DreamIAS

CURRENT AFFAIRS FOR UPSC

21st to 28th June 2026

INTERNATIONAL

DOWNING STREAK

Keir Starmer entered Downing Street in July 2024 with a landslide victory. Ending 14 years of Conservative rule, marked by Brexit and the chaos that followed, he promised to build a government for all and bridge the widening trust deficit between the public and the political elite. Less than two years later, the former lawyer who took pride in taking Labour back to the political centre after the brief left-wing interlude of Jeremy Corbyn, has resigned amid mounting public discontent and growing revolt within the Labour party. Mr. Starmer rode an anti-Tory wave but soon found the public turning against him over his lapses in judgment and slow economic progress. His uncharismatic, technocratic centrism failed to withstand the rapid changes shaping British politics at a time when far-right parties were surging across continental Europe. The tide began to turn after revelations that Peter Mandelson, Mr. Starmer's choice as Britain's Ambassador to Washington, had links to the late convicted paedophile Jeffrey Epstein. Pressure mounted after Labour lost local elections in England and polls in Wales and Scotland. When Andy Burnham, Labour's 'King in the North', won the Makerfield byelection and returned to Westminster, Mr. Starmer's fate was sealed, and he resigned on June 22.

Under Mr. Starmer, the U.K. saw modest improvements in key economic indicators. Its economy began growing faster than those of its G7 peers, while inflation remained broadly under control despite conflicts in Europe and Asia. New laws strengthened workers rights, and statutory minimum wage rates were raised. Yet, these incremental gains were insufficient to satisfy an electorate that had given Labour a commanding mandate. Mr. Starmer proved largely ineffective in addressing the economic anxieties of the working-class communities that delivered his majority, or the cultural grievances Reform UK had been amplifying. Labour MPs started turning against him, making it difficult for him to continue in office. Mr. Burnham, who belongs to the soft left camp of Labour, is expected to be elected as the party's new leader and the next Prime Minister — and at a moment when the old bipolar consensus of British politics is breaking down. Reform is no longer a fringe force. With the conservatives, Britain's traditional vehicle of the right, in deep decline, Reform is emerging as the second pole. Mr. Burnham should recognise that the Starmerite centrism is unlikely to withstand the onslaught of a far-right cultural politics entrenched in English nationalism. He must unite a fractious party around a progressive economic and foreign policy agenda and build a government that works for all while standing firmly on the right side of global issues. If Labour fails to reconnect with its core values and social base, it risks losing even the constituencies that have long sustained it.

TRAGIC EVENING

On Wednesday two earthquakes, of magnitudes 7.1 and 7.5, struck seconds apart, levelling large parts of Caracas, Venezuela. On Friday, the acting President, Delcy Rodríguez, put the dead at 589 and the injured at 2,980. In La Guaira, the worst-hit State, over a hundred buildings crumpled to rubble. Geologically speaking, such destruction is, in Venezuela, an aberration. The country sits where the South American and Caribbean plates grind past one another, a boundary that slips sideways rather than thrusting upward — unlike the frequent quakes along the Pacific's Ring of Fire. Strain here accumulates quietly, over generations, before the ground settles its accounts in a single afternoon. It is early days, but seismologists have explained the twin quakes as a 'doublet,' what the US Geological Survey (USGS) calls a "complex rupture-interaction". Northern Venezuela saw a smaller doublet last year; the Türkiye-Syria earthquakes of 2023, which killed over 55,000 people, were of the same provenance. Their shallowness — under 30 kilometres — drove the fury straight into the streets above. The USGS has flagged a plausible toll exceeding 10,000, and the past is proof that such fears are likely to bear out rather than be refuted.

India, which has already offered help, should make relief its first duty — search teams, medical supplies, and the unglamorous logistics of a disaster zone. But there is a lesson here that it ought not to file away and forget. This year the Bureau of Indian Standards withdrew a decade's worth of commissioned work that found seismic hazard along the Himalayan front badly underestimated — a revision that nearly doubled design forces in the highest zones and added a sixth zone to a map that stopped at five. It was shelved after a Cabinet Secretariat order warned the standards "materially affected" ongoing infrastructure, metro projects among them. India's Zone V still designs for 0.36g, where g measures for how much the ground can shake. Pakistan and Nepal, on the same colliding front, reckon on nearly 0.75g, the United States and Japan on a full g or more. Nearly 79% of Indians live under moderate to severe seismic threat, and 95% of earthquake deaths occur in the one- to three-storey houses that no code ever reaches. Venezuela is a portent of the implicit danger that exists. The science of prediction will remain, for the foreseeable future, hope filling the gaps of uncertainty. What can be done is build structures that hold and keep their inhabitants safe. The earth follows its rhythm; the only choice is whether or not to be ready.

'GENOCIDAL INTENT': THE IMPLICATIONS OF A UN PANEL REPORT FOR CASES AGAINST ISRAEL

In a report released Tuesday (June 23), a United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) commission of inquiry said that Israel has deliberately targeted Palestinian children in Gaza, documenting a pattern of acts to establish genocidal intent.

Key Takeaways:

— The commission called children "not just part of a population" but whose survival was "central to the existence and continuity of the Palestinian group". It said: "The sheer number of cases investigated and documented by the commission showing a clear pattern that children were directly targeted by the Israeli security forces constitutes a key element in the Israeli authorities' genocidal intent to destroy the Palestinian group in Gaza."

— The report has been released by the UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, and Israel. The commission was established in May 2021 through a UNHRC resolution as an independent body to follow up on the conditions in the occupied Palestinian territory. It is mandated to submit annual reports.

— The commission is currently chaired by S Muralidhar of India, who retired in 2023 as the Chief Justice of the Odisha High Court. Apart from Muralidhar, the commission has Florence Mumba of Zambia and Chris Sidoti of Australia as members.

— The commission cited instances to describe what it called "the intentional killing of Palestinian children through airstrikes in populated areas". As part of the inquiry process, it interviewed medical practitioners who reported a consistent pattern of children with single gunshot wounds inflicted by quadcopters or snipers, and reviewed photos, videos, CT scans and X-rays provided by them.

— The report highlighted that the October 2025 ceasefire between Israel and the Palestinian militant group Hamas did not stop the violence. There have been increasing killings of

Palestinians, including children, near the "yellow line" — this refers to an Israel-declared security buffer zone that cuts north-to-south through the Gaza Strip.

— The report also discussed the torture of children during arrests and detention, including "rape, threats of rape, sexual assault, violence to the genitals, forcible stripping and humiliating acts".

— The commission urged Israel to halt military operations in Gaza, return the bodies of deceased children, and adjudicate incidents involving children in special courts, among other things. Israel, however, dismissed the report, calling it "libellous sham" and "defamatory".

— In September 2025, the commission, then chaired by Navi Pillay of South Africa and comprising Miloon Kothari of India and Chris Sidoti of Australia as members, had reached similar conclusions on genocidal intent.

— For the UN Security Council and the UN General Assembly, the commission has suggested that they prohibit all two-way military-related trade involving Israel and apply enforcement measures, if necessary. Jaswal said that these enforcement measures could be a resolution condemning Israel, economic sanctions, cutting the country off diplomatically, or a select few countries coming together to take action against Israel.

— For UN member states, the commission has recommended that they cease the transfer of arms that "have involved or could involve the commission of genocide", arrest any Israeli officials against whom the ICC has issued arrest warrants, among other things.

— Sonia Gandhi writes: Despite this clear genocidal intent, the support of President Donald Trump's government in Washington DC has enabled the Israeli government to continue its brutal campaign against Palestinians. But the rest of the world has felt the pricking of its conscience.

— The UN has been unable to act with any resolve due to American obstruction, but through its agencies it has played a stellar role in the documentation of Israeli war crimes.

— Amidst the growing public backlash against Israel and the international community's cognisance of the unjustifiable brutality unleashed on Gaza, India remains a lone voice of silence. Justice Muralidhar's report, which has sparked renewed conversation and activism against the Gaza genocide, has been met with stony silence from the Narendra Modi government.

— The spirit of Indian nationhood demands that we speak up for our Palestinian brothers and sisters whose children have been so brutally targeted. The calculus of national interest demands that we respond to the global public opinion against the Israeli regime's genocidal actions in Gaza and its brutal displacement and dispossession of lakhs of Palestinian families in the occupied West Bank.

Do You Know:

— The UN Genocide Convention, under Article II, defines genocide as "any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such:

1. Killing members of the group;
2. Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;

3. Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;

4. Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group;

5. Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group."

— Genocide is defined in the same terms in the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC) under Article 6, as well as in the statutes of other international and hybrid jurisdictions.

— While a UN commission does not have the power to impose legal penalties, its findings can be used by international courts as documentary evidence. Noah Weisbord, associate professor of law at McGill University in Montreal, Canada, told The Indian Express that the report adds to the growing body of evidence of "genocidal intent" in cases against Israel.

HOW IRAN PLANS TO REGULATE HORMUZ VIA AN ONLINE FORM

With the signing of the memorandum of understanding (MoU) between the US and Iran, the Islamic Republic's newly-constituted Persian Gulf Strait Authority (PGSA) — which Tehran says will regulate maritime traffic through the the Strait of Hormuz — has announced new clearance procedures for vessels to cross the maritime chokepoint that connects the Persian Gulf with the Gulf of Oman and the Arabian Sea. And the procedure essentially involves an online form hosted on the PGSA's website.

Key Takeaways:

— Vessel movements through the narrow maritime corridor ground to an effective halt since early March after the West Asia war broke out following US-Israeli strikes on Iran on February 28. The disruption created one of the worst energy supply crises the world has ever seen, leading to a surge in oil and gas prices globally.

— The Strait of Hormuz usually accounts for a fifth of global oil and liquefied natural gas (LNG) flows. With the Pakistan-mediated initial pact between the US and Iran in place, there are expectations that maritime traffic through the strait will pick up and normalise over the coming weeks and months. Shipping firms, however, are still adopting a cautious approach, with the situation on the ground — and on the water — still being perceived as fragile.

— In its notice issued on Friday, the PGSA said that the only official channels for processing passing requests are its website and the email address mentioned. It also announced that the request to transit the Strait of Hormuz is submitted by a vessel at least 48 hours before it arrives in the area. The PGSA also said that during the initial 60-day window of the MoU, no tariffs or service fee will be collected from the ships, and will be borne by the Iranian government.

— Crossing the Strait of Hormuz was completely free before the war and did not require any permission, but Tehran now wants to charge fees for services like maritime security, navigation assistance, environmental protection, and insurance.

— The 14-point US-Iran MoU states that crossing the strait will be free only for 60 days, and Iran will hold talks with Oman and other Gulf littoral states "to define the future administration and maritime services in the Strait of Hormuz" in line with "international law and the sovereign rights of coastal states of the Strait of Hormuz".

— The PGSA reserves the right to introduce insurance fees in the future, which will be determined by the relevant insurer. Owners will then be required to purchase and renew coverage accordingly.

Do You Know:

— The Strait of Hormuz, the world's most strategic oil chokepoint, reopened this week after the United States and Iran signed the Pakistan-mediated Memorandum of Understanding on June 17, but the global oil market may already be too damaged for the reopening to ease prices quickly.

— For India, which sources 65-70 per cent of its crude oil through the Strait of Hormuz, the question is not whether prices will fall further but whether the reopening will arrive in time to prevent prolonged elevated fuel prices through the Indian summer driving season.

NATIONAL

PACOM, THE DEEPER MEANING BEHIND A DROPPED PREFIX

The decision by the United States military to change the name of its naval command in the region from “US INDOPACOM” to “US PACOM” — United States Indo-Pacific Command to United States Pacific Command — reverting to its original name that was changed in 2018 can be dismissed as superficial, even trivial. Many have already responded with the Shakespearean “What’s in a name?”, even as the U.S. Department of War pointed out that US PACOM’s area of responsibility, from “the waters off the West Coast of the United States to the western border of India” or what had once been described as “Hollywood to Bollywood, from polar bears to penguins”, has never changed. In 2018, U.S. Defence Secretary Jim Mattis said that the name INDOPACOM was a recognition of the “growing significance” of the Indian Ocean, the Indian subcontinent, and India itself, and the U.S. dropped the term “Asia-Pacific” to “Indo-Pacific”.

Current U.S. Secretary of War Pete Hegseth gave the signal, on May 30, that this understanding has now changed, at his speech at the annual Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore — compared to more than 30 references to the “Indo-Pacific” in his speech in 2025, his speech this year contained not a single reference to the Indo-Pacific region or strategy.

Given the centre stage that the U.S.’s Indo-Pacific policy has had in India’s strategic calculus since 2018, it is necessary, therefore, to go beyond the superficial to the subterranean or submarine, in this case. New Delhi must study how broader trends in U.S. policy are attempting to recast both the region and India’s position within it in terms of three broader geographies.

U.S.-China ties and the Quad

The first, is the U.S.’s outreach to China, and concurrently diminishing salience of the Quad (India, Japan Australia, the U.S.), which Beijing has always protested as an “exclusive clique” or derisively as “ocean foam”. In the long term, the U.S. and China cannot shy away from the fierce rivalry between them, but it is clear that in the immediate term, Trump 2.0 has decided to play nice.

U.S. President Donald Trump’s visit to Beijing in May 2026 and Chinese President Xi Jinping’s upcoming visit to the U.S. on September 24, indicate that the two sides do not want their differences to overcome the relationship, and the U.S. is tiptoeing around the Taiwan issue. Mr. Trump’s references to a “G-2”, including during a press availability with Mr. Modi on the sidelines of the 52nd G-7 summit in France (June 15 to 17), are an early warning of a plan to recast the world into “spheres of influence”, where China would be the predominant power in the continent, not as one pole in a multipolar Asia, as India envisions.

As a result, the Quad, rebuilt in Trump 1.0 as a counter to China in the region, appears to be floundering. The U.S.’s National Defense Strategy released in January 2026 does not mention the Quad even once. In terms of substance, the Quad’s combined agenda has been pared down to four areas of cooperation — maritime security, economic prosperity, critical and emerging minerals technology and disaster responses. Even within these limited objectives, there have been setbacks, such as over Artificial Intelligence cooperation. Despite Quad countries signing on to Pax Silica, and Critical Minerals Initiative Framework with the U.S., the Trump administration ordered Anthropic to end access to its latest models for all non-Americans.

Another question concerns the Quad Summit, which India has unsuccessfully sought to host since January 2024. During U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio's visit to Delhi in May 2026, he offered no firm commitment that Mr. Trump would visit Delhi this year, amid indications that the Quad may be relegated to a Foreign Ministers' level grouping. The U.S. Navy's reported actions involving Iranian ship IRIS Dena (March 2006) and recent attacks on three ships in which three Indians were killed underscore maritime security and domain awareness concerns within the Quad framework. In July, when he hosts Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi and travels to Indonesia, Australia and New Zealand, Prime Minister Narendra Modi must discuss alternative maritime coalitions and revive the Australia-India-Japan trilateral.

The U.S.-Iran MoU and West Asia

The second geography of concern is West Asia. The U.S. ceasefire with Iran, after just a few months of a surprisingly badly planned war, is indicative of a general fatigue in Trump 2.0 with U.S. friends and allies in the region. The situation is even more volatile today than it was prior to February 28, especially given the short shrift Israel has received in negotiations with Iran, and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's defiance over the ceasefire for Lebanon.

A closer look at the 14-paragraph "Islamabad MoU" released by Iran reveals several signals for the region. Paragraph four states that the U.S. commits to "remove its forces from the proximity of the Islamic Republic of Iran" within 30 days after the final deal. Paragraph five says that, after the Hormuz Strait is demined, Iran and Oman will define the Strait's future administration in consultation with Persian Gulf littoral states.

Paragraph 6 stipulates that the U.S., along with regional allies, will provide at least $300 billion for Iran's reconstruction. These provisions imply commitments on behalf of the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf (GCC) states while giving Iran leverage on key issues — military, connectivity, and economic security. Oman and Qatar are now closer to Iran than before and have been part of the Pakistan-led mediation process, while countries such as Saudi Arabia are seeking new security arrangements with Türkiye, Pakistan, and Ukraine.

India's policy towards the region requires a rapid revision in light of the post-war, post-deal power structure. What was once a finely balanced approach now appears tilted towards Israel and the United Arab Emirates. New Delhi must also urgently reconsider its compliance with U.S. sanctions on Iranian oil and the Chabahar port, given Washington's shifting positions.

The U.S. and South Asia

Finally, India must study the implications of U.S. foreign policy decisions in its neighbourhood. The appointment of Sergio Gor as both U.S. Ambassador to India and Special Envoy for South and Central Asia signals Washington's growing regional ambitions. New Delhi has pushed back on attempts by the U.S. to become a supra entity in South Asia, as well as its efforts to resolve intra-regional conflicts between India and Pakistan. This ambition was hinted at during Operation Sindoor (May 2025), and repeated by Mr. Trump over the past year, especially as he met the Pakistani leadership many times in this period.

Mr. Gor's recent travels to Kathmandu, Thimphu, Dhaka and Colombo indicate that the U.S. is keen to broaden its efforts across the region. In the absence of effective pan-regional frameworks such as the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) — both are constrained by

New Delhi's political tensions with Islamabad and Dhaka — it is clear that the U.S. is entering into competition with China for influence in South Asia.

Beijing has already built several mechanisms for cooperation with South Asia, and both powers side-stepping India. India, as chair of the Indian Ocean Rim Association, and with Mr. Modi due to attend the planned BIMSTEC summit in Bangladesh and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) summit in Pakistan next year, has an opportunity to reassert its regional leadership. Given the opportunities, a revival of the SAARC grouping and other pan-regional initiatives must be considered.

Concerns over the U.S.'s moves across India's geographies may seem contrary to the bonhomie at the Modi-Trump meeting at the G-7 meet in France, and the red carpet for Mr. Rubio's India visit. Shorn of the rhetoric, however, the trends in U.S. policy are clear, and New Delhi must plan accordingly, acknowledging that the shifts run far deeper than the ripples on the surface caused by a dropped prefix.

UAE IN TALKS WITH INDIA TO PURCHASE BRAHMOS MISSILES, AKASHTEER AIR-DEFENCE UNITS

The Indian government is in talks with the United Arab Emirates to sell some of its flagship defence systems, including the supersonic cruise missile BrahMos, four Indian sources said, as the Gulf nation steps up arms procurement following the war in West Asia.

The discussions include the potential sale of India's air defence system Akashteer, sources told Reuters. "The UAE has shown interest for a number of our weapon systems, including BrahMos and Akashteer. The talks between India and UAE are at initial stages and are progressing fast," said another source.

BrahMos, jointly developed by India and Russia, is among the world's fastest cruise missiles while Akashteer is a fully automated air-defence system developed by the state-run Bharat Electronics Ltd. and the Indian Army.

The UAE is considering buying defence equipment from India and other sources after the Gulf nation was heavily attacked by Iran during the conflict in West Asia, and as it enhances its ability to respond to emerging threats. It also needs to protect the Strait of Hormuz, a crucial conduit for its energy exports.

"A diversified supplier base gives the UAE more strategic autonomy, and closer ties with India have the added benefit of not antagonising the U.S. as the countries remain allies," said Pearl Pandya, South Asia senior analyst at Armed Conflict Location and Event Data, a conflict monitoring group.

Before clinching any BrahMos sale to the UAE, India would require Russia's approval, as the 290-km-range missile is jointly developed. One source said this is unlikely to pose a hurdle given Moscow's close ties with Abu Dhabi.

FROM 5 INDIANS TO 5% OF POPULATION: DIASPORA KEY TO SEYCHELLES TIES

It was in 1770 that five Indians landed in Seychelles as plantation workers, along with seven African slaves and 15 French colonists, recorded as the first inhabitants of the Islands located in the Indian Ocean. Today, persons of Indian origin comprise 5% of the island nation's population.

Key Takeaways:

— As Prime Minister Narendra Modi heads to Seychelles on a three-day visit beginning Saturday, here is a look at the ties that bind the two countries located 4,000 km apart.

— It was from the 20th century that a constant flow of Indians, mostly from Tamil Nadu, Puducherry and later Gujarat, came to reside in Seychelles as traders, labourers, and construction workers.

— In fact, during the British colonial period, Seychelles was governed from the Bombay Presidency for some time, with regular shipping and flow of goods from India. These trade links facilitated the migration of an Indian trading community looking for greener pastures, having reached a saturation point in East Africa.

— The number of Persons of Indian Origin (PIOs) with Seychelles citizenship is estimated at around 6,000 presently, which is significant in a country with a population of about 120,000. A majority belong to the Gujarati and the Tamil communities.

— When Seychelles attained freedom on June 29, 1976, a contingent from the Indian Naval Ship, INS Nilgiri, took part in the Independence Day celebrations. This year, as PM Modi is attending the 50th Independence Day celebrations as the Guest of Honour, an Indian Armed Forces contingent and two Indian Navy ships are participating as well.

— Diplomatic ties were established with Seychelles in 1976. Earlier this year, Modi also described Seychelles as a key part of India's maritime policy — Vision MAHASAGAR (Mutual and Holistic Advancement for Security and Growth Across Regions).

— In 2015, the Pravasi Bharatiya Samman Award was conferred on Justice D Karunakaran of the Supreme Court of Seychelles, becoming the second recipient from the country after V Ramadoss (2006), an entrepreneur and medical advisor to the Seychelles President.

— PM Modi had earlier visited Seychelles in 2015, while the first Indian PM to visit Seychelles was Indira Gandhi in 1981. During his three-day visit, Modi will address the National Assembly of Seychelles and interact with members of the Indian community.

— Beyond cultural relations, India has emerged as one of Seychelles' most trusted development partners through grants, concessional credit and capacity-building initiatives. More than 1% of Seychelles' population has received professional training in India.

Do You Know:

— The island republic of Seychelles is located in the western Indian Ocean. Seychelles is situated between 4° and 11° S latitude and 46° and 56° E longitude. The major islands are about 1,000 miles east of Kenya and roughly 700 miles northeast of Madagascar. Victoria, the capital, is on Mahé Island.

— Victoria is the capital city of the Republic of Seychelles. It is situated on the northeastern coast of Mahé Island, which is the largest in the Seychelles archipelago. It stands as the sole port and the only town of significant size within Seychelles, accommodating more than one-fourth of Mahé Island's population.

VIA LIPULEKH

With the Lipulekh Pass now set to reopen for trade after seven years, The Indian Express takes you on a cross-border route marked by geography and geopolitics.

Key Takeaways:

• The Pass is set to reopen after seven years, opening the door to a cross-border trade that is buffeted by the vagaries of geography and geopolitics. The Pass has stayed shut since 2019, first due to the pandemic and later as India-China border skirmishes led to a chill in bilateral relations.

• At the trijunction of India, Nepal, and China's Tibet Autonomous Region, the Lipulekh Pass loops its way through the snow-covered Himalayan ranges, reaching 17,000 feet at its highest point. The Pass has for centuries served as the gateway for pilgrims headed to Mount Kailash as part of the Mansarovar Yatra and Lake Manasarovar in Tibet. It's also a historical transit point for trade between India and the Taklakot market in Tibet.

• The region is contested, with Nepal claiming Lipulekh and the larger region, including Kalapani and Limpiyadhura, based on the 1816 Treaty of Sugauli.Which is why the Pass, and the announcement earlier this year to reopen it for business, holds immense strategic value despite the low trade volumes.

• Trade between the two regions was first suspended during the 1962 war with China, and reopened only in 1992. Since then, every diplomatic chill would be accompanied by uncertainty and fears that it would impact trade. But as India and China worked to mend their relationship, in 2025, the government opened the route for the Mansarovar Yatra and earlier this year, announced the reopening of the Lipulekh Pass for trade.

Do You Know:

• On April 30, India announced that the Kailash Mansarovar Yatra is set to take place from June to August this year. Nepal's objection to Lipulekh pass being used for the yatra and India challenging Kathmandu's premise sets a road¬block that needs to be removed before the pilgrims begin their journey.

• The Nepalese Foreign Ministry was referring to India and China resuming trade through the Lipulekh pass in August 2025, before the GenZ protests toppled the government in September 2025.

• Lipulekh pass became a point of discord between India and Nepal in 2020, when the Oli government had objected to India building infrastructure and a road there. This had led to Nepal publishing its own map, claiming Lipulekh. India rejected such claims in May 2020, as well as in August 2025 when Kathmandu objected to Delhi's plans to start trade with China through the pass.

• Treaty of Sugauli, 1816— Signed on March 4, 1816, to end the Anglo-Nepalese War (1814–1816), the Treaty of Sugauli established the western boundary of Nepal along the Kali River (Mahakali/Sarada). It forced Nepal to surrender territories like Garhwal, Kumaon, and the Tarai to the British East India Company. The treaty remains the basis for ongoing Kalapani border disputes.

FROM KALAMKARI PAINTING TO KASHMIRI CARPET, MODI'S GIFTS TO FOREIGN DIGNITARIES SHOWCASE INDIA'S HERITAGE

From Kalamkari Mahabharata painting to Pochampally silk stole to Lakadong Turmeric to thekua — a range of Indian art, handicraft and products figured in the list of items gifted by Prime Minister Narendra Modi to foreign dignitaries during his recent visit to France and Slovakia.

Gifts to France

Recipient	Gift	What Makes It Special
French President Emmanuel Macron	Kalamkari Mahabharata painting	Hand-painted artwork from Andhra Pradesh; took 6 months to complete; made using traditional pen-drawing technique; depicts scenes from the Mahabharata.
Macron's spouse	Pochampally silk stole	Handwoven textile from Telangana; uses the Ikat resist-dyeing technique; known for geometric and floral patterns.

Gifts to Slovakia

Recipient	Gift	What Makes It Special
PM Robert Fico	Kashmiri silk carpet	Hand-knotted craft from Jammu & Kashmir.
President Peter Pellegrini	Brass Dokra Antelope set	Uses the ancient Dokra metal-casting technique; practised by tribal artisans of Chhattisgarh, Odisha, Jharkhand, and West Bengal.
President Peter Pellegrini	Thewa motif cufflinks	Traditional jewellery craft of Pratapgarh, Rajasthan; gold sheets engraved and fused onto coloured glass.
Speaker Richard Raš	Charak Samhita, Susruta Samhita, and Thekua	The Samhitas reflect India's ancient scientific and medical heritage through Ayurveda; Thekua is a traditional festive sweet from Bihar.

Gifts at the G7 Summit

Nagauri Ashwagandha – Rajasthan (Ayurvedic Rasayana herb; adaptogen; supports immunity and vitality)

Lakadong Turmeric – Meghalaya (known for high curcumin content)

Ramban Honey – Chenab Valley, Jammu & Kashmir

Banarsi silk stoles – Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh

Do You Know:

— India, as a member of the World Trade Organization (WTO), enacted the Geographical Indications of Goods (Registration & Protection) Act, 1999, that came into force with effect from 15th September 2003.

— A Geographical Indication (GI) is a tag used on products that originate from a specific geographical area and have qualities or a reputation that are characteristic of that region. This tag signifies the product's unique identity and authenticity. It helps to raise awareness and build trust among consumers.

— Once a product gets this tag, any person or company cannot sell a similar item under that name. This tag is valid for a period of 10 years following which it can be renewed. The other benefits of GI registration include legal protection to that item, prevention against unauthorised use by others, and promoting exports.

— In India, the Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade, Ministry of Commerce and Industry, awards GIs. Darjeeling Tea was the first Indian product to get the GI tag.

— The Geographical Indications of Goods (Registration and Protection) Act of 1999 Act provide for the registration of handicrafts and handlooms as Geographical Indications (GI). Handicraft (& Handlooms) is covered under Section 2(f) of the Act which states that "goods" means any agricultural, natural or manufactured goods or any goods of handicraft (& Handlooms) or of industry and includes food stuff.

PRESIDENT PRESENTS SECOND SET OF PADMA AWARDS

Key Facts & Data

- **Padma Awards:** One of India's highest civilian awards, conferred in three categories — Padma Vibhushan, Padma Bhushan, and Padma Shri — presented by the President of India.
- **Ceremony:** Second civil investiture ceremony held at Ganatantra Mandap, Rashtrapati Bhavan.
- **Padma Vibhushan recipients:** K. T. Thomas, former Supreme Court judge (public affairs); P. Narayanan, Malayalam journalist (literature & education).
- **Padma Bhushan recipients:** Alka Yagnik (playback singer), Mammootty (actor), Dattatreyudu Nori (American oncologist), Vijay Amritraj (tennis), S.K.M. Maeilanandhan (industrialist), Vellappally Natesan (social worker/educationist); posthumously to Shibu Soren, JMM founder (received by wife Rupi Soren).
- **Padma Shri recipients:** Rohit Sharma (cricketer, led India to T20 World Cup win); Savita Punia (hockey); R. Madhavan (actor); Chandramouli Gaddamanugu (aerospace scientist, led Akash missile system development/deployment during Operation Sindoor); Asok Kumar Haldar (writer).
- **Posthumous Padma Shri:** Vladimir Mestvirishvili, Georgian coach who mentored Indian Olympic medallists Sushil Kumar, Yogeshwar Dutt, and Ravi Dahiya; and actor Satish Shah.

Static Syllabus Linkages

- **Polity:** Padma Awards are "civilian awards," not "titles" under Article 18 of the Constitution (which prohibits titles other than military/academic distinctions) — a classic prelims distinction.

- **Awards administration:** Announced on Republic Day, conferred by the President; administered by the Ministry of Home Affairs; recommendations via the Padma Awards Committee.

FROM SUNDAY, INDIA WILL RESUME TOURIST VISAS FOR BANGLADESH NATIONALS: TRIVEDI

Moving to improve bilateral relations, India on Thursday announced the resumption of tourist visas for Bangladeshi nationals after a nearly two-year suspension.

Key Takeaways:

• Delhi suspended tourist visas for Bangladeshi nationals in August 2024 following political unrest and the ouster of the Sheikh Hasina-led government. Trivedi announced that tourist visa applications will resume on June 28, at five visa centres, including the one in Dhaka. This was his first announcement after presenting his credentials to the President of Bangladesh, Mohammed Shahabuddin, Thursday afternoon, signalling that he has been tasked with repairing ties between the two countries.

• Last month, The Indian Express reported that India and Bangladesh were planning to resume visa services soon. As both countries sought to normalise their relationship after a period of significant turmoil, the full-scale resumption of visa services was agreed upon by both sides as an important first step.

• Bangladesh resumed issuing visas to Indian citizens across all categories following the swearing-in of the Tarique Rahman government in February this year. During Bangladesh Foreign Minister Khalilur Rahman's visit to India in April, the normalisation of visa processes was one of the key topics discussed by Dhaka.

• All Bangladesh visa centres in India, including the High Commission in New Delhi and the consular divisions in Kolkata, Agartala, Mumbai and Chennai, have been operational since February 20. In response, Dhaka requested that Delhi promptly reciprocate on the visa issue.

• The five IVACs in Bangladesh came under attack in August 2024, and Indian personnel working at development projects were threatened. Due to security threats and the attacks on the High Commission premises, the High Commission of India was forced to scale down visa operations in Bangladesh.

Do You Know:

• The Centre has granted Dinesh Trivedi a status equivalent to that of a Union Cabinet Minister. An order issued by the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) said Trivedi "has been assigned the equivalent status of Union Cabinet Minister in the Table of Precedence (ToP) as a measure personal to him, without amending the Table of Precedence."

"The position in the Table of Precedence is for ceremonial functions only," it said.

Trivedi has succeeded Pranay Kumar Verma, who was the Indian High Commissioner to Bangladesh for four years until May this year. The Ministry of External Affairs announced Trivedi's appointment to Dhaka on April 27.

• According to figures provided by the Bangladesh High Commission to The Indian Express, over 13,000 visas have been issued to Indian citizens in the first two months since the resumption of operations around February 20. These include various categories: business, tourism, medical and for those travelling across the border to meet family members.

• Bangladesh has been India's top source of foreign tourist arrivals, often accounting for over 20% of total arrivals. A significant portion of these visits is for medical treatment, business, and visiting friends/family, with West Bengal being a primary destination. In 2023, around 21.2 lakh visitors from Bangladesh came to India, according to official statistics, while the number dropped marginally to 17.5 lakh in 2024. However, Bangladeshi tourist arrivals to India dropped sharply to 4.7 lakh in 2025 (a 73% decrease), largely due to political tensions and visa restrictions.

• Once visa processes on both sides are normalised, Delhi and Dhaka would look at other points of convergence including economic ties and energy connectivity. Recently, India transported diesel to Bangladesh to alleviate energy shortages in the wake of the West Asian crisis.

BAN ON TELEGRAM STRETCHED MEANING OF 'INFORMATION' UNDER THE IT ACT

The Union government temporarily blocked Telegram to protect the sanctity of the NEET (UG) re-test by a single interpretative sleight of hand which compressed an entire intermediary platform into an expression: "information".

The ban won the endorsement of the Delhi High Court by stretching the meaning of "information" under the Information Technology (IT) Act, 2000.

Section 2(1)(v) of the Act had traditionally defined "information" in diminutive units, including data, messages, text, image, sound, voice, codes, computer programme, software, and databases. The Telegram ban changed that legal interpretation.

The government argued that an online platform like Telegram was an "aggregation" or "compilation" of these units. By reading entire platforms run by companies, which were legal entities by their own nature, within the ambit of 'information' under the Act, the government has effectively weaponised the content-blocking provision of Section 69A.

Section 69A of the IT Act gives the government power to issue directions to block public access to any 'information' through a computer resource. Here, the interpretation of the Centre has led to the successful replacement of the word 'information' with an 'entire intermediary platform'.

The High Court, in its June 19 order, endorsed the Centre's view that the "blocking power under Section 69A of the IT Act extends beyond individual pieces of content and, having regard to its wide legislative scope, encompasses the software architecture, codebase, databases, and programmatic ecosystem constituting an application".

Telegram had not accepted the "expansive" interpretation of the term "information" while noting that the government, acting through Section 69A, could only block access to "specific information".

Such a sweeping ban had disproportionately affected the very section it deemed to protect. Many of the 150 million Telegram users were students and educators who used the platform to share study material and educational resources for NEET preparation.

The platform's arguments are backed by the Supreme Court's judgment in the Anuradha Bhasin case on digital freedoms, holding that restrictions on fundamental rights must be proportionate and only the least restrictive measure must be employed.

EXPLAINED: RELIANCE COMMUNICATIONS AND TELEGRAM'S 'GLOBAL' BLOCKING

Late June 16, Telegram CEO Pavel Durov alleged on X, formerly Twitter, that "Indian telecom Reliance is sabotaging access to Telegram for millions of users OUTSIDE India (including the UAE) via a rogue method called BGP hijacking," and that this "sabotage seems intentional, as Reliance has ignored multiple reports".

What had happened was in fact a result of an accidental misconfiguration by Reliance Communications, the once-large telecom operator under the Anil Dhirubhai Ambani Group. That misconfiguration briefly caused Telegram outages in different countries, following an India-only ban ordered by the government to stop the spread of exam-related misinformation. While Telegram had challenged the ban in the Delhi High Court, the court upheld the Centre's ban as legal.

BGP mishap

Reliance Communications largely does not exist anymore, and is under an insolvency process, as a part of which some of its assets were acquired by Reliance Jio. However, it continues to hold on to a few assets, including datacentres in Mumbai, and some Internet traffic routes. As such, it is required to continue to comply with blocking orders for websites, so that networks that rely on its bandwidth are in turn compliant.

Jio categorically denied being involved with this incident; Mr. Durov appeared to mistakenly refer to the Reliance Industries subsidiary in his post. "Recent posts on X have led to speculation regarding Reliance Jio Infocomm Limited (AS55836) and a BGP route misconfiguration," Jio said, using the acronym for autonomous systems, a networking term that distinguishes large networks by assigning a number to them. "We categorically clarify that Jio has not been involved in any such incident. Jio continues to operate its network in accordance with global Internet routing best practices and the highest standards of reliability, security, and transparency."

But instead of applying this blocking order locally, Reliance Communications "hijacked" Border Gateway Protocol (BGP) routes globally that corresponded with Telegram. BGP is a protocol used by networks to map out efficient routes to other networks, and propagating incorrect information through BGP to external networks can disrupt access to services whose routing information is contained within such information.

Flag, a subsea cable network that was once owned by Reliance Communications and was later spun out as a separate company, likely maintains "open filters," with the latter, Anurag Bhatia, an Internet networking expert said. "It's common for networks to open filters completely for large customers with the hope and assumption that those customers will not hijack random prefixes," Mr. Bhatia said. "There is technology available for filtering, but it's not widely deployed."

BGP prefixes are, roughly speaking, IP address blocks that assist in routing. Essentially, Reliance Communications' announcement was trusted by the next network in line, and led to a situation where any network that trusted Reliance Communications' BGP announcements carried by Flag would lead people trying to reach Telegram's servers into Reliance Communication servers, where the connection would end with no result.

Impact, mitigation

The event was resolved in the early hours of June 17, as Reliance Communications appeared to have fixed its configuration. However, by then, Mr. Durov complained that Du, a telecom operator in the United Arab Emirates, where Telegram is headquartered, had ingested the incorrect BGP information, and led to disruptions to the service.

Doug Madory, director of Internet analysis at Kentik, a network intelligence firm, said on X that a similar incident took place when an Iraqi international Internet gateway similarly hijacked Telegram routes.

The workaround to that incident, Mr. Madory said, also prevented even wider damage to Telegram access in other countries this time around. Resource Public Key Infrastructure Route Origin Validation (RPKI ROV), a technology used by large networks to ensure that BGP announcements they receive are legitimate, was able to prevent Reliance's misconfiguration in time. That is the technology Mr. Bhatia was referring to.

Mr. Madory said that further IP addresses announced by Telegram were also hijacked throughout the night, worsening the issue. Overall, Mr. Madory said, "Only a small share of traffic to Telegram was misdirected but it came from all over the world."

BGP hijacks have been seen occasionally before. In 2008, Pakistan's state-owned telecom operator, PTCL, hijacked routes belonging to YouTube, leading to worldwide disruptions, due to this announcement being carried to an international transit provider based in Hong Kong.

MASS MESSAGING AND MORE

The mythology surrounding Telegram founder Pavel Durov is one of exile and reinvention: Mr. Durov declined to cooperate with Russian diktats to fork over data on Ukrainian protesters in 2014, in the months following the Euromaidan demonstrations in Kyiv. Mr. Durov's previous company, VKontakte, remains a popular social media platform with much of the same design language and content as Telegram, which was created around the same time he left Russia.

To understand Telegram's success in the highly expensive and competitive messaging app market, it is useful to look at what the app does differently from WhatsApp, or even Signal. The service moved quickly in its early years to deploy features that have made it a favourite among activist and dissident circles. For instance, channels send push notifications at a massive scale to subscribers, allowing activists, politicians and even news organisations to quickly get instant viewership on fast-moving events like the Russia-Ukraine war.

While some of those features have found their way into WhatsApp, Telegram stayed relevant with two more things that its competitors may have had less appetite for: incredibly large filesharing limits, and a penchant for performing its stated principles — a commitment to "user privacy and human rights such as freedom of speech and assembly," according to an automated message shared with journalists who send the platform any inquiries.

Deep imprint

The latter manifested in its decision to quickly challenge a week-long ban in India starting June 16, following the National Testing Agency's (NTA) concerns that exam paper leak related frauds, made possible by editing features the app provides to backdate newly uploaded documents, may cause mass confusion. Telegram lost its petition in the Delhi High Court seeking to overturn this ban.

Just like Meta and X, a billionaire founder's personal philosophies have left a deep imprint on the app's functioning. Mr. Durov said the firm loses "tens of millions of dollars" in India — an estimate that is consistent with its 15 crore-strong user base and the likely hundreds of terabytes of data travelling through the platform each day.

Unlike Meta and X, which are part of a diversified galaxy of firms, allowing their founders to cross-subsidise heavy messaging, Mr. Durov's firm is purely messaging-focused. That may have naturally incentivised the firm to vigorously fight bans and restrictions wherever possible.

But that confrontation has come with little representation. Even in a market where the firm loses millions of dollars with such a large user base, it has only a handful of employees, mostly to liaise with the Union government. It has been embroiled in copyright-related cases at a massive scale, for instance with some Hindi newspaper publishers.

It ended up making concessions, but the last-minute participation in court — when its availability was under legitimate threat — was also visible in Brazil, where it had no personnel or legal representation at hand until a judge blocked the platform entirely. Mr. Durov, a French-Emirati-Russian citizen, was himself arrested in France for allegedly lax moderation on the platform of child sex abuse and exploitation material.

A result of not having diversified business interests is that the firm gets to speak its mind. That is certainly not the case with firms like Meta and Google, which are often in a balancing act with the Union government in cases like censorship, since they have a vast array of digital revenues at risk if they are seen as too obdurate. Relenting to demands and a give-and-take approach to a relationship with the state is typical of the Big Tech giants.

Not Telegram. The firm's official X handle quickly responded with open derision to the ban, even as advocates at Khaitan & Co. were strenuously making a legal case to quash the ban in court. "Over 300,000 people die of drowning each year. In order to protect society, it is now illegal to consume or possess water," the account posted on June 17. "Your government is also considering banning solid food, as it presents a needless choking hazard. You are not an adult. You are a baby. Eat the baby food," it added.

WHY WAS THE NEWSCLICK CASE QUASHED?

The story so far:

The Delhi High Court has quashed the first information report (FIR) registered by the Economic Offences Wing (EOW) of the Delhi Police and the consequent money laundering proceedings initiated by the Enforcement Directorate (ED) against news portal NewsClick and its editor-in-chief, Prabir Purkayastha, over allegations of foreign funding. Holding the action to be a "mala fide and arbitrary" exercise of power, Justice Neena Bansal Krishna said it amounted to an abuse of the legal process and posed a threat to free and independent journalism.

What were the allegations against NewsClick?

The proceedings stemmed from two cases registered in 2020 by the EOW of the Delhi Police and the ED. The EOW case originated from a letter dated June 26, 2020, written by Sobhan Singh, who was an informant and not an aggrieved party, to the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, alleging that PPK NewsClick Studios Pvt. Ltd. had misappropriated funds and violated foreign direct investment (FDI) norms. The communication was subsequently forwarded by Vijay Kaushik, Under Secretary in the Ministry, following which the EOW registered an FIR.

The FIR alleged that NewsClick had received an investment of $1.5 million from Worldwide Media Holdings LLC, a Delaware-based entity in the United States, at an inflated share valuation. The investigating agency claimed that the premium at which the shares were issued was intended to circumvent the 26% cap on foreign investment in digital news media. However, the investment agreement had been signed in March 2018, and the funds received in April 2018, more than a year before the 26% cap was introduced through a government press note on September 18, 2019.

The allegation that NewsClick had manipulated its share valuation also formed the basis of the alleged violations under the Foreign Exchange Management (Transfer or Issue of Security by a Person Resident Outside India) Regulations, 2017 (FEMA). The regulations require that shares issued by an Indian entity to a foreign investor be valued in accordance with an internationally accepted pricing methodology and not be transferred below fair value.

The record also showed that, before receiving the investment, NewsClick had written to the Information and Broadcasting Ministry in December 2017 seeking clarification on whether online news portals were subject to the FDI restrictions applicable to print media. In January 2018, the Ministry responded that “online publications on website/web portal do not fall under the ambit of print media”.

During the proceedings, reference was made to a status report dated July 26, 2021, signed by Assistant Commissioner of Police Anil Kumar of the EOW and supplied to NewsClick’s counsel. The report incorporated a response from the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) stating that the foreign remittance had come through the automatic route and that no FEMA violation was disclosed.

However, on July 29, 2021, the state sought to distance itself from the report and requested permission from the court to file a fresh status report. When a revised report was eventually filed on October 4, 2021, the RBI’s observations were omitted. The EOW nevertheless maintained that NewsClick, despite being a loss-making entity, had received FDI at inflated valuations and alleged that the share valuation mechanism had been used to bypass regulatory restrictions. It further claimed that 45% of the foreign investment had been diverted.

Within a week of the FIR being registered, the ED initiated proceedings under the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA) by registering an Enforcement Case Information Report (ECIR), similar to an FIR, on the basis of the same allegations. The predicate offences cited in the FIR included criminal breach of trust, cheating and criminal conspiracy.

How did the UAPA case against NewsClick unfold?

Apart from the proceedings under FEMA and the PMLA, Mr. Purkayastha and NewsClick’s head of human resources, Amit Chakravarty, also faced prosecution under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA). In October 2023, the Special Cell of the Delhi Police arrested the duo following a report published by The New York Times alleging links between NewsClick’s funding and Chinese state-backed propaganda efforts. Mr. Chakravarty subsequently turned approver and was released from custody.

Mr. Purkayastha remained in Tihar Jail for nearly seven months before the Supreme Court, in May 2024, declared his arrest illegal and set aside the remand order. The court found that neither he nor his counsel had been furnished with the written grounds of arrest before he was remanded to custody.

A Bench comprising Justices B.R. Gavai and Sandeep Mehta held that communication of the grounds of arrest in writing by the investigating agency was "sacrosanct and cannot be breached under any situation". The Bench observed that failure to furnish the grounds of arrest would violate the fundamental right guaranteed under Article 22(1) of the Constitution, which provides that no arrested person shall be detained without being informed of the grounds of arrest and shall not be denied the right to consult and be defended by a legal practitioner of their choice.

Accordingly, Mr. Purkayastha was thereafter released on the grounds of not being provided a "communication of the grounds of arrest in written", thus vitiating the arrest and subsequent remand.

What were the court's findings on the alleged FDI violations?

On the allegation of FDI violations, the court noted that the correspondence issued by the RBI approving the transaction between NewsClick and Worldwide Media Holdings LLC was sufficient to demonstrate that no violation had occurred. The court reasoned that the transaction had been cleared by the very regulator within whose domain the alleged offence fell. It also took note of the fact that no FDI cap on digital news media existed at the time the investment was made.

Justice Krishna also rejected the State's allegation that over 45% of the foreign investment had been siphoned off through salary payments, consultancy fees and rent. Referring to the company's financial records, the court noted that its expenditure exceeded its revenue during the relevant period.

"When a company is functioning, especially in the business of digital print media, such expenses are bound to occur. Even if it is accepted that there were overpayments and excessive expenditure incurred by the petitioner, it does not disclose any criminal offence. The allegation of siphoning is, therefore, not tenable," the judge said.

Why did the court find that the offences of cheating and criminal breach of trust were not made out?

With regard to the offences of cheating under Section 415 of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) and criminal breach of trust under Section 406, the court pointed to the absence of any aggrieved party. It noted that Worldwide Media Holdings LLC, the entity that had invested funds in NewsClick, had never lodged any criminal complaint. The court further observed that the prosecution had failed to identify any person who could be said to have been deceived, cheated or otherwise suffered any grievance on account of the transaction.

The court also highlighted that Mr. Singh, on whose complaint the FIR was registered, had no direct involvement in the transaction. It held that a commercial investment made in exchange for shares could not, by itself, amount to an entrustment of property so as to attract the offence of criminal breach of trust.

What did the court say about the money laundering charge?

The ED's money laundering case was primarily based on the allegation that Mr. Purkayastha and others had conspired to bring foreign funds into India through an investment in NewsClick. It is alleged that ₹9.59 crore (approximately $1.5 million) was routed into the country under the guise of an investment in digital media, thereby attracting the offence of criminal conspiracy under Section 120B of the IPC. According to the agency, Mr. Purkayastha had colluded with Jason Pfetcher of Worldwide Media Holdings LLC and American businessman Neville Roy Singham in facilitating the inflow of funds.

The court, however, rejected the contention and pointed out that a charge of conspiracy requires material indicating an agreement to commit an illegal act or to achieve a lawful objective through unlawful means. Apart from what it described as "bald assertions", the court found no material to suggest the existence of any such agreement or unlawful design. It further noted that despite the ED carrying out extensive investigations for nearly a year and a half, during which the petitioners and several employees were repeatedly summoned, no incriminating material had been placed on record.

"Aside from bald assertions of there being a criminal conspiracy, there is not a whisper of any incriminating allegation which would even remotely suggest the commission of the offence punishable under Section 4 of the PMLA (punishment for money laundering)," the court observed.

Having found the allegation of criminal conspiracy untenable, the court went on to hold that the ED's money laundering case could not survive once the underlying FIR was quashed. Relying on the Supreme Court's decision in Vijay Madanlal Choudhary v. Union of India (2022), it observed that where the predicate offence is set aside, money laundering proceedings founded on the same set of allegations cannot be sustained against the accused. Consequently, the ECIR was also quashed.

JUST TRUTHS

To protect children from the stigma of illegitimacy, the erstwhile Indian Evidence Act 1872 and the Bharatiya Sakshya Adhiniyam 2023 place the burden of proof on the party denying paternity rather than the party seeking confirmation. The Supreme Court of India first considered the challenges posed by DNA evidence in this regard, in Goutam Kundu (1993), where it held that DNA tests could not be ordered as a matter of routine and that courts must first assess whether a strong prima facie case had been made out. It reiterated this position in Shri Banarsi Dass (2005); both cases also reinforced the protection of legitimacy over any interest in forensic curiosity. Then, in the litigation mooted by Rohit Shekhar alleging that veteran politician N.D. Tiwari was his father, the Delhi High Court and the top court called for the test despite Mr. Tiwari insisting that his right to privacy was being violated. In Nandlal Wasudeo Badwaik (2014), the Court said that when reliable scientific proof confronts legal fiction, the former may prevail in the interest of justice; in Dipanwita Roy (2014), it acknowledged that refusing testing can lead to adverse inference. Both orders also confirmed the legitimacy of DNA tests based on need.

Then, in K.S. Puttaswamy (2017), as it encoded the right to privacy — including of genetic data — as a fundamental right under Article 21, the Court introduced a constraint that prior paternity jurisprudence did not have to reckon with. The threefold test it set up, of legality, legitimate aims, and proportionality, was brought to bear in Aparna Ajinkya Firodia (2023), which concluded that DNA tests should be ordered only where they are necessary and proportionate, and not if a dispute could be resolved based on other evidence. In Ivan Rathinam (2025), the Court said neither privacy nor knowledge were absolute and that the judiciary also has to negotiate stigma and necessity. Its order in CP vs AP (2026) tied all these contentions together as it upheld a trial court's direction for a DNA test on the grounds that the disputed question of paternity could not be resolved by the existing material record and required a scientific determination, by applying necessity and proportionality considerations. In the post-Puttaswamy era, then, the Constitution protects bodily autonomy and restricts compelled genetic disclosure — but courts could order a DNA test if paternity is directly in issue, there is no other evidence on record capable of resolving the question, and the test would serve the interest of justice. Thus, by positioning DNA testing as a last resort, the courts have to ensure that while science may be infallible, the pursuit of truth is only just when it respects a person's rights.

INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES & THE QUESTION OF CHOICE IN GIVING BIRTH

The Karnataka High Court permitted the parents of a 23-year-old woman with severe intellectual and developmental disabilities a total abdominal hysterectomy, or the surgical removal of the uterus, last week.

Key Takeaways:

• Her parents had approached the court stating that their daughter's cognitive impairments made her incapable of understanding or managing menstrual hygiene, which had led to recurring infections and prolonged medical complications. After a multidisciplinary medical board confirmed that the woman lacked the capacity to give informed consent and recommended the surgery for her well-being, the court allowed the procedure.

• The judgment was the latest instance of courts' intervention in the reproductive autonomy of women with intellectual disabilities — decisions that often involve the complex intersection of law, medicine, and human rights.

• Historically, women with intellectual disabilities have been highly vulnerable to forced sterilisations and non-consensual medical procedures, often justified by caregivers as a matter of convenience or under the guise of protecting them from the consequences of sexual abuse.

• To prevent this, Indian law places strict safeguards on procedures that permanently alter a person's reproductive capacity. Section 10 of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016, prevents persons with disability from being subjected to any medical procedure leading to infertility without their free and informed consent.

• A legal dilemma, however, arises when a woman's intellectual disability is so severe that she lacks the cognitive capacity to understand the nature, risks, and consequences of a procedure, rendering her unable to give "informed consent".

• In such scenarios, caregivers and doctors cannot unilaterally make the decision and must approach a court. The courts invoke what is known as "parens patriae" — a legal doctrine wherein the court steps into the shoes of a guardian for individuals unable to care for themselves. The court does not simply substitute its own judgment for the individual's; it conducts an inquiry to determine what course of action lies in the "best interests" of the person — that prioritises their health, dignity, and bodily integrity.

• The issue of consent and medical necessity in hysterectomies was addressed by the Supreme Court in the 2023 case of Dr Narendra Gupta v. Union of India, a public interest litigation that highlighted that "unnecessary hysterectomies" were being carried out on women, particularly from marginalised communities, under government health insurance schemes. These procedures were often allegedly performed in private hospitals without informing the women about the side-effects or obtaining their informed consent.

• Recognising this as a serious violation of the fundamental right to health under Article 21 of the Constitution, the Supreme Court directed all states and Union Territories (UTs) to strictly implement the Union Health Ministry's 2022 Guidelines to Prevent Unnecessary Hysterectomies. The court mandated the formation of hysterectomy monitoring committees at the national, state and district levels to audit such surgeries and directed the blacklisting of hospitals found performing the procedure without medical necessity or informed consent.

Do You Know:

• While the Karnataka case dealt with a hysterectomy, most of the jurisprudence regarding the reproductive rights of intellectually disabled women in India revolves around pregnancies, often resulting from sexual assault. Here, the Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act, 1971, comes into play. Under the Act, if a pregnant woman has a mental illness, a pregnancy can be terminated with the written consent of her guardian. The law, however, does not extend this guardian-consent provision to women with intellectual disabilities. For them, their own consent remains an absolute legal requirement for an abortion.

• This distinction came to the fore in Suchita Srivastava v. Chandigarh Administration, a landmark 2009 Supreme Court judgment. In this case, a woman with mild intellectual disability residing in a state-run welfare home in Chandigarh was raped and became pregnant. The UT's administration approached the judiciary seeking to terminate the pregnancy, assuming she was unfit for motherhood. The woman, however, expressed a desire to keep the child.

QUEER LIVES

Every June, the world observes Pride Month, which traces its origins to the 1969 Stonewall riots in New York City. In response to a police raid at the Stonewall Inn at Greenwich Village in the U.S., the LGBTQI+ began protests and demonstrations. This marked a pivotal turning point for the modern LGBTQIA+ rights movement.

In India, the LGBTQI+ rights movement has been dynamic, securing significant legal protections for the community. However, the latest Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Amendment Act, 2026 — which removes the statutory recognition of self-perceived gender identity, introduces medical-board certification and bureaucratic verification requirements, and mandates inclusion in a National Transgender Registry — has brought the gap between legal recognition and lived reality into sharp focus once again.

One step forward, two steps back

Medical gatekeeping is an infringement on dignity, autonomy, personal liberty, and privacy. So long as recognition remains conditional, equality remains incomplete. Advocate Jayna Kothari explains the relationship between law and the lived realities of transgender people in Transforming Rights: How Law Shapes Transgender Lives, Identity and Community in India (QD). The collection of essays examines India's transformation in transgender rights, from the recognition of gender self-determination and the decriminalisation of same-sex relations to the recent legislative rollback of self-identification rights.

Even as the courts have laid down a framework for equal protection under the law, the trans community continues to face exclusion and discrimination, and remains engaged in a struggle for basic rights to education, healthcare, livelihood, and shelter. Kothari questions the contradiction in the compilation of voices of scholars, activists, lawyers, policy researchers, and community members, who have experience in working with the wider LGBTQIA+ community. The chapters explore the constitutional trajectory of equality and protection in transgender rights cases, the implementation of reservations, questions of intimacy, the impact of increased surveillance and safety measures on trans lives, public attitudes, and structural exclusion. Drawing on legal, social, and community-based perspectives, the essays outline the progress made over the years, the continuing challenges, and the reforms still needed.

CAN POLICE RE-OPEN PROBE WITHOUT COURT APPROVAL?

The story so far:

The Supreme Court recently in Paliniswamy Veeraraja & Ors. versus The State of Karnataka & Anr. reiterated that the investigating authorities were required to obtain permission from the Magistrate to initiate further investigation after filing the closure report. In this case, the court quashed the First Information Report (FIR) and subsequent chargesheet noting that such permission had not been obtained.

Although an application seeking further investigation had been filed before the concerned Magistrate for a third time, no order granting permission was placed on record, the court said.

The investigating agency had earlier filed closure reports twice, stating that the dispute appeared to be entirely civil in nature. The court also relied on the principles laid down in State of Haryana v. Bhajan Lal (1992), holding that the civil nature of the dispute was an additional ground for quashing the FIR and subsequent proceedings.

Can supplementary report be filed without Magistrate's approval?

The sub-section (2) of Section 173 of the Criminal Procedure Code (CrPC) provides for forwarding a report to the Magistrate after completing investigation in the prescribed form. The Section 173(8) CrPC says that in case the in-charge of a police station finds additional evidence after sending final report to the Magistrate, he may send supplementary report to the Magistrate. It is silent on obtaining permission from a Magistrate for filing supplementary report under sub-section (8). Section 193(9) of the BNSS is pari materia (dealing with the same subject matter) to Section 173(8) of the CrPC.

What has been held by the Supreme Court with regard to further investigation after filing a final report?

The Supreme Court in Vinay Tyagi versus Irshad Ali (2013) held that "though there is no specific requirement in the provisions of Section 173(8) of the code to conduct further investigation or file supplementary report with the leave of the court, the investigating agencies have not only understood but also adopted it as a legal practice to seek permission of the courts to conduct further investigation and file supplementary report with the leave of the court".

The court held that the requirement of seeking prior leave of the court to conduct further probe will have to read into, and is necessary implication of the provisions of Section 173(8) of the code. The court held that the doctrine of contemporanea expositio supports such an interpretation, as a practice that has been consistently understood and implemented over time, and is backed by law, should be recognised as an integral part of the interpretative process. This proposition has been approved by the Supreme Court in subsequent cases also.

While the newly added proviso to Section 193(9) of the BNSS (which is pari materia to Section 173(8) of the CrPC) mandates that the permission of the court is necessary if the trial has begun, the top court, in Rama Chaudhary versus State of Bihar (2024) reiterated that even though the statute does not require express permission, the law has developed and seeking permission from the concerned magistrate is essential. The Supreme Court, in Robert Lalchungnunga Chongthu v. State of Bihar (2025), reaffirmed the ratio in Vinay Tyagi (supra), holding that obtaining the court's leave to file a supplementary chargesheet forms an integral part of the law.

Therefore, despite the new provision of the BNSS, once a chargesheet or closure report has been filed, further probe based on new evidence may be undertaken only with the permission of the court.

POLICE BEGIN COLLECTING DNA RECORDS UNDER 2022 LAW; OVER ONE LAKH PROFILES GENERATED

The police in several States have started collecting DNA records, primarily from blood samples, of suspects arrested for heinous crimes. Along with DNA profiles, photographs, fingerprints, and iris scans, the government is creating a unique identification record of arrested persons and convicts that can be retained for up to 75 years.

Over the past five months, the DNA records of more than one lakh suspects have been stored in a central database operated by the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) under the Union Home Ministry.

The samples are being collected under the Criminal Procedure (Identification) Act (CrPI), a law passed in Parliament in 2022. More than 2,600 measurement collection units have been established across the country, and the CrPI system is now available in police districts and prisons. It is also accessible to Central agencies such as the Central Bureau of Investigation, the National Investigation Agency, and the Narcotics Control Bureau.

The contours of the CrPI system were showcased on June 19 at an NCRB event presided over by Home Minister Amit Shah.

"The samples are at present being collected by police in cases punishable by seven years. The DNA, mostly drawn from blood and in some cases saliva too, is then sent to a forensic laboratory, which generates a unique number. The NCRB preserves the code in its records. The sanctity of the samples depends on the police," an NCRB official said.

NAFIS

"CrPI Act, 2022 allows police and prison officers to take physical and biological samples of arrested and convicted individuals. To make these provisions effective, there was a need for a national platform that could integrate and make identification-related data useful across the country. In this direction, the NCRB launched the National Automated Fingerprint Identification System (NAFIS) in the year 2022, which fully automated the fingerprint matching process. Today, with more than 1.27 crore fingerprint records, NAFIS has played a significant role in solving many old inter-State criminal cases," a presentation on the CrPI system said.

"Through CrPI, now all information related to identification, including face, iris, and biological samples is available in a national-level searchable database, making accurate and scientific identification possible within moments. Now, a photo obtained from a crime scene can be instantly matched with records across the country. CrPI functions as a unified system across the country, where every identification-based measurement is securely stored in a standardised system. As per standards, while taking photos, clarity of the eyes is ensured so that identification is not hindered despite any disguise or changes. CrPI ensures enrolment of face and iris measurements of arrested and convicted persons, and in special cases, registration of biological samples as well. There is a provision to retain all these measurements securely for 75 years," it said.

According to the NCRB presentation, biological samples recovered from crime scenes can be directly matched with existing records, enabling the identification of habitual offenders through scientific methods.

Video analytics feature

The NCRB said the CrPI system also has an advanced video analytics feature through which investigating officers can upload CCTV footage to identify faces of suspicious persons and match them with the national database. "What earlier took hours of manual investigation is now possible in just a few minutes. This feature also simplifies and speeds up identification of interstate criminals, as their records can be matched instantly across the country," it said.

ARE FOOTPATHS MORE THAN SAFE SPACES?

The story so far:

A Bench of Justices P.S. Narasimha and Atul S. Chandurkar has, in its judgment (Maniyar Iliyaz@Shaik Riyaz versus P. Ayyappan), said a footpath's relevance is more than that of a narrow strip of land where the 'less-fortunate' ones take cover from being knocked down by vehicles speeding on multi-lane motorways.

Does the ruling deconnect the footpath from the theme of accidents?

Justice Narasimha's judgment divorces the footpath from the theme of motor accidents. The sole aim of a footpath is not to avoid accidents. The pathways have an identity and a purpose of their own.

The footpath caters to the most essential, the most fundamental of rights — the pleasure of walking. The court said the presence of a broad footpath is a reflection of civilisational advancement and respect for the freedom to walk. The tracks offer the public access to urban spaces through movement by walking.

The judgment declared that the right to walk on a comfortable and safe footpath held "priority over movement by motor vehicles".

In a way, reasoning of the judgment suggests that footpaths suffer from a situation described in environmental law as the 'tragedy of the commons' or the degradation of a precious resource when many individuals use it. Safe and broad footpaths have become a scarce resource, riddled by encroachments, garbage and pavement trade. Secondly, the court has reasoned that broad footpaths, besides amplifying the beauty of cities, must also enable equitable access to all. Nothing should be done to thwart the public's free access to common spaces.

Justice Narasimha has observed that access to common spaces, in both urban areas and rural areas, should be distributed in such a way that it was "not a monopoly of the motorised class alone". Article 39(b) of the Constitution mandates that material resources of a community must be distributed so as to sub-serve the common good. Authorities must consider the "common good" of both pedestrians and motor vehicle owner while designing a material resource like land to build roadways. A wide, well-demarcated and uninterrupted footpath could "change the beauty of and equitable access to our cities and towns".

Does walking still hold significance in the Indian imagination?

The court said that the act of walking have had diverse roles in the Indian imagination. Walking was a struggle for the not-so-unfortunate, a meditation in motion for many, resistance for others, discovery for the inquisitive, a cohesive strategy for sharp socio-political minds.

From the first sparks which ignited the national struggle for freedom to the complexities of modern politics, the idea of walking as a means of expressing an opinion or drawing public attention remains a constant. Walking was not just motion, but embodied the fundamental freedoms of speech and expression, of peaceful protest and the right to form associations and unions for gaining the just rights of workers.

Have the 'duty-bearers' neglected their duty to protect footpaths?

However, laws like the Motor Vehicles Act of 1988 paid homage to movement by wheels. They even "undermined the precious rights of walkers". Justice Narasimha said the tendency to subjugate safe and comfortable footpaths to motor transport was a civilisational problem.

The primary "duty-bearers" responsible for effectively managing footpaths are urban development authorities, municipal corporations, municipalities, and panchayats. Footpaths are held in trust by these bodies for the public's benefit. They are the material resources of the community.

Is there a need for statutory law and regulator?

The judgment is not satisfied by merely declaring the right to walk safely on a wide and clearly demarcated footpath as a basic right, but recommends to the government to implement the fundamental right through a statutory law, and moreover, establish a regulator to hear aggrieved pedestrians.

The court recalled the positive role played by Parliament and State legislatures in the past in enabling the effective exercise and enjoyment of fundamental rights on the ground.

It also noted that modern statutes have shaped a new framework of institutional governance by creating regulatory bodies. These bodies institutionalise continuity through perpetual succession and seal, embed expertise through specialisation, promote diversity through their composition, and ensure integrity through mechanisms of accountability.

One of the examples the court drew in this context was the Right to Education Act, which had declared the fundamental right to free and compulsory elementary education under Article 21A in Sections 3 to Section 5. The National Commission for Protection of Child Rights was recognised as the regulator.

Justice Narasimha said a similar Act and a regulatory body must be devised by the legislature to protect the fundamental right to walk on demarcated footpaths. The statutory framework would not only ensure the working of the fundamental right on the ground but also identify the duty-bearers. The court said such an Act must also establish a full-time regulator to plan, enforce, and implement this precious right. The apex court has directed its Registry to send a copy of the judgment to the Central Ministries and the Law Commission of India to "reflect on the compelling necessity for initiating the necessary legal framework".

SAVING LIVES ON ROAD: SC TOLD STATES TO PUT IN 5 KEY MEASURES, HARDLY ANY STATE DID

INDIA'S DISMAL road safety record of 1.77 lakh fatalities a year has a revealing backstory. Not a single state has a complete trauma care architecture the Supreme Court sought for saving lives, according to data submitted to it by 34 states and Union Territories over the last nine months.

Key Takeaways:

• A common emergency phone number, GPS-equipped ambulances, a Good Samaritan law, a trauma registry and a rescue protocol — these are the five most important measures of the total nine the Supreme Court had asked states to put in place in its May 26 order. These five measures form a crucial framework to prepare for the "Golden Hour" — the first 60 minutes after an accident critical to saving lives.

• The top court's order came in a petition filed by SaveLIFE Foundation, a Delhi-based road safety organisation, which had recommended a uniform trauma care system across states.

• A comprehensive reading of the 1,200 pages of court submissions shows that of the eight states — Uttar Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Karnataka, Rajasthan, Bihar and Andhra Pradesh — that account for two out of every three accident deaths in the country, seven are yet to merge all their emergency numbers into 112; one state Karnataka did not provide information.

• The phone number 112 was launched by the Union Home Ministry in 2019 as a Nationwide Emergency Response System that would subsume all emergency numbers for police, fire, medical, ambulance, highways, women, etc. With so many numbers for different emergencies, NERS was conceived to do away with the confusion about which number to call.

• Another important aspect which holds back people from offering help on the road is the fear of being harassed by the police or hospital with a lot of questioning. But of the eight states which accounted for two-thirds of 1.77 lakh fatalities in 2024, only two — Maharashtra and Karnataka — have a grievance redressal system for good samaritans. Four states do not have it, and two states did not provide the required information in the submission to the Supreme Court.

• More than 10 years ago, on March 30, 2016, the Supreme Court passed a significant order recognising the rights of Good Samaritans or bystanders or Rah-Veer. Later, the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways (MoRTHs) notified the Good Samaritan Rules in 2020 under Section 134A of the Motor Vehicles (Amendment) Act, 2019 to provide protection to people helping out accident victims. Under the scheme, anyone who helps an accident victim receive medical attention within the Golden Hour is eligible for a Rs 25,000 reward.

• However, even 10 years after the court order, the states are dragging their feet on building key trauma-response infrastructure to save lives lost on the country's road network. This matters because at least 30% of all trauma-related deaths in the country are attributable to delays in emergency care, according to a 2021 NITI Aayog-AIIMS Emergency and Injury Care Report.

• The documents further show that states with high fatality also lag behind in building trauma registry, and many are still working on the basis of manual databases. A trauma registry is a clinical database that tracks a patient's journey from the scene of an injury through ambulance, hospital treatment and discharge. It is a key requirement to audit medical care, monitor outcomes, and policy decisions. But five out of these eight states do not have a trauma registry. Three states Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh said they have a trauma registry system. Tamil Nadu's trauma care registry records pre-hospital ambulance details, transit case details in hospital reception and resuscitation details outcome of patient on a real time basis.

Do You Know:

• The roads in Uttar Pradesh are most unsafe and tops in road deaths. It recorded 24,118 or 13.61% of the total fatalities in 2024. On average in every second accident, there was a death.

The state said it has integrated most of the emergency number with 112 NERS, with only 102 emergency medical services remaining to be integrated. This was done between 2018 to 2025. It also does not have a separate grievance redressal system for Good Samaritans.

• Tamil Nadu is the number one state in total road accidents and second in fatalities. It has only partially integrated the various emergency numbers. In its September 25, 2025, letter, the state highlighted its comprehensive protocol for rescue of injured victims, which prescribes scene safety measures such as use of reflective jackets, warning triangle cones, blinkers, turning on ambulance hazard lights, at scene triage protocols tagged as critical/ based on canadian tirage acuity scale (CTAS), pre-arrival notification systems for medical facilities, pre-arrival intimation is given by the EMT to the receiving hospital through mobile application.

• Maharashtra said its emergency medical services (MEMS 108) or ambulances only are fitted with a GPS system. Madhya Pradesh said its grievance redressal system for good Samaritans is under process. The state recently developed a comprehensive trauma care policy, which specifies roles and responsibilities of different stakeholders (police, health, road patrol, road owning agency) for victim's rescue.

• Another important aspect which holds back people from offering help on the road is the fear of being harassed by the police or hospital with a lot of questioning. But of the eight states which accounted for two-thirds of 1.77 lakh fatalities in 2024, only two — Maharashtra and Karnataka

IS RSS A LEGAL PERSON?

The story so far:

Karnataka Home Minister Priyank Kharge, in a letter dated June 13 addressing the Sarsanghchalak (chief) of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), Mohan Bhagwat, questioned the legal status of the RSS.

In an accompanying post on social media platform X, Mr. Kharge asked, "If citizens, labour, NGOs, trusts, temples and companies are expected to register, disclose and comply with the law, why should the RSS remain exempt?"

He raised similar questions towards the end of last year as well regarding the legal existence of RSS. He has asked about the registration, organisation structure, funding and donation and also about the overall functioning of the organisation.

What is a legal person?

According to legal theorist John Salmond, "A person is any being whom the law regards as capable of rights and bound by legal duties." The term 'person' is further classified into two terms: 'natural person' and 'juridical/artificial person'. Generally, in law, a living human being is considered a natural person. However, a juridical/artificial person is an entity created by law that possesses legal rights and obligations distinct from its members or the individuals associated with it. For example, companies incorporated under the Companies Act are artificial persons, statutorily recognised as legal persons.

To be a company, certain criteria must be met according to Section 9 of the Companies Act, 2013. That includes that, after registration, a company shall be a body corporate by the name contained in its memorandum – "capable of exercising all the functions of an incorporated company under this Act, having perpetual succession, having a common seal with power to acquire, hold and dispose of property both movable and immovable, tangible and intangible, to contract and to sue and be sued" by the said name.

How does RSS describe itself and what is its organisational nature?

In a similar exchange in December 2025, RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat described the organisation as "a body of individuals". RSS in itself is a socio-cultural voluntary organisation with an ideal "to carry the nation to the pinnacle of glory through organising the entire society and ensuring protection of Hindu Dharma", according to the website.

RSS has been addressed as an "association of persons", according to the Commissioner Of Income Tax v Rastriya Swayam Sangh on February 22, 1994, in which they have been sued with respect to tax exemption.

The Income-tax Appellate Tribunal has referred this matter to Patna High Court to address whether the amount received from members and devotees can be taken to be Gurudakshina (token of gratitude to teacher) and thus be exempt from taxation. The court held that the amount received from members can be taken to be Gurudakshina and be exempted from tax.

Section 2(31) of the Income Tax Act, 1961, defines 'person' expansively and includes a 'body of individuals', whether incorporated or not. Under the 1961 Act, the 'body of individuals' is a separate taxable entity comprising exclusively natural persons (human beings) who have come together for a shared purpose.

Generally, unregistered bodies cannot sue or be sued in their own names, as they are not considered separate legal persons.

The organisation is, however, named as a distinct party in cases including Singhai Lal Chand Jain v Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh on February 15, 1996 in the Supreme Court of India. The case revolved around the eviction of the RSS from certain premises in Panna, Madhya Pradesh, initiated by the appellant, Singhai Lal Chand Jain. The appellant filed a civil suit seeking the eviction of the RSS and its office-bearers, alleging unauthorised occupation of the premises. Holding that the RSS was properly represented by its Manager, President, and a member who jointly defended the suit, the court upheld the eviction decree.

What are the legal options for registering a voluntary association in India?

Registering a voluntary association in India requires choosing one of three primary legal structures: a Society (under the Societies Registration Act, 1860), a Trust (under the Indian Trusts Act, 1882), or a Section 8 Company (under the Companies Act, 2013).

The company after incorporation intends to apply its profits, if any, or other income only for promoting its cited objects.

What about donations/Gurudakshina?

As mentioned earlier, the RSS's legal status came under scrutiny in the 1970s during tax proceedings in Bombay and Patna. The disputes centred on whether donations received as "gurudakshina" from RSS workers were taxable. In the case of Commissioner Of Income-Tax v Rastriya Swayam Sevak Sangh on 22 February, 1994, The Patna High Court addressed the matter and exempted RSS from taxes, considering donations from members as Gurudakshina. Also, the Income Tax Act considers a 'body of individuals' as a 'person', as mentioned above.

There is the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act (FCRA), 2010, which regulates the acceptance and utilisation of foreign contribution or foreign hospitality by certain individuals or associations or companies. Any donation, delivery or transfer received from a 'foreign source' whether in rupees or in foreign currency, is construed as a 'foreign contribution' under FCRA, 2010.

Even for the grant of registration under FCRA, the association should be registered under an existing statute like the Societies Registration Act, 1860 or the Indian Trusts Act, 1882 or Section 8 of Companies Act, 2013 etc. The association should be in existence for at least three years and has undertaken reasonable activity in its chosen field for the benefit of the society for which the foreign contribution is proposed to be utilised. And the applicant NGO/association will be free to choose its items of expenditure (excluding the administrative expenditure as defined in Rule 5 of FCRR, 2011) to become eligible for the minimum threshold of ₹15 lakh spent during the last three years.

How can one join RSS?

According to the Frequently Asked Questions section of the RSS website powered by Bharati Web Private Limited, "there is no formal membership enrolment in the RSS. Anyone can approach the nearest 'Shakha', which is the fundamental unit of activity of RSS and become a swayamsevak. There are no fees, no registration form, and no formal application. Once you start attending the daily shakha either in the morning or in the evening as per your convenience, you become the swayamsevak of RSS. It is that simple. If someone does not know any shakha or Swayamsevak nearby, One can join the RSS online too."

Any person who wants to work towards the sanatan dharma can join the RSS, even if they don't visit the shakhas. There is no formal procedure or criterion that stops anybody for that matter from joining the organisation. There is a registration form on the website that requires one to fill up primary details for the same.

What are the RSS affiliates and are they registered?

There are around 32 sister organisations that work under the umbrella of RSS, with many more like-minded organisations. The Akhil Bhartiya Vidhyarthi Parishad, the Vidya Bhrati, Bharatiya Janata Party, Vishva Hindu Parishad, Bajrang Dal, Durga Vahini, Dharam Sansad or Religious Parliament etc.

The list of RSS-affiliated bodies is vast and spans every sector of Indian society: students, education, labour, agriculture, women, tribals, culture, science, law, economics, publishing, and more. However, each of these is registered under different laws.

For example, the student body Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad began its activities around 1948 and was registered on July 9, 1949, as a non-governmental organisation (NGO) under the Societies Registration Act of 1860. Thus, the units of the RSS function as registered entities.

Trade union Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh functions within the legal framework governing labour organisations. Educational, social-service and tribal welfare bodies associated with the Sangh generally operate through registered trusts and societies.

RSS continues to describe itself as a voluntary socio-cultural organisation and a body of individuals rather than a registered corporate entity. Court records show that it has been recognised in tax proceedings and litigation, while many organisations associated with the Sangh function through separately registered bodies.

Mr. Kharge's questions, however, have renewed the debate over whether an organisation of the RSS's scale and reach should continue to operate without a formal registration framework.

UNION MINISTER GETS RS 99-LAKH SUBSIDY FOR HIS CUCUMBER FARM — FROM SCHEME UNDER OWN MINISTRY

Bhagirath Choudhary is Minister of State in the Union Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers' Welfare. An investigation by The Indian Express reveals that he received the subsidy three months ago through a scheme under his own ministry and approved by a board in which he is ex-officio Vice-President.

Key Takeaways:

— The scheme to promote "commercial farming" — on a large scale for profit — of select vegetables and flowers comes under Mission for Integrated Development of Horticulture (MIDH), which was launched in 2014-15 and is administered by the National Horticulture Board (NHB), an autonomous organisation under the administrative control of Choudhary's Ministry.

— The initiative offers a maximum subsidy of 50 per cent, capped at Rs 1 crore per family, of the project cost for farming capsicum, cucumber and tomato, and eight varieties of flowers, including rose, anthurium and orchids.

— Choudhary's project for cucumber cultivation across 16,592 sq m is one of 467 approved by NHB in 2025 under the scheme titled "Development of Commercial Horticulture through Production and Post-Harvest Management of Horticulture Crops".

— According to NHB's official website, its activities are managed by a Board of Directors headed by the Union Agriculture Minister as ex-officio President, with the Union MoS for Agriculture as ex-officio Vice-President.

— Agriculture Minister of State Bhagirath Choudhary received a Rs 99 lakh government subsidy for his Rajasthan cucumber farm — from a scheme run by a board he heads as ex-officio Vice-President.

— A signboard at his Peeh village farm proudly displays the NHB assistance, but omits that the beneficiary is the very minister overseeing the funding body.

— Choudhary financed his Rs 1.99 crore project with a Rs 1.49 crore HDFC Bank loan, into which the subsidy was directly credited just weeks after final NHB clearance in March 2026.

— In-principle approval arrived in just 14 days after application — though the scheme requires on-site joint inspections before any clearance is granted.

— His PMO asset declaration, filed a month before approval, lists his Peeh farmland but makes no mention of the pending NHB project; an aide says it "will be disclosed."

— Choudhary did not respond to The Indian Express questionnaire on whether the subsidy constituted a conflict of interest.

Do You Know:

— 'Development of Commercial Horticulture through Production and Post-Harvest Management of Horticulture Crops' is a sub-scheme under National Horticulture Board's Mission for Integrated Development of Horticulture (MIDH).

— Its purpose is to promote commercial farming (for profit) of horticultural crops on a large scale. The crops under the scheme are three types of vegetables: capsicum, cucumber and tomato; and eight varieties of flowers: anthurium, orchid, rose, lilium, chrysanthemum, carnation, gypsophila and gerbera.

— Upto 50 per cent of the project cost, capped at Rs 1 crore per family, is available as subsidy under the scheme.

— Beneficiaries: Individuals, self-help groups, associations or groups of growers, trusts, cooperative societies, companies, farmer producer organisations, cooperative marketing federations, agricultural produce marketing committees, marketing boards, municipal corporations, agro-industries corporations, state agriculture universities and R&D organisations.

IN UJJAIN, A FAMILIAR PLOT, A DISTURBING ABDICATION

India is witnessing a welcome spurt in urban public infrastructure investment, with land the centrepiece of these projects. Land use decisions are the most consequential — and most corruptible — instruments of urban governance. What gets designated "residential"? Which agricultural land turns "commercial"? Which highway corridor gets sanctioned first? Who shapes or reshapes the master plan? Knowledge of which way the state is likely to tilt, either in allocating funds or changing land use, has deepened information asymmetry in land markets, benefitting a few. An investigation in this paper has shone a light on such transactions in Ujjain. The buck, quite literally, stops at the door of Chief Minister Mohan Yadav.

The investigation has revealed that since he took oath in December 2023, Chief Minister Yadav's family and their real-estate firms have bought at least 137 plots of land totalling up to 168 acres. These plots have been bought in areas that have benefitted from the government's infrastructure push. For instance, a significant share of these are in the vicinity of new road projects announced in or around Ujjain. The Yadav family owns land in virtually every zone that has been demarcated for change of land use — as per the Ujjain Master Plan 2035, from agriculture to residential. This is a disturbing pattern, it smacks of cronyism.

In Ujjain, or in any city, permits, licences or approvals needed for construction work have to be obtained from arms of the state government. When individuals or firms connected to the Chief Minister are involved in real-estate transactions, these are easier to come by. Politics distorts the economics of the market when lines are crossed and due process sidestepped, when compliance is given short shrift. The consequences ripple through the city, and the system. Dots can be connected, for example, from the building that collapsed in Saidulajab and the bed and breakfast that caught fire in Hauz Rani recently to the clear disregard for propriety and norms in land acquisition uncovered in Ujjain. The blurring of lines between Mohan Yadav and his family, the politician-in-power and the builder network, and an erosion of checks and balances cast a lengthening shadow on Ujjain's urban governance. Transparency must be brought into the process of land acquisition, the abuse of the state's discretionary power must be curtailed. For the BJP's "good governance" mantra to mean anything, those in power need stronger guardrails. The party leadership must ask the Chief Minister to explain his family's growing land bank. Calling this business as usual will not wash.

CAB SECY'S POSER: DO WE WANT 30-YR SERVICE EXPERIENCE OR JUST ONE REPEATED 30 TIMES?

In a two-page note sent to all Secretaries to the Government of India, accompanied by a 10-page guide on how to conduct meetings, Cabinet Secretary T V Somanathan has said that if they just follow "a beaten track", the question they may face at the end of their service is: did they get "30 years' experience or one year's experience repeated 30 times".

Key Takeaways:

• The note, sent on June 12, underlined the need to improve each year, to get the "small things" right, and to "pause and revisit" matters which may seem "routine".

• Somanathan also asked the Secretaries to circulate the guide on holding effective meetings, drawn up by the National Centre for Good Governance (NCGG), to all civil servants. He said the Cabinet Secretariat, along with the NCGG, would circulate similar guides on various topics. The conduct of meetings was chosen as the first topic as meetings take up a lot of time in an officer's day, he wrote.

• The Cabinet Secretary wrote that several middle-ranking officers had told him that they were happy with the subject-matter training being imparted to them, but needed more practical advice on "so-called routine matters". "'Routine', though it may seem boring, is often extremely important and, thus, during our long careers in the civil service, we may need to pause and revisit it," he wrote.

• The 10-page guide on holding meetings starts with the basics, including being clear about why a meeting is being called, who is to be called and the timing. It advises that if the purpose can be achieved through email, phone or text messages, then a meeting should be avoided.

Do You Know:

• The Cabinet Secretariat is responsible for the administration of the Government of India (Transaction of Business) Rules, 1961 and the Government of India (Allocation of Business) Rules 1961, facilitating smooth transaction of business in Ministries/ Departments of the Government.

—This Secretariat provides Secretarial assistance to the Cabinet and its Committees, and also assists in decision-making in Government by ensuring Inter-Ministerial coordination , ironing out differences amongst Ministries/ Departments and evolving consensus through the instrumentality of the standing/ adhoc Committees of Secretaries. Through this mechanism new policy initiatives are also promoted.

—Management of major crisis situations in the country and coordinating activities of various Ministries in such a situation is also one of the functions of the Cabinet Secretariat.

• A Chief Secretary is the highest-ranking civil servant and administrative head of a state government or Union Territory in India. Appointed by the Chief Minister, they serve as the principal advisor on all administrative matters, head the state civil services, and act as the secretary to the state cabinet.

CRPF OFFICER SUSPENDED, 20 OTHERS TRANSFERRED AFTER 'KIN PROTESTED AGAINST CAPF BILL'

Twenty Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) officers have been transferred and a Deputy Inspector General (DIG) rank officer has been suspended, allegedly because they or their families voiced their opinions against the Central Armed Police Force (General Administration) Act, 2026.

The legislation was passed by Parliament on April 2 and came into effect on April 9.

Retired and serving officials of the Central Armed Police Forces (CAPF) expressed concern about the suspension of the decorated DIG-rank officer.

'Politically provocative'

On June 10, the officer, posted in Tripura, was informed about a pending enquiry against him for allegedly disseminating "audio/video messages and poster/banner for changing of the Government established by law across social media."

The letter said that an Inspector General-rank officer would probe his WhatsApp account and other encrypted platforms he was active on to enquire about the dissemination of "politically provocative" messages against the government. On June 17, the officer was served a suspension order based on the pending enquiry.

It is learnt that the officer has challenged the suspension, on the grounds that there is no "disciplinary proceeding contemplated or pending" against him as required under the Central Civil Services (Classification, Control and Appeal) Rules, 1965.

'Targeted harassment'

Ranbir Singh, the general secretary of the Alliance of All Ex Paramilitary Association said that officers whose families participated in a protest against the CAPF Act at Jantar Mantar in the capital on March 23 and May 6, and at Rajghat on April 9 were being targeted by the CRPF's top brass.

"We want to draw the attention of Home Minister Amit Shah to this targeted harassment of CRPF officers... For the first time in the history of the CRPF, the suspension of a serving DIG without cause has sparked resentment among the paramilitary personnel. Officers are being posted to the North East as a punitive measure," Mr. Singh said.

YES, TEACH EMERGENCY TO THE YOUNG. THE LESSONS ENDURE

That the new NCERT Social Science textbook for Class 9 includes a section on the Emergency, in a chapter titled "Democracy", is a good call. It replaces a textbook in which the Emergency was cursorily mentioned in a chapter on electoral politics. The NCERT move stands out as a departure from a range of its recent and not-so-recent ill-judged, politically inspired rewrites, insertions and deletions — most recently, its bizarre and prudish decision, rolled back after a report in this newspaper, to digitally cover the bare torso of the iconic Dancing Girl of Mohenjo-daro in the Class 9 Art textbook. The attempt to sheath the 4,500-year-old bronze figurine, then, framed a condescending distrust of students' ability to see and understand an image in the fullness of its context and setting. The inclusion of the section on the Emergency, now, signals a heartening acknowledgement of students' right to a less airbrushed education on democracy. Students must be taught about democracy's virtues, of course. But they must also be made aware of its several challenges, including and especially those that stem from within. That awareness can help shape more empowered citizens of the future, who are conscious of the fragility of freedoms and the need not to take them for granted. Citizens who are mindful, too, of the constitutional architecture that protects their fundamental rights as well as of the possibilities of their own agency and role.

Essentially, democracy is a habit that needs to be cultivated, a wakefulness that needs to be learnt, an education that needs to be passed on to the young. For this, it is important to remember. The Emergency imposed between 1975 and 1977, when democracy was stilled, was but a blip in the life of the nation, but it has left behind some large and resonant lessons that are not, and will not be, outdated. As the textbook notes, "During this period, a majority of fundamental rights were suspended, the press was censored and numerous political leaders and activists were arrested". The failure of institutions, and systems of checks and balances, to stand up against the hubris of the powerful was sobering, and a cautionary tale. But the electoral defeat of the Indira Gandhi government in 1977 was a reminder of democracy's undaunted possibilities — it is the only form of government in which the power of the people eventually surpasses that of those who rule over them.

That lesson is as relevant today as it was in that June over five decades ago. For, what was hijacked during the Emergency, a citizen's freedoms, remain as fragile now as ever — and call for constant and continuing vigil.

NAME, CONTENT OF NCERT'S KANNADA BOOK TRIGGER ROW

Amid the controversy over implementation of the three-language policy for Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) students, the title and content of the Class 6 R3 Kannada textbook implemented by National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) have turned contentious.

Educationists and writers have objected to the title of the textbook being 'Krishna', the inclusion of only sattvic foods as balanced diet, and the omission of non-vegetarian food.

As part of the implementation of National Education Policy (NEP-2020) and National Curriculum Framework for School Education (NCF-SE)-2023, the CBSE has taken steps to implement the three-language policy (R1, R2, R3) for Classes 6 to 10 from the 2026-27 academic year.

"It is shocking to see the R3 Kannada textbook for class 6 released by NCERT. It is dangerous to use books that are supposed to be designed for children's learning as a weapon for political and cultural oppression. As part of the imposition of Indian Knowledge Heritage of NEP-2020, the trend of infusing mythological virtues in education in NCERT books is condemnable. Naming the textbook for class 6 as Krishna is an attempt to saffronise the textbooks," alleged Niranjanaradhya V.P., a development educationist.

In addition, vegetarian and non-vegetarian diets were mentioned as balanced diets in earlier textbooks. Now, it is alleged that only a vegetarian diet is emphasised in R3 textbooks for class 6.

"While talking about food in the Health is Wealth lesson, sattvic food is being discussed. There are crores of people in Karnataka who eat pork, fish, eggs, chicken, mutton. This is a technique to deliberately ignore non-vegetarian food. This is not education, it is cultural terrorism," Mr. Niranjanaradhya has alleged.

CIVIL SERVICES PRELIMINARY EXAMINATION 2026: TOUGH BY DESIGN OR DEFAULT?

The story so far:

The Civil Services (Preliminary) Examination, introduced in 1979 following the Kothari Committee's recommendations, was designed as a screening mechanism — a 'filter and funnel' — to shortlist candidates for the descriptive Main examination. In its original format, it consisted of two components: an optional subject paper at the graduate level and a General Studies paper, with the optional paper carrying greater weight. For many years, this system functioned smoothly with minor changes.

The Alagh Committee set up in 2000 observed that the preliminary exam should have an optional paper to assess the intellectual competence of the aspirant and maintain its connection with the university system. It also proposed a Civil Services Aptitude Test (CSAT) which would evaluate skills such as general awareness, problem-solving, data analysis and decision-making. The committee also recommended that the questions at the preliminary exam should be made challenging and a case-study approach should be adopted.

In 2009, the S.K. Khanna Committee recommended that the Preliminary Examination should be renamed as the Civil Services Aptitude Test with two common papers at the Preliminary. The preliminary exam was reconstituted to comprise two papers — General Studies Paper- I and General Studies Paper- II. The Paper I covers all conventional areas in 'Humanities', while Paper-II has questions on quantitative aptitude, reasoning, comprehension, interpersonal skills and communication, decision-making and problem-solving. The components of Paper- II were designed to test whether the aspirant had the ability to imbibe new technologies. Both the papers had equal weightage and the combined marks in both the papers were taken to determine merit.

This change practically delinked the Preliminary Examination with the university system. After a few years, due to protests, Paper-II known as CSAT was made qualifying in nature. In practice, this meant that nearly five lakh aspirants were narrowed down to about 10,000 candidates solely based on their performance in the 100 questions attempted over two hours.

Bringing down the vast pool of aspirants to a manageable number through a paper comprising just 100 questions is an inherently difficult task. As a result, examiners were forced to constantly reinvent and compile the most unpredictable questions. Over time, it became quite evident that the objective of selecting candidates was being overshadowed by the need to eliminate them. Even the qualifying paper became a tool for rejection, with overall difficulty level of questions rising.

What changed this year?

Against this evolving backdrop, the Civil Services (Preliminary) Examination held in May has come under widespread criticism for the perceived inequity in the distribution and format of questions. Many aspirants found the paper unusually difficult and unpredictable — concerns that were publicly acknowledged by the UPSC Chairman, who expressed empathy with candidates.

This has sparked a broader debate on whether the nature of the paper was an unintended outcome of systemic constraints or a deliberate shift in examination design, and more importantly, what course corrections are needed to ensure fairness, balance and credibility in the screening process.

This year, UPSC committed itself to greater transparency, and agreed to release the answer key of the preliminary exam immediately after it. Openness also meant that the questions had to be set from verifiable authoritative sources. The questions were framed using carefully curated information drawn from government websites.

Attempting the question paper entailed sifting through 55 pages and comprehending 40,000 words in two hours. In addition to this, the subject-wise distribution of questions was distorted and the style of questioning underwent a noticeable shift. Consequently, the aspirants found no link between their preparation and the questions. They had to make guesses, "some informed" and "some wild". Solving previous years' questions, which was considered as the gold standard was also of no help.

This gap between the preparation and examination, coupled with the element of surprise, prompted the aspirants to voice their concerns. The democratisation of expression through social media platforms further amplified the protests, creating a snowballing effect.

The nature of the question paper, thus, appears to be less a matter of a deliberate design and more a consequence of systemic constraints — a by-product of a short-sighted examination pattern established 15 years ago. In retrospect, the committee which introduced the pattern overlooked a dictum that is crucial in policy formulation; that anticipation is the highest form of competence. It failed to adequately foresee the challenge of balancing the increasing number of aspirants with a relatively static number of vacancies.

What is the way out?

The perceived unfairness of the Preliminary Examination has been widely voiced by aspirants and has also been recently flagged by a Parliamentary Committee. However, the Chairman's acknowledgement of the paper's difficulty should not remain a mere instance of proverbial "ventilation therapy." Many crises in governance are not sudden surprises; they are warning signals that were noticed but not acted upon in time. This appears to be one such signal — one that calls for deeper reflection and timely course correction.

It is time for the government to appoint a committee to revisit the examination pattern and make suitable long-term changes after public consultation. The UPSC has been collecting information regarding the socio-economic profile of the aspirants. They have information about the distribution of applicants based on place of birth, schools and colleges attended, status of parents etc. as they are collecting this information at the preliminary stage itself. This information should be used as an input to align the scheme of examination to the background of the aspirants.

Questions may be unpredictable by design, but aspirants should not feel that they are incapable of rising up to the required level of the questions or the highest positions in the country are beyond their reach. The government must undertake reforms both in the examination system and the university framework by introducing 'bridge courses' along the lines of the recommendations of the Second Administrative Reforms Commission. Such measures would help restore visible alignment between education and assessment.

The education system and public employment emanate from the same source — the government. Any disconnect between the two risks eroding their trust in the system. Respecting the aspirations of this generation and sustaining their faith is the order of the day. It is better to prevent a crisis rather than 'firefight' one.

WORLD IS MOVING ON FROM PAYING PUBLISHERS — INDIA SHOULD TOO

A number of activities are underway in the global scholarly publishing policy space. Within a span of 18 months, from late 2024 to mid-2026, the United States has placed the economics of academic publishing under Congressional scrutiny, Australia has mandated immediate open access to all publicly funded peer-reviewed research, Europe has launched a publicly owned publishing platform called Open Research Europe, and China has begun building an integrated domestic scholarly publishing ecosystem explicitly designed to redirect research prestige and publishing revenue away from foreign publishers.

India, meanwhile, committed ₹6,000 crore over three years to pay those same publishers for access to knowledge — a considerable part of which was generated by its own researchers.

The contrast is not incidental. It reflects an essential divergence in how the world's major research-producing nations are thinking about knowledge sovereignty. And it raises a question India's science policy community has not yet answered with sufficient seriousness: what comes after 'One Nation One Subscription' — and are we really building towards it?

Building sovereignty

As Ashutosh Ghildiyal, Ning Zhang, Gareth Dyke, and Yanli Wang wrote in The Scholarly Kitchen, China's strategy is elaborate. In its vision, the country is no longer simply a major contributor to global research output but is increasingly a central actor shaping the future of scholarly publishing.

To that end, China is changing research evaluation practices by discouraging metrics like the 'impact factor', investing in journal infrastructure, instituting a credible peer-review system, and increasing international visibility. (A journal's impact factor is meant to show its impact on the field based on how much the papers it publishes are cited.) As a result, China wishes to position its domestic journals to compete globally.

The country has also made policy choices to encourage Chinese researchers to publish in domestic journals. They include evaluating research by its quality rather than by the journal it appeared in and paying attention to whether research is addressing national needs.

As part of this upgrade, the second phase of its Journal Excellence Action Plan, China is building an integrated scholarly publishing ecosystem in which funding, publication venues, evaluation systems, editorial networks, and policy incentives reinforce one another. As a result, it plans to create more than 400 world-class Chinese-owned journals, capture publishing revenues currently flowing to foreign publishers, and establish Chinese platforms as credible alternatives to the likes of Nature, Science, and Cell.

The Chinese Academy of Sciences, which has more than 50,000 researchers across 100 institutes, also announced in early 2026 that it would stop paying article processing charges (APCs) for more than 30 high-cost international journals, explicitly including Nature Communications, Science Advances, and Cell Reports. The APC is a fee levied by journals to publish open-access papers; the fee is supposed to 'compensate' the revenue the journal will lose since others won't have to buy the paper to read it. Each of these three journals charges over $5,000 per paper in APCs.

The message to publishers is clear: China will not subsidise the prestige economy of foreign publishers while building its own. The message to its researchers is equally clear: publishing in domestic journals will count for career progression and should not be treated as a second-class choice.

Checking expenses

The situation in the U.S. is more volatile and ideologically complex. A congressional hearing in April brought together lawmakers, researchers, and publishing industry representatives to examine the rise of paper mills and the costs of open-access publishing. The questions included whether the U.S. government is getting enough value for the billions it spends annually on journal subscriptions and APCs, and whether the current system serves the public interest.

The Office of Management and Budget proposed curtailing the subscription and journal publication costs, including APCs and other fees, and suggested disallowing them under federal awards. While policy has yet to be changed, the fact remains that the U.S. government is viewing journal publishers' profits — and whose margins rival those of Big Tech — as a fiscal and transparency concern rather than solely as an open-access one.

This scrutiny offers both a policy opportunity and a cautionary tale for India. If the world's two most powerful research-funders are reconsidering what they are paying for scholarly publishing, the negotiating environment that has kept publisher pricing confidential and non-negotiable is beginning to shift.

A clear new mandate

As it happens, Australia has moved with the least ambiguity of any major research system. The Australian Research Council (ARC) Open Access Policy, especially the v2026.1 update, takes effect on July 1, 2026, and requires journal articles and conference papers arising from ARC-funded research to be made openly accessible immediately upon publication, with no exceptions.

Crucially, the compliance burden falls on the organisations administering the grants — i.e. the universities and research institutions. The policy is aligned with large international funding bodies such as the U.S. National Institutes of Health and the Wellcome Trust in the U.K. This matters because it means that when Australian researchers co-author with U.S. or U.K. colleagues, a single rights-retention approach serves all funder requirements simultaneously, reducing the transaction costs that have previously allowed publishers to exploit policy fragmentation across borders.

The ARC first introduced its policy in 2013, and the 2026 version represents the culmination of a decade-long trajectory from encouragement to hard mandate. It is also careful to mention green open access: once ready, a copy of the paper will be archived in an openly accessible repository. Aside from guaranteeing access, doing so will also allow the paper's authors to retain the rights to it.

Publicly owned infrastructure

Europe's approach is also ambitious and relevant to what India should be building towards. Instead of negotiating with existing publishers — including the 'One Nation One Subscription' scheme — or requiring researchers to publish their papers to be open access by paying an APC, the European Commission has concluded that the long-term solution is to create publicly owned publishing infrastructure that removes commercial publishers from the equation entirely.

Open Research Europe, which is the European Commission's own publishing platform, is entering a new phase backed by a nearly €17 million budget for 2026-2031, co-funded by the European Commission by up to €10 million. The operating platform will be provided by the European Organisation for Nuclear Research (better known as CERN). The platform is expected to begin operating as a collectively supported publishing service later this year. Once it is live, researchers from 11 participating national research systems — Austria, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, and Switzerland — will be able to publish without paying.

This is open access but it is also the European research ecosystem taking back the publishing function that it had outsourced to commercial publishers over the last four decades.

In parallel with Open Research Europe, Europe has operationalised the diamond open access model at scale. In this paradigm, a journal publishes open access papers without levying an APC; the costs are instead borne by the funders and the research institutions. With some support from the French National Research Agency, the European Diamond Capacity Hub needs to strengthen diamond open-access publishing infrastructure across Europe.

What ONOS does and does not do

India's 'One Nation One Subscription' (ONOS) scheme, which has been operational since January 2025, was a genuine step forward in addressing a real and urgent problem. ONOS provides access to more than 13,000 journals from 30 publishers to approximately 6,300 government, academic, and research institutions at a total committed budget of ₹6,000 crore over three years (2025-2027). For researchers at tier-2 and tier-3 institutions who have never had access to the journals their fields require, this is transformative.

However, while ONOS solves the reading problem, it does not address the publishing problem. ONOS comes with an APC fund of ₹150 crore per year, replenished from what India allocates for research, which is already dwindling. Further, with more than half of research worldwide already being freely accessible, a significant proportion of what ONOS is paying to access is already available at zero cost. That is, India is partly paying ₹6,000 crore to access content that is already free and partly to subsidise a subscription model whose foundations are being dismantled everywhere else in the world.

The structural problem runs deeper. ONOS is opaque on publisher pricing, protection against future cost inflation, investment in Indian journals, and a post-2027 strategy. Every future negotiation is to be conducted from a position of demonstrated dependence, with journal publishers aware that India has no credible alternative — and that the political cost of losing ONOS access is too high for any government to bear.

In this sense, ONOS should be seen as a bridge, not a destination.

India's stated ambition to become more self-sufficient is inconsistent with indefinitely subsidising a small group of foreign commercial publishers to access knowledge produced by Indian researchers with Indian public funds. A better strategy would be to combine immediate green open-access mandates for publicly funded research, rights retention policies for researchers, more investments in Indian journals and publishing platforms, transparent APC expenses, and participating in international efforts to develop community-governed publishing infrastructure.

Window is now

The geopolitics of scholarly publishing has shifted more in the last 18 months than in the last two decades. China is building sovereignty. The U.S. is scrutinising costs. Australia is prioritising immediate access. Europe is building public infrastructure. Africa is also moving forward with local infrastructure, and Latin America was and still is the leader in self-reliant, community-governed local publishing infrastructure.

The direction of change across every major research system is the same: away from commercial dependencies and towards public ownership, public access, and public benefits.

In this context, India has both an opportunity and a time constraint. ONOS has established that the Government of India recognises knowledge access as a public good worth funding at scale. The Anusandhan National Research Foundation also has a mandate to reform the conditions in which Indian science reports its findings. Thus, India has the political legitimacy to push back against publishers' pricing in ways that would have seemed radical five years ago.

BROKEN ACCOUNTABILITY

In light of the Taratala warehouse collapse in Kolkata on June 24, the ability to erect a structure based on a reportedly flawed plan is reminiscent of West Bengal's infamous Syndicate Raj. As per the Kolkata Municipal Corporation, an empanelled architect and a structural engineer must certify building plans. The corruption ranges from local cartels, some backed by political heavyweights, allegedly forcing developers to buy subpar construction materials at premium prices to licensed surveyors allegedly delegating the task of signing off on designs not of their doing to unlicensed persons. Early reports of the warehouse collapse — which has now claimed 11 lives while several of the injured are critical — have already found that the contractor used corrugated tin sheets to support the much heavier load of the concrete roof cast — a shortcut cartels have been known to take to cut costs. Eyewitnesses described sudden shaking, a loud sound, and the rapid pancaking of floors; one account also reported visible shaking hours before the collapse following heavy rains. While West Bengal Chief Minister Suvendu Adhikari has suspended all Trinamool Congress-era projects in and around Kolkata as part of a bid to eliminate corruption, migrant labourers will continue to bear the brunt of flawed construction approval and activities if the State does not rein in the informal subcontracting chain. This need is also informed by India expecting to have more migrant labourers with time as environmental degradation undermines many rural livelihoods.

Several structural failures such as this have displayed fragmented accountability, and given the tragic spate of similar 'accidents' around India over the last few years, the time has come to reckon with the fragmentation per se. At least some of these failures may have been the result of an anachronistic model of governance that has failed to keep up with the speed of modern construction and complexities in the private sector. An accountability gap thus arises due to land ownership, especially if it involves Centre-State uncertainties, as at Taratala, and/or due to legal systems catering to a paradigm in which the State was the primary builder. Persistent loopholes in existing licensing procedures may also allow the ultimate owners of capital to stay away from 'dirty work' at the construction site, allow impugned engineers to claim ignorance of day-to-day lapses, and give way to jurisdictional ping-pong. At Taratala, reports indicated there were no records of who was on site when the structure collapsed, forcing authorities to rely on accounts from residents and family members, even as blame centred on the local contractor. While he is likely liable, he is only one rung of the ladder.

VIKSIT AND SURAKSHIT

The Lucknow fire, which killed 15 people, mostly students, and injured five others, captures both the promise and the perils of aspirational India. It reflects a booming education economy built around a growing services sector, but also the unplanned urban growth and regulatory failures that often accompany it. India's young population, eager to acquire skills and improve economic prospects, has fuelled an ecosystem of coaching centres and training institutes, many of which operate outside formal regulatory frameworks, require low capital investment and generate high profits. As advances in artificial intelligence threaten to reshape employment patterns and formal educational institutions struggle to keep pace with skill requirements, such centres are likely to proliferate. The three-storey building where the fire occurred was reportedly not authorised for commercial use, yet it escaped demolition despite repeated notices. According to the FIR by the civic authorities, neither the owners nor the businesses operating there had made adequate provisions for fire safety. Such violations are common across India, where commercial and educational establishments have little regard for basic safety norms.

The Lucknow incident is also part of a disturbing pattern. This summer has witnessed a succession of major fire accidents across the country. Public attention usually focuses on administrative negligence, and official explanations frequently end with the phrase "electrical fire" — a description that often conceals more than it reveals. Electrical fires can arise from several identifiable causes, including overloaded circuits caused by growing use of appliances, harmonic currents generated by sophisticated equipment that create localised hotspots, poor-quality wiring, and the absence of arc-fault protection devices. Understanding these causes is key to preventing similar tragedies. This requires a stronger culture of investigation. India suffers from inadequate firefighting infrastructure and a shortage of trained fire-forensics experts capable of conducting rigorous root-cause analyses and recommending systemic remedies. Without such expertise, lessons from each disaster remain limited. The challenge therefore demands a national response. India's ambition of becoming a developed nation cannot be separated from the imperative of ensuring public safety. Yet, many buildings lack mandatory fire detection and suppression systems that are standard in developed countries. A Viksit Bharat must also be a Surakshit Bharat. A nationwide assessment of building safety, even through a scientifically designed sample survey, would provide valuable data for reform. The task may be large, but the human and economic costs of inaction are far greater.

DEADLY FUMES

Tamil Nadu has witnessed its deadliest industrial ammonia gas leak tragedy, which has so far claimed the lives of eight migrant women workers at a private seafood processing unit in Tiruvallur district. Some of the 68 hospitalised workers are in intensive care on oxygen support. Since the 1980s, the State has battled ammonia leaks in factories every few years, mostly in and around Chennai. Other than in Thoothukudi in 2024, where one worker died, such accidents have at worst led to the hospitalisation of large numbers of people with eye irritation and breathing difficulties. There were no casualties even when an estimated 67.638 tonnes of ammonia leaked from the undersea pipeline of a private company in Ennore during Cyclone Michaung in 2023. The scale of the tragedy at St. Peter & Paul Seafood Exports Pvt. Ltd., Tiruvallur, indicates that the colourless pungent gas may have accumulated in the atmosphere at fatal concentrations. The leak occurred when workers were resting in factory accommodation, on Sunday. Had the incident occurred on a working day, the number of people exposed to the leak from the ammonia pipeline to the ice-flake machinery could have been significantly higher.

While a committee comprising the Director of Industrial Safety and Health (DISH), the Member Secretary of the TN Pollution Control Board, and the Additional Director of Public Health is conducting an inquiry, disturbing facts have emerged. The factory reportedly failed to rectify serious deficiencies, pointed out during an earlier DISH inspection, including the absence of a suitable alarm system and fire hydrant. It had also not obtained a revised plan approval for installing an ice-flaking machine. That matter is sub judice. Investigations will reveal whether these shortcomings had any bearing in this tragedy. What is clear, however, is that had the recommendations made by DISH in the Ennore case been universally enforced in factories using ammonia, the scale of the current tragedy could have been contained. DISH had recommended the provision of adequate ammonia sensors in the plant and surrounding areas for early warning, along with water-curtain systems linked to ammonia alarms and fire-water nozzles for ammonia feed pumps to reduce the impact of leaks. The government has now decided to form a committee to inspect all 6,669 hazardous industries. However, numerous checks and balances exist under the Tamil Nadu Control of Industrial Major Accident Hazards Rules, 1994. What is required is strict enforcement through a coordinated approach, stronger penalties for violators, and the political will to act decisively against them.

IN WEST BENGAL, KEEP EGG ON THE MENU

The first budget of the Suvendu Adhikari government in West Bengal has drawn attention for two contrasting decisions on school nutrition. On the one hand, it has substantially increased the per-child allocation for mid-day meals, raising the material cost from Rs 6.78 to Rs 10, signalling a welcome recognition that better nutrition requires greater public investment. Yet the decision to hand the running of mid-day meals in the Kolkata Municipal Corporation area to the religious organisation

ISKCON effectively excludes one of the staples from the menu — eggs. The defence by CM Adhikari — "You will get good food to eat. You will get pure food, nothing to worry about" — and by state education minister Dipak Burman — "There is no logic behind the idea that children must consume eggs, especially to fulfil their nutritional needs" — only exacerbates concerns. By imposing a vegetarian ideal in a culturally varied state, the move depletes the menu of one of the country's most important welfare programmes.

The nutritional case for retaining eggs is compelling. The National Family Health Survey-6, released last month, shows that although stunting among children under five years has declined, nearly three out of every 10 children continue to be affected. West Bengal has long grappled with significant levels of child undernutrition and anaemia among both children and women. Eggs remain one of the most effective, economical and familiar sources of protein. The proposed substitutes — paneer, soyabean, rajma and pulses — undoubtedly have nutritional value, but ensuring their availability and acceptance at scale is far more complex.

Food in India has long been bound up in questions of caste, religion, and social power. In the weeks before the watershed assembly elections in April, the BJP went to great lengths to reassure voters that Bengal's culinary traditions would remain untouched under its stewardship. The removal of eggs from mid-day meals in schools — a template followed in several BJP-ruled states — sits uneasily alongside those assurances, particularly in a state where 98 per cent of people consume non-vegetarian food. The Adhikari government must reconsider its decision.

WHEN DOCTORS CAN MOVE, HEALTHCARE BENEFITS

In a first-of-its-kind reform, Andhra Pradesh has thrown open its doors to doctors from across India by removing state registration hurdles. An MBBS graduate holding a recognised medical qualification and valid registration with any state or UT medical council in the country will now be allowed to practise in the state, without a separate Andhra Pradesh Medical Council registration or a No Objection Certificate (NOC) from the council where they are registered. The order cuts through a bureaucratic roadblock that has long deterred doctors — particularly young graduates and specialists — from moving to states where there are better opportunities. With Andhra Pradesh's registered doctor base standing at roughly 1.05 lakh for a population of nearly 5 crore, and the country's overall doctor-population ratio hovering at 1:811 against the WHO benchmark of 1:1,000, this is likely to help address shortages in specialist care and strengthen the state's ambition to attract medical talent from across India.

The significance of the decision is not limited to healthcare administration alone. In a country that routinely speaks of the ease of living and doing business, domicile preferences in public employment and local registration requirements have often tested the spirit, if not always the letter, of constitutional guarantees. Driven by political and administrative considerations, states frequently create procedural hurdles that limit opportunities. For instance, in an attempt to stem high attrition rates, Bihar recently made it mandatory for government doctors to complete three years of continuous service before becoming eligible for NOCs. There are also other tangible costs for those seeking to relocate. Re-registration fees at state councils typically range from Rs 5,000 to Rs 10,000, while obtaining an NOC from a home-state council — a prerequisite for re-registration elsewhere — can take weeks and involve additional paperwork.

Andhra Pradesh's move also aligns with the broader objective behind the National Medical Commission's efforts to create a seamless national registration framework. The "One Nation, One Registration" platform was launched in August 2024 to eliminate impediments to professional mobility. Yet only around 1,800 registration certificates have been issued so far, while more than 30,000 applications remain pending verification at state medical councils. By lowering barriers to mobility, Andhra Pradesh has not only moved to strengthen healthcare delivery, it has shown that states need not wait for administrative bottlenecks to be resolved before adopting the principle underlying the reform.

'100%' TAG ON LABEL, DISCLAIMERS ON THE BACK: WHY CCPA FINED 2 COMPANIES

From juices to breads, the "100%" label is a near-ubiquitous marketing tool meant to assure consumers of a product's unadulterated quality.

Key Takeaways:

• However, in two separate orders passed this month, the Central Consumer Protection Authority (CCPA) imposed a penalty of Rs 1 lakh each on two major food and beverage companies — Mrs. Bectors Food Specialities Ltd and Storia Foods and Beverages Pvt Ltd — for running misleading advertisements and engaging in unfair trade practices by prominently using "100%" claims on their packaging and promotional materials. It also ordered them to immediately discontinue these advertisements.

• Central to both cases is the Consumer Protection Act, 2019. The CCPA invoked Section 2(28) of the Act, which defines a "misleading advertisement" as one that falsely describes a product, gives a false guarantee or deliberately conceals important information. It also relied on Section 2(47), which defines an "unfair trade practice" as making false representations about the standard, quality or composition of goods.

• The regulatory backdrop for these orders was set by the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI). In an advisory issued in May last year, the food regulator noted a growing trend of brands using the "100%" term. The FSSAI underlined that the term is not defined in its advertising regulations and that its use "is likely to convey a false sense of absolute purity or superiority, potentially leading consumers to believe that competing products in the market do not comply with prescribed standards." This false sense of purity was the focal point in the case against Mrs. Bectors Food Specialities Ltd, the makers of English Oven bread. The CCPA took suo-motu cognisance of advertisements for the company's "100% Atta Bread" and "100% Whole Wheat Bread".

• During the proceedings, the company admitted that the actual wheat flour (atta) content in the bread was only 87%. However, it defended the "100%" label by arguing that it was meant to convey that wheat flour was the "sole grain source" used, without any refined flour (maida). The company also relied on FSSAI labelling regulations, which state that for a bread to be classified as "Whole Wheat Bread", it must contain a minimum of 75% whole wheat flour. Since their product contained 87%, they argued the label was justified.

• The CCPA rejected this, noting that while FSSAI regulations prescribe a minimum 75% threshold to classify a product as atta bread, this cannot be "elevated into a justification for making an unqualified and absolute claim such as '100% Atta Bread'."

• It observed that an average consumer would reasonably construe the label to mean the product is entirely composed of atta. "The use of the qualifier '100%' is absolute, unequivocal, and admits of no dilution or interpretative flexibility," the CCPA said in its order, adding that a product falling short of this literal meaning renders the claim factually incorrect.

Do You Know:

• The Section 2(28) of the Consumer Protection Act, 2019 defines "misleading advertisement" in relation to any product or service which— (i) falsely describes such product or service; or (ii) gives a false guarantee to, or is likely to mislead the consumers as to the nature, substance, quantity or quality of such product or service; or (iii) conveys an implied representation which, if made by the manufacturer or seller or service provider thereof, would constitute an unfair trade practice; or (iv) deliberately conceals important information.

• The Central Consumer Protection Authority is being constituted under Section 10(1) of The Consumer Protection Act, 2019. The Act replaced The Consumer Protection Act, 1986, and seeks to widen its scope in addressing consumer concerns. The new Act recognises offences such as providing false information regarding the quality or quantity of a good or service, and misleading advertisements. It also specifies action to be taken if goods and services are found "dangerous, hazardous or unsafe".

STAY WITH THE EVIDENCE

The character of science leans to openness: to new evidence and emerging facts. Its ability to be agile to pivot and shift to newer guidelines is therefore absolutely crucial. The Health Ministry's recent ban on 16 Fixed Dose Combination (FDC) drugs comes on the evidence that these drug combinations lack therapeutic justification, are 'deemed irrational or unsafe' and might pose risks to patients. The drugs include dermatological drugs, analgesics and antispasmodics, and antibiotic-based formulations. An FDC is a drug containing two or more active pharmacological ingredients, combined in a fixed ratio in a single dosage. These were meant to improve treatment compliance in chronic conditions (such as Tuberculosis) by reducing the pill burden and, sometimes, by improved therapeutic effectiveness. However, irrational combinations, besides being ineffective, can also be counter-productive and harmful. As per the latest order, all State Drug Controllers, regulatory authorities, and enforcement agencies are to ensure strict implementation and compliance with the recent notification. Instructions must also be sent to manufacturers, importers, distributors, and even individual pharmacies, to stop stocking and selling the banned FDCs.

This is not the first time that the Health Ministry is cracking down on FDCs. A detailed scientific review is undertaken before these decisions to ban FDCs are taken. In March 2016, the government banned a whopping number of over 330 FDC drugs, on the ground that they were irrational, with immediate effect. While FDCs offer the advantage of a reduction in the number of pills, of certain benefit to certain categories of patients, there are some innate issues as well: patients might need different titrations of doses, impossible with FDCs; patients might develop allergies, but it will not be clear what particular pharmaceutical ingredient they are reacting to. It is also clear that all patients may not actually need all the drugs in the combination, exposing them to unnecessary side effects. A further potential harm exists with FDCs of antibiotics: In 2016, 19% of the 330 FDCs banned were antibiotics; There is enough evidence to show that irrational antibiotic FDC drug usage leads to or exacerbates the growing antimicrobial resistance problem in the country. While the government has taken a positive step with banning these FDCs, its work has just begun. In many instances in the past, stocks of banned drugs were still being sold in pharmacies, because the message had not percolated down. While staying solidly on the side of evidence-based medicine, the government must also activate its monitoring and supervision arm in order to ensure that the benefits from the ban reach the last mile.

GOVT. TO SIMPLIFY DRUG IMPORT RULES FOR TEST, EXAMINATION, ANALYSIS

Union Health Ministry has proposed amendments to the Drugs Rules, 1945 to simplify the procedure for securing permission for import of drugs for examination, test or analysis. The change introduces an acknowledgement-based system for import of all drugs in small quantities for analytical and non-clinical testing purposes.

Under the revised provisions, applicants intending to import such drugs will be required to submit a prior intimation form and may import the drug based on the acknowledgement generated upon submission of such intimation.

The procedure is applicable for import of drugs for analytical and non-clinical testing, except for certain drugs belonging to the categories of sex hormones, cytotoxic drugs, beta lactam drugs, biologics containing live microorganisms and narcotic and psychotropic substances, said a release issued by the Health Ministry.

The Ministry has already carried out amendments to the New Drugs and Clinical Trials Rules, 2019 in January introducing a similar notification system for domestic test licences. The present proposed amendment expands it to imports also.

The amendment is expected to significantly cut compliance burden on applicants by eliminating licensing needs for importing small lots of drugs for testing or R&D purposes.

Deregulation role

"This will play a substantial role in deregulating the R&D sector in pharmaceuticals and enable start-ups and industries to quickly initiate testing or analysis. The online intimation system will offer a seamless and instant gateway for the stakeholders," said a senior health official. The draft has been placed in the public domain for stakeholder consultation.

Meanwhile, the Ministry also published a draft notification proposing amendments to Rule 31 of the Drugs Rules, 1945 with the goal of rationalising the residual shelf-life norm for imported drugs and promoting ease of doing business in the pharma sector.

The draft amendment proposes to revise the norm of a minimum residual shelf life of more than 60% for imported drugs to a minimum residual shelf life of 12 months at the time of import. However, in view of specialised nature and public health considerations, the existing norm of a minimum residual shelf life of more than 60% shall continue to apply to biological products and radio pharmaceuticals.

The proposed amendment seeks to aid more efficiency in the pharmaceutical supply chain while maintaining availability of quality medicines for patients. By ensuring imported drugs have a minimum remaining shelf life of 12 months upon entry into the country, the proposal provides sufficient time for distribution and consumption before expiry, thereby ensuring patients continue to receive medicines with adequate usable shelf life.

SUSTAINING INDIA'S LOW-FERTILITY FUTURE

India is entering a new demographic phase. The latest Sample Registration System data puts the country's total fertility rate at 1.9 children per woman, below both the global average of 2.2 and the replacement level of 2.1 needed to keep a population stable. For a country that has long worried about population growth, this marks an important turn.

However, the decline is not uniform. Rural fertility is still around the replacement mark, while urban fertility has fallen to 1.5. The sharper divide is geographic. Delhi's fertility rate stands at an ultra-low of 1.2, while Kerala, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal are at 1.3. These levels are lower than those in the United States (1.6), Finland (1.4), and Japan (1.3). At the other end, Bihar remains at 2.9, followed by Uttar Pradesh (2.6), Madhya Pradesh (2.4), and Rajasthan (2.3).

The implication is that India has crossed into low fertility as a nation, but not as one demographic economy. While some States are already moving rapidly towards ageing, others still have large cohorts set to enter the labour force over the next two decades. India must create productive opportunities for young workers in poorer and younger States, while strengthening income, care, and health systems for older populations where fertility has already fallen very low.

A difficult shift

The transition could indeed be challenging. Western Europe and Japan aged after they had industrialised, brought a large share of workers into formal employment, widened their tax systems, and built welfare institutions with some capacity for risk-pooling. Even then, ageing strained public finances; Japan saw the burden push public debt above 200% of GDP.

India enters the same demographic passage on a weaker institutional and fiscal base. Its per-capita income is around $2,800. Its direct tax base remains narrow, with net direct taxpayers accounting for only about 6% of the total population. State governments, tasked with much of the social-sector response, are already fiscally stretched.

The labour-market base is just as fragile. Since most workers spend their lives in informal or semi-formal work, old-age income security remains largely outside formal employment contracts. A contribution-based pension system works best when earnings are predictable, employment is formal, and workers can save regularly over decades. In India, that assumption holds for only a minority of the workforce.

Existing public safety nets acknowledge this vulnerability but do not provide meaningful income security. The Atal Pension Yojana assumes sustained contributions across one's working life, which is difficult for informal workers with volatile incomes. The old-age pension under the National Social Assistance Programme remains ₹200 a month for those aged 60 to 79 and ₹500 for those above 80. Such support does not protect the elderly from dependence.

Income security, however, is only one part of the problem. For generations, India's welfare state has been partly hidden inside the household. The joint family, co-resident children, and unpaid female care absorbed many of the costs of old age. That arrangement is weakening under the pressure of urbanisation, migration, nuclear households, and women's educational and work aspirations. Studies of left-behind elderly parents show that while children's migration improves monetary resources, it worsens loneliness and health vulnerability.

To be sure, India has about 150 million people aged 60 and above. By 2050, that number is projected to rise to 347 million, or nearly one-fifth of the population. Yet the income base of old age remains weak. NITI Aayog has noted that 70% of the elderly depend on others while 78% have no pension cover. These numbers explain why India needs an inflation-indexed minimum pension floor, not as a substitute for contributory pensions, but as a basic layer of public risk-pooling for old age.

Ageing will also change the nature of healthcare demand. The pressure will come from the long-term management of hypertension, diabetes, dementia, disability, and palliative dependence. India has shown that sustained public investment can alter demographic outcomes. It did so for fertility, institutional deliveries, and child survival. The same mission-mode action will now be needed for embedding geriatric care into nursing practice, district health planning, and primary care.

The question of migration

The transition also has a federal dimension. The fastest-ageing States will increasingly need workers from younger States. This could be a source of national balance, but only if younger States invest aggressively in education, health, and skills, so that their workers do not merely move into low-wage informality elsewhere. It will also require older, richer, and more urbanised States to treat migrants not as temporary labour but as citizens who help sustain their economies and therefore deserve portable protection. A national labour market cannot rest on welfare systems tied narrowly to domicile. If workers move across State borders, their entitlements must move with them. Portability of welfare benefits must be one of the foundations of an ageing economy.

International evidence shows that low fertility can accompany prosperity. The difficulty is that India is entering mass ageing before completing the transitions that made ageing manageable elsewhere. India's low-fertility future will be sustainable only if stronger public systems gradually assume responsibilities that large families once carried quietly.

PCPNDT ACT

- **PCPNDT Act, 1994:** Pre-Conception and Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques Act — enacted in response to a sharp decline in child sex ratio, driven by misuse of ultrasonography for prenatal sex determination and selective abortion of female foetuses.
- **Core provisions:** Mandates registration of all genetic clinics, ultrasound centres and laboratories; prohibits communication/disclosure of foetal sex; prescribes record-keeping, monitoring, and penalties.
- **Machine regulation:** Purchase of an ultrasound machine requires prior registration as a genetic clinic/imaging centre; manufacturers must verify buyer credentials and obtain a written undertaking against sex-determination use; machine location and every scan must be documented.
- **Penalty:** Unauthorised movement of an ultrasound machine outside a registered facility is an offence carrying a minimum of three months' non-bailable imprisonment.
- **Unintended consequences (evidence-based):** Families with a firstborn girl, restricted from sex selection, showed a 25% higher child mortality rate among firstborn girls compared to firstborn boys, alongside increased fertility (more children) and wider gender gaps in education — effects concentrated among poorer, rural households.
- **Continuing violations:** October 2025 — Karnataka authorities uncovered an organised racket conducting illegal prenatal sex determination and abortions targeting rural

women; similar rackets reported using portable ultrasound devices and informal providers across States.

- **Global dimension:** UK reports indicate son preference and sex-selective practices persist among some Indian-origin diaspora communities.
- **Tech-policy mismatch:** Portable, smartphone/tablet-linked ultrasound devices can bring diagnostics (e.g., cancer detection) to remote areas, but their community-level use is currently illegal under the Act, even though high-frequency linear probes used for such purposes cannot perform foetal sex determination.
- **AI angle:** AI-enabled ultrasound systems can assist image acquisition/interpretation and generate automated reports without full image storage — potentially reducing misuse risk for sex determination while enabling safe diagnostic use; a pilot study showed AI-assisted portable ultrasound (operated by minimally trained users) correctly flagged all confirmed breast cancer cases.
- **Rural relevance:** Nearly 70% of India's population resides in rural areas with uneven access to radiologists/imaging — unlike Western countries that rely on resource-intensive mammographic screening.
- **Proposed reform:** Suggested amendment to legalise community-based ultrasound using high-frequency linear probes (no sex-determination capability) and to incorporate AI-enabled, safeguarded imaging systems designed to prevent foetal-sex disclosure irrespective of intent.

RAJASTHAN C-SEC DEATHS: CENTRE SEEKS REPORT AFTER WHO ASKS FOR INFO

The Union Health Ministry has asked the Rajasthan government for a detailed report on women developing complications following caesarean operations across several government hospitals in the state, with some resulting in casualties.

Key Takeaways:

— Sources said the ministry sent a note after the World Health Organization (WHO) sought information from the Indian government on the possible link of spurious oxytocin to the cases. The WHO sought information to ascertain whether the issue was localised, or more widespread, with potential risk at other locations, the source said.

— Several maternal deaths have been reported from Kota, Bikaner, and Jodhpur over the last couple of months. The women suffered fatal complications, including kidney failure and severe infections, following caesarean sections and routine deliveries.

— Investigation suggested that the Kota fatalities were linked to the use of fake or substandard oxytocin — a critical drug used to induce labour before a delivery and to contract the uterus for preventing blood loss after it.

— Many of the women who died or developed complications in Rajasthan saw excessive blood loss. Tests indicated the drug lacked active pharmaceutical ingredients. However, the deaths in Bikaner are being linked to unsanitary conditions, lack of fumigation in operation theatres, and poor infection control as major contributing factors.

— The Centre's action followed after the Rajasthan government and the top drug regulator in the country cancelled licences of a Kota-based wholesale drug distributor of oxytocin and two factories manufacturing the drug in Punjab and Himachal, respectively.

— Sources said inspections had discovered widespread irregularities, including the absence of evidence of key tests regarding drug purity and proof of data fudging.

— In the latest case, eight women who underwent C-sections at the District Government Hospital in Paota, Jodhpur, on June 20 fell ill after surgery. Two of them who developed complications were moved to AIIMS, Jodhpur, and all are stable now.

— The WHO, as part of its global surveillance of medical products, usually reaches out to the national drug regulators for information on any spurious or harmful drug whenever there are such reports. It also raises alert when there is a likelihood of these products crossing national borders.

— In the first week of June, the Central Drugs Standard Control Organisation (CDSCO) held a joint inspection of the manufacturing units in Punjab and Himachal of Jackson Laboratories, the manufacturer of the oxytocin that is under a cloud in Rajasthan, along with the regulators of the two states.

— On Tuesday, the Rajasthan Drug Control Department cancelled the wholesale drug licence of Kota-based pharma distributor Rajasthan Medical Hall, over the alleged sale of thousands of spurious oxytocin injections and other irregularities.

Do You Know:

— Oxytocin, also known as the 'love hormone', is a hormone secreted by the pituitary glands of mammals during sex, childbirth, lactation or social bonding. However, it can also be chemically manufactured and is sold by pharma companies for use during childbirth. It is administered either as an injection or a nasal solution.

— "It is a practice to give oxytocin during a C-section as these contractions are essential to reduce bleeding after childbirth and prevent postpartum haemorrhage, one of the leading causes of maternal mortality worldwide. It also stimulates breast milk production," said Dr Swati Ajit Gaikwad, consultant, obstetrician and gynaecologist, Motherhood Hospital, Kharadi, Pune.

— During a normal vaginal birth, the body releases significant amounts of natural oxytocin in response to labour. However, during a C-section, especially under spinal or epidural anaesthesia, this natural hormonal response may not be sufficient.

RAZOR'S EDGE

The southwest monsoon deficit nationwide has increased from 35% to 43%; the winds' northward advance was stalled near Mumbai; and both the U.S. NOAA and the India Meteorological Department (IMD) expect a moderate-to-strong El Niño this year. The El Niño suppresses the vertical air movement needed for rainclouds to form while a warming Pacific is weakening the trade winds that bring moisture to the subcontinent. The Madden-Julian Oscillation is also in an unfavourable phase and the Indian Ocean Dipole currently cannot offer a buffer. Further, while northwest India has received 5% more rain than normal, central India and the northeast face deficits of 63% and 43%, respectively. But with two-thirds of the seasonal rainfall historically arriving in July and August, the monsoon may still recover and salvage the season. Together with reservoir storage at 30.4% of capacity, compared with 25.1% during previous El Niño years, there is no reason for alarm yet. However, the effects for agriculture are more concerning. The Agriculture Ministry has already prioritised 111 districts out of 315 vulnerable ones based on their irrigation coverage. Extreme heat has been reducing farm labour productivity. High heat and rain shortfall have sown anxiety over the cardamom harvest in Idukki, a fate that bodes ill for other plantation crops in the Western Ghats.

Both the kharif sowing window for rice, pulses, and oilseeds and the availability of fertilizers could come under pressure, the latter due to Chinese export curbs and tensions in West Asia, heightening the risks of lower soil moisture and higher input stress. Retail food inflation was 4.2% in April; further deficits will especially threaten vegetables and pulses, complicating the monetary policy. The fundamental problem is the way India has built its rural economy around the assumption of reliable rainfall delivery. No adaptation strategy can indefinitely outpace unchecked warming, so limiting future warming should amount to reducing the extent of exposure. The ideal sustainable strategies are to switch from rain-centric to water-centric organisation, reduce dependence on water-intensive crops, and improve resilience. Pathways for the first two have already been outlined. On the last, while the Agriculture Ministry's extant contingency plans reflect the need for adjustable sowing windows and alternative seed varieties, the principal variable remains implementation at scale. Second, the government should consider a new authority to coordinate inter-State water use and cropping changes based on extended El Niño forecasts, eliminating the cropping governance currently fragmented between the Agriculture and Jal Shakti Ministries, and the IMD.

HIDDEN CLIMATE COST OF EVERYDAY LIFE IN INDIA

Climate change is often framed as a problem for 2070, the year by which many countries have pledged to reach net-zero emissions. Yet even as its impacts are felt more sharply around the world, the rising everyday costs it creates receive far less attention. In India, climate change is already a problem for the end of the month, in both the summer heat and the monsoon season. From food and electricity to water and healthcare, a warming world is quietly making everyday life more expensive, especially for those who can least afford it.

When a heatwave hits north India now, it shows up as higher vegetable prices, erratic power cuts, hospital bills going up, and a spike in electricity bills as fans and ACs run longer. Economists are already warning that this year's combination of intense heat and a weaker monsoon could push inflation above 5%, largely through food and energy costs. Even as the government revises the inflation basket, food and beverages still carries the heaviest weight in India's consumer price index, about 45.86% in the current series, so any climate shock to crops reflects quickly into what people pay at the Kirana store.

World Bank's warning

We know this is not a one-off. The World Bank has warned that rising temperatures and changing monsoon patterns could shave up to 2.8 percent off India's GDP by 2050 and depress living standards for nearly half the population. Behind that there is a simple reality that climate change is eroding incomes and pushing up essential costs at the same time. Central and northern States such as Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and Maharashtra are projected to be among the worst hotspots where living standards fall the most. These hotspots of climate vulnerability are also hotspots of agrarian distress, where low and volatile farm incomes, high indebtedness and persistent farmer suicides have become structural features of rural life.

Take food as an example. A weaker or delayed monsoon can reduce harvests and disrupt planting, while extreme heat can damage yields even when the rains arrive on time. In 2023, a below-normal monsoon with about a 6% rainfall deficit reduced sown area for pulses and oilseeds, and farmers across several States reported crop losses; retail prices of rice, wheat and pulses were higher by 6–15% year-on-year by early October . Studies also show that repeated climate shocks from heatwaves to erratic rainfall and floods, are reshaping food price dynamics in India and driving more persistent food inflation. Each shock creates a chain reaction, lower yields, supply bottlenecks, hoarding and speculation, that ends with higher prices on the plate.

Energy costs as well tells a similar story. As temperatures increase, households that can afford to pay or can rely more on cooling, which pushes up power demand and strains the grid. During the May 2026 heatwave, power demand in India has repeatedly hit a record 270.8 gigawatts, driven by millions of fans and AC units trying to keep homes and workplaces liveable. When utilities scramble to meet this demand, often with expensive coal and imported fuels, the costs are eventually passed on through higher tariffs or surcharges. For middle-class homes, a jump in the electricity bill is an irritation; for informal workers and low-income families, it means cutting back on other essentials including food and education.

Water scarcity

Water is another hidden driver of the climate cost-of-living crisis. In many parts of rural India, erratic rainfall and groundwater depletion are making wells run dry more often, forcing households to spend more time and money securing water. In cities, this has already produced a parallel "tanker economy," where those without reliable municipal supply pay private vendors for basic drinking and domestic water. For Dalit, Adivasi and other marginalised communities who are living in the informal settlements and slums, who already start from a position of economic and social disadvantage, these extra costs compound existing inequalities.

Health impacts add another layer. Heat stress, poor air quality and the spread of climate-sensitive diseases increase out-of-pocket health spending, which is already high in India. A source on climate and health in India shows that rural women, for example, are bearing disproportionate burdens as they walk longer distances for water, work in hotter fields and care for sick family members. Every extra day lost to illness is a day of wages gone, and every clinic visit draws from already thin household budgets.

All of this plays out in a country where most people still live close to the poverty line. A review of climate-related risks in India from Indian Institute of Human Settlements notes that, despite impressive growth in median incomes over the last three decades, a large share of Indians remain highly vulnerable to even small economic shocks. Climate change turns those "small" shocks into something more constant and structural. It is not just about one bad year of rain but about a pattern of repeated, overlapping disruptions that steadily raise the floor price of survival.

The burden is also sharply unequal. Studies of farmers' access to climate adaptive technologies in India find that marginalised castes and tribes are less likely to adopt and sustain irrigation and other coping strategies, even as climate pressures mount. In other words, those with more land, more capital and better social status can protect themselves from climate volatility, while those at the bottom are left to absorb higher costs through debt, distress migration or cutting back on food and education. Climate change acts like a regressive tax, taking the most from those who contributed the least to the problem.

Policy responses so far have mostly focused on firefighting, export bans when onion prices spike, ad hoc relief after floods or droughts, short-term power subsidies when heatwaves hit. These may be politically necessary, but they do not address the structural ways in which climate change is squeezing household budgets. Indian think tanks have started to estimate the long-run economic costs of climate impacts for India, including future GDP losses, but the everyday reality of higher bills and thinner paychecks rarely makes it into climate debates.

Cost of living issue

Recognising climate change as a cost-of-living issue, not just an environmental or diplomatic concern, would change the political conversation. It would push governments to invest more aggressively in climate-resilient agriculture like Andhra Pradesh Community Natural Farming (APCNF), urban heat planning, affordable public transport, and universal basic services like water and health. It would also force a reckoning with who pays, whether these rising costs are allowed to continue falling on the rural poor, small and marginal farmers, informal workers and marginalised castes, or whether India chooses to redistribute the risks and build a more equal form of climate resilience.

ESA FOR WESTERN GHATS: WHY CONSERVATION IS KEY

The Western Ghats, a 1,500-km long chain of largely unbroken mountains which fringes off the western coast of India, is one of the country's most famous natural ecosystems, next only to the Himalayas. Unlike the Himalayas, the Western Ghats are densely populated and have been an economic hub for states abutting India's west coast, and is home to famous cash crops.

Key Takeaways:

• A special regime of legal protection, conservation, and sustainable development prescribed for this fragile ecosystem has been hanging fire due to objections and concerns of the six state governments — Gujarat, Maharashtra, Goa, Karnataka, Kerala, and Tamil Nadu — where the Ghats extend.

• Separate protections for the Ghats region were initially prescribed by the famous Madhav Gadgil-led expert panel, and later by a high-level working group, chaired by former Indian Space Research Organisation chief K Kasturirangan.

• It is in this backdrop of the Kasturirangan panel's 2013 report that the Centre demarcated 56,825 sq km as ecologically sensitive area (ESA) in a draft notification. With a lack of consensus that continued till 2022, the Centre constituted a fresh expert committee with the task of re-examining the objections by the six states, keeping the Ghats' conservation and needs of the region in mind.

• The expert committee appointed in 2022, under Sanjay Kumar, former Director General of Forests, Environment Ministry, has held several meetings with state governments, and has undertaken field visits in all states except Kerala. Sources aware of developments said that some of the fundamental issues the committee has sought to resolve are reconciliation of village-level data, names, revenue details, based on satellite imagery, and information provided by state governments.

• Kerala and Karnataka remain the two states where consensus is not any closer. Karnataka has been steadfast in its total rejection of the Kasturirangan panel recommendations. Kerala, meanwhile, has sought to reduce the earlier 9,993.7 sq km area by another 1,000 sq km or so, arguing to omit villages from Idukki due to plantation, agriculture activities, especially in Cardamom Hills.

• In Maharashtra, the state government has sought exclusion of 378 villages from the 2,133 notified in the draft notification, according to reliable sources. Sources said that the state has argued to omit villages for industries, mining, and because some villages are distant from ESAs.

Do You Know:

• The Kasturirangan panel's report identified an area of 1,64,280 sq km, whereas the Gadgil panel identified 1,29,037 sq km as the Ghats's extent. Compared with the Gadgil panel — which recommended that the entire area be designated as ESA with heavy cross-sectoral restrictions — the Kasturirangan panel adopted a different approach.

• Its analysis found that 60% of the Ghats region was already under "cultural landscape", which was human dominated and where land was under settlements, plantations, or agriculture. The remaining 40% — 60,000 sq km — was classified as "natural landscape", a high biological richness, low fragmentation, low population density, and inclusive of national parks, and tiger and elephant habitats.

• The panel proposed that this 60,000 sq km be notified as ESA along with a ban on mining, quarrying, red category polluting industries, thermal power plants, and large constructions and townships. In the past, ESAs have been notified in Dahanu, Mahabaleshwar-Panchgani, and Doon valley taking into account the area's biological diversity and need to regulate activities.

The then United Progressive Alliance government accepted these recommendations in-principle. But on the back of concerns raised by state governments on wide restrictions on industries, it asked the six states time to submit their views before finalising the ESA boundaries in December 2013.

• Later, in March 2014, the Centre also issued a draft notification, demarcating 56,825.7 sq km as ESA. The area was reduced by over 3,000 sq km on account of Kerala's submission, based on their own ground truthing exercise, that sought omission of several agricultural areas, orchards, horticultural plots, plantation and residential areas outside the remit of ESA.

RAIL/ROAD-INTEGRATED PHOTOVOLTAICS (RIPV)

Why it matters

With a goal of achieving net-zero carbon emissions by 2030, the Indian Railways is striving to add an estimated 30 gigawatts (GW) of renewable energy capacity. Also, the National Highways Authority of India (NHAI) has partnered with the Solar Energy Corporation of India to explore solar deployment along national highways. In this next phase of India's energy transition attention now is turning to how India's road and railway infrastructure could double as clean energy generators. In this context, knowing about the emerging concept of rail/road-integrated photovoltaics (RIPV) becomes important.

Core Concept:

— RIPV involves integrating solar photovoltaic (PV) systems directly into existing rail and road infrastructure. PV technology converts sunlight directly into electricity through the photovoltaic effect, where semiconductor materials in a PV cell absorb photons (particles of energy) from sunlight and release electrons, generating flow of electricity.

— What sets it apart from conventional solar PV systems is that it eliminates the need for dedicated land for installation. Instead, solar panels can be installed along railway tracks, highway dividers, and medians or onto other structures. This not only overcomes land constraints but also brings energy generation closer to the point of consumption.

— Several European countries are exploring ways to integrate solar PV systems into the transport infrastructure. For instance, a solar noise barrier has been installed along the A50 motorway in the Netherlands, which is capable of supplying around 40-60 households with green electricity.

— Building on global momentum, the National Capital Region Transport Corporation and Indian Railways have also piloted "solar-on-track" systems for the Namo Bharat network and at Banaras Locomotive Works in Varanasi, respectively. NHAI also plans to install solar panels on elevated sections of the Delhi-Dehradun Expressway and replicate the model across national highways.

— Despite being implemented on a small scale, these projects demonstrate that RIPV systems can be deployed and operated under Indian conditions, helping validate the concept for wider adoption and future scale-up.

Battery energy storage systems (BESS)

— BESS technology stores electricity chemically and discharges it when needed. Lithium-ion batteries, particularly lithium iron phosphate (LFP) batteries, are currently the dominant technology for grid-scale storage because of their falling costs, high efficiency and long operational life.

NETRA AEW&C: FINAL OPERATIONAL CLEARANCE (FOC)

Why in News

The Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) formally handed over the Final Operational Clearance (FOC) certificate for India's indigenous Netra Airborne Early Warning and Control (AEW&C) system to the Indian Air Force (IAF) on 25 June 2026, at a ceremony held at the Centre for Airborne Systems (CABS), Bengaluru.

The FOC certifies that Netra meets all Air Staff Qualitative Requirements (ASQR) and is fully combat-ready for high-intensity operations — the final stage after the Initial Operational Clearance (IOC) granted in 2015.

Background / Context

- AEW&C (Airborne Early Warning and Control) systems act as a 'flying radar station and command centre', extending radar coverage far beyond ground-based radar's line-of-sight limits — vital for early threat detection, battle management and network-centric warfare.

- At an event to mark the occasion, scientists and IAF officers dedicated the achievement to colleagues killed in a tragic air crash in 1999. The seeds of India's airborne warning and control system (AWACS) were sown in the early 1980s.However, the tragic crash of a modified HS-748 Avro aircraft near Arakkonam in Tamil Nadu, with eight people aboard, including four IAF personnel and four scientists, on January 11, 1999 resulted in the programme being abandoned temporarily.
- The programme was revived and sanctioned afresh in 2004 (joint IAF–DRDO feasibility study was in 2003), with CABS designated the nodal DRDO laboratory for design, integration and testing.
- Netra received Initial Operational Clearance (IOC) in 2015 and was inducted into the IAF in February 2017; two more aircraft followed by 2019 and 2023 respectively, taking the fleet to three.
- Netra is distinct from India's Russian-origin A-50 Phalcon AWACS (mounted on the Il-76 platform), which has longer range and 360° coverage; Netra is the lighter, indigenous, complementary platform.

Key Facts

- Developer: Centre for Airborne Systems (CABS), DRDO, Bengaluru — with contributions from LRDE (radar), DEAL (data link/communication), DARE (self-protection/EW suite) and industry partner Bharat Electronics Limited (BEL).
- Platform: Brazilian Embraer EMB-145I / ERJ-145 aircraft, modified with in-flight refuelling capability, satellite communication and advanced avionics.
- Mission suite: Active Electronically Scanned Array (AESA) radar, Identification Friend or Foe (IFF), mission computer, secure communication networks, Electronic Support Measures (ESM) and communication support measures.
- Fleet: Three Netra Mk-1 aircraft in service with No. 200 Squadron, IAF, based at Bhisiana Air Force Station near Bathinda, Punjab.
- Global standing: India became the fifth country in the world to indigenously develop this capability.
- Integration: Networked with the IAF's Integrated Air Command and Control System (IACCS) for real-time situational awareness and battle management.
- Operational record: Played a force-multiplier role in the 2019 Balakot air strikes, the 2020 India–China border standoff, and Operation Sindoor (2025).
- Future expansion: The Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS)/Defence Acquisition Council has approved six additional Netra Mk-1A systems (upgraded GaN-based AESA radar, ~450 km range) and, separately, six Netra Mk-2 systems on refitted Airbus A321 airframes (~₹19,000 crore project, deliveries expected from around 2033).

DO YOU KNOW?

• 'Netra' is Sanskrit for 'eye' — reflecting its role as the IAF's 'eye in the sky'.

• The FOC ceremony was dedicated to the eight personnel (4 IAF, 4 DRDO scientists) who died in the 1999 Arakkonam crash of the testbed aircraft.

• Pakistan's numerical edge in AEW&C-type aircraft (Saab 2000 Erieye) during the 2019 Balakot episode is often cited as a driver for India's accelerated AEW&C expansion.

• The Integrated Air Command and Control System (IACCS), with which Netra is integrated, is often called the 'nerve centre' of IAF air defence operations.

EXAM ALERT

• Do not confuse Netra Mk-1 (Embraer EMB-145I based, indigenous, in service since 2017) with India's Phalcon AWACS (Israeli AESA radar mounted on Russian Il-76 airframe) — these are two separate systems in IAF service.

• FOC (Final Operational Clearance) ≠ IOC (Initial Operational Clearance). IOC = early induction with partial capability; FOC = full combat readiness after meeting all ASQR.

• Netra Mk-1A is an upgraded Embraer-based system — NOT the same as Netra Mk-2, which uses a larger Airbus A321 airframe. This distinction is a common distractor.

• India is the fifth country to indigenously develop AEW&C capability — a frequently tested static-cum-current-affairs fact.

THREE DISTINCT STRATEGIC ROLES OF THE THREE SHIPS INDUCTED INTO NAVY

The Indian Navy inducted three ships today (June 21) — one that can fight far out at sea, one that can map the sea, and one that can hunt submarines close to the coast. Prime Minister Narendra Modi presided over the commissioning of INS Dunagiri, INS Sanshodhak, and INS Agray in Kolkata, adding to the steady inducting of new vessels into the Indian Navy since January 2025.

Key Takeaways:

• The three vessels — the Brahmos-armed stealth frigate INS Dunagiri, the deep-water survey vessel INS Sanshodhak, and the Anti-Submarine Warfare Shallow Water Craft (ASW SWC) INS Agray — have been built by Garden Reach Shipbuilders & Engineers (GRSE) in Kolkata. According to the Ministry of Defence, the three together have more than 75 per cent indigenous content, and involve over 200 MSMEs.

Do You Know:

• **INS Dunagiri:** The largest and most heavily armed of the three is INS Dunagiri. It is a frigate, which, in simple terms, is smaller than a destroyer but large enough to operate far from the coast. It is part of the Navy's Project 17A, under which a new generation of stealth guided-missile frigates are being built in India. The 'stealth' here does not mean complete invisibility, but means that it is harder to detect on radar and other sensors. Dunagiri carries weapons such as BrahMos surface-to-surface missiles and a medium-range surface-to-air missile (MRSAM) system, along with sensors including Multi-Function Surveillance, Track And Guidance Radar (MFSTAR), sonar, electronic warfare systems and anti-submarine weapons.

• **INS Sanshodhak:** This is a Survey Vessel — Large (SVL). Its job is to measure and map the sea: the depth of waters, seabed features, approach channels to ports, navigational routes, and oceanographic data. It is equipped with systems such as autonomous underwater vehicles, remotely operated vehicles and multi-beam echo sounders. These help the ship collect data from the surface and underwater.

—Sanshodhak is the last ship of the Sandhayak-class of SVLs. The contract for four SVLs was signed in October 2018. The other ships of this class are INS Sandhayak, INS Nirdeshak and INS Ikshak, commissioned in February 2024, December 2024 and November 2025.

• **INS Agray:** The third vessel, INS Agray, is the smallest of the three but has a highly specialised role. Put simply, it is a submarine-hunter designed for coastal waters. Agray belongs to the Arnala-class, a class of smaller warships built specifically to detect and attack submarines in shallow waters near the coast, ports, naval bases and important sea approaches. Agray carries lightweight torpedoes, indigenous anti-submarine rocket launchers and sonar systems.

—The word often used for coastal waters is littoral, which simply means waters close to the shore. "Coastal waters are difficult places to find submarines. They are noisy, busy and cluttered. Fishing boats, merchant ships, seabed features and coastal activity can make submarine detection harder than in the open ocean. That is where ASW-SWCc such as Agray come in," said an officer.

KINGMAKERS: MEET THE INSECTS THAT MAKE INDIA'S FAVOURITE MANGOES

More than a thousand varieties of mangoes exist in India, the popular ones being Banganapalli, Dassheri, Alphonso, Badaami, Imaam Pasandh, and Malgoa. There is even a "Lalbagh" variety in Bengaluru. Many of us associate the fruit with a summer childhood memory, of eating it with our bare hands, the mango juice dripping on our clothes.

More recently, the fruit has become popular on social media platforms, where users explain hundreds of ways to cook and eat it. This year, the fruit's popularity reached a new height: the red carpet at the Met Gala in New York. Mangoes and Indian summers go hand-in-hand, yet do you know how this fruit comes to be?

In other words, the mango tree gives out flowers… and then what happens?

Making a mango

Between December and March every year, mango trees across the country bloom and issue a sweet yet slightly fermented odour. Look closer at a mango tree in this time and you will find a branch with several bouquets of small, cream-coloured flowers. Each branch, which botanists call a panicle, contains a few hundred to up to 10,000 individual flowers. And a single mango tree can carry up to some 3,000 panicles, depending on its size and branching.

Each one of these flowers is the start of a mango in the making. Some flowers carry only the male parts while others only the female parts, and sometimes there can be flowers with both (which are biologically called hermaphrodites). Regardless, for the mango to form, pollen must travel between these flowers.

This is where pollinators make their mark. There is a curious history here. Mango cultivars had once insisted that mango flowers are pollinated only by wind. But this theory could not explain why the flowers issued a sweet odour. It had to be to attract insects.

To confirm that insects were indeed pollinators, researchers in Bengaluru teamed up with their peers from Germany to survey several Badami mango farms in the city's urban and rural areas. Their findings, published in 2023, were striking: "We found that allowing flowers access to ants and flying visitors (bees, hoverflies, nonsyrphid flies), dramatically increased mango yield by 350%, highlighting the importance of wild insects for mango pollination," the study paper read.

These flying insects were found to include wild bees such as the dwarf honey bee (Apis florea), giant honey bee (Apis dorsata), and stingless bees (Tetragonula sp.). Other important flying visitors included hoverflies, which look like bees (Syrphus sp.), the common house fly (Musca domestica), and the blow fly (Calliphoridae family).

Effective pollination

The researchers also observed that the mango yields dropped when they barred crawling insects, such as ants, from the flowers. Soubadra Devy, a senior researcher at the Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment, Bengaluru, and an author of the study, said ants are "messy pollinators" and that it is essential to investigate them as pollinators of mango in future studies.

Dr. Devy also said she anticipates that the pollinator community is not any different for other Indian mango varieties since the "floral traits, i.e. the flower structure, pollen, and nectar are likely to be very similar".

Researchers have conducted similar studies in Mexico, on the 'Ataulfo' mango, and in Australia, on the 'Kensington Pride' variety — and have revealed similar findings. Both teams also took more steps to determine which insects were the pollinators.

They calculated a 'pollination effectiveness' metric based on the abundance of pollinators, the number of visits to flowers (with a 'legitimate' visits quantified using video cameras on trees), and the number of pollen grains deposited. And both studies showed that wild and native insects were most efficient at pollination, producing a higher yield of fruits.

Non-native bees to Mexico, such as European honey bees (Apis mellifera), were abundant and contributed to 80% of the pollination. Paradoxically, however, that did not result in a higher yield. The reason was that these non-native bees stayed around the same trees or in the same orchard and delivered the wrong pollen, resulting in malformed fruits. On the other hand, the native bees transferred pollen between orchards, giving rise to more full and juicy fruits.

Farmers' friends

Yet these native bees are under threat from the same insecticides that protect the mango crop from pests. Neonicotinoid insecticides, which are commonly sprayed on mango trees, are neurotoxic and affect cognitive functions in bees, such as navigation, learning, and memory, and eventually their survival. This ripples through the entire colony, as the insecticides travel to the pollen and nectar and are brought back to the hive by bees.

The Bengaluru-based study observed that fewer bees visited the mango flowers, and the harvested fruits were lighter by almost 30%, resulting in a three-way loss for the farmer: expensive pesticides, loss of pollinators, and a loss in the fruit yield.

Dr. Devy said monoculture farms that prevail in rural areas are more prone to pest attacks, and hence suffer higher pollinator loss as well. However, she also said she sees hope in bee-safe pesticides and in farmers timing their sprays to avoid peak pollinator activity — practices already in use in several western countries.

"One recent welcome move", in her words, was the Indian government recognising pollinators in the country's new 'environmental accounting' framework. This framework recognised that India has more than 800 bee species, plus butterflies, moths, beetles, birds, bats and flies as pollinators and that they are ecologically important for agriculture. The government has also attached a monetary value equivalent to 8-10% of the total crop output value, amounting to ₹2.6 lakh crore in 2021-22, to pollinators.

Rights of pollinators

Attaching a monetary value could nudge policy towards actively protecting our pollinators, through changes at the farm and landscape levels. These could include, as the Mexico study suggested, increasing the spread of natural and semi-natural areas near orchards, such as native forest patches and wildflower strips, to attract more wild insects.

Dr. Devy also pointed out that in May, stingless bees in Peru had become the first insects to win the legal rights to exist, thrive, and be represented in court. This is significant for the conservation of the species against insecticides, climate change, and competition from non-native insects.

The question then arises: will India accord similar rights to its pollinators, which carry the weight of the country's agriculture? As you relish this season's mangoes, it could also be your food for thought.

KASHMIRI PANDITS VISIT KHEER BHAWANI TEMPLE FOR MELA, WELCOMED BY RESIDENTS, LEADERS

Thousands of people belonging to the Kashmiri Pandit community from different parts of the country assembled at Tulmulla, around 30 km from Srinagar, on Sunday to celebrate Zyeshtha Ashtami and take part in the Kheer Bhawani Mela.

Key Takeaways:

• J&K Lt Governor Manoj Sinha and former chief minister Mehbooba Mufti visited the temple, and the Valley's chief cleric Mirwaiz Umar Farooq greeted the Kashmiri Pandits on the occasion of Zyeshtha Ashtami.

• Tight security arrangements were in place as people poured into Tulmulla from early Monday morning and offered milk and kheer (rice pudding) to the goddess. A large number of tourists also arrived at the temple.

• The annual festival gives a rare opportunity to Kashmiri Pandits living outside the Valley to return for a few days and to pay obeisance at the sacred temple. The Kheer Bhawani Temple, dedicated to the Goddess Ragnya Devi, is one of the most sacred Hindu pilgrimage sites in Kashmir.

• Lt Governor Sinha offered prayers at the temple also interacted with the Kashmiri Pandit community. "Today, I prayed for the well-being, peace and prosperity of all. May the blessings of Mata Kheer Bhawani be upon everyone. This year, the number of devotees visiting the holy shrine is higher compared to previous years," Sinha told reporters.

• Extending greetings on the occasion, J&K Chief Minister Omar Abdullah, who visited the temple a couple of days earlier, expressed hope that the festival would "further strengthen the bonds of harmony, brotherhood and rich composite cultural heritage of Jammu and Kashmir".

• Former chief minister and People's Democratic Party (PDP) president Mehbooba Mufti visited the temple on Monday and said, "I am happy that they (Kashmiri Pandits) are coming and that the people here are giving them a warm welcome."

Do You Know:

• Zyeth Atham (Jyeshtha Ashtami), observed on the eighth day of Shukla Paksha (the waxing phase of the moon) in the Hindu month of Jyeshtha (May–June), which fell on June 3, holds profound importance for the Kashmiri Pandit community. On this day, devotees honour Goddess Ragnya Devi, also known as Kheer Bhawani, at her temple in Tulmulla, in the Ganderbal district of Jammu and Kashmir.

• The temple derives its distinctive name from kheer—a rice and milk pudding—which is offered to the goddess as the principal prasad. The Kashmiri Pandit community reveres Goddess Kheer Bhawani, an incarnation of Mata Durga, as their Kuldevi (family deity).

Tulmulla is approximately 25 kilometers northeast of Srinagar. The temple, nestled amidst chinar trees and built over a sacred spring, finds mention in numerous ancient texts, including Kashmiri historian Kalhana's 12th-century chronicle Rajatarangini.

• "Mention of this place is made in the last chapter of the Ragnya Pradurbhava which is a section of the Bhringish Samhita," writes Kashmiri educationist and ornithologist Samsar Chand Kaul in his book 'The Mysterious Spring of Khir Bhawani'.

• The shrine features a hexagonal spring surrounding a marble temple that houses the idol of the presiding deity. The current marble structure was constructed by Dogra ruler Maharaja Pratap Singh in the early 20th century and was later renovated by Maharaja Hari Singh.

• According to a legend, Ragnya Devi was once worshipped in Lanka by King Ravana. Displeased with his tyranny, she left Lanka and, with the assistance of Lord Hanuman, relocated to Kashmir, choosing Tulmulla as her abode. "...the goddess, wrathful at Ravana's misdeeds, cursed him and ordered Hanuman to take her to Sad Sar (Kashmir) on her vehicle along with 360 Nags.

Hanuman selected a spot in the northern side of the Valley within the space surrounded by the villages of Borus (Bhawanish), Ahatung (Tungish), Ladwun (Labdawan), Wokur (Bhageh). Here he installed the goddess with all her satellites. She was called Khirbhawani or Raji Ragyni, exclusively preferring milk, sugar, rice and all vegetarian forms of offerings," Kaul writes.

• The mela at Kheer Bhawani Temple, managed by Jammu and Kashmir Dharmarth Trust, continues to draw thousands of devotees annually. "To mark the Ashtami, devotees perform hawan in reverence to Mata Ragnya, accompanied by rituals such as offering milk and dropping Kaand (sugar cones) into the sacred spring, scattering flowers and aromatic leaves known as Vyna

Patar. The festival serves as a reunion for the Kashmiri Pandit diaspora, a reaffirmation of faith, and a symbol of resilience," says retired IFS officer Poshkar Nath Pandit.

ASI TRANSFERS RAKHIGARHI SKELETONS TO ANSI FOR A SCIENTIFIC INVESTIGATION

The Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) has sent nearly 5,000-year-old skeletons unearthed at Haryana's Rakhigarhi, the largest known site of the Harappan civilisation, for scientific examination and facial reconstruction.

Key Takeaways:

• Four skeletons recovered during the latest excavation were sent to the Anthropological Survey of India (AnSI) in Kolkata on Friday, while DNA samples from one of the skeletons have been forwarded to the Birbal Sahni Institute of Palaeosciences (BSIP), Lucknow.

• Speaking to The Indian Express, Manoj Saxena, Superintending Archaeologist, ASI, said three skeletons, along with soil samples, had been sent to Kolkata, while only skeletal remains were sent in the fourth case. A fifth skeleton has been retained by the ASI. Of the five skeletons recovered, three are believed to be female and two male. Preliminary assessments suggest all five individuals were between 30 and 40 years old, though their exact ages will be determined through detailed scientific analysis.

• Saxena described the discovery as significant because the remains date back nearly 5,000 years to the Harappan period. He said the studies would help determine whether the individuals died of natural causes or disease and, if disease was involved, identify the nature of the ailments. The research is also expected to reveal details about their ancestry, height, physical features and social status.

• One of the key objectives of the study is facial reconstruction, which could provide a visual representation of what inhabitants of the Harappan civilisation may have looked like. According to Saxena, anthropological and DNA studies will be combined to produce a comprehensive report.

• Researchers are also expected to reconstruct the palaeo-environment of the period to better understand the human populations that inhabited the region and identify areas requiring further study.

Do You Know:

• Rakhigarhi comprises seven mounds. Excavations have previously been carried out at Mound No. 7 in 2005-06, 2015 and 2023, while limited excavations were conducted at Mound No. 6 in 2005-06 and 2015.

• Earlier excavations revealed residential structures, streets, drainage systems and what is believed to have been a jewellery-manufacturing unit. Archaeologists also recovered copper and gold ornaments, terracotta toys, seals and thousands of earthen pots.

• Dating back to approximately 4200 BCE, Rakhigarhi is considered one of the two largest Harappan sites in India, alongside Dholavira in Gujarat. The site is among 15 archaeological locations identified by the Centre for development as cultural heritage destinations.

• Announcing the initiative in the Union Budget earlier this year, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman said excavated landscapes would be opened to the public through curated walkways and supported by interpretation centres, conservation facilities and immersive storytelling technologies to enhance visitors' understanding of India's ancient civilisations.

• The Anthropological Survey of India (AnSI) is a premier research organization under the Ministry of Culture, Government of India. Established in 1945, it is the leading institution for anthropological research in India. Headquartered in Kolkata with regional centres across India, AnSI conducts extensive field studies and research in various domains of anthropology, including bio-cultural, social-cultural, and linguistic aspects of the diverse communities of India.

SHORT NEWS

PUNJAB, HARYANA RIFT OVER MALWA CANAL AT ZONAL MEET

Fresh differences over water management surfaced between Punjab, Haryana, and the Bhakra Beas Management Board (BBMB) Friday, with Punjab questioning the availability of water for a proposed irrigation canal in the Malwa region and challenging the assessment methods being used by the Board.

Once completed, the project will provide irrigation facilities to four districts of Punjab's Malwa belt by drawing water from the Harike barrage.

During the 22nd meeting of the Standing Committee of the Northern Zonal Council held in Shimla, Haryana officials also sought access to the Detailed Project Report (DPR) of the proposed canal project, stating they needed complete technical details before any further discussions could take place.

Punjab questioned whether the BBMB possessed accurate measurements and reliable data regarding the quantity of water available in the reservoirs

GOLD RING SCHEME

Every year, the Tamil Nadu government will spend ₹755.83 crore on gifting one-gram gold rings to roughly 4.42 lakh babies born in government hospitals under its new scheme, Thaimaaman Thanga Mothiram Thittam.

The gold ring may be intended as a celebration of birth, but for many within the public health sector, the more pressing need is investment in the workforce and infrastructure that makes safe deliveries possible.

Already, the Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy Maternity Benefit Scheme provides maternal assistance of ₹14,000 in cash support and two nutritional kits valued at ₹4,000. With this in place, the questions raised are plenty — Can the State government sustain a recurring cost of ₹755.83 crore a year, or ₹17,000 per ring (today's gold rate), for 4,41,667 deliveries along with administration cost? Whether symbolic incentives such as gold rings are the best use of public resources when basic gaps in the health system remain unresolved? Does this self-defeat the State's family welfare measures by incentivising higher order births?

HOLLYWOOD FILMMAKER’S CRASH PUTS SPOTLIGHT ON HIMACHAL’S PARAGLIDING DESTINATION

George Richmond, the celebrated Hollywood cinematographer who was seriously injured during a paragliding expedition in the Deo Tibba region of Kullu district on June 8, counts among his friends former Punjab chief minister Amarinder Singh’s son Raninder Singh. The family pooled in all the resources, including reaching out to the IAF, to ensure Richmond reached PGIMER, Chandigarh, for timely medical help.

The 54-year-old, who has worked on blockbusters such as Quantum of Solace (a James Bond film), and Deadpool & Wolverine, has undergone a surgery for his spinal fracture and is said to be recovering fast. However, the incident put the spotlight on an adventure sport that has gained popularity very fast in Himachal Pradesh, with the support infrastructure struggling to keep up.

The state started emerging as a top paragliding destination globally in the past decade, the reasons being its air conditions which help the gliders upwards into the sky, and wide and open areas facing mountains providing clear spaces to fly. During the same period, there have been countless accidents, with 19 fatalities since 2016. Himachal has at least a dozen popular paragliding sites across the districts of Kangra, Kullu, Shimla, Chamba and Lahaul & Spiti. Bir-Billing, located in the Dhualdhar mountain ranges of Kangra, at a height of around 2,400 metres, is Asia’s highest paragliding site and ranked among the world’s best.

The credit of introducing paragliding to Bir-Billing goes widely to Neil Kinnear of England and Keith Necols of the US, who visited the site over 40 years ago. In 1984, the Hang-Gliding World Cup was held in Bir-Billing, with 43 pilots from 13 countries participating.

BUSINESS AND ECONOMY

CHINESE EV MAKERS ARE SHUT OUT OF INDIA - BUT THEIR TECHNOLOGY ISN'T

India has restricted direct entry of Chinese automakers since the 2020 border tensions, but Chinese EV technology is still entering India through supply and platform-sharing deals. Tata Motors' arrangement with Chery to use its EV platform shows how Indian firms are using Chinese technology without equity partnerships or formal technology transfer, keeping political sensitivities in mind.

Such partnerships are almost inevitable: India needs faster EV manufacturing capability and local supply-chain development, while Chinese automakers need new markets as growth slows at home. These deals may help Indian companies launch EVs faster and eventually localise production.

However, China's own export-control rules have created hurdles, especially in battery technology. For example, Amara Raja had to end its licensing deal with China's Gotion for lithium-ion cell technology and is now relying more on in-house R&D and imported Chinese equipment/materials.

The trend is also a challenge for Japanese, Korean, and European players in India, because Chinese technology is often cheaper and quicker to deploy. Overall, India may keep Chinese companies formally out, but Chinese EV platforms, components, and know-how are increasingly shaping India's EV ecosystem.

EVIDENT DISTRESS

As the resolution process of the West Asia crisis drags on, an increasing number of economic metrics are exposing key weaknesses in the Indian economy. Many of these existed before the crisis broke out in late February and are now becoming apparent as the economy faces stress. The latest data on the Index of Eight Core Industries show that these sectors cumulatively grew just 0.5% in May 2026, the second-lowest in 21 months. It would have been easy to pass this off as a war-related impact, but the data also show that the index grew by an almost equally anaemic 1.1% over the course of the entire financial year 2025-26. What remains a concern is that the domestic crude oil and natural gas sectors continued their multi-year streaks of contractions in May as well. By this time, the third month of the conflict, oil prices had settled somewhat lower than their April peaks. As a result, oil imports by oil marketing companies began rising once again to meet domestic demand. A strategic goal continues to be missed here. While imported oil can be used to meet demand, domestic production should nevertheless be ramped up to fill strategic reserves. This reserve oil, even of inferior quality, can be released in times of shortage. The same holds true for natural gas. With natural gas imports and domestic production contracting, it followed that the fertilizer sector would also contract. The good news, however, is that the contraction — of 0.9% in May 2026 — was much lower than it was even two months earlier. In any case, what impact the 'super El Niño' will have on fertilizer demand is still uncertain.

Coal production, too, contracted by the most in nearly a year. As the summer continues to heat up, electricity generation will increasingly have to rely on variable renewable sources or costly imported coal. Notably, the core sectors are not the only ones revealing economic distress. The latest Goods and Services Tax (GST) revenue data too show that domestic economic activity seems to be slowing. Revenues from domestic transactions contracted 2.6% in May 2026. The government argues that this is because of a one-time windfall transfer it received in May last year. Even so, the average growth of domestic GST revenue over the last six months was just 3.1%, lower than in 2025-26 and the year before that. This is not a supply issue, since merchandise exports hit a record high in May 2026. It is a demand problem, as low real wage growth meets rising inflation to squeeze wallets. These are all distressing signals even as India enters a deficient monsoon. Trade deals are no substitute for hard-hitting reforms.

BEFORE TARIFF RESET, WILL US AND INDIA STRIKE BALANCE?

As US Trade Representative (USTR) Jamieson Greer leads his first trade delegation to India after over a year of negotiations, the two countries appear to be closer than ever to finally completing their trade deal.

Key Takeaways:

• Greer, in an op-ed last year, wrote that US President Donald Trump uniquely recognises that the privilege of selling into the world's most lucrative consumer market is a "mighty carrot" and a tariff is a "formidable stick". America's approach to trade deals across the globe and the timing of USTR's visit to India encapsulates this carrot-and-stick approach.

• The US had imposed sweeping reciprocal tariffs on several countries last year under a rarely-used legislation called the International Emergency Economic Powers Act (IEEPA). In February, however, the US Supreme Court struck down these reciprocal tariffs, prompting the administration to use alternative legislation to resurrect its tariff policy.

• One of these pieces of legislation was under Section 122, which gives the US authority to impose 10% tariffs for 150 days. These are now set to lapse on July 24 — when Washington is expected to introduce a new, steeper tariff architecture under Section 301 of the US Trade Act of 1974.

• The final stretch of the India-US talks come right before this. The US has already proposed 12.5% tariffs on India and is expected to release the findings of its second Section 301 investigation on India and 15 other countries well before July 24.

• India is among the handful of countries with whom the US is yet to formally sign a trade deal. It has already sealed deals with nearly a dozen trade partners, including the EU, Japan, South Korea and several ASEAN countries.

Do You Know:

• Under IEEPA, the US President has the power "to deal with any unusual and extraordinary threat, which has its source in whole or substantial part outside the United States, to the national security, foreign policy, or economy of the United States, if the President declares a national emergency with respect to such threat."

• Before Trump, the Act was used to impose sanctions on other nations, with Carter declaring a national emergency in the wake of the 1979 Iran hostage crisis to freeze all Iranian government assets in the US. This emergency has been renewed annually by eight successive presidents over 40 years, leaving the US in a virtual state of emergency ever since. George W Bush did something similar in 2001 following the September 11 attacks. As of September 1, 2025, 77 national emergencies have been declared under IEEPA, of which 46 are ongoing, according to a Congressional Research Service report.

• However, no US President before Trump had interpreted IEEPA to impose tariffs. The executive order announcing the sweeping 'Liberation Day' tariffs of April 2, 2025, said the US is facing a "national emergency" due to the "foreign trade and economic practices" and the "absence of reciprocity" in trade relationships.

• India was one of the worst hit by tariffs that resulted in a flight of foreign investment and resulted in steep depreciation of the domestic currency. The rupee has fallen almost 12% in the last one year. A formal trade deal remained aloof for months as the US demanded that India wind down imports of Russian oil and accept genetically-modified American agricultural products.

• The India-US joint statement of February said India will eliminate or reduce tariffs on all US industrial goods and a wide range of US food and agricultural products, including dried distillers' grains (DDGs), red sorghum for animal feed, tree nuts, fresh and processed fruit, soybean oil, wine and spirits, and additional products.

WHAT US FED'S RATE HIKE SIGNAL COULD MEAN FOR STRUGGLING INDIAN MARKETS

The US Federal Reserve's Federal Open Market Committee (FOMC) held its benchmark interest rate steady at 3.50-3.75% late on Wednesday, in what was new Fed Chair Kevin Warsh's first policy meeting and press conference at the helm of the central bank.

Key Takeaways:

— While the rate remained unchanged for a fourth consecutive meeting, the underlying data and changes announced by Warsh struck a more hawkish note, signalling the possibility of rate hikes later this year.

— Warsh announced a series of changes, including an end to forward guidance on economic metrics such as inflation and growth. Calling the policy statement "a bit shorter, a bit simpler", he said providing forward guidance was "not well-suited to the current policy conjuncture". The policy statement also omitted how each member of the committee voted on the interest rate action.

— The central bank's latest Summary of Economic Projections (SEP) signalled a more hawkish stance compared to the March meeting. Based on the responses of 18 of the 19 officials, excluding Warsh who didn't vote, the median estimate for the Fed funds rate by the end of 2026 rose to 3.8% from 3.4% in March, signalling that the committee sees at least one rate hike this year.

— This comes at a time when the country has seen a strong set of growth and labor data, while inflation has been a consistent pain point, first due to the reciprocal tariffs announced by President Donald Trump last year and now due to the ongoing war in West Asia, which has driven up fuel prices and disrupted supply chains globally.

— The latest Fed policy led to yields of short-term US treasuries rising to a 16-month high on Wednesday, with the US rate markets putting 72% odds on a rate hike by the central bank by October, according to a Reuters report. Yields, which move inversely to bond prices, rise on expectations of higher interest rates to reflect higher borrowing costs for the government.

— Higher interest rates in the US can potentially lead to foreign outflows from the Indian capital market as higher yields across US treasuries offer attractive returns for foreign investors. Higher bond yields in the US also reduce the attractiveness of Indian bonds for foreign investors.

— This is at a time when the Indian market has already been crippled by persistent foreign outflows due to headwinds such as high crude oil prices, an uncertain geopolitical environment, a weaker rupee squeezing the returns of foreign investors, and the underperformance of the Indian stock market due to a lack of AI-related opportunities.

— This time around, foreign inflows remain largely dependent on whether a peace deal between the US and Iran will be signed and followed through. Exorbitant fuel prices have crippled the Indian stock market since the start of the war, with crude oil rising as high as $125 a barrel at its peak. Both countries are scheduled to sign a peace deal on Friday.

— The Reserve Bank of India's recent measures to attract foreign capital also remain a positive for the market.

Do You Know:

— As the world's biggest economy, the United States has a significant influence on global financial systems. Whether it's a shift in its monetary policy or a tweak in fiscal spending, every move made in Washington resonates across global markets — and India is no exception. American economic policy directly or indirectly affects India's economic policymaking and market behaviour.

CHANGED REALITY

Nations rise to power on the strength of their economies and, by extension, trade. Historically, countries such as the United Kingdom, Japan, the United States and China have combined economic prosperity with maritime dominance. India's weak shipping sector reflects its geopolitical position. Yet, its seafarers generate billions of dollars in foreign exchange while facing risks from piracy and geopolitical tensions. The recent conflict with Iran showed that control of strategic waterways can be as consequential as economic sanctions. By leveraging the Strait of Hormuz, Iran exposed a critical vulnerability in the global economy. Disruptions to energy flows imposed costs far beyond the battlefield and the economic consequences appear to have played a significant role in shaping the U.S. response. From a shipping perspective and its Hormuz stakes, Iran may have secured strategic gains despite the heavy damage inflicted on it by Israeli and U.S. Even as the attacks on Lebanon cast a shadow over the peace deal, Iran has announced that the Persian Gulf Strait Authority it set up during the war will be the sole authority that will handle Strait of Hormuz transits.

The memorandum of understanding envisages lifting sanctions on Iran and on ships serving Iranian trade. It also mandates Iranian talks with Oman and other Gulf states on maritime administration in the Strait of Hormuz. Previously, vessels transiting the Strait neither paid tolls nor reported to Iran or Oman. Whether or not the new framework results in transit fees is less important than the reality: that shipping companies must now account for Iran as a decisive stakeholder in the Strait of Hormuz. For India, the conflict has exposed a major strategic weakness. Despite the Strait of Hormuz being vital to its energy security, the disruption exposed the absence of a credible contingency plan for such eventualities. India's LPG strategy relies heavily on imports moving through the Strait of Hormuz, supported by a limited fleet of Indian-flagged carriers and a tightly scheduled supply chain with little long-term cavern storage. Similar vulnerabilities affected other fuel supplies too. Many countries are now reassessing their dependence on the Strait of Hormuz. The United Arab Emirates is pursuing a "zero Hormuz dependency" strategy by strengthening alternative infrastructure and routes. India must draw lessons from the crisis. Diversifying supply chains, investing in alternative maritime and land corridors, and strengthening strategic partnerships should become priorities. Projects such as Chabahar offered precisely such an opportunity but India gave up on it. For India, reducing dependence on the Strait of Hormuz is no longer just an economic goal; it is a strategic necessity.

WHY HAVE INDIA'S STATISTICAL DATABASES BEEN UPGRADED?

The story so far:

Last November, the Indian government received a 'C' grade, the second-lowest grade, by the International Monetary Fund for the quality of its national accounts statistics. Over the last few months, it has made several upgrades to its statistical databases, improving their timeliness, representativeness, accuracy, and coverage. These improvements have been wide-ranging, covering the way India measures its gross domestic product (GDP), the value addition in the economy, industrial output, and price levels at the retail, wholesale, and producer levels.

What are the metrics that have been updated?

The most significant of these changes was made to India's national accounts statistics in February this year by the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI). National accounts include several key metrics such as GDP, gross value added (GVA), sector-wise output and growth figures, and the contributions of each of the engines of growth to the economy — government expenditure, private investment, household consumption, and trade. These are released on a quarterly and annual basis.

In June, MoSPI also updated the Index of Industrial Production (IIP), which captures how industrial activity in the economy is doing on a monthly basis. This includes key sectors such as manufacturing, mining, electricity, infrastructure, capital goods, and consumer goods. Apart from providing a regular snapshot of how the industrial sectors are doing, these monthly figures also feed into the GDP and GVA metrics.

The third broad set of upgrades were to how India measures inflation. Price changes at the retail level, which is meant to capture the consumer-end of the market, are measured by the Consumer Price Index (CPI). Similarly, price changes at the wholesale level, which is ideally meant to capture the prices that producers get, are measured by the Wholesale Price Index (WPI). MoSPI releases the CPI while the Ministry of Commerce and Industry releases the WPI. Both these indices have been significantly updated and upgraded — the CPI in February and the WPI in June.

In June, the Commerce Ministry also introduced a new index — the Producer Price Index (PPI) — which not only captures the price impact on producers more accurately, but will also replace the WPI entirely in five years.

Why was an update needed?

These databases were outdated and were becoming less representative of reality with each passing year. The GDP and GVA data, for example, had a base year of 2011-12, as did the IIP. The economy has changed substantially in the years since then, with the contribution of several sectors to the economy growing while others have diminished in importance. An outdated base year weakens the overall measurements and makes them less representative of the current reality.

Before they were updated, the WPI and CPI had base years of 2011-12 and 2012, respectively. Here, too, the outdated indices were measuring price changes and index values based on household consumption patterns that were about 15 years old. Several items used back then, such as DVDs and cassettes, were included in the indices even though they are not used now. Conversely, several items that are being used now were not captured by the indices because they were not in use back then.

More accurate price information is important not just for policymaking but also for a more accurate measure of the size of the economy and its growth. The RBI's Monetary Policy Committee, for example, uses the CPI to gauge inflation and decide on interest rates. The Dearness Allowance and Dearness Relief given to current and former government employees, respectively, are pegged to inflation. The rate of growth of the real economy, which is the commonly accepted metric used to measure growth worldwide, is arrived at after having adjusted the impact of inflation on the economy.

What changes were made to the national accounts?

First, the base year was updated to 2022-23, immediately making the data more representative of the current situation. Apart from this, the new series of national accounts has also incorporated several methodological changes and measurement improvements.

One of the most important changes, and one that has long been advocated by statisticians, was the incorporation of the 'double deflator' method for estimating real GDP growth. This adjusts input and output prices separately, providing a much more accurate picture of the impact of price changes. Currently, the 'double deflator' method is being used for agriculture and manufacturing. It is expected to be adopted for the other sectors as well over time.

The other important change was the segregation of activities in multi-activity enterprises. There are several companies that are active across different sectors. Earlier, the data would capture the company's entire output and allocate it to the main sector within which it was operating. This yielded a somewhat inaccurate measure of sectoral activity. Now, the output will be allocated to each sector proportionately, providing a more accurate picture.

The new series also incorporates new data sources such as the Goods and Services Tax data and the Periodic Labour Force Surveys. It also incorporates several improvements in statistical methodology that will reduce discrepancies.

What other changes were made to output measures?

MoSPI updated the base year of the IIP to 2022-23 and expanded its coverage by including sectors such as gas supply, water supply, sewerage, and waste management activities, while retaining the previous sectors. Simultaneously, the index was revamped to provide greater granularity in terms of sources of electricity (renewable and non-renewable), and the types of minerals produced.

The revised item basket consists of 1,042 products mapped to 463 item groups, compared to 839 items mapped to 407 item groups in the previous series.

What are the inflation-related changes?

The base year of the CPI was updated to 2024, and the basket of items it measures as well as their relative weightages were pegged to the latest Household Consumption Expenditure Survey of

2023-24. The price change metrics now better reflect the current consumption patterns of households.

The data is also more illustrative, with the tables providing 12 different categories of items compared to the six groups in the previous series. Overall, the total number of items measured — including both goods and services — has increased from 299 to 358.

These additions of goods and services include for the first time inclusion of rural house rent, modern consumption items such as online media services and fuels such as CNG and PNG, and improvements in the measurement of telephone charges, rail fare, air fare, fuel, postal charges and online media and streaming services. Items that are no longer used, such as VCRs, DVD players, radio, tape recorders, and cassettes, were removed from the CPI.

The WPI was similarly updated, with its base year revised to 2022–23 and the number of items expanded from 697 to 957. The new series also incorporates several methodological refinements.

The data have also been reorganised more logically. For instance, crude petroleum and natural gas have been moved from the 'Primary Articles' category to the 'Fuel and Power' major group, which already includes other key fuels such as coal, electricity and petroleum products.

The third major change introduced by the Commerce Ministry was the adoption of a PPI. Unlike the WPI, the PPI separately tracks the prices producers pay for inputs and the prices they receive for their outputs. The PPI excludes additional costs such as transport and indirect taxes, which the WPI includes. This makes the PPI a more accurate representation of prices at the producer level. It also incorporates both goods and services, which makes it more holistic. The government has indicated that the WPI will be phased out over the next five years, leaving the CPI and PPI as the country's two principal price indices.

⚠ EXAM ALERT

All four legacy indices (GDP, CPI, WPI, IIP) had base year 2011 or 2012 — now updated.

GDP uses the new 'double-deflator approach' (a long-standing IMF/statisticians' demand).

PPI is a brand-new index; it will REPLACE WPI after 5 years from its release date.

IMF currently gives India's national accounts data a 'C' grade — expected to improve after these upgrades.

Chain Link — How These Indices Connect

- Better CPI + Better WPI → more accurate GDP Deflator → more accurate Real GDP growth (i.e., GDP adjusted for inflation).
- Better IIP data collection → feeds into more accurate GDP data (industrial output component).
- Census (still pending) is expected to further improve data quality once released in a time-bound manner.

⚠ EXAM ALERT

Double-deflator method currently applies ONLY to agriculture and manufacturing — a common trap in Prelims options claiming it covers all sectors.

New GDP series also draws on GST and PLFS data — remember these two new data sources.

Old IIP (Base 2011-12)	New IIP 2022-23
839 items mapped to 407 item groups	1,042 items mapped to 463 item groups
No sub-classification of electricity source or mineral type	Renewable/non-renewable electricity and mineral-type granularity added
Gas supply, water supply, sewerage, waste management not covered	Gas supply, water supply, sewerage, waste management now included

Major Changes in New WPI Series (Base 2022-23)

#	Change	Detail
1	More items	Total items increased from 697 → 957
2	New energy sources added	Solar & Wind added under 'Electricity' group; Nuclear Electricity also included
3	Restructured energy tracking	Crude petroleum & natural gas moved from 'Primary Articles' → 'Fuel and Power' group (which already has coal, electricity, petroleum products)
4	Improved weighting method	Weights now based on Gross Value of Output (GVO); earlier used Net Traded Value (GVO + Imports − Exports)

Old CPI Structure vs New CPI 2024 Structure

Old CPI (Base 2011-12)	New CPI 2024
6 broad groups: Food & beverages; Pan, tobacco & intoxicants; Clothing & footwear; Housing; Fuel & light; Miscellaneous	New hierarchy: 12 Divisions → 43 Groups → 92 Classes → 162 Sub-classes → 358 Items
Basket of 299 items	Basket of 358 items (+59)
No rural house rent captured	Rural house rent included for the first time
Based on 2011-12 consumption pattern	Based on 2023-24 HCES consumption pattern

⚠ **EXAM ALERT**

CPI basket: 358 items (old: 299) — a favourite number-based question.

New hierarchy order to memorise: Divisions (12) → Groups (43) → Classes (92) → Sub-classes (162) → Items (358).

CPI 2024 is based on HCES 2023-24 (not the outdated 2011-12 survey).

Rural house rent — included for the FIRST TIME in CPI 2024.

WPI vs CPI — Quick Comparison

Point of Difference	WPI	CPI
Market level	Wholesale market	Retail market (MRP, incl. taxes)
Services included?	No	Yes (e.g., haircut, banking)
Base year (new)	2022-23	2024
Released by	Ministry of Commerce & Industry	MoSPI
Main use	Price-escalation clauses in contracts	Retail inflation; used by RBI for interest-rate decisions
Future	To be replaced by PPI in 5 years	Continues as the main household inflation index

One-Look Revision Chart

Indicator	New Base Year	Key New Feature
GDP	2022-23	Double-deflator approach; new data sources
CPI	2024	HCES 2023-24 basket; 358 items; rural house rent added
WPI	2022-23	957 items; Solar/Wind/Nuclear added; GVO-based weights
IIP	2022-23	1,042 items (463 groups); gas/water/sewerage/waste added; renewable-electricity & mineral granularity
PPI (new)	2022-23	New index; will replace WPI in 5 years

RELIEF TO DIGITAL FRAUD VICTIMS: HOW LOSSES UP TO RS 50K CAN BE RECOVERED

Victims of digital transaction fraud can breathe easy. Under the Reserve Bank of India's revised compensation mechanism, victims of digital payment fraud involving amounts up to Rs 50,000 can recover a major portion of the money lost to fraud.

Key Takeaways:

• Notified by the central bank on Wednesday, and effective January 1, 2027, the new system is another measure to limit customer liability and safeguard customers in such situations.

• The new framework, under which the RBI has offered to compensate a substantial portion, comes at a time when bank frauds, especially digital transaction frauds, have become a growing concern for the RBI. In FY26, while the reported fraud cases more than halved to 10,114, the amount involved rose 46% to Rs 48,021 crore.

• The central bank has attempted to make the new compensation guidelines strongly pro-consumer. The RBI will contribute the major part of the compensation under the new framework.

• Under the new mechanism, victims are eligible for compensation of up to 85% of their losses, up to Rs 25,000, thereby reducing the hit they take from such frauds. A bona fide victim who lodged a complaint involving gross loss of an amount up to Rs 50,000 on account of a fraudulent electronic banking transaction (EBT) will be compensated 85% of the net loss amount or Rs 25,000, whichever is less, once during the lifetime, the RBI's new framework reads.

• For a complaint involving a loss of less than Rs 29,412 via fraudulent EBT, the customer will receive 85% of the amount as compensation. Victims are eligible for such compensation only if they lodge a complaint regarding the fraud within five calendar days. The loss must also be established in accordance with the internal processes set out in the victim's bank's policy.

• The central bank states that the victim's bank must compensate the victim entirely for any fraud arising from the bank's negligence. Negligence in this case includes failing to ensure proper safety and security mechanisms for EBTs, failing to send mandatory alerts for EBTs above Rs 500, failing to provide 24×7 channels for customer complaints, system malfunctions, security breaches, and failing to act diligently on customer complaints.

• The framework specifies that banks must resolve customer complaints regarding fraudulent EBTs within 45 calendar days for domestic fraudulent EBTs, and within 60 days for cross-border fraudulent EBTs.

Do You Know:

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

• The Central Government and telecom service providers also devised systems to identify and block incoming international spoofed calls displaying Indian mobile numbers. The Citizen Financial Cyber Fraud Reporting and Management System has saved over ₹3,431 crore from fraudulent attempts.

WHY INDIA'S LARGEST POWER TRADER CAN'T TRADE ON THE EXCHANGE IT HELPED CREATE

India's largest power trader, PTC India, finds itself in a Catch-22 situation. The country's top electricity regulator on Wednesday (June 17) rejected a plea by a power exchange — a platform for generators, distribution companies, traders and large consumers to buy and sell electricity — that sought an exemption for PTC India.

Key Takeaways:

• Hindustan Power Exchange Ltd (HPX) asked for a three-year transitional exemption for the company to trade on the exchange while it gradually dilutes its stake to meet the regulatory threshold. Under the Central Electricity Regulatory Commission (CERC) (Power Market) Regulations, 2021, a trader-member cannot hold more than 5% equity in the power exchange on which it trades. PTC India currently owns 22.62% of HPX.

• This comes as the CERC plans to overhaul India's power market architecture through market coupling. Under this mechanism, power prices across exchanges would be discovered through a centralised mechanism operated by Grid Controller of India, replacing the current system where each exchange independently determines prices based on its own demand-supply dynamics.

• The regulatory framework has left PTC in a difficult position. The company cannot trade on the HPX, which it helped create, unless it first dilutes its stake. Yet, selling that stake may prove difficult because HPX has struggled to gain market share and attract sufficient trading volumes.

• India currently has three power exchanges regulated by the CERC. The Indian Energy Exchange (IEX) dominates the market with over 80% share, while Power Exchange India Ltd (PXIL) and HPX account for the remainder.

Do You Know:

• Established in 1999, PTC India is India's pioneering power trader and accounted for nearly 31.8% of the total bilateral electricity volume transacted through licensed traders in FY25, making the regulatory impasse significant for both the company and HPX.

BHARAT NET'S LAST MILE WOES: ONLY 45% CONNECTIONS ACTIVE

Less than half the number of connections targeted until March 2026 by the government as part of BharatNet —its ambitious rural broadband connectivity programme — were actively using the service, with new customer additions seeing a steady decline over the last three years, data obtained by The Indian Express under the Right to Information (RTI) Act showed.

Key Takeaways:

— As of March this year, a total of 13.23 lakh (13,22,842 to be precise) fixed connections were commissioned under BharatNet, as opposed to a target of 18 lakh. However, only about 8.01 lakh connections were actively being used, the RTI data showed.

— According to government officials, the scheme was faltering on various parameters, with active connections, in-use Wi-Fi hotspots, last-mile connectivity, funds leakages, and confusing tariff structures.

— Pegged to be the world's largest rural fiber optic network, BharatNet is the government's flagship rural broadband initiative. It is designed to bridge the digital divide by providing high-speed internet to all Gram Panchayats and connecting remote communities to digital public services, education, healthcare, and entrepreneurial opportunities.

— BharatNet is essential to deliver high-capacity, uninterrupted fixed-line broadband to rural areas. It could serve as the digital backbone necessary to support heavy data usage, rural e-governance, and seamless digital healthcare, while avoiding network congestion. Mobile internet is typically not well suited for such high-data use cases.

— An earlier March 2025 report by the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Communication and Information Technology, said there were 12.24 lakh fixed broadband connections provided under BharatNet until January 2025. Tallied with the numbers obtained by this paper through the RTI, it means that only around 98,842 new connections were added in the next 14 months until March 2026 (to take the number to 13.23 lakh), which is just a little over 7,000 new connections per month. But it is the active usage of the service where the scope of the project is faltering further, an official said.

— The Parliamentary committee had specifically noted that usage of the network remains suboptimal despite the availability of underlying infrastructure. It had also flagged an under-utilisation of funds, noting that the revised estimates for the scheme in 2024-25 was Rs 6,500 crore, of which only 48%, or Rs 3,145 crore were spent.

— Data obtained through RTI also showed there was a progressive slowdown in solidifying the user base for BharatNet over the last three years, underscoring the lack of traction in the ambitious connectivity project.

— According to the government's last publicly available data, 1.04 lakh public Wi-Fi hotspots were installed under the BharatNet scheme, but of this only 0.7% or 766 such hotspots were operational as of September 2025. The Wi-Fi service is a key way to ensure last-mile delivery of the connectivity scheme.

— India launched the National Optical Fibre Network (NOFN) in 2011 to bring high-speed broadband to 2.5 lakh Gram Panchayats using optical fibre cables, which later spawned into the BharatNet project. In 2012, Bharat Broadband Network Ltd (BBNL) was set up to manage the project, initially planned for completion by 2014. Delays led to its relaunch as BharatNet in 2015. Phase I targets were achieved only by 2017, and Phase II faced further delays despite revised deadlines. In June 2021, the project was expanded under Phase III to cover 6.5 lakh villages by 2025, with upgraded networks and last-mile partnerships. In 2022, the Union Cabinet approved the merger of BBNL with BSNL to speed up BharatNet rollout.

— A year later, in 2023, the government launched the Rs 1.39 lakh-crore Amended BharatNet Program. The updated scheme promises to provide 1.5 crore fixed broadband connections across rural households, institutions and enterprises in India over a period of five years.

In a recent consultation paper floated by the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) on the proliferation of public Wi-Fi hotspots under the PM-WANI scheme, the regulator had said that existing infrastructure set up under BharatNet could be used to offer such a service in the country. However, in response to the paper, some stakeholders flagged the last-mile challenge related to BharatNet.

INITIAL PUBLIC OFFERING (IPO)

Why it matters

After nearly a decade of delays caused by regulatory hurdles, the National Stock Exchange (NSE), India's largest stock exchange, finally submitted its IPO (initial public offering) documents late on Wednesday. In this context, let's know what an IPO is.

Core Concept:

— When a company raises funds by offering securities to the public through an offer document (prospectus), it is called a public issue. Public issues are broadly classified into Initial Public Offer (IPO) and Further Public Offer (FPO).

— When a (unlisted) company makes a public issue for the first time and gets its shares listed on stock exchange, the public issue is called an initial public offer (IPO).

— While coming up with an IPO, the company has to file its offer document with the market regulator Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI). The offer document contains all relevant information about the company, its promoters, its projects, financial details, the object of raising the money, terms of the issue, etc.

— Advantages of listing a company: While listing on the stock exchange calls for additional disclosures by companies on a regular basis, leading thereby to more stringent compliance requirements, it may help a company raise capital, and diversify and broaden its shareholder base.

— Listing provides an exit to existing investors of the company. A listed company can raise share capital for growth and expansion in the future through a follow-on public offering or FPO.

What is a further public offer?

When a listed company makes another public issue to raise capital, it is called further public / follow-on offer (FPO).

Indian Depository Receipts (IDR)

— A foreign company which is listed in the stock exchange abroad can raise money from Indian investors by selling (issuing) shares.

— These shares are held in trust by a foreign custodian bank against which a domestic custodian bank issues an instrument called Indian depository receipts (IDR).

— IDR can be traded in stock exchange like any other shares and the holder is entitled to rights of ownership including receiving dividend.

WHY FMCG GIANTS BUY D2C BRANDS

India's consumer sector is witnessing a significant wave of consolidations. The recent acquisition of Innovist by L'Oreal was but the latest in a long line of such deals. Over the last few years, several large FMCG firms acquired digital-first brands to strengthen presence in emerging categories and online channels.

Hindustan Unilever acquired Minimalist and Oziva; Marico acquired Cosmix and 4700BC; ITC invested in Yoga Bar; USV Pharma acquired Wellbeing Nutrition and Honasa Consumer bought men's grooming brand Reginald Men.

Indispensible online

At the heart of the acquisitions is a simple reality: the online channel has become indispensable for consumer companies. India's online penetration in the grocery, food and general merchandise categories remains below 5%, significantly lower than in global markets.

Historically, this was because e-commerce had limited success in building a profitable grocery model. However, the emergence of quick commerce players such as Blinkit, Instamart and Zepto has changed the landscape. What started as a convenience-led grocery proposition has rapidly expanded into beauty, personal care, wellness and general merchandise categories. As quick commerce players increasingly encroach upon categories traditionally dominated by e-commerce platforms, large marketplaces have been forced to strengthen their quick-commerce offerings. The result is a rapidly expanding online consumption ecosystem that is likely to drive a meaningful rise in digital penetration over the coming decade.

Against this backdrop, the recent acquisition wave reflects the changing nature of consumer demand, brand discovery and distribution in India.

Direct to consumers

The biggest driver of these acquisitions is the accelerating shift towards online commerce. Consumers today are increasingly discovering brands through social media, influencers, quick commerce apps and e-commerce platforms rather than traditional retail shelves. Digital-first brands have been the early beneficiaries of this trend, building strong relationships with younger consumers and creating communities around specific product categories. For incumbent FMCG and beauty companies, acquiring such brands offers a faster route to capturing digital demand than building online capabilities organically. More importantly, it provides direct access to consumers who are likely to account for a growing share of consumption over the next decade. As online penetration expands across categories, these acquisitions represent not just a growth opportunity but also a strategic necessity.

The end of easy money

During the era of low interest rates, D2C brands had abundant access to venture capital and could prioritise customer acquisition and growth over profitability. That environment has changed. Global interest rates remain elevated, cost of capital has increased, and investor attention has increasingly shifted towards artificial intelligence, AI infrastructure and deep-tech opportunities. As a result, many consumer startups are finding it harder to raise fresh capital at premium valuations. Strategic acquisitions have emerged as a logical outcome. Founders and investors get liquidity, while larger consumer companies gain access to proven brands without bearing the risks associated with building one from scratch.

Buy vs. build

Another important factor is the changing pace of consumer innovation. Traditional FMCG companies are often structured to optimise scale and efficiency, whereas D2C brands are built to experiment rapidly with new ingredients, product formats, marketing campaigns and consumer trends. Categories such as active beauty, clean-label nutrition, functional foods and premium grooming have largely been pioneered by digital-first brands. Acquiring these brands allows incumbents to stay relevant among younger consumers and participate in emerging categories without spending years developing in-house capabilities. In many cases, acquiring innovation has become faster and more efficient than creating it internally.

Distribution strength

While many D2C brands have built awareness online, scaling up beyond a certain size often requires omnichannel capabilities. Customer acquisition costs across Meta, Google and e-commerce marketplaces have increased over the last few years, making digital-only growth increasingly expensive. To become enduring consumer franchises, brands eventually need access to general trade, modern trade, pharmacies, beauty stores and organised retail networks.

This is where incumbent FMCG and beauty companies possess a significant advantage. Their distribution infrastructure, manufacturing capabilities and retailer relationships can accelerate growth far beyond what a standalone startup can achieve.

For many D2C brands, partnering with a larger consumer company is, therefore, not merely a financial decision but also a strategic necessity

Omnichannel future

The acquisition wave highlights the increasingly complementary strengths of both sides. Large FMCG and beauty companies gain access to younger consumers, digital capabilities, innovation-led brands and emerging categories. D2C startups gain access to capital, distribution, supply chain expertise and the ability to scale up nationally. Consumers ultimately benefit from stronger brands reaching wider audiences.

India's D2C story is therefore not ending — it is evolving. The easy-money era may be over, but the strategic value of strong consumer brands has never been higher.

RECLAIMING T.N.'S FISCAL AUTONOMY

The Government of Tamil Nadu's white paper is a comprehensive analysis of the State's financial status and economic conditions. Detailed like the white paper prepared by the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) in 2021, the Tamilaga Vettri Kazhagam's (TVK's) 120-page document begins with an important line: 'it is neither an exercise in retrospective blame nor a political statement'. In that spirit, this is a genuine exercise.

It indeed offers an honest account of what went wrong with tax collection: a shrinking base and leakages embedded in both revenue collection and expenditure patterns. While its diagnosis is rigorous, what is not clear, however, is how the government is going to fix the leakages and manoeuvre the welfare that it has promised during its election campaign.

Unsustainable fiscal deficit

The white paper lays bare the structural weaknesses facing Tamil Nadu's economy and outlines a possible course correction which, in that sense, has a lot more continuity than the earlier one submitted by the DMK.

Both literally state that "the current levels of fiscal deficit are unsustainable primarily because a substantial portion of the fiscal deficit is simply to fund the revenue deficit". It means the State is simply borrowing to fund current consumption rather than to create assets. To be sure, for every rupee borrowed about 60 paise goes to current consumption. But one has to be cautious in reading too much into this as substantial expenditure for health and education are under the revenue account.

In an economy, the government needs to raise resources to pay for the provision of public goods and services, build social and physical infrastructures needed for growth and protect the vulnerable from the market forces. In that sense, every policy is a political choice with losers and gainers not just within the present generation but also across generations since public debt shifts the burden of payment to future governments.

The white paper says that the State is deep in debt and its fiscal deficit is beyond the prescribed limit. On average, an individual pays about ₹38,000 in taxes to the State and the Union governments and receives about ₹54,500 worth of subsidies and services. The gap is typically funded by borrowing. The consolidated debt of each individual is then around ₹1.29 lakh, and the cumulative debt is about 28% of the State income, which is the cause for concern today.

Collapse of revenue generation

The serious concern that the report flags is not just debt but of the collapse of the revenue generation itself. While the white paper shows the account of revenue generation of the past five years, the collapse precedes this by at least a decade.

Make no mistake, Tamil Nadu was one of the few States that predominantly sustained itself on its own revenue for its expenditure — about 70% of its expenditure from its own tax in sharp contrast to States such as Bihar and Uttar Pradesh which largely rely on the Centre's transfer.

With the introduction of the GST in 2017, States have lost their autonomy on taxation. Tamil Nadu suffered the most. The State's Own Tax Revenue (SOTR) to Gross State Domestic Product (GSDP) ratio, which was 7.92% in 2011-12, has been steadily declining, and was down to 5.93% in 2021-22 and further down to 5.45% in 2025-26. The ratio reflects the State's capacity to mobilise its own tax resources relative to the size of its economy. While the white paper clearly shows that the decline is spread across all major tax heads — GST, petroleum VAT, State excise, stamp duty and motor vehicle tax, the GST alone accounts for about 53% total tax revenue. Despite having the second largest economy with the size of ₹35.29 lakh crore of GSDP, its GST collection was ₹72,008 crore lower than that of Karnataka (₹87,256 crore), and Gujarat (₹80,823 crore).

Beside the systemic corruption and inefficiencies in tax collection, the predominance of the service sector also contributed to the decline in GST collection. It appears many units within the sector are beyond the tax net.

Revenue leakages, sectoral debt

Similarly, motor vehicle tax collection has lagged since the number of vehicles registered in the State has not kept pace. Not to mention stamp duties in rent-seeking sectors such as real estate which is known for undervaluation of the property at registration and excessive leakages and corruption.

Even mining revenue is among the most striking examples of stagnation in non-tax income. Besides corruption in valuation, leakage in the assessment of minor mineral extraction also contributed to the decline.

The key sectors that drive the State in this debt trap are the power sector and transport. The power sector alone carries ₹2.47 lakh crore of debt.

The State has historically built progressive power subsidy model – taxing industries and paying for poor and farmers which have become sites of political rent-seeking tied to electoral cycles.

Beside the steady decline in its own tax collection, the State has also been increasingly losing its share in the Union transfer. For instance, Union tax devolution and grants-in-aid together constituted about 34.95% of Total Revenue Receipts in 2021-22 and it declined to 25.5% in 2025-26. Again, this decline precedes a decade. The State's share in total transfer was 5.305% in the 12th Finance Commission period, but it came down to 4.969% in the 13th Finance Commission period and fell down to 4.023% for the 16th Commission.

This declining share is due to the formula adopted by the successive Finance Commissions. The high weightage given to the per capita income distance, combined with population works to the State's disadvantage. In this sense, the State has become a victim of its own success; since per capita income distance favours poorer States by allocating them a larger share of resources, relatively developed States like Tamil Nadu receive less, effectively penalising their higher levels of economic progress. Even the weight assigned to GDP contribution by the 16th Finance Commission did not help as the formula remains unfavourable. Nor have criteria such as area and forest cover worked in the State's favour.

On the other hand, the shareable divisible pool has been shrinking thanks to the arbitrary cess and surcharges imposed by the Centre that takes away the legitimate resources of the States. In that sense, the State is a victim of both vertical and horizontal distribution.

With declining Union transfers and the erosion of its own revenue base, Tamil Nadu's government size — measured by total expenditure as a share of GSDP — has shrunk, weakening the State's fiscal capacity. Together, these factors, limit the State's ability to intervene in the economy.

As the white paper shows, about 64% of every rupee of revenue receipts in 2025-26 is pre-committed on the account of salaries, pensions and interest. With the inflexible non-discretionary obligations of 23%, the pre-committed expenditure goes up to 87% leaving little room for any additional expenditure or any new schemes. Global uncertainty or any exogenous shock could make the economy paralysed.

Debt, demography and scissors effect

This potential debt trap also comes at a time when the State is witnessing faster demographic change. It's aging faster than any other large State in India. Tamil Nadu's median age is 34.25 years — nearly 9.5 years older than Uttar Pradesh and its old-age dependency ratio is projected to increase from 20.6 in 2021 to 32.7 by 2036. This has two implications. The ability to repay the debt is limited, the paper argues, because a shrinking working-age population means a shrinking tax base. It also means the need for higher social expenditure as the share of elderly population goes up. The interaction between a rising debt stock and a shrinking working-age population can create condition for a debt trap which demographers call 'scissors effect' — the widening gap between revenue capacity and expenditure obligations.

The pressing problem

However, Tamil Nadu's problem today is not fiscal profligacy or corruption. The pressing problem is its model of inclusive growth itself. The real challenge thus is getting investment, generating decent jobs, improving wages, while actively renegotiation fiscal space with the Centre. The welfare architecture that the State has built is not enough.

Educated youth who rallied behind the TVK are not seeking more welfare, but decent jobs and wages. Welfare can't be a substitute for jobs and wages. It is time to get the growth fundamentals right, which require investment in education, health, and public infrastructure. Chief Minister Joseph Vijay thus has the enormous responsibility not only to put the inclusive growth model back on track, but also to reclaim fiscal autonomy from the Centre.

GOVT. EASES QUALITY CONTROL ORDER RULES

The Union government has eased the most stringent aspects of the Quality Control Orders (QCOs) it has passed for various sectors, allowing manufacturers to use an alternative mechanism to transition to the more stringent version over the course of five years.

From 2020, the government has been issuing QCOs in an attempt to improve the quality standards of Indian manufacturing and protect consumer interests. These standards, however, met with significant opposition from local manufacturers who said the compliance process was long and paperwork arduous.

The latest notification by the Ministry of Commerce and Industry, called the Transition Facilitation (Quality Control) Order, 2026, "introduces an alternative risk-based compliance mechanism to facilitate a smooth transition for industry while maintaining quality assurance and consumer protection," the Ministry said.

Basically, the notification allows selected local firms to procure supplies from manufacturers holding licences under the less rigorous Scheme II of Schedule II of the Bureau of Indian Standards (BIS) regulations, instead of the more rigorous Scheme I.

As per the notification, this relaxation would apply to the QCOs on toys, personal protective footwear, air conditioners, rubber footwear, electric water heaters, washing machines, hinges, furniture, and electrical safety equipment.

ONEROUS RULES

Civil society organisations play a vital role in areas such as health, education, disaster relief, and civil liberties and rights, stepping in where the state falls short. Yet, the Indian state has treated NGOs with suspicion, using the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act (FCRA), 2010, to impose stringent restrictions on their functioning. Earlier this week, the FCRA Amendment Rules, 2026 were notified, which require all NGOs registered under the FCRA, 2010, to confine their work to activities specified for their category and to the States and Union Territories named in their registration. They must also disclose their social media handles, websites and publications and are barred from carrying "political content". The new rules impose stringent penalties for using funds for unapproved purposes and require NGOs to pay separate fees for each category of work and to each State or Union Territory in which they operate, replacing the earlier system of a single registration fee. These increase compliance costs and paperwork. While the government argues that such measures promote transparency, even-handedness and national security, the rules are clearly meant to stifle the work of NGOs. The operation of the FCRA regime has been far from transparent. As CPI(M) MP John Brittas recently complained, parliamentary questions on FCRA cancellations and non-renewals have been disallowed as "secret", even though more than 20,000 registrations have reportedly been revoked over the past decade on opaque grounds. Far from improving transparency, the new rules burden NGOs with greater barriers and commitments, raising concerns that the Centre intends to create a chilling effect.

In Noel Harper (2022), the Supreme Court upheld the stringent 2020 FCRA amendments, accepting the state's invocation of sovereignty and national security. Yet, in in 2020, the Court had read down rules that would have classified the rights activism of civil society bodies, including protests and demonstrations as work "of a political nature", drawing a distinction between party politics and the everyday work of social and economic betterment. The new Rules seek to treat advocacy and "political content" as grounds for disqualification. In March 2026, the Centre had proposed amendments allowing a government-appointed authority to take over the assets of NGOs whose registrations were cancelled, surrendered, or not renewed. Following strong protests, particularly from minority institutions, it put the proposal on hold. Now, the newly notified rules seem another way of throttling NGOs that utilise foreign funding for civil society work. The Centre should withdraw the punitive provisions, particularly those on multiple fees and political content, and adopt fairer rules.

SC judgments

The government's sweeping powers to regulate foreign donations have been blessed by the Supreme Court in multiple judgments. A three-judge Bench in Noel Harper versus Union of India in April 2022 declared that "no one can be heard to claim a vested right to accept foreign donation, much less an absolute right".

The court had disapproved of the tendency to seek funds abroad, saying it gave an impression that the nation was incapable of looking after its own needs.

A March 2020 decision of the Supreme Court in Indian Social Action Forum (INSAF) versus Union of India had agreed with the Centre that the "regulation of acceptance and utilisation of foreign contribution is for the purpose of protecting national interest". The court had, however, in this case, called for a "balance" between the law's objective and the rights of the voluntary organisations to access foreign funds. The INSAF judgment declared that only associations which play a role in active or party politics were barred from accessing foreign funds.

The government has argued in court that the FCRA, its Rules, and amendments were meant to regulate the manner of doing business, more importantly, concerning foreign contributions. The FCRA did not intend to stop charitable work. It has argued that the regulatory regime did not hurt the fundamental rights of individuals to form associations or practice a profession or carry on an occupation, trade or business under Article 19(1)(c) and Article 19(1)(g), respectively, of the Constitution.

The Centre has referred to Article 19(4) to demonstrate that it could frame laws to reasonably restrict the fundamental freedom to form associations under Article 19(1)(c) in the interest of the sovereignty and integrity of India or to protect public order or morality. Similarly, Article 19(6) allowed the government to impose reasonable fetters on the right to trade, business, occupation available under Article 19(1)(g) if the State could show these freedoms were against public interest.

BANKS CAN EXTEND LOANS AGAINST FCNR(B) DEPOSITS, SAYS RBI

The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) on Tuesday said Indian banks, including their overseas branches, are permitted to extend loans to non-resident account holders or even issue Standby Letters of Credit (SBLC) in favour of overseas lenders against FCNR(B) deposits mobilised under the new swap facility.

Key Takeaways:

• The regulator has said that this permission is in addition to existing provisions that already allow banks to extend secured or unsecured credit and issue guarantees under normal banking norms.

• The RBI, in its clarification issued as frequently asked questions (FAQ), said banks are permitted to extend loans to the FCNR (B) account holders and mark lien on such deposits. Lien is a legal claim or right over someone else's property until a debt or obligation is paid.

• On June 5, the RBI announced the special dispensation that allows banks to mobilise fresh three- to five-year FCNR(B) deposits until September 2026. It also permitted them to swap these deposits with the RBI at a concessional rate, effectively covering the entire hedging cost.

• By absorbing the hedging burden, the RBI has made FCNR(B) deposits a more attractive source of overseas funding for lenders. Experts believe the steps announced may attract an additional $50 billion in foreign capital into Indian markets as banks have offered higher interest rates after considering the hedging sops.

• The RBI will be providing a forex swap for the deposit received. The facility is a plain buy/sell foreign exchange swap from the RBI side covering only the principal amount of the deposits and not the interest component. "The bank will be allowed to undertake swaps for tenors of less than three years provided they have mobilised fresh eligible FCNR (B) deposits for minimum original tenor of three years as per the scheme," it said.

• Interest rates on deposits, including where differential rates of interest are offered, will be subject to compliance with paragraph 32(2) of the Reserve Bank (Commercial Banks – Interest Rate on Deposits) Directions, 2025.

• Banks will continue to offer regular FCNR (B) deposits, without availing swap facility, for customer deposits with a tenor of 3 years and above up to 5 years, without the requirement of a minimum lock-in period of one year. However, records shall be maintained separately, it said.

• ECBs can be raised for any period, as permitted in terms of Foreign Exchange Management (Borrowing and Lending) (First Amendment) Regulations, 2026. However, the ECBs of average maturity of three years and above are eligible for this facility. Further, the tenor of the swap will be co-terminus with the repayment schedule or maturity of the ECB, subject to a maximum period of five years, the central bank said.

Do You Know:

• FCNR(B) deposits are fixed-term bank deposits that can be opened in India by NRIs, Overseas Citizens of India (OCIs), and Persons of Indian Origin (PIOs). These deposits allow overseas Indians to maintain their savings in designated foreign currencies such as the US dollar, pound sterling, euro, Japanese yen, Australian dollar, and Canadian dollar, rather than converting their funds into Indian rupees.

• Interest earned on FCNR(B) deposits is exempt from income tax in India as long as the depositor qualifies as a non-resident under Indian tax laws. Under the current framework, banks can offer rates linked to internationally accepted benchmark rates.

CREDIT GUARANTEE FUND OF MICROFINANCE UNITS

The credit guarantee fund of microfinance institutions (CGSMFI 2.0) has come as a boon to a sector reeling under liquidity deficit for more than a year. Many lenders kept away from MFIs or enhanced underwriting norms in the past two years. Some institutions that supported the microfinance sector even during worst times in the past have stepped back at the moment, miring the sector in uncertainty. At this juncture, the announcement of the CGSMFI 2.0 scheme for guaranteeing funders' money has come as a great relief.

Similar to a fund created during the Covid-19 pandemic, the CGSMFI 2.0 has almost three times the allocation at ₹20,000 crore. It has been designed to ensure every institution can benefit equitably. Additionally, 15% has been earmarked for small and mid-segment MFIs.

The scheme also prescribed a cap of 20% of assets under management (AUM) for individual borrowers to ensure the money was better distributed. The maximum amount eligible for each institution was also capped at ₹100 crore, ₹200 crore or ₹1,000 crore, depending on institution's size. The limit for the larger MFIs was increased subsequently. Similarly, the scheme has been extended up to August 31.

Signs of revival

Thankfully, the scheme comes at a time when the sector is showing signs of revival. The past few months have seen a positive trajectory of disbursements and outstanding. There are indications that disbursements in May may have been much higher. The funding under the guarantee scheme would speed up the revival.

Self-regulation

The microfinance sector — which enables easy access to credit without collateral for low-income individuals, marginalised groups, and small entrepreneurs — was hit badly by the Covid-19 pandemic. The borrowers are among the most vulnerable in such calamities. The sector catered to the post-pandemic surge in demand for credit. But the higher credit flow without commensurate revival of the economy saw some households ending up in an over-leveraged position, leading to higher indebtedness and sector-wide stress.

As a corrective measure, self-regulatory organisations came up with a set of guardrails, first in July 2024 and again in April 2025. They were finalised jointly with the CEOs of MFIs and their diligent implementation has put the sector back in order.

There has been an improvement in several parameters in the last few quarters. The portfolio size declined from ₹4.4 lakh crore in March 2024 to ₹3.71 lakh crore in March 2025 and ₹3.34 lakh crore in March 2026. It had dipped below ₹3.2lakh crore during the year, but showed growth in the last two months of the financial year to close at ₹3.34 trillion, below the previous year's close. However, the numbers for May would be more encouraging, given the higher lending. When it comes to the portfolio at risk (PAR) value, the PAR 30–179 days has improved from 6.65% in March 2025 to 2.31% in March 2026. Similar, the PAR 90-plus improved from 3.93% to 1.49%. The PAR 179-plus, has stabilised in last six months.

LIFE AND SCIENCES

CARBON ISOTOPES: CLOCKS OF SORTS

Scientists studying the comet 3I/ATLAS have determined that this interstellar visitor formed an estimated 12 billion years ago in a primordial planetary system, and has a composition unlike anything in our solar system.

An evaluation of the chemical make-up of 3I/ATLAS, only the third interstellar object ever spotted in the solar system, provided guidance about the physical and chemical conditions in the planetary system where it formed, the researchers said.

They added that 3I/ATLAS appears to have been born in a much colder environment (-243C) than the one in which the earth and other bodies in our solar system formed roughly 4.5 billion years ago. They said it has travelled a vast distance since it was somehow expelled from its home planetary system.

The researchers measured the ratio of isotopes — different versions of chemical elements such as hydrogen and carbon — observed on 3I/ATLAS using the James Webb Space Telescope.

Its hydrogen isotopes offered evidence about temperature and radiation in the environment in which 3I/ATLAS formed. Its carbon isotope ratios offered clues about the composition of the interstellar gas cloud that gave rise to 3I/ATLAS and its home planetary system.

The carbon composition indicated 3I/ATLAS formed some 12 billion years ago during a period of intense star formation in its region. The universe is thought to have begun with the Big Bang event 13.8 billion years ago, so 3I/ATLAS would date to a time when the cosmos was only around 13% of its current age.

WHAT IS GOOGLE'S PROJECT NIMBUS, AND WHY ARE STUDENTS PROTESTING AGAINST IT?

The story so far:

On June 14, Google CEO Sundar Pichai's speech at Stanford was disrupted as more than 100 students walked out in protest. Some carried Palestinian flags, others draped black-and-white patterned keffiyeh as scarves, and they shouted, "Free, free Palestine!"

The students were protesting against Google's Project Nimbus, a tech contract between the search giant and the Israeli government that is linked with violence against Palestinian civilians.

What is Project Nimbus?

Project Nimbus is a technology contract between the Israeli government and Google and Amazon. It is worth over $1 billion. In May 2021, Google said the agreement would deliver cloud services to Israeli government entities, including ministries, authorities, and government-owned companies. The project was scheduled to run for an initial period of seven years, and the Israeli government could extend it for up to 23 years. A month later, Amazon said the Israeli government had selected Amazon Web Services (AWS) as its primary cloud provider, under the Nimbus contract for government ministries and its subsidiaries.

In 2024, an investigation by Israeli media outlets +972 Magazine and Local Call found that the country's army stored information on servers managed by AWS. That data came from the surveillance of Palestinians, as per the investigation. Sources quoted by the media outlets alleged such information could be used to help plan airstrikes.

Furthermore, the outlets reported an increase in Israeli service demands from Google Cloud, AWS, and Microsoft Azure since October 2023, as army units sought data storage and AI services.

Why are protesters against Project Nimbus?

Project Nimbus has been facing backlash since it was first announced. In 2021, an anonymous letter signed internally by 90 Google workers and over 300 Amazon workers criticised the partnership, per The Guardian. They condemned Project Nimbus and the Israeli military's killings of Palestinian civilians, claiming that their employers would be "selling dangerous technology to the Israeli military and government."

The workers claimed that cloud service technology would help expand the surveillance of Palestinians, as well as illegal Israeli settlements on Palestinian land.

Opposition to Project Nimbus has grown since the Hamas attacks against Israeli civilians on October 7, 2023, followed by Israel's airstrikes and blockades in Gaza. In 2024, protesting Google employees even carried out sit-ins at Google locations in the U.S. Later, 28 employees were fired.

Pro-Palestinian protests by employees have also taken place at Big Tech company events, such as during Microsoft's 50th anniversary celebrations in 2025.

Last year, The Guardian, +972 Magazine, and Local Call cited leaked documents revealing that under the Project Nimbus contract, Israel mandated that Google and Amazon would not restrict how its governmental units used the tech companies' cloud services — even if Israel violated their terms of service.

However, Google has in the past stressed that Project Nimbus workloads are not related to the military, weapons, or classified intelligence. Amazon too highlighted its privacy commitments to its customers.

Which other tech companies have links to Israel?

A Palestinian-led movement, called Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS), has identified large technology companies that have formal contracts with Israel and its military sector.

The BDS website alleges these companies "technologically equip the Israeli military with computing systems as well as surveillance and communications technologies to accelerate the genocide in Gaza and automate apartheid in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem."

In September, Microsoft Vice-Chair & President Brad Smith said the company had "ceased and disabled a set of services to a unit within the Israel Ministry of Defense (IMOD)." This announcement came after media outlets The Guardian, +972 Magazine, and Local Call reported that the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) was using Microsoft's Azure to store Palestinians' recorded phone calls data that could be leveraged for mass surveillance or even military action.

Did Microsoft truly sever its ties with Israel's defense surveillance systems?

While Mr. Smith said that Microsoft does not provide technology to facilitate the mass surveillance of civilians, he affirmed the company's "important work" to protect the cybersecurity of Israel and other West Asian countries.

In a conclusion to the external investigation that Microsoft commissioned after the Azure surveillance allegations, the tech giant said it would implement better review processes, provide more guidance to employees, and let employees anonymously report potential policy violations.

The No Azure for Apartheid group, which is made up of Microsoft workers, claimed on June 6 that Microsoft still allowed the Israeli military and government to host other surveillance projects on Azure. "Nothing short of cutting all ties with the genocidal Israeli military and government will be enough. We will show up to escalate, confront, and disrupt in every place, at every moment, announced and unannounced," said the group.

MICROSOFT INTRODUCES PAY-AS-YOU-GO MODEL FOR AI AGENTS

Bundling AI services into software subscriptions and selling it the way enterprise software has been sold for years looked fine for some time. Microsoft, Google and others added AI assistants to their productivity suites and put a monthly price tag on them.

That logic worked if companies were already paying per employee for email, spreadsheets and collaboration tools. But AI is unlike traditional software.

One employee may use an AI assistant a few times a week to summarise meetings. Another may use it all day to analyse documents, write reports and automate repetitive tasks. Increasingly, AI systems are also becoming agents that can perform actions on behalf of users, carrying out tasks that would previously have required hours of human effort. This leads to a mismatch between how AI is consumed and how it is billed.

That is what makes Microsoft's latest move interesting. The company has introduced a pay-as-you-go model for its AI agents, allowing customers to pay according to usage rather than committing solely to fixed licences.

What Microsoft is really doing is moving AI closer to the economics of cloud computing.

Cloud computing became a trillion-dollar business because it replaced large upfront investments with consumption-based pricing. Companies could rent computing power as required and pay for what they used.

The model worked because it aligned costs with value. If a business needed more computing resources, it paid more. If demand fell, spending fell too. AI seems to indicate a similar trend.

The challenge with subscription pricing for AI services is that it assumes every user derives roughly the same value from the service. In reality, AI usage varies enormously. Some workers barely touch these tools. Others rely on them constantly. The gap is likely to become even wider as AI agents become more capable and autonomous.

A flat monthly fee begins to look increasingly arbitrary in such a world. So, the new pricing attempts to solve that problem by linking spending to usage. Customers can experiment without making large commitments.

But the reason behind Microsoft taking this route isn't just to give its customers more autonomy.

For instance, once Word is installed, Microsoft does not incur any additional cost each time a customer types out a new document. The product has been sold. But with AI, the business relationship is back and forth. Every prompt, every response and every agent action consumes computing resources. This type of supplier and customer relationship will shoot up the token generation cost for cloud providers.

No wonder Microsoft picked a consumption-based model that reflects this reality far more accurately than a fixed subscription. In effect, the Windows software maker is likely treating AI as an organism that grows and takes new forms inside an organisation.

The company's experience with Azure suggests it understands how to build operating models around metered consumption. Enterprises have already become comfortable paying for storage, computing power and databases this way. Paying for AI capacity may not be such a dramatic leap.

Yet there are reasons for caution. The same pricing model that makes cloud computing flexible can also make it unpredictable. Anyone who has ever been surprised by a cloud-services bill knows that usage-based pricing has a downside. Customers like paying only for what they use, but they also like knowing what next month's bill will look like.

But as the use of AI agents expands in organisations, it will be difficult to forecast how much to budget for the next quarter. Organisations face a challenge akin to modernising the plumbing of an old, large building.

If AI agents become deeply embedded in their business processes, usage could rise rapidly. Microsoft's challenge will be convincing customers that they can scale their AI deployments without losing control of spending.

WHAT'S DRIVING EUROPE HEATWAVE, AND WHY IS IT STRUGGLING TO COPE?

Around 50 people dead. Schools shut, public transport interrupted, air-conditioned cinema halls and museums asked to shelter the young and the elderly for free, farmers harvesting their crop at night. Western Europe is reeling under a severe heatwave again, with countries from Netherlands to UK to Italy to France affected.

Key Takeaways:

• In France, 40 people have drowned over the past week because they went swimming in unsupervised waters. The country recorded its hottest day since record-keeping began in 1947 on Tuesday (maximum temperature hitting 44.3 degree Celsius), and thousands of homes are now sweltering in a power outage unlikely to be resolved before Wednesday night. Italy and the UK have also issued extreme heat alerts.

• An Omega Block, so named because it is shaped like the Greek letter Ω, is basically an area of high pressure between two zones of lower pressure. The heat dome also refers to an area of high pressure high above a landmass. Because of this high pressure zone, warm air rising from the ground is not able to escape into the atmosphere and is trapped close to the surface, further heating up the surroundings.

• Generally, winds known as jet streams blow from the west to east over Europe, moving weather systems. In the present scenario, this steady flow has become disrupted, leading to the omega-shape of air flow. This specific weather pattern aside, Europe has in general been warming up very fast, thanks to the effects of climate change.

• The 2025 edition of the European State of the Climate (ESOTC), an annual report published by the Copernicus Climate Change Service and the World Meteorological Organization (WMO), says, "Since the 1980s, Europe has been warming twice as fast as the global average, making it the fastest-warming continent. Heatwaves are becoming more frequent and severe, while extreme rainfall is leading to catastrophic floods. Glaciers continue to melt. Climate change is also affecting biodiversity, which is vital for a sustainable future."

• Apart from a high rate of industrialisation, urban heat islands (where highly concretised urban areas heat up faster), fracking for oil and gas, and other human activities, Europe is also suffering from something called the albedo effect, which refers to how surfaces reflect sunlight back. The only area in the world heating up faster than Europe is the Arctic, where glaciers are melting rapidly. Whereas the bright, white ice would have reflected heat back, the darker water of the Arctic Ocean is absorbing it, thereby heating up neighbouring Europe further.

● Rail tracks can reach up to 60°C in direct sun (versus ~44°C air temperature), risking 'track buckling' and 'dewirement' (sagging overhead catenary lines snagging on trains); mitigation includes reflective white paint (can cut rail temperature by 5–10°C) and rigid overhead power lines in place of sagging catenaries.

Do You Know:

• The unusual heat in Europe right now is being attributed to the formation of a "heat dome" that is preventing warm air near the ground from rising and dissipating. This is leading to an increase in surface temperatures.

• Heat dome' is just a fancy way to describe how heatwaves normally occur. Heatwaves anywhere, including over India, are caused by the emergence of high-pressure air systems in the mid-troposphere, about 7-10 km above Earth's surface, that trap the heated surface air near the ground. They push down the air and compress it, increasing the temperature in the process.

• This same system also prevents cloud formation and precipitation. Local influences can then amplify or weaken this phenomenon. For example, the heat dome effect over India often gets aggravated by the presence of dry soil, the "urban heat island effect" and the movement of hot air blowing from the deserts in the west. The urban heat island effect is a phenomenon where urban areas record higher temperatures than surrounding rural areas because their concrete traps heat during the day and radiates it at night.

• The formation of a heat dome is not an unusual phenomenon in European summers. This year, however, it has happened a little early, resulting in an extremely warm May — possibly the warmest May in several places.

• The Climate Prediction Centre of the US's National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, one of the world's most authoritative agencies tracking the Pacific Ocean, however, says it is too early to make any reliable prediction about its strength.

⚠ EXAM ALERT

- Do not confuse 'heat dome' with 'polar vortex' — a polar vortex is a large low-pressure, cold-air system near the poles; a heat dome is a high-pressure, warm-air system.
- The 'Omega Block' is named for the shape of the jet stream pattern (resembling the Greek letter Ω), not the shape of the high-pressure zone itself — a frequently twisted distinction.
- Death-toll figures in press reports for this event are inconsistent across sources (approximately 50 vs 60+ vs 40 drowning-specific) because they reflect different reporting dates during an evolving crisis — do not memorise a single fixed number; questions are more likely to test the mechanism than the exact toll.
- ESOTC (European State of the Climate) is a joint Copernicus Climate Change Service – WMO publication, not a WMO-only or EU-only report — a common attribution error.
- The Arctic, not Antarctica, is the fastest-warming region on Earth (warming faster than Europe); Europe is the fastest-warming continent.

ℹ DO YOU KNOW

- Rail track surface temperatures can run up to 15–20°C above the surrounding air temperature because dark ballast and steel absorb solar radiation efficiently — explaining why 44°C air can mean 60°C rail.
- Painting rail tracks white/reflective is an adaptation measure already used in parts of the UK and Italy, and can lower rail temperature by 5–10°C.
- Unlike Europe, North America relies far less on overhead electric catenary systems for rail (using diesel traction on most lines), which is one reason US/Canadian rail networks are less heat-vulnerable in this specific way — though extreme heat still causes track buckling there too.
- The 'albedo effect' — reduced reflectivity as Arctic sea ice is replaced by darker open ocean — is a feedback loop that indirectly accelerates warming in neighbouring Europe.

✓ QUICK REVISION

- A jet-stream disruption (Omega Block) created a 'heat dome' that trapped hot air over Western Europe in late June 2025.
- France hit 44.3°C (hottest day since 1947); 50–60+ deaths and ~40 drownings reported; power and rail systems disrupted.
- Europe is warming ~2x the global average since the 1980s (ESOTC 2025, Copernicus/WMO) — fastest-warming continent, linked to the Arctic albedo effect.
- France responded with an event-alcohol ban, round-the-clock parks, and its post-2003 heat governance framework.

NO ALCOHOL WHEN IT'S HOT

In response to a new heatwave alert across Europe, France has partially banned the consumption of alcohol. The restriction is a public health measure as part of reducing heat-related illnesses.

Alcohol affects the body in many ways that become more dangerous if the person is also exposed to extreme heat. It causes the body to produce more urine, and thus increases the risk of dehydration. It impairs the body's ability to regulate temperature by dilating blood vessels in the skin and suppressing the hormone vasopressin. And it lowers their awareness of early warning signs such as dizziness and nausea and makes them less likely to seek shade or drink water.

These risks are compounded at large outdoor events like the annual Fête de la Musique, where people may spend hours standing in crowded spaces under direct sunlight.

As Reuters reported, "After a crisis meeting, Prime Minister Sebastien Lecornu pre-emptively banned alcohol consumption on Sunday at the annual Fete de la Musique festivals and other public events" scheduled in the 35 regions with heat alerts. It added that Paris authorities had "ordered parks to remain open around the clock". Since the city is a concrete jungle, parks could keep people cool at night.

Since the deadly 2003 heatwave in Europe, which killed nearly 15,000 people in France alone, French authorities have adopted more interventionist responses to heat, including opening cooling centres, checking on vulnerable residents, and restricting activities that could increase health risks.

THE KEY HURDLE TO CLIMATE TARGETS: ELECTRIFICATION

The mid-year climate talks in Bonn, Germany, that ended this week failed to make much headway on any contentious issue, but did throw up one interesting proposal.

Key Takeaways:

— Turkey, which will host the year-ending climate conference COP31 this year, proposed that the world should aim to meet at least a third of its energy needs from electricity by 2035 to reduce emissions. As of now, only about 20% of the world's final energy consumption is met through electricity.

— Turkey has suggested that all countries agree to adopt this goal as one of the outcomes from the COP31 conference, which it is hosting together with Australia in the Turkish city of Antalya in November.

— The electrification target, if agreed upon, would be one more addition to several other climate-related global goals that are already in place, the foremost being the temperature targets contained in the Paris Agreement.

— The 2015 Paris Agreement says the world must strive to limit the rise in global temperatures within 2 degrees Celsius, preferably 1.5 degrees Celsius, from pre-industrial times.

— Electrification is at the heart of this energy transition. In fact, a complete energy transition, from fossil fuels such as oil, gas and coal, to cleaner sources such as wind and solar, is not even possible without full electrification.

Do You Know:

— The COP (Conference of Parties) climate meetings that are held every year have yielded a few more of these targets. COP28 in Dubai in 2023, for instance, decided that countries should work towards tripling the global installed capacity of renewable energy by 2030 from its existing levels in 2023.

— TFEC, or FEC, is a measure of energy that is ultimately used. It excludes all the energy that is consumed in producing, transforming or transporting energy itself. The coal that is burnt to produce electricity, or the energy used for refining petroleum, the diesel burnt for transporting fuel trucks, or the transmission and distribution losses in electricity, are not counted in FEC.

— The COP meetings are held by rotation in five UN-designated geographical regions – Africa, Asia-Pacific, Eastern Europe, Latin America and Caribbean, and Western Europe and Others. Countries volunteer to host the event. But if there are more than one candidate, the respective geographical region selects one by consensus.

— The Paris Agreement is an international accord that was adopted by nearly every country in 2015 to address climate change and its adverse effects.

— Its primary goal is to substantially reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions in a bid to limit global warming in this century to "well below" 2 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels while pursuing the means to curb warming to 1.5 degrees.

CORAL REEFS

Why it matters

Coral colonies and giant clams that will be impacted due to the work on the transhipment port proposed at Galathea Bay as part of the Great Nicobar Island (GNI) mega project will be translocated to four sites on the west coast of the islands, the Zoological Survey of India (ZSI) has said. In this context, let's know what coral reefs are and their significance.

Core Concept:

— Corals are animals from the phylum Cnidaria. They comprise hundreds to thousands of living organisms called polyps, each only a few millimeters in diameter. Each polyp has stinging tentacles to capture food such as plankton and small fish. It lives in groups of hundreds to thousands of genetically identical polyps known as a 'colony', which is recognised as coral.

— Corals are characterised as either hard or soft coral. The architects of coral reefs are hard corals, which form complex three-dimensional structures over thousands of years.

— At the coral base is a hard, protective limestone skeleton called a calicle, which forms the structure of coral reefs. Reefs begin when a polyp attaches itself to a rock on the seafloor, then divides, or buds, into thousands of clones. The polyp calicles connect to one another, creating a colony that acts as a single organism.

— The reason for the colorful appearance of corals is the microscopic algae that live inside coral cells, called zooxanthellae. These algae perform photosynthesis, bringing vital food and nutrients to the corals.

Significance of coral reefs

— Protection from big storms and floods. Coral reefs act like low-crested breakwaters and absorb 97% of wave energy.

— Underwater cities that support marine life. A single reef can support thousands of different marine species.

— Act as 'wave breaks' between the sea and the coastline and minimise the impact of sea erosion.

— Referred to as "rainforests of the sea", existed on the Earth for nearly 450 million years.

Do you Know?

Australia's Great Barrier Reef is the largest in the world, stretching across 2,028 kilometres. In India, coral reefs are protected in the same way as the tiger or elephant, under Schedule I of the Wildlife Protection Act (WPA), 1972.

Coral bleaching

— Most corals contain algae called zooxanthellae — they are plant-like organisms — in their tissues. Corals and zooxanthellae have a symbiotic relationship. While corals provide zooxanthellae a safe place to live, zooxanthellae provide oxygen and organic products of photosynthesis that help corals to grow and thrive. Zooxanthellae also give bright and unique colours to corals.

— Corals are very sensitive to light and temperature and even a small change in their living conditions can stress them. When stressed, they expel zooxanthellae and turn entirely white. This is called coral bleaching.

— Notably, coral bleaching doesn't immediately lead to the death of corals. They would rather go under more stress and are subject to mortality.

— Coral bleaching reduces the reproductivity of corals and makes them more vulnerable to fatal diseases. If the bleaching is not too severe, corals have been known to recover.

DIVE AND RESURFACE

Why do recessive traits from older generations suddenly resurface in one individual?

Genes work in pairs. Every person inherits two copies of most genes, one from each parent. Some gene variants, called dominant alleles, express themselves even when only one copy is present. Others, called recessive alleles, express themselves when a person inherits both copies.

Someone with one recessive allele alongside a dominant one is called a carrier: they will show no sign of the trait. So a family may carry the allele for a particular eye colour, yet a single person won't display it if in every generation, each carrier is paired with someone who has the dominant allele.

But when two carriers have a child together, each parent may pass on their recessive allele, and if both do, the child inherits two copies. Thus, the trait will finally express itself.

Chance has a starring role. When eggs and sperm form, genes get shuffled and distributed at random, creating a vast range of possible combinations, which is why even full siblings can inherit different traits from the same parents.