

Monthly Current Affairs

April 2026



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Governance & Policy

Sadhana Saptah 2026

What's the News?

- The Government of India launched **Karmayogi Sadhana Saptah 2026**, a massive national initiative to mark five years of **Mission Karmayogi** and the Foundation Day of the **Capacity Building Commission (CBC)**.
- Inaugurated at the **Dr. Ambedkar International Centre**, the program aims to shift governance from a "rule-based" to a "role-based" framework, emphasizing citizen-centric service delivery.

Sadhana Saptah 2026?

- Full Form:** Sādhana stands for **Strengthening Adaptive Development and Humane Aptitude for National Advancement**.
- Three Sutras:** The initiative is anchored around three core pillars—**Technology**, **Tradition**, and **Tangible Outcomes**.
- Objective:** To foster a culture of continuous learning and integrate emerging technologies like **Artificial Intelligence (AI)** into governance.
- Scope:** It involves a collaborative effort between Central Ministries, Departments, and Organisations (MDOs), State governments, and over **250 Civil Services Training Institutions (CSTIs)**.
- Mandate:** All participating officials are encouraged to complete at least **four hours of learning** on the **iGOT Karmayogi** platform during this week.

Mission Karmayogi & New Initiatives?

- Rashtriya Jan Sewa Programme:** A national rollout aimed at strengthening last-mile citizen service delivery.
- AI-Powered Amrit Gyaan Kosh:** An AI-enabled ecosystem for governance case studies, allowing officers to analyze and learn from real-world scenarios.
- Trust-Based Learner Assessment:** A new framework on the **iGOT platform** that validates learning through evidence-based outcomes rather than just course completion.
- Karmayogi Kshamata Connect:** Designed specifically to empower frontline functionaries with digital awareness and essential knowledge of national priorities.
- Karmayogi Kartavya Karyakram:** A behavioral transformation initiative targeting nearly **1.3 crore officials** to instill *Seva Bhav* (spirit of service).

Additional Info

- Mission Karmayogi (National Programme for Civil Services Capacity Building - NPCSCB):**
 - Launched by the Government of India to transform the capacity-building ecosystem for civil servants.
 - Budget outlay of **₹580 crore** (initial phase).
 - Over **4,300+ courses** available on the iGOT platform.
 - Operates under the **Department of Personnel and Training (DoPT)**.
- Capacity Building Commission:**

- Established as an autonomous body to bring coherence and scale to the capacity-building ecosystem across all government levels.
- Responsible for coordinating and standardising training programmes across Central Ministries, States, and training institutions.

iGOT Karmayogi Platform:

- Integrated Government Online Training platform serving as the digital backbone of Mission Karmayogi.
- Enables anytime-anywhere learning for government employees.

The Jan Vishwas (Amendment of Provisions) Bill, 2026

What's the News?

- The Parliament has passed the **Jan Vishwas (Amendment of Provisions) Bill, 2026**, a landmark legislative move aimed at enhancing **Ease of Living** and **Ease of Doing Business** in India.
- Bill amends **784 provisions** in **79 Central Acts** administered by **23 Ministries**, covering industry, municipal governance, transport, and colonial-era legislations.
- 717 provisions** decriminalised to reduce compliance burden; **67 provisions** specifically target ease-of-living improvements for citizens.
- Replaces criminal sanctions (imprisonment/fines) with civil penalties, warnings, and administrative mechanisms for minor procedural lapses.

Four Pillars of Reform

The Bill rests on four structural pillars:

- Warning before Punishment:** First-time and minor lapses attract warnings or advisory notices rather than immediate penalties.
- Proportionate Penalties:** Penalties calibrated to offence severity, ensuring balanced enforcement.
- Faster, Fair Resolution:** Dedicated **adjudicating officers** and **appellate authorities** enable swift resolution, reducing court burden.
- Dynamic Penalty Framework:** Penalties subject to **10% automatic revision every three years** (unless specific Act provides otherwise).

Amendments Breakdown

Reform Type	Number of Provisions	Examples
Fine converted to civil penalty	317	Tea Act, Legal Metrology Act
Fine removed entirely	158	Outdated municipal offences
Jail + fine converted to civil penalty	113	Drugs and Cosmetics Act (₹1 lakh penalty)
Jail + fine removed	57	Electricity Act, Indian Succession Act

Warning for first-time default	63	Apprentices Act, Tea Act
Jail term reduced	17	Rationalised punishments
Compounding of offences introduced	17	Motor Vehicles Act
Imprisonment removed	29	Various sectoral laws
Scope of offence limited	6	Narrowed applicability

Ease of Living Reforms

The Bill introduces **67 provisions** specifically improving daily citizen interactions:

- **Motor Vehicles Act, 1988:**
 - **30-day grace period** for driving licence renewal after expiry.
 - Travelling without ticket **decriminalised** (civil penalty up to ₹500 instead of criminal fine).
 - Accident victims get **12 additional months** to file compensation claims beyond prescribed period.
- **Delhi Police Act, 1978:**
 - **Section 102(c) repealed:** Being outdoors at night without "satisfactory explanation" no longer a crime (removed colonial-era suspicion-based provision).
- **NDMC Act, 1994:**
 - Illegal use of public water: criminal fine replaced with **₹1,000 civil penalty**.
 - **Property tax standardised:** Unit Area Method applied uniformly (replacing outdated rateable-value method for 5% properties).
 - **Advertisement tax removed.**
- **Railways Act, 1989:** Refusing to vacate reserved berth: criminal fine replaced with **₹1,000 civil penalty**.
- **Court Fees Act, 1870:** Unauthorised stamp sale: imprisonment removed, replaced with **₹10,000 penalty** for non-fraudulent acts.
- **Clinical Establishments Act, 2010:** Minor deficiencies: criminal prosecution replaced with **₹10,000 civil penalty**.

Ease of Doing Business Reforms

717 provisions decriminalised for businesses across sectors:

- **Graded Enforcement:**
 - **Tea Act, 1953:** Warning for first contravention; penalty up to ₹1 lakh only for subsequent violations.
 - **Apprentices Act, 1961:** Advisory → Warning → Penalty tiered approach.
- **Improvement Notices:** Under **Legal Metrology Act, 2009**, businesses get time to rectify non-compliance before penalties.
- **Specific Sector Changes:**
 - **Central Silk Board Act, 1948:** Incorrect information/failure to produce records: imprisonment replaced with warning + monetary penalties.

- **Copyright Act, 1957:** Errors in Copyright Register: imprisonment provision **removed entirely**.
- **Drugs and Cosmetics Act, 1940:** Contraventions: imprisonment replaced with **₹1 lakh penalty** or 3x confiscated goods value.

Additional Info

Legislative Journey:

- **August 2025:** Original Bill introduced (16 Acts, 355 provisions).
- **Select Committee** (chaired by **Tejasvi Surya**): 49 sittings, report submitted March 2026.
- **Expanded scope:** 79 Acts, 784 provisions based on Committee recommendations.

Colonial-Era Laws Reformed:

- **Cattle Trespass Act, 1871.**
- **Live Stock Importation Act, 1898.**
- **Indian Succession Act, 1925.**
- **Delhi Police Act, 1978** (Section 102(c) repealed).

International Election Visitors' Programme (IEVP) 2026

What's the News?

- The **Election Commission of India (ECI)** has commenced the **International Election Visitors' Programme (IEVP), 2026**, a flagship initiative to showcase India's electoral management to global delegates.
- Inaugurated by **Chief Election Commissioner Gyanesh Kumar** alongside Election Commissioners **SS Sandhu** and **Vivek Joshi** at the **India International Institute for Democracy and Election Management (IIDEM)**, New Delhi.
- The programme involves **43 delegates from 23 countries**, including representatives from five Foreign Missions in Delhi, who will observe the conduct of upcoming Legislative Assembly elections.

Programme Structure & Activities

- **Two-Phase Field Deployment:**
 - **Phase I:** Delegates visit **Assam, Kerala, and Puducherry** to observe election logistics and polling.
 - **Phase II:** Delegates visit **West Bengal and Tamil Nadu** for similar on-ground exposure.
- **Operational Exposure:**
 - **Technological Demonstration:** Hands-on experience with **Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs)** and **Voter Verifiable Paper Audit Trail (VVPAT)** systems via mock polls.
 - **Administrative Visits:** Inspection of dispatch centres, District Control Rooms, and Media Monitoring Centres to understand administrative safeguards.
 - **Stakeholder Interaction:** Direct engagement with state-level **Chief Electoral Officers (CEOs)** and technical experts to discuss grassroots implementation.

Additional Info

- **Constitutional & Institutional Framework:**

- **Article 324:** Vests the superintendence, direction, and control of elections in the **Election Commission of India**.
- **IIDEM:** Established in 2013 as the ECI's training and research arm, focusing on capacity building for domestic and international election officials.
- **Technological Interventions:**
 - **EVM-VVPAT:** Ensures verifiability and auditability of the voting process.
 - **cVIGIL App:** A citizen-centric application for reporting Model Code of Conduct violations in real-time.
 - **SVEEP: Systematic Voters' Education and Electoral Participation** programme aimed at enhancing informed voter turnout.

President Assents to CAPF General Administration Act, 2026 Establishing Statutory Cadre

What's the News?

President Droupadi Murmu has given assent to the **Central Armed Police Forces (General Administration) Act, 2026**, which was subsequently notified by the Ministry of Home Affairs. The legislation creates a statutory **Group 'A' General Administration Cadre** for the Central Armed Police Forces (CAPFs) to streamline senior-level appointments and address long-standing issues regarding command and control structures.

CAPF General Administration Act 2026?

- **Objectives:**
 - To bring uniformity in the administration of different forces which were previously governed by separate individual Acts.
 - To simplify disciplinary procedures and recruitment rules across the board.
- **Details:**
 - **Unified Command Structure:** Enhances coordination between different forces during joint operations.
 - **Service Parity:** Aims to ensure equal opportunities for promotions and career progression for officers and personnel across all branches.
 - **Legal Clarity:** Provides a consolidated legal shield and code of conduct for personnel deployed in diverse geographical terrains and conflict zones.
- **Significance:**
 - Reduces administrative red tape within the **Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA)**.
 - Addresses long-standing grievances regarding the "deputationist" vs. "cadre" officer hierarchy by defining clearer administrative roles.

Welfare and Operational Impact

- **Personnel Benefits:**
 - Introduces provisions for standardized housing, medical facilities, and post-

- retirement benefits for the **approx. 10 lakh** CAPF personnel.
- Establishes a dedicated **Grievance Redressal Cell** to handle internal disputes and mental health concerns.
- **Modernization:**
 - The Act provides a statutory backing for the digital transformation of personnel records and transfer systems, aiming for **100% transparency** in postings.
 - It facilitates smoother inter-operability between forces for internal security duties, election deployments, and disaster management.

Additional Info

- **Current CAPF Structure (Pre-Act) :**
 - **Hierarchy:** Director General (DG) → Additional DG → Inspector General (IG) → Deputy Inspector General (DIG) → Commandant.
 - **Cadre Control:** Prior to the Act, cadre management was governed by Central Civil Services Rules and specific Force Acts (e.g., BSF Act, 1968; CRPF Act, 1949). Senior administrative posts were largely filled by IPS officers on deputation.
- **Evolution of the Bill:**
 - **Introduced:** Rajya Sabha (March 2026).
 - **Standing Committee:** Referred to the Department-related Parliamentary Standing Committee on Home Affairs for examination.
 - **Final Passage:** Passed by Parliament before receiving Presidential Assent.

Supreme Court Defines Voting as a "Sentimental Right" for Indian-Born Citizens

What's the News?

- The **Supreme Court of India** has observed that for individuals born in India, the right to remain on the electoral roll and exercise their franchise is a **"sentimental right"**.
- The Bench emphasized that being part of the democratic process is deeply connected to an individual's identity and sense of belonging to the nation.
- The court's message to the **Election Commission of India (ECI)** highlights the need for caution when questioning the citizenship or voting status of individuals born within the country's territory.

Supreme Court's Key Observations and Rationale

- **Voting as a Sentimental Right:** The Court emphasized that the act of voting is the **"biggest expression of nationality and patriotism"** as it is the primary participatory process in a democratic setup.
- **Rebuke of 'Logical Discrepancy' Criterion:** The Court noted that the **"logical discrepancy"** category used for mass deletions was **unique to West Bengal** and was not applied in the SIR of other states like **Bihar**. It observed that the original SIR Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) did not contemplate scrutinizing

voters whose names were already present in the **2002 electoral roll**.

- **Impact on Election Legitimacy:** The Bench flagged a critical threshold for judicial intervention: **if in a constituency, voter deletion is 10% but the victory margin is only 2%, the court will consider such cases**. This underscores the potential for administrative actions to skew democratic outcomes.
- **Directives Issued:**
 - **No Interim Voting Rights:** The Court refused to allow voters who were found eligible by appellate tribunals to vote immediately, insisting that the formal adjudication process must be completed first.
 - **Principle of Inclusion:** It directed the **19 Appellate Tribunals** to hear the pending **34 lakh appeals** based on the **principle of inclusion**, ensuring that fairness prevails over statistical justifications.
 - **Security for Judicial Officers:** The Court ordered the state and the **Election Commission (EC)** to ensure security for **West Bengal judicial officers** involved in the SIR scrutiny, stating that their cover shall not be withdrawn without prior Supreme Court permission.

Special Intensive Revision (SIR): Context & Concerns

- **Objective:** SIR was launched to "purify" electoral rolls by removing ineligible entries, duplications, and discrepancies through document verification and field checks.
- **Implementation Challenge:**
 - **Logical Discrepancy:** A new, non-standardised category used to flag mismatches between enumeration forms and the **2002 electoral roll baseline**, leading to mass exclusions without adequate personal hearings.
 - **Appellate Backlog:** Over **34 lakh appeals** filed before 19 tribunals, with each handling over one lakh cases, raising concerns about timely redressal before elections.
- **Judicial Safeguard:** The Court deployed **judicial officers** to oversee scrutiny in West Bengal to ensure due process, emphasising that administrative efficiency cannot override fundamental voting rights.

Constitutional & Legal Framework on Voting Rights

- **Constitutional Provisions:**
 - **Article 324:** Empowers the **Election Commission of India (ECI)** with superintendence, direction, and control over electoral roll preparation and election conduct.
 - **Article 325:** Prohibits exclusion from electoral rolls on grounds of **religion, race, caste, or sex**; mandates a single general roll per constituency.
 - **Article 326:** Guarantees **adult suffrage** to all citizens aged 18+ unless disqualified by law.

- **Supporting Legislation:**
 - **Representation of the People Act, 1950:** Governs voter eligibility, delimitation, and electoral roll preparation.
 - **Representation of the People Act, 1951:** Regulates election conduct, disputes, and candidate qualifications.
 - **Registration of Electors Rules, 1960:** Details procedures for claims, objections, and roll revisions.

Constitution (131st Amendment) Bill, 2026

What's the News?

- The Union Government has proposed **The Constitution (131st Amendment) Bill, 2026**, seeking to increase **Lok Sabha** strength from **543 to 850 members** and amend delimitation rules to enable immediate implementation of **one-third women's reservation** in Parliament and State Assemblies.
- The Bill targets **Articles 81, 82, and 334A** of the Constitution and is accompanied by the **Delimitation Bill, 2026**, which replaces the Delimitation Act, 2002.

Provisions of the 131st Amendment Bill

- **Composition of Lok Sabha (Amendment to Article 81):**
 - The new maximum strength of the Lok Sabha shall be **850 members**.
 - **815 members** will be chosen by direct election from territorial constituencies in the States.
 - **35 members** will represent the Union Territories.
- **Delimitation Exercise (Amendment to Article 82):**
 - **Removes the mandatory link** between delimitation and the first Census conducted **after the year 2026**.
 - Allows the **Delimitation Commission** to redraw constituencies based on the **latest published Census figures** (effectively the **2011 Census** data).
 - The stated objective is to **expedite** the implementation of women's reservation without waiting for the completion and publication of the next Census.
- **Women's Reservation (Amendment to Article 334A):**
 - Amends the provisions of the **106th Constitutional Amendment Act, 2023** (Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam).
 - Allows the one-third reservation for women to be operationalised **immediately after the upcoming delimitation exercise**, rather than waiting for a post-2026 Census delimitation.

Accompanying Delimitation Bill, 2026

- **Objective:** To replace the **Delimitation Act, 2002** and provide a legal framework for the redrawing of constituencies.
- **Delimitation Commission:**
 - **Composition:** To be chaired by a sitting or former **Supreme Court Judge**. Members include the **Chief Election Commissioner** (or

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an Election Commissioner nominee) and the **State Election Commissioner** of the relevant state.

- **Associate Members:** Ten members from each state (5 MPs and 5 MLAs) will be nominated to assist the Commission but **will not have voting rights**.
- **Criteria for Delimitation:** Constituencies shall be drawn to be **geographically compact areas**, taking into account administrative boundaries, communication facilities, and public convenience.
- **Legal Standing:** Orders of the Delimitation Commission, upon publication in the Official Gazette, shall have the **force of law and cannot be challenged in any court** of law.

Additional Info

- **Constitutional Provisions:**
 - **Article 81:** Defines the composition of the **Lok Sabha**. Currently, it mandates that the House shall consist of not more than **550** elected members.
 - **Article 82:** Provides for the readjustment of seats in the **Lok Sabha** and the division of each State into territorial constituencies after each census.
 - **84th Amendment Act, 2001:** Placed a freeze on the number of seats in the **Lok Sabha** and State Assemblies until the first census taken after the year **2026**.
- **Delimitation Commission:**
 - A high-level body established under the **Delimitation Commission Act**.
 - It is responsible for redrawing the boundaries of various assembly and Lok Sabha constituencies based on a recent census.
 - The orders of the Commission have the force of law and cannot be challenged in any court.
- **Historical Context:**
 - The last major change in seat numbers occurred in **1973** (based on the 1971 census) via the **31st Amendment Act**, which increased seats from **525 to 545**.

Urban Challenge Fund (UCF): Operational Guidelines Launched

What's the News?

- The **Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs (MoHUA)** has launched operational guidelines for the **Urban Challenge Fund (UCF)** and the **Credit Repayment Guarantee Sub-Scheme (CRGSS)**.
- The initiative aims to catalyse **₹4 lakh crore** in urban infrastructure investment through market-linked financing, with **₹1 lakh crore** in central assistance.
- Funds are expected to start disbursing from **September**, with a focus on reform-driven, outcome-based project selection and enhanced fiscal discipline for Urban Local Bodies (ULBs).

Urban Challenge Fund (UCF)

- **Objective:** To transform city development through a reform-driven and financially sustainable model,

focusing on **bankable projects** rather than solely grant-based funding.

- **Funding Structure:**
 - **Total Central Outlay:** ₹1 lakh crore.
 - **Project Allocation:** ₹90,000 crore for infrastructure projects.
 - **Enablers:** ₹5,000 crore for **Project Preparation** and Capacity Building; ₹5,000 crore for **Credit Guarantee Mechanism** (targeting smaller and hilly cities).
 - **Leverage Requirement:** Centre and State can fund up to **25%** of project cost each. The remaining **50% must be mobilized** through market instruments like **municipal bonds**, bank loans, or **Public-Private Partnerships (PPP)**.
- **Implementation & Competition:**
 - Funds will be earmarked based on urban population share, but **allocation is competitive**. States with slower implementation risk losing funds to more proactive counterparts.
 - **Disbursement:** 30% of central funds are expected to be released starting September.

Credit Repayment Guarantee Credit Sub-Scheme (CRGSS)

Launched alongside UCF, this sub-scheme provides a credit guarantee to enable **Tier-II, Tier-III, hilly, and North-Eastern cities** to access market finance. It mitigates risk for lenders and encourages ULBs with weaker financial profiles to raise funds independently.

Urban Governance Reforms (Pre-Conditions)

To access funds, States and Urban Local Bodies (ULBs) must undertake specific reforms, shifting focus from mere infrastructure creation to **institutional strengthening**:

- **Financial Prudence:** Submission of baseline data on asset registers, land bank inventories, and improved revenue collection metrics.
- **Integrated Planning:** Statutory plans aligning land use, mobility, climate resilience, and economic growth.
- **Innovative Governance:** Permission for ULBs to designate private entities as "**Special Purpose Urban Infrastructure Manager (SPUIM)**" for integrated delivery and maintenance. Ward-level foundations and RWAs are allowed to mobilize community-led private investment.

Union Territories Laws (Amendment) Bill, 2026

What's the News?

- The **Union Territories Laws (Amendment) Bill, 2026** has been introduced in the Lok Sabha. It is a supplementary legislation to extend the provisions of the **131st Constitutional Amendment** and the **Delimitation Bill, 2026** to Union Territories (UTs) with legislative assemblies.
- The Bill aims to uniformly apply legal changes regarding seat increases and women's reservation to the UTs of **Delhi, Puducherry, and Jammu & Kashmir**.

Features of the Bill

- **Application to Specific UTs:** Modifies laws governing the Legislative Assemblies of **NCT of Delhi, Puducherry, and J&K**.
- **Delinking from 2027 Census:** Removes the requirement that women's reservation must wait for the first census after 2023. Instead, it allows for reservation based on delimitation using the **2011 Census**.
- **Alignment with 131st Amendment:** Integrates the increase in the maximum number of UT representatives in the Lok Sabha (from **20 to 35 members**) into UT-specific statutes.
- **Synchronized Delimitation:** Mandates that the **Delimitation Commission** (constituted under the Delimitation Bill, 2026) will redraw assembly seats in these UTs.
- **Rotational Reservation:** Seats reserved for women in UT assemblies will be allotted by rotation to different constituencies across successive elections.

Impact on Assembly Size & Nominated Members

- **Nominated Members Increase:** The Bill amends the **Government of Union Territories Act, 1963**, increasing nominated members in UT assemblies to **five**, of which **two seats are reserved for women** (effective after delimitation).
- **J&K Reorganisation Act, 2019 Amendment:** The number of seats in the J&K Legislative Assembly will no longer remain fixed; the Delimitation Commission can adjust seat count based on population.
- **Continuity of Current Assemblies:** Existing Legislative Assemblies will continue until their term ends; sitting members will not lose seats during the redrawing process.

Integrated Dashboard for Infrastructure Performance Monitoring Launched

What's the News?

- The **Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI)** has launched an **Integrated Performance Monitoring Dashboard** to track infrastructure performance across key sub-sectors, strengthening **data-driven governance** in India.
- The dashboard operates under the **PAIMANA framework** (Project Assessment, Infrastructure Monitoring & Analytics for Nation-building), replacing the older **OCMS-2006** system for monitoring Central Sector Infrastructure Projects.
- It covers **6 major infrastructure sub-sectors** with **116 indicators**, shifting focus from output-based tracking to multi-dimensional performance assessment.

Dashboard Framework & Features

- **Multi-Dimensional Assessment:** Moves beyond production metrics to evaluate infrastructure across five dimensions:
 - **Access:** Availability and reach of infrastructure services
 - **Quality:** Reliability and usefulness of infrastructure

- **Fiscal Cost & Revenue:** Efficiency in financial resource allocation
- **Utilisation:** Operational efficiency and capacity usage
- **Affordability:** Economic accessibility for citizens

Sector Coverage & Indicators:

- **Ports, Shipping & Waterways:** 49 indicators (largest coverage)
- **Civil Aviation:** 29 indicators
- **Power:** 13 indicators
- **Roads & Railways:** 9 indicators each
- **Telecommunications:** 7 indicators
- **Unified Digital Interface:** Provides interactive visualisation, time-series analysis, and cross-sectoral views for policymakers, researchers, and stakeholders.

Sectoral Performance

Civil Aviation:

- Passenger traffic reached **20.2 crore** with **Passenger Load Factor at 81.8%**
- Cargo handled: **19.8 lakh tonnes**; reflects sustained demand recovery

Power Sector:

- **Plant Load Factor:** 69.5% (thermal), 79.1% (nuclear)
- Peak demand met with only **0.03% deficit**, indicating strong grid reliability

Telecommunications:

- **8.48 lakh telecom towers**; tele-density improved to **91.7**
- Average wireless data usage: **25.2 GB/subscriber/month**

Road Transport:

- **114.4 lakh FASTags issued**; e-toll transactions rose **13.3% YoY** to 282.5 crore

Railways:

- Passenger train kilometres: **835 million km**; punctuality index for Mail/Express trains improved to **77.1%**

Ports & Waterways:

- Fleet strength: **1,545 vessels**; inland waterways length: **29,267 km**

Additional Info

Constitutional Articles:

- **Article 345:** Empowers the Legislature of a State to adopt by law any one or more of the languages in use in the State (or Hindi) as the official language(s).
- **Article 347:** Provides that if the President is satisfied that a substantial proportion of the population of a State desires the use of any language spoken by them to be recognized by that State, he may direct that such language shall also be officially recognized.

The Eighth Schedule:

- Currently lists **22 official languages** of India.
- Inclusion in the schedule ensures the language is used in national competitive exams (like **UPSC**) and receives funding for development via the **Sahitya Akademi**.
- The Meghalaya Assembly had previously passed a unanimous resolution in **2018** urging

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the Union Government to include Khasi and Garo in the Eighth Schedule.

- **Linguistic Background:**

- **Khasi:** Belongs to the **Austroasiatic** language family; spoken primarily in the eastern half of the state.
- **Garo:** Belongs to the **Tibeto-Burman** language family; spoken predominantly in the western Garo Hills region.

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Additional Info

- **Constitutional Provisions:**
 - **Article 81:** Defines the composition of the **Lok Sabha**. Currently, it mandates that the House shall consist of not more than **550** elected members.
 - **Article 82:** Provides for the readjustment of seats in the **Lok Sabha** and the division of each State into territorial constituencies after each census.
 - **84th Amendment Act, 2001:** Placed a freeze on the number of seats in the **Lok Sabha** and State Assemblies until the first census taken after the year **2026**.
- **Delimitation Commission:**
 - A high-level body established under the **Delimitation Commission Act**.
 - It is responsible for redrawing the boundaries of various assembly and Lok Sabha constituencies based on a recent census.
 - The orders of the Commission have the force of law and cannot be challenged in any court.
- **Historical Context:**
 - The last major change in seat numbers occurred in **1973** (based on the 1971 census) via the **31st Amendment Act**, which increased seats from **525 to 545**.

Cabinet Approves Continuation of Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana-III till March 2028

What's the News?

The Union Cabinet, chaired by the Prime Minister, has approved the continuation of the **Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana-III (PMGSY-III)** beyond its initial timeline. The scheme is now extended up to March 2028 for the completion of pending road and bridge projects. The total revised financial outlay for the scheme has been increased to **₹83,977 crore**.

Extended Timeline and Scope

- **Timeline Extension:**
 - Roads and bridges in plain areas and roads in hilly areas: Completion extended till **March 2028**.

- Bridges in hilly areas: Completion deadline further extended to **March 2029**.
- **Financial Revision:**
 - Original outlay: ₹80,250 crore.
 - **Revised outlay: ₹83,977 crore.**
- **Project Inclusion:**
 - Un-awarded works sanctioned before a prior cutoff date may now be tendered and executed.
 - Approval granted for **161 Long Span Bridges (LSBs)** pending sanction, with an estimated cost of **₹961 crore**. These bridges lie on the alignment of already approved roads.

Socio-Economic Significance

- **Rural Connectivity and Market Access:**
 - Focus on consolidating Through Routes and Major Rural Links connecting habitations to **Gramin Agricultural Markets (GrAMs)**.
 - Aimed at reducing transportation time and costs for agricultural and non-farm products, thereby improving rural incomes.
- **Access to Essential Services:**
 - Improved connectivity is designed to facilitate better access to **Higher Secondary Schools** and **Hospitals**, particularly in remote and underserved areas.
- **Employment Generation:**
 - The continuation of construction activities is expected to generate substantial direct and indirect employment opportunities in rural areas.

Additional Information

- **About Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana (PMGSY):**
 - **Launch:** December 2000 (as a Centrally Sponsored Scheme).
 - **Primary Objective:** To provide single all-weather road connectivity to eligible unconnected habitations in rural areas.
 - **PMGSY-III Specifics:** This phase focuses specifically on the **upgradation** of existing Through Routes and Major Rural Links, rather than the construction of new connectivity roads.

Centre Reconstitutes NITI Aayog – New Vice Chairperson & Full-Time Members Appointed

What's the News?

- The Union Government has reconstituted **NITI Aayog**, appointing former Chief Economic Advisor **Ashok Kumar Lahiri** as the new **Vice Chairperson**.
- Five new **Full-Time Members** have been appointed: former Cabinet Secretary **Rajiv Gauba**, **Prof. K. V. Raju**, **Prof. Gobardhan Das**, **Prof. Abhay Karandikar**, and **Dr. M. Srinivas**.
- Prime Minister Narendra Modi (who is the Chairperson of NITI Aayog) stated that the institution has become a vital pillar in India's policy-making architecture, fostering cooperative federalism and enhancing 'Ease of Living'.

New Vice Chairperson & Full-Time Members

- **Vice Chairperson:** Ashok Kumar Lahiri (former Chief Economic Advisor, member of the 15th Finance Commission, and BJP MLA from West Bengal).
- **Full-Time Members:**
 - **Rajiv Gauba** – former Cabinet Secretary.
 - **Prof. K. V. Raju** – member of the Economic Advisory Council to the PM (EAC-PM) and economic advisor to the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh.
 - **Prof. Gobardhan Das** – Director, Indian Institute of Science Education and Research (IISER), Bhopal.
 - **Prof. Abhay Karandikar** – Secretary, Department of Science & Technology (DST); former Director, IIT Kanpur.
 - **Dr. M. Srinivas** – Director, All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS), Delhi.
- The new team replaces the previous full-time members; ex-officio members and special invitees remain unchanged.

NITI Aayog – An Overview

- **Full Name:** National Institution for Transforming India.
- **Established:** 1 January 2015, via a Union Cabinet resolution.
- **Predecessor:** The **Planning Commission** (instituted in 1950).
- **Mandate:** To serve as the premier **policy think tank** of the Government of India, providing directional and strategic policy inputs.
- **Core Philosophy:** Moving from a "one-size-fits-all" top-down model to a **bottom-up**, collaborative approach that actively involves State Governments.

Functions

- **Policy Design:** Formulating strategic, long-term policy and programme frameworks.
- **Knowledge & Innovation Hub:** Acting as a resource centre, promoting innovation (e.g., **Atal Innovation Mission**) and sharing best practices.
- **Monitoring & Evaluation:** Through the **Development Monitoring and Evaluation Office (DMEO)**, which tracks real-time performance data of ministries.
- **Reform Driver:** Pushing cross-sector reforms and improving 'Ease of Living'.
- **Cooperative Federalism:** Providing a platform for States/UTs to participate in national development agenda.

Governing Structure

- **Chairperson:** Prime Minister of India.
- **Vice Chairperson:** Appointed by the PM; holds the rank of a Cabinet Minister.
- **Full-Time Members:** Experts appointed by the government; enjoy the rank of Minister of State.
- **Part-Time Members:** Maximum 2, from leading universities/research institutions.
- **Ex-Officio Members:** Up to 4 Union Ministers nominated by the PM.
- **Chief Executive Officer (CEO):** Appointed by the PM for a fixed tenure; rank of Secretary to the Government of India.

- **Governing Council:** Chaired by the PM; comprises Chief Ministers of all States & UTs with legislatures, Lt. Governors of other UTs, Vice Chairperson, Full-Time Members, and Special Invitees.

Centre Notifies Promotion and Regulation of Online Gaming Rules, 2026

What's the News?

- The Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY) has notified the **Promotion and Regulation of Online Gaming (PROG) Rules, 2026**.
- These Rules operationalise the **Promotion and Regulation of Online Gaming Act, 2025**, enacted by Parliament in August 2025.
- The framework establishes the **Online Gaming Authority of India (OGAI)** as a unified, digital-first regulator, replacing the fragmented landscape of state-level gaming laws with a cohesive national framework.

Features of the PROG Rules, 2026

- **Structure:** The Rules are organised into 6 Parts containing 26 Rules, covering six regulatory pillars.
- **Aim:** To safeguard citizens from predatory online money games, protect the financial system, enable coordinated enforcement, and uphold user rights, while fostering e-sports and social gaming.

Online Gaming Authority of India (OGAI)

- **Establishment:** An attached office of MeitY, headquartered in Delhi, designed as a digital-first regulator.
- **Composition:** Six-member body chaired by the **Additional Secretary, MeitY** (ex-officio). Five other members are Joint Secretary-level officers from the Ministries of Home Affairs, Information & Broadcasting, Youth Affairs & Sports, Department of Financial Services, and Department of Legal Affairs.
- **Functions:**
 - Mandated to maintain and publish a public list of prohibited **Online Money Games**.
 - Empowered to inquire into complaints, issue compliance orders, and coordinate with financial institutions and law enforcement agencies for enforcement.
 - Operates as a digital-first office, minimising physical processes.

Determination & Classification of Games

- A **determination test** classifies games as:
 - **Online Money Games** (prohibited under the parent Act).
 - **Permissible Online Social Games or e-sports** (regulated).
- **Trigger Mechanisms:** Classification may be initiated by:
 - The OGAI suo motu.
 - An application by a service provider seeking e-sport classification.
 - A Central Government notification for specific social game categories.
- **Objective Factors (Rule 9):**
 - Whether the game involves payment of fees or stakes.

- Whether users have an expectation of monetary winnings.
- Structure of the revenue model.
- Whether in-game rewards or assets can be redeemed or monetised externally.

- **Timeline:** Determination must be completed within **90 days** of a complete application or notice.

Registration of Online Games

- Registration is **not universally mandatory**. It is required only for:
 - Games intended to be offered as **e-sports**.
 - Specific categories of social games notified by the government, based on risk to users (especially children), scale of participation, transaction volumes, and country of origin.
- A digital **Certificate of Registration**, valid for up to **10 years**, is issued upon successful determination and registration.
- **Online Money Games are ineligible** for recognition or registration as e-sports under the National Sports Governance Act, 2025.

User Safety Mandates

- Platforms must implement **User Safety Features** calibrated to each game's risk profile, including:
 - Age verification and age-gating.
 - Time restrictions to limit excessive play.
 - Parental controls.
 - User reporting tools.
 - Counselling support for addiction-related concerns.
 - Fair-play and integrity monitoring.
- Service providers must disclose these features at the time of applying for determination or registration.

Grievance Redressal Mechanism

- The Rules establish a **two-tier statutory mechanism**:
 - **Tier 1:** Every service provider must maintain an internal grievance redressal system.
 - **Tier 2:** Dissatisfied users may escalate to the **OGAI** within 30 days; the Authority is to resolve matters within 30 days. A further **second appeal** lies before the **Appellate Authority (Secretary, MeitY)**, who shall dispose of the matter within 30 days.

Penalties & Enforcement

- **Digital-first proceedings:** Conducted in digital mode unless physical presence is deemed necessary. Cases must be concluded within **90 days** of a complaint.
- **Proportionate penalties:** Penalties are calibrated considering the gain from non-compliance, loss to users, recurrence, gravity, and mitigation efforts.

Financial Oversight & Data Localisation

- Banks and payment gateways are brought into the regulatory net; they must verify a game's status before facilitating transactions, effectively blocking banned real-money gaming platforms.
- Gaming platforms are required to **store all traffic and user data within India** (data localisation mandate).

Additional Info

- **PROG Act, 2025:** Enacted by Parliament in August 2025, laying the legal foundation for the 2026 Rules. It

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aims to curb harmful online money gaming and promote a regulated ecosystem for e-sports and social games.

- **National Sports Governance Act, 2025:** Referenced in the Rules; explicitly bars online money games from recognition as e-sports under this Act.
- **State Law Precedents:** Several states (e.g., Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Telangana) had enacted their own bans on real-money gaming; the PROG framework provides a unified national regime to supersede this fragmentation.
- **Industry Context:** India's online gaming sector has witnessed exponential growth, becoming one of the largest gaming markets globally. The framework aligns with PM Modi's vision of positioning **India as a global hub for gaming, innovation, and creativity** while protecting society from financial and psychological harm.

NITI Aayog Launches DPI@2047 Roadmap for Viksit Bharat

What's the News?

- NITI Aayog has released the **DPI@2047 for Viksit Bharat** roadmap, a strategic framework to steer India's digital public infrastructure (DPI) from basic inclusion toward **productivity-led, non-linear, and inclusive socio-economic growth**.
- The report was unveiled by **Suman Bery** (Vice Chairman, NITI Aayog) and **Prof. Ajay Kumar Sood** (Principal Scientific Adviser to the Government of India).
- It is developed by the **NITI Frontier Tech Hub (FTH)** in partnership with **EkStep Foundation** and **Deloitte**.

DPI@2047 Roadmap: Overview

- The roadmap envisions India becoming a **\$30 trillion economy** with a **per capita income of \$18,000 by 2047**, leveraging DPI as the core enabler.
- It marks a shift from **GDP-centric measurement to productivity-centric measurement**, linking better jobs and livelihoods to rising productivity.
- Key current DPI achievements highlighted:
 - **Aadhaar** covers nearly the entire adult population, with **80–90 million identity authentications daily**.
 - **UPI** handles about **730 million transactions per day**, the highest volume of any payment platform globally.

Two-Phase Approach: DPI 2.0 & DPI 3.0

- **DPI 2.0 (2025–2035) – Theme: “Realising Aspirations”**
 - Aims to **empower livelihoods at scale** and build a broad base of capable citizens.
 - Expands digital rails beyond identity, payments, and welfare delivery into **livelihoods, productivity, and market access**.
- **DPI 3.0 (2035–2047) – Theme: “Achieving Prosperity”**
 - Targets a **compounding effect** through grassroots innovation and **sustained, high-value local economic growth** across all regions.

- Will transition India into a developed nation (**Viksit Bharat**) with widespread, non-linear prosperity.

Eight Sectoral Transformations (DPI 2.0 Scope)

- **Mass Inclusion at Scale**
 - Scaled market expansion for **MSMEs** – market intelligence, linkages, simplified compliance.
 - **MSME job matching** – making local talent digitally visible for low-cost, high-trust hiring.
 - Improved livelihoods for **smallholder farmers** – advisory services, market linkages, credit.
- **Foundations of Human Capability**
 - **Safe spaces for learner-centric education** – local language materials, aligned with NEP 2020.
 - **Universal Health Coverage** – preventing a single health crisis from erasing financial stability.
- **Systemic Enablers**
 - **Access to credit for a billion Indians** – leveraging asset tokenization for micro-credit.
 - **Decentralized energy markets** – efficient use of renewable sources.
 - **Benefits finding beneficiaries** – timely, inclusive delivery of social benefits.

Four Execution Imperatives

- **District-led demand aggregation** – hyper-local solutions driven by grassroots adoption.
- **Scaling technology entrepreneurship** – building a distributed network of innovators and suppliers.
- **Leveraging AI momentum** – using AI as a productivity engine to solve systemic bottlenecks.
- **Cross-sectoral strategic unlocks** – better data use, expanded digital transactions (open netw

Additional Information

- **Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI):** Shared digital building blocks (identity, payments, data exchange) that enable inclusive, population-scale service delivery.
 - India's DPI stack includes **Aadhaar, UPI, DigiLocker, ONDC, A account Aggregator framework**, etc.
 - Recognized globally as a model for **inclusive digital transformation** (G20 New Delhi Leaders' Declaration, 2023).
- **NITI Frontier Tech Hub (FTH):** A NITI Aayog initiative to identify, evaluate, and accelerate the adoption of frontier technologies for public good.
- **EkStep Foundation:** A not-for-profit organisation co-founded by Nandan Nilekani, Rohini Nilekani, and Shankar Maruwada, focused on creating **societal platforms** for learning and development.
- **Viksit Bharat 2047:** The national vision to make India a developed nation by the centenary of its independence, encompassing economic growth, social inclusion, and environmental sustainability.

MoPR Releases Panchayat Advancement Index 2.0

What's the News?

- The **Ministry of Panchayati Raj (MoPR)** released the **Panchayat Advancement Index (PAI) 2.0** report for FY 2023–24.
- The index evaluates the performance of over **2.5 lakh Gram Panchayats** across India on a range of development metrics.
- The report reveals a clear **North-South divide**, with smaller states generally outperforming larger ones. Tripura leads the nation, while large states like Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and Rajasthan lag behind.

Findings and Rankings

- **National Participation:** The exercise saw **97.3%** participation, with **2,59,867** Gram Panchayats submitting validated data, a significant increase from 80.79% in PAI 1.0. West Bengal did not participate.
- **Overall Categorisation:**
 - **Achiever (Score 90–100):** No panchayat achieved this top category.
 - **Front Runner (Score 75–90):** 3,635 panchayats.
 - **Performer (Score 60–75):** 1,18,824 panchayats.
 - **Aspirant (Score 40–60):** 1,23,719 panchayats.
 - **Beginner (Below 40):** 13,689 panchayats.
- **Top Performers:**
 - **Tripura:** Leads the nation with **80%** of its 1,176 Gram Panchayats achieving 'Front Runner' status.
 - **Kerala:** 10% of its Gram Panchayats are 'Front Runners'.
 - **Odisha:** 8% of its Gram Panchayats are 'Front Runners'.
- **Laggard States:** Very few panchayats achieved 'Front Runner' status in several larger states, indicating significant scope for improvement in rural governance.
 - **Uttar Pradesh:** Only 51 out of 57,678.
 - **Rajasthan:** Only 8 out of 11,037.
 - **Bihar:** Only 2 out of 8,053.
 - **Punjab:** Only 1 out of 13,233.

About the Panchayat Advancement Index (PAI)

- **Framework:** PAI is a **data-driven, multi-dimensional framework** designed to serve as a "report card" for grassroots governance, assessing the performance and progress of Gram Panchayats.
- **Thematic Alignment:** The assessment is based on **150 indicators** (reduced from 516 in PAI 1.0 for better usability) and 230 data points, aligned with the **Localisation of Sustainable Development Goals (LSDGs)** across nine key themes:
 - Poverty Free & Enhanced Livelihoods
 - Healthy Panchayat
 - Child Friendly Panchayat
 - Water Sufficient Panchayat
 - Clean and Green Panchayat
 - Self-Sufficient Infrastructure
 - Socially Just and Secured Panchayat
 - Panchayat with Good Governance

- Women & Child Friendly Panchayat
- **Data Validation:** Introduced a single data entry form, **Gram Sabha validation**, and real-time dashboards for enhanced transparency.
- **Transparency:** MoPR has directed all panchayats to display their scorecards publicly and include PAI score discussions as a regular agenda item in **Gram Sabha** meetings.

Significance for Governance

- **Evidence-Driven Planning:** Provides granular data for preparing **Gram Panchayat Development Plans (GPDs)**, enabling targeted interventions.
- **Competitive Federalism:** Fosters a spirit of healthy competition among panchayats and states by creating a benchmark for performance. This is in line with the vision of "**Viksit Gram Panchayats**".
- **Strengthening Local Bodies:** Encourages transparency, accountability, and participatory governance, thereby strengthening **Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs)**.
- **Linking to Global Goals:** The framework has been presented to the **United Nations** as part of India's efforts to achieve the **Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)** through local action.

Additional Info

- **Constitutional Backing for PRIs:**
 - **Article 243:** Defines the constitution and composition of Panchayats.
 - **Article 243B:** Mandates a three-tier Panchayati Raj system (village, intermediate, and district level) in all states.
 - **Article 243G:** Empowers State Legislatures to endow Panchayats with the powers and authority necessary to function as institutions of self-government, including the preparation of plans for economic development and social justice.
 - **Eleventh Schedule:** Lists 29 subject matters (e.g., agriculture, health, education, drinking water) that may be devolved to Panchayats, forming the functional core of their responsibilities.
- **Related Initiatives:**
 - **e-Gram Swaraj:** A portal for PRIs for planning, budgeting, and accounting to ensure transparency.
 - **Rashtriya Gram Swaraj Abhiyan (RGSA):** A scheme aimed at strengthening the capacity of PRIs.
 - **SDG India Index:** NITI Aayog's tool to track progress on SDGs, which the PAI complements by providing grassroots-level data.

Empowerment

Union Cabinet Approves Amendments to the Women's Reservation Act

What's the News?

- The **Union Cabinet**, chaired by Prime Minister **Narendra Modi**, has cleared a draft bill to introduce key amendments to the **Women's Reservation Act** (officially known as the **Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam**).
- The amendments aim to streamline the implementation process of the law, which mandates a **33% reservation** for women in legislative bodies.
- The government has termed these modifications the "need of the hour" to ensure that the transition toward increased female representation in grassroots and national politics is legally and administratively seamless.

Implementation Framework & Delimitation

- **Seat Expansion Proposal:**
 - Lok Sabha strength proposed to increase from **543 to 816 seats**.
 - Approximately 273 seats (33%) to be reserved for women.
 - **Vertical quota system:** Reservation applied within Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST) categories to ensure intersectional representation.
- **Accelerated Timeline:**
 - Delimitation exercise to be based on **2011 Census data**, bypassing the wait for 2027 Census figures.
 - This shifts potential implementation from ~2034 to **2029**, aligning with the next scheduled general elections.
- **Legislative Process:**
 - A **Constitution Amendment Bill** will modify the Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam.
 - A separate ordinary Bill will amend the **Delimitation Act, 1972**.
 - Both Bills expected to be introduced and passed in a special Parliamentary sitting.

Constitutional Provisions

- **Article 330:** Reservation of seats for SC/ST in the House of the People.
- **Article 332:** Reservation of seats for SC/ST in Legislative Assemblies of States.
- **Article 334:** Originally mandated the cessation of SC/ST reservation after 10 years but has been extended periodically; currently set to expire in **2030**.
- **Article 330A:** Inserted via the 106th Amendment to provide 33% reservation for women.

Current Representation

- **Lok Sabha (18th):** Women constitute approximately **14%** of the total strength (74 out of 543 elected members).
- **State Assemblies:** Average women representation stands at approximately **9%**.

- **Global Ranking:** India ranks **143rd** out of 185 countries in terms of women's representation in the lower house of Parliament (IPU Data).

NITI Aayog Report on Women and India's Evolving Credit Market

What's the News?

- **NITI Aayog**, in collaboration with **TransUnion CIBIL**, has released a comprehensive report titled "**From Borrowers to Builders: Women and India's Evolving Credit Market**."
- The report identifies a significant transition in the financial behavior of Indian women, moving from consumption-based borrowing to **enterprise-oriented lending**.
- It highlights how increased access to formal credit is empowering women to become active contributors to the **Viksit Bharat @2047** vision by transitioning from "borrowers" to "builders" of the economy.

Evolution of the Credit Market?

- **Portfolio Growth:** The total credit portfolio held by women in India has reached a landmark **₹76 lakh crore**.
- **Active Borrowers:** There has been a consistent **15% Compound Annual Growth Rate (CAGR)** in the number of credit-active women over the last five years.
- **Credit Discipline:** Women borrowers are reported to have higher average **credit scores** and lower **delinquency rates** (defaults) compared to their male counterparts, making them a "low-risk, high-return" segment for banks.

From Borrowers to Builders?

- **Rise in Business Loans:** The report notes a **24% year-on-year growth** in enterprise-related loans, such as **Business Loans** and **Commercial Vehicle** loans, sanctioned to women.
- **Digital Integration:** The adoption of digital payment systems and **Fintech** platforms has accelerated credit penetration in **Tier-2** and **Tier-3** cities.
- **Sectoral Shift:** While gold loans and personal loans were historically dominant, there is a rising trend in women seeking credit for **Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs)** and agriculture-allied activities.

Persistent Challenges in Financial Inclusion

- **Untapped Potential:** Nearly **two-thirds of credit-eligible women** (~29 crore) remain outside formal financial systems.
- **Agency & Capability Gaps:**
 - Rural women nano-entrepreneurs often lack **autonomy over credit decisions**, limiting strategic fund utilization.
 - **Digital translation gap:** High smartphone usage does not translate to understanding AI/digital tools for business planning.
- **Structural Constraints:**
 - **Time poverty:** Unpaid care work (cited by **38% in Kerala**) restricts engagement with digital credit platforms.

- Nano-enterprises frequently lack **formal collateral**, creating dependency on entry-level products.

Policy Enablers & Institutional Initiatives

- Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI):
 - **Aadhaar e-KYC, UPI, and DigiLocker** have reduced entry barriers for first-time rural women borrowers.
- **Targeted Platforms:**
 - Women Entrepreneurship Platform (WEP): NITI Aayog initiative aligning financial institutions and CSOs for women's enterprise growth.
 - Financing Women Collaborative (FWC): Launched to bridge sex-disaggregated data gaps and coordinate the financing ecosystem.
- **Capacity Building:**
 - **Project Seher** (TransUnion CIBIL): Credit literacy program for women.
 - **Stamp duty concessions:** State-level incentives encouraging women's participation in housing loans.

e-SafeHer: Cyber Security Training for Rural Women

What's the News?

- The **Reliance Foundation** and the **Centre for Development of Advanced Computing (C-DAC)**, functioning under the **Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY)**, have launched the **e-SafeHer** programme.
- The initiative aims to create a network of **one million "Cyber Sakhis"** across rural India.
- The primary goal is to enhance cyber security awareness, promote digital safety, and empower women to navigate the digital world securely.

The e-SafeHer Initiative

- **Collaborative Effort:** It is a joint partnership between the **Reliance Foundation** and **C-DAC** to bridge the digital safety gap in rural areas.
- **Target Population:** Focuses on training **1,000,000 women** in rural communities, designated as **Cyber Sakhis**.
- **Objective:** To provide specialized training on recognizing cyber threats, ensuring personal data protection, and understanding legal recourses for cyber-crimes.
- **Training Modules:**
 - Safe use of social media and digital payment platforms.
 - Identification of phishing, online scams, and financial frauds.
 - Understanding of privacy settings and digital hygiene.
- **Implementation Model:** The programme utilizes a "train-the-trainer" approach where **Cyber Sakhis** act as community leaders to disseminate knowledge to other residents.

Significance of the Programme

- **Addressing the Gender Digital Divide:** While digital penetration is increasing, women in rural areas often lack the technical literacy to defend against online harassment and fraud.
- **Strengthening Digital India:** By securing the most vulnerable sections of the population, the initiative supports the broader **Digital India** mission and the growth of a secure digital economy.
- **Localized Education:** The curriculum is designed to be accessible and is offered in multiple regional languages to ensure effective communication at the grassroots level.
- **Socio-Economic Impact:** Enhanced digital literacy allows rural women to participate safely in e-commerce, digital banking, and government e-services.

Additional Info

- **C-DAC (Centre for Development of Advanced Computing):**
 - A premier R&D organization of the **Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY)**.
 - Responsible for carrying out R&D in IT, Electronics, and associated areas, including the development of supercomputers like **PARAM**.
- **Cyber Sakhis:**
 - Conceptualized as community educators who bridge the gap between complex cyber laws and local understanding.
- **Related Initiatives:**
 - **I4C (Indian Cyber Crime Coordination Centre):** An initiative of the **Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA)** to provide a framework for law enforcement agencies to deal with cyber-crime.
 - **Cyber Jaagrookta Diwas:** An initiative to create awareness among school and college students regarding cyber safety.
 - **Information Security Education and Awareness (ISEA):** A project by **MeitY** for capacity building in the area of information security.

Indian Railways Clarifies Travel Rules for PwDs with UDID Cards

What's the News?

- **Indian Railways** has issued a clarification allowing **Persons with Disabilities (PwDs)** holding a valid **Unique Disability ID (UDID)** card to travel in unreserved coaches specifically earmarked for **Divyangjan**.
- The move aims to simplify the verification process and ensure that eligible passengers can access designated facilities in **Mail and Express** trains without administrative hurdles.
- This policy treats UDID cardholders as **bona fide passengers**, aligning railway documentation with the national standardized identification for disabilities.

Features of the UDID Card

- **Purpose:** The **UDID card** is a standardized, nationally recognized identification document for persons with disabilities, issued by the **DEPwD**. It is designed to simplify access to various government schemes, benefits, and services across India.

UDID Card Integration?

- **Recognition of Authority:** PwDs holding a valid UDID card issued by the **Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities (DEPwD)** are now officially recognized for travel in designated compartments.
- **Travel Authority:** Along with the UDID card, passengers must possess a valid travel authority (ticket). This includes those who are already eligible for **concessional railway fares**.
- **E-Ticketing Photo Identity Card (EPICS):** While the UDID is now accepted for coach access, the **Divyangjan Card (EPICS)** remains the primary identity document for availing specific fare concessions during ticket booking.

Concessions & IRCTC Integration

- **Divyangjan Card (EPICS):** Enables PwDs to avail fare concessions on both reserved and unreserved tickets via **IRCTC e-ticketing**.
- **Master List Registration:** Passengers can add disability details in their IRCTC profile under "**Add/Modify Master List**" for seamless concession claims.
- **Booking Process:** Concession checkbox available during ticket booking; details auto-fetch from saved passenger list if registered.

Designated Coaches and Enforcement?

- **Coach Types:** The rule applies to specially designed unreserved compartments known as **SLRD** (Second Class cum Luggage and Brake Van) and **LSLRD** (LHB variant) coaches.
- **Strict Enforcement:** To ensure these facilities remain available for the intended beneficiaries, the Railways has directed zonal authorities to take strict action against unauthorized passengers under the **Railway Act, 1989**.
- **Operational Guidelines:** All **Zonal Railways** have been instructed to sensitize ticket-checking staff and RPF personnel regarding the validity of the UDID card to prevent any inconvenience to **Divyangjan** passengers.

Related Legal Framework and Constitutional Provisions

- **Railway Act, 1989:** This act provides the legal basis for regulating railway operations, including the enforcement of rules related to passenger travel and the use of reserved compartments. Section 155 of the act specifically deals with the penalty for entering a reserved compartment without proper authority.
- **Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016:** This landmark legislation mandates accessibility, non-discrimination, and equal opportunities for PwDs in all spheres of life, including transportation.
- **Constitutional Provisions:** The **Directive Principles of State Policy** under **Article 41** of the Indian Constitution direct the State to make effective provision for securing the right to work, to education, and to public assistance in cases of disability.

Goldman Prize 2026: All-Women Cohort Wins "Green Nobel" for First Time

What's the News?

The 2026 **Goldman Environmental Prize**, widely regarded as the "**Green Nobel**", has been awarded to an all-women cohort of six grassroots environmental activists for the first time in its history. The prize recognizes individuals from six global regions who have taken significant personal risks to safeguard the environment. The 2026 winners hail from **Colombia, Nigeria, Papua New Guinea, South Korea, the United Kingdom, and the United States**. Each recipient receives **\$200,000** in prize money to support their ongoing work. The award is significant for highlighting the central role of **women in grassroots environmental leadership** and community-driven solutions to climate change and biodiversity loss.

The 2026 Goldman Environmental Prize Winners

Winner (Country/Region)	Key Achievement
Yuvelis Morales Blanco (Colombia, South & Central America)	Mobilized her community in Puerto Wilches to successfully prevent the introduction of commercial fracking in Colombia, forcing Ecopetrol to suspend pilot projects. She also won a Constitutional Court ruling confirming the violation of the community's right to free, prior, and informed consent .
Iroro Tanshi (Nigeria, Africa)	Rediscovered the endangered short-tailed roundleaf bat and launched a successful, community-led wildfire prevention system to protect its habitat in the Afi Mountain Wildlife Sanctuary . Her team prevented any serious wildfires between early 2022 and May 2025.
Borim Kim (South Korea, Asia)	Led the organization Youth 4 Climate Action to victory in the first successful youth-led climate litigation in Asia. In August 2024, the South Korean Constitutional Court ruled that the government's climate policy violated the constitutional rights of future generations.
Sarah Finch (United Kingdom, Europe)	Fought a decade-long legal battle against oil drilling in Surrey, culminating in the landmark " Finch ruling " by the UK Supreme Court in June 2024. The ruling mandates that authorities must consider the downstream climate impacts of fossil fuels before granting extraction permits.

Theonila Matbob (Papua New Guinea, Islands & Island Nations)	Roka	Led a successful campaign that compelled mining giant Rio Tinto to sign a landmark agreement in November 2024 to address the environmental and social devastation caused by its abandoned Panguna copper mine , 35 years after its closure.
Alannah Acaq Hurley (USA, North America)		As Executive Director of the United Tribes of Bristol Bay , she led a coalition of 15 tribal nations to secure a historic EPA veto in January 2023, stopping the proposed Pebble Mine megaproject in Alaska and protecting the world's largest wild salmon run.

Significance of the Prize

- **Historic First:** This marks the first time since the prize was established in 1989 that all six recipients are women. This underscores the growing and critical role of women in leading grassroots environmental and climate action.
- **Grassroots Focus:** The prize is unique for honoring grassroots activists, emphasizing that effective environmental solutions often emerge from local communities directly impacted by ecological threats.
- **Global Reach:** With this year's awards, the prize has now honored **239 winners from 98 countries**, creating a powerful global network of environmental leaders. Previous winners have gone on to hold influential positions in government, civil society, and international organizations.
- **Financial Support:** Beyond recognition, the prize provides substantial financial backing, starting with the \$200,000 award, along with international exposure, media support, and access to a global network, which is crucial for the continuation of the winners' work.

Additional Info

- **Goldman Environmental Prize:** Founded in **1989** by San Francisco philanthropists **Richard and Rhoda Goldman**, the prize is awarded annually to one grassroots environmental activist from each of the world's six inhabited continental regions: Africa, Asia, Europe, Islands & Island Nations, North America, and South & Central America.
- **Indian Connection:** Several Indian environmentalists have been awarded the prize in the past. Most recently, in 2024, **Alok Shukla** won for his successful community campaign that saved **445,000 acres** of biodiversity-rich forests in **Hasdeo Aranya, Chhattisgarh**, from 21 planned coal mines. In 2004, **Rashida Bee** and **Champa Devi Shukla** were awarded the prize for their activism related to the 1984 Bhopal gas tragedy.

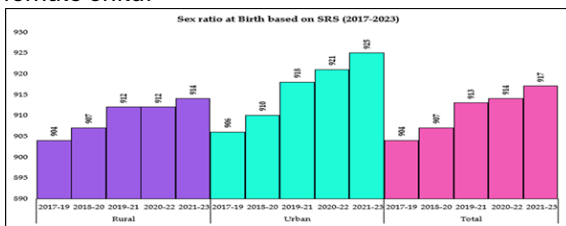
MoSPI Releases "Women and Men in India 2025" Report

What's the News?

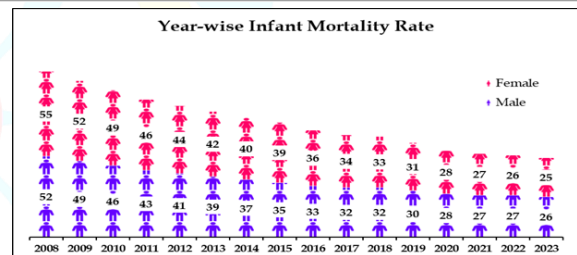
- The Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI) has released the 27th edition of its annual publication, "Women and Men in India 2025: Selected Indicators and Data".
- The report was unveiled at the National Deliberative Summit on "Data for Development" in Bhubaneswar, Odisha.
- It provides a comprehensive compilation of gender-disaggregated data across key socio-economic domains, including population, health, education, economic participation, decision-making, and violence against women.

Highlights of the Report

- **Sex Ratio at Birth (SRB):** Improved from 904 (2017-19) to **917** (2021-23), indicating better survival of the female child.

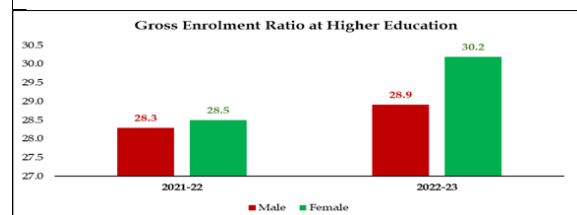
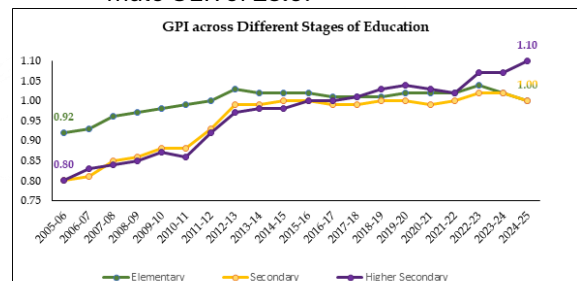


- **Infant Mortality Rate (IMR):** Both female and male IMR have recorded a sustained decline between 2008 and 2023.



Education:

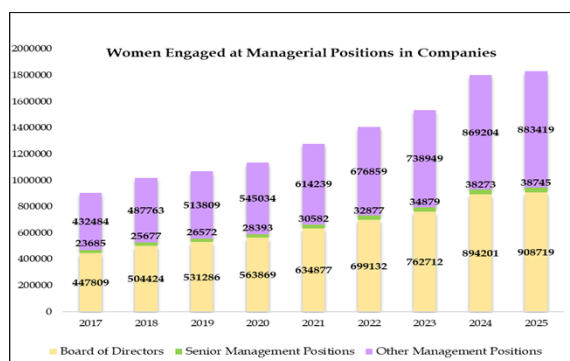
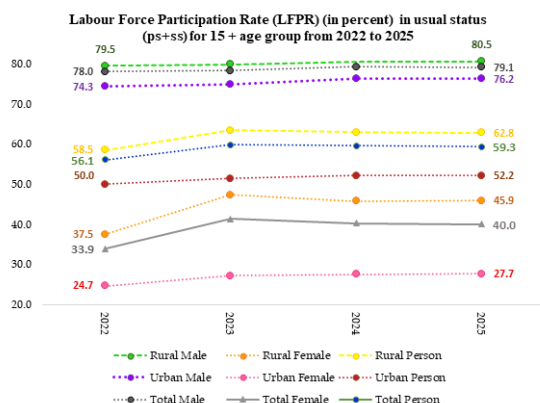
- **Gender parity** has been achieved across all levels of school education, from Primary to Higher Secondary.
- **Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER)** in Higher Education for females rose from 28.5 to **30.2** (2021-22 to 2022-23), surpassing the male GER of **28.9**.



Economic Participation:

- **Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR)** for ages 15+ has increased for both genders.

- Rural female LFPR saw a significant rise from **37.5% to 45.9%** between 2022 and 2025.
- Women in managerial positions grew by **102.54%** between 2017 and 2025, outpacing the 73.80% growth for men.



• Health & Demography:

- **Maternal Mortality Ratio (MMR)** reduced from 254 (2004-06) to **88** per 1,00,000 live births (2021-23).
- Adolescent (15-19 years) Fertility Rate has shown a sustained downward trend.
- Mean age at marriage for women increased to **24.3** years in 2023.

Challenges and Areas of Concern

- **Sex Ratio at Birth:** Although improved, the SRB of 917 is still below the natural norm of 952, indicating that **son preference** and sex-selective practices persist.
- **Urban-Rural & State Disparities:** The report provides data disaggregated by rural-urban and state/UT categories, which reveal continued inter-state variation in key indicators.
- **Violence Against Women:** The report covers data on violence against women, a domain where under-reporting and social stigma remain significant hurdles.
- **SDG 5 Score:** Despite progress, India's **SDG India Index score for Goal 5** remained static at **48** (2020-21 to 2023-24), highlighting slow overall progress.

Additional Info

- **About MoSPI:**
 - Formed in 1999, the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation is the nodal body for the Indian Statistical System.
 - The publication "Women and Men in India" has been institutionalized since **1995**.
- **Related Initiatives:**

- **Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (BBBP):** Launched in 2015 to address the declining Child Sex Ratio and promote girl child education.
- **POSHAN Abhiyaan:** Aims to improve nutritional outcomes for children, pregnant women, and lactating mothers.
- **Skill India Mission:** Focuses on enhancing employability, with increasing female participation in new-age skills.
- **SDG 5 (Gender Equality):** NITI Aayog's index shows India's score improved from 36 (2018) to 49 (2023-24) but remains in the "Aspirant" category.
- **Constitutional & Legal Framework:**
 - **Article 14:** Right to Equality.
 - **Article 15(3):** Enables the State to make special provisions for women and children.
 - **Article 51A(e):** Fundamental Duty to renounce practices derogatory to the dignity of women.
 - **The Maternity Benefit (Amendment) Act, 2017:** Enhanced paid maternity leave to 26 weeks.

Culture and Arts

India's First Petroglyph Conservation Park: Safeguarding Ladakh's Ancient Rock Art

What's the News?

- The foundation stone for **India's first Petroglyph Conservation Park** was laid in **Leh, Ladakh** on the banks of the **Indus River**, coinciding with **World Heritage Day**.
 - The initiative, inaugurated by **Lieutenant Governor Vinai Kumar Saxena**, aims to protect centuries-old **rock carvings (petroglyphs)** threatened by unregulated tourism, infrastructure expansion, and environmental stress.
 - A **Memorandum of Understanding (MoU)** was signed between Ladakh's **Department of Archives, Archaeology and Museums** and the **Archaeological Survey of India (ASI)** for scientific conservation and joint management.
-
- **Petroglyph**: Image/symbol created by **removing part of a rock surface** through pecking, carving, or abrasion (distinct from *pictographs*, which are painted).
 - **World Heritage Day**: Observed annually on **18 April** to raise awareness about cultural heritage preservation; 2026 theme focused on ancient art and modern conservation challenges.

Park Architecture & Conservation Strategy

- **Core Objective**: Create a dedicated, curated space to relocate and preserve **endangered petroglyphs** from isolated, vulnerable sites while enabling public access and education.
- **Target Sites**: Focus on isolated petroglyphs along the **Indus and Zaskar river valleys**, which face higher risks from road construction, blasting, and low awareness compared to clustered sites.
- **Scale of Heritage**: Ladakh hosts **nearly 400 documented petroglyph sites**, representing one of the **largest collections of prehistoric rock art in South and Central Asia**.
- **Key Locations**: Major clusters identified at **Domkhar, Alchi, Chilling, Dah Hanu, and Tangtse**.

Historical & Cultural Significance

- **Chronological Span**: Petroglyphs document human history from the **Palaeolithic Age** through later historic periods, showing cultural evolution.
- **Iconography**:
 - Early motifs: **Hunting scenes, wild animals** (ibex, snow leopards, argali).
 - Later additions: **Buddhist symbols** (stupas, mantras), trade imagery, and multilingual inscriptions.
- **Linguistic Heritage**: Some carvings feature inscriptions in **Sanskrit, Chinese, Arabic, and Tibetan**, reflecting Ladakh's role as a historic **Silk Route crossroads**.
- **Ethnographic Value**: Carvings provide insights into ancient **migration patterns, belief systems, ecological knowledge, and trade networks**.

Environment

Tar Balls Management Rules 2026

What's the News?

- Centre proposes **Tar Balls Management Rules, 2026** — India's first dedicated regulatory framework to manage tar balls, the sticky, weathered residue from oil spills causing on-shore and off-shore marine pollution.
- Draft rules assign clear responsibilities to **oil facility owners, state governments, district administrations, and central ministries** for environmentally sound collection, transport, treatment, and disposal.
- Introduces **polluter pays principle**: Oil facility owners liable to pay environmental compensation for spills causing damage to ecology or public health.
- Proposes use of **space technology** (satellite, drones, sensor buoys) via **National Remote Sensing Centre** for oil spill surveillance and tar ball hotspot detection.

What are Tar Balls?

- Definition**: Small, dark, sticky or hardened blobs of weathered crude oil formed through **physical and chemical weathering** of oil spills.
- Formation Process**:
 - Oil release from ships, offshore platforms, or natural seeps.
 - Evaporation of lighter components.
 - Emulsification with seawater forming thick mousse.
 - Fragmentation by wind/waves into smaller pieces.
 - Solidification into dense, sticky spheres.
- Composition**:
 - Heavy hydrocarbons (paraffins, aromatics).
 - Asphaltenes** (provide black color and sticky texture).
 - Trapped sand, shells, seaweed, microplastics.
 - Trace sulfur, nickel, and vanadium.
- Characteristics**:
 - Persistence**: Highly resistant to degradation; remain in marine environment for extended periods.
 - Size**: Range from coin-sized to basketball-sized.
 - Seasonality**: Most prominent on India's **western coast (Gujarat to Goa)** during **April-September** due to south-westerly winds and currents.

Environmental and Economic Impact

Ecological Threats:

- Marine Life**: Seabirds, fish, sea turtles mistake tar balls for food; ingestion causes internal poisoning; external coating impairs flight/swimming ability.
- Habitat Damage**: Smothers coral reefs and seagrass beds.
- Toxicity**: Contains heavy metals, trace elements, and persistent organic pollutants.

Economic Consequences:

- Tourism Impact**: Accumulation on beaches reduces aesthetic value of coastal destinations (particularly affects **Goa, Maharashtra, Karnataka, Gujarat**).
- Fisheries**: Contamination affects fishing industries along western coast.

Affected Regions:

- Primary Impact**: Western coastal states—**Maharashtra, Goa, Gujarat, Karnataka**.
- Seasonal Pattern**: Monsoon period (strong winds and currents drive tar balls ashore).

Institutional Framework & Responsibilities

- State Governments**:
 - Declare tar ball-induced coastal pollution as **state disaster** under **Disaster Management Act, 2005**.
 - Establish **State Level Crisis Management Groups** under National Oil Spill Disaster Contingency Plan (NOS-DCP).
- District Administrations**:
 - Responsible for on-ground collection, handling, processing, and transport of tar balls from shorelines.
 - Integrate tar ball management into **District Disaster Management Plans**.
- Indian Coast Guard (MoD)**:
 - Implement **NOS-DCP**; conduct regular aerial/surface surveillance in **Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ)**.
 - Deploy advanced tech: remotely operated vehicles (ROVs), automated underwater vehicles (AUVs) for underwater plume detection.
- Ministry of Petroleum & Natural Gas**:
 - Submit quarterly oil leakage/spill reports from offshore installations (within 500m radius) to ICG, state PCBs, and CPCB.
 - Implement preventive measures at exploration facilities.
- Steering Committee**: Multi-ministry body (7 ministries + CPCB/SPCBs) to advise coastal states/UTs on rule implementation.

Disposal & Resource Recovery Mechanism

- Repurposing as fuel**: Tar balls with calorific value **>1,500 kilo-calories/kg** permitted for use as alternative fuel in **cement kilns**, subject to State PCB authorisation.
- Environmentally sound disposal**: Mandates treatment/storage protocols to prevent secondary contamination during transport and processing.
- Compensation framework**: Environmental compensation levied on defaulters equals actual loss/damage incurred by district administration for cleanup operations.

Timeline:

- Draft rules notified for stakeholder consultation (**60-day comment period**)
- Final rules to come into force **one year** from official gazette notification

Concerns Over Groundwater Contamination in Eight Indian States

What's the News?

- The **Parliamentary Standing Committee on Water Resources** has raised serious concerns regarding the deteriorating quality of groundwater across India.
- A recent report highlights that **4,949 villages** across **eight states** are currently affected by severe chemical contamination.
- The committee emphasized that excessive groundwater extraction has led to a sharp decline in water tables and the concentration of hazardous pollutants, necessitating urgent remedial measures under the **Jal Jeevan Mission (JJM)**.

Groundwater Contamination in 8 States?

- **Affected States:** The identified states include **Assam, Bihar, Kerala, Odisha, Punjab, Rajasthan, Tripura, and West Bengal**.
- **Regional Hotspots:**
 - **Rajasthan:** Reported to have the maximum number of affected districts, facing a dual crisis of depletion and toxicity.
 - **Punjab:** Districts like **Fazilka, Ferozepur, Moga, and Patiala** are specifically flagged for high concentrations of heavy metals including **Mercury, Uranium, Selenium, and Cadmium**.
- **Pollutant Trends:** Monitoring over the past five years indicates an "alarming" increase in **Electrical Conductivity (EC), Fluoride (F), and Nitrate (NO₃)** levels across various partially affected districts.

Findings and Health Impacts?

- **Heavy Metal Toxicity:** Contamination is often location-specific, driven by local hydrogeological conditions and industrial pressures rather than uniform spread.
- **Agricultural Linkages:** High nitrate levels are primarily attributed to the leaching of nitrogen-based fertilizers and improper animal waste management in agrarian belts.
- **Health Risks:**
 - * **Nitrates:** Can lead to **Methemoglobinemia (Blue Baby Syndrome)** in infants.
 - **Uranium/Arsenic:** Associated with increased risks of chronic kidney disease and various cancers.
 - **Fluoride:** Prolonged consumption causes **Skeletal and Dental Fluorosis**.
- **Water Table Depletion:** The report links the rise in geogenic (natural) toxins like Arsenic and Fluoride to the over-extraction of water, which draws pollutants from deeper soil layers.

Government Initiatives and Remedial Measures?

- **Habitation Recovery:** Due to government interventions, Arsenic-affected habitations dropped from **14,020 (in 2019)** to **314 (by Jan 2026)**, and Fluoride-affected habitations fell from **7,996** to **245**.

- **Jal Jeevan Mission (JJM):** Focuses on providing functional household tap connections to ensure safe drinking water, bypassing contaminated local wells.
- **Atal Bhujal Yojana (Atal Jal):** A **₹6,000 crore** scheme aimed at community-led sustainable groundwater management in water-stressed states.
- **National Aquifer Mapping (NAQUIM):** Managed by the **Central Ground Water Board (CGWB)** to characterize aquifers and assess water quality at the Panchayat level.
- **Regulatory Action:** The **National Green Tribunal (NGT)** and the **Supreme Court** have recently ordered crackdowns on illegal effluent discharge, particularly in Rajasthan's industrial belts, invoking the **"Polluter Pays Principle"**.

India Withdraws Candidature to Host COP33 Climate Summit in 2028

What's the News?

- India has formally withdrawn its bid to host the **33rd Conference of Parties (COP33)** under the **UNFCCC**, scheduled for 2028.
- The decision was communicated via official letter to the chair of the **UNFCCC Asia-Pacific Group**, citing a "review of national commitments for 2028".
- The offer was originally announced by **Prime Minister Narendra Modi** at **COP28 in Dubai**, with preparatory structures like a dedicated high-level cell already established.
- Following the withdrawal, **South Korea** remains the only other declared contender from the Asia-Pacific region for hosting COP33.

Context: COP Hosting Mechanism & India's Preparations

- **Rotational System:** COP venues are decided by rotation among five **UN regional groups**; COP33 was allocated to the **Asia-Pacific Group**.
- **Preparatory Steps Taken:**
 - Formation of an **11-member high-power coordination cell** under the **Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC)**.
 - Endorsement from **BRICS nations** in a joint statement welcoming India's candidature.
 - Initial logistical assessments for hosting ~75,000 delegates from nearly 200 countries over a two-week summit.
- **Recent Hosting Timeline:**
 - **COP30:** Brazil | **COP31:** Türkiye | **COP32:** Ethiopia | **COP33:** Asia-Pacific (pending final decision).

India's Climate Commitments Remain Unchanged

- **Updated Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) for 2031-2035:**
 - Reduce **emissions intensity of GDP** by **47%** from 2005 levels.
 - Achieve **60% cumulative installed electricity capacity** from non-fossil fuel sources by 2035.

- Create an additional **carbon sink of 3.5–4.0 billion tonnes of CO₂ equivalent** through forest and tree cover.
- **Long-term Goal:** Achieve **Net-Zero emissions by 2070**, aligned with the **Panchamrit** strategy announced at COP26.
- **Policy Continuity:** Withdrawal from hosting does not alter India's participation in global climate negotiations or domestic implementation of **Paris Agreement** commitments.

Additional Info

- **Institutional & Legal Framework:**
 - **UNFCCC & Paris Agreement:** India is a signatory; NDCs are submitted under Article 4 of the Paris Agreement.
 - **MoEFCC:** Nodal ministry for climate policy, coordinating with **NITI Aayog** and sectoral ministries.
 - **COP History:** India last hosted a climate COP in **2002 (COP8, New Delhi)**; has consistently advocated for **Common But Differentiated Responsibilities (CBDR)**.
- **Climate Initiatives Supporting NDCs:**
 - **National Solar Mission:** Target of 280 GW solar capacity by 2030.
 - **National Green Hydrogen Mission:** Aims to make India a global hub for production and export.
 - **LIFE Mission (Lifestyle for Environment):** Promotes sustainable consumption patterns globally.
 - **CAMPA Fund:** Compensatory Afforestation Fund for enhancing forest cover and carbon sinks.
- **Strategic Considerations (Exam Perspective):**
 - **Diplomatic Balance:** Withdrawal may reflect prioritisation of other multilateral engagements (e.g., **G20, Quad**) in 2028.
 - **Resource Allocation:** Hosting COP requires significant logistical, financial, and administrative resources; decision may align with domestic electoral and policy cycles.
 - **Global South Leadership:** India continues to champion climate finance and technology transfer for developing nations through forums like **G77+China** and **International Solar Alliance**.

Centre Notifies Two Repositories Under Biological Diversity Act

What's the News?

- The **Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC)**, in consultation with the **National Biodiversity Authority (NBA)**, has designated two premier scientific institutions as **National Repositories**.
- The **Referral Centre Bhavasagara** at **CMLRE, Kochi**, and the **MACS Collection of Microorganisms** and **National Fungal Culture**

Collection at ARI, Pune, have been notified under the **Biological Diversity Act, 2002**.

- This move expands the national network of repositories to **20**, aimed at strengthening the scientific conservation, documentation, and safe custody of India's biological resources.

The New National Repositories?

- **Referral Centre Bhavasagara (CMLRE, Kochi):**
 - It is a unique national facility dedicated specifically to **deep-sea biodiversity**.
 - The centre maintains over **3,500 taxonomically identified** and geo-referenced voucher specimens.
 - Its collection includes a wide range of marine organisms, such as deep-sea fishes and invertebrates, representing unexplored ocean ecosystems.
- **Agharkar Research Institute (ARI, Pune):**
 - **MACS Collection of Microorganisms:** Specializes in preserving microbial cultures, with expertise in rare, anaerobic, and **extremophilic species** (organisms that thrive in extreme conditions).
 - **National Fungal Culture Collection of India (NFCCI):** A leading repository for authenticated fungal cultures collected from diverse habitats across the country.
 - These facilities support high-end research in **agriculture, healthcare, and industrial biotechnology**.

Role and Mandate of Repositories?

- **Safe Custody:** They are entrusted with the long-term preservation of **voucher specimens**—the physical evidence that verifies the existence and identity of a species.
- **Mandatory Deposit:** Under the law, any person discovering a **new taxon** (species) is required to notify a designated repository and deposit the corresponding specimens.
- **Access and Benefit Sharing (ABS):** The repositories support the **ABS mechanism** by improving the traceability of biological resources used in commercial or research applications.
- **Scientific Documentation:** They facilitate the creation of a systematic database for biodiversity, aiding in the prevention of **biopiracy** and unauthorized international patents.

Additional Info

- **Statutory Framework:**
 - **Section 39 of the Biological Diversity Act, 2002:** Empowers the Central Government to designate institutions as repositories for different categories of biological resources.
 - **National Biodiversity Authority (NBA):** A statutory body headquartered in **Chennai**, established in **2003** to implement the Act.
- **Three-Tier Institutional Structure:**
 - **National Level:** National Biodiversity Authority (**NBA**).
 - **State Level:** State Biodiversity Boards (**SBBs**).

- **Local Level:** Biodiversity Management Committees (BMCs) responsible for preparing **People's Biodiversity Registers (PBRs)**.

River Basin Management Scheme: Integrated Water Governance for 2026–31

What's the News?

The Government of India has approved the continuation of the **River Basin Management (RBM) Scheme** for the period **2026–27 to 2030–31** with an enhanced financial outlay of **₹2,183 crore**. The scheme, operated under the **Ministry of Jal Shakti**, shifts water governance from fragmented, project-based approaches to a unified **basin-level framework**—treating entire river systems, including tributaries, groundwater, and ecosystems, as single hydrological units.

What is the RBM Scheme?

- **Central Sector Scheme** implemented by the **Department of Water Resources, River Development and Ganga Rejuvenation**, Ministry of Jal Shakti.
- **Core Objective:** Integrated planning, sustainable use, and protection of **surface and groundwater resources** at the river basin level.
- **Key Shift:** Moves away from isolated local projects toward holistic basin-level management, covering rivers, tributaries, lakes, and groundwater as interconnected ecosystems.

Institutional Framework

The scheme operates through three key agencies:

- **Brahmaputra Board:**
 - Focuses exclusively on the **North Eastern Region**.
 - Responsible for preparing Master Plans for flood control, erosion prevention, and drainage improvement.
 - Executes anti-erosion works (e.g., protection of **Majuli Island** in Assam) and constructs raised platforms in flood-prone zones.
 - Promotes **springshed management** and indigenous water conservation practices.
- **Central Water Commission (CWC):**
 - Conducts topographical surveys, hydrological investigations, and prepares **Detailed Project Reports (DPRs)** for multipurpose projects.
 - Focuses on challenging terrains in the **Indus, Brahmaputra, Barak, and Teesta** basins.
- **National Water Development Agency (NWDA):**
 - Handles national-level water planning, specifically the **Interlinking of Rivers (ILR)** programme.
 - Prepares Pre-Feasibility Reports (PFRs), Feasibility Reports (FRs), and DPRs for inter-basin water transfer projects.

Components & Focus Areas

- **Integrated Basin Planning:** Preparation and periodic revision of **Master Plans** for river basins to guide irrigation, hydropower, and navigation projects.

- **Scientific Survey & Investigation:** Use of **GIS, remote sensing, LiDAR, and drone-based surveys** for topographical and hydrological accuracy.
- **Interlinking of Rivers (ILR):** NWDA has identified **30 river link projects**, with Feasibility Reports completed for **26** and DPRs for **15**.
- **Flood & Erosion Control:** Targeted interventions including protection of **Majuli Island** (Assam) and raised platforms in flood-prone North Eastern areas.
- **Community-Based Interventions:** Promotion of **springshed management** and indigenous water conservation practices among tribal communities in hilly regions.

Challenges

- **Difficult Terrains:** Remote locations in J&K and North East face logistical constraints and limited working seasons.
- **Inter-State Disputes:** Water allocation conflicts complicate inter-basin transfer plans and integrated management.
- **Data Deficits:** Historical lack of real-time monitoring hampers accurate streamflow predictions.
- **Ecological Balance:** Balancing large infrastructure (dams/canals) with river ecosystem protection remains complex.
- **Fiscal Constraints:** Anti-erosion works in shifting rivers like the Brahmaputra often exceed initial cost estimates.

Additional Info

- **Hydrological Context:**
 - A **river basin** is the basic hydrological unit for water resource planning in India.
 - India's drainage system comprises **20 river basin groups: 12 major basins** (catchment area >20,000 sq km) and **8 composite basins**.
 - The **Ganga-Brahmaputra-Meghna basin** is the largest, covering approximately **11.0 lakh km²** (over 43% of the total catchment area of major rivers).
 - Notably, **81% of India's geographical area** falls under inter-state river basins, highlighting the need for integrated governance.
- **Constitutional Framework:**
 - **Water** is a **State Subject** under **Entry 17 of the State List** (List II) of the Seventh Schedule.
 - However, **Entry 56 of the Union List** (List I) empowers the Central Government to regulate and develop **inter-state rivers and river valleys** to the extent declared by Parliament by law to be expedient in the public interest.
 - The RBM Scheme operates within this federal framework, providing central technical and financial support without infringing upon state ownership of water resources.

State of India's Bats Report 2024-25

What's the News?

- India's first-ever national bat assessment, **State of India's Bats (SolBats) 2024-25**, has been released by the **Nature Conservation Foundation (NCF)** in

collaboration with **Bat Conservation International (BCI)**.

- The report documents **135 bat species** in India, with **16 endemic species** (found only in India) and **7 species listed as threatened** on the **IUCN Red List**.
- It highlights a critical **data deficit**, with **35 species unassessed or data-deficient**, and calls for urgent research, habitat protection, and policy integration to conserve bat diversity.

Report Overview

- **Diversity Hotspots:**
 - **West Bengal** leads with **68 species**, followed by **Meghalaya (66)**, **Uttarakhand (52)**, **Sikkim (43)**, and **Kerala & Karnataka (41 each)**.
 - **Haryana and Punjab** record only **5 species each**, reflecting low forest cover and agricultural expansion.
 - Even urban centres like **Delhi** host **15 species**, demonstrating bats' adaptability to human-modified landscapes.
- **Endemism Patterns:**
 - **16 endemic species** are distributed across six biogeographic zones: **Himalayas/Northeast (4)**, **Western Ghats (4)**, **Andaman & Nicobar Islands (4)**, **Peninsular India (2)**, **Gangetic Plains (1)**, and **Chotanagpur Plateau (1)**.
- **IUCN Red List Status (Threatened Species):**
 - **Critically Endangered:** Kolar Leaf-nosed Bat (*Hipposideros hypophyllus*) — known from a single cave in Karnataka.
 - **Endangered:** Nicobar Leaf-nosed Bat, Pomona Leaf-nosed Bat, Salim Ali's Fruit Bat, Nicobar Flying Fox, Andaman Horseshoe Bat.
 - **Vulnerable:** Durga Das's Leaf-nosed Bat (*Hipposideros durgadasi*).

Conservation Challenges & Ecological Significance

- **Threats:**
 - **Habitat loss** due to deforestation, mining, urbanisation, and climate change.
 - **Human persecution** driven by myths and post-pandemic stigma linking bats to zoonotic diseases.
 - **Disturbance of roosting sites**, especially caves and old structures critical for endemic species.
- **Ecosystem Services:**
 - **Pollination** of night-blooming plants and fruit trees.
 - **Seed dispersal** aiding forest regeneration and biodiversity.
 - **Pest control:** Insectivorous bats reduce crop-damating pests, lowering pesticide dependency.
 - **Soil enrichment** through nutrient-rich guano (droppings).
- **Research Gaps:**
 - Lack of dedicated bat research centres and bureaucratic delays in field permissions.
 - Regional bias: Most studies concentrate in the **Western Ghats**, leaving **Northeast**,

Himalayas, and **island ecosystems** understudied.

Policy Relevance & Governance Linkages

- **Legal Framework:**
 - Bats are protected under the **Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972**; several species fall under **Schedules I and II**, granting highest protection.
 - **Article 48A** (Directive Principles) and **Article 51A(g)** (Fundamental Duties) mandate environmental protection, including biodiversity conservation.
- **Strategic Alignment:**
 - Supports **National Biodiversity Action Plan (NBAP)** and **National Wildlife Action Plan (2017-31)** objectives on species-specific conservation.
 - Aligns with **SDG 15** (Life on Land) and **SDG 13** (Climate Action) through habitat preservation and climate-resilient planning.
- **One Health Approach:**
 - Report emphasises balancing conservation with public health: habitat disruption may increase zoonotic spillover risks (e.g., **Nipah virus**, linked to *Pteropus* fruit bats).
 - Calls for integrated surveillance in biodiversity hotspots to monitor bat-virus dynamics without stigmatising species.

Additional Info

- **Bat Biology & Adaptations:**
 - Only mammals capable of **true sustained flight**; use **echolocation** (20–200 kHz ultrasonic calls) for navigation and hunting.
 - Size range: **Bumblebee Bat** (~2g, world's smallest mammal) to **Flying Foxes** (wingspan up to 2m).
 - Roosting behaviour: Caves provide stable microclimates; many species also use man-made structures, including heritage monuments.
- **Key Terms:**
 - **Endemism:** Species restricted to a defined geographic area (e.g., 12% of India's bats are endemic).
 - **Data Deficient (IUCN):** Category indicating insufficient information for threat assessment — applies to ~26% of India's bat species.
 - **Zoonotic Reservoir:** Bats host viruses (e.g., Nipah, SARS-like CoVs) asymptotically due to unique immune adaptations; spillover typically requires intermediate hosts or direct exposure.

National Biodiversity Authority Revises ABS Fund Sharing and Repository Guidelines

What's the News?

The **National Biodiversity Authority (NBA)** has approved a set of major policy revisions aimed at strengthening the implementation of the **Biological Diversity Act, 2002**. The

key changes involve streamlining the utilization of **Access and Benefit Sharing (ABS)** funds and issuing revised guidelines for **Designated Repositories** that hold biological specimens.

Revised Framework for ABS Fund Sharing

The new framework introduces a transparent and standardized formula for distributing ABS funds collected from the commercial use of India's bio-resources. This aligns with the mandate of **Section 27** of the Act, which requires benefits to be channeled back to conservers and local communities.

- **When the Source of Origin is Identifiable:**
 - **Institutions/Repositories** (for conservation and documentation role): **25-40%** of ABS funds.
 - **Local Communities** (via State Biodiversity Boards - **SBBs**): **60-75%** of ABS funds.
- **When the Source of Origin is NOT Identifiable:**
 - A standard formula of **30%** to institutions and **70%** to the **NBA** will be applied. The NBA's share is further distributed to **SBBs** and **Union Territory Biodiversity Councils (UTBCs)** for biodiversity management activities as per **Section 32** of the Act.
- **Widely Distributed Resources:** For resources accessed through traders where the specific origin cannot be ascertained, the funds will be utilized collectively for biodiversity conservation and management under the provisions of **Section 27**.

Revised Guidelines for Designated Repositories

Repositories are institutions authorized to keep **voucher specimens** of biological resources. The revised guidelines aim to modernize their functioning and enhance scientific integrity.

- **Digitization of Specimens:** Promotion of digitizing voucher specimens to facilitate remote identification and verification, reducing the need for physical transfer of sensitive materials.
- **Strengthened Documentation:** Mandatory maintenance of robust **provenance records** (history of origin and ownership) and strict adherence to **Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs)** for specimen custody.
- **Preventing Biopiracy:** The focus on provenance and traceability aims to curb the illegal use of bio-resources and ensure that commercial utilization is legally accounted for.

Additional Info

- **National Biodiversity Authority (NBA):**
 - Established in **2003**, it is a **statutory autonomous body** under the **Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC)**.
 - Headquartered in **Chennai**, it implements the Biological Diversity Act, 2002.
- **Biological Diversity Act, 2002:**
 - Enacted to fulfill India's obligations under the **Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD)**.
 - **Three-tier Structure:** Implemented via the **NBA (National)**, **State Biodiversity Boards (SBBs)** (State), and **Biodiversity**

Management Committees (BMCs) (Local level).

- **Legal Provisions:**
 - **Section 27:** Governs the utilization of the **National Biodiversity Fund** for conservation and community development.
 - **Section 32:** Relates to the management of state-level biodiversity funds.
 - **Section 39:** Empowers the Central Government to designate institutions as repositories for biological resources.

Climate Alert: Rising Risks of a "Super El Niño" in 2026

What's the News?

- Global meteorological agencies, including **NOAA** and the **India Meteorological Department (IMD)**, have issued alerts regarding the rapid transition from **ENSO-neutral** conditions to a potentially intense **El Niño** phase.
- Observations indicate a significant warming of the equatorial Pacific, with a **70% probability** of development between **April and June 2026**.
- Scientists warn of a "**Super El Niño**" event—where sea surface temperatures (SST) rise more than **2°C** above average—which could lead to record-breaking global temperatures and severe weather disruptions.

Super El Niño: Characteristics and Forecast

- **Defining Intensity:** A "Super" event is characterized by extreme SST anomalies in the **Niño 3.4 region**, often exceeding the **2°C** threshold.
- **Mechanism:** The phenomenon occurs when **Trade Winds** weaken or reverse, allowing warm water from the western Pacific to surge eastward, altering the **Jet Stream** and global moisture distribution.
- **Timeline and Probability:**
 - Current monitoring shows subsurface heat advancing rapidly.
 - There is a **one-in-four chance** of the event reaching "very strong" or "super" status by the end of **2026**.
- **Global Comparison:** This event is predicted to potentially disperse more heat than the historic super El Niños of **1982-83**, **1997-98**, and **2015-16**.

Impact on India's Monsoon and Agriculture

- **Monsoon Suppression:** Historically, 7 out of 10 El Niño years have resulted in below-average rainfall. For **2026**, initial projections suggest rainfall at approximately **92%** of the **Long Period Average (LPA)**.
- **Regional Vulnerability:**
 - Central and Northern India are likely to see suppressed monsoon activity.
 - Higher temperatures and unseasonal humidity may lead to intense **Heatwaves**, further straining the power grid and public health.
- **Agricultural Risk:**
 - **Kharif Season:** A weak monsoon directly threatens water-intensive crops like **Rice, Pulses, and Oilseeds**.

- **Compound Distress:** The alert comes as northern regions already face "snow droughts" and unseasonal hail, which have damaged the **Rabi** (winter) harvest.
- **Economic Implications:** Reduced yields could trigger **Food Inflation** and decrease rural demand, impacting the broader GDP growth.

Additional Info

- **Technical Terms:**
 - **Long Period Average (LPA):** The average rainfall recorded over a particular region for a long period (usually 30 or 50 years); used by **IMD** as a benchmark.
 - **RONI (Relative Oceanic Niño Index):** A newer metric adopted by **NOAA** to track ENSO while accounting for the background warming of the oceans due to climate change.
- **Historical Impact:** Past super El Niño events have been linked to significant agricultural losses and "climate regime shifts" that can alter soil moisture patterns for years.
- **Government Resilience Measures:**
 - **Water Management:** Focus on reviving reservoirs and check dams via **MGNREGA**.
 - **Crop Diversification:** Incentivizing farmers to shift toward climate-resilient crops like **Millets** under the **National Food Security Mission**.
 - **PM Fasal Bima Yojana (PMFBY):** Essential for providing a safety net against crop failures caused by erratic weather.

Shekha Jheel Bird Sanctuary Declared India's 99th Ramsar Site

What's the News?

- The **Shekha Jheel Bird Sanctuary** in Aligarh district, **Uttar Pradesh**, has been officially designated as India's **99th Ramsar site**, marking a significant step in the country's wetland conservation efforts.
- The announcement was made by Union Environment Minister **Bhupender Yadav**, who highlighted that the recognition would boost **local livelihoods, biodiversity, water security, and climate resilience**.
- With this designation, **Uttar Pradesh now has 12 Ramsar sites**, the highest number among all Indian states.
- India now stands on the cusp of reaching the historic milestone of **100 Ramsar sites**.

Ecological Significance of Shekha Jheel

- **Location & Role:** Situated in **Aligarh district**, western Uttar Pradesh, the wetland serves as a critical **stopover on the Central Asian Flyway**, a major migratory corridor linking breeding grounds in Central Asia to wintering areas in the Indian subcontinent.
- **Key Species:**
 - **Bar-headed Goose** (notable for high-altitude Himalayan migration)
 - **Painted Stork** (Near Threatened species)
 - Multiple species of **ducks, waterfowl, and resident aquatic birds**
- **Ecosystem Functions:**

- Supports **avian biodiversity** and aquatic food webs.
- Aids in **groundwater recharge, flood mitigation, and carbon sequestration**.

Ramsar Convention: An Overview

- The **Ramsar Convention**, signed in **1971 in Ramsar, Iran**, is an international treaty focused on the **conservation and sustainable use of wetlands** of international importance.
- It operates on **three pillars**: wetland conservation (and restoration), wise use of wetlands, and **CEPA** (Communication, Education, Participation, and Awareness).
- Each Contracting Party must designate at least one wetland within its territory as a **Wetland of International Importance** and maintain its ecological character.
- Wetlands designated under the convention receive **international recognition**, enhanced **conservation planning**, and support for **sustainable development**.

India's Ramsar Site Landscape

- As of early 2026, India has the **highest number of Ramsar sites among South Asian nations**.
- **Uttar Pradesh leads with 12 sites**, followed by **Tamil Nadu (20 sites)**, which remains the state with the highest total number of Ramsar wetlands.
- Prior to Shekha Jheel, India added **Patna Bird Sanctuary (Uttar Pradesh)** and **Chhari-Dhand (Gujarat)** as the 97th and 98th Ramsar sites in January 2026.
- India's Ramsar network encompasses diverse wetland habitats, including **lakes, rivers, marshes, and man-made wetlands**.

Montreux Record: A register of Ramsar sites where changes in ecological character have occurred or are likely to occur due to pollution or human interference. Currently, two Indian sites (**Keoladeo National Park** and **Loktak Lake**) are on this list. **Wetlands (Conservation and Management) Rules, 2017:** The primary legal framework in India for protecting non-Ramsar wetlands of high ecological value.

Indian Landfills Among World's Top Methane Super-Emitters

What's the News?

- Two Indian landfill sites — **Jawahar Nagar (Secunderabad, Telangana)** and **Kanjurmarg (Mumbai, Maharashtra)** — have been identified among the **world's top 25 methane "super-polluters"** in a satellite-based global analysis.
- The report, released by **UCLA's STOP Methane Project**, used data from **Carbon Mapper** to detect methane plumes from over 700 waste sites worldwide.
- These findings underscore urgent **climate governance** and **urban waste management** challenges, with implications for India's **NDC commitments** and **public health**.

Findings: Emission Data & Global Ranking

- **Emission Rates:**
 - **Secunderabad landfill:** 5.9 tonnes methane/hour (**4th globally**).
 - **Mumbai landfill:** 4.9 tonnes methane/hour (**12th globally**).
 - Top global emitter: Campo de Mayo, Argentina (7.6 tonnes/hour).
- **Scale of Impact:**
 - A single source emitting **5 tonnes methane/hour** has a warming effect equivalent to **1 million SUVs** or a **500-MW coal power plant**.
 - Methane is **~86 times more potent than CO₂** over a 20-year horizon and contributes to **~30-45% of recent global warming**.
- **Global Context:**
 - 25 sites across **18 countries** identified; India joins Brazil, Chile, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey with multiple entries.
 - Operators linked: **Ramky Engineers** (Hyderabad), **Antony Waste Handling Cell Ltd** (Mumbai).

Additional Info

- **Global Methane Pledge:**
 - An international initiative to reduce global methane emissions by at least **30% by 2030** relative to 2020 levels.
 - While India is not a formal signatory, it has initiated several domestic programs to curb emissions.
- **Indian Policy Initiatives:**
 - **Swachh Bharat Mission-Urban (SBM-U) 2.0:** Prioritizes the **remediation of legacy waste** dumpsites to make Indian cities "Garbage Free."
 - **Waste to Wealth Mission:** One of the nine scientific missions under the **PM-STIAC** focused on identifying technologies for sustainable waste treatment.
 - **GOBARdhan Scheme:** Aims to convert organic waste into **biogas** and compressed biogas (CBG), directly reducing methane release from open dumping.
- **Monitoring Technology:** Modern monitoring utilizes instruments like the **MethaneSAT** and sensors on the **International Space Station (ISS)** to detect "methane plumes" with high precision.
- **Carbon Mapper:** A non-profit organisation that uses advanced remote sensing technology, including satellites and aircraft, to detect and quantify large-scale methane and CO₂ emissions from point sources. Its **Tanager-1 satellite** (launched in August 2024) provides high-resolution data to identify "super-emitters."

9th India International Water Week (IIWW)

What's the News?

- The **Ministry of Jal Shakti** has announced that the **9th India International Water Week (IIWW-2026)** will be held from **September 22 to 26** at **Bharat Mandapam**,

New Delhi, under the central theme "**Climate Resilient Water Management**."

- This is the **first edition** to be branded as the "International" Water Week, signaling a deliberate effort to broaden global participation and establish the event as a premier international water forum.
- A parallel **Second International WASH Conference** will also be held from **September 22 to 24**, focusing on water quality, sanitation, and hygiene.

9th India International Water Week (IIWW-2026)

- **Origins & Frequency:**
 - Conceptualized as a flagship event in **2012** by the Ministry of Jal Shakti.
 - Held on a **biennial** basis; eight editions have been organised so far (2012 to 2024).
 - The 9th edition in 2026 becomes the **first under the expanded "International" mandate**.
- **Venue:** **Bharat Mandapam**, Pragati Maidan, New Delhi.
- **Theme:** "**Climate Resilient Water Management**" — chosen in the context of increasing extreme weather events, erratic rainfall, and growing water stress across India and the world.
- **Objective:**
 - Provide a global platform for **knowledge-sharing, innovation, and partnerships** in water governance.
 - Promote **sustainable and adaptive water management practices** aligned with India's long-term water security goals.
- **Scale:**
 - Over **5,000 delegates** expected (500 more than the previous edition).
 - Exhibition space of **7,000 sq. m** in Hall No. 14.
 - **11 partner country delegations, 6 Union Ministries, and 16 States/UTs** participating.

Parallel Event: 2nd International WASH Conference

- Held concurrently from **September 22 to 24** at the same venue.
- Focus on **water quality, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH)** — key pillars of the government's integrated water management strategy
- Participation from **experts, researchers, State governments, Central ministries, and NGOs**.

Government Water Initiatives

- **Jal Jeevan Mission (JJM) / JJM 2.0:**
 - Scheme extended till **December 2028** with an enhanced total outlay of **₹8.69 lakh crore** (Central share: ₹3.59 lakh crore).
 - Aims to provide tap water connections to all **19.36 crore rural households** by 2028.
 - As of now, **~15.80 crore households (81.61%)** have tap water connections.
 - **JJM 2.0** shifts focus from infrastructure creation to **service delivery, sustainability, and community ownership** through initiatives like "Sujalam Bharat" (digital framework), "Jal Arpan" (community



handover), and “Jal Utsav” (annual maintenance event).

- WHO estimates JJM has saved **5.5 crore hours daily** in women’s drudgery and prevented **400,000 diarrheal deaths**.
- **Mission Amrit Sarovar:**
 - Launched in **April 2022** with the target of constructing/rejuvenating **75 water bodies per district**.
 - Over **68,000 Amrit Sarovars** completed nationwide, surpassing the initial goal of 50,000.
- **Jal Shakti Abhiyan: Catch the Rain:**
 - A nationwide campaign emphasizing **rainwater harvesting and water conservation** with community participation.
 - The 2025 edition was launched on **World Water Day** with the continued tagline “Catch the rain, where it falls, when it falls”.
- **River Health & Yamuna Cleaning:**
 - Union Minister C.R. Patil highlighted ongoing Centre-State collaboration for comprehensive river rejuvenation plans, including the **Yamuna**.

India’s Water Stress

- **Per Capita Water Availability:**
 - Declined from **~5,000 cubic metres** in 1961 to **1,486 cubic metres** in 2021 — a **~70% drop**.
 - Projected to fall further to **~1,300 cubic metres by 2047**
 - **Water Stress Threshold:** Below **1,700 cubic metres per capita**; **Water Scarcity Threshold:** Below **1,000 cubic metres**.
- **Demand vs. Supply:**
 - India supports **~17% of the world’s population** but has only **4% of global freshwater resources**.
 - **NITI Aayog’s Composite Water Management Index (CWMI)** reports that nearly **600 million Indians** face high to extreme water stress.
 - National water demand is expected to **outstrip harvestable availability by 2047**.
- **Groundwater Dependency:**
 - Groundwater contributes **62% to irrigation, 85% to rural water supply, and 45% to urban water supply**.

National Water Mission (NWM)

- One of the **eight missions** under the **National Action Plan on Climate Change (NAPCC)**.
- **Objectives:**
 - Increase **water use efficiency by 20%**.
 - Promote basin-level integrated water resource management.
 - Assess the impact of climate change on water resources.
 - Encourage water conservation as a **people’s movement**.
- The mission provides the overarching policy framework for many of the themes being discussed at IWWW-2026.

India has formally submitted its updated NDCs for the 2031-2035

What’s the News?

- India has submitted its third set of **NDCs** to the UNFCCC, outlining enhanced climate action goals for 2035.
- The new targets were approved by the Union Cabinet in March 2026 and come at a time when the US has withdrawn from the global climate framework and several developed nations are scaling back their ambition.
- India has highlighted a “**mitigation ambition gap**” by developed countries, stating that the failure of many developed nations to meet their climate obligations weakens collective global efforts.

India’s Updated Climate Targets for 2035

- **Non-Fossil Fuel Energy Capacity:** Achieve around **60% cumulative electric power installed capacity** from non-fossil fuel-based energy resources by 2035, contingent on the transfer of technology and low-cost international finance.
- **Emissions Intensity Reduction:** Reduce the **emissions intensity of India’s GDP by 47%** by 2035, compared to 2005 levels.
- **Carbon Sink Creation:** Create an additional **carbon sink of 3.5 to 4.0 billion tonnes of CO2 equivalent** through enhanced forest and tree cover by 2035, over the 2005 baseline.

Progress on Track for Existing Climate Goals

- **Non-Fossil Capacity Achievement:** As of **February 2026**, over **52.5%** of India’s installed electric power capacity was from non-fossil fuel sources. This surpasses the 40% target set in the 2015 NDC for 2030, achieved in 2021, nine years early, and is ahead of the 2022 NDC’s 50% target for 2030.
- **Emissions Intensity Progress:** India has already reduced the **emissions intensity of its GDP by 36%** between 2005 and 2020, compared to the initial 2015 target of a 33-35% reduction by 2030.
- **Carbon Sink Progress:** An additional **carbon sink of 2.29 billion tonnes of CO2 equivalent** was created between 2005 and 2021, keeping the country on track to meet its earlier forest cover targets.

Conditional Nature of Commitments & Global Finance Gap

- **Concessional Support Dependency:** India has explicitly stated that the effective implementation of its NDC depends on the provision of additional support, including **financial resources, technology transfer, and capacity-building**, from developed countries in accordance with the UNFCCC and the Paris Agreement.
- **Massive Financial Requirement:** The NDC submission cites the **UNFCCC’s Second Needs Determination Report (2024)**, which estimates that developing countries require a cumulative **USD 5.012 trillion to USD 6.852 trillion** to implement their NDCs by 2030. This translates to an annual mobilisation need of approximately **USD 455–584 billion** between 2019 and 2030.

Additional Info

- **Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs):** These are non-binding, voluntary national climate action plans under the **Paris Agreement**, adopted in **2015**. Each country determines its own commitments to reduce national emissions and adapt to the impacts of climate change. NDCs are to be updated every five years with progressively ambitious targets, a process involving a “**ratchet mechanism**”.
- **India's NDC Journey:**
 - **1st NDC (2015):** Targeted a 33-35% reduction in emissions intensity of GDP and 40% non-fossil fuel power capacity by 2030.
 - **2nd NDC (2022):** Enhanced the targets to a 45% reduction in emissions intensity and 50% non-fossil fuel capacity by 2030.
 - **3rd NDC (2026):** Further raised the targets to a 47% reduction in emissions intensity and 60% non-fossil fuel capacity by 2035.



Health & Pharma

India to Establish Blood Centre in Every District by 2026

What's the News?

- The **Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MoHFW)** has announced a national target to establish at least **one blood centre in every district** by the end of **2026**.
- This initiative aims to address geographical gaps in blood availability and ensure universal access to safe, quality blood transfusion services.
- The decision follows a national-level review of blood transfusion services which identified that approximately **10% of districts** currently lack a functional blood centre.
- The **National AIDS Control Organisation (NACO)** is spearheading this roadmap to achieve **zero transfusion-transmitted infections (TTIs)**.

The "Blood Desert" Challenge

- India collects approximately **14.6 million units of blood annually**, which meets the country's total clinical demand. However, **distribution remains starkly uneven**, with urban centres reporting surpluses while rural regions face severe scarcity.
- The absence of local blood centres is a leading contributor to preventable deaths during **postpartum haemorrhaging, severe road accidents** (which claim approximately **1.5 lakh lives annually** in India), major surgeries, and chronic conditions like **thalassemia** and **sickle cell anaemia**.
- As of March 2026, there are **2,165 blood donation centres** in India, with the highest concentrations in **Tamil Nadu** and **Maharashtra** (187 centres each).

Gaps Identified in the National Review

- **District-level infrastructure deficit:** Nearly 10% of districts lack any blood centre, forcing patients to travel long distances during medical emergencies
- **Digital integration shortfall:** A significant number of blood centres remain disconnected from **eRaktKosh** and the **Blood Bank Management System (BBMS)**, limiting real-time monitoring and transparency.
- **Licensing compliance issues:** Many operational blood centres have not secured proper licensing from the **Central Drugs Standard Control Organisation (CDSCO)**, India's national drug regulatory authority.
- **Variable voluntary donation rates:** While **voluntary non-remunerated donations stand at approximately 70% nationally**, significant regional disparities persist
- **Component separation capacity:** Uneven availability of facilities for separating whole blood into components (red cells, platelets, plasma) reduces efficiency and increases wastage.
- **TTI referral gaps:** Weak referral and linkage systems for donors found positive for **Transfusion-Transmitted Infections (TTIs)** such as HIV, Hepatitis B, and Hepatitis C.

Priority Actions for 2026

The Ministry has outlined a comprehensive action plan to achieve the December 2026 target:

- **Ensuring 100% licensing compliance** of all operational blood centres through stricter enforcement and regular inspections.
- **Strengthening district-level administrative ownership** and convergence between health departments and regulatory authorities.
- **Enforcing Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs)** for blood collection and donation camps to ensure safety and quality.
- **Scaling up voluntary blood donation** through structured outreach programmes, awareness campaigns, and institutional engagement with colleges, workplaces, and community groups.
- **Achieving 100% digital integration** by onboarding all blood centres onto **eRaktKosh** and **BBMS** for real-time stock visibility.
- **Strengthening TTI-reactive donor referral systems** to ensure affected individuals are connected to appropriate care and treatment programmes.

Digital Integration and Safety?

- **e-RaktKosh Portal:** All blood centres are required to achieve **100% onboarding** on the **e-RaktKosh** platform to enable real-time monitoring of blood stocks.
- **Transparency:** Digital integration aims to eliminate "hidden" stocks and ensure citizens can find blood availability via the web or mobile apps.
- **Referral Linkage:** Standardizing the referral and linkage mechanism for donors who test positive for **TTIs** (such as HIV, Hepatitis B, and C) to ensure they receive timely medical care.

UK Passes Landmark Bill to Create First "Smoke-Free Generation"

What's the News?

- The **United Kingdom Parliament** has officially passed the **Tobacco and Vapes Bill**, a pioneering piece of legislation designed to eliminate smoking among future generations.
- The law effectively imposes a **lifetime ban** on the sale of tobacco products to anyone born after **2008**.
- This "rolling" age limit ensures that the legal age for purchasing cigarettes will increase by one year every year, making it impossible for today's children to ever legally buy tobacco.
- The move is aimed at reducing preventable deaths, easing the long-term burden on the **National Health Service (NHS)**, and making the UK one of the first countries to implement a near-total tobacco phase-out.

How the Ban Works?

- **Rolling Age Limit:** Instead of a fixed minimum age (currently 18), the law prohibits the sale of tobacco to anyone born in or after **2009**.

- **Targeted Products:** The ban applies specifically to **combustible tobacco products** like cigarettes and cigars.
- **Vaping Restrictions:** While vapes are not banned for adults, the bill introduces strict new regulations to curb **youth vaping**, including:
 - Bans on **disposable vapes**.
 - Restrictions on flavors specifically marketed to children (e.g., "bubblegum" or "candy" flavors).
 - Limits on bright, youth-appealing packaging and in-store displays.
- **Enforcement:** Retailers caught selling tobacco to underage individuals will face significant on-the-spot fines, with persistent offenders risking the loss of their license to sell tobacco products.

Public Health and Economic Rationale?

- **Health Burden:** Smoking is identified as the UK's single largest preventable cause of death, responsible for approximately **80,000 deaths** annually and one in four cancer-related fatalities.
- **NHS Impact:** The UK government estimates that tobacco-related illnesses cost the **NHS** and the wider economy nearly **£17 billion** per year in healthcare costs and lost productivity.
- **Addiction Prevention:** Data suggests that four out of five smokers start before the age of 20; by preventing the initial uptake, the law aims to break the cycle of lifelong nicotine addiction.

Additional Info

- **Global Context:**
 - The UK's legislation is inspired by a similar model originally proposed by **New Zealand**, though the latter's plan was repealed following a change in government.
 - This makes the UK the first major economy to successfully enact such a "smoke-free generation" framework.
- **Tobacco Control in India:**
 - **COTPA, 2003:** The **Cigarettes and Other Tobacco Products Act** is the primary law in India regulating tobacco trade and advertisement.
 - **E-Cigarette Ban:** India completely banned the production, import, export, sale, and advertisement of **e-cigarettes** and heated tobacco products in **2019** via the **PECA Act**.
 - **Section 6 of COTPA:** Prohibits the sale of tobacco products to persons under **18 years** of age and within **100 yards** of educational institutions.
- **SDG 3.a:** The UK's bill aligns with the **WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC)** and **Sustainable Development Goal 3**, which aims to ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all.

WHO Prequalifies First-Ever Malaria Treatment for Newborns and Infants

What's the News?

- The **World Health Organization (WHO)** has granted **prequalification** to an artemether-lumefantrine formulation—**Coartem Baby**—the first malaria treatment specifically designed for newborns and infants weighing between **2 and 5 kg**.
- The WHO also prequalified **three new Rapid Diagnostic Tests (RDTs)** that target the **pLDH** protein, enabling detection of *P. falciparum* strains that are "invisible" to standard HRP2-based tests.
- The announcement was made ahead of **World Malaria Day** (observed annually on **25 April**), which in 2026 adopted the theme "**Driven to End Malaria: Now We Can. Now We Must.**"

First Malaria Treatment for Newborns and Infants

- **Product:** Coartem Baby (artemether-lumefantrine), developed by **Novartis** in partnership with the **Medicines for Malaria Venture (MMV)**.
- **Formulation:** A child-friendly, dissolvable tablet with a sweet cherry flavor that can be mixed with breast milk.
- **Mechanism:** A dual-action **combination therapy**:
 - **Artemether** – acts rapidly to reduce parasite load in the bloodstream.
 - **Lumefantrine** – stays longer in the body to clear remaining parasites and prevent recrudescence.
- **Target Population:** Neonates and young infants weighing as little as **2 kg** – a group previously excluded from quality-assured malaria treatment.
- **Pricing:** Novartis is providing the treatment on a **largely not-for-profit basis** in malaria-endemic regions.

Clinical Basis & Significance

- **CALINA Study:** The approval was supported by a **Phase II/III clinical trial** (CALINA) that investigated the optimal dose and ratio for infants under **5 kg**, whose liver functions and metabolic needs differ from older children.
- **Treatment Gap Addressed:** Approximately **30 million babies** born each year in malaria-endemic African regions lacked a dedicated infant formulation.
- **Safety:** Unlike previous practices of crushing adult or older-child tablets—which carried high risks of dosing errors, toxicity, and side effects—this formulation ensures **accurate, weight-appropriate dosing** and eliminates risky manual dose adjustments.

New Rapid Diagnostic Tests (RDTs)

- **Problem:** Some *P. falciparum* parasites have undergone **gene deletions (pfhrp2/3)** and no longer produce the **HRP2** protein targeted by standard RDTs, leading to **false-negative results**. In parts of the Horn of Africa, up to **80% of cases** were missed.
- **Solution:** WHO prequalified three new tests (BIOCRECREDIT line by Rapigen Inc.) that detect **pLDH (Parasite Lactate Dehydrogenase)**, an essential enzyme that the parasite cannot easily shed.
 - **BIOCRECREDIT Malaria Ag Pf (pLDH)** – detects *P. falciparum* even in the absence of HRP2.

- **BIOCREDIT Malaria Ag Pf (pLDH/HRP2)** – dual-target combo for maximum reliability in mixed zones.
- **BIOCREDIT Malaria Ag Pf/Pv (pLDH/pLDH)** – distinguishes between *P. falciparum* and *P. vivax* without relying on HRP2.
- **WHO Recommendation:** Countries should switch to alternative RDTs when more than **5% of cases** are missed due to pfhrp2 deletions.

Global Malaria Burden & Context

- **Statistics** (World Malaria Report 2025): In 2024, there were an estimated **282 million malaria cases** and **610,000 deaths** across 80 countries, an increase from 2023.
- **Stalling Progress:** Gains are at risk due to **drug resistance, insecticide resistance, diagnostic failure**, and severe reductions in international development assistance.
- **Progress:** 47 countries have been certified malaria-free, and 37 countries reported fewer than 1,000 cases in 2024.
- **India's Malaria Burden:** India accounted for approximately **2% of global malaria cases** and **2% of global malaria deaths** (per WHO 2024 estimates). India's National Framework for Malaria Elimination (NFME) targets elimination by **2030**.

Additional Info

- **WHO Prequalification:** A regulatory status confirming that a medicine meets international standards of quality, safety, and efficacy, thereby enabling procurement by UN agencies, the Global Fund, and national governments for distribution in low-resource settings.
- **Artemether-Lumefantrine:** A first-line **Artemisinin-based Combination Therapy (ACT)** recommended by

WHO for uncomplicated *P. falciparum* malaria. It is listed in the **WHO Model List of Essential Medicines**.

- **Malaria Parasites:** Five species infect humans – *Plasmodium falciparum* (deadliest), *P. vivax* (most widespread in India), *P. ovale*, *P. malariae*, and *P. knowlesi*.
- **Related Indian Initiatives:**
 - **National Vector Borne Disease Control Programme (NVBDCP):** The umbrella programme for malaria prevention and control in India.
 - **National Framework for Malaria Elimination (NFME):** Launched in 2016 with the goal of malaria elimination by 2030.
 - **'Malaria No More' Campaign:** A civil-society led initiative supporting malaria elimination efforts.
- **Other Malaria Tools:**
 - **RTS,S/AS01 (Mosquirix)** and **R21/Matrix-M** are the two WHO-recommended malaria vaccines for children.
 - **Long-lasting Insecticidal Nets (LLINs)** and **Indoor Residual Spraying (IRS)** remain core vector-control interventions.
- **World Malaria Day Themes:**
 - 2026: "Driven to End Malaria: Now We Can. Now We Must."
 - 2025: "Accelerating the Fight Against Malaria for a More Equitable World."
 - 2024: "Health Equity, Gender and Human Rights."
 - 2023: "Time to Deliver Zero Malaria: Invest, Innovate, Implement."

NSO 80th Round Health Survey

What's the News?

- The **National Statistical Office (NSO)** released findings from its **80th Round Survey on Household Social Consumption: Health**, capturing data from over **1.39 lakh households** across rural and urban India.
- The report points to a notable improvement in healthcare access, a sharp expansion in government health insurance coverage, and a significant shift toward proactive health-seeking behaviour.
- Key positive trends include increased **institutional deliveries**, reduced **Out-of-Pocket Expenditure (OOPE)** in public facilities, and greater public trust in government healthcare infrastructure.

Findings at a Glance

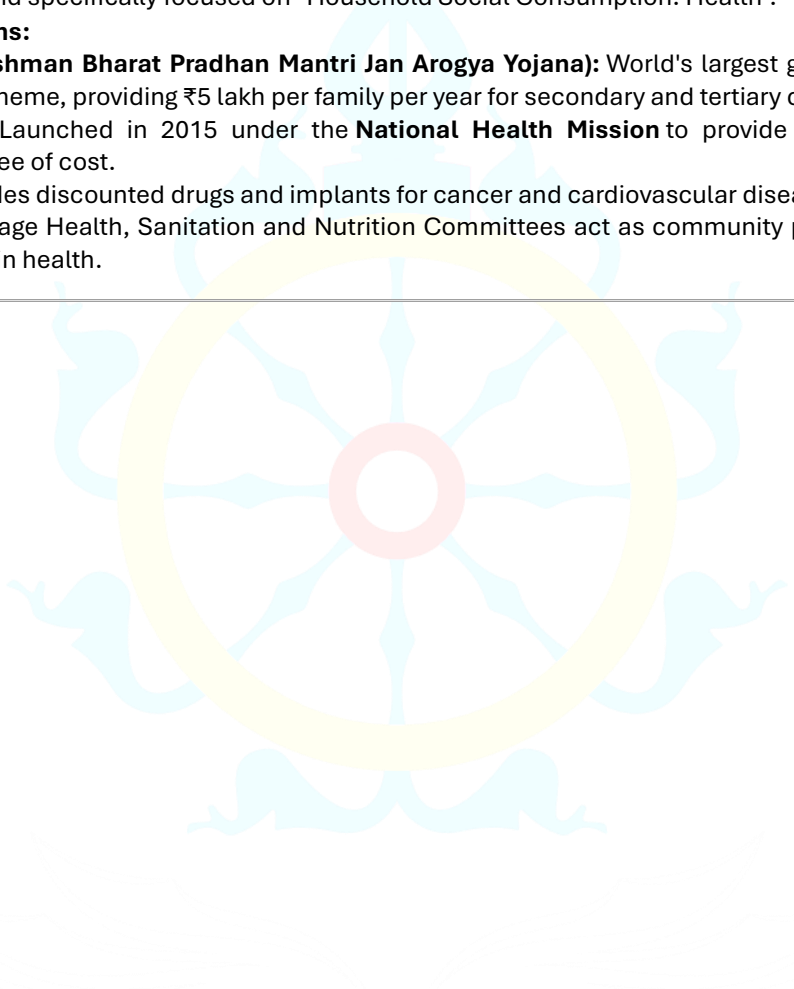
Indicator	Key Data / Trend	Inference
Health-Seeking Behaviour (PPRA)	Rural: 6.8% → 12.2% ; Urban: 9.1% → 14.9% (since 2017-18)	Near doubling indicates greater awareness and willingness to seek formal medical care.
Government Health Insurance Coverage	Rural: 12.9% → 45.5% ; Urban: 8.9% → 31.8%	More than threefold expansion, largely driven by Ayushman Bharat PM-JAY .
Public Healthcare Utilisation (Rural OPD)	Increased from 28% (2014) to 35% (2025)	Reflects growing trust and improved accessibility of public primary care.
Institutional Deliveries	Rural: 95.6% ; Urban: 97.8%	Strong maternal healthcare outcomes due to targeted schemes.
Out-of-Pocket Expenditure (OOPE)	Median ₹11,285 per hospitalisation; Public facilities: ~₹1,100; OPD in public: often zero	Greater financial protection, especially for the poor; reduced risk of medical poverty.
Epidemiological Transition	Decline in infectious diseases; Rise in NCDs (Diabetes, Cardiovascular Diseases)	Shift toward lifestyle diseases requiring long-term, preventive care.

Underlying Drivers

- **Expansion of Primary Care Network:** Over **1.84 lakh Ayushman Arogya Mandirs (AAMs)** provide comprehensive primary healthcare closer to communities, including preventive, promotive, and curative services.
- **Free Drugs and Diagnostics:** Initiatives such as the **Free Drugs Service Initiative (FDSI)** and **Free Diagnostics Initiative (FDI)** ensure essential medicines and tests at no cost in public facilities.
- **Affordable Medicines and Reliable Implants for Treatment (AMRIT):** Over **220 pharmacies** across 29 States/UTs offer more than **6,500 drugs** at up to 50% discount, improving affordability.
- **Maternal Care Schemes:** **Janani Suraksha Yojana, Janani Shishu Suraksha Karyakram,** and **Pradhan Mantri Surakshit Matritva Abhiyan** have collectively boosted institutional deliveries and safe motherhood.
- **Budgetary Push:** Sustained increase in public investment in health has enabled infrastructure expansion across primary, secondary, and tertiary levels.

Additional Info

- **About NSO:**
 - The NSO, under the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI), is the nodal statistical agency responsible for large-scale sample surveys.
 - The 80th Round specifically focused on "Household Social Consumption: Health".
- **Schemes and Acronyms:**
 - **PM-JAY (Ayushman Bharat Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana):** World's largest government-funded health assurance scheme, providing ₹5 lakh per family per year for secondary and tertiary care.
 - **FDSI & FDI:** Launched in 2015 under the **National Health Mission** to provide essential medicines and diagnostics free of cost.
 - **AMRIT:** Provides discounted drugs and implants for cancer and cardiovascular diseases.
 - **VHSNCs:** Village Health, Sanitation and Nutrition Committees act as community platforms for intersectoral convergence in health.



Education

NCERT Granted Deemed-to-be University Status by Education Ministry

What's the News?

The Ministry of Education has granted **deemed-to-be university status** to the **National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT)** following recommendations by the **University Grants Commission (UGC)**. This status, granted under a "distinct category," empowers NCERT to award its own degrees and significantly expands its academic mandate beyond curriculum development.

Deemed University Status

- **Legal Basis:** Granted under a "distinct category" pursuant to **Section 3 of the UGC Act, 1956**.
- **Constituent Units Covered:**
 - Regional Institutes of Education (RIEs) in Ajmer, Bhopal, Bhubaneswar, Mysuru, and Shillong.
 - Pandit Sunderlal Sharma Central Institute of Vocational Education, Bhopal.
- **Expanded Academic Mandate:**
 - Authorised to initiate research programmes, doctoral degrees, and innovative courses.
 - All academic programmes must conform to **UGC norms and standards**.
 - Prohibited from engaging in commercial or profit-making activities.

Regulatory & Operational Implications

- **Compliance Requirements:** NCERT must now:
 - Participate in **National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF)** rankings.
 - Seek accreditation from **NAAC** (National Assessment and Accreditation Council) and **NBA** (National Board of Accreditation).
 - Implement the **Academic Bank of Credits (ABC)** and upload student credit scores to digital lockers.
- **Affiliation Shift:** Previously, graduate/post-graduate programmes at RIEs were affiliated with local universities (e.g., Barkatullah University, University of Mysuru); these will now transition to NCERT's own degree-awarding framework.

Additional Info

- **NCERT at a Glance:**
 - Established in **1961** as an autonomous organization under the Government of India
 - Core functions include developing **National Curriculum Framework (NCF)**, model textbooks, and supplementary learning materials
 - Assists Central and State governments in educational policy formulation
- **Legal Framework:**
 - **UGC** is a statutory body under the Ministry of Education responsible for higher education standards

- **Deemed university status** is granted by the Central Government on UGC's advice under the **UGC Act, 1956**

Supreme Court Reaffirms RTE Act's 25% Quota as a "National Mission" for Social Inclusion

What's the News?

- The **Supreme Court of India**, in a landmark judgment (**Lucknow Public School Eldico vs. State of UP & Ors.**, January 2026), delivered a strong reaffirmation of **Section 12(1)(c) of the Right to Education (RTE) Act, 2009**.
- The Court ruled that private unaided schools **cannot delay or refuse admission** to students allotted seats by the State under the **EWS/DG quota** on grounds of eligibility disputes.
- It elevated the 25% reservation for Economically Weaker Sections and Disadvantaged Groups from a mere welfare provision to a **"national mission"** aimed at achieving the constitutional objective of "equality of status."
- The judgment explicitly prohibits private schools from acting as an appellate authority over State selection decisions, mandating immediate admission once the official list is released.

The RTE Act and Section 12(1)(c)

- The **Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act** was enacted in 2009 to operationalise the fundamental right to education under **Article 21A** of the Constitution (introduced via the **86th Constitutional Amendment Act, 2002**).
- It guarantees free and compulsory education to all children **aged 6 to 14 years**.
- The Act marked a paradigm shift from a charity-based to a **rights-based approach** in elementary education.

Provisions of the RTE Act:

- **Universal Access:** Free and compulsory education for the 6-14 age group. As per **UDISE+ 2024-25 data**, India's Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) at the primary level has remained **over 100%**, signalling near-universal access.
- **25% Reservation (Section 12(1)(c)):** Mandates all private unaided schools and specified category schools to reserve **25% of seats at the entry level** (Class 1 or Pre-school) for children from **Economically Weaker Sections (EWS)** and **Disadvantaged Groups (DG)**. The government reimburses schools for these seats.
- **Infrastructure Norms:** Prescribes standards for school buildings, equipment, and facilities. The Department of School Education & Literacy (DoSEL) reports **99.3% of schools** now have functional drinking water facilities (as of 2025).
- **Pupil-Teacher Ratio (PTR):** Section 25 mandates a PTR of **30:1** for primary schools. The national average

stands at **26:1** (UDISE+ 2024-25), compliant with the statutory requirement.

- **No-Screening Policy (Section 13)** : Prohibits schools from subjecting children or parents to any screening procedure for admission, preventing discrimination at the entry point.
- **No-Detention Policy**: Initially prohibited detention up to Class 8; the policy was amended in **2019** to allow for regular examinations and the possibility of detention in **Classes 5 and 8**.
- **School Management Committees (SMCs)** : Mandates parent and local representative participation in school governance and development plans.

Constitutional and Legal Framework

- **Article 21A**: States that "the State shall provide free and compulsory education to all children of the age of six to fourteen years." Inserted by the **86th Constitutional Amendment Act, 2002**.
- **Directive Principles of State Policy**: Articles **38, 39, and 46** direct the State to promote social justice, minimise inequalities, and protect the educational interests of weaker sections.
- The RTE Act and its 25% reservation clause translate these constitutional aspirations into enforceable legal obligations.

The Supreme Court's Ruling: Key Directives

- **Mandatory Immediacy**: Schools must admit State-allotted students **the moment their names appear** on the official list, without any delay.
- **Prohibition of Appeal**: Private schools are **legally barred from appealing** the State's selection decisions or withholding admission while any dispute is pending.
- **National Mission**: The Court defined the 25% quota as a **national mission to secure the preambular objective of 'equality of status'**. The ruling underscored that this provision enables "the child of a multi-millionaire... to sit in the same classroom... as the child of an autorickshaw driver."
- **Judicial Expediency**: Courts are directed to provide efficient and expeditious relief to parents when schools refuse admission, ensuring immediate redressal.

Social Inclusion: The Core Rationale

- **Shared Classrooms, Shared Destiny**: The provision is not merely about access to education but about the **social integration of diverse socio-economic classes** within a single learning environment.

Evidence of Positive Impact:

- **Scale of Benefit**: Over **5 million children** have reportedly benefited from the provision, with retention rates exceeding **90%** in several states.
- **Pro-Social Behaviour**: Research cited in the **Economic Survey 2024-25** found that integrated classrooms lead to a **12% increase in pro-social behaviour** among students from wealthier backgrounds towards their lower-income peers.
- **Improved Transition Rates**: The Ministry of Education (2025) reports that the transition rate from primary to

upper primary has reached **92.2%**, a significant rise from the pre-RTE era.

- **Social Capital**: Children from disadvantaged backgrounds gain access to peer networks, new aspirations, and institutional cultures, acting as a catalyst for long-term social mobility.

Implementation Challenges

- **Resistance from Private Schools**: Some institutions resist admissions, citing administrative or eligibility disputes, as evidenced by the recent Supreme Court case.
- **Hidden Financial Burden**: Families often bear costs for uniforms, textbooks, and transport, which are not fully covered by reimbursements.
- **Delays in Reimbursement**: State governments' delays in disbursing fee reimbursements to private schools create friction and disincentivise compliance.
- **Subtle Discrimination**: Children from disadvantaged backgrounds may still experience social stigma or subtle exclusion within schools.
- **Uneven Implementation**: Significant variations exist across states in the effectiveness of monitoring and grievance redressal mechanisms.

Way Forward

- **Timely Reimbursements**: Establish a streamlined, time-bound digital system for reimbursing private schools to reduce friction.
- **Eliminate Hidden Costs**: Expand support to cover ancillary expenses (uniforms, books, transport) for EWS/DG students.
- **Digital Monitoring Systems**: Strengthen technology-enabled admission and monitoring platforms to ensure transparency and accountability.
- **Robust Grievance Redressal**: Create accessible, fast-track mechanisms for parents to challenge admission denial.
- **Sustained Investment in Public Education**: The RTE framework does not diminish the State's obligation to strengthen government schools; improvements in public education infrastructure must continue in tandem.

Economy & Finance

Coal-to-Ammonium Nitrate Project in Odisha

What's the News?

- **Bharat Coal Gasification and Chemicals Ltd (BCGCL)** and **Mahanadi Coalfields Ltd (MCL)** signed a landmark land leasing agreement for a **Coal-to-Ammonium Nitrate project** at Lakhanpur, Odisha.
- Project capacity: **2,000 tonnes per day (TPD)** ammonium nitrate facility; first in India to deploy **indigenously developed gasification technology by BHEL**.
- Enabled by **Ministry of Coal policy reforms** allowing Coal Bearing Area (CBA) land utilisation for value-added coal projects.
- Estimated investment: **~₹25,000 crore**; financial incentive of **₹1,350 crore** extended under the Coal Gasification Incentive Scheme.

Project Overview?

- **Technology & Execution:**
 - Uses **BHEL's indigenous coal gasification technology**, reducing dependence on imported systems.
 - **Lump Sum Turnkey (LSTK) contracts:** LSTK-1 & 2 awarded to **BHEL**; LSTK-3 & 4 to **Larsen & Toubro**.
 - Site development (boundary walls, tree enumeration) progressing alongside statutory clearances.
- **Output & Applications:**
 - **Ammonium nitrate (NH_4NO_3):** High-nitrogen compound used as fertiliser and oxidising agent in mining explosives.
 - Supports **agricultural productivity** (soil fertility) and **industrial security** (controlled blasting operations).
- **Land & Location:**
 - **~350 acres** of land under MCL possession in Lakhanpur, Odisha—a coal-rich region with existing logistics infrastructure.

Technology: Indigenous Coal Gasification

- **Process:** Coal gasification converts coal into **synthetic gas (syngas)**, which is then processed

into downstream chemicals such as ammonium nitrate.

- **Indigenous Technology:** The project deploys BHEL's homegrown gasification technology, marking India's first coal gasification initiative using domestically developed technology.
- **Cleaner Alternative:** Coal gasification is considered a cleaner use of coal compared to traditional burning, offering environmental benefits while utilising domestic coal resources.

Regulatory Framework for Ammonium Nitrate

Due to its dual-use nature (fertiliser and explosive component), ammonium nitrate is strictly regulated in India:

- **Classification:** Under rules introduced in 2012 and updated in 2021, substances containing more than **45% ammonium nitrate** are classified as explosives.
- **Licensing Authority:** The **Petroleum and Explosives Safety Organisation (PESO)** is responsible for licensing the manufacture, storage, transport, and usage of ammonium nitrate.
- **Possession Limits:** A District Magistrate can authorise possession of up to **30 metric tonnes**; larger quantities require approval from PESO.

Additional Info

- **What is Ammonium Nitrate (NH_4NO_3)?**
 - A crystalline white solid formed as a salt of ammonia and nitric acid.
 - Contains high nitrogen content, making it valuable as a fertiliser and as an oxidising agent in mining explosives.
- **Incentive Scheme Categories (₹8,500 crore outlay):**
 - **Category I (₹4,050 crore):** Only PSUs eligible; three projects approved with ₹1,350 crore each (this project falls under this category)
 - **Category II (₹3,850 crore):** Both private sector and PSUs eligible; three private projects approved.
 - **Category III (₹600 crore):** Demonstration or small-scale projects; one private project approved.

RBI Bars Non-Deliverable INR Derivatives to Curb Forex Speculation

What's the News?

- **Reserve Bank of India (RBI)** issued revised directions prohibiting banks from offering **non-deliverable derivative (NDD) contracts** involving the Indian Rupee
- **Circular No. 03** dated **April 1, 2026** issued under **FEMA, 1999**
- Directions effective **immediately** until further review
- **Second regulatory move** in less than a week - earlier on March 27, 2026, RBI capped banks' net open positions

Non-Deliverable Derivatives?

Overview

- **Non-deliverable derivatives (NDDs):** Financial contracts where parties agree on a future exchange rate but settle in cash (typically US dollars) rather than physical currency delivery
- **Purpose:** Used for hedging or speculating on currency movements without direct access to the currency
- **Common in:** Countries with capital account restrictions like India

Why They Exist

- Due to India's **capital account restrictions**, foreign investors cannot freely trade the rupee
- Offshore NDD markets emerged in financial centres beyond RBI's direct regulatory reach
- These markets often influence rupee price expectations before domestic markets open

RBI's New Restrictions

Key Prohibitions

Aspect	New Regulation
NDD Contracts	Authorised dealers cannot offer non-deliverable derivative contracts involving INR to residents or non-residents
Deliverable Derivatives	Allowed only for hedging purposes , provided users do not maintain offsetting non-deliverable positions
Rebooking	Not permitted for any cancelled forex derivative contract (deliverable or non-deliverable) after circular issuance
Related Party Transactions	Authorised dealers barred from INR derivative contracts with related parties (as per Ind AS 24/IAS 24)

Compliance Requirements

- Authorised dealers may call for **information/documents** from users to ensure compliance
- Banks must verify users are not undertaking offsetting NDD positions alongside deliverable contracts

Strategic Impact

Immediate Market Effect

- **Rupee strengthened** past **93** mark against US dollar following announcement
- Currency appreciated **~2%** to **92.94 per dollar**
- Move aimed at curbing **one-sided speculative movement** seen in recent sessions

RBI's Objectives

- **Curb excessive speculation** and offshore market influence on domestic currency
- **Improve transparency** in price discovery aligned with domestic fundamentals
- **Safeguard financial stability** in foreign exchange market
- **Prudent measure** amid war-related uncertainties

Additional Info

Related Regulatory Changes (March 27, 2026)

- **Previous framework:** Allowed banks net open positions up to **25% of tier-I capital**
- **New hard cap:** **USD 100 million** maximum net open position
- **Impact:** Major compression for large banks (previously had USD 2-5 billion effective exposures)
- **Compliance deadline:** April 10, 2026

FEMA Provisions

- Directions issued under **Sections 10(4), 11(1), and 11(2)** of **Foreign Exchange Management Act, 1999**
- Without prejudice to permissions/approvals required under any other law

Non-Deliverable vs Deliverable Derivatives

Feature	Non-Deliverable (NDD)	Deliverable
Settlement	Cash (typically USD)	Physical currency delivery
Purpose	Often speculative	Genuine hedging
Regulatory concern	Offshore price distortion	Need-based risk management
Current status	Prohibited	Allowed for hedging

India Launches First-Ever Survey of Incorporated Services Sector (ASISSE)

What's the News?

- The **National Statistical Office (NSO)**, under **MoSPI**, has launched the **Annual Survey of Incorporated Services Sector Enterprises (ASISSE)**—India's first dedicated statistical exercise to capture granular data on the **formal services economy**.
- The survey targets **incorporated enterprises** registered under the **Companies Act (1956/2013)** and **LLP Act (2008)**, covering key sectors: trade, transport, IT, hospitality, education, and healthcare.
- With a sample size of **~1.21 lakh enterprises** and using the **GSTN database** as its sampling frame,

ASISSE aims to generate reliable indicators for **evidence-based policymaking**.

ASISSE: Scope & Methodology

- **Coverage:** All States and Union Territories; reference period is **FY 2024–25**.
- **Sampling Framework:** Leverages the **Goods and Services Tax Network (GSTN)** to identify and stratify enterprises, ensuring representativeness of the formal services sector.
- **Data Collection:** Conducted via a **secure web-based portal** under the **Collection of Statistics Act, 2008** (as amended by **Jan Vishwas Act, 2023**), ensuring confidentiality and compliance.
- **Key Indicators Tracked:**

- Employment generation, revenue, operational costs, digital adoption, export orientation, and regional distribution of services enterprises.

Significance for Policy & Governance

- **Fills Critical Data Gap:** The services sector contributes >50% of India's GDP and employs millions, yet lacked a dedicated annual survey for its incorporated segment.
- **Completes Statistical Architecture:** ASISSE complements two existing MoSPI surveys:
 - **Annual Survey of Industries (ASI):** Tracks registered manufacturing.
 - **Annual Survey of Unincorporated Sector Enterprises (ASUSE):** Covers informal non-agricultural activities.
 - Together, they provide a **holistic view of India's non-agricultural economy.**
- **Enables Targeted Interventions:** Granular data will support:
 - Design of **skilling initiatives** aligned with sectoral employment trends.
 - Assessment of **MSME competitiveness** in high-growth services sub-sectors.
 - Monitoring of **SDG 8 (Decent Work & Economic Growth)** and **SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation & Infrastructure)** indicators.
- **Strengthens Federal Planning:** State-level disaggregated data will aid **NITI Aayog** and state governments in crafting region-specific economic strategies.

India Hikes Windfall Tax on Diesel and ATF Exports

What's the News?

- The **Government of India** has significantly increased the **Special Additional Excise Duty (SAED)**, commonly known as the **windfall tax**, on the export of **diesel** and **Aviation Turbine Fuel (ATF)**.
- The move aims to ensure adequate domestic availability of fuel and curb the "windfall" profits earned by private refiners from high international oil prices triggered by the ongoing **West Asia conflict**.
- While duties on diesel and jet fuel have been raised, the export duty on **petrol** continues to remain at **nil**.

What is a Windfall Tax?

- It is a **Special Additional Excise Duty (SAED)** levied on the export of specific petroleum products.
- It was first introduced in **July 2022** as a policy tool to respond to extraordinary global crude oil price spikes following geopolitical events.
- The tax rates are reviewed **fortnightly** based on the average international crude oil prices and product cracks (the price difference between crude oil and refined products) in the preceding two weeks.

Special Additional Excise Duty (SAED)

- The technical name for the levy imposed under the **Central Excise Act**.
- It serves as a regulatory tool to prevent domestic shortages when international price arbitrage becomes highly favorable for exporters.

Windfall Tax Hike Details

- **Diesel Export Duty:** Raised to **₹55.5 per litre** from the previous rate of **₹21.5 per litre**.
- **ATF (Jet Fuel) Export Duty:** Increased to **₹42 per litre**, up from **₹29.5 per litre**.
- **Immediate Effect:** The revised rates were implemented following a notification from the **Ministry of Finance** to align domestic levies with volatile global crude prices.
- **Objective:** The primary goal is to discourage private refiners from prioritizing exports over domestic supply during periods of global supply disruptions, specifically around the **Strait of Hormuz**.

Impact on the Energy Sector

- **Stock Market Reaction:** Shares of major oil marketing companies (OMCs) and refiners, including **IOC, BPCL, HPCL, and Reliance Industries (RIL)**, witnessed a downward trend following the announcement.
- **Refining Margins:** Analysts anticipate a compression in **Gross Refining Margins (GRMs)** for private refiners like **Reliance** and **Nayara Energy**, as the higher tax eats into the profit spreads of exported fuels.
- **Aviation Sector:** The hike in ATF export duty, combined with rising domestic jet fuel prices, is expected to increase operating costs for airlines, potentially leading to higher airfares for travelers.
- **Domestic Supply:** By making exports less lucrative, the government expects a higher volume of refined products to stay within the Indian market, stabilizing local fuel stocks.

Cabinet Approves Startup India Fund of Funds 2.0

What's the News?

- The **Union Cabinet** has approved the launch of the **Startup India Fund of Funds 2.0 (FFS 2.0)** to further strengthen the domestic startup ecosystem.
- The programme features a dedicated corpus of **₹10,000 crore** to be utilized over the next few years.
- The initiative focuses on providing equity capital to early-stage startups through **Alternative Investment Funds (AIFs)**, moving away from direct government investment to a market-linked model.

Startup India Fund of Funds 2.0

- **Nature of the Fund:** It operates as a **Fund of Funds**, which means it does not invest directly in startups. Instead, it contributes to the corpus of **SEBI-registered Alternative Investment Funds (AIFs)**. These AIFs, in turn, act as venture capital funds that invest in individual startups.
- **Total Corpus and Timeline:**
 - The fund has a total corpus of **₹10,000 crore**.
 - The financial commitment will be spread across the **16th and 17th Finance Commission cycles**.
- **Implementation and Monitoring:**
 - The **Small Industries Development Bank of India (SIDBI)** will serve as the primary **Implementation Agency (IA)**.

- The scheme will also onboard an additional domestic implementation agency.
- A **Venture Capital Investment Committee (VCIC)**, comprising industry veterans, will screen and select eligible AIFs.
- An **Empowered Committee (EC)** will oversee the scheme's overall implementation and performance.
- **Priority Focus Areas:** While sector-agnostic, the fund will prioritize AIFs that support:
 - **Deep Tech Startups**
 - **Technology-driven and Innovative Manufacturing Startups**
 - **Early Growth-Stage Startups** supported by smaller AIFs
- **Governance and Compliance:**
 - Includes a **co-investment framework** allowing the government and institutional investors to co-invest under strict governance safeguards.
 - Supported AIFs must invest in entities officially **recognized as 'startups'** by the **DPIIT**.

Additional Information

- **Context and Background:**
 - **FFS 1.0 (2016):** The first iteration was launched under the **Startup India Action Plan** with a corpus of ₹10,000 crore, spread over the 14th and 15th Finance Commission cycles. It successfully catalyzed domestic venture capital and addressed early-stage funding gaps.
 - **Budget Announcement:** The second phase (FoF 2.0) was initially sanctioned in the **Union Budget 2025-26**, underscoring the government's continued focus on fostering innovation and manufacturing.
- **Definitions & Institutions:**
 - **Alternative Investment Funds (AIFs):** A privately pooled investment vehicle that collects funds from sophisticated investors for investing in accordance with a defined investment policy. They are regulated by the **Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI)**.
 - **DPIIT:** The nodal department under the **Ministry of Commerce and Industry** responsible for formulating and implementing policies related to industrial development, including the startup ecosystem.

Rise in Middle-Class Vulnerability in India

What's the News?

- Recent economic assessments highlight a growing trend of **middle-class vulnerability** in India, despite the country's high GDP growth rate.
- The analysis suggests that while the middle class is expanding in size, it is increasingly susceptible to economic shocks due to rising costs of living, high **out-**

of-pocket expenditure (OOPE), and stagnant real wages.

- Experts point toward a "**squeeze**" where the middle-income group lacks the social safety nets provided to the poor while being unable to absorb the inflationary pressures faced by the wealthy.

Growing Economic Vulnerability?

- **Income Stagnation:** While nominal wages have risen, **real wage growth** (adjusted for inflation) for middle-management and formal sector workers has remained sluggish.
- **Household Debt:** There is a notable spike in **household debt-to-GDP** ratios, as families increasingly rely on personal loans and credit to fund education, healthcare, and housing.
- **Savings Decline:** Net **household financial savings** have hit a multi-decadal low as a percentage of GDP, reducing the financial buffer available to families for emergencies.
- **The "Missing Middle" in Health:** A significant portion of the middle class is not poor enough to qualify for **Ayushman Bharat (PM-JAY)** but lacks adequate private insurance, leading to "medical poverty" following major health crises.

Drivers of Vulnerability

- **Educational Inflation:** The soaring cost of private higher education and professional courses has led to a high dependency on **education loans**, impacting the long-term wealth accumulation of young professionals.
- **Urban Cost of Living:** High urban inflation, particularly in **housing and transportation**, is consuming a disproportionate share of disposable income.
- **K-Shaped Recovery:** Post-pandemic economic recovery has been uneven, where capital-intensive sectors and high-earners have thrived, while the labor-intensive sectors that employ the bulk of the middle class have faced slower growth.
- **Job Insecurity:** The rise of the **gig economy** and contract-based hiring in the formal sector has diminished the traditional "job security" associated with middle-class employment.

Inequality & Economic Fragility

- **Wealth Concentration:** Top 1% captures >22% of national income; ~275 billionaires hold wealth equivalent to ~1/4 of national income.
- **Human Development Constraints:**
 - Child wasting: ~18.7%; Child stunting: ~35% (NFHS-5)—long-term barriers to cognitive and physical productivity.
 - Intergenerational transmission of vulnerability due to inadequate health and education access.
- **Geeconomic Risks:** Global trade volatility and automation threaten to deepen inequality in emerging economies like India.

Policy Shift: From Poverty Reduction to Mobility

- **Measurement Reform:** Adopt spectrum-based well-being metrics (World Bank proposal) to capture vulnerability above poverty lines.
- **Employment-Centric Growth:**

- Revitalise **labour-intensive manufacturing** and **MSMEs** to absorb 12 million annual labour force entrants.
- Strengthen **skill-development ecosystems** aligned with market demand (e.g., **Skill India, PLI schemes**).
- **Social Security Expansion:** Extend formal protections to informal workers via **e-Shram portal** integration and portable benefits.
- **Wage-Productivity Linkage:** Policy mechanisms to ensure fair sharing of productivity gains through real wage growth.

Additional Information

- **Critique of Current Measurement: The 'Poverty Line Trap'**
 - The World Bank paper proposes a shift from a **binary poverty line** (poor vs. non-poor) to a **"well-being spectrum."**
 - This new approach would measure **"distance from a reasonable standard of living,"** providing a more nuanced picture of economic welfare and the size of the vulnerable population that current metrics obscure.
- **Government Initiatives Acknowledged (and their Limitations):**
 - **Last-Mile Welfare:** Schemes providing **subsidized food** (under the **National Food Security Act, 2013**) and **Direct Benefit Transfers (DBT)** via the **JAM Trinity (Jan Dhan, Aadhaar, Mobile)** have been crucial in reducing extreme deprivation.
 - **Skill India & PLI Schemes:** Initiatives like the **Production Linked Incentive (PLI)** schemes aim to boost manufacturing and create jobs, but their impact on mass employment is still nascent.
 - **e-Shram Portal:** The creation of a national database of unorganized workers is a foundational step toward universal social security but has yet to translate into comprehensive coverage of benefits.

Government Notifies India's First Semiconductor SEZ at Dholera

What's the News?

The **Department of Commerce** has officially notified the establishment of a **Special Economic Zone (SEZ)** for India's first commercial semiconductor fabrication plant. The SEZ has been granted to **Tata Semiconductor Manufacturing Private Limited** and will be located in **Dholera, Gujarat**. This marks a pivotal step in India's strategic push to build a domestic chip manufacturing ecosystem and reduce import dependency.

Semiconductor SEZ at Dholera

- **Project Details:** The project entails a massive investment of **₹91,000 crore** for setting up a semiconductor fabrication unit ("fab").
- **Scale and Employment:** The SEZ will be spread over **66.16 hectares** of land and is projected to

generate direct employment for approximately **21,000 people**.

- **Strategic Objective:** To create a foundational node for the **India Semiconductor Mission (ISM)** by enabling large-scale, high-precision manufacturing and attracting ancillary industries.

Policy Reforms and Enabling Framework

The approval follows a critical regulatory amendment made in June 2025 to incentivize semiconductor investments:

- **SEZ Rule Amendment:** The **minimum contiguous land requirement** for setting up an SEZ in the semiconductor and electronics component sector was reduced from **50 hectares to 10 hectares**.
- **Significance:** This change makes it easier for both large anchor units and smaller ancillary or specialized units (such as Assembly, Testing, Marking, and Packaging - **ATMP** facilities) to secure SEZ status, thereby availing associated fiscal and regulatory benefits.

Expansion of Semiconductor Ecosystem

The Dholera Fab is part of a broader approval wave for semiconductor and electronics SEZs, indicating the emergence of a comprehensive value chain:

- **Micron Semiconductor Technology India Ltd.:**
 - **Investment:** ₹13,000 crore.
 - **Location:** Sanand, Gujarat.
 - **Activity:** Semiconductor Assembly, Testing, Marking, and Packaging (**ATMP**).
 - **Employment:** Over 20,000 jobs.
- **CG Semi Ltd.:**
 - **Investment:** ₹2,150 crore.
 - **Activity:** Assembly and testing operations.
- **Kaynes Semicon Ltd.:**
 - **Investment:** ₹681 crore.
 - **Activity:** Assembly and testing operations.

Strategic Importance for India

- **Supply Chain Resilience:** The initiative directly addresses global semiconductor supply chain vulnerabilities and positions India as a credible alternative in the **China Plus One** strategy adopted by global electronics manufacturers.
- **Atma Nirbhar Bharat:** The project aligns with the goal of technological self-reliance, aiming to reduce India's significant import bill for semiconductors—critical components for sectors ranging from defense and automotive to consumer electronics and **Artificial Intelligence (AI)**.
- **Geopolitical Context:** Amidst global competition for chip dominance, this development enhances India's strategic autonomy in critical and emerging technologies.

What is a Special Economic Zone (SEZ)?: An SEZ is a geographically delineated duty-free enclave deemed to be foreign territory for trade operations. Units in SEZs benefit from exemptions on customs duties, central excise, and income tax (subject to sunset clauses), facilitating ease of doing business and export competitiveness.

India Slips to Sixth Position in IMF GDP Rankings 2025

What's the News?

According to the latest **International Monetary Fund (IMF)** estimates, India has slipped to the **sixth-largest economy** globally in **2025** in terms of nominal **Gross Domestic Product (GDP)**. This is a drop from the fifth position held in 2024. The decline is attributed to the **depreciation of the Indian Rupee** against the US Dollar and a **statistical revision of the GDP base year**, rather than a slowdown in economic growth.

IMF GDP Rankings 2025 (Nominal)

Global rankings are calculated by converting national GDP figures into **US Dollars**. The key positions for 2025 are:

- **United States: \$30.8 trillion** (1st)
- **China: \$19.6 trillion** (2nd)
- **Germany: \$4.7 trillion** (3rd)
- **Japan: \$4.44 trillion** (4th)
- **United Kingdom: \$4 trillion** (5th)
- **India: \$3.92 trillion** (6th)

Reasons for the Ranking Slip

Despite India remaining the **world's fastest-growing major economy**, two primary statistical factors caused the drop in dollar-denominated rankings:

- **Rupee Depreciation:** The Indian Rupee weakened from an average of **₹84.6 per USD in 2024** to approximately **₹88.5 per USD in 2025**. Since nominal GDP is measured in dollars, a weaker local currency reduces the relative size of the economy when converted, even if growth in rupee terms is robust (India's nominal GDP in rupees grew from ₹318 trillion in 2024 to ₹346.5 trillion in 2025).
- **GDP Base Year Revision:** The **Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI)** revised the GDP base year from **2011-12 to 2022-23**. This methodological update led to a downward adjustment in the estimated size of the economy. For instance, the nominal GDP for FY26 was revised down to ₹345.5 trillion from an earlier estimate of ₹357 trillion. The IMF's rankings incorporate this revised, lower baseline.

Future Projections and Outlook

The IMF's **World Economic Outlook** projects that India's slip in rankings is temporary, though the timeline to become the third-largest economy has been extended:

- **By 2027:** India is projected to regain the **4th position** with a GDP of **\$4.58 trillion**, surpassing the United Kingdom (\$4.47 trillion).
- **By 2028:** India is expected to overtake Japan to become the **3rd-largest economy** with an estimated GDP of **\$5.06 trillion**.
- **By 2031:** India is projected to firmly establish itself in the 3rd spot with a GDP of **\$6.79 trillion**, well ahead of Japan's projected \$5.13 trillion.

Additional Info

- **Nominal GDP vs. Real GDP:**
 - **Nominal GDP:** Measures a country's economic output at **current market prices**, including the effect of inflation and exchange rates. This is the metric used for global size comparisons and rankings.

- **Real GDP:** Measures output adjusted for **inflation**, providing a clearer picture of actual growth in production volume. India continues to show strong **real GDP growth** of over 6%.

- **Significance of Exchange Rate:** The ranking shift underscores the critical impact of **exchange rate management** and **external sector resilience** on India's global economic standing. While domestic growth remains robust, a weakening currency can erode these gains in dollar terms.

India's First Semiconductor Chip Fabrication Plant Notified at Dholera SEZ

What's the News?

- The Government of India has notified the country's first **semiconductor fabrication plant (fab)** as a **Special Economic Zone (SEZ)** at **Dholera, Gujarat**, to be developed by **Tata Semiconductor Manufacturing Private Limited**.
- The project involves an investment of approximately **₹91,000 crore** and is expected to generate around **21,000 jobs**.

About the Dholera Semiconductor SEZ

- **Location:** Dholera Special Investment Region (SIR), Gujarat – a major industrial smart city initiative.
- **Area:** Spread over **66-166 hectares** (varying sources) with integrated infrastructure for electronics, IT/ITES, and semiconductor production.
- **Type:** Sector-specific SEZ focused on **electronic hardware, software, and semiconductor manufacturing**.
- **Employment:** Primarily high-skilled jobs for engineers and technicians in chip design, process engineering, and cleanroom operations.

Features & Policy Support

- **SEZ Reforms (2025):** To attract capital-intensive semiconductor investments, the government amended SEZ rules:
 - Minimum land requirement reduced from **50 hectares to 10 hectares** for semiconductor/electronics SEZs.
 - Flexibility in land encumbrance norms and domestic sales allowed in **Domestic Tariff Area (DTA)** subject to duties.
- **Production Process:** A semiconductor fab manufactures microchips on ultra-pure silicon wafers using **nanoscale precision processes** like photolithography, doping, and etching in ultra-clean rooms.

Other Approved Semiconductor & Electronics SEZ Projects

Company	Location	Focus Area	Investment
Micron Semiconductor or Technology India	Sanand, Gujarat	Assembly, Testing, Marking, Packaging (ATMP)	~₹13,000 crore

Aequis Group	Dharwad , Karnatak a	Electronic component manufacturi ng	Not specified
Kaynes Semicon	Not specifie d	Assembly, testing, packaging	₹681 crore
CG Semi	Not specifie d	Assembly, testing, packaging	₹2,150 crore

Additional Info

- **What is a Semiconductor Fab?**
 - A highly advanced manufacturing facility where microchips are produced on silicon wafers.
 - Chips are essential for **smartphones, computers, automobiles, defence equipment, AI systems**, and digital infrastructure.
- **Policy Backdrop:**
 - Part of the government's **Semiconductor Mission** to incentivize chip manufacturing.
 - Aligned with **Production Linked Incentive (PLI) scheme** for electronics and IT hardware.

NITI Aayog Releases 7th Edition of Trade Watch Quarterly

What's the News?

- **NITI Aayog** released the seventh edition of the "**Trade Watch Quarterly**," providing a comprehensive analysis of India's trade performance for the third quarter of the fiscal year (**Q3 FY26**).
- The report highlights a **mixed but resilient trend** in India's global trade, characterized by steady growth in services and persistent challenges in merchandise exports.
- It emphasizes the need for structural reforms to improve competitiveness, particularly in labor-intensive sectors and small-scale industries.

Trade Performance?

- **Merchandise Trade:**
 - **Exports:** Reached **\$110.48 billion**, reflecting a modest year-on-year (y-o-y) growth of **1.6%**.
 - **Imports:** Rose at a significantly faster pace of **7.9%**, totaling **\$202.33 billion**, leading to an elevated merchandise trade deficit.
- **Services Trade:**
 - **Exports:** Demonstrated strong growth of **7.8%**, reaching **\$111.2 billion**.
 - **Imports:** Increased by **2.8%** to **\$53.7 billion**.
 - **Impact:** The sustained surplus in services trade continues to act as a crucial anchor for India's overall external balance.
- **Overall Growth:** Total trade (merchandise and services combined) grew by **5.6%** during the quarter.

Gems and Jewellery Sector?

- **Global Standing:**
 - Excluding raw gold, India holds a **7.8% share** of the global export market in this sector, valued at **\$29.5 billion**.

- India is a global leader in **diamonds** and **precious metal jewellery**, which account for over **54%** of global demand.
- **Surat as a Hub:** The report identifies **Surat** as the world's largest cutting and polishing hub, driven by high value-addition to imported raw materials.
- **Structural Challenges:**
 - High market concentration, with exports primarily directed to the **USA, UAE, and Hong Kong**.
 - Fragmented **MSME** base leading to lower value-addition compared to global peers.
 - A significant **credit gap** due to limited trust from financial institutions toward small-scale players.

FTA and Regional Dynamics?

- **FTA Performance:**
 - Exports to **Free Trade Agreement (FTA)** partners saw a contraction of **7%**, whereas imports from these partners grew by **6%**.
 - Significant declines were noted in exports to **Singapore (34%)** and **Australia (22.2%)**.
- **Regional Shifts:**
 - **Northeast Asia** recorded a robust export growth of **33.5%**, led by increased shipments to **China**.
 - **West Africa** emerged as a major import source, with a growth of **59.8%**, primarily driven by **natural pearls** and **fertilisers**.

About Trade Watch Quarterly

- It is a flagship analytical publication of **NITI Aayog**, India's premier policy think tank.
- The report tracks India's trade performance and global trends, offering forward-looking policy insights to support decision-making and improve India's position in global markets.
- It provides a platform for sector-specific analysis, with previous editions covering themes like electronics, pharmaceuticals, and textiles.

SEBI Operationalises Past Risk and Return Verification Agency (PaRRVA)

What's the News?

- The **Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI)** has fully operationalised the **Past Risk and Return Verification Agency (PaRRVA)**, a first-of-its-kind regulatory framework.
- The framework aims to independently validate the past performance claims made by regulated entities, curbing misleading advertisements and protecting investors. Following a successful pilot phase, PaRRVA will commence regular operations from **May 4, 2026**.
- **CARE Ratings Limited** has been recognized as the official PaRRVA, and the **National Stock Exchange (NSE)** will act as the **PaRRVA Data Centre (PDC)**.

About the PaRRVA Framework

- **Objective:** To create a standardised, transparent, and reliable mechanism for verifying and disclosing the past risk and return metrics of financial market

intermediaries. This directly addresses the problem of unverified and often inflated performance claims.

- **Genesis:**
 - The framework was initially specified by SEBI through a circular on **April 4, 2025**.
 - A pilot phase was launched on **December 8, 2025**. After its successful completion, the agency is now fully operational.
- **Scope of Verification:** PaRRVA will verify performance data related to:
 - **Investment Advisory Services**
 - **Research Services** (provided by Research Analysts)
 - **Algorithmic Trading** offerings
- **Design of the System:**
 - **PaRRVA (Verification Body):** A SEBI-registered **Credit Rating Agency (CRA)** — in this instance, **CARE Ratings Limited** — functions as the verification agency.
 - **PaRRVA Data Centre (PDC):** A recognised stock exchange — the **National Stock Exchange of India Limited (NSE)** — serves as the data repository and processing centre.
 - **Oversight Committee:** An independent committee supervises the framework, ensuring adherence to the prescribed methodology and data privacy norms.

Regulatory Mandate & Timeline

- **Mandatory Enrolment:** Regulated entities (IAs, RAs, algo providers) must enrol with PaRRVA within **three months** of its operationalisation to continue communicating any certified past performance.
- **Prohibition:** After the three-month window, communication of past performance without PaRRVA verification will be prohibited.
- **Exclusive Use:** After a period of **two years**, only PaRRVA-verified performance metrics may be disclosed, completely disallowing any pre-operational or non-verified data.
- **Advertisement Integration:** Regulated entities are explicitly permitted to use PaRRVA-verified performance data in their advertisements, provided it aligns with SEBI's applicable regulatory provisions. This creates a "level playing field" where genuine performers can showcase their audited track record.

Additional Info

- **About SEBI:**
 - The **Securities and Exchange Board of India** is the statutory regulatory body for the securities and commodity market in India, established on April 12, 1992, under the **SEBI Act, 1992**.
 - Its core functions are protective, developmental, and regulatory in nature.
- **Related Regulatory Provisions:**
 - The PaRRVA framework is operationalised under the **SEBI (Credit Rating Agencies) Regulations, 1999** (Regulation 12A) and the **SEBI (Intermediaries) Regulations, 2008** (Regulation 16E).
 - A prior interim arrangement allowed IAs/RAs to communicate past performance data

certified by a member of **ICAI/ICMAI** only on a specific client request and a one-to-one basis, with a mandatory disclaimer that it was not PaRRVA-verified.

- **Context of Investor Protection:**
 - This initiative aligns with SEBI's objective of **ease of doing business** for genuine intermediaries while simultaneously strengthening the **investor protection** framework, a key pillar of the Indian securities market.

EPFO to Launch E-PRAAPTI Portal

What's the News?

- The **Employees' Provident Fund Organisation (EPFO)** is set to launch a dedicated digital platform called **E-PRAAPTI**.
- E-PRAAPTI stands for **EPF Aadhaar-Based Access Portal for Tracking Inoperative Accounts**.
- The portal is designed to help members identify, track, and link their old or inoperative **EPF accounts** with their **Universal Account Number (UAN)**.
- This initiative was announced by the Union **Labour and Employment Minister**.

E-PRAAPTI Portal: Overview & Features

- **Purpose:** To bridge the gap between legacy EPF accounts (opened before the UAN system) and the current digital ecosystem, enabling members to access and claim long-pending deposits.
- **Aadhaar-Based Authentication:** The portal uses Aadhaar for secure identity verification, allowing members to access old accounts that are not linked to a UAN.
- **Phased Rollout:**
 - **Phase 1:** Members need their old **Member ID** to track their accounts. This ensures a secure and efficient rollout.
 - **Phase 2:** The scope will expand to include members who cannot recall or access their old Member IDs.
- **Profile Updating & Linking:** Members can update their profiles and seamlessly link their old accounts with their active UAN for activation.
- **Reduced Manual Intervention:** The platform minimizes physical documentation and the need for employer intervention or visits to EPF offices.
- **System Migration:** The existing EPFO portal will undergo a brief migration period of 1–2 days for the implementation.

Additional Info

- **About EPFO:**
 - It is a statutory body established under the **Employees' Provident Funds and Miscellaneous Provisions Act, 1952**.
 - It functions under the administrative control of the **Ministry of Labour and Employment**.
 - It manages social security schemes like the **Employees' Provident Fund (EPF)**, **Employees' Pension Scheme (EPS)**, and **Employees' Deposit Linked Insurance (EDLI)**.

- **Definitions:**

- **Universal Account Number (UAN):** A 12-digit unique number allotted to EPFO members. It acts as an umbrella for multiple Member IDs assigned by different employers, facilitating portability.
- **Inoperative EPF Account:** An account where contributions have not been received for **36 consecutive months** after leaving a job, post-retirement, or permanent migration abroad. Such accounts stop earning interest.

- **Constitutional & Legal Framework:**

- The EPFO operates under Entry 24 of the **Concurrent List** (List III) of the Seventh Schedule, which covers "Welfare of labour including conditions of work, provident funds, employers' liability, workmen's compensation, invalidity and old age pensions and maternity benefits."
- **Directive Principles of State Policy** under **Article 43** mandates the State to secure a living wage, decent standard of life, and social and cultural opportunities for all workers.



Science & Technology

ISRO Launches Mission Mitra for Gaganyaan Astronauts in Ladakh

What's the News?

- ISRO has launched **Mission Mitra** in **Ladakh** as part of India's **Gaganyaan human spaceflight programme**
- **Four Gaganyaan astronauts** began the mission after acclimatisation in Leh
- Mission focuses on **psychological resilience, team dynamics, and human endurance** in extreme conditions
- Conducted by **Human Space Flight Centre (HSFC)** with multidisciplinary team of scientists, engineers, medical specialists, and psychologists

Mission Mitra?

Full Form

- **Mitra: Mapping of Interoperable Traits & Reliability Assessment**

Objective

- Evaluate **human performance** in hostile environments simulating space-like conditions
- Test **psychological resilience** under stress, hypoxia, and prolonged isolation
- Assess **team cohesion, decision-making under pressure**, and emotional stability
- Study **communication and coordination** between astronauts and ground support teams

Why Ladakh?

- **High-altitude, extreme environment** serves as ideal terrestrial analogue for space conditions
- **Key features:**
 - Freezing temperatures
 - Low oxygen levels
 - Geographic isolation
 - Minimal external stimuli
- Among **closest Earth-based environments** to simulate space missions

Astronauts Involved

- **Group Captain Shubhanshu Shukla**
- **P Balakrishnan Nair**
- **Two other selected Gaganyaan astronauts**

What Will Be Tested?

Parameter	Focus Area
Psychological responses	Reactions to cold, hypoxia, prolonged isolation
Team dynamics	Interpersonal cohesion under extreme stress
Communication	Coordination with ground teams despite constraints
Decision-making	Performance under pressure and limited resources
Cold resilience	Physical and mental adaptation to extreme cold

Significance

For Gaganyaan Mission

- Provides **crucial data** on team dynamics and mental endurance
- Shapes **future astronaut training frameworks**

- Tests **life-support systems, crew escape mechanisms**, and emergency response frameworks
- Prepares astronauts for **real-life challenges** in space (isolation, communication delays, limited resources)

Global Parallels

- **European Space Agency (ESA):** CAVES experiment (astronauts train in underground caves)
- **NASA:** Various analogue missions for Mars preparation
- India adopting **innovative approaches** combining real-world environments with scientific research

Additional Info

Gaganyaan Mission Overview

- **India's first human spaceflight programme** led by ISRO
- **Key objectives:**
 - Demonstrate human spaceflight capability
 - Develop advanced crew safety systems
 - Strengthen India's position in global space exploration

- **Crew:** 3 astronauts planned for first mission

- **Orbit:** Low Earth Orbit (LEO)

Human Space Flight Centre (HSFC)

- Established in **2019** in Bengaluru
- Lead body for India's **crewed space missions**
- Responsible for astronaut training, crew module development, and life support systems

India's Astronaut Selection

- **Four test pilots** selected from Indian Air Force
- Underwent training in Russia and India
- **Prime crew and backup crew** designated

Previous Gaganyaan Milestones

- **Test Vehicle Abort Mission-1 (TV-D1):** Successful crew escape system demonstration
- **HLVM3 vehicle development:** Ongoing for crewed missions
- **Crew module testing:** Multiple successful trials

Earthquake Lights (EQL): From Folklore to Scientific Phenomenon

What's the News?

Following recent seismic activity in **Turkey**, reports of floating, glowing lights in the sky—known as **Earthquake Lights (EQL)**—have gained scientific credibility. Once dismissed as myths or UFO sightings, these rare atmospheric phenomena are now recognized by organizations like the **USGS** as legitimate co-seismic or pre-seismic optical events.

What are Earthquake Lights?

- **Overview:** Rare luminous atmospheric phenomena appearing shortly before, during, or after earthquakes
- **Characteristics:**
 - Diverse forms: luminous spheres (**ball lightning**), vertical beams, sheet lightning, streamers, or steady localized glow
 - **Silent phenomenon**—unlike storm lightning
 - Approximately **97% of documented cases** occur at or near **rift zones** or sub-vertical fault systems

Scientific Explanation

- **Tectonic Stress:** Massive pressure builds up in the lithosphere, especially in **igneous rocks**
- **Charge Carriers (p-holes):** Intense stress activates **positive holes (p-holes)** within rocks
- **Ionization:** These charges travel rapidly to the surface through fault systems acting as high-speed conduits
- **Plasma Discharge:** Upon reaching the surface, charges **ionize the atmosphere**, creating a luminous plasma-like glow
- **NASA Research:** Indicates transient electric potential in the crust couples with the **lower atmosphere and ionosphere**

Additional Info

- **Recognition:**
 - **USGS (United States Geological Survey)** officially recognizes EQL as co-seismic or pre-seismic optical events
 - Global satellite networks now documenting these phenomena systematically
- **Key Terms:**
 - **Lithosphere:** Rigid outer part of the Earth, consisting of crust and upper mantle
 - **Rift Zones:** Areas where tectonic plates are separating/diverging
 - **p-holes:** Positive hole charge carriers activated by stress in rocks

India's Indigenous Fast Breeder Reactor Attains Criticality

What's the News?

- India's first indigenously designed **Prototype Fast Breeder Reactor (PFBR)** at Kalpakkam, Tamil Nadu, has attained **criticality**, marking the initiation of a self-sustaining nuclear fission reaction.
- The **500 MWe reactor**, developed by **Bharatiya Nabhihiya Vidyut Nigam Ltd (BHAVINI)**, is a cornerstone of India's **three-stage nuclear power programme**.
- **Criticality** refers to the state where a nuclear reactor maintains a self-sustaining chain reaction, meaning each fission event releases enough neutrons to cause exactly one more fission event.

What is a Fast Breeder Reactor?

A **Fast Breeder Reactor (FBR)** is an advanced nuclear reactor that generates more fissile material than it consumes while producing electricity.

- **Fuel Cycle:** Uses **Uranium-Plutonium Mixed Oxide (MOX)** fuel, utilizing recycled plutonium from first-stage reactors.
- **Breeding Process:** Surrounds the core with a **Uranium-238** blanket; when U-238 atoms capture fast neutrons, they transmute into **Plutonium-239**, creating surplus fuel.
- **Coolant System:** Employs **Liquid Sodium** as coolant instead of water, which does not slow down neutrons, maintaining the fast reaction necessary for breeding.
- **Efficiency:** Operates at higher temperatures than conventional reactors, delivering better thermal

efficiency and extracting significantly more energy from uranium resources.

Why Does Criticality Matter?

Criticality signifies that the reactor's core geometry, fuel arrangement, and engineering calculations are functioning as designed.

- **Scientific Validation:** Confirms that each fission event releases sufficient neutrons to sustain an ongoing chain reaction without external neutron sources.
- **Pre-Commercial Step:** Represents the final major milestone before the reactor begins generating electricity for the grid and reaching full 500 MWe capacity.
- **Technological Sovereignty:** Demonstrates indigenous capability across the entire nuclear fuel cycle, from design and construction to fuel fabrication and safety systems.

India's Three-Stage Nuclear Programme

- **First Stage:** Pressurised Heavy Water Reactors (PHWRs) using natural uranium fuel and heavy water coolant; forms the bulk of current 8,180 MWe installed capacity.
- **Second Stage:** Fast Breeder Reactors utilizing plutonium from Stage 1; PFBR marks the operational beginning of this stage.
- **Third Stage:** Thorium-based reactors using Uranium-233 derived from Thorium-232; aimed at utilizing India's 25% of global thorium reserves.

National Quantum Mission Achieves 1000 km Secure Communication Breakthrough

What's the News?

India has achieved a significant milestone under the **National Quantum Mission (NQM)** by successfully demonstrating **secure quantum communication over a distance of 1,000 kilometres**. This breakthrough positions India among an elite group of nations with the capability to deploy **Quantum Key Distribution (QKD)** for unhackable data transmission, a critical requirement for national security, banking, and strategic infrastructure.

The 1000 km Quantum Communication Milestone

- **Technology Demonstrated:**
 - The feat involved the successful transmission of **quantum-secure cryptographic keys** over a free-space or fibre-hybrid network spanning **1,000 km**.
 - This was achieved through advanced **Quantum Key Distribution (QKD)** protocols, which leverage the principles of quantum mechanics (**Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle** and **No-Cloning Theorem**) to detect any eavesdropping attempt.
- **Implementing Institution:**
 - The experiment was conducted by a consortium led by the **Raman Research Institute (RRI)**, Bengaluru, in collaboration with the **Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO)** and **Centre for Development of Telematics (C-DOT)**.

• Strategic Significance:

- **Defence and Internal Security:** The ability to secure long-haul communication links is vital for the **Indian Army, Navy, and Air Force** to prevent signal interception and data breaches.
- **Financial Sector:** Provides a pathway to quantum-resistant encryption for **RBI-regulated banking transactions** and **UPI infrastructure**.
- **Geopolitical Benchmark:** India joins **China** (Micius Satellite) and **European Union** (EuroQCI) in achieving long-distance terrestrial/satellite-based QKD.

National Quantum Mission (NQM): An Overview

- **Mandate and Tenure:** Approved by the **Union Cabinet** in **2023** with an outlay of **₹6,003.65 crore** for implementation from **2023-24 to 2030-31**.
- **Nodal Ministry:** Department of Science and Technology (DST).
- **Four Thematic Hubs (T-Hubs):** The mission is anchored around establishing four technology hubs across premier institutions:
 1. **Quantum Computing:** Indian Institute of Science (IISc), Bengaluru.
 2. **Quantum Communication:** Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Madras.
 3. **Quantum Sensing and Metrology:** Tata Institute of Fundamental Research (TIFR), Mumbai.
 4. **Quantum Materials and Devices:** IIT Delhi and IIT Bombay.
- **Primary Goals:**
 - Development of **intermediate-scale quantum computers** with **50-100 physical qubits** within 5 years.
 - Establishment of **quantum-secured communication** between ground stations over a range of **2,000 km** and **satellite-based QKD** within India.
 - Fostering a skilled workforce in **Quantum Information Science and Technology (QIST)**.

Additional Info

- **How QKD Works:**
 - QKD uses photons (light particles) to generate and distribute a secret key between two parties (**Alice** and **Bob**).
 - Any attempt by an eavesdropper (**Eve**) to measure the quantum state of the photons inevitably disturbs them, alerting Alice and Bob to abort the transmission.
- **Global Quantum Race:**
 - **China:** Launched **Micius**, the world's first quantum communications satellite, and operates the **Beijing-Shanghai Quantum Link**.
 - **USA:** **National Quantum Initiative Act** (2018) funds multiple research centers.
 - **Europe:** **European Quantum Communication Infrastructure (EuroQCI)** initiative aims to build a pan-European quantum network.

India's Samridh Gram Initiative Nominated for WSIS Prizes 2026

What's the News?

India's **Samridh Gram** initiative, an integrated 'phygital' service delivery model, has been nominated for the prestigious **World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) Prizes 2026** under the "Enabling Environment" category. This nomination is a significant global recognition of India's efforts to leverage its digital infrastructure, particularly the **BharatNet** project, to foster inclusive growth and socio-economic empowerment in rural areas. The first **Samridh Kendra** was recently inaugurated at Umri Village in Guna district, Madhya Pradesh, marking a key milestone in expanding digital service delivery.

Samridh Gram: An Integrated Phygital Model

- **Concept:** **Samridh Gram** is an initiative by the **Department of Telecommunications (DoT)**, Ministry of Communications, designed to bridge the rural-urban digital divide. It delivers integrated "phygital" (physical + digital) services to rural citizens, transforming connectivity into a platform for social and economic advancement.
- **Backbone:** The initiative leverages **BharatNet**, the world's largest rural broadband project, for high-speed connectivity.
- **Implementation Model:** It follows a community-based entrepreneurial framework to ensure scalability and sustainability. The pilot phase, supported by the **Telecom Technology Development Fund (TTDF)**, began in 2025.

Samridh Kendras: One-Stop Community Hubs

At the core of the initiative are **Samridh Kendras (SK)**, which function as one-stop community hubs spanning 800-1000 sq. ft. These centres provide assisted access to a wide array of services:

- **Healthcare:** Facilitates teleconsultations via platforms like **e-Sanjeevani** and provides health kiosks for basic diagnostics.
- **Education & Skills:** Equipped with **AR/VR smart classrooms** and labs offering vocational courses from government platforms like **Diksha** and **Swayam**.
- **Smart Agriculture:** Deploys **IoT sensors** for soil monitoring, smart pump controls, and provides drone-based farming assistance.
- **E-Governance & Commerce:** Provides assisted access to government schemes and connects local entrepreneurs to digital commerce platforms like **ONDC**.
- **Connectivity Expansion:** Promotes **Fiber-to-the-Home (FTTH)** connections and **PM-WANI** public Wi-Fi hotspots for last-mile connectivity.

World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS)

- The **WSIS Forum** is a globally recognized, multi-stakeholder platform organized by the **International Telecommunication Union (ITU)** to advance digital development.
- The **WSIS Prizes** celebrate innovative **Information and Communication Technology (ICT)** projects that

contribute to the **UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)**.

- Projects are nominated across 18 different "Action Lines". Samriddh Gram is nominated under **Action Line C6: Enabling Environment**.
- The WSIS Forum 2026 is scheduled to take place in **Geneva**.

BharatNet Project

- Originally launched as the **National Optical Fibre Network (NOFN)** in **October 2011**.
- Renamed as **BharatNet** in **2015**.
- World's largest rural broadband project aiming to connect all **Gram Panchayats** in India.
- Implemented by **Bharat Broadband Network Limited (BBNL)**, which is now merged with **BSNL**.

MeitY Constitutes Technology and Policy Expert Committee

What's the News?

- The **Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY)** has constituted the **Technology and Policy Expert Committee (TPEC)** to provide specialized advisory support to the country's AI governance framework.
- The committee is tasked with assisting the recently formed **AI Governance and Economic Group (AIGEG)** in making informed decisions on policy design, regulatory frameworks, and international engagements.

Technology and Policy Expert Committee (TPEC)?

- **Role:** Acts as a standing advisory body providing technical, legal, and strategic expertise to the **AIGEG**.
- **Functions:**
 - Translates complex technological and policy challenges into actionable insights for the government.
 - Identifies emerging AI trends, technological risks, and regulatory gaps.
 - Offers guidance on India's position in multilateral forums and international AI diplomatic dialogues.
- **Composition:** Includes selected experts from **academic research**, the **technology industry**, and **digital policy** to ensure a multi-disciplinary approach.
- **Objective:** To foster a "contemporary and nuanced understanding" of AI, ensuring that global best practices are adapted to India's unique socio-economic and strategic context.

AI Governance and Economic Group (AIGEG)?

- **Nature:** A high-level **inter-ministerial body** serving as the central institutional mechanism for AI policy development and coordination in India.
- **Leadership:**
 - **Chairperson:** Union Minister for Electronics & IT.
 - **Vice Chairperson:** Minister of State for Electronics & IT.
- **Membership:** Includes the **Principal Scientific Advisor (PSA)**, **Chief Economic Advisor (CEA)**, **CEO**

of **NITI Aayog**, and Secretaries from the **Department of Telecommunications** and other key ministries.

Core Mandate:

- Sets the strategic direction for AI governance and coordinates policy across various government departments.
- Oversees national initiatives in both public and private sectors to promote **Responsible AI**.
- Studies the impact of AI on the **labour market**, including employment shifts and the need for workforce transitioning.

Additional Info

India AI Governance Guidelines:

- The formation of these bodies follows recommendations from the **India AI Governance Guidelines** and the **Economic Survey**.
- The guidelines are founded on seven core principles: **Trust, People First, Innovation over Restraint, Fairness & Equity, Accountability, Understandable by Design, and Safety & Sustainability**.

Mission IndiaAI:

- Part of a broader vision to democratize AI benefits and bolster India's global leadership in technology.
- Focuses on integrating AI with **Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI)** to ensure scalable and inclusive deployment.

Viksit Bharat @2047:

- These institutional frameworks are designed to align AI development with the national goal of becoming a developed nation by **2047**, emphasizing "AI for All."

Fossil Bed from the Holocene Period Discovered

What's the News?

- A significant **fossil bed** dating back to the **middle-to-late Holocene period** (approximately **8,000 to 12,000 years ago**) has been discovered in the **Panaiyur area of Thoothukudi district, Tamil Nadu**.
- The discovery was announced by the Union Minister for Environment, Forest, and Climate Change, **Bhupendra Yadav**, who stated that the find substantially enriches the **Quaternary fossil record of India**.
- The fossil sites were initially exposed following torrential rains in **2023**, after which the **Zoological Survey of India (ZSI)** conducted a detailed field survey to assess and safeguard the site.

Details of the Discovery

- **Location and Revelation:** The fossil bed is located at **Panaiyur** in the Thoothukudi district and was revealed due to heavy rainfall in 2023. The district administration of Thoothukudi requested the ZSI to undertake the scientific survey.
- **Scientific Assessment:** A team from the **Zoological Survey of India (ZSI)** promptly surveyed the area. The Union Environment Ministry commended ZSI for its

"swift and exemplary scientific response" in preserving this piece of natural heritage.

- **Age Confirmation:** Scientific assessments have confirmed that the fossil bed belongs to the Holocene epoch, specifically the middle-to-late phase, making the fossils roughly between 8,000 and 12,000 years old.

Significance of the Find

- **Enriched Quaternary Record:** This discovery is a major addition to India's Quaternary fossil archives, which are crucial for studying the country's most recent geological history.
- **Understanding Ancient Life and Climate:** The fossil bed will provide critical data that helps scientists better understand the **ancient wildlife, environment, and climate** that existed in the region during the transition into the modern epoch.
- **Reconstructing Regional History:** The find is expected to offer new insights into the environmental and climatic patterns of southern India during the Holocene, a period marked by significant shifts in sea levels and the flourishing of human civilization.

Additional Info: The Holocene Epoch

- **Definition:** The **Holocene** is the current geological epoch, and the latter of the two epochs that make up the **Quaternary Period** (the earlier one being the Pleistocene).
- **Timeframe:** It began approximately **11,700 years ago** after the last major ice age and continues to the present day.
- **Key Characteristics:**
 - **Post-Glacial Warming:** The epoch is characterized by a warmer and more stable global climate following the retreat of the ice sheets.
 - **Sea Level Rise:** The melting of large ice sheets caused a significant rise in global sea levels.
 - **Rise of Human Civilization:** This period saw the development of agriculture, permanent human settlements, and the adaptation of modern wildlife to current environments.

ISRO Opens Gaganyaan Astronaut Selection to Civilians for the First Time

What's the News?

- The **Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO)** has decided to open the **second batch of Gaganyaan astronauts to civilians from STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) backgrounds**, breaking from the earlier model of selecting only Indian Air Force (IAF) test pilots. This marks a fundamental shift towards building a **sustained human spaceflight programme** capable of supporting long-term national goals such as the **Bharatiya Antariksh Station (Indian Space Station)** and a **crewed lunar landing by 2040**.

The Gaganyaan Programme: An Overview

- **Gaganyaan** is India's first human spaceflight mission, aiming to demonstrate indigenous capability to launch a crew into a **Low Earth Orbit (LEO)** of **~400 km** and bring them back safely.

- The **first batch of four astronauts**, all IAF test pilots, was selected in 2020 and underwent advanced training at Russia's **Yuri Gagarin Cosmonaut Training Centre** under **Roscosmos**. The training included survival drills, zero-gravity simulations, and spacecraft systems familiarization.
- The first crewed flight (H1 mission) is targeted for **early 2027**, preceded by three uncrewed missions. In the first uncrewed mission, the half-humanoid robot **Vyomitra** will fly as a human proxy to test life-support and other critical systems.

The Second Astronaut Batch

- A dedicated committee on astronaut selection and management has recommended a second batch of **10 astronauts**.
- **Composition:**
 - **Six mission pilots** from a military aviation background (potentially including combat helicopter pilots, in addition to test pilots).
 - **Four civilian specialists** drawn from STEM disciplines.
- This is the first time ISRO will induct civilians into its astronaut corps, a practice common among established spacefaring nations.

Committee & Selection Process

- ISRO has formed a dedicated committee comprising agency officials and current astronauts (**Group Captain Shubhanshu Shukla, Group Captain Ajit Krishnan, Group Captain Angad Pratap**, etc.). The committee is tasked with defining eligibility rules, training modules, and evaluation frameworks.
- A key challenge is adapting international selection standards to Indian conditions. While agencies like NASA often require civilian applicants to hold pilot licences, ISRO acknowledges this can be prohibitively expensive in India and is exploring alternative pathways, such as providing flying training to civilian candidates, without compromising on rigorous medical and psychological evaluations.

Phased Induction: Civilians to Fly from the Fourth Crewed Mission

- The committee has recommended a phased approach:
 - **Early crewed missions (H1, H2, H3):** Crewed exclusively by military-aviation astronauts.
 - **From the fourth crewed mission (H4) onwards:** Civilian STEM specialists will begin flying as part of mission crews.
- This aligns with global precedent—nations typically rely on military pilots until the human-spaceflight technology is mature enough to safely accommodate civilians.

Long-Term Cadre Vision

- The planning assumes a mission tempo of **two crewed flights per year**, with astronauts potentially flying again after a two-year gap. A full turnaround cycle (selection to mission) is estimated at **4.5 years**.
- The committee envisions a progressive expansion of the astronaut pool:
 - **Second batch:** ~10 astronauts (6 pilots, 4 specialists).

- **Third batch:** ~12 astronauts (2 pilots, 10 specialists), to support the **Bharatiya Antariksh Station** where scientific utilisation demands a larger, more diverse astronaut corps.
- **Long-term cadre strength:** Up to **40 astronauts** to account for mission opportunities, attrition, and international collaboration.
- Crew size is proposed to increase from **two to three astronauts** from the seventh crewed mission, enabled by augmenting the Gaganyaan crew module's capacity.

Challenges & Infrastructure Requirements

- ISRO currently operates only a **temporary astronaut training centre** and is yet to set up a full-fledged facility with living quarters and advanced simulators.
- The **Environment Control and Life Support System (ECLSS)** remains a critical technology under development.
- Financial and administrative frameworks—pay grades for civilian astronauts, operational protocols, and training infrastructure—need to be fully in place before the new batch is inducted.
- Readiness for the second batch is targeted within **72 months**, and for the third batch within **96 months**.

Additional Information

- **Gaganyaan Programme: Key Facts**
 - **Objective:** Demonstrate human spaceflight capability to LEO.
 - **Launch Vehicle:** Human-Rated LVM3 (HLVM3).
 - **Crew Module:** Designed to carry 2–3 astronauts for a 3-day mission.
 - **Vyomitra:** A half-humanoid robot designed for microgravity, to fly on the first uncrewed mission to monitor parameters and simulate human functions.
- **Bharatiya Antariksh Station (BAS)**
 - India's planned indigenous space station in LEO.
 - **Configuration:** Five modules. The first module (**BAS-01**) is targeted for launch by **2028** at an estimated cost of **₹1,763 crore**.
 - **Objective:** Provide a microgravity platform for advanced scientific research and technology development.
- **Historical Context**
 - **Rakesh Sharma:** The first Indian citizen to travel to space (1984), flying aboard the Soviet Soyuz T-11 mission.
 - **Wing Commander Rakesh Sharma**, an IAF pilot, underwent training at the same **Yuri Gagarin Cosmonaut Training Centre** in Star City, Russia, where the current Gaganyaan astronauts trained.
- **Constitutional & Policy Framework**
 - **Article 51A (Fundamental Duties):** Clause (h) mentions developing "scientific temper,

humanism and the spirit of inquiry and reform."

- **Article 253:** Empowers Parliament to make laws for implementing international treaties; relevant to India's obligations under the **Outer Space Treaty (1967)**.
- **Space Policy 2023:** Lays down the framework for private sector participation and ISRO's focus on R&D and human spaceflight.

Agriculture

India's Cocoa Self-Sufficiency Roadmap: Targeting 2040 for Aatmanirbhar Bharat

What's the News?

- India has unveiled a strategic roadmap to achieve **cocoa self-sufficiency by 2040**, aiming to reduce import dependence and position the country as a **global cocoa processing hub**.
- A knowledge paper by **Grant Thornton Bharat** in collaboration with **FICCI**, released at the Cocoa Roundtable, outlines a phased approach to boost domestic production, currently meeting only **20-30% of national demand**.
- Annual cocoa imports exceed **\$866 million**, highlighting a critical supply-demand gap; the roadmap aligns with the **Aatmanirbhar Bharat** vision to strengthen agri-value chains and farmer incomes.

The 2040 Cocoa Roadmap: A Phased Strategy

The proposed strategy is structured across four distinct phases with specific targets and interventions:

- Phase 1 (2026-2028) - Foundation & Institutional Strengthening:**
 - Launch of a dedicated **National Mission on Cocoa**.
 - Establishment of a **Centre of Excellence (CoE)** for cocoa research and development.
 - Development of **250 hectares** of polyclonal seed gardens across key growing regions to ensure access to quality planting material.
- Phase 2 (2028-2030) - Capacity Building & Farmer Empowerment:**
 - Focus on training approximately **1 lakh farmers** in improved agronomic practices.
 - Establishment of regional **CoE hubs** for decentralized support.
 - Distribution of an estimated **25 million high-yielding cocoa seedlings**.
 - Introduction of a **pilot digital farmer registry and traceability system** to enhance value chain transparency.
- Phase 3 (2030-2035) - Scaling Production & Infrastructure:**
 - Expansion of the total area under cocoa cultivation to **1 lakh hectares**.
 - Intensification of R&D activities and promotion of domestic cocoa processing infrastructure.
 - Target to meet **at least 50% of domestic demand** through indigenous production.
- *Phase 4 (2035-2040) - Self-Sufficiency & Global Integration:**
 - Achievement of **full self-sufficiency** in cocoa bean production.
 - Positioning India as a **global cocoa processing hub** and transitioning toward a **net exporter** of cocoa products.
 - Implementation of **100% digital traceability** across the supply chain.
 - Significant improvement in farmer incomes through value addition and market linkages.

Structural Challenges in Cocoa Sector?

- Supply-Side Constraints:**
 - Limited access to **high-yielding, disease-resistant planting material**.
 - Long gestation period (3-4 years) and high initial investment deter smallholders.
 - Fragmented extension services and region-specific R&D gaps.
- Policy & Market Gaps:**
 - Inverted duty structure:** Lower tariffs on finished cocoa products vs. raw beans discourage domestic processing.
 - Weak **traceability systems** affect quality certification and export competitiveness.
 - Underutilised processing capacity despite growing domestic demand.
- Demand Projection:**
 - Domestic consumption expected to grow at **5.5% CAGR**, reaching **4.67 lakh tonnes by 2040**.

Additional Info

- Major Producing States:**
 - Andhra Pradesh:** Leading producer in India, particularly known for large-scale cocoa cultivation in oil palm plantations.
 - Kerala, Karnataka, and Tamil Nadu:** Traditional hubs where cocoa is integrated into coconut and arecanut gardens.
- Cultivation Requirements:**
 - Climate:** Requires a tropical climate with temperatures between **15°C and 35°C** and high humidity.
 - Rainfall:** Thrives in areas with well-distributed annual rainfall of **1500mm to 2000mm**.
- Global Market Context:**
 - West Africa accounts for nearly **60%** of the world's cocoa supply. India's move toward self-reliance is a strategic response to the increasing frequency of climate-induced crop failures in that region.

Important Days

World Autism Awareness Day 2026

What's the News?

- **World Autism Awareness Day** observed globally to promote dignity, acceptance, and neuroinclusive policies for autistic individuals.
- **2026 theme:** "*Autism and Humanity – Every Life Has Value*" emphasises equal rights, challenges stigma, and calls for inclusive systems in health, education, and employment.

World Autism Awareness Day 2026?

- **Date & Theme:** Observed on **April 2**, the 2026 theme focuses on "**Moving from Surviving to Thriving**", emphasizing the transition from basic support to ensuring autistic individuals lead fulfilling lives.
- **Significance:** It aims to fulfill the **Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)**, specifically **SDG 4** (Quality Education) and **SDG 10** (Reduced Inequalities).
- **Global Recognition:** First designated by the **United Nations General Assembly** in 2007 to encourage member states to take measures to raise awareness about children with autism throughout the world.

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) & India?

- **Nature of Condition:** A neurological and developmental disorder that affects communication, social interaction, and behavior. It is a "spectrum" condition, meaning it affects every person differently and to varying degrees.
- **Indian Statistics:**
 - Estimates indicate that approximately **1 in 68 children** in India are affected by autism.
 - The prevalence is higher in males than in females, with a ratio of nearly **4:1**.
- **National Significance:** In India, the day is utilized to promote the **Unique Disability ID (UDID)** project, which helps in streamlining government benefits for the neurodivergent population.

Additional Info

- **What is Autism?** Autism, or Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), is a neurodevelopmental condition that typically manifests within the first two years of life. It affects communication, behaviour, and social interaction to varying degrees. The word 'spectrum' is key—autism presents differently in every individual.
- **Historical Background:** The United Nations General Assembly designated **April 2 as World Autism Awareness Day in December 2007** (Resolution A/RES/62/139), with the first observance held in 2008.

International Day of Sport for Development and Peace 2026

What's the News?

- **International Day of Sport for Development and Peace (IDSDP)** observed annually on **April 6** to recognise sport's transformative role in advancing peace, social inclusion, and sustainable development.

- **2026 Theme:** "**Sport: Building Bridges, Breaking Barriers**" — emphasises sport's capacity to foster equality, inclusion, and cross-cultural dialogue while addressing disparities like gender inequality, disability exclusion, and racism.
- Day aligns with **UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development**, highlighting sport as a cost-effective tool to advance **SDG 3** (Health), **SDG 5** (Gender Equality), **SDG 10** (Reduced Inequalities), and **SDG 16** (Peaceful Societies).

Historical Background & Institutional Framework

- **Establishment:** Declared by **UN General Assembly** via **Resolution 67/296** (2013); first observed in 2014.
- **Date Significance:** April 6 marks the opening of the **first modern Olympic Games (1896)**, linking sport to a legacy of global unity.
- **Key Partners:** **International Olympic Committee (IOC)**, **UN Office on Sport for Development and Peace (UNOSDP)**, civil society, and private sector collaborate on implementation.
- **Global Reach:** IOC's **Olympism365** strategy supports **550+** social impact programmes across **189 countries**, reaching millions through sport-based interventions.

Sport as an Enabler of Sustainable Development

- **Policy Recognition:** In 2015, sport formally integrated into **SDG framework**; reinforced in 2024 when all **193 UN Member States** adopted resolution "**Sport as an Enabler of Sustainable Development**".
- **Key Contributions:**
 - **Health & Well-being:** Promotes physical activity, mental health, and disease prevention.
 - **Social Inclusion:** Creates platforms for marginalised groups (women, persons with disabilities, refugees) to participate and lead.
 - **Peacebuilding:** Facilitates dialogue across conflict lines; exemplified by **Olympic Truce** tradition and athlete-led solidarity initiatives.
 - **Education & Skills:** Sport-based programmes enhance literacy, life skills, and employability among youth.
- **Football for the Goals:** UN-led initiative mobilising global football community to align strategies with **SDGs**, leveraging the sport's visibility for advocacy and behavioural change.

Africa in Focus: Dakar 2026 Youth Olympic Games

- **Landmark Event:** First Olympic event hosted on African soil (Youth Olympic Games, Dakar); scheduled for late 2026.
- **Strategic Significance:**
 - Aims to boost youth engagement, infrastructure development, and regional integration.
 - Showcases sport as a driver for economic growth, gender equity, and pan-African cooperation.

- Aligns with **AU Agenda 2063** and continental sport-for-development frameworks.

Additional Info

- **Constitutional & Policy Linkages (India):**
 - **Article 51A(g)** (Fundamental Duties): Encourages citizens to develop scientific temper and spirit of inquiry — sport fosters critical thinking and teamwork.
 - **Khelo India Programme:** Central scheme promoting grassroots sport, talent identification, and infrastructure; aligns with IDSDP objectives of inclusion and health.
 - **Fit India Movement:** National campaign encouraging physical activity; complements global sport-for-development goals.
- **Key Entities:**
 - **UNOSDP:** Coordinates UN system-wide sport-for-development efforts.
 - **Commonwealth Secretariat:** Implements sport-for-development programmes across member states, including India.
 - **Olympic Council of Asia:** Regional body promoting sport as tool for peace and development in Asia.

National Maritime Day 2026

What's the News?

- India observes **National Maritime Day** annually on **April 5** to honour its seafaring legacy and the shipping sector's pivotal role in trade, economy, and strategic security.
- **2026 Theme: "Maritime India – Empowering Progress"** — emphasises port modernisation, sustainable shipping practices, and technological advancement towards a self-reliant maritime ecosystem by 2047.
- Day commemorates the historic **1919 maiden voyage of SS Loyalty** from Mumbai to London, marking India's entry into global shipping and breaking colonial monopoly over sea routes.
- Celebrations include **Sagar Samman Awards**, seminars, and awareness campaigns organised by **Directorate General of Shipping** and **Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways**.

Historical Significance: SS Loyalty's Legacy

- **Milestone Voyage:** SS Loyalty, operated by **Scindia Steam Navigation Company**, sailed from Mumbai to London on April 5, 1919 — first Indian-owned vessel to undertake international commercial voyage.
- **Symbol of Sovereignty:** Voyage challenged British dominance in maritime trade, laying foundation for India's indigenous shipping industry.
- **First Observance:** National Maritime Day officially instituted in **1964**; observed annually since to recognise maritime contributions to national development.

Maritime Sector: Economic and Strategic Backbone

- **Trade Dependency:** Over **90% of India's trade by volume** and **70% by value** moves via sea routes,

underscoring shipping's critical role in economic connectivity.

- **Infrastructure Scale:**
 - **7,500+ km coastline** with strategic location on major global shipping lanes.
 - **12 Major Ports** and **200+ Non-Major Ports** handling cargo, passenger, and energy logistics.
 - India ranks **16th globally** in maritime capacity; among top suppliers of skilled seafarers worldwide.
- **Policy Framework:**
 - **Sagarmala Programme:** Port-led development initiative focusing on infrastructure modernisation, coastal community development, and logistics efficiency.
 - **Maritime Amrit Kaal Vision 2047:** Long-term roadmap for transforming India into a global maritime hub through technology, sustainability, and capacity expansion.

Additional Info

- **Constitutional & Legal Framework:**
 - Entry 25, List I (Union List): Shipping and navigation on national waterways fall under Union jurisdiction.
 - **Major Port Authorities Act, 2021:** Grants greater autonomy to major ports for operational efficiency and private participation.
 - **Coastal Shipping Rules:** Promote short-sea shipping to decongest roads/railways and reduce carbon footprint.
- **Related Initiatives:**
 - **PM Gati Shakti:** Integrates maritime infrastructure with road, rail, and air networks for seamless logistics.
 - **National Logistics Policy:** Aims to reduce logistics costs from ~14% to single digits, with maritime efficiency as a key lever.
 - **Sagar Parikrama:** Coastal outreach programme to engage fishing communities and promote maritime awareness.

Nation Pays Tribute to Martyrs on 107th Anniversary of Jallianwala Bagh Massacre

What's the News?

India observed the **107th anniversary** of the **Jallianwala Bagh massacre**, a watershed moment in the Indian freedom struggle. On this day in **1919**, British troops under **Brigadier-General Reginald Dyer** opened fire on a peaceful gathering of unarmed civilians in Amritsar, Punjab. **President Droupadi Murmu**, **Prime Minister Narendra Modi**, and other leaders paid homage to the martyrs, underscoring the event's enduring legacy in shaping India's resolve for **Swaraj** (self-rule).

The Jallianwala Bagh Massacre: An Overview

The event was a brutal act of colonial repression that fundamentally altered the course of the Indian independence movement, shifting its goal from seeking dominion status to demanding complete freedom.

- **Context and Prelude:**
 - **The Rowlatt Act, 1919:** Also known as the "**Black Act**," this legislation allowed the British government to arrest and detain any person suspected of sedition without trial for up to two years.
 - **Rowlatt Satyagraha:** Mahatma Gandhi launched a nationwide satyagraha against the Act, leading to widespread protests and heightened tensions.
 - **Arrest of Leaders:** The arrest of popular local leaders Dr. Saifuddin Kitchlew and Dr. Satyapal in Amritsar triggered protests and violence, prompting the imposition of martial law under General Dyer.
- **The Day of the Massacre (April 13, 1919):**
 - **The Gathering:** Thousands of people, including men, women, and children, assembled at Jallianwala Bagh, a walled garden. Many were attending the Baisakhi festival, while others had gathered for a peaceful protest.
 - **The Action:** Without warning or an order to disperse, General Dyer entered with **50 troops**, sealed the only narrow exit, and ordered sustained firing.
 - **Duration and Ammunition:** Troops fired for approximately **10 minutes**, expending over **1,600 rounds** of ammunition into the trapped crowd.
 - **Casualties:** Official British figures placed the death toll at **379**, but Indian estimates and subsequent inquiries suggested the number exceeded **1,000**, with over **1,200 injured**. Many died in a stampede or by jumping into the garden's well to escape bullets.
- **Aftermath and Imperial Response:**
 - **"Crawling Order":** Dyer imposed humiliating punishments, including an order forcing Indians to crawl through a street where a British missionary had been assaulted.
 - **Hunter Commission:** A British inquiry committee censured Dyer's actions, but he was not criminally prosecuted. He was, in fact, celebrated as a hero by some imperial loyalists in Britain.
 - **Indian Outrage:** The massacre and the subsequent exoneration of Dyer caused deep and lasting anger across India.

Impact on India's Freedom Struggle

The massacre served as a pivotal turning point with profound consequences for the nationalist movement.

- **Shift to Complete Independence:** The sheer brutality of the event convinced leaders like Mahatma Gandhi that British rule was inherently immoral and "satanic." It directly catalyzed the launch of the **Non-Cooperation Movement (1920-22)**, marking a decisive shift from seeking reform to demanding **Purna Swaraj** (complete independence).
- **Unifying Force:** The tragedy united Indians across class, caste, and religious lines against a common colonial oppressor, bridging significant social divides.

- **Inspiration for Revolutionaries:** The memory of Jallianwala Bagh became a driving force for a new generation of revolutionaries. **Bhagat Singh** was deeply influenced by the event, and **Udham Singh** would later assassinate **Michael O'Dwyer** (the Lieutenant Governor of Punjab who endorsed Dyer's actions) in London in 1940 as an act of vengeance.
- **Symbolic Protests:** In a powerful act of dissent, Nobel laureate **Rabindranath Tagore** renounced his **Knighthood**, and Mahatma Gandhi returned his **Kaiser-i-Hind gold medal**.

India Observes 18th National Civil Services Day

What's the News?

- India commemorated the **18th National Civil Services Day** to honor the contributions of its civil servants, often hailed as the "**Steel Frame of India**."
- The central event was held at **Vigyan Bhawan, New Delhi**, organized by the **Department of Administrative Reforms and Public Grievances (DARPG)**, where the Vice-President delivered the keynote address.

Theme for 2026

"Viksit Bharat: Citizen-Centric Governance and Development at the Last Mile"

- **Vision Alignment:** The theme for the 18th Civil Services Day is "**Viksit Bharat: Citizen-Centric Governance and Development at the Last Mile**."
- **Core Focus:** This theme aligns with the broader vision of "**Viksit Bharat 2047**," underscoring the government's commitment to transparent, accountable, and citizen-centric governance, with a strong emphasis on inclusive development and last-mile delivery.

Prime Minister's Awards for Excellence in Public Administration (PMAEPA)

- **Purpose:** The **Prime Minister's Awards for Excellence in Public Administration (PMAEPA)** are conferred annually to acknowledge, recognize, and reward extraordinary and innovative work done by districts and organizations of the Central and State Governments.
- **2026 Categories:** The awards were presented under three key categories:
 - **Holistic Development of Districts:** For districts achieving overall progress in development indicators through coordinated governance.
 - **Aspirational Blocks Programme:** For blocks showing significant improvement in socio-economic indicators and efficient service delivery at the grassroots level.
 - **Innovation Category:** For innovative practices that improve governance quality and strengthen citizen-centric service delivery systems.
- **Selection and Recognition:** The selection involves a multi-tiered process including Screening and Expert Committees, with final approval by the Cabinet Secretary and the Prime Minister. Each award includes a trophy, a scroll, and **₹20 lakh** to support public welfare initiatives.

Additional Info

• Historical Significance:

- **Date:** National Civil Services Day is observed every year on **April 21**. This date marks the day in **1947** when **Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel**, India's first Home Minister, addressed the first batch of civil service probationers at Metcalfe House in Delhi.
- **"Steel Frame of India":** It was during this historic address that Sardar Patel famously referred to the civil services as the **"Steel Frame of India,"** a term that has since defined the role and responsibility of the bureaucracy in the nation's administrative framework.
- **Formal Declaration:** The day was formally declared by the Government of India as National Civil Services Day in **2006** and was first officially observed at Vigyan Bhawan, New Delhi.

• Historical Evolution:

- **Lord Cornwallis** is regarded as the **"Father of Indian Civil Services"** for introducing merit-based reforms during British rule.
- Post-independence, the **Indian Administrative Service (IAS)** and **Indian Police Service (IPS)** were constituted under the **All India Services Act, 1951**.

• Constitutional Basis:

- **All India Services (IAS, IPS, IFoS)** are established under **Article 312** of the Constitution.
- **Union Public Service Commission (UPSC)** conducts recruitment under **Articles 315-323**.

• Mission Karmayogi:

- Formally known as the **National Programme for Civil Services Capacity Building (NPCSCB)**.
- It aims to transition from a "rules-based" to a "roles-based" human resource management system.
- Focused on building a creative, proactive, and technology-enabled civil service.

World Earth Day 2026: "Our Power, Our Planet"

What's the News?

- **World Earth Day** is observed annually on **April 22** to promote environmental protection, climate action, and sustainable development globally.
- The **2026 theme, "Our Power, Our Planet,"** emphasises community-led action, accelerating the transition to **renewable energy**, and strengthening accountability for environmental degradation.
- Over **1 billion people across 190+ countries** participate in Earth Day activities, making it the world's largest civic environmental observance.

Historical Evolution & Global Impact

• Origins (1970):

- Founded by **US Senator Gaylord Nelson** following the 1969 Santa Barbara oil spill
- Organised by activist **Denis Hayes**; mobilised 20 million Americans in rallies and teach-ins.
- Catalysed creation of the **US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)** and landmark laws: **Clean Air Act, Clean Water Act**.

• Global Expansion:

- **1990:** Earth Day went global with participation from **141 countries** and 200 million people.
- **2016:** **175 world leaders** signed the **Paris Climate Agreement** on Earth Day, reinforcing its role in global climate governance.

• Current Reach:

- Activities span **193 countries**, including tree plantations, clean-up drives, policy dialogues, and youth-led climate campaigns.

Theme 2026: "Our Power, Our Planet" – Key Focus Areas

• Renewable Energy Transition:

- Calls for **tripling global renewable energy capacity by 2030** to limit warming to 1.5°C
- Promotes decentralised solar, wind, and green hydrogen solutions for energy access and security

• Community-Led Climate Action:

- Highlights role of **local communities, educators, and workers** in driving sustainability beyond top-down policies
- Encourages behavioural shifts: waste reduction, energy conservation, sustainable consumption

• Policy Accountability:

- Urges governments to strengthen environmental regulations and reverse recent rollbacks (~400 weakened laws globally)
- Supports integration of **climate literacy** into education systems and civic engagement programmes

India's Alignment: Policies & Initiatives

• National Frameworks:

- **National Action Plan on Climate Change (NAPCC):** Eight missions including **National Solar Mission, Green India Mission, and Sustainable Habitat**
- **LIFE Mission (Lifestyle for Environment):** Promotes individual-level sustainable practices aligned with Earth Day principles

• International Leadership:

- **International Solar Alliance (ISA):** Co-founded by India and France; targets **\$1 trillion in solar investments by 2030**
- **Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure (CDRI):** Supports climate-resilient infrastructure in vulnerable nations

• Grassroots Implementation:

- **Swachh Bharat Mission 2.0:** Focus on scientific waste management and plastic waste reduction

- **Amrit Dharohar and MISHTI:** Wetland and mangrove conservation schemes enhancing carbon sinks

National Panchayati Raj Day 2026

What's the News?

- **National Panchayati Raj Day (NPRD) 2026** was observed across India on **April 24, 2026**, to commemorate the constitutionalisation of local self-government.
- The day marks the enactment of the **73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992**, which came into force on **April 24, 1993**, granting constitutional status to Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs).
- The Ministry of Panchayati Raj organised a national event at Vigyan Bhawan, New Delhi, centred around the theme of **"Action-Oriented Governance"** for a developed India.

Theme: "Sashakt Panchayat, Sarvangeen Vikas"

- The official theme for National Panchayati Raj Day 2026 was **"Sashakt Panchayat, Sarvangeen Vikas"** (Empowered Panchayats, Holistic Development).
- **Core Focus Areas:**
 - Localisation of **Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)**.
 - Enhancing **digital governance** through platforms like **e-GramSwaraj**.
 - Contributing towards the vision of **"Viksit Bharat" (Developed India) by 2047**.

Significance of the Day

- **Constitutional Recognition:** Commemorates the **73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992**, which established a structured three-tier system of local self-government.
- **Grassroots Democracy:** Reinforces the importance of democratic power at the grassroots level, empowering **over 3.1 million elected representatives** in more than **2.5 lakh Panchayats** across India.
- **Promotion of Decentralisation:** Highlights the role of Panchayats in implementing schemes related to agriculture, education, health, and infrastructure.
- **Empowerment:** Underscores the role of constitutional provisions in empowering women and marginalised groups through reservation.

Additional Info

- **73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992:**
 - **Enactment:** Passed by Parliament in December 1992; came into force on 24 April 1993.
 - **Constitutional Provisions:** Added **Part IX (Articles 243 to 243O)** and the **11th Schedule** to the Constitution.
 - **Three-Tier Structure:** Mandated the formation of PRIs at Village (Gram Panchayat), Intermediate/Block (Panchayat Samiti), and District (Zila Parishad) levels.
 - **Reservations:** Seats reserved for Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and **not less than one-third of seats for women**.

- **Elections & Finance:** Mandated elections every five years, **State Election Commissions** to oversee polls, and **State Finance Commissions** (every 5 years) to recommend principles for sharing finances between the State and Panchayats.

- **11th Schedule:** Lists **29 subjects** (e.g., agriculture, land improvement, minor irrigation, animal husbandry, fisheries, social forestry, drinking water, roads, rural electrification, poverty alleviation programmes) for devolution to Panchayats.
- **Gram Sabha:** Recognised as the foundation of the Panchayati Raj system, comprising all adult members registered as voters in the village.

Evolution of Local Governance:

- **Ancient Roots:** Village councils, traditionally called 'Panchayats' (from 'Panch', meaning five), were responsible for local administration.
- **Colonial Era:** The system was disrupted under early British rule.
- **1870: Lord Mayo's Resolution** introduced elected representatives in urban municipalities.
- **1882: Lord Ripon's Resolution**, known as the **"Magna Carta of Local Self-Government"**, aimed to transfer administrative and financial responsibilities to local bodies.
- **1957: The Balwantrai Mehta Committee** recommended a three-tier Panchayati Raj system.
- **October 2, 1959:** The first Gram Panchayat was established at **Nagaur, Rajasthan** by PM Jawaharlal Nehru.
- **2010:** PM Manmohan Singh declared April 24 as the first National Panchayati Raj Day.

Digital Initiatives:

- **e-GramSwaraj:** A digital platform under the **e-Panchayat Mission Mode Project (MMP)** to enhance transparency and efficiency in Panchayat administration, covering planning, budgeting, and asset management.
- **SVAMITVA Scheme:** A scheme using drone survey technology to map rural inhabited land, providing villagers with 'Record of Rights' to their properties.
- **PANCHAM Chatbot:** An AI-powered chatbot launched by the Ministry to assist Panchayat functionaries and citizens with queries related to PRI functioning and schemes.

Constitutional Status:

- Part IX of the Constitution (Articles 243–243O) deals exclusively with Panchayats.
- **Article 40** (Part IV, Directive Principles of State Policy) directs the State to organise village panchayats and endow them with powers to function as units of self-government—this was operationalised through the 73rd Amendment.

State Affairs

Odisha Police Awarded President's Colour for Service Excellence

What's the News?

- **President Droupadi Murmu** has approved the conferment of the **President's Police Colour** on **Odisha Police**, the highest institutional honour for police forces in India.
- The recognition acknowledges exceptional service in **law and order maintenance, crime prevention, anti-Maoist operations**, and **citizen-centric policing reforms**.
- Announcement coincides with **Odisha Police's 90th Foundation Day** (established 1936), symbolising institutional evolution and operational excellence.
- Award recommended by **Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA)** after rigorous evaluation of performance metrics and service records.

President's Police Colour: Significance & Criteria?

- **Highest honour:** Also known as '**Nishaan**', awarded to military/police units for sustained exemplary service to the nation.
- **Eligibility criteria** (MHA SOP):
 - Force must be **at least 15 years old** with distinct identity and operational autonomy.
 - Demonstrated excellence in **discipline, bravery, professionalism, and public trust**.
 - Proven record in **modern policing**, technology adoption, welfare measures, and gender inclusion.
- **Symbolism:** Ceremonial flag bearing unique insignia reflecting regional ethos; recipients wear special emblem on uniform sleeve as mark of distinction.
- **Rarity:** Only select police forces in India have received this honour, underscoring its prestige.

Odisha Police: Performance Highlights?

- **Operational achievements:**
 - Effective **anti-Naxal operations** in red-corridor districts (Koraput, Malkangiri, Sundargarh).
 - Adoption of **technology-driven policing:** AI-based surveillance, integrated command centres, and digital grievance redressal.
 - **Community policing initiatives:** *Mo Sarkar*, *DISHA* camps, and women's safety programmes enhancing public trust.
- **Institutional reforms:**
 - Modernised training infrastructure at **Odisha Police Academy** and specialised wings for cybercrime, forensic science, and disaster response.
 - Focus on **personnel welfare**, mental health support, and capacity building aligned with **Mission Karmayogi** principles.
- **Data point:** Odisha Police serves a population of **~4.8 crore** across **30 districts**, managing complex challenges from coastal security to tribal insurgency.

Additional Info:

- **Historical Context:**

- The **Odisha Police** was established as a separate entity in **1936**, coinciding with the formation of the Odisha province.
- Its official motto is "**Service and Security**".
- **The 'Nishaan' Legacy:**
 - The **Indian Navy** was the first Indian armed force to receive the President's Colour in **1951**.
 - Other state police forces that have received this honour include **Uttar Pradesh, Delhi, Maharashtra, Assam, Himachal Pradesh**, and **Haryana**.
- **Procedural Detail:**
 - The award will be formally presented during a ceremonial parade, where a unique flag incorporating the state's cultural heritage will be unveiled.
 - It places Odisha Police in an elite group of state forces recognized for **long-term excellence**.

Dispute Over Sijimali Bauxite Mining and Tribal Rights in Odisha

What's the News?

- Severe clashes have been reported between police personnel and tribal communities in the **Rayagada district** of Odisha.
- The conflict escalated during the construction of a road project connected to the **Sijimali Bauxite Mine**.
- Local tribal groups are resisting the mining operations, raising concerns over land alienation, environmental damage, and the violation of traditional rights.

Sijimali Bauxite Mine Project?

- **Location:** The mining block is situated across the **Rayagada** and **Kalahandi** districts of Odisha, involving the ecologically sensitive **Mali hills**.
- **Project Allocation:** The block was successfully auctioned to **Vedanta Limited** by the **Government of Odisha** to secure raw material for its alumina refineries.
- **Data & Metrics:**
 - **Estimated Reserves:** The Sijimali mine holds approximately **311 million tonnes** of bauxite.
 - **Lease Area:** The project covers roughly **1,549 hectares** of land.
 - **Economic Value:** Odisha currently contributes over **50%** of India's total bauxite production, making this project critical for the national aluminum industry.

Core Issues and Protests

- **Tribal Displacement:** Members of the **Kondh** and other tribal communities fear the loss of their ancestral lands and sacred sites located on the hills.
- **Legal Violations:** Protesters allege that the mining process bypasses mandatory consultations with the **Gram Sabhas** (Village Councils).
- **Environmental Concerns:**

- Potential destruction of perennial water streams that sustain local agriculture.
- Loss of biodiversity in the Eastern Ghats region.
- **Security Tensions:** The deployment of large security forces to facilitate survey and road construction has led to a breakdown in communication between the administration and the local populace.

Legal Framework & Consent Controversy

- **Forest Rights Act, 2006 & PESA:**
 - Mandates **Gram Sabha consent** for land diversion in **Scheduled Areas** for development projects.
 - Administration claims **unanimous approval** from 8 Gram Sabhas (Dec 2023); villagers allege **forged signatures** and **non-consultative processes**.
- **Forest Clearance Status:**
 - **Stage-I (in-principle) clearance** granted by Centre with conditions (compensatory afforestation, fund deposition).
 - **Stage-II (final) clearance** pending; subject to compliance and resolution of tribal consent disputes.
- **Judicial Precedent:**
 - **Supreme Court (2013, Niyamgiri case):** Ruled that **Gram Sabha consent is mandatory** for mining in Scheduled Areas; all 12 Gram Sabhas subsequently rejected Vedanta's proposal.

Mahanadi Water Disputes Tribunal Issues Final Warning to Odisha and Chhattisgarh

What's the News?

- The **Mahanadi Water Disputes Tribunal (MWDT)** has issued a final warning to **Odisha** and **Chhattisgarh** to reach a mutual water-sharing agreement, expressing strong dissatisfaction over repeated adjournments and the failure to present a concrete settlement proposal.
- The tribunal has set **May 2, 2026**, as the last opportunity for both states to finalise minutes of the technical committee meeting on annual water availability; failing a consensus, the MWDT will proceed to deliver a **merit-based judgment** with its own water-sharing formula.
- The Centre has extended the tribunal's tenure by **9 months**, with a new deadline of **January 13, 2027**, for submission of its report and decision.

Mahanadi Water Disputes Tribunal (MWDT)

- **Constitution:** Established on **March 12, 2018**, by the Central Government under the **Inter-State River Water Disputes (ISRWD) Act, 1956**, following a complaint filed by Odisha seeking adjudication of the inter-state water-sharing conflict.
- **Composition:** Headed by Chairperson **Justice Bela M. Trivedi**, with members **Ravi Ranjan** and **Indermeet Kaur Kochhar**.
- **Recent Developments:**
 - The tribunal completed a five-day site inspection visit to Odisha, examining key

locations linked to the Mahanadi river basin, including the **Chilika Lake**.

- Despite assertions of efforts towards an amicable resolution, no substantive proposal has been placed on record before the tribunal.
- The convener of **Mahanadi Bachao Andolan**, Sudarshan Das, expressed disappointment that even after eight years of the tribunal's existence, reliable data on water availability has not been submitted.

The Mahanadi River

- **Origin:** Near **Pharsiya village** in **Nagri Sihawa**, Dhamtari district, Chhattisgarh, at an elevation of approximately **442 metres** above sea level.
- **Length:** Ranges between **851 km and 900 km**.
- **Course:** Flows through **Chhattisgarh** and **Odisha** before draining into the **Bay of Bengal**.
- **Drainage Basin:** Covers an area of approximately **1,32,100 sq. km** to **1,41,600 sq. km**, representing about **4.28%** of India's total geographical area.
- **Key Tributaries:**
 - **Left Bank:** **Shivnath, Hasdeo, Mand, and Ib.**
 - **Right Bank:** **Jonk, Ong, and Tel.**
- **Major Geological Features:**
 - **Hirakud Dam:** Located near Sambalpur, it is the **longest earthen dam in the world** (26 km including dykes) and was India's first major multipurpose river valley project after independence.
 - **Hirakud Reservoir:** The largest artificial lake in Asia, covering **784 sq. km** at full capacity.
 - **Satkosia Gorge:** A 64-km long gorge where the river cuts through the Eastern Ghats.
 - **Mahanadi Delta:** A combined delta formed with the Brahmani River, entering the sea through channels like the Kathjori, Birupa, and Devi.
- **Water & Hydropower Potential:**
 - Annual surface water potential: **66.9 cubic km**, of which **50 cubic km** is usable.
 - Hydropower potential assessed at **627 MW** at 60% load factor.
 - The valley supports **80,000 sq. km** of cultivable area, making it a vital agricultural zone.
- **Discharge:** During peak monsoon, discharge rate reaches **2 million cubic feet per second**, comparable to the Ganges.

Genesis of the Dispute

- The dispute in its current form dates back to **2016**, when Odisha alleged that Chhattisgarh had **unilaterally constructed multiple barrages** in the upper catchment areas of the Mahanadi, resulting in reduced water flow into Odisha during non-monsoon seasons.
- Odisha contended that Chhattisgarh's actions violated a **1983 agreement** between Odisha and undivided Madhya Pradesh, which mandated supervision of projects on the river by a **Joint Control Board (JCB)**.

When Chhattisgarh was carved out of Madhya Pradesh in **2000**, it inherited both the river and the conflict.

- The Mahanadi sustains irrigation, hydropower, and fisheries across at least **20 of Odisha's 30 districts**; Odisha, as the lower riparian state, argues that reduced flows threaten its agricultural economy and drinking water security.

Additional Info

- **Inter-State River Water Disputes (ISRWD) Act, 1956:**
 - Provides for the adjudication of disputes relating to waters of inter-state rivers through ad hoc Water Disputes Tribunals constituted by the Central Government.
 - Once constituted, the tribunal investigates the matters referred to it and submits a report with its decision to the Central Government; the decision is **binding on the states involved**.
 - Under the Act as amended in 2002, tribunals are required to give their decision within **three years**, which may be extended by the Centre.
- **Mahanadi Bachao Andolan (MBA):**
 - A civil society organisation fighting for the protection of the Mahanadi River and securing Odisha's proper share of its waters.
 - Led by convenor **Sudarshan Das**, the MBA has organised satyagrahas and dharnas (including at Jantar Mantar, New Delhi) to press for the constitution of a tribunal and timely resolution of the dispute.
- **River Boards Act, 1956:** Provides for the establishment of River Boards for regulation and development of inter-state rivers and river valleys; however, no River Board has been constituted for the Mahanadi.
- **Other Major Tribunals:** As of 2023, **9 water disputes tribunals** have been constituted under the ISRWD Act, of which **5 have been dissolved** after adjudication. Active tribunals include those for **Krishna, Cauvery, Mahanadi**, and **Mahadayi** water disputes.

Defence

INS Aridhaman Commissioned

What's the News?

- **INS Aridhaman**, India's third indigenous **nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarine (SSBN)**, has been commissioned into the Indian Navy
- The submarine was formally inducted by **Defence Minister Rajnath Singh** at Visakhapatnam
- Alongside INS Aridhaman, the stealth frigate **INS Taragiri** was also commissioned under **Project 17A**
- With this induction, India now has three operational ballistic missile submarines for the first time - **INS Arihant**, **INS Arighaat**, and **INS Aridhaman**

Nuclear-Powered Ballistic Missile Submarine?

Overview

- **SSBNs** form the sea-based leg of India's **nuclear triad** (land, air, and sea-based nuclear delivery systems)
- These submarines are the **most survivable** component of nuclear deterrence due to their stealth and ability to remain submerged for extended periods
- They provide **second-strike capability** - the ability to retaliate with nuclear weapons even after a first strike on land and air assets

Key Specifications of INS Aridhaman

- **Displacement:** ~7,000 tonnes (larger than predecessors)
- **Missile tubes:** 8 vertical launch tubes (double the capacity of INS Arihant and INS Arighaat)
- **Reactor:** 83 MW pressurised light-water nuclear reactor
- **Endurance:** Can stay submerged for months (limited mainly by food supplies)
- **Stealth features:** Enhanced acoustic signature reduction making it harder to detect

Missile Capability

- **K-15 SLBMs:** Range ~750 km (can carry up to 24)
- **K-4 SLBMs:** Range ~3,500 km (can carry 8)
- Future potential for longer-range systems

Strategic Significance

- **Nuclear triad completion:** India joins an elite group of nations (US, Russia, China, UK, France) with full nuclear triad capabilities
- **Enhanced deterrence:** Bigger, quieter, and deadlier than predecessors - strengthens credible minimum deterrence posture
- **Indo-Pacific presence:** Bolsters India's maritime security amid growing regional competition
- **Indigenous development:** Built under the classified **Advanced Technology Vessel (ATV)** project at Visakhapatnam

Additional Info

Arihant-Class Submarines Timeline

- **INS Arihant:** Commissioned in **2016** - first deterrence patrol in **2018**
- **INS Arighaat:** Commissioned in **2024** - technologically more advanced than Arihant

- **INS Aridhaman:** Commissioned in **2026** - largest and most advanced of the class
- **S4 (fourth submarine):** Under construction with even larger capacity for K-4 missiles

India's Nuclear Doctrine

- **"No First Use" policy:** Nuclear weapons reserved solely for deterrence and retaliation
- **Credible minimum deterrence:** Maintains sufficient nuclear capability to inflict unacceptable damage on any aggressor

Related Programs

- **SSN Programme:** India is also pursuing nuclear-powered attack submarines (not ballistic missile carriers)
 - Plans to build **2 indigenous SSNs**
 - **1 Russian lease:** Expected by **2027-28**

INS Taragiri (Commissioned Alongside)

- **Project 17A** stealth frigate built by **Mazagon Dock Shipbuilders Limited**
- **Displacement:** 6,670 tonnes
- **Indigenous content:** Over **75%**
- Features advanced missile systems, anti-submarine warfare capabilities, and modern combat management system

Exercise Cyclone-IV: India-Egypt Special Forces Joint Drill

What's the News?

- The **Indian Army** contingent has departed for Egypt to participate in **Exercise Cyclone-IV**, the fourth edition of the joint special forces exercise between India and Egypt.
- The drill focuses on enhancing **interoperability, joint mission planning, and counter-terrorism operations** in desert and semi-desert terrains.
- This exercise reinforces the **Strategic Partnership** between India and Egypt, aligning with India's **Look West Policy** and maritime security interests in the **Red Sea** and **Suez Canal** region.

Exercise Cyclone-IV

- **Nature and Scope:**
 - This is a **Special Forces specific** exercise focusing on high-intensity tactical operations in desert and semi-desert terrain.
 - **Mode:** The exercise alternates between India and Egypt. The previous edition (Cyclone-III) was held in **Mahajan Field Firing Ranges, Rajasthan**.
- **Primary Objectives:**
 - **Counter-Terrorism Operations:** Joint planning and execution of raids, hostage rescue missions, and precision strikes against terrorist camps.
 - **Desert Warfare Tactics:** Sharing expertise in navigation, camouflage, and survival in extreme arid environments—a specialty of the Egyptian Al-Sa'iqa forces.

- **Employment of Advanced Technology:** Integration of **Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs)** and **loitering munitions** for intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR).
- **Tactical Drills Covered:**
 - **Free-Fall Combat Jumps:** High Altitude Low Opening (HALO) and High Altitude High Opening (HAHO) parachute infiltration techniques.
 - **Close Quarter Battle (CQB):** Indoor combat simulation and room intervention drills.

Additional Info

- **India's Major Joint Exercises in 2026:**
 - **Garuda Shakti** (with **Indonesia**): Army Special Forces.
 - **Sada Tanseeq** (with **Saudi Arabia**): Army.
 - **Vajra Prahar** (with **US**): Army Special Forces.
 - **Samudra Shakti** (with **Indonesia**): Navy.
- **Egyptian Al-Sa'iqa Forces:**
 - Established in **1955**, the Al-Sa'iqa ("Thunderbolt") forces are elite commando units of the Egyptian Army, modelled initially on Soviet **Spetsnaz** and **US Green Beret** doctrines.
 - They specialize in long-range reconnaissance, surgical strikes, and anti-terror operations in the **Sinai Peninsula**.

India-Uzbekistan Joint Military Exercise DUSTLIK 2026 Commences

What's the News?

The **7th** edition of the bilateral joint military exercise "**DUSTLIK**" between **India** and **Uzbekistan** commenced on **April 12, 2026**. The exercise is being held at the **Gurumsaray Field Training Area** in **Namangan**, **Uzbekistan**, and will continue until **April 25, 2026**. An Indian Army contingent has departed for Uzbekistan to participate in the drills, aimed at bolstering defence cooperation and interoperability between the two nations.

Exercise DUSTLIK: An Overview

Exercise DUSTLIK (meaning "Friendship") is an annual feature in the defence calendar of India and Uzbekistan, symbolizing their growing strategic partnership in Central Asia.

- **Nature and Frequency:**
 - It is an **annual bilateral military exercise** conducted alternately in India and Uzbekistan.
 - The **6th** edition was held in **April 2025** at the **Foreign Training Node, Aundh (Pune)** in India.
 - The **7th** edition (**2026**) is being hosted by Uzbekistan.
- **Composition of Forces:**
 - **Indian Contingent:** Comprises **60 personnel**, including **45 troops** from the **Indian Army** (primarily from a battalion of the **MAHAR Regiment**) and **15 personnel** from the **Indian Air Force (IAF)**.

- **Uzbekistan Contingent:** Also consists of approximately **60 personnel**, drawn from the **Uzbekistan Army** and **Air Force**.
- **Objectives and Operational Focus:**
 - The primary aim is to enhance **joint operational capabilities** in **semi-mountainous terrain**.
 - Focus areas include joint planning, joint tactical drills, special arms skills, and a high degree of physical fitness.
 - The exercise seeks to establish a unified command-and-control framework for coordinated operations between the two forces.
 - Specific tactical drills will include **land navigation**, **strike missions on enemy positions**, and **seizure of hostile areas**.

Additional Info

- **India-Uzbekistan Defence Cooperation:**
 - Uzbekistan is a key partner in India's **Extended Neighbourhood Policy** in Central Asia.
 - The two countries have a robust defence relationship, which includes Joint Working Groups on Defence and regular military exchanges.
 - Besides DUSTLIK, both nations also participate in other multilateral military engagements.
- **Other Indian Exercises:**
 - **Yudh Abhyas:** India-USA.
 - **Shakti:** India-France.
 - **Vajra Prahar:** India-USA (Special Forces).
 - **Surya Kiran:** India-Nepal.
 - **Mitra Shakti:** India-Sri Lanka.

India-Sri Lanka DIVEX 2026 Strengthens Maritime Cooperation

What's the News?

- **INS Nireekshak**, an Indian Navy diving support vessel, arrived in **Colombo, Sri Lanka**, to participate in the **fourth** edition of the bilateral diving exercise **IN-SLN DIVEX 2026**.
- The exercise is being hosted by the **Sri Lanka Navy** and will involve specialised underwater operations and training drills over **seven days**.
- India will hand over **two BHISM cubes** (portable medical units) under the **Aarogya Maitri** initiative, and provide **50,000 rounds of 9 mm ammunition** to the Sri Lankan Navy to enhance operational readiness.
- The engagement reinforces India's role as a **preferred security partner** and **first responder** in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR).

IN-SLN DIVEX 2026

- **Type:** Specialised bilateral naval exercise focused on **diving and underwater operations**.
- **Participants:** Elite diving units of the **Indian Navy** and the **Sri Lanka Navy**.
- **Objective:**
 - Enhance **interoperability** during underwater salvage, search and rescue missions.

- Strengthen coordination in the **Indian Ocean Region (IOR)**.
- Facilitate exchange of **best practices** between the two maritime forces.
- **Host:** Sri Lanka (Colombo).
- **Duration:** Seven days of intensive underwater drills and professional interactions.

Key Features

- **Specialised Drills:** Underwater training exercises simulating real-world contingencies, including clearing of shipping lanes.
- **High-Level Dialogue:** Commander Sailesh Tyagi, Commanding Officer of INS Nireekshak, held strategic discussions with **Rear Admiral SJ Kumara**, Flag Officer Commanding Western Naval Area (Sri Lanka Navy).
- **Camaraderie Building:** Social interactions, sports fixtures, and joint **yoga sessions** to foster personal bonds between personnel.

MAHASAGAR Vision & SAGAR Policy

- **MAHASAGAR** (Mutual and Holistic Advancement for Security and Growth Across Regions) is India's maritime cooperation framework aimed at promoting **collective growth and regional security**.
- The exercise is a practical application of India's **SAGAR** (Security and Growth for All in the Region) policy, which positions India as a **net security provider** and **first responder** in the neighbourhood.
- Both frameworks underscore India's commitment to a **free, open and inclusive Indo-Pacific**, with a focus on the **Global South**.

BHISM Cubes & Humanitarian Outreach

- **BHISM** (Bharat Health Initiative for Sahyog Hita & Maitri) cubes are compact, portable medical units.
- ***Capabilities:**
 - Can handle up to **200 emergency cases**.
 - Equipped with essential medicines and **basic surgical facilities**.
- Handed over under the **Aarogya Maitri initiative**, India's flagship programme for providing medical aid to partner countries during emergencies.
- **Significance:** Demonstrates India's soft-power approach and commitment to **humanitarian assistance** in the IOR.

Security Assistance

- **50,000 rounds of 9 mm ammunition** to be provided to the Sri Lanka Navy.
- **Aim:** Bolster the operational readiness of Sri Lanka's naval forces, further cementing **defence cooperation** between the two nations.

INS Nireekshak: Role & Capabilities

- Type: **Diving Support & Submarine Rescue Vessel (DSRV support)**
- Key Features:
 - Equipped with **deep-sea diving systems & recompression chambers**
 - Supports **submarine rescue operations**
 - Enables **saturation diving missions**
- Significance:
 - Critical for **search & rescue, underwater inspection, and diver training**

- Demonstrates India's **advanced maritime capabilities**

7th Edition of India-Uzbekistan Joint Military Exercise DUSTLIK Concludes Successfully

What's the News?

- The seventh edition of the annual bilateral military exercise '**DUSTLIK**' between India and Uzbekistan concluded at the **Gurumsaray Field Training Area** in Namangan, Uzbekistan.
- The exercise took place from April 12 to April 25, 2026.
- The Indian contingent comprised **60 personnel**, with 45 from the Indian Army (primarily a battalion of the **Mahar Regiment**) and 15 from the Indian Air Force. An approximately equal number of personnel represented the Uzbekistan Army and Air Force.

Exercise DUSTLIK: An Overview

- **Nature:** DUSTLIK is an **annual bilateral training event** conducted alternately in India and Uzbekistan.
- **Previous Edition:** The 2025 edition was held at the Foreign Training Node in Aundh, Pune, India.
- **Primary Objective:** To foster military cooperation and enhance combined capabilities for executing **joint operations in semi-mountainous terrain**.
 - A core aim is to establish a **unified operational algorithm** between the command-and-control structures of both nations.

Additional Information

- **India-Uzbekistan Defence Cooperation:**
 - The exercise series is a cornerstone of growing defence ties.
 - India extended a **Line of Credit (LOC) of USD 40 million** to Uzbekistan to support defence industrial cooperation.
 - Bilateral defence cooperation has been strengthened through structured dialogue, including two major defence industrial workshops held in September 2019 and November 2020.
- **India's Major Joint Military Exercises:**
 - **With the US:** Exercise **Yudh Abhyas** (Army) and **Malabar** (Navy).
 - **With France:** Exercise **Shakti** (Army), **Varuna** (Navy), and **Garuda** (Air Force).
 - **With Russia:** Exercise **INDRA** (Tri-service).
 - **With Sri Lanka:** Exercise **Mitra Shakti** (Army).
 - **Central Asian Focus:** Exercises like **Khanjar** (India-Kyrgyzstan) and **KazInd** (India-Kazakhstan) highlight India's growing strategic cooperation with Central Asian Republics.

India Becomes the World's Fifth-Largest Defence Spender

What's the News?

- According to the latest report by the **Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI)**, India has become the **world's fifth-largest military spender in 2025**, with an expenditure of **\$92.1 billion**.
- This marks an **8.9% increase** from the previous year and accounts for **3.2% of total global defence spending**.
- The surge is attributed to emergency procurements and enhanced operational readiness, particularly in the context of **Operation Sindoor** and ongoing regional tensions.

Drivers and Regional Dynamics

- ₹7.85 lakh crore** has been allocated for defence in the Union Budget 2026-27, a significant portion of which is directed towards capital outlay for modernisation.
- Operation Sindoor**: The brief but intense armed conflict with Pakistan in May 2025 was a primary driver for the increased spending, prompting emergency acquisitions.
- Regional spending comparison**: Pakistan's military expenditure also rose by **11% to \$11.9 billion**, largely driven by aircraft and missile purchases from China. Despite this increase, India's defence budget remains nearly **eight times larger**.
- Arms import diversification**: While India remains the world's second-largest arms importer, its dependence on Russia has declined. India is increasingly sourcing from **France, Israel, and the United States**.

Global Military Expenditure Trends

- Global military expenditure reached a historic **\$2.887 trillion** in 2025, marking an **11th consecutive year of increase**.
- The **top three spenders**—the **United States (\$954 billion)**, **China (\$336 billion)**, and **Russia (\$190 billion)**—together accounted for **51% of global spending**.
- Europe** recorded the sharpest regional increase of **14%**, driven by the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war and NATO-led rearmament.
- Asia and Oceania** saw an **8.1% rise**, with China marking its 31st straight year of budget growth.

India's Defence Budget Allocation (Union Budget 2026-27)

- The total defence outlay stands at **₹7.85 lakh crore**.
- Emphasis is placed on capital acquisition with funding directed towards:
 - Modern fighter jets
 - Advanced submarines and naval platforms
 - Helicopters
 - A wide array of missiles
 - Unmanned aerial vehicles (drones) and counter-drone systems
 - Smart weapons systems

Additional Info

- Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI)**: An independent international institute based

in Sweden, dedicated to research into conflict, armaments, arms control, and disarmament.

- Operation Sindoor**: A military operation launched by India in May 2025 in response to the Pahalgam terror attack, involving cross-border strikes against terror infrastructure and a subsequent brief armed conflict with Pakistan.
- Arms Import Dynamics**:
 - India accounted for **8.2% of global arms imports** between 2021-2025.
 - Despite a **4% fall** in arms imports compared to the 2016-2020 period, India remains the **second-largest arms importer globally**.
 - The shift in suppliers is a strategic move to reduce dependence on a single source and modernise the armed forces with diversified technology.

Indian Army Launches Inaugural Multilateral Exercise 'Pragati' with 11 Nations

What's the News?

- The Indian Army has launched the inaugural edition of the multilateral exercise '**Pragati**' at the Foreign Training Node in **Umroi, Meghalaya**.
- Military delegations from **11 friendly countries** are participating alongside India.
- This marks a significant shift in the Indian Army's training engagements from bilateral formats to **consortium-style multilateral exercises**.

Exercise Pragati: Overview & Objectives

- Full Name**: Partnership of Regional Armies for Growth and Transformation in the Indian Ocean Region.
- Host & Venue**: Indian Army, at the Foreign Training Node, Umroi, Meghalaya.
- Participating Nations (11)**: Laos, Myanmar, Seychelles, Sri Lanka, Philippines, Nepal, Maldives, Malaysia, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Bhutan.
- Primary Aim**: To strengthen **defence cooperation**, enhance **interoperability**, and build **mutual trust** among participating regional armies.
- Core Philosophy**: Reflects a **shared commitment to collective security and regional stability**.

Focus Areas & Components

- Operational Focus**: The exercise centers on **counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism operations**, with emphasis on joint training and defence diplomacy.
- Training Format**: Designed for joint tactical maneuvers and collaborative planning, utilizing the specialized environment of the Umroi training node.
- Industrial Exposition**: A **two-day industry exposition** is a key component, showcasing the **Indian Army's indigenous capabilities** and fostering **industrial partnerships with ASEAN nations**.
- Shift in Paradigm**: Represents the Indian Army's move from **bilateral to consortium-style** training engagements, allowing multiple nations to train together under one framework.

International Relations

UNSC Defers Vote on Strait of Hormuz Security Resolution

What's the News?

The **United Nations Security Council (UNSC)** has postponed voting on a resolution to secure the **Strait of Hormuz**, a critical global maritime chokepoint. The vote, initially scheduled for Friday and then moved to Saturday, has been delayed to next week due to ongoing diplomatic disagreements among major powers.

Draft Resolution

- **Authorisation Scope:** Permits member states, acting unilaterally or via "voluntary multinational naval partnerships", to use "all defensive means necessary and commensurate with the circumstances".
- **Geographic Application:** Covers the Strait of Hormuz and adjacent waters to secure transit passage and deter obstruction of international navigation.
- **Duration:** Proposed mandate of at least six months, extendable based on UNSC review.
- **Revised Language:**
 - Removed explicit invocation of **Chapter VII of the UN Charter** (which permits enforcement action) to address concerns of skeptical members.
 - Emphasises defensive nature of intervention to accommodate positions of **France, Russia, and China**.

Strait of Hormuz Significance

- Handles approximately **one-fifth of global oil trade**
- Critical chokepoint for energy supplies to Asia, Europe, and Americas
- Recent tensions involving **Iran** have heightened security concerns in the region

US Strategy Shift

- Moving away from direct military intervention to reopen the Strait
- Focus shifting toward weakening **Iran's naval and missile capabilities**
- Increased emphasis on **diplomatic pressure** and allied cooperation
- Concerns that prolonged military engagement could escalate conflict beyond manageable timelines

Additional Info

- **UNSC Structure:**
 - **15 members** total: **5 permanent members** (P5) with veto power (China, France, Russia, UK, US) and **10 non-permanent members**
 - **"Put in blue":** Term for a final draft resolution ready for voting
 - **Silence procedure:** Diplomatic method where absence of objection implies consent
- **Regional Context:**
 - Strait of Hormuz located between **Iran and Oman**
 - Connects the **Persian Gulf** with the **Gulf of Oman** and **Arabian Sea**

India to Host Crucial BRICS Talks Amid West Asia Tensions, Facilitating Iran-UAE Dialogue

What's the News?

As the **2026 BRICS Chair**, India is set to host a series of crucial diplomatic engagements, including a meeting of Foreign Ministers in **May**, that will bring together **Iran** and the **United Arab Emirates (UAE)** for direct discussions. This marks the first high-level, face-to-face interaction between the two nations since the escalation of the **West Asia conflict**. The meetings occur against the backdrop of a fragile ceasefire between the US and Iran, failed talks in Islamabad, and ongoing regional instability impacting global energy security.

India's Diplomatic Challenge: Forging Consensus in a Divided BRICS

India's presidency faces the complex task of managing deep divisions within the expanded BRICS grouping, which now includes key stakeholders in the West Asian conflict.

- **The Core Challenge:** India must balance its strong bilateral ties with all involved parties, including **Iran**, the **UAE**, and **Saudi Arabia**, to build consensus.
 - **Divergent Positions:**
 - **Iran** has urged BRICS to condemn the **US-Israeli military strikes** on its territory and what it terms "aggression and crimes."
 - **UAE and Saudi Arabia** have sought condemnation of **Iranian drone and missile attacks** on their energy infrastructure and territories hosting US military assets.
 - **Impact on BRICS Unity:** These differences previously prevented BRICS from issuing a unified joint statement on the crisis. **External Affairs Ministry** has emphasized that **BRICS operates on consensus**, making a common stance difficult when member states are directly involved in the conflict.
- **The Stakes of the Meeting:**
 - The talks aim to address not only bilateral Iran-UAE tensions but also broader regional issues including the situations in **Palestine, Syria, Yemen, and Lebanon**.
 - A key focus is the **Strait of Hormuz** blockade and its disruption to global oil supplies, which has triggered inflationary pressures and supply chain strains worldwide.
 - **Egypt**, a key BRICS member and strategic partner of India, has publicly backed India's efforts. **Russia** has also extended its support to India's chairmanship.

India's Role as a Consensus Builder

India is positioning itself as a crucial diplomatic bridge and facilitator, leveraging its strong relations across West Asia.

- **Facilitating Dialogue:** The meetings will provide a neutral platform for direct Iran-UAE engagement, creating a channel for de-escalation within a multilateral framework.
- **Navigating Complexity:** India's diplomatic approach is under test as it attempts to "safely sail through" the upcoming meetings, as noted by Egypt's ambassador. The objective is to steer BRICS towards a shared position that addresses the root causes of the crisis.
- **Context of Previous Statements:** Under **Brazil's 2025 presidency**, the BRICS declaration had condemned military strikes against Iran, calling them a violation of international law. The current conflict has significantly intensified since then, raising the stakes for India's chairmanship.

Additional Info

- **BRICS Membership and West Asia:**
 - The recent expansion of BRICS has made it a more relevant but also more complex forum for West Asian geopolitics. Key members now include:
 - **Iran** (Joined 2024)
 - **United Arab Emirates (UAE)** (Joined 2024)
 - **Saudi Arabia** (Joined 2024)
 - **Egypt** (Joined 2024)
- **Timeline of Key BRICS Meetings Under India's 2026 Presidency:**
 - **February 2026:** First BRICS Sherpa and Sous Sherpa meeting in New Delhi set the agenda under the theme: *"Building for resilience, innovation, cooperation and sustainability."*
 - **March 2026:** Virtual meeting of BRICS Sherpas to deliberate on the evolving West Asia situation.
 - **May 2026: BRICS Foreign Ministers' Meeting** in New Delhi, where Iran and UAE will meet face-to-face.
 - **September 2026:** The **17th BRICS Summit** under India's leadership.
- **Geopolitical Significance for India:**
 - **Energy Security:** India imports a significant portion of its crude oil from West Asia. Stability in the region and freedom of navigation in the **Strait of Hormuz** are vital economic interests.
 - **Diaspora:** India has a large expatriate population (over **8 million**) in the Gulf region, whose safety and remittances are a key concern.
 - **Strategic Autonomy:** Successfully managing the BRICS presidency amid this crisis reinforces India's image as a **Vishwa Mitra** (friend of the world) and a credible voice of the **Global South**, capable of engaging with diverse and conflicting partners.

China Emerges as India's Largest Trading Partner in FY26

What's the News?

- **China** has overtaken the **United States** to become India's largest trading partner in the financial year **2025-26**.
- Bilateral trade between India and China reached a total of **USD 151.1 billion**, reflecting India's continued reliance on Chinese industrial inputs.
- While India's exports to China saw a significant percentage increase, the overall trade deficit has widened to a record high, surpassing the **USD 112 billion** mark.

Trade Metrics for FY26

- **India-China Bilateral Trade:**
 - **Total Trade:** **USD 151.1 billion**.
 - **Exports to China:** **USD 19.47 billion** (an increase of **36.66%**).
 - **Imports from China:** **USD 131.63 billion** (an increase of **16%**).
 - **Trade Deficit:** **USD 112.16 billion** (widened from **USD 99.2 billion** in FY25).
- **India-US Bilateral Trade:**
 - **Total Trade:** **USD 140.2 billion**.
 - **Exports to US:** **USD 87.3 billion** (marginal growth of **0.92%**).
 - **Imports from US:** **USD 52.9 billion** (an increase of **15.95%**).
 - **Trade Surplus for India:** **USD 34.4 billion** (declined from **USD 40.89 billion** in FY25).

Analysis of Shifting Trade Dynamics

- **China's Position:**
 - This marks a return to the top position for China, which was previously India's largest trading partner from **2013-14 to 2017-18**, and again in **2020-21**.
 - The surge in total trade is primarily **import-driven**, reflecting India's continued reliance on Chinese goods, particularly in sectors like **electronics, machinery, chemicals, and active pharmaceutical ingredients (APIs)**.
 - The **36.66% growth in exports to China** is a notable positive indicator, though it remains overshadowed by the massive volume of imports.
- **US Position:**
 - The US had held the position of India's top trading partner for four consecutive years (FY22 to FY25).
 - The marginal growth in exports to the US (0.92%) and a sharp rise in imports (15.95%) led to a contraction in India's **trade surplus** with the US.

Additional Info

- **Historical Context:**
 - China previously held the position of India's top trading partner between **2013-14** and **2017-18**, and again in **2020-21**.
 - The US emerged as the top partner in **2021-22** and maintained that status until **2024-25**.

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- **Major Commodities:**
 - **Imports from China:** Dominated by **telecom instruments, computer hardware, electric machinery, organic chemicals, and plastics.**
 - **Exports to China:** Primarily consist of **iron ore, slag and ash, organic chemicals, mineral fuels, and marine products.**

India Advocates for UNSC Reform with Veto Power for New Permanent Members

What's the News?

- India has firmly called for a comprehensive expansion of the **United Nations Security Council (UNSC)**, emphasizing that "real reform" requires new permanent members to be granted **veto power**.
- Speaking at the **Inter-Governmental Negotiations (IGN)**, India's representatives highlighted that maintaining a distinction between old and new permanent members would only perpetuate existing inequities.

Arguments Presented by India

- **Core Principles of Reform:** India identified **membership** and the **veto power** as the two fundamental aspects causing an imbalanced structure and lack of legitimacy in the UNSC.
- **Rejection of New Categories:** India cautioned against creating intermediate or new categories of membership (e.g., longer-term elected seats without veto), stating it would complicate negotiations and preserve the relative advantage of the current **Permanent Five (P5)** members.
- **Historical Analysis of Power Ratios:** The 1960s reform, which only expanded non-permanent seats, shifted the permanent-to-non-permanent ratio from **5:6 to 5:10**, inadvertently **increasing the relative power** of the veto-wielding P5. India argued that a similar reform today would worsen this imbalance.
- **Failure of Existing Veto Restraints:** India noted that the **2022 UN General Assembly resolution** mandating a debate after a veto has been ineffective as a deterrent. Since its adoption, **24 vetoes have been cast on 20 draft resolutions**, with **7 vetoes cast in 2024 alone**—the highest since 1986.
- **Issue of 'Effective Veto':** India highlighted the practice of "effective veto," where both elected and non-elected members block outcomes like **Presidential Statements** or **Sanctions Committee** decisions to serve narrow national interests.
- **Alignment with Africa:** India reiterated its support for the **African Common Position (Ezulwini Consensus)**, which demands at least two permanent seats with veto power for Africa.

Need for UNSC Reform and Challenges Ahead

- **Why Reform is Necessary:**
 - **Crisis of Legitimacy:** The P5-centric model reflects the geopolitical realities of **1945**, ignoring the rise of major economies and democracies from Asia, Africa, and Latin America.

- **Representation Deficit:** Entire continents, including **Africa and Latin America**, lack permanent representation.
- **Functional Paralysis:** Frequent use of veto on critical global conflicts (e.g., Ukraine, Middle East) has rendered the Council ineffective in its primary mandate of maintaining international peace and security.

Challenges to Comprehensive Reform:

- **The Veto Paradox:** Any amendment to the **UN Charter** to expand or limit the veto requires the consent of the current P5, who are unlikely to dilute their own exclusive authority.
- **P5 Resistance:** While some P5 members support India's candidacy in principle, there is no consensus on granting veto power to new permanent members.
- **Opposition from UfC Group:** The **Uniting for Consensus (UfC)** group, which includes Italy, Pakistan, and South Korea, opposes the addition of new permanent members and instead advocates for more non-permanent seats.
- **Fragmented Negotiations:** The IGN process lacks a single, consolidated negotiating text, leading to repetitive and circular discussions without tangible outcomes.

Additional Info

Current UNSC Composition:

- **P5 (Permanent Five):** China, France, Russia, the UK, and the USA. These members hold the power to veto any substantive resolution.
- **E10 (Elected Ten):** Non-permanent members elected for **two-year** terms by the General Assembly.

G4 Bloc:

- Comprising **India, Brazil, Germany, and Japan**, this group works collectively to reform the UNSC and secure permanent seats for each member.

L.69 Grouping:

- A cross-regional group of **42 developing countries** advocating for broad expansion in both permanent and non-permanent categories to represent the developing world.

The Veto Mechanism:

- Under **Article 27** of the UN Charter, a "no" vote by any of the P5 prevents the adoption of a resolution, regardless of overall international support.

India Hosts First BRICS Health Working Group Meeting 2026 in New Delhi

What's the News?

- The **Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MoHFW)** chaired the first **Health Working Group (HWG)** meeting under India's **BRICS** Chairship for 2026.
- Chaired by Union Health Secretary **Punya Salila Srivastava**, the meeting gathered senior health

officials and technical experts from member nations to advance collaborative public health goals.

- The meeting focused on building future-ready health systems through the overarching theme: **“Building for Resilience, Innovation, Cooperation and Sustainability.”**

BRICS Health Working Group (HWG)

- **About:** The HWG is a specialized platform under the **BRICS framework** where senior health officials coordinate on public health challenges, harmonize regulations, and share evidence-based policy interventions.
- **2026 Guiding Theme:** The meeting was guided by India's overarching theme for its BRICS Chairship: **“Building for Resilience, Innovation, Cooperation and Sustainability.”**
- **Objective:** To foster inclusive, sustainable, and evidence-driven health cooperation that strengthens **pandemic preparedness**, advances **health technology innovation**, and leverages collective expertise to achieve **Universal Health Coverage (UHC)**.

India's New Priority Areas

Under its Chairship, India introduced two new strategic pillars to the BRICS health agenda, shifting focus toward preventive and holistic well-being:

- **BRICS Mission for Healthy Lifestyles:** Aimed at mitigating **Non-Communicable Disease (NCD)** risk factors by addressing unhealthy diets, physical inactivity, and the harmful use of **tobacco and alcohol**.
- **Promotion of Mental Health and Wellness:** Focuses on strengthening mental health services, reducing associated **stigma**, and integrating mental health support into broader public health frameworks.

Continuing Priority Areas

The HWG will continue to advance cooperation on seven existing strategic tracks, ensuring continuity and deepening technical collaboration:

- **BRICS TB Research Network:** Ongoing collaborative research to accelerate the elimination of **Tuberculosis**.
- **Evidence-Based Traditional Medicine:** Promotion of **Traditional, Complementary, and Integrative Medicine (TCIM)** rooted in biodiversity and indigenous knowledge.
- **Digital Health Architecture:** Developing frameworks for a continuum of care, with a special focus on delivering specialized healthcare to remote and underserved areas.
- **Regulatory Cooperation:** Collaboration among Medical Products Regulatory Authorities to ensure equitable access to safe, effective, and affordable **vaccines and medicines**.
- **Integrated Early Warning System:** Strengthening systems for the prevention and coordinated response to mass infectious diseases.
- **BRICS Network of Public Health Institutes:** Fostering institutional linkages among national public health bodies for shared learning.

- **Social Determinants of Health:** Addressing diseases driven by social determinants (**DDSDH**) to promote health equity.

India and New Zealand to Sign Landmark Free Trade Agreement

What's the News?

- India and New Zealand are scheduled to formalize a **Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (FTA)** later this month to significantly deepen bilateral economic ties.
- The agreement follows the conclusion of intensive negotiations aimed at reducing trade barriers and fostering a long-term investment partnership.
- This pact marks a major milestone in India's trade strategy, as it has now concluded economic agreements with nearly all **Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP)** members, excluding China.

Trade and Investment Impact?

- **Bilateral Trade Target:** The agreement aims to double the total bilateral trade from the current level to **\$5 billion** within the next five years.
- **Investment Commitment:** New Zealand has committed to facilitating **\$20 billion** in investment into India over a **15-year** period.
- **Duty-Free Access:** India will receive zero-duty market access for **100% of its exports** to New Zealand, benefiting labor-intensive sectors such as **textiles, pharmaceuticals, gems and jewelry, and engineering goods**.
- **Tariff Rationalization:** India will eliminate or reduce tariffs on approximately **95% of New Zealand's exports**, including items like **wool, wood, coal**, and select fruits.

Sensitive Sectors and Services?

- **Agricultural Safeguards:** To protect domestic farmers, India has excluded highly sensitive sectors from the agreement, most notably **dairy products** (milk, cream, cheese), **sugar, edible oils**, and certain spices.
- **Skilled Mobility:** A new **Temporary Employment Entry Visa** will be introduced, providing a quota of **5,000 visas** for Indian skilled professionals in sectors like **IT, healthcare, and education**.
- **Traditional Systems:** The agreement prioritizes the promotion of **AYUSH** (Ayurveda, Yoga, Unani, Siddha, and Homoeopathy) and traditional Indian knowledge systems internationally.

Current Economic Status

- Bilateral merchandise trade reached **\$1.3 billion** in 2024–25, representing a **49% growth** year-on-year.
- Total trade in both goods and services stood at approximately **\$2.4 billion** in the last fiscal year.

India and South Korea Target \$50 Billion Bilateral Trade and Strategic Expansion

What's the News?

- Prime Minister **Narendra Modi** and South Korean President **Lee Jae-myung** held a high-level meeting to

deepen the **Special Strategic Partnership** between the two nations.

- Both leaders established an ambitious bilateral trade target of **\$50 billion**, aimed to be achieved by **2030**.
- A key outcome of the summit was the agreement to expedite the review and "reworking" of the existing **Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA)** to address trade imbalances and enhance market access.

Trade & CEPA Rework?

- **Trade Target:** The leaders sought to nearly double the current trade volume, focusing on high-growth sectors such as **semiconductors**, **electric vehicles (EVs)**, and **green hydrogen**.
- **CEPA Upgrade:**
 - Negotiations will focus on reducing non-tariff barriers and simplifying **Rules of Origin (RoO)** to benefit Indian exporters, particularly in the agriculture and pharmaceutical sectors.
 - The goal is to address the widening trade deficit, which has been a point of concern for India.
- **Investment Facilitation:** Discussions included enhancing the **Korea Plus** initiative—a dedicated cell for facilitating South Korean investments in India—under the **Invest India** framework.

Shipbuilding & Strategic Sectors?

- **Shipbuilding Cooperation:** The two nations are pushing for a major partnership in shipbuilding, aiming to integrate South Korean technology with India's **Maritime Amrit Kaal Vision 2047**. This includes building advanced container ships and specialized vessels.
- **India-Korea Digital Bridge:**
 - A new "Digital Bridge" initiative was proposed to foster collaboration in **Artificial Intelligence (AI)**, **6G technology**, and **Quantum Computing**.
 - Both countries agreed to strengthen supply chain resilience, particularly in critical minerals and electronics.
- **Defense Ties:** Exploration of joint production and co-development of defense equipment under the **Make in India** initiative, following the success of projects like the **K9-Vajra** self-propelled howitzers.

New Institutional Mechanisms for Implementation

- **Industrial Cooperation Committee:** Chaired by industry ministers of both nations to resolve trade/investment bottlenecks and monitor progress.
- **India-Korea Financial Forum:** To facilitate cross-border capital flows, fintech collaboration, and MSME financing.
- **Economic Security Dialogue:** Focused on protecting critical technologies, securing supply chains, and coordinating on Indo-Pacific economic architecture.
- **Steel & Critical Tech MoUs:** Formal agreements to enable joint R&D, standardisation, and knowledge sharing in priority sectors.

Cultural & Digital Partnership: Soft Power Integration

- **India-Korea Digital Bridge:** Aims to deepen collaboration in **AI governance**, **cybersecurity**, **digital public infrastructure**, and IT skill development.
- **Cultural Initiatives:**
 - Permanent **K-pop hub** in Mumbai and joint **India-Korea Friendship Festival** planned for 2028.
 - Cooperation in film, animation, gaming, and content creation to leverage growing people-to-people ties.
- **Multilateral Alignment:** South Korea joined the **International Solar Alliance** and endorsed India's **Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative**, reinforcing shared commitment to a rules-based regional order.

Historical Context of India-South Korea Relations

- **Diplomatic Relations:** Full diplomatic relations were established in **1973**.
- **Strategic Partnership:** The relationship was elevated to a "**Special Strategic Partnership**" in **2015** during Prime Minister Modi's visit to Seoul.
- **Trade Agreement:** The **Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA)** came into force in **2010**. It was India's first comprehensive free trade agreement with an OECD country.

Fourth India-Africa Forum Summit (IAFS-IV) to be Hosted in New Delhi

What's the News?

- India is set to host the **Fourth India-Africa Forum Summit (IAFS-IV)** in **New Delhi**, marking the revival of this high-level diplomatic platform after a gap of over a decade.
- The summit will bring together heads of state and government from across the **African Union (AU)** to strengthen bilateral ties and address common challenges.
- Key discussions will focus on **capacity building**, **digital transformation**, and **maritime security**, reflecting a shift from a traditional aid-based relationship to a strategic partnership.
- The event follows India's successful advocacy for the **African Union's** permanent membership in the **G20**, reinforcing India's role as a voice for the **Global South**.

IAFS-IV?

- **Strategic Focus Areas:**
 - **Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI):** Sharing India's "India Stack" (e.g., **UPI**, **Aadhaar**) to bolster financial inclusion and digital governance across Africa.
 - **Education & Skill Development:** Highlighting initiatives like the **IIT Madras** campus in **Zanzibar** and expanding the **ITEC (Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation)** program.
 - **Health & Pharmaceuticals:** Strengthening vaccine manufacturing hubs and healthcare

delivery through the **e-VidyaBharti** and **e-AarogyaBharti (e-VBAB)** networks.

- **Defense & Maritime Security:** Enhancing cooperation in the **Indian Ocean Region (IOR)** to combat piracy, terrorism, and ensure "Security and Growth for All in the Region" (**SAGAR**).

- **Economic Objectives:**

- Targeting a bilateral trade increase from the current **\$100 billion** to **\$200 billion** by 2030.
- Transitioning from **Lines of Credit (LoC)** to increased **Foreign Direct Investment (FDI)** and private sector-led development.
- Securing supply chains for **critical minerals** (like lithium and cobalt) essential for the global green energy transition.

Additional Info

- **Historical Context:**

- The IAFS was launched in **2008** to provide a structured framework for engagement between India and the 54 nations of Africa.
- Previous Summits:
 - **IAFS-I:** New Delhi (2008).
 - **IAFS-II:** Addis Ababa, Ethiopia (2011).
 - **IAFS-III:** New Delhi (2015) – recognized as the largest-ever gathering of African leaders in India.

- **Relevant Frameworks:**

- **Agenda 2063:** The African Union's strategic blueprint for transforming Africa into a global powerhouse; India aims to align its developmental assistance with these continental goals.
- **Banjul Formula:** A previous selection mechanism where only 15 African countries attended; since 2015, India has invited **all African nations** to participate.

- **Diplomatic Footprint:**

- India has significantly expanded its presence by opening **16 new diplomatic missions** in Africa since 2018, bringing the total to 45.

International

Spain Closes Airspace to US Military Amid Escalating US-Iran Conflict

What's the News?

- **Spain** has officially restricted the **United States** military from using its national airspace and strategic bases for operations linked to the ongoing conflict with **Iran**.
- The decision aims to preserve Spanish neutrality and safeguard the nation from being drawn into a direct military confrontation in the Middle East.
- This move has created a significant diplomatic rift within **NATO**, as Spain refuses to allow the use of the **Rota Naval Base** and **Morón Air Base** for offensive sorties or logistical support targeting Iranian assets.

Strategic Airspace Restrictions?

- **Scope of Ban:** The restriction applies to all US military transport, refueling, and combat aircraft diverted through Spanish territory toward the Persian Gulf.
- **Base Impact:**
 - **Rota Naval Base:** A key hub for the US Navy's **6th Fleet**; restrictions here hamper maritime logistics and Aegis-equipped destroyer movements.
 - **Morón Air Base:** Primarily used by the **US Air Force** for heavy lift operations; its closure forces longer, costlier flight paths over the **Mediterranean** or around the African continent.
- **Objective:** The Spanish government cited the need to prevent domestic territory from becoming a "launchpad" for a war that lacks a clear **United Nations (UN)** mandate or **European Union (EU)** consensus.

Spain's Position: 'No to War'

- **Legal and Moral Stance:** Prime Minister **Pedro Sánchez** has described the war as "profoundly illegal and profoundly unjust," adding, "You cannot respond to one illegality with another, because that's how humanity's great disasters begin".
- **Scope of Restrictions:** The ban applies to all US military flights related to the Iran operation, including **refuelling aircraft**. Defence Minister Robles stated, "We don't authorise either the use of military bases or the use of airspace for actions related to the war in Iran".
- **Operational Impact:** Military planes, including those based in the UK and elsewhere in Europe, will now be forced to bypass Spain en route to targets in the Middle East, except in emergencies.
- **Base Denial:** Earlier, Spain had denied the US use of the **Rota and Morón de la Frontera** military bases in southern Spain. As a result, 15 American KC-135 refuelling planes were diverted to bases in France and Germany.

Artemis II Mission: First Crewed Lunar Flyby in Over 50 Years

What's the News?

- **NASA** successfully launched **Artemis II**, the first crewed mission to the Moon since the Apollo era, using the **Space Launch System (SLS)** rocket and **Orion spacecraft**.
- Four astronauts—**Reid Wiseman, Victor Glover, Christina Koch**, and **Jeremy Hansen**—embarked on a **~10-day mission** to orbit the Moon and return to Earth.
- Mission objective: Validate **life-support systems, deep-space navigation**, and **crew safety protocols** for future lunar landings under the **Artemis programme**.
- Represents a milestone in **international space cooperation**, with participation from the **Canadian Space Agency (CSA)**.

Mission Architecture & Technical Highlights?

- **Trajectory design:**
 - **Free-return trajectory:** Uses lunar gravity for Earth return, minimising propulsion dependency and enhancing crew safety.
 - Maximum distance: **~250,000 miles** from Earth, surpassing the **Apollo 13** record.
- **Key spacecraft systems tested:**
 - **Environmental Control and Life Support System (ECLSS)** for long-duration human spaceflight.
 - **Radiation shielding**, thermal management, and deep-space communication arrays.
 - **Launch Abort System** for emergency crew separation during ascent.
- **Payloads carried:**
 - Four **CubeSats** from international partners for deep-space science.
 - Digital archive with **5.6+ million names** from NASA's public engagement campaign.

Crew Composition & Historic Firsts?

- **Reid Wiseman (Commander):** Veteran of ISS missions; leads mission execution.
- **Victor Glover (Pilot):** First Black astronaut to travel to deep space.
- **Christina Koch (Mission Specialist):** First woman to journey beyond low-Earth orbit.
- **Jeremy Hansen (CSA Mission Specialist):** First non-American on a lunar mission.
- **Significance:** Reflects global shift toward **inclusive, multilateral space exploration**.

Additional Info:

- **Historical context:**
 - Last crewed lunar mission: **Apollo 17 (1972)**.
 - Artemis programme named after Apollo's twin sister in Greek mythology; aims for sustainable lunar presence and Mars preparation.
- **The Artemis Roadmap:**

- **Artemis I:** An uncrewed test flight completed in **2022** that proved the integrity of the SLS and Orion.
- **Artemis III:** The subsequent mission aimed at landing the first woman and person of color at the **Lunar South Pole**.
- **International Partnerships:**
 - **European Space Agency (ESA):** Provided the **European Service Module**, which powers and provides air/water to the Orion capsule.
 - **Artemis Accords:** A US-led international agreement ensuring that space exploration is conducted peacefully, sustainably, and transparently.
- **Scientific Focus:**
 - Exploration of the **Lunar South Pole** is a priority due to the presence of **water ice**, which could be used for life support or converted into rocket fuel (Oxygen and Hydrogen).
 - Monitoring **radiation levels** in deep space to develop better shielding for future Mars-bound astronauts.

India Ranks Among World's Most Optimistic Nations in Ipsos Global Survey

What's the News?

- India emerges as a rare outlier in global sentiment, with **65% of citizens** believing the country is heading in the **right direction**, significantly above the **global average of 39%**.
- The **Ipsos "What Worries the World"** survey (March 2026) places India among the **top three most optimistic nations**, alongside **Singapore** and **Malaysia**.
- Despite high optimism, citizens cite **inflation, unemployment, and governance issues** as key concerns, reflecting a nuanced public perception.

Survey Findings: India's Optimism in Global Context

- **Comparative Rankings:**
 - Singapore: **78%** optimism
 - Malaysia: **73%**
 - India: **65%**
 - Global average: **39%**
 - Lowest optimism: France (**9%**), Peru (**13%**)
- **Economic Perception:** **74%** of Indians rate current economic conditions as "good", supported by robust **GDP growth projections (~7.4% for FY 2025–26)**.
- **Personal Financial Strain:** A decline in the **Personal Financial Conditions Index** indicates household-level cost pressures despite macroeconomic strength.

Concerns Among Indian Citizens

- **Top Five Worries** (percentage of respondents citing each):
 - **Inflation:** 47% (driven by food and energy costs)
 - **Unemployment:** 40%

- **Education:** 30% (rising demand for quality, digital-ready learning)
- **Crime and Violence:** 27%
- **Financial/Political Corruption:** 26%
- **Other Notable Concerns:** Taxes (21%), terrorism (21%), poverty/inequality (19%), healthcare (13%).
- **Global vs. Indian Priorities:** While global concerns align broadly, India's ranking places **inflation and unemployment** ahead of crime/violence—highlighting distinct domestic pressures.

Factors Behind India's Resilient Sentiment

- **Geopolitical Neutrality:** India's balanced stance amid **West Asia tensions** has helped insulate public perception from global volatility.
- **Energy Security Measures:** Diversification of **crude oil imports** and investments in **renewable energy** (solar, electric mobility) mitigate external supply shocks.
- **Policy Continuity:** Domestic reforms under **Aatmanirbhar Bharat** and focus on **infrastructure development** reinforce confidence in long-term growth.
- **Demographic Dividend:** A young, aspirational population contributes to forward-looking sentiment despite near-term challenges.

Survey Methodology:

- **Conducted by:** Ipsos, a global market research firm.
- **Survey Name:** "What Worries the World" – March 2026 edition.
- **Fieldwork Period:** February 20 to March 6, 2026.
- **India Sample Size:** Approximately **2,200 respondents**.
- **Data Collection:** ~1,800 face-to-face interviews and ~400 online responses.
- **Demographics:** Urban-focused sample covering **Socio-Economic Classes (SEC) A, B, and C** across metropolitan areas and tier 1-3 cities in all four zones.
- **Limitations:** Sample represents more educated, urban, and affluent segments rather than the entire national population.

China-Pakistan Joint Peace Initiative for West Asia

What's the News?

- **China** and **Pakistan** have jointly proposed a **five-point peace plan** to de-escalate the West Asia conflict, calling for an immediate ceasefire, protection of civilian infrastructure, and safe navigation through the **Strait of Hormuz**.
- The initiative, announced following talks between Chinese Foreign Minister **Wang Yi** and Pakistan's Foreign Minister **Ishaq Dar** in Beijing, emphasises **multilateral dialogue** under the **UN Charter** and humanitarian access to conflict-affected areas.
- The proposal reflects growing **Global South diplomacy**, with China expanding its crisis-management role while Pakistan leverages its regional connectivity in the Islamic world.

The Five-Point Framework

- **Immediate Cessation of Hostilities:** Calls for halting military operations to prevent further escalation and humanitarian catastrophe.
- **Early Peace Talks:** Urges all parties to initiate diplomatic negotiations without preconditions.
- **Protection of Civilians & Infrastructure:** Demands adherence to **International Humanitarian Law (IHL)**; prohibits attacks on energy facilities, desalination plants, power infrastructure, and nuclear installations.
- **Maritime Security in Critical Chokepoints:** Stresses safe passage for commercial vessels through the **Strait of Hormuz** and adjacent waters—vital for global energy trade.
- **Primacy of UN Charter:** Reinforces sovereignty, territorial integrity, and non-interference as foundational principles for conflict resolution.

Strategic Interests and Global Impact?

- **China's Mediation Role:** Following its success in brokering the **Iran-Saudi Arabia** rapprochement, China aims to solidify its status as a credible alternative to Western-led diplomacy in the region.
- **Pakistan's Iran Connection:** Pakistan is utilizing its historical and strategic ties with **Iran** to act as a bridge, seeking to prevent a wider regional war that could destabilize its own borders.
- **Economic Security:** Both nations have high stakes in regional stability; China relies on the region for **40%** of its crude oil imports, while Pakistan seeks to protect **CPEC**-related maritime trade routes.
- **Countering Western Influence:** The initiative is seen by analysts as an attempt to challenge the traditional security architecture dominated by the **United States** and its allies.

EU Strengthens Water Protection: PFAS Added to Pollution Monitoring List

What's the News?

- The **European Parliament** has approved updated **water pollution standards**, mandating stricter monitoring of **Per- and Polyfluoroalkyl Substances (PFAS)**—"forever chemicals"—in rivers, lakes, and groundwater.
- The directive amends three key EU water laws: **Water Framework Directive (2000/60/EC)**, **Groundwater Directive (2006/118/EC)**, and **Environmental Quality Standards Directive (2008/105/EC)**.
- EU member states must align national rules by **December 2027**, with full compliance on pollutant standards expected by **2039** (extendable to 2045).

PFAS: What Are "Forever Chemicals"?

- **Definition:** PFAS are a group of **4,700+** **synthetic chemicals** with strong carbon-fluorine bonds, making them highly resistant to environmental degradation.
- **Key Subgroups:** **PFOS** (Perfluorooctane Sulfonic Acid) and **PFOA** (Perfluorooctanoic Acid) are listed as **Persistent Organic Pollutants (POPs)** under the **Stockholm Convention**.
- **Common Sources:**

- Non-stick cookware, food packaging, stain-resistant textiles
- Industrial applications: aerospace, electronics, firefighting foams
- Leaching into soil, water, and air during production/disposal
- **Exposure Routes:** Contaminated drinking water, food chain accumulation, inhalation of dust.

New EU Monitoring Standards

- **Limit Values** (effective January 2026):
 - **0.1 µg/L** for "Sum of PFAS" (20 priority compounds)
 - **0.5 µg/L** for "Total PFAS"
- **Expanded Monitoring List:** Now includes PFAS, microplastics, pharmaceutical residues (e.g., painkillers), pesticides, and antimicrobial resistance indicators.
- **Harmonised Methods:** Member states must use standardised testing protocols and report data to the **European Commission**.
- **Corrective Action:** Mandatory remediation if thresholds are exceeded; public notification requirements strengthened.

Argentina Formally Withdraws from World Health Organization

What's the News?

The Government of **Argentina** has submitted a formal letter of withdrawal from the **World Health Organization (WHO)**, initiating a one-year notice period mandated by the WHO Constitution. This decision makes Argentina the first **Latin American** nation and one of the few **G20** members to unilaterally sever institutional ties with the global health body since its inception in 1948.

Reasons Cited for Withdrawal

- **Sovereignty and Bureaucracy:** The Argentine administration, led by **President Javier Milei**, has framed the withdrawal as an assertion of national sovereignty. Officials argued that the WHO imposes "**supranational mandates**" that infringe upon domestic policy-making, particularly regarding **sanitary lockdowns** and travel restrictions.
- **Critique of Pandemic Response:** The primary grievance stems from the WHO's management of the **COVID-19 pandemic**. Argentina cited what it perceives as a "**lack of independence**" from the political influence of specific member states and a failure to ensure timely, transparent information sharing regarding the virus's origins and early transmission.
- **Cost-Benefit Analysis:** The government highlighted the disparity between mandatory membership dues (**assessed contributions**) and the actual utility derived. It stated that the financial resources would be redirected to **domestic health infrastructure** and direct procurement of medical supplies.

Implications for Argentina and Global Health Governance

- **Impact on Vaccine Access and Procurement:**

- Argentina will lose access to the **Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) Revolving Fund**, a collective procurement mechanism that allows Latin American nations to purchase vaccines at significantly reduced **bulk rates**.
- This could increase the fiscal burden on Argentina's national immunization program, which relies heavily on PAHO for **pediatric vaccines** and **influenza shots**.
- **Loss of Technical and Surveillance Cooperation:**
 - Withdrawal severs access to the **Global Outbreak Alert and Response Network (GOARN)**, limiting Argentina's real-time intelligence on emerging pathogens in the region.
 - It also halts participation in **WHO's Prequalification Programme**, which is critical for ensuring the quality of generic medicines and medical devices imported into the country.
- **Geopolitical Ripple Effects:**
 - The move adds momentum to ongoing global debates regarding **WHO reform** and the **Pandemic Accord** negotiations.
 - It follows a pattern set by the **United States** (which announced withdrawal in 2020 before rejoining in 2021), potentially encouraging other skeptical nations in the **Global South** to reconsider their treaty obligations.

Additional Info

- **Legal Framework for Withdrawal:**
 - **WHO Constitution (Article 7):** A member state may withdraw by providing a formal notice to the **Secretary-General of the United Nations** and the **WHO Director-General**. The withdrawal takes effect **one year** after the notice is received.
 - **Condition:** The member state must have fulfilled all **financial obligations** (outstanding dues) to the organization prior to the effective date of withdrawal.
- **Role of PAHO:**
 - **Pan American Health Organization (PAHO)** serves as the **Regional Office for the Americas** of the WHO.
 - It is an independent inter-American agency with a separate constitution. Argentina's withdrawal from WHO complicates but does not automatically terminate its relationship with PAHO, though legal and financial integration between the two bodies is extensive.
- **India's Position:**
 - India is a founding member of WHO and the **WHO South-East Asia Region (SEARO)**.
 - India has consistently advocated for **equitable vaccine distribution (COVAX)** and **reformed global health architecture** with a focus on **traditional**

medicine (WHO Global Centre for Traditional Medicine in Jamnagar, Gujarat).

Archaeological Discovery: 200 Ancient Sites Identified in Greece

What's the News?

- Archaeologists have discovered over **200 previously unknown ancient sites** across Greece, uncovering evidence of human activity spanning **6,000 years**.
- The findings provide a comprehensive look at human habitation from the **Neolithic period** through to the **Ottoman era**.
- This discovery was made possible through a multi-disciplinary approach involving advanced mapping technology and extensive field surveys, significantly expanding the known archaeological map of the region.

Archaeological Findings?

- **Methodology:** Researchers utilized a combination of **satellite imagery**, **aerial photography**, and traditional **ground-level fieldwork** to identify hidden structures.
- **Diversity of Sites:** The discovery includes a wide variety of rural and urban remains, such as:
 - Small farmsteads and agricultural terraces.
 - Large-scale defensive fortifications.
 - Ancient burial grounds and religious shrines.
- **Chronological Reach:** The sites offer a timeline of roughly **six millennia**, showcasing how land use evolved from the early farming communities of the **Stone Age** to the complex societies of the **Byzantine** and **Ottoman** periods.

Additional Info

- **Technological Tools in Modern Archaeology:**
 - **LiDAR (Light Detection and Ranging):** A remote sensing method used to examine the earth's surface and detect structures hidden under dense vegetation.
 - **GIS (Geographic Information Systems):** Used to manage and analyze spatial data to understand settlement density and proximity to natural resources.
- **Historical Periods Identified:**
 - **Neolithic (New Stone Age):** Characterized by the beginning of farming and permanent settlements.
 - **Bronze Age:** Known for the rise of the **Minoan** and **Mycenaean** civilizations.
 - **Classical Antiquity:** The era of Greek city-states like **Athens** and **Sparta**.
 - **Byzantine Period:** The continuation of the Roman Empire in the East, which heavily influenced Greek religious and civic architecture.
- **Global Heritage Context:**
 - Greece is home to numerous **UNESCO World Heritage Sites**; these new discoveries may lead to further protected zones under national and international law.
 - **UNESCO Convention (1972):** Focuses on the protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage.

US-Iran Talks in Islamabad Fail to Yield Peace Deal

What's the News?

Marathon 21-hour direct negotiations between the **United States** and **Iran** in Islamabad, Pakistan, concluded without an agreement to convert a temporary two-week ceasefire into a permanent peace deal. The talks, mediated by Pakistan, represented the highest-level direct engagement between the two nations since the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Key sticking points included Iran's nuclear enrichment program, the status of the **Strait of Hormuz**, and ongoing Israeli strikes in Lebanon.

Why Did the Islamabad Talks Fail?

The high-stakes dialogue failed to bridge fundamental gaps in position between the two adversaries, primarily due to irreconcilable red lines and a deep trust deficit.

• Core Stalemates:

- **Nuclear Program:** The **US** demanded a complete halt to uranium enrichment and the surrender of Iran's stockpile of near-weapons-grade material. **Iran** rejected these as "excessive and unreasonable," asserting its right to civilian nuclear power under the **Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT)**.
- **Strait of Hormuz:** The **US** insisted on the immediate and unconditional reopening of the strategic chokepoint. **Iran** viewed control of the strait as primary leverage and refused to yield without significant sanctions relief and security guarantees. A reported US proposal for a joint toll-collection venture was rejected by Iran in favor of sovereign control.
- **Lebanon Factor:** Iran demanded a cessation of **Israeli** strikes against **Hezbollah** in Lebanon as a prerequisite for a broader deal. The US did not offer guarantees to restrain Israel, which maintained the ceasefire did not apply to its operations.

• Atmospherics and Trust Deficit:

- The talks were conducted under the shadow of **President Trump's** maximalist threats, which Tehran perceived as coercion rather than genuine diplomacy.
- The decades-long history of hostility, including the US withdrawal from the 2015 **Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)**, created an environment where Iranian negotiators approached US proposals with deep skepticism.

• Figures and Outcome:

- **US Delegation:** Led by Vice President **JD Vance**, included Special Envoy **Steve Witkoff** and **Jared Kushner**.
- **Iranian Delegation:** Led by Parliament Speaker **Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf** and Foreign Minister **Abbas Araghchi**.
- **Outcome:** The talks ended with both sides reverting to their original positions. The fragile ceasefire is now considered precarious, with increased risk of renewed military

confrontation. Analysts suggest Iran holds an asymmetric advantage due to its perceived ability to endure economic pressure longer than the US can tolerate disrupted global energy markets.

Strategic Significance of the Strait of Hormuz

The Strait of Hormuz emerged as a central and contentious issue, highlighting its critical role in global energy security and economic stability.

• Geostrategic Importance:

- A narrow waterway connecting the Persian Gulf to the Gulf of Oman and the Arabian Sea.
- Prior to the conflict, roughly **one-fifth** of the world's total oil consumption and a significant volume of liquefied natural gas (LNG) transited through the strait daily.
- It is the world's most important oil transit chokepoint.

• Context of the Standoff:

- Iran has the capability to effectively close or disrupt traffic in the strait through naval assets, coastal missile batteries, and naval mines.
- The closure since the conflict began has caused major disruption to global oil supplies, contributing to inflationary pressures and energy price volatility worldwide.
- The US demand for reopening is driven by the need to stabilize global markets, while Iran's use of the strait as leverage is a key component of its asymmetric warfare strategy against a technologically superior adversary.

Additional Info

• Historical Context of US-Iran Relations:

- **1979:** The Islamic Revolution overthrows the US-backed Shah. Iranian students seize the **US Embassy in Tehran**, holding 52 American diplomats hostage for 444 days. This event severs formal diplomatic relations.
- **1980s:** The **Iran-Contra Affair** reveals secret US arms sales to Iran to fund Nicaraguan rebels.
- **2002:** President **George W. Bush** labels Iran part of the "**Axis of Evil**" in his State of the Union address.
- **2015:** The **Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)** is signed between Iran and the **P5+1** (US, UK, France, Russia, China, and Germany), limiting Iran's nuclear program in exchange for sanctions relief.
- **2018:** President **Donald Trump** unilaterally withdraws the US from the JCPOA and reimposes crippling economic sanctions on Iran.
- **2026 (February 28):** A major military conflict erupts with coordinated **US-Israeli airstrikes** against targets inside Iran.

• The Nuclear File:

- Iran is a signatory to the **Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT)**, which grants it the "inalienable right" to develop research,

production, and use of nuclear energy for peaceful purposes.

- The international community's concern centers on the potential for a state to use civilian enrichment technology to produce fissile material for a nuclear weapon. The US demand for "zero enrichment" goes beyond the stipulations of the JCPOA and the NPT.
- **Pakistan's Mediation Role:**
 - Pakistan hosted the talks out of acute concern for regional stability, as a prolonged war involving Iran poses severe security and economic risks, including refugee flows and energy price shocks.
 - The nation sought to position itself as a diplomatic bridge, leveraging its geographical proximity and relations with stakeholders.

Philippines Joins US-Led 'Pax Silica' Initiative for Semiconductor Supply Chain Security

What's the News?

- The **Philippines** has joined the **US-led 'Pax Silica' initiative**, a framework aimed at securing global semiconductor and technology supply chains from raw materials to advanced manufacturing and data infrastructure.
- As part of this partnership, the US and Philippines will jointly develop a **4,000-acre industrial hub** in the **Luzon Economic Corridor**, focusing on semiconductors, electronics, and critical minerals processing.

About the Pax Silica Initiative

- **Objective:** To secure the full technology supply chain — from extraction of **critical minerals** to chip fabrication and data infrastructure — by building trusted, resilient networks among allied nations.
- **Membership:** The Philippines is the **13th member**, joining countries such as **India, South Korea, Singapore, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates**.
- **Strategic Approach:** Promotes "**friend-shoring**" — relocating supply chains to allied countries to reduce dependence on strategic rivals like China.

The Luzon Industrial Hub

- **Location:** Luzon Economic Corridor (a key manufacturing and logistics zone including Manila), under a trilateral framework with **Japan** also committing to infrastructure investments.
- **Focus Sectors:**
 - Semiconductor manufacturing
 - Electronics
 - Processing of **critical minerals** — nickel, cobalt, copper (the Philippines is a major producer of these minerals essential for batteries and chips)
- **Significance:** Positions the Philippines as a potential node in the global **minerals-to-chips ecosystem**.

Geopolitical & Strategic Context

- **US-China Competition:** The initiative reflects intensifying rivalry in advanced technologies. It aligns

with US policies to reduce reliance on China for chips and critical minerals.

- **Philippines' Role:** Under President Ferdinand Marcos, Manila has deepened security and economic ties with Washington, especially amid **South China Sea tensions**.
- **Parallel Developments:**
 - US and **European Union** are nearing an agreement to jointly coordinate critical mineral supplies, including incentives like minimum price guarantees for non-Chinese suppliers.
 - **Multilateral institutions** (e.g., IMF) have noted that such fragmentation could reshape global trade patterns even as it strengthens sectoral resilience.

Additional Info

- **Critical Minerals** (as defined by India): Includes **lithium, cobalt, nickel, graphite, rare earth elements** — essential for electronics, EVs, and defence. India has set up **KABIL** (Khanij Bidesh India Ltd) to secure overseas mineral assets.
- **Friend-shoring:** Term popularised by US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen; refers to limiting trade to geopolitical allies to enhance supply chain resilience.
- **Luzon Economic Corridor:** Part of the **Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF)**, launched by US, Japan, and Philippines to boost infrastructure and high-tech investment.

Israel-Lebanon 10-Day Ceasefire Announced Amid Continued Hostilities

What's the News?

- A **10-day ceasefire** between Israel and Lebanon (targeting Hezbollah) has been announced following US-led diplomatic efforts, coming into effect after **seven weeks of fighting**.
- Despite the announcement, reports indicate **intermittent shelling** in southern Lebanon (Khim, Dibbine), with the Lebanese army accusing Israeli forces of violations. Israel states it is reviewing claims, citing possible "self-defence" actions under the ceasefire terms.

Key Terms of the Ceasefire

- **Duration:** 10 days, with possibility of extension if progress is made in parallel US-Iran negotiations.
- **Israeli Reservations:** Israel reserves the right to "self-defence" against "planned, imminent, or ongoing attacks" but will not carry out **offensive military operations** against Lebanese targets.
- **Security Zone:** Israel has declared it will maintain a **10 km "security zone"** along the border in southern Lebanon and has stated its troops will not withdraw.
- **Hezbollah's Stance:** The group has linked its participation to a **complete halt** in Israeli military operations and has said it will respond to any Israeli strikes.

Diplomatic & Regional Context

- **First Israeli-Lebanese Summit in Decades:** A meeting between Israeli PM **Benjamin Netanyahu** and

Lebanese President **Joseph Aoun** is scheduled in Washington next week.

- **Pakistan as Mediator:** Pakistan's army chief, **Gen. Asim Munir**, has been facilitating backchannel communication between the US and Iran. A first round of US-Iran peace talks in Islamabad broke down after 21 hours.
- **Iran's Role:** Iran has welcomed the Lebanon truce and insists the original ceasefire (expiring April 22) should apply to Lebanon as well. Iran has reportedly agreed to hand over its stockpile of enriched uranium, though this remains unconfirmed.
- **US Position:** US Defense Secretary **Pete Hegseth** warned that US forces are "locked and loaded," threatening Iran's energy industry if negotiations fail.

Ground Realities & Humanitarian Impact

- **Continued Hostilities:** Despite the truce, Israeli forces blew up the last remaining bridge into the city of **Tyre**, cutting off ~30,000 residents, and razed a school in Marwahin.
- **Casualties** (in less than 7 weeks):
 - Lebanon: **2,196 killed**, 7,185 wounded
 - Iran: **3,000+ killed**
 - Israel: 23 killed
 - US service members: 13 killed
- **Displacement:** ~1 million people displaced in Lebanon; Lebanese army has advised civilians not to return to southern areas due to lingering insecurity.

Additional Info

- **Hezbollah:** A major Lebanese **non-state armed group** backed by Iran; designated a terrorist organisation by the US, Israel, and several Gulf states. It holds significant political and military power in Lebanon.
- **Ceasefire vs. Peace Agreement:** A ceasefire is a temporary halt to fighting; a peace agreement is a formal, lasting settlement. This 10-day truce is intended to create space for broader negotiations, including a potential US-Iran deal.
- **Backchannel Diplomacy:** Informal, secret negotiations between adversaries, often facilitated by a third party (here, Pakistan). Crucial when official diplomatic ties are absent (Israel and Lebanon do not have formal relations).
- **1983 Israel-Lebanon Agreement:** A previous US-brokered deal where Lebanon would recognise Israel and Israel would withdraw. It collapsed during Lebanon's civil war and was rescinded in 1984.

Global Fertilizer Supply Crisis Deepens

What's the News?

The ongoing conflict involving Iran and the resulting disruption of maritime traffic through the **Strait of Hormuz** have triggered a severe global supply shock in the fertilizer market. This has led to a sharp surge in prices and significant supply gaps for key agricultural inputs, particularly **Urea** and **Diammonium Phosphate (DAP)**. For India, which relies heavily on imports for both finished fertilizers and the natural gas used to produce them domestically, the crisis poses a direct threat to agricultural

productivity and food security for the upcoming Kharif and Rabi seasons.

Crisis at the Strait of Hormuz

- **Strategic Chokepoint Blocked:** The **Strait of Hormuz**, a vital maritime corridor, handles a significant portion of global fertilizer trade. Its disruption has effectively removed substantial volumes of fertilizers and key precursors from the international market.
- **Global Trade Impact:**
 - Approximately **30% of global Urea exports** and **27% of Ammonia exports** transit through this corridor.
 - The effective closure has removed an estimated **800,000 tonnes per month** of fertilizers and precursors from global supply.
- **Price Volatility:** The supply shock has led to extreme price inflation.
 - **Urea Prices:** Import bids reportedly jumped from **\$510 per tonne** in February to **\$950 per tonne** in April.
 - **Raw Material Costs:** Prices for essential raw materials like **Sulphur** and **Ammonia** have tripled to over **\$900 per tonne**.

Impact on India's Agriculture and Economy

- **Import Dependence:** India is acutely vulnerable due to its high dependence on the Gulf region. **Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)** countries account for **40% of India's Urea imports** and **over 60% of its Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) imports**.
- **Domestic Production Hit:** The shortage of LNG as feedstock has crippled domestic manufacturing. Urea production, which typically stands at **2.5 million tonnes per month**, reportedly fell to **1.5 million tonnes** in March due to gas shortages.
- **Supply-Demand Gap for Kharif 2026:**
 - **Requirement:** **19.4 million tonnes** of Urea.
 - **Opening Stock:** Only **5.5 million tonnes**, highlighting a significant deficit that needs to be met through imports.
- **Fiscal Burden:** The doubling of global prices is expected to substantially increase the government's **fertilizer subsidy bill**, putting pressure on the national exchequer.

Challenges and Long-Term Risks

- **Physical Barrier:** The blockade of the Strait of Hormuz is a physical chokepoint, meaning shipments cannot proceed regardless of the price India is willing to pay.
- **Rabi Season at Risk:** While Kharif sowing may be managed with current stocks and emergency measures, the **Rabi season (October-December)** is at high risk if supply lines remain blocked for an extended period.
- **Logistical Hurdles:** Increased insurance premiums and war-risk perceptions are making shipping companies hesitant to operate in the West Asia maritime corridor.
- **Systemic Vulnerability:** The crisis underscores India's fragile linkage between energy security (LNG imports) and food security, exposing the agricultural sector to distant geopolitical conflicts.

EU Approves €90 Billion Ukraine Aid Package and 20th Round of Russia Sanctions

What's the News?

- The European Union (EU) has approved a €90 billion financial assistance package for Ukraine, alongside its 20th round of sanctions against Russia.
- The approval was made possible after Hungary withdrew its veto, ending months of deadlock.
- Ambassadors from all 27 EU member states backed the decisions, which are expected to be formally adopted through a written procedure.
- The package is intended to support Ukraine's wartime budget needs during 2026 and 2027.

Hungary's Veto and Resolution

- **Hungary's Objections:**
 - Hungary, under outgoing Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, had blocked both the aid package and sanctions.
 - Budapest raised concerns over disruptions in Russian oil supplies through the **Druzhba pipeline**, a key energy route for Hungary and Slovakia.
 - The pipeline was damaged by Russian attacks affecting oil transit through Ukraine.
 - Hungary argued that delays in restoring the route threatened its energy security and criticized Kyiv over the matter.
- **Resolution:**
 - The breakthrough came after Ukraine completed repairs on the Druzhba pipeline.
 - President Volodymyr Zelenskiy confirmed the pipeline could resume operation.
 - Additionally, Viktor Orbán lost the April 12 election and is due to leave office, signaling a potential policy shift.
 - The restoration of oil transit and growing diplomatic pressure from other EU members helped resolve the dispute.

The €90 Billion Aid Package

- **Purpose:**
 - The package aims to help Ukraine manage its wartime budget needs during 2026 and 2027.
 - Nearly half of the amount will support defence requirements, while the remaining funds will be used for public services, salaries, pensions, and maintaining economic stability.
 - Ukraine continues to face severe financial pressure as military costs remain high and foreign support remains essential.
- **Funding Mechanism:**
 - The EU will offer interest-free loans for 2026-2027, funded by its borrowing on capital markets and underpinned by the EU budget headroom.
 - Hungary, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic have secured exemptions from this joint borrowing initiative and will not participate in the collective financing arrangement.
- **Repayment Plan:**

- Ukraine is not expected to repay the loan from its own funds. Repayment is contingent upon Russia paying war reparations after the conflict ends.
- Russia has approximately €210 billion in central bank assets frozen in the EU, which could be used for repayment.
- The scheme was designed to utilize frozen Russian funds without confiscating them, a step previously deemed legally risky.

20th Round of Sanctions on Russia

- The EU cleared its **20th sanctions package** against Russia simultaneously with the aid approval.
- These sanctions aim to increase economic restrictions on Moscow and reduce its ability to sustain the war effort.
- The measures are part of the EU's long-term strategy to maintain diplomatic and financial pressure on Russia while demonstrating continued political backing for Ukraine.

Political Shift in Hungary

- The breakthrough reflects changing political conditions in Hungary.
- Viktor Orbán lost the April 12 election and is due to leave office, to be replaced by opposition leader Péter Magyar.
- With Orbán's influence weakening and leadership transition discussions increasing, Budapest softened its resistance to both measures.
- The final approval is expected to strengthen European unity and send a clear message of continued support for Ukraine against Russian aggression.

Additional Info

- **Druzhba Pipeline:**
 - One of the longest oil pipelines in the world, supplying Russian oil to Europe.
 - Hungary and Slovakia remain highly dependent on Russian oil imports through pipeline routes.
- **EU Sanctions Requirements:**
 - All European Union sanctions require unanimous approval from all 27 member states.
- **EU Support for Ukraine:**
 - The EU has been among the largest providers of financial and military support to Ukraine since 2022.

Finland Builds the World's First Permanent Nuclear Waste Repository

What's the News?

- Finland is set to operationalise the **Onkalo** facility, the world's first permanent underground repository designed for the final disposal of high-level radioactive **spent nuclear fuel**.
- The facility is located on **Olkiluoto Island**, home to three of Finland's five nuclear reactors, and is built **400–450 metres** below the surface in bedrock that is approximately **1.9 billion years** old.

- The construction, managed by the company **Posiva Oy**, has taken over two decades (since 2004) with an investment exceeding **€1.5 billion (~₹13,500 crore)**, and the repository is designed to store around **6,500 tonnes** of waste until it is permanently sealed in the **2120s**.

The Onkalo Deep Geological Repository: Design & Safety

- **Purpose:** Unlike temporary storage methods like cooling pools or dry casks, Onkalo is a **deep geological repository (DGR)**, internationally recognised as the most viable permanent solution for isolating high-level radioactive waste from the biosphere.
- **Multi-Barrier Safety System:** The facility relies on a robust, layered safety approach based on the principle of **passive safety**, meaning it will remain secure without future human maintenance or monitoring.
 - **Boron Steel Canister:** Spent fuel rods are sealed inside a cast-iron insert within a sturdy canister.
 - **Copper Capsule:** This canister is then encased in a corrosion-resistant copper capsule, designed to withstand the deep underground environment for millennia.
 - **Bentonite Clay Buffer:** The capsules are surrounded by **bentonite clay**, which swells upon contact with groundwater, creating a watertight seal that protects against water flow and minor rock movements.
 - **Ancient Bedrock:** The entire system is embedded within the **1.9-billion-year-old stable granite bedrock**, which acts as the final natural barrier against surface-level risks like earthquakes, human intrusion, or future ice ages.
- **Operational Timeline:** The facility is expected to receive and entomb waste canisters for approximately **100 years** before final closure.

Global Significance of Onkalo

- **Addressing a Critical Challenge:** The project tackles a major obstacle for the nuclear energy sector: convincing public and political opinion that a safe, permanent solution for radioactive waste exists.
- **A Blueprint for Other Nations:** As countries globally return to nuclear power to meet **climate goals** and rising electricity demands, Onkalo offers a real-world, working model for downstream accountability. It is subject to the **IAEA's safeguards** for verifying spent nuclear fuel in a geological repository, setting a precedent for international oversight of such facilities.

Relevance for India

- **India's Nuclear Waste Management Strategy:**
 - India manages its nuclear waste under the provisions of the **Atomic Energy Act, 1962**, and the **Atomic Energy (Safe Disposal of Radioactive Wastes) Rules, 1987**, which are aligned with **International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA)** guidelines.
 - The country follows a **closed fuel cycle** philosophy, reprocessing spent fuel to

extract fissile material for future reactors, which both recycles resources and reduces the waste burden.

- India has mastery over the entire nuclear fuel cycle, from exploration and mining to waste management, a key consideration for the **Technology Development and Deployment** aspect in India's **Three-Stage Nuclear Power Programme**.
- For **high-level radioactive waste**, India's current strategy involves vitrification (converting it into a stable glass form) and interim storage, with research into technologies for partitioning and transmutation of long-lived radioactive elements.
- **India's Energy Context:**
 - India has an ambitious target of achieving **100 GW of nuclear power capacity by 2047**, and the government has assured that the resulting nuclear waste can be managed using existing practices and systems.

Additional Information

- **Nuclear Waste Statistics:**
 - Globally, about **400,000 tonnes** of spent nuclear fuel have been produced since the 1950s, with Onkalo's capacity being a fraction of this total.
 - Spent nuclear fuel remains dangerously radioactive for **100,000 years**, necessitating long-term planning horizons.
- **India's Institutional Framework:**
 - The **Bhabha Atomic Research Centre (BARC)** and the **Indira Gandhi Centre for Atomic Research (IGCAR)** are at the forefront of research and development in waste management technologies in India, including vitrification and advanced reprocessing.
 - The **Atomic Energy Regulatory Board (AERB)** ensures compliance with safety standards at all nuclear facilities, including waste management sites.
 - India's **SHANTI Bill (2025)** aims to attract private investment in the nuclear sector, which will bring the question of waste management financing and responsibility to the forefront, potentially requiring clear policy frameworks.

NASA's Nancy Grace Roman Space Telescope Set for September Launch

What's the News?

- NASA has completed the final assembly of its next-generation **Nancy Grace Roman Space Telescope** at the Goddard Space Flight Center. The observatory is now preparing for launch in **September 2026** aboard a **SpaceX Falcon Heavy** rocket.
- The mission, described as a "flagship-class" observatory, is notably **months ahead of schedule and under budget**.
- Once operational, it will create a new, dynamic atlas of the universe, capturing images so large that **no**

existing screen can display a single Roman image at full resolution.

Mission Highlights

- **Unprecedented Survey Speed:**
 - The telescope will map the cosmos **1,000 times faster** than the Hubble Space Telescope.
 - Its panoramic view covers **100 times more sky** in a single image compared to Hubble.
 - It can process in a single year what would take Hubble **2,000 years** to achieve.
- **A “New Atlas of the Universe”:**
 - Over its **five-year primary mission**, Roman is expected to discover **tens of thousands of new planets** and chart **billions of galaxies** and **tens of billions of stars**.
 - It will be stationed at **Lagrange Point 2 (L2)**, a gravitationally stable point nearly **1 million miles (1.6 million kilometers)** from Earth.
- **Technical Specifications:**
 - **Primary Mirror:** **2.4 meters (7.9 feet)** in diameter, identical in size to Hubble’s but equipped with a much wider field of view.
 - **Wide Field Instrument (WFI):** A **300-megapixel** visible-to-near-infrared imaging camera and slitless spectrometer.
 - **Coronagraph:** An experimental instrument to **block bright starlight**, enabling direct imaging of large exoplanets.

Core Scientific Objectives

- **Probing Dark Energy and Dark Matter:**
 - The mission aims to address the “crisis in cosmology” by studying the large-scale distribution of galaxies and the history of cosmic expansion.
 - It will build detailed 3D maps of the universe to refine models explaining why the universe’s expansion is accelerating (attributed to **Dark Energy**) and why galaxies hold together (attributed to **Dark Matter**).
- **Exoplanet Census and Time-Domain Astronomy:**
 - Roman will pioneer **time-domain astronomy** by repeatedly scanning wide swathes of the sky to catch transient events like **supernovae** and **fast radio bursts**.
 - Its coronagraph is expected to detect planets up to **100 million times** dimmer than their host stars, refining technologies for future life-hunting missions.

Additional Information

- **Naming and Legacy:** The telescope is named after **Dr. Nancy Grace Roman**, NASA’s first Chief of Astronomy and the first woman in an executive position at the agency. She is celebrated as the “Mother of Hubble” for her pivotal role in making that iconic telescope a reality.
- **Historical Context and Budget:**
 - The \$4.3-billion observatory was kick-started in 2012 after the U.S. National Reconnaissance Office donated two surplus wide-field telescopes and optics to NASA.

- The project survived a proposed budget cut from the White House in 2025 after the U.S. Congress voted to keep its funding.

Comparison with Other Observatories:

- **Hubble Space Telescope:** Primarily observes in visible and ultraviolet light with a narrow field of view.
- **James Webb Space Telescope (JWST):** Specializes in deep-field infrared observations.
- **Roman Space Telescope:** Complements both by providing wide-field surveys in visible and near-infrared light, acting as a strategic bridge between the all-sky survey capabilities of small telescopes and the deep-field precision of JWST.

China Develops First Zero-Carbon Coal Fuel Cell

What’s the News?

- Researchers at **Shenzhen University, China**, led by **Xie Heping**, have developed the world’s first **Zero-Carbon-Emission Direct Coal Fuel Cell (ZC-DCFC)**.
- The technology converts the chemical energy in coal directly into electricity through **electrochemical oxidation**, bypassing the traditional combustion process entirely.
- The findings were published in the journal **Energy Reviews**.
- This breakthrough challenges the long-held assumption that coal must always be a major source of pollution and offers a potential pathway for cleaner utilisation of vast coal reserves.

How the Technology Works: Electrochemical Oxidation

- **Core principle:** The ZC-DCFC avoids burning coal. Instead, it uses an electrochemical reaction to generate power.
- **Process steps:**
 - Coal is pulverised, dried, purified, and pre-treated.
 - It is then fed into the **anode chamber** of the fuel cell.
 - Oxygen is supplied to the **cathode**.
 - Fine coal particles undergo electrochemical reactions across an **oxide membrane**, generating electricity directly without any intermediate steam cycle or mechanical turbine.
- **Efficiency logic:** Conventional thermal plants are bound by the **Carnot cycle**, which caps efficiency at around **40%**. By eliminating combustion and thermal-to-mechanical conversion losses, the ZC-DCFC offers a theoretical efficiency nearly **double that of conventional coal-fired plants**.

Carbon Capture: In-Situ Catalysis

- A defining feature of the ZC-DCFC is its ability to capture carbon emissions at the source.
- The electrochemical reaction produces a **highly pure stream of CO2** at the anode outlet.

- This CO₂ is captured "**in-situ**" and converted into useful industrial feedstocks through catalysis, such as:
 - **Synthesis gas (syngas)**— a mixture of hydrogen and carbon monoxide.
 - **Sodium bicarbonate** (baking soda) or other mineral compounds.
- This transforms carbon dioxide from a waste product into a valuable industrial resource, supporting both environmental protection and a circular economy.

Advantages Over Conventional Coal Power

- **No direct CO₂ emissions:** The system prevents the release of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere, classifying it as a zero-carbon-emission technology during operation.
- **Higher efficiency:** Avoids energy losses from high-temperature flames, steam cycles, and mechanical turbines.
- **Deep underground application potential:** The concept can be extended to deep coal seams, potentially enabling electricity generation directly at depths of up to **2 km**. This reduces the need for costly mining operations and eases pressure on depleting shallow reserves.
- **Challenges traditional coal narrative:** Demonstrates that coal-based energy can be decoupled from inevitable high pollution.

Challenges in Commercialisation

- **Material costs:** The materials required for manufacturing these fuel cells are expensive.
- **Durability concerns:** The long-term stability and lifespan of the components remain unproven at scale.
- **Timeline for viability:** Industry estimates suggest the technology may not become cost-competitive for grid-level commercial use until after **2045**.
- **Infrastructure lock-in:** Existing coal-fired power infrastructure will continue to influence the pace of adoption, as replacement involves significant capital and transition costs.

Additional Info

- **Conventional Coal Power Generation:** Typically involves pulverised coal combustion in a boiler, producing high-pressure steam that drives a turbine connected to a generator. The process is governed by the **Rankine cycle**, with efficiency limited by the **Carnot theorem**. Major pollutants include CO₂, SO_x, NO_x, and particulate matter.
- **Fuel Cell Technology:** A fuel cell is an electrochemical device that converts the chemical energy of a fuel (hydrogen, natural gas, coal) into electricity. Unlike batteries, fuel cells can continuously generate power as long as fuel and oxidant are supplied. Types include **Proton Exchange Membrane Fuel Cells (PEMFC)**, **Solid Oxide Fuel Cells (SOFC)**, **Molten Carbonate Fuel Cells (MCFC)**, and **Direct Carbon Fuel Cells (DCFC)**.
- **Syngas:** A mixture of hydrogen (H₂) and carbon monoxide (CO), commonly used as an intermediate in producing synthetic natural gas, ammonia, methanol, and liquid fuels via the **Fischer-Tropsch process**.
- **Sodium Bicarbonate (NaHCO₃):** Apart from its common use as baking soda, it is used industrially in

flue gas treatment, as a fire extinguishing agent, and in the pharmaceutical and food industries.

- **China's Coal Dominance:** China is the world's **largest producer and consumer of coal**, accounting for over **50% of global coal consumption**. In 2023, coal accounted for **60.7%** of China's total primary energy consumption. The country has pledged to start reducing coal consumption from **2026**.
- **India's Climate Targets (NDCs) :** As of 2026, India has submitted its third set of Nationally Determined Contributions, targeting a **47% reduction in emissions intensity of GDP by 2035** and **60% non-fossil fuel power capacity by 2035**, conditional on international support.

17th Petersberg Climate Dialogue

What's the News?

- The **17th Petersberg Climate Dialogue (PCD)** was held in **Berlin, Germany** as the first major climate ministerial of 2026, serving as a critical precursor to **COP31**.
- High-level representatives from over **40 countries** gathered to build political consensus on accelerating climate action and implementation of the **Paris Agreement**.
- The Dialogue was jointly organized by **Germany**, alongside **Türkiye** (incoming COP31 Presidency) and **Australia** (COP31 Presidency of Negotiations).
- It was convened against the backdrop of a severe global energy crisis triggered by geopolitical conflict in West Asia, including the closure of the **Strait of Hormuz**, which exposed the vulnerabilities of fossil-fuel-dependent energy systems.

Focus Areas & Outcomes

- **Renewable Energy & Electrification:** A major theme was **centering electrification** in the clean energy agenda. German Environment Minister Carsten Schneider highlighted this as the next frontier for mobility and heating, while the EU Commissioner noted that electricity currently represents only **23%** of final energy consumption in Europe.
- **Climate Finance:** The Dialogue grappled with the persistent **financial gap** faced by the Global South. While German Chancellor Friedrich Merz reaffirmed support for multilateral climate policy, he did not announce new financial commitments. Developing nations pushed for **more predictable, accessible, and scaled-up funding** for adaptation and loss & damage.
- **Implementation of NDCs:** COP31 President-Designate **Murat Kurum** urged countries to submit their **Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs)** and Biennial Transparency Reports (BTRs) without delay, emphasizing the USD 1.3 trillion **Baku-to-Belém Roadmap**.

India's Position & Significance

- The Dialogue is strategically important as a **bridge between the Global North and Global South**, though developing nations continue to face challenges in securing adequate climate finance.

- India has consistently emphasized that global climate action must be rooted in the principle of **Common But Differentiated Responsibilities (CBDR)**.
- The outcomes of the PCD are likely to feed into ongoing UN climate negotiations, where **financing mechanisms and equity in implementation** remain central sticking points.

Additional Info

- **Petersberg Climate Dialogue:** An informal high-level annual forum launched in **2010** by former German Chancellor **Angela Merkel**. It was established after the **Copenhagen Climate Change Conference (COP15)** to maintain political momentum and prepare the ground for subsequent **UNFCCC COP negotiations**.
- **COP31:** The **2026 UN Climate Change Conference** will be held in **Antalya, Türkiye, from 9–20 November**. The conference will focus on advancing green industrialization, accelerating the transition away from fossil fuels, and finalizing **2035 emission reduction targets**.
- **Organising Structure:** The Dialogue was hosted by the **German Federal Ministry for the Environment, Climate Action, and Nature Conservation and Nuclear Safety (BMUKN)** in close cooperation with the incoming Turkish COP31 Presidency and Australia, which leads negotiations.

UAE Exits OPEC and OPEC+ in Strategic Policy Shift

What's the News?

- The **United Arab Emirates (UAE)** has announced its withdrawal from both the **Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC)** and the wider **OPEC+** alliance, effective **May 1, 2026**.
- The decision, described by the UAE as a "strategic move" aligned with its long-term economic vision, followed a comprehensive review of its national production policy and future capacity.
- The exit marks a significant blow to the 65-year-old oil producers' cartel, with analysts describing it as potentially "the beginning of the end" for OPEC's market dominance.

About OPEC and OPEC+

- **OPEC**
 - **Full Name:** Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries.
 - **Established:** 1960 at the Baghdad Conference by Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Venezuela.
 - **Headquarters:** Vienna, Austria.
 - **Mandate:** Coordinate and unify petroleum policies among member countries to secure fair and stable prices for producers and ensure a regular supply to consumers.
 - **Current Membership (Post-UAE Exit):** 11 countries, including Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Iran, Kuwait, Algeria, Libya, Nigeria, and others. The UAE had been a member since 1967.
- **OPEC+**

- **What it is:** A broader alliance that includes the 13 core OPEC members and 10 major non-OPEC oil-producing nations, most notably Russia, Mexico, and Kazakhstan.
- **Established:** 2016 via the Declaration of Cooperation (DoC), formalized in 2019 with the Charter of Cooperation. Formed to counter the US shale boom and manage market share.

Why the UAE Left

- **Divergence on Production Quotas:** The UAE has long desired to pump more oil to monetize its massive reserves and recent capacity investments but was constrained by OPEC quotas set primarily by Saudi Arabia and Russia.
- **National Interest & Strategic Autonomy:** The UAE stated the decision was based on a "careful review" of its national interest, emphasizing its long-term strategic and economic vision.
- **Capacity Expansion Plans:** The UAE aims to increase its oil production capacity by up to 30% to meet long-term global demand, something difficult to achieve within OPEC's quota discipline.
- **Geopolitical Considerations:** The decision came amid broader geopolitical realignments, including the UAE's frustration with what it viewed as an inadequate collective Arab response to regional security threats during the Iran conflict.

Implications for Global Oil Markets

- **Weakening of OPEC's Influence:** The UAE holds the group's second-largest spare capacity after Saudi Arabia. Its departure strips OPEC of roughly 15% of its total spare capacity, significantly reducing its ability to influence prices.
- **Shift in Market Dynamics:** Analysts predict a "structurally weaker OPEC" and potentially more volatile oil markets, with Saudi Arabia's dominance within the group now nearly absolute.
- **Potential for Increased Output:** In the longer term, the UAE's exit could lead to a sustained increase in global oil supply, potentially capping price spikes and benefiting consuming nations like India.
- **US Alignment:** The move is viewed as a win for US President Donald Trump, who has repeatedly pressured OPEC to lower oil prices, and could signal closer bilateral energy ties between Washington and Abu Dhabi.
- **Cracks in Gulf Solidarity:** The unilateral exit, reportedly not discussed with Saudi Arabia, exposes growing policy divergences between the two traditional Gulf allies.

Additional Information

- **India's Crude Import Dependency:** According to **PPAC data**, India's net import dependency for crude oil stood at **87.7% in FY 2024-25**. A \$1 per barrel sustained decrease saves India roughly **₹1,500 crore** annually in foreign exchange.
- **OPEC & OPEC+ Key Terms:**
 - **Spare Capacity:** The ability to quickly increase or decrease production. Market influence is exerted through members (like

Saudi Arabia and UAE) that hold spare capacity.

- **Production Quotas:** Agreed production targets for member countries to manage global supply. The UAE's quota for 2025 stood at **3.5 million barrels per day**, while its installed capacity was closer to **4.8 million bpd**.
- **Declaration of Cooperation (DoC):** The December 2016 agreement that formally brought OPEC and non-OPEC members together, creating the OPEC+ framework.
- **UAE's Energy Profile:** The UAE holds the **seventh-largest proven crude oil reserves** globally (approx. 111 billion barrels). It is one of the world's most cost-competitive producers, with some of the lowest carbon-intensity barrels.
- **Strait of Hormuz:** The narrow waterway between Iran and Oman through which about one-fifth of global crude oil and LNG passes. Its partial closure during the US-Israel-Iran conflict has already disrupted supply and masked the UAE's exit impact.

China Expands Zero-Tariff Access to All 53 African Nations with Diplomatic Ties

What's the News?

- China will grant **zero-tariff treatment** on 100 % of taxable imports from **all 53 African countries** that maintain diplomatic relations with Beijing, effective **May 1, 2026**.
- The move extends a unilateral, duty-free market access regime that previously covered only **33 Least-Developed Countries (LDCs) in Africa** (since December 1, 2024).
- For the **20 non-LDC African nations**, the zero-tariff benefit is implemented from **May 1, 2026 to April 30, 2028** through a preferential tariff rate.
- For products governed by **Tariff Rate Quotas (TRQs)**, only the **in-quota tariff** is reduced to zero; the out-of-quota duty remains unchanged.
- This makes **China the first major economy** to extend unilateral, full-coverage zero-tariff access to an entire continent, coinciding with the **70th anniversary of China-Africa diplomatic relations**.

China-Africa Trade: Scale, Imbalance & Strategic Vision

- **Record Trade Volume:** Two-way trade reached **USD 348 billion** in 2025, a **17.7 % increase** over 2024.
 - Chinese exports to Africa: **USD 225 billion**.
 - Chinese imports from Africa: **USD 123 billion**.
 - Africa's **trade deficit with China widened to USD 102 billion** in 2025.
- **Policy Anchors:**
 - The zero-tariff expansion fulfills a promise first made at the **2024 FOCAC Beijing Summit**, where China committed to 100 % tariff-line coverage for African LDCs.

- It is embedded in the broader **China-Africa Economic Partnership for Shared Development** and a proposed **"green channel"** for African agricultural exports.

- **Early Impact:** In Q1 2026, Chinese imports of African coffee and cocoa surged **70.4 %** and **56.8 %** respectively, validating the earlier LDC-focused phase.

Additional Information

- **Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC):**
 - A triennial multilateral platform for collective dialogue and cooperation between China and African states, launched in **2000**.
 - The **2024 FOCAC Beijing Summit** was the key decision-point for full zero-tariff coverage for African LDCs, later expanded to all 53 diplomatic allies.
- **India's Africa Engagement:**
 - **India-Africa Forum Summit (IAFS):** Three editions held (2008, 2011, 2015). The 4th IAFS has been pending for several years.
 - **e-VidyaBharti and e-AarogyaBharti (e-VBAB):** Tele-education and tele-medicine networks for African countries.
 - **Pan Africa e-Network:** Launched in 2009, providing satellite connectivity, tele-medicine, and tele-education.
 - **Lines of Credit (LoCs):** India has extended concessional credit worth over **USD 12 billion** for 200+ projects across Africa.
- **African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA):**
 - Operational since January 2021, creating the world's largest free-trade area by participating countries.
 - India is interested in leveraging AfCFTA to harmonise its trade and investment frameworks with the continent.

Miscellaneous

Karnataka Wins Inaugural Khelo India Tribal Games

What's the News?

- The inaugural Khelo India Tribal Games (KITG) concluded in Chhattisgarh with a closing ceremony attended by Chief Minister Vishnu Deo Sai
- Karnataka crowned overall champions with **23 gold medals**
- Mary Kom and Bhaichung Bhutia were present at the closing ceremony
- Host state Chhattisgarh finished ninth with **3 gold, 10 silver, 6 bronze**

Khelo India Tribal Games?

Overview

- Objective:** Promote sports among tribal communities and provide national-level platform for tribal athletes
- Participation:** Approximately **3,800 athletes** from **30 states and Union Territories**
- Duration:** 10 days across three cities in Chhattisgarh

Competition Disciplines

- Seven main sports:** Archery, Athletics, Football, Hockey, Swimming, Weightlifting, Wrestling
- Demonstration sports:** Mallakhamb, Kabaddi (showcasing traditional/indigenous sports)

Final Medal Tally (Top 5)

Rank	State	Gold	Silver	Bronze	Total
1	Karnataka	23	8	7	38
2	Odisha	21	15	21	57
3	Jharkhand	16	8	11	35
4	Maharashtra	6	10	4	20
5	Arunachal Pradesh	6	1	4	11

Key Performances

- Manikanta L (Karnataka):** Most successful athlete with **8 gold, 1 silver** (swimming)
- Dhoneesh N (Karnataka):** **5 gold, 1 silver** (swimming)
- Anjali Munda (Odisha):** **5 gold medals** (swimming)
- Meghanjali (Karnataka):** **4 gold, 2 bronze** (swimming)

Additional Info

Archery Results (Final Day)

- Women's Recurve Individual:** Gold - Komalika Bari (Jharkhand)
- Women's Recurve Team:** Gold - Nagaland
- Men's Recurve Individual:** Gold - Arjun Khara (Odisha)
- Men's Recurve Team:** Gold - Jharkhand

Football Final

- Gold:** West Bengal (defeated Chhattisgarh 1-0)
- Silver:** Chhattisgarh
- Bronze:** Arunachal Pradesh, Goa

Chhattisgarh Government Announcements

- Cash rewards for individual medallists:**
 - Gold: ₹2 lakh
 - Silver: ₹1.5 lakh
 - Bronze: ₹1 lakh
- Cash rewards for team championship medallists:**
 - Gold: ₹1 lakh

- Silver: ₹75,000
- Bronze: ₹50,000

- Olympics promise:** Financial windfall announced for any state athlete qualifying for Olympics

Khelo India Programme

- Launched:** 2018 by Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports
- Components:**
 - Khelo India Youth Games (annual)
 - Khelo India University Games
 - Khelo India Winter Games
 - Khelo India Tribal Games (new addition)
- Objective:** Build strong framework for all sports played in India and establish India as a great sporting nation

TIME100 2026: Indian Personalities Recognised for Global Influence

What's the News?

- TIME magazine** has released its **2026 list of the 100 most influential people**, featuring three Indian-origin personalities across **technology, entertainment, and culinary arts**.
- Sundar Pichai** (CEO, Google/Alphabet), **Ranbir Kapoor** (actor), and **Vikas Khanna** (chef-restaurateur) have been recognised for their contributions to global innovation, cultural storytelling, and culinary diplomacy.
- The inclusion underscores India's expanding **soft power** and the growing international resonance of Indian talent across diverse sectors.

Indian Representatives on TIME100?

- Sundar Pichai – Technology Leadership**
 - Recognised for steering **Google's AI innovation** and expanding access to digital ecosystems globally.
 - Key focus: Responsible AI development, bridging the digital divide, and advancing **India's tech ecosystem** through investments in startups and skilling initiatives.
- Ranbir Kapoor – Cinematic Storytelling**
 - Highlighted for nuanced performances that prioritise **artistic depth over commercial metrics**.
 - Tribute by Ayushmann Khurrana notes Kapoor's role as a "cultural bridge", helping global audiences engage with Indian narratives beyond stereotypes.
- Vikas Khanna – Culinary Diplomacy**
 - Celebrated for promoting **Indian culinary heritage** globally through storytelling, philanthropy, and cross-cultural collaborations.
 - Recognised alongside international visionaries in fashion, arts, and gastronomy.

Additional Info

- Other Indian-Origin Leaders on the List:**
 - Neal Mohan (CEO of YouTube):** Featured in the Innovators category, his inclusion further

cements the significant influence of the Indian diaspora in steering global digital and tech platforms.

- **Zohran Mamdani (New York City Assemblyman/Mayoral Candidate):** Listed among world leaders, highlighting the rising political influence of the Indian diaspora in key Western democracies.
- **About TIME100:**
 - The **TIME100** is an annual list published by **TIME Magazine** that recognizes the world's most influential individuals across various sectors, including politics, business, science, arts, and activism.
 - Being named to the list is considered a marker of significant global impact and thought leadership, reflecting not just individual achievement but broader societal influence.

India Selected for FIFA Women's Development Programme

What's the News?

- The **Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA)** has selected **India** as one of the 12 countries globally to participate in its **Women's Development Programme**.
- This selection follows an application by the **All India Football Federation (AIFF)**, marking a significant step toward professionalizing and expanding the footprint of women's football in India.
- The program is designed to provide member associations with technical expertise, financial assistance, and specialized mentorship to enhance the female football ecosystem.

Women's Development Programme?

- **Scope:** India is part of a select group of nations chosen for the **2024-2026** cycle of this global initiative.
- **Focus Areas:** The program provides support across eight key pillars:
 - **Women's Football Strategy:** Crafting long-term roadmaps.
 - **League Development:** Strengthening domestic competitions like the **Indian Women's League (IWL)**.
 - **Capacity Building:** Training for coaches, referees, and female administrators.
 - **Grassroots & Youth:** Increasing participation at the school and academy levels.
- **Implementation:** FIFA experts will work directly with the **AIFF** to implement tailor-made projects based on India's specific regional needs.

Impact on Indian Football?

- **Technical Growth:** Access to FIFA's specialized knowledge will help in bridging the gap between Indian domestic standards and international benchmarks.
- **Commercial Viability:** By improving the quality of the league and national teams, the program aims to attract more sponsors and broadcast partners to women's sports.
- **Pathway for Athletes:** Enhanced youth structures will provide a clearer "pipeline" for young girls to transition

from amateur play to the **Senior National Team (the Blue Tigresses)**.

Additional Info

- **Current Status of Women's Football in India:**
 - **Indian Women's League (IWL):** The top-tier professional league, established in 2016.
 - **FIFA Ranking:** The Indian Women's Team consistently ranks significantly higher than the Men's team in global standings (historically within the top 60-70).
- **Major Recent Events:**
 - India hosted the **FIFA U-17 Women's World Cup** in 2022, which served as a catalyst for infrastructure development.
 - **Vision 2047:** AIFF's strategic roadmap which aims to make India a powerhouse in Asian football, with a specific focus on the women's game.
- **Global Context:** The FIFA Women's Development Programme is part of FIFA's objective to have **60 million** women and girls playing football worldwide by 2026.

F1 Sim Racing India Open 2026

What's the News?

- **India's first official Formula 1 sim racing championship**, the **F1 Sim Racing India Open 2026**, has been launched in a partnership between **Formula 1** and **Mumbai Falcons Racing Limited (MFRL)**.
- The fully-sanctioned national competition will follow a **tiered format**: online qualifiers, city-based simulator rounds, and a grand national final in Mumbai.
- It is the first time Formula 1 has rolled out a **dedicated, at-scale esports racing programme** exclusively for a single country.
- The championship reflects the **growing synergy between esports and professional motorsport** in India, offering a structured talent pipeline.

F1 Sim Racing India Open 2026: A Structured Platform

- **Competition format & accessibility:**
 - The tournament will be played on the official **F1 25 game**, mirroring real-world circuits, liveries, and formats of the FIA Formula 1 World Championship.
 - Participants can compete on **PC, PlayStation 5, and Xbox**, with no platform restrictions.
 - Registrations open through the **MFRL App** (available on Google Play Store and Apple App Store).
 - The event follows a **three-stage structure**:
 - **Online qualifiers** open to all registered participants across India.
 - **City-based simulator rounds** for top qualifiers.
 - **National final in Mumbai** to crown the champion.
- **Talent pipeline objective:**
 - The championship aims to **bridge virtual racing with real-world motorsport**, allowing young drivers to develop racecraft, strategy,

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and technical understanding without the high costs of traditional racing.

- It is designed as a credible **stepping stone into competitive racing** and may nurture future talent for national and international events.

- The circuit was officially homologated by the **FIA** and designed by renowned track architect **Hermann Tilke**.

Partnership & Stakeholders

- **Formula 1:**

- The global motorsport brand has officially sanctioned this championship, signaling India's rising importance in its global expansion strategy.
- This is the first **country-exclusive F1 sim racing programme**, highlighting the strategic value of the Indian market.

- **Mumbai Falcons Racing Limited (MFRL):**

- Founded in **2019** by **Ameet Gadhoke**, it is an Indian motorsport team that became the **first Indian outfit to win an FIA-accredited single-seater championship** (Formula Regional Asian Championship, 2022).
- MFRL has supported the early careers of several rising stars, including **Jehan Daruvala, Kush Maini, and Oliver Bearman**, among others.
- The organisation holds the rights to host this official F1-sanctioned sim racing competition in India.

Additional Info

- **Esports recognition under Indian law:**

- The **Promotion and Regulation of Online Gaming Act, 2025**, enacted on **August 22, 2025**, formally recognises esports and establishes a legal framework for its regulation.
- The draft **Promotion and Regulation of Online Gaming Rules, 2025** propose the creation of an **Online Gaming Authority of India** and set registration requirements for esports.
- Recognition under the Act is preceded by mandatory registration under the **National Sports Governance Act, 2025**.

- **Mumbai Falcons Racing Limited (MFRL) key milestones:**

- Founded in November 2019.
- Won the **Formula Regional Asian Championship** in 2022, becoming the first Indian team to win an FIA-accredited championship.
- Achieved **18 podium finishes, 4 pole positions, and 5 fastest laps** across the five-round 2022 championship.
- Continues to compete in international junior formulae, including the Formula Regional Middle East series.

- **India's motorsport history:**

- India hosted the **Formula 1 Indian Grand Prix** at the **Buddh International Circuit (Greater Noida)** from **2011 to 2013** before the event was dropped due to tax and bureaucratic challenges.

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