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DREAMIAS

INTERNATIONAL

IN RARE PUBLIC FORAY, MELANIA TRUMP DENIES EPSTEIN LINKS

U.S. First Lady Melania Trump made a surprise statement on Thursday denying any knowledge of Jeffrey Epstein's abuse, or that she herself was a victim of the convicted sex offender.

The 55-year-old's rare on-camera remarks at the White House came out of the blue, in an extraordinary intervention in a scandal that has long haunted her husband President Donald Trump.

"The lies linking me with the disgraceful Jeffrey Epstein need to end today," she said. "The individuals lying about me are devoid of ethical standards, humility and respect."

Ms. Melania and Donald Trump had previously been photographed with Epstein, but she said that she had met her husband independently two years prior to meeting Epstein.

"I am not Epstein's victim. Epstein did not introduce me to Donald Trump," Melania Trump said.

The First Lady also urged Congress to hold a public hearing for survivors of Epstein's abuse to "give these victims their opportunity to testify under oath."

But some Epstein survivors and their families, including the brother of Epstein's main accuser Virginia Giuffre, called the speech a "deflection of responsibility."

"First Lady Melania Trump is now shifting the burden onto survivors under political conditions that protect those with power" including "the Trump Administration, which has still not fully complied with the Epstein Files Transparency Act," according to a joint statement posted on social media.

Epstein died in federal custody in 2019 while awaiting trial on sex trafficking charges.

WHY DOES TRUMP WANT TO PULL OUT OF NATO?

The story so far:

Last week, in an interview to the British newspaper, U.S. President Donald Trump said withdrawing U.S. membership from the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) is now "beyond reconsideration". Through this, he indicated that one of America's oldest alliances since World War 2 could be on the brink of a break-up.

The tough words, and the U.S. President's description of NATO as a "paper tiger", reflect an antagonism that goes back more than a decade that has been heightened during the ongoing war with Iran. Even so, the U.S. may not find it easy to exit the 32-nation, 76-year old alliance.

Why is Mr. Trump angry with NATO?

The immediate trigger for Mr. Trump's comments to *The Telegraph* was that most NATO allies refused U.S. requests for military and airspace support in connection with the war against Iran, where the U.S. has faced significant setbacks in recent weeks.

While Spain and Italy have directly criticised the U.S.-Israeli strikes on Iran, France has denied U.S. military jets overflight permission to fly to Israel. Even the U.S.'s closest allies — the U.K., Germany, and Canada — have refused to take part in operations.

U.S. officials feel that this stand violates Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty, which states that "an armed attack against one NATO member shall be considered an attack against them all".

Two days before Mr. Trump's interview appeared, U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio had also told an American television channel that NATO's founding principles and membership would have to be "re-examined". "If NATO is just about us (the U.S.) defending Europe if they're attacked, but them denying us basing rights when we need them, then that's not a very good arrangement," Mr. Rubio said.

The seeds of U.S. discontent with NATO had been planted by Mr. Trump ever since his first term as President, when he announced that NATO was "obsolete". He criticised European allies for not pulling their weight in military expenditure while depending on the U.S. for their defence. In Mr. Trump's second term, the rift grew over his rough treatment of Ukraine. More recently, he was angered that NATO members criticised the U.S.'s regime change operations in Venezuela and that they fiercely opposed his plans to annexe Greenland. With the U.S.-Israel war with Iran entering its sixth week, and no exit strategy in sight, European allies have become more determined in not joining the operations.

What is the purpose of NATO?

NATO (or OTAN, according to the French abbreviation) was formed in 1949, with the U.S., Canada and 10 West European countries which felt threatened by the Soviet Union, particularly after the installation of pro-Soviet Communist regimes in Eastern Europe and China. The North Atlantic Treaty, signed in Washington DC on April 4, 1949, created the inter-governmental military grouping mandated with "collective security". Over time, NATO gathered more members, including Greece and Turkey in the 1950s and Spain in 1982.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, more than a dozen East European countries joined, triggering a backlash from Russia. After Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, which was not a member, Finland and Sweden joined NATO, taking the total membership up to 32.

Ironically, although NATO was set up to counter the Soviet threat, NATO forces did not carry out a single military operation during the Cold War; it was only after conflicts in the Baltic states in the 1990s that NATO forces began joint operational missions, such as in Iraq (1990 and 2003), Bosnia (1992), Kosovo (1999), and Afghanistan (2001).

NATO does not have a separate independent force, but when required, combines resources and personnel of the 32 members that operate under a unified command structure called the Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE), based in Belgium. It is led by the Supreme Allied Commander Europe, a U.S. 4-star General or Admiral who heads the U.S. European Command.

Although Ukraine has now backed away from plans to join NATO, Ukrainian forces have worked closely with NATO after Russia launched its 'Special Military Operations' in February 2022. They

have received major aid packages, including a $40 billion pledge at the NATO Summit in 2024, training, and security assistance.

As a result, Mr. Trump has complained that when it came to his demands that NATO members support U.S. operations in Iran, send their navies to help open up the Strait of Hormuz, or facilitate refuelling and overflight missions, their response should have been "automatic".

"We've been there automatically, including Ukraine," he said. "Ukraine wasn't our problem. It was a test, and we were there for them, and we would always have been there for them. They weren't there for us," he told *The Telegraph*.

How much does the U.S. fund NATO operations?

Throughout all these operations, the U.S. has provided much of NATO's funding, including 62% of the defence spending and about 15% of the civil budget of the alliance. It also provides NATO countries with a "nuclear umbrella" and maintains U.S. military bases that enhance deterrence in the region. Under increasing security concerns and U.S. pressure, all NATO members agreed at the 2025 Hague Summit to raise defence spending to 5% of their GDP by 2035, but Mr. Trump has continued to chide allies to share more of the burden.

How hard would it be for the U.S. to pull out of NATO?

A U.S. exit from NATO or the Alliance Treaty seems unimaginable and is many times more difficult than its exit from more than 60 different multilateral organisations and treaties, including the World Health Organization and the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change in January 2026, and much more legally complex than the U.K.'s exit from the European Union (Brexit) in January 2020.

Article 13 of the North Atlantic Treaty provides for the withdrawal of any member, but says the member must submit a one-year "notice of denunciation… to the Government of the United States of America, which will inform the Governments of the other Parties." As the depository authority, the U.S. government would therefore have to hand itself the notice, and then inform other countries, which would make for an awkward process.

In addition, and as a measure against Mr. Trump's own statements in his first tenure, the Biden administration pushed a law through the U.S. Congress in 2023 that prohibits the U.S. President from trying to "suspend, terminate, denounce, or withdraw the United States from the North Atlantic Treaty — without the advice and consent of the Senate or an act of Congress". Alternative paths could see the U.S. withdraw personnel from SHAPE or skip NATO meetings — in the manner India has withdrawn from attending SAARC summits — which would make the organisation virtually defunct.

In terms of its impact on the world order, especially in the midst of a war, the U.S.' withdrawal from NATO would lead to the remaking of all global security structures, severely weaken the hold of the Western coalition, and strengthen other global powers such as Russia and China. It is therefore more likely that both the U.S. and its NATO allies will work to avoid such a drastic step, beginning with the visit of NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte to Washington on April 8.

TALKING PEACE: WHY MEDIATION STILL MATTERS IN A WORLD AT WAR

Conflict resolution is an integral component of international relations, both in the academic and general sense. With the war in West Asia entering its second month, discussions around mediation have gained prominence. A significant section of the international community is keen on bringing a resolution to end this war. Although the possibility of mediation in the Iran conflict is shrouded in ambiguity, the debate intensified following reports suggesting a potential role for Pakistan. Without delving into the specifics of Pakistan's involvement, which still remain unclear, it is more useful to examine what mediation is and why it continues to be a relevant and effective tool for conflict resolution.

Understanding mediation

Mediation has deep historical roots, with one of the earliest recorded instances dating back nearly 4000 years, when the Sumerian king Mesilim mediated a dispute between the city-states of Lagash and Umma. Despite its long history, mediation remains a complex process, and scholars have offered diverse perspectives on its dynamics. One of the most influential contributions is by Jacob Bercovitch, who developed the Contingency Model of mediation. Based on empirical research, he argued that the success of mediation depends on multiple factors, like the nature of the parties, the characteristics of the dispute, and the role and capabilities of the mediator. He emphasised that effective mediators must possess credibility as well as personal attributes such as communication skills, intelligence, and patience.

Another major contribution is by I. William Zartman, who introduced the 'theory of Ripeness'. According to Zartman, mediation becomes effective only when a conflict is "ripe" for resolution, particularly when parties face a 'Mutually Hurting Stalemate'. The Lancaster House Agreement (1979), which led to Zimbabwe's independence, illustrates this dynamic, as negotiations occurred when all parties had reached such a stalemate. Additionally, the concept of biased mediation challenges the assumption of neutrality. It suggests that mediators can be effective precisely because of their power and leverage, enabling them to offer incentives or exert pressure on conflicting parties to reach an agreement.

Legal position on mediation

The Hague Conventions of 1899 and 1907, which led to the adoption of the Pacific Settlement of International Disputes, marked a significant step in the development of mediation as a diplomatic practice. They promoted the peaceful resolution of conflicts by encouraging the use of mediation, good offices, and arbitration, and by legitimising third-party involvement in disputes. The conventions also established the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA), providing an institutional mechanism for arbitration. While they did not fully codify mediation as binding international law, they laid the normative and institutional groundwork that later influenced the dispute resolution frameworks of the League of Nations and the United Nations.

The United Nations framework provides important principles and guidance for mediation, particularly through the UN Charter, which emphasises the peaceful settlement of disputes, and through various resolutions supporting mediation practices. Chapter VI of the UN Charter provides the framework for the peaceful settlement of disputes. Article 33 explicitly calls upon parties to resolve disputes through peaceful means such as negotiation, mediation, conciliation, arbitration, judicial settlement, or other agreed methods. The United Nations has further strengthened the role of mediation through General Assembly Resolution 65/283 (2011), which emphasises its importance in conflict prevention and resolution and calls for enhanced mediation capacity. This was complemented by the UN Guidance for Effective Mediation (2012), which

outlines key principles, including preparedness, consent, impartiality, inclusivity, national ownership, coordination, and the need for implementable agreements. In practice, the UN and its affiliated actors have facilitated numerous mediation efforts across conflicts worldwide. Additionally, since 1948, the UN has undertaken over 70 peacekeeping missions, with around a dozen active operations in recent years, often working alongside mediation initiatives to maintain international peace and security.

Instances of mediation

There are several good examples of individuals and states playing an important role in mediation; however, success relates to their stature. For instance, Kofi Annan's mediation in Kenya in 2008 helped prevent further instability and led to a power-sharing agreement. Mediation at times, opens channels of communication that are often absent during conflict, as seen in Norway's role in facilitating the Oslo backchannel negotiations between Israel and Palestine.

Mediation also creates political space for negotiation, witnessed in the Camp David Accords (1978), where the U.S. suceeded in bringing Egypt and Israel together, despite deep hostility. It can reshape perceptions of conflict, as in the Colombian Peace Process (2016), where political solutions gained prominence over military approaches.

Furthermore, mediation helps manage time and information, as evidenced by the tightly controlled U.S.-led negotiations of the Dayton Agreement (1995) in Bosnia. Mediation also relates to trust between parties, as demonstrated in the Good Friday Agreement (1998), mediated by former U.S. senator George Mitchell. Finally, mediation provides opportunities for face-saving, allowing conflicting parties to enter negotiations without appearing weak, which is often critical for successful conflict resolution.

On the West Asian crisis

Drawing on the theoretical insights of Bercovitch and Zartman, it can be argued that while media reports suggest that Islamabad may serve as a venue for dialogue between the U.S. and Iran, this should not be interpreted as Pakistan playing the sole mediatory role. Mediation processes in international conflicts are often multi-layered, involving several actors and countries like Turkiye and Egypt are also reportedly engaged in facilitating dialogue.

Moreover, Pakistan's close strategic ties with the United States may limit its credibility as a neutral mediator in the eyes of Iran. Instead, Iran is likely to prefer a relatively more independent and influential actor. In this context, China emerges as a strong choice for Iran. As a major importer of Iranian oil and a country with significant economic investments in Iran, China holds considerable leverage. It also facilitated the 2023 rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia, that adds to its credibility as a mediator.

Additionally, China's consistent anti-war stance and its broader economic and political influence in international affairs, position it as a capable and acceptable intermediary. An early resolution of the conflict is desirable. However, all will depend on the strategic calculation of the U.S. and Iran and their willingness to engage in meaningful dialogue.

NATIONAL

DELHI AND DHAKA MUST INSULATE TIES FROM SHORT-TERMISM

Over the better part of two decades, Delhi and Dhaka crafted one of the Subcontinent's most significant and stable bilateral relationships. Part of the reason for this was the conducive atmosphere created by the Sheikh Hasina-led Awami League government in Bangladesh. Hasina's perceived "pro-India" stance has become a thorny issue in her country since her ouster in August 2024, and matters were made worse by the political instability, including attacks on minorities. However, after the BNP's victory in the Bangladesh elections in February, it is clear that a more mature leadership on both sides is ready to reset ties. The visit by Bangladesh Foreign Minister Khalilur Rahman is an important step in that journey.

According to the Bangladesh Foreign Ministry, the minister "reiterated its request to extradite Sheikh Hasina and her Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan Kamal to Bangladesh, who have been awarded the death penalty by the International Crimes Tribunal (ICT)". The demand must be read for what it is — a political statement by a new government. Delhi cannot acquiesce to the request, not least because the ICT was widely condemned as a politically partisan body. That said, there was much in the Foreign Minister's visit to steer ties back on track. Both sides reportedly discussed the importance of renewing the Ganga Water Treaty, which will expire in December. Bangladesh also expressed the need for greater supplies of fuel and fertilisers. Both countries have agreed to normalise the issuing of visas. For India, the most salient issue is securing the 4,156 km border. Cooperation along the border has helped maintain a stable frontier for both sides, including along India's northeastern states. Connectivity, energy cooperation and multilateral initiatives under bodies such as BIMSTEC depend on Dhaka and Delhi being on the same page.

To his credit, PM Tarique Rahman has struck a conciliatory note since his appointment. It is necessary to build on Dhaka's call for ties to be based on "mutual trust and respect and reciprocal benefit". Both countries share a history, culture and geography that make the gains of working together exponential. The task now is not to let the past — including the Hasina issue — become a roadblock. For the sake of the people of India and Bangladesh, their governments must insulate the relationship from a short-term politics.

REBUILDING TIES

New Delhi's recent moves to re-engage diplomatically and hold Foreign Office Consultations with diplomats in Turkiye and Azerbaijan is a considerable shift in the government's policy, especially over the past year. Since the India-Pakistan conflict and Operation Sindoor in May 2025, the government had expressed its anger not just at Pakistan, but at countries that were seen as supportive of Pakistan, diplomatically or militarily during the conflict. In particular, the Ministry of External Affairs had expressed its disappointment with statements made by Turkiye, Azerbaijan and Malaysia, that questioned the government's decision to launch strikes on terror sites in Pakistan after the Pahalgam terror attacks. During briefings about Operation Sindoor, as the 96-hour military conflict from May 7-10 was named, the government left out envoys from countries that it felt had not expressed solidarity with India. In a military briefing in July, the deputy chief of army staff said India had had to contend with at least three adversaries on its border with Pakistan, including Turkiye. Azerbaijan too was believed to have helped Pakistan with technological support. Trade and tourism to Turkiye and Azerbaijan dropped significantly for several months, as calls to boycott them went out from influential accounts. During its evacuation

of Indians from Iran after U.S.-Israel airstrikes on nuclear installations in June 2025, the MEA pointedly told those heading out by land routes to use Armenia and Turkmenistan, not either Turkiye or Azerbaijan. In addition, foreign policy commentary suggested that India was building an alliance of India, Armenia, and Greece as a counter to their age-old rivals – Pakistan, Azerbaijan and Turkiye – who had already formed a strong trilateral grouping. Given the heated rhetoric, and the freeze in diplomatic ties, the decision to send Secretary West in the MEA, Sibi George, to Baku to revive Foreign Office Consultations with Azerbaijani counterparts last week, and to invite the Turkish Deputy Foreign Minister to Delhi this week, are significant diplomatic moves that indicate that Baku and Ankara too feel that better bilateral relations are in their interests.

In a world more fraught with conflicts that fast spiral out of control, it is necessary for New Delhi to pick its diplomatic battles more carefully. The quick escalation from government demarches to online outrage and calls for boycotts have in the past few years had a detrimental impact on bilateral ties with close friends as well as neighbours. With countries that are adversaries, as both Turkiye and Azerbaijan have been, given their closeness to Pakistan and positions on the Kashmir dispute, New Delhi must consider its options with less emotion and more pragmatism. India has traditionally managed relations between rivals without allowing itself to be hyphenated with Pakistan, or by falling into multilateral "camps".

IN DELHI'S SUPPORT FOR ARAB GULF, A RETURN OF THE BOMBAY SCHOOL OF THOUGHT

The Bombay School saw India's security beginning at sea. Its leading figures — John Malcolm and Mountstuart Elphinstone — viewed Persia and Arabia as the natural outer ring of India's defence.

Whether the Iran war escalates into a more devastating confrontation or cools into a diplomatic mode this week, one fact is now beyond dispute: The Gulf has moved decisively to the very top of India's strategic priorities. Geography alone should have made this happen long ago.

• India's approach to the current war suggests that Delhi will no longer treat the Gulf as a peripheral region.

• The First Anglo Afghan War (1839-42) was the decisive collision between these two schools. The Ludhiana School prevailed in policy, pushing the Raj into Kabul to install a friendly ruler. The catastrophic retreat from Afghanistan vindicated the Bombay School's scepticism about continental adventures. Yet the Ludhiana logic proved resilient. As the Raj consolidated the Punjab and fretted about Russian expansion, the Ludhiana School entrenched itself.

• The revival of the Bombay School does not mean India can ignore the challenges on its northwestern marches. The enduring hostility with Pakistan remains real. The task for Delhi is not to choose between maritime and continental imperatives but to integrate them — to anchor maritime India firmly in the Gulf while maintaining credible military deterrence on the land frontier.

Do You Know:

• The story begins in the late 18th century, when the British Raj, newly ascendant in the Subcontinent, confronted a dramatic external shock: Napoleon's conquest of Egypt in 1798. His ambitions in the eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East exposed the vulnerability of the Indian empire's western approaches. The result was the birth of the "Great Game", the prolonged contest between Britain and its European rivals for influence across the territorial arc from the Levant to the Hindu Kush. Out of this crucible emerged two distinct strategic visions. Both saw the

need for defending India well beyond its territorial borders. They diverged on questions of geographic focus and policy instruments.

• The Bombay School, shaped by the commercial dynamism of the emerging Parsi and Gujarati capitalists operating in the space created by the empire in western India and the Arabian Sea, saw India's security beginning at sea. Its leading figures — John Malcolm and Mountstuart Elphinstone — viewed Persia and Arabia as the natural outer ring of India's defence.

• The Ludhiana School — where the East India Company agents were located before gaining full control of the Punjab — was continental in orientation. Figures such as Henry Lawrence, John Lawrence, and Claude Wade operated in a world shaped by tribal politics, feudal forces, and shifting alliances in the effort to prevent European penetration through Central Asia and Afghanistan.

GLOBAL CONCERNS VS NATIONAL INTEREST: WHY INDIA LOST INTEREST IN HOSTING COP33

It was in December 2023, during the COP28 climate meeting in Dubai, that Prime Minister Narendra Modi offered to host the 2028 edition of this annual meeting in India. A public and explicit offer to host a COP meeting, five years in advance, and that too from a head of state, was extremely rare, and was a clear indication that India was looking to play a more active role in international climate affairs, and take a leadership role.

Key Takeaways:

— India's own positions on climate related issues evolved significantly during this time, and it became increasingly evident that as host and president of a COP meeting, it would have to champion causes that could come in conflict with its own stated positions and national interest.

— As a result, India has decided not to pursue this matter any further and not bid for COP33 when the time comes, later this year, to begin the process for picking up the host for 2028.

— There has been growing acknowledgment of the fact that the international climate regime, represented by the Paris Agreement, continued to remain heavily stacked against developing countries, particularly a country like India which has a large emission footprint but a compelling need for more carbon space to ensure greater prosperity to its people.

— Consequently, in matters of climate and energy policy, there has been a clear attempt by India in the last few years to prioritise long-term national interest over global climate concerns.

— India even began questioning the very foundations of Paris Agreement, arguing that pursuing an arbitrarily-defined temperature goals (1.5 or 2 degree Celsius targets) was probably not the best way, and certainly not the only way, to deal with climate change.

— India had begun to argue for a development-first approach, hoping to get on a trajectory similar to that of China, which in the last three decades unabashedly prioritised growth and development to reach a position from where it can make meaningful contributions on climate without hampering its national interests.

— India has been pressing for the full implementation of Article 9.1 of the Paris Agreement, a largely overlooked finance provision that states that developed nations "shall provide", not just 'mobilise', financial resources for developing countries.

— On India's insistence, the COP30 meeting in Brazil last year was forced to establish a two-year work programme to discuss all pending matters on climate finance, including Article 9.1.

— Having taken these positions, it would have been extremely difficult for India to steer the negotiations at COP33. The host and president of the COP meetings is expected to champion the effective implementation of the Paris Agreement, not question its core foundations.

— This predicament would have been particularly pronounced in COP33 because that meeting is due to carry out the second Global Stocktake (GST) to assess the progress being made on Paris Agreement targets.

— GST is an important exercise set up under the Paris Agreement , to be carried out at five-year intervals, to ensure that the world does not lose sight of its goal and adjusts the ambition of its climate actions to achieve these.

— The first GST was held at COP28 in Dubai and the second one is due in 2028. Considering that the world is currently nowhere close to the pathway that will achieve the Paris Agreement targets, COP33 would need to deliver an outcome that would result in substantial increase in climate ambition, an unlikely scenario.

— As host and president, it would have been India's responsibility to get such an outcome delivered. India's own positions and actions would have come under greater scrutiny.

— The under-preparation seventh assessment report (AR7) of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) worsened India's predicament. Work on AR7 began last year and it is due to be published in 2029.

— But there are demands from some countries to expedite the publication of the main report, and its summaries, by 2028 itself, so that it can feed into the GST process.

— India, along with some other countries including China, have been opposing an early publication of the IPCC AR7 report, arguing that many developing countries, with fewer resources, would have lesser time to review the report.

— India's opposition to the early publication, however, appears motivated mainly by concerns that it will increase pressure on countries like itself to do more on climate. As host and president of the COP supervising the GST process, it would be difficult for India to oppose the early publication. It would be seen as an obstructionist approach.

Do You Know:

— The 30th edition of the Conference of the Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP30), the annual two-week climate talks, was held in Belem, Brazil in November 2025.

— The Presidency has framed the conference as the "implementation COP,"—was meant to focus less on what the world must do, rather on how to make it all happen.

— The conference ended with the adoption of the Belem Political Package. However, the final statement diverged significantly from the earlier draft by removing references to a fossil fuel phase-out and instead focusing on a two-year process to negotiate climate finance, including Article 9.1 obligations. India has welcomed the key outcomes from the conference.

— The Paris Agreement obligates the developed nations to both "provide" finance (Article 9.1) as well as "take the lead in mobilising climate finance" (Article 9.3) for developing countries. These two are related but independent obligations. One does not negate or take precedence over the other.

— Turkiye will be the host country of COP31 next year. Australia and Turkiye both expressed their interest in hosting the COP31. Interestingly, the host for COP is not decided by vote. It has to be a consensus decision. That means one of the candidates has to eventually withdraw.

SINGED BY CASH AT HOME SCANDAL, JUSTICE VARMA QUITS, ENDING IMPEACHMENT PROCESS

Justice Yashwant Varma, judge of the Allahabad High Court, who is facing impeachment proceedings over the alleged discovery of burnt cash from his Delhi residence last year, has resigned from office.

Key Takeaways:

— With Justice Varma's resignation — via a letter addressed to President Droupadi Murmu — the investigation by a Lok Sabha committee under the Judges Inquiry Act, 1968 also comes to an end, preventing what could have been the first impeachment of a judge of a constitutional court.

— Upon resignation, a judge is entitled to the same pensionary benefits as a judge who superannuates from service. Justice Varma was due to retire in 2031.

— With his resignation, the future course of action over allegations levelled against him enters uncharted territory. Legal experts said that resignation is a step towards foreclosing a possible impeachment motion.

— This is not the first time that a judge facing allegations has opted to resign from office. In 2011, the Sikkim High Court Chief Justice P D Dinakaran resigned from office, expressing "lack of faith and confidence" in the three-member committee examining complaints against him.

— However, while the threat of an impeachment motion ends, other legal methods could still be looked at by the government but that may require assent of the judiciary. For any court to take cognisance of an offence by a judge (for actions from the time that he held office), the Chief Justice of India would be required to grant sanction for prosecution.

Do You Know:

— The process of impeachment of a judge of the Supreme Court is laid down in Article 124(4) of the Constitution of India. Article 218 says the same provisions shall apply in relation to a judge of the High Court as well. Article 124(4) states that a judge can be removed by Parliament through a laid-down procedure on only two grounds: "proved misbehaviour" and "incapacity".

— A Judge of the SC or HC is removed from office when at least two-thirds of those "present and voting" in both Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha vote in favour of removing the judge. The number of votes in favour must be more than 50% of the "total membership" of each House. If Parliament passes such a vote, the President will pass an order for the removal of the judge.

THE EXECUTIVE OFFICE WITHOUT A LIMIT

India has developed a convention limiting a third presidential term, but the Constitution places no such restriction on the Prime Minister's tenure. With Prime Minister Narendra Modi completing 8,931 days in office, this asymmetry invites closer scrutiny.

On March 22, 2026, Narendra Modi completed 8,931 days as head of an elected government in India, combining over thirteen years as Chief Minister of Gujarat (from October 7, 2001 to May 21, 2014) with three consecutive terms as Prime Minister. The milestone surpassed the record of Pawan Kumar Chamling, who served as Chief Minister of Sikkim for 8,930 days. Neither the congratulations from within the ruling dispensation nor the alarm from its critics engages the constitutional question the milestone makes unavoidable: why does India's Constitution impose no limit on how long a single individual may hold the office that wields actual executive power?

India is unusual among large democracies in this respect. The United States adopted the Twenty-Second Amendment in 1951, responding to Franklin Roosevelt's four consecutive terms. South Korea, Brazil, Colombia, and Indonesia all impose presidential term limits. Among parliamentary democracies, the question is considered less urgent because the Prime Minister serves at the confidence of the legislature. But this theoretical availability of removal is what requires scrutiny in the Indian context.

Constituent Assembly's rationale

The Constituent Assembly's reasoning was articulated by B.R. Ambedkar in his speech of November 4, 1948 introducing the Draft Constitution. Ambedkar drew a distinction between "the daily assessment of responsibility," available through questions, no-confidence motions, and adjournment motions, and the "periodic assessment" offered by fixed-term elections. The daily assessment, he argued, was far more effective. No term limit was needed because the legislature's confidence served as a rolling check.

What the Tenth Schedule broke

The Fifty-Second Amendment (1985) inserted the Tenth Schedule, providing for the disqualification of any legislator who votes against the party whip. The Supreme Court in *Kihoto Hollohan vs. Zachillhu* (1992) upheld its constitutionality as a measure to protect the integrity of the electoral mandate. But the Tenth Schedule fundamentally altered the relationship between legislature and executive that Ambedkar had relied upon. Under the anti-defection regime, a ruling-party member who votes against the government on a confidence motion faces disqualification. The no-confidence motion becomes a dead letter whenever the ruling party has a working majority.

Nor does the British safety valve operate in India. Indian political parties have no institutionalised mechanism for leadership challenges. The anti-defection law locks legislators into party loyalty; the absence of intra-party democracy locks the party into loyalty to its leader.

The comparative evidence

Tom Ginsburg, James Melton, and Zachary Elkins, in their study of executive term-limit evasion, showed that leaders in multiple regions have sought to extend their tenure through constitutional amendment, replacement, or judicial interpretation. Ginsburg and Aziz Huq further argued that democratic decline more often proceeds through incremental institutional decay than through

sudden authoritarian rupture. India has not needed to abolish a term limit because it never had one. The question is whether the absence of a formal constraint, combined with the neutralisation of parliamentary accountability, produces the same structural risks that term limits elsewhere are designed to prevent.

The presidential irony

India has developed a convention against a third presidential term, though the presidency is largely ceremonial. No President has served more than two terms. The expectation satisfies the three-part test for constitutional conventions laid down by Ivor Jennings in The Law and the Constitution (1959): precedents exist, the actors believed themselves bound by a rule, and the rule has a reason. The office that holds no real executive power is constrained by convention. The office that holds virtually all executive power is constrained only by the electorate's periodic verdict, with the anti-defection law largely disabling other accountability mechanisms.

The strongest counter-argument is that voters have endorsed Mr. Modi's tenure three consecutive times, and that a term limit would override their expressed preference. The objection is serious; a term limit is, in a real sense, anti-democratic. But it rests on the premise that Ambedkar relied upon: that periodic elections, combined with parliamentary accountability, suffice to discipline executive power. If that accountability has been structurally impaired by the Tenth Schedule, elections must carry a heavier burden. And elections, however free, are a weak constraint on the compounding advantages of prolonged incumbency: control over appointments to regulatory bodies, the Election Commission, and the higher judiciary; the capacity to shape the information environment; and the ability to calibrate policy for electoral benefit across multiple cycles.

What might be done

The more natural reform is to restore the mechanism the framers relied upon. Exempt votes on confidence motions from the Tenth Schedule's disqualification provision, so that legislators can remove a government without forfeiting their seats. A more ambitious possibility is a constitutional amendment limiting consecutive terms as Prime Minister or Chief Minister, while permitting a return after a gap. The State-level dimension is equally pressing, given the extended tenures of leaders such as Jyoti Basu, Naveen Patnaik, and Pinarayi Vijayan.

The 8,931-day milestone forces attention to whether India's parliamentary system retains the self-correcting capacity the framers relied upon.

KARNATAKA LAW AFFIRMS ABSOLUTE RIGHT OF ADULTS TO CHOOSE PARTNERS

On December 21, 2025, 19-year-old Manya Patil, who was seven months pregnant, was beaten to death in Karnataka's Dharwad district by her father and other relatives for having married a Dalit boy against their wishes. The incident shook the state, prompting the state government to come up with a landmark legislation: The Freedom of Choice in Marriage and Prevention and Prohibition of Crimes in the Name of Honour and Tradition Bill, 2026 (Eva Nammava Eva Nammava Bill) to curb honour killings.

Key Takeaways:

• Passed during the state legislature's recently concluded Budget session, the Bill now awaits the Governor's assent.

• Prominent among the features of the Bill, also known as the Eva Nammava Eva Nammava ("They are our own people") Bill, is the freedom of choice in marriage.

• The Bill makes it clear that consent of parents, family, caste, or clan is not required once two adults decide to marry. It criminalises acts of violence, intimidation, or harassment committed against the couple, and imposes various penalties for the same. It also provides legal support for such couples to pursue their relationship.

• In short, the legislation affirms that adults have the absolute right to choose their partners.

• The Bill stipulates the formation of Eva Nammava Vedike, a district-level body comprising officials and experts to help solemnise inter-caste marriages. It will be headed by the Deputy Commissioner and will offer counselling services for the couple. The Bill also provides for the establishment of special fast-track courts to try cases pertaining to such crimes.

Do You Know:

• Caste remains a dominant factor in several parts of Karnataka. Several villages remain divided along caste lines, especially in the state's backward regions.

• According to data, around 15 cases of honour killings were reported in Karnataka over the past five years. While there have been sporadic instances of violence against inter-faith couples — perpetrated by dominant communities such as the Vokkaligas and the Lingayats — three cases were reported in 2025.

HOW DID THE 'AMARAVATI BILL' COME INTO PLACE?

As Parliament passed a law last week recognising Amaravati as the capital of Andhra Pradesh, Chief Minister N. Chandrababu Naidu scored a decisive political victory. When he broke ground for Amaravati on June 6, 2015, it was not without controversy. About 217 square kilometres of fertile farmland along the Krishna river were envisaged to be consolidated for a capital city that Mr. Naidu hoped would rival Hyderabad — a city on which he had expended considerable political and administrative capital. Trouble came early. Those lands supported thriving agrarian communities, dominated by Kammas — a powerful landholding community to which Mr. Naidu belongs and which forms a key support base of the Telugu Desam Party (TDP). The process was routed through the Land Pooling Scheme (LPS), seen by critics as a way to circumvent the 2013 land acquisition law. The LPS, however, found acceptance among landowners, who were promised annuities for 10 years and developed residential and commercial plots. But agricultural labourers received only modest monthly assistance — initially ₹2,500 — along with limited skill-development support. Environmental concerns and perceptions that Rayalaseema and north coastal Andhra were being neglected added to the resistance.

The story so far:

On April 2, Parliament passed the Andhra Pradesh Reorganisation (Amendment) Bill, 2026, to recognise Amaravati as the sole and permanent capital of Andhra Pradesh. There was broad political consensus regarding the passing of the Bill, with even the principal Opposition party, the Congress, extending support to it. Only the YSR Congress Party (YSRCP), which had earlier proposed a three-capital plan for the State, opposed it.

What is the background of this Bill?

The undivided State of Andhra Pradesh was bifurcated in 2014 with the passing of the Andhra Pradesh Reorganisation Act, 2014. This facilitated the creation of the State of Telangana and residual Andhra Pradesh. The Act specified that Hyderabad could be used as the capital by both the States for a period not exceeding 10 years, after which Andhra Pradesh had to establish its own capital.

After the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) came to power in Andhra Pradesh in 2014, Chief Minister N. Chandrababu Naidu declared that Amaravati would be the new capital of the State and moved his administration out of Hyderabad. However, the project fell into a limbo after the YSRCP came to power in 2019 and proposed three capitals instead: Visakhapatnam as the executive capital, Amaravati as the legislative capital, and Kurnool as the judicial capital.

In March 2022, a three-judge Bench of the Andhra Pradesh High Court ruled that the capital could not be shifted out of Amaravati, primarily on the ground that the State lacked the legislative competence required to reverse a policy decision taken in 2014-15. The YSRCP government challenged the High Court judgment in the Supreme Court by filing a Special Leave Petition (SLP).

The SLP was pending when the NDA returned to power in the State. The Naidu government filed an affidavit in late 2024 in the apex court, affirming its commitment to develop Amaravati as the capital. The SLP, filed by the YSRCP government, is in the process of being withdrawn, in alignment with the present government's vision of building a greenfield capital.

What does the Bill say?

On March 28, 2026, the Andhra Pradesh Legislative Assembly adopted a resolution requesting the Union government to grant statutory recognition to Amaravati as the State's sole capital. The resolution sought an amendment to Section 5 of the Andhra Pradesh Reorganisation Act, 2014, to explicitly name Amaravati as the capital and end the ambiguity caused by previous three-capital proposals. Following the request, the Union government introduced the Andhra Pradesh Reorganisation (Amendment) Bill, 2026.

As mandated by Section 5 of the Andhra Pradesh Reorganisation Act, 2014, Hyderabad served as the joint capital for Telangana and Andhra Pradesh for a decade starting June 2, 2014. This arrangement concluded on June 2, 2024, after which Hyderabad became the exclusive capital of Telangana, leaving Andhra Pradesh to establish a new capital.

The new Bill seeks to declare and notify Amaravati as the sole capital city of Andhra Pradesh with effect from June 2, 2024, by inserting the words "at Amaravati" to Section 5(2) of the 2014 Act and adding the phrase "and Amaravati includes the capital city areas notified under the Andhra Pradesh Capital Region Development Authority Act, 2014" to the explanation to Section 5.

Why amend the Andhra Pradesh Reorganisation Act, 2014?

Amending the Act is essential because the genesis of the capital of the successor State of Andhra Pradesh lies in this Central legislation. Amaravati needed to be explicitly recognised as the capital with statutory backing. The State government believed that the only way to prevent a future dispensation from shifting or splitting the capital was to amend the Act.

Why has the YSRCP opposed the Bill?

YSRCP MPs said they were not opposed to the Bill declaring Amaravati as the capital, but were unhappy with its "present form," as it allegedly ignores unfulfilled promises, especially with regard to the Land Pooling Scheme. This involves the voluntary contribution of land by farmers in exchange for smaller, developed, and high-value plots, making them partners in the development process. The YSRCP has argued that the interests of farmers who had parted with land for the capital project remain unaddressed. Party member P.V. Midhun Reddy said a clear timeline must be provided for compensating farmers and incorporated into the Bill.

SYSTEMIC RECKONING

Delivery of justice to hapless victims of police brutality requires a combination of an actively engaged judiciary, the courage of victims and witnesses to speak out against the khaki fraternity, and a determined investigation to assemble irrefutable evidence. All these factors perfectly aligned to uncover the truth behind the custodial killing of an innocent trader, Jayaraj, and his son Benicks, who were tortured at the Sattankulam police station in Thoothukudi, Tamil Nadu, six years ago. Relying on the CBI's scientific evidence, despite early attempts to destroy it, a trial court in Madurai has now convicted all nine policemen arraigned in the case. A tenth accused had died earlier of COVID-19. While the awarding of the death penalty to the convicts militates against the principle of rehabilitative justice, the conviction sends a strong message to those in uniform who assume the power to wield force against unarmed citizens as if it were a statutory right. This case might have passed off as yet another suspicious custodial death but for overwhelming evidence of torture and public outrage. The police picked up Jayaraj on false charges of violating lockdown conditions during the pandemic, and Benicks was detained later when he confronted them for assaulting his father. The two men were stripped, brutally beaten overnight, and even forced to clean their own blood with their clothes. After registering an FIR on trumped-up charges, the injured men were produced before a government doctor, who dubiously issued a "fit for remand" report. The jurisdictional magistrate too mechanically remanded them to judicial custody, ultimately leading to their deaths.

That the policemen felt entitled was evident when a Judicial Magistrate found the atmosphere at the station hostile and "intimidating". Justices P.N. Prakash and B. Pugalendhi of the Madurai Bench of the Madras High Court, having taken *suo motu* cognisance, in an extraordinary direction, asked revenue officials to take control of the station to safeguard evidence. The turning point came when a head constable, Revathi, testified against her colleagues. The CBI established that blood samples recovered from the station matched the victims' DNA, while call data records confirmed the presence of both the victims and the accused at the time of the crime, sealing the case. The trial court appears to have applied uniform proportionality in assigning culpability to all accused. This may not withstand scrutiny in higher courts, as seen in the Rajiv Gandhi assassination case, where the Supreme Court, in 1999, upheld the death sentences of only four of the 26 convicted by the TADA court. Nonetheless, the convictions should help sensitise the police force that excesses will not go unpunished.

'OPPOSITION FAILED

Rajya Sabha Chairman C.P. Radhakrishnan and Lok Sabha Speaker Om Birla rejected notices moved by the Opposition MPs seeking the removal of Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) Gyanesh

Kumar, holding that the Opposition failed to provide proof and the allegations levelled against him did not establish a *prima facie* case of "misbehaviour" as required under the Constitution.

A detailed 17-page order issued by the two presiding officers said the charges either lacked proof related to matters already adjudicated or were currently under judicial scrutiny. While the issues raised may be pertinent for political debate, the order noted that they did not meet the "high constitutional bar" necessary to initiate removal proceedings under Articles 324(5) and 124(4) of the Constitution or the Judges (Inquiry) Act, 1968.

The notices, submitted on March 12, were signed by 63 Rajya Sabha and 130 Lok Sabha members and contained seven charges against the CEC. Each charge was examined and rebutted in the order.

Dismissed charges

On the allegation that Mr. Kumar's appointment was "tainted" as the law governing his selection under the Chief Election Commissioner and Other Election Commissioners Act, 2023 was under challenge in the Supreme Court, the Chair said the pendency of a constitutional challenge did not amount to misbehaviour. The claim that Mr. Kumar's previous postings reflected "deep executive embeddedness" was dismissed, with the order noting that many former CECs had similar administrative background without any presumption of bias.

Another charge, that the Election Commission applied different standards to the government and the Opposition, was rejected for lack of "clear demonstrable evidence" of abuse of authority. The Chair underlined the "sensitive and delicate" nature of the commission's constitutional functions.

Allegations that the commission obstructed investigations into alleged electoral fraud by refusing to share information with State authorities were also dismissed. The order noted that once a First Information Report is registered, the appropriate remedy lies before a competent court. Even if such refusal were assumed, it could not constitute grounds for the CEC's removal.

Similarly, the refusal to provide machine-readable electoral rolls to political parties was held to be in compliance with Supreme Court directions and consistent with the fundamental right to privacy recognised in the *Puttaswamy* judgment. The charge failed to cite any specific violation of electoral law, it said.

Several charges related to the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls in Bihar and its proposed nationwide expansion. The Chair observed that the EC has plenary powers under Article 324 and that the SIR exercise has been extensively considered by the Supreme Court, which has affirmed the commission's competence. Judicial directions aimed at improving transparency and fairness could not be construed as evidence of misbehaviour, particularly when the matter remains *sub judice*.

The allegation of contempt of court for non-compliance with the Supreme Court directions was also rejected.

PRESIDING OFFICERS BYPASSED PARLIAMENT IN REJECTING CEC REMOVAL NOTICE: INDIA

Criticising the decision of Lok Sabha Speaker Om Birla and Rajya Sabha Chairman C.P. Radhakrishnan to reject the notice submitted by 193 Opposition MPs seeking the removal of Chief

Election Commissioner Gyanesh Kumar, INDIA bloc leaders on Wednesday said "collective parliamentary wisdom" had been bypassed.

They alleged that the presiding officers held a "mini-trial" of their own without revealing whom they had consulted before arriving at the decision.

Rajya Sabha MP and senior Congress leader Abhishek Manu Singhvi said the presiding officers were only required to form a "*prima facie*" view. "This means that they need to establish whether the notice is in order," he said.

Mr. Singhvi was joined by senior Trinamool Congress leaders Derek O'Brien and Sagarika Ghosh, senior RJD leader Manoj K. Jha, and AAP leader Sandeep Pathak, among others.

He explained that once such a notice is submitted, it has to be referred to an inquiry committee to probe the charges levelled. The committee then presents a report to Parliament, which takes the final call.

Mr. Singhvi said that if the Opposition's notice is not allowed to go beyond the presiding officer's table, there can never be an impeachment, and no one can be held accountable. "Instead of taking a *prima facie* view, the Chair has held a mini-trial. This is completely wrong," he added.

EC FAILED BENGAL VOTERS, SC SHOULD LOOK AGAIN

In September last year, when the Election Commission of India published the electoral roll for Bihar after a contentious exercise, apprehensions of mass disenfranchisement were put to rest. Nudged by the Supreme Court, the poll body released a list in which deletions were largely attributable to death, migration, and duplication. The process raised hopes that the EC had learnt its lessons — that future Special Intensive Revisions would be routine exercises in electoral hygiene. That hope has been belied in West Bengal. What has unfolded over the past three-and-a-half months is a troubling story of mass deletions, procedural opacity, and a system that, flying in the face of due process, shifted the burden of proof onto the very citizens it is meant to enfranchise. The numbers are stark. When the SIR began in December, West Bengal had 7.66 crore registered voters. The roll frozen on Monday lists only 6.77 crore — a fall of 11.62 per cent. Of the more than 60 lakh whose eligibility was under adjudication since February, as many as 27,16,393 — more than 45 per cent — will have no say in the Assembly elections. Most of them had fulfilled the documentation requirement. Democracy rests on the idea that every citizen has an equal right to choose their representatives. That principle has been compromised.

Yes, these 27 lakh citizens have a right to appeal. But the appellate process is cold comfort when elections are imminent. The window for redressal is too narrow, the machinery too overwhelmed, and as this newspaper has reported, people have been left in the lurch by appellate agencies. It was here that the SC's intervention was needed — especially on the foundational question of inclusion. The Court did engage: It allowed tribunals to accept fresh documents. But its Monday decision is disappointing. Its reasoning —"Appellate authorities will formulate a fair procedure…That may take a month, that may take even 60 days. We cannot, on that contemplation, allow some people because they were earlier mapped" — gives the EC the benefit of the doubt. It is, in effect, the Court's virtual acceptance of disenfranchisement in this electoral cycle.

This is a departure from the Court's own Bihar standard, where it pushed the Commission towards transparency, compelling it to own and justify its deletions. In Bengal, that sustained scrutiny was

absent when it mattered most. The EC has a storied record of reaching out to every voter, of erring on the side of inclusion. In West Bengal, with a process skewed against the voter and framed by a shrill rhetoric of illegal immigrants, lakhs fear disenfranchisement. Every valid voter deleted from the roll, everyone who now has to navigate the intimidating machinery of redressal, is a blot on the poll panel's record. The SC has always been the last line of defence for the citizen's franchise. That role is not diminished by a frozen roll or an electoral calendar. The Court needs to look again, not to reopen a process, but to ensure that no eligible citizen loses her vote because of institutional failure.

AS PUDUCHERRY VOTES, HOW ITS STATUS AS A UNION TERRITORY DIFFERS FROM DELHI, J&K

Despite its UT status, Puducherry has a legislative assembly and a chief minister. This is a distinction it shares with only two other UTs in India.

Key Takeaways:

• The Treaty of Cession, which established the de jure, or formal legal transfer, of the territories of Puducherry, Yanam, Mahe and Karaikal from France to India was signed on May 28, 1956. In practice, India enjoyed de facto or administrative control of Puducherry since November 1, 1954. However, this treaty was not legally ratified until August 1962.

• The administrative distinction of providing Puducherry with a legislature reflected India's commitment to the Treaty while continuing the French practice of maintaining Puducherry's representative assembly. This special status is enshrined in Article 239A, which provides for local legislatures and a council of ministers in Puducherry.

• The President also has the power to nominate members to the Puducherry Assembly, a provision that has had political implications in the past.

• Only two other UTs presently enjoy similar representative status: Delhi since 1992, and Jammu and Kashmir since 2019.

Do You Know:

• Union territories are governed under Part VIII of the Constitution, comprising Articles 239 to 242. This section entrusts the administration of UTs to the Indian President, via appointed administrators. Thus, most UTs, including Chandigarh, Daman & Diu and Dadra & Nagar Haveli, and the island territories of the Andaman & Nicobar and Lakshadweep, have no elected legislature, and are governed by administrators.

• However, the passage of the Government of Union Territories Act 1963 constituted Puducherry as a UT, and provided it with a legislature.

• Delhi was elevated to the status of National Capital Territory (NCT) under the Constitution (69th Amendment) Act, 1991, which came into force in 1992. The Act introduced Article 239AA, which provides for a legislative assembly, with the power to make laws on subjects in the State and Concurrent lists, barring public order, police and land.

• In 2019, Article 370 of the Constitution, which granted the erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir special status, was abrogated. In its place came the 2019 Jammu and Kashmir Reorganisation Act,

which bifurcated the former state into two UTs: Jammu & Kashmir, with a legislature, and Ladakh, without a legislature.

FOLLOWER-TURNED-WHISTLEBLOWER HELPS POLICE ARREST GODMAN

A devotee-turned-whistleblower says he has blown the lid on the sexual offences of godman Ashok Kharat and saved the lives of scores of women who were allegedly hoodwinked by the 67-year-old self-styled guru.

Mr. Kharat is currently lodged in police custody in a rape and black magic case. A Special Investigation Team (SIT) has been probing allegations against him in the high-profile case that has caused ripples in Maharashtra politics.

The SIT has been collecting evidence and recording witness statements.

Outside the ambit of the police probe too, allegations have been levelled by political leaders and social activists against Mr. Kharat for his alleged contacts with top politicians and bureaucrats in the State.

Speaking exclusively to *The Hindu*, Jaywant Miske (name changed) says he was an ardent follower of the self-styled godman till a few years ago. He would diligently serve him, take care of his daily chores, and bow before him, he says.

This subservient relationship went on till Mr. Kharat, he claims, allegedly sexually assaulted his then pregnant wife a few years ago. Mr. Miske took the call to keep tabs on the fake godman. Mr. Miske said he installed a CCTV camera in Mr. Kharat's office and recorded several videos of the conman's transgressions. Mr. Miske says he had worked in one of Mr. Kharat's offices for a few years, till he left the job after he got the recordings.

The follower recently turned a whistleblower as he gave the Nashik police a blow-by-blow account of the arrested conman's deeds. The CCTV recordings are key evidence in the police investigation.

Mr. Miske says he has done a "pious job" by turning a whistleblower in the matter. " I have saved thousands of Hindu women and girls. Had I not blown the lid off this exploitation ring, he would have still been worshipped as God by all the followers. He would have destroyed many more families, many women," he says, while claiming that Mr. Kharat had been involved in this racket since 1998.

Describing the ordeal his wife faced during her pregnancy, Mr. Miske says: "The *baba* [as he referred to Mr. Kharat] told me that an auspicious puja needs to be done in the seventh month of pregnancy. He asked me to call my wife to office. When she came, both of us went inside his cabin. In some time, he sent me out. After a while, my wife came out looking pale. She did not say a word and went home. That night, she told me that the *baba* was a terrible person and that he had done wrong things to her."

Thereafter, Mr. Miske started seeing Mr. Kharat in a different light, speaking to his client base, trying to understand in detail about his property dealings and financial holdings. He claims to have secretly installed the CCTV camera in Mr. Kharat's cabin that recorded over 100 instances of sexual transgressions within a month. Mr. Miske says there are 156 videos that have been recorded. The police have not put a number on the seized videos, but have said that there are more than 100.

Mr. Kharat had registered a complaint of extortion against Mr. Miske, while he has denied any involvement in it.

While registering the complaint, Mr. Miske says he was scared for his life. When he goes to the SIT, he worriedly asks the police officers if Mr. Kharat will come out of prison free. "Think of someone who has duped so many high-profile people. He was in direct touch with the Ministers, officers, and businessmen. What will it take for him to get someone like me killed? When the SIT asks me questions, I ask them if he will be able to walk out of that prison. I am scared for my life. But this [revelation] had to be done," he says, adding that he has been given police protection.

The police say that Mr. Miske's complaint and testimony form an important part of the case. "While Mr. Kharat is the villian, Jaywant Miske is the hero who put his life at stake to turn into a complainant".

IN ODISHA CLASHES BETWEEN POLICE & TRIBALS, BAUXITE MINING IN FOCUS

Clashes between rural tribal communities and police near Odisha's Rayagada district left at least 40 police personnel and 25 residents injured on Tuesday.

Key Takeaways:

• The immediate trigger for the violence was the construction of a 3-km approach road leading to the Sijimali bauxite mine in Kashipur, officials said. But the opposition to the road reflects a long-simmering discontent over the bauxite project, ever since the mine was handed over to Vedanta Ltd in 2023 through an auction.

• The project's approval has been contentious. The district administration has stated that Gram Sabhas (meetings comprising all adults in a village) were held in all eight affected villages on December 8, 2023, under the Forest Rights Act, and that the villages' residents gave their "unanimous approval". Vedanta has also submitted a proposal to the Centre, seeking clearances for mining.

• The residents, however, alleged that the Gram Sabhas were conducted fraudulently and their signatures were forged. They have held protests against the project over concerns that it would endanger their livelihoods.

• Vedanta, meanwhile, says it has received Stage-1 forest clearance from the Union government and is targeting commissioning the project next year. Stage-1 clearance is a conditional approval, where the company must comply with compensatory afforestation, deposit funds for diversion of forest land, etc.

Do You Know:

• Sijimali is part of the Eastern Ghats hill ranges and is interspersed with valleys. The bauxite reserve, spread over 1,500 hectares, covers Rayagada and Kalahandi districts. With an estimated reserve of 311 million tonnes of high-grade bauxite, Sijimali is located close to Vedanta's alumina refinery at Lanjigarh in Kalahandi district.

• Alumina is refined from bauxite ore and used to produce aluminium, which is instrumental in making everything from soda cans to aircraft. Aluminium's strength, lightness and conductivity allow for a multiplicity of uses. It is also the most abundant metal in the Earth's crust, and the third most common element, after oxygen and silicon.

• According to the Indian Bureau of Mines' 2022 Yearbook, Odisha alone accounts for 41% of India's bauxite resources, and was the leading producer in 2021-22, comprising about 73% of the total production. Beyond bauxite, Odisha has some of the richest mineral deposits in the country, including high-grade iron ore, coal, nickel, gemstones and graphite, together accounting for nearly 17% of India's total mineral reserves.

• Vedanta had earlier faced rejection in its bid to mine bauxite from the nearby eco-sensitive Niyamgiri hill, inhabited by the Dongria Kondhs, a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group which worships Niyam Raja as the God of the Niyamgiri forest.

• Vedanta and the state-owned Odisha Mining Corporation had formed a joint venture to mine the bauxite reserve for the Lanjigarh alumina refinery. The project ran into rough weather after the Centre refused Stage-II forest clearance in 2010 for diverting 660 hectares of forest land. In 2013, the Supreme Court ruled that the mining project required clearance from the Gram Sabhas. Later that year, all 12 Gram Sabhas rejected the plan.

ELASTIC RULES

The latest iterations of India's plastic waste management rules, announced on March 31, suggest that the government has hit a wall in its attempts to curb plastic waste collection and recycling. The Plastic Waste Management Rules, first introduced in 2016, have been amended periodically, reflecting a policy framework in constant evolution. The intent is to make companies that produce and use plastics invest in recycling plastic so that, ultimately, less plastic is wasted and dumped in landfills, rivers, oceans, and public spaces. The paradox is that the same qualities that have made plastic ubiquitous — adaptable to a near infinite range of consumer goods, easy to produce, accessible to the richest and the poorest, and flexible in a way that metal can never be — also make it near impossible to incentivise collection and reuse. This is why the Rules were necessary.

Since 2022, when the Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) regime came into force, producers, importers and brand owners — makers and users of plastic packaging and raw materials — were required to collect and process plastic waste equivalent to 35% of the plastic they introduced into the market in 2021-22, increasing to 70% in 2022-23 and 100% by 2024-25. The amendments of 2026 bring in new mandates. This time, companies must ensure that recycled content makes up a minimum (and increasing) percentage of their plastic packaging annually. For instance, producers, importers and brand owners must ensure that rigid plastic packaging (Category I) contains at least 30% recycled material, rising to 60% by 2028-29. There are also similar 'reuse' obligations. But, strangely, companies that fail to meet their targets in 2025-26, the gazette notification says, may carry forward the shortfall for up to three years, provided they make up at least a third of the deficit annually. In effect this means that the 2025-26 target can be met in 2028-29. Also, at present, there is no evidence or even a claim by the government that all companies are collecting 100% of their obligations. By the government's own responses to Parliament it hovers from 50%-60%, and yet there are no targets set for 2025 and beyond. This seems to suggest that the government has given up on pushing companies to collect or recycle plastic, or has shifted focus to having them use recycled plastic irrespective of how it is sourced. There are provisions on using 'trading certificates' that suggest the logic is to let market economics decide on what is an environmental problem. Without a proper reckoning of collection and recycling targets, the new targets on reuse, which are already elastic, risk being ignored, thus undermining the intent of the EPR regime.

OVER 4,600 OBJECTS PLACED IN ORBIT IN 2025 AFTER 315 SPACE LAUNCHES: REPORT

The year 2025 saw 315 successful space launches globally, with about 4,651 objects placed in orbit. According to the Indian Space Situational Assessment Report (ISSAR) for 2025 released on Wednesday, a maximum number of payloads were deployed during 2025.

The report stated that 4,651 objects were launched to orbits and 1,911 re-entered the atmosphere with a net annual growth of 74.5%.

27 satellites operational

With regard to the Indian space assets in 2025, eight satellites were launched and four rocket bodies were placed in orbit. The report said that 12 Indian objects re-entered the atmosphere.

It added that the IRNSS-1 D satellite was decommissioned 600 km above geosynchronous orbit.

In total, there are 86 Indian satellites in orbit of which 27 are operational, 23 are defunct (still in orbit), and 36 decayed.

Among the Indian rocket bodies, three Launch Vehicle Mark-3 (LVM-3) are still in orbit and five are decayed; four Small Satellite Launch Vehicles are decayed; four Geosynchronous Satellite Launch Vehicles (GSLV) are in orbit and 10 have decayed, and 42 Polar Satellite Launch Vehicles (PSLV) are in orbit and 19 have decayed.

The report also said that 563 and 519 orbital manoeuvres were carried out in low-earth orbit and geostationary orbit, respectively.

Fourteen collision avoidance measures were carried out in low-earth orbit along with four in geostationary orbit, the ISSAR report said.

HOW WILL GAGANYAAN ASTRONAUTS RETURN SAFELY TO EARTH?

The story so far:

The Gaganyaan crew module, which will host the Indian astronauts on their human spaceflight mission, will orbit the earth at about 7,800 m/s. When it re-enters the atmosphere, it will have to shed its kinetic energy. The atmospheric drag itself will be the primary brake, taking away most of its energy in a process called aerobraking. To further reduce the module's velocity for a soft landing, a multi-stage parachute system will be deployed once the module comes within 12 km of the ground. A typical recovery system includes all the items required to soft-land the module in sea or on land after aerobraking. This includes parachutes, locating devices to find out where the module has splashed down, and a system to ensure the module is pointing in a favourable direction in case it drops in the sea. For touchdown on land, apart from parachutes, the recovery system will fire braking motors to reduce the impact velocity before touchdown. The Russian Soyuz and Chinese Shenzhou modules are designed for terrestrial landing and use retro-rockets for braking.

Why do parachutes alone not suffice?

As the land is hard, touching down on land needs to be around 1-2 m/s. The module can, however, tolerate landing at around 7-9 m/s in the sea, as water is a natural energy absorber.

Land touchdowns also require vast, empty territories free of people or buildings, while offering easier crew recovery and quicker refurbishing of the module.

Sea landings are preferred by countries that lack large deserts or plains. However, it requires recovery ships, flotation bags, and specialised gear to keep the crew safe in rough waters.

Reducing a module's velocity to less than 2 m/s using parachutes alone is impractical due to the inverse-square relationship between speed and drag area. To slow a module from 7 m/s to 1 m/s, the parachute will have to be roughly 49x larger, incurring a large weight and volume penalty.

A parachute that large would also be difficult to deploy without tangling.

Why is the landing zone elliptical?

When a module returns to the earth, it doesn't aim for a bull's-eye but rather a large ellipse. This is because the module's kinetic energy is concentrated almost entirely along its flight track. At hypersonic speeds, minor fluctuations in atmospheric density or re-entry conditions like velocity can cause the module to over- or undershoot its target by hundreds of kilometres.

In contrast, energy available to make any significant path changes in a direction sideways to its track is very low and hence lateral deviations are minimal. The result is a landing footprint significantly elongated along the path of travel.

Once a module is in the water, recovery teams use predictive tracking, electronic signalling, and visual aids to find it. The module transmits its GPS coordinates and homing signals to satellites and aircraft and also releases a bright green fluorescent dye.

If the splashdown is at night or in low visibility, flashing from high-intensity strobe lights from the module will be used to locate it. To ensure it stands out against the deep indigo colour of the water, the module and its flotation bags are painted international orange.

How will the Gaganyaan crew module be recovered?

The Gaganyaan recovery operation will be led by the Indian Navy, plus other stakeholders. After the module is slowed by parachutes, it will splash down in the Bay of Bengal. Immediately after, the parachutes will be released to avoid any entanglement and the flotation bags will automatically inflate.

Once naval divers find and secure the module with a flotation collar and towing gear, it will be winched onto a ship's deck to safely extract the crew.

AT LONG LAST

The Prototype Fast Breeder Reactor (PFBR) in Kalpakkam, Tamil Nadu, achieving first criticality is a genuine cause for satisfaction, albeit a measured one. A Parliamentary Standing Committee reported this year that the project's final cost is ₹8,181 crore, more than twice the sanctioned amount. Criticality itself is at least 16 years behind schedule; the fast reactor fuel cycle facility is expected to be commissioned by 2029, over a decade late. Poor planning and flawed procurement, abetted by political insulation, are the causes of the delay. The PFBR is the first commercial-scale component of the second stage of India's nuclear power programme. Its purpose is to use spent fuel, after reprocessing, from the first stage, and depleted uranium to produce more plutonium. In the final stage, reactors will use plutonium and thorium as fuel. The programme's design is based

on India's abundant thorium deposits, but this sword cuts both ways. The nuclear establishment must also be scrupulous about the PFBR's performance as it is prepared for commercial operation, and admit mistakes or under-performance plainly. The goal is not to use thorium at any cost but to achieve energy security and self-sufficiency. If the economics of solar and wind power render the current nuclear power paradigm a poor allocation of scarce public capital, that finding should honestly determine policy.

Nuclear power contributes around 3% of India's electricity from 8.78 GW of installed capacity. The country has committed to becoming a net-zero economy by 2070 amid an energy demand growth that will be among the largest of any major economy over the next two decades. Nuclear power facilities are expected to consume 6% of the land area required for equivalent solar power generation per unit of electricity produced. Considering that India's biodiversity commitments depend on not converting green cover, nuclear power offers a non-trivial path forward. Breeder reactors are more fuel-efficient, and will also extend the fuel cycle and reduce dependence on uranium imports. The challenge is to realise these merits without squandering time and public money. This means fixing the problems that the PFBR throws up during commissioning, and proceeding with the planned FBR1 and FBR2 units at Kalpakkam based on lessons learned, without the opacity that has prevailed so far. The PFBR also comes online alongside the SHANTI Act, private nuclear power operations, the advent of small modular reactors, and a new liability regime. Now is an opportune time for India to revamp its regulatory regime. So far, the AERB and the DAE have reported to the Atomic Energy Commission, which is thus both the promoter and the regulator of nuclear energy. The government must resolve this administrative short-circuit before any new complexities arise.

WHY INDIA WANTS FAST BREEDER REACTORS

The story so far:

In an important milestone, the prototype fast breeder reactor (PFBR) at Kalpakkam achieved criticality on April 6. The term 'criticality' is familiar to India: over the decades, it has been associated with the slow and tedious successes of India's nuclear power programme. At the same time, in keeping with many terms in the nuclear vocabulary, 'criticality' is also often mistaken as an end goal. In reality, it is actually the first step.

What is criticality?

A nuclear reactor becomes critical when its chain reaction is able to sustain itself. That is, when an atom's nucleus undergoes nuclear fission, it releases neutrons that trigger at least one more fission reaction in the surrounding nuclei. Reactor engineers ensure this happens by controlling the composition of the fuel (the material whose nuclei undergo fission), how well the neutrons are able to 'access' more nuclei, and the temperature of the reactor. Once a reactor is critical, it also means it is in a kind of stable state. However, it does not mean that it is operating in a commercially viable way. That comes much later. After criticality, the operators keep the reactor running as it produces a low amount of power, for months if necessary, while they check if its operating parameters are within design limits. If an operator is sure that the parameters are, they can go to the next stage.

How do FBRs work?

Most of India's currently operating nuclear reactors are pressurised heavy water reactors (PHWRs). They are designed to support the fission of natural uranium. Natural uranium consists of 99.3% of uranium-238 and 0.7% of uranium-235. '235' and '238' denote the total number of protons and neutrons in the nucleus. In a PHWR, neutrons are introduced into the reactor, where a device called a moderator slows them down. This is necessary for the neutrons to cause uranium-235 to undergo fission. When it does, it releases heat, which the PHWR converts to electricity; a small amount of plutonium; and a few neutrons.

PHWRs are inefficient because only a small fraction of the fuel, around 1%, undergoes fission before it becomes unusable.

A fast-breeder reactor (FBR) is more efficient, achieving a fuel use rate of around 10% or more. Mainly, the fuel consists of plutonium, not uranium. The reactor core is surrounded by a 'blanket' of depleted uranium, like the unusable fuel produced by PHWRs. When a fast neutron bombards the blanket, the uranium nuclei are transmutated to plutonium nuclei, which are reprocessed as nuclear fuel. The plutonium-based fuel also uses the fast neutrons to undergo fission, releasing more fast neutrons.

What is India's three-stage programme?

The nuclear physicist Homi Bhabha is widely credited with conceiving India's nuclear programme in the first years of its independence. The programme has three stages. In the first stage, PHWRs will use natural uranium to produce plutonium and depleted uranium and electricity. In the second stage, FBRs will use the plutonium and depleted uranium from the first stage to produce even more plutonium and electricity. Finally, future nuclear reactors will use plutonium and thorium to produce electricity.

Bhabha came up with this programme because India has abundant quantities of thorium but only modest reserves of uranium.

And in this scheme, FBRs have been envisaged as a bridge between the initial step, to use what we have, and the final step, to complete the cycle and thus make India self-sufficient in nuclear power.

Why are FBRs challenging?

That an FBR is easier said than done would be a gross underestimate. The Indian government approved the PFBR more than two decades ago. It was designed by the Indira Gandhi Centre for Atomic Research and built by the Bharatiya Nabhikiya Vidyut Nigam, Ltd. The latter proved to be more challenging than first expected.

Among other features, the PFBR uses liquid sodium as coolant. Sodium becomes liquid at a higher temperature, and at higher temperature heat transfer is more efficient. Liquid sodium also does not need to be pressurised. However, it reacts violently with air and water, so the pumps, pipes, and tanks exposed to liquid sodium need to be perfectly sealed, with stringent leak detection protocols. Water-cooled reactors do not have such operational complexities, nor the additional cost.

India is also not alone in confronting these challenges. Japan's Monju Nuclear Power Plant suffered a sodium leak and fire in 1995, leading to long shutdowns; the plant eventually had to be decommissioned. The Superphénix in France was once the world's largest breeder reactor but it

was shut down as well, due to technical issues and high operating costs, which also fanned political opposition. Russia, however, has continued to maintain a small fleet of fast-breeder reactors.

In other words, operators have shown FBRs to be technically feasible but they are not yet economically feasible; they have also not won broader public acceptance. Aside from the costs of making them, they also demand rigorous oversight — which depends on both engineering excellence and the safety culture.

How has India pursued FBRs?

India is pursuing FBRs because, as discussed earlier, the three-stage nuclear programme prioritises long-term fuel security. Importantly, it is able to do so because India's nuclear sector remains largely driven by the state. Its decision-making structure is relatively insulated from the ruling establishment: the Department of Atomic Energy (DAE) reports directly to the Prime Minister's Office. As a result, as long as there has been political stability, India has been able to sustain nuclear projects across electoral cycles.

On the flip side, this insulation has reduced scrutiny of the nuclear power programme and protected it from the same pressure to deliver that assails other public sector enterprises like the Indian Railways and the National Highways Authority of India. Engineers have taken on projects with limited transparency on timelines and budgets. When one or both have slipped, the accountability has been spread across agencies. The PFBR's original cost was ₹3,500 crore. It came to ₹6,800 crore in 2019. The DAE also sought multiple deadline extensions. In 2020, it said the PFBR would be commercialised in October 2022. That milestone is still pending.

The economics of FBRs also remain uncertain. In addition to the aforementioned issues, the broader fuel cycle — especially the reprocessing of spent fuel and the fabrication of new fuel assemblies — will require its own infrastructure. And for this the nuclear establishment will have to set up new regulatory processes.

What next for the PFBR?

The PFBR will be operated at a low power level to check its behaviour in different operating conditions. Engineers will collect the data from these tests to inform decisions about raising the reactor's power output and refining safety protocols. Eventually, they will seek approval from the Atomic Energy Regulatory Board to operate the reactor in commercial mode.

This entails running the PFBR at or near its rated capacity to generate electricity for the grid on a sustained basis, with standard operating procedures and clear regulatory oversight. At this point in time, the reactor will also have transitioned from being experimental to a commercial power plant.

In parallel, the DAE will also develop fuel reprocessing facilities and plan for future FBRs. Once these aims are closer to being realised, the government and India will develop a clearer sense of whether the broader vision of a closed fuel cycle can be realised.

Do You Know:

This programme envisages a pathway to utilising India's abundant thorium reserves – found in coastal and inland placer sands on the beaches of Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Odisha, Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra and Gujarat, and in the inland riverine sands of Jharkhand and West Bengal – to generate electricity.

• Nuclear transmutation involves the conversion of a chemical element or isotope into another chemical element, with the numbers of protons or neutrons in the nucleus of the atom undergoing a change.

• The first stage entails the setting up of PHWRs and associated fuel cycle facilities, which is currently in progress. For the PHWR programme, the India-US civil nuclear deal has opened the doors for India to buy uranium for its domestic reactors, thus increasing the pace of its nuclear programme.

• FBRs enable the potential to harness the energy of natural uranium by over 60 times through multiple recycles. These breeder reactors are also crucial for enlarging the inventory of plutonium — produced after the first stage PHWRs — so that a much larger irradiation capacity to produce an isotope of Uranium (U-233) at scale for use in the third stage programme can be built up.

NEW MEASURE FOR HEAT STRESS REFRAMES CLIMATE CHALLENGE

The onset of climate change has fundamentally transformed the understanding of heat stress on humans. People in most parts of the world are not only experiencing warmer weather, but the rise in temperatures is also accompanied by changing moisture patterns. Humans are resilient to high temperatures, provided sweat can evaporate. However, when the air is saturated with moisture, sweat lingers on the skin, and the body's thermoregulatory system is put under duress. The combined effect of the two variables on human health is not totally unknown to medical science. The wet bulb approach, for instance, attempts to recalibrate temperatures by accounting for heat and humidity. A 35°C wet-bulb temperature is generally considered the theoretical upper limit of human endurance. A new study published in Nature Communications draws on recent episodes of intense heat and humidity to conclude that this safe limit could be much lower. A 31°C wet-bulb temperature can be unforgiving for the elderly and people who work outdoors.

The new understanding reframes India's climate challenge. Several cities routinely report heat indices that push human tolerance to its limits, even when wet-bulb temperatures remain below 35°C. The tragedy in Navi Mumbai, three years ago, when sun stroke claimed 13 lives even when the temperature, according to the Met department, was about 35°C, underlined the need to redraw the metrics of well-being during summer. However, planning has been slow to factor in the new imperatives. Concrete-dense neighbourhoods, sparse tree cover, and inadequate ventilation create "urban heat islands" where temperatures can be several degrees higher than surrounding rural areas. In such environments, nighttime offers little space to recover from the heat stress of the day. Heat thresholds are also shaped by social conditions. For construction workers, farm labourers, street vendors, and those who work in the gig economy, heat and humidity are occupational hazards.

In recent years, Indian cities have tried to draw up heat action plans. However, these plans are often based on dry-heat thresholds, and not the more dangerous combination of heat and humidity. Most of them are also not attuned to local idiosyncrasies. Protecting people from heat, humidity and rainfall requires granular knowledge. Dealing with a new form of heat will require joining several dots. India's cities do not have time to lose.

CLIMATE CHANGE RESHAPING DISEASE PATTERNS, STRAINING HEALTH SYSTEMS: REPORT

Climate change is emerging as a major public health threat in India, reshaping disease patterns, straining healthcare systems, and placing nearly 40% of districts at high risk from extreme weather events, according to a new report.

The report, *Under the Weather: India's Climate-Health Intersections and Pathways to Resilience*, by Dasra, a philanthropy fund organisation, highlights how rising temperatures, erratic rainfall, floods, and cyclones are no longer isolated events but part of a continuous cycle of disruption affecting health, livelihoods, and access to care across the country.

Changing disease landscape

Extreme weather events in India are increasing in frequency and intensity, bringing both immediate and long-term risks, the report notes. Floods trigger outbreaks of water-borne diseases such as cholera and hepatitis, while heatwaves lead to dehydration, heatstroke, and increased cardiovascular stress.

The report says climate change is altering how diseases spread. Warmer temperatures and shifting rainfall patterns are expanding the range of vector-borne diseases such as dengue and malaria into new regions. Areas that were previously unaffected, including Shimla, parts of Jammu & Kashmir, and the Himalayan foothills, are now reporting cases. The report also identifies Pune as a major dengue hotspot, with cases expected to rise further.

Non-communicable diseases are also linked to climate stress. Heat exposure has been associated with higher cardiovascular mortality, while worsening air pollution contributes to respiratory illnesses and chronic conditions. Climate change, the report says, is acting as a "health-risk multiplier", increasing both disease burden and pressure on healthcare systems.

Unequal burden

The impact is not evenly distributed. Vulnerable communities — including rural populations, informal workers, women, and children — face the greatest risks. These groups are often the least equipped to cope with climate shocks, deepening existing inequalities.

Extreme heat, for instance, reduces labour productivity and increases health risks for outdoor workers. The report notes that India lost an estimated 160 billion labour hours due to heat exposure in 2021.

Women and children face heightened risks from climate-related health impacts. The report notes that exposure to extreme heat is linked to a 16% increase in the odds of preterm birth during heatwaves, with risks rising further for every 1 degree Celsius increase in temperature.

Air pollution, particularly fine particulate matter (PM2.5), has been associated with hypertensive disorders in pregnancy, including pre-eclampsia, as well as increased gestational blood pressure. As infants and young children have limited ability to regulate body temperature, it makes them more prone to heat stress, dehydration, and respiratory illnesses.

Exposure to air pollution is also linked to low birth weight, asthma, and reduced lung function, the report says.

Climate disasters also disrupt access to healthcare. Floods and cyclones can damage hospitals, cut off roads, and interrupt the supply of medicines and vaccines. In remote areas, even a small disruption can leave communities without access to basic services.

Beyond direct health impacts, climate change is also affecting livelihoods and economic stability. Rising healthcare costs, loss of income, and reduced productivity are creating a cycle of vulnerability, particularly for those already at risk.

Efforts taken

Despite these challenges, the report highlights growing efforts to address the climate-health link. Over the past decade, India has begun to move from broad climate policies to more targeted approaches that recognise the connection between climate and health. Initiatives such as the National Action Plan on Climate Change and Human Health and State-level action plans are helping shape local responses. Heat Action Plans, which include early warnings and preparedness measures, are now being implemented in several cities and districts.

These efforts are helping communities adapt to both immediate shocks and long-term climate risks.

Challenges ahead

However, the report identifies several challenges, including a lack of local, disaggregated data linking climate events to health outcomes, limiting targeted interventions. Funding for adaptation remains constrained and skewed towards mitigation, while weak public awareness and fragmented data systems further hinder effective response.

The report calls for stronger collaboration between government, civil society, and the private sector, along with greater investment in local data systems and climate-resilient healthcare infrastructure. It also calls for placing health at the centre of climate policy, rather than treating it as a secondary concern.

MISSING LINK IN INDIA'S NATURAL-BIRTH STORY: MIDWIVES

In 2008–09, C-sections accounted for about 6.4 per cent of institutional births in India. By 2024–25, that figure had crossed 27 per cent. The WHO recommends 10–15 per cent as the optimal population-level rate.

• The maternal mortality ratio has fallen from 130 per lakh live births in 2014-16 to 93 in 2019-21, and over 33 years, maternal deaths have reduced by 86 per cent — against a global reduction of 48 per cent. These are extraordinary numbers. But it also shows us something sinister.

• The cost for a C-section in a small-town private hospital is roughly Rs 40,000, while in large cities it often crosses Rs 1,00,000. Deliveries account for 70 to 80 per cent of the earnings of private gynaecologists. Cultural factors compound this: In parts of India, many women prefer surgical delivery; some families request surgery to align with auspicious dates.

• The case against unnecessary caesareans is real. The immediate risks to the mother are well established: Infection, haemorrhage, adhesions, and complications in future pregnancies. Less widely known is that caesarean significantly increases the risk of scar endometriosis — a condition where endometrial tissue implants itself along the surgical wound, causing cyclical pain that can develop years after the birth.

• For the child, the science is more tentative. The disruption to gut microbiota at birth is real, but also partially reversible: Exclusive breastfeeding has been shown to restore it. The long-term signals are harder to dismiss: C-section children are more likely to develop respiratory tract infections, asthma, and obesity.

Do You Know:

• A trained professional midwife is not simply a substitute for an obstetrician at a normal birth. She is the person who holds space for a normal birth to happen — who recognises that labour is not a medical emergency, who supports a woman through it without the clock-watching and liability anxiety. Professional midwives are trained to identify risk conditions, and refer to specialists when medically indicated, making surgical intervention the exception, not the default.

• India took a right step with the Nurse Practitioner in Midwifery programme in 2018. Approximately 1,500 midwives have been produced to date, far fewer than the nearly 90,000 midwives we would need for the public-health system alone.

SEMAGLUTIDE IS OFF PATENT: WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR OBESITY IN INDIA?

GLP1 therapy has improved Rakesh's metabolic health, reduced his cardiovascular risk, improved his fatty liver and optimised his cholesterol and blood pressure. These, therefore, are not just weight-loss drugs: they are disease-modifying agents that target the root of metabolic disease.

GLP1 therapy has taken the world by storm in recent times. These drugs, which have been around for almost two decades now for the management of diabetes, gained popularity, when their indication expanded beyond diabetes, as anti-obesity/weight management drugs.

Obesity has been found to be the main reason for the increasing prevalence of diabetes in all populations. Therefore, targeting obesity seems to be the right strategy, especially at individual levels. GLP1 therapy, in that regard, has been a game-changer, transforming the management of both obesity and diabetes.

The Indian context

The growing burden of type 2 diabetes and metabolic disease, including obesity, in India, is a matter of grave concern. This is related to changing food habits, especially an increase in the consumption of fat, as well as sedentary lifestyles. Indians have a high risk of diabetes and cardiovascular disease, even with lower levels of generalised obesity due to what is known as the "thin-fat" phenotype. This means that even if not obese by overall body weight, Indians have higher body fat percentage and higher insulin resistance, thus increasing our risk for type 2 diabetes and lifestyle diseases.

Targeted therapies such as GLP1, combined with lifestyle changes, can play a crucial role in addressing this growing epidemic in India. GLP1 therapy, when used in the right individual, is a great option for the typical "insulin resistant" Indian. Through its actions, it can result in meaningful weight loss – reducing waist circumference and body fat and improving metabolic health.

On March 22, the originator company, Novo Nordisk's patent for semaglutide (the active ingredient) expired, and the floodgates opened. More than 50 companies in India have now launched semaglutide at almost half the price that multinational companies sold it at.

What does this mean for India? One of the biggest barriers for GLP1 therapy so far, the cost, may now be overcome. From ₹11,000 to ₹18,000 a month for a pen, the cost has now dropped to around ₹5,000 per month, making it more affordable and thus increasing access.

Who can take it?

GLP1 therapy has clear indications, as to who can use it and when.

Being primarily an antidiabetic agent, its use in type 2 diabetes is clear. In people without diabetes, these drugs have been approved for weight reduction. Here, they can be used in anyone with a BMI of over 27, suffering from obesity-related complications such as obstructive sleep apnea, diabetes, hypertension etc., or in a person with a BMI of over 30 without diabetes. This is a boon to many, in whom lifestyle changes alone do not suffice, and in fact, bridges the gap between lifestyle management and bariatric surgery for obesity management.

It is important to note that these drugs are not shortcuts and not for casual use or as cosmetic quick fixes.

Do they really work, and how?

The short answer is yes. But this also depends on two factors: pharmacogenomics, as each person's response to a drug may be different, and tolerability to the drug , which in turn determines compliance to taking it, and ease with dose escalation, as weight loss is best with higher doses.

GLP1 therapy, primarily works through natural pathways in the body, by regulating/suppressing appetite, delaying gastric emptying time and other mechanisms. Hence the response to the drug is largely dependent on each person's natural response. On an average, a good response would be between 10 to 15% of body weight loss from baseline weight.

As with any other drug, GLP1 therapy must only be used under medical supervision, by a certified health professional.

Side effects are mainly gastro-intestinal (due to the mechanism of action) and include — nausea, loss of appetite, burping and in some cases, diarrhea. However it is important to note, that these side effects are usually transient, and subside after the first few weeks. With medical guidance, these side effects can be mitigated to a large extent.

As far as safety is concerned, there is a rare association with pancreatic inflammation, thyroid tumours and rare case reports of eye complications. Proper guidance and monitoring are key to safe and effective use.

When one stops

If you lost a lot of weight through diet and exercise, and then stopped both, what would happen? You would potentially regain the weight. The same principle applies to GLP1 therapy.As with any intervention, stopping the drugs may cause a regaining of weight to some extent. This serves to illustrate the fact that obesity is a chronic, relapsing condition, requiring long-term treatment.

It is important to reiterate that GLP1 therapy is not a replacement to lifestyle changes or a shortcut for weight loss. It is only an add-on to lifestyle modifications, including diet and exercise.

Another factor to remember while on GLP1 therapy is that it is important to include strength training/muscle strengthening, and sufficient protein in the diet, so as to reduce muscle loss. A study found that the use of semaglutide, when combined with sufficient protein intake and resistance training, resulted in fat mass loss of 18%, and although lean body mass initially dropped, it was subsequently maintained and stabilised.

India is facing a growing epidemic of obesity and metabolic disease, including in the young population.

This looming crisis demands immediate attention and action. GLP1 drugs are one form of treatment and while exciting, there is an urgent necessity to tackle the problem on other fronts. We need to change food policies to reduce consumption of processed food and reduce fat content in marketed food products. Similarly, urban and town planning must be rejigged to encourage physical activity.

Obesity now is considered a chronic metabolic disease. While clinicians today have an effective tool, with GLP1 therapy enriching the landscape of options, the real question that remains is, will this translate into meaningful change in public health? Only time and our actions now, will tell.

DRAFT MASTER PLAN: TOURISM, INFRA PUSH FOR GREENFIELD CITY ON GR NICOBAR ISLAND

CITING TOURISM as the "backbone" for the growth of Great Nicobar Island and its primary economic driver, the Andaman and Nicobar Islands administration has outlined the proposed development of a greenfield coastal city that will rest on the pillars of an airport, a transshipment port, tourism and entertainment hub, and allied servicing industry.

Key Takeaways:

• The Public Works Department of the islands has sought suggestions and objections on the 'draft master plan for Great Nicobar Island Development Area – 2047', and as per sources, a notification to this effect has been published locally. The report did not specify which agency had prepared it.

• The draft master plan primarily focuses on the integrated township component of the Rs 81,000-crore Great Nicobar Island (GNI) mega infrastructure project.

• An international airport, a transshipment port at Galathea Bay, a gas and solar power plant and defence-related plans are the other key parts of the project that is proposed to make the island an economic and defence hub. A linear, multi-nodal urban corridor stretching around 35-km from north-south along GNI's eastern coast from Campbell Bay to Indira point has been proposed for urbanisation.

• Of the total 166-sq-km area required for all components of the GNI project, the new greenfield city will take up the largest chunk. This will comprise 9.51 sq km land for mixed-use development covering hotels, retail and offices; 8.68 sq km for parks and open spaces; 5.95 sq km for residential use and 1.12 sq km for industry.

• Agricultural land measuring 3.46 sq km has been conserved, with provisions allowing eco-resorts and farmstays alongside traditional coconut and areca nut cultivation.

• A big chunk of 66.53 sq km will be reserved as no-felling zone, as per conditions laid down by the Environment Ministry while granting clearances.

Do You Know:

• The islands' 8,000-8,500 odd population is spread over the seven revenue villages — Campbell Bay, Govind Nagar, Joginder Nagar, Vijay Nagar, Laxmi Nagar, Gandhi Nagar and Shastri Nagar — on the eastern coast. As part of the road development, a new trunk road is proposed.

• For economic growth, a tourism and entertainment hub, a port-linked finance hub, a wellness hub for promoting yoga, naturopathy and ayurveda, and a knowledge hub are envisaged. Singapore, Busan, Dubai and Hong Kong have been mentioned as reference points for the development of a finance hub to complement the port-linked activities. "The establishment of banking and insurance services will be essential to support port activities as well as meet financial services needs of the incoming population," the report said.

• Annual tourist arrivals are projected to grow from 98,000 in 2029 to 7.35 lakh by 2047 and over one million by 2055. To accommodate them, the draft plan proposes resort clusters and beachfront developments along six beaches, including a continuous six-km stretch near the proposed airport. A gaming and entertainment hub, wellness retreats, eco-tourism trails and community-run homestays are also proposed.

• The Greater Nicobar island is occupied by the Shompen and Nicobarese tribes. The project area falls near two national parks – Galathea Bay National Park and Campbell Bay National Park. The Greater Nicobar region is home to leatherback sea turtles and other important species such as Nicobar macaque, Nicobar megapode and saltwater crocodiles and rare and endemic plant species such as tree ferns and orchids. The project was given a go-ahead keeping in mind the strategic importance of the port to be developed.

ARREST THE GRIEF

The National Chambal Gharial Sanctuary in central India protects a lotic ecosystem across an area straddling three States. Its existence is crucial for the critically endangered gharial, the red-crowned roofed turtle and the endangered Ganges river dolphin. All three species depend on sand to survive, especially the river's sandbars and sandbanks. Yet, organised crime and state paralysis have been stealing away just that sand, prompting the Supreme Court of India to call the local sand-mining mafia "modern dacoits". The mafia erupted to meet the demand for sand during North India's construction boom, and has been able to exploit gaps in jurisdiction among the three States — Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, and Uttar Pradesh — despite the Court and the National Green Tribunal (NGT) banning the activity. State governments have also abetted this ploy by passing the buck on acting against the mafia. Between 2017 and 2024, tractor trolleys laden with illegally mined sand mowed down forest guards and police officers while miners also shot at police during raids. The police reported that miners had also begun using local villagers to track the movement of patrol vehicles using mobile apps and GPS. By 2023, reports indicated that mining syndicates in the Gwalior-Chambal region were using semi-automatic weapons, often outgunning the local forest departments.

Frustrated with having failed to staunch the bleeding, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan attempted to legalise sand mining in certain districts inside the sanctuary. Madhya Pradesh submitted proposals for limited mining in two districts but resistance from the NGT stalled its plans, and the State subsequently withdrew them. Rajasthan followed with a similar proposal in March this year only for the Court to block it. Traditional agriculture is difficult in the Chambal ravines, leaving many young men to turn to mining sand for a living. The mafia recruits them as foot soldiers,

leaving forest officials to face 'public anger' when they militate against the mafia. The Court took *suo motu* cognisance of Rajasthan's measure, with Justice Sandeep Mehta, last week, 'reminding' the State of the National Security Act and the State-specific Goonda Act. The Court's frustration is understandable. But given the recent troubled history of green governance, where it has played regulator, there is merit in the Court disciplining the regulator rather than replacing it. The lesson from Chambal's violent history is that force alone cannot quiet an economy feeding on grievance. Sweeping crackdowns will deepen local resentment and entrench the same social cover that sustains the syndicates. Lasting change will come only from restoring lawful livelihoods and credible, even-handed enforcement.

25 HIMALAYAN GRIFFON VULTURES DEAD IN UP

Around 2 pm on Tuesday, a villager living on the edge of the Dudhwa Tiger Reserve witnessed a rare sight of several Himalayan Griffon vultures circling his field — only to be shocked when the birds suddenly began collapsing.

Key Takeaways:

• By the time he alerted the forest department and teams reached the spot in Semariya village, in Gola tehsil of Lakhimpur Kheri district, 25 of the raptors were dead. Six were rescued.

• Officials said the area forest officer of Bhira range, range staff and a team, including veterinary officer Dr Hemant Kumar Singh from Bijua, carried out an inspection.

• Preliminary findings, they said, pointed to a suspected case of secondary poisoning. According to officials, rice laced with pesticides or some artificial chemical may have been left in the open, possibly to target stray dogs.

Do You Know:

• The raptor (Gyps himalayensis) is listed as 'Near Threatened' on the Red List of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN). Experts have said the Himalayan Griffon vulture is not an endangered species unlike oriental white-backed, slender-billed and lone-billed vultures.

• Himalayan Griffon vulture are migratory, adults live on higher reaches. They can live upto 40-45 years of age. Their large wingspan helps these vultures soar high in the sky searching for carcasses on the ground. By feeding on the carcasses, vultures prevent diseases from spreading to humans.

PHULE'S LIFE AND THOUGHT, A CONSTITUTIONAL PROJECT

As we mark the beginning of the bicentenary year of Mahatma Jyotirao Phule, born on April 11, 1827, he is rightly remembered as a social reformer, educator, fierce critic of caste, and pioneer of women's education.

Key Takeaways:

• Phule's life and thought can be understood as a constitutional project. Even if it did not produce a legal text, it reimagined the foundations of social order on the principles of equality, dignity, and the redistribution of power.

• Born into a Shudra community, Phule experienced firsthand the injustices of a graded society. Yet, what transformed experience into critique was his encounter with new intellectual resources.

• Reading English classic texts furnished him with a vocabulary through which he could begin to articulate claims of rights, equality, and justice. A transformational moment was his engagement with Thomas Paine's Rights of Man in 1847.

• Paine wrote that every individual possesses certain natural rights due to "his existence", and certain civil rights for "being a member of society". Paine also understood a constitution as a foundational structure of political power. A constitution is a "body of elements" containing the principles on which government is organised, with the ultimate purpose of promoting "the general happiness".

• Phule's subsequent interventions aimed at promoting the rights of all through institutional and structural efforts: The establishment of schools for women and oppressed castes, the opening of public wells to those deemed "untouchable", and advocacy for widow remarriage alongside a critique of child marriage.

• Phule was also a keen observer of global constitutional developments. In his seminal work Gulamgiri (Slavery), 1873, he situated the struggle against caste oppression within a transnational history of emancipation.

Do You Know:

• Mahatma Jyotirao and Savitribai Phule stand out as an extraordinary couple in the social and educational history of India. They spearheaded path-breaking work towards female education and empowerment, and towards ending caste- and gender-based discrimination.

• In 1840, at a time when child marriages were common, Savitri at the age of ten was married to Jyotirao, who was thirteen years old at the time. The couple later in life strove to oppose child marriage and also organised widow remarriages.

• Together, by 1848, the Phules started a school for girls, Shudras and Ati-Shudras in Poona. The historic work was started by Jyotirao when he was just 21 years old, ably supported by his 18-year-old wife.

• In 1853, Jyotirao-Savitribai opened a care centre for pregnant widows to have safe deliveries and to end the practice of infanticide owing to social norms. The Balhatya Pratibandhak Griha (Home for the Prevention of Infanticide) started in their own house at 395, Ganj Peth, Pune.

• Jyotirao and Savitri did not have biological children, and adopted the child of a widow. Yashwantrao grew up to be a doctor, rendering his services in the 1897 Bubonic plague.

The Satyashodhak Samaj (The Truth-Seeker's Society) was established on September 24, 1873 by Jyotirao-Savitribai and other like-minded people. The Samaj advocated for social changes that went against prevalent traditions, including economical weddings, inter-caste marriages, eradication of child marriages, and widow remarriage.

A HEARTH OF SUFISM

The Zool festival of Aishmuqam shrine of Baba Zain-ud-Din Wali is a procession of faith and light. Also known as the illumination or torch festival, the Zool is a centuries-old tradition held at the shrine in Anantnag district of southern Kashmir.

At this shrine, located on a hillock overlooking the road to Pahalgam, the famous tourist destination in Kashmir, the annual fire procession symbolises the victory of light over darkness while commemorating the 15th-century Sufi saint Baba Zain-ud-Din Wali, a primary disciple of the renowned mystic Sheikh Noor-ud-Din Wali, also known as Nund Rishi.

This year, the festival was celebrated on April 2.

According to local legend, the saint meditated in a cave at Aishmuqam that was once infested with snakes or, in some versions, terrorised by a demon. His spiritual power eventually cleared the cave, and local people celebrated this "victory of good over evil" by lighting torches.

The procession involves thousands of devotees carrying wooden torches, locally called *mashals* or *phrov*, crafted from special wood gathered from nearby forests. Before the festival, local people refrain from eating or selling meat for three days as a form of spiritual purification.

As the sun sets, a glowing river of fire snakes up the 100-step staircase leading to the hilltop shrine. Participants chant religious hymns and seek blessings, creating a spectacle visible for miles across Anantnag.

The event also marks the *Shab-e-Doum* (the second night of prayers) and serves as a traditional herald of spring and signals farmers to begin sowing paddy after the harsh Himalayan winter.

The Aishmuqam fire procession remains a powerful symbol of Rishi-Sufi culture, drawing people from various faiths to celebrate communal harmony and the enduring legacy of *Sakhi* (the Generous) Zain-ud-Din Wali.

WHAT TANTRA AND BHAKTI POEMS TELL US ABOUT MEDIEVAL INDIA

A tiny fragment of the Indian population was literate in medieval times. But a large portion knew poetry, composed poetry and transmitted poetry. These poems are thus major cultural outputs. In medieval times, about 1000 years ago, two kinds of poetry emerged: the Tantric Charyapada of eastern India and the Bhakti Alvar–Nayanar poetry of South India.

The Charyapada was composed roughly between the 8th and 12th centuries by Buddhist tantric teachers known as siddhas. The Tamil bhakti poets mostly belong to the 6th–9th centuries. Their hymns were later compiled into canonical collections such as the Nalayira Divya Prabandham and the Tevaram. The Charyapada, by comparison, is not a devotional canon in the same institutional sense but a scattered set of mystical songs preserved in a later manuscript.

This Charyapada verse by Luipada emphasises controlling the restless mind.

"The body is like the finest tree, with five branches.

Darkness enters the restless mind.

Strengthen the quantity of Great Bliss, says Luyi…

Learn from asking the Guru.

Embrace the wings of the Void."

Here is an example of Tamil Alvar poetry where the poetess Andal reveals her passionate longing for Lord Vishnu.

"If there is even mere talk of offering this,

my body to mortal men,

then I cannot live.

It is equal in violence to a forest jackal

stealthily entering and sniffing at the

sacrificial food."

Language and literary structure

The most striking difference lies in language structure. Tamil bhakti poetry uses a mature Dravidian literary language with established grammar, poetic conventions, and metres. Tamil literature had already developed sophisticated forms during the earlier Sangam period. The Alvar and Nayanar poets therefore write within a recognisable literary framework even when their tone is emotional and devotional.

The language of the Charyapada, by contrast, is linguistically unstable. It belongs to the transitional stage between Apabhramsha and early eastern Indo-Aryan languages. Grammar is simpler and less standardised. Many forms look like early Bengali or Assamese, but they are not yet fixed. In linguistic terms, the Charyapada reflects the birth of new regional languages, whereas Tamil bhakti poetry represents the continuity of an already established literary culture.

Clarity versus concealment

Another major contrast lies in clarity versus concealment. The Tamil bhakti poets speak openly and passionately about their devotion to Shiva or Vishnu. The hymns describe temples, rituals, sacred geography, and emotional surrender to a personal deity. Their language is meant to be heard and understood by a wide audience.

The Charyapada works very differently. Its poets deliberately use Sandhya-bhasha, or twilight language. Every day images conceal tantric teachings. A boat may symbolise spiritual practice, a woman may represent wisdom, and a house with nine doors may refer to the human body. This coded style reflects the secretive nature of tantric traditions, where knowledge was often transmitted only to initiated disciples.

Thus, the Tamil bhakti poets are communicative and public, while the Charyapada poets are cryptic and esoteric.

Social worlds and imagery

The social worlds reflected in the languages also differ. Tamil bhakti poetry often celebrates temple worship. The poets praise specific temples across Tamil Nadu and describe the deity residing there. Their songs helped create a sacred geography linking shrines such as Srirangam, Chidambaram, Madurai, and Tirupati. Over time, these hymns became part of the temple liturgy.

The Charyapada rarely refers to temples. Its imagery is drawn instead from village life – fishermen, hunters, farmers, boats, rivers, craftsmen, and wandering yogis. The language reflects a more marginal world of tantric practitioners moving between monasteries, forests, and rural communities.

Religious orientation

The religious tone also differs. The Alvars and Nayanars emphasise devotion, surrender, and emotional intimacy with God. Their poems are filled with love, longing, and ecstatic praise. The deity is personal and present in temple images.

In the Charyapada, the focus is not devotional worship but inner realisation. The language speaks of the body, the mind, and the transformation of consciousness. Even when the imagery involves men and women, food, or household activities, the meaning often relates to yogic processes or mystical insight.

The contrast between the two traditions therefore reveals two different pathways of religious vernacularisation in India. In the South, a mature regional language became the vehicle for public devotional religion centred on temples. In the East, a transitional vernacular became the medium for mystical poetry that circulated among small tantric communities.

Both movements demonstrate that by the early medieval period, the religious imagination of India was no longer confined to Sanskrit alone.

SHORT NEWS

VENEZUELAN CRUDE OIL

— India is likely to take delivery of around 10-12 million barrels of Venezuelan crude oil this month, the highest in over six years, according to data from commodity market analytics firm Kpler.

— The bulk of Venezuelan crude is classified as a heavy sour crude—heavy because it is thicker and denser than the lighter crude oil grades, and sour because of its high sulphur content.

— So, the amount of sulfur it contains determines whether it is sweet or sour. Sweet crude has very low levels of sulfur, well under 1%. Sour crude has as much as 1-2% of sulfur.

— Heavy sour crudes are usually notably cheaper than light sweet crudes, which means that the feedstock cost for the expensive-to-set-up complex refineries is much lower than that of a relatively less complex refinery that cannot handle heavy crude grades

— That is why the US continues to import significant volumes of the cheaper heavy crudes, while exporting its domestic light crude oil at a premium in the international market.

India — specifically private sector refining giant Reliance Industries Ltd (RIL) — was a regular buyer of Venezuelan crude prior to the imposition of US sanctions on Caracas in 2019. Following the sanctions, oil imports from Venezuela stopped within a few months.

According to India's official trade data, Caracas was New Delhi's fifth-largest supplier of oil in 2019, providing close to 16 million tonnes, or about 117 million barrels, of crude to Indian

refiners. The bilateral trade between India and Venezuela was $6.40 billion in 2019-20, of which Indian imports—primarily crude oil—were worth $6.06 billion.

JAPAN'S KABUKI THEATRE

— Handing down a name over generations is a central part of the Japanese traditional theater art of Kabuki, and that ceremony gets celebrated at theaters and special events every few years. Kabuki, dating to the 1600s, is still very much alive in modern-day Japan.

— The ritual is taking place with the eighth Kikugoro, who is having that honour passed down from his 83-year-old father, the seventh Kikugoro, who in turn got that name from his father.

— In the world of Kabuki, a stage name is handed down over generations in a family in a male-only hereditary system and carries a great responsibility and honour. A new successor must live up to the expectations for the style, spirit and skill that the stage name carries.

— Actors usually have three stage names during their Kabuki career as they mature. It is typically passed from father to son, the artform largely limited to Japanese men.

— Kabuki performances feature stylized dancing and makeup, powerful live music, and elaborate costumes and sets. Many popular storylines include star-crossed lovers, suicides and the pursuit of revenge.

— The Kabuki actors specializing in women roles are called "onnagata," while others like Kikugoro play both men and women.

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON SPACECRAFT MISSION OPERATIONS (SMOPS)

— The second edition of the International Conference on Spacecraft Mission Operations (SMOPS) was organised from 8-10 April, 2026 in Bangalore, India. The theme of the second edition of the International SMOPs Conference is "Innovative Operations for Smart and Sustainable Space Mission Management – Next Generation".

— The conference is organised by Isro, the Astronautical Society of India (ASI), and the International Academy of Astronautics (IAA).

DIRECTING TO STRENGTHEN FORENSIC SCIENCE LABORATORIES (FSLS)

— In a push to modernise India's criminal justice system, the Union Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) has issued comprehensive directives to chief secretaries of all states and UTs, directing them to strengthen forensic science laboratories (FSLs), fill vacancies, and clear backlogs within 90 days. The MHA has asked all the states to coordinate through the Directorate of Forensic Science Services (DFSS) and align with the new 'Naveen Sanhitas' – the trio of criminal laws replacing colonial-era codes.

SUBANSIRI LOWER HYDEL PROJECT

— Recently, Assam and Meghalaya have refused to purchase any power in excess of their allocated share from the Subansiri Lower hydro-electric project as this would "unnecessarily inflate their power purchase costs, a burden that ultimately impacts the end consumers."

— Subansiri Lower hydel project at Gerukamukh on the Assam-Arunachal Pradesh border was cleared in 2005.

— According to the Ministry of Environment and Forest, Subansiri River originates in Tibet and is the major right bank tributary of Brahmaputra traversing through Arunachal Pradesh.

— There are six major river basins in Arunachal Pradesh viz. Kameng, Subansiri, Siang (Dihang), Dibang, Lohit and Tirap with a large number of their tributaries draining the waters of vast catchment area into the Brahmaputra.

— At a meeting of the North Eastern Regional Power Committee (NERPC) last month, both states have also said they have already made adequate arrangements to meet long-term power needs.

— NERPC was established in 2005 under the Electricity Act 2003. It is a forum of the seven northeastern states for planning, development, and operation of the regional power sector.

RENEWABLE CAPACITY STATISTICS 2026

— As per the Renewable Energy Statistics 2026 published by the International Renewable Energy Agency (IREA), India is now ranked third globally in Renewable Energy Installed Capacity, surpassing Brazil.

— As per the Statistics, 2025 saw the largest increase in renewable energy capacity to date – with the addition of 692 gigawatts (GW) of renewable capacity – expanding the stock of renewable power by 15.5%. Solar power alone accounted for nearly three-quarters of renewable additions, with a record 510 GW added during the year;

while 159 GW of wind energy was added.

BITUMEN

— Road works under the Public Works Department (PWD), as well as major projects like Barapullah Phase III elevated corridor, have slowed down due to a rise in the price of petroleum-based products, including bitumen, triggered by the war in West Asia, The Indian Express has learnt.

— Bitumen, derived from crude oil, is mainly used as a binder in road construction, where it holds together materials like sand, gravel, and crushed stone to form asphalt. Waterproof, adhesive, and flexible, it helps roads withstand traffic load and weather conditions.

DELHI-DEHRADUN EXPRESSWAY: CRITICAL UNDERPASS RECORDS ITS FIRST WILDLIFE MOVEMENT

As Delhi-Dehradun expressway is set to be inaugurated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi on April 14, the Wildlife Institute of India (WII), in collaboration with National Highway Authority of India (NHAI), has recorded the first evidence of movement of animals like elephants, golden jackal and deers across one of Asia's largest wildlife elevated corridor in the project.

Out of the 213-km expressway, 12-km stretch near Dehradun is the animal underpass to facilitate unobstructed animal movement below seven meters from the road. This section of the

expressway cuts through Rajaji and Shivalik forest division, which is home to endangered species such as tigers, elephants, greater hornbills and king cobras.

RBI ON FPI LIMIT IN GOVERNMENT SECURITIES

— The RBI has kept the limits for foreign portfolio investment (FPI) investment in Government Securities (G-Secs), State Government Securities (SGSs), and corporate bonds unchanged at 6%, 2% and 15% respectively, of the outstanding stocks of securities for FY27 for the general route.

— Government Securities or G-Sec are debt instruments issued by the government to borrow money. The two key categories are treasury bills – short-term instruments which mature in 91 days, 182 days, or 364 days, and dated securities – long-term instruments which mature anywhere between 5 years and 40 years.

— When foreign portfolio investors make international investments in stocks, bonds, and other financial assets, it is known as FPI. It is different from the Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), which is a direct investment in foreign businesses along with an interest and control over the operations and management.

AT-1 BOND MIS-SELLING CASE: HDFC BANK ACTS AGAINST 15 EXECUTIVES FOR ALLEGED ROLE

HDFC Bank is learnt to have taken disciplinary action against 15 executives for their role in the alleged mis-selling of Credit Suisse Additional Tier-1 bonds. Investors have alleged that the AT-1 bonds which are complex, high-risk financial instruments, the Credit Suisse AT-1 bonds, were probably held by HDFC Bank in its books, and sold off to them when the bank realised in late 2020 that Credit Suisse was not doing well.

SOLID WASTE MANAGEMENT (SWM) RULES, 2026

— The Union Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change has notified the new Solid Waste Management (SWM) Rules, 2026 in January, which come into force on April 1, 2026, replacing the SWM Rules of 2016.

— Four streams of mandatory segregation at source: The government has spelt out a “waste hierarchy” and defined a “four-way” segregation of waste. The hierarchy comprises prevention, reduction, reuse, recycling, recovery and disposal as the last resort. The segregation system expands the ‘dry-waste-wet-waste’ system by adding sanitary waste and special-care waste.

— Discourage landfills: It imposes higher landfill fees. The new rules intend to make landfills the last stop for garbage disposal and only for non-usable, non-recyclable and non-energy-recoverable waste material.

— Refuse Derived Fuel (RDF): Industries have been given targets to replace solid fuel with refuse-derived fuel, which is obtained from various waste categories, with 6% use initially, and up to 15 % after six years.

— RDF is produced by shredding and dehydrating municipal solid waste with high calorific value. As per the new rule, waste with calorific value of 1500 kg calories or more must be used for energy generation through refuse-derived fuel or for co-processing in cement and thermal plants.

INDIA'S FIRST GOURAMI FOSSIL- SAHARANPUR DISTRICT OF UP

— This is the first time that scientists have discovered freshwater fish fossils from the Siwalik foothills in Uttar Pradesh's Saharanpur district, including the first fossil record of gourami in India and only the second known globally.

— This indicates a well-structured and complex freshwater ecosystem in the Himalayan region during the Pliocene Epoch, some 5 million years ago.

— According to a peer-reviewed research study undertaken by multiple scientists, the set of otoliths (calcium carbonate structures for hearing and balance) is the first from the Pliocene period in this region in Saharanpur's Mohand, and helps scientists understand ancient freshwater fish in northern India.

— The presence of snakeheads, gouramis, and gobies shows a clear food chain, with smaller fish as prey and snakeheads as predators.

— Siwalik Group, which ranges in age from 18.3 to 0.22 million years old, is a freshwater deposit exposed along the length of the Himalayan foothills that stretches from the Potwar Plateau of Pakistan in the west to Assam in the east.

ASIAN BOXING CHAMPIONSHIP

— The Asian Boxing Championships were held in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia. India finished its campaign with 16 medals.

— India finished second on the table with five gold, one fewer than Kazakhstan, but claimed the most medals overall.

— In the women's competition, all 10 Indian boxers finished with a medal.

* Minakshi Hooda (48kg), Preeti Pawar (54kg), Priya Ghanghas (60kg), and Arundhati Choudhary (70kg) bagged Gold

* Jaismine Lamboria (57kg) and Alfiya Pathan (+80kg) took Silver

* Nikhat Zareen (51kg), Ankushita Boro (65kg), Lovlina Borgohain (75kg) and Pooja Rani (80kg) clinched Bronze

— In the men's competition, Asian Wrestling Championship, 6 Indian boxers finished with a medal

* Vishvanath Suresh defeated Daichi Iwai of Japan to win gold in the men's 50kg category, becoming the only Indian man to clinch gold at this edition of the continental event.

* Sachin Siwach lost 2-3 to Orazbek Assylkulov of Kazakhstan, the reigning world champion, in the men's 60kg final to clinch Silver

* Harsh Choudhary (90kg), Akash (75kg), Lokesh (85kg) and Narender (+90kg) – settled for Bronze

BUSINESS AND ECONOMY

OPEC+ TO BOOST OIL OUTPUT WHEN HORMUZ REOPENS

OPEC+ agreed on Sunday to raise its oil output quotas by 206,000 barrels per day for May, a modest rise that will largely exist on paper as its key members are unable to raise production due to the U.S.-Israeli war with Iran.

Key Takeaways:

• The war has effectively shut the Strait of Hormuz, the world's most important oil route, since the end of February and cut exports from OPEC+ members Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Kuwait and Iraq, the only countries in the group which were able to significantly raise production even before the conflict began.

• Crude prices have surged to a four-year high close to $120 a barrel, translating into soaring prices for transport fuels which are pressuring consumers and businesses across the globe, and triggering government action to conserve supplies.

• The OPEC+ quota increase of 206,000 bpd represents less than 2% of the supply disrupted by the Hormuz closure, but it signals readiness to raise output once the waterway reopens, OPEC+ sources have said. Consultancy Energy Aspects called the increase "academic" as long as disruptions in the strait persist.

• "In reality it adds very few barrels to the market," said Jorge Leon, a former OPEC official who now works as head of geopolitical analysis at Rystad Energy. "When the Strait of Hormuz is closed additional barrels from OPEC+ become largely irrelevant."

• Eight members of OPEC+ agreed to the increase in May quotas at a virtual meeting on Sunday, OPEC+ said in a statement. Besides the disruptions affecting Gulf members, others such as Russia are unable to increase output – in Moscow's case due to Western sanctions and damage to infrastructure inflicted during the war with Ukraine.

Do You Know:

• Established in 1960 by founding members Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Venezuela, OPEC has since expanded and now has 13 member states. With the addition of another 11 allied major oil-producing countries that include Russia, the grouping is known as OPEC+.

• The objective of the organisation is to "coordinate and unify the petroleum policies of its Member Countries and ensure the stabilisation of oil markets in order to secure an efficient, economic and regular supply of petroleum to consumers, a steady income to producers and a fair return on capital for those investing in the petroleum industry," according to the OPEC website.

• Previously controlled by western-dominated multinational oil companies known as the "Seven Sisters," OPEC sought to give the oil-producing nations greater influence over the global petroleum market. They account for roughly 40 per cent of the world's crude oil and 80 per cent of the globe's oil reserves, according to estimates from 2018. They usually meet every month to determine how much oil the member states will produce.

OIL RISK: WHY INDIA AND THE GLOBAL SOUTH NEED FOSSIL-FUEL INTENSITY METRIC

From the OPEC crisis of the 1970s to today's West Asia tensions and the Russia-Ukraine conflict, each disruption has reminded the Global South of a structural vulnerability it has never fully measured - dependence on fossil fuels, particularly imports of oil, gas, and coal.

The Global South, which is historically least responsible for anthropogenic causes of climate change, has deployed terawatt-scale non-fossil capacities. Economies such as Brazil, China and India stood among the top five in the Renewables 2025 Global Status Report for "Total Renewable Energy Supply by Technology".

Yet, each fossil-fuel price and supply-chain volatility shock shakes most countries in the Global South.

As per India's Petroleum Planning & Analysis Cell (PPAC), crude oil free-on-board (FOB) price (Indian basket) per barrel increased by over 50% in March 2026 compared with March 2025. With the ongoing tensions in West Asia showing little sign of easing, such volatility is unlikely to remain a one-off episode. Recently, *Reuters* reported increases of 34% and 35% in petrol and diesel prices respectively per litre in Malawi. Similarly, Gambia is reported to have increased petrol and diesel prices by over 18% and 12% respectively. The Global South economies, despite steady progress on clean energy transition, are once again susceptible to fossil-fuel shocks.

Under-reported

Vulnerability is more pronounced in economies that are heavily dependent on fossil-fuel imports, where import bills constitute a substantial share of gross domestic product and where imports originate from geopolitically volatile regions.

Fossil-fuel shocks penetrate deep through costs and erode household purchasing power, raise input costs for industry, and amplify inflationary pressures for all sectors. If the West Asia conflict situation persists, as appears likely, rising import burden can adversely impact development activities and disproportionately affect the vulnerable populations. A long-term crisis can undo the progress on energy access.

To track decarbonisation, countries primarily measure carbon intensity and energy intensity. These don't measure continued fossil-fuel dependence and vulnerabilities.

Fossil-fuel intensity, defined as the total consumption of oil, gas, and coal relative to economic output, can be leveraged as complementary metric to measure progress.

Fuel substitution

To cut fossil-fuel risks, leading economies are undertaking fuel substitution programmes, tailored to national contexts. In India, flagship initiatives for universal access to electricity and clean cooking have considerably improved energy access. Strategic electrification of demand, from households to railways, has reduced consumption of petroleum products, while deployment of renewables and green molecules, such as biofuels and green hydrogen, is gradually replacing fossil fuels in hard-to-abate sectors. A composite index, based on fossil-fuel intensity, fossil-fuel vulnerability scores, and the benefits of fuel-substitution programmes can be leveraged to fully understand the real transition in the Global South.

Exposed to import risks

As per the IEA, future growth in energy demand is expected to come from emerging economies, which are mostly in the Global South. While energy intensity and carbon emissions in most Global South countries are declining, their fossil-fuel demand is not. As per the PPAC, between 2014-2015 and 2024-2025, India registered a 40% rise in aggregate consumption of petroleum product categories.

Leveraging existing datasets from the IEA, IRENA, the World Bank, and national statistical agencies, among others, measuring national and sectoral fossil-fuel intensity is possible.

In this endeavour, incorporating the principle of Common but Differentiated Responsibilities and Respective Capabilities, by normalising preliminary findings with country specific data on income levels, historical emissions, vulnerability and resource endowments, will facilitate equitable infusion of financial and non-financial interventions.

This will enhance macroeconomic stability, help attract climate finance, improve transition rankings, and boost investment attractiveness. It is imperative for financial institutions, policymakers, renewable energy agencies to explore synergistic partnerships to allow agencies align on standardised protocols, data sources, and methodologies for defining, evaluating and normalising the composite index.

A comprehensive clean energy transition metric for the Global South must serve its purpose: building resilient economies that are not exposed to external fossil-fuel shocks, not merely to enable comparison with the developed world.

WHY DID IRAN WAR NOT AFFECT CHINA'S ENERGY SECURITY SO FAR?

As the Israel-US war on Iran has meandered on, India has faced the shortage of liquified petroleum gas (LPG) and experienced a social panic over the possible shortage of petrol and diesel. One does not see similar news from China despite its bigger economy, larger consumer market and role as a supplier to global markets, raising the question of how China escaped the early consequences and how, and in what ways it may be affected in the future. The answer to that question lies in what China has done in the past two decades and how its geography, its position as the world's largest polluter, its stringent actions against the local air pollution challenges and its concerns over status have combined to protect it from the current crisis.

How did it tackle the Malacca dilemma?

About 15 years ago, China's concerns over its dependence on the Malacca strait for trade and energy transits, and the near permanent American presence in the vicinity were real. The country sought to address this by building the capacity to create strategic petroleum reserves (SPR) and used long-term contracts to fill those up. Today China has nearly 120 days of SPR storage and it may be tapping into some of that. Data suggests that a combination of China's oil reserves and diversification may allow it to bypass imports from the Strait of Hormuz for several months.

China's second approach to reducing the dependence on the Malacca strait was to build pipelines to import oil and gas from Central Asia and Russia. If the straits were a geopolitical challenge, its stable relations with its Central Asian neighbours made the geography an opportunity.

Now almost 20 per cent of China's crude oil imports happen through these pipelines, including an estimated 900,000 barrels per day from Russia. Consider that against the failed attempts to establish the Iran-Pakistan-India and the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan- India (TAPI)

pipelines, which have been stalled for a combination of reasons. On the other hand, China's national oil companies like Sinopec, CNPC and CNOOC, have traditionally had deeper pockets and China has been an active negotiator in conflict zones like Sudan or Angola and their proactive strategies have also helped it create a good diversification in its imports sources.

What are China's climate and energy strategies?

For its part, China joined hands with India, South Africa, and Brazil, to protect their carbon space, forming the BASIC bloc during the early days of global climate change negotiations.

However, it also used its status as the world's largest polluter and managed to get the US-China Ten-Year Framework Cooperation on Energy and Environment, in June 2008, before it agreed to any commitments under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). This cooperation and the subsequent knowledge and technology transfer led to the success of the Paris Climate Accord and allowed China to create a foundation for its industrial surge in sectors like solar panels, wind and tidal energy, energy efficiency and management, carbon storage and sequestration, electric mobility including cars and buses.

Along with this, China has also faced a significant criticism for its role as the world's largest coal consumer. China has also worked to undertake energy transition plans and address the air pollution challenge that Beijing and other cities have faced via time-bound targets declared in its numerous white papers, task forces and bureaucratic restructuring initiatives.

How did EVs help lower oil demand?

China's role as a large middle-class economy also matters. China is also the largest consumer of electric vehicles. Its preferential policies favour EV via tax concessions, mandates and preferential lottery chances and its scaling capabilities and larger size of consumer markets have contributed to their popularity. This has allowed China to significantly reduce its imports in 2025 and this number is bound to grow in the coming years.

Is economic slowdown a factor?

Lastly, China is indeed facing a serious economic slowdown which means its overall energy consumption is lower. It has set a modest target of growth at 4.5% for 2026. Its construction sector has nearly stalled and it means that sectors such as cement, iron and steel and others are not doing well too. China's role as the world's factory is changing gradually compared to how it was a decade ago, and it has been a good thing for its energy demand.

To sum it up, a combination of opportunities, proactive strategies and strategic and status concerns have helped China to stay afloat stronger in the current crisis.

IRAN WAR AND THE LOOMING PROSPECT OF STAGFLATION

During the 1970s and early 1980s, most Western countries experienced "stagflation"— a condition where low, if not negative, economic growth coexisted with high inflation.

Key Takeaways:

• Thus, the United States and the United Kingdom registered annual GDP growth rates of -0.5% and -1.7% respectively in 1974 and -0.2% and -0.7% in 1975. This was accompanied by consumer price inflation of 11.1% (US) and 16% (UK) in 1974 and 9.1% (US) and 24.2% (UK) in 1975.

• A similar phenomenon was recorded in 1979, 1980, 1981 and 1982, with the US alone posting GDP growth of 3.2%, -0.3%, 2.5% and -1.8% and annual consumer price inflation rates of 11.3%, 13.5%, 10.3% and 6.1% for these years. In both episodes of stagflation — the term was coined by Iain Macleod, a British Conservative Party politician — the driver was oil shocks.

• The first one came after the Yom Kippur War between Israel and Egypt-Syria in October 1973. The Organization of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries implemented a total oil embargo against the Western nations that had supported Israel. The second oil crisis happened with Iran's Islamic Revolution in 1979, followed by Iraq's invasion of Iran a year later.

• Since that time, the world has witnessed at least three oil shocks — in 2008, 2022 and 2026. The 2008 shock resulted in stagnation (negative to very low single-digit GDP growth), but no runaway inflation. The 2022 Russia-Ukraine war produced some inflation, but no great recession.

TIMELY INACTION

The RBI Monetary Policy Committee's (MPC) decision to keep interest rates unchanged — a "wait and watch" approach, in the Governor's words — is a sensible move. At a time when hasty words and deeds have roiled world markets, economies, and even households, a measured policy response was the need of the hour. The challenge before the MPC is that the main tool it has — the repo rate — impacts growth and inflation in opposite ways. That is, if it had raised rates to try to contain an anticipated surge in inflation, this would have hurt growth. On the other hand, if it lowered rates to boost growth, this would have pushed inflation up. The war in West Asia has resulted in both of these undesirable outcomes: supply chain constraints have pushed up costs while also dragging down growth. A rate change at this juncture could have made matters significantly worse and further dampened the mood in the economy. In his speech, RBI Governor Sanjay Malhotra predicted that India's GDP would grow 6.9% in 2026-27. Given that this is still the first month of the financial year, the forecast is likely to change considerably over the subsequent MPC announcements. For example, the MPC in April last year had predicted that growth in 2025-26 would be 6.5%. In contrast, the government's latest estimate for the year is 7.6%. Considerable uncertainty continues to persist in West Asia, with shipping companies still hesitant to brave the Strait of Hormuz.

All of this, coupled with the fuel constraints, will continue to hamper growth in 2026-27. The RBI lowered its growth forecast for the first quarter by just 0.1 percentage points, which might end up being an over-optimistic reading of the situation. The World Bank's India Development Update report, released on Thursday, predicts a slowdown in industrial growth in India over the course of this financial year. Consumer and government demand, too, is expected to slow as both groups try to tighten their belts. Inflation, on the other hand, is expected to accelerate considerably to 4.6%, according to the RBI. Yet, the MPC was correct not to raise rates since most of the inflationary pressure is due to supply issues rather than demand conditions. Raising rates would not only have slowed growth further, but even the primary objective of containing inflation would not have been met. A lot of factors need to play out before monetary policy can act — the war, the U.S. tariff-related investigations, greater clarity on a potential El Nino impact on the monsoon this year, to name a few. Until then, inaction is the best course of action.

Do You Know:

• Monetary policy essentially deals with the supply and cost (interest rates) of money in an economy. The RBI's MPC meets every two months to assess the state of monetary activities, and

may tweak the repo rate — the interest rate at which the RBI lends to commercial banks — in a manner that reduces price fluctuations in the economy while keeping the inflation rate (the rate at which the general price level in the economy grows) at a reasonable level.

• Repo Rate: The interest rate at which the Reserve Bank provides liquidity under the liquidity adjustment facility (LAF) to all LAF participants against the collateral of government and other approved securities.

• Marginal Standing Facility (MSF) Rate: The penal rate at which banks can borrow, on an overnight basis, from the Reserve Bank by dipping into their Statutory Liquidity Ratio (SLR) portfolio up to a predefined limit (2 per cent). This provides a safety valve against unanticipated liquidity shocks to the banking system. The MSF rate is placed at 25 basis points above the policy repo rate.

• Reverse Repo Rate: The interest rate at which the Reserve Bank absorbs liquidity from banks against the collateral of eligible government securities under the LAF. Following the introduction of SDF, the fixed rate reverse repo operations will be at the discretion of the RBI for purposes specified from time to time.

RBI SET FOR ANTI-MIS-SELLING NORMS, FOCUS ON INCENTIVES

The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) may announce final guidelines on 'Responsible Business Conduct' - rules to prevent mis-selling by banks soon, to protect the interest of citizens.

The draft guidelines with likely implementation date of July 1 are expected to outline how banks should distribute third-party financial products, especially insurance and how to make insurance distribution more transparent.

But the main driver of mis-selling is commissions paid by insurers, which fall under IRDAI's purview.

IRDAI, examining the issue since 2023, initially capped total management expenses, including commissions. However, commission expenses across life and non-life insurance continued rising faster than premiums.

As per IRDAI's latest annual report, total commissions in life insurance alone stood at ₹60,800 crore in FY25, up 18% year-on-year, while premiums grew in single digits.

First-year commissions rose over 20% while single-premium payouts jumped nearly 37%. Industry executives said this reflected aggressive acquisition strategies of insurers.

Reportedly, an elderly woman was recently made to withdraw all her fixed deposits to buy a single-premium policy and this case highlighted how agents get enriched, at the cost of customers who ended up paying higher premiums to enable insurers to pay higher commissions for customer acquisition.

Significant changes

IRDAI is proposing significant changes in the insurance commission structure to address rising costs and ensure sustainability.

Reportedly the regulator is considering fixing commissions itself rather than leaving it to insurers or introducing any caps.

However, it may not be the most effective way to curb malpractices, as per industry officials.

"Instead, IRDAI could consider making the board of insurance companies responsible and accountable for fixing commissions.

Insurers could be required to adopt a board-approved commission policy ensuring commissions stay within overall Expense of Management (EOM) limits, supported by regulatory disclosures. This would create accountability at the highest level while still allowing flexibility," an industry official said.

"A still better solution would be to stagger the payment of commissions," the official added.

Today, banking distributors earn most of the commission upfront, often passed on as incentives to staff authorised to sell insurance. The quantum can be significant and because it is largely front-loaded, it tilts the scales.

Sellers are motivated to push products aggressively, secure fee and move on.

Moving toward trail-based commissions and removing sales inducements may not just curb mis-selling but help restore trust in insurance itself, according to some industry officials.

WHAT ARE THE CONCERNS OVER THE FCRA BILL?

The story so far:

The Central government proposed to introduce the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Amendment Bill, 2026 during the Budget Session of Parliament, which concluded on April 2. The Bill seeks to amend the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act, 2010, under which registration is mandatory for non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and associations to receive foreign funds or donations. It was introduced in the Lok Sabha on March 25; however, following an uproar by Opposition parties, its discussion and passage were deferred.

According to the statement of objects and reasons, around 16,000 associations are registered under the FCRA and receive approximately ₹22,000 crore annually. The Act regulates the acceptance and utilisation of foreign contributions to ensure that such inflows do not adversely affect national interest, public order, or national security.

What are the key changes proposed?

One of the key changes proposed in the Bill is the appointment of a 'designated authority' to take over, manage, or dispose of assets created from foreign funds when an NGO's FCRA registration is suspended, cancelled, or not renewed. This authority will have the powers of a civil court and can order the transfer or sale of assets owned by NGOs to either the government or any other body. The 2010 Act provided for regulation of foreign fund flows, but lacked a statutory framework for managing assets created from such funds. The government said that Section 15 of the Act provides for vesting of assets, but the absence of a comprehensive framework for the supervision, management, and disposal of such assets has led to administrative uncertainty and scope for misuse.

Another proposed amendment broadens the definition of an NGO's 'key functionary' beyond office bearers and directors to include trustees, partners, the Karta of a Hindu undivided family, governing body members, or anyone controlling or managing the organisation, and makes them liable for FCRA offences unless they can prove lack of knowledge or due diligence.

What are the other changes proposed?

The Bill seeks to amend Section 43 of the parent Act to require any law enforcement agency or State government to obtain prior approval from the Central government before initiating investigations into FCRA-related complaints.

It also proposes timelines for the receipt and utilisation of foreign contributions under the 'prior permission' category (one-time receipt of funds), and provides for automatic cessation of certificates upon expiry or non-renewal.

The Bill proposes to reduce the maximum imprisonment for FCRA offences from five years to one year. It also proposes fixed timelines for the utilisation of foreign funds received under the 'prior permission' category unlike the open-ended provision under the 2010 Act.

How does the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) regulate foreign donations in India?

The MHA regulates foreign donations in the country through the FCRA to ensure that such funds do not adversely affect the country's internal security. The legislation was first enacted in 1976. In 2010, it was repealed and replaced with a new legislation. The 2010 Act came into force on May 1, 2011 and has been amended in 2016, 2018, and 2020.

The FCRA registration is valid for five years, after which the NGO has to apply for a renewal. Since 2015, the FCRA registrations of more than 18,000 NGOs have been cancelled. As on April 3, there are 14,965 FCRA-registered NGOs active in the country. NGOs can receive foreign contributions for social, educational, religious, economic, and cultural programmes.

Why is the Bill being opposed?

The Catholic Bishops' Conference of India said the Bill amounts to "executive overreach" and raises concerns about "undue interference" in the functioning of minority institutions and civil society groups. The body objected to "clauses that grant sweeping powers to the Central government, allowing it to deny renewal or cancel licenses of organisations" and the powers "to assume control over institutions, including their funds, properties, and other assets." The Chief Ministers of poll-bound Tamil Nadu and Kerala have opposed the Bill as well.

What is the status of the Bill?

The Bill was deferred following an uproar by the Opposition. In Kerala and Tamil Nadu, there were fears it could be misused to seize assets of minority institutions, such as churches. Meanwhile, the Bharatiya Janata Party has been reaching out to the Christian community in Kerala to build a support base. The legislation remains active.

WHAT DOES THE JAN VISHWAS BILL DO?

The story so far:

Unnecessary criminalisation is an anathema to business regulations. India's regulatory framework has significant punitive aspects. Under dozens of Central Acts, minor procedural lapses, missed filings, or technical defaults could land a citizen or a small business owner in jail. The Jan Vishwas (Amendment of Provisions) Bill, 2025-26, seeks to shift India's regulatory approach from a punitive model to "trust-based governance." It builds on the earlier Jan Vishwas (Amendment of Provisions) Act, 2023, which decriminalised 183 provisions across 42 Central laws.

Why is the Bill being introduced?

The 2026 Bill proposes amendments to 784 provisions across 79 Central Acts administered by 23 ministries. Of these, 717 provisions are earmarked for decriminalisation, while the rest address ease of living more broadly. Its governing principle is proportionality — the severity of the State's response must bear a rational relationship to the gravity of the conduct it targets.

The Bill pursues three related goals, all rooted in ensuring proportionality in regulation.

First, it seeks a principled separation between conduct that warrants criminal sanction, such as fraud, wilful evasion, and threats to public safety, and procedural non-compliance that carries no comparable moral charge. Conflating the two does a disservice to the seriousness of the former and an injustice to those caught by the latter.

The second objective is equity. Smaller enterprises and MSMEs are disproportionately exposed to compliance risks, not because they violate laws more often, but because they lack the capacity to absorb the consequences when accused of doing so. The idea is to make compliance simpler.

Third, it seeks to provide institutional relief. India's district and subordinate courts carry over 4.8 crore pending cases (NJDG, December 2025), a significant share of which consists of minor regulatory matters. Decriminalising such cases is not leniency but a rational reallocation of judicial resources.

What are the key features?

The Bill focuses on removing the criminal liability clause for minor procedural lapses and improving the ease of doing business and living.

Its central mechanism is the replacement of criminal penalties with civil and administrative alternatives. The measures on imprisonment provisions are intended to be replaced by monetary penalties calibrated to the gravity of the violation.

For minor or first-time defaults, graded responses such as warnings and advisory notices replace prosecution. Compounding provisions are expanded to provide faster resolution without full adjudication.

Adjudicating officers are empowered to decide cases within defined timelines, with appellate mechanisms to ensure fairness. Penalties are to be periodically revised to retain their deterrent value, and the Bill emphasises digitisation and procedural simplification to reduce inconsistencies in enforcement.

How does it impact institutions?

For the judiciary, the most immediate consequence is meaningful relief. Diverting routine regulatory cases from criminal dockets should free courts to concentrate on matters of genuine public significance.

For regulatory agencies, the Bill increases responsibility. Administrative adjudication is faster and less resource-intensive than criminal prosecution, but it requires institutional capacity, clear guidelines, and oversight mechanisms to avoid arbitrariness. The appellate structures built into the Bill acknowledge this risk, and hence, their effectiveness will depend entirely on how seriously they are operationalised.

For businesses, particularly MSMEs, reduced criminal exposure could meaningfully shift the calculus around formalisation. The fear of prosecution, even where the underlying conduct is technical rather than intentional, has long acted as a disincentive to transparency and engagement with the formal economy.

How does the Bill promote efficient justice?

The indiscriminate use of criminal sanctions — treating a tax fraudster and a businessperson who faltered on a procedural formality — undermines the law's pragmatism. By reserving criminal liability for conduct involving genuine intent or harm, and channelling procedural defaults through civil mechanisms, the Bill narrows the scope for over-criminalisation in a structured way.

A more predictable regulatory environment encourages voluntary compliance. When the consequence of a minor lapse is a proportionate penalty rather than the spectre of prosecution, the incentive structure shifts towards transparency. The durability of these gains will depend on implementation. Enhanced administrative discretion must be matched with clear guidelines, meaningful oversight, and appellate mechanisms that function as genuine checks.

The Jan Vishwas Bill is a serious and overdue reform. Its success will depend less on what it says than on whether the institutions tasked with carrying it forward are genuinely equipped, and held accountable, to do so.

There is a risk of excessive discretion in administrative authorities, weak appellate safeguards in some sectors, the possibility that monetary penalties may replace criminalisation without reducing the burden, and limited clarity on uniform standards across different laws.

15TH FINANCE COMMISSION PERIOD SET A RECORD WITH 94.98% FUNDS RELEASE FOR RURAL BODIES

As the Sixteenth Finance Commission's five-year award period kicked in from April 1, a closer look at past commissions reveals a clear and rising trend: rural local bodies (RLBs), including gram, block, and district panchayats, are receiving more funds than ever before, with release of grant peaking at a historic high of 94.98 per cent under the last Commission.

Key Takeaways:

• The data available with the Ministry of Panchayati Raj shows that the Fifteenth Finance Commission term (2020-26), which ended on March 31, also saw five states, Assam, Kerala, Mizoram, Tripura and Uttar Pradesh, receiving 100 per cent of RLB grants allocated to them.

• The data show that the Fifteenth Finance Commission recommended a total grant of Rs 2,97,555 crore for rural local bodies during its award period (2020-26), including Rs 60,750 crore allocated during the interim period (2020-21). Out of this, Rs 2,82,632 crore (94.94 per cent) was released to the RLBs till March 31, the highest since the 10th Finance Commission.

• The Finance Commission began awarding grants to rural local bodies from the 10th Finance Commission onward. The corresponding figures for release stood at 91 per cent during the 14th Finance Commission and 90.5 per cent during the 13th Finance Commission.

• The development is significant, as the 16th Finance Commission has recommended a grant of Rs 4.35 lakh crore to rural local bodies for its award period (2026-27 to 2030-31). Of the Rs 4.35 lakh crore grant, Rs 3.48 crore will be the basic grant, Rs 43,524 crore the rural local body performance grant, and Rs 43,524 crore the state performance grant.

• Of the total grant, 90 per cent will be given to gram panchayats, while block and district panchayats will each receive 10 per cent. Among the states, the grant will be distributed based on each state's projected rural population for 2026 and its total area.

Do You Know:

• The Finance Commission is constituted by the President under article 280 of the Constitution, mainly to give its recommendations on distribution of tax revenues between the Union and the States and amongst the states themselves. The Commission's work involves redressing the vertical imbalances between the taxation powers and expenditure responsibilities of the Centre and the States respectively and equalisation of all public services across the states.

NO NEW CLEARANCES FOR PRODUCTION OF REFRIGERANT GASES AFTER 2027: CENTRE

In line with its international commitments to gradually phase-down production of planet-warming hydrofluorocarbons (HFCs), the Government has directed all state and Central authorities to stop granting environmental clearances for new or additional HFC production beyond December 31, 2027.

Key Takeaways:

• Those applying before the deadline will need to submit an undertaking guaranteeing that their plant will be fully operational, including commencement of production, on or before December 31, 2027.

• The Environment Ministry directive in this regard was issued on April 1 through office memorandum to State Level Environment Impact Assessment Authorities and Expert Appraisal Committees at Central level.

• The ministry's memorandum stated that the phase-down targets would be implemented through appropriate regulatory mechanisms, including amendment of the Ozone Depleting Substances Rules, 2000. This will be to align it with the HFC phase-down schedule under the Kigali Amendment, prohibition on setting up of new or expansion of HFC production capacity for controlled application after the freeze date of January 1, 2028, and implementation of appropriate framework permitting HFC production.

Do You Know:

• The 1989 Montreal Protocol is meant to protect the ozone layer of the upper atmosphere. It wasn't originally an instrument to fight climate change. A set of chemicals, mainly the chlorofluorocarbons or CFCs, which were being used in the air-conditioning and refrigeration industry earlier, were found to be damaging the ozone layer of the upper atmosphere.

• The Montreal Protocol mandated the complete phase-out of CFCs and other ozone-depleting substances (ODS), which it has successfully managed to do in the last three decades.

CFCs were gradually replaced, first by HCFCs, or hydrochlorofluorocarbons, in some cases, and eventually by HFCs which have minimal impact on the ozone layer. The transition from HCFCs to HFCs is still happening, particularly in the developing world.

• India is a party to the landmark Montreal Protocol of 1989 which was brought to tackle ozone depletion through phase-out of CFCs, with a complete ban from 2010. Later in 2021, India ratified the Kigali amendment to the protocol, which adopted a plan to phase-down controlled applications of HFCs that were being used as a replacement for CFCs. This landmark amendment to the protocol was agreed upon in Kigali, Rwanda, in 2016.

• India has agreed to a phase-down schedule from January 1, 2028, onwards, which will see 10 per cent reduction in HFCs by 2032 rising up to 85 per cent by 2047. The Centre said in view of the January 1, 2028, freeze date, it was necessary to put in place a mechanism to regulate and progressively reduce HFC production to meet India's international commitments. "Accordingly, no additional HFC production capacity should be permitted beyond 31.12.2027," the memorandum stated.

TOP 10% RURAL HOUSEHOLDS OWN 44% LAND IN INDIA: STUDY

Land ownership in rural India is highly concentrated with the top 10% of households owning 44% of total land area even as about 46% of households are landless, according to a working paper released by the Paris-based World Inequality Lab.

Key Takeaways:

• Large landholders dominate land ownership in many villages with the largest landholder controlling about 12% of village land on an average, while two states — Bihar and Punjab — have the highest share of villages in which a single landlord owns more than half of the available land, the paper titled 'Land inequality in India: Nature, history, and markets' said.

• The paper, co-authored by economists Nitin Kumar Bharti, David Blakeslee, and Samreen Malik, said Bihar and Kerala stand out among states for their high levels of land concentration in terms of top 10% or 5% or 1% ownership. Overall, while the top 10% rural households own 44% of total land area, the top 5% and top 1% own 32% and 18% of total land area, respectively, it said.

• The paper draws its findings from the Socio-Economic Caste Census conducted in 2011, which covered 650 million individuals from 270,000 villages across ten of the largest states of India — Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, and West Bengal — accounting for approximately 75% of the rural population.

Land inequality among states

Do You Know:

• The share of land owned by the top household ranges from a low of 7.3% in Uttar Pradesh to a high of 20.1% in Bihar, the working paper said. Among the four states where dependency on agriculture is particularly high, Rajasthan (34%) and Uttar Pradesh (39%) have a relatively lower level of landlessness than Madhya Pradesh (51%) and Bihar (59%). Punjab, known for its highly developed commercial agriculture sector, has the highest level of landlessness at 73%, the paper said.

• As per the all-household Gini measure, Kerala has the highest Gini coefficient at 90, followed by Bihar, Punjab, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal, each with a Gini coefficient of around 80. Karnataka and Rajasthan have the lowest Gini coefficient of below 65, the paper stated.

• A lower Gini coefficient indicates a more equal distribution of income or wealth within a population, meaning a smaller gap between the rich and poor. "Excluding landless population reduces the Gini coefficient for all states, and reduces variation across states, indicating that landlessness contributes significantly to the all-household Gini measure," it said.

WHY GREATER RELIANCE ON COAL MAY SPUR RECORD SOLAR POWER CURTAILMENTS

As India heads into a "hotter-than-normal" summer, with forecasts pointing to an above-average number of heatwave days, the government plans to rely more on coal-based power to meet peak summer demand.

Key Takeaways:

— On Monday, the government informed Parliament that the country's power system remains "adequately positioned" to meet peak summer demand, despite gas supply constraints triggered by the ongoing conflict in West Asia.

— While gas-based power accounts for a relatively small share of the energy mix, it plays a crucial role during non-solar hours, with nearly 10 GW of capacity typically relied upon during high demand summer months.

— The government said its plans to use "alternative sources" like coal-based generation, renewable energy and energy storage systems compensating for reduced gas-based generation.

— However, this shift may come with trade-offs that extend beyond immediate supply concerns, experts said. A greater reliance on coal could lead to curtailment of renewable energy, particularly solar, due to the operational inflexibility of coal plants.

— Gas-based power plants, meanwhile, are more flexible and can ramp generation up or down to accommodate renewable power while keeping the grid stable during evening peak hours when solar generation is unavailable.

— Coal-based power plants already dominate India's electricity generation mix, contributing over 70%. Gas contributes around 1-2% in the country's overall power generation.

— Power generated from gas-based units is typically more expensive than coal and renewable energy. However, due to their flexibility, they are generally used during high-demand periods, such as peak summer months when cooling demand surges, to meet evening peak demand.

— In the past, the government has invoked emergency measures to ensure utilities operate both gas and coal plants at full capacity when soaring temperatures push electricity consumption to record levels.

— However, disruption of gas supply due to the conflict in West Asia has cast a shadow over availability of gas for the country's gas-based power plants as the government decided to prioritise certain sectors during the shortage.

— To meet this gap and summer demand, the government told the parliament that a series of measures are being rolled out to ensure adequate power supply.

— The government also said it is closely monitoring the progress of thermal and hydro projects slated for commissioning by June 2026. Meanwhile, thermal power plants have been asked to defer their planned maintenance to make available adequate generation capacity.

LIFE AND SCIENCES

WHY ARTEMIS II CREW WENT FARTHER FROM EARTH THAN ANYONE BEFORE

The four astronauts of NASA's Artemis II mission on Monday (April 6) travelled 252,756 miles (406,771 kilometers) away from Earth. The Orion spacecraft, in setting the new record, swung around the far side of the Moon.

Key Takeaways:

• The record before this was the 4,00,171 km travelled by Apollo-13 in 1970, though in that case, the mission had to deviate farther than its intended path due to a malfunction.

• For Artemis II, the distance was part of the plan, but setting this record is not the mission's main objective. The distance is a function of the path Artemis II is following to fulfill its goals.

• The first crewed lunar mission since December 1972, Artemis II is not a landing mission. Instead, it is a highly regulated flyby designed to test the limits of the Orion spacecraft.

• The mission holds significance as it will be the first time humans will venture further than low Earth orbit since Apollo 17 in 1972.

Do You Know:

• Prioritising crew safety and fuel efficiency, this free-return trajectory is executed in two distinct phases:

—The High Earth Orbit (HEO): Initially, rather than aiming directly for the Moon, Orion pushed into an elliptical path around Earth, stretching outward to roughly 74,000 km. This afforded the crew a 42-hour window to conduct critical checks on the environmental control and life support systems (ECLSS). Should any system have failed here, the spacecraft remained within Earth's gravitational pull, allowing an abort and splashdown within hours.

—The Translunar Slingshot: Once cleared for deep space, Orion was pushed toward the Moon by the European Service Module, aiming for a precise point roughly 10,300 km beyond the lunar far side. This allowed the Moon's gravity to act as a tether, catching the spacecraft and whipping it around the far side directly back toward Earth's atmosphere.

ARTEMIS MISSION ASTRONAUTS TO STUDY THE MOON'S SURFACE USING THEIR EYES

More than 50 years after humans first flew around the moon, Artemis astronauts will repeat the feat on Monday and use the most basic instrument to study it: their eyes.

Despite the technological advancements since the Apollo missions, NASA still relies on the eyesight of its astronauts to learn more about the Moon.

"The human eye is basically the best camera that could ever or will ever exist," Kelsey Young, the lead scientist for the Artemis 2 mission, told *AFP*. "The number of receptors in the human eye far outweighs what a camera is able to do." Although modern cameras may be superior to human eyesight in some respects, "the human eye is really good at colour, and it's really good at context, and it's also really good at photometric observations," Ms. Young said.

In just the blink of an eye, humans can detect a subtle colour shift and understand how lighting changes the contours of a landscape like the Moon's surface, details which are scientifically useful but difficult to ascertain from photos or videos.

To ensure they made the most of their proximity to the Moon, the four Artemis 2 crew members underwent more than two years of training. Ms. Young said the goal was to turn the astronauts into "field scientists" via a combination of classroom lessons, geological expeditions to Iceland and Canada, and multiple simulated flybys of the Moon, just like the mission they are on.

Using an inflatable Moon globe, they practiced seeing how the angle of the sun changed the colors and textures of the lunar surface, honing their observation and note-taking skills for the big moment.

The Artemis astronauts' mission is to study certain lunar sites and phenomena as part of 10 objectives chosen by NASA and ranked in priority order based on scientific interest.

The Artemis 2 flyby will be broadcast live by NASA, save for a period for when the spacecraft is behind the Moon.

Note:

The astronauts on NASA's Artemis II lunar flyby saw brief flashes on the Moon's surface consistent with meteorite impacts. Mission commander Reid Wiseman and crew member Jeremy Hansen described the impacts as tiny, millisecond-long "pinpricks" of light, appearing white to bluish-white. NASA's lunar science team, led by Kelsey Young, is now trying to correlate the crew's sightings with satellite data, noting many of the flashes occurred during a solar eclipse when the Moon blocked the Sun.

ENERGY FROM SPACE

Q: What is space-based solar power?

A: The Shimizu Corporation in Japan has proposed a belt of power plants sitting along the moon's equator, which is 11,000 km long, called the "Lunar Ring". According to the company's plans, robots can build this mega-structure from lunar soil. The facilities will collect solar energy from the sun and beam it to the earth as microwaves.

If space-based solar power sounds like science fiction, it is exactly that. The concept involves launching large arrays of satellites to collect sunlight 24/7, and beaming the energy to the earth as microwave radiation. The corporation's plans are slightly different — they involve facilities on the lunar surface rather than in earth orbit — but otherwise involve the same physics.

Unfortunately for supporters of the idea, there are daunting hurdles.

The cost of space-based solar is staggering. Even if rocket launch prices drop significantly, engineers must still transport thousands of tonnes of hardware into orbit (or the moon). Building a single functional power plant is an unprecedented logistical feat. Once operational, the system must beam power through the atmosphere, a process that will lose significant energy as heat.

In orbit, a single collision with space debris could cripple a billion-dollar array, turning it into junk. Maintenance will also be extremely expensive on the moon.

Terrestrial solar and battery storage are also getting cheaper and more efficient every year, making it hard to justify a complex and risky orbital or lunar facility. For now, space-based solar remains an idea trapped in poor economics.

HOW THE MATH WORKS ON A $1.75 TRILLION SPACEX VALUATION

SpaceX is seeking an exceptionally large $1.75 trillion IPO valuation, which—by typical market comparisons—would make it about the sixth most valuable U.S. public company, ahead of firms like Meta and Berkshire Hathaway. The enthusiasm is being driven mainly by Starlink's profitability and scale (10M+ subscribers; roughly 50–80% of SpaceX revenue) plus a highly dominant launch business(Falcon 9's 165 launches in 2025). Investors are also paying a premium for Elon Musk "optionality"—future upside from still-unproven bets like Starship, xAI, and ambitious plans for data-centre satellites. Reported 2025 financials cited: about $15–16B revenue and roughly $8B EBITDA, but with no standard analyst consensus forecasts—so the valuation hinges on continued execution, especially on Starship timelines and Starlink's next growth phase (e.g., direct-to-cell).

THE AXIOS HACK – MILLIONS OF DEVELOPERS EXPOSED BY A SINGLE COMPROMISED ACCOUNT

- Axios is a widely used JavaScript library for fetching data from servers, downloaded by millions of developers weekly.
- Last week, hackers pulled off a highly sophisticated supply chain attack by compromising the npm account of a lead axios maintainer through a stolen password.
- The attacker replaced the account's email, locking out the real maintainer, and uploaded a malicious npm package, 'plain-crypto-js', as a dependency.
- Two poisoned axios versions ('1.14.1' and '0.30.4') were published, containing a Remote Access Trojan (RAT) that opened a backdoor into any affected machine and then self-destructed to evade detection.
- The attack bypassed usual code review and publishing safeguards, as the malicious releases were published directly to npm, not GitHub.
- Developers and automated systems downloading the compromised versions inadvertently pulled in malware, putting production databases and sensitive user data at risk.
- The incident exposes a critical vulnerability in the open-source ecosystem—trust is easily undermined when a single account is compromised, leaving millions potentially exposed.
- Recommended actions: Developers who installed the affected versions should treat their environments as fully compromised: rotate all credentials, roll back to clean axios releases ('1.14.0' or '0.30.3'), and check network logs for suspicious activity.

WHEN AI FLATTERS, BEWARE

Among the many adjectives associated with sycophancy, the word unctuous is possessed of a unique beauty, combining flattery with a sense of — perhaps supercilious — insincerity. It is greased by a manner that is inevitably oily yet, alas, not altogether crude. The word instantly brings to mind an entire genre of smarmy advisers. The trope can allow those at the top to evade responsibility for their own incompetence or tyranny, as advisers and bureaucrats are assumed to be the villains. This is so prevalent that the Russians have an expression for it: "Good tsar, bad boyars".

Today, like many others, the unctuous vizier may be staring at the prospect of losing his job to AI. Anecdotal evidence has suggested that popular chatbots have a tendency to tell users that they are absolutely right, and also wonderful. Now, a study on "sycophantic AI", published in Science, has found that this is indeed the case. Chatbots' responses were "nearly 50 per cent more sycophantic than humans" even when the users were talking about doing something harmful or illegal. People, in turn, accepted the flattery, and became less likely to take responsibility for their actions or try to repair relationships.

This is especially concerning at a time when AI is increasingly becoming the arbiter both of truth and of right and wrong, a fact checker-cum-agony aunt-cum-therapist for many. Human counsel, for all its flaws, is statistically less sycophantic — unless, of course, one surrounds oneself with a coterie of particularly jelly-like specimens, who will keep mum even when the tsar's phone really needs to be taken away.

SHE ISN'T YOUR AUNTIE

An aunt, strictly speaking, is "the sister of someone's father or mother, or the wife of someone's uncle or aunt". Most Indians do not speak so strictly. Adding a "y" or "ie" can widen the catchment area considerably, even in far colder climes: For Britons, "Auntie" can also be the public broadcaster. The BBC Written Archives explain: "A phrase of obscure origin: Presumably journalistic, possibly from cartoons. Increasingly used in 1950s to contrast BBC's prudish, cosy, puritanical 'refained' image with that of the much brasher ITV." It's a bundle of connotations, not all of them interesting.

It doesn't take a leap to understand why not everyone would want to be called "auntie". Now in Britain, this has gone all the way to an employment tribunal. A 61-year-old NHS healthcare assistant has just been awarded £1,425 in compensation because a younger male colleague, a nurse, repeatedly addressed her as such, ignoring her objections, and also suggested that she would be a "good match for an older staff member". This was ruled as harassment based on age and sex, although the nurse argued that in his Ghanaian culture, "auntie" was a term of respect for older women. It didn't fly, and probably shouldn't have — even those from what one might call "auntie-positive" cultures would hesitate to use it in a professional environment for someone who had already complained about it.

"Auntie-negativity" has its advantages, especially for those who still fancy themselves to be in their prime and want the freedom to do so. On the other hand, finding someone to call auntie might make a strange place feel like home — or at least, a relative's house where one can be assured of good food and good gossip.

BRAZIL REQUISITIONS SERVICES OF BANK MANAGERS TO COMBAT DEFORESTATION

After struggling for years to track and punish deforestation across the world's largest rainforest, Brazil is recruiting new allies in the battle to protect the Amazon: bank managers.

A new rule taking effect on Wednesday requires banks to check if rural loan applicants have any deforestation on their farms using government tools that provide data about them based on satellite imagery.

If bank managers detect any clearing since 2019 in the Amazon or woodlands, farmers applying for government-funded rural credit must show proof of deforestation permits to get their loans approved.

The new policy has drawn blowback from Brazil's powerful agribusiness sector, whose deep pockets and growing opposition to the government may shape October elections. The Agriculture Ministry itself argued to scrap the rule late last year.

But advocates argue the government needs more weapons in its anti-deforestation arsenal. As on-the-ground enforcement has become more difficult, the rule change aims to bring deforesters to heel by withholding billions of dollars of subsidised public credit.

The policy and its blowback reflect President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva's commitment to one of his most globally salient pledges: to end deforestation in Brazil by 2030 — an ambitious goal in a country that still records the most tropical forest loss every year.

Farmers pushback

Denying public credit to some farmers on Brazil's fast-expanding agricultural frontier may stir deeper resistance from rural power brokers already skeptical of the leftist Lula and hurt his appeal in farm states such as Mato Grosso and Goiasas he runs for re-election. The new policy includes a provision blocking subsidised credit to farms if those funds would be used to clear native vegetation, even where farmers have permits to deforest.

"You can still do it, but with your money, not with public money," Lima said. Debate over the new rule may wind up in Congress, where Lula has already lost many battles over the environment, including over a law that gutted the country's permitting process.

Brazil's National Confederation of Agriculture and Livestock (CNA), the biggest farm lobby group, said it will work to change the rule in Congress, which has a powerful farm caucus.

In a statement, the group said that government tools using satellite images to detect deforestation make mistakes and could lead banks to withhold credit unfairly.

Data from two academic studies between 2019 and 2021 pointed to 93% accuracy in the government satellite system tracking deforestation, known as Prodes. The studies found that Prodes errs more often in ignoring deforested lands than in reporting deforestation where it never happened.

SULPHUR

Why in the news?

The impact of war in West Asia travels deeper; Indian manufacturers, ranging from steel, aluminium, textiles and even alcoholic beverages, are reporting operational disruptions on account of surging freight rates, stuck shipments, gas shortages and payment issues. The agriculture sector could also be the war's soft underbelly victim for India, as fertiliser imports can be impacted.

This is what we all have been reading since the war in West Asia started, but here it becomes important to also know about the important chemical element such as – sulphur – because West Asia conflict is not just an oil story; it is a raw-material shock that will travel through seventeen different chemical value chains before reaching the Indian consumer.

Key Takeaways:

1. Sulphur (identified by the letter S) is a non-metallic chemical element. It is a valuable commodity and integral component of the world economy.
2. It combines directly with almost all the elements with the exception of gold, platinum and the noble gases. In its native form, sulphur is a yellow crystalline solid. It can be found as a pure element or as sulphate or sulphide minerals.
3. It occurs naturally in the environment and is believed to be the thirteenth most abundant element in the earth's crust. Most elemental sulphur is obtained as a co-product recovered from oil and gas production.

Distribution of Sulphur

1. As per the Indian Minerals Yearbook 2023, native sulphur deposit has been reported in Puga Valley of Leh district in the Union Territory of Jammu & Kashmir. The grade of the deposit ranges from 9% to 24% of sulphur.
2. Small occurrences of native sulphur are also reported from Barren Island of Bay of Bengal. Sulphur along with hot springs were reported from various parts of Chamoli, Rudraprayag, Uttarkashi, etc. districts in Garhwal & Kumaun divisions of Uttarakhand.
3. In Andhra Pradesh, native sulphur occurs in granular form with clay and silt in coastal areas of Krishna and East Godavari districts. Occurrences are also reported from Alappuzha district of Kerala and Kangra district of Himachal Pradesh.
4. According to the India Mineral Yearbook 2023, in 2022-23 among the states, **Odisha** accounted for 25% of the total sulphur production and it was followed by **Kerala** 20%, **Haryana** 17%, Gujarat 16%, West Bengal 9%, Uttar Pradesh 6%, Maharashtra 5%, and remaining production was contributed by Bihar and Assam.
5. The domestic production of elemental sulphur is limited to by-product recoveries from petroleum refineries and fuel oil used as feedstock for manufacturing fertilizer.

Uses and Consumption of Sulphur

1. Sulphur is an essential raw material for many chemical industries and is essentially used for the production of sulphuric acid.

2. Sulphuric acid is a strong mineral acid. It is soluble in water at all concentrations. It has many applications and is produced in greater amounts than any other chemical besides water. Principal uses include ore processing, fertilizer manufacturing, oil refining, waste water processing and chemical synthesis.

3. Sulphuric acid is also essential for processing copper, nickel, and cobalt. The production and consumption of sulphuric acid are an indicator of a nation's industrial development. The principal use of sulphuric acid is in the manufacture of phosphatic fertilizer.

4. Powdered form of sulphur produced by sublimation process that may contain up to 30% of the amorphous allotrope are generally used in rubber vulcanisation, agricultural dusts, pharmaceutical products and stock feeds.

5. Sulphur is used as a light-generating medium in the rare lighting fixtures known as "sulphur lamps". The sulphur lamp is a highly efficient full-spectrum electrodeless lighting system whose light is generated by sulphur plasma that has been excited by microwave radiation.

6. Sulphur compounds are also used in detergents, fungicides, dyestuffs and agrichemicals. In silver based photography, sodium and ammonium thio-sulphate are used as "fixing agents". Sulphites, derived from burning sulphur, are used to bleach paper. They are also used as preservatives in dried fruit and processed fruit products.

7. Nitrogen (N), phosphorus (P) and potassium (K) are critical components of a well-fertilized crop. But to achieve yields and more nutritious foods, crops need sulphur (S). It improves protein and oil percentage in seeds, cereal quality for milling and baking, marketability of dry coconut kernel (copra), quality of tobacco, nutritive value of forages, etc.

8. Concrete binder made with sulphur is an eco-efficient alternative to conventional Portland cement for paving stones, sidewalks and building foundations.

What is Copper?

1. Copper is a soft, malleable and ductile metal with very high thermal and electrical conductivity. It is one of the few metals that occur in nature in directly usable metallic form (native metals).

2. It is an important non-ferrous base metal with wide industrial applications. Copper is essential to the modern economy, with uses ranging from housing and manufacturing to power grids, clean energy, artificial intelligence and defence. Thus, it is often seen as a barometer of economic health.

9. A rise in copper prices is considered a signal of robust economic growth, while falling prices tend to raise concerns about an economic slowdown.

10. According to the Indian Minerals Yearbook 2022, India is not self-sufficient in the production of copper ore. In addition to domestic production of ore and concentrates, India imports copper concentrates for its smelters.

11. As per the Indian Minerals Yearbook 2022, largest reserves/resources of copper ore (52.25%) are in the State of Rajasthan followed by Madhya Pradesh (23.28%) and Jharkhand (15.14%).

BON APPETITE AND VOYAGE

To preserve a food item meant to remove moisture, increase acidity and/or to use natural preservatives. Meats and fish would be hung over fires before departure as the smoke deposited antimicrobial compounds into the flesh. Then, sailors would pack meat in wooden barrels with dry salt. Fish, especially cod, were dried on wooden racks in the open air until stiff.

Vegetables were stored in vinegar or salt brine. Sauerkraut was a staple on long voyages and its high acidity preserved it and provided vitamin C, helping prevent scurvy. Dried peas, beans, and lentils stored well without any treatment and were a staple of hot meals.

Ships also carried live chickens, pigs, goats, and sometimes cows, penned on deck that provided fresh eggs, milk, and meat in the early weeks of a voyage before being slaughtered one by one.

All said, scurvy, caused by vitamin C deficiency, killed more sailors than storms and battles combined, as these methods didn't work for fresh produce.

PSYCHEDELICS ARE REVEALING HOW THE BRAIN BUILDS THE SENSE OF SELF

Many people have reported moments when the sense of being a distinct self 'loosens'. Among astronauts, it is called the overview effect while deep-sea explorers report a similar shift sometimes called the underview effect. Both involve sudden changes in perspective in which the usual boundary of 'me' briefly softens, as if the vastness they encounter is mirrored inwardly and the distance between self and world is momentarily absent.

This dissolution often translates into shared experiences of oneness and interconnectedness with the outside world.

The 19th century Indian teacher Ramana Maharshi treated this instability not as an anomaly but as something to examine directly. Continuing a long philosophical tradition, he invited people to look for the 'I' in their own experiences — in the body, sensations, and thoughts — and notice that none of them fully captures the true nature of the self.

Such inquiry explores experience from the inside, a subjective, first-person view. Modern science, by contrast, examines the brain processes that accompany experience from the outside, making these inner shifts harder to access directly.

Only recently, however, has a new experimental tool offered a way to observe what happens in the brain as the sense of self begins to shift. Psychedelics can temporarily 'loosen' the brain patterns that support the feeling of a 'me', allowing researchers to watch that system reorganise itself in real time.

The brain in action

To study what happens when the sense of self weakens, an international team of researchers turned to a fast-acting psychedelic compound called N,N-Dimethyltryptamine (DMT) in a laboratory study with 27 volunteers. DMT produces a brief and intense shift in awareness that often includes a loss of the usual feeling of being a separate 'me'.

In the experiment, published in *The Journal of Neuroscience* on January 14, volunteers received DMT while researchers recorded their brain activity using electroencephalography (EEG) to track rhythmic electrical patterns across the scalp.

In normal conditions, one of the brain's dominant rhythms is the alpha wave — a slow oscillation linked to inward focus. This rhythm helps regulate internally focused processing. Importantly, this rhythm is not the self itself but one neural signature associated with how the brain maintains a coherent sense of self over time.

During the DMT experience, that pattern began to loosen. Alpha rhythms weakened and lost coordination. Overall brain activity also shifted away from its usual organisation. And the more this rhythm weakened, the more strongly participants reported losing their ordinary sense of self.

The findings suggest that specific brain processes are involved in maintaining aspects of the felt sense of self. When neural patterns associated with maintaining a stable sense of 'me' loosen, the organisation of that experience can temporarily shift.

Neuroscientists describe the waking brain as operating in a delicate balance between structure and flexibility. This regime is sometimes called criticality. In this state, brain networks are organised enough to remain coherent while still adapting to new information. Under the influence of DMT, that balance shifted towards a quieter, less coordinated mode. As the organising rhythm weakened, the brain activity associated with maintaining a coherent self-model also shifted.

But what shifts in these experiments is not something transcendental, like in the philosophical traditions of India and China. Dan Zahavi, professor of philosophy at the University of Copenhagen, cautioned that the self is not a single thing that can simply vanish. "It involves multiple layers," he explained, including bodily awareness, lived experience, and personal narrative, "and altering how those layers are organised is not the same as erasing identity". Neuroscience, in this view, is observing temporary changes in how the self is structured rather than its elimination.

At a more practical level, Jeff Greenberg, professor of psychology at the University of Arizona noted that a stable sense of self plays an important role in everyday functioning, including supporting emotional regulation, planning, and continuity. Brief disruptions can be informative, he added, but they should not be mistaken for a lasting loss of identity.

Self, mortality, emotional acceptance

If a brief disruption of the brain's self-model can reveal how fragile the feeling of 'me' really is, the question naturally arises whether that insight changes how we face impermanence or the transient nature of the world.

Psychologists have long shown that reminders of death can influence the way we behave, in part because the sense of self is a continuous, bounded self and acts as a psychological anchor, keeping change and mortality at a distance.

In a study published recently in *Psychopharmacology*, researchers asked whether repeated ego-softening might reshape how people relate to death by comparing 54 long-term ayahuasca users, each with at least nine lifetime uses and averaging around fifty uses, to 53 people who had never taken psychedelics. Participants completed psychological measures assessing death anxiety, avoidance, and emotional attitudes towards impermanence.

The ayahuasca group reported less fear and anxiety about death, were less likely to avoid thinking about it, and were more comfortable with the idea of impermanence. The researchers found that this pattern was best explained by what they called "acceptance of impermanence", an emotional ability to stay open to change — rather than religion, personality or general mindfulness.

Yair Dor-Ziderman, research director at the University of Haifa, Israel, and lead author of the study, said this was striking because popular narratives often assume psychedelic experiences reduce fear of death by changing one's beliefs.

Instead, he explained, the data pointed to a different mechanism: not adopting a comforting metaphysical story but developing "a more flexible emotional relationship to uncertainty, dissolution, and loss". The emotional acceptance of change rather than belief or personality best explained the difference between the groups.

To clarify what that kind of acceptance entailed, M. Samir Hossein, a psychiatrist and thanatologist, noted that fearing death less was not the same as accepting impermanence. Fear, he explained, could diminish in defensive ways like distraction or reinterpretation whereas acceptance reflected a deeper shift in how a person related to loss and change in everyday life.

"Fear can quiet down without disappearing but acceptance reorganises how we live with impermanence."

Prof. Greenberg cautioned that studies of this kind are correlational and rely heavily on self-report measures, making it difficult to determine whether psychedelics themselves produce lasting changes in how people relate to death. Larger, more controlled research will be needed to clarify if there is a causal link.

"But if someone who is in need thinks one of these approaches might help, I would not discourage them from trying," he said.

Meditation and the brain's defences

The ayahuasca findings point towards a broader possibility: that such shifts may not be unique to psychedelics but reflect a more general capacity of the brain to relax its defensive stance, in general and toward death.

In one February 2025 study involving magnetoencephalography — a brain-imaging method similar to EEG that tracks small magnetic signals produced by neural activity — Dr. Dor-Ziderman and another team of researchers compared how meditators and meditation-naïve participants responded to death-related words.

The participants repeatedly saw words paired with images of their own face or a stranger's, while the brain's rapid 'surprise' signal — a built-in response that appears when something unexpected happens — was measured in real time.

In most people, reminders of mortality triggered an automatic defensive pattern.

When death-related words were paired with self-images, the 'surprise' signal weakened, suggesting the brain was dampening the association before the conscious gains awareness, effectively filtering out the implication that "death applies to me".

Experienced meditators showed a different response. Their brains registered the same death-related cues without that suppression. Rather than reflexively filtering the signal, neural activity indicated the information was processed more directly, pointing to a reduced automatic defence linking death and self.

Dr. Dor-Ziderman interpreted this shift as reflecting a change in how the embodied self is represented. Ordinarily, he explained, the brain models the self as a stable object that must be protected, especially when confronted with mortality. Meditation repeatedly exposes practitioners to experience as an unfolding process: sensations arise and pass, agency fluctuates, and the sense of being a fixed 'someone' loosens.

In this context, death is processed less as a catastrophic contradiction and more as another expression of change, allowing the brain to encounter existential cues without automatically reinforcing defensive boundaries.

A common pattern

None of these results implies that ego dissolution is inherently beneficial or that altering the sense of self is a universal remedy for existential distress. Dr. Dor-Ziderman cautioned that not all disruptions of self-experience operate at the same level.

Acute psychedelic states may reshape concepts and emotions whereas deeply rooted perceptual defenses — including those tied to mortality — likely require sustained training and repeated evidence for the brain to revise them. The studies also rely on different methods, populations, and interpretations, so they can't establish straightforward cause-effect claims.

What the findings do point to, however, is a clearer view of how the brain might construct its sense of self. Moments when that sense loosens — whether in orbit, in meditation or under carefully studied conditions — reveal what feels like a fixed boundary is actively maintained and can shift. The emerging evidence points less to transcendence than to flexibility: a reminder that the experience of self is dynamic, not fixed.

In that light, as Dr. Dor-Ziderman put it, acceptance of impermanence is less about adopting a belief than "developing an emotional stance toward change", the capacity to remain open to endings without reflexively turning away. The idea echoes a long-standing contemplative insight — known in Buddhist thought as 'anicca', for instance — a doctrine asserting that all conditioned existence, physical and mental, is in a constant state of flux, arising and passing away.

Modern neuroscience doesn't quite resolve the mystery of the self — yet. But it does suggest that learning, whether through experience or training, to hold that 'me' a little more lightly may change how the mind responds to temporariness.