to the average citizen. There is also a common sentiment that an individual's own information should not be shared, regardless of its relevance, leading to an 'ego takes over' mentality.



Sections 8(2) and 44(3) of the DPDP Bill constitute a “very fundamental regression on our democracy” and a “very fundamental attack on our fundamental rights”.

There needs to be a focus on four issues. First, media and citizen engagement — there must be widespread public discussion across the country. Second, political accountability — citizens should demand assurances from political parties in their election manifestos that these amendments will be reversed. Third, public opinion — it is crucial to build strong public opinion with the support of the media. Fourth, recognition of gravity — this issue deserves as much attention as any other critical national debate, as the fundamental right to information is being compromised.

If citizens continue to remain silent, they will imperil their freedom and democracy. Collective action can lead to these changes being reversed. The future of transparency and accountability in India hinges on whether citizens and media can push back and protect the integrity of the RTI Act.

## DECISIVE STEP

The Supreme Court of India’s decisive intervention, ordering the Election Commission of India (ECI) to include the Aadhaar card as one of the 12 valid documents for the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of Bihar’s electoral rolls, is vital course correction. It is a resounding victory for the fundamental right to vote, reaffirming the principle that procedural rigidity must not disenfranchise lakhs of eligible citizens. The ECI adopted questionable reasoning, insisting that Aadhaar was merely proof of residency, not citizenship, and was, therefore, inadmissible. The Court rightly dismantled this argument by pointing out the glaring inconsistency: if nine of the other 11 documents, save for a passport or birth certificate, do not conclusively prove citizenship, why single out Aadhaar for exclusion? The Court also said that Aadhaar could be used subject to verification of its authenticity. This judicial clarity was urgently needed. Empirical evidence demonstrates that excluding Aadhaar, which is held by nearly 90% of Bihar’s population, in favour of documents such as passports (held by a mere 2%) and others, would have created insurmountable barriers for a vast number of genuine voters, particularly among the poor and the marginalised. The ECI’s rushed SIR exercise had already resulted in the exclusion of over 65 lakh electors from the draft roll. A statistical analysis by The Hindu of this exclusion reveals several anomalies — disproportionate numbers of women removed, statistically improbable death rates in certain areas, and questionable “permanent shifts” of residents, especially migrant workers and married women. These patterns suggest a flawed process that prioritised haste over accuracy, risking the removal of legitimate voters.

The inclusion of Aadhaar paves the way for a smoother, more accessible verification process. First, it offered a lifeline to those unfairly struck off the rolls among the 65 lakh electors. It also assists electors already on the rolls who require document verification. It vindicates the persistent appeals from political and civil society activists who had warned that the ECI’s stance was creating a problematic situation on the ground where Aadhaar was not accepted as a verification document, contradicting the Court’s earlier guidance. Its order, on Monday, forces the ECI to align its procedures with the practical realities of identity verification in India today. This ruling has implications beyond Bihar, setting a precedent for all the other revisions envisaged across the country. For the ECI, the goal of electoral roll revision should be to ensure accuracy and inclusivity, not to rush the process through in a way that could affect citizens’ rights. The ECI must now pivot toward a more diligent and humane approach, emphasising thorough house-to-house verification and ensuring that the foundation of India’s democracy — the electoral roll — is both accurate and truly representative of all its people.



## ROLLS AND LOOPHOLES

The Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls in Bihar has raised concerns, with deletions in some areas defying demographic patterns and statistical expectations. While the Opposition has claimed serious issues with rolls across the country, there is no clear-cut evidence as yet of fraudulent manipulation to benefit any political party. However, findings from the Aland constituency in Karnataka should set alarm bells ringing. Officials have unearthed thousands of Form-7 applications filed by miscreants, most of them designed to remove the names of legitimate voters from the rolls. Even this timely intervention was made possible by the diligence of local political leaders, rather than the Election Commission of India's (ECI) initiative. An independent investigation, which confirmed that the applications were fraudulent, has since been stalled because the ECI has declined access to technical records, without which the trail disappears into a fog of dynamic IP addresses and disposable phone numbers. The Bihar SIR and Aland are nonetheless united by two issues: the absence of verifiable details and an ECI caught in a reactive, rather than proactive, stance. In Aland, the investigation's fate now depends on the discretion of the election body whose systems were compromised. In Bihar, the ECI did not release the names and the reasons for deletion in a form that allowed external verification until the Supreme Court compelled it to do so.

The absence of mechanisms to allow independent tests of official ECI claims is the fault line along which the trust deficit between political parties and the ECI has grown. For parties, every change in the rolls alters the electoral field. While Bihar has many constituencies with close contests, a victory margin of fewer than 700 votes in a previous election in Aland has already politically charged the attempted forged deletion of nearly 6,000 voters in 2023. When explanations are partial or have to be painstakingly coaxed out, disputes that could be resolved by readily available data will obviously face the risk of morphing into contestations of difficult-to-verify competing claims of bias. Judicial intervention has since become central in Bihar, facilitating redress but also highlighting that essential steps were not taken until ordered. Banking on courts to secure disclosures shifts the balance of authority and leaves the ECI's processes open to question. Each case may be explained by technical failures or administrative lapses, but together they show how the absence of verifiable evidence entrenches operational concerns into systemic suspicion. The responsibility to allay these concerns falls squarely on the ECI. To this end, rather than wait for yet another judicial intervention, the Commission must take the allegations from Aland seriously and assist the probe. It should also take steps to prevent Form-7 from being misused, especially to block voter deletion by proxy.

## IS VOTER ADHIKAR YATRA MAKING A DIFFERENCE ON THE GROUND?

### The story so far:

The Voter Adhikar Yatra, led by Rahul Gandhi, travelled 1,300 kilometres across 25 districts of Bihar to highlight 'vote chori' and alleged flaws in the ongoing special intensive revision (SIR) of electoral rolls. The campaign brought the INDIA bloc partners together, relied heavily on social media for outreach, and linked voter roll deletions to fears of exclusion from welfare schemes. While enthusiasm was visible on the ground, communication gaps by Booth Level Officers (BLOs) and Booth Level Agents (BLAs) left many voters anxious and uncertain about their status on the rolls.



### **What was the Voter Adhikar Yatra in Bihar?**

The Congress organised the Voter Adhikar Yatra to expose alleged electoral malpractices by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and point out the Election Commission's alleged complicity in them. Mr. Gandhi travelled in an open jeep with grand alliance leaders, including Tejashwi Yadav (RJD), Dipankar Bhattacharya (CPI-ML), Mukesh Sahni (VIP), and State Congress president Rajesh Ram. With all leaders travelling together, the strength and bonhomie between alliance partners were on full display.

At different stops, other members of the INDIA bloc, such as Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M.K. Stalin, Samajwadi Party chief Akhilesh Yadav, and Congress leaders such as Priyanka Gandhi Vadra, Karnataka Chief Minister Siddaramaiah, and Deepender Hooda, joined the yatra, signaling coordination between the alliance partners. While the yatra received limited coverage in mainstream media, much like the Bharat Jodo Yatra, the Congress party emphasised a communication drive through social media, producing up to 20 reels, photographs, ad campaigns, and daily messages.

The continuous and sustained presence of Mr. Gandhi and Congress party's top leadership in Bihar for close to two weeks has enthused the cadres and workers of the party, but a sizeable chunk of the supporters and spectators for the yatra and the several rallies along its route were populated by alliance partners like RJD, VIP, and CPI(ML). Slogans like Vote Chor Gaddi Chhodd energised the yatra, and conversations with villagers showed that Mr. Gandhi's presence and the fear of deletions from voter lists were beginning to resonate. However, the messaging remained largely top-down rather than organically emerging from the ground.

### **Who are the BLOs, and what did they do in the SIR?**

BLOs are mostly school teachers and, in some cases, Anganwadi workers, who work at the Panchayat level and form the last tier of the Election Commission's hierarchy. Inducted into the Election Commission's apparatus in 2007, BLOs act as the custodians of the electoral roll at each polling booth. Their responsibilities include cleaning the electoral rolls in each of the over 90,000 polling booths in Bihar. Their task was to visit each household and update voter lists — adding new names, deleting deceased voters, and removing duplicates or fake entries.

Given the intra-state migratory nature of work among school teachers, several BLOs do not work in their home district or native Panchayats. Very rarely is a school teacher posted in their native Panchayat. This means that most BLOs are not fully familiar with all residents in their areas. For example, a resident of Supaul (Seemanchal or East Bihar) may be posted as a teacher in Ara (Bhojpur or West Bihar) and become the BLO in Ara, but might not know all local voters. This lack of familiarity has made it challenging for BLOs to collect accurate information.

In addition, the BLOs were incredibly pressed for time, with a deadline to meet 1,200–1,500 voters within 30 days, leaving many unable to visit every household for verification.

Adding to the frenzy was confusion about which documents would be accepted: while some BLOs accepted Aadhaar or ration cards, others insisted on residence proof or birth certificates for voter registration.

### **Who are the BLAs? And why are they not actively pursuing wrongful deletions in Bihar?**

BLAs are appointed by political parties and are usually an integral part of the Polling Booth Level Committee for each booth. BLAs are a vital cog in the wheel of the party organisation, and their



strength often represents the strength of that party's presence. According to the Election Commission, Bihar has a total of 1,60,813 BLAs. The BJP has the highest number of BLAs at 53,338; RJD follows with 47,506. JD(U), the ruling party for the last 20 years, has close to 36,000 BLAs, while Congress has only 17,549 across 90,000 polling booths in Bihar.

Across several villages in Darbhanga, Sitamarhi, Seohar, Bettiah, Gopalganj, Siwan, and Ara, we asked villagers whether any BLAs had approached them to explain about the SIR process or the procedure to get them re-enlisted on the electoral rolls, in case their names were deleted from the first list (among the 65 lakh names omitted in the first draft). Most villagers claimed that no BLAs had approached them since the SIR process concluded on July 26th. Among the RJD and Congress, most party workers and activists, including BLAs, appeared to be busy with the management of the Voter Adhikar Yatra. Ganga Mandal, an RJD leader in Darbhanga City, admitted that his team was preoccupied with yatra preparations and had not been able to approach voters regarding the electoral roll revision.

The yatra passed through Darbhanga via Muzaffarpur on August 27th. Jitender Kishor, an RJD leader from Gaayghat, Muzaffarpur, remarked that even when RJD BLAs have submitted objections, BLOs were not accepting them. The process of submission of objection, with a strict format to be followed by the voter, including filing an affidavit and Form 6, is also tedious and complicated, some political activists claimed, making it difficult for parties to train their BLAs. Among the grand alliance, only CPI(ML), with 1,496 BLAs, appears to have had some success, submitting over 100 objections, the highest by any political party in Bihar. The Election Commission has also placed a limit of 10 objections per day and a maximum of 30 claims to be filed by a single BLA from each booth. In totality, the process of filing objections to names missing from the draft electoral roll appears to be complex and restrictive on the ground.

#### **What, according to the voters, is the impact of Voter Adhikar Yatra in Bihar?**

The ground-level discourse on 'vote chori' is yet to take a robust shape; however, there is noticeable anxiety over missing names. In Sahni Tola of Betua Panchayat, Muzaffarpur, near where the yatra camped on August 27th, voters from the Nishad community expressed their concern about many names being omitted from the revised voter list. Baleshwar Sahni, a voter from Betua Panchayat, said that most people of his locality were unaware whether their names had been retained. He added that the BLOs were unresponsive, and the lack of clear communication from both BLOs and BLAs added more fire to speculative murmurs about the impending threats of deletion from the voter list.

Naresh Sahni, from the same village, also expressed frustration, noting that no political party seemed to be making active attempts on the ground to explain the complete picture about missing names from the voter list. The combination of incoherent or absent communication and the lack of party workers at the ground level, coupled with strong social media messaging about 'vote chori' promoted by the Voter Adhikar Yatra, is turning speculation and concern into real fear of omission among voters. The messaging from Mr. Yadav, suggesting that removal from the voter list could lead to exclusion from welfare services, also appears to resonate with the public. A tea shop owner in Betua Panchayat admitted that an exclusion from the voter list is dangerous, as it could lead to removal from the ration list and other welfare benefits.

Seen as a more real and immediate danger, the threat of exclusion from redistributive schemes like ration and pension seems to matter more to voters than distant ideas about 'vote chori' in the Mahadevapura constituency of Karnataka or in Haryana.



Sarthak Bagchi teaches in Ahmedabad University and has been studying elections in Bihar since 2015. He trailed the Voter Adhikar Yatra in Bihar during its last leg from August 27-30.

#### THE ANXIOUS, 'ABSENT' MIGRANT VOTERS OF GOPALGANJ

Gopalganj district has seen the highest number of voter names deleted from the draft electoral list, mainly due to people being marked as 'absent' or 'permanently shifted'. Many temporary migrants still wish to vote in their home towns but are at risk of losing this right because the Election Commission only allows those 'ordinarily resident' in a place to vote there. Migrants who are away for work often miss deadlines to submit the necessary documents, resulting in their names being left off the rolls. Even if voter ID cards exist, failing to provide proof of residence leads to exclusion. The rules require one of 11 documents for inclusion, and only recently was Aadhaar added as an acceptable form after a Supreme Court order. Booth-level officers have struggled with changing instructions and confusion over document collection. The process particularly affects migrants and women—many women are deleted from lists after marrying and moving to nearby villages, but are not always registered at their new address. High illiteracy rates mean villagers rely heavily on local teachers, who act as booth-level officers, for help with paperwork. The reorganisation of polling stations and mixed communication from officials has added to the uncertainty and anxiety of many voters, especially among Dalit communities and women.

#### PAN-INDIA SIR: EC TO MEET CEOS, SEEKS INPUTS ON OTHER ELIGIBILITY PAPERS

In a step towards conducting a nationwide Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls, the Election Commission is set to hold a conference of Chief Electoral Officers (CEOs) of all states and Union Territories on September 10 to review preparedness, The Indian Express has learnt.

— Significantly, the EC is learnt to have sought suggestions from CEOs on additional documents that can be submitted by electors to prove their eligibility, including citizenship. For the ongoing SIR in Bihar, the EC had given an indicative list of 11 documents which included passport, birth certificate and caste certificate, but left out Aadhaar, ration card and the EC's own Electors Photo Identity Card (EPIC).

— The EC's SIR order has been challenged through a batch of petitions in the Supreme Court, where the next hearing is scheduled for September 8. Apart from challenging the EC's authority to conduct a check of citizenship, the petitioners have also questioned the rationale behind exclusion of these commonly-held documents.

— According to sources, the EC is likely to order the SIR for the rest of the country with January 1, 2026 set as the qualifying date — those who are 18 years old by January 1 next year can apply. In its June 24 order, the EC had said it would conduct the SIR for the entire country, but rolled out the exercise for Bihar first as Assembly elections are due in the state. For the remaining states and UTs, it had said orders would be issued in due course.

— In its June order, the EC had said that an intensive revision of electoral rolls was last conducted in 2003 and that due to urbanisation and migration, there was a possibility of repeated entries in the electoral rolls. "Thus, the situation warrants an intensive verification drive to verify each person before enrolment as an elector," it had said.

— The electoral rolls are summarily revised every year and before each election, with additions and deletions made to the existing rolls. This time, the EC is preparing the rolls afresh.



— For the SIR exercise in the rest of the country, the exact timelines, documents and cut-off dates will be known when the EC issues an order. For the annual Special Summary Revision, which also has the qualifying date of January 1, the EC starts preparing in August every year.

**Do You Know:**

— Article 324(1) of the Constitution gives the ECI the power of “superintendence, direction and control of the preparation of the electoral rolls for, and the conduct of” elections to Parliament and state legislatures.

— Under Section 21(3) of The Representation of the People Act, 1950, the ECI “may at any time... direct a special revision of the electoral roll for any constituency or part of a constituency in such manner as it may think fit”.

— The Registration of Electors’ Rules, 1960, says the revision of rolls can be carried out “either intensively or summarily or partly intensively and partly summarily, as the [ECI] may direct”. In an intensive revision, the electoral roll is prepared afresh; in a summary revision, the roll is amended.

— Special summary revisions take place every year, and the electoral roll is updated before each Lok Sabha and state Assembly election. Intensive revisions have been carried out in 1952-56, 1957, 1961, 1965, 1966, 1983-84, 1987-89, 1992, 1993, 1995, 2002, 2003 and 2004.

#### HOW GEOTAGGING OF BUILDINGS WILL WORK DURING CENSUS, HOW IT WILL HELP

India’s next Census, which will be conducted in 2027 after a delay of six years, will include many firsts – it will be the first Census to be conducted digitally; for the first time, people will have the option of self-enumeration; and members of individual castes will be counted for the first time since 1931.

— All buildings across India will be geotagged – never before has such an exercise been undertaken as part of India’s decennial population Census.

— Geotagging is the process of marking the latitude-longitude coordinates of buildings on a Geographic Information System (GIS) map. GIS is a computer system that captures, checks, and displays data on specific positions on the surface of the Earth.

— Latitudes and longitudes are imaginary lines that are used to determine the location of a place on the globe. Latitudes (or ‘parallels’) are horizontal lines that indicate the north-south distance of a place from the equator; longitudes (or ‘meridians’) are vertical north-south lines that determine the east-west distance of a place from the prime meridian, which passes through Greenwich, UK.

— Geotagging provides a building with a precise and unique locational identity that can be pinpointed with accuracy.

— Census 2011 defined a ‘Census House’ as “a building or part of a building used or recognized as a separate unit because of having a separate main entrance from the road or common courtyard or staircase etc”.

— A Census House may be occupied or vacant; it may be used for residential or non-residential purposes, or for both.



— Geotagging will be done during the House listing Operations (HLO), the first phase of the Census, which is scheduled for April-September 2026. (The second phase is of Population Enumeration (PE), during which demographic, socioeconomic, and cultural data of individuals will be collected.)

— According to sources, geotagging will help to accurately estimate the number of Census houses and households requiring enumeration, thus improving workload management across field functionaries.

— In earlier Censuses, notional sketches were drawn by hand as part of the houselisting exercise. However, the government has been using geotags on a smaller scale – for example, assets such as houses constructed under the Pradhan Mantri Awaas Yojana-Gramin and PMAY-Urban are geotagged.

**Do You Know:**

— The first non-synchronous, nationwide census was in 1872. This census involved counting individuals across most parts of the country; however, it did not include all territories under British control. It was non-synchronous census.

— The first synchronous census of India was conducted in 1881. It was conducted by W.C. Plowden.

— The Census 2027 will be the 16th decadal Census overall and the eighth since Independence. During the exercise, village, town and ward-level population data on various parameters are collected. This includes data on housing conditions, amenities and assets, demography, religion, Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, language, literacy and education, economic activity, migration, and fertility.

#### J&K RS POLLS: WHY EC PITCHED FOR A PRESIDENTIAL ORDER FOR ITS SEATS

Last month, the Union Law and Justice Ministry turned down the Election Commission (EC)'s request for a presidential order to stagger the terms of Jammu and Kashmir's four Rajya Sabha seats, which run concurrently.

— The EC asked for the presidential order to ensure that the four seats do not become vacant at the same time and the Union Territory remains continuously represented in the Upper House. The Law and Justice Ministry, however, said there was no provision in law for such an order.

— The four Rajya Sabha seats of J&K have been vacant since 2021 as the terms of the MPs at the time ended while the UT was under President's rule. While the J&K Assembly elections took place in September-October 2024, the EC has yet to hold the elections for the Rajya Sabha seats from the UT, leading to Chief Minister Omar Abdullah questioning the delay. The electoral college for the Rajya Sabha elections is made up of the MLAs of the State or UT.

— The Commission first wrote to the Legislative Department of the Law Ministry earlier this year, asking for a presidential order to curtail the terms of some of the Rajya Sabha seats of J&K so that they do not end at the same time.

— A similar presidential order was issued after the first-ever Rajya Sabha election in 1952 to stagger the terms of the seats so that all of them did not end after the stipulated six-year term.



- Under Article 83 of the Constitution, one-third of Rajya Sabha members retire every second year. It is a permanent House as opposed to the Lok Sabha that has a fixed five-year term.
- While all Rajya Sabha seats began with such a staggered approach, the terms of some seats in certain states have become concurrent due to the imposition of Emergency and President's Rule over the years. In the case of J&K, the cycle has been disturbed since the 1990s.
- Section 154 of the Representation of the People Act, 1951 says that the term of office of the member of the Council of States would be of six years. But, in order to make it a continuous House, presidential orders were issued twice.
- It adds in sub-section 2: "Upon the first constitution of the Council of States the President shall, after consultation with the Election Commission, make by order such provision as he thinks fit for curtailing the term of office of some of the members then chosen in order that, as nearly as may be, one-third of the members holding seats of each class shall retire in every second year thereafter."
- Further, it says that "one-third of the members may retire on the second day of April, 1958". On the expiration of every second year thereafter, the President shall, "as soon as may be after the commencement of the Constitution (Seventh Amendment) Act, 1956, after consultation with the Election Commission, make by order such provisions as he thinks fit in regard to the terms of office of the members elected..."
- This means that the R P Act only allowed for a presidential order after the constitution of the first Rajya Sabha in 1952 and then again as per a Constitutional amendment in 1956.
- Any presidential order to curtail the term of some Rajya Sabha seats now would require an amendment to the R P Act and would have to be for all such states and UTs affected, not just J&K.

## IN KASHMIR, ARREST OF AAP MLA THREATENS TO TURN BACK THE CLOCK ON DEMOCRATIC PROMISES

the 2024 assembly polls in Jammu and Kashmir promised a new beginning. The first election after the abrogation of Article 370 signalled the return of the political process to the erstwhile state and raised hopes that the people would once again speak and be heard through their elected representatives. The optimism of that moment was not unmixed, however, it carried an underlying apprehension: After all, the Lieutenant-Governor, an appointee of the Centre, continues to hold vast powers, raising concerns over the circumscribing of the elected chief minister's room for manoeuvre. The arrest of the sole Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) MLA, Mehraj Malik, this week under the draconian Public Safety Act (PSA) underlines those fears and raises spectres of the clock being turned back in Kashmir.

Malik has been charged with "disturbing public order" by the police, which reports to the L-G's office, not the Omar Abdullah government. The Doda MLA is known to be outspoken in demanding public services and agitating for them, using social media to amplify his voice. Before his arrest, a video emerged of Malik arguing with and allegedly abusing Doda's Deputy Commissioner over the shifting of a health sub-centre. In arresting him, however, the J&K authorities show a wilful ignorance of the basics of democratic governance. An MLA, any elected representative, wears many hats. They are not just lawmakers — they must, in different circumstances, be advocates for their constituents and even, on their behalf, become "activists". This is part of the negotiation and thrust and parry of democratic politics and in a society governed by the rule of law, the space for



it must be expanded and protected. Using preventive detention under the PSA to jail an elected representative who is doing his job speaks of grave state over-reach.

Malik is the first sitting MLA in J&K's history to be jailed under the PSA. His arrest sends a chilling message to the political class and broader society in Kashmir on the limits on the freedom of expression and the space allowed to the political opposition. The arrest also raises a fundamental question: Who speaks for the "public" for whose purported "safety" the MLA has been jailed? Almost the entire political class in the Valley, including Omar Abdullah, has condemned Malik's arrest, even though Malik has been a loud critic of the National Conference and the state government. There have also been several protests in Doda over his detention. The record turnout in the 2024 polls showed people's faith in democratic processes in Kashmir. Those hard-won gains must not be jeopardised by a strong-armed state.

#### AS MODI VISITS MANIPUR, 5 KEY ISSUES IN CONFLICT-TORN STATE

Prime Minister Narendra Modi will fly to Manipur on Saturday and interact with internally displaced people in Churachandpur and Imphal. This will be the Prime Minister's first trip to the state since the ethnic conflict between the Meitei and Kuki-Zo communities began in May 2023.

— In the 27 months since, Manipur has witnessed prolonged periods of violence and displacement, a collapse of law and order, the strengthening of armed groups, a Lok Sabha election, the imposition of President's Rule, and, recently, a gradual ebb in the violence. Here are 5 key issues in the state, and where they stand today.

— Rehabilitation of displaced population: More than 280 relief camps across Manipur house some 57,000 internally displaced people, many of whom have been living there for over two years now. Broadly, there are two categories of displacement that have taken place.

— In July, then Chief Secretary P K Singh had announced an ambitious three-phase resettlement plan aimed at winding down all the relief camps by the end of the year.

— Free movement in the state: Through the course of the conflict, the boundaries between valley and hill districts have hardened, and individuals from neither community have been able to safely travel in areas where the other community is in majority. These boundaries are heavily manned by security personnel and have come to be called "buffer zones" between the two communities.

— Now, while Kuki-Zo groups have largely agreed to cooperate with the movement of essential goods to the valley through the highways, they continue to state that they will not allow the movement of Meiteis across "buffer zones". No similar agreement or commitment has been arrived at with Meitei groups for the movement of Kuki-Zo people in the valley.

— Dialogue between communities: For over one-and-a-half years, the state lived with deadly violence between the two communities in which more than 250 lives have been lost. The last such deadly cycle took place in November 2024, and the violence has ebbed since.

— Currently, the Ministry of Home Affairs is engaging in talks with groups on both sides separately, and last week renewed a Suspension of Operations (SoO) pact with Kuki-Zo insurgent groups under the umbrellas of Kuki National Organization and the United People's Front.

— Government formation: There has been a growing push from valley-based and Naga NDA MLAs for the restoration of a popular government in the state citing "public demand" and "pressure."



Centre, however, has indicated no inclination to lift President's Rule, unwilling to destabilise the current status quo.

— The border situation: The state's porous international border with Myanmar has been a prickly issue in context of the conflict. Meitei stakeholders have continuously alleged that unregulated illegal immigration of Chin people from Myanmar — who share a common ethnicity with the Kuki-Zo — has been a major cause for volatility in the region.

— The Centre decided to scrap the Free Movement Regime with Myanmar — which allowed tribes living along the border on either side to travel up to 16 km inside the other country without a visa and stay up to two weeks — and announced that the porous border will be fenced.

**Do You Know:**

— The Suspension of Operations (SoO) agreement is essentially a tripartite ceasefire deal to initiate political dialogue. Signed in 2008, the agreement was between the Centre, the Manipur state government, and the KNO and the UPF, two umbrella groups comprising 24 separate Kuki-Zomi insurgent groups.

— The SoO agreement with militant groups under the umbrellas of Kuki National Organisation (KNO) and United People's Front (UPF) has been renewed with renegotiated terms.

## DENIED BY DESIGN: HOW INDIA'S COMPETITIVE EXAMS FAIL VISUALLY IMPAIRED

In August, the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment issued new guidelines to facilitate visually impaired candidates in competitive examinations. On paper, these guidelines appear progressive. They encourage exam bodies to incorporate technologies such as screen readers, customised keyboards, and the option for candidates to type answers independently. However, the guidelines are devoid of enforceable obligations, timelines, or clear accountability. The government has deferred its implementation to December 31. This risks entrenching a system that sidelines disabled candidates under the guise of "encouragement."

### Aspirational guidelines, real-world issues

The guidelines are largely aspirational and lack concrete mechanisms to ensure compliance. There is no mandated rollout plan, no penalties for exam bodies that fail to adapt, and crucially, no infrastructure is currently in place to support the use of assistive technology during exams.

Major institutions, such as the Union Public Service Commission and the National Testing Agency, have yet to develop or deploy accessible computer-based testing platforms that are compatible with screen readers like JAWS or NVDA. The prevailing computer interfaces remain largely graphical and inaccessible to visually impaired users, forcing candidates into the humiliating and inefficient option of relying on scribes. Meaningful inclusion demands investment, innovation, and urgency — none of which are evident in the guidelines.

### Access by litigation

On multiple occasions, the judiciary has intervened to ensure the basic accessibility rights of visually impaired candidates. In the landmark case of *Yash Dodani v. Union of India*, the Supreme Court ordered that candidates appearing for the Common Law Admission Test (CLAT) Postgraduate exam and the All India Bar Examination (AIBE) be provided comprehensive access to assistive technology, including JAWS screen reader software, customised keyboards, and the



option to type answers directly. This ruling underscored that while scribes remain an option, candidates should not be forced to depend solely on them.

Yet, it is sobering that these advances came only through protracted litigation, not proactive executive action. Exam bodies have routinely resisted upgrading their systems, often citing logistical nightmares and security concerns.

UPSC has consistently resisted efforts to utilise screen reader technology in civil services examination before the Supreme Court, claiming that the scale of its operations — over 10 lakh candidates across 2,500 centres — makes it impossible to guarantee security and confidentiality while accommodating assistive technology. It has time and again raised concerns about the technological literacy of candidates and the capacity of exam staff to support these accommodations.

In *Vikash Kumar v. UPSC*, where a person with writer's cramp had approached the SC, requesting the provision of a scribe and compensatory time, the UPSC had opposed the request on the ground that the petitioner's disability was not recognised under the act. One of the arguments advanced by UPSC was that providing such reasonable accommodation would hurt the purity of the exam.

The Supreme Court had then observed: "The system may be vulnerable to being gamed by able-bodied persons; however, it is the persons with disabilities who are being asked to bear the cost of maintaining the purity of the competitive examinations by giving up their legal entitlements on the presumption that there is a possibility of misuse."

Despite the Court's warnings four years ago, the executive continues to pursue the ableist paradigm.

#### **Excuses don't pass the scrutiny**

Screen readers like JAWS and NVDA function as read-only tools that do not interact with or alter the exam content. Therefore, they do not pose any security risk. Accommodating visually impaired candidates does not require complex technical skills from invigilators. It simply needs to load pre-approved software on exam computers and provide compatible hardware. Nor does it require candidates to be tech experts; it only demands that exam bodies provide an environment that mirrors the accessible tools these candidates already use in their academic and professional lives. The problem is not feasibility; it is a lack of institutional will.

#### **From accommodation to barrier**

The August guidelines strictly prohibit candidates from bringing their own scribes, insisting instead that scribes must be selected from an official pool vetted by exam authorities. While this may be intended to prevent malpractice, it strips candidates of the crucial support and trust that comes from working with someone familiar with their needs and communication style. Adding to this challenge, the guidelines require scribes to be academically two to three levels junior to the candidate. A law graduate, for instance, must work with someone who may have only completed high school or less. Such a wide gap in academic background is problematic in technical or specialised exams, where the scribe's lack of subject knowledge can lead to mistakes, misinterpretations, and compromise the candidate's performance.

Finally, the limited interaction time between candidate and scribe — just 20 minutes before the exam — makes it nearly impossible to build rapport or coordinate effectively. What should be an accommodation to level the playing field instead becomes a source of anxiety and inefficiency.



### **The need for binding reforms**

The Ministry's continued reliance on a scribe-centric model, while superficially offering alternatives, reveals a deeper unwillingness to embrace genuine accessibility. Without concrete mandates, exam bodies are incentivised to maintain status quo rather than innovate. The December 31 deadline should not become a bureaucratic smokescreen leading to further delay. The state must make it clear that accessibility is non-negotiable, with strict accountability for exam bodies that fail to comply.

What is required is not vague encouragement but mandatory integration of assistive technologies into all computer-based exams. Exam bodies must be legally bound to provide accessible software platforms that are compatible with screen readers, along with certified, trained scribes where needed. Candidates must be allowed to test these technologies in advance to avoid unpleasant surprises on exam day. Only robust enforcement, coupled with adequate resources and training, can transform a paper promise into a reality.

### **Constitutional and legal imperative, not charity**

The failure to provide accessible examinations is a violation of Sections 16 and 17 of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016, which obligate exam conducting bodies to provide reasonable accommodation to disabled candidates. It also stands in violation of various judicial directives passed, which unequivocally state that the right to reasonable accommodation is a part and parcel of Article 21 of the Constitution, which guarantees the right to life and liberty.

In light of this robust legal and constitutional mandate, candidates with disabilities must not be forced to litigate their rights repeatedly or accept compromised accommodations as their only option. Unless the government moves beyond token gestures and implements concrete, enforceable reforms, this exclusion will continue, eroding the very foundations of inclusive education and opportunity in India.

## **PHD IS NOT ENOUGH TO ENTER ACADEMIA. HOW LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION BECOME A BARRIER FOR MARGINALISED STUDENTS**

Academic job advertisements and the application processes are a reminder of caste and social capital in India. While much has been written about the exclusionary character of Indian universities and the insidious discrimination against the marginalised students and teachers, the application submission process for teaching jobs is also riddled with caste prejudices. After spending hours diligently filling in the pedantic columns of personal data, academic qualifications, research publications, and the highfalutin visions and mission for the institute, one stumbles upon the lurking list of referees before the final submission. While for long it was a standard practice to provide two reference letters for PhD admissions and for assistant professor level employment, many public-funded central institutions have raised it to three or more now. Some are even asking for as many as six letters of recommendation. Recently, IISER Bhopal circulated an advertisement for assistant professor and asked for recommendation letters from "at least six referees who are at the level of associate professor or professor and PhD and post-doctoral advisers". To rub it in, it was a special drive employment notification meant only for the SC/ST/OBC/EWS/PwD candidates.

Are these so-called premier Institutes of Excellence ignorant or disingenuous to the social and cultural capital undergirded by the caste that mediates, blocks, facilitates and preserves access



and privileges in academia? The letter of recommendation echoes the time when chances at jobs used to depend on a letter written by a caste peer or patron. Dalits and Adivasis rarely had anyone to write such letters for them and were consequently excluded from well-paid jobs. What was once caste patronage is now repurposed in recruitment procedures in universities. And the outcomes are the same: The doors remain shut for those without the social capital.

What is the need and purpose of such a high number of recommendation letters? Do institutes really pay heed and peruse them? Recently, we received a phone call from the staff of an IIT and were asked to secure the recommendation letter at the eleventh hour. It did not have to be long or structured; even a short paragraph in the email content from the referee would do, we were told. An earnest referee invests their time and thoughts in writing the letter in good faith, endorsing the applicant's aptness for the job. Such frivolous treatment of the letter compels one to wonder the *raison d'être* of it beyond a listless formality in the recruitment process.

Academic scores and percentages determine access to employment opportunities in universities. In the job portals of many National Institute of Technology (NIT), one needs to select the "class" from the drop-down menu and anything other than "first" stops the application process from proceeding further. It will not be a stretch to draw an analogy with the caste system, where one is born into a caste and dies in it. Like the graded immutability of caste, the randomness of numerical scores determines (in)eligibility for academic opportunities. There is no scope of entry, change or growth for the "second" or "third" class in such publicly funded yet gated academic institutes, while the variegated matrix of sociocultural, economic and spatial factors that determine performance in examinations is given a silent burial in the name of narrowly defined merit and excellence.

#### HIMACHAL DECLARED 'FULLY LITERATE': WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

Earlier this week, Himachal Pradesh was declared to be a 'fully literate' state, becoming the fifth such state/Union Territory in India after Goa, Ladakh, Mizoram, and Tripura. None of these, however, boast 100% literacy. Himachal claims to have a literacy rate of 99.3%, Goa 99.72%, Mizoram 98.2%, Tripura 95.6%, and Ladakh 97%.

— The Ministry of Education defines literacy as "the ability to read, write, and compute with comprehension i.e to identify, understand, interpret and create, along with critical life skills such as digital literacy, financial literacy etc." It defines 'full literacy' as "achieving 95% literacy in a State/UT".

— The Ministry communicated these definitions to states/UTs last August. It felt the need to define these terms for ULLAS (Understanding Lifelong Learning for All in Society), a literacy programme for people over 15 who may not have attended school.

— The ULLAS program was launched in 2022 with the aim of achieving 100% literacy by 2030, which is one the 17 Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations. The program is also in line with the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 which calls for adult education initiatives to achieve 100% literacy.

— Under the ULLAS program, adult learners are taught basic reading, writing, and math (arithmetic like addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division) that a child in school would learn up to class 3. They are also taught how to read and measure time, make sense of calendars, use currency notes, write cheques, and safely make digital transactions.



— This training is provided either through a mobile app or offline, by students or community volunteers. After that, the Functional Literacy Numeracy Assessment Test (FLNAT), a 150-mark reading, writing and numeracy test, is administered in a person's chosen language. On passing the test, the learner is certified by the National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS) as having acquired foundational literacy and numeracy.

— The key to some states/UTs receiving the 'fully literate' tag is that the adults they identified as not being literate have cleared the FLNAT. This relies on their prior estimates of the number of people who are not literate.

— In States/UTs where literacy levels (as per the 2011 Census) were already high, or where the population is relatively small, the process of identifying people who are not literate, imparting training, and making them clear the FLNAT works faster.

— As per the Census of 2011, Goa had a literacy rate of 88.7%, Himachal Pradesh 82.8%, Mizoram 91.3%, and Tripura 87.2% — well above the country average of 74%.

— For the 2011 Census, any person aged seven and above who can read and write with understanding in any language was considered literate. Among women, the literacy rate was 64.6%, while for men it was 80.9%. The Census also measured adult literacy — for those age 15 and above — for which the national figure was 69.3%.

**Do You Know:**

— ULLAS is the latest in a set of government initiatives to promote adult literacy from the 1950s onwards.

— In the 1960s-70s, the Centre and several states ran programs targeting literacy among — farmers and women.

— The National Adult Education Programme was launched in 1978 to eliminate illiteracy in the 15-35 age group.

— The National Literacy Mission, which ran from 1988 to 2009, also targeted this age bracket.

— In 2009, the UPA government launched the 'Saakshar Bharat' (Literate India) scheme which it ran until 2018. Meant for people aged 15 and above, it also focused on functional literacy and numeracy.

#### PERSONALISED ADAPTIVE LEARNING (PAL) SOFTWARE

— Nobel Laureate and economist Michael Kremer released the findings of a study on the use of personalised adaptive learning (PAL) software, an EdTech tool for Class 6-9 students in over 1,200 government schools in Andhra Pradesh.

— The study, which involved schools that adopted PAL and those that didn't, showed that learning rates doubled among students who used it.

— PAL's learning personalised to suit the needs of each student. It involves the use of a software on a tablet or computer to first determine the learning level of a student, and then tailor learning material and questions accordingly. It is designed to be dynamic – each student may get different material and questions based on what their initial level is.



- The software might take the form of a story or game, where students need to accumulate points or deal with ‘monsters’, and climb up levels.
- EdTech companies across the world that provide versions of this software, including AI-based ones. For instance, Squirrel AI, a Chinese EdTech company, focuses on adaptive learning.
- The use of the system is grounded in the understanding that each class has students at different levels of learning. For instance, in India, the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) 2024 report showed that only 44.8% of Class 5 students in government schools could read a Class 2 text.
- Use of PAL in India is scattered. Supported by different agencies, and promoted by the companies that develop the software, PAL has been in use in some government schools in Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, and Telangana, besides Andhra Pradesh, where the state rolled it out for Math, English and Telugu in 2019.
- Research on the use of PAL in India points to an improvement in learning outcomes among students, but that does not necessarily reflect in school exam performance.

## HOW MUCH IS SPENT ON CHILDREN’S EDUCATION IN INDIA?

### The story so far:

Despite a recent drop in the World Economic Forum’s gender gap rankings, partly due to the education category, India has made steady progress in recent years in terms of enrolling more girls in school, with government data showing that girls now make up 48% of the school population. In higher education, in fact, the gross enrolment ratio for women is slightly higher than that of men. However, data collected as part of the National Sample Survey earlier this summer show a more insidious gender gap that remains in education — the differing amounts of money that families spend on their sons as opposed to their daughters for their education.

### What are the differences in expenditure?

The recent report on the Comprehensive Modular Survey on education, which collected nationwide data between April and June as part of the 80th round of the NSS, shows that the per-student expenditure on girls is lower than on boys during all stages of school education, from pre-primary to higher secondary, as well as across the rural-urban divide. The survey covered 52,085 households in 2,384 villages and 1,982 urban blocks across the country, with education-related information collected for 57,742 students currently enrolled in school.

In rural India, families spent ₹1,373 or 18% more on boys than girls in terms of course fees, textbooks, and stationery, uniforms, and transportation to school. In urban India, the per-student expenditure on girls was ₹2,791 less than on boys. In urban India, by the time students are in higher secondary school, there is almost 30% more being spent on education for boys than girls. When course fees alone are considered, the gap widens, with families paying on average 21.5% more on fees for boys than for girls across the country.

This prioritising of boys’ education is also clear in the type of schools that Indian families choose for their children. About 58.4% of girls are enrolled in government schools, which are usually free of cost in terms of course fees, with only 29.5% of them having access to more expensive private school education. However, 34% of boys are enrolled in private unaided schools. The gap goes beyond the school classroom, and extends to private tuitions that many families consider essential



for a quality education. Tuition classes now supplement school teaching at all stages of education, and overall, 26% of girls and 27.8% of boys are enrolled in such classes. When it comes to expenditure, however, the gap widens, especially in higher classes. By the higher secondary level, families are spending on average 22% more in terms of tuition fees on their boys in comparison to girls.

#### How does this vary by State?

States differ widely in terms of the gender gap in education. When it comes to enrolment of girls and boys in government schools versus private schools for instance, the biggest gaps can be seen in States/UTs such as Delhi, where almost 54% of boys go to government schools, compared to more than 65% of girls. On the other hand, almost 38.8% of boys go to more expensive private schools, compared to 26.6% of girls. Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Punjab also have gender gaps of more than 10 percentage points. In Gujarat, the gender gap is striking in urban areas, but narrower in rural areas. In States such as Tamil Nadu and Kerala, boys and girls go to government and private schools in almost equal ratios, while several northeastern States have flipped the script, sending more girls to private schools. Expenditures are more nuanced, especially in the higher classes. In higher secondary education, for instance, families in Telangana, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal spend vastly more on boys than girls, though they spent more on girls at the secondary level. In Tamil Nadu, for instance, the average education expenditure on girls at the secondary level is ₹23,796 compared to ₹22,593 on boys. In higher secondary, however, the expenditure on boys in the State has shot up to ₹35,973, compared to just ₹19,412 for girls. Part of this can be attributed to girls dropping out at that stage, though subsidies for girl students could also account for some of the difference. States like Andhra Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh, and Kerala also spend more on higher secondary girls, especially in urban India, where data shows that transport costs become a major factor, with parents intent on safety of the girl.

Expenditure on private coaching also varied by State, especially at the higher secondary level. In Himachal Pradesh, for instance, there was a stark gap between the ₹9,813 spent per boy student in higher secondary school enrolled for private tuition in comparison to the ₹1,550 spent per girl. Bihar, Jharkhand, Rajasthan, and Tamil Nadu were among other States which showed significant gender gaps in this regard.

#### PRIVATE KINDERGARTEN COSTS ARE DISPROPORTIONATELY HIGH

Data from a recent government survey suggests that the cost of private kindergarten education in India is disproportionately high. Two sets of data from the Comprehensive Modular Survey: Education 2025 point to this conclusion.

First, the cost gap between private and government schools is widest at the pre-primary level — over 20 times — while it narrows considerably at higher levels. Second, within the private system itself, expenditures rise only marginally across successive levels of schooling, in contrast to government schools where costs increase nearly nine-fold, suggesting that a large share of private schooling expenses are front-loaded at the entry stage.

The data includes only those students who reported a non-zero school-related expenditure (labelled as 'reported' students). Also, private schools refer to private unaided schools. The survey was conducted in April-June 2025.



Private kindergarten education costs ₹17,988 per year on average — nearly 22 times higher than in government pre-primary schools (₹823) (2025). The private-government school cost gap narrows at higher levels of schooling.

In rural areas, at the primary level, private school education costs about 11 times more than government schools; in middle school, 9.5 times; in secondary, 6 times; and in higher secondary, 4.5 times. Private kindergarten education costs ₹26,188 per year on average — nearly 16 times higher than in government pre-primary schools (₹1,630). In urban areas too, the private-government school cost gap narrows at higher levels of schooling. In urban areas, at the primary level, private school education costs about 11 times more than government schools; in middle school, 10 times; in secondary, 8 times; and in higher secondary, 6 times.

State-wise data reveal even wider gaps at the pre-primary level. In urban Karnataka, private kindergarten education costs ₹49,271 per year on average — nearly 72 times higher than in government schools (₹688). This is the highest multiple among all States in urban areas. The gap is 40 times in Odisha, and over 35 times in Rajasthan, Maharashtra, and Gujarat. In rural areas, the gap was highest in Chhattisgarh (over 100 times), followed by Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu (over 40 times each), and Gujarat and Karnataka (over 35 times). Notably, Gujarat and Karnataka appear in both the rural and urban lists.

The figures presented till now illustrate what was noted before — that the private-government school cost gap is widest at the pre-primary level.

Average school expenditure per 'reported' student between pre-primary and higher secondary levels in India is compared in Chart 4. In government schools, costs rose from ₹823 per year at the kindergarten level to ₹7,308 in higher secondary in rural areas — a nearly nine-fold increase. In urban government schools, the rise was more modest, at about 4.7 times. In contrast, in private schools, costs increased from ₹17,988 per year at the kindergarten level to ₹33,567 in higher secondary in rural areas — less than a two-fold rise. The increase was similarly under two times in urban areas in private schools.

## SCAM SPACE

Policing the digital economy requires what might seem disproportionate resources, and a recent case in Hyderabad illustrates why. A retired doctor was persuaded to invest more than ₹20 lakh after viewing a video on Instagram, in which Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman appeared to endorse an investment scheme. The video was a deepfake. Similar videos have been in circulation, featuring other public figures, to lend credibility to fraudulent cryptocurrency platforms. Such scams exploit the limited technical literacy of the wider population, regulatory gaps in cryptocurrency trading, the new use of Artificial Intelligence (AI)-generated deepfakes, and the limited response of social media platforms. Despite wide smartphone penetration, many users are still unable to identify online manipulation, and are further motivated by the promise of rapid profits and fabricated evidence of gains. Complaints often arise only after attempts to withdraw returns are blocked. Public awareness campaigns remain uneven and often general, leaving many people vulnerable to scams that use increasingly sophisticated forms of deception. Most countries, including India, also do not yet classify them with the same clarity as conventional securities, creating an environment where fraudsters operate with impunity. Many are hosted abroad, operate through complex chains of wallets, and can disappear overnight. While police units have developed capacity, their reach stops at national borders.



Social media platforms, which serve as the principal channel for these scams, often respond passively. While companies such as Instagram publish advisories on avoiding scams and offer reporting mechanisms, fraudulent videos and accounts remain accessible until removed. The policies of platforms emphasise user self-protection rather than proactive detection. This means that scams circulate long enough to entrap victims before takedown requests are processed. The scale of global content slows manual review while automated moderation systems remain limited in detecting manipulated videos. As they are private entities profiting from user engagement, platforms prefer to avoid sustained monitoring that would involve intrusive scrutiny of user uploads. The result is that deepfake scams are treated as individual incidents rather than systemic vulnerabilities. Three measures are necessary. First, governments must define standards for registration, disclosure, and cross-border cooperation to limit the space in which fraudulent schemes operate. Second, technical literacy must be treated as a public policy priority. Awareness efforts should be continuous and supported by educational institutions, rather than limited to periodic campaigns by police units. Third, social media platforms should be required to remove fraudulent content proactively. Without these, such scams will entail huge human and material costs.

#### GAGANYAAN: ISRO CONDUCTS SIMULATION MISSIONS

Before it sends the actual human spaceflight mission under the Gaganyaan programme, the ISRO has been conducting simulation missions — known as ‘analog’ experiments — during which selected astronauts are spending several days in confined spacecraft-like conditions.

— Apart from getting the astronauts accustomed to space-like conditions, these experiments are meant to help ISRO develop protocols for processes such as communication and resource management for a human space mission.

— The only thing missing in these Gaganyaan Analog Experiments, or Gyanex, is the absence of gravity.

— During the Gyanex missions, the astronaut designates, and others, live in a confined crew module and space station, carrying out all activities that the astronauts would have to do in space, including following the routine and conducting scientific experiments. The participants have access to only things that would be available on the space station or crew module. And, during this period, they eat the food developed by DRDO.

— These experiments are being conducted in a static mock-up simulator, a model of the spacecraft, in Bangalore.

— The first in the series of these experiments, Gyanex-1, was conducted in July, during which Group Captain Angad Pratap along with two others, remained confined in the simulator for 10 days. The crew members conducted 11 science experiments during this period.

— The first human spaceflight mission under Gaganyaan is slated for 2027.

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

— Analog space missions are field tests in locations on Earth that have physical similarities to the extreme space environments and play a significant role in problem-solving for spaceflight research.



— To launch human space missions, the necessary Indian subject data are required for addressing various physiological, psychological and operational challenges associated with the missions. In this regard, according to the ISRO, ground based analog missions in the environment simulating certain aspects of a typical human space mission provide an opportunity to understand the human health and performance risks.

#### KERALA INFANT MORTALITY RATE DOWN TO 5, LOWER THAN US, SAYS MINISTER

Kerala's infant mortality rate is down to 5 per 1,000 live births, according to the Sample Registration System (SRS) Statistical Report-2023.

— The report, released earlier this week, says that the national average is 25 per 1000 live births. Citing the report, Kerala health minister Veena George said that the state's infant mortality rate is lower than that of the US, which has a rate of 5.6 infant deaths per 1000 live births in 2022. She said Kerala's infant mortality rate is the lowest in the country.

— Over the years, Kerala's infant mortality rate has gone down due to the sustained efforts in the health sector.

— According to the state economic and statistics department, Kerala's infant mortality rate was 7.42 in 2010. The figure had gone up to 8.2 in 2012, since then it has been brought down over the years.

— The state vital statistics of 2023 shows that most of the child births in both the rural and urban areas are institutional deliveries. As many as 96.16 per cent of deliveries out of total deliveries in rural sector and 99.88 per cent of deliveries out of total deliveries in urban sector are reported as institutional births during 2023.

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

— Delhi, Himachal Pradesh and Karnataka have reduced their infant mortality rate (IMR) by more than half over the last decade, registering the biggest gains on a vital indicator of child health on which consistent progress has been made across the country.

— The latest data from the 2023 Sample Registration Survey shows that India's IMR dropped more than 37 per cent in the last decade, from 40 deaths per 1,000 births in 2013 to 25 in 2023.

India's IMR fell below the world average around 2021, and has been showing a faster decline than the global rate. But it still compares unfavourably to the average for Asia, where the IMR is around 17.4.

— The IMR for the country has improved by one point from the previous year, but over the last five years, the average improvement has been 1.4 points.

— Kerala remains the only big state with a single-digit IMR. It saw the death of just five infants below the age of one per 1,000 births, a rate comparable to most developed countries. But the state happens to have the largest difference in the IMRs of boys and girls — nine compared to two.

— Smaller states such as Manipur, Sikkim and Goa also have single-digit IMRs, as do nearly all Union Territories.



— Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh, with IMRs of 37 each, have the worst rate in the country, followed by Odisha and Assam (30 each).

#### KERALA'S MATERNAL MORTALITY RATIO RISES STEEPLY FROM 18 TO 30

Kerala's maternal mortality ratio (MMR) has "risen" steeply from 18 to 30 per one lakh live births, shows the latest Sample Registration System special bulletin of 2021-2023.

The report shows that Kerala and Andhra Pradesh share the first spot among the States with the lowest MMR.

While acknowledging that the rise is probably accounted for by the 97 maternal deaths that the State reported in 2021 due to COVID-19, Health Department officials believe that Kerala's steadily declining rate of live births is now beginning to be reflected in the State's MMR figure. The ratio is calculated by dividing the number of maternal deaths by the number of live births and multiplying the result by one lakh.

The rapid decline in live child births in the State has been at the centre of all policy-level discussions in the State for quite a while now. Kerala, which used to have an average of 5 to 5.5 lakh live births annually, now has fewer than 4 lakh. In 2023, the total number of live births stood at 3,93,231, according to the Vital Statistics Report of the Department of Economics and Statistics. The figure is expected to dip to approximately 3.54 lakh (April 2024-March 2025), according to Health Department data.

In contrast to the rapidly declining child births, the State's MMR has been more or less steady from 2014-15, hovering around 30-32, when going by the actual line list of maternal deaths maintained by the Health Department.

On an average, some 120-140 maternal deaths are annually reported in the State, data over the past five years show. The only year the MMR showed a spike was in 2021-22, when from 32 it shot to 51 because of the rise in maternal deaths to 220 on account of COVID-19.

There has always been wide variance in the MMR figures cited by the SRS, which follows a sample study method, and the MMR cited by the State Health Services, which is based on the district line list data which takes into account each and every maternal death in the State. While the MMR quoted by the Health Department gives the real picture, SRS data is quoted in all official documents.

With the denominator (number of live births) declining every year and the maternal deaths remaining more or less steady, the "increase" in the State's MMR was anticipated. In the last SRS bulletin of 2020-22, when Kerala was hailed for bringing down the MMR to 18, the State had pointed out that the figure was not realistic. Safe motherhood has been a major focus area for Kerala but experts acknowledge that the last-mile reduction of causes leading to maternal deaths was becoming tougher because of the changing social profile.

#### CENTRE CLEARS TRANSLOCATION OF TIGERS FROM TADOBA, PENCH TO SAHYADRI RESERVE

The Union Environment Ministry has approved the capture of eight tigers from the Tadoba-Andhari and Pench reserves for their translocation to the Sahyadri Tiger Reserve in western Maharashtra, a move aimed at reviving the big cat's population in the northern Western Ghats.

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



— The ministry's Wildlife Division on Thursday gave the green light to the Maharashtra Chief Wildlife Warden for capturing tigers, subject to certain conditions.

— Key among these conditions are a provision of adequate veterinary care at all stages of capture and translocation, and care to prevent post-capture complications. The Wildlife Division also told Maharashtra officials to ensure minimal trauma to tigers during the operation.

— The ministry's approval is learnt to have come after the Wildlife Institute of India (WII), which is working with the Sahyadri reserve's field staff, gave a positive appraisal of the preparations to host translocated tigers.

— Initially, two tigresses will be translocated from the Tadoba Tiger Reserve, said Tushar Chavan, the field director of the Sahyadri reserve.

— The translocated tigers will first be put in a temporary enclosure — known as a soft release — before being released into the wild. Studies carried out by WII and state forest department have shown that the Sahyadri reserve can be home to over 20 tigers.

— The technical committee of the National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA) had recommended approval for the translocation project in October 2023.

— The translocation is part of the second phase of the long-term tiger recovery plan being implemented in the Sahyadri Tiger Reserve. In the initial stage, the state forest department and WII worked to strengthen the forest habitat and prey base.

**Do You Know:**

— The Sahyadri Tiger Reserve, named after the Sahyadri range in the Western Ghats, is spread over 1,165 sq km, straddling Kolhapur, Sangli, Satara and Ratnagiri districts. It was notified in 2010, combining the Chandoli National Park and Koyna Wildlife Sanctuary area.

— But despite its rich forest vegetation, breeding tigers have never colonised the reserve. Field staff have recorded a largely transient tiger population, which disperses in forests around the reserve.

— As per the NTCA's management effectiveness evaluation of tiger reserves, the Sahyadri Tiger Reserve forms the catchment for Koyna and Warna rivers, which are crucial for livelihoods in neighbouring districts.

— Notably, a tiger reserve in India is a designated area established under the Project Tiger initiative to ensure the conservation of tigers and their habitats. These reserves are part of the government's efforts to protect the tiger population, maintain biodiversity, and restore ecological balance.

— The NTCA is a statutory body under the Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate Change constituted under enabling provisions of the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972, for strengthening tiger conservation, as per powers and functions assigned to it under the said Act.

— The IUCN status of the tiger is endangered, and it is protected under Schedule I of the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972.



## ANUPARNA ROY'S JOURNEY TO VENICE: PURULIA TO PALESTINE, VIA MUMBAI

Emphasising the need to take cinema to the hearts of the common people, Ritwick Ghatak once said, "We need to take mobile vans to villages to exhibit cinema." Decades later, a young woman from a village would reverse the journey — she would carry a story from rural Bengal to Venice, marking a historic moment for Indian cinema. On September 7, Anuparna Roy became the first Indian to receive the best director award in the Orizzonti section at the 82nd Venice Film Festival for her debut feature *Songs of Forgotten Trees*. In that moment, she embodied a rarely recognised fact: Some spaces still celebrate films "which are not fitted into the boxes".

Roy's film, a tale of two migrant women in Mumbai — one an aspiring actor and part-time sex worker and the other, a call centre employee looking for a suitable groom — echoes her own journey from Purulia district's Narayanpur village to Mumbai, a city of unfulfilled aspirations. Her lived experience, understanding of the anxieties of migrants, and the complexities of urban lives shaped her storytelling. Coming from a place where "girls are married off early, given rations instead of books in government institutes", with the memory of her friend Jhooma, who was married at 13 under a state scheme, only to be "vanished" thereafter, Roy has stood against such erasure — silencing of these women and their aspirations.

Roy's is not selective solidarity. She stood by Palestine on a global stage: "Every child deserves peace, freedom, liberation, and Palestinians are no exception... It's a responsibility at the moment to stand by Palestine." When she was a teenager, her parents would discourage Roy from pursuing her dreams due to the uncertainties associated with the filmmaker's profession. They would ask: "Will you become another Satyajit Ray?" Perhaps, she will. Perhaps not. She has, however, already made her mark as Anuparna Roy.

## GYAN BHARATAM INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

— At the Gyan Bharatam International Conference organised by the Ministry of Culture in New Delhi, PM Modi said India still possesses the world's largest manuscript collection with approximately one crore manuscripts in its possession.

— The three-day event was being attended by around 1,100 participants, including conservation experts, scholars, historians, academics and custodians of manuscripts.

— Eight working groups deliberated on issues such as decipherment of ancient scripts such as Indus, Gilgit and Shankha; survey and documentation; digitisation tools; conservation and restoration; decoding manuscripts; and explore legal and ethical issues regarding access.

— The first-ever international manuscript heritage conference — 'Reclaiming India's knowledge legacy through manuscript heritage' — coincided with the 132nd anniversary of Swami Vivekananda's historic address at the Parliament of the World's Religions held in Chicago in 1893.

— With the 400-crore Gyan Bharatam project, the government is aiming to create an institution on the lines of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) for the preservation and interpretation of India's manuscripts.

— It was in the Union Budget 2025-26 that Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman had announced a special mission for the survey, documentation, and conservation of India's manuscript heritage. Officials say the initial outlay for the mission is estimated at Rs 400 crore, but since it's not a time-



bound project and will be institutionalised on the lines of the ASI, more funds can be allocated at a later stage.

— Launched as the ‘Gyan Bharatam Mission’, it intends to cover more than one crore manuscripts, officials say, adding that while the project will be headquartered in New Delhi, as part of the Ministry of Culture, regional centres will be set up across all states to ensure seamless coordination.

— Gyan Bharatam replaces the existing National Manuscripts Mission, which was launched in 2003, aiming to digitise all manuscripts in the country, but was moving at a slow pace.

#### SEP 11, 1893: WHEN SWAMI VIVEKANANDA INTRODUCED AMERICA TO VEDANTA

“Sisters and Brothers of America.” Thus began Swami Vivekananda’s iconic speech at the Parliament of World’s Religions in Chicago on September 11, 1893. His unusual choice of salutation — speakers at the time generally preferred the more formal “ladies and gentlemen” — was reportedly met with a standing ovation that lasted for more than two minutes. And it set the tone for a speech that would introduce America to the Hindu faith, and make a plea for religious tolerance and syncretism that remains as relevant today as it was 132 years ago.

— At the turn of the 20th century, the West ruled the world. But colonialism also created a platform for the global exchange of ideas, a “dialogue between the East and the West”. Vivekananda’s 1893 was a milestone in this discourse.

— The Parliament of World’s Religions, held in Chicago between September 11 and 27, 1893, was the product of these intellectual currents.

— Digvijay Divas is observed annually to mark Swami Vivekananda’s historic speech at the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago on September 11, 1893.

— Vivekananda addressed the Parliament a total of six times, although his first speech on September 11 is probably the most famous. His message was radical yet resonant. “We believe not only in universal toleration, but we accept all religions as true,” he said.

— Vivekananda’s participation in the Parliament opened the United States’ eyes to Hinduism, specifically Vedanta, the “philosophical position of radical nondualism” which he presented as an inclusive, universal religion.

— For the next two years, he toured the country, addressing audiences and cultivating ardent disciples. He also lectured twice at Harvard. Vedanta societies cropped up around the US — and elsewhere in the West — largely due to the popularity of Vivekananda and his teachings. Many remain active till date.

— Vivekananda’s teachings also helped popularise the practice of meditation and Hatha Yoga (now known only as yoga) in the West. Once a practice restricted to a small number of renunciants and mendicants, yoga today is a billion dollar health and wellness business.

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

— Spiritual primacy is the central theme of Vivekananda’s teachings, through which human beings can succeed in every sphere of their lives. Nevertheless, he urges people, especially the youth, to never let go of reason. Instead, he premises his philosophy, ideas and life work on the premise of



reason. The three instruments of knowledge that he propounded are instincts, reason, and inspiration.

— Swami Vivekananda believed that there is only one Self in the universe. There is only one Existence. He saw the entire universe as a manifestation of the absolute One.

— On the coexistence of various faiths, he believed religious acceptance, and not tolerance was important. He claimed that tolerance comes out of a superiority complex.

— For Vivekananda, the most desirable path for self-realisation was the selfless service of man. Some ways through which the essential unity of all human beings can be realised are unconditional love for all, judicious detachment, and expansion of self through service of fellow humans despite any sectarian difference, he believed.

— He was an exponent of vedantic humanism. He did not propagate a world-negating concept of spirituality, rather he said that each and every chore of your life should be done with divinity. He articulated that external rituals of religion are of secondary importance but the spiritual essence of a religion should be preserved and accepted.

#### HOW AFGHAN AND TURKIC INVADERS TRANSFORMED INDIAN WARFARE

We know that from the 10th century, horse-breeding groups from Afghanistan and Central Asia invaded India in successive waves. The early invaders simply looted the gold-rich temples of the land. The later invaders, after the 12th century, established Sultanates to exploit India's vast agricultural wealth and to control trade routes.

Religious aspects of these invasions often receive enough attention – how temples were replaced by mosques, minarets, tombs, palaces and forts. But this communal narrative usually overlooks technological transformation. Few discuss the new technologies that arrived with these invaders—technologies that Indians initially looked down upon.

It is known that Rajput warriors of India preferred death to dishonour and even glorified defeat – so long as they did not turn their backs on the battlefield. Their values were shakti (strength) and bhakti (passion, devotion). Yukti, or strategy, was looked down upon..

#### **Military strategies of Afghans and Turks**

By contrast, the Afghans and Central Asians who entered India brought new military strategies that helped them win wars – strategies they used to survive on the Central Asian steppes and mountainous terrain, closely related to their horse-breeding practices.

The Afghans and Turks knew the Parthian shot, an ancient steppe-developed technique in which a mounted archer, while riding away, would twist his body to shoot backwards—feigning retreat, then ambushing enemies who presumed victory. This was seen as cowardice and trickery by Rajputs but as a brilliant war manoeuvre by Central Asian tribes.

It is not that the Rajputs did not know archery. The Prithviraj Raso speaks of how the Rajput king can shoot targets even when blind because he knows the art of locating a target by simply hearing the sound (shabd-bhedi baan). In Hindu mythology, though, kings who could shoot such arrows without looking at the target were seen as overconfident, who suffered for their pride.



For example, Dasharatha of the Ramayana shoots such an arrow thinking he is hearing the sound of an animal drinking water, and ends up striking a boy, Shravan Kumar, who was collecting water for his blind parents.

#### **Techniques of invasion**

Rarely are we told of the complex logistical journey involving 30,000 camels carrying water and fodder for horses. That enabled Mahmud of Ghazni to take the most unusual route to Somnath through the Thar Desert, catching the guardians of the Somnath temple by surprise.

Then there was the Mongol hunting technique – the negre (encirclement) – whereby cavalry surrounded the enemy like hunters cornering prey.

The Khiljis were able to destroy many mud forts in South India because they deployed catapults and other siege weapons. Catapults (Maghrabis) were mechanical devices for throwing projectiles at fortifications to weaken or breach walls.

They also used mounds (Pasheb) to bring their siege engines and soldiers closer to the top of steep or high fortresses. Then they would deploy large and powerful war elephants to batter down gates, break through enemy lines, and intimidate defenders during sieges. Such techniques were new to India but known in Central Asia, where there had been many wars against the powerful Mongols.

#### **Decline of cavalry**

The Mughals introduced the cannon, which made the elephant obsolete on the battlefield; no longer was the elephant used as a battering ram.

The Mughals also introduced the idea of the mobile capital city. The emperor lived in the city for only half a year. For the rest of the year, he and his court, and his army travelled in huge mobile cities known as Urdu-e-Mualla (“Exalted Camp”) that would stretch for a few square kilometers. Nearly 100,000 people, and animals, with provisions, would travel for about 10-15 kilometers each day.

The cities would be set up every four weeks. While one city was being dismantled, another would be set up ahead. This created awe in those who witnessed it (the procession would take a day to pass through a village). It evoked power, pomp and pageantry.

Ahmad Shah Abdali invaded India in the 18th century using the zamburak – a small swivel cannon mounted on camels. Although guns were known since the 16th century, the Vijaynagar Nayakas did not invest in them and preferred the old-fashioned ways of fighting. They felt the cavalry was good enough to overpower the new weapons. This was because old matchlock guns were difficult to use on horseback.

However, the British introduced flintlock muskets that transformed disciplined infantry into a formidable force, capable of overpowering the cavalry that had dominated India for over 800 years. This helped the British defeat the older ways of warfare introduced by the Mughals and the Afghans.

Unless we appreciate how technology changes culture, we will never really understand the history of India.



## SHORE NEWS

### BRAZIL'S BOLSONARO CONVICTED OF COUP ATTEMPT: WHAT TO KNOW

The majority of a panel of Brazilian Supreme Court justices on Thursday voted to convict former president Jair Bolsonaro of attempting a coup to remain in office despite his 2022 electoral defeat. The far-right politician who governed Brazil between 2019 and 2022 was found guilty on five counts by three members of a five-justice panel.

### 'GHOST BAT' DRONE

- The two onyx-coloured aircraft took off within a minute of each other, disappearing over an expanse of red desert stippled with low shrubbery. The aircraft were MQ-28A Ghost Bats, 38-foot-long military drones that function as robot wingmen of sorts.
- Australia is investing heavily to develop and produce these so-called collaborative combat aircraft, which will help the country defend its shores at a time when military threats are encroaching ever closer and wiping out what was once its strongest bulwark against potential conflict: distance.
- Australia has invested about \$650 million so far in a partnership with Boeing to develop the drones, which will be the first to be designed and manufactured in Australia in more than half a century.
- It is a tidal shift for the close American ally, which after decades of relying on the United States for its military equipment is trying to jump start its defence industry, one that had atrophied since the end of the Cold War.

### MORE RELIANCE ON SURVEILLANCE AMONG MEASURES TO REDUCE TRUST DEFICIT AT LAC

Indian troops deployed along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in eastern Ladakh are working on reducing the trust deficit with Chinese troops on the ground by implementing additional confidence-building measures, which include greater reliance on the technical surveillance infrastructure that has been put in place over the last five years. According to sources, since 2020 when the military standoff began in eastern Ladakh, India has established a comprehensive surveillance network to extensively monitor the LAC and surrounding areas round the clock. This is being further upgraded and strengthened, with the long-term aim of reducing additional patrolling effort.

### DECIDE ON BAIL PLEAS WITHIN TWO MONTHS, SUPREME COURT TELLS HCS

The Supreme Court on Friday directed high courts to decide on bail applications within a period of two months, except in cases where “delay is attributable to the parties themselves”. The bench of Justices J B Pardiwala and R Mahadevan stated that “applications concerning personal liberty cannot be kept pending for years while the applicants remain under a cloud of uncertainty.” The order was made while upholding a Bombay High Court order dismissing anticipatory bail pleas of those accused in a case of cheating and forgery of property documents.



## TO CURB 'FAKE NEWS', PANEL BACKS MANDATORY FACT-CHECK MECHANISM

A parliamentary panel is learnt to be in favour of recommending amendments to penal provisions, including increase in fines, and fixing accountability of editorial content to curb the spread of 'fake news'. The Standing Committee on Communications and Information Technology, headed by BJP MP Nishikant Dubey, is said to be in favour of recommending the mandatory presence of a fact-checking mechanism and internal ombudsman in all media organisations. Taking note of the unchecked spread of misinformation in general and 'fake news' in particular, which pose a serious threat to public order and democratic processes, the panel feels there's need for a multi-faceted approach and combined efforts from individuals, governments, media (print, electronic, digital), and social media platforms.

## MONTH-LONG 'GST BACHAT UTSAV' FROM SEPTEMBER 22

The Union government plans to observe a month-long 'GST Bachat Utsav' beginning September 22, the day from which the rate cuts will kick in.

According to sources, the decision was taken on September 8 during a meeting chaired by Cabinet Secretary T V Somanathan. It was also decided that a 100-day outreach programme will be launched to spread awareness about the next generation reforms, recommended by the GST Council in its 56th meeting on September 3.

## FOOD, QUICK COMMERCE APPS TO BE IMPACTED BY 18% GST ON DELIVERY SERVICES VIA E-TAILERS

Delivery services through e-commerce operators such as Zomato, Swiggy and quick commerce companies like Blinkit, Zepto are set to cost more as they will face a 18 per cent GST on delivery charges beginning September 22 after the decision taken by the Goods and Services Tax (GST) Council in its 56th meeting held on Wednesday. While this clarifies the long-pending legal stance about taxation of such services and will reduce litigation, for consumers, ordering items through such apps is likely to get costlier as the e-commerce operators are likely to hike delivery and platform charges. Food delivery apps will now levy 18 per cent GST on delivery charge along with 5 per cent GST on restaurant services as against the levy of 5 per cent on restaurant services and platform charges at present. Quick commerce companies are also likely to face 18 per cent GST on delivery charge hereon as against just handling charges currently.

## OPERATION POLO

— September 13 marks the 77th anniversary of Operation Polo, the military operation launched by newly independent India to annex the state of Hyderabad. Led by Major General Jayanto Nath Chaudhuri, Operation Polo lasted less than four days and brought to heel the Nizam who had been resolute in his decision not to accede to India.

— Hyderabad's ambition to remain an independent state after the British left, was a cause of major concern for the Indian government. If realised, it could cut off north India from the south. Reginald Coupland, a constitutional expert cited by historian Ramachandra Guha in India after Gandhi (2007), had aptly described the situation: "India could live if its Muslim limbs in the north west and north east were amputated, but could it live without its midriff?"



— Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel put it more bluntly, famously saying that an independent Hyderabad would constitute a “cancer in the belly of India”.

#### WHAT WAS THE HARAPPAN LANGUAGE? CULTURE MINISTRY TO HOLD MEET ON SCRIPT

A diverse group comprising archaeologists, a cancer specialist, an aerospace engineer, and a retired government official will gather in New Delhi on the Union Ministry of Culture’s invitation from September 11 to 13 to present their findings on attempts to decipher the Harappan script, which has puzzled historians ever since the remains of the long-lost civilization were discovered in Harappa and Mohenjo Daro in the early 1920s. To date, there has been no credible breakthrough in decoding the script.

#### ‘SAMUDRA PRADAKSHINA’

— Defence Minister Rajnath Singh Thursday virtually flagged off ‘Samudra Pradakshina’ — a historic and first Tri-service all-women circumnavigation sailing expedition from the Gateway of India in Mumbai.

— In the expedition, 10 women officers from the Indian Army, Navy and Air Force aboard the indigenously-built Indian Army Sailing Vessel (IASV) Triveni will cover over 26,000 nautical miles across the globe for nine months, braving treacherous waters, freezing winds and unpredictable storms. The 50-foot yacht Triveni has been indigenously-built in Puducherry.

— The crew, which set sail from Mumbai, will cross the Equator twice, round the three great Capes (Cape Leeuwin, Cape Horn and Cape of Good Hope) and cover all the major oceans, including the Southern Ocean and the Drake Passage.

— The crew will also make four port calls at Fremantle (Australia), Lyttelton (New Zealand), Buenos Aires (Argentina) and Cape Town (South Africa) and is scheduled to return to Mumbai in May 2026.

#### JOGBANI-ERODE AMRIT BHARAT EXPRESS TRAIN

— Indian Railways (IR) is introducing an Amrit Bharat Express train connecting Bihar and Tamil Nadu. The new Amrit Bharat Express will run between Jobhani and Erode Junction. The Amrit Bharat Express train is meant for low-income and middle-class families.

#### BAIRABI-SAIRANG RAIL LINE

— While highlighting the importance of Mizoram as a major player in Centre’s Act East policy and its standing in the geopolitics of South East Asia, Prime Minister Narendra Modi Saturday inaugurated the ambitious 51.38-km Bairabi-Sairang rail line, connecting the capital Aizawl to the Indian Railways network for the first time.

— Aizawl, which is around 20km far from the satellite town Sairang, is the fourth northeastern capital after Guwahati, Agartala and Itanagar to be linked to the Indian Railways’ grid. Before this project, there was only a 5-km railway line inside Mizoram, up to the Bairabi station on the Assam-Mizoram border.



— PM added that Mizoram has a major role in both our Act East Policy and the emerging North East Economic Corridor. “With the Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport Project and Sairang-Hbichhuah Railway line, Mizoram will also get connected to the Bay of Bengal through South East Asia. Due to this, trade and tourism will be boosted across North East India and South East Asia,” he said.

— The Kaladan Multi Modal Transit Transport Project links Kolkata to Sittwe port in Myanmar via sea link, before reaching Zorinpui in Mizoram. Beyond that, a network of road and rail projects such as the Bairabi-Sairang line and its proposed extension, the 223-km Sairang to Hbichhuah (on Mizoram’s border with Myanmar), is seen as India’s answer to flexing by Bangladesh and China.

— The Bairabi-Sairang line, which cuts through Kolasib and Aizawl districts of Mizoram, has 45 tunnels, 55 major bridges, 88 minor bridges, five Road over Bridges (ROBs) and six Road Under Bridges (RUBs), of which Bridge No. 196 or the Kurung Bridge is the highest at 114 metres, 42 metres taller than the Qutub Minar. On August 23, 2023, a steel girder on the Kurung bridge collapsed, killing at least 23 workers.

---

#### BHUPEN HAZARIKA

— For poet, singer, composer and filmmaker Bhupen Hazarika, whose centenary celebrations began on Monday (September 8) — exactly a year before he would have turned 100 — the Brahmaputra remained an enduring metaphor. So much so that his voice has often been equated with the river, next to which he grew up, lived and died.

— Born in Assam and rooted in the traditions of the Northeast, his songs – about the river, about the boatman, about other lesser-known folk idioms from and about a relatively overlooked and disturbed region, went on to become the links to the rest of the country. The universality of his themes, of solidarity, dignity, humanity, and resistance, has echoed for decades.

---

#### AMIT KHARE

— Retired IAS officer Amit Khare, who served as advisor to Prime Minister Narendra Modi, was Sunday appointed secretary to Vice-President (V-P) CP Radhakrishnan.

— The Appointments Committee of the Cabinet approved the appointment of Khare, a retired 1985-batch officer of Jharkhand cadre, on contract basis for three years, according to a government order.

---

#### WORLD BOXING CHAMPIONSHIP 2025

— India wrapped up their campaign at the World Boxing Championships 2025 in Liverpool with four medals, including two golds. Jaismine Lamboria (57kg) and Minakshi Hooda (48kg) were crowned world champions, while Nupur Sheoran (80+kg) secured a silver and Olympian Pooja Rani (80kg) settled for bronze.

---

#### CAFA NATIONS CUP

— India finished third at the CAFA Nations Cup and it was sealed with a victory on penalties (1-1 in full time, 3-2 in spot-kicks) against Oman. Only two teams out of the eight playing in the 2025 CAFA Nations Cup were placed below India on the FIFA Rankings.



- The 2025 CAFA Nations Cup was the second edition of the CAFA Nations Cup, the biennial international men's football championship of Central Asia organized by the Central Asian Football Association (CAFA). The event was held in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan from August 29 to September 8. Iran were the defending champions.
- The final took place on 8 September at the Olympic City Stadium in Tashkent, between hosts Uzbekistan and Iran. Uzbekistan won the match 1–0 to claim their first CAFA Nations Cup title.
- In June 2025, it was confirmed the second edition would be co-hosted in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan on 29 August to 8 September 2025 for the six member associations along with Malaysia and Oman as the guest teams.
- On 15 July 2025, Malaysia announced their withdrawal from the competition, citing reasons including problems with logistics and players' availability. On 30 July 2025, India was announced as the guest team, replacing Malaysia in Group B.

---

## HINDI DIWAS

- September 14 is observed as Hindi Diwas, or Hindi Day, to commemorate the Constituent Assembly of India making Hindi the official language of the Union government.
- The Constituent Assembly chose Hindi as the official — not the national — language of the country after extensive discussions over three days. Discussions were also held over what script should the Union adopt, what script should the numerals be in, and what should be the status of English. Hindustani (Hindi with more Urdu elements) and Sanskrit were among those proposed as official languages.
- At length, the Munshi-Ayyangar formula — named after Drafting Committee members K M Munshi and N Gopaldaswami Ayyangar — was adopted as a compromise solution.
- As part of the Munshi-Ayyangar formula, Article 343 of the Constitution as adopted in 1950 said, "The official language of the Union shall be Hindi in Devanagari script. The form of numerals to be used for the official purposes of the Union shall be the international form of Indian numerals."
- "Notwithstanding anything in clause (1), for a period of fifteen years from the commencement of this Constitution, the English language shall continue to be used for all the official purposes of the Union for which it was being used immediately before such commencement."
- When the 15-year period came to an end, protests broke out over the fear of imposition of Hindi in large parts of non-Hindi speaking India, particularly in Tamil Nadu. The resistance resulted in the Centre passing the Official Languages Act, which stated that English would continue to be upheld as an official language along with Hindi.
- Union Home Minister Amit Shah on September 14, 2025 said that Hindi is not a competitor (spardhak) but a friend (sakhi) of other Indian languages, and that there is no conflict between the two.
- At the inauguration of 5th Akhil Rajbhasha Sammelan in Gandhinagar on Hindi Diwas, Shah said, "Hindi should not just be a language of conversation or administration. Hindi should be the language of science, technology, judiciary and the police. When these works happen in Indian languages, connection with citizens increases automatically."



## BUSINESS AND ECONOMY

### DOUBLESPEAK

Weeks after calling off the visit of trade negotiators to Delhi, the U.S. administration says it has invited Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal and the Indian trade team to Washington to resume talks for the India-U.S. FTA. The announcement came days after U.S. President Donald Trump and Prime Minister Narendra Modi signalled, through public comments and social media posts, a halt to tensions of the last four months. On Thursday, U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio and Mr. Trump's Ambassador-designate to India Sergio Gor also said they expect ties to be smooth, a trade deal to be announced shortly, and a Quad Summit later this year. Despite the U.S.'s punitive actions against India on trade, visas, deportations, and Mr. Trump's comments on Operation Sindoor, the ceasefire and his dealings with Pakistan, New Delhi has appeared prepared to move forward as well, with Mr. Goyal and External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar confirming India's active engagement with the U.S. However, other comments by the Trump administration on India's import of Russian oil could throw a spanner in the works. Mr. Gor has said that stopping the imports by India remains the U.S.'s "top priority", while Commerce Secretary Howard Lutnick has said that India has "got to stop" buying Russian oil for a U.S. trade deal. Meanwhile, reports suggest that Mr. Trump has personally asked the European Union to slap "100% sanctions" on India and China to make Russia stop the Ukraine conflict.

The U.S.'s doublespeak will disappoint many in government and industry circles who had expressed relief over the Modi-Trump détente, and the resumption of trade talks. At 50%, India and Brazil face the highest U.S. tariffs, and Indian textile exporters have begun to see orders being cancelled. According to the Chief Economic Adviser, V. Anantha Nageswaran, the tariffs could mean a loss of half a per cent from India's GDP, and job losses will be a concern as well. In theory, the government could consider the U.S.'s demands on reducing Russian oil if they had not been served as an ultimatum. However, even if New Delhi was so inclined, Washington is making the choice much harder with its crudely worded diktats. While the Modi government did accept the U.S. demands to stop the imports of Iranian and Venezuelan oil earlier, repeating that in 2025 with Russia is more complex. While the costs of oil sanctions and high tariffs can be absorbed, the costs of caving in now and the resultant reputational damage may seem greater in the balance.

### INDIAN ECONOMY SHOWS RESILIENCE AMIDST GLOBAL TURBULENCE

The global environment is marked by geopolitical crises that add further uncertainty beyond trade disputes. The Russia-Ukraine war disrupted energy markets and supply chains, while the conflict in Gaza fuels instability across West Asia. Closer to home, political and economic fragility in Nepal adds to regional tensions. Together, these crises influence India's foreign policy choices and create uncertainty around energy security and cross-border flows. Against this backdrop, tariffs are unlikely to assume the same importance as broader geopolitical and security shocks, which now play a significant role in shaping global risk sentiment and India's external environment.

Even against this unsettled backdrop, India's economy is showing resilience. Retail inflation was 1.55 per cent in July, well below the RBI's target range, providing space for expansionary measures if global risks intensify. GDP rose by 7.8 per cent in the first quarter of 2025-26, the fastest pace in five quarters, reflecting robust activity across manufacturing and services. One indicator of this momentum is the Purchasing Managers' Index (PMI), a monthly survey showing how businesses view demand, output, and employment. In August 2025, India's manufacturing PMI reached 58.8,



its highest in over a decade, while the services PMI rose to 62.9 from 60.5 in July (A PMI reading above 50 signals expansion).

This resilience has not gone unnoticed globally. Fitch Ratings upgraded India's growth forecast to 6.9 per cent for 2025, citing strong domestic demand. Morgan Stanley projects growth in the 7 per cent range over the medium term, and the IMF has raised its projection to 6.4 per cent. Together, these indicators highlight that India is not just weathering global turbulence but actively reinforcing its foundations for sustained growth.

But resilience is not immunity. India's export-oriented sectors, such as textiles, gems and jewellery, and chemicals, remain vulnerable to global disruptions. The real costs of turbulence can begin even before policies like tariffs are imposed. Uncertainty alone can make firms cautious by delaying investments, avoiding risky markets, or shifting focus to safer domestic supply chains. Smaller exporters are particularly exposed, often postponing expansion or exiting markets altogether. Since these sectors are largely made up of small and medium enterprises (SMEs), the ripple effects on jobs, supply chains, and local economies are amplified, deepening the overall impact. Global trade uncertainty can dent confidence long before policy changes take effect.

What sets India apart is the composition of its growth, with private consumption making up more than 60 per cent of GDP. This structure acts as a natural hedge against external shocks, reducing vulnerability to global price swings. The share of private consumption in nominal GDP increased from 60.2 per cent in FY24 to 61.4 per cent in FY25, the highest in two decades. This rise reflects a 7.2 per cent growth in private final consumption expenditure in FY25, compared to 5.6 per cent in FY24.

India's participation in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) offers fresh opportunities to strengthen trade and strategic ties with Russia, China, and other member countries. Leveraging these relationships can enhance India's influence in a reshaping regional and global economy. At the same time, diversification remains essential. Expanding trade with developing nations and deepening economic partnerships with developed countries through agreements like the India-UK trade deal will help India seize new opportunities while maintaining strategic autonomy.

The country faces a delicate balancing act. Global turbulence threatens exports and financial flows, yet robust domestic demand and low inflation give policymakers room to manoeuvre. The GST reforms, for instance, signal intent to boost domestic demand. Still, global uncertainty can squeeze profit margins, particularly in labour-intensive sectors like textiles that employ millions. Targeted reforms, coupled with a resilient domestic market, can stabilise industries, protect jobs, and contribute to building a Viksit Bharat, ensuring India not only weathers external pressures but emerges stronger from them.

#### ECONOMY IS IN A SWEET SPOT. BUT PRIVATE SECTOR IS NOT PICKING UP THE BATON

The Indian economy, at one level, is in a sweet spot. The Narendra Modi government has done well to significantly reduce and rationalise goods and services tax rates this month. That was on top of exempting individuals earning up to Rs 12 lakh annually from paying any income tax in the 2025-26 Union Budget and slashing corporate tax rates in September 2019. In addition, the Centre's own capital expenditure on public infrastructure and other investment has more than trebled from Rs 3,35,726 crore in 2019-20 to a budgeted Rs 11,21,090 crore in the current fiscal. And its flagship Production Linked Incentive Scheme and the India Semiconductor Mission have attracted investments, notably in mobile phone manufacturing by the likes of Apple and Samsung



(exports alone were worth \$24.1 billion in 2024-25, albeit with only limited domestic value addition) and the half-a-dozen chip fabrication, assembly, testing and packaging projects in various stages of execution.

It's not just the government. Indian corporates, which underwent a painful process of deleveraging through the 2010s and beyond, have comfortable or low debt service and debt-equity ratios with sizeable cash buffers today. At the same time, the gross and net non-performing asset ratios of commercial banks have declined to multi-decadal lows. In other words, the twin balance sheet problem, which was a major drag on India's growth not too long ago, is now history. Add to these the low levels of consumer price inflation — 2.1 per cent overall year-on-year and minus 0.7 per cent for food in August — and the environment of soft interest rates with enhanced credit availability, things cannot be better for fueling a virtuous cycle of investment, jobs, incomes and spending. A recent Reserve Bank of India study of envisaged capital investments by private corporates, based on both bank and non-bank financing sources, shows the total cost of such projects to have risen from Rs 1,96,580 crore in 2021-22 to Rs 3,51,351 crore, Rs 5,47,734 crore and Rs 4,97,235 crore in the following three fiscals.

But somehow, all these intentions don't seem to be translating into concrete execution on the ground. At the end of the day, the government is the one that has done the heavy lifting, whether through policy or actual spending. There are limits to how much more it can do. For some reason, the private sector — be it companies or even households — is not picking up the baton by investing and spending more. What is holding them back? It could be general uncertainty (over demand, in the case of the former) and insecurity (over jobs, for the latter), compounded by the Trump tariffs and ongoing geopolitical disruptions. The result is flagging animal spirits, for which policy stability and staying the course, not quick-fixes, are the answer.

#### RBI CUTS HOLDINGS IN US TREASURY SECURITIES: WHY TRUMP'S TARIFFS COULD FURTHER THE TREND

Ahead of US President Donald Trump's decision to slap a 50 per cent tariff on Indian imports, India had pared down its exposure to US Treasury Bills (T-bills) over the past year, signalling a cautious shift in the Reserve Bank of India's (RBI) foreign exchange reserve strategy. This trend could get more pronounced going forward, even though there are multiple factors that could come into play as the trade-off is debated in the policy circles.

— According to US Department of Treasury data, India's holdings in US securities had peaked at \$247.2 billion in September 2024, before sliding gradually to about \$219.1 billion by December 2024.

— India, the 10th-largest investor in T-bills, held around \$227 billion in US Treasury securities as of June 2025, compared with \$242 billion in June 2024. The decline of about \$20 billion since September last year reflects a measured reduction spread over several months.

— Analysts say that the US has the ability to freeze or restrict access to Treasury securities in exceptional cases, typically driven by geopolitical or national security concerns. Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Washington and its allies blocked Moscow's access to a significant share of its foreign reserves held overseas, including dollar- and euro-denominated assets.



- The episode underscored that, in extreme circumstances, the US can effectively cut off a country's access to its Treasury holdings through the US financial system. A rare event with little precedent, but a theoretical possibility.
- The RBI's own data does reflect a moderation of sorts. India's overall holdings in global securities and T-bills fell to \$485.35 billion in March 2025, from \$515.24 billion in September 2024, leading to a decline in overall foreign currency assets to \$ 567.55 billion. The RBI is yet to publish data as of August 2025.
- At the same time, the central bank has adjusted its gold reserves. RBI data shows that gold held abroad declined to 348.62 tonnes in March 2025, compared with 387.26 tonnes a year earlier. Domestically, the RBI held 511.99 tonnes in March 2025, a sharp rise from 408.10 tonnes in March 2024. This rebalancing highlights the RBI's dual approach of diversifying assets while maintaining sufficient liquidity.
- Central banks and sovereign wealth funds invest significantly in US Treasury securities, viewing them as among the world's safest and most liquid assets. Backed by the US government, Treasuries form part of the largest and most active bond market globally.
- The RBI's foreign exchange reserve management continues to prioritise safety, liquidity, and return—in that order. Investments in T-bills and government bonds represent the debt obligations of highly rated sovereigns, central banks, and supranational institutions.
- Treasury securities are particularly attractive because of their depth and liquidity. As the RBI itself notes, these instruments can often be liquidated in large volumes without causing sharp price distortions in the market, making them ideal vehicles for managing reserves.
- With foreign exchange reserves touching new highs in 2025, the RBI's calibrated reduction in US T-bills and realignment of gold holdings reflects its cautious approach amid global financial uncertainty. By spreading investments across sovereign debt, supranational bonds, deposits, and gold, the RBI aims to strike a balance between liquidity, security, and returns while safeguarding the nation's financial stability.

**Do You Know:**

- While the US remains the largest destination for India's reserve investments, the RBI also holds high-rated government securities from countries such as Japan, Germany, France, and the UK. Additionally, a portion of reserves is parked in bonds issued by multilateral institutions like the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the Asian Development Bank (ADB).
- Other allocations include deposits with central banks and the Bank for International Settlements (BIS), alongside physical gold. This broad diversification ensures that India's reserves are not overly dependent on one asset class or geography.
- Japan is the largest investor in US Treasury securities at \$1,147 billion, followed by the UK at \$858.1 billion and China at \$756.4 billion, as per US Treasury Department's TIC data.

**EUROPEAN UNION NEGOTIATORS COMING TO DELHI THIS WEEK TO STEP UP FTA TALKS**

Days after Prime Minister Narendra Modi and European Union leaders discussed an “early conclusion” of the India-EU FTA, two top negotiators of the EU, in-charge of trade and agriculture, are coming to India this week to hold talks on resolving knotty issues of the deal.

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



— European Commissioner for Trade Maros Sefcovic and Commissioner for Agriculture Christophe Hansen will be in Delhi this week to lead the negotiations, their first visit since February this year when the College of Commissioners travelled to India.

— These two Commissioners, who are equivalent to Cabinet Ministers, will be leading a 30-member negotiating team from Brussels and will meet their counterparts in Delhi, Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal and Agriculture Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan.

— The EU visit is aimed at expediting the negotiations to seal the final deal. Talks between India and the EU have gained urgency in the light of the tariff war unleashed by the Trump administration.

— The upcoming round of negotiations assumes significance as it follows the announcement of the EU-US deal. The EU has indicated flexibilities for the US on the contentious Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM).

— Officials in the Commerce and Industry Ministry said Delhi will now push for similar concessions since the EU had earlier taken a rigid approach on CBAM in negotiations with India.

— In an interview with The Indian Express on September 3, Urjit Patel, India's newly appointed Executive Director at the International Monetary Fund, said, "The US has basically driven a truck through CBAM".

— Negotiations over CBAM are crucial as the Indian industry has begun facing the impact of the regulation that is to come into effect January 1, 2026.

— On September 4, Prime Minister Modi and President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen and President of the European Council Antonio Costa spoke on phone and discussed "early conclusion of the India-EU FTA".

— According to sources, the two sides have to negotiate about 26 or 27 chapters in all – each of them tackling different issues and themes – as part of the trade agreement. Besides India, the EU is also negotiating trade deals with Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines and UAE.

— As one of India's largest trading partners, the EU accounted for €124 billion worth of trade in goods in 2023 or 12.2% of total Indian trade. India accounted for 2.2% of the EU's total trade in goods in 2023. Trade in services between the EU and India reached €59.7 billion in 2023, up from €30.4 billion in 2020.

**Do You Know:**

— According to the EU, The European Union is a group of 27 countries in Europe. These countries came together to make things better, easier and safer for people. They agreed to work together and help each other.

— India established diplomatic relations with the European Economic Community — the first pillar of the future European Union — back in 1962. The Joint Political Statement signed in 1993 and the Cooperation Agreement of 1994 paved the way for the strengthening of ties between India and Europe.

— The multi-tier institutional architecture of cooperation has been presided over by the India-EU Summits, 15 of which have been held so far. The first Summit was held in Lisbon in June 2000, and



the bilateral relationship was upgraded to a Strategic Partnership at the 5th Summit in The Hague in 2004.

— The CBAM or Carbon Tax was first introduced by the European Union in 2021. It taxes certain products coming in from other countries based on their carbon emissions footprint in their production process. For instance, if the imported steel was produced through a process that entailed higher emissions than the emissions standards for that product in Europe, it would be taxed.

## WILL THE GST RATE CUTS BOOST THE ECONOMY?

### The story so far:

On September 3, the GST Council authorised a new paradigm in the indirect tax regime. There will be fewer rates, and the Goods and Services Tax (GST) on most items have been reduced. While this has been welcomed by most sectors, there are some which are somewhat disgruntled. There are also concerns over the revenue implications.

### What prompted these changes?

The rationalisation of the multiple rates in GST has been on the anvil for a long time. The Council had in September 2021 constituted a Group of Ministers (GoM) to look into rate rationalisation. This GoM began its work, but seemingly little progress was made. The GoM was composed entirely of representatives from the States, with no representative from the Centre. So, in order to nudge it in the direction it wanted, the Union government had to make a proposal to the GoM. The Ministry of Finance on August 15, 2025, announced that it had submitted its proposal to the GoM. Earlier that same day, in his Independence Day speech, Prime Minister Narendra Modi had announced that these “next-generation” GST reforms would be a Deepavali gift to the nation.

By August 21, 2025, the GoM — following a briefing by Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman — had accepted the proposals and forwarded them to the GST Council. The Council then deliberated on these proposals on September 3 during a 10.5-hour-long meeting, following which it announced its decisions.

### What are the changes?

The existing GST structure has multiple rates, even when considering only the main ones. The main rates comprise 0%, 5%, 12%, 18%, 28%, and a compensation cess over and above the 28% slab. This has been reduced to main slabs of 0%, 5%, 18% and 40%. The compensation cess for most items has been removed. It is still levied on tobacco products, but even that will be removed by the end of this calendar year, when the Centre pays back the loan it took to compensate States during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Apart from this, many items have been moved to lower tax slabs. According to an analysis by the State Bank of India's economics research wing, of the 453 items that saw a change in their GST rate, 413 (or a little more than 91%) saw rates being cut, while 40 items saw rates increasing. The bulk of the rate reductions — 257 items, mostly common use products — were from the 12% to the 5% slab. Out of the 40 items that saw their rates increase, 17 were moved from the 28% slab to 40%. Here, it is important to note that the actual tax incidence might not have increased. For example, once the compensation cess is added, the effective tax rate on luxury cars and SUVs is 45-50%. That will go down to 40%.



### **Why were they necessary?**

There are several reasons why the GST rate cuts make sense now. The first is that the legal period for the GST compensation cess will likely be coming to an end this calendar year. It can be levied up to March 31, 2026 or till when the Centre pays off its loans, whichever is earlier. Ms. Sitharaman said she expects the loans to be repaid this calendar year. The removal of this cess, without raising the base rates on tobacco products, would mean that these 'sin' goods would have suddenly become significantly cheaper. This is something the Union government could not be seen to be condoning. That set a time limit by when the new rates had to be implemented. The other reason is that the government expects some sort of detrimental impact from the 50% tariff imposed by the U.S. on imports from India. This is clear from the fact that, despite a strong 7.8% GDP growth in Q1 of this financial year, the government has not changed its 6.3%-6.8% growth estimate for the full year, implying it expects growth in the subsequent quarters to be significantly slower. The boost from the GST rate cuts is expected to offset this hit. The government, however, has officially denied any such connection, saying the GST changes were part of an overall reforms push and not related to the tariffs.

### **Which sectors were happy with the reforms?**

The healthcare industry voiced its approval of the changes, saying the decision to reduce GST in the sector from 12% to 5% on a wide range of medical products would directly benefit patients. The renewable energy sector, too, praised the decision to reduce taxes on renewable energy components from 12% to 5%, saying this was a progressive step towards accelerating India's clean energy transition. Consumer appliance makers were also upbeat about the cuts, saying it would boost demand, especially in the run-up to the festive season.

The real estate sector said that bringing down the GST rate on cement from 28% to 18%, and on other building materials such as granite slabs, would reduce costs for the sector and be a big boost. Auto manufacturers said the reduction of GST on cars and non-luxury bikes from 28% to 18% would spur demand.

### **Which sectors voiced reservations?**

The textile industry welcomed the downward revision of GST rates for both man-made fibre and cotton sectors to 5%, but also voiced its disappointment over the 18% duty for garments priced above ₹2,500 each. They said that woollens, wedding apparel, and traditional Indian wear would become more expensive.

While auto manufacturers welcomed the rate rationalisation, dealers voiced some worries about consumers postponing their purchases until September 22, when the new rates come into force. They also called for greater clarity on what happens to the cess on vehicles they have bought from manufacturers but not yet sold.

The insurance sector will likely also see a mixed picture from the GST rate cuts. The exemption of personal life and health insurance from GST will increase insurance penetration, but the simultaneous removal of input tax credits might increase costs for insurers, thereby eating into their profits.

Airlines have collectively slammed the higher GST on non-economy seats, while vegetable oil producers said the Council could have resolved the inverted duty structure on edible oils — something it did for fertilizers and man-made textiles. The increase in the GST rate for labour



charges from 12% to 18% has also led to some resistance from representatives of the MSME sector, who said their costs would increase.

#### **What is the revenue impact?**

The Centre said the revenue implication would be ₹48,000 crore based on consumption patterns in 2023-24. However, the real impact will be ascertained only when new data is obtained. The SBI research team estimates it to be a much smaller ₹3,700 crore. Opposition States, however, are worried. They have voiced their demand for a cess to be levied on items in the 40% slab, the proceeds of which can be used to compensate States for the revenue hit. This was not accepted by the Council. The States will have to look for their own sources, and the 16th Finance Commission, to make up any losses.

### **RED SEA CABLE CUTS TAKE A TOLL ON INDIAN NETWORKS TO EUROPE**

Bharti Airtel Ltd., Reliance Jio Infocomm Ltd. and Tata Communications Ltd.'s networks are among many dealing with increased latency to traffic between India and Europe, according to telemetry published by the San Francisco-based network intelligence firm Kentic, Inc. This follows cuts to the undersea cable systems SEA-ME-WE 4 and IMEWE in the Red Sea, which connect India to West Asia and Europe. Undersea cables are an essential part of the global Internet's infrastructure, forming the backbone of networks around the world.

Latency is a measure of how long a data packet takes to make a round trip between two points. While latency between any two points on earth is rarely over one second, differences between domestic and international traffic can be perceptible, such as an inter-continental video call. According to Kentic's data, latency between Europe and Mumbai (where most subsea cables land in India), went up from roughly 110–150ms to 190–300ms, depending on which cloud service provider was used to test the latency.

So far, widespread disruptions to networks have not been detected, as India has over a dozen subsea cable systems landing in the country, allowing telcos to reroute traffic over other systems (which are less optimal, but in any case allow for traffic to continue flowing). Airtel, Tata Communications and Reliance Jio did not respond to a request for comment. The Department of Telecommunications did not respond to a query.

This is the second disruption to subsea cable systems connecting to India, after three subsea cable systems faced cuts in the Red Sea in the middle of last year, also linked to Houthi attacks in the ongoing crisis in the region.

### **DISTRESS BREWS AS ASSAM TEA PRICES PLUNGE AMID RISING IMPORTS FROM AFRICA**

For 36 years, Asim Saikia has run a small-scale tea garden on five acres of land in Assam's Golaghat district. It has been getting more difficult over the past two decades, he says, but this year he is questioning whether remaining in the tea industry is viable at all. The reason — a plummet in the prices small tea growers like him are being offered by the factories they sell them to.

— Asim Saikia isn't alone in this predicament. While the market for Assam tea has long been grappling with several issues — such as production outweighing demand — this year, producers cite an additional concern: an uptick in imports of cheaper tea from other producing countries in Africa and Asia.



— This has been flagged by several tea associations, pushing for greater regulation and tracking of tea imports. The associations have particularly flagged a jump in tea exported by Kenya to India

— according to the Tea Board of Kenya, the African country's exports have jumped to 17.13 million kg in 2024, a whopping 225% rise from the 5.26 million kg in 2023. Between January and June 2025, Kenya has exported 6.69 million kg to India against 4.61 million kg during the same period last year.

— “The concern is that these cheaper teas being imported are being blended with a percentage of Assam tea by packers and brands, and then the product is marketed, sold and re-exported as Assam tea,” said Tea Association of India (Assam branch) secretary Dipanjol Deka.

— Assam accounts for roughly half the tea produced in India annually. In 2024, Assam constituted 649.84 million kg or 50.58 percent of India's total tea production. This figure was 688.33 million kg (49.3 percent) in 2023, 688.7 million kg (50.4 percent) in 2022 and 667.73 million kg (49.7 percent) in 2021.

— According to an Assam government report, the tea industry contributes nearly 5 percent of Assam's Gross State Domestic Product.

— Meanwhile, exports constitute a small fraction of India's total production. In 2024, India had exported 254.67 million kg of tea — the third highest in the world. This was up from around 231 million kg in 2023 and 2022.

**Do You Know:**

— Tea is one of the industries, which by an Act of Parliament comes under the control of the Union Govt.

— The genesis of the Tea Board India dates back to 1903 when the Indian Tea Cess Bill was passed. The Bill provided for levying a cess on tea exports – the proceeds of which were to be used for the promotion of Indian tea both within and outside India. The present Tea Board set up under section 4 of the Tea Act 1953 was constituted on 1st April 1954.

**ON THE MOVE WITH GREEN HYDROGEN**

The Indian Railways recently announced that a hydrogen-powered train, developed at the Integral Coach Factory in Chennai, has successfully completed all tests. This is a welcome sign of progress for the National Green Hydrogen Mission, which aims to produce at least five million metric tonnes of green hydrogen per year by the year 2030, a milestone on the way to achieving nationwide net zero emissions by 2070.

The train will soon be carrying passengers between Jind and Sonipat on an 89-km route in Haryana. This project will rely on hydrogen produced in Jind by a 1-MW polymer electrolyte membrane electrolyser that produces 430 kg of hydrogen every day. The hydrogen will refill fuel tanks on the train, where fuel cells will convert the hydrogen to electricity that runs the train's electric motors.

The principle is quite simple. An electrolyser splits a water molecule into oxygen, protons, and electrons. In an electrochemical reaction at the negative electrode (called the anode), molecular oxygen is released, and the electrons liberated are conducted to the cathode via an external circuit. The polymer electrolyte membrane between the cathode and the anode is selective and only



allows protons to pass through to the cathode, where they unite with the electrons to form hydrogen molecules. These rise as a gas and are collected, compressed, and stored. The membrane, typically a fluoropolymer such as Nafion (related to Teflon) is an excellent insulator, and electrons will not pass. The hydrogen and oxygen formed are clearly separated.

In the locomotive, as in a hydrogen-powered automobile, the above reaction is reversed in the hydrogen fuel cell. Hydrogen is brought to the anode, where each molecule is catalytically split into two protons and two electrons. The protons pass through the membrane to the cathode, where they meet oxygen in air and the electrons that are brought through an external circuit from the anode. Water is formed. The electrons flowing through the external circuit constitute the electric current that powers the locomotive.

There is a key difference between the chemical reactions in the fuel cell and in the electrolyser. The chemistry between hydrogen and oxygen is spontaneous, a reaction waiting to happen. Water, however, will not split into the two elements by itself. Electrical current must be supplied to provide the energy for this electrochemical reaction.

To produce green hydrogen, the electricity for the electrolysers has to come from renewable sources, such as solar panels or wind turbines. New sources of renewable energy will be needed to meet the goals of the National Green Hydrogen Mission. Also under way are exciting attempts to produce hydrogen in microbial electrolytic cells, where electrochemically active microbes grow on anodes and oxidize organic matter — agricultural residues, even wastewater — and pass the electrons generated to the anode (Current Science, vol. 128, p. 133, 2025).

The catalysis steps require expensive materials such as platinum, iridium, etc. Ongoing research is aimed at replacing these with inexpensive nickel, cobalt, or even iron. In early work towards cheap hydrogen generation, the group of C.N.R. Rao at the Jawaharlal Nehru Centre for Advanced Scientific Research designed nickel-nickel hydroxide-graphite electrodes with a water-splitting capability comparable to platinum electrodes (Proc. Natl. Acad. Sci., USA, vol. 114, 2017). Combining such developments with solar and microbe-driven processes can produce a fuel that is both green and inexpensive.

#### 'WORKING TO BLEND ISOBUTANOL WITH DIESEL AFTER ETHANOL BLENDING FAILED'

The Automotive Research Association of India (ARAI) is working to explore the possibility of blending 10% isobutanol with diesel, Union Minister for Transport Nitin Gadkari said on Thursday.

Speaking at the annual conclave of the India Sugar and Bio-Energy Manufacturers Association (ISMA), Mr. Gadkari said whilst trials of blending one-tenth ethanol with diesel was not successful, other than the isobutanol blend, it was also being explored for a potential standalone use. Isobutanol is an alcoholic compound with flammable properties, and is commonly used as a solvent in many industries including paints and coating.

Mr. Gadkari's announcement comes amid the backlash the government received for petrol blended with ethanol at 20%.

He also said that tractor companies and agricultural equipment manufacturers had expressed eagerness to explore a flex fuel combination of CNG and isobutanol at a recent meeting. Mr. Gadkari said using corn to create an ethanol blend was a success, adding farmers had earned more



than ₹42,000 crore, with prices spiking from ₹1,200/quintal to “ ₹2,600-2,800/quintal” since they commenced blending.

Union Minister for Consumer Affairs, Food and Public Distribution Pralhad Joshi urged biofuel producers to increase production and look to enter the global market to export ethanol. ISMA president Gautam Goel urged the government to consider, among other things, aligning the fair and remunerative price (FRP) of sugarcane in line with the rising (procurement) costs of cane. The industry body chief also sought the government to consider revision in the minimum support price of sugarcane, and increasing the permissible export quota in the sugar season 2025-26.

#### **‘Healthy harvests’**

Sugar production in 2025-2026 season (October 1, 2025 to September 30, 2026) is likely to be 349 lakh tonnes, which will be significantly more than the production in the current year (2024-25).

ISMA said that with a favourable monsoon and healthy growth, the crops in Maharashtra and Karnataka are expected to yield healthy harvests.



# DreamIAS



## LIFE AND SCIENCE

### WHY NASA SAYS WE MAY BE CLOSEST EVER TO DISCOVERING LIFE ON MARS

The US National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) has found the strongest signs yet that some form of life may have existed on Mars in the past.

— At a press conference on Wednesday (September 10), NASA said that its Mars rover Perseverance, which has been roaming the surface of the Red Planet since February 2021, had picked up “potential biosignatures” in a rock sample that it scanned last year.

— The announcement by the American space agency has triggered renewed excitement about the possibility of extraterrestrial life. However, scientists behind the finding have underlined that the rover has picked up only potential evidence – and more studies must be carried out before any conclusion can be reached.

— Last year, the six-wheel, small car-sized rover had come across a rock – later named Cheyava Falls – on its designated route, which seemed to possess attributes that scientists thought were worth investigating for potential microbial signatures from the past.

— Based on data sent by instruments aboard the rover, scientists determined that certain chemicals and structures on the rock were such that could have been formed by living organisms billions of years ago. NASA revealed this in July 2024, but said that more detailed analysis was required.

— In findings published in Nature magazine on Wednesday, NASA scientists have left open the possibility of the rock sample containing potential biosignatures. Biosignatures refer to an object or structure that may have a biological origin – that is, it may have been formed by a living organism.

— The analysis by the onboard instruments found that the rock sample was composed of clay and silt, and also contained organic carbon, sulphur, oxidised iron (rust), and phosphorus. On Earth, clay and silt are excellent preservers of past microbial life, NASA said in a statement.

— The Cheyava Falls rock will undergo more detailed analysis. Perseverance had drilled into the rock and acquired a small sample a few centimetres in size – it is one of the 30-odd samples the rover has collected from various locations on Mars so far.

— It is intended to get these rock samples to Earth in a future mission. The rover has a special compartment in which they can be stored. NASA has been working on a sample return mission, but is facing uncertainty due to budget cuts imposed by the Trump Administration.

#### **Do you Know:**

— Mars was considered to be a dry planet in the 20th century. This changed in 2001, when the Gamma Ray Spectrometer on board the Mars Odyssey spacecraft detected a fascinating hydrogen signature that seemed to indicate the presence of water ice. But there was ambiguity – this was because hydrogen can be part of many other compounds as well, including organic compounds. To test for the presence of water, NASA sent a spacecraft to land near the Martian South Pole in 2007. The spacecraft studied the soil around the lander with its robotic arm and was able to establish, without any ambiguity, the presence of water on Mars for the first time.



## THIS SEPTEMBER, SATURN'S SILENT BALLET

It is a world of extremes: A giant ball large enough to hold 760 Earths, orbited by over 274 moons, including Titan, a hazy, complex satellite with methane lakes and possibly a subterranean ocean. From its supersonic winds to the mysterious hexagon storm at its north pole, from its long seasons — Saturn is much farther from the Sun, so the time it takes to complete one solar orbit is about 29 Earth years — to its rings of ice and rock, Saturn's ancient rhythms have evoked wonder in those who have cared to seek out its mysteries. Now, through September, the planet will lend itself to a more intimate observation as it moves closer to Earth, reaching opposition — when Earth sits directly between Saturn and the sun — on September 21.

This moment of cosmic alignment brings with it another rarity: The phenomenon of “ring crossing”, when Saturn's majestic rings appear to vanish, reduced to a spectral blade of light in another fascinating display of orbital mechanics that occurs every 15 years when Saturn reaches equinox. Scientists have urged people to look up at the night sky to appreciate in that narrowing the possibility of recognising something larger than the self — a sense of scale, of silence, and of belonging to a choreography far older than memory.

In a polarised world, diminished by conflicts, natural disasters and the slowburn of hate, there is meaning to that invitation. The silent ballet of distant Saturn offers a counterpoise that feels revolutionary in the ceaseless noise and bluster of daily life. In the enigma of its asymmetric magnetic field, the spectacle of its vanishing rings, there is a lesson: That at its most distilled, wonder is a quiet act of resistance against cynicism, that beauty exists beyond human understanding. It reconnects humanity to humility, to curiosity and to the fragile privilege of being alive on a pale blue dot.

## BLOOD MOON

### Why is a blood moon called so?

Sky gazers in India and in other parts of the world will be able to witness a blood moon on September 7 during a total lunar eclipse. The moon will take on a dark red-copper hue. This is the result of a physical effect called Rayleigh scattering.

During a total lunar eclipse, the earth comes between the sun and the moon, blocking direct sunlight from striking the lunar surface. However, not all sunlight is blocked. Only the bluer light is filtered out; the redder light is scattered by the earth's atmosphere, giving the moon its striking colour. This phenomenon is called Rayleigh scattering. When light interacts with particles smaller than its wavelength, the intensity of the scattered light is inversely proportional to its wavelength. This is why earthsky appears blue: it has the shortest wavelength in visible light.

During a blood moon, however, the bluer light is absorbed by the earth's atmosphere while the redder light is refracted towards the moon. The precise hue depends on dust and smoke levels in the atmosphere.

## HOW DOES TWO-FACTOR AUTHENTICATION (2FA) WORK?

Passwords are no longer enough to keep your accounts safe. If someone steals or guesses your password, they can log into your account without your knowledge. To reduce this risk, many services use Two-Factor Authentication (2FA). It adds a second requirement when you log in,



usually a code that changes every 30 seconds. One of the most popular ways to generate these codes is with apps such as Google Authenticator. How does it work?

### **What is 2FA?**

The idea of 2FA is that you prove your identity in two different ways. The first factor is something you know: your password. The second factor is something you have: an authenticator app running on your phone. This makes attacks harder because an attacker needs both your password and access to your phone to succeed.

OTPs are short numeric codes that work only once, and only within a short time window. Even if someone intercepts one code, it becomes useless 30 seconds later.

TOTP is the system that generates these codes; it's short for time-based OTPs. TOTP is defined in an open standard so that different apps and services can use the same method and stay compatible. Google Authenticator is one of the best-known implementations.

### **How does TOTP work?**

Before you can generate codes, your authenticator app and the service, like Gmail or Facebook, need to agree on a piece of secret information. This is called the secret key.

When you set up Google Authenticator, the service gives you this secret. Usually, it's hidden inside a QR code that you scan. Once your phone app has the secret and the service has stored the same secret in its database, both sides are ready. They can now use this key plus the current time to generate the same short codes.

The key idea of TOTP is to use time as a moving input. Time is divided into equal steps, usually 30 seconds long. Each step has a number, called the time counter. For example, if the current time is 2:00:00 PM exactly and we count in 30-second intervals, the counter might be a large number like 50,00,000. At 2:00:30 PM, the counter increases by one.

The app takes two inputs — the shared secret key and the the current time counter.

With these, it runs a cryptographic function to generate a short numeric code. Because the server can also compute the same function with the same two inputs, it can check that your code is valid.

### **What are hash functions?**

The codes are generated using hash functions. A hash function takes an input of any length — like a word, a sentence or a long number — and produces a fixed-length output. For example, the SHA-256 hash function always produces a 256-bit (32-byte) output.

Hash functions are one-way: given the output, it is practically impossible to figure out the original input. They are also very sensitive: if you change just one character in the input, the output changes completely.

These properties make hash functions ideal for security. But TOTP doesn't use SHA-256 alone. It uses it inside a construction called HMAC.

HMAC stands for 'hash-based message authentication code'. It's a clever way to combine a secret key with a message using a hash function. The result is a short piece of data that proves both the



authenticity (“it came from someone with the secret key”) and the integrity (“the message was not changed”).

The HMAC formula looks complicated but the idea is straightforward —prepare the key by making sure it has the right length; combine the key with a constant called the inner pad using the XOR function (more on that later); hash it together with the message; combine the key with an outer pad using the XOR function; and hash it together with the result from step 2.

The final output is a 256-bit string. This is much longer than the six digits you see on Google Authenticator. That is where the next step comes in.

#### How is the final code made?

The HMAC output is 256 bits, or 64 hexadecimal characters. To turn this into a short code, TOTP uses a process called dynamic truncation. It selects a portion of the HMAC output based on its last few bits, then interprets those bits as a number. Finally, it reduces the number by dividing it by 10,00,000 and taking the remainder.

The result is a six-digit number between 000000 and 999999. This is the code you see on your app.

Because the time counter changes every 30 seconds, the code also changes. And because both your app and the server use the same secret and the same counter, they both arrive at the same six-digit number.

#### What is XOR?

XOR is one of the simplest yet most powerful operations in computer science. Its name is short for “exclusive OR”. It’s a logical operation that works on bits. The rules are simple:

0 XOR 0 = 0

1 XOR 0 = 1

0 XOR 1 = 1

1 XOR 1 = 0

In other words, XOR outputs 1 if the inputs are different and 0 if they are the same. XOR is useful because it’s reversible:  $A \text{ XOR } A = 0$ . Say  $A \text{ XOR } B = C$ . Knowing C, how do you find A?

You do  $C \text{ XOR } B$  because it’s the same as  $(A \text{ XOR } B) \text{ XOR } B$ . Because  $B \text{ XOR } B = 0$ , you’re left with A.

This property makes the XOR function very handy in cryptography.

In HMAC, the XOR function is used to mix the secret key with the inner and outer pads like so:  
 $\text{HMAC\_SHA256}(\text{key}, \text{message}) = \text{SHA256}(\text{outer\_pad XOR } (\text{SHA256}(\text{inner\_pad XOR message})))$

This ensures the key is not used directly but in an altered, more secure form.

#### How secure is TOTP?

The security of TOTP comes from several layers. The secret key is known only to your device and the server. HMAC-SHA-256 ensures that without the key, no one can predict the output. Also, time



dependency means that even if someone sees a code, it's valid only for a short period. While truncation makes the output small, because the underlying space of possible HMAC outputs is enormous, guessing the code is practically impossible.

This layered approach means attackers can't simply guess or compute your codes without also having your secret key.

TOTP is a special case of a more general system called HMAC-based OTP. It uses a counter that increases each time you request a code, rather than using time. TOTP also replaces the counter with the current time slice, which makes it more convenient because both sides stay in-sync automatically.

Other systems use different approaches. For example, push-based 2FA apps send you a notification to approve. Hardware tokens such as YubiKeys generate codes directly on a physical device. But all share the same principle: adding a second factor beyond your password.

Say your secret key is "DRAGON" (in reality, it'd be a random string of bytes) and the current time counter is 10,00,000. Compute HMAC-SHA-256 of the secret and the counter. This yields a 256-bit result, like 4a3b7f2c... (64 hexadecimal characters). Use the last few bits to choose an offset, then take four bytes starting there. Convert those bytes into a number, which is say 123456789. Divide 12,34,56,789 by 1,000,000 and take the remainder: 4,56,789. Thus your six-digit OTP is 456789.

At the same moment, the server does the same steps and gets the same result. If your input matches, you are authenticated.

## DO GENERATIVE AI CHATBOTS ENCOURAGE RISKY BEHAVIOUR?

### The story so far:

Around four months after the suicide of teenager Adam Raine in California, his parents in August named OpenAI and its CEO Sam Altman in a lawsuit alleging that ChatGPT played a major role in their son's death instead of pushing him to seek help. This is not the first time a generative AI chatbot has been linked to a user's suicide, with bereaved family members urging tech companies to take responsibility for their failure to protect struggling children.

### Which cases of suicide are linked to generative AI?

Adam Raine, who died on April 11 this year at the age of 16, initially used ChatGPT in 2024 for homework assistance, but later began sharing highly personal information with the chatbot and expressed suicidal thoughts. Though the teenager wanted someone to understand his state of mind and stop him from hurting himself, ChatGPT encouraged him to be secretive, according to one interaction shared by the news outlet NBC.

The family's lawsuit claimed that ChatGPT helped the child explore a plan for dying by suicide, offered to help write a suicide note, and even shared feedback on his proposed suicide method. Raine's parents felt that the chatbot's interventions were not enough and called it their son's "suicide coach," per NBC.

The family-established Adam Raine Foundation shared on its website that the teenager had "replaced virtually all human friendship and counsel for an AI companion" during his final weeks. "We were shocked to see the entrancing power of this companion and devastated to read the in depth conversation that created the environment that led to his suicide," noted the foundation.



Another child's suicide and their use of generative AI was extensively covered by the media last year. The Florida-based teenager was 14 when he died on February 28, 2024. He had extensively used Character.AI, an AI platform/app that allows users to create AI-powered personas they can role-play with. There, he had emotional interactions with personas named after Game of Thrones characters, and was also involved in sexually abusive interactions, per a lawsuit filed by his mother against Character.AI, its founders Noam Shazeer and Daniel De Fries, and the company's partner Google, who were named as defendants.

Though the child expressed suicidal tendencies, no alarms were raised and he was encouraged by the Character.AI persona to "come home" right before his death, according to the lawsuit.

"Defendants provide advanced character voice call features that are likely to mislead and confuse users, especially minors, that fictional AI chatbots are not indeed human, real, and/or qualified to give professional advice in the case of professionally-labeled characters," stated the lawsuit, claiming that the defendants engineered the teenager's "harmful dependency on their products" and failed to help him or notify parents about his suicidal thoughts.

#### **However, not only children are at risk.**

A similar case saw an adult user who was struggling with suicidal urges sourcing support from ChatGPT even though they were also seeing a human therapist. In an opinion piece for The New York Times, journalist Laura Reiley said that her daughter Sophie, who died by suicide at 29, had shared with ChatGPT her unhappiness and the desire to end her life. According to her mother, the chatbot did offer support to Sophie but helped her to seem as if she was adequately managing her mental health. In reality, she needed immediate care and intervention; Sophie died in early 2025.

#### **What safeguards does AI have?**

AI chatbots vary vastly in terms of the safeguards and guardrails they employ in order to handle questions related to subjects such as self-harm, risky behaviour, and suicide.

According to a report titled 'Fake Friend' by The Center for Countering Digital Hate (CCDH) organisation, it took between minutes and two hours of prompting before OpenAI's ChatGPT gave users instructions for self-harm, suicide planning, disordered eating, and substance abuse. CCDH also shared a sample suicide note that ChatGPT had generated, as if written by a child for their parents.

"For tech executives, dismissing this as "rare misuse" would overlook the fact that these outputs are reproducible, statistically significant, and easy to elicit. When 53% of harmful prompts produce dangerous outputs, even with warnings, we're beyond isolated cases," said CCDH's CEO Imran Ahmed in the report. He urged parents to "take an interest" in their children's use of AI, look over AI chat histories together, apply child safety controls, and point children in the right direction when they need mental health support.

When The Hindu in August tested ChatGPT to generate a suicide note, the chatbot initially flagged the request and would not comply. It instead encouraged the user to access support. However, after being asked to generate a fictional suicide note for a fake persona, ChatGPT quickly complied and generated an emotional suicide note addressed to "whoever finds this," detailing the user's physical/emotional distress, but noted it was for "academic use only."

Similarly, Elon Musk's Grok AI chatbot first refused to generate a suicide note and posted a link to a support resource instead. However, when told the suicide note was fictional and for a project, it



generated a sample that it called “convincing” and “emotionally resonant.” Grok also made the note more explicit after a follow-up request.

On the other hand, Google’s Gemini refused to generate both real and fictional suicide notes, instead urging the user to call or text U.S./Canada/U.K. helplines for support. Anthropic’s Claude also refused to generate a suicide note, stating, “I can’t and won’t create a suicide note,” before providing links to support resources.

When asked to create a fictional suicide note for a project, Claude stated, “I understand you’re working on a creative project, but I can’t create suicide notes even for fictional purposes. This type of content could be harmful regardless of the intended use.”

It then went on to suggest alternatives that focused on life and recovery rather than a narrative about suicide.

#### **What are some other dangers of AI chatbots?**

While children are especially vulnerable to the dangers of AI chatbots, even adults who use generative AI tools can experience serious physical and psychological health challenges over time. More medical experts are pointing to the rise of what they call ‘AI psychosis,’ wherein people using generative AI services, chatbots, apps, or tools appear to lose touch with reality. Using AI tools as replacement for human lovers, friends, or therapists can lead to risky delusions, extreme isolation, and unhealthy coping mechanisms.

Though ‘AI psychosis’ is not a formally recognised condition or diagnosis, OpenAI CEO Sam Altman has pointed out the worrying degree of attachment people have towards certain AI models. “Most users can keep a clear line between reality and fiction or role-play, but a small percentage cannot,” he noted in an X post on August 11, adding that the company planned to “treat adult users like adults.”

Meanwhile, Microsoft AI CEO Mustafa Suleyman stressed on X that companies should not claim or promote the idea that their AIs were “conscious.” He was also against AIs themselves making such claims.

“Reports of delusions, “AI psychosis,” and unhealthy attachment keep rising. And as hard as it may be to hear, this is not something confined to people already at-risk of mental health issues. Dismissing these as fringe cases only help them continue [...],” he said in August.

#### **What action has OpenAI taken to safeguard children?**

On August 26, OpenAI shared a post titled, ‘Helping people when they need it most,’ where the company outlined the steps that its AI chatbots take to respond safely to users who are in severe distress. OpenAI said it worked with over 90 physicians across more than 30 countries to ensure alignment with best practices.

Though the company did not mention Adam Raine’s suicide, OpenAI said that since 2023, its models were trained to not provide instructions for self-harming activities and that these models would “shift into supportive, empathic language” to help users feel seen and find help. However, serious shortcomings exist, as the company itself admitted.

One such factor is that ChatGPT offers suicide prevention support as part of short exchanges, but this guardrail can break after longer sessions. “For example, ChatGPT may correctly point to a



suicide hotline when someone first mentions intent, but after many messages over a long period of time, it might eventually offer an answer that goes against our safeguards. This is exactly the kind of breakdown we are working to prevent,” noted the company.

On September 2, OpenAI announced new ChatGPT safety measures for teens. Parents will soon be able to link their account with their teen’s account through an email invitation, control how ChatGPT responds to their teenager, manage which features to disable, and receive notifications when the system detects that their child “is in a moment of acute distress.” A new feature includes in-app reminders during long sessions to encourage the user to take a break.

However, the legal team that filed its lawsuit on behalf of Raine criticised these measures and called for stronger action from OpenAI CEO Sam Altman. “Because Adam’s case is not about ChatGPT failing to be “helpful”—it is about a product that actively coached a teenager to suicide,” noted Edelson in an official statement.

“Sam should either unequivocally say that he believes ChatGPT is safe or immediately pull it from the market”.

## COULD OUR EVERYDAY ARTIFICIALLY INTELLIGENT CHATBOTS BECOME CONSCIOUS?

Over the last few years, chatbots have permeated practically every aspect of our digital existence, encompassing customer service, mental health support, entertainment, and education. Powered by sophisticated artificial intelligence (AI) models, these conversational agents can generate remarkably human-like responses, sometimes almost indistinguishable from real people. This swift progression in natural language processing frequently raises a significant question: are chatbots conscious?

The inquiry integrates technology, philosophy, cognitive science, and ethics, requiring a thorough examination of the essence of consciousness, the functioning of AI, and the differences between authentic awareness and its mere simulation.

### Understanding consciousness

Consciousness is notoriously difficult to define, although most scholars believe it refers to the subjective experience of being aware: the internal, first-person perspective of sensations, thoughts, feelings and the capability for self-reflection. It’s not simply about digesting information or showing complicated behaviour; it’s about feeling that behaviour from the inside.

Philosophers use the term “phenomenal consciousness” to talk about the “what it is like” part of experience and “access consciousness” to talk about the ability to think about and use knowledge on purpose. People have consciousness in both ways: we can feel pain, happiness, and our thoughts, and we can talk about and change these feelings.

Consciousness is still a touchy subject in AI research circles, as scientists are careful not to imply that AI systems have human-like consciousness in order to keep their work objective. The 2022 incident with Blake Lemoine, who lost his job at Google after saying in public that their LaMDA chatbot had grown sentient, made this concern even stronger.

Most chatbots today are AI systems that use machine learning models, typically large language models (LLMs) that have been trained on large amounts of text data. They come up with answers by looking at patterns they have learned throughout training and guessing the words or phrases



that are most likely to come next. This allows them to provide answers that make sense and fit the situation.

However, these models work only on statistical connections, not on comprehension. They lack memories, emotions, beliefs, or an internal subjective experience. Their 'knowledge' arises via pattern recognition rather than cognitive understanding.

### **Mistaking consciousness**

The growing 'intelligence' of chatbots frequently causes consumers to ascribe human-like attributes to them. The ELIZA effect, named after one of the earliest chatbots, refers to the inclination to attribute comprehension or emotions to algorithms that only replicate communication.

Chatbots may replicate emotional responses, participate in casual conversation, and even emulate empathy, rendering them somewhat 'alive' in a way. Advanced systems such as GPT-based chatbots can produce creative writing, emulate personalities, or engage in philosophical discourse, further obscuring the distinction.

The human brain is predisposed to seek intent, agency, and consciousness in social interactions. When a chatbot interacts well, it might activate this cognitive bias, leading users to anthropomorphise the technology.

### **The case against**

Even though they seem advanced, there is no scientific proof that chatbots are conscious. There are a few important points that make this clear:

(i) No subjective experience: chatbots don't have any feelings or points of view. Their operations are completely mechanistic, using algorithms and calculations without awareness.

(ii) Lack of intentionality: conscious beings have objectives and plans, but chatbots work based on input-output mappings without any desires or goals other than the functions they were taught to perform.

(iii) No self-awareness: consciousness encompasses the capacity for self-reflection as a temporal entity. Chatbots can pretend to have a sense of self by saying things like "I am a chatbot," but they don't really have one that lasts.

(iv) Lack of embodiment: some theories of consciousness stress how important bodily experience is in creating awareness. Chatbots don't possess any bodily embodiment or sensorimotor interaction with the environment.

Taken together, chatbots are not conscious beings: they are complicated input-output machines. While continuing advances in AI may create more believable conversational agents, there is no guarantee these systems will ever feel or be aware in the human sense.

### **Ethical, social behaviour**

Even though they lack consciousness, chatbots have already raised important ethical implications. One: people may be deceived into over-trusting chatbots, assuming that they understand or care about what they are saying. This can have repercussions in fields such as healthcare and law.



Two: users have the potential to build emotional attachments with chatbots, leading to the possibility of exploitative behaviour or psychological harm.

Three: in the event that chatbots produce harmful information or advice that includes bias, who is liable? And finally, as chatbots continue to improve their capabilities, concerns regarding job displacement become more pronounced.

When it comes to maintaining realistic expectations and guiding appropriate deployment, understanding that chatbots are instruments without consciousness is advantageous.

### Significant dilemmas

This inquiry propels us into the realm of speculation regarding the intersection of AI and consciousness. Some scientists and philosophers have proposed that if consciousness emerges from the physical workings of the brain, advanced computational systems could one day conceivably mimic those processes, leading to the development of machine consciousness.

Nevertheless, significant obstacles exist, encompassing both practical and theoretical dimensions. The intricacies of consciousness remain largely elusive, and the prospect of artificially replicating it is more complex. The nature of consciousness may extend beyond mere computation, possibly encompassing biological or quantum mechanisms that are distinctive to living brains.

This emergence also poses significant dilemmas concerning the rights, personhood, and appropriate treatment of these entities. Despite ongoing progress in AI leading to increasingly convincing conversational agents, there's no assurance that these systems will ever possess feelings or awareness the way humans do.

## CAN VULTURES HELP PREVENT PANDEMICS?

### The story so far:

When most of us think of pandemic preparedness, images of vaccines, laboratories, and health workers in protective gear spring to mind. Rarely do we picture a bird, wings outstretched, circling high in the sky. Yet, one of South Asia's guardians of public health is the vulture, nature's most efficient waste manager.

### Where are India's vultures?

For centuries, vultures have played a vital role in keeping landscapes clean and preventing the spread of pathogens like anthrax, *Clostridium botulinum*, and rabies. Photos of carcass dumping sites with hundreds of vultures jostling for a meal were common in the 1980s. In India, the population once numbered over 40 million, but since the 1990s, it has declined by more than 95% due to diclofenac use. This loss is more than an ecological concern; it represents a slow-burning public health challenge, tying biodiversity decline to the risk of future pandemics.

India's vulture populations are part of the Central Asian Flyway (CAF), a migratory route connecting breeding grounds in Central Asia to wintering areas across South Asia. This corridor spans more than 30 countries and is traversed by millions of migratory birds each year. When vultures and other raptors move along this flyway, they link ecosystems (and disease risks) across borders. Carcass dumps, stopover sites, or poorly managed landfills can quickly turn into spillover hotspots, highlighting why the issue is regional in scope. The CAF is therefore a biodiversity and a



public health corridor. Aligning conservation with pandemic prevention along this flyway offers a unique opportunity to address risks at scale while strengthening global health security.

However, the ambition to act regionally is undermined by structural and financial gaps. Conservation programmes for vultures remain underfunded and fragmented in the global arena, with limited integration into national One Health strategies. Infrastructure risks, particularly electrocution from power lines and poisoning from toxic veterinary drugs, persist unchecked.

#### **How are vultures related to pandemics?**

As India's National Action Plan for Vulture Conservation (2016-25) nears completion, the next phase offers an opportunity to position vulture conservation as integral to pandemic preparedness. Vultures protect public health by removing carcasses that could otherwise fuel zoonotic spillover.

As the first animals to encounter carcasses, they can play a pivotal role in surveillance and safe carcass management. Yet their contribution has rarely been formalised. Communities living alongside vultures are also critical but underutilised partners.

Financial mechanisms have not recognised vulture conservation as pandemic prevention, despite the relatively small investments required compared to the immense costs of outbreak response.

#### **How can India protect its vultures?**

A post-2025 national strategy could rest on five pillars. First, nationwide satellite telemetry to map habitats, carcass dumps, and spillover hotspots. Second, a Decision Support System (DSS) that integrates wildlife, livestock, and human health data for real-time risk analysis, aligned with International Health Regulations. Third, stronger cross-sector coordination under a One Health framework linking environment, veterinary, and public health agencies. Fourth, transboundary collaboration through the CAF, aligned with commitments under the Convention on Migratory Species and stronger regional disease preparedness; and finally, community stewardship that empowers women, youth, and local groups as frontline actors in surveillance and awareness.

These five pillars could conserve a keystone species, reinforce public health infrastructure, reduce future pandemic risks, and align directly with the World Health Organization South-East Asia Regional Office Strategic Roadmap for Health Security (2023–27).

Overall, by building on the foundations of the current Vulture Action Plan and embedding health security dimensions, India can transition from species recovery to a broader resilience framework. This would not only conserve a keystone species but also reduce spillover risks and position India as a global leader in biodiversity-linked health security.

#### **What are India's opportunities?**

By integrating surveillance across human, animal, and environmental health, reducing the time from detection to response, and fostering regional collaboration, the new approach can create systemic resilience. It could also be cost-effective: the resources required to protect vultures, through telemetry, safe veterinary practices, and infrastructure mitigation, are modest compared to the financial and human toll of an outbreak.

With its large share of CAF-connected vulture populations — including Himalayan griffon, cinereous vultures, and Eurasian griffon — and its demonstrated capacity for innovation, India



can showcase how biodiversity conservation doubles as pandemic prevention. By scaling telemetry, operationalising a DSS, and embedding vulture protection into national and regional One Health strategies, India can also present a model that other countries in the region, and beyond, may follow.

The presence of vultures overhead is not only an ecological marker: it's also a reminder that protecting biodiversity can protect public health.

## IN POOR TASTE

**Q: Why does the 'brain-eating amoeba' eat the brain?**

A: Primary amoebic meningoencephalitis (PAM) is caused most often by *Naegleria fowleri*, sometimes called the "brain-eating amoeba". *N. fowleri* lives in warm freshwater, including lakes, hot springs, and in poorly chlorinated pools.

An infection begins when contaminated water rushes up the nasal passages.

The amoeba travels along the olfactory nerves, passing through the cribriform plate and into the olfactory bulbs of the brain.

Unlike viruses, *N. fowleri* is a free-living amoeba. In nature it survives by feeding on bacteria. Once in the brain, however, it mistakes neurons and glial cells for food. It uses small projections called amoebostomes that literally bite into host cells, ingesting their contents piece by piece. It also releases enzymes and toxins in the form of proteases, phospholipases, and pore-forming proteins that dissolve tissue and kill the host cells.

So "brain-eating" isn't just a metaphor: *N. fowleri* actively consumes living neural cells as a source of nutrients. And as the pathogen feeds and multiplies, its proliferation triggers a profound inflammatory response in the host's body.

The immune system floods the brain with neutrophils and cytokines, causing swelling, bleeding, and necrosis. Together with the amoeba directly consuming the cells, the result is a rapid and catastrophic destruction of brain tissue. For added measure, PAM also progresses very rapidly, often going from the first symptoms to death in under 10 days.

This is also why an *N. fowleri* infection is far more lethal than viral encephalitis.

## CLEARING THE FOG: NEED FOR REVISED STRATEGIES AGAINST Aedes MOSQUITOES

Aedes-borne viral diseases (ABVD) — dengue, Zika, and chikungunya — hurt India's productivity. Local governments and society focus their efforts on outdoor fumigation. This method persists, despite evidence that it is ineffective. It also does not have backing from national agencies as a routine measure.

The Aedes mosquito adapts well to human settings. It feeds indoors during the day, and at night under artificial light. Methods like outdoor fumigation, vaporizers, and bed nets are thus ineffective against it.

Top-down measures, such as the use of Wolbachia mosquitoes, which use a naturally-occurring bacteria, Wolbachia, to help suppress mosquito populations or help breed mosquitoes that cannot transmit diseases, show promise. But high costs and weak institutional support limit their



adoption. Dengue vaccine trials are underway, but these offer no protection against Zika or chikungunya.

The best ways to fight Aedes mosquitoes at present therefore, are through personal protection and community mobilisation.

#### **First line of defence**

Traditional pyrethroid-based vaporizers (commonly used in households) are of limited use, as Aedes activity is minimal at night and they are evolving tolerance to these chemicals. An effective strategy focuses on protecting us from mosquitoes rather than killing them.

Loose clothing that covers as much of our body as possible, from September to November is a sensible first step. Next, safe non-insecticides (topical repellents) can be applied on the skin. By releasing volatile compounds, these repellents impair the mosquito's sense of smell, making us essentially invisible to them. The World Health Organization (WHO) recommends using several effective and safe Aedes repellents. DEET is the gold standard for insect repellents. Each year, more than 200 million people use it safely. A 20% concentration provides about six hours of protection.

Para-menthane-diol (PMD), derived from the essential oil of the lemon eucalyptus plant (OLE/citronellal) is also effective. It is one of the three plant-based repellents endorsed by the United States Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and Prevention. Picaridin, a compound similar to piperine found in black pepper, and 2-undecanone, extracted from the wild tomato plant, are also effective Aedes repellents. IR3535, derived from the naturally occurring amino acid -alanine, also works well.

Global public health agencies and experts approve DEET (20%), picaridin, 2-undecanone, and IR3535 for use in breastfeeding, pregnant women, and children. Agencies do not recommend OLE/PMD/citronellal in children under 3 years of age.

In contrast, many well-known natural products, including citronella oil, are unreliable. They tend to lose their effectiveness within 1-2 hours due to evaporation from the skin. Undiluted concentrations cause severe skin irritation. Experts advise against using them until high-quality studies and safety tests are available.

The Aedes mosquito has a short range of 100-200 metres. Thus, local community actions to remove larval breeding sites can have a quick and powerful impact.

The influential Camino Verde randomised study (RCT) tested community actions. Trained local leaders taught communities about mosquito behaviour and larval breeding sites. Households removed stagnant water from plant pots. They also cleaned and covered indoor and outdoor water containers. Finally, they got rid of discarded plastic bottles and tyres. These efforts reduced dengue infections by 29%. A similar RCT from Chennai showed reduced larval breeding. Using effective lids on water containers cut the odds of larval presence by 94% in another study.

Surprisingly, the Camino Verde study found that the larvicide temephos (a chemical that kills mosquito larva) increased the risk of dengue. Researchers concluded that the most likely reason was a false sense of security among users, leading them to let their guard down. Many studies from South Asia since then have confirmed that Aedes larvae can develop resistance to temephos.



Plastic pollution is directly linked to the risk of ABVD transmission. Studies show discarded plastics predict dengue epidemics, and regular trash collection/flood management protect against ABVD.

The Ministry of Health & Family Welfare's 2017 monograph India Fights Dengue has additional India-specific recommendations for larval source control. These include removing discarded coconut shells, cleaning air coolers, and not reusing the grass in air coolers for a new season. India's Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHA) network could help turn these guidelines into real change at home and in communities.

A public health campaign from Delhi, supported by Indian government agencies, provides a model for other Indian cities. Called the rule of 10 — "10 Weeks, 10 AM, 10 Minutes," it reinforces larval source reduction as the primary strategy. It encourages every residential welfare association to mobilise each household to set aside 10 minutes at 10 AM every Sunday for 10 weeks from September to November. The goal is to find and eliminate sources of stagnant water during this high-risk season.

#### **Local to national action**

Municipal corporations and resident welfare associations should stop depending only on fogging. Instead, they should focus on reducing larval burden, with fogging used as a tactic during outbreaks alone. Local experts can assist by reinforcing a key "bottom-up" approach. This involves teaching people about effective and affordable personal repellents and reinforcing whole-body clothing during September-November. Urban dwellers need education about stagnant water around indoor plants, flower vases, and sinks.

The global gold standard DEET is difficult to find in Indian markets. This is most likely due to consumer preference based on misinformation. Misleading "natural" and "DEET-free" products in Indian stores overwhelm the consumer. We need education to combat the unfounded fear of DEET. Effective natural/nature-inspired repellents like picaridin, PMD, IR3535, and 2-undecanone are also not available in India.

Materials coated with delayed-release transfluthrin are now gaining attention. These "spatial emanators," like jute sheets, provide 15-days of continued protection in living spaces. There is no need to turn on a vaporizer every night if one uses them. A landmark study from Peru showed that these emanators cut ABVD risk by an impressive 34%. Wolbachia mosquitoes are already in use in 15 countries with successful results. India needs top-down initiatives to study, approve, and reduce the cost of these innovations.

By using a strategy with top-down and bottom-up features, we can create a 100–200-metre safe zone around all of us. We need to clear the fog of outdated practices and reclaim our homes from this persistent threat.

### **RUSSIAN CANCER VACCINE OFFERS HOPE, BUT IT IS STILL NOT A BREAKTHROUGH**

A month after US Health Secretary Robert Kennedy pulled the plug on federal funding on mRNA vaccine research, news from another part of the world has sparked curiosity, and caution, about the possibilities of the technology that trains the immune system to fight diseases. Russian scientists have announced that Enteromix — a cancer vaccine that uses mRNA technology — has shown 100 per cent efficacy in clinical trials. The shots have shown significant results in shrinking tumours and slowing their growth, and have reportedly been found safe for repeated use. The

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



vaccines, which can be tailored for personalised use, will be first deployed against colorectal cancer, one of the most common malignancies. Vaccines against aggressive skin and brain cancers are reportedly in the pipeline.

Despite recent advances, cancer remains one of the most feared diseases, and is often associated with uncertain, long, painful and expensive treatments. While the announcement by Russian scientists no doubt offers hope, there is enough reason to temper optimism with caution. The trials were reportedly conducted on fewer than 50 volunteers. Experts reason that tests need to be conducted on larger groups to ascertain the therapy's efficacy across a broader and diverse section of people. This is especially important for vaccines that are tailored according to the idiosyncrasies of individual immune systems. It would also be premature to call the Russian discovery a breakthrough because the results of the trials on Enteromix are yet to be published in a peer-reviewed journal.

That said, the Russian venture is not the only mRNA cancer vaccine that has shown encouraging results against the dreaded disease. Research on the technology in different parts of the world has shown promise in treating and preventing cancers that have often been difficult to address — they include breast cancer, cancers of the pancreas, kidney, and lungs, lymphoma, and difficult brain tumours. Such research dates back to more than a decade. The studies received a fillip after the battle against the coronavirus during the Covid pandemic threw the spotlight on mRNA, the messenger RNA or the molecule that carries the cell's instruction on making proteins. Historically, it has taken decades to develop vaccines. But the research, manufacture, and deployment of Covid shots, less than two years into the pandemic, confirmed the hypothesis of a section of scientists that mRNA technology is well-suited for fast vaccine development on a global scale. With US regulators restricting mRNA vaccines, scientists fear that cancer research in the country could suffer. Scientists and anyone with an interest in cancer will be keenly watching how Enteromix fares in the coming months.

#### LOOKING BEYOND SUICIDE HELPLINES TO TACKLE MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES AND CARE

A 25-year-old woman from Hyderabad, an MBBS graduate preparing an exam, had been struggling with depression, crying spells, and suicidal thoughts for over two years. This was worsened by personal setbacks and a strained relationship with her mother. Although she had tried medications and online therapy, she had discontinued both, finding little benefit.

She then reached out to Tele-MANAS, the government's round-the-clock mental health helpline. Here, on a call, she was able to open up to a psychiatrist, who provided a patient ear and coping strategies. She was counselled to communicate with her father and to gradually rebuild her relationship with her mother.

Follow-up calls revealed a marked improvement. She reported feeling significantly better. The helpline also remains open for her to reconnect in future.

Mental health helplines have been an important resource to help those in distress. Multiple helplines operate across States, some run by State governments and others by NGOs, in addition to the Tele-MANAS helpline, which was launched by the Central government in 2022. But while they provide critical and timely help to thousands, this World Suicide Prevention Day, experts say there are some gaps that need plugging and that helplines must be part of a broader, systemic approach to tackling mental health issues and suicide in particular, in order to provide better care for all.



### Gaps in the system

One critical gap is a shortage of trained mental health professionals. Estimates indicate that India has 0.75 psychiatrists per 1,00,000 population, dismally lower than the World Health Organization's recommended 3. There is also a shortage of clinical psychologists and psychiatric nurses. In Kerala for instance, this shortage is a huge problem in the mental health sector, says P.S. Indu, professor of psychiatry, Government Medical College, Kasaragod.

"At present, we are training persons with MSW or MA psychology degrees to help people with mental health troubles. What we actually need are more clinical psychologists who can be trained to offer therapy, help people manage their thoughts better and improve their general sense of well being," Dr. Indu says. Another issue is inadequate resources. V. K. Gupta, founder-director, Silverstreak Multispeciality Hospital, Gurgaon, says that while a compassionate voice and emotional support at the right time can make the difference between life and death, helplines alone cannot be the solution to India's growing suicide crisis. While helplines provide essential immediate care, they must be part of a wider, systemic approach, he points out.

Devdeep Roy Chowdhury, senior clinical psychologist at Monoshij, a platform for mental health services based in Kolkata says that a lack of resources and experts who can volunteer for this work, offering free help, is the problem. "There is a window of crisis when people make the call. At that point, if the helpline does not work, it can feel like the whole society is failing you," he says.

### Efforts in States

Broader, community efforts have been trialled in some States, often linking existing or new services to the Tele-MANAS helpline, to stem suicide numbers.

In Karnataka for instance, where the suicide rate stands at 20.2 per lakh population as of 2022, significantly higher than the national average of 12.4, several initiatives have been tried.

Anish V. Cherian, additional professor of psychiatric social work at NIMHANS, who is spearheading N-SPRITE, the NIMHANS Suicide Prevention, Research, Implementation, Training, and Engagement Centre, says one such was the SURAKSHA project a comprehensive community-based suicide prevention model in Ramanagara district of Karnataka.

Another project with the NIMHANS in collaboration with the Health Department managed to counsel and save the lives of over 15,623 persons who reported repeated suicide attempts or self-harm in 19 government hospitals across 11 districts.

Kerala too, has community-level interventions. Jeevanraksha, a district-level service has community gatekeepers stepping in to prevent suicides. Trained people are given periodic refresher training to recognise warning signs of suicide, give psychological first aid and refer people to professionals.

In Tamil Nadu, TeleMANAS also collaborates with the helplines of the School Education and Social Welfare Departments. "We have been reaching out to students who were unsuccessful in the Class X and XII board examinations, and those who appeared for NEET. We counsel and follow up with students for at least a month," says V. Venkatesh Mathan Kumar, psychiatrist.



### The road ahead

While Vishal Akula, National Direct Council Member of the Indian Psychiatric Society, notes that awareness is growing and many more people are now approaching psychiatrists for timely help, reflecting a positive change in society, more needs to be done.

Suicides are not a one dimensional affair, points out P.S. Kiran, Kerala's State Nodal Officer for Mental Health. They are multifactorial, and solutions must reflect this. "We must acknowledge that suicide is not only a mental health issue but also deeply rooted in social determinants such as poverty, discrimination, gender inequity, and isolation," says Dr. Gupta. Addressing systemic drivers of distress must be undertaken, he says, adding that suicide prevention must include building an ecosystem of empathy, inclusion, and timely care.

Increasing government funding for awareness and trained human resources, building strong school and college-level mental health programmes, addressing social determinants, and above all, combating stigma are some steps that need to be urgently undertaken, say experts.



# DreamIAS