



19th to 25th October 2025

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INTERNATIONAL

THE FAR-RIGHT'S INFILTRATION INTO THE WEST'S MAINSTREAM

For years, western capitals invoked the Enlightenment — liberty, equality, reason — as their moral compass. Across the trans-Atlantic world today, ideas long parked on the fringes, nativism, ethno-nationalism, and hardline “law and order”, increasingly shape prime-time debate. This is not a sudden rupture but a gradual normalisation, election by election and motion by motion, testing whether democracies that preached tolerance abroad can still defend it at home.

Normalising once-fringe hardline agendas

Italy has a far-right Prime Minister in Giorgia Meloni, the first since the Second World War. In France, Marine Le Pen's National Rally has shed its outcast tag, taking 41% in the 2022 runoff and often leading opinion polls. Germany's Alternative for Germany (AfD), long kept at arm's length, has topped national surveys, won its first district office, and even the present ruling party of Germany had relied on AfD votes to pass hard-line migration motions, breaching a post-war taboo. In the Nordics, the Sweden Democrats and Finland's Finns Party are no longer gatecrashers but kingmakers, trading support for tougher immigration rules. Mainstream political trends in Hungary and Poland have normalised a nationalist turn. On the Iberian rim, Spain's Vox and Portugal's Chega are gaining ground. What began as protest is edging into power, recasting the centre, not with a single sweep, but through steady local wins and tactical coalitions that shift policy first and politics after. Even where they do not hold power outright, they are dragging the political centre rightward. Traditional conservative parties, desperate to stem the loss of voters, increasingly echo hard-right positions on issues such as immigration, multiculturalism and “law and order”. The “Unite the Kingdom” march in London in September, organised by far-right activist Tommy Robinson, drew around 1,10,000 people, one of the largest right-wing demonstrations in recent memory. Mr. Robinson and allied commentators argue that there is a “two-tier policing” regime that treats right-wing protesters more harshly than others, casting their mobilisation as a free-speech defence and themselves as victims of an establishment double standard.

In the United States, the rightward drift is no longer atmospheric; it is administrative now. Since January 20, 2025, U.S. President Donald Trump has moved on multiple fronts: an order to constrict birthright citizenship, now tied up in litigation; the resurrection of “Schedule F,” reopening the door to sweeping political control over policy posts; a Justice Department push asking the Supreme Court to lock passports to sex assigned at birth; and a headline-grabbing move to slap a \$1,00,000 charge on new H-1B visa petitions. Each step signals a project to hard-wire ideology into rules and paperwork. Meanwhile, ideas once confined to the fringe, the ‘replacement’ conspiracy and talk of an immigrant ‘invasion’, now echo in prime time and from elected officials, blurring the boundary between protest and policy. Together, policy levers and grievance politics are pulling the Republican party's centre of gravity further right, and dragging the national conversation with it.

A democratic counter-strategy should be sober, not alarmist. Four priorities which need to stand out.

First, the need to address material grievances on inflation, public safety, service strain - without scapegoating migrants or minorities. Welfare-chauvinism is politically seductive but fiscally thin



for the long term. Second, maintain the firewall with no Faustian pacts. Short-term parliamentary wins that rely on extremist votes erode long-term democratic norms.

Third, responsibility in media and tech platforms which needs to amplify verified information, throttle demonstrable falsehoods, and insist on context when airing incendiary claims such as “two-tier policing”.

Fourth, civic courage for ordinary citizens, institutions, and mainstream parties who must defend equal citizenship and pluralism, principles that have served open societies well.

The stakes for India

For India, the stakes are concrete now. The U.K.’s grievance-driven street politics intersects with diaspora safety and social cohesion. Continental Europe’s hardening on migration and identity can shape visa regimes for students and skilled workers, as well as attitudes toward multiculturalism. The U.S. H-1B surcharge — if it remains in force after litigation and potential congressional scrutiny — directly raises costs for Indian professionals and firms, potentially diverting investment and talent flows. India also has a diplomatic interest in the quality of liberal democracy among key partners. When mainstream actors chase fringe talking points to protect vote banks, they shift the Overton window on pluralism, media independence and human rights — the very norms that underpin predictable partnerships, research ties and people-to-people links. That has knock-on effects for Indian students, businesses and long-standing communities abroad.

History and a caution

To be sure, the far-right’s ascent has not gone unchallenged. Citizens, activists and leaders continue to push back — in Germany, Spain and elsewhere, crowds have gathered to say that hate is not welcome, while courts and journalists have exposed abuses that thrive in the shadows. In several western countries, broad alliances have been forged to keep extremists from power, as France’s mainstream did against Marine Le Pen. The ideals are not dead yet, but they do need stewards. The question is whether the trans-Atlantic world will live up to its professed values or allow fear to erode gains won over generations. History’s caution is plain — Europe’s 1930s showed how a modern society can abandon liberal norms under the spell of demagoguery. The post-war order was built precisely to avoid that slide. Meeting this moment will require sober self-correction: listening to real economic and cultural anxieties without turning them into vendettas; resisting the temptation to launder fringe ideas through expedient coalitions; insisting on accuracy in public debate; and renewing everyday solidarities across lines of difference. Democracies are strongest when they protect the equal dignity of all. Equality, pluralism and reason remain the surest compass if we choose to follow it.

Efforts to ban books addressing LGBTQ themes and race relations in the United States have intensified, largely driven by right-wing conservative groups. The number of book challenges soared from under 300 in 2020 to over 9,000 in 2023, according to the American Library Association. Conservatives argue that their goal is to restrict access to material they deem inappropriate, not to censor. Notable works targeted include “All Boys Aren’t Blue,” “The Bluest Eye,” and “The Perks of Being a Wallflower.” Laws and policies in several States, particularly Florida, have sought to limit access to such books, while publishers, authors, and advocacy groups are actively resisting through legal action and community engagement. Globally, book bans and censorship are also on the rise, but supporters of literary freedom stress the importance of diverse representation in literature and continue to fight against these restrictions.



ERRATIC TRUMP AND EMBOLDENED PUTIN: WHY ENDING UKRAINE WAR IS SO COMPLEX

Days after brokering a fragile ceasefire in West Asia, US President Donald Trump has turned his attention once again to Eastern Europe. His stance on the ongoing three-and-a-half-year war has swung like a pendulum. In February, the Oval Office spat with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy was followed by threats of sanctions against Moscow. Then at the Alaska Summit in August, Trump met Russian President Vladimir Putin and appeared to align himself with the Kremlin's position — particularly Putin's demand that Ukraine cede unoccupied parts of the Donbas region in exchange for a ceasefire. Subsequently, Trump threw his weight behind Kyiv and speculated in September that Ukraine could take back all of its territory and “maybe even go further than that”. He even expressed openness to the idea of supplying Tomahawk cruise missiles to Ukraine. Now, there is yet another reversal. Following a lengthy call with Putin last week and a meeting with Zelenskyy on Friday, Trump has urged Kyiv and Moscow to “stop where they are”, suggested that the war should end by allowing the Donbas region to “be cut the way it is” (leaving most of it under Russian control), and rejected Zelenskyy's request for the Tomahawks.

Trump's inconsistency is all-too-familiar and yet disquieting, not just for Ukraine, but also for Europe. Over the past six weeks, Russia has sent drones over Poland and Romania, flown fighter jets into Estonian airspace, and is accused of orchestrating drone flights that disrupted airports in Denmark, Belgium, and Germany — allegations Moscow has denied. At the time, Trump expressed clear solidarity with NATO, declaring that it should shoot down Russian aircraft violating its airspace. Now, as the US president again presses Ukraine to make concessions, it will be up to Europe to ensure that, in the event of a deal, robust security assurances are provided to Ukraine.

An erratic Trump and an emboldened Putin illustrate the challenges that lie ahead in ending the war. Trump has reportedly agreed to hold another summit in Hungary — an EU member that opposes Ukraine's accession and is led by the pro-Putin Prime Minister Viktor Orban. Once again, it appears that Ukraine and Europe are being sidelined, with Washington positioning itself as the arbiter of war and peace. If this trend continues, and given the US president's current stance, the day may not be far when Ukraine is left with little choice but to yield to Trump's terms and compromise on its territory. To avert that scenario, Europe will need to act quickly.

SANCTIONING RUSSIA

The Trump administration has imposed fresh sanctions on Russia as punitive measures relating to Moscow's refusal to strike a ceasefire agreement to bring the war in Ukraine to a halt, with Washington targeting Russian oil giants Rosneft and Lukoil. Russia's use of the oil trade to finance war has been a bone of contention for NATO members since the early days of Russia's incursion into and attacks on Ukraine, an indirect dimension of the conflict that has pulled Asian powers India and China into the fray. Over the summer, Mr. Trump sought to up the ante in this regard by slapping India with an additional 25% tariff for importing Russian oil, over and above the basic 25% rate imposed on other countries as well, even though China, as a top importer of Russian seaborne crude, was spared this levy. Now, the latest round of sanctions appeared to have penalised both trading partners of Moscow significantly, with reports suggesting that at least four major state-owned Chinese oil companies have suspended purchases from Russia and that at least one private and three state-owned Indian refinery companies are planning for “recalibration of Russian oil imports” including the possibility of a “massive cut” over time.



At the heart of the White House move is the seething frustration of Mr. Trump over failed attempts to not only bring Russian President Vladimir Putin to the negotiating table — a feat achieved in Alaska in August and a second summit agreed in Budapest before it was postponed following the collapse of ceasefire talks — but also to nudge the Kremlin towards at least a short-term arrangement that might lead to a cessation of hostilities as a precursor to a broader treaty on territorial and institutional agreements. It is possible that the latest sanctions may lead to a genuine tightening of options for Mr. Putin on ending the war, especially as Washington will now be joining the European Union that has adopted its 19th sanctions package against Moscow, specifically focusing on technology supply chains, energy revenues, and financial networks. Nevertheless, it may be premature to applaud their potential impact on the Kremlin's strategic calculus. Ultimately, whether sanctions have teeth or not depends on the consistency of their enforcement, including shutting down the inevitable loopholes and workarounds that Moscow will seek to exploit to continue selling oil abroad, possibly at even sharper discounts. Mr. Trump may find that he has travelled full circle to arrive at the same sticky negotiating points between Moscow and Kiev that his predecessor faced — an early end to ground hostilities, control of Donbas, and the permissible extent of NATO influence in the region. Only if sanctions can break Russian strategic will on at least one of these points will the prospects for peace brighten considerably.

BENJAMIN NETANYAHU PROLONGED A WAR. WHO CAN KEEP THE PEACE IN GAZA?

On July 23, 2023, about 10,000 military reservists in Israel came out on the streets against the Benjamin Netanyahu government's impending overhaul of the country's independent judiciary. The threat by military personnel to stop serving was of a piece with months of protests against the government's plans, as well as against the prime minister himself, not least because of the corruption allegations — he has been in the dock since 2020 — against him. Political instability had plagued Israel for around half a decade at the time. The 2022 poll that saw Netanyahu's return to power at the head of a fragile coalition was the fifth election in four years. In the immediate aftermath of the horrific attack by Hamas on October 7, 2023, those political divisions — and the legitimate grievances against the PM — were papered over. Now, after two years of a war that has devastated Gaza and, at times, expanded beyond Palestine to Iran and Lebanon, that shield has been dented. For the sake of the ceasefire, a durable accommodation of Palestinians and broader regional stability, the country that claims to be “the only democracy in the Middle East” needs a return to a politics of accountability.

At the beginning of the war, his popularity had soared, but as recently as August, polls suggested that over 70 per cent of Israelis had lost trust in the government. On Sunday, the Israel Defence Forces attacked Gaza in response to alleged terrorist action and the country's parliament, the Knesset, called a vote on bills that favour annexing the West Bank. Reports are also emerging about impediments to aid to Gaza. Washington, reports suggest, is “frustrated” over these actions. Just two weeks after President Donald Trump announced “peace” with great fanfare, V-P J D Vance described the bills proposed by far-right parties as a “political stunt”, an insult.

There is little doubt that Netanyahu's political fortunes were buttressed by the Hamas attack. Yet, both within and outside Israel, sympathy for the beleaguered people of Gaza has grown. Elections are not due till October 2026. But as the ceasefire progresses, the politics may well become more shrill and lead to greater instability in Israel. It will require leaders who can take people and coalition partners along. That is a tall order in the current circumstances. A fresh mandate might empower a new government to turn ceasefire into peace.



NATIONAL

THE CHALLENGES POSED BY THE TTP TO PAKISTAN

During the last two weeks, Pakistan's relationship with Afghanistan worsened with border clashes. Though the two have reached an agreement in Doha, Pakistan believes that the primary problem between the two countries is the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), with the Afghan Taliban giving safe haven to the group.

Extent of the conflict

Pakistan's primary challenge with respect to the TTP is the high level of violence and terrorism in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) province. According to media reports referring to data sourced from think tanks and Pakistan's Inter Services Public Relations (ISPR), 2024 had the worst violence in the last decade. More than 1,600 people were killed last year; around 680 of them security personnel. There were more than 59,770 military operations in 2024, during which around 900 militants were killed. While the two provinces — KP and Balochistan — together witnessed 94% of the casualties in 2024, the former, where the TTP has a significant presence accounted for 63%. Thus, there has been a steady increase in violence since 2021, especially in KP, after a decline during 2016-20. Data published by Pakistan's Centre for Research and Security Studies and the Pakistan Institute for Peace Studies runs contrary to the once-held general Pakistani belief, that once the U.S. leaves Afghanistan, militancy will decline. Taliban's return to Kabul has not brought peace to Pakistan's tribal regions.

Then there are the demands of the TTP. The Pakistan Taliban wants the demerger of tribal regions from the rest of the KP province; removal of security forces; and the imposition of Shariah law. The TTP seeks to rule the tribal areas — the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) that the British created. In 2018, the Pakistan Muslim League (N) (PML-N) government, through the 25th constitutional amendment, removed FATA's special status and merged it with KP, thereby providing representation of the FATA in the provincial Assembly and allowing the jurisdiction of the courts in the region. The TTP wants to undo the above and impose its writ.

Provincial issues

There are complex issues plaguing the KP region. First is its colonial legacy and the federal writ in the tribal regions. The British found it useful to create a buffer region between its India empire and Afghanistan, and thus created the FATA and used the Frontier Crime Regulation (FCR) to administer the seven tribal areas separately. Independent Pakistan followed this British policy for the next seven decades, and never imposed its writ. It was directly administered by Islamabad and Rawalpindi (mainly by the latter); and democratic institutions and administrations were not allowed in these seven tribal regions, as it suited Pakistan's myopic approach of controlling Kabul.

Second is the civil-military imbalance in Pakistan, and the country's search for strategic depth in Afghanistan. During the two external invasions of Afghanistan (by the Soviet Union in the 1980s and the U.S. in 2000s and 2010s) and internal Afghan instability (during the 1990s), the Establishment (Pakistan military) saw the tribal region as a strategic board to pursue its interests in Kabul. With such an aim in mind, the presence of political parties, local administration, provincial elections and representation in the KP (then the North-West Frontier Province) provincial assembly, and access to courts by the FATA were seen as a liability for Pakistan's pursuit of strategic depth. However, the above vacuum provided space for the TTP's emergence.



While political and military establishments see the TTP as a post-2001 development, it ignores the inherent reasons which allowed the TTP to thrive. That is, while Pakistan's primary accusation that the Afghan Taliban has a TTP connection is a valid point, what Pakistan ignores is how such a connection came about.

Third is the rise of the Afghan Taliban and the U.S.-led war on terrorism in Afghanistan. The TTP came into existence in the tribal regions, especially in two areas — the Mehsud and Wazir led North and South Waziristan — when the Afghan Taliban along with the al-Qaeda moved into the tribal region when the U.S. invaded Afghanistan. Both wanted safe havens and local support to fight against the U.S.-led forces across the Durand Line. The TTP came into existence to provide that support. Pakistan's political and military establishments were aware of the link, and even tried to make multiple deals with the TTP and its different factions between 2005 and 2015.

The Afghan Taliban found an ally in the TTP, and some TTP factions even fought along with the Afghan Taliban. The Establishment in Pakistan was aware of this linkage and wanted to believe that they would remain focused west of the Durand Line. There was even a naïve belief, that once the U.S. leaves, the Afghan Taliban would sever its links with the TTP. However, that was not the case as data proves. After the U.S. withdrawal in 2021, the Afghan Taliban did not give up on the TTP, and there has been a multi-fold increase in violence within Pakistan. The Afghan Taliban, despite global pressure, did not give up the relationship with al-Qaeda either. Expecting it to give up the TTP now is a tough call. Besides, Afghan Taliban sees the Daesh (ISIS) as the primary threat inside Afghanistan. There have been reports of TTP splinter groups joining the Daesh; for Kabul that would be a bigger internal threat.

Fourth is the lack of a consistent approach towards the TTP by Pakistan. The first serious TTP debate in Pakistan came only in December 2014, after the attack on the Army Public School (APS) at Peshawar, that killed more than 150, mostly students. Before this, the TTP's attacks were primarily concentrated in the tribal region, which the Establishment dealt with through a series of military operations and peace deals. However, after the APS attack in December 2014, Pakistan announced a "National Action Plan" that included a policy shift in addressing the militant threat. It included political, military and institutional measures such as reforming religious seminaries, creating institutions and military course to deal with terrorism and extremism. But within a few years, there was again a U-turn, from the military resolve to crush the TTP to engaging with it. During 2020-22, there were dialogues, ceasefires and extensions. It was during this phase that Pakistan expected the Taliban to force the TTP to disarm.

While the Establishment blamed the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) for talking to the TTP, the initial response of the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) during 2022, led by the PML-N and the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) also focused on the same. Moreover, the PPP-PML government would not have negotiated with the TTP without the Establishment's approval.

The fifth issue is the missing social/political players in the tribal regions, where the TTP has a presence. Pakistan has failed to encourage alternative political players in the tribal areas that could collect and express the local sentiments, especially the youth. In fact, the state has suppressed all alternate options. The existing religious political parties in the region are the two factions of the Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (JUI) which have monopolised the political space. However, both represent only the old guard, while the tribal youth are looking for new narratives. The Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM) could have become a primary social and political party representing the new generation, especially in Waziristan, where the TTP has its base. PTM



leaders such as Manzoor Pashteen, Ali Wazir, and Mohsin Dawar are from Waziristan; and some of them were elected to Parliament. Instead of promoting the PTM, Pakistan decided to ban it.

Sixth, blaming the TTP threat on Afghanistan and India. There is a national consensus in Pakistan that the TTP problem persists because of external support from the Taliban and India. Creating a new term — Fitna-al-Khwarij — for the TTP highlights this new narrative that Pakistan wants to build. Calling the TTP as outsiders, and referring to them as being supported by external actors (India and the Afghan Taliban) is to shift the blame for its internal failures.

Internal fault

Pakistan has a serious problem especially in the tribal regions that are undergoing a social and demographic transformation. Pursuing the tribal region with strategies of the 1980s would not yield the desired results. As the support to the PTM would reveal, the tribal region is looking for new players. The old religious political parties are becoming irrelevant. Political parties and organisations like the PTI and the PTM can occupy that space; unfortunately, both are out of favour with the Establishment.

Blaming the Afghan Taliban for the TTP and carrying out attacks inside Afghanistan would be counterproductive. Pakistan should know more about the Afghan Taliban and the Afghan nation. Unilateral military actions from the east of the Durand Line since the British days, have never yielded the desired political results.

Pushing the Afghan refugees back; unilateral closer of border points; and blaming Afghanistan for the TTP problem would only alienate the Afghan nation. For Pakistan, that would be a bigger threat, than what the TTP is today.

D. Suba Chandran is professor and dean at the school of conflict and security studies at the National Institute of Advanced Studies (NIAS).

HOW ARE INDIA-TALIBAN RELATIONS CHANGING?

The story so far:

The Indian government framed the visit by Acting Foreign Minister of Afghanistan, Amir Khan Muttaqi, and the warm welcome it extended to the Taliban leader, as an outreach to the “people of Afghanistan”. The visit coincided with violent clashes on the Afghanistan-Pakistan border.

How has India grown links with the Taliban?

After years of being seen as “too slow” to engage with the Taliban, the government has gone to considerable lengths in recent months to build ties with the group that controls Afghanistan. In January this year, Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri made the first such contact, meeting Mr. Muttaqi in Dubai, and discussed increasing trade between both countries. On May 16, just days after the India-Pakistan conflict ended in a ceasefire, External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar spoke to Mr. Muttaqi over the telephone, thanking Afghanistan for its support and condolences over the Pahalgam terror attack. In August, India approached the UN Security Council to request permission from its Sanctions Committee for a visit by the Taliban FM to India. Mr. Muttaqi is on the UNSC’s consolidated sanctions list since January 2001, and requires a waiver to travel internationally. The request was denied, but when the request was repeated a month later, it came through, allowing the visit from October 9 to 16. India doesn’t recognise the “Islamic Emirate of



Afghanistan”, as the Taliban that took control of Kabul in 2021 renamed it. Even so, Mr. Jaishankar met Mr. Muttaqi with full protocol and held delegation-level meetings with him at the official venue, Hyderabad House, and the visitor was accorded security and hospitality any other foreign minister would receive.

What transpired during the talks?

During the talks, Mr. Jaishankar announced India’s plans to upgrade its technical mission in Kabul to an embassy, and is expected to appoint diplomats to be posted there shortly. He also handed over the keys to 20 ambulances being donated to Afghanistan, and promised health infrastructure projects, water projects and humanitarian aid. For its part, the Afghan side joined India in condemning terrorism in the region and committed that it would not allow Afghan soil to be used by groups inimical to India. In 2022, UN reports said Jaish-e-Mohammad and Lashkar-e-Taiba maintained camps in Eastern Afghan provinces.

Why has cooperation been enhanced?

Mr. Muttaqi’s visit began just as clashes broke out between Pakistan and Afghanistan. Pakistan launched airstrikes on Kabul in retaliation for terror attacks by the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) that Pakistan claims is sheltered by the Taliban. The timing suggests India is getting closer to its “enemy’s enemy” in an effort to upset Pakistan with a pincer movement months after Operation Sindoor, but there are many other reasons for such an outreach. The first is to neutralise any threat from the Taliban in an increasingly volatile neighbourhood, with governments losing power to protesters; India losing stable partners in South Asia; and China making inroads. Another reason is to build connectivity for trade as land routes are closed. Pakistan refuses to allow transit trade, and the U.S. has now re-imposed sanctions for projects at Iran’s Chabahar port, which was being developed by India as an alternate route. In the broader Eurasian region, Russia has officially recognised the Taliban government, the first country to do so, and others like China, Pakistan, Iran, Gulf and the Central Asian states, that have already allowed Taliban embassies, could follow. India cannot afford to be cut out. India has also maintained that working with the regime in power is the only way for it to continue its humanitarian aid to Afghan men and women, and to secure more than \$3 billion in investments that it made between 2001-2021, when the Taliban was out of power. Four years since it took over, the Taliban regime appears stable, with little political or insurgent opposition to its control of the country, and has been able to impose a very strict form of the Islamic Sharia law, that prohibits women from education, work, forces them into burkhas, and bans them from public parks and buildings. Despite the situation, Mr. Jaishankar’s opening remarks and the joint statement contained no mention of the restrictions on women, another indicator that New Delhi has decided that the Taliban is here to stay for the foreseeable future.

Is India preparing to recognise the Taliban?

The rapid growth of Delhi’s ties with the Taliban, and the setting up of an embassy in Kabul, have raised speculation that India could, like Russia, break with the UN and western countries to give recognition to the Taliban government. This may seem unlikely soon, but much will depend on the next steps New Delhi takes, and the seniority level at which it establishes the embassy. Mr. Muttaqi said once Indian diplomats are sent to Kabul, he expects India to receive Taliban-appointed diplomats in Delhi. This will be significant, as thus far the Afghanistan embassy in Delhi has remained loyal to the previous democratically-elected Islamic Republic of Afghanistan government. As a result, they resisted Mr. Muttaqi’s visit to the embassy, and at the two press



conferences he held there, tried unsuccessfully, to stop the Taliban delegation from placing the black and white flags of the Emirate there. The black, green and red tricolour of the Republic is still hoisted at the front of the embassy for now, but India's decision to upgrade missions has cast a cloud over its future and that of the staff members there, who now fear for their lives. The Ministry of External Affairs did not protest when Mr. Muttaqi held a press conference on October 10, inviting nearly 20 journalists, all male, to the embassy. However, after public outrage, the Taliban delegation held a second press conference, inviting all journalists without restrictions. There, they faced hard questions on the condition of women, although Mr. Muttaqi maintained that women were "free" and girls were receiving an education in religious madrassas, statements which are clearly untrue.

Can a Taliban led-Afghanistan go from being India's enemy's enemy and become a friend?

India has much to gain from a friendly government in Kabul, with influence based on its historic friendship with the Afghan people during the 2001-2021 period. India was Afghanistan's first strategic partner; built an air corridor to increase bilateral trade; and worked on a number of development and infrastructure projects there. While the Taliban's current conflict with Pakistan will only enhance New Delhi's role, it must be remembered that the Taliban in power now have had very close ties with Pakistan's military in the past. In addition, the Taliban leadership in Kabul and Kandahar have differences, and as Afghanistan's economy continues to suffer, they may face challenges to the regime's control. For India, building a tactical relationship with Kabul is vital, but a friendship based on shared values and common worldviews seem impossible at present.

THE PAKISTAN PROBLEM

Kanti Bajpai writes: In dealing with Pakistan, India must understand why our neighbour matters to a range of powers including China, Russia, the US, various European countries and Saudi Arabia.

— Over time, we complacently persuaded ourselves that India's much greater power had diminished Pakistan's attractiveness to others. In fact, US President Donald Trump's recent outreach, Russia's deepening ties, and China's steady support to Islamabad underline that the major powers are very much engaged with our troublesome neighbour.

— Pakistan is attractive to many countries for at least three enduring reasons: Location, disruptive capabilities, and power.

— First, Pakistan's location matters. The country abuts Afghanistan, Iran, and China (and India). It is proximate to the Gulf states, including Saudi Arabia. Through Afghanistan, it is connected to Central Asia. From Pakistani naval bases and air bases, distant powers can project force in a wide arc. In addition, foreign ground forces can operate from Pakistan against Afghanistan and Iran.

— Second, and less positively, Pakistan matters because it is a potential disrupter and danger. Indian diplomats portray Pakistan as a state that supports terrorists. They are right, but it is precisely because Islamabad has that capability that it is feared, engaged, and even propitiated.

— A lesson for us in India is that the more we castigate Pakistan, the more we play into Islamabad's hands. This is because Pakistani leaders are not overly embarrassed by their dark reputation.

— Third, contrary to our belief that Pakistan is a puny entity, our neighbour has five assets that make it both feared and attractive — its military, demographic, Islamic, diasporic, and alliance power.



— Above all, Pakistan is a formidable military power. With half a million men in uniform, its armed forces are among the biggest in the world. In addition, it is a nuclear power. With roughly 200 nuclear weapons, it is India's peer.

— Pakistani power is not simply military. This is a country of around 260 million people, making it the fifth-most populous globally. By 2050, some estimates put its population at between 340 and 380 million, which would make it the third largest in the world, behind only India and China. Like India, it will have a huge population of young, potentially productive people.

— If it gets its economic act together, it could also be a large market in which to sell and invest. Will any major power give up on Pakistan given its demography?

— Another component of Pakistani power comes from its position in the global Muslim community. Pakistan is the second-largest Muslim country in the world in population terms. While it is poorer than many other Muslim countries, it is influential in global Islam by sheer size of numbers. Its demographic size is amplified by its military and diplomatic power.

— Pakistani diplomacy is also a force in the Muslim world including in the apex Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). China, Russia, and the US and others, who have stakes in the stability of the Islamic world, cannot ignore Islamabad's influence.

— We in India consider our diaspora a source of power. The Pakistani diaspora is not as large or influential as India's, but it cannot be dismissed. Between 1995 and 2020, the UN World Migration Report estimates 6.14 million Pakistanis emigrated, placing it in sixth position (India had 17.79 million emigrants).

— Finally, Pakistan has alliance power. It was a formal ally of the US in SEATO and CENTO in the 1950s and 1960s. It has been a quasi-ally of China since 1963 and was a quasi-ally of both China and the US against the Soviet Union in the 1980s (in supporting the Afghan mujahideen).

— In sum, galling as it is, we must recognise that Pakistan cannot be dismissed in strategic terms. Powerful others will continue to engage with it, despite their strong ties to India. This is the reality. Our diplomacy must be cool-headed in thinking about Pakistan's place in the world and our policies towards it. Irritation and condescension are not enough.

Do You Know:

— C. Raja Mohan writes: As violence escalated between Pakistan and Afghanistan last week, the initiative to stop it did not come from Washington but from the Middle East. The Pak-Afghan ceasefire talks took place in Doha, with Turkish intelligence officials in attendance. The next meeting is likely to be held in Turkey.

— The new diplomacy of mediation highlights the rise of unconventional players. Turkey, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and increasingly China, have inserted themselves into conflict resolution as Western power fragments and the UN weakens. Mediation is becoming a new marker of global relevance and, even more significantly, of power projection.

FREE WORLD

The free movement of people and ideas is integral to a globalised world. But India continues to send out conflicting signals on this count. On the one hand it wants to welcome technology, capital and know-how from all corners of the world but on the other, it is also trying to insulate itself,



feeling insecure about an alleged global conspiracy against it. The deportation of Francesca Orsini, a scholar of Hindi and South Asian literature and professor emerita at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) University of London, from Delhi airport on October 20 has to be seen in this context. She held a valid five-year e-tourist visa but was blacklisted in March 2025 for violation of visa conditions. Ms. Orsini had allegedly engaged in academic activities during a visit in October 2024, which were, technically, a violation of the terms of her tourist visa. Her influential work, *The Hindi Public Sphere 1920-1940: Language and Literature in the Age of Nationalism*, has significantly contributed to the understanding of Indian literary and cultural history. She is one among the many foreign scholars who have devoted their lives to researching and writing on various aspects of India. The argument about violations may well be true, but also evident is the arbitrariness in deportation decisions. Foreign business leaders visiting India routinely make political statements praising the government, which can be termed a violation of visa conditions.

Those who see themselves as guardians of India's national security will have to think hard on the cost and benefits of restricting the entry of international scholars into the country. Many people associated with the ideological ecosystem of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party believe that there is an international conspiracy to influence the thinking of Indians. This thought is reflected in policy actions that restrict non-governmental organisations and scholars. There are various forces globally at play at any given point, some favouring India, and some not. While the country must have a strategy to harness the forces that help it and counter those that do not, it cannot do this by fencing itself in. In Ms. Orsini's case, there is nothing beyond the claim that she violated visa conditions. To begin with, visa conditions should be more welcoming of scholars, scientists and experts. It is also relevant in this context that there are several global leaders in many fields who are of Indian origin but are citizens of another country. A country that feels threatened by authors, scientists and thinkers will have little chance of realising its full potential. Open societies have their vulnerabilities; but trying to fix them by turning into a closed society will stunt progress without necessarily enhancing security.

TIME FOR INDIA AND SRI LANKA TO CHAMPION REGIONAL ENVIRONMENTAL CONSTITUTIONALISM, SAYS SC JUDGE

Supreme Court judge Justice Surya Kant on Wednesday said the time is ripe for judiciaries of India and Sri Lanka "to champion a model of regional environmental constitutionalism."

— Kant stressed on the fact that environmental cooperation between the two nations is not a matter of charity or diplomacy, but also a matter of survival.

— Speaking at the Faculty of Law, Colombo, at the 'Indo-Sri Lanka Policy Dialogue' on 'Advancing Environmental Sustainability and Regional Cooperation', Justice Kant said the region between the two countries has, in recent times, re-emerged as "a strategic corridor, rich in marine resources but ecologically stressed".

— He lauded initiatives such as BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation) and the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), saying they reflect this "burgeoning recognition that environmental security is integral to regional stability".

— Justice Kant said despite measures such as the reactivation of the Joint Working Group on Fisheries in 2016, the India-Sri Lanka Maritime Boundary Agreements and the 2022 MoU on Renewable Energy Cooperation, "there is a lack of an integrated transboundary environmental governance mechanism.



— He flagged that “perhaps the solution to filling these gaps lies in judicial and civil-society oversight.”

— Highlighting the role played by the Supreme Courts of India and Sri Lanka in developing environmental rights, he said “both courts have... increasingly drawn on international environmental norms, illustrating a nascent regional environmental constitutionalism.

— “In the absence of robust regional institutions, courts become de facto arenas for transnational accountability. Judicial pronouncements influence executive behaviour, compel environmental reporting, and often drive policy reform,” Justice Kant added.

— These are the steps he had suggested in this regard: “(i) Establishing a Joint Commission on Marine Ecology, empowered to issue ecological advisories; (ii) Creating data-sharing protocols for pollution and fisheries management; (iii) Encouraging judicial workshops under BIMSTEC to develop common interpretive standards for environmental rights.”

Do You Know:

— In 1974, when Indira was Prime Minister, the two governments signed — on June 26 in Colombo and June 28 in New Delhi — an agreement by which the island went to Sri Lanka. This settlement is known as ‘Indo-Sri Lankan Maritime agreement’.

— “Indian fishermen and pilgrims will enjoy access to visit Katchatheevu as hitherto, and will not be required by Sri Lanka to obtain travel documents or visas for these purposes,” the agreement said. The agreement did not specify the fishing rights of Indian fishermen.

— Moreover, as per the agreement, Indian fishermen were still allowed to access Katchatheevu “hitherto”. Unfortunately, the issue of fishing rights was not ironed out by the agreement. Sri Lanka interpreted Indian fishermen’s right to access Katchatheevu to be limited to “rest, drying nets and for visit to the Catholic shrine without visa”.

— Another agreement in 1976, during the period of Emergency in India, barred either country from fishing in the other’s Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). Again, Katchatheevu lay right at the edge of the EEZs of either country, retaining a degree of uncertainty with regard to fishing rights.

PENDENCY ISSUES IN COURTS: WHY SC FLAGGED EXECUTION PETITION

Last week, the Supreme Court described the state of affairs in the country’s lower courts as “highly disappointing”, referring to numerous cases where litigants, despite having won court cases, are still awaiting the receipt of what the court awarded them.

- In an order dated October 16, a bench of Justices JB Pardiwala and Pankaj Mithal reviewed nationwide data collected on its direction and found the figures to be “alarming” — over 8.82 lakh execution petitions are pending across district courts.
- This situation, the order noted, rendered justice futile. “After the decree is passed, if it is going to take years and years to execute the decree, then it makes no sense and would be nothing short of a travesty of justice,” it said.
- At the conclusion of a civil lawsuit, the court delivers an order — formally a “decree” — that declares the rights and liabilities of the parties involved. But winning a lawsuit and getting a favourable decree from a court is only the first step.



- An execution petition is the legal tool used to implement a decree. It is the final and most crucial stage of a lawsuit, in which the winner formally requests the court to enforce its decision against the losing party, be it, for instance, the payment of a sum of money or the vacation of a property.
- Data from the National Judicial Data Grid (NJDG) shows that while an average civil suit takes about 4.91 years for disposal, an execution petition takes an additional 3.97 years to conclude. Around 47.2% of all pending execution petitions across civil courts were filed before 2020.
- The database also lists reasons for the delay in the disposal of execution petitions. Chief among these are legal counsel not being available (which accounted for delay in 38.9% of all pending execution petitions), a stay on the proceedings by a court (17%) and awaiting documents (12%).
- Procedurally, the law itself provides multiple stages where delays can creep in. The Civil Procedure Code requires the court to issue notice to the losing party even at the execution stage, giving them a chance to raise objections.
- Experts also point to significant regional disparities, with states like Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu showing disproportionately high pendency, suggesting that local factors, from judicial infrastructure to the volume of commercial disputes, also play a crucial role.
- This is not the first time the apex court has intervened to address delays in execution. In a 2021 judgment, a three-judge bench led by then Chief Justice of India SA Bobde had laid down a comprehensive set of 14 mandatory directions for all trial courts, including a six-month deadline for disposing of execution proceedings.
- To remedy this, the court in its March judgment issued a sweeping, pan-India directive. It ordered all High Courts to collect data from their respective district courts on pending execution petitions, and directed them to ensure their disposal within six months.
- The Supreme Court has now granted an additional six months to all High Courts to follow up with their district courts and expedite the disposals.
- The bench also took a stern view of the non-compliance by the Karnataka High Court with its order. It directed the Registrar General of the High Court to explain the failure to submit the data within two weeks. The Supreme Court will hear the matter again on April 10, 2026, to monitor progress.

Do You Know:

- The goals of justice require a balance between the speedy disposal of cases and ensuring that the pursuit of truth and adherence to legal procedure are not hampered. This requires a coordinated, systemic approach to judicial remedies, with each stakeholder taking responsibility to avoid clogging the machinery of justice delivery.
- Extrapolating the views of the Supreme Court, it is evident that every stakeholder, including lawyers, corporate entities and individual citizens as well as judges and courts, must reassess their approach and introspect on their role in reducing delay. Particularly in commercial matters, where the time value of money is significant, delay from any stakeholder can have enormous economic ramifications.



- International jurisdictions, such as Hong Kong, Singapore and the USA have evolved such mechanisms to address this issue. The US, for example, has 28 USC § 1927, which provides for sanctions in case of vexatious litigation.
- Legislative enactments focusing on judicial efficiency, such as Ireland's Court Proceedings (Delays) Act 2024, are other avenues that help to decongest and make the delivery of justice more efficient.

SC COLLEGIUM'S SHIFT IN JUSTICE SREEDHARAN'S POSTING TRIGGERS JUDICIAL INDEPENDENCE CONCERNS

The Supreme Court Collegium's unexpected change of mind to recommend a Madhya Pradesh High Court judge, Justice Atul Sreedharan, for the Allahabad High Court, in compliance with the Centre's wishes instead of an earlier proposal to shift him to Chhattisgarh, has brought back into focus executive interference in judicial appointments and transfers in constitutional courts.

An October 14 'bare-bones' collegium resolution does not reveal why the Supreme Court body gave up its earlier recommendation on Justice Sreedharan.

In August, the Supreme Court Collegium had recommended the transfer of the judge to the Chhattisgarh High Court, where he would have been the second senior-most judge.

In the Allahabad High Court, Justice Sreedharan would be seventh in seniority, and outside the High Court Collegium. The collegium has the power of veto, and could reiterate the earlier August recommendation, following which the government would have to bend.

Justice Sreedharan's is not the first in recent years when the Supreme Court Collegium has swayed to the government's wishes as far as transfer of judges were concerned. In 2018, the Centre objected to a collegium recommendation to appoint Justice Akil Kureshi, whose decision in the Gujarat 'fake' encounter cases had ruffled feathers, as Madhya Pradesh High Court Chief Justice. The collegium, instead, agreed to his appointment as Tripura High Court Chief Justice, a smaller court with four Judges. Though one of the senior most High Court judges, he was not considered for the Supreme Court.

In the J&K and Ladakh High Court, Justice Sreedharan was part of a Bench which struck down several preventive detention orders under the Public Safety Act.

He was repatriated to Madhya Pradesh in March 2025. Back in Madhya Pradesh, he was part of the Bench which had taken suo motu cognisance of remarks allegedly made by State Minister Vijay Shah against Colonel Sofiya Qureshi, who had briefed the media during Operation Sindoor, and ordered the registration of an FIR against the BJP leader.

COURT SLAMS U.P. POLICE FOR ILLEGALLY DETAINING INTERFAITH COUPLE UNDER 'SOCIAL PRESSURE'

The Allahabad High Court on Saturday slammed the Uttar Pradesh Police for "illegally" detaining an interfaith couple which the court noted is a "violation of their fundamental rights".

The court said detention under "social pressure" but without authority of law does not make the detention legal and only increases its "illegality".



A Bench of Justices Salil Kumar Rai and Divesh Chandra Samant, which held a special hearing on a holiday, set free the couple – a Muslim man and a Hindu woman – who had gone missing after attending a hearing in the court, last week. It also directed the police to ensure the safety of the couple and make sure that there are no extra-legal interferences.

The woman's father had lodged an FIR alleging that his 'minor' daughter was abducted by Shane Ali. Acting on the complaint, the Aligarh police arrested the couple. When they were produced before a lower court, the woman said that she was an adult and had married Mr. Ali on her own will.

Following a habeas corpus petition moved before the High Court, the couple was produced on Saturday where they submitted that they had been abducted by the woman's father and his accomplices, with assistance from the police, and taken to Aligarh in custody.

The government advocate submitted that there was social tension in the area because of the inter-religious marriage and the police had to detain the couple.

The court noted that the State government and its law enforcement machinery are expected to use their power to protect the liberty of a citizen and not to succumb to social pressures and curtail freedom.

ON CBI TAKEOVERS: A JUDICIAL STANDPOINT

On October 13, the Supreme Court abruptly applied the brakes on a fledgling investigation of a Madras High Court-appointed Special Investigation Team (SIT) and a State-constituted Enquiry Commission headed by Justice (retired) Aruna Jagadeesan into the Karur stampede (on September 27, 41 people were killed during a stampede at a political rally hosted by actor-cum-politician Vijay in Karur district, Tamil Nadu).

Both the SIT and Justice Jagadeesan were directed to immediately hand over papers and evidence to the officers of the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI). The top court's decision to shift the Karur stampede investigation to the CBI was powered by two "sweeping" factors — the "political undertones" of the case and a perception that top-ranking Tamil Nadu Police officers made comments in a press conference to the extent that their subordinates were not at fault. The Bench of Justices J.K. Maheshwari and N.V. Anjaria concluded that the conduct of the State's senior police officers "may create doubt in the minds of the citizenry about the impartiality and fairness of the investigation", necessitating its transfer to the CBI.

The CBI is a central agency governed by the Delhi Special Police Establishment Act, 1946 which traces its origins to the Special Police Establishment (SPE) formed in 1941 to weed out corruption in war-time procurements. Once coined by the Supreme Court as a "caged parrot" of the Centre, the CBI is considered a premier investigative body which probes a wide range of crimes with inter-State and national ramifications.

However, the top court's reasoning, entirely based on petitioners' pleadings and "sweeping remarks" unaccompanied by prima facie evidence to show the SIT probe was riddled by bias, are simply not enough to shift a case to the CBI without the express consent of the State government. While it is well-settled that a constitutional court can order a CBI probe as judicial review is part of the Basic Structure, the court, be it the Supreme Court or a State High Court, must not direct a CBI enquiry in a "routine manner". A judicial order of transfer of a probe to the CBI is only the 'last resort'.



'Measure of last resort'

The Supreme Court has a well-developed jurisprudence, evolved through judgments, which imposes significant self-restraint on the exercise of the extraordinary constitutional power to order a CBI probe under Article 32 (for the Supreme Court) or Article 226 (High Court) of the Constitution. The top court has held that the exercise of inherent powers to direct the CBI to investigate must be exercised "sparingly, cautiously, and only in exceptional situations". The court has consistently cautioned that a CBI investigation should not be directed "merely because a party casts certain aspersions or harbours a subjective lack of confidence in the State Police".

"It goes without saying that for invoking this power, the court concerned must be satisfied that the material placed prima facie discloses commission of offences and necessitates a CBI investigation to ensure the fundamental right to a fair and impartial investigation, or where the complexity, scale, or national ramification of such allegations demands expertise of central agency," the court has explained.

Judicial precedents have underscored that an order directing an investigation to be carried out by CBI should be treated as a "measure of last resort", justified only when the constitutional court is convinced that the integrity of the process has been compromised or has reasons to believe that it may get compromised to a degree that shakes the conscience of courts or public faith in the justice delivery system.

Such circumstances compelling the judicial transfer of an investigation to the CBI from the State Police may typically arise when the materials placed on record before a court prima facie point towards systemic failure, the involvement of high-ranking State officials or politically influential persons, or when the local police's conduct itself creates a reasonable doubt in the minds of the citizenry regarding their ability to conduct a neutral probe.

In the absence of these factors, constitutional courts must avoid placing unnecessary burdens on a specialised agency with "matters that do not satisfy the threshold of an exceptional case".

The reason for the shift

The 25-page order of the Supreme Court shifting the Karur stampede probe to the CBI shows that the decision was largely made on the basis of "allegations" raised by the petitioners, who have been identified as relatives of victims and public-spirited persons.

The court noted that the tragedy which claimed 41 lives and left over a 100 injured at a rally organised by Vijay, founder of the Tamilaga Vettri Kazhagam (TVK), at Velusampuram in Karur District had "stirred public sentiment and shook the conscience of people across the nation". The court said that petitioners have made "allegations" that the ruling dispensation, which has "control over the immense machinery of the State", did not discharge its functions "properly". The Bench, in this context, referred to averment in the petitions that top police officers, held a press conference during which they "robustly" defended their colleagues, raising the apprehension that the probe by the SIT comprising Tamil Nadu Police officers would not be held fairly. It recorded submissions in the petitions that the police had denied permission earlier, in January, to another political party to conduct a rally at the same place where the tragedy occurred during the TVK event. The court voiced this vague notion to hint at "political undertones" at play.



These factors led to the court to prima facie conclude that there was “a doubt in the minds of the general public about the independence and impartiality of the investigation” and victims should be spared of being caught in the “political tussle between two sides”.

Previous judgments

A cursory read of the order shows that the decision to shift the probe to the CBI was entirely based on the allegations levelled by the petitioners. The Supreme Court judgment in Secretary, Minor Irrigation & Rural Engg. Services UP has observed that the power of a court to shift an investigation to the CBI “can be exercised only in cases where there is sufficient material to come to a prima facie conclusion that there is a need for such inquiry. It is not sufficient to have such material in the pleadings”.

Secondly, the Supreme Court did not specify a single instance of bias or delay by the Tamil Nadu Police’s SIT. In a Constitution Bench judgment in State of West Bengal versus Committee for Protection of Democratic Rights, the top court had held that the extraordinary power to transfer probes to CBI “cannot and should not be exercised in a routine manner without examining the complexities, nature of offence and sometimes the tardy progress in the investigations involving high officials of the State investigating agency itself”.

In an October 16, 2025 order authored by Justice Maheshwari himself in the case of Legislative Council UP versus Sushil Kumar, the judge noted that public order (Entry 1) and the police (Entry 2) was a State subject falling in List II of Schedule VII of the Constitution. “It is a primary responsibility of the investigating agency of the State Police to investigate all offences which are committed within its jurisdiction. The investigations can be entrusted to the CBI only in exceptional circumstances,” Justice Maheshwari had written. In K.V. Rajendran versus Superintendent of Police, CBCID, the top court had held that a transfer of a case to CBI could only be justified by showing sufficient material to prove that the State investigation was dishonest or malafide.

Thirdly, ambiguous inferences about “political undertones”, “political tussles between two sides” and reported comments made by police officers in a press meet cannot be grounds for making incursions into a State’s power to investigate crimes within its own jurisdiction, especially when Tamil Nadu had withdrawn its general consent to CBI investigation in 2023. The Supreme Court has further constituted a committee headed by former top court judge, Justice Ajay Rastogi, to oversee the CBI probe. Such an arrangement does not have any statutory backing.

Besides, the SIT was formed separately by the Madras High Court in the Karur stampede case. The Justice Jagadeesan Commission of Enquiry was constituted on the very night of the tragedy. There had been no allegation of specific bias levelled against the SIT or the Enquiry Commission, warranting a change of the probe agency. The Madras High Court had also previously refused a specific demand for transfer to the CBI. In the Shree Shree Ram Janki Asthan Tapovan Mandir judgment, the top court had held that it was not for the judiciary to make sweeping remarks about the State government and its functionaries and subject them to CBI investigation merely based on allegations brought before it. The court said the judiciary has to understand that the “functioning in the government is by different officers and the working of the Executive has in-built checks and balances”.



SUPREME COURT ORDER ON TRANS RIGHTS HIGHLIGHTS GOVERNMENT FAILURES

Over 10 years after the landmark NALSA judgment — it recognised a “third gender”, affirmed trans persons’ fundamental rights and the right to self-determination of gender identity — and five years after the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Rules, 2020 came into effect, trans persons in India continue to face discrimination. On October 17, the Supreme Court pulled up the Centre and state governments for “brutishly” reducing the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019 and its corresponding rules to “dead letters” and exhibiting “a grossly apathetic attitude towards the transgender community”. Jane Kaushik, a transgender woman, petitioned the Court after allegedly facing discrimination and the forceful termination of her employment at two private schools in Uttar Pradesh and Gujarat in the span of a year. The SC bench hearing the matter constituted an advisory committee to assess the implementation of the Trans Act and recommend a “viable equal opportunity policy... to be introduced by the Union and state governments” within three months of the draft’s submission. For establishments lacking their own policies, the Centre’s policy will be enforceable.

The creation of a panel to operationalise protections guaranteed in law is a welcome step. But it speaks of a larger failure — the lack of political will to ensure that transgender citizens can live a life of dignity and equality as guaranteed by the Constitution and affirmed by the SC. The NALSA judgment and the Trans Rules mandate protections against discrimination in employment, medical care and education for transgender persons. Yet, implementation has been abysmal. For example, the Rules require governments to build separate washrooms and wards in hospitals. Over three years past the deadline, however, this remains a pipe dream. The Rules also mandated the constitution of transgender welfare boards, which only 19 states and Union Territories had done as of 2024; fewer still are reportedly functional. Across states, transgender persons have had to move high courts and the SC after being denied access to medical care, employment opportunities, and documents such as passports and graduation certificates due to bureaucratic apathy and/or insensitivity.

The fact that courts have had to step in repeatedly to ensure that the rights of a vulnerable section of the citizenry are not violated, reflects poorly on the executive. It is up to the state now to ensure the implementation of the Rules and the committee’s policy recommendations.

CENTRE TO ALLOW ONLY SENIOR OFFICIALS TO FLAG ‘UNLAWFUL’ CONTENT FOR BLOCKING

The Ministry of Electronics and IT is bringing out amendments to one of its content blocking laws, under which it will specify that content notices sent under Section 79 (3)(b) of the Information Technology Act, 2000, can only be issued by senior officials at the Centre and state levels, officials said Wednesday.

— As per amendments to the Information Technology Rules, 2021, the ministry will specify that content blocking intimations to social media platforms like YouTube, Instagram and X can be sent by a senior officer not below the rank of Joint Secretary (JS), or equivalent, and a Director or an officer equivalent in rank where a JS has not been appointed.

— In case of police authorities, only an officer not below the rank of Deputy Inspector General of Police (DIG), specially authorised, can issue such intimation.



- A senior government official said that there had been instances in some states, where police officers at the rank of sub inspectors and assistant sub inspectors were sending content notices to social media companies.
- Currently, the rules say that such directions can be issued by an “appropriate Government or its agency,” without specifying any particular designation of the official.
- To be sure, Elon Musk-owned social media platform X had challenged this specific provision of the IT Act, saying that the government was trying to establish a “parallel” content blocking regime, under which it had empowered any official at the Centre and state levels to issue content notifications. The Karnataka High Court had ruled in favour of the Central Government last month.
- Senior officials briefing the media said the changes the government was now bringing about were not related to X’s arguments and have no relation to them.
- All intimations issued under Rule 3(1)(d) will be subject to a monthly review by an officer not below the rank of Secretary of the appropriate Government – the IT Secretary in case of the Centre, and either the Home or IT Secretaries at the state level.
- On the face of it, the changes the IT Ministry is now making to the law, seem to address some of the concerns X had raised in its plea. As per Section 79(3)(b) of the IT Act, online intermediaries like X can lose their safe harbour protections if they fail to block access to content which has been flagged by an “appropriate” government agency.
- This process is separate from Section 69(A) of the IT Act, which also allows for content blocking in cases affecting the “sovereignty and integrity of India, defence of India, security of the State,” whereas under Section 79 (3)(b), any “unlawful” content can be directed to be removed.

Do You Know:

- Safe harbour protections are key to the functioning of social media platforms, as they afford them legal immunity from hosting user generated content.
- The government also proposed draft rules that require mandatory labelling of artificial intelligence or AI-generated content on social media platforms like YouTube and Instagram.
- According to the draft amendments to the Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021, platforms that allow creation of AI content will be required to ensure that such content is prominently labelled or embedded with a permanent unique metadata or identifier.
- In case of visual content, the label should cover at least 10 per cent of the total surface area, and in case of audio content, it should cover the initial 10 per cent of the total duration.
- Under Section 79 of the Information Technology Act, 2000, the social media intermediaries such as X, Telegram, Facebook, Instagram, etc., have the immunity against legal prosecution for content posted by users.
- Section 79 says any intermediary shall not be held legally or otherwise liable for any third party information, data, or communication link made available or hosted on its platform.



— However, section 79(3)(b) states that the intermediary could be held liable if it does not immediately remove such unlawful information “upon receiving actual knowledge, or on being notified by the appropriate Government or its agency”.

— In *Shreya Singhal v Union of India* (2015), the Supreme Court struck down Section 66A of the IT Act which criminally punished, among other things, sending false information “for the purpose of causing annoyance or inconvenience”. After this decision, Section 69A of the IT Act became the primary law governing the matter.

J&K HAS AN ELECTED GOVERNMENT. IT NEEDS TO BE A STATE

On several occasions since the abrogation of Article 370 in August 2019, senior members of the central government and ruling party have spoken of the steps forward taken in the erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir. Broadly, the claims of a turnaround rest on three pillars — development projects and economic growth, improved security and integration. Yet, an anomaly has persisted. The only state to be bifurcated into Union Territories was administered by an appointee of the Centre. Last year, the people of J&K turned out in large numbers to vote in the assembly elections, and yet the elected government continues to be hemmed in. The Omar Abdullah government has conspicuously avoided confrontation with the Centre, by and large setting aside its political differences with the BJP to work within the constraints. But now, a year after the elections, it is time that the promise of returning full statehood to J&K — made in Parliament and before the Supreme Court — is fulfilled.

As Chief Minister Abdullah pointed out in an interview with this newspaper, “a Union Territory with an Assembly is by far the most inefficient model of governance”. It is a principle of democracy that a mandate must be accompanied by the power to implement it. The Abdullah ministry has attempted to keep some of its poll pledges. It recently announced the return of the Darbar Move — the government moves from Srinagar in summer to Jammu in winter — a 150-year-old tradition scrapped by the Lieutenant Governor in 2021. The Move, since its inception, was a signal to various parts of the erstwhile state — Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh — that the government is willing to go to the people and that it seeks to represent all interests. Beyond such gestures, however, the Abdullah government has been cramped by, and in effect, dependent on, the L-G’s approval and whim. While the state government’s cordial relationship with the Centre has had some benefits — like receiving Rs 5,000 crore over the budgetary allocation — it has come at a political cost. Both from within the ruling alliance in J&K and the Opposition, the government faces criticism for not demanding the return of special status and for allegedly failing to stand up to the L-G. In this fraught context, even political gestures such as the CM’s visit to a cemetery on Martyr’s Day have become political flashpoints.

The Centre’s evident reluctance to restore statehood has little justification. Delimitation has been completed, as has a peaceful, free and fair election. Invoking national security in general, and the Pahalgam terror attack in particular, to delay statehood does a grave disservice to the people of J&K. In the aftermath of the horrific killing of tourists by Pakistan-backed terrorists, CM Abdullah, the state assembly and the people of the Valley stood with the rest of the country, in shared grief. The powers-that-be at the Centre must recognise that representative and accountable government is not a privilege, conditionally conferred. It is at the core of the constitutional and federal architecture. The recent protests in Ladakh offer a sobering lesson on the perils of prolonging a democratic deficit. In J&K, the representation gap must be bridged without delay.



SCALE OF DYNASTIC POLITICS, ACROSS POLITICAL PARTIES, IS A WARNING AND A SYMPTOM

In a democracy as large and vibrant as India, there are several ways to categorise and analyse political parties: Through ideology, modes of organisation, as well as area and scope of influence. However, as an investigation in this newspaper has shown, dynastic leaders are common to nearly all major parties in the country. About 149 families — in a country of 1.45 billion — have more than one dynast-legislator. Congress, even in its diminished state, has 857 legislators and 33.2 per cent of them are dynasts. The BJP has almost thrice the number of legislators — 2,078 MPs, MLAs and MLCs — but its share of dynasts is 18.6 per cent, just above half that of Congress. Most major regional parties — from the SP and RJD to the JD(U), DMK and TDP — are dominated by families in both party and government. The Left parties are exceptions. The most obvious danger of this epidemic of political fiefdoms is the diminishing opportunities for new talent and the narrowing of representation to a few lineages. The sheer scale of the problem, however, demands a more nuanced analysis.

With all its ups and downs, Indian democracy has deepened representation since Independence — both within and outside electoral politics. Since the first generation of leaders who gained credibility because of participation in the anti-colonial struggle, the polity has expanded — as a result of protests, elections, splits and new entrants — to give political voice to marginalised groups. Today, almost every major political party must take into account these voices and their aspirations, in one form or another — from Dalits and religious minorities to Adivasis, OBCs and women. This churn makes painting every party with the same brush a fraught exercise. The question, then, is not merely about how many “dynasts” are in a party but also the internal structures that enable mobility, and where on the social ladder its leaders are. In the case of parties emerging from social justice movements, for example, the failure is arguably as much structural as of leadership: While the first generation of leaders emerged from a culture of protest, they did not build organisations that allowed for the creation of a broader, more empowered leadership pool. The Left and the BJP are ideological and cadre-based, where such structures have been built in. The Left has withered away except in Kerala and the BJP has ensured more of a level playing field than others, although it should also pay heed to early warning signs: As its power footprint grows, more families are getting a slice of the pie. For Congress, India’s oldest party, family leadership is the most ossified, its label of “dynastic politics” well-earned.

Over half of India’s population is under 30. How many of them can look up to a leadership that can empathise with their struggles and aspirations? How many leaders can they look up to who have worked their way in? For political parties, this is an important question to ask themselves. Dynastic politics is a symptom. Few would object to the son or daughter of a politician getting a ticket if they came up through the ranks, paid their dues, from the panchayat or municipal level to Parliament. Political parties need to open their doors and at the same time set a higher bar for relatives. In fact, a family association should be seen as a liability rather than the asset it now is. This will ensure political competition and the continued confidence of the electorate, and their long-term future. Without such reform, parties will fail to attract talent and may well wither away — to make way for those that do.



ELECTORAL ROLL REVAMP: THE CASE FOR DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION

After two decades of silence on one of India's most critical democratic processes, the Election Commission (EC) has finally revived the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls — beginning with Bihar, followed by West Bengal, and later the rest of the country.

Electoral rolls require continuous updating — removing those who have died or surrendered citizenship and transferring entries for individuals who shift residence to another constituency. A person must be an Indian citizen of at least 18 years of age and ordinarily resident in India to be included in the roll. However, concerns persist about including ineligible persons, especially those who may have entered from neighbouring countries, underscoring the need for transparent verification.

Although this long-awaited SIR aims to update the voter database, it became controversial due to procedural ambiguities and reliance on outdated and cumbersome Standard Operating Procedures (SoPs) instead of modern digital tools.

Reliance on outdated methods

The last full-fledged SIR of electoral rolls in most Indian States was conducted between 2002 and 2004, when voter data was entirely paper-based, fragmented, and manually verified. Two decades later, despite India's sweeping digital transformation — from Aadhaar integration to the Digital India mission — the SIR 2025 framework remains rooted in outdated, paper-era procedures.

To mirror the 2002-04 model, 11 documents were mandated for voter verification, including birth certificate, passport, driving licence, domicile, caste certificate, and family register. However, the list excluded Aadhaar, India's most widely used and digitally verifiable ID. The justification that Aadhaar is not fool-proof and can be manipulated is only partly valid, as the same limitations apply to most other accepted documents. More reliable documents such as passports and government service IDs cover only a small section of the population.

Relying on limited and often inaccessible proofs contradicts the spirit of Digital India — turning what was meant to be a modern transparency reform into a bureaucratic bottleneck. The exclusion of Aadhaar made verification cumbersome and eroded public trust, particularly among migrants, first-time voters, and marginalised groups. The deeper issue lies in the failure to adopt interoperable, technology-based systems. Most approved databases remain isolated and inaccessible, preventing real-time verification and automated consistency checks. As a result, the SIR of 2025 repeated the old cycle of manual errors, delays, and inconsistencies.

A credible and trustworthy SIR requires a nationally unified, technology-driven framework that ensures accuracy, accountability, and transparency across India's billion-plus voters — not replicating the early 2000's outdated methods in 2025's digital era.

Aadhaar: a national digital ID

After extensive hearings and deliberation, Aadhaar was upheld as a valid and legitimate digital ID for electoral governance processes. Despite earlier concerns about privacy and misuse, the decision confirmed Aadhaar's operational legitimacy, establishing it as the backbone of India's digital ecosystem.



India has no comparable identity system. Aadhaar uniquely combines personalised details with biometric data, enabling reliable individual verification. It is the only centralised identity database accessible to multiple government and private agencies for authentication. Over time, Aadhaar verification has become routinely used for attendance systems, scholarship disbursement, welfare distribution, financial transactions, life certification, and educational institutions. In practice, it has emerged as India's de facto national digital identity register.

Therefore, rather than sidelining it, India's technical leadership must make the Aadhaar ecosystem more robust, tamper-proof, and transparent. It can securely integrate birth, death, and migration records with appropriate safeguards, ensuring that electoral rolls remain dynamically updated without compromising privacy. Integrating verified Aadhaar data into electoral roll management under strict data protection norms could eliminate duplication, automatically remove deceased voters, update residential shifts, and prevent fake or multiple registrations. Every addition, deletion, or correction would carry a digitally signed authorisation, create an unbroken digital audit trail, and ensure a transparent, verifiable, and accountable electoral database.

Data anomalies

The revised electoral roll of Bihar revealed significant inconsistencies, including deleting 3.66 lakh names without adequate clarity or traceable communication to those affected. The total number of electors was around 80 lakh (nearly 10%) lower than the estimated adult population of the State, with no verification trail explaining the reasons for such deletions or confirming that due notice had been given.

Further scrutiny exposed several irregularities such as centenarians being listed as new voters, and names re-included without supporting documents to maintain overall voter counts. There were also gross variations in demographic statistics, such as a decline in the gender ratio from 934 in September 2025 to 892 in the final roll, a statistically implausible shift, inconsistent with population trends. These anomalies suggest data entry errors or unverified mass revisions, raising serious questions about the integrity of the database.

Moreover, data transparency remained the primary concern. The lists of additions and deletions were not published in machine-readable formats, preventing independent audit or public scrutiny.

Collectively, these anomalies — from demographic distortions and manual errors to opaque data handling — expose the fragility of electoral roll management and underscore the urgent need for technology-driven verification and transparent data governance in revisions.

On ECI-Net

ECI-Net is among the world's largest and most dynamic digital databases, housing records of nearly one billion voters. Continuously updated through additions, address changes, and profile modifications, it is searchable by Electoral Photo Identity Card (EPIC) ID and voter-name and administered by the Centre for Development of Advanced Computing (C-DAC), Pune, India's premier computing R&D institution. Globally, few systems match the scale, functionality, and democratic significance of this mission-critical database.

By design, ECI-Net can detect duplicates, flag inconsistencies, and facilitate corrections through authorised verification. Its architecture can instantly produce real-time demographic and



statistical reports transparently and accurately. With the integration of data analytic APIs, the system can automatically identify and resolve most anomalies and demographic inconsistencies identified during recent revisions.

However, the lack of disclosure and system-level analytics raises serious concerns. If automated audit and analytical tools already exist — as expected in a database of this scale — they could have easily detected duplication, demographic distortions, and data irregularities without large-scale manual intervention. The failure to utilise these digital capabilities suggests institutional inertia or deliberate avoidance of technology-based transparency. Such practices weaken confidence in the integrity of existing SoPs. Despite strong technical expertise within its leadership, the reliance on manual verification over verifiable, software-driven protocols remains inexplicable. Until data-driven audits and system-level transparency are prioritised, claims of purification of electoral rolls will continue to invite public scepticism and institutional introspection.

The way ahead

Today, India has one of the world's most advanced digital ecosystems — from Aadhaar-linked databases and UPI to data analytics and e-governance. Yet, the procedures guiding SIR 2025 show little reflection of this progress. The weaknesses are not merely administrative but structural, stemming from the absence of traceability, and database integration. Reforming the SoPs is therefore not optional; it is vital for safeguarding democratic credibility.

The electoral roll must be recognised as a living, dynamic national asset rather than a static, state-bound record. Its accuracy directly shapes the integrity of elections and public confidence in electoral governance.

Recent judicial observations have underscored the need to learn from the Bihar experience as preparations begin for a nationwide revision. Future SIR exercises must demonstrate procedural correctness, visible fairness, transparency, and accountability. The focus should shift to software-driven verification, digital audit trails, and real-time corrections. The ECI-Net should be made more user-friendly, technical glitches should be fixed promptly, and an efficient and quick grievance redressal mechanism should be incorporated.

The 2025 SIR must not become another verification ritual; it must transform into a trust revolution powered by technology based on transparency, verification, and integrity.

Do You Know:

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

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

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



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

DOES INDIA'S 1.9 FERTILITY RATE REFLECT REALITY?

The recent United Nations Population Fund's State of World Population 2025 report shows that India's current Total Fertility Rate (TFR) has fallen to 1.9. This sub-replacement fertility has shifted the focus of discourse from the belief that rapid population growth is the root of economic backwardness to new concerns about ageing populations.

The report brings urgent questions to the forefront. Does the methodology used to calculate TFR accurately reflect public perception? And could the decline in TFR pose risks to India's economic trajectory, thereby creating the need to raise the TFR?

Perceived meaning of TFR

In public discourse, TFR is interpreted as the average number of children a woman would bear by the end of her reproductive age. However, it is a statistical measure which calculates the average number of children a woman would have in her lifetime if she experienced the current birth rate trends at each age cohorts from 15 to 49 years throughout her reproductive life.

The reproductive age is divided into seven five-year age cohorts: 15-19, 20-24, 25-29, 30-34, 35-39, 40-44, and 45-49. For each age cohort, the number of live births per 1,000 women in a given year is calculated; this is known as age-specific fertility rate (ASFR). These ASFRs are then converted into per-woman figures by multiplying each rate by five (since each cohort covers five years) and dividing by 1,000. Adding up the figures for all seven cohorts gives us the TFR.

This calculation assumes that today's 15-19 age cohort will show fertility patterns similar to today's 45-49 cohort (or other older cohorts) once they themselves reach that age, and vice versa. This is known as the synthetic cohort assumption.

Limitation of TFR calculation

Real fertility preferences do not follow the synthetic cohort assumption. They often evolve differently, as future younger cohorts are likely to exhibit preferences that differ from those of today's older women.

Another important limitation is that it is a point-in-time measure, which is highly sensitive to a phenomenon known as the tempo effect. This refers to changes in the timing of childbearing, not necessarily reduction in the number of births. Since TFR is calculated from the ASFRs of women in a given cohort, births postponed are not captured in that year's data, so the fertility of women who delay childbirth is effectively 'missed' even though they may have the same number of children later. Thus, tempo effect artificially reduces the TFR and gives a false impression of lower fertility. The phenomena exacerbates when birth postponement takes place in the majority of the younger age cohorts. Interestingly, today's postponement will overestimate future TFR calculation. This large gap between real and calculated TFR is particularly relevant in India, which is simultaneously undergoing economic, social, and cultural transitions. These include rising female literacy and a more career-oriented outlook among women that creates a stronger incentive to delay childbirth.



The ASFR trends presented in Charts 1 and 2 reflect a shift in childbirth patterns, with fertility being postponed from younger to older cohorts. In urban areas, the decline in the share of ASFR among the youngest two cohorts (15-19 and 20-24) and the corresponding increase across the older cohorts (25-29 to 45-49) strongly indicates a postponement of fertility preferences rather than an overall decline in fertility.

In rural areas, a decline in the share of ASFR is observed in the 15-19 age cohorts, along with an increase in the 20-24 to 30-34 age cohorts. This also suggests a postponement of fertility preferences. However, unlike in urban areas, this shift is largely confined to the middle age cohorts. The declining share of older cohorts (35-39 and above) points to a reduction in fertility preference in these age cohorts.

Another key limitation of the TFR is its exclusion of births to women below 15 and above 49, based on the assumption that such cases are negligible. This assumption is less valid in developing and Islamic countries where early marriages are common. Owing to legal and social sensitivities, births to underage girls are often concealed. Moreover, survey enumerators may also avoid uncomfortable questions, as noted in the 2020 DHS Methodological Report.

Given these problems, and amid growing calls to raise the TFR due to concerns over ageing population, it is important to recognise that historically, sub-replacement fertility has not constrained economic progress, as evidenced in Europe, the U.S., and several newly industrialised economies. Moreover, India has missed the opportunity to fully harness its demographic dividend, constrained by persistent youth unemployment, a challenge likely to intensify with automation and AI. More importantly, the current size of the elderly population remains largely independent of present fertility trends. While caring for the ageing population is a moral responsibility of the state, its urgency does not automatically increase simply because of a reported decline in TFR.

MAMATA URGES PM TO WITHDRAW APPOINTMENT OF INTERLOCUTOR ON ISSUES RELATING TO GURKHAS

West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee on Saturday wrote to Prime Minister Narendra Modi expressing “surprise and shock” at the Centre’s unilateral appointment of an interlocutor for the “issues relating to Gurkhas in the Darjeeling hills, Terai and Dooars regions of West Bengal”.

The Union Home Ministry on Thursday appointed retired IPS officer Pankaj Kumar Singh as the interlocutor to hold talks with representatives of political parties in the Darjeeling hills to address their political demands.

The appointment of Mr. Singh, a former chief of the Border Security Force (BSF) who also served as Deputy National Security Adviser, was welcomed by the political parties such as the Gorkha Janmukti Morcha (GJM), Gorkha National Liberation Front and the BJP. But Ms. Banerjee said the appointment was made without any consultations with the State government. Ms. Banerjee also said the appointment was against the spirit of cooperative federalism.

“This appointment has been made without any consultation with the Government of West Bengal, even though the issues under reference directly relate to the governance, peace, and administrative stability of the area under Gorkhaland Territorial Administration (GTA), an autonomous body under Government of West Bengal,” she said.

In the letter, the Chief Minister recalled how the GTA was constituted following a Tripartite Agreement signed on July 18, 2011 in Darjeeling among the Government of India, the Government



of West Bengal and the GJM, “in the presence of the then Hon’ble Union Home Minister and the Chief Minister of West Bengal”.

She said that “any unilateral action in this sensitive matter will not be in interest of peace, and harmony in the region”.

A COMMISSION OF OMISSIONS

Currently, the National Commission for Minorities (NCM) has no chairman or members. There have also been whispers regarding its uncertain future. The Delhi High Court, while hearing a Public Interest Litigation (PIL) pleading for directions to reconstitute the Commission, has recently sought the response of the Union government.

- There are several National Commissions in the country. All of them are supposed to be watchdogs to oversee adherence to the provisions of the Constitution relating to civil rights and liberties of various sections of society.
- The Minorities Commission was first set up in 1978 under a Ministry of Home Affairs resolution. Five months later, a similar body named the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Commission was formed.
- On returning to power in 1981, the Congress reconciled with the existence of the Minorities Commission but remained averse to giving it any space in the Constitution.
- However, in 1992, the Congress government led by Narsimha Rao at last placed it under a parliamentary charter, renaming it as the National Commission for Minorities (NCM) and enabling it to exercise some powers of a civil court specified in the Act.
- In 2004, the Congress government set up a separate National Commission for Minority Educational Institutions (NCMEI).
- None of the so-called National Commissions has ever enjoyed autonomy in fulfilling its statutory obligations. None of them, even after long years, has brought any revolution in the lives of those for whom it had been created.
- Its history of 47 years shows that whatever little the minorities of the country can expect in terms of the constitutional provisions for their rights as equal citizens of the country can never be secured through intervention by the toothless tiger called the NCM. So, if it is thrown into the dustbin of history, it will be worthless to shed tears on its unceremonious exit from the national scene.

Do You Know:

- Constitutional bodies are institutions or authorities whose powers, duties, and structures are explicitly defined in the Constitution. Their roles extend beyond mere administrative functions, as they are designed to serve as checks and balances on governmental power.
- Some of the constitutional bodies are the Election Commission of India (ECI), Union Public Service Commission (UPSC), Finance Commission, Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG), National Commissions for SCs, STs, and Minorities, and Attorney General of India.



- Apart from constitutional bodies, there are statutory bodies that play a vital role in strengthening our democracy. Statutory bodies are institutions established by an act of Parliament or state legislatures, deriving their authority from legislation rather than directly from the Constitution.
- Some examples of statutory bodies are the Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI), the National Green Tribunal (NGT), the Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority of India (IRDAI), the Central Vigilance Commission (CVC), the University Grants Commission (UGC), the National Commission for Women (NCW), the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) and the Reserve Bank of India (RBI).
- On the other hand, non-statutory bodies, also known as executive or advisory bodies, are organisations or committees that are established by an executive order or administrative resolution rather than by an act of Parliament or state legislatures. They are created for specific purposes and may not have a legal framework backing them, as is the case with statutory bodies.

FOR A NEW PATH

That the Maoist insurgency is on the back foot has been evident for months now. The Maoist presence has been limited to 11 districts, with its core areas whittled down to three — the forested and remote districts of Bijapur, Narayanpur and Sukma in Chhattisgarh. The credit for weakening what was once termed India's "greatest internal security threat" must be shared by security forces that adapted counter-insurgency tactics to the realities on the ground, and district administrations and successive governments since the mid-2000s which accelerated developmental work. The defeat of the Maoists in hitherto impoverished tribal regions of central India followed a similar retreat from united Andhra Pradesh, which saw the same strategy. This made it near impossible for the insurgents to build alternative governance structures, eventually encircling cities — a plan followed by the Chinese Communist Party a century ago to defeat the Nationalists. The Maoists aimed to form base areas in remote districts of central and north-central India, in Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, eastern Maharashtra, western Odisha and northern Andhra Pradesh. They expected support from tribals, many nursing disaffection due to the absence of the state and its developmental arms.

While areas such as Abujmad in south Chhattisgarh, Gadchiroli in Maharashtra and parts of Odisha initially provided conditions for the Maoists to establish alternative institutions, over time, tribal unrest grew, with resentment over being used as pawns in militarist battles against the Indian state. This was partly because the Maoists privileged armed struggle over the economic uplift of tribals. The Maoists gained strength in the late 2000s when the Salwa Judum campaign resulted in massive displacement and brutal internecine battles, providing discontented recruits. However, the Supreme Court's ban on the campaign and the professionalisation of anti-insurgency forces weakened the militant insurgency. Simultaneously, tribal people saw more benefits from a proactive state — despite persisting limitations — leading to growing disillusionment with the Maoist idea of a violent route towards an alternative state. This experience mirrors what transpired in Peru, Colombia, the Philippines and Malaysia. That this realisation has dawned upon senior Maoist leaders is evident when surrendered Politburo member Mallojula Venugopal Rao suggested that the only task left was to "abandon the dogmatic practice of the Chinese and Russian lines, regardless of the change in circumstances and time [in India]". This opens the opportunity for the cadres to utilise spaces within Indian democracy for political engagement. Even if it has not convinced all the insurgents as yet, it will serve the people of the remaining districts and those committed to their uplift well if the Maoists abandon their struggle.

4TH FLOOR SHATABDI TOWER, SAKCHI, JAMSHEDPUR



SLEEPING DEATHTRAPS

The accident in Kurnool district, Andhra Pradesh, in the early hours of October 24, involving a “luxury” bus from Hyderabad to Bengaluru with 46 passengers, was one that mirrored previous such tragedies. It was apparently triggered by a fuel leak after the bus collided with a bike that had been knocked to the ground earlier in a hit-and-run incident. The accident claimed 20 lives including the bike rider; the survivors barely managed to escape through broken windows. Some 10 days earlier, 20 people were burnt alive when an air-conditioned bus from Jaisalmer to Jodhpur, with 57 passengers, caught fire. There have been several eerily similar fires such as in 2023, on a Nagpur-Mumbai bus.

Typically, most of these buses carry the names of well-known brands but the fact is that only the engine and the chassis are purchased from these OEMs. The chassis is then made into a full bus in body-building shops. While there is a case that increasingly advanced electronics, electrical and the air-conditioning systems used carry the risk of electric fires, rigorous safety standards are typically followed while designing and installing these systems. But what is not rigorous is body installation and modifications made at the body shops. The Automotive Industry Standards (AIS) developed by the Road Transport Ministry do lay down the structural and fire safety requirements for bodies as well, but these are seldom followed. Often, the body is made of poor quality composite material that is highly inflammable. There is hardly any crash testing. At the body shop, unsafe modifications are sometimes made such as installing an extra fuel tank. The sleeper arrangements on board restrict passenger movement. Soft, highly inflammable materials are used for curtains and other barricades. Recent regulations specify that there must be four exits on such buses — two main doors and two collapsible windows — with no seat or sleeper obstructing them. But these do not apply to the existing fleet. The drivers are often not trained to handle emergencies. It would enhance safety to mandate that the emergency exit arrangements are explained to passengers as they are on a flight. Crash testing of the entire bus assembly must be mandated to enhance safety during collisions. Though current standards mandate fire detection and safety systems that would detect and give audible and visual warnings in a fire followed by the activation of firefighting devices, these are seldom followed at the body shops. What is needed is a more comprehensive AIS that takes into account risks in sleeper buses followed by strict implementation and regular monitoring.

A KERALA STORY: MARRIAGE, LOVE AND THE BENEFITS OF A VIDEO KYC

Long before the one-time password became part of the faintly horrifying heartbeat of mundanity, the abbreviation “OTP” stood for something a little more romantic: One True Pairing, used by fans for their preferred fictional couples. A little of that romance seemed to have rubbed off on the one-time password recently when a couple in Kerala registered their marriage using video KYC, which verifies identities using Aadhaar-based OTPs or email authentication, and received a digitally verified certificate on the same day. Those who’ve been brought down to earth soon after their weddings by the full-length, analogue municipal office experience might be forgiven for feeling a little envious.

One couple’s video — showing them completing the KYC process on a laptop while in their wedding clothes, complete with garlands — has gone viral, but it’s part of a broader trend in Kerala, taking advantage of the state government’s digital governance initiatives. Online marriage registration is one of the features of the K-SMART platform for local self-governance, launched



last year. Reportedly, of the 1,44,416 marriages registered in Kerala between January 2024 and September 2025, 62,524 were done online.

This must be placed in the context of Kerala's strides in digital literacy, and comes after another initiative of the Local Self-Government Department in which nearly 22 lakh people who were identified as "digitally illiterate" completed a training programme. Alongside this is the KFON project, which aims to ensure universal internet access, providing it free of cost to families below the poverty line. The major remaining challenge is to ensure that all households actually have digital devices. The promise of digital governance can be fully realised only when it is democratised by ensuring both access and literacy. The rapid uptake of facilities like online marriage registration signals that progress is being made towards that end; the momentum must continue. The alternative is to learn to appreciate the musty charms of the municipal office and the reflective possibilities of the queue.

INDIA AIMS AT SELF-RELIANCE IN SOLAR PHYSICS, SPACE WEATHER

The sun has a profound influence on life on earth. It's the source of life as well as the motivation for the technological infrastructure that sustains modern society. Solar flares, coronal mass ejections, and energetic storms create space weather that affects satellites and astronauts in space, disrupting communications, navigation, and power grids on earth. Understanding how solar activity originates, evolves, and affects our space environment is thus vital for effective space weather forecasting.

Astronomers in India recently provided an overview of the current state of solar and space physics. They focused on key challenges that are expected to shape the field over the next decade and highlighted how the Indian scientific community will tackle them with help from existing expertise as well as upcoming facilities.

Their ideas were detailed in a paper published in the *Journal of Astrophysics and Astronomy*.

Solar tantrums

"The key scientific question is understanding solar eruptions, such as solar flares and coronal mass ejections (CMEs), and their potential impact on space assets like satellites orbiting earth," Vaibhav Pant, scientist at the Aryabhata Research Institute of Observational Sciences (ARIES) and second author of the paper, said. "Given our increasing reliance on space technologies, addressing this issue is of utmost urgency."

CMEs are sudden discharges of a large amount of plasma from the outermost part of the sun's atmosphere, known as the corona (Latin for 'crown'). Solar wind, on the other hand, is a continuous outflow of charged particles from the corona. A solar flare is a massive explosion on the sun, triggered by the rapid release of energy from twisted magnetic fields above sunspots, generating a burst of radiation across the electromagnetic spectrum, including radio waves, X-rays, and gamma rays.

Dr. Pant said several significant challenges complicate the study and prediction of CMEs and related solar phenomena. Key issues include the incomplete understanding of the connection between CMEs and the solar wind, the poorly defined magnetic structures of CMEs (which affect their motion), and the complex interactions with ambient solar magnetic fields that alter their orientation and affect the earth and other planets. Predicting solar flares is still challenging due to limited knowledge about how magnetic fields emerge from under the sun's surface.



Sun-watching strategies

In September 2023, the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) launched Aditya-L1, India's first space observatory focused on the sun. Aditya-L1 is stationed 1.5 million km from earth at Lagrange point 1 (L1). Lagrange points are positions in space where gravitational forces between two bodies, like the sun and the earth, balance out the orbital motion of a smaller object, creating areas of relative stability that allow spacecraft to “hover” with minimal fuel use. There are five Lagrange points in the sun-earth system.

“Aditya-L1 is positioned at the L1 location, where it takes high-resolution images and spectra of the solar atmosphere. A number of exciting results have already been published from this mission,” Dr. Pant said. “We should also consider deploying more [instruments] at other strategic locations, such as L4 and L5” — a suggestion articulated in the overview.

L1 is located on the line connecting the sun and the earth, so any eruption from the sun moving towards the earth will pass through it, and Aditya-L1 can detect it. The L4 point is 60° ahead of the earth's orbit, and L5 is 60° behind. So a spacecraft at L5 can observe solar regions before they rotate towards the earth, allowing them to detect solar activity and CMEs potentially before they occur.

Two spacecraft, one at L1 and another at L5, will function like “two eyes” observing the same solar events, allowing researchers to accurately compute the 3D trajectories of these phenomena, Dr. Pant said. Another spacecraft at the L4 point will create a triangular observation network with the earth at the centre. Using its data, physicists can better track eruptions and produce better estimates of when they arrive at the earth.

On the flip side, L4 and L5 are 30 million km from the earth, complicating data transmission. “Sending data will be slower compared to the L1 position, but if this challenge is mitigated, it would be a great technological demonstration by Indians,” Dr. Pant said.

The Indian solar community is also working on enhancing ground-based facilities to observe the Sun.

“The Indian Institute of Astrophysics has proposed a two-metre-class ground-based telescope that will be instrumental in studying the sun's lower atmosphere with high resolution,” Dr. Pant said.

This upcoming project is called the National Large Solar Telescope. Its planned size makes it unsuitable for deployment in space.

Onward, sunward

The long-term vision of solar physics in India also includes plans to educate early-career researchers and young students on solar physics and to analyse Aditya-L1 data. To this end, ISRO and ARIES have been conducting workshops across India. Ten have been completed thus far, and an 11th one is scheduled for October at Pondicherry University.

“It was an amazing experience, and the workshop exposed me to a world of cutting-edge research and the top-level researchers leading these studies,” said Hardik Medhi, a doctoral student at the National Centre for Radio Astronomy in Pune, who attended the third Aditya-L1 workshop.

Savitha M.S., an integrated MTech PhD student at the Indian Institute of Astrophysics, Bengaluru, attended the third and fifth Aditya-L1 workshops. She said: “This exposure not only broadened



my knowledge but also strengthened my passion and determination to pursue research in solar physics.”

The paper reported the involvement of 229 early-career Indian researchers in solar physics, both in India and abroad, plus 65 faculty members and scientists working in India. The authors stressed the need to expand the community by hiring new faculty members, developing academic programmes, engaging with the public, and fostering industry partnerships.

The authors also highlighted the need for a national network of advanced supercomputing facilities for computational astrophysics.

As telescopes and space missions improve, analysing and interpreting the data they collect will demand heavy physics-based simulations, rendering supercomputers very useful, if not essential.

Looking ahead, Dr. Pant expressed optimism that “in the next 10 to 15 years, we should be able to develop our own state-of-the-art prediction models for solar flares and the arrival times of coronal mass ejections (CMEs) on earth.”

India recently opened its space sector up to private companies.

Aside from building satellites and launching rockets, their involvement also portends private-sector innovation in modelling solar storms and predicting space weather.

“These developments will make India self-reliant in understanding space weather and the solar-terrestrial relationship,” Dr. Pant added.

With a community of experts, young researchers, new facilities, and numerous initiatives (many in the works); and now a long-term guiding vision, solar physics and space weather are expected to grow significantly in the coming years.

LCA TEJAS MK 1 A TAKES FIRST FLIGHT: SYMBOL OF SELF-RELIANCE: RAJNATH

The indigenous Light Combat Aircraft (LCA) Tejas Mk 1A undertook its first public sortie at the Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL) facility in Nashik on Friday, a move that Defence Minister Rajnath Singh called a “shining symbol” of India’s growing self-reliance in defence.

- The event also marked the formal inauguration of the third production line of the LCA Mk 1A and the second production line of the indigenously made Hindustan Turbo Trainer (HTT)-40 basic trainer aircraft.
- Singh said India once imported 65-70 per cent of critical military hardware, but is now manufacturing 65 per cent of the equipment on its own soil, highlighting the government’s resolve to increase domestic manufacturing to 100 per cent in the years to come.
- The inaugural flight of the LCA Mk 1A is a step forward towards its delayed formal induction into the Indian Air Force (IAF), which has been facing a decline in its fighter squadron strength. The newly inaugurated production line in Nashik has the capacity to manufacture eight aircraft every year, and can be increased to 10. HAL is expected to produce a total of 24 aircraft annually.
- Singh highlighted the need to stay ahead of the curve as Artificial Intelligence, cyber warfare, drone systems and next-generation aircraft are shaping the future, and wars are being fought across multiple frontiers.



- HAL has operationalised the third LCA Mk 1A production line in a record time of two years, fully equipping it with more than 30 structure assembly jigs for all major modules of the aircraft, including centre fuselage, front fuselage, rear fuselage, wings and air intake.

Do You Know:

- The AMCA will be India's indigenous fifth-generation fighter aircraft. The indigenous Light Combat Aircraft (LCA) Tejas is a 4.5-generation single-engine multirole aircraft.
- Loosely put, a generational shift in fighter jets is said to occur when a certain technological innovation cannot be incorporated into an existing aircraft through upgrades and retrospective fit-outs — each new generation comes with a certain significant leap in technology.
- There are currently five generations of fighter jets that are (or were in the past) in active service, with sixth generation jets currently in development.
- Currently, only the US (F-22 and F-35), Russia (Sukhoi Su-57), and China (Chengdu J-20) have developed operational fifth generation aircraft. India is currently developing its own fifth-generation aircraft with AMCA.

GOVT CLEARS DEFENCE PURCHASE PROPOSALS WORTH RS. 79,000 CRORE

In a bid to boost the combat capabilities of the military, India on Thursday cleared proposals to procure weapons and military hardware worth Rs 79,000 crore, including Nag missiles, amphibious warfare ships and electronic intelligence and surveillance systems. The procurement proposals were cleared at a meeting of the Defence Acquisition Council (DAC), chaired by Defence Minister Rajnath Singh.

- It is the second major decision on procurement after Operation Sindoor. Procurement projects worth Rs 67,000 crore were approved on August 5. The DAC approved proposals amounting to nearly Rs 79,000 crore, the Defence Ministry said.
- For the Indian Navy, approval was granted for the procurement of Landing Platform Docks (LPDs), 30-mm Naval Surface Guns (NSGs), Advanced LightWeight Torpedoes (ALWTs), the Electro Optical Infra-Red Search and Track System and Smart Ammunition for 76-mm Super Rapid Gun Mount.
- The procurement of the 30-mm NSGs will enhance the capability of the Navy and the Coast Guard to carry out low-intensity maritime operations and take anti-piracy measures. For the Army, approval was accorded for the procurement of the Nag missile system (Tracked) Mk-II (NAMIS), the ground-based mobile ELINT (electronic intelligence system) and high-mobility vehicles (HMs).
- The NAMIS procurement will enhance the Army's capability of neutralising the enemy's combat vehicles, bunkers and other field fortifications, whereas the GBMES will provide round-the-clock electronic intelligence of enemy activities, it said.
- The DAC approved the procurement of Collaborative Long Range Target Saturation/Destruction System (CLRTS/DS) for the Indian Air Force (IAF). It also cleared some other procurement proposals of the IAF.



Do You Know:

- The goal of a Viksit Bharat (developed India) by 2047 requires the defence sector to be more resilient and self-reliant. The transformation underway in the defence industrial complex has set the stage for multiple stakeholders to rally and promote domestic technological innovation while cementing strategic partnerships around the world.
- LPDs are amphibious warfare ships that are used to transport heavy equipment and land troops. The ministry said the integrated sea capability provided by LPDs will also help the Navy undertake peacekeeping operations, humanitarian assistance, disaster-relief measures.
- The Nag missile has been developed to strike and neutralise highly fortified enemy tanks. It also has night strike capabilities. It has a minimum range of 500 metres and maximum range of four kilometres. A third-generation fire and forget category system, Nag uses an imaging infra-red seeker to lock on to the target before launch.

A CAMPUS THAT LISTENS

The Supreme Court had to intervene last month suo motu, following tragic incidents of student suicides in top institutions including IITs, highlighting the urgent need for systemic reform. The NCRB 2022 statistics are staggering — 7.6 per cent of the total suicides in India were by students, translating to 13,089, an increase from 12,526 from the previous year.

- Almost 44 per cent of these were female, while 56.51 per cent were male. The most affected states were Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, and Madhya Pradesh.
- It is distressing to see young college students and those in their early 20s dying by suicide. That it is happening with great regularity is a blot on our societal standards and norms.
- Academic pressure, financial burden, social isolation, and identity crisis could all be reasons. Tackling depression and suicidal ideation among university students requires more than pamphlets and crisis hotlines.
- Even as traditional therapy, medication, and counselling are vital, there is an urgent need for some innovative and holistic strategies to support student mental health in personalised ways.
- Mental health literacy is one of the most underutilised but powerful tools in fighting depression. Maybe gamified mental health education is an answer.
- Why not integrate interactive, story-driven apps or games into freshers' orientation or course modules in our universities? Through gamification, students can learn about anxiety, depression, coping strategies, and when to seek help.
- "SPARX" (Smart, Positive, Active, Realistic, X-factor thoughts) is a digital platform that uses a fantasy-themed role-playing game to deliver Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) to those experiencing mild to moderate depression. It helps in personal connection and recall, making students more likely to seek support when needed.
- Peer support is another powerful method. Many students are more likely to confide in a peer than a professor or counsellor. Our institutions must train select students as Mental Health Navigators (MHNs), equipped with mental health first aid, motivational interviewing, and active listening skills.



- Several technology-based tools too could be used. Every student has a smartphone. Why not use them to manage mental health? Some universities are beginning to experiment with AI-powered mood tracking apps that monitor language, sleep, and social behaviours via passive data and self-reporting.
- Even physical spaces significantly impact emotional well-being. Why not rethink campus architecture with mental health in mind? Universities could create “emotional wellness zones”, designed for de-stressing and reflection.
- Lack of sleep and poor nutrition are both strongly correlated with depression. Campuses must innovate by creating “wellness labs” or “body-mind biohacking labs”, spaces where students experiment with improving sleep, nutrition, and hydration under guided protocols.
- Mental health is not one-size-fits-all. Just as an academic advising helps students achieve goals, mental health roadmaps should also be customised.
- Finally, many students report feeling unseen or unheard by the institution itself. Faculty and administration should undergo “radical listening” training, learning to create safe spaces for students to voice their concerns without fear of judgment or retaliation.

Do You Know:

- Suicide accounts for one in every 100 deaths globally. According to new data released by the World Health Organisation (WHO), an estimated 727,000 people across all ages lost their lives to suicide in 2021, with one suicide death happening in over 20 suicide attempts. The WHO further says that more than a billion people are living with mental health disorders.
- The new findings were published in two reports – ‘World Mental Health Today’ and ‘Mental Health Atlas 2024.’ Over the next few weeks, WHO will also be releasing country profiles as part of ‘Mental Health Atlas 2024,’ the first after Covid and factors in after-effects of the pandemic.
- The most common mental disorders are anxiety and depressive disorders, which together accounted for more than two-thirds of all mental health conditions in 2021. Between 2011 and 2021, the number of people living with mental disorders increased faster than the global population.
- As a result, the global age-standardized point prevalence of mental disorders reached 13.6 per cent, which is 0.9 per cent higher than a decade ago.
- Younger adults aged 20–29 years are estimated to have the largest increases (1.8 per cent) in prevalence since 2011. Males are estimated to more commonly have attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), autism spectrum disorders, and idiopathic disorder of intellectual development (comprising intellectual disability from any unknown source).
- Females are estimated to more often experience anxiety, depressive and eating disorders. Anxiety disorders typically emerge earlier than depressive disorders, which are rare before ten years of age.
- Suicide is the leading cause of death among young people across all countries and socio-economic contexts. Yet, progress in reducing suicide mortality is too low to meet the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) of a one-third reduction in suicide rates by 2030.



WHY EMERGENCY CARE NEEDS TO BE PRIORITISED

Ambulances, in various forms, have existed since mankind indulged in war. The instinct to save lives, to reach a healer in time, is as old as civilisation itself.

Modern ambulances, however, are a product of the industrial revolution, shaped by better automobiles and advances in medicine, especially trauma care. The two World Wars, as well as the Korean and Vietnam wars, became great teachers in emergency medical response. War brought not only destruction but also discipline, the precision of rapid evacuation, organised triage, and timely resuscitation. These hard lessons laid the foundation for what we now know as modern emergency medicine.

'Platinum Ten Minutes'

The idea of the ambulance is grounded in the science of human physiology. Acute illnesses, especially trauma, trigger sudden circulatory and pathological disturbances that can quickly turn fatal. Prompt diagnosis and intervention can reverse such pathological disturbances and restore normalcy. Delayed treatment leads to irreversible pathological changes in major organs, often resulting in preventable mortality. Hence, the 'Golden First Hour' concept is now universally accepted not just in trauma care but in heart attack and stroke cases too. It has evolved from quick transport from the site of the accident to starting treatment right from the accident site, and continuing treatment while transporting the patient to a hospital.

Today, most ambulances are equipped to deliver oxygen, start intravenous fluids, secure the airway, manage breathing, including intubation and intercostal drainage, and control bleeding. Many are fitted with defibrillators, ECG and ECHO machines, and some even carry mobile CT scanners which allow early stroke diagnosis and treatment during transit. Deliveries can be conducted if necessary, and the new-born can be stabilised until the ambulance reaches the hospital. From the golden hour, the world is now moving towards the 'Platinum Ten Minutes' standard — the goal that medical help, not just an ambulance, should reach the victim within 10 minutes. Many countries aspire to this, though challenges remain, including difficult terrains, remote areas, war zones, extreme weather, and overcrowding during mass events. The 'Platinum Ten Minutes' is not a slogan but an ethical responsibility that defines how a society values human life.

Operational challenges

Broadly, there are two models of ambulance care. One is manned by paramedical personnel trained in basic life support, and the other is led by doctors, where the ambulance functions as a mobile hospital. India follows a mix of both. The success of either model depends not only on technology but also on the training, motivation, and coordination of the people involved in it.

However, there are many technological and operational challenges. Ambulances require special designs to safely use oxygen and other inflammable gases. They must remain in good condition, be strategically placed, and be driven by trained drivers who can move fast without causing accidents, which are not uncommon. Health workers or nurses must be skilled to handle critical patients, make quick decisions, and act effectively in a moving vehicle. A central call centre with GPS is essential to identify the nearest available ambulance, estimate travel time, alert hospitals, and ensure readiness of medical personnel, blood, and ventilators. Facilities for live communication with specialists, image transmission, and real-time guidance can save crucial



minutes during resuscitation. In many advanced systems, the hospital team monitors the patient's vitals even before arrival. India has the talent to do this; what we often lack is a system that ensures it every single time.

The National Ambulance Code (AIS-125), mandated by the Union government, standardises the design, construction, performance, and equipment of ambulances. The Motor Vehicles Act, 1988, and its 2019 amendments, provide the legal basis for granting ambulances the right of way. The demands of the ambulance vary from transporting a stable patient to transporting one who requires advanced life support. The design and staffing of the vehicle varies accordingly and the call centre should be able to decide which type of ambulance would be appropriate for each emergency call.

The need to standardise

In India, while the National Health Mission provides crucial financial and technical support to States, the States have flexibility in implementation. This leads to a disparity in the quality of service across States. For the record, the State-run 108 Ambulance service is one of the most successful examples of public-private partnerships. About 10,000 ambulances are deployed in the country transporting between seven to nine million patients a year. Tamil Nadu is one of the best performers. It has a fleet of 1,353 strategically placed vehicles. The average response time in Tamil Nadu is 10 minutes and 14 seconds — almost reaching the internationally recognised 'Platinum Ten Minutes' standard.

However, apart from the State-run 108 service, private ambulances operate in most States with little standardisation of services. There is a need for a central organ to oversee, regulate and standardise all emergency services across States and Union Territories including air ambulance and drone services which may become critical vehicles for transporting life-saving organs for transplantation. There is a need for a uniform syllabus, certification and periodic drills for all those who are involved in rescue missions. Skilled personnel are not so easily available in rural areas and attrition rate is quite high even in cities. The lack of a uniform pay structure, promotion opportunities and high levels of stress preclude even interested persons, including medical personnel choosing this field. More often, private ambulances owned by small hospitals lack qualified personnel and equipment.

It is high time that every State establishes an Emergency Services Regulatory Authority to ensure that ambulances serve the purpose of saving lives and not just transporting patients.

A constitutional duty

But even the best ambulance is of little use if it cannot reach the site of a disaster. This has been witnessed repeatedly during large public gatherings. The recent stampede in Karur, Tamil Nadu, is one such grim reminder. Though ambulances responded promptly, they could not enter the scene due to chaos and blocked routes. This is not new, for similar tragedies have unfolded time and time again. Every time, we mourn and move on, without fixing the basics.

The State has a duty towards its citizens. The right to life includes the right to emergency medical care. No mass gathering should be permitted without ensuring unobstructed entry and exit routes for ambulances. This should be non-negotiable. Events should not extend beyond a few hours, as most deaths occur due to dehydration and compression asphyxia rather than the stampede itself. People can suffocate even while standing, crushed by the crowd around them.



The State must deploy well-trained and certified paramedical staff or volunteers, identifiable by uniform, within such gatherings, equipped with basic emergency kits. Immediate on-site cardiopulmonary resuscitation can save many lives; it is a proven intervention. The 'Platinum Ten Minutes' standard starts the very moment disaster strikes. Every passing minute decides the line between life and death.

A nation capable of performing advanced organ transplants and robotic surgeries cannot afford to lose lives to preventable tragedies like stampedes. Our ambulance services must be standardised, regulated, and integrated, including air and drone ambulances, with fresh standard operating procedures drawn up at the earliest. Tamil Nadu, with its very rapid response time, must come out with a Comprehensive Standard Operating Procedure at the earliest. The time has come to treat emergency medical response not as a service but as a constitutional duty. In the end, the true measure of a health system is not how many hospitals it builds, but how quickly it reaches the injured when every second counts.

HOW DO MONSOONS AFFECT TAMIL NADU?

The story so far:

The northeast monsoon has kicked in early this year, at least four days sooner for the second year running, over Tamil Nadu. Last year, this phase of the monsoon ended with the State recording 33% more rain than the long-period average, and forecasters expect this year to go the same way.

Historically, policymakers and State authorities have consistently interpreted excess rain as a positive. Climate change is complicating this calculus because while rainfall volumes increase, they are often concentrated in short and localised bursts, delivering over-large quantities of water in places that often can't absorb them in full. As a result, it might be time to reconsider the idea that "excess is good".

Why is excess rainfall a concern?

In urban areas, surfaces paved with concrete and asphalt keep them from absorbing heavy rainfall, leading to rapid runoff that overwhelms drainage systems, leading to flash floods, low-lying areas being inundated, property damage, and disrupted transportation.

As seen during Cyclone Michaung and Tamil Nadu in 2023, urban power authorities are also prone to cutting power supply in such circumstances, citing loose cables. The sheer volume of water can also lead to sewage overflows, where untreated wastewater is discharged into streets and waterbodies, unleashing significant health and environmental hazards.

The agricultural sector's vulnerability to excessive rainfall is well-known: waterlogged soil suffocates plant roots, washes away seeds and young crops, sheds the nutrient-rich topsoil over time, and ultimately loses its long-term fertility. Too much moisture can also ease the spread of fungal diseases and pests that devastate crops and undercut yield, leading to significant financial losses for farmers. Intense bursts can also wash fertilizers, pesticides, and other agricultural debris into waterbodies, including reservoirs, degrading water quality. Finally, stagnant water becomes a breeding ground for mosquitoes, increasing the risk of vector-borne diseases such as malaria and dengue fever and zoonotic diseases like leptospirosis, Japanese encephalitis, and scrub typhus.



What are the wider impacts?

Prolonged periods of rainfall also raise the water table, the level below which the ground is saturated with water. And a persistently high water table can compromise the stability of building foundations, roads, and other infrastructure; it can also exert pressure on basement walls, leading to cracks, leaks, and the growth of mold. Saturated soil also loses its load-bearing capacity and causes foundations to shift or settle, potentially leading to significant structural damage over time.

The cumulative impact of these issues translates to significant economic and social costs. Damage to buildings, public infrastructure, and agricultural land warrants substantial investments in repair and rebuilding solutions. Disruptions to businesses and transport networks hamper economic activity. Flooding and landslips can also displace communities, injure people, and even kill them if they are particularly vulnerable. The psychological toll on affected populations, including stress and anxiety, is another significant and often overlooked consequence.

Why is Tamil Nadu particularly vulnerable?

Tamil Nadu, in particular, needs to consider the Kerala factor as well. The two States receive rain from two different monsoon patterns: Kerala's primary rainy season is the southwest monsoon from June to September, whereas Tamil Nadu receives most of its rain during the northeast monsoon from October to December. An important problem arises when these monsoon periods overlap or when both States experience intense rainfall simultaneously. This is currently the case with the early onset of the northeast monsoon.

At the heart of the issue is the Mullaperiyar Dam, which, while it is located in Kerala's Idukki district, is operated by the Tamil Nadu government to divert water to irrigate farmlands. There is, as a result, a 'direct' link between the rainfall in Kerala's catchment areas and the water levels in Tamil Nadu's river systems.

When the catchment areas of the Mullaperiyar Dam receive heavy rainfall, the reservoir fills up rapidly. To ensure the dam's safety and to manage the rising water levels, Tamil Nadu's authorities are compelled to open the dam's shutters. The released water flows in two directions and risks creating a double whammy. One portion flows down the Periyar river within Kerala, potentially flooding the low-lying areas of Idukki district and creating an inter-State issue while the primary flow is diverted to Tamil Nadu's Vaigai Dam. And this influx may arrive precisely when Tamil Nadu's own rivers and reservoirs are already swollen from the ongoing northeast monsoon.

What is happening on the ground now?

This simultaneous influx thus turns Kerala's "excess" water from a potential resource into an immediate flood risk for Tamil Nadu. Instead of just managing the rainwater falling within its own borders, Tamil Nadu must also handle a massive, concentrated inflow from its neighbour. The State is currently keeping all 13 shutters of the Mullaperiyar Dam open, releasing thousands of cusecs of water to make room for the incessant influx. As a result, both farmland and residential areas in Theni are already submerged even as the district is being battered by its own monsoon rains.

For these reasons, it may be time for Tamil Nadu and other States like it, including Kerala, to reconsider the "excess is good" notion vis-à-vis rainfall.



IS PUNJAB'S STUBBLE BURNING PROBLEM REALLY DECLINING?

The story so far:

Paddy harvesting has picked up momentum in Punjab, the country's key grain-producing State, and so have stubble burning incidents. This year, stubble burning has been relatively fewer because the State faced one of its worst floods in decades, leaving vast stretches of farmland inundated. Close to the autumn season every year, paddy stubble burning is considered to be one of the contributing factors of air pollution across the country's northern region, including New Delhi. The paddy crop, harvested using combine harvester machines, leaves behind a stubble of stalks. To destroy this stubble, the farmers consider setting the crop residue on fire the most 'effective' method, as they need to prepare the fields for sowing the next winter crop. The short time window between paddy harvesting and wheat sowing — roughly three weeks — is a key reason why farmers resort to stubble burning.

Are stubble burning incidents declining?

The governments, including the State and the Centre, have claimed that incidents of paddy stubble burning have significantly declined over the years, thanks to a range of measures, including stricter enforcement, access to subsidised machinery for crop residue management. Punjab government data, based on satellite aggregation, shows that in 2024, there were 10,909 cases of farm fires in the State, compared to 36,663 in 2023, marking a 70% decline.

While Punjab has reported a significant drop in farm fire incidents since 2021, the total area scorched by these fires has largely expanded. Satellite data from the Punjab Remote Sensing Centre and the Punjab Pollution Control Board show that in 2024, the area under 'residue burning for paddy', which gives a relatively stronger sense of farm fire menace, stood at around 19.17 lakh hectares, compared to around 19.14 lakh hectares in 2023.

In 2022, it was nearly 15.40 lakh hectares, while in 2021, it was approximately 15.60 lakh hectares.

Why do the data differ?

Although the number of stubble fire counts has significantly declined, experts believe that the total burnt area could have increased for several reasons. Fire count measurements often miss smaller, low-intensity, or partial burns.

Farm fire incidents in Punjab, and in other States as well, are recorded by satellites using thermal imaging based on temperature differences. A recent study conducted by the Indian Institute of Science Education and Research, Mohali, published in Science of the Total Environment, highlights several limitations of satellites in collecting fire emissions. The study notes that satellites like MODIS and VIIRS pass over the region only a few times a day, and since most fires are lit in the late afternoon or evening, many events are missed. Haze or clouds can obstruct satellite detection of fires, leading to underreporting. Moreover, north-west States have small landholdings, and farmers often burn crop residue in fragmented, short-duration fires, which are harder for satellites to detect compared to large-scale forest fires. The study also points out that farmers are increasingly aware of satellite monitoring and may cover up burnt areas before the next satellite overpass.



Senior scientist and Professor Ravindra Khaiwal at Environmental Health, Department of Community Medicine and School of Public Health in Chandigarh-based Post Graduate Institute of Medical Education and Research, points out that burnt-area estimation has become more precise with advancements in remote sensing. He says, “While thermal sensors may miss fires due to heat signal blockage, optical sensors like Sentinel-2 can identify post-fire discolouration and burn scars, providing a more accurate assessment of the total burnt area.”

What is the way forward?

Asserting that for accurate assessment of incidents, fire data should be generated by integrating thermal and optical satellite observations and validated through systematic ground verification through ground surveys, Dr. Khaiwal says: “increased burnt area does not necessarily imply higher stubble burning ‘emissions’. Many of these burns are low-intensity, partial, or short-duration fires, releasing relatively less particulate matter and gaseous emissions compared to widespread fires. Hence, emissions must be assessed using fire intensity, fuel load, and duration, not burnt area alone.”

FIRE IN THE SKY

This Deepavali, firecrackers are being burst under legal sanction in Delhi. The Supreme Court of India, in an order last week, modified a ban it had sanctioned since 2018, allowing the use of green crackers during the festival. While the decision comes with caveats on implementation, it underscores the continuous challenge that authorities face in dealing with pressures from cultural norms and economic activity while prioritising public health and environmental safety. The re-introduction of legally sanctioned, less-polluting options marks a shift in government policy after the Bharatiya Janata Party came to power and aims to accommodate traditional celebrations while acknowledging the severe environmental impact of conventional fireworks in Delhi, which is disproportionately affected by noxious winter air. This move recognises that the use of fireworks is an integral cultural expression of joy during the festival of lights. Furthermore, the firecracker industry supports the livelihoods of lakhs of people, making economic considerations part of the regulatory landscape.

However, as the history of Delhi’s air pollution shows, the battle for clean air is a complex interplay of meteorology, economic structure, population and geography. Multiple expert bodies and task forces have deployed science and widespread measurement — at a scale few cities in the world have attempted — to conclude that air quality is impacted by diverse sources: transport, industry, agriculture-waste burning, biomass burning, construction and road dust at different periods. Evidence also suggests that intervals of extended rains often have the largest effect on improving average air quality levels. While the contribution of firecrackers to the annual pollution problem may be temporary, data confirm that the resultant spike makes an already bad air situation worse. Allowing the use of scientifically developed ‘green’ crackers — which are estimated to be about two-thirds less noxious — is an effort to tolerate a temporary surge under controlled conditions. This approach seeks to find a middle ground between honouring tradition and minimising harm. But while green crackers represent an improvement over conventional ones, they are not zero-emission products. In legalising this less-effulgent option, governments and courts must be careful not to take the focus away from the need for public commitment to stricter environmental norms rooted in science and reason, and not in hope and faith. There is no alternative to comprehensive, consistent action against all sources of pollution.



DELHI AIR TURNS 'VERY POOR' POST DIWALI, BJP AND AAP SET OFF POLITICAL FIREWORKS

As air pollution levels rose the day after Diwali, the Delhi government led by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) alleged the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) had “forced” farmers in Punjab to burn stubble to foul the capital’s air.

- Farm fires in Punjab have been at an all-time low this year — the state has recorded only 353 instances of stubble-burning between September 15 and October 20. This figure was 1,445 for the same period last year, and hit an all-time high of 9,399 in 2020, the year in which the Indian Agricultural Research Institute (IARI) started maintaining farm fire data.
- Overall, 1,461 fire incidents have been recorded in Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, Haryana, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, and Delhi so far. Uttar Pradesh has seen 557 incidents (38%), the most so far. Madhya Pradesh has reported 285 incidents (20%), and Rajasthan 212 (15%). All these states are ruled by the BJP.
- Experts have noted that floods and heavy rain in Northwest India delayed the paddy harvest in Punjab this year. This means that farm fires, too, have been delayed, as the crop is yet to be harvested in many areas.
- An analysis of particulate matter (PM) 2.5 trends over the years carried out by research and advisory group Climate Trends shows that post-Diwali pollutant levels this year were the highest in five years.
- The Supreme Court allowed ‘green’ crackers this year, with a direction to the district administration and police to ensure that fireworks were restricted only to two time slots – 6 am to 7 am and 8 pm to 10 on Chhoti Diwali (Sunday) and Diwali (Monday). But this direction was flouted widely, with violations being reported from across NCR.
- Real time data from the Delhi Pollution Control Committee (DPCC) showed PM2.5 and PM10 concentrations breached safe limits by 15 to 18 times at several stations.
- In recent years, delayed monsoon withdrawals have become a troubling new normal, widely linked to climate change by researchers. SAFAR’s earlier studies have shown that such delayed retreat, followed by the anti-cyclonic circulation that tends to slow down the winds beneath, gets further support under colder temperatures, leading to subsiding air and a compressed boundary layer.
- This dynamic acts like a lid over the city, allowing pollutants to accumulate ceaselessly. This year, however, was a welcome exception. The 2025 monsoon officially withdrew from Delhi at the beginning of the last week of September — the earliest retreat since 2002.
- The benefits were twofold. First, the early retreat under relatively warmer conditions kept the winds active, preventing the accumulation of pollutants near the surface. Second, post-withdrawal spells of western-disturbance-induced rainfall continued to wash the air, further curbing pollution build-up.
- India is presently under El Niño-Southern Oscillation (ENSO)-neutral conditions. However, the equatorial Pacific sea surface temperatures are trending below normal, signalling a likely transition towards a La Niña phase, with a 71 per cent probability by mid-October 2025.



- Recent studies from the National Institute of Advanced Studies (NIAS) indicate that strong La Niña events enhance surface wind speeds over northern India, promoting greater dispersion, thereby reducing the build-up of fine particulates that typically lead to winter smog conditions.
- A weak La Niña could also have counterproductive effects. If its link with climate change holds, the winter may be prolonged and severe, creating conditions that favour pollution accumulation and extreme smog events.
- Delhi's air pollution crisis is complex and persistent. This underscores the need for long-term, systemic solutions rather than temporary fixes like water sprinkling, costly smoke towers, or cloud-seeding experiments.
- The only viable path is to tackle the root cause — source emissions. While implementation is challenging, the sooner Delhi adopts an airshed-based approach, the better it will be for the health and well-being of its residents.

Do You Know:

- Cloud seeding is a kind of a weather modification technology to create artificial rainfall. It works only when there is enough pre-existing clouds in the atmosphere. These 'seeds' of rain can be the iodides of silver or potassium, dry ice (solid carbon dioxide), or liquid propane. Delhi government is planning to use 'cloud seeding' to induce rains amid pollution.
- The colour-coded AQI index was launched in India in 2014, and it helps the public and the government understand the condition of the air and what subsequent measures are to be taken to combat the situation, based on its severity. The pollutants measured include PM 10, PM 2.5, Nitrogen Dioxide, Ozone, Carbon, etc. There are six categories of AQI, namely
 - o (i) 'Good' (0-50),
 - o (ii) 'Satisfactory' (51-100),
 - o (iii) 'Moderately polluted' (101-200),
 - o (iv) 'Poor' (201-300),
 - o (v) 'Very Poor' (301-400),
 - o (vi) 'Severe' (401-500).

WHY CLOUD SEEDING IS NOT A SOLUTION TO DELHI'S AIR POLLUTION CRISIS

The story so far:

Delhi's plan for cloud seeding is being sold as a bold solution to air pollution. In reality, it is a textbook case of science misapplied and ethics ignored.

Why is Delhi's air fouler in winter?

Across North India, air quality is poor throughout the year, but it reaches extreme levels in the post-monsoon and winter months. After the monsoon withdraws, dry continental air masses from the northwest dominate the region. The winds weaken and the air becomes stagnant, keeping pollutants from being dispersed efficiently.



Cooler air holds less absolute water vapour and the stable, high-pressure systems that prevail during these months suppress the upward motion needed for clouds to form. The sky may look hazy, but that haze comes from trapped pollution, not from rain-bearing clouds. Rain cannot be conjured out of thin air. It needs water vapour.

For most of the highly polluted cooler months, the atmosphere is too dry and stable to support significant rainfall. Rain does occur occasionally during these months, but these brief spells are typically caused by western disturbances, weather systems that originate in the Mediterranean region and can bring moisture from that region or interact with local systems drawing up moisture from our neighbouring seas. These events can be predicted a few days in advance, but are not a reliable or consistent source of rainfall for North India.

Does cloud seeding help?

Cloud seeding depends on natural clouds; it can't create them. And even when clouds exist, the evidence that seeding reliably increases rainfall remains weak and contested. And when it rains and reduces pollution, the respite is temporary at best. The overwhelming evidence is that pollution levels go back up within a day or two.

The air pollution problem is not just confined to Delhi. Across North India, air quality is dangerously poor year-round. Yet public debate often treats smog as a seasonal nuisance, normalising pollution and noticing it only when it becomes unbearable. Cloud seeding is just another gimmick in a series of similar unscientific ideas, like smog towers, suggesting that flashy interventions can substitute for serious, structural solutions.

What are the risks of cloud seeding?

The temptation to engineer a shortcut to fix air pollution is understandable — but it raises deeper ethical questions about how science is used, what risks are justified, and who bears responsibility when things go wrong.

Even if the science behind cloud seeding were robust, which it is not, it still involves dispersing compounds such as silver iodide or sodium chloride into clouds to trigger condensation. Silver iodide works for cloud seeding because its crystal structure is very similar to that of ice, so it 'tricks' water droplets in the clouds into freezing onto it. These newly formed ice crystals then grow heavy and fall as rain or snow. While generally considered low risk in small doses, repeated use can accumulate in soils and water bodies. The long-term effects on agriculture, ecosystems, and human health remain poorly understood.

Beyond these environmental risks, there is the question of accountability. If cloud seeding coincides with intense rainfall that leads to flooding, causing damage to infrastructure, crops, and livelihoods, or loss of life, who will be responsible? Even if the rainfall and flooding are unrelated to seeding, public perception could still link the two, undermining trust in both science and governance.

What can 'fix' the air?

Science has long identified the real cause of North India's hazardous air: the lack of effective control over emissions from vehicles, industry, construction, power plants, waste burning, and seasonal agricultural fires, compounded by unfavourable meteorology during the cooler months. The solutions are equally clear but remain largely unimplemented: cleaner transport, sustainable energy, better waste management, and urban planning that actually reduces pollution sources.



Yet, instead of reinforcing these priorities, parts of the scientific ecosystem — researchers, advisors, and institutions — are lending credibility to a costly spectacle that will do little to address the sources of the crisis. By attaching their authority to the illusion of quick fixes, they risk wasting scarce public resources, undermining trust, and diverting attention from systemic changes that could make a real difference.

Snake-oil solutions will not clear the air in Delhi or the rest of North India. Instead, courage is required on the ground: to reduce the sources of pollution and pursue equitable, evidence-based action. Anything less is not just misplaced science — it is an ethical failure, a diversion from the patient, unglamorous work needed to ensure clean air throughout the year.

2006 ACT RESTORES LIVELIHOODS, DIGNITY OF FOREST COMMUNITIES, GOVT TELLS SC

In a strong defence of the landmark Forest Rights Act (FRA), 2006, the Ministry of Tribal Affairs (MoTA) has sharply rebutted a plea which has challenged before the Supreme Court (SC) the legal validity of the 2012 Rules, made under the law, The Indian Express has learnt.

- In a counter affidavit filed before the SC, the Centre has not only defended the legal validity of the Act but also stressed that the law goes beyond mere land ownership regularisation and aims to restore dignity, livelihoods, and cultural identity of forest-dependent communities.
- It has also rebutted assertions that FRA violates the wildlife and forest protection laws, and has termed as misguided the view that rights of forest-dwelling communities conflict with wildlife and forest conservation.
- It cited the examples of indigenous communities such as Baiga and Santhal and said they have lived harmoniously with wildlife, nurturing and preserving them through traditional practices.
- Enacted in 2006, the FRA seeks to recognise and vest forest rights in forest-dwelling Scheduled Tribes and other traditional forest dwellers who have lived on such lands for generations but whose rights were never formally recorded.
- The Act and the Rules enunciate the process of submitting claims, recognition of individual and community forest rights, including rights over forest resources, evidence that can be submitted for claims, among others provisions.
- The petitioner has raised questions over legal validity of certain provisions of the 2012 Rules in the IA, including how ‘community rights’ are defined, disposal of minor forest produce, vesting of rights to communities other than ST’s, and pushing for use of technology to verify forest title claims.
- The Centre has countered the charge that allowing forest right title holders to meet livelihood needs, including through sale of surplus produce, was leading to “commercial” and “large scale” extraction of minor forest produce.
- Non-timber forest produce including bamboo, brush wood, cocoons, honey, wax, lac, tendu or kendu leaves are included in the definition of minor forest produce.
- About 100 million tribals and other forest dwellers directly depend on minor forest produce for their subsistence and livelihood and including indirect dependence, the number is higher.



- On the petitioner's claim that the term 'community' is undefined, leading to misuse by those who are ineligible to exercise forest rights, the Centre said that the Act was clear on what constitutes a community. It pointed out that a claimant of forest rights can be an individual, group of individuals, or community, under the law.
- It cited the 2013 Niyamgiri judgment that recognised the cultural, religious and community rights of the Dongria Kondh tribe over Niyamgiri Hills in Odisha, and reaffirmed that Gram Sabha has the final authority to decide on community rights or cultural affiliations.

Do You Know:

- According to the Ministry of Tribal Affairs, the Forest Rights Act (FRA), 2006 recognizes the rights of the forest dwelling tribal communities and other traditional forest dwellers to forest resources, on which these communities were dependent for a variety of needs, including livelihood, habitation and other socio-cultural needs.
- It recognizes the symbiotic relationship of the STs with the forests, reflected in their dependence on the forest as well as in their traditional wisdom regarding conservation of the forests.
- The Act further enjoins upon the Gram Sabha and rights holders the responsibility of conservation and protection of bio-diversity, wildlife, forests, adjoining catchment areas, water sources and other ecologically sensitive areas as well as to stop any destructive practices affecting these resources or cultural and natural heritage of the tribals.
- The Gram Sabha is also a highly empowered body under the Act, enabling the tribal population to have a decisive say in the determination of local policies and schemes impacting them.

'SANCTUARY' STATUS FOR FORESTS OF SARANDA: WHY THIS MATTERS, CASE BEFORE SC

A Supreme Court Bench headed by the Chief Justice of India (CJI) on October 10 ordered the Jharkhand government to give an undertaking to notify a new wildlife sanctuary in Saranda, home to one of the most verdant Sal forests in the country.

- The Supreme Court's verdict has put a spotlight on this forested habitat, which has seen illegal mining in the past, and is a biodiversity hotspot at the junction of south-west Jharkhand and Odisha.
- The Supreme Court directed the Jharkhand government to notify an area of 314 sq km as a wildlife sanctuary while hearing a plea, which sought compliance with a July 2022 judgment of the National Green Tribunal's eastern zone Bench. The plea before the NGT sought a declaration of an eco-sensitive zone in Saranda/Sasangada Sanctuary in West Singhbhum district.
- The petitioner had argued that the large forested area was already declared as a "game sanctuary" in 1968, in undivided Bihar. It was underlined before the NGT that under the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972, any sanctuary and national park declared by a state government under any Act, before the 1972 Act, shall be "deemed" as a sanctuary or national park.
- Even as the NGT did not find anything on record to show that the Saranda Forest Division was ever notified as a game sanctuary, it ordered the Jharkhand government to consider whether the area needed to be declared as a sanctuary.



- A Supreme Court Bench on November 20, 2024, took on record the NGT's directions and directed the Jharkhand government to come out with a positive response on the declaration of a sanctuary.
- The Hemant Soren government has argued in the Supreme Court that while it supports the declaration of the sanctuary, the rights of tribals and other forest dwellers must be protected, and has also pointed out high revenue from mineral extraction. The Saranda region accounts for 26% of the country's iron ore reserves.
- It argued that sanctuary notification risks criminalising subsistence activities, thereby violating provisions of the Forest Rights Act, Panchayats (Extension to the Scheduled Areas), 1996.
- Controversies around mining and the threat it poses to the rich biodiversity of Saranda are also not new. Under the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government, a commission of inquiry led by Justice M B Shah had probed illegal mining in Jharkhand.
- The Shah Commission had exposed that iron ore of an approximate value of 14,403 crores and manganese of Rs 138 crore were extracted illegally. As part of the action taken on Justice Shah Commission's recommendation, the Union Environment Ministry prepared a sustainable mining plan for iron mining in Saranda.

Do You Know:

- Saranda, meaning seven hundred hills, forest division in West Singhbhum district covers about 856 sq km, and 816 sq km is a reserved forest, and the rest is a protected forest. In its assessment of the biological and ecological significance of the Saranda landscape, the Wildlife Institute of India has underlined that the area is historically recognised for its rich biodiversity.
- It presently harbours elephants, four-horned antelope, and sloth bear, and is experiencing habitat degradation and fragmentation and is home to three elephant corridors, providing connectivity with other neighbouring forests.
- A reserve forest is given the highest level of protection under the Indian Forest Act, 1927, in which hunting, grazing, and logging are prohibited except when expressly permitted. Reserve forests are designated by state governments and are key to conserving and preserving habitats and wildlife.
- As per 1972 Wildlife Protection Act a Sanctuary is defined as: "The State Government may by notification declare any area to be a sanctuary if it considers that area is of adequate ecological, faunal, floral, geomorphological, natural, or zoological significance for the purpose of protecting propagating or developing wildlife or its environment".

GUDALUR'S VIOLET REVIVAL: THE KURINJI BLOOMS AGAIN

"What is special is that it has bloomed at Tamil Nadu's newly notified reserve forest in Gudalur, the Nilgiris," says Supriya Sahu, Additional Chief Secretary, Department of Environment, Climate Change and Forests. The kurinji is not just a rare flower but also an indicator of climate change. The flowering offers an excellent barometer of the grasslands. Where there are healthy grasslands, there is mass flowering, while disturbances lead to patchy flowering. "When you provide protection and conserve the area, kurinji will certainly bloom and will bring along with it a lot of wildlife," she adds.



Ms. Sahu says the Tamil Nadu government is on a mission to create new forest areas. “In the last four-and-a-half years, over 90 new forests have been notified in Tamil Nadu which is unprecedented. These are legacy projects because they have been notified under the Tamil Nadu Forest Act to increase the green cover of the State,” she says. “These flowers have a lot of meaning to the indigenous communities who know the timing of the bloom. It’s a fantastic sign of the biodiversity coming back to the area — something the indigenous communities can take pride in.”

One of the rarest flowers in the world, the neelakurinji (*Strobilanthes kunthiana*) blooms once every 12 years in the high-altitude grasslands of the Western Ghats. In Gudalur, the mass bloom is of another species of kurinji, *Strobilanthes sessilis*, which blooms once in eight years. Both are grassland species but isolated to different altitudes: neelakurinji occurs in grasslands of altitude above 1,300 metres, and *sessilis* in the lower altitudes.

“Kurinji blooms are fascinating,” says E. Kunhikrishnan, an expert on the Western Ghats, adding that there are as many as 60 species of these flowers that are endemic to the Western Ghats and they do not grow anywhere else in the world. “While the neelakurinji is the most famous and charismatic, there is karinkurinji that blooms annually and several others that bloom in the periodicity of four years, eight years, 10 years (over 20 species), and 12 years.”

The mass flowering often provides a feast for butterflies, honeybees and other insects. The purple flowers hold a large amount of nectar, which especially attract the eastern honeybee. N. Venkatesh Prabhu, District Forest Officer of Gudalur Gene Pool, a key biodiversity conservation site, says “Nadugani is a thriving biodiversity zone with over 100 species of trees endemic to the Western Ghats. Sightings of elephant herds and tigers are common. It is a haven for bird watchers. Hornbills are sighted in good numbers as well as butterfly congregations. Our botanist has documented the kurinji flowering of Nadugani forest cover, which is spread across 600 acres.”

According to V. Sundaresan, botanist at Gudalur Gene Pool, the kurinji blooms can be seen in purple, blue, white, or pink colours. “For every single colour, there will be 10 shades varying from dark to light. There are 33 varieties of kurinji in the Nilgiris,” he adds.

Mysterious flora

Naturalist A.K. Pradeep from Kottayam in Kerala, who has a neelakurinji named after him (*Strobilanthes pradeepiana*), calls it a deeply mysterious and enticing floral species. He has followed kurinji flowers all the way to Tapti in Gujarat where the Western Ghats taper and to Agasthya mountain ranges in Ponmudi, near Thiruvananthapuram, to photograph and document various species of kurinji. His study over two decades proved that of the 450 kurinji species the world over, 150 were in India. He says, “Endemism is the main characteristic of the kurinji. I have photographed the Munnar hills carpeted by the breathtaking kunthiana blooms. Mass blooming is indicative of a healthy grassland and a thriving wildlife.”

Mr. Pradeep recalls how in 2011, Udthagamandalam’s Doddabeta, where *Strobilanthes homotropa* (that flowers every 10 years) bloomed in thousands, was reduced to a couple of plants in the next season in 2021. “It needs favourable conditions for germination. Climate change, uncontrolled tourism, and growth of invasive species have an adverse impact. The species seen in one area cannot be found in another. This is precisely what makes the kurinji hills a storehouse of organic wealth,” Mr. Pradeep says. “In the Nilgiris, Kodaikanal and Munnar, we lost a major part of the grasslands because of the invasion of black wattle, a species we introduced from Australia,” says Professor Kunhikrishnan.



Kurinji plants flower only once in a lifetime, a phenomenon seen in certain bamboo species that flowers only once in 40 or 60 years. Once it flowers, its dateline with death is set. The next generation starts from the germination of the seeds. “The gregarious blooms, bring spurts of happiness, and vanish. It’s Nature’s mystery,” he says. Since the plant species is hugely dependent on microclimatic conditions, the blooming is an indicator of its habitat diversity and presence of alpine conditions for its survival. “The blooms help study the ecology, altitude, alpine climate at high elevations near the equator among others. The grasslands are unique, and a quick evolution is happening there. The plant’s species diversity indicates its ability to evolve and adapt. These pockets need preserved. Uncontrolled tourism has to be avoided,” says Professor Kunhikrishnan.

BEYOND THE DATA: CHALLENGES FOR ELEPHANT CONSERVATION IN INDIA

After over a year’s delay, the results of the Synchronous All India Elephant Estimation 2021-25 were released Tuesday (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. And while the exercise followed a different methodology compared to previous SAIEEs, its results reveal significant challenges faced by India’s national heritage animal.
- 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.
- As per official data, India accounts for the largest population, over 60%, of the endangered species. The largest mammal found in India’s forests, elephants have been counted every five years since the launch of Project Elephant in 1992.
- The latest estimation exercise was initiated in 2021-22. It was held simultaneously with the tiger count estimation for the very first time in order to harmonise estimation methods. The delay in results was due to additional sampling coverage in elephant occupied areas of Northeast, as the initial data was deemed limited compared to the distribution of elephants in the region.
- The results showed that the Western Ghats continues to be the home to the largest number of elephants, with 11,934 jumbos — more than half of India’s elephant population — found in this cluster.
- The North Eastern Hills and Brahmaputra floodplains hold an estimated 6,559 elephants, Shivalik Hills and Gangetic plains have 2,062 elephants, and Central India and Eastern Ghats 1,891 elephants.
- 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 of the largest sub-population in Western Ghats. It comprises the Mysuru Elephant Reserve, Nilgiri Elephant Reserve, Wayanad Elephant Reserve, Nilambur Elephant Reserve and Coimbatore Elephant Reserve.



- 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 government has, however, said in the report that the current estimate is not directly comparable to earlier figures due to the change in methodology and protocol differences across estimation cycles. The latest SAIEE employed a methodology used to count tigers since 2006; the government has termed the population estimate as a “new baseline.”
- That said, despite the variance in methodologies and the resultant change in estimates, elephants face some steep challenges in the form of habitat loss and degradation, and threats due to mining and the growing network of linear infrastructure such as railways, roadways, canals and power lines.

Counting could not be undertaken in areas such as the Andaman Islands (25 elephants in 2017), primarily due to a low budget.

Do You Know:

- Earlier elephant censuses relied on a mix of direct sightings, counts at waterholes, and dung-decay methods, where population density was inferred from how quickly dung was deposited and decayed. In recent rounds, this approach was refined by combining dung-decay data with sample block counts in 5 sq km areas, and then using extrapolation to estimate elephant numbers across larger landscapes.
- For SAIEE 2021–25, India’s forests were divided into 100 sq km cells, further subdivided into 25 sq km and 4 sq km grids, which is a design borrowed from the tiger estimation program used since 2006. Data on elephants and other species have been collected under this framework largely for mapping distribution and relative abundance.

WHY DO ELEPHANTS FACE A JUMBO CHALLENGE?

Why was the new methodology adopted?

The first elephant population estimation was conducted in 1929 across the forests of the United Province, comprising present-day Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand. Estimates till 1978 relied on the direct total count method, involving the averaging of figures obtained from three direct visual counts conducted at 10-day intervals at the forest beat level. The inception of Project Elephant in 1992 led to a shift in population estimation practices every five years, employing diverse methods, including total count, tracking-based total count, registration count, water hole count, sample count, transect count, and dung count. The choice of method varied across sites for elephant population monitoring, making comparison difficult. The Synchronised Elephant Census was conducted in 2005, 2010, and 2017, using total (direct) count, sample block count, line transect dung (indirect) count, and waterhole count. The limitations of this method led to the Synchronous All-India Elephant Estimation (SAIEE) method for 2021-25.

They said the SAIEE data would serve as the baseline for estimation using the method in future. SAIEE entailed dividing India into 100 sq. km cells and then into 4 sq. km grids, each uniquely coded so that subsequent inferences could be compared on the same spatial scale and extent. Enumerators surveyed 6,66,977 km on foot covering 1,88,030 trails and transects, and collected



21,056 elephant dung samples during the three-phase exercise. The focus of the first phase was on data collection with these components: carnivore and mega-herbivore sign encounters, ungulate (hoofed animals) abundance, vegetation status, human disturbance, and dung counts. Phase Two involved assessing habitat characteristics and anthropogenic impacts, such as vegetation cover, forest patch size, human footprint etc. Phase Three emphasised spatially explicit abundance estimation, with human impact and habitat characteristics factored in.

How have the landscapes fared?

The study was conducted across four elephant-bearing landscapes. The Western Ghats landscape encompassing Karnataka, Kerala, and Tamil Nadu accounted for 11,934 elephants, which is 53.17% of the all-India estimate. Karnataka led the chart with 6,013 elephants, followed by Tamil Nadu with 3,136 and Kerala with 2,785 elephants. The North Eastern Hills and Brahmaputra Flood Plains, comprising seven (minus Sikkim) northeastern States and northern West Bengal, offered the second-best habitat with 22.22% of India's elephants. Assam topped the table here with 4,159 elephants. The other two landscapes — Shivalik Hills and Gangetic Plains (Uttarakhand, Uttar Pradesh, and Bihar) and Central India and Eastern Ghats comprising seven States, including Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, Telangana, Odisha, and southern West Bengal — recorded 9.18% and 8.42% of the country's total elephants. Uttarakhand recorded the most elephants (1,792) in these two landscapes, followed by Odisha with 912.

What does the study portend?

The study points to rapid fragmentation of elephant landscapes due to expanding commercial plantations (coffee and tea), invasive plants, farmland fencing, human encroachment, mining, and developmental projects. This fragmentation has prompted elephants to venture into areas devoid of the animal for at least 200 years, resulting in conflicts with humans lacking cultural coexistence experience and posing a threat to elephant populations. A case in point is Andhra Pradesh to which herds migrated from three adjoining States. The first herd moved from the Hosur-Dharmapuri forests of Tamil Nadu to Kuppam and Palamaner Forest Divisions of Chittoor district in 1980. More elephants from Tamil Nadu and Bannerghatta in Karnataka migrated between 1983 and 1986. While Karnataka harbours the highest number of wild elephants in India, it is also one of the major hotspots for human-elephant conflict. For instance, the contiguous forests of Nagarhole, Bandipur, and BRT Hills face threats from frequent forest fires, development projects and plantations of acacia and eucalyptus. Similar issues have escalated human-elephant conflicts in Kerala. Tamil Nadu's most critical habitats are the Nilgiris and Coimbatore Forest Division, where conflicts have claimed 150 human and 170 elephant lives so far. Experts underscore the need to engage with communities for sensitisation campaigns in elephant-occupied areas and newly colonised places.

BLACKBUCKS, 'LOCALLY EXTINCT' FOR 50 YEARS, MAKE COMEBACK IN CHHATTISGARH SANCTUARY

In 2018, officials at Chhattisgarh's Barnawapara Wildlife Sanctuary embarked on an ambitious venture: to revive the blackbuck population 50 years after it had become "locally extinct". It was a gamble: the habitat loss, human encroachment and forest fragmentation that contributed to the animal's erasure from the state still existed, and officials were unsure if their efforts would pay off. They did – Barnawapara now boasts 190 blackbucks, and officials plan to replicate the conservation model across the state.



- Over the last five years, the Chhattisgarh government has successfully reintroduced the blackbuck – a graceful medium-sized antelope that inhabits open grasslands of India and Nepal – back into the state’s forests through its five-year reintroduction plan.
- Once found in Barnawapara in Balodabazar district, the blackbuck is listed among endangered species under Schedule I of the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972.
- As part of the 2021–2026 revival plan, the Chhattisgarh State Wildlife Board translocated 77 blackbucks – 50 from the National Zoological Park in New Delhi and 27 from the Kanan Pendari Zoological Garden, Bilaspur. The move paid off.
- According to the Raipur Forest Division’s Working Plan – a document outlining forest management activities – blackbucks were found in Balodabazar in the 1970s. But rampant poaching, infrastructure development and encroachment on grassland areas caused their population to crash, leading to their being declared “locally extinct” – that is, disappearing completely from Chhattisgarh.
- That changed after a meeting of the state wildlife board in 2018. Soon, the board brought in 19 males and 50 females into the sanctuary – first keeping the animals in enclosures for up to two years before releasing them into the wild.
- According to officials, the forest department has so far released 100 animals into the wild while 90 remain in enclosures and will eventually be released.
- It wasn’t without setbacks. Officials admit that the first two years were challenging, with eight blackbucks dying in a pneumonia outbreak.
- After this, the department took measures to steady the course. In the short term, it sand-layered the enclosure to keep it dry, improved drainage and waste disposal, and appointed an on-call veterinary doctor. In the long term, it formed a dedicated conservation team for habitat management, nutrition and monitoring.
- Following the success in Barnawapara, the forest department is now drawing up plans to reintroduce the animal in sanctuaries with open grasslands such as Gomardha Wildlife Sanctuary.

Do You Know:

- Blackbucks are found only in the Indian subcontinent. Males have corkscrew-shaped horns and black-to-dark brown coats, while females are fawn-coloured.
- The animals are mainly seen in three broad clusters across India-northern, southern, and eastern regions.
- It is listed under Schedule 1 of the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972. Hunting and poaching blackbucks is a non-bailable offence and can invite a jail term of up to six years. It is worshipped by the Bishnoi community.

WHEN A PARASITIC WASP SAVED SOUTH’S TAPIOCA CROPS

Two years after scientists from the National Bureau of Agricultural Insect Resources (NBAIR), under the Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR), released a tiny parasitic wasp into South India’s tapioca fields, the crop that once faced near devastation from an invasive pest is now



thriving again. Farmers in Tamil Nadu, Kerala, and Puducherry report that their tapioca harvests have returned to pre-outbreak levels. This marks a rare success in controlling a major agricultural pest without chemicals.

Cassava, better known as tapioca, is grown on about 1.73 lakh hectares in India, with Tamil Nadu and Kerala together contributing more than 90% of total production. Before the outbreak, yields averaged 35 tonnes per hectare, far above the global average of 10.76 tonnes, and India exported value-added tapioca products worth nearly ₹200 million annually, according to NBAIR officials.

However, the mealybug's arrival in Thrissur, Kerala, in April 2020 changed this landscape. By 2021, nearly 1.43 lakh hectares were infested, and some areas of Tamil Nadu saw yields collapse to 5–12 tonnes per hectare. The pest fed on the plant sap, causing leaf curling, stunted growth, and poor tuber formation. With no effective local predators, the infestation escalated quickly and posed a serious economic threat to farmers, they said.

Chemical sprays were considered, but repeated pesticide use was costly, harmful to the environment, and unsustainable for small farmers. ICAR–NBAIR scientists instead turned to classical biological control, a strategy that introduces a natural enemy from the pest's native region to restore ecological balance. "Scientists identified a tiny parasitic wasp, *Anagyrus lopezi*, that specifically targets the cassava mealybug. The wasp lays its eggs inside the pest, and the developing larvae consumes it from within, naturally reducing mealybug numbers without harming other crops," S.N. Sushil, Director, ICAR-NBAIR said.

The institute imported a shipment from the International Institute of Tropical Agriculture, West Africa.

ICAR–NBAIR set up three satellite mass-production centres, distributed over 200,000 parasitoids, and conducted 25 awareness programmes and multiple training sessions. By 2023–24, they had achieved remarkable results. Across the previously infested 1.43 lakh hectares, the mealybug is now under natural control and has eliminated the need for chemical sprays.

ARE HORSES NATIVE TO INDIA?

Many people are arguing that horses are native to India and were domesticated here in pre-historic times. They argue that cave paintings of horses in Bhimbetka prove that horses existed in India even before the Harappan period (2500-2000 BC). But this is simply not true.

The horse species *Equus namadicus* is an extinct equine native to the Indian subcontinent that disappeared by the Holocene epoch, around 11,700 years ago. But this is not depicted in artworks. Only fossils have been found in the Narmada valley.

Bhimbetka is located on the Vindhya hills near Bhopal. It is a UNESCO World Heritage Site that preserves some of the earliest traces of human imagination. Spread across seven hills and comprising more than 700 rock shelters, these caves are not just prehistoric dwellings but also canvases where early humans left behind engravings and paintings.

First recognised for their prehistoric significance in 1957 by archaeologist V. S. Wakankar, Bhimbetka has since become central to our understanding of human evolution and cultural history in South Asia.



What petroglyphs of Bhimbetka say

What makes Bhimbetka truly remarkable are its petroglyphs – engravings of cupules (cup-shaped depressions) and linear grooves carved into stone. Some experts, especially Robert Bednarik, suggest these could date back as far as 700,000 years, perhaps even before Homo sapiens walked the earth.

In the famed Auditorium Cave, with its cathedral-like grandeur, these engravings appear beneath Acheulean tool layers, indicating that they were created by earlier hominins. If so, Bhimbetka, along with Daraki-Chattan in Madhya Pradesh, may hold the title of the world's oldest known rock art.

The popular image of Bhimbetka, however, comes from its wall paintings of hunts, dancers, and riders. Some reports claim they are 30,000 years old, but scholars caution against exaggeration. Unlike the engravings, the paintings lack reliable scientific dating. People have painted over earlier works making dating difficult.

Most experts now agree that the majority belong to the Mesolithic and later Holocene periods (around 10,000 years ago onwards), with many extending into historic times. There is clear evidence of artworks of the Stone Age (hunting and foraging) and later Copper (Chalcolithic Age), when farming and herding began.

Horses in India came with the Vedic people

There are scenes depicting men riding horses or elephants. These cannot predate the arrival of those animals in Indian society. The horse was domesticated around 2200 BC on the Eurasian steppe. Evidence of horses in India appears only from the Megalithic period, around 1000 BC. They came with the Vedic people.

Rig Veda, dated to 1500 BC, contains the earliest horse poetry in the world. There were no horses in any civilization prior to 1500 BC. It reached Egypt, Greece and China around this time. The earliest uncontroversial evidence of horse remains on the Indian subcontinent dates to the early Swat culture (around 1600 BC), long after Harappan cities ceased to exist.

Chariot riding came first, as horses breeds domesticated early were too small for riding. Horse riding came later. Horse riders appeared worldwide only after 700 BC. Not earlier. Thus, the horse paintings at Bhimbetka (chariot-riders and horse-riders) are at best 2500 years old.

Horses are difficult to breed in India's monsoon climate. Horse breeding began in Maharashtra (Bhimthadi horse), Gujarat (Kathiawar horse) and Rajasthan (Marwari horse) only after 1200 AD, not before.

Bhimbetka, a window into art and life over millennia

Similarly, elephants – depicted with ropes on Indus seals around 2500 BC – were captured but never truly domesticated, since no selective breeding programmes ever reshaped their biology. The earliest reference to domestic elephants comes from Vedic ritual manuals (the Brahmana) dated to 800 BC.

The rock shelters themselves were perfect homes for humans. Abundant spring water, game animals like deer and boar, and natural protection made Bhimbetka a thriving settlement for hundreds of thousands of years.



Excavations have yielded Acheulean hand axes, cleavers, and hammerstones, proving continuous occupation from the Paleolithic through the Mesolithic. Even the Toba super-eruption of 74,000 years ago, once thought catastrophic for humanity, did not wipe out life here — stone tool traditions carried on uninterrupted.

The name “Bhimbetka” connects the site where Bhima of the Mahabharata met (bhet) Hanuman. But its true legacy is deeper, belonging to prehistoric humanity itself. The site captures the entire arc – from early hominin engravings possibly older than 500,000 years, to Mesolithic hunts, to historic battle scenes with horses and elephants. It tells us that art did not arrive suddenly with modern humans; it evolved gradually, layered over millennia, reflecting shifting economies, technologies, and rituals.

WITH 2030 COMMONWEALTH GAMES, INDIA’S CHANCE TO BE A SPORTING DESTINATION

Twenty years after the controversy-ridden Delhi Games, India is set to host the Commonwealth Games again in 2030. They might be the Games that few want, going by the troubled 2022 and 2026 editions and fairly muted response for 2030. But for India, hosting the Commonwealth Games will still be beneficial. On Wednesday, the Commonwealth Sport Executive Board recommended Ahmedabad as a “proposed host” ahead of the Nigerian capital Abuja, the only other city in contention. A formal nod is expected on November 26 during the Commonwealth Sports’ General Assembly.

Purely from a sporting point of view, hosting the CWG can provide a boost to the ecosystem at a time when the performance of Indian athletes across sports is stagnating. Back in 2010, India experienced the “host nation bump” wherein the government’s spending on buying top-quality equipment, hiring reputed foreign experts and sending the teams abroad to train and compete resulted in the best-ever performance at the CWG. India won 101 medals in 2010 and the residual impact of it was seen at the 2012 London Olympics, where India won six medals, the most in a single edition at the time. The Delhi CWG did more — they were a shot in the arm for many Olympic sports that never got such attention and brought to light the heartwarming stories of Indian athletes, such as the Phogats in wrestling, Krishna Poonia in athletics and gymnast Ashish Kumar.

India could not sustain that momentum beyond 2012. And all that remained in the name of the 2010 CWG legacy were countless court cases and investigations that dragged on for years. India can ill-afford a similar mess. The country with aspirations to host the Olympics in 2036 will be judged as much — if not more — on its organisational abilities as for its sporting achievements. The 2030 CWG will give India a chance to rebuild its image and be the sporting destination it so desperately wants to be. But for that, India must learn, not forget, lessons from 2010.

SHORT NEWS

SEVILLA FORUM ON DEBT

— A new global platform to confront mounting debt challenges – the Sevilla Forum on Debt was launched on October 22, 2025, at the 16th United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD16) in Geneva.



— The Forum, a Spanish-led initiative supported by UNCTAD and the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA), aims to serve as an open and inclusive space for dialogue and action on sovereign debt reform.

— The Forum marks one of the first tangible outcomes of the Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development (FfD4) held from 30 June – 3 July in Seville, Spain.

— Financing for development (FfD) is an ongoing process to align financial flows and policies with economic, social, and environmental priorities.

— Many countries face escalating debt burdens, declining investments, decreasing international aid, and increasing trade barriers. The Conference is seen as an opportunity to close the staggering \$4 trillion annual financing gap, promoting development, bringing millions of people out of poverty, and helping achieve the UN's Sustainable Development Goals, which are currently lagging.

UNITED NATIONS CONFERENCE ON TRADE AND DEVELOPMENT (UNCTAD16)

— The 16th session of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD16) took place from 20 to 23 October 2025 at the Palais des Nations in Geneva.

— The theme of the UNCTAD16 was “Shaping the future: Driving economic transformation for equitable, inclusive and sustainable development”.

— UNCTAD, a permanent organ of the United Nations (UN) General Assembly, was established in 1964 to promote trade, investment, and development in developing countries.

— It is headquartered in Geneva, Switzerland, with approximately 190 members.

NEW MEMBER TO ASEAN

— East Timor was added as the newest member to the 10-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) on October 26.

— East Timor, also known as Timor-Leste, had long attempted to join ASEAN, given the organisation's significance in maintaining economic, political and security coordination in the region.

— With a population of 1.4 million, East Timor is located in the Pacific Ocean to the north of Australia. It constitutes the eastern side of a larger island, while most of the western side is under Indonesian control.

— Current President Jose Ramos-Horta, 75, won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1996. He was jointly awarded with Catholic priest and fellow East Timorese Carlos Filipe Ximenes Belo, “for their work towards a just and peaceful solution to the conflict in East Timor”.

— It also marked ASEAN's first expansion in years, after Cambodia last joined it in 1999.

— Members of ASEAN: Indonesia, Thailand, Singapore, Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, Myanmar, Cambodia, East Timor, Brunei and Laos.



— The 47th ASEAN Summit is happening in Kuala Lumpur in Malaysia under the theme, “Inclusivity and Sustainability”.

KAFALA SYSTEM

— Recently, Saudi Arabia has decided to replace the Kafala System with a contractual model, giving migrant workers more rights and freedom to work in the kingdom.

— The Kafala System refers to a binding contract between migrant workers and their local sponsor, under which they can only work for the specific employer throughout the period of their residence in the country.

— Under the Kafala System, the employer, who is also the sponsor of the migrant workers, had an undue legal advantage over them as they were not allowed to switch jobs without the Kafala’s consent.

— Due to its exploitative nature, especially on migrant workers who come to the Middle East for jobs, including domestic work, construction, etc, critics have often called it modern-day slavery.

— In 2009, Bahrain became the first country in the Middle East to abolish the Kafala system, while the UAE diluted its Kafala system in 2015, allowing migrant workers whose contracts have expired to obtain a new permit and remain in the country on a 6-month job seeker visa.

— Gulf Cooperation Council countries that still have the strict Kafala system in place are Kuwait, Qatar, and Oman.

STATE OF CLIMATE ACTION REPORT

— Ahead of COP30, the State of Climate Action Report 2025 was published by **Change Lab**, as a joint effort of the Bezos Earth Fund, Climate Analytics, the Climate High-Level Champions, ClimateWorks Foundation and World Resources Institute.

— According to the report, not a single one of the 45 indicators assessed is on track to meet the 2030 targets needed to achieve the Paris Agreement of limiting global warming to 1.5°C by the end of this decade.

— The report highlighted the key areas where acceleration is needed. The world needs to phase out coal more than ten times faster — equivalent to retiring nearly 360 average-sized coal-fired power plants each year and halting all projects in the pipeline.

— There is a need to reduce deforestation nine times faster. The current levels are far too high — roughly equivalent to permanently losing nearly 22 football (soccer) fields of forest every minute in 2024.

GLOBAL FOREST RESOURCES ASSESSMENT (GFRA) 2025

— India has climbed to the ninth spot globally in total forest area and retained its third rank in annual forest area gain, according to the Global Forest Resources Assessment (GFRA) 2025, released by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations in Bali.



— India accounts for 2% of the world’s forest areas, with a total of 72.74 million hectares, placing it just behind Indonesia.

— The world’s total forest area stands at 4.14 billion hectares, covering 32 per cent of the planet’s land. More than half (54 per cent) of this is concentrated in just five countries i.e. Russia, Brazil, Canada, the United States and China.

— According to the report, seven countries and areas – the Falkland Islands (Malvinas), Gibraltar, Holy See, Monaco, Nauru, Svalbard and Jan Mayen Islands, and Tokelau – reported having no forest at all.

PLEASE MIND THE GAP

A recent newspaper report (IE, October 22,) mentions that the government is considering a scheme to attract “Indian-origin star faculty” in STEM areas to come and work in Indian institutions. The idea is to capitalise on the Donald Trump administration’s recent policies of squeezing higher education and research in the US, and strengthen the research ecosystem in our country.

The idea of harnessing NRI talent is not a new one — previous schemes offered them short-term positions for collaborative research.

On the face of it, the scheme sounds like a win-win for all. The researchers will get to work in a relatively benign environment, be closer to their roots, and possibly feel a sense of pride in contributing to the motherland while we would gain from their experience and competence. However, as they say, the devil is in the details.

PM-SHRI

— The CPI(M)-led Left Democratic Front (LDF) government in Kerala has agreed to implement the PM-SHRI scheme. This has drawn fire not only from the opposition Congress, but also from within the LDF.

— The Centre’s PM Schools for Rising India (PM-SHRI) scheme was approved in 2022. It seeks to develop 14,500 schools to “showcase” aspects of the NEP 2020. These schools are to be “exemplars” for other schools in their region.

— The scheme is for existing elementary, secondary, and senior secondary schools run by the central government and state and local governments across the country.

JAIMEX-25

— Indian Naval Ship (INS) Sahyadri participated in the Sea phase of JAIMEX-25 (Japan India Maritime Exercise) from 16 to 18 Oct 2025 and made a port call at Yokosuka, Japan, on 21 Oct 2025 for the Harbour phase.

— JAIMEX, earlier known as JIMEX, has been conducted since 2012. It comprised of complex tactical drills in all dimensions of Naval warfare to enhance interoperability between two key maritime forces in the Indo-Pacific.



380 INFANTRY BATTALIONS EQUIPPED WITH 'ASHNEY' DRONE PLATOONS

Three hundred eighty infantry battalions of the Indian Army have been equipped with drone platoons while elite commando units are being raised as part of a modernisation drive to bolster the force's combat capabilities along the northern and western frontiers.

The Army is also procuring 4.25 lakh battle carbines at a cost of Rs 2,770 crore as part of the infantry modernisation plan, he told reporters.

The armed drones will include Kamikaze drones and precision ammunition dropping un-manned aerial vehicles, he said, explaining how the Army is initiating measures to boost the combat capabilities of the infantry battalions.

TRISHUL JOINT EXERCISE

— The Pune headquartered Southern Command of the Indian Army undertakes a Joint Exercise 'Trishul' with the Navy and Air Force, with offensive manoeuvres in the creek and desert sectors, and amphibious operations off the Saurashtra coast.

— The exercise comprises joint multi-domain operational exercises encompassing Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR), Electronic Warfare (EW), and Cyber capabilities.

— In the initial days, they conducted two critical drills — Agni Drishti and the spectrum dominance exercise Trinetra.

— The network-centric warfare drill Agni Drishti aimed at integrating land, air, space, and unmanned Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR) assets.

— Exercise Trinetra focused on electromagnetic spectrum operations and counter-unmanned aerial system kill-chains.

— The concept of spectrum dominance refers to the ability to control the electromagnetic spectrum for communications, surveillance, and combat advantage, while denying the same to the enemy.

ON ARMY TABLE: PROPOSAL TO RAISE AGNIVEER RETENTION RATE FROM 25% TO 75%

A proposal to raise the Agniveer retention rate from the current 25 per cent to up to 75 per cent, along with measures to enhance jointness among the three services and review the implementation of Mission Sudarshan Chakra, are likely to be among the key issues on the agenda at the Army Commanders Conference in Jaisalmer starting Thursday, The Indian Express has learnt. This will be the first Army Commanders Conference since Operation Sindoor in May. The conference serves as a platform for the Army's senior leadership to review the overall security situation and deliberate on key operational priorities to address emerging challenges.

MINIMUM UNEMPLOYMENT PERIOD FOR PREMATURE PF SETTLEMENT HIKED

The Employees' Provident Fund Organisation (EPFO) has increased the time period for availing premature final settlement of provident fund during unemployment as well as final settlement from the existing two months to 12 months.



The minimum time period for final pension withdrawal has also been increased from two months to 36 month.

These changes — along with a relaxation in withdrawal norms for education, illness, housing and special circumstances — are expected to come into effect in the next 1-2 months, a government official said on Tuesday.

The changes in the minimum period for withdrawal only affect 75 per cent of the PF contribution, as new provisions require members to maintain a minimum of 25 per cent of the contribution at all times. The move is aimed at boosting existing pension corpus levels that tend to get depleted due to complete withdrawals only after two months of unemployment.

GANGOTRI, KEDARNATH AND YAMUNOTRI CLOSE FOR WINTER AS CHAR DHAM SEASON WINDS DOWN

With three of the four Chota Char Dham pilgrimage centres closing for winter, Uttarakhand's biggest religious tourism run this year has neared its end.

The state government has been promoting the winter char dham circuit at the seats of these presiding deities, where they are carried down to a lower altitude for six months.

The idols were taken from the winter seats and brought to these shrines. Mukhba in Uttarkashi is the winter seat of Gangotri Dham; Kharsali, also in Uttarkashi, is the winter seat of Yamunotri Dham; Kedarnath's winter abode is the Omkareshwar temple in Rudraprayag's Ukhimath; and Badrinath's is at Pandukeshwar in Chamoli.

GURU CHARAN YATRA

— Prime Minister Narendra Modi urged people to have darshan of the sacred 'Jore Sahib' during the Guru Charan Yatra, from New Delhi to Bihar's Patna Sahib Gurudwara, which commenced on October 23.

— The Jore Sahib, meaning holy or sacred shoes, are a pair of footwear belonging to Guru Gobind Singh, the last of the ten Sikh Gurus, and his wife Mata Sahib Kaur. It is considered a sacred relic as it is revered as the personal belongings once worn by the Sikh spiritual leaders.

— The pair of footwear, measuring 11" by 3½" for the right foot of the 'Dasam Pita', or Tenth Father, and 9" by 3" for the left foot of Mata Sahib Kaur, are sacred relics deeply revered in Sikhism.

— Guru Gobind Singh, the last human Guru of the Sikhs, founded the Khalsa Panth, or the community of the pure. He declared the Guru Granth Sahib as the eternal successor.

NINGOL CHAKOUBA FESTIVAL

— The Manipur government organised the 46th 'Fish Fair-cum-Fish Crop Competition' at Hatta Kangjeibung, Imphal, which is a part of the Ningol Chakouba festival.



- Ningol Chakouba festival falls on the second lunar day of the Manipuri calendar's Hiyangei month (November). Ningol means 'married woman' and Chakouba means 'invitation for a feast'.
- On this day, married women are invited to their parents' home for a feast. The invitation comes from the son(s) of the parental family of the Ningols, generally a week in advance.
- The essence is to strengthen the bond of affection among the brothers and sisters, daughters and parents of a family.

BOMA TECHNIQUE

- Recently, the Madhya Pradesh forest department has used the helicopter-driven boma technique to capture the key antelope species from Shajapur district and shifted them to the safe zone of the Gandhi Sagar Wildlife Sanctuary to save the standing crops.
- The Boma capturing technique, which is popular in Africa, involves luring animals into an enclosure by chasing them through a funnel-like fencing. The funnel tapers into an animal selection-cum-loading chute, supported with grass mats and green net to make it opaque for animals, which are herded into a large vehicle for their transport to another location.

OPENAI LAUNCHED ATLAS

- OpenAI has announced its own web browser called Atlas. This followed after artificial intelligence firm Perplexity announced its AI browser Comet.
- The web browser is the gateway to everything – search, docs, shopping, banking, research, entertainment. Owning that interface means companies can control how users reach the web, and observe and optimise user intent directly.
- Whoever owns the interface, owns user data, which can be used as a monetisation channel, the way Google does with its advertisement business.

THALASSEMIA

- At least five thalassemia-affected minors have allegedly tested HIV positive in Jharkhand's West Singhbhum district after receiving blood transfusions at Sadar Hospital in Chaibasa, prompting a high-level probe by the state Health Department.
- Thalassemia is an inherited genetic hemoglobinopathy, a group of disorders that lead to defective production of haemoglobin synthesis in the body. This results in low production of red blood cells and a lack of oxygenated blood supply to the body parts. Thalassemia is mainly classified into two types: Alpha-thalassemia and Beta-thalassemia. The main difference between these two is the involvement of alpha chain and beta chain production (of haemoglobin) respectively and clinical presentation.

CENTRE PLANS PLAY ON SARDAR PATEL'S LIFE, NSD TO STAGE IT IN CITIES ACROSS THE COUNTRY

To mark Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel's 150th birth anniversary next week, the government has commissioned a play on his life story, which will be staged in Gujarat's Kevadia on October 30-31.



The play will showcase Sardar Patel's return to Ahmedabad as a barrister after studying law in London, and how a 1916 speech by Bal Gangadhar Tilak marked the turning point in Patel's political consciousness.

Patel was so moved by Tilak's message of Swaraj (self-rule) that it inspired him to erect a statue of Tilak, despite British opposition. His relationship with Mahatma Gandhi will also be highlighted; how in 1946, just ahead of Independence, Patel didn't flinch when asked by Gandhi to withdraw his candidacy for the Indian National Congress presidency in favour of Jawaharlal Nehru. Nehru then went on to become the country's first Prime Minister, Patel was the Deputy PM and Home Minister.

POLICE COMMEMORATION DAY

— The Police Commemoration Day is observed, every year on October 21, to remember the sacrifices of ten policemen who died in Chinese firing in 1959.

— So far since Independence, 34,418 Police personnel have sacrificed their lives for safeguarding the integrity of the nation and providing security to the people of this country.

SUNIL AMRITH

— Historian Sunil Amrith has been named the winner of the 2025 British Academy Book Prize for *The Burning Earth: An Environmental History of the Last 500 Years*, a panoramic account of how human ambition has transformed the planet, and how the planet, in turn, has shaped human history.

— Amrith has become the 13th winner of the British Academy's non-fiction book prize which has been awarded annually since 2013. It recognises work that "searches for truth and reason in difficult places, and shines a light on the connections and divisions that shape cultural identity worldwide."

SANAE TAKAICHI

— Sanae Takaichi has been elected Japan's prime minister by its parliament, making her the first woman to hold the office.

— Takaichi will replace Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba, ending a three-month political vacuum and wrangling since the Liberal Democratic Party's disastrous election loss in July.

— Takaichi is among the Japanese politicians who have stonewalled measures for women's advancement. Takaichi supports the imperial family's male-only succession and opposes same-sex marriage and allowing separate surnames for married couples.

PROFESSOR EKNATH VASANT CHITNIS

— Veteran space scientist Professor Eknath Vasant Chitnis passed away in Pune on Wednesday (22nd October). He was 100.

— Among the pioneers of the country's space programme, Chitnis had played a key role in establishing the Indian Space Research Organisation (Isro).



— His most significant contribution came through the Satellite Instructional Television Experiment (SITE) in 1975-76, which he directed. This project conducted educational programmes in 2,400 villages across six states using Nasa's ATS-6 satellite, and laid the groundwork for the digital revolution.

CHAMAN BORDER

— The Chaman border crossing between Pakistan and Afghanistan has partially reopened following a ceasefire between the two countries.

— The Chaman border was sealed when the Pakistan and Afghanistan conflict started, leaving nearly 400 containers carrying goods from the Karachi port stranded at the border.

ICELAND

— Iceland, one of the few places in the world to be free of mosquitoes, recorded its first sighting of the insect this month. Iceland is currently warming at four times the rate of the rest of the northern hemisphere. This has led to unprecedented glacier melt and frequent heatwaves.

— Mosquitoes, like all arthropods, are cold-blooded creatures and cannot regulate their body temperature in response to the surrounding environment. As a result, temperature is one of the biggest drivers of mosquito activity, and most of their species thrive in warmer weather.

— That is why global warming has enabled the insect to proliferate. Several studies have shown that with rising temperatures, mosquitoes can invade and thrive in habitats which once represented hostile environments.

— Only female mosquitoes are known to bite humans to get a "blood meal" — they extract proteins from our blood to produce their eggs. Higher temperatures result in a faster rate of blood meal digestion, making mosquitoes hungrier and leading to more bites.

— Note that male mosquitoes usually consume plant nectar, sweet plant secretions, and fruit juices.

BAGH-E-GUL DAWOOD

— Chief Minister Omar Abdullah has officially opened Kashmir's latest tourist spot – the Bagh-e-Gul Dawood– Kashmir's first exclusive chrysanthemum garden – at Cheshma Shahi.

— Cradled between the bluish Zabarwan mountains and the shimmering Dal Lake, the terraced Bagh-e-Gul Dawood – or Chrysanthemum Garden – stands next to Srinagar's other main attraction, the Tulip Garden.



BUSINESS AND ECONOMY

CONCERNED CARMAKERS RACE TO BEAT CHINA'S RARE EARTHS DEADLINE

Global automakers are scouring the globe for crucial rare earths ahead of looming Chinese export controls, with executives worried they could lead to parts shortages and plant closures. Rare earth magnets power motors in car parts such as side mirrors, speakers, oil pumps, windshield wipers and fuel leakage and braking sensors. They play an even bigger role in EVs.

While a U.S.-China deal diverted a supply threat, stock piles were depleted by similar restrictions earlier this year, while Beijing has also made it harder to get export licenses. China has since dramatically expanded export curbs, with companies facing global supply shortages.

As part of efforts to counter Chinese dominance, on Monday President Donald Trump and Australian Prime Minister Anthony signed a critical minerals agreement that includes U.S. investments in rare earth mining projects in Australia.

While there are plenty of rare earths available in countries like Sweden, they do not have the mines or refining capacity to make them usable. And for heavy rare earths, China controls 99.8% of global refining capacity, making alternative sources negligible.

Rare earths can be recycled from old cars, but that industry is in its infancy. Neutral, a Renault-backed company, currently recycles rare earths from 4,00,000 cars a year in France and has contracts with 15 brands in Europe.

But “the challenge is scaling up these activities,” said Neutral CEO Jean-Philippe Bahuaud.

Even if Chinese suppliers can fulfil fresh orders before the November 8 export controls take effect, the journey by sea to Europe can take 45 days and the threat of a rare earth bottleneck is among several headaches facing the auto industry.

China has also placed export restrictions on lithium-ion batteries and battery materials, triggering concerns over parts supplies for electric vehicles.

And last week, an intellectual-property dispute between China and the Netherlands involving little-known Dutch chip-maker Nexperia, sparked fears of factory closures because it supplies a large amount of chips car parts and components. Automakers also face the challenge of U.S. tariffs and are expected to detail the costs in their third-quarter earnings. But China's hold over the industry through its control of rare earths ranks among the thorniest problems. “They can shut us down in two months, the entire auto industry,” said Ryan Grimm, Toyota Motor's NorthAmerica group vice president of purchasing supplier development.

Automakers are taking steps to reduce reliance.

Some such as General Motors and major suppliers such as ZF and BorgWarner are developing EV motors with low-to-zero rare-earth content, while BMW and Renault have produced rare earth-free motors. Monumo has used AI and deep-tech simulation to help clients cut rare earth content in motors already in production, which CEO Dominic Vergine said has led to an average reduction of 24% among the U.K. firm's customers, which include several of the world's top 10 carmakers, he said.



Automakers are also pushing hard to improve rare earth-free motors for the next generation of EVs.

U.S.-AUSTRALIA RARE EARTHS DEAL WON'T SHAKE CHINA DOMINANCE

Donald Trump's backing of Australia's critical minerals will bring much-needed financial support to the industry, but experts say the U.S. President will have to wait longer to shift the supply chain away from China and weaken its market dominance.

In a wide-ranging agreement signed on Monday, U.S. and Australia committed a combined \$3 billion to mining and processing projects, and to a price floor for critical minerals, a step long sought by Western miners. The countries will also sign off on financing that includes offtake rights. The White House said U.S. investments into Australia would unlock deposits of critical minerals worth \$53 billion, without offering many details.

"In general in the rare earths industry nothing can happen quickly. I don't think we are going to be swamped with supply growth and there's no way we will be swamped in a year. We might have supply growth in 5-7 years," he said. China accounts for 90% of the world's refining capacity for rare earths which have crucial uses in sectors such as clean energy, defence and automobiles. In a note on Monday flagging risks of supply disruptions, Goldman Sachs noted China also controls 69% of global rare earth mining, and 98% of magnet manufacturing.

FROM IMF, A NOTE ON RESILIENCE IN FACE OF UNCERTAINTY

Kristalina Georgieva, the head of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), had a stark message for global policymakers, central bank governors, and global business leaders in the recent annual meetings of the IMF and the World Bank. She warned them to "buckle up" since "uncertainty is the new normal" and it is here to stay. "The average person today is much better off than, say, 30 years ago, but the averages conceal deep undercurrents of marginalisation, discontent, and hardship. Many people in many places — especially the young — are taking their disappointment to the streets... demanding better opportunity. All of this plays out against a backdrop of deep transformations: in geopolitics; in technology; in demographics..." she said in the curtain raiser to the latest World Economic Outlook (WEO). On the face of it, the global outlook shows little change. The global growth rate is projected to slow down marginally from 3.3 per cent in 2024 to 3.2 per cent in 2025 and to 3.1 per cent in 2026. Still, this outlook is an improvement relative to the July WEO Update, and cumulatively, it is just 0.2 percentage point below the forecasts made in last October. But the apparent inactivity in data masks fast-changing and complex undercurrents.

In April, as US President Donald Trump unleashed a wave of punitive tariffs, there was a genuine fear that the move could be the last straw that breaks the back of the global economy. Since 2020, economies have been buffeted from sharp and sudden growth shocks on the one hand and equally sharp and sudden waves of inflation on the other. But six months on, it appears that the world economy might have survived the worst of Trump's tariffs without succumbing to recessions. The IMF has pointed out the key role of astute fiscal and monetary policies — governments not retaliating with counter tariffs while central bankers continue to contain prices. Equally important has been the role of the private sector in ensuring that the economy adapts to the fast-changing conditions. This is best seen in how companies across the world front-loaded imports before tariffs spell havoc. Lastly, global markets have surged despite uncertainty as an Artificial Intelligence-led boom papers over other weaknesses.



The IMF has also sounded notes of caution. The nature of the global economy is such that the situation can turn adverse quickly. “Global resilience hasn’t been fully tested,” said Georgieva, pointing to the surge in the global demand for gold, a move that suggests growing nervousness. Similarly, the sentiment on the stock market can “turn on a dime” as the AI-boom is beginning to resemble the Dotcom bubble of the late ’90s, even as governments continue to see their debt to GDP rise. It is a matter of pride that the IMF singled out India for turning into a key engine of global growth, but under the circumstances, it is best not to let the guard down.

AMID SHIFTING TRADE WINDS, LIMITS TO US' CHINA TARIFF STRATEGY HOLD CUES FOR INDIA

After a steep decline in American equities following US President Donald Trump's threat to impose 100% tariffs, a familiar script seems to be playing out — China standing firm against threats, signalling its willingness to bear the tariff heat, and Trump moderating his aggressive rhetoric.

— Reacting to the tariff threats, the Chinese embassy in the US said: "China's position on the trade war is consistent: we do not want it, but we are not afraid of it."

— Trump's toning down may not guarantee the cessation of further flare-ups with China, just as in the case of India, where the US has maintained 50% tariffs on Indian goods despite Trump calling Prime Minister Narendra Modi his "friend" on multiple occasions.

— In the face of steep US demands, New Delhi has indicated a higher appetite for reforms. NITI Aayog CEO B V R Subrahmanyam said that after the GST rate rejig, new reforms could be introduced, and that India should focus on trading with Asian countries.

— With shifting trade winds, India is also dialling down tensions with China in a calibrated manner. India-China direct flights have restarted after five years, and ministries are weighing investments from China.

— The US has imposed tariffs on India and China to correct trade imbalances, but a World Trade Organization (WTO) report released last week suggested that not only are such imbalances not necessarily problematic, they are a feature of an open economy.

— The WTO's trade outlook report said that sectoral imbalances arise from specialisation: for instance, a country with a comparative advantage in services may run a surplus in services and a deficit in goods, as is the case of India's trade with the US.

— While India runs a surplus in goods exports with the US, Washington enjoys a trade surplus with India in services. Ignoring this, Trump has imposed 25% reciprocal tariffs and aggravated India's challenges by levying an additional 25% tariff for importing Russian oil.

— The WTO report added that while trade policy can, in principle, influence aggregate trade imbalances, macroeconomic factors tend to play a far more decisive role.

— While India is unfairly penalised by the US for importing Russian oil and running a goods trade surplus — a natural phenomenon, as per the WTO report — China seems to be better prepared to deal with American coercion.

— China's net exports to the US have declined, but its shipments to other parts of the world, particularly ASEAN countries, have surged following the US tariffs.



— Moreover, the recent curbs on critical minerals could be part of a well-thought-out plan. A report by Japan-based MUFG Research said: "Our best sense right now is that these export control measures by China are probably something the Chinese authorities were planning for a long time, given the significant comprehensiveness of the measures."

— As far as critical minerals are concerned, New Delhi too had begun taking steps to secure them, though the efforts may take years to bear fruit. The government last year announced the setting up of a National Critical Minerals Mission to secure critical mineral resources for India, both domestically and abroad.

Do You Know:

— NCMM aims to intensify the exploration of critical minerals within the country and in its offshore areas. It aims to create a fast-track regulatory approval process for critical mineral mining projects.

— The objective is to encourage Indian public sector enterprises and private sector companies to acquire critical mineral assets abroad and enhance trade with resource-rich countries. It also proposes development of stockpile of critical minerals within the country.

— The mission aims to strengthen India's critical minerals value chain by building a technological, regulatory, and financial ecosystem to ensure mineral availability from both domestic and foreign sources. The mission is set to boost access to raw materials used across strategic sectors, from clean energy and electronics to defence and agriculture.

— According to a report, published by the Institute for Energy Economics and Financial Analysis (IEEFA) in 2024, India's demand for critical minerals is expected to more than double by 2030, while domestic mining operations may take over a decade to start producing.

CURBS TIGHTEN TAP, LEAVE INDIA WITH HEADROOM TO TAPER OFF RUSSIA CRUDE

India's oil imports from Russia, its biggest supplier, may fall sharply following the imposition of sanctions by the US on Russian oil majors Rosneft and Lukoil, industry insiders and experts told The Indian Express on Thursday (October 23).

- While it is still too early to estimate the actual impact of the US sanctions, industry sources said that government-owned refiners are already evaluating compliance risks in a bid to ensure that whatever Russian oil they buy henceforth is not being sourced directly from Rosneft, Lukoil and their numerous arms.
- Private sector refining giant Reliance Industries (RIL), which alone accounts for around half of India's Russian oil imports and sources a bulk of its Russian oil purchases from Rosneft under term deal, could see a massive cut in its oil imports from Moscow.
- Sources indicated that the company would be looking to attune its Russian oil imports with the view the Indian government takes on the issue. So far this year, Russian oil has accounted for over 35 per cent of India's oil imports.
- This move by the Trump administration — it had so far not imposed direct sanctions on Russian oil majors even as it pressured New Delhi to cut oil imports from Moscow — is being seen as a major escalation in its bid to force Russia's hand into ending the war in Ukraine.



- The sanctions effectively mean that companies and financial institutions doing transactions with the sanctioned entities run the risk of attracting secondary sanctions from Washington. Historically, India has avoided oil imports from countries like Iran and Venezuela, whose oil was sanctioned by the US.
- Oil, Russia's biggest source of revenue, is a lever that the Trump administration believes it can use to force Moscow to end the war in Ukraine. New Delhi is the second-largest buyer of its oil after Beijing, and is in the midst of sensitive trade pact negotiations with Washington.
- It was clear that India did not want to compromise on its strategic autonomy and was unwilling to be dictated to by the US on whom it should be doing business with, particularly when it came to Russia, an old and key strategic partner.
- The sanctions now offer India far more headroom to quickly taper off Russian crude, which would have otherwise been difficult under the current circumstance despite the diminishing economic tradeoff.
- The discounts on Russian oil have contracted considerably from three years ago when India started lapping up Russian barrels, and the current oil price environment is also far more benign, which means that the loss of Russian barrels, while still a hit for Indian refiners, may not be too significant.
- On its part, the Indian government has consistently maintained that the country will buy oil from wherever it gets the best deal, as long as the oil is not under sanctions. There are no sanctions on Russian oil; it is only subject to a price cap imposed by the US and its allies that applies if Western shipping and insurance services are used for transporting the oil.
- When Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, Moscow's share in New Delhi's oil imports was less than 2 per cent. With much of the West snubbing Russian crude following the invasion, Russia began offering discounts on its oil to willing buyers.
- Indian refiners were quick to avail the opportunity, leading to Russia—earlier a peripheral supplier of oil to India—emerging as India's biggest source of crude with a commanding market share, displacing the traditional West Asian suppliers.
- The US and the EU's latest round of sanctions on Russia goes against Delhi's policy position on sanctions that have been imposed unilaterally and that impact India's economic interests and energy security.
- Politically, Delhi has always been opposed to unilateral sanctions, since it has been subjected to similar sanctions in the past — 1974 and 1998 when it tested nuclear weapons. Delhi has always said it abides by the sanctions imposed by the UNSC, and not country-specific unilateral sanctions.
- Russia has also adopted new ways for circumvention in response to sanctions, particularly those relating to its global trade in oil and gas. Russia has been exploiting international procurement networks and has made extensive use of a growing "shadow fleet" of tankers to transport Russian crude oil around the globe and/or circumvent the oil price cap instituted by the G7.



Do You Know:

- Under international law, secondary sanctions are viewed as coercive measures that penalise third states or their entities for maintaining relations with a sanctioned actor. Unlike primary sanctions, which regulate a state's own nationals and territory, secondary sanctions target external actors to influence their dealings with the primary target.
- They operate by altering access to the sanctioning state's market or financial system, creating indirect pressure on third parties to conform to the sanctioning state's policy objectives.

SWADESHI: THE IDEA, ITS ECONOMICS

As the government doubles down on its swadeshi push, Union Home Minister Amit Shah on Wednesday (October 8) became the latest member of the Union Cabinet to switch to the home-grown Zoho Mail.

- This came days after the Ministry of Education issued a circular titled 'Strengthening digital sovereignty under Swadeshi movement' which directed officials to use the "indigenous" Zoho Office Suite for official work to "empower India to lead with homegrown innovation, strengthen digital sovereignty, and secure our data for a self-reliant future".
- Most notably, in 2020-21, the government had embraced the Mohandas Pai-funded Koo, a microblogging platform, as an alternative to Twitter (now X).
- The genesis of swadeshi as an idea can be traced to two interrelated criticisms of British rule: one, that colonialism was ruinous for India economically, and two, that it was pernicious to the nation's culture and spiritual ethos.
- The former criticism was articulated in various forms from the early- to mid-19th century onwards, including in rebel proclamations in 1857. But its most sophisticated conceptions were put forth in the late-19th, early 20th centuries by Dadabhai Naoroji (1825-1917) and Romesh Chunder Dutt (1848-1909) who argued that "on the whole, British rule was economically injurious to India and that perhaps it was designedly so". (Bipan Chandra, *The rise and growth of economic nationalism in India*, 1966).
- Dutt's thesis on deindustrialisation — that the British destroyed traditional handicrafts of India, created a "helpless dependence" on agriculture, which in turn was ruined by excessive taxes — was in vogue, especially in Left intellectual circles, well into the 1970s-80s.
- Naoroji's "drain of wealth" theory, on the other hand, showed how the Indian taxpayer was effectively paying the British for his own servitude.
- In a series of speeches in Poona (now Pune) in 1872, Mahadev Govind Ranade (1842-1901) spoke about "preferring the goods produced in one's own country even though they may prove to be dearer or less satisfactory than finer foreign products". (Chandra 1966).
- The idea that the moral, patriotic obligation toward swadeshi overrode economic logic has been a central feature of the idea's enduring political resonance — and its failures — over the years.



- The greatest champion of swadeshi as a moral force was Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948), who, in a 1916 speech, described it as “that spirit in us which restricts us to the use and service of our immediate surroundings to the exclusion of the more remote”.
- This moral force operated across domains, from politics to religion to economics. Swadeshi, for Gandhi, was “the ‘law of laws’ ingrained in the basic nature of human being”, academic Siby K Joseph wrote in ‘Understanding Gandhi’s vision of Swadeshi’ in 2012.
- In economics, for instance, swadeshi would mean that one “should use only things that are produced by my immediate neighbours” (Joseph 2012). Gandhi’s argument was borne out of moral considerations.
- During the freedom struggle, the political deployment of swadeshi occurred in the form of boycotts of British-manufactured goods, and the concurrent push for indigenous manufacturing and enterprise.
- In 1896, Bal Gangadhar Tilak (1856-1920) organised public burnings of foreign cloth in the Bombay Presidency, as a response to newly-introduced excise duties on manufactured Indian cloth.
- Less than a decade later, the first “mass movement” of the freedom struggle, the so-called Swadeshi Movement which was triggered by Lord Curzon’s decision to Partition Bengal, borrowed heavily from Tilak’s methods.
- Beyond the rejection of foreign goods, swadeshi entailed embracing domestic industry. There was general consensus among Indian nationalists, including those on the Left, that industrialisation was necessary to uplift the country’s downtrodden masses.
- By the 1930s, as the economic historian Aashish Velkar wrote, the concept of swadeshi had become a fulcrum for making capitalist demands.
- Nitin Pai, director of The Takshashila Institution, wrote in his 2021 paper ‘A Brief Economic History of Swadeshi’ that while the “fear of economic imperialism” drove Jawaharlal Nehru’s India to adopt a mixed economy model with a large role for the public sector, the use of “import substitution as a policy tool...eventually became an end in itself”.
- The result: decades of protectionism with the stated goal of helping domestic industry find its feet. Economists have long argued that this protectionism, while allaying the insecurities of indigenous capitalists by shielding them from competition, was ultimately detrimental for the economy on the whole.
- It was only in the 1980s, as the Indian economy stagnated and amid a crippling balance of payments crisis, that the allure of swadeshi in the halls of power in New Delhi began to wane.
- As India opened up its economy after the landmark economic reforms of 1991, swadeshi took a backseat for a couple of decades. This was the high noon of globalisation around the world, the “end of history” as Francis Fukuyama had famously declared.
- But this hyperglobalisation, which upended old supply chains and industries, particularly in the West, while providing a ballast for countries in the Global South — China, India, Vietnam, among others — to grow rapidly, ended with the financial crisis of 2008.



- Since then, economic stagnation in developed countries, and growing popular resentment against offshoring and immigration, has created a new political and economic landscape for swadeshi.
- Although the BJP has frequently also championed easing FDI norms, since the beginning of Narendra Modi's second term, the government has renewed its swadeshi push, in terms of both rhetoric and substance.
- The Make in India initiative and the emphasis on creating an Aatmanirbhar Bharat (Self-reliant India) echo the concerns and prescriptions that advocates of swadeshi have had since the 19th century — but in context of the supply chain disruptions caused by the Covid-19 pandemic and India's difficult relationship with China.
- But as past experiences show, an uncritical, dogmatic embracing of swadeshi may in the end be counterproductive. As Pai wrote, "the compass of economic nationalism is better pointed to samarthya (capability) rather than swadeshi."

POST-DIWALI FARM CHALLENGE

Retail food inflation has been in negative territory for the last four consecutive months ending September 2025. That's against an average 8.5% annual rise in the consumer food price index during the eighteen months from July 2023 to December 2024.

- The softening has to do with the easing of supply pressures – thanks to back-to-back good monsoons, after an El Niño-induced prolonged period of dry weather and above-normal temperatures in 2023-24 – and overall weak price sentiment in agricultural commodities.
- The supply turnaround is particularly evident in cereals. The real glut, however, is in rice, where government agencies are not only holding an unprecedented level of stocks; these are also 4.4 times what is necessary to meet the needs of the public distribution system plus a strategic reserve for emergencies.
- The oversupply is set to intensify as the harvesting and marketing of the new crop, which has started from October, picks up post Diwali. Indian farmers have planted a record 44.2 million hectares (mh) area under rice this kharif (monsoon) season, up from last year's 43.6 mh.
- The jump has been even more, from 8.4 mh to 9.5 mh, for maize. Not for nothing that the starchy feed grain is currently wholesaling in states such as Karnataka and Haryana at around Rs 2,000-2,100 per quintal, compared to Rs 2,200-Rs 2,300 a year ago and the government's minimum support price of Rs 2,400.
- Through the second half of 2023 and the whole of 2024, the government struggled to contain food inflation that was eating into the purchasing power of households. With that battle decisively won, the shoe is on the other foot. It's farmers, not consumers, that are at the receiving end now.
- Almost all crops – whether maize, soyabean and cotton or bajra (pearl millet), arhar (pigeon pea) and moong (green gram) – are selling way below their MSPs. The sentiment is overwhelmingly bearish, even as the benefits of recharged groundwater aquifers and filled reservoirs from the surplus monsoon rains are likely to extend to the ensuing rabi (winter-spring) cropping season as well.



- The coming weeks and months could see a shift in the government's policy focus, from an excessively pro-consumer approach to one that is more pro-farmer. These may take the form of restoring import duties on cotton and yellow/white peas, besides stepping up MSP procurement of pulses and oilseeds under its price support scheme.

Do You Know:

- Minimum support price (MSP) is the price at which the government is supposed to procure/buy that crop from farmers if the market price falls below it. MSPs provide a floor for market prices and ensure that farmers receive a certain "minimum" remuneration so that their costs of cultivation (and some profit) can be recovered.
- MSP was introduced in the mid-sixties when India was in food deficit. The government was keen to boost domestic production through green revolution technologies but realised farmers wouldn't plant input-intensive high yielding wheat or paddy varieties unless guaranteed a minimum price. MSP was first fixed for wheat in 1966-67 at Rs. 54 per quintal.
- The MSPs are announced by the Union government on the recommendations of the Commission for Agricultural Costs and Prices.
- The Commission for Agricultural Costs & Prices recommends MSPs for 22 mandated crops and fair and remunerative price (FRP) for sugarcane. The Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs (CCEA) of the Union government takes a final decision on the level of MSPs.
- Crops covered under MSP:
 - o 7 types of cereals (paddy, wheat, maize, bajra, jowar, ragi and barley),
 - o 5 types of pulses (chana, arhar/tur, urad, moong and masur),
 - o 7 oilseeds (rapeseed-mustard, groundnut, soyabean, sunflower, sesamum, safflower, nigerseed),
 - o 4 commercial crops (cotton, sugarcane, copra, raw jute)

CONSEQUENCES OF RISING PUBLIC DEBT FOR GOVT, TAXPAYERS

According to the International Monetary Fund's latest Fiscal Monitor report, global public debt is projected to rise above 100 per cent of GDP by 2029.

- Simply, when governments borrow to cover the gap between what they spend and what they raise in revenues, it is called a deficit. Each year's deficit adds to the

mountain of public debt, or the gross debt of the general government (that is, not just the central government but also the state governments). Typically, this debt is expressed as a percentage of a country's total GDP.

- The IMF finds that at the current rate, global public debt would reach its highest level since 1948. This year is significant because it marks a time when countries across the world, especially in Europe, were borrowing heavily to rebuild their economies after the massive destruction in the wake of the Second World War.



- Higher public debt has many adverse consequences. For one, it increases the interest payments that governments (read taxpayers) have to make. That, in turn, forces governments to curtail their spending while raising taxes.
- Overall, a higher debt-to-GDP ratio shows that governments are inadequately prepared to deal with the next economic shock, which may require them to spend more or tax less.
- The so-called Advanced Economies are the most stretched in terms of public debt. For instance, Japan's public debt is 230% of its GDP. What's worse, across the board, these numbers are likely to get worse by 2030.
- The situation is slightly better when one looks at the data from the so-called Emerging Economies as well as Low-income Developing Countries. However, in most cases, the debt levels are pegged to rise in the coming year.
- The size of the debt is going up for a variety of reasons, ranging from increasing demands for government expenditure on defence, climate change-related activities, dealing with disruptive technologies like AI and their impact on jobs, and the need for governments to bolster social safety nets, not to mention calls for higher wages and higher pensions.
- More often than not, governments simply roll over their debt. In other words, they pay back their old debt by raising new debt. But there was a crucial shift in the interest rate regime over the past five years.
- While interest rates were very close to zero in the developed countries between the Global Financial Crisis of 2008-09 and the Covid-19 pandemic, they have gone up sharply since then.
- That's because central banks across the board have raised interest rates to contain inflation. The net result is that governments have had to borrow at higher interest rates, thus putting a greater burden on their finances

Do You Know:

- A recent CAG report on state finances finds that whenever fiscal revenues fall short, Indian states tend to bridge the deficit gap with enhanced loans and utilised bonds, steadily adding to their public debt.
- India's fiscal map reveals a stark contrast between its larger and smaller states. At one end are the big states, defined by vast geographies and wide responsibilities.
- Maharashtra generated nearly 70 per cent of its receipts internally in 2022-23, signalling strong revenue mobilisation, while other states depend on more volatile sources. Kerala's lottery receipts approached Rs 12,000 crore. Economists warn that such tactics are like "paying rent by selling family heirlooms," highlighting the limits of one-off revenues.
- In 2022-23, Uttarakhand reported an own-tax share of 34.8 per cent of receipts while Arunachal managed only 9.4 per cent; most northeastern states remain below 20 per cent, confirming reliance on Union transfers.
- With narrow tax bases and high delivery costs, modest increases in borrowing can push the debt-to-GSDP ratios of smaller states to levels that would be unremarkable in larger states but alarming here.



THIS DIWALI BOOST, SIGNS OF REVIVAL IN CONSUMPTION SENTIMENT

Domestic two-wheeler sales grew 6.7 per cent year-on-year to a record 21.60 lakh units in September. Passenger vehicle sales also hit an all-time high of 3.72 lakh units for the month, even with a lower 4.4 per cent increase. Still more impressive was tractor sales that posted a whopping 45.4 per cent growth to over 1.46 lakh units. Seen together — alongside other indicators such as the value of UPI transactions that were annually up 20.6 per cent for the month — they suggest a revival of consumption sentiment. Some of that might, of course, have to do with the festival season's early onset. The Navratri period this time began on September 22 and Diwali is on October 20, whereas these fell on October 3 and October 31 last year. The true extent of revival — whether or not it is just a one-off phenomenon — will be known only post-Diwali when the festivities end.

But there are other significant factors too. The most obvious is the goods and services tax (GST) rate cuts — from 28 per cent to 18 per cent on small cars and two-wheelers, and from 12 per cent to 5 per cent on tractors — announced on September 3 and effective from September 22. Coming on top of the Union budget decision exempting individual earning up to Rs 12 lakh annually from paying any income tax, it has put more money in the hands of households. Their ability to spend has been further enhanced by consumer price inflation falling to a 99-month low of 1.5 per cent year-on-year in September and good monsoon rains, which should translate into higher rural incomes. The timing of the GST rate reductions — ahead of the main festival season and on the back of a bountiful monsoon — couldn't have been better. The Narendra Modi government is clearly betting on a household consumption expenditure recovery offsetting the impact of US President Donald Trump's prohibitive tariffs on India's exports.

This links up to the larger point about the economy's four growth engines: Household consumption, private investment, government spending and net exports. Out of the four, the second is the one that has been stalled the longest. Without investment, there would be no jobs and incomes that alone can sustain household consumption beyond the festival season. Government spending is constrained by the imperatives of fiscal consolidation and there are limits to how much more heavy-lifting the Centre or indebted states can do. The ongoing geopolitical disruptions have cast a cloud over export prospects too, at least in the short run. All the more reason why the focus of policy must be now on reviving the "animal spirits" of entrepreneurs. Their investing is key to ensuring durable consumption sentiment.

MAKHANANOMICS: THE POLITICS BEHIND GOVT'S BID TO BOOST BIHAR'S MAKHANA INDUSTRY

Speaking at a poll rally in Samastipur, Bihar, Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Friday (October 24) referred to the recently-inaugurated National Makhana Board as a "revolution".

- The state of Bihar contributes to roughly 90% of India's makhana (foxnut) production. In recent months, members of the ruling party, including the Prime Minister himself, have repeatedly spoken about the government's efforts to support the makhana industry.
- Makhana is the dried edible seed of the prickly water lily or gorgon plant (*Euryale ferox*), a species which grows in freshwater ponds across South and East Asia. The plant is known for its violet and white flowers, and massive, round and prickly leaves — often stretching more than a meter across.



- Most of the makhana grown in India comes from Bihar, where production is concentrated in the nine districts of northern and eastern Bihar — Darbhanga, Madhubani, Purnea, Katihar, Saharsa, Supoul, Araria, Kishanganj and Sitamarhi — which fall in the so-called Mithilanchal region. Of these, the first four districts mentioned contribute to 80% of Bihar’s makhana production.
- While makhana has been consumed, often in ritual settings, for centuries, of late it has gained popularity as a “superfood” due to its nutritional benefits — experts say that makhana is nutrient-dense and low-fat, making it an ideal “healthy snack”.
- This has prompted the government to make efforts to harness its commercial potential, including through concerted marketing campaigns and the creation of stronger industrial infrastructure and linkages. The establishment of the Makhana Board is a part of this push.
- The global makhana market was valued at \$43.56 million in 2023, and expected to touch the \$100 million-mark by 2033, according to the market research firm Spherical Insights.
- Despite being the largest producer, Bihar has not been able to harness makhana’s growing market. Indeed, the largest makhana exporters in India are Punjab and Assam; the former does not even grow its own makhana.
- Bihar neither has a developed food processing industry, nor required export infrastructure. Thus, Bihar ends up selling all its fox nuts as raw material to FPU (food processing units) outside the state at cheap prices.
- Low productivity is another major problem in makhana cultivation in Bihar. Currently, cultivating makhana is an extremely arduous and labour heavy process, which pushes up the overall input costs.
- Seeds are sown in standing water bodies and harvesting is carried out manually by diving to the bottom of the water body. Subsequent processing of makhana, from cleaning and sun drying the seeds to roasting and finally “popping”, is also all manual.
- Moreover, farmers have been slow to adopt high yield varieties of fox nut seeds developed by agricultural institutes, such as Swarna Vaidehi and Sabour Makhana-1. According to a 2020 ICAR paper, traditional farming practices have a production capacity of 1.7-1.9 tonnes per hectare, far lower than the 3-3.5 tonnes per hectare from the HYV seeds.
- Ahead of this year’s state Assembly polls, the makhana push is a part of the ruling coalition’s larger economic imagination for the state, especially at a time when unemployment and migration have emerged as key poll issues.
- With some 10 lakh families in Bihar involved in the cultivation and processing of makhana, supporting the industry can benefit millions in the electorate, especially those belonging to the impoverished Mallah community.
- The farming and harvesting of Makhana is almost entirely done by the Mallahs. Although accounting for only 2.6% of Bihar’s population, Mallahs are concentrated in the riverine belts of North Bihar, where they can command a voteshare of more than 6%.
- Last year, the Bihar government had asked for an MSP for makhana from the Centre. In 2022, ‘Mithila Makhana’ was conferred a Geographical Indication (GI) tag, a certification that signifies



that a product can only be grown in a particular geographical location, and as a result, has unique characteristics (like Darjeeling's tea or Mysore sandal soap).

Do You Know:

- Makhana (Gorgon Nut or Foxnut) is an aquatic crop and is mainly grown in tropical and subtropical regions. It is traditionally cultivated in stagnant water bodies such as ponds, land depressions, lakes, ditches, or wetlands with shallow water depths of up to 4-6 feet.
- For optimal growth and development, Makhana requires a temperature range of 20-35°C, relative humidity of 50-90%, and annual rainfall between 100-250 cm.

WHAT ARE THE NEW PF WITHDRAWAL GUIDELINES?

The story so far:

A meeting of the Central Board of Trustees (CBT) of the Employees Provident Fund Organisation (EPFO) held in Delhi on October 13 announced a number of measures for partial withdrawal of PF funds, which the government claimed was to enhance the "ease of living" of an EPFO subscriber.

What are the new provisions?

The CBT approved the merger of "13 complex provisions" for withdrawal into a single, streamlined rule under three categories — essential needs (illness, education, marriage), housing needs and special circumstances. Till now, a member could withdraw only the employee contribution to the PF and its interest ranging from 50-100%. Now, the member can withdraw from the employer contribution as well. The decision faced flak from Opposition parties, trade unions and even employers' organisations. Though employees can withdraw up to 100% of the eligible balance in the PF including employee and employer share during their service, a new provision has been made that 25% of the contributions in an account should be maintained as minimum balance at all times. The CBT also decided to change the conditions for availing premature final settlement. If a person is leaving the job, he/she cannot withdraw the full PF amount within two months as is the norm now. Now the person can withdraw the amount only after 12 months. The final pension can be withdrawn only after 36 months, from the present two months. "75% of the amount can be withdrawn immediately after leaving the job, and the full amount can be withdrawn after being unemployed for one year," the government said.

What is the government's argument?

The government said that frequent withdrawals earlier caused breaks in service, leading to rejection of many pension cases. It argues that at the time of final settlement, employees were left with very little money. "The above provisions will ensure continuity of the employee's service, a better final PF settlement amount, and financial security for the family," the government said. The government also claimed that it will help the member to enjoy the higher rate of interest offered by the EPFO along with compounding benefits to accumulate a high value retirement corpus. Earlier, withdrawal for marriage or house purchase was allowed only after 5-7 years and the government said now it can be done after just one year. "Withdrawal limits for education or illness have also been made more flexible. Additionally, in any special circumstances or emergencies, the full eligible amount can be withdrawn up to twice a year without any questions asked," it said.



What is the Opposition saying?

Opposition MPs Manickam Tagore and Saket Gokhale said in separate statements that the Centre is being cruel to pensioners and EPFO subscribers. “Pensioners and job-losers are being punished for needing their own savings...,” Mr. Tagore said on social media. Both MPs held that the new rules are not for the benefit of workers as the worker will have to wait to get access to his or her hard-earned savings. Mr. Gokhale called the new rule “draconian” and said persons who lose their jobs will not be able to meet their expenses for a full year when their PF withdrawal is blocked.

What is the position of trade unions?

The All-India Trade Union Congress General Secretary, Amarjeet Kaur, demanded scrapping of the rules. “Financial prudence in the face of privation is a rude joke played on the unemployed,” she said. She said 87% of the EPFO members have less than ₹1 lakh and 50% of them hold only less than ₹20,000, as per EPFO’s own data. “The low levels of financial stability are directly attributed to the low wages of majority members. This being the case, holding back 25% of the savings as minimum balance is nothing but preying on the weak,” she alleged. K.E. Raghunathan, former member of the CBT representing employers, said the new rules are deeply concerning and regressive. According to him, PF savings are not meant to be treated as recurring deposits for short-term liquidity. “They are structured to provide dignity and financial protection at the end of a worker’s career. By allowing repeated full withdrawals, we risk leaving millions with negligible retirement savings and no fallback when income ceases,” he said, adding that the decision is not empowerment— it is erosion. “The temptation to withdraw will rise, and the long-term consequences will be irreversible. We are effectively dismantling the safety net that generations have relied upon,” he added.

WHAT EPFO NUMBERS REVEAL

As the retirement fund body, Employees’ Provident Fund Organisation (EPFO), moves in the direction of liberalising the withdrawal process, alongside the introduction of a 25 per cent minimum balance requirement, a closer look at the numbers reflects a disconcerting trend — about half the members have less than Rs 20,000 at the time of final settlement.

—The high frequency of withdrawals by them during their work tenure, which depletes the balance, is one of the reasons cited by the retirement fund for its latest intervention.

— A starker data point — around 95 per cent of these claims are made immediately in the wake of an unemployment stint cited by members, even as official data shows that nearly half of these members are then seen “rejoining EPFO”.

— It is perhaps also a pointer to the employment profile of a member of the retirement fund body — over 65 per cent of the EPFO members are making PF and pension contributions at a monthly wage equal to or less than Rs 15,000, the wage ceiling for ‘mandatory’ EPF contributions. A ballpark 35 per cent is making EPF contributions ‘voluntarily’ for wages above Rs 15,000, a senior official told The Indian Express.

— Premature final settlements, which are separate from partial withdrawals under categories such as illness, housing or education, are, meanwhile, clocking a high run rate. For instance, of the total 52.95 lakh final settlement claims in 2024-25 — including claims for retirement, retrenchment or migration — around 95 per cent were premature settlements by members just after two months of unemployment, as per the EPFO data reviewed by The Indian Express. Out of



this, 46 per cent or 24.21 lakh members were identified to have subsequently rejoined establishments to become EPF members again.

— The trend is the same in value terms, with around 66 per cent of the total amount of final settlement being on account of premature withdrawals claimed by the members for unemployment, as per para 69(2) of the EPF Scheme, 1952 that allows full withdrawal or settlement after unemployment for a continuous period of not less than two months.

— Any kind of break in the form of such premature final settlement results in ineligibility for family pension in case of death and also lower amount of pension at the time of retirement or superannuation if a member dips into the EPS corpus as well apart from the EPF amount. Under the Employees' Pension Scheme, 1995, a member needs to put in a minimum of 10 years of pensionable service to be eligible for pensionary benefits later.

— The EPFO announced a slew of changes to its withdrawal norms by streamlining the withdrawal categories from 13 to three — essential needs (illness, education, marriage); housing needs; and special circumstances — along with an introduction of a minimum balance of 25 per cent last week.

— Withdrawal limits for education or illness have been made more flexible: partial draws can now be made 10 times for education during the membership and 5 for marriage, as against the existing limit of 3 partial withdrawals for marriage and education combined. Under illness and 'special circumstances' categories, withdrawals will be allowed 3 times and 2 times every financial year.

— The decisions, however, came under fire from several quarters. The Ministry of Labour and Employment had to then step in to clarify that 75 per cent of a member's amount can be withdrawn immediately after leaving the job, in line with the 75 per cent withdrawal allowed for other three part withdrawal categories, and the full 100 per cent amount can be withdrawn after remaining unemployed for one year. This essentially implies that changes in the minimum period for premature final settlement, only affect 25 per cent of the PF contribution — minimum balance requirement — while 75 per cent can be withdrawn at all times.

STAFF SEEK OLD SCHEME AS GOVT EXTENDS OPT-IN PERIOD FOR UPS

Even as the government's Unified Pension Scheme (UPS) that was introduced earlier this year has found few takers so far, several employee associations are now planning to hold a protest at Jantar Mantar on November 9 to press for a return to the Old Pension Scheme (OPS) that was replaced by the National Pension System (NPS) in 2004.

- The All-India NPS Employees Federation, along with other associations, is set to hold the protest to demand restoration of OPS at Jantar Mantar, its president, Manjeet Singh Patel, said. The federation has written to the Delhi Police to intimate the same, he said.
- According to government sources, only about 4.5% (1.11 lakh) of the 23.93 lakh employees under NPS had decided to switch to UPS as on September 30.
- The Cabinet had approved the UPS in August 2024 and the Ministry of Finance rolled it out with effect from April 1 this year. Initially, employees under NPS had till June 30 to opt-in for UPS, but the deadline has been extended twice due to the slow pace of adoption, first till September 30 and then till November 30.



- Under OPS, employees get 50% of their last drawn basic salary as pension. All those employed on or after January 1, 2004, are under the NPS — in which the pension amount is linked to the markets and the amount invested by the employee.
- With employees continuing to demand a return to OPS, the government last year came up with the UPS, in which employees are guaranteed 50% of the average basic pay drawn in the last 12 months prior to retirement as pension for those completing 25 years of service.
- Employees under NPS have the option of switching over to UPS. However, many Central government employees, requesting anonymity, said the NPS, which is linked to the markets, was still a better option than the UPS.
- In a representation submitted to the Department of Pensions and Pensioners Welfare on October 7, the federation demanded that the pension benefits under UPS be made applicable from the date of voluntary retirement, rather than the date of superannuation.

Do You Know: Key features of UPS:

1. Assured Pension: The scheme provides an 'Assured Pension', which will be calculated at 50 per cent of the average basic pay drawn over the last 12 months by the employee, prior to superannuation or before their retirement, for a minimum qualifying service of 25 years. The pension will be proportionate for a lesser service period up to a minimum of 10 years of service.
2. Assured minimum pension: The UPS guarantees a monthly pension of Rs 10,000 for superannuation after at least 10 years of service.
3. Assured family pension: If a retiree dies, their immediate family is entitled to 60% of the pension last taken by the retiree.
4. Inflation indexation: Dearness relief for three types of pensions will be determined using the All India Consumer Price Index for Industrial Workers, which is similar to serving workers.
5. Lumpsum payment at superannuation: In addition to gratuity, lump-sum payment will be given at superannuation. This will be one-tenth of the monthly emolument (pay + DA) as on the date of superannuation for every completed six months of service. The payment will not reduce the quantum of assured pension.
6. Pension assurance for compulsorily retired employees: The UPS will also be available for employees compulsorily retired under fundamental rule 56 (j), which is not a penalty under central civil services rules, the notification said. However, assured payout will not be available in case of removal or dismissal from service or resignation of the employee. "In such cases, the Unified Pension Scheme option shall not apply," it said.

HOW KERALA ELIMINATED EXTREME POVERTY

As Malayalees around the world prepare to celebrate Kerala Piravi on November 1, Kerala is set to become the first Indian state to proclaim itself free of extreme poverty. The Left Democratic Front — which is enjoying its second term in succession and aiming for a hat-trick early in 2026 — has facilitated this remarkable shift. It is powerful and irrefutable proof that communist ideology is not mere fantasy but an organising principle that has the power to transform the present, opening up the future to fresh possibilities.



Immediately after the Left came to power for the second time in 2021, the government made a decision to end extreme poverty, defined as severe deprivation in four core areas — nutritious food, safe housing, basic income, and health status. Despite the Centre's biased policy, Kerala had already pushed the Multidimensional Poverty Index below 1. However, the government was keen to address the plight of those still left destitute.

It took the state a great deal of effort and systematic scrutiny to identify those in extreme poverty. First, it used critical deprivation indices developed through multiple trials to capture the nuanced realities of extreme poverty: Those who do not receive government benefits, destitute people without any sources of income or shelter, those suffering from health conditions and so on. In other words, these were people who were not captured by the otherwise extensive welfare functions of the state.

Second, a massive community participatory process was adopted for the identification of beneficiaries. The state confirmed them through systematic surveying, validation and cross-validation with hundreds of volunteers in partnership with Kudumbashree, the LIFE Mission, ASHA workers, NGOs, community activists, various government departments and civil society networks, all effectively supervised by the Local Self-Government (LSG) Department. Following community inputs, there was a field-level validation, super-checks, and then a final approval in grama/ward sabhas. In this process, 87,158 households were shortlisted from the originally identified 1,18,309 families. This was followed by the preparation of a priority list of 64,006 families with 1,03,099 people as beneficiaries.

Third, the LSG Department consulted with each family, and developed individual micro-plans to meet their basic needs. The micro-plans included short-term (the benefits to be provided immediately), medium-term (those that could be completed within three months to two years) and long-term components.

Fourth, the micro-plans were implemented, providing the beneficiaries with food, shelter, and medical care tailored to their individual needs; they have also been provided with insurance, MNREGS job cards, scholarships and study materials for children, and free travel passes; land is also being provided. In this process, 21,263 families received essential documents including ration cards and Aadhaar, 29,427 families were provided medical care, three meals a day for 20,648 were provided through community kitchens and often delivered at doorsteps, nearly 4,000 families were provided new houses with and without land, and 5,651 families received up to Rs 2 lakh each for renovation of their houses. Job opportunities were scaled up and 34,672 new job cards were provided. Of the 64,006 families, more than 96 per cent have been uplifted from extreme poverty and the rest are on the agenda. The scheme was designed in such a way that people originally identified as beneficiaries who travelled out of the state as part of their nomadic lives are taken care of once they are back home. A wide range of rights were realised in what I would call an exemplary exercise in "right making/state making".

The credit for this goes first to Kerala's Left legacy, from the first communist government in 1957 with its egalitarian ideals, and second, to the re-orientation of politics and economy by the "New Left", which began the Agathi Rahitha Keralam (Destitute-Free Kerala) scheme in 2017. Another reason the state succeeded in this mission was the robust social welfare system that was already in existence and which has now been made more accessible to those who were destitute. The Karunya Arogya Suraksha Padhathi (KASP), which assures free treatment up to Rs 5 lakh per family per year, now covers 41.99 lakh poor and vulnerable families. Simultaneously, the Food and Civil Supplies Department and Supplyco ensure household food security with nutritious



packages through an extensive public distribution network that never fails in its outreach, particularly to the vulnerable sections. Yet another reason is the “second turnaround” in Kerala’s economy (the first was in the 1980s, fuelled by the Gulf remittances), now fuelled by investments in social and economic infrastructure, supplemented by private investments and multiplier effects. This economic growth allows the state to pursue its social development goals and egalitarian ideals.

Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan’s leadership has successfully integrated all existing welfare provisions into the lives of the destitute, supplemented with fresh schemes; the budget for extreme poverty eradication alone crossed Rs 1,000 crore, all in the larger context of the dwindling share of central funds for states.

History is replete with examples of those who escaped poverty falling back into it whenever there was a crisis at either the individual or macro level. This has happened in India and other parts of the Global South; even advanced Western countries were not exceptions. Kerala’s government needs to be vigilant and ready to deal with such challenges, which will require not just monitoring but constant evaluation and learning. The fact that each beneficiary is geo-tagged makes it easier for the government to take follow-up actions.

In the spirit of John Rawls, one would argue that the society-state synergy is strongest when the weakest sections of society improve, and this improvement eventually benefits society at every level.

RANGARAJAN LINE: 15 YEARS ON, HOW POVERTY IS MEASURED TODAY IN INDIA

Almost 15 years ago, the erstwhile Planning Commission set up a committee headed by C Rangarajan, a former governor of the Reserve Bank of India (RBI), to review the methodology for measurement of poverty in the country.

- The committee, which submitted its report in June 2014, caused a stir when it estimated the national poverty line at Rs 1,407 in terms of monthly per capita expenditure for urban areas and Rs 972 for rural areas. What this meant was that anyone spending more than Rs 47 per day in urban areas and Rs 32 per day in rural areas was not ‘poor’. These thresholds led to the number of poor in India being pegged at 29.5 per cent of the population. Since then, no new poverty line, at least one backed by the government, has been created.
- Last week, economists from the RBI’s Department of Economic and Policy Research published a paper in which they ‘updated’ the Rangarajan line for 20 major states of India using the government’s Household Consumption Expenditure Survey (HCES) for 2022-23.
- The results showed Odisha and Bihar had posted the biggest decline in poverty levels between 2011-12 and 2022-23, with the proportion of the population below the updated version of the Rangarajan poverty line falling by around 40 percentage points.
- On the other hand, the decline in the percentage of the population below the poverty line was the least in Kerala and Himachal Pradesh.
- On the whole, rural poverty in 2022-23 was lowest in Himachal Pradesh (0.4 per cent) and highest in Chhattisgarh (25.1 per cent). Urban poverty, meanwhile, was lowest in Tamil Nadu (1.9 per cent) and highest, again, in Chhattisgarh (13.3 per cent).



- It is worth pointing out that the all-India rural and urban poverty lines estimated by the Rangarajan committee were not updated by the RBI economists in their study.
- Unlike some others, the RBI staff study chose not to ‘adjust’ the old poverty lines using Consumer Price Index (CPI) inflation – because it’s not accurate to do so as the CPI basket and the Rangarajan poverty line basket (PLB) are different: the weight of food in the rural Rangarajan PLB is 57 per cent compared to 54 per cent in rural CPI, while 47 per cent of the urban Rangarajan PLB is food compared to 36 per cent for urban CPI. What they instead did was create a new price index – like the CPI – but one whose constituent items have the same weight as the Rangarajan PLB.
- The level of poverty in India has been a matter of intense discussion for years. Earlier this year in January, State Bank of India Research estimated using 2023-24 HCES data that poverty in rural areas was 4.86 per cent and 4.09 per cent in urban areas. These estimates were based on inflation-adjusted 2023-24 poverty lines of Rs 1,632 for rural areas and Rs 1,944 for urban areas.
- As far as the government is concerned, poverty lines are seemingly a thing of the past. What matters now is multidimensional poverty, which goes beyond just money and consumption. Based on the global Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI), the Indian MPI looks at poverty through three lenses: health, education, and standard of living. These are represented by 12 indicators: nutrition, child and adolescent mortality, maternal health, years of schooling, school attendance, cooking fuel, sanitation, drinking water, housing, electricity, assets, and bank account.
- The global MPI does not take maternal health and bank accounts into consideration while measuring poverty.

Do You Know:

- Poverty can be defined as a condition in which an individual or household lacks the financial resources to afford a basic minimum standard of living. Economists and policymakers estimate “absolute” poverty as the shortfall in consumption expenditure from a threshold called the “poverty line”. The poverty line is a threshold used to classify people as poor or not based on their income or consumption levels. The poverty line represents the minimum income level necessary to meet basic needs, and varies across countries depending on their overall economic conditions.

GOOGLE’S \$15 BILLION AI INVESTMENT IN ANDHRA PRADESH: A BOOST, A BEGINNING

The last few years have seen a dramatic surge in AI investments, driven by global tech majors such as Microsoft, Alphabet, Meta, Nvidia and OpenAI. As developing AI models and then making them available for use at a global level requires huge capital, the scale of the investments being made has reached impressive proportions. In 2024, global corporate investment in AI touched \$252.3 billion as per the AI index report from Stanford University. As per McKinsey, the data centres needed to handle AI processing are expected to require \$5.2 trillion in capex by 2030, the bulk of which is likely to be directed towards technology developers to produce chips and computing hardware. While some have expressed concerns over this AI boom — the IMF has, for instance, warned that “the risk is also that lofty profit expectations will ultimately be unmet” — others are more optimistic with tech majors stepping up their investments.

Earlier this week, Google announced that it will invest \$15 billion over the next five years (2026-2030) to set up an AI data centre in Andhra Pradesh. Situated in Visakhapatnam, it will be Google’s largest outside the US, and will include a “purpose-built data centre campus capable of gigawatt-scale compute capacity”. Earlier this year, during its second quarter earnings season, the company



had raised its capex forecast for the year to \$85 billion to meet the growing demand as adoption rates for both firms and companies surge. This is a big boost to India's plans to be a major player in this space. India's data centre industry had crossed the 1 GW mark in 2024 as per a report by JLL. Estimated to account for 52 per cent of the country's capacity, Mumbai leads the market, followed by Chennai and Delhi.

The world over governments are announcing ambitious plans and pledging huge resources in the AI space. The Indian government has also taken several steps to help build the larger ecosystem in the country. Ten semiconductor manufacturing projects, including high-volume fabs and OSATs (outsourced semiconductor assembly and test), have been approved. Alongside, 23 chip-design projects have been sanctioned by the government and 12 startups have been chosen to build indigenous large language models and small language models. Thus, across the spectrum, from the physical infrastructure (data centres) and the semiconductor projects (chips) to developing large language models, India is making progress. These efforts need to be supplemented by a similar focus on boosting research and development and skilling the labour force.

GOOD JOB

Small, incremental steps are what set a flywheel in motion. As far as labour laws go, the Tamil Nadu government's proposal to allow women to be employed in about 20 operations listed as 'dangerous', and from which they were prohibited from being employed in so far, is progressive. The government has proposed amendments to the Tamil Nadu Factories Rules, 1950, to allow women to take up even jobs titled hazardous or dangerous, when these Rules come into practice; only pregnant women and young persons will be barred from these jobs. Earlier, the government had amended the Rules to allow women to be deployed on the night shift in factories, changing the historic practice of keeping them out. In this recent amendment, which was hosted in the public realm for feedback in September, factories are also required to get the woman's consent in writing for the night shift. These are changes that have come literally, rule by rule, but in effect, the government has shrugged off its patriarchal stance here, freeing up women from the perception that they are vulnerable and weak and will have to be protected by the State. The operations which are set to be opened for women include electrolytic process, glass manufacture, manufacture and treatment of lead, generation of gas and petroleum, blasting, liming and tanning of raw hides and skins, graphite powdering, manufacture of dichromates and carcinogenic dye intermediates, fireworks and match factories, manufacture of manganese, dangerous pesticides, use of benzene, and operations involving high noise and vibration levels.

Removing legal barriers is the first step toward implementing progressive measures that will facilitate more equitable workplaces. However crucial this first step is in rectifying age-old patriarchy-reinforced assigned gender roles in society and industry, it is not enough. This should be followed up by provision of adequate amenities and facilities for women, including separate toilets, changing rooms, and closed areas for conducting medical checks which are mandated for such industries, besides drop home facilities in places that have hitherto had no women workers at all. This will clearly require some investment, close involvement of the management, and at least initially, active monitoring by State labour authorities. The government must also take care to ensure that women who are in circumstances that might not enable their participation in these jobs are not forced into them, or penalised for not opting for these tasks. Without this being set in place, any progressive measure to dismantle the barriers that keep Indian society from being a more equitable job market will turn out to be a damp squib.



LIFE AND SCIENCE

CHANDRAYAAN-2 DETECTS FIRST EVIDENCE OF SOLAR STORMS STIRRING MOON'S ATMOSPHERE

An instrument aboard India's Chandrayaan-2 mission has confirmed what scientists had long predicted — an increase in the density of molecules in the Moon's exosphere, or its extremely thin atmosphere, during a major solar event called a Coronal Mass Ejection (CME) last year.

- The Moon's exosphere, found close to its surface, is made up of molecules released through processes such as solar radiation, solar wind, and meteorite impacts. During a CME — when the Sun ejects a burst of plasma from its outer layer — more molecules are knocked off the lunar surface, raising the density of the exosphere. Unlike Earth, the Moon lacks a magnetic field to shield it from these solar blasts, making it especially vulnerable.
- This is what Chandrayaan-2's payload, the Chandra's Atmospheric Composition Explorer-2 (CHACE-2), recorded during a series of powerful CMEs in May last year. The event led to a noticeable increase in total pressure in the Moon's sunlit exosphere, exactly when the CME reached the lunar surface.
- The finding is significant, as it deepens understanding of the Moon's exosphere and space weather — knowledge crucial for India's goal of sending humans to the Moon by 2040. Such insights will also help design lunar habitats that can withstand extreme solar events, which are known to damage satellites outside Earth's magnetic field.

Do You Know:

- A solar storm or a Coronal Mass Ejection as astronomers call it, is an ejection of highly magnetised particles from the sun. These particles can travel several million km per hour and can take about 13 hours to five days to reach Earth.
- Earth's atmosphere protects us humans from these particles. But the particles can interact with our Earth's magnetic field, induce strong electric currents on the surface and affect man-made structures.
- The first recorded solar storm occurred in 1859 and it reached Earth in about 17 hours. It affected the telegraph network and many operators experienced electric shocks.
- The Solar Ultraviolet Imaging Telescope (SUIT) on board the Aditya-L1 mission has captured a solar flare 'kernel' in the lower solar atmosphere, namely the photosphere and the chromosphere.

FLASHES IN THE PAN

Q: What are transient lunar phenomena?

A: For centuries, sky-gazers have reported seeing peculiar, short-lived events on the moon's surface, from strange flashes of light to hazy glows and patches of unusual colour. These fleeting occurrences are called transient lunar phenomena (TLPs). A TLP can last anywhere from a few seconds to several hours before vanishing.



Scientists don't know what they really are or why they happen, but they've interpreted the TLPs' existence to mean the moon is more dynamic than they once believed.

People have documented reports of these mysterious events for a thousand years; even the Apollo 11 astronauts reported witnessing a luminous glow in 1969. The most common sightings include bright, star-like points of light, reddish or coloured glows, and some sort of mists obscuring the view. Some of the most active areas for these phenomena include the Aristarchus and Plato craters.

While scientists are still exploring the origins of TLPs, there are a few leading theories. One is the release of gases such as radon and argon from beneath the moon's surface. This outgassing could be triggered by gravitational stresses or the heating of the surface, causing the released gas and dust to glow or reflect sunlight. Another likely cause is meteoroid impacts, which are frequent on the moon because it lacks a protective atmosphere. These high-velocity collisions can generate a flash of light.

Other possibilities include electrostatic phenomena, where lunar dust becomes charged and levitates, and disturbances in the earth's own atmosphere that distort our view of the moon.

UNDULATING FIELD

Why does the earth's magnetic field have 'weak spots'?

Researchers analysed data from the European Space Agency's 'Swarm' mission and recently reported that the South Atlantic Anomaly, the region of weakest intensity in the earth's magnetic field, has expanded since 2014. Today, according to the data, it covers about 0.9% more of the earth's surface than it did in 2014.

The field has weak spots because the molten iron and nickel circulating in the earth's outer core don't move uniformly. Their motion generates the field in a process called the geodynamo. Since the flow is uneven, there are regions where the magnetic flux is concentrated and others where it spreads out.

The earth's field is reorganised as the fluid core moves, and the weak regions can expand, shrink or migrate over decades without threatening the planet's overall magnetic shield or indicating a magnetic reversal. Indeed, the study's authors have stressed that despite the Anomaly's apparent expansion, there is no reason for alarm since such changes are part of the natural variation of the geomagnetic field.

WHAT IS THE LATEST OFFERING BY OPENAI WHICH HAS CAUSED MUCH OUTRAGE?

On October 14, OpenAI CEO Sam Altman posted on X about ChatGPT allowing erotica for verified adults from December. After the post garnered over 15 million views and triggered reactions ranging from enthusiasm and curiosity to disgust and rage, Mr. Altman issued a clarification two days later, addressing concerns about child safety and ChatGPT users facing mental health challenges.

What did Sam Altman post on X?

Earlier in the week, Mr. Altman admitted that ChatGPT was made "pretty restrictive" in order to be careful about mental health issues, but added this policy made the chatbot experience less



enjoyable for those without mental health challenges. The OpenAI CEO claimed that since they had been able to “mitigate the serious mental health issues and have new tools,” many restrictions could be relaxed. Such a claim is yet to be backed up by regulators.

Mr. Altman further explained that a new, upcoming version of ChatGPT would let people better customise its responses, including acting “like a friend.”

“In December, as we roll out age-gating more fully and as part of our “treat adult users like adults” principle, we will allow even more, like erotica for verified adults,” said Mr. Altman. This statement went viral, with some criticising Mr. Altman for making it easier to access erotica, while others opposed the sudden changes that were made to the older 4o model.

How did OpenAI respond?

Following the backlash, Mr. Altman clarified that AI-generated erotica was just one example of the freedom that a verified adult user could expect with ChatGPT.

Mr. Altman stressed that the company would prioritise safety over privacy and freedom for teenagers, and that no policies concerning mental health would be loosened.

However, he repeatedly noted that the company’s policy was to treat adult users like adults.

“As AI becomes more important in people’s lives, allowing a lot of freedom for people to use AI in the ways that they want is an important part of our mission,” he posted in his clarification on X. “It doesn’t apply across the board of course: for example, we will still not allow things that cause harm to others, and we will treat users who are having mental health crises very different from users who are not. Without being paternalistic we will attempt to help users achieve their long-term goals,” he said.

How is OpenAI protecting minors?

OpenAI came under pressure to deliver better protections for children after the death of 16-year-old Adam Raine this year, whose parents sued the ChatGPT-maker. They alleged that the chatbot coached their son to die and assisted him in learning more about different suicide methods, instead of helping him find emergency support.

OpenAI has since introduced new age verification mechanisms to protect teens and more vulnerable users. In late September, the ChatGPT-maker announced parental controls so that parents/guardians could link their accounts to their teens’ accounts, manage the children’s chat settings, customise younger users’ experience, and get notified in case their child is in danger of harming themselves.

“Once parents and teens connect their accounts, the teen account will automatically get additional content protections, including reduced graphic content, viral challenges, sexual, romantic or violent roleplay, and extreme beauty ideals, to help keep their experience age-appropriate,” said OpenAI in a blog post at the time.

However, there are unresolved contradictions. During an episode of ‘This Past Weekend’ podcast with Theo Von this summer, Mr. Altman pointed out major gaps in privacy rights for users who ask ChatGPT extremely personal questions.



Do other AI companies allow erotica?

Many less regulated AI companies and chatbots allow users to engage in sexual interactions, often with flimsy age-gating measures. App store reviews for these Gen AI chatbots note the ability for users to initiate sexual role-plays with the AI chatbots. This has also impacted the safety and mental health of children.

In one instance, the mother of a 14-year-old who died by suicide in 2024 alleged that her son was sexually abused by a Character.AI chatbot, which lets users engage in role-play with AI personas inspired by popular characters. The mother has filed a lawsuit against the creator, Character Technology.

Meta too faced backlash and said it would revise content policies after it was found that its AI chatbot could make romantic or sexually suggestive comments to children.

Meanwhile, Elon Musk's Grok AI chatbot that is available on X is also able to generate erotic content, with Mr. Musk himself sharing videos of partially dressed women that he said were created with Grok Imagine.

TAKE A BOW, AI — YOU'RE GETTING CLOSER TO HUMANITY

New research suggests that AI's "thought" processes may be more similar to those of humans than previously suspected. Here's how: You're scrolling endlessly through all the junk on X. The memes, the insults, the fake news and conspiracy theories, the gender wars and literal wars. Pause, and take a deep breath — it's starting to get to you, isn't it? Consuming junk data isn't productive; it's destructive. It won't enhance your understanding; it'll give you brain rot. And here's the clincher: It'll affect an LLM in exactly the same way. Take a bow, AI — you're getting closer to humanity.

A preprint study by researchers from Texas A&M University, the University of Texas at Austin and Purdue University has found that AI can indeed get brain rot. Exposing LLMs to junk data from X led to declines in "reasoning, long-context understanding, safety, and inflating 'dark traits' (e.g., psychopathy, narcissism)". And once an AI goes down that route, there's no coming back — attempts to "heal" the LLMs using clean data were only partially successful.

Fears of AI turning "dark" aren't just sci-fi hypotheticals; they reflect today's fast-changing realities. There are more and more reports about conversations with AI leading to suicide — in one case, a chatbot discouraged a teen in the US from seeking help, and offered to write a suicide note — as well as crimes including murder. Another danger is the erosion of humans' ability to carry out research for themselves or compose a simple piece of writing. It won't be hard for psychopathic robots to one day conquer a species that has outsourced thought. Perhaps the brain rot itself is the best defence — the would-be AI overlords may be too busy memeing to murder. The best part? This editorial was written by a human being.

BLACKOUTS AND WATER SHORTAGES: THE OTHER SIDE OF TECH COMPANIES' AI FRENZY

The United States has been at the nexus of a data center boom, as OpenAI, Amazon, Google, Microsoft and others invest hundreds of billions to build the giant computing sites in the name of advancing artificial intelligence. But the companies have also exported the construction frenzy abroad, with less scrutiny.



- Nearly 60 percent of the 1,244 largest data centers in the world were outside the United States as of the end of June, according to an analysis by Synergy Research Group, which studies the industry. More are coming, with at least 575 data center projects in development globally from companies including Tencent, Meta and Alibaba.
- As data centers rise, the sites — which need vast amounts of power for computing and water to cool the computers — have contributed to or exacerbated disruptions not only in Mexico, but in more than a dozen other countries, according to a New York Times examination.
- In Ireland, data centers consume more than 20 percent of the country’s electricity. In Chile, precious aquifers are in danger of depletion. In South Africa, where blackouts have long been routine, data centers are further taxing the national grid. Similar concerns have surfaced in Brazil, Britain, India, Malaysia, the Netherlands, Singapore and Spain.
- The issues have been compounded by a lack of transparency. Google, Amazon, Microsoft and other tech companies often work through subsidiaries and service providers to build data centers, masking their presence and revealing little about the resources that the facilities consume.
- Many governments are eager for an A.I. foothold, too. They have provided cheap land, tax breaks and access to resources and are taking a hands-off approach to regulation and disclosures.
- Tech companies, which are racing to build data centers to power new A.I. models and create “superintelligence,” or A.I. with power that exceeds the human brain, said the boom brought jobs and investment. They added that they were working to shrink their environmental footprint by generating their own energy and recycling water.
- Directly linking any data center to local power and water shortages is difficult. Yet building in areas with unstable grids and existing water strains has pressured already frail systems, according to experts, increasing the potential for cascading effects.
- In country after country, activists, residents and environmental organizations have banded together to oppose data centers. Some have tried blocking the projects, while others have pushed for more oversight and transparency.

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. ML is implemented by training (this term will also be explained in subsequent explainers) computers on data so that they can make predictions about new information.

IMPRISONED JOURNALISTS WIN EU’S TOP HUMAN RIGHTS AWARD

two journalists, one imprisoned in Belarus and the other in Georgia, have won the European Union’s top human rights honour, the Sakharov Prize, European Parliament President Roberta Metsola announced on Wednesday.



Andrzej Poczobut is a correspondent for the influential Polish newspaper Gazeta Wyborcza. He was convicted of “harming Belarus’ national security” and sentenced to eight years, which he is serving in the Novopolotsk penal colony.

Mzia Amaghlobeli, a prominent journalist who founded two of Georgia’s independent media outlets, was convicted in August of slapping a police chief during an anti-government protest.

She was sentenced to two years in prison in a case that was condemned by rights groups as an attempt to curb media freedom.

“Both are journalists currently in prison on trumped up charges simply for doing their work and for speaking out against injustice. Their courage has made them symbols of the struggle for freedom and democracy,” Ms. Metsola said at the parliament in Strasbourg, France.

The annual EU award, named after Soviet dissident Nobel Peace Prize laureate Andrei Sakharov, was created in 1988 to honour individuals or groups who defend human rights and basic freedoms.

THE DEATH OF KANCHHA SHERPA AND THE PERKS AND PERILS OF RECOGNITION

Was it Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay who conquered Mount Everest in 1953, or Tenzing Norgay and Edmund Hillary? Although the two men weren’t particularly fussed about the question of who reached the summit first — they were a team — speculation abounded until Tenzing put it to rest in his autobiography two years later: “Hillary stepped on top first.” It was, perhaps, a prelude to the inequity in recognition: Two men climbed to the top of the world; one was knighted, the other was referred to as a “helper” or “porter”. Time would, arguably, redress the balance, with TIME magazine ranking both among the 100 most influential people of the 20th century in 1999.

The years brought recognition to Kanchha Sherpa, too — the last surviving member of that famous expedition, he died aged 92 on October 16. He was one of three Sherpas who reached the final camp with Hillary and Tenzing. Upon hearing on the radio that the duo had reached the summit, “We danced, hugged, and kissed. It was a moment of pure joy,” Kanchha would later recall. He continued with his own mountaineering career until 1973.

The decades after 1953 also saw the home of the Sherpas become a magnet for tourism. Often sought out by the media in his later years, Kanchha could see both sides of the coin: He recognised how tourism benefited the local economy, but worried about its impact on the environment. “If we stop the tourists to save the mountains, we don’t have anything to do,” he told ClimateWire in 2011. Melting ice, he believed, was the result of more and more people trampling on sacred ground, angering the gods. Kanchha’s death is a moment to pay tribute to the spirit of adventure and human fortitude, but perhaps also a time to reflect on how fame and recognition affect people, communities and the physical environment.