



25th January to 1st February 2026

CURRENT AFFAIRS FOR UPSC

DreamIAS





INTERNATIONAL

KILLER AGENTS

The fatal shooting of Alex Pretti by federal agents in Minneapolis marks a dramatic escalation in the Trump administration's aggressive immigration enforcement campaign. On January 24, the 37-year-old nurse was killed during a federal operation — the second by agents in the city in recent weeks. The incident sparked large protests, building on weeks of resistance to what officials describe as the largest immigration enforcement operation in American history. The unrest reflects broader community outrage that intensified after the January 7 killing of Renée Good, a 37-year-old mother, by a federal agent. Federal agencies as well as President Trump swiftly defended the operation, saying that Pretti was carrying a loaded gun. White House adviser Stephen Miller claimed that Pretti was a “domestic terrorist” who “tried to assassinate federal law enforcement”. But the U.S. citizen had no serious criminal history. Legal experts have confirmed that he was a lawful gun owner with a permit. Critically, multiple bystander videos contradict the official narrative: footage showed Pretti holding a phone and his gun appeared to have been taken away by an agent before another shot him.

Federal-State tensions have reached a breaking point in Minnesota, where Governor Tim Walz, a Democrat, has described immigration enforcement as “organized brutality”. Minneapolis Mayor Jacob Frey has called on Mr. Trump to “end this operation now”. Police Chief Brian O’Hara reported that Homeland Security officials blocked State investigators from the crime scene, prompting Minnesota officials to file emergency lawsuits demanding evidence preservation. In a controversial move, Attorney General Pam Bondi reportedly offered to withdraw the ICE from Minnesota in exchange for access to the State’s voter database — a move critics viewed as an attempt to politicise the crisis. At the root of this crisis is Mr. Trump’s hardline immigration policy and the massive deployment of federal agents to Minneapolis. Reports indicate that their aggressive behaviour and crowd control tactics are triggering fear and terrorising entire communities. For the Trump administration, immigration enforcement is a war at home rather than civil law enforcement. And killings suggest that this approach is gravely counterproductive. When federal agents operate with impunity, reject local oversight, resist shared investigation and use lethal force, they risk undermining the very rule of law that they claim to uphold, besides straining the federal-State balance. Mr. Trump, who called Iranian protesters “patriots” and offered them help, should show at least some of that concern for the American protesters. He should withdraw federal agents from Minneapolis immediately and ensure accountability for the agents who kill.

PRESSURE POINTS

What is unfolding in Venezuela is naked imperialism. Having ordered the abduction of a sitting head of state and imposed a naval blockade on a sovereign nation, U.S. President Donald Trump declared that Washington would now “run” Venezuela. That he endorsed Acting President Delcy Rodríguez rather than the opposition does not diminish the criminality of these actions; it merely reveals their purpose, which was not about democracy or narcotics but about control of Venezuela’s oil. The Trump administration’s approach might appear contradictory: help retain the Bolivarian regime while strangling its economic sovereignty. But the logic is coherent. Washington wants Venezuela’s oil without the costs of occupation or the chaos of regime change. It learned from Iraq that dismantling state structures creates insurgencies. It believes that it is better to



capture the existing apparatus and redirect its functions — a form of neocolonialism that maintains the forms of statehood while exercising actual control.

This arrangement places Ms. Rodriguez in a difficult position. The Bolivarian movement was built on resisting precisely this kind of American domination over Venezuela's resources. Yet her government, battered by a decade of sanctions, must now negotiate with the very power that kidnapped her predecessor. Her statement on Sunday, "Enough already of Washington's orders over politicians in Venezuela", reveals the strain that she is under. She has complied with American demands on oil trade and released political prisoners as a "peace gesture". But she cannot surrender Venezuelan sovereignty entirely without losing the Chavista base that sustains her government. The more pressure Washington applies on Caracas, the more it risks the very instability it claims to want to prevent. If the U.S. wanted a productive economic relationship with Venezuela, it should not have embarked on this marauding path. The sanctions that devastated Venezuela's economy were American policy. The migration crisis that Mr. Trump cited to justify intervention was a consequence of those sanctions. Now, Washington offers to ease the pressure it created, but only if Venezuela submits to exclusive American control over its resources. This is not diplomacy; it is extortion. The world cannot remain silent. When Russia violated Ukrainian sovereignty, the international community condemned it and imposed sanctions. Mr. Trump's 'Donroe Doctrine' threatens not just Venezuela, but the foundations of the international order. If it remains unchallenged internationally, no nation in the Global South can be safe.

Note:

Venezuela's oil collapse has plunged Cuba into a deep crisis, exacerbated by the U.S. military incursion in Venezuela and subsequent abduction of President Maduro. The close relationship between Havana and Caracas, built on subsidised oil in exchange for Cuban medical and technical services, has been severely disrupted by recent U.S. seizures of Venezuelan oil tankers, cutting off deliveries to Cuba since December 2025. This has led to widespread power cuts, fuel shortages, and disruptions to food and transport. Cuba's heavy reliance on oil for energy and its dependence on imports for food make the situation dire, especially as Venezuela's share of Cuban oil imports dropped significantly, with Mexico and Russia unable to fill the gap. The long-standing U.S. embargo, tightened over decades and reinforced by Cuba's designation as a "State Sponsor of Terrorism", has further isolated Cuba financially, leading to persistent and growing trade deficits. Unable to secure oil on commercial terms, Cuba's economy has been severely weakened by the collapse of its oil-for-services arrangement with Venezuela.

DISCOMBOBULATOR: THE SYSTEM THAT US LIKELY USED IN VENEZUELA ATTACK

President Donald Trump said last week that American forces had used a weapon called "the discombobulator" during the military strike on Venezuela on January 3, in which the country's leader Nicolás Maduro and his wife, Cilia Flores, were captured.

— Speaking to The New York Post, Trump stated that the weapon was designed to disable enemy defensive infrastructure, and he was "not allowed" to talk about it. The President had earlier told NewsNation, a US news channel, that a "sonic weapon" had been used in the operation. However, there is still no clarity about what the discombobulator used by the US in the latest operation comprises.

— Experts told The Indian Express that the discombobulator may or may not be a single weapon and could comprise more than one capability. It could have jointly disabled Venezuela's military



defensive systems in a highly defended area. The discombobulator could also have included systems that produce high-pitched sounds and blinding effects to temporarily deafen, blind, or disorient people during an operation.

— All of these systems could have been deployed individually or in combinations to achieve the desired effect of disorienting people and disabling military defences.

— **Systems that disorient people**

1. Active denial system: Also called a heat ray, it is a directed energy weapon that can deeply penetrate skin to create a burning sensation. This can force people to flee, and trigger confusion and panic.

2. Vortex ring generator: It typically uses high-pressure pulses to either hit a person or deliver a payload of stink bombs. This causes disorientation and, in some cases, nausea.

3. Acoustic hailing devices (or long-range acoustic device): Also known as sonic cannons, these systems can emit a highly directional, piercing sound, which is loud enough to disorient people by causing nausea, vertigo, and confusion.

4. Visual dazzlers: These are high-intensity, pulsing laser weapons, which can cause a blinding impact on a person, rendering them disoriented on a battlefield. Reports from Venezuela spoke of soldiers bleeding, vomiting or being incapacitated, likely to be caused by the use of high-intensity acoustic waves.

— A discombobulator could also involve a range of electronic warfare systems that can jam air defences, including radars and sensors. The US created the Counter-electronics High Power Microwave Advanced Missile Project, which can render electronics ineffective by projecting microwave pulses. In the past, the US has also carried out sophisticated cyber operations. Cyber attacks are part of the ‘suppression of enemy air defences’ missions.

— Graphite munitions, non-lethal weapons to disable power grids, can also be a part of a discombobulator.

— The US uses a programme called Suter, which is integrated into the country’s aircraft. It attacks enemy networks and communications, including air defence networks. Operators running Suter 1 can see what enemy radar operators are looking at. Suter 2 seizes control of enemy networks and can direct their sensors. Suter 3 penetrates links to surface-to-air missile launchers.

Do You Know:

— On January 3, 2026 under Operation Absolute Resolve, the US military went into Venezuela and left with President Nicolás Maduro and his wife, all within three hours, which also effectively ended the Bolivarian Republic that was started by Hugo Chávez in 1999.

— This Operation marked a significant escalation of the long-running standoff with Venezuela after months of strikes on Venezuelan “drug boats” and a massive military build-up in the Caribbean with the deployment of troops, aircraft and warships. The US has accused Maduro of drug trafficking and working with gangs designated as terrorist organisations.

— Oil has emerged as the key factor in America’s capture of Venezuela’s President Nicolás Maduro. Soon after Maduro’s capture, US President Donald Trump said Washington would take control of



Caracas's oil sector and that American majors would pump in billions of dollars to revive the struggling Venezuelan oil industry and fix its broken oil infrastructure.

— Venezuela has the largest oil reserves globally, estimated at over 300 billion barrels or a fifth of the proven oil reserves all over the world. The world's largest oil exporter, Saudi Arabia, is second to Venezuela in terms of proven oil reserves. But Venezuela produces around 1 million barrels per day (bpd) of crude, while global output is over 100 million bpd. The relatively insignificant oil production by Venezuela, despite massive potential, is a result of a combination of factors that include US sanctions on the country's oil and gas sector constraining its energy exports, apart from a severe economic crisis in Venezuela and a debilitating lack of investment in the country's oil and gas infrastructure.

WHAT LIES BEHIND TRUMP'S GREENLAND MOVES?

The story so far:

U.S. President Donald Trump originally mooted the idea of the U.S. taking over the Arctic territory of Greenland during his first term in office. He later cancelled a visit to Denmark after its Prime Minister, Mette Frederiksen, said Greenland was "not for sale". Early in his second term, in January 2025, Mr. Trump re-upped his demand for Greenland, vowing that Washington "would tariff Denmark at a very high level" if it played spoiler, adding that he would not rule out the use of military force to push the deal through.

What happened next?

In mid-January 2026, the White House proposed a plan to slap eight European countries with a 10% tariff on "any and all goods" beginning on February 1 which was then set to increase to 25% on June 1, until an agreement was reached on Greenland. However, speaking in recent days at the World Economic Forum at Davos, Mr. Trump backed down from this strident rhetoric, announcing "the framework of a future deal with respect to Greenland and, in fact, the entire Arctic region." At that forum, Mr. Trump suggested that the time frame of such a deal would be "infinite". He said additional discussions on Greenland were ongoing, including the Golden Dome missile defence plan, a \$175 billion system which aims to position U.S. weapons in space.

Why does Greenland matter to the U.S.?

Greenland is primarily coveted by the Trump administration for two broad reasons: its rich natural resources base and strategic location. The strategic location aspect is one that is claimed by the Trump administration, the access to resources less so. At Davos, Mr. Trump said that it is rightful for the U.S. to "have" Greenland "for security [and not] anything else." Commenting on the complexities of Arctic exploration, he noted, "You have to go 25ft down through ice to get it. It's not something that a lot of people are going to do or want to do." This argument is premised on the Trump White House's claim that Russian and Chinese influence in the region is expanding, one that is not substantiated by intelligence reports — especially given that Greenland is also protected by the security umbrella of NATO.

Similarly, there is regional reassurance for the U.S. and its allies in the fact that under the U.S.-Denmark pact of 1951, security threats to the Arctic territory could legally trigger the U.S.'s option to broaden its military presence in Greenland. Reports have noted that Washington had stationed close to 10,000 troops on the island in the Cold War period, compared to only 200 or so U.S. troops there currently.



However, there is little doubt that Greenland is home to considerable, and possibly vast, reserves of oil and natural gas, as well as certain raw materials vital for the military technologies sector, electronics industry, and clean energy outputs. Reports suggest that 25 of 34 minerals considered to be “critical raw materials” by the European Commission are present in Greenland, including graphite and titanium.

Thus, while some U.S. lawmakers have said that the Trump administration’s apparent adventurism in forcing Denmark’s hand on surrendering Greenland to Washington is based on protecting U.S. national security interests in areas such as shipping lanes, energy and fisheries, the true motivation for this quest likely has far more to do with striking bargains for the extraction of natural resources than what public proclamations suggest.

What about the latest agreement?

The so-called “framework of a future deal with respect to Greenland” that Mr. Trump mentioned at Davos has been long on rhetoric and short on details. The only fact known is the meeting that Mr. Trump had with NATO Secretary General, Mark Rutte, and the latter’s clear statement that the discussion had not touched upon the question of Danish sovereignty over Greenland. Yet it is hard to conceive of the terms of an agreement that would be acceptable to Mr. Trump that did not at least cede partial control of certain territories within Greenland to Washington. Anonymous U.S. officials have been quoted in certain reports suggesting exactly this — that any viable agreement would likely mirror the concept of the U.K.’s military establishments in Cyprus, considered to be part of British territory.

What are the broader ramifications?

The Trump climbdown from an aggressive posture on U.S. control of Greenland was quite likely precipitated by the prospect of a potential judicial ruling against the White House’s use of the International Emergency Economic Powers Act to slap allies and partner nations with broad-based tariffs. Importantly, European nations had also signalled that in the event of such aggression, they would seriously consider bringing into force a hard-hitting counter-tariff mechanism that would negatively impact the trade in goods and services of large U.S. tech firms conducting business in the EU. Yet, the deeper concern for other countries, is the fact that there is a lingering possibility of a territory-hungry Washington interfering in the politics of not only Denmark and Venezuela, but other countries as well.

What role should other nations play?

The rules based international order may not be what it was at the end of the first decade of the 21st century. However, it must be true that countries such as India, China, and others, still subscribe to certain basic principles of that order. These nations now need to find ways to push back on the neo-imperialist depredations of Washington, Moscow, and Tel Aviv, in terms of their brazen disregard of territorial sovereignty and human rights in the pursuit of commercial and strategic interests.

NEO-COLONIAL SHADOWS

President Donald Trump’s neo-colonial posturing at the World Economic Forum in Davos could mark the opening salvo of what may be termed great-power climate wars — an irony, given that it is being waged by a climate-change denier. As global warming is rapidly melting Arctic polar ice, it has sharpened interest in the Northern Sea Route (NSR), which promises to cut shipping time



between East Asia, western Europe and North America. The route also carries geopolitical implications: it enables tighter trade and market integration between China and the Western Hemisphere — an outcome Mr. Trump has often sought to obstruct. At Davos, his renewed suggestion that the U.S. could “purchase” Greenland has rattled allies and revived colonial anxieties. The remark came even as Sara Olsvig, chair of the Inuit Circumpolar Council, has said that “there’s no such thing as a better coloniser”, reflecting on over three centuries of Danish rule.

Greenland’s strategic value is undeniable. China has conducted trial commercial voyages through the NSR, promoting it as a shorter, and potentially lower-emission, shipping route, even though its existence is a product of climate breakdown. Chinese firms have also shown sustained interest in Greenland’s significant mineral wealth, particularly rare earths. For Mr. Trump, who has weaponised trade and was forced to moderate tariffs against China due to Beijing’s dominance over rare earth supply chains, such activity is easily framed as strategic encroachment into America’s sphere of influence. Yet, extraction in Greenland would be neither easy nor uncontested. Much of the mineral wealth is buried deep under permanent ice, and local resistance is likely. Greenlanders have fought long struggles for political and economic sovereignty, achieving enhanced self-rule only in 2009. Recent opinion polls suggest that an overwhelming majority of Greenland’s population opposes any form of American rule. Nevertheless, Mr. Trump claimed on the sidelines of Davos that Washington had reached a “framework” with the European Union, addressing U.S. security and resource interests. Media reports of proposals allowing indefinite American basing rights and access to subsoil resources reinforce the perception that this push is driven less by security than by extraction and control. Davos, long projected as a forum for global cooperation, appeared this year as a staging ground for resurgent resource nationalism. In doing so, it may have sown the seeds of a new world order, undermining the very rules-based system that post-war America once built. Ironically, by alienating allies, Mr. Trump may be nudging them towards Beijing — a China that has now arrived as a full-spectrum great power.

WHAT’S HAPPENING IN SYRIA’S KURDISH REGIONS?

The story so far:

When Bashar al-Assad’s regime collapsed in December 2024, many hoped it would mark the end of Syria’s years-long civil strife. Ahmed al-Sharaa (formerly Abu Muhammad al-Golani), who emerged as the country’s interim leader, pledged to form an inclusive administration. But the past year has been marked by a resurgence of sectarian violence against the Alawites in the west and the Druze community in the south. In the latest flare-up, fighting broke out in the country’s northeast, between government forces and the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). The SDF has been pushed out of parts of eastern Syria it once controlled, and, despite a ceasefire, a tense standoff persists between Kurdish militias and government forces in the country’s Kurdish areas. The renewed violence now threatens to unravel the autonomy Syria’s Kurds have exercised since the 2011 civil war.

Who are the main Kurdish actors?

Syria’s Kurds, who make up roughly 10% of the country’s population, have long demanded autonomy for the Kurdish-populated regions in the north and east. When the Assad regime was forced to withdraw troops from the northeast in 2012, amid the civil war, Kurdish parties, councils and militias moved swiftly to fill the vacuum by establishing their own administrative structures. Several Kurdish regions (called ‘cantons’) came together to declare autonomy from the Syrian



state, and establish the Democratic Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (DAANES), also known as Rojava.

The main party in Rojava is the left-leaning Democratic Union Party (PYD), whose ideology is rooted in the 'democratic confederalism' championed by Abdullah Ocalan, the leader of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). Another major political actor is the Kurdistan National Council (KNC), which is aligned with the Iraqi Kurdistan Democratic Party. The main armed militia in Rojava is the People's Protection Units (YPG), which is aligned with the PYD, the ruling party. The YPG and its women's brigade YPJ gained prominence in 2014-15 as they defeated Islamic State (IS) jihadists in Syria's Kobane, a predominantly Kurdish region. After their victories against the IS in Syria's north and east, the U.S. started offering them air cover in the battles against jihadists. In 2015, with the blessings of the U.S., the Kurdish leaders formed the SDF with Arab and other minority militias, with the YPG being its core component.

Why did fighting break out?

The question of Kurdish autonomy emerged immediately after the Assad government fell. Mr. Sharaa, formerly the chief of al-Qaeda's Syria branch, wanted to establish a centralised regime in Damascus — an idea pushed back by the country's ethnic and religious minority communities. In March 2015, Mr. Sharaa and SDF commander Mazloum Abdi signed an integration agreement, laying out principles for integrating the SDF and other administrative units into the Syrian state. But the Kurds were clear on one point — they did not want to forfeit the autonomy they had built over more than a decade. In an interview with The Hindu in May, Salih Muslim Muhammad, co-chairman of the Democratic Union Party (PYD) said that "nobody wants another centralised regime in Syria".

The Shaara-Abdi agreement promised to flesh out the details of integration by the end of the year, but that deadline passed without progress. Tensions mounted as Damascus proposed deploying its troops in Kurdish regions. While the Syrian government wanted to extend its control across the country which it thinks is essential for reasserting its sovereignty, Kurdish leaders argued that losing military control of the north and east would imperil their autonomy. As talks stalled in early January, Mr. Sharaa's forces moved into the Arab neighbourhoods of Aleppo, which were controlled by Kurdish forces. Fighting soon followed and government forces asserted control within days, forcing the SDF to withdraw to the northeast.

What does Damascus want?

While the Syrian state forces withdrew in 2012 and other rebel and jihadist groups were preoccupied with their battles against Damascus during the civil war, the IS exploited the vacuum to establish a solid presence in Syria's east. But the YPG, the Kurdish militia, emerged as critical foot soldiers in the war against the IS. The first major defeat the IS faced was at the hands of the YPG. In the following years, the YPG (or the SDF, the expanded version) became the key anti-IS force on the ground in Syria while the U.S. provided them air cover. They controlled the regions they liberated from the IS and established Rojava. The Assad regime tolerated Kurdish autonomy because it was preoccupied with other problems.

Now, Mr. Sharaa, who has been emboldened by the international recognition he has achieved, wants to end Kurdish autonomy. He has taken a two-pronged approach. On January 16, amid ongoing fighting between government forces and the SDF, Mr. Sharaa issued a decree formally recognising Kurdish as a "national language" and offering citizenship to all Syrian Kurds. He also declared Newroz, the new year festival celebrated by Kurds, as a national holiday. But he said



nothing about Kurdish autonomy. His plan is to give cultural concessions while taking control of the Kurdish militias militarily.

Where do Turkiye and the U.S. stand?

Turkiye sees the PYD (the political party) and the YPG (the militia) as extended arms of the PKK (the Turkiye-based Kurdish group which has been designated as a terrorist entity by Ankara and its Western allies). Mr. Sharaa and his group, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) are close allies of Turkiye. Ankara backed Mr. Sharaa's plan to integrate the Kurdish administrative and military structures into the Syrian state. When Kurds resisted the move, in December 2025, Turkiye warned against them. In the past, Turkiye had carried out military operations to push Kurdish forces away from the Syria-Turkish border and create a buffer. Now that a peace process is under way in Turkiye between the government and the PKK, Ankara believes weakening of the SDF across the border would strengthen its hand and weaken the overall Kurdish push for confederal autonomy.

The U.S. on the other side backed the SDF in the fight against the IS. The U.S. still has some 900 troops in Syria, mostly in the Kurdish northeast. But Washington has warmed up to Damascus after Mr. Sharaa, a former designated terrorist who carried a \$10 million State Department bounty on his head, captured power. Mr. Sharaa visited Washington in November 2025 and met Mr. Trump after which Syria announced that it would join the U.S.-led coalition to fight the IS. Now that the U.S. has Damascus, it doesn't need the Kurds to maintain its presence in Syria. The U.S. and Turkiye also find common ground in establishing a centralised Syria, by strengthening the hands of Sharaa, so that the influence of Iran and Russia could be gradually neutralised.

What lies ahead?

After seizing the SDF-held regions of Aleppo, Mr. Sharaa's forces turned to areas between Aleppo and the Euphrates River. These predominantly Arab-populated regions were captured by the SDF between 2015 and 2019 after it drove out the IS. SDF positions subsequently collapsed across Raqqa and Deir al-Zour, both former IS strongholds. Reports also emerged of internal cracks within the SDF, with some Arab militias breaking ranks with YPG commanders. Dozens of IS members escaped from a prison in Hassaka which was caught in the crossfire. On January 18, Mr. Abdi, the SDF commander, agreed to a ceasefire and integration deal. Mr. Sharaa insists that the military integration of the SDF be undertaken on an "individual basis" — not as units. The ceasefire agreement also asks the SDF to hand over Raqqa and Deir al-Zour provinces "administratively and militarily" to the government; to integrate all administrative institutions in al-Hassaka into government structures; to hand over all border crossings and oil and gas fields; and to expel all non-Syrian members of the PKK from Syria.

But there seems to be serious disagreements on the degree of autonomy Kurds would retain. The agreement affirms the need "to protect the special character of the Kurdish areas". The SDF seems ready to give up Raqqa and Deir al-Zour, but they don't want to give up their positions in Kobane, al-Hassaka and Qamishli. While the Sharaa regime wants to end the SDF's local monopoly on the use of force, the SDF doesn't want government troops to be deployed in Kurdish areas. A Kurdish representative based in Europe told The Hindu that the autonomous administration has called for a general mobilisation. "Kobane is now under siege. But Kurdish fighters are defending their positions," he said.



WITH XI JINPING'S PURGE, CHINA'S MILITARY IS WEAKENED

As vice-chair of the Central Military Commission (CMC), Zhang Youxia is not just China's second-most powerful figure in its military (after President Xi Jinping). By all accounts, the country's highest-ranking general is among the few commanders with extensive combat experience (Vietnam, 1978), and his personal ties with Xi run deep. Recent revelations that Zhang, along with fellow CMC member General Liu Zhenli, is under investigation for "suspected serious violations of discipline and law" cap Xi's three-year purge of the entire top tier of China's military leadership, ostensibly on corruption charges. Should Zhang and Liu be officially dismissed, the seven-member CMC, which holds supreme authority over the 2-million-strong People's Liberation Army (PLA), will be left with only two members: Xi and the anti-corruption officer, Zhang Shengmin. Not since the era of Mao Zedong has Communist China witnessed a purge of this magnitude.

When Xi assumed power in 2012, he vowed to eradicate corruption in the PLA by cracking down on both "tigers and flies". Another round of purges began in 2023 in the PLA Rocket Force, which oversees China's missile arsenal, with reports emerging that water had been used instead of fuel in some of its missiles. This wave has culminated in the removal of Zhang, who, until now, was one of Xi's most trusted aides. While corruption has been given as the formal justification, China watchers point to another possible factor: Zhang's assessment of the PLA's operational readiness for a Taiwan invasion may not have aligned with Xi's deadline, which, according to US intelligence, is 2027. On January 1, Xi had doubled down on his Taiwan pledge, reiterating that China's "reunification" is "unstoppable". Differences between Zhang and Xi over how to achieve this objective may have sealed the former's fate.

China is a black box. Yet one thing is clear: The Chinese military stands weakened. The question, now, is where the PLA goes from here. Will the supposed anti-corruption drive strengthen the force, or will continued disruptions erode cohesion and degrade capability? Beyond operational considerations, what is also evident is that any decision regarding escalation across the Taiwan Strait will rely exclusively on Xi and his personal.

DreamIAS



NATIONAL

INDIA-BANGLADESH TIES ARE PRECARIOUS. DIAL DOWN, LET THE BANGLADESH XI PLAY IN INDIA

An unsporting spectacle is playing in the cricket arena, involving bans and ultimatums and brinkmanship. That this is unfolding between two nations and two neighbours with overlapping histories and cultural intimacies that have contributed to regional stability makes it even more of a self-goal for India and Bangladesh. Sports is not always insulated from politics, and it is true that India-Bangladesh ties are currently in a fragile moment. Even so, the ICC diktat that has forced Bangladesh out of the upcoming T20 World Cup, and the events that led up to it, showcase the takeover of an escalatory reactivity and a paralysis of long-termist diplomacy. This is more so in India, the much larger player, on and off the field.

Bangladesh's exclusion from the tournament comes after its government reiterated that its players would find it difficult to play in India because of "security concerns" after the BCCI asked the Kolkata Knight Riders to — unreasonably — remove Bangladesh seamer Mustafizur Rahman from its squad. The BCCI decision pointed to "recent developments", that is, the attacks in Bangladesh on religious minorities. The targeting of minority Hindus amid a weakening state authority on the watch of the Mohammad Yunus-led interim government is a serious concern. New Delhi has done well to flag this — loudly and clearly. But this categorical message is undermined when the BCCI, the behemoth, targets an individual player who has nothing to do with law enforcement or state policy, and when it is seen to be pandering to online troll brigades. In effect, this has only narrowed one of the few remaining spaces for people-to-people engagement, while reinforcing perceptions in Bangladesh of a heavy-handed Delhi.

Ever since the events of August 2024, when a students' uprising toppled the Sheikh Hasina government, India-Bangladesh ties have yet to recover their footing. Now, the February elections in Bangladesh offer a chance for both Delhi and Dhaka to turn the page. Even as Sheikh Hasina continues to find refuge in India — and she should — External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar's visit to Dhaka to attend Khaleda Zia's funeral, and his meeting with Tarique Rahman, her son and BNP chief, acknowledged that imperative. A Delhi-Dhaka reset will depend on both sides moving carefully — the "ghuspaithiya" rhetoric ahead of elections in Assam and West Bengal, and anti-India posturing by parties ahead of polls in Bangladesh, will be watched closely. In this precarious time, both countries must let cricket be. The Delhi-Dhaka relationship is too valuable to be hijacked by grandstanding or by letting hardliners run away with the ball. If both sides dial down and a Bangladesh XI plays in India, it will be a win-win.

MARCH OF THE REPUBLIC

President Droupadi Murmu reflected on India's democratic and development journey on the eve of India's 77th Republic Day. Her emphasis was rightly on the self-reliance of the country in all fields and India's role as a messenger of peace and stability in a world that is increasingly fractious. Ms. Murmu highlighted recent national achievements and touched upon political and cultural themes that are currently the priorities of the Centre. She noted that the national song, Vande Mataram, was a "lyrical national prayer" even as the country celebrates the 150th anniversary of its composition, and also paid tribute to Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, whose 150th birth anniversary was celebrated recently, for his role in unifying the nation. The commander-in-chief also hailed the success of Operation Sindoor, which involved precision strikes against terror infrastructure,

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and credited it to India's growing self-reliance in defence. The President said India's progress towards becoming the third largest global economy was well on track, and commended economic reforms such as the GST and the new Labour Codes. She noted the great strides achieved by the country's women in fields ranging from agriculture to space, and their critical role as voters. Farmers, sanitation workers, teachers, scientists, and healthcare professionals also found special mention in the President's speech.

The President invoked the idea of constitutional nationalism. Republic Day celebrations are an annual occasion to revisit the ideals of the Constitution and to review its progress in principle and practice. Cataloguing the achievements of the country is motivating, but also essential on such occasions is self-reflection. Economic growth or military prowess are not the sole markers of progress for any nation. Singing paeans to the Constitution is one thing, but delivering on its principles by protecting the rights of citizens and discharging the duties of the state is quite another. The state in its self-congratulatory posture, as reflected in the President's speech, must not ignore the many struggles of the citizenry that persist even in the eighth decade of the Republic. Civilisational pride cannot be a ruse to overshadow the material questions of the present. Republic Day celebrates the ideals of the Constitution. Sectarian politics, the weakening of the federal character of the Republic, and corruption should not be allowed to undermine those ideals.

VS AND DHARMENDRA AMONG FIVE PADMA VIBHUSHAN AWARDEES

Actor Dharmendra Singh Deol and former Kerala Chief Minister and CPM veteran V S Achuthanandan have been honoured with the Padma Vibhushan posthumously. The nation's second-highest civilian honour has also been conferred on former Supreme Court judge K T Thomas, Hindustani classical violinist N Rajam, and Malayalam journalist P Narayanan.

Key Takeaways:

— Former Jharkhand Chief Minister Shibu Soren, the face of the Jharkhand movement that led to the birth of the state, has been awarded the Padma Bhushan posthumously. The awards for VS and Soren signal the government's acknowledgement of the roles the two Opposition leaders played.

— In all, the President has approved 131 Padma awards this year – five Padma Vibhushan, 13 Padma Bhushan and 113 Padma Shri awards. The list includes 19 women, six foreigners/NRI/PIO/OCI, and 16 posthumous conferments. The awards, announced annually on Republic Day, are presented by the President at ceremonial functions in Rashtrapati Bhavan, usually in March or April.

— Among the Padma Vibhushan awardees is Justice K T Thomas who served in the Supreme Court between 1995 and 2002 and is remembered for a series of consequential judgments touching upon free speech, sentencing principles and judicial accountability. Post-retirement, he chaired and served on several committees on legal and judicial reforms, contributing to policy thinking on criminal justice and constitutional interpretation.

— P Narayanan, also honoured with the Padma Vibhushan, served as chief editor of Janmabhoomi, a daily newspaper with close ties to the RSS. He had worked as a pracharak in North Kerala and been the state convenor for the Swadeshi Jagran Manch.



— Among the Padma Bhushan awardees are veteran actor Mammooty, whose four-decade-long career has shaped contemporary Malayalam cinema, and Vellappally Natesan, senior Ezhava leader and general secretary of the Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam, credited with establishing more than 130 educational institutions and wielding considerable influence among OBC communities.

— Also in the Padma Bhushan list is former Uttarakhand Chief Minister and ex-Maharashtra Governor Bhagat Singh Koshyari who has been honoured for public affairs. Others in the Padma Bhushan list include advertising veteran Piyush Pandey (posthumous), banker Uday Kotak, senior BJP leader V K Malhotra (posthumous), playback singer Alka Yagnik, and tennis legend Vijay Amritraj.

— The Padma Shri recipients include cricketers Rohit Sharma and Harmanpreet Kaur Bhullar who have both led India to World Cup wins; women's hockey goalkeeper Savita Punia; actors R Madhavan and Satish Shah (posthumous); former UGC Chairman Mamidala Jagadesh Kumar; retired IPS officer K Vijay Kumar who led the team against bandit-smuggler Veerappan; neonatologist Armida Fernandez who established Asia's first human milk bank in Mumbai; Ayodhya excavation archaeologist Buddha Rashmi Mani; former Prasar Bharati CEO Shashi Shekhar Vempati; and RVS Mani, former Under Secretary in the Ministry of Home Affairs.

— Group Captain Shubhanshu Shukla, the first Indian to the International Space Station (ISS), has been honoured with Ashoka Chakra — India's highest peacetime gallantry award. On the eve of Republic Day, President Droupadi Murmu also approved gallantry awards to 69 other Armed Forces personnel, including six who would receive the honour posthumously.

— The gallantry decorations include three Kirti Chakras; 13 Shaurya Chakras (one posthumous); one Bar to Sena Medal (Gallantry); 44 Sena Medals (Gallantry) (five posthumous); six Nao Sena Medals (Gallantry), and two Vayu Sena Medals (Gallantry).

— Group Captain Shukla flew to the ISS as part of the Axiom-4 mission in June last year. IAF officer and astronaut Group Captain Prasanth Balakrishnan Nair, Major Arshdeep Singh of 1 Assam Rifles, and Naib Subedar Doleshwar Subba of 2 Para (SF) have been awarded Kirti Chakra.

— Ten Army personnel and two women officers of the Navy have been awarded the Shaurya Chakra. The women Navy officers include Lieutenant Commander Dilna K and Lieutenant Commander Roopa A.

— The Citation for Lieutenant Commander Dilna K, selected for Navika Sagar Parikrama II, a pioneering dual-handed circumnavigation aboard INSV Tarini between October 2, 2024 and May 29, 2025, states that she sailed over 25,600 nautical miles through the Indian, Pacific, Atlantic and Southern Oceans.

Do You Know:

— Padma Awards, one of the highest civilian awards of the country, are conferred in three categories, namely, Padma Vibhushan, Padma Bhushan and Padma Shri.

— The awards are given in various disciplines and fields of activities – art, social work, public affairs, science and engineering, trade and industry, medicine, literature and education, sports, civil service, etc.



- Except for interruptions in 1978, 1979 and between 1993 and 1997, every year the names of the recipients of Padma Awards are announced on Republic Day eve and are conferred by the President of India at ceremonial functions which are held at Rashtrapati Bhawan usually in March – April every year.
- The awardees do not get any cash reward but a certificate signed by the President apart from a medallion which they can wear at public and government functions.
- While a Padma awardee can be given a higher award (i.e. a Padma Shri awardee can receive a Padma Bhushan or Vibhushan), this can only happen after five years of the conferment of the previous award.
- Notably, all persons without distinction of race, occupation, position or sex are eligible for these awards. However, government servants including those working with PSUs, except doctors and scientists, are not eligible for these awards.
- There is no rigid criteria or trenchant formula for selection, according to the Ministry of Home Affairs. However, the lifetime achievement of an individual is among the main considerations.
- All nominations received for Padma awards are placed before the Padma Awards Committee, which is constituted by the Prime Minister every year. The Padma Awards Committee is headed by the Cabinet Secretary and includes Home Secretary, Secretary to the President and four to six eminent persons as members. The recommendations of the committee are submitted to the Prime Minister and the President of India for approval.

CAMELS, PONIES, RAPTORS AT R-DAY PARADE: ROLE OF ARMY ANIMAL WING

At the annual Republic Day parades, the Indian Army's Remount and Veterinary Corps (RVC) are generally represented by the dog squad. This year, in a first, other animals will also be part of the parade.

Key Takeaways:

- Making the moment even more significant in the 247-year history of the Corps, the contingent will march under the leadership of a woman officer, Captain Harshita Raghav, one of the first women inducted into the RVC in 2023.
- The RVC is a specialised Corps of the Indian Army responsible for the breeding, rearing, and training of Army animals, including horses, mules and Army dogs. It ensures the operational readiness of these animals for combat, reconnaissance, and logistics, particularly in high-altitude and difficult terrain, while also providing veterinary care and supporting counter-terrorism operations.
- The RVC is one of the oldest branches of the Indian Army, tracing its foundation to the Stud Department established in Bengal in 1779. After periodic reorganisations — from Army Veterinary Corps (India) in 1920 to Indian Remount and Veterinary Corps in 1950 — it was formally established as the Remount and Veterinary Corps in 1960. The Corps motto is 'Pashu Seva Asmakam Dharma (Service to animals is our duty)'.
- The RVC has played a vital role in all conflicts before and after Independence, including the First and Second World Wars. In 1989, the Corps, headquartered in Meerut, was awarded the President's Flag for its meritorious service.

4TH FLOOR SHATABDI TOWER, SAKCHI, JAMSHEDPUR



— The RVC's contribution to logistics is crucial. Mules continue to be a reliable and cost-effective means of transporting essential military supplies in difficult and high-altitude areas, where vehicles or aircraft cannot reach. Meanwhile, Army dogs are equipped with specialised skills, including explosive and mine detection, tracking, guarding, disaster and avalanche rescue, search missions, and combat roles.

— Apart from military duties, the RVC is also involved in strengthening military diplomacy by providing horse riding training under the NCC, veterinary assistance in remote areas, participation in United Nations missions and providing trained animals to friendly countries.

— The RVC will for the first time present a specially curated animal contingent at the Parade, highlighting its vital operational role as a force multiplier in difficult terrains. The contingent will also underscore the enduring bond between soldiers and animals in safeguarding the nation.

— Leading the contingent will be Bactrian camels, inducted for animal transport in the cold deserts of Ladakh. Adapted to extreme cold and altitudes above 15,000 feet, these camels can carry loads of up to 250 kilograms and negotiate steep gradients and sandy terrain, supporting logistics and mounted patrolling along the Line of Actual Control (LAC).

— They will be followed by indigenous Zanskar ponies from Ladakh, known for exceptional endurance at high altitudes and sub-zero temperatures. Despite their small stature, these ponies carry loads of 40 to 60 kilograms over long distances and are employed for logistics and patrol duties in high Himalayan regions, including Siachen.

— Army Dogs, the more experienced participants, will be at the rear of the contingent. The RVC has recently (2023-2025) inducted indigenous dog breeds such as Mudhol, Rampur, Chippiparai, Kombai, and Rajapalayam as part of the indigenous breeds drive, after the Mudhol Hound became the first Indian breed formally taken up by the RVC in 2016. The contingent will also feature four raptors.

— RVC units were actively involved in Sri Lanka as part of the Indian Peace Keeping Force. During the Kargil conflict, the corps was closely involved in ensuring operational requirements of animal transport at far-flung posts were met efficiently. More recently, the Corp was active during the Wayanad floods in August 2024, and the Himachal and Uttarakhand floods last year.

— Many of the animals, particularly, the highly specialised trained dogs, have been known to lay down their lives in the call of duty.

— In 2024, Kent, a six-year-old Labrador, died while shielding her handler from a terrorist encounter. In another operation, the Indian army lost their K-9 dog Phantom of 9 Paras SF in a terrorist gunfire in J&K's Akhnoor district. Mansi and Axel are other martyrs from this corps of "silent warriors." Phantom and Kent have also been conferred gallantry awards for their supreme sacrifice for the nation.

2-MINUTE SILENCE ON JANUARY 30: HOW THE TRADITION BEGAN

Shyamlal Yadav writes- "Every year at 11 am on January 30, Mahatma Gandhi's death anniversary, the President lays a wreath at Rajghat. The Vice President of India, the Prime Minister, the Defence Minister and other dignitaries, too, pay floral tributes, after which a two-minute silence is observed to pay homage to those who sacrificed their lives during India's freedom. This is



followed by the Indian Army band playing the Last Post, a solemn British military bugle call to honour fallen soldiers.”

Key Takeaways:

— “Though the two-minute silence and the bugle call is a January 30 ritual, it was only in 1955 that the tradition began and the day came to be observed as Martyrs’ Day. Documents released a few months ago on the Nehru Archive, a digital library of the writings and speeches of India’s first Prime Minister, show that it all began with a letter that Field Marshal K M Cariappa, then High Commissioner of India to Australia and New Zealand, wrote to Nehru in 1954.”

— “In his letter dated May 14, 1954, Cariappa wrote that a minute’s silence should be observed on January 26, Republic Day, in the memory of those who sacrificed their lives for the country’s freedom. Cariappa also suggested that the minute’s silence should be observed simultaneously all across India.”

— “The idea appealed to Pandit Nehru, but he doubted if it was practical for all of India to simultaneously observe a minute’s silence. Instead, he suggested, that it be observed wherever a parade was being held. Pandit Nehru then referred the matter to the Coordination Committee that was in charge of the arrangements for the Republic Day celebrations in New Delhi.”

— “While some of the committee members were in favour of the proposal, others felt that Republic Day would not be an appropriate day for such an event. Some members also felt that it would be difficult to organise a minute’s silence given the celebrations and the parade that day.”

— “The letters show that some of the members of the Coordination Committee went on to suggest that January 30 was a more appropriate day to observe the one-minute silence. Nehru, too, was also in favour of observing it on January 30, the day Gandhi was assassinated.”

— “On January 26, 1955, Nehru wrote to the Chief CMs again — this time conveying his decision. By then, Cariappa’s suggestion of a one-minute silence had been revised to two minutes. “I would remind you that January 30 will be a Day of Remembrance for those who sacrificed their lives in the cause of India’s freedom. At 11 o’clock that day there should be a two-minute silence everywhere.”

— “Meanwhile, Cariappa wasn’t happy with the shape his suggestion had taken. On June 23, 1958, he wrote to Nehru, expressing his disagreement with the “military guard firing a ‘feu-de-joie’, sounding of the Last Post on bugles and so on, as is done at Military funerals” at Rajghat on January 30. Cariappa found it “out of place” in that atmosphere of “sanctity, purity and solemnity”.”

— Nehru replied the next day, on June 24, 1958, disagreeing. “There was a great deal of discussion amongst us whether we should have a military guard firing a ‘feu de-joie.’ We ultimately decided that we should have it.” The matter didn’t end there. Nehru kept reminding the CMs and other dignitaries about the two-minute silence. His note dated January 18, 1959, reads, “...I am told that this two minutes’ silence, gathering together of all people in the office, has not been very successfully managed. Perhaps, it would be better for office people to gather in a number of places inside the office, in small groups, at 11, and at the strike of 11, stand up and observe the two minutes’ silence.”



WHEN CAN COURTS INTERFERE IN AN ONGOING INVESTIGATION?

The story so far:

The Supreme Court recently in *State of U.P. & Anr versus Mohd Arshad Khan & Anr* (December 2025) set aside the Allahabad High Court's order and held that "directing a time-bound investigation must remain the exception rather than the norm". The Court said that High Courts should intervene only "where delay itself begins to cause prejudice". The Court also did not find any justification for granting protection from arrest (or coercive action) without granting the relief actually prayed for — quashing the First Information Report (FIR). Earlier in November 2025, the Delhi High Court in *Satya Prakash Bagla versus State & Ors.* held that the phrase "coercive measures" did not apply to freezing of bank accounts by the police during investigation. It said that the intent of the phrase "coercive measures" was not to restrain further investigation by the police, but was used in the context of only the petitioner's personal liberty.

When can courts interfere?

A three-judge Bench of the Supreme Court in *Neeharika Infrastructure (P) Ltd. versus State of Maharashtra* (2021) discussed the scope of the High Court's powers to quash an investigation or pass interim orders staying an investigation. The Supreme Court said that the police have the statutory right and duty under the relevant provisions of the Code of Criminal Procedure (CrPC) to investigate into a cognisable offence. The courts should not thwart any investigation into such offences. It is only in cases where no cognisable offence, or offence of any kind, is disclosed in the FIR, that the Court can stop an investigation. Thus, the power of quashing should be exercised sparingly with circumspection. Courts are barred from usurping the jurisdiction of the police, since the two organs of the state operate in two specific spheres of activity and one must not tread over the other, save in exceptional cases where non-interference would result in a miscarriage of justice.

What about using the phrase 'coercive measures'?

The Supreme Court in *Neeharika Infrastructure* (supra) observed that the High Courts had passed interim orders to stay arrest and said that "no coercive steps [should] be taken against the accused" without assigning any reasons. The Supreme Court held that the High Court is not justified in passing such orders either during the investigation or till the investigation is completed. It also dismissed the quashing of the petition under Section 482 CrPC (Section 528 BNSS) and Article 226 of the Constitution.

Whenever an interim order is passed by the High Court of "no coercive steps to be adopted", the High Court must clarify what it means by that phrase as the term is too vague and broad, and can be easily misunderstood or misapplied. Therefore, while passing a 'no coercive steps' order, if the High Court intends to stay the investigation, it must specifically state so and must assign reasons thereof. Such reasons, however brief, must disclose an application of mind.

However, the Delhi High Court in *Satya Prakash Bagla* (supra) said that the expressions 'coercive measure' and 'coercive steps' derive their meaning, import and significance from the context and the nature of the proceedings in which they are used. To ascertain the court's intention in employing these expressions in a given order, it is necessary to examine the nature of the relief or protection that was sought, and what the court intended to grant to a party at the relevant stage of the proceedings. It would, therefore, be neither appropriate nor judicious for a court to attribute



to these expressions any inflexible, or predetermined meaning. The High Court clarified that the mere articulation of the phrases ‘no coercive measure’ or ‘no coercive steps’ with reference to a person cannot be construed as necessarily implying a stay or suspension of any ongoing investigation against that person.

CAN THE ED FILE WRIT PETITIONS BEFORE COURTS?

The story so far:

On January 20, the Supreme Court agreed to examine whether the Enforcement Directorate (ED) is entitled to invoke the writ jurisdiction of constitutional courts to seek relief. A Bench comprising Justices Dipankar Datta and Satish Chandra Sharma admitted separate petitions filed by the Kerala and Tamil Nadu governments challenging a Kerala High Court ruling that upheld the agency’s right to do so. Taking note of the substantial question of law raised by the Opposition-ruled States, the Bench directed that the matter be listed for hearing after four weeks.

When can courts issue writs?

In India, the Supreme Court is vested with the power to issue prerogative writs under Article 32 of the Constitution, while High Courts exercise a similar jurisdiction under Article 226. These writs trace their origins to English common law, where they evolved as extraordinary remedies issued by the sovereign in situations where ordinary legal remedies were unavailable or ineffective.

The Constitution recognises five such writs — habeas corpus (to secure the release of a person from unlawful detention), mandamus (to compel a public authority to perform a statutory or public duty), prohibition (to restrain a lower court or tribunal from acting beyond its authority), certiorari (to quash an order of a lower court or tribunal for lack of jurisdiction or illegality), and quo warranto (to question the legality of a person’s claim to a public office).

While Article 32 enables the Supreme Court to issue writs primarily for the enforcement of fundamental rights, Article 226 vests High Courts with broader authority, allowing them to issue writs not only for enforcing fundamental rights but also “for any other purpose”, including the enforcement of legal rights and the review of administrative action. However, the grant of such writs is discretionary, and courts may decline relief where an effective alternative remedy is already available.

Further, under Article 361 of the Constitution, a writ of mandamus cannot be issued against the President or the Governor of a State with respect to the exercise and performance of the powers and duties of their office. A writ also does not ordinarily lie against private individuals or bodies, except in cases where the state is alleged to have acted in collusion with a private party in violation of constitutional or statutory provisions.

Why did Kerala approach the SC?

The dispute traces its origin to a September 26, 2025 ruling of a Division Bench of the Kerala High Court, which held that the ED, established by the Union government under Section 36 of the Foreign Exchange Management Act, 1999 (1999 Act) pursuant to a June 2000 notification, is a statutory body entitled to invoke the writ jurisdiction of High Courts under Article 226 of the Constitution.



The ruling arose from a writ petition filed by the ED challenging the Kerala government's decision to constitute a Commission of Inquiry (CoI) in connection with the diplomatic gold smuggling case. The case relates to the seizure of 30 kg of gold, valued at ₹14.82 crore, from diplomatic baggage arriving from the United Arab Emirates at the Thiruvananthapuram International Airport on July 5, 2020. The National Investigation Agency subsequently registered a case under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, 1967, alongside parallel proceedings initiated by the ED under the Prevention of Money Laundering Act, 2002 (PMLA).

The case later emerged as a flashpoint between the Centre and the State after Swapna Prabha Suresh, the prime accused, released an audio clip alleging that ED officials had coerced her into implicating persons holding high office in the State. Similar allegations were subsequently made in a letter by a co-accused. Acting on these allegations, the Pinarayi Vijayan government had tasked the inquiry commission to probe if there was a conspiracy afoot against the State's leaders and, if so, to unearth the identity of those behind the plot.

The ED, thereafter, through its Deputy Director, approached the High Court challenging the May 7, 2021, notification constituting the CoI. It sought a writ of mandamus to call for the relevant records and a writ of certiorari to quash the notification on the ground that it was wholly without jurisdiction and contrary to law.

However, the Kerala government questioned the ED's locus to maintain a writ petition, contending that it is merely a department of the Union government and not a juristic person or body corporate capable of suing or being sued. It further argued that the agency's only available remedy lay under Article 131 of the Constitution, which vests the Supreme Court with exclusive jurisdiction to adjudicate disputes between the Centre and the States. To buttress its contention, the State also relied on the Supreme Court's 2003 ruling in *Chief Conservator of Forests, Government of Andhra Pradesh versus Collector*, which had deprecated the practice of Centre and State governments filing writ petitions against each other before High Courts.

What did the High Court rule?

In August 2021, a single judge of the High Court rejected the State government's objection to the maintainability of the ED's writ petition, observing that ED officers exercise statutory powers and that the agency cannot be treated as merely a department of the Union government. The State's appeal against this decision was dismissed by a Division Bench in its September 2025 ruling.

The Bench, comprising Justices Sushrut Arvind Dharmadhikari and Syam Kumar V.M., reiterated that the ED is a statutory body and that its officers are designated statutory authorities under Sections 48 and 49 of the PMLA. Rejecting the State's contention that the agency lacked juristic personality and the capacity to sue, the Bench observed that such an objection amounted to a "trivial defect" and was "a matter of form and not substance", which could not defeat the ED's statutory right to seek recourse under Article 226 of the Constitution.

What have Kerala and Tamil Nadu argued before the Supreme Court?

In its appeal before the top court, the Kerala government objected to the High Court's characterisation of its challenge to the maintainability of the ED's writ petition as a "trivial defect". It pointed out that the Supreme Court, in *Chief Conservator of Forests*, had held that the capacity of a legal entity — natural or artificial — to sue or be sued is a matter of considerable importance and that proceedings would fail if the necessary party lacked such capacity.



The State further contended that the Deputy Director of the ED, being only an officer and not a juristic person, lacked the locus to file a writ petition. “Hence, he also could not have filed a writ petition. Therefore, the finding of the High Court that the Deputy Director of Enforcement has locus standi to institute the writ petition is erroneous... Neither the provisions of the 1999 Act nor the PMLA confer any legal personality on the ED so as to entitle it to be treated as a juristic person competent to sue,” the petition stated. Tamil Nadu, supporting Kerala’s challenge, submitted that it had been placed in nearly identical circumstances. It alleged that the ED had indulged in a “gross and blatant abuse of the process of law” by filing a writ petition before the Madras High Court in connection with proceedings relating to alleged illegal mining in the State. In a separate appeal before the Supreme Court, Tamil Nadu argued that the Kerala High Court’s ruling had “emboldened the ED to venture a similar line of action” before the Madras High Court in its case.

What are the possible implications?

“It is contested whether the ED can be placed on the same footing as statutory bodies such as the Securities and Exchange Board of India or the Reserve Bank of India, which are juristic entities with perpetual succession and an express statutory capacity to sue and be sued”, Alok Prasanna Kumar, co-founder of the Vidhi Centre for Legal Policy, told The Hindu. He noted that the ED is widely regarded as an instrumentality of the Union government, prosecuting cases on its behalf rather than functioning as an autonomous legal entity. Mr. Kumar further pointed out that the ED does not have any independent legal rights vis-à-vis State governments. “State governments do not owe any ‘public duty’ to the ED that could justify the issuance of a writ of mandamus or certiorari against them. At best, the allegation may be that a State has encroached upon the powers of the ED as an arm of the Union government. Such a claim would have to be pursued as a Centre-State dispute under Article 131 of the Constitution, over which the Supreme Court has exclusive jurisdiction”, he said.

‘STRIKING INTRUSION’: SC JUDGE FLAGS GOVT INTERVENTION IN JUDICIAL TRANSFERS

Supreme Court judge Justice Ujjal Bhuyan Saturday flagged concerns about the functioning of the collegium system, warning that executive influence over judicial transfers undermines judicial independence.

— “When the collegium itself records that a transfer is being made at the request of the Central Government, it reveals a striking intrusion of the executive into a process that is constitutionally meant to be independent and immune from executive and political influence,” he said.

— Speaking at the Principal GV Pandit Memorial Lecture at ILS Law College, Pune, Justice Bhuyan said, “By the very nature of things, the Central Government can have no say in the transfer and posting of the HC judges. That is exclusively within the domain of the judiciary.”

— His remarks come against the backdrop of controversy last year when the SC Collegium modified its proposal to transfer Justice Atul Sreedharan from the MP HC to the Chhattisgarh HC and instead recommended his transfer to the Allahabad HC. The collegium expressly recorded that the change was made “on consideration sought by the Government”.

— Justice Bhuyan said that after the judiciary had “repelled the Government’s attempt to replace the collegium system,” it had become even more important for the judiciary, more so for the members of the collegium, to ensure that it continued to function independently.



— Questioning the rationale behind transfers following adverse rulings, Justice Bhuyan asked, “Why should a judge be transferred from one High Court to another High Court just because he had passed certain inconvenient orders against the Government? Does it not affect the independence of the judiciary?” Such actions, he warned, undermine judicial independence, which is a basic feature of the Constitution.

— He cautioned that the judiciary’s independence is more vulnerable to internal compromise within the institution. The issue, he said, was not limited to the collegium as a mechanism but went to the heart of how constitutional power is exercised by judges themselves.

— “Constitutional morality is the soul of democratic governance, he said, “in our scheme of things, constitutional morality must outweigh the argument of public morality”, stressing that constitutional courts are “by their very nature counter-majoritarian”.

Do You Know:

— Collegium is the system of appointment of Judges of the higher judiciary, which evolved through a series of Supreme Court judgments known as “Judges Cases.”

— The doctrine of separation of powers stands for a form of government in which the mechanism of governance is divided into three branches, namely Legislature, Executive and the Judiciary in the majority of democratic nations.

— The doctrine of separation of powers evolved with the famous work of Aristotle, The Politics, in which he discussed the concept and stated that every constitution should include different branches of government, namely the judiciary, public officials, and the deliberative branch.

— In the 18th century, French jurist and philosopher Baron de Montesquieu meticulously developed the notion of the separation of powers in his book, The Spirit of Laws.

— Montesquieu increased the weight and independence of the judiciary. He asserted that these three powers must be separate and act independently to avoid totalitarian rule and to protect individual liberty.

WHAT IS THE SALMAN KHAN PERSONALITY RIGHTS CASE?

The story so far:

The High Court of Delhi issued a notice on January 21, 2026, to actor Salman Khan on an application filed by a China-based AI voice generation platform seeking to vacate an interim injunction protecting the actor’s personality rights. While the main matter was heard on January 23 by the Joint Registrar (Judicial), the Chinese app’s application is listed for February 27.

Who is John Doe?

The original suit named 28 defendants, including major technology companies such as Apple Inc., Google LLC, Meta’s Facebook and Instagram, X, e-commerce platforms including Amazon India and Flipkart, and intermediaries like Telegram FZ LLC. Mr. Khan also sought an injunction against unknown persons, joined as Defendant No. 1 ('John Doe' or 'Ashok Kumar'), a procedural device that allows courts to pass ex-parte orders where defendants cannot be identified.



The Chinese AI platform was later added as Defendant No. 35, though it is yet to be formally impleaded following the order of the Joint Registrar (Judicial).

How do personality rights operate?

In *K.S. Puttaswamy v. Union of India* (2017), the Supreme Court recognised privacy as a fundamental right under Article 21. Courts have since held that unauthorised commercial exploitation of an individual's persona may infringe the right to life. Personality rights recognise the economic value of identity, particularly for public figures, and are distinct from statutory intellectual property rights.

In a 2025 order involving Aishwarya Rai Bachchan, the Delhi High Court noted that unauthorised use of a celebrity's identity could cause commercial harm. Courts have restrained false impersonation, unauthorised use of images and names by websites and AI tools, and the creation of manipulated or inappropriate content.

While Article 19(1)(g) guarantees Indian citizens the right to conduct business, this right is subject to reasonable restrictions. Courts have also protected artistic expression, provided such works do not mislead the public or imply endorsement. Foreign entities, however, cannot invoke Article 19 before Indian courts.

What is the Chinese app context?

In 2020, the Union government banned over 200 Chinese applications under Section 69A of the Information Technology Act, citing national security concerns related to data collection and storage. Although the Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023, has been passed, enforcement remains pending, leaving gaps in regulation, particularly in the AI sector. Nandan Nilekani recently said voice-based AI is critical for digital equity and could be like a UPI-moment for India. A dismissal of the Chinese platform's application could have broader implications for misuse by AI companies.

What about fees in celebrity suits?

Personality rights claims are typically filed under the Commercial Courts Act, 2015, since celebrities rarely hold conventional IP rights over their identity. Courts have, however, allowed interim injunctions without upfront payment of court fees in several cases, granting extensions under procedural provisions. This practice has attracted scrutiny, given the high brand valuations often cited in such suits. Recent scrutiny in the European Union of generative AI systems such as Elon Musk's Grok highlights similar regulatory concerns.

In India, while the IT Rules, 2021 provide takedown mechanisms, the limited effectiveness of grievance redressal systems has pushed public figures to seek relief directly from High Courts. Ensuring protection against digital impersonation from celebrities to citizens remains a pressing concern.

SC: MENSTRUAL HEALTH IS A PART OF FUNDAMENTAL RIGHT TO LIFE

Saying that the right to menstrual health is a part of the right to life under Article 21 of the Constitution, the Supreme Court on Friday directed all States and Union Territories to put in place Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM) measures, including gender-segregated toilets and free sanitary napkins, in all government as well as private schools.



Key Takeaways:

— Issuing a slew of directions, the bench of Justices J B Pardiwala and R Mahadevan asked the Centre, States and UTs to ensure compliance within three months.

— Citing provisions of the Right to Education Act, the court also warned of stringent consequences for non-compliance, including the de-recognition of private schools and holding state governments directly accountable for failures in public institutions.

— The absence of MHM measures “does not merely disrupt a girl child’s presence in school,” it said. “It impairs her access to opportunities both during schooling and later in life. The absence of MHM measures at school would lead to recurrent absenteeism, which would result in gap in learning...”

— “Access to safe, effective and affordable menstrual hygiene management measures helps a girl child attain the highest standard of sexual and reproductive health. The right to healthy reproductive life embraces the right to access education and information about sexual health,” the bench said.

— It directed that all the existing and newly constructed toilets in schools should be designed, constructed and maintained so as to ensure privacy and accessibility, including by catering to the needs of children with disabilities and “all school toilets shall be equipped with functional hand-washing facilities, with soap and water available at all times.”

— The schools should provide “oxo-biodegradable sanitary napkins manufactured in compliance with the ASTM D-6954 standards free of cost,” it said.

— Referring to the Schedule to the Right to Education Act, which says that school buildings shall have “barrier-free access” and “separate toilets for boys and girls”, the bench said Section 19 of the Act states that no school shall be recognised until it fulfils the norms laid down in the Schedule.

— The bench also directed district education officers (DEO) “to conduct periodic inspections, preferably once in a year, of school infrastructure, particularly with regard to toilet and washing facilities, availability of menstrual absorbents, sanitary waste disposal mechanisms and training/awareness measures undertaken by the concerned school.”

— To spread awareness and provide training about menstrual health and puberty, the bench asked the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) and the State Council of Educational Research and Training (SCERT) to “incorporate gender-responsive curricula, more particularly, on menstruation, puberty and other related health concerns (PCOS, PCOD, etc.), with a view to break stigma and taboo associated with menstrual health and hygiene.”

— It also asked the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR), or, as the case may be, the State Commission for Protection of Child Rights (SCPCR), “to oversee the implementation” of its directions.

Do You Know:

— The court issued a continuing mandamus — a judicial order through which it keeps a matter pending to monitor compliance — directing the Centre and states to ensure free sanitary napkins and functional toilets in all schools.



— Both the High Courts and the Supreme Court can be approached for violation or enactment of fundamental rights through five kinds of writs:

- Habeas corpus (related to personal liberty in cases of illegal detentions and wrongful arrests)
- Mandamus — directing public officials, governments, courts to perform a statutory duty;
- Quo warranto — to show by what warrant is a person holding public office;
- Prohibition — directing judicial or quasi-judicial authorities to stop proceedings which it has no jurisdiction for; and
- Certiorari — re-examination of an order given by judicial, quasi-judicial or administrative authorities.

— The RTE Act guarantees free elementary education for children of ages 6-14. Government schools are required to provide free education to all enrolled children; aided schools must provide free seats proportionate to the aid they receive.

STAY THE COURSE

On Thursday, the Supreme Court of India stayed the University Grants Commission (UGC)'s Promotion of Equity in Higher Education Institutions rules, calling them "too sweeping". Notified in January, the rules sought to address all forms of discrimination, in particular caste-based, on campuses after years of activism, litigation and tragic suicides such as Rohith Vemula that shocked the nation's conscience. The Court had mandated the UGC to draw up these rules. The 2012 UGC framework on this issue had been almost completely ignored by HEIs. Caste and caste-based discrimination is a persisting reality and addressing it should be a political, social and educational priority. Many students have faced it, leaving lifelong scars, and sometimes ruining lives. UGC figures show that the number of such complaints in HEIs has more than doubled in the last five years. The draft rules were made public last year for discussion and the rules have been notified with changes. There is a case that the new rules are a dilution of the 2012 framework that identified many more and pressing forms of discrimination, and had separate sections that dealt with problems faced by SC/ST students such as not fulfilling reservation norms. But what is different is that the new rules seek to implement the setting up of equal opportunity centres, equity committees, equity helplines and squads, and time bound complaint resolution through better monitoring, oversight and representation in the inquiry committees. An HEI's non-compliance with these rules can invite UGC action, potentially bolstering compliance.

Campuses in parts of northern India have seen protests against the new rules on two counts. The rules define caste-based discrimination as only those against SC/STs and OBCs, and there is no provision for action against false complaints. At one level, the former may seem unfair to general category students who appear to have been denied recourse. Though it is self-evident that caste-based discrimination is almost exclusively against lower castes, the Court could consider leaving out the explicit definition. This may mar the political signalling in the context of what led to the original Court directive but could be considered so as to achieve the overall goal of the new rules. Also, the draft rules of 2025 offered provisions for addressing false complaints. Putting them back in could have a chilling effect on complainants from marginalised sections. But a solution could ensure that only complaints proven to be motivated to frame someone were actionable, not all complaints that were merely unable to prove discrimination.



SUPREME COURT STAYS NEW UGC RULES ON CASTE BIAS: 'WILL DIVIDE SOCIETY'

In a significant order on the new rules to deal with discrimination on campuses, mainly over caste, the Supreme Court on Thursday stayed the University Grants Commission (Promotion of Equity in Higher Education Institutions) Regulations, 2026, observing that they raise important questions which, if left unexamined, could have “very sweeping consequences” and “divide society”.

— Issuing notice to the Centre and UGC on three petitions challenging the new rules, a bench of Chief Justice of India Surya Kant and Justice Joymalya Bagchi ordered that “the 2026 Regulations be kept in abeyance”. “In exercise of our powers under Article 142, we further direct that the 2012 Regulations will continue in force till further orders,” the bench ordered.

— Hearing the matter, the bench also said orally that the Government must constitute a committee of eminent jurists to address the issue.

— The petitioners — Mritunjay Tiwari, advocate Vineet Jindal and Rahul Dewan — have primarily challenged Section 3(1)(c) of the Regulations, saying it refers to discrimination only on the basis of caste or tribe against the members of SC, ST and OBC communities while excluding those from the general category.

— CJI Kant pointed out that there may be instances of economically well-off students within a caste harassing others within the same caste, and sought to know how the Regulations address such a scenario.

— How do the 2026 regulations differ from the 2012 guidelines?

— Definitions of discrimination vs caste-based discrimination: The 2026 regulations defines ‘discrimination’ (section 3(1)(e)) and ‘caste-based discrimination’ (section 3(1)(c)) separately, while the 2012 version defines ‘discrimination’.

— Under the new guidelines, caste discrimination is “discrimination only on the basis of caste or tribe against the members of the scheduled castes, scheduled tribes, and other backward classes.” This definition was challenged before the Supreme Court for excluding the general category.

— This is similar to the 2012 regulations, but the latter included language and ethnicity in addition to religion, caste, gender, and disability. The 2012 regulations also separately defined ‘harassment’, ‘victimisation’, and ‘ragging’, which are omitted from the new guidelines.

— SPECIFIC FORMS OF DISCRIMINATION NOT DEFINED IN 2026: The 2012 regulations listed specific forms of discrimination, harassment, or victimisation. This included breaching the reservation policy in admissions; discrimination in accepting and processing applications for admissions; limiting or denying access to benefits for students; announcing the names of castes, tribes, religion or region of students; labelling students as ‘reserved category’...

— These specific forms of discrimination have been left out of the 2026 regulations, which task the ‘equal opportunity centre’ within institutions to prepare and disseminate an illustrative list of acts that shall be construed as discrimination.

— The new rules also instruct institutions to ensure that any selection, segregation, or allocation into hostels, classrooms, mentorship groups, or any other academic purposes is transparent, fair, and non-discriminatory.



— PUNITIVE ACTION NOW INTRODUCED: Under the new rules, non-compliant institutions can be debarred from participating in UGC schemes, offering degree and online programmes, or removed from the list of institutions that can receive central grants.

— The UGC is also required to establish a monitoring mechanism to review progress made in achieving the objectives of the regulations and to constitute a national-level monitoring committee to oversee the implementation. The old regulations did not provide for any such action.

— EQUAL OPPORTUNITY CENTRES AND PROCEDURES: While the 2012 regulations provided for 'Equal Opportunity Cells' to be set up at institutions to promote equality, they did not specify the composition and functions of these cells, or the procedure to be followed in an instance of discrimination.

— The 2026 version mandates 'Equal Opportunity Centres' at institutions, with 'equity committees' which must be represented by OBCs, Persons with Disabilities, SCs, STs, and women.

— Why were the new regulations framed? The new regulations were formulated after a plea in the Supreme Court filed by Radhika Vemula and Abeda Salim Tadvi, the mothers of Rohit Vemula and Payal Tadvi.

Do You Know:

— Article 142 provides a unique power to the Supreme Court, to do "complete justice" between the parties, where, at times, the law or statute may not provide a remedy. In those situations, the court can extend itself to put an end to a dispute in a manner that would fit the facts of the case.

IN UTTARAKHAND, JUDICIARY PROTECTS CITIZENS FROM EXECUTIVE OVERREACH

Laws that carry harsh criminal penalties are justified because they protect citizens from harm and ensure that perpetrators are held accountable for the injury they cause. It is precisely because they empower the state to take away the rights to life and liberty enshrined in Article 21 of the Constitution that they must be framed and deployed with the utmost care and address genuine harm. The Uttarakhand Freedom of Religion Act (UFRA), passed in 2018 by the BJP state government — its penal provisions were made harsher last year — fails to meet these criteria. As an investigation by this newspaper has shown, the alleged instances of "forced conversions" the law sought to address have been few, and in a vast majority of the cases, they have not stood up to judicial scrutiny.

Of the 62 cases registered under the UFRA in the last seven years, The Indian Express obtained the court records of 51. Of these, only five have completed trials, and in all of them, the accused were acquitted. Seven more were dismissed during trial, and in the vast majority of the remaining cases — about 75 per cent — the accused have been granted bail. It is clear from court records that evidentiary standards have often not been met, consensual relationships criminalised, and there are procedural lapses in investigation and prosecution.

The so-called "anti-conversion" law is prima facie a textbook case of using legislative and executive power to chase a chimaera conjured for ideological ends. But, as the acquittals, dismissals and grants of bail show, a vigilant judiciary can undo some of the damage, intended or otherwise, of a bad law. The trial courts, Uttarakhand High Court and even the Supreme Court have heard citizens' pleas and granted them bail. While acquitting Vinod Kumar, who was accused of "criticising" Hinduism and praising Christianity to convert people, a trial court in Tehri Garhwal



observed, "Every person is free to profess, practise and propagate any religion, so long as in doing so they do not infringe upon the civil rights or any legal rights of another person." The courts have lived up to their constitutional mandate and protected citizens from executive excess. The Uttarakhand legislature and government must now reflect on why the judiciary needed to do so, and what purpose the UFRA truly serves.

M.P. VILLAGE ANNOUNCES 'BOYCOTT' OF FAMILIES WHOSE MEMBERS MARRY BY CHOICE; PROBE ON

A village in Madhya Pradesh's Ratlam district has announced a social and economic boycott of families if a member elopes to marry and the same treatment will be given to the families that support them.

In a video that has now gone viral on the Internet, a man is heard reading out what he claims are the decisions of the village panchayat in the wake of a woman eloping to marry and her family later accepting the couple. The video is from Panchewa village of Ratlam's Piploda tehsil.

"All villagers have decided that if any boy or girl in village Panchewa marries by eloping or falls in love and gets married, following restrictions will be imposed on them and their family: the family will be socially boycotted and they will not be invited to any social event, and nobody will call them for labour work; if someone calls that family, they will also face social restrictions," the man says at a large gathering of locals.

The man lists out further restrictions on the families, including supply of milk or any other products, leasing their fields for farming, and any priests, barbers or any other service provider giving services to those families. "Any witness or any resident of the village who helps in such marriages, or provides shelter to the couple will also be socially boycotted," the man says, while naming three individuals who have been "boycotted" as per the panchayat declaration. As per local reports, the decision was taken three days ago due to a rise in marriages in the village due to elopement.

Ratlam Collector Misha Singh told The Hindu that the matter has been taken into consideration and an investigation is on, while denying that the decision was taken by the gram sabha.

"We have taken the matter into cognisance and the local SDM (sub-divisional magistrate) and SDOP (sub-divisional police officer) visited the village to talk to locals. They found out that no formal resolution has been passed by the gram sabha but since it's a matter of great discord, legal action will be taken against those involved," Ms. Singh said.

THE ISSUES SURROUNDING GOVERNORS' ADDRESS

The story so far:

There have been a series of issues in Opposition-ruled States with respect to the address by the Governor to the State legislature at the commencement of the first session of the year. This has raised constitutional and political questions about the Governor's role in State legislature.

What is the history?

Section 63 of the Government of India Act, 1935 (GOI Act) provided that the Governor may in his discretion address the provincial legislature. From April 1937, when provincial autonomy started



under the GOI act, the Governor's speech was prepared in consultation with the council of ministers in provinces that laid down the legislative agenda.

Similarly, in the Constituent Assembly, while adopting the Article dealing with Governors' address to State legislature, it was understood that it would reflect the policy of the elected council of ministers and not the Governor's personal views.

What are Constitutional provisions?

Article 175 of the Constitution specifies that the Governor may address the house(s) of the State legislature. This is not a mandatory address and may be rarely used by a ruling government. Article 176, on the other hand, provides that the Governor shall address the house(s) of the State legislature at the commencement of the first session after each general election to the Legislative Assembly and at the commencement of the first session of each year. This is a mandatory address to be prepared by the council of ministers, and delivered by the Governor, outlining the government's achievements in the previous year and its roadmap for policies in the ensuing year. This address is also provided whenever a new assembly is constituted to enable a newly sworn-in council of ministers to outline their policies to the elected representatives and through them to the citizens at large. Article 176 further directs that the rules of procedure of the house(s) shall have provisions for allotment of time for discussion of matters referred in such address. This is the 'Motion of thanks on Governor's address' where the ruling and opposition legislators debate on policy matters announced in the address before voting on the same.

The Supreme Court in *Shamsher Singh versus State of Punjab* (1974) had held that the Governor is only a constitutional head who acts on the advice of the council of ministers. In *Nabam Rebia versus Deputy Speaker* (2016), the Supreme Court reiterated that the address under Article 175 or 176 is to be performed by the Governor on the aid and advice of the council of ministers.

What are the current issues?

The current issues arise because Governors in Opposition-ruled States act against established constitutional practices. In Tamil Nadu, the Governor had skipped some portions of the address prepared by the council of ministers in 2022 and 2023. Subsequently, since 2024, the Governor has failed to address the assembly as required under Article 176. In Kerala, the Governor skipped a few portions of the policy address prepared by the State's cabinet. In Karnataka, the Governor did not read out the address prepared by the council of ministers but instead delivered his own two-line address before leaving the joint session of the legislature.

It is pertinent to note that the Governors take the oath of office under Article 159 that requires them to 'preserve, protect and defend the Constitution and the law.' Such actions go against constitutional principles and the law as settled by the highest court of the country. There have been instances of friction between elected governments and nominated governors since the 1960s with respect to the formal yearly address to the State legislature.

However, current instances are more frequent with Governors altogether skipping the address.

What can be the way forward?

Governors act as the nominal head of the State executive just like the President does for the Union executive. Further, the Governor acts as an appointee of the Centre which may be required for maintaining the unity and integrity of the nation in critical times. Nevertheless, federalism is also a basic feature of our Constitution and the Governor's office should not undermine the powers of



popularly elected governments. The underlying issue for conflicts has been the politicisation of the Governor's post. Many political leaders have called for abolition of the post in the past. But considering our quasi-federal constitutional scheme, such demands for abolition are likely to remain only on paper. The reform that can be implemented is the recommendation of the Sarkaria and Punchhi Commission. As per these recommendations, the Constitution may be amended to provide that the Chief Ministers of States shall be consulted before the appointment of Governors. While this may not be a panacea for all issues between Governors and elected governments, it could be a good starting point to minimise discord on important legislative issues and avoid confrontation on customary practices like the annual address.

NO CENSUS NOTIFICATION YET FROM BENGAL, FLAGS CENTRE

Amid the ongoing tussle between the Centre and the Mamata Banerjee-led TMC government over a host of issues, West Bengal not having republished the Census 2027 notification in its official gazette issued in June last year is the latest sticking point between the two sides.

Key Takeaways:

- This was flagged by the Central officials during the Conference of the Chief Secretaries, State Nodal Officers and Directors of Census Operations on Census 2027 held in New Delhi on Friday.
- Republication of the notification is a statutory requirement to notify the state's intent to conduct the population count exercise, of which the first phase—the Houselisting and Housing Census—is scheduled to begin on April 1 this year.
- The notification was issued by the Union Home Ministry on June 16 last year and all other states and Union Territories have already re-published it.
- The conference organised by the office of the Registrar General and Census Commissioner of India, which comes under the Ministry of Home Affairs and is responsible for conducting the decadal census, discussed the preparations for the Census 2027.
- According to the rule 8(i) of the Census Rules 1990, the state governments and the Union Territory administrations are required to “republish the intention of taking a census notified by the Central government in their state or Union territory gazettes”.
- Apart from the republication of the Census notification, the West Bengal government is yet to confirm the Centre's definition of identifying Urban Agglomerations (UAs), it is learnt. As per the Census of India, an urban agglomeration is a continuous urban spread constituting a town and its adjoining outgrowths or two or more physically contiguous towns together with or without outgrowth of such towns.
- The Census is a Union subject and is listed at serial number 69 in the Seventh Schedule of the Constitution of India.
- On June 16 last year, the Centre issued a notification declaring its intent to conduct the Census 2027. The notification was issued under the Census Act, 1948, which empowers the Centre to undertake a census in the country. The Section 3 of the Census law states, “The Central government may, by notification in the Official Gazette, declare its intention of taking a census in the whole or any part of the territories to which this Act extends, whenever it may consider it necessary or desirable so to do and thereupon the census shall be taken.”



Do You Know:

— The Indian Census is the largest administrative and statistical exercise in the world. The responsibility for conducting the decadal census lies with the Office of the Registrar General and Census Commissioner of India (ORG&CCI), which is part of the Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India. According to the Census India website, the Census Organisation was set up on an ad-hoc basis for each Census till the 1951 Census. In 1948, the Census Act was enacted to provide for the scheme of conducting population census with duties and responsibilities of census officers.

— This census involved counting individuals across most parts of the country; however, it did not include all territories under British control. The first synchronous census of India was conducted in 1881. It was conducted by W.C. Plowden.

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

HIMANTA BISWA SARMA DOESN'T SURPRISE WITH HIS DIVISIVE RHETORIC, THUMBS NOSE AT EC, SC

There is little that is surprising in Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma's latest diatribe. His attacks on people from the minority community and the boast that he had asked BJP workers to "trouble" them (whether by filing objections to their inclusion in the electoral roll or paying a rickshaw driver "Rs 4 instead of Rs 5") is of a piece with the political idiom he has consistently employed since joining the BJP. The distinction between "miyas" and Assamese Muslims that he seeks to make is fraught. Clearly, Sarma sees political benefit in amplifying polarising rhetoric ahead of the Assembly elections later this year. So what if it conflicts with constitutional and political propriety. But this time, it's more than a campaign speech. In effect, an elected CM, who has sworn to uphold the Constitution, is flaunting a bid to intervene, influence, the Special Revision of electoral rolls in Assam.

In the past six months, the sanctity of the electoral roll has been at the centre of a contentious debate: Who gets in, who is asked to explain, who is deleted. Questions related to exclusion, timing, documentation and whether or not the Election Commission has the mandate to verify citizenship continue to be asked and answered in the Supreme Court. The apex court's much-needed nudge to the ECI has injected credibility into the process. After the Bihar SIR, the poll body has allowed the inclusion of Aadhaar among the list of accepted documents, softened its stance on citizenship criteria and made it easier for electors to trace their names to the 2003 rolls. Sarma's exclusionary rhetoric goes against this accommodative stance.

The Chief Minister's call to BJP workers to fill out Form 7 to "trouble" one demographic group is not only divisive, it also flies in the face of law and procedure — filing a false claim invites a penalty. Incidentally, when the Opposition questions the SIR process — and there are times its criticism has been more political than substantive — the Chief Election Commissioner gives a testy rebuttal, at times even sounding like a party spokesperson rather than a constitutional authority. The Election Commission's SIR process is unfolding across states under the gaze of the nation's highest court. When the Chief Minister thumbs his nose at both, he needs a cautionary reminder.



IN AJIT PAWAR'S DEATH, A TRAGEDY AND MORE CHURN FOR MAHARASHTRA POLITICS

The tragic death of Ajit Pawar, Deputy Chief Minister of Maharashtra, in an air crash Wednesday leaves an empty space, bringing to an abrupt end the career of a politician of his time. As part of different parties — from Congress to the Sharad Pawar-founded NCP to the NCP splinter he steered into the BJP-led NDA — and as six-time Deputy CM and eight-term MLA, Ajit Pawar embodied the dominant strand of a pragmatic politics that criss-crosses ideological red lines, while keeping alive a direct connect to the ground. His death also forecloses the possibilities that still lay ahead, perhaps, for the man who wanted to be chief minister. The churn in Maharashtra that began with the splitting of the NCP and Shiv Sena into two parties each, and that rearranged the two main coalitions, MVA and Mahayuti, is not yet done. Municipal polls nearly a fortnight ago saw the two NCPs join hands for the civic elections in Pune and Pimpri-Chinchwad, amid talk of tensions within the Mahayuti.

From the time he entered politics, getting elected to the Lok Sabha in 1991 from Baramati, a seat he later vacated for Sharad Pawar to settle down in state politics, Ajit Pawar earned a reputation, amid allegations of corruption, as an administrator who got things done, and as a finance minister who underlined fiscal discipline. He was also the politician whose unvarnished bluntness and impatient streak courted controversy — be it his swearing-in as Devendra Fadnavis's deputy, after the 2019 assembly polls, in a hurried early-morning ceremony in Raj Bhavan to form a government that lasted 80 hours, or his comments during a period of acute water shortage that were seen to be off-key. Power came to him as a family bequest, but at the same time, as uncle Sharad Pawar started spending more time in national politics in Delhi, he moulded it in his own image in western Maharashtra's sugar belt. "Ajit dada" kept the organisation intact, engaged with milk unions and sugar cooperatives and coordinated with other players and parties. When the NCP split in 2023, the majority of NCP workers saw their future with him. His faction's performance in the 2024 assembly election seemed to cement his claim to leading the real NCP.

With his premature exit from the political field, Ajit Pawar joins leaders like Madhavrao Scindia, Y S Rajasekhara Reddy, Pramod Mahajan, and more recently, Vijay Rupani, all gone in their political prime. In a party and polity dominated by family and personality, he leaves behind the question of the future of the NCP. His going will sharpen the tumult in the fluid politics of his state, his party — and his family.

ABYSMAL FAILURE

When 14 people died in a massive hotel fire in the Burrabazar area of central Kolkata last April, it seemed that devastating fires had become a disturbingly routine phenomenon in the city. The tragedy on the eve of this year's Republic Day, in which 11 are reported dead so far, has only confirmed that inference. Seventeen missing persons complaints have been filed, and the toll is likely to climb as agencies clear the area. The bodies are charred beyond recognition and DNA tests would be required to identify them. The dead were mostly migrant workers from faraway places such as Purba Medinipur and the makeshift warehouses were their night shelters. A year ago, the hotel accident highlighted the poor fire safety aspects of inner cities of India's metropolises. This time, the devastating fire broke out in two large warehouses stretched over 12,000 sq. ft. in Anandpur. The State fire department has declared that the warehouses were not approved for fire safety and had no fire safety features. One of the outlets belonged to a popular momo eatery chain and the second to a local "decorator". Decorators help furnish events such as weddings and may have stored fabrics, chairs, and various accessories. Those who escaped the



fire reported foul smells and thick smoke that can be a quick killer. The fire raged until Tuesday afternoon, requiring 12 engines to put it out. This indicates the extent of storage of flammable material and the lack of attention given to constructing the structures in a way that would facilitate efficient firefighting.

The State agencies that generally amp up their visibility after such accidents have been reticent. Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee, who typically rushes to such spots, has not visited the site yet. Social media channels of State agencies have been silent. It may well be that the ruling Trinamool Congress does not want to draw too much attention to the tragedy just ahead of Assembly elections. A compensation of ₹10 lakh per person has been announced. So far, not even a perfunctory noise has been made regarding the larger issues — the cause of the accident and how such tragedies can be avoided in the future. That such large unapproved structures with little attention to fire safety had come up at an ecologically sensitive area in Kolkata indicates the abysmal state of civic administration in what used to be the foremost city of India.

CENTRE REVISES CADRE ALLOCATION POLICY WITH NEW GROUP STRUCTURE

In a significant administrative reform, the central government has revised the cadre allocation policy for the three All-India Services – the Indian Administrative Service (IAS), Indian Police Service (IPS) and Indian Forest Service (IFoS) – introducing a new grouping structure as per alphabetically that replaces the earlier zonal arrangement for allocation of cadres to successful candidates of the civil services examination.

Key Takeaways:

— The new framework, notified by the Department of Personnel and Training (DoPT) after consultations with state governments, revises the system that had been in place since 2017. It introduces a new grouping structure that replaces the earlier zonal arrangement for allocation of cadres to successful candidates of the civil services examination.

— “To ensure a fair and transparent system, all State Cadres and Joint Cadres have been arranged alphabetically and divided into four groups,” the DoPT said in the notification. The allocation will now be based on these four groups, with candidates expressing preferences among them.

— According to the new grouping:

- Group I: AGMUT (Arunachal Pradesh-Goa-Mizoram and Union Territories), Andhra Pradesh, Assam-Meghalaya, Bihar, and Chhattisgarh.
- Group II: Gujarat, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Jharkhand, Karnataka, Kerala, and Madhya Pradesh
- Group III: Maharashtra, Manipur, Nagaland, Odisha, Punjab, Rajasthan, Sikkim, and Tamil Nadu.
- Group IV: Telangana, Tripura, Uttarakhand, Uttar Pradesh, and West Bengal.

— Earlier, Zone-I had seven cadres – AGMUT, Jammu and Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Punjab, Rajasthan and Haryana. Zone-II consisted of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand and Odisha, while Zone-III comprised Gujarat, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh. West Bengal, Sikkim, Assam-Meghalaya, Manipur, Tripura and Nagaland constituted Zone-IV, while Zone-V had Telangana, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Kerala.



— Officials said the restructured framework seeks to maintain national integration within the civil services while addressing concerns raised by several state governments regarding uneven vacancy distribution under the previous policy.

— Sources in the DoPT indicated that the Centre expects the new allocation model to streamline administrative processes and enhance inter-state exposure for young officers, in line with the original spirit of the All-India Services.

— Under the revised guidelines, the cadre-controlling authorities – DoPT for IAS, Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) for IPS, and Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEF&CC) for IFoS – will annually determine the number of vacancies in each service. These vacancies will be distributed among various categories, including Unreserved (UR), Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST) and Other Backward Classes (OBC).

— The new framework, issued by the Department of Personnel and Training (DoPT), aims to bring greater transparency and consistency to the system of vacancy determination and cadre allocation.

— According to the new policy, the principles for the maintenance of rosters for determination of vacancies for category-wise reservation and insider/outsider distribution would be as per the established procedure.

— “The determination of vacancies will be based on the cadre gap as of January 1 of the year following the Civil Services Examination (CSE). States must submit their vacancy requisitions by January 31 of the same year. The new norms also clarify that vacancies earmarked for the Economically Weaker Sections (EWS) will be treated as part of the Unreserved category and reflected accordingly in the cadre roster,” an official said.

— The policy reiterates that allocation of “insider” candidates – those opting for their home state cadre – will strictly follow the order of merit and vacancy availability. “A candidate’s willingness to serve in their home State is now a mandatory condition for eligibility against an insider vacancy,” the official said.

— Under the new policy, an official said now cadre allocation will proceed through a rotational cycle system – corresponding to the 25 states and joint cadres – with each cycle covering 25 candidates in merit order. “If multiple candidates fall within the same cycle, allocation priority will go to the one with the higher rank, while the others move to subsequent cycles,” the official added.

— An official said after insiders are placed, allocation for outsider candidates will be done per the roster system in two stages – first for Persons with Benchmark Disabilities (PwBD) and then for others. “The move is expected to bring greater objectivity to the cadre allocation process, which has long been a sensitive subject among aspirants and state governments alike. The revised system aligns with the government’s broader goals of promoting fairness and administrative efficiency in the all-India services,” the official said.

Do You Know:

— When the Constitution came into effect in India on January 26, 1950, so did some institutions that enabled the foundation of a newly democratic nation. One such institution was the Union Public Service Commission (UPSC), located at Dholpur House on Shahjahan Road in New Delhi.



— The UPSC is governed by a chairman and a body of members, all appointed by the President. The Constitution mandates that at least half of the members must have a minimum of ten years of experience in government service. The chairman and members serve a fixed term of six years or until the age of 65, whichever is earlier.

— The commission's work is supported by its secretariat, which includes dedicated wings for examinations and direct recruitment. Earlier this year, Dr. Ajay Kumar, a distinguished retired IAS officer and former Defence Secretary, was appointed as the new Chairman.

— The UPSC's constitutional mandate is laid out in Articles 315-323 of the Constitution, with Article 320 detailing its core functions. The UPSC is India's premier body for conducting examinations for appointments to the three All-India Services (IAS, IPS, IFS), the Central Services, and various other key government posts. It also frames and amends recruitment rules for various services and posts.

INDIA HAS MOST ROAD ACCIDENT DEATHS IN THE WORLD. CAN 'TALKING CARS' CURB THESE?

The government is planning to launch Vehicle-to-Vehicle (V2V) safety technology to prevent road accident deaths and reduce traffic. In a meeting of the parliamentary consultative committee on January 22 in New Delhi, the Union Minister of Road Transport and Highways, Nitin Gadkari, said that the Department of Telecommunications has allocated 30 GHz radio frequency for the development of vehicle-to-vehicle communication systems, which will help reduce road accidents and fatalities.

Key Takeaways:

— V2V or vehicle-to-vehicle communication is a wireless technology that will enable the vehicles to communicate or talk with one another to share real-time information like speed, location, acceleration, braking, etc. It is the sub-category of Vehicle-to-Everything (V2X) and comes under the umbrella of the Intelligent Transport System.

— The system is similar to the aviation sector technology, where aircraft broadcast their position, speed, altitude, and the nearby aircraft and ground stations receive it. While this system is fortified in the aviation sector across the world, the road sector is still evolving, and V2V is working in a few countries, mostly developed nations.

— According to the MoRTH officials, for the V2V system, an On Board Unit (OBU) will be installed in cars so that the nearby vehicles can exchange information among vehicles wirelessly. It will alert the driver about the black spots, obstacles, parked vehicles on roadsides, fog or any potential threats.

— Usually, V2V systems have a range of 300 metres and can detect vehicles in this range. For instance, if a car applies brakes suddenly, the nearby vehicles will get an alert to slow down before seeing it. This will help in reducing crashes.

— India ranks first in the world in total road accident fatalities, far ahead of second- and third-ranked countries: China accounts for just 36%, and the United States for 25%, of India's road deaths.



— The government has not yet announced any specific date for rolling out this system. However, it is MoRTH's key initiative as part of its road safety program for the year.

— The V2V system offers a solution for road accidents and managing traffic better. However, there are some limitations and privacy concerns as well. The frequency band allocated for the system might not support all the vehicles. It means that if information is miscommunicated, it can lead to accidents and fatalities.

— The other issue is that it will store a large amount of data about the vehicles, their location, details about the driver, etc., which puts the whole intelligent transport infrastructure at the potential risk of being misused. It would certainly require government regulations and rules to implement it.

— The cyber attack is another concern for this system. If an attacker gains complete control of the system, it can be misused to create a major security threat for the region.

— The US is the leader in V2V communication system research and its implementation with strong regulation. Apart from this, some of the European countries like Germany, France, the United Kingdom, etc., are incorporating V2V into new vehicles and smart city projects.

Do You Know:

— The National Road Safety Month is being observed by Ministry of Road Transport and Highways during 1st January – 31st January, 2026.

— The Stockholm Declaration on Road Safety, adopted at the 3rd Global Ministerial Conference on Road Safety in February 2020, set a global target to reduce road traffic deaths and injuries by 50% by 2030. India is also a signatory.

— Brasilia Declaration on Road Safety, 2015: The declaration was signed at the second Global High-Level Conference on Road Safety, which was held in Brazil. Under the declaration, the countries plan to achieve Sustainable Development Goal 3.6, which is to halve the number of global deaths and injuries from road traffic accidents by 2030.

— India is a signatory to the declaration and is committed to a reduction in fatalities.

— Decade of Action for Road Safety 2021-2030: The UN General Assembly adopted resolution "Improving global road safety" with the ambitious target of preventing at least 50% of road traffic deaths and injuries by 2030.

— The Global Plan aligns with the Stockholm Declaration, by emphasizing the importance of a holistic approach to road safety.

— Bloomberg Initiative for Global Road Safety (BIGRS) 2020-2025: It aims to reduce road crash fatalities and injuries in low and middle-income countries and cities by implementing a comprehensive set of actions that are proven to save lives.

NUCLEAR POWER EXPANSION IS AN R&D CHALLENGE

The draft National Electricity Policy, released last week, aims to align the power sector with India's long-term energy goals. It bears the imprint of the country's climate commitments, particularly the 2030 target to reduce the emissions intensity of GDP by 45 per cent compared to 2005 levels.



At the same time, the policy also attempts to recalibrate the power mix to meet India's developmental priorities. Its emphasis on renewable energy is accompanied by a roadmap to ensure grid stability. Emerging sectors of the economy, such as AI and data systems, are particularly dependent on assured, uninterrupted electricity supply. Coal-based plants will continue to play an important role as buffers against the intermittency of solar and wind power. However, the policy is alive to the need to create a viable substitute to fossil fuels. Its thrust on a 10-fold upscaling of nuclear capacity by 2047 is of a piece with the country's decarbonisation goals as well as its developmental imperatives.

Nuclear fission produces negligible carbon emissions, and unlike renewables, atomic energy is not affected by weather variabilities. After hydropower, it is the world's second-largest source of low-carbon power, according to the International Energy Agency. The Sustainable Harnessing and Advancement of Nuclear Energy for Transforming India (SHANTI) Act, passed by Parliament last month, has opened the doors for expanding the sector's capacity. The draft electricity policy builds on the Act's enabling provisions. It pushes for the adoption of advanced nuclear technologies such as small modular reactors (SMR) and direct use of nuclear power by commercial and industrial consumers. Such reactors have significant advantages — they take up less space, can be assembled relatively easily, have robust safety features, and can be installed on site. This means SMRs can be situated close to demand centres and replace the captive thermal power units of industrial centres.

That said, generating 100 GW of nuclear power in the next 21 years is an ambitious goal. India's domestic uranium resources are limited and generally of lower grade. The country is dependent on imports from Russia, Kazakhstan and Canada. Policymakers must now frame strategies to tap India's large thorium deposits as an alternative to conventional nuclear fuel. Globally, thorium's potential has not been realised because of nuclear power's traditional links with military use — uranium and plutonium were used to develop atomic bombs. The challenge for the country's policymakers, therefore, is to upscale R&D to extract and exploit this rare earth material.

INDIA TO EXPAND ITS HYPERSONIC ARSENAL WITH LR-ASHM MISSILE

At the 77th Republic Day Parade on Kartavya Path, the highlight of the Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) display is the Long-Range Anti-Ship Hypersonic Missile (LR-AShM), which it is showcasing for the first time.

Key Takeaways:

— The DRDO is displaying LR-AShM along with its launcher. The missile system is designed to meet the coastal battery requirements of the Indian Navy. The LR-AShM is capable of engaging static and moving targets and is designed to carry various payloads to a range of around 1,500 kilometers.

— This missile follows a quasi-ballistic trajectory with hypersonic speeds starting at Mach 10 (multiples of speed of sound) and maintaining average Mach 5 with multiple skips.

— Ballistic missiles are boost-powered initially and then travel unpowered on a high, arched trajectory. Quasi-ballistic missiles begin ballistically but fly lower and manoeuvre in flight to change course and evade interception.

— As this missile flies at low altitudes with high speed and manoeuvrability, enemy ground and ship-based radars cannot detect it. The LR-AShM is configured with a two-stage solid propulsion



rocket motor system. These propulsion systems boost the missile to the required hypersonic velocities.

— Stage-1 of the vehicle is separated after it is spent. After Stage-II burnout, the vehicle performs an unpowered glide with required manoeuvres in the atmosphere before engaging the target, the DRDO has said.

— The obvious advantages of the hypersonic speed is it makes it difficult for missiles to be detected. It can cover its range around 1,500 kilometres in 15 minutes. Versions with higher ranges upto 3,500 kilometres are currently at various stages of development.

— As part of the further development cycle, the missile warhead and sensor mechanisms will be integrated soon, before its induction into the Navy in two to three years.

— This missile takes some key components from the submarine-launched ballistic missile Sagarika or K-15, which is from the K missile family and also from the Brahmos supersonic cruise missile.

— Amidst cutthroat global competition in hypersonic weapons, DRDO is working on two key hypersonic technologies. One is hypersonic glide and another is hypersonic cruise. LR-AShM is a hypersonic glide vehicle and includes in itself major achievements in indigenous technologies like materials and control systems needed for sustained hypersonic flight.

— Hypersonic cruise missiles fly within the atmosphere at hypersonic speeds using scramjet engines for sustained powered flight and manoeuvrability.

— Ramjets are air-breathing engines that compress incoming air using forward motion, with fuel igniting in a combustion chamber; they require an assisted take-off and work best around Mach 3, losing efficiency at hypersonic speeds.

— Scramjets improve on ramjets by keeping airflow supersonic in the combustion chamber, enabling efficient operation above Mach 5, but are far more complex to design and operate.

Do You Know:

— In its first Republic Day celebrations after Operation Sindoor, India showcased its military might with a display of fighter jets, indigenously built missiles, newly raised units and lethal weapons used during the military operations last year.

— BrahMos supersonic missiles, Akash weapon systems, 'Suryastra' universal rocket launcher system, Main Battle Tank Arjun, Dhanush artillery guns and Divyastra battery were among the major weapon systems displayed at the parade.

— The Ministry of Defence declared 2025 as the "Year of Reforms". While progress on theatre command integration was incremental and at best cautious, the objectives of "self-reliance" and "defence preparedness" were validated by the numbers as much as the test of war.

— Since January 2025, the Defence Acquisition Council has approved capital acquisition proposals worth over Rs 3.84 lakh crore, focusing mainly on indigenisation. Defence production hit a record Rs 1.54 lakh crore, and import dependency dropped below 35 per cent for the first time.



— The rigorous enforcement of “Positive Indigenisation Lists” continues to drive this shift away from imports. With defence exports touching Rs 23,622 crore, the target of Rs 50,000 crore by 2029 seems less elusive.

CAN INDIA ELIMINATE MALARIA BY 2030?

The story so far:

In 2016, under its National Framework for Malaria Elimination in India (2016-2030), India set an ambitious target to eliminate malaria (zero indigenous cases) by 2030, with an interim milestone of interrupting indigenous transmission across the entire country, including all high-transmission States and Union Territories (UT), by 2027. By the end of 2025, the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MOHFW) reported that robust surveillance and sustained interventions had led to 160 districts across 23 States and UTs reporting zero indigenous malaria cases from 2022 to 2024. This was seen as a significant milestone as it meant that the country was getting closer to completely eliminating malaria.

How is prevalence of the disease measured?

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), a country is granted a certification of malaria elimination when “the chain of local transmission of all human malaria parasites have been interrupted nationwide for at least three consecutive years, and that a fully functional surveillance and response system is in place to prevent re-establishment of indigenous transmission”. As of mid-2025, 47 countries or territories have been officially certified malaria-free by the WHO.

Where does India stand?

The World Malaria Report 2025 notes that India made significant progress in reducing malaria incidence and mortality in its high-endemic States, officially exiting the WHO “High Burden to High Impact” Group, in 2024. Malaria cases reduced by around 80% from 2015-2023 in the country. In 2024, India accounted for 73.3% of the 2.7 million estimated malaria cases in the WHO South-East Asia Region. While localised transmission driven by population movement and cross-border importation remain as key challenges, India is on track to achieve the WHO Global Technical Strategy (GTS) for malaria 2016-2030 target of at least a 75% reduction in incidence by 2025 (compared with a 2015 baseline), having already achieved reductions exceeding 70% by 2024, the World Malaria Report added.

If Tamil Nadu is taken as an example, data from the State’s Directorate of Public Health and Preventive Medicine show a steady decline in malaria cases, from 5,587 in 2015 to 321 in 2025. Since 2023, 33 of 38 districts have reported zero indigenous cases, placing them in “Category 0” (prevention of re-establishment phase). The remaining five districts, including the capital Chennai, are classified as “Category I” (Elimination phase) where the Annual Parasite Incidence (API) is less than one case per 1,000 population at risk (API is the number of confirmed new malaria cases registered in a specific year, expressed per 1,000 individuals under surveillance, for a given country, territory, or geographic area).

How is India working to eliminate malaria?

The country has put in place two national plans to guide and accelerate malaria elimination — the National Framework for Malaria Elimination in India (2016-2030) which outlines the vision, goals, and targets for a phased malaria elimination, and the National Strategic Plan (NSP) for



Malaria Elimination (2023-2027) that builds upon earlier frameworks. According to the NSP, transforming malaria surveillance as a core intervention for malaria elimination, ensuring universal access to malaria diagnosis, treatment by enhancing and optimising case management by “testing, treating and tracking” and ensuring universal access to malaria prevention by enhancing and optimising vector control are among the key strategies.

In Tamil Nadu, measures to detect malaria are being carried out intensively in government hospitals and primary health centres. Larval control measures are implemented alongside. One of the key focus areas is to monitor migrant workers. Intensive surveillance is being taken up among workers coming from malaria-prone neighbouring States.

What are the challenges?

One of the challenges is migration from malaria-endemic neighbouring States that poses a risk of reintroduction in low-transmission areas. Urban areas, according to NSP, pose a different set of challenges for malaria elimination. Special focus is given to challenging malaria paradigms such as in urban, forest, tribal, project/and border areas, hard to reach areas and migrant populations, it said.

Acknowledging that the WHO South-East Asia Region has made major progress towards malaria elimination, achieving reductions in both incidence and mortality over the past two decades, the World Malaria Report stated that significant challenges remain. Persistent *Plasmodium vivax* transmission, which accounts for nearly two thirds of regional cases, continues to complicate elimination efforts. Localised transmission in India and Nepal, driven by population movement and cross-border importation, points to the need for targeted subnational and regional coordination, it added. Other strategies by India include drug resistance monitoring, insecticide resistance monitoring and ensuring compliance of the 14 days of radical treatment for *Plasmodium vivax* cases.

The World Malaria Report 2025 has also highlighted the growing threat of antimalarial drug resistance. As the WHO noted: “Partial resistance to artemisinin derivatives — the backbone of malaria treatments after failures of chloroquine and sulfadoxine-pyrimethamine — has now been confirmed or suspected in at least eight countries in Africa, and there are potential signs of declining efficacy of some of the drugs that are combined with artemisinin.”

With the government focussing on achieving zero indigenous cases by 2027 and ensuring prevention of malaria re-establishment, measures to strengthen surveillance system and diagnostic capacities, and intensifying control measures in high burden districts, are pivotal.

What is the road ahead?

In its annual report of 2024-2025, the MOHFW said that in 2023, 34 States/UTs achieved an annual parasite incidence of less than one except in two States, Tripura (5.69) and Mizoram (14.23).

T. Jacob John, senior virologist, said the most important aspect in this phase is accuracy of data. Next, to ensure that private practitioners report cases, strict public health surveillance is needed. “All doctors should mandatorily report even suspected cases of malaria,” he added.

T. S. Selvavinayagam, former Director of Public Health and Preventive Medicine, Government of Tamil Nadu, said malaria in urban areas continues to be a challenge. “Urban areas or larger metropolitan cities such as Chennai face challenges due to rapid urbanisation, growing



infrastructure and large number of apartment complexes where water storage conditions need to be looked at. Here, the government alone cannot play a role but needs measures at the individual household level as the source is clean water," he said.

QUICK PILL

The government's move to scrap the traditional, mandatory test licences required to manufacture small quantities of drugs for research is an effort to remove the sometimes-crippling regulatory hurdles in the pharmaceutical sector. This decision aligns with the national goal of facilitating ease of doing business. The central element of these amendments to the New Drugs and Clinical Trials Rules, 2019, is replacing the mandatory licence requirement for non-commercial manufacture of drugs with a prior-intimation mechanism. Developers can now manufacture small quantities of drugs for research, testing, and analysis after intimating the Central Drugs Standard Control Organisation via its SUGAM Portal, online. Once a 'notice of intent' is acknowledged online, a company is free to go ahead with drug synthesis, strictly for research. In a post-COVID world, where speed of delivery for end use has gained virtue, the government anticipates that removal of this licencing factor will fast-track the timeline of drug development by at least three months. Specific low-risk bioavailability and bioequivalence studies can also commence after an online intimation on the portal. In addition, even for categories in which a licence is still required, such as for high-risk psychotropic or narcotic drugs, the statutory processing time will be reduced from 90 days to 45. All manufacturers are required to meticulously document and file processes as per rules.

The abolishment of a 'licence raj' is always good news. The dismantling of hurdles in pharma research and development bodes well for a country that is aspiring to position itself as the pharmacy of the world. The paperless, prior intimation mechanism will no doubt reduce the time spent twiddling thumbs, waiting for a physical copy of the licence. And time saved is, naturally, money and lives saved. Reducing the time a drug takes from the lab to the bedside for practical use can save countless lives and reduce morbidity in many more. However, the government would do well to circumvent the danger of a drop in quality control by initiating a mechanism, after intimation, to ensure that all good manufacturing practices are strictly adhered to. No drug, however speedily produced, is worth the blister it is packaged in if it comes with quality lapses. Poor pharmaceutical oversight, as recent cough syrup-related deaths showed, can be fatal.

STEM CELL THERAPY CANNOT BE OFFERED AS A CLINICAL SERVICE FOR AUTISM: SUPREME COURT

Stem cell 'therapies' cannot be offered as a clinical service for Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), outside of an approved and monitored clinical trial or research setting, the Supreme Court held in a judgment on Friday.

A Bench of Justices J.B. Pardiwala and R. Mahadevan criticised the Union government for its failure to act against those offering such therapies, which has led parents and guardians to seek an unproven method of treatment for their children suffering from ASD at a huge financial cost.

The court directed the government to constitute a dedicated authority for regulatory oversight over stem cell research across the country.



The Bench held that the therapeutic use of stem cells in ASD cases, based on uncertain scientific knowledge or evidence about its effectiveness as a cure or the possible repercussions, would fail the “reasonable standard of care” that doctors owed their patients.

“There is a dearth of established scientific evidence on the efficacy and safety of therapeutic use of stem cells in ASD. As a result, the doctors do not have ‘adequate information’ to provide their patients in the first place,” the court observed.

The court clarified that parents, guardians, and caregivers cannot demand that stem-cell therapy be administered as a clinical service.

“Even consent obtained from patients would not be valid as the prerequisite to disclose adequate information cannot be satisfied,” the court said.

Though consent is a mode of exercising patient autonomy, it cannot be “stretched to seek an entitlement to subject oneself to a clinical procedure that is scientifically unvalidated, ethically impermissible, and outside the bounds of reasonable medical practice”, the court reasoned

Besides, the court said, ‘consent’ means an “informed authorisation, grounded in adequate disclosure of the nature, procedure, purpose, benefits, effects, alternatives, substantial risks; and adverse consequences of refusing treatment”.

The judgment came on the basis of a series of petitions raising concerns about the rampant promotion, prescription and administration of stem cell therapy for the treatment of ASD by clinics across the country.

The petitioners argued that though stem cell therapy itself is in an experimental stage, it was being touted as a ‘treatment’ and ‘cure’ for ASD.

They noted that people diagnosed with ASD and their caregivers place their implicit faith in centres offering stem cell therapy in the hope of a “miraculous cure”.

The petitions argued that there was also a lapse on the part of the government in allowing such stem cell therapies, which were in violation of the New Drugs and Clinical Trial Rules, 2019.

NARRATING STORIES OF THE WORLD’S WOMEN MATHEMATICIANS, IN PORTRAITS

20 women selected for a photographic exhibition titled ‘Women of mathematics from around the world’, which has travelled 170 countries and is now on show at the Science Gallery Bengaluru. The exhibition of women — from Congo to India — shows each mathematician against a blackboard filled end-to-end with equations.

The exclusive group of mathematicians chosen for this exhibition includes Neela Nataraj, the institute chair professor at the department of mathematics, IIT Bombay, who is now working on mathematical problems related to liquid crystals.

The curator, Ms. Paycha, said that women worldwide researching mathematics and theoretical physics “are still scarce.” The purpose of the exhibition was “to make visible women of mathematics and theoretical physics from around the world and to encourage young women to embrace a career in mathematics and/or theoretical physics.”



'Specific obstacles'

Ms. Matoff said of her decade-long project of portraying female mathematicians worldwide: "Even after 37 such sessions, I am still inspired by the passion with which female mathematicians explain, describe, and paint their theories on the blackboard."

The portraits are presented in collaboration with the Consulate General of the of Germany, the International Centre for Theoretical Sciences, and the Raman Research Institute. The exhibition will be open to the public until March 15.

The organisers expressed hope that presenting mathematics through women mathematicians' perspectives and life stories will make this discipline more tangible and accessible to new entrants. "Entering the field of mathematics can be tough, and women often encounter specific obstacles."

SEIZE THE PODIUM, BUT FIRST LOOK THE AIR PROBLEM IN THE EYE

India's sporting ambition gets stronger by the day. It will host the 2030 Commonwealth Games and is bidding for the 2036 Olympics, amid dreams of gold medals and proposals of world-class infrastructure projects. Grand sporting spectacles and freeze-frames of the nation's young standing proud on podiums are healthy markers of national aspiration. But India's big dreams are in danger of turning foggy because of the toxic air that hangs over its sporting hubs. At the India Open badminton tournament in New Delhi last week, a top international player pulled out because of the capital city's exceptionally high levels of AQI. Some have flagged their concerns to the International Olympic Committee. The problem is far worse for Indian athletes who live and train in the country.

Sportspersons across disciplines speak about pollution and extreme heat eating into their training cycles and causing long-lasting health problems. More worryingly, the unhealthy outdoors also cut the play time of children in the local park, reducing their physical activity and increasing the risk of illness. India's unclean air is also being flagged in other sectors and arenas. At the World Economic Forum, for instance, economist Gita Gopinath, who has served as the first deputy managing director of the IMF, said that pollution poses a bigger threat to India's economic growth than tariffs. The fact is, India cannot wish away the haze outside the window. Pitching for the Olympics requires it to confront the problem at home. It cannot continue to turn a blind eye to its own athletes battling harsh summers and toxic winters.

This is a wake-up call. Grand dreams sometimes demand the making of hard choices. When Beijing — which wrestled with many of the same issues as Delhi — hosted the Olympics, a series of measures were undertaken and executed between 2000 and 2008 to improve the air quality. It included plant relocations and closures, traffic controls, and reduced industrial use of coal. India must find the solutions and methods that best suit its needs. Until that happens, the authorities must schedule events smartly, relocate international events, shift national training bases seasonally, rework competition calendars and invest heavily in indoor, climate-controlled facilities. In the end, the question is not just about medals tallies and hosting bids for events. It is also, and especially, about the will to protect the health of the next generation of citizens as they work and play.



SHORT NEWS

US UNVEILS NEW ROADMAP: DIALING DOWN ON CHINA, HOMELAND IS PRIORITY

Taking a softer view on China and not referring to its perennial flashpoint Taiwan, the National Defence Strategy (NDS), released by the Trump administration Friday flagged, as a key priority, its dominance in the Western hemisphere. The NDS 2026, coming a month after the National Security Strategy, is sharply different from the NDS 2018 during Trump's first administration that had underlined how "China and Russia want to shape a world consistent with their authoritarian model". In contrast, NDS 2026 said US will "deter China in the Indo-Pacific through strength, not confrontation". This is a significant departure of posture by the US towards China's assertive, and sometimes, aggressive behaviour, in the Indo-Pacific. This "increased burden-sharing" with US allies and "partners" is a clear message to India as well — that the US commitment to the Quad grouping of India, US, Australia and Japan is being put to test, if Delhi and other partners don't step up their end of the bargain.

US MUSEUM TO RETURN 3 BRONZE SCULPTURES 'REMOVED ILLEGALLY' FROM TEMPLES IN TN

The Smithsonian's National Museum of Asian Art announced on Friday its plans to return three sculptures to India, following what it calls "rigorous provenance research that documented that the sculptures had been removed illegally from temple settings".

These bronze sculptures include 'Shiva Nataraja' (Chola period, 10th century), 'Somaskanda' (Chola period, 12th century), and 'Saint Sundarar with Paravai' (Vijayanagar period, 16th century). These were among some of the sacred idols carried in temple processions.

JAL JEEVAN MISSION (JJM) FUNDS

— Recently the Union Jal Shakti Minister informed the states that they would receive funds under the Jal Jeevan Mission (JJM) only after signing of separate MoUs, with each scheme mapped through a Sujal Gaon ID and future releases linked to the demonstration of 15 days of continuous water supply.

— This comes amid concerns over irregularities in the implementation of the Jal Jeevan Mission which is waiting for the center's approval for extension till 2028.

— Sujal Gaon ID is a digital module that records comprehensive details of all village water supply schemes, including geo-tagged pipelines, overhead tanks, and drinking water quality.

— The Centre launched JJM in 2019 to provide tap connections to every rural household by 2024. While the mission ended in 2024, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman announced its continuation in her Budget speech on February 1, 2025, with enhanced financial support till 2028.

OVERSEAS CITIZEN OF INDIA (OCI)

— European Council President António Costa, who was the Chief Guest at the 77th Republic Day, has Goan roots. In January 2017, Costa visited his ancestral home in Goa and was honoured with the Pravasi Bharatiya Samman and conferred an Overseas Citizen of India (OCI) card.



— The OCI scheme was introduced in August 2005 to provide for registration of all Persons of Indian Origin (PIOs) who were citizens of India on January 26, 1950, or thereafter, or were eligible to become citizens of India on the said date.

— It was introduced by amending the Citizenship Act, 1955, in August 2005. The Scheme was launched during the Pravasi Bharatiya Divas convention 2006 at Hyderabad.

SECOND INDIA-ARAB FOREIGN MINISTERS' MEETING

— India hosted the 2nd India-Arab Foreign Ministers' Meeting (IAFMM) on 31 January 2026. The meeting was co-chaired by India and the UAE.

— Foreign Ministers of other Arab League Member States and the Arab League Secretary General participated in the meeting.

— The Foreign Ministers' meeting happened after a gap of 10 years, the first meeting being held in 2016 in Bahrain.

— India Arab Foreign Ministers' Meeting is the highest institutional mechanism driving this partnership, which was formalised in March 2002 when India and League of Arab States (LAS) signed an MoU institutionalizing the process of dialogue.

— The Arab League, formally known as the League of Arab States, was established in 1945 with initially just six nations: Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, and Syria. Currently, it has 22 member states, who have pledged to cooperate on economic and military affairs, among other issues.

PRESIDENT'S 'AT HOME' INVITE TRIBUTE TO ARTISTIC LEGACIES OF NORTHEAST

Once the Republic Day Parade is over on Monday, all the dignitaries, including Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the Chief Guests – European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and European Council President António Costa – will be hosted by President Droupadi Murmu for a customary 'At Home' reception. The formal invite for 'At Home' this year pays tribute to the artistic intelligence of the North-eastern states. Carefully curated elements from the eight states highlight how traditional knowledge, natural ecosystems and craftsmanship continue to shape everyday life in the region. Besides, the guests arriving at Rashtrapati Bhavan will be greeted with a specially designed Eri silk stole. Commonly known as 'peace silk', Eri silk holds an important place in the cultural fabric and livelihood systems of northeast India, valued for both its ethical production and durability.

ACID ATTACKS: SC FOR HARSHER MEASURES LIKE IN DOWRY DEATH

The Supreme Court on Tuesday sought to know if there can be legislative intervention to ensure harsher measures to deal with acid attack cases, including shifting the burden of proof on the accused like in dowry death cases.

The CJI also suggested attaching the assets of the convicts in acid attack cases so that they can be auctioned and the money be paid to the victim.

Following this, the court asked states and Union Territories to furnish details on incidents of acid attack reported year-wise, how many instances of forced ingestion of acid, whether chargesheets



in those cases were filed, how many cases have been decided and how many are still pending at the trial stage, particulars of each victim of acid attack, their educational qualifications, current employment status, marital status, medical treatment, details of the expenditure incurred or committed to be incurred by the state on such treatment and on the rehabilitation scheme for the victims of acid attacks.

HILL LEADERS TO INTERLOCUTOR: 'GORKHALAND STATE, OR UT, WITH FULL LEGISLATIVE POWERS'

Leaders of the Darjeeling Hills on Saturday met the Central government's Interlocutor Pankaj Kumar Singh and "unequivocally" demanded the "creation of Gorkhaland as a state or a Union Territory with full legislative powers". Singh, a former deputy national security adviser who has been tasked by the Centre with addressing the long-pending demands of the Gorkha community in the region, is on his first visit to Darjeeling after his appointment as interlocutor. He held a series of meetings with the Hill leaders since his arrival on Friday. The Hill leaders included representatives of the Gorkha Janmukti Morcha (GJM), who highlighted that if not a state, the "creation of a Union Territory with full legislative powers" is a must. They also pressed for tribal status for 11 Gorkha sub-tribes.

INDIA ENERGY WEEK 2026

- The 4th edition of India ENergy Week 2026 was held in Goa from 27-30 January 2026. It was held under the patronage of India's Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas.
- It is the country's flagship global energy platform, which brings together government leaders, industry executives, and innovators to accelerate progress toward a secure, sustainable, and affordable energy future.
- India, while being among the largest consumers of crude, has an oil import dependency level of over 88%, and has been looking to increase domestic oil and gas production by intensifying exploration efforts.

INDIA'S SOLID WASTE MANAGEMENT RULES 2026

- The Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change has notified the Solid Waste Management (SWM) Rules, 2026, to give effect to the new framework.
- Four streams of mandatory segregation at source – wet waste, dry waste, sanitary waste and special care waste – have been defined. This will cover waste from paper and kitchen waste to sanitary towels and diapers to tube lights, waste batteries.
- The focus of the new framework is on a 'waste hierarchy' which prioritizes prevention and reduction, followed by reuse, recycling, recovery and disposal, with prevention being the most preferred option.
- The new Rules broadens the scope of responsibilities, increases linkages for reuse of waste as fuel in boilers, cement kilns, to promote circular economy, and introduces clear penalties for non-compliance.



— It places stringent onus on bulk generators – which account for 30 per cent of waste – to process solid waste at source.

— Bulk generators have been defined as entities which fulfill either of these criterion – buildings with floor area of 20,000 square metres or more, water consumption of 40,000 litres per day or more, generation of 100 kg/day waste or more.

— These bulk generators must ensure that the waste is collected, transported, and processed in an environmentally sound manner.

— About 1.85 lakh tonnes/day solid waste is generated in the country, of which 1.79 lakh tonnes/day is collected, 1.14 lakh tonnes/day is processed or treated and 39,629 tonnes/day is landfilled, as per Central Pollution Control Board's 2023-24 data.

2 NEW RAMSAR SITES

— Patna Bird Sanctuary in Etah district of Uttar Pradesh and Chhari-Dhand in Kutch district of Gujarat have been included as wetlands of international importance in Ramsar sites list, under the global Ramsar convention.

— The Patna bird sanctuary wetland consists of freshwater marshes, woodlands and grasslands, and is surrounded by agricultural landscapes, as per the note.

— Chhari-Dhand is a seasonal saline wetland located between the famous Banni grasslands and salt flats of Kutch, as per a note issued by the Ramsar Convention secretariat.

— The designation of these two sites under the Ramsar Convention takes the total number of such wetlands in India to 98.

NEW INFLATION SERIES: FOOD'S, WEIGHT TO FALL TO 37% FROM 46%

India's new headline inflation data, with 2024 as the base year for prices, will see the weight of food and beverage items fall from 45.86% to 36.75%.

According to documents published by the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI) on Thursday, the new series will also see housing become a more prominent component of the Consumer Price Index (CPI) basket — a move which, in conjunction with certain methodological changes adopted to measure rent increases more accurately, will likely result in higher housing inflation and exert upward pressure on overall retail inflation.

'THORIUM-BASED N-POWER KEY TO SECURING ENERGY INDEPENDENCE'

India's nuclear strategy has long rested on a three-stage programme, built around a basic constraint: the country has limited uranium but vast reserves of thorium. In the first stage, pressurised heavy water reactors (PHWRs) run on uranium to generate electricity and produce plutonium. The second stage uses this plutonium in fast breeder reactors to multiply fuel and prepare the ground for the final phase — thorium-based nuclear power, where thorium is converted into uranium-233 for long-term energy security.

Former Atomic Energy Commission chairman Anil Kakodkar, who is now Chancellor of the Homi Bhabha National Institute and Chairman of the Rajiv Gandhi Science & Technology Commission,

4TH FLOOR SHATABDI TOWER, SAKCHI, JAMSHEDPUR



tells Anil Sasi that with a large PHWR capacity now running on imported uranium, India can start producing uranium-233 by irradiating thorium alongside advanced fuels such as HALEU, accelerating the country's path to energy independence.

INDIA'S CHEAPEST POWER NEEDS NEW BUYERS

For decades, India's power sector grappled with scarcity and affordability issues even as it undertook complex and ambitious power-sector reforms. Today, we add 40 GW of renewable capacity every year, far more than in most developed economies and cheaper than in most geographies. The task is to organise markets, institutions, and demand. Absorption is becoming a constraint with nearly 42 GW of renewable capacity awarded through auctions yet to find buyer utilities.

NIPAH VIRUS

- Airports in Thailand, Taiwan and Nepal have reintroduced Covid-style health checks following reports of Nipah cases in India.
- Nipah is a viral infection that mainly affects animals such as bats, pigs, dogs, and horses. Being zoonotic, it can jump to humans who come in contact with the infected animals and cause serious disease.
- Nipah can spread to humans after close contact with infected animals or secretions containing the virus on fruit trees, fruits, date palm sap, juice or toddy. It can spread from human to human through close contact at home or in hospitals. It can spread from handling dead bodies of those with Nipah.
- There are no antivirals and there is only symptomatic management.

HOW SUFI POET BULLEH SHAH BLENDED RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND CHALLENGED ORTHODOXY

Last week, a shrine of the 17th-century Sufi poet Bulleh Shah was vandalised by miscreants in Mussoorie, Uttarakhand, sparking widespread outrage and calls for the protection of Sufi heritage. The reactions also underscored the continued cultural relevance of Bulleh Shah, one of Punjab's greatest Sufi poets, who is often likened to Rumi. He preached the primacy of "ishq" (universal love) above all religions, rejecting divisions of caste, creed, religion, and gender. Dr HS Bhatia, former Dean (Languages) at Amritsar's Guru Nanak Dev University, says his core messages were universal love, tolerance, compassion, and concern for mankind. Fluent in Persian and Arabic, he wrote in simple Punjabi. His writing was laced with cultural nuances, earning him a lasting fandom.

MARK TULLY

- Sir Mark Tully, the broadcaster whose warm voice that once travelled through crackling shortwave radios to become, for millions, the most trusted interpreter of India, passed away in New Delhi at the age of 90.



— Raised partly in India and later educated in Britain, Tully returned in 1965 with the BBC, initially in an administrative role, before growing into one of the most influential foreign correspondents the country has known.

— During the Emergency, when Prime Minister Indira Gandhi imposed censorship and threw out all foreign correspondents who were unwilling to sign an undertaking that they were agreeable to pre-censorship, Tully was but naturally the first non-Indian journalist to be targeted.

— Tully's gripping accounts of other epoch-making events such as Operation Blue Star, the Bhopal gas tragedy and Rajiv Gandhi's assassination are etched in a generation of Indians in the 70s, 80s and 90s.

ARUNDHATI ROY

— Celebrated author and activist Arundhati Roy has won the Mathrubhumi Book of the Year Award 2026 for her novel, *Mother Mary Comes to Me*.

— The award, now in its seventh edition, carries a cash prize of ₹200,000 and a sculpture.

— It honours an English-language book published in India that has made a lasting contribution to contemporary literature, whether originally written in English or translated from an Indian language.

THOMAS V KUNNUNKAL

— Father Kunnunkal, a Jesuit priest, a Padma Shri awardee and one of the most influential figures in India's post-Independence education system, died at the age of 99.

— He is best known for reshaping the Central Board of Secondary Education into a national benchmark. He has served as the CBSE chairman from 1980 to 1987.

DreamIAS



BUSINESS AND ECONOMY

DOES TRUMP HAVE CASE ON JPMORGAN FOR CLOSING HIS ACCOUNTS?

U.S. President Donald Trump filed a \$5 billion lawsuit against JPMorgan Chase and its CEO Jamie Dimon on Thursday for closing his accounts allegedly for political reasons.

Here is a look at Trump's claims and how the case could play out:

Why is Trump suing?

The largest U.S. bank closed accounts of several Trump businesses in April 2021 after they had been customers for decades, according to Trump's lawsuit. JPMorgan notified Trump of the closures about a month after his supporters stormed the U.S. Capitol building on January 6, 2021.

In bad faith

Trump said the bank's motivation was political and that JPMorgan violated Florida law barring unfair trade practices and acted in bad faith.

Trump also accused Dimon of ordering a malicious "blacklist" to warn other banks about doing business with the Trump Organization, Trump family members and Trump himself. Trump said the publication of this blacklist amounted to trade libel under Florida law and said his businesses suffered considerable financial and reputational harm as a result. The suit comes after Dimon criticized Trump's immigration policies and proposal to cap interest rates that banks charge on credit cards.

JPMorgan denied wrongdoing, said the lawsuit had no merit and that it closes accounts that create legal or regulatory risk for the company.

The case will likely boil down to whether Trump's legal team can prove the bank cancelled the accounts because of his political viewpoints. Terms of banking agreements tend to strongly favour the banks, which do not need to provide a reason for closing an account and customers often don't know why their accounts are terminated.

In this case, Trump said JPMorgan gave a 60-day notice of the account closure but did not provide a reason.

Banks must monitor customers for a variety of potential risks, and a customer who had an account closed because of banned activity such as money laundering would have no grounds to challenge it.

However, some reasons for terminating an account might be considered an unfair trade practice or bad faith, including closing an account due to a customer's religion or ethnicity.

Legal experts said cancelling an account because of an accountholder's political viewpoint, which JPMorgan said it does not do, would likely be impermissible. However, it might be legal if an account holder's views were so extreme they undermined trust in the bank. Trump could argue that his political views were mainstream as he had just amassed more than 70 million votes in losing the November 2020 election.



Trade libel claim

Trump's trade libel claim stems from the allegation of a blacklist. Trump claims the JPMorgan blacklist is reserved for clients that have engaged in malfeasance or other actions worthy of having their accounts closed. Trump said his business accounts were in good standing prior to being added to the list. In February 2024, nearly three years after the accounts were closed, a New York state judge found Trump and his businesses liable for civil fraud, in a case brought by the state's attorney general. A state appeals court later threw out a half-billion dollar penalty against Trump without completely overturning the fraud finding. Both sides appealed.

Legal experts said trade libel claims usually involve a defendant accused of disparaging a plaintiff's product to gain a competitive edge — an aspect that is lacking from the Trump allegations. The claim will depend on the existence a blacklist and if JPMorgan made disparaging statements to other banks about Trump and his businesses that were false.

TRUMP'S POLICIES, SANCTIONS TURN CENTRAL BANKS TO GOLD, DRIVE DE-DOLLARISATION

On Monday, even as the US dollar fell to a four-month low, the price of gold crossed the \$5,000-per-ounce mark for the first time. The yellow metal's historic rally is showing no signs of slowing down, with even the smartest and biggest institutions in the world – and not just small-time investors like households – continuing to pile in on gold. One category of these smart and big investors is central banks.

Key Takeaways:

— Take the Reserve Bank of India (RBI), for instance. Last week, data from the Indian central bank showed that its foreign exchange reserves were up more than \$14 billion as on January 16 – the biggest weekly increase in 10 months. However, nearly a third of this rise was due to the RBI's gold kitty of 880 tonnes appreciating in value.

— Over the past year, the value of RBI's foreign currency assets – which predominantly make up the forex reserves – has increased by just 5% even as total reserves rose 12%. What has been the primary driver? Gold, with the value of the RBI's holdings up 70%.

— The RBI, though, hasn't even been the biggest buyer of gold over the last year. In fact, the RBI's gold holdings only increased by 4 tonnes or so in 2025. Leading the charge were the central banks of Poland (95 tonnes), Kazakhstan (49 tonnes), and Brazil (43 tonnes), as per World Gold Council data until November 2025.

— But central banks buying gold is not news. What matters is gold's relative position in what these banks hold as reserves; the RBI, for example, now holds 17% of its forex reserves as gold, up from 12% a year ago. The reason, directly and indirectly, is US President Donald Trump.

— In a note last week, economists from Morgan Stanley said that Trump's policies on trade and sanctions, among other factors, and the shift to a multipolar world are key to pushing people away from the US dollar.

— Trump has made no secret about maintaining the US dollar's global supremacy, even threatening the BRICS nations with 100% additional tariff should they move forward with a common currency to “degenerate” and “destroy” the dollar.



— De-dollarisation, after all, can shift the balance of power away from the US and weaken its ability to shape the world economy and global financial markets in its image.

— At the same time, everything Trump has done has weakened the greenback's status in the eyes of foreign beholders, resulting in the US dollar weakening by 9% in 2025 – the most in almost a decade. This has helped drive the rise in gold prices, with the demand for safe-haven assets on the up amid Trump's sabre-rattling and policy uncertainty.

— According to JP Morgan analysts, de-dollarisation has been most visible in commodity markets. In a note last year, the investment bank said that “a large and growing proportion of energy is being priced in non-dollar-denominated contracts”. However, this is also showing up in sovereign debt.

— The RBI, for instance, has sharply lowered its holdings of US government bonds: in November 2025, holdings by India stood at \$186.5 billion, down for the sixth month in a row. In November 2024, the figure was \$234 billion. Meanwhile, China's holdings of US government debt are at a 16-year low.

— The diversification of forex reserves away from the dollar and assets denominated in it received a big push after the US froze Russia's reserves following its invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

Do You Know:

— Dollarisation is the process by which a country decides to recognize the U.S. dollar (stronger currency) as a medium of exchange alongside or in place of its domestic currency. It is a form of currency substitution where governments may choose to partially or fully adopt a foreign currency.

— For the past 80 years, the US dollar has been the dominant global reserve currency. Central banks, corporations, and travelers rely on the dollar to facilitate international trade and financial transactions. Today, the dollar is the most widely held reserve currency, playing a role in an estimated \$6.6 trillion in daily transactions. Its supremacy underpins the global financial system.

— Notably, the history of the beginning of 'Dollarisation' goes back to the Bretton Woods Conference of 1944, which redefined the global monetary order with participation from 44 Allied countries, including the US, Canada, and much of Western Europe.

— In response to Europe's need for financial stability post- second world war, the US established the dollar as the central reserve currency, pegging global currencies to it and making it convertible to gold at a fixed rate.

— De-dollarisation, in simple terms, is the process of reducing dependence on the dollar. Discussions about 'de-dollarization' have gained momentum in recent decades. This trend is driven by U.S. sanctions and a growing shift toward multipolarity.

AMID VOLATILITY, A SUPPLY COMFORT IN COMMODITIES

In 2022, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, even as the world was recovering from the post-pandemic supply chain disruptions, sent international prices of food and other commodities soaring. The benchmark FAO Food Price Index scaled an all-time high of 160.2 points in March and Brent crude futures crossed \$139 per barrel on March 7 that year. In contrast, the recent geopolitical storms — whether in Venezuela, Iran or Greenland, not to speak of US President Donald Trump's seeming



upending of the world order — have had minimal effect on the global commodity trade. The FAO index is well below the 2022 peaks, averaging 124.3 points in December, while Brent prices are at around \$65 per barrel now.

As far as supplies go, the world is moving to surpluses. Global wheat production is projected to reach a new high, mainly on the back of bigger crops in Argentina and the EU. The same goes for rice, corn and barley, where the drivers for record output are India, the US and the EU respectively. In oilseeds, too, the expected bumper production of soyabean and palm oil is largely courtesy of Brazil and Indonesia. On top of that, take India's own total stocks of wheat and rice in government godowns on January 1, which were nearly 4.5 times the required minimum level for that date. The good monsoon rainfall in 2025, in combination with moderate temperatures, has also delivered a good harvest in the kharif and, in all likelihood, the current rabi season as well.

The supply comfort in commodities, both global and domestic, is a redeeming feature in the present situation, where the rupee and the stock market are in freefall amid continued selling by foreign portfolio investors and capital outflows from India. Soft commodity prices are cushioning the impact of a weakening rupee that would otherwise have engendered imported inflation. The Union Budget should focus on macroeconomic stability. Far from taking the foot off the pedal of fiscal consolidation, there should be a clear glide path for a reduction in the deficit and debt ratios of both the Centre and state governments. Geopolitical risk and uncertainty are often beyond any government's control. The same cannot be said, though, about macro stability and policy predictability.

MATURE AND PRAGMATIC

The free trade agreement (FTA) between India and the European Union (EU) is significant not just on account of the sizes of the economies involved, but also because it showcases Indian negotiators' skill and maturity when dealing with a powerful counterparty. India has managed to negotiate favourable terms in each of the previous eight FTAs of the last four years or so, but those were with much smaller economies or groupings. For context, the other eight FTAs together accounted for about 16% of India's total trade in 2024-25, while the EU itself accounted for nearly 12%. Under the latest deal, the EU will drop tariffs on 99.5% of the items that India exports, with most going down to zero immediately upon implementation. India has given tariff concessions on 97.5% of Europe's exports. Both sides did well to address issues that were previously intractable. India ensured that strategic agricultural sectors and dairy were excluded from the deal. The EU too managed to exclude several of its sensitive agricultural sectors. What stood out was how the two sides arrived at a workable solution on automobiles. It had been disagreements over auto and auto parts that had derailed negotiations in 2013. The quota-based system now arrived at not only protects India's domestic manufacturers at the lower end of the price band, but also provides a big opportunity for Europe's luxury carmakers. Similarly, the quota-based wine tariffs not only give French winemakers an opportunity — a fervent demand on their part — but also provide protections to India's burgeoning domestic industry. Such a mature and pragmatic approach to persistent hindrances is the way large economies must negotiate with each other. This is further illustrated by the mobility, defence, and technology agreements that were signed separately.

That said, there are some concerns. India could not negotiate any concessions under the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM). At the moment, this tariff applies to only six products, but is designed to include all industrial goods in some years. The upside is that CBAM applies to all countries equally, and India has done well to negotiate a deal wherein any concession granted to a third country would automatically apply to it as well. Second, if India is to attract foreign



investors looking to take advantage of a cheaper export route to Europe, it will have to quickly implement reforms that encourage large-scale manufacturing. Finally, with the FTA document to be translated into 27 European languages before it can be cleared by each country and finally the European Parliament, actual implementation will likely take a while. India must push for as speedy a clearing process as possible. Otherwise, the gains so painstakingly bargained for will be too late to offset the U.S. tariff pain.

MOST EUROPEAN LUXURY CARS WON'T GET CHEAPER IN INDIA

As India and the European Union announced the formal completion of negotiations for the long-awaited free trade agreement (FTA) on Tuesday, one headline figure caught everyone's attention: that tariffs on European-made cars imported into India would progressively come down from the current 110% to a mere 10%.

Key Takeaways:

- This has given way to anticipation that European cars could now be available in India at much more affordable prices. However, industry insiders say that the actual ground effects may not be as pronounced as the low tariff structure might suggest.
- The headline tariff deflation from 110% to 10% (over a period of time) only applies to completely built units, or CBUs. These cars are not made in India and are entirely imported from elsewhere.
- The duty reduction does not, or rather cannot, apply to cars assembled in India, which constitute more than 90% of the European cars currently sold in the country. These cars, called completely knocked down, or CKD, units are assembled in India locally, and only kits are imported. The duty on importing CKDs is around 16-17% currently.
- So, for brands like Mercedes, Audi and BMW, their cars might not be cheaper by much, or at all, as those cars are anyway not paying the high 110% tariff but the 16-17% duty, since they import cars in the CKD state and later assemble them in India.
- An industry source also said that the Rupee's depreciation compared with the Euro could play spoilsport in imported cars getting cheaper in the near-term. "Rupee depreciated by 19% in 2025 compared with Euro, and this is expected to erode any benefit arising from lower duty import for CBU's in the next couple of years," a senior industry executive said.

INDIA-EU TRADE DEAL: WHAT IT MEANS FOR PHARMA SECTOR

- The India-EU Free Trade Agreement (FTA) aims to significantly boost trade by reducing tariffs on pharmaceuticals while increasing EU access to India's medical devices and technology market. It seeks to restore export competitiveness for Indian generics and medtech, though with pressure from the EU regarding intellectual property (IP) rules.
- The FTA grants European companies easier access to India's growing market for high-end medical devices and technologies. It eliminates tariffs on nearly all EU pharmaceutical products and over 90% of optical, medical, and surgical equipment, aiming to reduce healthcare costs and boost trade.



— Duties of up to 11% on EU pharmaceutical products will be almost completely removed. Around 90% of European optical, medical, and surgical equipment will become duty-free in India.

— The deal is expected to encourage investment by European companies in India's research-based pharmaceutical sector. The agreement depends on the EU's push for greater market access and IP protection with India's focus on keeping medicines affordable, including for its extensive generic market.

— India has resisted EU demands for stricter intellectual property (IP) rights and data exclusivity, aiming to protect its large generic medicine sector.

Do You Know:

— When a company develops a new drug, it must submit clinical trial data demonstrating the safety and efficacy of its product to regulators.

— The regulator may use this data to approve another company's generic version on the basis of much less resource-intensive bio-equivalence studies, which demonstrate that the generic version works as well as the innovator product.

— The generic manufacturer can then start marketing its generic drugs on the date the original company's patent ends.

— Here's where data exclusivity comes in. This provision grants innovator pharmaceutical companies exclusive rights over the clinical trial data, meaning a regulator cannot use it to grant approvals to subsequent generic versions during this period.

— So, generic drug companies have to either wait until the exclusivity expires or carry out expensive clinical trials themselves to prove safety and efficacy, just like the innovator company.

WHAT IS RBI NUDGING INDIA TO DO AT BRICS?

The story so far:

Media houses have reported that the Reserve Bank of India is making suggestions to the Indian government and encouraging it to push other BRICS countries to work together on using digital currencies for cross-border payments. This has several advantages, but could also face some near-term risks that will have to be considered.

What is the proposal by the RBI?

While not officially announced, news reports have cited sources in the central bank saying that it has written to the Ministry of Finance to take advantage of India's chairmanship of the BRICS in 2026 to encourage the BRICS nations to use their Central Bank Digital Currencies (CBDCs) to facilitate cross-border payments. If this were to take off, it would be a payments system spanning not just the five founding members of BRICS — Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa — but also more recent joiners such as Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, United Arab Emirates, and Indonesia. Several more countries are waiting in the wings to join the grouping.

What are central bank digital currencies?

CBDCs are legal tender issued by a central bank entirely in digital form. In India, for example, the RBI has been issuing the e-rupee on a limited scale. This currency is the same as the normal rupee,



but is entirely digital and is a store of value all on its own. That is, the CBDC is held in a wallet that is separate from your bank account. Where the Unified Payments Interface (UPI) facilitates the transfer of rupees from one bank account to another, CBDCs move from a wallet to another, with each transaction recorded on a blockchain — in essence a digital ledger.

CBDCs differ from private cryptocurrencies in that, where private cryptocurrencies like Bitcoin are decentralised by design, with no central issuer and no regulator, CBDCs have a very definite issuer and regulator: the central bank. Also, while most cryptocurrencies (apart from stable coins) are not pegged to any real world asset from which they can derive value, CBDCs are backed by the central bank and have a set value. That is, one e-rupee equals one rupee.

What are the benefits of using CBDCs?

Being entirely digital and linked to a blockchain makes CBDCs extremely transparent. A blockchain is a ledger visible to all parties and immutable in structure. Once a transaction is recorded, it is permanent. It cannot be deleted or modified, and the only way to 'undo' it is to conduct a reverse transaction of the same value.

Cross-border transactions are a major route for black and laundered money. The transparency and immutability of CBDCs thus could be a huge advantage in tracking these transactions and cracking down on them. In addition, the nature of these currencies allows them to be programmed in particular ways. For example, they can be programmed to be usable only for certain transactions. As the RBI website mentions, they can be programmed to be applicable on the basis of expiry dates, geo-location, merchant registration codes, particular merchant categories, etc. The limits of what can be programmed lie in the imagination of those doing the coding. The blockchain can also be programmed to record details such as the name and other identifiers of the payer and the payee, adding further transparency.

At a larger geopolitical level, CBDCs can also help India deal with some of its stickier international payments-related issues. For example, trade with Iran and Russia has become significantly harder because both countries have been excluded from the U.S. dollar-based SWIFT international payments system. At the moment, India is getting around this by making payments in national currencies, but that approach has its limitations and is not sustainable for long. CBDCs, thus, offer a workable solution. Iran held a blockchain conference in November 2025 where a number of officials urged BRICS nations to trade with it using cryptocurrencies.

What are the risks?

The first issue is that working out the legal and regulatory issues between multiple countries could take a long time and so the benefits of such a structure will likely not be available for some years ahead. The other, more significant and immediate, issue is how the U.S. will react to such a step. U.S. President Donald Trump has already in the past threatened additional tariffs on BRICS countries if they go ahead with developing alternatives to the U.S. dollar. A move to use CBDCs as opposed to the dollar, could, therefore, attract further tariffs on top of the 50% tariffs already levied on imports from India. India will have to weigh the costs of additional tariffs against the benefits of using CBDCs for cross-border payments.

DEVOLUTION, NOT DEBT

While the Union Budget is keenly tracked by States to assess their share in overall Central tax devolution, it is becoming increasingly clear that this revenue stream no longer plays the



stabilising role it once did in State finances. The evidence lies in the rapid expansion of State Development Loans (SDLs), which have emerged as a key financing instrument for States' day-to-day spending needs. In 2024-25 (Revised Estimates), SDLs amounted to about 35% of Tamil Nadu's total revenue receipts and nearly 26% of Maharashtra's — levels that would have been considered fiscally exceptional a decade ago. This shift gathered pace after 2020-21, when the COVID-19 pandemic delivered a severe economic shock and Central devolution proved inadequate. This dependence on borrowing has not reversed since. Instead, States are increasingly relying on SDLs; borrowings by profit-making State PSUs and Special Purpose Vehicles are done to finance even routine revenue expenditure. This has happened despite the 15th Finance Commission fixing States' share at 41% of the divisible pool, as the effective flow of resources has been eroded by the growing use of cesses and surcharges, which lie outside the divisible pool. The problem is acute for industrialised States with a large indirect tax base. Since the introduction of GST in 2017, a substantial share of these revenues is collected by the Centre and redistributed through a formula that often weakens the fiscal link between tax effort and reward. Consequently, welfare commitments — pensions for the elderly and retired employees and mass health insurance schemes for the poor — are increasingly being funded through domestic borrowing. This limits the availability of funds for public capital expenditure and private investment, which is essential to sustain growth.

A comparison of borrowing patterns over the past five years across Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra and West Bengal underlines this trend. West Bengal, which is structurally dependent on Central devolution — averaging about 47.7% of its revenue receipts over the last five years — continued to borrow heavily from the domestic market. SDLs constituted roughly 35% of the State's revenues on average during this period, even as nominal tax devolution rose. This points to a steady erosion of States' fiscal autonomy, with potentially serious macroeconomic consequences as debt-to-GSDP ratios rise while assured revenue streams weaken. If debt, rather than devolution, becomes the primary shock absorber in India's federal system, fiscal sustainability itself comes under strain. India needs higher effective devolution, and a reworking of horizontal devolution criteria to give greater weight to tax effort and efficiency. Cesses and surcharges must be brought into the divisible pool.

HAS HEALTH SPENDING BY THE CENTRE INCREASED?

The 2017 National Health Policy (NHP) had committed to “increase health expenditure by Government as a percentage of GDP [Gross Domestic Product] from the existing 1.15% to 2.5% by 2025.” While 2025 is now over, this basic goal is nowhere near realisation, since the Union government has not upscaled its health budget as required over the last decade. The NHP also proposed that the Union government's share should be 40% of total public spending. This essentially means that spending by the Centre should increase from the current level of 0.29% to 1% of GDP — which requires increasing allocations by at least three times.

Low spending on public health

Public spending on health in India continues to be abysmally low compared to many countries. For instance, Bhutan's per capita spending on health was 2.5 times more than that of India's, while Sri Lanka's was three times in 2021. All the other BRICS nations spent 14-15 times more on health per person than India did. Similarly, Thailand and Malaysia also spend at least 10 times more per capita on health than India.



During the COVID years, public spending on health as a percentage of GDP had increased somewhat, with much of the rise attributed to the States rather than the Union government. The States have sustained such increase post-COVID as well. As per data from the Reserve Bank of India (RBI), allocations for health and family welfare by all States and Union Territories have increased from 0.67% in 2017-18 to 1.1% of GDP as per 2025-26 Budget Expenditure (BE). Similarly, the share for health spending in overall State budgets has increased from 5% to 5.6% during this period.

In contrast, the Union government's spending on health as a percentage of GDP, which increased moderately during the pandemic, has decreased post-pandemic. The Union government's allocation on health in the 2025-26 Budget was 4.7% less than what was actually spent in 2020-21, when one takes into account the effect of increasing prices. This means that the care that could be provided in 2020-21 cannot be ensured now, given that allocations have declined while prices have skyrocketed. As a percentage of GDP, the Union government's allocation for health has declined drastically from 0.37% (2020-21 Actual Expenditure) to 0.29% (2025-26 BE). It seems that even the modest higher priority accorded to the health sector during COVID has been slashed after the immediate emergency passed. The share of health in the total Union Government budget has declined from 2.26% to 2.05% in this period.

On cess

In 2018-2019, Health and Education Cess (HEC) was introduced as 4% of one's total taxable income. The cess was supposed to top up and expand existing government spending on health and to take care of the health of poor and rural families. However, the thousands of crores collected yearly as HEC has not been used to expand the health budget but instead is being used to supplement tax resources. For instance, the FY2023-24 collection of HEC was ₹71,180 crore, of which one fourth went to health, which came to around ₹17,795 crore. If we keep aside this cess amount, we note that the Union Budget's allocation for health has declined by 22.5% in real terms between 2020-21 and 2023-24.

Cutting schemes

In 2014-15, three-fourth (75.9%) of Union spending on health was transferred to the States for various Centrally Sponsored Schemes like the National Health Mission. Overtime, this has declined consistently to reach just 43% in 2024-25 (Budget Estimates), which is completely insufficient to maintain basic health services. It should be noted that the State governments bear the main costs of providing healthcare to people across India, and they need to be adequately resourced by the Union government. The trend reflects hyper-centralisation of financial resources on health, although health services largely fall within the domain of States.

By trying to identify which schemes and programs have received cuts and which have seen considerable increase, one can understand the real health sector priorities of the Union Government. Schemes which strengthen the public health system and protect the health of the most vulnerable sections of society, like the NHM, the Pradhan Mantri Swasthya Suraksha Yojana, and schemes on nutrition and health research have received severe cuts despite doing good work in hard times.

Launched in 2005, the NHM has been a crucial intervention by the Union government to improve health services in rural and urban areas. But in the last seven years, expenditure on this key scheme has mostly remained stagnant or has come down. Between FY14 and FY19, the spending on NHM grew at 7.4% on average, largely due to a sudden jump in FY18. However, during the



second tenure of the National Democratic Alliance government, spending on NHM actually declined in real terms by 5.5% on average.

GANDHI'S GRAM SWARAJ IDEAL, AND WHY TRUE DEVOLUTION OF POWER HAS REMAINED OUT OF REACH

A week before the commencement of Parliament's Budget session, Congress President Mallikarjun Kharge criticised the Union government for changing the name of the MGNREGS (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme) to VB-G RAM G (The Viksit Bharat — Guarantee for Rozgar and Ajeevika Mission-Gramin).

— Introduced in 2005 under the Manmohan Singh-led UPA government, the MGNREGS was notified with effect from February 2006 to provide basic livelihood opportunities in rural India... The "Mahatma Gandhi" prefix, however, was added to the scheme only on October 2, 2009.

— The Congress also criticised the removal of Gandhi's name from the scheme, evoking his philosophy, which championed the self-sufficiency of rural areas for the health of the nation as a whole.

— Gram swaraj of Gandhi: Across his writings, Gandhi envisioned the all-round development of villages and their self-reliance.

— He wrote on June 23, 1946, "I regard the growth of cities as an evil thing, unfortunate for mankind... The British have exploited India through its cities. The latter have exploited the villages. The blood of the villages is the cement with which the edifice of the cities is built. I want the blood that is today inflating the arteries of the cities to run once again in the blood vessels of the villagers."

— His speech was matched by action, be it in Champaran, where he led his first major satyagraha in 1917, and Sevagram, a self-sufficient ashram he established in Maharashtra.

— Gandhi regularly wrote on the subject in his magazines Harijan and Young India. On July 26, 1942, he wrote in Harijan on the idea of Gram Swaraj, "My idea of Village Swaraj is that it is a complete republic, independent of its neighbours for its own vital wants, and yet interdependent.

— In the early years of Independence, policy focus was on urban-centric development. The urban-rural gap kept widening, prompting migration to major industrial townships for jobs, even if that meant those coming from the villages ended up in slums, living in suboptimal conditions.

— What happened to Gandhi's idea of Gram Swaraj? Genuine devolution of power — financial, political and administrative — is still out of reach, often hinging upon the political will of those at higher levels of governance, and their reluctance to let go of control. Changing these impulses will require much more than policy and funding-related changes.

Do You Know:

— The law on the governance of India's villages was a manifestation of one of Mahatma Gandhi's central principles. He often championed the idea of a Panchayati Raj setup, where local people participate in the functioning of their villages – in improving the condition of schools, roadways and water bodies.



— In fact, Gandhi stated that after Indian independence from British rule in 1947, he wished for the Congress Party to transform into a volunteer organisation consisting of panchayat-like units in all Indian villages to interact with villagers for achieving swaraj. We explain what Gandhi meant when he spoke about the concept and why the law was a milestone.

INSIDE EPFO 3.0: NEW WEBSITE, AI TRANSLATION, ISSUE RESOLUTION AT ALL CENTRES IN NEXT PHASE OF REFORMS

A new portal, new software at the backend, AI-backed translation tools and a core banking solution that will enable access at any centre across the country. These are some of the user-friendly features that the Employees' Provident Fund Organisation (EPFO) is looking to incorporate in its next phase of reforms.

Key Takeaways:

— The retirement fund body has already carried out changes to ease withdrawal norms and the claims settlement process as part of its earlier phase of reforms (called EPFO 2.0). It streamlined withdrawal categories from 13 to three, announced a UPI-linked withdrawal facility (likely to be rolled-out by April) and enabled self-correction of details.

— EPFO 3.0: The key reforms being introduced: In this new phase of reforms, termed EPFO 3.0, the retirement fund body is bringing in a centralised system of operations for its core banking solution, just like banks.

— This will help members access their account and resolve issues at any regional office in the country. This is an important move that will especially help EPFO members who move around cities for work.

—The website, meanwhile, is expected to be more user-friendly and have language translation tools backed by Bhashini, an AI-powered language translation platform developed by the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology.

— The next phase of reforms will also help address the EPFO's expansion in scale as it will cover both unorganised and organised sector workers after the implementation of the Labour Codes. It is learnt that the EPFO is likely to be given the responsibility of administering the fund for unorganised workers. This would be separate from the social security fund for gig and platform workers.

— The retirement fund body currently has nearly eight crore active members and maintains a corpus of around Rs 28 lakh crore. EPFO coverage is mandatory for establishments with 20 or more employees, with coverage now extending to all establishments having 20 or more employees, regardless of the industry, under the new Social Security Code.

— The ongoing second phase of the reforms, EPFO 2.0, is in its final stages. The UPI-linked facility is expected to be introduced by April and only three modules — pension, claim and overall annual accounts — remain to be rolled out.

— Other measures: Under the UPI facility, members can withdraw funds using the BHIM app. They will also be able to separately view their available balance, the balance eligible for withdrawal and the minimum 25% balance. The withdrawal amount could be initially capped at Rs 25,000 per transaction, according to internal discussions.



— The EPFO will also bring into effect the October announcement of liberalising its withdrawal norms that will streamline the withdrawal categories from 13 to three – essential needs (illness, education, marriage); housing needs; and special circumstances.

— The EPFO has introduced two other significant changes regarding 25% minimum balance and premature final settlement in cases such as withdrawal at the time of unemployment, for which the minimum period for availing premature final settlement during unemployment was extended from the existing two months to 12 months.

Do You Know:

— Launched by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in July 2022, BHASHINI, under the National Language Technology Mission, aims to provide translation services in 22 scheduled Indian languages to break through linguistic barriers and enable people to access digital services smoothly.

— Bhashini is an artificial intelligence (AI)-based language translation tool designed to facilitate real-time translation of Indian languages to establish a National Public Digital Platform for languages and increase the amount of content available in Indian languages.

MIND THE TIME

While India is often celebrated for its demographic dividend, its States are undergoing a significant but uneven demographic transition. According to a new RBI report, Kerala and Tamil Nadu will be “ageing States” by 2036 because their elderly populations will exceed 22% and 20%, respectively. On the other hand, the working age populations of Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and Jharkhand will continue to rise beyond 2031. Karnataka and Maharashtra occupy the middle ground, balancing growth with the onset of ageing pressure. In response, the RBI has advised ageing States to “rationalise” their subsidies to afford rising pension costs and youthful States to “invest heavily in human capital”. But how mindful is the RBI’s fiscal advice of the political undertones? Southern States, having successfully tamed population growth, face a double whammy: lower Central tax devolution because population weightage in Finance Commission formulae favours the populous northern States plus lower parliamentary representation due to the upcoming delimitation exercise. On the other hand, while the youthful States have a “window of opportunity” to boost growth using a larger workforce, the share of their spending on education has stagnated or declined, and the question of employability persists. These people will also enter the workforce at a time of manufacturing automation and AI in industry, so the RBI’s suggestion to “boost labour-intensive sectors” may leave these States vulnerable to the possibility of ageing before they get rich.

Research has shown that ageing in India disproportionately affects women, who often live longer but with fewer financial assets. The RBI’s focus on “workforce policy” overlooks the majority of elderly women who were never in the formal workforce and thus have no pension. The RBI model also assumes some level of family support, but with migration and nuclear families becoming the norm, the informal safety net is collapsing. Ultimately, the demographic transition cannot be managed by fiscal changes alone. First, a new industrial policy is needed to create jobs en masse in new sectors such as green energy and the care economy. Second, the youthful States must build healthcare and pension services now to avoid fiscal shocks if and when the replacement fertility rate drops. Third, for most of India’s elderly, the future looks less like “graceful ageing” and more like financial dependency, unless the state drastically expands social pensions; but this directly



contradicts the RBI's call for fiscal consolidation. Finally, without a massive expansion of public geriatric care, the "graceful ageing" that the report envisions will be available only to the wealthy.

MANUFACTURING WOES

India's quest to install 500 GW non-fossil fuel capacity by 2030 has found its primary industrial engine in the Production Linked Incentive (PLI) schemes. Buoyed by the momentum the scheme generated in telecom manufacturing, where the government pays out a predetermined sum only if companies achieve agreed sales targets annually, ministries expect the initiative to transform India from a net importer of green technology into a global manufacturing hub. Unlike telecom, however, the PLI for high-efficiency solar photovoltaics and advanced chemistry cell battery storage face daunting implementation challenges. While downstream module assembly is robust (achieving 56% of its specific target by mid-2025), the critical upstream segments remain a bottleneck. Polysilicon and wafer manufacturing, the most technology-intensive parts of the value chain, have only reached 14% and 10% of their respective targets. This disparity highlights a persistent reliance on imported raw materials and specialised technical expertise, prompting the government to consider additional capital subsidies to de-risk these high-capex upstream projects.

Similar woes stalk the scheme for battery manufacturing. The progress towards establishing 50 GWh of domestic battery cell production to fuel the electric vehicle revolution, with an outlay of ₹18,000 crore, has been sluggish. By late 2025, only about 2.8% (1.4 GWh) of the targeted capacity had been commissioned. The gap between policy ambition and ground reality in battery manufacturing stems from stringent domestic value addition requirements — mandating 25% within two years and 60% within five — and the immense technical barriers of "gigafactory" construction. To add to these are challenges such as not issuing visas to Chinese technical experts, who will be setting up several manufacturing facilities. The Indian government's expectation that mere capital support will substantially improve high-technology manufacturing is misplaced. The complex infrastructure required to make it at scale requires decades of research investment and workforce training. While mega corporates expect international technology transfers to accelerate the process, they are capital intensive and do not always translate to near-term gain. Several companies face steep fines for not delivering on their deadlines. A relook at provisions in the PLI scheme to prioritise expertise and technical know-how rather than the net worth of companies bidding for PLI contracts is necessary.

**LIFE AND SCIENCE****THE DOOMSDAY CLOCK SHOWS THE DANGER, BUT NOT A WAY-OUT FOR THE WORLD**

On January 27, the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists moved its Doomsday Clock to 85 seconds to midnight, the closest it has been to the metaphorical point of global catastrophe. The Doomsday Clock is historically significant because it transformed the abstract, technical threat of nuclear war into a universally understood symbol of urgency. Since the so-called Chicago group of scientists involved in the Manhattan Project created it in 1947, the clock has bridged the gap between scientific experts and the general public, forcing the world to confront the reality of potential self-destruction through a simple visual metaphor.

As the Bulletin has moved the clock's hands back and forth, but mostly forth, their movements have validated major arms control treaties or condemned dangerous escalations like the hydrogen bomb. And in the last eight decades it has become a cornerstone of the cultural framework that treats nuclear weapons and climate change as existential, rather than just political, problems.

But for all the ease with which the clock has raised alarms — thanks in no small part to its iconic design by the American artist Martyl Langsdorf — the clock has also failed to put out the fires. This is because the clock banks on the idea that if you show people a sufficiently frightening picture of their future, they will demand change. But history is clear that this strategy is flawed: while the clock has successfully branded the apocalypse, it has failed to overcome the political gridlock that actually drives the arms race.

That said, perhaps its most significant achievement is to set the agenda. Before the clock, nuclear strategy was a secret language spoken only by generals and physicists. The Bulletin changed that by creating a symbol everyone could understand, one of the number of minutes to midnight. This was clever because it forced the media to talk about nuclear risk every single year. When the U.S. and the Soviet Union signed major arms control treaties in the late 1980s and when the Copenhagen Summit concluded in 2009 with the 2° C climate goal, the clock moved backwards, giving people a clear way to see that diplomacy was working.

Unfortunately for the clock, constant fear often leads to paralysis, an effect psychologists call psychic numbing. When the clock stayed at two minutes to midnight for decades or hovered at 90 seconds as it did recently, its shock value wore off. Instead of rushing to fix the problem, people get used to living on the edge of destruction. Keeping the alert level so high for so long unintentionally normalised the very danger the Bulletin wished to eliminate. It's understandable: if it's always the end of the world, people stop believing the end is actually coming.

Equally understandably, the clock hasn't been able to change the behaviour of national governments. The scientists behind the clock have appealed to securing the safety of the human race — what could be more important? — but governments have increasingly cared only about the safety of their own borders. And these goals often clash. For instance when India and Pakistan tested nuclear weapons in 1998, the Clock moved forward to condemn them, yet that condemnation meant nothing to the leaders in New Delhi or Islamabad, who believed they needed the weapons to survive. Even the current setting of 85 seconds to midnight is proof of this restriction: the fact that we're closer to doom now than at any point in the Cold War suggests the people with the power to launch the missiles have ignored the clock's warnings.



Too many threats

The clock's effectiveness was further complicated when the Bulletin decided to include climate change and disruptive technologies in its calculations. To be sure, this decision was scientifically sound but it also muddled the message. Whenever the clock moved before, everyone knew it was about nuclear bombs. Today its moves are a mix of nuclear tension, rising temperatures, mis- and dis-information risks, biological threats, and so on. The clock is an example of science communication in action yet its attempts to account for all possible threats, even if they're all equally real, undermines the people's ability to understand what to demand from their leaders. A politician can claim they're addressing the clock's warning by passing a climate bill even as the government builds more nuclear weapons.

The Doomsday Clock is ultimately a good diagnostic tool, just not a cure. It banks on shame and reason in a world that, more signs by the day indicated, runs on fear and power. It tells us exactly what time it is but it's silent on how we can stop the ticking.

HOW IS CHINA FRAMING ITS ANTARCTIC AMBITIONS?

The story so far:

On December 23, 2025, media houses reported that China was proposing a draft legislation titled the 'Antarctic Activities and Environmental Protection Law'. The draft has been submitted for first reading to the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress. The proposed legislation seeks to regulate China's activities in Antarctica.

What does the draft legislation say?

The draft legislation consists of seven chapters and 57 articles. It seeks to establish a comprehensive domestic legal framework governing all Chinese-related activities in Antarctica. It applies not only to Chinese citizens and organisations but also to foreign entities that organise Antarctic activities from within China or depart from Chinese ports. It also drafts rules aimed at regulating expeditions, scientific research, fisheries, tourism, and shipping. A central feature of the draft is its emphasis on peaceful use and environmental protection in line with the Antarctic Treaty System (a collection of international agreements which govern the southern continent). The draft prohibits military activities, and only allows its limited use if it is to support peaceful objectives. It does not permit combat operations, weapons testing, troop deployment, or strategic military activities. Mineral resource exploitation is banned except for scientific research. The draft also introduces environmental impact assessments, supervision mechanisms, and post-incident accountability. Governance challenges on Antarctic tourism, waste management, and marine pollution are also addressed.

What about China's presence in the Antarctic?

In 1984, China conducted its first scientific expedition to Antarctica. Later it became a consultative party to the Antarctic Treaty in 1985. It has since then expanded its scientific and logistical footprint in the continent over 40 years. Currently, China operates five research stations in the Antarctic, namely the Great Wall Station, the Ongshan Station, the Taishan Station, the Kunlun Station, and the Qinling Station. This well-established network of research stations in different parts of the Antarctic allows China to conduct year-long scientific research. It can conduct research across key climatic, glaciological, atmospheric, and astronomical zones. China also



operates advanced polar icebreakers such as the Xuelong and Xuelong 2, strengthening its logistical capacity.

What are China's Antarctic goals?

China's official statements emphasise scientific research, climate studies, environmental protection, and international cooperation. Antarctic research supports China's understanding of the global climate challenge, sea-level rise and polar-atmospheric interactions. This has implications for domestic environmental planning as well. Its ambitions are framed around science, governance, participation, and long-term strategic presence rather than territorial claims. At the governance level, China seeks to move from being a participant to a rule-shaping actor within the Antarctic Treaty System. Moreover, sustained polar operations contribute to advancement in ice-breaking, satellite navigation and extreme-environment engineering.

What does it mean for the Antarctic treaty?

China's draft Antarctic law signals its move towards formalising and strengthening its Antarctic presence. It places Antarctic activities within a clear domestic legal and regulatory framework rather than relying only on policy guidelines. It also reflects a broader pattern among major consultative parties using national legislation to ensure better compliance with Antarctic Treaty obligations. China's legislative initiative reinforces the need to monitor how major powers organise and regulate their Antarctic engagement, as domestic laws increasingly shape behaviour within a treaty-based governance system.

EXOMINER++: PLANET SPOTTER

ExoMiner++ is a deep-learning artificial intelligence (AI) model developed by NASA researchers to spot exoplanets in telescope data. It's the successor to ExoMiner, which examined Kepler telescope data. ExoMiner++ will comb through the Transiting Exoplanet Survey Satellite (TESS) mission as well.

ExoMiner++ analyses graphs showing the brightness of a star over time. When a planet crosses in front of its star, it causes a dip in brightness. The challenge is to separate true planetary signals from false positives, such as two stars orbiting each other or background objects that mimic planetary transits.

Unlike many black-box AI models, ExoMiner++ is designed to be explainable. It provides astronomers with a score indicating the likelihood of a signal being a planet and offers insights into why it made that classification.

ExoMiner is credited with validating 370 new exoplanets from Kepler data. These planets were from a shortlist stuck in limbo: scientists had listed them as candidates but their signals were too ambiguous for standard validation techniques.

Compared to ExoMiner, ExoMiner++ is trained on both Kepler and TESS data and can compare a much greater number of stars at a time. As a result, thus far, ExoMiner++ has identified around 7,000 potential exoplanet candidates in TESS data.

NASA has released ExoMiner++ as open-source software on GitHub and has invited researchers to replicate NASA's results, apply the model to their own datasets, and refine the algorithm for future missions, such as the Nancy Grace Roman Space Telescope.



AT 25, WIKIPEDIA SHOWS US WHAT THE INTERNET WAS — AND COULD BE

From December 1, 2012 to January 31, 2013, there was a war of words over a tiny preposition on a Wikipedia “talk” page. Two editors battled over whether the “into” in the Wikipedia page for the 2013 film *Star Trek Into Darkness* should be lower or upper case. It got nasty — over 40,000 words were exchanged before the upper-casers won.

During its 33 years in the public domain, the internet has had several transformations, from the blog posts era to the social media era to the AI revolution. With each new iteration, information has become more unreliable, more bite-sized, more polarising. Amidst this, Wikipedia, which turned 25 this month, seems like a throwback to the early internet: Not offering the eye-catching features of ever-evolving technology, but stolidly building a database of knowledge. What began as a website distrusted by serious seekers of knowledge, who viewed it as being synonymous with sloppy, low-effort work, now offers, as per a Nature investigation, accuracy comparable to that of Encyclopaedia Britannica.

In other ways, too, it is something of an outlier in today’s digital landscape, with its volunteer-based, not-for-profit structure. Today, it has over 66 million articles in 342 languages. A study by SEO firm Graphite found last year that over 50 per cent of the internet has been taken over by AI slop. Amidst this, perhaps Wikipedia’s model — ponderous and unhip in the age of flashier and faster chatbots — offers an opportunity to reflect on the value of slowness (as far as anything can be slow on the internet), even if that means engaging in a fight over a preposition.

WHAT THE ANNA’S ARCHIVE SPOTIFY HACK REVEALS ABOUT DIGITAL PIRACY

The story so far:

In late December, a relatively little-known platform, Anna’s Archive, made global headlines after it hacked Spotify. Tracked closely by open source movement advocates, the database that indexes millions of digital books and journals claimed it had scraped from Spotify about 86 million music files and metadata coming to slightly under 300TB. The platform claimed it “saw a role for us here to build a music archive primarily aimed at preservation.” While the music collection is yet to be made fully available, the main web link to access Anna’s Archive is down globally. This sudden outage has left numerous users — academics, bibliophiles, and open source activists — in distress.

What is Anna’s Archive?

Anna’s Archive is a type of shadow library project that unifies existing libraries — both legal and illegal. It does this by collaborating with volunteers, scraping web content, and setting up mirrors to preserve digital records. When a user accesses Anna’s Archive, they can see a variety of fast and slow download links from the platform’s partner servers. Those who contribute certain amounts can get a higher number of faster downloads per day. In essence, Anna’s Archive is a search engine for the contents of different shadow libraries.

Anna’s Archive claims that it has preserved about 16% of the world’s books, including scientific journals, since its inception in 2022. The real identity of the person or group behind the project is unknown. But the group has cited Aaron Swartz, a U.S. technologist and digital activist, as one of its inspirations. The group considers itself a non-profit and claims that all donations are spent on servers, storage, and bandwidth.



About its site being taken down and the scraping of Spotify data, the group posted on Reddit: “This unfortunately happens to shadow libraries on a regular basis. We don’t believe this has to do with our Spotify backup.” While many expressed support for the database, others criticised the project for drawing attention to its illegal activities by targeting a high-profile company like Spotify.

Is Anna’s Archive an illegal platform?

Yes. But Anna’s Archive claims that its mission is “backing up all knowledge and culture of humanity” and making it available to anyone. To fulfil its mission, the database breaks copyright laws and violates licensing permissions so users can download e-books and other digital files for free. When a reader finds free books through Anna’s Archive rather than going through a bookseller or a library, publishers lose out on their revenue while authors, artists, and other creatives lose out on royalties.

Anna’s Archive has made contradictory claims regarding the legality of its project. In an introductory blog post published in November 2022, the author noted: “We deliberately violate the copyright law in most countries. This allows us to do something that legal entities cannot do: making sure books are mirrored far and wide”. On the other hand, the website claimed that it does not host any copyrighted materials, and only indexes publicly available metadata as a search engine. Furthermore, Anna’s Archive has shared that its code and data are fully open source. The platform offers its dataset that includes unreleased collections for archival and LLM training purposes. Anna’s Archive offered enterprise-level access “for donations in the range of tens of thousands USD,” or in exchange for high-quality collections it doesn’t have yet. This means that companies building AI chatbots could use Anna’s Archive to train their products on millions of works of art, science, and literature, without fairly compensating the creators.

This month, a U.S. judge ordered Anna’s Archive to delete its data from WorldCat, a global catalog of library materials. Anna’s Archive in a 2023 blog post claimed it had “meticulously scraped all WorldCat records,” by exploiting a flawed website upgrade to obtain a comprehensive to-do list of all the remaining books to be added to Anna’s Archive. The legal order is also meant to stop Anna’s Archive from scraping, harvesting, using, storing, or sharing WorldCat’s data. However, this is unlikely to deter the group, which gleefully thanked WorldCat for hundreds of millions of records and the metadata of 30,000 libraries.

What is the current status?

Anna’s Archive is currently unreachable through its annas-archive.org address, even when attempting to access it via a TOR browser. Some people are using alternative web addresses in order to access the database while others are waiting for the platform to come back online through the old address. Anna’s Archive as well as community members have provided tips and technical advice for those who wish to access the platform through other links. However, there is the risk of less experienced users being scammed by fake web addresses. Anna’s Archive has alleged that the annas-archive.su address, for example, is fraudulent and steals users’ donations.

In spite of the takedown, downloads appear to be continuing. On January 19, Anna’s Archive shared on its website that based on downloads in the last 30 days, the hourly average was 37,000 and the daily average was 8,83,000. There was a sharp dip in downloads after the .org web address went down, followed by a gradual recovery. The platform also provides downloads stats for individual books.



Multiple Anna's Archive users and donors on Reddit justified their downloads by citing the prohibitive cost of buying books. Others spoke about the lack of libraries in their country, high import fees for foreign books, the need for educational resources, the inability to get new books during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, getting digital versions of physical books they already had, upskilling for career reasons, working on their hobbies, inculcating a reading habit instead of scrolling online, reading more diversely, or not wanting to use the restrictive e-book formats provided by the original publishers.

"[G]od bless, being from 3rd world country where can i get all [this] valuable knowledge. however we have to come to a common ground and see how to compensate authors[,] the knowledge that i got from books has made people retain jobs and support families," shared a user on Reddit this month, in response to Anna's Archive.

HOW WILL U.S. EXIT AFFECT SOLAR ALLIANCE?

The story so far:

On January 7, the U.S. government announced that it would withdraw from 66 international organisations. The reason given was that these bodies no longer served American interests. Among them were major climate platforms, including the International Solar Alliance (ISA), an organisation headquartered in India and jointly led by India and France.

What is the ISA?

The ISA was set up in 2015 to make solar power cheaper and easier to adopt, especially in developing countries. While it doesn't build solar plants itself, it helps countries access finance, reduce risk for investors, and speed up solar adoption. Today, the Alliance has over 120 member countries and works across Africa, Asia, and island nations. The U.S. joined fairly late, in 2021. Over three years, it has contributed around \$2.1 million.

How will U.S. exit affect the ISA?

The U.S. exit will not really harm the alliance financially. U.S. contribution made up only about 1% of the Alliance's total funds. Indian officials have already said that the ISA's day-to-day work will continue, and that ongoing programmes will not be shut down. Moreover, training and capacity-building efforts are still in place.

But economics is not only about budgets, it's also about confidence. And that's where the ripple effects begin.

What about India's solar industry?

As India does not depend on the U.S. for solar panels or key equipment, solar power will not become more expensive. In fact, India now makes a large share of solar components on its own. As of late 2025, India's solar module manufacturing capacity was close to 144 gigawatts. Solar cell manufacturing was around 25 gigawatts and is growing fast, with Indian companies investing across the entire supply chain.

Moreover, China is by far the largest producer of high-efficiency mass market solar modules and cells, with 70% of the global cell producing capacity. In fact, India imported about \$1.7 billion worth of Photovoltaic (PV) modules from China in FY25, as per a Ministry of New and Renewable Energy (MNRE) report in Parliament.



This makes it clear that the recent U.S. decision does not push up project costs in India. It does not affect electricity tariffs either. For consumers, nothing changes.

Will investments slow down?

Again, unlikely. Most solar projects in India are driven by domestic demand. They are backed by long-term contracts with state utilities and central agencies. Investors look at India's power demand, policy stability, and growth potential.

The U.S. is not the main source of funding for Indian solar projects. Indian banks, global funds, and development institutions continue to invest based on India's market fundamentals. So the pipeline of projects inside India remains intact. Even with respect to jobs, India is relatively well-protected. Solar jobs in India come mainly from manufacturing, installation, and operations within the country. Since India is rapidly building a strong local manufacturing capacity, these jobs are not affected by U.S. climate policy. There is even a possible upside. As the U.S. becomes more inward-looking and slows renewable approvals at home, it may still need clean energy equipment. With the U.S. having supply tensions with China and Mexico, Indian manufacturers could find openings, either through exports or by setting up units that meet U.S. standards. A lot however, hinges on the ongoing talks for a bilateral trade agreement between New Delhi and Washington.

Where is the real economic risk?

Mostly outside India. The ISA works extensively in Africa and poorer developing countries. These regions depend heavily on cheap loans and international cooperation to build solar projects. When a large economy like the U.S. steps back from climate engagement, lenders can turn cautious; projects can slow down; and decisions can take longer. If solar growth slows in these regions, Indian companies looking to expand abroad may feel the impact.

The ISA is also one of India's key tools for climate leadership and diplomacy in the Global South. It helps India build influence, open markets, and support Indian companies overseas. While the U.S. exit removes one influential partner and some technical expertise, it does not change who leads the alliance. India still does. That leadership now comes with more responsibility.

What next?

Solar power in India does not become costlier, domestic projects are not threatened, and jobs inside India remain secure. The real challenge then is a more divided global climate landscape, where cooperation is harder and emerging markets need to work harder to attract finance. For India's solar industry, this is not a shock. It is a stress test. And compared with where it stood a few years ago, India appears to be better prepared to handle it.

US QUILTS PARIS DEAL, BUT HAS CHOSEN TO REMAIN IN SOME CLIMATE BODIES

Earlier this month, the United States withdrew itself from over 60 major international organisations and agreements saying these no longer served American interests.

Key Takeaways:

— The most high-profile of these exits related to environment and climate-related treaties and groups like the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA), International Solar Alliance (ISA), International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and a few others.

4TH FLOOR SHATABDI TOWER, SAKCHI, JAMSHEDPUR



— US President Donald Trump's contempt for climate action is well-known. He has described climate change as a 'hoax', and pulled his country out of the 2015 Paris Agreement immediately after assuming office for the second time in January last year.

— However, the United States has not exited from all such organisations or agreements. It pulled out of 31 UN entities but not from the UN Environment Programme (UNEP), which has a significant footprint on global climate policy and discussions. It has quit IRENA but not the International Energy Agency (IEA), whose work also influences global energy transitions.

— Similarly, the US has withdrawn from IPCC, the scientific body that produces periodic assessments of climate science, but not the World Meteorological Organisation (WMO), which too produces climate science and happens to be the host of IPCC.

— There are quite a few other organisations and agreements related to environment, energy and climate that the US is still a member of.

— One of those interests could be to ensure that a few important international agreements currently under discussion are aligned with American priorities. For example, since 2022, the UNEP has been facilitating talks on a Global Plastics Treaty, which is to be a legally-binding international instrument to curb plastic pollution, including in the oceans.

— The US is one of the largest producers of plastics, which are made from fossil fuels, and it is important for it to ensure that the eventual agreement does not jeopardise its industry... But the Trump administration clearly does not see it as profitable to disengage from this conversation at the current stage.

— Somewhat similar is the case with discussions on shipping emissions happening under the International Maritime Organization (IMO). One of the goals of the discussion is to finalise a net-zero emissions framework for 2050, which involves, among other things, the imposition of a tax on carbon emissions from ships.

— This too was supposed to be finalised last year, but ran into trouble due to opposition from the United States and the same set of other players.

— A good comparison could be that between IRENA, from which the US has withdrawn, and IEA, from which it has not.

— Both are energy-related institutions, and seek to promote energy access, availability, and fair and equitable energy policies. But IRENA's core objective is to push the deployment of renewable energy. It does not align with the priorities of the Trump administration, which wants to use more oil and gas.

— The IEA was formed in 1974 to ensure the security of oil supplies. Though it has also been promoting sustainable energy in recent years, it is not ideologically inclined towards renewable or clean energy.

— The case of the World Meteorological Organization, a UN agency, is somewhat similar. WMO produces a lot of climate science, but its main job is global weather forecasting, ocean and atmospheric monitoring, disaster early warning, and weather data and analysis.



Do You Know:

— Zerin Osho writes: US actions were hardly unexpected. Donald Trump’s renewed assault on climate multilateralism follows a familiar script: Withdrawal, obstruction, and indifference to scientific consensus.

— His decision to pull the US out of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change and disengage from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change does not alter a single physical reality of the climate system. Temperatures will keep rising. Seas will continue to swell. Extreme weather will intensify.

— Nor does the exit from over 60 other treaties and multilateral bodies reverse the economic direction of travel, as investment in low-carbon energy continues to outpace fossil fuels. What it will do, however, is dry up funding for many non-profit organisations working on climate action and introduce friction into a narrative of inevitability that had begun to take root among governments, markets, and the public.

‘LOSS OF NATIVE WILDLIFE DRIVES MOSQUITOES TO BITE HUMANS MORE’

There was once a time when mosquitos had multiple hosts to sink their piercing proboscis into, from frogs to birds. But as forests and wildlife have dwindled, they now increasingly quench their appetite with human blood.

A new study in the *Frontiers in Ecology and Evolution* surveyed the Atlantic Forest along the Brazilian coast, home to 850 species of birds, 370 amphibians, 200 reptiles, 270 mammals, and 350 fish.

As guava plantations, pepper plants, ornamental grass, horse breeding, and residential development expanded, a little under a third of the forest’s 1.3 million sq. km remains today. Thus, mosquitoes have also been feeding on human blood more, in the process transmitting a variety of deadly viruses and parasites.

The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates India accounts for three-quarters of all malaria cases in South and South East Asia. About 95% of India’s population also lives in malaria endemic regions.

The authors of the new study aimed to identify mosquitoes’ food sources in the Brazilian areas to help understand ecological and epidemiological dynamics.

The loss of native vegetation and wildlife is associated with more transmission of arboviruses, i.e. transmitted by arthropods such as mosquitoes, ticks, and sandflies. The natural habitats of vectors and their life cycles are also altered, affecting their population density.

WATER INTENSIVE

Why is rice such a water-intensive crop?

Many rice-growing systems deliberately flood the fields and most of the water is lost to the air or to the ground. Farmers often maintain shallow flooding to stabilise some nutrient dynamics. In many paddies, water also moves sideways or down the soil unless the field is rich in clay or well



sealed. Flooding is an easy way to meet these goals but also expands the exposed water surface, so the total water demand rises.

Second, the plant needs CO₂ inside the leaf for photosynthesis. CO₂ enters primarily through open stomata, but the same open pores also allow water vapour to leave. Third, rice is a C₃ plant, and C₃ photosynthesis is less water-efficient in hot or dry conditions than C₄ (e.g. maize). In C₃ plants, the main CO₂-fixing enzyme sometimes reacts with oxygen instead of CO₂.

Finally, flooded soils are oxygen-poor because oxygen diffuses slowly through water. Most crops' roots struggle in these conditions. Rice is tolerant, however, because it develops air-filled channels that move oxygen from the shoots to the roots.

A NATURAL HEATER HIDDEN IN INDIA'S 'SACRED LOTUS' FLOWERS

Thermogenesis is the word for the way living things create their own body heat. While we usually only think of birds and mammals as being warm-blooded, all complex life forms produce some heat. Small power plants in cells, called mitochondria, turn food into a biological fuel, adenosine triphosphate (ATP). But only about one-quarter of the energy from your food actually becomes ATP; the remaining escapes as heat.

Sometimes, mitochondria can turn all the energy in sugar into heat. In plants, an enzyme that can do this is even named alternative oxidase. However, only a few plants generate heat for some very clever uses.

The 'sacred lotus' plant (*Nelumbo nucifera*) is native to North and Central India and grows in ponds, lakes, and gently flowing waters. Flowering begins in early summers, at mild ambient temperatures. Its pretty flower blooms for three to four days. In this period the internal temperature of the flower is around 30-35° C even as the surrounding temperature can go down to 10° C.

Thermogenesis is triggered when the unopened flower's petal tips turn pink. Early the next day, the opening flower emits heat, which also helps in releasing an attractive scent. The lotus flower has a central cone-shaped receptacle whose flat top has 10-30 female organs, the pistils. As in other thermogenic plants, the female organs mature first. The scent attracts insect pollinators — bees and beetles — to its receptive pistils. The petals close by midday, forming a cozy, insulated chamber where insects seek shelter for the night.

Before the flower opens on the second morning, the flower's male organs, the stamens, mature. Fed on pollen and covered with it, the insects fly out and move to other receptive plants. The system is designed to ensure cross-pollination between plants, which offers many advantages to their offspring, including greater genetic diversity and increased pest resistance. Each pistil grows into a lotus nut and the receptacle matures into a showerhead-shaped seed pod.

The flat top carrying the pistil gets about 4-5° C warmer than the rest of the flower. Calcium ions serve as the 'on' switch. The level of calcium in the cells of this region jumps four times higher when it is time to warm up. This calcium heads to the mitochondria and signals them to shift into high gear. To produce heat, large amounts of stored starch and fat are used up.

Some plants of the Arum family also use thermogenesis to attract insects and for other strange purposes. The Eastern skunk cabbage, not related to the cabbage, grows in the colder zones of North America and gets its name from a fetid odour reminiscent of cabbage, with a hint of mustard.



The flowering stalk of this plant emerges in early spring by generating heat to melt the snow covering the soil. Beetles find a warm respite in this flower, along with pollen. A putrid smell is associated with the flowers of the dead horse arum lily, found in Sardinia. This plant uses heat to vigorously dissipate compounds like dimethyl disulphide, which smells like a leaking gas cylinder with a top note of garlic. Carrion-seeking blowflies find this odour totally irresistible and arrive in large numbers.



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