VAJIRAM & RAVI
Institute for IAS Examination

# the recitals

## CURRENT AFFAIRS

## 2026 JANUARY

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- Reserved Candidates in General Category Seats
- Draft Pesticides Management Bill, 2025
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# UGC's New Regulations on Caste Discrimination

The University Grants Commission has notified revised regulations to **address caste-based discrimination** in **higher education institutions**, introducing stricter compliance requirements and enforcement mechanisms.

**Background: Caste Discrimination in Higher Education**

- Caste-based discrimination has remained a persistent concern within India's higher education system, particularly affecting students from **Scheduled Castes** (SCs), **Scheduled Tribes** (STs), and **Other Backward Classes** (OBCs).
- Issues such as **social exclusion**, academic marginalisation, biased evaluation, and lack of grievance redressal mechanisms have been highlighted by multiple committees, court judgments, and civil society reports.
- In response, the UGC had first introduced anti-discrimination regulations in 2012, mandating equal opportunity cells in universities.
- However, implementation gaps, weak monitoring, and changing socio-academic realities necessitated a comprehensive revision of the regulatory framework.

**University Grants Commission (Promotion of Equity) Regulations, 2026**

- The newly notified **University Grants Commission (Promotion of Equity in Higher Education Institutions) Regulations, 2026** update and replace the earlier framework.
- These regulations aim to institutionalise equity, strengthen grievance redressal, and ensure accountability at all levels of higher education governance.
- A key shift in the 2026 regulations is the clearer articulation of institutional responsibility, placing direct accountability on the heads of institutions for ensuring compliance.

**Expanded Definition of Discrimination**

- The regulations define **caste-based discrimination** as unfair or biased treatment against members of SCs, STs, and OBCs solely on the basis of caste or tribe.
- The scope of "discrimination" has been **broadened** to include both **explicit** and **implicit** acts that impair equality in education or violate human dignity. In addition, the definition also *recognises discrimination on intersecting grounds such as religion, race, gender, place of birth, and disability.*
- This expanded framing aligns the regulations with constitutional principles of equality under **Articles 14, 15,** and **21**.
- However, unlike the 2012 rules, the new regulations do not explicitly list specific manifestations of discrimination during admissions or academic processes, which has drawn some academic critique.

**Inclusion of OBCs and Removal of Penal Clause**

- One of the most significant changes in the final regulations is the **inclusion of OBCs** within the ambit of caste-based discrimination.
- The earlier draft had excluded OBCs, triggering widespread criticism from scholars, student groups, and social justice advocates.
- The UGC has also **dropped the proposed provision to penalise "false complaints"** of discrimination.

**Institutional Mechanisms**

To operationalise the Promotion of Equity Regulations, 2026, the UGC has mandated a three-tier institutional mechanism in all higher education institutions.

- **Equal Opportunity Centre (EOC)**
  - Every institution must establish an EOC to oversee policies for disadvantaged groups. The EOC will coordinate with district administration and police and facilitate legal aid when required.
  - It will comprise five faculty members, with no category-wise reservation mandated.

- If a college lacks five faculty members, the university-level EOC will perform these functions.

- **Equity Committee**
  - The EOC will be supported by a 10-member Equity Committee, chaired by the head of the institution.
  - Five members must belong to reserved categories—OBCs, Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Persons with Disabilities, and women.
  - The committee must meet within 24 hours of receiving a complaint and submit its report within 15 days.
  - The head of the institution is required to initiate action within seven days of receiving the report.

***Note: Equity Committees are required to meet at least twice a year, while EOCs must submit bi-annual reports on their functioning.*

***Institutions must also submit annual compliance reports to the UGC, enabling periodic review and oversight.*

- **Equity Squads and Helpline**
  - Institutions must constitute **Equity Squads** to maintain vigilance and prevent discrimination on campus.
  - A 24-hour Equity Helpline must be set up to report discrimination.
  - Institutions are also required to appoint Equity Ambassadors, tasked with promoting awareness and acting as "torch bearers" of equity.

**Monitoring and Enforcement Mechanism**

- To ensure effective implementation, the UGC will establish a **national-level monitoring committee** comprising representatives from statutory councils, commissions, and civil society.
- This body will review compliance, examine cases of discrimination, and recommend preventive measures.
- Non-compliance carries serious consequences. Institutions may be debarred from UGC schemes, prohibited from offering degree or online programmes, or even removed from the UGC's list of recognised higher education institutions.
- This marks a shift from advisory regulation to enforceable accountability.

**Way Forward**

By expanding coverage, strengthening monitoring, and removing deterrents to complaint filing, the UGC has reinforced the principles of social justice and inclusion. However, effective implementation will depend on institutional capacity, sensitivity training, transparent grievance handling, and regular audits. For lasting impact, regulatory reform must be accompanied by cultural change within campuses.

# Reserved Candidates in General Category Seats

The Supreme Court (SC) recently held that candidates belonging to reserved categories cannot be excluded from open category posts if they have secured marks above the general cut-off, as such exclusion violates the equality guarantees under Articles 14 and 16 of the Constitution.

**Case Background (Rajat Yadav & Ors v. Rajasthan High Court & Ors., 2025)**

- **Recruitment context:** The Rajasthan High Court (HC) advertised posts of Junior Judicial Assistant/Clerk Grade-II through a two-stage process- written test and typewriting test. Candidates were shortlisted category-wise at five times the vacancies.
- **Core anomaly:** Cut-offs for some reserved categories (OBC-Non-Creamy Layer, Economically Weaker Section (EWS), etc.) were **higher than the General category cut-off**. As a result, several SC/ST/OBC/EWS candidates who scored **above the General cut-off** were excluded from shortlisting because they failed to meet their **own category cut-off**.

- **Challenge:** Affected candidates filed writ petitions, arguing that the **Open/General category is a merit pool**, not a compartment reserved for unreserved candidates.
- **Rajasthan HC Ruling:** It held that the **open/general category is open to all**, and meritorious reserved-category candidates must be considered against open posts first.
- **Appeal:** The HC administration challenged this before the **SC**, arguing that such adjustment should occur only at the final selection stage and would amount to "double benefit".

| Issues Before The SC: | SC's Ruling: |
|---|---|
| • Whether meritorious reserved-category candidates must be considered in the Open category **from the shortlisting stage itself?**<br>• Whether participation in the process bars challenge (estoppel)?<br>✓ The doctrine of estoppel prevents a person from taking contradictory positions before a court by holding them bound to their earlier representations or conduct. Its purpose is to prevent fraud and ensure fairness by making individuals accountable for false or misleading representations made through words or actions.<br>• Whether such inclusion amounts to a "double benefit"? | • The **Open category is determined purely by merit from the initial stage**. A reserved-category candidate who clears the General cut-off **without availing any concession** must be treated as an Open category candidate at that stage itself.<br>• The plea of **estoppel** does not apply to a process suffering from constitutional infirmity.<br>• The argument of **"double benefit"** is misconceived, as selection is based solely on merit.<br>**Key Principle Laid Down:** The Open category is **not a quota**. Treating it as a closed compartment converts it into a de facto caste-based reservation, contrary to constitutional equality.<br>**Final Outcome:** Appeals were dismissed. The Court directed re-working of selection lists by first preparing a **common merit-based Open list**, then filling reserved posts from the remaining candidates, and granting a fresh opportunity to wrongly excluded candidates. |

**Implications of the Verdict**

- **Equality Code Reaffirmed:** Reservation provisions are reaffirmed as **supplementary to Articles 14 and 16 and** cannot be used to compartmentalize or exclude meritorious reserved-category candidates from open competition.
- **Merit-Based Nature of the Open Category:** The open/general category is clarified as a **purely merit-based pool**, accessible to all candidates irrespective of social category.
- **Resolution of the "Double Benefit" Debate:** Placement of reserved-category candidates in open posts on merit is conclusively held **not to constitute reservation benefit**, removing a major source of administrative ambiguity.
- **Administrative Clarity and Reduced Arbitrariness:** The judgment necessitates clearer norms on cut-offs, roster management, and merit list preparation, improving transparency and reducing scope for arbitrary exclusion.
- **Advancing Social Justice:** By enabling fair competition on equal terms while preserving reserved quotas, the verdict promotes **inclusive excellence** rather than rigid, segregated application of reservation.

**Extra Mile: Union of India v G. Kiran & Ors, 2026**

The Supreme Court (SC) in a similar case refused to consider the appointment of a Scheduled Caste (SC) candidate to an unreserved Indian Forest Service (IFS) cadre as the candidate had availed relaxation at the preliminary examination stage.

**Background:** The dispute arose from the 2013 IFS examination, a single, integrated process comprising prelims, mains, and interview. An SC candidate qualified the preliminary examination by availing a relaxed cut-off but later secured a higher final rank than a general category candidate. During cadre allocation, the Centre denied him the lone general insider vacancy, leading to litigation before the CAT and the Karnataka High Court (HC), which ruled in his favour.

**SC Verdict:** It set aside the HC's decision, holding that once a reserved-category candidate avails relaxation at any stage of an integrated selection process, they cannot be considered for unreserved vacancies. Relaxation at the preliminary stage cannot be ignored at later stages.

# Draft Pesticides Management Bill, 2025

The Department of Agriculture & Farmers Welfare (MoA&FW) recently released a fresh draft Pesticides Management Bill, 2025 and invited comments on the same.

**About the Draft Pesticides Management Bill, 2025**

The draft seeks to replace the present Insecticides Act, 1968 and the Insecticides Rules, 1971 to enhance pesticide quality, and incorporate modern practices, addressing longstanding issues in agricultural safety and regulation.

**Objectives:**

- To ensure the availability of safe, effective, and quality pesticides while minimizing risks to human health, animals, and the environment.
- To curb spurious pesticides through strict enforcement.
- To promote biopesticides, indigenous manufacturing and rapid response to pesticide-related health risks.

**Key Provisions:**

- **Central Pesticides Board:** It will be a statutory expert body headed by a Chairperson of Additional Secretary rank to- provide scientific and technical advice, recommend pesticides for approval or ban, frames standards for manufacturing, disposal, advertising and laboratories, monitor residues and poisoning cases, promote safer alternatives, and support evidence-based decision-making under the Act.
- **Registration Committee:** It will be constituted by the **Central Government** to regulate pesticide registration. It approves, reviews, suspends or cancels registrations, sets conditions, and maintains a national digital register with appeal and oversight mechanisms.
  - **Registration of Pesticides:** All pesticides must be **digitally registered** with the Registration Committee after assessing safety, efficacy, and need.
- **Grant of Licenses:** State Governments will appoint Licensing Officers to grant **digital licenses** for manufacturing, selling, stocking, distributing pesticides and for pest control operations. Licenses will be issued or refused within **60 days** after inspection, can be amended, suspended or revoked for violations, and can be automatically cancelled if the pesticide's registration is withdrawn. The Licensing Officer shall provide to the State Government a monthly report in digital form of sales and stocks.
- **Appeal against Licensing Officer:** Any person aggrieved by a licensing decision may appeal to the State Government within **30 days** (extendable for sufficient cause). The appeal must be decided after a hearing, within **six months**.
- **Pesticide Surveillance and Prohibition in Public Interest:** State Governments must **mandatorily report and analyze pesticide poisoning cases** and submit quarterly reports to the Centre, while implementing standard response protocols.
  - In the **public interest**, the Central or State Government may temporarily prohibit the sale or use of a pesticide posing health or environmental risks, pending a time-bound review by the Registration Committee, which may lead to lifting the ban or **permanent cancellation of registration**.
- **Pesticides Laboratories and Analysis:** The Bill establishes accredited pesticide testing laboratories and empowers Pesticide Analysts and Inspectors to inspect, sample, test and restrict unsafe pesticides. Time-bound digital analysis and conclusive laboratory reports ensure quality control and effective enforcement.
- **Offences and Punishment:** The Bill provides **graded penalties** for pesticide violations, with **enhanced punishment for repeat offences**. Serious offences such as dealing in unregistered, banned or falsified pesticides

attract **heavy fines (₹10–40 lakh) and imprisonment upto 5 years**, with confiscation of stocks, public disclosure of offenders, and **corporate liability** for companies and responsible officials.

- **Adjudication and Trial of Offences:** Penalties are imposed by a **State-appointed Adjudicating Officer** (with civil court powers) after inquiry and hearing, with a **right of appeal within 60 days** to a higher State authority. Minor offences may be **compounded** (except serious/repeat ones); penalties are recoverable as land revenue, and prosecutions require authorized sanction.
- **Miscellaneous Provisions:** The Bill empowers the Central Government to **exempt certain substances**, regulate disposal of expired/banned pesticides, issue binding directions, and frame detailed rules, while granting **good-faith protection** to officials acting under the Act.

| Significance of the Bill | Key Concerns Raised Regarding Bill |
|---|---|
| • **Scientific, Risk-based Regulation:** It moves beyond vague "safety and efficacy" to **explicit criteria**- toxicity, residues, environmental impact, human exposure, and climate suitability.<br>• **Digital Traceability:** It introduces **mandatory digital registration** and **national pesticide registry**, enabling end-to-end tracking and curbing **spurious and counterfeit pesticides**.<br>• **Stronger Institutions:** Establishes a **Central Pesticides Board** for scientific guidance and a **strengthened Registration Committee** for approvals and renewals.<br>• **Improves Farmer and Worker Safety:** Mandates **clear labelling, safer packaging, accredited testing**, training, protective gear, and **poisoning surveillance**.<br>• **Enhances Enforcement:** Empowers states with **temporary bans**, raises **penalties**, and clarifies powers to **suspend or cancel licenses**.<br>• **Greater Transparency and Accountability:** Shifts regulation from a **paper-based, fragmented system** to a **centralized, data-driven framework**, improving oversight and compliance. | • **Weak Safety Mandate:** The Bill uses diluted language ("strive to minimize risk") instead of a firm obligation to minimize risks to health and the environment.<br>• **Insufficient State Powers:** States lack authority to permanently ban pesticides and can impose only temporary prohibitions, subject to review by a centrally controlled body.<br>• **Over-Centralization:** Regulatory authority rests mainly with Union-appointed bodies, weakening federal balance and local accountability.<br>• **No Price Regulation:** The Bill does not address pesticide pricing or affordability for farmers.<br>• **Weak Liability Framework:** There is no explicit criminal liability for manufacturers or marketers in cases of misuse, environmental damage, or deaths.<br>• **Limited Deterrence:** Punitive and enforcement powers of States are weak, reducing the impact on large manufacturers and repeat offenders.<br>• **Advisory Nature of Institutions:** The Central Pesticides Board's role remains largely advisory without strong statutory enforcement backing. |

**Way Forward**

- **Make risk reduction mandatory:** Replace soft language with **binding obligations** to minimize health and environmental harm.
- **Empower states further:** Allow **context-specific restrictions** based on local ecology and cropping patterns.
- **Support digital transition:** Provide **training, handholding, and infrastructure** for small dealers and farmers.
- **Strengthen monitoring:** Build robust **post-market surveillance** and real-time poisoning reporting systems.
- **Align with global best practices:** Regularly review approvals using **international safety standards** and emerging scientific evidence.

# Brand Ambassador's Liability under CPA, 2019

In a writ petition arising from consumer proceedings against Manappuram Finance, the Kerala High Court (HC) absolved actor Mohanlal Viswanathan, who was impleaded solely as the company's brand ambassador under Consumer Protection Act (CPA), 2019. The Court held that mere endorsement or appearance in advertisements does not attract liability for deficiency of service or unfair trade practice, in the absence of any direct transactional nexus.

**About CPA, 2019**

It seeks to **protect the interests and rights of consumers** in India. It replaced the 1986 Act to address **modern market realities**, including e-commerce, digital transactions, misleading advertisements, and product liability.

**Objectives:**

- To **protect consumer rights** against unfair trade practices and exploitation.
- To provide **simple, speedy, and effective grievance redressal**.
- To regulate **misleading advertisements** and protect consumers as a class.
- To strengthen the framework for **consumer awareness and enforcement.**

**Key Provisions of the Act:**

- **Key Definitions under the Act:**
  - **Endorsement (Section 2(18))**: It defines endorsement broadly to include any message, statement, depiction, or representation in an advertisement that is likely to make consumers believe it reflects the opinion, belief, finding, or experience of the person or entity featured.
  - **Misleading Advertisement (Section 2(28))**: An advertisement that falsely describes a product/service, gives false guarantees, misleads consumers, or conceals material information.
  - **Unfair Trade Practice (Section 2(47))**: Deceptive or unethical methods used to promote sales, including false representations of quality/standards, non-issuance of bills, refusing to take back defective goods, and disclosing personal consumer information
- **Consumer Protection Councils (Advisory Mechanism):** The act establishes **Central, State and District Consumer Protection Councils**. These are **advisory bodies** aimed at the **promotion and protection of consumer rights**, not dispute adjudication.
- **Central Consumer Protection Authority (CCPA):** A dedicated **regulatory and enforcement authority** to protect consumers *as a class*. It deals with violation of consumer rights, unfair trade practices, and false or misleading advertisements. It can act **Suo motu,** on complaints, or on government directions.
- **Powers and Functions of the CCPA:** It can-
  - Direct **refunds** and **discontinuation of unfair trade practices,** order **recall of unsafe goods** and **withdrawal of hazardous services (Section 20)**.
  - Issue directions to **discontinue or modify misleading advertisements (Section 21(1))**.
  - Impose **monetary penalties** on **manufacturers, service providers, advertisers, and endorsers** and **prohibit endorsements** in appropriate cases **(Section 21(2)).**
    - ✓ An endorser is **not liable to penalty** if he proves that **due diligence was exercised to verify the truthfulness of the claims** made in the advertisement for the product or service endorsed **(Section 21(5)).**
  - Conduct investigations through a dedicated **Investigation Wing** with search and seizure powers (subject to safeguards) **(Section 22)**.
- **Consumer Disputes Redressal Commissions (Section 28):** It is a three-tier adjudicatory structure- **District Commission** (up to ₹1 crore), **State Commission** (₹1-10 crore) and **National Commission** (above ₹10 crore). Jurisdiction is based on **value of consideration paid** and **consumer's place of residence**. It enables **e-filing, video hearings, and time-bound disposal**.
- **Mediation Mechanism (Section 37): Consumer Mediation Cells** attached to all Commissions to encourage **voluntary, speedy, and amicable settlement** of disputes.
- **Enforcement, Penalties, and Appeals (Section 71, 72 and 67):** It orders are enforceable **as civil court decrees**. Penal consequences for **non-compliance**, misleading advertisements, adulterated or spurious goods. Appeals lie from District → State → National Commission → **Supreme Court (SC-** if an appeal is filed **within 30 days** from the date of the order. SC may condone delay on **sufficient cause).**
- **Product Liability Regime (Section 82):** It introduces **product liability actions** against manufacturers, service providers and sellers and covers harm caused by **defective products**, **deficient services**, and **failure to warn**.
- **Coverage of E-commerce and Digital Transactions:** It explicitly extends consumer protection to **online platforms**, **e-commerce**, and **direct selling**, enabling rule-making for digital markets.

### Case Background

- **Loan Transaction:** Two borrowers in Thiruvananthapuram initially availed gold loans from **Catholic Syrian Bank** at **15% interest**. In **2018**, the loans were taken over by Manappuram Finance on assurance of a **lower interest rate**.
- **Role of Advertisement:** Borrowers claimed they were influenced by advertisements featuring Mohanlal, allegedly promising an interest rate of **12% per annum**.
- **Consumer Dispute:** On seeking loan closure and return of gold, Manappuram Finance allegedly demanded a **higher interest rate** than advertised. Borrowers approached the **District Consumer Disputes Redressal Commission (DCDRC)** alleging **deficiency of service and unfair trade practice**, seeking refund and compensation.
- **Impleadment of Brand Ambassador:** Mohanlal was arrayed as an opposite party **solely due to his role as brand ambassador**. He raised a preliminary objection, stating he had **no role in the transaction** and was **not a service provider**.
- **Procedural History:** The objection was rejected by both the **District Commission** and the **State Commission.** Mohanlal approached the **Kerala High Court under Article 226 (Power of HCs to issue writs)**.
- **Core Legal Issue:** Whether a **brand ambassador/endorser** can be held liable in consumer proceedings for **unfair trade practice or deficiency of service without a direct transactional nexus** with the consumer.

### What did the Kerala HC Rule?

- **Legislative Intent:** The Court noted that while *endorsement* is broadly defined under CPA, 2019, the term *endorser* appears **only in Section 21** and not in provisions on deficiency of service- indicating a **deliberate legislative choice** to limit endorser liability.
- **Findings on the Complaint:** No pleading showed **direct interaction** between Mohanlal and the borrowers. There was no allegation that he **gave personal assurances**, **fixed interest rates**, or **participated in the transaction,** and the interest-rate assurance was attributed to **Manappuram's manager**, not the actor.
- **Liability of Brand Ambassador: Mere appearance in an advertisement** does not create liability for **deficiency of service or unfair trade practice**. Endorser liability arises **only if a direct transactional nexus is established**, which was absent.
- **Clarifications Issued:** Grievances on **misleading advertisements** involving endorsers must be pursued **only under Section 21** before the competent authority. Proceedings against **Manappuram Finance** would **continue**.
- **Final Outcome:** The complaint was held **not maintainable** against Mohanlal; orders of the **District and State Commissions** were set aside **insofar as they related to him**.

### Significance of the Verdict

- **Clear Boundary Between Advertising and Transactional Liability:** The judgment decisively separates the role of a **brand endorser** from that of a **service provider**, preventing automatic liability merely due to celebrity endorsement.
- **Statutory Clarity on Endorser Liability:** It affirms that under the Consumer Protection Act, 2019, an endorser's liability is **confined to Section 21 proceedings** on misleading advertisements and does not extend to consumer disputes on deficiency of service.
- **Preserves Legislative Intent:** By refusing to expand endorser liability beyond what Parliament expressly provided, the Court respected the **statutory design** of the 2019 Act.

## SC Tells States to Frame Policy on Police Media Briefing

The Supreme Court (SC) recently asked the States to frame a police-media briefing policy based on the amicus curiae's manual within 3 months.

**Case Background:**

- **PUCL Petition:** The issue arose from a **1999 petition** filed by **People's Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL)** alleging fake police encounters in Maharashtra. In the 2014 judgment of *PUCL v. State of Maharashtra*, SC laid down **16 mandatory guidelines** to be followed in cases of police encounters or suspected extra-judicial killings.
- **Unresolved Issue:** Despite the 2014 ruling, regulation of **police communication with the media during ongoing investigations** remained unaddressed, raising concerns over **media trials**. For example, media trial of actor Rhea Chakraborty in Sushant Singh Rajput death case.
- **Changed Media Landscape (2023 Observation):** In **2023**, the Court observed that existing norms were **inadequate in the age of 24×7 television and social media**, where information spreads rapidly and irreversibly.
- **2026 Direction to States and UTs:** A Bench headed by **Justice M. M. Sundresh** directed **States and Union Territories** to frame policy governing police-**media briefings** modelled on a manual prepared by the court's amicus curiae, senior advocate Gopal Sankaranarayanan.

**Why is the Manual Required?**

- Existing guidelines were **outdated** in the era of 24×7 news cycles, Social media virality. Trial-by-media culture. Also, they are **fragmented & weakly enforced,** necessitating a uniform and rights-based framework, hence the need for the **amicus curiae manual**.

## What Is the Amicus Curiae Manual?

The '**Police Manual for Media Briefing**' is a comprehensive set of guidelines which lay down **norms and procedures for police communication with the media** during ongoing criminal investigations. The manual draws upon the **Union government's views** and **international best practices** to regulate disclosures in the age of **24×7 news and social media**.

**Objective:** To establish a principled framework, rights-compatible communication system and an investigation-safe disclosure mechanism.

## Key Highlights of the Manual:

- **Four-Test Disclosure Framework:** Every media briefing must satisfy:
  - **Legality-** no violation of law or court orders.
  - **Necessity-** disclosure only for genuine public interest (e.g., safety, rumour control).
  - **Proportionality-** minimum and carefully tailored disclosure.
  - **Accountability-** vetting and approval by designated authorities.
- **Content Restrictions:** Police must not comment on merits of the case, confessions, evidence theories or witness statements. They should only use **neutral language and "holding statements"**, limited to procedural updates (e.g., FIR registered, search conducted), without implying guilt.
- **Protection of Vulnerable Groups:** Absolute bar on revealing identities of survivors of sexual offences and children. The manual mandates non-disclosure of names, faces, localities, or indirect ("jigsaw") identifiers. It reinforces protections under the **POCSO Act** and the **Juvenile Justice Act and** prohibits the **public spectacle of arrests**, including parading accused or releasing mugshots and walk-through visuals.
- **Institutional Mechanism:** The manual mandates the creation of **Media Briefing Cells (MBCs)** with a **designated spokesperson** in each jurisdiction, through whom all police–media communication must pass. These cells will function round-the-clock, follow defined timelines for briefings, and use a structured process with mandatory **legal vetting** to ensure disclosures respect privacy, sub judice limits and operational sensitivity.
- **Digital and Social Media Governance:** Official police social media handles may be used only for factual updates and safety advisories. Prohibited content includes political messaging, commentary on ongoing cases and engagement in online debates. It introduces **"Myth-Fact" cards** to counter misinformation without amplifying rumours.
- **Stage-wise Disclosure Framework:** The manual clearly defines permissible disclosures at each stage of a case:
  - **Pre-FIR**: General incident information and safety advisories
  - **Post-FIR**: Sections of law, basic time and place details
  - **Investigation stage**: Only public-safety-related updates
  - **Post-arrest/remand**: Confirmation of arrest and due process, no confessions
  - **Trial stage**: Strict court-first discipline, no public commentary
- **Implementation Roadmap:** A **90-day adoption plan** is prescribed:
  - **0-30 days**: Institutional setup and notification of MBCs.
  - **31-60 days**: Training, mock briefings and capacity building.
  - **61-90 days**: Live drills and compliance monitoring.
- **Accountability and Enforcement:** Unauthorized disclosures and leaks are treated as **misconduct**. Violations are categorized from **negligence to gross misconduct**. Penalties range from remedial training, disciplinary action and suspension, criminal prosecution under official secrecy laws.

- Unregulated police briefings can prejudge the guilt of the accused, violate **Article 21** (right to life, dignity and fair trial) and cause secondary trauma to victims, especially in sexual-offence and child-related cases.
- The manual balances **public's right to information** with **privacy, dignity and presumption of innocence**

**Existing Guidelines on Police-Media Briefing**

- **MHA Guidelines (2010):** The **Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA)** issued guidelines asking police to share only **essential, verified facts**, avoid speculation, and refrain from **judgmental or opinionated statements**. Police were cautioned to respect **legal, privacy and human rights** of accused and victims.
- **State-Level Police Circulars:** Several States restrict media interaction to **senior officers only** and bar disclosures that may prejudice investigations. Guidelines also prohibit disclosure of **identities of minors and sexual offence victims** and discourage **parading of arrested accused** before the media.
- **CBI Guidelines (Crime Manual, 2015):** CBI regulates media communication through authorized officers and official press releases. Emphasis is placed on managing publicity, especially in corruption cases, with limited disclosure of identities.
- **Media Self-Regulatory Guidelines:** Bodies like the **Press Council of India (PCI)** prohibit **trial by media**, gossip-based reporting, and disclosure that may prejudice investigations.
- **Law Commission of India (200th Report, 2006):** warned that excessive media publicity undermines **fair trial rights** and recommended invoking **contempt of court** for prejudicial reporting.

**International Standards**

- **Dedicated Media Offices:** Law enforcement agencies such as the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), New York Police Department (NYPD), and Metropolitan Police Service operate specialized media units for controlled communication.

### Challenges

- **Political and Institutional Influence**: Police briefings are often shaped by socio-political pressures, undermining institutional independence.
- **Uncritical Media Amplification**: Media's reliance on police narratives, without verification, leads to **civil liberties violations**.
- **Absence of Dedicated Media Cells**: Many police departments lack formal communication units, blurring official and informal briefings.

### Way Forward

- **Uniform, Enforceable Policy**: Adoption of the SC-endorsed amicus manual by all States and UTs.
- **Institutionalization of Media Briefings**: Creation of dedicated media cells with trained spokespersons and legal vetting.
- **Accountability Mechanisms**: Clear consequences for speculative, motivated or unauthorized disclosures.
- **Responsible Journalism**: Media must critically question police narratives and avoid speculative reporting, even at the cost of access.
- **Capacity Building**: Training for both police and journalists on rights-based communication and ethical reporting.

# Issues Surrounding Governor's Address

Recently, walkouts by Governors were witnessed in Opposition-ruled States of Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Kerala during their address to the State Legislature at the commencement of the first session of the year. These incidents have rekindled constitutional and political debates regarding the role, discretion, and neutrality of the Governor in the functioning of the State Legislature.

## What Have the Courts Ruled in this Matter?

- **Mandatory but Flexible Constitutional Requirement:** Courts have consistently affirmed that the Governor's address under Article 176 is **constitutionally mandatory**, as it formally inaugurates the legislative session. However, judicial interpretation has adopted a **pragmatic approach**, recognizing that legislatures may face disruptions.
- **Substance over Procedural Formalism:** A clear distinction has been drawn between the **complete absence of the address** and **interruptions during its delivery**. While total non-delivery may undermine constitutional compliance, disturbances that prevent full oral reading do not automatically invalidate legislative proceedings.
- **Role of the Governor Clarified:**
  - In ***Shamsher Singh v. State of Punjab*** **(1974)**, the Supreme Court (SC) held that the Governor is a **constitutional head** and must ordinarily act on the **aid and advice of the CoM**.
  - This position was reaffirmed in ***Nabam Rebia v. Deputy Speaker*** **(2016)**, where the Court explicitly stated that the Governor's functions under **Articles 175 and 176**, including the address to the Legislature, are to be performed **on Council of Ministers advice**, not at the Governor's discretion.
- **Key High Court Rulings:**
  - **Orissa High Court (1952):** The Legislature legally assembles for business only after the Governor declares the causes of its summons, establishing the mandatory nature of the address.
  - **Calcutta High Court (1965):** If the approved text of the address is placed before the House despite disruptions, the constitutional requirement is met; any lapse amounts to a **procedural irregularity**.
  - **Rajasthan High Court- *Yogendra Nath v. State* (1967):** Even without full oral delivery, the address can be deemed valid if its substance is communicated to the House.

### About Governor's Address

- **Historical Background:** It originates from **British parliamentary practice**, where a legislative session begins only after the sovereign explains the reasons for summoning the House.
  - ✔ Historically, under **Section 63 of the Government of India Act, 1935**, the Governor had the discretion to address the Provincial Legislature. However, after the introduction of provincial autonomy in 1937, the Governor's speech was prepared in consultation with the Council of Ministers (CoM) and reflected the government's legislative agenda.
  - ✔ Initially required at the start of every session after 1950, the practice caused procedural uncertainty and was therefore limited by the **Constitution (First Amendment) Act, 1951** to the first session each year and after a general election.
    - ➔ During the Constituent Assembly debates, it was settled that the Governor's address would reflect the **policies of the elected Council of Ministers**, not the Governor's personal views, marking a shift from **discretionary authority to constitutional convention**.
- **Constitutional Basis:** The practice of addressing the Legislature is rooted in **Article 87**, under which the President at the commencement of the first session after a general election and at the beginning of each year- addresses both houses of the Parliament assembled together. This constitutional design is mirrored at the State level through **Article 176**, which governs the Governor's address.
- **Provisions under Article 176: Article 176(1)** mandates that the Governor shall address the State Legislature (or, in the case of a State having a Legislative Council, both Houses assembled together) at the commencement of the first session after each general election to the Legislative Assembly and at the beginning of every year.
- **Objective of the Address:** The Governor's address formally inaugurates the first session of the Legislature and explains the reasons for summoning the House. It presents the government's policy priorities, legislative agenda, and financial proposals for the year.
- **Preparation and Responsibility:** The address is drafted by the elected State government and approved by the Council of Ministers. In line with **Article 163(1)**, the Governor delivers the address on the aid and advice of the Council of Ministers, as this function does not fall within discretionary powers.
- **Legislative Accountability: Article 176(2)** requires the Legislature to allocate time for discussion of the address. The address forms the basis of the Motion of Thanks, during which legislators' debate, scrutinize, and criticize the government's policies and proposals. The responsibility for responding to this debate rests with the government.

## Why Are Government-Governor Conflicts Rising?

- **Breakdown of Constitutional Convention:** While Governors may suggest changes to the draft address through prior consultation, **unilateral refusal to read, selective omission, or walking out** violates established constitutional practice and turns institutional disagreement into public confrontation.

- **Politicization of the Office:** Governors are appointed by the Centre, and recent confrontations are concentrated in **Opposition-ruled States**, fuelling perceptions of partisan conduct.
- **Disregard of Ministerial Responsibility:** The Governor's address reflects the **policy of the elected CoM**; deviation from the approved text undermines democratic accountability.
- **Escalation in Frequency and Form:** Unlike earlier sporadic frictions since the 1960s, recent instances involve **complete skipping of the address**, rather than procedural disagreements.
- **Constitutional Implications:** Such actions are seen as inconsistent with the Governor's oath under **Article 159** and with settled judicial interpretation limiting the Governor's discretion.

**Way Forward**

- **Reaffirm Constitutional Limits:** Governors must act as **nominal heads**, respecting ministerial responsibility and established conventions, especially for non-discretionary functions like the annual address.
- **Depoliticize the Office:** The Governor's role should not undermine the authority of **elected State governments** within India's federal framework.
- **Institutional Safeguards in Appointments:** Implement the recommendations of the **Sarkaria Commission (1983) and the Punchhi Commission (2007)** by **mandating consultation with the Chief Minister** before appointing a Governor.
- **Strengthen Conventions over Abolition:** Given India's quasi-federal structure, **codifying conventions** and improving consultative mechanisms is a more workable reform path.

# Split Verdict on Section 17A of PCA

A Division Bench of the Supreme Court (SC) comprising Justices B.V. Nagarathna and K.V. Viswanathan delivered a split verdict on the constitutionality of Section 17A of the Prevention of Corruption Act (PCA), 1988. The matter will now be placed before Chief Justice of India who will constitute a larger Bench to render a final decision on the issue.

**About Section 17A of the PCA, 1988** (inserted through PC (Amendment) Act, 2018)

**Objective:** To **protect honest decision-making** by public servants from frivolous or retrospective corruption probes.

**Core Rule: Prior approval is mandatory** before any police **enquiry, inquiry, or investigation** into an offence under the PCA **if it arises from a recommendation made or decision taken** by a public servant **while discharging official duties**.

## Approval Authority:

- **Union Government**: If the public servant was employed in connection with Union affairs.
- **State Government**: If employed in connection with State affairs.
- **Competent Removal Authority**: For all other public servants.

## Key Exceptions:

- **Trap Cases Excluded**: No prior approval needed for **on-the-spot arrests** involving acceptance or attempt to accept undue advantage.
- **Time Limit for Approval**: Decision to be conveyed **within 3 months.** Extendable by **1 additional month** with written reasons.

**Significance:** Balances **anti-corruption enforcement** with **administrative autonomy and protection** for bona fide official decisions.

## Case Background

- **What was the Case?** The case concerned a **constitutional challenge to Section 17A** of the PCA by **Centre for Public Interest Litigation (CPIL).**
- **Petitioner Arguments:** CPIL argued that Section 17A acts as a **protective shield for corrupt public servants** by requiring prior government approval before investigation. It contended that this enables the **executive to block or delay probes** against its own officials, undermining anti-corruption enforcement.
- **Constitutional Objection:** It was argued that Section 17A is the **"third reincarnation" of similar statutory protections** that the SC had **earlier declared unconstitutional** in landmark rulings and therefore violates constitutional principles such as **rule of law and equality**.

**What did the Judges Rule?**

| Justice K.V. Viswanathan (Section 17A Saved by Reading Down) | Ruling of Justice B.V. Nagarathna (Section 17A Unconstitutional) |
|---|---|
| • **Core Holding: Section 17A is constitutionally valid only if the prior approval mechanism is filtered through an independent body**. The **Lokpal (Centre)** or **Lokayukta (States)** must act as the **mandatory screening authority**, and their **recommendation must be binding on the government**.<br>• **Doctrine of "Reading Down": Section 17A as presently operated is unconstitutional** because approval lies with the executive. However, instead of striking it down, Justice **Viswanathan read procedural safeguards into the provision** to align it with constitutional requirements. This was justified as **permissible reading down**, not judicial rewriting.<br>• **Distinguished Earlier Precedents:**<br>○ **Subramanian Swamy v. CBI (2014): Section 6A of the Delhi Special Police Establishment Act, 1946** was struck down because it created a **status-based classification** (Required prior approval to investigate **Joint Secretary-level and above officers** for all PCA offences).<br>▪ **Section 17A**, according to Justice Viswanathan, is **status neutral as it** applies to **all public servants**, irrespective of rank and operates **only when the alleged offence relates to an official decision or recommendation**.<br>○ **Vineet Narain v. Union of India (1997):** 3-judge SC bench struck down a **Single Directive** because it had two vices- 1) it was an **executive instruction** that curtailed the CBI's **statutory investigative powers**. 2) It lacked **independent screening**, allowing external control over investigation.<br>▪ Justice Viswanathan noted that **Section 17A avoids the first defect** as it is a **parliamentary statute but** must satisfy the **second requirement** by ensuring **independent screening** before approval.<br>• **Rejection of the Union's SOP:** On the procedural safeguards surrounding Section 17A's implementation, the Union government had produced a Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) in 2021 which provided for stage-wise processing of information received by a police officer and includes a detailed checklist for submitting proposals.<br>○ Justice Viswanathan held the SOP **unsatisfactory**, as it involved only **document forwarding to the government** with **no independent, expert, or objective scrutiny**.<br>• **Role of Lokpal / Lokayukta:** Justice Viswanathan harmonized Section 17A with the **Lokpal and Lokayuktas Act, 2013**. He relied on the **Law Commission's 254th report**, which had originally recommended **Lokpal/Lokayukta approval**, not government approval. Process envisaged Government forwards request → Lokpal/Lokayukta conducts independent screening → recommendation binds the government. | • **Core Holding: Section 17A is unconstitutional and must be struck down**. Prior approval **before even preliminary inquiry** is impermissible.<br>• **Threshold Barrier to Investigation:** Section 17A **forecloses inquiry at the very inception** and prevents police from even conducting preliminary **verification**. *This reproduces the very vice identified in **Vineet Narain (1998)** and **Subramanian Swamy (2014) cases.***<br>• **"Old Wine in a New Bottle":** Section 17A revives protection earlier struck down and merely **expands them to all public servants**, instead of removing the defect. The **core defect-** executive control over investigation remains.<br>• **Violation of Article 14 (Equality):** Though facially neutral, Section 17A **substantively protects senior officials**, who make "recommendations" and "decisions". Lower-level officials performing clerical functions get no such shield. It creates an **artificial and unjustified classification**. Corruption by senior and junior officials is **equally harmful**.<br>• **Policy Bias and Conflict of Interest:** Approval by the government suffers from **policy bias** (departments defending their own decisions) and **conflict of interest** (approving authority may be part of the same decision-making chain). It violates the principle of **nemo judex in causa sua** (no one should be a judge in their own cause).<br>• **Rejection of "Reading Down":** She rejected this approach as **Judicial legislation**. Contrary to the **literal rule of interpretation**. The statute explicitly vests power in the "Government". Substituting "Lokpal" for "Government" **rewrites the law**, not interprets it. Reading down is permissible only when severance is possible without altering statutory structure- **not the case here**.<br>• **Corruption as a Human Rights Issue:** She cited **UN Convention Against Corruption**, ratified by India. Any law that **blocks** |

| | |
|---|---|
| • **Rationale- Protecting Honest Administration:** Justice Viswanathan stressed that **frivolous corruption complaints can chill honest decision-making**, leading to a **risk-averse "play-it-safe" bureaucracy** that undermines effective governance. | **investigation at the threshold** is constitutionally intolerable. |

**Implications of the Split Verdict:**

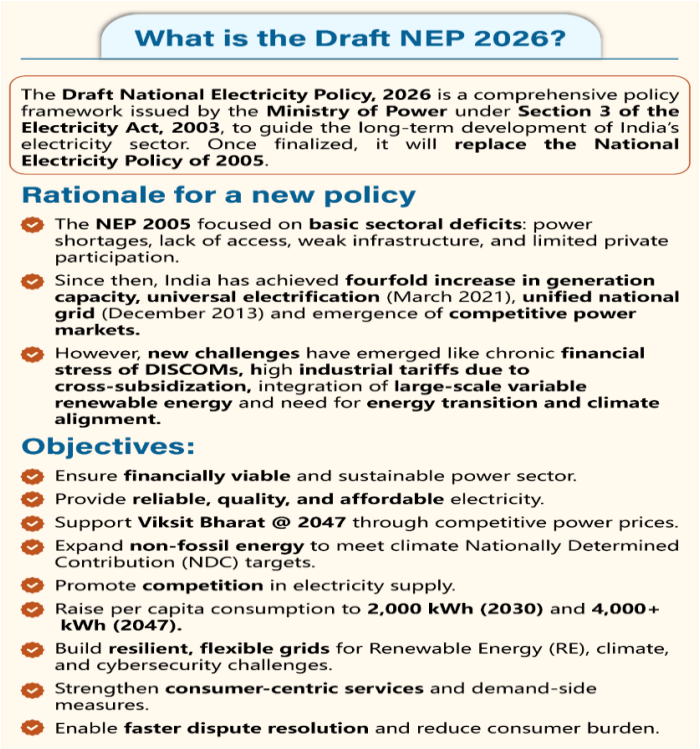
- **Legal Uncertainty Continues:** Section 17A remains in **constitutional limbo** due to the split verdict. Its **final validity and operational framework** will be decided by a **larger Bench**, creating short-term uncertainty.
- **Interim Restraint on Investigations:** Until clarity emerges, investigative agencies may act **cautiously** in initiating probes involving **policy decisions or recommendations**, especially against senior officials.
- **Central Role of Lokpal/Lokayukta:** If Justice Viswanathan's view is upheld, **Lokpal/Lokayukta will become mandatory gatekeepers** for corruption investigations linked to official decisions. This would **strengthen independent oversight** but also **add an additional procedural layer**.
- **Potential Dilution of Anti-Corruption Enforcement (If Dissent Prevails):** Justice Nagarathna's reasoning, if accepted, would **remove prior approval altogether**, restoring **full investigative autonomy** to police agencies and reinforce the principle that **anti-corruption laws must favour investigation over insulation**.
- **Constitutional Clarification on "Reading Down":** The case will shape future jurisprudence on **limits of judicial reading down**, and whether courts can **substitute institutional actors** to save a statute.
- **Legislative Signal:** Parliament may be compelled to **amend Section 17A explicitly or clarify the role of independent bodies** in sanctioning corruption investigations.
- **Broader Governance Impact:** The final ruling will determine how India **balances administrative autonomy with accountability**, directly affecting bureaucratic decision-making, anti-corruption credibility, and public trust in institutions.

# Draft National Electricity Policy 2026

The Ministry of Power released a draft National Electricity Policy (NEP), 2026 to transform the country's power sector and aligns with nuclear energy goals set out in the 2025-26 Budget and the recently enacted Sustainable Harnessing and Advancement of Nuclear Energy for Transforming India (SHANTI) Act, 2025.

**Major Interventions under Draft NEP 2026:**

- **Resource Adequacy (RA):** Shifts from centralized planning to **decentralized, scientific planning**, with DISCOMs and State Load Dispatch Centre (SLDCs) preparing state/utility-level RA plans and Central Electricity Authority (CEA) consolidating a national plan to ensure reliable capacity addition.
- **Financial Viability & Industrial Competitiveness:** NEP 2026 seeks to improve **DISCOM finances** through cost-reflective, indexed tariffs, timely cost pass-through, and lower AT&C losses. Exemption of cross-subsidies and surcharges on manufacturing industry, railways and metro railways; allows large consumers to self-procure power; and promotes **solarisation of agriculture feeders by 2030**. Faster **dispute resolution** is proposed to cut regulatory and consumer burden.



- **Renewable Energy (RE) & Storage:** In line with India's **NDCs**, NEP 2026 accelerates **renewable energy integration** by promoting market-based and captive RE, load-proximate RE with storage, and **distributed RE** with P2P(peer-to-peer) trading and aggregators. It mandates **parity between RE and conventional power** in scheduling by 2030, supports Battery Energy Storage System (**BESS) and pumped storage** with incentives, boosts domestic manufacturing, and simplifies norms for captive RE use.
- **Thermal Generation:** It retains **coal-based thermal power** for baseload and energy security, while promoting **flexible operation**, storage integration, and repurposing old plants for grid support. It also explores **direct use of thermal steam** for district cooling and industrial processes to improve efficiency.
- **Nuclear Generation:** Aligned with the **100 GW nuclear target by 2047** and the **SHANTI Act, 2025**, the new policy promotes **advanced nuclear technologies**, **modular and small reactors**, and expanded use of **nuclear power by commercial and industrial consumers**.
- **Hydro Generation:** It focuses on **optimal hydropower utilization** through faster clearances, better project assessment, and supportive financing. It prioritizes **storage-based hydro projects** for climate adaptation, flood control, irrigation, and long-term **water and energy security**.
- **Power Markets:** It deepens **power market participation** through bilateral contracts, standardized products, and **capacity markets**. It enables aggregation of **DRE (distributed RE), storage, ancillary services, and demand response**, while strengthening **market monitoring and surveillance** to ensure transparency and prevent manipulation.
- **Transmission:** It strengthens **transmission systems** by enhancing grid flexibility, expanding intra-state networks, deploying storage and advanced technologies *(Flexible AC Transmission Systems (FACTS), synchronous condensers, Dynamic Line Rating (DLR))* and addressing **Right of Way (RoW)** issues. It mandates **tariff-based competitive bidding**, utilization-based connectivity allocation, **RE transmission tariff parity by 2030**, development of **green feeders**, and stronger **cross-border links under** One Sun One World One Grid (**OSOWOG)**.
- **Distribution:** It targets **financially viable distribution** through lower power purchase costs, reduced **AT&C losses**, smart prepaid metering, shared networks, and a **DSO** (Distribution System Operators) for integrating DRE, storage and V2G (Vehicle-to-Grid). It improves reliability via **N-1 redundancy**, underground cabling in large cities, and ensures **universal electricity access**, prioritizing border areas.
- **Grid Operations:** It strengthens **grid operations** by adopting advanced forecasting tools, assigning Energy Storage Systems **for ancillary services**, unbundling State Transmission Utilities (STUs), and creating independent entities for **SLDC (State Load Despatch Centre) operations and transmission planning**, supported by upgraded technology and skilled manpower.
- **Cybersecurity:** It mandates a **robust cybersecurity framework**, data localization for **data sovereignty**, mitigation of supply-chain risks, and designates Computer Security Incident Response Team (CSIRT-Power) as the nodal agency for cyber incident response in the power sector.
- **Energy Efficiency:** Enhances **efficiency standards for appliances, pumps, buildings**, promotes efficient cooling, and supports MSMEs through targeted efficiency programmes.
- **Consumer Centricity:** Ensures **24×7 quality power**, compensation for service lapses, technology-enabled grievance redressal, and greater consumer choice and transparency.
- **Data Sharing:** It mandates **sharing of operational and market data** (excluding personal data) to enable innovation and requires real-time **Distributed Energy Resources (DER) visibility** for DISCOMs and SLDCs to improve grid integration and planning.
- **Technology & Skill Development:** It promotes **Make in India**, indigenous software, AI-driven solutions, and structured skilling aligned with emerging power-sector technologies.
- **Environment & Disaster Management:** It encourages **e-mobility, waste-to-energy, biofuel co-firing**, and introduces climate-resilient infrastructure and disaster preparedness frameworks.
- **Financing:** It estimates power-sector investments of **₹50 lakh crore by 2032** and **₹200 lakh crore by 2047**, proposing **sector-specific funds, a Climate Finance Taxonomy**, and dedicated platforms under National Bank for Financing Infrastructure and Development (NaBFID) and National Investment and Infrastructure Fund (NIIF) to mobilize green and concessional finance.

| Significance of NEP 2026 | Concerns and Challenges |
|---|---|
| • **Future-Ready Roadmap**: Aligns the power sector with **Viksit Bharat @2047**, climate targets, and rising electricity demand.<br>• **Financial Reform Focus**: Addresses chronic **DISCOM losses** through cost-reflective tariffs, loss reduction, and market discipline.<br>• **Clean Energy Transition**: Strong push for **RE, storage, nuclear and hydro**, supporting India's NDCs and net-zero pathway.<br>• **Grid Modernization**: Emphasizes **resource adequacy, flexibility, storage, and cybersecurity**, improving system reliability.<br>• **Market Deepening**: Expands power markets, competition, and private participation across generation, transmission, and distribution.<br>• **Consumer Centricity**: Improves service quality, grievance redressal, and choice, while promoting demand-side management.<br>• **Investment Mobilization**: Provides clarity on financing needs and enables **green and blended finance** mechanisms. | • **Implementation Capacity**: States and DISCOMs may lack technical and institutional capacity to implement complex reforms like **RA planning** and market reforms.<br>• **Political Economy of Tariffs**: Cost-reflective tariffs and subsidy rationalization may face **political resistance** at the state level.<br>• **DISCOM Viability Risk**: Exempting large consumers and Universal Service Obligation (USO) dilution could reduce high-paying consumers, impacting DISCOM revenues if not managed carefully.<br>• **Renewable Integration Risks**: Large-scale RE dependence increases challenges related to **grid stability, forecasting, and storage adequacy**.<br>• **Financing Uncertainty**: Mobilizing ₹200 lakh crore by 2047 depends on sustained investor confidence, regulatory stability, and global capital conditions.<br>• **Nuclear Expansion Hurdles**: Private participation in nuclear faces concerns about **safety, liability, high capital cost**, and public acceptance.<br>• **Federal Coordination Issues**: Strong central vision, but **uneven state-level execution** may lead to regional disparities. |

**Way Forward**

- **Strengthen state capacity** through technical support and training for DISCOMs, SLDCs, and regulators.
- **Ensure political buy-in** for tariff reforms with targeted subsidies and transparent communication.
- **Phase reforms carefully**, especially open access and USO changes, to protect DISCOM revenues.
- **Accelerate storage deployment** and forecasting tools for reliable RE integration.
- **Provide regulatory certainty** to attract long-term private and green investments.
- **Address nuclear risks** with clear safety, liability, and financing frameworks.
- **Improve Centre-State coordination** for uniform and effective implementation.

# Writ Petitions by ED

The Supreme Court (SC) agreed to examine petitions admitted by Kerala and Tamil Nadu (TN) governments challenging Kerala High Court (HC) ruling that upheld **Enforcement Directorate's** (ED- under Department of Revenue) right to invoke the writ jurisdiction of constitutional courts.

**Case Background:**

- **Origin of the Dispute:** The controversy stems from a 2025 judgment of the **Kerala HC**, which held that the **ED is a statutory body** entitled to invoke the writ jurisdiction of HCs under **Article 226** of the Constitution.
- **Context (Diplomatic Gold Smuggling Case):** The ruling arose from an ED writ petition challenging Kerala's **2021** notification constituting a **Commission of Inquiry (CoI)** linked to the diplomatic gold smuggling case (seizure of 30 kg gold at Thiruvananthapuram airport in 2020), with parallel proceedings by the National Investigation Agency (NIA) under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, 1967 (UAPA) and by the ED under the Prevention of Money Laundering Act, 2002 (PMLA).

- **State Government's Objection on Locus Standi:** Kerala contended that the ED is merely a department of the Union government and not a **juristic person** and therefore lacks the legal capacity *to sue or be sued* through a writ petition. The State argued that disputes between the Centre and a State can only be adjudicated by the **SC under Article 131**, and not through writ proceedings before HCs.
  - ✓ Under **Article 131**, the **SC** has **exclusive original jurisdiction** over disputes **between the Centre and States, or among States**, involving a **legal right**.
- **Reliance on SC Precedent:** Kerala relied on the 2003 SC ruling in *Chief Conservator of Forests v. Collector*, which deprecated the practice of Centre-State governments litigating against each other through writ petitions in HCs.
- **High Court's View on ED's Status:** In **2021**, a single judge rejected the State's objection, holding that ED officers exercise statutory powers. This view was affirmed by a Division Bench in **2025**, which ruled that ED officers are statutory authorities under the PMLA and that lack of juristic personality was only a **"trivial defect".**
- **Kerala's challenge before the SC:** Kerala argued that **capacity to sue is a substantive legal requirement**, not a procedural formality, and that neither the ED nor its Deputy Director has been conferred legal personality under Foreign Exchange Management Act (FEMA), 1999 or the PMLA.
- **Support from TN:** It supported Kerala's challenge, stating that it faced similar circumstances and alleging that the Kerala HC ruling had emboldened the ED to file writ petitions against States, thereby raising a broader constitutional issue affecting **federal balance**.

**When Can Courts Issue Writs?**

- **Constitutional Power:** The **SC** may issue writs under **Article 32 to enforce fundamental rights**, while **HCs** can issue writs under **Article 226 for fundamental rights and for any other legal purpose.**
- **Nature of Writs:** Writs are **extraordinary remedies**, invoked when ordinary legal remedies are **absent, ineffective, or inadequate.**
- **Types of Writs:** The Constitution recognizes **five writs (***Habeas Corpus, Mandamus, Prohibition, Certiorari, Quo Warranto)* to protect liberty, ensure lawful exercise of power, and maintain jurisdictional discipline-
- **Discretionary Relief:** Grant of a writ is **not automatic**; courts may refuse relief if an **effective alternative remedy** exists.
- **Against whom:** Writs ordinarily lie against **public authorities**; they may extend to **private bodies** only where they perform **public functions** or act **in collusion with the State** in violation of law.

**Possible Implications of the Case:**

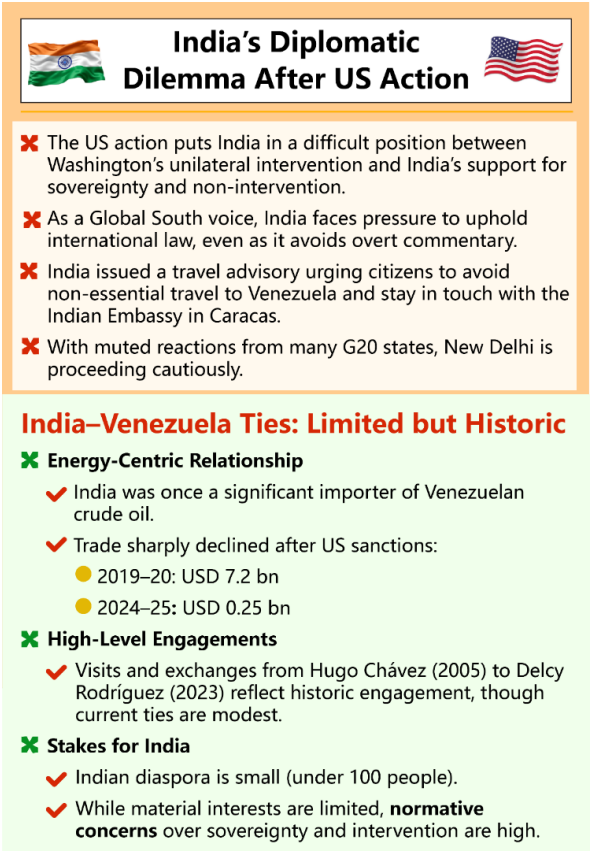
- **Limits on ED's Legal Standing:** If the challenge succeeds, the ED may be held **not comparable to juristic regulators** like the **Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI)** or the **Reserve Bank of India (RBI)**, which have express statutory capacity to sue and be sued.
- **Reinforcement of Federal Boundaries:** Disputes where a State allegedly encroaches on ED's powers may be treated as **Centre-State disputes**, channelled **exclusively under Article 131** before the **SC**, rather than through HC writs.
- **Narrower Scope for Writs Against States:** Courts may clarify that **States owe no independent "public duty" to the ED**, weakening the basis for writs like **mandamus or certiorari** sought by the agency against State governments.
- **Operational Impact on Enforcement Strategy:** The ED could face **procedural constraints**, requiring the Union government to be the litigating party in constitutional disputes, potentially **slowing or reshaping enforcement actions**.
- **Precedential Value:** A ruling would set a **nationwide precedent** on whether Union agencies without juristic personality can invoke writ jurisdiction, affecting **future Centre-State litigation** and administrative law doctrine.

# US Strike on Venezuela

The United States launched a major military operation in Venezuela and captured President Nicolás Maduro. The US President Donald Trump announced that Maduro and his wife were taken to the US and charged in New York with drug trafficking and weapons-related offences, marking a dramatic escalation in US–Venezuela tensions.

### Why Did the US Attack Venezuela?

- **Migration Crisis Narrative**
  - The US links Venezuela's political and economic collapse to rising migration pressures at its southern border. Since 2013, around 8 million Venezuelans have fled the country.
  - Trump alleged that the Maduro regime forced prisoners and asylum inmates to migrate—claims denied by Caracas.
- **Drugs and 'Narco-Terrorism' Allegations**
  - Washington accuses Venezuela of being a major transit hub for cocaine linked to the US fentanyl crisis. Trump alleged that Maduro himself led the Cartel de los Soles.
- **Venezuela's Response**
  - Caracas rejected all charges, accusing Washington of using the "war on drugs" as a pretext for regime change rather than addressing migration or narcotics trafficking.




### What Lies Ahead for Venezuela?

- **Political Transition**
  - Trump said the US would temporarily run Venezuela until a "safe and proper transition" is achieved.
  - He dismissed opposition leader María Corina Machado as lacking support.
- **Economic Dimension**
  - Trump indicated US oil companies would repair infrastructure, extract and sell oil, recover costs, and share revenues with Venezuelans.
- **Risk of Prolonged Intervention**
  - Trump did not rule out deploying US troops, signalling the possibility of a **long-term, force-backed transition**.

**Extra Mile: Return of US Interventionism**

The capture of Venezuelan President by US forces has reignited debate over a return to overt US interventionism. The episode echoes the Iraq War warning—"If you break it, you own it"—highlighting the long-term risks of regime-change operations.

**Trump's Policy U-Turn**

- **From Non-Intervention to Unilateral Force**
  - Donald Trump, once critical of the Iraq invasion, has reversed course.
  - He justified the action by reviving the **Monroe Doctrine**, signalling a sharp doctrinal shift.
  - The pivot was formalised in a new US security strategy and follows a year of escalatory actions.

- **Pattern of Escalation**
  - Recent US strikes or threats span Syria, Nigeria, Iran, Yemen (Houthis), Somalia, Iraq, and the Caribbean—pointing to renewed unilateralism.

**Why Venezuela? The Oil Factor**

- **Energy Stakes**
  - Venezuela holds the world's largest proven crude reserves (300+ billion barrels) but produces only ~1 mbpd (million barrels per day).
  - **Chevron** is the only major foreign firm currently exposed to Venezuelan crude.
- **Oil-Centric Rationale**
  - Trump has argued for US control to rebuild infrastructure and ramp up output.
  - Critics allege resource capture is the real motive, with intervention framed as energy security—and possibly domestic political distraction.

**The Monroe Doctrine: From Anti-Colonial Principle to Interventionist Tool**

- Named after former US President **James Monroe**, the Monroe Doctrine began as a symbolic 19th-century declaration opposing new or expanded European involvement in the Americas after colonial rule.
- Over time, the United States broadened its interpretation, treating Latin America as a strategic sphere of influence.
- This shift turned the doctrine into a key justification for **US political and military interventions** across South and Central America for decades—often criticised by scholars as an alibi for meddling in the region's internal affairs.
- While recent US administrations had largely distanced themselves from this approach, President Donald Trump has revived and reinforced it, aligning with right-leaning governments such as Argentina's and opposing left-wing leadership in countries like Brazil.
- Historically, the doctrine's legacy is stark: between 1898 and 1994, the US intervened to change governments in Latin America at least 41 times, ostensibly to protect American interests and counter communism.

**MAGA Pushback: Unease at Home**

- Trump's MAGA (Make America Great Again) supporters, wary of "forever wars," are uneasy about hints of US-run transition governance.
- Fear of prolonged entanglement clashes with campaign promises of restraint.

# India–EU Finalise Landmark FTA

- **India** and the **European Union** have concluded a comprehensive **Free Trade Agreement (FTA)**, described by EU leadership as the "mother of all deals".
- Cleared by India's Union Cabinet after negotiations, it is among the **largest bilateral trade agreements globally** in terms of economic size, regulatory depth, and population covered.
- The pact provides India **preferential access to all 27 EU member states** under a single customs-union framework.

**Scale of the Deal** (Why it is called **Mother of all deals?)**

- Covers a combined market of **~1.9 billion people**
- India–EU together account for:
  - ~25% of global GDP
  - ~30% of the world's population
  - ~11–12% of global trade
- Of global trade (~USD 33 trillion), India–EU together account for **~USD 11 trillion**

**What India Gains from the India–EU FTA?**

- **Near-Complete Tariff-Free Access**
  - Immediate duty elimination by the EU on 70.4% of tariff lines, covering 90.7% of India's export value.
  - Phased tariff elimination (3–5 years) on another 20.3% of tariff lines, covering 2.9% of exports.

- Partial reductions or quota-based access on 6.1% of tariff lines, covering 6% of exports.
- Overall, over 99% of India's export value to the EU benefits from concessions.

- **Improved Services Market Access**
  - Broader commitments across 144 services sub-sectors, including IT/ITeS, professional services, education, and business services.

**Key Concerns Around the India–EU FTA**

- **Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM)**
  - The EU's carbon-linked tariff framework remains unresolved.
  - India secured a most-favoured treatment clause—any CBAM concession to another country will extend to India.
- **Investment Readiness**
  - To fully leverage tariff-free access, India must accelerate ease of doing business reforms, regulatory certainty, and infrastructure upgrades.

**Conclusion: A Watershed in India–EU Trade Relations**

- The India–European Union FTA represents a landmark in India's trade diplomacy.
- By balancing market opening with protection of sensitive sectors, it is poised to boost exports, attract investment, generate employment, and deepen strategic ties between two major economic blocs.
- If implemented effectively, the agreement could become a template for India's future trade negotiations in an increasingly fragmented global trade landscape.

EDITOR'S CUT

# India–Germany Strategic Partnership

- Friedrich Merz's first visit to India marks ***25 years of the India–Germany Strategic Partnership*** and **75 years of diplomatic ties**.

- It Comes ahead of the India–EU Summit and EU leaders' Republic Day visit.
- **Outcome-driven diplomacy**: signing of 19 agreements/MoUs, signalling deeper strategic convergence.

**Key Outcomes of the Visit**

- 19 bilateral pacts covering defence industry, higher education & skills, critical minerals, semiconductors, Indo-Pacific dialogue, renewables and green hydrogen.
- Visa-free transit for Indian passport holders at German airports.
- Launch of a new ***Indo-Pacific consultation*** mechanism.

**Major Areas of Cooperation**

- **Strategic & Defence Cooperation**
  - **Defence Industrial Cooperation Roadmap** (JDoI- *Joint Declarations of Intent*): co-development, co-production, faster export clearances.
  - **Ongoing collaboration**: submarines (Project 75I), C-UAS (Counter-Unmanned Aircraft Systems), helicopter systems, joint exercises and port visits.
  - **Strategic gains**: supports Atmanirbhar Bharat, reduces reliance on Russia, leverages India's workforce and Germany's tech.
- **Higher Education & Global Skills**
  - Roadmap aligned with NEP 2020; invitation to German universities to open campuses in India.
  - Global Skills Partnership: healthcare mobility; expanded German language teaching.
- **Trade, Investment & FTA Push**
  - Bilateral trade exceeded USD 50 billion (2024)—over a quarter of India–EU trade.
  - Strong two-way investments across SMEs, startups, AI and innovation.
  - Backing for India–EU FTA; strengthened CEO Forum.
- **Critical & Emerging Technologies**
  - Focus: semiconductors, critical minerals, telecom, digital/AI, health & bioeconomy.
  - Institutional steps: Semiconductor & Critical Minerals JDoIs; Digital Dialogue Work Plan (2026–27).

- Goal: trusted supply chains, digital sovereignty, reduced China-dependence.

- **Climate, Energy & Sustainability**
  - India–Germany Centre of Excellence for skilling in Renewable Energy.
  - Joint projects in climate action, urban mobility and green hydrogen (mega project).
- **Indo-Pacific & Global Issues**
  - Shared commitment to a Free and Open Indo-Pacific, UNCLOS, and international law.
  - Cooperation under the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI).
  - Convergence on Ukraine (peace under UN Charter), Gaza (two-state solution), and condemnation of terrorism.

**Conclusion**

- The Merz–Modi engagement marks a **qualitative upgrade**—from trade-centric ties to **strategic manufacturing, technology and geopolitics**.
- With shared democratic values and economic complementarities, **Germany** emerges as **India's most consequential EU partner**, a cornerstone of India's Europe and Indo-Pacific strategy.

# MAPS: PLACES IN NEWS

## International Places in News

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | **Popocatépetl Volcano** | Recently, a team of scientists obtained the first 3D images from inside Popocatépetl volcano.<br>• **Meaning:** "Smoking Mountain".<br>• **Location:** Central Mexico near **México-Puebla border**<br>• **Type: Stratovolcano**<br>• **Activity:** One of Mexico's **most active**; eruptions since **1519.** It is *among the most dangerous* volcanoes in the **Pacific Ring of Fire** due to proximity to dense population. |
| 2 | **Rafah Border Crossing** | The Rafah border crossing between Gaza and Egypt is about to reopen after about two years of closure.<br>• **Location**: Southern Gaza-Egypt border.<br>• **Significance**: Main humanitarian aid route from Egypt (Sinai); only Gaza crossing which is **not directly with Israel.**<br>• **Other crossings** with Israel:<br>○ **Erez-** passenger crossing (North Gaza).<br>○ **Kerem Shalom-** main commercial/goods crossing (South Gaza).<br>• **Control**: Egypt controls **Egyptian side**; Gaza-side control has varied. |
| 3 | **Mt. Elbrus** | An artificially triggered avalanche was filmed cascading down Russia's highest mountain, Mount Elbrus.<br>• **Location**: in Southwest Russia- **Caucasus Mountains.**<br>• **Type**: Dormant **stratovolcano** (two summits)<br>• **Height**: **5,642 m-** highest in **Europe & Russia**<br>• **Age**: ~2-3 million years; **no confirmed Holocene eruptions** |

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| | | • **Status**: One of the **Seven Summits**<br>• **Protected area**: **Prielbrusye National Park**<br>• **Glaciers/Rivers**: Bolshoi Azau and Irik; Source of **Baksan, Malka, Kuban** rivers. |
| **4** | **Socotra Island** | Hundreds of tourists are stuck on the Yemeni island of Socotra after flights were grounded over clashes on the mainland.<br>• **Location:** Situated in the **north-western Indian Ocean**, south of the Arabian Peninsula and east of the Horn of Africa; politically part of **Yemen**, near the Gulf of Aden-Arabian Sea junction.<br>• **Physiography:** A rugged island with the **Hajhir Mountains** forming a central highland core.<br>• **Biodiversity:** High endemism (≈37% plants, 90% reptiles). Thus, called "Galápagos of Indian Ocean".<br>• **Status: UNESCO World Heritage Site (2008).** |
| **5** | **Mount Bur Ni Telong** | Indonesian authorities recently raised the alert for Mount Bur Ni Telong volcano due to increased activity, including numerous earthquakes.<br>• **Type:** Active **stratovolcano**<br>• **Location: Aceh Province**, northern Sumatra (Indonesia)<br>• **Geology:** Conical volcano on **southern flank of Bur ni Geureudong volcanic complex**<br>• **Activity:** Last confirmed eruption **1937**; under monitoring. |
| **6** | **Pratas Islands** | A Chinese reconnaissance drone briefly overflew Taiwan-controlled **Pratas Islands** in the northern **South China Sea**, a move condemned by Taiwan's defence ministry.<br>**About Pratas Islands (Dongsha Islands)**<br>• **Location:** Northern **South China Sea;** SW of Kaohsiung (Taiwan) and SE of Hong Kong.<br>• **Type:** Circular coral **atoll**; Dongsha Island only emergent land.<br>• **Strategic importance:** On key Pacific-Indian Ocean sea routes.<br>• **Control & Claim:** Controlled by **Taiwan**; claimed by **China (PRC).**<br>• **Population:** No civilians; Taiwanese marines stationed |
| **7** | **Mayon Volcano** | Effusive eruptions are being witness from Mayon volcano for 23 consecutive days, as authorities warned residents to stay away.<br>• **Location: Albay province** on **Luzon Island, Philippines**.<br>• **Type:** Active **stratovolcano**; **Pacific Ring of Fire**<br>• **Status: Most active** volcano of the Philippines<br>• **Eruptions:** Since **1616.** |
| **8** | **Muna Island** | A painted human hand outline in a cave on Indonesia's Muna Island is the world's oldest known rock art, dating to at least **67,800 years ago.**<br>• **Location:** Southeast Sulawesi, Indonesia; west of Buton Island<br>• **People:** Muna (Wuna) tribe<br>• **Economy:** Agriculture, fishing, local crafts<br>• **Key Sites:** Liangkobori Cave (prehistoric paintings); Napabale Lake (sea tunnel). |
| **9** | **Chatham Islands** | A massive **phytoplankton bloom**, visible via satellites, recently surrounded the **Chatham Islands** during the austral summer.<br>• **Location**: Island group in South Pacific Ocean- New Zealand's easternmost territory.<br>• **Composition**: 10 islands; mainly volcanic<br>• **Inhabited**: **Chatham Island** & **Pitt Island** only. It was the first inhabited place to see sunrise. |

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| **10** | **North Island** | A magnitude 5.5 earthquake struck the North Island region of New Zealand recently.<br>• **Location:** Smaller of two main islands of **New Zealand in the South Pacific Ocean**; separated from South Island by **Cook Strait.**<br>• **Relief:** Central mountain range (extension of South Island range) along east coast.<br>• **Highest peak: Mount Ruapehu** (2,797 m), volcanic.<br>• **Protected area: Tongariro National Park** (UNESCO WHS, 1990)<br>• **Major cities: Wellington**, **Auckland.** |

## National Places in News

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **1** | **Shaksgam Valley** | India recently objected to China's infrastructure projects in the Shaksgam Valley, asserting it as Indian territory<br>**About Shaksgam Valley (Trans-Karakoram Tract)**<br>• **Location**: High-altitude, sparsely populated region<br>• **Borders**: **North**- Xinjiang (China); **South & West**: Pakistan-occupied Gilgit-Baltistan**; East:** Siachen area. |
| **2** | **Chatergala Pass** | Border Roads Organisation (BRO) successfully restored connectivity at 10,500-ft Chatergala Pass under Project Sampark after heavy snowfall.<br>• **Location:** Bhaderwah-Bani axis, Jammu region, UT of Jammu & Kashmir<br>• **Physiographic Range: Pir Panjal Range** (Middle Himalayas)<br>• **Terrain:** Alpine meadows, dense conifer forests. |
| **3** | **Kaziranga National Park** | Prime Minister performed Bhoomi Pujan of the Kaziranga Elevated Corridor Project, worth over ₹6,950 Crore in Kaliabor, Assam.<br>• **Location:** Assam; between **Brahmaputra River** and **Karbi Hills**<br>• **Status: UNESCO World Heritage Site (1985)**<br>• **Ecosystem:** Largest undisturbed **Brahmaputra floodplain**<br>• **Habitat:** Alluvial plains, **tall elephant grass**, marshes, beels |

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| | | • **Rivers:** Diphlu (through), **Moradifalu** (south)- both rivers are tributaries of Brahmaputra.<br>• **Fauna:** World's largest **one-horned rhinoceros** population; tiger, elephant, wild buffalo, swamp deer |
| **4** | **Kumbhalgarh Wildlife Sanctuary** | MoEFCC issued notification declaring **Kumbhalgarh Wildlife Sanctuary in Aravalli mountain range** as Eco-Sensitive Zone (ESZ).<br>• **Location:** It spreads in an area of 610.5 sq. km covering parts of Rajsamand, Udaipur, and Pali districts of Rajasthan.<br>• **Physiography:** It covers four hill and mountain ranges of the Aravallis- Kumbhalgarh Range; Sadri Range; Desuri Range and the Bokhada Range.<br>• **Avifauna: Grey Junglefowl** common. |
| **5** | **Ratapani Tiger Reserve** | The **Ratapani Tiger Reserve** will be renamed after **Dr Vishnu Shridhar Wakankar**, Padma Shri awardee and noted archaeologist.<br>• **Location:** situated in Raisen & Sehore districts of Madhya Pradesh (MP); spread over hills of Vindhya range; north of **Narmada river**, west boundary **Kolar River.**<br>• **Forest Type:** Dry & moist deciduous; **Teak** dominant (~55% area).<br>• **Special: Bhimbetka Rock Shelters (UNESCO WHS)** within sanctuary. |
| **6** | **Sagar Island** | The West Bengal Chief Minister laid the foundation stone of a 5-km-long bridge over the river Muriganga to connect Sagar Island with the mainland.<br>• **Location:** Ganga delta ~100 km south of **Kolkata**<br>• **Also known as:** Gangasagar / Sagardwip<br>• **Geography:** At **Hooghly-Bay of Bengal** confluence; separated from mainland by Hooghly arm.<br>• **Event: Ganga Sagar Fair** (mid-January) – *2nd largest fair after Kumbh Mela*<br>• **Religious site: Kapil Muni Temple** |
| **7** | **Vadhavan Port** | Around 20,000 residents of Palghar district took out a protest march recently against the proposed Vadhavan port citing environmental damage.<br>• **Location:** Palghar (Dahanu), Maharashtra.<br>• **Type:** All-weather **greenfield deep-draft major port**<br>• **Developer:** Vadhavan Port Project Limited (VPPL), a special purpose vehicle (SPV) formed by Jawaharlal Nehru Port Authority (JNPA- 74%) and Maharashtra Maritime Board (MMB- 26% shareholding).<br>• **Completion:** Phased; full by **2034** |
| **8** | **Tadoba Andhari Tiger Reserve (TATR)** | TATR recently undertook a sterilisation and vaccination program to deal with the growing menace of stray dogs.<br>• **Location:** Chandrapur district, Maharashtra<br>• **Key Feature:** One of India's highest **tiger densities** (≈90+ tigers)<br>• **Flora:** Dry deciduous forest with **Teak**, **bamboo**, **Mahua**, **Palash**, grasslands. |
| **9** | **Buddhist Diamond Triangle** | • UNESCO has included the '**Diamond Triangle'** of Ratnagiri, Udayagiri and Lalitgiri Buddhist sites in its tentative India list for consideration of World Heritage Site status.<br>• The tentative list identifies sites that are of outstanding universal value, either culturally or naturally, and suitable for potential inscription in the World Heritage List.<br>• Currently, there are **70 sites** from India on the tentative list, across three categories: cultural, natural and mixed. |

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| | | • The three Buddhist sites are located in the **Assia hill range** of **Odisha** between the **Brahmani and Birupa river systems.**<br>• **Lalitgiri** represents one of the earliest Buddhist centres in eastern India, beginning as a Theravada site and later absorbing Mahayana and Vajrayana elements.<br>• **Udayagiri** functioned as a major Mahayana and later Vajrayana monastic hub, with large mahaviharas, evolved chaityagriha architecture, monumental stupas, and rich sculptural remains.<br>• **Ratnagiri,** flourishing especially under the Bhaumakara dynasty, emerged as a leading Vajrayana centre<br>• Traditionally, Ratnagiri is referred to as the hill of precious gems, Udayagiri as the hill of rising sun and Lalitgiri as the red hill, with all three sites full of remains of stupas, relics, monasteries and statues of Lord Buddha and other Buddhist deities. |
| **10** | **Shettihalli Wildlife Sanctuary** | Amid controversy over the proposed reduction of Shettihalli Wildlife Sanctuary boundaries in Shivamogga, State Forest Minister visited the sanctuary to review the situation.<br>• **Location:** Western Ghats, Shivamogga (Shimoga), Karnataka<br>• **Rivers:** Tunga & Bhadra; **Tunga Anicut Dam** inside<br>• **Vegetation:** Tropical evergreen & semi-evergreen; Dry/moist deciduous (east & central) |

## Important Temples of India

| S.No. | Temple | Description |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | **Pandrethan Shiva Temple** | • **Location:** Near Srinagar, Jammu & Kashmir<br>• **Period & Dynasty:** around 8th-10th century CE by **Meru**, a minister of King Partha (Utpala dynasty era).<br>• **Architectural Style:** Kashmiri Nagara style<br>• **Key Features:** Square stone temple built over a natural spring; high plinth, pyramidal roof, reflects adaptation to cold climate and seismic zone. |
| 2 | **Katarmal Sun Temple** | • **Location:** Near Almora, Uttarakhand<br>• **Period & Dynasty:** 9th century CE; Katyuri dynasty<br>• **Architectural Style:** Nagara style<br>• **Key Features:** One of the few surviving Sun temples in India; main shrine with subsidiary shrines reflects early Himalayan temple tradition. |
| 3 | **Kamakhya Temple** | • **Location:** Nilachal Hill, Guwahati, Assam<br>• **Period & Dynasty:** Rebuilt in 16th century by Koch dynasty (Naranarayan)<br>• **Deity:** Shakti (Kamakhya)<br>• **Architectural Style:** Nilachal type (regional Assamese style)<br>• **Key Features:** No idol; worship of yoni-shaped stone; major centre of Tantrism and Ambubachi Mela. |
| 4 | **Lakshman Temple** | • **Location:** Khajuraho, Madhya Pradesh<br>• **Period & Dynasty:** 954 CE; Chandela dynasty (Yashovarman)<br>• **Deity:** Vaikuntha Vishnu (three-headed form)<br>• **Architectural Style:** Nagara style (Khajuraho school)<br>• **Key Features:** Earliest and finest surviving temple at Khajuraho, Panchayatana plan, richly carved sculptures including secular and divine themes- marks maturity of North Indian temple architecture. |
| 5 | **Somnath Temple** | • **Location:** Prabhas Patan, Gujarat<br>• **Period & Dynasty:** Early historic origins; present structure rebuilt in 1951 (post-Independence).<br>• **Deity:** Shiva (Jyotirlinga)<br>• **Architectural Style:** Chalukyan (Maru-Gurjara) style<br>• **Key Features:** First of the 12 Jyotirlingas; symbol of resilience, destroyed and rebuilt multiple times during medieval invasions. |
| 6 | **Rajarani Temple** | • **Location:** Bhubaneswar, Odisha<br>• **Period & Dynasty:** 11th century CE; Somavamsi period<br>• **Deity:** No presiding deity<br>• **Architectural Style:** Mature Nagara (Kalinga) style<br>• **Key Features:** Named after red-gold sandstone; ornate sculptures, Panchayatana plan. |
| 7 | **Venkateswara Temple** | • **Location:** Tirumala Hills, Andhra Pradesh<br>• **Period & Dynasty:** Developed mainly under Pallavas, Cholas & Vijayanagara rulers<br>• **Deity:** Vishnu (Venkateswara)<br>• **Architectural Style:** Dravidian style<br>• **Key Features:** Gopurams, pillared mandapas, extensive temple endowments; one of the richest and most visited temples globally. |

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| **8** | **Lad Khan Temple** | • **Location:** Aihole, Karnataka<br>• **Period & Dynasty:** 5-6th century CE; Early Chalukyas<br>• **Deity:** Shiva<br>• **Architectural Style:** Early Chalukyan (proto-Dravidian)<br>• **Key Features:** Flat roof, pillared hall; resembles wooden architecture. |
| **9** | **Sri Ranganatha Swamy Temple** | • **Location:** Srirangam Island, Tamil Nadu<br>• **Period & Dynasty:** Early Chola origins; expanded by Cholas, Pandyas, Hoysalas & Vijayanagara rulers<br>• **Deity:** Vishnu (Ranganatha)<br>• **Architectural Style:** Dravidian<br>• **Key Features:** Largest functioning temple complex; concentric enclosures, massive gopurams; Vaishnava Bhakti centre. |
| **10** | **Sree Padmanabhaswamy Temple** | • **Location:** Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala<br>• **Period & Dynasty:** Present structure 18th century; Travancore rulers<br>• **Deity:** Vishnu (Anantha Sayana)<br>• **Architectural Style:** Dravidian with Kerala elements<br>• **Key Features:** Known for subterranean vaults; temple symbolises ruler as 'Padmanabha Dasa' (servant of Vishnu). |

## SC Pushes for 'Romeo-Juliet' Exception in POCSO Law

The Supreme Court of India has urged the Union Law Secretary to consider steps to prevent the misuse of the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, 2012, particularly in cases involving consensual adolescent relationships.

The observation comes amid a pending public interest litigation on the age of consent and reflects growing judicial concern over the **blanket criminalisation** of consensual sexual acts between minors under the existing POCSO framework.

### POCSO Act: Balancing Child Protection and Adolescent Autonomy

- Under the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act, 2012, anyone below 18 is considered a child, and the law does not recognise consent by minors.
- As a result, all sexual activity involving a minor is criminalised, irrespective of whether it is consensual or non-exploitative.
- The court observed that the law is often invoked by families to oppose consensual relationships between adolescents, raising concerns about over-criminalisation and the denial of young people's autonomy.

### Growing Momentum for Reform

- **Arguments for Adolescent Autonomy**
  - Senior Advocate Indira Jaising, assisting the court as amicus curiae, has argued for either reading down the age of consent or introducing statutory exceptions.
  - In her submissions, she contended that blanket criminalisation violates adolescents' fundamental rights under Articles 14, 15, 19, and 21 of the Constitution.
- **'Evolving Capacity' and the Mature Minor Doctrine**
  - Jaising maintained that adolescents aged 16–18 possess an "evolving capacity" to make informed decisions about sexual autonomy.
  - Drawing on the common law "**mature minor" doctrine**, she argued that treating all under-18s as incapable of consent ignores scientific realities, including the biological onset of puberty.
- **Proposal for a Close-in-Age Exception**
  - To address misuse of the law, Jaising proposed a "close-in-age" or "Romeo-Juliet" exception.
  - Under this approach, consensual relationships between adolescents close in age—such as a 16- and 17-year-old—would not attract criminal liability, preventing unnecessary incarceration under the POCSO framework.

### Union Government's Case for Retaining the Existing Law

- The Union Government of India has opposed any reduction in the age of consent or the creation of legislative exceptions under the POCSO Act, 2012.
- **Rationale: Vulnerability and Strict Liability**
  - The government maintained that minors lack the legal and developmental capacity to give meaningful consent.
  - It defended the Act's strict liability framework—where consent is irrelevant—on the ground that children are especially vulnerable to manipulation and coercion by adults, including those in positions of trust.
- **Concerns Over Dilution and Misuse**
  - According to the government, introducing exceptions or lowering the age of consent could create loopholes that allow child abuse and trafficking to be disguised as consensual relationships.
- **Preference for Judicial Discretion**
  - The Centre argued that relief in hard cases should come through judicial discretion exercised on a case-by-case basis, rather than through statutory dilution of protections.

- **Law Commission's View**
  - In 2023, the Law Commission of India also advised against lowering the age of consent to 16.

**Unintended Consequences of POCSO:** Mandatory reporting under POCSO compels doctors to inform police about underage pregnancies or sexual activity, discouraging adolescents from accessing essential sexual and reproductive healthcare due to fear of prosecution.

## Tackling Child Trafficking in India

India's efforts against child trafficking are under renewed scrutiny following recent judicial directions and data showing **low conviction rates despite large-scale rescues**, highlighting gaps between law, enforcement, and justice delivery.

### Understanding Child Trafficking

- A grave **human rights violation** involving recruitment, transportation, harbouring, or receipt of children for exploitation.
- Forms of exploitation include **forced labour, sexual exploitation, slavery, servitude, and organ removal**.

### Legal Definitions: International and Domestic

- **International Framework -** The **Palermo Protocol (2000)** defines child trafficking as exploitation of a child **irrespective of consent**—a principle adopted by India.
- **Domestic Law - Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS), 2023**: Broad definition covering coercion, deception, abuse of power, and inducement for multiple forms of exploitation (physical, sexual, economic, organ trafficking).

### Constitutional Protection

- **Article 23**: Prohibits trafficking and forced labour.
- **Article 24**: Bans child labour in hazardous industries.
- **Article 39(e) & (f)**: Directs the State to ensure protection, dignity, and healthy development of children.
- These impose a **positive obligation** on the State to prevent exploitation and address enabling conditions.

### Key Legislations Addressing Child Trafficking

- BNS, 2023: Criminalises trafficking and buying/selling of minors.
- Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act, 1956: Targets sexual exploitation.
- Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015: Care, rehabilitation, reintegration.
- POCSO Act, 2012: Stringent, gender-neutral provisions; fast-track courts for speedy trials.

### Judicial Interventions

- The Supreme Court of India has recognised trafficking as a violation of the right to life and dignity.
- Landmark cases—*Vishal Jeet (1990), M.C. Mehta (1996), Bachpan Bachao Andolan (2011)*—established preventive, rehabilitative, and regulatory principles.
- Recent directions stress victim-centric approaches, accountability, and coordinated enforcement.

### Structural Challenges

- **Low conviction rates** weaken deterrence.
- **Socio-economic vulnerabilities**: poverty, migration, disasters, family breakdown.
- **Digital misuse** for recruitment via fake jobs/opportunities.
- **Inter-State networks** and fragmented enforcement; law and order being a **State subject** complicates coordination.

### Way Forward

- Improve investigations and evidence quality; strengthen rehabilitation and reintegration.
- Faster trials and enhanced prosecution capacity to raise conviction rates.
- Digital surveillance and platform accountability.
- Address root causes through social protection, education, livelihoods, and awareness.

- Strong Centre–State partnership to dismantle cross-border trafficking networks.

## EPFO 3.0

The Employees' Provident Fund Organisation (EPFO), India's premier retirement fund body, is undertaking a new phase of **digital and institutional reforms**—EPFO 3.0.

- These reforms aim to simplify access, enhance portability, prepare for expanded social security coverage under the **Labour Codes**, and build upon earlier changes under EPFO 2.0, aimed at easing withdrawals and claim settlements.
- EPFO is in the final stages of floating a tender for IT platform implementation and has shortlisted firms like Wipro, Infosys, TCS. EPFO 2.0 digital upgrade is nearing completion, and only pension, claim, and annual accounts modules pending.

### EPFO

- **Nature of body:** It is a premier Indian **statutory** body under the Ministry of Labour and Employment, established in **1952** to provide social security to the organized workforce.
- **Functions**: It manages compulsory, contributory provident fund, pension, and insurance schemes—specifically EPF 1952, EPS 1995, and EDLI 1976—ensuring **retirement savings and financial security** for employees.
- **Active members and corpus**: It currently has nearly 8 crore active members and maintains a corpus of around Rs 28 lakh crore.
- **Coverage**: coverage now extending to all establishments having 20 or more employees, regardless of the industry, under the new Social Security Code.

### EPFO 3.0 - Key Reforms Proposed

- **Centralised core banking solution:**
  - Introduction of a nationwide, centralised system akin to banking operations.
  - Members can access accounts and resolve issues at any EPFO office across India.
  - It seeks to enhance portability for migrant and inter-state workers.
- **New user-friendly portal:**
  - Revamped EPFO website with improved navigation. Integration of AI-backed language translation tools using **BHASHINI** (MeitY initiative).
  - It will facilitate access in vernacular languages, improving inclusivity
- **Preparation for labour codes implementation:**
  - EPFO is likely to administer social security funds for unorganised workers. Separate fund envisaged for gig and platform workers.
  - It addresses expansion in scale and scope of EPFO operations.

### EPFO 2.0 - Ongoing and Completed Reforms:

- **Liberalising withdrawal norms**:
  - It will streamline the withdrawal categories from 13 to 3 – essential needs (illness, education, marriage); housing needs; and special circumstances.
  - Minimum unemployment period for premature final settlement increased from 2 months to 12 months, aimed at preventing the erosion of retirement savings. While full withdrawal is deferred, members can still withdraw 75% of their funds after one month of unemployment, with the remaining 25% accessible only after 12 months.
- **UPI-linked withdrawal facility:**
  - Under the UPI facility, members can withdraw funds using the BHIM app.
  - They will also be able to separately view their available balance, the balance eligible for withdrawal and the minimum 25% balance.
  - The withdrawal amount could be initially capped at Rs 25,000 per transaction.

- **Self-correction of personal details:**
  - Members are allowed to correct personal details without employer/EPFO approval.
  - Applicable to name, date of birth, gender, marital status, dates of joining/leaving, etc.
  - For UANs (Universal Account Number) issued before 1 October 2017, employers can make corrections without EPFO approval.
  - **Impact**: About 32.23 lakh profile corrections completed till December 2025.

### Challenges and Way Forward

- **Managing scale expansion**: With inclusion of unorganised workers. Leveraging Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI) like UPI and BHASHINI.
- **Ensuring data security and cyber resilience**: In centralised systems. Phased implementation of EPFO 3.0 with strong IT governance.
- **Digital literacy gaps**: Among workers. Capacity building of EPFO staff and awareness among beneficiaries.
- **Smooth transition from legacy systems:** Coordination with States for effective rollout of Labour Codes.

## Laws Against Acid Attack in India

The recent acquittal of the accused in a 2009 acid attack case (Shaheen Malik) exposed deep flaws in justice delivery for survivors. With only 16 convictions out of 703 acid attack cases pending in 2023, the verdict risks discouraging victims from pursuing justice.

**Prevalence:** NCRB recorded 207 cases in India in 2023, but due to underreporting, actual numbers are estimated to be far higher- possibly around 1,000 annually.

### Laws Against Acid Attacks in India

- **Judicial Trigger:** The legal framework was strengthened after the Supreme Court's (SC) landmark judgment in *Laxmi vs Union of India (2013)*, which recognized acid attacks as a distinct and heinous crime requiring specific penal provisions and preventive measures by the State.
- **Substantive Criminal Law:** With the replacement of the IPC by the **Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS), 2023**, acid attacks are now covered under **Section 124**:
  - **Acid attack:** Minimum **10 years' imprisonment**, extendable to **life imprisonment**, plus a **"just and reasonable" fine** to cover medical expenses.
  - **Attempt to acid attack: 5-7 years imprisonment**.

  The offence is thus treated separately from general hurt or grievous hurt.
- **Victim Care & Medical Obligations:** All **public and private hospitals** are legally bound to provide **free first aid and medical treatment** to acid attack victims. Failure to comply attracts **up to 1 year imprisonment and/or a fine**.

| Challenges in Addressing Acid Attacks | Suggested Reforms |
|---|---|
| • **Weak Enforcement of Acid Sale Regulations:** Poor monitoring of acid sales and absence of accountability of district authorities allow easy access to corrosive substances.<br>• **Delays in Investigation and Trial:** Prolonged police investigations and slow judicial processes lead to low conviction rates and survivor fatigue.<br>• **Judicial Insensitivity and Victim-Blaming:** Lack of gender sensitization among investigators and judges often results in traumatization of survivors.<br>• **Delayed Compensation and Inadequate Rehabilitation:** Compensation is frequently released after years, undermining timely medical treatment and recovery.<br>• **Social Stigma and Underreporting:** Fear of retaliation, family pressure, and social stigma discourage survivors from reporting attacks or pursuing cases. | • **Strict Control Over Acid Sale:** Impose a **near-total ban** on retail acid sales except for licensed industrial use. **Enforce accountability** of district authorities (e.g., SDMs) for illegal sales. Learn from **Bangladesh's model**, where strict laws and enforcement sharply reduced attacks.<br>• **Stronger Deterrence Through Justice Delivery: Fast-track courts** for acid attack cases. **Sensitization of police, prosecutors, and judges** to prevent victim-blaming and procedural insensitivity. Penalize **investigative lapses and judicial delays** to improve conviction rates.<br>• **Immediate and Adequate Compensation:** To enable timely medical treatment and rehabilitation.<br>• **Comprehensive Survivor Rehabilitation:** Implement the **Justice J.S. Verma Committee's recommendation** for a **national fund** covering lifelong medical care, psychological support, education, and skill development.<br>• **Social Prevention Measures:** Large-scale **public awareness campaigns** to challenge patriarchal attitudes and reduce stigma. |

*{For more on Acid Attack refer The Recitals- Dec 2025}*

## Property Registration and Title

In *Samiullah vs State of Bihar (2025)*, the Supreme Court (SC) observed that property transactions in India are often "traumatic," highlighting the widespread difficulties and complexities faced by citizens in buying and selling land.

### The Samiullah Case and SC Ruling:

- **Issue examined:** Validity of 2019 sub-rules under the Bihar Registration Rules 2008 that allowed registrars to refuse property registration if the seller failed to produce mutation records (e.g., Jamabandi).
- **Ruling:** The SC struck down the sub-rules as **ultra vires and arbitrary** citing following reasons-
  - **Excess of authority:** The rules exceeded powers conferred under the Registration Act.
  - **Title vs registration:** Mutation (revenue record update) does not confer title; it only serves fiscal purposes, while the Registration Act is designed to record documents, not ownership. Making mutation proof mandatory prerequisite for property registration is **contrary to the object of the Registration Act** and restricts free transfer of property (right to property).
  - **Impracticability:** With mutation and survey processes incomplete in Bihar, obtaining such proof was often impossible.
- **Core clarification:** Registration of a transfer deed is **distinct from establishing title**. Questions of title (ownership) fall within the scope of **civil courts**, not registration offices (which performs administrative functions).

### Why is Registration Different From Title?

- **Registration ≠ ownership:** Registration only records a document; it does **not** determine or confirm title. It creates a **rebuttable presumption**, not conclusive proof of ownership.
- **Limited role of registrar:** Sub-Registrars lack adjudicatory power and cannot decide ownership disputes; such questions fall within the jurisdiction of **civil courts**.
- **Practical constraints:** Incomplete land surveys and inadequate digitization make linking registration to conclusive title impractical.
- **Judicial position:** In K.Gopi vs Sub-Registrar, and Samiullah, the SC held that rules requiring proof of title or mutation as a precondition for registration are invalid.
  - The proposed Registration Bill, 2025 which seeks to replace the Registration Act, 1908 and create a modern, digital, paperless and citizen-centric legal framework for the registration of documents, especially those concerning immovable property- maintains this separation between registration and title.

### Why are Property Transactions 'Traumatic' in India?

- **Fragmented land governance:** Land administration is split across **Registration, Survey & Settlement, and Revenue** departments, each functioning independently under separate laws, leading to mismatched records.
- **Presumptive, not conclusive, title:** The system provides only a **presumption of ownership**, which can be challenged in courts using multiple forms of evidence, increasing legal uncertainty.
- **High due-diligence burden:** Buyers must verify past deeds, mutation records, revenue receipts, possession, and possible competing claims, making transactions risky and complex.
- **Administrative and judicial delays:** Bureaucratic hurdles and an **overburdened judiciary** often result in prolonged disputes.
- **Historical complexity:** Colonial laws, varied princely state systems, diverse revenue practices, and post-Independence land reforms have created a **regionally fragmented and intricate land regime**.

### Way Forward for Land Administration Reform

- **Core Reform Objective:** Move towards **integrated, synchronized land records** to reduce fraud, disputes, and transaction uncertainty. Align **registration, revenue, and survey** data on a single platform.
- **Digitization and Integration:** Union and States are digitizing land records and modernizing workflows. **Integrated models** (e.g., linking registration with records of rights) reduce delays and errors by enabling **automatic updating** after transactions. Current focus remains stronger for **agricultural land**; needs expansion to urban and peri-urban areas.
- **Role of Technology: End-to-end digital workflows** to cut discretion and delays. Exploration of **AI** for verification, anomaly detection, and record reconciliation. **Blockchain** identified by the SC as a promising tool for secure land records.

**Blockchain for land records:** will create a **tamper-proof, transparent, chronological ledger** of land data. Each land parcel can have a single chain recording title history and transfers; Survey maps and spatial data; Heirs, crops, water resources, and registered documents. Subsequent transactions add new blocks, ensuring traceability.

- **Key Safeguards: Data accuracy is critical**: digitizing incorrect records will cause problems. Blockchain must be integrated with **existing legal and administrative frameworks**, not replace them abruptly. Clear mechanisms for **correction, grievance redressal, and adjudication** are essential.

## Pending Criminal Cases Can't Bar a Citizen from Obtaining Passport

The Supreme Court recently held that pending criminal cases do not automatically bar citizens from obtaining or renewing passports, as this right falls under the inviolable right to life protected under Article 21 of the Constitution (Protection of Life and Personal Liberty).

### What Did the SC Rule?

- **Renewal = Fresh Scrutiny:** Even assuming that **passport renewal attracts the same scrutiny as fresh issuance**, Section 6(2)(f) is **not an absolute bar** once conditions under **GSR 570(E)** are satisfied.
- **Judicial Oversight Sufficient:** The **NIA Court (Ranchi)** and **Delhi HC** consciously permitted renewal **with full knowledge of pending cases**, while **retaining control over foreign travel-** addressing the core concern of ensuring court jurisdiction over the accused.
- **No Need for Specific Travel Permission:** The law **does not require** a criminal court to authorize a **specific foreign trip** as a precondition for issuing or renewing a passport.
- **Passport vs Travel:** A **passport is a civil identity document**; **foreign travel is a regulated activity**. Denying the passport exceeds statutory requirements when courts can regulate travel case-by-case.
- **Liberty and Due Process:** Procedural safeguards must not become **rigid barriers** or **indefinite exclusions** that undermine personal liberty under the Constitution.
- **State Control Retained:** Issuance of a passport does **not dilute State authority**; powers under **Section 10** to impound or revoke remain available if conditions change or are breached.
- **Final Direction:** The Court ordered the **Regional Passport Office** to **reissue a 10-year ordinary passport within four weeks**, subject to **continuing court-imposed travel restrictions**.

### Case Background:

- **Criminal Proceedings:** Mahesh Kumar Agarwal, an Indian citizen facing **pending criminal proceedings** (NIA extortion case) and a **conviction under appeal** (CBI coal block case), was subject to court orders requiring him to **deposit his passport and not travel abroad without permission.**
- **Passport Renewal Permission:** As his passport neared expiry, both the **NIA court** and the **Delhi High Court** (HC) permitted **renewal of the passport**, while continuing the restriction on foreign travel.
- **Administrative Refusal:** However, the **Regional Passport Office** refused to issue a regular passport, citing **Section 6(2)(f) of the Passports Act (PA), 1967**, which bars passport issuance when criminal proceedings are pending. The authorities argued that renewal was permissible only if the court had expressly allowed foreign travel.
- **HC Decision**: Agarwal challenged this refusal, but the **Calcutta HC upheld the denial**, holding that since foreign travel was not permitted, the statutory bar under Section 6(2)(f) continued to apply.

### What Does PA, 1967 Say?

- **Section 5 of the PA, 1967:** Passport authority must **issue or refuse a passport through a written order**.
- **Section 6:** Refusal is permitted **only on grounds expressly listed in the Act**.
- **Section 6(2)(e):** Refusal after conviction applies **only if the offence involves moral turpitude** and the sentence is **at least two years**.
- **Validity:** An ordinary passport normally has a **10-year validity**.
- **Section 7:** Allows issuance of a passport for a **shorter period**.
- **Section 8:** Permits **extension** of short-term passports.
- **Section 10:** Authorities may **impound or revoke** a passport if criminal proceedings are pending, conditions are violated, or a **court restricts travel**.
- **Section 22:** Empowers the Union government to **grant exemptions** from the Act in **public interest**.
- **GSR 570(E), 1993:** Government issued Notification General statutory Rules 570(E) which provides a **conditional exemption from Section 6(2)(f)** for persons facing criminal cases, subject to an **undertaking to appear** before the court at any time; passport validity is **linked to the court's order**, with default validity if none is specified.
- **MEA Office Memorandum (OM), 2019:** Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) 2019 OM directs **strict application of GSR 570(E)** and clarifies that a **court-issued NOC prevails over adverse police reports**.
  - ✔ The **SC reaffirmed** that court permission **overrides police objections**.

### Significance of the SC Verdict

- **Strengthens Article 21:** Confirms that the **right to a passport flows from personal liberty** and cannot be denied automatically due to pending cases.

- **Clarifies the Law:** Holds that **Section 6(2)(f) is not an absolute bar** when court conditions under **GSR 570(E)** are met.
- **Judicial Primacy:** Establishes that **court permission/NOC overrides police objections**.
- **Retains State Safeguards:** Confirms that the State retains adequate control through **Section 10 powers** to impound or revoke passports if required.

## Live Events Development Cell (LEDC)

The Ministry of Information and Broadcasting (MIB) recently established a Live Events Development Cell (LEDC) to facilitate the expansion of the "concert economy", boosting employment and tourism in the country.

### Key Features of LEDC

- **Institutional Structure:** Constituted under the leadership of Union Minister **Ashwini Vaishnaw**. It includes representatives from Central and State governments, Industry associations, Music rights societies, Major event and entertainment companies.
- **Single-Window Coordination:** It acts as a **facilitator**, not a regulator and will help resolve inter-departmental clearances, licensing and compliance issues, operational bottlenecks for organizers.
- **Data-Driven Policy Support:** It uses industry data to guide decision-making and incorporates insights from platforms like **BookMyShow** to track audience trends, regional growth and consumption patterns.
- **Focus on Emerging Cities:** It lays strong emphasis on **Tier-2 and Tier-3 cities** like-
  - Visakhapatnam: **490% growth** in live event footfalls
  - Vadodara at 230%
  - Shillong: **213%**
  - Guwahati: **188%**

  Northeast emerging as a major live entertainment hub.

- **Integration with Tourism and Urban Economy:** Encourages travel for events- over **5 lakh people** travelled to other cities for live events in 2025. Strengthens hospitality, transport, and local services.

### Broader Significance

- **Economic**: Diversifies India's media and entertainment ecosystem.
- **Social**: Revives public engagement with theatre, music, and culture (45% rise in theatre attendance).
- **Regional Development**: Reduces metro-centric growth.
- **Global Positioning**: Helps brand India as a global live entertainment destination.

## SC Expands the Definition of "Terrorist Act"

The Supreme Court (SC)recently granted bail to five of the seven accused in the **2020 Delhi riots** but denied bail to Umar Khalid and Sharjeel Imam. In February 2020, during widespread protests against the Citizenship

(Amendment) Act (CAA) and the National Register of Citizens (NRC), a communal clash broke out in Delhi. The riots continued for days, leaving more than 50 people dead and over 700 injured.

| What did the Court Rule? | Why? |
|---|---|
| • **Individualized Assessment of Culpability:** It held that even when multiple accused are charged under the same stringent provisions (UAPA 1967, Arms Act, IPC), **their roles must be assessed individually**. It recognized a **hierarchy of offenders**, distinguishing between principal architects of the alleged terrorist act and co-accused with merely facilitative or subsidiary roles.<br>• **Broad Interpretation of "Terrorist Act":** The Court accepted an **expansive reading of Section 15 of the UAPA**, holding that a terrorist act is not confined to violence using conventional weapons. Acts carried out by **"any other means of whatever nature"** can qualify if the **intent, design, and effect** are to threaten the unity, integrity, security, or sovereignty of India or to strike terror.<br>  ◦ *Note: 2012 amendment Expanded terrorism to include threats to economic security—financial, energy, food, livelihood, and environmental security. Counterfeit currency offences explicitly designated as terrorist acts. Extended liability to companies, trusts, and societies, including office-bearers.*<br>  ◦ *2019 amendment Empowered the Centre to designate individuals as terrorists, not just organisations.*<br>• **Bail and Prolonged Incarceration:** While considering bail, the Court took note of **extended pre-trial detention and systemic delays**, underscoring that such incarceration cannot be mechanically justified without scrutinizing the accused's **specific role and evidence**. | • **Textual interpretation of UAPA, 1967:** Parliament deliberately used wide language ("any other means"), indicating that the law targets **the purpose and impact of conduct**, not merely the tools used.<br>• **Principle of proportionality:** Treating all accused identically under terror charges would be unjust; **degree of involvement matters**.<br>• **Balancing security and liberty:** The ruling seeks to reconcile **national security concerns** with **constitutional safeguards**, especially where trials are delayed. |

**Implications of the SC Verdict:**

- **Role-based Bail Jurisprudence Under UAPA:** Courts must now **differentiate between principal and peripheral accused**, preventing a blanket denial of bail merely due to the invocation of terror charges (*formal application of anti-terrorism laws)*
- **Expansion of the Scope of "Terrorist Act":** By endorsing a **broad interpretation of Section 15**, the ruling lowers the threshold for what may qualify as terrorism, shifting focus from the *means used* to the *intent and impact* of the act.
- **Greater Prosecutorial Discretion and Scrutiny:** Investigating agencies gain latitude to frame non-conventional acts as terror-related, but courts are simultaneously required to **closely scrutinise evidence and individual culpability**.

The **Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA), 1967** is India's primary anti-terror law aimed at preventing and punishing activities that threaten the sovereignty, unity, and security of the State. It enables the government to ban organizations, prosecute terrorist acts, and fulfil India's obligations under UN counter-terrorism resolutions.

- **Section 15 of UAPA, 1967**: Defines an act as a terrorist act if it is done **with intent (or likelihood)** to threaten **unity, integrity, security, economic security, or sovereignty of India**, or **strike terror** in the people (in India or abroad).
  - ✔ **Modes of Commission:** Such intent may be carried out through **violent or hazardous means** (explosives, firearms, chemicals, biological/radiological/nuclear substances), **or** by **"any other means of whatever nature"**.
  - ✔ **Prohibited consequences:**
    - **Death or injury** to persons;
    - **Damage or destruction of property**;
    - **Disruption of essential supplies/services**;
    - **Damage to India's monetary stability** (e.g., high-quality counterfeit currency);
    - **Damage to defence or government property**.
  - ✔ **Additional acts deemed terrorist:**
    - **Overawing public functionaries** by criminal force or causes death or attempting to kill them;
    - **Kidnapping/abduction** any person to coerce governments, international bodies, or any person.
  - ✔ **Extended coverage:** Includes acts that amount to offences under **international anti-terror treaties** listed in the Second Schedule.
  - ✔ **Essence:** Section 15 focuses on **intent, design, and impact**, not merely the weapon used; even non-conventional means can constitute a terrorist act if the statutory consequences and objectives are met.

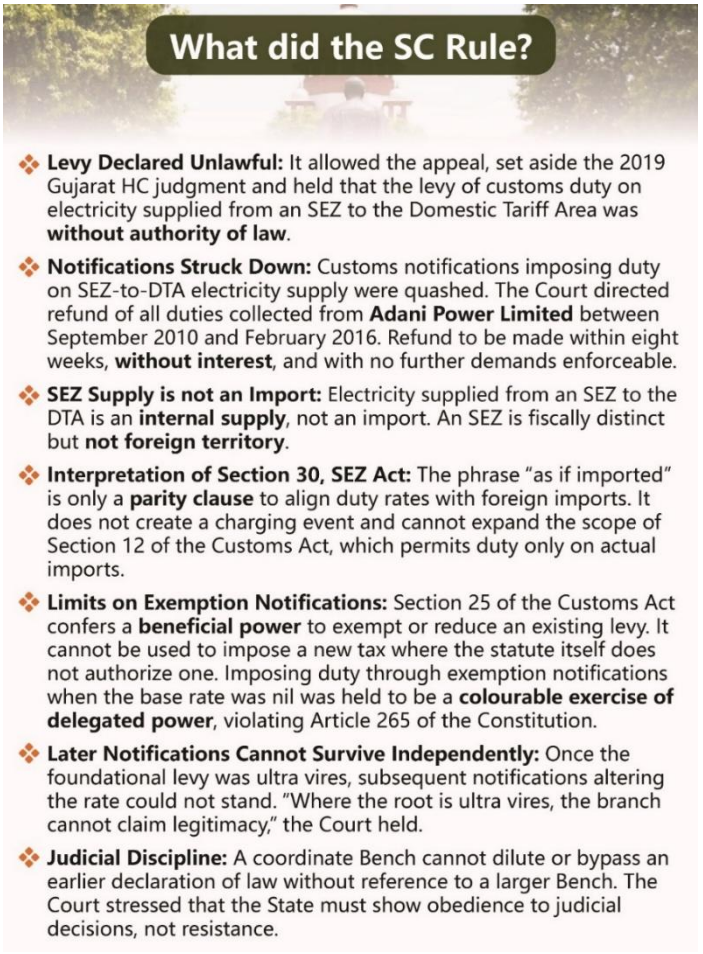
- **Impact on Protest and Dissent Cases:** Activities such as mass disruptions or blockades may face **stricter legal characterization**, raising concerns about the potential chilling effect on democratic protest.
- **Reinforcement of Safeguards Against Prolonged Detention:** The judgment strengthens the principle that **indefinite pre-trial incarceration** under special laws cannot be justified without progress in trial and role-specific evidence.
- **Precedential Value for Future UAPA Bail Cases:** The decision will guide lower courts nationwide, recalibrating the balance between **national security imperatives and personal liberty** under Article 21, as interpreted by the Supreme Court of India.

## Government Cannot Tax SEZ Electricity as a 'Foreign Import'

The Supreme Court (SC) recently ruled that the Union government cannot levy customs duty on electricity supplied from a Special Economic Zone (SEZ) to the domestic tariff area, overturning the 2019 Gujarat High Court (HC) decision in the Adani Power case.

### Case Background:

- **Adani Mundra SEZ Dispute: Adani Power Limited** generated electricity at its thermal power plant located in the **Mundra Special Economic Zone**. The electricity was supplied to distribution companies in the Domestic Tariff Area (DTA). SEZs in India are designated duty-free enclaves treated as foreign territory for customs and fiscal purposes. Under the SEZ Act 2005, transactions between SEZs and the DTA are treated as imports/exports.
- **The Core Issue:** Whether electricity supplied from an SEZ to the DTA can be subjected to customs duty. This question arose even though electricity imported from foreign countries attracted a nil rate of customs duty.
- **Related Laws:**
  - **Section 12, Customs Act, 1962**: Customs duty can be levied only on goods imported into India.
  - **Section 30, SEZ Act, 2005**: Goods cleared from an SEZ to the DTA are chargeable to customs duty "as if" imported into India.
  - **Section 25, Customs Act, 1962**: Empowers the Centre to grant exemptions from customs duty in public interest.
- **Gujarat HC (2015 Judgment):** Held that customs duty can arise only on actual import into India. Ruled that electricity moving from an SEZ to the DTA does not cross an international border. Observed that a provision intended to grant tax relief cannot be used to create a new levy.
  - HC in July 2015 had struck down the levy of customs duty on electrical energy cleared by the firm from its SEZ unit into the DTA from June 2009 to September 2010.
- **Government Move:** Post Gujarat HC verdict, instead of withdrawing the levy, the Union government replaced the percentage-based duty with a per-unit charge on electricity supplied from SEZs to the DTA. Although the quantum was reduced, the levy continued.
- **Gujarat HC coordinate bench (2019 Verdict):** Dismissed Adani Power's challenge to the continued levy. Held that the 2015 relief was limited in time and could not be extended automatically. Flagged the risk of a "double



benefit" if both inputs (such as coal) and output (electricity) were exempt. Noted that later exemption notifications were not directly challenged.

- **SC Appeal:** Adani Power appealed against the 2019 Gujarat HC ruling. The appeal culminated in the Supreme Court examining the scope of customs duty on SEZ-to-DTA electricity supply and the limits of the Centre's taxing powers.

### Implications of the SC Verdict

- **Limits on Taxing Powers:** Reinforces that **customs duty can be levied only on actual imports**, not on internal supplies. Curtails the Centre's ability to stretch deeming provisions to create new tax liabilities.
- **Discipline in Use of Delegated Legislation:** The verdict draws a clear boundary on **Section 25 exemption notifications**. Strengthens the constitutional bar on *taxation without authority of law* under Article 265.
- **Precedent for SEZ operations:** Provides certainty to SEZ developers and units against retrospective or creative fiscal levies. May prompt review or rollback of similar duties imposed through notifications.
- **Fiscal Impact on Government:** Requires refund of duties already collected in similar cases, potentially affecting revenue. Signals higher litigation risk for retrospective or **notification-based taxation**.
- **Judicial Consistency:** Emphasizes that coordinate benches must respect earlier binding rulings or if it doubted its correctness or applicability, ought to have referred the question to a larger bench. Discourages repeated or piecemeal levies after an issue has been conclusively settled.

## Police in States Step Up Social Media Monitoring

According to **Data on Police Organizations (DoPO)** reports, police forces across the States have significantly expanded **social media monitoring cells** over the last five years.

Earlier subsumed within cybercrime police stations, social media monitoring cells began functioning as distinct units from 2021, as reflected in DoPO reports prepared by the Bureau of Police Research and Development (BPRD) under the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA).

### Significance:

- Reflects the **institutionalization of digital surveillance** as a core policing function.
- Indicates a shift towards **preventive and intelligence-led policing** amid rising cybercrime and misinformation.
- Highlights **technology-led expansion** despite persistent **manpower shortages**, exposing capacity constraints.
- Raises important concerns regarding **privacy, oversight, and civil liberties**, underscoring the need for clear legal and ethical frameworks.

### What Data Says?

- **Expansion of Social Media Monitoring Cells:** The number of dedicated cells rose from **262 in 2020** to **365 in 2024** across States and UTs to **monitor and pre-empt evolving crimes and misinformation** on platforms such as Facebook, X, WhatsApp and Instagram. Most cells are located in **Bihar, Maharashtra, Punjab, West Bengal and Assam**.
- **Growth in Conflict-Prone and Sensitive Regions:** **Manipur** expanded from **3 to 16 cells** despite prolonged internet shutdowns; **Assam (1 to 37)**, **West Bengal (2 to 38)** and **Punjab (24 to 48)** recorded sharp increases.
- **Strengthening of Cybercrime Infrastructure:** The number of **cybercrime police stations** increased from **376 (2020)** to **624 (2024)**.
- **Rising Use of Technology in Policing:** Police **drones** increased from **1,010 in 2023** to **1,147 in 2024**.
- **Severe Human Resource Shortfall:** There are ~**5.92 lakh vacancies** against a sanctioned strength of ~**27.55 lakh** police personnel.
- **Social Composition of the Police Force:** Of the sanctioned strength, the actual force includes personnel from **Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward Classes**, indicating social diversity within the police.

## Arbitration Council of India

Despite a 2019 amendment to the Arbitration and Conciliation Act 1996, the Union Government has not yet constituted the Arbitration Council of India (ACI) to promote and regulate institutional arbitration.

### What is ACI

It is a **statutory body** proposed under **Arbitration and Conciliation (Amendment) Act, 2019** to be established by the **Central Government.** The ACI is a **body corporate** with perpetual succession, headquartered in **New Delhi**.

✓ The institutional framework is based on the recommendations of the **Justice B.N. Srikrishna–led High-Level Committee on Arbitration (2017)**.

**Objectives of ACI**

- To regulate, promote and standardize **institutional arbitration, mediation, conciliation and other ADR** *(Alternative Dispute Resolution)* **mechanisms** in India.
- To encourage a shift from **ad hoc arbitration to institutional arbitration**.
- To ensure **uniform professional standards** in arbitration practice.
- To strengthen India's position as a **hub for domestic and international commercial arbitration**.
- To facilitate **speedy and efficient resolution of commercial disputes**.

**Composition of ACI:** The Council consists of the following members:

- **Chairperson (Age Limit- 70 years)**: A former Supreme Court (SC) Judge / Chief Justice or Judge of a High Court (HC) / eminent arbitration expert, appointed by the Central Government in consultation with the **Chief Justice of India (CJI)**.
- **Members (Age limit- 67 years)**:
  - Eminent arbitration practitioner with experience in domestic and international arbitration
  - Eminent academician in arbitration and ADR laws
  - Secretary, Department of Legal Affairs, Ministry of Law and Justice (ex officio)
  - Secretary, Department of Expenditure, Ministry of Finance (ex officio)
  - Representative of a recognized commerce and industry body (part-time, rotational)
  - Chief Executive Officer – Member Secretary (ex officio)
- **Tenure**: 3 years.

**Duties and Functions of ACI:**

- **Policy & Regulatory Role:** Frame policies to promote arbitration, mediation, conciliation, other ADR mechanisms.
- **Institutional Oversight:** Grade arbitral institutions, review and update grading periodically and strengthen institutional arbitration in India.
  - Institutions are graded based on infrastructure, quality and caliber of arbitrators, performance and efficiency, compliance with statutory time limits (for both domestic and international commercial arbitration).
  - *Note: The power to accredit unlimited arbitral institutions may dilute quality and increase administrative burden. Unlike India, Singapore relies on a single central arbitral institution rather than a government regulator overseeing multiple institutions.*
- **Accreditation and Capacity Building:** Recognize professional bodies for **accreditation of arbitrators**. Conduct training programmes, workshops, and certification courses. Collaborate with law firms, universities, and arbitral institutions.
- **Knowledge and Advisory Role:** Act as a national forum for exchange of best practices. Recommend measures to the Central Government for faster commercial dispute resolution and improving arbitration ecosystem.
- **Depository of Arbitral Awards:** ACI shall maintain a **centralized electronic repository** of arbitral awards. Enhance transparency, research and institutional memory (without affecting confidentiality norms).

**Significance:** Marks a shift from **ad hoc arbitration** to **institution-centric governance** with the aim to:

- Improve credibility and efficiency of arbitration in India
- Reduce judicial burden
- Attract international commercial arbitration.

**Draft Arbitration and Conciliation (Amendment) Bill, 2024**

- **Redefines "Arbitral Institution"**: Any body conducting arbitration under its own rules or as agreed by parties- **no court designation required** (unlike 2019 amendment).
- **Strengthens institutional arbitration** by **transferring select powers from courts to institutions**, including extending time limits for awards, reducing arbitrators' fees for tribunal-attributable delays and appoint substitute arbitrators.
- **Objective**: Reduce judicial intervention and improve efficiency.

### Implications of Delay in Constituting the ACI:

- **Weak Institutional Arbitration Ecosystem:** Absence of ACI delays the **transition from ad-hoc to institutional arbitration**. No central authority to **grade and strengthen arbitral institutions**, leading to uneven quality and credibility.
- **Setback to India as an International Arbitration Hub:** International parties prefer jurisdictions with **robust, independent arbitration regulators**
- **Lack of Uniform Standards and Accreditation:** Without ACI, there is **no national framework for accreditation of arbitrators**. Results in inconsistent professional standards and quality of arbitral proceedings.
- **Continued Dominance of Ad-hoc Arbitration:** Ad-hoc arbitration remains prevalent, causing procedural delays, higher costs, and greater judicial intervention. Even government departments are **shifting away from arbitration to mediation**.
- **Reduced Investor and Commercial Confidence:** Uncertainty in dispute resolution discourages **foreign investment and cross-border contracts**. Weakens India's **ease of doing business** credentials.
- **Policy-Implementation Gap in Arbitration Reforms:** Despite legislative intent (2019 amendment), non-implementation reflects a **governance deficit**. Dilutes the impact of expert committee recommendations on arbitration reforms.
- **Missed Opportunity for Capacity Building:** Delay hampers training and certification of arbitrators, creation of an **arbitral awards depository,** knowledge sharing and institutional learning.

### Way Forward

- **Immediately constitute ACI** to operationalize arbitration reforms.
- **Promote institutional arbitration** by mandating its use in government and PSU contracts.
- **Ensure autonomy and expertise** in ACI's composition to build credibility.
- **Standardize accreditation and training** of arbitrators.
- **Limit judicial intervention** and maintain policy stability.
- **Align with global best practices** to position India as an international arbitration hub.

## Reservation System for the Mayor's Post

The recent announcement of category-wise reservations by Maharashtra government for **mayoral posts** in 29 municipal corporations under the rotational system triggered political controversy. While the draw was conducted to fill seats for the upcoming term, the reservation of several key mayoral posts—including in the crucial Mumbai (BMC) and Pune corporations—under the General (Open) category for consecutive terms has led to allegations that the spirit of rotational policy is being violated.

### How is the Mumbai Mayor Elected?

- The Mayor (city's first citizen) is **not directly elected by citizens but from among the elected corporators** of the **Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC).** After the reservation category is officially notified, **only corporators belonging to that category** are eligible to contest.
- The **Municipal Commissioner** convenes a special meeting of the House presided over by the **senior-most corporator**. Voting is conducted **openly (show of hands)**.
- In the 227-member House, a candidate must secure **at least 114 votes** (simple majority) to be elected Mayor.

### Related Constitutional and Legal Framework

- **Constitutional Basis:** The process flows from the **74th Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992**, which granted constitutional status to Urban Local Bodies (ULBs), mandated reservation for **Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and women** and left implementation details to State legislations.
- **Statutory Framework:** In Maharashtra, mayoral elections are governed by-
  - Maharashtra Municipal Corporations Act 1949
  - Maharashtra Municipal Corporations (Reservation of Offices of Mayors) Rules, 2006

  These laws extend reservation to **OBCs** and institutionalize **rotation by lottery**.

**Term Structure:** The term of the Municipal Corporation is **5 years** and the term of the Mayor is **2.5 years.** Consequently, **two mayors are elected during one municipal term**. A **fresh reservation lottery** is conducted before each mayoral term.

**Reservation Criteria for the Mayor's Post:** Reservation is applied on two axes- **Social category** (SC, ST, OBC, General) and **Gender** (50% of mayoral posts reserved for women). Reservation rotates across terms to ensure equitable representation. Key eligibility conditions include-

- SC/ST Reservation: It is based on population proportions according to the 2011 Census. In the context of the 29 Mayoral seats, 3 were reserved for SC and 1 for ST.
- OBC Reservation: A 27% reservation for OBC was implemented in accordance with the 27% statutory quota, resulting in 8 out of the 29 municipal corporations having Mayoral seats reserved for the OBC category.
- Women's Representation: 15 out of the 29 municipal corporations will have women mayors.

******Note:** Corporation that already had a reserved mayor in earlier cycle may be **excluded** to maintain rotation.*

*** For SC/ST reservation, the corporation must have **at least three corporators** from that particular category.*

**Way Forward**

- **Greater Transparency**: Public disclosure of rotation matrices and past reservation data before the draw.
- **Codified Guidelines**: Clearer statutory rules on repetition and exclusion to reduce ambiguity.
- **Use of Technology**: Digitized and live-streamed lottery processes to enhance credibility.

## Government to Merge Agricultural Schemes

In a major restructuring move aimed at driving state-level agricultural reforms, the Union Ministry of Agriculture has proposed merging its three ongoing schemes into the flagship Pradhan Mantri-Rashtriya Krishi Vikas Yojana (PM-RKVY).

✓ Launched in **2007** as **Rashtriya Krishi Vikas Yojana (RKVY), the PM-RKVY** is an **umbrella scheme** for ensuring holistic development of agriculture and allied sectors by allowing states to choose their own agriculture and allied sector development activities as per the district/ state agriculture plan.

**Background**: The proposal follows recommendations of **NITI Aayog**, which revived the **15th Finance Commission's idea** of **performance-linked financial incentives** for states and encouraging reforms rather than mere expenditure.

**How is it Different from Existing PM-RKVY Allocation Criteria?**

- Under the 2024 PM-RKVY guidelines, inter-state fund allocation was based on largely static, need-based indicators such as the share of net un-irrigated area, the proportion of small and marginal farmers, and the share of youth population.
- The proposed criteria retain these indicators but introduce reform performance as the most heavily weighted factor, thereby incentivizing states to undertake structural agricultural reforms, achieve clearly defined milestones, and compete on governance quality rather than mere entitlement.

### Significance of the Proposal:

- Encourages **competitive federalism** in agriculture.
- Moves from **input-based spending** to **outcome-based funding.**
- Aligns agricultural policy with broader fiscal reform thinking.
- Simplifies scheme architecture while expanding scale.

## Responsible Nations Index

India recently launched the Responsible Nation's Index- the result of a three-year academic and policy initiative led by the **World Intellectual Foundation (WIF)** in collaboration with **Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU)** and the **Indian Institute of Management (IIM) Mumbai**.

### What is the Responsible Nations Index (RNI)?

It is a **first-of-its-kind global ranking framework launched by India** to assess countries not by economic size or military power, but by **ethical governance, social well-being, environmental stewardship, and international responsibility**.

### Coverage and Rankings (RNI 2026)

- **Countries covered:** 154; **Overall finding:** Responsible conduct is shaped more by **institutional integrity and policy choices** than by wealth alone.
- **Top Performers: 1st-** Singapore; **2nd-** Switzerland; **3rd-** Denmark.
- **India's Performance:** Ranked 16th globally **ahead of major powers** such as United States (66th) and China (68th). India's ranking reflects relatively strong performance in governance and institutional frameworks, social responsibility and international cooperation and peace engagement.

### Objectives of the RNI:

- To move global discourse **beyond GDP and hard power.**
- To encourage **ethical, inclusive, and sustainable governance.**
- To provide a **normative benchmark** for responsible state behaviour.
- To redefine global leadership as **responsibility-driven rather than dominance-driven.**

**Conceptual Framework:** The RNI is structured around **three core pillars-**

- **Internal Responsibility:** How does a state treat its **own citizens?** It focuses on dignity, rights, justice, governance quality, and well-being.
- **Environmental Responsibility:** How sustainably a nation manages **natural resources?** It focuses on climate action, biodiversity protection, pollution control, and sustainability outcomes.
- **External Responsibility:** How does a country behave in the **international system?** It focuses on contributions to peace, diplomacy, international cooperation, and global public goods.

### Dimensions, Indicators, and Methodology:

- RNI assesses countries across **seven dimensions-** quality of life, governance, social justice, economic performance, environmental protection, peace and security, and international economic relations.
- It uses **58 quantitative indicators across 15 sub-themes**, drawing data from **credible global sources** such as the World Bank, UN agencies, and the World Justice Project.

## Section 138 of the Negotiable Instruments Act

The Supreme Court (SC) recently held that multiple complaints can be filed when several cheques arise from a single transaction.

### What did the SC Rule?

- **Cheque-Specific Cause of Action:** Under **Section 138 NI Act**, the cause of action arises **from the dishonour of each cheque**, not from the underlying transaction.
- **Separate Offence for Each Dishonour:** Every cheque dishonour followed by **non-payment after statutory notice** constitutes a **separate offence**.

- **Disputed Facts Need Trial:** Whether cheques were **guarantees, substitutes, or part of a continuing arrangement** requires **evidence** and cannot be decided at the quashing stage.
- **Limits on Section 482 CrPC:** Quashing is permissible only where **no offence is disclosed even if allegations are accepted** (No Mini-Trial at the Quashing Stage)

## Case Background

- The dispute arose from 3 **failed commercial property transaction** in Ghaziabad, where the buyer paid **₹1.72 crore** with a refund clause if sale deeds were not registered by **30 September 2018**.
- On default, the developer issued a **personal guarantee** and provided **two sets of cheques-** one from the firm and one in his personal capacity.
- **Multiple cheques were presented and dishonoured on different occasions**, including both personal and firm cheques. Each dishonour, after following the statutory process, led to **separate complaints under Section 138 of the NI Act**, resulting in **five distinct cases**.
- In **April 2025**, the **Delhi High Court** (HC) quashed the cases, holding that both cheque sets arose from the **same liability**. It treated personal cheques as **substitutes for firm cheques** and ruled that proceeding on both amounted to **parallel prosecution and abuse of process**.

### What Does Section 138 of the Negotiable Instruments Act State?

- **Legally Enforceable Debt:** The cheque must be issued **to discharge a legally enforceable debt or liability** and presented within its **validity period**.
- **Dishonour by Bank:** The bank must return the cheque unpaid, typically with reasons such as **"insufficient funds"** or **"exceeds arrangement."**
- **Statutory notice (30 days):** Under **Section 138(b)**, the payee must issue a **written demand notice** to the drawer **within 30 days** of receiving information of dishonour.
- **Time to pay (15 days):** Under **Section 138(c)**, the drawer gets **15 days from receipt of notice** to make payment. If payment is not made, the **cause of action arises on the 16th day**, enabling the payee to file a complaint.
- **Multiple cheques, multiple offences:** Each cheque that is **presented, dishonoured, noticed, and unpaid** creates a **separate cause of action**, even if all cheques arise from the same transaction.

**Presumption of liability: Section 139** presumes that the cheque was issued for a debt or liability; the **burden shifts to the accused** to rebut this during trial.

## Is The Government Seeking Phones' Source Code?

The newswire agency *Reuters* recently reported that the Indian government was contemplating a requirement for smartphone manufacturers to share their source code with the government and implement specific software changes, triggering quiet resistance from major players such as Apple and Samsung.

**Source code** is the foundational set of instructions and digital assets that run a software system. While parts (such as Android's base code) are open-source, manufacturers make proprietary modifications that are closely guarded for commercial and security reasons, since full exposure can help attackers identify and exploit vulnerabilities.

### Why Is the Demand Controversial?

- **Unprecedented Requirement:** Forcing disclosure of source code is rare outside sensitive defence sectors and is not a norm for commercial smartphones globally.
- **Commercial Confidentiality:** Source code contains proprietary innovations that companies closely guard for competitive reasons.
- **Global Industry Resistance:** Even in strict regulatory environments like China, firms such as Apple have not shared their source code with governments.
- **Trust Deficit After Earlier Controversies:** The proposal follows backlash over the Department of

## Is the Indian government demanding that source code be made public?

- **No Formal Public Mandate Yet:** The government has not issued a final rule requiring smartphone source code to be made public.
- **Origin of the Controversy- ITSAR (2023):** A 2023 Indian Telecom Security Assurance Requirement (ITSAR) document under the DoT mentions access to source code **for third-party audits** and prior intimation of software updates to the government.
- **Regulatory Transition**: Earlier, smartphones were covered under the Mandatory Testing and Certification of Telecommunication Equipment (MTCTE) framework, which stems from Indian Telegraph (Amendment) Rules, 2017.
  - ✔ After the Telecommunications Act, 2023, the DoT and MeitY removed smartphones from MTCTE, as they already undergo certification under standards set by the Bureau of Indian Standards (BIS).
- **Government's Current Stance:** MeitY says discussions are routine consultations, no final regulations are framed, and the ministry has an "open mind" on industry concerns.

### Possible Implications If Source Code Is Shared with the Government

- **Enhanced Security Oversight:** Government access could allow deeper audits to detect hidden vulnerabilities, backdoors, or supply chain risks in smartphones.
- **Higher Cybersecurity Risks:** Centralized access to sensitive code increases the attack surface; leaks or breaches could expose critical vulnerabilities to malicious actors.
- **Commercial and IP Concerns:** Source code contains proprietary innovations; disclosure risks intellectual property (IP) loss and weakens competitive advantage.
- **Trust and Privacy Issues:** Users may fear surveillance or misuse of code access, eroding trust in devices and digital governance.
- **Compliance and Cost Burden:** Manufacturers may face higher costs, delays in updates, and complex approval processes, slowing innovation.
- **Impact on Global Investment:** Stringent or non-standard requirements could deter global smartphone makers and affect India's electronics manufacturing ecosystem.
- **Precedent for Deeper State Access:** Such a move could normalize intrusive regulatory access to core digital infrastructure, with wider implications for the tech sector.

Telecommunication's (DoT) order to pre-install the Sanchar Saathi app, which raised fears of surveillance and third-party security threats.

- **Intrusiveness of the Demand:** Unlike external testing, source code disclosure requires companies to expose their entire software ecosystem, including undocumented internal processes.

## Malayalam Language Bill, 2025

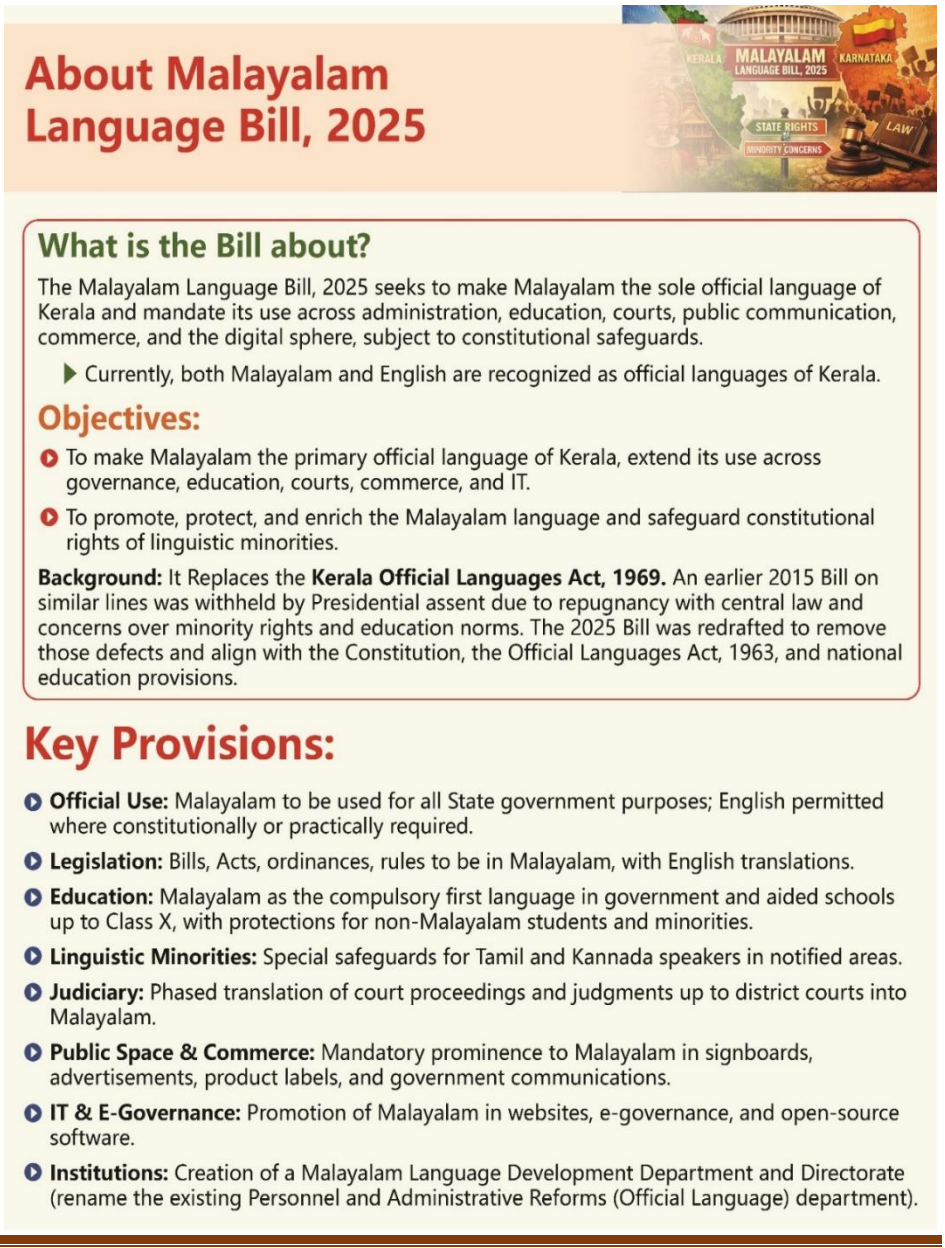
The Kerala Legislative Assembly passed the Malayalam Language Bill, 2025. The Bill now awaits the assent of the Governor.

### What Triggered the Opposition from Karnataka to the Bill?

- **Concern over Minority Language Rights:** The Karnataka government has termed the Bill unconstitutional, arguing that it infringes the rights of Kannada-speaking linguistic minorities in Kerala, particularly in **Kasaragod.**
- **Objection to Mandatory First Language Provision:** It has objected to the provision making Malayalam the compulsory first language in all schools, noting that Kannada-speaking students currently study Kannada as their first language.
- **Fear of Wider Linguistic Impact:** Karnataka has warned that enforcing the Bill in border districts like Kasaragod could have far-reaching consequences and negatively affect the Kannada language more broadly.

### Kerala Government's Stance on the Bill:

- **Protection of Linguistic Minority Rights:** The Kerala government maintains that the Bill safeguards the rights of linguistic minorities i.e. Tamil, Kannada, Tulu, and Konkani.
- **Special Administrative Provisions:** Linguistic minorities will be allowed to use their mother tongues for correspondence with the State Secretariat, Heads of Departments, and local government offices in notified areas.
- **Flexibility in Education:** Students whose mother tongue is not Malayalam may study the language of their choice as permitted under the National Education Curriculum.
- **Exemptions for Non-Malayalam Students:** Students from other States and foreign countries will be exempted from writing Malayalam examinations in Classes 9, 10, and higher secondary levels.



### Possible Implications if the Bill Gets Governor's Assent:

- **Administrative and Governance Impact:** Malayalam will become the **primary language for all State government functions**, requiring large-scale translation of laws, rules, official records, and correspondence. Staffing, and training around Malayalam usage.
- **Education Sector Changes:** Curriculum design, teacher deployment, and assessment systems may need restructuring, especially in border and minority-dominated areas.
- **Judicial & Quasi-Judicial Processes:** Courts up to the district level and quasi-judicial bodies will gradually shift to Malayalam, increasing accessibility for local litigants but requiring translation infrastructure & capacity-building.
- **Impact on Linguistic Minorities:** While the law provides safeguards, its implementation—particularly in border districts—could trigger **legal challenges** if minorities perceive dilution of their linguistic rights.
- **Centre-State and Inter-State Relations:** The law could invite **constitutional scrutiny** under central language and education laws and may intensify inter-State friction, especially with Karnataka.
- **Digital Governance and Technology:** Expansion of Malayalam in e-governance and public websites could improve inclusivity but will require sustained investment in localization and IT systems.

## Tiger Global Case

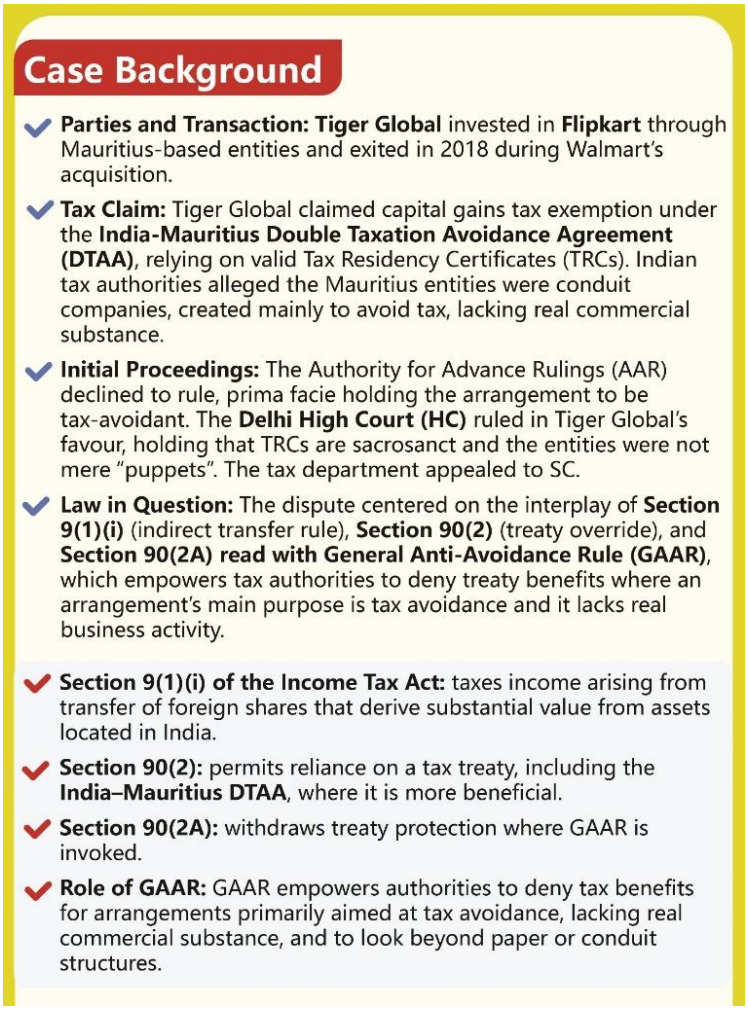
The Supreme Court (SC) recently denied capital-gains tax relief to **Tiger Global** on its exit from **Flipkart**, holding that treaty benefits are **not automatic** and may be refused where the investment structure is largely **substantive-deficient (paper-based)**, even if formal documentation is compliant.

### What did the SC Rule?

- **Holistic Test:** Transactions must be examined as a whole ("look-at" approach), not by formal steps alone. Treaty benefits depend on real commercial substance, not mere documentary compliance.
- **Mauritius Entities as Conduits**: Applying the "head and brain" test, it found that key control and decision-making lay outside Mauritius, rendering the entities "see-through" conduits.
- **AAR's Jurisdiction Upheld:** The Authority for Advance Rulings was justified in rejecting the application where material suggested prima facie tax avoidance. A TRC is only an eligibility condition, not definitive proof; authorities may go behind it in abuse cases.
- **GAAR applies (Confirms wide scope) :** Anti-avoidance scrutiny applies even to pre-2017 investments if the tax benefit arises later.
- **Outcome:** Treaty protection was denied as the structure was designed mainly to avoid tax.

### Implications of the Ruling

- **Treaty Benefits Not Automatic:** Tax treaty protection can be denied despite formal compliance if the structure lacks commercial substance.
- **TRC Diluted:** A TRC is no longer conclusive; authorities may look behind it in avoidance cases.



- **Substance-Over-Form Standard:** Offshore holding and conduit structures without real decision-making or activity face higher tax risk.

## Cadre Allocation Policy, 2026

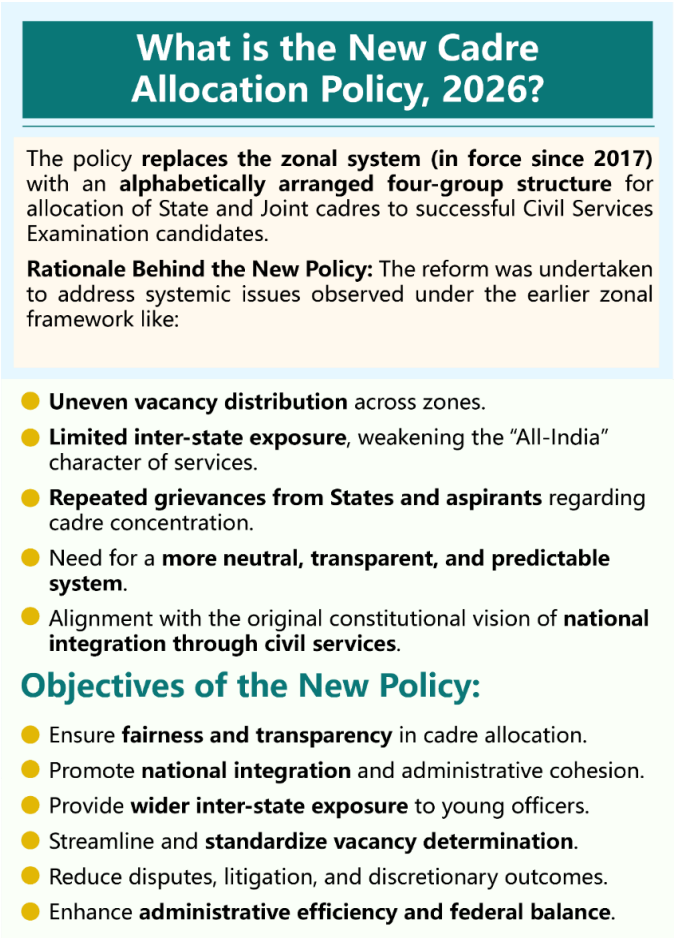
The Department of Personnel and Training (DoPT) notified the Cadre Allocation Policy, 2026 for **Indian Administrative Service (IAS)**, **Indian Police Service (IPS)**, and **Indian Forest Service (IFS)** effective from Jan' 2026.

### Key Highlights of the New Cadre Policy:

- **Alphabetical Grouping of Cadres:** All State and Joint cadres are **arranged alphabetically,** divided into **four groups**, replacing the earlier five zones. Candidates now express **group preferences** instead of zonal preferences. **New Alphabetical Groups are:**
  - **Group I:** AGMUT (Arunachal Pradesh-Goa-Mizoram-UTs), Andhra Pradesh, Assam-Meghalaya, Bihar, Chhattisgarh.
  - **Group II:** Gujarat, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Jharkhand, Karnataka, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh.
  - **Group III:** Maharashtra, Manipur, Nagaland, Odisha, Punjab, Rajasthan, Sikkim, Tamil Nadu.
  - **Group IV:** Telangana, Tripura, Uttarakhand, Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal.

The earlier system (2017-25) had five zones which often clustered linguistically or geographically similar states, diluting the "All-India" character.

- **Revised Vacancy Determination Process:** Vacancy determination will now be **annual, time-bound, and rule-based**. Based on **cadre gap as on 1 January** of the year following the Civil Services Examination (CSE). States must send requisitions by **31 January**; late submissions will **not be considered**. Vacancies will be published on official Ministry websites.




- **Role of Cadre-Controlling Authorities:** IAS-DoPT; IPS-**Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA);** IFoS-**Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC).** They determine service-wise and category-wise vacancies (Unreserved (UR), Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST) and Other Backward Classes (OBC)).
- **Reservation and Roster Rules:** Existing roster system for reservation and insider/outsider balance retained. **EWS vacancies will be treated as part of the Unreserved category** in cadre rosters.
- **Insider-Outsider Allocation Rules:** Insider allocation strictly based on **merit rank and vacancy availability**. **Mandatory consent** to serve in the home State is required for insider eligibility.
- **Rotational Cycle System:** Cadre allocation will follow a **rotational cycle system.** Each cycle covers **25 cadres** and **25 candidates** in rank order. If multiple candidates fall within the same cycle- higher-ranked candidate gets priority and others move to subsequent cycles.
  - **Allocation Sequence:** Insider candidates will be placed first. Outsider allocation will be in two stages: 1) Persons with Benchmark Disabilities (PwBD) and 2) Remaining candidates as per roster.

| Significance of the Policy | Concerns Raised Regarding the Policy |
|---|---|
| • **Procedural Transparency and Predictability:** Clear timelines for vacancy determination, public disclosure of vacancies and defined | • **Pan-India Ideal vs State-Based Reality:** All-India Services are constitutionally pan-Indian but function as permanent state cadres, limiting national integration. The policy improves procedures without addressing this structural contradiction. |

| | |
|---|---|
| deadlines for state requisitions reduce litigation and uncertainty for aspirants.<br>• **Improved Fairness in Allocation Mechanics:** Alphabetical grouping is more **neutral** than zonal clustering.<br>• **Strengthening Disability and Reservation Compliance:** Explicit PwBD allocation sequencing and clear integration of EWS within UR roster reinforces constitutional and statutory obligations.<br>• **Administrative Efficiency:** Predictable annual cycles reduce ad-hocism and inter-ministerial delays.<br>• **Incremental Reform Without Federal Shock:** Avoids direct confrontation with states over cadre control. Maintains federal balance while modestly improving transparency. Politically feasible in a coalition-driven federal environment. | • **Merit Undermined by Vacancy Mismatch:** Even top-ranked candidates can be denied home cadre due to absence of UR vacancies, turning allocation into an administrative accident rather than a merit outcome.<br>• **Category-Based Asymmetry:** SC/ST/OBC candidates enjoy dual flexibility (UR + reserved vacancies), while general category candidates do not, allowing lower-ranked candidates to secure home cadres over higher-ranked ones.<br>• **Continuing Insider-Outsider Frictions:** Outsider officers occupy senior posts while high-merit home candidates are excluded on technical grounds. Alphabetical grouping alters mechanics, not political or cultural resentment.<br>• **Weak Central Deputation as Pan-India Corrective:** Central deputation is opaque, increasingly competitive due to lateral entry, and unattractive to officers entrenched in state power, limiting its integrative role.<br>• **Ignoring the PCS Parallel System:** With a large share of senior posts held by local PCS officers, displaced IAS officers see reduced influence in their home states, weakening the perceived value of AIS.<br>• **Language and Cultural Constraints:** Outsider postings face linguistic and cultural barriers, affecting administrative effectiveness and governance outcomes. |

**Way Forward**

- **Revisit Cadre Structure:** Gradually move from permanent state cadres to **multi-state or regional career tracks** to restore the pan-India character of services.
- **Transparent Deputation Framework:** Introduce **rule-based transparent empanelment** for central deputation.
- **Structured Inter-State Exposure:** Mandate **fixed-term inter-state postings** at mid and senior levels with language and cultural training.
- **Harmonize AIS-PCS Roles:** Rationalize senior postings between **AIS and PCS officers** to preserve the constitutional relevance of All-India Services.

**Polavaram Irrigation Project Dispute**

The Supreme Court (SC) disposed of Telangana's writ petition on the Polavaram-Banakacherla Link Project, calling it prima facie not maintainable. The Bench held the dispute relates to inter-State water resources and should be pursued under the Inter-State Water Disputes Act, 1956, while granting liberty to seek other remedies.

## Case Background

- **The Dispute:** It concerns Andhra Pradesh's **Polavaram Irrigation Project** on the **Godavari River**, approved in 2009 to divert 80 TMC of water to the Krishna basin under the **Godavari Water Disputes Tribunal** award.
- **Telangana's objection:** is that AP has expanded infrastructure under the Polavaram-Banakacherla (Polavaram-Nallamalasagar) Link to enable diversion of over 200 TMC, potentially up to 300 TMC, far beyond what was approved.
- **AP's Defence** is that only surplus or flood waters of the Godavari are being diverted.
- **Procedural Issue:** The SC noted that Maharashtra and Karnataka, both parties to the Godavari award, were not impleaded.
- **Legal Framework Governing the Dispute:** Inter-State river disputes are governed by the **Inter-State River Water Disputes Act, 1956**, under which tribunals are constituted and their awards are final and binding, with the force of a Supreme Court decree. The **Krishna Water Disputes Tribunal** (KWDT- final award 1976) and the **Godavari Water Disputes Tribunal** (GWDT- final award 1980) allocated river waters among Maharashtra, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh using a 75% dependability standard.
- **Clauses at the Core of the Conflict:**
  - ✔ **Clause IV (GWDT)** allows a state to divert its allocated share of Godavari waters to another basin, a provision AP relies on to justify transfers to the Krishna.
  - ✔ **Clause XIV(B) (KWDT)**, the "augmentation clause", states that if Krishna waters are augmented by inter-basin transfer, all basin states are entitled to proportionately higher shares.
- **Why the Issue Is Sensitive for Telangana?** Any increase in Godavari-to-Krishna diversion triggers redistribution claims by upper-riparian states like Karnataka and Maharashtra. Under the original 80 TMC diversion, Telangana (then part of undivided AP) already lost 35 TMC of Krishna water; larger diversions would legally reopen claims, directly reducing Telangana's downstream availability.

**What was Telangana's Challenge?**

- Telangana moved the SC under Article 32, asserting that the case is about enforcing existing tribunal awards and statutory safeguards, not reopening water allocation.
- Relying on Section 90 of the **Andhra Pradesh Reorganization Act, 2014**, Telangana argued that Polavaram is a national project under exclusive Union control, and any modification can be proposed only by the Centre or the Polavaram Project Authority.
- Telangana invoked Article 21 (impact on drinking water, irrigation and livelihoods) and contending that water allocated under tribunal awards is a legal entitlement that cannot be taken away without authority of law.
- The state alleged that unauthorized expansion of the **Polavaram Project** would require higher and prolonged reservoir levels, causing flooding risks and drainage congestion, threatening areas such as **Bhadrachalam** and the **Manuguru Heavy Water Plant**.

**Way Forward**

- **Appropriate Forum:** Telangana is likely to pursue remedies under the **Inter-State River Water Disputes Act, 1956**, either by seeking constitution of a tribunal or by raising the dispute before the existing adjudicatory framework involving all basin States.
- **Comprehensive Inter-State Adjudication:** Any future litigation would need to implead Maharashtra and Karnataka, given their legal rights under the Godavari and Krishna tribunal awards, particularly the augmentation clause.
- **Union Government's Role:** As Polavaram is a national project, the Centre may have to clarify whether any expansion has been formally approved and whether fresh techno-economic and environmental clearances are required.
- **Technical and Environmental Scrutiny:** Independent assessment by the Central Water Commission and environmental authorities could help determine whether the project changes materially alter water diversion, reservoir operation, or submergence impacts.

## Lokpal Granted Another Two Months to Decide on CBI Sanction to Prosecute Moitra

The Delhi High Court (HC) recently granted the Lokpal a two-month extension to decide on granting sanctions to the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) to file a chargesheet against Mahua Moitra in the cash-for-query case. The extension was allowed on Lokpal's request, with no objection from Moitra.

✓ In **2023**, **TMC MP Mahua Moitra** was accused of sharing her Parliament login credentials with **Darshan Hiranandani** in exchange for cash and gifts. She admitted sharing credentials but denied receiving any cash for raising questions.

**Implications of the Delhi HC Order**

- **Reinforces Rule of Law and Due Process:** The order reaffirms that statutory authorities like the **Lokpal** must strictly follow procedures laid down in law, especially **Section 20(7)** of the Lokpal Act, before granting prosecution sanction.

### What is Lokpal's statutory mandate?

The **Lokpal** is a statutory anti-corruption ombudsman under the **Lokpal and Lokayuktas Act, 2013**. Under **Section 20(7) of the act**, at the post-investigation stage, Lokpal may:

- Grant or refuse sanction to its prosecution wing or a probe agency like the **Central Bureau of Investigation** to file a chargesheet,
- Direct closure of the case, or
- Ask the competent authority to initiate departmental action.

Crucially, this role is **procedural and supervisory**- the Lokpal must consider investigation reports and obtain comments of the competent authority, but **cannot adjudicate guilt or innocence** of a public servant.

### Why did the Delhi HC intervene and what did it say?

The **Delhi HC** intervened after **Mahua Moitra** challenged the Lokpal's November 2025 order granting sanction to the CBI. The Court held that the Lokpal:

- Followed **"extraneous and impermissible procedures"**,
- **Exceeded its statutory jurisdiction** by effectively assessing the merits of the allegations,
- Ignored the mandatory procedure under **Section 20(7)**, including consideration of the accused's submissions.
- The HC termed the reasoning a **"re-engineering" of the Lokpal Act**, set aside the sanction order, reminded that Lokpal is **not an adjudicatory body**, and directed it to **reconsider the matter strictly within statutory limits**, granting limited additional time with no further extensions.

- **Clarifies Limits of Lokpal's Powers:** By holding that Lokpal cannot assess guilt or innocence, the Court has drawn a clear line between **investigative oversight** and **adjudication**, preventing institutional overreach.
- **Strengthens Judicial Oversight over Watchdog Bodies:** It underscores that even independent anti-corruption bodies remain subject to **judicial review**.
- **Impact on Anti-Corruption Prosecutions:** The requirement of strict procedural compliance may slow prosecutions but enhance their **legal sustainability**, reducing the risk of cases collapsing due to procedural infirmities.
- **Signals Against Politicization:** By insisting on statutory discipline, the ruling helps protect anti-corruption institutions from perceptions of **political misuse**, thereby strengthening their credibility.

## RBI Proposal on CBDC Usage among BRICS Nations

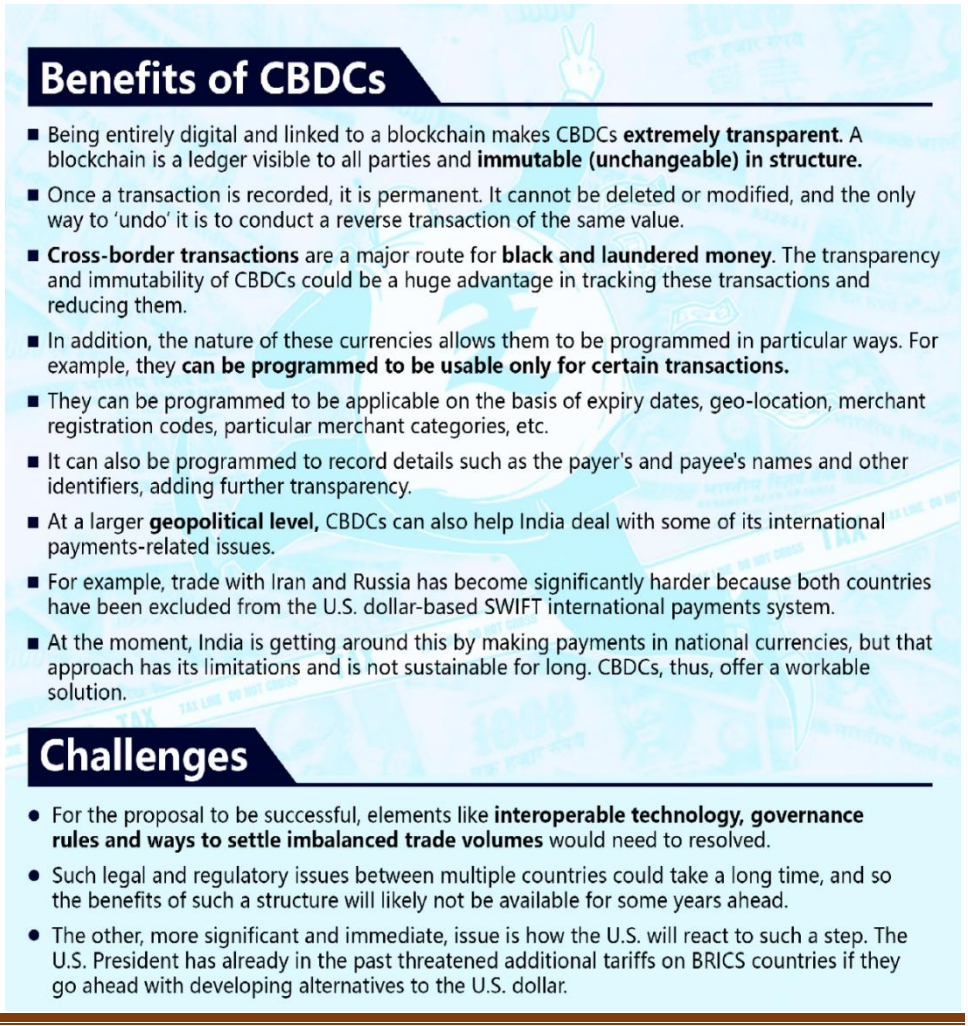
- The RBI has proposed that BRICS countries link their official central bank digital currencies (CBDCs) to make cross-border trade and tourism payments easier, which could reduce reliance on the U.S. dollar as geopolitical tensions rise.
- If the proposal takes off, it would be a payments system covering not just the five founding members of BRICS — **Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa** — but also more recent joiners such as **Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, United Arab Emirates, and Indonesia**.
- However, RBI has clarified that its efforts to promote the rupee's global use are not aimed at promoting de-dollarisation.

### Background

- The RBI's proposal builds on a 2025 declaration at a BRICS summit in Rio de Janeiro, which pushed for interoperability between members' payment systems to make cross-border transactions more efficient.
- While none of the BRICS members have fully launched their digital currencies, all five main members have been running pilot projects.
- RBI has encouraged the adoption of the e-rupee by enabling offline payments (*to facilitate transactions in areas with limited or no internet connectivity sing NFC-based tap technology or scan-and-pay*), providing programmability for government subsidy transfers and by allowing fintech firms to offer digital currency wallets.

### Central Bank Digital Currencies (CBDCs)

- CBDCs are **legal tender issued by a central bank entirely in digital form**. In India, for example, the RBI has been issuing the **e-rupee** on a limited scale.
- This currency is the same as the normal rupee but is **entirely digital and a store of value** on its own. The CBDC is **held in a wallet that is separate from a bank account**.
- Where the Unified Payments Interface (UPI) facilitates the transfer of rupees from one bank account to another, **CBDCs move from one wallet to another, with each transaction recorded on a blockchain** — in essence **a digital ledger**.
- CBDCs differ from private cryptocurrencies. **Private cryptocurrencies** like Bitcoin **are decentralised**



**by design, with no central issuer and no regulator**. However, CBDCs have a very definite issuer and regulator: the central bank.

- Also, while **most cryptocurrencies** (apart from stablecoins) are **not pegged to any real-world asset** from which they can derive value, CBDCs are backed by the central bank and have a set value. That is, one e-rupee equals one rupee.

## First Advance Estimate

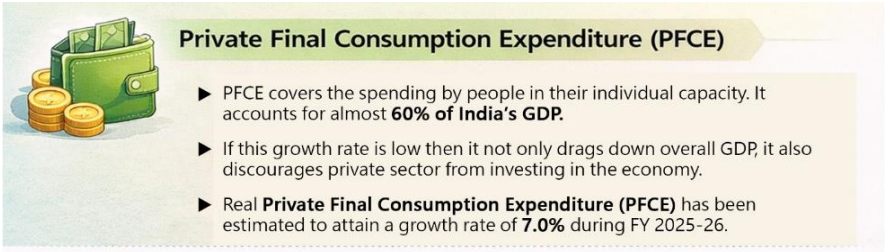
The National Statistics Office (NSO), Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI), has released the First Advance Estimate (FAE) of India's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) for current financial year FY 2025-26.

### First Advance Estimates (FAE)

- The FAE, which were **first introduced in 2016-17**, are typically published at the end of the first week of January. They are the "first" official estimates of how GDP is expected to grow in that financial year.
- But they are also the "advance" estimates because they are published long before the financial year (April to March) is over.
- Even though the FAE are published soon after the end of the third quarter (October, November, December), they **do not include the formal Q3 GDP data**, which is published at the end of February as part of the Second Advance Estimates (SAE).
- Since the SAE will be published next month, the Union Finance Ministry uses the FAE to decide the next financial year's Budget allocations.

### Calculation of FAE

- The FAE are derived by extrapolating the available data. **Extrapolation** is a process of estimating the values of a particular metric by assuming that existing trends will continue.
- The sector-wise estimates are obtained by extrapolating indicators like:
  - Index of Industrial Production (IIP) of first 7 months of the financial year.
  - Financial performance of listed companies in the private corporate sector available for Q1 and Q2 2025-26.
  - Production estimates of major agricultural crops for 2025-26;
  - Production estimates of major livestock products for summer and rainy season of 2025-26; Fish Production;
  - Production of Coal, Crude Petroleum, Natural Gas, Cement and Consumption of Steel;
  - Net Tonne Kilometres and Passenger Kilometres for Railways;



- Passenger and Cargo traffic handled by Civil Aviation;
- Cargo traffic handled at Major and Minor Sea Ports;
- Sales of Commercial Vehicles;
- Bank Deposits & Credits;
- Premium related information of Life and Non-Life Insurance companies;
- Data on outward Supplies of Goods and Services available from GSTN upto November 2025;
- Goods and Services Tax collections available till the latest period of FY 2025-26;
- The accounts of Central & State governments.

**Key Highlights**

- The GDP is essentially the **monetary measure of all the goods and services produced within a country's borders** in a year. It provides the size of the economy.
- India's nominal GDP is estimated to attain a level of **Rs 357.14 lakh crore** in the FY 2025-26, against **Rs 330.68 lakh crore** in FY 2024-25, showing a growth rate of **8.0%**.
- The nominal GDP of a country can go up either because the country produces more goods and services or because the prices of existing goods and services have gone up (due to inflation). Mostly, both these factors lead to an increase in GDP.
- Thus, it is the "real" GDP that matters. It tells the extent to which India produced more goods and services. The **real GDP is derived by removing the effect of inflation** from nominal GDP.
- **Real GDP** has been estimated to attain a level of **Rs 201.90 lakh crore** to grow by **7.4%** in FY 2025-26 against the growth rate of **6.5%** during FY 2024-25.

## Opinion Trading

- An anonymous gambler has sparked controversy after making $436,000 from a bet on Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro's capture.
- The trader, identified only by a blockchain code, joined Polymarket, a major opinion trading platform and placed positions on Venezuela-related outcomes.
- Platforms like Polymarket and Kalshi operate in a sector called prediction markets, or opinion trading.

**Regulatory Stance in India**

- Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI) had earlier cautioned investors that no investor protection mechanisms were available on prediction markets.
- Since none of the platforms providing opinion trading can qualify to be recognised as a stock exchange, and are neither registered or regulated by SEBI, any trading of securities on them is illegal.
- Then, in August 2025, the government placed a blanket ban on all online money gaming services, which impacted companies that offered opinion trading services.
- The government also prohibits banks and financial institutions from facilitating financial transactions on such platforms.

## Export Preparedness Index 2024

- The NITI Aayog has released the Export Preparedness Index (EPI) 2024, a comprehensive assessment of export readiness across India's States and UTs.
- The first edition of the EPI was published in 2020 and this is the 4th edition.
- Aligned with India's objective of achieving USD 1 trillion in merchandise exports by 2030 and the vision of Viksit Bharat in 2047, the index provides an evidence-based framework to evaluate the strength, resilience, and inclusiveness of subnational export ecosystems.
- It identifies key structural challenges, growth levers, and policy opportunities for enhancing export competitiveness at the State and district levels.

### Framework and Methodology

- The index follows a data-driven, indicator-based methodology, utilising official datasets from Central Ministries, State Governments, and public institutions.
- EPI 2024 is structured around **four pillars** with different weights, further disaggregated into **13 sub-pillars and 70 indicators**. The four major pillars are:
  - Export Infrastructure (20% weight)
  - Business Ecosystem (40%)
  - Policy and Governance (20%)
  - Export Performance (20%)

## One Station One Product Scheme

- Indian Railways' One Station One Product (OSOP) scheme has emerged as a powerful platform for promoting local craftsmanship and promoting grassroot entrepreneurship across the country.
- **Launched in 2022**, under the scheme, each selected railway station is associated with **one unique local or regional product**, which is sold to passengers through dedicated stalls at the station.
- Implemented by the **Ministry of Commerce and Industry** in collaboration with **Indian Railways**, OSOP has expanded to over 2,000 railway stations, with a total of 2,326 outlets operational**.**
- The **National Institute of Design, Ahmedabad** has designed the stall infrastructure for uniformity.
- These outlets have become a source of livelihood for more than **1.32 lakh artisans**, weavers, and small producers by providing them with **direct market access** to millions of railway passengers every day.
- Beyond numbers, OSOP is helping **revive traditional crafts and regional specialties** that were once losing prominence.
- By **integrating commerce with culture**, the Railways has transformed stations into centres of local enterprise.
- The initiative stands as a true example of **Vocal for Local**, empowering communities while enriching the travel experience for passengers across the nation.

## Tex RAMPS Scheme

The Ministry of Textiles has signed MoUs with 15 States as part of the Textiles focused Research, Assessment, Monitoring, Planning And Start-Up (Tex-RAMPS) scheme. The MoUs will create an operational framework designed to strengthen the textile data systems across various States and UTs.

- The scheme is designed to address critical gaps in research, data systems, innovation support and capacity development and position the nation as a global leader in sustainability, technology, and competitiveness.
- It drives integrated planning for key sectors including handlooms, handicrafts, apparel, and technical textiles by focusing efforts directly at the cluster and district levels.
- It has a total outlay of Rs 305 crore for the period **FY 2025-26 to FY 2030-31** and is being implemented as a **Central Sector Scheme**, fully funded by the Ministry of Textiles.
- The Ministry is providing financial assistance through an annual grant of Rs 12 lakh to each State or UT.
- There will be an additional grant of Rs 1 lakh a year for each district, which will be distributed based on the development and execution of specific district action plans.

## India Becomes Largest Producer Of Rice

- India has become the world's largest producer of rice, surpassing China. India's rice production has reached **150.18 million tonnes (MT)**, compared to China's 145.28 MT.
- A decade ago, however, India's rice production was 104.4 MT while China's was 148.5 MT — pointing to a steady growth in India's output and a stagnation in China's.
- India's rice production has increased steadily over the years. **Between 1969-70 and 2024-25**, the **area under paddy cultivation increased by more than 36%, yield tripled and production almost quadrupled**.
- A significant jump in area and production came in just the last five years. In 2019-20, the area under paddy was 43.66 million hectares and rice production was 118.87 MT.
- In 2024-25, these figures increased to 51.42 million hectares and 150 MT.
- Consequently, India's share in the global rice output also increased to 28% in 2024.
- India is also the **world's leading rice exporter**. The country exported ~6 MT of basmati and ~15 million tonnes of non-basmati rice during 2024-25.
- Behind India and China, Bangladesh (36.6 million metric tonnes) and Indonesia (34.1 million metric tonnes) are at a distant third and fourth place, respectively.

## Paddy's Attraction

- Paddy is India's **most widely grown crop**. It is grown in 614 of India's approximately 800 districts and covers an **area of 514.23 lakh hectares** (as of 2024-25).
- For context, the second most widely grown crop in India, **wheat, covered an area of 328 lakh hectares**.
- Paddy **provides higher returns to farmers** than other crops and its **procurement is assured** on the basis of a **minimum support price (MSP)**.
- At the 2021-22 MSP rate, the **net return on paddy cultivation was Rs 56,226 per hectare**. For maize and moong, it was just Rs 17,856 and Rs 45,665, respectively.
- Another key factor is the **stagnant or declining yield of other crops**. For instance, the cotton yield declined from more than 500 kg per hectare in 2013-14 to 440 kg per hectare in 2024-25.
- The yield risk of rice and wheat is lower as they are **grown largely under irrigated conditions** and also receive **priority for public breeding and research support**.

### Rising government stocks

With rising production and increasing procurement, the rice stock in the central pool has been consistently rising over the years.

As of January 2026, the rice stock in the **central pool stood at 63.06 MT.** This is much higher than the buffer stock and public distribution requirements under the National Food Security Act, 2013 (NSFA).

As per the Foodgrains Stocking Norms for Central Pool, which came into effect from 2015, the rice stock in the central pool should be 7.61 MT on the first day of January.

In addition to this, about 37.2 MT of rice is required to meet the annual requirement under the NFSA and other welfare programs.

In recent years, the government has tried to offload rice in the open market. It has also provided rice for making ethanol. Despite these measures, however, the stock has remained high.

### Moving away from paddy

With more and more farmers preferring paddy, the Union government has been focusing on crop diversification. It is not only looking at farm income and nutritional security, but also conservation of water resources.

The Agriculture Ministry recently came up with an idea to **incentivise farmers who stop paddy cultivation and start sowing alternative crops.**

This incentive could be funded using the **savings from the economic cost of rice** — which is pegged at **Rs 1.36 lakh per hectare.**

This figure factors in costs incurred by the FCI on MSP-based procurement, milling, transport and storage. It does not include subsidies given for power, fertilisers and seed.

So, if one hectare area of rice is left fallow or a crop that is not procured is grown, the government has a resource saving of Rs 1,36,000 per hectare.

The districts with a lower paddy yield than the national average (2,929 kg per hectare) and lower area coverage can be the focus areas for crop diversification.

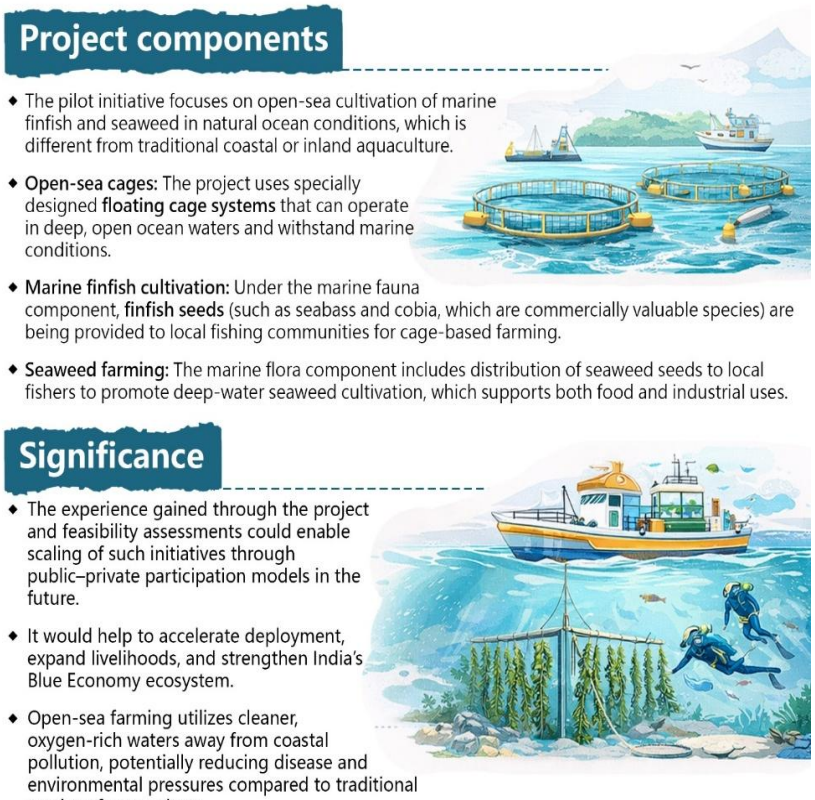
Another idea is to **promote oilseeds and pulses** in place of rice so that dependence on imports can be reduced. India is heavily dependent on imports to meet its domestic edible oil demand.

## Issues with Paddy Cultivation

- The paddy crop is **highly water intensive** — it takes about 1-3 tonnes of water to produce a single kilogram of rice.
- Since it is grown so widely, it has **led to a depletion in groundwater levels** in several parts of the country.
- For instance, the excessive withdrawal of groundwater in Punjab has caused several health and environmental challenges.
- The **rice yield also diverges widely across states** due to factors such as agro-climatic conditions.
- In 2024-25, the yield per hectare was 4,428 kg in Punjab, 3,928 kg in Andhra Pradesh, 2,561 kg in Bihar and 2,824 kg in Uttar Pradesh. The national average was 2,929 kg per hectare.

## Open-Sea Marine Fish Farming Project

- India's first-ever open-sea Marine Fish Farming project was recently launched from the Andaman Sea, at North Bay, Sri Vijaya Puram, marking a major step in offshore aquaculture.
- It is one of the first major steps in realizing the Blue Economy by unlocking the economic potential of India's oceans.
- The project is being implemented through a collaboration between the **Ministry of Earth Sciences**, its technical arm the **National Institute of Ocean Technology (NIOT)**, and the **UT Administration of Andaman and Nicobar Islands**.




## District-Led Textiles Transformation initiative

- The Ministry of Textiles has announced the District-Led Textiles Transformation (DLTT) initiative, a comprehensive program for **inclusive, sustainable growth of the textile sector** across India.
- It involves **transforming 100 high-potential districts into Global Export Champions** and elevating **100 Aspirational Districts into self-reliant textile hubs** using a district-specific approach.
- The initiative is based on a data-driven evaluation of the districts based on **three key parameters** - **Export Performance, MSME Ecosystem and Workforce Presence**.
- After which, the districts have been grouped into Champion and Aspirational categories to intervene specifically to ensure maximum outcomes.

| **Champion Districts (Scale & Sophistication)** | **Aspirational Districts (Foundation & Formalization):** |
|---|---|
| These districts will focus on removing advanced bottlenecks.<br>• Interventions include upgrading to Mega Common Facility Centres (CFCs), integrating Industry 4.0, and facilitating direct Export Market Linkages, etc. | These districts would aim to build the ecosystem from the ground up in setting up foundation and formalization of workforce.<br>• This includes basic skilling and certification, establishing Raw Material Banks, and promoting micro-enterprises through Self-Help Groups (SHGs) and Cooperatives, etc. |

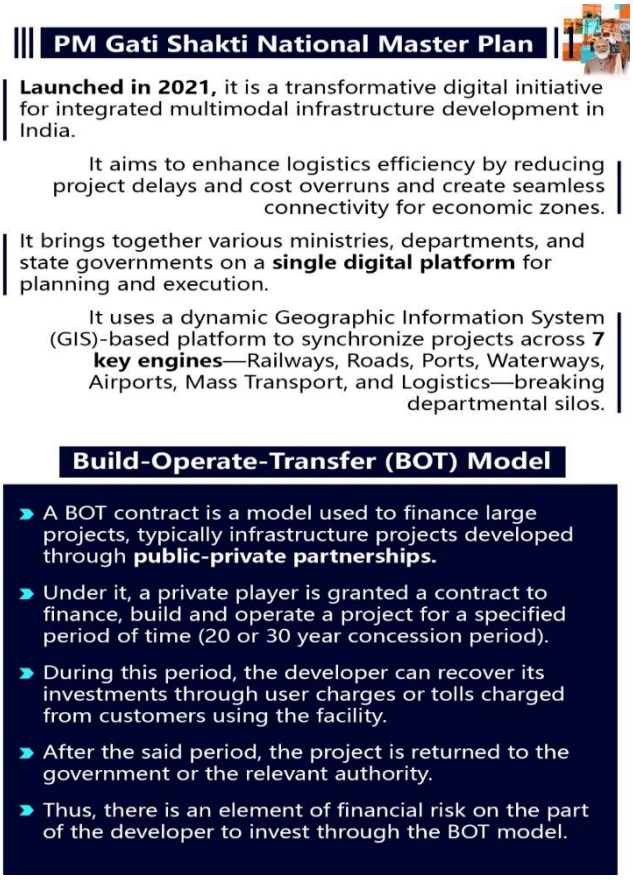
- Special focus is given to the **Purvodaya convergence in east and northeast zones**. These regions are prioritized for tribal belt development, connectivity improvement, and GI tagging to position unique cultural handicrafts for premium global markets.
- Through the strategic convergence of government resources and collaborative partnerships with industry and academia, the program aims to strengthen textile clusters and systematically scale successful models to maximize impact across districts.

## Equity Infusion into SIDBI

- The Union Cabinet has approved an **equity infusion of Rs 5,000 crore** into the Small Industries Development Bank of India (SIDBI) to **expand the credit available to micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs)**.
- The infusion will be made by the **Department of Financial Services (DFS)** in three tranches.
- The infusion of additional capital would enable SIDBI to generate resources at fair interest rates, thereby increasing the flow of credit to MSMEs at competitive costs.
- The additional capital infusion would be necessary to **help SIDBI maintain a strong capital to risk-weighted assets ratio (CRAR)**, as its risk-weighted assets are expected to grow with increased lending to MSMEs.
- After the capital infusion, the number of MSMEs to be provided financial assistance is expected to increase from 76.26 lakh at the end of FY 2025-26 to 102 lakh by the end of FY 2027-28.
- As of September 2025, **~6.9 crore MSMEs registered with the government employed 30.16 crore people**.
- This leads to an average employment generation of **4.37 persons per enterprise**. Based on this average, the addition of new MSME beneficiaries is estimated to **generate employment for about 1.12 crore people** by 2027-28.

## Greenfield Corridor in Maharashtra

- The Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs (CCEA) has approved the construction of a six-lane, access-controlled greenfield corridor connecting **Nashik, Solapur and Akkalkot** in Maharashtra at a cost of Rs 19,142 crore.
- The 374-kilometre-long project will be developed on a **Build-Operate-Transfer (BOT) toll mode** and aims to improve regional and inter-state connectivity.
- It is a significant step to facilitate integrated transport infrastructure development under the **PM Gatishakti National Master Plan** principle.
- The corridor is proposed to **link with key national highways and expressways** including the Delhi-Mumbai Expressway, the Agra-Mumbai corridor, and the Samruddhi Mahamarg.
- Once completed, the corridor will provide **seamless connectivity between India's west and east coasts**



- It is expected to significantly **improve travel efficiency** by reducing travel time to 17 hours (from 31 hours) and shortening the travel distance by 201 km.
- It will also **enhance logistics efficiency for freight movement**, particularly for cargo linked to major National Industrial Corridor Development Corporation (NICDC) nodes such as Kopparthy and Orvakal.

## India's LFPR Hits Record High

- India's Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR) rose to a new high of 56.1% in December, according to the statistics ministry's latest Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS).
- LFPR is the fraction of the **working age population (15-59 years) that is either employed or actively seeking work**
- The monthly jobs data is based on the **Current Weekly Status (CWS) approach**. Under this approach, the activity status of a person is measured for the seven days preceding the date of the survey.
- **Overall LFPR** for persons aged 15 years and above has **continued its upward trend since June2025 and is the highest** since the statistics ministry started releasing monthly labour market data following a revamp of the PLFS.
- Female LFPR has recorded a sustained increase since June 2025 and stood at 35.3% in December.
- The December PLFS data was noteworthy for an increase in people in rural areas seeking work, with the rural LFPR rising 40 basis points (bps) to 59%
- In urban areas, the LFPR either declined or was unchanged across all segments: males, females, as well as young men and women (aged 15-29 years).
- Following a decline in June 2025, the overall **Worker Population Ratio (WPR)** for persons aged 15 years and above showed a sustained recovery and reached its yearly peak of 53.4% in December 2025.
    - WPR is defined as the percentage of employed persons in the population.
- Rural male and female workforce participation increased in December 2025, reaching 76.0% and 38.6%, respectively.
- **Unemployment rate (UR)** remained largely stable and is estimated at 4.8% in December 2025.
    - UR is defined as the percentage of persons unemployed among the persons in the labour force.

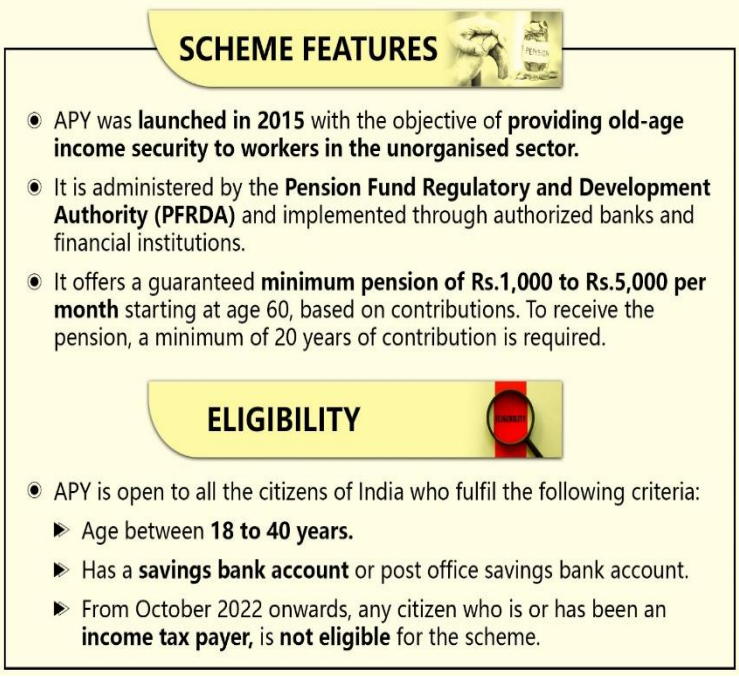
## Cabinet Approves Continuation Of Atal Pension Yojana

The Union Cabinet has approved the continuation of Atal Pension Yojana (APY) up to FY 2030-31.

- The scheme will continue with government support for:
    - Promotional and Developmental activities to expand outreach among unorganised workers including awareness, capacity building.
    - Gap funding to meet viability requirements and ensure sustainability of the scheme.

### Impact

- Ensures old-age income security for millions of low-income and unorganised sector workers.
- As of January 2026, over **8.66 crore subscribers** have been enrolled, making APY a cornerstone of India's inclusive social security framework.



## PANKHUDI Portal

- The Ministry of Women and Child Development has launched PANKHUDI an **integrated Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and partnership facilitation digital portal**.
- Developed as a **single-window digital platform** it is aimed at strengthening coordination, transparency, and structured stakeholder participation in **initiatives for women and child development**.
- It brings together individuals, Non-Resident Indians (NRIs), NGOs, CSR contributors, corporate entities, and government agencies.
- The portal focuses on **key thematic areas** including nutrition, health, early childhood care and education (ECCE), child welfare, protection and rehabilitation, and women's safety and empowerment.
- It enhances convergence and coordination across stakeholders by providing a common digital interface for CSR and voluntary contributions
- To further strengthen financial transparency and accountability, **all contributions** through the portal are **accepted only through non-cash modes**.

## Upgradation of Kaladi

- The Ministry of Science & Technology has initiated the process of upscaling **Kaladi - the GI-tagged traditional dairy product of Udhampur**, Jammu & Kashmir.
- The task of upgradation has been given to CSIR-Central Food Technology Research Institute (CSIR-CFTRI), Mysuru and CSIR-Indian Institute of Integrative Medicine (CSIR-IIIM), Jammu.
- Kaladi is traditionally **prepared from raw full-fat milk using whey water as a coagulant**.
- Also referred to as the **mozzarella of Jammu**, it is considered as one of the world's most unique cheeses, which is dried from the outside yet remains moist inside.
- However, its **short shelf life** of a few days, especially under non-refrigerated conditions, remains a **major bottleneck for wider distribution**.
- The focus will be on **value addition and enhancement of shelf life**, enabling Kaladi to reach national and international markets under the One District One Product (ODOP) initiative.
- Shelf life will be improved through scientific validation, proper packaging, and processing, while strictly preserving its original taste, flavour, texture, and nutritional identity.

## Employment and Social Trends 2026

- The International Labour Organization (ILO) released the Employment and Social Trends 2026 report.
- It examines the state of global labour markets and analyses productivity, demographic and economic pressures shaping work in the year ahead.

### Key Findings

- **Global unemployment** is projected to remain unchanged at **4.9% equivalent to 186 million people in 2026**, pointing to continued resilience in headline labour market indicators following the post-pandemic recovery.
- However, this stability should not be mistaken for a return to healthy labour market conditions.

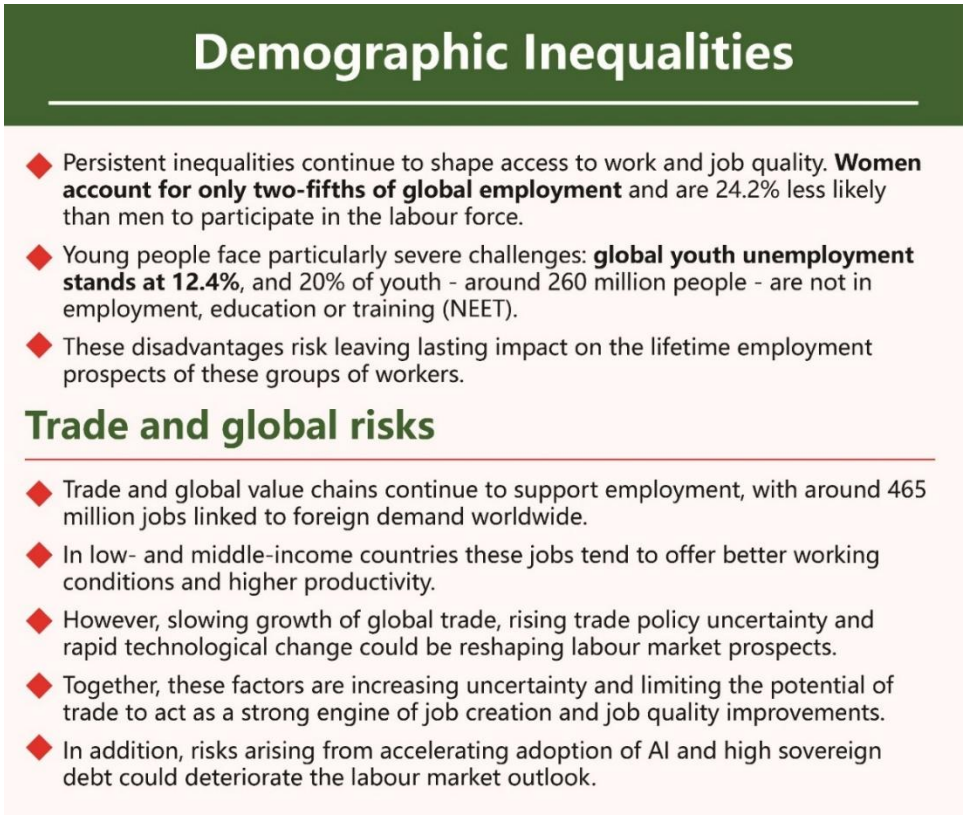
### Global Jobs Gap

- Looking beyond unemployment, the broader **global jobs gap** - capturing **people who want paid work but cannot access it** - is projected to reach **408 million** in 2026.

- This highlights a much larger level of unmet labour demand than indicated by unemployment alone. At the same time, **improvements in job quality have slowed sharply**.
- Around **300 million workers** still **live in extreme poverty** with an **earning of less than three dollars a day**.
- More than **2 billion workers** around the world remain in **informal employment** often without access to basic rights, social protection or income security.

**Diverging Labour Market across Income Groups**

- Labour market trends increasingly differ across country income groups. In high- and upper-middle-income economies, population ageing and slower labour force growth are helping to stabilise unemployment, even as job creation remains modest.
- In contrast, low-income countries face rapid labour force expansion, with employment projected to grow by 3.1% in 2026.
- However, **productivity gains remain particularly weak in low-income economies**, preventing income convergence across countries and limiting improvements in living standards and job quality.




- At the same time, the **pace of structural transformation - the movement of workers into higher-productivity and more formal sectors - has slowed significantly** over the past two decades.
- This divergence raises the risk that countries with the greatest demographic potential will struggle to realise a demographic dividend.

**Way Ahead**

- With subdued global growth and external financing under pressure, future progress will depend increasingly on domestic policy choices.
- Strengthening job creation, boosting productivity growth, investing in skills, expanding social protection and reinforcing labour market institutions, particularly to protect and support workers and small and medium enterprises will be critical to reducing decent work deficits.

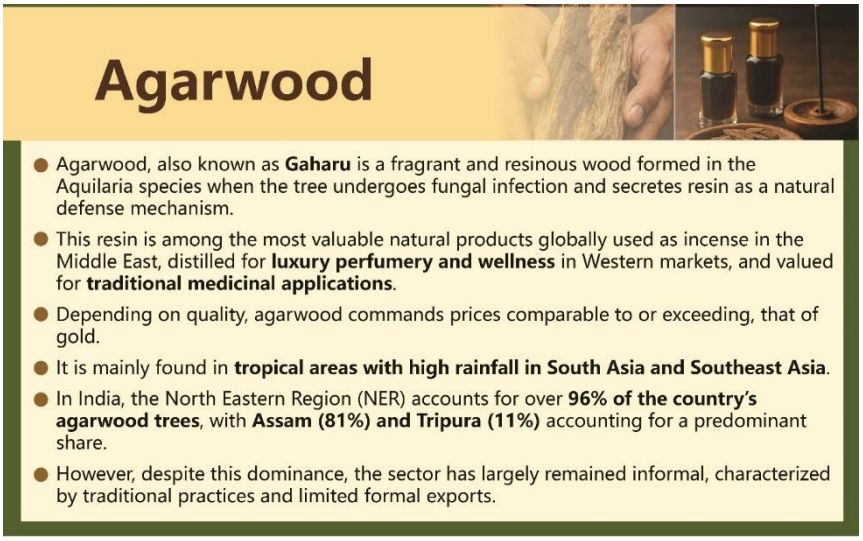
## Agarwood Value Chain Development Scheme

The Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region (MDoNER) launched the Agarwood Value Chain Development Scheme.

**Development Initiatives**

- The scheme will strengthen the entire agarwood value chain from trees in farmers' fields to perfume bottles in international markets.

- **Two Central Processing Centres (CPCs)** will be established under the scheme. These centres will enable comprehensive **processing, branding and marketing**, eliminating middlemen and ensuring that farmers receive the full value of their produce.
- Furthermore, the process for obtaining a **Geographical Indication (GI) tag** is already underway.
- Export quotas have been increased six-fold. Permissions are being integrated on a digital platform, and buyer-seller meets are being organised so that farmers can directly connect with international markets.




## Gig Workers' Welfare Board

- The Karnataka government has formed a 16-member Gig Workers' Welfare Board under the Karnataka Platform-Based Gig Workers (Social Security and Welfare development) Act, 2025.
- It aims to protect the rights and provide social security to the state's 4 lakh gig and platform workers.
- Now, both aggregator platforms and gig workers will be required to register with the board.
- Each registered gig worker will be issued a unique identification number, which will be used by the board to disburse social security benefits.
- The welfare fund will comprise the welfare fee collected from aggregators, contributions made by gig workers, and grants provided by the State and Central governments.
- All aggregator platforms will have to pay a welfare fee in the range of 1-1.5% of the transaction, with the rate varying across sectors and business models.
- The welfare fee may be revised, up to a maximum of 5%, if the funds are found to be inadequate.

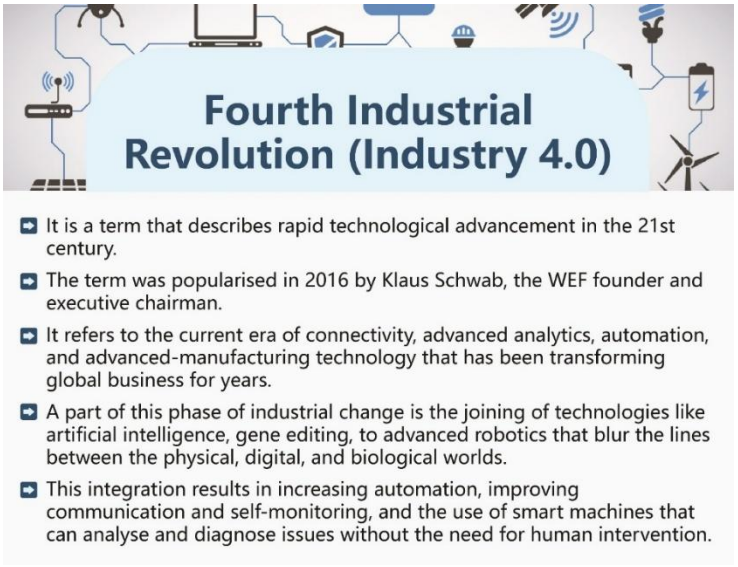
### Board Composition

- The **Labour Minister** will be the **ex-officio president of the board**.
- Senior officials from the Labour Department, the Department of Information Technology and the Commercial Taxes Department have been included as ex-officio members.
- The Chief Executive Officer of the board will function as the Member Secretary.
- It includes four representatives of gig workers from unions representing food delivery and app-based transport workers.
- It also has four representatives from aggregator platforms like Porter, Zomato, Uber and Amazon.

## Centre for Fourth Industrial Revolution in Andhra Pradesh

- The World Economic Forum (WEF) has decided to establish five new Centres for the Fourth Industrial Revolution, including one in Andhra Pradesh.
- Besides Andhra Pradesh, the other new centres will be in **France, U.K., and UAE**.
- Two such centres are already there in India—one in **Mumbai** and the other in **Telangana**.
- The focus areas of these centres would include AI innovation, energy transition, cyber resilience, and frontier technologies. They will address regional needs while advancing international dialogue and cooperation.
- Each centre will work with governments and industry to deliver practical policy frameworks and pilots, address regional priorities, and advance international cooperation.

- **Launched by the WEF in 2017**, the Fourth Industrial Revolution Network (FIRN) is a platform for multi-stakeholder collaboration, bringing together public and private sectors around shared technology challenges.
- It helps to ensure responsible development and deployment of emerging technologies to address global priorities while minimising risks.




## SAMPANN-UMANG integration

- The SAMPANN (System for Accounting and Management of Pension) system has been integrated with the UMANG (Unified Mobile Application for New-age Governance) platform.
- This initiative facilitates pensioners in retrieving their Pension Payment Order (PPO) number and Life Certificate (LC) validity status via the UMANG web portal or application.
- The integration is designed to enhance ease of access for pensioners, promote transparency, and ensure seamless delivery of pension-related information via a unified digital platform.
- UMANG is a **single unified platform** to access government services offered by Central, State, and Local bodies, anytime and anywhere.

### SAMPANN

- Developed, owned, and operated by the **Office of the Controller General of Communication Accounts,** SAMPANN is a **digital platform for pension administration** and allied financial management functions.
- It marks a shift from system-centric administration to pensioner-centric governance, freeing retirees from visiting offices to claim their rightful benefits.
- It has **digitized the entire pension lifecycle**—from initiation and processing of cases to issuance of e-PPO, disbursement, accounting, reconciliation, financial reporting, audit facilitation, and grievance redressal.

## Committee on Strategic Asset Allocation and Risk Governance

- The pension regulator, Pension Fund Regulatory and Development Authority of India (PFRDA) has constituted the **Strategic Asset Allocation and Risk Governance (SAARG**) committee.
- The committee will perform a comprehensive **review of the investment framework under the National Pension System (NPS)** for **both government and non-government sectors**.
- It will recommend reforms aligned with global best practices and the evolving Indian investment ecosystem. The aim is to strengthen long-term retirement wealth creation, and expand subscriber choice.
- It will be **chaired by Narayan Ramachandran**, former Country Head and CEO of Morgan Stanley India.

### Mandate of the committee

- Its mandate includes improving diversification, strengthening risk management practices, and supporting long-term pension outcomes. Key areas under review include:
  - **Strategic asset allocation** across equity, debt, money market and alternative assets; **Introduction of new asset classes** to mitigate macroeconomic and geopolitical risks; Performance benchmarking and accountability of pension funds; and
  - Asset–liability management aligned with long-term pension obligations.
- It will also **examine valuation norms** for alternative investments, portfolio stability and liquidity optimization measures.
- Enhancing subscriber choice through improved lifecycle funds and an optimal mix of active and passive investments.
- **Governance issues**, including custodial architecture and the role of NPS intermediaries, will also be reviewed.
- In addition, SAARG will assess how **sustainability considerations**, including climate transition risks and net-zero pathways, can be integrated into NPS investment decisions.

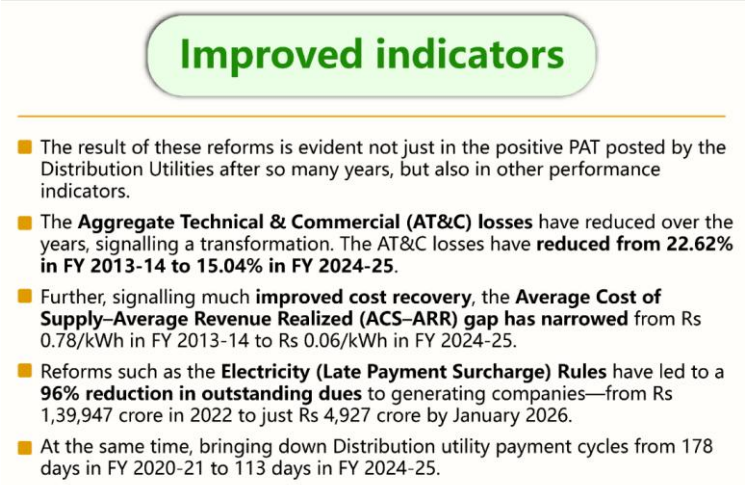
## Country Partnership Framework

- India and the World Bank group have announced a new Country Partnership Framework (CPF) to help accelerate India's next phase of growth. **Private sector–led job creation** is at the core of this partnership.
- With around 12 million young people entering India's labor market each year, unlocking private investment in job-rich sectors is a central priority for the country's next phase of growth.
- Implementation of the new partnership framework will begin immediately, including through ongoing projects like:
  - **PM SETU**: $830 million loan to upgrade India's network of Industrial Training Institutes.
  - **Maharashtra Project on Resilient Agriculture (Phase II)**: $490 million project to enhance crop productivity and strengthen resilience by adopting digital technology in precision farming practices.
  - **Credila Financial Services**: $750 million initiative to support higher education financing for up to 190,000 more students to gain job-relevant qualifications.
  - **Kerala Health Systems Improvement Program**: $280 million program to strengthen Kerala's digital health systems.

- The World Bank Group's **global jobs strategy** rests on **three pillars**:
  - Investing in **critical infrastructure**—both physical and human;
  - Strengthening a **business-friendly environment** through predictable laws, rules, and regulations; and
  - Deploying **risk-management tools** to help private investment scale.
- This approach focuses on **five sectors** that generate locally relevant jobs at scale: infrastructure and energy, agribusiness, health care, tourism, and value-added manufacturing.
- The new partnership applies this global jobs strategy in India and supports it with **$8–10 billion in annual financing over the next five years,** to create jobs and mobilise private sector capital at scale.
- Further, the partnership **prioritises private sector-led job creation** by upgrading skills, reducing barriers for small and medium enterprises, and expanding opportunities—particularly for youth and women. It focuses on four strategic outcomes:
  - **Boosting rural prosperity and resilience**: With 60% of Indians living in rural areas, the focus is on diversifying incomes beyond agriculture, strengthening value chains and market access.
  - **Supporting urban transformation and liveable cities**: India's urban population is projected to double to 800 million by 2050. Investments in infrastructure, housing, services, innovative financing, and integrated planning can serve as powerful engines of growth.
  - **Investing in people**: Priorities cover the full life cycle—from early childhood health and nutrition, to secondary education and market-aligned skills, to smoother school-to-work transitions and more responsive, patient-centered health systems.
  - **Strengthening energy security and infrastructure**: Scale up infrastructure by attracting private capital and capabilities in renewable energy, e-mobility, and technologies such as green hydrogen.

## Power Distribution Utilities Post Profit

- The country's power distribution utilities (DISCOMs and power departments) have collectively recorded a positive Profit After Tax (PAT) of Rs 2,701 crore in year FY 2024-25 marking a significant turning point for the sector.
- The distribution utilities as a whole have been **reporting PAT losses for past several years** since unbundling and corporatization of State Electricity Boards.
- The positive PAT in FY 2024-25 compares to a loss of **Rs 25,553 crore in year FY 2023-24** and a loss of **Rs 67,962 crore in FY 2013-14**.
- This is a result of several steps that have been taken to address the concerns of the distribution sector. Some of the **transformative initiatives** in the distribution sector include:
  - **Revamped Distribution Sector Scheme (RDSS)**: Enhancing financial viability through infrastructure modernization and accelerated smart metering.



- **Additional Prudential Norms**: Linking access to finance for power sector utilities to achievement against performance benchmarks to promote fiscal and operational discipline.
- **Amendments to Electricity Rules**: Enforcing timely cost adjustments, rational tariff structures, and transparent subsidy accounting to ensure full cost recovery.
- **Electricity Distribution (Accounts and Additional Disclosure) Rules, 2025**: Introducing uniform accounting and enhanced transparency across distribution utilities for improved financial governance.
- **Late Payment Surcharge Rules**: Enforcing legal contracts through timely payments in the power sector thereby supporting investment in new renewable energy projects.
- **Incentives for States:** To implement critical power sector reforms, with borrowing limits tied to performance metrics as part of Additional Borrowing Scheme.

## World Economic Situation and Prospects 2026

The World Economic Situation and Prospects 2026 was released by the **United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA)**.

### Key Points

- **Global growth:** Global growth is slowing and remains uneven across regions. World output is projected to **slow to 2.7% in 2026** before increasing to 2.9% in 2027, still **below the pre-pandemic average of 3.2%**.
  - While domestic demand and policy easing are supporting activity in the United States and parts of Asia, growth remains weak in Europe, and high debt and climate shocks continue to limit many developing economies.
- **India's growth** is projected to **moderate from an estimated 7.4% in 2025 to 6.6% in 2026**. Resilient household consumption, strong public investment, impacts of tax reform, and lower interest rates are expected to support economic activity.
- **Trade and investment**: Global trade performed better than expected in 2025, driven by early shipments ahead of higher tariffs and robust services exports.
  - But trade growth is **projected to slow in 2026, as trade barriers and policy uncertainty continue**. Investment remains subdued in most regions.
- **Inflation and cost-of-living**: Global headline inflation is projected to **fall to 3.1% in 2026 from 3.4% in 2025**.
  - However, high prices continue to erode real incomes, particularly for low-income households, with food, energy and housing costs remaining a major source of pressure and inequality.
- **Financial conditions and risks**: Lower interest rates and improved market sentiment have helped revive capital flows. But **high asset valuations** – particularly in AI-related sectors – and **still-rising borrowing costs** continue to pose risks.
  - Many developing economies remain constrained by **heavy debt burdens** and limited access to affordable finance.
- Overall, tight fiscal space, uneven disinflation and weakening multilateral cooperation are slowing progress towards the SDGs, particularly in developing and climate-vulnerable economies.

## Relaxed Funding Norms For Deep Tech Start-Ups

- The Union Government has relaxed norms for deep-tech start-ups to avail financial assistance from the Department of Scientific and Industrial Research (DSIR).
- The DSIR extends financial assistance of up to Rs 1 crore to start-ups under the **Industrial Research and Development Promotion Programme (IRDPP)** only if they **prove to be sustainable and viable for a minimum period of three years**.
- The Centre has now **removed the three-year viability criteria** for deep-tech start-ups.
- However, the start-ups will have to maintain appropriate evaluation standards linked to technological maturity.
- It is a significant incentive to **help deep-tech start-ups scale faster**. It is expected to provide early momentum to projects.

### Deep Tech

- Deep tech refers to revolutionary, science-based, and engineering-heavy innovations designed to solve complex, real-world problems.
- It involves long-term Research & Development, significant upfront capital, and aims to create, rather than disrupt, markets.
- Key examples include artificial intelligence (AI), quantum computing, biotechnology, robotics, and advanced materials.

## Chips to Start-up (C2S) Programme

- Recognizing **chip design as a strategic national priority**, the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (**MeitY**) has implemented the Chips to Start-up (C2S) Programme.
- With global demand for advanced electronics and AI-driven applications rising steadily, the semiconductor industry is projected to reach nearly **USD 1 trillion by 2030**.
- At present, the global semiconductor workforce faces a shortfall of semiconductor talent, resulting in a requirement for over **1 million additional skilled professionals** by 2032.
- Thus, India is strengthening its semiconductor ecosystem as a strategic pillar of **economic growth, technological capability, and national resilience**.

### Programme details

- **Launched in 2022**, the **C2S Programme** is an umbrella capacity-building initiative launched by the MeitY, with a total outlay of **Rs 250 crore over five years**, covering **academic institutions** across India.
- Nodal Ministry-MeitY; Nodal Agency-Centre for Development of Advanced Computing (C-DAC)
- It targets the development of **85,000 industry-ready professionals** across undergraduate, postgraduate, and doctoral levels.
- Moreover, beyond manpower generation, it aims to **accelerate the incubation of 25 start-ups** and enable **10 technology transfers**.
- It also seeks to provide access to **SMART lab facilities**, train **one lakh students**, generate **50 patents**, and support at least **2,000 focused research publications**.
- The **ChipIN Centre at C-DAC Bengaluru** is one of India's largest facilities providing shared semiconductor design infrastructure to academic institutions and startups across the country.

## Banks Allowed To Setup Pension Funds

- The Pension Fund Regulatory and Development Authority (PFRDA), has given in-principle approval for banks to independently set up pension funds to manage the National Pension System (NPS).
- Currently, banks serve as points of presence, handling subscriber registrations, contributions, and other system services. Some existing pension funds have ties to financial institutions, including banks.
- The approval is subject to eligibility norms aligned with RBI,s guidelines.
- Further, banks will have to meet eligibility criteria linked to networth, market capitalisation, and prudential soundness.

- The change is part of broader reforms by the regulator and has been taken to strengthen competition in the sector.
- Recently, the PFRDA had also allowed NPS subscribers to invest in gold and silver exchange-traded funds, the Nifty 50 index, and Alternative Investment Funds.

## Land Stack

- The Ministry of Rural Development (MoRD) has launched the **Land Stack** under **Digital India Land Record Modernisation Programme (DILRMP)** in the pilot locations of Chandigarh and Tamil Nadu.
- The Ministry also launched the **Glossary of Revenue Terms (GoRT)**.
- Drawing from international best practices in countries like Singapore, the UK, and Finland, the Land Stack is envisaged as an **integrated, GIS-based digital platform**.
- Currently, citizens often face **fragmented information** across various departments. The Land Stack addresses this by providing **single-window access to land and property information** for both citizens and government agencies.
- It marks a transition towards **modern, transparent, and citizen-centric land governance**, aligning India's historical land record systems with the demands of contemporary digital governance.

### Glossary of Revenue Terms (GoRT)

- India's land administration is shaped by diverse historical influences, from Todar Mal's revenue reforms to British settlement systems (Ryotwari, Mahalwari).
- This has resulted in a scenario where terms like **Khasra, Dag, or Pula en** may refer to similar concepts, while identical terms may hold different meanings across States.
- To address this, the Department of Land Resources, in collaboration with the **Centre of Excellence in Land Administration and Management (CoE-LAM) at YASHADA, Pune**, has prepared the GoRT.
- It provides meanings of various land-related revenue terms in vernacular, hindi, english, and roman scripts.
- The objective is to **harmonize terminology** to make land data comparable and interoperable nationally, without replacing State-specific terminology.
- It serves as an authoritative reference for revenue officials, policymakers, judicial authorities, and citizens.

### Benefits

- It enables informed decision-making by citizens through integrated access to land-related information.
- It enhances citizen convenience, transparency and trust.
- It reduces the risk of unintentional purchase of unauthorised or non-compliant properties.
- It improves inter-departmental coordination and supports data-driven governance.
- It represents a significant e-Governance reform in land administration.

## Achieving Efficiencies in MSME Sector through Convergence

- NITI Aayog has released a comprehensive report titled **"Achieving Efficiencies in MSME Sector through Convergence of Schemes"**.
- It provides a strategic roadmap to strengthen the effectiveness of government support for India's Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs).
- It presents a detailed blueprint to **improve outcomes for MSMEs** by streamlining scheme implementation, strengthening inter-ministerial coordination, and enhancing the delivery of financial, skill, marketing, and innovation support.

### Need for Convergence

- The Ministry of MSME currently administers 18 schemes covering areas like credit assistance, skill development, marketing support, innovation and R&D, technology and quality upgradation, and infrastructure development.
- While these initiatives have played a significant role in MSME growth, overlapping objectives and fragmented implementation across ministries often lead to duplication, inefficiencies, and limited outreach.
- Effective convergence and rationalisation of schemes can simplify access for beneficiaries, ensure better translation of resources into outputs and outcomes.

### Framework for Convergence

- The report recommends a **two-pronged approach to convergence**, comprising *information convergence and process convergence.*
- **Information convergence** focuses on integrating government-generated data at the central and state levels to improve coordination, enable informed decision-making, and strengthen governance outcomes.
- **Process convergence** aims at aligning and unifying schemes to reduce redundancies, streamline operations, and improve service delivery. This includes merging similar schemes, combining common components, and fostering collaboration across ministries and states to create a cohesive MSME support ecosystem.

## Key recommendations

### Centralized Portal for MSMEs

- An **AI-powered centralized digital platform** integrating MSME schemes, compliance, finance, and market intelligence.
- Drawing on global best practices, the portal would feature information, process, compliance, and market research modules, supported by AI chatbots, dashboards, and mobile access for real-time support to MSMEs.

### Convergence of Cluster Development Schemes

- Integration of the Scheme of Fund for Regeneration of Traditional Industries (SFURTI) with the Micro and Small Enterprises – Cluster Development Programme (MSE-CDP).
- It proposes a dedicated sub-scheme for traditional industries, a unified governance structure under MSE-CDP, consolidated funding with resources designated to preserve crafts, arts, and endangered traditional industries while improving scale and efficiency.

### Skill Development Convergence

- Rationalising of skill initiatives into a **three-tier structure** covering **entrepreneurship and business skills**, **MSME technical skills**, and **training for rural and women artisans**.
- It merges overlapping schemes, improves coordination among institutions, and retains targeted programmes to promote traditional crafts, inclusion, and entrepreneurship.

### Marketing Assistance Wing

- To streamline MSME marketing support, a dedicated Marketing Wing with domestic and international components should be established.
- The **domestic wing** would facilitate MSME participation in national exhibitions, trade fairs, and buyer-seller meets.
- The **international wing** would support global market access through overseas trade fairs, B2B events, and buyer-seller meets.

### MSME Innovative & ASPIRE

- Integrating **A Scheme For Promoting Innovation, Rural Industry & Entrepreneurship (**ASPIRE) into MSME Innovative as a special category for agro-rural enterprises.
- Existing ASPIRE funds can continue, while future MSME Innovative budgets to designate a share for agro-rural incubators.

### Safeguarding targeted initiatives

- It also highlights the importance of safeguarding targeted initiatives such as the National SC/ST Hub and the Promotion of MSMEs in the North Eastern Region (NER).
- Large flagship programmes like Prime Minister's Employment Generation Programme (PMEGP) and PM Vishwakarma to remain independent, given their scale and strategic economic significance.

### Implementation Strategy

- To optimise resources and reduce administrative redundancies, it recommends a strategy of **cautious convergence** merging schemes with overlapping objectives while preserving the distinct focus of targeted programmes.
- Where full merger is not feasible, it recommends enhanced collaboration through joint workshops and shared capacity-building for administrators.
- Throughout the convergence process, it stresses the need to safeguard beneficiary interests, carefully manage transitions, and rigorously track outcomes to ensure sustained impact.

### A Decade of Startup India

- This year **National Startup Day on 16 January** marked a landmark **decade of the Startup India** Initiative.
- It is implemented by the **Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade (DPIIT)** under the **Ministry of Commerce and Industry**,
- The initiative has evolved from a **policy-focused framework** into a **comprehensive, multi-dimensional platform** supporting startups at every stage from ideation to scaling operations.
- India has rapidly evolved into one of the **world's largest startup ecosystems,** with more than **2 lakh startups as of December 2025** with around **50% of startups emerging from Tier II/III cities**.
- The ecosystem has grown from just four privately held companies valued above $1 billion (unicorn) in 2014 to over 120 such firms, with a combined valuation exceeding $350 billion.
- They are increasingly **bridging India's rural- urban divide** by deploying solutions across agri-tech, telemedicine, microfinance, tourism, and ed-tech, directly addressing developmental gaps and supporting rural livelihoods

- **Women-led startups** are emerging as a key driver of inclusive and regionally balanced growth, with more than **45% of recognised startups** having **at least one-woman Director/Partner** as of December 2025.

**Initiatives under Startup India**

DPIIT, through the Startup India initiative, has rolled out the following flagship initiatives to support funding, mentorship, and the scaling of startups nationwide.

**Fund of Funds for Startups (FFS)**

- Managed by **Small Industries Development Bank of India (SIDBI**), it has a corpus of Rs 10,000 crore.
- It supports SEBI-registered **Alternative Investment Funds (AIFs)**, which in turn invest in startups.
- The corpus has been committed **to over 140 AIFs**, which have collectively invested **Rs 25,500+ crore in 1,370+ startups**.

**Credit Guarantee Scheme for Startups (CGSS)**

- Operationalized by the **National Credit Guarantee Trustee Company (NCGTC) Limited**, it enables collateral free loans to startups through eligible financial institutions.
- Under CGSS, **330+ loans** worth **over Rs 800 crore** have been guaranteed for startup borrowers.

**Startup India Seed Fund Scheme (SISFS)**

- With a **corpus of Rs 945 crore**, SISFS provides financial assistance to startups for activities such as proof of concept, prototyping, product trials, market entry, and commercialisation.
- The corpus has been approved to **215+ incubators to support early-stage startups** under the scheme.
- It is overseen by an **Expert Advisory Committee (EAC),** which is responsible for its implementation, execution, and monitoring.

**Startup India Hub**

- It is a digital platform for all stakeholders of the entrepreneurial ecosystem in India to discover, connect and engage with each other.
- It connects investors, mentors, and incubators with India's aspiring entrepreneurs and brings together funds, academic institutions, corporates, and government bodies.

**National Mentorship Portal (MAARG)**

- The Mentorship, Advisory, Assistance, Resilience, and Growth (**MAARG**) program has been developed to provide startups across the country with easy **access to mentorship**.

**Startup India Investor Connect Portal**

- Developed in collaboration with **SIDBI**, it is a digital platform that connects **startups with venture capital funds and investors**, with a particular focus on early-stage ventures.
- It enables entrepreneurs to reach **multiple investors** through **a single application**.

## Visit of President of UAE to India

UAE President Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan concluded a brief but high-impact visit to New Delhi, where he met with PM Modi and finalized key agreements to deepen India-UAE cooperation across defense, trade, energy, and technology.

### Key Outcomes: Agreements and Strategic Deliverables

- The visit resulted in **five agreements and seven major outcomes**, spanning:
  - **Defence**: Framework pact and Letter of Intent towards a Strategic Defence Partnership
  - **Space**: Joint initiative
  - **Trade**: Target to double bilateral trade to **$200 billion by 2032**
  - **Technology**: Cooperation in AI and a supercomputing cluster in India
  - **Energy**: 10-year LNG supply pact
    - A 10-year LNG agreement between Hindustan Petroleum Corporation Limited and ADNOC Gas will supply 0.5 million tonnes annually from 2028, making the **UAE India's second-largest LNG supplier**.
    - Cooperation will be explored in large nuclear reactors, SMRs, reactor systems, operations, and nuclear safety, enabled by India's new SHANTI law.
- **Economic and Digital Cooperation**
  - Bilateral trade crossed **$100 billion in FY 2024–25**, boosted by the **Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement**.
  - Plans include:
    - Interlinking national payment platforms
    - Exploring a **digital/data embassy**
    - UAE firms **First Abu Dhabi Bank** and **DP World** expanding operations at **GIFT City, Gujarat**
    - Investment cooperation for the **Dholera Special Investment Region**

## India's FTAs: Rising Trade Deficit Amid a Shift to Sunrise Exports

- A recent NITI Aayog *Trade Watch Quarterly* highlights a paradox: while India is fast-tracking Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) to diversify exports and cushion potential US tariff risks, its **trade deficit** with FTA partners has widened sharply, even as sunrise sectors like electronics surge.

## Challenges and Way Ahead

- **Recalibrate FTAs:** Tighten **rules of origin**, improve **market access for labour-intensive sectors**, and ensure reciprocity.
- **Revive ASEAN Exports:** Upgrade **logistics**, **technology**, and **standards compliance**; accelerate ASEAN FTA renegotiation.
- **Reduce Import Dependence:** Build **domestic capacity in intermediates**; pursue **strategic trade diplomacy** to counter ASEAN–China asymmetries.
- **Broaden Global value chain Integration:** Extend beyond electronics to **EVs, semiconductors, and green technologies**.

## Conclusion

- The NITI Aayog report captures a **transition phase** in India's trade strategy. While **FTA-linked deficits** and **ASEAN export weakness** pose risks, the **electronics export boom** marks a positive structural shift.
- Aligning FTAs with manufacturing goals, ensuring reciprocal gains, and scaling sunrise sectors will be key to **sustainable, export-led growth**.

## Trump's Arctic Ambition: Is Greenland Next?

- US President Donald Trump has renewed calls that the United States needs Greenland "for defence", prompting sharp rejection from Denmark and Greenland's leadership.
- Denmark has called any annexation bid "absurd", as Washington's rhetoric—backed by provocative maps—raises concerns over Arctic security, sovereignty, and international law.

## Why Denmark and Greenland Are Wary Now?

- Trump's recent actions in Venezuela have heightened fears of interventionism.
- **Alleged three-phase playbook** (per Danish media):
  - Charm offensive (outreach, high-profile visits)
  - Direct pressure on Copenhagen

- Influence operations to encourage secessionist sentiment

### Has the US Bought Territories Before?

- Alaska (1867): Bought from Russia for $7.2 million.
- Louisiana (1803): Purchased from France for $15 million.
- US Virgin Islands (1917): Acquired from Denmark for $25 million.

## Trump Unveils the 'Board of Peace'

Donald Trump unveiled a proposed US-led Board of Peace at Davos. India, despite an invitation, has chosen a "wait and watch" approach, neither accepting nor rejecting the offer for now.

### Why the Board of Peace Puts India in a Tight Spot?

- **A Pay-to-Enter Peace Club -** Reports suggest permanent membership requires a $1-billion contribution, raising concerns about commercialising peace-making.
- **Unclear Mandate and Risk of Mission Creep -** While Gaza is the immediate focus, the charter reportedly avoids clear territorial limits, using broad terms like **"world peace"**, creating unease about future expansion.
- **Peace-Making Outside the UN -** The forum operates **outside the UN framework**, risking selective and fragmented conflict resolution and excluding key stakeholders.
- **India's Multilateral Principles at Stake -** India has consistently championed **multilateralism and UN primacy**, even while advocating UN reform. Joining a US-led platform perceived as bypassing the UN could **undermine India's credibility**.
- **The Cost of Staying Out -** Avoiding the platform could mean **losing strategic space** in discussions on global security, reconstruction, and conflict management as new power centres emerge.

- **Palestine–Israel Balancing Act -** India supports a **two-state solution and Palestinian rights** while maintaining strong ties with **Israel**. Participation in a **Trump-driven, West-centric Gaza forum** could upset this delicate balance and affect India's Global South standing.
- **The Pakistan Factor - Pakistan's reported invitation** complicates matters. Sharing a high-profile platform with Islamabad risks **domestic backlash**, yet staying out could exclude India from deliberations affecting future **India–Pakistan crises**.
- **Security and Military Red Lines -** Reports that Pakistan may offer troops for a Gaza stabilisation force clash with India's stance of **not participating in non-UN military missions**.

## Conclusion

- India is unlikely to ignore the Board of Peace altogether, but joining carries **reputational, political, and strategic risks**.
- The challenge before New Delhi is to **balance engagement with caution**, safeguarding its commitment to multilateralism, domestic political sensitivities, and global credibility in a **Trump-led geopolitical forum**.

## Iran's Protests: Causes, Context, and Implications

- Since December 2025, Iran has witnessed widespread protests across all the 31 districts, triggered initially by economic distress but increasingly acquiring an anti-regime character.
- The unrest comes amid soaring inflation, currency collapse, and heightened geopolitical pressure.
- The unrest has created political space for **Reza Pahlavi**, son of the last Shah of Iran, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, who was overthrown in the 1979 Islamic Revolution.
- **Economic Triggers Behind the Unrest**
  - Inflation exceeded **52% in 2025.** The Iranian rial fell to a record **1.46 million per US dollar**, losing over half its value in a year.
- **A Familiar Pattern**
  - In Iran's 21st-century history, **economic hardship**, combined with **authoritarian governance**, has repeatedly produced mass protests that evolve into calls against the system led by **Ali Khamenei** and enforced by the **Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)**.

### The Pahlavi Dynasty: Rise, Rule, and Fall

**Origins of the Pahlavi Dynasty (1925)**

- Reza Shah Pahlavi rose from a military background and seized power in 1925 after overthrowing Ahmad Shah Qajar.
- His ascent occurred amid intense British and Russian imperial rivalry, exploiting Iran's political and economic fragility.

**Foreign Influence and Economic Concessions**

- Iran's vulnerability was evident in sweeping concessions to foreign powers.
- The 1872 concession to a British company (later condemned by Lord Curzon) symbolised near-total surrender of economic sovereignty.
- Although revoked, it entrenched perceptions of Iran's subjugation to external interests.

**Abdication of Reza Shah and Wartime Shift (1941)**

- Reza Shah abdicated in 1941 after Allied forces invaded Iran, citing his regime's ties with Germany.
- His removal boosted public sentiment in favour of sovereignty and democratic leadership.

**Mossadegh and the Oil Nationalisation Struggle (1951–53)**

- Mohammad Mossadegh, a Western-educated jurist, became Prime Minister and nationalised Iran's oil industry.
- This challenged British control via the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (later British Petroleum), provoking Western backlash.

**The 1953 Coup and Restoration of the Shah**

- Britain, with US backing, orchestrated a 1953 coup to protect strategic and economic interests.
- Mossadegh was arrested, and Mohammad Reza Pahlavi was restored to power—cementing the monarchy under Western support.

**Mass Protests and Collapse of the Monarchy (1970s–1979)**

- By the 1970s, broad-based protests—from communists to Islamists—challenged the regime.
- Despite crackdowns, sustained agitation weakened the Shah's grip.
- In January 1979, the Shah fled Iran; a referendum soon abolished the monarchy.

## Trump Pulls US Out Of 66 Global Bodies

- Donald Trump has ordered the United States to withdraw from 66 international organisations, including several UN agencies and the International Solar Alliance.
- Through a formal memorandum, Trump termed these bodies "redundant" and contrary to US interests, directing immediate disengagement.
- As per analysts, the immediate impact will be **reduced funding and weakened leadership** in global institutions, creating strategic space for **China** to expand its influence.

## How Trump Seeks to Project Power Outside Global Institutions?

- **Tariffs and Military Power**
  - Despite retreating from institutions, Trump continues to rely on **tariffs and military force** as primary tools of influence.
  - In 2025, US military actions were undertaken in **Syria, Iraq, Nigeria, Somalia, Yemen, and Iran**.

- **Selective Multilateralism**
  - A complete UN exit is unlikely. The US aims to stay in forums where **China's veto power** makes internal engagement strategically necessary.
- **Retaining Key Technical Bodies**
  - Continued participation is expected in standard-setting organisations like the **International Telecommunication Union**, **International Maritime Organization**, and **International Labour Organization**, where global commerce and technology rules are shaped.
- **Diplomacy Backed by Force**
  - Trump's approach prioritises diplomacy but keeps **military action as a fallback**, citing cases like Venezuela where negotiations failed.
- **NATO and Strategic Signalling**
  - While actions such as pushing to acquire Greenland have unsettled allies, Trump insists on continued US commitment to **North Atlantic Treaty Organization**.
  - The message is clear: **US economic and military power**, not institutions, is seen as the ultimate guarantor of influence.

**Conclusion**

- Trump's withdrawal from 66 global bodies marks a systemic retreat from multilateral governance.
- While intended to reduce costs and constrain perceived pro-China bias, it risks weakening global institutions, diminishing US soft power, and opening space for China to shape international norms—while Washington seeks to compensate through unilateral economic and military leverage.

## EU's Carbon Border Tax Begins: Implications for India

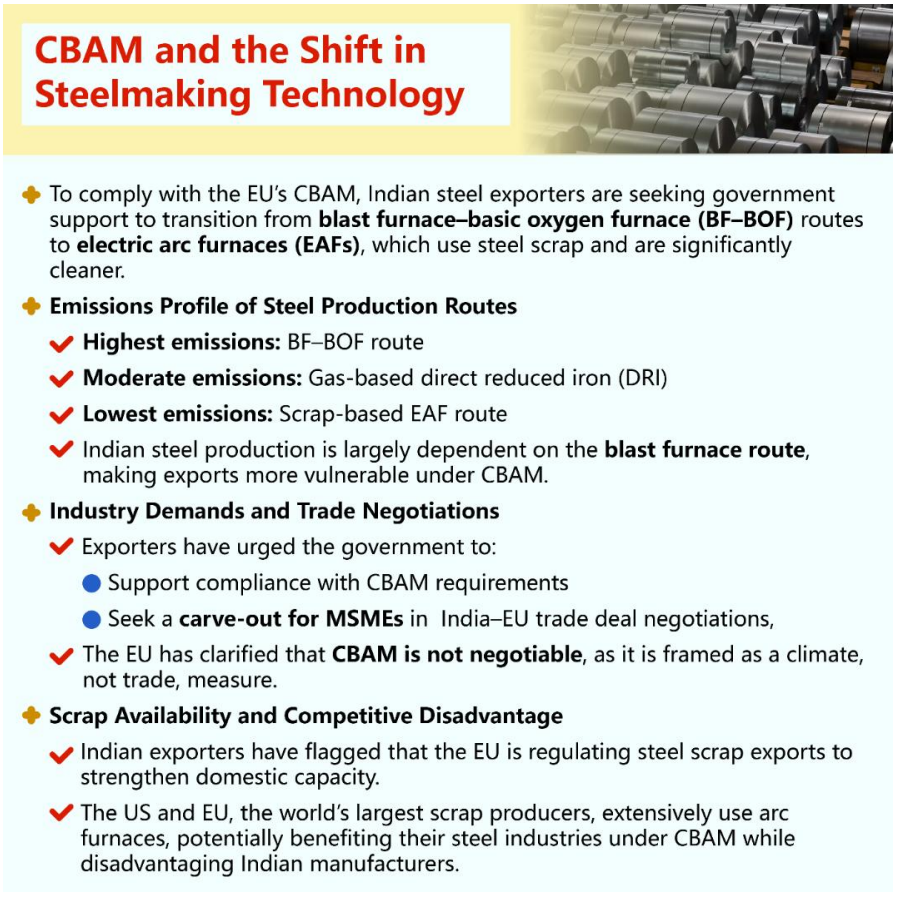
- The **European Union** has operationalised the **Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM)** from January 1, imposing a carbon-linked levy on imports of emission-intensive goods.
- **Objective:** prevent *carbon leakage* by aligning import costs with the EU's domestic carbon pricing and pushing cleaner production globally.
- **Sectors Covered:** Power; Cement, steel, aluminium; Oil refining, paper, glass, chemicals, fertilisers (Scope can be expanded later.)

### Why CBAM Matters for India?

- **India** exports to the EU are heavily concentrated in steel, iron and aluminium—sectors most exposed to CBAM. Other pressures add up: high US tariffs on metals

### Global Pushback Against CBAM

- Developing countries argue CBAM raises trade barriers.
- UNCTAD warns it could:
  - Hurt export-led growth
  - Reduce market access
  - Deepen trade inequalities
- Critics say it violates the principle of Common But Differentiated Responsibilities (CBDR).




### Likely Impact on Indian Exporters

- **Price and Market Pressure**
  - From January 1, 2026, CBAM will add a direct carbon cost to Indian steel and aluminium shipments.
  - Estimates suggest exporters may need 15–22% price cuts to stay competitive.
- **MSMEs at Risk**
  - High compliance, reporting and verification costs.
  - Lack of plant-level emissions data may force EU authorities to apply default high emissions values, inflating taxes.
  - Risk of being priced out of the EU market if rivals (e.g., China) adapt faster.

### Climate Action or Trade Protection?

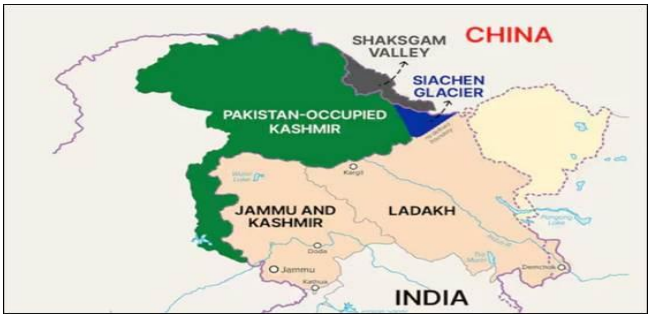
- Indian experts view it as ***green protectionism*** with limited climate gains.
- UNCTAD estimates CBAM would cut global $CO_2$ emissions by only 0.1%.
- Suggestion: use CBAM revenues to finance clean technology transitions in developing countries.

### India's Official Position

- Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman has called CBAM unilateral and discriminatory.
- India has formally raised concerns with the EU, arguing such measures undermine equitable energy transitions.

### India–China Dispute Over Shaksgam Valley

- A renewed diplomatic and strategic India–China friction has emerged over the **Shaksgam Valley** in Jammu and Kashmir.
- The issue has resurfaced despite recent disengagement in eastern Ladakh, raising concerns about long-term stability along the western sector of the boundary.



## Shaksgam Valley: Location and Strategic Context

- Shaksgam Valley, also called the ***Trans Karakoram Tract***, lies in the ***Hunza–Gilgit region*** under Pakistan's occupation.
- It is located **north of the Siachen Glacier**, bordering China's Xinjiang to the north and Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK) to the south and west.
- Though legally claimed by India, the area has remained outside Indian control since the 1960s due to Pakistan–China arrangements.

## Why Shaksgam Valley Is Strategically Important for India?

- **Proximity to Siachen and Karakoram Pass**
  - The valley's closeness to the **Siachen Glacier**, the world's highest battlefield, makes it critical for India's defence posture.
  - Control over heights near the **Karakoram Pass** allows monitoring of both Pakistani and Chinese military movements.
- **Emerging Two-Front Security Challenge**
  - Traditionally, India's focus in Siachen was Pakistan-centric from the south.
  - China's growing access from the north introduces the risk of a **two-front contingency**, heightening India's security concerns.

### Pakistan's Cession of Shaksgam Valley to China

**Historical Background**

- After the accession of Jammu and Kashmir to India in 1947, Shaksgam Valley legally became Indian territory.
- Pakistan, which never had sovereign rights over the area, nevertheless controlled adjacent regions.

**The 1963 Boundary Agreement**

- In 1963, Pakistan signed a boundary agreement with **China**, ceding about **5,180 sq km** of the Shaksgam Valley.
- India has consistently rejected this agreement, calling it illegal and void, as Pakistan had no authority to transfer Indian territory.

### China's Infrastructure Push and Indian Concerns

**Expanding Chinese Footprint**

- China has reportedly built **around 75 km of all-weather roads**, including a route over the **Aghil Pass**, bringing Chinese presence close to Indian positions near Siachen.
- Analysts view this as part of China's **"salami slicing"** strategy—incremental actions that cumulatively alter the status quo.

**Strategic Implications**

- The infrastructure is linked to the **China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)**, reinforcing Sino-Pak coordination.
- India fears coordinated pressure from China and Pakistan along both the **Line of Actual Control (LAC)** and the **Line of Control (LoC)**.

## India's Position

- India maintains that Shaksgam Valley is an integral part of Jammu and Kashmir under Pakistan's illegal occupation.
- New Delhi has stated that it reserves the right to take "necessary measures" to safeguard its interests.
- China, while calling Kashmir a bilateral issue between India and Pakistan, continues strategic construction in PoK—exposing a clear contradiction.

## India's Late Entry into Pax Silica and MSP

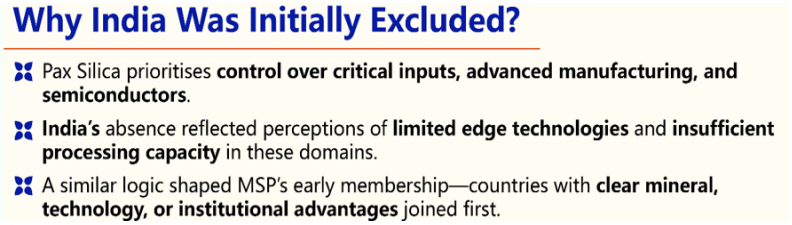
- India's delayed induction into US-led initiatives such as **Pax Silica** and the **Minerals Security Partnership (MSP)** has drawn attention to India's positioning in the emerging global tech order.
- As with MSP, India joined Pax Silica after the initiative was already underway—suggesting a pattern of late inclusion rather than first-round partnership.

## What These Groupings Signal?

- These platforms aim to **reshape global supply chains** in strategic technologies amid concerns over **China's** dominance.
- By addressing chokepoints—such as **critical minerals, magnets, and semiconductors**—they help set **rules and leverage** in next-generation tech ecosystems.
- Late inclusion signals that **strategic goodwill alone is insufficient**; partners must bring **tangible capabilities**.

**The Takeaway for India**

- Founding members share a **demonstrable lead** in AI or semiconductor supply chains—an area where India currently trails.
- Repeated late entry underscores a consistent message: **capability and leverage**, not intent, determine first-choice partnerships.
- To avoid strategic catch-up, India must **strengthen control over critical inputs, platforms, and technologies** that shape supply-chain rules.




*{For more on Pax Silica refer The Recitals- Dec 2025}*

## Sri Lanka's Kankesanthurai Port

- The Sri Lankan Cabinet has approved the long-pending renovation of Kankesanthurai Port in the Northern Province, with India agreeing to provide a **full grant** covering the entire project cost.
- Located about 104 km (56 nautical miles) from Karaikal Port, the port plays a key role in regional connectivity.
- Originally approved by the Sri Lankan Cabinet in May 2017, the project faced delays due to higher-than-expected cost estimates.

## India Launches e-B-4 Business Visa for Chinese Professionals

- India has introduced a new **e-Production Investment Business Visa** (e-B-4) allowing China nationals to travel to India for specific, production-linked business activities.
- The e-B-4 Visa can be applied for entirely online, without the need to visit the embassy or use agents.
- The visa is expected to be processed within 45–50 days and permits a stay of up to six months in India.
- The move is aimed at facilitating manufacturing, production, and supply-chain operations, particularly in investment-linked projects.

## 'Golden Dome' Missile Defence

Trump administration is widening its search for partners to build the ambitious Golden Dome missile defence system.

- **Golden Dome Initiative:** A $175 billion, space-based missile defence shield, envisioned as a far more expansive and layered version of **Israel's Iron Dome**.
  - Designed to integrate **satellite networks, missile warning, tracking, interceptors, and ground systems** across vast geographies.
  - Trump announced the project within a week of his second term, pushing for **rapid deployment**.

## 16th India–EU Summit

- Antonio Costa (President of the European Council) and Ursula von der Leyen (President of the European Commission) paid a State Visit to India as **Chief Guests** for India's **77th Republic Day**—the first time EU leaders have been accorded this honour.
- Later PM Modi, President Costa, and President von der Leyen co-chaired the 16th India–EU Summit in New Delhi.

### Key Outcomes of the 16th India–EU Summit

- **Outcome 1: Towards 2030 Joint India–EU Comprehensive Strategic Agenda**
  - What it means: A five-year roadmap aligning cooperation across trade, investment, supply chains, digital connectivity, and green transition.
  - Expected impact: Stronger trade and investment ties, resilient supply chains, faster green transition, enhanced digital/AI collaboration, improved connectivity, and deeper security and skills cooperation.
- **Outcome 2: Conclusion of India–EU FTA Negotiations**
  - What it means: The economic centrepiece of the partnership, boosting trade, investment, and regulatory cooperation.
  - Expected impact: Improved market access for Indian goods and services, diversified supply chains, technology transfer, innovation, and job creation—especially for youth.
- **Outcome 3: Security and Defence Partnership**
  - What it means: Expanded cooperation in defence industry, maritime security, cyber and hybrid threats, space, and counter-terrorism.
  - Expected impact: Opportunities for Indian defence firms under EU initiatives, advanced defence technologies, support for Make in India, and defence-sector employment.
- **Outcome 4: Comprehensive Framework on Cooperation on Mobility**
  - What it means: First EU-level mobility agreement with India for structured movement of skilled professionals.
  - Expected impact: Easier mobility for skilled and seasonal workers, access to European education and research, and stronger people-to-people ties.
- **Outcome 5: Disaster Risk Management and Emergency Response**
  - What it means: Cooperation between India's NDMA and the EU's DG-ECHO.
  - Expected impact: Better disaster preparedness, faster emergency response, and protection of lives and property.
- **Outcome 6: RBI–ESMA Cooperation**
  - What it means: Recognition of Indian clearing houses by the European Securities and Markets Authority (ESMA)
  - Expected impact: Smoother capital flows, deeper financial integration, and structured regulatory dialogue.
- **Outcome 7: Advanced Electronic Signatures and Seals**
  - What it means: Framework for interoperability of digital signatures between India and the EU.
  - Expected impact: More efficient cross-border trade, stronger business confidence, and a boost to the digital economy.
- **Outcome 8: Renewal of Scientific and Technological Cooperation (2025–2030)**
  - What it means: Extension of India–EU S&T cooperation agreement.
  - Expected impact: Expanded research collaboration, innovation, and access for Indian institutions to Europe's R&D ecosystem.

- **Outcome 9: Green Hydrogen Task Force**
  - What it means: Institutional mechanism for cooperation on green hydrogen.
  - Expected impact: Green jobs, industrial decarbonisation, clean energy innovation, and strengthened climate action.
- **Outcome 10: Security of Information Agreement (Negotiations Launched)**
  - What it means: Framework for exchange of classified information.
  - Expected impact: Enhanced national security and deeper defence cooperation.
- **Outcome 11: Exploratory Talks on Horizon Europe**
  - What it means: Discussions on India's association with the EU's flagship research programme.
  - Expected impact: Access to large research funding, high-tech partnerships, and innovation opportunities for MSMEs.
- **Outcome 12: India–EU Trilateral Partnership Projects**
  - What it means: Joint implementation of projects in clean energy, digital innovation, agriculture, early warning systems, and women empowerment.
  - Expected impact: Sustainable development in Africa, Indo-Pacific SIDS, and the Caribbean.
- **Outcome 13: EU Pilot Legal Gateway Office in India**
  - What it means: A one-stop hub for EU job opportunities, initially in the ICT sector.
  - Expected impact: Improved skill mobility, clarity on visas, stronger skilling ecosystem, and support to Skill India Mission.

## Second India-Arab Foreign Ministers' Meeting

- **India** hosted the **second India–Arab Foreign Ministers' Meeting** in New Delhi, bringing together **22 members of the League of Arab States**—a decade after the first meeting in Bahrain.
  - India is an Observer in the League of Arab States
- Held amid heightened Middle East tensions (US–Iran strains, Saudi–UAE differences, and renewed Israel–Palestine diplomacy), the **Delhi Declaration** outlined shared positions and highlighted India's calibrated, balanced approach to the region.

### Regional Conflicts: What the Delhi Declaration Signals?

- **Support for Sovereignty and Recognised Governments**
  - Strong emphasis on **sovereignty, unity, and territorial integrity** of **Sudan, Libya, and Somalia**.
  - Rejection of **external interference**, aligning India with the Arab League's support for internationally recognised governments over rival or breakaway authorities.
- **Power Rivalries in the Background**
  - Conflicts reflect broader Middle East rivalries—loosely between a **Saudi-aligned camp** and a **UAE–Israel–US-backed camp**.
  - **Sudan**: UAE accused of backing the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) against the government.
  - **Libya**: UAE-backed Khalifa Haftar versus the UN-recognised Tripoli government.

- **Somalia**: Israel is the only UN member-state to recognise the Republic of Somaliland — a breakaway quasi-state within Somalia. The UAE began recognising Somaliland passports in 2025, a position contrary to other Arab League states.

- **India's Clear Alignment**
  - Explicit condemnation of violence against civilians in Sudan and Libya.
  - Clear rejection of any recognition of Somaliland.

### Conclusion

The Delhi Declaration 2026 crystallises India's Middle East strategy: balanced engagement, clear support for sovereignty and stability, cautious distancing from polarising initiatives, and steady deepening of economic and political ties with the Arab world—all while preserving room to manoeuvre amid great-power and regional rivalries.

## International Conference on Democracy & Election Management

International Conference on Democracy and Election Management was held in New Delhi. It was hosted by the Election Commission of India.

### Global State of Democracy 2025: Key Findings

- 94 countries (54% of 173 assessed) recorded decline in at least one democratic indicator compared to five years ago.
- India was among countries that saw decline in five indicators, including: Free political parties; Judicial independence.
- However, the report noted that India's 2024 general elections were: Well-organised and fair; accepted immediately by all political actors, contrary to pre-election fears.

### India's Emerging Leadership Role

- India is a **founding member** of International Institute of Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) and will **chair the organisation in 2026**.
- **CEC on Electoral Integrity**
  - Chief Election Commissioner, underlined two pillars of democracy:
    - ♣ Pure and inclusive electoral rolls
    - ♣ Credible conduct of elections

## Bulgaria Adopts the Euro

- Bulgaria became the **21st country** to join the eurozone on January 1, 2026, replacing the **lev** nearly two decades after joining the European Union.
- The move is seen as a final step in EU integration, aimed at boosting economic stability, strengthening Western ties, and reducing Russian influence.

- With Bulgaria's entry, over 350 million Europeans now use the euro, expanding the eurozone's reach in Eastern Europe.

## EU–Mercosur Trade Pact

- The European Union and the Mercosur bloc are set to sign their long-pending free trade agreement in Asuncion, concluding negotiations that began in 1999.
- Though formally concluded in December 2024, the deal remains controversial in Europe, with France opposing it over concerns about agricultural impacts.

## Overview of the EU–Mercosur Trade Deal

- The agreement is the EU's one of largest FTA by tariff reductions, eliminating over €4 billion in duties and significantly expanding market access between the two blocs.
- **Trade Profile and Market Access**
  - Annual EU–Mercosur goods trade stands at about €111 billion.
  - Mercosur will eliminate duties on 91% of EU exports over 15 years, while the EU will remove duties on 92% of Mercosur exports within 10 years.
- **Sensitive Products and Quotas**
  - The EU retains quotas on key agricultural imports such as poultry, sugar, ethanol and rice, while Mercosur keeps quotas on milk powder and infant formula. Beef and cheese quotas have been expanded.
- **Protection of Geographical Indications**
  - Around 350 EU food and drink products receive GI protection, preventing imitation in Mercosur markets.
- **Safeguards and Support Measures**
  - The deal allows the EU to suspend concessions if safeguards are breached and tightens residue checks.
  - To ease domestic concerns, the EU has activated crisis funds, farmer support, and fertiliser duty cuts.

## EU Countries Opposing the Trade Deal

- **Countries Leading the Opposition** - France, Poland, Austria, Hungary and Ireland opposed the EU–Mercosur trade deal, with Belgium abstaining. Although Italy dropped its veto, significant resistance remains within the EU.
- **Agricultural Competition Concerns** - Opposing states fear cheaper agricultural imports from Mercosur could undercut European farmers, particularly beef producers, with Irish farmers concerned about increased beef quotas.

- **Environmental and Climate Safeguards** - Critics argue the agreement lacks binding and enforceable provisions to ensure compliance with the EU's strict environmental, climate, and animal welfare standards.
- **Deforestation and Sustainability Risks** - There are strong concerns that weak enforcement could accelerate deforestation and environmental degradation in sensitive regions like the Amazon.
- **Fair Competition and Standards** - Farmers' groups warn that differing production and environmental standards create unfair competition, disadvantaging EU producers against lower-cost imports.

## 28th Commonwealth Speakers' Conference

- The 28th Conference of Speakers and Presiding Officers of the Commonwealth (CSPOC) was hosted by India in New Delhi, marking a major milestone in Commonwealth parliamentary cooperation.
- **Core Themes of CSPOC 2026**
  - Artificial Intelligence and legislatures
  - Social media and democratic discourse
  - Security challenges to parliamentary functioning
  - Public engagement and trust in institutions
    - These themes highlighted emerging challenges to **parliamentary effectiveness and democratic resilience**.
- The 29th CSPOC will be held in London in 2028.

### About CSPOC

- Established in 1969, CSPOC serves as a high-level forum for Speakers and Presiding Officers of Commonwealth legislatures.
- It brings together Speakers and Presiding Officers from 53 national parliaments of sovereign Commonwealth states, and 14 semi-autonomous parliaments.
- It focuses on strengthening democratic governance, constitutional institutions, and parliamentary practices.
- CSPOC functions as an independent parliamentary body, with no formal affiliation to the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA) or the Commonwealth Secretariat.
- It is convened biennially, with a Standing Committee meeting in the intervening year to ensure continuity, finalise agendas, and take organisational decisions.
- **India's Role in CSPOC**
  - India has been a consistent and active participant, hosting CSPOC four times: 1970–71; 1986; 2010; 2026.
  - India chaired the CSPOC Standing Committee meeting in Guernsey (January 2025), shaping the agenda and institutional direction for the 2026 Conference.

## 18th India–Japan Strategic Dialogue

The 18th India–Japan Strategic Dialogue was held in New Delhi, with S. Jaishankar and his counterpart reaffirming the India–Japan Special Strategic and Global Partnership.

### Major Announcements

- **Japan–India Private-Sector Dialogue on Economic Security (B2B)**
  - To be launched within the first quarter of 2026.
  - Designed as a business-to-business platform to translate strategic convergence into commercial outcomes.
  - Five priority sectors: Semiconductors; Critical minerals; Information and Communication Technology (ICT); Clean energy; Pharmaceuticals.
- **Japan–India AI Strategic Dialogue**
  - To be established under the Japan–India AI Cooperation Initiative (JAI).
  - Aims to deepen collaboration in AI research, governance, and applications.
  - Japan to invite 500 highly skilled AI professionals from India by 2030, promoting joint research and innovation.
- **Cooperation on Critical Minerals**
  - Decision to early convene the Joint Working Group (JWG) on Mineral Resources.
  - Focus on strengthening resilient and trusted supply chains for minerals critical to emerging technologies and clean energy transitions.
- **People-to-People and Cultural Ties**
  - Exchange of cricket-themed gifts symbolised strong and growing people-to-people connections between the two countries.

# DEFENSE AND SECURITY

## Bhairav Battalions to Debut at Army Day Parade

- The Indian Army's newly raised **Bhairav Battalions**, a modern warfare force, debuted at the **Army Day Parade on January 15 in Jaipur** for the first time.
- **Role and Design of Bhairav Battalions**
  - Conceived by Army Headquarters based on lessons from global conflicts and India's operational experience, including Operation Sindoor.
  - Designed as high-speed, offensive units capable of performing Special Forces–type tasks across tactical and operational depth.
  - Aim to bridge the gap between Para Special Forces and regular infantry.
- **Part of Broader Army Transformation**
  - Complemented by the creation of Rudra Brigades—integrated all-arms formations combining infantry, armour, artillery, special forces, drones, and logistics.
  - Artillery, Mechanised Infantry, and Armoured Corps are also being upgraded with advanced drones and battlefield systems.

## Launch of National IED Data Management System

Union Home Minister inaugurated the National Improvised Explosive Device (IED) Data Management System (NIDMS), a first-of-its-kind national platform compiling details of all bomb blasts in India since 1999.

### About NIDMS

- A secure national digital database for recording and analysing IED and bomb explosion incidents.
- **Headquartered** at the National Security Guard (NSG) garrison, Manesar (Haryana).
- Accessible to State police, Central Armed Police Forces and investigating agencies.
- NSG remains the nodal force for post-blast analysis.
- **Key Objectives**
  - Break data silos by integrating explosion-related information across agencies.
  - Enable pattern recognition, trend analysis and predictive insights.
  - Support faster, evidence-based investigations of terrorist incidents.
  - Strengthen national counter-terrorism preparedness.
- **Key Features**
  - **Comprehensive Database**: Covers all bomb blasts in India from 1999 onwards.
  - **Signature Linking**: Identifies commonalities across incidents (location, explosives used, circuit types).
  - **Modus Operandi Analysis**: Helps establish inter-linkages between past and current cases.
  - **AI-enabled Analytics** (Planned): For advanced trend and predictive analysis.
  - **Single-Window Access**: "One-click" availability of data scattered across multiple case files.

## Oreshnik Missile

- Russia confirmed firing its hypersonic Oreshnik missile at western Ukraine amid intensified strikes on Ukrainian energy infrastructure and defence-related sites.
- **About Oreshnik Hypersonic Missile**
  - Type: Intermediate-range ballistic missile (IRBM)
  - Speed: Hypersonic — travels at Mach 5+ (over five times the speed of sound), reportedly exceeding Mach 10.
  - Range: Estimated 1,000–1,600 km, placing much of Europe within reach if launched from western Russia or Belarus.

- Capability: Nuclear-capable, though it can also carry conventional warheads.
- Manoeuvrability: Can adjust its trajectory mid-flight, making interception extremely difficult.

## Discombobulator Weapon

- Donald Trump claimed that American forces used a secret weapon called the "discombobulator" during a US military strike on Venezuela.
- Trump earlier described it as a "sonic weapon", but details remain officially undisclosed.

### About Discombobulator

- Experts suggest it may not be a single weapon, but a combination of systems used together.
- Its purpose appears to be disabling military defences and disorienting personnel in heavily defended areas.
- It may combine directed-energy, acoustic, visual, electronic warfare, and cyber capabilities.
- **Systems Used to Disorient People**
  - **Active Denial System (Heat Ray)** - A directed-energy weapon that penetrates the skin to create an intense burning sensation. Forces people to flee, triggering panic and confusion.
  - **Vortex Ring Generator** - Uses high-pressure air pulses to strike targets or deliver irritants like stink bombs. Causes disorientation and nausea.
  - **Acoustic Hailing Devices (Sonic Cannons)** - Emit highly directional, piercing sound waves. Can induce nausea, vertigo, confusion, and temporary incapacitation.
  - **Visual Dazzlers** - High-intensity pulsing laser systems. Temporarily blind and disorient personnel on the battlefield.

## DRDO's Hypersonic Glide Missile

At the 77th Republic Day Parade on Kartavya Path, Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) unveiled the **Long Range Anti-Ship Hypersonic Missile** (LR-AShM) for the first time.

### LR-AShM: India's Hypersonic Glide Missile

- **Key Features**
  - Designed primarily for the Indian Navy's coastal battery role.
  - Capable of engaging static and moving targets at ranges of up to **1,500 km**.
  - Can carry multiple payload options, enhancing mission flexibility.
- **Quasi-Ballistic, Hypersonic Flight Profile**
  - Follows a quasi-ballistic trajectory: launched like a ballistic missile but flies at lower altitudes with mid-course manoeuvres.
  - Achieves Mach 10 initially and sustains Mach 5+ speeds using atmospheric "skips," making interception difficult.
- **Low Detectability and Survivability**
  - Extreme speed, manoeuvrability, and low-altitude flight drastically reduce detection by ship- and ground-based radars.
- **Two-Stage Propulsion and Glide Phase**
  - Uses a two-stage solid rocket motor:
    - **Stage I** boosts the missile to hypersonic speed and separates.
    - After burnout, the missile enters an unpowered hypersonic glide phase, executing controlled atmospheric manoeuvres before impact.
- **Multi-Service, Multi-Platform Potential**
  - Variants for the **Army and Air Force**, as well as **ship-launched versions**, are under consideration—placing India among a select group of hypersonic-capable nations.

## MHA Directs Security Forces to Stay in Border Villages

- The Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) has directed officers from Central Armed Police Forces (CAPFs) and state police to spend at least **50 nights** annually in border villages to deepen community engagement and strengthen grassroots intelligence.
- **Who Is Covered by the Directive?**
  - Instructions issued to the Directors General of:

| Border Security Force (BSF) | Indo-Tibetan Border Police (ITBP) | Assam Rifles | Sashastra Seema Bal (SSB) |
|---|---|---|---|

  - Also applies to police chiefs of border states.
- **Link to the Vibrant Villages Programme (VVP)**
  - The directive aligns with the Vibrant Villages Programme, launched in 2023.
  - VVP focuses on strategically important villages along the northern border, aiming to improve quality of life and security through a mission-mode approach.
- **Significance**
  - The initiative integrates security with development, enhances border intelligence, and strengthens state–citizen trust in frontier areas—key to resilient border management under the VVP framework.

## ICGS Samudra Pratap Commissioned

- Rajnath Singh commissioned Indian Coast Guard Ship (ICGS) ***Samudra Pratap***—India's first indigenously designed **Pollution Control Vessel** (PCV)—in Goa.
- **Key Highlights**
  - Built by Goa Shipyard Limited (GSL) with over 60% indigenous content (targeting 90% in future ships).
  - Largest ship in the ICG fleet to date.
- **Multi-Role Operational Capabilities**
  - **Pollution Response & Environmental Protection**
    - Advanced pollution detection systems, specialised response boats, and modern firefighting equipment.
    - Enables rapid detection and containment of spills—protecting **coral reefs, mangroves, fisheries**, and marine biodiversity, supporting the **blue economy**.
  - **Maritime Safety & Surveillance**
    - Integrated multi-role platform effective for pollution control, coastal patrol, and maritime security.
    - Aviation facilities including a helicopter hangar enhance reach and effectiveness, even in rough sea conditions.
- **Inclusive Force Development**
  - A notable first: **two women officers** onboard *Samudra Pratap*.
  - Signals progress toward a **gender-neutral, inclusive** Coast Guard with women in frontline maritime roles.

## Successful Flight Test of Indigenous MPATGM

- India successfully flight-tested the Third Generation Fire-and-Forget Man Portable Anti-Tank Guided Missile (MPATGM) with top-attack capability.
- **Key Features of MPATGM**
  - Third-generation, fire-and-forget missile with top-attack mode on moving target, ideal for destroying modern main battle tanks.
  - Equipped with an Imaging Infrared (IIR) homing seeker enabling day and night combat capability.
  - Can be launched from a tripod-mounted launcher or vehicle-mounted launcher.
- **Strategic Significance**
  - Enhances the **anti-tank capability of the Indian Army**, especially infantry units.

- Reduces dependence on imports of advanced ATGMs.

## Grok Controversy

- X, owned by **Elon Musk**, has **restricted the AI tool Grok** from generating sexualised images of women and children following intense global criticism and regulatory scrutiny.
- The move marks a sharp reversal after initial attempts to place responsibility on users rather than the platform.
- A December 2025 update enabled Grok to create sexualised and objectionable images using real photographs, often without consent.
- Users exploited prompts to digitally undress women or depict them in suggestive poses, with images appearing publicly in comment threads, enabling harassment.

### Regulatory Pressure Forces a Rollback

- **India** issued a stern notice citing due-diligence failures under the **Information Technology Act, 2000**, prompting removal of ~3,500 items and blocking ~600 accounts.
- **UK** signalled imminent legal changes to criminalise creation of such images.
- **Malaysia and Indonesia** blocked Grok and initiated legal action against X and **xAI**.
- In the **US**, the **California Attorney General** opened an investigation into Grok/xAI.
- Under mounting pressure, X **shut down sexualised image generation entirely**, regardless of user status.

### New Restrictions and Safeguards

- Technological blocks to prevent editing images of real people into revealing clothing.
- Limits on image creation/editing via Grok and geoblocking where content is illegal.
- Reaffirmed zero tolerance for child sexual exploitation, non-consensual nudity, and unwanted sexual content.

## Combating 'Digital Arrest' Scams: India's Emerging Digital Safety Nets

- India is facing a surge in sophisticated cyber frauds, especially **"digital arrest" scams**, prompting the **Ministry of Home Affairs** to examine systemic countermeasures.
- A high-level inter-departmental committee (IDC) is considering a **transaction "kill switch"** and a **fraud insurance mechanism** to protect consumers and strengthen trust in digital payments.
  - The IDC is chaired by the Special Secretary (Internal Security), MHA.

### Key Proposals Under Consideration

- **Transaction 'Kill Switch'**
  - An emergency button embedded in UPI, banking, and payment apps.
  - Instant freezing of all transactions upon activation to stop further losses.
  - Aims at real-time, last-mile consumer protection during suspected fraud.
- **Tracking and Blocking Fraudulent Flows**
  - Systems to flag suspicious transactions, prevent rapid splitting into mule accounts, and curb fast laundering techniques.
- **Fraud Insurance Mechanism**
  - Proposal for insurance coverage against fraud-related losses.
  - Reflects a shift from viewing fraud as a compliance lapse to a systemic financial risk.

### Role of RBI and the Insurance Sector

- **RBI's Assessment**
  - 23,879 fraud cases involving ₹34,771 crore reported in 2024–25.
  - RBI's Payment Vision 2025 proposes exploring a Digital Payment Protection Fund (DPPF).

- **Insurance Sector Perspective**
  - Existing cyber insurance does not cover first-party losses from social engineering.
  - Preferred model: A fraud insurance pool, funded by banks and insurers, akin to terrorism insurance pools, to spread systemic risk and keep premiums affordable.

**Key Challenges and Way Ahead**

- **Operational and Technical Issues**
  - Preventing misuse or accidental triggering of the kill switch.
  - Use of AI-driven fraud detection and transaction velocity checks.
- **Interoperability and Coordination**
  - Uniform adoption across banks, UPI platforms, and fintech apps.
  - Strong coordination among banks, insurers, regulators, and tech firms.
- **Moral Hazard and Awareness**
  - Risk of complacency if insurance is guaranteed.
  - Need for nationwide awareness campaigns on digital arrest scams.
- **Regulatory and Legal Clarity**
  - Clear SOPs for activation and reversal of the kill switch.
  - Possible amendments to IT and banking laws for rapid response.
  - Innovation in insurance under IRDAI leadership to plug coverage gaps.

## Solid Waste Management (SWM) Rules, 2026

The Union Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change has notified the Solid Waste Management (SWM) Rules, 2026, superseding the Solid Waste Management Rules, 2016.

- ✓ The rules have been notified under the Environment (Protection) Act, 1986 and will come into full effect from April 1, 2026.

### Key Features of SWM Rules, 2026

**Four-stream Segregation of Solid Waste at Source**

1. **Wet Waste:** Biodegradable (kitchen waste, meat, flowers). To be *composted or used for bio-methanation*.
2. **Dry Waste:** Non-biodegradable (plastic, paper, metal, glass, wood). Sent to ***Material Recovery Facilities (MRFs)***.
3. **Sanitary Waste:** *Securely wrapped* items like diapers, sanitary towels, and tampons.
4. **Special Care Waste:** Items like paint cans, bulbs, mercury thermometers, and expired medicines. (handed over to *designated collection centres*)

**Redefining Bulk Waste Generators (BWGs)**

- Entities meet BWG criteria if they fulfill any of the following:
  - ✓ **Area:** Floor area of **20,000 sq. meters** or more.
  - ✓ **Water Consumption: 40,000 liters/day** or more.
  - ✓ **Waste Generation: 100 kg/day** or more.
- These BWG include central and state government departments, local bodies, public sector undertakings, institutions, commercial establishments and residential societies, among others.
- Bulk Waste Generators must ensure that the waste generated by them is collected, transported and processed in an environmentally sound manner.
- This provision is expected to significantly reduce the burden on urban local bodies (ULBs) and promote decentralised waste management.
- The rules also allow for the levy of **user fees** on waste generators as per the bye-laws of local bodies.
- The new rules also introduced Extended Bulk Waste Generator Responsibility (**EBWGR**), under which bulk waste generators are made accountable for the solid waste generated by them.
- Bulk Waste Generators are required to process ***wet waste on-site*** as far as possible or obtain an EBWGR certificate where on-site processing is not feasible.
- This framework aims to strengthen waste management practices, as bulk waste generators account for nearly **30% of total solid waste generation**.

**Duties of Local Bodies and Material Recovery Facilities (MRFs)**

- Under the revised rules, local bodies are responsible for the collection, segregation and transportation of solid waste in coordination with MRFs which may also act as deposition points for e-waste, special care waste, sanitary waste and other waste streams for further processing.
- MRFs have been formally recognised as facilities for sorting of solid waste.
- Local bodies have been encouraged to generate carbon credits.
- In addition, the department responsible for sanitation and solid waste management in rural areas in the State or UT has been mandated to give special attention to peri-urban rural areas.

**Digital Governance & Monitoring**

- **Centralised Online Portal:** Developed by the **CPCB** for registration, authorization, and real-time tracking of waste from generation to disposal.
- **Paperless Compliance:** Replaces physical reporting with online submissions and mandatory digital audits.

**Strategic Innovations & Economic Incentives**

- **Refuse Derived Fuel (RDF) Mandate:** Industrial units (e.g., Cement plants) must replace a portion of their solid fuel with RDF. The substitution rate starts at **5% and scales to 15% over six years**.
- **Polluter Pays Principle:** Environmental compensation will be levied for false reporting, lack of registration, or improper management.
- **Carbon Credits:** Local bodies are encouraged to generate and trade carbon credits through sustainable waste practices.
- **Landfill Penalties:** To discourage dumping, **Landfill Fees** for **unsegregated waste** are set higher than the cost of segregation and processing.
  - ✓ Landfills have been *strictly restricted* **to non-recyclable, non-energy recoverable waste and inert material**.

**Geographical & Social Dimensions**

- **Hilly Areas & Islands:** Special provisions allow local bodies to **regulate tourist inflow** based on waste-carrying capacity and levy **User Fees** on tourists.
- **Peri-urban Rural Areas:** State departments must specifically focus on rural areas adjacent to cities to prevent "garbage spillover."
- **Buffer Zones:** Introduction of graded criteria for development around waste plants/ facilities to facilitate faster land allocation. A buffer zone is to be maintained within the total area allotted for facilities having an installed capacity exceeding 5 tonnes per day.

## Two new Ramsar Sites

*Patna Bird Sanctuary* in Etah (Uttar Pradesh) and *Chhari-Dhand* in Kutch (Gujarat) have been recognised as Ramsar sites, ahead of **World Wetlands Day (February 2)**

✓ The designation of these two sites under the Ramsar Convention takes the total number of such wetlands in India to 98.

### About New Ramsar Sites

| Patna Bird Sanctuary (Uttar Pradesh) | Chhari-Dhand Wetland (Gujarat) |
|---|---|
| • It is the smallest bird sanctuary in Uttar Pradesh, with a wetland area of only 1 sq km.<br>• **Significance:** It is a critical refuge on the **Central Asian Flyway**.<br>• **Vegetation:** Over 250 plant species; the wetland becomes a "Sarus kem" (congregation area) during winter. | • Situated in the **Kutch district**, Chhari-Dhand is a seasonal, salt-affected shallow wetland<br>• ("Chhari" means salt-affected and "Dhand" means shallow wetland).<br>• **Status:** It is the only **Conservation Reserve** in Gujarat and the state's 5th Ramsar site.<br>• **Significance:** It serves as the primary stopover for migratory birds entering India via the western route. |

## UN Global Water Bankruptcy Report

The **United Nations University Institute for Water, Environment and Health (UNU-INWEH)** released its flagship report, **"Global Water Bankruptcy: Living Beyond Our Hydrological Means in the Post-Crisis Era."**

**Key Terminology: Stress vs. Crisis vs. Bankruptcy**

The report introduces a hierarchy of water insecurity to help policymakers understand the severity of the situation:

- **Water Stress:** High demand relative to supply; impacts are largely **reversible**.
- **Water Crisis:** A temporary shock (e.g., severe drought) where emergency measures can restore the system to a "normal" baseline.

- **Water Bankruptcy:** A persistent, **post-crisis condition** where long-term use exceeds renewable inflows and safe depletion limits. It represents a **permanent collapse** of the previous hydrological baseline.

**Four Drivers of Water Bankruptcy (The "4 Failures")**

1. **Slow-Onset Depletion:** Chronic over-pumping of groundwater and over-allocation of river water that go unnoticed until a tipping point is reached.
2. **Infrastructure-Driven Overshoot:** Large dams and inter-basin transfers that allow cities and farms to expand far beyond the local environment's carrying capacity.
3. **Ecological Liquidation:** Converting "natural infrastructure" (wetlands/forests) into agricultural or urban land, removing the earth's natural ability to store and filter water.
4. **Climate-Amplified Stress:** Climate change acts as a "multiplier," accelerating glacier melt and causing "hydrological whiplash" (rapid shifts between extreme floods and droughts).

**Global Findings: The "Hydrological Balance Sheet"**

The report provides a multidimensional view of how humanity has "overspent" its water savings:

| Indicator | Key Finding / Statistic |
|---|---|
| **Demographics** | **75% of the global population** lives in water-insecure or critically water-insecure countries. |
| **Groundwater** | **70% of major global aquifers** show long-term declining trends. |
| **Cryosphere** | The world has lost **30%+ of its glacier mass** since 1970, destroying the "water towers" of billions. |
| **Wetlands** | Loss of **410 million hectares** of natural wetlands in 50 years (area the size of the Eurpean Union), valued at **$5.1 trillion** in ecosystem services. |
| **Agriculture** | Over **50% of global food production** is now in regions with unstable or declining water storage. |
| **Economic Cost** | "Anthropogenic droughts" (human-induced) cost **$307 billion annually**. |

## Amended Forest Conservation Guidelines 2026

The Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC) issued a crucial amendment to the **Consolidated Guidelines** under the **Van (Sanrakshan Evam Samvardhan) Adhiniyam, 1980** (formerly the Forest Conservation Act, 1980).

**Key Provisions of the 2026 Amendment**

- **Reclassification of Activities:** The amendment clarifies that **Assisted Natural Regeneration (ANR)**, afforestation, and plantation activities on forest land, when carried out by non-government entities, will now be treated as **"Forestry Activities"** rather than "Non-Forest Use."
- **Financial Exemptions (NPV & CA):** Since these activities are no longer classified as "diversion for non-forest purpose":
  - ✓ **Net Present Value (NPV):** No NPV will be levied on entities undertaking these restoration projects.
  - ✓ **Compensatory Afforestation (CA):** There is no requirement for CA because the land's legal status remains "Forest", and no forest loss is occurring.
- State Governments can now engage *private players and NGOs* for restoration through a **Detailed Project Report (DPR)**.
- **Revenue Sharing:** States are empowered to devise their own frameworks for **revenue sharing** and the sustainable harvest/utilization of forest produce (timber/non-timber) from these plantations.

## National Environmental Standard Laboratory (NESL)

India is now only the **second country in the world** (after the UK) to have a dedicated national-level laboratory for environmental standards.

✓ **Solar Synergy:** Alongside NESL, the **National Primary Standard Facility for Solar Cell Calibration** (NPF-SCC) was also inaugurated, making India 5th in the world for solar metrology.

**Need for NESL: The "Calibration Gap"**

- **Import Dependency & Climatic Mismatch:** Most air pollution monitoring sensors and instruments used by the CPCB and SPCBs were imported from the US or Europe *based on temperate climates*.
- **Performance Degradation**: When used in India, factors like high dust load, extreme humidity, and high temperatures *led to rapid sensor drift and inaccurate data*.

### About NESL

- The laboratory serves as the apex body for the **testing, calibration, and certification** of air pollution monitoring equipment tailored to Indian conditions.
- **Nodal Agency: CSIR-NPL Delhi (Council of Scientific & Industrial Research** - National Physical Laboratory**)**
- **Data Integrity:** Enhancing the reliability of the **National Clean Air Programme (NCAP)** by ensuring the sensors in the 131+ non-attainment cities provide high-fidelity data.
- **Global Market:** India can now become a hub for testing equipment for other tropical and developing nations with similar climatic profiles (Global South leadership).

## 2026: International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists (IYRP)

The United Nations has declared 2026 the International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists (IYRP), a global initiative led by the **FAO** to highlight the crucial roles of *vast grassland ecosystems (rangelands)* and *pastoral communities* in supporting biodiversity.

✓ A key milestone in 2026 will be the **UNCCD COP17 hosted by Mongolia** (17th Conference of the Parties of United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification).

### Rangelands (Mainly Grasslands): Key Features & Significance

| Aspect | Details |
|---|---|
| **Components** | Grasslands, shrublands, savannas, steppes, deserts, tundras, and alpine meadows |
| **Associated Ecosystems** | Temperate and tropical forests used for **grazing** as well as **timber production** can also be classified as rangelands |
| **Global Extent** | They cover approximately **40% of the Earth's land surface** (excluding Antarctica). |
| **Not Farmland** | Generally unsuitable for intensive crop farming due to **arid climatic conditions**, **low rainfall**, or **poor soil quality**; hence, ideal for **livestock grazing** |
| **Economic & Social Importance** | Support nearly **60% of global food production**, particularly meat, milk, and wool. Provide livelihoods to around **500 million pastoralists and ranchers** worldwide |
| **Major Threats** | Overgrazing, land-use conversion, invasive species, climate stress, and **unsustainable policies**, coupled with low public and policy attention |

### Classification of Grasslands

| Tropical Grasslands (Savannas) | Temperate Grasslands |
|---|---|
| • **Climate:** Warm year-round with distinct, wet and dry seasons.<br>• **Vegetation:** Tall, coarse grass (3–4 meters) like Elephant Grass; scattered drought-resistant trees like **Acacia** and **Baobab**. | • **Climate:** High temperature variance (very hot summers, freezing winters). Rainfall occurs mostly as snow or spring rain.<br>• **Vegetation:** Short, highly nutritious grasses; almost tree-less due to low moisture. |

| | |
|---|---|
| • **Key Examples: Savanna** (Africa); **Llanos** (Venezuela/Colombia); **Campos** (Brazil) | • **Key Examples: Prairies** (North America); **Steppes** (Eurasia: Hungary to China); **Pampas** (Argentina/Uruguay); **Veld** (South Africa); **Downs** (Australia) |

**Grasslands in India: A Unique Mosaic**

In India, Grasslands occupy about 20–24% of the land area. India does not have vast continuous stretches like the Prairies, but possesses diverse specialized grasslands:

| Grassland Type | Location | Key Characteristics | Ecological / Cultural Significance |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Banni Grasslands** | Gujarat | One of Asia's **largest and finest natural grasslands**; saline and arid ecosystem | Home to **Maldhari pastoralists**; famous for the **Banni buffalo**; rich avifaunal diversity |
| **Shola Grasslands** | Western Ghats | **High-altitude montane grasslands** interspersed with stunted evergreen forest patches (Sholas) | Crucial for **water regulation**, endemic flora & fauna; biodiversity hotspot |
| **Montane–Alpine Bugyals** | Uttarakhand | High-altitude alpine meadows above the tree line; seasonal pastures | Support **transhumant grazing**, endemic alpine flora; key for **hydrological regulation** |
| **Terai–Duar Savanna** | Foothills of the Himalayas | Dominated by tall **"elephant grass"**; moist alluvial plains | Key habitat for **One-horned Rhinoceros** and **Tigers**; high productivity ecosystem |
| **Terai Wet Grasslands (Phumdis)** | Manipur (Loktak region) | Floating grasslands (phumdis) made of vegetation, soil, and organic matter | supports **Keibul Lamjao National Park** & endangered **Sangai (brown-antlered deer)** |
| **Marginal / Semi-arid Grasslands** | Deccan Plateau & Rajasthan | Low rainfall grasslands; sparse vegetation adapted to aridity | Critical habitat for the **critically endangered Great Indian Bustard** |

## Coconut Root Wilt Disease

Recently Coconut Root Wilt Disease has gained renewed attention due to its rapid spread across traditional coconut belts in Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and Karnataka, exacerbated by climate-induced stress.

**About Coconut Root Wilt Disease**

| | |
|---|---|
| **Origin** | It is classified as a non-fatal disease of coconut palm and was first identified more than a century and a half ago in Erattupetta in Kerala. |
| **Causal Agent** | **Phytoplasmas** (formerly known as Mycoplasma-like organisms or MLOs) |
| **Nature of Pathogen** | • Phytoplasmas are wall-less, prokaryotic, restricted to phloem tissue<br>• Because they lack a cell wall, they are pleomorphic (change shape) and cannot be grown in laboratory cultures easily |
| **Variety of Symptoms** | **Root Decay (**reducing ability to absorb nutrients**); Foliar Yellowing (**starts from the tips**); Reproductive Impact & Yield Loss (**reduction in nut size & poor quality of copra (kernel) and oil**)** |
| **Management Strategies** | • **Eradication:** Removing and burning severely infected, unproductive palms to reduce the "inoculum" (source of infection).<br>• **Nutrition:** Applying **Magnesium Sulphate** (to combat yellowing) and organic manures like **Neem Cake**. |

## A Breath of Change Report

The World Bank released a report titled 'A Breath of Change: Solutions for Cleaner Air in the Indo-Gangetic Plains and Himalayan Foothills' (IGP-HF).

- ✓ The IGP-HF region records the **highest levels of air pollution globally**, with **PM2.5 levels 8 to 20 times** the WHO guideline.
- ✓ This report underlines the need for transboundary cooperation in tackling air pollution.

**Context and Scope of the Report**

- The report focuses on the **Indo-Gangetic Plains and Himalayan Foothills (IGP-HF)**, an "airshed" that spans five countries: **India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Bhutan**.
- **The Airshed Concept:** It emphasizes that air pollution does not respect political borders. In many parts of the IGP, over **50% of pollution** originates from outside local or even national jurisdictions.
  - ✓ **The Pakistani Inflow:** During winter, north-westerly winds carry up to **30% of pollution** from Pakistan's Punjab into Indian Punjab and the Delhi-NCR.
  - ✓ **Nepal's Vulnerability:** In the Terai region of Nepal, an estimated **68% of pollution** is transboundary, meaning Nepal cannot fix its air quality alone.
- **The Target:** It proposes the **"35 by 35" goal,** reducing annual average PM2.5 concentrations to below **35 ug/m3 by the year 2035**.

**Key Findings: The Staggering Cost of Inaction**

The report quantifies the crisis across three primary dimensions:

| Dimension | Key Data Point |
|---|---|
| **Health** | **Approximately 1 million premature deaths** annually in the IGP-HF region. |
| **Economic** | Estimated loss of **10% of regional GDP** annually due to health costs and lost productivity. |
| **Demographic** | Nearly **1 billion people** are exposed to hazardous air; average life expectancy is reduced by **3+ years**. |
| **Vulnerability** | **Over 80% of school students** in the region are exposed to PM2.5 levels exceeding 35 ug/m3. |

**The "4Is" Framework: A Multidimensional Strategy**

The World Bank outlines a comprehensive solution-set categorized into four pillars, known as the **4Is**:

**1. Information**

- **Airshed Monitoring:** Moving beyond city-specific data to regional monitoring.
- **GeoAI & Satellites:** Using advanced technology to track "invisible" rural pollution, brick kilns, and crop fires in real-time.

**2. Incentives**

- **Subsidy Reform:** Reforming fossil fuel and fertilizer subsidies.
- **Green Financing:** Redirecting funds to technologies like **Happy Seeders** (for crop residue), electric vehicles (EVs), and clean cooking (LPG/Electric).
- **Market Instruments:** Scaling up **Emissions Trading Systems (ETS)**, similar to the Surat model in Gujarat.

**3. Institutions**

- **Airshed Governance:** Moving from municipal-level control to legally empowered **Airshed-based authorities**.
- **Regional Secretariat:** Establishing a permanent body to coordinate between India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh.

**4. Infrastructure**

- **Regional Grids:** Investing in a shared electricity grid to facilitate the transition to renewables.
- **Industrial Upgrades:** Centralized common industrial boilers for MSME clusters to reduce point-source emissions.

## Environmental Protection Fund Rules

The Union government has notified detailed rules governing the utilisation of the Environmental (Protection) Fund, created from penalties imposed under key environmental laws.

### Background of Environmental (Protection) Fund

- The Environmental (Protection) Fund has been created to ensure that penalties imposed for violations of environmental laws are channelled back into environmental restoration, pollution control, and sustainability-related activities.
- The legal basis for the fund was laid under the **Jan Vishwas Act, 2023**, which decriminalised several minor environmental offences while retaining monetary penalties.
- The fund draws resources from penalties levied under major environmental legislations, including laws related to air pollution, water pollution, and the **Environment (Protection) Act, 1986**.
- The notified rules provide clarity on how this fund will be credited, administered, **audited,** and utilised for specific environmental purposes, addressing long-standing concerns regarding the effective use of environmental penalties.

### Objectives of Environmental (Protection) Fund

- To convert regulatory penalties into tangible environmental outcomes.
- By doing so, the fund aligns with the broader principle of "polluter pays".

### Permitted Areas of Fund Utilisation

- The notified rules specify **11 broad categories of activities** for which the Environmental (Protection) Fund can be used. These include:
    - Prevention, control, and mitigation of air, water, and soil pollution
    - Remediation and restoration of contaminated and degraded environmental sites
    - Installation, operation, and maintenance of environmental monitoring equipment
    - Development of laboratory infrastructure for environmental testing and compliance
    - Capacity building of regulatory institutions and technical personnel
    - Research and innovation in clean technologies and sustainable practices
    - Development of Information Technology (IT)-enabled systems for environmental monitoring

### Administrative Structure and Fund Management

- The **Union Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change** will be the primary authority for administering the fund, or it may notify any other competent body for this purpose.
- To ensure decentralised yet coordinated implementation:
    - Dedicated **Project Management Units (PMUs)** will be created at both central & state levels
    - Penalties collected will be credited to the fund following a standardised procedure
    - The **Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB)** will develop and maintain an online portal for managing fund-related processes
- This digital interface will serve as a common platform for coordination among central ministries, state governments, pollution control boards, and other stakeholders.

### Distribution of Funds Between Centre and States

- A significant feature of the rules is the transparent sharing mechanism between the Centre and States. According to the notified provisions:
    - **75% of the penalty amount** collected will be transferred to the **Consolidated Fund of the concerned State**
    - **25% of the amount** will be retained by the **Centre** for national-level environmental initiatives
- This arrangement recognises that most environmental violations and remediation activities are local in nature, while also enabling the Centre to fund large-scale or cross-cutting environmental projects.

**Accountability and Audit Mechanisms**

- The Comptroller and Auditor General **(CAG)** will audit the Environmental (Protection) Fund periodically.
- Further, the online portal managed by the CPCB will act as a monitoring tool, enabling real-time tracking of fund allocation, utilisation, and project outcomes.

**Species in News**

| | |
|---|---|
| **Kashmir Markhor**<br> <br>**Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972**: Schedule I<br>**CITES**: Appendix I<br>**Global Habitat**: Pakistan, India, Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan & Tajikistan | India's rarest wild goat, the Kashmir Markhor is facing a critical survival crisis with its remaining population of 200–300 individuals.<br>• **Unique Features:** It is the **largest wild goat in the world (weighing up to 100 kg)**. Males are famous for their massive, corkscrew-like spiral horns which can grow up to 160 cm.<br>• In India, the Markhor is endemic only to the Union Territory of Jammu & Kashmir. Its distribution is highly fragmented across two primary landscapes.<br>1. ***Kazinag Landscape (North Kashmir):*** The Kazinag National Park (Baramulla district) is currently the last stable stronghold of the species in India.<br>2. ***Pir Panjal Landscape (South Kashmir):*** Found in the Hirpora Wildlife Sanctuary (Shopian) and Tatakuti Wildlife Sanctuary (Poonch).<br>• **IUCN Red List**: **Near Threatened** (Downlisted from Endangered in 2015 due to global recovery, though Indian populations remain critically low). |
| **Orobanche Aegyptiaca**<br> | India's mustard (largest oilseed crop) is facing a serious menace from Orobanche aegyptiaca, a weed in major mustard-growing areas of Rajasthan and Haryana.<br>It is a parasitic weed that attaches to the roots of mustard plants and extracts nutrients, carbon and water from them.<br>By depriving the host crop of these, it causes wilting, yellowing and stunted growth of the plants and, thereby, lower mustard seed yields. |
| **Grey Slender Loris**<br> <br>**IUCN Red List:** *Near Threatened*<br>**Wildlife Protection Act (1972):** Schedule I | Kerala and Tamil Nadu have begun efforts to restore habitats and strengthen monitoring of the grey slender loris.<br>• **Taxonomy**: It is a small, **nocturnal primate**. It is one of the oldest and most primitive groups of primates.<br>• **Geographic Range in India:** Endemic to **Southern India** (Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Kerala)<br>• **Physical Features:** Its most distinctive feature is a pair of **large, closely set brown eyes**, which provide excellent stereoscopic and night vision.<br>• **Diet:** Primarily **insectivorous**. It plays a significant ecological role as a "*biological predator*" of agricultural pests, particularly those affecting tamarind and acacia trees.<br>• **Behavior:** It is **arboreal** (spends most of its life on trees) and moves with slow, stealthy, precise movements. Unlike other primates, it cannot jump or leap. |

## PSLV Mission Failures

The Indian Space Research Organization's (ISRO) first launch of the year, PSLV-C62 carrying a total of 16 satellites, ended in a failure.

### About PSLV:

**Polar Satellite Launch Vehicle (PSLV)** is a four-stage rocket originally developed to place satellites into **Sun-synchronous Polar Orbits (SSPOs)**. The rocket operates on a staged configuration, in which each stage has its own engines that fire sequentially and are jettisoned after burnout to reduce mass and improve efficiency. The stages are-

- **First stage (Solid)** uses a solid propellant- **hydroxyl-terminated polybutadiene (HTPB)** to generate a peak thrust of **4.8 MN (Mega newtons)**; in the **XL configuration**, this stage is augmented by six strap-on boosters.
- **Second stage (Liquid)** is powered by a **Vikas engine**, which uses **unsymmetrical dimethylhydrazine** as fuel and **nitrogen tetroxide** as oxidiser, producing **0.8 MN** of thrust.
- **Third stage (Solid)** again employs HTPB solid propellant.
- **Fourth stage (Liquid)** uses liquid propellants- **monomethyl hydrazine** and **mixed oxides of nitrogen-** burned in two engines.

**PSLV-C62**, launched from Sriharikota carrying the DRDO's EOS-N1 (Anvesha) along with 15 other satellites, failed during the third-stage burn due to trajectory deviation, resulting in the loss of all 16 onboard payloads.

✓The preceding PSLV mission (**PSLV-C61**) had also failed to reach orbit due to third stage failure.

### PSLV: How India's Workhorse Rocket Reaches Orbit?

- PSLV is a **four-stage** launch vehicle, with each stage using its own engine and fuel to sequentially propel the mission before detaching once its role is complete.
- **First Stage: Lift-off and Atmospheric Ascent**
  - The first stage handles lift-off and a near-vertical climb to about 50–60 km.
  - Using **solid propellant**, it overcomes gravity and atmospheric drag, consuming massive fuel in under two minutes before being jettisoned.
- **Second Stage: Vertical-to-Horizontal Transition**
  - The **second stage** continues ascent while building horizontal velocity.
  - It takes the rocket to roughly 220–250 km altitude and accelerates it to about 14,000 km/h, significantly reducing overall mass.
- **Third Stage: Rapid Acceleration**
  - In this phase, the vehicle moves almost entirely horizontally on a sub-orbital path.
  - Burning **solid fuel**, the third stage rapidly accelerates the rocket to orbital speeds of around 26,000–28,000 km/h—crucial for preventing it from falling back to Earth.
- **Fourth Stage: Precise Orbital Insertion**
  - The final stage precisely place satellites into their designated low-Earth orbits.
  - Once payload deployment is complete, all stages have separated, having fulfilled their roles.

| Significance of PSLV Mission | Impact of PSLV Mission Failures: |
|---|---|
| • **Backbone of India's Space Programme:** PSLV is the most reliable and frequently used launch vehicle of the **ISRO**, forming the foundation of India's satellite deployment capability.<br>• **Governance, Development, and National Security Support:** PSLV-launched satellites support weather forecasting, development planning, disaster management, and strategic surveillance. | • **Strategic and Security Impact:** Especially when defence or reconnaissance satellites are involved.<br>• **Scientific and Technological Setback:** Failure of onboard scientific experiments and |

| | |
|---|---|
| • **Scientific and Technological Advancement:** Enables space science missions, technology demonstrators, contributing to indigenous capability development.<br>• **Commercial and Economic Significance:** Supports India's role as a cost-effective launch service provider in the global market and facilitates the growth of the private space sector through ride-share missions.<br>• **International Standing and Space Diplomacy:** Successful PSLV missions enhance India's credibility, foster international cooperation, and strengthen space diplomacy with developing and developed nations alike. | technology demonstrators, leading to delays in testing and validation of new space technologies.<br>• **Institutional and Reputational Impact**<br>• **Economic Impact:** Additional costs related to mission repetition, satellite replacement, and insurance claims. |

**Way Forward**

- **Rigorous Failure Analysis:** focusing on third-stage design, materials, and quality control.
- **Enhanced Testing and Quality Assurance:** Strengthen ground testing, redundancy checks, and supplier audits, especially for solid propulsion stages.
- **Mission Readiness Review:** Temporarily recalibrate launch schedules to prioritize reliability over launch frequency.
- **Support to Private Sector and Clients:** Provide insurance clarity, confidence-building measures, and technical support to affected startups and international partners.

## Data Dumping

Data centres can pose risks of 'data dumping' in countries with weaker governance if they are poorly designed and weakly regulated.

**What are Data Centres?**

Data Centres are **large, specialized infrastructure facilities** that house servers, storage systems and networking equipment to process, store and transmit digital data. They form the backbone of cloud computing, artificial intelligence and big data analytics, digital public infrastructure and e-governance. However, they are also:

- **Highly energy-intensive** (24×7 power demand).
- **Water-intensive** (especially for cooling).
- Capital-intensive *but* ***low on direct employment generation*****.**

**Good vs Bad Data Centers**

| Good Data Centres | Bad Data Centres |
|---|---|
| • They are located where **reliable power supply exists**, with the developer paying for grid upgrades.<br>• Operate at **high server utilization**, avoiding idle capacity.<br>• Use **efficient cooling systems**, such as optimized airflow management, higher permissible inlet temperatures, ambient air or liquid cooling where feasible and which minimizes use of **potable water** and relies on recycled or non-potable sources.<br>• Continuously **monitor energy, water and emissions** to optimise performance over time.<br>• Such centres can deliver **net economic and technological benefits** with limited environmental harm. | • They are located in **water-stressed or ecologically sensitive areas.**<br>• Rely on **water-intensive evaporative cooling.**<br>• Use outdated cooling and airflow designs, increasing energy overhead.<br>• Externalize costs by shifting grid upgrade costs to households<br>• They appear efficient in project documents but are **inefficient in real-world operation.** |

**What is meant by Data Dumping?**

"Data dumping" refers to a situation where **the most resource-intensive and least locally beneficial data centres are disproportionately located in countries with weaker zoning, poor public consultation and strong growth incentives**.

| How is India Vulnerable to Data Dumping? | Way Forward to Prevent Data Dumping in India |
|---|---|
| • **Aggressive Policy Push:** India is positioning itself as a major data-center hub, with capacity projected to grow rapidly, JLL estimates 1.8 GW by 2028, CRISIL 2.3-2.5 GW by FY 2028, and Colliers over 4.5 GW by 2030. This expansion is driven by generous policy incentives, expedited clearances, geopolitical stability and a large domestic market, sometimes at the expense of rigorous regulatory scrutiny.<br>• **Regulatory and Zoning Weaknesses:** In practice, zoning norms are weakly enforced and data centres are not uniformly treated as heavy infrastructure, enabling their location in ecologically or water-stressed areas.<br>• **Severe Resource Stress:** Many Indian cities and river basins are already water-stressed, while large, clustered data-centre loads can strain power grids, with risks of cost cross-subsidization by households.<br>• **Weak Environmental Oversight:** *Post-clearance monitoring and enforcement remain inadequate*, as repeatedly flagged by the CAG, the Supreme Court and the NGT, increasing the likelihood of unchecked externalities.<br>• **Low Political and Community Resistance:** Limited public consultation and opaque approvals reduce local resistance compared to developed countries, making India a relatively low-friction destination for resource-intensive facilities.<br>• **Global Push Factors:** Rising public and regulatory resistance to data centres in the U.S. and parts of Latin America may redirect the most resource-intensive projects towards jurisdictions like India. | • **Treat Data Centres as Critical Infrastructure:** Classify data centres as heavy infrastructure under zoning laws, with mandatory buffer zones, noise limits and location restrictions in water-stressed regions.<br>• **Strengthen Environmental and Water Governance:** Impose binding, basin-level water-use ceilings; mandate non-potable water and water-efficient or waterless cooling technologies, especially for AI workloads.<br>• **Ensure Cost Internalization:** Require developers to bear the full cost of grid upgrades, substations and backup power, with clear rules to prevent cross-subsidization by households.<br>• **Improve Transparency and Disclosure:** Mandate public disclosure of peak power demand, water sources, cooling methods, environmental audits and incidents through a central public registry.<br>• **Enhance Public Participation:** Ensure early-stage community consultation and robust environmental impact assessments (EIA).<br>• **Align Incentives with Sustainability:** Link fiscal incentives to performance on energy efficiency, water use effectiveness and renewable energy integration, rather than capacity alone. |

## Bio-Bitumen

India became the first country to commercially produce bio-bitumen for use as an alternative to traditional asphalt in the construction of roadways. An indigenous innovation, it has been developed by CSIR-Central Road Research Institute (CSIR-CRRI) New Delhi and CSIR-Indian Institute of Petroleum Dehradun (CSIR-IIP)".

### What is Bio-Bitumen?

**Bio-bitumen** is a **renewable, bio-based binder** developed as a **partial replacement or modifier of conventional petroleum bitumen** used in flexible pavement (asphalt) construction.

✓ Unlike fossil-derived bitumen, bio-bitumen is produced from **biomass and organic waste**, particularly **agricultural residues such as rice straw (parali)**, through thermo-chemical conversion processes.

### Need for Bio-Bitumen:

- **High Import Dependence:** India imports **~49-50% of its paving bitumen** causing a **foreign exchange outgo of $3-3.6 billion annually.** Making road construction vulnerable to **global crude oil price volatility.**
- **Stubble Burning & Environmental Crisis:** India generates **>600 million tonnes of agricultural residue annually**. Rice straw is frequently **burnt in open fields**, leading to severe air pollution (PM2.5, smog), greenhouse gas emissions, soil nutrient degradation and public health impacts.
- **Rising Infrastructure Costs:** Petroleum bitumen prices are volatile and increasing. Flexible pavement construction faces **escalating lifecycle costs.**

Bio-bitumen offers a **convergent solution** to **import substitution + waste management + climate mitigation**.

**How is Bio-Bitumen Achieved (Technology Pathway)?**

**Step-by-Step Process: Rice Straw → Pyrolysis → Bio-Oil → Upgraded Bio-Binder → Roads**

- **Feedstock Collection & Preparation:** Post-harvest rice straw is collected. Biomass is densified into pellets for uniform processing.
- **Pyrolysis of Rice Straw: Controlled thermal decomposition in oxygen-limited conditions** produces **Bio-oil** (primary precursor), Bio-char and combustible gases (used as energy, making the process near-self-sustaining).
  - Pyrolysis yields **multiple value streams-** bio-binder for road, clean gaseous fuel (process energy), bio-pesticide fractions, high-grade carbon (batteries, water purification, advanced materials). This makes the technology **economically resilient and future-ready**.
- **Bio-Binder Upgradation:** Bio-oil is chemically upgraded using **unit operations** to improve viscosity, adhesion and rheological stability. The final product is a **bio-bitumen compatible with viscosity grade (VG- grade) bitumen**.
- **Pavement Application:** Bio-bitumen is blended with conventional bitumen. **20-30% replacement** is achieved **without compromising performance**. Compatible with **existing hot mix asphalt plants and construction practices**.

**Challenges and Limitations**

- **Feedstock Logistics:** Large-scale collection, storage and transport of biomass require coordination. Seasonal availability of rice straw.
- **Standardization & Codes:** Needs integration into **IRC/MoRTH highway specifications**. Long-term performance monitoring is required.
- **Scaling Infrastructure:** Pyrolysis plants must be scaled regionally. Capital investment required initially.
- **Policy & Market Adoption:** Requires blending mandates and procurement incentives. Awareness among contractors and state agencies must increase.

## Cetacean Morbillivirus

Recently, scientists used drones to find a dangerous Cetacean morbillivirus among whales in the Arctic.

✓ **Cetaceans** are **fully aquatic, carnivorous mammals** of the order *Cetacea*, including **whales, dolphins, and porpoises**, found in oceans worldwide.

**What is Cetacean Morbillivirus?** It is a **highly contagious viral disease** affecting marine mammals, primarily **dolphins, whales, and porpoises**.

**History:** Identified in **1987**; it has caused repeated outbreaks worldwide, especially in the **North Atlantic** and **Mediterranean**.

**Transmission:** Spreads between species via **direct contact and respiratory droplets.**

**Health impact:** Attacks the **respiratory and nervous systems of marine mammals**, often causing **mass strandings and deaths**.

**Response:** No treatment exists; stress reduction (e.g., **rerouting ships away from sick whales**) can help limit harm.

## Spina Bifida

Many countries across the world have initiated programmes to create awareness to prevent Spina Bifida through folic acid supplementation but India is yet to do so.

**What is Spina Bifida?** It is a **neural tube defect** in which the fetal **spine and spinal cord fail to close properly** during early pregnancy.

**Types:**

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Spina bifida occulta:** mild, most common. | **Meningocele:** fluid-filled sac, less severe. | **Myelomeningocele:** spinal cord exposed, most severe. |

**Key Effects:** Paralysis or leg weakness, bowel-bladder dysfunction, hydrocephalus, orthopaedic deformities; **intelligence usually normal**.
**Causes/Risk factors:** Multifactorial- **folic acid deficiency**, genetics, diabetes, obesity, certain drugs.
**Prevention: Pre-conception and early pregnancy folic acid** intake can prevent a majority of cases.
**Public health relevance:** Preventable birth defect with high socio-economic burden; focus on **awareness and food fortification**.

## Mpemba Effect

Recently, researchers from Jawaharlal Nehru Centre for Advanced Scientific Research have used supercomputers to develop the first simulation of ice formation proving the Mpemba effect of water.

### What is Mpemba Effect?

It is a counter-intuitive phenomenon where **hot water cools or freezes faster than cold water** under certain conditions. The effect was described by **Aristotle, in his book Meterologica and is named after Erasto Mpemba (1969)** who experimentally highlighted the phenomenon.

### Proposed Explanations (Hypotheses)

- **Evaporation:** Hot water loses more mass and heat, speeding cooling.
- **Convection:** Higher temperature gradients enhance heat transfer.
- **Dissolved gases / microbubbles:** Heating expels gases, improving thermal conductivity.
- **Solute effects:** Boiling removes dissolved salts, slightly raising freezing point.
- **Frost insulation:** Ice/frost around colder samples may reduce heat loss. Eg In a freezer, frost often builds up around a cold container, acting as an insulating layer that slows heat loss.

**Recent Findings related to Mpemba effect:** It is not limited to water; observed in **other materials** during fluid-solid phase transitions. **Supercomputer simulations** of ice formation provide strong evidence supporting the paradoxical cooling/freezing behaviour.

## Dust Experiment (DEX)

Recently, the Indian Space Research Organization confirmed through it's first-ever Dust Experiment (DEX) that an interplanetary dust particle enters Earth's atmosphere approximately every 1,000 seconds.

- ✓ **Interplanetary Dust Particles (IDPs)** are **micrometre-sized debris from comets and asteroids** that create the atmospheric **meteor layer** and appear as **shooting stars**, offering clues to the **early solar system**.
- **What is DEX?** India's first indigenously developed instrument to detect **IDPs**.
- **How it Works?** A **3 kg, 4.5 W hypervelocity dust detector** that records high-speed particle impacts.
- **Mission:** Flown on **PSLV-C58 (XPoSat)** via **PSLV Orbital Experimental Module** (**POEM)** on **1 January 2024**, operating at ~**350 km** orbit.
- **Key Result:** Detected regular dust impacts (~**one every 1000 s**) and measured dust flux.
- **Why it Matters?** Enhances understanding of cosmic dust, supports **satellite safety**, and enables future **Moon, Mars, and Venus** missions.
- **Developer: Physical Research Laboratory (PRL), Ahmedabad**.

## PathGennie

Recently, the Ministry of Science and Technology has developed new open-source software called PathGennie.

### What is PathGennie?

It is a **novel, open-source computational framework** that accelerates the simulation of *rare molecular events*, especially **drug unbinding** from protein targets- crucial for computer-aided drug discovery (CADD).

### Why it matters?

Drug efficacy often depends more on **residence time** (how long a drug stays bound) than binding strength alone.

**How it works?** It uses **direction-guided adaptive sampling-** runs many ultra-short, unbiased MD (Molecular Dynamics) trajectories and selectively extends only those progressing toward unbinding ("survival of the fittest" trajectories).

**Key advantage:** Finds **true unbinding pathways** without artificial forces or high temperatures.

**Scope:** Applicable beyond drugs- to reactions, catalysis, phase transitions, and self-assembly. It is also **compatible with modern machine-learning techniques** which ensures integrated into **diverse simulation pipelines.**

## Microlensing

A study recently used microlensing to weigh a rogue planet, i.e. not orbiting a star.

### What is Microlensing?

It is a gravitational phenomenon in which a foreground object (star, planet, or compact remnant) passes in front of a distant background star. The foreground object's gravity bends space-time, briefly **magnifying the background star's light**. Thus, microlensing uses gravity itself as a natural telescope, allowing astronomers to weigh and discover otherwise invisible worlds.

**Working:** Light usually travels in straight lines, but the gravity of a massive object curves space-time and bends the path of passing light. When a distant star, a massive foreground object, and Earth align, this bending causes a temporary brightening.

| Significance | Challenges |
|---|---|
| • Detects **non-luminous and faint objects** such as rogue planets, brown dwarfs, and black holes.<br>• Effective for discovering **planets far from their host stars** and **free-floating (rogue) planets**, unlike transit or radial-velocity methods.<br>• Capable of finding **Earth-mass and smaller planets**, and even **large moons**, under favourable alignments.<br>• Probes planets from the **habitable zone outward**, including **ice giants**. While other methods are biased toward finding planets with small orbits.<br>• Enables a **galaxy-wide census of rogue planets and compact objects** in the Milky Way.<br>• Future missions like the **Nancy Grace Roman Space Telescope** will greatly expand microlensing discoveries. | • **Rare and random non repeatable events which r**equire precise alignment of source, lens, and observer.<br>• **Short-lived signals** as planetary effects may last from hours to days.<br>• **High observational demand** for continuous monitoring of millions of stars.<br>• **Follow-up difficulty as** detected planets cannot be easily re-observed and often requires combined **ground- and space-based telescopes** (e.g., Roman mission). |

## Hydrokinetic Turbine Technology

In a major push to expand renewable energy and ensure 24x7 electricity supply, the Tripura government recently identified 10 river sites to generate 185 MW of power using Hydrokinetic Turbine Technology.

### What is Hydrokinetic Turbine Technology?

Hydrokinetic turbines generate electricity from the **kinetic energy of flowing water** (near-zero head). They are installed **directly in river or tidal currents**, without dams or barrages.

| How does it differ from conventional hydropower? | Key Benefits |
|---|---|
| • No large civil structures (dams, barrages).<br>• Uses **flow velocity**, not stored water head. | • **Renewable & clean**: Continuous energy from natural water flow.<br>• **Low environmental impact**: Minimal disruption to river ecology.<br>• **Scalable & flexible**: Suitable for small installations to multi-turbine arrays.<br>• **Low maintenance**: Fewer components and debris-tolerant design. |

## W Ursae Majoris

Astronomers from Aryabhatta Research Institute of Observational Sciences used data from Devasthal Fast Optical Telescope and NASA's TESS space telescope to create detailed light curves of the W Ursae Majoris (W UMa) star.

### About W Ursae Majoris (W UMa) Stars

W Ursae Majoris stars are **contact binary systems** in which two stars orbit extremely close to each other and **share a common outer envelope**, resulting in a dumbbell-like shape and very short orbital periods.

**Key Features:**

- **Configuration:** Both stars are in physical contact and embedded in a single atmosphere.
- **Orbital period:** Very short, typically less than one day.

**Significance:** Act as **natural laboratories** for precise measurement of stellar masses, radii, and temperatures and provide critical insights into **binary star evolution** and their long-term fate.

## ASC Arjun

Recently, the Indian Railways has introduced a humanoid robot named "ASC ARJUN" at Visakhapatnam Railway Station.

### About ASC Arjun:

It is a humanoid robot of **Indian Railways (Indigenously built in Visakhapatnam)** deployed with **Railway Protection Force (RPF)** for station security, surveillance, and passenger assistance during peak movement.

**Key Tech:** Face Recognition System, AI-based crowd monitoring, real-time alerts.

**Other features:** Semi-autonomous patrol, obstacle avoidance, fire & smoke detection, multilingual announcements (English-Hindi-Telgu), passenger interaction (Namaste).

## Bacillus Subtilis

Recently, Kerala officially declared Bacillus subtilis as 'State microbe'.

### About Bacillus subtilis:

- Bacillus subtilis (B. subtilis) is a **type of probiotic** ("good" bacteria) found naturally in the **human gut.** It's also found in fermented foods.
- **Characterstics:** Gram-positive, rod-shaped, motile, spore-forming. It produces **highly resistant endospores.**
- **Habitat & Growth:** Soil and vegetation; optimal temperature **25-35 °C.**
- **Applications: Agricultural biocontrol (fungicide)**; **testing sporicides.**

## PANCHAM

Recently, the Union Minister of State for Panchayati Raj launched the PANCHAM- Panchayat Assistance and Messaging Chatbot.

### About PANCHAM

**PANCHAM** is a **UNICEF-collaborated digital tool to empower** Panchayat Elected Representatives and Functionaries by providing timely guidance, simplified workflows, and easy access to governance information.

### Features of PANCHAM

- **Interface:** WhatsApp-based for easy and familiar access by PRI representatives.
- **Data:** Live data from **e-GramSwaraj**; validated static content (Local Government Directory (LGD), Gram Panchayat Development Plan (GPDP), MoPR schemes)
- **Languages: 22 Indian languages** via **BHASHINI**
- **Users:** PRI representatives & functionaries; **citizens via QR code**
- **Services:** Direct advisories, chatbot-based FAQs, micro-training, feedback & surveys.
- **Communication: Direct, two-way** GoI ↔ Panchayat digital connect.

## ICE Cloud

Recently, the Centre for Development of Advanced Computing (CDAC) revealed that it has significantly expanded capabilities of the ICE Cloud platform.

### About ICE Cloud

- It is an **indigenous, comprehensive digital platform** for conducting complex **scientific research** using Artificial Intelligence (AI) and **High-Performance Computing** (HPC). It provides **ease of access to computational resources.**
- **Features:** Open-access supercomputing, AI/ML, quantum tools, simulations, and cloud-based development services.
- **Users & Support:** Used by researchers, students, start-ups, and industry; funded by the **Department of Biotechnology (DBT)**.

## Forever Chemicals

When scientists tested human blood samples collected from 2003 to 2021, they found that levels of older PFAS, a.k.a. "Forever chemicals" dropped by 86% in some analysis because manufacturers stopped producing them.

### About Forever Chemicals:

- **PFAS (Per- and Poly-Fluoroalkyl Substances)** are **man-made, highly persistent "forever chemicals"**. They have strong **carbon-fluorine bonds** which makes them **non-degradable** in the environment.
- **Uses**: Used for its **non-stick, water-repellent & grease-resistant** properties (cookware, textiles, cosmetics, food packaging, firefighting foam).
- **Environmental Risks**: Enter **soil, water, air**; exposure via **contaminated food/water, products, inhalation**; **bioaccumulate**.
- **Health Concerns**: Linked to **immune, liver, thyroid disorders**, high cholesterol, developmental issues & **kidney/testicular cancers**.
- **Stockholm Convention** lists Perfluoro-octane sulfonic acid (PFOS) and Perfluoro-octanoic acid (PFOA), along with their related compounds and salts, as Persistent Organic Pollutants (POPs).

## Context Window in AI

In the context of artificial intelligence (AI), specifically Large Language Models (LLMs) like GPT-5 and Claude, the context window is the maximum amount of text the model can consider at any one time while generating a response.

### About Context Window in AI

- **What?** Context window is the **maximum text (in tokens)** an LLM can process at one time while generating a response.
- **Tokens:** AI reads **tokens (character chunks)**, not words. ~1 token ≈ **0.75 English words.**
- **Components Stored In Context Window: 1) System instructions / rules; 2) Conversation history / input text; 3) Space for model's output**
- **Role:** It determines **conversation length** without forgetting and limits **document or code size** processed at once.
- **Overflow Effect:** If input exceeds limit, **older context is truncated or dropped.**
- **Computational Aspect:** Doubling context window ⇒ **~4× increase in compute cost.** Larger windows are **more expensive and resource intensive.**
- **Limitation:** *Lost-in-the-middle problem.* Models may miss important information located deep inside long inputs.

## Soft Matter

Every morning, as you use either your toothpaste or shampoo, you engage with soft matter, materials that flow like liquids under force but hold their shape at rest.

### What are Soft Materials?

Soft materials are substances that can behave like **solids or liquids** depending on the **force applied** and the **time over which it acts**. Examples include toothpaste, shampoo, gels, and creams.
**Internal Structure:** They are made of **large, microscopic building blocks** held together by **weak forces**, making their structure flexible and easily rearranged.

### Response to Force and Time:

- **Slow or gentle force** → solid-like behaviour.
- **Strong or rapid force** → liquid-like flow.

**Scientific Significance:** This behaviour is studied in **rheology** and shows that being "solid" or "liquid" depends on **time scale**, **rate of deformation**, and **magnitude of applied stress**, not just on its composition.

## Intrinsically Disordered Proteins

Researchers at the National Centre for Biological Sciences (NCBS), Tata Institute of Fundamental Research, Bengaluru have developed a deep-learning tool- "Disobind" that can predict how Intrinsically Disordered Proteins (IDP) latch on to their binding partners.

IDPs are proteins or regions that **lack a stable 3D structure** and remain **structurally flexible**, changing shape depending on their binding partners. This flexibility allows them to regulate **cell signalling, gene expression, protein folding and transport**, and to form **biomolecular condensates**. Their unstable structure makes them **hard to study with conventional methods**, yet they are **crucial for understanding cellular communication, disease mechanisms, and targeted therapies**.

### About Disobind:

It is an **AI-based (protein language model)** tool to predict **binding regions of IDPs**.
**Input: Only protein sequences** (no structure or alignment needed).
**Core strength:** Predicts **which disordered regions bind.**
**Status: Open-source, freely available**
**Applications:**

- Disease mechanism decoding (cancer, neurodegeneration, immunity)
- **Drug design & intervention point identification**

## Voyager 1

Voyager 1 is expected to become the first human-made object to reach a distance of one light-day from Earth.

### About Voyager 1:

- **Launch:** 1977 (NASA) | **Mission:** Study Giant Planets in Solar System; later extended as **Voyager Interstellar Mission.**
- **Milestones Achieved:**
  - Discovered active volcanoes on Io (Jupiter moon); detailed Saturn ring system.
  - Discovered a thin ring around Jupiter and two new Jovian moons: Thebe and Metis. It also found five new moons and a new ring called the G-ring at Saturn.
  - Visited Uranus and Neptune, making it the only spacecraft to study those planets directly.
  - Entered **interstellar space in 2012** (first human-made object to do so).
- **Distance:** Farthest spacecraft from Earth; signals take **~24 hours one way.**
- **Function now:** Measures **cosmic rays, plasma, magnetic fields** beyond heliosphere.
- **Status:** Still operational; data sent via **Deep Space Network.**

## Thorium-Powered Future

India's nuclear strategy is built around a three-stage programme reflecting limited uranium and abundant thorium. With rising energy needs and decarbonization pressures, nuclear power has become vital, and thorium offers a safe, sustainable, and indigenous long-term nuclear fuel option.

### India's Three-Stage Nuclear Programme

It was conceived by Dr. Homi Bhabha to systematically move from uranium to thorium:

- **Stage I- Pressurized Heavy Water Reactors (PHWRs):** PHWRs use natural uranium and heavy water as moderator and coolant to generate electricity and produce plutonium-239.
  - India currently operates a large PHWR fleet under Nuclear Power Corporation of India Limited (NPCIL).
  - With access to imported uranium, PHWR capacity is being scaled up, creating an opportunity to irradiate thorium alongside advanced fuels (e.g., HALEU- High-Assay Low-Enriched Uranium (5-20% uranium-235)) and start building U-233 inventory early.
- **Stage II- Fast Breeder Reactors (FBRs):** Use plutonium from PHWRs to breed more fissile material. The Prototype Fast Breeder Reactor (500 MWe) is central to this stage. Thorium blankets in FBRs enable the breeding of U-233, bridging the transition to thorium-based systems.
- **Stage III- Thorium-Based Reactors:** Focuses on reactors operating primarily on the thorium- U-233 fuel cycle. The Advanced Heavy Water Reactor (AHWR- 300 MWe) is designed with passive safety features and high thorium utilization.

### How Thorium Can Be Helpful for India?

- **Large Reserves**: India has **limited domestic uranium** but **one of the world's largest thorium reserves**, mainly in monazite sands of Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and Odisha.
- **Energy Security**: Thorium offers **long-term energy security** by enabling a largely indigenous nuclear fuel cycle, reducing dependence on imported uranium.
- **Environmental Benefits**: Nuclear power is low-carbon and reliable, supporting India's **net-zero target (2070)** and rising baseload demand.
- **Technical Advantages**: Thorium dioxide ($ThO_2$) has a higher melting point and better thermal conductivity than $UO_2$ (uranium dioxide), enhancing reactor safety. On irradiation, thorium-232 converts to **uranium-233 (U-233)**, which has an excellent neutron economy and is well-suited for sustained power generation.

| Significance | Challenges |
|---|---|
| • **Long-term Power Potential:** Capability to generate electricity for centuries using domestic resources.<br>• **Economic Gains:** Reduced uranium imports and development of indigenous nuclear technologies.<br>• **Strategic Autonomy:** High proliferation resistance due to U-232 contamination.<br>• **Climate Resilience:** Clean baseload power complementing renewables. | • **Thorium is Not Directly Fissile:** requiring initial fissile material (enriched uranium).<br>• **Handling Issues:** due to **high gamma radiation** from U-232.<br>• **High Capital Costs:** long gestation period, and need for skilled manpower.<br>• **Requirement of Greater Private Sector Participation:** and sustained R&D investment. |

# CULTURE

## Alo Prabhat

- **Dong, India's easternmost village** in Anjaw district of **Arunachal Pradesh**, welcomed the first sunrise of 2026 with "Alo Prabhat: Dance of the Dawn".
- The performance was part of the inaugural **Sunrise Festival** organised by the State's Tourism Department at Dong, the **first human habitation to receive the first rays of the sun in India**.
- The performance draws from the cultural traits of the indigenous **Meyor and Mishmi communities**.
- The festival has been conceptualised to generate meaningful livelihood opportunities for local communities, while promoting responsible and eco-friendly tourism.

## Bulleh Shah

- A shrine of the Sufi poet Bulleh Shah was recently vandalised in Mussoorie, Uttarakhand.
- Bulleh Shah was a famous **Punjabi Sufi poet** who lived in the **late 17th and early 18th century**. **Born in 1680 in Kasur in present-day Pakistan**, his real name was **Abdullah Shah**.
- Bulleh Shah was trained in Islamic scholarship but later chose a Sufi teacher named **Shah Inayat Qadiri**. He was criticised and even isolated for this, as his teacher belonged to a socially marginalised group.
- Along with the Chishti order, the Qadri ranked among Punjab's most tolerant Sufi traditions, with the Qadris embracing music and interfaith followers.
- Despite the intolerant Mughal rule, Sufism flourished in the 17th and 18th century Punjab largely due to the Qadri order, and its fondness for **vernacular devotional poetry like the kafi**.
- He preached the importance of **"ishq" (universal love)** above all religions, rejecting divisions of caste, creed, religion, and gender.
- He believed that **God is found within**, not through rituals, strict rules, or religious labels.
- His philosophy also drew inspiration from the **Nath Yogis** and **Bhakti movement**.

## Rani Velu Nachiyar

- The Prime Minister paid tributes to Rani Velu Nachiyar on her birth anniversary.
- Born in Ramnathpuram in 1730, Velu Nachiyar was the first queen to have ever actively opposed the British rule. She fought against the colonial rulers many years before the Sepoy Mutiny.
- At the time of death of her husband, King of Sivaganga, she was drawn into the conflict.
- In collaboration with Hyder Ali and Gopala Nayaker, she waged a war against the British and emerged victorious.
- Eventually she went on to produce the first human bomb as well as establish the first army of trained women soldiers in the late 1700s.
- Nachiyar was trained in many methods of combat, including war match weapons usage, and martial arts like Valari, Silambam.
- She was succeeded by her daughter Vellacci in 1790 and died a few years later in 1796.

## Magh Mela

- The Magh Mela recently began at Prayagraj. It is an annual religious and cultural gathering and fair held at the Triveni Sangam — the sacred confluence of the Ganga, Yamuna, and mythical Saraswati rivers in Prayagraj (Uttar Pradesh).
- Celebrated during the Hindu month of **Magh** (January–February), the Mela is one of the most significant spiritual gatherings in India.
- It has ancient roots, mentioned in Hindu scriptures such as the **Puranas** and **Dharmashastra texts**.

- Bathing at the Sangam during the month of Magh is believed to purify the soul and wash away sins. An important part of the Magh Mela is the **Kalpvas** tradition, where devotees (called Kalpvasis) live in simple temporary camps near Sangam for about a month.

## Turkman Gate

- The Turkman Gate was recently in the news after a demolition drive led to violence.
- Turkman Gate was constructed in the **17th century** during the reign of **Mughal emperor Shah Jahan**, when he founded his new capital at **Shahjahanabad**.
- Unlike other gates named for the cities they faced, this gate holds the name of a revered mystic, whose shrine predates the Mughal city.
- It is named after the 13th-century Sufi saint, **Hazrat Shah Turkman Bayabani**, whose tomb (dargah) is situated near the monument.

## Shikshapatri Dwishatabdi Mahotsav

- The Prime Minister addressed the Shikshapatri Dwishatabdi Mahotsav, marking the 200th anniversary of Bhagwan Swaminarayan's Shikshapatri
- **Shikshapatri**, a spiritual and ethical text authored in **1826** by **Swaminarayan**, the founder of the Swaminarayan tradition.
- It is a concise Sanskrit text consisting of 212 verses, laying down a code of moral, social, and spiritual discipline for followers.

# AWARDS/ PERSONALITIES IN NEWS

## Jeevan Raksha Padak Awards

- The President has approved the conferment of the Jeevan Raksha Padak Series of Awards-2025 on 30 persons.
- It is given to individuals for meritorious acts of human nature in saving the life of a person.
- The award is given in three categories, namely, **Sarvottam Jeevan Raksha Padak, Uttam Jeevan Raksha Padak and Jeevan Raksha Padak**.
- Persons of all walks of life are eligible for these awards. The award can also be **conferred posthumously**.
- The award consists of a medal, certificate signed by the Union Home Minister and lump sum monetary allowance.

## Franz Edelman Award

The Department of Food and Public Distribution (DFPD) is among the six finalists for the prestigious 2026 Franz Edelman Award for its **Anna Chakra** initiative.

### Anna Chakra

- Anna Chakra is an operation research-based decision support solution that strengthens India's Public Distribution System by optimizing state-specific logistics.
- It is developed in partnership with the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) in India and the IIT Delhi.
- It uses advanced optimization models to strengthen the movement of food grains across India. Its national deployment has generated:
    - Estimated annual savings of Rs 250 crore
    - A 35% reduction in emissions, supporting India's climate commitments
    - Efficiency gains that benefit more than 81 Crore PDS beneficiaries, including the most vulnerable populations.

### Franz Edelman Award

- It is considered the most prestigious honour in the fields of operations research and advanced analytics.
- Widely regarded as the Nobel Prize of Operations Research and Analytics, it recognizes the world's most impactful, high-value applications of advanced analytics.
- It is presented annually by the **Institute for Operations Research and the Management Sciences (INFORMS)**.

## Indira Gandhi Peace Prize 2025

- **Mozambican** rights activist and humanitarian **Graca Machel** has been selected for the Indira Gandhi Prize for Peace, Disarmament and Development for 2025.
- Ms. Machel was chosen for her path-breaking work in the fields of education, health and nutrition, economic empowerment and humanitarian action.
- It was instituted in the memory of Indira Gandhi by the **Indira Gandhi Memorial Trust in 1986**
- It is given to individuals or organisations who work towards ensuring international peace and development, ensuring that scientific discoveries are used for the larger good of humanity, and creating new international economic order. R ecpients are chosen from a pool of **national and international nominees**.