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DreamIAS



INTERNATIONAL

'NO KINGS' PROTESTS RETURN AS TRUMP RAMPS UP 'AUTHORITARIAN PRACTICES'

The "No Kings" protests have returned to American streets in what organizers claim may be the largest single-day demonstration in U.S. history, with millions rallying against what they describe as President Trump's authoritarian policies.

The Scale of the Movement

Nearly 7 million people attended No Kings rallies across the country on October 18, 2025, marking the largest single-day nationwide demonstrations in U.S. history, according to organizers. More than 2,700 No Kings protests took place across the U.S., from major cities like New York, Los Angeles, and Washington D.C. to small towns like Burns, Oregon (population 2,700).

What They're Protesting

The overriding theme of the marches was the accusation that President Trump is behaving more like a monarch than an elected official. Key concerns include:

- **Immigration Crackdowns:** Many protesters connected their attendance to the ongoing immigration crackdown and the federal government's forceful response to anti-ICE protests.
- **Government Shutdown:** The rallies come amid a government shutdown that is testing the core balance of power as an aggressive executive confronts Congress and the courts.
- **First Amendment Rights:** Many demonstrators called out what they feel is a threat to freedom of expression in the US.

A Festive Yet Serious Atmosphere

Despite the serious concerns, in many places the rallies looked more like a street party, with marching bands, a huge banner with the US Constitution's "We The People" preamble that people could sign, and protesters wearing inflatable costumes, particularly frogs, which have emerged as a sign of resistance in Portland, Oregon.

Political Reactions

Republican Response: House Speaker Mike Johnson slammed Saturday's protests as a "hate America rally," and other Republicans have derided the event as anti-American. Republican Governors Glenn Youngkin of Virginia and Greg Abbott of Texas mobilized their states' National Guards in preparation for the protests.

Trump's Response: Responding to questions about the protests, White House spokeswoman Abigail Jackson said: "Who cares?"

Commitment to Peace

This marked the second massive wave of protests organized by No Kings — a network of progressive organizations fighting against Trump's agenda. The first wave in June drew an



estimated 4-6 million participants. Organizers emphasized their commitment to nonviolent action and trained tens of thousands of people in safety and de-escalation techniques.

NEW DAWN

While addressing the Knesset, the Israeli Parliament, U.S. President Donald Trump declared that the ceasefire agreement between Hamas and Israel, which he had helped broker, marked “the historical dawn of the new Middle East”. In Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt, Arab and Muslim leaders joined him in praising his 20-point peace plan. While all sides hailed Mr. Trump’s role as a peacemaker, the declaration of a new era of peace in West Asia, claiming to end a “3,000-year-old” conflict, glosses over deep and enduring complexities. The Gaza ceasefire, which appears to be holding with Hamas and Israel releasing hostages and prisoners, is undoubtedly a relief for Palestinians and hostage families. But the greater challenge lies in implementing the next phase, let alone building “a new Middle East”. A notable outcome of the Sharm el-Sheikh summit was the joint declaration by Egypt, Qatar, Türkiye and the U.S., also calling for the safeguarding of the fundamental rights of Palestinians and Israelis. It recognised the region’s historical and spiritual significance to multiple faiths, and committed signatories to dismantling extremism and radicalisation. But the declaration was silent on more contentious issues — Hamas’s disarmament, one of the central objectives of the Trump plan, or of Israel’s continuing military presence in Gaza.

Mr. Trump later claimed that Hamas had promised to disarm, warning that “If they don’t disarm, we will disarm them..., perhaps violently”. But Israel, despite its two years in Gaza, has still failed to disarm Hamas. How then does Mr. Trump plan to disarm them? He also claimed that the Iran threat had been neutralised, and urged more Arab countries to join the Abraham Accords. While Iran’s regional influence has been dented, it remains an influential regional player. Hezbollah, despite military setbacks, continues to be a powerful socio-political actor within Lebanon, and U.S.-led attempts to disarm the Shia group have gone nowhere. In Yemen, despite relentless Saudi, American, British and Israeli bombing campaigns, the Houthis, another Iranian ally, still control key population centres, including Sana’a. Moreover, Arab countries now have growing security concerns about Israel, particularly after its bombing of Qatar in September. Against this background, Mr. Trump’s sweeping claims of regional peace ring hollow. What he should prioritise instead is ensuring that the Gaza ceasefire holds. The next step should be forcing Hamas to give up power in the enclave while pressing Israel to withdraw. Once peace is consolidated and reconstruction begins, the U.S., with its Arab and European allies, should work towards a practical road map for the establishment of a Palestinian state. Unless the Palestine question is resolved and the Israeli occupation ends, grand declarations about remaking the region will remain little more than empty rhetoric.

BLATANT AGGRESSION

In a brazen admission, U.S. President Donald Trump has confirmed authorising covert CIA operations in Venezuela targeting the government of Nicolás Maduro. This escalation follows weeks of deadly strikes on boats in Caribbean waters, threatening to destabilise the region by violating fundamental principles of international law. The prospective actions fall under a grim historical pattern of actions by the CIA — the 1954 coup in Guatemala, the Bay of Pigs disaster in Cuba, the orchestration of the 1973 coup in Chile that resulted in President Salvador Allende’s death and the Contra wars in Nicaragua in the 1980s. Such interventions have led to catastrophic consequences such as decades of instability, democratic backsliding and authoritarian rule,



leaving scars across Latin America. Mr. Maduro's disputed election victory in 2024 has compounded his regime's economic mismanagement which, combined with sanctions, has devastated Venezuela's economy. In recent years, millions of Venezuelans have been forced to flee because of the crisis, with many undertaking perilous journeys through Colombia, the dreaded Darién Gap and Mexico to reach the U.S. The refugee influx has provided the Trump administration with ammunition to weaponise the immigration issue and to issue claims about Venezuelan drug trafficking to up the ante against the Chavistas, as the followers of former President Hugo Chávez are called. Mr Trump has repeatedly, without proof, characterised Mr. Maduro as a "narcoterrorist", alleging that the country operates as a drug corridor, with criminal trafficking organisations under his control. This has been contradicted by the U.S. intelligence agencies, much to Mr. Trump's disapproval, leading to consequences such as the firing of a National Intelligence Council director who refused to alter his assessment of the drug issue and the Maduro regime.

It is not difficult to ascertain the true motive of the Trump administration — to control Venezuela's massive petroleum reserves and substantial natural gas deposits. The fact that Caracas has maintained strong trading relations with Russia and China, and close ties with the U.S.'s bête noire, Cuba, also presents a geopolitical challenge to American hegemony in the region — this has also explained the hostility by preceding American administrations but none was as brazen as Mr Trump is. This is not to absolve the Maduro regime. Its authoritarian trajectory and manipulation of electoral processes deserve international censure. But acknowledging these failures does not justify illegal U.S. intervention. The international community must resist the Trump administration's recourse to illegal and Cold War-era regime change policies and instead pursue diplomatic solutions that respect Venezuelan sovereignty while supporting its genuine democratic forces. Venezuela must determine its future without external intrusion.

WORLD'S OLDEST LEADER COULD EXTEND HIS RULE AS CAMEROON VOTES

Cameroon voted in an election on Sunday that could see Africa's oldest leader extend his rule by another seven years.

Analysts have predicted a victory for President Paul Biya. Now 92, he would be 99 by the time his term finishes. He first came to power in 1982 following the resignation of Cameroon's first President, Ahmadou Ahidjo, and has ruled the country since then. Mr. Biya was declared the winner of seven subsequent elections. Cameroon has seen just two leaders since independence in 1960. His health has routinely been a topic of speculation as he spends most of his time in Europe, leaving day-to-day governing to key party officials.

"In the face of increasingly difficult international environment, the challenges facing us are more and more pressing," Mr. Biya said in announcing another run. "In such a situation, I cannot shirk my mission."

Mr. Biya faces nine Opposition candidates, including some former allies and appointees. They include Bello Bouba Maigari, who was Minister for Tourism, and Issa Tchiroma Bakary, who until recently served as the Minister of Employment.

Cheukam Ginette, a 34-year-old environmentalist and first-time voter, said she will not choose Mr. Biya. "Things have to change," she said.

At a campaign rally last week in the northern city of Maroua, Mr. Biya promised change for one of Cameroon's poorest areas. Poll results are expected at the latest by October 26.



A REALIGNMENT OF PAK.-AFGHAN RELATIONS

On October 11 and 12, there was an intense clash along the Durand Line between Pakistan and Afghanistan with substantial casualties on both sides. According to Islamabad, its forces killed more than 200 fighters on the Afghan side, while the Taliban has claimed the killing of 58 Pakistani soldiers. According to an official press release by the Pakistan Establishment (military), there were precision fires and strikes and physical raids targeting “Taliban camps and posts, terrorist training facilities and support networks operating from Afghan territory, including elements linked to Fitna al Khwarij (FAK), Fitna al Hindustan (FAH) and ISKP/ Daesh.” The Afghan military was quoted to have stated that the Afghan attacks were “in retaliation for the air strikes by Pakistani forces.” Taliban’s defence ministry went on to state that the operations ended at midnight of October 11 and “if the opposing side violates Afghanistan’s territory again, our armed forces are ready to defend their territory and will respond firmly.”

Following the clashes, Pakistan has closed the border crossings between the two countries.

For Pakistan, the clashes started on October 11, with “unprovoked” attacks from the Afghan side. For the Taliban, the border clashes were a response to an earlier attack by Pakistan on October 9, inside Afghanistan in the Kabul and Paktika province. While there have been minor skirmishes during recent years across the Durand Line, the latest attacks are the most important in recent Afghanistan-Pakistan history, and likely to be transformative in the Taliban-Pakistan military Establishment relationship.

Understanding the geography

The first set of attacks in the last week took place on October 9 in Kabul, the Afghan capital, and in the Paktika province. Kabul is just 230 km by road from Torkham at the western end of the Khyber Pass in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) province. As the crow flies, it should be less than 100 km if Pakistan has to conduct any aerial operations over Kabul. Of the five eastern Afghan provinces that share a border with two provinces of Pakistan, KP and Balochistan, Paktika shares the border with two tribal regions in KP — North and South Waziristan — the stronghold of the Mehsud and Wazir tribes.

The second set of attacks took place from October 11 to 12 along the Durand Line across the tribal regions — starting from Chitral in the north to Waziristan in the south. In return, Pakistan had targeted Afghan posts as well as training command and forts on the Afghan side.

Chequered history

After propping up the Taliban in the 1990s, and supporting it over the next two decades, why has Pakistan turned against them now?

The trigger for the recent clashes differ for both countries. Media reports have speculated that the target of Pakistan’s attack in Kabul could have been Noor Wali Mehsud, leader of the Pakistan Taliban. The two attacks on October 9 could also have been a warning to Afghanistan to not get close to India, for on that day, the Afghan foreign minister had landed in New Delhi for a week-long trip in India. Surprisingly, Pakistan’s DG-ISPR statement on October 12 also refers to the Afghan minister’s visit to India, but links it to Afghanistan’s “serious provocation,” and ignores its earlier October 9 attack in Kabul.



While the above two incidents were the trigger, the following five reasons could be identified as the underlying causes for the tensions between Pakistan's Establishment and the Taliban. At the core of the conflict is how Pakistan and the Taliban perceive each other. Pakistan's Establishment looks at the Taliban as its vassal. It expects the latter to be grateful for its creation in the 1990s, and the crucial political and military support it has received, both overtly and covertly, during the last three decades from Pakistan. On the other hand, the Taliban sees itself as independent, having weathered the previous two decades, especially Pakistan playing a double act during the U.S. occupation of Afghanistan during 2001-21.

Pakistan wants Kabul to be subservient to its strategic interests, while the Taliban seeks to chart a new beginning and pursue an independent policy, both within Afghanistan and outside.

Kabul had also initiated a dialogue with China. In August 2025, China's foreign minister, Wang Yi, visited Kabul and talked about investments in Afghanistan, especially in the mining sector. China has also started receiving official delegations from Afghanistan, including its Ambassador. In July 2025, Russia recognised the Taliban and accepted its Ambassador in Moscow. The Taliban wants to have its own external engagement while Islamabad expects its approval for the same. Pakistan's attack in Kabul and Paktika last week, when the Afghan foreign minister was visiting India, is not a coincidence. Pakistan wants the Taliban to be dependent on it, from economy and trade to foreign policy. The recent New Delhi-Kabul rapprochement has not gone down well with the Establishment.

Secondly, Pakistan wants the Taliban to give up its support to the Tehrik-e-Taliban-Pakistan (TTP). Pakistan has been accusing the Taliban of providing a safe haven for the TTP, and also Daesh and Indian proxies. The Taliban had developed close linkages with the TTP during the U.S. occupation. The Pakistani Taliban, especially the Mehsuds and Wazirs, had provided crucial support to the Taliban when Pakistan was playing a double game during 2001-21. So, it is possible that the Taliban still maintains connections with the TTP. However, Taliban disagrees with the Pakistan Establishment, and blames the latter's militant problems squarely on Pakistan itself. For the Taliban, the Daesh militants are equally a threat.

Third, within Pakistan, the Establishment has either usurped external relations vis-à-vis the Taliban and Afghanistan, or the Parliament has abdicated its responsibility of the same. Since the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, it has been the Establishment which has carried out Pakistan's Afghan policy and not the Parliament. The latter has become a mere spectator, and even a supporter. The first thing that Pakistan Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif said after the latest clashes with Afghanistan was to praise the Army Chief for his resolve. The weak civil-military relations within Pakistan have been an important factor in Pakistan's troubled relationship with all its neighbours, including Afghanistan.

Fourth, for the Taliban, the biggest issue is Islamabad's unilateral decision to deport Afghan nationals from Pakistan. Since the 1980s, Pakistan has been hosting millions of Afghans who crossed the Durand Line in multiple waves. During the 1980s and 90s, Pakistan saw Afghan nationals as an asset, and as part of its strategic interests. Now, with the Taliban at the helm, Pakistan considers the Afghans within their territory as a liability. Since 2023, Pakistan has been unilaterally deporting, first, undocumented Afghan migrants (who came into Pakistan without any valid papers or registration), and later even registered Afghan refugees. The Taliban and the Afghans are against such unilateral deportation. Even international organisations, such as the UN Human Rights Council, have criticised Pakistan's decision to deport Afghan migrants and refugees.



The fifth and final issue is the unilateral and repeated closure of border points by Pakistan in KP and Balochistan — especially at Torkham and Chaman. These two border points are not only the largest bilateral trade posts but also the primary entry and exit points for goods and people into Afghanistan. Though Afghanistan shares borders with Iran and Central Asia, historically, these two points have acted as global gateways for the movement of Afghans and of goods. Pakistan understands the strategic importance of these border points for Afghanistan; in recent years, it has repeatedly closed these two border posts, primarily as a pressure strategy against Kabul.

Pakistan sees the border points as a leverage, while Afghanistan sees them as their lifeline.

Readjusting relations

Pakistan, during the last few years, has been looking at the changing regional situation and pursuing actions to address it. Its recent rapprochement with Iran, its defence agreement with Saudi Arabia and the recent developments with the U.S. are part of this.

Similarly, the Taliban has also started to readjust to its regional environment. During recent years, it has been facing an assertive Iran, and like Islamabad, Tehran has also been deporting Afghan nationals. As mentioned above, the Taliban has opened a front with its immediate and extended neighbourhood — Moscow, Beijing and now New Delhi. Taliban needs these external engagements, not only for political reasons, but also to sustain its economy and rebuild Afghanistan.

Pakistan also has a serious internal problem in Balochistan and KP, for which the Establishment is blaming other nations, especially India.

If Pakistan sees Afghanistan as a vassal state, blaming Kabul (and India) for all its internal violence will worsen the relationship. The Establishment's control of Pakistan's Afghan policy will worsen an already bad situation.

AFGHANISTAN-PAKISTAN CONFLICT – AND WHY INDIA CARES

There is an understandable, if sometimes counterproductive, tendency in New Delhi to view Pakistan's internal tensions and contradictions only through the lens of a troubled bilateral relationship. The clash between Pakistani and Afghan forces during Afghanistan Foreign Minister and Taliban leader Amir Khan Muttaqi's visit to India, and its fallout, is a case in point. The current round of violence began with Pakistan carrying out airstrikes inside Afghan territory, and the latter retaliating by capturing military posts across the Durand Line. Security personnel have been killed on both sides. The state of ties between Rawalpindi and Kabul is certainly of strategic significance to India in particular and the region as a whole. It is also important, however, to understand the broader historical and cultural underpinnings of the current conflict, and gauge whether the leadership across the border is capable of drawing the right lessons from it.

In August 2021, when the US withdrew from Afghanistan after two decades, Islamabad did little to disguise its jubilation. It saw the return of the Taliban as an opportunity to chase, once again, the chimaera of "strategic depth". That triumphalism, however, was short-lived. Fundamental issues between the two countries that go back to Partition remained unresolved. Kabul does not recognise the Durand Line, and the Pakistani establishment's fear of "Pashtunistan" continues to colour its approach to the frontier. Rawalpindi and Islamabad accuse the Taliban of sheltering the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), and providing a haven for terrorists who attack from across the border. At the same time, the Pakistan army and government have given short shrift to bodies



like the Pashtun Tahafuz (self-respect) Movement — a peaceful organisation that seeks a dialogue on rights and autonomy. Kabul, for its part, has long resented Rawalpindi viewing it as a puppet.

The people of Pakistan, and those across countries who have suffered the consequences of the adventurism of its military-intelligence complex, are the victims of a cruel irony. Its policies have tied Islamabad's hands, and violence has become a common currency in the country's politics: Protests against Israel by the fundamentalist Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) have also witnessed violence and the deployment of security forces. The use of religion and fundamentalist non-state actors to pursue strategic ends can have no happy ending. India will closely observe the developments in Pakistan and the degree of maturity the government and army show in dealing with discontent and strategic challenges. An unstable Pakistan does not augur well for regional security.



DreamIAS



NATIONAL

TALKING TO TALIBAN

Marked by controversy, Afghanistan's Acting Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi's ongoing visit to India was meant to signal a major reset in ties between New Delhi and the Taliban. The visit was his first since the Taliban grabbed power in 2021, as was his meeting with External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar and National Security Adviser Ajit Doval. It was made possible by the UN Security Council's Sanctions committee that waived the travel ban on Mr. Muttaqi, who is on the list of sanctioned terrorists since 2001. New Delhi has strategic reasons for the warm welcome and enhanced relationship. Close ties neutralise the considerable security risk and terror threat from India's western flank, and protect India's personnel and considerable investment in projects there. The deterioration in Afghan-Pakistan ties indicates that the Taliban, as an "enemy's enemy", could prove a valuable ally. Given that the Taliban now control nearly all of Afghanistan, it would seem pragmatic to engage with them at the level other regional powers including Russia, China, Pakistan, Iran and the Central Asian states do. India has announced that it would upgrade the Indian Embassy in Kabul, a "technical mission" thus far, and that both sides will exchange diplomats. This takes India a step closer to recognising the Taliban government, something only Russia has done. India also announced initiatives to build hospitals, provide humanitarian assistance and enhance trade levels. Significantly, both sides "emphasized respect for each other's sovereignty and territorial integrity" — indicating that neither side accepts Pakistan's territorial claims. Mr. Muttaqi also affirmed that the Afghan government will not allow its territory to be used against India, a considerable shift from 2001-21 when Taliban forces targeted India's missions and infrastructure projects.

While the text of the joint statement was substantive, the headlines of the visit have been overshadowed by several missteps and poorly structured optics. The press conference at the Afghan Embassy, and the attempt to raise the flag of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan was one. It also emerged that no women journalists had been invited, leading to outrage. Two days later, Mr. Muttaqi held another, all-inclusive press conference. The government, which distanced itself from the event, missed an opportunity to express its stand on the wider question of the Taliban's ban on women's education and employment, lack of an inclusive political process, treatment of minorities and past attacks by the group. While engaging the Taliban is no doubt important, and vital, for regional security, India must clarify how far it plans to go down the road of appeasing the group, and risking its reputation, towards that end.

FORMER AFGHAN GOVT. STAFFERS FEAR FOR THEIR FUTURE

At the heart of the controversy over the Taliban acting Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi's exclusion of women from his first press conference is a deeper tussle between the Taliban regime in Kabul, which calls itself the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, and the former, democratically elected Afghan government, which refers to itself as the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, and is still recognised by India, over the control of the Afghanistan Embassy compound in New Delhi.

The Afghan diplomatic staff remaining in Delhi see the press conferences, which they claim the Indian External Affairs Ministry encouraged, as an attempt to grab control of the embassy. They now say they fear for their lives and the safety of their families.



The External Affairs Ministry has consistently said it had “no involvement in the press interaction” held by Mr. Muttaqi.

After outrage from journalists over his first press conference in Delhi last Friday, Mr. Muttaqi held a second one, inviting journalists without any gender restriction on Sunday. Even as the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan’s red, green and black flag flew on the tall flagpole in front of the embassy, the Taliban delegation used their own black and white flags.

Russia, China, Pakistan, and some Gulf and Central Asian countries have accepted the Emirate flag at their Afghan embassies, but none of the Western and East Asian countries that host the embassies of the former government have done so thus far.

“We waged jihad under this flag. We fought with the flag and won with the flag, and that’s the reason we have this flag here today,” Mr. Muttaqi said in response to a question from The Hindu on Sunday. Asked how much of the embassy they controlled, he replied “100%”, claiming all five lakh Afghan government employees and mission staff worldwide now work for the Islamic Emirate.

Recognition by India

However, the Charge d’ Affaires of the Afghanistan Embassy in Delhi, Mohammad Ibrahimkhil, who was present at the press conference, said the claim was “not correct”.

“This is a lie. Until the Indian government recognises the Taliban government, this embassy is with the Republic, and our flag is flying on Shantipath (where the Afghan embassy is situated in New Delhi). When India recognises them, we will respectfully leave, and hand the MEA the keys to the embassy. Then it is for the MEA to decide whether India will fly the Emirate flag of the Taliban here,” one of the staffers, who unsuccessfully tried to stop the Taliban delegation from putting up its flags, said.

With India now agreeing to upgrade its technical mission to an embassy in Kabul and Mr. Muttaqi’s announcement that India will now accept the Emirate’s diplomats, the staff members said they would be powerless to resist any further takeover and fear losing their jobs and their safety if they were forced to return to Afghanistan.

The External Affairs Ministry did not respond to questions posed by The Hindu on the situation at the embassy and at what level India and the acting Government of Afghanistan would exchange diplomats following the agreement announced by External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar.

ENGAGEMENT WITHOUT RECOGNITION: INDIA & NEW AFGHANISTAN

Among the developments which Muttaqi’s unprecedented visit has yielded is India’s decision to re-establish the Embassy in Kabul. Since June 2022, almost a year after the Taliban took power, the Embassy has been functioning as a downgraded “technical mission”, principally to coordinate the distribution of humanitarian aid and development efforts.

— Despite reopening its Embassy, however, India continues to refrain from formally recognising the Taliban-led government in Kabul.

— The actions of recognising a government or state, and establishing an embassy in that state, are distinct political acts which are governed by different norms of international law and practice



— Officially recognising the Taliban-run Islamic Emirate would entail India's acceptance of its de jure nature. This would in turn mean that India deems the Taliban's violent displacement of an elected government in 2021, to be a legitimate form of governmental transition within a recognised state.

— This would be similar to when India, in the 1980s, became the sole country to recognise the legitimacy of the Soviet-backed Democratic Republic of Afghanistan that was established after the 1978 coup.

— However, this does not mean that India cannot use traditional diplomatic tools to engage with the de facto entity ruling Afghanistan. Engaging with the Taliban does not violate any norms of international law as they presently stand (lex lata).

— International conventions such as the Vienna Conventions on Diplomatic Relations (1961) and Consular Relations (1963) are functional documents meant to standardise and codify international practice regarding the rights and responsibilities of diplomatic and consular missions of a sending state, in a receiving state. They do not (and are not meant to) classify when a state can or cannot formally recognise a government.

— Cumulatively, along with India's own steady increase in diplomatic interactions with the Taliban across the last two years, this has meant the assertive use of an 'engagement-without-recognition' model.

— India has used this model even for other states (such as Taiwan) or governments (such as the Myanmar junta) which it does not recognise. The former is represented by the Taiwan Economic and Cultural Centre in New Delhi, and the latter controls the Myanmar Embassy through staff appointed by the de facto military leadership ruling Myanmar from 2021.

— India's model for engagement is also not reliant on future recognition of the Taliban government, even if the possibility of a future Taliban-designated Ambassador in New Delhi remains. Notably, it is not unusual for Embassies to function without Ambassadors.

— Unlike avenues of diplomatic interaction, the question of granting political recognition is more linked with international practice. As the formal representative of the international comity of nations, the United Nations' (UN's) recognition in particular is a benchmark for legitimacy and remains the Taliban's foremost foreign policy goal.

— Broadly, Kabul must satisfy the UN on three fronts: an inclusive government, dismantling terror groups operating in Afghanistan, and respect for human rights and liberties, especially of women and girls. Given the Taliban's failure to meet a satisfactory threshold for all three thus far, the UN continues to reject the group's efforts to claim Afghanistan's UN seat. In November, 2024, the UNGA Credentials Committee rejected the Taliban's request for the fourth year in a row.

— More functionally, the UN's non-recognition also leaves other states' abilities to host Taliban senior representatives subject to UN permissions. Muttaqi's ongoing visit to New Delhi was itself possible due to the UNSC 1988 Sanctions Committee approving an exemption to his international travel ban on September 30.

— Even as they push their own forms of engagement-without-recognition, regional states are also seemingly united in their opposition to foreign militaries in Afghanistan which could raise the spectre of violence again.



— India joined other states (including Pakistan) in the latest Moscow Format Consultations on Afghanistan to reiterate this position, especially in light of US President Trump's recent efforts to regain control of the Bagram airbase in Afghanistan's Parwan Province.

—Muttaqi's remarks across events in New Delhi focused on showing Afghanistan to be a positive investment environment, with the Taliban also inviting Indian firms to invest in Afghanistan's mining sector.

— He reiterated Afghanistan's continuing interest in connectivity projects such as the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas pipeline and increased transit through the Chabahar port in Iran.

— Even as Pakistan remains an unavoidable obstacle for TAPI and India's investment in the Chabahar port remains vulnerable to US sanctions, the Taliban's need to unlock greater Indian engagement remains.

Do You Know:

— According to the Asian Development Bank, the TAPI Pipeline extends for approx. 1,600 kilometres (km), from the Turkmenistan (TKM)-Afghanistan (AFG) border to the Pakistan (PAK)-India (IND) border. At full capacity, the pipeline will transport 33 billion cubic meters (bcm) of natural gas annually from TKM to respective buyers in AFG (5%), PAK (47.5%) and IND (47.5%) during the 30-year commercial operations period.

— Since Taliban captured Kabul in 2021, the global situation has changed. Taliban's ally, Pakistan, has turned into an adversary; Iran has been weakened; Russia is fighting its own war; the US is behaving differently under Trump 2.0; and China is making inroads by exchanging ambassadors with Taliban.

— This explains India's move to upgrade the level of official engagement with Taliban — or it will lose out on years of investment in Afghanistan, which is significant to its security calculations.

—Express View: The series of engagements confirms that New Delhi recognises the ground reality that the Taliban is the only force, for now, that appears capable of controlling all of Afghanistan. It is also an acknowledgement that, in a highly competitive neighbourhood, maintaining ties with the Taliban is a geostrategic necessity.

INDIA, MONGOLIA INK 10 PACTS, TIES ELEVATED TO STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP

India on Tuesday decided to fund an oil refinery project, give training to Mongolian armed forces, give free e-visas to Mongolian citizens and have cultural ties between Ladakh and a province of the east Asian nation as Prime Minister Narendra Modi and visiting Mongolian President Khurelsukh Ukhnaa met Tuesday.

— After the bilateral meeting at Hyderabad House, PM Modi said the two countries had elevated their ties to a strategic partnership of about 10 years. They signed 10 pacts in the area of cultural exchange, immigration cooperation, promotion of cooperatives, humanitarian aid, geology and mineral resources, yoga and renovation of the Bogd Khan Palace.

— "India has been a strong and reliable partner in Mongolia's development. The Oil Refinery Project, supported by India's \$1.7 billion line of credit, will strengthen Mongolia's energy security.



It is India's largest development partnership project globally, with over 2,500 Indian professionals working alongside Mongolian counterparts," Modi said.

— Terming the two nations "spiritual siblings" as they share the age-old bond of Buddhism, the PM said, "Next year, the holy relics of two great disciples of Lord Buddha — Sariputra and Maudgalyayana — will be sent from India to Mongolia."

— He said, "We have also strengthened our cooperation in skill development. Through the Atal Bihari Vajpayee Centre of Excellence for IT and the India-Mongolia Friendship School, the aspirations of Mongolia's youth are reaching new heights."

— President Khurelsukh planted a banyan tree in honour of his late mother as part of the initiative "Ek Ped Maa Ke Naam". He hailed India's leading role in the clean energy sector and specifically referred to the New Delhi-led International Solar Alliance.

— MEA's Secretary (East) P Kumaran said, "Critical minerals and renewable energy... Mongolia has large reserves of coking coal... and India buys coking coal from a variety of partners including Canada, Indonesia, Australia etc. Mongolia offers itself as a potential partner for this. The difficulty of course happens to be the fact that Mongolia is landlocked and depends on ports and neighbouring countries to be able to ship out the coal. Most of their coal is currently exported to China."

Do You Know:

— The 17th edition of India-Mongolia Joint Military Exercise NOMADIC ELEPHANT is being conducted in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia, from 31st May to 13th June 2025.

— It is an annual event conducted alternately in India and Mongolia. The 2024 edition was conducted at Umroi, Meghalaya.

EXECUTION OF NIMISHA PRIYA IN YEMEN STALLED, CENTRE TELLS SC

The Supreme Court on Thursday was informed by the Centre that "nothing adverse was happening" in the case of Indian nurse Nimisha Priya, who faces execution in Yemen for murder, and that a new mediator had stepped in to facilitate discussions.

A Bench of Justices Vikram Nath and Sandeep Mehta was hearing a petition filed by the International Action Council, which has been extending legal assistance to Ms. Priya in its efforts to save her life. The execution, earlier slated for July 16, was postponed following diplomatic interventions by the Indian government and efforts by Kanthapuram A.P. Aboobacker Musliyar, a

Ms. Priya, who hails from Palakkad in Kerala, was sentenced to death by a Yemeni trial court in 2020 for the murder of a local man who was her business partner. Her appeals were subsequently dismissed by the appellate courts in Yemen. "Her only child, a 12-year-old girl, is living in a convent. Her mother is a domestic helper in Ernakulam and her husband is an autorickshaw driver," the petition stated.

Earlier, the counsel for the petitioner had told the top court that the payment of blood money to the victim's family, permissible under Sharia law, could be explored as an avenue for relief. He had submitted that the victim's family might pardon Ms. Priya if blood money were paid.



FLAWED ORDER

More than two weeks have passed since 41 people died after a crowd crush at a political rally of actor-politician Vijay and his party, the Tamilaga Vettri Kazhagam (TVK) in Karur. Yet, far from establishing culpability, the judicial response risks prioritising political narrative over factual inquiry. On October 13, the Supreme Court of India's intervention, transferring the investigation to the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) and appointing a supervisory committee, was ostensibly meant to restore order after procedural disarray at the Madras High Court. The Court's move seems to have arisen because of the sharp remarks, perhaps unwarranted, by a single judge at the Madras High Court about Mr. Vijay and the TVK, neither of whom was a party in a case about rally protocols that did not directly concern the Karur incident (which fell under the Madurai Bench's jurisdiction). But the Court has created new problems. It has granted the petitioners' demands for a CBI investigation and judicial supervision as "interim relief", yet the measures are irreversible. Once the CBI files a charge sheet, there can be no reversion to State police investigation. The Court's rationale for the CBI transfer is equally problematic. It cites press conferences by senior State officials as attempts to exonerate subordinates, casting a doubt on investigative impartiality. But this amounts to a gag order on public officials. After the incident, Mr. Vijay and his supporters alleged conspiracy. Should State officials refrain from responding to grave allegations amplified across social media merely to appear neutral? Presenting factual evidence, including footage, should not automatically prejudice an investigation. This is too flimsy a ground for a transfer of the case to the CBI, once described by the Court as a caged parrot of the Centre. Ironically, the Court cited *State of West Bengal and Ors. vs The Committee for Protection of Democratic Rights, West Bengal and Ors. (2010)*, which warns against ordering CBI investigations "as a matter of routine or merely because a party has levelled some allegations against the local police", undermining its own reasoning.

The order devotes considerable attention to police "inaction" and crowd management failures but makes no mention of the TVK's or leaders' responsibilities in organising the rally. The Court may be seen as pre-judging who was at fault. It notes that the TVK was not made a party in the High Court proceedings, yet does not consider what this could mean for a balanced inquiry. Following the interim order, it is unclear what remains to be adjudicated at the final stage. It remains to be seen how the Court will address allegations that one petitioner was unaware of the petition filed in his name, and that another litigant, who abandoned his family years ago, is not a 'real' representative of a child victim. Justice requires affixing clear responsibility to deter chaos, not proceedings that muddy accountability.

DECODING SUPREME COURT ORDER ALLOWING GREEN CRACKERS

In a significant move ahead of the festive season, the Supreme Court on Wednesday relaxed the absolute ban on the sale and use of firecrackers in the Delhi-National Capital Region (NCR), allowing government-approved "green crackers" on a "test case basis".

— The order, passed by a bench of Chief Justice of India B R Gavai and Justice K Vinod Chandran, attempts to strike a balance between the livelihood concerns of the firecracker industry, festive traditions and the public health crisis caused by air pollution in the region every winter.

— The Supreme Court has laid down a strict regulatory framework for this temporary relaxation.

— The court's reasoning stems from a desire to find a "balanced approach" after acknowledging that the complete ban had its own set of problems.



— First, the court noted that despite the ban, conventional and highly polluting firecrackers were being smuggled into the NCR and used rampantly. It reasoned that allowing a less-polluting alternative like green crackers in a regulated manner could be more effective than a complete ban that is difficult to enforce.

— Second, the development of green crackers, which the court was informed could reduce particulate emissions by 30-80%, presented a viable middle path. The order acknowledged the work done by NEERI in developing the chemical formulations for these less-polluting crackers.

— Third, both the Union and Delhi governments argued in favour of relaxing the ban, assuring the court of strict compliance with norms. This marked a shift from the previous stance, where the Delhi government had imposed a year-round ban.

— Finally, the court considered the economic hardship faced by the firecracker industry and its workers, as well as the concerns of neighbouring states like Haryana, Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan, large parts of which fall under the NCR and were affected by the ban.

— However, as air quality in the NCR continued to plummet each winter, the National Green Tribunal in 2020 imposed an “absolute” ban on the sale or use of firecrackers in NCR during the Diwali period.

— The term ‘green cracker’ does not mean it is pollution-free. It refers to a formulation developed by the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) and NEERI to have a reduced environmental impact compared to traditional firecrackers.

They do not contain harmful chemicals like barium nitrate, arsenic, lithium and mercury.

They are designed to release water vapour or dust suppressants that trap a portion of the particulate matter generated.

They are claimed to reduce PM2.5 emissions by at least 30%.

They have a lower noise intensity, capped at 120 decibels.

Manufacturers must obtain a licence from the Petroleum and Explosives Safety Organisation and a certificate from CSIR-NEERI to produce and sell them. Authentic green crackers can be identified by a green logo and a QR code on the packaging.

Do You Know:

— Graded Response Action Plan (GRAP) is a set of emergency measures that kick in to prevent further deterioration of air quality once it reaches a certain threshold. Stage 1 of GRAP is activated when the AQI is in the ‘poor’ category (201 to 300). The second, third and fourth stages will be activated three days ahead of the AQI reaching the ‘very poor’ category (301 to 400), ‘severe’ category (401 to 450) and ‘severe +’ category (above 450) respectively.

— The GRAP was first notified in January 2017 by the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change. This was based on a plan that was submitted by the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB) in November 2016.

— According to the notification, the task of implementing the GRAP fell on the now-dissolved Environment Pollution (Prevention and Control) Authority for the NCR. From 2021 onwards, the GRAP is being implemented by the Commission for Air Quality Management (CAQM).



— The Commission for Air Quality Management in NCR and Adjoining Areas (CAQM) was constituted through the CAQM Act, 2021, which came into force in the same year on April 13.

— The air quality monitoring body is tasked with better coordination, research, identification, and resolution of problems surrounding the air quality index and related matters in NCR and adjoining areas. It has the power to take measures, issue directions and entertain complaints to protect and improve the air quality in the region.

SC WON'T LIFT STAY ON QUOTA IN TELANGANA CIVIC POLLS

The Supreme Court on Thursday declined to interfere with a Telangana High Court order that had stayed two Government Orders enhancing the reservation for Other Backward Classes (OBCs) in municipalities and panchayats to 42%.

A Bench of Justices Vikram Nath and Sandeep Mehta declined to stay the High Court's interim order, observing that it could not take a view inconsistent with Constitution Bench rulings that have fixed a 50% ceiling on total reservations in local body elections. However, it said that local body elections could proceed without the proposed hike in OBC quotas.

"You may continue with your elections... [State's appeal] dismissed. This will not prevent the High Court from deciding the matter on its own merits," the Bench told the State.

The Telangana Government had approached the Supreme Court challenging the High Court's October 9 order, which halted its move to raise the OBC quota in local bodies. The High Court had found that the proposed increase would push the total reservation, including 15% for Scheduled Castes and 10% for Scheduled Tribes, to 67%, breaching the 50% ceiling prescribed by the Supreme Court in earlier rulings. It had, however, clarified that there was no impediment to holding local body elections, and directed the State Election Commission (SEC) to conduct the polls while capping the overall reservation at 50%.

Polling for the Telangana local body elections is scheduled for October 23 and 27.

'Policy decision'

During the proceedings, senior advocate Abhishek Manu Singhvi, appearing for the State, argued that the enhanced quota was a "policy decision" aimed at empowering marginalised communities and that there was "a misconception that reservations cannot exceed 50%." He referred to the 1992 judgment in *Indra Sawhney v. Union of India*, which upheld the Mandal Commission recommendations, to contend that the 50% ceiling could be breached in exceptional circumstances. "It is a policy decision by the elected government to benefit marginalised classes. How can it be stayed without pleadings? Barring the first few pages, no reasons have been given for the stay," he said, referring to the High Court's order.

The Bench, however, questioned the State on the timing of the decision, asking why the reservation hike had not been introduced before the issuance of the election notification.

In response, Mr. Singhvi submitted that the delay arose because the Governor had withheld assent to the Bill.

When the Bench pointed out that the Bill had yet to receive formal assent, the senior counsel referred to the Supreme Court's April ruling in the Tamil Nadu Governor case, that the concept of "deemed assent" now applied if the Governor failed to act within a stipulated time period.



A Division Bench headed by Justice J.B. Pardiwala had held that laws which remain pending with the President and Governor beyond the specified three-month deadline would be “deemed” as approved.

However, a month after the ruling, a reference was sought by the President under Article 143 seeking clarity on whether the judiciary can fix timelines for the President and State Governors to clear State Bills.

The Judges also questioned whether the State had complied with the parameters laid down in its 2010 ruling in *K. Krishna Murthy v. Union of India*, which mandates a “triple test” — identification of backwardness, determination of inadequate representation, and ensuring administrative efficiency — before extending reservation to local self-government institutions.

‘Prior precedents’

Opposing the State’s plea, senior advocate Gopal Sankaranarayanan, representing social activist Buttemgari Madhava Reddy, who had challenged the government orders before the High Court, cited the Supreme Court’s 2021 ruling in *Vikas Kishanrao Gawali*, which had reaffirmed that reservations in local body elections cannot exceed 50%. “The High Court’s order strictly followed these rulings,” he said, pointing out that the State’s ordinances had also lapsed on August 30, rendering the subsequent government orders legally untenable.

The Bench appeared to concur with this view, telling Mr. Singhvi, “You cannot expect us to take a view different from the Constitution Bench about the 50% ceiling,” before dismissing the appeal.

GOVT TO DELHI HC: CHRI DIVERTED FUNDS TO BENEFIT BANGLADESH, PAKISTAN, AFGHANISTAN

The government has told the Delhi High Court that the FCRA registration of the NGO Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI) was cancelled because foreign contributions received by the organisation had been “diverted towards activities benefiting countries/ citizens such as Bangladesh, Pakistan and Afghanistan”.

— This “diversion of benefits to unfriendly nations constitutes a grave concern and poses a potential threat to national security”, the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) has said in an affidavit submitted to the court.

— CHRI’s registration under The Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act, 2010 (FCRA) was cancelled in September 2024 after the NGO “came under adverse notice through the inputs of the Security Agency”.

— The MHA’s affidavit is learnt to have made at least three specific allegations. First, that CHRI used foreign contributions on activities outside Indian territories in contravention of the FCRA.

— Second, as per the affidavit, CHRI deposited consultation fees amounting to almost Rs 32 lakh in its FCRA account, even though this sum was not FC.

— Third, the affidavit states CHRI provided “incomplete information” in statutory form FC-4 for FY-2018-19 by not providing details of the activities/ projects for which FC was received and utilised, and “incorrect information” for FY 2013-14 and FY 2018-19 on opening and closing balances.



— CHRI was founded in 1987 as a public charity in the UK, and brought to India in 1993 by the late jurist Soli Sorabjee. On June 7, 2021, its registration certificate under FCRA was suspended for six months (and later extended) over five alleged violations.

— CHRI had moved the HC at the time seeking quashing of the suspension order. As an interim relief, the court had allowed CHRI to use 25% of the FC towards payment of salaries to staff and consultants on humanitarian grounds. However, CHRI's challenge to the suspension order was dismissed in February 2022.

Do You Know:

— The FCRA was enacted during the Emergency in 1976 amid apprehensions that foreign powers were interfering in India's affairs by pumping money into the country through independent organisations. These concerns were, in fact, even older — they had been expressed in Parliament as early as in 1969.

— The law sought to regulate foreign donations to individuals and associations so that they functioned "in a manner consistent with the values of a sovereign democratic republic".

— In May this year, the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) has amended the rules under the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA) and henceforth, NGOs engaged in publication-related activities and receiving foreign contributions will not be able to publish any newsletter and must get a certificate from the Registrar of Newspapers for India that it does not circulate any news content.

APPOINT NODAL OFFICERS TO TRACE MISSING CHILDREN: SC

The Supreme Court on Tuesday directed the Union government to instruct all States and Union Territories to depute a nodal officer to handle cases of missing children and to provide their names and contact details for publication on the Mission Vatsalya portal operated by the Ministry of Women and Child Development.

The court was hearing a public interest litigation petition filed by the non-profit organisation, Guria Swayam Sevi Sansthan, which highlighted the rising number of missing children across several States who remain untraced.

A Bench of Justices B.V. Nagarathna and R. Mahadevan observed, "We direct the Union of India to communicate to each State and Union Territory to depute a nodal officer responsible for cases of missing children and to make available their name and telephone number so that these details may be uploaded on the Mission Vatsalya portal."

The Bench further directed that whenever a complaint regarding a missing child is received on the portal, the information should be simultaneously shared with the respective nodal officers. They must then take prompt action to trace the child, identify and investigate the perpetrators, and register additional complaints where necessary.

E-portal for tracing

In an earlier hearing, the court had directed the Centre to develop an online platform to trace missing children, allowing police agencies across States and Union Territories to share information and coordinate investigations.



Appearing for the Centre, Additional Solicitor-General Aishwarya Bhati informed the Bench that such a system was already in place through the Mission Vatsalya portal. She added that two earlier platforms, TrackChild and Khoya-Paya, had been integrated into it, and that 14 stakeholders were currently participating in the initiative.

Ms. Bhati submitted that any citizen who came across a missing child, or any parent or guardian seeking to report a missing child, could directly access the portal to file a complaint.

However, Justice Nagarathna remarked that there was “hardly any dissemination of information” among the stakeholders concerned despite the existence of a dedicated portal.

“There has to be cooperation between the State and the Centre in this... this is how you make it workable,” she said.

Senior advocate Aparna Bhat, assisting the court as amicus curiae, drew attention to a recent surge in cases of child abduction and trafficking, observing that authorities had failed to take timely and effective action.

Better coordination

The Bench directed that the deputed nodal officers must establish a coordinated network across districts, States, and Union Territories to ensure efficient dissemination and collection of information.

The court granted four weeks to the Centre to collect details of nodal officers from all States and Union Territories and to upload the information on the Mission Vatsalya portal.

APEX COURT FORMS PANEL TO RECOMMEND EQUAL OPPORTUNITY POLICY FOR TRANSGENDER PERSONS

The Supreme Court on Friday set up a committee under former Delhi High Court judge Justice Asha Menon to formulate, among others, an equal opportunity policy for transgender individuals and to suggest measures for inclusive medical care and protection for gender non-conforming and gender-diverse persons.

— A two-judge bench presided by Justice J B Pardiwala directed this while awarding compensation to a trans woman teacher, who alleged that her services were unlawfully terminated by a school in Gujarat and one in Uttar Pradesh over her gender identity.

— The court said that it has formulated guidelines and “if any establishment does not have guidelines, we have prescribed that you will follow these guidelines till the Union comes out with policy”

— The plea said the petitioner, Jane Kaushik, was offered a position of a trained graduate teacher, English and Social Sciences, at Children’s Academy in Uttar Pradesh “after undergoing a rigorous selection process in November 2022”.

— “The Petitioner worked for a total of 8 days from 25.11.22 to 2.12.22 during which she was continuously subjected to body shaming, harassment and derogatory name-calling,” the plea said, adding that the petitioner was finally “forced” to resign over the threat that her compensation would be withheld.



— Last month, the Supreme Court bench comprising Chief Justice B R Gavai and Justice K Vinod Chandra issued legal notices to the central government, NCERT, and state governments of Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Punjab, Tamil Nadu, and Karnataka, asking them to explain why school curricula are non-inclusive for transgender students.

— Following the measures to enhance transgender students' access to educational institutions, there should be a mechanism to ensure their postadmission inclusion. It requires a radical change in the culture of the institution.

— Deborah Zalesne rightly notes, "Society (and the law) has learned to view biological sex as the determinant of gender." Postadmission discrimination based on sex occurs due to biological differences among trans persons, women, and men — particularly citing differences in their external genitalia. Non-provision of separate toilets in schools for transgender students is nothing but discrimination based on sex.

— Thus, without inclusive curricula, access of students from equity-deserving groups remains a half victory.

SC CONFIDENT EC WILL REVEAL BIHAR VOTER DATA, REFUSES ORDER

The Supreme Court on Thursday declined to issue a specific direction to the Election Commission (EC) to publish the individual details of voters added or deleted from the final electoral roll in Bihar after the special intensive revision (SIR). It had "no doubt" that the poll body would ultimately discharge its responsibilities, the court said.

The EC declared that it would publish everything only after the deadline for nominations ends on October 20, and also objected to having this assurance recorded in an order.

"We have no doubt that they know their responsibility. After doing the deletions and additions, which are bound to be there, they are bound to publish it... It is an ongoing exercise which is yet to finally culminate into a final list," Justice Surya Kant, heading the Bench with Justice Joymalya Bagchi, observed.

Over 21.5 lakh voters were added in the final roll, while 3.66 lakh names were deleted, in addition to the 65 lakh removed in the draft list.

Appearing for the petitioners, advocate Prashant Bhushan questioned why the revision process had such a "minimal level of transparency". He told the Bench that the lakhs of voters had neither been given notice nor informed of the reasons for their removal. "The ECI is saying that they have informed them. How can these claims be verified? The only way to do this is to put all the lists of additions and deletions on the website so that people can check," Mr. Bhushan submitted.

Denying his claim, senior advocate Rakesh Dwivedi, appearing for the EC, said, "The voters know everything. He is only interested in the analysis of the data. He can wait for some time. Let the elections be completed first." He told the court that the Commission is in the process of publishing the final electoral roll, which will be completed in line with the nomination deadlines — October 17 for the first phase of elections and October 20 for the second. Voting is scheduled to take place in two phases, on November 6 and November 11. "After October 20, we will publish everything. There is no doubt," he assured the Bench.



While declining to issue a formal direction, Justice Kant orally observed that the final voter list, after disposal of appeals filed by those excluded, must be provided to all political parties and polling agents. He also said that the poll body is “expected” to fix the typographical errors in the final list, which were previously flagged by the petitioners.

Mr. Bhushan questioned the court’s reliance on the EC’s assurances, arguing that if it were truly a “responsible” body, it would have already disclosed the details of voters whose names appeared in the draft rolls but were missing from the final list.

“Let us see what they publish first. We are not closing the chapter,” Justice Kant remarked.

THE VOTING PATTERNS OF MUSLIMS IN SEEMANCHAL

Muslim voters are often said to vote en-bloc. This assumption has been applied to the Muslims of Seemanchal in Bihar as well, largely due to the surprising rise of Asaduddin Owaisi’s party All India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen (AIMIM) in 2020.

However, this is hardly the case. Around 28% of Bihar’s 2.31 crore Muslim population live in the Seemanchal region comprising Kishanganj, Katihar, Araria and Purnia districts. While almost all of them are from the Sunni denomination of Islam, the community is not homogeneous.

Caste composition

Muslims in Seemanchal are broadly divided into three castes — the Surjapuri, Shershahbadi and Kulhaiya castes. Although the differences between them are not very obvious to an outsider, these three caste groups differ culturally, rarely intermarry, and speak distinct dialects. The dialects originate from a mixture of Maithili and Bangla, diluted with words borrowed from Hindi and Urdu. The dialect spoken by Shershahbadis is closer to Bangla, while the Kulhaiya dialect is closer to Maithili. Surjapuri lies somewhere in the middle, with heavy dilution from Urdu words.

However, the biggest difference between the caste groups depends on which Sunni Islamic movement they follow — Barelvi, Deobandi, or Ahle Hadith. Surjapuris are divided between Barelvi and Deobandi, with a larger section leaning towards the former. The Kulhaiyas are predominantly Deobandi, while Shershahbadis largely follow Ahle Hadith. Barelvi, Deobandi and Ahle Hadith are three Sunni Islamic movements in South Asia. Barelvis embrace Sufism, veneration of saints, and the celebration of Prophet Muhammad’s birthday. Deobandis are more reformist, discourage excessive saint veneration and innovations, while maintaining some Sufi influence in a stricter form. Ahle Hadith adherents rely directly on the Quran and Hadith, opposing any religious customs not found in early Islamic texts.

Earlier, all three groups — the Surjapuri, Shershahbadi and Kulhaiya — were identified as Shaikh, one of the three castes categorised as upper-caste Muslims along with Pathan and Syed. However, due to the historical backwardness of the region and changes in political representation, Shershahbadis and Kulhaiyas were included in the list of Extremely Backward Classes (EBC), while Surjapuris remained in the Backward Caste category. The Bihar caste Census 2023 identifies Surjapuris as the third largest Muslim caste group (after Shaikh and Ansari) with a population of around 24.5 lakh people. The Shershahbadis have around 13 lakh, and Kulhaiyas, 12.5 lakh. There is also a fourth caste derived from Shaikh called the Sekhra, with a population of about 2.5 lakh in Seemanchal. In addition, there are Muslims from different castes who have migrated from different parts of Bihar to Seemanchal for business purposes. They are collectively referred to by



locals as Pachhimas, meaning Westerners or those coming from the west, particularly from the region around the Begusarai district.

The Surjapuri Muslims mainly live in Kishanganj, Purnia and Katihar districts. Araria is dominated by Kulhaiya Muslims, with a considerable population also living in Purnia. Shershahbadi Muslims primarily live in Katihar, with a considerable presence in Kishanganj.

Shifting trends

Caste awareness and voting along caste lines is a recent phenomenon among the Muslims of Seemanchal. These political shifts began around 2000, and by 2010, the change had become visible.

Before 2000, there were Muslim MLAs from all four prominent castes in Seemanchal. Mohammad Hussain Azad, Rafique Alam, Abdul Jalil Mastan (Amour), Abdus Subhan, Islamuddin, Najmuddin, Mohammad Suleman, Abdul Jalil (Kadwa) and Usman Ghani from the Surjapuri caste; Mohammad Taslimuddin, Hasibur Rahman, Motiur Rahman, Halimuddin Ahmed, Muzaffar Hussain and Beula Doza from Kulhaiyas; Mohammad Shakoor, Mubarak Hussain and Mansoor Alam from Shershahbadis; and Mohammad Azimuddin from the Sekhra caste were elected MLAs from different constituencies of Seemanchal. Many of them got elected from seats not dominated by their castes.

However, this well-distributed representation, which reflected the saying *Jiski jitni sankhya bhaari, Uski utni hisse daari* (the greater one's numbers, the greater one's share), was not reflected at the Lok Sabha level. The Kishanganj Lok Sabha constituency, dominated by Surjapuri Muslims, was represented either by Kulhaiya leaders like Mohammad Tahir, Jamilur Rahman, Halimuddin Ahmed and Mohammad Taslimuddin, or by upper-caste Muslim leaders such as Syed Shahabuddin, Syed Shahnawaz Hussain, or parachute politicians like M.J. Akbar.

It took a tall Surjapuri leader, Maulana Asrarul Haque Qasmi, a well-known Islamic scholar who served as general secretary of the Jamiat Ulema-e-Hind, 24 years to get elected from Kishanganj. He first contested in the 1985 byelection but could only win in the 2009 general elections, when Surjapuri Muslims collectively rallied behind him against the incumbent Mohammad Taslimuddin, a Kulhaiya. After that, in 2014, Mr. Taslimuddin shifted his base to neighbouring Araria, a Kulhaiya-dominated constituency.

In subsequent elections, Surjapuri Muslims continued to dominate the Kishanganj seat, reaching a peak in the last Lok Sabha elections which saw a triangular contest between three Surjapuri Muslim candidates — Mohammad Jawaid from the Congress, Mujahid Alam from the Janata Dal (United), and Akhtarul Iman from the AIMIM. Meanwhile, Mr. Taslimuddin's family has maintained dominance in Araria, winning or losing in close contests since 2014. Katihar's long wait for local Muslim representation in Parliament continues as Tarique Anwar, a Syed from Arwal, has held sway there for 50 years.

The present scenario

Since 2000, the number of Surjapuri MLAs in the Bihar assembly has ranged between five and seven, Kulhaiya between one and two, Sekhra between zero and one, while MLAs from the most vilified Shershahbadi community has dropped from two to zero.

Out of the 24 Assembly constituencies in Seemanchal, 11 were won by Muslim MLAs in 2020. Of these, six are Surjapuri, two Kulhaiyas, one Sekhra, and two upper-caste Muslims. The number of



Muslim MLAs in the region was the same in 2015, but then there were seven Surjapuri MLAs and only one upper-caste Muslim MLA. Purnia's Baisi seat is currently represented by Syed Ruknuddin Ahmad, an upper-caste Muslim whose family has traditionally managed a local dargah, a shrine revered by Bareilvi Muslims. Senior Congress leader Shakeel Ahmad Khan, also an upper-caste Muslim, has consecutively won from Katihar's Kadwa seat.

Just like the Kishanganj Lok Sabha seat, in many seats the caste equation has now stabilised. All four Assembly seats in the Kishanganj district — Kochadhaman, Bahadurganj, Kishanganj and Thakurganj — along with Katihar's Balrampur, are dominated by Surjapuri Muslims. Araria district's Jokihat and Araria are traditional Kulhaiya seats. Purnia's Amour and Baisi are largely Surjapuri-dominated but have a significant Kulhaiya population. Katihar's Pranpur has a mix of Surjapuri and Shershahbadi populations, while Kadwa has a large Surjapuri population. Katihar's Barari, Manihari and Korha, and Kishanganj's Thakurganj and Kishanganj seats, have a considerable Shershahbadi population.

Sekhra Muslims are numerically significant in the Araria assembly seat, although the only current Sekhra MLA represents Purnia's Kasba, which has a notable Kulhaiya and Shershahbadi presence.

It is now almost impossible for a non-Surjapuri Muslim candidate to win from Kochadhaman, Bahadurganj, Kishanganj, Thakurganj and Balrampur. Similarly, a non-Kulhaiya Muslim cannot hope to win from Jokihat, and the Araria assembly seat is also difficult for a non-Kulhaiya Muslim candidate. Amour and Baisi, though Surjapuri-dominated, often see strong Kulhaiya candidates. Pranpur is the only seat where a prominent Shershahbadi Muslim candidate has appeared in the last few elections. Manihari is reserved for Scheduled Tribes, Korha for Scheduled Castes, while none of the major alliances now field Muslim candidates in Barari.

The Mahagathbandhan (grand alliance) in Bihar, which is the Opposition alliance, comprising the Rashtriya Janata Dal, Congress, Left parties and others will respect the caste dominance in their ticket distribution this time as well. The AIMIM which had tasted success in five seats of Seemanchal by unifying Surjapuri-Kulhaiya votes is making the same attempt again in these elections. The AIMIM Bihar chief Akhtarul Iman is a prominent Surjapuri leader and the incumbent MLA from Amour. However, the party has announced a Kulhaiya candidate in the neighbouring Baisi seat, in an attempt to unite Surjapuri-Kulhaiya votes in the region, and it is given that the party's candidate in the neighbouring seat, Jokihat, will be a Kulhaiya.

Note:

Muslims account for 17.7% of Bihar's population, but just a few of them are on the candidate lists of political parties.

No party has named more than four Muslim candidates, apart from the Jan Suraaj Party, which has promised to field 40 Muslims and announced 21 already.

The Muslim population is over 20% in 87 constituencies. About 75% of the Muslims in the State lives in northern Bihar. In recent years, the Muslim population in Seemanchal, or border, districts of Katihar, Purnea, and Araria, has gone up to 40%, while Muslims are in a majority in Kishanganj district, accounting for over 68% of the population.



REFUGEES, INFILTRATORS

Union Home Minister Amit Shah has rightly stressed the need to make a distinction between refugees and infiltrators. Though valid, the problem lies in the application of objective parameters by those in power to make a distinction. Even where proper policy and a legal framework exist, issues may arise. Also at play is the level of official understanding. In India, which is not a signatory to the 1951 UN Convention on the Status of Refugees and the 1967 Protocol, there is no comprehensive single law defining who a refugee is, leaving scope for arbitrary action. Till the end of March 2025, apart from the Citizenship Act 1955 and the Passports Act 1967, three laws (the Foreigners Act, 1946, the Registration of Foreigners Act, 1939 and the Passport (Entry into India) Act, 1920) were applied to deal with foreign nationals, including refuge seekers. From April, the Immigration and Foreigners Act replaced the three pre-Independence laws and subsumed the Immigration (Carriers' Liability) Act, 2000. While this streamlined the legal framework, the absence of a refugee policy document has also led to different yardsticks for the refugee community in India. While there was a rehabilitation policy in 2014 for about 63,000 Tibetan refugees, there is no such document for the nearly 90,000 Sri Lankan Tamils. At the end of June 2023, the population of refugees or persons of concern in India was over 2.11 lakh (also counting those from Myanmar, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Africa and West Asia). Any undocumented or overstaying refugee is regarded as an illegal migrant (Citizenship Act). He can also be called an infiltrator. Thus, genuine and harmless refugees risk facing harassment.

Even though the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019 was aimed at providing citizenship to six religious minorities belonging to Bangladesh, Pakistan and Afghanistan, it drew sharp criticism as it discriminated on the lines of religion and left out sections of Muslims, and also Sri Lankan Tamils and the Rohingya, both minorities in their countries. But in a notification last month, undocumented or overstaying Tamil refugees, who have registered themselves with the authorities, were granted exemption from penal provisions of the Immigration and Foreigners Act, provided they took shelter in India on or before January 9, 2015. Other groups too have been covered. Still, there is no change when it comes to the recent trend of religion-based exclusions. There is nothing fundamentally wrong with the approach of discreet humanitarian relief to refugees in general but this has to be backed by consistent, rational and fair treatment for all.

NUMBER OF BIRTHS DECLINES; DEATHS RISE SLIGHTLY: REPORT

India registered 2.52 crore births in 2023, around 2.32 lakh fewer than in 2022, the Vital Statistics of India based on the Civil Registration System (CRS) report for the year 2023 shows.

The report, compiled by the Registrar-General of India (RGI) and released on Monday, stated that 86.6 lakh deaths were registered in 2023, a marginal increase from 86.5 lakh deaths in 2022.

The report shows that there was no major spike in deaths in 2022 and 2023, despite the COVID-19 dashboard maintained by the Health Ministry showing that the total number of pandemic-induced deaths stood at 5,33,665 as on May 5.

However, there was a significant rise in deaths in 2021, the second-year of COVID-19 lockdown, which recorded an excess of 21 lakh deaths from the 2020 count.

There were 81.2 lakh deaths in 2020 and 102.2 lakh in 2021.



The report also said that Jharkhand recorded the lowest sex ratio at birth at 899, followed by Bihar at 900, Telangana at 906, Maharashtra at 909, Gujarat at 910, Haryana at 911 and Mizoram at 911. Since 2020, Bihar has been recording the lowest sex ratio, which is defined as the number of females born per 1,000 males.

Sex ratio count

The highest sex ratio was reported by Arunachal Pradesh at 1,085, followed by Nagaland at 1,007, Goa at 973, Ladakh and Tripura at 972, and Kerala at 967.

The share of institutional births in total registered births is 74.7 % in 2023. However, the report did not include information from Sikkim. Overall registration of births for the year 2023 stood at 98.4%.

Statewise data

The report said that 11 States/Union Territories achieved more than 90% registration of births within the prescribed time limit of 21 days.

These States are Gujarat, Puducherry, Chandigarh, Dadra and Nagar Haveli and Daman & Diu, Tamil Nadu, Lakshadweep, Andaman and Nicobar Islands, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Goa and Punjab. Five States — Odisha, Mizoram, Maharashtra, Chhattisgarh and Andhra Pradesh — reported 80-90% registration, while in 14 States — Assam, Delhi, Madhya Pradesh, Tripura, Telangana, Kerala, Karnataka, Bihar, Rajasthan, Jammu & Kashmir, Jharkhand, West Bengal, Meghalaya and Uttar Pradesh — the registration stood at 50-80%.

THE RTI IS DEAD. LONG LIVE THE RTI

Nikhil Dey and Aruna Roy wrote: Beawar, in central Rajasthan, likes to call itself the "RTI City". Today, it stands at a crossroads of historical significance for India's democracy. On October 12, the RTI Act completed 20 years, and Beawar marked 30 years of its struggle for the path-breaking legislation. It was a moment when people could, with justification, say they created history.

— This sense of accomplishment led the municipality of Beawar to unanimously, and across party lines, resolve to build a memorial at the Chang Gate — where a protest was held in 1996 to demand transparency in information — to mark Beawar's contribution to the RTI movement and the powerful law that followed.

— When Beawar became a district in 2023, the municipality passed a resolution to set aside land for an RTI Museum to document and exhibit the contribution of ordinary people to the movement, and to serve as a resource place and inspiration for the further expansion of the people's right to know — and the deepening and strengthening of Indian democracy. Ironically, however, October 12 was a moment of celebration as well as a time for disappointment and deep apprehension for the people's Right to Information.

— But the recently passed (but yet to be implemented) Digital Personal Data Protection Act (DPDPA) threatens to completely destroy the power and utility of the RTI Act, as well as severely curtail freedom of expression in the country.

— Section 44(3) amends the RTI Act by essentially using the excuse of protecting "privacy" and "personal information" to ensure that, after the Act is notified, nobody will be entitled to ask for, or obtain, the name of any person for their acts of omission and commission.

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— We need to understand exactly what the DPDPA does to the RTI Act. Section 44(3) amends other acts, including Section 8(1)(j) of the RTI Act. Section 8(1) j of the RTI Act creates a harmony between the Right to Information and the Right to Privacy by exempting from disclosure "information which relates to personal information the disclosure of which has no relationship to any public activity or interest".

— This section, therefore, also clarified that information related to public activity or interest could not be private or personal.

— The importance given to public interest is clear from Section 8(2), which creates a public interest override for the exemption clause · the "public authority" has the right (as it should) to disclose any information in public interest.

— It has introduced a blanket exemption on "personal information" without any qualifiers. Also, the decision to override the exemption is a discretionary power of the government, and not a power that lies with citizens.

— One of the most powerful provisions in the RTI Act is the line that explicitly equates the power, authority, and privilege of the ordinary citizen with the elected representative, who they elect through their vote.

— The RTI has empowered people to identify and expose and reform, with the help of proof, officials engaged in corruption, and mitigate the arbitrary exercise of power. It helps in holding accountable those who block the realisation of our rights and entitlements. Without names being revealed, the RTI will only become a platform for propaganda.

— The DPDPA goes further: It not only shields the corrupt from being exposed, but also gags anyone from revealing the truth without permission from the person being exposed. It invites fines of Rs 250 crore.

— But the people will not give up. The ordinary people in and around Beawar fought for RTI and its use when there was no law. That is why the

they are building will not be a place to remember a "dead law", but a living space that will inspire more and more battles for open and accountable government.

Do You Know:

— The RTI Act, which came into force in October 2005, was seen as a significant development towards freedom of information. It gave ordinary citizens the right to request information from government bodies, making authorities accountable for their actions and decisions.

— According to the official site of the Right to Information, "the basic object of the RTI Act is to empower the citizens, promote transparency and accountability in the working of the Government, contain corruption, and make our democracy work for the people in a real sense." These are the four pillars of the Act.

— The RTI Act, 2005, provided for a Central Information Commission and State Information Commissions to deal with appeals and complaints against public authorities. Section 12 of the RTI Act states, "The Central Information Commission shall consist of the Chief Information Commissioner (CIC), and such number of Central Information Commissioners, not exceeding 10, as may be deemed necessary."



A READING OF A REVISIONISM IN CONSTITUTIONAL HISTORY

A quiet revisionism in constitutional history is being seeded. Some commentators now argue that Sir Benegal Narsing Rau, the Constitutional Adviser to the Constituent Assembly, was the real architect of India's Constitution, while Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, the Chairman of the Drafting Committee, merely polished an already finished product. This argument may sound academic, but it is not. It represents an attempt to diminish Dalit agency in India's founding story and to erase the moral force that B.R. Ambedkar brought to the making of the Republic.

Complementary, not competing

Both men were indispensable to the Constitution's creation, but their roles were entirely different. Sir B.N. Rau, a distinguished civil servant and jurist, was appointed Constitutional Adviser in July 1946. His assignment was technical and preparatory. Rau had in British India, helped in the drafting of the Government of India Act of 1935. Eleven years later, he had to prepare a working draft of the Constitution based on reports of the Constituent Assembly's committees and his study of other constitutions. He examined the American, Canadian, Irish, Australian and Weimar models, and consulted jurists such as Felix Frankfurter and Harold Laski. In October 1947, he submitted his draft with 243 articles and 13 schedules. Rau's document provided the Assembly with a starting point. He had no seat in the Constituent Assembly and no political mandate. His authority was scholarly, not representative.

Ambedkar's task was of a different order. As Chairman of the Drafting Committee, he had to turn a legal draft into a political covenant. He carried the Constitution through the turbulence of Partition, the murder of the Mahatma and had to defend its provisions, clause by clause, in the Assembly. His responsibility was not only to refine the text but also to build consensus among sharply divided interests. Rau built the framework. Ambedkar made it a living instrument of justice.

Ambedkar never denied Rau's contribution. In his concluding address to the Constituent Assembly on November 25, 1949, he said: "The credit that is given to me does not really belong to me. It belongs partly to Sir B.N. Rau, the Constitutional Adviser to the Constituent Assembly who prepared a rough draft of the Constitution for the consideration of the Drafting Committee."

He also said, "A part of the credit must go to the members of the Drafting Committee who, as I have said, have sat for 141 days... Much greater share of the credit must go to Mr. S.N. Mukherjee, the Chief Draftsman of the Constitution. His ability to put the most intricate proposals in the simplest and clearest legal form can rarely be equalled, nor his capacity for hard work."

Thus the words which are often used to claim that Rau, not Ambedkar, was the real author of the Constitution in fact, show the opposite. Ambedkar called Rau's work a "rough draft", not a finished text. The Drafting Committee and the Assembly turned that raw material into the document that finally came into force in January 1950. Nor does any evidence exist to show that Rau ever claimed to be the Constitution's author. His correspondence at that time with Ambedkar and Jawaharlal Nehru conveys respect and cooperation. The current effort to crown him as "Father of the Constitution" distorts both the record and Rau's own modesty.

The political motive

The campaign to elevate Rau and sideline Ambedkar is not driven by scholarship alone. It reflects a discomfort with the idea that a Dalit thinker could stand at the centre of the Republic's founding



moment. Recasting Rau as the Constitution's principal author is an attempt to reclaim authorship for caste privilege. It tames Ambedkar's radical legacy and turns a social revolution into a bureaucratic exercise. The Constitution is not a sterile legal document. It is, first and foremost, a social manifesto which promises the dignity of the individual. It was born out of conflict, hope and redemption. It represented the arrival of the oppressed at the table of power. To detach Ambedkar from it is to rob it of its soul.

Ambedkar's presence in the Constituent Assembly was itself the result of a decisive act of political wisdom. He had originally been elected from Bengal, but after Partition, that seat went to Pakistan. Many within the Congress were hesitant to bring him back because of past disagreements. It was Mahatma Gandhi's intervention that settled the question.

Though Gandhi and Ambedkar had clashed over separate electorates, Gandhi insisted that Ambedkar must be part of the Assembly. He told Congress leaders that no Constitution could claim legitimacy if the Scheduled Castes were excluded from its making.

As a result, Ambedkar was re-elected from the Bombay Presidency. Gandhi's insistence was an act of foresight. In 1947, when the nation was fractured by religion, an alienated Dalit leadership could have deepened the divide. By ensuring Ambedkar's inclusion, Gandhi prevented a crisis that could have weakened the new Republic at its birth. Ambedkar's subsequent leadership proved that inclusion right. He turned the making of the Constitution into a moral enterprise that bound the country together.

Rau's draft provided the order and structure. Ambedkar gave the Constitution its moral depth. The provisions on Fundamental Rights, Directive Principles, and affirmative action bear his imprint. His speeches in the Assembly made the Constitution a living moral philosophy.

Ambedkar warned that political equality would fail without social and economic equality. He said, "How long shall we continue to deny equality in our social and economic life? If we continue to deny it for long, we will do so only by putting our political democracy in peril. We must remove this contradiction at the earliest possible moment or else those who suffer from inequality will blow up the structure of political democracy which this Assembly has so laboriously built up." That warning still remains the most powerful moral statement in India's constitutional history.

The peril of forgetting

Every Republic must guard its memory. The attempt to raise Rau above Ambedkar is part of a larger effort to drain the Constitution of its radical spirit. It presents the founding as a matter of technical competence rather than social transformation. To honour Ambedkar is not to diminish Rau. Both served the Republic faithfully. But the Constitution is more than a legal framework. It is a statement of national purpose. It needed a scholar's precision, but it also needed a reformer's conviction. Ambedkar was that reformer.

When the Constitution was adopted, leaders across the political spectrum, including Nehru, Patel and Prasad, publicly acknowledged Ambedkar's central role. None suggested that Rau was the Constitution's principal author. They understood the difference between drafting a text and shaping a nation's conscience.

Rau deserves admiration as a brilliant adviser. Ambedkar deserves reverence as the Constitution's moral architect. The Constitution was not written in the calm of colonial offices but in the shadow of Partition, the Mahatma's assassination and caste oppression. To place Ambedkar at its centre



was not symbolic generosity but a statement that India's new order would belong equally to those once excluded.

Ambedkar never claimed sole authorship. Yet, his leadership of the Drafting Committee, his defence of every clause, and his vision of liberty, equality and fraternity have defined the Indian Republic. To diminish his role is to betray the Republic's founding promise. Rau built the structure; Ambedkar filled it with justice. Sir B.N. Rau deserves gratitude as the constitutional engineer. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar remains the architect and moral founder of modern India.

To deny that truth is to deny the Republic.

DEATH BY DEVOTION: HERO- WORSHIP AND ITS DISCONTENTS

The recent tragedy at a political rally of actor-turned-politician Vijay, where a stampede claimed the lives of several of his supporters, should shake the conscience of any well-meaning individual. The dead were mostly fans — ordinary men and women who had thronged the event not merely for politics, but to catch a glimpse of their beloved star. That they perished in their devotion is a stark reminder of how perilous the cult of hero-worship can be.

In Tamil Nadu, the incident is neither unprecedented nor wholly unexpected. The State's political history is entwined with cinema, with a lineage of actors and writers who have turned the fan's gaze into a vote bank, and then into consolidated political power. The lines between reel and real life have been blurred for decades, with film scripts doubling up as political manifestos and larger-than-life cinematic personas re-enacted on the campaign trail. Vijay's entry into politics is therefore less an anomaly than an almost natural continuation of this tradition.

However, the cult of the leader is not unique to Tamil Nadu, nor even to India. It is a feature of human societies across geographies and epochs. But in India, with its long history of reverence for individuals — from spiritual gurus to kings, from poets to film stars — the danger of confusing adulation with citizenship has always been acute.

Historical warnings

India's freedom struggle was not just against colonialism, but against the feudal structures of thought that propped it up. Many of the leaders of that era recognised the peril of blind devotion to individuals. They knew from history that when loyalty is transferred from ideas to personalities, democracy weakens and authoritarianism strengthens.

B.R. Ambedkar, in his historic speech to the Constituent Assembly on November 25, 1949, offered perhaps the most searing warning: "The second thing we must do is to observe the caution which John Stuart Mill has given to all who are interested in the maintenance of democracy, namely, not 'to lay their liberties at the feet of even a great man, or to trust him with power which enable him to subvert their institutions.' ... In India, Bhakti or what may be called the path of devotion or hero-worship, plays a part in its politics unequalled in magnitude by the part it plays in the politics of any other country in the world. Bhakti in religion may be a road to the salvation of the soul. But in politics, Bhakti or hero-worship is a sure road to degradation and to eventual dictatorship."

Even earlier, in a 1943 lecture, Dr. Ambedkar lamented how journalism itself had surrendered to this culture of uncritical adulation, "To accept a hero and worship him has become its principal duty. Under it, news gives place to sensation, reasoned opinion to unreasoning passion..."



The good doctor was not alone. Bhagat Singh, in his famous essay *Why I am an Atheist*, criticised precisely this tendency to treat leaders as infallible, “You go against popular feelings; you criticise a hero, a great man who is generally believed to be above criticism. What happens? No one will answer your arguments in a rational way; rather you will be considered vainglorious. ... Merciless criticism and independent thinking are the two necessary traits of revolutionary thinking. ... As Mahatmaji is great, he is above criticism ... This is not constructive thinking. We do not take a leap forward; we go many steps back.” For Bhagat Singh, unquestioned devotion was not merely a political weakness but a regression of thought itself.

M.N. Roy, too, reflecting on the reputation of the Chinese leader Chiang Kai-Shek in *Men I Met*, warned against both the making of gods and the disappointment that inevitably follows, “Therefore, the objective historian must not be carried away by propaganda, for, or against him. He was neither a god nor a devil. If he failed to be a god-like hero, the fault is not his, but of the interested propagandists who wanted him to do what they wished. He was not a democrat; how could he serve the cause of democracy? He did not betray anybody; illusions about him were cruelly destroyed, because they were illusions. The disillusioned, whoever they may be, must blame themselves for the bitter experience. Hero-worship, not the man, is the real culprit.” Roy’s words cut to the core of the matter: it is not the leader alone who is at fault, but the society that demands heroes, invests them with expectations, and then writhes in disillusionment when reality intrudes.

The post-independence cult

Independent India’s political history is dotted with examples of personality cults that often overrode institutional safeguards. During the time of Indira Gandhi, the Congress party had become almost synonymous with her persona. The slogan “Indira is India, India is Indira” encapsulated how thoroughly politics could collapse into personality. The Emergency of 1975 was a direct manifestation of the authoritarian potential of the cult of personality, evidenced by the swift return of Indira Gandhi to power after only a few years away from it.

In later decades, regional satraps — from N.T. Rama Rao in Andhra Pradesh and Bal Thackeray in Maharashtra to Lalu Prasad in Bihar — built their political fortunes not just on policy or ideology but on cult-like charisma. Their followers often saw them not as fallible leaders but as embodiments of hope, identity, or even divinity. In Tamil Nadu, this trend was perhaps the most theatrical, with MGR’s fans performing rituals, and even engaging in acts of self-harm at his death.

Today, the cult of Narendra Modi stands as the most striking national example. His image dominates campaigns, policies, and even institutions. Supporters frequently collapse the distinction between nation and leader, echoing the failings of the Indira era. The problem is not unique to the BJP but the scale of PM Modi’s personal cult is unprecedented in contemporary Indian politics.

Why humans worship

The question, then, is why human societies, even in the modern era of reason and information, continue to fall prey to hero-worship. Psychologists have argued that the phenomenon stems from our evolutionary wiring: in complex groups, rallying around a single leader simplifies decision-making, reduces uncertainty, and provides a sense of collective identity. Sociologists point out that in unequal societies, leaders often become projections of people’s own unrealised aspirations. A farmer in rural Tamil Nadu who struggles with powerlessness may see in Vijay a redeemer who carries the promise of recognition.



But the roots of this malaise stretch back further, into the history of religion itself. In the infancy of human thought, when knowledge of the natural world was meagre, explanations were sought not in reason but in myth. Figures in sacred history — prophets, saints, and incarnations — were invested with absolute moral and metaphysical authority. Blind faith, born of ignorance, hardened into tradition, and tradition ossified into intolerance. It is this reflex of unquestioning devotion that later migrated into politics and culture.

That is why, even today, artists who dare to subject religious figures to critique — whether M.F. Husain with his paintings of Hindu goddesses, or the cartoonists of Charlie Hebdo in their satirical takes on Islam — are met not with debate but with violence. The parties of God, across faiths, insist that their heroes must remain inviolable, and that offence to them is unforgivable.

The American revolutionary Thomas Paine saw this clearly more than two centuries ago. “Lay then the axe to the root,” he wrote, calling for an end to the deification of men and the enthronement of reason instead. Until that axe is swung against the tree of hero-worship, the cycle of adulation, betrayal, and disillusionment will repeat.

The costs of this phenomenon are borne not just by democracy but also by the people themselves. The stampede at Vijay’s rally is a tragic literalisation of the phrase crushed under the “weight of devotion”. But beyond such immediate tragedies, there are deeper consequences. Hero-worship erodes accountability: leaders become beyond question, their failures rationalised, their excesses forgiven. It breeds intolerance: criticism of the leader is seen as betrayal of the community or the nation. And it diminishes the citizen: instead of active participants in a democracy, people are reduced to passive spectators, awaiting cues from their chosen saviour.

Hero-worship also distorts policymaking. Rather than responding to collective needs through institutional mechanisms, policies become instruments of image-building. Welfare schemes are branded with leaders’ faces and national interest is subordinated to personal prestige.

Towards a politics of institutions

The antidote to hero-worship is not cynicism but maturity — the maturity to separate admiration from adulation, respect from surrender. Leaders can and should be admired for their vision, their achievements, and their service. But admiration must not curdle into devotion. The republic’s health depends on the vigilance of its citizens and the strength of its institutions. Citizens must reflect not only on the culture of film-star politics but also on the fragility of its democracy when fandom substitutes for citizenship. India must heed the warnings of its founding figures and reinvest in building institutions that command loyalty beyond the lifespan of individual leaders.

Ultimately, the lesson is as much about politics as it is about human society at large. Whether in religion, in nationalism, or in celebrity culture, the temptation to worship heroes is perennial. It offers the comfort of certainty and belonging. But the price is almost always the same: disempowerment, manipulation, and, in the worst cases, tragedy.

IN BATTLE WITH MAOISTS, A POLITICAL-IDEOLOGICAL WIN

The surrender of Mallojula Venugopal Rao (alias Sonu), along with 60 other Maoist cadres, in Gadchiroli, Maharashtra, is a significant moment in the decline of Left Wing Extremism in the country. It is, on the one hand, the result of a multi-pronged strategy to tackle what former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh had called “the greatest internal security threat” to India. The crackdown by security forces — both central and in states affected by LWE violence — has kept

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Naxals on the back foot. Over the last decade and more, LWE violence has been declining: According to the Home Ministry's 2024 report, there was a 48 per cent drop in incidents of Maoist-related violence between 2013 and 2023 and a 65 per cent decline in related deaths, from 397 to 138. The killing of CPI (Maoist) General Secretary Nambala Keshava Rao, alias Basavaraju, in Chhattisgarh in May dealt a severe blow to the organisation. The success of that operation indicated that the state had breached — and had the support and intelligence network to do so — the heart of the “red belt”. If Basavaraju's killing signalled a strategic and tactical success, Rao's surrender shows gains on the political-ideological front.

Rao, a CPI (Maoist) Politburo member, was a part of the party's senior leadership and one of its primary ideologues. In the days before his surrender, letters between him and other leaders underlined the deepening rifts on ideological and, flowing from these, tactical questions. Rao, and reportedly a significant number who sympathise with his view in the Maoist ranks, want to discard violence as a political tool. The call for the “cessation of armed struggle” marks a major shift. The disillusionment with violence as a means to ensure social justice must be welcomed and built upon. The Centre's surrender policy, and trust in that process, have also played their part in this. From 2024 to October this year, 1,850 Maoists laid down arms — the figure was around 800 in 2022 and 2023.

The Centre has set March 2026 as the deadline to “eradicate Naxalism”. Part of that mission has been the security forces' push deeper into Maoist strongholds. On the political front, victory may well be declared when erstwhile votaries of violence and armed struggle against the state “fight shoulder to shoulder with all political parties and struggling organisations as far as possible on public issues”, without resorting to violence, as Rao suggested. But this is also a time for vigilance. There are prominent leaders in the CPI (Maoist), still, who continue to advocate violence. In the long run, the only way to defang Left Wing Extremism is an approach that balances the security imperative with a development policy that involves the people.

KASHMIR COLLEGE CHANGES NAME OF AUDITORIUM TO 'LAL DED' FROM 'LALLA ARIFA' FOLLOWING PROTESTS

Kashmir's prominent Government College for Women in Srinagar on Wednesday announced that it had changed the name of its auditorium to 'Lal Ded' from 'Lalla Arifa'.

The development comes in the wake of protests by Kashmiri Pandits.

“Good to see the auditorium's name changed from Lalla Arifa to Lal Ded. When will the other names be restored? Lal Ded, the mystic saint, will live forever for Kashmir,” said Ravinder Pandita, head of the Save Sharda Committee.

During the day, the college hosted a function at the 'Lal Ded' auditorium, which was attended by Jammu and Kashmir Education Minister Sakeena Itoo. The Minister commended the college for being a “cornerstone of women's empowerment” and announced the construction of a new 1,000-seat auditorium at the event held to mark the college's 75th anniversary.

In August this year, Abhay Sopori, a prominent Kashmiri Pandit santoor player, composer, and conductor, refused to perform at the college over the name given to the auditorium after the 14th-century poet, referred to as Lalleshwari by Kashmiri Pandits and Lalla Arifa by Muslims.



Welcoming the development, Mr. Sopori told The Hindu: “Lal Ded is a name that is equally regarded by both communities. I did not perform at the college’s musical festival after the auditorium’s name was pointed out to me. I cancelled my performance in protest.”

The college had planned a festival to celebrate India’s classical music heritage from August 23 to 25 at the auditorium.

“Kashmir has seen a lot, and the time has come not to invest in names that cause friction. I will always stand for the culture of Kashmir,” added Mr. Sopori.

When contacted, the college principal, Prof. Yasmeeen Farooq, refused to comment.

RS 58-CR DIGITAL SCAM: VICTIM TARGETED MONTHS AFTER HE GOT RS 50 CR FROM SHARES

Just months before a 72-year-old man in Mumbai fell prey to a Rs 58-crore digital arrest scam, one of the largest cyber cons in the country, he received Rs 50 crore for liquidating his shares in a pharmaceutical company where he was a partner, The Indian Express has learnt.

— While the money came into his account “earlier this year”, officers associated with the probe told this newspaper, the man was first contacted via video call by digital scamsters on August 19.

— The Maharashtra Cyber police, which is probing the case, arrested seven persons in the case on Wednesday and Thursday.

— An officer said that in some cases, withdrawals were made by the scamsters from banks using cheques to break the link of accounts across which the money had been transferred.

— TAKING NOTE of the rising instances of people being defrauded through “digital arrests”, the Supreme Court on Friday sought the response of the Union Ministry of Home Affairs and the CBI in the matter.

— While the digital age has brought unparalleled convenience and connectivity, it has also seen a parallel and alarming rise in cybercrime. This surge is attributed to the increasing penetration of the Internet and digital services across the globe, making more individuals and organizations vulnerable to cyber threats.

— Cybercrime encompasses a wide range of malicious activities, including identity theft, online fraud, financial fraud, hacking, cyberstalking, and the distribution of harmful software, among others. Digital Arrest is a form of online fraud.

— A “Digital Arrest” scam involves fraudsters impersonating law enforcement via video calls, threatening fake arrests to extort money.

— In the majority of cases, online frauds and criminals typically call potential victims and tell them that they have sent or are the intended recipients of a parcel containing illegal goods, drugs, fake passports or any other contraband item. In some cases, the criminals contact relatives or friends of the target and tell them that the target has been found to be involved in a crime or an accident, and is in their custody.



NONE TOO SOON

The timely arrival of the northeast monsoon, which benefits many parts of the southern peninsula, especially Tamil Nadu and the coastal and Rayalaseema regions of Andhra Pradesh, has brought relief to the region, given its importance from an agricultural as well as a disaster management perspective. Against its normal arrival date of October 20 (plus or minus seven days), the monsoon set in on October 16. The India Meteorological Department has forecast “above normal” rain with more than 112% of the long period average. Going by the data for 1971-2020, the season’s share in the annual rainfall is 48% for Tamil Nadu and over 30% for Andhra Pradesh. The monsoon also witnesses at least three cyclonic disturbances over the Bay of Bengal. There is also the added factor of cloudbursts, which are more frequent now, according to an Indian Institute of Tropical Meteorology study. Consequently, coastal States face urban flooding with residents of Chennai living in dread of it, going by their experiences of the past 10 years.

Keeping this in mind, the Tamil Nadu government is putting in place a real-time flood forecasting system for Chennai to calibrate excess water discharge from the reservoirs in and around the city. In addition, the authorities, as in other southern States, are preparing the official machinery to handle any situation. Over the years, the loss of lives has dropped after effective coordination among the agencies concerned. However, there are still many areas in need of more focused attention. The state of stormwater drains and water courses through cities leaves much to be desired, but State governments alone cannot be held responsible for this. That sections of people still use waterbodies as dumping yards only aggravates the problem, highlighting the near absence of community ownership among urban residents. In the farm sector, the shortage of fertilizers, particularly urea, has been bothering agriculturists. About a month ago, Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M.K. Stalin, in a letter to Prime Minister Narendra Modi, flagged the issue. Other States which are dependent on rainfall during the southwest monsoon, had also complained of urea shortage. The Union Ministry of Agriculture is reported to have enhanced urea demand for October — it was 36.65 lakh tonnes a year ago. Looking at the macro picture of the monsoon, the message is that as rainfall is expected to be more intense, the authorities at every level have to be vigilant and act in unison so that any adverse impact is reduced, if not eliminated.

HOW DOES GAGANYAAN’S VITAL CREW ESCAPE SYSTEM WORK?

The story so far:

The Gaganyaan mission aims to safely transport Indian astronauts to a low-earth orbit of around 400 km altitude using the human-rated LVM3 (HLVM3) rocket as the launch vehicle, and to return them safely. In human space missions, crew safety is more important than mission success. It is imperative that safety is addressed during all phases: launch pad, ascent, orbit, and descent.

What is the CES?

A dedicated Crew Escape System (CES) will be used during the initial part of the atmospheric phase of the Gaganyaan mission to ensure crew safety in the event of a contingency that jeopardises the mission. The CES is designed to rapidly separate the crew module, along with the crew, from a malfunctioning launch vehicle, and move it to a safe distance in the least possible time. The atmospheric phase of flight is one of the most critical stages of the ascent, during which the rocket accelerates to hypersonic speeds — more than five times the speed of sound — and will be experiencing very high structural loads. The HLVM3 rocket is equipped with two powerful S200 solid-fuel boosters to lift off, and unlike liquid or cryogenic engines, solid motors cannot be



shut down once they are ignited. Thus, the CES must extract the crew module with greater acceleration than the launch vehicle itself, and in minimal time. In the Gaganyaan mission, the CES could impart acceleration up to 10-times that of gravity. For a healthy human body, such high acceleration is tolerable for a few seconds if the crew is positioned correctly, with the acceleration acting perpendicular to the chest and the body pressed against the seat in a “child in cradle” orientation. Rocket systems are more intricate than those of aircraft, with rocket reliability much lower than that of passenger aircraft. Nevertheless, the CES significantly improves crew survival probability through its heritage-based design, redundant systems, and robust mission planning.

What are different types?

The CES is classified into two types based on the way it extracts the crew module: (i) puller type — used in Gaganyaan, where the CES pulls the crew module away from the launch vehicle; (ii) pusher type — used in vehicles like SpaceX’s Falcon 9, where the crew module is pushed away using compact, high-thrust liquid-fuel engines. Both systems have advantages and disadvantages, with the choice depending on propulsion technology and system integration aspects. Once the CES has moved the crew module a safe distance away from the failing vehicle, the module will be released and decelerated by a multistage parachute system. This will reduce the module’s velocity in steps, ensuring it splashes down safely in the sea without exceeding the crew’s physiological limits upon impact. Typically, the crew will remain inside the module until splashdown. But during the Soviet Union’s first human spaceflight, Yuri Gagarin ejected from the Vostok module at approximately 7 km altitude and parachuted safely to the ground.

The Integrated Vehicle Health Management system, which is a network of sensors, electronics, and software, will aid in taking a decision to activate the CES when a contingency arises. It will monitor all vital parameters of vehicle systems and crew health in real time.

Has it been tested?

The ISRO has developed a cost-effective, single-stage Test vehicle powered by the Vikas engine to validate the CES. The first successful test occurred in October 2023, during which the CES was activated when the Test vehicle reached transonic conditions — a critical phase in atmospheric flight when the velocity transitions from subsonic to supersonic. ISRO plans additional Test vehicle flights to simulate other critical ascent trajectory conditions. The CES is a cornerstone of the Gaganyaan programme and reflects ISRO’s commitment to astronaut safety.

MOST UTILISING AYUSHMAN BHARAT TO SEEK CARE IN PRIVATE HOSPITALS: REPORT

While government hospitals make up a bulk of hospitals empanelled under Ayushman Bharat, the health insurance scheme is largely being utilised by people to seek care in private-sector hospitals and at higher costs.

— The private sector accounts for over half of all the treatments approved and nearly two-thirds of the treatment cost received by beneficiaries under the scheme, according to the recently released annual report of the National Health Authority that runs the scheme.

— Over nine crore instances of treatment — costing Rs 1.29 lakh crore — have been accessed under the Centre’s flagship health insurance scheme in the seven years since its inception.



— Of the total 31,005 hospitals empanelled under the scheme, only 45% were private sector-run. Yet, 52% of the 9.19 crore hospitalisations under the scheme were in private-sector hospitals, the report revealed.

— According to the report, the most commonly sought treatments under the scheme are haemodialysis and common medical maladies such as fever.

— Other than that, the most common treatments were for fevers (4%), gastroenteritis or stomach upset due to bacterial or viral infection (3%), and animal bites (3%).

— States such as Uttar Pradesh and Punjab were among the top in terms of both the number of patients travelling out of the state for treatment and those coming in for treatment.

— The report showed that the government's plan to create a digital infrastructure to share health records across facilities is also well underway. Under this scheme, which was launched by the National Health Authority in 2021, 50 crore health records have already been linked.

Do You Know:

— The Ayushman Bharat insurance scheme was rolled out in 2018 with the aim of providing universal health coverage, especially in a country where a majority of hospital-based care — 60% in urban areas and 52% in rural areas — is provided by the private sector.

— This essentially means that the scheme has been able to prevent people from dipping into their savings or going into debt to afford care that they were anyway accessing at private hospitals. This is affirmed by the reduction in out-of-pocket expenditure even as the government expenditure has increased.

— PMJAY is for inpatient secondary and tertiary care. Outpatient services are not a part of the scheme. The latter component is being addressed through Ayushman Arogya Mandirs (AAMs), earlier called Health and Wellness Centres. With over 1,75,000 AAMs free consultations and many medicines (up to 172) and diagnostics (up to 63) are being provided free.

— AB PM-JAY is the world's largest public health insurance scheme. It provides free cover up to Rs 5 lakh annually to all members of eligible families — estimated to comprise the bottom 40% of the population economically — irrespective of age.

INDIA'S BURDEN OF LIFESTYLE DISEASES IS GROWING. WE NEED A MULTI-PRONGED APPROACH

In 2017, the National Health Policy emphasised the need to focus on non-communicable diseases (NCDs) like heart ailments, diabetes and respiratory afflictions. The policy was a response to an epidemiological transition that had commenced around the second decade of this century. The report of the latest Global Burden of Disease study, released earlier this week, shows that the shift has become more pronounced in the eight years since the policy came into operation. It makes a strong case for a healthcare strategy that recognises the adverse effects of environmental pollution, unhealthy diets and sedentary lifestyles. Another key takeaway of the report is that though Indians are living longer, chronic diseases diminish the quality of life of senior citizens.

The Global Burden of Disease study should be read along with other recent studies on NCDs in India. WHO data, for instance, shows that these diseases are responsible for close to 65 per cent of deaths in India and about a fourth of those who succumb to NCDs are below the age of 70 —



this figure is roughly 12 per cent for the US and 17 per cent for China. In other words, cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, and lung ailments are cutting the lives of a large section of Indians short, hurting their families, society, and the economy. The problem is also that some of these diseases are not well understood. The Global Burden of Disease study draws attention to one such ailment, COPD (Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease) — it constitutes more than 75 per cent of the country's burden of respiratory diseases. COPD is incurable, but not untreatable, and early diagnosis can make a big difference. In a large number of patients, however, the disease evades diagnosis because doctors do not follow protocols and most often target the symptoms — cough, cold and fever. In recent years, the government has bolstered community health centres (CHCs) and primary health centres (PHCs) in rural areas. The Global Burden of Disease study underscores the next-level challenge for the National Health Policy — to strengthen the diagnostic acumen of doctors at CHCs and PHCs.

The country needs an approach that combines medical research with understanding from nutritional and ecological sciences. Ensuring that people make healthy choices will require building awareness — on food habits, physical activities, the environment — from a young age through schools, families, and communities. Building synergies between projects targeted at the environment, the National Clean Air Programme, for instance, and those aimed at improving people's health and well-being is an imperative that cannot be postponed.

CURB ON USE OF 'ORS' TERM BRINGS TO LIGHT A DOCTOR'S 8-YEAR BATTLE

For years, the Hyderabad-based paediatrician, Dr Sivaranjini Santhosh, has been collecting stories like these — heartbreaking accounts from parents, colleagues and anxious relatives who reach out to her through her social media platforms.

— On Wednesday, the country's food regulator issued an order banning all beverages from using the term ORS in their trademarked name, withdrawing an earlier order allowing the term with disclaimers.

— Her journey started with educating people on social media around eight years ago — she saw children coming to her clinics who were severely dehydrated despite being given what the parents assumed was an ORS solution.

— But she knew that was not enough. These products were not only giving children excess sugar; they were actively harming their health.

— “Even if a product carries the warning ‘not ORS’ — which many of the new products do not — people still think that it is an ORS solution because that's what the brand name suggests. It misleads people into choosing products that can actually worsen the diarrhoea in children and may even lead to deaths if timely medical intervention does not happen,” said Dr Santhosh

— “ORS is a medical product that has saved millions of lives. Around 13 per cent of the deaths in children under the age of five years happen because of diarrhoea and ORS is an effective tool for preventing these deaths.”

— “There is a fixed formula for how much glucose, sodium chloride and potassium chloride should be present in the ORS solution. This formula is such that the sugar and salt actually pull water with them into the body and rehydrate a person. Any excess sugar will actually pull the water back into the gut and worsen the diarrhoea,” she explained.



— Then came an April 2022 order where the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) restricted the use of the term ORS, but the relief did not last long.

— Her struggle came to fore earlier this month when she posted a video about the deaths of children in Madhya Pradesh after consuming tainted syrup. She asked a simple question — how could doctors alone ensure the safety of children when regulators kept allowing harmful products to enter the market.

— And, finally, the FSSAI on Wednesday banned the use of ‘ORS’ in these beverage names.

— According to WHO- Food standards are a mechanism for promoting food safety and quality among the general public. Food standards ensure that established food safety practices are followed. They provide guidance on hygienic food handling for farmers and processors. They define the maximum levels of additives, contaminants, residues of pesticides, and veterinary drugs that can safely be consumed by all.

— In India, the Food Safety and Standard Act, 2006, provides the legal framework for monitoring the status of food safety, and the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) is the main authority for ensuring food safety.

— Food Safety and Standard Act, 2006: It aims to establish a single reference point for all matters relating to food safety and standards, by moving from multi-level, multi-departmental control to a single line of command. The Act established FSSAI and the State Food Safety Authorities for each State.

— FSSAI: It is an autonomous statutory body established under the Food Safety and Standards Act, 2006. Ministry of Health & Family Welfare, Government of India is the administrative Ministry of FSSAI. Its headquarters is in Delhi.

WHO ISSUES PRODUCT ALERT ON THREE CONTAMINATED ORAL LIQUID MEDICINES

The World Health Organization (WHO) has issued a medical product alert on three liquid medicines identified in India as contaminated and reported to it on October 8.

They have been identified to be of specific batches of Coldrif, Respifresh TR and ReLife, manufactured by Sresan Pharmaceutical, Rednex Pharmaceuticals, and Shape Pharma, respectively.

The UN agency said Indian regulatory authorities had been advised to consider targeted market surveillance, with particular attention to informal and unregulated supply chains where products might circulate undetected.

They should carefully evaluate the risks associated with any oral liquid medicines originating from the same manufacturing sites — particularly those produced since December 2024.

“The CDSCO [Central Drugs Standard Control Organisation] has informed WHO that none of the contaminated medicines have been exported from India and there is currently no evidence of illegal export,” it said adding that the affected products contained active ingredients commonly used to relieve symptoms of the common cold, flu, or cough.



Substandard product

The WHO said the products were considered substandard as they failed to meet quality standards and specifications. On October 8, the CDSCO reported presence of diethylene glycol in at least three oral liquid medicines. Diethylene glycol is toxic to humans when consumed and can prove fatal.

“WHO continues to collaborate closely with Indian health authorities to monitor the situation, identify the source of the contamination and mitigate any potential public health risks,” it said.

The agency warned that the contaminated products posed significant risks to patients and could cause life-threatening illness.

ROTAVIRUS VACCINE EFFECTIVE AGAINST GASTROENTERITIS IN CHILDREN: STUDY

A recent study on the impact of the indigenous rotavirus vaccine in India found marked reductions in rotavirus-based gastroenteritis in sites across the country.

Published in the recent edition of *The Nature Medicine*, the study ‘Impact of the indigenous rotavirus vaccine Rotavac in the Universal Immunization Program in India during 2016–2020’, is an observational, multi-centre analysis by Nayana P. Nair and Samarasimha N. Reddy, on behalf of the collaborators of the rotavirus vaccine effectiveness and impact assessment network.

The study looked at 31 hospitals in nine States between 2016 and 2020, to compare proportions and trends before and after the introduction of Rotavac in the Universal Immunisation Programme (UIP).

In 2016, India introduced Rotavac, an indigenous oral rotavirus vaccine, administered at 6, 10 and 14 weeks of age, in its UIP. When a vaccine is introduced in the UIP, it is provided free to all eligible beneficiaries.

The authors said, “Evaluating its effectiveness under routine programmatic conditions is critical, given the variable performance of rotavirus vaccines in low- and middle-income countries.”

They noted, “The effectiveness of the routine use of indigenous Rotavac vaccine in the national immunisation program was 54%. This was reassuringly similar to the efficacy of 54%, reported during the phase 3 vaccine trial.” Further, the effectiveness was sustained in the first two years of life, when the burden of rotavirus is at its greatest.

They found that the proportion of paediatric rotavirus hospitalisations also declined substantially.

Rotavac was developed as part of a public-private partnership with the Department of Biotechnology, Bharat Biotech, the U.S. National Institutes of Health, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Stanford University, and PATH, with support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, among others.

Gagandeep Kang, Indian virologist and microbiologist who played a key role in Rotavac’s development, stressed the importance of the study in a post on social media. “Rotavirus vaccine effectiveness is similar to efficacy in India! In other words, vaccines work in the real world and not in just controlled clinical trials. [This is] The first data from India from one of the largest- ever rotavirus vaccine effectiveness studies, contributed by collaborators across many States and



organisations. It took a really long time to generate the data and publish it, but it was important to conduct this study for the first indigenous oral rotavirus vaccine.”

RUINS OF DELHI'S FIRST CITY TO BUDDHA RELICS: MONUMENT GETS READY FOR PIPRAHWA GEMS

In the days to come, this nondescript 12th-century monument, which contains the ruins of the first city of Delhi — Rai Pithora — will make its mark in public memory for another reason: as the spot where Lord Buddha's Piprahwa relics will be exhibited for the first time since they were excavated from ancient Kapilvastu nearly 130 years ago.

— Likely to be inaugurated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi this month, the Qila Rai Pithora exhibition, being put up by the Ministry of Culture, will boast yet another first — the Piprahwa jewels will be displayed alongside the Buddhist relics in possession of Kolkata-based Indian Museum and objects of similar significance from various other museums, including New Delhi's National Museum.

— The Piprahwa relics, comprising gems and jewels, were discovered in 1898 by William Claxton Peppe during the excavation of a stupa in Uttar Pradesh's Piprahwa village, in present-day Siddharthnagar district. In possession of his great-grandson Chris Peppe, the relics were repatriated to India recently, after their scheduled auction at Sotheby's Hong Kong was stopped.

— Considered sacred in Buddhist heritage, the Piprahwa relics, deposited by the Sakyas, Lord Buddha's kin, also comprise his bone fragments, crystal caskets and gold ornaments. While the repatriated Peppe collection holds 349 precious gem relics and gold objects, Indian Museum's collection includes 221 gem relics, six reliquaries (a container with the relics of a holy person) and one coffer.

— The gem relics, which feature intricately carved lotus flowers, leaves and the Buddhist Triratna (three jewels) symbol, have been crafted from a variety of semi-precious stones and metals, including carnelian, amethyst, topaz, garnet, coral, crystal, shell and gold, among others.

— While telling the story of Lord Buddha's life and tracing his footsteps in India through historical and archaeological objects at the Mehrauli venue, the Ministry will also focus on repatriation of India's cultural heritage.

— The Sotheby's auction was stopped in the nick of time, via multiple legal notices by the Ministry. For two months, the Ministry worked discreetly with Sotheby's and the Peppe family to get these relics back to India from Hong Kong, a territory with a huge Chinese influence.

— Devised by the Ministry, the return of these jewels has become a new model in heritage repatriation — wherein a public-private partnership was allowed for their journey back home. Philanthropist Pirojsha Godrej had stepped in to acquire these jewels at an undisclosed cost.

Do You Know:

— Buddhism emerged in India around the fifth-sixth centuries BC during a period that scholars call "the second urbanisation of India", a time of great socio-cultural change in the Gangetic plains. It emerged, along with other heterodox traditions such as Jainism, as a response to Vedic Hinduism's highly rigid and ritualistic ways.

— Buddhism prescribes the three gems (triratna) as the means of liberation. These are:

4TH FLOOR SHATABDI TOWER, SAKCHI, JAMSHEDPUR



1. Knowledge (Prajñā),
2. Conduct (śīla), and
3. Meditation (samādhi)

CAMBODIA-THAILAND BORDER TEMPLE THAT ONCE KNEW NO NATIONS

The recent skirmish between Cambodia and Thailand caught Indian attention not because of Buddhist politics but because the fight was over a Hindu temple perched on the border of two Buddhist nations. The temple, known as Preah Vihear, is a grand Shaiva temple built between the 9th and 12th centuries on a clifftop in the Dangrek Mountains.

In 1962, the International Court of Justice ruled that it belonged to Cambodia. But Thailand and Cambodia have clashed repeatedly over the surrounding land, reminding us how old ritual centres still shape modern politics and national pride. But why is there a Hindu temple here at all? To answer this, we must follow the trail of the monsoon and the ships it carried across the Indian Ocean.

For over two thousand years, monsoon winds shaped the rhythm of trade. Ships from Arabia and Africa came to India's western coast before the rains, and returned after the monsoon had passed. On the eastern coast, ships sailed before the monsoon towards the lands we now call Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam, and Indonesia, and came back once the winds reversed. Cotton textiles from India flowed east, and in return came gold, rubies, sapphires, spices, and fragrant woods that dazzled Indian courts.

As early as the 3rd century CE, Chinese records speak of Indian merchants, dancers, and scribes in the Mekong delta, the land then known as Funan. Stories are told of an Indian named Kauṇḍinya who married a Naga princess and brought with him the Indian way of living – its rituals, writing, and cosmology. Funan became a major hub, linking inland Mekong trade to the sea.

Such hubs arose wherever rivers met the ocean: the Mahanadi delta of Kalinga, the Godavari and Krishna deltas of Andhra, the Cauvery and Vaigai of Tamil Nadu, the rivers of Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, and Java. River mouths became cultural cauldrons where goods, stories, and gods exchanged hands.

One of the great ideas that travelled eastwards after the 7th century was the cult of Shiva. This was the great Shaiva age – from the 7th to the 12th centuries – when Shaiva gurus taught kings that Shiva's power could be invoked in the body of the king himself. A king infused with Shiva-tattva was said to command the rains, charm the people, attract talent to his court, and strike fear into enemies. He would become the axis around which a mandala kingdom arose – a world of prosperity, music, dance, and abundance.

But for this to happen, elaborate rituals had to be performed as described in the Shaiva Agamas – texts that claimed to reveal secrets even the Vedic Brahmins had forgotten. These rituals required sacred precincts, and thus arose the great Shaiva temples of India and South-East Asia. We see Prambanan in Java, the shrines of My Son in Vietnam, and the grand Angkor complex in Cambodia.

Some temples installed Vishnu images instead of Shiva, for the two deities were seen as complementary forces – Harihara images, half Vishnu and half Shiva, became popular both in Odisha and in South-East Asia.



The temple on the Cambodia-Thailand border is part of this tradition. Built on a mountain, it was not a bhakti temple where ordinary people came for darshan. It was a royal ritual centre, where kings performed ceremonies to activate their divine aura and transform their kingdom into a cosmic paradise.

This was the theatre state, a polity where kingship depended less on war or welfare and more on performance – performances timed to the rhythm of the monsoon, mirroring sowing and harvest cycles, ensuring prosperity. Through these rites, the king transformed himself into Indra, the king of heaven, ruling a garden of delight, swarga, on earth.

This was not feudalism. The king was not just a landlord but a god-king or Dev-raja, holding together nature and culture. This idea seeped even into Buddhism, giving birth to tantric forms of Buddhism that spread not only to Cambodia and Java but also to Tibet.

Thus, the temple fought over by Cambodia and Thailand is a fossil of a time when kings sought not just power but cosmic legitimacy, when monsoon trade brought Indian gods to distant shores, and when kings dreamed of making their kingdom not just rich but radiant, a paradise on earth.

There were no borders or nation-states when these temples were built. There was no Cambodia or Thailand then. But today sanctuaries of old gods and their royal patrons are tourist attractions as well as matters of pride. The resulting economic and political tensions result in wars. It has nothing to do with the faith of people.

SHORT NEWS

TOMAHAWK: AMERICA'S GO-TO MISSILE, WHICH KYIV MIGHT GET

US President Donald Trump has hinted that he may send Tomahawk cruise missiles to Ukraine, which would give President Volodymyr Zelenskyy the ability to attack Moscow with precise munitions capable of great destruction. The US began developing the Tomahawk in the early 1970s; the missiles first saw combat in the 1991 Persian Gulf War. The US has launched more than 2,300 Tomahawks in combat since. Because of their long range, accuracy and low cost compared to piloted warplanes, Tomahawks have long been a go-to weapon in the Pentagon's arsenal. The Tomahawks can cover over 1,600 km. When in cruise mode, they can fly low to the ground, making them more difficult to spot by radar. They also fly relatively fast: at nearly 900 kmph, or roughly 70% the speed of sound. And perhaps most useful for Ukraine, the United States has many hundreds of them.

G20 DISASTER RISK REDUCTION WORKING GROUP (DRR WG)

— The Fourth Working Group and Ministerial Meeting of the G20 DRR WG was held at Cape Town, South Africa from 8–13 October 2025.

— It was held under the theme “Solidarity and Resilience” to advance international collaboration on early warning systems – a core component of the Early Warnings for All (EW4All) flagship initiative launched by the UN Secretary-General in 2022.

— South Africa has launched its national EW4All Roadmap, making it the first G20 country to unveil a national strategy at the G20 DRR WG event.



— DRR WG was established under India's G20 Presidency in 2023 which aims to integrate risk reduction measures into public and private sector investment decisions and policy making.

— Held every 13 October, the International Day for Disaster Risk Reduction day celebrates how people and communities around the world are reducing their exposure to disasters and raising awareness about the importance of reining in the risks that they face. The theme of this year is "Fund Resilience, Not Disasters."

— The International Day for Disaster Risk Reduction was started in 1989, after a call by the United Nations General Assembly for a day to promote a global culture of risk-awareness and disaster reduction.

AFTER WORLD BANK, IMF ALSO CUTS INDIA'S FY27 GDP GROWTH FORECAST BY 20 BPS

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) on Tuesday lowered its GDP growth forecast for India for 2026-27 by 20 basis points (bps) to 6.2 per cent, days after the World Bank announced a similar cut. However, like the World Bank, the IMF also raised its forecast for the current fiscal by 20 bps, it said in an update to its World Economic Outlook (WEO) report.

DECKS CLEARED FOR MAITRI II, INDIA SET TO CHART NEW FRONTIERS IN ANTARCTICA'S ICY WILDERNESS

India's next chapter in the world's southernmost continent, Antarctica, is all set to unfold. The Finance Ministry has granted approval for Maitri II — the country's newest research station proposed to come up in eastern Antarctica.

Once built and readied by January 2029, Maitri II will become India's fourth research base on the frozen continent.

Goa-based National Centre for Polar and Ocean Research (NCPOR) under the Ministry of Earth Sciences (MoES) is the nodal agency responsible for operating and organising missions to Antarctica and the Arctic.

EXTENSION OF 16TH FINANCE COMMISSION

— The government has extended the tenure of the 16th Finance Commission by one month till November 30.

— The 16th Finance Commission was constituted by the government on December 31, 2023, with former Niti Aayog vice-chairman Arvind Panagariya as its Chairman. The report by the panel was due by October 31.

'WE RISE' INITIATIVE

— 'We Rise – Women Entrepreneurs Reimagining Inclusive and Sustainable Enterprises' has been launched as a joint initiative of NITI Aayog's Women Entrepreneurship Platform and DP World.

— This programme under the aegis of WEP's Award to Reward (ATR) initiative, aims to help women entrepreneurs in India to scale their businesses globally through trade facilitation, mentorship, and strategic partnerships.



— WEP serves as national aggregator to strengthen India's women entrepreneurship ecosystem and make women-led development a reality.

— The Award to Reward (ATR) initiative, launched in 2023, institutionalises WEP's partnership framework by bringing together ecosystem stakeholders to address the specific needs of women entrepreneurs. It serves as a plug-and-play model fostering scalable collaborations and measurable impact.

SCHEME FOR INNOVATION AND TECHNOLOGY ASSOCIATION WITH AADHAAR (SITAA)

— To foster innovation and collaboration in the digital identity domain, the Unique Identification Authority of India (UIDAI) has launched the SITAA.

— The initiative aims to strengthen India's ID Tech ecosystem by enabling startups, academia, and industry to work closely with UIDAI.

— Through this initiative, UIDAI seeks to drive innovation, promote indigenization, and co-develop advanced and future-ready identity technologies.

STATE MINING READINESS INDEX

— The Ministry of Mines has released the State Mining Readiness Index (SMRI) and corresponding State rankings, marking what it described as a major step towards promoting mining sector reforms at the State level.

— Under the SMRI, States were grouped into three categories on the basis of their mineral wealth.

* Category A for mineral-rich states. The top three ranked States are Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Gujarat.

* Category B for those with moderate resources, and the top three states are Goa, Uttar Pradesh, and Assam.

* Category C for states with limited mineral resources. Punjab, Uttarakhand, and Tripura have obtained the top three ranks.

— The purpose of the index is to serve as a tool for benchmarking State performance and encouraging healthy competition, thereby accelerating the pace of mining reforms and sustainable resource management across India.

NEW NSG HUB IN AYODHYA TO BOOST COUNTER-TERROR RESPONSE, SAYS SHAH

A new NSG hub is being established in Ayodhya to strengthen counter-terror response in the region, Union Home Minister Amit Shah announced on Tuesday.

The move is part of the Centre's plan to overhaul the operational framework of the National Security Guard (NSG) with expanded regional readiness, Shah said while addressing the 41st Raising Day event of the anti-terror commando force at its headquarters in Manesar.



DISASTER WARNING SYSTEMS ARE NOT LUXURIES: PRINCIPAL SECY TO PRIME MINISTER

Early warning systems to tackle disasters are not technological luxuries but strategic investments in resilience, said PK Mishra, Principal Secretary to Prime Minister Narendra Modi, on the first day of the G20 Ministerial Meeting on Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) at Cape Town, South Africa.

India, he said, viewed early warning as a global public good; inclusive, multilingual, and anticipatory. He urged the G20 to strengthen interoperable regional platforms, shared data protocols, and joint capacity-building initiatives under the global Early Warnings for All framework.

BRAHMOS MISSILES

- Recently, the first batch of supersonic BrahMos missiles manufactured at the Lucknow unit of BrahMos Aerospace Limited was flagged off.
- Lucknow facility was inaugurated in May at a cost of Rs 380 crore over 200 acres, which has manufactured and delivered its first batch of missiles in just five months.
- BrahMos is considered an extremely versatile ‘fire and forget’ type missile, which has proved its capabilities across its land-based, ship-based, air-launched and submarine-based versions.
- It is a two-stage cruise missile with a solid propellant booster engine.

LCA TEJAS MK 1 A

- The indigenous Light Combat Aircraft (LCA) Tejas Mk 1A undertook its first public sortie at the Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL) facility in Nashik on 17th October, 2025.
- LCA Tejas is a 4.5 generation, all-weather and multi-role fighter aircraft. India is currently developing its own fifth-generation aircraft with Advanced Medium Combat Aircraft (AMCA).
- Currently, only the US (F-22 and F-35), Russia (Sukhoi Su-57), and China (Chengdu J-20) have developed operational fifth-generation aircraft.

WMO GREENHOUSE GAS BULLETIN

- According to the World Meteorological Organisation (WMO) Greenhouse Gas Bulletin, an annual publication, globally averaged surface concentrations of carbon dioxide had increased by 3.5 parts per million from the 2023 levels to reach 423.9 ppm in 2024, a record high.
- The year 2024 was also the warmest year ever recorded, with the global average temperature being 1.55 degrees Celsius higher than pre-industrial times.
- This was the first time that global temperatures had breached the 1.5 degree Celsius threshold.
- The current CO₂ concentration in the atmosphere, 423.9 ppm, is now 152% more than the pre-industrial levels of 278.3 ppm.
- CO₂ is known to have contributed about 66% of the warming that has happened since pre-industrial times, and about 79% in the last decade.



— Anthropogenic activities, increased human-linked sources, rise in wildfire incidents were being underscored, yet again, as the major contributors for pushing the levels of CO₂ during 2023 – 2024.

WORLD HEALTH SUMMIT 2025

— The World Health Summit 2025 took place from October 12-14 in Berlin, Germany, and online under the theme “Taking Responsibility for Health in a Fragmenting World.”

— The annual World Health Summit brings together global health stakeholders from all sectors and regions to find solutions for the most pressing health challenges. In 2025, it took place under the theme “Taking Responsibility for Health in a Fragmenting World.”

— WHS was founded in 2009 on the occasion of the 300th anniversary of Berlin’s Charité – Universitätsmedizin Berlin, and it is supported by the WHS Academic Alliance.

— Axel R. Pries is the President of WHS. Prof. (Dr.) Balvir S. Tomar is the International President of the World Health Summit 2025. He is the founder and Chancellor, NIMS University, Jaipur, India.

WHY UNESCO’S NEW VIRTUAL MUSEUM OF STOLEN CULTURAL OBJECTS MATTERS

“When a cultural object is stolen, we lose a part of our identity. Learning about these missing objects is the first step toward their recovery,” reads an introductory note of UNESCO’s newly launched Virtual Museum of Stolen Cultural Objects.

The museum, launched September 29 at UNESCO’s MONDIACULT conference, is “an innovative digital platform [which] reconnects communities with their stolen cultural treasures”, and seeks to confront the illicit trafficking of heritage items, particularly as a result of colonialism.

The digital museum currently displays almost 240 missing objects from 46 countries, a number that is expected to grow, but also eventually fall. This is because the museum aims to “gradually empty itself”, as the objects are recovered, and returned to their countries of origin.

INDIA MOBILE CONGRESS (IMC) 2025

— The India Mobile Congress was organised by the Department of Telecommunications (DoT) and the Cellular Operators Association of India (COAI) over four days, that is, from October 8 to 11.

— It is said to be the largest tech expo in Asia with an estimated 1.5 lakh participants from more than 150 countries, including delegates from domains such as 5G and 6G networks, artificial intelligence, electronics manufacturing, cybersecurity, semiconductors, quantum computing, and more.

SYNCHRONOUS ALL INDIA ELEPHANT ESTIMATION (SAIEE) 2021-25

— The Synchronous All India Elephant Estimation (SAIEE) 2021-25 was released on October 14 in Dehradun by officials of the Union Environment Ministry and Wildlife Institute of India (WII).



- The estimation reported 22,446 elephants in the country, primarily concentrated across the Western Ghats in the southern states, and the hills and plains of the Northeast.
- Among states, Karnataka continues to be home to the largest elephant population, 6013, followed by Assam (4,159), Tamil Nadu (3,136), Kerala (2,785), Uttarakhand (1,792), and Odisha (912).
- The Brahmagiri – Nilgiri – Eastern Ghats block is home to the largest sub-population in Western Ghats.
- Compared to the 2017 numbers, the estimated population of elephants has dipped by nearly 18%, with the highest dip seen across the Northeast Region and Central India and Eastern Ghats region. Jharkhand and Odisha have seen a 68% and 54% drop, respectively, compared to the 2017 estimate.
- The endangered Asian elephant (*Elephas maximus*) is an endangered species. It has been on the IUCN Red List, which details the global conservation status of animal, fungi and plant species, since 1986.

SOUTH ATLANTIC ANOMALY

- Using the data of 11 years from Swarm, an Earth Explorer mission developed under ESA's Earth Observation FutureEO programme, the scientists have discovered that the weak region in Earth's magnetic field over the South Atlantic – known as the South Atlantic Anomaly (SAA) – has expanded by an area nearly half the size of continental Europe since 2014.
- The SAA is caused by the “tilt of Earth's magnetic axis and the flow of molten metals within its outer core”.
- Earth's magnetic field has a protective layer around the planet that keeps charged particles (solar particles) from the Sun at bay. Its protection is also extended to the satellites that orbit close to the Earth.
- However, the SAA causes these particles to dip closer to the surface than they are supposed to. This will result in interference in the data collection by knocking out satellites' computers.

ABEL PRIZE

In March this year, the Japanese mathematician Masaki Kashiwara found out over a Zoom call that he had been awarded the Abel Prize, one of mathematics' highest honours, for “his fundamental contributions to algebraic analysis and representation theory”. The Fields medal is another prestigious prize in mathematics but is reserved for those below the age of 40.

DEEPIKA PADUKONE

- Actor Deepika Padukone was appointed as the first-ever Mental Health Ambassador of India by the Health Ministry.
- The announcement was made on World Mental Health Day, which is marked on October 10 every year to raise awareness about mental health concerns while mobilising support for its well-being.



— The World Federation for Mental Health, a global mental health group with members and links in over 150 countries, initiated the first World Mental Health Day on October 10, 1992.

— The theme of this year is ‘Mental Health in Humanitarian Emergencies’, which encourages governments, organisations, and the general public to provide psychological support, trauma care, and community resilience programmes, particularly during times of crisis.

VIVEK MENON

— Vivek Menon has been elected as the new Chair of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Species Survival Commission (SSC) for the 2025–2029 quadrennium.

— Menon’s appointment marks the first time in the Commission’s 75-year history that an Asian leader will head the global body — a significant recognition of the growing leadership of Asia and the Global South in shaping conservation action worldwide.

— The SSC is one of the seven expert commissions under the global body that advises the IUCN secretariat on matters concerning biodiversity and species conservation. The commission and its specialist groups play a key role in preparing the IUCN’s red list of threatened species.

SONALI GHOSH

— Sonali Ghosh, the Director of Kaziranga National Park and Tiger Reserve, has become the first Indian to receive the prestigious WCPA-Kenton Miller Award for innovation in national parks and protected area sustainability.

— The award was presented at the IUCN World Conservation Congress by the World Commission on Protected Areas (WCPA), a global body that recognises individuals who have made innovative contributions to wildlife area conservation.

2030 COMMONWEALTH GAMES

— India is set to hold the Commonwealth Games (CWG) in 2030 with Ahmedabad as the venue for the centenary edition of the event. India last hosted the CWG in 2010 in Delhi.

— The final decision on the host nation for the Centenary Commonwealth Games will be made by the General Assembly of Commonwealth Sport and will be announced on November 26 in Glasgow.

— First hosted in 1930 in Hamilton, Canada, the Commonwealth Games will see its 24th edition play out in 2030.

— The 2026 edition of CWG will be held in Glasgow and it will feature only 10 games.

KHELO INDIA UNIVERSITY GAMES 2025

— Khelo India University Games 2025 will be held in Rajasthan from November 24 to December 5. It will be held across seven Rajasthan cities – Jaipur, Ajmer, Udaipur, Jodhpur, Bikaner, Kota, and Bharatpur.



— Rajasthan will be hosting the KIUG for the first time. The inaugural Khelo India University Games was held in 2020 with Bhubaneswar, Odisha, playing host.

BWF WORLD JUNIOR CHAMPIONSHIPS 2025

— Tanvi Sharma won the silver medal in the girls' singles event at the BWF World Junior Championships 2025 badminton tournament in Guwahati, Assam, on 19th October, 2025. She lost to Thailand's second seed Anyapat Phichitpreechasak

— She became the fifth Indian to win silver at the World Junior Championships, after Aparna Popat (1996), Saina Nehwal (2006), Siril Verma (2015), and Sankar Muthusamy (2022).

— The Indian Badminton team also clinched bronze in the Mixed Team event at the BWF World Junior Mixed Team Championships 2025. Though India lost to Indonesia in the semifinals, but secured a historic first-ever medal in the event category.

— The BWF World Junior Championships were held in Guwahati from October 6 to 19. India hosted the Junior Championships after 17 years.



DreamIAS



BUSINESS AND ECONOMY

MATURE RELATIONSHIP

At a time when social media threats, reciprocal actions, and shrill rhetoric are becoming the global norm, the manner in which the India-U.K. economic relationship is unfolding is a refreshing change. U.K. Prime Minister Keir Starmer's two-day visit to India last week reinforced the existing solidity in economic relations and deepened them. India's negotiations with the U.S. have been fraught, erratic, and dramatic. U.S. President Donald Trump has also shown that he is more than willing to change the contours of deals already struck. Negotiations with the European Union have been less fraught and dramatic, but there certainly seems to be a gap between the positive assurances made by the leaders and what the negotiators say in private about the deal's progress. Against this backdrop, Sir Starmer chose to bring a delegation of more than 100 entrepreneurs, cultural representatives, and university vice-chancellors and left India with defence, investment and movie deals, further cementing the trade deal signed in July. The keenness to deepen trade relations makes eminent sense. India, despite being the fourth-largest economy in the world and one of the largest markets, accounts for less than 2% of the U.K.'s total merchandise exports. The U.K. accounts for about 3% of India's exports. There is ample scope for trade to grow. Growing India-U.K. trade could also mitigate some of the impact of the U.S.'s punitive 50% tariffs, if they remain.

One of the unsaid reasons why India is slowing its capital expenditure is because it needs to fund its defence acquisitions. Sir Starmer's visit made sure that some of these acquisitions — in the form of a £350 million missile supply deal — came the U.K.'s way. The U.K. government also revealed that 64 Indian companies have so far committed to invest £1.3 billion in the U.K. It goes without saying that U.K. companies would have made similar investment commitments in India, but the Indian government has inexplicably not made these public yet. Yet, statements by companies such as Rolls-Royce show that there is enthusiasm there. The Indian population in the U.K. is the largest ethnic minority, and this is not lost on the political leadership either. One of the first things Sir Starmer did on arriving in Mumbai was to visit Yash Raj Films (YRF) and meet Indian producers. The result was that YRF has committed to shoot three films in the U.K. Two U.K. universities have also committed to opening campuses in India. This cross-sector cooperation is how mature democracies should work together — without fuss and ego, just business.

CLAIM, COUNTERCLAIM

President Donald Trump appears to have set the cat among the pigeons yet again so far as recent Indian foreign policy actions are concerned, this time with regard to an alleged assurance by Prime Minister Narendra Modi that India would halt its oil imports from Russia. Speaking at the White House, Mr. Trump said that Mr. Modi had assured him on Wednesday that India "will not be buying oil from Russia... Now we've got to get China to do the same thing". This utterance follows in the wake of a summer of heightened temperatures in the bilateral space, after multiple claims by Mr. Trump that he played a role in bringing Operation Sindoor to an abrupt halt, with a full and immediate ceasefire agreed only after "a long night of talks mediated by the United States". India was quick to challenge the White House's narrative, with a Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson saying that he was unaware of a conversation between the leaders on the previous day, even if discussions were "ongoing" about deepening India's energy cooperation with the U.S. Nevertheless, he did not unequivocally confirm or deny Mr. Trump's assertion that India would



be halting its purchases of Russian oil. A similar ‘soft denial’ approach seemed to be the chosen tack in the aftermath of Operation Sindoor.

The quandary faced by Indian foreign policy strategists is that India is in a sensitive phase of bilateral engagement with the U.S., specifically regarding its hopes for bilateral trade deal in the nearer term and shared regional goals in the context of the rise of China, over the longer arc of the evolving balance of power in Asia. Additionally, Mr. Trump’s sheer chimerical nature, which is either the trait of an impulsive but popular leader on American soil, or the standard “art of the deal” playbook trait of a President seeking to bring global counterparts to the negotiating table, appears to be routinely frustrating South Block mandarins seeking predictability in their engagements with U.S. interlocutors. India may have found an appropriate response in avoiding knee-jerk public reactions to the sometimes outlandish claims of Mr. Trump. However, the bigger challenge for New Delhi is to clarify its global posture on issues such as the purchase of Russian oil in the context of Russian aggression in Ukraine. It would do well to remember that it is not so much the strident voices of the North Atlantic that matter as much as India’s hopes to be a true global power one day, and speak with the moral clarity that accompanies such a title.

THE FUTURE OF THE IMEC

The recent trade friction with the U.S. has prompted India to intensify its efforts to further diversify its economic interactions with various countries worldwide. While India has signed an agreement with the U.K., it is also negotiating a similar agreement with the EU. In addition to such compacts, India should also proactively develop frameworks such as the India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC).

The IMEC visualises the upgradation of maritime connectivity between India and the Arabian Peninsula, as well as high-speed trains running from the ports in the UAE to the Haifa port in Israel through Saudi Arabia and Jordan. The goods transported on these networks would be shipped to and from European countries. Additionally, the IMEC seeks to build a clean hydrogen pipeline, an electricity cable, a high-speed undersea digital cable and consolidate existing infrastructure such as ports.

Historical background

In 2023, the geopolitical context was favourable for the operationalisation of the IMEC. The Abraham Accords had generated considerable optimism that peace would prevail in West Asia, with Israel and Arab countries working to build a stable relationship. Consequently, proposals were made to build railway lines for regional peace, connecting the Israeli port of Haifa with the Jordanian railway network, which would be linked to other ports in the Gulf region. Furthermore, there was significant improvement in India’s relations with Arab countries, particularly with the UAE and Saudi Arabia. India’s relations with the U.S. were also on an upward trajectory. Such convergences facilitated the emergence of the India, Israel, UAE, and U.S. (I2U2) framework. These geopolitical developments created a favourable environment for the launch of the IMEC on the sidelines of the G-20 Summit in Delhi, with various leaders of the EU, France, Germany, Italy, Saudi Arabia etc. endorsing the initiative.

However, within a few weeks of the launch of the IMEC, the security situation in West Asia deteriorated significantly. The October 7 Hamas attacks, followed by Israel’s military actions in the region, contributed to the deterioration in the relationship between Israel and other countries in the region. These developments have raised questions about the feasibility of the IMEC.



Mediterranean concerns

Climate change has now opened new transport routes through the Arctic, with the principal beneficiaries being countries such as the U.S., Russia, China, and other northern European nations. It is now possible to transport more goods through the Arctic, significantly reducing transportation time and associated costs. Consequently, there is an expectation that port cities near the Arctic will emerge as new commercial centres.

Among IMEC's European signatories, France has both the Mediterranean and Atlantic coastlines. On the other hand, Italy has only the Mediterranean coast. Thus, there is significant concern about the implications of an Arctic trade route on its economy. As a result, Italy and other Mediterranean countries view the IMEC as a vital platform to preserve their influence in maritime trade. Mediterranean countries maintain that to hold a strong position in global trade requires new thinking, new partners, and scaling up of economic engagement with leading economies. India, with its four trillion-plus economy and sustained high growth, is seen as a viable partner to meet future challenges. Currently, it is still uncertain whether the Arctic route confers any unique advantages to India in terms of reduced transportation costs. Therefore, for India, accessing European markets through the Mediterranean route will continue to be important.

Given higher per capita income, technological advancements, and educational progress, Europe will continue to retain its trade significance for India. With trade over \$136 billion, the EU is the largest trade partner of India. India and European countries need to scale up connectivity corridors and logistics networks to build resilient supply chains between the two.

The importance of the IMEC

The recent geopolitical developments have demonstrated that the security of sea lanes is unpredictable. The Houthi disruption in the Red Sea trade has prompted considerable trade to go around the Cape of Good Hope in South Africa, increasing the time and costs of transportation of goods. It is also still too early to determine if the recent Gaza peace plan will hold in the long run. Therefore, it is essential to find new routes to amplify economic relations between India, West Asia, and Europe.

Since the IMEC is a multi-member initiative, it gives considerable space for innovative approaches to adapt to changing geopolitical dynamics, which India and Arab countries should leverage. In addition to the proposed routes in IMEC, there is a need to explore the possibility of engaging other commercial centres and ports in Saudi Arabia and Egypt. Robust economic interactions between India and the Arab countries will also nullify Pakistan's attempt to build an alliance-like relationship in the region.

While focusing on the security challenges of IMEC, it is critical not to lose sight of economic opportunities that can be derived from India-Europe interactions. India and Europe should act as bookends by pooling their resources to promote prosperity in the IMEC region.

TRADE, ENERGY, AI: INDIA, CANADA TAKE SERIES OF STEPS TO RESTORE TIES

Amid the strain in ties with the US over the Trump administration's imposition of tariffs and the "ongoing global economic uncertainty", India Monday signalled the revival of bilateral relations with Canada as the two sides agreed on a roadmap to deepen cooperation in trade, investment, agriculture, science and technology, civil nuclear collaboration, artificial intelligence, critical minerals and energy.

4TH FLOOR SHATABDI TOWER, SAKCHI, JAMSHEDPUR



— Canada's Foreign Minister Anita Anand, who reached New Delhi Sunday night, held talks Monday with her counterpart, External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar, and called on Prime Minister Narendra Modi before leaving for Mumbai at night.

— New Delhi and Ottawa agreed on a raft of measures: start ministerial-level discussions on bilateral trade and investment, resume the India-Canada CEOs Forum in early 2026, revive the energy dialogue, discussions on civil nuclear energy cooperation, and a joint working group on higher education.

Sources said the delegations discussed an invitation for Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney to visit India in February next year for the Artificial Intelligence (AI) Summit. While Mr. Carney has not yet accepted the invitation, a senior official from the Canadian Prime Minister's Office was present during the meetings, indicating the visit to India was being considered seriously.

— This is the first visit to India by a Canadian Foreign Minister in over two years. Ties between the two countries plummeted in 2023 after Justin Trudeau, the then Canadian Prime Minister, alleged "potential" involvement of Indian government agents in the killing of Canada-based Khalistan separatist Hardeep Singh Nijjar – a charge that India rejected as "absurd" and "motivated". This led to downgrading of diplomatic ties

— Following the change of guard in Ottawa, Prime Minister Mark Carney met Modi on the sidelines of the G7 leaders summit in Kananaskis this June and the two leaders asked their officials to mend ties.

— The joint statement talked about a 'New Roadmap': "In keeping with the priorities that the Prime Ministers of India and Canada had set out for bringing momentum to the relationship..."

— They also agreed on "resuming the Canada-India CEO Forum which will bring together leading business executives from both countries to identify concrete.

— On energy, the joint statement said that they agreed to re-establish the Canada-India Ministerial Energy Dialogue (CIMED), promote two-way trade for LNG & LPG and investment in oil and gas exploration and production sector

— They also decided to promote dialogue among government, industry and think tanks to identify how Canada's mining expertise can provide India with critical minerals needed for energy security.

— They also decided to hold the first Critical Minerals Annual Dialogue on the margins of the Prospectors and Developers Association Conference in Toronto in March 2026.

— On the new frontiers in S&T including AI and digital infrastructure, they decided to relaunch the Joint Science and Technology Cooperation Committee.

Do You Know:

— Canada hosts one of the largest Indian diasporas in the world, numbering 16 lakh people of Indian origin, accounting for more than 3 percent of the total Canadian population and 700,000 NRIs. India became the top source of foreign students studying in Canada — 2.3 lakh, according to 2022 data.



— India's total trade with Canada (goods and services) in 2021-22 was US \$11.68 billion, much below potential, but when it comes to India's import of pulses, almost 30% of the total import comes from Canada.

— As per the 2021 Canadian census, Sikhs account for 2.1 per cent of Canada's population, and are the country's fastest growing religious group. After India, Canada is home to the largest population of Sikhs in the world.

GOVT CLEARS DECKS TO LET ADANI PLANT FOR BANGLADESH LINK TO INDIA GRID

The Centre has granted approval to Adani Power Limited (APL), a large thermal power producer, to lay an overhead transmission line to connect its Godda Ultra Super Critical Thermal Power Plant with the Indian grid through a Line-In Line-Out (LILo) arrangement of the Kahalgaon A–Maithon B 400 KV line. As of now, the Godda plant supplies electricity exclusively to Bangladesh.

— For laying the proposed transmission line, which will pass through 56 villages of two tehsils — Godda and Poreyahat — in Godda district of Jharkhand, the Centre has conferred the same powers to the APL, which the telegraph authority possesses under the Indian Telegraph Act, 1885, for placing telegraph lines and posts.

— Under the Act, the authority can, from time to time, place and maintain a telegraph line under, over, along or across, and posts in or upon, any immovable property.

— The Ministry of Power extended similar authority to APL by issuing an order on September 29 using powers under Section 164 of the Electricity Act, 2003.

— The Ministry's order comes in the wake of multiple, and unprecedented, amendments to regulations to enable this transmission connectivity to the APL's Godda plant.

— This includes the ministry's move to amend the guidelines for import and export of electricity, the Central Electricity Authority's (CEA) move to amend procedure for facilitating cross border flows and the Central Electricity Regulatory Commission's (CERC) move to amend the General Network Access regulations for Inter-State Transmission System (ISTS) and, separately, its regulations governing cross border trade.

— APL's Godda power plant, which was declared as a Special Economic Zone (SEZ) by the Central Government in March 2019, supplies electricity exclusively to Bangladesh.

— However, after a regime change in Dhaka in August last year, the government had allowed as an interim arrangement to connect the Godda plant with ISTS, a high-voltage network in India that transmits electricity across state borders, enabling power flow from surplus regions to areas with deficits and ensuring grid stability.

— "In case, the route of above overhead lines (or some portion of the route of above overhead line) falls in the Great Indian Bustard (GIB) area, the applicant has to comply with the orders of the Hon'ble Supreme Court in the petition No.838 of 2019 regarding Great Indian Bustard (GIB) case, and the directions of the technical/expert committee constituted by the Hon'ble Supreme Court in this regard," it said.

— According to trade data available on the Department of Commerce portal, from April 2023 to March 2024, India exported 11,933.83 million units (MU) of power worth \$1.03 billion — 9.3 per cent of total exports of \$11.06 billion — to the neighbouring country.



— In 2022-23, power exports to Bangladesh stood at \$1.075 billion or 8.8 per cent of the total export volume of \$12.21 billion.

— A line in/line out (LILLO) substation is a type of electrical substation where the incoming and outgoing transmission lines are directly connected to each other without any intervening equipment. This simple configuration is only possible if the voltages and currents on the two lines are compatible. If not, more complex arrangements must be used.

ENERGY SECURITY, GEOPOLITICS: BEHIND CHINA'S CRUDE OIL STOCKPILING

Despite major oil producers' grouping OPEC and its allies raising production by reinstating output that was curtailed earlier, the sense among industry watchers is that crude oil prices have stayed at levels higher than what would be normally expected in the prevailing market situation. The reason, they say, is the world's largest oil importer China, which has been heavily stockpiling crude and thereby absorbing additional global oil supply.

— According to some estimates, China put nearly 160 million barrels of crude—worth over \$10 billion—into storage in the first nine months of 2025. The purchases were made by China's state-owned refiners as well as private or independent refiners. And oil industry analysts and experts expect the trend to continue well into 2026.

— But why is China stockpiling so much crude, particularly when markets are expected to be well-supplied in the coming months? Like with various Chinese policies, Beijing has not publicly spelt out its reasons, and its oil sector is not exactly transparent.

— Experts and analysts say that for China, the reasons are likely rooted in the quest for energy security amid the prevailing geopolitical volatility, risk of tougher Western sanctions against suppliers Russia and Iran, the China-US tariff war, and even the possibility of a Chinese invasion of Taiwan. And all that in a subdued oil price environment—prices have largely stayed under \$70 per barrel since April.

— Had China not gone on its stockpiling overdrive, international oil prices would most certainly have dropped lower.

— China is known to take a very long-term view on key commodities, and given oil prices have been rather subdued this year and the fact that China has a lot of unutilised—and still growing—storage capacity, Beijing appears to be taking a strategic view from the lens of energy security.

— It is no secret that China buys about a fifth of its oil from the likes of Iran and Venezuela—countries that have been sanctioned by the US, or from Russia, where, at least formally, a price cap is in place. Despite the curbs, China has managed to keep a healthy flow of oil from these countries, particularly Iran and Russia. The Donald Trump administration has signalled tougher sanctions against these countries, which could potentially increase risks for the Chinese independent refiners, and disrupt supplies.

— The ongoing trade tensions between the US and China are also seen as a factor in shaping China's stockpiling strategy. China depends heavily on imports for ethane and propane, which are key petrochemical feedstocks. It was importing substantial volumes from the US, but the trade war has significantly disrupted those flows. With a large oil stockpile, China can balance its petrochemical feedstock imports and reduce import dependence as those feedstocks can be manufactured locally from crude oil.



— China's stockpiling of oil has also led to some speculation in certain sections about the possibility of an invasion of Taiwan. While oil industry analysts and experts haven't really listed it among the most plausible reasons yet, there are murmurs that it could very well be a factor. China's aggressive stance and increasing military activity, including exercises, around Taiwan have many believing that Beijing may be preparing for war. If a potential invasion of Taiwan is indeed on the horizon, then stockpiling makes a lot of sense for Beijing.

— A conflict would most certainly lead to sanctions and curbs from the US and its allies—like on Russia following its invasion of Ukraine—and could lead to a blockade of the Taiwan Strait, a maritime choke point critical for China's energy imports. A major disruption or blockade of the Strait could have a debilitating impact on China's energy supply chain.

THE NEW POWER OF RARE EARTHS

The China-US trade war has had an enduring sticking point: rare earth minerals. Last Thursday, China ramped up the clampdown on its rare earth exports, prompting US President Donald Trump to threaten economic retaliation by way of 100% tariffs.

— Rare earths are a subset of the critical minerals grouping that includes 17 metallic elements nestled lower down in the periodic table. These elements are characterised by their high density, high melting point, high conductivity and high thermal conductance.

— Rare earths form crucial inputs, although often in trace volumes, across a range of products, from weapons platforms and electronics, to wind turbines, robotics, electric vehicles, MRI scanners and cancer treatment devices.

— The term “rare” earths is a bit of a misnomer: except for promethium, these elements are found in relatively high concentrations across Earth's crust.

— Although moderately abundant, these elements are not found in large concentrations.

— Over 60% of mined rare earth production currently comes from China, which controls more than 90% of the global output of rare earths in the processing stage. China's repeated curbs on rare earth minerals are part of its stated policy to weaponise trade.

— Brazil has large reserves, so does Australia, and even India. But most of these countries are not doing all that much in the way of mining.

— In its most recent move, China has added five rare earth elements to its control list.

— The impact of China's rare earth restrictions on India is expected to be limited, given its relatively low domestic consumption of rare earths.

India imported 2,270 tonnes of rare earth elements in 2023-24, up 23% from 1,848 tonnes in 2019-20. India is hoping to ramp up its exposure to rare earths, launching an auction for seabed blocks in the Andaman Sea.

Do You Know:

— With Indian negotiators in Washington this week, shared concerns over critical minerals could provide the much-needed political push for the India-US trade deal that has remained stalled for months.



GOOGLE'S \$15 BN AI HUB IN AP: DECODING ITS IMPORTANCE FOR INDIA

Google has announced an investment of \$15 billion over five years to set up an artificial intelligence (AI) data centre in Andhra Pradesh, in what will be its biggest investment yet in the country. The tech giant has partnered with the Adani Group and Airtel to build the infrastructure for the project, which also includes the construction of a new international subsea gateway.

— The big investment commitment comes amid soured ties between India and the United States, with Prime Minister Narendra Modi having called for people to prioritise local, or swadeshi, products, with key members of his Cabinet promoting domestically made communication and navigation apps.

— Google's data centre will come up in the port city of Visakhapatnam, and will be a part of the company's global network of AI centres spread across 12 countries.

— An AI data centre is different from a traditional data centre in terms of it being specifically tailor-made to support AI applications.

— An AI data centre is needed to process vast amount of data, and is equipped with more cutting edge hardware such as GPUs to handle tasks like image and video production, generative AI, etc.

— Being developed with AdaniConneX and Airtel, the AI hub will be built with the same infrastructure that powers Google products like Search, Workspace, and YouTube.

— Google's AI hub investment includes construction of a new international subsea gateway, including multiple international subsea cables to land in Visakhapatnam on India's eastern coast — connecting to Google's more than two million miles of existing terrestrial and subsea cables. Airtel will assist Google on this.

— Google will work with local partners to deliver new transmission lines, clean energy generation, and energy storage systems in Andhra Pradesh.

— India's data centre market is currently estimated to be worth \$10 billion, with around \$1.2 billion revenue generated in FY24, according to a recent report by Anarock.

— AI data centres have a massive energy demand. As per the International Energy Agency (IEA), data centre power usage could double by 2026, making the challenge for companies to become net zero or carbon negative by 2030 increasingly unattainable.

— Power consumption and related infrastructure costs are a key part of a data centres' capital and operational expenditure.

Do You Know:

— Artificial intelligence (AI) refers to the field of computer science which aims to make computer systems think, reason, learn, and act to solve a complex system like humans.

— To enable computer systems to imitate the way that humans learn, and perform tasks autonomously (meaning, without instructions), machine learning (ML) is used.



RESTORING FISCAL SPACE FOR THE STATES

The journey of Goods and Services Tax (GST) implementation has entered a major new stage with the latest restructuring of tax slabs, a move expected to pass on over ₹2 lakh crore in tax benefits to consumers. With this, the GST compensation cess stands abolished as it merges with the regular tax, marking the end of an era of compensation under GST. The decision is likely to boost local demand, and the consequent growth in revenue may reduce the expected revenue loss. However, certain States feel that no proper estimation of this loss has been made, and that the actual loss could be much higher than projected. They are aggrieved that their demand for compensation has been ignored.

Though studies show that GST implementation has largely benefited all States through liberal compensation mechanisms, the post-compensation tax structure is expected to raise concerns in some of them. The cess and surcharge mechanism gives the Centre additional leverage over the States. With significant changes in the fiscal policy landscape in recent years, including the introduction of GST, which has effectively shifted taxation power from the States to the GST Council, there is an increasing demand to revisit the fiscal policy on tax sharing to live up to the principle of 'cooperative federalism.'

Evolving tax landscape

Fiscal policy in India, particularly on revenue sharing between the Union and State governments, is an evolving story. Article 246 of the Constitution (subject-matter of laws made by Parliament and by the legislatures of States) demarcates the areas of taxation power between the Centre and the States under the Union List and the State List, respectively, with residuary power reserved for the former. Using this residuary power, Parliament amended the Constitution in 2016 through Article 246A for the levy of Service Tax. The tax landscape changed with the introduction of the Service Tax through the 92nd Amendment, and further with the 101st Amendment, through which GST was launched in July 2017.

For the first time, GST introduced a destination-based tax instead of an origin-based one, besides allowing the Centre and the States to share a common tax base. With GST being a contributor of substantial own tax revenue to States, this new regime has led them to suffer a significant erosion in their fiscal autonomy, as the power on taxation is shifted to the GST Council, where the Centre dominates the decision-making process.

As India is a multi-tiered government, design asymmetry arises in assigning resources and responsibilities between the Centre and the States. Normally, the power to raise resources is largely centralised for efficiency and economic reasons. The expenditure responsibilities are decentralised for better accountability and efficient delivery of public services. The resulting fiscal imbalances are corrected through re-assignment and redistribution, enabling the government at each level to command resources to discharge its responsibility. Such an adjustment must remain dynamic to address changes in the fiscal landscape.

Role of Finance Commission

Articles 268 to 293 of the Constitution define the Centre-State financial relations. The Finance Commission (FC) is constituted under Article 280, which has been constitutionally assigned the task of determining transfers to all States. However, there are grievances regarding the manner in which the Central Finance Commission applies its tax-sharing criteria, which, according to some



States, penalise progressive ones. There are also complaints of inconsistency among the Finance Commissions in adopting criteria and applying relative weights.

The Commission's grants are supplemented by grants under various Centrally Sponsored Schemes (CSS), Central Sector Schemes, and, earlier, by the Union Planning Commission (PC) grants, which ceased after the abolition of the Planning Commission in 2014. Article 282 provides for direct grants by the Union government, while Article 275 provides for statutory grants through the Finance Commissions. Some States feel that the flow of funds through these channels is neither fair nor transparent.

Falling devolution share

The earlier system of sharing individual taxes was replaced by a global sharing principle, thanks to the 80th Amendment that came into effect during the 11th Finance Commission (2000-2005). The Commission recommended 29.5% to the States out of the proceeds of shareable Central taxes, which was steadily enhanced to 30.5% by the 12th Finance Commission, 32% by the 13th Finance Commission and 42% by the 14th Finance Commission. In view of Jammu and Kashmir having ceased to be a State, the share came down to 41%. However, despite higher recommendations, the actual devolution to the States as a percentage of Gross Tax Revenue (GTR) has consistently fallen short.

The shortfall is attributed to the ever-increasing cesses and surcharges, which are not part of the shareable pool of revenue. The cess and surcharge accounted for ₹3,86,440 crore as per the Revised Estimates (RE) 2024-25. It is expected to be ₹4,23,456 crore under the Budget Estimates (BE) for 2025-26, excluding the GST compensation cess. States have been constantly pressing for their merger with the shareable pool, a demand the Union government has not accepted. This resource gives additional leverage to the Centre in managing its expenses over and above its usual tax share, as the proceeds from cesses and surcharges often fund the Central share in various schemes.

Dependence on Central transfers

Central transfers still account for 44% of the States' revenue receipts. It ranges from 72% for Bihar to 20% for Haryana with nine States — Haryana (20%), Telangana (21%), Gujarat (28%), Maharashtra (28%), Karnataka (31%), Tamil Nadu (31%), Goa (33%) Kerala (34%), and Odisha (41%) — getting less than the overall average figure of 44%. This indicates heavy dependency of States on Central transfers and, to that extent, a compromise in their fiscal autonomy.

A look at the proportion of tax revenue shared between the Centre and the States during pre- and post-GST periods reveals a clear trend: the power to levy taxes is getting centralised, while the expenditure responsibilities on the States are on the rise.

For the five years from 2012-13 to 2016-17, the pre-GST period, the Centre collected 67% of the total tax revenue, while the States collected 33%. During the post-GST period (2018-19 to 2022-23), the ratio remained unchanged. As for revenue expenditure, the Centre incurred 47% and the States 53% in the pre-GST era. During the post-GST period, the figures were 48% and 52%, respectively. Increases in the Centre's revenue expenditure in recent years are largely attributed to the expansion of CSS on subjects that mostly fall in the domain of the States.

The expenditure commitments of the States are comparatively higher, as they are responsible for tackling the subjects of law and order, health, education, agriculture, and local self-government.



As a result, States seek power to collect higher tax revenues, as the present fiscal policy of taxing power does not adequately address their requirements. Further, heavy dependence on Central transfers also creates problems such as liquidity management and the fear of political vendetta on the Opposition-ruled States.

As a way out, some States suggest that the example of Canada be followed where the federal government collects 46% of tax revenue and spends 40%, while sub-national governments collect 54% and spend 60%. Such a system gives more financial autonomy and flexibility to the States.

With rising public aspirations and widening service gaps, States' expenditure commitments are steadily increasing. GST introduction has altered the resource position of the States, in addition to centralising the authority to levy tax. The heavy dependence of the States on the Centre is creating friction, especially in the Opposition-ruled States. This is why many States and economists are calling for a restructuring of the tax sharing principle to enhance the States' fiscal autonomy.

Towards fiscal autonomy

States like Tamil Nadu have appointed a committee to examine Centre-State relations. It is against this backdrop that the recommendation is being made to share the tax base on personal income tax (IT) between the Centre and the States, on the lines of the GST. For instance, the share of Central tax devolution to States as per the 2025-26 Budget Estimates is ₹14,22,444 crore. If the personal IT base of ₹13,57,000 crore (BE 2025-26) is shared on a 50:50 basis with States where tax is collected, the Central tax devolution share to the States would effectively get reduced to ₹ 7,43,944 crore.

Alternatively, it is also suggested to empower the States to top up IT, without major changes to the current system of levy and collection.

Such an arrangement would reduce States' fiscal dependence on the Centre, improve liquidity, and allow progressive States — which contribute more tax revenue — to directly benefit from their higher tax base. The Centre will still have substantial leverage in resource sharing to correct fiscal imbalances, if any, through Central schemes, grants and usual tax devolution.

WHY IS THE FISCAL ARCHITECTURE OF MUNICIPALITIES FLAWED?

The story so far:

Urban India generates nearly two-thirds of the national GDP, yet its municipalities control less than one per cent of the country's tax revenue. Indian cities are not generating revenue, not because they are inefficient, but because the fiscal architecture has failed them. Today, municipal finance is dependent on intergovernmental transfers, loans, and schemes. The core of the problem lies in the centralisation of taxation powers.

How did cities lose its tax revenues?

After the introduction of the Goods and Services Tax (GST), Indian cities lost nearly 19% of their own revenue sources. Octroi, entry tax, and local surcharges — the traditional lifelines of municipal budgets — were subsumed into the GST framework. Promised compensatory mechanisms have largely bypassed the municipal level, deepening cities' dependence on State and Central grants.



Therefore, municipalities lack both fiscal autonomy and predictable revenue streams. The result is a peculiar inversion of democracy — where power is centralised and responsibility decentralised. Cities are expected to deliver solid waste management, affordable housing, climate resilience, and digital infrastructure, but without the resources to fund such services.

What about municipal bonds?

Every major policy pronouncement — from NITI Aayog’s urban strategy to the latest reform-linked incentive grant — promotes bonds as the new frontier of local finance. However, the credibility of Indian municipal bonds remains abysmally low. It is not merely that cities are unable to generate capital to back their bonds; it is that the very framework of assessing credibility is skewed. A city’s creditworthiness is often judged narrowly by its “own revenue” performance — property taxes, user charges, and fees — while completely discounting the regular flow of grants and transfers from higher levels of government. This is not just an accounting error; it is an ideological one. When the RBI or credit rating agencies discount grants as “non-recurring income,” they perpetuate the myth that cities survive on charity. In truth, these grants are legitimate entitlements, part of a redistributive compact enshrined in the Constitution. The 74th Amendment did not conceive of cities as beggars before the State or the Union but as equal tiers of governance entitled to a share of the tax pool. Similarly, institutions like the World Bank and Asian Development Bank have long argued that cities should become “self-reliant” by focusing on property tax collection and user fees. While property tax reform is important, this narrow prescription is inadequate and unjust. It is inadequate because property tax typically accounts for only 20-25% of a city’s total revenue potential, and is often politically and administratively constrained. It is unjust because it shifts the burden of urban financing disproportionately onto residents, especially in lower-income settlements already struggling with poor services. The obsession with “user pays” logic converts public goods into private commodities. Clean water, sanitation, public lighting, and mobility — these are not marketable products but collective entitlements.

What is the way ahead?

India must democratise the fiscal contract. In Scandinavian countries, where cities enjoy strong fiscal health, the local tax base is not an afterthought — it is the foundation of the welfare state. Municipalities in Denmark, Sweden, and Norway have the right to levy and collect income taxes directly, ensuring a transparent and accountable relationship between citizens and local governments.

This decentralised model has produced both efficiency and equity: citizens can see where their money goes, and cities have the flexibility to plan for the long term. Most importantly, transfers from higher levels of government are treated as part of a shared fiscal ecosystem, not as discretionary favours. India can learn from this. What is needed is a reimagined model of fiscal federalism, where municipalities have predictable, adequate, and untied revenues — both from their own sources and from constitutionally mandated transfers.

Similarly, for municipal bonds to become credible instruments, the first step is to recognise grants and shared taxes as legitimate components of city income. Only then can cities build a trustworthy balance sheet. Second, the rating system must account for the governance capacity of a city — transparency, audit compliance, citizen participation — rather than solely relying on financial metrics. Third, cities should be empowered to earmark a portion of their GST compensation or



State share as collateral for municipal borrowing. Such reforms would restore the principle of cooperative federalism that the Constitution envisaged.

India's urban future depends on fiscal justice. Municipal finance must be seen not as a bookkeeping exercise but as a moral and political question. The grants that flow to cities are not gifts; they are part of a social contract. The revenues that cities generate are not charity; they are a right. True reform will begin only when India accepts that cities are not cost centres — they are the foundation of national prosperity.

INFLATION LESSONS

The September 2025 retail inflation data, at a 99-month low of 1.54%, has important policy implications for the RBI in particular. Except for August, retail inflation has slowed in every month this financial year. The average rate of inflation for the first half of the fiscal is 2.2%, just within the RBI's comfort band of 2%-6%. When inflation was at the higher end of this band, the RBI had repeatedly said that its target was 4%, and that it would not rest until inflation was at that level. There is an argument to be made for the central bank to strive for that same target now that inflation is repeatedly coming in below that mark. Consistently low inflation means that supply is comfortably outstripping demand. Inflation in the clothing and footwear category, for example, was at 2.3% in September 2025, and has been falling pretty consistently for the last two years. This is not a good place to be in, especially now. Faced with the same oversupply problem, albeit at a much larger scale, China is increasingly depending on demand from abroad to absorb its supply. This has not exactly been India's forte historically, and the current tariff tensions affect exports. The government has tried to stimulate domestic demand through income-tax and GST rate reductions. Households have been using the direct tax rebate to bolster their savings and reduce debt rather than increase consumption. GST rate cuts also led to only a temporary spurt in purchases.

What is needed is a sustained increase in real wages, and for that the private sector needs to step up. It is good news that private sector investment announcements grew strongly in the first half of this year, but those need to translate into real projects on the ground soon. One way that the RBI can help is to cut interest rates significantly in the next Monetary Policy Committee meeting in December. With inflation so low and private investment needing a boost, it is better to err on the side of accommodation than conservatism. The other policy issue the RBI needs to deal with is the inaccuracy of its forecasts. In April, it had predicted that inflation for the year would be 4%. Later, it consistently revised this forecast, arriving at 2.6% at the latest meeting in end-September. While factors influencing inflation are dynamic, such a drastic revision of the forecast in just six months shows that something is wrong with the RBI's estimation process. Since a key aspect of its work is with inflation prediction, this is a deficiency that it should address quickly.

THE GRAIN OF ETHANOL PRODUCTION

The programme for blending of ethanol in petrol was initiated primarily to help sugar mills make timely payments to farmers, by creating an additional revenue stream from the processing of cane.

— Till 2017-18, mills produced ethanol only from so-called C-heavy molasses, the final dark brown liquid byproduct of cane processing containing sucrose that cannot be further economically recovered and crystallised into sugar.



- From the 2018-19 supply year, mills began making ethanol from an earlier 'B-heavy' stage molasses (having higher sucrose content available for fermentation) and also directly from whole cane juice or syrup.
- They were encouraged to do so by the Narendra Modi government's decision to pay mills more for ethanol produced from the B-heavy and direct cane juice/syrup routes, in order to compensate them for the revenues foregone from reduced/ nil recovery and sale of sugar.
- The result: Between 2013-14 and 2018-19, the total supply of ethanol to oil marketing companies (OMC) shot up from a mere 38 crore to nearly 189 crore litres. The all-India average ethanol blending in petrol, too, rose from 1.6% to over 4.9%.
- From 2018-19, the Modi government also fixed separate ex-distillery prices for ethanol derived from rice, maize and damaged foodgrains. This was, again, intended mainly to help sugar mills.
- The incentives for ethanol production from grains led to not only sugar mills using these as an alternative, off-season feedstock — in no time, exclusively grain-based ethanol distilleries came up in states such as Punjab, Haryana, Bihar, Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Karnataka, Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh.
- The grains were largely maize and rice. That included surplus and broken/damaged grain sourced from the Food Corporation of India (FCI) as well as the open market.
- There are two reasons why cereal grains have become the mainstay of the ethanol blended petrol programme rather than its originally targeted beneficiary, sugar.
- The first was the drought-induced poor sugarcane crops in 2023-24 and 2024-25. The Modi government responded by limiting the use of B-heavy molasses and cane juice/syrup for making ethanol. The sugar diverted for production of ethanol through these routes, then, fell from 45 lakh tonnes (lt) in 2022-23 to 24 lt and 35 in the following two seasons.
- The second reason had to do with differential pricing. For the 2024-25 supply year, the ex-distillery price of ethanol produced from maize was fixed at Rs 71.86 per litre. This was more than the per-litre prices payable by the OMCs for ethanol from C-heavy molasses (Rs 57.97), B-heavy molasses (Rs 60.73), cane juice/syrup (Rs 65.61) or even FCI surplus rice (Rs 58.50) and broken/damaged grains (Rs 64).
- From a policy perspective, the problems are two-fold. The first is the excess capacity. At last count, there were some 499 distilleries in India that had invested roughly Rs 40,000 crore in building an annual ethanol production capacity of 1,822 crore litres. And there are limits to how much more ethanol blending in petrol is technically feasible.
- The second relates to the familiar "fuel versus food and feed" debate. The ethanol blending programme has certainly given a boost to maize growers, by creating a new market for the grain consumed mostly as a poultry and livestock feed ingredient.
- The fuel vs. food dilemma is probably less in sugar, where domestic consumption isn't growing as much. That leaves more surplus cane as feedstock for biofuel.



Do You Know:

— Ethanol production basically involves fermentation of sugar by yeasts. In molasses or cane juice, sugar is present in the form of sucrose. Grains contain starch, a complex carbohydrate that has to first be extracted and broken down into simple sugars before further fermentation, distillation and dehydration to ethanol with 99.9% alcohol concentration.

— Ethanol is basically 99.9% pure alcohol that can be blended with petrol. It is different from the 94% rectified spirit having applications in paints, pharmaceuticals, personal care products and other industries, and 96% extra neutral alcohol that goes to make potable liquor.

DO CASH TRANSFERS BUILD WOMEN'S AGENCY?

The politics of welfare in India has become increasingly gendered, with cash transfers emerging as both a social policy instrument and an electoral strategy. Just weeks before Assembly elections, the Bihar government has rolled out the Mukhyamantri Mahila Rojgar Yojana — a ₹10,000 transfer to 75 lakh women as seed capital for self-employment. The goal is to help them start or expand small enterprises, with up to ₹2 lakh in additional support for successful ventures.

This joins a list of women-focused cash transfer programmes, such as Karnataka's Gruha Lakshmi, West Bengal's Lakshmir Bhandar, Madhya Pradesh's Ladli Behna Yojana, and Telangana's Mahalakshmi. These are powered by India's Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT) architecture, anchored on the 'JAM trinity' of Jan Dhan accounts, Aadhaar, and mobile phones. This infrastructure enables targeted delivery and transparency.

As of August 2025, over 56 crore Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana accounts have been opened, with women owning 55.7% of them. According to the World Bank's Global Findex Database 2025, 54% of Indian women reported opening their first bank account primarily to receive government benefits or wages. With 89% of Indian women now holding a bank account — on par with developed nations and far above the global average of 77% — India has achieved a remarkable milestone in recognising women as economic actors with a formal financial identity.

At the heart of this progress lies a critical question: can direct cash empower women as economic agents rather than just welfare recipients? DBT schemes have been shown to enhance women's visible control over resources. Research shows that income in a woman's name increases her say in household decisions and improves outcomes for children and the elderly. Therefore, schemes such as Bihar's can represent the first formal recognition of women's economic identity.

However, beneath the impressive numbers, the story is more complex. Despite the JAM push leading to near-universal account ownership by women, around 20% remain dormant due to insufficient funds, low perceived need, or discomfort in engaging with formal banking. In rural and semi-urban areas, distance from bank branches and the digital divide worsen this disengagement.

Moreover, a large number of women use their accounts primarily to withdraw the cash transfers — usage for savings, borrowing, or payments remains low. Although 38 crore RuPay cards (which come free with Jan Dhan accounts) have been issued and UPI transactions have surged from ₹2 crore in FY17 to ₹18,600 crore in FY25, women's usage of debit cards as well as digital payments continues to lag behind men's.



Apart from patriarchal norms, a low level of digital access has prevented the proliferation of bank accounts from translating into sustained savings, credit uptake, or active digital transactions for women. Women are 19% less likely to own mobile phones (as per GSMA), which are needed to access information about accounts and funds. Data from the Findex survey shows that the costs of phones and data, lack of privacy, fear of cyber fraud, and social norms prevent women's ownership of mobile phones. Shared phone access for a large number of women further limits independent digital banking. Financial and digital literacy remain significant barriers. In fact, more than two-thirds of Indian women still rely on male relatives to make financial transactions.

Therefore, India's leap from access to agency for women remains incomplete. So, for schemes such as Bihar's Rojgar Yojana to become genuine instruments of economic empowerment, they need to move beyond simply placing money in women's bank accounts. Beneficiaries require complementary long-term support.

Most importantly, building genuine financial agency will require giving women control over assets by providing them with secure property rights and joint land titles. Only when women have tangible control over land or business assets can they leverage credit, participate in markets, and engage in new forms of commerce.

Equally critical is strengthening the 'mobile' pillar of the JAM trinity. Subsidised smartphones and affordable data plans would allow women to access their accounts and digital payment tools independently, avoiding reliance on shared devices that erode privacy and autonomy. Banks, fintech, and mobile operators must co-create financial products that reflect the realities of women's informal, seasonal, or sporadic incomes; caregiving responsibilities; and limited financial and digital literacy.

Community-based confidence networks can bridge the trust gap. Initiatives such as digital banking sakhis and secure WhatsApp or UPI groups can offer trusted spaces for women to seek advice, share experiences, and resolve doubts collectively. Another priority should be to expand the number of female banking agents — less than 10% of India's 1.3 million business correspondents are women.

The path to real empowerment lies in coupling access with agency-building — ensuring women can not only receive money but also control, grow, and sustain it for their own advancement.

HUSBAND, WIFE CLAIMING SAME BENEFIT? GOVT FLAGS 29.13 LAKH PM-KISAN CASES

The Union government has flagged 29.13 lakh beneficiaries of the Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi (PM-Kisan) scheme as "suspected" cases where both husband and wife were receiving cash benefits simultaneously.

— This was revealed after a massive scrutiny drive undertaken by the Union Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers' Welfare. The Centre has informed states and Union Territories about these names.

— According to sources, the ministry identified 29.13 lakh suspected cases of the husband and wife both receiving PM-Kisan instalments. Of these, verification of 19.4 lakh beneficiaries has been completed, out of which 18.23 lakh (94 per cent) have been confirmed as husband and wife and have been declared as "ineligible" beneficiaries till October 13, 2025, said a source.



— The PM-Kisan, is aimed at supplementing the financial needs of all landholding farmers' families. Under the scheme, the Union government releases Rs 6,000 each year in three equal installments into the bank accounts of the eligible farmers through Direct Benefit Transfer, subject to certain exclusions.

— The operational guidelines define a landholder farmer's family as a family comprising "husband, wife and minor children" who owns cultivable land as per land records of the concerned State/UT.

— As per the PM-Kisan scheme's operational guidelines, only one member (husband, wife and minor children) can avail of PM-Kisan, said the sources.

— The sources said that the ministry has identified 1.76 lakh cases where minors and other family members from the same household were receiving the benefits.

— In recent years, the Centre has taken multiple measures to ensure that the scheme's benefits reach its intended beneficiaries. For instance, the Centre made the Farmer ID mandatory for enrollment of new PM-Kisan beneficiaries from January 1.

Do You Know:

— The PM-Kisan scheme was launched on February 24, 2019, just before the 2019 Lok Sabha elections. The PM-Kisan is a Central Sector scheme with 100% funding from the Centre. The fund is directly transferred to the bank accounts of the beneficiaries.

— Prime Minister Narendra Modi released the 20th installment of the PM-KISAN scheme from Varanasi on August 2, 2025. In the 20th round of the installment, the PM-Kisan amount was transferred to over 9.7 crore farmers across the country.

— Two new agriculture schemes, the PM Dhan Dhaanya Krishi Yojana (PMDDKY) and the Mission for Aatmanirbharta in Pulses, with a total outlay of `35,440 crore, was launched by Prime Minister Narendra Modi on 11th October, 2025.

— PMDDKY is designed on the lines of the Aspirational Districts Programme (ADP) that was launched by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in January 2018 in the country's 112 most underdeveloped districts, with the aim of transforming them quickly and effectively.

— The pulses mission has an outlay of `11,440 crore. It will be implemented from 2025-26 to 2030-31 and aims at expanding the area under pulses to 310 lakh hectares, increase production to 350 lakh tonnes, and raise yield to 1130 kg/ha by 2030-31.

'INDIA'S DIGITAL FUTURE ISN'T DEFINED BY CREDIT SCORES'

When you start any loan application online - whether through NetBanking or a fintech app, the first message you see is: "We will fetch your credit bureau report."

Have you wondered how many people in India actually have a bureau score? And is someone's repayment capacity really defined by just that number? What if you don't have a score at all?

That's where smart underwriting steps in. It is reshaping the credit industry in India. Among those aged 18-25, only 11% have an active loan product. That means the remaining 89% have little to no exposure to credit.



Now imagine someone in that 89% who is earning steadily, saving responsibly, and even maintaining a healthy cash flow. None of this is recognised by most lenders.

In a country, where Gen Z and millennials are redefining how we work and earn, relying solely on bureau data isn't just outdated, it's exclusionary.

Even today, the lending ecosystem assumes that every working professional earns a fixed salary. And as a result, they are granted instant low-interest loan approvals (based on their bureau score, and sometimes with no collateral) and credit cards with outrageous limits.

And while the Indian economy is undergoing a major shift, lenders are completely disregarding freelancers, gig workers, start-up employees, and digital creators, who now make up a large share of the workforce.

But, for new-to-credit (NTC) customers, the story is very different.

Less than 16% of all new loan originations in Q4 of FY25 went to NTC (New-to-credit) borrowers, down from 23% in the same period. In unsecured personal loans, the numbers drop to 10%, and for ticket sizes above ₹50,000, it falls further to 7-8%.

This creates a paradox. Salaried employees keep getting credit for leisure spending, vacations, new gadgets, and even cosmetic surgeries, which in turn makes their credit history stronger. Meanwhile, an independent CA struggles to get a small business loan. Most start-up employees are also turned away if their companies are not on lenders' "approved employer" lists.

The Gen Z paradox

Gen Z is financially stable by every measure, except one: bureau scores. They earn through gigs, creator platforms, and micro-entrepreneurship. They spend almost entirely online, with every transaction as proof.

A PayPal receipt, a delayed electricity bill, or even a traffic challan - each is a datapoint in their financial story. Yet none of this counts in the traditional credit system. And that needs to change.

India cannot unlock its full credit potential by relying on bureau scores alone. The real opportunity lies in richer, forward-looking signals - data that's already in front of us. Banking transactions, utility bill payments, and savings patterns directly reflect a person's ability and willingness to pay.

In Q1 FY26, ₹73 lakh crore worth of transactions flowed through UPI - almost double the ₹36 lakh crore in cash circulation. And nearly half of that cash isn't even actively circulating.

Today, 80-90 per cent of India's transactions have a digital footprint, and this digital footprint can act as alternate data to unlock billions of loans in this new world of underwriting.

True repayment ability lies in forward-looking signals: income, growth, savings, spending, and financial discipline.

Alternative data should be treated as the primary signal, with bureau data serving as secondary validation. That's how we shift from measuring credit history to evaluating credit potential.

By embracing alternative data, India's lenders can tap into new segments, foster genuine financial inclusion, and fuel the aspirations of its youngest citizens.



TIME FOR SANITY IN INSURANCE CLAIMS

We seem to be stuck in an ongoing crash — a cashless crash, to be precise. What began as hospitals withdrawing from the cashless health insurance ecosystem has now changed course, with insurers starting to suspend the facility.

At one-time, cashless hospitalisation was a premium value-add. Today, it's a basic expectation. It's what makes insurance usable in real life. When it is suddenly withdrawn, it's us, the customers, who are left grasping at thin air during a medical crisis. The same fragmented, conditional access to cashless claims exists in motor cover too. But here, the complications are more subtle.

Insurer matters

Motor cover in India has two parts. The first is Third-Party (TP) insurance, which is mandatory under the law. It covers legal liability if your vehicle causes harm to others or their property. The second part is Own Damage (OD) insurance, which covers the repair or replacement of your own vehicle if it's damaged or stolen. This is optional but widely purchased and, if you buy both together, it's called a comprehensive policy.

Coming to cashless, it applies only for the OD part as it is about repairs, but only if you buy the policy from the right source!

New car buyers often get insurance bundled via the dealer, thanks to tie-ups with specific insurers, agents/brokers.

If there's an accident, the claim process is seamless with the repairs: you sign a few documents, and the authorised service centre takes care of everything under a cashless arrangement.

But if you choose to buy policy from a different provider — say, one that offered better coverage or pricing— you may suddenly find yourself outside the cashless net.

The insurer might ask you to pay upfront and claim reimbursement later. In effect, access to cashless service depends less on the policy and more on the sales channel. It works well for the insurer, his sales channels and the car dealer and maker. But not you!

Other countries

In many countries, this problem has been resolved in a practical, consumer-friendly way. Neutral industry bodies or consumer associations certify and maintain a network of garages. These garages work with all insurers, under predefined contracts that standardise repair rates, quality benchmarks, and even spare parts arrangements with manufacturers.

Take the Automobile Association (AA) in the U.K., for example. It plays a central role not only in certifying garages and setting service standards but also in offering insurance products and managing claims. The result? Transparency, consistency and choice — regardless of where you buy policy. Similar arrangements exist in many countries including New Zealand and Australia. I have even seen it in Sri Lanka way back in the mid-1990s.

India's missed chances



We do have automobile associations in India but they play only a peripheral role, mostly helping with driving licences, RTO paperwork like address change and registration formalities if you buy a resale vehicle or sell your car to someone in another State.

Being a voluntary association of vehicle owners, it has immense untapped potential to:

- Act as an insurance aggregator, helping consumers buy policies and manage claims;
- Certify and audit garages, ensuring standardised pricing and repair quality;
- Negotiate with manufacturers and insurers, creating truly open networks for cashless repairs.

It would remove multiple pain points at once. Frankly the Indian vehicle owner has no clue if a recommended repair is necessary or fairly priced. Mechanics operate in a trust-based vacuum. Standardisation could bring much-needed fairness.

Fix the system

Whether it's hospitals or garages, the cashless claims ecosystem today is a patchwork of closed loops, private arrangements, and inconsistent service. At a time when we want all Indians to be insured, this fragmentation is no longer sustainable.

We urgently need regulatory clarity from IRDAI on standardising and ensuring cashless access across sectors; stronger consumer representation, perhaps via revamped automobile associations or new third-party aggregators. The vehicle population in India is exploding. Hospital costs are rising. Insurance is no longer a luxury—it's a necessity.

But without a functional, trustworthy, and transparent claims process, insurance fails at the one moment when it's supposed to deliver. It's time to bring some sanity back into the system.

PSYCHOLOGY BEHIND PRICE SURGES

On September 19, U.S. President Donald Trump signed a proclamation raising the annual fee for H-1B visas to a staggering \$1,00,000 a year. Almost instantly, immigration attorneys and firms such as Microsoft and Amazon advised H-1B visa-holding staff outside U.S. to return before the proclamation kicked in on September 21.

Many visa holders rushed to book flights and several travel agents observed a sharp surge in last-minute bookings to the U.S. The sudden panic-driven demand pushed ticket prices higher, illustrating a textbook case of fomoflation: a phenomenon wherein Fear Of Missing Out (FOMO) coupled with surging demand resulted in rapid flight ticket inflation.

For instance, a passenger secured a one-way ticket to Dallas on Qatar Airways spending about \$2,000, which is more than twice the cost of original round-trip fare.

How Fomoflation operates

Another example of Fomoflation is Sri Lanka's economic crisis of 2022. Triggered by near-depletion of foreign exchange reserves, the country faced acute fuel shortages, forcing the government to repeatedly raise petrol and diesel prices. What followed soon was panic buying and people started hoarding petrol. This FOMO-driven rush pushed prices even higher. The cycle of panic-driven demand and resultant price surges illustrates how Fomoflation operates. Unlike



usual inflation, which is an outcome of macroeconomic factors, Fomoflation arises from behavioral psychology, often amplified by social media.

In short, Fomoflation occurs when consumer behaviour (demand psychology) and market or supply pressures combine to create rapid inflation even in essentials, where prices rise faster than underlying economic factors would justify.

Fomoflation can also be seen in consumer goods. For example, during festive seasons, demand for staples such as pulses and cooking oil spikes after media reports highlight potential shortages or price hikes. Influenced by the reports, consumers rush to stock up, pushing prices higher even when supply is sufficient. Therefore, it is the fear of 'scarcity' or the FOMO which triggers buying frenzy, setting off an 'artificial demand' loop and eventual price rises.

Dealing with Fomoflation

Consumers could shield themselves from its effects by staying alert to the behavioral triggers that drive it. Find out if buying decisions are influenced by FOMO, media reports or social pressure. Understand if there is a real need for the item. Plan purchases ahead and avoid last-minute rushes, especially during festive seasons. Try to maintain a small buffer of essentials at home so that you don't have to respond instantly to every perceived shortage. You can also compare prices across stores and online platforms to avoid paying inflated rates. For larger purchases/investments, analyse and research if price movement is justified or hype-driven.

Key is balance

By staying patient, informed and disciplined, you can break the loop of 'artificial demand' and avoid inflated prices. Allow time for the situation to settle.

For instance, in H-1B visa fee proclamation, travellers who waited would have realised the \$1,00,000 fee applied only to new applicants. Those who rushed to book flights allowed FOMO to drive prices higher.

In cases like Sri Lanka's fuel shortage, patience alone wouldn't help. The key is balance: combine patience with informed, proactive action. Assess if the scarcity is real, exaggerated, or driven by hype and act judiciously. Then, you can avoid paying FOMO-inflated prices.

WHEN FEAR IS THE KEY

There is the fear of missing out (FOMO) and then, the fear of losses (FOL). Both have opposite effect on an individual's investment decision. FOMO drives individuals to take high risk whereas FOL makes them give-up gainful opportunities. Here, we discuss why FOL dominates FOMO.

Loss aversion

What if we take losses on investments and then prices go up? Also, taking losses confirms our initial decision to invest was not right.

That leads to regret. The emotional part of the brain is tuned to avoiding regret. Not taking losses can moderate this regret. A factor that plays a dominant role in this behaviour is the time horizon of your investments.



Not a virtue

Patience is not a virtue for most individuals. Yet, most invest for the “long term”. Why? Suppose an individual decides to trade for the short term. That means the individual must take one of three actions. One, take profits if the investment meets the price target. Two, cut losses if the investment hits the stop loss.

And three, close the position if reasonable time has elapsed since initiating the trade without the investment hitting the price target or the stop loss. Now, action two and three triggers loss aversion — that losses loom larger than gains of the same magnitude.

The advantage of considering investments to be long term is that an individual does not have to be concerned about unrealised losses, even if they are large.

The argument is not that long-term is irrelevant or bad for your financial well-being. Rather, whether an individual embraces the “long term” argument to avoid short-term regret. One way to observe if you are suffering from such behaviour is to see if you take quick profits when “long term” investments soar unexpectedly in the short term. Many buy with a long-term perspective yet sell in the short-term when gains are tempting.

Conclusion

Have you avoided short-term investments and missed out the recent rally in gold prices or in the stock market because of FOL? If so, you let FOL dominate FOMO.

You may argue that you invest for the long term. While your life goals and related investments are long term, they are also bound by time.

Do you extend investment horizon to avoid short-term regret? Do you consider a company blue-chip or fundamentally-sound after its stock price falls sharply? Maybe, it is time you look at your narratives with an open mind.

CAN RAPIDO PLAY SPOILSPORT IN THE FOOD DELIVERY PARTY?

Despite being a decade-old journey, India’s \$10 billion online food delivery business presents a delicious opportunity as its penetration is just 12% compared to the 14-25% in the U.S. and China.

A deep-rooted home-cooked meal culture places India’s food order frequency at just 4 per month, half of that in the U.S. and China where order frequency ranges between 8 and 9 a month. But order frequency is expected to increase riding on the back of trends like protein conscious menus, lower lead time between order and delivery (thanks to the advent of quick delivery services), and more affordable menu options.

Yet, all said and done, food delivery in India is practically a duopoly led by Swiggy and Zomato, after a red ocean battle in 2015-2020, as most smaller players (Foodpanda, Scootsy and UberEats) were either gobbled up or shut shop due to poor unit economics.

Multiple attempts by even larger platforms such as ONDC, Ola Foods, Uber Eats, Thrive and DotPe failed to create a dent for the incumbents in food tech due to a number of factors. These ranged from weak last-mile connectivity, lack of menu depth, fragmented operations, poor consumer experience to limited access to capital. Thus, Swiggy and Zomato have continued to rule the roost



as efficient aggregators in the food delivery space. In this milieu, enter Rapido via Ownly. Will it prove to be different from past competitors?

Rapido has a large, dedicated 3-4 million registered rider base that gives it strong last-mile connectivity, it is in talks for a potential \$300 million fundraise from Prosus and Westbridge (the last big round of \$200 mn was in 2024), and it also has some experience (from its ONDC experiment). With its zero-commission model for restaurants, it can successfully attract smaller outlets burdened by Swiggy and Zomato's high commission rates of 18-30% (across different categories of restaurants).

However, managing consumer experience in a hyper competitive landscape to capture even a 4-5% marketshare will require Rapido to cross-utilise its fleet whereas Zomato and Swiggy enjoy a dedicated network of riders for delivery.

More challengingly, the recent preference for under 30-minute deliveries such as Swiggy's BOLT and Zomato's Quick (though it shut down), demands a stronger grip over rider availability.

Food tech is highly sensitive to delivery experience, and so parallel management of ride hailing and food transportation service would be a tall task.

While food menus are almost similar on all platforms, the sector can be disrupted by either lower prices or better lead time for consumers.

However, while consumers may benefit from Rapido's model, the menu prices of large chains are lower on Swiggy and Zomato, given the discounts that chains offer. Moreover, highly-in-demand global QSR brands are yet to be available on Rapido due to its smaller scale.

Meanwhile, lowering the lead time of delivery could be a tall ask for the newcomer as Ownly will have to cross utilise the fleet, thus putting more pressure on Rapido, against a dedicated fleet of Zomato/Swiggy.

There are two levers at play here. First, Rapido with a zero commission model is in a position to share some delivery costs with restaurant chains, and as a result may pass on the price benefit to consumers via menu pricing. Second, a wide supply side adoption like we saw in the Rapido cab story may not be possible in the food delivery business as menu pricing is flexible and restaurant chain operators are the price setters.

Nonetheless, Ownly can emerge as a strong challenger to the duopoly by taking a grip on key pockets of cities, though execution remains a question mark.

DGCA PROBES INCIDENT FACED ON LANDING AT BIRMINGHAM AIRPORT

There appeared to be nothing out of the ordinary with Air India flight AI-117 on Saturday, flying from Amritsar to Birmingham in the UK, until it descended to an altitude of just 400 feet on its final approach into the Birmingham airport. Then, strangely, the ram air turbine (RAT)—a last-resort emergency power system—of the Boeing 787-8 aircraft deployed on its own, even as all electrical and hydraulic parameters were found to be normal and the pilots did not spot any abnormality with the plane.

— This extremely unusual incident, in which the RAT was deployed without an explicit command, has raised concerns about Boeing 787 aircraft. It comes less than four months after the catastrophic crash of an Air India Boeing 787 in Ahmedabad on June 12, which killed 260 people.

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— In modern aircraft, the RAT deploys automatically during grave emergencies involving total electrical failure, a debilitating hydraulic failure, or a dual engine failure, considered to be the rarest of rare scenarios. Pilots may also deploy it manually. Thus, an accidental automatic RAT deployment in the absence of an emergency is an extremely unusual occurrence and unheard of.

— India’s aviation safety regulator, the Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA), will be investigating this bizarre incident. Meanwhile, the Federation of Indian Pilots (FIP) urged the DGCA to inspect the electrical systems of all Boeing 787 aircraft operating in India, arguing that the RAT deployment points at electrical system issues with the Boeing 787s and that the incident serves as a pointer to the Ahmedabad crash.

— The RAT, a critical system, is essentially a wind turbine stowed in a compartment on the underside of the Boeing 787’s fuselage, just behind the aircraft’s wing. It deploys into the airstream to generate power only when primary and secondary power sources fail.

— Although aircraft are equipped with auxiliary power units (APUs) to provide the required power to critical aircraft systems in the event of a total engine failure, the RAT offers an additional layer of safety, making it the plane’s last-ditch emergency power system when everything else fails.

— The RAT generates power from the airstream by injecting ram pressure, which is created by the forward motion of the aircraft, and depends on the plane’s speed at the time. In the event of total power failure, the RAT helps power vital systems, including flight controls, flight-critical instrumentation, navigation, and communication equipment.

— During the brief period between the aircraft’s loss of power and the deployment of the RAT, the plane’s batteries ensure the bare minimum essential instrumentation continues to work.

— The RAT is particularly useful at high or cruising altitudes and high aircraft speeds, allowing the pilots enough time and supportive power for the aircraft’s essential systems and controls, while helping them try and glide it to the closest available airfield. The RAT, however, is not a substitute for engine power.

— This last-resort emergency power system has been credited with helping to avert a few major aviation disasters. According to Collins Aerospace, which is among RAT manufacturers, these turbines “are responsible for saving more than 2,400 lives over the past five decades”.

Do You Know:

— A Parliamentary Standing Committee has recommended granting full financial and administrative autonomy to aviation safety regulator Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA), saying that the lack of autonomy is the “single greatest impediment” to the regulator’s ability to fulfil its mandate effectively.

— In its report published in August this year on ‘Overall Review of Safety in the Civil Aviation Sector’, the Standing Committee on Transport, Tourism and Culture also highlighted that the DGCA is grappling with a “profound and persistent” shortage of technical and regulatory personnel, and said that the staff shortage is “an existential threat” to the integrity of India’s aviation safety system.

— The panel, which is headed by Rajya Sabha member and JD(U) leader Sanjay Kumar Jha, recommended a time-bound plan to grant autonomy to the DGCA.



— Among other issues, the panel’s report also flagged the shortage of air traffic controllers (ATCOs), and fatigue among the controllers.

— It also criticised the Airports Authority of India (AAI), which handles the civilian air traffic control function in India, for not adhering to duty time limitations for ATCOs.

— As an immediate recommendation, the panel called for the development of a national Fatigue Risk Management System (FRMS) for ATCOs, along with a comprehensive staffing audit.

INDIA’S 4G STACK EXPORT AMBITION: COUNTER TO CHINA’S DIGITAL SILK ROAD’?

During his inaugural speech at the 9th edition of the India Mobile Congress (IMC) 2025, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said with its 4G stack India would not only offer seamless connectivity, high-speed internet and reliable services to citizens, especially in remote areas, but also export the technology abroad.

— India’s ambitions of exporting its recently unveiled 4G stack, which includes telecom hardware and software, will pit it squarely against China, which has for several years now managed to get a significant foothold in building telecom infrastructure for other countries in the developing world, for instance, in Africa.

— Along with the 4G stack, New Delhi has also prepared its ‘digital’ public infrastructure, and hopes to export it to the developing world. Called the India Stack, — moniker for a set of digital codes and digital public goods that aim to unlock the economic primitives of identity, data, and payments at population scale.

— Key features of the 4G stack include:

* Radio Access Network (Tejas), Core Network(C-Dol)and domestic integration, therefore reducing dependency on foreign vendors and building local capability.

* Enables rapid upgrades, scalability and easier future migration path to 5G.

* Sites and architecture described as “5G ready,” facilitating an upgrade path without replacing large parts of the deployed infrastructure.

— For years, Chinese telecom companies have offered infrastructure to several developing countries, at cheaper rates than their Western counterparts, and backed by easy loans from Chinese funding agencies. This has resulted in Beijing’s telecom companies having a stronghold in several developing markets.

— As per the Delhi-based think tank, the Organisation for Research on China and Asia, China’s Digital Silk Road is part of the Belt and Road Initiative that finances and supports digital connectivity infrastructure to support China’s technology companies, goods and services.

— This includes the provision of cellular networks as well as applications and mobile payment platforms to facilitate China’s trade with developing countries.

— The DSR is also a nexus between the state and tech companies to establish China as the primary supplier of technology goods. The initiative is backed by policy banks and receives political support from the government.



Do You Know:

— In a major boost to telecommunication infrastructure, Prime Minister Narendra Modi on last month inaugurated BSNL's 'Swadeshi' 4G stack, marking India's entry into a coveted league of nations, such as Denmark, Sweden, South Korea, and China, which manufacture homegrown telecom equipment.

— India is gearing up to roll out high-speed 6G communication services by 2030 and has set up a Bharat 6G project to identify and fund research and deployment of the next-generation technology in the country, according to a vision document unveiled by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in October last year.

BHARAT 6G ALLIANCE, 9 GLOBAL BODIES ENDORSE 6G

Government-backed Bharat 6G Alliance along with nine international bodies have signed the Delhi Declaration, which endorses principles for 6G ecosystem including the commitment to make it secure, open, resilient, inclusive, and sustainable by design.

— The Delhi Declaration was announced at the International Bharat 6G Symposium 2025 held at India Mobile Congress 2025.

— “As 6G research accelerates worldwide, this declaration underscores our collective responsibility to develop trusted technologies, open standards, and sustainable networks.”

— India's leadership through Bharat 6G Alliance reflects our vision for an inclusive digital future. The Bharat 6G Alliance is proud to stand with global 6G alliances in endorsing these shared principles,” Bharat 6G Alliance Director General R K Pathak said.

Do You Know:

— Bharat 6G Alliance (B6GA) was launched by Honourable Minister of Communications on 3rd July 2023 as an initiative aimed at facilitating the realization of the “Bharat 6G Vision” unveiled by the Prime Minister of India, Shri Narendra Modi on 22nd March 2023 for fostering the development of 6G technology in the country.

— B6GA is an industry-led body, facilitated by the government, that provides a collaborative platform to various technology stakeholders comprising public/private companies, academia, research institutions, and Standard Development organizations

— The 6G project is proposed to be implemented in two phases: the first one from 2023 to 2025 and the second one from 2025 to 2030.

(i) In phase one, support will be provided to explorative ideas, risky pathways and proof-of-concept tests.

(ii) Ideas and concepts that show promise and potential for acceptance by the global peer community will be adequately supported to develop them to completion, establish their use cases and benefits, and create implementational IPs and testbeds leading to commercialisation as part of phase two.



LIFE AND SCIENCES

QUANTUM BREAKTHROUGH IN DIGITAL SECURITY: HOW INDIAN RESEARCHERS ACHIEVED THIS, SIGNIFICANCE

In a significant breakthrough that can have profound implications for digital and online security, an Indian research group has developed new quantum techniques to generate and certify truly random numbers.

— This means that, for the first time, a technique to generate true random numbers is ready to be deployed in real-life situations. It potentially paves the way for the development of hack-proof digital security.

— Randomly-generated numbers are critical to digital security. In fact, very large randomly-generated numbers are the foundation on which modern encryption systems and security architectures are built.

— The defining feature of such numbers is that they are created in completely random processes, not by following any pattern or algorithm. As a result, they cannot be guessed or predicted. Anything built on top of them — passwords, encryption keys, or authentication systems — become highly secure against hacking.

— These pseudorandom numbers are good enough for securing our existing networks and information systems. Even the fastest computers, applying brute-force algorithms, would take centuries or longer to decode the passwords or encryption keys based on these numbers.

— All this may change with the advent of quantum computers, which utilise the highly unique and unusual properties of the quantum world to store and process data. These computers handle data in a manner that allows them to efficiently perform complex tasks that go beyond the capabilities of traditional computers. This renders realistic vulnerabilities in the current architectures of digital security.

— Strengthening the current security architecture is, therefore, one of the major areas of scientific research, which is where techniques to generate truly random numbers become so important.

— If a stream of photons is sent through a device and measured for a particular property, some of the photons might exhibit one behaviour, and can be assigned the number 0, while others can be assigned 1. The resulting sequence of 0s and 1s can be truly random. This is how a Quantum Random Number Generator typically works.

Do You Know:

— True randomness is observed in some natural or physical processes that are inherently random, not from any algorithm. Radioactivity and weather events are a few examples of random processes in nature. The quantum behaviour of microscopic particles is also inherently random.

— In the quantum world, two particles, such as photons or electrons, that have interacted previously may be mysteriously linked to each other, with the behaviour of one instantaneously influencing that of the other, regardless of the physical distance between them. Each particle can be measured independently and in a randomly chosen manner, and the results compared.



— The inherent quantum behaviour and randomness of this linkage is established if the outcomes violate a property called Bell's Inequality.

— Several scientific groups have run such experiments and generated random numbers, but have to contend with the challenge of separating the two particles by at least a couple hundred metres to eliminate any possibility of external interference. A set-up exceeding two hundred metres in size is not a practical proposition in real-life situations.

— Sinha used a slightly modified approach. Instead of using spatial separation in two particles, she used time separation in a single particle to look for violations of another property, the Leggett-Garg inequality. In 2024, Sinha's laboratory at RRI became the first one to generate truly random numbers by showing the violations of Leggett-Garg inequality in a loophole-free experimental set-up.

— Sinha's result is a major breakthrough with huge commercial and strategic implications. It is the kind of fundamental research that the National Quantum Mission was set up to support. In fact, it is the first major globally-relevant research output from the National Quantum Mission so far.

HOW IS THE IMMUNE SYSTEM KEPT IN CHECK?

The story so far:

The Nobel Prize season for 2025 began with the announcement of the Physiology or Medicine Prize on October 6. The three awardees — U.S.-based researchers, Mary E. Brunkow and Fred Ramsdell, and Japan's Shimon Sakaguchi — were chosen for their "discoveries concerning peripheral immune tolerance." Their discovery enabled a fundamental understanding of how the immune system works — how it is regulated and kept in check. This has led to the evolution of several new potential treatment options, currently being tested, including for cancer.

What does their discovery mean?

Unless the body's immune system is kept in check, it can attack its own organs. In that case, why do most people not develop autoimmune conditions where the body turns on itself? U.S. and Japanese scientists, working independently, arrived at an explanation for how the immune system is kept in check. It is for their work in making discoveries concerning what prevents the immune system from attacking the body that the Nobel was awarded. The laureates identified the immune system's regulatory T cells which perform the precise task of preventing immune cells from launching an attack on the body.

Literally every day the immune system, a formidable army, is on guard, battling pathogens that try to invade the body. The question here is how do these cells "know what they should attack and what they should defend", as the Nobel Committee pointed out. "Their discoveries have been decisive for our understanding of how the immune system functions and why we do not all develop serious autoimmune diseases," said Olle Kämpe, chair of the Nobel Committee.

What are regulatory T cells?

The story goes back to Sakaguchi when he was working at the Aichi Cancer Centre Research Institute, Japan, some four decades ago. All T cells have special proteins called T-cell receptors on their surface. These receptors can be likened to a type of sensor. Using them, T cells can scan other



cells to discover whether the body is under attack. There are a vast number of T cells with different receptors that can detect invaders, including new viruses. But they also have receptors that can attach to human tissues. But then, intuitively, is there a switch mechanism that warns the T cells off body cells?

In the 1980s, scientists realised that when T cells mature in the thymus, a small gland located in the upper chest behind the breastbone and in front of the heart that plays a crucial role in the immune system, they are taught to recognise and eliminate the body's own proteins in a process called central tolerance. By the time Sakaguchi began his research into trying to understand this mechanism, his colleagues had already reportedly performed an experiment on newborn mice. They hypothesised that the mice would develop fewer T cells and have a weaker immune system if they removed the thymus. Instead, the immune system went into overdrive and ran amok, with the little mice developing several autoimmune conditions. This experiment might not have satisfied its primary goal, but in it was the idea for a Nobel that would come about 30 years later. Sakaguchi took off from where the experiment stopped. He injected these mice with T cells and it appeared that the T cells could protect the mice from autoimmune diseases.

Veering off from the current scientific wisdom of the time, Sakaguchi was convinced that the immune system must have some form of security guard — one that calms down T cells and keeps them in check; in this case, protecting the mice from the autoimmune condition. It took him over a decade, but in 1995, he presented to the world, a new class of T cells to the world, those that carried an extra protein called CD25 on their surface. This was called the regulatory T cell. But other researchers were not convinced yet of this idea.

It would take a second act, and efforts from Brunkow and Ramsdell, to concretely prove the experiment. A new set of mice, being studied since the Manhattan Project in fact, stood up to the occasion. In this instance, half of all the male mice were sickly and died in a few weeks, while the females thrived. It turned out the male's organs were being attacked by T cells that destroyed the tissues. The Nobel-winning pair, who were then working at a biotech company Celltech Chiroscience in the U.S., realised that the mice could provide important clues in their work. After years of study, at an age when molecular biology was at best infantile, with a great deal of patience, they narrowed down on the faulty, mutant gene and named it *Foxp3*. They finally had an explanation for why a specific mouse strain was particularly vulnerable to autoimmune diseases. They also showed that mutations in the human equivalent of this gene cause a serious autoimmune disease, IPEX.

Two years later, Sakaguchi and others could prove, this time, convincingly, that the *Foxp3* gene controls the development of the regulatory T cells, being able to prevent other T cells from mistakenly attacking the body's own tissue, in a process that is called peripheral immune tolerance. Regulatory T cells also ensure that the immune system calms down after it has attacked invaders, answering Sakaguchi's initial question.

What are the specific uses in medicine?

While specific therapies are yet to hit the market, over 200 studies involving regulatory T cells are currently in progress, said Thomas Perlmann, secretary-general of the Nobel Assembly, while making the announcement of the prize on October 6. These stand testimony to the potential slew of new treatment modalities to address various conditions.

This includes work on cancer — dismantling the regulatory T cells so that the immune system can access the tumours and set to work on them; and on autoimmune disorders where researchers



are trying to promote the growth of more regulatory T cells, inside the body, but also outside of it, in order to make sure that the immune system does not attack its own body.

It is also believed that this research will have far-reaching implications for organ transplantation by regulating organ acceptance. Clinical studies are afoot to test many of these pathbreaking treatment modalities.

WHAT IS MACROSCOPIC QUANTUM TUNNELLING?

The story so far:

Particles can sometimes cross barriers they don't have the energy to climb, like boring through a mountain instead of scaling it first, as per quantum mechanics. This process, called tunnelling, is common in nuclear and atomic physics. The 2025 physics Nobel Prize laureates John Clarke, Michel Devoret, and John Martinis showed that such behaviour can occur not only in subatomic particles but also in an electrical circuit made of superconductors.

What is a Josephson junction?

The fundamental unit of the award-winning experiments the trio conducted is a device called a Josephson junction. Here, two superconductors are separated by a very thin insulator. The trio wanted to know if a parameter of the circuit as a whole, in this case the junction's phase difference, could behave like a single quantum particle. They came away from their experiments with a resounding 'yes', by observing both macroscopic quantum mechanical tunnelling and discrete energy levels in the circuit. In a superconductor, many electrons pair up and move without resistance. In a Josephson junction, the phase difference between the two superconductors measures how out of step the collective quantum wave of paired electrons is on one side compared with the other. This phase's value controls how easily the pairs can cross the insulating barrier. When this phase becomes trapped in an 'energy valley', quantum mechanics allows it to tunnel through to the other side, producing a small but measurable voltage across the junction.

When the scientists sent a current through the Josephson junction, they found that if it was small enough, the flow of paired electrons was stalled by the insulator and the circuit produced no voltage. In classical physics, this state would never change: the electrons' flow would remain blocked. But in the quantum world, the current has a small chance of suddenly tunnelling through the insulator and flowing freely on the other side, creating that voltage.

Why was the circuit fragile?

In the early 1980s, several groups searched for this tunnelling by varying the current and recording the value at which the junction produced a voltage. If the electron pairs were simply escaping to the other side due to thermal fluctuations — akin to being heated enough to jump across the mountain — cooling the device ought to steadily increase the amount of current required to produce a voltage. On the other hand, if the electron pairs were tunnelling through, the rate of crossing over would eventually stop changing with temperature. Simple though the setup was, the challenge was in keeping stray microwave radiation from affecting the circuit and producing data consistent with the temperature-independent behaviour. So the experimenters needed to reduce and characterise environmental noise with great care.

The team led by Clarke, working with Devoret and Martinis, solved this problem by redesigning their setup so stray signals couldn't interfere. They used special filters and shielding to block



unwanted microwaves and kept every part of the experiment extremely cold and stable. Then they sent in faint yet precisely tuned microwave pulses to gently test how the circuit responded, allowing them to measure its electrical properties accurately. When they finally cooled the system to very low temperatures, they saw that its behaviour matched the exact patterns predicted by quantum tunnelling theory.

How did the circuit show quantum effects?

The researchers also wanted to find out if the circuit's trapped state behaved like a quantum system with distinct energy steps — a hallmark of a quantum state — instead of a smooth range. They shone microwaves of different frequencies onto the junction while adjusting the current. When the frequency exactly matched the gap between two allowed energy levels, the circuit suddenly escaped more easily from its trapped state. The higher the level, the faster this escape happened. These patterns showed that the circuit's overall state could only receive or emit fixed packets of energy, which is also how a single particle following the rules of quantum mechanics would behave. In short, the circuit as a whole behaved like a quantum particle.

Put together, the results revealed two facts. First, a macroscopic electrical circuit — one that you could see with the naked eye — could display quantum behaviour when sufficiently isolated from its environment. Second, a relevant macroscopic variable in that circuit could be understood using the standard tools of quantum mechanics. These experiments also pointed to a practical path for controlling and 'reading' macroscopic quantum states — in this case using a bias current, weak microwaves, and sufficient protections to shield from external radiation — one that gave the field a template to make reliable quantum measurements in solid-state devices. Subsequent work extended these ideas, developing superconducting qubits, embedding them in microwave resonators, and improving their coherence.

What are the applications of this work?

The technological applications flow from the same physics. A circuit with a Josephson junction can be made to mimic the quantised energy levels of an atom; microwaves could drive the circuit to jump between these energy levels; and carefully coupling the circuit to a resonator could allow an operator to measure changes in the circuit without disturbing it. This architecture, known as circuit quantum electrodynamics, is the foundation of many of today's superconducting quantum processors (The resonator is like an echo chamber for microwaves. When the circuit is coupled to a resonator, the two can exchange energy in a controlled way, allowing scientists to measure the circuit's state indirectly by observing changes in the resonator's behaviour).

Superconducting circuits that exploit macroscopic quantum effects are central to several emerging technologies. They are quantum amplifiers that boost extremely weak signals without adding noise — a useful ability in diagnostics as much as searches for dark matter. They are used to measure current and voltage with extraordinary precision. They can be microwave-to-optical converters that link quantum processors to fibre-optic networks. They are components in quantum simulators used to model complex materials or even chemical reactions atom by atom.

WHY DID MOFS PIONEERS WIN THE CHEMISTRY NOBEL?

The story so far:

For centuries, chemistry's main terrain was to craft ever more complex molecules but it soon became clear to scientists that they were all confined to their own boundaries. The Nobel Prize in

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Chemistry 2025 honours three scientists who expanded that horizon. Susumu Kitagawa, Richard Robson, and Omar Yaghi have been feted for developing metal-organic frameworks (MOFs), little molecular scaffolds with vast internal spaces where other atoms and molecules can move, react or stay.

What is an MOF?

MOFs are crystalline structures in which metal ions serve as nodes and organic molecules as connectors. The resulting structure can have enormous internal surface areas — thousands of square metres per gram — and their pores can be customised to attract or hold specific molecules. By carefully choosing the building blocks, researchers can control the size and shape of the cavities and the chemical environment within. MOFs are thus among the most versatile materials ever created.

What did Robson and Kitagawa achieve?

In the 1970s, Richard Robson at the University of Melbourne was preparing ball-and-stick models to show students how atoms connect. He realised that the positions of the holes drilled into each atom contained all the information needed to determine the molecule's shape. If that logic worked for small molecules, he wondered if it could be scaled up.

A decade later, Robson combined copper ions, which like to bond in a tetrahedral arrangement, with an organic molecule bearing four arms ending in nitrile groups. To everyone's surprise, instead of a messy tangle, the components self-assembled into a diamond-like crystal. This lattice wasn't dense like a diamond but full of empty cavities, each capable of hosting other molecules. Robson predicted that such "frameworks" could be tailored to trap ions, catalyse reactions, and sieve molecules by size.

However, Robson's early crystals were fragile. Susumu Kitagawa in Japan made them stable and functional. Guided by his philosophy of finding "usefulness in the useless", Kitagawa pursued porous materials even when they seemed too delicate to matter. In 1997, he used cobalt, nickel or zinc ions linked by a bridging molecule called 4,4'-bipyridine to build a true three-dimensional MOF. When the material was dried and refilled, gases such as methane, nitrogen, and oxygen could flow in and out without damaging the structure.

Kitagawa also recognised that MOFs could be soft rather than rigid, with flexible molecular joints allowing them to expand, contract or bend around depending on temperature, pressure, and the molecules inside.

What was Yaghi's contribution?

Omar Yaghi in the U.S. gave MOFs their structural strength and reproducibility. Having grown up in modest circumstances in Jordan, Yaghi was fascinated by chemistry's ability to create new forms of order. At Arizona State University in the 1990s, he sought a way to build extended materials by design, not by chance, using metal ions as joints and organic molecules as struts. In 1995, he made the first two-dimensional frameworks linked by cobalt or copper ions that could host other molecules without collapsing. Four years later, he achieved a landmark with MOF-5, a robust three-dimensional lattice made from zinc ions and benzene-dicarboxylate linkers. MOF-5 was strong and, notably, just a few grams had an internal surface area comparable to a football field. It was also intact when heated to 300°C and emptied of all 'guest' molecules.



By the early 2000s, his team had built entire families of MOFs with the same underlying geometry but different pore sizes and functions.

Why are MOFs important?

Chemists can easily make use of them for different applications. An MOF called CALF-20 can efficiently capture carbon dioxide from factory exhaust and is already being tested in industrial plants. MOF-303 can harvest drinking water from arid desert air by absorbing vapour at night and releasing it in sunlight. UiO-67 can remove persistent forever chemicals (PFAS) from water. MIL-101 and ZIF-8 can speed up the breakdown of pollutants and recover rare-earth metals from wastewater.

In the energy sector, NU-1501 and MOF-177 can store hydrogen or methane safely at moderate pressure, a crucial step toward clean-fuel vehicles. Others serve as containers for toxic gases in semiconductor manufacturing and as drug-delivery capsules that release medicines in response to biological cues.

HOW INNOVATION DRIVES ECONOMIC GROWTH

The story so far:

On October 13, the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences announced that it had decided to award the 2025 Sveriges Riksbank Prize in Economic Sciences to Joel Mokyr, Philippe Aghion and Peter Howitt “for having explained innovation-driven economic growth”. One half of the prize goes to Mr. Mokyr, while the other half will be divided between Mr. Aghion and Mr. Howitt.

Who are the winners?

Joel Mokyr was born in 1946 in Leiden, the Netherlands. He is currently a professor at Northwestern University. According to the award citation, he won the prize “for having identified the prerequisites for sustained growth through technological progress”. Philippe Aghion was born in 1956 in Paris, France. He is currently a professor at Collège de France and INSEAD, Paris, and The London School of Economics and Political Science, U.K. Peter Howitt was born in 1946 in Canada and is a professor at Brown University in the U.S. Mr. Aghion and Mr. Howitt jointly won the other half of the award “for the theory of sustained growth through creative destruction”.

What was Joel Mokyr’s work?

To understand the work of all three economists, one must first understand the fact that global growth has been unusually sustained over the last 200 years, following centuries of stagnation. The work of all three economists, in different ways, tries to answer what happened in the last two centuries that set them apart. This will also help create a model of sorts for sustained growth into the future as well.

Through his research in economic history, Mr. Mokyr showed that a continual flow of “useful knowledge” is necessary for sustained growth. This useful knowledge, he theorised, has two parts: propositional knowledge and prescriptive knowledge. Propositional knowledge basically has to do with looking at the natural world and figuring out why something works. Prescriptive knowledge refers to actual practical instructions, drawings or recipes that describe what is necessary for something to work — like an instruction manual.



He argued that, prior to the Industrial Revolution, the world's leading innovators had a good command of propositional knowledge. That is, they had strong theories, after observing the world, of why things worked. This propositional knowledge, however, did not rest on a bedrock of prescriptive knowledge. Without the latter, it became next to impossible to build upon existing knowledge. This changed in the 16th and 17th centuries, Mr. Mokyr argued. Scientists started including precise measurement methods and controlled experiments in their work, and began to insist that results be reproducible.

What were implications on policy?

The policy prescription of Mr. Mokyr's research was twofold. The first was that new ideas would become a reality only if practical, technical and commercial knowledge was abundantly available. Without these, he argued that even brilliant ideas such as Leonardo da Vinci's helicopter designs would remain on the drawing board, as they indeed did. He argued that sustained growth first took place in Britain because it was home to many skilled artisans and engineers who were able to transform ideas into practical and commercial products, which was vital in achieving sustained growth. The policy implication from this is that governments must invest heavily in skilling if they want sustained growth. The other factor — and policy prescription — for sustained growth was that society should be open to change. Innovation invariably creates winners, but it also creates losers as new technologies replace existing ones. This can often lead to resistance to change from established interest groups.

What about Aghion and Howitt?

These two economists took the idea of “creative destruction” — where innovation leads to gains, but also the destruction of the incumbents — and created a mathematical model to capture it. They showed, through maths, how technological advancement leads to sustained growth.

The model developed by both of them can be used to analyse whether there is an optimal volume of R&D in society. There are two opposing trends here, as per the developed model. The first trend is that, when a new innovation comes in and replaces another, the benefits from the replaced technology still continue to flow to society, even if the company that developed it is no longer making profits from it. In other words, technology that has been outcompeted has more value for society than for the company that developed it. This makes it imperative that R&D be subsidised. However, the other competing trend is that when a company comes up with an innovation that rises to the top of the chain, it starts receiving bulk of the profits even though the actual improvement might have been only incremental. For society, the gain from this new technology is limited because it is only a relatively small improvement over the older technology. In such a scenario, investments into R&D might be too high. Therefore, under this trend, R&D should not be subsidised.

The answer to the question of how much R&D needs to happen will thus vary depending on the society and economy in question, but the model developed by the two economists lends a lot of insight into how to arrive at this optimal level.

FIX YOUR WORKFLOW BEFORE USING AI TOOLS

In the world of work, there is always market for tools that increases productivity and reduces the time taken to complete tasks. That market has enabled creation of new apps, better planners, and faster devices. Now AI has entered the scene, promising to take things a step further.



AI tools can draft your emails, plan your week, summarize meetings, and even suggest when you should take a break. The companies shipping AI products are making an irresistible pitch: let the machine handle the mess so you can focus on the meaningful.

In my earlier column on decoded, I showed how AI alone can't solve your email problem. In this article I'll show how you should fix your workflows before deploying AI to complete tasks.

The simple truth is this: if your workflow is broken, AI won't fix it. In fact, it often makes the cracks bigger. Without clear systems, automation doesn't create clarity; it just moves chaos around faster.

Consider personal tasks like scheduling, note-taking, or managing to-dos. AI can quickly slot an appointment onto your calendar, transcribe a meeting, or sort tasks by priority. But if you haven't defined when you review your calendar, where you store your notes, or how you act on tasks, you'll still feel disorganized. The problem isn't the lack of AI; it's the lack of structure.

This is why the starting point isn't "Which AI tool should I use?" but "Do I have a workflow worth automating?" Only once you've built a foundation can AI actually amplify it. Otherwise, you're giving a shaky system more moving parts.

So how do you create that foundation? One practical way is to follow a three-step framework that begins by capturing the information, followed by building a process, and then concludes in executing the rules consistently.

Firstly, decide where every type of information or data goes. Emails, notes, and ideas should have a single, trusted home. Scattered sticky notes, half-used apps, and random reminders on your phone only make AI's job harder.

Then, define how often and in what order you review information. For example, maybe you check your task list twice a day or review your calendar at the start and end of the week. A system without regular checkpoints is like a filing cabinet no one ever opens.

Lastly, choose clear rules for execution. Do tasks get done immediately if they take under two minutes? Do larger items get scheduled into time blocks? Without clear criteria for action, even the best AI prioritization will leave you staring at a list you don't trust.

Once this capture-process-execute cycle is in place, AI becomes a multiplier. A transcription tool doesn't just create a messy text file; it feeds into your note system where you already know how to tag, review, and use it. An AI calendar assistant doesn't just book time; it supports the way you already plan your week.

Think of it this way: AI is like adding horsepower to your car. If your wheels aren't aligned, you won't go faster. Instead, you'll skid off the road.

The temptation is to let AI shoulder responsibility for your personal productivity.

But the truth is, it's still on you to design a workflow you trust. Once that foundation is in place, AI isn't just impressive, but a genuinely transformative tool. Without it, you're just automating bad habits.

The question isn't whether AI can help you work smarter. It's whether you've created the systems that make "smarter" possible in the first place.



DOPAMINE OVERDOSE: HOW MODERN LIFESTYLES ARE REWIRING OUR BRAINS

If there were a chemical formula for happiness, dopamine would be at its core. Often called the “feel-good” neurotransmitter, dopamine drives motivation, reward, and pleasure, whether from a good meal, an achievement, or a meaningful relationship. From drug addictions to social media marathons, contemporary life has made dopamine a double-edged sword that both stimulates productivity and feeds addiction.

Dopamine is a chemical signal that conveys pleasure and thus a sense of reward. Each time something happens that makes us happy, such as eating chocolate or receiving a compliment, our brain releases dopamine, prompting us to act in the same manner again. On a neurobiological level, this is largely contingent on the mesolimbic pathway from the ventral tegmental area (VTA) to the nucleus accumbens, a central part of the brain’s reward pathways. The mesolimbic pathway reinforces behaviours we perceive as constructive or pleasurable, along with reward prediction and a motivation to learn.

Certain times, these processes are commandeered by addictive drugs, including cocaine, nicotine, or alcohol. Such drugs induce massive dopamine surges, overwhelming the reward centre of the brain. Over time however, the brain gets desensitised, requiring more doses of the addictive substance in order to feel normal. This is where addiction begins — not from pleasure itself, but from the brain trying to bring balance back.

From substances to screens

Drugs used to be the primary cause of dopamine overload, but now, technology is the new push. Every ping, like, and notification serves to deliver tiny doses of dopamine, delivered intermittently, to promote user engagement in a reward schedule that best resembles a slot machine. Social media, short videos, reels, and streaming services exploit this gap, producing dependency with their endless cycle of suspense and satisfaction.

Although scrolling on Instagram or watching endless short videos may feel harmless, neuroscientists have shown that the brain processes the kind of stimulation presented by technology similarly to actual drug use. Such use promotes compulsive checking behaviours, fractured attention, anxiety, or withdrawal when disconnected. Functional MRI studies have shown overlapping activation in the nucleus accumbens during social media engagement and substance use, supporting the idea that digital stimuli can trigger the same reward circuits that drive addiction.

What is more concerning is that dopamine-driven design is not coincidental — it is a result of behavioural engineering, in which algorithms find out what rewards you the most and serve you more of it.

Young adults and teenagers, who are still learning how to manage their emotions and impulses, are especially susceptible. Research indicates that adolescents who report spending more than three hours a day on social media report substantially higher levels of anxiety and depressive symptoms. The adolescent brain is particularly plastic in development. This means that understimulation from the world around them and overstimulation from technology may, quickly yet casually, shape their reward circuits — creating hyper-short attention spans and emotional instability. Excessive screen time is shown by research to change the sensitivity of dopamine



receptors, making it more difficult to find pleasure in daily life. Short of that, our normal baseline happiness is decreasing, while our appetites for stimulation become stronger.

An overload of dopamine does not indicate that we are off the charts happy; it suggests that our brain's reward system may be fatigued. By constantly seeking out stimulation, we are unknowingly setting ourselves up for burnout. The implications may be slow and stealthy at first: the experience of losing motivation when performing a normal task as it feels bland compared to an immediate sense of stability experienced while waiting for digital affirmation or enjoying the pharmacologic effects of a substance. Eventually, wear and tear will dull our emotional responses to regular experiences, for instance, the ability to experience joy, and will interrupt sleep, shorten our attention span and begin to deteriorate our mental health with anxiety, depression and poor self-esteem.

It is possible to use social media engagement to stimulate reward circuits in the brain that resemble what drives some to addiction. When the brain becomes accustomed to constant spikes of pleasure and begins screaming for more, potential manifestations include addiction, whether social media, video games, or drugs.

Reclaiming balance

The solution, of course, is not to eliminate dopamine, but rather to bring it back in balance. "Dopamine fasting" refers to taking a break from the defeating pleasure and excitement our brains tend to rely on and instead, attempting to retrain our brains to function appropriately with a more moderate and sustainable level of happiness when engaging in slower and deeper experiences. Taking time away from constant phone reminders, silencing emails, taking a break from your devices, making your devices greyscale, or simply instituting a tech break can help your mind reset its rhythm.

Regular movement and moderate engagement with mindfulness will allow you to experience dopamine naturally and at a more stable and healthy level, instead of the non-stop hyper-stimulating level we are used to in the present. Focusing on meaningful activities — deep work, learning new skills — also ushers in enjoyable experiences with slower, more lasting rewards.

The most important return to balance comes with real human connection — a good old-fashioned conversation, a laugh with a friend, or time spent with family that provides a level of happiness that no social media 'likes' can match. Ensuring good sleep, good nutrition, and emotional awareness helps stabilise dopamine levels and grounds our moods.

WOMAN CANDIDATE FOR UN CHIEF POST DECLINES PREFERENTIAL TREATMENT

Rebeca Grynspan, the Costa Rican candidate to lead the United Nations, said the selection process should be carried out without discrimination or preferential treatment for women.

As UN chief Antonio Guterres's second term draws to a close next year, calls have been mounting for the world body to finally put a woman in charge.

If you have "a process that will not discriminate against women, and we are able to get to the post of being secretary-general, we will show the world that we can live on equal terms", said Ms. Grynspan, who heads the UN trade and development agency UNCTAD.



Since its founding in 1945, the UN has had no women and only one Latin American at the helm: Peruvian Javier Perez de Cuellar, in charge between 1982 and 1991. The names of several prominent women from Latin America and the Caribbean have been floated for the next UN chief. They include former Chilean President and former UN rights chief Michelle Bachelet; Prime Minister Mia Mottley of Barbados; and Mexican Environment Minister Alicia Barcena.

“All of them have wonderful CVs... [and] none of us need any special treatment,” Ms. Grynspan said. “What we don’t want is discrimination... in setting the agenda of who will be the next secretary-general,” she said a few days after Costa Rica’s government presented her candidacy.

The former Costa Rican Vice-President pushed back against demands that there “has to be” a woman UN chief. “The question is: why hasn’t it happened with so many capable women around?”

UNKINDEST CUT

How does cutting onions make you cry?

When you pierce the skin of an onion, you are left with stinging eyes caused by chemicals released from the onion that affect your nerves in the cornea. And it seems the cutting technique may have a role to play as well.

Onions cut by steel blades of varying sharpness and speed matter, according to a study published in Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences.

“Using high-speed visuals, we found that an onion does not release tear-triggering fluid in one burst. Instead, the blade first punches out a layer of high-speed mist, then slower fluids snap into drops,” the authors wrote. Blunter blades and faster cutting speeds release a larger number of droplets, “causing pressure to build under the onion’s skin before the droplets were ejected. Refrigerating the onions prior to cutting produced an increased number of droplets of similar velocity, compared with the unchilled samples,” it said.

Using sharp knives “not only reduces tears while cutting onions but may also reduce the number of potential pathogens released while chopping other raw foods”.

SNACKS AND NAPS

Q: Why do we feel sleepy after a heavy meal?

A: We often feel sleepy after a meal because digestion changes how blood and energy circulate in the body. When we eat, the stomach and intestines start working to break down food and absorb nutrients. To support this work, the body directs more blood towards the digestive organs. As a result, less blood and oxygen reach the brain for a short while and this drop can make us feel drowsy or less alert.

The type of food we eat also affects how sleepy we feel. Meals rich in carbohydrates, such as rice, bread, and sweets, raise the amount of glucose in the blood. The body releases more insulin to use or store this glucose. Insulin, in turn, allows certain amino acids to enter the brain, especially tryptophan. Once inside, tryptophan helps produce serotonin and melatonin, two compounds that regulate mood and sleep. A heavy meal, therefore, not only diverts blood flow but also increases the level of sleep-inducing hormones.



Large or fatty meals add to this effect because they take longer to digest. The body continues sending blood to the stomach for several hours, keeping energy levels low and slowing down physical activity. Warm environments or a relaxed state after eating can make this drowsiness more intense.

People who eat smaller, balanced meals or include fibre and protein often feel less sleepy because digestion is steadier and blood sugar levels stay stable.

STANFORD UNIVERSITY RESEARCH ON SNOW LEOPARDS: A GENETIC WARNING SIGN

Stanford-led research found very low genetic diversity among the elusive big cats, who have an estimated population of less than 8,000. In fact, snow leopards have the lowest genetic diversity of any big cat species—lower even than cheetahs, long known for their genetic bottlenecks.

A 900,000-Year History

The research suggests that snow leopards have had a consistently low population for at least the last nine hundred thousand years. This low diversity is not due to recent inbreeding, but rather a long evolutionary history of small, isolated populations. The study indicates their population experienced a bottleneck about 20,000 to 30,000 years ago during the height of the last glaciation.

The Research Breakthrough

Before this study, only four snow leopards had ever had their genomes fully sequenced. This study brings that number to 41, including 35 wild snow leopards and six from zoos around the world, achieved through years of work and extensive collaboration with researchers and wildlife officials from 11 countries.

A Silver Lining with a Dark Cloud

There's one surprising positive finding: snow leopards have a significantly lower "homozygous load"—meaning fewer instances of having duplicate copies of potentially harmful mutations, suggesting periodic purging of bad mutations in their population over time.

However, this comes at a steep cost. Snow leopards don't have many individuals and don't have much genetic diversity, so they are just not well situated to deal with changes that are likely coming their way.

Why This Matters for Conservation

Snow leopards' low genetic diversity means they lack the resiliency needed to survive changes to their environment—especially in the face of global warming. If their habitat starts degrading, then snow leopards might go extinct fairly easily, simply because there's just not much ecological space for them and the total population is so small.

Innovative Conservation Tools

The research team has developed practical applications from this work. Researchers developed a genetic test for feces that will allow scientists to learn a lot about wild snow leopards without the need to trap or sedate them, making it possible to monitor these elusive cats without disturbing them in their remote mountain habitats.



The study, published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences in October 2025, serves as both a scientific milestone and a conservation warning for one of the world's most mysterious big cats.

Critical to Asia's mountains

The wild feline indeed faces a long list of threats today: climate change, habitat loss, decreased availability of primary prey (mountain ungulates such as the Siberian ibex), retaliatory killings for livestock predation, and poaching for their skin. All this while climate change in Asia's high mountains threatens their future. Despite this, snow leopards, which were first listed as 'endangered,' were controversially downlisted to 'vulnerable' in 2017, as they did not meet certain criteria for population size.

There are no more than 4,500 to 7,500 individuals, each critical to the Asian mountain ecosystem "that offers immense ecosystem services — acting as an important source of carbon storage and providing water to almost two billion people."

Hearteningly, however, the international community has worked for decades to establish a sustainable zoo population: in 2008, there were 445 snow leopards across 205 institutions globally, the paper read.

The snow leopard, distinguished by an unusually long tail, which acts as a rudder to help it keep its balance as it traverses its rough terrain, happens to be the least genetically studied of all big cat species. There is, however, evidence of continuous habitat connectivity across at least 75 km in Pakistan and around 1,000 km in Mongolia, and the animal is known to cross long distances between mountain ranges, according to the study.

'Very poorly studied'

As for India, a pioneering survey last year estimated that 718 snow leopards exist in the wild: 477 in Ladakh, 124 in Uttarakhand, 51 in Himachal Pradesh, 36 in Arunachal Pradesh, 21 in Sikkim, and nine in Jammu and Kashmir. The Indian snow leopard accounts for 10-15 percent of the global population.

"Of the 12 countries with wild snow leopards, India has the highest numbers after China and Mongolia. That makes India one of the most important countries for the conservation of this species," Kulbhushansingh Suryawanshi, with the India programme of the Snow Leopard Trust at the Nature Conservation Foundation (NCF), Mysore, told The Hindu.

He added that the genetic diversity of leopards in India "is very poorly studied ... We need to sample across the high mountains to understand the genetic diversity of snow leopards in India."

"India's Project Snow Leopard, dedicated to the conservation of snow leopards, and NGOs such as the NCF, have been working on snow leopard conservation for 27 years. Local community members from snow leopard habitats such as Ladakh, Jammu and Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Sikkim, and Arunachal are key partners in the conservation of snow leopards," said Dr. Suryawanshi.

But the snow leopard in India is threatened by land use change and climate change, he said.

"Almost the entire snow leopard habitat in India is within 50-100 km of the international border. Large-scale infrastructure is changing the face of this region. Climate change-induced warming



and floods are impacting the wildlife of this landscape, including the snow leopards, to a large extent.”

ARCTIC SEALS, BIRDS IN NEW 'RED LIST' OF ENDANGERED SPECIES: IUCN

Arctic seals and birds are coming under increasing threat, mainly due to climate change and human activity, according to an updated list of endangered species released Friday by the world's top conservation body.

The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) said habitat loss driven by logging and agricultural expansion is a threat to birds. At the same time, seals were at risk mostly due to global warming and human activities, including maritime traffic.

The IUCN said it was changing the status of the hooded seal from vulnerable to endangered while bearded and harp seals are now classified as near threatened.

“This timely global update highlights the ever increasing impact human activity is having on nature and the climate and the devastating effects this has,” its director general Grethel Aguilar told reporters at its World Conservation Congress in Abu Dhabi.

The IUCN red list now includes “172,620 species of which 48,646 are threatened with extinction,” it said in a statement.

Global warming is destroying the natural habitat of animals including seals that live in the cold parts of the world. Maritime traffic, mining and oil extraction, industrial fishing and hunting are among other risks to the species.

“Global warming is occurring four times faster in the Arctic than in other regions, which is drastically reducing the extent and duration of sea ice cover,” the IUCN said.

“Ice-dependent seals are a key food source for other animals,” it added.

They “play a central role in the food web, consuming fish and invertebrates and recycling nutrients” and are one of the “keystone species” of their ecosystem.

Kit Kovacs, a scientist at the Norwegian Polar Institute, raised the alarm about the Svalbard archipelago, halfway between Norway and the North Pole.

“When I lived on the archipelago, just a couple of decades ago, we had five months of sea ice cover in areas that are now winter ice-free. It is really hard to express just how rapidly the Arctic is changing,” she said.

The IUCN said its red list of birds is the fruit of nine years of work by “thousands of experts”.

“Overall, 61% of bird species have declining populations — an estimate that has increased from 44 percent in 2016,” the IUCN said.

It studied thousands of bird species worldwide and found that “1,256 (or 11.5%) of the 11,185 species assessed are globally threatened”.

This year's update focused on regions where the destruction of tropical forest poses a growing threat to birds. In Madagascar, 14 species were newly classified as near threatened and three



others were labelled vulnerable. In West Africa, five more bird species were found to be near threatened in addition to one more in Central America.

The report also mentioned a positive development. The green turtle is no longer endangered, it said, citing “decades of sustained conservation action” that saw its population recover by 28% since the 1970s.

Nicolas Pilcher, the Executive Director of the Marine Research Foundation, said this success should spur action not complacency.

“Just because we have reached this great step in conservation isn’t a reason to sit back and then become complacent,” he said.

EVEN ON ‘CLEAR’ DAYS, THE AIR CAN STILL BE CHEMICALLY TOXIC

Governments and scientists often judge air quality by the amount of fine particulate matter (PM2.5) in it. These particles can enter deep into the lungs and bloodstream and have toxic effects. New research from East China Normal University suggests, however, that this measure may not tell the whole story. Even when PM2.5 levels meet global safety standards, the air can still contain toxic particles that harm the lungs.

In the study, published recently in *Environmental Health*, scientists analysed PM2.5 levels in Shanghai in winter and spring 2025. Then they used a sensitive method called single-particle inductively coupled plasma time-of-flight mass spectrometry to identify the chemical makeup of each particle. They paid special attention to metal-containing fine particles (MCFPs), small fragments that include aluminium, silicon, iron, manganese, and lead. The scientists found that MCFPs made up about 80% of all metal particles in the city’s air. They also used machine learning to determine the particles’ origins and tested how they affected human lung cells.

The results were striking. Air samples collected on clean days, when the PM2.5 concentration was under 15 g/m³, were often more toxic to lung cells than those collected on polluted days. The oxidative stress in cells, a sign of tissue damage, was up to 8.1x higher and cell death was up to 6.3x higher, even as the total particle mass was lower.

The main culprit was iron-rich MCFPs that carried other toxic metals such as manganese and lead. These combinations triggered strong chemical reactions inside cells, releasing free radicals that damaged DNA.

The team found that most of these iron-rich particles came from human activities, especially vehicle emissions and burning coal. On days with heavy dust or haze, the MCFPs were partly masked by larger mineral particles, which reduced their relative abundance. But on seemingly cleaner days, the proportion of these particles was much higher, rendering the air chemically more dangerous.

The study concluded that PM2.5 mass alone is a poor indicator of air safety. Even air that seems clear can hide particles small enough to evade the body’s defences and persist in organs for years. The researchers suggested that air-quality monitoring and regulation should shift from measuring only total particle mass to identifying and controlling the specific toxic components, particularly iron-rich MCFPs from traffic and fuel combustion.



A MERE FOUR MUTATIONS HELP THE NAKED MOLE RAT FIX ITS DNA AND LIVE LONGER

The naked mole rat, a small rodent from East Africa, is known for its exceptional lifespan of up to 37 years—much longer than similar-sized mammals. Scientists believe its longevity is linked to superior DNA repair mechanisms. A recent study found that the molecule cGAS, which usually hinders DNA repair in humans and mice, actually enhances repair in naked mole rats due to four key amino acid changes. These substitutions allow cGAS to stay bound to DNA after damage, promoting the activity of repair proteins FANCI and RAD50 and reducing cellular ageing. Remarkably, introducing these changes into human cGAS also improved DNA repair. The findings suggest that efficient DNA repair is crucial for longevity and could inspire future age-related therapies if safely replicated in other species.

COUNTING CALORIES: A BRIEF HISTORY OF HOW THE UNIT OF FOOD WAS CONCEPTUALISED

Ever glanced at the back of a food packet and seen that bold number staring back at you? Calories. For over a century, this single unit has dominated our conversations about food, health, and weight. We count them, burn them, and often, feel guilty about them. But have you ever wondered where this powerful little number came from? The story is a fascinating journey involving French chemists, German physiologists, American innovators, and surprising facts you won't find on any food label.

How 'calorie' came to be

The story begins not in a kitchen, but in a Parisian laboratory in the 1780s. The brilliant French chemist Antoine Lavoisier proposed a radical idea: breathing is a form of combustion, just like a candle burning. To prove it, he and his colleague Pierre-Simon Laplace built a device called an ice calorimeter, large enough to house a guinea pig. By measuring the heat the animal produced (by how much ice it melted), they linked the energy of life to the physics of heat. Soon after, the word "calorie," from Latin for heat, was coined to measure this energy.

For decades, the calorie remained a tool for physicists and engineers. Its journey into our diets began with a German baron, Justus von Liebig, who was concerned about malnourishment. In the 1840s, he developed a concentrated beef extract to provide cheap, energy-rich food for the poor: a product we know today as the Oxo cube. His students, inspired by his work, began meticulously measuring the energy the human body extracted from different foods. One of them, Max Rubner, established that proteins, fats, and carbohydrates could be measured by their equivalent heat value. This simple idea — that different foods could be compared through a single number — laid the groundwork for every diet fad to come.

The calorie truly went global when an American chemist, Wilbur Olin Atwater, who studied in Germany brought the science back to the U.S. In the 1890s, he published influential government bulletins that calculated the energy values of hundreds of foods. It was Atwater who established the capitalised "Calorie" (actually a kilocalorie, or 1,000 small calories) that we now see on U.S. food labels.

But science alone didn't make the calorie a household name. Fashion did. In the roaring twenties, physician Lulu Hunt Peters published her blockbuster book, *Diet and Health*. She brilliantly linked calorie counting to the trendy "flapper" ideal: a thin, boyish figure that symbolised a modern,



liberated lifestyle. Suddenly, counting calories wasn't just for scientists; it was a chic tool for self-transformation. The ordinary act of eating was forever changed, governed by arithmetic.

However, the original motivation for counting calories wasn't personal health or beauty. It was about social control and efficiency. Early nutritionists studied prisoners, factory workers, and the impoverished to determine the minimum amount of fuel needed to keep them productive without causing food riots. The goal was to find the cheapest way to feed the masses in institutions such as schools, the military, and workhouses.

A question of justice — how to feed the hungry — was reframed as a problem of cost and management.

Looking beyond

Today, science is revealing the limits of this 18th-century idea. The simple model of “calories in, calories out” is being challenged. We now know that the numbers on food labels are averages, with significant margins of error. More importantly, our bodies are not simple furnaces. How we absorb energy depends on our unique genes, gut bacteria, and even the way food is cooked. Not all calories are created equal; 200 calories of almonds are processed very differently from 200 calories of fizzy drink.

The future of nutrition lies in a more personalised and complex understanding. Fields such as nutrigenomics are exploring how our individual genetic makeup interacts with the food we eat. We are slowly moving away from the simple act of counting and towards understanding the intricate relationships within our bodies.

Calories gave us a language to talk about food energy, but it's a language that's now due for an update. So, the next time you look at that number on a label, remember its rich and complicated history — a story of guinea pigs, beef cubes, and flappers — and know that we are far more complex than a simple calculation.

FROM BRISK WALK TO SIMPLE EXERCISES, INVESTING IN SPINAL HEALTH NOW CAN PAY RICH DIVIDENDS

World Spine Day on October 16, has arrived with a clear, energising brief: “Invest in Your Spine.” Far from a passive plea to sit up straight, the 2025 campaign is a call to motion, urging every age group to treat spinal health as an active, daily practice rather than a background setting on a digital device. With low back pain now the leading cause of global disability, the most valuable contribution we can make is to move — deliberately, repeatedly, and joyfully — because the vertebrae thrive on rhythm, load, and circulation, not on the static hunch that has become the signature posture of modern life.

Stepping up

For the average adult the equation is refreshingly simple: the more steps you bank before noon, the less pain you will tally by nightfall. A brisk 20-minute walk at sunrise wakes the deep stabilising muscles that hug the lumbar spine and drives nutrient-rich fluid through the discs, keeping them plump and shock-absorbent. From there, micro-doses of motion are the interest that compounds: set a quiet hourly chime, stand up and march in place for 60 seconds while rolling the shoulder blades together; climb one flight of stairs sideways, leading with the left leg on the way up and the right on the way down; swap the elevator queue for a two-minute calf-stretch



against the wall. These snippets accumulate into the 150 minutes of moderate activity recommended by the World Health Organization, yet they feel less like exercise and more like reclaiming stolen minutes from a chair.

Pregnancy, often misinterpreted as a nine-month sentence to stillness, is in fact an invitation to curated movement. Physiotherapists now prescribe pool walking three times a week; the buoyancy unloads 70% of body weight while the gentle drag of water strengthens multifidus muscles that guard the spine. On land, a standing pelvic tilt — hands on hips, exhale and tuck, inhale, and release — can be performed at the kitchen counter for two sets of fifteen, turning meal prep into a mini-workout. A low step stool placed beneath the desk allows one foot to alternate elevation, keeping the pelvis dynamic and reducing the static sway-back that compresses lumbar discs.

After birth, front-loaded baby carriers can be replaced with ergonomic backpacks that sit above the hips, encouraging the parent to walk taller and longer, transforming stroller routes into spine-lengthening hikes.

Rewrite ageing

Ageing does not retire the spine from activity; it merely rewrites the playlist. Osteopenia vertebrae respond to axial loading with renewed mineral deposition. Doctors encourage the elderly to keep up with their daily outings including temple stairs and market walks to stay in shape, but with small updates.

A calm dawn walk around the neighbourhood temple or park gives steady, weight-bearing steps; carrying a light cloth bag with a kilogram of lentils adds a gentle load that tells bones to stay strong. At home, a firm cotton mattress on a regular wooden cot supports the back better than the old rope-strung cot, and placing a rolled towel under the knees during afternoon rest eases lower back arch. Calcium comes through food like ragi porridge sweetened with jaggery, small river fish eaten with soft bones, and a warm glass of milk at night. These habits let ageing spines stay active and upright.

The ledger is unambiguous: every minute spent in motion is interest earned against future pain, surgery days and pharmacy bills. The spine is not a fragile column to be guarded; it is a dynamic spring that wants to be compressed, released and compressed again. Invest today by moving, and the spine will pay dividends for every tomorrow you plan to stand up in.