

The background of the entire page is a photograph of a traditional Indian building with a thatched roof and a large, intricately carved wooden door. The scene is set outdoors with trees in the background. A semi-transparent dark grey box is overlaid on the lower half of the image, containing text.

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Current Affairs

For Prelims and Mains

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1. How Uttarakhand UCC regulates live-in relationships

Uttarakhand UCC Live-in Relationships

The Uttarakhand government recently rolled out the Uniform Civil Code Rules for regulating live-in relationships which requires, among other things, the couple to fill a 16-page form and obtain a certificate from a religious leader showing they are eligible to marry, if they so choose. The Uttarakhand UCC makes it compulsory to register all live-in relationships. This applies to Uttarakhand residents living in the state as well as those living elsewhere in India. Chief Minister Pushkar Singh Dhami has said that a law regulating live-in relationships is necessary to avoid domestic crimes outside of marriage.

How Uttarakhand UCC regulates live-in relationships

The screenshot displays a user interface for the Uttarakhand UCC portal. It features a dark teal header with the text 'Uttarakhand, UCC'. Below the header, there are four service cards, each with an icon and a description:

- Registration of Marriage/Acknowledgement of Registered Marriage**: Officially register your marriage online.
- Registration of Divorce/Nullity of Marriage**: Official recognition of Court's Decree.
- Registration of Live-in Relationship**: Formally register your live-in relationship.
- Termination of Live-in Relationship**: Conveniently terminate your live-in status.

First, what is a live-in relationship?

The Uttarakhand UCC describes a live-in relationship as a relationship between a man and a woman, "who cohabit in a shared household through a relationship in the nature of marriage." The term "shared household" is defined as one "where a man and a woman, not being minors, live under one roof in a rented accommodation or in a house owned jointly or by any one of them or any other accommodation."

Essentially, cohabitation by a male and a female adult and managing of a household, subject to exceptions, qualifies as a live-in relationship.

Who can enter into a live-in relationship?

The aforementioned definition, however, covers only heterosexual relationships. It also specifies certain groups that are prohibited from entering such a relationship, like in the case of marriage. The Uttarakhand UCC mentions some 74 prohibited relationships for marriage, including first cousins.

Additionally, the law states that one cannot enter a live-in relationship with a person who is already married or in another live-in relationship.

There is also a crucial provision which states that "where the consent of one of the partners was obtained by force, coercion, undue influence, misrepresentation or fraud as to any material fact or circumstance concerning the other partner, including her/his identity," the relationship will not be counted as a live-in relationship.

The Registrar has the power to make a "summary inquiry" at the time of registration to ascertain if a relationship being registered is indeed in the nature prescribed by law. Questions of consent, identity can all be "verified" by the government.

How does the UCC regulate live-in relationships?

Part 3 of Uttarakhand's UCC deals with live-in relationships. The law essentially requires individuals to submit "a statement of live-in relationship" within a month of entering such a relationship. It also requires them to submit a statement of "termination of relationship."

The law states that the registration is only for the "purposes of record keeping" and also that the Registrar will forward these statements to the local police stations where the couple lives, and in case one of them is less than 21 years of age, to their parent or local guardian.

How does one register a live-in relationship?

For live-in couples, the code stipulates either online or offline registration. For online registration, citizens need to register with their Aadhaar. An OTP will be sent to the mobile number linked to Aadhaar.

For offline registration, the couple may approach the registrar of their jurisdiction (in the place of the shared household) with the requisite registration form and supporting documents. The application will be verified by the registrar within 30 days of its receipt. If it is rejected, an appeal can be sent within 30 days.

The Rules also state that if one of the live-in partners dies during the continuance of a live-in relationship, the partner shall update this information within thirty days from the date of issuance of the death certificate of the deceased.

Proof of permissibility of marriage.

This is a new legal documentation required to ascertain that the couple are not within the degrees of prohibited relationship. The Rules require a certificate issued by a "religious leader/community head concerned or official of a religious/community body concerned that the customs & usage governing the party/parties to the marriage permit the marriage within the degrees of prohibited relationship." Essentially, this certificate would have to show that if they wished, the couple could be married. The Rules also require full name, address and email id of the religious official certifying the relationship.

What are the benefits of registering?

If a woman is deserted by her live-in partner, she can seek maintenance as if they had been married. The law states that the provisions related to maintenance in a marriage shall apply mutatis-mutandis (a Latin legal term to indicate correlation).

The law also states that legitimacy of a child born out of a live-in relationship shall be recognised. It has been the position of law since 1976, and has been widely applied by the Supreme Court, that children born out of wedlock are legitimate and can inherit property.

Section 16(1) of the Hindu Marriage states that "notwithstanding that a marriage is null and void," under the Act, "any child of such marriage who would have been legitimate if the marriage had been valid, shall be legitimate." How a marriage is defined, whether the man is already married are all questions of facts that courts have to decide on a case to case basis.

The Rules also state that as long as a certificate or a provisional certificate of a live-in relationship is available, no landlord can refuse tenancy solely because a couple is not married.

What happens if a couple fails to register?

There is a jail term prescribed for not registering a live-in relationship. Also, the rules prescribe that landlords are required to ask for a certificate for renting a house to an unmarried couple. Under the UCC Act, a person who fails to register a live-in relationship within 30 days of entering into one, could face charges. Upon conviction, a magistrate can sentence the individual with a jail term of up to three months, or with a fine up to Rs 10,000 or both.

The Registrar, either on his own account or based on a complaint that a person has not registered their live-in relationship can issue a notice for registration. If the person fails to comply with the notice, he could face charges. Upon conviction, a magistrate can sentence the individual with a jail term of up to six months, or with a fine up to Rs 25,000 or both.

If a person has filed a false complaint about another person, the complainant shall be cautioned and warned to be careful in future. If the same person files another complaint which

is found false, they will be asked to pay a fine as determined by the State Government, and on further false complaints by the same person, they will be liable to pay a heavier fine.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Governance

Source: Indian Express

2. Bill to set up Tribhuvan Sahkari University in Lok Sabha: What it will teach, why

Introduction

The government introduced a Bill to establish a new university, the Tribhuvan Sahkari University, on the campus of the Institute of Rural Management Anand (IRMA) in Gujarat. The new university will be declared an institution of national importance.



TRIBHUVAN SAHKARI UNIVERSITY BILL, 2025 INTRODUCED IN LOK SABHA

What is the proposal?

At present, IRMA offers specialised courses in rural management. It also provides training in the development sector, including the cooperative sector.

The new university is aimed at imparting technical and management education and training in the co-operative sector. It also aims

to promote co-operative research and development and to attain standards of global excellence.

While it will be the first university of its kind in India, several countries, such as Germany, Kenya, Colombia and Spain, have a dedicated university for cooperatives.

How will the Tribhuvan Sahkari University be different from other universities?

The Bill's Statement of Objects and Reasons says, "The University would be a specialised University, the first of its kind, in the co-operative sector, to impart and promote co-operative education, training, research and development and thereby strengthen the co-operative movement in the country."

The university aims to establish sector-specific schools such as dairy, fishery, sugar, banking, rural credit, co-operative finance, co-operative marketing, co-operative accounting, co-operative laws, co-operative audit, multi-state co-operatives, etc., on its campus or in the states that are the leaders in the respective sectors.

Why a cooperative university?

The cooperative sector plays a significant role in the country's economy. It accounts for 19 per cent of the agricultural credit availed by farmers, 35 per cent of fertiliser distribution, 25 per cent of fertiliser production, 31 per cent of sugar production, 10 per cent of the production

and procurement of milk, 13 per cent of wheat procurement, 20 per cent of paddy procurement, and 21 per cent of fish production.

The government believes that the present education and training infrastructure in the co-operative sector is fragmented and inadequate to meet the demand for qualified manpower, and capacity building of existing employees, in co-operative societies.

What is the IRMA?

The IRMA was founded by Dr. Verghese Kurien, the Father of White Revolution in India, in 1979. It was established with support from the National Dairy Development Board (NDDB), the Swiss Agency for Development Cooperation (SDC), the Government of India, government of Gujarat, and the erstwhile Indian Dairy Corporation. It is spread over a 60-acre campus.

What will be IRMA's role after the new university comes up?

The IRMA was registered as a society under the Societies Registration Act, 1860. Once the Tribhuvan Sahkari University Bill, 2025 is legislated into an Act and becomes effective, the IRMA society will be dissolved. The IRMA will become one of the schools of the new university and be declared a Centre of Excellence for rural management. Its autonomy and identity will be preserved within the institutional framework of the university.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Governance

Source: Indian Express

3. Cabinet approves extension of the tenure of National Commission for Safai Karamcharis for three years beyond 2025

Introduction



The Union Cabinet, chaired by the Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi, has approved the extension the tenure of the National Commission for Safai Karamcharis (NCSK) for three years beyond 31.03.2025 (i.e. upto 31.03.2028).

IT would help in facilitating socio-economic upliftment of sanitation workers, improving the working conditions in the sanitation sector and aiming to achieve zero fatalities while performing hazardous cleaning.

Functions of the Commission

Mandate of the NCSK is to:

- (a) recommend to the Central Government specific programmes of action towards elimination of inequalities in status, facilities and opportunities of Safai Karmacharis;

(b) study and evaluate implementation of the programmes and schemes relating to the social and economic rehabilitation of Safai Karmacharis and scavengers in particular;

(c) investigate specific grievances and take suo-motu notice of matter relating to non-implementation of (i) programmes or schemes in respect of any group of Safai Karmacharis, (ii) decisions, guidelines etc. aimed at mitigating the hardships of Safai Karmacharis; (iii) measures for the social and economic upliftment of Safai Karmacharis etc,

(d) study and monitor the working conditions, including those relating to health safety and wages of Safai Karmacharis,

(e) make reports to the Central or State Government on any matter concerning Safai Karmacharis, taking into account any difficulties or disabilities being encountered by Safai Karmacharis; and

(f) any other matter which may be referred to it by the Central Government.

Under the provisions of the Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act, 2013 (MS Act 2013), NCSK shall perform the functions namely:

1. to monitor the implementation of the Act;
2. to enquire into complaints regarding contravention of the provisions of this Act and to convey its findings to concerned authorities with recommendations requiring further action;
3. to advise the Central and State Govt for effective implementation of the provisions of this Act; and
4. to take suo-motu notice of matter relating to non-implementation of this Act.

Background

The National Commission for Safai Karamcharis Act, 1993, was enacted in September, 1993 and a statutory National Commission for Safai Karmcharis was first constituted in August, 1994.

Relevance: GS Prelims; Governance

Source: PIB

4. BJP sweeps Delhi Election

Vote and Seat Share

1. AAP: The AAP saw a drop of nearly 10 percentage points in its vote share. The AAP secured a vote share of 43.57 per cent, down from 53.57 per cent in the 2020 assembly election. In the 2015 poll, it had secured 54.5 per cent of the votes.

In 2020 and 2015, the AAP won a massive mandate by securing 67 and 62 seats, respectively. However, this time, it was restricted to only 22 seats.

No Aam Story

➤ The IITian and Magsaysay Award winner who quit his sarkari IRS job becomes a face – along with the likes of former IPS Kiran Bedi and senior advocate Prashant Bhushan – of Anna Hazare-led anti-corruption movement in 2011-12



➤ In Nov 2012, parts ways with Hazare and launches Aam Aadmi Party (AAP)

➤ AAP finishes second behind BJP in its first Delhi poll outing. Kejriwal becomes CM with outside support from Congress but resigns in 49 days over Jan Lokpal Bill issue

➤ Takes on and loses to Narendra Modi in Varanasi in 2014 Lok Sabha polls

➤ AAP wins 67 of 70 seats in 2015 Assembly polls. Kejriwal becomes CM for second time. Waiver of power and water bills, launch of Mohalla clinics and improvement of govt schools are key initiatives

➤ Scripts another landslide in 2020 with 62 of 70 seats. AAP expands footprint and wins Punjab polls in 2022

➤ In 2024, after arrest in excise case, Kejriwal hands CM's post to Atishi

deputy Manish Sisodia.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II

Source: Governance

5. Reasons behind BJP victory in Delhi

2. Congress: The Congress, which failed to win a single seat for the third consecutive time in Delhi. For the Congress, which was in power in Delhi for 15 years from 1998 to 2013, the only consolation was the fact that it saw an improvement of 2.1 per cent in vote share. The Congress polled 6.34 per cent of the valid votes as against 4.3 per cent in the 2020 assembly poll.

3. BJP: The BJP was out of power in the national capital for more than 26 years. The BJP, which is returning to power, secured a vote share of 45.56 per cent and won 48 seats. Its vote share jumped from 38.51 per cent in 2020 and 32.3 per cent in the 2015 election.

New Delhi seat

BJP's Parvesh Verma, son of Delhi CM Sahib Singh Verma, defeated Arvind Kejriwal from the New Delhi constituency. Kejriwal lost the seat by 4,089 vote margin in the constituency, where Sandeep Dikshit of the Congress finished a distant third with 4,568 votes, higher than the victory margin.

AAP and Congress rivalry, Benefit of BJP

In the 2025 Delhi assembly election, the AAP and Congress's rivalry contributed to BJP's decisive win. AAP's vote share plummeted to 43.57%.

The Aam Aadmi Party and Congress, both members of the INDIA bloc, contesting separately in the 2025 Delhi assembly election appeared to have been a key factor in splitting the anti-Bharatiya Janata Party vote. A war of words between Congress Rahul Gandhi and AAP chief Arvind Kejriwal during the Delhi election campaigns further dented the ruling party's chances.

The Congress received more votes than the winning margin in 14 constituencies where the BJP emerged victorious, defeating AAP candidates, including former Delhi chief minister Arvind Kejriwal and his former

1. Focus on the middle class

The AAP was born out of the middle class's frustration with the political status quo. However, over the years, it has come to be increasingly seen by this class as a party that works only for the poor, with welfare schemes such as 200 units of free electricity and free bus travel for women.



Kejriwal did try to pivot to middle class concerns in his speeches ahead of the election, but that seems to have been too little and possibly too late.

The BJP, meanwhile, wooed this voter segment assiduously through several outreach programs including Residents Welfare Association (RWA) meetings. The icing on the cake came through the massive tax cut announced by the government in the Union Budget.

The definition of "middle class" varies, but according to a 2022 report by the People Research on India's Consumer Economy, this section makes up 67.16% of Delhi's population. The BJP appears to have managed to make deep inroads into this vote bank.

2. Declaration that no AAP schemes would be stopped

While the BJP, including the Prime Minister himself, had earlier derided welfare schemes as revadis (freebies), in Delhi, it was careful to emphasise that none of the ongoing schemes of the AAP government would be stopped if it came to power.

This was announced by Modi himself, giving it added weight that helped counter the AAP's claim that the poor would lose out on benefits if the BJP was voted in.

3. Poor condition of roads and sewers

The major factor that contributed massively to AAP's unpopularity was the poor condition of the capital's roads and sewers. Overflowing drains, potholed roads, and irregular garbage collection had angered voters across the national capital.

The fact that the AAP is in power in the MCD as well meant it could not pass the buck to the BJP, saying the central government, through the Lieutenant Governor (LG), was not allowing it to work.

4. The relentless LG-AAP tussle

The explanation the AAP gave for poor roads and lack of civic work was that the LG was holding up projects. The past few years have been marked by increased acrimony between the Delhi government and the LG, who holds significant power in the national capital.

Voters seem to have decided that a BJP government was likely to function more smoothly alongside a Centre-appointed LG. This is in line with the BJP's promise of a "double engine" government, where the governments at both Centre and UT-level work for New Delhi in tandem.

5. Anti-incumbency

AAP, which was formed in 2012, came to power in Delhi the following year, and has been in power continuously since 2015.

That the AAP was aware of anti-incumbency was apparent from its candidate list. However, the last-minute changes were not enough to counter the unpopularity of some MLAs, seen as unavailable and inaccessible.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II

Source: Governance

6. National Mission for Manuscripts to be made autonomous

National Mission for Manuscripts



The National Mission for Manuscripts (NMM) was established in February 2003 by the Ministry of Tourism and Culture. A unique project in its programme and mandate, the Mission seeks to unearth and preserve the vast manuscript wealth of India.

According to the Ministry of Culture, the NMM has documented around 5.2 million manuscripts across the country. It has conserved 90 million folios of manuscripts and digitised 3.5 lakh manuscripts that contain 3.5 crore number of pages.

Granting Autonomy

Steps have been initiated to make the National Mission for Manuscripts (NMM) autonomous, with the Centre allocating ₹491.66 crore over the next six years separately to the institution through a Special Finance Committee. The Special Finance Committee has allocated an amount of ₹491.66 crore to the body till 2031.

The NMM was till now functioning as a part of the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA). But for January to March, the funds for institutions were routed through the Sahitya Akademi. Sahitya Akademi is autonomous in nature. Thus, routing funds through Sahitya Akademi implies autonomy for National Mission for Manuscripts as well.

Budget proposal: Gyan Bharatam Mission

New 'Gyan Bharatam Mission' for manuscripts was announced in the Union Budget last week. According to the Budget document, the Gyan Bharatam Mission intends to cover more than one crore manuscripts. It would undertake the "survey, documentation and conservation" of

India's manuscript heritage lying with academic institutions, museums, libraries, and private collectors.

It is to be noted that it is not yet clear whether the new 'Gyan Bharatam Mission' for manuscripts, announced in the Union Budget last week would be a part of the NMM or be a separate entity.

Relevance: GS Prelims; Governance

Source: The Hindu

7. Former Cong MP Sajjan Kumar was convicted of double murder during the 1984 anti-Sikh riots

Introduction

A Delhi court convicted former Congress MP Sajjan Kumar of murder in a case during the anti-Sikh riots that followed the assassination of Indira Gandhi.

The case is related to the killing of Jaswant Singh and Tarundeep Singh, two Sikh men in Saraswati Vihar on November 1, 1984.

Role of Ranganath Mishra Commission

The FIR for this case was registered in 1991 based on an affidavit given by the complainants – the wife and mother of the victims – before the Justice Ranganath Mishra Commission.

The commission was appointed in 1985 by then Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi "to inquire into the organised violence that took place in Delhi...and to recommend measures that may be adopted for prevention of recurrence of such incidents."



1984 Anti-Sikh Riots: Sajjan Kumar Convicted For Killing Father, Son In Delhi

Question before Court

The main question before the court concerned the reliability of the witness testimonies. The case had three main witnesses: the complainant, her daughter, aged 14 during the incident, and her niece, then aged 21.

The Special Investigation Team (SIT) probing this case, had argued that the statements of the witnesses were reliable. On the other hand, the defence lawyers had long maintained that the complainant came forward as an eye witness after a 32-year delay, making her testimony unreliable.

The cases against Sajjan Kumar

Sajjan Kumar is already in Tihar Jail, serving a life sentence handed in 2018 in a case related to the

killing of five persons at Raj Nagar Part I in Palam Colony on November 1-2, 1984, and the burning down of a gurdwara in Raj Nagar Part II.

In September 2023, a Delhi court acquitted Kumar in a case related to the murder of seven people from the Sikh community in Sultanpuri during the 1984 riots.

Relevance: GS Prelims; Governance

Source: Indian Express

8. What's new in the Income Tax Bill, 2025

Introduction

The Income-tax Bill, 2025 intends to simplify India's six-decade-old structure of direct taxation by streamlining provisions, removing obsolete references, and creating a crisper and simpler legal framework.

Once passed by Parliament, the new law will likely come into effect on April 1, 2026.

It is shorter — all provisos (about 1,200) and explanations (about 900) have been removed, the word count almost halved to 2.60 lakh from 5.12 lakh, and all redundant provisions have also been omitted.

INSIDE BILL INTRODUCED IN PARLIAMENT		
Particulars	Income-tax Act, 1961	Bill tabled in LS
Chapters	47	23
Sections	819*	536
Words	5.12 lakh	2.60 lakh

** Effective sections. About 1200 provisos and 900 sections have been removed in the new Bill.*

Aspects of the Bill

Shorter, Simpler

● The Bill is 622 pages long, about 24% shorter than the 823-page Income-tax Act (updated until 2024). There is a focus on simpler language.

● There are 23 chapters, fewer than half the 47 chapters in The Income-tax Act. There are 16 schedules, two more than in the Act.

● There are 536 sections in the Bill, compared to the 819 effective sections in the Act. The Act mentions only 298 sections, however; over the years, new sections were numbered in

continuation with existing sections. For example, provisions relating to tax in special cases were inserted as part of the 115 series, viz., 115 AC, 115AD, 115JB, 115VP, etc., the government said.

Tax Year

● The Bill introduces the concept of “tax year”, which has been defined as the 12-month period beginning April 1.

In case of a business or a newly-set-up profession, the tax year will begin from the date it was set up, and will end with the said financial year. Income tax will be levied on the basis of the economic activity and income earned in a tax year.

At present, income tax has the concept of “assessment year” (AY), which assesses tax on income earned in the “previous (financial) year”. For instance, income earned in the financial year (FY) 2024-25 (April 1, 2024 to March 31, 2025) is assessed in AY 2025-26 (beginning April 1, 2025).

Crypto As Property

● Virtual digital assets such as cryptocurrencies have been included in the definition of property to be counted as a capital asset of the assessee along with existing categories of immovable property such as land and building, shares and securities, bullion, jewellery, archaeological collections, drawings, paintings, sculptures, and any work of art.

Disputes Resolution

● The section on Dispute Resolution Panel (DRP) in the Bill provides the points of determination, decision, and the reasons behind it, marking a shift from the earlier section, which lacked clarity on the manner of issuing DRP directions.

Use of Tables

● Deductions from salary such as standard deduction, gratuity, and leave encashment have been detailed in tabular form.

Previous attempts

The government has attempted to simplify the Income-tax Act on several occasions previously. In 2018, a task force was formed to draft a new direct tax law that submitted its report in 2019. The UPA government had proposed a Direct Taxes Code (DTC), and a draft Bill was tabled in Parliament in 2010. After review by the Standing Committee, the draft was revised twice, in 2012 and 2014, but it lapsed with the dissolution of the 15th Lok Sabha.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Governance

Source: Indian Express

9. President's Rule imposed in Manipur days after CM's exit

President rule imposed

After Manipur Chief Minister N. Biren Singh resigned, President's Rule was imposed in Manipur that has been affected by ethnic violence for the past two years.

President Droupadi Murmu issued a proclamation under Article 356 of the Constitution after receiving a report from Governor Ajay Kumar Bhalla.

The order said she was satisfied that a situation had arisen that the "governance of that State cannot be carried on in accordance with the provisions of the Constitution of India".

Legislative Assembly Suspended

A statement by the Manipur government said the "Manipur Legislative Assembly will be under suspended animation". The Assembly has not been dissolved.

Manipur is among States with highest instances of President's Rule

- This marks the **11th time** President's Rule has been imposed
- The latest instance was **277 days** from June 2, 2001, to March 6, 2002
- The first was for **66 days** from January 12 to March 19, 1967
- The longest was for **2 years and 157 days** from October 17, 1969, to March 22, 1972
- **Rishang Keishing of the Congress became the first Chief Minister to complete his full term. Okram Ibobi Singh of Congress was the first Chief Minister to finish not one but three terms**

Approval of Parliament required

Article 356 (3) of the Constitution states that the proclamation shall be laid before each House of Parliament and shall cease to operate at the expiration of two months unless approved by resolutions of both the Houses of Parliament passed by simple majority.

Situation in Manipur

A political crisis had emerged in the State since Mr. N. Biren Singh stepped down recently after a meeting with Home Minister Amit Shah.

The State Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leadership failed to reach a consensus on an alternative leadership to replace Mr. Singh.

More than 250 people have been killed and around 60,000 people displaced in the ethnic violence between the tribal Kuki-Zo and the Meitei people in the State that erupted on May 3, 2023.

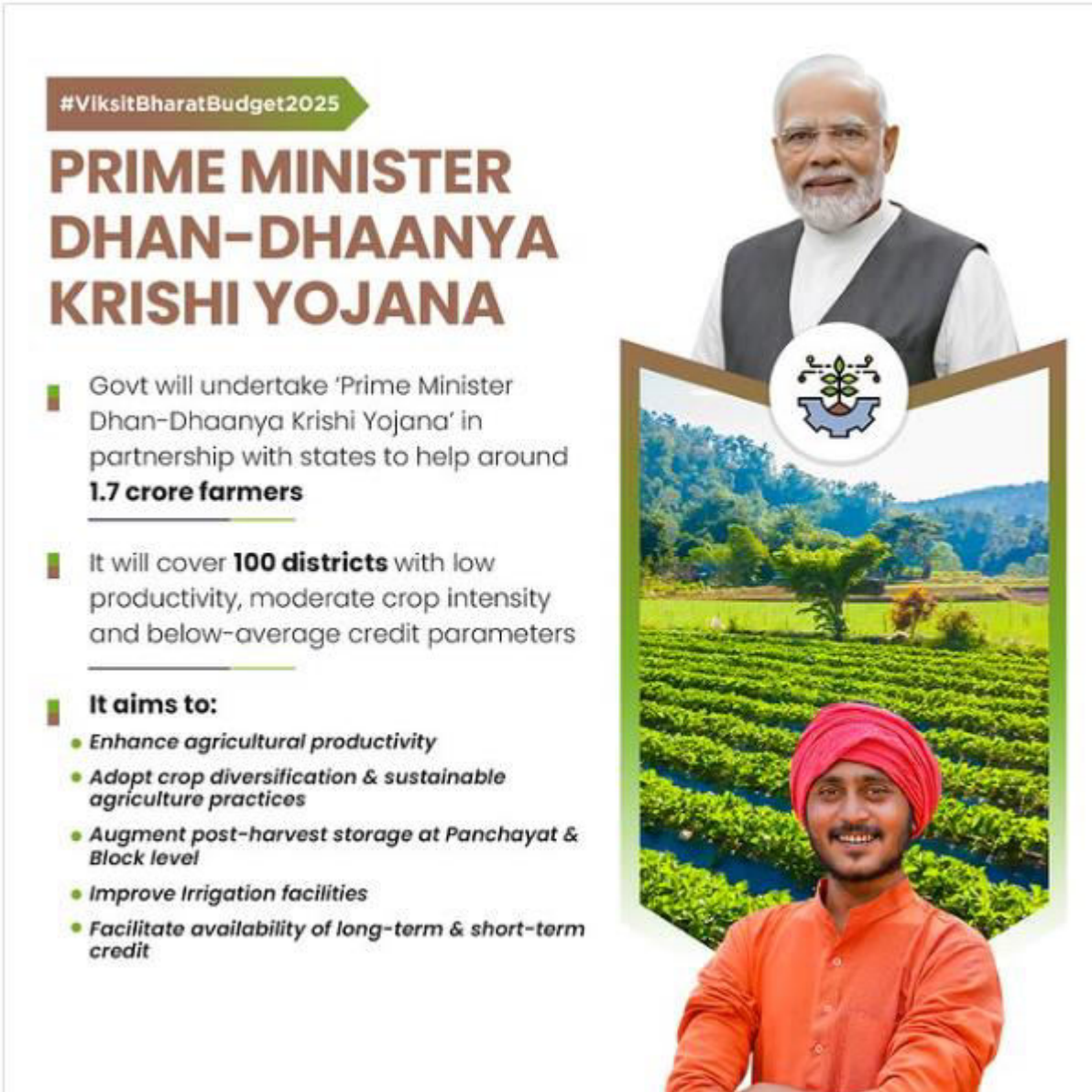
Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Governance

Source: The Hindu

10. Prime Minister Dhan-Dhaanya Krishi Yojana

Introduction

Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharman while presenting the Union Budget announced the launch of the Prime Minister Dhan-Dhaanya Krishi Yojana (PMDKY).



#ViksitBharatBudget2025

PRIME MINISTER DHAN-DHAANYA KRISHI YOJANA

- Govt will undertake 'Prime Minister Dhan-Dhaanya Krishi Yojana' in partnership with states to help around **1.7 crore farmers**
- It will cover **100 districts** with low productivity, moderate crop intensity and below-average credit parameters
- It aims to:**
 - Enhance agricultural productivity
 - Adopt crop diversification & sustainable agriculture practices
 - Augment post-harvest storage at Panchayat & Block level
 - Improve Irrigation facilities
 - Facilitate availability of long-term & short-term credit

“Motivated by the success of the Aspirational Districts Programme (ADP), our government will undertake a PMDKY in partnership with States,” Sitharaman had said while announcing the programme.

Aspirational Districts Programme (ADP)

ADP was launched by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in January 2018. The programme aimed to quickly and effectively transform 112 of the most under-developed districts across India.

Districts to be covered

PMDKY will cover 100 districts based on three broad parameters: low productivity, moderate crop intensity, and below-average credit parameters. The Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers’ Welfare has been collecting data of these parameters, based on which the districts will be identified.

Cropping intensity is a measure of how efficiently land is used. The cropping intensity indicates the number of crops grown on a piece of land in an agricultural year (July-June).

At the all-India level, the cropping intensity was recorded at 155% in 2021-22, although the figure greatly varied from state to state. Cropping intensity was only 111% in 1950-51.

Aim of scheme

The program has the following five objectives:

- Enhancing agricultural productivity;
- Adopting crop diversification and sustainable agriculture practices;
- Augmenting post-harvest storage at the panchayat and block level;
- Improving irrigation facilities; and
- Facilitating availability of long-term and short-term credit.

This programme is likely to help 1.7 crore farmers.

Relevance: GS Prelims; Governance

Source: Indian Express

11. PM Modi, Amit Shah & Rahul Gandhi meet to appoint new Chief Election Commissioner

Introduction

Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Home Minister Amit Shah and Leader of Opposition Rahul Gandhi met to appoint the successor of Chief Election Commissioner Rajiv Kumar.

This marks the first time a selection panel has been set up to appoint the head of the country’s election watchdog.

How were Chief Election Commissioners appointed earlier?



The Election Commission (EC) is a three-member body made up of one Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) and two Election Commissioners. Although all three election commissioners are equal, the CEC, like the Chief Justice of India, is the first among equals.

Earlier, there was no law passed by Parliament for the appointment of the CEC and ECs. The appointments were done by the President on the advice of the Prime Minister. Traditionally, the successor to the incumbent CEC has been the next senior-most Election Commissioner. Seniority was usually defined by who was appointed earlier to the Commission.

Decision on seniority

The current Commission is made up of Rajiv Kumar as CEC and Gyanesh Kumar and Sukhbir Singh Sandhu as the two Election Commissioners. Both Kumar and Sandhu were appointed to the Commission on the same day, March 14, and are of the same batch of IAS officers (year 1988). So who is senior? Sources within the government and Commission state that it is Gyanesh Kumar, since in the appointment notification issued by Rashtrapati Bhavan, his name comes first.

Hence, under the old system, upon Rajiv Kumar's retirement, the President would have notified Gyanesh Kumar's appointment as CEC. But it's not so simple this time.

How is the new CEC be appointed this time?

The new CEC is being appointed under a new law — Chief Election Commissioner And Other Election Commissioners (Appointment, Conditions of Service And Term of Office) Act, 2023. This law lays down procedures for appointment of both CEC and ECs.

Under the Act, a search committee headed by the Law Minister and comprising two senior bureaucrats serving as secretaries to the Government of India must first draw up a shortlist of five candidates. This shortlist is then sent to a Selection Committee made up of the Prime Minister, Leader of Opposition, and a Cabinet Minister nominated by the PM.

The current Selection Committee comprises Prime Minister Narendra Modi, LoP Rahul Gandhi and Home Minister Amit Shah. This committee met Monday evening at the Prime Minister's Office in South Block to select Rajiv Kumar's successor. Section 8 of the Act gives this Committee the power to also consider names beyond the shortlisted five. This is the same process used to appoint Gyanesh Kumar and Sukhbir Singh Sandhu to the Commission in March 2024.

Apart from laying down the exact appointment process, does the new Act also specify eligibility conditions?

While in the past the government had usually appointed retired senior bureaucrats to the Commission, the Act makes the qualification for the job clear: "The Chief Election Commissioner and other Election Commissioners shall be appointed from amongst persons who are holding or have held a post equivalent to the rank of Secretary to the Government of India and shall be persons of integrity, who have knowledge of and experience in management and conduct of elections," Section 5 of the Act states.

The Act also sets clear terms of service. "The Chief Election Commissioner and other Election Commissioners shall not be eligible for re-appointment. Where an Election Commissioner is appointed as Chief Election Commissioner, his term of office shall not be more than six years in aggregate as the Election Commissioner and the Chief Election Commissioner," it states.

Why was the appointment process changed?

This Act was brought after an intervention from the Supreme Court, following a clutch of petitions filed between 2015 and 2022 challenging the Centre's exclusive powers in picking the Election Commissioners.

The court had noted that the Constitution's founders never intended to give the Executive exclusive appointment powers. Concerned about the "devastating effect" of leaving appointments solely to the Executive, the court established a new process. In its judgment on March 2, 2023, the Supreme Court ruled that a selection committee comprising the Prime Minister, the Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha and the Chief Justice of India would select the CEC and ECs, until Parliament enacted a law.

Before any vacancy in the Commission could arise, the government brought the Bill in Parliament, which passed it in December 2023. The Act changed the composition of the selection committee — replacing the CJI with a "Union Cabinet Minister to be nominated by the Prime Minister", effectively giving the government the final say on who is selected.

Will today's Selection Committee decision settle the matter of the new CEC appointment?

No, not until the Supreme Court hears petitions challenging the new appointment process. Association for Democratic Reforms has challenged the removal of the Chief Justice of India as member of the Selection Committee under the new law.

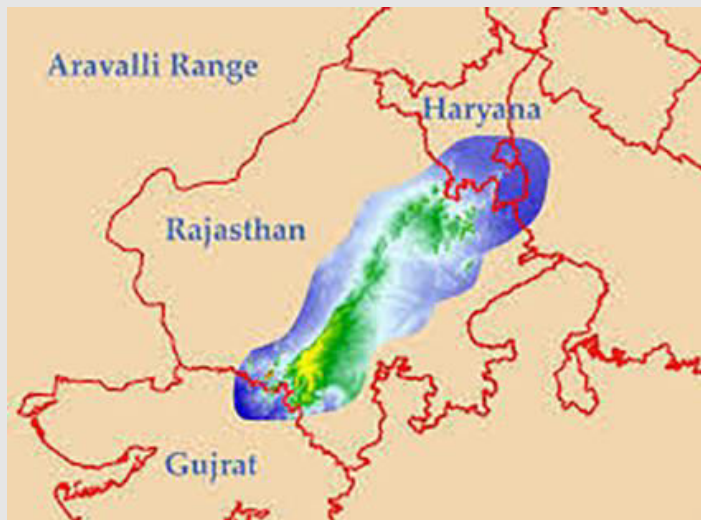
The key constitutional question raised by these petitions is whether Parliament has the legal authority to override or modify a Constitution Bench judgment through legislation or ordinance. Although the petitioners sought an early hearing before Rajiv Kumar's retirement, the Court scheduled it for February 19, a day after his exit. However, SC judge Surya Kant assured the petitioners that "consequences" of the court's decision on the validity of the new Act would apply even if appointments were made in the interim period.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Governance

Source: Indian Express

12. What is the Aravali safari park project?

Introduction



The Haryana government's ambitious 3,858 hectare Aravali safari park project spread across Gurugram and Nuh is envisaged to be the world's largest safari park.

What is the project?

As per the tender invited by the Haryana Tourism Department, the proposed Aravali safari park will have animal cages, guest houses, hotels, restaurants, auditoriums, an animal hospital, childrens' parks, botanical gardens, aquariums, cable cars, a

tunnel walk with exhibits, an open-air theatre and eateries. The project has now been transferred to the forest department and an expert committee has been set up to oversee it. Of the total 3,858 hectares proposed in the tender, 2,574 will be in Gurugram and the remaining 1,284 in Nuh.

Why is there opposition?

The hills in the southern districts of Gurugram and Nuh are a part of Aravali, the oldest fold mountain range in the world. It runs diagonally across Rajasthan extending from Champaner in Gujarat in the southwest to near Delhi in the northeast for about 690 km. It is ecologically significant as it combats desertification by checking the spread of the Thar Desert towards eastern Rajasthan, and performs the role of an aquifer with its highly fractured and weathered quality rocks allowing water to percolate and recharge the groundwater. It is also a rich habitat to a wide spectrum of wildlife and plant species.

A group of 37 retired Indian Forest Service officers have written a letter to Prime Minister Narendra Modi seeking to scrap the project arguing that the project's aim is to simply increase tourist footfall and not conserve the mountain range. The "primary purpose of any intervention in an eco-sensitive area should be 'conservation and restoration' and not destruction", the letter said.

The increased footfall, vehicular traffic and construction will disturb aquifers under the Aravali hills which are critical reserves for the water-starved districts of Gurugram and Nuh (the groundwater level in the two districts has been categorised as "over-exploited" by the Central Ground Water Board). Additionally, the location of the project falls under the category of "forest", which is protected under the Forest Conservation Act, 1980. Besides, Haryana has very low forest cover of 3.6%, and therefore, the State needs rewilding of natural forests and not destructive safari projects, the letter said.

13. Allahbadia bail condition: SC's gag order and the question of free speech

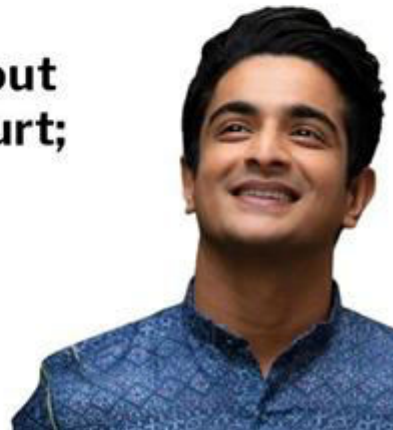
Introduction

The Supreme Court recently granted interim protection from arrest in the FIRs registered against podcaster-influencer Ranveer Allahbadia for his comments on a YouTube show.

However, a Bench of Justices Surya Kant and N K Singh imposed crucial conditions, including that Allahbadia or his associates cannot air any content on social media until further orders. While Allahbadia was granted relief, the gag order raises some questions of free speech. The order also flies in the face of an SC judgment that said such a condition could have a "chilling effect on the freedom of speech".

Ranveer Allahbadia - Supreme Court order in a nutshell

- **Arrest of Allahbadia stayed in all FIRs registered against him;**
- **No further FIR shall be registered;**
- **Allahbadia can approach local police of Maharashtra and Assam for protection of life and liberty in case of any threat;**
- **He should deposit his passport with the Thane police;**
- **Cannot leave country without permission of Supreme Court;**
- **Should not do any other show for now.**



Petitioner's plea

The petitioner had moved the SC seeking clubbing of FIRs against him, and an interim order preventing his arrest.

Essentially, the relief would be akin to granting anticipatory bail. Such pleas are routinely entertained under Article 32 of the Constitution for the enforcement of fundamental rights as a safeguard against arbitrary police action.

The pattern of filing multiple FIRs in different jurisdictions for the same cause of action or alleged offence has been noted in several cases as restricting liberty.

Courts club the FIRs or allow investigation in one FIR, while the others are stayed so the petitioner does not have to appear in multiple courts. Ultimately, even if convicted, the accused would serve a common sentence, and not consecutive sentences.

SC's gag order

The court stayed the FIRs already registered, and also any future FIRs on the same set of allegations. It allowed Allahbadia to approach the police for protection in the event of any threat.

But the SC imposed two conditions: that Allahbadia deposit his passport so he does not leave the country, and that he "or his associates shall not air any show on Youtube or any other audio/video visual mode of communication till further orders".

Bail conditions

Section 438(2) of the CrPC stipulates that the High Court or the Court of Sessions can direct a person to be released on conditional bail. The court shall impose conditions in the context of the facts of a particular case.

For example, the condition of depositing a passport is to address situations where the accused could be a flight risk. Bail could be set for a high monetary value to ensure the accused joins the investigation. Another common condition is that the accused should periodically present himself before a police officer.

In other cases, courts have imposed onerous bail conditions like sharing a Google map PIN or residing in a particular locality.

However, a gag order, while granting protection from arrest, is an unusual condition because it is in the nature of a prior restraint — when speech or any other expression is prohibited before it can take place.

A body of jurisprudence in India bars the state from making prior restraint laws. In hate speech cases, the court could observe that the accused cannot make similar statements, essentially tailoring the gag order narrowly to not interfere with speech entirely.

Past SC ruling

In 2022, while granting bail to Alt News co-founder Mohammed Zubair, a three-judge Bench headed by Justice D Y Chandrachud rejected the Uttar Pradesh government's plea that the accused must be barred from tweeting while on bail.

"Merely because the complaints... arise from posts that were made by him on a social media platform, a blanket anticipatory order preventing him from tweeting cannot be made. A blanket order directing the petitioner to not express his opinion — an opinion that he is rightfully entitled to hold... — would be disproportionate to the purpose of imposing conditions on bail. The imposition of such a condition would tantamount to a gag order against the petitioner. Gag orders have a chilling effect on the freedom of speech," the court said.

The court noted that Zubair would need to use social media as a medium of communication for his work, and said that a gag order would "amount to an unjustified violation of the freedom of speech and expression, and the freedom to practice his profession".

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Governance

Source: The Hindu

14. What is the MPID Act under which the Torres scam is being investigated in Maharashtra?

Introduction

Investors who were defrauded in the Torres Ponzi scam may receive about Rs 40 crore over the next six months. The Mumbai Police's Economic Offences Wing (EOW) has begun the procedure to commence auctioning the seized properties of the accused parties, under the MPID Act.



What happened earlier?

In January, thousands of investors staged protests outside multiple Torres outlets in Mumbai after they suddenly stopped receiving their promised interest payments in various investment schemes in late December 2024.

According to the EOW investigation, the company had allegedly floated multiple schemes encouraging them to buy jewellery at exorbitant weekly interest rates, with some yielding an annual return of up to 500 per cent. The company allegedly lured them with incentives such as iPhones, jewellery and other expensive gifts, including branded bags, cars, and apartments. The payments suddenly stopped in December 2024, causing panic among those who had invested with Torres.

This case is the latest to be registered under the MPID Act which concerns the attachment of seized assets from fraudulent establishments and their sale and distribution. Similar acts have been enacted in other states. Here is what to know about the act.

What is the MPID Act and why was it passed in Maharashtra?

The Maharashtra Protection of Interest of Depositors (in Financial Establishments) Act, 1999, was enacted by the state legislature, and received the President's assent on January 21, 2000. At its introduction, the bill identified the growth of financial establishments in the state, with some intending to defraud the public by grabbing their deposited money. These investors mostly belonged to the middle class and poor economic backgrounds, and were lured with the promise of unprecedented interest rates or returns.

What are the main provisions of the Act?

The Act states that any financial establishment which fraudulently defaults repayment of deposit on maturity along with benefit in the form of interest, bonus, profit as assured, then every person including its promoter, partner, director, manager, employee responsible for the management or conducting business, can be held responsible. If found guilty, they can be sentenced to imprisonment for a maximum term of six years and fined up to Rs 1 lakh.

The Act also empowers the government to issue an order attaching the money or other property believed to have been acquired by the financial establishment. It lays out the procedure to be followed with powers designated to courts to make the order of attachment absolute.

Once an order is passed, the court can issue directions for the sale of the assets and its equitable distribution of the amount among the depositors. Unlike the provisions in criminal law which deal with cheating and fraud by financial establishments, the speedy procedure for attachment and distribution of the properties makes the Act significant for depositors.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Governance

Source: The Hindu

15. What is Article 101(4)? Why should Amritpal not worry about it?

Introduction

Incarcerated Khadoor Sahib MP Amritpal Singh recently moved the Punjab and Haryana High Court to attend the ongoing Parliament session, lest he lose his seat because of his prolonged absence from the House.

Amritpal, who faces charges under the stringent National Security Act, has been detained in Dibrugarh since April 2023. He contested and won the 2024 Lok Sabha election from prison, but thus far has an attendance of only 2%.

**JAILED MP AMRITPAL SINGH
MOVES PUNJAB AND HARYANA
HC REQUESTING PERMISSION
TO ATTEND PARLIAMENTARY
PROCEEDINGS**



The provision

"If for a period of sixty days a member of either House of Parliament is without permission of the House absent from all meetings thereof, the House may declare his seat vacant," Article 101(4) says. The 60 days, however, do not account for "any period during which the House is prorogued or is adjourned for more than four consecutive days".

Effectively, the period of absence is only calculated based on the actual sittings of Parliament. Amritpal, for instance, only attended one sitting of the Lok Sabha — the one in which he was sworn in last July. Since then, he has remained in detention in Assam. This has amounted to nearly 50 absences thus far.

However, as former Lok Sabha Secretary General told, he does not recall a single instance in which Article 101(4) was invoked, and an MP lost her seat as a result.

MPs can seek leave

The operative term in Article 101(4) is "without permission of the House". For long absences, MPs write to the 'Committee on Absence of Members from the Sittings of the House', the parliamentary panel that deals with this issue.

The committee makes recommendations on each leave application, which are then ratified by the House concerned. In practice, however, applications are seldom rejected. Past leave application reports list illness — their own or some relative's — as the most common reason for MPs being granted leave. That said, members have requested and been granted leave on the count of being imprisoned as well.

Matter Put to vote to decide vacancy

Even if an MP is absent for more than 60 days, the House has to "declare" the seat vacant, meaning the matter has to be put to vote. This makes it even less likely that Amritpal will end up losing his seat simply because he is unable to attend proceedings.

Relevance: GS Prelims; Polity

Source: Indian Express

16. SC stays Lokpal order on power over High Court judges

Introduction

Redefining jurisdiction

Lokpal's January 27 order defines the rules and conditions under which it will inquire into complaints against High Court judges

- SC judges are public servants under the Prevention of Corruption Act but are not public servants under the Lokpal Act

- The SC was 'established' by the Constitution. The HCs pre-existed the Constitution and are only 'recognised' by it

- A judge of an HC established by an Act of Parliament will come within the ambit of expression 'any person' in Section 14(1)(f) of the Lokpal Act

- There is a precondition to consult the Chief Justice of India before initiating, under Section 20 of the Lokpal Act, a preliminary inquiry into a complaint lodged against an HC judge



Lokpal Order

The Lokpal, in its January 27 order, said a High Court judge came within the ambit of clause (f) of Section 14(1) of the 2013 Act.

A clause of Section 14 notes the Lokpal has jurisdiction over "any person who is or has been a chairperson or member or officer or employee in any body or Board or corporation or authority or company or society or trust or autonomous body (by whatever name called) established by an Act of Parliament or wholly or partly financed by the Central government or controlled by it".

The term 'any person' in the clause would include a judge of a High Court established by an Act of Parliament.

Rationale Behind Order

The Lokpal concluded that High Court judges were 'public servants' and came within the ambit of the Lokpal and Lokayuktas Act of 2013. Thus, the Lokpal assumed jurisdiction to inquire or investigate complaints about High Court judges.

Lokpal argued, unlike the Supreme Court, the High Courts in India were constituted by British Parliamentary Acts — Indian High Courts Act, 1861 and Government of India Act 1935. In fact, the High Courts pre-dated the Constitution.

Article 214 of the Constitution, which said “there shall be a High Court for each State”, had only “intrinsically recognised” the existence of the High Courts. The Constitution did not establish the High Courts, the Lokpal argued in the January 27 order. On the other hand, the Supreme Court was completely a child of the Constitution.

Supreme Court judges outside Jurisdiction

A few days before the January 27 order, the Lokpal, in a decision on January 3, had declared that it had no power over Supreme Court judges, including the Chief Justice of India.

In the January 3 order, the Lokpal had explained that the Supreme Court was not a “body” established by an Act of Parliament or financed or controlled by the Central government. It had observed that Supreme Court judges, including the CJI, even though ‘public servants’ in terms of the Prevention of Corruption Act of 1988, were not amenable to the jurisdiction of the Lokpal.

Reaction of Supreme Court

The Supreme Court recently stayed a Lokpal order bringing High Court judges under its jurisdiction, terming the top anti-corruption ombudsman’s interpretation “very disturbing”.

Taking suo motu cognisance of the January 27 Lokpal order, a Special Bench of of the Supreme Court and Collegium members, said it impacted the independence of the judiciary.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Governance

Source: Indian Express

17. Established as ‘antidote’ to ‘linguistic hostility and bitterness: what are zonal councils?

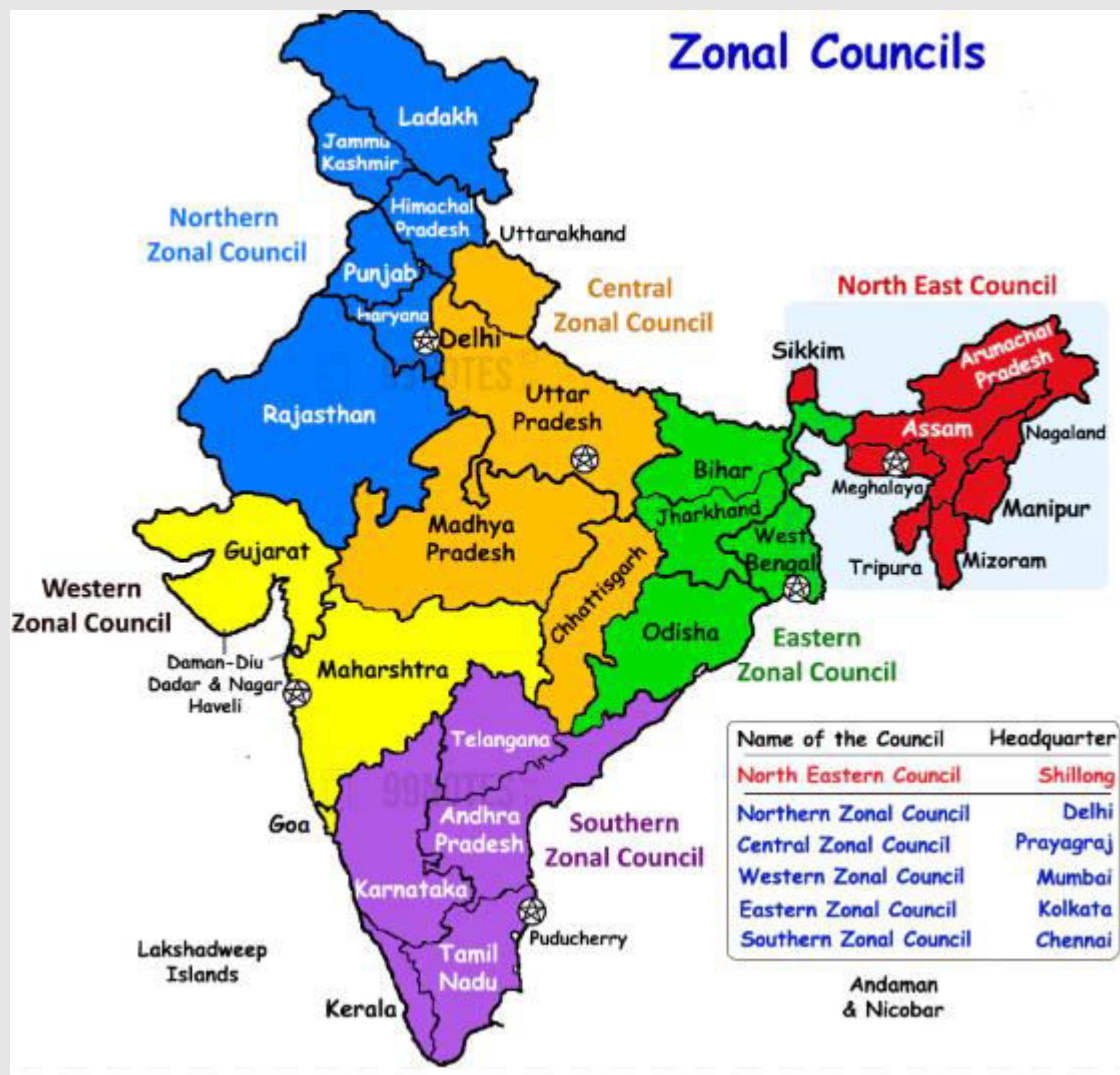
Introduction

As Union Home Minister Amit Shah chaired the 27th meeting of the Western Zonal Council in Pune recently, a look at the formation of these Zonal Councils in the 1950s as an ‘antidote’ for the linguistic hostilities and bitterness from the re-organisation of the states on linguistic pattern and what are their functions.

Idea mooted by then Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru

The idea of creation of Zonal Councils was mooted by the first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru in 1956 when during the course of debate on the report of the States Reorganisation Commission, he suggested that the states proposed to be reorganised may be grouped into four or five zones having an Advisory Council “to develop the habit of cooperative working” among these states, say the records of the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA).

This suggestion was made by Pandit Nehru at a time when linguistic hostilities and bitterness as a result of re-organisation of the states on linguistic patterns were threatening the very fabric of our nation. As an antidote to this situation, it was suggested that a high-level advisory forum should be set up to minimise the impact of these hostilities and to create healthy inter-state and Centre-State environment with a view to solving inter-state problems and fostering balanced socio economic development of the respective zones. In the light of the vision of Pandit Nehru, five Zonal Councils were set up as per the States Reorganisation Act, 1956.



Members of the Zonal Councils

The present composition of the Zonal Councils is as follows: The Northern Zonal Council, comprising the States of Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Jammu & Kashmir, Punjab, Rajasthan, National Capital Territory of Delhi and Union Territory of Chandigarh.

The Central Zonal Council, comprising the States of Chhattisgarh, Uttarakhand, Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh.

The Eastern Zonal Council, comprising the States of Bihar, Jharkhand, Orissa, and West Bengal. The Western Zonal Council, comprising the States of Goa, Gujarat, Maharashtra and the Union Territories of Daman & Diu and Dadra & Nagar Haveli.

The Southern Zonal Council, comprising the States of Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala, Tamil Nadu and the Union Territory of Puducherry.

North Eastern Council was set up under the North Eastern Council Act, 1972 with Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Tripura, Mizoram, Meghalaya and Nagaland as its members. The state of Sikkim which was earlier in the Eastern Zonal Council was included in the North Eastern Council in 2002.

Composition of Zonal Councils

Each Zonal Council has a Standing Committee consisting of Chief Secretaries of the member states. These Standing Committees meet from time to time to resolve the issues or to do necessary groundwork for further meetings of the Zonal Councils.

The composition of each council is as follows: The Union Home Minister is the chairman of each of these council. The Chief Ministers of the states included in each zone act as Vice-Chairman of the Zonal Council for that zone by rotation, each holding office for a period of one year at a time. Chief Minister and two other ministers as nominated by the Governor from each of the states and two members from Union Territories included in the zone. One person nominated by the planning commission for each of the Zonal Councils, Chief Secretaries and another officer nominated by each of the states included in the Zone.

In 2018, the Union Cabinet chaired by the Prime Minister Narendra Modi approved the nomination of the Union Home Minister as ex-officio chairman of North Eastern Council and the Minister Development of North Eastern Region (DoNER) to serve as Vice Chairman of the Council.

Role of Zonal Councils

The MHA has said that the Zonal Councils provide an excellent forum where irritants between Centre and States and among states can be resolved through free and frank discussions and consultations. The councils act as regional forums of cooperative endeavour for states linked with each other economically, politically and culturally.

The zonal councils can discuss matters of common interest in the field of economic and social planning, matters concerning border disputes, linguistic minorities or inter-state transport and matters connected with the reorganization of the states under the States Reorganisation Act.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Governance

Source: Indian Express

18. Why is three-language policy controversial?

Introduction

The Union Government has withheld ₹2,152 crore in funds due to Tamil Nadu under the Samagra Shiksha scheme for refusing to join the Prime Minister Schools for Rising India (PMSHRI) initiative. While T.N. is eager to participate in the PM SHRI scheme, it staunchly opposes the accompanying mandate to implement the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. One of the State's core objections to the NEP is its insistence on adopting a three-language formula in schools.



What does the NEP 2020 state?

The NEP 2020 has retained the three-language formula, a concept first introduced in the NEP of 1968. The key difference, however, is that back then the NEP advocated for Hindi to be a compulsory language across the nation. Hindi-speaking States were required to teach Hindi, English, and a modern Indian language — preferably

a south Indian language — while non-Hindi speaking States were expected to teach the local regional language, Hindi, and English. In contrast, NEP 2020 offers greater flexibility, technically not imposing any specific language on any State. It states that “the three languages learned by children will be the choices of States, regions, and, of course, the students themselves, so long as at least two of the three languages are native to India.” This means, in addition to the State's language, children would be required to learn at least one other Indian language — not necessarily Hindi. The policy also emphasises bilingual teaching, particularly in the home language/mother tongue and English. Conspicuously, it places significant emphasis on Sanskrit as an optional choice within the three-language formula.

Why is the three-language policy seen as an attempt to impose Hindi?

Tamil Nadu has long resisted the ‘imposition of Hindi’. Political parties and activists in T.N. view the three-language policy as a “smokescreen” and a “backdoor” attempt to impose Hindi. They argue that, in practice, the implementation of a three-language scheme would inevitably lead to the teaching of Hindi, given the limited resources for providing additional language teachers and learning materials.

Moreover, the Union Government and prominent BJP leaders have periodically advocated for the promotion of Hindi. In 2019, the Union Budget allocated ₹50 crore to support the appointment of Hindi teachers in non-Hindi speaking States. Critics contend the Centre's actions do not match its rhetoric on promoting regional languages, as evidenced by the lack of efforts to hire adequate regional language teachers in Kendriya Vidyalayas or to ensure south Indian languages are taught in schools above the Vindhyas.

What is the way forward?

The only viable solution lies in constructive dialogue and a practical compromise between the Centre and the State on an issue like education, which was transferred from the State to the concurrent list during the Emergency. Notably, T.N., with its long-standing two-language

policy, has consistently outperformed many other States in key metrics such as Gross Enrolment Ratio and reduced school dropout rates. Disagreements over teaching a third language should not be allowed to derail funding for Samagra Shiksha, a comprehensive programme for education.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Governance
Source: The Hindu

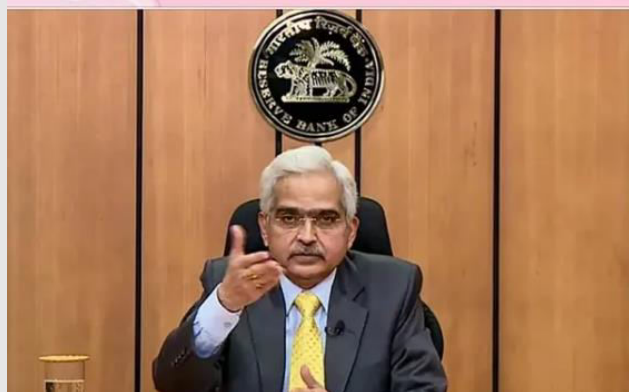
19. Shaktikanta Das appointed new Principal Secretary

Introduction

Former Reserve Bank of India (RBI) Governor Shaktikanta Das was appointed the Principal Secretary to the Prime Minister recently. The retired IAS officer is perhaps the only bureaucrat in history who would be holding the post with experience working in both monetary policy (controlled by the central bank) and fiscal policy (laid out by the government).

Das holds another distinction: he is only the second RBI Governor to have a six-year tenure, apart from Bimal Jalan (1997-2003).

**Former RBI governor
Shaktikanta Das appointed
as 'Principal Secretary-2' to
Prime Minister Narendra Modi**



Who is Shaktikanta Das?

Das joined the Indian Administrative Service in 1980 as an officer of the Tamil Nadu cadre. A history graduate from St. Stephen's College from the University of Delhi, he was the Fertilisers Secretary in 2014.

Soon after, he was made Revenue Secretary in the Ministry of Finance under the BJP-led NDA government which had just then come to power. He was named the Economic Affairs Secretary in August 2015 and remained so till his retirement in May 2017. Das was also a member of the 15th Finance Commission.

RBI Governor from 2018 to December 2024

He served as the RBI Governor from 2018 to December 2024. An official release upon his appointment stated: "During his long tenure in the Ministry of Finance, Government of India, he was directly associated with the preparation of as many as 8 Union Budgets. Shri Das has also served as India's Alternate Governor in the World Bank, Asian Development Bank (ADB), New Development Bank (NDB) and Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). He has represented India in international fora like the IMF, G20, BRICS, SAARC, etc."

Further, he oversaw the withdrawal of Rs 2,000 notes from circulation. Das also focused on making Unified Payments Interface (UPI) and RuPay, the card payments network of the country, global. However, prolonged high food inflation remained a major challenge in the last six years.

What is the Principal Secretary's post?

The Principal Secretary is the administrative head of the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) and is considered the most important aide to the PM. Currently, Pramod Kumar Mishra, a retired IAS officer of the 1972 batch, is the Principal Secretary. Das will be Principal Secretary-2.

In general, the PMO also includes the National Security Advisor, Advisor to PM, Additional Secretaries, Joint Secretaries and other senior bureaucrats. The Principal Secretary is tasked with preparing notes on matters to be discussed between the PM and foreign dignitaries, ensuring coordination among various ministries and departments, sharing important orders before the PM, and so on.

Relevance: GS Prelims; Governance

Source: The Hindu

20. NAKSHA scheme which will update urban land records

Introduction

Union Rural Development Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan launched the Central government's new initiative—'NAtional geospatial Knowledge-based land Survey of urban HABitations' (NAKSHA)— on February 18 from Raisen in Madhya Pradesh.



What is NAKSHA?

NAKSHA is a city survey initiative under the existing Digital India Land Records Modernization Programme (DILRMP). It is spearheaded by the Department of Land Resources (DoLR), under the Ministry of Rural Development.

Under the new initiative, maps of towns and cities will be prepared. The programme has been launched as a pilot across 152 urban local bodies in 26 states. The cities selected meet two criteria: area less than 35 sq km, and population less than 2 lakhs. The pilot will be completed in a year. According to the DoLR officials, the Centre plans to scale up NAKSHA once the pilot is completed.

Why was the program needed?

The programme addresses the issue of updation of land records in urban areas. Several cities lack maps even today. Most urban areas – barring a few states like Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, Gujarat and Goa – have outdated or unstructured land records, causing inefficiencies in governance and taxation.

What does NAKSHA entail?

As per the Census 2011, India has 7,933 towns covering 1.02 lakh square km of the total 32.87 lakh square km geographical area of the country. NAKSHA will cover 4,142.63 square km of area.

The initiative is 100 per cent centrally funded. The pilot project is expected to cost about Rs 194 crore. Once completed, NAKSHA is expected to provide comprehensive digital urban land records, reduce land disputes, aid in faster and more efficient urban planning, improve property tax collection, simplify property transactions and improve access to credit.

How will the survey be done?

The survey will be done through aerial photography using cameras. These cameras will be mounted on drones. The ground resolution of these cameras will be 5 cm, which is far better than any satellite.

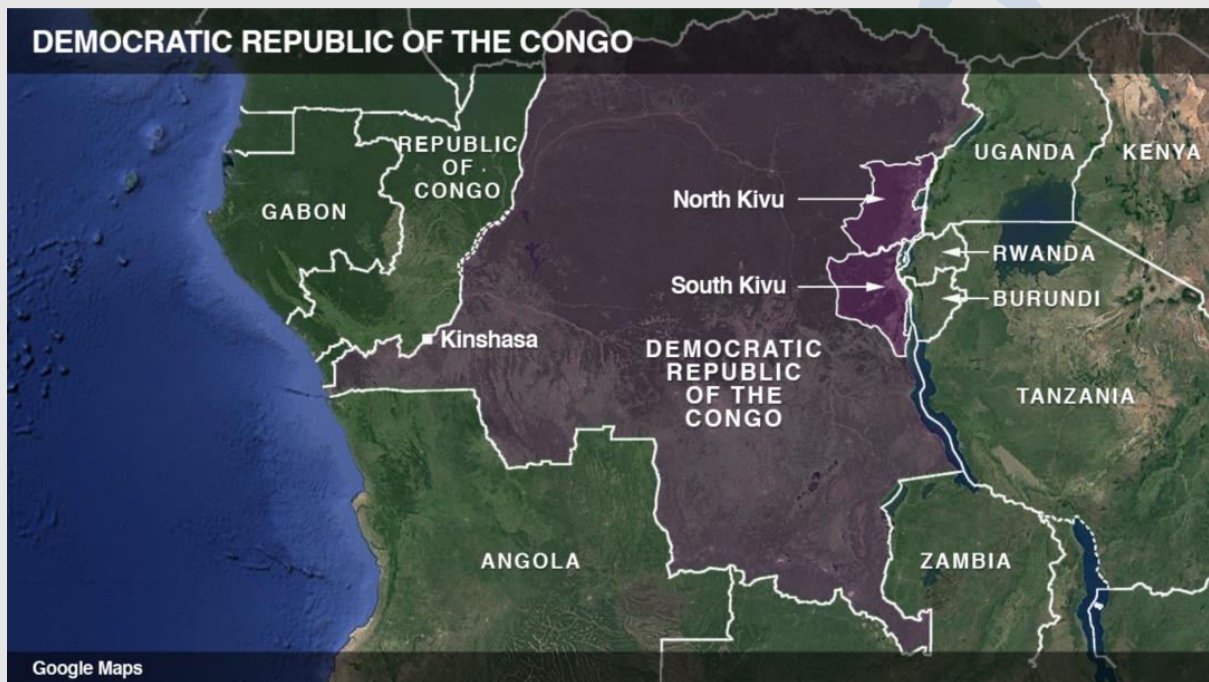
Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Governance

Source: Indian Express

1. What is happening in Congo and why are M23 rebels fighting?

Introduction

Rwandan-backed M23 rebels in the Democratic Republic of Congo are seeking to advance south towards Bukavu, the capital of South Kivu province, in an attempt to expand their area of control in the country's east after capturing the city of Goma. The latest fighting is part of a major escalation of a decades-old conflict.



What is happening?

The rebels entered Goma, the capital of North Kivu province, on January 27 night. By January 30 morning, the rebels were in control of the devastated city, where corpses still lay in the streets.

Since then, M23 fighters have pushed southwards into South Kivu, battling the Congolese army. The reports claim of Rwandan troops crossing the border into South Kivu.

What are M23 rebels?

M23, which refers to the March 23, 2009, accord that ended a previous Tutsi-led revolt in eastern Congo, is the latest group of ethnic Tutsi-led insurgents to take up arms against Congolese forces. It launched the current rebellion in 2022.

The group has accused the government of Congo of not living up to the peace deal and fully integrating Congolese Tutsis into the army and administration.

It also vows to defend Tutsi interests, particularly against ethnic Hutu militias such as the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR). The FDLR was founded by Hutus who fled Rwanda after participating in the 1994 genocide of close to one million Tutsis and moderate Hutus.

Advances into new territory by M23 rebels since the start of the year have prompted hundreds of thousands more people to flee their homes. For more than a year, M23 has controlled Congo's coltan-mining region of Rubaya, generating an estimated \$800,000 per month through a production tax. Coltan is used in the production of smartphones and other equipment.

Why is Rwanda involved?

The government of Congo, UN officials and Western powers including the United States have accused Congo's neighbour Rwanda of fuelling the conflict by deploying thousands of its own troops and heavy weapons on Congolese soil in support of M23.

According to Rwandan President Paul Kagame's government, which denies backing the rebels, it has taken what it calls defensive measures and accuses Congo of fighting alongside the FDLR, which has attacked Tutsis in both countries.

Relevance: GS Prelims; International Relations

Source: Indian Express

2. Trump, Musk against functioning of USAID: All about the agency

Introduction



President Donald Trump ordered a 90-day pause on foreign aid given by the United States Agency of International Development (USAID). Two top USAID security officials have also been removed after they refused to grant representatives of Elon Musk's Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) access to restricted spaces at the agency. Musk has since repeatedly called for USAID's "death", referring to it as a "criminal organisation".

Why have Trump, Musk targeted USAID?

Trump and Musk have targeted USAID for the same reasons as they have gone after multiple other departments and agencies in the federal government: to reduce spending and eliminate the perceived bloat within the US federal government.

The President had promised to downsize the federal government, and slash excessive and inefficient government spending. To deliver on these promises, Trump appointed billionaire

Musk as the chief of the newly created Department of Government Efficiency whose sole mandate is to make the federal government more efficient. Musk has vowed to slash federal spending by \$2 trillion.

What does USAID do?

USAID is the “lead international humanitarian and development arm of the US government”. The agency provides assistance to other countries primarily by funding non-governmental organisations (NGOs), foreign governments, international organisations, or other US agencies, often for specific programs to alleviate poverty, provide education and healthcare, among other things.

The agency managed more than \$43 billion in funds, and provided assistance to around 130 countries in FY2023. USAID employed more than 10,000 people in FY2023, with approximately two-thirds of this workforce serving overseas. USAID maintains more than 60 missions around the world.

What is the history of USAID?

Proponents of USAID argue that the agency is essential to further US influence overseas. Since the end of World War II, the US has viewed international development assistance as a key weapon in its foreign policy arsenal, one it has wielded to make new allies, and exert leverage over existing ones.

The agency was established via an executive order by President Kennedy after the US Congress in 1961 passed the Foreign Assistance Act which mandated the creation of a single agency to administer foreign aid.

What role does USAID play in India?

The US has provided development and humanitarian assistance to India since 1951. Economic aid from the US has also helped establish eight agricultural universities, the first Indian Institute of Technology, and 14 regional engineering colleges, as well as strengthen India’s national programs on immunisation, family planning, maternal and child health, HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, and polio, according to the website.

However, its operations in India — as in the rest of the world — have historically come with strings and conditions attached.

For instance, USAID in 1965 gave India a \$67 million loan to build a chemical fertiliser factory in Madras (now Chennai) on the condition that a private American company be in charge of distribution, rather than the Indian government, and no additional fertiliser plants be built in the region.

In 2004, the Indian government decided to reject any foreign aid that comes with conditions. This has, over time, led to a decline in the quantum of such assistance. Since then, the role of USAID in India has gone significantly down.

Relevance: GS Prelims; International Relations
Source: Indian Express

3. U.S. sends back 200 Indians on military plane



Turned away

The U.S. started military repatriation flights after Donald Trump took over as President

■ Indian sources point out the latest repatriation is unique as it is being done using a military aircraft

■ Trump had earlier said that Prime Minister Narendra Modi “will do what’s right when it comes to taking back illegal Indian immigrants from America.”

■ Tuesday’s exercise indicates a continued dialogue between the Trump administration and the Indian authorities

Major crackdown: A file photo of detained immigrants being boarded on a U.S. C-17 military aircraft last month. REUTERS

Deportation of 200 Indian Nationals

The Donald Trump administration has started the process of deporting illegal Indian immigrants. A military aircraft was used to deport around 200 Indian nationals. Official sources here said that the Indian side confirmed the nationality of all the individuals before the U.S. authorities went ahead with the deportation.

Around 18000 illegal immigrants

The conversation was held against the backdrop of reports that the two sides were in discussion over the presence of at least 18,000 Indian nationals in the U.S. who were being viewed as illegal immigrants by the Trump administration.

Indian sources, however, pointed out that while the deportation of Indian nationals who had landed in the U.S. through dubious means was not new, the use of a military aircraft to carry out the task was a new method.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Bilateral Relations
Source: The Hindu

4. Trump’s plans to ‘own’ Gaza

Introduction

In an extraordinary press conference that he addressed with Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu by his side, United States President Donald Trump made some major policy announcements on the Middle East.



First, he said that Palestinians should leave Gaza, and insisted that Jordan and Egypt should take them in: "They (Jordanians and Egyptians) say they're not going to accept, I say they will." Any number of "alternate" sites could be identified for displaced Gazans to live in peace; "why would they want to return [to Gaza]? The place has been hell."

Second, he said that the US will "take over Gaza and...do a job with it too". America will "own" Gaza, and turn it into the "Riviera of the Middle East", he said – an idea similar to the one floated by his son-in-law Jared Kushner last year about making Gaza a valuable "waterfront property".

What are the analytical takeaways from Trump's proposals?

The President's new proposal for Gaza (and Palestine) risks violating long-standing UNSC and UNGA resolutions supporting the Palestinian right of self-determination (which India has proactively backed at the United Nations), and several peremptory norms of international law (*jus cogens*) including those that prohibit ethnic cleansing.

Trump's claim that Gazans do not want to return contrasts with abundant evidence from the enclave following the ceasefire, with thousands returning to North Gaza – even though Israeli bombardment has turned many homes to rubble.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; International Relations

5. Trump authorises sanctions against ICC: What is the International Criminal Court?

Introduction

US President Donald Trump has authorised economic and travel sanctions targeting people who work on International Criminal Court investigations of US citizens or US allies such as Israel.

The move, which was condemned by the court, is a protest against the ICC's arrest warrant for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

When was the ICC set up and why?

The court was established in 2002 to prosecute war crimes, crimes against humanity, genocide and the crime of aggression when member states are unwilling or unable to do so themselves. It can prosecute crimes committed by nationals of member states or on the territory of member states by other actors. It has 125 member states.

What is the ICC investigating?

The ICC is conducting investigations from the Palestinian territories to Ukraine and African states such as Uganda, Democratic Republic of Congo and Kenya to Venezuela in Latin America and Myanmar and the Philippines in Asia, according to its website. It says there have been 32 cases before the court, with some cases having more than one suspect. ICC judges have issued at least 60 arrest warrants.

Who is on the court's arrest warrant list?

The ICC has issued an arrest warrant for Netanyahu, who is accused of being criminally responsible for acts including murder, persecution and using starvation as a weapon of war in the Gaza conflict.

It also issued a warrant for Netanyahu's former defence chief Yoav Gallant and for Hamas leader Ibrahim al-Masri, also known as Mohammed Deif. The warrant for Masri lists charges of killing, rape and hostage-taking during the Oct. 7, 2023, attacks in Israel that triggered the Gaza war.

The Israeli leader dismissed the decision as anti-Semitic and said the accusations were absurd and false.

Also on the list is Russian President Vladimir Putin, accused of the war crime of illegally deporting hundreds of children from Ukraine. In March 2023, after the court issued the warrant, the Kremlin said the move was meaningless. Moscow has repeatedly denied accusations that its forces have committed atrocities during its invasion of Ukraine.

Which countries are not members of the ICC?

Although the court is supported by many United Nations members and the European Union, other countries such as the United States, China and Russia are not members, arguing the ICC could be used for politically motivated prosecutions.

Myanmar is not a member of the court, but in 2018 and 2019 judges ruled the court had jurisdiction over alleged cross-border crimes that partially took place in neighbouring ICC-member Bangladesh, such as deportation and persecution, and said prosecutors could open a formal investigation.

Israel is not a member of the court and does not recognise its jurisdiction, but the Palestinian territories were admitted as an ICC member state in 2015. This, together with a ruling by judges, means the court can look at potential war crimes carried out by Hamas fighters in Israel and by Israelis in the Gaza Strip.

India is also not a member of the International Criminal Court (ICC). Like other non-members, India has not ratified the Rome Statute, which is the legal basis for membership in the ICC.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; International Organisations

Source: Indian Express

6. PM Modi Co-Chair of AI Summit held in Paris

Introduction

The President of France Emmanuel Macron has chaired the Artificial Intelligence (AI) Action Summit in Paris held on February 11. Prime Minister Narendra Modi co-chaired the Summit.



India at AI summit

The invitation to India to co-chair the AI Summit is being seen as a recognition of New Delhi's approach to AI, and its expanding role in the domain of new and emerging technologies. While China is a global leader in this breakthrough technology, the choice made by Paris signals the importance it attaches to shared

values and convergences. India will share its views on the democratisation of AI, and on bringing its benefits to the Global South.

Previous AI Summits

The Paris Summit will seek to build on the two summits held in the United Kingdom in November 2023 and South Korea in May 2024.

The Bletchley Park Declaration (UK) signed at the AI Safety Summit, which was attended by 28 countries, affirmed that AI should be designed, developed, deployed, and used in a manner that is safe, human-centric, trustworthy, and responsible.

The Seoul Summit, co-hosted by the UK, was attended by 27 nations. The Seoul Declaration reaffirmed their commitment to international cooperation on AI, and to addressing the challenges and opportunities presented by the new technology. The Seoul Summit also proposed a network of AI Safety Institutes.

Theme of Paris Summit

The Paris Summit has five main themes: Public Interest AI, Future of Work, Innovation and Culture, Trust in AI, and Global AI Governance. It will aim to leverage existing initiatives and fora on AI, including by the United Nations.

The Summit will launch concrete initiatives to place AI at the service of the common good, with specific focus on the needs of the Global South.

New Delhi's focus

India has put forward the example of the IndiaAI Mission. The Rs 10,371 crore program of "Making AI in India and Making AI for India" aims to democratise AI innovation and ensure that its benefits are equitably distributed to all citizens.

On the global cooperation on AI, India is focused on three main areas:

GPAI: Global Partnership on Artificial Intelligence is an OECD-supported multi-stakeholder initiative to guide the responsible development and use of AI. As a founding member and lead chair of GPAI for 2024, India has been working towards making GPAI the nodal partnership for global cooperation on AI.

BRIDGING THE AI DIVIDE: India is pushing for inclusive AI Governance focused on bridging the widening AI divide between countries, and democratising AI globally.

GLOBAL SOUTH PRIORITIES: India is advocating the empowerment of voices from the Global South in the discourse around cooperation on AI, spotlighting the unique challenges, opportunities, and requirements of the developing world.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; International Organisations

Source: Indian Express

7. India-France ties

Introduction

The President of France Emmanuel Macron has chaired the Artificial Intelligence (AI) Action Summit in Paris held on February 11. Prime Minister Narendra Modi co-chaired the Summit.



Previous Co-Chairs

India's Strategic Partnership with France is its oldest, and the two countries have stood together in addressing a range of global issues.

In 2015, they launched the International Solar Alliance on the sidelines of the Paris climate conference, and they are co-chairs of the Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure (CDRI).

Frequent Meetings

The Prime Minister's visit will be an occasion to further deepen the India-France strategic partnership. The PM shares a warm personal equation with President Macron, and the two leaders met thrice in 2024, with the President attending the 2024 Republic Day celebrations as Chief Guest.

Defence Cooperation is Crucial Part

Strategic ties between the countries have traditionally pivoted on areas such as defence, security, space, and civil nuclear energy collaboration. In particular, India and France have a strong and robust defence partnership with an increasing indigenous element.

Their defence cooperation is reviewed under the Annual Defence Dialogue (Defence Minister level) and the High Committee on Defence Cooperation (Secretary level).

Major ongoing defence-related projects include the purchase of Rafale aircraft and the P-75 Scorpene Project. The two countries are discussing buying 26 Rafale-M fighter jets for the Indian Navy's aircraft carriers and three more Scorpene-class conventional submarines.

The French have always assured that the element of "Make in India" and "transfer of technology" that they offer is something their competitors don't. What adds a layer is that Paris is also training Indians to use the technology at the optimum level, and not just handover the blueprints of the technology shared.

Other potential areas of collaboration being pursued are co-development of next generation engines for fighter planes. An office of DRDO has also been opened in the Indian Embassy in France in 2023 for strengthening the technology cooperation between India and France.

India-France Innovation Year, 2026

The bilateral ties are also now expanding into the sectors of tech, innovation, renewable energy, trade, economy, supply-chain partnership, and people-to-people relations. The logo of India-France Innovation Year, 2026, has been unveiled during the PM's visit.

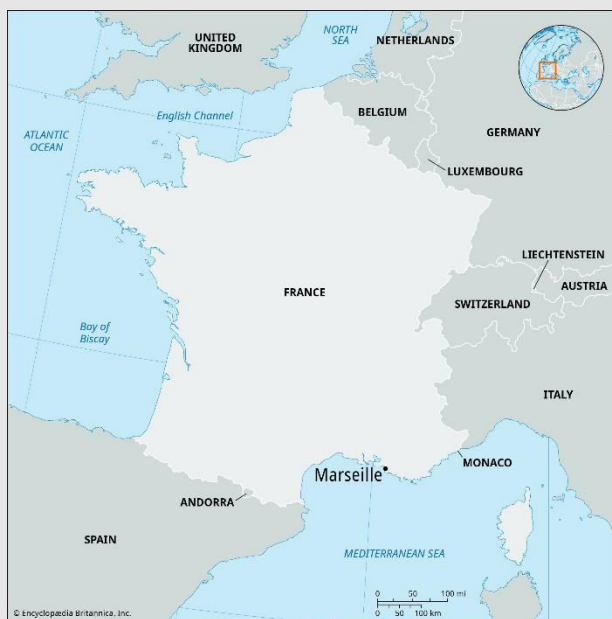
Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Bilateral Relations

8. Prime Minister and President of France jointly inaugurate the Consulate General of India in Marseille

Introduction

Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi and the President of the French Republic, H.E. Mr. Emmanuel Macron, today jointly inaugurated the newly opened Consulate General of India in Marseille.

The decision to open a Consulate General in Marseille was announced during Prime Minister's visit to France in July 2023.



PM Modi recalls Story of Savarkar's attempted escape

While in Marseille, Prime Minister Narendra Modi wrote about the port city's "special" connection to India's struggle for Independence.

"It was here that the great Veer Savarkar attempted a courageous escape. I also want to thank the people of Marseille and the French activists of that time who demanded that he not be handed over to British custody," he posted on X.

Savarkar's attempted escape at Marseille

Vinayak Damodar Savarkar was arrested in

London in March 1910, on charges of anti-state acts and abetment of Nashik magistrate A M T Jackson's murder. While being brought to India for trial onboard the commercial ship SS Morea, Savarkar tried to escape from custody in Marseille.

SS Morea had sailed from London on July 1, 1910. It docked at Marseille a week later. On July 8, 1910, Savarkar, who was being closely guarded, sought permission to use the washroom. He then bolted the toilet from inside, jumped out of the ship's porthole, and swam ashore.

However, Savarkar was soon apprehended by a brigadier of the French maritime gendarmerie, who handed him over to guards from the ship after mistaking him for a crew member.

Sentence Given to Savarkar

Savarkar was brought to India and tried. He was sentenced to two life terms by the Bombay High Court for 25 years each in December 1910 and January 1911. He would be sentenced to rigorous imprisonment in the Cellular Jail in Port Blair, Andaman and Nicobar Islands, on July 4, 1911.

Savarkar's account

Savarkar references his attempted sea escape in his Marathi biographical work Mazi Janmathep, first published in 1927. The book has been translated into English as The Story of My Transportation for Life by Prof V N Naik.

Relevance: GS Prelims; Bilateral Relations

Source: PIB and Indian Express

9. Prime Minister visited the Mazargues War Cemetery

Mazargues War Cemetery

Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi and President Emmanuel Macron visited the Mazargues War Cemetery in Marseille and paid tribute to the Indian soldiers who lost their lives during World Wars I and II. The Mazargues War Cemetery preserves the history of valor and sacrifice of Indian soldiers who fought for peace in Europe.



Relevance: GS Prelims; Bilateral Relations

Source: PIB

10. UK-India Young Professionals Scheme

Introduction

The ballot for this year's United Kingdom-India Young Professionals Scheme (YPS) will open next week. The scheme offers both British and Indian nationals the opportunity to live, study, travel, and work in the other country for up to two years.



3,000 per year.

However, while there is a ballot system for Indians to apply to live in the UK, with a cap of 3,000 announced this year, there is no such ballot for British citizens to apply under the scheme.

What is the scheme?

Launched in February 2023, the YPS is a reciprocal scheme under which UK and Indian nationals, who are aged from 18 to 30 can live, study, travel, and work in the other country for up to two years. It is part of the Migration and Mobility Agreement that the two countries signed in 2021, capping the number of young professionals admitted to either country at

What are other conditions?

While the YPS does not require any pre-approved employer certificate or salary conditions, it allows Indians to land in the UK and seek a job or self-employment if they have enough savings to support their stay. However, YPS is not extendable unless the regular work visas which are valid for five years can be extended. The scheme also does not allow any dependent children to accompany the applicant.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Bilateral Relations

Source: Indian Express

11. The India-US TRUST initiative

TRUST Initiative

India and the United States have launched a bilateral initiative called Under the Transforming Relationship Utilizing Strategic Technology (TRUST) initiative. The Initiative was announced during Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to the US.

Under the Initiative, the two countries will reduce barriers to technology transfer, address export controls, and enhance high tech commerce.

Further taking previous cooperation

The TRUST initiative follows India's induction into the US-led Minerals Security Finance Network in September last year. India joined the Minerals Security Partnership (MSP) in 2023.

Unlike previous multilateral partnerships, however, the TRUST initiative will build on bilateral engagement. It also positions India and the US to accelerate existing efforts, and counter China's dominance in critical minerals supply chains.

Minerals Security Partnership

Launched in 2023, the Minerals Security Partnership (MSP) is a US-led collaboration of 14 countries that aims to catalyse public and private investment in critical minerals supply chains. In addition to the US, it includes India, Australia, Canada, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the Republic of Korea, Sweden, the UK, and the European Union (represented by the European Commission).



Why critical minerals are key in strategic sectors

Critical minerals and REEs are essential for strategic industries, including defence, semiconductors, quantum computing, energy, and space.

Elements such as neodymium, praseodymium, and samarium are crucial for high-performance magnets used in missiles, fighter jets, and radars.

Lithium, cobalt, and nickel power are used in advanced batteries for energy storage and electric vehicles, while gallium and indium are key in

semiconductors and AI hardware.

Quantum computing relies on ultra-pure silicon and superconducting materials, while REEs like europium and terbium enhance biotech imaging and medical diagnostics.

In energy, rare earth magnets are vital for wind turbines, and space technology depends on heat-resistant alloys and lightweight materials like scandium.

China's dominance

With China controlling nearly 70% of global REE production and much of the processing infrastructure, securing diversified supply chains is critical for technological sovereignty and national security.

India, despite some reserves, remains dependent on imports, particularly for heavy rare earths.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Bilateral Relations

Source: Indian Express

12. The India-US 123 Agreement of 2007 could finally achieve its full potential

India-US 123 Agreement of 2007



Section 123 of the United States Atomic Energy Act of 1954, titled "Cooperation With Other Nations", establishes an agreement for cooperation as a prerequisite for nuclear deals between the US and any other nation. Such an agreement is called a 123 Agreement. To date, the U.S. has entered into roughly twenty-six 123 Agreements with 52 countries. Such an

agreement was also signed with India. Subsequent to this agreement, India-US Nuclear took place.

Indo-US Nuclear Deal 2008

The most path-breaking part of Indo-US relationship was Indo-US nuclear deal. According to this deal, the United States will provide India access to nuclear fuel, reactor and technology subject to the waiver of Nuclear Suppliers Group.

India was required to ensure that the nuclear supplies would be used only for civilian purposes. Consequently, India separated its nuclear facilities into military and civilian. The civilian facilities used were put under IAEA inspections to prevent any diversion of nuclear supplies for military purposes. As a result, India ratified the 'Additional Protocol' with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and civilian facilities were put under IAEA safeguards.

Roadblocks due to India's Legislative framework

Though the Nuclear deal took place, still there are many roadblocks which hampered the nuclear cooperation between the two countries.

Atomic Energy Act, 1962: This act allowed only to state-owned Nuclear Power Corporation of India Ltd (NPCIL), and some joint ventures between NPCIL and other state-owned companies such as NTPC Ltd and NALCO into nuclear power plant operations.

Civil Liability for Nuclear Damage Act, 2010: This act had sought to create a mechanism to compensate victims for a possible nuclear accident, and allocate liability and specify procedures for compensation. This act provided for the initial liability of nuclear operators in case of nuclear accident. However, the operators can further sue suppliers of nuclear reactors, if the accident took place due to fault of suppliers.

These provisions have been cited as an impediment by foreign players such as GE-Hitachi, Westinghouse, and the French nuclear company Areva (Framatome) to investing in India, primarily on the grounds that the legislation channelised operators' liability to equipment suppliers.

Proposed Changes in India's Legislative Framework

In the recent Union Budget, government has mentioned its intentions to take up amendments to the Atomic Energy Act, 1962 and the Civil Liability for Nuclear Damage Act, 2010 (CLNDA) for nuclear reactors.

The proposed changes to the Atomic Energy Act are aimed at opening the door wider to let the private sector into nuclear power plant operations, and to enable them to enter the Small Modular Reactor (SMR) sector as operators.

The proposed changes to CLNDA act seek to cap the liability of nuclear suppliers in case of an accident.

'810' roadblock in the US Laws

This '810' provision — Part 810 of Title 10, Code of Federal Regulations of the US Atomic Energy Act of 1954 — allows American nuclear power companies to export to countries such as India under some strict safeguards, but restricts them from manufacturing any nuclear equipment or performing any nuclear design work outside of the US.

This provision is a big hindrance for India's Small Modular Reactors (SMR) ambitions, since it wants to participate in manufacturing these reactors being built in India, and to co-produce the nuclear components for its domestic needs. An exception on 810 is, therefore, vital for India.

Why SMRs matter to India

SMRs are reactors with a capacity of 30MWe (megawatt electric) to 300 MWe per unit. India is seeking to heavily rely on SMRs for its future energy needs. Currently, two SMR projects have reached the operational stage globally. The Akademik Lomonosov floating power unit in Russia, which has two modules of 35 MWe, started commercial operation in May 2020. The other, a demonstration SMR project called HTR-PM in China that was grid-connected in December 2021, is reported to have started commercial operations in December 2023.

Multiple Western companies are in various stages of getting certifications for their own SMRs.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; International Relations

Source: Indian Express and The Hindu

13. US position on Ukraine-NATO shifts

NATO's Bucharest Summit Declaration- Apr 3, 2008

NATO's Bucharest Summit Declaration said "NATO welcomes Ukraine's and Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations for membership in NATO. We agreed today that these countries will become members of NATO."

Feb 12, 2025 Statement

Feb 12, 2025: United States Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth told the Ukraine Defense Contact Group in Brussels that "...The United States does not believe that NATO membership for Ukraine is a realistic outcome of a negotiated settlement [of the war]..."



Clear Cut shift in Policy

During his February 12 phone call with Russia's President Vladimir Putin, US President Donald Trump rejected as "impractical" the possibility of Ukraine joining the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), the 32-member transatlantic military alliance in which an attack on any member is considered an attack on all.

The possibility of Ukraine becoming part of NATO has been Moscow's declared casus belli. Though the US and its European allies have never committed to when Ukraine might join the alliance, the statements by Trump and Hegseth mark a fundamental shift in America's Ukraine policy.

West's broken 'promises'

In 1990, James Baker, President George H W Bush's Secretary of State, assured Mikhail Gorbachev, the Soviet leader who oversaw the dissolution of the USSR, that "not an inch of NATO's present military jurisdiction will spread in an eastern direction". But in fact, NATO continued to expand steadily eastward, adding former Soviet allies and satellites as members.

NATO's eastward march

In 1999, less than a decade after the collapse of the USSR, NATO onboarded former Warsaw Pact countries Czechia (formerly part of Czechoslovakia), Hungary, and Poland.

President Bill Clinton presented this as a project for democracy: "We want all of Europe to have what America helped build in Western Europe — a community...where nations cooperate to make war unthinkable. That is why I have pushed hard for NATO's enlargement and why we must keep NATO's doors open to new democratic members." (Speech delivered in San Francisco, 1999; Clinton White House Archives)

In 2004, more Warsaw Pact countries — Bulgaria, Slovakia (formerly part of Czechoslovakia) and Romania — joined NATO, as did erstwhile Soviet republics Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, and Slovenia, which was formerly a part of neutral Yugoslavia. NATO was now literally at Russia's doorstep.

Albania and Croatia joined in 2009, and Montenegro and North Macedonia in 2017 and 2020 respectively, expanding NATO's Eastern European footprint further.

Moscow's concerns

The expansion of NATO presents Russia with a classic "security dilemma", a situation in which the actions of one state to make itself more secure tends to make another state less secure, and prompts them to respond in ways that result in a spiral of hostility.

Article 5 in the NATO Charter of 1949 establishes the principle of collective defence, such that "an armed attack" against any NATO member is to be considered as "an attack against them all", and all NATO members would be obligated to defend the one who has been attacked.

Putin's Russia sees NATO as a tool of Western hegemony, and its expansion eastward as a threat to its national security.

The Trump disruption

President George W Bush was the first major leader to suggest that Ukraine should be brought into NATO. But France and Germany were opposed, and the Bucharest Summit produced a "worst of all worlds" compromise — a promise without a timeline for delivery. While nothing changed for Ukraine, Russian insecurity spiked sharply. Putin annexed strategically vital Crimea in 2014, and ultimately invaded the Donbas in 2022.

Meanwhile, NATO continued to repeat its resolve to let Ukraine in. In July 2024, at the NATO summit in Washington, its leaders pledged to support Ukraine on an "irreversible path to full Euro-Atlantic integration, including NATO membership".

All this has changed now. Trump is halting the expansion of NATO.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; International Organisations

Source: Indian Express

14. India, Qatar elevate ties to strategic partnership

Introduction



Qatar, a major natural gas supplier to India, signed an agreement to elevate India-Qatar relationship to the level of a strategic partnership. The agreement was signed between the Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the visiting Emir, Sheikh Tamim Bin Hamad Al-Thani.

As of February 2025, India and Qatar have been actively enhancing their bilateral relations across various sectors, including trade, energy, and cultural exchanges.

Trade Relations

In February 2025, during a two-day official visit to New Delhi by Qatar's Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani, both nations agreed to double their trade volume to \$28 billion over the next five years. They are also exploring the possibility of signing a free trade agreement to facilitate this growth.

Energy Cooperation

Energy collaboration remains a cornerstone of India-Qatar relations. India is boosting gas imports as Prime Minister Narendra Modi aims to raise the share of gas in the country's energy mix to 15% by 2030 from about 6.5% now. Qatar, among the world's top LNG exporters, is India's biggest LNG supplier.

In August 2023, QatarEnergy and GAIL (India) Ltd. signed a long-term agreement for the supply of over 1 million metric tons of liquefied natural gas (LNG) annually for 20 years. Further strengthening this partnership, in February 2024, QatarEnergy entered into a deal with Petronet LNG to supply 7.5 million metric tons of LNG per year from 2028 to 2048.

Cultural and People-to-People Ties

The Indian expatriate community in Qatar, numbering approximately 840,000, continues to be a vital link between the two countries. Their contributions have been acknowledged in various bilateral discussions, emphasizing the importance of cultural and people-to-people connections.

Overall, the relationship between India and Qatar is on a positive trajectory, marked by mutual efforts to enhance cooperation across multiple domains.

15. LNG's centrality in India-Qatar Trade

Introduction

The India-Qatar trade relationship has predominantly been fueled by New Delhi's heavy imports of liquefied natural gas (LNG), of which Doha is India's largest supplier. LNG, or super-chilled gas, is likely to play a pivotal role in future bilateral trade as well.



The reason: India's LNG imports are expected to surge over the next five years as the country's natural gas consumption is set to grow significantly. The expected growth in imports would coincide with Qatar expanding its LNG export capacity. In fact, Qatar and the US are the two key geographies that are likely to see notable expansion in LNG export capacity over the coming years, and Indian oil and gas companies are understood to be eyeing both countries to meet the incremental gas demand.

LNG: Energy that drives India-Qatar trade

The balance of trade between the two countries is heavily skewed in Qatar's favour, with LNG topping the list of New Delhi's imports from Doha.

LNG imports accounted for 50 per cent of India's overall imports from Qatar, which totalled \$11.49 billion in the first 11 months of 2024. Notably, other major imports were also fossil fuel-linked commodities and products like liquefied petroleum gas (LPG), crude oil, plastics, and other petrochemicals. By contrast, India's exports to Qatar during the 11-month period totalled just \$1.61 billion.

India's largest LNG importer Petronet LNG has a long-term contract with Qatar for 7.5 million tonnes per annum (mtpa) of LNG, which only last year was extended till 2048. Apart from the LNG volumes that are imported under this term contract, Qatar also has a sizable share in India's LNG purchases from the spot market. In December, public sector major GAIL inked a five-year contract with QatarEnergy for additional LNG imports.

Growth in India's LNG imports, Qatar's export capacity

The Indian government has set an ambitious target to increase the share of natural gas in the country's primary energy mix to 15 per cent by 2030 from a little over 6 per cent at present, which is bound to result in a rapid increase in LNG imports over the next few years. India is already a major LNG importer, with domestic natural gas being able to meet just about half of the country's demand.

The US factor

Over the coming years, the US is expected to be Qatar's biggest competitor for LNG market share in India. The US, which is the world's largest LNG exporter, is currently India's second-largest source of super-chilled gas. In January-November 2024, India imported 5.12 million tonnes of LNG from the US, accounting for 20.2 per cent of the LNG imports during the period. India's LNG imports from the US for the 11-month period were valued at nearly \$2.5 billion.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Bilateral Relations

Source: Indian Express

16. 2025 German Elections

Winning Political Party

In the recent German federal election held on February 23, 2025, the political landscape experienced significant shifts. The center-right Christian Democratic Union (CDU), led by Friedrich Merz, secured approximately 28.5% of the vote, translating to 208 seats in the Bundestag. This victory positions Merz to become the next Chancellor of Germany. Merz has indicated plans to initiate coalition talks with the SPD to form a stable government.

Second Political Party

Notably, the far-right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) achieved its best-ever result, obtaining around 20.8% of the vote and securing 152 seats, making it the second-largest party in the Bundestag. Despite their significant gains, Merz has categorically ruled out forming a coalition with the AfD.

Third Political Party

The center-left Social Democratic Party (SPD), led by outgoing Chancellor Olaf Scholz, experienced a historic low, garnering only 16.4% of the vote and 120 seats. This marks their worst performance since World War II.

Bundestag

The Bundestag is the lower house of parliament in Germany, consisting of 736 members elected every four years. It is responsible for enacting laws and overseeing the government.

Germany has a bicameral legislature, consisting of two houses:

1. Bundestag (Lower House) – The primary legislative body, directly elected by the people, responsible for making laws and electing the Chancellor.

2. Bundesrat (Upper House) – Represents Germany's 16 federal states (Länder) and participates in legislation, especially on matters affecting state governments.

While the Bundestag holds more legislative power, the Bundesrat plays a crucial role in federal governance, ensuring state interests are considered in national policies.

Relevance: GS Prelims; International Issues

17. Indian commitments to UN Peacekeeping Missions

Introduction

Since the 1950s, India has contributed over 290,000 peacekeepers across more than 50 UN Peacekeeping missions. Today, more than 5,000 Indian peacekeepers are currently deployed in nine of the 11 active peacekeeping missions.

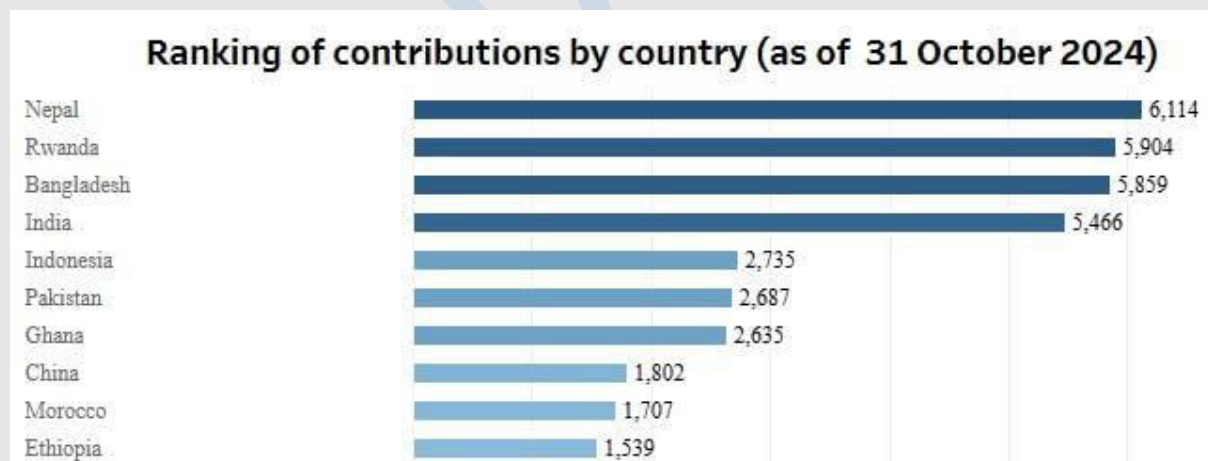
First, what are UN Peacekeeping missions?

The idea of UN Peacekeeping stems from the UN having no military forces. Therefore, Member States voluntarily provide the military and police personnel that are periodically required for each peacekeeping operation from their national forces.

Peacekeepers usually wear their countries' uniforms and are identified as UN peacekeepers only by a UN blue helmet or beret and a badge. They are tasked with protecting civilians, actively preventing conflict, reducing violence, strengthening security, and empowering national authorities to assume these responsibilities.

How many UN Peacekeeping missions have been carried out?

More than 71 Field Operations have been undertaken since 1948, following collaborations between the UN Secretariat, the Security Council, and the countries that contribute uniformed personnel. More than 100,000 military, police, and civilian personnel from 125 countries currently serve in 14 peacekeeping operations.



First UN Peacekeeping mission

The first UN peacekeeping mission was established in May 1948, when the UN Security Council authorised the deployment of a small number of UN military observers to the Middle East to form the United Nations Truce Supervision Organization (UNTSO) to monitor the Armistice Agreement between Israel and its Arab neighbours. Early on, troops and police came from a relatively small number of countries and were almost exclusively men.

Who funds UN Peacekeeping Missions?

The UN Security Council makes decisions about establishing, maintaining, or expanding peacekeeping operations, while all UN Member States are collectively tasked with financing them. Every member is legally obligated to pay their respective share under Article 17 of the Charter of the United Nations. The United States (26.95%) and China (18.69%) pay the most, partly because they are part of the UNSC. India's share is around 0.2088%.

Peacekeeping soldiers are paid by their Governments according to their own national rank and salary scale. Countries volunteering uniformed personnel to peacekeeping operations are reimbursed by the UN at a standard rate, approved by the General Assembly, of US\$1,428 per soldier per month as of 1 July 2019.

What's behind India's contributions?

Permanent Seat in UNSC: For one, sustained participation in a key UN programme is thought to help bolster India's standing in the international community. It may also help its claims towards securing a seat in the UN Security Council as a permanent member. However, the expansion of the P5 is based on multiple factors, perhaps the most important being how willing the existing members are to share power.

Death of Personnel: The efficacy of peacekeeping missions has also been questioned, given the costs. UN data states that as many as 179 Indian military personnel, including some central armed police forces personnel, have laid down their lives while serving as UN peacekeepers.

More contribution from Developing Countries: There is also disagreement among countries about the provision of troops, with most coming from developing countries. Troops and police personnel data from October 2024 says the US provided 26 workers while the UK provided 275. The biggest contributor, Nepal, was at 6,114 while India stood fourth at 5,466.

Another view traces the distribution of troops as being dependent on the interests of respective countries rather than a genuine interest in conflict resolution. This could mean foreign exchange for poor African and Asian countries, or strategic interest — such as China looking at commercial gain in Africa or India seeking to bolster its claim to a permanent Security Council seat.

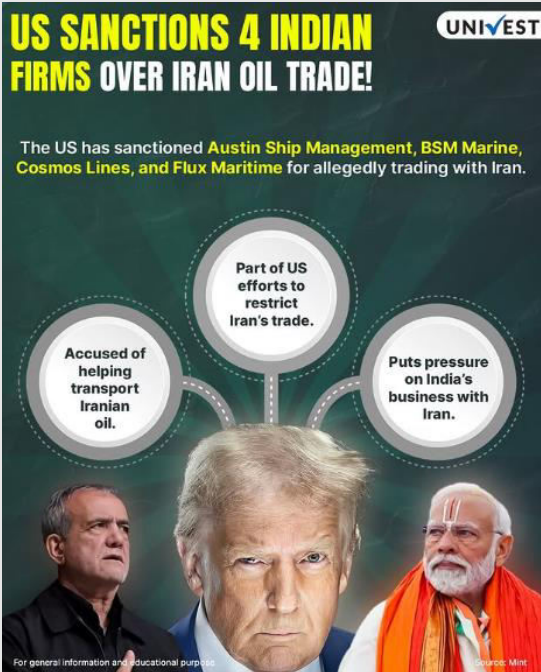
Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; International Organisations

Source: Indian Express

18. Four Indian firms among those sanctioned by the US: Why, and what are sanctions?

Introduction

As part of its "maximum pressure" campaign against Iran, the US has sanctioned four India-based companies among other companies, "for their role in brokering the sale and transportation of Iranian petroleum-related products.



Which Indian firms are on the list?

According to information from the US Office of Foreign Assets Control and the Department of State, the four Indian companies are Navi Mumbai-based Flux Maritime LLP, National Capital Region (NCR)-based BSM Marine LLP and Austinship Management Pvt Ltd, and Thanjavur-based Cosmos Lines Inc. Three of these four companies have been sanctioned for being commercial or technical managers of vessels allegedly involved in transportation of Iranian oil and petroleum products, while one—Cosmos Lines—has been sanctioned for its alleged involvement in transport of Iranian petroleum.

View of the US

Because Iran is heavily sanctioned, many countries and firms don't buy Iranian oil openly. However, the US has alleged, the trade still continues, through "shadow fleets". A shadow fleet is a group of ships that transport goods, like oil, in secret to avoid detection and regulation. Shadow fleets often violate international sanctions.

Sanctioned Iranian tankers rely on ship-to-ship transfers outside of jurisdictional port limits with non-sanctioned vessels to transport petroleum to foreign customers. This money is then used for "regionally destabilising activities of Iran's military and its proxy groups.

What are sanctions?

Sanctions basically restrict or entirely scrap the economic relations between the entity applying the sanctions and the one they are being applied on. Sanctions can take the form of import or export ban, refusal to trade, freezing of assets, ban from using banking systems and currency of a country or group of countries, etc.

According to the Council on Foreign Relations, "Sanctions may be comprehensive, prohibiting commercial activity with regard to an entire country, like the long-standing US embargo of Cuba, or they may be targeted, blocking transactions by and with particular businesses, groups, or individuals."

The US, for example, has imposed sanctions on a host of countries, including Iran, North Korea, China, etc. Russia, after the breakout of the Ukraine war, became the most sanctioned country in the world.

Apart from individual countries, the United Nations Organisation (UNO) also imposes economic sanctions, after they are approved by its Security Council. The European Union (EU), too, has a mechanism for imposing sanctions.

Utility of Sanctions

While sanctions act as a tool of punishment or pressure tactic on the country or entity they are being applied to — the logic being that economic losses will force it to reconsider its moves — their efficacy has been debated. Critics have pointed out that targets can easily find ways to circumvent sanctions, and enforcing them hurts the other party too.

For example, Russia's economy has not been derailed despite heavy Western sanctions, as other countries, such as India and China, continue to trade with it. When an international organisation like the UN imposes sanctions, it has no means to enforce it, and that is left to individual member countries. Also, if a country were to ban imports from another country, its industries that need the imports also suffer.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; International Relations

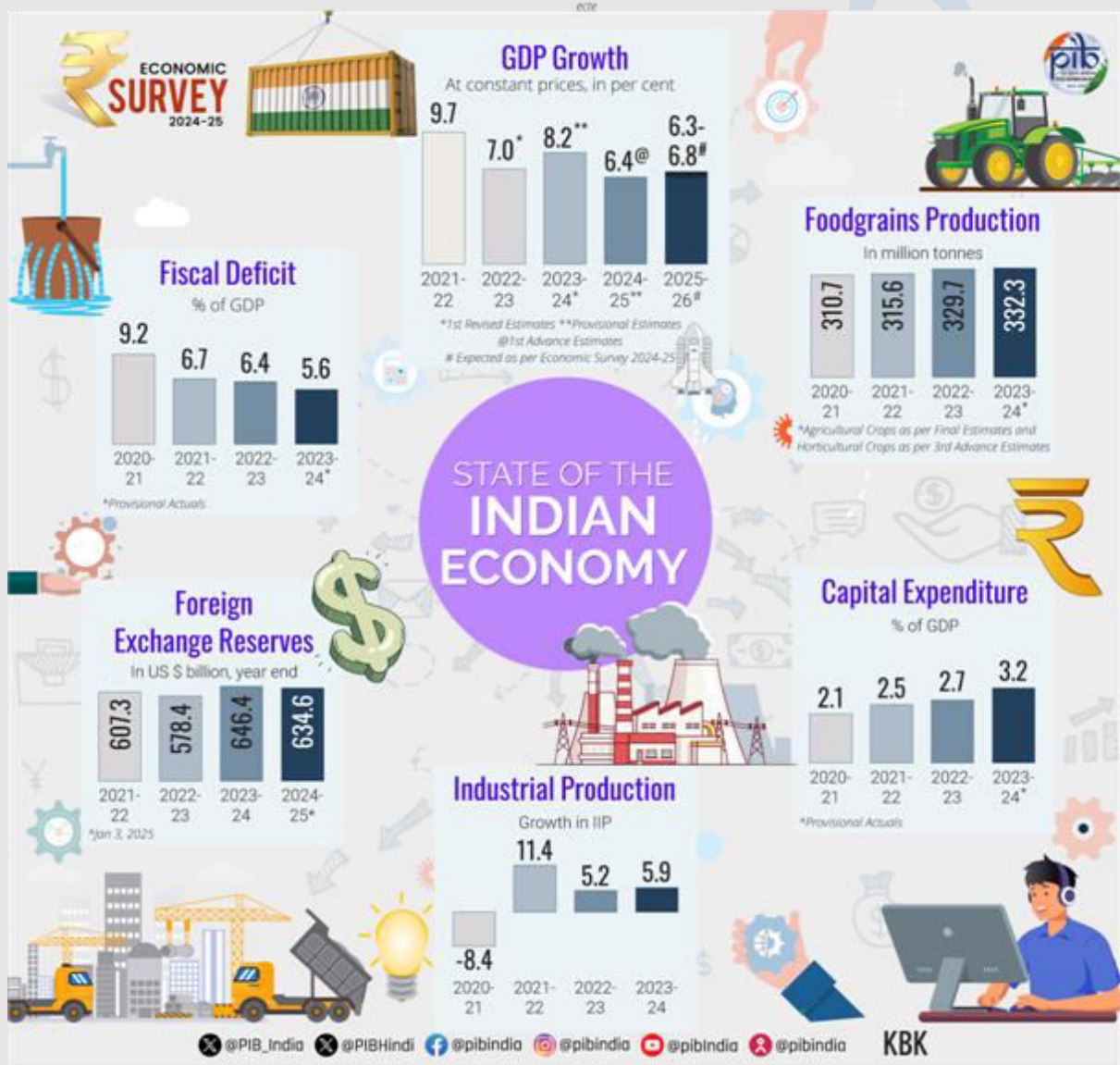
Source: Indian Express

Economics

1. What the Economic Survey says: key Economy Related Figures

Economic Survey

The Economic Survey for 2024-25 was tabled by Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman in Parliament. The Survey is a report of the state of the Indian economy in the financial year that is coming to a close. It is prepared by the Department of Economic Affairs in the Union Finance Ministry, under the guidance of the Chief Economic Advisor (CEA).



Key Economy related figures given in ECONOMIC SURVEY 2024-25

The global economy grew by 3.3 per cent in 2023. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) projects global growth to average around 3.2 per cent over the next five years. As per the Survey, the global economy exhibited steady yet uneven growth across regions in 2024.

The Survey highlights that, despite global uncertainty, India has displayed steady economic growth. India's real GDP growth of 6.4 per cent in FY25 remains close to the decadal average.

The agriculture sector is expected to rebound to a growth of 3.8 per cent in FY25. The industrial sector is estimated to grow by 6.2 per cent in FY25. Strong growth rates in construction activities and electricity, gas, water supply and other utility services are expected to support industrial expansion. Growth in the services sector is expected to remain robust at 7.2 per cent, driven by healthy activity in financial, real estate, professional services, public administration, defence, and other services.

Coverage of irrigation area increased

The government has prioritised irrigation development and water conservation practices to enhance access to irrigation facilities. The coverage of irrigation area has increased between FY16 and FY21 from 49.3 per cent to 55 per cent of the gross cropped area (GCA).

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Economics

Source: PIB

2. Budget in a nutshell: Major takeaways from Finance Minister's speech

Budget 2025 Highlights

Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman presented the second Budget for the third term of the BJP government. In the lead up to the Budget, it had become clear that the Indian economy was losing its growth momentum. India's GDP has grown at an average of less than 5% annually since 2019 and less than 6% since 2014.

Here are the key takeaways from the Union Budget for the next financial year (2025-26).

1. Massive Income Tax Cuts, More Money in Hands of Taxpayers

FM surprised everyone by announcing massive income tax relief by raising the tax rebate level to an annual income of Rs 12 lakh. This level has been Rs 7 lakh until now.

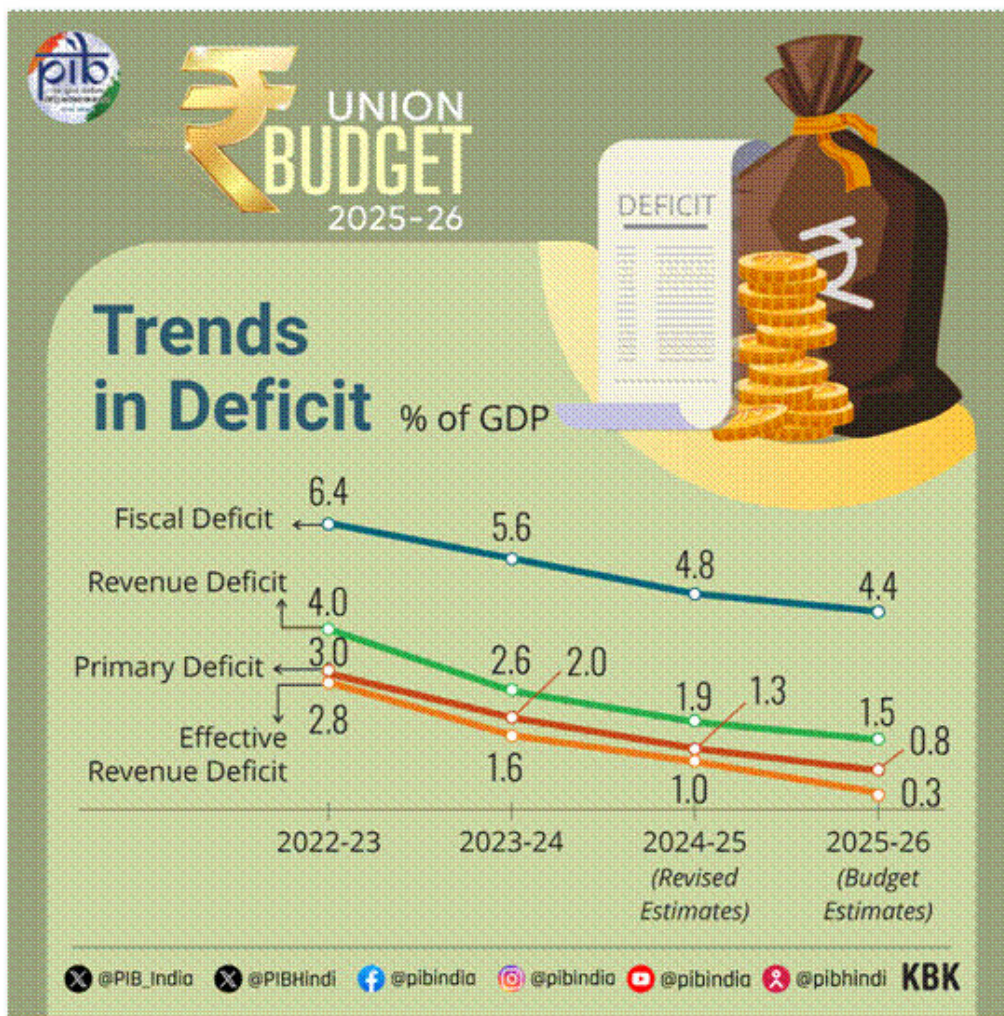
She also tweaked tax slabs in a manner that the highest tax rate in the country — 30% — will come into effect only after one reaches an annual income of Rs 24 lakh per annum, or Rs 2 lakh per month.

This relief is given to income tax payers. It will leave them with more money in their pockets. The government hopes that the additional money will be spent, and that will kick-start a growth process that will also incentivise companies to finally start investing in new capacities, thus creating new jobs and incomes.

NEW TAX REGIME

EXISTING TAX SLABS		PROPOSED TAX SLABS (Budget FY26)	
Total Annual Income	Rate of Tax	Total Annual Income	Rate of Tax
Up to ₹3 lakh	Nil	Up to ₹4 lakh	Nil
₹3 to 7 lakh	5%	₹4-8 lakh	5%
₹7 to 10 lakh	10%	₹8-12 lakh	10%
₹10 to 12 lakh	15%	₹12-16 lakh	15%
₹12 to 15 lakh	20%	₹16-20 lakh	20%
Above ₹15 lakh	30%	₹20-24 lakh	25%
		Above ₹24 lakh	30%

2. Fiscal Discipline Maintained, Deficit to Reduce Despite Foregone Revenue



When governments overspend or provide tax relief, there is fear that it may force them to borrow more money.

When governments borrow more, they either leave less money for private citizens and companies to borrow, which, in turn, raises interest rates for everyone. Or, they are forced to print money – and that leads to inflation, which also works like a tax because it reduces the purchasing power of people’s money.

However, despite the massive tax cut, which will cost the government around Rs 1 lakh crore in foregone revenues, the fiscal deficit (or the level of money borrowed) of the government will be reduced further to 4.4% (of the GDP) in 2025-26.

3. Capital Expenditure Failed to Meet Target



Capital expenditure essentially refers to spending towards creating productive assets such as roads and ports and bridges, etc.

The capital expenditure (capex) target for the current financial year (2024-25) was Rs. 11,11,111 crore. However, the actual capital expenditure for the year was Rs. 10,18,429 crore.

That being said, the capex allocation is increasing year by year.

4. Focus On Employment Generation, Visible in Attempt to Boost Specific Sectors

Another big turnaround in focus has been the shift towards employment generation.

For a while now, the government has been criticised for ignoring the employment generation aspects of its policy measures. For instance, the Production Linked Incentive (PLI) scheme was essentially a subsidy for companies and ventures that were heavy on the use of capital instead of labour.

This Budget brings the focus back on employment generation, and this shows up in the shape of measures announced for boosting economic activity in sectors such as textiles and leather that traditionally create more jobs for the same level of GDP.

5. Push For Regulatory Reforms

The FM announced the creation of a committee that will look into regulatory reforms that are required to make it easier for companies and entrepreneurs to do business in India.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Economics

Source: PIB and Indian Express

3. New Makhana Board Announced

When the Announcement was made?

Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman while presenting the Union Budget said that a "Makhana Board" will be set up in Bihar.

What is makhana?

Known in English as fox nut, makhana is the dried edible seed of the prickly water lily or gorgon plant (*Euryale ferox*), a species which grows in freshwater ponds across South and East Asia. The plant is known for its violet and white flowers, and massive, round and prickly leaves — often stretching more than a meter across.

Rising popularity of Makhana

In recent years, makhana has skyrocketed in popularity around the world as a "superfood" of choice among fitness enthusiasts. Makhana has gained popularity as a 'superfood' for its rich nutritional properties — makhana is nutrient-dense, low-fat, and an ideal "healthy snack".

In 2022, 'Mithila Makhana' was conferred a Geographical Indication (GI) tag, a certification that signifies that a product can only be grown in a particular geographical location, and as a result, has unique characteristics (like Darjeeling's tea or Mysore sandal soap).

The state of Bihar contributes to roughly 90% of India's makhana production. Outside Bihar, the crop is cultivated in smaller quantities in the states of Assam, Manipur, West Bengal, Tripura and Odisha, as well as in Nepal, Bangladesh, China, Japan, and Korea.



Why is the announcement in the Budget significant?

Despite being the largest producer of makhana, Bihar has not been able to harness its growing market. This is exemplified by the fact that despite Bihar producing 90% of the country's makhana crop, the largest makhana exporters in India is Punjab and Assam. Punjab does not even produce makhana.

This is because Bihar neither has a developed food processing industry, nor required export infrastructure. In fact, not a single airport in Bihar has a cargo hold.

Thus, Bihar ends up selling all its fox nuts as raw material to FPU's (food

processing units) outside the state at cheap prices. These FPU's add value to the product through flavouring and packaging, and thus command better prices.

Additionally, since the market in Bihar is not well-developed and organised, there is a long chain of intermediaries leading to those engaged in fox nut farming getting very low prices compared to what makhana commands in the commercial market. Thus, neither the farmer, nor the state — in terms of revenue — earns what they actually can.

Labour intensive

Low productivity is another major problem in makhana cultivation in Bihar. Currently, cultivating makhana is an extremely arduous and labour heavy process, which pushes up the overall input cost.

Seeds are sown in standing water bodies and harvesting is done manually by diving to the bottom of the water body. Subsequent processing of makhana — from cleaning and sun drying the seeds, to roasting and finally "popping" to produce the form in which they are consumed — too is manually done.

How exactly can having a Makhana Board help?

The Mahakana Board, which has a budget of Rs 100 crore, is expected to provide training to farmers, making them export-oriented, help create an ecosystem that brings investments in the food processing sector, and help create required export infrastructure.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Economics

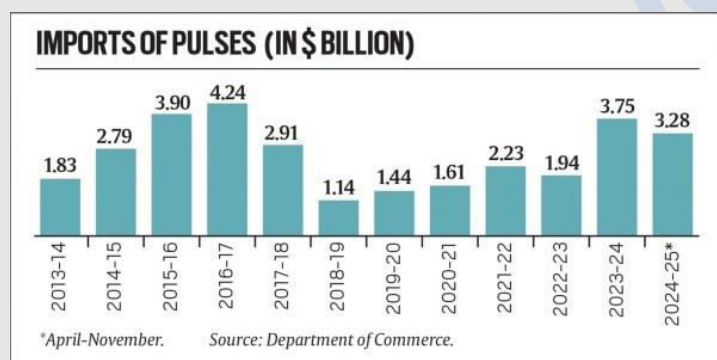
Source: Indian Express

4. Budget announcement: Why aatmanirbharta in pulses is a challenge

Mission for Aatmanirbharta (self-reliance) in Pulses

Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman has announced the launch of a six-year 'Mission for Aatmanirbharta (self-reliance) in Pulses' with a special focus on tur/arhar (pigeonpea), urad (black gram) and masoor (red lentil).

The 2025-26 Union Budget has allocated Rs 1,000 crore towards this scheme, which aims to provide minimum support price (MSP)-based procurement and post-harvest warehousing solutions in respect of the three pulses crops.



Rising Imports

Between 2013-14 and 2016-17, India's pulses imports rose both in value (from \$1.83 billion to \$4.24 billion) and quantity (from 31.78 lakh tonnes to 66.09 lakh tonnes) terms. Subsequently, they fell to 24.96 lakh tonnes (\$1.94 billion) in 2022-23. However, the Pulses imports seem to be rising in current

year. Only 8 months of imports have reached \$3.28 billion.

What's new this time?

Domestic pulses production increased from 192.55 lakh tonnes in 2013-14 to 273.02 lakh tonnes in 2021-22 and 260.58 lakh tonnes in 2022-23.

This was mainly courtesy two crops: chana and moong (green gram). Chana output went up from 95.26 Lakh tonnes in 2013-14 to 122.67 Lakh Tonnes in 2022-23 and the Moong output increased from 14.56 Lakh Tonnes in 2013-14 to 36.76 Lakh Tonnes in 2022-23.

Development of short-duration varieties of Chana

The production increase was enabled by the development of short-duration varieties. Traditional chana varieties take 140-150 days to grow from seed to grain, while requiring 1-2 irrigations. The newer varieties can be harvested in 100-120 days, with farmers having to give

a single irrigation at most. They can sow from end-September to mid-October, after harvesting of the kharif (post-monsoon) crop and using the residual moisture left by it in the soil.

New Varieties of Moong

The breeding breakthroughs have been even greater in moong, where farmers today take as many as four crops. The first one is during kharif, with sowing from end-June to mid-July and harvesting after mid-September. The second is during rabi (winter), with sowing in November-December. The third is grown in spring (February-March sowing) and the last one over summer (after April 1-20 sowing). The summer and rabi moong crops mature in 50-60 days, while it is slightly longer (65-75 days) for the kharif and spring varieties.

In moong, Indian scientists have bred varieties that are not just short-duration, but also photo-thermo insensitive: Being non-sensitive to temperature or photoperiod (the length of time in a 24-hour period that plants are exposed to light), they can practically be grown anytime and anywhere.

Challenges

The Modi government probably wants to replicate the above success story and extend it to other pulses – namely tur/arhar, urad and masoor.

That's easier said than done. To start with, there are growing limitations, particularly in tur/arhar, which was traditionally a 250-270 days crop yielding around 20 quintals per hectare. Breeders have brought the duration down to 150-180 days with 15-16 quintals/hectare yields, but that's still comparatively long and low.

Aatmanirbharta in tur/arhar would, perhaps, require development of hybrids maturing within 140-150 days, giving 18-20 quintals/hectare yields.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Economics

Source: Indian Express

5. Gender Budget Allocations in Union Budget of 2025-26

Overall Share in Total Budget

Union Minister of Finance and Corporate Affairs Smt. Nirmala Sitharaman presented the Union Budget 2025-26 in Parliament on 1st February, 2025. The share of Gender Budget allocation in the total Union Budget has increased to 8.86% in FY 2025-26 from 6.8% in FY 2024-25.

An allocation of Rs. 4.49 lakh crore has been reported for welfare of women and girls in the gender budget statement of FY 2025-26. This is an increase of Rs. 37.25% over the GBS allocation of Rs. 3.27 lakh crore in FY 2024-25.

Gender Reporting by More Ministries/Departments

This year a total of 49 Ministries/Departments and 5 UTs have reported allocations as against 38 Ministries/Departments and 5 UTs in FY 2024-25. This is the highest number of reporting by the Ministries/Departments in the GBS since its inception. Twelve new Ministries/Departments have reported allocations in the GBS 2025-26.

Gender Budgeting

Gender budget does not refer to a separate budget for women. Instead, the gender budget is an attempt to ensure that some part of the budget is definitely spent on women. As a result, separate women cells have been created in various ministries/departments to ensure that a section of grants is allocated dedicatedly for women.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Economics

Source: Indian Express

6. What is ELS cotton, why doesn't India grow more of this premium variety?

Introduction

Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman, while presenting the Union Budget, announced a five-year mission to "facilitate significant improvements in cotton farming, and promote extra-long staple (ELS) cotton varieties".



What is ELS cotton?

Cotton is classified, based on the length of its fibres, as long, medium, or short staple. *Gossypium hirsutum*, which constitutes roughly 96% of the cotton grown in India, falls in the medium staple category, with fibre lengths ranging from 25 to 28.6 mm.

On the other hand, ELS varieties boast fibre lengths of 30 mm and above. Most ELS cotton comes from the species *Gossypium barbadense*, commonly known as Egyptian or Pima cotton. Having originated in South America, ELS cotton today is mainly grown in China, Egypt, Australia, and Peru.

The fabric produced using ELS cotton is of the highest quality. This is why brands producing top-of-the-line fabrics mix a small quantity of ELS with medium staple cotton to improve quality.

Why is ELS cotton not grown in India?

For the 2024-25 season, the Minimum Support Price (MSP) of medium staple cotton was Rs 7,121 (per quintal) while that of long staple cotton was Rs 7,521.

Nonetheless, cotton farmers in India have thus far been reluctant to adopt ELS cotton. This is mainly due to lower than average per acre yields. While the medium staple variety yields between 10 and 12 quintals per acre, ELS cotton has a yield of only 7-8 quintals.

Additionally, farmers growing ELS cotton are often unable to market their premium produce at premium prices.

How can the Cotton Mission help?

The mission will provide the best science & technology support to farmers involved in Cotton cultivation. The cotton production is affected by low per-acre yields, and increased pest attacks. Thus, adoption of the latest technologies would be a welcome step.

Currently, India's per acre yields are significantly lower than other countries. For instance, Brazil boasts an average yield of 20 quintals per acre, while China boasts a yield of 15 quintals. Better seeds, timely agronomic advice, and adoption of technology would help India improve in this regard, and grow premium varieties such as ELS cotton.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Economics

Source: Indian Express

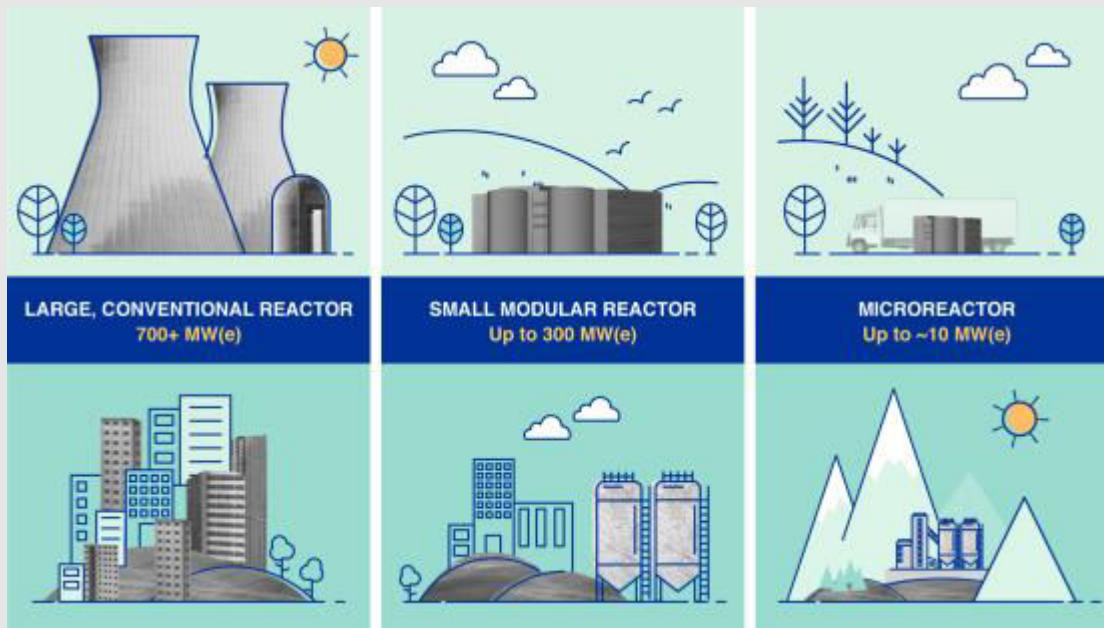
7. Union Budget 2025-26 push towards Civil nuclear energy

Introduction

The Union Budget 2025-26 outlines a significant push towards nuclear energy as part of India's long-term energy transition strategy. The government has set an ambitious target of 100 GW nuclear power capacity by 2047, positioning nuclear energy as a major pillar in India's energy mix. As of January 30, 2025, India's nuclear capacity is 8180 MW.

Small Modular Reactors (SMRs)

A key highlight of the Union Budget 2025-26 is the launch of a Nuclear Energy Mission, which is focused on research and development (R&D) of Small Modular Reactors (SMRs). The government has allocated ₹20,000 crore for this initiative, aiming to develop at least five indigenously designed and operational SMRs by 2033.



Small modular reactors (SMRs) are advanced nuclear reactors that have a power capacity of up to 300 MW(e) per unit, which is about one-third of the generating capacity of traditional nuclear power reactors. SMRs, which can produce a large amount of low-carbon electricity, are:

- **Small** – physically a fraction of the size of a conventional nuclear power reactor.
- **Modular** – making it possible for systems and components to be factory-assembled and transported as a unit to a location for installation.
- **Reactors** – harnessing nuclear fission to generate heat to produce energy.

Bhabha Atomic Research Centre (BARC) is developing Small Modular Reactors (SMRs) in India.

Bharat Small Reactors

The government is also actively expanding its nuclear energy sector by developing Bharat Small Reactors (BSRs) and exploring partnerships with the private sector. BSRs are 220 MW Pressurized Heavy Water Reactors (PHWRs). These reactors are being upgraded to reduce land requirements, making them suitable for deployment near industries such as steel, aluminium, and metals, serving as captive power plants to aid in decarbonization efforts.

The plan involves private entities providing land, cooling water, and capital, while the Nuclear Power Corporation of India Limited (NPCIL) handles design, quality assurance, and operation and maintenance, all within the existing legal framework.

Relevance: GS Prelims; Economics

Source: PIB

8. India Achieves Historic Milestone of 100 GW Solar Power Capacity

Why in News?



India has achieved a historic milestone by surpassing 100 GW of installed solar power capacity. This remarkable achievement is a significant step toward realizing the ambitious target of 500 GW of non-fossil fuel-based energy capacity by 2030.

Unprecedented Growth in Solar Sector

India's solar power sector has witnessed an extraordinary 3450 % increase in capacity over the past decade, rising from 2.82 GW in 2014 to 100 GW in 2025. As of January 31, 2025, India's total solar capacity installed stands at 100.33 GW.

Contribution of Solar Energy

Solar energy remains the dominant contributor to India's renewable energy growth, accounting for 47% of the total installed renewable energy capacity. Rajasthan, Gujarat, Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh are among the top-performing states, contributing significantly to India's total utility-scale solar installations.

Solar Manufacturing Capacity

India has also made significant strides in solar manufacturing. In 2014, the country had a limited solar module production capacity of just 2 GW. Over the past decade, this has surged to 60 GW in 2024, establishing India as a global leader in solar manufacturing. With continued policy support, India is on track to achieve a solar module production capacity of 100 GW by 2030.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Economy

Source: PIB

9. 18th Railway Zone has been created

South Coast Railway Zone

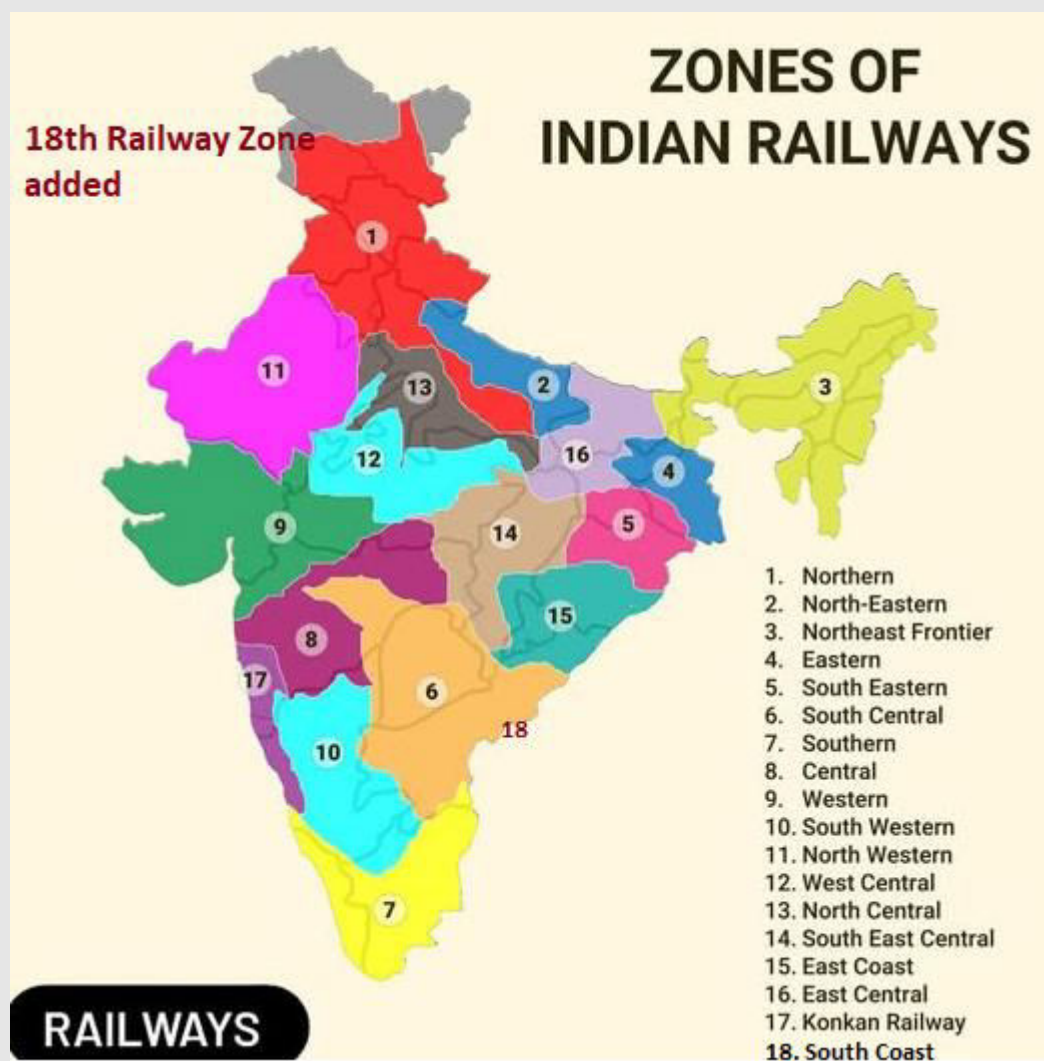
The Union Cabinet ex post facto approved the plan to create the new South Coast Railway Zone. Prime Minister Narendra Modi laid the foundation stone of the South Coast Railway headquarters in Visakhapatnam, Andhra Pradesh.

Created under the Andhra Pradesh Reorganisation Act of 2014, which led to the formation of Telangana state, the SCoR zone will be the 18th zone of the Indian Railways. Its jurisdiction has been carved out from parts of the East Coast Railway and South Central Railway zones.

Divided and Renamed the Waltair Railway Division

The Cabinet also divided the Waltair Railway Division (earlier under the East Coast Railway) into two parts. Citing its colonial-era name, the government renamed the first part as the Visakhapatnam Railway Division and included it under the new zone. The other part will be

converted into a new division with headquarters at Rayagada, Odisha, under the East Coast Railway.



It is to be noted that a single Railway Zone is divided into multiple divisions.

Why was the new railway zone announced?

According to item 8 of Schedule 13 (Infrastructure) of the Andhra Pradesh Reorganisation Act, Indian Railways was to examine establishing a new railway zone.

The Central government announced its decision to create a new railway zone, envisaged as a strategic hub for operations in Andhra Pradesh. It would help improve operational efficiency and provide focused service to the growing passenger and freight demands.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Economics

Source: Indian Express

10. Gross Domestic Knowledge Product (GDKP)

Introduction

Gross Domestic Knowledge Product: What is it, what is the 2021 idea govt is reviving



Recently, the Government of India revived a proposal to measure the Gross Domestic Knowledge Product (GDKP). This initiative aims to supplement the traditional Gross Domestic Product (GDP) metric. The Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI) is leading this effort.

What is GDKP?

The GDKP concept aims to quantify the contributions of knowledge, innovation, and intellectual assets to the economy. It recognises that GDP alone does not fully capture the value generated by knowledge-based activities. Some knowledge-related data is already recorded under GDP, but a structured

approach is needed.

Historical Context

The idea was first discussed in 2021 by NITI Aayog. At that time, concerns were raised about the lack of a clear methodology for data collection. Recently, MoSPI held a session to explore the GDKP measurement framework. MoSPI is now actively working to develop this framework.

Methodological Challenges

There are certain methodological challenges in measuring GDKP. First, There is no clear method to capture the knowledge economy yet. Second, Identifying relevant parameters for measurement poses a challenge. Third, Data availability is another concern.

Satellite Account Approach

MoSPI is considering a “satellite account” approach to measure the knowledge economy. A satellite account is an additional system used to track specific economic activities. This method is similar to existing satellite accounts for tourism, culture and the ocean/blue economy. The goal is to create a separate framework that accurately captures the knowledge base.

Technical Committee Formation

MoSPI plans to establish a technical committee. This committee will evaluate the GDKP proposal and guide the measurement process. Collaboration with various ministries will be essential for effective implementation.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Economics

11. Bilateral Trade Agreement (BTA) Negotiations with US

Introduction

Prime Minister Narendra Modi and US President Donald Trump announced plans to negotiate the first tranche of a mutually beneficial, multi-sector Bilateral Trade Agreement (BTA) this year, and to double bilateral trade between the two countries from the current \$200 billion-level to \$500 billion by 2030 (Called Mission 500).

Bilateral Trade Agreement

BTA, unlike a free trade agreement, is far narrower in scope and focuses on specific goods rather than overall trade liberalisation. A Free Trade Agreement focusses on overall trade liberalisation.

Trade between Indian and US

India's goods trade surplus with the US has been rising, particularly after the Covid-19 pandemic, doubling from \$17.30 billion in 2019-20 to \$35.33 billion in 2023-24, alongside a notable shift in the export basket. While exports of electronic and engineering goods surged, traditional exports such as gems and jewellery and garments remained largely unchanged.

India's goods trade surplus with US has doubled over the past 5 years			
Year	Exports to US	Imports from US	Surplus
2023-24	77.52	42.19	35.33
2022-23	78.31	50.86	27.45
2021-22	75.6	43.31	32.29
2020-21	51.63	28.88	22.75
2019-20	53.11	35.81	17.3

Meanwhile, India's imports from the US over the past five years have grown at a slower pace compared to its exports. US exports to India reached \$42.19 billion in 2023-24, up from \$35.81 billion in 2019-20, with the bulk concentrated in five categories: mineral fuels (the largest segment), followed by precious and semi-precious stones, nuclear reactors, electrical machinery, and aircraft and parts.

Relevance: GS Prelims; Economics

Source: Indian Express

12. What are sovereign green bonds? Why is demand for such bonds weak in India?

Introduction

Like several emerging markets, India also turned to sovereign green bonds to help fund its transition to a low-carbon economy, but investor demand remains weak.

What are green bonds?

Green bonds are debt instruments issued by governments, corporations, and multilateral banks to raise funds for projects that reduce emissions or enhance climate resilience.

Issuers typically offer green bonds at lower yields than conventional bonds, assuring investors that the proceeds will be used exclusively for green investments. The difference in yield — known as the green premium, or greenium — determines the cost advantage of green bonds. A higher greenium allows issuers to raise funds at lower costs, making green investments more attractive.

Investors in green bonds often seek stable, long-term returns, and may also have internal or external mandates to allocate a portion of their funds to green financing. Despite their potential, green bonds constitute a small part of the debt market and overall climate financing, as governments strengthen reporting practices and introduce incentives to attract investors.

Sovereign Green Bonds

Sovereign green bonds (SGrBs) are those that are issued by sovereign entities, like the Government of India, which formulated a framework for issuing such bonds in 2022. The framework defines “green projects” as those that encourage energy efficiency in resource utilisation, reduce carbon emissions, promote climate resilience, and improve natural ecosystems.

Utilisation of Funds

Since 2022-23, India has issued SGrBs eight times, and raised almost Rs 53,000 crore. Each year, the government uses roughly 50% of proceeds from SGrBs to fund production of energy efficient three-phase electric locomotives through the Ministry of Railways.

For 2024-25, the revised estimates for allocations to schemes eligible under SGrBs include Rs 12,600 crore for electric locomotive manufacturing, roughly Rs 8,000 crore for metro projects, Rs 4,607 crore for renewable energy projects, including the National Green Hydrogen Mission, and Rs 124 crore for afforestation under the National Mission for a Green India.

Why are investors not excited?

India’s SGrB issues have struggled to gain traction due to muted investor demand, making it difficult for the government to secure a greenium. Despite efforts, including easing rules for foreign investors, auctions have seen limited participation, with bonds often devolving to primary dealers.

While globally greeniums have reached 7-8 basis points, in India it is often at just 2–3 basis points. This limits the expansion of SGrBs as a viable funding source.

A key challenge is liquidity. Small issue sizes and investors holding bonds until maturity have stifled secondary market trading, reducing their appeal. Additionally, India lacks a strong ecosystem of social impact funds and responsible investing mandates, which in other markets drive green bond demand.

Why does this matter?

The government's inability to raise adequate proceeds from SGrBs impacts funding for schemes eligible under it and increases pressure on general revenue to meet the shortfall.

Initially, the estimated funding requirement from SGrB proceeds for 2024-25 stood at Rs 32,061 crore. However, after unsuccessful attempts to sell SGrBs due to higher yields cited by investors, the revised estimate has been lowered to Rs 25,298 crore. As a result, allocation for a scheme promoting grid-scale solar projects has been slashed from Rs 10,000 crore to Rs 1,300 crore.

The total expenditure in the current financial year will be made against expected proceeds amounting to Rs 21,697 crore, and to bridge the shortfall, roughly Rs 3,600 crore will be drawn from the government's general revenue.

What can be the way forward?

According to a recent World Bank report, emerging market sovereign issuers tend to issue more bonds that finance a combination of green and social projects compared to advanced market sovereign issuers, which overwhelmingly issue green bonds. In other words, bonds for projects that combine green and social projects, also known as sustainability bonds, could boost investor interest and increase proceeds from issues.

The report also noted that sovereigns take considerable time to prepare the post-issuance allocation and impact report, which impacts investor interest.

The Department of Economic Affairs, which oversees allocation of proceeds, hasn't yet published the allocation report for 2023-24.

To increase investor confidence, India can also partner with multilateral development banks to back its green bonds strategy with their credit ratings given that it does not have a very high rating itself.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Economics

Source: The Hindu

13. Middle Class 2.0: Changing employment sector in India, and its one big challenge

Employment share among Public and Organised Private Sector

India's middle class after Independence was largely created by the public sector. Employment in the public sector stood at 194.7 lakh and that in the organised private sector only at 80.6 lakh as on March 31, 1995. The former — employees in the central and state governments plus

quasi-governments (public sector undertakings) and local bodies — fell to 176.1 lakh and the latter rose to 119.7 lakh by March 31, 2012.

Changing face of employment

Table 1: Closing Headcount at Big-5 IT Companies

	Mar 2020	Sep 2022	Dec 2024
TCS	4,48,464	6,16,171	6,07,354
Infosys	2,42,371	3,45,218	3,23,379
Wipro	1,82,886	2,59,179	2,32,732
HCL	1,50,423	2,19,325	2,20,755
Tech Mahindra	1,25,236	1,63,912	1,50,488
Total	11,49,380	16,03,805	15,34,708

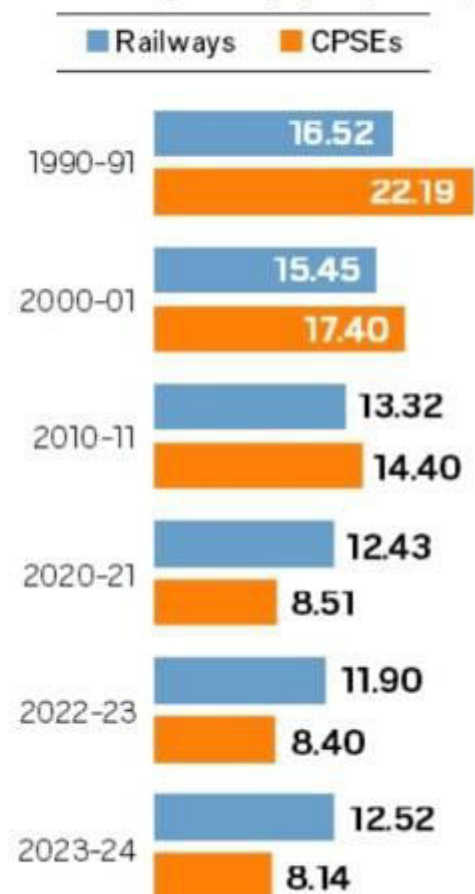
Source: Company quarterly results.

Table 2: Employees in Scheduled Commercial Banks

	Public	Private*	Total**
1991-92	8,47,412	63,398	9,76,931
2000-01	7,85,826	75,670	9,26,518
2010-11	7,75,688	1,95,311	10,50,885
2015-16	8,27,283	3,87,926	13,00,934
2020-21	7,70,800	6,00,096	15,66,913
2022-23	7,56,644	7,72,473	17,65,017
2023-24	7,46,679	8,74,049	18,72,217

*Includes Foreign Banks; **Includes Regional Rural, Small Finance and Payments Banks. Source: Reserve Bank of India.

Number of regular employees (in lakhs)



Source: Indian Railways and Public Enterprises Survey annual reports.

Middle Class 2.0

But it is fair to assume that the trend of organised employment shifting from the public to private sector — especially post the economic reforms of 1991 — has gathered pace after 2011-12.

One indicator of that is the number of regular employees with the Indian Railways. Between 1990-91 and 2023-24, these plunged from 16.5 lakh to 12.5 lakh. Still sharper is the reduction in employment with Central public sector enterprises: From 22.2 lakh in 1990-91 to just over 8.1 lakh in 2023-24.

On the other hand, take the information technology (IT) industry, the symbol of India's post-reform "second middle class". There has been enormous employment boom in IT companies such as Tata Consultancy Services (TCS) and Infosys.

The big-five IT companies together had 15,34,708 employees as on December 31, 2024. That's more than the 12,52,180 regular employees with the Indian Railways as of 2023-24. It is also more than the currently estimated 14.2 lakh officers, soldiers, airmen and sailors in the three defence services.

Banking sector transformation

Another, not as much highlighted, Middle Class 2.0 story is the banking industry. In 1991-92, scheduled commercial banks in India had a total employee strength of about 9.8 lakh. Public sector banks had a lion's share of nearly 8.5 lakh or 87% in that. The latter number registered a decline to 7.7 lakh by 2020-21, but still exceeded the 6 lakh employees in private sector banks.

The period 2022-23 was a landmark, when private sector banks, for the first time, overtook their state-owned counterparts in employment. At the end of 2023-24, their employee strength was 8.74 lakh, as against the less than 7.5 lakh of public sector banks.

Employment challenge

Simply put, liberalisation and globalisation opened up new industries and opportunities for private enterprise.

That, in turn, led to unprecedented employment generation – whether in IT and finance (banking, insurance, mutual funds, market intermediation/brokerages, etc) or accountancy, legal, health, hospitality and tourism, transportation and logistics, aviation, media, advertising, sports and entertainment, real estate and retail services.

The private sector-led Middle Class 2.0's expansion happened just when the post-Independence government-created Middle Class 1.0 started shrinking with the initiation of reforms.

Job Generation Restricted to Mainly to Services

The above job generation, however, has had a major limitation. It has been mainly in services. India, unlike China and most industrialised countries, has not experienced "structural transformation" involving the large-scale transfer of surplus labour from agriculture to sectors — particularly manufacturing and modern services — where productivity (output value per worker) and average incomes are higher.

Official Periodic Labour Force Surveys (PLFS) show the farm sector's share in India's workforce decreasing from 64% in 1993-94 to 48.9% in 2011-12 and further to 42.5% in 2018-19, but subsequently going up to 46.2% in 2023-24.

Large number of petty jobs in Service Sector

While the services sector has expanded, with India even becoming a “back office to the world” (like China is its “factory”), the well-paying jobs have been more for the better educated. Not everyone can be a software programmer, doctor, financial analyst, accountant or lawyer.

Most services sector jobs are informal and low-paying: Construction and headload labour, sanitation, security staffing, domestic help, shop assistant, petty retailing and gig work.

Uber has over 10 lakh drivers using its platform, as per the cab aggregator’s 2024 India Economic Impact report. Zomato engaged 4,80,000 average monthly active food deliverers and 1,45,000 quick-commerce riders during October-December 2024. Its rival Swiggy had 5,43,562 average “transacting delivery partners” for the same quarter.

But these jobs cannot, beyond a point, get people to join the Middle Class 2.0. And therein lies India’s real employment challenge.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Economics

Source: Indian Express

14. What is the fraud at Mumbai’s New India Cooperative Bank, why depositors can’t get their money

Introduction

The Economic Offence Wing (EOW) of the Mumbai Police last week arrested Hitesh Mehta, former general manager and head of accounts at the city-based New India Cooperative Bank, for allegedly siphoning Rs 122 crore from the bank’s safe. A developer, Dharmesh Paun, has also been arrested for allegedly assisting Mehta in routing the embezzled money.

The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) then restricted withdrawals from the bank, leading to depositors queuing up for their money.



What is the fraud at the New India Cooperative Bank?

The fraud involved the disappearance of a significant amount of cash from the bank. During an RBI inspection on February 12, officials discovered discrepancies in the bank’s cash records. Specifically, Rs 112 crore was found missing from the Prabhadevi branch safe, and an additional Rs 10 crore was missing from the Goregaon branch’s safe.

Upon investigation, Hitesh Mehta came under the scanner for allegedly stealing the money over six years, between 2019 and 2025.

Who are the key individuals involved in the fraud?

Hitesh Mehta was responsible for handling the cash at the Prabhadevi and Goregaon branches. Mehta has confessed to stealing the money. He has further admitted to taking cash from both branches and handing it over to Dharmesh Paun, who allegedly helped him in routing the money through his company. While Mehta and Paun have been arrested, another suspect yet to be arrested is Unnanathan Arunachalam, who is also believed to have helped in misappropriating the funds.

What are the sections invoked?

The FIR was filed under sections 316(5) (criminal breach of trust by a public servant or banker, merchant, broker, attorney or agent) and 61(2) (criminal conspiracy) of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS).

What action has the RBI taken?

The RBI has imposed restrictions on the bank due to concerns over its financial stability. These restrictions include prohibiting the bank from issuing new loans, making investments, borrowing funds, or allowing withdrawals for a period of six months.

Additionally, the RBI has superseded the bank's board of directors for a 12-month period due to "poor governance standards." The RBI has appointed Shreekant, a former chief general manager of the State Bank of India, as the administrator to manage the bank's affairs, assisted by a committee of advisors.

The restrictions also prevent the bank from granting or renewing loans, making investments, incurring liabilities, accepting fresh deposits, or disbursing payments without written approval from the RBI.

What is the record of the bank?

New India Cooperative Bank had a network of 30 branches and a deposit base of Rs 2,436 crore as of March 2024. The bank had posted losses of Rs 22.78 crore in 2023-24 and Rs 30.74 crore in 2022-23.

Is this the first time that the RBI has imposed restrictions on a cooperative bank in Maharashtra?

No. A similar thing happened with the Punjab and Maharashtra Co-operative (PMC) Bank, which faced action due to large-scale fraudulent loans.

On September 23, 2019, the RBI imposed restrictions on PMC Bank, preventing around 17 lakh depositors from withdrawing money from its 137 branches across six states.

Probe revealed that the bank had unlawfully sanctioned around 73% of its loans to the Housing Development Infrastructure Ltd (HDIL) group of companies, favouring its promoters, Rakesh

Wadhawan and his son Sarang. The bank allegedly concealed HDIL's non-performing assets from the RBI. The EOW arrested over 15 people in the case, including the bank's top management.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Economics

Source: Indian Express

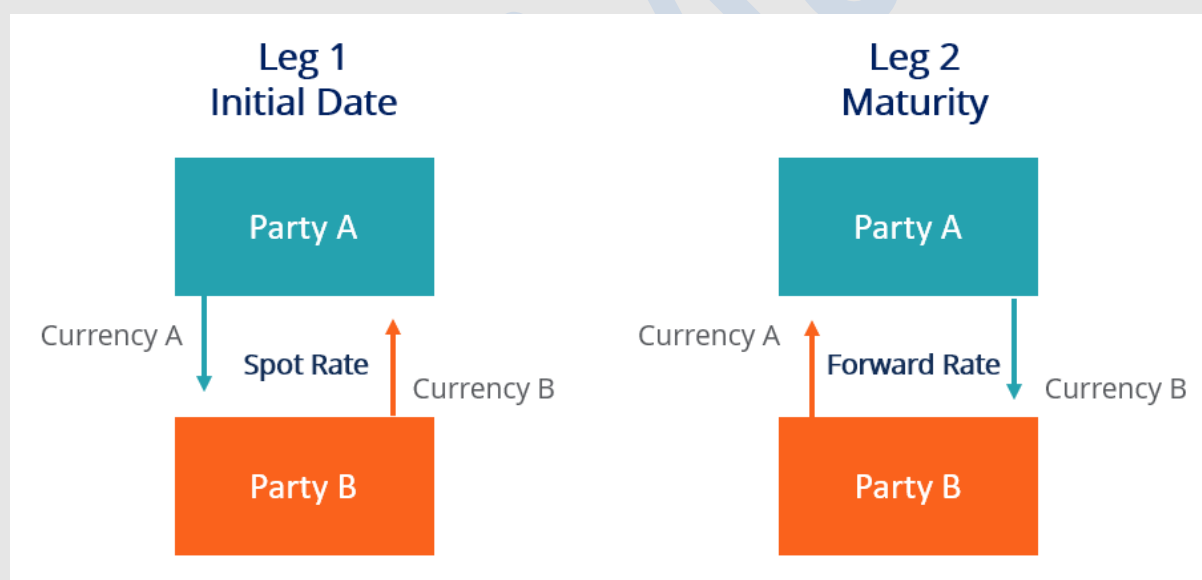
15. What is the RBI's Buy-Sell Swap?

Introduction

The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) is conducting a foreign exchange swap to manage liquidity (availability of cash in the economy) and stabilize the Indian rupee. This means that RBI will temporarily buy US dollars from banks and later sell them back at a fixed future date.

This move helps:

1. Boost liquidity – Ensuring banks have enough rupees to lend and invest.
2. Control volatility – Keeping the rupee's exchange rate stable.
3. Increase forex reserves – Strengthening India's financial position by holding more US dollars.



How Does the Swap Work?

1. First Leg (Buy Dollars, Release Rupees)
 - Banks sell US dollars to RBI through an auction (competitive bidding process).
 - RBI pays rupees to these banks by crediting their accounts.
 - Banks transfer dollars to RBI's nostro account (foreign currency account held by RBI in overseas banks).
 - Release of rupees in the market enhances liquidity and buying of dollars increase the forex reserves with RBI.

2. Second Leg (Return Rupees, Get Dollars Back)

- At the end of the swap period (a fixed time, like 3 or 6 months), banks buy back their US dollars.
- Banks return the rupees they got earlier, along with a swap premium (a small extra cost, like interest).
- RBI gives back the dollars to the banks.

Key Terms Explained

- Liquidity – The availability of money in the financial system. More liquidity means banks can lend easily.
- Volatility – Rapid price or currency movement. The swap helps stabilize the rupee's value.
- Forex Reserves – Foreign currencies held by RBI, mainly in US dollars.
- Nostro Account – An account that RBI holds in a foreign bank, used for international transactions.
- Swap Premium – The extra amount banks pay to RBI when they buy back dollars (similar to interest on a loan).

This mechanism helps RBI manage liquidity, stabilize the rupee, and strengthen forex reserves without directly buying or selling dollars in the open market.

Relevance: GS Prelims; Economics

Source: The Hindu and Indian Express

16. How can Indian farmers be weaned away from urea, DAP and potash?

Introduction



Capping or even reducing the consumption of urea, di-ammonium phosphate (DAP) and muriate of potash (MOP) has become a strategic imperative for India.

Lead to Imports

All these fertilisers are imported, whether directly or as inputs for domestic manufacturing.

MOP is wholly imported from countries such as Canada, Russia, Jordan, Israel, Turkmenistan and Belarus, as India has no mineable potash reserves.

In urea, India's production meets over 85% of its consumption demand, but the plants mostly run on liquefied natural gas imported from Qatar, US, UAE or Angola.

DAP is imported in the form of finished fertiliser (mainly from Saudi Arabia, China, Morocco, Russia and Jordan) as well as raw material (rock phosphate from Jordan, Morocco, Togo, Egypt and Algeria; sulphur from UAE, Qatar and Oman) and intermediate chemicals (phosphoric acid from Jordan, Morocco, Senegal and Tunisia; ammonia from Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Oman and Indonesia).

Import dependence is made worse by the rupee's depreciation.

High percentage of individual nutrients

The second reason for limiting urea, DAP and MOP usage is that they are high-analysis fertilisers: Urea and MOP contain 46% nitrogen (N) and 60% potash (P) respectively. DAP has 46% phosphorous (P) plus 18% N.

Most crops don't require fertilises with such high percentage of individual nutrients. They need balanced fertilisation – products with nutrients in the right quantities and ratios for effective absorption through the plant roots and leaves.

These include not only N, P and K, but also secondary nutrients (sulphur, calcium and magnesium) and micronutrients (zinc, iron, copper, boron, manganese and molybdenum). Weaning away farmers from high-analysis fertilisers also translates into more efficient use of imported material and scarce foreign exchange.

An effective DAP replacement

A good example is 20:20:0:13 or ammonium phosphate sulphate (APS). A complex fertiliser with 20% N, 20% P, 0% K and 13% sulphur (S), it has emerged as an effective substitute for DAP, despite having less than half of the latter's P content.

DAP is manufactured by importing merchant-grade phosphoric acid with 52-54% P content and reacting it with ammonia (the source of N). The end-product has 18% N and 46% P.

But companies can, instead, import rock phosphate with 28-36% P and react it with sulphuric acid. The resultant "weak" phosphoric acid, with only 27-29% P, is further reacted with ammonia and sulphuric acid to produce 20:20:0:13.

The idea is not to waste expensive phosphoric acid. Making one tonne of DAP requires about 460 kg of phosphoric acid and 220 kg of ammonia. Here, you use only 220-230 kg of phosphoric acid, 220 kg of ammonia and 1,200 kg of sulphuric acid to get one tonne of 20:20:0:13.

Substitution drivers

APS are good enough for oilseeds, pulses, maize, cotton, onion, chilly and all such "sulphur-hungry" crops. Even the P and K nutrient requirement of potato can be effectively met through 10:26:26:0 or 12:32:16:0 complex fertilisers: DAP should be reserved only for wheat, rice and sugarcane".

APS has become India's third largest-consumed fertiliser after urea and DAP. It has overtaken single super phosphate (SSP), previously the most popular alternative to DAP. SSP, which contains 16% P and 11% S, is manufactured by reacting rock phosphate directly with sulphuric acid.

The road ahead

This fiscal (2024-25) should see sales of NPKS complex fertilisers touch 14 mt, almost double the 7.3 mt of 2013-14. Much of it is courtesy of 20:20:0:13, which is steadily replacing DAP.

A similar marketing push is necessary for 10:26:26:0, 12:32:16:0, 15:15:15:0 and 14:35:14:0, so as to minimise direct application of MOP and selling only after incorporating into these complexes.

The ultimate goal must be to cap, if not reduce, consumption of all high-analysis fertilisers.

Relevance: GS Prelims; Economics

Source: Indian Express

1. Why Yamuna in Delhi has high ammonia levels

What is ammonia?

HIGH LEVELS OF AMMONIA IN YAMUNA CAUSE AND EFFECTS

Easily dissolvable in water, ammonia is a colourless, gaseous chemical with a sharp odour, which is widely used in industrial processes. For instance, it is used as fertiliser, coolant, cleansing agents, food additives, and in animal feed production, plastic and paper manufacturing.

Sources of Ammonia

Major sources of ammonia pollution include runoff from farmlands, a direct discharge of effluents from industries where ammonia is used and untreated sewage. The chemical is also naturally released in water with the degradation of organic matter such as blue-green algae.

Impact

The long-term impact of ammonia in human bodies can cause damage to internal organs due to its corrosive properties.

Why is ammonia in Yamuna an issue in Delhi?

Notably, dye units, distilleries and other factories concentrated in the Panipat and Sonipat districts as well as sewage from colonies are believed to pollute the stretch of the Yamuna before it enters Delhi. The situation worsens in the dry, winter months due to the absence of freshwater from melting of glaciers and lack of rainfall.

Moreover, water treatment plants cannot treat water with ammonia content beyond certain level. As a result, water supply disruptions take place in the capital when the ammonia levels spike in the river.

How is ammonia-laden water treated?

The Delhi Jal Board's water treatment plants use chlorine to treat excessive ammonia. Some amount of chlorine should remain in the treated water after the treatment process so that pathogens can be neutralised.

What have governments done to tackle the issue?

For years now, the Delhi and Haryana governments have failed to come up with a long-term viable solution to resolve the issue of excessive ammonia in water. Delhi government has proposed setting up an in-situ ammonia treatment plant at the entry point of Yamuna in Delhi. However, it remains under development. The Haryana government is also yet to complete laying down a pipeline to prevent the inter-mixing of pollutants.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Environment
Source: Indian Express

2. Deposit insurance and the case of raising it

Introduction

The government is considering increasing the insurance cover for bank deposits from the current limit of Rs 5 lakh. The deposit insurance cover is offered by the Deposit Insurance and Credit Guarantee Corporation (DICGC), a specialised division of the Reserve Bank of India (RBI).



How are the deposits of customers insured against failure of the bank?

The objective of the DICGC is to protect “small depositors” from the risk of losing their savings in case of a bank failure. The insurance cover of Rs 5 lakh per depositor is for all accounts held by the depositor in all branches of the insured bank.

DICGC insures all commercial banks, including branches of foreign banks functioning in India, local area banks, regional rural banks, and cooperative banks. However, primary co-operative societies are not insured by the DICGC.

Savings, fixed, current, and recurring deposits are insured. The DICGC does not provide insurance for deposits by foreign, central, and state governments, and for inter-bank deposits. The premium for deposit insurance is borne by the insured bank. DICGC collects premiums from member financial institutions at a flat or differentiated rate based on the bank’s risk profile.

How does the limit for DICGC’s insurance coverage work?

Imposition of Restrictions: In 2021, a new Section 18A was inserted in the DICGC Act, 1961, which enabled depositors to get interim payment and time-bound access to their deposits to the extent of the deposit insurance cover through interim payments by DICGC, in case of imposition of restrictions on banks by the RBI.

At present, the DICGC offers insurance cover on bank deposits up to Rs 5 lakh within 90 days of imposition of such restrictions. DICGC insures both the principal and interest amount held by a depositor in a bank.

Liquidation of Bank: If the bank goes into liquidation, DICGC is liable to pay to the liquidator the claim amount of each depositor up to Rs 5 lakh within two months from the date of receipt of the claim list from the liquidator.

The liquidator will have to disburse the right claim amount to each insured depositor.

Has the depositor's insurance ceiling always been Rs 5 lakh?

The cover was raised from Rs 1 lakh to Rs 5 lakh from February 4, 2020, after RBI took action against the Mumbai-headquartered Punjab and Maharashtra Co-operative Bank Ltd. PMC Bank had deposits of more than Rs 11,000 crore, and RBI's action impacted thousands of depositors.

Deposit insurance was introduced in India in 1962, and coverage has thus far been enhanced six times – from Rs 1,500 per depositor held in the same right and same capacity at all the branches of the insured bank to Rs 5 lakh now.

The deposit insurance scheme was started with 287 banks in 1962; the number of insured banks was 1,997 as of March 31, 2024.

What is the case for revising the deposit insurance upwards?

RBI Deputy Governor M Rajeshwar Rao had noted last year that as of March 31, 2024, fully protected accounts were 97.8% of the total, higher than the international benchmark of 80%. However, challenges were likely going forward given that a growing and formalising economy can be expected to see a sharp increase in both primary and secondary bank deposits.

An increase in cover will not only protect to a greater extent the interest of depositors in case of a bank failure, it will likely also strengthen their trust in the banking system.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Economics

Source: Indian Express

3. International Big Cat Alliance (IBCA) officially comes into force

Introduction

In a major development, the Framework Agreement on establishment of the International Big Cat Alliance (IBCA) has officially come into force. From 23rd January, 2025, the IBCA and its Secretariat have become a full-fledged treaty based inter-governmental international organization and international legal entity.

Member Countries

As of now, 27 countries including India have consented to join IBCA. The five countries namely Nicaragua, Eswatini, India, Somalia and Liberia have signed the Framework Agreement to formally become members of the IBCA.

About the IBCA

The IBCA was launched in 2023, during the event 'Commemorating 50 years of Project Tiger'. The headquarters of IBCA are in India. It was launched with the aim of conservation of seven big cats - Tiger, Lion, Leopard, Snow Leopard, Cheetah, Jaguar and Puma – with membership of all UN countries/the range countries harbouring the said species and non-range countries where historically these species are not found but interested to support big cat conservation.



The IBCA was established by Government of India, through the nodal organisation viz., National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA), Ministry of Environment, Forest & Climate Change (MoEFCC).

The IBCA will facilitate collaboration and synergy among stakeholders, consolidating successful conservation practices and expertise to achieve a common goal of conservation of big cats at global level. This unified approach, bolstered by financial support, aims to halt the decline in big cat populations, and reverse current trends.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Environment

Source: PIB

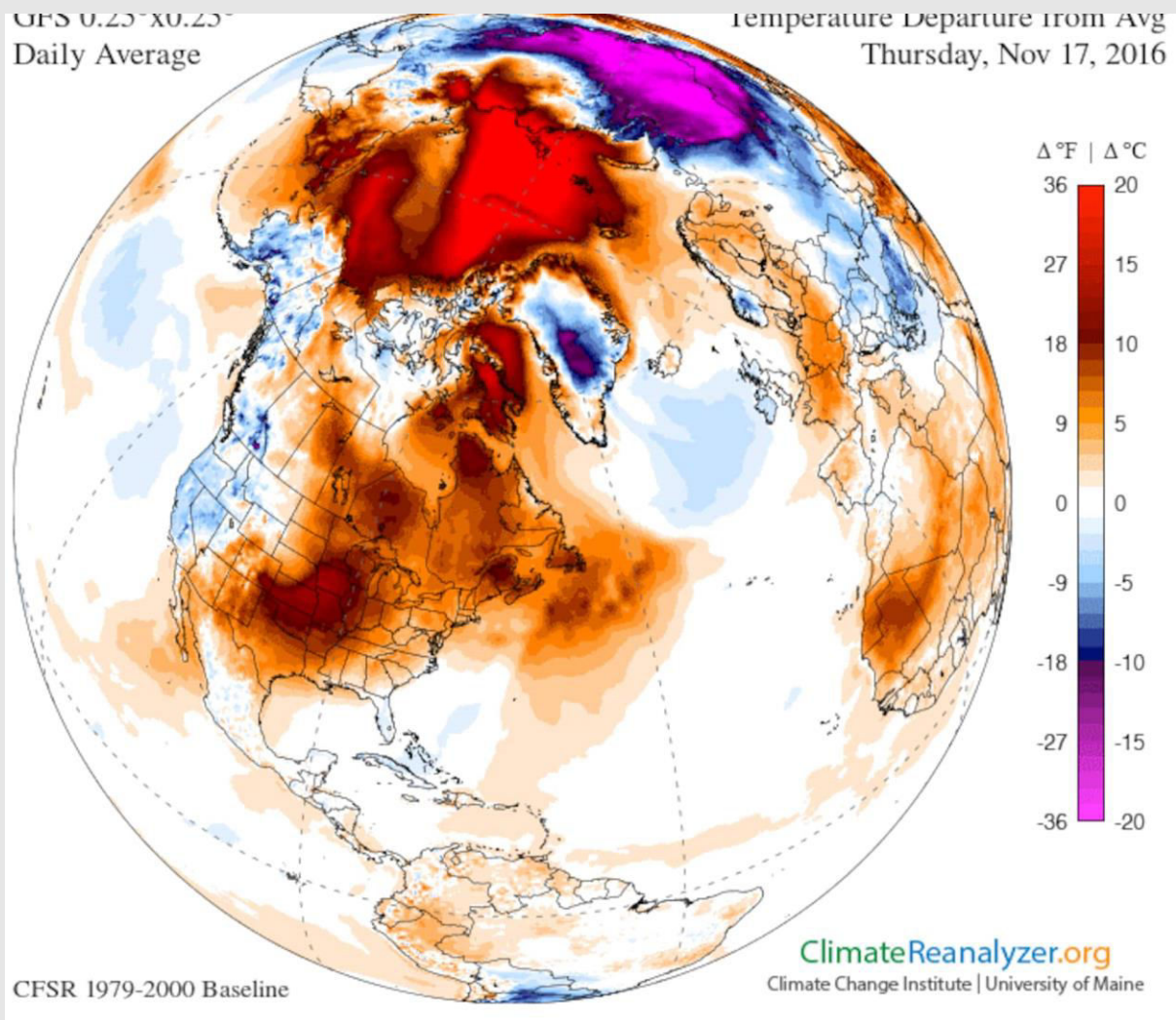
4. Why temperatures at north pole reached 20 degrees Celsius above average

High temperature rise at North Pole

Temperatures increased by more than 20 degrees Celsius above average at the north pole, crossing the threshold for ice to melt, on February 2. While mercury soared to 18 degrees Celsius hotter than the 1991–2020 average in the north of Svalbard, Norway, on February 1, it had risen to more than 20 degrees Celsius by the next day.

Act as Global Refrigerator

Since 1979, the Arctic has warmed four times faster than the global average. This is an issue because the region acts as a refrigerator for the rest of the world — it helps cool the planet. If temperatures continue to soar at this rate, it can lead to severe global impacts including rising sea levels and disruption of weather patterns.



Why has the Arctic warmed faster than the global average?

The global temperatures have increased by around 1.3 degrees Celsius compared to the 1850-1900 baseline. However, this rise in temperatures is not uniform across the planet. For instance, the Arctic has warmed 3.8 times faster than the global average since the late 1970s.

There are multiple factors behind the Arctic's rapid warming.

1. Albedo Effect: One of the most prominent factors is the albedo effect or how much sunlight a surface reflects. Sea ice keeps temperatures down in the polar regions, as its bright, white surface reflects more sunlight back to space than liquid water. As the ice cover in the Arctic is melting, more land or water is getting exposed to the Sun and more heat is getting absorbed, leading to a rise in temperatures.

2. Lack of Convection: The lack of convection in higher latitudes such as the Arctic is another reason. Convection occurs when air close to the ground is heated by the warm surface of the Earth. In the tropics, where more sunlight can reach the surface compared to the Arctic, strong

convection takes place, causing warm air to rise. This vertical mixing distributes heat throughout the atmosphere.

However, in the Arctic, due to weak convection, the extra warming from the greenhouse gases is not able to mix vertically and the heat remains concentrated near the surface.

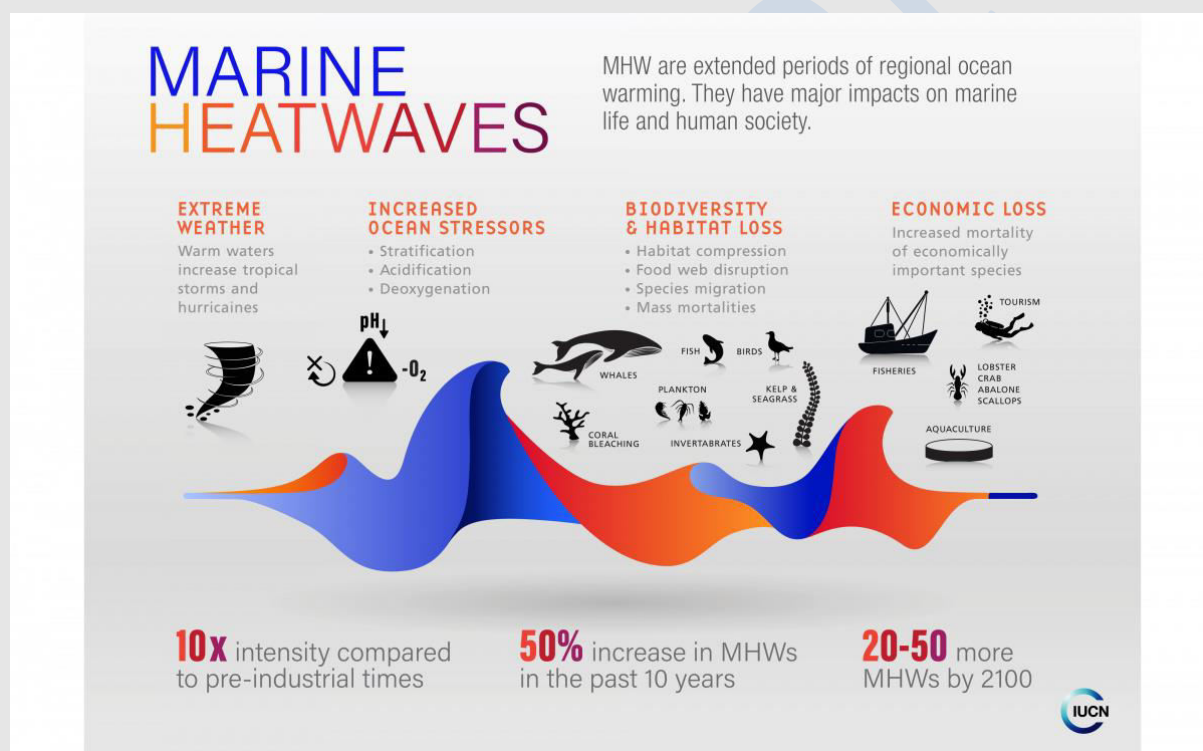
Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Environment

Source: Indian Express

5. How the climate crisis has intensified marine heatwaves across the world

Why in News?

The marine heatwaves (MHWs) are linked to the death of more than 30,000 fish off the coastal Western Australia in January 2025.



What are marine heatwaves?

A marine heatwave is an extreme weather event. It occurs when the surface temperature of a particular region of the sea rises to 3 or 4 degrees Celsius above the average temperature for at least five days. MHWs can last for weeks, months or even years. In the past few decades, MHWs have become longer-lasting, more frequent, and intense.

Why have marine heatwaves intensified?

The primary reason is the climate crisis. As global temperatures have soared to 1.3 degrees Celsius above the pre-industrial levels, 90% of the extra heat has been absorbed by the ocean.

This has increased the global mean average sea surface temperature (SST) by close to 0.9 degrees Celsius since 1850, and the rise over the last four decades is around 0.6 degrees Celsius. As a result, MHWs have become more frequent, long-lasting, and severe.

What is the impact of marine heatwaves?

Marine heatwaves (MHWs) can be devastating for marine life. For example, the 2010-11 MHWs in Western Australia caused large-scale fish kills — the sudden and unexpected death of many fish or other aquatic animals over a short period and mainly within a particular area. It also destroyed kelp forests and fundamentally altered the ecosystem of the coast. Kelps usually grow in cooler waters, providing habitat and food for many marine animals.

These heatwaves contribute to coral bleaching, which reduces the reproductivity of corals and makes them more vulnerable to life-threatening diseases. Thousands of marine animals depend on coral reefs for survival and damage to corals could, in turn, threaten their existence.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Environment

Source: Indian Express

6. "Shatavari – For Better Health" a nationwide Species-Specific Campaign launched

Campaign by Ministry of Ayush

In a bid to raise awareness about the health benefits of medicinal plants, a species-specific campaign titled "Shatavari –For Better Health" was launched today by Shri Prataprao Jadhav, Minister of State (Independent Charge), Ministry of Ayush.

The Minister also mentioned previous successful campaigns including those for Amla, Moringa, Giloe, and Ashwagandha. These initiatives have contributed to spreading knowledge of the health benefits of medicinal plants across the country.

Shatavari



Shatavari, also known as satavari, satavar, or *Asparagus racemosus* (*A. racemosus*), is said to promote fertility and have a range of health benefits, particularly for the female reproductive system.

The herb is thought to be adaptogenic, which means that it may help to regulate the body's systems and improve resistance to stress.

Health benefits of Shatavari

Shatavari is a popular supplement that people use to treat a wide range of symptoms. It can be taken orally as a tablet, a powder, or liquid essence.

Recent studies suggest that the root could provide a number of health benefits. However, more studies are needed before this herb can be recommended to treat any specific condition, and it is not currently used in clinical medicine.

Research has suggested that shatavari may provide the following health benefits:

1. Improving female reproductive health

Perhaps the most common traditional use of shatavari, or *A. racemosus*, is to treat female health conditions, specifically reproductive disorders.

Recent research also suggests that a combination of herbal medicines, including *A. racemosus*, may reduce the symptoms of menopause.

2. Antioxidant effects

Antioxidants protect the body from harm caused by free radicals, which can damage cells and lead to the development of diseases, including cancer. Antioxidants also fight against oxidative stress, another cause of disease. Shatavari possibly has antioxidant properties, though more research is needed in humans.

3. Anti-anxiety effects

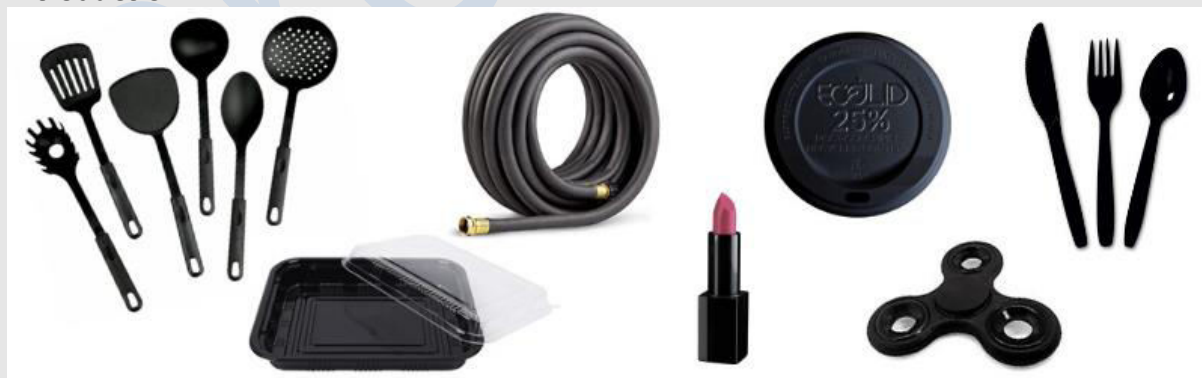
Shatavari supplements have also traditionally been used to combat anxiety and depression.

Relevance: GS Prelims; Ecology

Source: PIB

7. What is black plastic and why you should get rid of it?

Introduction



Black plastics are widely used in various industries, including electronics, automotive, packaging, and construction, due to their durability and aesthetic appeal. However, their environmental impact and potential health hazards are increasingly becoming a cause for concern. This article explores the composition, recycling challenges, and health risks associated with black plastics.

What Are Black Plastics?

Black plastics are primarily made from recycled or virgin plastic materials infused with carbon black, a pigment that gives them their distinctive color. These plastics are found in everyday items such as food trays, electronic casings, automobile parts, and packaging materials.

Recycling Challenges

One of the biggest environmental concerns with black plastics is their poor recyclability. Most recycling facilities use optical sorting technology, which relies on near-infrared (NIR) sensors to identify and separate different types of plastic. However, the carbon black pigment absorbs infrared light, making it difficult for sorting machines to detect and categorize black plastics. As a result, these plastics often end up in landfills or are incinerated, contributing to environmental pollution and carbon emissions.

Health Hazards of Black Plastics

Despite their widespread use, black plastics pose significant health risks, primarily due to their composition and potential for chemical contamination. Here are some key concerns:

1. Presence of Toxic Chemicals

Many black plastics are made from recycled electronic waste (e-waste), which may contain hazardous substances such as brominated flame retardants (BFRs), heavy metals (lead, cadmium, mercury), and phthalates. When used in food packaging or kitchen utensils, these toxins can leach into food and beverages, posing serious health risks.

2. Endocrine Disruption

Certain chemicals found in black plastics, such as bisphenol A (BPA) and phthalates, are known endocrine disruptors. They interfere with hormonal balance and have been linked to reproductive issues, developmental disorders, and increased risks of certain cancers.

3. Carcinogenic Risks

Carbon black itself has been classified as a possible human carcinogen by the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC). Prolonged exposure to carbon black particles, particularly in industrial settings, has been associated with respiratory issues, lung damage, and an increased risk of lung cancer.

4. Microplastic Contamination

As black plastics degrade, they release microplastics into the environment, which can be ingested by humans through food, water, and air. Studies have shown that microplastics can accumulate in the body, leading to inflammation, cellular damage, and potential long-term health effects.

Alternatives and Solutions

To mitigate the environmental and health risks posed by black plastics, several measures can be adopted:

1. Improved Sorting Technologies: Developing advanced recycling technologies that can accurately detect and process black plastics.

2. Use of Safer Additives: Encouraging manufacturers to replace carbon black with alternative colorants that do not interfere with recycling.

3. Regulation and Awareness: Implementing stricter regulations on the use of toxic chemicals in black plastics and raising consumer awareness about safer alternatives.

4. Adopting Sustainable Packaging: Promoting biodegradable and eco-friendly packaging materials as alternatives to black plastics.

Conclusion

Black plastics, despite their functional advantages, pose significant challenges in terms of recyclability and health safety. With growing awareness and technological advancements, it is crucial to find sustainable alternatives and implement stringent regulations to reduce their impact on both human health and the environment. Consumers, manufacturers, and policymakers must work together to promote safer and more eco-friendly materials for a healthier future.

Relevance: GS Prelims; Environment

8. Why gharials are endangered, how MP has emerged the leader in their conservation

Introduction



Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister Mohan Yadav last week released 10 gharials, a critically endangered species, into the Chambal river at the National Chambal Gharial Sanctuary in Morena.

Madhya Pradesh's decades-long conservation efforts have earned it the title of a "gharial state," hosting over 80 per cent of India's gharials.

What are gharials?

The gharial is a species of *Gavialis gangeticus*—long-snouted, fish-eating crocodilians. The name 'gharial' comes from the Hindi word ghara, meaning pot or vessel, referring to the bulbous snout tip of adult males, which resembles an inverted pot. In Indian mythology, gharials hold sacred significance, often depicted as the divine mount of the goddess Ganga. Their slender snouts, lined with numerous sharp, interlocking teeth, are adapted to trap fish, the mainstay of their diet.

Reproduction among Gharials

Males grow from 3-6 meters, and females 2.6–4.5 meters. Gharials mate during November, December, and January. Sandbanks, sandbars, and islands are critical to their ecology, serving

as preferred sites for basking and nesting. From March to May, as river levels recede, female gharials climb onto exposed sandbanks and islands to nest communally, with many laying eggs in the same area. Females provide parental care for the first few days after hatching.

Gharials are important for a river's ecosystem, as they clean up carrion.

Gharial Population Status

The Madhya Pradesh state alone boasts the highest number of gharials in India, with a 2024 census recording 2,456 individuals in the Chambal sanctuary.

Globally, Gharial populations saw a steady recovery until 1997, but between 1997 and 2006, numbers plummeted by 58%, dropping from 436 adults to 182, according to a 2007 research paper.

Wildlife researchers have said the species is likely extinct in Myanmar and Bhutan, with only small, uncertain populations remaining in Pakistan, Nepal, and Bangladesh's upper Brahmaputra.

What threats do gharials face?

Historical threats included overhunting for skins, trophies, eggs, and traditional medicine. Modern challenges—dam construction, irrigation canals, siltation, river course changes, embankments, sand-mining, pollution, and fishing—continue to devastate populations. Gill nets, in particular, kill gharials of all sizes, even in protected areas.

What are the conservation efforts?

Between 1975 and 1982, India established 16 captive breeding and release centers and five gharial sanctuaries. Today, the species survives primarily in five refuges: National Chambal Sanctuary (NCS), Katerniaghat Sanctuary, Chitwan National Park, Son River Sanctuary, and Satkosia Gorge Sanctuary.

Conservation efforts include captive breeding programmes to rear and release hatchlings back into the river, monitoring populations, actively managing threats like sand mining, and engaging local communities in habitat preservation and awareness campaigns

Why is the Chambal sanctuary crucial?

Spanning three states, the Chambal sanctuary protects a 435-km stretch of one of India's cleanest rivers. Apart from gharials, the stretch hosts over 290 bird species, including rare Indian Skimmers (80% of the national population).

The sanctuary has also been helpful in reviving gharial populations elsewhere. Gharials had disappeared from the rivers of Punjab around 1960-70. Gharials were sent to Punjab from the Deori Gharial Center of Chambal in 2017. In 2018, 25 gharials were sent to the Sutlej River, and in 2020, 25 gharials were sent to the Beas River.

Relevance: GS Prelims; Environment

9. Srisailem Left Bank Canal (SLBC) tunnel collapse

Introduction

The Srisailem Left Bank Canal (SLBC) tunnel collapse in Nagarkurnool district of Telangana has drawn significant attention due to its tragic consequences and the safety concerns it highlights in large-scale irrigation projects.

What Happened?



On February 17, 2024, a portion of the SLBC tunnel collapsed near Yellur village in Nagarkurnool district. 8 workers were trapped inside the tunnel following the collapse. The incident occurred during ongoing works to complete the tunnel lining and finishing process.

This tunnel is part of the Srisailem Left Bank Canal project, which aims to divert Krishna River water to drought-prone areas of Mahabubnagar and surrounding districts in Telangana.

Rescue Operations

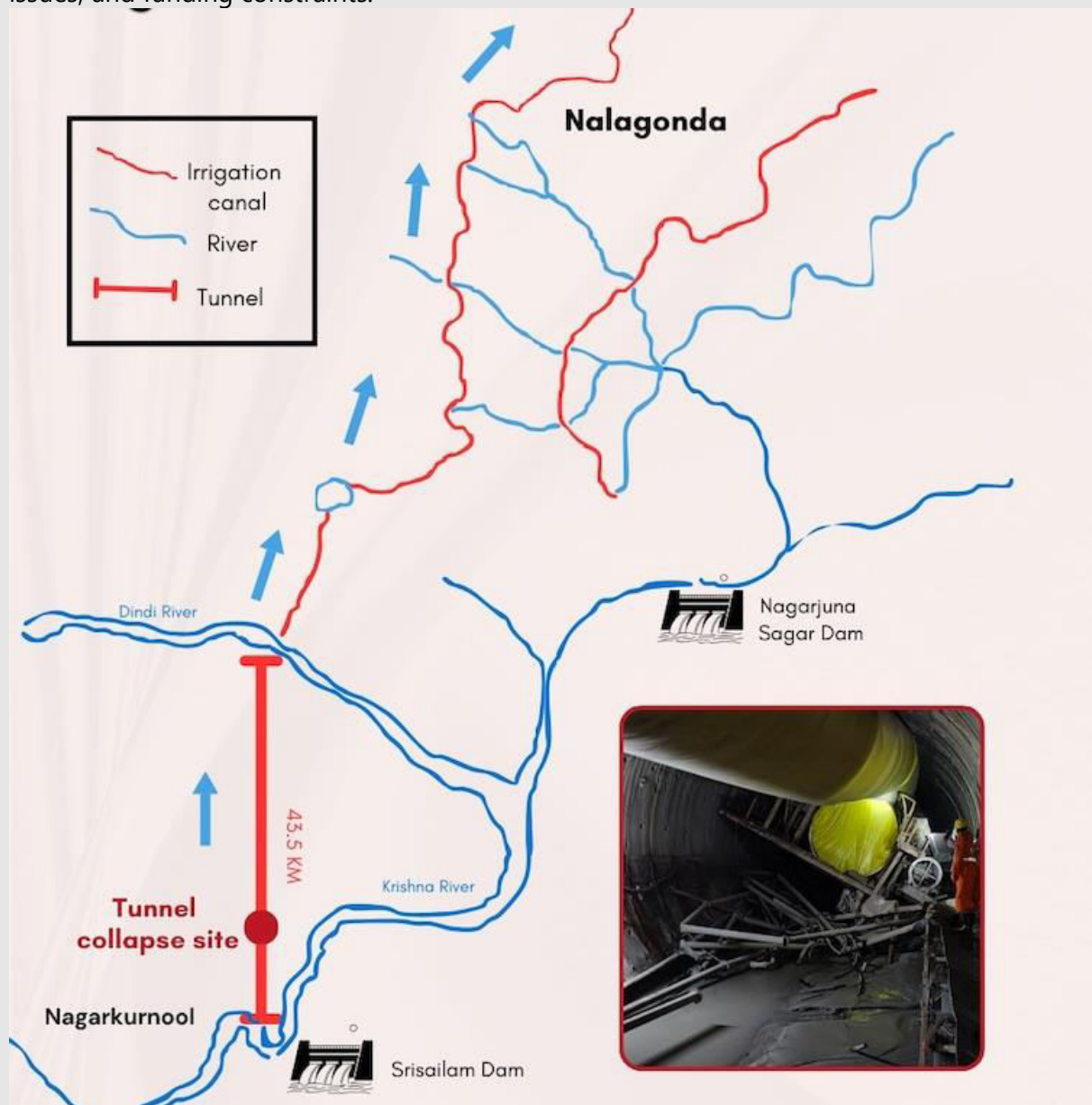
Massive rescue operations were launched, with National Disaster Response Force (NDRF), State Disaster Response Force (SDRF), and Irrigation Department teams involved.

Rescue efforts were hampered by poor visibility, lack of oxygen, and water ingress within the tunnel, making it a very challenging operation. Specialized drilling equipment was brought in to create an alternative entry point into the collapsed tunnel section.

About SLBC Tunnel

The SLBC tunnel is a crucial part of the Srisailem Left Bank Canal project, designed to bring water from Srisailem Reservoir to dry regions in Telangana. The tunnel is 43.5 km long, making it one of the longest irrigation tunnels in South India.

This project has faced delays for decades, owing to technical challenges, land acquisition issues, and funding constraints.



Aftermath & Accountability

The incident has sparked criticism about safety lapses, poor project management, and inadequate contingency planning in large-scale infrastructure works.

The Telangana government has ordered a high-level inquiry into the collapse. Contractors, engineering teams, and officials involved in the tunnel construction are being scrutinized for possible lapses in safety protocols and tunnel reinforcement.

This incident has reignited debates over the safety standards followed in major infrastructure projects in India, especially underground works in challenging geological conditions.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Disaster Management
Source: The Hindu

PrepMate

1. Isro's 100th launch: why this is significant, the road ahead

ISRO 100th Rockets Launch

With the first launch of 2025, the Indian Space Research Organisation achieved the significant milestone of having carried out 100 launches. The GSLV-F15 put in orbit the navigation satellite NVS-02.



Why is this significant?

The space agency has its roots in the Indian National Committee for Space Research set up under the Department of Atomic Energy in 1962. The Indian Space Research Organisation that we know today was set up in 1969 — the same year that the United States sent men to the moon. A separate department of space was created only in 1972.

The space agency has since developed several rockets, becoming a reliable launch partner even for satellites from other countries. It has also carried out scientific missions such as the three Chandrayaan missions, which provide useful data not only to researchers from within the country but across the world.

Rockets

Isro has so far developed at least six generations of launch vehicles, of which four remain in operation. The first two generations of launchers are no longer in use.

It was the third generation PSLV that continues to be Isro's workhorse launcher. The PSLV is capable of carrying just under 2,000 kg to low earth orbit. There have been 62 flights of PSLV, including three development flights. Only two of the launches using PSLV have been unsuccessful.

Then came the GSLV, whose initial flights used cryogenic engines supplied by Russia. When the technology could not be transferred from Russia because of geopolitical reasons, India developed its own cryogenic engine. GSLV-F15 utilised for the 100th launch is a variation of this vehicle — and the eleventh flight using an indigenously developed cryogenic engine.

The GSLV MkIII, now called LVM3, capable of carrying nearly 8,500 kg to low earth orbit, is the heaviest vehicle India has. The vehicle has been used for seven launches so far, none of which have been unsuccessful. The vehicle was used for Chandrayaan-2 and 3 missions. And, a modified, human-rated version will be used for the Gaganyaan mission.

Isro has also developed the Small Satellite Launch Vehicle to transfer to private industry for commercial launch of small satellites. There have been three developmental flights of the launcher.

Launches: In the 100 launches so far, the space agency has placed in orbit 548 satellites weighing 120 tonnes in total. This includes 433 satellites weighing 23 tonnes that came from foreign nations. Isro has launched communication satellites, earth observation satellites, navigation satellites, and experimental satellites.

The space agency has also launched several scientific missions such as space-based observatory AstroSat, Mars Orbiter Mission, Chandrayaan 1, 2 and 3, another space observatory XpoSat, and solar mission Aditya L1.

What are the upcoming developments?

With the space agency targeting big-ticket missions such as the sample return mission from the moon, the mission to Venus, setting up an Indian space station, and sending a man to the moon, Isro is working towards developing a heavier rocket called Next Generation Launch Vehicle.

NGLV will be capable of carrying up to 30,000 kg to low earth orbit. It will be 91 metres tall as compared to the 43 metres of LVM3. It will also have a re-usable first stage, which would be utilised 15 to 20 times, to make the launches more affordable.

The cabinet has also green-lit the setting up of the third launch pad needed for NGLV launches. Built at an estimated cost of Rs 3984.86 crores over four years, the third launch pad would also be capable of launching human missions along with the modified second launch pad. It will also help in increasing the number of LVM3 launches, thereby increasing the space agency's capability of carrying out heavy commercial missions.

What is NVS-02?

NVS-02 is one of the five replacement satellites for the Indian Regional Navigation Satellite System, also referred to as NavIC (Navigation with Indian Constellation). The new generation satellites are heavier with longer mission life. They carry the indigenously developed atomic clock onboard.

What is NavIC?

NavIC is a seven-satellite regional positioning system that can provide location data on the Indian mainland and up to 1,500 kilometres around. The NavIC satellites can provide position accuracy of up to 20 m under standard positioning service that is available to all and a restricted service for better accuracy available to customers.

A fully functional NavIC system with all seven satellites and ground stations outside of India is likely to be more accurate than the GPS in the region currently. The satellites for NavIC are placed directly over India, which ensures better availability of signals even in difficult geographical locations than GPS whose signals are received in India at an angle making it difficult to access in certain areas like valleys and forests.

Are there other countries that have similar systems?

India is the only country with a regional navigation system. Japan's four-satellite Quasi-Zenith Satellite System (QZSS) augments the GPS signals in the region. Other than there are four global navigation systems in the world — the American GPS, the Russian GLONASS (GLObalnaya NAVigatsionnaya Sputnikovaya Sistema), the European Galileo, and the Chinese Beidou. There have been discussions in the past about increasing the coverage area of India's IRNSS as well.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Science & Technology

Source: Indian Express

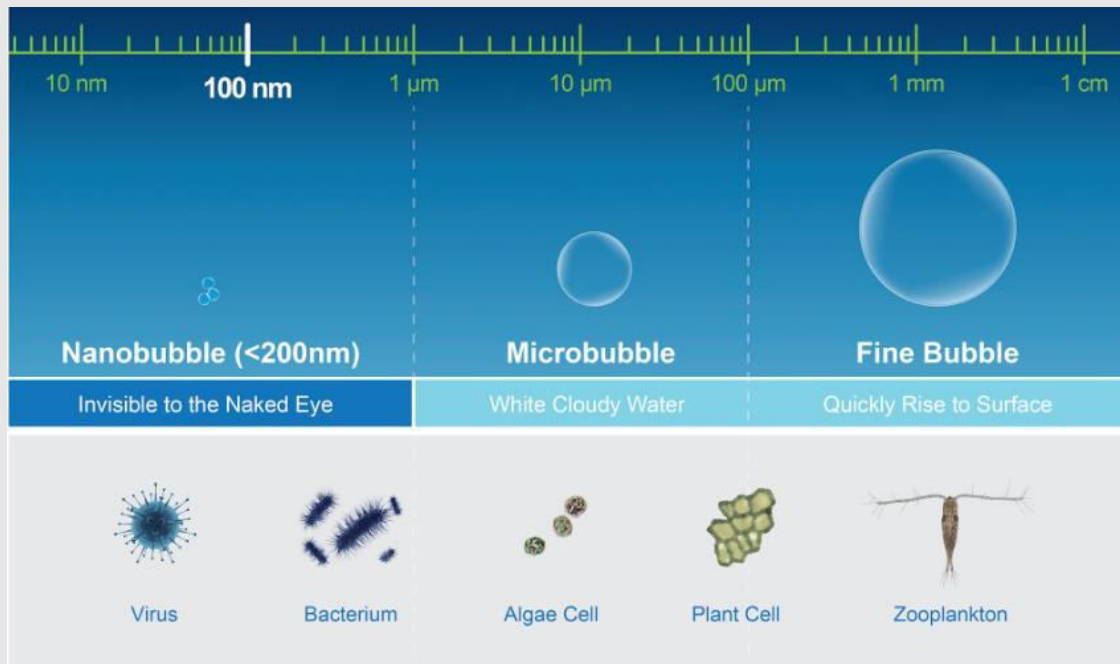
2. Nano Bubble Technology: A Breakthrough in Water and Gas Transfer

Why in News?

Union Minister of State for Environment, Forest and Climate Change gave reply on Nano Bubble Technology in Lok Sabha.

What Are Nanobubbles?

Nanobubbles are microscopic gas bubbles, only 70-120 nanometers in size—about 2,500 times smaller than a grain of salt. Unlike larger bubbles, which quickly rise to the surface and burst, nanobubbles remain suspended in liquids for long periods. They can be created using any gas, such as oxygen or nitrogen, and injected into any liquid, making them highly versatile.



Key Properties of Nanobubbles

1. Large Surface Area

Because nanobubbles are so small, they have a much higher surface area compared to their volume. This means more gas is exposed to the surrounding liquid, allowing for efficient gas exchange.

This property is especially useful in applications like oxygenation, where a higher surface area increases the amount of dissolved oxygen in water.

2. Brownian Motion

Nanobubbles do not rise to the surface like regular bubbles. Instead, they move randomly due to a phenomenon called Brownian motion. Brownian motion is the random movement of tiny particles in a liquid or gas, first observed in 1827 by Scottish botanist Robert Brown. This phenomenon occurs because molecules in a fluid are constantly moving and colliding with each other.

This random motion helps distribute oxygen and other gases evenly throughout a liquid, preventing oxygen loss and ensuring dissolved oxygen levels remain stable for long periods.

3. High Oxygen Transfer Efficiency

Traditional aeration methods, like air pumps or diffusers, lose much of the oxygen they inject because large bubbles rise and escape into the air.

Nanobubbles, however, stay in the water longer due to their small size and high stability, allowing up to 90% of the oxygen to be absorbed into the liquid. This makes nanobubbles much more efficient than conventional methods.

4. Surface Charge

Nanobubbles carry a strong negative charge, which repels other negatively charged particles in water. This property enhances the separation of suspended impurities in processes like wastewater treatment, making it easier to remove contaminants.

In industries such as oil and gas, nanobubbles improve separation efficiency, reducing the need for additional chemicals.

Uses

Nanobubbles offer superior performance compared to traditional aeration or gas transfer methods, making them useful in various industries:

1. Water Treatment

Their ability to efficiently dissolve oxygen helps break down organic pollutants, kill bacteria, and remove contaminants without requiring harmful chemicals.

2. Cleaning

Nanobubbles can penetrate tiny pores and crevices, effectively dislodging stubborn dirt and biofilms that traditional cleaning methods may miss.

3. Agriculture & Aquaculture

Supplying oxygen-rich nanobubbles to crops or aquatic life improves their growth, health, and resilience. Higher oxygen levels lead to better root development in plants, stronger immune systems in fish, and improved nutrient absorption. Nanobubbles also reduce the need for fertilizers, pesticides, and antibiotics, making farming more sustainable.

4. Oil & Gas Industry

In oil extraction, nanobubbles improve the flow of fluids in underground reservoirs, reducing the need for excessive chemicals and increasing oil recovery efficiency.

5. Skin & Hair Care

Nanobubbles help skincare products absorb more effectively into the skin, promoting hydration and improving overall skin health. Their deep-cleaning ability also makes them useful in hair treatments, helping remove residues and improving scalp health.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Science & Technology

Source: PIB

3. Story of NavIC: crucial indigenous Satellite Navigation system, a few hurdles in development path

Indian Regional Navigation Satellite System



The Indian Regional Navigation Satellite System (IRNSS), operationally referred to as the Navigation with India Constellation (NavIC) system, was conceived in 1999 following the war in Kargil. During this war, India's military could not use the American Global Positioning System (GPS) in the conflict zone. (India and the US now cooperate in many fields, and Washington has approved the system.)

The construction of seven-satellite constellation serving both defence and civilian needs started with the launch of first satellite in 2013.

Eleven years later, however, only five of the 11 satellites launched in the NavIC program – including replacements for failed satellites – are fully operational.

What went wrong recently?

India's space agency reported the partial failure of its NVS-02 navigation satellite due to the non-firing of its engines in space. As a result, the satellite was left in a sub-optimal orbit around Earth. Sub-optimal orbit means that the satellite could not be placed in the intended orbit. This satellite was launched on 29th January, 2025.

What happened to other failed satellites?

Mid-2016 onward, there were reports of failures of the rubidium atomic clocks used in several navigation satellites. There are three atomic clocks on each IRNSS satellite.

Satellites rely on highly accurate atomic clocks like rubidium clocks to precisely time the signals they send, which is essential for calculating distances and thus, locations on Earth.

If the rubidium clocks on a satellite fail, the satellite's ability to accurately pinpoint location data is significantly compromised, leading to inaccurate GPS readings and potentially major disruptions in navigation systems reliant on that satellite.

Few other satellites launched were lost in the accidents during their journey itself.

Why is the IRNSS/ NavIC system important for India?

The NavIC satellites provide two types of services – Standard Positioning Service which is for general and commercial use, and Restricted Service which is meant for the defence forces – over the Indian landmass and neighbouring regions.

A primary reason to develop an indigenous satellite navigation system like the IRNSS despite the existence of global systems such as the GPS (US), GLONASS (Russia), Galileo (Europe), Beidou (China), and QZSS (Japan), is the reliability that it offers in defence use.

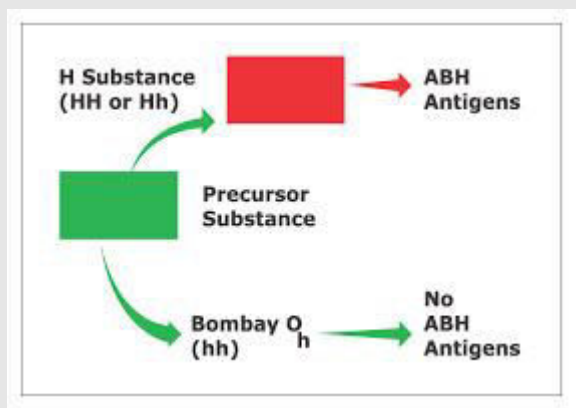
Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Science & Technology
Source: Indian Express

4. Cross-blood transplant performed on a patient with Bombay blood

Introduction

In mid-2024, the patient underwent a kidney transplant. Though he was relatively young for a transplant, that's not where he stands unique. He had the extremely rare Bombay blood group, which prevented him from receiving organs or even blood transfusions from anyone who didn't have the same blood group running through their veins.

His mother donated her kidney, though she did not have the Bombay blood group.



The Bombay blood group

The Bombay, a.k.a. HH, blood group is a rare blood group first discovered in Mumbai in 1952 by Y.M. Bhende. The key differences between the Bombay blood group and the common ABO blood groups lie in the presence (or absence) of the H antigen, which is the fundamental building block for the ABO blood group system.

In normal individuals, the H antigen serves as the base structure for building A and B antigens. In Bombay blood group individuals, the gene responsible for producing the H antigen is mutated or absent, so neither A nor B antigens can be formed.

Therefore, these people cannot receive blood transfusions from any ABO group, including type O, which has the H antigen. They can only receive blood from another Bombay blood group donor. Its prevalence is about 0.0004% (one in 4 million) of the total human population. While it drops to one in a million in the European population and one in 10,000 in Mumbai, the act of finding a donor is still daunting.

How was Transfusion made possible?

The Transfusion was made possible through a special procedure called double filtration plasmapheresis (DFPP). The procedure has been developed by the Japanese. Double filtration plasmapheresis (DFPP) is a blood purification technique that removes pathogenic molecules from the blood. It's a semi-selective process that uses two filters to separate plasma from blood cells and fractionate the plasma into different components.

Relevance: GS Prelims; Science & Technology
Source: The Hindu

5. Scientists discover 'Einstein ring' around nearby galaxy: What it is, its significance

Introduction

The European Space Agency's (ESA) Euclid space telescope has discovered a rare ring of light, known as an Einstein ring, around a galaxy nearly 590 million light-years away from Earth. The ring was discovered around NGC 6505, a galaxy that was first found in the 19th Century.

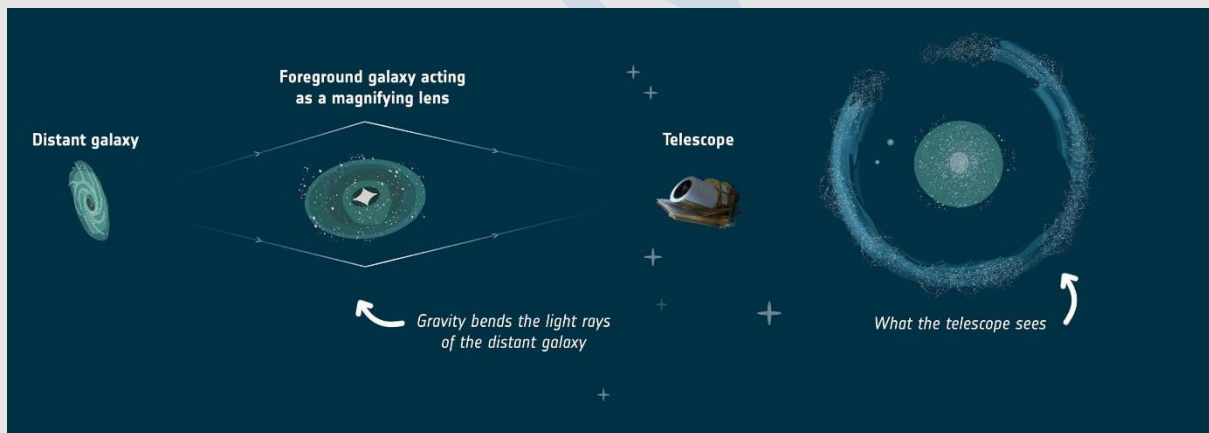
What is an Einstein ring?

An Einstein ring is a ring of light around a form of dark matter, galaxy or cluster of galaxies. It is essentially an example of gravitational lensing.

Gravitational lensing

Gravitational lensing is a phenomenon which occurs when a massive celestial body — such as a galaxy or cluster of galaxies — creates a gravitational field which distorts and amplifies the light from distant galaxies that are behind it but in the same line of sight. The body causing the light to curve is called a gravitational lens.

In the case of the recently discovered Einstein ring, NGC 6505 was the gravitational lens. The nearer galaxy distorted and amplified the light coming from a distant unnamed galaxy, located 4.42 billion light-years away. A light-year is the distance light travels in one year, which is 9.46 trillion kilometres.



Named after Einstein

Einstein rings are named after mathematician and physicist Albert Einstein, whose general theory of relativity predicted that light could bend and brighten around objects across the cosmos. The first Einstein ring was discovered in 1987, and since then, several more have been discovered. However, it remains unclear how many such rings exist. Notably, they are extremely rare — less than 1% of galaxies have an Einstein ring.

Einstein rings are not visible to the naked eye, and can be observed only through space telescopes such as Euclid.

Why do scientists study Einstein rings?

These rings help scientists investigate dark matter, which has never been detected but is believed to make up 85% of the total matter in the universe.

Moreover, Einstein rings enable scientists to learn about distant galaxies, which otherwise might not be visible. They can also provide information about the expansion of the universe as the space between the Earth and other galaxies is stretching.

Relevance: GS Prelims; Science & Technology

Source: Indian Express

6. What is India's dilemma over fighter jets?

Introduction



The two foremost Fifth Generation Fighter Aircraft (FGFA) of Russia and the U.S., the SU-57 and F-35, got a lot of attention at Aero India, which was held from February 10-14 in Bengaluru. Just as that wound up, U.S. President Donald Trump, addressing a press meet with Prime Minister Narendra Modi, said the U.S. is also paving the way to “ultimately” provide India with F-35 stealth fighters.

What's the F-35?

The F-35 Joint Strike Fighter is a single seat, single-engine strike fighter jet with three variants, F-35A, which has a conventional take-off and landing for the Air Force, F-35B short take-off/vertical landing for the Marine Corps and an F-35C aircraft carrier variant for the Navy and the Marine Corps. These fighter jets are being made by Lockheed Martin (a US company) along with others.

Noting that it wasn't a firm offer yet and what Mr. Trump meant was that they will look at a roadmap for making the F-35 available.

What is the status of the Russian fighter jet?

It is pertinent to note that in 2010, India and Russia signed a preliminary design agreement to jointly produce the FGFA, now the SU-57, for use by both countries after which each had invested \$295 million for preliminary design which was completed in 2013. But protracted negotiations followed over the high cost and limited technology transfer. One of the limiting factors was that it was a single seater and the creation of a twin-seat variant, the IAF's preference, would mean a steep rise in costs. India eventually pulled out of the FGFA project and decided to go with its indigenous FGFA, the Advanced Medium Combat Aircraft (AMCA).

What is the IAF's squadron strength?

The IAF has a sanctioned strength of 42.5 fighter squadrons, but, is languishing today at 31 squadrons with a significant proportion of ageing platforms. China, Russia and the U.S. have already fielded fifth generation fighter jets, with China recently stealing a march over everyone else as it flew two advanced fifth generation fighters, dubbed by some as a sixth-generation jet, in addition to the two jets already developed and inducted. Reports suggest that Pakistan is looking to acquire 40 J-35 fifth generation jets from China.

What is in the pipeline?

India has an ambitious plan to acquire over 500 fighter jets, a bulk of them variants of the Light Combat Aircraft (LCA) and the AMCA, that is at least a decade away from induction.

There has been a delay in the deliveries of 83 LCA-Mk1A already contracted, with 97 more to be ordered. The delay in deliveries has been partly due to engine delays from General Electric (GE), and Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL) has now assured that 12 jets will be delivered to the IAF this year; the order for 83 jets will be completed in three-and-a-half years.

Officials said that the more capable LCA-Mk2 is expected to make first flight in early 2026. The AMCA prototype is expected to roll out by end-2026 or early-2027, certified by 2032 and ready for induction by 2034.

Relevance: GS Prelims; Science & Technology

Source: The Hindu

7. How doctors treated a genetic disorder in the womb for the first time

Introduction



A two-and-a-half-year-old girl has shown no signs of a genetic disorder — known as spinal muscular atrophy (SMA) — becoming the first person in the world to be treated for the disease while in the womb. The girl's mother began taking the gene-targeting drug during late pregnancy, and the child continues to take it.

The results of the treatment were published last week in the journal the New England

Journal of Medicine.

What is spinal muscular atrophy?

SMA is a debilitating genetic condition which affects motor neurons that control movement, and leads to progressive muscle weakening. "About one in every 10,000 births have some form of the condition — making it a leading genetic cause of death in infants and children."

How was SMA treated in the womb?

For the treatment, scientists used an oral drug called risdiplam, which is given to patients to slow the progression of SMA. Risdiplam is typically given to a patient soon after birth — the earlier the intervention, the better the results seem to be. Therefore, in the new trial, scientists decided to administer the drug before birth for the first time.

The mother, who was 32 weeks pregnant, took Risdiplam daily for six weeks. The baby started taking the drug from roughly one week old.

The scientists found that the girl had higher levels of the SMN protein in her bloodstream, compared to those usually born with the condition. The girl “seemed to have lower levels of nerve damage, and even after 30 months had normal muscle development with no sign of atrophy.”

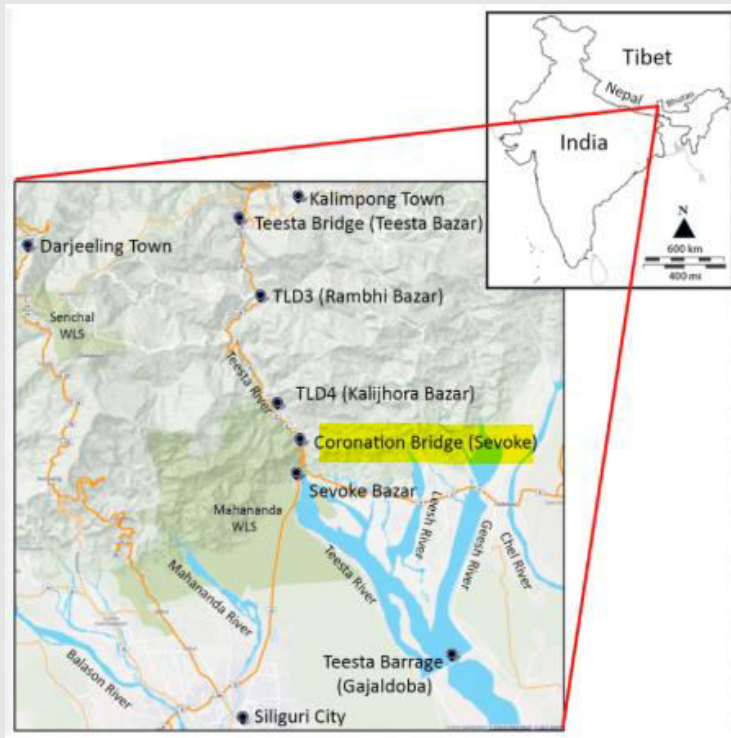
Scientists said that the success of the trial had opened doors for larger studies to see whether the findings could be replicated.

Relevance: GS Prelims; Science & Technology

Source: Indian Express

1. After a decade, Teesta bridge gets Bengal nod: The project, its security significance

Introduction



After more than 10 years, the West Bengal government this week gave its nod to the Teesta bridge project, which will connect Sikkim and West Bengal. The new bridge will not only help boost tourism, but is also important for strategic purposes.

At present, there is only one British-era bridge on the Teesta linking West Bengal and Sikkim.

What is the existing bridge over the Teesta?

The Coronation Bridge was built in the memory of King George VI and Queen Elizabeth from 1937 to 1941. Even after more than 80 years, it remains the only link

between West Bengal and Sikkim. The bridge was damaged in the 2011 earthquake, after which the Centre started planning an alternative bridge to increase connectivity between the two states on this strategically important route.

The Doklam standoff between India and China in 2017 made the construction of a new bridge more urgent, as the Coronation bridge is the only lifeline for the armed forces to transport necessary equipment to the China and Bhutan border and military bases.

Why has it taken 12 years?

According to officials, Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee was unhappy with the land acquisition needed for the project. There were some land acquiring problems that stopped Mamata Banerjee from giving her go-ahead to this project. Banerjee wanted that the land should be acquired only with the full consent of people.

However, with the fall of the Hasina government in Bangladesh and China's increasing presence at the Sikkim border, the need of Teesta bridge has become apparent. Thus, she has given her nod.

Sikkim is also one of the main tourist destinations for tourists from West Bengal. A new bridge will also facilitate tourist flow.

What happens now?

After the state government gave its nod, the Centre has approved Rs 1,100 crore for the project. After this, the state government will move to acquire land. Once the Detailed Project Report is approved by the central government, tenders will be called for the construction.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Internal Security

Source: Indian Express

2. Mahakumbh stampede: Causes of such disasters, how they can be prevented

Mahakumbh Mela 2025 Stampede News

A stampede at the Mahakumbh Mela in Allahabad killed 30 people and left 60 more injured. UP Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath in a statement said the administration was overwhelmed by the huge crowds converging at the Mela for Mauni Amavasya and a large number of people moving towards the Sangam Nose at the same time.

The National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA), the apex body on formulating disaster mitigation policies in the country, had in 2014 published a report on crowd management at big events and prevention of stampedes.

The report said, "Majority of the crowd disasters in India and developing countries have occurred at religious places."

What causes stampedes?

Causes of stampedes can be many: structural, which includes weak temporary structures, poor barricading, poor guardrails, poorly-lit stairwells, narrow entry and exits etc; fire or electrical failure; inadequacies in crowd control; crowd behaviour; poor security; and lack of coordination between stakeholders.

Crowd Control is Key

According to the NDMA report, crowd control is key to avoiding stampedes. Some of the reasons due to which crowd control fails, the report says, include: arrival of more than anticipated crowd at a religious gathering or a public function; underestimation of audience, staffing and services; people allowed in excess of holding capacity; limited holding area before the entrance; lack of access control; closed/locked exit; lack of adequate and strong railings to marshal the queue; lack of sectoral partitions to segregate assembled crowd, etc.

The report suggests improper/inadequate arrangements only add to the problem.

"As a result, there is either panic or an excitement in visitor's mind which further leads to evacuation or crowding respectively," the report says. This, it claims, leads to either overcrowding or accelerated movement of the crowd. "On occasions, this has led to deaths

because of crushing, suffocation, and trampling. Historically, compressive asphyxia has been the most common reason for deaths in crowd disasters,” the report says.

What does it say about past incidents?

The report makes references to many past stampedes. One among them is the August 2003 stampede at the Nashik Kumbh, where 29 pilgrims died.

According to the report, a magisterial enquiry found the following reasons for the stampede: pressure of people at various points at the barricades; a sudden flow of people in reverse direction; sadhus were allowed to move in procession on elephants and in jeeps along the “shahimarg” along with pilgrims; and unforeseen ingress of pilgrims on the “shahimarg” from various points.

Another stampede took place during the Kalubai Yatra Mandhardevi at Wai, Satara, Maharashtra, in January 2005. It killed 293 people.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Disaster Management

Source: Indian Express

3. India's Chandrika Tandon Bags Award At Grammy 2025

Chandrika Krishnamoorthy Tandon bagged Grammy

India-born Chandrika Krishnamoorthy Tandon has bagged the Grammy for her album Triveni under the category for the Best New Age, Ambient, or Chant Album at the award ceremony held in Los Angeles. She was awarded at the 67th Grammy Awards.

Tandon achieved her second Grammy nomination when she was named during Grammy 2025 nominations. She bagged her first Grammy nomination for the 2009 album Soul Call.



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Grammy Awards

The Grammy Awards are awards presented by the Recording Academy of the United States to recognize outstanding achievements in the music industry. They are regarded by many as the most prestigious and significant awards in the music industry worldwide. They were originally called the Gramophone Awards, as the trophy depicts a gramophone. The first Grammy Awards ceremony was held in 1959. The 67th Annual Grammy Awards, featuring a total of 94 categories, were presented on February 2, 2025.

One of Four Major Awards

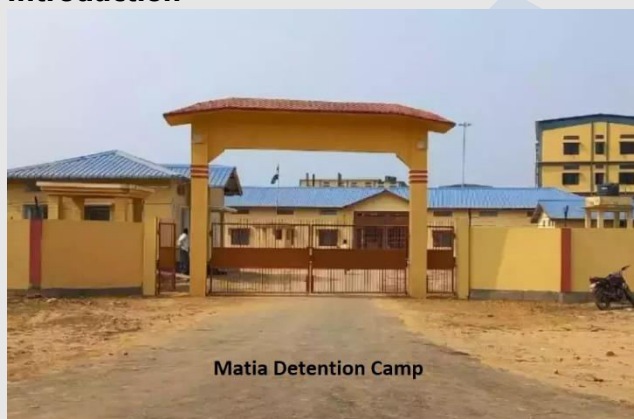
The Grammys are considered one of the four major annual American entertainment awards with the Academy Awards (for films), the Emmy Awards (for television), and the Tony Awards (for theater).

Relevance: GS Prelims

Source: PIB

4. As Assam faces Supreme Court heat, why deporting 63 'foreigners' is easier said than done

Introduction



The hearing in the apex court focused on the status of 63 of the 270 inmates of the Matia "transit camp" – the designated detention camp for "illegal foreigners" in Assam. The court rapped the state for not initiating the process of deporting 63 individuals who have been declared foreigners by Foreigners Tribunals on the ground that their addresses are unknown.

In December, the court had granted the state government time to file an affidavit explaining the reasons for detaining the 270 individuals there and the steps taken for their deportation.

Who is at the camp?

There are two categories of "foreigners" among the 270 inmates.

1. Declared as Foreigners by Regular Courts: There are 103 Rohingya people, 32 Chin people and an individual from Senegal who had been referred to sessions courts where they were sentenced and convicted for violations of the Foreigners Act, the Citizenship Act and the Passports Act. These individuals are citizens of other countries, and after completing their sentences in prisons, they have been placed in the "transit camp" while awaiting deportation.

2. Declared as Foreigners by Foreigners Tribunals: The rest of the 133 inmates have been declared “foreigners” by Foreigners Tribunals in Assam – quasi-judicial bodies that determine whether or not a person presented before them is an Indian citizen.

The challenges in deportation

The process of deportation is a diplomatic issue and a central government matter. The role of the state government is limited to referring the matter to the Ministry of External Affairs.

The State government is required to fill a nationality verification status report and send it to the MEA, which sends it to the embassy or high commission of the other country. Once the embassy confirms that the individual is indeed a national of that country and the address is correct, then the person is deported.

However, in most of the cases, the persons declared as foreigners have not divulged an address country from where they were originally. One of the reasons behind not divulging address is that these ‘Declared foreigners’ have been living in India from long time, and they might actually don’t have address outside India.

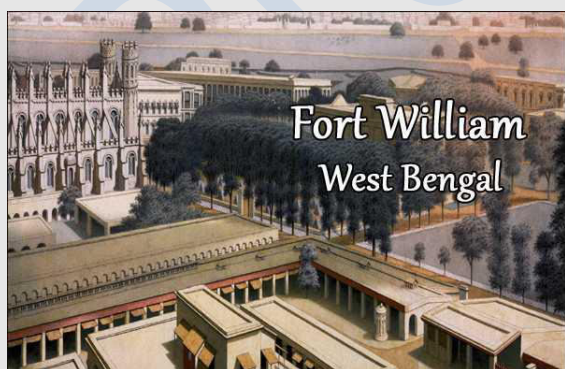
Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Internal Security

Source: Indian Express

5. Fort William, Army’s Eastern HQ, renamed Vijay Durg

Renaming

In the latest step toward eliminating colonial practices and mindsets within the armed forces, Fort William in Kolkata, the headquarters of the Eastern Army Command, has been renamed Vijay Durg. Additionally, Kitchener House inside Fort William has been renamed Manekshaw House, and South gate, formerly known as St. George’s Gate, is now Shivaji Gate.



History of Fort William

Fort William, named after King William III of England, was constructed by the British in 1781. The new name, Vijay Durg, is derived from the oldest fort along the Sindhudurg coast in Maharashtra and served as a naval base for the Marathas under Chhatrapati Shivaji.

Rationale

In recent years, there have been a series of measures aimed at removing “vestiges of the colonial era” and “Indianising” military traditions and customs — an initiative Prime Minister Narendra Modi has termed as “gulami ki mansikta se mukti (freedom from the mentality of slavery)”.

In September 2022, the Navy adopted a new naval ensign that moves away from its colonial past, featuring a new octagonal design inspired by the seal of Chhatrapati Shivaji.

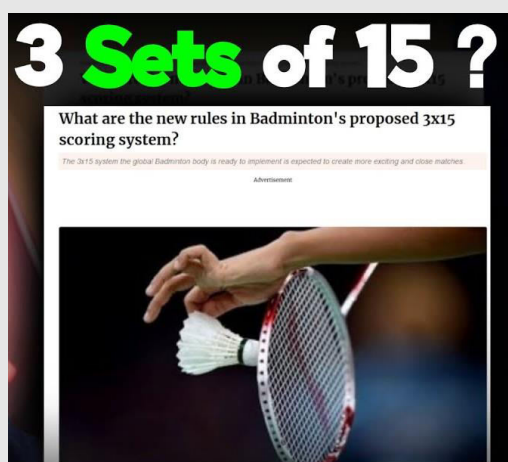
Relevance: GS Prelims

Source: The Hindu

6. Proposed new scoring system for Badminton

Introduction

A new scoring system could be in place for badminton, as the Badminton World Federation has said this week that its chief decision-making body (BWF Council) has endorsed the 3×15 scoring system to replace the current 3×21 system.



What is the 3×15 system?

The 3×15 is already defined as part of the 'Alternative Laws of Badminton' – in simple terms, a match will consist of the best of three games. The game shall be won by the side that first scores 15 points (instead of the current 21).

What happens at 14-14? We will continue to play on till one side gains a two-point lead first. In the current scoring system, 29-29 becomes the decisive point in a game, which will now change to 20-all. So the side scoring the 21st point will win the game.

Will this rule change be immediate?

There is some time yet. The BWF Council has only approved a plan where the 3×15 will be tested at selected Continental Championships, Grade 3 tournaments, national and international leagues, and national tournaments. The testing period is set to be approximately April to September/October 2025.

What are the reasons for this proposed change?

The BWF has listed three main factors. a) more exciting points and a higher probability that each point is more exciting; b) Getting to more exciting points sooner; c) the shorter matches will lead to better scheduling and help sustain fan interest while also helping with player health and longevity.

Relevance: GS Prelims

Source: Indian Express

7. Discovery of potash reserves in Rajasthan and Punjab

Introduction



Punjab Mining Minister Barinder Kumar Goyal said the government will explore potash mining in Fazilka and Sri Muktsar Sahib districts, where surveys previously detected large mineral reserves in three mining blocks.

Surveys of the Geological Survey of India (GSI) have also identified reserves in parts of Rajasthan's Ganganagar and Hanumangarh Districts.

These findings highlight the potential for potash mining in both states, reducing India's dependence on imports and bolstering the domestic fertilizer industry. India imports 50 lakh tonnes of potash annually, primarily used in fertilisers and industries.

What is potash?

Potash refers to potassium-bearing minerals that are primarily used in fertilisers. Over 90% of potash is used as fertilizer and it is one of the three primary agricultural nutrients (Nitrogen, Phosphorus and Potassium or N-P-K).

Where were potash reserves found?

Punjab is now the second state after Rajasthan to have significant potash reserves. The three mining blocks with potash reserves — Kabarwala (Muktsar Sahib), Sherewala and Ramsara (Fazilka) and Shergarh and Dalmir Khera (Fazilka) — are spread over nearly 18 square kilometres.

In Rajasthan, potash deposits were mainly found in the northwestern Nagaur-Ganganagar basin, including the Ganganagar and Hanumangarh districts that border Fazilka and Muktsar.

What is the Status of Potash Mining?

So far, India has not engaged in potash mining. According to the National Mineral Inventory (NMI) database, the total potash resources are estimated at 23,091 million tonnes in 2020. Rajasthan alone contributes 89% to the total resources.

Why are potash reserves yet to be mined in Punjab?

In 2019, the GSI discovered potash deposits in two districts of Punjab that were located approximately 450 metres below the surface. Some farmers from Muktsar and Fazilka believe their land will be acquired for mining reserves and have protested against any mining to be done in the future. In response, the minister said no land acquisition will happen. Potash will be extracted using an advanced drilling system with zero impact on land ownership.

He also pointed to the likely benefits, saying potash mining in Punjab will create new employment opportunities and drive regional economic development. However, farmers have asked for a written assurance regarding their land.

Although the central government has the auctioning rights for minerals, states receive royalties upon their extraction. According to sources, the Kabarwala block has reached the auctioning

stage, with the Punjab government approving mining. Once the central government completes the auctioning process, extraction can commence. However, until the farmers are convinced, the project is unlikely to proceed further.

Relevance: GS Prelims; Geography

Source: Indian Express

8. Volvo Trucks unveils India's first road train for logistics

India's 'first' road train

Volvo Trucks has introduced India's 'first' road train. It is operated by logistics firm Delhivery.



The concept was formally incorporated into regulations in 2020, allowing for vehicle lengths of up to 25.25 metre. A road train consists of a tractor unit towing two or more trailers.

Relevance: GS Prelims

Source: The Hindu

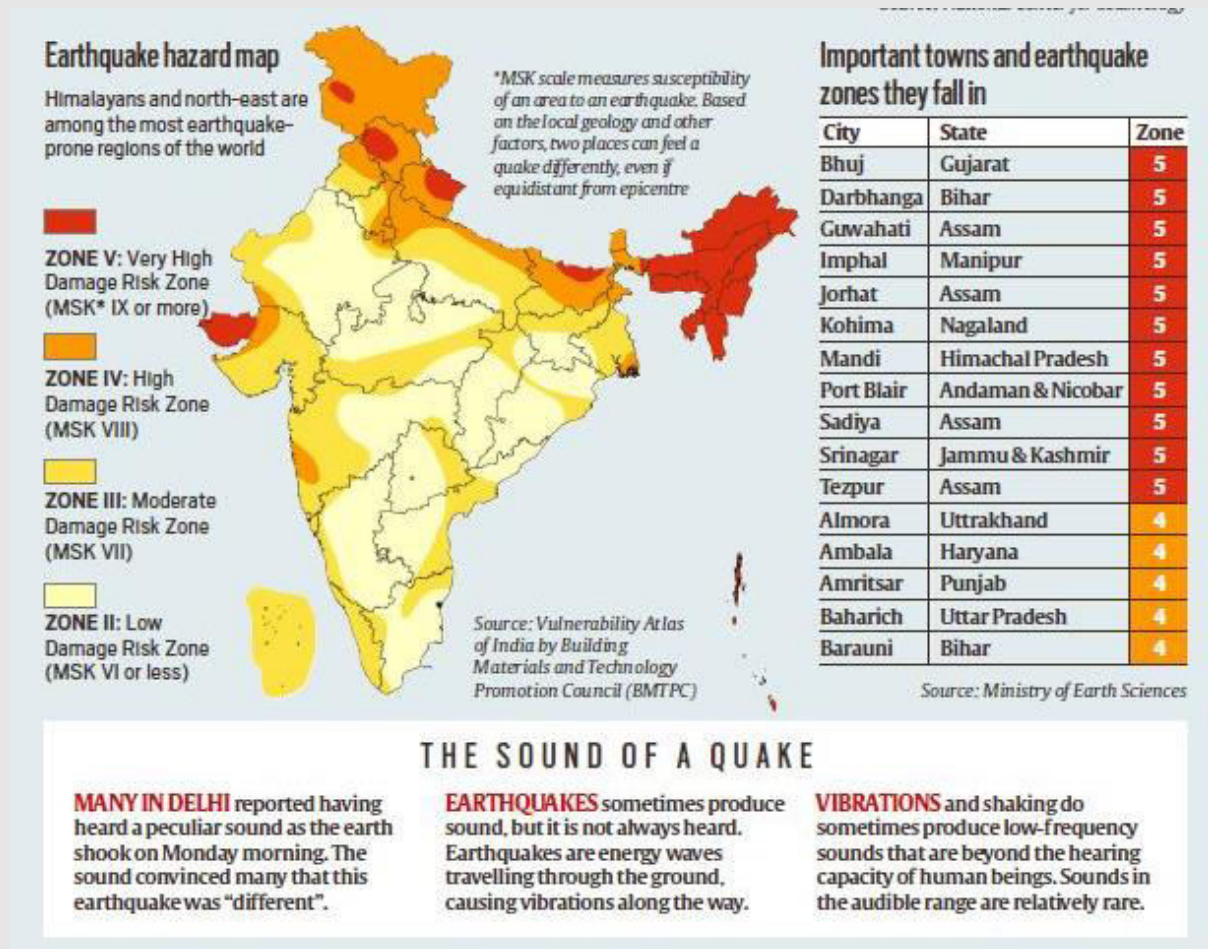
9. The Recent dawn quake in Delhi

Introduction

Delhi is no stranger to earthquakes, but the one that occurred recently was slightly different.

Mostly, the tremors experienced in Delhi from time to time are from earthquakes that originate elsewhere, sometimes as far away as Afghanistan. Recent magnitude 4 earthquake was located in Delhi itself, somewhere close to the Dhaula Kuan area.

In fact, it was the strongest earthquake to have originated in Delhi in at least five years, data from the National Centre of Seismology showed. However, Magnitude 4 earthquakes are not very strong, and do not result in much damage.



Seismic activity in Delhi

Delhi lies in a seismically active area. India's official earthquake hazard map puts Delhi in Zone 4, the second highest classification of areas based on their susceptibility to shaking experienced during an earthquake.

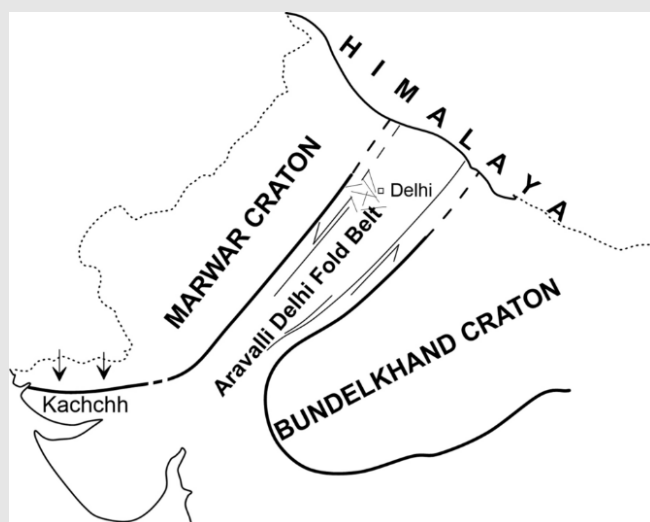
MSK-8-level

Zone 4 in India includes areas that are expected to experience MSK-8-level intensity during an earthquake. The MSK, or Medvedev-Sponheuer-Karnik scale is a measure of intensity, rather than strength, or energy released, which is described by magnitude.

Delhi falls in a region that has high susceptibility to quakes. MSK-8 means the area is vulnerable to major damage being caused to buildings and other infrastructure. Zone 5, the most vulnerable areas in India, correspond to MSK-9 levels of intensity or higher.

Aravalli-Delhi Fold Belt

Delhi lies in what is known as the Aravalli-Delhi Fold Belt, a seismically-active geological belt extending from southern and eastern Rajasthan to Haryana and Delhi.



This region is characterised by the presence of deformed layers of rock that have been folded or bent due to geological processes hundreds of millions of years ago. These deformities have created stress which is sometimes released in the form of earthquakes.

The Aravalli-Delhi Fold Belt was much more seismically active in the past than it is now. Over the years, the tectonic activity in the region has slowed down considerably, leading to greater geological stability. But some faults still remain, which give rise to

occasional mild earthquakes.

Different from Himalayan Earthquakes

This is a very different mechanism from the one that triggers earthquakes in the Himalayan region, which is one of the most quake-prone regions in the world. The Himalayan region has been witnessing the subduction of the Indian tectonic plate under the Eurasian plate — one pushing against the other — which results in a lot of stress building up.

A peculiar sound

Many people reported having heard a peculiar sound during the earthquake in Delhi, a sound that was not known to have accompanied the earlier quakes that were felt in the capital. It was this sound that led some to speculate that the nature of recent earthquake was different in some way.

The fact is earthquakes do sometimes produce sound — but it is not heard most of the time. Earthquakes are energy waves travelling through the Earth, causing vibrations as they pass. These vibrations and shaking do sometimes produce low-frequency sounds that are beyond the hearing capacity of human beings. Bigger earthquakes can produce sounds in the audible range, but these are relatively rare events.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Disaster Management

Source: Indian Express

10. Kash Patel is the new FBI director

Appointment



Kash Patel, a staunch ally of President Donald Trump, was confirmed by the US Senate to lead the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). He was confirmed by a vote of 51 to 49. Only two Republicans joined all Democrats against Patel, citing concerns over his qualifications to lead the FBI and claimed that he would pursue retribution against critics of Trump.

Appointment Process

The FBI director is nominated by the President. After nomination, the appointment is required to be confirmed by Senate through ordinary majority. Senate is the representative body of States in the US Congress.

Indian Connection

Kashyap Pramod Patel or Kash Patel was born to Gujarati-Indian parents in New York's Long Island. He was raised a Hindu and has described a "very deep connection" with India.

Relevance: GS Prelims

Source: The Hindu

11. Why Iraq is (slowly) sinking into Earth

Introduction

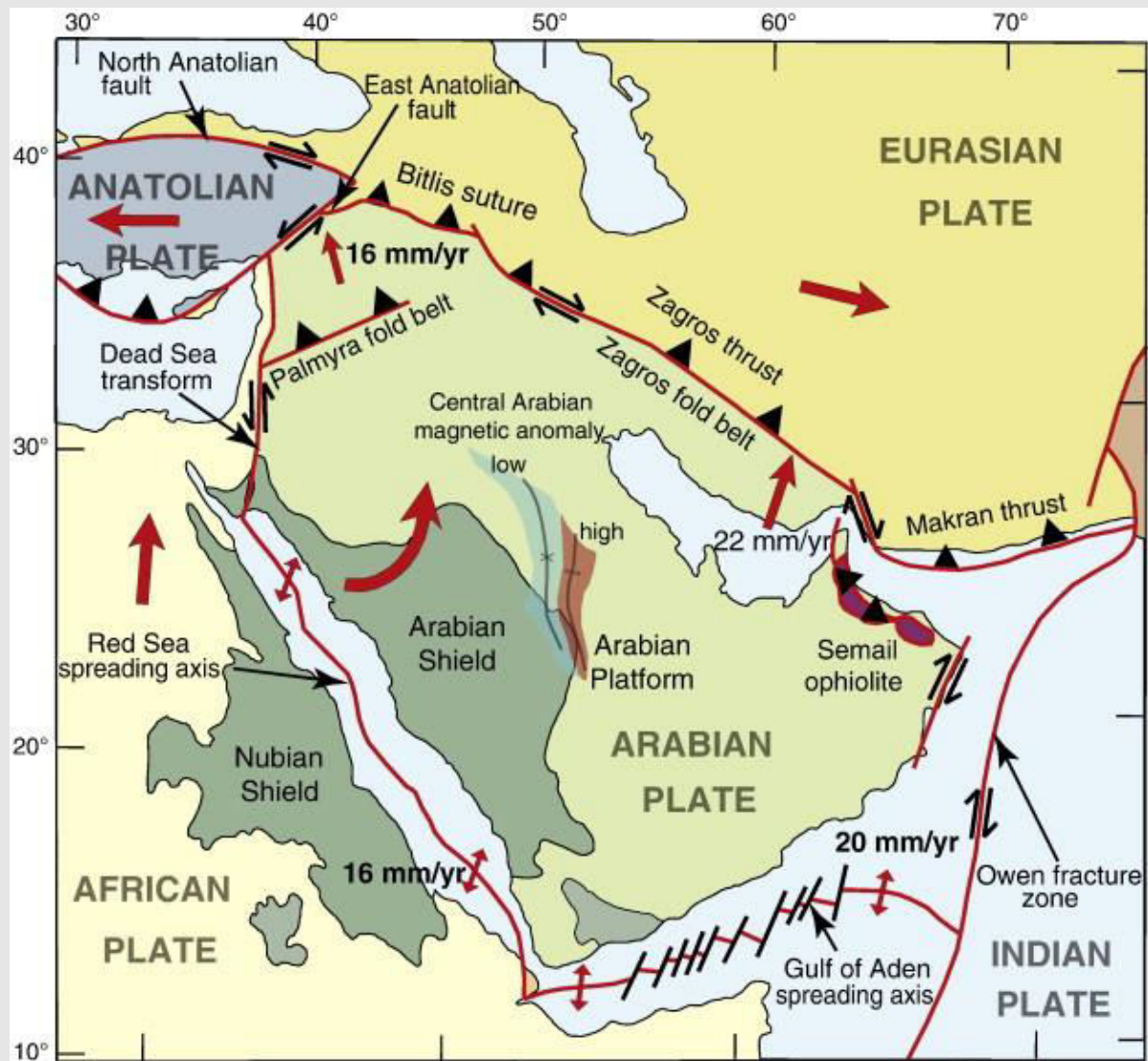
To be exact, the region surrounding the Zagros Mountains in the Iraq's north is sinking. A team of researchers has found a sinking oceanic "slab" below the Earth's surface is pulling the northern region of Iraq down with it.



Why is the Iraqi region sinking?

In short, it's plate tectonics.

A growing tear is forming in a region along the Arabian and Eurasian continental plates known as the Neotethys oceanic slab. The slab, which formed the floor of an ancient ocean more than 66 million years ago, is splitting from southeast Turkey to northwest Iran. So now, the slab is sinking into the Earth's mantle. This process will take tens of millions of years.



How can this research help in earthquake predictions?

The findings have several practical implications because they "reveal the mechanisms by which our planet operates. This study highlighted how dynamic our planet is and how connected its interior and exterior are. Its results can be used to construct more exact geological models that depict activity deep beneath the Earth's surface. These models can help with earthquake prediction.

12. The relics of Ratnagiri

Introduction

Recent excavations at the Ratnagiri site in Odisha's Jajpur district have unveiled significant Buddhist relics, shedding light on the region's rich historical and cultural heritage.

Buddha Sculpture

The Buddha sculptures found at Ratnagiri are made of Khondalite stone. Massive Buddha head, 1.4 metres tall (around 4 feet), is the largest ever discovered in Odisha.

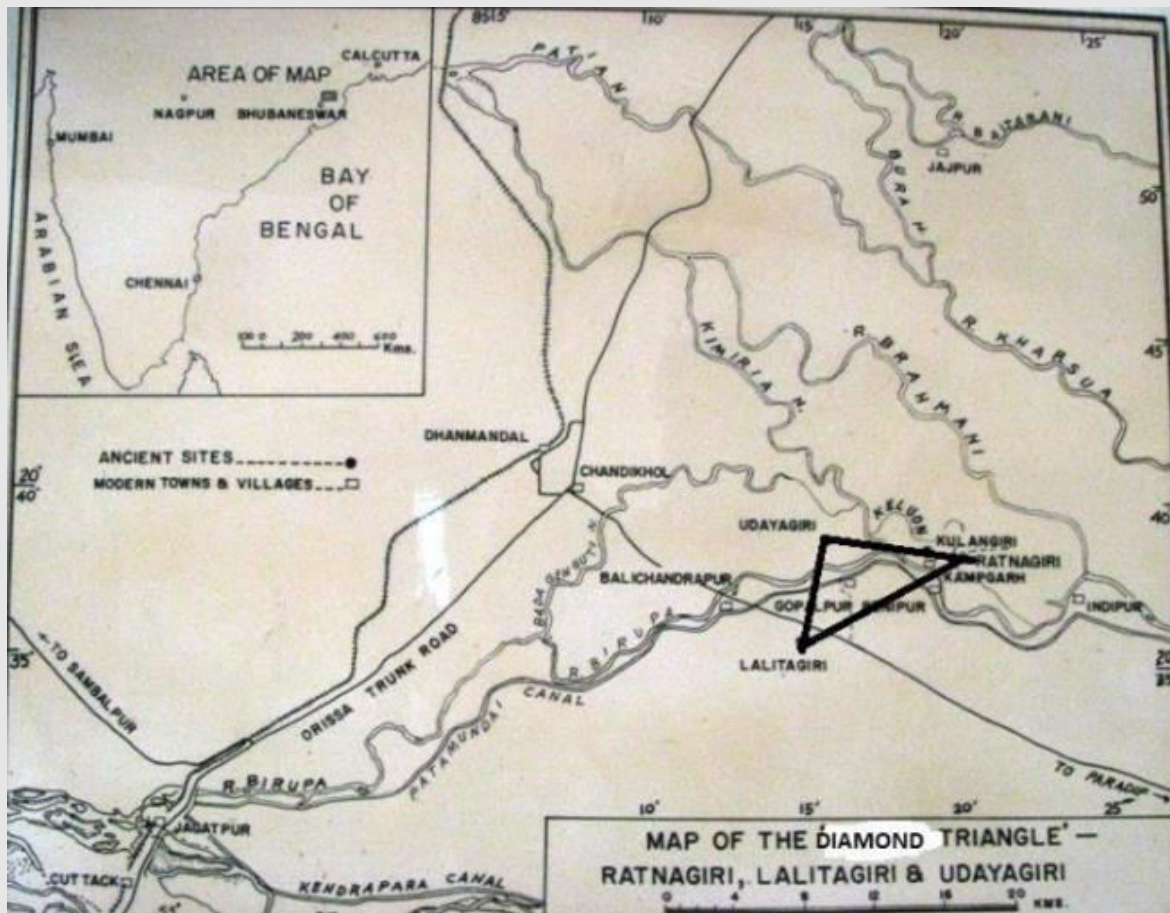
Subsequently more stone-carved parts were found, including palms and fingers, which, along with the head, are believed to belong to a huge sculpture of Buddha in a meditating posture.



Hills of jewels

Ratnagiri, which means 'Hills of jewels' in Odia, is located on a hillock in the Assia hill range in Jajpur and encircled by the rivers Brahmani, Kimiria, and Birupa and their tributaries. The village is situated around 100 km from Bhubaneswar and is part of the 'Diamond Triangle', a collection of three Buddhist sites — Ratnagiri, Udayagiri and Lalitgiri — located in a 10-km radius.

Archaeologists believe this landscape was strategically chosen for Buddhist establishments. Its once-secluded nature made it ideal for spiritual and scholarly pursuits.



Ratnagiri's Past

Based on the findings from sculptural and epigraphic remains, the earliest Buddhist settlement at Ratnagiri has been dated to the 5th century AD. It flourished until the 13th century. Over time, its significance declined, leading to its eventual abandonment. However, Buddhist activities in the area continued till the 16th century. Ratnagiri's historical importance is well-documented through various sources, including historical records, inscriptions, and literary evidence.

A copper plate charter of Somavamsi King Karna, unearthed during excavations, confirmed that it was once a major centre for Vajrayana (Tantric Buddhism). The place was identified as Ratnagiri based on seals bearing the legend of 'Sri Ratnagiri Mahavihara Arya Bhikshu Sangha'.

Notable findings

The notable discoveries include a lion pedestal (Buddha's Simhasana) and votive sculptures of Buddhist deities, such as Amoghasiddhi, one of the five wisdom Buddhas of the Mahayana and Vajrayana tradition; Ratnasambhava, one of the five meditating Buddhas; Akshobhya, another wisdom Buddha; Amitabha, one of the most widely worshipped Buddhist figures in Mahayana Buddhism; Tara, a female Buddha who is a consort of Amoghasiddhi Buddha; Marici, a popular goddess in Buddhism; Padmapani, a Bodhisattva; and Cunda, the smith who gave Gautama Buddha his last meal.

Ratnagiri consists of two monasteries where Buddhist followers once lived, meditated, and studied. It also includes a massive stupa, which symbolises veneration.

A 'chaitya griha', of the kind seen in the two nearby archaeological sites namely Udayagiri and Lalitgiri, has not been found in Ratnagiri so far.

Other findings

The excavation has uncovered three sculpted heads of varying sizes, a monolithic elephant sculpture, and hundreds of votive stupas, ranging from simple to highly ornamented. Brick and stone masonry structures have also been discovered during the excavation.

Smaller votives — stone-carved pieces depicting divinities — have been found arranged in a line, reflecting the Vajrayana practice of making offerings upon the fulfilment of wishes. The abundance of votives suggests that the site attracted a large number of visitors.

Stone tablets of different sizes, inscribed in Sanskrit using the Kutila script (Siddhamatrika), have also been found at the site.

Relevance: GS Prelims; Culture

Source: The Hindu

13. Champions Trophy is being held after a gap of 8 years

Introduction

The Champions Trophy went dormant for eight years, to return only this year with Pakistan as the host (Matches of India are being hosted at Dubai).

Why was the Champions Trophy discontinued for eight years, and why has it come back?

History



The Champions Trophy was earlier known as the ICC Knockout, when it was staged in Dhaka in its 1998 debut. The next edition was in 2000 in Kenya.

The event was renamed the ICC Champions Trophy in 2002 and was held every two years until 2009. Subsequently the event moved to a four-year cycle and features the top eight teams in the ICC one-day rankings.

The last edition took place in 2017.

Fluctuating fortunes

The goals of the event had been to take cricket to new countries — which explains the first two editions in Bangladesh and Kenya.

However, the Kenya event proved that fans would shell out money for tickets only in the few countries where cricket was already popular.

Then in 2008, the Indian Premier League (IPL) exploded onto the cricketing world, and the Champions Trophy went from being a two-year to a four-year event, until it was stopped entirely after 2017.

Why ICC Men's Champions Trophy is back

Experts believe that there are two main reasons for bringing back the Champions Trophy — the need for a big-ticket event in years that don't have the T20 or the ODI World Cup, and India's refusal to play Pakistan in non-ICC events.

Champions Trophy tournaments are scheduled for 2025 and 2029. The next year, 2026, has the T20 World Cup, which is held every two years, while the ODI World Cup is in 2027, four years after the 2023 edition.

India and Pakistan matches remain the most eagerly watched cricket clashes, and because India does not play Pakistan in bilaterals anymore, ICC tournaments are the only opportunity for fans to watch this high-intensity spectacle.

What is the prize money this time?

The total prize pool has been increased by 53 per cent from the 2017 edition. The prize pool is whopping Rs 59.9 crore (\$6.9 million).

The winner of the eight-team tournament will receive Rs 19.50 crore (\$2.24 million). The runner-up will receive Rs 9.72 crore (\$1.12 million), while the losing semi-finalist will get Rs 4.86 crore (\$560,000) each. All eight teams are assured of \$125,000 (Rs 1.08 crores) each for competing in the ICC Men's Champions Trophy 2025.

Relevance: GS Prelims

Source: Indian Express

14. Bhagat Singh's uncle Ajit Singh who started Pagri Sambhal Jatta movement

Introduction

Farmers protesting at the Punjab and Haryana borders are observing February 23 as Pagri Sambhal Diwas, in honour of Ajit Singh, paternal uncle of freedom fighter Bhagat Singh.

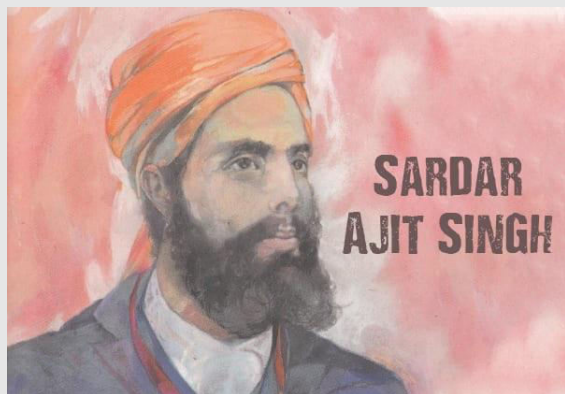
Who was Ajit Singh, and why is he an important figure for protesting farmers? What was the 'Pagri Sambhal Jatta' movement?

Who was Ajit Singh?

Born on February 23, 1881 at Khatkar Kalan village in Punjab (it is now part of Shaheed Bhagat Singh Nagar district), Ajit Singh was a prominent freedom fighter, revolutionary, and nationalist leader. He played a significant role in inspiring his nephew Bhagat Singh.

Ajit was the elder brother of Kishan Singh, Bhagat Singh's father. From 1909 to 1947 he remained in exile, as he was targeted by the British for his role in the Pagri Sambhal Jatta movement. He came to India in March 1947 but died in Dalhousie due to ill health on August 15, 1947, the day India got independence.

What was the Pagri Sambhal Jatta movement?



Pagri Sambhal Jatta Movement

In 1907, Ajit Singh started the Pagri Sambhal Jatta movement in protest against three agricultural laws imposed by the British. 'Pagri Sambhal Jatta' literally translates to 'take care of your turban, o farmer', and invokes self respect and honour.

The three laws were: The Punjab Land Alienation Act, 1900; The Punjab Land Colonisation Act, 1906; and The Doab Bari Act, 1907.

The Punjab Land Alienation Act restricted the rights of farmers to sell or mortgage their land freely. It favored moneylenders and landlords, making it difficult for peasants to escape debt.

The Punjab Land Colonisation Act gave the British control over land ownership in the newly developed Chenab Colony (now in Pakistan). Farmers had to transfer their land to the British government upon death instead of passing it to their heirs.

The Doab Bari Act, 1907, too, took away farmers' ownership rights over their lands, effectively reducing them to contract workers.

Along with this, the British raised taxes on agricultural land and water for irrigation, increasing the financial burden on farmers. Many small farmers and peasants were forced into debt and land loss.

Soon, farmers started protests against these laws, demanding their repeal. Ajit Singh and Kishan Singh (Bhagat Singh's father) formed the Bharat Mata Society, a revolutionary group for farmers. Lala Lajpat Rai and other leaders also supported the movement. The slogan "Pagri Sambhal Jatta" was coined by Banke Dayal, a nationalist poet, and became a symbol of resistance.

Impact of the movement

Pagri Sambhal Jatta was one of the first major farmer movements against British rule, laying the foundation for future resistance in Punjab. The agitation led to mass protests and civil disobedience. Due to intense pressure, the British government withdrew some of the oppressive clauses of the laws.

The movement inspired future protests, including the Ghadar Movement and Bhagat Singh's revolutionary activities.

Both Ajit Singh and Lala Lajpat Rai were arrested in May 1907 and exiled to Burma (now Myanmar), but due to public pressure, were released in November 1907. Ajit Singh, however, escaped to Persia, then Turkey, Brazil, Germany, and later settled in Italy. He worked closely with revolutionaries in Europe and was associated with Lala Hardayal and Madame Cama.

Pagri Sambhal Diwas

From 2021 onwards, February 23 has been observed as Pagri Sambhal Diwas. In 2021, farmers were protesting at the Delhi borders seeking repeal of the now-scrapped three farm laws, and hence had observed Ajit Singh's birth anniversary as Pagri Sambhal Diwas. At present, farmers have been protesting at Punjab and Haryana borders since February 13, 2024, seeking MSP as a legal guarantee among other demands.

Relevance: GS Prelims; History

Source: Indian Express