CURRENT AFFAIRS for UPSC

15th to 21st March 2026

DreamIAS

INTERNATIONAL

WHY NATO DOESN'T HAVE TO ANSWER TRUMP'S CALL TO JOIN IRAN WAR

US President Donald Trump revived a familiar refrain on Sunday (March 15), calling on allies in NATO to join the war commenced by the US and Israel against Iran, now in its third week.

Key Takeaways:

• In an interview with The Financial Times, Trump said NATO allies could face a "very bad future" if they refused to help the US in opening up the Strait of Hormuz. "It's only appropriate that people who are the beneficiaries of the Strait will help to make sure that nothing bad happens there," Trump said, arguing that Europe and China are heavily dependent on oil from the Gulf, unlike the US.

• The latest remarks on the alliance have prompted a recall of Trump's rhetoric at the start of the year, when he took to the stage at Davos to say that the US "never got anything out of NATO."

• The US and Israel commenced their war against Iran on February 28, resulting in major retaliatory action that has engulfed the entire West Asian region. Part of this action has been the closure of the critical Strait, through which nearly 20% of global oil and fuel shipments flow.

Do You Know:

• Formed in 1949 with 12 member nations in the aftermath of World War II, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization or NATO is an intergovernmental alliance now comprising 32 members. Except for two nations – the US and Canada, all allies are European nations.

• In marked contrast to most other alliances, NATO is defined by the commitment of its independent member states to secure mutual defence in the event of an attack by an outside party. Article 5 of the treaty governs this, enshrining an attack against one member as an attack against all members.

• Under Article 1 of the Charter, members must commit to resolve any international dispute they are involved in through peaceful means, without endangering international peace, security and justice. Allies are also expected to refrain from using the threat or use of force inconsistent with the purposes of the United Nations. The present conflict presents a clear rejection of this practice, with the fallout spreading globally.

• Thus far, the alliance has limited its role to "enabling support", such as logistics and missile defence, without invoking Article 5. Early into the war, NATO Secretary General Rutte emphasised that there are "absolutely no plans" for NATO to be involved, "other than individual allies doing what they can to enable what the Americans are doing together with Israel."

US HITS KEY IRAN ISLAND; OIL PRICES MAY MOUNT

In what marks a new escalatory phase, the US Friday bombed Iran's Kharg Island, a small 8-km-long rocky outcrop in the Persian Gulf around 50 km off the Iranian mainland, through which almost all of the country's oil exports flow. Despite some 5,000 places targeted in Iran since the start of the US-Israel military operation, Kharg had been spared so far.

Key Takeaways:

— In a post on Truth Social, US President Trump said military targets on Kharg Island had been "totally obliterated" in "one of the most powerful bombing raids in the History of the Middle East." He said he had chosen not to target oil infrastructure on the island for now. According to officials quoted by Reuters, only "military targets" on Kharg Island were targeted and the US Navy would soon begin "escorting tankers" through the Strait of Hormuz.

— Kharg Island is arguably Iran's most sensitive economic target. The reason why this export terminal has remained untouched throughout the devastating US-Israel attacks is that bombing the site would likely trigger a sustained increase to already surging oil prices, as it would amount to neutralising almost all of Iran's daily crude exports. With this attack now happening, the chances are that crude could move towards the $150 per barrel mark.

— On an average, around 1.5 million barrels of oil pass through Kharg every day, though Iran had sharply ramped up volumes to 3 million barrels a day in mid-February, according to the investment bank JP Morgan. This was in anticipation of a US-led attack. A further 18 million barrels are stored on Kharg as a backup, JP Morgan said in a note.

— Kharg is particularly significant for Iran since most of that country's coastline is too shallow for very large crude carriers to dock. Kharg is pretty close to deep waters and has jetties built in on its eastern shoreline.

— The infrastructure on Kharg allows very large crude tankers to be able to come up to the terminal quite easily, and then get back down the Persian Gulf and out of the Straits of Hormuz, all the way to China – the main user of Iranian oil.

— From a strategic point of view, Kharg island is the economic lifeline of the regime in Iran and is fundamental to the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corp (IRGC) to keep fighting back the Americans and the Israelis. Theoretically, if the Americans were to take that island and hold it, then they could effectively cut off the economic lifeline of the Iranians, thereby stunting their ability to be able to conduct this war. And the ability of the Iranians to obstruct the Strait of Hormuz – the crucial maritime lifeline that is a vital conduit for transition of West Asian crude.

— But the problem for the Americans is that they would ideally not want to cause collateral damage to the oil export infrastructure on Kharg Island, since that would most certainly send the prices of crude surging. Especially as China looks to buy from elsewhere. Markets are already nervous and the destruction of Iran's oil infrastructure could dampen sentiments further.

— Kharg is where pipelines from Iran's oil fields in the middle and the west of the country terminate. Set up by a US oil conglomerate, American Oil Company or Amoco, it was seized by Iran during the 1979 revolution. Amoco continues to retail fuel brands under BP ownership.

FIRE AND FURY

Benjamin Netanyahu and Donald Trump have brought death and destruction to Asia and economic havoc on the whole world by launching an ill-conceived, illegal war on Iran on February 28. Twenty days on, Iran continues to fire missiles and drones at Israel and neighbouring Persian Gulf countries hosting U.S. bases. Iran's closure of the Strait of Hormuz, along with retaliatory strikes on oil and gas facilities in the Gulf countries, have driven up energy prices, threatening the global economy. The irony is stark: Mr. Trump, who won the presidency twice, campaigning on opposing America's "forever wars", has now led the U.S., at Israel's behest, into another disastrous conflict. After the initial window for regime change closed, Mr. Trump sent mixed signals. He said he had authorised talks; when Iran refused, he ordered a strike on Kharg Island, the country's main energy export terminal. Israel then escalated the conflict further by assassinating Ali Larijani, Iran's Security Council Secretary and a key link between the Revolutionary Guards, who are leading the war effort, and the political establishment, as well as Iran's Intelligence Minister and the commander of the Basij paramilitary force. On Wednesday, Israel crossed another red line by attacking Iran's South Pars gas field, triggering Iranian strikes on energy sites in Qatar, the UAE and Saudi Arabia.

Many had warned even before the war began that an all-out attack on Iran could trigger a regional crisis. Mr. Trump, who until recently sought the Nobel Peace Prize, went ahead regardless. With over a dozen American soldiers killed, more than a hundred wounded, U.S. bases under attack, and rising oil, gas, and fertilizer prices, he now faces growing political backlash at home. On March 17, Joe Kent resigned as Director of the National Counterterrorism Center, claiming that the U.S. entered the war "due to pressure from Israel and its powerful American lobby". It is now clear that Mr. Trump did not anticipate such a prolonged conflict. Even if Mr. Trump wants to declare victory and end the bombing, he faces two hurdles: Iran can continue attacking targets in the Gulf and Israel; and the Strait of Hormuz remains shut. If Mr. Trump prefers further escalation, he could end up sending ground troops to Iran, an extremely risky gamble, or expanding the war to the region's energy infrastructure, a move that could cripple the global economy. The only viable option is diplomacy. Mr. Trump should engage Iran through a mediator with access to all sides and pursue a mutually workable deal. Tehran should stop holding the global economy hostage and reopen the Hormuz Strait as part of a ceasefire. A deal could still be possible if the U.S. offers credible guarantees against future American or Israeli aggression.

THE POLITICS OF MARTYRDOM, SACRIFICE AND VENGEANCE IN IRAN'S BODY POLITIC

On February 28, the U.S. and Israel assassinated Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the 86-year-old Supreme Leader of Iran, along with a number of other leaders. On March 17, an Israeli air strike killed Ali Larijani, Secretary of Iran's National Security Council. The next day, Iran's intelligence minister was killed. This is not the first time Iran's senior military and political leaders are getting killed.

These killings are clear setbacks to Iran. But despite losing its top leaders and commanders, the Iranian state continues to function while its military refused to stop fighting against the U.S.-Israeli attack. If Israel and the U.S. thought the decapitation strikes would lead to a state collapse in Iran, the plan doesn't seem to be working.

Iran has a long tradition of statecraft, and the core tenets of Shia Islam has remained a defining factor of state behaviour for centuries. Since the Safavid dynasty adopted Shia Islam as the official religion of the Persian empire in the early 16th century, Iran (Persia) has been majority Shia. And since the 1979 Islamic revolution that overthrew the Pahlavi monarchy, the revolutionary state came to rest on two pillars: political Shiism and nationalism. In Iran, martyrdom lies at the heart of both. Shias venerate their martyrs, beginning with Imam Ali. By assassinating Khamenei, Larijani and others, the U.S. and Israel have elevated them, in the eyes of their supporters, to a higher realm of martyrdom.

The first martyr

After Prophet Mohammed's death, his followers split over who should lead the ummah (the Muslim community). One faction backed Ali, the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law. The other supported Abu Bakr, a close companion of the Prophet, who became the first Caliph. Ali later became the fourth. Those who rallied behind Ali came to be known as Shias [Shi'at Ali], while the followers of the Rashidun Caliphs (Abu Bakr, Umar, Uthman and Ali) formed the Sunni tradition. Ali was assassinated, becoming the first martyr in Shia memory. His son Hassan, the second Shia Imam, briefly assumed the Caliphate but abdicated under threats from the Umayyads. Hussein, Ali's younger son, refused to pledge loyalty to the Umayyad ruler, Yazid. In 680, Hussein and 72 of his followers were killed in Karbala, in today's Iraq, by the forces of Yazid.

The Battle for Karbala holds enormous significance in both Shia faith and political Shiism. For believers, Hussein, the Imam who refused to compromise even at the cost of his life, embodies the highest ideal of sacrifice. (Every year, Shias around the world mark Ashura, on the 10th of Muharram, with processions commemorating the martyrdom of Hussein.) During the Islamic revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini invoked both sacrifice and courage to mobilise opposition to Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. The monarch, Khomeini argued, was the new Yazid. He called on Hussein's followers, "the oppressed", to rise. And they did.

After the revolution, many experts and world leaders doubted that the theocratic state would endure. Within a year, Iraqi President Saddam Hussein invaded Iran, hoping to hasten the collapse of the fledgling republic. The new state was struggling to stabilise a fractured post-revolutionary order. Leftists, trade unionists, Islamists and liberals had all opposed the Shah, and the clergy's consolidation of power deepened divisions within this coalition.

Core tenets

But Saddam's invasion changed the equation. Iranians rallied behind the flag; Saddam was cast as the modern-day Yazid. The Islamic Republic moved to purge leftists and liberals at home without provoking any regime-threatening backlash, while the war was under way. In effect, the conflict helped the clergy tighten its grip on power.

After Khamenei was killed on February 28, Larijani repeatedly invoked the ideas martyrdom. He said, "the children of Imam Hussein fear nothing". After Larijani was killed, Mojtaba Khamenei, current Supreme Leader, said, "shedding the blood of such people at the foot of the mighty tree of the Islamic system will only make it stronger". Iran's leaders know the post-revolutionary state faces its gravest challenge in 47 years. But their response is not to give up the fight and flee, but to embrace the ideological core of the revolutionary state — martyrdom, sacrifice and vengeance.

security protection and the committee will vet their applications, according to the Bill.

CHINA'S ETHNIC UNITY LAW SHOWS LITTLE TOLERANCE FOR DIVERSITY

China's top legislative body on Thursday (March 12) adopted a law for securing "unity and harmony" among the country's ethnic groups.

Key Takeaways:

• Outlawing discrimination and promoting inter-community marriages, the Ethnic Unity and Progress Promotion Law also seeks to punish "acts that undermine ethnic unity and create ethnic division". It further advocates for Mandarin as the nation's common language and script.

• The law builds on certain existing policies and speaks to the state's present view of China's culture and diversity.

• Former Indian Foreign Secretary Shyam Saran, in his book How China Sees India and the World, wrote, "Through most of its history, the main challenge faced by successive Chinese empires was the perennial attacks by fierce nomadic tribes ranging across its northern and western peripheries…In some cases, these tribes themselves became Sinicised and, in turn, assumed the attitudes and mores of the heartland Chinese. The homogeneity of the latter-day Chinese is more a cultural rather than ethnic homogeneity, reinforced by shared attitudes and a unified script."

• The law is a continuation of policies and ideas propagated by the state, especially in recent years under Chinese President Xi Jinping. For instance, it frames solidifying "ethnic unity" as part of the goal of "rejuvenation" of the Chinese nation after what is seen as years of suppression under foreign rule. Xi has emphasised this term time and again, covering military capabilities, foreign relations, and ethnic relations.

• A crucial part of the idea is China's claims over Hong Kong, which enjoys some independence under the 'One Country, Two Systems' scheme, and Taiwan, an island that functions independently, with a democratic government. China has not ruled out forcibly taking control of Taiwan, and has increased displays of military might around the island.

Do You Know:

• Some noteworthy provisions are:

—Article 10: "Matters of ethnic unity and progress are not to be interfered with by foreign forces… using excuses such as ethnicity, religion, or human rights…" This is likely a reference to the global criticisms of the Chinese state for human rights violations in the autonomous regions of Xinjiang and Tibet.

—Article 15: "Schools and other educational institutions are to use the nation's common language and script as the basic language and script for education…"

China Law Translate said that it effectively meant "Mandarin must be emphasised," even when minority languages are used.

—Article 21: "The state is to support the Hong Kong and Macao special administrative regions in carrying out education on the history of the Chinese people, Chinese culture, and national conditions… The state is to…enhance Taiwan compatriots sense of belonging, identification, and pride in the Chinese people…"

—Article 40: "No organisation or individual may interfere with the freedom of marriage on grounds such as ethnic identity, customs, or religious beliefs." China Law Translate said of its interpretation: "Exchanges between ethnic cultures are intended to break down (what are viewed as) insular communities in favour of a larger identity with the community of Chinese people." Reports say the article may be covering objections by religious officials of minority communities.

—Article 62: "The organisation, planning, or carrying out of violent terrorist activities, ethnic division activities, or religious extremist activities constitutes a crime…"

• Officially, China recognises 56 ethnic groups, including the Hans, the Uyghurs (primarily in the northwestern region of Xinjiang), the Tibetans, the Manchus and the Mongols. Today, the Han

Chinese constitute over 90% of the total population. The Hans are also the largest group in Taiwan, which China claims as its own region, and in Hong Kong, which is China's Special Administrative Region.

NO END TO SUFFERING

As the U.S.-Israel war against Iran rages, India's western frontiers have flared up, intensified by recent clashes between Pakistan and Afghanistan forces on the Durand Line. On Tuesday, Pakistani airstrikes tragically killed at least 400 Afghans at a drug treatment and rehabilitation centre. Pakistan, which has accused the Taliban administration of harbouring the Tehreek e Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and supporting its terror attacks on Pakistan, denied Afghanistan's accusations, claiming that its strikes had only targeted "military installations". Despite the denial, it is clear from visuals that the Omid Rehabilitation Facility in Kabul was destroyed. In an extremely strong statement, India condemned what it called Pakistan's "cowardly" targeting of a hospital, rejecting its denial as a cover-up for a "massacre", and called for an international inquiry. The Pakistan-Afghanistan conflict, which has been simmering for over a year, escalated in February when the Pakistan Air Force struck Taliban bases in Kabul, Kandahar, and Paktia in what it called Operation Ghazab Lil Haq (Righteous Fury). Tensions have also risen after TTP attacks killed 11 soldiers and a child in Bajaur and 32 people in an Islamabad mosque following a suicide bombing. Pakistan has also been angered by closer India-Afghanistan ties and New Delhi's hosting of Taliban ministers, accusing the Taliban of turning Afghanistan into an "Indian colony" — a turnaround from its support in 2021, for the Taliban's rise to power in Kabul. Apart from its continued tensions and hatred of India, and now Afghanistan, Pakistan possibly benefits from the global focus on the U.S.-Israel war with Iran. The U.S.'s actions here and its statement expressing support for Pakistan's "right to defend itself against Taliban attacks", has also imbued Pakistan's generals with a sense of impunity to strike targets in Afghanistan at will.

New Delhi could be permitted some sense of 'payback' as Islamabad's fight against cross-border terrorism from Afghanistan mirrors India's problems with Pakistan. The constraints on Pakistan's military in a two-front situation with India and Afghanistan, compounded by a transnational war on the third front, may also be the source of some relief for India. With no dialogue with Pakistan, and the limited dialogue with a Taliban regime it deals with but does not formally recognise, India's diplomatic role in the conflict is limited. However, it must enlist other SCO members that have been concerned over the outbreak of an "open war" between Pakistan and Afghanistan, to intervene. The region is already suffering from trade, energy and travel restrictions as a result of the West Asia war, to risk more volatility and loss of lives, particularly in Afghanistan, where the vulnerable, especially women, have suffered the most.

NATIONAL

HOW DID THE SC READ THE OBC CREAMY LAYER TEST?

The story so far:

On March 11, the Supreme Court ruled that parental income alone cannot be the sole determinant of whether an Other Backward Classes (OBC) candidate falls under the 'creamy layer' category. The judgment came in a case that was meant to clear decades-long confusion about how to apply the crucial income/wealth test prescribed in regulations, specifically for OBC candidates whose parents are officials of Central or State public sector undertakings (PSUs) or in private employment, where the equivalence of their posts had not yet been established with government posts.

What do government regulations say about determining the creamy layer among OBCs?

The concept of a creamy layer among OBCs was introduced following the 1992 Supreme Court ruling in the Indra Sawhney case, which paved the way for the implementation of reservations for OBCs. The idea was to exclude certain categories of OBC candidates whose families had accumulated social and economic privileges over the years, known as the creamy layer.

In order to clarify which categories of OBC candidates would fall under the creamy layer, the Department of Personnel and Training (DoPT) prepared a guiding charter, in the form of an Office Memorandum (OM), issued in September 1993. This OM prescribed specific categories of OBC candidates who would not be entitled to the OBC quota. This included children of people holding constitutional positions such as the Offices of President and Vice-President; judges of High Courts and the Supreme Court; children of Class I and Class II officers directly recruited into either the Central or State government; and children of officers in the armed forces or paramilitary forces above a particular rank.

Besides this, the DoPT also prescribed a crucial income or wealth test, applicable to people in the salaried professional class or engaged in trade; people holding plantations, vacant land, and/or buildings in urban areas; and people whose parents were holding posts in Central or State PSUs where the equivalence of these posts with government service posts has not yet been established.

It is with respect to this last category of people — children of parents holding posts in Central or State PSUs where the equivalence of the posts with government service posts has not yet been established — that the Court delivered its recent judgment. The OBC candidates from this group, who were selected in civil service examinations from 2015 onwards, argued that the income/wealth test had been incorrectly applied to them, excluding them from the OBC quota.

What is the income/wealth test?

Under the 1993 DoPT OM on the income/wealth test for OBC reservations, a candidate is considered part of the creamy layer if their parents have a gross annual income of ₹1 lakh or more, or possess wealth above the Wealth Tax Act, 1957, threshold for three consecutive years. The limit of ₹1 lakh, set in 1993, was revised multiple times and now stands at ₹8 lakh, the last revision having come in 2017.

Importantly, the 1993 DoPT OM noted that parental income from salaries or agricultural land should be excluded when applying the income/wealth test and only income from sources such as property, business, or capital gains should be considered.

However, in October 2004, the DoPT issued a letter meant to clarify issues that had arisen in interpreting the 1993 OM. In para 9 of this letter, the DoPT took up the issue of how to calculate the income for the income/wealth test for OBCs whose parents were in Central or State PSUs where equivalence of posts had not yet been established. The DoPT seemed to suggest that income from salaries was to be counted to determine if the income is above the ₹8 lakh per year threshold for three consecutive years.

In an October 2020 affidavit filed in the Supreme Court, the DoPT pointed to both the 1993 OM and the 2004 clarificatory letter, to state that it had different ways of applying the income/wealth test for different categories. However, it did not clearly explain in which cases income from salaries was to be included while applying the income/wealth test.

In the 2026 ruling, the Division Bench noted that until the government establishes equivalence between the posts of Central or State PSUs and government services, the income/wealth test must continue to apply equally.

What does the latest judgment say?

The judgment said OBC candidates of such PSU staffers cannot be denied a fair creamy layer evaluation because the government had yet to establish the equivalence of posts with government service. Regarding the 1993 OM and the income/wealth test, the Supreme Court noted that it "operates as a residual filter". It added that salary and agricultural incomes are consciously excluded when applying the test.

The Court found that while the 1993 OM was clear about not including income from salaries in the calculation for the income/wealth test, the 2004 letter had called for its inclusion. The Court said that a House Committee's conclusions that the 2004 clarificatory letter had obfuscated the issue were valid.

The Court went on to note that the interpretation of the 1993 OM, read with the 2004 letter, had led to "hostile discrimination" between the children of those in government service and those in PSUs or private employment. It said, "Treating the children of those employed in PSUs or private employment, etc., as being excluded from the benefit of reservation only on the basis of their income derived from salaries, and without reference to their posts (whether Group A or B, or Group C or D) would certainly lead to hostile discrimination between parties who are similarly placed and would amount to equals being treated unequally." It added, "Adopting an interpretation that disadvantages one segment of the same backward class without rational justification would amount to treating equals as unequals and would thus become the antithesis of equality, the corner stone of our Republic."

Who does the judgment apply to? Who will benefit from this?

The judgment, while providing relief to about 100 candidates who appeared for civil service exams since 2015 and had been denied the OBC quota, will apply to children of parents working in PSUs and in private employment. This means the ruling will effect not just candidates who appear in exams from now on, but also candidates who might have been selected in services in the years before, but not at the rank they would have been if their claim to the OBC quota had been allowed. The Court said that the appellants (the government) should create supernumerary posts, as required, so that candidates who qualify as non-creamy layer OBCs can obtain the reservation benefits they were previously denied, as long as they meet all other eligibility requirements.

BATTLE OVER BRANDY: DELHI HIGH COURT RULES 'PISCO' CAN HAVE BOTH PERU & CHILE GI TAGS, NO EXCLUSIVITY

In September last year, the Latin American country Peru, a rare litigant at an Indian court, declared at the Delhi High Court – "this matter will involve heavy intoxication arguments". The fight was over exclusive protection over the Geographical Indication (GI) of the grape-fermented brandy from the region, 'Pisco', in favour of Peru.

Key Takeaways:

• A division bench of Justices C Hari Shankar and Om Prakash Shukla, dismissing an appeal by Peru, through its Embassy in India, challenging a single judge's order from July last year, concluded: "We are clear, however, in our mind, that Peru cannot be allowed registration of the GI PISCO as a standalone GI."

• Peru's key objection was with respect to sharing with Chile the GI over Pisco, in India. A country-specific prefix to the beverage dilutes Peru's centuries-old unique goodwill over the product and the "historical weight", it had told the court. "Eighty-two countries grant me without (country-based) prefix, India is the only country with prefix," Peru had said in court in September. It was their case that Pisco by itself is a GI, and one cannot add a prefix to a GI.

Do You Know:

• In 2018, the Intellectual Property Appellate Board had overturned the Registrar of Trademarks' decision in 2009 to grant GI to the two types of Piscos, Peruvian and Chilean, and had granted GI Pisco in favour of Peru. A Chilean association of Pisco producers, Asociación De Productores De Pisco A.G, had then moved the HC challenging the IPAB's decision in 2020, and five years later, the single-judge bench of the high court asked for the modification of the GI in favour of Peru to 'Peruvian Pisco' instead.

• Peru claims that historical records indicate the origin of the liquor dating back to the 17th century at Ica, in southern Peru, and traced its origin to the Pisco Valley in Peru. However, Chilean producers had said that the region in question encompassed certain parts of the Peruvian coastline as well as the Atacama Region and the city of Coquimbo in Chile. They also said that Pisco, as a brand, was universally identified with Chile and the country has been producing Pisco for at least a century now.

UPSC'S NEW RULE: SC NOD MUST FOR DELAY IN CHOOSING STATE DGPS

The Union Public Service Commission (UPSC) has revised the rules for the empanelment of State Director-General of Police and Head of Police Force.

The State governments will now have to get the consent of the Supreme Court for any delay in submitting the list of DGP-rank officers to the UPSC for empanelment.

While disposing of an interlocutory application moved by the Union Home Ministry, the Supreme Court had ruled that States should send their proposals in anticipation of the vacancies to the UPSC well in time — at least three months prior to the date of retirement of the incumbent on the post of DGP.

It also ordered that "none of the States shall ever conceive of the idea of appointing any person on the post of Director-General of Police on acting basis for there is no concept of acting Director-General of Police as per the decision in Prakash Singh's case".

With many States delaying the process of sending proposals for shortlisting the names of three DGPs to the top post for various reasons and some appointing Acting DGPs, the UPSC sought legal opinion in the matter.

The UPSC said "it is observed that many States have been submitting the proposals for convening the Empanelment Committee Meeting in violation of the Supreme Court directions".

Attorney-General R. Venkataramani opined that the delay by the State government in forwarding names for empanelment was "excessive".

"On examining the applicable rules and precedents, I find no provision empowering the UPSC to condone such inordinate delay and then proceed as though no irregularity had occurred, ultimately recommending a panel of DGP," he said.

The State government should have first come to Supreme Court in case of any difficulty. The more appropriate course, therefore, would be to require the State to seek leave or clarification from the Supreme Court, he noted.

Amending its earlier orders, the UPSC said the States shall seek leave or clarification from the Supreme Court for delayed submission except death, resignation or premature relieving of DGP in accordance with the top court judgment.

NCERT BOOK BAN, A CHAPTER ON JUDICIAL TRANSPARENCY

Max Boot, former Features Editor of The Wall Street Journal, authored the seminal study on the United States judiciary, 'Out of Order: Arrogance, Corruption, and Incompetence on the Bench' (1998). Robert H. Bork, former Solicitor General of the United States, wrote the foreword to it with a striking conclusion — "Our Courts are behaving badly and the public, to the degree it can be brought to understand that, will exert force for reform, a reform that must be structural as well as intellectual and moral."

He observed that the book's subtitle sums up a system in distress. The book underscores the critical role that the media and citizens must play while dealing with the judicial institution in a democracy.

In February this year, the Supreme Court of India, faulting what it felt as selective reference to corruption within the judiciary, directed "a complete blanket ban"on a Class eight social science textbook published by the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT). The three-judge Bench, presided over by the Chief Justice of India, further alluded to "an underlying agenda to undermine the institutional authority and demean the dignity of the judiciary".

The Court subsequently ordered that the persons responsible for preparing the passages should be 'disassociated' from future projects by governments and public universities. The Court thus instantly punished them, without due process or hearing. The prohibition by the Court is problematic as it sends critical signals about the shape of India's democracy today.

What appears to have annoyed the Bench were the passages in the book on judicial delay and corruption in judiciary. As per the news report cited by the Court, the textbook has data on the approximate number of pending cases in Indian courts. It refers to the Bangalore Principles of Judicial Conduct, which prescribe values for judicial life. It also discusses the in-house procedures evolved by the Supreme Court and the constitutional mechanism for the removal of errant judges.

An undermining of freedom

By itself, a book ban is the most egregious form of censorship. Such a move directly impacts the right to freedom of speech under Article 19, a solemn promise in the Constitution. This right could be restricted only by a law made by the state on grounds expressly provided under Article 19(2), such as "the sovereignty and integrity of India, the security of the state, friendly relations with foreign states, public order, decency or morality, or in relation to contempt of court, defamation, or incitement to an offence". There is no law made by the state to justify the ban on the book in question. Judicial orders or judgments do not come under the realm of 'law' made by the state, as understood in the context of Article 19 (Naresh Shridhar Mirajkar vs State of Maharashtra, 1966).

For an act to amount to contempt of court, there must be material that scandalises the authority of the court or prejudices or interferes with judicial proceedings or the administration of justice, as defined under Section 2(c) of the Contempt of Courts Act, 1971. Whether mere references to corruption in the judiciary and case backlogs meet this high threshold for criminal contempt was a question that, unfortunately, did not form part of the Court's deliberations. What was also not examined was whether the statements were too general in nature to suggest any malicious intent to scandalise the Court.

Further, and importantly, going by the scheme of judicial review, courts must put to constitutional scrutiny the law passed by Parliament often violating fundamental rights. When the courts take on the task of book banning, citizens are left without remedy, as constitutional courts are the last resort to safeguard fundamental rights.

Global efforts

In advanced democracies, the credibility of the court is a matter of concern, primarily for the court itself. Transparency International has conducted a number of surveys that show that there is a prevailing notion about judicial corruption. Judiciaries across the world have made efforts to address this problem. In Kenya, the reforms led by Chief Justice Willy Mutunga, between 2011 and 2013, are an illustrative example. During this period, institutions such as judicial ombudspersons, court users' committees, and performance management committees were established.

By 2013, public trust in Kenya in the judiciary had risen to 61%, compared to 27% in 2009. The reforms continued even thereafter. This happened only by acknowledging the issues and trying to address them, rather than suppressing critical voices.

In India, the courts including the top court have acknowledged the menace of delay and corruption. Judges have repeatedly warned about the 'bad apples' within the system. The very existence of the in-house Procedure indicates the possibility that a minuscule number of judges may breach their oath.

In K. Veeraswami vs Union Of India And Others (1991), the Court categorically held that judges of the High Courts and the Supreme Court fall within the definition of "public servant" for the purposes of prosecution under the Prevention of Corruption Act, while also cautioning against the potential for misuse of this provision by the executive. The Court also said: "We consider that the society's demand for honesty in a judge is exacting and absolute. The standards of judicial behaviour, both on and off the Bench, are normally extremely high. For a Judge to deviate from such standards of honesty and impartiality is to betray the trust reposed on him. No excuse or no legal relativity can condone such betrayal. From the standpoint of justice, the size of the bribe or scope of corruption cannot be the scale for measuring a judge's dishonour. A single dishonest judge not only dishonours himself and disgraces his office but jeopardises the integrity of the entire judicial system."

The need for introspection

Therefore, the need to eradicate corruption and delay is also in the best interest of the judiciary. In the interim order directing the book ban, the Court also pointed out that the "book also chooses not to delve into any of the transformative initiatives and measures pioneered by this Court towards overhauling legal aid mechanisms and streamlining the ease of access to justice". Not addressing all counterarguments might render an opinion potentially incomplete. Yet, that is no reason for banning the view expressed. If the exercise of free speech is required to follow a particular form, the right itself becomes illusory. During judicial deliberations, nobody pointed out that the judiciary, like other organs of the state, must be open to dissent and reform.

The first step in fighting systemic problems such as corruption — whether in the executive or the judiciary — is acknowledging it. After all, it is imperative to curb all kinds of corruption and that civil society is educated about the institutional challenges. A court that continuously reforms itself is the bedrock of any democracy.

FORMER SC JUDGE, SENIOR ADVOCATE JOIN PANEL TO GUIDE NCERT CURRICULUM

Solicitor-General Tushar Mehta informed the Supreme Court on Friday that former top court judge Justice Indu Malhotra and senior advocate K.K. Venugopal had agreed to be part of an expert committee to finalise the National Council for Educational Research and Training (NCERT) curricula on legal studies for Class 8 and higher grades.

Appearing before a Bench headed by Chief Justice of India Surya Kant, the top law officer for the Union Government orally submitted that the expert committee would collaborate or associate with retired Supreme Court Judge Aniruddha Bose, in his capacity as the Director of the National Judicial Academy, to finalise the curricula for these classes.

Chief Justice Kant orally expressed his satisfaction, stating that there was none better than these jurists to guide the framing of the curriculum. The development followed a March 11 order of the Supreme Court, which had taken suo motu cognisance of a newspaper article that referred to a portion on "Corruption in the Judiciary" in a Class 8 social science textbook.

The court had observed that the textbook chapter "The Role of the Judiciary in our Society", particularly the sub-topic expounding "Corruption in the Judiciary", was "prima-facie intended towards maligning the Indian judiciary". It had initiated contempt proceedings against those behind the lesson. On February 26, the Supreme Court had ordered the "blanket and complete" ban on the social science textbook despite the Centre withdrawing over 82,000 copies from circulation. The court had seen it as a calculated move to create bias against the judiciary in the "impressionable minds" of children.

On March 11, the court had taken strong exception to an NCERT statement that it had "duly rewritten" the chapter. The court had directed that the chapter, if revised, would not be published unless it was approved by a committee of domain experts. It had ordered the government to constitute the expert committee, which would include a former senior judge, an eminent academic, and a renowned practitioner in law. It said the committee may associate with the National Judicial Academy to look into the curriculum on legal studies for not only Class 8 but other classes too.

LOK SABHA PASSES DEMANDS FOR GRANTS FOR MANY MINISTRIES, RS 53 LAKH CR CLEARED

The Lok Sabha on Wednesday passed the Demands for Grants of various ministries for 2026-27 by approving an expenditure of over Rs 53 lakh crore without discussion by applying the guillotine. Earlier, the House discussed Demands for Grants for the Railways and Agriculture ministries.

Key Takeaways:

• The Appropriation Bill (2) Bill-2026, which was moved by Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman and seeks to authorise payment and appropriation of certain sums from and out of the Consolidated Fund of India for the services of the financial year 2026-27, was also passed.

• Proceedings witnessed the Opposition's demand for a legal guarantee to the Minimum Support Price for agricultural produce, countered by the government saying that states were not implementing Central government schemes only because they carried the Prime Minister's name.

Do You Know:

• Article 113 of the Constitution requires that any proposal or estimate seeking withdrawal of money from the Consolidated Fund of India should be presented to the Lok Sabha in the form of a demand for grants. Therefore, every ministry prepares a demand for grants for the expenditure to be incurred in the next financial year. These demands are collectively presented in the Lok Sabha as part of the Union Budget.

• The demand for grants include both charged and voted expenditure. Charged expenditures are considered liabilities of the government of India such as payment of interest and are not put to vote in the Lok Sabha.

• Article 113 (iii) prescribes that no demand for grants can be presented in the Lok Sabha without the President of India's prior approval. Under Articles 117 and 274 of the Indian Constitution, a Presidential recommendation is also required for tabling a Money Bill in the Lok Sabha. The Finance Bill, accompanying the annual financial statement which is called the Union Budget, also carries a certificate issued by the President.

• The Constitution states that 'no money shall be withdrawn from the Consolidated Fund of India except under appropriation made by law'. Accordingly, an appropriation bill is introduced to provide for the appropriation, out of the Consolidated Fund of India, all money required to meet:

—The grants voted by the Lok Sabha.

—The expenditure charged on the Consolidated Fund of India.

• No such amendment can be proposed to the appropriation bill in either house of the Parliament that will have the effect of varying the amount or altering the destination of any grant voted, or of varying the amount of any expenditure charged on the Consolidated Fund of India.

• The Appropriation Bill becomes the Appropriation Act after it is assented to by the President. This act authorises (or legalises) the payments from the Consolidated Fund of India. This means that the government cannot withdraw money from the Consolidated Fund of India till the enactment of the appropriation bill.

• In legislative parlance, to "guillotine" means to bunch together and fast-track the passage of financial business. It is a fairly common procedural exercise in Lok Sabha during the Budget Session.

HOUSE DECORUM

The Lok Sabha rejected by voice vote, on March 11, a resolution under Article 94(C) of the Constitution for the removal of Lok Sabha Speaker Om Birla from office, but only after a hostile debate on the functioning of the House deepened the wedge between the government and the Opposition. In principle, Parliament is the foundation of representative democracy, and its routine functions act as an instrument that holds the cabinet accountable. As a forum for government-Opposition interaction, it is meant to operate in a structured, methodical way. Single-party dominance has eroded all these formal and informal functions of legislatures at all levels, and the Lok Sabha, sadly, has become a platform for political partisanship. In recent years, the chairs of the Lok Sabha and the Rajya Sabha have been dragged into political conflict. In 2024, there was an Opposition resolution to remove Jagdeep Dhankhar as Rajya Sabha Chairman. Though the resolution did not pass, he resigned as Vice-President for unexplained reasons. The Opposition has raised concerns over the Lok Sabha's functioning, but what precipitated their protest into a formal resolution for Mr. Birla's removal was, possibly, his statement that he had confidential knowledge that Congress women MPs might act against Prime Minister Narendra Modi on the House floor.

Opposition MPs are routinely denied the opportunity to raise substantive issues, though the government cites statistics in its rebuttal. The Speaker had disallowed Leader of the Opposition (Lok Sabha) Rahul Gandhi from quoting former Army Chief M.M. Naravane's unpublished memoir, which discusses Prime Minister Narendra Modi's role in the 2020 military standoff with China. The microphones of Opposition MPs are frequently switched off during debates. The Opposition has pointed out that in February, Mr. Gandhi was interrupted 20 times while speaking during the Motion of Thanks to the President's Address and also blocked from raising the Gautam Adani investigation issue in the U.S. and the EU-U.S. trade deal. The government argued that the Opposition was given 56% of Zero Hour time, and that NDA MPs, despite their majority, received 321 supplementary questions against the Opposition's 364 during his tenure. Home Minister Amit Shah said that the House's productivity during Mr. Birla's tenure had been high and that it had debated in 14 regional languages. Mr. Shah also cornered Mr. Gandhi for being frequently absent from the House. The resolution and the debate manifested a deeply fractured polity in need of urgent corrective measures. The ruling majority and the Opposition must rise above partisanship and restore the majesty of Parliament.

WHAT IS NEW IN TRANSGENDER RIGHTS BILL?

The story so far:

Twelve years after the Supreme Court recognised the transgender identity and held that "self-determination of gender is an integral part of personal autonomy and self-expression", falling within the realm of personal liberty guaranteed by the Constitution of India, the Union government on March 13 introduced a Bill in the Lok Sabha to take away transgender people's "right to self-perceived gender identity" and redefine a "transgender person" by proposing amendments to the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019. Transgender community leaders, activists, and people across the country reacted with shock, arguing that the amendments go against the fundamental principles underlying their long struggle for recognition.

What are the changes being brought about?

The key changes being proposed have to do with the definition of a "transgender person" and the expansion of the section on offences against transgender people and punishments for them.

In the amendment Bill, the Centre has called for the omission of sub-section (2) of Section 4 of the Act, which says: "A person recognised as transgender under sub-section (1) shall have a right to self-perceived gender identity."

In addition to this, a new definition of 'transgender person' is proposed. It describes them as people "having such socio-cultural identities as kinner, hijra, aravani, and jogta, or eunuch", people with intersex variations, and people who have "congenital variations" in "male or female development" in their "primary sexual characteristics, external genitalia, chromosomal patterns, gonadal development, endogenous hormone production or response or such other medical conditions".

The definition also includes any person or child who has been "compelled to assume, adopt, or outwardly present a transgender identity, by mutilation, emasculation, castration, amputation, or any surgical, chemical, or hormonal procedure or otherwise". However, it adds that this definition shall not include "persons with different sexual orientations and self-perceived sexual identities".

Compared to this definition, the Act currently defines transgender person as someone "whose gender does not match with the gender assigned at birth and includes trans men and trans women (whether or not such person has undergone Sex Reassignment Surgery (SRS) or hormone therapy or laser therapy or such other therapy), person with intersex variations, genderqueer and person having such socio-cultural identities as kinner, hijra, aravani and jogta."

Further, a specific definition for "people with intersex variations" has also been proposed to be omitted.

Apart from these, the Bill suggests introducing the terminology for "authority", defining it as "a medical board, headed by a Chief Medical Officer or a Deputy Chief Medical Officer, as may be appointed by the Central government, State government or Union territory Administration".

Another key amendment is on the issuance of transgender certificates. While the law currently mandates the District Magistrate to issue a certificate based on a self-declared affidavit and without physical or medical examination, the proposed amendment requires the District

Magistrate to "examine the recommendation of the authority", and decide, if deemed necessary or desirable, and after consulting other medical experts, before issuing the certificate.

A new section has also been proposed, which confers the right of transgender people to have their first names changed in birth certificates and other identification documents, with the caveat that the person should be a "transgender person" under the revised definition.

The Bill also mandates that individuals apply for a revised gender certificate after undergoing SRS, as opposed to the current law, which leaves this to the individual.

Additionally, medical institutions performing SRS would be required to furnish details of such procedures to the District Magistrate.

The Bill also significantly expands provisions relating to offences and penalties, introducing graded punishments, including rigorous imprisonment up to life and fines of up to ₹5 lakh, for crimes against transgender persons and children.

However, it remains to be seen what further changes could come through in the form of Rules, if this amendment Bill is passed by Parliament.

How did the amendment Bill come about?

Union Social Justice Minister Virendra Kumar introduced the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Amendment Bill, 2026, in Lok Sabha on March 13. Days earlier, media reports cited that the Union Cabinet had approved amendments to the 2019 Act, though details were not disclosed. It remains unclear how long the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment and the Centre had been preparing these changes.

Transgender activists, including Tamil Nadu-based Grace Banu, who had been central to the drafting of the 2019 Act, told The Hindu that the amendments seem to have been brought in without consultation with the community. Several leaders and members have described their initial reaction as one of "shock", calling the changes "sudden".

Interestingly, just hours before the Bill was introduced, the Ministry had posted on X, promoting the 2019 version of the Act and advertising the fact that this Act allowed the right to self-perceived gender identity as a key feature.

A few days back, on March 4, the Ministry had posted, "The Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019, safeguards the rights and dignity of transgender persons."

In February, the National Council for Educational Research and Training (NCERT) informed the Supreme Court that it had developed teacher training modules to build sensitivity towards transgender issues.

It substantiated this by saying that the 2024 module specifically spoke of the difference between gender and sexuality and discussed the idea that sex identity ascribed at birth may be at odds with a person's perceived sex identity at a later stage. The NCERT added that it had been conducting capacity building and training programmes based on similar modules till as late as November 2025, with more planned this year.

Why is there a concern?

A primary concern raised by the transgender community is the omission of the right to self-perceived gender identity, followed by the new definition, which appears to contradict the principles laid down in the landmark 2014 NALSA judgment recognising the right to self-determination of gender.

Ms. Banu said, “there is an issue that the government seems to be including only those in the definition of transgender who may have been accommodated in Hindutva’s history and is using terms that indicate Hindutva’s accommodation of transgender identity like ‘hijra, kinner, aravani,’ etc.” And there seems to be some sort of refusal to use respectful terms that have evolved for transgender people in other parts of the country, like in Tamil Nadu, where there is now a vocabulary of thirunagai and thirunambi.”

Dr. Aqsa Shaikh has raised the issue of transgender people across the country having to now deal with the existential question of whether they continue to remain transgender as per the proposed new definition, while another Delhi-based transwoman spoke of concerns that this might create divides within the community about who has legitimacy to use the transgender identity.

What does the NALSA judgment say?

The landmark 2014 judgment in National Legal Services Authority vs Union of India, delivered by Justices K.S. Radhakrishnan and A.K. Sikri, remains central to India’s understanding of gender identity.

When the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Bill, 2019, was introduced, the Statement of Objects and Reasons in it noted that it flowed from this very judgment of the Supreme Court, adding that one of the principal goals of bringing this Bill was to “confer right upon transgender persons to be recognised as such, and a right to self-perceived gender identity”.

In the judgment that notably recognised a third gender beyond male and female, and the fundamental right of persons to self-determination of gender identity, the court accepted the principle that the concepts of gender and sexuality are different and that gender identity is on a spectrum.

The court said, “Gender identity is one of the most fundamental aspects of life which refers to a person’s intrinsic sense of being male, female or transgender or transsexual persons.”

The judgment explained that “a person’s sex is usually assigned at birth, but a relatively small group of persons may be born with bodies which incorporate both or certain aspects of both male and female physiology. At times, genital anatomy problems may arise in certain persons and their innate perception of themselves is not in conformity with the sex assigned to them at birth and may include pre and post-operative transsexual persons and also persons who do not choose to undergo or do not have access to operation and also includes persons who cannot undergo successful operations.”

On sexual orientation, the court defined it as an individual’s enduring emotional, romantic, or physical attraction to others.

Importantly, the court held that no person should be forced to undergo medical procedures — such as SRS, sterilisation, or hormone therapy — as a condition for legal recognition of their gender identity.

It concluded that self-determination of gender is integral to personal autonomy, dignity, and freedom under Article 21 of the Constitution.

Justice Sikri, in his judgment concurring with Justice Radhakrishnan, expanded on this, saying, "If democracy is based on the recognition of the individuality and dignity of man, as a fortiori we have to recognise the right of a human being to choose his sex/gender identity which is integral to his/her personality and is one of the most basic aspects of self-determination, dignity and freedom."

What is the government's reasoning?

In the Statement of Objects and Reasons, the government said that since the 2019 Act was enacted, "certain doubts and difficulties" have arisen in implementing it with regard to the "definition of transgender persons and how the identification of such persons is to be done".

It noted that the existing definition of "transgender person" was "vague", arguing that this made it "impossible to identify the genuine oppressed persons to whom the benefits of the Act are intended to reach". It added that this existing definition renders several provisions "unworkable", further saying that this definition was "not compatible" with several statutory provisions enacted by both Parliament and State legislatures.

The government has argued that the intent of the legislative policy was always to "protect only those who face severe social exclusion due to biological reasons" for no fault or choice of their own. It went on to say that the purpose of the legislation was never to "protect each and every class of persons with various gender identities, self-perceived sex/gender identities or gender fluidities".

Noting these aspects, the government argued for a "precise" definition of transgender people, saying, "The protection and benefits that are provided under the Act are vast in nature, and therefore, care has to be taken that such identification cannot be extended on the basis of any acquirable characteristics or personal choice or claimed self-perceived identity of an individual."

ANOTHER BARRIER

When considering a measure to address a work-related need, care must be taken to ensure that it does not inadvertently reduce the employee's opportunity to work. This was again made evident on March 13, when a two-judge Bench of the Supreme Court, headed by Chief Justice of India Surya Kant, refused to entertain a petition seeking a law providing menstrual leave for women workers and students. The Court cautioned that mandatory menstrual leave could unintentionally hinder women's careers and deny them "big responsibilities". Instead, it encouraged "voluntary" initiatives by States. In Odisha, women government employees up to the age of 55 can take an additional day of leave each month, while Kerala grants menstrual leave to female trainees in ITIs and universities. Karnataka issued an order that entitles women in the public and private sectors up to the age of 52 to a day's menstrual leave a month, raising concerns whether private establishments might be disincentivised from hiring women. This government order has been challenged in the High Court. Such changes must come with safeguards, and the top court rightly suggested that the government come up with a menstrual leave policy in consultation with stakeholders — as it had done in 2024 as well.

Many women face debilitating menstrual pain and conditions such as endometriosis, PCOD and PCOS. But the Court's reasoning rests on another, more universal reality: women are already disadvantaged at work, facing systemic barriers such as unequal pay. In this context, mandatory menstrual leave could become a form of biological determinism, limiting opportunities, pay and promotions for women. In countries where menstrual leave policies exist, they are either poorly enforced or are not opted for by most women. In Spain, legislation enacted in 2023, and hailed as "... historic ... for feminist progress", saw few women exercising the right a year later. In Zambia, some women said it was being misused. In India, the female Labour Force Participation Rate rose from 23.3% in 2017-18 to 41.7% in 2023-24, driven largely by rural women entering work due to distress, insecure employment and unpaid household work. In this context, a blanket menstrual leave policy could be counterproductive: many women cannot afford to lose workdays, and in informal jobs, it may also be unenforceable. Providing free sanitary products and medicines at workplaces and allowing time off under existing leave provisions would be a way forward. That would be an acknowledgement of biological realities without turning such well-intentioned but poorly thought-out initiatives into yet another barrier to women's participation.

CITING EQUALITY, SC SCRAPS AGE LIMIT FOR MATERNITY LEAVE IN ADOPTIONS

The SC on Tuesday (March 17) held that motherhood under the law cannot depend on the age of a child at the time of adoption, striking down a rule that denied maternity leave to women adopting children older than three months.

Key Takeaways:

• The bench comprising Justices JB Pardiwala and R Mahadevan held that the law's three-month cut-off created an "artificial" distinction between adoptive mothers, noting that women adopting older children are "similarly situated" in terms of their "roles, responsibilities and caregiving obligations".

• The condition, which was introduced to extend maternity benefits to adoptive mothers and support women's participation in the workforce, limited the benefit to children below three months. This condition that most adoptions could not meet made the benefit "illusory and devoid of practical application".

• The court held that mothers who adopt a child "shall be entitled to maternity benefit for a period of twelve weeks from the date the child is handed over to her."

• The bench noted that children raised in institutions often show higher stress levels and disrupted bonding responses, underlining the need for early, consistent care. Beyond biology, the bench relied on the ordinary meaning of "maternity" as the "state...of being a mother," not something tied to only childbirth.

• The bench also relied on developmental research to underline that early caregiving is crucial for a child's emotional development, and that children in institutional care often present with higher stress (cortisol) and disrupted bonding hormones like oxytocin, which are directly linked to emotional regulation. The bench concluded that early caregiving has positive effects on children and therefore the law cannot treat bonding time as optional, or make it contingent on how old the child was when they came home.

Further, the judges urged the government to legally recognise paternity leave as a social security benefit, noting that parenthood is not a solitary function performed by one parent alone.

The judges have, with one judgment, conferred equal rights to adoptive parents, and restored child rearing to a gender-neutral parenting paradigm. The patriarchal enabling system has feminised raising children, leading to it being undervalued or inadequately compensated, if it ever is. Nobel winner Claudia Goldin's work has identified that the gender pay gap often emerges with the birth of a first child. The top court has given India an opportunity to set right the inadequate laws governing maternity leave in adoption, and to a large extent, the gender imbalance in society. It is the duty now of the state to make sure that this progressive judgment finds effective implementation in every corner of the country.

Do You Know:

• The Maternity Benefit Act, 1961, and its successor, the Code of Social Security, 2020, were both amended to include adoptive mothers within the scope of maternity leave. The carve-out was that only those women who adopted a child below the age of three months would qualify for twelve weeks of leave.

• Section 60(4) of the 2020 Code states that " a woman who legally adopts a child below the age of three months or a commissioning mother shall be entitled to maternity benefit for a period of twelve weeks from the date the child is handed over."

• The petitioners argued that the three-month cap was "artificial and violative of Article 14". They said a woman who adopts a four-month-old baby has the same caregiving responsibilities as one who adopts a two-month-old. The child still needs to be fed, held and introduced to an entirely new environment. The mother still needs time away from work to make that happen.

• The government responded by saying that women adopting older children could use the crèche facilities at their establishments. The court found this "seemingly appears to be lucrative" argument to be deeply flawed.

GUJARAT'S UCC BILL SEEKS TO REGULATE LIVE-IN RELATIONSHIPS

THE GUJARAT government on Wednesday introduced the Gujarat Uniform Civil Code (UCC) Bill, 2026, in the legislative Assembly, proposing a common legal framework to govern marriage, divorce, succession and live-in relationships irrespective of religion.

Key Takeaways:

• Among other things, it provides for registration of live-in relationships, as well as their termination through a formal declaration.

• "The UCC Bill has been introduced in the Assembly. Further discussion will take place in the House. Everyone is welcome to share their views. The UCC Bill is a very important legislation. Our government has decided to bring this Bill to ensure that every citizen gets equal rights," Agriculture Minister and government spokesperson Jitu Vaghani told mediapersons after a Cabinet meeting.

• Titled the 'Gujarat Uniform Civil Code, 2026', the proposed law will extend to the entire state and also apply to residents of Gujarat living outside its territorial limits. However, it will not apply to members of Scheduled Tribes and certain groups whose customary rights are protected under the Constitution.

• The Bill aims at creating a uniform legal framework, said its 'Objects and Reasons' statement.

"The present Bill seeks to give effect to these recommendations by providing a uniform legal framework governing civil matters for all citizens of the State, irrespective of religion, caste, creed, or gender. It aims to uphold the principles of secularism, gender justice, and social reform, thereby strengthening the unity and integrity of society," the Bill document said.

• The Bill defines key terms such as child, spouse, estate, will and live-in relationship, and recognises children born within or outside marriage, including those born through assisted reproductive technologies, as well as adopted ones on an equal footing.

• A major component of the Bill relates to marriage and divorce. It lays down uniform conditions for a valid marriage, including prohibition of bigamy and minimum age of 21 years for men and 18 years for women.

• Marriages may be solemnised as per customary or religious ceremonies, but their registration will be compulsory. While non-registration will not invalidate a marriage, the Bill prescribes penalties for failure to register or for furnishing false information.

The Bill lays down that a person cannot enter into a second marriage while their spouse is alive. "A marriage is considered valid under the Code only if neither party has a living spouse at the time of marriage," it says.

• The proposed law also standardises provisions relating to matrimonial disputes, restitution of conjugal rights, judicial separation and annulment of void or voidable marriages.

• It specifies a range of grounds for divorce, including cruelty, desertion, adultery, conversion, mental disorder, communicable diseases, renunciation and presumption of death, along with an option for divorce by mutual consent.

• Additional grounds have been provided for women in certain circumstances. The Bill also covers maintenance, interim and permanent alimony, and custody and welfare of children, while recognising the legitimacy of children from void or voidable marriages.

• The Bill introduces uniform rules for distribution of property in cases of intestate succession, classifying heirs and recognising the rights of unborn children.

Do You Know:

• THE UCC has been proposed nearly a month after the Gujarat government proposed amendments to the Gujarat Registration of Marriages Act, 2006, making parents' consent compulsory for registering marriages, in the beginning of the Budget session of the Gujarat Assembly, citing "love jihad".

• The Seventh Schedule of the Constitution provides that both the Centre and state legislatures can legislate on matters pertaining to family laws.

MAHARASHTRA HOUSE PASSES FREEDOM OF RELIGION BILL AMID OPPOSITION PROTEST

Exposing a rare dissonance within the Opposition parties, the Maharashtra Freedom of Religion Bill, 2026 was passed in the state Assembly on Monday, backed by the ruling Mahayuti and Maha Vikas Aghadi (MVA) partner Shiv Sena (UBT). The Congress, NCP (SP), Samajwadi Party and CPI (M) opposed the Bill.

Key Takeaways:

• Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis introduced the Bill in the Assembly, saying the proposed law seeks to prevent religious conversions carried out through coercion, inducement, fraud or deception and is not directed against any particular religion.

• Introducing the Bill, Fadnavis said Maharashtra was not the first state to enact such a legislation, noting that similar laws are already in force in 12 states, including Odisha, Karnataka, Haryana, Rajasthan and Arunachal Pradesh. "This Bill is not against any particular religion. It applies to all religions. It is meant to prevent religious conversions carried out through coercion, inducement, fraud or deception," he said, adding that the legislation was "100 per cent constitutional".

• Explaining the rationale behind the Bill, Fadnavis said disputes around religious conversions — particularly those linked to interfaith marriages — often lead to law and order situations. "In cases of interfaith marriages involving individuals from different religious backgrounds, disputes often arise and sometimes lead to law and order situations. Once such a situation emerges, effective action must be taken to address it," he said.

• According to the Chief Minister, the legislation clearly defines illegal religious conversion, including conversions carried out through allurement, coercion, fraud, misrepresentation or undue influence, as well as cases involving minors.

• Persons or organisations facilitating such conversions would be liable for punishment under the proposed law. The Bill also empowers the police to take suo motu action in cases of alleged illegal conversion.

• Defending the legislation, Fadnavis said similar laws have existed in several states since 1968 and that the Bill is consistent with the constitutional guarantee of religious freedom.

Do You Know:

• The proposed Maharashtra law describes "unlawful conversion as conversion from one religion to another using allurement, coercion, deceit, force, misrepresentation, threat, undue influence or any other fraudulent step, including "brainwashing through the medium of education". Mass conversion is defined as the forced conversion of two or more persons at the same time.

• The concept of "allurement" under the Bill includes any temptation such as gifts, gratification, easy money or material benefit in cash or kind, employment, free education in institutions run by religious bodies, promise of marriage, better lifestyle and divine healing.

• In contrast to other states, the proposed Maharashtra law expands the scope of "allurement" to include glorification of one religion over another and the portrayal of customs, rituals, ceremonies or any part of a religion in a harmful manner compared with another.

• Coercion under the Bill includes compelling an individual, family or group to act against their will through psychological pressure or physical force, causing bodily injury or threats. Such threats include those against life, or property of related persons, as well as "divine displeasure" and "social ex-communication" or boycott.

• The Bill provides that any marriage undertaken solely for unlawful religious conversion shall be declared null and void by a competent court. A plea may be made by either party to the marriage alleging unlawful conversion by the other.

• Section 5 of the proposed law stipulates a unique provision that a child born out of a marriage due to unlawful conversion shall be deemed to belong to the religion followed by the mother before such a marriage or relationship in the nature of marriage.

• The child will also be entitled to maintenance under Section 144 of the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita (BNSS), and the child's custody shall remain with the mother unless the court directs otherwise.

NOTHING AT ALL

Activist Sonam Wangchuk's release on March 14 ended a months-long legal and political standoff between his allies and Ladakh's leadership on one hand and the Centre on the other. Detaining him under the National Security Act 1980, the Centre alleged that he was the "chief provocateur" of the September 2025 violent clashes in Leh that left four dead, and dubbed his presence in the region a catalyst for an "Arab Spring-like" mobilisation to force its hand on Ladakh's constitutional status. The Centre also argued that given Ladakh's borders with China and Pakistan, continued "instigation" by a high-profile figure such as Wangchuk threatened territorial stability. About six months later, the Ministry of Home Affairs modified its order, intending to create an environment of "peace, stability, and mutual trust" and resume formal talks with the Leh Apex Body (LAB) and the Kargil Democratic Alliance (KDA). But even as a judicial commission was still investigating the September violence, Wangchuk's legal team and his wife Gitanjali Angmo had successfully undermined the government's case. Foremost, the alleged evidence of incitement was a translation of a short speech padded with pages of "aspersions" — a legally dubious pattern seen in the Elgar Parishad, Delhi liquor scam, and G.N. Saibaba cases. His lawyers also pointed to Wangchuk's social media posts condemning the unrest that day.

The Supreme Court had also expressed serious concerns over Wangchuk's health in Jodhpur jail. His release came just three days before the Court's final hearing on the matter, letting the Ministry to avoid a potentially embarrassing ruling that could have deemed the detention arbitrary. But while Wangchuk's release has defused the immediate tension, the political situation remains fundamentally unresolved. Two days on, Leh saw massive rallies for the first time since September 2025, while Kargil observed a shutdown, with local leaders saying that the agitation for constitutional safeguards would continue. Talks between Ladakh bodies and the Ministry have however been inconclusive, with LAB and the KDA reiterating their demands for statehood and Sixth Schedule status — already recommended by the National Commission for Scheduled Tribes and promised in the BJP's 2020 election manifesto. Crucially, other activists, including Deldan Namgyal and Smanla Dorjey, remain in detention. In effect, what Wangchuk's detention was meant to serve is unclear, beyond allowing the Centre to brandish its heavy hand, worsening his health, and stalling negotiations. Unless the Centre can negotiate in good faith with the Ladakhi leadership and provide concrete timelines, the people of Ladakh will not get their due.

MARKETS SHUT IN LEH, KARGIL AS PROTESTERS DEMAND STATEHOOD

• Ladakh's two representative bodies, the Apex Body Leh (ABL) and the Kargil Democratic Alliance (KDA), which have been in talks with the Union Ministry of Home Affairs as part of a 15-member High Powered Committee (HPC), called for the shutdown in Leh and Kargil.

• Markets remained shut in both Leh and Kargil as people carrying banners demanding statehood and safeguards under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution walked through the main markets. The remote parts of Zanskar also joined in the strike called by the KDA and ABL.

• This was the first major protest in the region since the sit-in protests in September last year. Four people had died in police firing on September 24, and climate activist Sonam Wangchuk was detained under the National Security Act.

• Ladakh has been in conversation with the MHA over a four-point agenda. This includes statehood for Ladakh, safeguards under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution, reservation in jobs for the youth of Ladakh, and the creation of separate parliamentary constituencies for the two parts of the region.

• Of the two Autonomous Hill Councils in the region, the five-year term of the council in Leh concluded on November 1, 2025, and fresh elections to the council have not been announced. Since Ladakh was carved out of the former state of Jammu and Kashmir as a Union Territory without a legislature, there has been some anxiety around the lack of adequate democratic representation for the people, barring one MP from the region. The Hill Council in Kargil is currently in the third year of its term.

Do You Know:

• The issue dates back to 2019, since Article 370 was repealed and the Jammu and Kashmir Reorganisation Act, 2019 was passed. The result was the bifurcation of the erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir into two Union Territories: Jammu and Kashmir with a legislature, and Ladakh without one.

• The political and legal status of Ladakh has remained contentious since, with the people of the UT finding themselves under direct central administration.

• Given that over 90% of Ladakh's population belongs to the Scheduled Tribes, there has been a consistent demand to include the region under the Sixth Schedule. The Sixth Schedule under Article 244 of the Indian Constitution provides for the formation of autonomous administrative regions called Autonomous District Councils (ADCs), which govern tribal-majority areas in certain northeastern states.

ADCs have up to 30 members with a term of five years and can make laws, rules and regulations on land, forest, water, agriculture, village councils, health, sanitation, village- and town-level policing, etc. Currently, there are 10 ADCs in the North East, with three each in Assam, Meghalaya and Mizoram, and one in Tripura.

WHY IS RAJASTHAN'S PROPERTY BILL DRAWING SCRUTINY?

The story so far:

The Rajasthan Prohibition of Transfer of Immovable Property in Disturbed Areas Bill was passed by the Rajasthan Legislative Assembly on March 6 in a voice vote. The Bill seeks to regulate property transactions in areas that the government declares as "disturbed". However, the legislation has sparked debate over its constitutional validity, potential misuse, and its broader social and economic implications.

What does the Bill propose?

Under the proposed law, Section 3(1,2) states that the State government may declare any area within the State as a 'disturbed area' if it considers that communal violence, riots, or public disorder exist or are likely to occur.

According to Section 5(1,2), once a locality is notified, any transfer of immovable property, including land, houses or commercial establishments, would require prior approval from the District Magistrate or Collector. This restriction applies to transfers by sale, gift, exchange, lease, etc. Property transactions carried out without such permission would be treated as legally invalid. Section 7 empowers the District Magistrate or Collector to conduct an inquiry to determine whether the proposed transfer is voluntary and genuine, or whether it involves coercion, intimidation or a distress sale.

Under Section 9, the law also provides penalties for property transfers carried out without the required permission. Section 10 includes provisions aimed at protecting tenants from forced or unlawful eviction in such sensitive areas. Violations of the Act (Section 12) are treated as cognisable and non-bailable offences, punishable with three to five years of imprisonment and a fine.

How does the Gujarat model compare?

The Rajasthan Bill draws comparisons with the Gujarat Disturbed Areas Act, which has its origins in a 1986 ordinance passed after severe communal riots in Ahmedabad. The law was first enacted in 1991. It was later strengthened through amendments in 2020. The law was introduced to prevent distress sales of property by minorities who, after repeated communal riots in cities such as Ahmedabad and Vadodara, felt compelled to leave their neighbourhoods and sell property at low prices.

In Ahmedabad, a large share of the Muslim population is concentrated in Juhapura, often described as the largest Muslim ghetto in western Ahmedabad, limiting the community's geographical spread. In the context of the 2020 amendments, the then Chief Minister Vijay Rupani said publicly that the intent of the law was to ensure that Hindus and Muslims remain within their own areas and do not exchange property."

What are the legal and constitutional implications?

Even though the right to property was removed as a fundamental right by the 44th Amendment to the Constitution in 1978, it remains protected under Article 300A, which states that no person can be deprived of property except by authority of law. The proposed legislation provides such authority by requiring government approval before property in notified "disturbed areas" can be transferred. The Bill has also drawn attention in relation to Article 14, which guarantees equality before the law. Legal observers note that if the provisions disproportionately affect certain neighbourhoods or communities, the law could face scrutiny on grounds of arbitrary classification or discrimination.

What are the Opposition's concerns?

Congress questioned the Bill's communal bias. Moreover, real estate transactions in notified areas could slow down because each transfer would require administrative approval from district authorities. They also point out that vague terms such as "disturbed area" or "demographic imbalance" may leave room for broad administrative discretion. There are also concerns about the arbitrary classification of disturbed areas, the ghettoisation of communities, potential discrimination in government services, and the distortion of representation. As a result, the policy, though intended to prevent forced displacement, has been criticised for institutionalising residential separation and communal polarisation, while reinforcing existing communal boundaries in housing markets rather than promoting integration.

CAPF BILL GIVES PRIORITY TO IPS OFFICERS; GOVT. SAYS NEW LAW WILL CURB UNNECESSARY LITIGATION

The Central Armed Police Forces (General Administration) Bill, 2026, that is likely to be tabled in the Rajya Sabha next week, states that in all Central Armed Police Forces (CAPFs), 50% of the total posts in the rank of Inspector General, at least 67% posts in the rank of Additional Director General and all posts in the rank of Special Director General and Director General shall be filled by Indian Police Service (IPS) officers on deputation. Till now, such postings were done based on executive orders, and the Bill will codify the provisions.

The Bill seeks to negate a May 23, 2025 Supreme Court judgment which asked the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) to "progressively reduce" IPS deputation in CAPFs up to the rank of I-Gs in the next two years.

Stagnant careers

Retired CAPF officials have opposed the Bill stating that the government is discriminating against cadre officers who won the case after 10 years of litigation to overcome career stagnation.

Due to absence of senior level posts, it takes an officer who joins as an Assistant Commandant in CAPFs, at least 15-18 years for her/his first promotion.

The officers have argued that despite leading operations from the front, and several of them having been killed in the line of action, they face career stagnation and most times the first promotion comes only after 15-18 years of service.

The Bill circulated among Rajya Sabha members late on Friday said the CAPFs perform functions of national security in close coordination with State authorities, and in the interest of maintaining Centre-State relationship, the IPS officers are necessary for effective functioning of these forces. It said that "it is considered necessary to enact an umbrella law to regulate the recruitment and conditions of service of Group A General Duty Officers and other officers appointed to the CAPFs with a view to ensure legislative clarity, preserving its operational distinctiveness, and harmonising judicial directions with administrative and federal requirements."

Statement of reasons

The statement of objects and reasons by Home Minister Amit Shah said that in recent years, due to the absence of an umbrella law, regulatory provisions have evolved in a fragmented manner resulting in several litigations on service-related matters, leading to some functional and administrative difficulties.

It added that the Bill was being brought to "avoid unnecessary litigations."

It said the CAPFs play a vital role in maintaining national security and discharging important functions such as securing the borders of the country, undertaking anti-insurgency operations and maintaining internal security of the Union and the States, adding that these Forces are also designed to supplement Armed Forces of the Union during war.

It added that under Article 312 of the Constitution, IPS is an All India Service and "historically, IPS officers are an integral and important part of the CAPFs."

Presently, 20% of posts in the rank of Deputy Inspector General (DIG) and 50% of posts in the rank of Inspector General (IG) in CAPFs are reserved for IPS officers through an executive order. The total strength of CAPFs is around 10 lakh, which includes 13,000 Group A cadre officers.

The Parliament was recently informed that there are around 93,000 vacancies in all ranks in CAPFs.

POLL BUGLES

The people of at least one State will heave a sigh of relief now that the schedule for five Assembly elections — all in April — has been announced. The elections in West Bengal will be held in two phases, unlike the eight in 2021. Spread across so many phases for security reasons, the extended campaigns only turned ugly and vituperative, with the parties stoking passions through personal attacks and communal rhetoric. It is to the credit of the Election Commission of India (ECI) that it has decided to limit the Bengal election to just two phases, which should hopefully focus the contestation and discourse on more pertinent issues. That said, these elections are the second set of polls being held in States/Union Territories (UT) where the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) process has been completed. The ECI has yet to provide satisfactory explanations for the anomalies that arose during the SIR. These include a lowered gender ratio in most States except Tamil Nadu and an abnormally high number of deletions compared to the estimated adult population. The deletions are expected to affect short-term migrants and married women. Unlike Bihar, where the electoral variables were decisively in favour of the ruling National Democratic Alliance making the SIR a relative non-factor, it could affect West Bengal, where the sword of Damocles still hangs over 60 lakh people regarding their voting eligibility due to 'logical discrepancies' in their applications, which are still under review by judicial officers.

The other States and UT, barring Assam, that go to the polls also bring in a distinct element to them unlike most other Indian provinces. Here, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is less of a force and the elections will be decided based on the performance of State governments and local/regional variables. The entry of the Tamilaga Vettri Kazhagam, led by actor Vijay, and the staying power of the small but steady Naam Tamizhar Katchi party will complicate the battle in Tamil Nadu, even if it is being primarily fought between the two alliances led by the ruling Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam and the opposition All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam. In Kerala, the Left Democratic Front faces an uphill battle to counter anti-incumbency, with a resurgent Congress-led United Democratic Front challenging it, alongside a BJP seeking to expand its limited footprint. In Assam, the contest is between the two fronts led by the national parties, the ruling BJP and the Congress. The Congress's inability to rope in the Raijor Dal led by Akhil Gogoi into its front is a failing that could hurt it in a contest that BJP Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma seeks to frame less as a referendum on governance and more around crass identity politics. This kind of a largely bipolar contest is also expected in Puducherry, where the ruling regional party, the All India NR Congress, in alliance with the BJP, will take on the Congress-DMK-Left-VCK coalition.

BENGAL SIR APPEALS: POLL PANEL SETS UP 19 APPELLATE TRIBUNALS

The Election Commission on Friday set up 19 appellate tribunals for hearing appeals against the orders passed by judicial officers who are currently deciding on the eligibility of 60.06 lakh electors of West Bengal.

Key Takeaways:

— Acting on orders of the Supreme Court and recommendations of Calcutta High Court Chief Justice Sujoy Paul, the EC set up the appellate authority, naming 19 former judges as the single-member tribunals for the 23 districts. While most of the judges were named for a single district, three were assigned multiple districts.

— The appeals can be filed either on the EC's ECINET website or physically at the offices of the District Magistrates or Sub-Divisional Magistrates or Sub-Divisional Officers, who are to digitise and upload the appeals on the ECINET platform, the EC said.

— The EC's decision comes at a time when judicial officers appointed on orders of the Supreme Court on February 20 are deciding on whether 60.06 lakh electors flagged during the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls can remain on the rolls or not.

— The SC had ordered that as and when the judicial officers decide, supplementary lists of electors are to be published. This even as the EC has announced elections in West Bengal on April 23 and April 29.

Do You Know:

— According to PRS India, tribunals are institutions established for discharging judicial or quasi-judicial duties. The objective may be to reduce case load of the judiciary or to bring in subject expertise for technical matters.

— The Supreme Court has ruled that tribunals, being quasi-judicial bodies, should have the same level of independence from the executive as the judiciary.

— The tribunal system has developed as a parallel to the traditional court system over the last eighty years. The Income Tax Appellate Tribunal was created in 1941 to reduce pendency of cases in courts.

— After the insertion of Articles 323A and 323B, several tribunals such as the Central Administrative Tribunal as well as sector specific tribunals were set up from the 1980s to 2010s. The Finance Act, 2017 consolidated several tribunals. In 2021, a Bill has been introduced that abolishes nine tribunals and transfers the matters to courts.

BENGAL ROW: A LOOK AT POLL PANEL'S POWER TO TRANSFER OFFICIALS DURING ELECTIONS

Following the announcement of the schedule for the five upcoming Assembly polls at an Election Commission press conference at 4 pm on Sunday (March 15), the Model Code of Conduct (MCC) has come into force. With that, the EC has begun deploying security personnel and appointing officers for the smooth conduct of elections.

Key Takeaways:

• The MCC refers to the rules of conduct for parties and candidates, set to be in effect until the poll results are declared on May 4. In the first three days of its operation, the EC has made a slew of appointments and transfers of top IAS and IPS officers in West Bengal, Assam, Kerala and Tamil Nadu.

• With Bengal seeing the most changes, Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee hit out at the EC, terming the transfers as "sweeping". She wrote to Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) Gyanesh Kumar, calling the move "a matter of deep concern and surprise" and asking him to "refrain from adopting such unilateral measures in the future".

• The EC has been making appointments at various levels of state governments and police. The first such move was on Monday morning, when the EC announced the transfer of the Chief Secretary and Principal Secretary, Home and Hill Affairs, in Bengal. In total, at least 21 top IAS and IPS officers have been transferred by the Commission in Bengal, including the state's DGP and Kolkata Police Commissioner.

• While the reason for the transfers was not mentioned in the orders, CEC Gyanesh Kumar said that the Election Commission is "committed to holding transparent, free of fear, violence-free and inducement-free elections," in a written comment provided by the ECI along with the orders.

Do You Know:

• During an election and electoral roll revision, all officers concerned with related tasks are treated as though they are on deputation to the ECI. This is as per Section 13CC of the Representation of the People Act, 1950, which says, "Chief Electoral Officers, District Election Officers, etc., deemed to be on deputation to Election Commission."

• "The officers referred to in this part and any other officer or staff employed in connection with the preparation, revision and correction of the electoral rolls for, and the conduct of, all elections shall be deemed to be on deputation to the Election Commission for the period during which they are so employed and such officers and staff shall, during that period, be subject to the control, superintendence and discipline of the Election Commission," it adds.

• Though this section was added through an amendment in 1989, there was disagreement between the EC and the government on what "discipline" meant. In 1993, the TN Seshan-led EC moved the Supreme Court for clarification on this.

• As a result, the EC and government agreed to the terms of settlement in 2000, which made it clear that the EC could suspend and substitute officers for dereliction of duty. It is under these provisions that the EC continues to act during elections and revision processes to transfer officers.

PRISON OUTBREAK

The public health crisis in India's prisons is distinguished by its poorer infrastructure and a general disregard for treating ailments until they become inconvenient. A prisoner does not lose the right to health, a point courts have repeatedly stressed; yet, between August 20, 2025, and March 9, 2026, around 92 inmates at the Jalpaiguri Central Correctional Home were infected with herpes simplex virus (HSV) and seven of them died. HSV is common in the general population but experts have said that in immunocompromised or overcrowded populations with poor care, it can lead to encephalitis, which is often fatal. The Home's 171% occupancy rate rendered good hygiene and isolation a luxury. According to the 2023 Prison Statistics of India, district prisons in West Bengal have reported occupancy rates exceeding 160% and certain facilities, such as the Kandi Sub-Jail, have historically reached staggering levels of over 400%. While the State has many foreign national inmates, overcrowding is a persistent fact of India's correctional facilities. In 2023, 30% of inmates in 10 prisons in Kerala were found to have skin diseases caused by humidity and a lack of personal space. A 2023 study in The Lancet Public Health found prisoners in India five times more likely to develop tuberculosis (TB) than the general population. In 2025, the Home Ministry ordered prison screening camps as unventilated environments allow TB to spread rapidly. The Nagpur and Indore central jails had major COVID-19 outbreaks.

According to the India Justice Report 2025, HIV prevalence among inmates is also significantly higher than the national average due to shared equipment and inadequate screening at entry. Mandatory, comprehensive medical screening could catch many of these infections before they become injurious, which also requires facilities to have the requisite personnel. But the report also flagged a 43% vacancy rate for medical officers, resulting in the number of inmates per doctor being 2.6 times higher than recommended by the Model Prison Manual. There are also only 25 psychologists for India's 5.7 lakh inmates. Filling this gap requires integrating prisons into the National Health Mission, ensuring a sufficient number of health workers trained to manage outbreaks, and enforcing the Manual's standards uniformly across States. As West Bengal's actions in 2020 illustrate — temporarily releasing thousands of undertrials to relieve overcrowding in the South 24 Parganas District Correctional Home and the Baruipur Central Jail — the solutions are not confined to health. The judiciary must fast-track cases involving undertrials, who constitute the majority of inmates, expand the use of bail and non-custodial alternatives for minor offences and expedite the repatriation of foreign nationals.

GANGA BELONGS TO ALL, DON'T DISCRIMINATE

That 14 young men were arrested by the Varanasi Police because they took a boat out on the river Ganga and broke their Ramzan fast — after a video they made of their iftar party went viral and the BJP Yuva Morcha city unit chief filed a complaint — is disquieting. A routine excursion is being painted as a crime. The accusations sound forced, disproportionate and repressive. They range from hurting "religious sentiment" and defiling a religious place to water pollution, from consuming non-vegetarian food and throwing leftovers into the river to extortion — the last has been added after boat operators belatedly alleged that threats were issued and the boat taken forcibly. What is striking is the alacrity with which the police made the arrests, and the promptness with which a Varanasi court rejected bail applications and sent the accused to judicial custody. The police show no such urgency to act on hate speech, for instance, even after the apex court has mandated that FIRs be registered suo motu, without waiting for a complaint. And in most cases, the court drags its feet till the process itself becomes punishment. But the episode is disturbing, most of all, because of the charges that lie at its centre.

They reek of intolerance and describe a shrinking — of the Ganga's capacious myth and story. It is sacred for Hindus, of course, but it is also a river that belongs to all. The Ganga does not discriminate as it bears witness and carries family memories. Regardless of the faith of those who make it their own, it is forgiving and nurturing. The charges against the 14 young men mirror a narrowing, too, of the lived reality of an ancient and large-hearted city made of its teeming diversities. Varanasi, the Prime Minister's constituency, is the city of narrow lanes where moving forward calls for negotiation and conversation with others, and a cultural landscape where arguments are carefully crafted and savoured, regardless of who wins or loses. It is the site, also, of ongoing makeovers that are helping it to turn its face to the future, from the renovated Kashi Vishwanath temple complex to the redevelopment of the ghats, from projects of urban expansion to those of connectivity and mobility. The attempt to divide the Ganga, to claim that only one community owns it, is jarring and out of place in Kashi.

The Yogi Adityanath government must take note of the overzealousness of its police, and correct it. At stake is its own attempt to turn UP into a state that is dynamic and forward moving. That is undermined when it is circumscribed and weighed down by a politics that stokes divides.

FIRE AND MORE FIRE

Cuttack is not an anomaly. It is the latest entry in a ledger of preventable deaths in Indian hospital ICUs. In 2016, 22 people died in a fire at a private hospital ICU in Bhubaneswar, which did not have the mandatory fire safety clearance. Following this tragedy, fire safety audits were made compulsory for such facilities. Last year, the Odisha government allocated about ₹320 crore for fire safety improvement across hospitals in the State. But this did not prevent the fire at the government SCB Medical College and Hospital, Cuttack, apparently caused by a short circuit in the ICU of the trauma care unit. Some reports suggest the fire may have started in a ventilator, which was later found heavily charred. The accident, which occurred in the early hours of Monday, claimed 12 of the 23 ICU patients. Although the hospital had a firefighting unit, its personnel arrived after more than 30 minutes, reportedly because staff did not alert them early. Additionally, the fire hydrants could not be operated by staff. Nevertheless, water is not the right medium to fight electric fires, which are best extinguished using carbon dioxide, a method that requires trained personnel. Last October, six patients were killed in an ICU fire in Rajasthan. In 2024, newborns died in an ICU fire in Jhansi, Uttar Pradesh. Two similar accidents were reported in Maharashtra in 2021. An audit in Jhansi revealed hazards including exposed wiring, inadequate earthing and electrical circuits not matching power load requirements — the last being a leading cause of electrical fires in India.

ICUs have intrinsic safety risks, as their oxygen-rich environment can turn even a spark into an inferno. ICUs are also packed with electrical equipment, and the personnel are not always well trained in their safe handling. State-of-the-art medical equipment comes with advanced electronics and variable frequency drives that generate what are called “harmonic currents”. These currents flow within circuits and typically have no safety devices such as circuit breakers. Harmonics create silent, persistent overheating and insulation degradation and are a severe fire hazard. Today’s electrical practice lays down that every time a new ventilator is wheeled into an ICU, the wiring, protection and load capacity must be re-evaluated. Older facilities need an electrical upgrade before cutting edge equipment can be installed. As patients in ICUs are often sedated, intubated, and connected to machines, staff must be trained to ensure their safe evacuation. Until India treats hospital fire safety as a matter of criminal accountability rather than bureaucratic paperwork, the fires will keep burning and the bodies will keep mounting.

WHY PUNJAB CM WANTS RAJASTHAN TO PAY FOR WATER USED SINCE 1960

Punjab Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann has said his government will seek Rs 1.44 lakh crore from Rajasthan for drawing 18,000 cusecs of water since 1960 without payment. He has argued that an older, pre-Independence agreement required Rajasthan to pay for this water and called for its review. The statement has revived a long-running and complex dispute over river waters, historical agreements and inter-state allocations.

Key Takeaways:

• The reference is to an arrangement in the 1920s between the princely state of Bikaner and undivided Punjab under British rule. Maharaja Ganga Singh of Bikaner secured water from the Sutlej through what came to be known as the Gang (or Bikaner) Canal, originating at the Ferozepur headworks. Under this arrangement, Bikaner paid Punjab a royalty or usage charge, typically linked to irrigated acreage. This was essentially a commercial agreement between a princely state and the colonial administration, with payments continuing till around 1960.

• In 1981, a tripartite agreement was signed between Punjab, Haryana and Rajasthan, all ruled by Congress governments, with the backing of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi.

This agreement reallocated Ravi-Beas waters based on an estimated availability of 17.17 million acre feet (MAF). Rajasthan was allocated 8.6 MAF, the largest share, despite being a non-riparian state.

—The allocation formalised Rajasthan's entitlement and supported the expansion of the Indira Gandhi Canal system, which carries water from the Harike Barrage in the Tarn Taran district of Punjab deep into the Thar desert.

Do You Know:

• Article 262 in Constitution of India provides adjudication of disputes relating to waters, of inter-State rivers or river valleys. It says:

—Parliament may by law provide for the adjudication of any dispute or complaint with respect to the use, distribution or control of the waters of, or in, any inter-State river or river valley.

—Notwithstanding anything in this Constitution, Parliament may by law provide that neither the Supreme Court nor any other court shall exercise jurisdiction in respect of any such dispute or complaint as is referred to in clause (1).

• The Interstate River Water Disputes Act, 1956 (IRWD Act) is an act of the Parliament of India enacted under Article 262 of Constitution of India on the eve of reorganization of states on linguistic basis to resolve the water disputes that would arise in the use, control and distribution of an interstate river or river valley.

GOVT ASKS WHATSAPP TO BLOCK DEVICE IDS USED IN DIGITAL ARREST SCAMS

Blocking device IDs invol-ved in cases of digital arrest, introducing safety features similar to those on Skype, and stren-gthening technology to detect and block harmful APKs, the file formats used in Android systems.

Key Takeaways:

— These are some of the key measures WhatsApp has been asked to implement by a high-level Inter-Departmental Committee (IDC) constituted by the Union Home Ministry to tackle the threat of digital arrest, including the impersonation of law enforcement officers to perpetrate the scam, The Indian Express has learnt.

— Sources said that the Meta-owned messaging service has agreed to implement these measures and is already in the process of putting in place some of them. It is learnt that the interaction with representatives of WhatsApp took place earlier this month during the third meeting of the IDC, which was constituted in December 2025.

— According to the official, the representatives of WhatsApp conveyed that the platform is introducing several safety features similar to those on Skype, which is Microsoft's video-calling platform: more information on callers, warning signals for suspicious accounts and better detection of scam networks. WhatsApp has been asked to present a proposal on these measures within 30 days, the official said.

— In typical digital arrest scams, fraudsters impersonate law enforcement officers on video calls with victims, claim that they are being investigated for serious crimes and coerce them to transfer large sums to various bank accounts to avoid arrest.

Do You Know:

— Notably, "digital arrest" has not been explicitly defined in any law. Although fraudulent online activities are addressed under the Information Technology Act, 2000 and organised criminal activity under the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS), 2023, neither law explicitly defines "cybercrimes", causing ambiguity in the enforcement of regulatory response.

— As per Section 63 of the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita (BNSS) 2023, summons may be served electronically, but only if the communication is encrypted and carries the court's seal, image, and authorised digital signature. While such digitisation streamlines procedural delivery, the BNSS retains a clear emphasis on embodied due process that all forms of arrest require physical custody, the arresting officer must display proper identification, and an arrest memo must be prepared contemporaneously.

— Indian Cyber Crime Coordination Centre (I4C) has been instituted as an attached office to the Ministry of Home Affairs, so as to coordinate a comprehensive, national response to all cybercrime complaints. With respect to matters of digital arrest complaints, it has blocked over 1,700 Skype IDs, 59,000 WhatsApp accounts, 6.69 lakh SIM cards, and 1,32,000 IMEIs in 2024 alone.

CENTRE LOOKS TO EMPOWER MORE MINISTRIES TO BLOCK SOCIAL MEDIA CONTENT

The Centre may soon allow the ministries of Home Affairs, External Affairs, Defence, and Information and Broadcasting to issue content blocking orders to social media platforms under Section 69 (A) of the Information Technology (IT) Act, 2000, a power currently only available to the IT Ministry, The Indian Express has learnt.

Key Takeaways:

• This will impact tech platforms like Instagram, Facebook and YouTube which may start receiving blocking orders from a wide range of government agencies.

• According to two senior officials, the government is holding inter-ministerial discussions with various stakeholders to bring an amendment to make the change possible, which they said was being necessitated due to the proliferation of AI-generated misleading content on the internet.

• Although these five ministries are currently being discussed, the scope could also widen to allow regulators like the Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI) to send takedown orders directly to tech companies. For a long time now, SEBI has been flagging the issue of incorrect financial information through financial influencers on the internet.

Do You Know:

• Currently, there are two parallel content blocking mechanisms in India. One is under Section 69 (A) of the IT Act, through which content that violates national security, or threatens India's foreign policy, is taken down. Various ministries and state governments have nodal officers who gather such content and send it to officials at the IT Ministry, which is the final signing-off agency responsible for issuing the blocking order.

• The other mechanism works under Section 79 (3)(b) of the IT Act, under which various ministries have been directly empowered to issue blocking orders to online platforms, most commonly through the Home Ministry-led Sahyog portal.

• The changes are being considered at a time when the government is pushing social media companies to take down content quickly. Last month, it brought about a change in law to reduce blocking timelines from 24-36 hours to 2-3 hours.

• Users on social media have since also flagged that many of their posts which were satirical or critical of the government, and not necessarily illegal, have been impacted as companies ramp up their compliance infrastructure in the face of growing regulatory pressure.

• Broadly, Section 69 (A) of the IT Act empowers the Central government to restrict public access to information in the interest of sovereignty, security, public order or preventing incitement to offences. The process is governed by the Information Technology (Procedure and Safeguards for Blocking for Access of Information by Public) Rules, 2009.

• Typically, a government agency sends a request to the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology, which is examined by a committee before directions are issued to intermediaries such as social media platforms to block the specified content. In emergencies, interim blocking can be ordered before review. But in both these cases, it is the IT Ministry which currently sends the final blocking order to intermediaries like social media companies.

DILUTING THE POWER OF LIES IN A POST-TRUTH AGE

George John Writes- Truth-seeking is less a static possession than a disciplined habit: Gather evidence, listen to objections, revise when necessary, and still be willing to say, 'On present evidence, this is what we should believe'.

• Truth and falsehood are not just opposing statements; they are rival ways of living together. Lies — especially when amplified by power or prestige — can circle the world before patient fact has laced its boots.

• We live in a "post-truth" age, where feelings often seem to weigh more than evidence and where every claim can be dismissed as "just your narrative". Yet, ordinary life still depends on some shared sense that words ought to answer to reality. When that weakens, everything else begins to wobble.

• What, then, do we mean by "truth"? Philosophers speak of correspondence (our words matching the world), coherence (our beliefs hanging together), and pragmatism (truth as what "works" in experience). In practice, we borrow from all three. A doctor, a judge, or a journalist needs statements that fit the facts, make sense within a wider picture, and continue to survive serious questioning.

• If truth matters so much, why do falsehoods flourish? Part of the answer is motivational: Lies can be comforting, convenient, or profitable. Part of it is structural: Rumours and half-truths are easy to share, while verification is slow and unglamorous.

• Power deepens the damage. From totalitarian propaganda to today's flood of contradictory messages, those who control megaphones can blur the line between fact and fiction.

• When citizens no longer know whom to trust, many retreat into cynicism or cling to their tribe's preferred story. Most victims of misinformation are not wicked; they are human. We all prefer information that fits what we already believe. We are overwhelmed by headlines, clips, and forwards. In this environment, "cognitive ease" — what feels familiar — often masquerades as truth.

Do You Know:

• According to Wikipedia, Post-truth is a term that refers to the widespread documentation of, and concern about, disputes over public truth claims in the 21st century. The term's academic development refers to the theories and research that seek to explain the specific causes historically, and the effects of the phenomenon.

EXPERTS CLASH OVER HALEU-TH FUEL FOR INDIAN NUCLEAR REACTORS

A January report in the journal Current Science by scientists at the Bhabha Atomic Research Centre (BARC) has turned radioactive, with one of India's leading nuclear scientists characterising its conclusions as "misleading". The study compared the relative merits of different mixes of uranium fit for nuclear power and concluded that one option, called HALEU-thorium, was "unsuitable" for India's current fleet of reactors.

The assessment drew an incensed reaction from the Chicago-based company Clean Core Thorium Energy (CCTE). Led by Indian-origin entrepreneur Mehul Shah, CCTE has prepared a HALEU-Th fuel called 'ANEEL'.

In August 2025, CCTE reported a significant burn-up — a marker of the fuel's energy output — at a nuclear reactor run by the U.S. Department of Energy, for HALEU-Th. It subsequently entered an agreement with India's NTPC to "explore" ANEEL's use in Indian reactors.

The Current Science study modelled the performance of the pressurised heavy water reactor (PHWR) with three fuel combinations: (i) natural uranium (7 kg of uranium-235 and 993 kg U-238), (ii) HALEU-Th (32 kg of U-235, 129 kg of U-239, and 839 kg of thorium), and (iii) slightly enriched uranium (11 kg of U-235 and 989 kg of U-238). U-235 can sustain a chain reaction; U-238 and thorium mainly act as fertile materials that breed fissile fuel. In their simulation, the BARC scientists found the HALEU-Th combination yielded the highest burn-up of 50 gigawatt-days per tonne (GWd/t) while generating the least amount of spent fuel, a.k.a. radioactive waste: only 14% of what current reactors produce.

The study also said, however, that using HALEU-Th could require significantly changing the design of India's reactors because it also rendered the shutdown rods — a system used to rapidly stop nuclear reactions during an emergency — around 26% less effective. So, it concluded, "HALEU-Th fuel is far from a 'drop-in' option for the present generation of PHWRs."

But to Anil Kakodkar, former chairman of the Department of Atomic Energy and member of the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC), the conclusion doesn't follow from the results. He believes India's current 700-MWe PHWRs require "no modification" while the 220-MWe variants require "negligible" modification. "They [the study authors] are not understanding this... The conclusions are misleading," he added.

Prof. Koroush Shirvan at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) wrote a letter to the editor of Current Science asking the journal "withdraw" the study over its "serious and numerous technical flaws". "I have been supporting [CCTE] since 2016 as the head of their fuel design," Prof. Shirvan wrote to The Hindu. Upon reading the paper, he said it "was a bit out of context, since HALEU-Th fuel is not meant for reprocessing, so to compare it to more reprocessing-friendly fuel forms is quite misleading."

Current Science editor S.K. Satheesh said the journal had considered the comments, consulted with a "senior expert" on the topic, and declined to publish his comments and to his request to withdraw the paper. BARC scientist and study lead author K.P. Singh also said Prof. Shirvan's comments "have no relevance to the main outcome of our study".

Dr. Kakodkar however said that given the performance of the HALEU-Th mix in U.S. labs and India's ambition to have 100 GW of nuclear energy by 2047, the country should move to "test" the fuel: "Now that we have the SHANTI agreement, why can't we use it for a bilateral collaboration?"

Mr. Shah said he considered Dr. Kakodkar "a mentor" (the name 'ANEEL' is a homage). Dr. Kakodkar also said he had no 'stake' in CCTE: "I'm retired but I consider it my mission that India should use thorium soon."

AEC member and former BARC scientist Ravi Grover however supported the study's conclusions: "These simulations are faithful to real world situations, so if the results say one thing, why should we at this stage conduct these [thorium] tests?" he asked.

R. Srikanth, an analyst of India's nuclear programme at the National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bengaluru, said HALEU-Th has emerged just as India is set to commission its 500-MWe fast breeder reactor in Kalpakkam, which will mark the start of the second stage of India's nuclear programme, to generate plutonium that will then feed into future thorium reactors, ultimately freeing India from using imported uranium.

"HALEU is commercially limited and expensive. Why should India replace its current import dependence on uranium with another dependence (HALEU)?" he asked. "Everything should be tested but we are at a delicate stage today and must allow our programme to unfold in its natural course. To advocate for the use of thorium in our current PHWR seems like a distraction."

WHY INDIA'S 'LEAKY PIPELINE' IN RESEARCH IS UNLIKE REST OF THE WORLD

Girls and women represent half the population of the world yet their participation in scientific research is lagging. In many countries, this disparate contribution starts as early as school. In the U.S., for example, girls are less likely to take advanced calculus, physics, mathematics, and biology at high school level.

In many other countries, the number of girls opting to major in a science, technology, engineering or mathematics (STEM) subject is significantly lower than that of boys. Women constitute only 35% of STEM graduates across the world and earn only 40% of STEM Ph.Ds. Further, based on data from 146 nations, women scientists comprise only 30% of the STEM workforce, which includes academic jobs and faculty positions.

This systematic loss of women at various stages of STEM education and careers is commonly called the 'leaky pipeline'.

And at first glance, India appears to be an exception.

Where are the 'leaks'?

At the school level, nearly all students have 'science' as a mandatory subject and (at least anecdotally) girls participate in science quizzes, Olympiads, summer schools, hackathons, and hands-on tinkering challenges. After Class 10, the enrolment of girls in the 'science' stream can be as high as 60%, with girls making up 46% of all Class 12 science pass-outs.

In 2025 the Ministry of Education reported that for the first time in over a decade, more girls had cleared their Class 12 examination in science than in the arts stream. This indicated a significant increase in the participation of girls in science education: according to data from 2014, 7.5 lakh more girls graduated from the arts stream than science.

As a result, India boasts the highest percentage of female STEM graduates worldwide, with 43% women science graduates at the bachelor's level and nearly 50% at the Masters and doctoral levels.

But beyond the encouraging statistics, India does have a leaky pipeline for women in STEM — except that it looks different from the rest of the world.

In spite of producing the highest number of female STEM graduates, women constitute only 18% of the research and development workforce in the country.

A Department of Science and Technology report reveals that women constituted less than 30% of scientists in India's national research agencies; the highest representation was in the Indian Council of Medical Research at 29% and the lowest in the Defence Research and Development Organisation at 14%.

Women also make up only 8% of faculty at the Indian Institute of Science Bangalore and 11-13% of scientists at the IITs. While university settings, both government and private, report higher representation, the figures are still lower than 30%.

The typical Indian milieu

What this means is that while women in India enter STEM education in large numbers, they are under-represented in scientific research jobs. This 'leaky pipeline' persists due to a combination of social, structural, and systemic challenges.

In schools, girls in India are often encouraged to pursue science and those interested in science are considered to be 'good' or 'smart' girls, with 'wanting to become a scientist' looked upon favourably by teachers, peers, and parents.

Yet as women advance in their science education — the pursuit of which can require several years of training and commitment — social expectations pose barriers to their career plans. Completing a Ph.D. often coincides with the search for a research job as well as familial directives to 'settle down', bear children, and 'focus' on the household. In India's typical socio-cultural milieu, women often relocate to their husband's place of living, adjust to a new family structure, and handle the larger share of childcare and household responsibilities, all of which pose significant challenges to seeking lucrative scientific research jobs and positions.

Scientific recruitment across government research organisations have strict age cut-offs, especially at entry-level positions, in addition to erratic hiring practices, a dearth of positions, and specific mandates for certain fields of research.

For women, given geographic constraints and familial responsibilities, accessing these long-term jobs means doing so within the age eligibility and in a defined location, factors that result in a limited pool of options.

Academic jobs also don't allow for remote work; while certain roles may allow for flexible and hybrid work models, they typically don't directly involve research or teaching.

Position gap

At the level of the research ecosystem, some of these social and structural challenges are being addressed via special recruitment drives and funding schemes for women scientists. In spite of these measures, institutions lag in ensuring gender parity at the time of recruitment, and gender equity initiatives have either been limited to pilot projects, are not appropriately incentivised, or are associated with minimal accountability.

Consequently, the majority of women Ph.D. holders in STEM in India find themselves unable to access long-term, lucrative and prestigious research jobs. This results in a position gap, where women scientists often have to contend with short-term, contractual, precarious, and unstable positions, such as those found in quasi-academic initiatives, entities funded on grants, fellowships, or 'soft money', positions without full-spectrum benefits, promotions or increments, and roles with limited career advancement.

The big 'leak' in India's STEM pipeline, as seen by the sharp loss of women scientists during the transition from science education to the research workforce, is a consequence of social, structural, and systemic challenges -- and is reflected in the position gap that precludes the majority of trained women scientists from long-term and sustained participation in scientific research.

PROVIDE BREAKFAST TOO UNDER PM-POSHAN: PANEL

The Parliamentary Standing Committee on Education, headed by Congress Rajya Sabha MP Digvijaya Singh, has recommended that the Education Ministry introduce "at least a light breakfast" as part of the PM-POSHAN (midday meal) scheme in schools, and that the scheme be extended to cover all students up to Class 10, and then Class 12 in the next five years.

Key Takeaways:

• Under the PM-POSHAN scheme, a cooked meal is provided to government and aided school students up to Class 8.

• "The Committee feels that sudden stoppage of nutritional meals to students after Class 8, when most of them reach adolescence, is like suddenly turning the tap off before the bucket is filled completely. Given that adolescence is a critical growth phase… proper nutrition during these years will go a long way in preventing a large number of long-term health issues, reduce drop outs particularly amongst girls…," the committee noted in a report presented in Parliament on Wednesday.

• Stating that there is a sustained need to integrate education with nutrition beyond Class 8, particularly since Class 10 and 12 students prepare for board exams which "demand higher focus and cognitive performance," the committee has recommended that the Department of School Education and Literacy (DoSEL) of the Education Ministry should increase the scope and coverage of the scheme to all students up to Class 10, "and then take it to Class 12 in the next five years."

• The committee has also recommended that the Samagra Shiksha funds approved and due to Tamil Nadu, Kerala and West Bengal be released.

Do You Know:

• Pradhan Mantri Poshan Shakti Nirman (PM POSHAN) earlier known as the National Programme of Mid-Day Meal in Schools is one of the foremost rights based Centrally Sponsored Schemes under the National Food Security Act, 2013 (NFSA). The primary objective of the scheme is to improve the nutritional status of children studying in classes I-VIII in eligible schools.

• The objectives of the Scheme are to address two of the pressing problems for majority of children in India, viz. hunger and education by:

—Improving the nutritional status of eligible children in Government and Government aided schools.

—Encouraging poor children, belonging to disadvantaged sections, to attend school more regularly and help them concentrate on classroom activities.

—Providing nutritional support to children of elementary stage in drought-affected and disaster affected areas during summer vacation.

• PM POSHAN has been launched for an initial period of five years (2021-22 to 2025-26). The Centre will bear Rs 54,061 crore of the total estimated cost of Rs 1.3 lakh crore, with the states paying Rs 31,733 crore (Rs 45,000 crore will be released by the Centre as subsidies for food grains).

CATCH THEM YOUNG

The phrase 'catch them young' has acquired a perverse slant in a world grappling with a galloping non-communicable diseases epidemic. The full gamut of conditions that comprise metabolic diseases, usually impacting people with advancing age, are affecting even children, studies show. The recently released World Obesity Atlas 2026 delivers a true shocker. As per the report, released on World Obesity Day (March 4), in 2025, there were 14.9 million children in the 5-9 years group and more than 26.4 million children in the 10-19 age group in India who were overweight or obese. About 41 million children had a high BMI rate. Further, estimates suggest that by 2040, 20 million children in India will be obese and 56 million will be overweight. The report also estimates that at least 120 million children of school-going age are expected to have early signs of chronic illnesses such as hypertension and cardiovascular disease due to weight, in 2040. While, globally, China leads both categories, with 62 million children with high BMI and 33 million with obesity, India comes second, and is tailed by the United States (27 million high BMI; 13 million obesity). With such high obesity figures, the attendant health statistics too are unacceptably off the charts: In India, children aged 5-19 years with disease indicators attributed to high BMI, including hypertension, diabetes, hyperglycaemia, high cholesterol, and metabolic dysfunction-associated steatotic liver disease (MASLD) are projected to rise substantially by 2040. The risk factors are similar to adult-onset metabolic conditions, broadly categorised as insufficient activity and consumption of unhealthy foods. Other aspects, mentioned as causes, include poor access to healthy school meals for primary and secondary grade children, and sub-optimal breast feeding for infants aged 1-5 months.

Clearly, not enough is being done to stem this tide of growing childhood obesity. The World Obesity Federation calls for greater action and emphasis on monitoring in terms of marketing restrictions and sugar levies on packaged food products. Experts have also called for restrictions on marketing packaged foods to children, sincere implementation of global physical activity recommendations for children, ensuring the mandatory breastfeeding period for infants, and healthier school food standards, besides integration of prevention and care into primary health systems. It is worrisome that obesity and overweight, once associated with higher-income countries, are now catching up rapidly in low- and middle-income countries. If nothing is done at this stage, the gains that the nation expects from its youth, even as it heads towards a grey path, will be hollowed out. The only way out is to catch them young, even before non-communicable diseases can.

POOR DIET IS CAUSING ADULT DISEASES IN CHILDREN: SCIENTIST

With the recently released World Obesity Atlas placing India second globally after China in childhood obesity, nutrition scientist Zeeshan Ali warned that the crisis could worsen sharply if left unchecked.

Speaking to The Hindu, Dr. Ali, from the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine in Washington DC, said India could also see a steep rise in paediatric chronic diseases that were traditionally associated with adults.

The report states that more than 41 million children (aged 5–19) in India have a high body mass index (BMI), including about 14 million living with obesity. The number is projected to rise to 56 million by 2040, driven by poor diets, high consumption of sugary drinks, and low physical activity.

Packaged meals

Dr. Ali blamed rapid urbanisation for these trends, which is causing a nutritional transition in the country, wherein traditional diets rich in plant foods are being replaced by restaurant meals and packaged foods high in refined carbohydrates, added sugars, and unhealthy fats.

“Another complexity is the coexistence of undernutrition and overnutrition within the same population. This doesn’t just mean that high rates of hunger and stunting exist alongside a rapid surge in obesity. It also means that children and adults across various socioeconomic groups are often meeting or exceeding the caloric requirement,” he said, adding that the issue requires action at the policy, socioeconomic, and household levels.

“One way to improve children’s health is to re-emphasise indigenous foods and replace refined oils, saturated fats, and empty calories (food having little to no nutrients) that are becoming more common in modern diets.”

The World Obesity Federation, which released the report, noted that more than 200 million school-age children globally (aged 5-19) are living with overweight and obesity, concentrated in just 10 countries, including India.

Long-term issues

Dr. Ali cautioned that excess weight developed in childhood often continues into adulthood.

"They will also have a higher likelihood of developing conditions such as type 2 diabetes, hypertension, cardiovascular disease, and metabolic dysfunction-associated steat- otic liver disease (MASLD)," he said.

He cautioned that even before adulthood, children with excess body weight may develop reduced insulin sensitivity and disturbances in lipid metabolism, which can affect puberty (early menarche in girls and potential changes in pubertal timing in boys), hormonal health, and long-term health trajectories.

Beyond physical health, childhood and adolescent obesity also carries significant psychosocial consequences, including stigma, reduced self-esteem, and social challenges during formative years, he added.

WHY WEIGHT-LOSS DRUGS ARE CHEAPER STARTING TODAY

Several generic versions of the popular weight loss drug semaglutide are likely to become available Saturday (March 21) onwards, following the expiry of Novo Nordisk's patent today. Several of India's top drug manufacturers will launch their products, with as many as 50 brands likely to become available

Key Takeaways:

— Several companies have already announced the brands they will launch on Saturday. Take, for example, Natco Pharmaceuticals, which will launch 'Semanat' and 'Semafull' in 2mg, 4mg, and 8mg doses. The drug will cost R1,290 per month for the lowest dose and R1,750 for the highest one, according to the company….

— The generic versions of semaglutide are likely to become available in the market from Saturday onwards. These would be available at the local pharmaceutical stores, which may take a few days depending on supply.

— The lower dose version of semaglutide is meant for the treatment of type-2 diabetes, along with lifestyle interventions such as diet and exercise.

— The higher dose version is meant for those who are obese with a BMI of over 30 or those who are overweight with a BMI of over 27 but have other obesity-related co-morbid conditions such as diabetes, hypertension, or high cholesterol levels.

— The drug is usually prescribed for those who are struggling to lose weight, even with lifestyle modification, with doctors warning that these interventions need to continue even when a person starts taking semaglutide.

— An estimated 254 million people are living with obesity in India, according to the India study. This number increases to 351 million if abdominal obesity is considered. Abdominal obesity is the accumulation of fat around the waist, which is known to increase the risk of obesity-related conditions more than generalised fat.

— The number of adult men living with obesity or being overweight increased from 1.53 crores in 1990 to 8.12 crores in 2021, which is projected to increase to 21.8 crores by 2050, according to a Lancet study. When it comes to adult women who are overweight or obese, the numbers increased from 2.14 crore in 1990 to 9.8 crore in 2021, and are projected to go up to 23.17 crores by 2050.

— Concerningly, the number of children who are obese or overweight is also increasing, with the number of overweight or obese boys going up from 0.46 crore in 1990 to 1.33 crore in 2021, which is projected to go up to 1.6 crore in 2050.

— Obesity is now considered to be "a lifelong, chronic disease that requires holistic care including these therapies, surgeries, and other lifestyle interventions," according to the recent recommendations from the World Health Organisation, which said these new therapies can be used long-term for the treatment of obesity in adults.

— The guidelines also urged governments to work towards creating health systems geared towards life-long treatment of obesity by creating systems screening, early diagnosis, referral, maintaining patient registries, and regular follow-up to check progress. This is essentially the model followed for all other chronic diseases.

— The new definition for obesity also does away with a simple BMI measurement. A Lancet Commission recently defined pre-clinical and clinical obesity. This considers preclinical obesity as just a physical attribute, but not an illness.

Do You Know:

— One of the key reasons driving the obesity epidemic is the increase in consumption of processed foods high in salt, sugar and fat. "Between 2009 and 2019, the largest annual growth in ultra-processed food and beverage sales per capita was observed in Cameroon, India, and Vietnam," the study said.

— There is a shift in dietary choices away from traditional foods and physical inactivity. The traditional food was low on animal products, salt, refined oils, sugars and flours and the new dietary habits are high in energy but low in nutrients – refined carbohydrates, high fat, meat products, and processed foods.

— Increasing urbanisation has also led to reduced physical activity, longer commute times, and desk-bound jobs. The spillover effect of this is a rise in work-related stress, poor sleep, and mental health disorders, all of which are linked to obesity.

LOSING THE WAY

ISRO's NavIC constellation, for which it has launched 11 satellites since 2013, is in operational distress. Only three satellites remain capable of providing position, navigation, and timing (PNT) services, leaving the constellation unable to fulfil its purpose of replacing the U.S.'s GPS system over the Indian subcontinent. A PNT constellation requires at least four PNT-capable satellites, and India had only four until ISRO said an atomic clock onboard the IRNSS-1F satellite failed on March 13. The constellation's first-generation satellites use rubidium atomic clocks made by Swiss company SpectraTime, and which have been dogged by failure. ISRO's latest attempt to launch a second-generation satellite, NVS-02, was abortive after the machine was left in the wrong orbit. IRNSS-1F, launched in March 2016, completed its 10-year design life just three days before its clock failed. Eight other satellites have either been decommissioned, have failed to reach orbit or have bad clocks. In 2018, ISRO transitioned to using indigenous rubidium atomic clocks, developed by the ISRO-Space Applications Centre. NVS-01, launched in May 2023, was the first to carry the device; all second-generation NVS series satellites will too.

Part of NavIC's genesis was the U.S.'s refusal to share GPS data over Kargil during the 1999 war, and it continues to function largely as a defence programme managed by ISRO. However, while the space sector reforms in 2020 vouchsafed ISRO for R&D and NewSpace India for commercialisation, the absence of a national space law leaves ISRO acting as both designer and operator of NavIC, overextending the agency. Equally, India lacks a counterpart to the GPS Directorate or EUSPA, which respectively manage the GPS and Galileo constellations. The new generation of rubidium clocks also faces procurement challenges and ISRO has proposed equipping each satellite with five atomic clocks instead of the previous three. The constellation has been degrading faster than it can be replenished, due to ISRO's poor launch rate. This problem stems from several factors, including issues with the PSLV, an insufficient budget that must maintain a PNT constellation, an upcoming human spaceflight programme, several earth-observation satellites, and R&D for new rockets. ISRO is also hand-holding start-ups that have yet to get a grip on launching rockets to low-earth orbit. Meanwhile, the Union government has encouraged electronics manufacturers to support the L1 band of the NVS series for better interoperability with GPS while expecting its use by the armed forces. For all these reasons, ISRO's plan to launch three more second-generation satellites in 2026 does little to inspire confidence.

Do You Know:

• After the successful 2023 launch, the constellation had five satellites that could provide the positioning data: IRNSS-1B, 1C, 1F, 1I, and NVS-01, which is the new generation of NavIC satellites. Now, the atomic clock on board the IRNSS-1F has also been lost.

• Atomic clocks on board some of the initial satellites started failing early on, with replacement satellites planned to keep the system running. Besides the failing atomic clocks, some of the initial satellites are also aging out. IRNSS-1A was launched into orbit on July 1, 2013, and the 1B and 1C satellites were launched in the following year. 1A is almost defunct — the failed 1H mission of 2018 was intended to replace this satellite — and the other two are also past their 10-year mission lives.

• The last of the first-generation IRNSS satellites was 1I — a replacement for the failed 1H launch — which was launched in 2018. IRNSS-1H was launched in 2017 but did not reach orbit after the heat shield protecting the payload failed to open.

• There are four satellite systems in the world that provide global navigation data — the US Global Positioning System (GPS), the Russian GLONASS (GLObalnaya NAvigatsionnaya Sputnikovaya Sistema), the European Galileo, and the Chinese Beidou. Japan has a four-satellite system called Quasi-Zenith Satellite System (QZSS) that can augment GPS signals over the country.

• GPS, GLONASS, and Galileo all have over 20 satellites placed in medium-earth orbit at a distance of around 20,000 km from the Earth. Beidou has over 40 satellites in a mix of medium-earth orbit and higher geosynchronous orbits of over 35,000 km. India and Japan's systems, on the other hand, have fewer satellites — seven and four — all placed in higher geosynchronous orbits.

NOR'WESTER WREAKS HAVOC IN ODISHA, 2 DEAD

At least two people died and several others sustained severe injuries as a Nor'wester wreaked havoc in the Karanjia area in Mayurbhanj district on Sunday afternoon, officials said.

Key Takeaways:

• Two panchayats under Karanjia subdivision were severely lashed by strong winds followed by heavy rainfall, thunderstorm and lightning, leaving a trail of destruction, including uprooted trees, electricity poles and damaged thatched houses.

• Chief Minister Mohan Charan Majhi expressed concern over the deaths and directed the administration to ensure good treatment to the injured. Majhi also announced ex gratia of Rs 4 lakh each to the next of kin of the deceased.

• According to the Mayurbhanj Collector, officials have been rushed to the affected areas to take stock of the situation and to assess the damage, following which victims will be compensated.

Do You Know:

• According to NCERT textbooks, the movement of air from high pressure area to low pressure areas is called wind.

Winds can be broadly divided into three types.

—Permanent winds – The trade winds, westerlies and easterlies are the permanent winds. These blow constantly throughout the year in a particular direction.

—Seasonal winds – These winds change their direction in different seasons. For example monsoons in India.

—Local winds – These blow only during a particular period of the day or year in a small area. For example, land and sea breeze. It is called loo.

• According to NCERT textbooks, a striking feature of the hot weather season is the 'loo'. These are strong, gusty, hot, dry winds blowing during the day over the north and northwestern India. Sometimes they even continue until late in the evening. Direct exposure to these winds may even prove to be fatal. Dust storms are very common during the month of May in northern India. These storms bring temporary relief as they lower the temperature and may bring light rain and cool breeze. This is also the season for localised thunderstorms, associated with violent winds, torrential downpours, often accompanied by hail. In West Bengal, these storms are known as the 'Kaal Baisakhi'. Towards the close of the summer season, pre-monsoon showers are common especially, in Kerala and Karnataka. They help in the early ripening of mangoes, and are often referred to as 'mango showers'.

• Originating over east and northeast India, south Nepal, Bhutan and Bangladesh, the nor'westers are extremely severe thunderstorms accompanied by squally winds. Though the nor'westers were less active this summer, there were occasional instances in April and early

• In the early summer months (March and April), the daytime landmass heating over these regions triggers convection over some areas of Bihar, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Odisha, and sub-Himalayan West Bengal.

• As these convective clouds move towards West Bengal and Bangladesh, the nor'westers mix with the warm, moist air mass hovering over the Bay of Bengal, causing significant wind discontinuity. In addition, the local hills and thick forest cover combined with the sea breeze make it ideal for developing thunderstorm cloud cells. These thunderstorm events usually prevail between two to four hours during late afternoon hours.

INDIA'S FROGS FIND ALLIES FROM CITIZEN SCIENCE TO SANCTUARIES

World Frog Day on March 20 celebrates the role of frogs, the world's most numerous amphibians. They live at the interface between freshwater and terrestrial ecosystems, eat insects and in turn get eaten by other vertebrates, and are thus crucial in converting insect biomass into vertebrate biomass.

Losing them can mean a boom in insects that prey on plants as well as a depleted food base for many terrestrial vertebrates, which in turn can irreparably damage both freshwater and terrestrial ecosystems. Unfortunately for the earth, since the 1980s, frog and other amphibian populations have been on the decline worldwide. In 2023, the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN)'s Global Amphibian Assessment Report said 37 species have become extinct and continue to decline, making them the most threatened vertebrate group.

The most prominent historical driver of amphibian decline has been chytridiomycosis, a fungal disease caused by Batrachochytrium dendrobatidis and Bactrachochytrium salamandrivorans in frogs and salamanders, respectively. This disease affects their skin — an organ that protects them as well as allows respiration and exchange of ions to maintain electrolyte balance. In the last two decades, more than 60% of amphibians globally have been affected by it — although intensive monitoring and conservation efforts have reduced the extinction risk of 63 species, halving the impact.

Today, however, the most important drivers of extinction are climate change for 39% of species and habitat loss for 37%.

The Indian scene

India is home to more than 450 amphibian species, and roughly a quarter of them are categorised as 'threatened' and one-fifth as 'data deficient'. The burden of B. dendrobatidis and B. salamandrivorans fungi in India is substantial but it has not caused mass mortality the way it has for frogs in the Americas and Australia.

B. dendrobatidis and B. salamandrivorans both had their roots in Asia and spread worldwide through the trade on frog legs and salamanders as pets. In 1987, after Humayun Abdul Ali from Bombay Natural History Society published a scientific report highlighting their role in controlling agricultural pests, this trade was banned. However, by then, frog and salamander populations had been significantly affected as B. dendrobatidis had spread from Asia to Europe, the Americas, and Australia.

The situation in India itself is rather unique. Until 2015, scientists were unsure of the status of B. dendrobatidis; a diagnostic test emerged only in 2023. That said, while scientists in the country have not documented mass die-offs, they also haven't found the status of amphibians to have improved in the last two decades. Since they lack long-term monitoring data for any species, it is difficult to pinpoint the causes.

In fact, India hosts a significant share of the world's 'data deficient' amphibian species. And of the 157 threatened species in India, only six are protected under the Wildlife Protection Act 1972.

Climate change in India also presents a serious challenge. One well-known consequence is the mismatch between seasons and the natural rhythms of plants and animals. So a false cue of an early monsoon followed by a prolonged dry period can result in catastrophic breeding outcomes. At the same time, thanks to the lack of long-term datasets on surface water availability and amphibian populations in the region, scientists are also unable to predict the effects of climate change on them.

A time to care

The monsoons arrive at India's shores predictably every year and are synonymous with the frogs' chorus, when the adult males call out for mates. The females mate with several males and deposit their eggs in the water. The intensity of breeding frenzy wanes rapidly thereafter, when some laggards and first-time breeders might take a shot at breeding. While not all adult amphibians successfully breed every year, the intensity enhances the population's chances of survival.

The breeding activity is focused on producing many tadpoles, which then engorge themselves on the luxuriant growth of algae in water bodies and grow quickly. They metamorphose into small froglets and hop on the land. In this phase, many lose out as they become prey to animals. Because of their short lifespan, the timing of their complex breeding behaviours with rain, and the availability of surface water in streams and puddles, is critical.

Other important conservation efforts include the creation of the salamander sanctuary in Jorepokhri in West Bengal in 1985 (although it does not support a breeding population at present), the University Grants Commission banning the dissection of frogs for educational purposes in 2011; and the ongoing conservation breeding programme for Himalayan salamanders at the Padmaja Naidu Zoo in Darjeeling.

Avenues to participate

There have also been more success stories of late. These include the Mapping Malabar Tree Toad Project, a citizen science project, coordinated by K.V. Gururaja in the Western Ghats; the Amphibian Recovery Project by S. Harikrishnan of the Wildlife Trust of India in Munnar, Kerala, with the Kanan Devan Hills Plantations Company Pvt. Ltd.; and the Himalayan Salamander Conservation Project led by Barkha Subba, in which she has involved the locals in protecting habitats. The CSIR-Centre for Cellular and Molecular Biology (where the authors are employed) has also been running a long-term programme to monitor stream frogs, in collaboration with the Maharashtra State Forest Department in Tillari Conservation Reserve.

The Padmaja Naidu Himalayan Zoo and the Nehru Zoological Park in Hyderabad also prominently display amphibians in their collection of animals and spread awareness to visitors. There is also a growing number of young professionals implementing conservation programmes.

For a nation that embodies its conservation values in its Constitution, citizens have many avenues to participate: for instance, one can take a few minutes of their time to record their calls or take photographs of both healthy and sick frogs following ethical guidelines and share them on citizen science portals like iNaturalist.

Such efforts will help us move beyond a few charismatic species such as tigers and pandas.

The monsoon will arrive in a few months and we should play our role in amphibian conservation.

CRAB IN SILENT VALLEY FOUND DISPLAYING BOTH MALE AND FEMALE BIOLOGICAL TRAITS

A tiny crab displaying both male and female biological traits on the same body has been discovered in the Western Ghats. Discovered from the forests of the Silent Valley National Park, this freshwater crab belongs to the species Vela carli and is both male and female at the same time.

The dual-sex condition was observed in three crabs found in tree holes in Silent Valley.

Vela carli is an endemic freshwater crab found only in the forests and streams of the Central Western Ghats.

The study documents the first instance of gynandromorphy (a rare condition in which individuals exhibit both male and female characteristics) in Vela carli. This phenomenon is rare in crustaceans and has never before been reported in the freshwater crab family Gecarcinucidae, according to the researchers.

The study was carried out by K.S. Anoop Das and K.T. Fahis from the Centre for Conservation Ecology, MES Mampad College, in collaboration with scientist and crab specialist Sameer K. Pati and Purnima Kumari from the Zoological Survey of India. Their findings were recently published in the international journal Crustaceana.

Mr. Das, Head and Assistant Professor at the Centre, said that while gynandromorphy has been documented in several marine and freshwater crab families, it has not been reported in the family Gecarcinucidae.

“The bodies of the crabs displayed male reproductive structures, while other parts showcased female features, including gonopores,” said Mr. Das.

VAIRAMUTHU WINS JNANPITH; MANY RUSH TO TAMIL POET’S DEFENCE AS METOO ALLEGATIONS KICK UP DUST

The Tamil poet and lyricist Vairamuthu, whose verses have shaped the language of popular music and modern Tamil poetry for more than four decades, has been chosen for the 2025 Jnanpith Award, India’s highest literary honour.

Key Takeaways:

• The announcement on Saturday placed him among a small group of Tamil writers to receive the prize — and immediately reopened a long-running debate about artistic achievement, accountability and the unresolved tensions of the #MeToo movement.

• The Bharatiya Jnanpith literary organisation said the 60th Jnanpith Award recognised Vairamuthu’s contributions to Tamil literature and his wide influence as a poet and lyricist. Since 1964, the award has been presented annually to writers in Indian languages and carries a cash prize of Rs 11 lakh, a bronze statuette of Saraswati and a citation presented by the President of India.

• Vairamuthu, 72, becomes only the third Tamil writer to receive the award, after Akilan in 1975 and Jayakanthan in 2002. Unlike them, he is the first to be honoured primarily for Tamil poetry rather than prose.

• Born in Theni district in 1953, Vairamuthu published his first poetry collection, Vaigarai Meengal, at the age of 18. He later entered the Tamil film industry as a lyricist with the 1980 film Nizhalgal, working with director Bharathiraja and composer Ilaiyaraaja. Over the next four decades, he wrote more than 8,000 songs and won seven National Film Awards for his lyrics, earning the honorific "Kaviperarasu", or Emperor of Poets.

• The award, however, has been met with sharp criticism from some writers, artists and activists who point to sexual harassment allegations made against him during the #MeToo movement in India.

Do You Know:

• The Jnanpith Award, instituted in 1961 by the Bharatiya Jnanpith, is the oldest and most prestigious literary accolade in India. It honors authors for their exceptional contributions to literature in Indian languages listed in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution, with English being included from the 49th award onwards.

• The award is not given posthumously, ensuring that it recognizes living writers for their literary excellence.

• The Jnanpith award carries with it a cash of Rs 11 lakh, a bronze statue of the Hindu Goddess Vagdevi and a citation.

• The #MeToo movement in India, gaining momentum in 2018, is a social media-driven, watershed campaign against workplace sexual harassment and abuse of power, predominantly affecting women. The #MeToo movement, which began as a hashtag on Twitter in 2017 amid the Weinstein incident

INDIA'S NATIONAL SYMBOLS UNDER SCRUTINY OVER USE, MEANING, AND LAW

Last week, a Pune-based lawyer filed a complaint against cricketer Hardik Pandya for allegedly insulting the national flag during celebrations following India's victory in the ICC Men's T20 World Cup in Ahmedabad. According to the complaint, Pandya, who had the flag draped around his body, engaged in objectionable acts in the stadium.

The episode has once again drawn attention to the rules governing the use of the national flag and to the history and symbolism embedded in it.

Evolution of the tricolour

Recent books help us understand the story of the national flag. In A Flag to Live and Die For — A Short History of India's Tricolour (Aleph), diplomat and columnist Navtej Sarna traces the evolution of the flag across decades.

The national tricolour was not chosen on a whim. It evolved through several stages, dating back to 1907, when an early version was presented to Surendranath Banerjee, former Congress president, by Bhupendranath Dutt, the younger brother of Swami Vivekananda. Called the Calcutta Flag, it was designed by Sachindra Prasad Bose and Sukumar Mitra. "The design of the flag was inspired by the flag of the French Revolution. The flag had three horizontal stripes of red, yellow and green with eight half-open lotuses," writes Sarna.

Around the same time, Swami Vivekananda's disciple, Sister Nivedita, conceived a flag featuring the vajra, or thunderbolt. Sister Nivedita was a participant in the Swadeshi movement and the flag used religious and spiritual symbols to strike a chord with the masses.

The early decades of the 20th century saw more experimentation with the idea of the national flag. Many leaders of the freedom movement believed that Independence was around the corner and that a national flag could stir emotions in support of its attainment. Bhikaji Cama, a prominent figure in the Independence movement, unfurled a modified version of the Calcutta Flag in Stuttgart in 1907, thereby becoming the first Indian to hoist the Indian flag on foreign soil.

A new version of the flag emerged during Annie Besant's Home Rule movement. In 1917, she hoisted a flag with nine horizontal stripes — five red and four green — in Coimbatore. The effort was supported by several nationalist leaders.

In 1916, Pingali Venkayya, a freedom fighter, published his book A National Flag for India, outlining his ideas for a national emblem. Five years later, Mahatma Gandhi asked him to design a flag with the charkha, the spinning wheel that had become a powerful symbol of self-reliance. The tricolour as we recognise it today emerged through these iterations. During the Quit India Movement in 1942, the flag was to be hoisted by Maulana Abul Kalam Azad. However, his arrest by the British meant that Aruna Asaf Ali performed the honours in Bombay.

However, as musician and writer T.M. Krishna notes in We the People of India: Decoding a Nation's Symbols (Context, Westland), it was not until 2004, in Union of India v. Naveen Jindal, that an Indian citizen's fundamental right to fly the national flag was formally recognised. However, there are detailed rules on how the national flag should be displayed, handled, and used, set out in the Flag Code of India, 2002. Insults to the flag are punishable under the Prevention of Insults to National Honour Act, 1971, which prohibits burning, trampling, or improper display.

Explaining the power of a symbol, while speaking at The Hindu Lit for Life, Krishna said, "(When) you walk on the street, see a temple and you do a namaskaram, you respond to a symbol... Just recently, I was seeing the flag out of my hotel room in Hyderabad, and it was gorgeously fluttering, and it did something to me. Is it memory? Is it indoctrination? So, you're responding at an emotional level. The thing about symbolism is it's often an emotional activity."

Debating the national song

While the flag has recently taken centre stage, so has another national symbol, the national song. Vande Mataram has been a subject of debate in Parliament in recent times.

Krishna writes about the difference between the national anthem and the national song. "Vande Mataram was a cry for freedom against the tyranny of the British in Bengal... Historian Sabyasachi Bhattacharya dates the song to between 1872 and 1875... The first two stanzas were penned during this period. The rest seems to have been written later when Bankim wrote his novel Anandmath..."

The debate over Vande Mataram involved Rabindranath Tagore, who wrote to Subhas Chandra Bose in 1937, saying, "It is so evident that Bande Mataram is in praise of Goddess Durga...no Muslim will accept the ten-headed idol of goddess Durga as a symbol of their country."

This tension helped pave the way for Jana Gana Mana, described by Krishna as "a poetic mural that required meditation." He writes, "Long before the constitutional acceptance, Subhas Chandra Bose had named Jana Gana Mana the national anthem....Once Jana Gana Mana was designated as the national anthem, it transformed into a multi-layered, harmony-laden musical composition."

In the light of these debates, Krishna asks, "Should we treat Vande Mataram as one song? An idea worth exploring." His open-ended conclusion gives a certain immediacy in the light of the decision of the Union government in February, making it mandatory to sing the entire song in official functions and schools.

BEFORE SALT, THERE WAS WATER: WHY MAHAD SATYAGRAHA DESERVES ITS CENTENARY

Think of a child in school. He is thirsty. There is water in the classroom. But he cannot drink it. Not because the water is dirty. Not because there is a rule against drinking in class. He cannot drink because the peon who is supposed to pour the water into his cupped hands, from a height, so that the vessel is not polluted by his touch, happens to be absent that day.

No peon, no water

That was the rule that governed the childhood of Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar. He wrote about it with quiet, devastating precision in his autobiographical essay Waiting for a Visa, and in the fragment known as No Peon, No Water. He and his siblings, travelling to meet their father, arrived at a railway station parched with thirst. No one would give them water. They were Mahars. They were "untouchable." The public tap was not for them.

Let that image stay with you for a moment: small children, thirsty, surrounded by water, unable to drink. Not in a desert, but in a school. Not in a time of famine, but in a time of plenty.

That boy grew up. He went to Columbia. He went to the London School of Economics. He read law at Gray's Inn. And then he came home and walked to a water tank.

What happened at Mahad

On March 20, 1927, Ambedkar led a procession of thousands through the streets of Mahad, a small town in the Konkan, in the Bombay Presidency. Their destination was the Chavdar Tale, a public water tank. The Bombay Legislative Council passed the Bole Resolution in 1923, and the Mahad Municipality opened the tank to the depressed classes in 1924. But resolutions on paper and water in the throat are different things. The upper castes ensured that the resolution remained a dead letter.

Ambedkar walked to the tank. He bent down. He drank.

Thousands followed him — men, women, children. They drank. For perhaps the first time in their lives, they drank water from a public source as a matter of right, not as an act of stealth or charity.

And then the violence came. Rumours spread that the satyagrahis intended to enter the Veereshwar temple. Returning delegates were attacked in the streets, in their bullock carts, in their villages. The tank was "purified" with cow dung and urine, as though human dignity were a contaminant that could be washed away.

When Ambedkar returned to Mahad in December 1927 for a second conference, he brought with him not just the resolve to drink water again but a deeper symbolic intent. On December 25, 1927, the conference publicly burned a copy of the Manusmriti. That fire was not a mere gesture. It was a declaration that the future republic, if it was to mean anything at all, would rest on rights, not on graded inequality codified in ancient texts.

Ten years in court

What followed the satyagraha was as instructive as the satyagraha itself.

The upper castes of Mahad did not merely resort to violence. They also went to court.

On December 12, 1927, even before the second conference began, Hindu residents filed a civil suit in the Kolaba District Court seeking a temporary injunction to prevent the depressed classes from using the Chavdar tank. The injunction was granted on December 14, 1927.

Ambedkar, true to his belief in constitutional methods, chose to respect the court's order while continuing his conference. He addressed the gathering. He burned the Manusmriti. But he did not go to the tank.

The litigation dragged on for a decade. It passed through the trial court at Mahad and then the court of the Assistant Judge at Thana. At every stage, the courts held that the plaintiffs had failed to establish any immemorial custom entitling caste Hindus to exclude untouchables from the tank.

The case finally reached the Bombay High Court, where it was decided on March 17, 1937, by Justices Broomfield and N.J. Wadia in Narhari Damodar Vaidya v. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar. Justice Broomfield, in a passage that deserves to be remembered, held that the appellants had not established the immemorial custom they had alleged. The tank belonged to the municipality. It was public property. The untouchables had every right to use it.

A man led a procession to drink water from a public tank in 1927. It took until 1937 for the courts to confirm that he was entitled to do so.

The law vindicated Ambedkar. But the fact that vindication took a decade tells its own story about the depth of the resistance he faced.

Salt versus water

Three years after Mahad, on March 12, 1930, Mahatma Gandhi set out from Sabarmati ashram on his march to Dandi. The Salt Satyagraha was a masterstroke of political mobilisation. It challenged the economic apparatus of the colonial state and captured the imagination of the world press. Its place in the national narrative is secure, and rightly so. But consider what each satyagraha actually demanded, and of whom.

The Salt March demanded freedom from the British. The Mahad Satyagraha demanded freedom from fellow Indians. Dandi identified an external oppressor and asked him to leave. Mahad identified an internal sickness and asked a civilisation to heal itself. One required courage against a foreign ruler. The other required something harder: the willingness to look one's own neighbours, one's own co-religionists, one's own countrymen in the eye and say, "You have treated us as less than human, and we will not accept it any longer."

There is no dishonour to the Salt March in saying this. But there is a historical imbalance that needs correcting.

The salt tax was an imposition of an empire. Once the empire left, the tax could be abolished by a stroke of the legislative pen. Untouchability, by contrast, did not arrive with the British and did not leave with them. It was woven into the social fabric of Indian life for millennia. It required not a change of government, but a change of heart, of custom, of the very conception of who counts as human.

It is no accident that the man who drank water at Chavdar went on to draft the Constitution. The architecture of Part III bears the watermark of Mahad.

Article 15, which prohibits discrimination on grounds of caste and specifically addresses access to wells, tanks, bathing ghats, and places of public resort, reads as though Ambedkar had the Chavdar tank before his eyes.

Article 17, which abolishes untouchability and makes its practice a punishable offence, is the Mahad Satyagraha transmuted into constitutional text.

The Dandi March gave India the aspiration for Swaraj. Mahad gave India the grammar of equality. Swaraj could have been written by many hands. The grammar of equality could only have been written by one who had been denied water as a child.

The case for a centenary

The 100th anniversary of the Mahad Satyagraha falls on March 20, 2027. We are now in the 99th year. If this republic has any sense of its origins, any honest memory of the struggles that gave it a Constitution, it must mark this centenary with the seriousness and grandeur it deserves.

I would propose a year-long commemoration beginning on March 20, 2026, and culminating on March 20, 2027, with a great gathering at the Chavdar tank. Let citizens of every caste, creed, and class come to Mahad and drink together. Let it be a constitutional baptism: a re-immersion in the founding promise that no Indian shall be diminished by the accident of birth.

SHORT NEWS

ADAM SMITH

Tax the rich. Trash the tariffs. End monopolies. Such are the rallying calls of many of today's most heated economic debates. They could also come straight from the pen of revered economist Adam Smith, hailed by some as the "father of capitalism" and others as an early progressive.

Smith railed against trade protectionism and extreme affluence in "The Wealth of Nations", the best-read economics book in history, which celebrates its 250th birthday on Monday.

"It is the maxim of every prudent master of a family never to attempt to make at home what it will cost him more to make than to buy," the Scot wrote in the seminal work, for example.

"Would it be a reasonable law to prohibit the importation of all foreign wines, merely to encourage the making of claret and burgundy in Scotland?" he adds.

The foundational text of classical economics was published on March 9, 1776, the same year as the U.S. Declaration of Independence, 13 years before the French Revolution, and amid the early convulsions of the Industrial Age.

MACAO LAWMAKERS PASS BILL ALLOWING CLOSED-DOOR TRIALS FOR SECURITY REASONS

Lawmakers in China's casino city of Macao unanimously passed a law Thursday that would allow closed-door trials in cases where authorities decide that public proceedings would harm national security.

The legislation adds new authority to a national security committee in Macao, which is a special administrative region of China along with neighbouring Hong Kong. Critics say authorities in both cities have been strengthening their powers over political expression in recent years.

Under the new Macao legislation, if judges and the city's national security committee both decide that hearing a case publicly could harm national security, judges can hold proceedings behind closed doors.

Lawyers will need approval from designated judges to participate in proceedings considered necessary for national.

INDIA-MYANMAR PULSE AGREEMENT EXTENDED

— India has decided to extend its agreement with Myanmar for the import of pulses for another five years beyond 2025-26, which is expected to expire by the end of March this year.

— In June 2021, India and Myanmar signed an agreement to promote the trading of Urad and Tur dals.

— As per the agreement, India made a commitment to import an annual quantity of 2.5 lakh metric tonnes of Urad and 1 lakh tonnes of Tur from Myanmar, through private trade, over the five years — from 2021-22 to 2025-26 (April-March).

— The move comes at a time when the US and Israel's war with Iran has caused global supply chain disruptions, posing threats to fuel and fertilizer security.

— India's annual pulses demand is 28-29 million tonnes, but its production has remained about 24-25 million tonnes during the last three years, leaving the country dependent on imports to meet the demand.

HC ASKS RLYS TO PAY RS 8 LAKH FOR LOSS OF FOETUS IN MOTHER'S DEATH

The Lucknow bench of the Allahabad High Court modified a Railway Claims Tribunal judgment and ordered the railways to pay an additional compensation of Rs 8 lakh for the loss of an eight- or nine-month foetus who died along with the mother in an accident while boarding a train in 2018. In February last year, the tribunal had ordered the railways to pay Rs 8 lakh for the death of the pregnant woman.

RELIEF SCHEME

— The government has announced a Rs 497-crore RELIEF scheme to ease pressure on exporters facing trade disruption due to widespread logistical challenges, including near doubling of freight and fuel costs owing to the ongoing war in West Asia.

— It would include automatic extension of export obligations, logistical support, and potential financial measures to manage shipping delays.

— It would mainly include consignments destined for delivery or trans-shipment to the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, Oman, Bahrain, Iraq, Iran, Israel and Yemen.

— It is announced under the Export Promotion Mission (EPM). The Export Credit Guarantee Corporation (ECGC) of India has been designated as the nodal implementing agency responsible for verification, claim processing, disbursement, and monitoring.

BHAVYA SCHEME

— The government has approved Rs 33,660 crore Bharat Audyogik Vikas Yojna (BHAVYA) to develop 100 plug-and-play industrial parks across the country.

— The scheme aims to develop world-class industrial infrastructure, unlocking manufacturing potential and driving India's growth story.

— Under the scheme, industrial parks ranging from 100 to 1,000 acres will be taken up for the development with financial support of up to Rs 1 crore per acre.

— These parks will have core infrastructure like internal roads, underground utilities, drainage, common treatment facilities, ICT and administrative systems. The support for external infrastructure will also be provided up to 25% of the project cost.

INDIA'S FIRST NATIONAL REPORT ON NAGOYA PROTOCOL

— Recently, India has submitted the First National Report (NR1) on the implementation of the Nagoya Protocol on access and benefit sharing (ABS). The report was submitted by the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC), in collaboration with the National Biodiversity Authority (NBA) on 27th February 2026.

— The report covers the period from 1 November 2017 to 31 December of last year. It highlights the country's progress in implementing the Nagoya Protocol while contributing to Target 13 of India's updated National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (NBSAP).

— Target 13 is "Access and Benefit-Sharing". At every level, efficient legal, policy, administrative, and capacity-building measures must be implemented to guarantee and enhance the just and equitable distribution of benefits resulting from digital sequence information, biological and genetic resources, and traditional knowledge related to these resources. This includes facilitating suitable access and benefit-sharing tools.

The Nagoya Protocol on Access to Genetic Resources and the Fair and Equitable Sharing of Benefits Arising from their Utilization to the Convention on Biological Diversity, also known as the Nagoya Protocol on Access and Benefit Sharing, is a 2010 supplementary agreement to the 1992 Convention on Biological Diversity.

KERALA GOVT SHIFTS STAND ON ENTRY OF WOMEN INTO SABARIMALA TEMPLE

In a significant climbdown on the entry of women into the Sabarimala temple, the Left Democratic Government (LDF) government in Kerala has called for "wide consultations with and… soliciting views of eminent religious scholars and reputed social reformers of that religion" before any changes are made to the "religious practice followed for so many years". Earlier, the state government had supported the decision of a five-Judge Bench of the Supreme Court on September 28, 2018, to allow the entry of all women, irrespective of their age, to the temple. In a 4-1 verdict, the Bench had held that prohibiting women between the ages of 10 and 50 years from entering the hill shrine was exclusionary and violated the right of Hindu women to freely practice their religion

GANDIVA

— Recently, Kannur crime branch arrested 55-year-old Parveen Babu and her 32-year-old daughter Sakeena Fathima, solving a decade-old murder. The crime branch used the Gandiva (which is part of NATGRID), an advanced AI-driven analytical tool for tracking down and identifying the accused persons.

— National Intelligence Grid is a platform that connects to various government and private databases.

CLARITY ON CAPTIVE POWER GENERATION

The government on Saturday announced amendments in the electricity norms for bringing more clarity for captive power generation, especially for industries, in line with India's energy transition goals. Generating power closer to the point of consumption will help reduce transmission losses, improve system efficiency and strengthen grid resilience, the Ministry of Power said in a statement.

DIMETHYL ETHER (DME) TECHNOLOGY

— The ongoing crisis in West Asia has adversely impacted India's energy imports. The Council of Scientific and Industrial Research – National Chemical Laboratory in Pune has developed the Dimethyl Ether (DME) technology, which may hold the key to solving such a problem.

— DME is a clean-burning fuel that can be produced domestically from sources such as methanol, coal, biomass, or even captured carbon dioxide. Moreover, DME can be blended with LPG and used in stoves with little to no modifications. This blending has been tested by the CSIR-NCL in collaboration with the LPG Equipment Research Centre.

— This technology was developed by improving both the catalyst or the material used, and the engineering design. The team has developed a special catalyst that helps convert methanol into DME quickly and efficiently.

— This technology uses Mathanol to produce DME. However, India currently imports methanol from countries including Iran, which could still pose a challenge. To this, the team notes that methanol can be produced from several sources available domestically, such as coal, agricultural waste (biomass) or even captured carbon dioxide.

— Methane is the main part of natural gas. It does not directly produce DME, but serves as a starting material. It is first converted into syngas (CO and H2), and then into methanol, which is used to produce DME. Methane can be sourced from both fossil fuels and renewable sources, DME production is flexible and future-ready.

WORLD SPARROW DAY 2026

— World Sparrow Day, observed every year on March 20, is an initiative by the Nature Forever Society of India along with the Eco-Sys Action Foundation (France) and other national and international organisations to raise awareness about the bird.

— In India, sparrows are known by various names such as "Goraiya" in Hindi, "Kuruvi" in Tamil, and "Chirya" in Urdu.

— The house sparrow (scientific name passer domesticus) is a small passerine bird, around 16 cm long, and weighs 24–39.5 gm. The male and female birds look different in colour and size.

— The male is bigger than the female and has a dark brown colouration with a grey crown. Males have brighter black, white, and brown markings and whitish underparts. The male's bill is dark grey but black in the breeding season. He has a remarkable black patch on his throat. The female is pale brown in colour with light supercilium with greyish-white underparts.

— It is listed as least concern on the Red List of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) with a remark that its population is showing a declining trend.

FYI Interesting Fact: There is a sparrow memorial near Dhal ni Pol in Astodia in the walled city of Ahmedabad, India's first UNESCO World Heritage city. A sparrow died in police firing during the Navnirman movement and people made a plaque in its memory.

INTERNATIONAL DAY OF FOREST 2026

— Every year, March 21 is observed as the International Day of Forest (IDF) by the United Nations to commemorate the green cover around the world and reiterate its importance.

— The theme for 2026 is "Forests and Economies", highlighting the central role of forests in sustaining livelihoods and economic opportunities across sectors.

— According to the UN website, the IDF celebrates and raises awareness of the importance of all types of forests. On this day, countries are encouraged to undertake local, national, and international efforts to organize activities involving forests and trees, such as tree-planting campaigns.

WORLD WATER DAY 2026

— World Water Day is an annual celebration that takes place on the 22nd of March every year. Since its advent in 1993, this day has been observed to raise awareness about water-related issues and encourage people to take action to address global water challenges.

— The theme of 2026 is Water and Gender. According to the UN Water, "the global water crisis affects everyone – but not equally. Where people lack the human rights to safe drinking water and sanitation, inequalities flourish, with women and girls bearing the brunt. This World Water Day, it's time to centre women and girls in water solutions. Because where water flows, equality grows."

ASI APPROVES EXCAVATION AT 8 SITES IN TAMIL NADU

— After months of back-and-forth between the Tamil Nadu government and the Centre, the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) has granted approval for excavations at eight sites across Tamil Nadu.

— Keeladi: It is located near Madurai, where excavations will enter their 11th phase. Located along the Vaigai river basin, the site has already yielded evidence of an urban settlement dating back to at least the early historic period, with Tamil-Brahmi inscriptions, brick structures and drainage systems suggesting a literate and organised society.

— Vellalore: Further west, Vellalore in Coimbatore points to a different layer of history, one shaped by trade. Previous findings, including Roman coins and bead-making evidence, suggest the region was part of a wider commercial network linking Tamilakam (the ancient Tamil-speaking region of southern India) with the Mediterranean world.

— Along the coast, Nagapattinam and Pattinamarudur offer clues to maritime activity. Nagapattinam, historically associated with a Chola-era port and Buddhist influences, reflects a period of religious and commercial exchange. Pattinamarudur, where a shell-based ornament industry is believed to have existed, could deepen understanding of coastal economies and craft production.

— In the northern and central regions, sites like Manikollai and Thelunganur speak to industrial and technological histories. Manikollai has yielded Indo-Pacific glass beads tied to long-distance trade networks extending to Southeast Asia, while Thelunganur, an Iron Age site, is significant for evidence of early metallurgy — a field that has seen renewed attention after recent studies suggested iron usage in Tamil Nadu dates back several millennia.

— Further south, Adichanur (also Adichanallur), an Iron Age burial site, and Karivalamvanthanallur in Tenkasi district add to the picture of early settlement patterns, mortuary practices and regional variations in material culture.

WINNERS OF OSCAR 2026

— The 98th Academy Awards ceremony was held at the Dolby Theatre in Los Angeles on March 16. Director Paul Thomas Anderson's One Battle After Another swept the ceremony, winning six awards and Ryan Coogler's Sinners finished the race with four wins.

— The 98th Academy Awards ceremony introduced a new category, Achievement in Casting, taking the total to 24. One Battle After Another's Cassandra Kulukundis became the first person to win an Academy Award for Achievement in Casting, thus making history.

SAHITYA AKADEMI AWARD

— The Sahitya Akademi announced its 2025 annual awards on March 16, 2026.

— Twenty-four winners were named across the languages recognised by the Akademi, including eight in poetry, six in short fiction, four in the novel, two in the essay form, one each in literary criticism and autobiography, and two in memoir.

— Winners will be presented with an engraved copper plaque, a shawl, and ₹1 lakh at a ceremony scheduled for March 31.

— Among the more prominent recipients is former diplomat Navtej Sarna, honoured in English for his novel Crimson Spring. Hindi writer Mamta Kalia received the award for her memoir Jeete Jee Allahabad, and Tamil scholar Sa Tamilselvan was recognised in the literary criticism category for Thamiz Sirukathaiyyin Thadangal.

WORLD INDOOR CHAMPIONSHIP

— India will be hosting the 2028 World Indoor Athletics Championships in Bhubaneswar at the Kalinga Indoor Athletics Stadium.

— The World Athletics Council awarded the hosting rights of the event to India at its council meeting in Torun, Poland, which is the host for the 2026 World Indoor Athletics Championships.

— However, no Indian athlete will be taking part in the World Athletics Indoor Championships 2026. India are yet to claim a medal at the indoor meet.

— Organised by World Athletics, the World Indoor Athletics Championships is a biennial track and field competition that first took place in 1985 in Paris, France.

— India will become only the fourth Asian nation to host the World Indoor Athletics Championships. The one in Bhubaneswar will be the 22nd edition of the meet.

BUSINESS AND ECONOMY

IRAN WAR'S ECONOMIC FALLOUT MAY BE WORSE THAN UKRAINE

The world has largely adjusted to the Russia-Ukraine war, which only widened India's merchandise trade deficit in the first year. The West Asia conflict's ramifications will extend beyond goods (oil) to invisibles (remittances), on top of weak capital inflows.

Key Takeaways:

• In 2022, when the Russia-Ukraine war began, international prices of all three Fs – fuel, food and fertilisers – skyrocketed. Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022. Brent crude prices soared immediately to above $100 per barrel and stayed at those levels till early August, with a peak monthly average of $117.9 in June 2022.

• The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation's (FAO) food price index – having a base period value of 100 for 2014-16 – averaged 144.5 points in 2022 and scaled an all-time high of 160.2 points in March. Landed prices of imported di-ammonium phosphate (DAP) and muriate of potash fertilisers in India crossed $950 and $590 per tonne by July 2022, while that of intermediates and raw materials like phosphoric acid, ammonia and rock phosphate hit $1,715, $1,575 and $300-plus per tonne respectively during that year.

• The Russia-Ukraine conflict's impact was felt mainly on the merchandise trade account of India's external Balance of Payments (BoP). The trade deficit – the excess of imports over exports of goods – soared from $102.2 billion in 2020-21 (April-March financial year) to $189.5 billion in 2021-22 and $265.3 billion in 2022-23.

Do You Know:

• In the ongoing United States-Israel versus Iran conflict, it is fuel, out of the 3Fs, that has borne the brunt of price surge.

The effective closure by Iran of the Strait of Hormuz – the narrow maritime waterway between the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman, through which roughly a fifth of the world's total petroleum liquids consumption equivalent and liquefied natural gas (LNG) trade passes – has led to Brent crude prices go past the $100 per barrel mark this month.

• The effect on fertilisers has been less, at least for India. The country's comfortable stocks of urea, DAP and complex fertilisers, besides the next kharif (monsoon) crop planting season being 2.5-3 months away, means no immediate crisis. But with more than 60% of India's imports of LNG (the basic feedstock for urea) and 80% of inputs such as sulphur and ammonia coming from West Asia, any undue prolongation of this war can have serious implications for India's agriculture and food security down the line.

• As regards the third F, the FAO's food price index averaged 125.3 points in February 2026 – down from 126.6 points in February 2025 and way below the 2022 peaks following the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine war.

RAS LAFFAN ATTACK DEEPENS INDIA'S WORRIES OVER LNG

Hours after Israel hit South Pars, the world's largest natural gas field located in the Persian Gulf and shared between Iran and Qatar, Iranian missiles on Thursday morning (March 19) struck the world's biggest liquefied natural gas (LNG) facility in Qatar's Ras Laffan Industrial City.

Key Takeaways:

• These attacks have marked a major escalation in the conflict raging in West Asia, with specific energy infrastructure now being targeted, raising prolonged risks of supply disruption. Consequently, the price of international oil benchmark Brent, which was already at a little over $100 per barrel this week, has now hit around $118. It is now over 50% higher than the pre-West Asia conflict levels. Natural gas prices also shot up significantly.

• Iran released a statement hours earlier that it would also target other facilities in the UAE and Saudi Arabia, apart from Ras Laffan, in response to the attack on the South Pars gas field. Saudi Arabia and the UAE have said they intercepted missiles and drones from Iran. Saudi Arabia also said a drone hit its SAMREF refinery in the port city of Yanbu on the Red Sea. There are reports of energy infrastructure being hit in Kuwait, too.

• While the true extent of damage is not yet known, the strikes have significant escalatory implications. First, it is now unclear how

much time it will take for gas output from these facilities to return to normal, even if the war were to stop. Two, until now, the concerns have been about the transit pathway, but they have now moved further upstream to the production and supply side.

• Moreover, it's clear that Israel is now undoubtedly calling the shots in terms of further escalation, which includes a no-holds-bar attack on energy facilities, and the extremists in Iran are willing to push the attacks into a self-destructive phase. Both players are willing to play this Russian roulette, even as the world faces the escalating impact of spiralling energy prices.

Do You Know:

• The Ras Laffan hit is of particular significance, not just for global LNG flows but also for India. QatarEnergy's primary LNG production units, liquefaction plants, and export infrastructure are all concentrated in Ras Laffan, accounting for roughly a fifth of global LNG supply.

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• Qatar is India's largest source of LNG. India depends on LNG imports to meet roughly half of its natural gas demand, and over two-fifths of the country's LNG comes from Qatar — almost all of it from Ras Laffan.

• According to Commerce Ministry data, India imported 27 million tonnes of LNG in 2024-25, of which 11.2 million tonnes, or 41.4%, came from Qatar. QatarEnergy has an LNG production capacity of 77 million tonnes per annum, which is under expansion. In 2025, QatarEnergy exported around 81 million tonnes of LNG.

• With LNG from Qatar and other sources in West Asia unable to reach India due to the effective closure of the Strait of Hormuz and a production suspension by QatarEnergy, India had already cut natural gas supplies to certain industries.

• Overall, India depends on imports to meet over 88% of its crude oil requirement, 60% of its LPG needs, and around 50% of its natural gas requirement. For a large share of these energy imports, India depends on West Asia, from which they primarily come to India through the Strait of Hormuz. Around 2.5–2.7 million bpd of India's crude imports — accounting for about half of the country's total oil imports — have transited the Strait in recent months; the longer-term average is about 40%. This oil is mainly from Iraq, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Kuwait. India doesn't buy Iranian oil due to American sanctions on Tehran.

• India's dependence on the Strait for LNG and liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) supplies is greater than for crude. Roughly 60% of India's LNG imports come through the Strait of Hormuz, the figure is a staggering 90% for LPG, as evidenced by the LPG supply crisis the country is already grappling with.

CLOSED SKIES AND COSTLY DETOURS: WHY INDIAN AIRLINES ARE AMONG THE WORST HIT BY THE CONFLICT IN WEST ASIA

As Gulf routes that have long formed the backbone of Indian airlines' international networks are hit by the ongoing regional conflict, aircraft utilisation at domestic carriers has dropped sharply.

At Air India Express, for example, nearly a quarter of the fleet is effectively idle. "About one in four aircraft of Air India Express's 115-strong fleet is grounded," an industry executive said about the country's second-largest domestic airline. While the aircraft are not formally grounded, airlines are flying them once every three or four days to keep them serviceable, and because parking stands are scarce at several airports.

For many Indian carriers, destinations across the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, Oman, and Kuwait account for the bulk of their international flying, reflecting the presence of more than 90 lakh Indians living across the Gulf Cooperation Council countries. But flight restrictions and heightened military activity in the region led to about 2,600 flight cancellations by Indian carriers in the first nine days after tensions between Iran and Israel escalated on February 28.

While operations in Oman are normal, major hubs such as Dubai, Doha, and Abu Dhabi continue to face severe disruptions and intermittent suspensions.

In more normal times, roughly half of all international passengers flying to or from India travels on a Gulf route, using hubs such as Dubai, Doha, and Abu Dhabi to connect onward to flights to the U.S., Canada, and Europe.

Nearly four crore passengers travelled between India and the Gulf in 2025, making it the country's largest international aviation corridor by far.

Rising costs

Several other factors are also driving up operational costs for airlines. Jet fuel prices in India have risen by about $50 per kilolitre since January to $150 per kilolitre, while aircraft operating on Gulf routes are also facing additional war-risk insurance premiums of about ₹18,000 per seat.

Though airlines have announced a fuel surcharge of up to ₹400 on domestic routes (and higher for international routes), these barely cover 10% to 12% of the ticket fare, executives say.

The unpredictability of flight schedules to West Asia caused by security threats, along with last-minute slot allocations by airports in the region, leaves airlines with little time to sell seats, contributing to the underutilisation of aircraft. Most flights to these destinations are operating with very few passengers.

Redeploying their idle aircraft on Southeast Asian routes is not a viable option for airlines, as that market is already oversupplied and earnings per passenger per kilometre are significantly lower than on Gulf routes. The same holds true for domestic services, where margins are thinner and airlines must additionally contend with VAT and other levies on aviation turbine fuel that do not apply to international flights. In India, fuel alone accounts for about 40% of airlines' operating costs.

For Air India, the challenges are even greater as its flights to Europe and the U.S. are now forced to take a longer southerly route to avoid Iranian airspace, with some U.S. services also requiring fuel stops. This comes on top of the earlier closure of Pakistani airspace following Operation Sindoor last April.

As a result, flight times have lengthened sharply. A Delhi-London service now takes around 12 hours, compared with about nine hours last year. Flights to New York, which must now stop in Rome for refuelling, can take close to 20 hours instead of roughly 15 hours earlier.

WEST ASIA CRISIS AILS KERALA'S WELLNESS SECTOR

As neighbouring Colombo has introduced fuel rationing amid a drop in tourist arrivals following the escalating war between Iran and the combined forces of the U.S. and Israel, the hospitality sector in Kerala, which contributes around 10% of the State's Gross Domestic Product, is staring at a bleak future with a large number of cancellations, including in the medical tourism segment.

Kerala is considered the cradle of wellness tourism in the country, and nearly 70% of the foreign tourists visiting the State belong to this category.

About 85% of the foreigners visiting the State use either Doha or Dubai as transit points to reach Kerala, in the absence of direct flights connecting the State with Europe.

This movement has come to a halt following the outbreak of the war, leading to cancellations and postponements.

According to Sajeev Kurup, general secretary of the Confederation of Kerala Tourism Industries (CKTI) and chairman of the Ayurveda Task Force of FICCI's National Tourism Committee, the sector is facing an unprecedented crisis with travel restrictions coupled with an energy crisis.

"Despite the foreign tourist season nearing its fag end in Kerala, which usually begins in October-November and ends by March, the sector has already lost 20–25% of its business. There have also been no bookings for the next season since the war began.

The hospitality sector is also unable to operate smoothly due to shortages of commercial LPG, and the issue is likely to snowball into a major crisis if the war continues, especially once the Assembly elections in the country are over," said Mr. Kurup.

The crisis is likely to lead to lay-offs and cost-cutting measures once the upcoming domestic tourist season in April and May is over. According to James Kodianthara, former chairperson of the Kerala chapter of the Indian Association of Tour Operators (IATO), the domestic tourism sector will also be impacted by the disruption of global energy supply chains with the closure of restaurants.

The next financial year will be a difficult period for the sector unless the Centre introduces support measures such as the Emergency Credit Line Guarantee Scheme (ECLGS), which was rolled out during the COVID-19 pandemic, he said.

A foreign tourist visiting Kerala for medical tourism, particularly Ayurveda, typically spends two to three weeks in the State, significantly contributing to the local economy.

In 2025, about 8.21 lakh foreign tourists visited various destinations in Kerala, according to statistics from the State Tourism Department, compared with 7.38 lakh in 2023.

The United Kingdom and the United States together accounted for about 2.23 lakh visitors last year.

WEST ASIA CRISIS RATTLES 'FRAGMENTED' GLOBAL ALUMINIUM SUPPLY CHAIN

The Middle East accounts for around 9% of global aluminium production; the immediate price shock from the Gulf crisis drove LME three-month aluminium to a four-year high of $3,545.50 per metric ton last week; now, the secondary shock is travelling down the physical supply chain

The U.S.-Israeli war on Iran is now in its third week and its impact on Gulf aluminium production and exports is accelerating disruption across an already fragmented physical supply chain. Two Gulf smelters are curtailing capacity, and the continued closure of the Strait of Hormuz threatens more output cuts.

The Middle East accounts for around 9% of global aluminium production, a metal essential to construction, transport and renewable energy.

Remove China out of the equation and that ratio rises to over 20%. Take out Russia too — the reality for U.S. and European manufacturers under sanctions over its Ukraine invasion- and it rises higher still.

The impact is compounded by low inventories on the London Metal Exchange (LME), which are about to shrink a lot more as traders scramble for units.

Physical shock

The immediate price shock from the Gulf crisis drove LME three-month aluminium to a four-year high of $3,545.50 per metric ton last week.

Now, the secondary shock is travelling down the physical supply chain.

Japanese buyers initially baulked when global producers offered a premium of up to $250 over the LME price for second-quarter deliveries, a 28% increase on first-quarter terms.

They are now snapping up a revised offer of $350 for what serves as a benchmark for other Asian buyers.

The premium for duty-paid aluminium in Europe has surged to $450 per ton over the LME cash price, its highest level since late 2022. And there's more pain for U.S. buyers, already reeling from the impact of 50% import duties imposed last year. The Midwest premium is now trading on the CME at $2,400 per ton over the LME. While LME traders are trying to price the risk posed by the Gulf crisis to the global aluminium market, manufacturers have no choice but to pay inflated premiums just to guarantee they have metal.

Aluminium Bahrain and Qatalum, the Qatari smelter joint venture between Norsk Hydro and Qatar Aluminum Manufacturing are powering down some 570,000 tons of annual production capacity between them.

Export shipments have ground to a halt due to the risks to shipping of passing through the Strait of Hormuz.

Emirates Global Aluminium, which is still operating at full capacity, is looking to re-route shipments via the port of Sohar in Oman, which may offer some limited mitigation.

But with no signs of de-escalation, the threat to supply is growing with each passing day because just as product can't get out, raw materials can't get in. Only Saudi Arabia's Ma'aden smelter is fully integrated with its own bauxite mine and alumina refinery. How long raw materials stocks at the Gulf's other operators last is becoming an increasingly moot point.

The problem for buyers of Gulf aluminium is that there aren't a lot of alternative sources of metal to plug the widening supply gap. China is the world's largest producer, but the country's giant aluminium sector is geared towards exporting semi-manufactured products — bars, rods and tubes — rather than primary metal.

It's more competitor than saviour for Western manufacturers looking to source primary metal.

Moreover, China's smelter system has little spare capacity, running close to Beijing's mandated annual capacity cap of just over 45 million tons. Russian supply has already pivoted to Asia in the wake of U.S. and European sanctions following the invasion of Ukraine in2022.

Indeed, Russia has become a major supplier of primary aluminium to China as Chinese production growth grinds to a halt.

Given these structural supply constraints, it's logical that traders have turned to the market of last resort to replace what is currently stuck the wrong side of the Strait of Hormuz. Just over 150,000 tons of LME-warranted metal has been cancelled in preparation for physical load-out since the start of this month. The action has largely played out in Malaysia's Port Klang,which is significant since this is the primary LME storage point for Indian-brand aluminium. Stocks of Russian metal at the South Korean port of Gwangyang have been left largely untouched, meaning that a significant part of what remains in the LME storage system is now metal that many Western buyers can't or won't take. Nor is there much metal left in LME off-warrant storage. These shadow stocks have been steadily draining away over thelast year and at 108,000 tons are down by 52,000 tons since thestart of 2026.

The squeeze is visible in time spreads. The benchmark cash-to-three-months spread <CMAL0-3> has inverted from contango to backwardation, where spot supplies command a premium over future deliveries, a classic signal of acute near-term shortage. But the current cash premium of $18 per ton is modest relative to physical market premiums, which provides little incentive for fresh deliveries from an already strained supply chain.

While the rise in oil and gas pricing has understandably grabbed the headlines since the start of the war in Iran, the risks to the aluminium market are equally acute.

E-TRANSMISSION DUTY: US SEEKS PERMANENT CURBS, INDIA OPPOSES

India is set to oppose a key US-led World Trade Organisation (WTO) proposal seeking a permanent moratorium on customs duties on electronic transmissions at the 14th Ministerial Conference (MC14) set to be held in Cameroon later this month, The Indian Express has learned.

Key Takeaways:

• "We do not support the extension of the moratorium. The growth of e-commerce or gains from e-commerce should not be conflated with the so-called benefits of the moratorium. While the cost of the moratorium is almost completely borne by the developing countries that are net importers of digital products, its benefits are accruing to a few developed countries.

• "A re-consideration of the moratorium is critical for developing countries, most importantly to preserve policy space and achieve domestic industrialisation," an Indian representative said as per the minutes of the meeting of a WTO meeting held on December 2 last year.

• China has also supported the moratorium, saying it is "vital for development".

• The US has forced several trade partners to agree to a moratorium under bilateral trade pacts. India has been arguing against any extension to the moratorium because digital trade has been dominated by big tech and developed countries, and the moratorium squarely favours the developed nations. Experts say that India loses about $1 billion in tax revenue annually by foregoing duty on e-transmission.

• During the WTO meeting in December, India said that concrete actions are needed to address this matter, such as providing technical assistance and capacity-building activities focused on digital literacy and e-commerce skills development, tailored to the specific needs of developing countries and Least Developed Countries (LDCs).

Do You Know:

• According to a WTO website, recognizing that global electronic commerce is growing and creating new opportunities for trade, WTO members at the Second Ministerial Conference in May 1998 adopted a Declaration on Global Electronic Commerce. This declaration urged the WTO General Council to establish a comprehensive work programme to examine all trade-related issues arising from e-commerce. Ministers also agreed to continue their practice of not imposing customs duties on electronic transmissions until their next session. This is known as the "moratorium on electronic transmissions".

• India's position was sharply contrasting with that of the US, which has not only asked for an extension but has also sought a permanent moratorium, arguing that imposing duty on electronic transmissions would restore "some confidence in the WTO" and its ability to deliver something meaningful and tangible to those stakeholders — "stability and predictability in the digital economy".

• The controversial moratorium on customs duties on electronic transmission has been a subject that has divided developing and developed nations and has been renewed every two years since it was first instituted in 1998. However, with the advent of AI-generated products, the significance of rules around digital commerce has rapidly gained prominence.

• According to a WTO report, digitally delivered services exports have touched about $5 trillion, nearly double the level they had reached in 2017.

WHY IS THE U.S. INVESTIGATING INDIA?

The story so far:

Over the last week, the U.S. government has launched two investigations against India and several other countries in a bid to find some form of actions or policies that "are unreasonable or discriminatory and burden or restrict U.S. commerce". These investigations will likely take a few months, but could eventually result in the return of tariffs.

What is the current situation on tariffs?

The U.S. Supreme Court on February 20 ruled against the validity of U.S. President Donald Trump's use of the International Emergency Economic Powers Act (IEEPA) to levy reciprocal tariffs on America's trade partners. For India, these reciprocal tariffs had been 50% from August 2025 to February 6, 2026, after which Mr. Trump reduced them to 25%.

Following the court's decision, Mr. Trump imposed a 10% tariff on imports from all countries for a period of 150 days under Section 122 of the Trade Act of 1974. He threatened to increase this to 15%, but has not done so.

However, he said the U.S. would use other sections of the Trade Act to levy additional tariffs.

What was the first investigation?

On March 11, the office of the U.S. Trade Representative (USTR) said it had initiated investigations against 16 economies, including India, to see whether these economies were using excess manufacturing capacity to export to the U.S. in a manner that was hurting American businesses.

The order for investigation under Section 301(b) of the Trade Act included specific allegations against the economies named — China, the European Union, Singapore, Switzerland, Norway, Indonesia, Malaysia, Cambodia, Thailand, Korea, Vietnam, Taiwan, Bangladesh, Mexico, Japan, and India.

In India's case, the U.S. said the country had a bilateral trade surplus with it of $58 billion in 2025. Indian government data, however, shows that India had a merchandise trade surplus of $42.2 billion with the U.S. over this period.

"India's global goods trade surplus sectors include textiles, health, construction goods, and automotive goods," the U.S. order said. "For example, evidence suggests the solar module sector is plagued by excess capacity, including that India's current module manufacturing is nearly triple annual domestic demand."

It added that India has created "significant excess capacity" in petrochemicals, steel, and other industries.

What is the second investigation about?

A day later, the USTR announced the launch of a fresh investigation, this time on 60 countries, including India. The fresh investigation was to look into whether these countries had taken "sufficient steps" to prohibit the import of goods produced with forced labour and how the "failure to eradicate" these practices impacts U.S. workers and businesses.

This investigation, too, was under Section 301(b) of the Trade Act of 1974.

Why is Section 301(b) significant?

Section 301 of the Trade Act of 1974 is aimed at addressing unfair foreign practices affecting U.S. businesses. Notably, according to the website of the USTR, "Section 301 may be used to respond to unjustifiable, unreasonable, or discriminatory foreign government practices that burden or restrict U.S. commerce".

According to trade and industry experts, this "response" that has been allowed in the law is the pathway through which the Trump administration could once again levy tariffs on imports from other countries once the 150-day window for his current 10% expires.

"While its [the investigation's] impact on India's exports will be clear only after the investigation concludes, it seems the move is aimed at imposing a new tariff once the 150 days for the 10% global tariff expires," Pankaj Chadha, chairman of the Engineering Exports Promotion Council of India, said.

How did the Indian government respond?

So far, it has not responded publicly. In contrast, the European Union has already spoken strongly about it.

"We will be seeking further clarity from the U.S. on how the opening of this section 301 investigation would interact with" the EU-U.S. agreement signed last year, European Commission spokesman Olof Gill said. "The commission would respond firmly and proportionately to any breach of the joint statement commitments," he added.

How have Indian industries responded?

Mr. Chadha said that this fresh development comes over and above the existing tariffs that the steel, aluminium, auto, and auto components sectors still have to pay. The U.S. has implemented a separate 50% tariff on the import of these goods, including from India, which continues even after the Supreme Court's order.

Similarly, the Confederation of Indian Textile Industry has said that the recent developments add further uncertainty to the textiles and apparel sector, which it said is already under significant stress due to the developments in West Asia and a lack of clarity over how the U.S. tariff situation will unfold.

Ravi Sam, the Vice Chairman of industry body Texprocil, however, said there is no need for panic as these investigations will be long, drawn-out processes and will not have any immediate impact. This sentiment was echoed by trade expert and former Director General of Foreign Trade Ajay Srivastava as well.

NEW UNCERTAINTIES OVER US TRADE DEAL AND INDIA'S CHALLENGE

The implications of the US Supreme Court's ruling that struck down President Donald Trump's policy of reciprocal tariffs are unfolding across the world. A few days ago, Malaysia's investment, trade and industry minister Johari Abdul Ghani is reported to have said that the deal between the two countries was "null and void" following the US court's decision. Earlier, in the absence of any clarity on the tariff structure, the European Union had stopped working towards ratifying its trade deal with the US. This points towards a possible rethink among countries over recent trade agreements struck with the Trump administration.

In February, India agreed to a framework for an interim agreement with the US — the framework will now be signed only after "Washington puts in place a new tariff architecture which safeguards India's comparative advantage in the US market", a senior government official told this paper. Under the interim agreement, the US would impose a reciprocal tariff of 18 per cent on India's exports. While that tariff rate had then meant that India was placed favourably compared to some of its competitors, post the US court ruling, that relative advantage has disappeared. Trump has used Section 122 of the 1974 Trade Act to impose a uniform tariff rate of 10 per cent on goods imported in the US. This means that the concessions make little sense without reciprocity. Moreover, the 10 per cent tariff is for a 150-day period, which ends in July. There is little clarity on what happens after that.

Other challenges have arisen. A few days ago, the US Trade Representative launched an investigation under Section 301 of the Trade Act of 1974 for India and several other countries, citing "structural excess capacity and production in certain manufacturing sectors". Reportedly, the fast-tracked nature of the investigation could lead to new tariffs in place from May. The Tax Foundation, a US-based think tank, also says that these "investigations could pave the way to re-impose the now unlawful IEEPA tariffs". This suggests that a return to the era of low tariffs and a stable trading regime appears unlikely. In this unpredictable environment, India must use the space available to it to negotiate for greater market access. Its approach must be guided by the objective of seeking predictable, transparent and stable trade relations.

HOW INFLEXIBLE COAL-FIRED PLANTS HARM INDIA'S CLEAN ENERGY PUSH

Even as India rapidly expands its renewable energy capacity, the operational limitations of coal-fired power plants is emerging as a critical bottleneck in creating more headroom for clean energy in the national grid.

Key Takeaways:

• With the addition of over 44 GW of renewable energy in 2025, India's total installed renewable energy (RE) capacity has reached 262 GW, accounting for more than 51% of the country's overall installed power capacity.

• But integrating this growing green energy into a grid is proving difficult. Addressing the issue, Ghanshyam Prasad, Chairperson of the Central Electricity Authority (CEA), said an incentive scheme is now being proposed to encourage thermal power plants to adopt greater operational flexibility.

• However, industry insiders remain unconvinced. They say running plants at lower loads can cause damage to boilers and turbines, increase wear and tear, and shorten the life of the units —

risks that, in their view, financial incentives alone cannot fully address. This is true especially for the older thermal power plants in the country.

• Coal plants are expected to reduce output during peak solar hours — when generation from solar projects surges — and ramp up quickly after sunset when renewable supply dips. However, many of India's coal-fired stations lack this operational flexibility.

• A recent report by energy think tank Ember estimated that India lost 2.3 terawatt-hours (TWh) of solar generation between May and December 2025 due to curtailment. That is enough electricity to power nearly 14 lakh households for a year.

• The financial impact is also significant. The curtailment resulted in an estimated compensation payout of Rs 5.75 billion to Rs 6.9 billion to RE generators, the Ember report said. Notably, renewable energy generators are compensated when curtailed during emergency conditions.

• Separately, a latest CEA report also highlighted the issue of heavy curtailment of renewable energy during peak solar hours during May- November last year as rising green power generation collided with the operational limits of coal-fired plants.

• The curtailment was largely necessitated because a significant portion of India's coal-based thermal fleet is unable to operate below 55% minimum technical load (MTL), the report said. MTL is the lowest stable generation level at which a thermal unit can safely operate without shutting down.

Do You Know:

• India operates a unified national grid connecting generators, distribution utilities, and bulk consumers. Any demand-supply imbalance affects system frequency. The permissible band of system frequency is 49.900 Hz – 50.050 Hz. However, the latest CEA report said that in May last year, system frequency remained above the Indian Electricity Grid Code (IEGC) operating band for nearly 20% of the time. Sustained high-frequency conditions persisted for almost four hours during solar generation hours, reflecting the strain of surplus supply.

• Under the Detailed Procedure for Tertiary Reserve Ancillary Services (TRAS), renewable energy generators are compensated when curtailed during emergency conditions. They receive compensation at the energy charge rate adopted under the Electricity Act. This compensation is socialised across the power system and indirectly passed on to consumers through electricity tariffs. In effect, consumers pay for electricity that was generated but not used.

WHY INDIA MUST ELECTRIFY ITS KITCHENS

The story so far:

India spends $26.4 billion a year importing cooking gas, most of it shipped through the Strait of Hormuz. It has 332 million LPG connections, yet 37% of households still burn firewood and dung. The arithmetic has shifted: cooking with electricity is now cheaper than cooking with unsubsidised LPG. But moving hundreds of millions of kitchens from flame to wire raises a chain of questions about cost, grid stress, and who pays when demand spikes.

Why is gas-based clean cooking hitting a wall?

Domestic LPG connections grew from 150 million in 2015 to 332 million by 2025, but India imports 60% of its LPG and 50% of its natural gas. The Institute for Energy Economics and Financial Analysis (IEEFA) estimates that the combined import bill reached $26.4 billion in FY24-25 — a 50% jump in six years.

Every West Asian escalation sends a price shock straight into Indian kitchens. Gas-based clean cooking has hit an affordability ceiling.

Can electricity beat gas on cost, efficiency, and everyday cooking?

An IEEFA study from October 2025 found that electric cooking is 37% cheaper than non-subsidised LPG and 14% cheaper than piped natural gas for a family of four in Delhi — even without any electricity subsidy. Only the heavily subsidised Prime Minister Ujjwala Yojana (PMUY) pricing undercuts e-cooking, and that subsidy costs the exchequer thousands of crores each year.

The efficiency gap is equally stark. Induction cooktops transfer about 85% of their energy to the vessel, while an LPG burner manages roughly 40%. Electric pressure cookers, tested across the MECS programme's multi-country cooking diaries, use less energy than any other device assessed.

Indian cooking is not a single-pot affair. Anyone who makes chapatis, does a tadka, and stirs a dal simultaneously knows that a standard single-plate induction unit will not suffice.

The Energy and Resources Institute (TERI) argues that research and development on multi-pot and flame-replicating induction models is essential before mass adoption can take off, not as an afterthought, possibly explaining the 5% electric cooking share in 2021.

Both the International Institute for Sustainable Development and IEEFA recommend starting with urban kitchens, thereby freeing imported LPG for rural areas that still lack reliable electricity.

The logic is sound — but it leads to a harder question: if a hundred million urban kitchens switch on induction cooktops in the evening, what happens to the power grid?

What is a 'peak'?

Electricity demand shifts throughout the day. It ramps up around 3 p.m. and again from 9-11 p.m., mostly because households all flip on lights, fans, TVs, and ACs at the same time. This surge is called the 'peak.'

India's peak demand rose from 148 GW in 2014 to a record 242.5 GW in December 2025. According to the International Energy Agency (IEA), for every degree rise in average daily temperature, peak demand now increases by more than 7 GW.

When demand spikes beyond a distribution company's (discom's) contracted supply, it has a few options — none of them cheap.

It can buy power on the spot market, typically through the Indian Energy Exchange, where prices can swing from ₹3.50 per unit in normal hours to ₹9-10 during peak slots. It can fire up expensive gas-based peaking plants or release stored hydropower. It can dispatch grid-scale batteries — BSES Rajdhani in Delhi has commissioned India's first commercial battery storage system for precisely this kind of energy arbitrage.

Or, as a last resort, it can impose planned power cuts, rotating blackouts across zones — what is known as load shedding — which disrupts livelihoods, damages industrial output, and is increasingly penalised by regulators.

Now imagine adding millions of induction cooktops to that evening peak window. Without intelligent management, mass electric cooking would steepen the evening peak, raise spot-market costs, and increase the risk of outages.

The question is not whether to electrify cooking, but how to do so without overwhelming the grid. That is where automated demand response enters the picture.

Can smart technology flatten the peak automatically?

OpenADR — Open Automated Demand Response — is a two-way communication standard that enables automated participation of smart thermostats, EV chargers, water heaters, and cooktops in demand response, ancillary services (frequency/voltage), and DER coordination. These devices can adjust their consumption automatically, without anyone having to lift a finger.

Born after California's 2002 energy crisis, its latest version plugs into modern energy systems using standard web protocols.

India has begun deploying it. Tata Power Delhi Distribution ran the country's first OpenADR pilot across 167 commercial and industrial consumers, achieving an average peak reduction of 14%. A study done of the pilot stated that peak shaving ability of close to 7% could be achieved if the technology were deployed across buildings in India.

Internationally, South Korea's AutoDR pilot reduced electricity use by 24%; such programmes typically pay for themselves within four years by deferring the cost of new grid infrastructure.

What discoms still lack is the full stack: OpenADR-compliant servers, smart-meter-embedded receivers, and aggregator platforms that can orchestrate distributed loads into virtual power plants.

Building this stack is essential — but it is only half the solution. The other half lies in turning households from passive consumers into active grid participants, while also upgrading household load capacity from 3 kW to 5 kW through investment in transformers and feeder infrastructure.

Can rooftop solar and neighbourhood trading take the pressure off the grid?

A rooftop solar panel paired with a battery can turn a household into a 'prosumer'— both a producer and a consumer. The solar panel generates power by day; the battery stores surplus energy; and that stored energy can be used in the evening to run the induction cooktop. This offsets precisely the peak that mass e-cooking would otherwise create.

A 2025 Australian national-grid study referred to a halving of peak load and reduction of grid reinforcement costs by 75% when residential electrification was combined with rooftop solar, batteries, and off-peak scheduling.

India's rooftop solar capacity is projected to more than double from 24 GW in 2026 to over 41 GW by 2030, boosted by the PM-Surya Ghar Yojana, which aims to provide 300 units of free electricity to 10 million households.

The real impact comes when surplus solar is not just stored but traded.

Peer-to-peer (P2P) energy trading allows households to sell excess electricity directly to neighbours through digital platforms, bypassing the traditional discom route.

India ran South Asia's first blockchain-based P2P solar trading pilot in Lucknow, led by the India Smart Grid Forum and Australia's Powerledger, under a regulatory sandbox approved by the Uttar Pradesh Electricity Regulatory Commission. Prosumers set prices, tracked trades in real time, and settled transactions through smart contracts. The result was a 43% reduction in the energy buy price compared with the retail tariff.

Following the pilot's success, Uttar Pradesh directed all its utilities to make provisions for P2P trading — a first for any State. In February 2026, the Centre announced a P2P facility under the India Energy Stack for Delhi and western Uttar Pradesh. If a cluster of homes on a single feeder can trade solar surpluses during the evening cooking hours, the local peak flattens, the discom avoids buying expensive exchange power, and the neighbourhood effectively becomes a micro virtual power plant.

What needs to happen, and how soon?

New York's All-Electric Buildings Act mandates that most new buildings under seven storeys be all-electric from January 2026, and taller buildings from 2029.

India has begun laying the groundwork. The Go Electric campaign and the National Efficient Cooking Programme target two million induction stoves. The Bureau of Energy Efficiency has launched star labelling for induction hobs; the PM-Surya Ghar scheme links rooftop solar adoption to household savings.

But a wider architecture is needed: redirect part of the estimated ₹40,000 crore annual LPG subsidy towards one-time capital support for induction cooktops. Expand Energy Efficiency Services Limited's (EESL) bulk-procurement model to e-cooking appliances. Mandate time-of-use tariffs for e-cooking and require OpenADR compatibility in new appliances and smart meters. Fund R&D on multi-pot induction technology designed for Indian cooking. And mandate all-electric construction for new residential buildings in Tier-1 cities.

The urgency is as much geopolitical as it is economic. Every dollar India spends on LPG imports goes through supply chains exposed to the Strait of Hormuz and the decisions of oil producers.

Electricity is different — you can generate it from solar panels on rooftops and store it in batteries we assemble here. We are talking about moving from imported fuel to power we generate ourselves. That is not just energy policy, that is sovereignty.

Urban India is the obvious place to start this shift. The grid works, smart meters are already rolling out, and rooftop solar pays for itself in cities. The technology is there. The numbers add up. We know how to manage the grid. The question is whether the policy framework will catch up before the next oil shock forces the issue.

WHAT IS THE ESSENTIAL COMMODITIES ACT?

The story so far:

As the blockade of the Strait of Hormuz exposed the vulnerability of India's supply chain for cooking gas, the majority of which is imported, the Union government invoked the Essential Commodities Act, 1955. While long-term steps are needed to diversify and reduce reliance on global suppliers and expand strategic reserves, the Act is a crucial emergency tool for now. It allows the Centre to direct refiners to boost domestic LPG production, prioritise household consumption, and regulate the allocation of natural gas.

What is the Essential Commodities Act?

The Act empowers the Union government to control the production, supply, and distribution of commodities, including drugs, fertilizers, foodstuffs, edible oils, fuels, and seeds.

Under Section 3, the government can issue orders to maintain or increase supplies, to prioritise production of any essential commodity, or to secure their equitable distribution and availability at fair prices. It can set prices and stock limits, prevent sales, control storage, transport, and distribution, and prevent hoarding and black marketing.

In the recent past, the law has been invoked to manage shortages of wheat, sugar, and pulses. During the COVID-19 lockdown, it was invoked to prevent hoarding, black marketing, and profiteering of a range of goods.

Why has it been invoked now?

Facing U.S. and Israeli strikes, Iran has retaliated by attacking oil-producing neighbours in the Persian Gulf that hosted U.S. forces, and targeting ships in the Strait of Hormuz. While a fifth of the world's oil transits through this maritime chokepoint, it is the disrupted supply of Liquefied Petroleum Gas (LPG), or cooking gas, that has sent Indian consumers into a panic.

The Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana helped to boost LPG coverage in Indian households from about 62% in 2016 to almost 100% now. However, domestic production has not kept up with consumption. In 2024-25, Indian refineries produced 12.8 million metric tonnes of LPG, just 41% of the annual consumption of 31.3 million tonnes (Petroleum Ministry data). The gap is filled by imports, of which a whopping 90% comes through the Strait of Hormuz.

Liquefied natural gas (LNG) is also piped into Indian kitchens, apart from fuelling vehicles, and being used for other commercial purposes. Of India's consumption of 189 million metric standard cubic meters per day, 52% is produced domestically. A quarter of the total consumption is imported from the Persian Gulf.

How does the order affect LPG production?

On March 5, the government ordered all oil refineries in India to channel their propane and butane streams into LPG production, rather than using them for petrochemical manufacturing. A revised order on March 9 specified that SEZ oil-refining companies and petrochemical complexes are also to be included. It added that propylene, butene, and other elements of the C3 and C4 streams were also to be used for LPG production only.

Apart from state-run refiners, such as Indian Oil Corporation (IOCL), Bharat Petroleum (BPCL), and Hindustan Petroleum (HPCL), Chennai Petroleum, Oil and Natural Gas Corporation, and the Numaligarh Refinery, the order is also directed at private refiners such as Reliance and Nayara Energy.

The government claims that its order has already increased domestic production of LPG by at least 25%, though that still leaves a 50% gap in supplies to be met by imports.

All LPG is to be supplied exclusively to IOCL, BPCL, and HPCL, which have been directed to supply cylinders only to domestic households. The de-prioritisation of commercial kitchens has already resulted in restaurants, hostels, and hotels downing shutters or limiting their menus.

How does this regulate natural gas supply?

The March 9 order on natural gas does not impact production, but rather establishes a priority-based allocation framework for gas distribution, overriding any existing contracts.

Top priority will go to piped natural gas for households, compressed natural gas for transport, gas needed for LPG production, and pipeline compressor fuel. Supplies to these sectors will be maintained at 100% of their average consumption over the past six months, subject to availability. Fertilizer manufacturers will get 70% of their needs, though this may change if the war continues to disrupt supplies as kharif sowing gets into full swing in summer. Supplies to tea, manufacturing, and other industries have been capped at 80%.

Some petrochemical facilities run by ONGC, GAIL, and Reliance will face partial or full curtailment of LNG supply. Gas allocation to oil refineries will drop to 65% of their usual needs.

CENTRE BARS PNG USERS FROM REFILLING LPG CONNECTIONS

Seeking to ensure a steady supply to domestic consumers exclusively availing liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) amid the impact on imports due to tensions in West Asia, the government on Saturday mandated that individuals with a piped natural gas (PNG) connection will neither be allowed to obtain a new LPG connection nor retain an existing additional connection of liquefied petroleum gas.

The amended supply order also bars them from obtaining any refill.

Further, the order states that individuals having both LPG and natural gas connections at present “immediately surrender their domestic LPG connection”. This comes amid imports of cooking gas being affected because of the closure of the Strait of Hormuz amid the ongoing tensions in West Asia. For context, India imports about 60% of its overall cooking gas requirements. Of this, around 90% is routed through the Strait.

34 CR LPG CONSUMERS: AVERAGE HOUSEHOLD USE HALF CYLINDER PER MONTH

As the energy crisis stemming from the conflict in West Asia continues to grow, data on consumption of liquified petroleum gas (LPG) shows that states with the most beneficiaries under the Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana (PMUY), a programme that largely targets rural households, tend to consume the most LPG overall, though each household in such states consumes less LPG per month than states with more urban populations.

Key Takeaways:

• Over the last three decades, as per data published by the Petroleum Planning and Analysis Cell (PPAC), which falls under the Union Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas, India’s total LPG consumption has grown six-fold — from 446 TMT (thousand metric tonnes) in 1998-99 to 2,754 TMT in 2025-26.

• The 2000s and 2010s saw the highest growth rate of LPG consumption — between 8% and 11% each year. In 2016-17, after the launch of the PMUY, which provides free LPG connections and subsidised cylinders to poor and rural households, there was a considerable spike in LPG consumption – with a growth rate of 10.1% over the previous year. But since 2020, growth in consumption has slowed as LPG connections reached a saturation level.

• Earlier, while rural households traditionally relied on fuel sources like firewood and animal dung for cooking, the introduction of the PMUY resulted in an increasing acceptance of LPG as a cooking fuel. As per an answer to a Lok Sabha question, 80% of PMUY's beneficiaries were rural households as of end-2024.

• As of today, there are 33.37 crore LPG customers across India, including 10.56 crore PMUY connections. The PPAC data, as of December 2025, shows that largely rural and poorer states have the most LPG consumers, particularly under PMUY, and the highest total monthly LPG consumption.

• Uttar Pradesh alone, with 4.87 crore LPG consumers including 1.88 crore PMUY beneficiaries, accounts for 15% of India's total LPG consumers. The other states with the most LPG consumers are Maharashtra at 3.2 crore, West Bengal at 2.72 crore, Tamil Nadu at 2.4 crore, Bihar at 2.33 crore and Karnataka at 1.9 crore.

• An analysis of monthly average consumption of LPG per household shows that urban consumers use far more cooking gas than rural ones.

• This consumption pattern has a strong correlation with PMUY beneficiaries, 80% of whom live in rural areas. In the states with the most Ujjwala connections, like Bihar and UP, a majority of the population is rural. A comparison of average monthly LPG consumption per household of a largely rural state like Bihar with a mostly urban one like Delhi suggests that while rural households have the connections, they are likely stretching their cylinders out over longer periods or using other cooking fuels, whereas urban households rely on LPG exclusively and use it more intensively.

• The per-household monthly usage also correlates with per capita income. Households in richer states are more likely than poorer states to consume more LPG each month.

Do You Know:

• LPG is produced as a byproduct of refining crude oil or processing liquified natural gas (LNG). Between 2011-12 and 2024-25, crude oil imports have grown by 40% in volume and LNG imports have doubled.

• While India sees seasonal spikes in LPG consumption every year, particularly during festive periods and in the winter, consumption has seen a consistent year-on-year growth over the past two-and-a-half decades as more and more households turned to LPG as a clean fuel source for cooking.

• LPG consumption saw the highest growth rates in the 2000s and 2010s, between 8% and 11% each year.

• Data shows India's reliance on imports of liquefied petroleum gas (LPG), used in crores of domestic and commercial kitchens, has grown consistently in recent decades. Now, as much as 60% of India's LPG supply comes from outside the country. To ensure a steady supply of LPG, particularly to households, the government has ordered a 25% increase in domestic production and widened the gap between cylinder bookings from 21 days to 25 days for urban households and to 45 days for rural households. It has even made fuels such as kerosene, biomass and coal available for commercial users.

• According to data published by the Petroleum Planning and Analysis Cell (PPAC), which falls under the Union Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas, India has been a net importer of crude oil and LPG since 1999, the earliest year for which data is available.

• In May 2016, Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas (MOPNG), introduced the 'Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana' (PMUY) as a flagship scheme with an objective to make clean cooking fuel such as LPG available to the rural and deprived households which were otherwise using traditional cooking fuels such as firewood, coal, cow-dung cakes etc. Usage of traditional cooking fuels had detrimental impacts on the health of rural women as well as on the environment.

KYC COMPLIANCE LOOP CONTINUES TO STRAIN BANK STAFF & ACCOUNT HOLDERS

Over eight months after the central bank relaxed Know Your Customer (KYC) norms in a bid to simplify compliance and reduce inconvenience for customers, complaints from bank account holders show little sign of abating. Despite regulatory efforts to streamline the process and make KYC updation less cumbersome, many customers continue to face repeated requests for documentation, account restrictions and delays in verification.

Key Takeaways:

— In June last year, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) announced a string of changes to its Master Direction on KYC norms, which included allowing business correspondents to help conduct the KYC and giving banks one year — till June 2026 — to complete KYC updation of 'low risk' category customers.

— But the sheer number of bank accounts, which further swelled after the implementation of Centre's ambitious cash transfer scheme — Pradhan Manrti Jan Dhan Yojana — made the task of verifying the customer's identity even more difficult, bankers claim.

— It leaves both the affected customers and the depositors on tenterhooks. Regulatory pressure has triggered a wave of account restrictions and occasional freezes, leaving customers rattled — even as the bank staff scrambled to keep up with compliance demands.

— The insistence stems largely from compliance pressures, internal risk controls and an operational caution within the banking system, according to banking sources. Customers, however, say the repeated demands for KYC updates are no less than harassment.

— Bank officials say the compliance burden has become overwhelming as there are over 250 crore bank accounts in India. State Bank of India alone has over 50 crore bank accounts. The manager of a leading nationalised bank recently alleged irregularities in the KYC updation process and shot off a complaint to enforcement agencies.

— Bank officials say that the pressure to ensure KYC compliance has intensified over the past year. Regulations mandate 'high risk' customers to submit KYC documents every two years, 'medium risk' customers every eight years and 'low risk' customers every 10 years.

— However, this norm is often violated by banks. "Low-risk" customers are placed in the "high-risk" category, and KYC updates are demanded every two years," said a salaried customer who faced the consequences of KYC verification.

— According to an official of a nationalised bank, the industry has been under sustained regulatory scrutiny to ensure that every account is fully KYC compliant.

Do You Know:

— The government's flagship financial inclusion programme Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana (PMJDY) was launched by Prime Minister Narendra Modi on August 28, 2014.

— It is a National Mission for Financial Inclusion to ensure access to financial services, namely, a basic savings & deposit accounts, remittance, credit, insurance, pension in an affordable manner.

— Under the PMJDY, there are no account opening charges, no account maintenance charges, and no minimum balance charges. Free RuPay debit card, with in-built accident insurance cover of Rs 2 lakh, and access to overdraft facility of up to Rs 10,000, are other major features of the scheme.

— PMJDY accounts are eligible for Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT), Pradhan Mantri Jeevan Jyoti Bima Yojana (PMJJBY), Pradhan Mantri Suraksha Bima Yojana (PMSBY), Atal Pension Yojana (APY), Micro Units Development & Refinance Agency Bank (MUDRA) scheme.

INDIA'S FDI POLICY TWEAK FOR LBCS: WHO STANDS TO GAIN FROM THESE CHANGES

To boost investment in key manufacturing sectors such as mobile phone components and rare earth magnets, the Union government this week announced calibrated changes in the Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) policy for investments from Land Bordering Countries (LBCs), or those that share a land border with India.

Key Takeaways:

• The decision comes nearly six years after the government made its prior approval mandatory for Indian entities receiving investments from LBCs in April 2020. The changes, introduced through a document known as Press Note 3 or PN3, were to curb potential takeovers of local companies during the slump in equity valuations around Covid-19.

• PN3 was primarily meant for Chinese investors, as entities from Bangladesh and Pakistan can invest only under the government route, while investments from Nepal, Myanmar, Bhutan and Afghanistan comprise a minuscule share of India's total foreign investment inflows.

• To fast-track decisions on investment proposals from LBCs, the government announced that applications from "specified sectors", such as capital goods, electronic capital goods, electronic components, polysilicon, ingot-wafer and rare earth magnets "shall be processed and decided within 60 days."

• Further, automatic approval would be given to investors with "non-controlling LBC Beneficial Ownership of up to 10 percent." An equity ownership of up to 49% is typically considered "non-controlling", while a beneficial owner is the owner and controller of an entity.

• The political decision to ease the PN3 restriction, which had a national security consideration, was taken after the Economic Survey 2023-24 made a strong case for attracting investment from

Chinese companies to strengthen India's export competitiveness. A high-level committee chaired by NITI Aayog member Rajiv Gauba also recommended withdrawing curbs on Chinese investments in the interest of the manufacturing sector.

Do You Know:

• The first amendment to PN3 defines "Beneficial Owner" and applies only to non-LBC investor entities, including global funds like BlackRock and Carlyle.

Here, cases below the threshold (10%) of non-controlling ownership in investor entities shall be permitted under the automatic route. Officials in the Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade (DPIIT) have said that these funds, often having minimal Chinese ownership, were forced to require government approval under the PN3 restriction.

• The second amendment pertains to LBC investments, except from Pakistan, in "specified sectors", defined as electronic capital goods manufacturing, electronic component manufacturing, polysilicon wafers, advanced battery components, rare earth permanent magnets and rare earth processing.

• Such investments have to ensure "Indian majority shareholding and control of the Investee entity at all times". This effectively means that ventures in these sectors must have an Indian equity holding of 51% or more throughout their existence. The Committee of Secretaries under the Cabinet Secretary may also revise the list of sectors, DPIIT said.

• DPIIT officials clarified that the changes will primarily accrue to private equity and venture capital funds because the definition of "beneficial ownership" is only applicable to non-LBC entities. The automatic route will thus help entities with less than 10% shareholding from land bordering countries.

• Government officials said there is demand for electronic components, rare earth magnets, polysilicon wafers and India is import-dependent on these items. The idea behind the amendment is to bring capital and technology while ensuring that the majority stake remains with Indian companies.

• Electronic goods and rare earths — metallic elements used in a variety of key industries like defence and automobiles — are today central to the growth of high-value industries. China dominates the processing of rare earths and has used this to its advantage in its tariff war with the US, reiterating the need for countries to achieve self-sufficiency in the sector.

NTPC LOOKING AT IMPORTED PWR TECH FOR ITS NUCLEAR FLEET, IN TALKS WITH PLAYERS IN FRANCE, RUSSIA & US

State-run power major NTPC is looking at imported Pressurised Water Reactors (PWR) technology for its planned nuclear fleet. The company is in talks with various players across France, Russia and the US, said K Shanmugha Sundaram, Chairman of NTPC Parmanu Urja Nigam Ltd (NPUNL), a subsidiary of NTPC.

Key Takeaways:

— Speaking at the Bharat Electricity Summit 2026, Sundaram said NTPC's planned 30 gigawatt electrical (GWe) capacity will be a mix of both indigenous Pressurised Heavy Water Reactors

(PHWR) and imported PWRs. NTPC, a Central Public Sector Enterprise under the Ministry of Power, formed NPUNL in January 2025 and plans to build 30 GWe of nuclear power by 2047.

— On the Centre's target of 100 GWe of nuclear power by 2047, he said around 70-75% of the capacity will be provided by the government sector while the rest will be provided by private players. The chairman said the target is not difficult to achieve if finance is available.

— While PHWRs use natural uranium as fuel and heavy water as both coolant and moderator, PWRs are light water reactors (LWR) that use enriched uranium as fuel and ordinary water as the moderator as well as the coolant.

— LWRs entail a simpler design and engineering compared to heavy water reactors given that they use normal water as both coolant and moderator. So, they have some degree of overlap with the technology used by regular thermal power units (coal-fired and gas-based power plants), typically involving lower construction cost and make up most of the global installed nuclear capacity. LWRs are also considered more thermal efficient. They use normal water and need enriched uranium as fuel.

— Since access to enriched uranium is not a constraint in the West, LWRs are used extensively by the US, Russia and France. They now form the backbone of most global reactor fleets. On the contrary, PHWRs are prized for fuel flexibility and the ability to operate on natural uranium, an advantage in India's resource-constrained context but a relative handicap in export markets shaped and dominated by the LWR technology.

Do You Know:

— India has set an ambitious target to increase nuclear capacity to 22,800 MW by 2031-32 and 100 GW by 2047. A diversified energy portfolio is a strategic necessity for India's development and energy independence.

— In the union budget of 2025-2026, the government launched 'Nuclear Energy Mission (NEM) for Viksit Bharat' with a target of achieving 100 GW nuclear capacity by 2047. It has been envisioned with the purpose of achieving energy independence, and helping India to meet its climate targets by developing indigenous capabilities, public-private partnership, and Small Modular Reactors (SMRs). A budget of Rs 20,000 crores has been allocated to develop SMRs.

— SMRs are essentially advanced small nuclear reactors that have a power capacity of 30MWe to 300 MWe (megawatt electrical) per unit. The relatively simpler and modular design of SMRs—enabling their components to be assembled in a factory instead of being constructed on-site—lowers costs and allows flexible deployment, making them a much more attractive proposition in recent years.

LIFE AND SCIENCES

EARTH'S MAGNETIC FLIPS CAN LAST 70,000 YEARS, NEW STUDY FINDS

The earth's magnetic field aids navigation but also protects the planet from high-energy radiation from the sun. For decades, geologists believed that when this field periodically flipped, swapping the north and south poles, the process happened relatively quickly, on the order of 10,000 years. However, a new study in Communications Earth & Environment has reported evidence to reconsider this notion.

By looking back 40 million years into the earth's history, the team, from France, Japan, and the U.S., found that some transitions last much longer, leaving the planet with a weakened defence for several millennia.

Scientists have identified hundreds of magnetic reversals in the earth's past. However, most high-resolution data comes from the last 17 million years, a small fraction of the planet's life. Based on the recent data, many experts believe the 10,000-year duration is an intrinsic property of the earth's geodynamo, the process by which the churning of the liquid iron outer core generates the magnetic field. The researchers wanted to know if this was always the case. To test this, they turned to deep-sea sediment cores collected during an international drilling expedition in the North Atlantic Ocean and analysed mud that settled on the ocean floor roughly 40 million years ago, during the Eocene epoch.

As these sediments accumulated, small magnetic minerals within the mud aligned themselves with the earth's magnetic field. Once buried, these minerals were trapped, creating a permanent record of the field's direction and strength. The researchers used X-ray scanning and magnetic measurements to 'read' these records. They also used astronomical tuning to match sediment layers to known cycles in the earth's orbital tilt.

Thus the researchers found that one reversal lasted 18,000 years while another stretched across a staggering 70,000 years. The 70,000-year event in particular was characterised by a complex precursor phase and multiple "rebounds" as the field struggled to stabilise.

They also ran numerical simulations of the earth's core and found such reversals to be a natural, if rare, part of the geodynamo's behaviour. During a reversal, the magnetic field loses much of its strength. A weak field for 70,000 years could have exposed the atmosphere and surface life to significantly more solar radiation for a prolonged period. The researchers suggested these long intervals could have influenced ancient environments and the evolution of life on the earth.

LARGE HADRON COLLIDER DISCOVERS A NEW PARTICLE

The Large Hadron Collider has discovered a new particle, the 80th identified so far by the world's most powerful particle smasher, Europe's CERN physics laboratory announced on Tuesday. The new particle has been named "Xi-cc-plus". Scientists have expressed hope that the particle — which is similar to a proton but four times heavier — will reveal more about the strange behaviour of quantum mechanics.

All the matter around us, including the protons and neutrons that make up the nucleus of atoms, are made of baryons. These common particles are composed of three quarks, which are fundamental building blocks of matter.

Quarks come in six "flavours": up, down, charm, strange, top and bottom. Each has varying mass, electric charge and quantum properties. In theory, there could be many different types of baryons that mix these flavours. However, most are extremely difficult to observe.

To chase them down, the Large Hadron Collider sends particles whizzing around an underground ring at phenomenal speeds until they smash into each other. This gives scientists a brief chance to measure how the more stable elements decay, then deduce the properties of the original particle.

The newly discovered Xi-cc-plus contains two "charm" quarks and one "down" quark. Normal protons have two "up" quarks and one "down" quark. Because the new particle has two heavier "charm" quarks instead of "up" ones, it is much heavier.

Vincenzo Vagnoni, spokesman for the Large Hadron Collider beauty (LHCb) experiment, said it was "only the second time a baryon with two heavy quarks has been observed". It is also "the first new particle identified after the upgrades to the LHCb detector that were completed in 2023," he said in a statement.

"The result will help theorists test models of quantum chromodynamics, the theory of the strong force that binds quarks into not only conventional baryons and mesons but also more exotic hadrons such as tetraquarks and pentaquarks."

In 2017, the LHCb experiment announced that it had discovered a similar particle, made of two "charmed" quarks and one "up" quark. The new particle differs only in having a "down" quark in place of the "up" quark — a small change that has profound consequences.

Due to complex quantum effects, the new particle has a predicted lifetime up to six times shorter than its counterpart, making it far more tricky to spot, CERN said.

The collaboration observed the new baryon by analysing data from proton-proton collisions recorded during the third run of the LHC, achieving a statistical significance of 7 sigma, well above the 5 sigma threshold required to claim a discovery. CERN Director-General Mark Thomson called it "a fantastic example of how LHCb's unique capabilities play a vital role in the success of the LHC."

The Large Hadron Collider is a 27-km long proton-smashing ring running 100 metres below France and Switzerland. Famously, it proved the existence of the Higgs boson — known colloquially as the "God particle" — in 2012.

A HEAVY PRICE

Why can't anything travel faster than light and what would happen if it did?

Albert Einstein's equation E = mc2 says energy and mass are linked. If you push an object to go faster, you add energy to it. At everyday speeds, this just increases the object's velocity. But as you approach the speed of light, the energy starts adding up to the object's effective mass instead.

As the object becomes heavier, it also becomes harder to accelerate. To reach the actual speed of light, an object with mass would become infinitely heavy and require an infinite amount of energy to move. Since the universe contains a finite amount of energy, reaching light speed is impossible for anything made of matter.

Because space and time are woven together, travelling faster than light in vacuum would likely mean travelling backwards in time. Physically, the laws of nature would break, creating paradoxes the universe currently prevents. It's possible to travel faster than light in a particular medium, e.g. electrons can outpace light in water. The limit is light's speed in vacuum.

WHAT MAKES SOME LOCATIONS ON GOOGLE MAPS LOOK BLURRY OR DIFFICULT TO NAVIGATE?

The experience of using Google Maps is different in certain locations. While you may get turn-by-turn driving instructions and street-level views with the tap of your finger in several countries, other locations may look blurry and are difficult to navigate by road. A user's Google Maps experience is often linked to regulations in particular countries that curtail the use of satellite imaging and geographic surveys. This raises a set of questions about security and transparency.

Which countries resist being mapped, and why?

Several countries that have hostile relations with their neighbours or militant groups tend to resist being clearly mapped on Google's navigation system. They fear that making detailed satellite imagery of their land easily available to users could lead to the targeting of critical infrastructure or planning for potential attacks.

Countries like India, Israel, and South Korea have, over time, changed their tone on mapping. And these changes date back to a couple of decades earlier.

For instance, in 2007, the BBC reported that India had asked Google to lower the level of detail in some Google Earth images, for security reasons. Nearly a decade later, in 2016, India resisted Google's request for ground-level photographs for its Street View offering. Street View only returned to the country in 2022. But, in late 2025, Google announced that it was boosting its Maps service with Gemini AI, allowing people to get personalised travel advice and ask questions. The company noted then that it had data for about 35 million places in India.

Israel is another country that poses a quandary to Google Maps users. Zoom lightly into multiple parts of Israel and you are likely to be met by extremely blurry houses and out-of-focus manmade structures, or blurred out areas adjoined to far more discernible zones. Near Gaza, however, users can zoom in to clearly see the devastating aftermath of Israel's military action, such as the detailed rubble of the ruined Jabalia refugee camp market.

Israel's blurriness in Google Maps was previously due to a U.S. law known as the Kyl-Bingaman Amendment, which restricted the clarity of satellite images that show Israel and areas surrounding it. Enforced in 1997, it stipulated a resolution limit of two metres in Ground Sampling Distance (GSD), which measures how on-screen pixels translate to actual distances on the ground. In other words, a higher GSD value yields a less detailed and more blurry map, because less data is captured.

In July 2020, however, the U.S. Commerce Department published a Federal Register notice acknowledging that satellite imagery of Israel was available through other sources at a better resolution.

"The Department has therefore changed the existing resolution limit of 2.0 m GSD to 0.4 m GSD for U.S.-licensed satellite imaging of Israel," stated the notice. In essence, this meant more detailed data for satellite imagery—and a clearer look at Israel on the map.

Amnon Harari, who was the head of space programmes at Israel's Defence Ministry, was quoted by Reuters that month as saying that it was "always preferable to be seen blurred, rather than precisely."

Despite the change in regulations, multiple locations in Israel are still blurred on Google Maps, though not necessarily on other mapping/navigation platforms.

Several other countries have blurred out specific areas or particular landmarks on Google Maps, largely for security reasons, such as Interpol in France. On the other hand, entire patches of central Greenland and Antarctica are also difficult to explore in detail on Google Maps, with reasons for this including their climate.

South Korea, meanwhile, has pushed back against Google's requests for better map data. In a translated statement from last year, the company noted that international tourists faced "great inconvenience upon entering the country," claiming that the directions function of Google Maps was not available in Korea. Travellers instead use a local offering like Naver, which is restricted to showing South/North Korea and parts of their neighbouring countries. However, Google claimed that it was only requesting "safe" data, or a "national basic map' on a scale of 1:5000."

Finally, after years of dialogue and negotiations, Google claimed its victory. In late February, it was announced that the internet giant would be allowed to export high-precision map data to servers located overseas.

Google's Vice President Cris Turner said the company looked forward to bringing a "fully functioning Google Maps to Korea," per media statements. However, Korea's government expects Google to fulfil its security conditions, such as blurring sensitive facilities, and not fully revealing the longitude and latitude coordinates for South Korean territory, reported Reuters. This easing of restrictions was a condition that the Trump administration had reportedly pushed for, per media outlets.

How does greater mapping freedom affect Google and its users?

Google has explained that it uses techniques, including photogrammetry, to create its satellite-view of Maps, or a process where it puts together (satellite) imagery sourced from external providers. These include state agencies, geological survey organisations and commercial imagery providers, according to a Google blogpost from 2020.

From the company's perspective, better quality data of popular, frequently visited places — such as South Korea — makes navigation easier and safer for those using Google Maps in such locations. Accurate satellite data also plays a crucial role in journalism and activism; images of Gaza rubble from multiple platforms were used to raise international awareness about Israel's widespread bombing of civilian homes, even as the country insisted that it was targeting Hamas with precision.

Widening access to high-quality, verifiable satellite imagery is also helpful when detecting falsified images. Take the case of a satellite image published by Tehran Times, which claimed to show a destroyed U.S. base in Qatar, during the U.S.-Iran war this month. However, researchers soon identified this as an AI-edited fake image.

When Google Maps can obtain better satellite/mapping data, there is a definite benefit for its business as well. Once key cities and international hubs are mapped out in detail, this can ease the way for Google parent Alphabet to potentially deploy its Waymo robotaxis there while using its own navigational data, rather than depending on a third-party navigation company's technology.

However, some South Korean experts have raised antitrust concerns, noting that Google's enhanced access to Korea's map data could make it harder for local companies like Naver to compete and hold their own against an international giant.

As Google continues to juggle the navigational needs of billions of users with the security requests of their governments, the integrity of satellite images on Maps is not just a technology challenge, but an urgent geopolitical issue.

WHEN AI FIRMS BECOME POWER FIRMS, WHO PAYS?

It is rare for a policy announcement in Washington to feel like the real-time validation of a thought experiment I undertook. Yet that is precisely what happened last week when the Donald Trump administration unveiled the "Ratepayer Protection Pledge", urging America's largest artificial intelligence firms to build, or procure, their own electricity supply for the data centres that power AI.

The non-binding pledge asks hyperscalers like Alphabet, Microsoft, Amazon, Meta, Oracle, and xAI to pay the full cost of energy generation and grid upgrades required to run their facilities, rather than passing those costs on to ordinary consumers.

For anyone who has been modelling the economics of AI infrastructure, this proposal is striking. Interestingly, I ran a sort of Monte Carlo-style exercise examining Alphabet's "century bonds" in one of my earlier columns. One plausible long-term scenario from that exercise was hyperscalers slowly evolving into quasi-utility companies whose competitive advantage lies not only in algorithms and data but also in electricity generation, transmission, and physical compute capacity. The Trump administration's pledge seems to nudge the industry in that direction.

The reason is simple: AI is an energy revolution disguised as a technological revolution.

Training and running large AI models requires enormous computing clusters with thousands of GPUs operating continuously inside data centres that consume electricity at an industrial scale. In the U.S. alone, data centres currently account for roughly 4-5% of national electricity demand, and projections suggest this could rise to 9-17% by 2030.

That growth has triggered political backlash as communities hosting large data centres have complained about rising power bills and strained grids. This pledge is therefore as much a political gesture as an economic one. And, by the way, it is not binding and its operational details are sketchy at best. Still, the pledge signals something profound about the next phase of the AI race.

The constraint will no longer be about chips. It will be about energy.

If the pledge becomes reality, the hyperscalers may resemble a hybrid between a technology company and an independent power producer.

While the heads of these AI companies have signed a non-binding pledge to build and run their own electricity supply in the U.S., they are being aggressively courted by the Indian government with a tax holiday.

In the Union Budget earlier this year, the government announced a tax holiday until 2047 for foreign cloud providers that deliver global services through data centres located in India. The government's pitch fails to fully account for the downstream effects of such incentives. In effect, India risks subsidising capital-intensive infrastructure whose largest resource costs will ultimately be borne by local ecosystems and public utilities. Unlike the software companies India courted in the past, hyperscale data centres are heavy industrial facilities that consume gigawatts of electricity, enormous volumes of water for cooling, and large tracts of land. Offering a multi-decade tax holiday to attract such facilities could place additional strain on already stressed urban ecosystems.

While Washington's approach — at least rhetorically — is that hyperscalers should eventually finance their own power supply, India's current approach appears to be the opposite: offering generous incentives without fully considering the potential toll on the country's infrastructure and resources. If AI is indeed becoming the next layer of global industrial infrastructure, the question India must confront is not merely how to attract data centres, but who will ultimately pay for the energy systems that sustain them.

WORLD HAPPINESS REPORT FLAGS SOCIAL MEDIA'S NEGATIVE IMPACT; FINLAND HAPPIEST

Amid rising geopolitical tensions, 79 countries recorded significant gains in happiness levels from the 2006–2010 base period to 2023–2025, according to the World Happiness Report 2026.

• Finland remains the happiest country in the world in 2026, holding the top spot for the ninth consecutive year. The Finnish population reported an average life evaluation score of 7.764 out of 10 this year, up 0.375 points from last year.

• The Nordic countries, Iceland (2nd), Denmark (3rd), Sweden (5th), and Norway (6th), also rank among the top 10 happiest countries in 2026.

• Costa Rica is a standout performer this year, climbing steadily from 23rd in 2023 to 4th in 2026, its highest-ever ranking. Switzerland returned to the top 10 at 10th place after slipping to 13th last year.

• The 2026 rankings showed a notable absence of English-speaking countries, with none appearing in the top 10 for the second consecutive year.

• In contrast, Afghanistan, at the bottom of the list at 147th, has once again been ranked the world's unhappiest country, along with Malawi (145th) and Sierra Leone (146th), all affected by conflict.

• India improved its ranking from 126th in 2024 to 118th in 2025, rising two positions this year and currently standing at 116th with a life evaluation score of 4.536.

Do You Know:

• The annual report is published by the Wellbeing Research Centre at the University of Oxford. Country rankings were based on answers given by around 100,000 people in 140 countries and territories who were asked to rate their own lives. The study was done in partnership with the analytics firm Gallup and the U.N. Sustainable Development Solutions Network. These rankings increasingly influence government policy, with countries like Bhutan famously adopting Gross National Happiness over GDP as a development metric.

• As per the report, the six factors to explain life evaluations:

—Having someone to count on

—GDP per capita

—Healthy life expectancy

—Freedom to make life choices

—Generosity

—Freedom from corruption

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• Costa Rica is a standout performer this year, climbing steadily from 23rd in 2023 to 4th in 2026, its highest-ever ranking. It is largely attributed to well-being boosts from family bonds and other social connections.

• The World Happiness Report this year draws attention to social media's impact, amid growing moves by countries to regulate its use among youth. Heavy social media use is linked to a significant decline in well-being among young people, with the impact especially severe for teenage girls in English-speaking countries and Western Europe.

—The report notes a sharp fall in life satisfaction among those under 25 in the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand over the past decade, with prolonged social media use identified as a key factor.

MORAL DISENGAGEMENT AND THE IMPACT OF POWER

Even with the establishment of norms and laws to maintain morality and ethical behaviour, violence and unethical behaviour have always been part of society. Throughout history, harmful acts, especially when done by those who control the narrative, have rarely been presented as immoral. Instead, they are reframed in ways that make them appear necessary, justified, or even beneficial. There are many examples of this, both old and new. The killing of indigenous populations during colonisation was often described as "civilising" territories. War on weaker or defenceless countries for the purpose of strategic or economic interests is presented as a necessary operation, justified in the name of security or national defence. And, the consequent civilian deaths are labelled as "collateral damage." Violence or harassment against women and young girls has been and continues to be dismissed as "accidental dalliance" or "minor deviance", while the behaviour of the women themselves is always questioned, shifting the blame from perpetrators to the victims.

Some of the latest examples of this can be seen in how Artificial Intelligence (AI) systems use people's data without their consent for training purposes while presenting it as technological progress, and in how companies displace millions of workers with AI, and frame it as development. In many such situations, the perception of the act shifts, depending on who is involved, how it is described, and who holds power.

The concept of moral disengagement

Many theories attempt to explain harmful behaviour, violence and crime by focusing on individual deviance and social structures. One such concept introduced by the Canadian-American psychologist Albert Bandura was moral disengagement. The concept refers to the psychological processes through which individuals rationalise or justify harmful behaviour while continuing to see themselves as moral people.

Developed in the 1990s, the concept explains how people can commit harmful acts without experiencing strong guilt or moral conflict. This can happen in several ways, by minimising one's responsibility, ignoring the consequences of actions, blaming victims, or convincing oneself that the act serves a greater good.

However, moral disengagement does not operate only at the level of individuals. Within power-elite networks, these practices can function collectively. Shared vocabularies and institutional language are used to diffuse responsibility, limit scrutiny, and help sustain authority.

Mechanisms of moral disengagement

According to Bandura, there are several mechanisms through which individuals disengage from moral responsibility. One of these is moral justification, where harmful actions are framed as having a moral purpose, such as protecting national security or defending citizens. Another is advantageous comparison, where an action is made to appear less harmful by comparing it to something worse, allowing it to be presented as the "lesser evil." Displacement of responsibility occurs when individuals or institutions believe that they are not personally accountable for the action, as they are simply following orders, a dynamic often discussed in relation to violence by soldiers.

Similar to this, is the idea of diffusion of responsibility, where accountability becomes spread across actors, such that it becomes difficult to pinpoint who is responsible for the deed. Distortion of consequences involves minimising or ignoring the harm caused by an action, especially when the consequences appear distant or abstract. Finally, dehumanisation and attribution of blame occur when victims are portrayed as less human, dangerous, or responsible for their own suffering, reducing empathy for them, making it easier to justify the immoral action committed against them. Together, these mechanisms allow individuals/institutions to maintain a positive moral self-image even while participating in harmful actions or decisions. Moral disengagement, therefore, does not mean that people lack morality; rather, it shows how moral reasoning can be cognitively reorganised to make harmful conduct appear acceptable.

Euphemistic labelling and Media Framing Theory

One other key mechanism that enables moral disengagement through language is euphemistic labelling. Here, harmful actions are described using sanitised or technical language that makes them appear less severe. By replacing morally charged words with neutral terms, the emotional weight of an action is reduced, making it easier to justify. For instance, phrases such as "collateral damage" instead of civilian deaths or "enhanced interrogation" instead of torture transform violence into what appears to be a technical or bureaucratic procedure.

Language has the potential to become even more powerful when it is amplified through the media. Media institutions play a crucial role in shaping public perception, as they can influence how events are interpreted by choosing particular words, narratives, and frames. As discussed in the

Media Framing Theory developed by Canadian sociologist Erving Goffman, the way an issue is presented can shape how audiences understand its causes, consequences, and moral implications. In practice, media framing can sometimes support the interests of political elites and powerful institutions by softening or obscuring the reality of their harmful actions.

In discussions surrounding the cases of child rape and trafficking by influential people like Jeffrey Epstein and other political leaders, many news reports used terms such as "underage girls" or "young women". Such phrasing softens the idea of abuse and violence by framing it as sexual misconduct rather than child rape. Phrases like "sex with a minor" also imply mutual participation, obscuring the coercion and power imbalance involved.

Similarly, in this case, bureaucratic language was used that often referred to terms like a "network," "client list," or "recruitment," which made the operation sound like a corporate enterprise rather than an organised system of sexual exploitation.

Euphemistic language is also common in military contexts. In discussions of military operations in places such as Gaza, terms like "airstrikes," "collateral damage," or "security operations" can replace more direct descriptions such as bombing residential areas or killing civilians. Technical and euphemistic language reframes violence as strategic or procedural rather than highlighting human suffering, with the neutral nature of the terminologies, often reducing the emotional and ethical impact of a situation.

Moral disengagement and power

Moral disengagement becomes particularly significant in systems of power. Large institutions, including states, militaries, corporations, and bureaucracies, often operate through complex hierarchies and specialised roles. Within such systems, responsibility can easily become fragmented.

Those at the top of a hierarchy may justify harmful policies as necessary for national security, economic growth, or social order. Institutions and individuals within bureaucratic levels may diffuse responsibility by pointing to procedures or institutional rules. Media institutions may also shape public perception by softening or obscuring the reality of harmful actions. Civilians consuming such information may be limited to a neutral understanding of the situation due to the obscured nature of the information presented to them, and may therefore comply.

Key takeaways

Bandura's theory helps explain how individuals or institutions continue to propagate violence by reframing and disengaging from moral standards through cognitive and linguistic mechanisms, instead of openly rejecting morality.

Recognising these behaviours becomes crucial if there is any hope of resisting and challenging individuals and institutions that rely on moral disengagement to sustain themselves. Understanding these mechanisms enables people to question such systems by demanding accountability, insisting on transparency, and using language that accurately reflects the reality of a situation. Thus, the concept becomes especially important in the contemporary geopolitical context, as it helps people better navigate the world around them and critically question the narratives, policies, and decisions presented to them.

THE LANGUAGES THAT CANNOT BE FOUND

To quote Donald Rumsfeld in a context entirely unrelated to current events, the history of human languages includes some "known knowns". Researchers know a fair bit about the Indo-European languages because there's a lot of evidence available from members of this family, including ancient languages like Hittite, Sanskrit and Greek that were spoken at a time not too far removed from the common ancestor. On the other hand, reconstructing Proto-Afroasiatic — the ancestor of Semitic languages such as Arabic and Hebrew, and others like Ancient Egyptian — is a fraught affair because of the sheer depth of time. It may have been spoken as far back as 16,000 BCE, far earlier than even its earliest recorded descendents. What is possible to know about it is limited.

If one tries to go even further back, very little can be said — was there a "Proto-World", spoken by a single human population, from which all later languages descend? Maybe, maybe not. But in evolutionary terms, there must have been a point when the capacity for language developed. A paper published in Frontiers in Psychology attempts to set a lower bound for this. It uses genomic studies to pinpoint the earliest divergence in modern human populations, between the Khoisan people of southern Africa and the rest. Since all human populations today, including the Khoisan, have language, the capacity must have existed before this divergence, at least 1,35,000 years ago.

Linguistic capacity doesn't necessarily mean language — it has been suggested that, at first, there was a system internal to the mind, externalised for communication only later. But whenever they developed, the earliest individual languages have been lost to the abyss of time. They are not simply "known unknowns" but known unknowables.

SEX BIAS: KEY TO A DNA PUZZLE

For years, scientists noticed that modern humans carry very little Neanderthal DNA on their X chromosomes. To understand why, researchers from the University of Pennsylvania reversed the perspective and looked for early modern human DNA within ancient Neanderthal genomes. In a study published in Science on February 26, they reported that interbreeding between Neanderthals and early modern humans was heavily sex-biased.

To find this, the team analysed the Altai Neanderthal genome — a female individual found in the Altai Mountains whose 1,22,000-year-old remains provide the oldest high-quality Neanderthal genome — and found a 62% excess of modern human ancestry on its X chromosome compared to its other chromosomes.

The finding allowed the team to rule out natural selection as the main cause for the missing DNA. Why? Because if biological incompatibility were the main problem, the Neanderthal X chromosome would have rejected modern human DNA. But instead it contained a surplus.

The researchers then tested whether migration patterns, such as females moving between groups, could explain the data. They found that even extreme migration models could not account for such a high 62% surplus. Instead, the most likely explanation was ancestry-specific mate preference, i.e. it was concluded that interbreeding primarily involved male Neanderthals and female modern humans. Remarkably, this bias remained consistent across different encounters separated by 200,000 years, suggesting that the social dynamics between these two groups were stable over very long periods.