CURRENT AFFAIRS for UPSC

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DreamIAS

INTERNATIONAL

CAN NEUTRAL SHIPS BE LAWFULLY ATTACKED?

The story so far:

Recently, the U.S. Navy carried out Hellfire missile strikes against three merchant tankers — Marivex, Settebello and Jalveer — all carrying Indian seafarers. While Marivex and Jalveer escaped without casualties, three Indians aboard Settebello — the chief engineer, an engine fitter, and a deck cadet — were killed. Although U.S. President Donald Trump and Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian signed an MoU on June 17, intended to end the conflict and reopen the Strait of Hormuz, this fragile peace has already been breached by fresh confrontations between U.S. and Iranian forces. Beyond these shifting geopolitical tides, the fundamental legal questions surrounding the attacks on neutral shipping and the accountability for civilian lives lost in these combat zones remain unresolved.

What laws govern naval operations during armed conflict?

The two primary bodies of law governing naval operations during an international armed conflict are the (1) "law of naval warfare" — a branch of law of armed conflict or International Humanitarian Law (IHL) — and the (2) "law of the sea". The former regulates the conduct of hostilities at sea, including which vessels may be attacked and when merchant ships may be visited and searched, captured, destroyed after capture, or attacked, as well as the declaration and enforcement of 'naval blockades'. The latter provides the maritime legal framework within which the rights and obligations of belligerent (warring states) and neutral parties operate, thereby shaping the geography of naval operations.

The "law of the sea", set out primarily in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), often called the "Constitution of the Oceans", defines maritime zones such as the territorial sea (up to 12 nautical miles), exclusive economic zones (EEZs) (up to 200 nautical miles), the high seas, and international straits. Although the U.S., Israel, Iran, and some neutral states are not parties to UNCLOS, its relevant provisions are widely regarded as customary international law binding on all states.

Are neutral merchant vessels and civilians protected?

The "law of naval warfare" does not confer unrestricted authority upon belligerents. Its operation is constrained by IHL, neutrality law, and the "law of the sea". While ethical restraints on warfare have roots in ancient Greek, Roman, Indian, and Chinese civilisations, their modern legal expression lies in IHL, codified in the 1949 Geneva Conventions and supplemented by other treaties and customary international law. Designed to limit human suffering by regulating the 'means' and 'methods' of warfare, IHL protects the wounded, sick, prisoners of war, civilians and civilian objects, while restricting certain weapons and methods of combat. Unlike the UN Charter, which governs the legality of starting a war (jus ad bellum), IHL regulates the conduct of war (jus in bello) through the principles of 'distinction', 'proportionality', 'military necessity' and 'precaution'.

In naval warfare, as on land, civilians and civilian objects are generally protected from attack. Accordingly, submarine cables, pipelines, container ships, and tankers carrying food, fertilizer, or oil may not be targeted. Likewise, the right of "transit passage" through international straits, codified in Part III, Section 2 (Articles 37–44) of UNCLOS and recognised under customary international law, also continues during armed conflict. Equally important is the law of maritime neutrality — a key component of the "law of naval warfare" — which regulates relations between belligerent and neutral states by protecting neutral territory, shipping and commerce from unnecessary interference while requiring neutrals not to provide military assistance to either side. In the Strait of Hormuz, which straddles the territorial seas of Iran and Oman and carries roughly one-fifth of global oil supplies, neutral merchant vessels therefore remain entitled to exercise "transit passage" despite the hostilities.

When do the neutrals lose their protected status?

Under IHL, during an armed conflict, attacks may be directed only against 'military objectives'. At sea, some vessels (like enemy warships and naval auxiliaries) qualify as 'military objectives' by their nature, while others acquire that status because of their use or activities at the time of attack. Yet, the "law of naval warfare" permits attacks on merchant vessels in certain limited circumstances, although not in neutral waters. The San Remo Manual on International Law Applicable to Armed Conflicts at Sea (1994) — the most influential restatement of the "law of naval warfare" — provides that objects may be targeted when they make an effective contribution to military action and their total or partial destruction, capture, or neutralisation offers a definite military advantage (Paragraph 40 of the Manual).

Applying this principle to neutral shipping, Paragraph 67 of the Manual, which specifically addresses merchant vessels flying a neutral state's flag, permits attacks on neutral merchant ships reasonably believed to be carrying "contraband" or breaching a "blockade", and after prior warning they intentionally and clearly refuse to stop, or intentionally and clearly resist visit, search or capture, or where ships 'otherwise make an effective contribution to enemy's military action'. The International Law Association's Helsinki Principles on the Law of Maritime Neutrality (1998) adopt a similar approach. By contrast with 'neutral' merchant vessels, which typically cannot be captured merely for trading with the enemy, 'enemy' merchant vessels are generally liable to "capture" outside neutral waters. However, even the 'enemy' merchant vessels may be attacked only when, and for as long as, they qualify as 'military objectives', for instance, by laying naval mines, performing functions normally undertaken by naval auxiliaries, or gathering and transmitting tactical intelligence.

Can oil tankers be attacked?

Significantly, the U.S. military has alleged that the Palau-flagged Settebello was illegally transporting Iranian oil. While disputed, the claim raises the question of whether oil carried aboard a 'neutral' merchant vessel can be treated as "contraband". Given its military utility, oil may, in certain circumstances, qualify as "contraband", but only if destined for enemy-controlled territory or otherwise supporting the enemy's military effort — a concept particularly relevant to neutral merchant vessels, since enemy merchant ships are already generally liable to capture outside neutral waters.

More fundamentally, the legality of attacking oil tankers turns on whether they qualify as 'military objectives'. Under the traditional view, commercial exports do not become military objectives merely because they generate revenue for a belligerent; the tanker and its cargo must make an effective contribution to military action, and their destruction must offer a definite military advantage. Ordinary export trade, including oil sold on the open market, is generally considered too remote from military operations to meet this test. In contrast, the U.S.-backed "war-sustaining" theory treats objects that finance or sustain an enemy's war effort as military objectives, potentially rendering oil exports that generate revenue closely linked to military operations lawful targets.

What about naval blockades?

The U.S. justifies the strikes on the grounds that the vessels were violating an American blockade. Both the San Remo Manual and the Helsinki Principles recognise "blockade" enforcement as a legitimate belligerent right and permit force against neutral vessels reasonably believed to be breaching a lawful "blockade". A blockade seeks to prevent vessels and aircraft of all nations from entering or leaving enemy-controlled ports, airports or coastal areas, thereby restricting both the import of supplies and the export of goods. Notably, it must be publicly declared, applied impartially to all vessels of all states, including neutrals, and be effective rather than a mere "paper blockade".

However, compliance with the aforesaid "law of naval" warfare governing blockades is not, by itself, sufficient to justify attacks on neutral vessels. As many international law scholars argue, such actions must also comply with the UN Charter, adopted in 1945, following the devastation of World War II, to maintain international peace and security. Article 2(4) of the Charter prohibits states from using force against another State's 'territorial integrity' or 'political independence', except pursuant to UN Security Council authorisation or in self-defence under Article 51, including, under the contested but widely invoked doctrine of 'anticipatory' self-defence, against an imminent threat.

Since the U.S. war against Iran arguably has neither Security Council authorisation nor a valid self-defence claim, many scholars view it as violating the UN Charter itself. Consequently, the "blockade" forms part of an unlawful use of force and is therefore unlawful as a matter of jus ad bellum, regardless of its compliance with the law of naval warfare (jus in bello). In other words, the "blockade" and measures taken to enforce it may satisfy the latter but not the former, since the exercise of belligerent rights to enforce a "blockade", unlike self-defence or UN Security Council authorisation, is not recognised as an exception to Article 2(4)'s prohibition on the use of force.

Importantly, the UN Security Council may authorise forcible measures by member states, and Article 42 expressly identifies "blockade" as one such measure. However, outside a "blockade" authorised by the Security Council, there does not seem to be any jus ad bellum basis for using force against neutral merchant vessels to enforce a "blockade". The exercise of belligerent rights through attacks on vessels flagged to "neutral" states, including the forcible enforcement of a "blockade" against neutral shipping, sits in direct tension with the UN Charter, irrespective of whether force may lawfully be used against the blockaded state itself. Even where a state possesses a valid jus ad bellum basis for using force to repel an armed attack, it may employ only such force as is necessary and proportionate; that right does not ordinarily extend to attacks on third states or their vessels absent an independent basis for self-defence.

What is next for India?

Beyond the serious doubts surrounding the legality of the U.S. strikes, key questions remain: what intelligence supported the attack; were less intrusive measures such as boarding, diversion or capture available; and were adequate warnings issued to allow civilians to protect themselves? For India, the incident is not merely a diplomatic issue but a legally cognisable injury to its nationals. Under the doctrine of "diplomatic protection", India has standing to espouse claims arising from injuries to its citizens caused by an internationally wrongful act, demand explanations, seek accountability and compensation, and call for an independent investigation into the deaths of the three seafarers.

IN THE STRAIT OF HORMUZ, IRAN DRAWS ITS RED LINES AMID A CHANGING ORDER

Forty days of war, more than 60 days of tense negotiations, and then a memorandum of understanding. Yet, the U.S. still has no easy solution to a problem that did not exist before it joined Israel in launching its war against Iran on February 28: who will manage the Strait of Hormuz?

The strait, a critical energy and economic chokepoint connecting the Persian Gulf with the Arabian Sea through the Gulf of Oman, was open to international shipping before the war. That changed within days of the U.S. attack, when Iran asserted control over the waterway. Since then, Washington has tried a range of measures to restore free navigation — it bombed Iran's naval assets; U.S. President Donald Trump issued repeated ultimatums, threatening to destroy Iran's critical infrastructure. When he announced a ceasefire on April 8, he declared that the strait would reopen.

In mid-April, he imposed a blockade on Iranian ports and later launched the short-lived Operation Project Freedom to protect commercial shipping transiting the strait. None of these measures persuaded Iran to restore free passage.

After the MoU was signed between the U.S. and Iran on June 17, Mr. Trump again said Hormuz would be fully reopened for toll-free shipping. Iran did open a new route for passage, along its coastline, which it said would be safe. But this did not resolve the crisis. Last week, an oil tanker off Oman's coast was attacked by Iranian drones, after which the U.S. carried out attacks on Iran. Tehran retaliated, targeting U.S. bases in the region. While both sides agreed to halt tit-for-tat attacks, Iran has ruled out direct technical talks with the U.S., which were scheduled to continue this week, casting doubts on the implementation of the MoU.

At the heart of the problem lies a simple question: who controls the Strait of Hormuz?

What the MoU says

Under Article 5 of the MoU, Iran has promised to "make arrangements" for the "safe passage of commercial vessels, with no charges for 60 days only from the Persian Gulf to the Sea of Oman and vice versa". It says commercial traffic would immediately start and Iran would remove mines and other technical impediments for traffic within 30 days of signing the memorandum. The next line of the article holds enormous significance for the future of the strait. It says Iran will conduct talks with Oman "to define the future administration and maritime services in the Strait of Hormuz, in discussions with other Persian Gulf littoral states, in line with applicable international law and the sovereign rights of coastal states".

The agreement doesn't say passage would be free of charges in the future — that provision is applicable for only 60 days. It says Iran — not the U.S. — will hold talks with its neighbours to define the future status of the strait. In other words, Iran hasn't given up its claims or control over the strait in the MoU. Rather, it has reasserted them.

The U.S., which has already lifted its maritime blockade, is not happy with leaving the levers of one of the world's most important waterways in the hands of a state it sought to topple just four months ago. When U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio visited the region last week, he pressed

Persian Gulf countries to push against the Iranian plan. Oman opened an alternative route, along its coast, to transit Hormuz. Soon after Mr. Rubio left, Iran attacked a Singapore-flagged tanker off Oman's coast. Earlier, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) had warned that traffic through "non-designated routes" could be dangerous. Tehran knew the attack risked escalating tensions with the U.S., but it appeared willing to take that risk rather than surrendering control of Hormuz. Mr. Trump called the drone attack a "foolish violation" of the ceasefire, and struck Iran, triggering a retaliatory response from Tehran.

Why Hormuz matters

From Iran's point of view, two decisions it took proved critical to its own survival in the war — the regionalisation of the war by targeting American bases and energy infrastructure across the Persian Gulf, and the closure of the Strait of Hormuz. By retaining its grip on Hormuz despite American threats, attacks and blockade, Iran has demonstrated deterrence capability. Iran believes the war has fundamentally altered the region's strategic landscape and that control over Hormuz is central to deterring future attacks. What it wants to do is to assert Iranian control and "sovereignty" over the strait—a game-changing move which could solidify Iran's position as a powerful regional player in the Persian Gulf. Enforcing a service fee or insurance costs is only part of this broader objective.

Tehran wants vessels to use its designated route, coordinate with the newly created Persian Gulf Strait Authority (PGSA), and, eventually, pay for "services" provided by littoral states, drawing on models used in the Strait of Malacca and the Singapore Strait. "These are our territorial waters," Iran's Parliament Speaker and top negotiator with the U.S. said on June 30 in a televised interview. "Iran will never, under any circumstances, retreat from this position," he added. Iranians want to institutionalise this new mechanism for long-term management of the strait. And Gulf countries, including Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and even the UAE, are in talks with Tehran.

Mr. Trump still seems serious about negotiations with Iran. Despite Iran's remarks that technical talks were called off over last week's strikes, he sent Steve Witkoff and Jared Kushner to Qatar. With mid-term elections looming and his approval ratings falling, Mr. Trump's military options are constrained, at least for now. But he is also confronting a new reality in the Persian Gulf. The country he wanted to submit to U.S.-Israeli demands is now setting the terms of the regional order.

COURT REJECTS TRUMP BID TO LIMIT BIRTHRIGHT CITIZENSHIP

The US Supreme Court on Tuesday (June 30) ruled that the Trump administration's executive order outlawing birthright citizenship was unconstitutional. It reaffirmed that children born in the US are American citizens under the Fourteenth Amendment, regardless of whether their parents are in the country unlawfully or only temporarily.

Key Takeaways:

• In a 6-3 decision, the court rejected the administration's argument that such children are not "subject to the jurisdiction" of the US, holding that the executive order inconsistent with the Constitution's Citizenship Clause and longstanding Supreme Court precedent.

• The ruling marks one of the biggest judicial setbacks to the US President's second-term immigration agenda, and reaffirms a constitutional guarantee that has stood for over 150 years.

• Following the ruling, Trump called the decision "too bad for our country" and said his administration would continue pursuing efforts to restrict birthright citizenship. He also falsely claimed Congress could reverse the decision through legislation.

Do You Know:

• The 14th Amendment to the Constitution says, "All persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and of the State wherein they reside."

• The amendment, ratified in 1868 after the American Civil War, was intended to ensure that formerly enslaved people would be recognised as US citizens.

Courts have long interpreted the provision to confer citizenship on nearly everyone born on American soil, with two longstanding exceptions:

—The children of diplomats who have allegiance to another government.

—Enemies present in the US during hostile occupation.

• The principle of birthright citizenship predates the US Constitution and draws on the English common law doctrine of jus soli, or "right of soil", under which citizenship is determined by place of birth rather than parentage.

• In its June 30 ruling, the Supreme Court reaffirmed that the Fourteenth Amendment guarantees citizenship to nearly everyone born on US soil, regardless of their parents' immigration status.

• Hours after beginning his second term, Trump signed an executive order denying citizenship to children born in the US to parents who were in the country illegally or temporarily. The order argued that such children are not "subject to the jurisdiction" of the United States and are therefore not entitled to citizenship under the 14th Amendment. n his first post-election interview in December 2024, Trump said, "We have to end it. We're the only country that has it."

That claim is inaccurate. At least 37 other countries grant citizenship to anyone born on their soil, mostly in South America and the Caribbean. India does not practice unconditional birthright citizenship, nor do several European countries.

• The issue of birthright citizenship was one of the main challenges before the framers of the Indian Constitution, to decide whether citizenship should be based on birth or descent. Some members of the Constituent Assembly, such as P S Deshmukh (Indian National Congress Member from Maharashtra), argued against birthright citizenship, stating that it would make "Indian citizenship the cheapest on earth."

• However, other members, such as BR Ambedkar and Sardar Vallabhai Patel, favoured birthright citizenship, and it was ultimately recognised in the Constitution. Article 5 of the Constitution states that every person who was born in the territory before the commencement of the Constitution shall be a citizen of India.

• Parliament subsequently enacted the Citizenship Act, 1955, which provided birthright citizenship under Section 3 to every person born in India on or after January 26, 1950. There was an exception only for children born to "an envoy of a foreign sovereign power" who is not a citizen, and children of an "enemy alien" when the birth takes place in an area under enemy occupation.

Deportees sue U.S. over expulsions to Ghana in top human rights court

Lawyers have filed a suit against Ghana at west Africa's top human rights court on behalf of deportees sent to the country under the United States' immigration crackdown, the legal team said on Tuesday.

The complaint is the latest legal challenge in an African court against U.S. President Donald Trump's sweeping immigration clampdown under which he has deported people with legal protections.

In cases where Washington is barred from sending people home — after U.S. judges found they likely face torture or persecution, for example — it has sent deportees to "third countries" such as Ghana.

Ghana has then sent them home or, has dumped them in neighbouring Togo without documents.

HAPPY BIRTHDAY, AMERICA, YOU ARE NO MORE AN ONLY CHILD

Birthdays, for people and nations, are an occasion for celebration, for pageantry that would appear gauche on most other days. Add to that a chief executive who has doubled down on jingoistic nationalism and the triumphalism surrounding the United States of America's 250th Independence Day is understandable. Even so, the Ultimate Fighting Championship event on the White House lawns last month that carried the unsubtle symbolism of a Roman emperor presiding over a gladiatorial contest was a bit much. A major anniversary, however, is also an occasion for major reflection. While much about America remains exceptional, in a changing world the self-conception of its exceptionalism might require revision.

The philosophical and political underpinnings of US success, and the American model, can be found in the Declaration of Independence and the country's constitution. "Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" foregrounds the individual, and the optimism of what was seen by colonial settlers as a "new world". It encompasses both the American dream and its hypocrisies and exploitations — vis-à-vis indigenous populations, Black people, and migrants. The idea of natural rights, of inalienable freedoms, found its greatest expression in the US. The historic move away from constraining feudalism and an embrace of earned wealth and success laid the foundations for its knowledge economy, innovation, military power and even Hollywood. The latter, through cinema, TV and now OTT, continues to determine the cultural vocabulary of a significant chunk of the world population. US oligarchs control the latest industries and innovation. And yet, all is not well with the world's oldest democracy.

Donald Trump is seen by his many critics as undermining the foundations on which the American story was built — from its universities and free trade, to its openness and institutions. The question is whether he is the architect of this erosion or its symptom. Since the fall of communism in Europe and the end of the Cold War, the US has seen itself as the lone superpower —not just in terms of its economy or military, but also in terms of values. The "end of history", though, turned out to be short-lived. China, authoritarianism intact, has emerged as the world's factory and a competitor, in no small part thanks to US businesses and policies. Middle powers like India, Brazil, Australia are making their mark, on their own terms. At 250, America is no longer an only child. That can't be wished away by nostalgia or celebration.

NATIONAL

INDIA-JAPAN RELATIONSHIP

— Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi visited India from July 1 to 3. She participated in the 16th edition of the India-Japan Annual Summit, a mechanism established in 2006 under which the prime ministers of the two countries meet annually, each alternating as host.

— The bilateral trade reached $27.5 billion in 2025-26, with Japanese investment in India going up to $3.2 billion between April and December 2025.

— Japan is among India's largest investors, backing major infrastructure projects including a high-speed rail corridor between Mumbai and Ahmedabad.

— Japan is the only country with which India has a dedicated institutional mechanism for the development of the North-East – the India-Japan Act East Forum. India and Japan are partnering on connectivity and development in Northeast India, including projects in infrastructure, urban renewal, energy, agriculture, tourism and skills.

— The North-East fits into Japan's vision of a free and open Indo-Pacific as a bridge connecting South Asia with Southeast Asia.

— Japan participates in several bilateral exercises with India, including JAIMEX, Dharma Guardian, Veer Guardian, and bilateral Coast Guard Drills, as well as in multilateral exercises such as MALABAR and MILAN.

Major outcomes of the 16th India-Japan Annual Summit:

(i) India-Japan Joint Declaration on Economic Security to promote project-based collaboration in semiconductors, critical minerals, ICT, including AI, clean energy and pharmaceuticals, while enhancing joint resilience in strategic sectors.

(ii) Joint announcement to celebrate 2027 as the India-Japan Year of Shared Horizons, commemorating the 75th anniversary of diplomatic relations through a series of events.

(iii) MoU for the India-Japan Cooperative Biogas for Growth (CBG) Initiative to support the establishment of 1,000 biogas and organic fertilizer plants across India through dairy cooperatives.

(iv) MoUs were signed for batteries; pharmaceuticals and medical devices; geology and mineral exploration; and collaboration across the full AI technology stack, including foundation models.

PM ARRIVES IN SEYCHELLES, TO MARK 50 YEARS OF RELATIONS, CHART FUTURE

Prime Minister Narendra Modi landed in Victoria on Saturday to start his three-day state visit to Seychelles, during which he will hold talks with President Patrick Herminie and attend the golden jubilee celebrations of the archipelago nation's National Day celebrations as Guest of Honour.

Key Takeaways:

— At Seychelles International Airport, Modi was welcomed by Herminie and the two leaders drove together to Seychelles' National Botanical Garden. The PM received a ceremonial Guard of Honour, in the presence of Seychelles Cabinet ministers and senior dignitaries.

— Ahead of his departure from New Delhi, Modi said Seychelles is a valued maritime neighbour and a key partner in the Vision Mahasagar (Mutual and Holistic Advancement for Security and Growth Across Regions) and India's shared commitment to the Global South.

— Later in the day, the PM handed over Fast Patrol Vessel Lespwar, ambulances and utility vehicles to the Seychelles Coast Guard.

— On Sunday evening, PM Modi will participate in the country's 50th national day celebrations as Guest of Honour. 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 well, an Indian Armed Forces contingent and two Indian Navy ships are participating in the event.

— PM Modi last visited Seychelles in 2015, while President Herminie visited India earlier this year.

— Seychelles is a cornerstone of India's Global South strategy, serving as a critical maritime partner in the Western Indian Ocean. The island nation also helps India combat seaborne terrorism, piracy, and illegal fishing. Situated close to Africa, Middle East, and Asia, Seychelles serves as a vital counterweight against expanding influence in the Indian Ocean.

— Seychelles's recent full membership in the Colombo Security Conclave further strengthens this shared commitment to a stable, secure Indo-Pacific. India is also a security provider in the Indian Ocean.

— Around 5 percent of the Seychelles population comprises people of Indian origin (about 6,000); while another 9,000 non-resident Indians work in Seychelles, mostly in the construction sector, as shop assistants and professionals, according to government statistics. A majority of them belong to the Gujarati and the Tamil communities.

— India has emerged as a key development partner of Seychelles through grants, concessional credit and capacity-building initiatives. India continues to be a premier medical tourism destination for Seychelles, with institutional tie-ups connecting island hospitals with facilities in Chennai.

Do You Know:

— India's Island diplomacy with Seychelles and its outreach to ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) through deepening ties with countries like Malaysia further consolidates its position in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR).

— Seychelles, a strategically located archipelago of 115 islands in the Western Indian Ocean, relies on external state actors for its security and economic interests. India's engagement with the island nation underlines its commitment to the Indian Ocean region (IOR).

— In this context, island diplomacy comes into play. Island diplomacy is widely referred to as a country's strategic engagement with small island nations through defence cooperation, climate support, economic assistance, and infrastructure projects.

— Securing sea lanes of communication is a key aspect of Delhi's Indian Ocean strategy, which makes Seychelles an important nation as it is located near critical shipping lanes. Cooperation between the two countries spans maritime domain awareness (MDA), coastal surveillance radar systems, and defence training.

CHINA'S ROLE IN BANGLADESH'S TEESTA PLANS, AND INDIA'S STRATEGIC WORRIES

Bangladesh Prime Minister Tarique Rahman has received assurance from China on building the Teesta River Comprehensive Management and Restoration Project. The discussion in this regard took place when Mr. Rahman visited Beijing during June 24-26 and met top Chinese officials, including Premier Li Qiang, President Xi Jinping and Chinese Water Resources Minister Li Guoying.

China has harvested its major rivers for power generation and irrigation, and is considered a major dam builder among the world powers. It is expected to expedite a feasibility study of the Teesta project that aims to change the physical nature of the Teesta inside Bangladesh and turn it into an artery of economic development.

Bangladesh has been in talks with China about managing and developing the Teesta river region for nearly a decade, and the discussion has spanned the government of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, which has been taken forward by the current government of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party.

In January this year, under the interim government led by Prof. Mohammed Yunus, Bangladesh Water Development Board (BWDB) and the Chinese state-owned power generation company POWERCHINA signed an extension to an MoU that revived the Bangladesh-China cooperation on the river.

The original MoU in this project was signed in 2016 under the Sheikh Hasina government, which had suggested river bank erosion control, flood management, disaster reduction, land reclamation, transportation and environment preservation as some of the features of China's plans for Teesta.

Massive plans

The MoU included dredging of 140 million cubic metres of riverine sediment, reclamation of 171 square km of land, repairing of 110 km of embankment, constructing 124 km of new embankments and developing 224 km of road network. The project would lead to building of 82 jetty facilities along the Teesta. As a lower riparian project, the Chinese plans cannot disrupt the Teesta upstream in India and it aims to create conditions for Bangladesh to better utilise the water that it gets from India at present.

Teesta's water is essential for the farmers of northern Bangladesh, covering districts like Nilphamari, Rangpur, Dinajpur, Bogura, Joypurhat and Gaibandha. Bangladesh's main complaint is that Teesta's water reduces to a trickle in the winter months between December and February, when water is required for sowing of paddy and vegetables.

To deal with its water requirements, Bangladesh built the Teesta Barrage, the largest irrigation project of the country, in the 1990s. The Teesta Barrage Irrigation Project (TBIP) was built to help the northern region of Bangladesh, as it had a history of being hit by Teesta's floods, followed by a long spell of dry season, both of which used to disturb the local agricultural cycle.

India has built barrages and electricity projects upstream in the Teesta that allow it to harvest Teesta's waters for requirements in West Bengal, Sikkim and Assam. Most prominent among these is the barrage in Gajoldoba in West Bengal, which is a major irrigation project that is controlled by West Bengal.

Whenever India holds water for its needs in Gajoldoba or in power generation units in Sikkim, Bangladesh claims that the part of the Teesta on its side goes low on water. For example, last year in November, TBIP had to shut all its gates as the water flow on the Teesta had reduced. The TBIP is used to store water for nearly 55,000 hectares of land, but the reduction of water on the river causes concern for it as lack of water affects both irrigation as well as commercial activities on the river.

Teesta originates from the spectacular high altitude Cholamu or Tso Lhamu Lake (5100 metres) in the Himalayan range in Sikkim. As the river flows down, it gathers volume from multiple glaciers and streams, and India has built multiple power generation projects on the river.

Deal with India

Bangladesh's main demand from India has been getting what it considers to be a fair share of the Teesta's water so that the irrigation project in North Bangladesh can run smoothly.

The two sides had negotiated the issue of sharing of Teesta's water for decades, and it was taken up again in 2010 when India prepared a set of principles for sharing of Teesta's water, and the two sides agreed to an interim deal.

However, the agreement was not sealed when Prime Minister Manmohan Singh visited Dhaka in 2011, mainly because of objections from Mamata Banerjee, who had spoken about the matter during her election rallies that year.

Ms. Banerjee became Chief Minister that year after defeating the Left.

A joint statement issued on September 7, 2011, in Dhaka said, "The two Prime Ministers welcomed that there has been progress on the principles and modalities of interim agreements on sharing of waters of Teesta and Feni Rivers on a fair and equitable basis. They directed the concerned officials to work towards concluding the agreements at the earliest." At the end, it was clear that Kolkata's objection prevailed over Delhi's plans. Subsequently, Sheikh Hasina repeatedly raised the issue during her visits to Delhi and discussed this matter in June 2024 when a technical committee was planned to take the matter forward.

Before that visit, Foreign Secretary Vinay Kwatra had visited Dhaka and conveyed the Indian offer of financing the $1 billion project to dredge and manage the Teesta in Bangladesh. That was the last attempt by India to deal with the issue, as the two sides did not discuss the matter during the 15-month-long interim rule in Dhaka, which was followed by the BNP government led by Prime Minister Rahman.

The area of Nilphamari and Rangpur is near Jalpaiguri of India, which is where the "chicken's neck" is located. POWERCHINA, which has revived the MoU with Bangladesh, is a large organisation experienced in river projects, but it is also related to the strategic sectors of China.

Stationing a large number of Chinese professionals so close to a sensitive area of India will raise eyebrows in India. However, Bangladesh has several internationally supported projects, including the Ruppur nuclear power plant that has engineers and technicians from multiple countries, including Russia and Ukraine.

CAUGHT IN THE MIDDLE

India is located between two major drug-producing regions: Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran to the west and Myanmar, Thailand, and Laos to the east. While the West has historically dominated heroin production, the International Narcotics Control Board has said Myanmar has become the world's leading source of illicit opium while East and Southeast Asia remain major sources of methamphetamine. Officials have said drugs are being received at Gujarat, Kerala, and Tamil Nadu via maritime routes. Similarly, some drugs are produced domestically using illegally diverted pharmaceutical ingredients, aided by the fact that individuals possessing small quantities of heroin can attract up to six months' imprisonment, whereas drugmakers that cannot account for lakhs of doses often face only slaps on the wrist. The rise of Myanmar, where the territory under ethnic armed organisations is expanding, as a key source is also troubling since it shares a border with India. The Narcotics Control Bureau has noted a dramatic surge in the use of drones to smuggle drugs across borders, especially over Punjab. Traffickers are organising over the darknet and using cryptocurrencies. The pillars of India's response thus aim to keep the enforcement regime from being out-innovated and improve regulatory certainty.

States are trying to adopt a 'whole of society' approach recognising the public health and social dimensions. However, India needs to do more. Physical abuse and forced detoxification are frequently reported from many private centres. Punjab has an extensive network of de addiction centres providing opioid substitution therapy, and some northeastern States to a secondary extent, but most large States have much less access relative to need. Most Integrated Rehabilitation Centres for Addicts are located in urban areas whereas the highest density of addicts in Punjab are in border villages and rural pockets. Likewise, relapse is often treated as a moral failure and many addicts avoid government centres fearing social ostracisation, particularly in rural North India. The persistence of criminal records for small-scale possession prevents youth from getting jobs, reducing their odds of escaping the drug-crime cycle. Although the Nasha Mukt Bharat Abhiyaan has said it has sensitised over six crore women, facilities dedicated to women are scarce and concentrated in urban areas; stigma, caregiving responsibilities, and lack of gender-responsive treatment keep many women from seeking or completing care. Finally, as evidence shows, disrupted supply can drive many users to cheaper alternatives unless accompanied by effective treatment. India must therefore shift public focus from seizures and arrests to the number of lives restored.

OPEN LETTER TO MODI, SHARIF SEEKS DIALOGUE ON KASHMIR, RESUMPTION OF BILATERAL TIES

At least 117 individuals from India and Pakistan, in a joint open letter on Wednesday, asked Prime Ministers of both countries to re-open bilateral dialogue, resume discussions on J&K, demilitarise and de-escalate for a lasting peace in the region.

The initiative of the joint letter, addressed to Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Pakistani PM Shehbaz Sharif, was spearheaded by O.P. Shah, chairman of the Centre for Peace and Progress.

The joint letter called upon India and Pakistan to reopen comprehensive bilateral dialogue on all outstanding issues. "Resume discussions on Jammu and Kashmir, including revisiting the framework negotiated between 2004 and 2007. Take steps towards demilitarisation and de-escalation, to create lasting peace in the region. Address legitimate security concerns of both countries," the letter read.

It called upon governments of both countries "to take meaningful and sustained steps towards restoring peace, normalcy, dialogue and cooperation in South Asia".

"We believe that sustained engagement and dialogue remain the only viable path to resolving differences and building a stable and prosperous region," it added.

The letter pressed for restoration of full diplomatic relations, resuming normal visa services, enabling exchanges among families, students, academics, journalists, and others.

The Mirwaiz, who signed the letter, said, "The people of J&K have suffered enough and deserve peace, closure, justice and a dignified resolution." NC legislator Tanvir Sadiq said his party "has been a votary of a dialogue" "People from the RSS and different groups have definitely endorsed our point of view," said Mr. Sadiq.

The letter is signed by prominent politicians, including National Conference's Dr. Farooq Abdullah, Peoples Democratic Party's Mehbooba Mufti, Kashmir chief cleric Mirwaiz Umar Farooq, Congress' Mani Shankar Aiyar, Rashtriya Janata Dal's Prof. Manoj Jha, ex-chief of the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) A.S. Dulat, CPI(M)'s Mohamad Yousuf Tarigami, human rights advocate Rita Manchanda etc. From Pakistan, the letter is signed by former Minister of Foreign Affairs of Pakistan Khurshid Mahmud Kasuri, ex-diplomat Ashraf Jehangir Qazi, diplomat Shamsher Ahmed Khan, artist Beena Sarwar etc.

AMIT SHAH LAUNCHES NEW FCRA PORTAL AND E-OCI CARD

Union Home Minister Amit Shah on Tuesday launched a new portal that, apart from reducing paperwork, will speed up clearance of applications for registration under the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act, 2010 (FCRA) and also enable real-time monitoring of foreign fund inflows.

Mr. Shah launched the FCRA 2.0 Portal and an e-Overseas Citizen of India (e-OCI) card initiative in the presence of Union Home Secretary Govind Mohan, Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri, Director of Intelligence Bureau (IB) Mahesh Dixit, and several other senior officials.

At present, around 14,500 organisations with FCRA registrations are working across the country. FCRA registration is mandatory for an NGO or association to receive foreign donations. The Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) said that, under the Act, approximately 15,000 to 20,000 applications are made each year and about 17,000 annual returns are filed. The portal, hosted on the National Government Cloud (MeghRaj), includes features such as process re-engineering, an integrated dashboard, Aadhaar-based authentication, e-Sign facility, and OCR-based document analysis.

Unlike the old website, the new FCRA portal has removed the section on year-wise fresh registrations under the Act. In 2022, the MHA had dropped sections listing NGOs whose registrations were cancelled and the page detailing the annual returns filed by each NGO.

The Union Home Minister said the Centre's policy is to ensure transparency and embrace technology so that governance becomes easy for honest people and a strict surveillance system is put in place for wrongdoers, making the country increasingly secure. He said that, prior to 2014, the FCRA system was entangled in files and procedures and was beyond proper oversight, which is critical for both national security and development. In the past few years, there had been a significant increase in the number of applications and the flow of foreign donations, he added.

The new portal would lead to effective monitoring of foreign contributions made with wrong intentions and end physical submission of documents, Mr. Shahe said.

He said the e-OCI card would bring great convenience to more than 50 lakh OCI cardholders. After 20 years, when a new passport is issued, there will be no need to re-issue the OCI booklet, and the cardholder's registration number will also become unique, he said. The e-OCI card will eliminate the problem of loss or damage of the document, and cardholders will be able to carry out real-time verification themselves.

WHAT INDIA'S 12 'OPERATIONALLY DEPLOYED' NUCLEAR WARHEADS REALLY MEAN

The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) released its annual yearbook in June. For the first time, it classified 12 of India's estimated stockpile of 190 nuclear warheads to be operationally deployed, i.e., positioned with active military forces mated with delivery systems and ready for use.

This sounds alarming — but the alarm itself may not be warranted. The reason is that India has neither crossed a strategic threshold nor has it abandoned its decades-old 'no first use' policy.

India's promise

India's 'no first use' (NFU) policy is a pillar of its nuclear doctrine and its credible minimum deterrence posture. At the UN High-Level Meeting commemorating the International Day for the Total Elimination of Nuclear Weapons in September 2025, India's representative Sibi George reaffirmed India's commitment to NFU and to the non-use of nuclear weapons against non-nuclear-weapon states.

The political foundations of the doctrine are intact even as some analysts within India have periodically called for a conditional or hybrid first-use posture. Those calls have not prevailed.

Under NFU, India commits to not launching a pre-emptive nuclear strike. What it needs is the absolute certainty that even after absorbing a nuclear first strike, enough of its nuclear arsenal will survive to deliver a devastating retaliatory blow. This survivability guarantee is what strategists call a second-strike capability, and without it, NFU is not a doctrine but a liability. In other words, the doctrine depends on a force that can survive and retaliate.

The SIPRI report does not indicate a shift towards first use, a lowering of the threshold for nuclear employment or indeed any revision of the political controls that govern India's nuclear weapons. Instead, it documents the maturing of India's ability to credibly deliver the second strike.

Stockpile v. Deployment

This distinction is significant. Possessing a nuclear warhead and deploying it as part of an operational deterrent is not the same thing. For most of its nuclear history, India has kept its warheads in a de-mated state, meaning the warheads were stored separately from their delivery vehicles, in a central storage site and under strict civilian and political oversight. The idea was to maximise safety, reduce the risk of accidental use, and signal restraint to the international community.

Deployment, on the other hand, means a weapon has been paired with a delivery system — a missile, aircraft, or submarine — and positioned with operational military forces in a state of readiness. Again, this does not mean the weapons are about to be used; it means they are configured for use if authorised. A de-mated weapon requires time to prepare and deploy; a mated weapon can, in principle, be launched more quickly.

What SIPRI has recorded when it classified 12 Indian warheads as being deployed is that a small — but no doubt significant — fraction of India's arsenal now is being maintained in a state of operational readiness. And SIPRI has linked this assessment to the maturation of India's nuclear triad, particularly its sea-based deterrent, suggesting that a small number of warheads may now be deployed aboard a nuclear ballistic missile submarine (which are also called SSBN) conducting occasional deterrence patrols.

India's Arihant-class submarines have steadily strengthened the survivability of the country's second-strike capability, with additional platforms expected to further consolidate this leg of the triad. SIPRI also noticed India's increasing reliance on canisterised Agni-series missiles. This means the missiles are kept ready with fuel in a sealed cylinder, from which they can be directly fired without further preparations. Canisterisation thus indicates a greater level of operational readiness.

Overall, it seems India's long-envisioned deterrent posture is becoming increasingly operational across land and sea-based delivery systems — but not that the country is on a war footing.

NFU architecture

Bearing in mind India's pursuit of a doctrine of credible minimum deterrence centred on assured retaliation, the maturation of its submarine-based deterrent doesn't depart from NFU but is a means of strengthening it.

A doctrine that relies on retaliation requires forces capable of surviving an adversary's first strike. Land-based missiles, however capable, sit at known and mappable locations. An adversary confident in its intelligence could, in theory, target them in a disarming first strike before a retaliatory order is ever issued. On the other hand, a stealth submarine operating in the ocean can't be found, tracked or destroyed in time.

This is a fundamental difference — and in fact, ballistic missile submarines provide the most secure second-strike capability available. As the scholar Vipin Narang has written, states pursuing assured retaliation postures must, above all, solve the survivability problem, and sea-basing is the most robust solution available.

India has now done that. With three operational SSBNs sufficient to keep at least one submerged and on patrol at all times, India has closed the central vulnerability any NFU doctrine faces.

Manpreet Sethi, distinguished fellow at the Centre for Aerospace Power and Strategic Studies, New Delhi, said, "With the operationalisation of tri-SSBNs, it is not surprising that some of India's nuclear warheads now stand mated with delivery platforms. This in no way implies a doctrinal shift. Rather, it makes assured retaliation more credible and, hence, India more confident in its commitment to 'no first use'."

Wider warning

SIPRI's documentation of India's deployment milestone lies within a broader, more concerning global trend. The organisation's 2026 Yearbook observed that states are "increasingly relying on nuclear weapons as instruments of national power", signalling a reversal of decades of gradual progress in disarmament.

As of January this year, the world's nine nuclear-armed states collectively possessed an estimated 12,187 nuclear warheads. China's arsenal has grown to approximately 620 and continues to expand at a pace unmatched by any other nuclear power. In this context, India's reported deployment of 12 operationally assigned warheads is strategically significant.

India's nuclear choices must be understood from within this evolving security environment. SIPRI has noted that India's modernisation programme is increasingly focused on developing long-range delivery systems capable of reaching targets throughout China — while continuing to account for Pakistan.

With China's arsenal now more than three times the size of Pakistan's estimated stockpile, and Beijing simultaneously expanding its sea-based nuclear deterrent, India's SSBN programme appears directed as much towards maintaining credible deterrence against China as towards preserving stability with Pakistan.

The world that the SIPRI report has described is one in which the post-Cold War nuclear order is under mounting strain. Arms-control agreements have weakened or collapsed while competition in areas such as hypersonic delivery systems, artificial intelligence-enabled decision support, missile defence, and anti-submarine warfare continues to intensify.

The risk of miscalculation is correspondingly increasing. India's evolving deterrent posture should therefore be seen not as an isolated development but as part of a wider transformation in the global strategic environment. Policymakers should treat this as a warning that the institutions designed to manage nuclear risk must adapt quickly enough to keep pace with the capabilities now being fielded.

WHEN COURT NO. 24 BECAME THE LEGAL PREFACE TO EMERGENCY

Before the Emergency became a midnight story, it had a courtroom preface. On the night of 25-26 June 1975, Opposition leaders were arrested, the presses were censored, and freedoms began to shrink. But the political chain of events that led to that night had been triggered two weeks earlier through a judge's verdict in Allahabad. The Emergency is remembered through Delhi's darkness. Its legal pre-history unfolded in daylight.

Key Takeaways:

— That daylight can be traced to two rooms of the Allahabad High Court. Justice Jagmohanlal Sinha sat in Court No. 5. When Indira Gandhi came to give evidence in the election petition filed by Raj Narain, challenging the then-PM's Rae Bareli victory, the proceedings were held in Court No. 24.

— The story began in the 1971 general elections. After the Congress split of 1969 and the early dissolution of the Lok Sabha in December 1970, the Opposition tried "Indira Hatao" and she answered with "Garibi Hatao". In Rae Bareli, Indira Gandhi polled 1,83,309 votes, Raj Narain received 71,499.

— For most candidates, that margin would have closed the matter. Raj Narain carried it to court. In April 1971, he filed an election petition under the Representation of the People Act, 1951, alleging misuse of official machinery, campaign expenditure, and the role of Yashpal Kapoor, who had worked in the PM's Secretariat before joining Indira Gandhi's campaign.

— Over time, the case narrowed around Kapoor and a set of dates. Kapoor had resigned from government service in January 1971. Election law treats assistance from government servants, deployed to advance a candidate's prospects, as a corrupt practice.

— Officials, police, and public facilities belong to the Republic, not to a ruling party's campaign. In Rae Bareli, this ordinary rule had become historic because the candidate under scrutiny was also the PM.

— For three years, the case moved slowly until Justice Sinha took charge after the 1974 summer vacation and pushed it forward. In March 1975, Indira Gandhi's appearance as a witness enlivened the case.

— By the time Justice Sinha entered, the courtroom was packed. Raj Narain was present after he assured his counsel Shanti Bhushan that he would remain silent. Bhushan didn't want Raj Narain because he was known to be temperamental and outspoken.

— The court accommodated the dignity of office. She was not made to stand in the witness box. After consultation with Shanti Bhushan, Justice Sinha allowed her to sit on a chair placed on a raised platform to the right of the judge. Her counsel, S C Khare, examined her first. Then Shanti Bhushan cross-examined her.

— On 12 June 1975, Justice Sinha set aside Indira Gandhi's election and found her guilty of corrupt practices on limited grounds, connected with Yashpal Kapoor and official arrangements. The court granted a short stay for appeal. But the political crisis had begun. Congress rallied behind her. The Opposition treated the verdict as a crisis of legitimacy.

— On 24 June, Justice V R Krishna Iyer of the Supreme Court allowed her to continue as PM but restricted her rights as an MP. The next day, Jayaprakash Narayan and other leaders demanded her resignation at a Delhi rally. That evening, Indira Gandhi advised the President to proclaim a state of emergency. On the night of 25 June 1975, just before midnight, President Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed signed the proclamation.

— The Rae Bareli case still did not disappear. Parliament changed the election law retrospectively. The 39th Amendment attempted to place the election of the PM beyond judicial challenge.

— In November 1975, a Constitution Bench upheld several election-law changes but struck down the attempt to immunise the PM's election from judicial review, applying the basic structure doctrine articulated in Kesavananda Bharati.

Do You Know:

— Generally, the term "emergency" refers to the period from June 25, 1975, to March 21, 1977, during which the government of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi used special provisions in the Constitution to impose sweeping executive and legislative consequences on the country.

— However, emergency provisions contained in Part XVIII of the Constitution of India, from Articles 352 to 360, talk about the three different types of emergencies.

— The national emergency of 1975 brought about numerous changes in various aspects of India's democracy. From constitutional amendments to the emergence of a coalition government, the aftermath of the national emergency introduced new social forces and led to the decentralization of power.

— The Janata government reversed many of the constitutional changes effected by the 42nd Amendment Act of 1976. It did not do away with the provision of the emergency, but made it extremely difficult to impose for the future.

WHY IS THE CHARGESHEET IN THE SARLA BHAT CASE A MILESTONE?

The story so far:

After a gap of 36 years, the J&K Police's special cell State Investigation Agency (SIA) filed a chargesheet in the killing of Kashmiri Pandit Sarla Bhat, who worked as a nurse at Srinagar's Sher-i-Kashmir Institute of Medical Sciences (SKIMS). The chargesheet named Jammu Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF) chief Yasin Malik among five accused, only two of whom are alive.

The SIA, which started re-investigation in 2020, decided to initiate proclamation proceedings against the absconding terrorist, Khurshid Ahmad Chalkoo, "the man who pulled the trigger".

He is believed to have exfiltrated to Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (POK). Meanwhile, the SIA chargesheet does not mention any rape.

What is the significance of this case?

The killing of the 27-year-old nurse was among the first cases of targeted killing of Kashmiri Pandits in the valley following the armed insurrection in 1989. According to official listing, the first such killing took place on September 14, 1989 of Pandit Tika Lal Taploo, an advocate and senior BJP leader and then Pandit Neelkanth Ganjoo, a former judge who had sentenced JKLF founder Maqbool Bhat to death in a murder case.

These targeted killings eventually led to mass migration of Kashmiri Pandits outside Kashmir valley. The SIA said Sarla Bhat was abducted from the vicinity of SKIMS on April 18, 1990, subjected to brutal torture and physical assault, and horrendously killed by automatic rifle fire at Omer Colony, Malbagh, Srinagar. The filing of the chargesheet is seen by the family and the entire Pandit community as a step towards justice. The magnitude of the migration, the militant violence triggered, can be gauged from the fact that over 60,452 Pandits registered themselves as migrants by 2014, as the community was displaced to different parts of the country, including Jammu.

Why the delay?

Kashmir witnessed targeted killings of both Muslims, mostly affiliated to the National Conference (NC), and Pandits in the 1990s as hundreds of youths joined militant groups and attacked security forces.

Violence by the JKLF declined after Yasin Malik announced a unilateral ceasefire in 1994. An unwritten understanding with the Union government meant that cases against him were largely not pursued, with a Terrorist and Disruptive Activities Prevention Act (TADA) court in 2009 keeping proceedings in abeyance in key cases, including the Rawalpora killings and the 1989 kidnapping of Mufti Mohammad Sayeed's daughter. Reopening the Sarla Bhat case, the SIA said the investigation had stalled due to the climate of fear and intimidation during the peak years of militancy, which prevented witnesses from coming forward. It described the case as a symbol of one of Kashmir's darkest chapters of terrorism.

What does it mean for Yasin Malik?

The 59-year-old separatist is currently in the Tihar Jail. He faces sentence on two counts of life imprisonment and five 10-year prison sentences in a terror funding case in 2022. However, the National Investigation Agency (NIA) has sought the death penalty in the case. Besides, Malik also faces fresh trials in two other major cases, including the kidnapping and the Indian Air Force attack. His outfit was also banned in 2019 under provisions of Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA).

The JKLF has distanced itself from the murder of Bhat. According to the banned JKLF, Malik on April 8, 1990, just 10 days before the gruesome murder of Bhat, jumped from a five-storey building in Narwara, Srinagar, to evade his arrest during a BSF raid.

The JKLF claimed that Malik suffered a head injury, which caused his facial paralysis, in the incident.

It claimed that the organisation had launched its own investigations into the killing "but could not carry it forward due to the continued raids by security forces on JKLF leadership". The fact remains that it will be the third major case of terror from the 1990s against Malik and he could face the death penalty if the charges are proven in the court.

Why is it tipped as a landmark development by police?

The police's SIA termed the chargesheet as a landmark development and a defining moment in J&K's fight against terrorism. The 737-page chargesheet was compiled after an "exhaustive investigation, bringing together a formidable body of oral, documentary, forensic, ballistic, medical and electronic evidence accumulated over decades and meticulously analysed".

The SIA says the chargesheet marks a historic milestone in the pursuit of justice for victims of terrorism and stands as one of the most significant breakthroughs in the investigation of legacy terror crimes in Jammu and Kashmir. The chargesheet, the SIA said, sends a powerful and unequivocal message that time can never become a shield for terrorism.

JUSTICE NARASIMHA TO BE PART OF SC COLLEGIUM AS JUSTICE MAHESHWARI RETIRES

Justice P.S. Narasimha is set to become a member of the Supreme Court Collegium following Justice J.K. Maheshwari's retirement on Sunday.

Being the fifth senior-most judge, Justice Narasimha will officially be a part of the Collegium until he retires on May 2, 2028.

Justice Maheshwari who retired on Sunday, demitted office after nearly five years.

The Collegium will now comprise Chief Justice Surya Kant, Justice Vikram Nath, Justice B. V. Nagarathna, Justice M. M. Sundresh, and Justice P. S. Narasimha.

Under the Collegium system, which came into existence in 1993 following a Supreme Court judgment, the five top judges of the apex court recommend the appointment, transfer, and elevation of judges to the Supreme Court and the 25 High Courts.

The government can return the recommendation to the Collegium under this system. While it usually accepts the recommendation if it is reiterated by the Collegium, there have been cases when the government returned the file or did not respond to the recommendation.

EVEN THE 'WICKED' HAVE THE RIGHT TO A LAWYER, SC HAD SAID IN A JUDGMENT

The Faizabad Bar's resolution to deny legal representation to the accused in the Ram Temple embezzlement case transgresses a Supreme Court judgment that even a "wicked" person has a fundamental right to a competent advocate.

The Supreme Court judgment that clearly enunciates this highest of the traditions of the Bar is based on a case originating in Tamil Nadu regarding a confrontation between a lawyer and local policeman in Coimbatore. The local Bar Association had passed a resolution that no lawyer would represent the accused policemen.

A Division Bench of Justices Markandey Katju and Gyan Sudha Misra (both retired now), in a 2010 judgment in A.S. Mohammed Rafi versus State of Tamil Nadu, declared that such resolutions by Bar bodies were "wholly illegal, against all traditions and professional ethics".

'Duty of a lawyer'

"Every person, however wicked, depraved, vile, degenerate, perverted, loathsome, execrable, vicious or repulsive he may be regarded by society has a right to be defended in a court of law, and correspondingly, it is the duty of the lawyer to defend him," Justice Katju famously observed in a short judgment.

The judgment referred to Article 22(1) of the Constitution, which mandates that an arrested person should not be "denied the right to consult, and to be defended by, a legal practitioner of his choice".

Again, the 'Standards of Professional Conduct and Etiquette' chapter of the Bar Council of India Rules require that an advocate is bound to accept any brief unless special circumstances justify refusal.

"Professional ethics requires that a lawyer cannot refuse a brief, provided a client is willing to pay his fee, and the lawyer is not otherwise engaged," the court said.

A boycott of an accused, even if he is a suspected terrorist, rapist, or mass murderer, was against all norms of the Constitution. The judgment is remembered for giving historical examples of lawyers, real and fictional, standing up for professional values.

Reference to Erskine

Justice Katju referred to Thomas Erskine's defence of Thomas Paine, facing treason charges for his pamphlet "The Rights of Man" on the French Revolution, even at the cost of losing his position as the Attorney-General for the Prince of Wales.

The Bench had quoted the "ringing words" of the fictional Atticus Finch in Harper Lee's book To Kill a Mockingbird about courage in profession: "Courage is not a man with a gun in his hand. It is knowing you are licked before you begin, but you begin anyway and you see it through no matter what. You rarely win, but sometimes you do."

THANK YOU, JUSTICE JAMDAR

Why can't citizens protest government decisions and raise slogans? The police are servants of the people, not of top government functionaries. That question and that statement by a single-judge bench of Bombay High Court need to be celebrated. In a way, in setting aside the externment order issued by Mumbai Police against a political activist, by pointing out that in the absence of evidence that the protester posed a danger to public safety or property, the order affected his constitutionally guaranteed fundamental rights, Justice Madhav J Jamdar was only abiding by the Constitution, in letter and spirit, in their fullest form. After all, the judiciary is the custodian of citizen freedoms and a bulwark against their encroachment if and when the state becomes overreaching. And yet, Justice Jamdar's order on Thursday is also extraordinary. These are times when amid rising polarisation and receding common ground, powerful governments seek to subdue institutions and dominate spaces. They label and criminalise dissent and crack down on political opponents. In the name of the people, they create an architecture of distrust of the citizen. They use democratic instruments to shrink democratic spaces. In times like these, the Bombay High Court has asked a powerful question and spoken a truth to democracy.

The petitioner in the case, Saeed Ahmad Abdul Wahid Chaudhary, general secretary of the Social Democratic Party of India, had organised or participated in protests, allegedly without police permission, against the BJP-led government's decisions on the CAA/NRC, Babri Masjid and sealing at the Gyanvapi mosque. These tangled issues have touched off concerns, especially vis-à-vis the rights of minorities. They call for conversations that make space for citizens to ask difficult questions and express grievances — not for the state to wield extraordinary legal tools against them to send out a chilling message and strip them of their freedom and dignity. When Justice Jamdar asks the police if citizens are being made "slaves of government" by slapping cases for opposing government decisions, he points to the danger that comes from institutions bending to power, smudging lines that separate them and imperilling spaces for checks and balances to kick in.

Justice Jamdar's order will, hopefully, strike echoes in the system. The state must not challenge it. This is an opportunity to correct course. The relief given to an activist by a judge in Mumbai could become a moment for reflection, an act of redeeming. But even if cynicism triumphs and this is a mere flash in the judicial pan, it did shine very bright. Thank you, Justice Jamdar.

AS M.P. JUDGE FACES ONLINE FURY, CASE TO PROTECT JUDICIAL OFFICERS LANGUISHES IN SUPREME COURT

Madhya Pradesh Additional District and Sessions Judge Tabassum Khan has faced online abuse and threats ever since June 12, when she sentenced a group of cow vigilantes to life imprisonment for lynching truck driver Sheikh Lala Nazir Ahmed in August 2022. This comes even as a suo motu case to protect judges like her from "pressure, intimidation, threats and actual violence" languishes in the Supreme Court.

The suo motu case was initiated after another Additional District and Sessions Judge Uttam Anand, this time from Dhanbad in Jharkhand, was mowed down by a vehicle while he was out for a morning jog in 2021. He had reportedly rejected bail petitions for some gangsters shortly before his death. The case had sent shockwaves across the nation, compelling the Supreme Court to sit up and take notice.

The then Chief Justice of India, N.V. Ramana, had summoned senior advocate K.K. Venugopal, the then Attorney-General of India, to express the court's concern about the rising instances of violence and maligning campaigns against the judiciary.

'Alarming situation'

"There is no freedom for judges to work," a visibly upset Justice Ramana had said in the open courtroom on August 6, 2021, pointing out that threats, abusive messages, and "peeping" into online accounts take not only a physical but also mental toll on judges.

A few days later, the top court transferred the investigation of Judge Anand's death to the Central Bureau of Investigation. Its August 9, 2021 order highlighted the need to "resolve the alarming situation in the country where judicial officers and lawyers are being pressured and intimidated by threats of, and/or actual violence. There is, therefore, an institutional need to create an environment where judicial officers feel safe and secure."

The same August 9 order tagged the suo motu case, In re: Safeguarding Courts and Protecting Judges, with an earlier writ petition filed by advocate Karunakar Mahalik, who had said there was a "crying need" for a "special security system to protect court premises and persons related to justice delivery system".

The Supreme Court Advocates on Record Association (SCAORA) has issued a statement "unequivocally condemning" the threats and "targeted social media campaign" against Judge Khan.

YEAR AFTER UMEED, WAQF DATABASE SHOWS 11% APPLICATIONS REJECTED, A THIRD FROM UP

A YEAR after the Centre launched a portal to create a digital inventory of geo-tagged waqf properties across the country, there's a question mark on the fate of 88,571 such properties whose details for registration have been rejected after scrutiny. These account for just 11% of the total 7,95,784 waqf properties sought to be registered.

Key Takeaways:

• Data available on the UMEED portal — the Unified Waqf Management, Empowerment, Efficiency and Development platform — show that a total of 5,87,804 properties or 74% of the total were approved for inclusion. The registration process is yet to be completed.

• Uttar Pradesh with 31,783 rejections accounts for almost 36% of the waqf properties nationwide that failed to find space on the UMEED portal. West Bengal with rejection of 14,134 waqf property applications accounts for 16% of the total rejections, and Rajasthan with 12,080 accounts for over 13% of total rejections. Following the non-inclusion of 88,571 properties, officials of waqf boards in several states told The Indian Express that they have "no idea" what will happen to the properties rejected by the portal.

• States that witnessed the maximum rejection of their Waqf property applications included Rajasthan (37%), Tamil Nadu (26%), Uttar Pradesh (22.23%). In absolute terms, a total of 7,95,784 waqf properties were sought to be included on the portal — 160,857 properties from Uttar Pradesh alone (20.1%) and another 1,34,545 (16.9%) from West Bengal. In Uttar Pradesh, which has two separate waqf boards for Shia and Sunni communities, 29,724 of the 1.52 lakh Sunni waqf property applications were rejected. Of the 8,171 Shia waqf property applications, 2,059 were rejected. In neighbouring Uttarakhand, 455 of the 2,468 property applications were rejected.

Do You Know:

• The Centre launched the UMEED portal on June 6, 2025, to create a digital inventory after geo-tagging all waqf properties. Details of all registered waqf properties across India were to be mandatorily uploaded within six months. On December 5 last year, when the six-month deadline for inclusion in the portal ran out, Union Minority Affairs Minister Kiren Rijiju said that there would be no penalty for those who had failed to register properties on the portal, and that they could approach the waqf tribunals in the states for an extension. Subsequently, state waqf tribunals granted extensions to upload the details. The extended deadline has already passed in some states, while it will run out in the coming days in other states.

• The process for getting a waqf property registered on the portal has three layers – initiation by maker (mutawalli or caretaker of a waqf property), a check by the "checker" (a designated district-level official or state waqf board official), and approval by the "approver" (senior waqf board officials in the state).

• In Uttar Pradesh, which has two separate waqf boards for Shia and Sunni communities, the Sunni Waqf Board saw 29,724 out of 1.52 lakh applications for properties being rejected. The Shia Waqf Board saw rejection of 2,059 properties out of 8,171 applications. Uttar Pradesh Shia Waqf Board chairman Ali Zaidi said: "As per the Waqf Act, there was no provision regarding the roadmap on what will happen to properties rejected (for inclusion) on the portal. We have received no information from the government on this."

MANUFACTURING JUSTICE

But for its serious implications, a judge relying on Artificial Intelligence (AI) hallucinations to arrive at a judicial determination would have been comical. Given the serious miscarriage of justice that such hallucinations can lead to, if used in the judicial processes, the Supreme Court of India has likened it to methyl isocyanate, the poisonous gas that led to the Bhopal gas tragedy in

1984 — "invisible, insidious, and catastrophic by the time anyone notices". The Court made these observations while setting aside the orders of the National Company Law Tribunal (NCLT) and the National Company Law Appellate Tribunal (NCLAT) in an insolvency case after finding that the NCLT had relied on fictitious AI-generated legal citations, a lapse overlooked by the appellate tribunal. This is the latest in a series of interventions by the Court this year, cautioning against the use of AI-generated fictitious judicial precedents in court proceedings. Through its rulings and oral observations, the Court has consistently adopted a strict and cautionary approach to the deployment of AI in the justice delivery system. On February 27, the same Bench of Justices P.S. Narasimha and Alok Aradhe took cognisance of a trial court relying on AI-generated fictitious case laws and underlined that it was not merely "an error in decision-making" but amounted to judicial "misconduct".

The Court has made clear that AI may serve as an assistive tool to improve efficiency, but it can never replace independent human reasoning, judicial discretion or professional accountability. In AI, humanity is encountering what many experts fear might well be an existential question. AI disruption is a known unknown — everyone knows that it is happening but nobody quite knows its extent or implications. There is, however, enough evidence of a combination of human stupidity and deliberate design leading to dangerous social outcomes being derived from AI. Human oversight is the essential counter to these dangers. The Court has said that presenting fabricated, machine-generated judgments to a court constitutes professional misconduct for advocates and a serious lapse of duty for judges; and any judgment influenced by an iota of fake or hallucinated AI material is "no decision in the eyes of law". The draft 'Regulations for Use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in Courts, 2026' prohibits AI in the making of judicial outcomes such as the function of adjudication, sentencing, or deciding bail eligibility and evaluating the credibility of parties or witnesses. Even as the draft is open for public consultation, the Court has directed the Bar Council of India (BCI) to set up a dedicated committee to formulate strict norms and define disciplinary actions for lawyers who cite unverified AI material. Justice must be done and seen; not hallucinated.

MAINTENANCE NOT MUST WHEN WIFE EARNS MORE: HIGH COURT

Trial courts cannot straightaway award maintenance to a wife because she files a petition against her husband under various laws, especially when she earns more than her husband, observed the High Court of Karnataka.

"Only because a wife files a petition invoking the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act or the Hindu Adoption and Maintenance Act or the Code of Criminal Procedure..., the courts cannot straightaway pass an order awarding some amount towards maintenance payable by the husband," said Justice Chillakur Sumalatha while setting aside an award passed by a trial court.

Income, other factors

The High Court said that "when the wife is financially sound and in a case where her income is more than that of the husband and where no other liabilities are found on part of the wife, like looking after the children, courts should not be inclined to pass an order granting maintenance on the ground that women are required to be maintained by men or wife is required to be maintained by her husband".

It should be borne in mind that only when it is shown the wife has no financial sources to maintain herself according to the standards of her husband, then courts are required to award maintenance either interim or final, the High Court clarified.

It made these observations while allowing a plea filed by a man who had challenged an award passed by a magistrate court in Mysuru under the provisions of the Domestic Violence Act, directing him to pay ₹20,000 per month as interim maintenance to his wife, who had sought an interim maintenance of ₹1.13 lakh per month.

INDIA BLOC WRITES TO CJI ON 'BIASED CONDUCT' OF EC; DMK, AAP SIGN LETTER

Twenty-three Opposition parties have sent a joint memorandum to Chief Justice of India Surya Kant alleging "biased" conduct by the Election Commission, highlighting the special intensive revision (SIR) carried out in States such as West Bengal and Bihar, as well as the ongoing exercise in other States.

The Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) and the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), which were not present at the meeting of the Indian National Developmental, Inclusive Alliance on June 8, have also signed the letter.

The AAP is not a part of the bloc, while the DMK had informed its allies that it would not attend the meeting, rebuking the Congress for what it described as a post-election "betrayal" after the party switched sides to the TVK-led government in Tamil Nadu.

The decision to send a joint letter was taken during the meeting, which was convened at the insistence of former West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee following the Trinamool Congress's defeat in the Assembly election. She had urged the INDIA bloc leaders to visit the State to project Opposition unity. However, the proposal did not find support. Instead, several leaders, especially Independent Rajya Sabha member and senior Supreme Court lawyer Kapil Sibal, suggested that a joint memorandum be sent to the Chief Justice on alleged electoral irregularities.

Announcing the move, Congress general secretary (communications) Jairam Ramesh said in a post on X: "The Opposition parties are firmly anchored in SURE — Solidarity, Unity and Resistance."

The INDIA bloc has not shared the contents of the letter. However, a senior leader said, "When all else fails, Indian democracy looks towards the judiciary. We have flagged the biased conduct of the Election Commission and the ways in which election results are manipulated."

The Supreme Court has already heard a petition on the SIR.

A two-judge Bench on May 27 unanimously upheld the SIR in Bihar, holding that the exercise was constitutionally valid, proportionate and within the poll body's powers under Article 324 of the Constitution and Section 21 (3) of the Representation of the People Act, 1950.

BILL CLAUSE FOR REMOVAL OF MINISTERS IN CUSTODY FOR 30 DAYS LIKELY TO BE RETAINED IN PANEL REPORT

The Joint Parliamentary Committee (JPC) examining the controversial 130th Constitution Amendment Bill that seeks to remove ministers detained for serious offences for 30 consecutive days is expected to adopt its report on July 17. A House panel adopting a report is a routine procedure before the Bill is tabled in Parliament.

Key Takeaways:

• While the report is likely to retain the contentious clause that proposes the automatic removal of the Prime Minister, Chief Ministers, or other ministers from office if they are arrested and detained in custody for 30 consecutive days for serious offences, there could be notes of caution to ensure that the law is not misused for political vendetta, sources said.

• The Bill will be taken up in the Monsoon Session of Parliament, likely to begin on July 20, for consideration and passage, sources said.

• Union Home Minister Amit Shah introduced the Bill in August last year, and a 31-member parliamentary panel chaired by BJP MP Aparajita Sarangi was formed to examine it.

• Most members of the panel from the INDIA opposition bloc, including from the Congress, boycotted the proceedings, arguing that participation was pointless as the ruling party would override the opposition's concerns and use the panel as a rubber stamp to clear the Bill.

• Members of the panel belonging to the ruling coalition, it is learnt, rejected the opposition's argument that the provisions in the proposed law are undemocratic, anti-federal and contradict the bedrock principle of natural justice by punishing public representatives purely based on custody rather than conviction.

• The treasury benches, it is learnt, argue that 30 days are enough to seek bail at least thrice and, therefore, the legislation does not violate the principle of natural justice.

• However, the panel's members – be it from the ruling coalition, the opposition and neutral parties – are convinced that the draft Bill should add provisions to avoid misuse of the law, sources said. This suggestion will be part of the recommendations, they added. The committee is also expected to recommend curbs or a threshold regarding the nature of the crime for provisions of the proposed law to apply.

Do You Know:

• The Constitution (130th Amendment) Bill, 2025, provides for the removal of a minister if he/she is accused of an offence punishable with five or more years of imprisonment, and has been arrested and detained for 30 consecutive days. The removal, according to the proposed Bill, can be directed by the President or Governor upon the advice of the Prime Minister or the Chief Minister, respectively, or automatically on the 31st day of detention.

WHICH DOCUMENT PROVES INDIAN CITIZENSHIP?

The story so far:

The Indian passport is not a "document of citizenship," a senior official of the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) said in response to a query from The Hindu this week. So, if a passport is not proof of citizenship, what is?

Is it a new development that a passport cannot be used as a document to prove Indian citizenship?

A passport by itself is not conclusive proof of Indian citizenship, and this is not a new development or announcement. Last week, the senior MEA official was responding to a question from The Hindu on whether the Indian passport can be used to challenge exclusion from the voters' list through the special intensive revision (SIR) of electoral rolls that is currently underway in 16 States. The official said: "The passport is a travel document, not a document of citizenship, and theoretically speaking, that distinguishes the passport from other documents. Even though while travelling abroad, the passport attests to your nationality, it is not a document of citizenship."

This stance is based on existing law. The government's Passport Manual says that "a passport provides evidence of the holder's nationality, but this is placed in the same category as any other evidence of the citizenship status of an individual". In other words, a passport is strong evidence that its holder is an Indian citizen. However, in law, it is not treated as conclusive proof of citizenship. If a person's citizenship is disputed, courts may examine it alongside other relevant evidence.

According to Maneka Gandhi v Union Of India (1978), issuance of passport is based on conclusive proof that the holder is an Indian national, and is "entitled by virtue of their Indian nationality and passports to the protection of the Indian Republic and assistance of its Diplomatic Missions abroad."

Under Section 6(2)(a) of the Passports Act, 1967, the authorities can refuse a passport if the applicant is not a citizen of India. But under Section 20 of the Act, the Union government may issue a passport or travel document to a person who is not a citizen of India if it thinks that it is necessary to do so in public interest.

The MEA's response distinguishes between evidence of citizenship and conclusive proof of citizenship. While citizenship is determined under the Citizenship Act, 1955, and passports are issued under the Passports Act, 1967, the existence of a passport cannot by itself be called a conclusive or definitive proof of citizenship in a dispute.

Can the Aadhaar card be used to prove Indian citizenship?

When the Aadhaar was introduced one and a half decades ago, it was promoted as a one-stop digital identification document which could replace the many documents that Indians had to furnish to avail themselves of benefits from multiple government schemes. However, from the beginning, the Unique Identification Authority of India has emphasised that Aadhaar can only be treated as proof of identity and address, not of citizenship. In fact, non-Indian citizens who are legally resident in India are eligible to get an Aadhaar, and often require the identity card to avail themselves of many basic services, from banking to cooking gas.

In its judgment of May 27 this year, when the Supreme Court upheld the constitutional validity of the SIR, it held that an Aadhaar card does not constitute proof of citizenship and, therefore, cannot be relied upon for that purpose. However, it is among the documents which may be produced for the limited purpose of establishing the identity of a person, it said.

Does a voter ID prove Indian citizenship?

Only Indian citizens are eligible to vote in Indian elections, but one's presence on the electoral rolls or possession of an Electoral Photo Identity Card does not determine citizenship or conclusively prove it.

In the case of Lal Babu Hussein v. Electoral Registration Officer (1995), the Supreme Court unequivocally held that electors whose names appear on electoral roll are entitled to a presumption of citizenship, and that this presumption cannot be displaced except by following the procedure prescribed by law.

However, in this year's SIR judgment, the Court emphasised that the Election Commission's role is confined to determining eligibility for electoral rolls. It cannot adjudicate citizenship, and the citizenship of an individual under the Citizenship Act will not cease on account of their ineligibility to register in the electoral rolls, pursuant to the SIR.

In fact, the passport was one of the 11 'indicative' documents listed by the Election Commission as proof of citizenship. Some voters purged from the draft SIR in Uttar Pradesh, for instance, used their passports to prove that they are citizens of India and should be included in the final electoral roll. However, there have been reported cases of people in West Bengal who hold Indian passports, but who were still deleted from the draft electoral lists during the SIR.

So what document proves citizenship?

While responding to a question in the Lok Sabha on August 12, 2025, the Home Ministry did not specify the "categories of valid documents" required for people to prove citizenship in India. "The citizenship of India is governed under the provisions of the Citizenship Act, 1955, and rules made thereunder," the Minister of State for Home, Nityanand Rai, said in a written reply.

Under the Citizenship Act, citizenship can be acquired by birth, by descent, by registration, by naturalisation and by incorporation of territory.

Citizenship certificates are generally issued to people who acquired citizenship by registration or naturalisation, and can act as a conclusive proof document. The majority of Indians, however, are citizens by birth or descent, and do not have a citizenship certificate. Instead, they rely on different evidence that prove their date of birth, place of birth, or their parentage, depending on the context of the dispute.

Anyone born in India between January 26, 1950 and July 1, 1987 is a citizen by birth, irrespective of their parents' nationality. Such people would have to produce documents proving their place and date of birth to establish their citizenship. Given that mandatory birth certificates were not issued in this period, many people use a combination of other documents, including educational certificates and Aadhaar.

For those born between July 1, 1987 and December 3, 2004, proof of their own place and date of birth is insufficient as they must also prove that at least one parent was an Indian citizen. For those born on or after December 3, 2004, one parent must be an Indian citizen while the other should not be an illegal migrant, complicating the documentary proof required.

India does not prescribe one universal citizenship document. An effort to create such a document through the National Register of Citizens became politically contentious amid fears of a nationwide verification exercise that could exclude many due to incomplete documents. As former Foreign Secretary Nirupama Rao said in a post last week, the lesson is that "India needs stronger and more comprehensive civil registration, universal birth registration and reliable archival records so that citizenship can never become hostage to missing or inconsistent paperwork."

DOES DIALLING 112 HELPS IN ALL EMERGENCIES? DEPENDS ON STATE YOU LIVE IN

Which helpline do you dial? This is often the first problem Indians face after an emergency. To integrate India's fragmented emergency helplines, the government launched the universal code 112. Here's why it chose that number.

Key Takeaways:

• To address this issue, the Union government launched the Nationwide Emergency Response System (NERS) number 112 in 2019 — just like the US's 911. It was intended to subsume all emergency numbers — such as 100 (police), 101 (fire), 102 (emergency medical services), 108 (ambulance), 1033 (highway), 181 (women), 1098 (child) and 1091 (woman in distress) — into one common code.

• But even after seven years of 112's launch, The Indian Express has found from Supreme Court submissions that only five states and Union Territories — Delhi, Kerala, Gujarat, Haryana and Lakshadweep — have integrated all emergency helpline numbers into the 112 NERS.

• Uttar Pradesh is close to achieving full integration, with only 102 (emergency medical services) left to be included.

• On May 26, the Supreme Court gave all states and Union Territories three months to complete the technical and operational integration of all emergency numbers into the 112 helpline.

Do You Know:

• It's not just India that has adopted this code. The 112 helpline number is also used by European member states and many other countries. It was the European Conference of Postal and Telecommunications Administrations (CEPT) that first recommended 112 as a common emergency number, way back in 1976. And it did so for two practical reasons.

• "First, telephones at that time had rotary dials, and dialing '112' took the least amount of time. Second, dialing the number '3' would lock the dial, so even if the phone was locked, '112' could still be dialed," says a 2019 report by the Uttar Pradesh government.

The CEPT also chose different digits rather than repeated digits like 111 or 999 to prevent accidental dialing. In modern-day touchscreens, too, the numbers 112 are easier to dial rather than, say, 108 or 102.

• In India, the decision to launch 112 ERSS system was taken on the basis of recommendation made by an expert committee on 2012 Delhi bus gangrape case. The Justice J S Verma committee — which also included former High Court Justice Leila Seth and former Solicitor General of India Gopal Subramanium — recommended setting up a public emergency response system that would have the ability to dispatch an emergency response unit to respond to and close emergency calls.

• Following this, the Department of Telecommunications allotted the emergency number 112 and the Ministry of Home Affairs formally launched it across India on February 19, 2019 through the Nirbhaya fund to provide a one-stop solution to all kinds of emergencies. In their responses to the Supreme Court, 16 states said they have partially integrated multiple helplines into the common code. Ten states had not carried out any integration. Three states' responses were not available.

AYODHYA DONATION THEFT CALLS FOR ACCOUNTABILITY

The Ram temple in Ayodhya has been the ideological lodestar of the BJP, the culmination of a three-decade-long movement that has reshaped Indian politics. After January 22, 2024, when the temple was consecrated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, it symbolised the fulfilment of the party's core promise. Like the Temple Construction Committee, members of the Shri Ram Janmabhoomi Teerth Kshetra Trust, formed in February 2020, were handpicked and entrusted with the management of one of independent India's most politically consequential religious projects. Since its inception, the Trust is estimated to have received around Rs 3,500 crore as donations in cash alone. Allegations of financial irregularities — theft and embezzlement of funds and valuables donated to the temple — therefore constitute not just a grave breach of that public trust but also point to a serious institutional failure. Due process must now run its course. Anything less will deepen the damage.

Even before the temple's construction, allegations of irregular land purchases around the complex, in which Trust officials were named, had raised troubling questions. In 2020, a private audit firm had warned that the absence of a robust oversight mechanism could undermine the Trust's accountability and fair practices. Its warning went unheeded. The report submitted by the Special Investigation Team of the Uttar Pradesh government has uncovered multiple lapses. Since then, eight lower-ranked temple officials have been arrested and a portion of the stolen funds recovered. The Trust's general secretary and another senior trustee have resigned. As the probe widens its ambit, UP CM Yogi Adityanath has promised strict punishment for those found guilty. Those words must now be matched by action.

If the Ram temple has been one pillar of the BJP's political identity, alongside implementation of the Uniform Civil Code and abrogation of Article 370, its governance has reiterated PM Modi's pledge of zero tolerance to corruption. That promise is now under scrutiny. Opposition leaders have demanded a court-monitored Central investigation, alleging a cover-up to shield senior Trust functionaries. Whether or not that charge is ultimately borne out, a government that claims the high moral ground, that demands accountability from everyone else, and that sees conspiracy in every criticism, cannot turn away when the reckoning comes to its own doorstep. The investigation must follow the evidence wherever it leads, without fear or favour.

HOW TEMPLES DEAL WITH DONATIONS

Every day, thousands of devotees quietly fold currency notes into temple hundis believing the offering has reached the deity. What follows is a carefully choreographed chain involving authorised personnel, counting halls, bank officials, auditors, and surveillance cameras — a system that remains largely invisible to pilgrims.

Key Takeaways:

• The recent allegations of theft of donations at the Ram Temple in Ayodhya have brought that hidden world into public view. But Ayodhya is far from the country's only temple handling massive offerings. Shrines such as Tirupati, Jagannath, Vaishno Devi, Siddhivinayak, and Kashi Vishwanath receive hundreds of crores in donations every year, besides tonnes of gold, silver, and jewellery.

• Across India's biggest temples, the broad donation chain is remarkably similar. Offerings placed in hundis are removed by authorised personnel, shifted to counting centres, segregated into cash, coins and valuables, counted and recorded before being deposited into designated bank accounts. The entire process is under CCTV surveillance.

• Where temples differ is not in the journey of the donation but in the institutions governing it — who supervises each stage, who appoints the people handling donations, and what legal and administrative safeguards exist to ensure accountability.

• At the Ram Temple in Ayodhya, donations from about 35 hundis are opened by authorised personnel, including trust officials and a State Bank of India (SBI) representative, and taken to a counting hall inside the Pilgrim Facilitation Centre.

• There, counting staff outsourced by SBI and trust employees count cash and jewellery under the supervision of retired banker Subhash Srivastava, while overall responsibility for the donation process rests with trust member Anil Mishra. Once verified, the collections are deposited into the trust's SBI account.

• Few religious institutions in the world process donations on the scale of Tirumala, and its famed Parakamani system has evolved accordingly. Permanent Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanams (TTD) finance personnel, representatives of nationalised banks, and carefully vetted volunteers — mostly serving or retired government and bank employees — work together to process donations under an extensive CCTV network monitored by the temple's vigilance wing.

Do You Know:

• Most of India's older major temples are administered under dedicated legislation enacted by state governments. TTD functions under the Andhra Pradesh Charitable and Hindu Religious Institutions and Endowments Act, the Jagannath Temple under the Shri Jagannath Temple Act, the Shri Mata Vaishno Devi Shrine under the Jammu and Kashmir Shri Mata Vaishno Devi Shrine Act, the Siddhivinayak Temple under a Maharashtra law governing its trust, while the Kashi Vishwanath Temple is administered under the Uttar Pradesh Shri Kashi Vishwanath Temple Act. These laws create the governing bodies, define the powers of administrators, prescribe financial procedures, provide for government oversight and statutory audits, and in some cases lay down detailed rules for handling donations.

• The Ram Temple follows a different model. The Shri Ram Janmabhoomi Teerth Kshetra functions through a trust deed rather than a dedicated statute governing the administration of the temple. Day-to-day management, including appointments and financial administration, rests with the trust.

• Another point of departure is the composition of the management itself. In several of the older temples, key financial processes involve executive officers, statutory administrators, government nominees, magistrates, auditors, or other public officials whose responsibilities are defined under law.

• At the Ram Temple, many of the key office-bearers associated with donation management — including General Secretary Champat Rai, trust member Anil Mishra, administrator Gopal Rao, and donation supervisor Subhash Srivastava — have long associations with the RSS or its affiliates. Responsibility for administration is therefore concentrated within the trust structure rather than distributed across a broader statutory administrative framework.

DELAYED HONOUR

War is secretive and strategy may require deception. But that is no good explanation for the fact that the Narendra Modi government took over a year before formally acknowledging that six soldiers had lost their lives in Operation Sindoor in 2025. India had launched cross-border military strikes in Pakistan in retaliation for the Pahalgam terrorist attack, in April 2025, that killed 26 innocent people. From the beginning, the government has been reluctant to share any meaningful details of Operation Sindoor even as it continuously kept the hyperbolic selfcongratulatory posture. Its decision to not publicly acknowledge and honour the supreme sacrifice of the fallen soldiers contemporaneously was hardly a sign of any wise strategy. Casualties can happen in any military operation and that is a key consideration in any military planning, and more importantly, the political decision to go to war or not. Not being transparent about losses, human and material, may serve the political interests of the ruling party, but not national interest. By trying to be clever and selective about facts, the government undermined its own credibility and did a disservice to those who paid with their lives. Soon after the operation concluded in May 2025, the then Director General of Military Operations (DGMO), Lieutenant General Rajiv Ghai, paid tribute, during a press briefing on May 11, 2025, to Indian military personnel who had made the supreme sacrifice, though their names were not disclosed.

The cremations were done with full military honours. In August 2025, Air Chief Marshal A.P. Singh visited the family of Sergeant Surendra Kumar, who was killed during the operation, while the Ministry of Defence also announced gallantry awards for the fallen personnel. Tributes were simultaneously carried on the Indian Army's official social media platforms. In the Lok Sabha on July 28, 2025, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh said that "no Indian soldiers were harmed" during Operation Sindoor. Following accusations that it has misled Parliament, the government is now explaining that the Minister's remarks were made in the context of reports that Indian aircraft were shot down and were meant to clarify that no pilot was killed during the mission. The government has also maintained that details relating to aircraft losses during the conflict remain operationally sensitive and refused to disclose them. There is a distinction to be made between operational secrecy and requirements of public accountability. War is a stark demonstration of the fact that it is the public that always pays for all actions of the government. A public accounting of the gains and the losses is the best way to ensure wise decision making.

SHARING WATERS

The coming together of the Chief Ministers of Karnataka (D.K. Shivakumar), Telangana (A. Revanth Reddy) and Andhra Pradesh (N. Chandrababu Naidu), along with Union Jal Shakti Minister C.R. Patil, at the inauguration of the 33 spillway gates of the Tungabhadra dam on June 25 was significant beyond the optics. The three leaders pledged greater inter-State cooperation, which is welcome given that the dam has largely remained free of major disputes due to an established water-sharing formula and the Tungabhadra Board's regulation of releases. Located in Karnataka's Koppal district, the dam is considered to be the lifeline of the three southern States, providing irrigation to about 16.4 lakh acres — 9.26 lakh in Karnataka, 6.25 lakh in Andhra Pradesh, and 87,000 in Telangana. It hit the headlines in August 2024 when a crest gate was washed away during heavy inflows — which also happened when the dam was full with 105 thousand million cubic feet (tmc ft) of water. The damaged gate was replaced with a temporary one, but with much water wasted, the authorities, who did not want to take chances with the other 32 gates, chose to install high-grade steel gates, at ₹51 crore and which are expected to last 60 years.

Notwithstanding the bonhomie, the differences among the leaders on some issues concerning the larger Tungabhadra project cannot be brushed aside. The Upper Bhadra project, a major lift irrigation scheme under implementation in the central region of Karnataka and upstream of the Tungabhadra dam, has emerged as an irritant for Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. At one stage, the BJP-led Union government had made a provision of ₹5,300 crore in its budget for 2023-24, a few months before the Karnataka Assembly elections. However, the Centre later chose not to include it under any of its schemes, but this is being implemented by a Karnataka government undertaking. It remains to be seen whether the spirit of camaraderie will help the three neighbours to overcome their differences on the Upper Bhadra issue. The Tungabhadra dam is also facing excessive siltation, which has reduced its storage capacity from the original 133 tmc ft to about 106 tmc ft. Mr. Patil has assured the Chief Ministers about the Centre's plan to remove silt from water reservoirs across the country including the Tungabhadra. More importantly, the Union government should closely monitor and expedite, wherever required, the execution of dam rehabilitation and improvement projects being taken up in 19 States. Any laxity with regard to dam safety may have disastrous consequences. The focus must be on prevention, not reparation.

THE AKAL TAKHT'S LASTING HOLD ON PUNJAB'S POLITICS

The Akal Takht has given the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP)-led Punjab government a month to remove certain "objectionable" clauses in its anti-sacrilege law. This came after almost all Sikh legislators cutting across party lines, including 78 MLAs and nine ministers, appeared before it on Monday in response to its summons.

Key Takeaways:

• The Jagat Jyot Sri Guru Granth Sahib Satkar (Amendment) Act, 2026, passed on April 29, has been criticised for expanding the definition of sacrilege to include "hurt sentiments" and prescribing draconian jail terms.

• The Takht's summons to the 78 Sikh MLAs and nine Sikh Cabinet ministers comes two weeks after it declared Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann "panth virodhi" (opposed to the panth), and issued an edict calling for his boycott over an objectionable video.

• Few institutions have shaped Sikh religious and political life as profoundly as the Akal Takht. Here is a look at what the Akal Takht is, how its authority evolved, and why its summons continues to carry weight.

• The Akal Takht, meaning "throne of the timeless one", is the highest temporal (worldly/political) seat of the Sikhs. It's located directly opposite the Golden Temple (Harmandir Sahib) in Amritsar.

Do You Know:

• The Akal Takht, which faces the Harmandir Sahib in the Golden Temple complex, was established by the sixth Sikh master Guru Hargobind in 1606 following the execution of his father, Guru Arjan Dev, by the Mughals.

• According to Sikh Studies scholar Amarjit Singh of Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar, Guru Hargobind used this platform for governance, and is believed to have issued the first directive (Hukamnama) from here, urging Sikh congregations to contribute horses and weapons to the Panth.

• The Guru is said to have requested two swords, symbolising miri (temporal power) and piri (spirituality). The sword representing miri was slightly shorter, indicating the primacy of spiritual authority over temporal power.

• The Akal Takht was also a symbol and representation of the Sikh defiance of Mughal authority. Historian Joginder Singh, a former professor at Guru Nanak Dev University, who has written extensively on Sikh history, noted that the 12-foot-high platform of the Akal Takht symbolised a challenge to the Mughal government in Agra (and later Delhi), where Emperor Jahangir (1605-

27), on whose order Guru Arjan Dev was executed, sat on an 11-foot-high throne, and forbade anyone else from doing so.

• The Akal Takht became the focal point for Sikhs during the difficult period following the execution of Banda Singh Bahadur, the general of the Khalsa army, in 1716, Prof Amarjit Singh said.

• As the Sikhs faced massive persecution from the Mughal state, members of the community would gather at the Akal Takht on Baisakhi and Diwali for Sarbat Khalsa assemblies where crucial decisions would be made.

• The tradition of the Sarbat Khalsa continued, and one of the last assemblies was convened by Maharaja Ranjit Singh (1801-39), the founder of the Sikh empire, in 1805 to deliberate on supporting the Maratha prince of Indore, Jaswant Rao Holkar, against the British.

YES AND NO

A new report, based on Rural Development Ministry surveys, opens a rare data-backed window into the erosion of India's grassroots democracy. But where the state has framed the issue as one of "vibrancy", the report highlights a paradox. It acknowledges that "participation fatigue" has kept citizens from engaging in gram sabhas whereas its solutions, such as more meetings and oversight, are a recipe to further alienate the rural working class. The 73rd Amendment empowers gram sabhas, but governments have reduced them to clearinghouses for central and State schemes. This fundamental aspect must change. However, in response to 18%-28% of respondents citing a lack of outcomes as the reason for low interest, the report pushes for greater use of the NIRNAY app and to upload meeting minutes in real-time. In the real world, panchayat secretaries thus have less time facilitating discussion even as lacklustre oversight has allowed officials to tell workers that their MGNREGA demands were 'not entered in the system' due to server errors. Similarly, that more than half of the barriers to participation are related to livelihoods could point as much to visibly systemic issues — such as the precarious nature of rural labour today — as to deliberate economic exclusion by the state, as scholars have highlighted. But the report does not acknowledge such divergent possibilities. Due to the state failing to institutionalise attendance as a paid component of social protection, gram sabhas have remained a playground for the leisured elite such as landlords and contractors.

According to the report, gram sabhas spend 13% of the time identifying local issues but only 4% discussing revenue generation. But gram panchayats have been systematically constrained from raising their taxes, leaving them dependent on grants. The 14th and 15th Finance Commissions grants tied panchayat spending to central priorities such as drinking water and sanitation, limiting local priorities to 'flagship' programmes such as the Jal Jeevan Mission and Swachh Bharat. There is thus no incentive for citizens to attend a meeting if the funds are being earmarked by Delhi bureaucrats. The report also states that Provisions of the Panchayats (Extension to the Scheduled Areas) (PESA) Act areas have "reasonably strong physical infrastructure". Under the PESA Act 1996 and related forest rights laws, gram sabhas have the right to provide prior informed consent for land acquisition and mining. However, the state routinely bypasses them or uses the excuse of low participation to manufacture consent. The Hasdeo Arand protests were rooted in this issue. There is a right to say 'no' and the state simply needs to acknowledge it. If 'yes' must be the only answer, the report's grouses are a farce.

FAKE PATENTS ARE POISONING INDIA'S RACE FOR ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE

A worrying new trend of 'fake patents', in which education companies sell thousands of patents registered in the U.K. to academics from India and elsewhere, has raised concerns among research integrity experts.

Authors, from the U.K. and the U.S., of a report published in the International Journal of Educational Integrity wrote "eight firms … are likely involved in the sale of thousands of U.K. registered designs to Indian academics for the purpose of academic reputation manipulation."

Patent offices don't examine design applications for novelty, innovation or uniqueness, and they award them quickly. This is unlike the more stringent process for patents, which are typically used to commercialise a new discovery, Subhash Lakhotia, Distinguished Professor at the Cytogenetics Laboratory at Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi, said.

Not all filed patents are accepted either, and only a small fraction of the accepted ones end up being used by industry. "Thus, the real value of a patent is when it is used by industry for a process or product," Prof. Lakhotia, who is also on the advisory board of India Research Watch, a watchdog on Indian research, said.

'Fake' patents, filed without any original research by the person (or persons) in whose name the patent is filed, "refer to a non-existing entity," he said. "This unhealthy and … unethical act is promoted by shady companies acting as patent-filing or facilitating agencies — they sell the authorship of a patent for a non-existing entity to academics, who gain by earning academic points during assessment for academic excellence."

In the report, the authors spotlighted firms selling inventorship positions on design patents in the U.K., but 'sales' have also been recorded from India and Australia. However, these countries don't issue design patents; they issue design registrations, Reese Richardson, a postdoctoral fellow at the Center of Science and Innovation at Northwestern University, U.S. and one of the authors of the report, said. According to her, design patents issued in the U.S. have to pass a novelty review and have a good chance of being rejected. Design registrations, on the other hand, are usually granted with minimal review.

Look and function

In the U.K., the design registrations Dr. Richardson's team studied were usually granted in around 11 days. "What clients are actually buying are ownership positions on these design registrations", she said. "Moreover, because these registrations are for 'designs', they cover the way an object looks, not how it functions," she added. So when an academic buys an "inventorship" on a "U.K. design patent", "there are a number of lies taking place," she added. "The academic has not invented anything; the device does not exist (let alone work); what they have obtained is not a patent; and it does not cover the functionality of the product even if it did work."

Yet these academics can then tell their employers they have obtained an "international patent", helping them towards a promotion. "As far as I am aware, selling fake patents has only emerged on the academic black market in India," Dr. Richardson said.

Prof. Lakhotia identifies three factors that contribute to this distinction: the large population seeking education and jobs, the use of quantitative metrics without any serious assessment of quality, and the reliance of nearly all international and national academic ranking agencies on quantitative parameters.

"Other related problems have emerged because of the insistence of Indian rankings on patents," Dr. Richardson added. "For instance, many private Indian universities have been filing thousands of utility patents in India in the hopes of pumping up their numbers, often more than the IITs, combined. However, … less than 2% of these patents actually wind up being granted."

According to Prof. Lakhotia, an urgent step to curb the growing global menace of fake patents and papers is to stop all institutional rankings based on quantitative data. In the absence of independent verification, institutions unethically inflate these data, he said.

"The mere filing of a patent … must not be used for assessment," he explained, and that only patents used by industry should be included. And "the agencies that brazenly broker such fake patents and research publications must be taken to task severely." "We need to have stronger mechanisms to identify, catalogue, and respond to scientific misconduct," Anant Bhan, adjunct professor at Yenepoya (deemed) University, Mangaluru, and an expert on bioethics, said.

Some research funders in India, like Anusandhan National Research Foundation, and some regulators have been looking into using retractions as indicators. "We do need to ramp up efforts" and have a nimble regulatory oversight and governance system, Dr. Bhan added.

DO UNPRECEDENTED SECURITY MEASURES ADDRESS NEET'S REAL VULNERABILITIES?

The National Eligibility-cum-Entrance Test (NEET) has evolved into one of India's most high-stakes examinations, where a student's medical career often depends on performance in a single three-hour test conducted once a year. Intense competition for medical seats, immense social prestige, and the high economic value of a medical degree create enormous academic, financial, and psychological pressure.

The stakes are further amplified by management quota admissions, for which several crores of rupees may be offered, particularly in family-owned hospitals. In such an environment, paper leaks, impersonation, unfair means, coaching-centre collusion, insider access, and other forms of malpractice are not merely security failures but manifestations of the powerful incentives surrounding medical admissions.

Following the NEET-2026 controversy, the Union government made unprecedented security arrangements for Indian public examinations. Coordinated by the Cabinet Secretary and involving the Air Force, paramilitary and police forces, AI-enabled surveillance, biometric authentication, GPS-tracked logistics, and nearly seven lakh personnel, the exercise was comparable in scale to China's Gaokao. It demonstrated that the logistics of a high-stakes examination can be secured through an extraordinary national security and administrative effort.

Yet the central question remains: do these unprecedented measures address the real vulnerabilities of NEET, or merely its most visible component — the physical movement of question papers and personnel?

Recurring anomalies

Since its inception in 2013, NEET has repeatedly faced controversies involving allegations of paper leaks, score inflation, and unusually high-performing candidates emerging from particular centres, rooms, families, and coaching hubs. Concerns have also been raised about the weak correlation between NEET performance, Class XII marks, and subsequent performance in medical education. The repeated occurrence of these concerns warrants closer scrutiny.

The credibility crisis was serious enough to trigger a complete re-examination in 2015 (then AIPMT) and extraordinary interventions following the NEET-2024 controversy. The 2024 episode exposed systemic weaknesses, including an incorrect question paper, grace marks, inflated scores, and an unprecedented clustering of candidates' near-perfect scores.

More significantly, weeks before NEET-2026, highly targeted question compilations reportedly circulated across several parts of the country. Following the examination, many candidates claimed that an unusually large number of questions closely matched the circulated material. Yet no intelligence, cybersecurity, law enforcement, or the National Testing Agency (NTA) appears to have acted on these signals before the controversy surfaced through a whistleblower's FIR, ultimately leading to the cancellation of the examination.

Official submissions before the Supreme Court emphasised compliance with the Radhakrishnan Committee recommendations and the establishment of SOPs, while treating the leak allegations as arising from specific inputs. If the NTA detected no credible abnormality, what justified cancelling NEET-2026 and imposing enormous social, psychological, and economic costs on over two million students?

Where do leaks really originate?

Most past investigations failed to establish any printed paper leak, yet the NEET-2026 re-test security architecture was overwhelmingly focused on protecting printed question papers. This raises an obvious question: does the primary vulnerability lie elsewhere?

Before printing, question papers pass through question setting, moderation, translation, and digitisation, during which a small group of individuals has privileged access. The recurring appearance of highly targeted, accurate question compilations and coaching material closely resembling examination content points towards possible information flows at these source stages.

The risk increases when the same experts reportedly participate repeatedly across years and examinations while maintaining direct or indirect links to the coaching ecosystem. Such leakages need not involve complete papers; fragments, themes and high-probability questions may be sufficient to create a substantial advantage. If information is selectively transmitted through insider networks, recurring leakages can occur without a single printed question paper ever being leaked or recovered.

Will isolation of experts prevent leaks?

Keeping question setters, moderators, and translators in isolation assumes that leaks occur only after they are confined. But if their identities and information are already circulating through informal networks, isolation does not address the real source of risk.

The larger concern is the repeated engagement of some experts across years and examinations, often amid allegations of links with coaching ecosystems and other commercial interests.

In such circumstances, information advantages need not take the form of a leaked paper; they may appear as targeted question banks, recurring themes, or unusually accurate predictions.

The real issue, therefore, is not confinement for a few days, but the integrity, independence, and conflict-free selection of experts. Without safeguards against conflicts of interest, repeated engagements, and entrenched networks, isolation may leave the underlying vulnerability untouched.

Unaddressed vulnerabilities

Despite unprecedented security arrangements, several critical vulnerabilities remain outside the current security framework.

One of the most significant vulnerabilities is the absence of rigorous conflict-of-interest avoidance and antecedent verification for question setters, moderators, and translators. Alleged links between some experts and coaching or commercial ecosystems raise concerns about the integrity of the question-setting process itself. No amount of surveillance or expert isolation can compensate for a compromised source. Stringent background checks, conflict-of-interest scrutiny, and intelligence-based monitoring are therefore essential safeguards.

The National Medical Commission Act, 2019, mandates a single uniform entrance examination, not unlimited participation over decades. Yet NEET imposes neither an upper age limit nor any restriction on attempts, with nearly half of the candidate population reportedly being repeaters. This creates a large pool of long-term aspirants increasingly dependent on coaching ecosystems and susceptible to information asymmetries. While repeated attempts may improve familiarity with the examination, academic ability and professional suitability cannot be expected to improve indefinitely through repeated attempts alone.

The problem is compounded by the fact that the qualifying threshold is fixed at the 50th percentile; the larger the pool of long-term repeat candidates, the lower the effective qualifying score tends to become. Unlimited attempts and a low eligibility threshold encourage repeat participation and create conditions in which unfair practices can thrive.

NEET-2026 also exposed vulnerabilities beyond question papers. A teenager reportedly accessed candidate accounts and attempted to divert refund payments. At the same time, an ethical hacker reported access to super-administrative functions, including observer management, appointment letters, and backend data exports. Meanwhile, AI-enabled surveillance and monitoring systems reportedly failed to detect warning signals associated with the widely circulated “guided papers” controversy, even as portal glitches persisted.

These incidents point to weaknesses in cybersecurity and examination preparedness.

These are only some of the visible vulnerabilities. The bigger challenge is to understand where information advantages come from, who benefits from them, and how they spread through networks of coaching centres, intermediaries, insiders, and commercial ecosystems.

The way forward

NEET-2026 demonstrated that a high-stakes examination can be conducted under an unprecedented security apparatus. However, securing the physical movement of question papers is only one part of the challenge.

Future reforms must focus on the examination ecosystem itself: rigorous conflict-of-interest and antecedent verification of experts, stronger cybersecurity safeguards, intelligence-based monitoring of organised examination networks, and a review of structural vulnerabilities such as unlimited attempts, the absence of age limits, and the low qualifying threshold for private admissions.

Unless these vulnerabilities are addressed, additional layers of security may relocate the risk rather than eliminate it.

Ultimately, the credibility of NEET will depend not on how securely question papers are transported, but on whether the entire admission ecosystem is transparent, conflict-free, and genuinely merit-driven.

WHAT IS THE TET PAPER LEAK CASE?

The story so far:

The Special Investigation Team (SIT) is probing an inter-State paper leak racket after the Maharashtra Teacher Eligibility Test (TET) was postponed following an alleged leak. Investigators suspect the accused have links to similar paper leak cases in other States.

What is Maharashtra TET?

The Maharashtra Teacher Eligibility Test is an examination that assesses candidates' proficiency in subjects such as mathematics, science and languages for teaching roles. It is mandatory under the Right to Education Act to recruit primary school teachers for Classes I to VIII. As per guidelines issued by the National Council for Teacher Education, each State conducts its own

In Maharashtra, the examination is conducted by the Maharashtra State Council of Examination (MSCE), headquartered in Pune.

Why was the examination postponed?

The examination was scheduled for June 28. However, on the eve of the examination, the Maharashtra State Council of Examination postponed it after a police probe found that the papers had allegedly been leaked.

The last-minute postponement has affected more than six lakh candidates.

What is the paper leak scam?

Acting on a tip-off, the Thane Police laid a trap last week and arrested three accused who were allegedly trying to sell examination papers for ₹1.5 crore. Police had received information that a group of men was attempting to sell papers across Mumbai, Thane, Pune, Solapur, Nagpur, and Indore.

According to police, two separate groups of men from Bihar and Haryana reached Bhiwandi during the last weekend of June to allegedly sell four TET papers, apparently unaware of each other but believed to be operating under the same kingpin situated in Bihar. They allegedly planned to target coaching classes and sell the papers for ₹1.5 crore, with individual candidates being charged around ₹1.5 lakh each.

During the investigation, police used a decoy to pose as a buyer. The accused allegedly showed the question paper during a video call and then negotiated its sale.

After verifying the authenticity of the seized material, police arrested three individuals: Rajeev Shriprayag Shaw (Bihar), Akash Kumar Swaraj Kumar (Bihar), and Dheeraj Balraj Singh (Haryana). One of Dheeraj's associates, Kapil Dahiya (Haryana), reportedly managed to escape and remains absconding.

How many people have been booked so far?

A first information report (FIR) has been registered by the Thane Police against six persons so far. Four of them have been arrested. A Look Out Circular (LOC) has been issued against the two absconding accused.

Investigators have identified one of the absconding accused, Bijendar Kumar Baleshwar Kumar Sah, a resident of Patna, Bihar, as the alleged mastermind of the scam. Maharashtra Police also arrested his wife, Suman Kumari Gupta, from Patna.

Police are probing the accused's links to similar scams in other States. Officials investigating the case said Bijendar Kumar was allegedly involved in a 2024 Odisha paper leak scam. They also suspect his involvement in other paper leak cases, including the NEET scam, a senior officer said.

Why do the police suspect a larger network?

Police suspect a larger network because of the way the Maharashtra TET question papers were handled and distributed. The question papers are printed in Agra, where police say papers for other examinations are also printed. Investigators are examining possible locations of the paper leak and the likelihood of a nexus between different groups.

According to the investigation, the MSCE has signed a contract with Mahim Patram Private Limited, a company based in Agra and registered in Delhi, to print the TET papers. Police said the company has been handling similar contracts for the past 60 years.

As per procedure, MSCE hands over sealed question papers to the company about two months before the examination. These papers are then printed under security protocols and transported to examination centres.

Police are investigating the possibility of a leak at any stage in this process, which spans over two months. "After handing over the sealed papers, MSCE or Maharashtra Education Department officials are not present during printing or the tracking of the papers," police said.

Police teams are also probing the possibility of a leak during the transport of sealed papers to the examination centres. In the current case, the recovered papers carry serial numbers from the Latur, Jalna, and Washim centres. Each centre has a different serial number. This is a security measure put in place to help identify the source of a leak, if one occurs.

So far, 10 different teams have been formed by the SIT probing the case. These teams have travelled to four States, including Haryana, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and Delhi. Some teams have also visited Latur, Jalna, and Washim in Maharashtra.

The Maharashtra government is considering invoking the stringent provisions of the Maharashtra Control of Organised Crime Act against the accused.

FIXING THE ROT

Corruption in public life is often linked to "malfeasance", the venality of government officials in high places taking bribes and misusing their positions to enrich themselves or their cronies. But a more corrosive variant that impinges upon public life includes the systematic subversion of public examinations and recruitment. This is because public examinations and teacher recruitment are pathways to creating skilled individuals in a rapidly modernising economy where jobs increasingly depend on skills and training. Corruption in these processes, which should ideally be done on merit, will erode India's ability to fully realise its demographic dividend. Be it the National Testing Agency having to re-conduct NEET for medical undergraduate aspirants, or, the postponement of the Maharashtra Teacher Eligibility Test just before its scheduled date (June 28), the malaise seems depressingly familiar. It is driven by a cottage industry that leaks papers through insider networks and targets the vast coaching ecosystem to rake in money from those seeking shortcuts to pass. In the Maharashtra case, the alleged kingpin — a Patna resident suspected of links to an Odisha paper leak scam in 2024 and even to the NEET scam — reportedly ran teams from Bihar and Haryana that sought to sell papers to coaching classes.

Eerily, a similar template surfaces in scam after scam. In Gujarat, the alleged mastermind of the 2023 junior-clerk recruitment exam leak was an employee at a Hyderabad press that printed the paper. In 2024, in Jammu and Kashmir, a printing-press insider and security men were chargesheeted in the 2022 services board exam leak case. In Rajasthan, the December 2022 teacher-recruitment paper was sold by a serving government teacher. The common element is the presence of insider networks that have worked out ways to scam the system. The vulnerability lies not only in how question papers are distributed, but also in how they are set, with the repeated involvement of a select group of experts — many are linked to the coaching ecosystem. This is why the ritual of hunting for "kingpins" and running performative investigations until public attention fades leaves the core problem untouched. Pertinent questions are rarely addressed. Is the paper set by the same closed pool of examiners each time? Are their antecedents and commercial links verified? Do the departments that run these exams scrutinise examiners for conflicts of interest? Lastly, even if the system undertakes such reforms, it would be incomplete without accountability. Education Ministers — at the Centre and States — must own these failures. When leaks recur as routinely as they now do, the Minister who presides over the system should not remain in the post.

GOVT LOOKS AT STRICTER RULES FOR VPN PROVIDERS: OFFICE IN INDIA, APPOINT COMPLIANCE OFFICIALS

The Centre is working on an expansive legal framework to curtail virtual private network (VPN) providers that could require them to establish a local India presence and appoint key personnel to serve as a liaison with the government, The Indian Express has learnt.

Key Takeaways:

• This comes after a controversial directive in 2022 by the Indian Computer Emergency Response Team (Cert-In) which required VPN service providers to store a vast amount of customer data, including their names, email IDs, contact numbers and IP addresses.

• However, a new legal framework is now being seen as necessary due to an implicit acknowledgement that the 2022 directives may not have been able to yield satisfactory results.

The primary concern that the government has is that VPNs are being increasingly used by people to get around the blocking of apps and online content.

• The new framework could require VPN operators to establish offices in India and hire compliance officers who can address grievances raised by the government, two senior government officials told The Indian Express. Penal consequences, including jail terms for local employees, are also being considered in case of non-compliance, it is understood. Much of these requirements and penalties are also present for large social media companies under India's Information Technology (IT) Rules, 2021.

Do You Know:

• VPN services allow users to mask their IP addresses and browse the Internet via servers located elsewhere, making it appear like the traffic is coming from a different jurisdiction, while hiding the original location. India's censorship orders typically require companies to geo-block content within the country's jurisdiction, so, by using a VPN server located in the US, for instance, people can visit content that has been blocked here. They are also a way to anonymously browse the web, and are largely seen as a privacy-enhancing service.

• India has stepped up its content blocking ecosystem in recent years, with over 24,000 orders issued in 2025, up from the over 12,000 orders it had issued in 2024, The Indian Express had earlier reported.

• Another official said the need for having local points of contact for VPN companies is being felt so that the government can direct these services to not allow access to content that is being blocked, as such services "otherwise defeat the purpose".

• For instance, when the Centre temporarily blocked Telegram ahead of the NEET-UG retest last month, David Peterson, general manager at Proton VPN, a major VPN provider, said that daily registrations for the service from India jumped by more than 120%. Peterson's post on X and his account were both blocked in India after he shared this information.

• The 2022 Cert-In directive required VPN service providers along with data centres and cloud service providers, to store information such as names, email IDs, contact numbers and IP addresses (among other things) of their customers for a period of five years. In response, VPN operators like Proton VPN, NordVPN, ExpressVPN and Surfshark, had removed their servers physically located in India and had started routing traffic coming from India via Singapore.

INDIAN AND FOREIGN

The controversy over introducing a third language from Class 6 stems from an unresolved contradiction in the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. At several places, the NEP, rightly, extols the special importance of English, especially in mathematics, science and even legal education, and does not club it with other "foreign" languages such as French or Spanish. At the same time, it advocates the three-language formula, with two languages required to be native to India, one of them ideally the mother tongue, in effect relegating English to the status of a foreign language. The Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) has implemented this aspect of the NEP, ignoring other welcome observations that the policy makes on language learning. While introducing three languages from Class 6, it said students in Classes 7, 8 and 9 should also study three languages, of which two should be "Bharatiya". Thus, if a student had taken French as a second language along with English, they would have had to forego French and switch to two

Bharatiya languages, one of which would be entirely new to them. This could adversely affect their Class 10 Board examination performance, and render redundant the teaching capacity and resources schools had built in those languages. Following backlash, the CBSE has said that students in Classes 7, 8 and 9 need take only one additional Bharatiya language if they had taken English and, say, Spanish. The third language, moreover, will not be tested in the Class 10 examinations. These are, however, temporary arrangements and the CBSE is going ahead with the three language policy with two Bharatiya languages from Class 6.

Prudence demands that if the NEP is to guide the Union government's decisions, it should ensure language learning that serves the best interests of students. The policy speaks of the need for "high-quality bilingual textbooks and teaching-learning materials for science and mathematics, so that students are enabled to think and speak about the two subjects both in their home language/mother tongue and in English". Here, the NEP places the mother tongue and English on an equal footing if STEM is to be central to India's progress. In the same breath, it speaks of the importance of learning languages such as Japanese and German at the secondary level to enhance students' "mobility". The government's vision is to skill Indians for cutting-edge jobs worldwide, building the human capital needed to drive India's development. Instead of atavistic relapses, education initiatives should look ahead to serve at least this vision, even if that model is open to question. Given that the CBSE often becomes the template for much of India, the better course would be to teach the mother tongue and English and, where resources permit and students desire, offer a third language of their choice.

WHY EGGS MATTER FOR SCHOOLKIDS

At a time when several states continue to debate whether eggs should be part of school mid-day meals, the discussion often centres on culture, ideology or personal food choices. Lost in that debate is a far more fundamental question: what does science say?

Key Takeaways:

• For millions of Indian children, especially those from low-income households, the mid-day meal may be the most nutritious meal of the day. Decisions about what goes on that plate must, therefore, be guided by evidence, not perception. And the evidence on eggs — as a source of complete, affordable and highly bioavailable protein (which is well-utilised by the body upon consumption) — is difficult to ignore.

• All nutritional guidelines suggest that 10-35% of our daily calories should come from protein-rich foods. Protein is also necessary for building lean mass, burning fat, increasing metabolism, slowing blood sugar release, and helping the body repair itself. However, "The issue is not just of protein from animal or plant sources. The most important one is, how much of that protein can the body actually use," Dr Seema Gulati, Head, Nutrition Research Group at the National Diabetes, Obesity and Cholesterol (N-DOC) Foundation, Delhi, tells Rinku Ghosh. N-DOC is a non-profit that partners with the Indian Council of Medical Research to research and prevent metabolic diseases.

• The answer begins not with grams of protein, but with amino acids, the tiny building blocks of life from which every muscle fibre, hormone, enzyme and immune cell is made. The human body requires 20 amino acids, of which 11 can be manufactured internally. The remaining nine must come entirely from food.

• Egg protein naturally contains all nine essential amino acids in proportions remarkably close to human requirements. It is also highly digestible, allowing the body to absorb and utilise it more efficiently compared to other foods. This bioavailability is why eggs have long served as the international reference protein against which the quality of other proteins is assessed.

• Plant proteins tell a more complex story. Soybean is undoubtedly among the highest-quality plant proteins available and comes closer than most plant foods to providing a balanced amino acid profile. Yet, like other plant proteins, it is best viewed as part of a dietary mix rather than a standalone solution.

• Nutritionists, therefore, recommend combining legumes with cereals — dal with rice, rajma with rice, khichdi, roti with chana, or millets with pulses — so that one food compensates for the amino acids another supplies in smaller amounts. For vegetarians, this principle of protein complementation is fundamental with legumes, dairy, and nuts. An egg, by contrast, has that balance already built in. Plant proteins may seem inadequate individually. But they achieve their full nutritional potential through intelligent combinations. Cereals and pulses complement one another. Dairy and soy enrich the overall amino acid profile. Apart from combinations, there are always fortified foods.

Do You Know:

• Choline is a nutrient that receives far less public attention than protein, despite being indispensable for brain development, memory, nerve signalling and liver health. Whole milk provides around 14–16 mg of choline per 100 g. Paneer contains roughly 15–20 mg, while cooked soybean offers about 44–45 mg. Eggs provide 290–300 mg of choline. In simple terms, eggs contain almost seven times more choline than cooked soybeans and nearly 20 times more than milk or paneer.

• Each food brings something valuable to the table. Cooked soybeans are an excellent source of dietary fibre (7.92 g), iron (2.88 mg), magnesium (66.1 mg) and potassium (571.9 mg). It also contributes useful amounts of thiamine, niacin and folate, making it one of the strongest plant-based protein foods available.

• Paneer stands out for its 18.9 g of protein and its exceptionally high calcium content (476 mg per 100 g), making it an important food for bone health. It also contributes phosphorus, zinc and biotin in meaningful amounts. Milk remains one of the most accessible sources of calcium, riboflavin and high-quality dairy nutrition. A boiled egg provides high-quality complete protein, meaningful amounts of riboflavin, pantothenic acid, biotin, phosphorus, iron and zinc, together with one of the richest natural sources of choline, all within a single, compact food.

• The accompanying fats and carbohydrates also determine how a food fits into a balanced diet. Per 100 g, boiled eggs contain 10.54 g of fat and virtually no carbohydrates, making it naturally suited to diets that prioritise high-quality protein. Cooked soybeans provide 6.79 g of fat, 3.57 g of carbohydrates, and an additional 7.92 g of dietary fibre, offering a combination of plant protein, complex carbohydrates and fibre that supports sustained energy release.

• These differences illustrate that while eggs stand out for their complete protein and micronutrient density, soybeans contribute valuable fibre and plant nutrients, paneer offers concentrated dairy nutrition, and milk provides a balanced everyday source of energy and nutrients. Each food serves a distinct nutritional purpose rather than competing on a single parameter. But from the lens of nutrition science, the humble egg continues to hold its place as one of the most complete and easy-to-prepare foods.

BUYER BEWARE

Tracking down defective batches of drugs is essential

The Health Ministry's notification to expand Schedule H2 drugs to entire therapeutic classes now from a curated list of brands earlier is a commendable change from regulating based on revenue to regulating based on risk. The government had introduced Schedule H2 in 2022-23, which required a barcode or QR code on each pack of specific drugs to verify the pack's authenticity. It is part of a framework that also touches on regulating active pharmaceutical ingredients and export-oriented pharmaceutical compliance. Now, with the additional symbols encoding a product identifier, the manufacturing licence number, batch number, and other details, authorities hope to better track down defective batches. Counterfeit networks have long targeted vaccines, cancer medicines and antimicrobials, with WHO flagging high volumes of fake antimicrobials in low- and middle-income countries. India has one of the world's highest antimicrobial resistance rates, and substandard antimicrobials can lead to sub-therapeutic dosing, exerting selection pressure on resistant strains. The Narcotics Control Bureau has also expressed concerns about medicinal opioids and psychotropic substances 'leaking' into illicit markets. The government will hope that the new system addresses the U.S. FDA's and the European Medicines Agency's recurring concerns about quality control, an issue on which India has found itself on the back foot over contaminated cough syrups. The U.S. Trade Representative has also repeatedly identified India as a leading source of counterfeit medicines, with many fake pharmaceuticals seized at the U.S. border originating from or transiting through India.

Together with policy changes effected by the Jan Vishwas Act 2026, the new framework finally distinguishes between procedural non-compliance and substantial non-compliance, considering only the latter constitutes meaningful enforcement. In the long term, the government should rationalise the compliance burden and eliminate the risk of corruption associated with discretionary enforcement. The government must also recognise that the QR code system will only be effective if backed by a state-managed database that pharmacists and regulators can access in real time, supported by interoperable software and scanning infrastructure across States. Second, pharmacists and consumers must develop a habit of verifying medicines before a sale. Third, the compliance needs imposed by new packaging requirements and the IT integration will strain MSME manufacturers in particular. Finally, prescription data on controlled substances is sensitive information and will need to be handled with a digital governance layer that does not yet exist. Thus, whether the new framework will improve India's reputation as a pharmacy comes down to its implementation.

WHY MORE MEDICINES WILL NOW HAVE QR CODES ON THEIR PACKETS

The Centre has recently mandated that all vaccines, antimicrobials, narcotics and addictive drugs, and anti-cancer drugs carry a bar code or QR code, which can enable the tracking of each vial or blister pack of the medicine. This type of track-and-trace mechanism allows regulators as well as the companies to follow the entire journey of every single unit of the product right from the manufacturing plant to the retail store.

Key Takeaways:

• The tracking mechanism will be implemented for the new categories of products over the next two years — by July 2027 for vaccines, narcotics, and anticancer drugs and by July 2028 for antimicrobials, according to the recent gazette notification.

• Manufacturers of all medicines listed under the Schedule H2 of the Drugs Rules are required to affix a unique bar code or QR code on the primary package of the medicine, or in case of dearth of space, on the secondary packaging. A new schedule H2 was created in the Drug Rules, 1945 four years ago when the tracking mechanism was first initiated. This schedule lists the top 300 brands — and now the four new category of products — which have to implement the tracking system.

• In addition to the unique identification number for the particular blister pack or vial, the QR code or bar code also has to carry the following information: the brand name and generic name of the drug, name and address of the manufacturer, batch number, date of manufacturing, date of expiry, and manufacturing licence number.

• While most drugs in the market already carry this information on their pack, the QR code based tracking system requires the manufacturers, wholesalers, distributors, and retailers to log these products on specialised track and trace platforms.

Do You Know:

• The main aim of making the journey of the medicines traceable is to prevent counterfeiting. A drug can be counterfeited by either releasing products into the market with no active ingredient or diluting a drug to increase quantities for sale.

• A track and trace mechanism can help regulators identify whether the spurious drug was manufactured by a company trying to cut costs or was a completely fake product packaged like a known brand. It can also help regulators identify whether a product was contaminated at the source — at the manufacturing plant of a company — or was tampered with.

• Importantly, the possibility of tracking every single unit also means that regulators and companies know exactly where to find their products in case there is a recall.

OVER 99% OF BIRTHS, DEATHS REGISTERED IN 2024: REPORT

India's latest civil registration data, CRS 2024, released on Wednesday, suggest that registration is improving across the country, and that sex ratio at birth is improving in some places, but progress remains uneven across the States and Union Territories.

India's sex ratio at birth is 917 females per 1,000 males, meaning that 917 girls are born for every 1,000 boys.

While there is no surprise in the strong performance of Kerala (970 females per 1000 males) when it comes to sex ratio at birth, other States and Union Territories such as Arunachal Pradesh (1,050), Andaman and Nicobar Islands (984), Meghalaya (974), and Mizoram (972), are also top performers.

The weakest figures are from Nagaland (865), Lakshadweep (865), and Jharkhand (890).

A sex ratio at birth that is close to the biological norm, or slightly above it, is an indicator that birth rates are not heavily distorted by sex selective abortions/terminations. India, with its legacy issue of a son preference has struggled towards achieving a balance in sex ratio at birth historically. A masculine skew at birth has long dominated headlines in several parts of the country.

Haryana and Punjab have recorded the lowest child sex ratios at birth. In the 2011 Census, Haryana recorded 834 girls per 1,000 boys, followed closely by Punjab at 846. The battle to correct the skew has been long and hard fought from a policy level. The number of still births in 2024 was recorded as 81,117 with a heavy urban tilt, with 69% of still births happening in urban centres.

The civil registration system has continued to expand its coverage, and improving registration will offer a clearer picture of the country's demographic transition.

Expanded coverage

Registered births rose from 2.52 crore in 2023 to 2.54 crore in 2024, while registered deaths increased from 86.6 lakh to 89.4 lakh. Thirteen States recorded above 90% of births and 15 States recorded above 90% of deaths. The CRS report shows that the level of birth registration reached 99.1% in 2024 and the level of death registration reached 99.4%, both extremely close to full coverage.

The rise in registrations does not necessarily mean that either fertility or mortality is rising sharply; it means the system has begun to capture births, deaths, still births and sex ratio at birth more comprehensively.

T.N. WOMAN DIES AFTER BOTCHED HOME BIRTH; HER HUSBAND BOOKED

A 32-year-old woman from a village in Tiruppur district died of post-partum haemorrhage and related complications on Sunday, after she gave birth to a baby at her home, allegedly assisted by her husband watching YouTube videos on birthing, on June 24.

The police said that following complications, K. Sasikala, of Punjaithalavaipalayam in Uthukuli taluk, was taken to a private hospital in Coimbatore, where she died on Sunday morning.

The woman went into labour in the early hours of June 24. Her husband Kolanthasamy, 35, and mother-in-law assisted in the delivery, allegedly watching videos of natural childbirth on YouTube. She gave birth to a female child, the police said.

The woman developed post-partum haemorrhage as the placenta was not expelled after the childbirth. She was taken to the Government Erode Medical College and Hospital at Perundurai. Thereafter, she was admitted to a private hospital in Coimbatore on June 25 and died without responding to treatment on Sunday, the police said.

On a complaint filed by the Block Medical Officer, Kunnathur, the Uthukuli police registered a case against Kolanthasamy, under Section 105 (punishment for culpable homicide not amounting to murder) of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita.

"The deceased woman's family members did not want to file any complaint. They said the couple had planned for a natural delivery at home," Uthukuli Inspector S. Saravanan said.

Health Department sources said the infant was healthy and stable after the delivery. The couple has a six-year-old daughter, born in an institutional delivery in 2020. The department launched an inquiry and found that the woman was not registered under its maternal and infant care tracking system.

The police and Health Department officials are investigating further.

IN CHHATTISGARH'S HASDEO FORESTS, MINISTRY'S GREEN NOD FOR COAL MINING IN KENTE BLOCK

In Chhattisgarh's Hasdeo-Arand forests, the Environment Ministry has accorded environmental clearance for mining in the Kente extension integrated coal block ,with a projected production capacity of 9 million tonnes of coal per annum.

Key Takeaways:

• The environmental clearance (EC), issued on June 24, comes close on the heels of the in-principle forest clearance granted for the integrated open cast mining and washery proposal. The ministry's sectoral expert appraisal committee on coal mining had recommended EC for the project in January 2025. The grant of final EC, though, was linked to the in-principle forest approval, which was issued on June 9.

• This is the third major coalfield that has been granted clearance in the Hasdeo forests. Parsa and Parsa East Kente Basan (PEKB) open cast mines are already operational in the forests — once earmarked as a no-go zone for mining to protect forests and wildlife.

• The Kente extension coal block, spread over 1,760 hectares in Surguja district, was allotted to Rajasthan Rajya Vidyut Utpadan Ltd in 2015. The Adani Group is the mine developer and operator. Coal extracted from this mine will be transported to Rajasthan to feed the Chhabra and Suratgarh coal plants.

Do You Know:

• Captive use of coal refers to mining coal specifically for an organization's own consumption—primarily for steel, power, and cement production—rather than for open-market sale.

• The Hasdeo Arand is referred to as the "lungs of Chhattisgarh", with a wealth of biodiversity. According to the Indian Council of Forestry Research and Education (ICFRE), Hasdeo Arand is the "largest un-fragmented forests in Central India consisting of pristine Sal (Shorea robusta) and teak forests."

The Hasdeo-Arand Coalfield (HAC) covers an area of 1,879.6 sqkm, spanning three districts of Sarguja, Korba and Surajpur, in the northern tribal belt of Chhattisgarh.

• As per a 2021 report by the Wildlife Institute of India (WII), nine species in HAC have special protection under schedule I of the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972. These include Elephant, Leopard, Sloth Bear, Indian Grey Wolf, Honey Badger, Four-Horned Antelope, Indian Pangolin, Giant squirrel, and Rusty spotted cat. There are 92 species of birds in Hasdeo and 25 different mammals,16 types of snakes. Its also a habitat as well as a corridor for elephants and a corridor for tigers.

• According to the ICFRE in 2021, there are 640 floral species, 128 medicinal plants and 40 timber-yielding species of plants.

GOATS, CATTLE CONSTITUTE HALF OF CHEETAH PREY IN KUNO; CHITAL 42%, REVEALS REPORT

Goats and cattle together make up 50%, while Chital (spotted deer) formed 42% alone of the detected kills by 19 free-ranging cheetahs under Project Cheetah in the Kuno National Park and wildlife division landscape, according to the latest Project Cheetah progress report, which also identified continuous prey augmentation and improvements in habitat as central to sustaining reproductive cheetahs and the growing size of cubs.

Key Takeaways:

• Reflecting dietary diversity and prey availability challenges faced by the project, the progress report for September 2024 to December 2025, released by the Union Environment Ministry on Sunday, noted that the dietary diversity reflects 'ecological adjustments', with evidence of small Indian civet kills, as well as opportunistic preying of birds and other small mammals.

• India has 53 big cats under Project Cheetah. "Continuous monitoring of the cheetahs, as found during the previous two years, showed that the main prey species hunted by cheetahs in and around Kuno NP was chital. In the free-ranging environment, chital accounted for 42% of detected kills, followed by goat (30%), cattle (20%), Nilgai (2%), hare, sambar, chinkara, sheep, and wild pig (1% each)," the report stated.

• Free-ranging mothers with cubs, such as Jwala and Gamini, demonstrated higher hunting frequencies, indicating elevated energy demands, the report noted. "Notably, certain free-ranging groups exhibited predation on domestic livestock, particularly goats and cattle… underscoring the importance of proactive negative interaction mitigation and community engagement measures," the report noted.

• Jwala and her cubs, released into free-ranging areas in early 2025, predominantly relied on domestic goat kills, accounting for 40%, followed by cattle and chital. Agni and Vayu, male cheetahs fed mostly on chital (39%), followed by domestic cattle (26%), domestic goats (19%), sheep (10%), and Nilgai and wild pigs (3% each).

• Detailed tracking and analysis of their movements also showed the free-ranging cheetahs are moving far and wide, with some, like the male cheetah Agni, exploring a vast area of 3,198 sq km in the first 30 days since its release from the enclosed area. This was also witnessed recently in April as KP-2, a young male cheetah, made his way into Ranthambore's tiger forest and had to be immobilized to get him back to Kuno.

• Project Cheetah Director Uttam Kumar Sharma said it is natural for cheetahs to explore long distances and vast territories, and they have been found to have covered 12 districts, six each in Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan.

Do You Know:

• Kuno National Park in Sheopur district is spread over 748.76 sq km with adjoining forest areas falling within Kuno wildlife division, collectively covering 1,235 sq km, now increased to nearly 1,800 sq km. The national parks form part of the larger Sheopur-Shivpuri dry deciduous open forests spanning 6,800 sq km, and the Kuno River traverses the park area.

• Initiated in 2022, Project Cheetah saw the introduction of African cheetahs in Indian grassland and dry forest landscapes in Kuno through the first intercontinental translocation. A founder population of 20 cheetahs – 8 from Namibia and 12 from South Africa – was imported for the project. From 20, the population has now grown to 53, comprising 13, 17 sub-adults, and 23 cubs.

• Along with Kuno, three cheetahs are also hosted at Gandhi Sagar Sanctuary in Neemuch and Mandsaur districts, Madhya Pradesh.

DEATH OF RADIO-TAGGED VULTURE 'Z25' — REINTRODUCTION, RADIO TELEMETRY & CONSERVATION THREATS

Why in News

A captive-bred, radio-tagged white-rumped vulture (Gyps bengalensis), coded 'Z25', was electrocuted on a power line near Ebbanad village on the Sigur plateau (Mudumalai Tiger Reserve, Nilgiris, Tamil Nadu) on 28 June 2026. Its death ended India's first attempted reintroduction of a captive-bred white-rumped vulture into a South Indian landscape, and has renewed focus on power-line electrocution as a major threat to vultures and other large birds.

Context

The white-rumped vulture is a Critically Endangered (IUCN) species that suffered a catastrophic population crash of over 99% since the early 1990s, caused by veterinary use of diclofenac — an anti-inflammatory drug fatal to vultures feeding on treated cattle carcasses. India's response has included a 2006 diclofenac ban (veterinary use), the Action Plan for Vulture Conservation 2020-25 (MoEFCC), a network of Vulture Safe Zones, and captive-breeding centres — including the Jatayu Conservation Breeding Centre (JCBC) at Pinjore, Haryana, run by the Haryana Forest Department with the Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS), under the international SAVE (Saving Asia's Vultures from Extinction) consortium. This case is the first field test of releasing a JCBC-bred bird into a wild South Indian population, making it significant for reintroduction protocol and infrastructure-related mortality alike.

Key Facts

A. The Bird & Reintroduction Timeline

- 'Z25' — a captive-bred female white-rumped vulture from the Jatayu Conservation Breeding Centre (JCBC), Pinjore, Haryana (BNHS + Haryana Forest Department).
- Radio-tagged along with four other white-rumped vultures at Tadoba on 22 December 2025; all five released at Tadoba-Andhari Tiger Reserve, Maharashtra, on 30 December 2025.
- Within 1-2 weeks, Z25 left Tadoba and flew south, eventually reaching Kalaburagi (Gulbarga), Karnataka, where it was captured by the Karnataka Forest Department after showing signs of illness, and treated at Kalaburagi Zoological Park.
- Following consultations between BNHS, Karnataka Forest Department, and Tamil Nadu authorities, Z25 was released at the Mudumalai Tiger Reserve (Nilgiris) —

home to South India's last sizeable white-rumped vulture population — on 7 April 2026.

- The bird failed to acclimatise, was recaptured and re-released multiple times, and made repeated exploratory forays to Gudalur, Kallatti and Ebbanad before being electrocuted on a power line at Ebbanad on 28 June 2026.

B. Radio Telemetry & Behavioural Findings

- Z25's movements were tracked in real time via radio telemetry, with data monitored remotely at BNHS's Tadoba establishment.
- Telemetry data showed the bird was unusually drawn to humans — likely conditioned during its stay at Kalaburagi Zoological Park and by occasional human feeding at Mudumalai — and was assessed as 'not fit for the wild'.
- Based on this data, BNHS was considering moving Z25 to a breeding centre for captive breeding before the electrocution occurred.

C. Conservation Response & Identified Threats

- Power-line electrocution is flagged as a recurring cause of vulture deaths in the Nilgiris region over recent years.
- Arulagam (a Nilgiris-based vulture conservation NGO; secretary S. Bharathidasan) has called for bunch-cabling and insulation of power lines crossing vulture habitats.
- R. Kiruba Shankar, Field Director of Mudumalai Tiger Reserve, said the Forest Department will consult BNHS and researchers to understand why Z25 failed to acclimatise, and to check whether other captive-bred releases elsewhere faced similar issues.
- The Forest Department is also considering bird diverters on transmission lines in the region.

- The Tamil Nadu Forest Department held a workshop in April 2026 to formalise Vulture Safe Zone (VSZ) planning specifically for the Nilgiris landscape — a stronghold for three of the world's most threatened vulture species (white-rumped, Indian long-billed, and red-headed). This is the first state-level move toward giving VSZs legal, landscape-scale status in this region, and directly follows from the same conservation concerns highlighted by Z25's death.
- For comparison: India's other major power-line-vs-bird case is the Great Indian Bustard (GIB). The Supreme Court's original 2021 order for blanket undergrounding of transmission lines was modified in March 2024 on cost/feasibility grounds, and a final calibrated framework was issued on 19 December 2025 — undergrounding ~80 km of 33kV lines in Rajasthan and ~79 km in Gujarat, rerouting higher-voltage lines, and banning new wind/solar installations above 2 MW in priority GIB habitat.

Comparative Snapshot: Two Bird-vs-Power-Line Conservation Cases

Aspect	White-Rumped Vulture (Z25) — Nilgiris	Great Indian Bustard — Rajasthan/Gujarat
IUCN Status	Critically Endangered	Critically Endangered
Primary Historic Threat	Diclofenac poisoning (veterinary NSAID)	Habitat loss & power-line collision/electrocution
Key Intervention Type	Captive breeding + reintroduction (ex-situ)	Litigation-driven infrastructure change (in-situ)
Power-Line Response So Far	Under discussion — bunch-cabling, bird diverters proposed	Court-mandated undergrounding of select lines (Dec 2025 order)
Lead Agency/Body	BNHS, State Forest Departments, JCBC	Supreme Court, Wildlife Institute of India, MoEFCC

Static-Dynamic Linkage

- Prelims GS-I/III: Species-specific facts — Gyps bengalensis, IUCN status, Wildlife (Protection) Act 1972 Schedule; India's vulture conservation programme (JCBC, Vulture Safe Zones, Action Plan for Vulture Conservation 2020-25).
- Mains GS-III: Environment & Ecology — conservation of endangered species, ex-situ vs in-situ conservation strategies, challenges in captive-bred reintroduction (imprinting/habituation risk).
- Mains GS-III: Infrastructure-linked biodiversity threats — power-line electrocution/collision as an anthropogenic hazard, comparable to the Great Indian Bustard case.

Analysis

Significance: This is the first attempted reintroduction of a JCBC-bred white-rumped vulture into a South Indian wild population, so its failure is a direct data point for India's broader vulture recovery strategy, not just a local incident.

Implications: Radio telemetry proved valuable — it correctly flagged the bird's poor wild-fitness before death, showing the need for stronger pre-release fitness screening and possibly longer soft-release/monitoring periods before captive-bred birds are exposed to unprotected areas with power infrastructure.

Criticisms/Challenges: Power-line mitigation (bunch-cabling, insulation, diverters) remains at the proposal stage in the Nilgiris, unlike the court-enforced, if contested, GIB framework — highlighting how infrastructure retrofitting for bird safety often lags behind captive-breeding investment. It also raises the question of whether human-habituated captive-bred individuals should be reintroduced into unprotected, human-adjacent landscapes at all, versus being retained for breeding.

⚠ EXAM ALERT

- Do not confuse this case with the Great Indian Bustard case — different species, different primary historic threat (diclofenac vs habitat loss/power lines), though both now involve power-line mortality risk.
- Z25 was released twice in two different reserves — first at Tadoba-Andhari (Maharashtra, December 2025), then at Mudumalai (Tamil Nadu, April 2026) — a common date/location mix-up point.
- The bird died of electrocution (contact with a live power line), not collision — a frequently confused distinction in MCQs on bird-power line interactions.
- White-rumped vulture's population crash (>99% since the early 1990s) was due to diclofenac, a veterinary NSAID — not habitat loss, which is often the wrongly-assumed cause in distractor options.

ℹ DO YOU KNOW

- The Jatayu Conservation Breeding Centre (JCBC), Pinjore, Haryana — named after the mythological vulture Jatayu from the Ramayana — is run by the Haryana Forest Department with BNHS and is part of the international SAVE (Saving Asia's Vultures from Extinction) consortium.
- The Nilgiris landscape (including Mudumalai) is a stronghold for three of the world's most threatened vulture species: white-rumped, Indian long-billed, and red-headed vulture.
- Radio telemetry — fitting a bird with a radio transmitter tracked via receivers/antennas or satellite — is also used to study migration routes, home ranges, and cause of death in wildlife, beyond just monitoring reintroduction success.

★ POSSIBLE PYQ ANGLE

- Mains (GS-III): 'Captive breeding and reintroduction are key strategies for endangered species recovery, but they carry distinct risks. Discuss with reference to recent vulture conservation efforts in India.'

✓ QUICK REVISION

- Z25, a JCBC-bred white-rumped vulture, was released at Tadoba (Dec 2025), moved via Karnataka to Mudumalai (April 2026), and was electrocuted on a power line at Ebbanad on 28 June 2026 — ending India's first South Indian reintroduction attempt for this species.
- Radio telemetry showed the bird was too human-habituated for the wild; BNHS was considering moving it to a breeding centre before it died.
- Power-line electrocution is a recurring vulture threat in the Nilgiris; Arulagam and the Forest Department are now pushing bunch-cabling, insulation, and bird diverters, alongside a fresh April 2026 push to formalise Vulture Safe Zones in the region.
- Comparable case: the Great Indian Bustard, where the Supreme Court has mandated selective undergrounding of power lines (final framework, December 2025).

INDIA ADDS 709 NEW SPECIES TO ITS FAUNA DATABASE

India added 709 species to its fauna in 2025, which includes 483 species new to science and 226 species recorded for the first time in India. The country also added 353 taxa to its flora, of which 14 are infraspecific taxa.

The details of new discoveries and new records by the Zoological Survey of India and Botanical Survey of India were released by Union Minister for Environment, Forest and Climate Change Bhupender Yadav in Kolkata on Tuesday.

Kerala highest in fauna

"India's total faunal biodiversity now stands at 1,05,953 species, reaffirming its status as one of the world's premier mega diverse nations," a press statement from Zoological Survey of India said.

A State-wide analysis of the new animal discoveries point out that Kerala recorded the highest 98 new species of animals, followed by West Bengal with 76 species, Karnataka 67 species and Arunachal Pradesh 65 species of fauna.

Among the animal groups added to the country's fauna database, Hymenoptera contributed the highest number of additions (106).

This was followed by Lepidoptera (65), Diptera (64), Arachnida (64), Coleoptera (55) and Pisces (50), reflecting the remarkable diversity and continuing discovery of India's invertebrate fauna.

Among the crucial fauna discovered in 2025, Myotis himalaicus, a new species of Himayalan bat. Ptyctolaemus mamdaphaensis and Ptyctolaemu siangensis are two newly discovered species of green fan-throated lizard and Lycodon irwini, a species commonly known as Irwin's wolf snake.

Of the 353 plant taxa added to the country's floral database, 221 taxa have been described as new to science, while 132 taxa represent new distributional records for India, thereby expanding the known geographical range of several plant groups and enriching the country's floristic inventory.

A State-wise analysis of the plant discoveries indicates that Arunachal Pradesh emerged as the leading contributor with 49 discoveries, followed by Uttarakhand (39) and Kerala (37).

Vascular plants

The Plant Discoveries, 2025 documents 154 angiosperms, three pteridophytes, 13 bryophytes, 62 lichens, 93 fungi, 22 algae, and six microbes. Among the most notable discoveries are several wild relatives of economically and ecologically significant plant groups, including Begonia, Impatiens (balsams), legumes, and orchids.

"Approximately 43% of the newly described taxa belong to vascular plants, while the remaining discoveries comprise a wide array of non-vascular organisms, highlighting the growing scientific attention being accorded to these ecologically significant groups," a press statement by the Botanical Survey of India said.

Among the plants discovered Polystichum siangense, a recently discovered species of fern belonging to the family Dryopteridaceae found in Siang district of Arunachal Pradesh, Miliusa beddomei, and new wild member of the custard apple family discovered from Western Ghats and Hericium indicum is a recently discovered species of wild edible tooth-fungus.

WHAT IS INDIA'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE PYTHAGOREAN THEOREM?

The square on the longest side of a right-angled triangle equals the sum of the squares on the other two sides. Known as the Pythagorean theorem, we are usually told that a Greek philosopher named Pythagoras discovered it around 500 BCE. But the real history is far more interesting and far more complicated than that.

This geometric truth was discovered independently by several ancient civilizations, each arriving at the same insight through their own practical needs. India's contribution, recorded in a set of ancient texts called the Sulvasutras, is genuine and impressive. But it was not the first.

To understand the history of this geometry, we need to place the contribution of Baudhayana, the author of Sulvasutras, alongside the achievements of Mesopotamia, Egypt, China, and Greece, rather than simply declaring India to be the first or the greatest.

The oldest recorded evidence from Mesopotamia

The oldest recorded evidence of the Pythagorean relationship does not come from Greece or India. It comes from Mesopotamia, the land between the rivers Tigris and Euphrates in modern-day Iraq, where a highly organised civilisation of scribes and accountants left behind thousands of clay tablets.

Two of these tablets are especially important for historians of mathematics. The Plimpton 322 tablet, dated to around 1800 BCE, contains columns of numbers that are systematically organised Pythagorean triples. The YBC 7289 tablet goes even further, showing an accurate calculation of the square root of two by drawing diagonals across a tilted square.

These are not accidental results. They show that Babylonian mathematicians had a deep and working knowledge of the geometric relationship that we call the Pythagorean theorem, more than a thousand years before Pythagoras was even born.

The contribution of Egypt

Egypt's contribution is less thoroughly documented, partly because Egyptians wrote on papyrus, a material far more perishable than clay. The two most important early Egyptian mathematical papyri do not explicitly state the theorem. However, the Cairo Mathematical Papyrus, dating to around 300 BCE, contains nine problems directly involving the Pythagorean relationship.

It is also widely believed, though difficult to prove conclusively, that the builders of the pyramids used the 3-4-5 rule — a simple Pythagorean triple — to ensure that the massive square bases of their structures had perfectly right-angled corners. The practical demands of monumental architecture seem to have driven mathematical discovery here, as they did in several other ancient cultures.

The equally remarkable contribution of China

China's contribution is equally remarkable and is often overlooked in Western accounts of mathematical history. In China, the theorem is known as the Kou-ku theorem, and it appears in an ancient text called the Chou Pei Suan Ching, which was compiled around the sixth century BCE.

What makes the Chinese case particularly striking is the Hsuan-thu, a visual proof of the theorem that is regarded by historians as one of the earliest and most elegant demonstrations of the relationship anywhere in the ancient world. The Chinese arrived at this independently and used it for similar practical purposes involving surveying, construction, and measurement.

Did Pythagoras discover the theorem?

As for Pythagoras himself, historians are frank about the fact that he almost certainly did not discover the theorem that bears his name. Greek records suggest he travelled extensively in Egypt and Mesopotamia, where he would have encountered these mathematical ideas.

The first formal and rigorous Greek proof of the theorem was recorded by Euclid, the most prominent mathematician of Greco-Roman antiquity, in his best known treatise on geometry the Elements, nearly three centuries after Pythagoras died.

The theorem was named after him partly because of the prestige of Greek learning in later European scholarship, and partly because his school did important work in developing a mathematical and philosophical framework around these ideas.

India's contribution and the Sulvasutras

India's contribution comes through the Sulvasutras, a set of ancient texts composed between roughly 800 and 500 BCE. The name means "sutras of the cord", and these texts were written by priest-craftsmen who needed precise geometry to construct complex Vedic fire altars of specific shapes — falcons, tortoises, and other sacred forms.

The author Baudhayana gave what historians regard as the first clear and unambiguous verbal statement of the theorem, explaining that a cord stretched along the diagonal of an oblong produces an area equal to the combined areas produced by the two sides.

The Sulvasutras also enumerate several Pythagorean triples, including 3-4-5 and 5-12-13, and provide a procedure for calculating square roots, accurate to the fifth decimal place. This is sophisticated mathematical work by any standard.

What the historical evidence shows, taken together, is that the Pythagorean theorem belongs to no single civilisation. It emerged independently, in different forms and for different purposes, across the ancient world. India was neither a leader nor a laggard in this story. Placing India among peers, rather than above them, is not a demotion. It is the beginning of real history.

PETROGLYPHS IN KONKON

— The Maharashtra government is making technology meet archaeology by using Artificial Intelligence (AI) to scientifically analyse, classify and interpret the origin and cultural etymology of thousands of prehistoric petroglyphs scattered across the Konkan region.

— Petroglyphs are stone carvings of animal figures or humanoids, found in the lateral plateau regions across Ratnagiri and Sindhudurg districts of coastal Maharashtra.

— The carvings mainly comprise figurines, including turtles, elephants, peacock and rhinoceros. These were discovered throughout a series of expeditions and excavations carried out between 2017 and 2023.

— According to archaeologists and experts, the origin of these carvings ranges between 20,000 BC and 10,000 BC and is older than the Harappan civilization whose earliest phase dates back to 7,000 BC-5,000 BC. The carvings have an average size of 50 square metres by 20 square metres.

Do You Know?

India's first Petroglyph Conservation Park will open at Sindhu Ghat in Leh. The foundation stone was laid in April this year by L-G Vinai Kumar Saxena. The Petroglyph Park aims to serve as a dedicated conservation space for centuries-old rock carvings (petroglyphs) that are increasingly under threat due to unregulated tourism, rapid infrastructure development, and a lack of awareness.

SHORT NEWS

NASA'S SWIFT BOOST MISSION

— NASA has successfully launched a first-of-its-kind rescue mission, Swift Boost mission, aimed at extending the life of one of its longest-serving space observatories.

— The mission sent a privately built spacecraft into orbit to rendezvous with the ageing Neil Gehrels Swift Observatory, which is gradually losing altitude and faces eventual destruction as atmospheric drag pulls it back toward Earth.— The mission also marked the final flight of Northrop Grumman's Pegasus XL rocket, bringing an end to a launch vehicle that has served the space industry for more than three decades.

— Launched in November 2004, the Swift Observatory was designed to study gamma-ray bursts and other high-energy cosmic events. More than 20 years later, the telescope continues to deliver valuable scientific observations.

— However, increased solar activity has intensified atmospheric drag in low Earth orbit, causing Swift's orbit to gradually decay. Unlike many newer spacecraft, Swift was not designed with propulsion systems capable of raising its own orbit, leaving it vulnerable to eventual re-entry.

— Over the coming weeks, LINK will gradually approach Swift while observing the spacecraft to determine the safest location for capture.

— The servicing spacecraft is equipped with three robotic arms that will secure the observatory before using ion thrusters to slowly raise both spacecraft back to a more stable orbit over several months.

NCB ANNUAL REPORT 2025

— A total of 747 foreign nationals were arrested in India in 2025 in narcotics cases, with the highest numbers from Nepal (203), Nigeria (143), and Myanmar (97), according to the Narcotics Control Bureau's (NCB) Annual Report 2025.

— India also saw a significant rise in narcotics-related enforcement in 2025, with the number of people arrested in anti-drug operations increasing sharply.

— Encrypted messaging platforms such as Telegram, WhatsApp and Signal have become major channels for drug trafficking worldwide, including in India. Of these three, Telegram has emerged as a key platform for drug-related advertising.

— The report by the apex drug law enforcement agency also flagged a trafficking corridor from Myanmar into India's Northeast as a major security concern, warning that the drug trade in the region is linked to arms smuggling and financing of terror groups.

— The report flagged two emerging threats that require urgent attention: the spread of nitazenes, a class of synthetic opioids said to be 500 times more potent than heroin, and the increasing link between drug trafficking and organised violence across transit economies.

INDIA'S FIRST INTEGRATED BATTLE GROUPS (IBG)

— The Army is set to establish and operationalise its first Integrated Battle Groups (IBG) by next month.

— The Indian Express has learnt that a self-contained, agile, brigade-sized fighting unit will be carved out of the Panagarh-based XVII Corps — the mountain strike corps (MSC) facing China — for swift deployment in mountainous areas.

— Each IBG, comprising over 5,000 troops, will have battalions of infantry, artillery regiments, Corps of Electronics and Mechanical Engineers, Combat Engineers, Army Service Corps and a field hospital.

— The IBGs will be especially crucial in mountainous terrains, as their agile nature allows rapid deployment, eliminating the wait for the entire corps to mobilise.

— The creation of the IBGs is part of a larger restructuring plan of the Army, which includes the creation of Bhairav battalions, Rudra brigades, Divyastra batteries and Shaktibaan units.

'VIJAY' Roadmap

— Assuming charge as the 31st Chief of Army Staff on 1st July, General Dhiraj Seth underlined the need to take forward the modernisation of the Army with "renewed energy and firm resolve to respond effectively to the evolving security environment."

— Stating that the Indian Army is a combat-ready and battle-hardened force, fully prepared and capable of meeting every challenge in the operational domain, he listed his focus areas in the acronym 'VIJAY'.

'V' stands for Vigilance along borders and against emerging threats.

'I' stands for Innovation and Transformation through innovation in both doctrine and technological solutions

'J' stands for Jointness and Integration

'A' stands for Atmanirbharta and, with indigenous capabilities and technologies developed within the country

'Y' stands for Yodha First, adding that from the Agniveer to the senior-most veteran, each army personnel is a yodha (fighter).

LOW GRAM SABHA TURNOUT: NIRDPR STUDY FINDINGS

A NIRDPR (Hyderabad) study commissioned for the Ministry of Panchayati Raj has identified livelihood pressures and "participation fatigue" — repeated meetings without visible outcomes — as key reasons for low gram sabha attendance.

Gram Sabha is the village assembly of all registered voters, constitutionally recognised under Article 243A (73rd Constitutional Amendment, 1992). It is the foundational deliberative body of the three-tier Panchayati Raj system, distinct from the elected Gram Panchayat, and is meant to enable direct participation in local planning, budgeting and social audit.

Key Facts

- Study by: National Institute of Rural Development & Panchayati Raj (NIRDPR), Hyderabad, for the Ministry of Panchayati Raj.
- Coverage: ~7,790 respondents; 400 gram panchayats; 213 districts; 26 States/UTs.
- 47% of respondents attended only 1–2 gram sabha meetings in the previous year.
- Awareness: 94% aware meetings are held; 83% aware of participation rights; only 59% understood quorum/procedural requirements.
- Over 55% cited livelihood/occupational pressures (daily wagers, migrants) as the top reason for non-attendance.
- Reasons for disengagement (ranked): lack of transparency – 45%; no visible outcomes – 42%; repetitive/formal meetings – 33%; trust issues – 33%; political interference – 28%; weak grievance resolution – 16%.
- Report flags a persistent gap between grievances being heard and being resolved, eroding long-term trust.

High awareness but low actual/procedural engagement shows the barrier is participatory, not informational. Livelihood pressure on daily wagers/migrants points to a need for flexible meeting scheduling. Transparency and outcome deficits, not apathy, are the dominant drivers of disengagement — weakening the accountability and social-audit function gram sabhas are meant to serve in decentralised governance.

Exam Alert

NIRDPR is an organisation under the Ministry of Rural Development (not Panchayati Raj) — but this particular study was commissioned FOR the Ministry of Panchayati Raj. A common mix-up point.

Top-ranked barrier differs by type: livelihood pressure (55%+) is the top practical/occupational barrier, but lack of transparency (45%) is the top stated concern — don't conflate the two.

Do You Know

Gram Sabha ≠ Gram Panchayat: Gram Sabha comprises ALL registered voters of a village (deliberative body); Gram Panchayat is the elected executive body accountable to it.

Quorum and frequency of gram sabha meetings are prescribed by respective State Panchayati Raj Acts, not uniformly by the Constitution — explaining the variation in procedural understanding found in the study.

SCHEME TO PROMOTE MANUFACTURING OF SINTERED RARE EARTH PERMANENT MAGNET (REPM SCHEME)

— The Ministry of Heavy Industries (MHI) has extended timelines for global tenders under the REPM scheme as a response to demand for the same by multiple stakeholders.

— Under the scheme, the government aims to support 6,000 metric tonnes per annum (MTPA) of integrated REPM manufacturing capacity, which will be allocated among five beneficiaries selected through a competitive bidding process, with each eligible for up to 1,200 MTPA.

— Selected beneficiaries will receive sales-linked incentives worth Rs 6,450 crore over five years, along with a capital subsidy of Rs 750 crore to set up integrated REPM facilities.

— The scheme specifically focuses on "sintered rare-earth permanent magnets", which are primarily neodymium, iron, and boron (NdFeB) magnets, considered the strongest and most commercially demanded.

— These magnets use light rare-earth elements like neodymium (Nd) and praseodymium (Pr), combined with iron (Fe) and boron (B), for their strong magnetic properties. They also use heavy rare-earth elements such as dysprosium (Dy) and terbium (Tb) to improve susceptibility to demagnetisation, especially at high temperatures.

INDIA'S LARGEST PRIVATE-SECTOR GOLD MINING PROJECT

— Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister N Chandrababu Naidu inaugurated India's largest private-sector gold mining project at Jonnagiri in Kurnool district on June 24.

— Geomysore Services India Pvt Ltd and Deccan Gold Mines, the companies behind the project, are investing Rs 405 crore in mining, extraction, processing, and marketing of gold bars from Jonnagiri itself. Here is why it holds significance for the region.

— Jonnagiri has been known as a site of gold exploration since ancient times. It was once known as Swarnagiri and was renowned during Emperor Ashoka's period (268-232 BCE), with Ashokan inscriptions found near Erragudi.

— The wider Rayalaseema region has also been known as the land of precious stones and minerals. During the reign of Sri Krishnadevaraya (1509-29), gems and precious stones were traded in abundance.

— The Jonnagiri area is part of the Eastern Dharwar Craton, a piece of the Earth's crust formed 3.6-2.5 billion years ago. The region is known for gold mineralisation, or when various geological processes result in the transformation of gold into extractable ore deposits.

Gold and its distribution

Gold in its purest form is a bright, slightly reddish yellow, dense, soft malleable and ductile metal. It is one of the least reactive chemical elements and is solid under standard conditions. Gold often occurs in free elemental (native) form, as nuggets or grains, in rocks, in vein and in alluvial deposits. Gold is resistant to corrosion and to most acid and has unique properties distinct from other metals.

According to the Indian Minerals Yearbook 2022 (Part II: Metals & Alloys), by states, the largest resources in terms of gold ore (primary) are located in Bihar (43%), followed by Rajasthan (24.92%), Karnataka (20%), West Bengal (2.47%), Andhra Pradesh (3.03%) and Jharkhand (2%). The remaining 5.22% of resources of ore are located in Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Kerala, Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu.

STRONG HYBRID

— Provisions relating to strong hybrid vehicles in Delhi's new Electric Vehicle (EV) Policy continue to be debated as the existing policy nears expiry. There is a clear divergence of opinion over exempting strong hybrids from road tax.

— Hybrids have both an internal combustion engine and an on-board electric motor, with the two systems working in tandem to provide motive power.

— A strong (or 'full') hybrid vehicle combines a traditional internal combustion engine with a powerful electric motor and a larger battery, which enables it to run entirely on electric power at low speeds, and to switch automatically to the engine for higher speeds.

— A mild hybrid, by contrast, has a smaller electric motor and battery, and cannot run on electricity alone. The electric motor in mild hybrids acts only to boost acceleration and smoothen stop-start systems.

BOSS SCAM

— Cyber criminals are increasingly using a social engineering technique known as the "Boss Scam" or CEO impersonation fraud.

— In this scam, criminals impersonate senior executives or business owners to pressure employees into transferring money or sharing sensitive information. These requests often appear genuine and create a false sense of urgency.

— This modus operandi was used to dupe former Member of Parliament Naresh Gujral, son of former Prime Minister I K Gujral.

— Scammers had initially sent malicious messages to one of the company's directors. Perceiving it as urgent, the director forwarded it to the accountant for further action.

— As soon as the accountant clicked on the ZIP file, his WhatsApp account was allegedly compromised. The alleged fraudsters then gained control of the account, altered Naresh Gujral's contact details on WhatsApp, and began sending messages impersonating him.

The compressed ZIP archive typically contains a malicious executable (.exe) file along with a dynamic link library (.dll) file. Similar cases have been reported across the country.

— They instructed the accountant to transfer funds through Real-Time Gross Settlement (RTGS), a system used for urgent, high-value bank transactions.

— Sources said the scammers are targeting high-ranking officials and corporate executives by sending malicious ZIP archives through email or WhatsApp under the guise of urgent regulatory compliance requirements.

— In some cases, they impersonate officials from the Reserve Bank of India (RBI). The messages typically create a false sense of urgency by providing only a short time window for compliance.

WORLD'S FIRST SUB-1 NANOMETER (NM) CHIP TECHNOLOGY

— IBM, on June 25, announced a major breakthrough in semiconductor technology. The tech giant has unveiled what it describes as the world's first sub-1 nanometer (nm) chip technology featuring a transistor architecture at the 0.7 nm or 7 angstrom node.

— The new sub-1 nm chip comes with around 100 billion transistors all packed into the size of a fingernail. It has nearly twice the density of IBM's 2nm chip which was launched in 2021.

— According to the company, the new chip is backed by a range of structural and material innovations, including IBM's groundbreaking three-dimensional nanostack architecture.

— Researchers at IBM created a new transistor architecture called 'nanostack', also the industry's first known three-dimensional and nanosheet-based design, to develop the new chip.

VIZHINJAM PORT

— Adani Ports and SEZ (APSEZ) Ltd is moving to sell 49% of its stake in Kerala's Vizhinjam port to Switzerland-based container shipping behemoth MSC Group for around $1.4 billion (more than Rs 13,000 crore).

— The Kerala government has stated that Adani's decision to sell the 49% stake constitutes a change in ownership under the agreement's terms and, thus, requires government permission.

— Vizhinjam is India's first deep-water container transshipment port and is expected to handle domestic and regional cargo at a lower cost rather than routing it through Sri Lanka, according to its website.

— The project is being developed as a public-private partnership between the Kerala government and Adani Vizhinjam Port Pvt Ltd (AVPPL) — the port's operating company and concessionaire — under the Design, Build, Finance, Operate and Transfer (DBFOT) model.

— According to the concession agreement, Adani must retain 51% share in the port during the construction period and the first year of commercial operations. Beyond the first year, it has to maintain a minimum share of 26%.

— According to the Adani group, the Vizhinjam port is now in its second year of operations, allowing it to dilute up to 74% of its stake.

— The agreement doesn't prohibit a stake sale, as laid out above. But it does say that Adani shall not undertake or permit any change in ownership, except with the prior approval of the authority — that is, the government.

18TH ANNIVERSARY OF TIGER REINTRODUCTIONS AT THE SARISKA TIGER RESERVE

— The Centre released two new assessments to mark the 18th anniversary of tiger reintroductions at the Sariska Tiger Reserve in Alwar. Nestled in the lap of the Aravalli ranges, the tiger reserve had previously lost all its tigers.

— The first is a roadmap to manage tigers in the years ahead while the second dictates the lessons learnt from 12 re-introduction initiatives in the country. It has been argued that national parks and reserves with low tigers should be in focus beyond simply counting tiger numbers.

— India's tiger population has risen steadily. From 1,411 in 2006, there are now 3,682 tigers in 2022 across 58 tiger reserves, spread across 85,000 square kilometers (sq km).

— Of the 58 tiger reserves, 10-12 tiger reserves alone account for about 36 per cent of the population. Importantly, there are 12 tiger reserves with less than three tigers inside.

— Three of these reserves– Kawal, Kamlang and Dampa– have zero tigers. As the density of tigers increases, they disperse to buffer areas, territorial divisions and mixed-use land.

— The Sariska reintroduction episode is considered as the first successful scientific tiger reintroduction to be carried out in the world, with previous attempts having failed in Russia.

— Sariska's success was replicated in Panna which had faced a similar wipeout of tigers in the mid to late 2000s. Since Panna's reintroduction project in 2009, ten such translocations have been carried out with mixed success and some outright failures.

GOLDEN LANGURS

— A week after eight endangered golden Langurs were rescued from alleged wildlife traffickers in Assam, all except one have been released back into the wild. The one left died during the rescue and rehabilitation process.

— The golden langur (Trachypithecus geei) is an endangered primate endemic to Western Assam and the foothills of southern Bhutan. According to a population estimate released in 2024, there were 7,396 golden langurs in India at the time.

— These eight golden langurs had been rescued by a Special Task Force of the Assam police in the intervening night of June 19 and 20 from Chirang district in Western Assam, while they were in the possession of nine alleged wildlife traffickers.

— Assam Forest Minister Jayanta Mallabaruah announced that seven of the rescued langurs have been released into the Sikhna Jwhwlao National Park, which is spread across the Chirang and Kokrajhar districts in the Bodoland Territorial Region.

— The Sikhna Jwhwlao National Park forms part of the Manas Biosphere Reserve and provides habitat for several rare and endangered species, including the golden langur.

INDIA'S PROTECTED TURTLES

— Police in Madhya Pradesh are preparing their first coordinated crackdown on wildlife trafficking through the state's railway network.

— This is done after an analysis of six years of seizure data uncovered organised interstate networks smuggling protected freshwater turtles from northern India's river systems to markets in Southeast Asia and the Middle East, The Indian Express has learnt.

— "Freshwater turtles are the species we encounter most frequently in trafficking cases," a senior wildlife official said.

— The Indian softshell and Indian flapshell turtle — both listed under Schedule I of the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972, in the same protection category as tigers and elephants — inhabit the river systems of the Gangetic basin.

— "Indian roofed turtles and star tortoises are primarily sought for the illegal pet trade," officials familiar with the investigations said.

— "Species such as the Batagur turtle, which is critically endangered and survives in very limited stretches, including the Chambal river system, are particularly vulnerable as they are trafficked to exotic pet markets in Southeast Asia," a senior forest officer said.

BUSINESS AND ECONOMY

FRIENDSHORING

Why it matters

The crisis in West Asia and its impact on the global economy have renewed attention on various economic strategies. One such strategy is friendshoring. Let's take a closer look at what it is and why it matters.

Core Concept:

— While words such as 'onshoring,' 'reshoring,' and 'nearshoring' have been in standard use for some time in global trade, 'friendshoring' emerged out of economic crises and strains on global supply chains caused by various shocks to the global economy, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

— Friendshoring refers to the rerouting of supply chains to countries perceived as politically and economically safe or low-risk to avoid disruption to the flow of business.

— According to the World Economic Forum, friendshoring' is a growing trade practice where supply chain networks are focused on countries regarded as political and economic allies. However, there are fears the move towards friendshoring risks furthering geopolitical fragmentation and what's been described as 'deglobalisation'.

DEFINITION

Rerouting trade towards political allies

Friendshoring refers to rerouting supply chains to countries seen as politically and economically safe, to avoid disruption. The term gained traction after COVID-19 and Russia's invasion of Ukraine exposed the fragility of global supply networks.

A push towards deglobalization?

Critics warn friendshoring could deepen geopolitical fragmentation — the decline of interdependence between nations, institutions and enterprises that has driven global growth for decades.

— Also known as **in-shoring or onshoring, reshoring** is when a business transfers operations back to its home country. By reshoring, companies can reduce their exposure to outside risk.

— **Nearshoring** describes the process of a company relocating business operations to a nearby country, often with a shared border. With the global supply chain crisis, increasing numbers of companies are investing in the location of plants nearer their target markets.

— Moving business operations to another country is commonly known as **offshoring**. It can reduce labour costs and ensure the ready provision of certain skills. Notably, offshoring is not the same thing as outsourcing, where work is contracted out to an external organization. It is when a company relocates some of its existing operations abroad.

FERRARI AND BMW JOIN TESLA, CHINA IN SWITCH TO ALUMINIUM

Ferrari and BMW are rolling out new models featuring lightweight,cost-effective aluminium wiring, accelerating a shift away from copper, the dominant material in electric wiring since the invention of the electric battery two centuries ago. The decisions follow similar moves by Tesla and Chinese EV makers and reflect a broader industry trend forecast to affect around 2% of global copper demand this year, according toJPMorgan. Even more copper could be switched to aluminium in the coming years because of a structural rise in copper prices, driven by shortages of the metal and with increased demand from the green-energy sector and data centres.

Lower prices

Companies across several sectors are migrating to aluminium because of far lower prices and comparable performance, according to Reuters interviews with 18 carmakers, cable and air-conditioning companies, metals producers and consultants. Ferrari and BMW said they chose aluminium in part because of its lighter weight.

Record copper prices

Substitution of alumini um for copper has come in waves over two decades, but record copper prices in late January, peaking close to $15,000 per metric tonne, added weight to the case for switching to aluminium. Forecasts for global supply fall short of those for demand for more than the next decade.

Ferrari, which already uses aluminium for its bodies, engines and chassis, told Reuters it started using the lightweight metal for power cables on its 296 hybrid sports car last year. Ferrari has since introduced aluminium wiring into other models, including the Luce, its first ever EV launched last month.

Saving 20% weight

The move saves up to 20% of the total wiring weight, said Ferrari communications executive Dario Esposito.

“We are not choosing aluminium because it’s cheaper, we choose the material that has better performance,” he said.

But the metal is, in fact, much cheaper — currently about $3,100 a tonne, or about a quarter the price of copper.

CENTRE OPENS POWER BIDS TO FOUR CHINA-LINKED FIRMS

In a sign of a continuing thaw in India’s stance on Chinese investments, the government has issued an order allowing four companies with Chinese ownership or links to bid for projects tendered by the Indian government in the power sector.

The order, dated June 24, 2026, was issued by the Procurement Policy Division of the Finance Ministry’s Expenditure Department and has been reviewed by The Hindu.

In January, the Power Ministry had written to the Finance Ministry seeking an exemption from a previous order which mandated that companies located in countries that share a land border with

India must register with the Indian government before they can bid for critical public power projects. The approval of this registration was solely at the discretion of the government.

Following this, the Committee of Secretaries and the Registration Committee under the Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade (DPIIT) deliberated on the matter before passing the relaxation order.

Two-year exemption

Under the latest order, four companies — TBEA Energy India, Nanjing Electric India, New Northeast Electric India, and Taikai Electric (India) — have been granted exemption from the restrictions for a two-year period.

TBEA Energy India is the wholly-owned subsidiary of the Chinese company TBEA Group, while Nanjing Electric India is a wholly-owned subsidiary of the Chinese power equipment manufacturer Nanjing Electric.

New Northeast Electric India has technology transfer ties with Chinese power sector companies, and Taikai Electric (India) is a subsidiary of the China-headquartered Taikai Group.

The Procurement Policy Division's order, however, made sure to state that "such exemption for firms may not be considered as a precedent [sic]".

This order also builds on other partial relaxations the government has recently offered to companies that have investments from China and other countries that share a land border with India.

In May, the Finance Ministry had notified new rules to allow overseas companies with Chinese shareholding of up to 10% to invest in India under the automatic route, rather than first having to obtain government approval.

This was a relaxation made to the 'Press Note 3' that the Indian government had issued in 2020, ostensibly to prevent opportunistic takeovers and acquisitions of distressed Indian companies due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

EU CARBON TAX: GOVT TO SHOULDER 90% COMPLIANCE BILL OF MSMES

The Centre is working on a scheme to absorb 90% of the compliance cost borne by micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) to help soften the disproportionate impact of the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) compliance burden imposed by the European Union, The Indian Express has learnt.

Key Takeaways:

— India's efforts to secure a concession for its small industries in negotiations with developed countries have not worked, and the industry has been seeking assistance to meet the steep annual compliance costs due to the imposition of the EU's carbon tax since January 1, 2026.

— The UK too has plans to impose its version of CBAM from 2027. CBAM is an EU policy designed to put a price on the carbon emitted during the production of carbon-intensive goods that are entering the EU.

— Complying with the regulation is seen as a major global challenge, as declarants must track the embedded emissions of their goods, including direct emissions and, for certain sectors such as cement and fertilisers, indirect emissions.

— Industry sources said that the compliance cost for each MSME unit to meet the requirement under carbon tax alone is Rs 15 lakh to 20 lakh and that they do not have the wherewithal to report the number of data points sought under the regulation by the EU.

— Unlike large corporations, MSMEs often lack the technical expertise, systems and financial resources to measure, verify and report embedded emissions in accordance with CBAM requirements. They may have to incur significant upfront expenditure on carbon accounting, third-party verification, digital reporting systems and capacity building.

Do You Know:

— According to the World Bank, "a carbon tax directly sets a price on carbon by defining a tax rate on greenhouse gas emissions or – more commonly – on the carbon content of fossil fuels". It is a type of carbon pricing, and the other type of carbon pricing is the emissions trading systems (ETS). The CBAM is a form of carbon pricing system.

— The CBAM or Carbon Tax was first introduced by the European Union in 2021. It taxes certain products coming in from other countries based on their carbon emissions footprint in their production process. For instance, if the imported steel was produced through a process that entailed higher emissions than the emissions standards for that product in Europe, it would be taxed.

— CBAM allows industries in Europe to remain competitive while continuing to maintain high environmental standards. It prevents these industries from relocating their production to countries where the production might be cheap owing to less strict emission norms, a situation described as carbon leakage. In the process, it hopes to contribute to reducing global emissions.

WHAT ARE INDIA'S PROBLEMS WITH MOST CREDIT RATINGS AGENCIES?

While speaking at a business conference in London last week, Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal questioned the methodologies employed by sovereign ratings agencies in assigning ratings to India, saying they have been "unfair to India". On the other hand, he praised one ratings agency — CareEdge Ratings — for being "objective". This is not the first time the Indian government has pointed out its problems with the global sovereign ratings agencies. The Hindu looks into what the issues are.

What do the ratings agencies measure?

India is rated by seven international sovereign credit rating agencies: Standard and Poor's (S&P), Moody's Investors Service, Morningstar DBRS, Fitch Ratings, Japanese Credit Rating Agency (JCRA) and Rating and Investment Information (R&I), and CareEdge Ratings. The three most commonly accepted global ratings agencies are S&P, Fitch, and Moody's.

The core role of these agencies is to measure the ability and willingness of an entity to repay its debt. These entities can be companies, municipal corporations, states, and, in the case of sovereign ratings, Central or Union governments.

Ratings are assigned on an alphabet scale, with Fitch and S&P assigning AAA to their highest rating and Moody's assigning Aaa to it. The next lower scales are AA+, AA, AA-, A+, A, and A-, before moving on to the 'B' ratings in the same format. The lowest rating is D, implying the entity is in default.

Moody's ratings follow the same pattern, though its letters differ.

These ratings are important because they determine the interest rate at which the rated entity can borrow at. If an entity is rated AAA, then that means there is no risk of a default and so that entity can borrow at the lowest interest rates. However, the lower the rating, the lower the perceived ability or willingness to repay debt and so higher the interest rate to mitigate that risk.

Now, 'ability' and 'willingness' to repay debt are two very different metrics. The ability to repay is a much more quantitative metric, since there are hard numbers that can prove whether a country can repay its debt or not. Willingness to repay is an entirely different matter. It is a more qualitative metric and relies more on opinion rather than hard numbers.

How has India been rated so far?

India's ratings by most of the agencies has been at the lowest level of the investment grade ratings. That is, India has consistently been rated just a grade or two above 'junk' status, which is when institutions will stop lending money for fear of default. Until recently, these ratings were unchanged for more than a decade and, in some cases, nearly two decades.

For example, S&P upgraded India's long-term sovereign credit rating to 'BBB' from 'BBB-' in August 2025, the first upgrade by it in 18 years. Similarly, in 2017, Moody's upgraded India's rating to Baa2 (equivalent of BBB) from Baa3, its first upgrade in 13 years. There were a couple of other ratings upgrades in 2025, with Rating and Investment Information in September 2025 upgrading India to BBB+ from 'BBB' and Morningstar DBRS in May that year upgrading India to BBB.

What are India's issues with the ratings?

Despite the recent upgrades, India's ratings still remain just above junk grade. During his speech in London, Mr. Goyal pointed out these agencies "haven't recognised the India growth story, the strong India fundamentals and the sovereign capabilities... and captured it as much as a rating agency should have done". Previously, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman also pointed out the same thing, calling for a reform of the ratings agencies' methodologies.

Even the Economic Survey has taken up this issue. The 2020-21 edition by then Chief Economic Adviser Krishnamurthy Subramanian had an entire chapter dedicated to the matter. In it, he pointed out that this was the first time that the fifth largest economy in the world was assigned such a low rating.

He also went on to show India's macroeconomic fundamentals are strong and more than enough to highlight its ability to repay its debt. On the willingness front, he pointed out that India has never defaulted on its sovereign debt in the past despite several crises, and that this should go a long way in proving its willingness to pay.

The main allegation is the global ratings agencies rely too much on the qualitative aspects of the metrics rather than the quantitative ones. The feeling is that these qualitative metrics are often based on the opinions of a small group of experts and so can be extremely subjective, skewing the overall rating.

Quantitative metrics — where India performs relatively well — have a relatively lower weightage.

Why is CareEdge Ratings favoured?

CareEdge Ratings is the first sovereign ratings agency to be headquartered in India and so the perception is it can better reflect ground realities of India's economy. However, there are some key methodological factors that make CareEdge stand apart. Overall, in its note on methodology, CareEdge said primary importance has been given to quantitative factors.

ON THE DELAY IN INDIA-U.S. TRADE DEAL

The story so far:

India and the U.S. in February 2025 announced that they would work towards a comprehensive Bilateral Trade Agreement (BTA) that was to be finalised by fall 2025. Then, in February 2026, they signed a framework agreement for an interim trade deal that was to be implemented by April-May 2026. Neither deal has come to pass.

Why was the BTA delayed?

Soon after Prime Minister Narendra Modi and U.S. President Donald Trump announced their intentions to complete a BTA in February 2025, it became clear that a comprehensive deal would be elusive. The talk among government officials was about finalising at least the first tranche of the deal by fall 2025 (September-November 2025).

Talks intensified post April 2025, after Mr. Trump first announced his 'Liberation Day' reciprocal tariffs and then paused them for 90 days so he could negotiate deals with U.S. trade partners. However, despite several meetings, India and the U.S. could not finalise the first tranche, with key sticking points being India's reluctance to open up its agricultural and dairy sectors, and its decision to buy oil from Russia.

In two successive announcements in late July and early August, Mr. Trump raised tariffs on imports from India to 25% and then to 50%, with the latter hike being a penalty for India's Russian oil imports. This decision froze negotiations for a few months before matters thawed once again and talks resumed in October.

What is the interim deal?

Once talks resumed, Mr. Modi and Mr. Trump in February 2026 signed a framework for an interim agreement on trade. This was not a trade deal itself, but the framework along which one could be worked out. At the time, Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal expressed his confidence that the deal would be completed by April, or at the latest by early May 2026.

Under the framework, the U.S. was to reduce total tariffs on Indian imports to 18%, providing it a competitive advantage over its competitors. Both sides also committed to providing each other preferential market access in "sectors of respective interest".

Why has this deal been delayed?

Soon after the framework was announced, the U.S. Supreme Court invalidated the reciprocal tariff system itself, saying the law it was based on — the International Emergency Economic Powers Act (IEEPA) of the U.S. — did not allow for such tariffs. That removed a major foundation on which the deal negotiations had taken place.

Since then, the U.S. has taken several decisions that have further added to the tariff uncertainty.

Right after the Supreme Court's decision, Mr. Trump announced that he would be imposing a flat 10% tariff on imports from all countries under the Trade Act of 1974, which he said authorised him to take action to address the U.S.'s ballooning trade deficit. This tariff was temporary, supposed to last 150 days up to July 24. Mr. Trump said he would raise it to 15%, but never did.

The U.S. Court of International Trade deemed these illegal as well, but an appeals court put a stay on that order.

What fresh investigations have added more uncertainty?

In March, the office of the U.S. Trade Representative (USTR) said it had initiated two investigations under Section 301 of the Trade Act into several of its trade partners that could potentially see further tariffs being imposed on them.

The first investigation against 16 economies, including India, was to see whether these economies were using excess manufacturing capacity to export to the U.S. in a manner that was hurting American businesses.

The second one, against 60 countries including India, was to look into whether these countries had taken "sufficient steps" to prohibit the import of goods produced with forced labour and how the "failure to eradicate" these practices impacts U.S. workers and businesses.

Under the forced labour investigation, the U.S. government in early June proposed to levy a tariff of 12.5% on imports from 54 countries, including India, as they have "failed to impose and effectively enforce" prohibitions on the import of goods produced using forced labour. To be sure, this does not mean the U.S. is saying that India uses forced labour, but that it has not stopped the import of goods that have been manufactured using forced labour.

India has made its representations to the U.S. on this matter and the final hearing is on July 7. The findings of the excess capacity investigations are expected in mid-July.

What is India's stance on the deal?

As repeatedly expressed by Mr. Goyal, India remains committed to finalising a trade deal with the U.S. but is firm about the fact that it should receive a comparative advantage over its competitors as was agreed in February. For this, the Section 301 investigations will have to be completed and the tariffs decided on various countries.

In the meantime, the two sides continue to negotiate on the other non-tariff aspects of the deal, such as enhanced market access, digital trade, supply chain resilience, reduction of non-tariff barriers, and expanded cooperation in strategic sectors. The latest visit by USTR Jamieson Greer to India on June 23-24 did not yield any deadlines.

DATA DOUBTS

India's latest industrial growth figures show that, contrary to global trends and overall perception, the country's industrial output is getting stronger. Notably, the data show a quick bounce-back in industrial performance after the initial hit from the West Asia crisis. However, the new data also raise some important concerns about the composition of the growth, the systems behind the recent data upgrades, and the need for further improvements. Growth in the Index of Industrial Production hit a five-month high of 5.1% in May 2026, up from the 4.9% growth seen in April, which itself was a substantial improvement over the performance in March — the first full month after the West Asia crisis began. Within this, the manufacturing sector grew at a relatively robust 5.5% in May, albeit slower than in April. One view is that this is due to a revival in domestic consumption, since the consumer durables and non-durables sectors also grew at multi-month highs. Consumer durables, especially, have done well in April and May. However, the contrary argument is that domestic demand is in fact not doing well, and it is export growth that is leading to higher production. This is bolstered by the fact that GST revenues from domestic transactions have grown slower over the last six months than in 2025-26 and the year before that. Merchandise exports, on the other hand, hit a four-year high in April followed by an all-time high in May. It would certainly be welcome if India's industry has global demand to fill, but the fact that more of this demand is not coming from within the country is a cause for concern. The economy is already hostage to world events.

The May IIP data were also accompanied by a note from the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI) stating that it had made a major change to the methodology for computing growth for some sectors. It had abandoned the Wholesale Price Index as its chosen deflator to estimate the value of production in favour of the new Producer Price Index. This is a more accurate approach. But it did not, however, answer why this change was implemented belatedly and not when the new series of data was introduced on June 1. It suggests an unusually unsystematic approach by MoSPI. The strong growth in the IIP also does not reconcile with the fact that the Index of Eight Core Sectors — a separate government measure of industrial growth — grew at its second-lowest rate in 21 months in May. The core sector index is still outdated while the other major indices have been recently updated, but such a discrepancy nevertheless raises questions about what exactly is being measured.

UNWELCOME SURGE

The buoyancy in GST collections is spurred by imported inflation

India's June GST collections rose 13.9% year-on-year to ₹1.95 lakh crore, driven largely by import IGST, which surged 34.6% compared with June 2025, up from 17.2% growth in May. Domestic GST collections grew by a more modest 6.5%, suggesting that the sharp increase in overall collections owes less to a broad-based improvement in domestic value addition. Some economists have argued that this reflects stronger imports of capital goods and industrial inputs. However, May petroleum products' trade data and Q1 FY27 data on the performance of the eight core industries, point to a rather different explanation. June GST collections reflect economic activity during May. While crude and petroleum products constituted a 54% rise this May (YoY) in merchandise imports by value, the other chunk was gold, which constituted another 34% rise. The surge in gold price, by nearly 60% between last May and this May, suggests hedging during difficult times, rather than broad-based economic activity. To stem gold imports, the government hiked its import duty from 6% to 15% on May 13, which likely added to the May import GST kitty.

This period also coincided with the rupee depreciating by almost 6% against the U.S. dollar since late February. This coupled with a spike in freight charges, and a 14.5% rise on non-oil imports in May at elevated global prices mechanically raised the June tax base. This suggests that much of the import GST rise is driven by imported inflation and currency depreciation rather than domestic production growth, indicating an unwelcome increase due to higher prices.

Read alongside the performance of India's eight core industries, which expanded by only about 2.8% in Q1 FY27 compared with around 6% in the corresponding period last year, the domestic economy appears more subdued. Growth has been expectedly weak in crude oil, natural gas, refinery products, fertilizers and electricity. The latest HSBC Manufacturing PMI reading of 54.2 likewise points to steady but moderating factory activity, marking the second-lowest expansion in 13 months. These figures come as India marks nine years of GST as a unified destination-based indirect tax. The government can point to the expansion of the tax base from about 66 lakh taxpayers in 2017 to over 1.65 crore today, reflecting better compliance, greater formalisation, and faster refunds, though input tax credit, litigation and federal balance in revenue sharing issues remain unresolved. GST has strengthened India's indirect tax architecture. Yet, the June numbers are a reminder that a growing share of the recent buoyancy appears to have been underwritten by imported inflation and a depreciating rupee rather than stronger domestic value addition.

HAS RBI CHANGED THE RULES FOR SCAM COMPENSATION?

The story so far:

The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) on Wednesday issued fresh rules to protect customers from scam transactions where they lose money to fraudsters and cyberattacks. These directions amend the RBI's 2017 circular on "Limiting Liability of Customers in Unauthorised Electronic Banking Transactions". That previous framework only left banks liable to compensate scammed customers if transactions were not even authorised by customers, such as in a successful hacking incident. These rules are only a pilot for now, but may be extended in the future. They are effective from January 1, 2027, and last for the year.

What has the RBI changed?

In Wednesday's amendments, a draft version of which was released for public comment in March, customers can get reimbursed when they fall prey to certain scams, like digital arrests (where they are "coerced" into paying money), or when one-time passcodes (OTPs) are "fraudulently" stolen from them. Most financial fraud currently relies on "social engineering" attacks, which require hoodwinking customers in one way or another; since banks' core cybersecurity infrastructure is heavily regulated and subject to RBI audits, "zero click" hacks are vanishingly rare.

The new key concept is "fraudulent electronic banking transactions (EBTs)". RBI defines these as transactions which are "executed by a third-party using the credentials obtained from the customer through fraudulent means or executed by the customer by granting approval under coercion or duress from the third-party" or "an EBT which is not authorised by a customer and inter alia includes an EBT occurring on account of negligence by a bank and/or a third-party breach."

This means that customers who ignore fraud signal warnings, such as those on a UPI PIN screen that a given transaction could be a scam, would not be eligible for any compensation. In cases of a third-party hack, the timeline for a customer to report the loss has been increased to five calendar days from three working days. As in the 2017 rules, if any amount is deducted after a customer reports fraud, the customer bears no liability and is entitled to a reversal of the transaction.

Banks can waive customers' liability even if a transaction is negligent, but this is subject to their own discretion. If a user does not have their latest phone number or email address registered with the bank, this counts as negligence, as the bank would not send fraud alerts to the right contact.

How much compensation can customers receive?

For losses up to ₹50,000, individual victims can claim 85% of the amount as compensation, only once in their lifetime, up to ₹25,000. (This means that for any amount from ₹29,412 till ₹50,000, customers will receive a flat ₹25,000 compensation.) Roughly three-fourths of the amount will be paid by RBI itself, while the customer and beneficiary banks will pay half the remaining amount.

A customer must report to the cybercrime helpline (1930) within five days to be eligible for this. It is worth noting that scams above ₹50,000 don't seem to be covered in this framework at all.

What changed between the draft and final rules?

From the March draft, banks have been given more time to implement this new system; the draft rules had a July 1 effective date. This is now January 1, 2027. Complaint settlement timelines are also now increased to 45-60 days, with the latter applying for international transactions.

Dvara Research, a non-profit financial inclusion think tank, had suggested that the vulnerability of customers be taken into account. "Research suggests that Indians encounter fraud attempts multiple times a week, that these attempts are growing more sophisticated, and therefore, it is not unlikely that customers may fall for them more than once," the body wrote.

"Vulnerable customers may not be expected to meet high standards of attentiveness or defend themselves against frauds that are sophisticated even for the more evolved customers ... Under the Indian Contract Act, contracts executed under information asymmetry, external influence, or fraudulent pretext are voidable... Bundling such different transactions under the common definition of 'authorised transaction' diminishes their fundamental difference and may even reduce the significance of a liability framework."

WHAT DO THE AMENDED FCRA RULES SAY?

The story so far:

On June 22, the Union Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) notified the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Amendment Rules, 2026, to amend the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Rules, 2011.This is the tenth amendment to the Rules under the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act, 2010 (FCRA).

How does the MHA regulate foreign donations?

The MHA regulates foreign donations in India through the FCRA to ensure that such funds do not adversely affect the country's internal security. The legislation was first enacted in 1976. In 2010, it was repealed and replaced with a new legislation. The 2010 Act came into force on May 1, 2011 and has been amended in 2016, 2018, and 2020. The FCRA registration is valid for five years, after which the NGO has to apply for a renewal. Since 2015, the FCRA registrations of more than 18,000

NGOs have been cancelled. As on June 22, there are 14,456 FCRA-registered NGOs active in the country.

What are the broad amendments proposed to the FCRA Rules?

All NGOs and associations registered under the FCRA, 2010, are required to disclose their specific activities and the geographical scope of their programmes. The Rules no longer allow general permission under the FCRA and indicate tighter scrutiny on how NGOs utilise foreign funds.

Any new registration will have to follow the said norms. The Rules further broaden the definition of 'key functionary' of an NGO beyond office bearers and directors to include trustees, partners, the Karta of a Hindu undivided family, governing body members, or anyone controlling or managing the organisation.

They also require NGOs to mandatorily disclose social media accounts, websites, and declare whether the association or its key functionaries has brought out any publication during the year, which includes books, magazines or newspaper articles.

The Rules also impose a fee for registration for each specified purpose and for each State or Union Territory (U.T.) in which an NGO operates. So, NGOs operating across multiple sectors or regions now face higher registration costs.

What amendments apply to the programmes or purposes for which an NGO intends to receive foreign donations?

NGOs can receive foreign contributions for social, educational, religious, economic, and cultural programmes. The amended Rules state that the certificate of registration or the application form for new registrations shall specify the purpose or purposes for which registration is granted, chosen only from the list of purposes as specified in the Schedule appended to the rules; and the States or U.T.s in which the NGO proposes to undertake activities.

Those with existing FCRA registrations are expected to update the purpose and intimate the Central government within a year. Some categories specifically exclude political activities.

The educational purpose lists 22 activities, but adds the qualifier "strictly non-political in nature" to the category covering awareness programmes on constitutional rights, fundamental duties, and civic responsibilities.

Under cultural purpose, there are 18 categories, including "promotion of contemporary arts inspired by Indian traditions." The Rules specify that these must exclude political or ideological content.

As many as 16 categories of religious activities have been permitted which includes "conduct of religious education, moral instruction, satsangs, discourses, and meditation retreats (excluding proselytisation)" and "burial/ cremation ground development and maintenance."

There are 19 categories under the economic purpose and 30 items under the social category.

What are the penalties for violations?

The MHA has also notified an order specifying penalties for FCRA violations, including excess administrative spending, speculative investments, misuse of funds, unauthorised receipt or utilisation of foreign contributions, and the use of funds for unapproved purposes or in States/U.T.s not covered by an NGO's registration or prior permission.

Any utilisation of funds for purposes other than those for which they were received can attract a penalty of up to 30% of the amount misused or ₹₹1 lakh, whichever is higher. Likewise, using foreign contributions for purposes or in areas not covered by an NGO's registration or prior permission invites a penalty of 30% of the amount involved or ₹1 lakh, whichever is higher.

In addition, spending beyond the permitted administrative expense limit or engaging in speculative use of funds will be penalised with fines calculated as a percentage of the amount involved, subject to a minimum of ₹1 lakh.

What is the Opposition saying?

Opposition members have said that the new Rules will adversely affect the functioning of civil society organisations. Congress General Secretary (Organisation) K.C. Venugopal said that forcing NGOs to choose from a "rigid, government-mandated list" of activities and restricting their operational geography would undermine their ability to respond to emergencies. John Brittas, Communist Party of India (Marxist) Rajya Sabha member, wrote to Home Minister Amit Shah raising constitutional concerns. "Collectively, these changes signify a decisive shift from regulating foreign contribution to regulating voluntary organisations themselves," he wrote.

GULF REMITTANCES ROSE IN APRIL DESPITE WEST ASIA CRISIS: MINISTRY

Despite the West Asia crisis, net remittances from the region to India rose to $16 billion in April 2026, the second month of the conflict, up 70% over the corresponding period of last year, show data presented by the Union Finance Ministry in its latest report.

The Monthly Economic Review by the Department of Economic Affairs said that this resilience of remittance inflows is consistent with what happened during previous crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

"Contrary to concerns that geopolitical tensions in the West Asia region could adversely affect remittance inflows from the Gulf economies, transfer receipts have remained robust," the report said.

Stable component

The report highlighted the stability of remittances during volatile market conditions. "This resilience is consistent with empirical findings that remittances are among the most stable components of external financing, remaining relatively insulated from episodes of financial market volatility and geopolitical uncertainty... Unlike portfolio flows, debt flows or foreign direct investment, remittance inflows are relatively acyclical," the report added.

The Ministry report said that this resilience comes about because remittances are flows of funds driven by employment conditions and wage levels in host economies rather than by financial market signals or investor sentiments.

This means that remittances from the Gulf countries are more anchored to the working conditions there than the stock market performance in India.

In fact, an analysis in the report found that remittances in the short run may even run opposite to what a shock would generally result in.

That is, migrants in other countries front-load precautionary transfers back home during periods of uncertainty and stress.

The report, however, stopped short of saying whether this is what was playing out in the case of remittances to India.

However, this also leads to what could be a risk in the medium and long-term if the war-like conditions in the region do not abate.

Labour market

"The principal risk to remittance inflows, however, arises from a sustained deterioration in labour market conditions in host economies that affects migrant employment and earnings," the report said.

"Consequently, while short-term external shocks may have limited effects on remittance inflows, developments in overseas labour markets warrant close monitoring in the current context," it added.

NEW WITHDRAWAL RULES, SAME PF CONTRIBUTION RATES

The Centre has notified the Employees' Provident Funds Scheme, 2026, replacing the Employees' Provident Funds Scheme, 1952. The Ministry of Labour and Employment's move is part of the implementation of the Code on Social Security, 2020, with the new scheme coming into effect from June 29.

Key Takeaways:

• The EPF Scheme, 2026 states that the employer will be required to pay both the employer's contribution and the employee's contribution, in the first instance, along with administrative charges or other fees for an employee directly employed by the employer or through a contractor (not registered independently), within 15 days of the close of every month.

Do You Know:

• In October 2025, the EPFO announced a slew of changes to its withdrawal norms by streamlining the withdrawal categories from 13 to three — essential needs (illness, education, marriage); housing needs; and special circumstances, along with an introduction of a minimum balance of 25%.

• The new EPF Scheme, 2026 incorporates those changes by allowing members to withdraw funds in case of illness of self and family members, up to 100% of the eligible member balance, after completion of 12 months of total membership of the Fund. The 100% eligible member balance means withdrawal of 75% of the total funds as 25% is mandatory minimum balance requirement. The full 100% amount can be withdrawn after remaining unemployed for one year.

• The rate of contribution remains the same from the previous scheme at 12% and 10% for certain notified establishments. As per the existing scheme, the rate of contribution is mandatory till the wage ceiling. The EPF Scheme, 2026 requires provident fund contributions at 12% of wages from both the employer and employee and specifically provides that where wages exceed the statutory wage ceiling, mandatory contributions will be restricted on the wage ceiling amount. Gupta said. "Employees may, however, opt to make voluntary contributions either on wages exceeding the statutory wage ceiling or at a rate higher than the prescribed 12%. Employers also have the option to make matching contributions against such voluntary contributions," he added.

SMALL FIRMS PANIC OVER GOVT PROBE AT BEHEST OF JSW JOINT VENTURE

An anti-dumping probe initiated by the Commerce and Industry Ministry on Cold Rolled Grain Oriented (CRGO) steel, a specialised type of steel, has sparked outrage among MSME transformer manufacturers, and also raised fears of a hike in electricity cost for consumers.

Key Takeaways:

• The investigation, ordered on June 22, is based on an application by one company, JSW JFE Electrical Steel Nashik Private Limited, which is a joint venture between JSW Steel Limited, India's largest steel producer, and Japan-based JFE Steel Corporation.

• JSW JFE Electrical Steel is the only producer of CRGO steel in India, and is seen as strategically crucial for the country. It is a key input material in transformers, which forms the backbone of the electricity transmission system. The probe comes in the backdrop of a rapid expansion drive in the country's transmission network, which is expected to spur demand for CRGO steel.

• As on date, much of the domestic demand is met through imports. JSW JFE Electrical Steel faces stiff competition on the pricing front from producers in China, Japan and European Union.

• The initiation of the probe comes soon after JSW JFE Electrical Steel became the sole producer of CRGO post the Rs 4,158-crore acquisition of Thyssenkrupp's Nashik plant in January last year. A safeguard duty investigation initiated earlier had excluded CRGO from its scope on grounds India does not produce this specialised steel.

• A Jaipur-based MSME said CRGO is a very important raw material for transformers and it comprises about 40-50% of the cost of transformers. If the cost goes up, it will eventually be passed to consumers, said Ajay Sanghi, Managing Director, Sri Krsna Sudarshan Urja. The company manufactures distribution transformers.

• Another MSME federation head who did not wish to be named said CRGO is a key input item for small MSME transformer manufacturers. "JSW is the only beneficiary of the anti-dumping duty investigation in a sector dominated by MMSE," the federation official said.

Do You Know:

• CRGO is used in the core of transformers to enhance their magnetic properties. As per industry estimates, 98 per cent of all CRGO steel produced goes into the transformer business. Any price increase hence raises concerns about power infrastructure costs, which would ultimately reach consumers through tariffs.

• Alekhya Datta, Fellow and Director, Electricity and Renewables Division, The Energy and Resources Institute (TERI), said CRGO typically accounts for around 15–20% of the bill of materials in standard transformers. "So a 10% rise in CRGO prices can raise transformer costs by roughly 1.5–3%, while a 20% rise can raise transformer costs by about 3–6%," he told The Indian Express.

• The concern is larger here because India is in the middle of a major grid expansion plan over the next six years to 6.48 lakh circuit km of transmission network in 2032 from 4.91 lakh circuit km in 2024, and increase in capacity to 2,342 GVA from 1,290 GVA during the period.

• In its report announcing the initiation of the investigation, the Directorate General of Trade Remedies said JSW JFE Electrical Steel has provided prima facie evidence with respect to the injury suffered by the domestic industry due to the dumped imports. "There is evidence of price suppression and depression due to imports. The subject imports have had an adverse impact on the profitability parameters of the domestic industry," the DGTR said.

• India's CRGO market is highly import-dependent. While the country's annual CRGO consumption is estimated at 400,000-450,000 tonnes, domestic production is currently estimated at only around 40,000-50,000 tonnes. Nearly 90% of India's requirements are imported, mainly from China, Japan, South Korea and Russia.

WHY IS DELHI'S EV POLICY 2.0 FACING OPPOSITION?

The story so far:

Building on the momentum gained from its 2020 Electric Vehicles (EV) policy, which led to Delhi achieving almost 14% EV penetration by 2025, compared to the national average of 8%, the Delhi government issued the revised draft EV Policy in early April. Currently under stakeholder consultation, the policy envisages a complete ban on the registration of new internal combustion engine (ICE) three-wheelers from January 1, 2027. It also proposes a ban on new ICE two-wheeler registrations from April 1, 2028. The rationale behind the latter is straightforward: 67% of Delhi's registered vehicle stock comprises two-wheelers, and if the national capital is to achieve cleaner air in the foreseeable future, this segment requires targeted attention to enable the transition. The revised draft policy also proposes electrification mandates for school buses — with a target of 30% electrification by 2030 — fleet aggregators such as cab-hailing platforms and delivery services, as well as government transport fleets. While the number of vehicles in these segments is considerably lower than private two-wheelers, their pollution burden is disproportionately higher because of their daily utilisation.

Who is objecting to the policy and why?

Industry executives and people familiar with the stakeholder consultations say manufacturers represented by bodies such as the Society of Indian Automobile Manufacturers have expressed reservations about their ability to scale up production of electric variants within the proposed timelines. They worry about the possibility of losing market share and argue that the market is not yet ready to pivot to an all-electric paradigm, as economies of scale have not yet reduced EV prices sufficiently to compete with comparable ICE two-wheelers.

They also point to gaps in both public and private charging infrastructure. While there has been considerable progress in the former through charger deployment mandates, service delivery and reliability remain a concern, with breakdowns, theft of charging equipment, and power outages reported at several locations. As for private charging, there has been persistent hesitation among Resident Welfare Associations and apartment complexes in permitting community charging stations.

Stakeholders also point to the lack of competitive financing, particularly for electric light commercial vehicles, quality after-sales service, and the decline in resale values of used EVs.

Battery replacement costs and India's continued dependence on imported battery technologies are also being flagged, particularly as much of the global EV battery supply chain remains concentrated in China.

Automobile manufacturers have therefore argued for a more market-led transition, driven primarily by demand-side incentives.

What are supporters of the revised EV policy saying?

Proponents argue that regulation — much like the Corporate Average Fuel Efficiency norms that pushed manufacturers to improve fuel efficiency in conventional vehicles — must sometimes push the envelope in pursuit of a larger public good. In this case, they argue, the public good is Delhi's clean air. Indeed, the aim of both the 2020 policy and the revised draft policy is to address the contribution of road transport to Delhi's winter air pollution.

Think tanks and critics have also applied a social justice and labour lens, arguing that the policy must address the underbelly of the sector — the vast network of after-sales service providers built around ICE vehicles which will now have to pivot to a new technology. Many of these small businesses may be ill-equipped to make that transition within two years unless the State government also mandates large-scale reskilling programmes, ensures easier financing for small workshops, and provides incentives to upgrade their equipment as part of the broader EV transition.

Is India's power grid ready for the impact?

Another urgent issue must be addressed if such a rapid scale-up is to succeed — the ability of Delhi's electricity grid to handle peak-time charging loads and the substantial increase in power demand that widespread transport electrification will bring. Here, however, there is some reassurance. Studies by WRI India, CSTEP, and other energy think tanks suggest that if charging is managed through smart charging, time-of-day tariffs, and staggered charging patterns, the additional electricity demand from EVs is unlikely to overwhelm Delhi's grid in the near term. They argue that the larger challenge lies in strengthening local distribution infrastructure, particularly transformers and distribution feeders, rather than overall generation capacity.

CENTRE ORDERS BLOCKING OF BATTERY MANAGEMENT APPS

The Union government on Friday issued orders to block battery management apps after some users discovered they were able to remotely use them to shut down e-rickshaw batteries even as those vehicles were transporting passengers, an official said.

The apps, mostly developed by Chinese firms, appeared to be designed for legitimate battery owners.

The developers of three such apps — named by a Ministry official — Shenzhen Grenergy Technology, Shenzhen Ruichuang Lineng Technology, and Daly BMS, did not respond to queries from The Hindu.

It is unclear if banning the apps would completely eliminate the vulnerability, as these apps do not require Internet access to hijack and shut off battery units without a configured password or PIN. Testing standards to certify e-rickshaws do not include cybersecurity requirements.

Lithium ion battery packs include battery management systems to monitor charge, voltage, temperature and cell health. Instagram reels demonstrating this vulnerability on roads went viral over the week, showing rickshaws grinding to a halt.

A senior official pointed out to The Hindu that stranding vehicles like this was a punishable offence, and that "regular IPC/BNS sections of criminal mischief will apply".

The Information Technology Act, 2000 also contains anti-hacking provisions that could apply to smart battery systems.

In Ujjain, the police even caught a person demanding money from e-rickshaw drivers after using the exploit to disable their vehicles. Neel Ganga Police Station in-charge Tarun Kuril stated that the racket came to light following a targeted extortion incident at Loti Tiraha.

"We received information that an auto-rickshaw driver's vehicle had stalled at Loti Tiraha, and a young man charged him ₹200 on the pretext of fixing it.

Upon inquiry, the driver revealed that e-rickshaws in the city are being shut down remotely. Specifically, their batteries are being disabled via a mobile app.

"Some miscreants use this app to immobilise the vehicles and then demand money to restart them," Mr. Kuril said.

Three-wheeler e-rickshaws are typically categorised as L5M vehicles, and manufacturers such as Speego obtain certifications from the International Centre for Automotive Technology (ICAT). A review of the certification requirements on ICAT's website shows that while electrical and mechanical safety and roadworthiness are covered, cybersecurity requirements enumerated in standards such as AIS-189 are not required for e-rickshaws.

SHAH ATTACKS CAB AGGREGATORS OVER 'UNFAIR' BUSINESS MODEL

Union Cooperation Minister Amit Shah on Saturday launched a sharp attack on private app-based cab aggregators such as Uber and Ola, alleging that their business model exploits both drivers and commuters through practices that prioritise corporate profits over fair treatment. He said the newly launched cooperative ride-hailing platform, Bharat Taxi, was conceived to provide an alternative that safeguards the interests of drivers while ensuring better service for passengers.

Addressing the launch of Bharat Taxi in 14 cities across Gujarat, Mr. Shah, without naming the companies, alleged that private platforms deduct hefty commissions from drivers, delay payments and suspend their registrations based solely on passenger complaints without giving them an opportunity to present their case.

He said the cooperative model was introduced to eliminate such practices and ensure that drivers are treated as stakeholders rather than service providers dependent on private companies.

Competitors' challenge

"I received phone calls today and some newspapers have reported that Bharat Taxi's fares are higher. I want to tell customers across the country that wherever Bharat Taxi begins operations, competing companies immediately slash their fares and are prepared to incur losses. Our intention is not to inflict losses on anyone, but reducing fares and offering higher commissions to sarathis (drivers) is being done only to prevent Bharat Taxi from entering the market," he said.

"They want Bharat Taxi to fail so they can once again function arbitrarily," he said, adding that such strategies would not succeed in India, where "the spirit of cooperation and the desire to work for the welfare of others are the greatest strength".

Bharat Taxi, which was soft-launched in Gujarat last December, is being projected as India's first cooperative-owned, driver-led ride-hailing platform. Operating on a zero-commission model, it allows drivers to retain the entire fare while also giving them ownership in the platform.

The platform was formally launched in Ahmedabad, Surat, Vadodara, Rajkot, Dwarka, among other cities across Gujarat. It will initially offer services in three categories — two-wheelers, auto-rickshaws and four-wheelers.

Mr. Shah said Bharat Taxi would begin operations in Nagpur, Pune, Mumbai, Lucknow, Chandigarh, Jaipur and Kolkata before July 31, and services would be extended to more than 500 cities and towns over the next two years.

Addressing the drivers, he said they had become part of the country's larger cooperative movement, which already includes crores of farmers.

WHY HAS THE GOVT. NOTIFIED A NEW SET OF TELECOM RULES?

The story so far:

The Telecommunications Act, 2023, saw a clutch of rules being notified this month, namely the Telecommunications (Authorisation for Provision of Principal Telecommunication Services) Rules, 2026; the Telecommunications (Authorisation for Captive Telecommunication Services) Rules, 2026; and the Telecommunications (Authorisation for Provision of Miscellaneous Telecommunication Services) Rules, 2026.

What changes for telecom operators and users?

There are not many operational changes in India's telecom ecosystem due to the parent act or the rules being notified, as the major objective of the legislation is to simplify the oft-amended Indian Telegraph Act, 1885, which it replaces (along with other accompanying laws, like the Wireless Telegraphy Act, 1933.

Along the way, the Union government got some greater powers in the text of the parent statute, such as a definition of "telecommunication" that can be used to regulate messaging apps. (While the government initially denied this, last year the Department of Telecommunications (DoT) tried to force WhatsApp to log out users every six hours from web instances of the service, and to "bind" every user to a SIM, as an anti-spam measure.)

Which provisions of the Act have already been brought into force?

This is, of course, not the beginning of the notification of the Act. As early as 2024, the government notified parts of the law, such as one that renamed the Universal Service Obligation Fund (where telcos are required to pay into a corpus to fund financially unfeasible telecom infrastructure in remote and isolated areas) to the Digital Bharat Nidhi. Another part of the law that was notified was one that allowed the government to seize telecom infrastructure on national security or war grounds.

More parts of the law that have already been notified in previous months include a replacement for the interception orders, where in spite of an industry and civil society push, the government retained senior officials' powers to issue phone and internet tapping orders.

The specific rules notified this month replace the bulk of the licensing framework for telecom operators. This has been replaced with the term "authorisation," accompanied by language that simplifies and modifies some of the paperwork that telcos and Internet Service Providers (ISPs) have to do. It also adds anti-spam enforcement as an obligation under the Parent Act.

Why are some aspects of the new regime still uncertain?

The new telecom act also recognises satellite internet, but this has been taken away, even as Starlink, the largest satellite internet provider in the world, awaits approvals to launch. "The final Rules have removed explicit references to Global Mobile Personal Communications by Satellite (GMPCS), as contained in the Draft Rules," the law firm Khaitan & Co wrote in a brief. Separately, news reports (and the delay) indicate that the government is yet to give up on concerns of whether it can truly shut off Starlink, seeing how it is used in countries like Iran in defiance of the local government.

At any rate, telcos and ISPs can choose to migrate to this authorisation regime now, or wait until their licenses expire and then apply afresh. As Khaitan & Co pointed out, "a significant volume of operational detail is still awaited ... implementation detail awaits further clarity and remains dependent on further specifications, including the 'sound' track-record criterion, exemption thresholds and technical directions."

VB-G RAM G: MGNREGA'S REPLACEMENT — WAGES, FEDERAL FINANCE & STATE RESISTANCE

Why in News

The Viksit Bharat–Guarantee for Rozgar and Ajeevika Mission (Gramin) (VB-G RAM G) Act, 2025 replaced MGNREGA, 2005, effective 1 July 2026. The Centre notified a ₹300/day floor wage, but the scheme has drawn sharp criticism over a steep Centre-to-State funding shift (roughly 90:10 to 60:40), its shift from a rights-based, demand-driven model to a budget-capped, supply-driven one, and an early dip in registered/active workers post-transition.

Context

MGNREGA, 2005 operationalised the Directive Principle under Article 41 (right to work) as a justiciable, demand-driven legal guarantee of 100 days of rural employment, implemented through Panchayati Raj Institutions (73rd Amendment). Its funding pattern gave the Centre near-full responsibility for wages, with materials shared 75:25 (Centre:State), translating in practice to roughly a 90:10 overall split. VB-G RAM G restructures this into a supply-side, budget-determined scheme — the Union government now fixes a 'normative allocation' per State based on objective parameters linked to 16th Finance Commission devolution criteria, shifting significant fiscal and design discretion to the Centre while increasing States' expenditure share to 40%.

Key Facts

A. Wage Notification (from 1 July 2026)

- Floor wage fixed at ₹300/day; the 21 States/UTs previously paying below ₹300 under MGNREGA were raised to this level.
- Large Hindi-belt increases: Uttar Pradesh +₹48, Bihar +₹45, Madhya Pradesh +₹39, Rajasthan +₹19.
- Smallest increase: Telangana, +₹1 (0.33%), from ₹307 to ₹308; Dadra & Nagar Haveli and Daman & Diu saw no change.
- States already above ₹300 saw modest hikes: Andhra Pradesh (1.6%), Tamil Nadu (2.7%), Karnataka (3.2%), Haryana (2.25%).
- Highest wage (excluding Sikkim's special ₹450 rate for certain gram panchayats): Haryana ₹409, followed by Goa ₹406 and Kerala ₹401 — the only three States above ₹400.
- States/UTs with hikes above 15% to reach ₹300: Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Jharkhand, Assam, Tripura, Sikkim, West Bengal.

B. Structural Changes from MGNREGA

- Guaranteed workdays raised from 100 to 125 per household per year.
- Model shifts from demand-driven (open-ended, rights-based) to supply-driven (budget-capped via a Centre-fixed 'normative allocation' per State based on objective parameters tied to 16th Finance Commission devolution criteria).
- Section 5(1) empowers the Union government to notify which rural areas in a State the scheme applies to — a departure from MGNREGA's universal coverage.
- A new 'blackout period' allows the scheme to be paused (up to 60 non-working days) during peak agricultural seasons to ensure labour availability for farming.
- Cost-sharing changed: MGNREGA had the Centre bearing ~100% of labour cost and 75% of material cost (≈90:10 overall); VB-G RAM G applies a combined 60:40 (Centre:State) split across both labour and material costs together.
- States now bear full responsibility for: expenditure beyond the normative allocation, unemployment allowance if 125 days' work cannot be guaranteed, and compensation for payment delays.

C. Financial Burden on States

- The Hindu's analysis estimates States' combined expenditure could rise from ~₹7,700 crore (2024-25 actuals) to at least ₹51,000 crore in 2026-27 (excluding West Bengal) — a ~600% increase, well above the popularly cited 'three-fold' (90:10 → 60:40 arithmetic) estimate.
- Uttar Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Bihar are projected among States facing the steepest increases (600–800%).
- Centre's interim allocation for States for 2026-27: ₹95,692.31 crore, without a clear break-up of States' required contribution or past dues settlement.

- ₹20,422 crore in State dues remained pending from the Centre as of 2025-26 under the outgoing MGNREGA framework.
- At the national launch event (Mukkavaripalli village, Tirupati district, Andhra Pradesh), works worth ₹7,700 crore (Centre) plus ₹4,000 crore (State) were announced for Andhra Pradesh alone, alongside ₹422 crore for roads and Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana houses in the State.

D. Political Opposition & State Objections

- Congress leader Jairam Ramesh called the wages 'unjustifiably low', citing the Anoop Satpathy Committee's 2019 recommendation of a ₹375/day national minimum wage floor, and reiterated Congress's 2024 poll demand for a uniform ₹400/day national minimum wage.
- Saptagiri Ulaka (Congress MP, chair of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Rural Development) demanded VB-G RAM G's repeal and MGNREGA's restoration, criticising the shift from a rights-based to a supply-driven model.
- Madhya Pradesh, Bihar and Jharkhand (two BJP-led) objected to the financial-model shift; five States sought wage revisions (Bihar sought ₹413 against ₹255; Jammu & Kashmir sought ₹311 against ₹272); four States objected to the 60-day blackout provision; Uttarakhand sought a compensatory hike citing terrain difficulty.

E. Early Enrolment Data (LibTech India Analysis)

- Registered workers fell from 27 crore to 26.33 crore (−67.6 lakh, −2.5%) in the fortnight after transition; active workers (worked at least once in 3 years) fell from 10.84 crore to 10.57 crore (−26.3 lakh, −2.43%).
- Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Telangana accounted for the bulk of the fall — Bihar −5.98 lakh, Uttar Pradesh −8.06 lakh, Telangana −7.2 lakh workers.
- Rural Development Ministry disputed the analysis as reflecting only routine, continuous record verification/updation, not denial of work; it cited no complaints of employment denial due to pending e-KYC/facial recognition, and noted ~84,000 new Gramin Rozgar Guarantee Cards (1.91 lakh workers) already issued.
- LibTech flagged this as the fourth major worker-count decline linked to a digital-compliance measure, after Aadhaar-based payments (2022-23), mandatory e-KYC (2025), and facial recognition-based attendance (2026).

F. Broader Welfare-Federalism Context

- Per a CSIE-Azim Premji University handbook (Realising Rights), combined 2025-26 allocations for major welfare schemes totalled ₹24.20 lakh crore (6.77% of GDP), with the Union's own contribution just 1.89% of GDP — meaning States already fund the larger share of India's welfare spending, a trend VB-G RAM G intensifies.
- States fund an estimated 75.2% of school education spending; the 16th Finance Commission reported States spent ₹4.14 lakh crore on unconditional cash transfers.

UPDATE

- All States/UTs have since notified their respective schemes in compliance with the VB-G RAM G Act, the government informed the Lok Sabha (per a statement roughly three weeks after rollout) — including States that had formally opposed it.
- Kerala, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Telangana Assemblies had each earlier passed resolutions demanding the Act's withdrawal and MGNREGA's restoration (Kerala's resolution: 5 February 2026) — yet all four States proceeded to implement the scheme by July 2026, citing continuity of worker employment as the reason.
- On 2 July 2026, the Telangana Cabinet decided to implement the scheme while simultaneously moving the Supreme Court to challenge specific provisions on grounds that they violate the spirit of federalism and undermine States' role in implementation — illustrating the 'implement now, litigate separately' pattern several opposition-ruled States have adopted.
- Kerala's own projected annual contribution under the new 60:40 formula is estimated to rise from ~₹250 crore to ~₹2,090 crore — a concrete, State-specific illustration of the funding-burden shift described more generally in the supplied articles.
- The Centre released a first instalment of ₹25,863 crore to States shortly after rollout, with the Minister citing an average wage hike of ~10% nationally and urging Odisha, West Bengal and Jharkhand to expedite scheme notification/fund utilisation.

COMPARATIVE SNAPSHOT: MGNREGA VS VB-G RAM G

Feature	MGNREGA, 2005	VB-G RAM G, 2025
Guiding Model	Rights-based, demand-driven (open-ended)	Supply-driven, budget-capped ('normative allocation')
Guaranteed Workdays	100 days/household/year	125 days/household/year
Centre:State Cost Share	~90:10 (Centre ~100% labour + 75% material)	60:40 combined on labour + material
Area Coverage	Universal (all notified rural areas)	Centre notifies applicable areas [Section 5(1)]
Seasonal Pause	No blackout provision	Up to 60 non-working days during peak agri season
Liability Beyond Allocation	Centre-funded (demand-driven, uncapped)	State-funded (unemployment allowance, delay compensation)

STATIC–DYNAMIC LINKAGE

- Prelims/Mains GS-II: Constitutional basis (Article 41 DPSP), Panchayati Raj Institutions (73rd Amendment) as implementing agencies, Finance Commission's role in devolution formulas (16th FC referenced for 'objective parameters').
- Mains GS-II: Centre-State financial relations and cooperative/competitive federalism — funding-pattern shifts, unilateral area-notification powers, and States' fiscal autonomy concerns.
- Mains GS-III: Indian Economy — rural employment guarantee schemes, inclusive growth, transition from rights-based to budget-capped welfare delivery, digital governance in welfare (e-KYC/biometric verification trade-offs).

ANALYSIS

Significance: VB-G RAM G is among the most consequential rewrites of India's welfare-legislation architecture since 2005, converting a judicially-enforceable entitlement into a budget-determined scheme — a structural shift with implications well beyond rural wages.

Implications: The funding shift (60:40, on a combined and expanded cost base) could raise States' cumulative expenditure far more steeply than the 'three-fold' figure typically cited — The Hindu's analysis suggests up to six-fold — straining State finances already carrying a disproportionate share of India's welfare spending (Union contributes only ~1.89% of GDP against States' larger share). This tension sits at the heart of ongoing Centre-State fiscal federalism debates, alongside GST compensation and Finance Commission devolution disputes.

Criticisms/Challenges: Critics (Congress, several State governments, LibTech India) flag three separate concerns — wage inadequacy relative to the Satpathy Committee's ₹375 recommendation; a federalism concern over the Centre's discretionary power to notify areas and fix allocations; and a transparency concern over the sharp, unexplained early dip in registered/active workers coinciding with new digital verification requirements. The government's rebuttal — that worker counts are 'dynamic' and reflect routine record updates — has not been independently verified in the supplied material, and remains a live point of contestation, now further compounded by Telangana's Supreme Court challenge.

⚠ EXAM ALERT

- Do not confuse the Centre-State cost-sharing ratios: under MGNREGA it was ~90:10 (Centre bore ~100% of labour + 75% of material); under VB-G RAM G it is a combined 60:40 across both labour and material — a bigger shift than a simple '10% to 40%' framing suggests, since the base being shared has also expanded.
- Guaranteed workdays increased (100→125), but this is not automatically more generous in practice — funding beyond the Centre's 'normative allocation' is now a State liability, unlike MGNREGA's uncapped, demand-driven Central funding.
- ₹300 is the notified floor wage, not the average — actual State-wise wages range from ₹300 up to ₹409 (Haryana) or the special ₹450 rate in select Sikkim panchayats.
- Do not conflate the LibTech India worker-decline analysis with a government-confirmed finding — the Rural Development Ministry disputes it as reflecting routine record verification, not employment denial; treat this as a contested, evolving claim.

ℹ DO YOU KNOW

- The Anoop Satpathy Committee (constituted by the Union Labour Ministry) recommended a ₹375/day national minimum wage floor in 2019 — a figure Congress continues to invoke as a benchmark against VB-G RAM G's ₹300.
- At the scheme's national launch in Mukkavaripalli (Tirupati district, Andhra Pradesh), a 'Wood Bank' concept was introduced — planting revenue-yielding tree varieties (teak, neem, eucalyptus) on panchayat land as a future income source.
- LibTech India describes the current worker-count dip as the fourth such decline linked to a digital-compliance measure in recent years — after Aadhaar-based payments (2022-23), mandatory e-KYC (2025), and facial recognition-based attendance (2026).

★ POSSIBLE PYQ ANGLE

- Mains (GS-II): 'The shift from a demand-driven rights-based rural employment guarantee to a supply-driven, budget-capped model raises fundamental federalism concerns. Discuss with reference to VB-G RAM G.'
- Mains (GS-III): 'Examine the fiscal implications for States of the changing Centre-State cost-sharing pattern in India's flagship rural employment programmes.'
- Prelims: A statement-based question contrasting MGNREGA and VB-G RAM G on workdays, cost-sharing ratio, area coverage, and the blackout-period provision.

✓ QUICK REVISION

- VB-G RAM G (effective 1 July 2026) replaced MGNREGA, fixing a ₹300/day floor wage (up to ₹409 in Haryana, ₹450 special rate in Sikkim) and raising guaranteed workdays from 100 to 125.
- It shifts from a rights-based, demand-driven model (Centre ~90% funded) to a supply-driven, budget-capped one (60:40 Centre:State on combined labour+material costs), with States now liable for unemployment allowance and delay compensation beyond the Centre's fixed allocation.
- States' expenditure could rise ~600% (₹7,700 crore → ₹51,000 crore+ estimated for 2026-27); Congress and several States (including BJP-ruled MP, Bihar, Jharkhand) have objected on wage-adequacy and federalism grounds.
- Despite Assembly resolutions against it (Kerala, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Telangana) and Telangana's Supreme Court challenge, all States/UTs have implemented the scheme; a LibTech India analysis also flags an early, disputed dip in registered/active workers post-transition.

TOPIC AT A GLANCE

Aspect	Body/Agency Involved	Key Fact
Wage Notification	Union Ministry of Rural Development	Floor wage ₹300/day; Haryana highest (₹409)
Cost-Sharing Shift	Centre & States	~90:10 (MGNREGA) → 60:40 combined (VB-G RAM G)
Fiscal Impact on States	State Governments	Estimated ~600% rise in State expenditure (2026-27)
Political/Legal Opposition	Congress; Kerala, Karnataka, TN, Telangana	Assembly resolutions + Telangana's Supreme Court challenge (Jul 2026)
Worker Enrollment	LibTech India; Rural Development Ministry	~67.6 lakh registered workers dropped post-transition (disputed)

SUBMARINE CABLE PROJECT LINKING INDIA, MALAYSIA, SINGAPORE UNVEILED

A consortium comprising Microsoft, Singtel, Tata Communications and AI connectivity platform Lightstorm will build a submarine cable system connecting India, Malaysia and Singapore.

“The facility is designed to cater to the rapidly- growing demand from hyperscalers, GPU infrastructure providers and enterprises running AI training and inference workloads across the India–Southeast Asia corridor,” Lightstorm said announcing signing of contracts to launch the building of the cable system. No details of the proposed investment on the project were shared.

Dual landings

I-2SEA, the cable system, would link India’s east coast, home to the fastest-growing AI and hyperscaler data centre clusters in Hyderabad and Chennai, directly to Singapore, the region’s cloud interconnect and AI hub as well as Malaysia’s emerging data centre corridor in Kuala Lumpur. It would have dual landings in India, with the one at Machilipatnam providing shortest subsea access to Hyderabad and the other at a new diverse landing location in South Chennai.

"The I-2SEA consortium will operate under a joint build agreement. NEC Corporation has been appointed as system supplier and ASEAN Cableship (ACPL) as marine installation partner. The system is now open for capacity commitments," Lightstorm said.

I-2SEA is targeted to be ready-for-service in Q4 2029 and estimated length of the high-capacity cable is 3,600 km from Singapore to Machilipatnam with onward connectivity to Hyderabad.

"It is expected to deliver the fastest transmission on the Singapore/Malaysia–Hyderabad corridor, which is the most strategically critical city pair for AI workloads in the region," the company said.

TREATFLATION: THE INVISIBLE 'GHOST' IN OFFICE CULTURE

There is a hungry 'ghost' 'haunting' your office. It neither rattles chains, bangs on doors, roams dark corridors, nor lives in deserted, dilapidated buildings. It silently lurks in WhatsApp groups, emails or phone calls. Its ambush is never a one-time affair. It strikes again and again, often when least expected.

This invisible ghost rarely asks for a feast and never compels; a small bite usually suffices. It does not care whether you are carrying a mountain of debt, whether it's month-end, budget is already stretched, or if your wallet can withstand another hit.

Most employees feed this ghost: a pocket-friendly contribution for a birthday cake, a party for promotion, a wedding or a team lunch. The strangest thing is that this ghost never feeds on fear but on goodwill. Nobody is forced to offer a bite, yet, this ghost is somehow fed. I call this ghost Treatflation, a portmanteau of 'treat' and 'inflation' that captures the rising cost of recurring workplace celebrations.

It is the accumulation of countless small contributions in the name of treats. Each request seems modest in isolation. Yet, over time, these small acts of participation can quietly become a drain on personal finances. It's an invisible financial burden wherein workplace camaraderie slowly begins to resemble a subscription fee for a 'utility' you never subscribed to.

Treatflation is not created by greedy bosses or demanding colleagues. It is sustained by decent people doing decent things. Every contribution is usually voluntary; every occasion is genuine; every amount is modest. Yet, over the course of a career, when thousands of such gestures accumulate, they raise an uncomfortable question: can even goodwill become so expensive?

Treatflation is powered by a force that social psychologists call 'Normative social influence.' It is our tendency to change our behaviour in order to fit in with a group and maintain good relationships with the people around us.

Put simply, it is the urge to conform to group expectations. Most employees do not contribute because they are forced by their bosses or colleagues, but because they want to fit in, maintain good relationships and avoid being the only person who declines. As a result, money leaves the wallet not out of necessity, but out of social expectation and peer pressure. In the 1950s, psychologist Solomon Asch demonstrated this tendency in a series of conformity experiments. He found that people often aligned their behaviour with a group even when their own judgement suggested otherwise. The lesson was simple: the desire to fit in and avoid standing out proved stronger. The behaviour underlying Treatflation is a simple human need: the desire to belong. Most people would rather contribute a few hundred bucks than risk appearing indifferent to the group.

The consequences of this desire are not merely social; they are financial as well. Left unchecked, this desire expresses itself through a steady stream of small contributions.

What makes Treatflation different from most expenses is not its size, but its frequency. A ₹500 contribution rarely attracts attention, but if it occurs just twice a month, it adds up to ₹12,000 a year. Over a 30-year career, the cumulative cost can exceed ₹3.6 lakh. The result is a financial leak that many employees may feel the pinch of, but rarely plug. Viewed differently, the same ₹1,000 invested every month at a 10% annual return could potentially grow to nearly ₹20 lakh over 30 years. When millions of employees across the country repeatedly make thousands of small contributions year after year just to maintain relationships with friends, colleagues and relatives, then culture itself becomes an economic force. Treatflation is simply one of its many manifestations. Economists devote considerable attention to studying how people spend money on consumption, investment and savings. Treatflation reminds us that people also spend money on something less visible: social acceptance and belonging.

In a relationship-oriented society such as India, the cumulative value of such spending may be far greater than we realise. So, the next time a contribution request pops up, perhaps the question should be if the price of belonging is worth the wealth you give up in return. Also, if declining the contribution leaves you feeling left out, the wealth you give up may well be worth the sense of belonging you receive in return. After all, relationships have value too, even if they cannot be measured in monetary terms. The key is to maintain balance and make that trade-off consciously rather than contributing unknowingly.

LIFE AND SCIENCES

LIFE ON MARS: ENDURING MYSTERY

In a new study in Science Advances, an international team of researchers has reported finding organic matter on Mars. Using the NASA Perseverance rover, the team recorded a distribution of complex organic carbon within an ancient river valley on the red planet's Jezero Crater.

Using the rover's SHERLOC instrument, the researchers detected a complex and hardy form of organic matter called macromolecular carbon within fine-grained mudstones. According to the study paper, published in Science Advances, this is significant as it represents the most robust detection of organic material in Jezero Crater to date and is the first time such a material has been found directly on a natural rock surface on Mars.

Over the last decade, the NASA Curiosity rover has found organic molecules in Gale Crater, proving the building blocks of life could be preserved in Mars's lakebed rocks. However, Perseverance's previous scans of the floor of Jezero Crater only showed localised and faint hints of organic materials.

The new evidence, from the Neretva Vallis channel, suggests organic matter could be more widespread on Mars than thought. The fact that these organic materials have also been found alongside minerals like carbonates and sulphates suggests they may have been trapped and preserved by water-driven processes billions of years ago.

While the new study noted that these organics could have been formed by geological (i.e. abiotic) processes rather than biological ones, the findings are, in the paper's words, "astrobiologically compelling", showing that complex carbon can survive the planet's harsh radiation for aeons.

NEW, INEXPENSIVE CHINESE AI MODEL IS CATCHING UP WITH OPENAI

Since DeepSeek shocked markets early last year with its cheap but powerful AI model, global consumers have been faced with a choice: Chinese offerings with lower prices and less capability or OpenAI or Anthropic, which have poured billions into development.

A model called GLM-5.2, launched last month by Beijing-based startup Z.ai, may finally be closing that gap in terms of Western interest.

Rival U.S. offerings

GLM-5.2 has Silicon Valley buzzing with its coding and agent capabilities, or the ability to execute complex tasks with minimal prompting, that almost rival leading U.S. offerings at a fraction of the cost, in what some experts are calling a "mini DeepSeek moment."

It has quickly climbed the usage charts on third-party AI developer platforms like OpenRouter, where it now ranks above Anthropic's models, while executives from cloud data platform Snowflake's CEO Sridhar Ramaswamy to venture capitalist Marc Andreessen have lauded its abilities.

"We now have a Chinese open-weight model that is as good as the currently available models from OpenAI and Anthropic," said David Sacks, U.S. President Donald Trump's former AI czar, last week before Washington lifted curbs on Anthropic's Fable and Mythos models on Tuesday.

Those capabilities have put Z.ai's GLM-5.2 model at the heart of a growing debate about whether China is finally catching up to the U.S. in the AI race, as technology executives warn that Washington's unpredictable regulation of the industry risks hampering its lead in the frontier technology.

"It is just a tick below Opus 4.8 (from Anthropic) and right up there with GPT 5.5 (from OpenAI)," Sacks said of GLM-5.2 on the All-In podcast, adding that "we cannot afford to do things that slow our companies down."

U.S. curbs fuel demand

The Anthropic curbs and the delayed public rollout of OpenAI's latest GPT-5.6 model have fuelled global demand for the Chinese model, some experts said.

"The international developer community is increasingly aware that relying solely on proprietary, U.S.-based API models carries significant risk," said Brian Tse, founder and CEO of Concordia AI, a Beijing-based consultancy focused on AI safety.

GLM-5.2's positive global reception also suggests increased interest in cheaper open-source development because businesses are getting stung by the rising and often unpredictable costs of using AI to complete tasks, as closed-source agentic AI tools consume more tokens, the units used to measure AI usage.

Z.ai, also known as Zhipu AI, declined to comment. Anthropic and OpenAI did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

GLM-5.2 currently holds fifth place on Artificial Analysis' large language model (LLM) intelligence leader board, which ranks performance across a range of benchmarks designed to measure overall capability, including reasoning and coding skills. And it is in the second spot on Code Arena's front-end coding rankings, measuring how well models generate websites and front-end applications, while operating at roughly a sixth of the cost of closed U.S. frontier models like Claude and the GPT series.

Z.ai has not disclosed how much it spent to develop GLM-5.2.

In a reply to Elon Musk on X last month, Z.ai founder Tang Jie said that the Chinese startup could produce a model on par with Anthropic's Fable before the first quarter of next year.

"The shift GLM-5.2 brings is that the open-source model has become a plug-and-play, out-of-the-box product," said Tiezhen Wang, former APAC lead at Hugging Face, a startup that serves as a hub for developers tinkering with open-source models.

"You just deploy the model and without doing any complex fine-tuning systems, it is in a highly usable, ready-to-use state. This drastically lowers the barrier to entry for open-source adoption."

BORDER GATEWAY PROTOCOL

Why it matters

When Telegram was temporarily banned by the union government at the request of the National Testing Agency (NTA) until June 22, the messaging platform's founder and CEO, Pavel Durov, claimed that access to the app was compromised through a "rogue method" called BGP (Border Gateway Protocol) hijacking. In this context, let's know what the BGP is.

Core Concept:

— The Border Gateway Protocol is the internet's routing system. It tells networks across the world how to reach specific IP addresses. If a network falsely announces that it is the preferred route to a destination, traffic can be diverted, intercepted or blackholed. This is known as BGP hijacking.

— Every major telecom operator, cloud provider, content delivery network and internet service provider runs an Autonomous System (AS), a large network identified by a unique number. BGP is the protocol these networks use to tell each how traffic through these networks should reach a specific IP address.

— For a rough analogy, imagine the internet as a major highway, and BGP announcements as connecting streets, where each street corresponds to a particular service. If one connecting street falsely advertises its location as someone else's, then some of the traffic on the highway could believe the false flag and join that particular street instead.

— BGP hacking is a technique in which internet traffic is misdirected by falsely advertising the route to a website or online service.

— Phishing is a common type of cyber-attack that targets individuals through email, text messages, phone calls, and other forms of communication.

— A phishing attack aims to trick the recipient into falling for the attacker's desired action, such as revealing financial information, system login credentials, or other sensitive information.

— Vishing (short for voice phishing) consists of phone calls from fraudsters pretending to be officials, such as bank representatives, trick victims into revealing OTPs or account details.

COMMON CRICKET STRATEGY MAY BE A MYTH, DATA ANALYSIS FINDS

In cricket, few strategies are as deeply ingrained as the left-right batting combination: where of the two batters at the crease, one is left-handed and other right-handed. Coaches, commentators, and even players have argued that every time the batters switch ends when they run, the bowler and captain have to adjust their tactics and field placements. The wisdom is that this constant change will disrupt the bowler's rhythm and allow for more runs. However, a new working paper by economists Johan Fourie and Krige Siebrits, of Stellenbosch University in South Africa, has concluded that this wisdom might be a myth.

"This paper provides the first rigorously controlled test of cricket's conventional wisdom that left–right batting partnerships provide a scoring advantage," they wrote. The duo analysed a database of 96,686 partnerships and 34 lakh deliveries across men's international cricket — including Tests, ODIs, and T20Is — from 2001 and 2025. And they found that the left-right combination conferred no advantage.

Fourie wrote on his blog that India coach Gautam Gambhir and assistant coach Ryan ten Doeschate, as well as former South Africa captain Graeme Smith and his batting partner Herschelle Gibbs are strong supporters of the idea.

Instead, he and Siebrits found that the wisdom could have persisted because left-handed batters have been, on average, better than right-handed ones even though the latter are more common. Specifically, they reported that mixed-hand partnerships could have seemed more productive because they included very talented left-handed batters rather than because the batters disrupted the rhythm of elite bowlers. They found this because once they controlled for the individual quality of the batsmen and for the match conditions, the putative advantage of the left-right combination vanished from the data.

Their study also took a closer look at ball-by-ball data to check whether a bowler is more likely to bowl a bad ball immediately after the batters have changed ends. According to their analysis, bowlers' performance did drop slightly after the batsmen had switched ends — however, this did not depend on the batter's handedness. Put differently, bowlers would have been equally disrupted by two right-handed batters changing strike.

Finally, the analysis uncovered a potential disadvantage of sticking with a left-right combination. The duo found that the risk of a batter being dismissed was actually higher when part of a mixed-hand partnership than for a same-handed partnership. In other words, the left-right tactic could be counterproductive because it forces a batsman to play in a position where they may be less comfortable. But the wisdom wasn't entirely wrong, at least according to the analysis: the duo found a small exception in T20I matches. While the average benefit of the combination was still zero, mixed-hand partnerships in T20Is occasionally provided a small boost in the middle of the team's batting innings. This, the authors figured, could be because of the highly tactical nature of this format, which incentivises match-ups against specific types of bowlers together with rules that favour batting. But overall, Fourie and Siebrits concluded, the only wisdom that the data supported was that a team's composition should be based on skills alone rather than include the batter's handedness as well.

OMEGA BLOCK

Why it matters

Western Europe is reeling under a severe heatwave again, with countries from the Netherlands to the UK to Italy to France affected. The extreme temperatures have been attributed to an omega block, which has created a heat dome effect over the region. Let's understand what an Omega block is.

Core Concept:

— According to the UK Met office, "The developing heatwave is being driven by a strong area of high pressure building over continental Europe. This high pressure is promoting widespread sinking air, which suppresses cloud formation, allows for prolonged sunshine and leads to increasing temperatures through compressional heating." This phenomenon is also called the Omega Block.

— 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. 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.

Heatwave and Urban heat island

— A heatwave is a condition of higher temperatures than the average normal temperature of any place. For any place, 'heatwave' conditions are declared according to the historical temperature average of that place.

— An urban heat island is a temperature-induced phenomenon where a city or parts of a city experience much higher temperatures than nearby or surrounding areas. This is more pronounced at night when trapped heat during the daytime is released.

— There are several factors behind the urban heat island effect, including urban architecture, density, construction material used in building, roads, waste heat from vehicles and air conditioners, less open and green spaces, etc. As cities are expanding rapidly, in most cases through unplanned growth, the risk of urban heat islands will further increase.

AN OVERHEATED EUROPE, AN UNDERPREPARED WORLD

For several years, weather extremes seemed a distant crisis for much of the Western world. The devastating heatwave of 2023 did leave an imprint on the ecological consciousness of a section of Europeans. But it's only been about a decade since people outside the developing world began to feel the impact of global warming acutely. In Europe, temperature records were broken during the summers of 2019, 2022 and 2023. The hot weather has been particularly distressing for people across the continent this year. Temperatures have exceeded 40 degrees Celsius in several countries, red alerts have spread across France and other parts of Europe, schools have shut, transport systems have been disrupted, and health services have come under immense pressure. The UK has recorded its hottest June day on record, while Spain, Portugal, Belgium, the Netherlands and Germany have all experienced conditions that until recently would have been considered highly unusual. The exact toll taken by the climate vagaries is not yet known, but the tragedy of people drowning in France after jumping into rivers and canals to escape the heat underscores the severity of the crisis.

Municipalities in several parts of Europe are now discussing cooling centres, expanding green spaces, redesigning buildings, framing heat action plans and improving emergency response systems. Such conversations are necessary in a continent where buildings are designed to retain warmth. But adaptation addresses only one side of the problem. The European heat crisis is a reminder of something scientists have always asserted: Climate change is an interconnected planetary emergency. For instance, the current weather pattern, a blocked high-pressure system trapping hot air over Europe and drawing warm air up from the Sahara, is not unusual in European summers. But climate change has made such occurrences more frequent and exacting, especially because Europe is the fastest-warming continent.

Delays in global warming mitigation impose burdens all over the world. Most European countries have taken initiatives to cut net GHG emissions to negligible levels. But many of these plans have been criticised for being vague on near-term accountability. Ambitious emissions reductions are indispensable. Equally critical is ensuring that Europe honours its financial and technological commitments to developing countries. The heatwave should alert its policymakers to the fact that every unfulfilled climate promise makes future heatwaves more dangerous.

WATERED-DOWN BONDS

Why does wet paper tear so easily?

As the southwest monsoon sweeps over India, people brace for storms, floods, and the occasional sight of a damaged bookstore or library. What makes the last a particularly sad sight is that paper tears easily when it's wet.

Paper is made primarily from wood pulp, which contains a dense network of cellulose fibers.

Cellulose consists of the compound C6H10O5 attached to each other in long chains. Many of these chains clump together to form fibres, and the fibres are attached to each other using hydrogen bonds, i.e. a bond involving a hydrogen atom on one end. While hydrogen bonds are weaker than covalent, ionic or metallic bonds, millions of them act to keep paper together, along with the fibres also being entangled.

When paper is wet, water molecules penetrate between the cellulose fibres. Because water can also form hydrogen bonds, it competes with and disrupts some of the hydrogen bonds that normally hold neighbouring fibres together.

Water also causes the cellulose fibres to absorb moisture and swell, loosening the network and reducing friction. As a result, the fibres can slide past one another more easily, so less force is needed to tear wet paper.

THIS HARDY COFFEE HYBRID MAY BE YOUR MORNING CUP OF THE FUTURE

While the world's coffee drinkers favour Arabica or Robusta, a newly identified hybrid called Coffea x libex (the X denotes its hybrid status) — or just Libex — could be their brew of choice in future.

The world drinks roughly 17,000 tonnes of Arabica and 10,000 tonnes of Robusta beans (pre-roasting) every day. Together, they account for more than 99.99% of global coffee production. However, they are susceptible to rising temperatures and erratic rainfall. Libex on the other hand may be able to grow in warmer temperatures and under a wider range of rainfall patterns, according to research from the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, in the U.K. It was recently published in Scientific Reports.

The researchers investigated coffee samples from Central America, Africa, and Asia to quantify hybridisation between Liberica and Excelsa and assess the hybrid's potential to be cultivated. While hybrids between these two species had long been inferred from their physical characteristics, their existence had not been confirmed using genomic evidence. The team analysed 113 individual plant samples to confirm that Excelsa and Liberica had indeed been hybridised in cultivation. The team also reported that improved genotypes of these hybrids can be brought to production using clonal propagation, micropropagation or by grafting to select rootstocks, such as those of Liberica or Excelsa. The Indian version of Libex is a "delicious coffee," Akshay Dashrath of the South India Coffee Company (SICC) and a study co-author, said. Material from the Malleshwara Estate near Ballupet in Hassan district, taken from trees planted between 1980 and 1982, was confirmed by Kew to be an Excelsa-Liberica hybrid.

On the SICC site, Mr. Dashrath wrote that according to a leading coffee roaster in the U.K. with whom he works, "Early tastings of Libex reveal a balanced and approachable cup, blending tropical fruit notes from Liberica with chocolate and dried fruit depth from Excelsa."

Traditionally, farmers grew Excelsa as a boundary marker in coffee estates. While Liberica is a low-yielding coffee, Mr. Dashrath said Libex has better yield and outturn (the conversion ratio of fresh fruit to coffee beans), which is good news for farmers. Libex also has thinner pulp and parchment, which can make post-harvest processing more efficient and improve quality relative to Liberica.