



the recitals

CURRENT AFFAIRS - FEBRUARY 2025



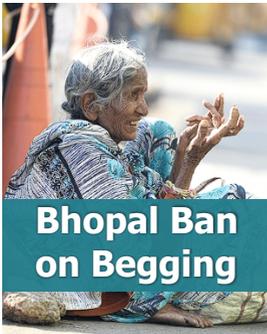
**PM Dhan Dhanya
Krishi Yojna**



**MIGRANTS DEPORTED
FROM U.S. TO REACH INDIA**



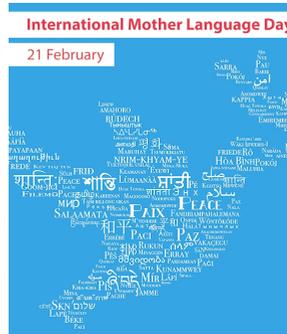
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**Bhopal Ban
on Begging**



**AI Action
Summit in Paris**



International Mother Language Day

21 February



Passport Surrendered

**SC Slams Ranveer Allahbadia For
His Controversial Remark !!**

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- Devolution Index Report
- President's Rule (Article 356)
- Immigration & Foreigners Bill, 2025
- Power To Grant Furloughs
- Ranveer Allahbadia's Row
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Should Convicted Persons Contest Elections?

The Supreme Court (SC) is hearing petitions seeking a **lifetime ban** on convicted persons from contesting elections.

Related Legal Provisions

- Under **Section 8(3) of the Representation of the People Act, 1951**, a person convicted of a criminal offense with a sentence of **at least two years** is disqualified from elections during imprisonment and for **six years after release**.
- **Section 8(1)** mandates disqualification for various crimes (e.g., promoting enmity between different groups, rape, untouchability, unlawful association, corruption etc.) **regardless of sentence duration**, plus six years post-release.

Need for Lifetime Ban for Convicted Politicians

1. Upholding Integrity in Public Office-

Lawmakers should maintain the highest ethical standards. Allowing convicted individuals, especially for heinous crimes (rape, murder, corruption), to contest elections undermines public trust in democracy.

- ✓ Singapore's zero-tolerance policy on corruption (Convicted individuals are permanently barred from contesting elections) has ensured a clean political landscape.

2. Preventing Criminalization of Politics-

Reports by ADR show that **46% of MPs in 2024** have criminal cases, with **31% facing serious charges**.

3. Equal Standards for Public Servants and Politicians-

Government employees with criminal convictions are permanently disqualified from holding office.

4. Ensuring Free and Fair Elections-

Candidates with criminal backgrounds have a **higher chance of winning (15.4%) compared to those with clean records (4.4%)**. Banning convicted politicians would level the playing field and promote merit-based leadership.

5. Enhancing Public Trust in Democracy-

Voters expect clean governance. A lifetime ban would restore faith in the electoral process and ensure that only those with a clean record serve in legislative roles.

Counterarguments Against a Lifetime Ban on Convicted Politicians

- **Judicial Delays May Lead to Wrongful Convictions:** India has a slow judicial process, and wrongful convictions are not uncommon. Many politicians face politically motivated cases that may take decades to resolve.
- **Possibility of Political Vendetta & False Cases:** In 2023, one MP was convicted in a defamation case and disqualified from Parliament, raising concerns about selective targeting.

Past Decisions on Decriminalization of Politics

1. **Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR) Case (2002)** – Supreme Court mandated disclosure of criminal records for all candidates contesting elections.
2. **CEC vs Jan Chaukidar (2013)** – Upheld Patna HC's ruling that undertrial prisoners cannot contest elections as they cease to be 'electors.' Parliament later overturned this judgment.
3. **Lily Thomas (2013)** – Struck down **Section 8(4)** of the RP Act, that allowed a sitting legislator to continue as a member even after being convicted if they filed an **appeal**.
 - The convicted MP now must secure a specific **order of stay** against the **conviction** of the trial court.
4. In **'Lok Prahari v Union of India' case (2018)**, the disqualification can be reversed if a higher court grants a stay on the conviction or decides the appeal in favour of the convicted lawmaker.
 - SC clarified that the disqualification will not operate from the date of the stay of conviction by the appellate court.
 - Here, it should be noted that the stay cannot merely be a **suspension of sentence**, but a **stay of conviction**.
5. **Section 11 of RP Act** – Allows the Election Commission (EC) to remove any disqualification or reduce disqualification periods of a convicted person. In 2019, EC controversially reduced **Prem Singh Tamang's** disqualification from **six years to 13 months**, despite corruption charges.

Current Petition on Lifetime Ban for Convicted Politicians

- The petition demands a **lifetime ban** on convicted persons from contesting elections, arguing that if they are ineligible for government jobs, they should not become lawmakers after six years.
- However, the **Central government**, in a 2020 affidavit, stated that MPs and MLAs are not bound by government service conditions, making the current **six-year disqualification** sufficient.
- The **SC** has now sought fresh responses from the **Central government and the Election Commission** on the matter.

Way Forward

1. **Amending the Representation of the People Act, 1951** – for introducing a legal provision explicitly barring individuals convicted of **heinous crimes (rape, murder, corruption, terrorism, etc.)** from contesting elections for life.
2. **Defining Serious Offenses Clearly** – and establishing a clear **framework** distinguishing minor offences from those involving **moral turpitude**, ensuring the ban is applied fairly and preventing misuse for political vendetta.
3. **Judicial Oversight on Disqualification** – Setting up a **“fast-track” judicial process** to review and confirm disqualifications, ensuring fairness and preventing politically motivated disqualifications.
 - ✓ **Fair & Transparent Review Process:** A three-tier system (Trial Court → High Court Review → Supreme Court Finality) can prevent arbitrary disqualifications.
4. **Strengthening Political Accountability** – **by mandating political parties to refuse tickets** to candidates with serious criminal records. The EC should enforce strict penalties on parties that violate this norm.
 - ✓ Only parties adhering to clean governance norms should be eligible for state funding for elections.
5. **Public Awareness and Electoral Reforms** – Educating voters about criminal records of candidates, promoting **clean governance initiatives** and encouraging them to elect representatives with ethical backgrounds.
 - ✓ The **‘Know Your Candidate’** campaign by Election Commission of India increased voter awareness about candidates' backgrounds.
 - ✓ **Role of Media & Civil Society:** EC should collaborate with civil society organizations to run large-scale voter awareness campaigns. **Example:** The ADR (Association for Democratic Reforms) regularly publishes reports on criminal records of MPs/MLAs.
6. **Judicial Review of EC’s Powers** – The **EC’s authority to reduce disqualification periods** should be **reviewed for constitutional validity**, ensuring transparency and consistency in election laws.
 - ✓ In Canada, an independent Ethics Commissioner oversees election disqualifications to prevent bias.
7. **Aligning Politicians with Government Servants’ Standards** – by implementing similar eligibility criteria ensuring **equal accountability**
 - ✓ **Parliamentarians as Public Servants:** Article 311 protections (which govern civil servants) should be extended to elected representatives to ensure equal accountability.



Devolution Index Report

Recently, the Devolution Index Report titled “Status of Devolution to Panchayats in States – An Indicative Evidence Based Ranking 2024” was released by the Ministry of Panchayati Raj and **Indian Institute of Public Administration (IIPA)**, with Karnataka securing the top position.

About the Devolution Index Report

The **Devolution Index** is a comprehensive tool that assesses the extent of power and autonomy granted to PRIs across Indian states and UTs.

➤ **Article 243G** of the Constitution empowers State legislatures to devolve powers and responsibilities to Panchayats across **29 subjects listed in the Eleventh Schedule**.

Key Highlights from the Devolution Index Report 2024

➤ **Top Scorers:** Karnataka was ranked first with a score of 72.23 followed by Kerala (70.59) and Tamil Nadu (68.38).

➤ **National Average Score:** It is **43.89**, with Bihar, Assam, Sikkim, and Uttarakhand ranking as moderate performers. (Devolution to Rural Local Bodies Increased from 39.9% to 43.89% between 2013-14 to 2021-22 due to initiatives like Rashtriya Gram Swaraj Abhiyan (RGSA))

➤ **Performance of States Across Key Dimensions:** The index evaluates decentralization across following six key dimensions

Dimension	Top State	Followed by
Framework (Legal & Institutional Structure)	Kerala	Maharashtra, Karnataka
Functions (Powers Delegated to Panchayats)	TamilNadu	Karnataka, Odisha
Finances (Fiscal Decentralization & Funding)	Karnataka	Kerala Tamil Nadu
Accountability (Transparency & Governance Monitoring)	Karnataka	Kerala, Maharashtra
Functionaries (Manpower & Resources at Panchayats)	Gujarat	Tamil Nadu & Kerala
Capacity Building (Training & Skill Development)	Telangana	Tamil Nadu & Gujarat

Need for the Devolution Index	Benefits of the Devolution Index
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Strengthening Cooperative Federalism: It encourages states to improve governance by adopting best practices. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ The 15th Finance Commission recommended performance-based grants to states based on their efforts in strengthening PRIs, reinforcing cooperative federalism. Measuring Multidimensional Aspects of Devolution: which involve political, administrative, and financial aspects. Since different states implement devolution in varied ways, an index helps standardize comparisons across time and space. Assessing the Level of Local Government Autonomy: i.e., the extent to which Panchayats can make independent decisions in governance, public service delivery, and financial management. Encouraging Competitive Governance: through benchmarking and ranking to motivate states to improve local governance. As this index serves as a policy tool to highlight areas needing reform and to create an incentive structure for states to enhance devolution efforts. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ The "Ease of Living Index" for cities created competition among urban local bodies; similarly, a Devolution Index can drive competition among PRIs. ✓ Maharashtra's "PESA Gram Sabhas" model outperforms many other states in tribal self-governance, showing how ranking can drive positive reforms. Addressing Gaps: The decentralization process varies across states due to regional and administrative differences. An index helps identify disparities and promotes targeted policy interventions to ensure that all states move towards stronger local governance. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ NITI Aayog's Aspirational Districts Program uses a similar approach, targeting governance gaps in underdeveloped districts. ✓ Odisha's Mission Shakti program integrates PRIs with women's SHGs, addressing local governance gaps. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For Citizens: It will enhance transparency in Panchayat decision-making and fund allocation. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ MGNREGA Social Audits – States like Rajasthan and Jharkhand use PRIs to conduct audits, reducing corruption in fund allocation. ✓ Odisha's "Mo Sarkar" initiative – A governance feedback mechanism that assesses the impact of Panchayat services from a citizen's perspective. • For Elected Representatives: It will provide data-driven insights to advocate for stronger decentralization. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Himachal Pradesh's PESA Implementation – Elected tribal leaders advocate for stronger implementation of the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996 based on devolution data. • For Government Officials: It will act as a roadmap for improving local governance structures. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Chhattisgarh's Gram Mitra Initiative – Deploys trained officials in weak PRIs to strengthen governance and service delivery for marginalized tribal communities. • For Policymakers: It will help in designing better policies for effective rural governance.

Challenges Being Faced by Panchayats	Key Recommendations
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Limited Devolution of Powers: Many states restrict Panchayats to basic civic duties, lacking clear role demarcation across governance tiers. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Lack of clear role demarcation between the three tiers of governance (Gram Panchayat, Block Panchayat, and Zila Parishad) leads to inefficiency. Financial Constraints: Panchayats rely on state and central grants due to limited tax authority, facing 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> For Strengthening Framework: Fix reservations for women, Scheduled Castes, and Scheduled Tribes for multiple terms; grant State Election Commissions (SECs) safeguards over elections; create a Common Electoral Roll to avoid duplication and confusion between Lok Sabha, state assembly, and Panchayat elections. For Enhancing Financial Devolution: Ensure timely fund transfers, allow Panchayats to levy

<p>delays in fund transfers and inconsistent financial support.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Weak implementation of State Finance Commissions (SFCs) recommendations, leading to inconsistent financial support. <p>3. Manpower & Infrastructure Shortages: Lack of staff, office space, internet connectivity, and administrative tools hinders local governance.</p> <p>4. Bureaucratic & Political Resistance: State control and political interference delay elections and weaken Panchayat autonomy.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ West Bengal Panchayat Elections (2018 & 2023) – Marred by political violence and allegations of state interference. <p>5. Weak Accountability & Transparency: Ineffective audits and lack of regular social audits contribute to inefficiencies and corruption.</p> <p>6. Limited Training & Capacity Building leaves Panchayat officials unprepared for governance responsibilities.</p> <p>7. Weak Role in Development Planning: Centralized control and parallel bodies undermine Panchayats' decision-making authority.</p> <p>8. Social & Gender Barriers: Women and marginalized groups struggle to assert leadership despite reservation policies.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Women Sarpanches face proxy leadership ('Pati Panchayat'), where male family members control decisions. 	<p>property tax, mandate Public Financial Management System (PFMS) for transactions and establish a Consolidated Local Government Fund to ensure stable financial resources.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Maharashtra permits Panchayats to levy property tax, boosting local revenue. <p>3. For Strengthening Functionaries: Recruit qualified staff, empower Panchayats to manage hiring, and create a Local Government Service Commission for transparent recruitment.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ West Bengal's Gram Panchayat Sahayak scheme has improved service delivery by hiring local youth. <p>4. For Capacity Enhancement: Conduct regular training programs and equip Panchayats with modern IT infrastructure and e-connectivity.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Chhattisgarh's e-Panchayat initiative has improved efficiency by digitizing Panchayat records. <p>5. For Accountability & Transparency: Enforce regular social audits and adopt unified accounting procedures across all Panchayats.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Andhra Pradesh's Smart Panchayat model ("Smart Village – Smart Ward towards smart Andhra Pradesh") integrates digital audits and citizen feedback for transparency.
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By measuring how effectively powers are transferred to local governments under **Article 243G of the Constitution**, the Index provides an **evidence-based ranking of states** in terms of Panchayat empowerment and is a crucial step towards achieving "**Viksit Bharat**", where empowered and accountable Panchayats drive **inclusive and sustainable rural development**.



President's Rule (Article 356)

The President's rule was imposed in Manipur recently due to ongoing ethnic violence between the Meitei and Kuki-Zo communities since May 2023. The conflict began over the Meitei demand for ST status, opposed by the Kukis. A political crisis deepened after Manipur Chief Minister resigned on February 9.

About Article 356 of the Constitution – President's Rule

It provides the framework for imposing **President's Rule** in a state if the constitutional machinery fails.

When is it Imposed?

- Article 356 {
 - If the President, based on the **Governor's report or other information**, believes that the state government **cannot function as per the Constitution**, they can impose **President's Rule** through a **Proclamation**.
- Article 365 {
 - Effect of failure to comply with, or to give effect to, directions given by the Union

The Governor carries on with the administration of the state on behalf of the President with the help of the state's Chief Secretary and other advisors/administrators appointed by him.

Does It Affect Fundamental Rights?

No, the President's rule does not affect citizens' fundamental rights, unlike a national emergency (Article 352).

Does It Result in Dissolution of State Assembly?

Under President's Rule, the State executive is dismissed, and the legislature is either suspended or dissolved. In Manipur's case, the

Assembly, with a tenure until 2027, has not been dissolved but placed under "suspended animation," meaning it is temporarily paused and can be revived once forming a popular government becomes feasible after the revocation of President's Rule.

- ✓ In 111 cases of President's Rule till 2015, the State's Legislative Assembly had been dissolved simultaneously with the proclamation 53 times, according to the Lok Sabha Secretariat's report. In the remaining instances, the legislature has been placed in suspended animation.

What Happens Under President's Rule?

The President may by Proclamation

1. **Take over state government functions**, assuming the powers of the Governor and other state authorities, **except the Legislature**.
2. **Give Parliament the power** to legislate for the state.
3. **Make necessary provisions** to implement the President's Rule, except for interfering with the High Court's functions.

Approval and Duration of President's Rule: The Proclamation must be approved by both the houses of Parliament by simple majority within **two months**, else it will **cease to operate**. Once approved, it remains in effect for **six months** and can be extended by **six-month intervals**, up to a **maximum of 3 years**.

Special Conditions for Extension Beyond One Year:

- (a) A **National Emergency** in the entire country or the state concerned.
- (b) The **Election Commission (EC) certifying that elections** to the state assembly **cannot be held** due to difficulties.

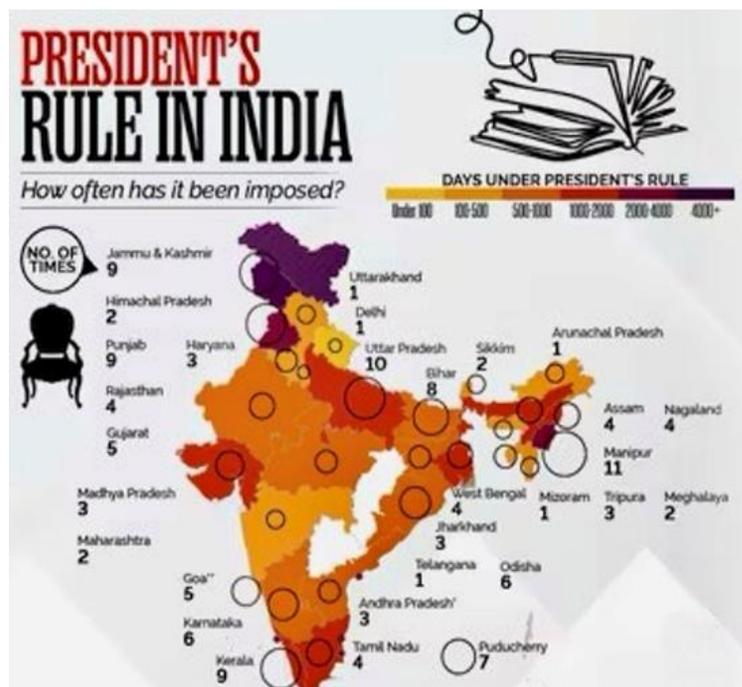
Revocation: The President **can revoke** the proclamation at any time through another **Proclamation**. Revocation does not require Parliament's approval.

Key Takeaways

- **Article 356 is meant for handling governance breakdowns** in a state.
- **It cannot be misused indefinitely**, as it requires **Parliamentary approval** and **time limits**.

History of President's Rule in India

- **Frequency of Imposition-** Since 1950, the President's Rule has been imposed 135 times across 29 states and UTs. Manipur (11 times) and Uttar Pradesh (10 times) have seen it most frequently.
 - ✓ **Punjab was the first state** where President's rule was imposed in 1951.
 - ✓ **West Bengal and Karnataka** have been under the President's rule for the **minimum duration** i.e. 7 days only.
 - ✓ No Instances of President's Rule has been witnessed in the Chhattisgarh, Telangana.
- **Longest Duration Under Central Rule-** **Jammu & Kashmir (J&K) (9 times)** holds the record, spending **over 15 years** under **President's Rule**, mainly due to **militancy and instability** followed by Punjab (over 10 years) and Puducherry (over seven years).



S. R. Bommai v. Union of India (1994): A Landmark Judgment on President's Rule

The S. R. Bommai case was a turning point in Centre-state relations, placing significant restrictions on the arbitrary use of Article 356 of the Constitution. The verdict played a crucial role in upholding **federalism, democratic accountability, and constitutionalism** in India.

Background

Before 1994, the Central government frequently misused Article 356 to dismiss state governments, often for political reasons.

SC's Verdict in S.R. Bommai Case

1. Judicial Review of President's Rule: The President's power under Article 356 is not absolute. The SC can review the imposition of President's Rule to check for illegality, malafide intent, abuse of power, or extraneous considerations.

✓ While the President's subjective decision cannot be challenged, the court can examine whether there was relevant material to justify the proclamation.

✓ Post-Bommai, the SC reviewed the dismissal of Arunachal Pradesh case (2016) and Uttarakhand (2016) governments, reinforcing that misuse of Article 356 is justiciable.

2. Guidelines for Protecting State Governments: The court created guidelines to protect the independence of state governments which involves-

a. **Legislative Assembly Suspension, Not Dissolution:** After President's Rule is imposed, the State Legislature be suspended, not dissolved, unless Parliament approves the proclamation within two months.

b. **Revival of Dismissed Government:** If Parliament does not approve the proclamation, the dismissed government must be reinstated.

c. **Limited Scope for Centre's Power:** The judgment established that Article 356 can be invoked only in extreme cases. The Centre cannot use Article 356 arbitrarily; it must act in line with constitutional principles.

3. Strengthening Federalism: *The judgment reaffirmed that states are not subordinate to the Centre, thereby enhancing cooperative federalism.*

Impact of the Judgment

1. Reduced Misuse of Article 356: Between 1950 and 1994, President's Rule was imposed around 100 times, an average of 2.5 times a year. After Bommai, the frequency of the President's Rule significantly declined (once per year), reinforcing federalism and state autonomy.

2. Judicial Check on Executive Power: The ruling curbed the Centre's ability to impose the President's Rule for political reasons, ensuring greater democratic stability in states.

Arguments in Favour of President's Rule

1. Ensures Constitutional Governance: Article 356 acts as a safeguard against constitutional breakdown in states where the elected government fails to function as per the Constitution.

2. Restores Law and Order: In cases of severe violence, insurgency, or breakdown of public order, the President's Rule helps bring stability and control.

➤ Example: Punjab (1987), J&K (1990) during periods of insurgency.

Arguments Against President's Rule

1. Threat to Federalism: Misuse of Article 356 weakens state autonomy and undermines the spirit of federalism.

2. Politically Motivated Misuse: Often used as a tool by the ruling party at the Centre to dismiss opposition-led state governments.

➤ Example: Indira Gandhi's government (1970s-80s) frequently dismissed opposition-led state governments.

3. Against Democratic Mandate: Dismissing an elected government undermines the people's will and democratic principles. Alternative mechanisms like floor

<p>3. Prevents Political Instability: When no party secures a majority or there is excessive horse-trading and defections, the President's Rule prevents governance paralysis.</p> <p>➤ Example: Puducherry (2021), Karnataka (2019) due to loss of majority.</p> <p>4. Checks Corruption and Maladministration: If a state government is involved in rampant corruption, misuse of power, or administrative failure, central intervention can ensure clean and efficient governance.</p> <p>5. Maintains National Integrity: in cases where regional separatist movements threaten the sovereignty of the country.</p> <p>➤ Example: J&K (2018–2019) after BJP-PDP alliance collapsed.</p>	<p><i>tests should be explored</i> before imposing the President's Rule.</p> <p>✓ Various commissions, such as the Sarkaria Commission (1987), the National Commission to Review the Working of the Constitution (2002), and the Punchhi Commission (2010), have suggested that- Article 356 should be a last resort in cases of extreme emergencies, such as a complete breakdown of constitutional machinery</p> <p>4. Judicial Limitations: Though the S. R. Bommai judgment (1994) allowed judicial review, courts often hesitate to interfere in political matters, making checks on misuse weaker.</p> <p>5. Prolonged Central Control: Some states remain under President's Rule for extended periods, depriving them of elected governance.</p> <p>➤ Example: Manipur (11 times in history).</p>
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Immigration and Foreigners Bill, 2025

The Immigration and Foreigners Bill, 2025, is set to be introduced by the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) in the ongoing Budget session.

About the Immigration and Foreigners Bill, 2025

The **Immigration and Foreigners Bill, 2025** seeks to consolidate and streamline immigration and foreigner-related regulations by replacing following legislations formulated during World Wars I & II:

<p>Foreigner's Act of 1946 enacted to confer upon the Central government certain powers in respect of foreigners.</p>	<p>The Immigration (Carriers' Liability) Act, 2000, which holds carriers responsible for transporting passengers into India in violation of the Passport (Entry into India) Act, 1920, and its associated rules.</p>	<p>Passport (Entry into India) Act, 1920 and the Registration of Foreigners Act, 1939 require passports of persons entering India; and to provide for the registration of foreigners in India.</p>
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Objective: To eliminate overlapping provisions and streamline laws on passports, travel documents, visas, and foreigner registration for efficient entry and exit regulation in India.

Key Provisions

- 1. Immigration Control and Administration:** The Bill defines the roles and powers of Immigration Officers, establishes the legal framework for the **Bureau of Immigration (BoI)** and mandates the requirement of passports, visas, and other necessary travel documents for entry into India.
- 2. Registration of Foreigners:** The Bill specifies the obligations of foreigners regarding their registration with the Foreigners Regional Registration Office (**FRRO**).
- 3. Obligations of Institutions and Accommodations:** Universities, educational institutions, hospitals, nursing homes, and medical institutions are required to provide information about foreign nationals admitted to their institutions. Hotels and guest houses must continue to share foreign guests' passport details with the police. There was no defined rule earlier for such institutions; foreigners were asked to register with FRRO.

4. **Entry Restrictions and Removal of Foreigners:** Foreigners deemed a threat to national security, sovereignty, foreign relations, or public health may be denied entry or stay in India, with the Immigration Officer's decision being final. The Bill codifies existing executive powers and expands the Centre's authority to issue removal orders, delegate powers, and grant exemptions.
5. **Penal Provisions:** Unauthorized entry into India without a valid passport or travel document is punishable by **imprisonment of up to five years or a fine of ₹5 lakh or both**. Using or supplying forged travel documents, passports, or visas is punishable by imprisonment of **two to seven years** and a fine ranging from ₹1 lakh to ₹10 lakh. Overstaying beyond the visa period is punishable with **imprisonment of up to three years and a fine of ₹3 lakh**.
6. **Regulation of Foreigners' Movement:** The Bill grants authorities the power to restrict foreigners' movements, regulate frequented places. It also maintains the burden of proof on individuals to establish their citizenship.
7. **Role of Carriers:** The Bill places a legal obligation on transport carriers (airlines, shipping companies, etc.) to remove foreigners denied entry into India. Carriers must also provide necessary details about their passengers to the authorities.
8. **State Authority in Immigration Enforcement:** State governments and their police forces are empowered to detect and deport undocumented migrants within their jurisdiction.
9. **Detention and Holding Centres:** The Bill does not explicitly use the term "**detention centres**", but states that foreigners with restricted movement must "**reside at a designated place under supervision.**" These places will be governed by rules regarding maintenance, discipline, and access, as determined by the Central Government. States are authorized to set up such centres without requiring explicit approval from the Centre.

Digital Tracking and Identification Mechanisms for Foreigners

- The MHA has directed States to form committees to identify foreigners overstaying beyond their visa period since January 1, 2011. Details of such individuals are uploaded on the **e-FRRO portal**, accessible to local police and government agencies.
- Additionally, the **Foreigners Identification Portal** enables State police to track and record biometrics of illegal migrants for deportation and document verification.
- The Unique Identification Authority of India (UIDAI) has been tasked with creating a negative list of Aadhaar cards obtained fraudulently.

Need for the Bill

- **Eliminating Overlapping Laws:** The bill replaces four outdated laws and provides a unified legal framework for managing immigration.
- **National Security Concerns:** It strengthens provisions to prevent unauthorized entry and movement of foreigners.
- **Regulation of Foreigners:** It formalizes procedures for visa issuance, registration, and tracking of foreign nationals in India.
- **Stronger Penalties:** The bill enhances penalties to deter illegal immigration and document fraud.
- **Simplification for Authorities:** It empowers Immigration Officers and provides clarity in enforcing immigration laws.

Benefits of the Bill	Concerns Raised
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Efficient Immigration Process: Streamlined procedures for entry, exit, and stay of foreigners. 2. Enhanced National Security from undocumented individuals. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Potential for Misuse: The discretionary power given to Immigration Officers may lead to arbitrary decisions. 2. Impact on Refugees and Asylum Seekers: The bill lacks clear provisions for humanitarian cases.

3. Legal Clarity for Foreigners and Institutions: Clearly defined rules for foreign students, tourists, and workers.	3. Increased Burden on Carriers: The requirement for carriers to remove inadmissible foreigners may be logistically challenging.
4. Improved Tracking and Deportation: Enhanced mechanisms for identifying and removing illegal immigrants.	4. State-Level Implementation Issues: While the bill empowers States, enforcement may be inconsistent across regions.



Power To Grant Furloughs

The Hashimpura massacre convicts have challenged a Delhi prison rule in the Delhi High Court (HC), arguing that furloughs, usually granted by the executive, are instead left to the court handling their appeal.

- ✓ On May 22, 1987, Provincial Armed Constabulary (PAC) personnel allegedly killed around 38 Muslim men in Hashimpura, Meerut, amid communal tensions.

What do the Delhi Prison Rules 2018 Say?

Chapter XIX of the Delhi Prison Rules 2018 governs furlough and parole. Note 2 of Rule 1224 states that if a convict's appeal is pending before the **HC** or the appeal period has not expired, the executive cannot grant furlough. Instead, the convict must seek court directions.

- ✓ This rule has been challenged in the HC.

Why is it Being Challenged?

Petitioners argue against restricting furloughs in such cases. However, the Delhi prison administration, in its 2022 affidavit, defended the rule, stating it was intentionally included based on the Parole/Furlough Guidelines, 2010, approved by the then Lt. Governor.

Parole versus Furloughs

Reformative Justice Approach: Both parole and furlough align with the idea of prisoner rehabilitation rather than pure retribution.

Aspect	Parole	Furlough
Nature	Conditional release is subject to good behavior in prison and to not committing specific offences.	Conditional release is subject to good behavior in prison and to not committing specific offences.
Effect on Sentence	Sentence is suspended; duration remains intact.	Sentence continues to run despite release. For example, a 10-year sentence with a 30-day furlough means the convict serves 9 years, 11 months but is still considered to have completed the full term.
Purpose	Granted for specific exigencies (e.g., illness, agriculture, legal appeal).	Granted for preventing solitude, maintaining family/social ties, and encouraging good conduct.
Legal Right	Not considered a legal right; authorities may deny parole even if the prisoner presents a sufficient case.	Considered more of a right compared to parole; however, it is not absolute and can be denied based on certain considerations.
Applicable to	Short-term imprisonment.	Long-term imprisonment after a certain period is spent in jail.

Granting Authority	Divisional Commissioner.	Deputy Inspector General of Prisons.
Requirement	Requires a specific reason.	No specific reason required.
Frequency	Can be granted multiple times.	Limited number of times.
Denial Grounds	Generally granted if requirements are met.	Can be denied in the interest of society.
Supervision	May involve supervision or monitoring during the release period, especially if deemed necessary.	Generally involves fewer supervision requirements, reflecting the intent to grant the prisoner a semblance of normalcy.

**** State Variations:** Given that prison administration is a state subject, there are variations in how parole and furlough are implemented across different states. For example, Maharashtra's prison rules allow furlough as a matter of right to certain categories of prisoners, whereas states like Uttar Pradesh have more stringent norms, especially for prisoners convicted of heinous crimes.

****Supreme Court Precedents:** Asfaq vs. State of Rajasthan (2017) distinguished parole as a privilege and furlough as a right (subject to conditions).

**** UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (Nelson Mandela Rules, 2015):** Recognizes the role of community ties in reducing recidivism.

Delhi HC's Interpretation of the Rule So Far

1. Single Judge Bench's View: The term "**High Court**" in Note 2 of Rule 1224 refers to the **appellate court**, which includes both the **Delhi HC and the Supreme Court (SC)**. If a convict's appeal is pending before the **SC**, then only the **SC can grant furlough**.

2. Current Examination by Division Bench: It is considering whether a convict can apply for furlough in the **Delhi HC** while their appeal is pending in the **SC** or if they must approach the **SC directly**. It is also reviewing the **constitutional validity** of the rule which includes:

- Violation of Fundamental Rights:** The rule is being tested against **Article 14 (Right to Equality)** and **Article 21 (Right to Life & Liberty)** to determine if it unfairly discriminates against convicts whose appeals are pending.
 - ✓ If convicts whose appeals are pending before the SC are denied furlough while those whose appeals are pending in the HC can get it, it may create unequal treatment among similarly placed individuals.
- Reformative Justice:** The court will assess whether denying furlough to a well-behaved convict—simply because their appeal is pending in the **SC- contradicts the reformative approach to punishment**.
- Parole vs. Furlough:** Since **furlough does not suspend a sentence** (unlike parole), the court will decide if legal principles applied to **parole** should also apply to **furlough**.

Who Decides on Suspension of Sentence?

- The issue dates back to the **1959 KM Nanavati (an Indian Navy Commander) case**, where the **Bombay HC convicted** him for the murder of his wife's lover. Before his appeal reached the **SC**, Governor **Vijayalakshmi Pandit** suspended his sentence under **Article 161** (Power of Governor to grant pardons, etc., and to suspend, remit or commute sentences).
- In **1960**, a **four-judge SC Bench** ruled that a **Governor cannot suspend a sentence** if the case is pending before the **SC**, as it would undermine the court's appellate authority.

Is Furlough Commonly Denied in case of the Pending Appeal?

- Yes, some states **do not** grant furlough or parole if a convict's appeal is pending before the HC, requiring them to seek relief from the court instead.

- In 2023, in a dowry case, it was argued before the SC that parole and furlough differ from sentence suspension or bail, as they are granted by the State Government per its rules.
- Acknowledging the issue, an SC Bench called for urgent attention from the Union and State Governments. The matter is still pending.



Ranveer Allahbadia's Row

The Supreme Court (SC) recently granted interim protection from arrest to podcaster Ranveer Allahbadia over FIRs linked to his remarks on YouTube show *India's Got Latent*.

Background

- **Controversial Remarks & Public Outrage:** During an episode of *India's Got Latent*, hosted by **Samay Raina**, Ranveer Allahbadia made a **crude joke** that was deemed **offensive and obscene**. The remark triggered **public outrage**
- **Legal Action & Police Involvement:** FIRs were filed in **Maharashtra and Assam** under **obscenity laws**. The **Maharashtra Cyber Police and Assam Police** booked Allahbadia, Raina, and others involved. The **National Commission for Women (NCW)** summoned **Allahbadia, Raina, and five others** over the incident.
- **SC's Interim Relief & Bail Conditions:** Allahbadia approached the **SC**, seeking relief from **multiple FIRs and potential arrest**. The SC granted **interim protection**, but imposed **stringent conditions**, including:
 - **Ban on posting content on social media** until further orders (effectively a **gag order** (prior restraint)).
 - **Surrendering his passport**, restricting international travel.

Legal Precedents & Onerous Bail Conditions	Gag Order & Free Speech Concerns
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Section 438(2) of the CrPC stipulates that High Courts and Sessions Courts can grant conditional bail based on case specifics. Common Conditions include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Passport deposit to prevent flight risk. ▪ High monetary bail to ensure cooperation in the investigation. ▪ Regular police reporting to monitor the accused. • Onerous Conditions & SC Rulings: Courts have imposed excessive conditions like sharing Google Maps PIN or residing in a specific locality. The SC has previously cautioned against excessive bail conditions that violate personal liberty. Important cases highlighting excessive bail conditions include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Satender Kumar Antil v. CBI (2022): Ruled that unreasonable conditions defeat the purpose of bail. ▪ Frank Vitus v. NCB (2024): Struck down intrusive conditions, such as tracking an accused's location via Google Maps. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A gag order with arrest protection is rare as it prevents speech before it occurs (prior restraint). • Indian jurisprudence generally bars prior restraint laws. In hate speech cases, courts may restrict similar statements without imposing a blanket speech ban. • The SC has struck down such restrictions in past free speech cases, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Shreya Singhal v. Union of India (2015): Struck down Section 66A of the IT Act (which provided for imprisonment of up to three years and a fine for sending offensive messages through communication service), emphasizing that free speech cannot be curbed arbitrarily. ▪ Mohammed Zubair, Alt News Co-founder (2021): Rejected a government request to prohibit him from tweeting while on bail. ▪ Rehana Fathima (2021): Overturned a Kerala HC condition restricting social media use, citing free speech.

What are the Laws Governing Obscenity in Online Content?

Bhartiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS), 2023 – Section 294	Information Technology (IT) Act, 2000 – Section 67
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Punishes selling, advertising, or displaying obscene material, including electronic content.• Defines obscenity as lascivious, prurient, or corrupting content.• Penalty: Up to 2 years imprisonment and a ₹5,000 fine for first-time offenders.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Prohibits publishing or transmitting obscene material online.• Penalty: Up to 3 years imprisonment and a ₹5 lakh fine for first-time offenders.• Section 67A provides stricter punishment (up to 5 years imprisonment and a fine upto 10 lakh rupees) for publishing or transmitting material containing sexually explicit content in electronic form.

Similar Controversies Around Obscenity in India

- **Urfi Javed Controversy (2023)**: Complaints were filed against actor Urfi Javed for wearing "indecent" outfits in public. The case sparked debates on freedom of expression vs. public morality.
- **Ranveer Singh's Photoshoot (2022)**: The actor was booked under Sections 292, 293, 509 of IPC and Section 67A of the IT Act for his nude photoshoot for *Paper Magazine*. Critics debated whether artistic expression should be classified as obscenity.
- **Milind Soman Beach Photograph (2020)**: The Model-actor was booked by Goa Police for uploading a nude running photograph on a beach. The case raised questions about personal freedom and artistic liberty in public spaces.

Evolution of Indian Judiciary's View on Obscenity

1. **Lack of Clear Definition in Indian Laws**: which do not explicitly define **obscenity**, leading courts to **interpret and evolve standards** over time. Until **2014**, Indian courts relied on the **Hicklin test** to determine obscenity.
 - **The Hicklin Test (1868)** originated from the **Regina vs. Hicklin (1868)** case in **English law**. It defined obscenity based on whether any part of the work could "**deprave and corrupt**" **susceptible minds**. **India applied this test** in *Ranjit D. Udeshi vs. State of Maharashtra (1964)*, leading to the ban of **DH Lawrence's book *Lady Chatterley's Lover*** which was considered scandalous for the times and faced obscenity trials in several countries, including the UK and India.
 - **MF Husain Case (2008)**: The Delhi HC ruled that nudity in art is not obscene unless it crosses societal acceptability. This verdict was upheld by SC striking a balance between artistic expression and societal sensibilities.
2. **Shift in Obscenity Standards in the UK and US**
 - In United Kingdom, the Obscene Publications Act, 1959, changed the standard to assess a work "as a whole", not just isolated portions.
 - In *Roth v. United States*, 1957 the US SC ruled that obscenity should be judged by "contemporary community standards" and whether the work's dominant theme appeals to prurient interest.
3. **Adoption of the Community Standards Test in India (2014)**: Influenced by **international legal shifts**, India, influenced by the Roth case, moved away from the Hicklin test in *Aveek Sarkar v. State of West Bengal (2014)*. The case involved a **semi-nude photo of Boris Becker and his fiancée**. The **SC ruled that**:
 - **Obscenity must be judged using contemporary societal norms** rather than the views of a small, sensitive group.
 - A work must be **evaluated as a whole** in its intended context.

What about Freedom of Expression?

- **Restrictions on Free Speech**: The **right to freedom of speech and expression** is guaranteed under **Article 19(1)(a)** of the **Indian Constitution**. However, this right is **not absolute** and is subject to **reasonable restrictions**

under **Article 19(2) in the interest of decency and morality**, among other grounds. This means that speech or content deemed **obscene** can be penalized if it **violates contemporary moral standards**.

- **Balancing Free Speech with Community Standards:** Courts have ruled that **freedom of expression must be weighed against evolving societal norms**. This ensures that **artistic, literary, or journalistic expression is not stifled unnecessarily** while preventing genuinely obscene material from circulating. Thus, **context, intent, and community standards** play a crucial role in determining whether content is obscene or protected speech.

Need for Digital Content Regulation to Avoid Obscenity

- **Regulatory Challenges and Legal Hurdles:** New media, including Over-the-Top (OTT) platforms, YouTube and social media, lack a specific regulatory framework. The IT Rules, 2021 introduced a three-tier grievance redressal system and age-based content classification, but parts of these rules remain stayed by courts, delaying their full implementation. India still lacks a comprehensive law for digital media regulation.
 - ✓ The IT Rules, 2021 introduced self-classification for digital content, categorizing it into age-appropriate ratings (U, U/A 7+, 13+, 16+, A).
 - ✓ YouTube follows the IT Rules' digital media code but is treated as a social media intermediary for user-generated content. It isn't liable for such content unless it fails to comply with government directives like blocking and due diligence.
- **Preventing Obscenity and Indecency:** Unregulated digital content may include explicit scenes, vulgar language, objectification of women, encourage immoral behavior or inappropriate themes that could violate cultural sensibilities. Regulatory mechanisms help in curbing such content.
- **Protecting Cultural and Moral Values**
- **Safeguarding Children and Vulnerable Audiences:** Implementing age restrictions and content filters can help protect younger audiences.
- **Preventing Misuse of Freedom of Expression:** The right to freedom of speech comes with reasonable restrictions to prevent the spread of offensive or obscene content under the guise of creative liberty.

Recent Steps Taken by the Indian Government

- **IT Rules (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) 2021:** Introduced guidelines for OTT platforms and social media intermediaries to ensure content moderation.
 - ✓ Mandated social media platforms to appoint a Grievance Redressal Officer, a Compliance Officer, and a Nodal Officer for law enforcement coordination.
- **Self-Regulation by OTT Platforms:** Many digital streaming platforms have adopted content classification systems and parental controls.
 - ✓ The Digital Publishers Content Grievance Council (DPCGC), under the aegis of the Internet and Mobile Association of India (IAMAI), serves as an industry-led self-regulatory body for content complaints.
- **Censorship of Unlawful Content:** The government can act against digital content that violates public decency and morality. Section 69A of the IT Act, 2000 empowers the government to block online content in the interest of sovereignty and security).
 - ✓ India banned TikTok, PUBG, and 58 other Chinese apps in 2020 citing national security threats.
 - ✓ **Crackdown on deepfake videos:** Following the rise of AI-generated deepfake videos, the government has pushed platforms for stricter AI content regulations.

Way Forward

- **Comprehensive Legislation** – Enacting a dedicated law for digital content regulation, covering OTT and social media.
- **Independent Regulatory Body** – Establishing a neutral authority to oversee digital content.
- **Platform Accountability** – Enforcing stricter compliance for content moderation on digital platforms.

- **Public Awareness** – Educating users on reporting obscene and harmful content.



Overseas Mobility (Facilitation and Welfare) Bill, 2024

The Indian government is actively considering the Overseas Mobility (Facilitation and Welfare) Bill, 2024 to modernize migration policies and ensure safe, orderly, and regular migration for Indians seeking overseas employment.

Background: The bill comes at a time when the US is deporting illegal Indian immigrants under the Trump administration's policies. India has also seen an increasing number of migrant workers heading abroad, necessitating a **legal framework that reflects current global migration dynamics**.

- ✓ **20,000 undocumented Indians** are facing deportation under Trump 2.0's **mass deportation policy**.
- ✓ **Total undocumented Indian population in the US: 7,25,000**, the largest group outside Latin America.
- ✓ The **fourth batch of deported Indians** has recently returned to India.

About the Overseas Mobility (Facilitation and Welfare) Bill, 2024

India boasts one of the world's largest diasporas, with ~15.85 million Indians residing overseas. These individuals contribute significantly to the nation's economy, with remittances reaching around \$100 billion in 2023, positioning India as the top recipient globally.

The bill seeks to replace the outdated Emigration Act of 1983 to ensure **structured, transparent, and legal migration channels**, safeguarding Indian workers from exploitation and fraudulent recruitment practices.

What is the Emigration Act of 1983?

It replaced the earlier Emigration Act of 1922 and aimed to regulate overseas employment and to protect Indian workers heading to Emigration Check Required (ECR) countries (nations with weak labour laws that require special clearance for Indian migrants). The law also established **Protector General of Emigrants (PGE)** and **Protector of Emigrants (PoE) offices** to monitor migration.

- ✓ The Act classifies Indian passport holders into **ECR** (Emigration Check Required) and **ECNR** (Emigration Check Not Required) categories.
- ✓ ECR countries include UAE, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, and others.

What are the issues with this act?

- **Lack of structured employment provisions:** The Act does not sufficiently address overseas job opportunities.
- **High risks of exploitation:** Many Indian workers face **fraudulent recruitment, wage theft, and contract discrepancies**.
 - ✓ Cases of domestic workers in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait facing wage non-payment, physical abuse, and contract violations.
- **Irregular migration:** Many Indians still migrate through **illegal and unregulated routes**, making them vulnerable to exploitation.
 - ✓ Kerala and Tamil Nadu workers using tourist visas to enter Gulf countries and then overstaying illegally.
- **Outdated:** As it does not account for **modern migration trends, digital recruitment, or emerging labour markets**.

Therefore, the **Overseas Mobility Bill, 2024**, seeks to **address these gaps** and ensure better protection for Indian migrants.

Key Objectives of the Bill

- **Updating Emigration Policies:** By replacing the **Emigration Act of 1983** and introducing a **modern framework** for migration, the bill will **facilitate circular mobility**, allowing workers to move between India and foreign countries for employment.
 - ✓ **Example:** India-UK Young Professionals Scheme allows short-term employment opportunities for skilled professionals.
 - ✓ **India-UAE Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA)** facilitates smoother labor mobility.
 - ✓ The e-Migrate portal already assists in recruitment regulation; the bill will enhance its scope.
- **Enhancing Worker Protection & Welfare:** The bill aims to **protect Indian migrant workers** from exploitation, mistreatment, and fraudulent recruitment agents. **Indian embassies and consulates** will play a more active role in ensuring workers' welfare abroad.
- **Strengthening Migration Infrastructure:** It plans to **expand PoE offices** in migration-heavy states like **Punjab and Uttar Pradesh**. These offices will oversee recruitment processes and combat illegal recruitment. Assistance will be provided for employment disputes, mistreatment and contract violations.
 - ✓ Punjab's Doaba region sees large-scale migration to Canada & UK—new offices will improve governance.
- **Ensuring Safe Migration Practices:** The Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) will raise awareness about **safe migration**, valid job opportunities, and legal recruitment agencies. It will also assist in **rescue and repatriation** of workers in distress.
 - ✓ The introduction of **blockchain-based authentication** for work permits and contracts can reduce fraud. UAE's Wage Protection System (WPS) tracks salary payments to prevent wage theft.
- **Grievance Redressal and Repatriation Support:** A **stronger complaint resolution mechanism** will be put in place. Indian workers facing **mistreatment abroad** will receive **legal aid and repatriation assistance**. Families of affected emigrants will receive timely updates and support.
 - ✓ Pravasi Bharatiya Sahayata Kendra (PBSK) in Dubai offers emergency assistance.

Implications of Proposed Bill

1. Benefits for Indian Migrant Workers:

- ✓ **Easier and Safer Migration-** A clear legal process will reduce fraud and illegal migration.
- ✓ **Protection from Exploitation-** Strict rules will prevent cheating by recruitment agencies and employers.
- ✓ **Better Support Abroad-** Indian embassies will help workers with legal issues, job disputes, and safe returns if needed.

2. Economic Benefits for India:

- 💰 **More Money from Remittances-** Legal migration will increase **money sent back home**, boosting India's economy.
- 🌐 **Stronger Global Job Market-** Indian workers will have better chances in **Gulf countries, US, and Europe**.
- 🤝 **Better Relations with Other Countries-** A well-regulated system will improve **India's reputation** and encourage work agreements.



PM Modi's Visit to USA

Prime Minister Narendra Modi and US President Donald Trump held a bilateral meeting at the White House in the US. The two leaders discussed **defence cooperation, trade expansion, energy security, and technology collaboration**.

Key Outcomes of the Visit

- **Defence Cooperation and F-35 Fighter Jet Sale**
 - The US will sell **F-35 stealth fighter jets** to India, strengthening India's air combat capabilities.
 - A **new 10-year framework** for US-India **Major Defence Partnership** will be signed this year.
 - India will procure **six additional P8I maritime surveillance aircraft**.
 - **Joint defence manufacturing & technology sharing** agreements will enhance cooperation.
 - A review of **International Traffic in Arms Regulations (ITAR)** will streamline defence trade and technology exchange.
 - The US will work with India on **autonomous defence technologies** under the **Autonomous Systems Industry Alliance (ASIA)**.
- **Extradition of 26/11 Terror Accused Tahawwur Rana**
 - President Trump confirmed the **extradition of Tahawwur Rana**, wanted for his role in the **2008 Mumbai terror attacks**.
 - The US Supreme Court approved his extradition, reinforcing India-US cooperation in counterterrorism.
- **'Mission 500': Expanding India-US Trade**
 - The two nations set a target of **\$500 billion in annual bilateral trade by 2030**.
 - A new **Bilateral Trade Agreement (BTA)** will be signed by **fall 2025**.
 - Indian companies have invested **\$7.35 billion in the US**, creating **3,000+ high-quality jobs**.
 - The US imposed **reciprocal tariffs**, but both nations agreed to resolve trade barriers.
- **Energy Security and Nuclear Cooperation**
 - India will increase **oil and gas imports from the US**, reducing trade imbalances.
 - The US will support **India's membership in the International Energy Agency (IEA)**.
 - Both countries will fully implement the **US-India 123 Civil Nuclear Agreement**.
 - Plans include the construction of **US-designed nuclear reactors in India**.
 - **Collaboration on advanced modular nuclear reactors** will ensure long-term energy security.
- **People-to-People Connections and Education**
 - The US recognized the **300,000-strong Indian student community**, contributing **\$8 billion annually** to the US economy.
 - Plans include:
 - ✓ **Joint degree programs** between US and Indian universities.
 - ✓ **Twinning programs** for student exchange.
 - ✓ **Offshore campuses** of US institutions in India.
 - The two countries committed to streamlining **visa processes** for professionals and students.
- **Technology and Innovation Partnerships**
 - Launch of **US-India TRUST (Transforming the Relationship Utilizing Strategic Technology)** initiative to promote **'application'** of **critical mineral** technologies in areas like defense, AI, semiconductors, quantum, biotechnology, energy and space.
 - Expansion of **INDUS Innovation**, a program to foster tech collaboration in **AI, energy, and space exploration**.
 - India and the US will jointly develop **quantum computing and biotechnology projects**.

- A new **Strategic Mineral Recovery Initiative** will help India access critical minerals like **lithium, cobalt, and rare earth elements**.
- The **US National Science Foundation and Indian Anusandhan National Research Foundation (ANRF)** signed an MoU for research collaborations.

- **Indo-Pacific Strategy**

- A new **Indian Ocean Strategic Venture** will focus on economic connectivity and commerce.

India-US TRUST Initiative: Strengthening Critical Minerals Cooperation

- India and the United States launched the **Transforming Relationship Utilizing Strategic Technology (TRUST) initiative** to enhance bilateral cooperation in critical and strategic minerals, advanced materials, and pharmaceuticals.
- **Key Objectives**
 - ▶ **Reducing Barriers to Technology Transfer** – Streamlining regulations to facilitate innovation and trade.
 - ▶ **Addressing Export Controls** – Ensuring smoother commercial exchange of strategic resources.
 - ▶ **Enhancing High-Tech Commerce** – Strengthening collaboration in cutting-edge sectors.
- **Focus on Critical Minerals**
 - ▶ A **Recovery and Processing Initiative** will be launched for strategic minerals like **lithium and rare earth elements (REEs)** to boost supply chains.
 - ▶ This move aims to counter **China's dominance** in the global critical minerals market.
- **Alignment with Global Frameworks**
 - ▶ TRUST builds upon India's participation in the **US-led Minerals Security Finance Network** and its induction into the Minerals Security Partnership (MSP) **in 2023**.
 - ▶ Unlike multilateral frameworks, TRUST focuses on **bilateral engagement**, enabling **faster execution and deeper collaboration**.



Trump's Reciprocal Tariffs & its Impact On India

Recently, US President Donald Trump announced plans to impose "reciprocal tariffs" on all countries, with implementation from April 2nd. By targeting both allies and adversaries, Trump signals a shift away from established trade norms.

Trump's Shift to Reciprocal Tariffs

- Trump's "reciprocal tariffs" policy seeks to **eliminate** preferential treatment for any country.
- Under this system, the US will impose the same level of tariffs on imports as other nations impose on US exports.
- The exact calculation method for reciprocal tariffs is still being finalized, with the US trade department expected to determine the final rates for each country by April.
- However, it is clear that the US plans to consider various subsidies and financial assistance provided by other countries to their exporters.
 - This means that if a country like India offers subsidies to its industries, the US may factor those into its tariff calculations to create a **"level playing field."**

About Reciprocal tariffs

- Tariffs are taxes imposed by an importing country on foreign goods, making them more expensive for domestic consumers.
 - ▶ For example, if a US citizen orders a Banarasi saree from India, US import tariffs will increase its price, affecting affordability.
- Higher tariffs slow down global trade by raising costs for all parties involved.
- **The Move Towards Free Trade**
 - ▶ Since World War II, the global economy has shifted toward freer trade, as developed nations agreed that open markets benefit all.
 - ▶ Agreements like GATT and WTO ensured that developing nations received special and differential treatment to protect their industries from stronger economies.
 - ▶ This allowed countries like India to maintain higher tariffs to safeguard local farmers and manufacturers from competition with highly industrialized nations.

- If this approach is strictly implemented, developing nations like India, which heavily subsidize exports, will face **higher tariffs** on their goods in the US market.
 - For instance, between 2022 and 2024, India provided \$1 billion (₹8,700 crore) in subsidies under the Production Linked Incentive (PLI) scheme to boost exports.
 - Since the PLI scheme is essentially a subsidy, it could lead to **higher US tariffs on Indian goods**.

Reciprocal Tariffs - Impact on India

- Given India's historically high tariffs on US goods, it is expected to be among the nations most affected by Trump's decision.

Bilateral trade (April–Nov 2024): \$82.52 billion	India's exports to US: \$52.89 billion	India's imports: \$29.63 billion	Trade surplus in India's favour: \$23.26 billion
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- **Increased US goods Imports**
 - To balance trade, India may **import more US goods**, including **defence equipment, oil, and consumer products**. This could lead to a reduction in India's trade deficit with the US.
- **Rupee Depreciation**
 - Higher imports from the US would **increase demand for dollars**, leading to a **weaker Indian rupee** against the US dollar.
- **Impact on Domestic Consumption & GDP Growth**
 - The recent **Rs 1 lakh crore tax break** in India aimed at boosting consumption may lead wealthy Indians to **spend more on US goods**, rather than on Indian products.
 - This could **limit the expected boost to India's GDP**, as more money flows into the US economy instead.
- **Long-Term Benefits & Risks**
 - **Cheaper US goods** could benefit Indian consumers.
 - Stronger trade ties with the US could help India's **economic growth and global positioning**.
 - However, this might **undermine Atmanirbhar Bharat**, as more US imports reduce demand for Indian-made products.
- **Potential Sectors at Risk for India**
 - Although India is not an immediate target, US trade restrictions may focus on high-value Indian exports, including:
 - ✓ **Pharmaceuticals** (21.9% of India's consumer goods exports to the US).
 - ✓ **Gems & Jewellery** (9.6%).
 - ✓ **Fisheries (shrimps & prawns)** (6.6%).
 - Other sectors that may come under scrutiny include **automobile, chemical products, textiles, and wood pulp**.

India is exempted from Trump's tariff volleys for now

- Despite Trump's frequent criticism of India's tariffs, the country was not included in the first round of US trade restrictions.
- India, however, has proactively reduced tariffs on US exports, including motorcycles, satellite ground installations, and synthetic flavouring essences, as announced in the Union Budget 2025-26.
- **India's Position in the US Trade Deficit**
 - India is the **ninth-largest** contributor to the US trade deficit, accounting for **3.2%** of the total.
 - The largest contributors are: **China**: 30% (\$317 billion surplus); **Mexico**: 19% (\$200 billion surplus); **Canada**: 14.5% (\$153 billion surplus).
- **Opportunities for India in the US Market**
 - With US tariffs making Chinese goods more expensive, Indian exporters see an opportunity to gain market share.
 - Experts noted that trade diversions in Trump's first term already benefited India, and the new tariffs could further enhance its position.
 - A study by Oxford Economics found that India was the fourth-largest beneficiary of trade diversions between 2017 and 2023, following Trump's tariff measures.
 - The electronics sector saw significant gains, with India's share in US imports rising tenfold since 2017, driven largely by telecommunications equipment like iPhones.

Conclusion

Trump's aggressive trade policies have set off a high-stakes economic confrontation, with potential global repercussions. As tariffs take effect, inflation, economic disruption, and strained international relations are likely to dominate Trump's second term.



State Visit of Amir of Qatar to India

- The Amir of the State of Qatar, Sheikh Tamim Bin Hamad Al-Thani paid a State Visit to India. During this visit, he held bilateral talks with PM Modi.
- This was his second visit to India. He had earlier visited India on a State Visit in March 2015.

Key Outcomes of the Visit

- Qatar is a key partner for India due to its strategic location, trade potential, energy resources, and strong Indian diaspora.
- The two countries are working on strengthening economic and security ties.
- **India-Qatar Relations Elevated to Strategic Partnership**
 - Both the leaders announced the elevation of India-Qatar ties to a **Strategic Partnership**.
 - With this partnership, Qatar joins UAE, Saudi Arabia, Oman, and Kuwait in India's strategic engagements within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC).
- **Doubling Bilateral Trade to \$28 Billion**
 - Both countries set a target to **double bilateral trade from \$14 billion to \$28 billion by 2030**, emphasizing trade, investment, and energy cooperation.
- **Qatar to Invest \$10 Billion in India**
 - Qatar's Sovereign Wealth Fund committed \$10 billion in India, expanding investments in infrastructure, ports, shipbuilding, renewable energy, smart cities, food parks, start-ups, AI, robotics, and machine learning.
- **Exploring a Free Trade Agreement (FTA)**
 - India and Qatar discussed a potential FTA to further boost economic cooperation.

India – Qatar Bilateral Relationship

- India-Qatar ties thrive on historic bonds, high-level engagement, and a valued Indian diaspora contributing to Qatar's progress and cooperation.
- **Defence Cooperation**
 - India-Qatar defense ties include training slots, naval visits, DIMDEX participation, and a Defense Cooperation Agreement, extended in 2018, overseen by the Joint Defence Cooperation Committee (JDCC).
- **Commercial & Investment Relations**
 - India's bilateral trade with Qatar in 2022-23 was US\$ 18.77 billion.
 - ✓ India's export to Qatar during 2022-23 was US\$ 1.96 billion and India's import from Qatar was US\$ 16.81 billion.
 - India is among the top three largest export destinations for Qatar (China and Japan being the other two) and is also among the top three sources of Qatar's imports, along with China and US.
- **Energy Cooperation**
 - Qatar is the largest supplier of LNG to India (10.74 MMT for US\$ 8.32 billion in FY 2022-23), accounting for over 48% of India's global LNG imports.
 - Qatar is also India's largest supplier of LPG (5.33 MMT for US\$ 4.04 billion in FY 2022-23) accounting for 29% of India's total LPG imports.
- **Cultural Cooperation**
 - There are over 835,000 Indian nationals residing in Qatar as on December 2023.
 - ✓ Indian community comprises around 27% of total population of Qatar.
 - Qatar's labor reforms include abolishing the Kafala system, easing job changes, penalizing passport confiscation, introducing a minimum wage, and strengthening worker protections, benefiting laborers despite some remaining challenges.

Qatar is a key partner for India due to its strategic location, trade potential, energy resources, and strong Indian diaspora. The two countries are working on strengthening economic and security ties.

The current visit marked a reset in India-Qatar ties after tensions over the incarceration of eight Indian Navy veterans, whose sentences were commuted. Seven returned, while one remains in Qatar.

- Separately, India is also negotiating an FTA with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), which includes Qatar.
- **Trade and Investment**
 - Decision of Qatar Investment Authority (QIA) to open an office in India.
 - Operationalization of India's UPI at Qatar National Bank (QNB) Point of Sales in Qatar.
 - Expansion of Qatar National Bank presence in India by setting up an office in the GIFT City.
- **Key Agreements Signed**
 - Both nations signed two agreements and five MoUs covering economic cooperation, youth affairs, and a double taxation avoidance agreement.
- **Strengthening Energy Ties**
 - Qatar, a major LNG supplier to India, reaffirmed its commitment to energy cooperation.
 - An agreement between Qatar Energy and Petronet LNG Limited will ensure the supply of 7.5 million metric tonnes per annum of LNG to India for 20 years starting 2028.



PM Modi's Visit to France

PM Modi's three-day visit to France has resulted in several important agreements and declarations aimed at strengthening bilateral cooperation between the two nations in the coming years. This visit highlighted the strengthening Indo-French partnership across key areas, including technology, nuclear energy, sustainability, and cultural ties.

Key Outcomes of the Visit

- **India-France declaration on Artificial Intelligence (AI):** Both nations committed to enhancing collaboration in AI research and applications, emphasising ethical and responsible AI development.
- **Launch of India-France Year of Innovation 2026 logo:** The two countries unveiled the official logo for the upcoming initiative, signifying their commitment to fostering innovation and scientific collaboration.
- **Indo-French Center for Digital Sciences:** A Letter of Intent was signed between India's Department of Science and Technology (DST) and France's Institut National de Recherche en Informatique et en Automatique (INRIA) to establish a dedicated center for digital sciences, furthering R&D.
- **Support for Indian startups:** In a bid to boost entrepreneurship, an agreement was signed to host 10 Indian startups at the renowned French startup incubator, Station F.
- **Partnership on advanced modular and small modular reactors:** A Declaration of Intent was signed to enhance collaboration on next-generation nuclear reactor technologies.
- **Renewal of MoU on nuclear energy cooperation** – The agreement between India's Department of Atomic Energy (DAE) and France's Commissariat à l'Energie Atomique et aux Energies Alternatives (CEA) was renewed, strengthening the nuclear energy partnership.
 - A new implementing agreement was signed between DAE and CEA to foster collaboration between India's Global Center for Nuclear Energy Partnership (GCNEP) and France's Institute for Nuclear Science and Technology (INSTN).
- **Triangular development cooperation:** India and France issued a joint declaration of intent to collaborate on development projects in the Indo-Pacific region, focusing on sustainability and economic growth.

- **India's consulate in Marseille:** PM Modi and French officials jointly inaugurated India's new consulate in Marseille.
- **Environmental partnership:** A Declaration of Intent was signed between India's MoEFCC and France's Ministry for the Ecological Transition to enhance cooperation in biodiversity conservation, climate action, and sustainable development.

Indo-France Relationship in Brief

PM Modi and President Macron share a strong personal rapport, having met thrice in 2024, with Macron attending India's Republic Day celebrations as Chief Guest in 2024.

- **Enduring Diplomatic Relations**

- India-France ties are built on strategic autonomy and mutual respect. France has historically stood by India during critical moments:
 - ✓ In 1998, France refused to impose sanctions after India's nuclear tests.
 - ✓ In 1976, Chirac visited India as PM during the Emergency, when India faced global isolation.

- **Robust Defence Collaboration**

- India and France maintain a strong defence partnership, reviewed under the Annual Defence Dialogue and the High Committee on Defence Cooperation.
- Major ongoing projects include:
 - ✓ Rafale fighter jet acquisitions, with discussions on purchasing 26 Rafale-M jets for the Indian Navy.
 - ✓ P-75 Scorpene Project, with plans for three additional submarines.
 - ✓ Co-development of next-generation fighter jet engines.
 - ✓ DRDO office in the Indian Embassy (opened in 2023) to enhance technology cooperation.
 - ✓ France's commitment to "Make in India" and technology transfer sets it apart from competitors, with dedicated training programs for Indian personnel.

- **Expanding Beyond Defence**

- Bilateral cooperation now extends to renewable energy, trade, supply-chain partnerships, and people-to-people relations. Key developments include:
 - ✓ India-France Innovation Year 2026 logo unveiling.
 - ✓ New Indian Consulate in Marseille to boost economic and cultural ties.
 - ✓ Marseille as a strategic data hub for global communications via undersea cables.

- **Economic & Technology Partnerships**

- In 2023-2024, India and France's bilateral trade exceeded \$15 billion for the first time.
- India's exports to France increased to \$7.19 billion, while imports from France increased to \$7.97 billion.
- During the current visit, PM Modi and President Macron held an India-France CEOs' Forum, focusing on:
 - ✓ Make in India collaboration in renewable energy, defence, start-ups, and pharmaceuticals.
 - ✓ Triangular Development Cooperation Initiative for climate and SDG-focused projects in the Indo-Pacific.
 - ✓ ITER (*International Thermonuclear Experimental Reactor*) **fusion project** visit near Marseille, with India playing a key role in advancing fusion energy technology.

India-EU Partnership

- A high-level delegation of 22 out of 27 European Commissioners, led by European Commission (EC) President Ursula von der Leyen, visited India.
- The visit coincided with meetings of the **India-EU Trade and Technology Council (TTC)**, bilateral discussions between Indian ministers and EU Commissioners, and a leaders' summit, all aimed at fostering greater cooperation and investments.
 - During this visit, second ministerial meeting of the TTC (launched in February 2023) was held in New Delhi.

Key Outcomes of President von der Leyen's Visit to India

- **Strengthening India-EU Strategic Partnership**
 - Marking 20 years of the India-EU Strategic Partnership and 30 years of India-EC Cooperation Agreement.
- **Enhanced Cooperation in Key Sectors**
 - **Trade & Economy:** Fast-track **Free Trade Agreement (FTA)** negotiations, Investment Protection, and Geographical Indications agreements.
 - **Technology & Innovation:** Collaboration in semiconductors, AI, 6G, high-performance computing, and digital infrastructure.
 - **Green Transition:** Agreements on clean hydrogen, offshore wind, solar energy, and EV battery recycling.
 - **Connectivity & Transport:** Steps towards the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC).
- **Defence & Security Cooperation**
 - Joint India-EU defence & security partnership, maritime security, and counter-terrorism efforts.
 - India's interest in joining EU's Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) and a Security of Information Agreement (SoIA).
- **Next Steps & Future Commitments**
 - Expedite FTA conclusion by end of 2025.
 - Focused defence discussions and expanding defence industry cooperation.
 - Stock-taking review on IMEC and enhanced maritime security cooperation.
 - Strengthened disaster management collaboration.
 - Next India-EU Summit to adopt a new joint Strategic Agenda.

Why This Visit was Significant?

- India has historically managed global power shifts by **engaging with multiple partners**.
- **For example**, India's strategy (until now) for managing US policy volatility has involved maintaining its ties with Russia and engaging in Moscow-led coalitions such as BRICS.
- This means, India traditionally relied on **balancing** ties with Russia and the US.
- With Russia seeking direct negotiations with the U.S., **India must broaden its strategic partnerships** and recalibrate its strategy amid shifting alliances.
- **Europe emerges as a key player** in India's evolving foreign policy framework.

India – EU Relationship

- India established diplomatic ties with the **European Economic Community (EEC)**—the forerunner to the EU—in **1962**.
- Over the decades, relations have expanded significantly, with key milestones including:
 - **1993**: Signing of the Joint Political Statement.
 - **1994**: Establishment of the Cooperation Agreement.
 - **2000**: The first India-EU Summit in Lisbon.
 - **2004**: Upgrading relations to a Strategic Partnership.
 - **2020**: Adoption of the India-EU Strategic Partnership Roadmap to 2025.
- **Trade and Investments**
 - India and the EU have been negotiating a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) for over **15** years, with discussions resuming in **2021**.
 - The EU remains **India's largest trading partner in goods**, with trade increasing by **90% over the past decade**.
 - **Key trade statistics (FY 2023-24)**:
 - ✓ **Bilateral trade in goods: \$135 billion** (Indian exports: \$76 billion; imports: \$59 billion).
 - ✓ **Bilateral trade in services: \$53 billion** (Indian exports: \$30 billion; imports: \$23 billion).
 - ✓ **EU's FDI in India (2000-2024): \$117.4 billion** (16.6% of total FDI equity inflows).
 - ✓ **Indian FDI in the EU (2000-2024): \$40.04 billion**.
- **Technology and Digital Cooperation**
 - India and the EU are collaborating on **emerging technologies**, especially in response to **China's rapid advancements** in digital infrastructure.
 - The **India-EU TTC**, launched in **2022**, focuses on:

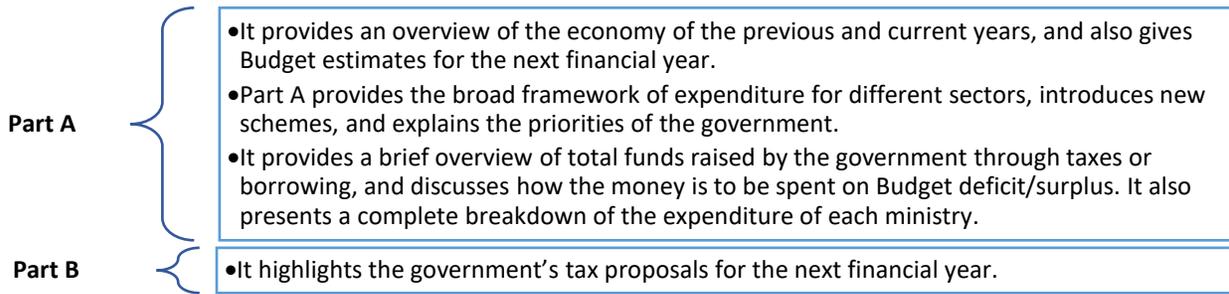
Digital and Strategic Technologies	Clean & Green Technologies	Trade, Investments, & Resilient Supply Chains
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 - Semiconductor Collaboration: A MoU on semiconductor R&D was signed in November 2023.
 - Supercomputing Initiative: India and the EU signed an Intent of Cooperation in High-Performance Computing (HPC) in 2022.
 - AI and Cybersecurity: The EU participated in the Global Partnership on AI Summit in New Delhi (2023).
- **Green Energy Cooperation**
 - Sustainability is a key pillar of India-EU collaboration, particularly in green hydrogen and renewable energy.
 - India-EU Green Hydrogen Cooperation Initiative: India was the exclusive partner at the European Hydrogen Week 2024 in Brussels.
 - The European Investment Bank (EIB) has committed €1 billion to fund Indian hydrogen projects.
 - Joint efforts are underway to establish a green hydrogen ecosystem in India by 2030.
 - These initiatives support India's **Net-Zero by 2070** goal and the EU's carbon neutrality targets.

- **Defence and Space Collaboration**

- India and the EU have strengthened defence and maritime security cooperation, particularly in the Indo-Pacific region under the **Enhanced Security in and with Asia & the Indo-Pacific (ESIWA+) program**.
- **First India-EU Joint Naval Exercise:** Held in October 2023 in the Gulf of Guinea.
- **Security & Counterterrorism:** Both sides collaborate on piracy control, natural disasters, and cyber threats.
- **Space Cooperation:**
 - ✓ ISRO launched EU's PROBA-3 mission in December 2024.
 - ✓ India-EU collaboration on Chandrayaan-3, Aditya-L1, and Gaganyaan missions.

BUDGET 2025-26

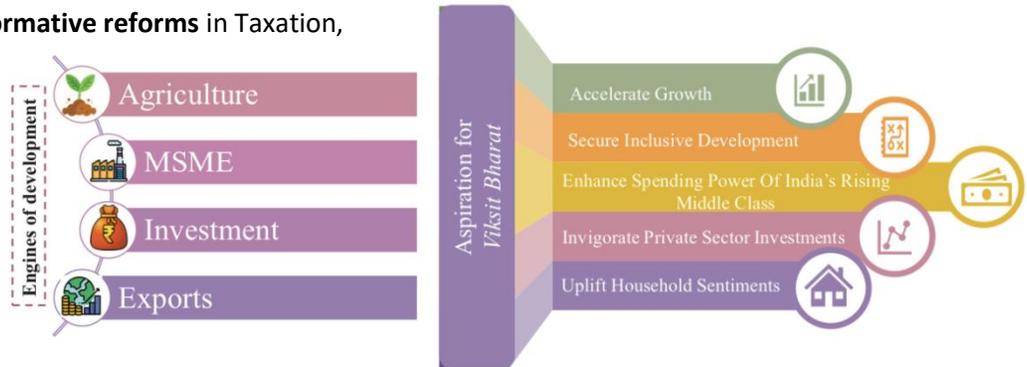
The Union Minister of Finance and Corporate Affairs presented the Union Budget 2025-26 in the Parliament. The Budget is divided into two parts: Part A and Part B



Part A

- Quoting Telugu poet and playwright Shri **Gurajada Appa Rao's** saying, 'A country is not just its soil; a country is its people.' – the Finance Minister presented the Union Budget 2025-26 with the **theme "Sabka Vikas"** stimulating balanced growth of all regions.
- In line with this theme, it outlined the broad **Principles of Viksit Bharat** to include the following:
 - Zero-poverty;
 - 100% good quality school education;
 - Access to high-quality, affordable, and comprehensive healthcare;
 - 100% skilled labour with meaningful employment;
 - 70% women in economic activities; and
 - Farmers making our country the 'food basket of the world'.

- It aims to initiate **transformative reforms** in Taxation, Power Sector, Urban Development, Mining, Financial Sector, and Regulatory Reforms to increase India's growth potential and global competitiveness.



Agriculture as the 1st Engine of Development

The Budget announced various measures to boost **agricultural growth and productivity, thereby benefitting the Annadata (farmer).**

Prime Minister Dhan-Dhaanya Krishi Yojana

- Motivated by the success of the Aspirational Districts Programme, the government will launch Prime Minister Dhan-Dhaanya Krishi Yojana in partnership with states.
- It will **cover 100 districts** with low productivity, moderate crop intensity & below-average credit parameters.

Aatmanirbharta in Pulses

- Government to launch a **6-year "Mission for Aatmanirbharta in Pulses"** with focus on **Tur, Urad and Masoor.**

- It will emphasize on development and commercial availability of climate resilient seeds; enhancing protein content; increasing productivity; improving post-harvest storage & management and assuring remunerative prices to the farmers.
- National Agricultural Cooperative Marketing Federation of India (NAFED) and National Cooperative Consumers Federation (NCCF) will procure these 3 pulses, as much as offered during the next 4 years from farmers who register with these agencies and enter into agreements.

Comprehensive Programme for Vegetables & Fruits

- To promote production, efficient supplies, processing, and remunerative prices for farmers will be launched in partnership with states.
- Appropriate institutional mechanisms for implementation and participation of farmer producer organizations (FPOs) and cooperatives will be set up.

Makhana Board in Bihar

- A Makhana Board to be established to improve production, processing, value addition, and marketing of makhana.
- The Board will support the people engaged in these activities to be organized into FPOs.
- It will **provide handholding and training support to makhana farmers** and also work to ensure they receive the benefits of all relevant government schemes.

National Mission on High Yielding Seeds

- This will be launched to strengthen the research ecosystem, targeted development and propagation of seeds with high yield, pest resistance and climate resilience.
- It will also have the provision for commercial availability of more than 100 seed varieties released since July 2024.

Mission for Cotton Productivity

- To address the challenges of stagnant cotton productivity, a **5-year mission** has been announced to facilitate significant improvements in productivity and sustainability of cotton farming, and promote extra-long staple cotton varieties.
- Science & Technology support will be provided to farmers under this Mission.

Building Rural Prosperity and Resilience

- A comprehensive **multi-sectoral programme** to be launched in partnership with states to address **under-employment in agriculture through skilling, investment, technology, and invigorating the rural economy.**
- Goal: To generate ample opportunities in rural areas so that **migration is an option, but not a necessity.**
- It will focus on **rural women, young farmers, rural youth, marginal and small farmers, and landless families.** The programme aims to:
 - Catalyze enterprise development, employment & financial independence for **rural women;**
 - Accelerate creation of new employment & businesses for **young farmers & rural youth;**
 - Nurture and modernize agriculture for productivity improvement and warehousing, especially for **marginal and small farmers;** and
 - Diversify opportunities for **landless families.**
- In Phase-1, **100 developing agri-districts** will be covered. Global and domestic best practices will be incorporated and appropriate technical and financial assistance will be sought from multilateral development banks.

Fisheries

- Highlighting that, **India ranks second-largest globally in fish production and aquaculture** with seafood exports of Rs. 60,000 crore, the Budget proposed the highest ever total annual **budgetary support of Rs. 2,703.6 crores** for the fisheries sector.
- India has an **Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) of 20 lakh sq. km** and a long **coastline of 8,118 km** with estimated **marine potential of 53 lakh tonnes (2018)** and **dependence of 50 lakh people** for their livelihoods on the marine fisheries sector.
- Thus, the government will bring a **framework for sustainable harnessing of fisheries from Indian EEZ and High Seas**, with a special focus on the Andaman & Nicobar and Lakshadweep Islands.
 - ✓ In **Andaman & Nicobar Islands** it will harness its **EEZ area of 6.6 lakh sq. km (1/3rd of Indian EEZ)** with marine fisheries potential of 1.48 lakh tonnes including potential of 60,000 tons for tuna fisheries. For this, development of **Tuna Cluster** has been notified.
 - ✓ In **Lakshadweep Islands** it will harness its EEZ area of 4 lakh sq. km (17% of Indian EEZ) and lagoon area of 4200 sq mt with potential of 1 lakh tonnes including potential of 4,200 tonnes for tuna fisheries. For this, development of **Seaweed Cluster** has been notified.
- **Basic Custom Duty (BCD) on frozen fish paste (surimi)** has been **reduced from 30% to 5%**, to enhance Indias competitiveness in global seafood market.
- Further, to strengthen the Indian shrimp farming industry globally, **import duty reduction from 15% to 5% on fish hydrolysate** (an important input for manufacturing of aqua-feed).
- This is expected to lower production costs and increase revenue and profit margins for farmers, thereby improving and increasing exports.

- By boosting domestic productivity, it will stabilise raw material availability, reduce import dependence and enhance the global competitiveness of India's textile sector, where 80% of capacity is driven by MSMEs.
- Aligned with the **5F principle (farmer, fibre, factory, fashion, and foreign)** it will increase income of the farmers and provide a steady supply of quality cotton.

Enhanced Credit through Kisan Credit Card (KCC)

The loan limit under the **Modified Interest Subvention Scheme** has been **enhanced from Rs 3 lakh to Rs 5 lakh** for fishers, farmers, processors and other fisheries' stakeholder for loans taken through the KCC.

Urea Plant in Assam

- A Urea plant with annual capacity of 12.7 lakh metric tons to be set up at **Namrup, Assam**.
- It will further increase **urea supply** and help to **achieve independence in urea production**, along with the recently reopened three dormant urea plants in the Eastern region.

MSMEs as the 2nd Engine of Development

The Budget defines MSMEs as one of the powerful engines for the story of development. The proposed development measures supports MSMEs to accelerate growth and secure inclusive development.

Revision in Classification Criteria for MSMEs

- Currently, **over 1 crore registered MSMEs, employing 7.5 crore people, generate 36% of the country's manufacturing and 45% of exports.**
- To help MSMEs achieve higher efficiencies of scale, technological upgradation and better access to capital, the **investment and turnover limits** for classification of all MSMEs will be **enhanced to 2.5 and 2 times respectively.**



₹ in Crore	Investment		Turnover	
	Current	Revised	Current	Revised
Micro Enterprises	1	2.5	5	10
Small Enterprises	10	25	50	100
Medium Enterprises	50	125	250	500

₹ in Crore	Credit guarantee cover	
	Current	Revised
MSEs	5	10
Startups	10	20
Exporter MSMEs	For Term Loans Up To ' 20 Crore	

Enhancement of Credit Availability with Guarantee Cover

To improve access to credit, the credit guarantee cover will be enhanced:

- For **Micro and Small Enterprises**, from Rs 5 crore to Rs 10 crore, leading to additional credit of Rs 1.5 lakh crore in the next 5 years.
- For **Startups**, from Rs 10 crore to Rs 20 crore, with the guarantee fee being moderated to 1% for loans in 27 focus sectors important for Atmanirbhar Bharat; and
- For **well-run exporter MSMEs**, for term loans up to Rs 20 crore.

Credit Cards for Micro Enterprises

- Customized Credit Cards with **Rs 5 lakh limit** for micro enterprises **registered on Udyam portal** will be introduced. In the first year, **10 lakh such cards** will be issued

Fund of Funds for Startups

- The Alternate Investment Funds (AIFs) for startups have received commitments of more than Rs 91,000 crore. These are supported by the Fund of Funds set up with a government contribution of Rs 10,000 crore.
- Now, a **new Fund of Funds**, with expanded scope and a fresh contribution of another **Rs 10,000 crore** will be set up.

Scheme for First-time Entrepreneurs

- A new scheme for 5 lakh women, SCs and STs **first-time entrepreneurs** will be launched. It will provide **term loans up to Rs 2 crore** during the next 5 years.

- Online capacity building for entrepreneurship and managerial skills will also be organized.

Focus Product Scheme for Footwear & Leather Sectors

- To enhance the productivity, quality and competitiveness of India's footwear and leather sector, a focus product scheme will be launched.
- It will support design capacity, component manufacturing, and machinery required for production of non-leather quality footwear, besides the support for leather footwear and products.
- It is expected to facilitate employment for 22 lakh persons, generate turnover of Rs 4 lakh crore and exports of over Rs 1.1 lakh crore.

Measures for Toy Sector

- The Budget proposed a **National Action Plan for Toys** to make India a global hub for toys.
- It will focus on development of clusters, skills, and a manufacturing ecosystem that will create high-quality, unique, innovative, and sustainable toys that will represent the 'Made in India' brand.

Support for Food Processing

- A **National Institute of Food Technology, Entrepreneurship and Management** will be set up in Bihar.
- The institute will provide a boost to food processing activities in the entire Eastern region.

National Manufacturing Mission

- A National Manufacturing Mission to cover small, medium and large industries for furthering Make in India has been announced.
- It will provide policy support, execution roadmaps, governance and monitoring framework for central ministries and states.
- It will lay **emphasis on five focal areas**: ease and cost of doing business; future ready workforce for in-demand jobs; a vibrant and dynamic MSME sector; availability of technology; and quality products.
- Mission will also support **Clean Tech manufacturing** & aims to improve domestic value addition.
- It will also build the ecosystem for solar PV cells, EV batteries, motors and controllers, electrolyzers, wind turbines, very high voltage transmission equipment and grid scale batteries.

Investment as the 3rd Engine of Development

Investment is the 3rd engine of development encompassing:

Investing in people > **Investing in economy** > **Investing in innovation**

1.) Investing in People

Atal Tinkering Labs

- **50,000 Atal Tinkering Labs** will be set up in government schools in next 5 years to cultivate the spirit of curiosity and innovation, and cultivate a scientific temper among young minds.

Broadband Connectivity

- Broadband connectivity to be provided to all government secondary schools and primary health centres in rural areas under the Bharatnet project.

Bharatiya Bhasha Pustak Scheme

- With the aim to help students understand their subjects better, it has been proposed to implement a **Bharatiya Bhasha Pustak Scheme** to provide digital-form Indian language books for school and higher education.

National Centres of Excellence for Skilling

- Five National Centres of Excellence for skilling to be set up with global expertise and partnerships to equip youth with the skills required for “Make for India, Make for the World” manufacturing.

Centre of Excellence in AI

- A Centre of Excellence in AI for education to be set up with a total outlay of **Rs 500 crore**.

Expansion of Capacity in IITs

- Additional infrastructure to be created in the 5 IITs started after 2014 to **facilitate education for 6,500 more students**.

Expansion of medical education

- 10,000 additional seats to be added in medical colleges and hospitals next year, with the goal of adding **75000 seats in the next 5 years**.

Saksham Anganwadi and Poshan 2.0

- To **enhance the cost norms for the nutritional support** under Saksham Anganwadi and Poshan 2.0 programme.
- The programme provides nutritional support to more than 8 crore children, 1 crore pregnant women and lactating mothers all over the country, and about 20 lakh adolescent girls in aspirational districts and the north-east region.

Day Care Cancer Centres in all District Hospitals

- The government will set up 200 Day Care Cancer Centres **in all district hospitals in the next 3 years**.

Strengthening urban livelihoods

- A scheme for the **socio-economic upliftment of urban workers** will be launched to help them improve their incomes, have sustainable livelihoods and a better quality of life.

Revamped PM SVANidhi scheme

- PM SVANidhi scheme will be revamped with enhanced loans from banks, UPI linked credit cards with Rs 30,000 limit, and capacity building support.
- It has helped over **68 lakh street vendors**, giving them relief from high-interest informal sector loans. As many as **95.84 lakh loans worth Rs 13,741 crore** have been disbursed so far.

Social Security for Gig workers

- **Gig workers** of online platforms provide great dynamism to the new-age services economy. Recognising their contribution, the government will arrange for their **identity cards** and **registration on the e-Shram portal**.
- They will be provided **healthcare under PM Jan Arogya Yojana**. This measure is likely to **assist nearly 1 crore gig-workers**.

II.) Investing in the Economy

Public Private Partnership (PPP) in Infrastructure

- Each infrastructure-related ministry will come up with a **3-year pipeline of projects** that can be implemented in PPP mode.
- States will also be encouraged to initiate and seek support from the **India Infrastructure Project Development Fund (IIPDF)** scheme to prepare PPP proposals.

Support to States for Infrastructure

- An outlay of **Rs 1.5 lakh crore** has been proposed for the **50-year interest free loans** to states for capital expenditure and incentives for reforms.

Asset Monetization Plan 2025-30

- Building on the success of the first Asset Monetisation Plan announced in 2021, the Budget proposed to launch the **Second Plan for 2025-30 to reinvest a capital of Rs 10 lakh crore** in new projects.

Jal Jeevan Mission (JJM)

- The total budget outlay for JJM has been **enhanced to Rs 67,000 crore** and the Mission has been **extended till 2028**.
- **15 crore households** representing **80% of India's rural population** have benefitted by JJM since 2019.
- Access to potable tap water connections is provided under the Mission and in the next three years the **target is to achieve 100% coverage**.
- JJM's focus will be on the quality of infrastructure and operations & maintenance of rural piped water supply schemes through **Jan Bhagidhari**.

Urban Challenge Fund

- The government will set up an **Urban Challenge Fund of Rs 1 lakh crore** to implement the proposals for **Cities as Growth Hubs, Creative Redevelopment of Cities and Water and Sanitation**. An allocation of **Rs 10,000 crore** has been proposed for 2025-26.
- Further, the fund will finance up to 25% of the cost of bankable projects with a stipulation that at least 50% of the cost is funded from bonds, bank loans, and PPPs.

Nuclear Energy Mission for Viksit Bharat

- A **Nuclear Energy Mission** for research & development of Small Modular Reactors (SMR) with an outlay of **Rs 20,000 crore** will be set up. At least **5 indigenously developed SMRs** will be operationalized by 2033.
- Development of at least 100 GW of nuclear energy by 2047 is essential for the country's energy transition efforts.
- For an active partnership with the private sector towards this goal, **amendments to the Atomic Energy Act and the Civil Liability for Nuclear Damage Act** will be taken up.

Shipbuilding

- The Budget gave a boost to India's domestic shipbuilding industry by announcing **new mega shipbuilding clusters** in the country.
- It also proposes a **10-year rent holiday for the land**, if not provided at a nominal rate. Investment is also designed to support creation of trunk infra like roads, utilities, sewage treatment among others.
- The proposed allocation of **Rs 6,100 crore** aims to support India's existing shipyards in **upgrading, modernising, and automating** their operations, enhancing efficiency, utilisation, and overall output.

Shipbuilding Financial Assistance Policy (SBFAP) 2.0

- The Budget has extended the **SBFAP 2.0**, aimed at providing **direct financial subsidies** to Indian shipyards.
- The initiative seeks to offset operational cost disadvantages.
- Another innovative scheme announced is the **Shipbreaking Credit note**. It will **incentivise ship scrapping by issuing a credit note of 40% of the scrap value** which can be reimbursed to buy new Made in India ships.

Tonnage tax Scheme

- In a boost to the inland waterways in the country, the **Tonnage Tax Scheme** is now **extended to Inland vessels**.
- It will encourage more cargo movement as the vessels will avail tax benefit from its capacity, instead of profit.
- This will further incentivise shipping companies to invest in inland waterways vessels as it becomes financially more viable.

Shipbuilding Capability Development Centres (SCDC)

- With an outlay of **Rs 1,200 crore**, SCDC is aimed at developing a platform for development of innovative ship design and engineering solutions as well as testing & evaluation of shipping projects.
- An additional provision of Rs 1040 crore have been announced for providing capital and operational assistance to the existing and upcoming shipbuilding design and training centres from the private sector.
- An allocation of **Rs 610 crore** is proposed for a support scheme for R&D and innovation in ship technology.
- It will facilitate development of new and improved shipbuilding technologies.

Ship classification

- Large ships above a specified size to be included in the infrastructure harmonized master list (HML).
- This will make them eligible for benefits such as easier access to long-term financing and tax incentives. It will also attract private investment and enhance fleet modernisation.

Maritime Development Fund

- A Maritime Development Fund (MDF) with a corpus of **Rs 25,000 crore** to be set up, with up to **49% contribution by the government**, and the balance from Major port authorities, Central PSEs, financial Institutions as well as private sector.
- This fund will directly benefit in **financing for ship acquisition**. It aims at boosting Indian flagged ships share in the global cargo volume upto 20% by 2047.
- Further, indigenous fleet will reduce dependability of foreign ships, improve Balance of Payment and secure strategic interests of the country.
- **By 2030**, MDF aims to generate upto **Rs 1.5 lakh crore investment** in the shipping sector.

UDAN - Regional Connectivity Scheme

- So far, UDAN has **operationalized 619 routes and connected 88 airports** across the country.
- A revamped UDAN scheme will be launched to **enhance regional connectivity to 120 new destinations**.
- Having already enabled 1.5 crore passengers to experience affordable air travel, the target is to extend this benefit to **4 crore passengers more over the next 10 years**.
- Additionally, the scheme will focus on supporting helipads and smaller airports in remote, hilly, and aspirational districts, including the North Eastern region.

Greenfield Airport in Bihar

- To cater to rising passenger demand in the eastern region, Greenfield airports will be facilitated in Bihar to meet the future needs of the State.
- These will be in addition to the expansion of the capacity of Patna airport and a brownfield airport at Bihta.

Western Koshi Canal Project

- **Financial support** will be provided for the **Western Koshi Canal ERM Project benefitting** a large number of **farmers cultivating over 50,000 hectares** of land in the Mithilanchal region of Bihar.

Mining Sector Reforms

- The Budget proposed mining sector reforms, including those for minor minerals, through sharing of best practices and institution of a **State Mining Index (SMI)**.
 - SMI is a transformative step that will enhance professionalization of State mining departments, encouraging them to innovate and adopt best practices in mineral exploration, auctioning, and sustainable mining.
- Further, a **Tailings Policy** for recovery of critical minerals from tailings has been announced.
 - Tailing refers to the left-over waste material after the valuable minerals are extracted from the ore during processing.
 - It is essentially the leftover crushed rock and water mixture that contains the uneconomic parts of the ore, often including trace amounts of the desired mineral as well as chemicals used in the extraction process.
- Good tailings management will increase domestic availability of critical minerals and also promote the domestic processing industry.
- Building on the series of tax relief measures for the mining sector of last year's Budget, particularly concerning critical minerals, this year's budget also introduces a range of progressive tax proposals.

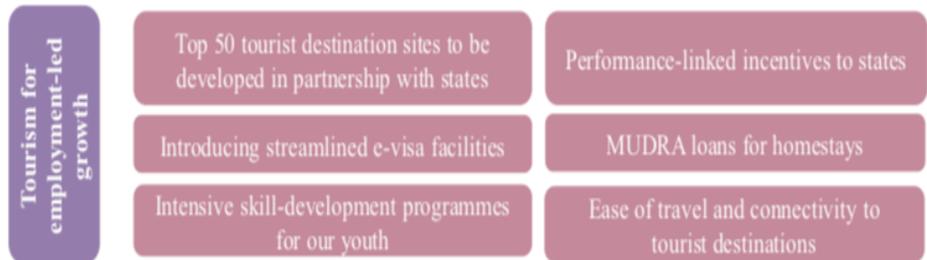
Special Window for Affordable and Mid-Income Housing (SWAMIH) Fund 2

- Under SWAMIH 50,000 dwelling units in stressed housing projects have been completed.

- Another 40,000 units will be completed in 2025, further helping middle-class families who were paying EMIs on loans taken for apartments, while also paying rent for their current dwellings.
- Building on this success, SWAMIH Fund 2 will be established as a **blended finance facility** with contribution from the government, banks and private investors. This fund of **Rs 15,000 crore** will aim for expeditious completion of **another 1 lakh units**.

Tourism for Employment-led Growth

- The Budget has identified tourism as a sector for **employment-led growth**.
- **Top 50 tourist destination sites** in the country will be developed in partnership with states through a challenge mode.



- The land for building key infrastructure including hotels will have to be provided by states. Hotels at these destinations will be included in the Harmonized Master List (HML) of infrastructure.
- Emphasis on places of spiritual and religious significance will be given and there will be a special focus on destinations related to the life and times of Lord Buddha.
- Medical tourism and Heal in India will be promoted in partnership with the private sector along with capacity building and easier visa norms.

III.) Investing in Innovation

Research, Development and Innovation

- Rs 20,000 crore to be allocated to implement private sector driven Research, Development and Innovation initiative announced in the July 2024 Budget.

Deep Tech Fund of Funds

- A Deep Tech Fund of Funds to be explored to catalyze the next generation startups, with the aim to bolster strategic autonomy in critical technological domains.

PM Research Fellowship

- In the next five years, under this scheme, provision of **10,000 fellowships for technological research in IITs and IISc** with enhanced financial support has been proposed

Gene Bank for Crops Germplasm

- India's first gene bank was set up in 1996 by the **Indian Council of Agricultural Research-National Bureau of Plant Genetic Resources (ICAR-NBPGR)** in New Delhi.
- Almost three decades later, the establishment of a **second Gene Bank with 10 lakh germplasm lines** was announced in the Budget.
- This bank will be set up for future food and nutritional security and provide conservation support to both public and private sectors for genetic resources.

National Geospatial Mission

- A National Geospatial Mission with an outlay of Rs 100 crore will be launched to develop foundational geospatial infrastructure and data.
- Using PM Gati Shakti, this Mission will facilitate modernization of land records, urban planning, and design of infrastructure projects.

- By utilising cutting-edge technologies like AI and quantum computing, the mission is expected to drive advancements in areas such as agriculture, transportation, and climate monitoring.
- By creating a robust geospatial database, the government aims to streamline processes involved in land reforms, making them more efficient and transparent.
- It will be a critical component in achieving the government's broader goals of improving efficiency and accountability in public services.

Gyan Bharatam Mission

- For survey, documentation and conservation of India's manuscript heritage with academic institutions, museums, libraries and private collectors covering more than 1 crore manuscripts. It will help in **digitising and centralising** India's traditional knowledge.

Exports as the 4th Engine of Development

Placing exports as the fourth engine of development, the Budget aims to initiate transformative reforms in domestic manufacturing and integrating India's economy with global supply chains.

Export Promotion Mission

- Allocation of **Rs 2,250 crore** to enhance India's export competitiveness.
- The Mission, with sectoral and ministerial targets, will be **driven jointly by the Ministries of Commerce, MSMEs, and Finance**.
- It will facilitate easy access to export credit, cross-border factoring support, and assistance for MSMEs in tackling non-tariff measures in overseas markets.

BharatTradeNet

- To streamline international trade processes, a digital public infrastructure, BharatTradeNet (BTN) has been proposed to be set-up as a **unified platform for trade documentation and financing solutions**.
- BTN will be developed in line with global best practices, making it easier for Indian businesses to participate in international trade by reducing paperwork, improving transparency, and facilitating access to financial services.

Integrating India's Economy with Global Supply Chains

- Support will be provided to develop domestic manufacturing capacities for integrating Indian economy with global supply chains. In this direction, the sectors will be identified based on objective criteria.
- It is also proposed that facilitation groups with participation of senior officers and industry representatives be formed for select products and supply chains.

Export infrastructure

- The government will also modernise infrastructure to support exports, particularly in **air cargo and warehousing**.
- This includes upgrading storage & logistics facilities for high-value and perishable **horticultural produce**
- Additionally, customs screening and clearance procedures will be streamlined.

Industry 4.0 and youth skilling

- Recognising the rise of Industry 4.0, which refers to the fourth industrial revolution driven by automation, AI, and digitalisation, the Budget emphasised that India's skilled workforce is well-positioned to benefit from these advancements.
- The government will extend support to the domestic electronics equipment industry to create more employment and training opportunities for youth.

National Framework for GCC

- A national framework will be formulated as guidance to states for promoting Global Capability Centres (GCC) in emerging tier 2 cities.
- It will focus on talent skilling, infrastructure, building bye-law reforms, and mechanisms for collaboration with industry.

Reforms as the Fuel

Budget defined **Reforms as the fuel to the engine** & will continue these efforts being undertaken.

- Several reforms for convenience of tax payers, such as faceless assessment, tax payers charter, faster returns, almost 99% returns being on self-assessment, and Vivad se Vishwas scheme have been implemented over the past few years.

Financial Sector Reforms & Development

FDI in Insurance Sector

- FDI limit for the insurance sector will be raised **from 74 to 100%**. This enhanced limit will be available for those companies which invest the entire premium in India.
- The current conditionalities associated with foreign investment will be reviewed and simplified.

Pension Sector

- A forum for regulatory coordination and development of pension products will be set up.
- The forum is expected to play a coordinating role to develop common minimum supervisory reporting formats, raise consumer protection standards and undertake comprehensive market development projects.
- It is also expected to create awareness for securing the future of people by investing in pension assets.

Grameen Credit Score

- Public Sector Banks will develop 'Grameen Credit Score' framework to serve the credit needs of the members of Self Help Groups (SHGs) and people in rural areas.
- It is expected to facilitate finance in rural areas and enforce repayment discipline.

KYC Simplification

- To implement the earlier announcement on simplifying the KYC process, the **revamped Central KYC Registry will be rolled out in 2025**. A streamlined system for periodic updating will also be implemented.

Merger of Companies

- The requirements and procedures for speedy approval of company mergers will be rationalized.
- The scope for fast-track mergers will also be widened and the process will be made simpler.

Bilateral Investment Treaties (BIT)

- To encourage sustained foreign investment and in the spirit of 'first develop India', the current model BIT will be revamped and made more investor-friendly.

Credit Enhancement Facility by NaBFID

- National Bank for Financing Infrastructure and Development (NaBFID) will set up a **partial credit enhancement facility** for **corporate bonds** in the **infrastructure sector**.
 - › **Established in 2021**, NaBFID is a specialised development finance institution.
 - › It supports the country's infrastructure sector by bridging the financing gap in the infrastructure sector, enabling credit flow through innovative instruments such as longer tenor loans, blended finance, partial credit enhancement, and facilitates crowding-in of infrastructure finance.
- This will bring a fresh pool of finance from pension & insurance funds looking for long-term investment avenues.
- Insurance and pension regulatory norms require that investment papers must have at least an "AA" rating to be eligible for investment from pension and insurance funds. Partial credit enhancement would scale up the rating of papers issued by infrastructure services firms, raising them from "A" to "AA".

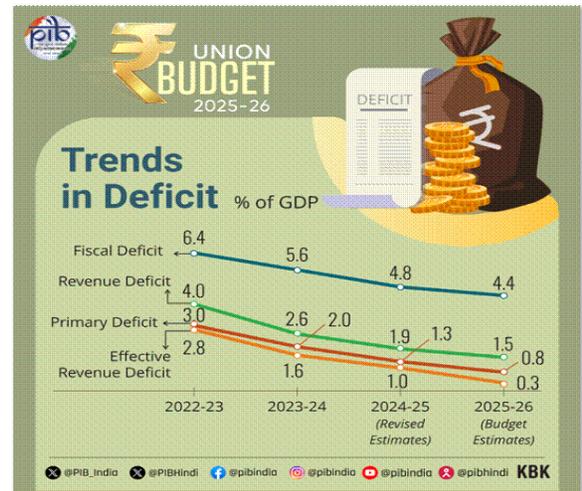
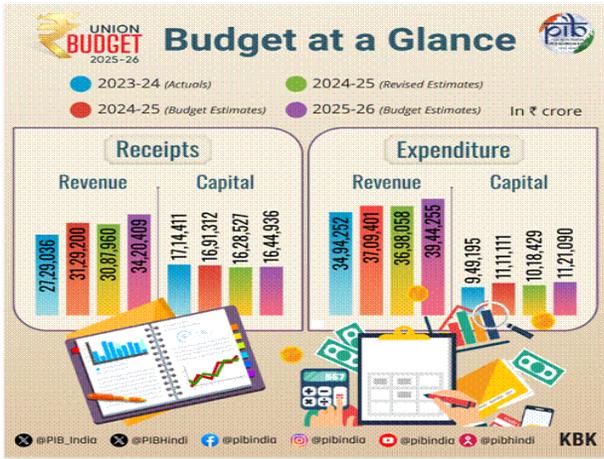
Regulatory Reforms

- Regulations must keep up with technological innovations and global policy developments.
- A **light-touch regulatory framework based on principles & trust** will boost productivity and employment. Regulations will be updated that were made under old laws.
- To develop this modern, flexible, people-friendly, and trust-based regulatory framework appropriate for the twenty-first century, the Budget proposed **four specific measures**.

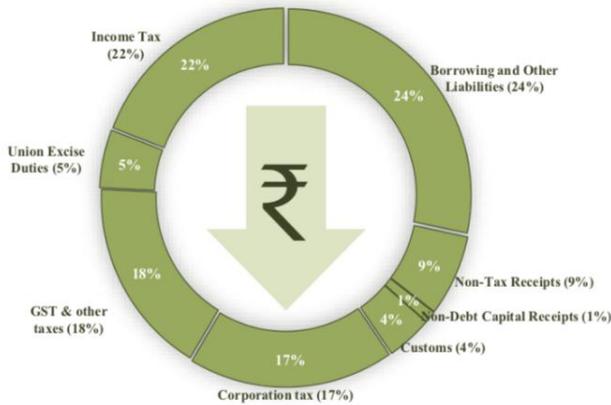
High Level Committee for Regulatory Reforms	Investment Friendliness Index of States	FSDC Mechanism	Jan Vishwas Bill 2.0
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A High-Level Committee for Regulatory Reforms will be set up for a review of all non-financial sector regulations, certifications, licenses, and permissions. The committee will be expected to make recommendations within a year. • Objective is to strengthen trust-based economic governance and take transformational measures to enhance ease of doing business, especially in matters of inspections and compliances. States will be encouraged to be a part of it. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An Investment Friendliness Index of States will be launched in 2025 to strengthen the spirit of competitive cooperative federalism by encouraging states to adopt best practices to attract investments and boost growth. • It is expected that the ranking will drive states to learn from top performers and implement necessary reforms. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Under the Financial Stability and Development Council, a mechanism will be set up to evaluate impact of the current financial regulations and subsidiary instructions. • It will also formulate a framework to enhance their responsiveness and development of the financial sector. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jan Vishwas Bill 2.0 would be introduced to decriminalize more than 100 provisions in various laws. • In the Jan Vishwas Act 2023, more than 180 legal provisions have already been decriminalized.

Budget Estimates 2025-26

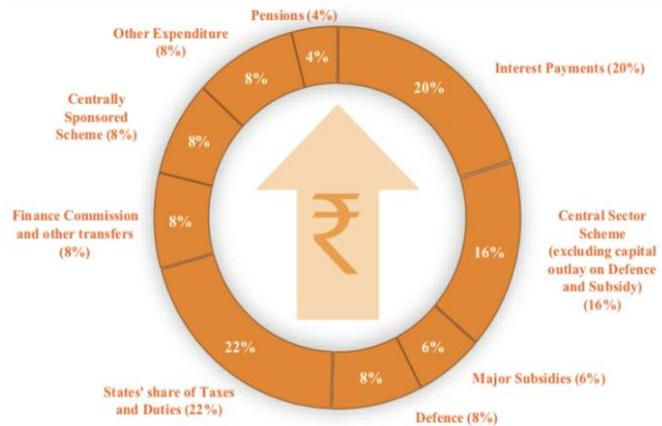
- The total receipts other than borrowings and the total expenditure are estimated at Rs 34.96 lakh crore and Rs 50.65 lakh crore respectively.
- The net tax receipts are estimated at Rs 28.37 lakh crore.
- **Fiscal Deficit:** The Revised Estimate 2024-25 is 4.8% of GDP, while the Budget Estimates 2025-26 is estimated to be **4.4% of GDP**.
- The gross market borrowings are estimated at Rs 14.82 lakh crore.
- Capital Expenditure of Rs 11.21 lakh crore (3.1% of GDP) has been earmarked in FY2025-26.



Rupee Comes From

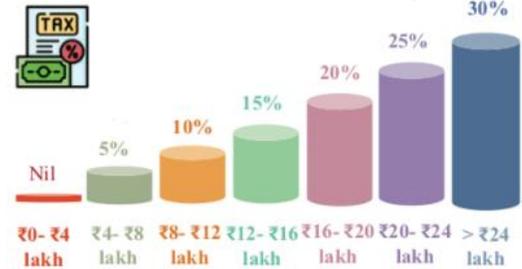


Rupee Goes To



DIRECT TAX

- The direct tax proposals include personal income tax reform with special focus on middle class.
- It also covers TDS/TCS rationalization, encouragement to voluntary compliances along with reduction of compliance burden, ease of doing business and incentivizing employment and investment.
- Towards the new tax structure and other direct tax proposals, government is set to lose revenue of about Rs 1 lakh crore.



Personal Income Tax Reforms with Special Focus on Middle Class

- **No income tax payable up to total income of Rs 12 lakh/annum** other than special rate income such as Capital Gains under the new regime.
- This limit will be Rs 12.75 lakh/annum for salaried tax payers, due to standard deduction of Rs 75,000.

Encouraging Voluntary Compliance

- Encouraging voluntary compliance, Budget extends time-limit to file updated returns for any assessment year, from the current limit of two years, to four years.

- It is further proposed to bring amendment in the Act to provide information wrt crypto-asset transaction

Reducing Compliance Burden

- Reduction of compliance burden for small charitable trusts/institutions by increasing their period of registration from 5 years to 10 years.
- The benefit of claiming the annual value of self-occupied properties as nil will be extended for two such self-occupied properties without any condition.
- The Budget also proposes that no tax will be collected at source on sale of specified goods of value of more than Rs 50 lakhs.

Ease of Doing Business

- Scheme proposed for determining arm's length price of international transaction for a block period of three years, to streamline the process of transfer pricing and to provide an alternative to yearly examination, in line with global best practices.
- With a view to reduce litigation and provide certainty in international taxation, the scope of safe harbour rules is being expanded.
- Parity has been proposed in rates of long term capital gain tax on transfer of securities by non-resident.
- Further, a proposal has been made to exempt withdrawals made from National Savings Scheme accounts by individuals on or after the 29th August, 2024, and similar treatment to NPS Vatsalya accounts, subject to overall limits.

Rationalization of Tax Deducted at Source (TDS)/Tax Collected at Source (TCS)

- Rationalization of TDS and TCS by reducing number of rates and thresholds above which deductions take place.
- The limit for tax deduction on interest for senior citizens doubled from the present Rs 50,000 to Rs 1 lakh.
- Further, TDS threshold on rent has been increased to Rs 6 lakh from Rs 2.4 lakh/annum
- This will reduce the number of transactions liable to TDS, thus benefitting small tax payers receiving small payments.
- The provisions of the higher TDS deduction will apply only in non-PAN cases.
- Further, the threshold to collect TCS on remittances under RBI's Liberalized Remittance Scheme (LRS) is proposed to be increased from Rs 7 lakh to Rs 10 lakh.
- Also, the **delay for payment of TCS** up to the due date of filing statement will be **decriminalized**.

Employment and Investment

- ▣ **Tax certainty for Electronics Manufacturing Schemes:** Proposal to provide a presumptive taxation regime for non-residents who provide services to a resident company that is establishing or operating an electronics manufacturing facility.
 - Further, introduction of a safe harbour for tax certainty for non-residents who store components for supply to specified electronics manufacturing units.
- ▣ **Tonnage Tax Scheme for Inland Vessels:** The benefits of existing tonnage tax scheme will be extended to inland vessels registered under the Indian Vessels Act, 2021, to promote inland water transport in the country.
- ▣ **Extension for incorporation of Start-Ups:** To support the Indian start-up eco-system, proposal to extend the period of incorporation by 5 years, to allow the benefit available to start-ups that are incorporated before 01.04.2030.
- ▣ **International Financial Services Centre (IFSC):** In order to attract and promote additional activities in the IFSC, the Budget proposed specific benefits to ship-leasing units, insurance offices and treasury centers of global companies that are set up in IFSC. Further, to claim benefits, the cut-off date for commencement in IFSC has also been extended by five years to 31.03.2030.
- ▣ **Alternate Investment Funds (AIFs):** Proposal to provide certainty of taxation to Category I and category II AIFs, which are undertaking investments in infrastructure and other such sectors, on the gains from securities.
- ▣ **Extension of investment date for Sovereign and Pension Funds:** Extension of the date of making investments in Sovereign Wealth Funds and Pension Funds by five more years, to 31st March, 2030, to promote funding from them to the infrastructure sector.

INDIRECT TAX

- The Union Budget focuses its customs proposals on rationalizing tariff structure and addressing duty inversion.
- Proposals will also support domestic manufacturing and value addition while promoting exports, facilitating trade and providing relief to common people.

Rationalisation of Customs Tariff Structure for Industrial Goods

- The Budget proposes to **remove seven customs tariff rates for industrial goods** over and above the seven tariff rates removed in Budget 2023-24. After this, there will be **only eight remaining tariff rates** including 'zero' rate.
- It also proposed to **levy not more than one cess or surcharge**. This will exempt Social Welfare Surcharge on 82 tariff lines that are subject to a cess.

Relief on Import of Drugs/Medicines

- 36 life-saving drugs and medicines will be added to the list of medicines fully exempted from Basic Customs Duty (BCD).
- 6 life-saving medicines to attract concessional customs duty of 5%.
- Specified drugs and medicines under Patient Assistance Programmes run by pharmaceutical companies are fully exempt from BCD, provided the medicines are supplied free of cost to patients. The Budget proposes to add 37 more medicines along with 13 new patient assistance programmes to the list.

Support to Domestic Manufacturing and Value Addition

Critical Minerals

- Cobalt powder and waste, the scrap of lithium-ion battery, Lead, Zinc and 12 more critical minerals fully exempted from BCD.
- This is in addition to the 25 critical minerals fully exempted of BCD in July 2024 Budget.

Textiles

- To promote domestic production of technical textile products such as agro-textiles, medical textiles and geo textiles at competitive prices, the Budget proposes to add two more types of shuttle-less looms to the list of fully exempted textile machinery.
- BCD rate on knitted fabrics revised from “10% or 20%” to “20% or ` 115 per kg, whichever is higher.

Electronic Goods

- In line with the ‘Make in India’ policy, the Budget proposes to increase the BCD on Interactive Flat Panel Display (IFPD) from 10% to 20% and reduce the BCD to 5% on Open Cell and other components.

Lithium Ion Battery

- 35 additional capital goods for EV battery manufacturing, and 28 additional capital goods for mobile phone battery manufacturing added to the list of exempted capital goods.
- This will boost domestic manufacture of lithium-ion battery, both for mobile phones and EVs.

Shipping Sector

- Exemption of BCD on raw materials, components, consumables or parts for the manufacture of ships extended for another ten years.
- The Budget also proposes the same dispensation for ship breaking to make it more competitive.

Telecommunication

- BCD reduced from 20% to 10% on Carrier Grade ethernet switches to make it at par with Non-Carrier Grade ethernet switches.

Export Promotion

Handicraft Goods

- To facilitate exports of handicrafts, the Budget proposes to extend the time period for export from six months to one year, further extendable by another three months, if required.
- Further, nine handicraft items to be added to the list of duty-free inputs.

Leather sector

- Crust leather exempted from 20% export duty to facilitate exports by small tanners.
- BCD on Wet Blue leather fully exempted to facilitate imports for domestic value addition and employment.

Domestic Maintenance Repair Operations (MROs) for Railway Goods

- To promote development of domestic MROs for aircraft and ships, the July 2024 Budget extended the time limit for export of foreign origin goods that were imported for repairs, from 6 months to one year and further extendable by one year.
- The current Budget proposes to extend the same dispensation for railway goods.

Trade facilitation and Ease of Doing Business

Time limit for provisional assessment

- Presently, the Customs Act, 1962 does not provide any time limit to finalize Provisional Assessments leading to uncertainty and cost to trade.
- As a measure of promoting ease of doing business, the Budget proposes to fix a time-limit of two years, extendable by a year, for finalizing the provisional assessment.

Voluntary Compliance

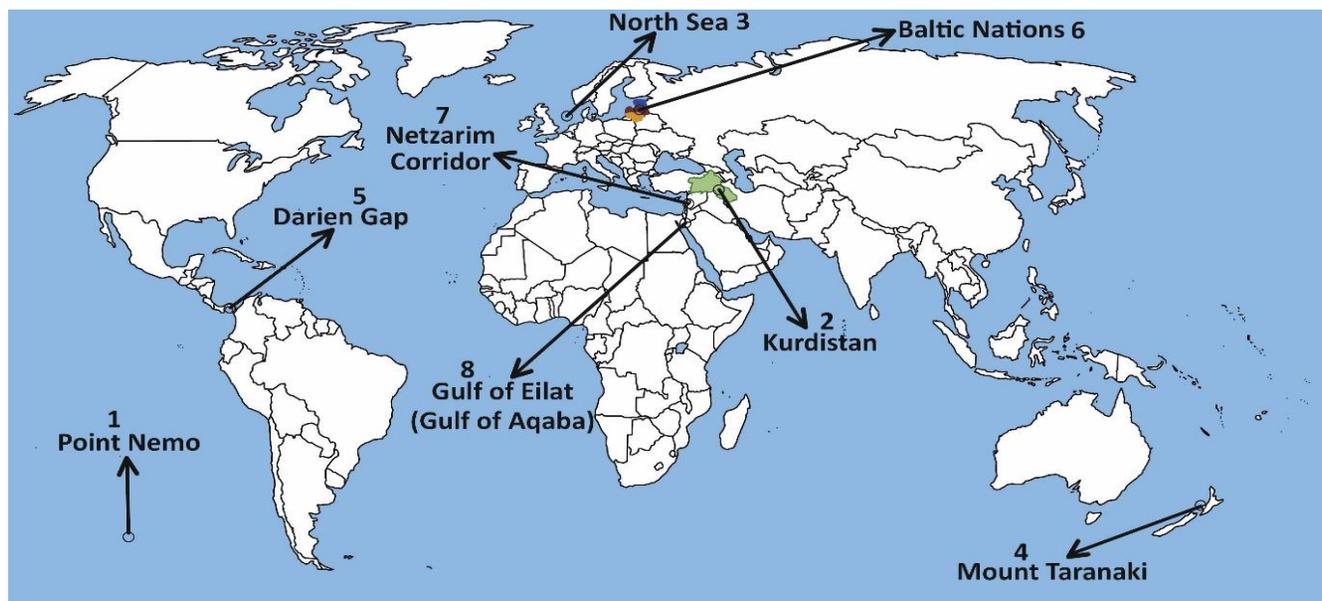
- A new provision introduced to enable importers or exporters, after clearance of goods, to voluntarily declare material facts and pay duty with interest but without penalty. This will incentivize voluntary compliance.
- However, this will not apply in cases where department has already initiated audit or investigation proceedings.

Extended Time for End Use

- Time limit for the end-use of imported inputs in the relevant rules extended from six months to one year.
- This will not only allow industry to plan their imports in a better way, but also provide operational flexibility due to cost and uncertainty of supply.
- Further, such importers will now have to file only quarterly statements instead of a monthly statement.

MAPS: PLACES IN NEWS

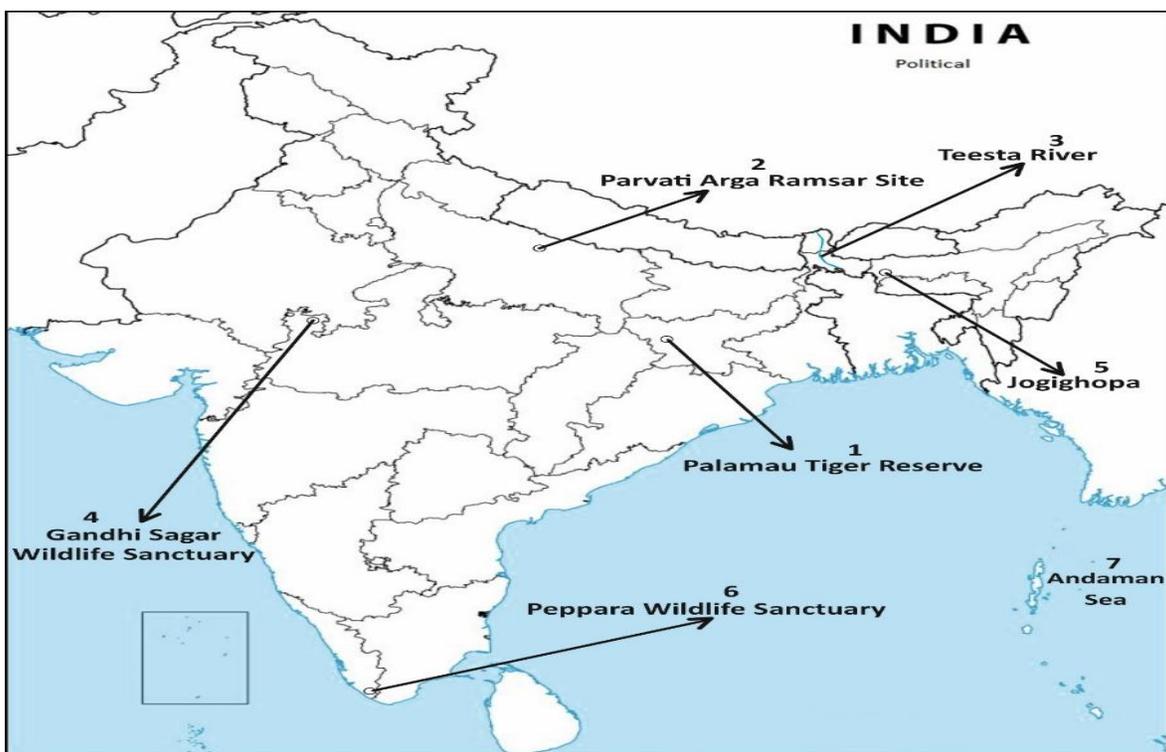
International Places in News



1	Point Nemo	Two women officers of the Indian Navy sailing on vessel INSV Tarini crossed the Point Nemo, the remotest location on earth. It was part of their efforts to circumnavigate the globe under Navika Sagar Parikrama-II. Also known as the Oceanic Pole of Inaccessibility, it is the point in the ocean that is farthest from any landmass. It's located in the South Pacific Ocean. The region falls within the South Pacific Gyre. Due to its isolation, it's used by space agencies as a place to dispose of decommissioned satellites and other space debris. The waters around Point Nemo are considered a "biological desert" due to the lack of nutrients.
2	Kurdistan (Capital: Erbil)	India has sent humanitarian aid to Kurdistan region of Iraq. It consists of an extensive plateau and mountain area, spread over large parts of eastern Turkey, northern Iraq, and western Iran and smaller parts of northern Syria and Armenia. It has the mountain systems of the Zagros and the eastern extension of the Taurus. Tigris and Greater Zab Rivers are the prominent rivers in the region. The area is rich in oil and natural gas.
3	North Sea	U.S. President-elect Donald Trump called to "open up" the North Sea and get rid of windmills. It is part of the Atlantic Ocean, nestled between Great Britain and the north-western European mainland. It borders Great Britain to the west, Norway and Denmark to the east, Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium, and France to the south. It connects to the Atlantic Ocean via the English Channel and to the Baltic Sea via the Skagerrak. Major Rivers draining in North Sea are Forth, Elbe, Scheldt, Thames, Humber.
4	Mount Taranaki	Mount Taranaki a stratovolcano was recognized as a legal person in New Zealand. It became the third natural feature (after Te Urewera park in 2014 and Whanganui River in 2017) to be given statehood. It has two official names Mount Egmont or Mount Taranaki. It was created by subduction of the Pacific Plate below the Australian Plate.
5	Darien Gap	It was in the news for being a major route for the illegal migration to the US. It is a 97 km span of dense, swampy rainforest between northern Colombia in South America and southern Panama in North America. It is characterized by muddy trails, wetlands, and steep mountains, making it one of the most inhospitable and dangerous regions in the world.

6	Baltic nations	Baltic states have disconnected their electricity systems from Russia's power grid. The Baltic states refers to Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania . They are all located on the eastern coast of the Baltic Sea. They gained independence from the USSR in 1991. All three countries are members of NATO, the European Union, the Eurozone, Council of Europe, and the OECD.
7	Netzarim Corridor	As part of the Israel-Hamas ceasefire agreement Israeli forces have withdrawn from the Netzarim Corridor. It is a strategic military zone established by the Israel Defense Forces in the Gaza Strip during the Gaza war. It stretched from the Gaza-Israel border to the Mediterranean Sea, effectively bisecting the Gaza Strip.
8	Gulf of Eilat (Gulf of Aqaba)	The coral reefs in the Gulf of Eilat experienced a 3,000-year growth shutdown due to global cooling. It is a narrow gulf extending northeast from the Red Sea. Its coastline is shared by four countries: Egypt, Israel, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia. It lies to the east of the Sinai Peninsula and west of the Arabian Peninsula.

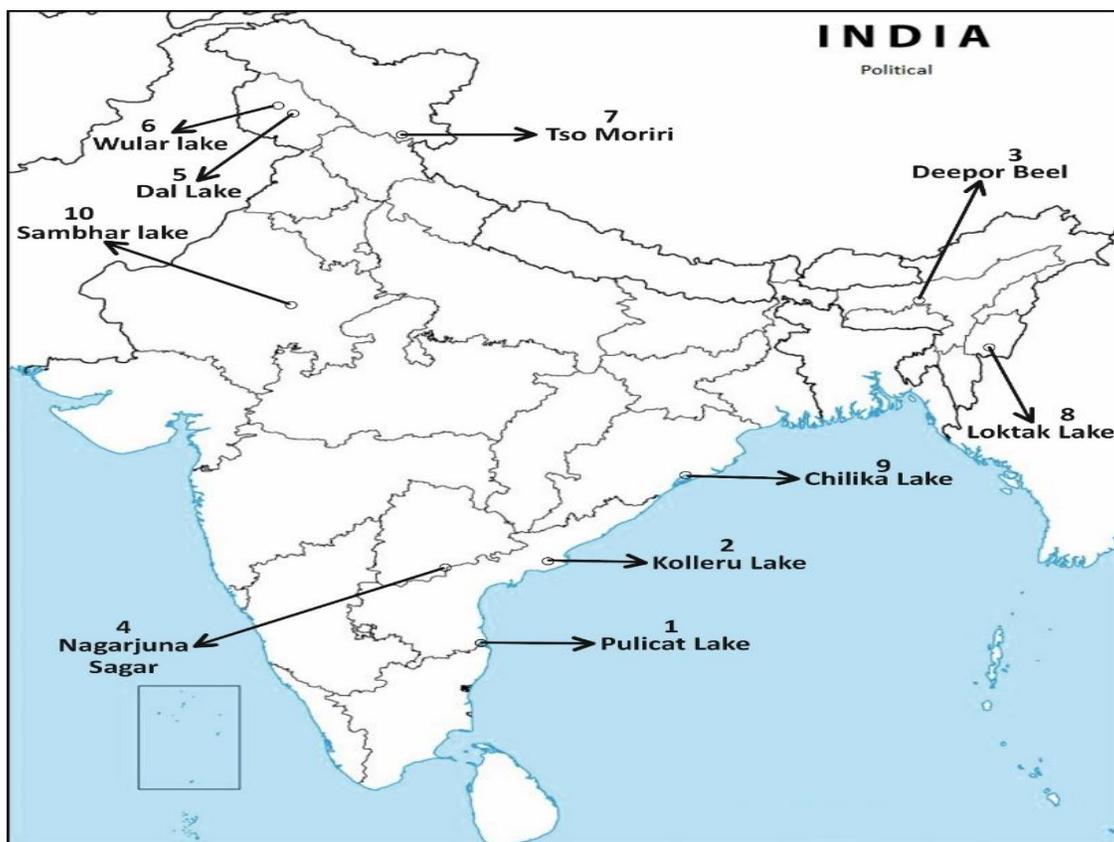
National Places in News



1	Palamau Tiger Reserve	The Jharkhand State Forest Department has initiated a study to revive the declining population of Bison (also Known as Gaur) at Palamau Tiger Reserve. It is in the western part of the Chotanagpur plateau, and is the only tiger reserve in the state of Jharkhand. It is spread over two districts Latehar and Garhwa and forms a part of the Betla National Park.
2	Parvati Arga Ramsar Site	MoEFCC organised the World Wetlands Day 2025 celebrations at the Parvati Arga Ramsar Site, Gonda district of Uttar Pradesh. It is a permanent freshwater environment consisting of two oxbow lakes. It is also a refuge for some of India's threatened vulture species, including: Critically endangered White-rumped Vulture and Endangered Egyptian Vulture.
3	Teesta river	Expert committee of the Environment Ministry has approved the reconstruction of the Teesta-3 dam in Sikkim, despite concerns over environmental safety and disaster risks. The River originates from Tso Lhamo Lake near the Pahurni and Khangse glaciers in

		Sikkim. It passes through Sikkim and West Bengal. It merges with the Brahmaputra (Jamuna) in Bangladesh. It has Lachung Chhu, Chakung Chhu, Dik Chhu, Rani Khola, Rangpo Chhu as left bank tributaries and Zemu Chhu, Rangyong Chhu, Rangit River as right bank tributaries.
4	Gandhi Sagar Wildlife Sanctuary	6-8 cheetahs from South Africa expected to arrive in Madhya Pradesh's Gandhi Sagar Wildlife Sanctuary which is set to become India's second cheetah habitat. It is situated along the Madhya Pradesh-Rajasthan border. It lies within the Khathiar-Gir dry deciduous forest ecoregion. River Chambal passes through it. Key tree species found are Khair, Salai, Kardhai, Dhawda, Tendu, and Palash.
5	Jogighopa	Inland Waterways Terminal (IWT) was recently established on Brahmaputra in Assam's Jogighopa. It is a town located on the northern bank of the Brahmaputra River in the Bongaigaon district. It is notable for its rock-cut caves. These caves are believed to be examples of Mlechchha dynasty period architecture.
6	Peppara Wildlife Sanctuary	The Periyar Tiger Conservation Foundation has implemented the real-time monitoring and networking system in the Peppara Wildlife Sanctuary under the Thiruvananthapuram Forest Division. It consists of the catchment area of the Karamana River.
7	Andaman Sea	An earthquake of magnitude 5.2 struck the Andaman Sea recently. This makes it strategically crucial for India's maritime security and its role in the Indo-Pacific region. It has diverse marine ecosystems, including coral reefs and mangrove forests. The Andaman Islands are particularly renowned for their endemic bird species including Narcondam Hornbill Andaman Serpent-Eagle, Andaman Woodpecker, Andaman Teal.

Important Lakes in India



1	Pulicat Lake	It is a brackish water lagoon located on the border of Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu in India. It's the second largest brackish water lagoon in India, after Chilika Lake. It's separated from the Bay of Bengal by the barrier island of Sriharikota. The lake is a significant habitat for various aquatic species, including fish, crustaceans, and migratory birds, particularly flamingos.
2	Kolleru Lake	Kolleru Lake is one of the largest freshwater lakes in India, located between the Krishna and Godavari delta systems in the state of Andhra Pradesh. It is an important habitat for migratory birds, including pelicans, storks, and ibises. It has been designated a Ramsar site of international importance.
3	Deepor Beel	It is a significant freshwater lake located in Guwahati, Assam. It's a permanent freshwater lake and a crucial wetland in the Brahmaputra Valley. It's recognized as a Ramsar site, highlighting its international importance for conservation. It's also designated as an Important Bird Area by Birdlife International.
4	Nagarjuna Sagar	It is a masonry dam built in Nalgonda district, Telangana. It's a multipurpose dam, built across the Krishna River primarily for irrigation and hydroelectric power generation. It provides water for agricultural lands in Telangana and Andhra Pradesh. It's one of the world's largest masonry dams.
5	Dal Lake	It is urban lake located in Srinagar. It is surrounded by the Pir Panjal mountains. Some geologists believe that Dal Lake is a remnant of a larger, ancient lake that once covered the entire Kashmir Valley during the Pleistocene epoch.
6	Wular lake	Wular Lake is one of the largest freshwater lakes in Asia, located in the Bandipora district of Jammu and Kashmir. It's situated in the Kashmir Valley, between the towns of Bandipora and Sopore. It's fed by the Jhelum River and acts as a natural flood reservoir. It's a Ramsar site of international importance.
7	Tso Moriri	It is a high-altitude brackish lake located in the Changthang region of Ladakh. It supports unique biodiversity, including migratory birds, such as the bar-headed goose, and various aquatic species. It is a Ramsar site. Due to its proximity to the Line of Actual Control (LAC), access to Tso Moriri is restricted, and Inner Line Permits are required for Indian nationals.
8	Loktak Lake	It is the largest freshwater lake in Northeast India, located in the state of Manipur. It's famous for its unique floating islands, known as "phumdis," which are heterogeneous masses of vegetation, soil, and organic matter in various stages of decomposition. It is an important habitat for the endangered brow-antlered deer, or Sangai. The world's only floating national park, Keibul Lamjao, is located on the southeastern shore of Loktak Lake.
9	Chilika Lake	It is a brackish water lagoon located along the eastern coast of India in the state of Odisha. It's the largest brackish water lagoon in Asia and the second largest in the world. It's separated from the Bay of Bengal by a narrow barrier island. It's a Ramsar site of international importance, recognized for its ecological significance. It is home to Irrawaddy dolphins.
10	Sambhar lake	It's India's largest inland salt lake, located in the Jaipur district of Rajasthan. It's a Ramsar site, recognized for its importance as a wetland habitat. It's a crucial wintering area for migratory birds, including flamingos. The lake receives water from several rivers, including the Mantha, Rupangarh, Khari, Khandela, Medtha, and Samod.

PwDs Are Worried About Digital Personal Data Protection Rules

The **Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY)** is finalizing public consultations on the **Digital Personal Data Protection (DPDP) Act, 2023** and its draft rules.

- However, disability rights activists have raised **serious concerns** over a specific provision in **Section 9(1)**, which **clubs adult Persons with Disabilities (PwDs) with children** and mandates that their **legal guardians provide consent** for any digital personal data processing.
- Activists argue that this **undermines the autonomy** of PwDs and reflects a **flawed understanding of guardianship laws**.

Understanding the Controversial Provision – Section 9(1)

- The DPDP Act requires **data fiduciaries (organizations processing data)** to obtain **verifiable consent from a parent/ legal guardian** before processing personal data of a **child/ PwD with a lawful guardian**.
- The **definition of PwDs** in this provision **lumps all individuals with disabilities together**, assuming that *those with guardians* are **incapable of making legally binding decisions**.
- The **draft rules** under **Rule 10(2)** require verification that the guardian was **appointed by a court or designated authority** under Indian guardianship laws.
- While the rule provides **detailed explanations for child consent**, it **lacks clarity on how guardianship-based consent would apply to PwDs**, leading to confusion.

Risk to Digital Rights of PwDs

- Making guardian consent mandatory for accessing online services could lead to:
 - **Exclusion from digital platforms** like banking, govt. schemes, e-commerce, and education portals.
 - **Increased control of guardians over PwDs' choices**, restricting their ability to make personal decisions.
 - **Legal ambiguity for guardians**, who may face **penalties** under the DPDP Act if their consent leads to **data misuse**.
- A survey by PACTA and Saksham Disability found that **27.4% of PwDs had legal guardians**, yet most of them managed their affairs independently, contradicting the assumptions made by the DPDP Act.

Recommended changes by disability rights groups include:

- **Amending Section 9(1)** to align with the **RPWD Act, 2016**, ensuring PwDs have **decision-making autonomy**.
- **Providing clear guidelines** on how data fiduciaries should handle **guardian-based consent for PwDs**.
- **Ensuring that digital accessibility barriers are addressed**, as many platforms are still not user-friendly for PwDs.

PwDs and Activists Concerns

Undermining Autonomy of PwDs

- The provision assumes that **all PwDs with guardians lack decision-making abilities**, ignoring the **Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPWD) Act, 2016**.
- Many PwDs function independently with **limited legal support** but may still have a legal guardian for specific purposes.

Legal Confusion Between RPWD Act and NT Act

- PwDs are governed by two laws:
 - The **RPWD Act, 2016** provides for **limited guardianship**, allowing the PwD to **exercise rights with support**.
 - The **National Trust (NT) Act, 1999** allows **full guardianship** for individuals with **autism, cerebral palsy, or intellectual disabilities**.
- However, the DPDP Act **does not differentiate between these categories**, applying a **blanket rule** for all PwDs with guardians.

Practical Challenges in Implementation

- There is **no clear guideline** on how digital platforms should obtain **guardian consent for PwDs**.
- If a guardian refuses consent, the PwD may **lose access to essential services**, such as **online banking, e-commerce, or healthcare platforms**.
- Activists also highlight **gender-based discrimination**, where **women with disabilities may be denied access to digital platforms** without guardian approval.

Controversy Around Three-Language Policy

The Union Government has withheld ₹2,152 crore in **Samagra Shiksha** funds from Tamil Nadu for refusing to join the PM SHRI scheme due to its opposition to implementing the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020.

While the State is willing to participate in PM SHRI, it rejects the NEP's three-language formula, preferring its longstanding two-language policy.

Centre insists on compliance, citing constitutional alignment, but Tamil Nadu government refuses to yield, calling it "blackmail" and questioning the constitutional basis of such mandates.

Opposition to this policy in Tamil Nadu

- Tamil Nadu has a long history of resisting the imposition of Hindi.
- **1965 Anti-Hindi Agitation**
 - In 1965, violent protests erupted in Tamil Nadu against making Hindi the sole official language, resulting in at least 70 deaths.
 - The unrest resurfaced in 1968 when the Parliament mandated Hindi teaching under the three-language formula.
- **Dravidian Movement's Stand**
 - In 1968, the DMK government under C.N. Annadurai passed a resolution rejecting the three-language formula, reinforcing Tamil Nadu's two-language policy of Tamil and English. Since then, successive governments have opposed any changes to this policy.
- **Recent Opposition and Policy Adjustments**
 - In 2019, strong resistance from Tamil Nadu led to the removal of mandatory Hindi learning from the draft NEP proposed by the Kasturirangan Committee.
 - The State continues to uphold its two-language system, resisting any attempts to introduce Hindi in schools.

Perceived Imposition of Hindi

- Political parties and activists in Tamil Nadu see the three-language policy as a covert attempt to impose Hindi. They argue that practical constraints, such as the lack of resources for additional language teachers, would naturally lead to Hindi being the default third language.
- **Government Actions Fueling Suspicion**
 - The Union Government's promotion of Hindi, including a ₹50 crore allocation in 2019 for appointing Hindi teachers in non-Hindi-speaking States, has reinforced concerns.
 - Critics point out the lack of similar efforts to promote south Indian languages in northern schools or Kendriya Vidyalayas.

Samagra Shiksha is an **integrated scheme** for school education extending from **pre-school** to class **XII** to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education. It subsumes 3 Schemes of **Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA)**, **Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan (RMSA)** and **Teacher Education (TE)**.

⊕ **NIPUN Bharat** launched under the aegis of the **Centrally Sponsored Scheme** of **Samagra Shiksha**, will focus on providing access to and retaining children in the foundational years of schooling

⊕ **NISHTHA** (under Samagra Shiksha) is capacity-building programme for "Improving Quality of School Education through Integrated Teacher Training".

PM SHRI is for development of more than 14,500 schools across the country by strengthening the existing schools among those managed by the Central government/State/UT Government/Local bodies.

Three-Language Formula in NEP 2020

⊕ NEP 2020 retains the three-language formula, originally introduced in the 1968 NEP.

⊕ However, unlike the earlier policy, which mandated Hindi across India, NEP 2020 provides more flexibility without imposing any specific language on States.

⊕ Language Flexibility and Choice

➤ The policy allows States, regions, and students to choose the three languages, ensuring that at least two are native to India.

➤ This means non-Hindi-speaking States are not necessarily required to adopt Hindi.

⊕ Emphasis on Bilingual Education

➤ NEP 2020 promotes bilingual teaching, encouraging instruction in the home language/mother tongue along with English.

⊕ Role of Sanskrit

➤ The policy highlights Sanskrit as an optional language within the three-language framework, giving it special emphasis.

Time Use Survey 2024

- The Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI) released the **Time Use Survey (TUS) 2024**, highlighting significant trends in **how Indians allocate their time to various activities, including employment, caregiving, and leisure**.
 - The National Statistics Office (NSO), MoSPI conducted the first all-India Time Use Survey during January – December 2019.
 - The present TUS conducted during January – December 2024 is the second such All-India Survey.

Implications of the Changing Work Dynamics

- **Economic Impact:** The shift of women from unpaid domestic duties to paid jobs has economic benefits, including:
 - **Higher household incomes**
 - **Enhanced productivity:** More women in the workforce can drive economic growth.
 - **Formalization of labor** and social security benefits.
- **Social and Policy Implications:** Despite progress, gender disparities in workforce participation persist. The findings highlight the need for:
 - **Skill Development Programs:** To help women transition into better-paying jobs.
 - **Flexible Work Policies:** Including remote work and part-time options to balance professional and domestic responsibilities.
 - **Government Support:** Policies like maternity benefits, affordable childcare, and financial incentives to encourage female workforce participation.

Key Findings of Time Use Survey 2024

○ Rise in Workforce Participation

- The participation of women in employment-related activities has increased from **21.8% in 2019 to 25% in 2024**.
- For men, the figure has risen from **70.9% to 75%**.
- This data reflects an expanding economic role for women, although the gender gap in labor participation remains substantial.

○ Decline in Time Spent on Unpaid Domestic Work

- Women spent **305 minutes per day** on unpaid domestic services in 2024, compared to **315 minutes in 2019**, indicating a transition toward paid work.
- Male members spent significantly less time on such tasks, averaging **88 minutes per day**.

○ Women's Role in Caregiving

- **41% of women aged 15-59** participated in caregiving activities, compared to only **21.4% of men** in the same age group.
- Women spent **137 minutes per day** in caregiving, nearly double the **75 minutes spent by men**.
- These figures highlight the continued burden of unpaid caregiving on women despite an increase in their economic participation.

○ Leisure and Cultural Activities

- **People aged 6 and above** spent **171 minutes per day** on cultural, leisure, and mass-media activities.
- Men spent slightly more time on these activities (**177 minutes**) than women (**164 minutes**), reflecting the gendered division of time.

○ Education and Self-Care:

- **89.3% of children aged 6-14** participated in learning activities, spending around **413 minutes per day** on studies.
- **Self-care and maintenance** accounted for an average of **708 minutes per day** across all age groups.

Future Outlook and Recommendations

- **Strengthening Skill Training:** Expanding vocational training programs for women in sectors like IT, healthcare, and entrepreneurship.
- **Creating More Job Opportunities:** Encouraging industries to hire more women through affirmative action.
- **Enhancing Social Security Benefits:** Strengthening maternity benefits, pension schemes, and workplace protections for female workers.
- **Workplace Inclusivity Initiatives:** Promoting gender-sensitive policies in both urban and rural employment sectors.

UGC-CARE List Scrapped

The University Grants Commission (UGC) has decided to discontinue the UGC-CARE (Consortium for Academic and Research Ethics) list of quality academic journals.

Instead, it will provide a set of suggestive parameters for selecting journals based on **eight criteria**.

Reasons for Withdrawing UGC-CARE

- **Concerns with the UGC-CARE List**
 - **Over-centralisation** in deciding journal quality.
 - **Delays** in adding or removing journals.
 - **Limited inclusivity**, particularly in fields like Tamil studies.
 - **Lack of transparency**, leading to the exclusion of highly respected Indian-language journals.
- **Shift to a Decentralised Approach:** The UGC argues that decentralisation will:
 - Help combat predatory journals more effectively.
 - Make institutions responsible for evaluating journals.
 - Allow flexibility for institutions to develop their own mechanisms aligned with **UGC's suggested parameters**.
 - Ensure evaluation models can adapt to evolving fields and disciplinary needs.
- **Expert Committee Review (2023)**
 - UGC formed an expert committee to review the CARE system which took the decision to discontinue it in October 2023

Concerns on Scrapping the CARE List

- **Potential Rise of Predatory Journals**
 - Academics fear that eliminating the CARE list **removes a key safeguard** against predatory journals.
 - Without a central oversight mechanism, **low-quality and exploitative journals may thrive**.
- **Lack of Public Consultation**
 - An academic described the move as **“retrograde”**, arguing that there should have been **public consultation** before scrapping CARE.

The New Approach to Journal Evaluation

- **Suggestive Parameters for Institutions**
 - The UGC has introduced **non-binding ‘suggestive parameters’** to help institutions assess journals.
 - These parameters include evaluating **the journal’s editorial process, peer review system, and the expertise of its editorial board**.
- **Institutional Responsibility & Accountability** for developing their own mechanisms to evaluate journals.
- **Decentralisation & Academic Freedom**
 - Faculty and researchers can assess journals **based on discipline-specific criteria** rather than relying on a centralised list.



UGC-CARE



- UGC-CARE was introduced in 2018 to combat the problem of predatory journals, journals that publish research in exchange for publishing fees without checks like peer reviews.
- **Reason for Setting Up UGC-CARE**
 - **Significance of Research Publications**
 - ▶ Publications in journals play a crucial role in institutional rankings, faculty appointments, promotions, and research grants.
 - ▶ The quality of research publications directly impacts the credibility and funding of higher education institutions.
 - **Rise of Predatory Journals**
 - ▶ Due to the importance of journal publications, substandard and predatory journals proliferated. This led to concerns about academic integrity and India's global research reputation.
 - **UGC's Concern and Response**
 - ▶ An investigation by a leading media house, in 2018, revealed over 300 publishers operating predatory journals in India, charging fees between \$30 and \$1800 for publication.
 - **Establishment of UGC-CARE**
 - ▶ Following these concerns, UGC introduced the CARE in 2018 to replace the previous system of university-suggested journals.
 - ▶ Under CARE, a dedicated UGC cell assessed journals based on strict quality protocols.

Budget Allocation for Urban Development

In 2015, the then government prioritized urban development, recognizing cities' 67% contribution to GDP. However, in its "Viksit Bharat" vision, urban development appears to be overlooked.

Budget Allocation for Urban India

- **Total Outlay** - ₹96,777 crore, up from last year's ₹82,576.57 crore. However, adjusting for inflation, the real allocation has declined.
- **Underutilisation of Funds** - Revised Estimates indicate only ₹63,669.93 crore will be spent by March, reflecting a 22.9% shortfall.
- **Cuts in Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana Urban**- Allocation for FY 2024-25 was ₹30,170.61 crore, but Revised Estimates slashed it to ₹13,670 crore.
- **Policy vs. Implementation Gap** - Despite increased outlay, funds are misaligned with urban infrastructure needs, prioritizing capital-intensive projects over employment and sustainable development.

Way Forward for Urban Development

- **Introduction of the Urban Challenge Fund**
 - A new ₹10,000 crore fund announced for urban redevelopment.
 - Target set at ₹1 lakh crore, with 50% expected from private investments.
 - Reliance on private funding seems unrealistic, given past low participation
- **Shift Towards Capital-Intensive Projects that generates employment and sustainability**
 - Focus on green jobs and inclusive economic growth.

Declining Urban Transfers: Analysing Budget Cuts and Their Impact

- Transfers to urban India primarily occur through three channels — direct transfers to Urban Local Bodies (ULBs); Centrally Sponsored Schemes (CSS); and Central Sector Schemes.
 - ** **Centrally Sponsored Schemes** are funded **jointly** by centre and state and implemented through the **State** in sectors falling in the State and Concurrent Lists of the Constitution.
 - ** **Central Sector Schemes** are implemented and financed by central govt. directly
- **Key Factors behind Reduction in Urban Transfers**
 - **Decline in Direct Transfers to ULBs**
 - ULBs' share reduced from ₹26,653 crore to ₹26,158 crore.
 - Revenue loss due to GST (21% decline) not compensated adequately.
 - Cities may need to impose additional taxes on citizens.
 - **Cuts in Centrally Sponsored Schemes (CSS)**
 - **PMAY(U) (CSS component):** 30% budget cut compared to last year.
 - **AMRUT & Smart Cities Mission:** Decreased allocations, with nearly no funds left for Smart Cities.
 - **SWATCH BHARAT MISSION (Urban):** Retains ₹5,000 crore allocation, but only ₹2,159 crore (56% less) is expected to be spent.
 - **Shift in Focus to Capital-Intensive Metro Projects**
 - Metro and Mass Rapid Transit Systems see increased funding.
 - FY 2024-25 Budget: ₹21,335.98 crore → RE: ₹24,691.47 crore.
 - FY 2025-26 Proposal: ₹31,239.28 crore (46% rise).
 - Prioritizing metro projects over broader urban mobility raises concerns about inclusivity.

Need for a Law on Domestic Workers

The Supreme Court's recent directive to the Union government to **explore the feasibility of a separate law for domestic workers** is a significant step toward recognizing their rights.

- The Court has ordered the Centre to **form an inter-ministerial committee** to examine the necessity of a legal framework for domestic workers' protection, regulation, and welfare.

Key Considerations for a New Law

- **Clear definition and employment proof:**
 - An inclusive definition of domestic work is necessary for effective regulation.
 - Proof of employment is a critical prerequisite for enforcing labour laws.
 - Workers' unions have demanded **mandatory employer registration** to address this issue.
- **Employer resistance and workplace recognition:**
 - Resistance by employers needs to be taken into account. Many employers do not consider themselves as such, nor do they view their homes as workplaces.

- Any new legislation should **ensure minimum entitlements and grievance redressal mechanisms.**
- **Recognise regional & local aspirations** while formulating laws.

Way Forward

- Regional efforts, such as those in **Kerala** should be examined. In Kerala, domestic workers are primarily protected under the "**Kerala Domestic Workers (Regulation and Welfare) Act, 2021**", which
 - Outlines their
 - ✓ Rights to minimum wages,
 - ✓ Dignified working conditions, written contracts, and
 - ✓ Protection against exploitation, including provisions for regulating employment agencies placing domestic workers with employers.
 - Stipulates regarding **working hours, rest days, and mandatory social security benefits.**
- **Concerns of the domestic workers' unions** must be taken into account while framing any law.

While immediate transformation may be challenging, such a law would serve as **a foundation for long-term improvements** in their working conditions and social status.

Vulnerability of Domestic Workers

- Domestic workers (such as those involved in the cleaning tasks and cooking or care work) remain **outside the purview of key labour laws** such as the Minimum Wages Act and the Equal Remuneration Act.
- The Court noted that while some states have regulations, a **uniform national law is missing.**
- This workforce is primarily composed of **marginalized communities and migrant workers**, making them even more vulnerable.

Challenges Faced by Domestic Workers

- **Low wages and exploitative conditions:**
 - › Wages vary widely, even within the same locality.
 - › Workers are often forced to take on additional tasks without extra compensation.
 - › There is a **lack of job security and social security benefits.**
- **Social invisibility and discrimination:**
 - › Domestic work is often **undervalued** due to gendered perceptions.
 - › Many workers face **harassment and humiliation** from employers.
 - › Abuse cases rarely get media attention and remain unaddressed.
- **Existing gaps in legal framework:**
 - › India has **yet to ratify** the International Labor Organization (**ILO**) **Convention 189** on domestic workers.
 - › The judiciary has previously directed the registration of placement agencies, but these efforts have had little impact.
 - › The 2019 Code on Wages includes domestic workers, but **variations in employment structures (part-time/full-time, live-in/live-out) create complexities.**

Bhopal Criminalizes Begging

Bhopal has banned begging in all public places, including giving alms. The Bhopal District Collector recently issued orders enforcing strict measures, including FIRs for both beggars and donors. The move revives debates on anti-begging laws, often criticized as ‘anti-poor’ over rehabilitation-focused approaches.

- ✓ In December 2024, Indore’s collector also banned almsgiving under **Section 163 of Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita (BNSS)** as part of the Union government’s Support for Marginalized Individuals for Livelihood and Enterprise (SMILE) scheme, 2022 which aims to rehabilitate beggars through medical care, education, and skill training to make cities **“beggar-free” by 2026**.

Legal Status of Begging Across Other States

- **Bombay**

Prevention of Beggary Act, 1959: Begging is criminalized in several states under the Bombay Prevention of Beggary Act, 1959, which allows authorities to detain beggars and place them in institutions. The law has its roots in colonial-era vagrancy laws.

The **“beggar-free” city** idea recalls **Delhi’s 2010 Commonwealth Games** preparations, when officials sought to remove beggars as a **“nuisance”** to create a **“world-class city”**. The Delhi government then enforced **zero-tolerance zones**, using **mobile courts and enforcement vans** to detain beggars, slum dwellers, and street vendors.

Legality of Orders Prohibiting Begging

- **Section 163 of BNSS, 2023:** The orders criminalizing begging in Indore and Bhopal are issued under this section which allows magistrates to impose restrictions in cases of nuisance or apprehended danger.
- **Consequences of Violation:** Violating these orders invites action under Section 223 of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS), with penalties ranging from six months’ imprisonment to one year and fine upto ₹5,000. However, such orders are temporary, lasting up to two months, extendable to six months by the state government.

The **Constitution of India** allows both the **Union and state governments** to legislate on **“vagrancy, nomadic and migratory tribes”** under the **Concurrent List (Entry 15, List III)**. During Constituent Assembly debates, a proposal to add “control and eradication of beggary” to the **Union List** was rejected, as Dr. B.R. Ambedkar clarified that **beggary was already covered under “vagrancy”**, enabling both central and state authorities to regulate it.

- ✓ The Bombay Prevention of Begging Act, 1959 serves as the definitional basis of the SMILE scheme identifies “begging” not only as the act of soliciting alms but also activities like performing on the streets; selling items to earn a livelihood; or merely appearing destitute with no visible means of subsistence.
- ✓ In 2018, the Delhi High Court (HC) decriminalized begging and struck down parts of the Bombay Act as **“manifestly arbitrary”**, violating **Article 21** (right to live with dignity). The court questioned how the state could **criminalize begging while failing to provide basic necessities**.
- ✓ In 2021, the Supreme Court (SC) rejected a PIL to remove beggars, refusing an “elitist view” on a socio-economic issue.
- **The Persons in Destitution (Protection, Care and Rehabilitation) Model Bill, 2016:** proposed repealing the Beggary Act and replacing it with rehabilitation centers in every district. Some provisions still allowed **police involvement and detention**, leading to concerns from activists. **Discussions on the Bill stalled after 2016**, and no further progress has been made.
- **‘Beggar-Free City’ Policies in States:** Despite the 2018 Delhi HC ruling, many states, including Maharashtra, continue to criminalize begging under similar laws. Several states have announced plans to make cities “beggar-free”. In 2020, the Union Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment proposed a rehabilitation-focused campaign in ten cities, including Mumbai, but the Beggary Act remains in force.
- **Mental Healthcare Act, 2017:** Includes provisions for **caring for detainees with mental illness** who are homeless or found wandering. It aims to provide **medical care rather than criminal punishment** for mentally ill individuals found begging.

Arguments in Favor of an Anti-Beggary Act	Arguments Against an Anti-Beggary Act
<p>1. Curbing Organized Begging Rackets: Many beggars, especially children, are exploited by trafficking gangs (subjecting them to inhumane conditions). A law can help identify, rescue, and rehabilitate victims while punishing traffickers.</p> <p>2. Ensuring Public Safety and Order: Unregulated begging at traffic signals, railway stations, and religious sites can lead to accidents and public inconvenience. Restricting begging can improve public hygiene and urban management.</p> <p>3. Encouraging Rehabilitation Over Dependence: The law can mandate skill training, employment, and shelter homes instead of allowing people to rely on alms. A structured welfare system can help break the cycle of poverty.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ The Bombay Prevention of Begging Act aimed to provide vocational training to beggars in 'beggar homes' to facilitate their reintegration into society. <p>4. Legal Clarity and Uniformity: A national law can standardize legal provisions while ensuring protection of rights.</p> <p>5. Preventing Nuisance and Exploitation of Public Sentiment: Some individuals pretend to be disabled or destitute to gain sympathy and exploit public generosity. A law can help distinguish between genuine cases needing assistance and fraudsters.</p>	<p>1. Criminalizing Poverty Instead of Addressing Its Root Causes: Many people beg out of extreme necessity, not choice. Instead of punishment, the state should focus on providing jobs, housing, and healthcare.</p> <p>2. Violation of Fundamental Rights: The 2018 Delhi HC ruling held that criminalizing begging violates Article 21. It also infringes on personal liberty, forcing the homeless into detention.</p> <p>3. Failure of Past Laws: Laws like the Bombay Prevention of Beggary Act, 1959 led to mass arrests but failed to reduce begging. Detention centers became overcrowded and poorly managed, worsening conditions for beggars.</p> <p>4. Discrimination Against the Poor: Anti-begging laws often target the homeless, slum dwellers, and street vendors, pushing them further into poverty. Instead of eradicating begging, such laws hide poverty rather than solving it.</p> <p>5. Ignoring the Role of Social Welfare: Begging is a symptom of unemployment, lack of education, and social exclusion. The government should expand social security schemes rather than penalizing the underprivileged.</p>

National Youth Parliament Scheme (NYPS 2.0)

The Rajya Sabha was recently informed about the National Youth Parliament Scheme (NYPS) 2.0 by the Minister of State in the Ministry of Parliamentary Affairs.

Key Features of NYPS 2.0

- 1. Web Portal for Participation:** which allows all citizens to take part in the Youth Parliament Programme in different ways.
- 2. Comprehensive Training Resources:** The web portal provides e-training materials, including:
 - Literature on Youth Parliament

About NYPS 2.0

- The **Ministry of Parliamentary Affairs** launched the **National Youth Parliament Scheme (NYPS) portal** in **November, 2019**, to expand the Youth Parliament Programme to all recognized educational institutions.
- In September, 2024, NYPS 2.0 was further expanded to include all citizens, allowing broader participation through institution, group, and individual modes.
- **Now, NYPS 2.0 allows all citizens** to participate through a dedicated **web portal**.
 - ✓ The age limit for the National Youth Parliament is 18-25 years.

Objectives:

- To **strengthen the roots of democracy** by educating participants about parliamentary procedures, constitutional values, and the functioning of the government.
- To promote **discipline, tolerance, and democratic values** among young citizens.

Modes of Participation:

Institution Participation	Group Participation	Individual Participation
<p>Schools, colleges, and universities can organize Youth Parliament sessions as per guidelines available on the portal under following categories:</p> <p>1. Kishore Sabha: For students from Classes VI to XII.</p> <p>2. Tarun Sabha: For Undergraduate and Postgraduate students.</p> <p><small>**The schools/ institutions shall be able to register themselves through Aadhaar credentials of Principal/ Head/ Registrar/ Dean or as may be prescribed from time to time.</small></p>	<p>Groups of citizens can organize Youth Parliament sittings following the guidelines provided on the website</p>	<p>Any citizen can participate by attempting a quiz on the theme 'Bhartiya Democracy in Action'.</p>

- Model Debates, Questions, and Scripts
- Video Tutorials and other learning resources

Benefits of NYPS 2.0

- **Experiential Learning:** It provides a simulated platform to understand legislative debates, bill formation, and question hour, reinforcing practical governance knowledge.
- **Enhances Critical Thinking:** Youth Parliament sessions demand policy research, structured arguments, and logical reasoning, enhancing analytical skills.
- **Gender Inclusion & Representation:** Encourages female students and marginalized groups to participate in political discourse.
- **Hybrid Learning Model:** Combines physical debates with digital tools like video tutorials and model scripts, making political education more interactive.

State Emblem of India

The Union Home Ministry has urged State governments to prevent the misuse of the State Emblem of India, stressing that the Lion Capital must include the motto “Satyamev Jayate” in Devanagari script. As it noted that many government agencies improperly depict the emblem, violating the State Emblem of India (Prohibition of Improper Use) Act, 2005.

About the State Emblem of India

- **Origin:** The emblem is an adaptation of the Lion Capital of Ashoka at Sarnath.
- **Original Structure:**
 - The **Lion Capital** consists of **four lions** standing back-to-back symbolizing power, courage, confidence and faith.
 - It is mounted on a **circular abacus** resting on a **bell-shaped lotus**.
 - The abacus features **sculptures of an elephant, a galloping horse, a bull, and a lion**, separated by **Dharma Chakras**.
- **Adoption as the State Emblem (on January 26, 1950):**
 - The official emblem depicts **three visible lions** (the fourth is hidden from view).
 - A **Dharma Chakra** is in the center of the abacus, with:
 - A **bull on the right**
 - A **galloping horse on the left**
 - **Dharma Chakras on both sides**
- **Modifications from the Original:** The **bell-shaped lotus** was omitted.
- **Motto:** The inscription “**Satyameva Jayate**” (Truth Alone Triumphs) in **Devanagari script** is placed below the emblem.



Rules Governing Its Use

The **State Emblem of India** serves as the **official seal of the Government of India**. Its use is restricted to **authorized authorities and official purposes** as per:

State Emblem of India (Prohibition of Improper Use) Act, 2005	State Emblem of India (Regulation of Use) Rules, 2007
<p>Objective: It prohibits improper use of the State Emblem of India for professional and commercial purposes.</p> <p>Restrictions on Use: It cannot be used without prior permission from the Central Government. Unauthorized use for trade, business, trademarks, patents, or advertisements is prohibited.</p> <p>Regulation by Central Government:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It specifies who can use the emblem, such as constitutional authorities, government officials, and diplomatic missions. • Controls use on stationery, seals, official vehicles, public buildings, and military purposes. 	<p>Objective: It regulates the use of the State Emblem of India in official seals, stationery, vehicles, public buildings, and other approved purposes.</p> <p>Key Provisions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Design of Official Seal: The emblem must be enclosed in an oval or round frame, with the name of the Ministry or office inscribed between the rims. • Usage by States & UTs: States/UTs can adopt the emblem as their official emblem without Central Government approval. However, incorporating the emblem into the State/UT emblem requires prior approval from the Central Government. • Authorized Usage: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Only specific constitutional authorities, government officials, and institutions (as per Schedule I) like President, PM, Other

<p>Penalties for Violation:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Imprisonment up to two years or fine up to ₹5,000, or both. • Repeat offenders face a minimum six-month jail term and a fine. <p>Enforcement: Competent authorities cannot register trademarks, patents, or designs containing the emblem. Prosecutions require prior sanction from the Central Government.</p> <p>Rule-Making Power: The Central Government can frame rules to regulate emblem usage, subject to Parliamentary approval.</p>	<p>Ministers, Judges etc. can use the emblem on official seals and stationery.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Permitted on certain vehicles, public buildings (e.g., Rashtrapati Bhavan, Supreme Court, Parliament), and diplomatic missions abroad. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Restrictions on Use: Unauthorized individuals, organizations, NGOs, universities, and private entities cannot use the emblem. Prohibited on letterheads, badges, flags, or for business purposes. • Special Permissions: Can be used for government publications, currency, stamps, medals, identity cards, and educational purposes, as specified in Schedule III. Prior approval required for joint use in events/publications with the government. • Enforcement: Violations are subject to legal action under the 2005 Act, including fines and imprisonment.
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Gyan Bharatam Mission

The **Union Budget 2025-26** introduced the ‘**Gyan Bharatam Mission**’ for the **survey, documentation, and conservation** of India’s **manuscript heritage**, with a target of covering **over 1 crore manuscripts** stored in **academic institutions, museums, libraries, and private collections**.

Objective: To protect and make accessible India’s rich repository of traditional knowledge.

Key Features

1. **Survey, Documentation, and Preservation:** The mission will conduct a **nationwide survey** to **identify, document, and preserve manuscripts** of historical and cultural significance.
2. **National Digital Repository:** will be created to store and **provide access** to India’s traditional knowledge, inspired by Indian knowledge traditions.
3. **Global Knowledge Sharing:** The mission will enable **international access** to India's **manuscript heritage**, fostering cultural and academic exchanges.



About Manuscripts



A manuscript is a **handwritten** document on materials like **paper, bark, palm leaf, cloth, or metal**, dating back at **least 75 years** with **scientific, historical, or aesthetic significance**.

Key Features:

1. **Distinct from Historical Records:** Unlike epigraphs, revenue records, or firmans (royal decrees), manuscripts focus on **knowledge and literature** rather than direct historical events.
 - ▶ **Preserving Ancient Wisdom:** Indian manuscripts contain knowledge in Vedas, Upanishads, Ayurveda, astronomy, mathematics, and music.
 - ▶ Ancient medical manuscripts like **Charaka Samhita and Sushruta Samhita** have contributed to modern medicine and surgery.
2. **Multiple Languages & Scripts:** Manuscripts exist in **various Indian languages and scripts** such as Sanskrit (Devanagari, Grantha, Sharada), Tamil (Vatteluttu), Odia, Persian, Arabic, and Prakrit. This diversity reflects India's pluralistic intellectual tradition.
 - ▶ The Tolkappiyam (Tamil Grammar, 1st BCE) manuscript preserved ancient Dravidian linguistic traditions.
 - ▶ Pali Canon Manuscripts are the oldest records of Buddha’s teachings.
3. **Exclusions:** Lithographs and printed books **are not considered manuscripts**.
 - ▶ Lithographs are prints created using lithography, a printing technique where images are drawn on a flat stone or metal plate with oil-based ink and transferred onto paper.

Manuscript Digitization Projects:

- Institutions like **IGNCA** (Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts) and Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute (BORI) digitize ancient texts.
- Example: Kashi Sanskrit University has digitized over 95,000 manuscripts.

Funding: To accommodate the GBM, funding for the **National Manuscripts Mission (NMM)**- established in 2003 by Ministry of Tourism and Culture to unearth and preserve the vast manuscript wealth of India) has been **significantly increased** from **₹3.5 crore to ₹60 crore**.

✓ NMM is currently part of the **Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA)**.

Culture Ministry Budget Highlights

- **Total allocation:** ₹3,360.96 crore (₹100 crore increase from last year).
- **Archaeological Survey of India (ASI):** ₹1,278.49 crore for conservation efforts.
- **National libraries & archives:** ₹156.55 crore for preserving historical records.
- **Museums (National Museum & National Gallery of Modern Art):** ₹126.63 crore for cultural preservation.

PRASHAD Scheme

A Parliamentary committee, citing slow progress in **Spiritual Tourism Circuits** under the Pilgrimage Rejuvenation and Spiritual Heritage Augmentation Drive (**PRASHAD**) scheme, has urged the government to establish a clear Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) and secure prior approvals for timely project completion.

- ✓ The Ministry of Tourism launched the Spiritual Tourism Circuits under the **Swadesh Darshan Scheme** to promote spiritual and religious tourism.
- ✓ The Parliamentary Standing Committee on Transport, Tourism, and Culture noted that five of the 23 Spiritual Circuits remain incomplete, with two in Kerala—the Sabarimala–Erumeli–Pampa–Sannidhanam and Sivagiri Sree Narayana Guru Ashram circuits—lagging behind schedule since their initiation in 2016-17 and 2018-19, respectively.

Implementation Hurdles in PRASHAD Scheme

1. **Delayed Project Completion:** Slow approvals and bureaucratic red tape hinder project timelines. For example, Spiritual Tourism Circuits like the Sabarimala–Erumeli–Pampa–Sannidhanam Circuit in Kerala remain incomplete despite work starting in 2016-17.
2. **Lack of Coordination & Standard Operating Procedure (SOP):** Multiple agencies (Tourism Ministry, State Governments, local authorities) are involved, leading to overlaps and inefficiencies. Poor interdepartmental communication also causes delays in clearances.
3. **Funding and Resource Constraints:** Although 100% publicly funded, projects often struggle with inadequate fund allocation and delayed disbursements. CSR and PPP contributions are not consistent, affecting private sector involvement.

About PRASHAD Scheme

- It was launched by the **Ministry of Tourism in 2014** as “PRASAD” to **preserve cultural heritage** and enhance **spiritual tourism** at **identified pilgrimage destinations** across India.
 - In October 2017, the scheme was redesignated as the National Mission on Pilgrimage Rejuvenation and Spiritual Heritage Augmentation Drive (PRASHAD).
- Upon the discontinuation of the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development’s HRIDAY scheme, the development of heritage destinations was integrated into the PRASAD scheme.
 - PRASHAD scheme operates **as a Central Sector Scheme**, with the Ministry of Tourism providing 100% financial assistance to state governments and UT administrations for sanctioned projects.
 - Additionally, the scheme encourages contributions through **Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)** initiatives and **Public-Private Partnerships (PPP)** to enhance project sustainability

Objectives:

1. **Infrastructure Development & Sustainable Tourism:** To strengthen water supply, sanitation, waste management and other services at pilgrimage sites (eco-friendly and responsible tourism).
2. **Improved Connectivity** through **road, rail, and air travel**
3. **Site Conservation:** by implementing **preservation projects** for culturally and spiritually significant pilgrimage sites.
4. **Promotion of Cultural & Religious Heritage:** by showcasing the **historical, religious, and spiritual significance** of pilgrimage sites to attract domestic and international tourists.
5. **Community Development:** through **Skill development and livelihood generation** programs for local communities involved in pilgrimage tourism.

4. **Infrastructure and Connectivity Issues:** Poor Road, rail, and air connectivity in remote pilgrimage destinations. Insufficient transport and accommodation facilities for tourists.
5. **Environmental and Heritage Conservation Concerns:** Unregulated tourism at religious sites leads to pollution, overcrowding, and damage to heritage structures. Lack of proper waste management systems increases environmental degradation.
6. **Community Engagement and Local Opposition:** Local communities are sometimes not adequately consulted, leading to resistance in project implementation. Lack of awareness and skill development programs affect livelihood benefits.

Way Forward

- **Streamline approvals** and ensure **timely fund disbursal**.
- Strengthen **inter-agency coordination** between **state and central authorities**.
- Improve **last-mile connectivity** and sustainable infrastructure.
- Implement **strict heritage conservation policies** to prevent environmental damage.
- **Enhance community participation** through training and employment opportunities.

National Commission for Safai Karamcharis (NCSK)

The Union Cabinet recently approved a three-year extension of tenure (until March 31, 2028) for the National Commission for Safai Karamcharis (NCSK).

Key Functions and Responsibilities

1. Advisory Role & Policy Recommendations:

It suggests programmes to the government for eliminating inequalities in status, facilities, and opportunities for Safai Karamcharis and recommends measures for their social and economic upliftment.

2. Monitoring & Evaluation:

It reviews the implementation of welfare schemes and rehabilitation programmes for Safai Karamcharis and assess their working conditions, wages, health, and safety in different employment sectors (government, municipalities, panchayats, etc.).

3. Addressing Grievances:

It investigates complaints related to the non-implementation of welfare schemes, legal provisions, and government decisions and takes Suo-motu action on matters affecting Safai Karamcharis.

4. Implementation of the Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and Their Rehabilitation Act, 2013:

It ensures enforcement of the law that bans manual scavenging and inquires into violations of the Act and advises the government on its effective implementation.

5. Supreme Court (SC) Directives on Compensation:

It monitors the implementation of the 2023 Supreme Court's judgment on sewer deaths in Dr. Balram Singh & Ors vs. Union of India, ensures compensation of ₹30 lakh for sewer death victims and of ₹10-20 lakh for sewer workers with disabilities.

About NCSK

It is a government body set up in 1994 under the **National Commission for Safai Karamcharis Act, 1993** that works for the welfare and rights of **Safai Karamcharis** (sanitation workers) to implement provisions of the law prohibiting manual scavenging across the country.

Legal Status: It functioned as a **statutory body** until 2004, when the NCSK Act lapsed. Since then, it has been operating as a **non-statutory body** under the **Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment**, with its tenure extended periodically.

Structure of NCSK: The Commission consists of:

- ▣ Chairperson (rank of Union Minister of State)
- ▣ Vice-Chairperson (rank of Secretary to Govt. of India)
- ▣ Five Members, including one lady member (rank of Secretary to Govt. of India)
- ▣ Secretary (rank of Joint Secretary to Govt. of India)

Recent Developments and Challenges

- **Non-Statutory Status:** Operating without statutory authority since 2004 has limited the Commission's enforcement capabilities, necessitating periodic extensions of its tenure.

- **Resource Constraints:** The Commission often contends with limited financial and human resources, impacting its operational efficiency and outreach.
- **Persistent Hazardous Practices:** Manual scavenging and unsafe sewer cleaning practices continue in various regions. Between 2020 and 2024, there were 294 reported sewer-related deaths in India.

Extra Mile: Various Initiatives for Sanitation Workers

- **National Action for Mechanized Sanitation Ecosystem (NAMASTE):** Launched in 2022 as a Central Sector Scheme. It aims to eliminate hazardous manual cleaning of sewers and septic tanks by promoting mechanization and ensuring the safety of sanitation workers.
- **GARIMA Scheme:** Launched by the Odisha state government in 2020, the GARIMA scheme focuses on the safety and dignity of core sanitation workers.
- **Sanitation Workers Rehabilitation Scheme (SWRS):** Implemented by the National Safai Karamcharis Finance and Development Corporation (NSKFDC), SWRS provides financial assistance to sanitation workers.
- **Social Security and Welfare Schemes:** Various social security initiatives have been extended to sanitation workers, including:
 - ✓ **Pradhan Mantri Jeevan Jyoti Bima Yojana:** Life insurance coverage at nominal premiums.
 - ✓ **Pradhan Mantri Suraksha Bima Yojana:** Accidental death and disability insurance.
 - ✓ **Atal Pension Yojana:** A pension scheme ensuring financial security post-retirement.
- **Swachh Bharat Mission 2.0** guidelines direct MoHUA to emphasize sanitation worker well-being, prompting ULBs to improve occupational safety.

Bifurcating Railway Zones

Recently, the Union Cabinet granted ex post facto approval for the establishment of the new South Coast Railway (SCoR) Zone with its headquarters in Visakhapatnam, Andhra Pradesh.

- ✓ The SCoR zone will be the 18th zone of the Indian Railways. Its jurisdiction has been carved out from parts of the East Coast Railway and South-Central Railway zones.
- ✓ The Cabinet also split **Waltair Railway Division** (earlier under the East Coast Railway), among the largest revenue-generating areas of the Indian Railways, into two parts, renaming one part Visakhapatnam under the new zone and creating a Rayaqada division under East Coast Railway.

Why was the new railway zone announced?

The new railway zone was announced as per the Andhra Pradesh Reorganization Act of 2014 (mandated the examination of a new railway zone following the state's bifurcation) to enhance operational efficiency, support regional growth, boost logistics for major ports, and promote tourism. Its implementation aligns with the current state-Centre political dynamics.

What divisions will the SCoR zone include?

The SCoR Zone will include Vijayawada and Guntur divisions (from South Central Railway) and Visakhapatnam Division (part of Waltair). It will cover key sections in Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, and Tamil Nadu, spanning around 410 km of the former Waltair Division.

Significance of Waltair Division

It is a key revenue generator due to its freight traffic from Odisha and Chhattisgarh's mining and steel industries. In 2023-24, it contributed 74.66 million tonnes to East Coast Railway's record 250 million tonnes of freight loading. The move to transfer its revenue-rich section to South Coast Railway has sparked criticism from Odisha's opposition leaders over economic concerns.

Appointment of the New Chief Election Commissioner (CEC)

Gyanesh Kumar, a 1988-batch Kerala cadre IAS officer and former cooperation ministry secretary, has been appointed as India's 26th Chief Election Commissioner (CEC). He is the first CEC to be appointed under the Chief

Election Commissioner and Other Election Commissioners (Appointment, Conditions of Service and Term of Office) Act, 2023.

About the Chief Election Commissioner and Other Election Commissioners Act, 2023

It introduced significant changes to the selection process, salary structure, and eligibility criteria for appointing Election Commissioners in India.

New Selection Process for CEC & ECs	Previous Appointment Process
<p>The CEC and Election Commissioners (ECs) are now appointed by the President based on the recommendation of a selection committee comprising:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Prime Minister (PM- the Chairperson) A Union Cabinet Minister (nominated by the PM) Leader of Opposition (LoP) or leader of the largest opposition party in Lok Sabha <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ The selection is made from a list of five persons prepared by a Search Committee headed by the Minister of Law and Justice and comprising two other members not below the rank of Secretary to the Government of India. ✓ The <i>Selection Committee may go beyond the names suggested by the Search Committee and choose any other candidate.</i> ✓ The appointment of the CEC and ECs remains valid despite any vacancy or defect in the Selection Committee's constitution. 	<p>Earlier, the Election Commission (Conditions of Service of Election Commissioners and Transaction of Business) Act, 1991 governed the service conditions of Election Commissioners but did not define a selection process.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The President appointed the CEC and ECs based on the advice of the PM and his Council of Ministers (CoM). • Traditionally, the senior-most Election Commissioner was appointed as the CEC.

Key Changes Under the New Act

- **Salary:** Aligned with Supreme Court (SC) judges. The bill initially proposed it to be equivalent to a *Cabinet Secretary* but after protest by opposition it was decided to **retain** the status on par with Judges of SC
- **Eligibility Criteria** (Newly introduced):
 - Candidates must be of **high integrity**.
 - Must have **experience in managing elections**.
 - Must be **servicing or retired Secretaries (or equivalent) to the Government of India**.

What Remains Unchanged?

- **Tenure & Reappointment:** Unchanged at six years or until 65 years of age, whichever is earlier, with no reappointment.
- **Removal:** The CEC can be removed from office in like manner and on like grounds as a SC judge (Article 324(5) of Indian Constitution), while ECs can only be removed on the CEC's recommendation.

Why Was the Process Changed?

In the **Anoop Baranwal vs. Union of India case**, the SC ruled that the Election Commission of India (ECI) must be independent and recommended a collegium-style selection process, including PM, LoP and the Chief Justice of India (CJI). However, Parliament passed the 2023 Act, replacing the CJI with a Union Minister, giving the Executive greater control over appointments.

Controversy & Legal Challenge: Several petitions, including one by Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR), challenged the law in the SC, arguing that it weakens the ECI's independence. The SC refused to stay the law but agreed to hear the case. A verdict is pending.

- ✓ The current appointment came hours after LoP Rahul Gandhi, while submitting a dissent note urged a delay in the appointment until the SC's ruling in the case.

Concerns Raised Regarding the CEC and Other ECs Act, 2023

- **Government Dominance in Selection Committee:** The 2023 Act removed CJJ's presence, increasing executive control. The Selection Committee gives the ruling government a majority, reducing the Election Commission's independence.
 - ✓ In tribunals, from past cases, removing judicial members from selection panels has led to legal challenges regarding fairness.
- **Power to Ignore Search Committee's Recommendations:** with the Selection Committee to pick candidates outside the suggested panel weakens the Search Committee's role in ensuring qualified and impartial appointments.
 - ✓ This provision opens doors for politically favorable appointments. **Example:** In the CBI selection, ignoring the empaneled list has led to allegations of favoritism.
- **Risk of Government Influence Over Salary:** Earlier, the CEC & ECs' salary was equal to that of SC judges, fixed by Parliament. The bill links their salary to a Cabinet Secretary, which is controlled by the government, increasing potential Executive influence. This provision was later removed in the Act
- **Narrow Eligibility Criteria:** Only those who have served as government secretaries (or equivalent) can be appointed. This excludes legal experts, election specialists, and other qualified individuals who could strengthen electoral oversight. Bureaucrats may be influenced by past government affiliations.
- **Lack of Parity in Removal Process among CEC & EC:** The CEC can only be removed like a SC judge whereas ECs can be removed on the CEC's recommendation. This creates an imbalance despite both having equal decision-making powers.
 - ✓ A pro-government CEC could recommend removing ECs who oppose government actions.
- **Functioning of Selection Committee with Vacancies:** If the LoP position is vacant (e.g., before elections), the committee will consist only of government members, affecting neutrality in decision making.
- **Administrative Independence Not Addressed:** Recommendations for an independent ECI secretariat (like Parliament or the SC) were ignored, keeping the ECI dependent on the government for resources.

Way Forward

- **Enhancing Selection Committee Balance** by including neutral members like the CJJ.
- **Expanding Eligibility Criteria** to include legal experts, election specialists, and retired judges.
- **Restoring Salary Parity** with SC judges to ensure financial independence.
- **Reviewing Removal Process** to ensure removal procedures are in line with constitutional principles of fairness and independence.
- **Establishing Periodic Oversight** to assess Act's impact on electoral integrity and recommend improvements.

National Geospatial Knowledge Based Land Survey of Urban Habitation (NAKSHA)

Ministry for Rural Development and Agriculture & Farmers' Welfare inaugurated the **National Geospatial Knowledge-based Land Survey of Urban Habitations (NAKSHA)** pilot program for urban land surveys in Raisen, Madhya Pradesh.

About NAKSHA

It is a pilot program under the **Digital India Land Records Modernization Programme (DILRMP)** for modernizing urban land records being implemented in **152 Urban Local Bodies (ULBs) across 26 States and 3 UTs.**

Context & Significance of NAKSHA

- **Urbanization & Land Governance:** As per World Bank Report, India is urbanizing rapidly. By 2036, its towns and cities will be home to 600 million people, or 40 percent of the population, up from 31 percent in 2011, with urban areas contributing almost 70 percent to GDP.
 - ✓ Efficient land records management is crucial to avoid disputes, promote planned development, and improve governance.
- **Digital India & Urban Land Records:** While rural land records have seen major reforms under SVAMITVA (Survey of Villages Abadi and Mapping with Improved Technology in Village Areas), urban land governance remains fragmented.
- **Global Best Practices:** The UK's Ordnance Survey & US Land Parcel Data Project have demonstrated the benefits of geospatial mapping for urban planning.

Key Objectives

- **Accurate & Reliable Land Records** – for ensuring proper documentation of urban land ownership.
- **Empowering Citizens & Ease of Living** – by reducing land disputes and simplifying property administration.
 - ✓ According to the NITI Aayog, over 66% of civil cases in India are related to land and property disputes,
- **Enhanced Urban Planning** – through better infrastructure, transportation, and flood management.
 - ✓ The revenues of the Greater Hyderabad Municipal Corporation are set to rise by 50-80% in the near future following the survey of properties undertaken by the corporation through the use of Geographic Information System (GIS).
- **IT-Driven Transparency** – through Web-based property record system for efficient governance.
 - ✓ LiDAR & AI Integration: Offers high-resolution mapping, detecting encroachments.
 - ✓ Blockchain for Land Titles: Future scope for tamper-proof land registry

Funding: ₹194 crore project, fully funded by the Government of India.

Implementation & Technology	Survey Methods
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Survey of India (SoI) is the technical partner, responsible for aerial surveys and providing orthorectified imagery through third-party vendors.• Madhya Pradesh State Electronic Development Corporation (MPSEDC) will develop an end-to-end Web-GIS platform.• National Informatics Centre Services Inc. (NICSI) will provide data storage facilities.• State & UT governments will conduct field surveys and ground validation to finalize urban land records.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Aerial & Satellite-Based Surveys using LiDAR (Light Detection and Ranging) and 3D imaging for high-precision mapping.• 2D/3D GIS Data Generation for property boundaries, buildings, roads, and public utilities.• Ground Surveys using GPS and geospatial tools for validation.

Digital Brand Identity Manual

The Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY) recently launched the Digital Brand Identity Manual (DBIM) marking a significant step in India's digital governance.

About Digital Brand Identity Manual (DBIM)

It is a government initiative aimed at creating a standardized, cohesive, and citizen-centric digital presence across all ministries, departments, and agencies. It aligns with the government's "Minimum Government, Maximum Governance" philosophy by introducing "Uniform Governance," ensuring **consistency in digital communication and service delivery**.

Key Objectives of DBIM

1. **Standardizing government websites & platforms** for a uniform and user-friendly digital presence.
2. **Enhancing digital governance** by making services more *accessible and inclusive*.
3. **Streamlining government communication** through centralized content governance.
4. **Leveraging technology for modernization** using AI-driven tools and robust security measures.
5. **Better Public Engagement:** through consistent messaging across digital channels.
6. **Federalism & Policy Coordination:** Ensures inter-ministerial coordination in digital branding across states & UTs and Reduces bureaucratic inefficiencies by implementing a one-nation, one-digital identity framework.
 - ✓ Kerala's e-Governance Initiative (**e-Sevanam**) – A state-driven digital service under DBIM standards.

Key Components of DBIM	Key Features of DBIM
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • DBIM Toolkit – A set of tools enabling seamless adoption of DBIM defining standards for color palettes, typography, and iconography, ensuring a uniform look and feel of government websites and strengthening the integrity of government-hosted data. • Gov.in CMS Platform – A content management system (CMS) for streamlined website governance. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Several ministry websites have already migrated to the Gov.in CMS platform, with more expected to follow. • CCPS (Central Content Publishing System) – A system for centralized content governance across ministries. • Social Media Campaign Guidelines – Establishes uniform standards for digital communication on websites, mobile applications and social media platforms. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Technological Modernization: The National Informatics Centre (NIC) plays a crucial role in providing technological support to modernize government infrastructure. Example: UIDAI (Aadhaar Portal) and DigiLocker. • Security & Innovation: Leverages AI-driven tools and robust security measures for a future-ready digital ecosystem. • Service delivery: With the digital economy projected to reach 20% of GDP, DBIM encourages ministries to adopt digital tools for efficient service delivery. Example, Unified Payments Interface (UPI), ONDC

Extra Mile: Chief Information Officer (CIO) Conference 2025

The **First Chief Information Officer (CIO) Conference 2025** was held in New Delhi recently alongside the launch of DBIM brought together experts from **MeitY, NIC, MyGov, and various ministries** to discuss the **adoption of DBIM**. Key discussions revolved around:

- Creating a **unified digital brand identity** across government websites.
- Managing websites on the **Gov.In platform** for better accessibility and performance.
- **Localizing content** to make digital services more inclusive.
 - ✓ **UMANG App** (Unified Mobile Application for Governance) – Multilingual support for rural citizens.
- Ensuring compliance with **Guidelines for Indian Government Websites and Apps (GIGW)** and **Standardization Testing and Quality Certification (STQC) certification** for quality assurance.
- **International Best Practices & Global Alignment:** Aligns with UN E-Government Development Index principles and Supports India's G20 Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI) agenda.
 - ✓ Estonia's X-Road Platform – A global model for interoperable digital governance adopted in India.

Losing Membership of Parliament (MP) under Article 101(4)

Incarcerated Khadoor Sahib MP Amritpal Singh has moved the Punjab & Haryana High Court (HC) seeking permission to attend the ongoing Parliament session, fearing loss of his seat under Article 101(4) due to prolonged absence.

- ✓ Article 101(4) states that if an MP of either House of Parliament misses all meetings of the house for 60 days without its permission, excluding periods when the House is prorogued or adjourned for over four days then the House may declare his seat vacant.
- ✓ Amritpal Singh, detained in Dibrugarh under the National Security Act (NSA) since April 2023, won the 2024 Lok Sabha election from prison but has only 2% attendance, as per PRS Legislative Research.

About National Security Act (NSA), 1980

The NSA has roots in the Defence of India Act, 1915, and Preventive Detention Act, 1950 (lapsed in 1969).

The NSA allows for preventive detention to maintain national security and public order.

Key Provisions:

- 1. Detention:** The **Central (National Security and Defense (Entry 1, Union List)) or State Government (Public Order (Entry 1, State List))** can **detain any person** posing a threat to **national security, public order, India's relations with foreign powers or essential services**.
 - ✓ **District Magistrates or Police Commissioners** may also issue detention orders for up to **three months**, extendable with government approval. Detention orders must be **reported to the State Government within 12 days** and to the **Central Government within 7 days** if approved.
- 2. Grounds for Detention:** Authorities must **inform a detained person of the reasons for detention** within **5 days (or 15 days in exceptional cases with written justification)** and provide an **opportunity to appeal** to the government.
- 3. Validity of Detention Orders:** A detention order **remains valid** even if:
 - (a) The detained person is **outside the issuing authority's jurisdiction**.
 - (b) The **detention location is outside the jurisdiction** of the issuing authority.
- 4. Advisory Board:** Central and State Governments **constitute Advisory Boards** when needed. Each board has **three High Court judges or qualified persons**, with one appointed as **Chairman**. Governments must present detention cases within **three weeks** of detention to the Boards which review materials, seek further details if needed, and **submit reports within seven weeks**. If **detention is justified**, the government may **continue detention** as needed otherwise the person must be released **immediately**.
 - ✓ Proceedings and reports remain **confidential**, and detainees **cannot have legal representation** before the Advisory Board.
- 5. Temporary Release:** The government may temporarily release a detained person with or without conditions and can revoke the release anytime for this purpose, the person may need to sign a bond and must surrender as directed. Failure to comply can result in **up to two years' imprisonment, a fine, or both**, and forfeiture of the bond.
- 6. Protection Clause:** No legal action can be taken against officials if they acted **in good faith** under NSA provisions.

Is There Any Previous Instance where an MP has Lost his/her Seat under Article 101(4)?

No, as per former Lok Sabha Secretary General P D T Achary, Article 101(4) has never been invoked in the history of the parliament.

- ✓ Other constitutional provisions (like defection under the Tenth Schedule or criminal disqualification under RPA, 1951) have led to MPs losing their seats.
- ✓ Suspensions vs. Disqualifications – Many MPs have been suspended for disruptions but not disqualified for absence.

Is There Any Other Option Available with the MPs to Avoid Losing Their Seat?

Yes, the key term in **Article 101(4)** is “**without permission of the House**”. Therefore, MPs with long absences seek approval from the **Committee on Absence of Members**.

What is Committee on Absence of Members?

- It reviews and makes recommendations on each leave application, which are then ratified by the House concerned. These applications are rarely rejected.
- MPs have previously been granted leave for **illness or imprisonment**, for instance **Ghosi MP Atul Rai in 2023** got permission to remain absent on 23 consecutive sittings of Parliament due to imprisonment.

What if an MP is Absent for more than 60 Days?

Even after 60 days of absence, the House must vote to declare a seat vacant. In the case of Amritpal Singh, this voting aspect can prevent him from losing his seat.

National Dam Safety Authority (NDSA)

The Supreme Court (SC) recently directed a supervisory committee, led by the National Dam Safety Authority (NDSA) chief, to examine Tamil Nadu's concerns over Kerala's maintenance of the 125-year-old Mullaperiyar dam.

About NDSA

Headquartered in New Delhi, the NDSA was established under the **Dam Safety Act, 2021 as part of a 4-tiered institutional mechanism**. It came into force in **2022** and aims to **maintain dam safety standards, prevent dam-related disasters, and resolve inter-state disputes** regarding dam management.

4-tiered institutional mechanism under Dam Safety Act, 2021

It consists of: **1) National Committee on Dam Safety (NCDS); 2) NDSA; 3) State Committee on Dam Safety (SCDS); and 4) State Dam Safety Organization (SDSO).**

- **National Committee on Dam Safety (NCDS)-Apex body at the national level:** It advises on policies and regulations for dam safety; reviews dam safety measures and standards. Chairman of Central Water Commission is the ex officio Chairman of NCDS.
- **NDSA acts as a regulatory authority to implement policies, guidelines, and standards devised by the NCDS.**
- **State Committee on Dam Safety (SCDS): Apex advisory body at the state level:** It reviews and advises on safety measures for dams in the state and ensures implementation of safety guidelines and standards.
- **State Dam Safety Organization (SDSO):** It is the technical arm of the state government. It conducts inspections and risk assessment of dams and enforces dam safety standards and regulations.

- ✓ As per the National Register of Large Dams compiled by the Central Water Commission, India has 5745 nos. of dams (5334 are completed and 411 are under construction stage).
- ✓ In terms of Dams, India is the third largest country in the world after the USA and China.
- ✓ Over 80% of large dams are more than 25 years old, and over 200 dams exceed 100 years, leading to structural weaknesses and heightened safety concerns.

Functions & Responsibilities

- **Regulates, oversees, and inspects dams** to ensure safety.
 - ✓ The Hirakud Dam (Odisha) has experienced sedimentation issues. NDSA can guide de-siltation efforts to improve its long-term viability.
- **Resolves disputes** between **State Dam Safety Organizations (SDSOs)** or between an SDSO and a **dam owner**. Krishna and Godavari River disputes have often seen conflicts over dam operations. NDSA provides a framework to ensure scientific, data-driven solutions.
- **Conducts awareness programs** to educate citizens on dam safety.

- **Ensure emergency response plans** are in place for natural disasters or unforeseen events.

Structure & Leadership: Headed by a **Chairman**, it is supported by **five members** leading:

Policy & Research	Technical	Regulation	Disaster & Resilience	Administration & Finance
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Remission Without Application

The Supreme Court (SC) recently directed states with remission policies to consider the premature release of prisoners even if they don't apply for remission beforehand. The ruling, delivered in the *Suo motu* case *In Re: Policy Strategy for Grant of Bail*, aims to address prison overcrowding.

- ✓ **Remission** refers to the reduction of the duration of a prison sentence for a convicted person. This does not remove the conviction but shortens the punishment period based on legal provisions. It is granted based on good conduct, age, health, or humanitarian considerations.
- ✓ Unlike parole or furlough, remission leads to early release without any obligation to return to jail.

Legal Provisions for Remission

- **State Government's Power of Remission:** Section 473 of the BNSS (Bhartiya Nyaya Suraksha Sanhita, 2023) and Section 432 of the CrPC (Code of Criminal Procedure, 1973) empower state governments to remit sentences "at any time."
 - Govt. can attach **conditions** to the remission, such as requiring the convict to report regularly to the police.
 - If the convict violates these conditions, the remission can be canceled, and the person can be re-arrested without a warrant.
- **Restriction on Remission for Certain Convicts: Section 475 of the BNSS (and Section 433A of the CrPC)** places restrictions on remission for convicts sentenced to **life imprisonment** for offenses punishable by **death**. Such convicts **must serve at least 14 years in prison** before they become eligible for remission.
- ** The BNSS and the CrPC mention that the remission process starts "Whenever an application is made to the appropriate Government" from the convict.
- ** Countries like Germany & Canada have successful early release programs with job placement assistance.

Presidential & Governor's Clemency Powers

- The **President (Article 72)** and the **Governor (Article 161)** of India also have the power to grant remission, but these are separate from the state government's remission powers.
- The President and Governors can consider factors beyond legal provisions, such as humanitarian grounds.

The SC Verdict on Remission

1. **Obligation of States to Consider Remission:** The SC ruled that states **must** consider remission for eligible convicts under their remission policies and should not wait for convicts to apply for remission. Failing to exercise discretion in granting remission would violate Article 14 (Right to Equality) of the Indian Constitution.
2. **Distinction from Past Judgments:** The court reconsidered its rulings in *Sangeet v. State of Haryana (2013)* and *Mohinder Singh v. State of Punjab (2013)*, which required an application for remission. It noted that these cases **did not address** situations where a **government policy** mandates remission. The ruling emphasized that some **state prison manuals** require prison officials to initiate remission proceedings.
3. **Mandatory Remission Policies by States:** It directed all states to create a **comprehensive remission policy** within **two months** if they do not already have one providing clear **eligibility criteria** for remission.
4. **Guidelines for Remission Conditions:** The court set guidelines to ensure remission conditions are fair and reasonable i.e. the guidelines-
 - Must consider **the motive of the crime, criminal background, and public safety**.
 - Should focus on **rehabilitation** and preventing repeat offenses.

- Must not be **overly strict** or vague, making remission unattainable.
 - Should be **reasonable and enforceable**.
5. **Protection Against Arbitrary Cancellation of Remission:** Referring to *Mafabhai Motibhai Sagar v. State of Gujarat (2024)*, the court ruled that remission should not be **automatically canceled** for minor breaches. Convicts must be given notice explaining the reasons for the cancellation and must have the opportunity to respond before the state revokes their remission.

Implications of SC Verdict on Remission

1. **Increased Accountability for State Governments:** as States will now have to proactively review all eligible cases under existing remission policies and the States without a remission policy will have to formulate one. This will ensure uniform application across the country.
2. **More Structured, fair and Transparent Remission Process:** In *Bilkis Bano case (2022)*, remission was granted selectively, raising concerns over bias and arbitrary decision-making. The ruling eliminates the possibility of arbitrary without considering individual eligibility.
3. **Better Rehabilitation and Reintegration of Convicts:** Now the remission could not be denied based on vague or excessively strict conditions that convicts cannot reasonably meet. Prison authorities will be encouraged to focus on **behavioral reform, vocational training, and counseling** to facilitate eligibility for remission.
 - ✓ **Example:** Programs in Tihar Jail, Delhi, where prisoners engage in skill development and earn degrees, could be expanded nationally.
4. **Protection of Convicts' Rights:** This **prevents misuse** of remission revocation as a punitive tool. Minor or trivial breaches **will not** automatically lead to cancellation, ensuring a fairer approach to discipline.
5. **Strengthening Judicial Oversight:** The judgment reinforces that remission policies must align with **constitutional principles of fairness and equality**. Courts may intervene if remission is denied arbitrarily or if conditions imposed are unreasonable. This strengthens **judicial review** over remission policies.
6. **Impact on Prison Administration:** It places **greater responsibility** on prison authorities to assess convicts' eligibility based on **objective criteria** and **encourages better prison management**, as remission incentivizes **good behavior and rehabilitation efforts**.
7. **Uniformity in Remission Policies Across India:** Since all states must establish **exhaustive remission policies**, disparities in how remission is granted will reduce. The verdict will ensure a **consistent approach** to premature release of convicts across different states, making the system more predictable and fairer.
8. **Impact on Prison Overcrowding:** India's prisons are severely overcrowded, with a **131.4% occupancy rate** (5,73,220 inmates against a capacity of 4,36,266) according to National Crime Records Bureau data from 2022. This ruling on remission could help **reduce overcrowding**, but its impact may be limited since **75.8% of inmates are undertrials** who are not eligible for remission.

Maharashtra Protection of Interest of Depositors (MPID) Act, 1999

Mumbai Police's Economic Offences Wing (EOW) will auction seized assets under the **MPID Act**, aiming to return **₹40 crore** to defrauded investors in the Torres Ponzi scam within six months. The **MPID Act** facilitates asset attachment and distribution in fraud cases.

Case Background

- **Fraudulent Investment Schemes:** Torres allegedly ran schemes requiring investors to buy jewellery, promising exorbitant weekly interest rates (up to 500% annually). The company enticed investors with incentives like iPhones, jewellery, luxury bags, cars, and apartments.
- **Sudden Halt in Payments:** In December 2024, all payments ceased, triggering panic and complaints and resulting in thousands protesting outside **Torres outlets in Mumbai**.

- **EOW Investigation:** Mumbai Police's EOW uncovered the Ponzi-style fraud, leading to asset seizures and legal action under the MPID Act.

About MPID Act, 1999

The **MPID Act, 1999** was enacted to protect investors from fraudulent financial establishments that lure people especially from middle-class and poor backgrounds with high returns and then default on payments.

Key Provisions of the Act

1. **Liability for Fraudulent Default:** Any financial establishment that fails to repay deposits or promised benefits (interest, bonus, profit) is liable under the Act. Promoters, partners, directors, managers, and employees involved in the fraud can be held responsible.
2. **Penalty:** If convicted, those involved may face up to six years of imprisonment and a fine up to ₹1 lakh.
3. **Attachment and Sale of Assets:** It empowers the government to attach assets of fraudulent financial firms, with courts finalizing the attachment. Once confirmed, courts can order asset sales for equitable distribution among depositors. Its swift process sets it apart from traditional criminal fraud laws.

Legal Challenges and Supreme Court Rulings

- **2005:** The Bombay High Court (HC) declared the MPID Act unconstitutional, stating that it conflicted with central laws like the Companies Act, 1956 and RBI Act, 1934.
- **2011:** Supreme Court (SC) overturned the HC ruling, holding the MPID Act constitutionally valid. It ruled that:
 - Fraudulent firms covered under the Act did not have RBI licenses.
 - The central laws did not regulate such fraudulent financial establishments.
 - MPID Act provides a speedy & effective remedy for depositors, unlike long-drawn conventional legal proceedings.
- **2022:** The SC reaffirmed the validity of the MPID Act.

Blocking of Tamil Magazine "Vikatan"

The Vikatan website became inaccessible on February 15 after BJP Tamil Nadu chief complained to Information & Broadcasting (I&B) Minister about a cartoon of Prime Minister (PM) Modi and Trump. The magazine and CM M.K. Stalin condemned it as an attack on free expression.

Background

- **Cartoon Depiction:** The February 10 edition of Vikatan Plus featured a cartoon of PM Narendra Modi shackled in chains, seated next to former U.S. President Donald Trump.
- **Context:** The shackling symbolized the plight of Indian migrants deported from the U.S. in chains aboard military planes.
- **Political Reaction:** BJP Tamil Nadu chief escalated the issue, writing to the Ministry of I&B, alleging Vikatan was biased and acting as a DMK mouthpiece.
- **Censorship Concerns:** Following the complaint, Vikatan's website became inaccessible, leading to criticism of the move as an attack on press freedom.
 - **Growing Trend of Digital Censorship:** The blocking of an entire website rather than specific content reflects the challenges of internet governance and regulation.

How Was Vikatan's Website Rendered Unavailable?

- **Blocking:** The **Ministry of I&B instructed the Department of Telecommunications (DoT)** to relay the order to **internet providers and telecom operators**, rendering the site inaccessible under **Section 69A of IT Act, 2000**. Blocking orders were **confidential**- neither Vikatan nor the public received a copy.

- Websites facing a block order **should receive prior notice** allowing them to present their case to a **review committee**.
- **Section 69A of IT Act, 2000** allows the government to **block websites** in the interest of **sovereignty, security, public order, or relations with foreign states**. But the SC in *Shreya Singhal v. Union of India* (2015), emphasized that blocking orders should follow due process and transparency. The lack of prior notice to Vikatan raises concerns about procedural fairness.

Blocking Procedure Under IT Rules, 2009: Ministries and State governments submit blocking requests through a nodal officer. A committee under the IT Ministry reviews the request and decides. If approved, the DoT directs telecom operators to enforce the block.

Difference from Content Removal Rules (IT Rules, 2021): Content removal (social media/streaming services) is governed by the IT Rules, 2021, allowing emergency blocking orders for specific content. However, due to HTTPS encryption, specific content within a website cannot be blocked without cooperation from the publisher—only entire domains can be restricted.

- **Post-Blocking Process:** On **February 16**, Vikatan received a notice under the **2021 IT Rules**, but **this notice did not acknowledge the website's full inaccessibility**.

What can Vikatan do now?

- **Appeal:** Vikatan presented its case during a hearing on February 20 to a review committee, as per the I&B Ministry's notice. If the review committee upholds the block, Vikatan can challenge the decision in the High Court (HC). Similar cases, like *VLC Media Player* in 2022, resulted in unblocking after discussions with the IT Ministry.
- **Legal Challenge:** Vikatan has vowed to challenge the order if the outcome does not align with press freedom principles.

Implications of the Government Blocking Vikatan's Website

- 1. Press Freedom & Censorship Concerns:** The blocking of Vikatan without prior notice **raises concerns over press freedom and government overreach**. It sets a **precedent for silencing critical media** through administrative orders, bypassing judicial scrutiny.
- 2. Lack of Transparency in Website Blocking:** Blocking orders under **Section 69A of the IT Act** are **confidential**, limiting public awareness and accountability. **Vikatan received no prior notice**, violating due process under the **2009 IT Blocking Rules and violating principles of natural justice**.
- 3. Potential Legal and Judicial Scrutiny:** If Vikatan **challenges the order in court**, it could lead to a **judicial review of the government's blocking powers**. The case might **set legal precedents** on how such censorship is applied to the news media.
- 4. Chilling Effect on Media & Digital Platforms:** The incident could **intimidate other media houses**, discouraging them from publishing **critical content** against the government. Digital platforms may **self-censor** to avoid being blocked, affecting free speech online.
 - ✓ Digital platforms, depend on internet access. Blocking their websites affects their reach, revenue, and credibility.
- 5. International Reputation & Democratic Values:** India's **global image as a democracy** may suffer if media censorship continues. It could invite **international criticism** from press freedom organizations like **Reporters Without Borders**.
 - ✓ India ranked 159th out of 180 nations in the 2024 Press Freedom Index by Reporters Without Borders.

Legal Action Against Amazon Web Services (AWS)

Bengaluru-based Adarsh Developers has filed a complaint against Amazon Web Services (AWS) over the loss of years' worth of company and customer data, leading to a financial loss exceeding ₹100 crores. The case raises

concerns about cloud storage security, data backup practices, and legal accountability in enterprise cloud services.

Background

- Adarsh Developers filed an FIR on February 11 against AWS after its entire SAP S/4HANA environment was deleted on January 9, 2025, leading to estimated losses of ₹150 crores.
- The company alleges that AWS representatives advised an upgrade for security in May 2023, but its financial, customer, and operational data was later erased, disrupting business completely.
- AWS has denied Adarsh Developers' allegations, stating it "operated as designed" and was "not responsible" for the data deletion. AWS also informed Adarsh that the data could not be restored, prompting legal action.
- A case has been registered under the Information Technology (IT) Act and sections on fraud and impersonation under the Bhartiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS).
 - ✓ Section 43A of the BNS also provides for compensation to be paid to the affected users by the corporate body for failure to protect sensitive personal information causing wrongful gain or wrongful loss to any person.
 - ✓ Section 72A of BNS: Punishment for disclosure of personal information in breach of lawful contract.
 - ✓ Section 66 of the Information Technology Act (IT Act) in India primarily covers acts related to hacking and data destruction, meaning that anyone who dishonestly or fraudulently performs any act mentioned in Section 43 of the IT Act (which includes unauthorized access to computer systems, data modification, and destruction) can be considered liable under this section.

What might be the Reasons for Missing Data?

- Data loss can result from malicious attacks, human error, or cloud misconfiguration such as poor security settings, bad system architecture, or unmanaged access.
- Adarsh Developers' FIR cites SAVIC's claim that individuals from **Redington and AWS** deleted the account at the root level.
- However, a forensic investigation is needed to determine the exact cause and responsibility, requiring all involved parties—Adarsh, Redington, SAVIC, and AWS—to provide technical evidence.

Jurisprudence on Cloud Data Security

- If the case proceeds to higher courts, it may set precedents for cloud service liability in India.
- Questions such as "Who is responsible for data loss—client, vendor, or cloud provider?" may be clarified.
- **Global Parallel:** In *Google Italy v. Vivi Down* (2010), Google was held accountable for failing to prevent privacy violations on its platform.

Electronic Personnel License (EPL)

Recently, the Civil Aviation Ministry launched **Electronic Personnel License (EPL) for pilots**, making India the **second country after China** to implement this digital system, enhancing aviation **safety, security, and efficiency**.

About EPL

The EPL implementation by the **Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA)** supports the government's **Ease of Doing Business** and **Digital India Initiative**. It simplifies licensing processes and enhances digital governance in aviation.

Key Features

- **Digital Replacement for Physical Licenses:** EPL is a **digital version of a personnel license** that will replace traditional **physical licenses** for pilots. It enhances accessibility and security by eliminating the need for paper-based documentation.

- ✓ In 2011, India's DGCA discovered fake pilot licenses, leading to stricter verification measures. EPL reduces such risks by enabling real-time digital authentication.
- **Secure Access via eGCA Mobile Application:** Pilots can access their licenses securely through the **eGCA Mobile Application**. This ensures a **seamless, transparent, and efficient** licensing process.
- **Compliance with ICAO Standards:** The introduction of EPL follows **International Civil Aviation Organization's (ICAO) Amendment 178 to Annex 1 – Personnel Licensing**. This amendment **encourages Member States to adopt electronic licenses** for enhanced security and efficiency.

About the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO)

ICAO (headquartered in Montreal, Canada) is an intergovernmental specialized agency associated with the United Nations (UN), established in 1947 under the Convention on International Civil Aviation (1944), also known as the Chicago Convention.

- ✓ India was one of the founding members of ICAO. ICAO has 193 member states, facilitating global cooperation in aviation. India was re-elected to the ICAO Council for the 2022–2025 term

Functions of ICAO

- **Ensuring Safe and Efficient Air Transport:** It develops safe and efficient international air transport for peaceful purposes and ensures equal opportunities for all countries to operate international airlines.
 - ✓ ICAO's No Country Left Behind (NCLB) initiative helps developing nations modernize air transport.
- **Setting Global Aviation Standards:** It establishes standards and regulations for:
 - **Aviation safety and security.** MH370 mystery (2014) led to improved tracking requirements for aircraft.
 - **Economic development** of the aviation sector.
 - **Environmental performance** improvements in aviation. Focus on reducing aviation's carbon footprint via Carbon Offsetting and Reduction Scheme for International Aviation (CORSIA).
 - In 2022, ICAO member states agreed to a long-term goal of **net-zero carbon emissions from aviation by 2050**.
- **Promoting International Cooperation:** It acts as a clearinghouse for discussions and cooperation on civil aviation issues among member states. It plays a key role in **airspace sovereignty disputes**, such as between China and Taiwan or India and Pakistan.
- **Liberalizing Aviation Markets:** It encourages regional and international agreements to promote open and competitive aviation markets. Eg. India-US Open Skies Agreement (2005) allows unrestricted flights between the two nations.

Article 371A

A **Meghalaya** regional party has suggested that bringing the State under Article 371 could help lift the 2014 ban on rat-hole coal mining. Article 371 grants special provisions to certain states. It cited **Nagaland's Article 371A**, which protects land, resources, and customary laws, as a model for Meghalaya.

- ✓ Rat-hole mining is a crude, unscientific and hazardous method of coal extraction involving small tunnels, typically 3-4 feet deep, which workers must crawl through to mine coal. It is commonly practiced in Meghalaya despite being banned by the **National Green Tribunal (NGT) in April 2014** due to its environmental and safety hazards.

What is Article 371A?

The state of **Nagaland** was carved out of Assam in 1963 as a result of **16-point agreement** between the Naga People's Convention and the Union of India.

- **Parliamentary Laws & Naga Autonomy:** No Act of Parliament applies to Nagaland regarding:

- **Religious or social practices** of the Nagas.
- **Customary laws and procedures**, including civil and criminal justice.
- **Ownership and transfer of land and resources.**
- Unless **Nagaland's Legislative Assembly** passes a resolution to accept it.
- **Land Ownership:** Non-residents cannot buy land in Nagaland, ensuring protection of indigenous rights and resources.

Significance of Article 371A

- **Protection of Naga Identity & Culture:** It safeguards traditional customs, social practices, and customary laws of the Naga people and ensures that Nagaland's distinct tribal heritage and governance remain untouched by national laws unless approved by the State Assembly.
 - ✓ Naga customary courts handle civil and criminal cases within their communities, limiting the reach of the Indian Penal Code (IPC).
- **Autonomy in Lawmaking:** The Nagaland Legislative Assembly has the power to accept or reject Parliamentary laws related to religious practices, land ownership, and customary laws. Thus, providing self-governance and greater control over legal matters affecting the state.
 - ✓ Nagaland's stance on UCC (Uniform Civil Code): Many Naga groups oppose UCC as it might override their tribal customs.
- **Land and Resource Protection:** It ensures that tribal land and resources remain under local ownership and preserves natural resources from external exploitation.
- **Special Responsibility of the Governor:** The Governor has discretionary powers over law and order, ensuring stability while maintaining the state's unique status. However, this provision has also led to tensions over autonomy between the state government and the Centre.
 - ✓ In 2020, Nagaland demanded the removal of AFSPA, but the Centre continued its enforcement under Governor's authority.
- **Influence on Other States:** It sets a precedent for other Northeastern states seeking special constitutional protections, influencing provisions in states like Arunachal Pradesh (371H), Manipur (371C), and Mizoram (371G).
 - ✓ The Inner Line Permit (ILP) system in Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, and Manipur follows Nagaland's model of restricting non-resident entry.
- **Political and Administrative Stability:** It helps maintain peace and stability by addressing the historical demands of Naga groups for autonomy and plays a role in ongoing negotiations for a permanent Naga political settlement.

Changing Employment Sector in India

- India's middle class after Independence was largely created by the public sector.
- Employment in the **public sector** stood at **194.7 lakh** and that in the **organised private sector** only at **80.6 lakh in 1995**.
- The former — employees in the central and state governments plus quasi-governments (public sector undertakings) and local bodies — fell to 176.1 lakh and the latter rose to 119.7 lakh by 2012.
- The Ministry of Labour & Employment has not compiled or released statistics on organised public and private sector employment after 2011-12 (April-March).
- Even the data last published in the Finance Ministry's Economic Survey for 2018-19 stops at 2011-12.

Middle Class 2.0

- However, the trend of organised employment shifting from the public to private sector — especially post the economic reforms of 1991 — has grown after 2011-12.
- One indicator is the number of regular employees with the Indian Railways, which dropped from 16.5 lakh to 11.9 lakh between 1990-91 and 2022-23
- The reduction in employment with Central public sector enterprises is even sharper, from 22.2 lakh in 1990-91 to just over 8.1 lakh in 2023-24.
- On the other hand, the IT industry rose as the symbol of India's post-reform "second middle class".
- Tata Consultancy Services (TCS) and Infosys already had 45,714 and 36,750 employees respectively at the end of 2004-05, which rose to 4,48,464 and 2,42,371 fifteen years later.

Changing face of employment

Table 1: Closing Headcount at Big-5 IT Companies

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

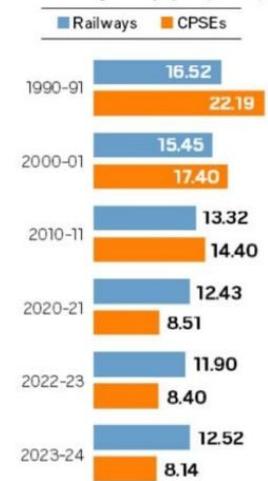
Source: Company quarterly results.

Table 2: Employees in Scheduled Commercial Banks

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

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

Number of regular employees (in lakhs)



Source: Indian Railways and Public Enterprises Survey annual reports.

- However, the real rise took place after Covid-19. As the pandemic triggered increased demand for digitisation even among businesses that were slow in adoption.
- It had a beneficial impact on India's exports of software services and also employment in IT companies.
- The total headcount in the **big-five firms** — TCS, Infosys, Wipro, HCL Technologies and Tech Mahindra — went up from below 11.5 lakh in end-March 2020 to above 16 lakh in end-September 2022.
- Although the numbers have dipped slightly since - 15,34,708 employees as on December 31, 2024. That's more than the 12,52,180 regular employees with the Indian Railways.
- It is also more than the currently estimated 14.2 lakh officers, soldiers, airmen and sailors in the three defence services.

Banking Sector Transformation

- Another, Middle Class 2.0 story is the banking industry. In 1991-92. Public sector banks (PSBs) had an 87% share of nearly 8.5 lakh in scheduled commercial banks
- The period of 2022-23 was a landmark, when private sector banks, for the first time, overtook their state-owned counterparts in employment.
- By end of 2023-24, their employee strength was 8.74 lakh compared to 7.5 lakh of public sector banks.

Employment Challenge

- Simply put, liberalisation and globalisation opened up new industries and opportunities for private enterprise. That, in turn, led to significant employment generation.
- The private sector-led Middle Class 2.0's expansion happened just when the post-Independence government-created Middle Class 1.0 started shrinking with the initiation of reforms.
- **This job generation, however, has had a major limitation. It has mainly been in services.**
- India, unlike China and most industrialised countries, has **not experienced “structural transformation”** involving the large-scale transfer of surplus labour from agriculture to sectors — particularly manufacturing and modern services — where productivity (output value per worker) and average incomes are higher.
- Official Periodic Labour Force Surveys (PLFS) show the **farm sector's share in India's workforce** decreasing from 64% in 1993-94 to 48.9% in 2011-12 and further to 42.5% in 2018-19 but subsequently going up to 46.2% in 2023-24.
- **Manufacturing's share** climbed initially from 10.4% in 1993-94 to 12.6% in 2011-12, only to come down to 11.4% in 2023-24.
- The latest 2023-24 PLFS report reveals the 11.4% share of manufacturing in the total employed labour force to be below that of construction (12%), trade, hotel & restaurants (12.2%) and “other services” (11.9%).
- Thus, while the services sector has expanded, with India even becoming a “back office to the world” (like China is its “factory”), the well-paying jobs have been more for the better educated.
- And not everyone can be a software programmer, doctor, financial analyst, accountant or lawyer. Most services sector jobs are informal and low paying: Construction and headload labour, sanitation, security staffing, domestic help, shop assistant and gig work.
- But these jobs cannot, beyond a point, get people to join the Middle Class 2.0 and this is India's real employment challenge.

Income-tax Bill, 2025

The Income-tax Bill, 2025 was recently introduced in Lok Sabha. It intends to simplify India's six-decade-old structure of direct taxation by streamlining provisions, removing obsolete references, and creating a crisper and simpler legal framework. The simplification exercise is guided by **three core principles**:

- **Textual and structural simplification** for improved clarity and coherence.
- **No major tax policy changes** to ensure continuity and certainty.
- **No modifications of tax rates**, preserving predictability for taxpayers.

Qualitative Improvements

- **Consolidation of amendments**, reducing fragmentation.
- **Removal of obsolete and redundant provisions**
- **Structural rationalization** through tables and formulae for improved readability.

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

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

Aspects of the Bill

- The Bill is 622 pages long, about 24% shorter than the 823-page Income-tax Act (updated until 2024). There are 23 chapters. There are 16 schedules, two more than in the Act.

SCHEDULE II (16 ROWS) Incomes exempt, such as agricultural income

SCHEDULE III (39 ROWS) Certain persons eligible for exemption on certain income such as partners of firms and HUF, etc.

SCHEDULE IV (14 ROWS) Exemptions to non-residents

SCHEDULE V (8 ROWS) Exemption to business trusts, Sovereign Wealth Funds, etc.

SCHEDULE VI (12 ROWS) Exemptions to IFSC units

SCHEDULE VII (48 ROWS) Persons exempt from tax

- And all redundant provisions, including those for capital gains, deductions, and dispute resolution that have seen amendments over the years, omitted.

Concept of Tax Year

- The Bill introduces the concept of “tax year” (instead of assessment year), which has been defined as the 12-month period beginning April 1. Income tax will be levied on the basis of the economic activity and income earned in a tax year.
- In case of a business or a newly-set-up profession, the tax year will begin from the date it was set up and will end with the said financial year.
- At present, income tax has the concept of “assessment year” (AY), which assesses tax on income earned in the “previous (financial) year”.

Social Media Access

- “Virtual digital space” has been defined in the powers to call for information by income tax authorities during surveys, searches and seizures.
- This will include email servers, social media accounts, online investment, trading and banking accounts, remote or cloud servers, and digital application platforms.

Crypto as Property

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

Dispute Resolution

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

Mutual Credit Guarantee Scheme for MSMEs

- The Centre has approved the Mutual Credit Guarantee Scheme for MSMEs (MCGS-MSME) to provide loan guarantee coverage by National Credit Guarantee Trustee Company Limited (**NCGTC**) to Member Lending Institutions (MLIs).
 - *NCGTC was established in 2014, under the Indian Companies Act, 1956, with a paid-up capital of Rs 10 crore. It is a **private limited company** that is fully owned by Govt. of India and operates under the Department of Financial Services, Ministry of Finance.*
- The scheme aims to strengthen the **manufacturing sector** by facilitating collateral free loans by banks and financial institutions to MSMEs who are in need of debt capital for their expansion and growth.
- MLIs include All Scheduled Commercial Banks (SCBs), Non-Banking Financial Companies (NBFCs) and All India Financial institutions (AIFIs) that register with NCGTC under the scheme.

Impact

- Manufacturing sector, currently contributes 17% to the nation’s

Features of the scheme

- It will provide **60% guarantee coverage to MLIs for credit facilities up to Rs 100 crore** to eligible MSMEs for purchase of equipment and machinery. Borrower should be an MSME with a **valid Udyam registration number**.
- Project cost could be of higher amount, but minimum cost of equipment/ machinery has to be 75% of project cost.
- Loan up to Rs 50 crore under the scheme will have repayment period of up to 8 years with up to 2 years moratorium period on principal installments.
- For loans above Rs 50 crore, higher repayment schedule and moratorium period on principal installments can be considered.
- An initial contribution of 5% of the loan amount will have to be deposited at the time of application of guarantee cover.
- Duration: 4 years or till cumulative guarantee of Rs 7 lakh crore are issued, whichever is earlier.

GDP and employs over 27.3 million workers.

- As global supply chains shift, India is emerging as an alternative supply source due to its raw materials, low labour costs, growing manufacturing knowhow, and entrepreneurial ability.
- The scheme addresses the industry's long-standing need for collateral-free loans, enabling MSMEs to expand their capacities and drive economic growth.

Swavalambini Programme

- The **Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship (MSDE)**, in collaboration with **NITI Aayog** has launched **Swavalambini - a Women Entrepreneurship Programme** - in **Assam, Meghalaya and Mizoram**.
- It is aimed at empowering female students in select **Higher Education Institutions (HEIs)** in the northeast.
- The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 has laid the foundation for an entrepreneurship-driven curriculum by emphasising skill integration, industry collaboration, and hands-on experience.
- Swalambini will build on this framework, ensuring that young women particularly in North-Eastern states receive the necessary guidance and financial backing to transform their ideas into scalable businesses.
- To this end, MSDE through **Indian Institute of Entrepreneurship (IIE)** along with NITI Aayog will provide a structured stage-wise entrepreneurial process—from awareness to development, mentorship, and funding support.

Components of the Programme

- It will provide structured training through the **Entrepreneurship Awareness Programme (EAP)** which introduces 600 female students to entrepreneurship as a viable career option.
 - EAP will be a **2-day session** covering basic entrepreneurial concepts.
- Further, 300 students will be selected for the **Women Entrepreneurship Development Programme (EDP)**.
 - EDP offers an intensive **40-hour training** covering crucial business aspects such as training and skilling, access to finance, market linkages, compliance and legal support, business services, and networking opportunities.
- This will be followed by **six months of mentorship and handholding support** to help participants translate their ideas into sustainable prospects.
- It will also utilise workshops, mentoring support, and seed funding to create sustainable women-led enterprises.
- A unique aspect of the program is the **Award to Rewards Initiative**, which will celebrate and recognise successful women entrepreneurs emerging from Swalambini.
- The programme also recognises the critical role of educators in promoting an entrepreneurial mind-set.
- Thus, to upskill the faculty in HEIs, a 5-day **Faculty Development Programme (FDP)** will be held.
- Faculty members will undergo specialised training modules designed to provide them with latest industry insights, business incubation strategies, and hands-on coaching techniques.

TEAM Initiative for MSMEs

- The Ministry of MSME, in partnership with the Open Network for Digital Commerce (ONDC), has launched the *MSME Trade Enablement and Marketing (TEAM)* Initiative.
- The initiative is aimed to enable MSMEs to embrace digital commerce and expand their market presence. It will connect MSMEs with the ONDC Network.

- **Budget: Rs 277.35 crore over three years** will focus on **on-boarding 5 lakh micro and small enterprises**, with 50% of these being women-led businesses.
- By providing access to digital storefronts, integrated payment systems, and logistics support, the initiative aims to reduce operational barriers and help businesses tap into wider customer bases.
- Beyond these tools, it emphasizes formalizing operations and establishing digital transaction histories, which will enhance the credibility and trust of participating MSMEs.
- To ease the transition to digital commerce, financial assistance will be provided to Seller Network Participants to facilitate catalogue creation, operations and account management.
- Over **150 workshops** will be held across **Tier 2 and Tier 3 cities**, targeting key MSME clusters, with special attention to **women and SC/ST-led enterprises**.
- By working along with existing government programs like **PM Vishwakarma** and the **Digital MSME scheme**, the TEAM Initiative offers a comprehensive approach to address the needs of small businesses in today's rapidly evolving economy.

ONDC

- Launched in 2021, ONDC is an initiative of the **Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade (DPIIT)** under the **Ministry of Commerce and Industry**.
- It has been incorporated as a private sector led non-profit company, to create a facilitative model to help small retailers take advantage of digital commerce.
- It is **not an application, platform, intermediary, or software but a set of specifications** designed to facilitate open, unbundled, and interoperable open networks.
- It aims at promoting open networks developed on open-sourced methodology, using open specifications and open network protocols independent of any specific platform.

Need to Develop ONDC

- The e-commerce market is currently operated and dominated by a few platforms like Amazon & Flipkart. These large platforms have been accused of discriminating among sellers on their platforms & promoting certain seller entities in which they hold indirect stakes.
- The government wants to change the fundamental structure of the e-commerce market from the current **platform-centric model to an open-network model**.
- Through this platform, consumers can potentially discover any seller, product or service by using any **ONDC-compatible application or platform**, thus increasing freedom of choice for consumers.

Functioning of ONDC

- ONDC is modelled around the successful Unified Payments Interface (UPI) project.
- The government wants to ensure that buyers and sellers of goods in the e-commerce market can transact irrespective of the platforms on which they are registered.
- The platform basically works on **two ends** — the seller side and the buyer side. The ONDC platform lies in the middle of the interfaces hosting the buyers and the sellers.
- On the ONDC, there will be several other backend partners such as logistics service providers, enterprise resource planners, e-commerce store hosting service providers, etc.
- The platform is also compliant with the Information Technology Act, 2000 and designed for compliance with the emerging Personal Data Protection Bill.

India's Single Largest Solar Cell Manufacturing Unit

- India's single largest photovoltaic solar cell and module manufacturing unit was inaugurated at **Gangaikondan SIPCOT Industrial Growth Centre, Tirunelveli, Tamil Nadu**.
- Set up by **TP Solar Limited** (TATA Power's solar energy manufacturing arm), with an **investment of ₹3,800 crore**, the facility is **India's largest integrated solar manufacturing unit at a single location** having an **annual capacity of 4.3 GW**.
- The unit would also manufacture some of the raw materials for module manufacturing and will provide **employment to over 4,000 people**, including an **80% female workforce**.

Beggar-Thy-Neighbour (BTN) Policies

- BTN policies **refer to protectionist economic policies** adopted by governments that are aimed at benefiting a country's economy at the expense of other countries.
- A trade war in which a government **imposes heavy "tariffs" and strict "quotas"** on the import of foreign goods into the country is the most common example of BTN policies.

- **Central banks** of countries also engage in such policies through currency wars, in which they “**depreciate the value of their domestic currencies**” against foreign currencies to boost their domestic exports and to discourage the import of foreign goods.
- Higher exports and lower imports, in turn, are expected to lead to a trade surplus which is believed to be good for the domestic economy.

ORIGIN

- Economist **Adam Smith** first used this term in his 1776 book **The Wealth of Nations**, to criticise mercantilists of his time who advocated protectionist policies.
- The mercantilists believed that a country can grow its wealth through international trade but at the cost of impoverishing other nations. However, Smith believed that free trade in the long-run enriches all nations engaged in such trade.
- BTN originated as a **policy solution** to **domestic depression** and **high unemployment rates**

Criticism of BTN Policies

- Critics, however, believe that BTN policies can make all countries poorer, particularly when countries begin to retaliate against each other by imposing tit-for-tat tariffs and currency devaluations.
- Such tit-for-tat policies were implemented most notably during the **period between the two major World Wars**. Retaliatory tariffs and competitive currency devaluations during the period led to a significant drop in global trade and investment.
- In fact, economic historians consider such protectionist policies to be **one of the major reasons behind the Great Depression** that affected countries across the globe.
- In recent decades, countries such as **China and Japan** have been accused of devaluing their currencies to help their exporters, and to achieve a trade surplus with other major economies such as the United States.
- The tariffs and other trade barriers imposed recently in the US will negatively affect American consumers who will now have to pay higher prices for goods due to reduced foreign supplies.
- Similarly, when a central bank depreciates the exchange value of its currency by flooding the forex market with its currency, it puts more domestic currency in the hands of foreigners, thus reducing the purchasing power of domestic consumers.
- Critics also argue that countries should not retaliate when a foreign country imposes tariffs or other trade barriers on their exporters or devalues its currency in order to favour its own domestic exporters.
- For example, while U.S. tariffs would hurt Chinese producers, imposing retaliatory tariffs against U.S. goods will only make things worse for China because Chinese consumers will then have to pay more for goods and services imported from the U.S.
- They believe that countries that adopt unilateral free trade can avoid the damage caused by retaliatory tariffs, and in fact even benefit from the protectionist policies of other countries.

Repo Rate Reduced

After holding the repo rate at 6.50% for two years, the RBI six-member Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) **reduced the repo rate by 25 basis points (bps) to 6.25%**. This marks the first repo rate cut in nearly five years

Reasons for the Cut

- The RBI’s decision to cut the repo rate depends on various factors, including inflation, economic growth, and global economic trends.

Repo Rate

- Repo rate, short form for **Repurchase Agreement**, refers to the rate at which commercial banks borrow money from the central bank of a country in case of shortage of funds. It is used by monetary authorities to control inflation.
- In case of high inflation, central banks increase repo rate as this acts as a disincentive for banks to borrow from the central bank. This ultimately reduces the money supply in the economy and thus helps in reducing inflation.
- When the central bank needs to pump funds into the monetary system, it lowers the repo rate.



- MPC has estimated the **GDP growth at 6.7%** and projected retail inflation at 4.2% for the fiscal 2025-26.
- Retail inflation i.e. Consumer Price Index (CPI) eased to a four month low of 5.22% in December 2024 from 5.5% in November 2024. Inflation is within RBI's target range.
- The main reason behind the rate cut is to stimulate economic growth by making borrowing cheaper for individuals and businesses, leading to increased spending and investment.

Impact of the Rate Cut

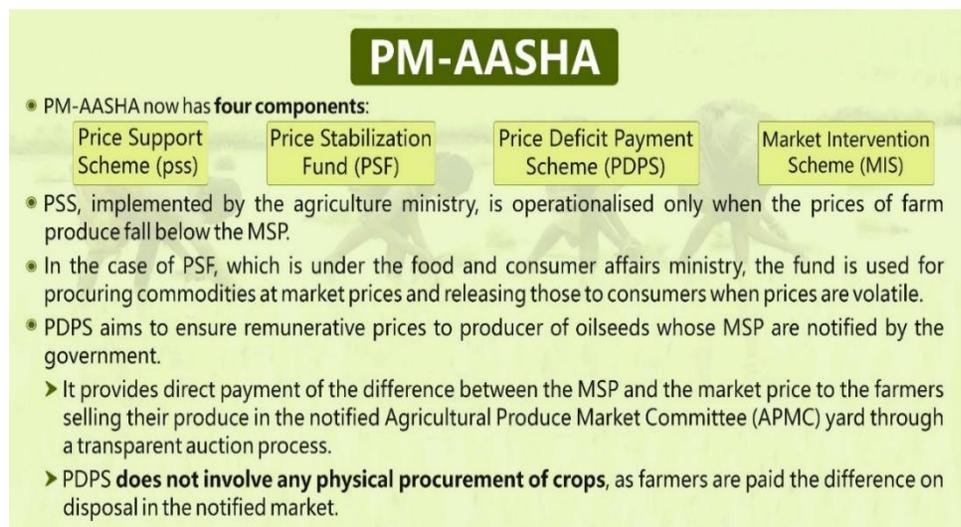
- All external benchmark lending rates (EBLR) — lending rates set by the banks based on external benchmarks such as the repo rate — will come down by 25 bps.
- Lenders may also reduce interest rates on loans that are linked to the **Marginal cost of fund-based lending rate (MCLR)** - the minimum lending rate below which a bank is not allowed to lend.
- A lower repo rate makes borrowing cheaper for individuals and businesses, which can lead to increased spending and investment, thereby boosting economic growth.
- EMIs on home and vehicle loans will come down.
- With lower interest rates, banks are more likely to lend, making credit more accessible to consumers and businesses.
- However, a lower repo rate can lead to higher inflation, as increased money supply and lower interest rates can drive up prices.
- It can reduce the interest earned on savings, making it less attractive for individuals to save.

Market Intervention Scheme (MIS)

- The agriculture ministry has revised the guidelines for Market Intervention Scheme (MIS), to encourage states to implement the scheme.
- MIS is implemented on the request of State/UT government for procurement of various *perishable agricultural/horticultural commodities* such as tomato, onion and potato (TOP) etc. for which Minimum Support Price (MSP) is not applicable.
- The scheme is to ensure farmers are not forced to sell their produce under distress.

Revised Guidelines

- MIS has been made a component of the integrated scheme of **Pradhan Mantri Annadata Aay Sanrakshhan Abhiyan (PM-AASHA)**.
- MIS will be implemented only when there is a **minimum reduction of 10% in the prevailing market price** as compared to the previous normal year.
- The revised **procurement/coverage limit** of production quantity of crops has been **increased from the existing 20% to 25%**.
- The State has also been given the option to pay the difference between the Market Intervention Price (MIP) and the selling price directly into the bank account of the farmers *in place of physical procurement*.



- Further, in case there is a difference in the price of TOP crops between the producing and consuming States, the operational cost in storage and transportation of crops from the producing State to consuming States will be reimbursed by Central Nodal Agencies like National Agricultural Cooperative Marketing Federation of India (NAFED) and National Cooperative Consumers Federation (NCCF).
- It is being proposed to include, apart from NAFED and NCCF, farmer producer organisations, farmer producer companies, state-nominated agencies and other central nodal agencies, to undertake procurement of TOP crops under MIS.

Restructured Skill India Programme

- The Union Cabinet has approved **continuation and restructuring of the central sector scheme - Skill India Programme (SIP) till 2026** with an outlay of **Rs 8,800 crore from the period of 2022-23 to 2025-26**.
- This approval is aligned with the vision of building a skilled, future-ready workforce by integrating demand-driven, technology-enabled, and industry-aligned training across the country.
- Following **Three components** will now be combined under the composite SIP.

Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas
Yojana 4.0 (**PMKVY 4.0**)

Pradhan Mantri National Apprenticeship
Promotion Scheme (**PM-NAPS**)

Jan Shikshan Sansthan
(**JSS**) scheme

- These initiatives aim to provide structured skill development, on-the-job training, and community-based learning, ensuring that both urban and rural populations, including marginalized communities, have access to high-quality vocational education.
- As a key driver of economic empowerment, SIP contributes to employment generation, entrepreneurship, and productivity enhancement across sectors.
- Under the three flagship schemes of Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship (MSDE), there are more than **2.27 Crore beneficiaries** till date.

Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY) 4.0

- PMKVY 4.0 provides **National Skills Qualifications Framework (NSQF)** aligned skill development training through Short-Term Training (STT).
- It includes Special Projects (SP) and reskilling and upskilling through **Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)**. Its target beneficiaries are **15-59 years of age**.
- It has undergone transformational changes to make skill development training industry oriented.
- A key shift under the scheme is the **integration of On-the-Job Training (OJT)** within short-term skilling programs, ensuring that trainees gain real-world exposure and industry experience.
- To keep pace with evolving industry demands and new age technology, **400+ new courses** on AI, 5G technology, cybersecurity, green hydrogen, drone technology, have been introduced.
- To provide targeted, industry-relevant skills, the program introduces micro-credential and National Occupational Standards (NoS)-based courses ranging from 7.5 to 30 hours.
- The **blended and flexible learning model** now includes digital delivery.
- The curriculum is available in **multiple regional languages**.
- To strengthen quality training and assessments, a **national pool of one lakh assessors and trainers is being developed**.
- **Industry partnerships** ensure access to employment opportunities through **Recruit Train Deploy (RTD) training**.

- Additionally, the scheme places a strong **emphasis on international mobility**, ensuring Indian workers are equipped with globally recognized skills.
- The MSDE has **Migration and Mobility Partnership Agreements (MMPAs)** and MoUs with various countries and has conducted necessary sectorial skill gap studies.
- Under PMKVY 4.0 a **whole-of-government approach** has been adopted to drive inter-ministerial convergence, ensuring the seamless execution of skilling initiatives across sectors.
- Key collaborations include PM Vishwakarma under the Ministry of MSME, PM Surya Ghar: Muft Bijli Yojana, and the National Green Hydrogen Mission of the Ministry of New and Renewable Energy, NAL JAL Mitra etc.
- A key reform is the **Ease of Doing Business approach**, which has significantly reduced the compliance burden, making participation in the scheme more streamlined and efficient.

PM National Apprenticeship Promotion Scheme (PM-NAPS)

- Globally, apprenticeship is considered as the best model for skill acquisition and earning while learning.
- The National Policy on Skill Development and Entrepreneurship, 2015 focuses on apprenticeship as one of the key components for creating skilled manpower in India.
- Apprenticeship training can play a major role for on-the-job vocational training where youth can acquire skills by working at actual workplace and earn some stipend, as financial support.
- PM-NAPS supports seamless transition from education to work, ensuring apprentices gain industry-specific skills through real-world exposure. The scheme is designed for individuals **aged 14 to 35 years**.
- To support both apprentices and establishments in India, **25% of the stipend, up to Rs.1,500 per month per apprentice, is provided by the Central Government**.
- NAPS encourages apprenticeship opportunities in emerging fields such as AI, robotics, blockchain, green energy, and Industry 4.0 technologies.
- It also encourages enrolment of apprentices in small establishments especially MSMEs, and those located in the underserved areas such as aspirational districts & North-East Region.

Jan Shikshan Sansthan (JSS) Scheme

- JSS scheme is a community-centric skilling initiative designed to make vocational training accessible, flexible, and inclusive, particularly for women, rural youth, and economically disadvantaged groups. It caters to the age group of **15 -45 years**.
- By delivering low-cost, doorstep training with flexible schedules, JSS ensures that skilling opportunities reach those who need them the most, facilitating both self-employment and wage-based livelihoods.
- Beyond skill development, the program plays a vital role in social empowerment, creating awareness on health, hygiene, financial literacy, gender equality, and education within communities.
- JSS is linked with key initiatives of the government like: Pradhan Mantri Janjati Adivasi Nyaya Maha Abhiyan (**PM JANMAN**), Understanding of Lifelong Learning for All in Society (**ULLAS**), etc. to promote **inclusive skilling**.

HS Code for GI Rice Varieties

- The Customs Tariff Act was recently amended to provide for an HS (Harmonised System) code for the export of Geographical Indication (GI) recognised rice.
- It is the first time in the world that an HS code has been introduced for GI-recognised rice.
- The Indian Patent Office has given a GI tag to 20 rice varieties:
 - Navara, Palakkadan Matta, Pokkali, Wayanad Jeerakasala, Wayanad Gandhakasala, Kalanamak, among others

HS CODE

- HS Code is a **six-digit identification code** developed by the **World Customs Organization (WCO)**.
- Over 200 countries use the system as a basis for their customs tariffs, internal taxes, quota controls, rules of origin, gathering international trade statistics, making trade policies, monitoring goods, economic research and analysis etc.
- The system helps in harmonising of customs and trade procedures, thus reducing costs in international trade.
- **Over 98% of the merchandise** in international trade is classified in terms of the HS.
- The system currently comprises of around 5,000 commodity groups, each identified by HS code. Of the six digits, the first two denote the HS Chapter, the next two give the HS heading, and the last two give the HS subheading.
- The HSN code for pineapple, for example, is 0804.30, which means it belongs to Chapter 08 (Edible fruit & nuts, peel of citrus/melons), Heading 04 (Dates, figs, pineapples, avocados, etc. fresh or dried), and Subheading 30 (Pineapples).

WORLD CUSTOMS ORGANIZATION (WCO)

- WCO is an **independent intergovernmental body** headquartered in **Brussels, Belgium**.
- It was established in **1952** as the **Customs Co-operation Council (CCC)**, with the objective of enhancing the effectiveness and efficiency of Customs administrations.
- It is internationally acknowledged as the global centre of customs expertise and plays a leading role in the discussion, development, promotion and implementation of modern customs systems and procedures.
- It represents **186 Customs administrations** across the globe that collectively process approximately **98% of world trade**.

Plans To Raise Deposit Insurance Cover

The government is considering increasing the insurance cover for bank deposits from the current limit of Rs 5 lakh.

Deposit Insurance

- Deposit insurance offers protection to the deposits of bank customers in case of a bank insolvency (bank failure). A bank becomes insolvent when its total liabilities exceed its total assets, usually as a result of poor investing or lending decisions.
- So, an insolvent bank may not be able to repay all the money that it owes its depositors. In such cases, the government steps in to compensate depositors, usually up to a certain threshold amount.
- Each depositor in a bank is insured up to a maximum of Rs 5 lakh for both principal and interest amount held by them as on the date of liquidation or failure of a bank.
- The insurance cover of Rs 5 lakh per depositor is for all accounts held by the depositor in all branches of the insured bank.
- Deposits in public and private sector banks, local area banks, small finance banks, regional rural banks, cooperative banks, Indian branches of foreign banks and payments banks are all insured by the DICGC. *However, primary cooperative societies are not insured by the DICGC.*
- The premium for deposit insurance is borne by the insured bank. DICGC (*Deposit Insurance and Credit Guarantee Corporation*) collects premiums from member financial institutions at a flat or differentiated rate based on the bank's risk profile.
- DICGC is a wholly owned subsidiary of the RBI.
- The DICGC insures all deposits such as savings, fixed, current, recurring, etc. except the following:
 - Deposits of foreign Governments;
 - Deposits of Central/State Governments;
 - Inter-bank deposits;
 - Deposits of State Land Development Banks with the State co-operative bank;
 - Any amount due on account of and deposit received outside India;

- Any amount, specifically exempted by the corporation with the previous approval of RBI.

Increase in the Cover

- The deposit insurance scheme was started in 1962; the number of insured banks was 1,997 as of March 31, 2024.
- The coverage has so far been **enhanced six times from Rs 1,500 to Rs 5 lakh** now. Last time it was raised from Rs 1 lakh to Rs 5 lakh in February 2020.
- As of March 31, 2024, **fully protected accounts were 97.8%** of the total, higher than the **international benchmark of 80%**.
- However, considering multiple factors like growth in the value of bank deposits, economic growth rate, inflation, increase in income levels etc., a periodical upward revision of this limit may be necessary.

Sovereign Green Bonds

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

Green Bonds

- Green bonds are **debt instruments issued by governments, corporations, and multilateral banks** to raise funds for projects that reduce emissions or enhance climate resilience.
- Issuers typically offer green bonds at lower yields than conventional bonds, assuring investors that the proceeds will be used exclusively for green investments.
- The difference in yield — known as the **green premium, or greenium** — determines the cost advantage of green bonds. A **higher greenium allows issuers to raise funds at lower costs**, making green investments more attractive.
- Investors in green bonds often seek stable, long-term returns.
- Despite their potential, green bonds constitute a small part of the debt market and overall climate financing, as governments strengthen reporting practices and introduce incentives to attract investors.

Sovereign Green Bonds in India

- SGrBs are green bonds that are **issued by sovereign entities**, like the Indian government, which formulated a framework for issuing SGrBs in 2022.
- The framework defines “green projects” as those that encourage energy efficiency in resource utilisation, reduce carbon emissions, promote climate resilience, and improve natural ecosystems.
- Since 2022-23, India has issued SGrBs eight times, and **raised almost Rs 53,000 crore**. Each year, the government uses roughly 50% of proceeds from SGrBs to fund production of energy efficient three-phase electric locomotives through the Ministry of Railways.
- For 2024-25, the revised estimates for allocations to schemes eligible under SGrBs include Rs 12,600 crore for electric locomotive manufacturing.
- Further, around Rs 8,000 crore for metro projects, Rs 4,607 crore for renewable energy projects, including the National Green Hydrogen Mission, and Rs 124 crore for afforestation under the National Mission for a Green India.

Low Demand in India

- While globally greeniums have reached 7-8 basis points, in India it is often at just 2–3 basis points. This limits the expansion of SGrBs as a viable funding source.
- A key challenge is liquidity. Small issue sizes and investors holding bonds until maturity have led to limited secondary market trading, reducing their appeal.

- Additionally, India lacks a strong ecosystem of social impact funds and responsible investing mandates, which in other markets drive green bond demand.

Impact of Low Demand

- The government's inability to raise adequate proceeds from SGrBs impacts funding for schemes eligible under it and increases pressure on general revenue to meet the shortfall.
- Initially, the estimated funding requirement from SGrB proceeds for 2024-25 stood at Rs 32,061 crore.
- However, after unsuccessful attempts to sell SGrBs due to higher yields cited by investors, the revised estimate has been lowered to Rs 25,298 crore.
- As a result, planned allocations for key schemes have been reduced. For example, allocation for a scheme promoting grid-scale solar projects has been reduced from Rs 10,000 crore to Rs 1,300 crore.
- The total expenditure in the current financial year will be made against expected proceeds amounting to Rs 21,697 crore, and to bridge the shortfall, roughly Rs 3,600 crore will be drawn from the government's general revenue.

Way forward

- According to a recent World Bank report, emerging market sovereign issuers tend to issue more bonds that **finance a combination of green and social projects** compared to advanced market sovereign issuers, which mostly issue green bonds.
- In other words, **bonds for projects that combine green and social projects**, also known as **sustainability bonds**, could boost investor interest and increase proceeds from issues.
- The report also noted that sovereigns take considerable time to prepare the post-issuance allocation and impact report, which impacts investor interest.
- The Department of Economic Affairs, which oversees allocation of proceeds, hasn't yet published the allocation report for 2023-24.
- Addressing liquidity issues, improving reporting transparency, and exploring sustainability bonds could help boost demand and expand green finance in the country.

Makhana Board

Union Budget announced that a Makhana Board will be set up in Bihar to boost its cultivation and marketing.

Makhana

- Makhana, also known as **fox nut**, is the **dried edible seed of the prickly water lily or gorgon plant** (*Euryale ferox*). This plant is found in freshwater ponds throughout South and East Asia.
- It is recognized for its **violet and white flowers**, as well as its large, round, and prickly leaves.
- The edible part of the Makhana plant consists of small, round seeds that have an outer layer ranging from black to brown. Thus, it is also known as the **Black Diamond**.
- After processing, these seeds are often consumed as popped snacks known as '**lava**.' Makhana is **highly nutritious** and provides an excellent source of carbohydrates, protein, and minerals. Due to its versatile applications in medicine, healthcare, and nutrition, this plant can be consumed in various forms.

Cultivation

- Bihar accounts for approximately **90% of India's makhana production**.
- The production is **primarily concentrated in nine districts located in northern and eastern Bihar**: Darbhanga, Madhubani, Purnea, Katihar, Saharsa, Supaul, Araria, Kishanganj, and Sitamarhi, which are part of the Mithilanchal region.

- Among these districts, the **first four contribute to 80%** of Bihar's total makhana output. In 2022, '**Mithila Makhana**' was conferred a **GI tag**.
- In addition to Bihar, makhana is cultivated in smaller quantities in the states of **Assam, Manipur, West Bengal, Tripura, and Odisha**, as well as in neighboring countries like **Nepal, Bangladesh, China, Japan, and Korea**.

Climatic Conditions for Makhana Cultivation

- Makhana is an **aquatic crop** and is mainly grown in **tropical and subtropical regions**. It is traditionally **cultivated in stagnant water bodies** such as ponds, land depressions, lakes, ditches, or wetlands with shallow water depths of up to 4-6 feet.
- For optimal growth and development, Makhana requires a **temperature range of 20-35°C**, **relative humidity of 50-90%**, and **annual rainfall between 100-250 cm**.

Significance of Makhana Board

- Although Bihar accounts for 90% of the country's makhana production, the largest exporters of makhana in India are Punjab and Assam, with Punjab not even producing the crop itself.
- This is due to **Bihar's lack of a developed food processing industry and inadequate export infrastructure**.
- Notably, **none of Bihar's airports have cargo facilities**, which further limits export capabilities. Additionally, **low productivity** in makhana cultivation is a significant issue. Currently, the cultivation process is extremely **labor-intensive** and challenging, **driving up overall input costs**.
- Further, farmers have been **slow to adopt high-yield varieties** of fox nut seeds developed by agricultural institutes, such as **Swarna Vaidehi** and **Sabour Makhana-1**.
- The Makhana Board, with a budget of Rs 100 crore, is expected to provide training to farmers, making them export oriented. People engaged in makhana cultivation will be organised in Farmer Producer Organizations (FPOs).
- It will help to create an ecosystem that brings investments in the food processing sector and help create the required export infrastructure.

Project Waterworth

- Meta introduced a project for internet subsea cable - Project Waterworth.
- Projects like Waterworth are the **backbone of global digital infrastructure** accounting for over **95% of international traffic across the world's oceans** to support digital experiences.
- The project is using **Artificial Intelligence (AI)** to enhance subsea cable infrastructure to improve global connectivity. It will utilize advanced machine learning models, to predict and mitigate potential disruptions, enhancing the resilience of subsea networks.
- It will **strengthen the scale and reliability of the world's digital highways** by opening three new oceanic corridors with high-speed connectivity needed to accelerate AI innovation across the world.
- It will cross **50,000 km in length** to connect five continents and will bring enhanced connectivity to the **U.S., India, Brazil, South Africa**, and other locations, while becoming the **longest subsea cable project in the world**.

Inland Waterways Terminal at Jogighopa

- The Union Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways inaugurated an **Inland Waterways Terminal (IWT) on Brahmaputra in Assam's Jogighopa**.

- The terminal is connected to a Multi-modal Logistic Parks (MMLP) at Jogighopa and a railway link is also proposed to be established connecting Jogighopa terminal with MMLP.
- Built at a cost of Rs 82 crore, the terminal will play a major role in logistics and connectivity of Eastern India and **boost trilateral trade between India, Bhutan and Bangladesh.**
- The terminal is at a distance of 108 km from Bangladesh border and 147 km from Guwahati. Also, it is just 91 km from Gelephu Bhutan (Gelephu Mindfulness City) where a modern city is under development.
- It is an important port of call for trade with Bangladesh given the MoU signed between India & Bangladesh for developing economic corridor under Bharatmala Programme with **Dalu-Tura-Goalpara-Gelephu multimodal trade route.**
- It is one of the declared ports of call under **Protocol on Inland Water Transit and Trade (PIWTT)** between India and Bangladesh.

Growth in Inland Waterways (IW)

- The IW sector has experienced an unprecedented rise in terms of trade and transport in the past decade.
- There has been a 767% increase in number of operational national waterways, a significant rise of 62% in multi-modal terminals with 860% increase in budget allocation for IW.
- Further, cargo traffic on national waterways has witnessed an exponential growth – **from 18 million tonnes a decade ago to 133 million tonnes** in FY 2023-24 at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of over 22%.

Inland Waterways Development Council

- It was established in October 2023. Its **objective** is comprehensive development of inland waterways and the associated Inland Water Transport (IWT) ecosystem for improved cargo efficiency, passenger movement, and river cruise tourism.

Inland Waterways Authority of India (IWAI)

- The IWAI is an autonomous body constituted in 1986, under the **Inland Waterways Authority of India Act, 1985.**
- It is primarily responsible for regulation, development & maintenance of National Waterways.

Prime Minister Dhan-Dhaanya Krishi Yojana

The government announced the launch of the Prime Minister Dhan-Dhaanya Krishi Yojana (PMDKY) aimed at benefitting 1.7 crore farmers across the country.

Objective

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

Details

- PMDKY will cover 100 districts based on **three broad parameters: low productivity, moderate crop intensity, and below-average credit parameters.**
- Cropping intensity is a measure of how efficiently land is used.
- In simple terms, cropping intensity indicates the number of crops grown on a piece of land in an agricultural year (July-June).

- At all India level, the cropping intensity was recorded at **155% in 2021-22**, although the figure greatly varied from state to state. Cropping intensity was only **111% in 1950-51**.
- Although the Budget does not provide a separate allocation for the scheme, funds will be drawn from various schemes implemented by the Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers' Welfare, and the Ministry of Fisheries, Animal Husbandry and Dairying.

Bharat Tex 2025

- Bharat Tex 2025, India's largest global textile event, was recently held at Bharat Mandapam, New Delhi.
- The event facilitates collaboration among **manufacturers, exporters, and importers**, providing them with an opportunity to **showcase** their expertise, cutting-edge innovations, and latest collections to a global audience.
- It also serves as a platform to accelerate the government's "**Farm to Fibre, Fabric, Fashion, and Foreign Markets**" vision.

India's Textile Industry

- India is the **sixth-largest** exporter of textiles globally, contributing **8.21%** to the country's total exports in 2023-24.
- The sector holds a **4.5%** share in global trade, with the **United States and European Union** accounting for **47%** of India's textile and apparel exports.
- It provides direct employment to over **45 million people** and supports the livelihoods of over **100 million** individuals indirectly, including a large proportion of women and rural workers.
- It aligns with key government initiatives such as Make in India, Skill India, Women Empowerment, and Rural Youth Employment, reinforcing its role in inclusive economic development.



Liquidity Injection Measures

RBI has announced measures to inject liquidity into money markets, marking the largest monetary easing since the pandemic. These steps aim to address the liquidity shortfall caused by the central bank's intervention in selling dollars to stabilise the rupee.

Liquidity Problem

- The Indian banking system encountered its worst liquidity crunch in more than a decade in January 2025. The liquidity deficit peaked at Rs 3.15 lakh crore its lowest level in nearly 15 years.
- Tax outflows, GST payments and the RBI's forex interventions to stabilize the rupee and currency in circulation (CIC) outflows significantly impacted cash flows in the banking system.
- The deficit led to increased dependence by banks on market borrowing, thereby keeping interbank call money rates — rate at which banks lend to each other — consistently above the policy repo rate of 6.50 per cent.

Measures Announced

Open Market Operations (OMO)	Variable Rate Repo (VRR) Auction	Dollar Rupee Swap
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • OMO purchase auctions aggregating to Rs 60,000 crore in three tranches. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • RBI will hold a long-term 56-day variable rate repo auction for Rs 50,000 crore. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Finally, RBI will execute a US dollar-rupee buy/sell swap

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • OMO refers to the sale and purchase of government securities (bonds) by the central bank (RBI). • OMOs help manage liquidity in markets and keep bond yields at desired levels. • If there is excess liquidity in the system, RBI sells government securities to reduce the liquidity in the system and vice versa. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The repo rate (Repurchase Option) is the interest rate at which the RBI loans money to commercial banks. • It is utilized by the RBI to control the flow of money in the market. When the market is impacted by inflation, the RBI raises the repo rate. • Thus, the central bank conducts the VRR auctions to inject liquidity in the banking system when it turns negative or tight. 	<p>auction of \$5 billion with a six-month tenure.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The swap is in the nature of a simple buy-sell foreign exchange swap from the Reserve Bank side. • A bank will sell US dollars to the RBI and simultaneously agrees to buy the same amount of US dollars at the end of the swap period. • In the reverse leg of the swap transaction, rupee funds will have to be returned to the RBI along with the swap premium to get the dollars back.
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RBI Reviews Economic Capital Framework

RBI Governor said the central bank is currently reviewing the **Economic Capital Framework (ECF)**.

RBI's Current Review of the ECF

• RBI Governor's Statement on ECF Review

- Recently, **RBI Governor** confirmed that the central bank is **reviewing the ECF**.
- This periodic review, recommended by the **Bimal Jalan Committee**, is meant to assess whether any adjustments are needed in the CRB range.
- RBI Governor clarified that while the **current CRB stands at 6.5% (as of March 31, 2024)**, the review could lead to an **increase or decrease** in the required buffer, though no immediate changes have been confirmed.

• Background on the Bimal Jalan Committee Recommendations

- The **Bimal Jalan-led panel** had suggested a **five-year review cycle** for the ECF, with its recommendations valid from **June 2019 to June 2024**.
- Given this timeline, the RBI has now begun an **internal assessment** to evaluate whether changes are necessary.

Economic Capital Framework (ECF)

- ▣ ECF is a policy that determines how the **RBI** manages its financial reserves, risk provisioning, and surplus transfers to the central government.
- ▣ It sets guidelines for the **contingency risk buffer (CRB)**—a financial reserve maintained by the RBI to address unforeseen economic crises.
- ▣ The **Bimal Jalan Committee**, formed in **2018**, recommended that the **CRB should be maintained between 5.5% to 6.5% of the RBI's balance sheet**.
- ▣ This buffer acts as a safeguard for economic stability, ensuring that the RBI can function effectively as the **Lender of Last Resort (LoLR)** during financial crises.
- ▣ Since **2019**, the RBI has followed these recommendations, and any revisions to the framework could influence how much surplus the RBI transfers to the government in future years.

Impact of the ECF Review on RBI's Surplus Transfers

• Record Surplus Transfer to the Government in 2023-24

- For the **financial year 2023-24**, the **RBI approved a record surplus transfer of ₹2.11 lakh crore** to the central government.
- This amount significantly boosts government revenue and helps finance fiscal policies, including infrastructure projects and social welfare programs.

- **How CRB Adjustments Could Affect Future Dividends?**
 - Economists believe that **any revision in the CRB threshold** could directly **impact future surplus transfers**.
 - If the **CRB requirement is increased**, the RBI may need to **set aside more reserves**, reducing the **amount of surplus available for government transfers**.
 - Conversely, if the **CRB is lowered**, it could **free up more funds** for dividend payments.
- However, as per the officials, the decision to **revise the CRB is not linked to current global uncertainties**, and any change will be **based purely on economic factors** rather than short-term concerns.

Importance of ECF Review

- **Ensuring Economic Stability**
 - The **CRB** serves as an essential financial safeguard against **global financial instability, banking crises, and currency fluctuations**.
- **Impact on Government Budget Planning**
 - The **RBI's surplus transfers** play a crucial role in supporting **government spending and fiscal deficit management**. Any change in the ECF could **influence the government's budgetary planning** for the upcoming fiscal years.
- **Balancing Risk and Development Needs**
 - The RBI must strike a balance between **maintaining financial stability** and **providing surplus funds** to the government.

Initiative Launched To Standardise Operations Of India's Major Ports

The Union Minister of Ports, Shipping & Waterways launched a series of major initiatives of the Ministry of Ports, Shipping & Waterways (MoPSW).

- **One Nation-One Port Process (ONOP): Standardizing Port Operations**
 - ONOP was launched to standardize port operations across India's major ports.
 - The initiative aims to eliminate inconsistencies in documentation, reduce inefficiencies, lower costs, and minimize operational delays.
 - The Ministry has streamlined documentation, cutting container operation documents by 33% (from 143 to 96) and bulk cargo documents by 29% (from 150 to 106).
- **Sagar Ankalan - Logistics Port Performance Index (LPPI): Enhancing Competitiveness**
 - The Sagar Ankalan LPPI was introduced to assess port performance and improve operational efficiency.
 - It evaluates key metrics like cargo handling, turnaround time, berth idle time, and ship berth-day output.
- **Bharat Global Ports Consortium: Expanding Trade Reach**
 - It was launched to boost India's maritime trade by integrating companies like IPGL (operations), SDCL (finance), and IPRCL (infrastructure development).
 - This initiative will enhance logistics, support the 'Make in India' movement, and strengthen global trade connectivity.
- **MAITRI: Digital Transformation in Trade**
 - The Master Application for International Trade and Regulatory Interface (MAITRI) was introduced to streamline trade processes, reduce bureaucratic delays, and improve efficiency through AI and blockchain.

- MAITRI will play a key role in operationalizing the **Virtual Trade Corridor (VTC)** between India and the UAE, aligning with the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEEC) and expanding to BIMSTEC and ASEAN nations.
- **National Centre of Excellence in Green Port and Shipping (NCoEGPS)**
 - A website for NCoEGPS was launched to promote **sustainability** in maritime operations. It will focus on *carbon footprint reduction, cleaner fuels, and eco-friendly port management*.

India Maritime Week 2025: Showcasing Maritime Growth

- India will host the India Maritime Week from October 27-31, 2025, in Mumbai.
- The event will highlight India's '**Maritime Virasat**' (Heritage) and '**Maritime Vikaas**' (Development), featuring the 4th Global Maritime India Summit (GMIS) and the 2nd edition of Sagarmathan.
- It will attract representatives from 100 countries and 100,000 delegates.

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Economic Impact of the Trump Trade War

- On February 1, President Trump signed an order imposing tariffs of 10% on all imports from China and 25% on imports from Canada and Mexico.
- The move aims to curb illegal immigration and **fentanyl exports** but has triggered swift retaliation.
- Later, Trump delayed the imposition of 25% tariffs on Mexico and Canada just hours before they were set to take effect.
- However, tensions with China escalated as Beijing retaliated against US tariffs by investigating Google for antitrust violations and imposing new tariffs on US coal, LNG, oil, and agricultural equipment.
- Trump also hinted at upcoming tariffs on the EU, citing trade imbalances.

Possible Impact of Tariffs Imposed by President Trump

- **Economic Risks and Inflation Concerns**
 - Economists warn that the tariffs could worsen inflation, leading to higher prices for groceries, autos, and housing, potentially undermining Trump's promise to lower costs.
- **Escalation of Protectionist Policies**
 - Trump signaled plans for additional tariffs on computer chips, steel, oil, gas, pharmaceuticals, and European imports.
 - This could lead to broader economic conflicts between the U.S. and major global economies.
- **Impact on Jobs**
 - Despite claims of protecting US jobs, Trump's tariffs had no substantial positive effect on employment in protected industries like steel.
 - Automation and higher input costs might hurt other sectors.
 - While some support tariffs for national security, most economists argue they fail to boost employment or reduce the trade deficit.

Fentanyl

- Fentanyl is a potent synthetic opioid approved for pain relief and anesthesia. It is about 100 times stronger than morphine and 50 times stronger than heroin.
- Opioids are drugs that originate from or mimic substances found in the opium poppy plant.
- They provide pain relief and can cause euphoria but are highly addictive.
- Apart from fentanyl, other well-known opioids include oxycodone, morphine, codeine, and heroin.
- Overdosing on fentanyl can lead to severe health issues, including stupor, changes in pupil size, clammy skin, cyanosis (blue skin), coma, and respiratory failure, which can be fatal.

National and International Legal Frameworks

- **India:** Fentanyl is regulated under the NDPS Act. Strict licenses are required for production, distribution, and possession.
- **UN Conventions:** Listed under the Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs, 1961, and the Convention on Psychotropic Substances, 1971.
- **US Efforts:** The SUPPORT Act empowers federal agencies to combat fentanyl trafficking.

Trump Imposes 25% Tariff on Steel Imports

- Trump announced a 25% tariff on all foreign steel and aluminium imports, including from allies like Canada and Mexico. He also plans to introduce **reciprocal tariffs** at later stage.
- This move follows previous tariff hikes on Chinese goods and threats against Europe, Taiwan, and key industries.

India's Concerns Amid Trump's Fresh Tariff Threat

• Rising Steel Imports and Dumping Concerns

- There are concerns over dumping with steel imports already on the rise.
- Higher tariffs may divert Asian steel exports to India, intensifying competition and pushing domestic prices downward.
 - ✓ In 2018, when the U.S. last imposed such tariffs, countries exporting steel to the U.S. were forced to seek alternative markets, flooding India with excess supply.
 - ✓ This led to price drops and significant losses for domestic producers.
- Small Indian producers could suffer from **low-cost Chinese dumping**, requiring India to tread cautiously in its trade policies.

• Indian Steel Producers to Face Export Challenges

- Moody's Ratings warned that Indian steelmakers will struggle to export following the US decision to impose an additional 25% tariff on steel and aluminium imports.

• Global Overcapacity Threatens Indian Manufacturing

- Countries like China, Japan, and South Korea face significant overcapacity in steel production.
- China, in particular, has shifted from long to flat products, increasing exports worldwide, which poses a risk to India's domestic steel sector.

• Ripple Effects on Indian Steel Exports

- Past US tariffs led to trade diversions, with Chinese steel exports shifting towards Europe, prompting the EU to impose import restrictions that negatively impacted Indian exports.
- Experts warn that the new tariffs could once again disrupt the global stainless steel market.

• Rupee Under Pressure

- The Indian rupee is expected to weaken further due to market uncertainty and potential disruptions in trade.

• Canada & Brazil Face Direct Impact; India Less Affected

- The US imports most of its steel from Canada, Brazil, and Mexico, with South Korea and Vietnam also being significant suppliers.
 - ✓ Canada alone accounted for 79% of US primary aluminum imports in the first 11 months of 2024.
- India's primary steel exports to the US in 2024 amounted to \$450 million, while aluminium exports reached \$820 million.
 - ✓ Steel pipes, tubes, and related products had minimal exports, totalling just \$2.83 million, indicating limited direct impact from the new tariffs.

Trump Engages Putin in Talks for Negotiated Ukraine War Settlement

- President Trump, in his second term, held a "lengthy and highly productive" call with Russian President Putin, marking their first confirmed conversation since Trump resumed office.

- The discussion signaled the start of a US-backed effort to negotiate an end to the Ukraine war.
- On the other hand, the European officials have asserted that Ukraine and Europe must be part of any negotiations, responding to Trump's announcement of US-Russia peace talks.

Trump's Stance on NATO and Ukraine's Borders

- Trump has signaled a shift in US policy, suggesting that Ukraine should abandon its NATO bid and that restoring its pre-2014 borders was unrealistic.
- As per various experts, the US is deprioritizing European security, emphasizing border control and deterring China instead.

Significance of Trump-Putin Call

- **A Potential Shift in Global Relations**
 - Trump is reshaping great power dynamics, with his latest call to Putin marking a significant departure from past US policy.
 - Trump announced immediate ceasefire talks for Ukraine and plans to meet Putin in Saudi Arabia soon.
- **Europe's Exclusion from Trump-Putin Talks**
- **Implications for Asia and India:** The impact of a potential Trump-Putin deal on Asia remains unclear.
 - Key questions arise:
 - ✓ Will Trump shift focus to counter China?
 - ✓ Could he extend his peace efforts to Taiwan?
 - ✓ How will this affect Moscow-Beijing ties?
 - **For India**, this is a crucial moment. Unlike in the mid-20th century, India now holds significant influence in global affairs.
 - With both nations facing trade deficits with China, PM Modi may align with Trump's call for a new economic order led by democratic nations to ensure balanced trade.

Donald Trump Offers 'Gold Card' Visas For US Citizenship

- US President Donald Trump introduced a new "gold card" immigration initiative, replacing the EB-5 visa program.
- For a \$5 million investment, wealthy foreign investors can gain a path to U.S. citizenship and permanent residency.
 - The existing EB-5 program, established in 1990, requires a minimum investment of \$1.05 million (or \$800,000 in distressed areas) to create or preserve jobs.
 - It has faced criticism for fraud and misuse, including funding projects linked to Trump family businesses.

Impact of Gold Card Program on Indian Investors

- In 2023, only 631 Indians obtained Green Cards through the EB-5 program.
- Given the \$5 million price tag, the Gold Card may not be attractive to many Indian investors.
- **Impact on applicants from other categories**
 - Over a million Indians are among those waiting for green cards in the U.S., according to US government data.
 - In employment-based categories, the backlog for Indian applicants is projected to reach 2.19 million by 2030.
 - Any new category will add to their waiting period.

EB-5 Visa Program

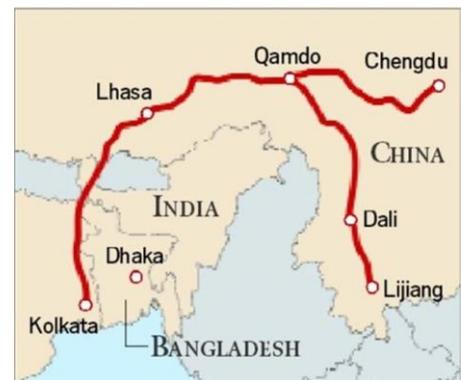
- Established by the U.S. Congress in 1990, the EB-5 visa program aimed to boost the American economy through job creation and capital investment by foreign investors.
- **Investment Requirements**
 - The program grants green cards to immigrants who invest at least \$1,050,000 or \$800,000 in economically distressed areas, known as **targeted employment areas**.
- **Criticism and Controversies**
 - The program faced criticism for deviating from its intended purpose, with reports indicating that businesses and Trump family members used it to fund major property developments.
 - Calls for reform grew during Trump's presidency.

Tea Horse Road Connecting India – China

- Recently, China's Ambassador to India Xu Feihong posted on X (Twitter) about the historic Tea Horse Road which spanned more than 2,000 km, and connected China to India via Tibet.
- The Tea Horse Road, played a key role in commerce and cultural exchange for centuries.
- While less famous than the Silk Road, this route facilitated the movement of tea, horses, and other valuable commodities across some of the world's most challenging terrains.

Tea Horse Road

- The Tea Horse Road traces its origins to the **Tang Dynasty (618-907 CE)**, when trade between Southwest China, Tibet, and India first flourished.
- Buddhist monk Yijing (635-713 CE) documented early trade exchanges, mentioning the movement of goods such as sugar, textiles, and rice noodles from China, while horses, Tibetan gold, saffron, and medicinal herbs were exported.
- By the **10th century**, during the **Song Dynasty (960-1279 CE)**, official markets were established along the route to regulate the trade of **tea and horses**, which became the dominant commodities exchanged between China and Tibet.
- **Expansion of Trade in the Early 20th Century**
 - With the fall of the Qing Dynasty in 1912, the Tea Horse Road became even more vital. Yunnan's tea industry expanded as China integrated into the global market.
- **World War II and the Road's Strategic Importance**
 - During **World War II**, when Japan controlled much of China's coastline, the Tea Horse Road served as an alternative supply route for transporting goods and military supplies to China's resistance forces.
- **Decline After the Founding of the People's Republic of China (1949)**
 - Following the establishment of the People's Republic of China, the importance of the Tea Horse Road declined.
 - Mao Zedong's land reforms significantly changed trade patterns, and with the advancement of modern transportation, the historic trade route lost its relevance.
 - However, some remnants remain, particularly in regions like **Lijiang**, which became a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1997 due to its historical significance in trade.

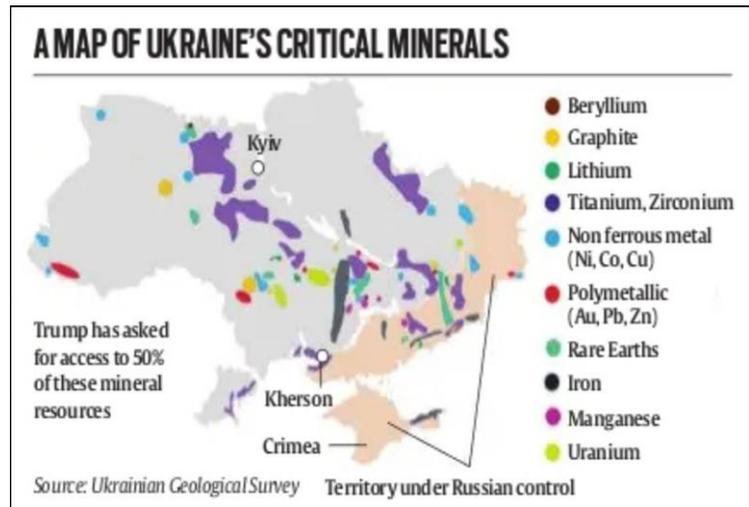


Mineral Resources of Ukraine

- US President Donald Trump accused Ukraine of renegeing on an unofficial deal granting the US access to 50% of its mineral resources in exchange for support against Russia.
- Ukraine views the deal as a way to secure future assistance, while Trump seeks compensation for past US aid.
- The details remain undisclosed, but Trump claims Ukraine owes the US \$500 billion worth of resources, including minerals, fuel, and infrastructure (such as ports), in return for military support against Russia.
 - US officials argue that securing economic stakes in Ukraine—such as mining rights—would serve as a security guarantee.
 - Zelenskyy, however, seeks a more concrete military and economic assurance rather than indirect security through economic involvement.

Importance of Ukraine's Mineral Resources

- Ukraine possesses rich mineral resources crucial for manufacturing high-end weapon systems, clean energy solutions (such as electric vehicles), electronic gadgets, and semiconductors.
- These minerals are rare and difficult to extract, making them highly valuable.



Geopolitical Significance

- China has large reserves of these critical minerals, making Ukraine's resources strategically important for the US and the West.
 - The US seeks rare-earth elements, titanium, gallium, and other critical minerals for weapons systems, clean energy, and reducing dependence on China.
- US President Donald Trump's interest in acquiring Greenland is also partly driven by mineral resource concerns.

Cook Islands, China Sign Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Deal

- The Cook Islands signed a comprehensive strategic partnership with China.
 - The Cook Islands are located in the South Pacific Ocean, northeast of New Zealand. They are between French Polynesia and Fiji, and just south of the equator.
- The deal aims to enhance cooperation in trade, investment, tourism, ocean science, aquaculture, agriculture, infrastructure, climate resilience, and disaster preparedness.
- **New Zealand's Concerns**
 - New Zealand, which has constitutional ties with the Cook Islands, expressed concern over the agreement, stating it had not been allowed to review the documents before they were signed.
- **China's Growing Influence in the Pacific**
 - New Zealand and its allies, including the U.S., have been wary of China's expanding presence in the South Pacific, fearing that it could weaken Western influence in the region.

PM Modi Inaugurates Murugan Temple In Indonesia

- PM Modi, while virtually addressing the *Maha Kumbabhishegam of Shri Sanathana Dharma Aalayam in Jakarta*, emphasized the deep cultural and historical ties between India and Indonesia, beyond just geopolitics.
- He noted that the **new Murugan Temple in Jakarta** strengthens this shared heritage and will serve as a center for faith and cultural values.
 - Built on a 4,000 sq m plot donated by the government, the temple is located in the Jakarta’s western part.
 - Besides housing shrines dedicated to Lord Murugan and other deities, it also houses a museum showcasing the historical connection between the two cultures.
- He also referenced the joint commitment to preserving historical sites like the *Prambanan and Borobudur temples*, reinforcing the strong people-to-people connections between the two countries.
- Noting that the Murugan Temple in Jakarta houses not only Lord Murugan but also various other deities, PM said that diversity and plurality form the foundation of our culture.
 - In Indonesia, this tradition of diversity is called “*Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*”, while in India, it is known as “Unity in Diversity”.

[For detailed discussion on India-Indonesia relationship, please refer the topic “**Indonesian President Prabowo as Chief Guest in Republic Day Celebration**” from-The Recitals – January 2025]

US Deports Illegal Indian Migrants

The first U.S. military aircraft carrying 104 deported Indian nationals landed in Amritsar in the first week of February 2025. This marks the beginning of a stringent crackdown on illegal immigration under President Donald Trump’s administration.

India’s Response

- **India’s Position on Deportation:**
 - India has agreed to accept undocumented Indians if nationality verification is confirmed.
 - India is against illegal immigration due to its links to organized crime and human trafficking.

■ Mass Deportations under the Trump Administration – key statistics ■

- The Trump administration is **targeting undocumented migrants**, leading to mass deportations.
- With an estimated 7,25,000 undocumented Indians in the US, the move impacts thousands of Indian nationals.
- 17,940 Indians are under final removal orders by US immigration courts.
- 2,467 Indians are currently in **detention centres** under **ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement)**.

■ Trump’s Immigration Crackdown and Policy Changes: ■

President Trump has declared illegal immigration a national emergency, implementing strict measures

◦ Enhanced Deportation Strategies:

- Military aircraft are being used for deportations, instead of commercial flights.
- ICE is **coordinating with the FBI, DEA, and Border Patrol** to locate and arrest undocumented migrants.

◦ New Immigration Measures:

- **ICE has removed legal protections** granted under Biden’s administration.
- The **CBP (Customs and Border Protection) One mobile app**, which allowed migrants to schedule border entry appointments, has been shut down.
- Birthright citizenship for children born to undocumented immigrants has been **eliminated**.

◦ Expansion of Detention Centers:

- Guantanamo Bay detention facility is being repurposed to house 30,000 migrants.
- The Buckley Space Force Base in Colorado is also being used for migrant detention.

◦ Tariff Impositions on Non-Cooperative Countries

- **Colombia refused** to accept a deportation flight—Trump retaliated with **25% tariffs** on Colombian goods.
- **Canada and Mexico** also faced **tariff threats**, forcing them to ramp up border enforcement.
- The US Congress is considering sanctions on countries not cooperating with deportation orders.

- **Ensuring Legal Pathways for Migration:**

- Over 1 million visas were issued to Indian nationals in 2024, including record numbers of student and business visas.
- 72% of H-1B visas issued in the last fiscal year went to Indian professionals.

- **India is actively considering a new law**

- The Indian government is actively considering a new law, tentatively titled the '**Overseas Mobility (Facilitation and Welfare) Bill, 2024**', to regulate and facilitate **safe, orderly, and legal migration** for overseas employment.
 - ✓ The bill aims to replace the outdated **Emigration Act of 1983** to address modern global migration challenges.
 - ✓ It seeks to facilitate **circular mobility** of Indian workers while ensuring their **safety and welfare** abroad.
 - ✓ MEA is currently consulting with line ministries, after which the draft will be opened for public consultation before finalization.

- **Other Efforts to Ensure Safe and Legal Migration**

- **Collaboration with Embassies & Consulates:** The Protector of Emigrants, in coordination with Indian embassies, ensures the welfare and grievance redressal of Indian emigrants.
- **Awareness & Advisory Initiatives:** Indian missions issue advisories and awareness programs for prospective emigrants to educate them on safe migration practices, valid job opportunities, and registered recruiting agents.
- **Addressing Grievances & Exploitation:** Indian authorities actively handle **complaints of mistreatment, wage fraud, and contract violations** by foreign employers and recruitment agencies.
- **Rescue & Repatriation Support:** In cases of exploitation or distress, Indian embassies assist in the rescue, repatriation, and reintegration of affected emigrants while supporting their families in India.

The New European 'Dunki' Route

- Traditionally, Indian migrants entered the US through South American countries like Brazil, Ecuador, or Colombia, then moved to Central America and Mexico.
- The new route involves traveling via Europe (UK, Italy, Germany, Spain, or Turkey) to Central America using transit or visitor visas.
- This alternative is safer and quicker, avoiding dangerous stretches like the Panama jungle.

How Migrants Enter Europe

- Migrants obtain Schengen visitor visas, which allow them access to multiple European countries. Some also use student visas for legal entry into the UK.
- Agents facilitate connecting flights from Europe to Central America (eg Mexico) or arrange direct routes via the Middle East (Dubai, Qatar, Turkey).
- Authorities in transit countries are aware of illegal immigration but often turn a blind eye for a fee.

Conclusion

The India-US immigration issue is a test of diplomatic balance. While India cooperates on deportations, it remains focused on protecting the rights and opportunities of legal travellers, students, and skilled professionals.

With Trump's aggressive immigration policies, India continues to engage in strategic diplomacy, ensuring that bilateral ties remain strong while managing evolving immigration challenges.

Revised Free Movement Regime (FMR) Along Myanmar Border

- 22 out of 43 crossing points along the Myanmar border under the revised **Free Movement Regime (FMR)** agreement have started functioning.
- 10 border gates operational in Manipur, five each in Mizoram and Nagaland, and two in Arunachal Pradesh.
- **New Regulations and QR Code Passes**
 - Union Home Ministry finalized new guidelines on December 6.
 - QR code-enabled border passes introduced to regulate movement.

- No formal orders issued yet for scrapping FMR despite Home Minister's announcement.
- **Monitoring and Security Measures**
 - Assam Rifles entrusted with monitoring border movement.
 - Border passes issued with biometric data uploaded to a central portal.
 - State police conduct further security verification at the place of stay.
- **Historical Background of FMR**
 - Introduced in 1968 due to ethnic and familial ties across the border.
 - Originally allowed free movement up to 40 km, reduced to 16 km in 2004, and now limited to 10 km.
- **Current Status of Refugees**
 - Over 40,000 Chin refugees fled to Mizoram and Manipur after Myanmar's 2021 military coup.
- **Future Developments**
 - 21 additional border check points to be made functional in the second phase.

India, U.S. Identify UDA Technologies For Co-Production In India

India, U.S. Identify Underwater Domain Awareness (UDA) Technologies for Co-Production In India

- **Launch of Autonomous Systems Industry Alliance (ASIA)**
 - Announced during PM Modi's visit to Washington.
 - Aims to enhance industry partnerships and UDA technology co-production in India.
 - Focuses on maritime security, particularly in response to China's growing presence in the Indian Ocean.
- **Co-Development of Sensitive Technologies**
 - U.S. has offered India exclusive access to sensitive UDA technologies.
 - Key technologies include: **Sea Picket** autonomous surveillance system (by Thayer Mahan); **Wave Glider** unmanned surface vehicle (Boeing's Liquid Robotics) etc.
- **Strengthening Defence and Military Cooperation**
 - India and the U.S. pledged deeper cooperation in air, land, sea, space, and cyberspace.
 - Focus on joint training, intelligence sharing, logistics, and humanitarian missions.
 - The Quad (India, U.S., Japan, Australia) to enhance shared airlift capacity and maritime patrols.

UK-India Defence Partnership Strengthens

- The United Kingdom announced the formal launch of "**Defence Partnership-India**" (DP-I), a dedicated cell within the U.K. Ministry of Defence for deepening cooperation with India.
- Several defence agreements were announced, including the production of MANPADS (*Man Portable Air Defence Systems*) and Lightweight Multirole Missiles (LMM) and the establishment of an ASRAAM (*Advanced Short-Range Air to Air Missile*) assembly and test facility in India.
- The agreements are expected to **enhance India's defence self-reliance (Atmanirbhar Bharat)**, create jobs in both countries, and improve interoperability between the Indian and British forces.

SUMMITS AND ORGANISATIONS

US Secretary of State to Skip G20 Summit

- US Secretary of State Marco Rubio announced he will not attend the G20 Foreign Ministers' meeting in Johannesburg.
- He criticized South Africa for using the summit to push "DEI (Diversity, equity, and inclusion) and climate change" under the guise of solidarity and sustainability.
- President Donald Trump accused South Africa of land confiscation and mistreating certain groups, vowing to cut future funding until an investigation is conducted.

India's Stakes in G20 and Possible Scenarios

- India has positioned the G20 as a more effective platform than the UN for addressing global challenges.
- Its leadership of the Global South has benefited from the G20's rising influence and India's active role in the group.
- **US Support Under Biden vs. Uncertainty Under Trump**
 - The Biden administration backed India's G20 presidency in 2023, seeing India as a bridge between the Global North and South.
 - However, Trump 2.0's priorities differ significantly, raising concerns about continued US engagement.
- **Worst-Case Scenario: US Disengagement from G20**
 - If the US withdraws entirely, it would weaken the group and potentially increase Russian and Chinese influence, complicating India's strategic interests.
- **India's Diplomatic Challenge with the Global South**
 - A transactional Trump administration may not value India's role as a Global South leader.
 - If US-Western support for India's bridging role diminishes, India's diplomatic positioning could face new hurdles.

Rubio's Boycott: A Response to South Africa's Case Against Israel

- ▣ Rubio's decision to skip the G20 meeting is primarily linked to South Africa's genocide case against Israel at the International Court of Justice (ICJ), which has been gaining international backing.
 - ▶ **ICJ:** A UN judicial body that handles disputes between states.
- ▣ Prominent Republican leaders have condemned the ICJ, calling it biased against Israel.
- ▣ They even threatened sanctions against countries supporting potential ICC arrest warrants for Israeli leaders.
 - ▶ **ICC (International Criminal Court):** Established in 2002 under the Rome Statute, it prosecutes individuals for genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity.
- ▣ **South Africa's Countermove**
 - ▶ In response, South Africa and Malaysia launched a campaign to protect ICJ and ICC rulings, forming the nine-nation "**Hague Group**" to defend Palestinian rights and challenge US attempts to weaken international courts.
- ▣ **Previous attempt of US to Undermine The Hague Courts & G20**
 - ▶ During his first term (2017–21), President Trump imposed sweeping sanctions on ICC. The Biden administration later reversed these, backing ICC investigations into Russian war crimes in Ukraine.
 - ▶ During his first term, Trump's "America First" policies led to friction within G20 but also reshaped its agenda, shifting focus from free trade to "reciprocal trade" in line with his trade war against China.
 - ▶ Unlike his first term, where the US remained engaged despite tensions, a more radical second-term agenda could see Trump deprioritizing the G20, potentially undermining cooperation within the group.

[For detailed discussion about G20, refer the topic "**Global Alliance Against Hunger and Poverty**" from The Recitals – November 2024.]

Trump Imposes Sanctions on ICC

- U.S. President Donald Trump signed an executive order imposing sanctions on the International Criminal Court (ICC) over investigations of Israel, a close U.S. ally.

- The move comes in response to the ICC’s issuance of an **arrest warrant against Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu** for alleged war crimes committed in **Gaza** following the **Hamas attack in October 2023**.
 - The executive order states that the ICC’s actions are a direct attack on a close U.S. ally, and that targeting Netanyahu is unacceptable.
 - The U.S. government has long been wary of an international tribunal holding American and allied officials accountable for military operations.
- Neither the **United States** nor **Israel** recognizes the ICC’s jurisdiction, leading Trump to denounce the court's actions as **“illegitimate and baseless”**.
- In 2020, Trump imposed similar measures against **then-Chief Prosecutor Fatou Bensouda** for investigating alleged U.S. war crimes in **Afghanistan**. However, these sanctions were later lifted under **President Joe Biden**.
- **Consequences of these sanctions**
 - Trump's executive order threatens **“tangible and significant consequences”** for ICC officials involved in the investigation against Israel. These include:
 - ✓ **Freezing Assets and Property** – ICC officials and their associates could have their **U.S. assets frozen**.
 - ✓ **Travel Bans** – ICC prosecutors and their **family members may be denied entry into the U.S.**
 - ✓ **Restrictions on Collaborators** – Individuals and organizations that assist the ICC’s investigations could face **legal consequences** under U.S. laws.

[For detailed discussion on ICC, refer the topic “ICC issues arrest warrant against Israel’s PM and Hamas Leader” from the Recitals – November 2024]

Paris AI Action Summit

- PM Modi co-chaired the AI Action Summit in **Paris** alongside French President Emmanuel Macron.
- The week-long summit (which began with the Science Days on February 6-7) concluded with a High-Level Segment featuring global leaders, policymakers, and industry experts.
- **Themes of AI Action Summit:** It focuses on **five main areas:** Public Interest AI; Future of Work; Innovation and Culture; Trust in AI; Global AI Governance.

Key Takeaways from the AI Action Summit

- **AI Declaration**
 - The US and UK refused to sign the summit’s **declaration on “inclusive and sustainable” AI**, citing concerns over excessive regulation.
 - 60 nations, including **India and China**, supported the declaration, which promotes AI accessibility, sustainability, human rights, and transparency.
 - **Key objectives of the declaration**
 - ✓ **Accessibility of AI:** Ensuring AI is available to all and does not create technological divides.
 - ✓ **Trust and Safety:** Deploying AI in a way that is ethical, safe, secure, and trustworthy.
 - ✓ **Economic and Labor Market Development:** Encouraging AI innovation while preventing market concentration and ensuring positive impacts on labor markets.
 - ✓ **Support for Developing Countries:** Narrowing inequalities and assisting nations in AI capacity-building.
- **Coalition for Sustainable AI launched**
 - The Coalition for Sustainable AI was initiated by the French government in collaboration with the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) and the International Telecommunication Union (ITU).

- o The coalition aims to create a driving force that brings together various actors committed to working towards sustainable AI.
- o The UK joined the *Coalition for Sustainable AI* but emphasized national interests, while the US criticized Europe's regulatory approach.
- o India has also joined the coalition.

• **Current AI Launched**

- o A new global “public interest AI Foundation” called **Current AI** was launched at the AI Action Summit.
- o With an initial \$400M investment, **Current AI** aims to reshape the existing AI landscape by developing and supporting large-scale initiatives that serve the public interest.
- o It was launched to promote AI for public good, aiming to counterbalance private-sector dominance. It will foster public-private collaboration in the field of AI.

PM Modi's Address at the AI Action Summit: Key Highlights

- o **Call for a Global AI Framework** -----
 - Modi advocated for a global governance structure for AI that promotes innovation while ensuring fair access, especially for the Global South, which lacks compute power, talent, data, and financial resources.
- o **Open-Source AI for Trust and Transparency** -----
 - He stressed the importance of open-source AI systems and bias-free datasets to enhance trust and transparency.
 - He urged global collaboration in pooling resources and talent to democratize AI technology.
- o **AI and the Future of Jobs** -----
 - Acknowledging concerns over job losses due to AI, Modi reassured that history has shown technology does not eliminate work but rather changes its nature.
 - He stressed the need for skilling and reskilling to prepare for an AI-driven future.
- o **The Need for Sustainable AI** -----
 - Modi highlighted AI's high energy consumption and called for green power solutions.
 - He also emphasized making AI models efficient in size, data needs, and resource requirements to ensure sustainability.
- o **India to Host the Next AI Summit** -----
 - Modi proposed that India host the next AI Summit, an offer that was accepted.
 - He reiterated India's commitment to sharing expertise and experiences in AI for the global good.

Freeze on USAID and Its Impact

- In January 2025, U.S. President Donald Trump imposed a **90-day freeze on foreign aid**, halting USAID operations.
- The agency's website was wiped, and most personnel were placed on administrative leave.

About USAID

- Established in 1961, USAID (U.S. Agency for International Development) provides humanitarian and development aid in over 100 countries, focusing on health, education, food security, climate change, and governance.
- Key programs include PEPFAR, Feed the Future, and Power Africa.

Why Has It Been Closed?

- Trump and Elon Musk, head of the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE), claim restructuring is needed to align aid with U.S. national interests.
- Critics argue it's politically motivated, targeting Biden-era programs.

Impact of Closure

- Aid withdrawal could severely affect countries like Ukraine, Ethiopia, Nigeria, and Yemen, impacting food security, healthcare, and poverty alleviation.
- With only 294 of 10,000 employees remaining, experts warn of a global humanitarian crisis and increased instability.

- **Impact on India**
 - USAID's funding to India has declined over the years due to government objections to grant conditions.
 - Over the past decade, India received \$1.5 billion (0.2%-0.4% of USAID's total global funding).
- **USAID in India**
 - USAID initially focused on food aid but later expanded to education, healthcare, economic reforms, and infrastructure development.
 - In 2024, USAID allocated \$79.3 million primarily for health programs (HIV/AIDS, TB, maternal and child health, immunization).
- **Impact of Closure**
 - While India's overall dependence on USAID is low, the funding freeze could affect health and environmental projects.
 - The ability of the Central and State governments to sustain these initiatives remains uncertain.
 - Meanwhile, USAID has instructed implementing agencies in India to suspend operations.

Eighth Indian Ocean Conference (IOC)

- India, in partnership with Singapore and Oman, hosted the Eighth Indian Ocean Conference (IOC) in **Muscat, Oman**.
- Foreign ministers from around 30 countries attended to discuss the region's future.
- Theme of the 8th IOC: "**Voyage to New Horizons of Maritime Partnership**".
- IOC is an annual summit that brings together leaders, policymakers, and experts from countries surrounding the Indian Ocean to discuss and collaborate on regional issues related to security, economics, and geopolitics.
- It was established by the India Foundation (India based think tank) in 2016 with the vision of "Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR)".
- **Jaishankar at Indian Ocean Conference**
 - He highlighted ongoing geopolitical turmoil, particularly in the Middle East and Indo-Pacific, which has disrupted global shipping and economic stability.
 - He stressed the need for collective response mechanisms and stronger regional partnerships.
 - Many Indian Ocean nations are struggling with economic headwinds, debt burdens, and challenges in achieving Sustainable Development Goals.
 - He noted the impact of imprudent borrowing and the necessity for transparent, consultative connectivity projects.

Munich Security Conference

- External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar attended the Munich Security Conference 2025.
- The **Munich Security Conference (MSC)** is an annual international forum focused on global security policy.
- It brings together **world leaders, defense officials, policymakers, and experts** to discuss pressing security challenges, including geopolitics, military conflicts, cyber threats, and climate security.
- **Founded:** 1963; **Location:** Munich, Germany
- **Significance:** One of the world's most influential platforms for **defense and foreign policy discussions**. It serves as a **neutral space** where global powers, including the U.S., EU, China, Russia, and others, engage in **high-level diplomacy** to address international crises and security threats.

Saudi Hosts 'Mini Arab Summit' on Gaza Crisis

- Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman hosted leaders from the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, Jordan, and Egypt to discuss the Gaza crisis.
- The meeting, held in Riyadh ahead of Saudi Founding Day, aimed to present a unified Arab stance on the issue and reinforce Saudi Arabia's commitment to regional peace and stability.
- The discussions focused on Saudi-led peace initiatives following U.S. President Donald Trump's controversial proposal to relocate Palestinians to neighboring countries.
- The 'mini-Arab summit' in Riyadh marks a significant step in shaping the Arab response to the ongoing crisis, with further deliberations expected at the upcoming Egypt summit in March.

Gautam Adani U.S. Indictment: Hague Convention

- The U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) informed a New York court that it has sought India's assistance under the **Hague Service Convention** to serve summons on Gautam Adani and Sagar Adani.
 - Earlier, the Trump administration temporarily suspended enforcement of the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act (FCPA) for 180 days.
 - ✓ The FCPA prohibits U.S. entities and individuals from bribing foreign officials for business gains.
 - However, the SEC's court filing suggests the pause does not apply retroactively, allowing the Adani investigation to proceed.
- The Adanis face criminal and civil charges from the U.S. Department of Justice and the SEC for allegedly bribing officials over \$250 million to advance Adani Group's solar projects.

Hague Service Convention

- **About**
 - The Hague Service Convention, signed in 1965, facilitates the cross-border exchange of legal documents, including summons, in commercial cases.
 - It aims to ensure defendants in foreign jurisdictions receive timely and actual notice of legal proceedings.
- **Membership and Applicability**
 - The Convention applies only when both the sending and receiving countries are signatories.
 - Currently, 84 states, including India and the U.S., are parties.
 - Each signatory must designate a central authority to handle service requests.
- **Permitted Channels of Communication**
 - The Convention allows service through diplomatic channels (via the Ministry of External Affairs), postal services, and direct communication between judicial officers or legal representatives.

India's Accession and Reservations

- India joined the Hague Service Convention in November 2006, with reservations against all alternative service methods under Article 10.
- India mandates that legal documents in cross-border commercial cases must be served indirectly through a designated authority rather than directly to the individuals involved.
 - MEA reiterates that private judicial officers cannot serve summons directly in India.
- It prohibits the service of judicial documents through diplomatic or consular channels, except when the recipient is a national of the requesting country.
 - For instance, a U.S. court cannot serve documents in India through U.S. diplomatic or consular channels, unless the recipient is a U.S. national residing in India.

- Additionally, all service requests must be in English or include an English translation.

Role of the Ministry of Law and Justice

- The Ministry of Law and Justice serves as India's designated central authority for processing service requests.
- It can reject a request but must provide reasons, such as concerns over sovereignty or security under Article 13.
- However, it cannot refuse service solely based on claims of exclusive jurisdiction or differences in domestic law (Article 29).

ILO Chief Lauds India's Social Security Network

- ILO Director-General Gilbert F. Hounqbo praised India's collaboration with the ILO and its efforts in expanding social security, particularly through **digital initiatives like e-Shram**.
- He called India's progress a model for other nations.
- The ***World Social Protection Report 2024-26*** highlights that India's social protection coverage has nearly doubled, rising from 24% to 49%.
- Union Labour Minister, at the *Regional Dialogue on Social Justice*, emphasized India's economic transformation, citing a drop in unemployment from 6% (2017-18) to 3.2% (2023-24) and an **increase in the Labour Force Participation Rate from 49.8% to 60.1%.**
- He credited these improvements to labour reforms, including the consolidation of 29 labour laws into four Labour Codes, which have enhanced worker welfare, social security, and business efficiency.

First Edition of the SOUL Leadership Conclave

- PM Modi inaugurated the first edition of the **School of Ultimate Leadership (SOUL) Leadership Conclave 2025** at Bharat Mandapam, New Delhi.
- He emphasized the crucial role of leadership in nation-building, stating that developing excellent leaders across all sectors is essential for a Viksit Bharat (Developed India).
- The SOUL Leadership Conclave 2025 served as a premier platform for leaders from various fields to share their experiences and discuss leadership challenges.
- The conclave fosters collaboration, knowledge exchange, and leadership development for India's future leaders.
- The School of Ultimate Leadership (SOUL) is a new leadership institution in Gujarat that aims to train and nurture leaders for public service based on merit, commitment, and passion rather than political lineage.

DRDO Successfully Conducts Trials Of Indigenous MANPAD

- DRDO has successfully conducted three successive flight trials of the Very Short-Range Air Defence System (VSHORADS) from Chandipur, Odisha.
- The tests were aimed at intercepting high-speed, low-altitude aerial targets, including drones.
- **Key Features of VSHORADS**
 - Fourth-generation, miniaturized **Man Portable Air Defence System (MANPAD)**.
 - Indigenously designed and developed by DRDO's Research Centre Imarat (RCI), Hyderabad, in collaboration with other DRDO labs and Indian industry partners.

Fort William, Army's Eastern HQ, Renamed Vijay Durg

- Fort William in Kolkata, the headquarters of the Eastern Army Command, has been renamed Vijay Durg.
 - The historic Fort William was built by the British in 1781 and was named after King William III of England.
- This renaming is part of a broader initiative to eliminate colonial-era practices and symbols from India's armed forces.
- This effort aligns with PM Modi's call for "**freedom from the mentality of slavery**" (**gulami ki mansikta se mukti**) and aims to enhance indigenisation in military traditions, doctrines, and customs. Key measures in this process include:
 - **Renaming British-era military landmarks:** *Fort William* → *Vijay Durg*, *Kitchener House* → *Manekshaw House*, *St. George's Gate* → *Shivaji Gate*.
 - **Revising military traditions and symbols:**
 - ✓ The Indian Navy's ensign was redesigned in 2022, removing colonial elements and incorporating **Chhatrapati Shivaji's seal**.
 - ✓ The **Beating Retreat ceremony** replaced British-era tunes with Indian compositions.
 - ✓ **Ceremonial practices and attire** have been reviewed to reflect indigenous heritage
- A review on colonial practices in the armed forces, released by Defence Minister in September 2024, highlighted the need to eliminate outdated legacy systems and adopt **modern, indigenous approaches**.
- The move is part of a long-term strategy to reshape India's military identity in line with its cultural and historical ethos.

Ancient 'Stitched' Ship Launched In Goa

- A 5th-century-style wooden stitched ship, constructed using ancient techniques with coconut fiber stitching, coir rope, natural resins, and cotton sails, was launched at Goa's Divar Island.
- Modeled after a painting from the Ajanta caves, the vessel will retrace ancient trade routes to Oman by the end of 2025.
- The project is a collaboration between the Indian Navy, the Ministry of Culture, and Goa-based Hodi Innovations Pvt Ltd.
- This initiative will help in reviving India's maritime heritage.
- Designed by traditional artisans, the ship uses steaming methods to shape wooden planks, which are stitched together with coir and sealed with coconut fiber, resin, and fish oil.

- The keel is made of Matti wood, while other parts incorporate teak and jackfruit wood.
- The project aims to showcase India’s ancient shipbuilding expertise and reconnect with its rich seafaring past.

India to Induct Advanced Stealth Frigate Tamal from Russia

- India is set to welcome **Tamal**, one of the world’s most advanced multi-role stealth guided missile frigates, built at Russia’s Yantar Shipyard.
- It is the second of two warships constructed under a **2016 Indo-Russian agreement** for four Talwar-class frigates—two built in Russia and two in India.
 - The first, **INS Tushil**, has already been inducted into the Indian Navy.

Key Features of Tamal

- **Supersonic BrahMos Missile Capability** for precision strikes.
- **Anti-Submarine Warfare** – Equipped with advanced **torpedoes and anti-submarine rockets**.
- **Helicopter Deployment** – Can operate a **multi-role helicopter** for surveillance and combat.
- **Stealth Technology** – to evade **enemy radar detection**.
- **Speed and Range** – Can cruise at **30 knots (55 km/h)** with an operational range of **3,000 km**.

- **Tamal: India’s Last Imported Warship**
 - The **Indian Navy has announced that Tamal will be the last imported warship**, signaling a shift towards complete **indigenous warship production**.
 - India has been operating Talwar-class frigates since **2003**, with six currently in service.

Conference for Women Peacekeepers from the Global South

- A two-day conference on women peacekeepers deployed in UN missions was held in New Delhi.
- Titled “**Women in Peacekeeping: A Global South Perspective,**” this first-of-its-kind event was organized by the MEA, in collaboration with the Ministry of Defence and the **Centre for United Nations Peacekeeping**.
- While addressing the conference, EAM S. Jaishankar reaffirmed India’s dedication to supporting Global South nations in building their peacekeeping capacities.

India’s Motivations and Challenges in UN Peacekeeping

- **Strategic and Diplomatic Interests**
 - ✓ India’s sustained peacekeeping contributions help bolster its international standing and strengthen its claim for a permanent seat in the UNSC.
 - ✓ However, UNSC expansion depends largely on the willingness of current P5 members to share power.

India's Key Contributions to Peacekeeping

- **Training & Capacity Building** – India, through the **Centre for UN Peacekeeping**, will continue offering training programs, including women-specific courses, as seen with ASEAN nations in 2023.
- **Major Peacekeeping Contributor** – Since the 1950s, India has deployed over 290,000 peacekeepers across 50+ UN missions worldwide.
- **Current Deployment** – Over 5,000 Indian peacekeepers are serving in 9 of the 11 active UN peacekeeping missions. This includes 154 women.
 - India **pioneered** women's participation by deploying the **first all-female Formed Police Unit (FPU) to Liberia in 2007**.
 - India's **Female Engagement Teams** in **Abyei (UNISFA)** and **Congo (MONUSCO)** have enhanced **civilian protection** and **community trust**.
 - **Captain Seema Gowdar's team** in Abyei has been recognized for strengthening local engagement.
 - **Major Radhika Sen**, serving in MONUSCO, won the **2023 UN Military Gender Advocate of the Year Award** for her leadership.

o Challenges & Criticism

- ✓ The effectiveness of UN peacekeeping is debated due to its high cost & questionable impact.
- ✓ India has lost 179 personnel in UN peacekeeping missions.
- ✓ There is unequal troop contribution, with developing nations supplying the bulk of forces. (As of October 2024, Nepal led with 6,114 troops, while India ranked fourth with 5,466 troops).
- ✓ Many countries contribute based on strategic interests rather than genuine commitment to conflict resolution.
- ✓ For instance, China seeks commercial gains in Africa, while India's role aligns with its UNSC ambitions.

Indian Army Air Defence Gears Up for Drone Warfare

- The Army is set to **induct fragmentation ammunition** for its **1,300 air defence guns** and push for new counter-drone systems.
 - o Procurement is underway for **air burst ammunition, laser weapons, and smart ammunition** to counter drone threats.
 - ✓ L-70 and Zu-23 air defence guns will be equipped with air burst fragmentation ammunition.
 - o The **Quick Reaction Surface-to-Air Missile (QRSAM)** contract is expected within **4-5 months**.
 - o **Akash SAM**: Three regiments are in service, and two **Akash-NG (next generation)** regiments have been contracted.
- **Evolving Threats & Tactical Challenges**
 - o Drones, loiter munitions, and smart drones have revolutionized warfare, making air threats difficult to quantify.
 - o The Army faces a disruptive air defence challenge to operate freely in the air and maneuver troops on the ground.
- **Strategic Lessons from Ukraine War**
 - o Indigenous software & decentralized command posts are critical for air defence.
 - o The rapid evolution of drone warfare has forced even major air powers, like Russia, to operate at higher altitudes, making them more vulnerable.
 - o **Smart ammunition** is a game-changer, with higher kill probability and reduced logistics, equating 17 high-explosive rounds to one smart round.
- India is focusing on indigenization, advanced technology, and strategic adaptability to counter emerging aerial threats.

DDoS Cyberattack Hit Karnataka's Kaveri 2.0 Portal

- In January 2025, Karnataka's property registration portal, Kaveri 2.0, faced severe outages, disrupting citizen services.
- An investigation by the Revenue and E-Governance Departments revealed that the disruption was not due to technical glitches but a deliberate Distributed Denial of Service (DDoS) attack.
- The cyberattack on the 2023-launched portal underscores the vulnerability of critical digital infrastructure to cyber threats.

About Distributed Denial of Service (DDoS) attack

- DDoS attack is a cyberattack designed to disrupt the normal functioning of a server, service, or network by overwhelming it with excessive internet traffic.
- **How It Works**
 - Unlike a Denial of Service (DoS) attack, which originates from a single source, a **DDoS attack** uses multiple compromised systems, often infected with malware, to generate traffic.
 - These systems form a botnet that floods the target with requests.
- **Types of DDoS Attacks**
 - **Bandwidth Saturation:** Overloading a site's bandwidth.
 - **Protocol Exploitation:** Exploiting vulnerabilities in network protocols.
 - **Application Targeting:** Attacking weaknesses in specific applications or services.
- **Impact**
 - DDoS attacks can cripple online services, making them inaccessible to legitimate users and causing financial and reputational damage.
- **Prominent DDoS Attacks**

Attack on X Platform
(August 2024)

Attack on Microsoft-
owned GitHub (2015)

Romance Scams

- Experts and authorities have warned about rising romance scams involving emotional manipulation, deceit, and financial fraud.
- According to a Moody's report, India ranked third globally in new romance scam profiles in 2024, accounting for 12% of the total, behind the US (38%) and Nigeria (14%).

Romance Scams

- Romance frauds typically occur through dating apps and social media, where scammers create fake online profiles to lure victims.
- According to the Indian Cyber Crime Coordination Centre (I4C), fraudsters gain trust and then demand money, gifts, bank details, or intimate content.
- These scams often pose a risk to victims' personal safety, as criminals may belong to organized networks.
- **Rise of Romance Scams During Covid-19**
 - The Covid-19 pandemic saw a sharp increase in such scams, as fraudsters exploited people's isolation and emotional vulnerability.
 - A technique called "love bombing"—where scammers excessively express affection to gain victims' trust—was commonly used.
- **Financial and Reputational Risks**
 - Moody's warns that money from romance scams, including sextortion, is often laundered through banks, exposing financial institutions to reputational damage and legal penalties.

Other Major Fraud Trends in Focus

- **Fake Donation & Travel Booking Scams:** Fraudsters exploit major festivals like Diwali by setting up fake charities and offering fraudulent travel deals.
- **AI-Generated Celebrity Investment Scams:** Scammers use deepfake videos, fake news articles, and social media posts to promote fraudulent cryptocurrency and trading investments.
- **Remote Access Tech Support Fraud:** Posing as bank, tech support, or government officials, scammers create a sense of urgency to steal device access or sensitive data.
- **Job Scams:** Fraudsters lure job seekers with fake high-paying remote work or international job opportunities, often requiring upfront payments.
- **Predatory Loan App Scams:** Scammers target people in urgent financial need, offering quick loans with minimal paperwork but trapping them in high-interest repayment cycles.

- o Sextortion—which mainly targets teenage boys—involves extortion using fake profiles to solicit explicit content, later used to blackmail victims.
- **Preventive Measures**
 - o Authorities advise people to avoid sending money or sharing sensitive personal information with strangers online and to be cautious about the details they share on social media.

TRAI Tightens Rules Against Spam Calls & Text Messages

- India’s telecom regulator, TRAI, has introduced new rules under the Telecom Commercial Communications Customer Preference Regulations (TCCPCR), 2018, to curb spam calls and messages.
- Telecom operators like Airtel, Jio, and Vi must analyze call and SMS patterns in real time to detect spammers and report spam activity.
- Misreporting can result in fines ranging from ₹2 lakh for the first offense to ₹10 lakh for repeated violations.
- The revised regulations aim to combat evolving telecom misuse and create a more transparent commercial communication system for consumers.

Cracking Down on Spam Communication

- **Faster Action Against Spam**
 - o Users can now report spam more easily, with telecom operators required to act within **5 days**, down from the previous **30-day limit**.
- **Clear Identification of Spam Calls**
 - o Telemarketers can no longer use **normal 10-digit numbers** for promotional calls. Instead:
 - ✓ **140 series** remains for promotional calls.
 - ✓ **1600 series** is now designated for **transactional and service calls** (already being implemented).
- **Opting Out of Promotional Messages**
 - o Telecom operators must provide a mechanism for users to **opt out** of promotional communication, though users can **opt in** anytime.
- **Stricter Monitoring of Spam Activity**
 - o Operators must **analyze call and SMS patterns** based on factors like:

High call volumes	Short call durations	Low incoming-to-outgoing call ratios
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 - o This real-time monitoring helps detect potential spammers.
 - o Legitimate business messages will now have further disclosure requirements. “Customers will be able to identify the type of commercial message by just looking at its header as “-P”, “-S”, “-T”, and “-G” for identification of promotional, service, transactional, and government messages, respectively.
- **Stronger Verification & Penalties**
 - o Telemarketers must undergo physical verification, biometric authentication, and unique mobile number linking.
 - o Repeated violators will have all telecom resources suspended.
 - o Operators must maintain detailed records of complaints and sender information to ensure quick action.

Aero India 2025

- Aero India 2025, the 15th edition of Asia's premier **aerospace and defence exhibition**, was held at Yelahanka Air Force Station, Bengaluru.
- **Theme:** *'The Runway to a Billion Opportunities'*.
- Aero India, Asia's largest air show, is a **biennial event**, organized by the Defence Exhibition Organisation, Ministry of Defence.
- It serves as a global platform for showcasing cutting-edge aerospace technologies, fostering strategic dialogues, and enhancing international defence partnerships.

TROPEX Exercise

- The Indian Navy's biennial Theatre Level Operational Exercise (TROPEX-25) is being conducted from January to March in the Indian Ocean Region.
- The exercise involves 65 Navy ships, 9 submarines, and over 80 aircraft, testing complex maritime operational scenarios to validate warfighting strategies and interoperability with other services.
- **Key Highlights:**
 - **Joint Participation:** Includes assets from the Army, Air Force, and Coast Guard.
 - **Operational Phases:** Conducted both in harbour and at sea, covering combat, cyber, and electronic warfare operations.

India-Egypt Joint Special Forces Exercise CYCLONE-III

- The third edition of Exercise CYCLONE-III was held at Mahajan Field Firing Range, Rajasthan.
- This 14-day military drill focuses on enhancing joint operational capabilities, combat readiness, and tactical coordination between the elite forces of India and Egypt.

India Opens Demchok for Civilian Visitors Under Battlefield Tourism Initiative

- Less than four months after India and China agreed on a border disengagement, India has opened Demchok, a key friction point, for civilian visitors under the **Battlefield Tourism initiative**.
 - Led by the Ministry of Defence, Ministry of Tourism, and state governments, the initiative covers 77 forward locations, including 21 in Arunachal Pradesh, 14 in Ladakh, 11 in Jammu & Kashmir, and 7 in Sikkim.
- **Key Highlights:**
 - **Newly Accessible Sites:** Locations like Tawang, Bum La, Galwan, and Pangong Tso—historically significant battle zones.
 - **Safety Measures:** Visitors must coordinate with the Indian Army and follow acclimatization protocols in high-altitude areas.
 - **Single-Window Clearance:** Streamlines permissions for tourists.
 - **Strategic Impact:** Aims to boost tourism, enhance connectivity, and promote socio-economic growth while maintaining operational readiness in border regions.
- This initiative grants citizens access to historic battlegrounds while ensuring **national security and safety protocols** remain intact.

ENVIRONMENT AND GEOGRAPHY

Ocean Coordination Mechanism

Recently, the Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission of UNESCO (UNESCO-IOC) has launched the Ocean Coordination Mechanism (OCM) to address critical marine challenges in the Caribbean and North Brazil Shelf (**CLME+ region** (*Caribbean Large Marine Ecosystem*)).

About Ocean Coordination Mechanism (OCM)

- **Focus Areas:** Sustainable fisheries, Ecosystem restoration, Pollution control, Blue carbon development (using coastal ecosystems for carbon storage), Marine spatial planning, Marine protected areas
- **Funding:** The OCM has secured funding from the Global Environment Facility (GEF) through the UNDP/GEF PROCARIBE+ Project
- **Collaboration:** The OCM emphasizes cross-country collaboration and integrates traditional knowledge with scientific research. It also prioritizes the involvement of vulnerable communities in conservation efforts

Lessons for India

India, with its vast coastline and strategic location in the Indian Ocean, can draw valuable lessons from the OCM:

- **Adopting Blue Carbon Initiatives:** Restoration of mangroves along the Sundarbans and Gulf of Kachchh.
- **Marine Spatial Planning:** Effective zoning for fisheries, tourism, and conservation in Lakshadweep and Andaman & Nicobar Islands.
- **Cross-Country Collaborations:** Enhancing cooperation under the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA).

Geographical Significance of the Caribbean Sea

Boundaries	Geopolitical & Environmental Significance
North: Greater Antilles (Cuba, Jamaica, Hispaniola, and Puerto Rico)	Key shipping routes and biodiversity hotspots.
East: Lesser Antilles (Virgin Islands to Trinidad)	critical coral reef systems.
South: Venezuela to Colombia	Oil-rich waters; fishing grounds
West: Central America & Yucatán Peninsula	Mangrove ecosystem & marine biodiversity hubs

North Brazil Shelf: It stretches along the northeastern coast of South America, from the border with the Caribbean Sea to the Parnaíba River estuary in Brazil. It is dominated by the North Brazil Current, which is an extension of the South Equatorial Current. These current influences the shelf's temperature, salinity, and nutrient levels.

New Ramsar Sites

Ministry of Environment, GOI has added four new Ramsar sites, taking the total to 89.

About New Ramsar Sites

Therthangal Bird Sanctuary (Ramanathapuram district of Tamil Nadu, near the Gulf of Mannar)	Lies along the Central Asian Flyway, a major route for migratory birds. It serves as a crucial breeding and foraging ground for various waterbird species, including the Spot-billed Pelican, Black-headed Ibis, and Oriental Darter.
Sakkarakottai Bird Sanctuary (Ramanathapuram district)	It is primarily an irrigation tank that provides crucial water storage for agriculture in the region. It's recharged by the northeast monsoon, particularly between October and January. The sanctuary provides a crucial breeding and foraging

of Tamil Nadu, close to the Gulf of Mannar)	ground for a variety of resident and migratory bird species. It's home to over 40 different bird species, including the Spot-billed Pelican, Grey Heron, Little Cormorant, and Black Kite.
Khecheopalri Wetland (West Sikkim district of Sikkim, in the foothills of the Himalayas)	Khecheopalri Lake, which is a part of the wetland, is considered sacred by both Buddhists and Hindus. It's believed to be a wish-fulfilling lake and is associated with Guru Padmasambhava and Goddess Tara.
Udhwa Lake (Sahibganj district of Jharkhand)	Comprises two large water bodies: Pataura Jheel and Brahma Jamalpur Jheel.

Inland MANGROVES

The 32.78-hectare area of Guneri village in Lakhtar tehsil of Kutch district, which is a natural inland mangrove site, has been declared as the first Biodiversity Heritage Site (BHS) of Gujarat.

Biodiversity Heritage Site (BHS):

- These are notified by State Governments in India, in consultation with local communities, under Section 37 of the Biological Diversity Act, 2002.
- **The criteria for designation include:** Areas of significant biodiversity that may include High endemism (species found nowhere else), Presence of rare, endangered, or threatened species, Unique or representative ecosystems, Wild ancestors of domesticated species, Areas with cultural, ethical, or aesthetic values related to biodiversity
- It is managed by Biodiversity Management Committees (BMCs) at the local level, with support from State Biodiversity Boards (SBBs).
- Examples: Nallur Tamarind Grove in Karnataka, Majuli River Island in Assam (The world's largest river island), Ameenpur Lake in Telangana, Khecheopalri Wetland in Sikkim

Inland MANGROVES

- Inland mangroves, distinct from their coastal counterparts, are unique ecosystems found away from coastal shorelines, typically along riverbanks, estuaries, and inland water bodies.
- Unlike their coastal counterparts, these mangroves thrive in non-tidal conditions, often relying on groundwater sources for sustenance.
- These are rare and have been reported from only eight locations across the globe till date. The Guneri inland mangrove site is the last remains of its kind in India.

About Guneri mangrove site

- Guneri mangrove site is located at a distance of 45 km from the Arabian Sea and four km from the Kori Creek, where seawater never approaches. It is also devoid of any sludge and is spread over a flat piece of land like a forest.
- **Origin:** It might have originated either after the marine transgression which occurred in the area during the Miocene period or on the bank of the lost river (the Saraswati River) in the Great Rann of Kachchh. The Saraswati, a mythological river, is assumed to have once run in Great Rann of Kachchh during 3000-4000 B.C.

Marine Heat Wave

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

About Marine Heat waves (MHW)

- It occurs when the surface temperature of a particular region of the sea rises to 3- 4 degrees Celsius above the average temperature for at least five days.
- MHWs have increased by 50% over the past decade and now last longer and are more severe (report by the IUCN 2021)
- Causes: changes in ocean currents, atmospheric conditions (e.g., high-pressure systems, reduced wind), and increased greenhouse gas concentrations leading to ocean warming.
 - ✓ **Atmospheric Patterns:** Phenomena such as El Niño and La Niña influence ocean temperatures, with El Niño often leading to warmer sea surfaces.
- Impacts: Coral bleaching (Great Barrier Reef), Seagrass die-off, Marine biodiversity loss (shifts in species distributions), Harmful algal blooms,
 - ✓ **Climate Feedback:** Warmer oceans can alter weather patterns, contributing to extreme events like hurricanes and altering precipitation distribution.
- Examples: The “Blob,” a massive MHW in the North Pacific (2013-2016), had devastating impacts on marine life, including mass die-offs of seabirds and marine mammals. The 2011 MHW off the coast of Western Australia caused significant losses in the abalone and rock lobster fisheries.
 - ✓ Indian Ocean: Studies indicate that by 2050, the Indian Ocean could experience MHWs for 220-250 days annually, potentially leading to intensified cyclones and threats to fisheries.

Potash Reserves

The Punjab government will explore potash mining in Fazilka and Sri Muktsar Sahib districts, where surveys previously detected large mineral reserves.

- Surveys of the Geological Survey of India (GSI) have also identified reserves in parts of Rajasthan (northwestern Nagaur-Ganganagar basin, including the Ganganagar and Hanumangarh districts that border Fazilka and Muktsar)
 - ✓ These findings position Punjab as the second Indian state, after Rajasthan, to have significant potash reserves.
 - ✓ Potash is mined from underground deposits formed by the evaporation of ancient seas. These deposits are found in various parts of the world, with Canada (leads with over 33% of these reserves), Belarus & Russia being major producers.
- India lacks domestic potash production. This exploration will reduce India’s dependence on imports and bolstering the domestic fertilizer industry. India imports 50 lakh tonnes of potash annually, primarily used in fertilisers and industries.
- According to the **National Mineral Inventory (NMI) database**, the total potash resources are estimated at 23,091 million tonnes in 2020. Rajasthan alone contributes 89% to the total resources.

About Potash

- Primarily refers to potassium compounds, most commonly potassium chloride (KCl), Other forms include potassium sulfate (K₂SO₄) and potassium carbonate (K₂CO₃).
- Over 90% of potash is used as fertilizer and it is one of the three primary agricultural nutrients (Nitrogen, Phosphorus and Potassium or N-P-K).
- Forms of Potash fertilizers: Sulphate of Potash (SOP), a premium potash fertilizer that is free of chloride (a compound considered harmful to plants). On the other hand, Muriate of Potash (MOP- most commonly used potash fertilizer) contains some chloride.

- While SOP is used primarily on high-value crops, usually leafy plants, fruits and vegetables, MOP is commonly used on carbohydrate-type crops, such as wheat, maize and rice.

Milestone of 100 GW Solar Energy Capacity

India has achieved the milestone of 100 GW solar energy capacity as of January 2025 and progress toward a 500 GW non-fossil fuel target by 2030.

Recent Trends in Installation of Solar Energy

- Witnessed a massive surge reaching 100 GW in 2025 from just 2.82 GW in 2014. 2024 saw record-breaking solar additions, with 24.5 GW installed, doubling the capacity added in 2023.
 - ✓ **Reduced Carbon Emissions:** Helps India achieve its Net Zero target by 2070
- India aims to achieve 500 GW of renewable energy capacity by 2030, with solar energy playing a dominant role.
- Contributes 47% of total installed renewable capacity. India ranks third globally in total solar capacity.
- Leading states: Rajasthan, Gujarat, Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, and Madhya Pradesh

Key Government Initiatives regarding Solar Energy

- PM Surya Ghar Muft Bijli Yojana (2024): Aiming to install solar panels on 1 crore households and provide free electricity.
 - ✓ **Gujarat's 'Surya Urja Ghar Yojana':** Gujarat successfully deployed rooftop solar panels in over 2.5 lakh households, reducing power dependency.
- Empowering Farmers: Schemes like **PM-KUSUM** support farmers by allowing them to generate and sell surplus solar power.
- India co-founded ISA (International Solar Alliance) to mobilize \$1 trillion investment in solar energy by 2030.
 - ✓ **One Sun, One World, One Grid (OSOWOG)** aims to create a global solar power transmission network.
- Solar Parks Scheme: Aims to develop large-scale solar parks across states, providing necessary infrastructure and land for solar projects.
 - ✓ **Bhadla Solar Park (Rajasthan)** – The world's largest solar park with 2.25 GW capacity.
- PLI Scheme for Solar Manufacturing: It boosts domestic solar module manufacturing, reducing reliance on imports (China currently supplies over 75% of India's solar modules) and promoting self-reliance in the sector.

Climate Risk Index (CRI) 2025

The Climate Risk Index (CRI) 2025 was released recently, putting India sixth among the most affected countries (By analyzing data over a 30-year period 1993-2022), despite improving its short-term ranking to 49th in 2022.

About Climate Risk Index (CRI) 2025(Published annually by Germanwatch, an environmental think tank)

- It assesses the human and economic losses due to climate-induced disasters based on extreme weather event data from the International Disaster Database (Em-dat) and socio-economic data from the International Monetary Fund (IMF).
 - ✓ Provides empirical evidence for climate justice discussions in forums like G20 & UNFCCC's COP.
- Most Affected Countries in 2022: Pakistan, Belize, and Italy suffered the most due to Heatwaves, storms, and floods. This highlighted the disproportionate impact on developing nations despite their low carbon footprint.
- Storms caused the highest economic losses (35%) followed by Heatwaves (30%), Floods (27%)

- **Findings about India**

- Disasters in India accounting for 10% of global fatalities caused by such events, and 4.3% of the damage (in dollar terms).
- Dominica, China, Honduras, Myanmar, and Italy are ranked ahead of India.
- India faced more than 400 extreme events, causing \$ 180 billion in losses, and at least 80,000 fatalities (1993 to 2022)
- Severe floods, cyclones, and heatwaves remained major climate threats

Puducherry-Villupuram-Auroville-Cuddalore (PVAC) Bioregion

A database on the biodiversity of Puducherry-Villupuram-Auroville-Cuddalore (PVAC) bioregion is being collected by citizen science initiative.

Bioregion: It is a geographical area defined by its unique combination of living organisms (plants and animals), ecological systems, and physical features like landforms, soils, and watersheds. Unlike political boundaries, bioregions are determined by natural factors.

** Many bioregions have indigenous communities whose traditional knowledge contributes to sustainable practices.

Examples of Bioregions: The Amazon rainforest, The Great Plains, The Arctic tundra, The Sahara Desert

** Agreements—such as Biosphere Reserves (UNESCO MAB Programme), National Mission for Sustaining the Himalayan Ecosystem (NMSHE), and Green India Mission—emphasize bioregional planning.

About PVAC Bioregion

- Location: The PVAC bioregion spans approximately 2,500 sq km across the states of Tamil Nadu and Puducherry in India.
- The Nallavadu Lagoon is a vital habitat for migratory birds, including redshank, common greenshank, gulls, and terns.
- Ecological Features:
 - Fauna: Vulnerable species such as the smooth-coated otter, intertidal species like mudskippers, fish such as mangrove red snapper, and other aquatic life like mud crabs, Indian glassy fish, and grey mullets
 - Flora: The PVAC bioregion is part of the East Deccan dry evergreen forests ecoregion, known for its unique tropical dry evergreen forests.
- Key Initiatives:
 - **Know Your Bioregion:** This citizen science initiative encourages residents to document and share information about the region's biodiversity, contributing to a comprehensive database.

Delhi Earthquake (Aravalli-Delhi Fold Belt)

Recently experienced earthquake in Delhi was distinct as its epicenter was within Delhi itself, near Dhaula Kuan unlike frequently originating tremors from distant regions of Himalayas.

✓ One of the contributing factors for Delhi earthquake is Aravalli-Delhi Fold Belt.

About Aravalli-Delhi Fold Belt

- Geographical Extent: Extends from southern and eastern Rajasthan, through Haryana, and into Delhi, constituting a major part of the Aravalli Mountain range.

- **Geological Formation:** It is composed of deformed rock layers that have been folded due to intense geological stress over hundreds of millions of years. It's a product of ancient orogenic events (mountain-building processes). It involves both the Aravalli and Delhi Supergroups of rocks.
 - ✓ The Khetri Copper Belt (Rajasthan) is a major copper mining region due to mineralization linked to ancient geological processes.
- **Tectonic History:** Long and complex tectonic history, with multiple phases of rifting, sedimentation, and orogenic events.
 - ✓ Experienced multiple phases of sedimentation, folding, and faulting due to collision of cratons (Bundelkhand Craton & Marwar Craton).
- **Seismic Activity:** While the region is relatively stable compared to the Himalayan region, it still experiences occasional mild earthquakes. These earthquakes are generally attributed to the release of localized stress within ancient faults.
- India's seismic zoning map divides the country into four zones (Zone 2, 3, 4, and 5) based on earthquake risk.
- Delhi falls in Seismic Zone 4. Presence of Mahendragarh-Dehradun Fault, Delhi-Haridwar Ridge, Sohna Fault makes it vulnerable to mild earthquakes.

Zone 5: Highest seismic activity	Himalayan region
Zone 4: High risk	Delhi, Jammu & Kashmir, Bihar
Zone 3: Moderate risk	Mumbai, Chennai, Kolkata
Zone 2: Low risk	Deccan Plateau

TrailGuard AI System To Detect Poachers

TrailGuard AI is being used in reserves, including Kanha Tiger Reserve, Dudhwa National Park and Similipal Tiger Reserve using 100-150 AI-enabled cameras to detect poachers.

TrailGuard AI System (by Nightjar Technologies, a social impact enterprise in Gurgaon)

Working

- **Movement Detection:** Cameras are in a low-power state and activate when movement is detected.
- **AI-Based Analysis:** An onboard AI chip analyzes captured images, classifying objects as "animal," "human," or "vehicle."
- **Real-Time Alerts:** If a potential threat is identified, the system sends an alert, including the image, to a control center.
- **Rapid Response:** Authorities can then quickly mobilize rangers and other personnel.

Key features: Compact Design, Long Battery Life, Rapid Transmission, AI driven image classification

****African Model – TrailGuard AI in Tanzania & Kenya:** Used in Serengeti and Maasai Mara to prevent elephant and rhino poaching.

Compensatory Afforestation

Comptroller and Auditor General of India (CAG) has flagged that the funds allocated for compensatory afforestation were diverted for other activities by Uttarakhand's Forest divisions.

- The report flagged that in 37 cases, compensatory afforestation was executed after more than eight years of getting final clearance. As per CAMPA guidelines, after receiving funds, afforestation should be conducted within a year, or two growing seasons.

Compensatory Afforestation (to maintain ecological balance and biodiversity)

- It aims to compensate for the deforestation caused by development projects like infrastructure, mining, and industrial expansion.
- When forest land is diverted, the user agency (the entity undertaking the project) is required to plant trees in an equivalent or greater area of non-forest or degraded forest land. This involves funding the afforestation activities, including planting, maintenance, and monitoring.
- **Case study: Odisha** has seen extensive forest land diversion for mining projects, particularly **for minerals like iron ore and bauxite**. CAMPA funds were allocated to Odisha to undertake compensatory afforestation and related activities. It emphasizes the need for greater community participation, transparency, and accountability in CAMPA implementation.
 - ✓ In Madhya Pradesh, resistance by Baiga and Gond tribes led to the revision of compensatory afforestation plans to ensure their participation and benefit-sharing.

Legal Framework

- The Forest (Conservation) Act, 1980, is the primary legislation governing compensatory afforestation.
 - ✓ In June 2022, the government amended the Forest Conservation Rules to propose a mechanism to allow developers to raise plantations "over land on which the (FC) Act is not applicable" and to swap such plots against subsequent requirements of compensatory afforestation.
- The Compensatory Afforestation Fund Act, 2016, and its associated rules, establish the framework for managing the funds collected for compensatory afforestation.
- The Compensatory Afforestation Fund Management and Planning Authority (CAMPA) oversees the implementation of compensatory afforestation activities.
 - ✓ National CAMPA Advisory Council has been established as per orders of Supreme Court.
- The states deposit money collected from user agencies with the national CAF (Compensatory Afforestation Fund) to be eventually credited into state CAFs as per their entitlement. The states, however, receive only 90% of their share; the other 10% are held back to cover administrative expenses.
- **National Green Tribunal (NGT) Orders:** Stricter compliance on compensatory afforestation projects.

Reclassification of Major Minerals

The Ministry of Mines reclassified Barytes, Feldspar, Mica, and Quartz as major minerals from their previous minor mineral status.

The distinction between Major Minerals and Minor Minerals in India

It is based on their economic significance, regulatory framework, and industrial use. This classification is defined under the Mines and Minerals (Development and Regulation) Act, 1957 (MMDR Act).

Major Minerals	Minor Minerals
Minerals that are of high economic importance and are used extensively in industrial and infrastructure development.	Minerals that are less valuable and are primarily used in construction, local industries, and minor commercial purposes.

Rationale of Reclassification

- In consonance with government's focus on enhancing the domestic mining of critical minerals with India's focus on self-reliance in critical minerals.
- These minerals are often associated with other valuable critical minerals like Lithium, Beryl, and Tantalum.

- **Need for Domestic Mining of Critical Minerals:** India relies heavily on imports for critical minerals. Reclassification helps in better exploration, reporting, and extraction of associated minerals.
 - ✓ **Example:** Lithium (imported from China & Australia) → Essential for EV batteries.
- Previously, under minor mineral leases, the focus was primarily on their use in construction and ceramics, leading to the under-extraction and under-reporting of associated critical minerals.
 - ✓ Example: Mica was largely mined for paints and insulation but has aerospace applications too.
- **Global Energy Transition & India's Green Energy Push:** India's 2070 Net-Zero target and expansion of solar PV & wind energy need these minerals.
 - ✓ **Barytes** in radiation shielding → Useful in nuclear power plants & space technology.

Key Minerals & Their Strategic Importance

Mineral	Previous Use	Strategic Relevance After Reclassification
Barytes	Used in oil drilling	Nuclear shielding, medical industry, space tech
Feldspar	Essential for ceramics, glass, and paints.	Battery-grade materials, advanced glass coatings
Mica	Electrical insulation, cosmetics.	Defense, aerospace, satellites
Quartz	Industrial applications.	Semiconductors, solar PV, fiber optics

Major Minerals

- Those specified in the First Schedule of the Mines and Minerals (Development and Regulation) Act, 1957 (MMDR Act).
- Including: Metallic minerals (e.g., iron ore, manganese, copper, gold); Non-metallic minerals (e.g., limestone, mica, barytes, quartz, feldspar); Fossil Fuels (Energy Minerals; Coal, Lignite, Uranium)
- Regulation and development: It involve both the central and state governments, with the central government (Oversees mining through The Indian Bureau of Mines (IBM)) playing a significant role in policy formulation and national-level oversight.
 - ✓ National Mineral Exploration Policy, 2016 and "National Mineral Policy, 2019" formulates policies aimed at promoting sustainable mining practices
- Lease Period: Up to 50 years, as per Section 8A of the MMDR Act, 1957.

Black Plastic

Recent study about Black Plastic observed that it contains toxic flame retardants, raising concerns over food contamination and health risks.

About Black Plastic (made from polypropylene (PP), polystyrene (PS), and polyethylene (PE))

- It refers to plastics dyed with carbon black pigments, commonly used in packaging, electronics, automotive parts, and household goods.
- It often contains recycled materials, sometimes including electronic waste. This can introduce potentially harmful substances like flame retardants and heavy metals.
- Recyclability Issues: Optical sorting technology often fails to detect the black pigment, leading to these items being rejected and sent to landfills.

Species in News

<p>Rusty-Spotted Cat</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• For the first time ever it was found in the jungles of West Bengal's Purulia district.• It is the world's smallest and lightest known cat.• Habitat: Dry deciduous and semi-deciduous forests in northern and central India, Western Ghats, Kachchh and Rajasthan, and peninsular India, besides Nepal and Sri Lanka.• India holds 80% of the cat's total population.• IUCN Red list: Near Threatened
<p>Gambusia Affinis (Mosquitofish)</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The National Green Tribunal has sought a response from the Centre on two highly invasive and alien fish species (Gambusia Affinis (Mosquitofish) and Poecilia Reticulata (Guppy)) being used as biological agents for controlling mosquitoes.• Gambusia Affinis (Mosquito fish) is a Small freshwater fish• Native Range: South-eastern United States and north-eastern Mexico• Tolerates a wide range of water conditions, including high salinity and pollution.• Diet: Primarily feeds on zooplankton, small insects, and mosquito larvae (Considered "larvivorous")
<p>Poecilia Reticulata (Guppy):</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Small freshwater fish native to Northeastern South America and the Caribbean.• Found in tropical and subtropical freshwater bodies globally.• Males are smaller than females but have ornamental fins.• Diet: Omnivorous, feeding on mosquito larvae, small insects, algae, and organic detritus.

Graphics Processing Unit (GPU)

The Indian government is set to procure more graphics processing units (GPUs) under the IndiaAI Mission.

About GPU

- It is a specialized electronic circuit designed to rapidly manipulate and alter memory to accelerate the creation of images in a frame buffer intended to be displayed on a device such as a monitor or television.
 - ✓ **Historical Evolution:** The development of GPUs began with simple graphics accelerators in the 1980s and evolved to modern, highly specialized chips capable of AI and machine learning computations.
 - ✓ **Semiconductor Supply Chain:** GPUs are part of the critical semiconductor industry.
- It excel at parallel processing, making them ideal for handling the complex mathematical calculations involved in rendering images, videos, and 3D graphics.
- While popular for gaming, their capabilities extend to various fields, including video editing, 3D modeling, scientific research, and artificial intelligence.
- GPUs have thousands of cores, allowing them to perform many calculations simultaneously, which significantly speeds up processing time.
 - ✓ **Energy Efficiency:** Despite higher power consumption than CPUs (Sequential Processing), GPUs provide better performance-per-watt efficiency for parallel workloads.
- GPUs can be integrated into the CPU (integrated graphics) or exist as a separate dedicated card (discrete graphics). Discrete GPUs offer higher performance but consume more power.
 - ✓ **AI-Powered GPUs:** NVIDIA's Tensor Cores and AMD's RDNA architecture exemplify AI-driven improvements in GPU performance.

Security Challenges Related to GPUs

- **Cryptojacking:** Unauthorized mining of cryptocurrencies using GPU power.
- **AI Model Attacks:** Vulnerabilities in GPU-powered AI models exploited for adversarial attacks.
- **Data Leakage:** GPUs shared in cloud environments may inadvertently expose sensitive information.
 - ✓ **Example:** Cryptojacking malware like "XMRig" targets GPUs to mine Monero cryptocurrency.

Applications of GPU Beyond Gaming

- **Healthcare:** Medical imaging, drug discovery, and research involving high-dimensional data sets (such as in protein folding).
 - ✓ **Example:** DeepMind's AlphaFold leveraged GPU power for groundbreaking protein folding research.
- **Finance & High-Frequency Trading (HFT)** : Real-time stock market analysis & predictive algorithms for trading.
- **Data Centers & Cloud Computing:** Accelerating cloud-based services such as Google Cloud TPU and AWS (*amazon web services*) for AI/ML solutions.
- **Metaverse & AI Edge Computing:** GPUs will play a crucial role in rendering virtual environments. Powering real-time AI applications at the edge (e.g., autonomous vehicles).

Small Modular Reactors (SMR)

The Finance Minister announced a ₹20,000 crore 'Nuclear Energy Mission' to develop indigenous Small Modular Reactors (SMR).

- ✓ In February 2025, India and France signed a declaration to establish a partnership focused on the development of small modular nuclear reactors.

About Small Modular Nuclear Reactors (alternative to traditional large-scale nuclear reactors)

- Capacity: maximum output of 300 Megawatt electric (MWe) and can produce 7.2 million kWh per day.
 - ✓ Whereas large-size nuclear power plants have an output of over 1,000 MWe and can produce 24 million kWh per day.
- SMRs are characterized by their modular construction, allowing for factory fabrication and subsequent assembly on-site. This approach not only reduces construction timelines and costs but also enhances quality control and scalability.
- **Grid Compatibility:** The smaller size and modular nature of SMRs make them suitable for integration into existing power grids, especially in remote or underserved regions.
- Many designs incorporate passive safety features, which rely on natural forces like gravity and convection to shut down the reactor in case of an emergency, reducing the need for active systems and human intervention.

India's Initiatives in SMR Deployment

- **The Department of Atomic Energy**, in collaboration with Tata Consulting Engineers, has outlined plans to construct 40-50 SMRs by 2032. These reactors are intended to replace aging coal-fired power plants.
- **Private Sector Engagement:** NTPC, India's largest power producer, is in discussions with international firms, including U.S.-based Holtec International Corp, to explore the construction of SMRs within the country.

Global Developments in SMR Technology

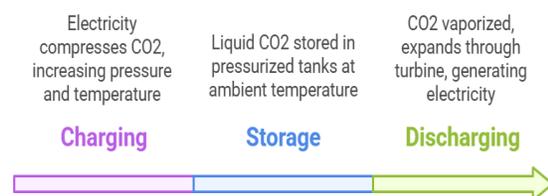
- **China and Russia** have pioneered the deployment of operational SMRs. Russia's "Akademik Lomonosov," a floating nuclear power plant, has been supplying electricity in the Arctic region since 2020.
- **Commercial Interest:** In 2024, Google entered into an agreement with Kairos Power to procure 500 megawatts of low-carbon energy from multiple SMRs, aiming to power its data centers and AI operations.
- **The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA)** reports over 80 SMR designs under development across 19 countries, encompassing a range of technologies from **advanced light-water reactors to fast neutron reactors and molten salt reactors**.

CO2 Battery Energy Storage Technology

The National Thermal Power Corporation (NTPC) of India has partnered with Energy Dome (an Italian CO₂ battery technology company) to implement a 160 MWh CO₂ battery energy storage system at the Kudgi Super Thermal Power Plant in Karnataka.

- CO₂ battery energy storage technology is an innovative approach to long-duration energy storage, utilizing CO₂ in a closed-loop thermodynamic process to store & release energy.
- This technology offers a sustainable and efficient alternative to traditional battery systems, aligning with global efforts to transition to cleaner energy sources.

The CO2 Energy Cycle: From Charging to Discharging



Advantages: Long duration energy storage (LDES), Cost-effective (than lithium-ion batteries or pumped hydro storage), Environmentally friendly (utilize readily available and non-toxic materials (CO₂, water, and steel)), Scalable and flexible, long lifespan (over 30 years)

Applications: Grid-scale energy storage (can be used to store excess renewable energy (solar, wind) and release it when needed, helping to balance supply and demand on the electricity grid.

GARBHINI-DRISHTI

India made a major leap forward with the opening of its first Ferret Research Facility, the launch of the GARBHINI-DRISHTI data repository.

About GARBH-INI-DRISHTI (initiative of Department of Biotechnology (DBT))

- It is a data repository and information sharing hub established at the Translational Health Science and Technology Institute (THSTI) in Faridabad, Haryana
- Primary goal: to advance research and improve healthcare interventions related to maternal and neonatal health.
- It provides access to a wealth of clinical data, images, and biospecimens collected from over 12,000 pregnant women, newborns, and postpartum mothers. This makes it one of South Asia's largest maternal and child health databases.
- GARBHINI-DRISHTI is an integral part of the larger GARBH-INi program, which is a collaborative interdisciplinary program initiated by the DBT in 2014. GARBH-INi focuses on understanding and addressing the biological and non-biological risks associated with preterm birth.
 - ✓ **Preterm birth** is a leading cause of neonatal mortality and morbidity.
 - ✓ The GARBH-INi program has made notable strides in this area, including the identification of **19 single nucleotide polymorphisms (SNPs or genetic markers)** associated with spontaneous preterm births among Indian women.
 - ✓ Such genetic insights are crucial for developing predictive tools and targeted interventions.

SRY Gene

Recent studies revealed that certain rare cases where **biological females carried the SRY gene**, are challenging conventional understanding of sex determination.

About SRY Gene (Sex-determining Region Y)

- It is a crucial gene located on the Y chromosome that plays a primary role for initiating male sex determination in mammals, including humans. Its presence typically leads to the development of male characteristics.
 - ✓ The Y chromosome is indeed small, containing roughly 50 to 60 genes and representing about 2% of a cell's total DNA, primarily involved in male sex determination and development.
- It codes for a protein called Testis-Determining Factor (TDF), also sometimes referred to as the SRY protein. This protein acts as a master switch, triggering the development of the undifferentiated gonad into a testis in a developing embryo.
- The TDF protein acts as a transcription factor, meaning it binds to DNA and regulates the expression of other genes involved in testis development. It initiates a cascade of events that lead to the formation of the Sertoli cells, which are crucial for further male reproductive development.

Clinical Implications

- Mutations or alterations in the SRY gene can lead to disorders of sex development (DSDs).
 - ✓ For instance, **Swyer syndrome** is a condition where individuals with an XY karyotype develop female characteristics due to mutations in the SRY gene.

- Conversely, the presence of the SRY gene in individuals with an **XX karyotype** can result in testicular development and male characteristics.
- Routine Role of Chromosomes in Sex Determination
 - ✓ Humans have 23 pairs of chromosomes. The first 22 pairs, called autosomes, are identical in males and females. The 23rd pair, the sex chromosomes, determines sex: XX (female) or XY (male).
 - ✓ Egg cells always carry an X chromosome, while sperm cells carry either X or Y.
 - ✓ If a sperm with an X chromosome fertilizes an egg, the baby is female (XX); if a Y-carrying sperm fertilizes the egg, the baby is male (XY).

Einstein Ring

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

- ✓ This discovery is notable for its clarity and proximity, providing a unique opportunity to study the mass distribution within NGC 6505, including its dark matter content.

About Einstein Ring

- It is a phenomenon of gravitational lensing where the light from a distant source (like a galaxy or quasar) is **bent and magnified** by a **massive object** (like another galaxy or black hole) lying between the source and the observer.
 - ✓ Gravitational Lensing (as predicted by Albert Einstein's General Theory of Relativity): Massive objects warp spacetime, causing light passing nearby to bend. This bending is analogous to how a lens bends light.
- This bending of light can cause the image of the source to be distorted into a ring-like shape around the lensing object



Provides Information About

- Mass Distribution: The shape and size of the Einstein ring can be used to calculate the mass of the lensing object, including dark matter, which doesn't emit light.
- Distant Objects: They can magnify the light from very distant and faint objects, allowing us to study them in greater detail (to study the expansion of the universe).

Examples of Einstein Ring

- **Einstein's Cross:** While not a complete ring, this is an example of gravitational lensing where a quasar's light is distorted into four distinct images surrounding a lensing galaxy.
- **B1938+666:** Nearly complete Einstein ring (discovered in 1998, using the Hubble Space Telescope), where the light from a distant galaxy is lensed into a ring by a foreground galaxy.

PARAS-2 Spectrograph

Scientists of the Physical Research Laboratory (PRL), Ahmedabad, have discovered a new exoplanet, TOI-6038A b (a dense sub-Saturn exoplanet) using the PARAS-2 spectrograph.

About PARAS-2 Spectrograph

- It is a high-resolution Radial Velocity (RV) Spectrograph, used for exoplanet detection and mass measurement. (highest resolution among spectrographs in Asia)
 - ✓ PARAS-2 aids in the precise measurement of an exoplanet's mass, which is crucial for distinguishing between rocky planets, gas giants, and sub-Saturn-like planets.

- **Primary purpose:** To detect exoplanets, especially those of low mass like super-Earths using the radial velocity method, which looks for “wobbles” in a star’s motion caused by the planet’s gravity.
- It’s installed at the PRL’s 2.5-meter telescope at Mount Abu Observatory, which offers excellent observing conditions (maximum precision) due to its high altitude and clear skies.

TOI-6038A b

- A dense sub-Saturn of 6.41 Earth radii, 78.5 Earth masses, having massive rocky core
- It is a part of a wide **binary system**, with K-type companion TOI-6038B at 3217 AU.
- Significance of the discovery: Enhancing Exoplanet Research, Validating Exoplanet Migration Theories, Aiding studies on gravitational influences on planetary orbits
 - ✓ Findings from TOI-6038A b could assist ISRO’s future space telescope projects like ExoWorlds and ASTROSAT-2.
 - ✓ Contribution to Astrobiology & Search for Extraterrestrial Life: While TOI-6038A b is unlikely to support life, studying such exoplanetary atmospheres can help refine models for habitable zone planets.

Indirect Prompt Injection

Researchers have warned about rapidly growing Indirect prompt injection attacks on AI chat bots particularly those that use Large Language Models (LLMs).

About Indirect Prompt Injection Attacks

- **Manipulating the Context:** Unlike direct prompt injection where an attacker directly interacts with the LLM, indirect attacks manipulate the data sources that the LLM relies on for context.
- **Hiding Instructions:** Attackers embed malicious instructions within seemingly harmless data, like emails, documents, or even online content.
 - ✓ The hidden instructions blend into benign-looking content, evading traditional detection mechanisms.
 - ✓ **Website Attack:** Hidden text on a webpage manipulates search engine chatbots to generate biased responses or incorrect data.
- **The LLM is Tricked:** When the LLM processes this data, it unknowingly executes the hidden instructions, potentially leading to harmful actions.

Threats Posed by It

- Exploit the vast range of data sources that LLMs access, making them harder to defend against.
- The malicious instructions can be hidden in plain sight, making them difficult to detect.
 - **Diverse Attack Vectors:** These attacks can be used for various malicious purposes:
 - **Data Exfiltration:** Stealing sensitive information.
 - **Denial of Service:** Disrupting the LLM’s functionality.
 - **Disinformation:** Spreading false or misleading information.
 - **Malicious Code Execution:** Triggering harmful actions within the system.

Mitigation techniques include: Data Sanitization, Access Control, Input Validation, Security Monitoring and User Awareness

** US National Cybersecurity Strategy (2023) highlights AI security as a national priority.

** EU AI Act (2023) emphasizes safety, transparency, and accountability in AI deployment.

Indian Perspective

- **India's National Cyber Security Strategy (NCSS)** emphasizes AI security but lacks explicit AI-specific threat regulations.
- **CERT-In's Role** – India's Computer Emergency Response Team (CERT-In) must enhance monitoring of AI vulnerabilities.
- **DPDP Act, 2023** – The Digital Personal Data Protection Act could be expanded to regulate AI interactions with user data.

International Thermonuclear Experimental Reactor (ITER)

Prime Minister of India have paid visit to International Thermonuclear Experimental Reactor (ITER) in Cadarache, Southern France.

ITER

Collaborative effort involving seven member parties: China, the European Union, India, Japan, Russia, South Korea, and the United States.

- India joined the ITER project in 2005
- India has contributed critical components such as the **Cryostat (designed to encase and thermally insulate the reactor)**, the world's largest high-vacuum pressure chamber, manufactured by Larsen & Toubro (L&T).

Purpose

- To produce 500 megawatts of fusion power from 50 megawatts of input heating power, achieving a tenfold energy gain.
- It is designed to produce a “burning plasma,” (over 150 million°C, hotter than the Sun) where the fusion reactions (Future energy Source) themselves provide the majority of the heating.
 - ✓ The fusion reaction involves the combining of deuterium and tritium atoms, releasing vast amounts of energy.
- **Fusion vs. Fission:** Unlike conventional nuclear power plants (which use fission), fusion reactors:
 - ✓ Have no risk of meltdowns (e.g., Chernobyl, Fukushima disasters).
 - ✓ Produce less radioactive waste than Fission Reaction.

Technology behind Fusion Process

- Uses a “**tokamak**” design (nuclear fusion reactors), a doughnut-shaped device (a toroidal) that uses powerful magnets to confine and control super-heated plasma.
- China's **EAST** (Experimental Advanced Superconducting Tokamak) reactor has achieved 120 million°C for over 100 seconds.
 - ✓ They are often also called ‘artificial suns’ due to the fact that these doughnut-shaped machines replicate processes that occur in the sun. Currently over 200 tokamaks in operation across the globe

Coronal Holes

A new study has estimated the **physical parameters of thermal and magnetic field** structures of solar coronal holes.

About Coronal Holes (first discovered in the 1970s by X-ray satellites)

- These are regions in the Sun's corona (outer atmosphere) that appear dark & Visible in extreme ultraviolet (EUV) and X-ray images.

- They are cooler, less dense areas compared to the surrounding plasma characterized by open, unipolar magnetic field lines. These open magnetic field lines allow solar wind to escape more readily into space, resulting in high-speed solar wind streams
- Coronal holes contribute to intense auroras due to increased geomagnetic activity in polar regions.
Example: The Northern Lights (Aurora Borealis) are more vibrant during periods of high solar wind activity.
 - ✓ Energetic particles from coronal holes can **affect stratospheric ozone concentration**, influencing global temperature patterns.
- They are more common and persistent during solar minimum periods and can vary in size and duration, lasting from a few weeks to months.
 - ✓ NASA's Solar Dynamics Observatory (SDO) and ESA's Solar Orbiter actively monitor coronal holes to predict space weather impacts.
 - ✓ India's Aditya-L1 Mission (launched in 2023) is dedicated to studying solar activity and space weather.

Significance

- Coronal holes are a source of high-speed solar wind, which can interact with Earth's magnetosphere, causing geomagnetic storms.
- These can affect satellites (increase drag on low-Earth orbit (LEO) satellites), communication systems (affect GPS accuracy), and even power grids.
 - ✓ HF radio signals are disrupted due to ionospheric disturbances caused by solar storms. Pilots flying over polar regions experience radio blackouts due to solar activity.
- They have also been shown to have influence on weather patterns, such as the Indian summer monsoon. High-speed solar wind alters Earth's upper atmospheric circulation, influencing cloud formation and precipitation patterns.

Bacteria-Made Band-Aid For Plants

Researchers have reported that Bacterial cellulose can be used as a bandage to improve healing and regeneration in plants.

About Bacterial Cellulose (BC)

- Produced by Bacteria: Unlike plant-based cellulose, BC is produced by certain types of bacteria, primarily from the Komagataeibacter genus.
- Unique Structure: It has a unique structure of nanofiber-woven, three-dimensional networks, giving it exceptional properties.
- High Purity: BC is remarkably pure, free from lignin, hemicellulose, and other components found in plant cellulose.
- Other characteristics: High Tensile Strength, High Water-Holding Capacity, Biocompatibility, High Crystallinity, Moldability
 - ✓ **Drought Resistance** – Retains moisture in arid regions, reducing plant stress.

Applications

- Biomedical: Wound dressings and skin substitutes, Tissue engineering scaffolds, Drug delivery systems, Artificial blood vessels
 - ✓ **Genetically Engineered BC** – Scientists could modify BC to release growth hormones for faster healing.
- Food Industry: Edible packaging and films, Food thickeners and stabilizers,

✓ **Post-Harvest Preservation:** used on harvested fruits & vegetables to extend shelf life.

- Cosmetics: Facial masks and skin care products, Hair care products.
- Industrial Applications: High-strength paper and composites, Acoustic membranes for speakers and headphones, Filters and separation membranes, Textiles

Case Studies & Examples

- Apple Orchards in the USA: BC bandages tested to prevent fungal infections in apple trees.
- Banana Plantations in India: Used to protect wounds from Panama disease-causing fungi.
- Vineyards in France: BC applied to damaged grapevines to improve recovery post-pruning.

Majorana 1

Microsoft has announced a new quantum computing chip, called Majorana 1.

Key Aspects

- Topological Core Architecture:
 - Majorana 1 is the world's first quantum chip powered by a Topological Core architecture. This architecture utilizes a "topoconductor" (topological superconductor), creating a novel state of matter.
 - This approach aims to produce more stable and scalable qubits, the fundamental building blocks of quantum computers.
 - **Key components: Indium arsenide (a semiconductor) and aluminum (a superconductor)**

Why Topological Core Architecture is Important?

- Reduces quantum decoherence, a major challenge in quantum computing.
- Enhances fault tolerance, making quantum operations more reliable.

- **Majorana Fermions:** The chip relies on Majorana fermions, which are particles that act as their own antiparticles. These particles contribute to the chip's enhanced quantum stability.

Applications:

- Breaking down microplastics. (Quantum simulations for plastic-eating bacteria)
- Creating self-healing materials.
- Improving healthcare solutions. (AI + Quantum synergy for cancer drugs)
- Solving complex problems in chemistry and materials science.
- IBM's Quantum Network collaborates with biotech firms to accelerate drug discovery.
- Google's Quantum AI Lab is working on quantum-assisted materials design.

Technology Adoption Fund

The Indian National Space Promotion and Authorisation Centre (IN-SPACe) has launched the Technology Adoption Fund (Corpus of ₹500cr.)

About Technology Adoption Fund

- **Purpose:** To encourage and support the development of cutting-edge space technologies by Indian private entities, startups, and academia.
 - ✓ **Technology Development Fund (TDF- Implementing Agency: DRDO)** encourages **indigenous defense technology** development to reduce import dependence.

- To bridge the technology gaps identified by ISRO (Indian Space Research Organisation) and other space stakeholders.

Features

- Funding: Up to 60% of project costs for startups/MSMEs and 40% for larger industries, capped at Rs 25 crore per project.
- Eligibility: Open to all non-government entities (NGEs) with commercially viable space technologies.

Focus Areas: Supports development in many areas, including but not limited to: Small satellite technologies, Launch vehicle technologies, Downstream space applications, Advanced materials and manufacturing, Artificial intelligence and machine learning for space applications.

Selenium

As per a medical expert’s report about incidents of sudden hair loss in Maharashtra’s Buldhana district were due to high selenium content found in wheat from Punjab and Haryana supplied by local ration shops.

About Selenium (Symbol: Se; Atomic Number: 34)

- It’s a nonmetal with properties intermediate between sulfur and tellurium
- It exists in various forms, including a red powder, a black vitreous solid, and a gray metallic form.
- It’s found in trace amounts in the Earth’s crust, often associated with sulfide ores.
- Applications: Glassmaking, Pigments, and some electronic components

Role in Human Health

- Biologically, it is an essential trace mineral vital for functions such as thyroid hormone metabolism, DNA synthesis, and protection against oxidative damage and infection.
 - ✓ Essential for various enzymes, including glutathione peroxidase, which protects cells from oxidative stress.
- **Dietary Sources:** Brazil nuts (richest source), fish, eggs, poultry, sunflower seeds, and whole grains.

Deficiency Effects	High Content: Selenosis
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Keshan Disease (a heart disorder in selenium-deficient regions of China). • Kashin-Beck Disease (a type of osteoarthritis linked to selenium deficiency). • Weak immune system, infertility, and cognitive decline. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Symptoms: Nausea, hair loss, nail brittleness, neurological abnormalities. • Chronic exposure may cause severe organ damage. • Bioaccumulation & Biomagnification: Excess selenium in aquatic systems can be toxic to birds and fish (example: Kesterson Reservoir disaster in the USA).

Government Policies & Initiatives (India & Global)

- **Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO):** Advocates selenium biofortification in crops.
- Indian Efforts:
 - ✓ ICAR (Indian Council of Agricultural Research) studies selenium fortification in agriculture.
 - ✓ FSSAI (Food Safety and Standards Authority of India) monitors selenium levels in food.
- **WHO Guidelines:** Recommended dietary intake set to prevent deficiency disorders.

Kashi Tamil Sangamam

- The **Kashi Tamil Sangamam (KTS) 3.0**, a 10-day long event, was recently held in **Varanasi**, Uttar Pradesh. **First held in 2022**, the programme is part of the **Ek Bharat Shreshtha Bharat initiative**.
- Organized by the **Ministry of Education** in collaboration with various ministries and the Government of Uttar Pradesh, it aims to celebrate and strengthen the ancient civilizational bond between Tamil Nadu and Kashi.
- The project is in sync with **National Education Policy 2020** emphasizing on integrating the wealth of Indian Knowledge Systems with modern systems of knowledge.
- The main **theme** in this year's event is highlighting the significant **contributions of Sage Agasthyar**.

Objectives of Kashi Tamil Sangamam

- Highlight the literary, spiritual, and artistic connections between Tamil Nadu and Kashi.
- Encourage academic and research-based interactions between scholars from both regions.
- Showcase traditional art forms, crafts, and cuisine to enhance cultural appreciation.
- Provide a platform for Tamil students to explore the historical significance of Kashi and its ancient educational institutions.

Sage Agasthyar's Legacy

- Sage Agasthyar, one of the seven Saptarishis in the Vedic texts, is revered for his contributions to health, philosophy, science, linguistics, and art.
- He is considered the father of Siddha medicine and developed early Tamil grammar in his work *Agattiyam*.
- Agasthyar spread Vedic culture in South India and is worshipped in Java and Sumatra.
- He authored Sanskrit texts like the **Agastya Gita found in Varaha Purana, Agastya Samhita found in Skanda Purana, and the Dvaidha-Nirnaya Tantra text**.

Ek Bharat Shreshtha Bharat

- Launched in **2015** it aims to enhance interaction & promote mutual understanding between people of different states/UTs through the concept of state/UT pairing.
- The **broad objectives** of the initiative are to:
 - Celebrate the **unity in diversity** of the nation.
 - Promote the **spirit of national integration** through a deep and structured engagement between all Indian states and union territories.
 - Showcase the rich heritage and culture, customs and traditions of States to **encourage a sense of common identity**.
 - Create an environment which **promotes learning between States** by sharing best practices and experiences.

Pagri Sambhal Jatta Movement

Farmers protesting at the Punjab and Haryana borders, observed February 23 as Pagri Sambhal Diwas, in honour of Ajit Singh, paternal uncle of freedom fighter Bhagat Singh.

Ajit Singh

- Born in February, 1881, in Khatkar Kalan, Punjab, Ajit Singh was a key freedom fighter and revolutionary who inspired his nephew Bhagat Singh.

- Exiled from 1909 to 1947 for his involvement in the Pagri Sambhal Jatta movement, he returned to India in 1947 but passed away in Dalhousie on August 15, 1947 due to ill health.

Pagri Sambhal Jatta (PSJ) Movement

- ‘Pagri Sambhal Jatta’ literally translates to ‘take care of your turban, o farmer’, and invokes self respect and honour.
- The slogan PSJ was given by **Banke Dayal**, a nationalist poet, and became a symbol of resistance.
- In 1907, Ajit Singh started the PSJ movement in protest against three agricultural laws imposed by the British.
- The three laws were: **The Punjab Land Alienation Act, 1900; The Punjab Land Colonisation Act, 1906; and The Doab Bari Act, 1907.**
- **The Punjab Land Alienation Act** restricted the rights of farmers to sell or mortgage their land freely. It favoured moneylenders and landlords, making it difficult for peasants to escape debt.
- **The Punjab Land Colonisation Act** gave the British control over land ownership in the newly developed Chenab Colony (now in Pakistan).
- Farmers had to transfer their land to the British government upon death instead of passing it to their heirs.
- **The Doab Bari Act, 1907**, too, took away farmers’ ownership rights over their lands, effectively reducing them to contract workers.
- Along with this, the British raised taxes on agricultural land and water for irrigation, increasing the financial burden on farmers. Many small farmers and peasants were forced into debt and land loss.
- Soon, farmers started protests against these laws, demanding their repeal. Ajit Singh and Kishan Singh (Bhagat Singh’s father) formed the **Bharat Mata Society**, a revolutionary group for farmers. Lala Lajpat Rai and other leaders also supported the movement.

Impact of the Movement

- The movement was one of the first major farmer uprisings against British rule in Punjab, leading to mass protests and civil disobedience. Under pressure, the British withdrew some oppressive laws. It inspired future protests like the **Ghadar Movement and Bhagat Singh’s activities.**
- Ajit Singh and Lala Lajpat Rai were arrested in May 1907 and exiled to **Burma**, but released in November. Ajit Singh later traveled across Europe, working with revolutionaries.

Ali Ai Ligang Festival

- Assam’s largest tribal community, the **Mising tribe** celebrated the Ali Ai Ligang festival in Jorhat.
- Started around 40 years ago, the festival is observed every year on the **first Wednesday of the month of Fagun.**
- The meaning of **Ali is seed and roots, Ai stands for fruits** and **Ligang means to sow.** Thus, Ali Ai Ligang is the first sowing of fruits and roots.
- Deeply rooted in agricultural traditions, the festival **marks the beginning of the sowing season** and is celebrated as a festival of cultivation.
- The festival begins with **Laitom Tomchar (flag hoisting).** Prayers are offered to God, **Donyi Polo (mother Sun and Father Moon),** seeking protection for crops from insects and natural calamities.
- At **Morung Okum** (Morung Ghar - a dormitory for youth), where **Apong (traditional wine),** meat, fish and other traditional foods are offered to the God. After which the traditional **Gumrag dance** is performed by men and women.

Lezim

- A Hindi film Chhava, based on the life of Maratha ruler Chhatrapati Sambhaji Maharaj has led to a controversy with people objecting to a Lezim dance sequence.
- **Lezim** is a folk-dance form of **Maharashtra**. Lezim is a **small mallet, made of a thin wood with pieces of metal (like cymbals)** strung together, which produce a sound after swinging. The dance form is named after this instrument.
- Lezim is as much a rigorous physical exercise, a drill, as a dance. The formations are in twos and fours and sometimes even a circle.
- Vigorous movements, such as stepping, squatting, and jumping, form an intrinsic part of the dance.
- The dance is accompanied by a **dhol or dhalgi (small dhol)**. There are no wind or string instruments accompanying it.
- There are three main types of Lezim - **military lezim** (mostly used as a martial art for defense), **talathekya and samanyajananna**.



Chhatrapati Sambhaji Maharaj

- Sambhaji Maharaj, son of Chhatrapati Shivaji, ruled the Maratha kingdom from 1681 to 1689 after a violent succession battle with his half-brother Rajaram.
- His reign was marked by frequent clashes with Mughal emperor Aurangzeb, who aimed to expand into the Deccan.
- While Sambhaji was able to defend many famous forts against Mughal forces for some years, he was captured by them in 1689 and eventually put to death.

International Mother Language Day

- International Mother Language Day (IMLD) 2025 was recently celebrated across the globe on **February 21**. It has been observed every year since the year 2000 to **promote linguistic and cultural diversity and multilingualism**.
- This year marks the **25th anniversary** of IMLD, with the theme “**Silver Jubilee Celebration of International Mother Language Day**”.

Background

- The Day was proclaimed by UNESCO in 1999. Later, the UN General Assembly recognized it in a resolution in 2002.
- UNESCO declared the Day, to commemorate a 1952 protest against West Pakistan’s imposition of Urdu as the official language of East Pakistan (present-day Bangladesh).
- In Bangladesh, since 1953, February 21 is observed as Ekushe Day, after the Bengali word for twenty-one.

Status of Languages across the World

- Globally, English remains the most widely spoken language with ~1.5 billion speakers, followed by Mandarin with ~1.11 billion. Hindi is third with ~609.5 million speakers, while Bengali is seventh with ~273 million.

Statistics of Various Languages from India

- India is home to one of the most linguistically diverse populations in the world, with over **19,500 languages and dialects** spoken across the country.
- Hindi is the most spoken language in India, with over 528 million speakers in 2011, as per the Census.

INDIA TRENDS, 1991-2011

(Speakers of each as % of India population)

LANGUAGE	1991	2001	2011
Hindi	39.29	41.03	43.63
Bengali	8.30	8.11	8.03
Marathi	7.45	6.99	6.86
Telugu	7.87	7.19	6.70
Tamil	6.32	5.91	5.70
Gujarati	4.85	4.48	4.58
Urdu	5.18	5.01	4.19
Kannada	3.91	3.69	3.61
Odia	3.35	3.21	3.10
Malayalam	3.62	3.21	2.88
Punjabi	2.79	2.83	2.74
Assamese	1.56	1.28	1.26

Source: Census 2011

Loss of Languages in India

- India's linguistic diversity is under threat, with around 250 languages extinct in the last 60 years. Currently, 42 Indian languages are critically endangered, the highest number globally, and 197 languages in India are at risk of extinction.

Threats



Thaipusam

- The Prime Minister greeted everyone recently on the occasion of Thaipusam.
- Also known as Thai poosam, it is a Hindu festival celebrated to **honour Lord Murugan (also known as Lord Kartikeya)**, the Hindu god of war, victory, and wisdom.
- The name “Thaipusam” is a combination of **Thai (the Tamil month)** and **Poosam**, which is the name of **a star that is at its highest point** during this festival. It is **celebrated on the full moon in the Tamil month of Thai**.
- The festival marks the day when Goddess Parvati presented Lord Murugan (Lord Kartikeya) with a divine spear, known as the Vel, to help him defeat the demon Soorapadam. The event symbolises the victory of good over evil.
- It is widely celebrated by the **Tamil community** in Tamil Nadu and across the world, especially in Sri Lanka, Singapore, Malaysia, and more.

TIME's Women of the Year

- **Dr Purnima Devi Barman** has been named in TIME's Women of the Year 2025 list, recognising her extraordinary **contributions to conservation**. The distinguished **wildlife biologist from Assam** is the only Indian woman on the list.
- She is best known for her efforts to save the **endangered greater adjutant stork (Hargila)** and for creating the **Hargila Army**, an all-female conservation group (of around 10,000 women) dedicated to protecting the species and its habitat.
- These women are engaged in rescuing injured birds, planting trees, and educating communities about conservation.
- Her unique approach of **blending wildlife protection with women's empowerment** has created a sustainable, community-driven movement.
- Her work has saved an endangered species and officially moved their status to "near threatened" under the International Union for Conservation of Nature.
- The initiative has also helped local women gain financial independence by involving them in sustainable businesses such as making textiles with stork-themed embroidery.
- Dr Barman has received numerous awards for her work:
 - **Nari Shakti Puraskar** (2017) – India's highest civilian award for women.
 - **Champions of the Earth Award** (2022) – The UN's highest environmental honour.
 - **Whitley Gold Award** (2024) – Also known as the 'Green Oscar'.

Libia Lobo Sardesai

- **Goan freedom fighter Libia Lobo Sardesai**, aged 100, has been honoured with the Padma Shri for her role in the state's liberation struggle.
- Born in 1924 in Portuguese-ruled Goa and raised in Bombay, she became active in the Goan nationalist movement during college.
- In 1954, after Portuguese forces attacked and arrested satyagrahis demanding an end to colonial rule, India closed its borders to Goa and imposed an economic blockade, cutting off sea, road, and rail links.
- In August 1955, thousands of satyagrahis attempted to enter Goa but were shot at by the Portuguese, causing several deaths, while total censorship was in place.
- The nationalists had to find a way to counter these issues and to tell the people about the state of the liberation movement and maintain morale among the nationalists.
- From 1955 to 1961, Libia and her colleague and later husband **Vaman Sardesai** ran an **underground radio station** from the jungles of the **Western Ghats**.
- On **November 25, 1955** the anniversary of **Goa's reconquest by the Portuguese in 1510** — the station, now called '**GoencheSodvonecho Awaz**' (Voice of Freedom of Goa) for Konkani broadcasts and '**Voz de Liberdade**' for the Portuguese ones, began broadcasting.
- Initially, the radio was operated from **Maharashtra's Amboli** and later from **Castle Rock in Karnataka**.
- It was Libia who announced the news of **Goa's liberation** from four-and-a-half centuries of Portuguese rule on **December 19, 1961**.

Trination Buddhist Motorcycle Expedition

- The Heartfulness Lord Buddha Trination Tri-Services Motorcycle Expedition was recently flagged off.
- Organized in association with **the International Buddhist Confederation (IBC)** along with other partners, the unique initiative brings together **India, Nepal and Sri Lanka**.
- The journey **commenced from Lumbini, Nepal, the birthplace of Lord Buddha**. It will cover significant Buddhist heritage sites across the three countries.
- The Indian chapter of the expedition is being organized with the support of the **Land Port Authority of India** (under the Ministry of Home Affairs) and **Nalanda University, Rajgir** (under the Ministry of External Affairs), with Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (**BIMSTEC**) as the **strategic partner**.
- The route in India will include **key Buddhist landmarks** such as:
 - Sarnath, Uttar Pradesh – site of Buddha’s first sermon;
 - Bodhgaya, Bihar – place of Buddha’s enlightenment;
 - Nalanda, Bihar – renowned ancient Buddhist university;
 - Nagarjuna Sagar, Andhra Pradesh – an important Buddhist learning center;
 - Udayagiri, Odisha – A significant Buddhist monastic site;
 - Karnataka – Various Buddhist sites reflecting India’s rich Buddhist legacy.
- The expedition aims to:
 - Promote peace and harmony through the teachings of Buddha.
 - Enhance cultural and heritage tourism across South Asia.
 - Raise awareness on environmental conservation and sustainable development.
 - Strengthen people-to-people & defence ties between India, Nepal, and Sri Lanka.