



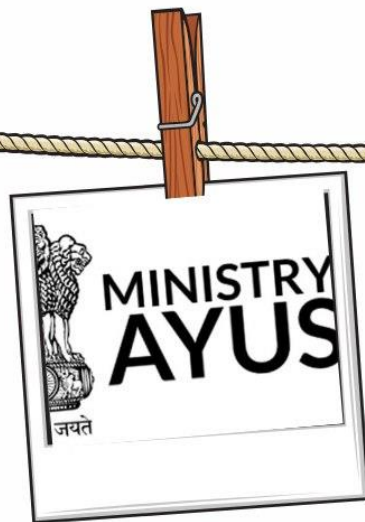
Weekly Current Affairs



To The Point

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CCI Investigates Google for Alleged Anti-Competitive Practices in Real Money Gaming

Context: The CCI has initiated a probe into **Google** following a complaint by **Winzo**, an RMG platform. The complaint alleges **discrimination** and **market distortion** through Google's **selective policies** on its Play Store.

Online Gaming in India:

Types of Online Games:

1. **E-Sports**
 - **Competitive video gaming** where players compete in tournaments at various levels.
 - Examples: **PUBG Mobile, Call of Duty, Dota 2, Free Fire.**
2. **Fantasy Sports**
 - Players create teams of **real-life athletes** and earn points based on their actual performances.
 - Examples: **Dream11, MPL Fantasy, MyTeam11.**
3. **Games of Skill**
 - Outcomes depend primarily on the **player's skills** and decisions.
 - Examples: **Rummy, Poker, Chess, Carrom.**
4. **Games of Chance**
 - Outcomes are determined mostly by **luck**, with minimal skill involved.
 - Examples: **Roulette, Slot Machines, Lottery.**



Regulations for Online Gaming in India:

Key Principles

- Only "**games of skill**" are permitted, while **games of chance** are often deemed **gambling** and are prohibited.
- Lack of a **clear definition** for "games of skill" complicates enforcement.

State-Specific Rules:

- **Gaming is a state subject**, allowing individual states to define their own laws.

Role of Self-Regulatory Bodies (SRBs):

- Platforms register with **SRBs**, which ensure compliance and resolve complaints.
- **Non-monetary games** are exempt from regulatory approval.

Key Guidelines:

- Platforms must implement **KYC (Know Your Customer)** for user verification.
- The **Ministry of Electronics and IT (MeitY)** is the nodal authority for online gaming.
- **E-sports** fall under the Department of Sports, part of the **Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports.**

Challenges Facing India's Online Gaming Industry:

- **Lack of a Comprehensive Regulatory Framework:** Absence of clear rules governing online gaming.
- **Distinguishing Legitimate Platforms:** Users face difficulty differentiating **genuine platforms** from illegal gambling sites.
- **National Security and Money Laundering:** Growth of **offshore illegal gambling** exacerbates these risks.

CCI's Investigation into Google:

What Prompted the Probe?

- **Winzo** alleged that Google's policies unfairly favor certain apps like **Dream11** under its **pilot program**.
- The **CCI** raised concerns about Google's **dominant position** and its potential abuse in the **RMG ecosystem**.

Key Allegations Against Google

2022 Policy and Pilot Program

- Google's **pilot program** allowed only **Daily Fantasy Sports (DFS)** and **rummy apps** on the Play Store.

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- **Winzo** criticized this move as **discriminatory**, benefiting specific competitors like **Dream11**.
- Example: Dream11 reportedly gained **1.7 crore users** within two months of the program launch.

Advertising Restrictions:

- Google's **ad policies** limited promotions to DFS and rummy apps, blocking others from advertising on its platform.
- This **restricted growth opportunities** for other RMG platforms.

Payment Warning Messages:

- Google reportedly displayed **warning messages** during transactions on **Winzo's app**, discouraging users from engaging.
- Examples of messages:
 - "This person might be flagged as risky."
 - "This is an unusually high amount."

Google's Defense

Ambiguity Around Games of Skill:

- **No clear definition** exists for "games of skill" in India.
- Google argued that each game must be evaluated on its **features, format, and rules**.

Pending Gaming Regulations:

- Highlighted the **uncertainty** around the **IT Ministry's gaming rules**, including SRBs' role in determining permissible games.

Fragmented Laws:

- India's **state-specific regulations** create **compliance challenges** for platforms like Google.

What's Next?

- The CCI has tasked its **Director General** to conduct a detailed investigation within two months.
- The outcome could shape future regulations for the **online gaming ecosystem** in India and influence global tech practices.

This probe into Google highlights the urgent need for a **clear regulatory framework** in India's booming **online gaming industry**. Balancing **fair competition** with **user protection** will be key to fostering sustainable growth in this dynamic sector.

National Transit Pass System (NTPS): Streamlining Forest Produce Transit

Context: The Union Minister for Environment, Forest, and Climate Change recently launched the National Transit Pass System (NTPS) across India. This initiative aims to simplify and standardize the movement of timber, bamboo, and other forest produce nationwide.

What is the National Transit Pass System?**Key Features of NTPS:**

- Facilitates the **seamless transit** of timber, bamboo, and forest produce across India.
- Replaces the current system of **state-specific transit permits**, creating a "One Nation-One Pass" regime.
- Designed to enhance **efficiency and transparency** for farmers and agroforestry practitioners.

**Objectives of NTPS:****1. Unified Online Platform:**

- Provides a centralized, digital system for issuing **timber transit permits**.
- Makes the process simple and accessible through **desktop and mobile applications**.

2. Ease of Doing Business:

- Aims to support **tree growers** and **farmers** by removing interstate barriers to the transportation of forest produce.
- Contributes to the government's push for **streamlined business operations** in the forestry sector.

3. Seamless Inter-State and Intra-State Transit:

- Manages permits for the movement of timber, bamboo, and forest products from sources like:
 - **Private lands**
 - **Government forests**
 - **Private depots**

How Does NTPS Work?**Innovative Features:**

- **QR-Coded Permits:**
 - Transit permits feature **QR codes**, enabling verification at state check posts.
 - Ensures the **authenticity** of permits for uninterrupted transit.
- **User-Friendly Design:**
 - Farmers and businesses can easily register and apply for permits through mobile or desktop applications.
- **Self-Generated Certificates:**
 - Users can generate **No Objection Certificates (NOCs)** for **exempted tree species** without additional approvals.

Adoption Across India:

- **25 States and Union Territories** have already implemented NTPS.
- Enables **interstate coordination**, promoting smoother operations for **producers, farmers, and transporters**.

Significance of NTPS:

- Promotes Agroforestry:**
 - Encourages farmers to grow regulated tree species by simplifying permit procedures.
- Boosts Economic Growth:**
 - Enhances the profitability of timber and bamboo businesses by reducing transit delays.



3. **Technology-Driven Efficiency:**

- Introduces a transparent and efficient system, replacing outdated manual procedures.

4. **Environmental Regulation:**

- Ensures better compliance with forestry laws and regulations, balancing development with conservation.

Nodal Ministry:

The **Ministry of Environment, Forest, and Climate Change** is the primary authority overseeing the implementation of NTPS.

The **National Transit Pass System** is a transformative step toward simplifying forestry-related trade, empowering farmers, and promoting sustainable practices in **timber and bamboo production** across India. Its “**One Nation-One Pass**” vision marks a significant stride toward **efficiency, transparency, and environmental responsibility**.



Human-Lion Coexistence in Gujarat: Adapting to a Unique Challenge

Context: New research has highlighted the **coexistence of 674 Asiatic Lions** with humans in Gujarat. This remarkable harmony is made possible through **mutual adaptation, strict legal protection, economic incentives, and government compensation** for livestock losses. The study, which analyzed over **14,000 livestock predation incidents, 11,000 compensation claims,** and **human-lion interactions across 277 villages,** sheds light on how these factors collectively enable **peaceful coexistence.**

**Understanding Asiatic Lions****Who Are the Asiatic Lions?**

- The **Asiatic Lion** (*Panthera leo persica*), also known as the **Indian Lion**, is a symbol of **courage and strength** in Indian culture and an integral part of its wildlife heritage.

Key Features**Physical Traits:**

- Smaller and more compact** than African lions.
- Males have **sparser manes** and a distinct **skin fold along their belly.**
- Habitat:**
 - Thrive in **dry deciduous forests, scrublands, and open grasslands.**
 - Currently found exclusively in **Gir Forest and surrounding regions** in Gujarat.

Status and Range:

- Historically, Asiatic lions roamed across the **Middle East and India**, but now their range is confined to **Gujarat.**
- Population expansion has seen lions move beyond **Gir Forest**, extending to **neighboring districts.**

IUCN Status:

- Initially listed as **Endangered**, their status was upgraded to **Vulnerable** in 2024, reflecting positive conservation outcomes.

Challenges Facing Asiatic Lions**Habitat and Conflict**

- Habitat Loss:** Encroachment due to **agriculture, urbanization, and industrial activities.**
- Human-Wildlife Conflict:** Livestock depredation and occasional human attacks create tension.

Genetic Concerns

- Genetic Bottlenecks:** A small population limits genetic diversity, increasing vulnerability to diseases.

Other Threats

- Poaching and illegal wildlife activities.**
- Natural risks like **droughts, forest fires,** and potential outbreaks of disease.

Key Findings of the Study**What Enables Coexistence?**

- Economic Incentives:**
 - Regulated **wildlife tourism** generates income for local communities.
 - Government compensation schemes for livestock losses help reduce tensions.
- Sociocultural Acceptance:**
 - Lions are viewed as **noble and charismatic creatures**, fostering a sense of pride and tolerance among locals.
- Benefits for Lions:**
 - Human tolerance** allows lions to roam beyond protected areas.
 - Abandoned **old cattle** serve as a significant food source, reducing predation on live animals.

**Challenges to Coexistence:****Fragile Harmony:**

- Coexistence remains delicate and requires careful **management of conflicts** and **protection of lion populations**.

Unmet Conservation Goals:

- Plans to translocate lions to **Madhya Pradesh** to enhance genetic diversity and prevent disease risks remain **unimplemented**, despite Supreme Court directives.

Conflict and Intolerance:

- **Pastoralist communities** exhibit higher intolerance due to economic losses.
- **High-conflict villages** are often more tolerant due to economic benefits derived from lions.

Livestock Depredation:

- **91% of livestock predation incidents** occur outside protected areas.
- **Amreli district** reports the highest claims, followed by **Junagadh, Gir Somnath, and Bhavnagar**.

Recommendations for Sustainable Coexistence:**1. Improved Monitoring:**

- Use **radio collars with virtual geofencing** to monitor lion movements and issue warnings, reducing negative interactions.

2. Enhanced Compensation:

- Update **livestock compensation schemes** to match market rates.
- Explore **livestock insurance programs** for better financial security.

3. Community Engagement:

- Strengthen community ties through **education** and **awareness campaigns** about the ecological importance of lions.

4. Implementation of Translocation Plans:

- Establish a second lion population to ensure long-term **genetic health** and **population stability**.

Conclusion:

The **coexistence of humans and lions in Gujarat** is a remarkable example of **mutual adaptation**. While the challenges are significant, the **benefits of coexistence** far outweigh the costs. By **enhancing conservation strategies**, addressing **conflicts**, and promoting **economic incentives**, this unique relationship can continue to thrive.

Warli Paintings: A Timeless Tribal Art Form

Context: An exhibition by the **Inherited Arts Forum** recently celebrated the artistic journey of the **Mashe family**, renowned for their efforts in reviving **Warli paintings**, a rich and ancient tribal art form.

What are Warli Paintings?

Origins:

- **Warli paintings** are a distinctive tribal art style created by the **Warli tribe**, indigenous to the **North Sahyadri Range** in Maharashtra.
- This art form dates back to the **10th century AD**, but it only gained widespread recognition for its unique style in the **1970s**.



Traditional Practitioners: Historically, this art was practiced by **Warli women**, known as **Suvasinis**, who adorned the **Lagn Chowk** or wedding square with intricate designs.

Themes of Warli Art:

Depiction of Rural Life:

- Warli paintings illustrate the **everyday lives** of rural communities, capturing their:
 - **Connection with nature.**
 - **Religious beliefs, myths, and traditions.**
 - **Festivities and social customs.**

Geometric Simplicity:

- The art relies on **basic geometric shapes**:
 - **Circle:** Inspired by the sun and moon.
 - **Triangle:** Derived from mountains and trees.
 - **Square:** Represents sacred enclosures.
- The central motif in many paintings is a square, called "**chauk**" or "**chaukat**", which is further categorized into:
 - **Devchauk:** Dedicated to deities.
 - **Lagnachauk:** Used for weddings.

The Tarpa Dance:

- A prominent feature in Warli paintings is the **Tarpa dance**, symbolizing community bonding.
 - **Tarpa**, a trumpet-like instrument, is played by men, around whom others form a circle, entwining hands and dancing rhythmically.

Painting Techniques and Materials:

Process:

1. **Design Selection:** The motif or theme is first decided.
2. **Freehand Drawing:** Artists directly draw on surfaces like **paper** or **cloth** without tracing.
3. **Brushes:** Handmade brushes are crafted from **bamboo sticks**, skillfully modified to create intricate designs.

Natural Colors:

- **Earth-derived hues** bring Warli art to life, including:
 - **White:** Made from **thick rice paste**.
 - **Brown/Orange:** Sourced from **henna**.
 - **Indigo:** Extracted from **dyes**.
 - **Red:** Produced using **brick dust**.

A Cultural Treasure:

Warli paintings beautifully capture the harmony between humans and nature, reflecting the **values, culture, and heritage** of the tribal communities. Their revival through exhibitions and dedicated efforts by families like the **Mashe family** ensures that this timeless art form continues to thrive in modern times.

Know India Programme (KIP): A Gateway to India's Cultural and Societal Landscape

Context: Recently, the **Secretary (CPV & OIA)** addressed the **Valedictory Session** of the 70th edition of the **Know India Programme (KIP)**, a significant initiative held by the **Ministry of External Affairs**. This program has been a key avenue for engaging with the **Indian diaspora youth** and promoting awareness about India.

What is the Know India Programme (KIP)?

The **Know India Programme (KIP)** is a prestigious **three-week orientation** program organized by the **Ministry of External Affairs (MEA)**. It focuses on youth of **Indian origin** aged between **18 and 30 years**, aiming to foster a deeper understanding of contemporary **Indian life**. The initiative has been running since **2003**, providing participants with unique insights into India's **culture, economy, and society**.

**Key Features of KIP****Immersive Experience:**

- Participants are selected after a thorough **selection process** and travel to India for a **21-day itinerary**.
- The program is designed to offer a comprehensive exposure to India's **political system, economic landscape, and key developmental sectors**.
- Participants explore India's rich **historical heritage** through visits to **cultural landmarks, and historically significant sites**.
- The program also arranges for **interactive sessions** with **students, professionals, and government officials**, offering a platform to engage with India's leadership and experts.

Support for Participants:

- **90% of the airfare** is covered by the Ministry, while participants are required to pay the remaining **10%**.
- **Accommodation, meals, and domestic travel** (by road/air) within India are provided by the Ministry throughout their stay.
- A **7-10 day state visit** to one or more **Indian states** is included to give participants a more localized experience of the country's diversity.

Eligibility Criteria:

To participate in the **Know India Programme**, applicants must meet the following requirements:

- **Age:** Applicants should be between **18 and 30 years** old. Preference is given to youth from **Girmitiya countries** such as **Mauritius, Fiji, Suriname, Guyana, Trinidad & Tobago, Jamaica**, etc.
- **Educational Qualifications:** Applicants must have completed **graduation** from a recognized institution or be currently enrolled in a **graduation program**.
- **Language:** Proficiency in **English** is essential. The applicant should have studied English at the **High School level** or have **English as the medium of instruction** in their undergraduate studies.
- **Previous Participation:** Applicants who have previously participated in any **KIP, Internship Programme for Diaspora Youth (IPDY)**, or similar programs organized by the Government of India or State Governments are not eligible.
- **Preference for First-time Visitors:** Preference is given to applicants who have not visited India before.

Why Participate in KIP?

The **Know India Programme** offers a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for **youth of Indian origin** to connect with their **roots** while experiencing firsthand the dynamic changes shaping India today. By participating in this program, youth can gain:

- A deeper understanding of **India's culture, heritage, and economic growth**.
- The chance to interact with **policymakers, scholars, and professionals** from various fields.
- The opportunity to explore India's **diverse states** and witness local traditions and innovations.

This program serves as a bridge for diaspora youth to strengthen their **connection with India**, and empowers them to become **ambassadors** of India's culture and developments globally.

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Understanding Japanese Encephalitis Virus (JEV) news

Context: Recently, a **suspected case of Japanese Encephalitis Virus (JEV)** was reported in **Bindapur, New Delhi**. JEV is a **mosquito-borne flavivirus**, belonging to the same genus as other significant viruses such as **dengue, Zika, yellow fever, and West Nile virus**. It is primarily spread through the bite of an infected mosquito, particularly the **Culex tritaeniorhynchus** species.

Symptoms of Japanese Encephalitis Virus:

JEV infection can manifest in two stages: **mild** and **severe**.

Mild Symptoms (Initial Phase):

- **Fever**
- **Headache**
- **Gastrointestinal pain**
- **Seizures**
- **Vomiting**

Severe Symptoms:

If the infection progresses, it can lead to:

- **High fever**
- **Neck stiffness**
- **Disorientation**
- **Weakness**
- **Coma**
- **Seizures**
- **Spastic paralysis**
- **Death** in extreme cases

The time between infection and the onset of symptoms typically ranges from **5 to 15 days**.

Transmission and Risk Factors

JEV is **not** spread from person to person. Instead, it circulates in nature between mosquitoes and animals, particularly **wading birds** and **pigs**. Humans typically contract the virus when a mosquito feeds on infected animals and then bites a person.

Regions and Seasonality:

- **Temperate areas of Asia** are most affected during the **warm season**.
- In the **tropics** and **subtropics**, transmission intensifies during the **rainy season**.

Who is at Risk?

- **Children under 15 years old** are particularly vulnerable.
- Less than **1%** of infections develop into severe **neurologic illness**.
- **20-30%** of severe cases can result in death due to **brain inflammation**.
- **30-50%** of those who survive may suffer from **long-term neurological effects**, such as:
 - Seizures
 - **Hearing or vision loss**
 - **Memory, language, or speech problems**
 - Weakness of the limbs

Prevention and Treatment:

Vaccine and Prevention:

There is a **vaccine** available to prevent **Japanese Encephalitis**. Individuals living in high-risk areas should consider vaccination.

Treatment

There is currently **no antiviral treatment for JEV**. The focus is on:

- **Supporting patients** to relieve symptoms
- **Rest, fluids, and pain management** to alleviate discomfort.

For **severe cases**, medical support is crucial to help manage complications and provide **critical care**.

JEV remains a significant health concern, especially in certain regions, but with **early detection, supportive care, and vaccination**, the risks can be managed effectively.



India's Impressive Climb in the Network Readiness Index 2024

Context: India has achieved a significant milestone by rising from **60th position in 2023** to **49th in 2024** in the **Network Readiness Index (NRI)**. This leap highlights India's **advancements in digital infrastructure** and **technological capabilities**.

About the Network Readiness Index (NRI)

The **NRI**, published by the **Portulans Institute**, assesses the **digital readiness** of **133 economies**. It uses **54 variables** categorized under four pillars:

- **Technology**
- **People**
- **Governance**
- **Impact**

India's Key Achievements in NRI 2024:

India's overall score rose from **49.93 in 2023** to **53.63 in 2024**, reflecting significant progress in multiple areas.

Global Rankings Across Key Metrics:

- **1st place globally:**
 - **AI scientific publications**
 - **AI talent concentration**
 - **ICT services exports**
- **2nd place globally:**
 - **Fiber-to-the-Premises (FTTH) Internet subscriptions**
 - **Mobile broadband traffic**
 - **International internet bandwidth**
- **3rd place globally:**
 - **Domestic market scale**
- **4th place globally:**
 - **Annual telecom investments**

Telecom Sector Transformations:

India's telecom industry has witnessed remarkable growth:

- **Tele-density:** Increased to **84.69%**.
- **Wireless connections:** Surged to **119 crore**.
- **Internet subscribers:** Rose from **25.1 crore** to **94.4 crore**.

Impact of 5G and Beyond

The launch of **5G services in 2022** propelled India's global mobile broadband speed ranking from **118th** to **15th**.

India's ambitious **Bharat 6G Vision** is setting the stage for it to become a **global leader in telecom innovation**.

India's advancements in the NRI underline its growing stature in the global digital landscape and its commitment to building a robust and inclusive digital ecosystem.





Accelerated and Extended Degree Programmes: A New Horizon in Higher Education

Context: The University Grants Commission (UGC) has introduced a Standard Operating Protocol (SOP) enabling Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to offer two innovative options for undergraduate students: the Accelerated Degree Programme (ADP) and the Extended Degree Programme (EDP).



What are ADPs and EDPs?

Accelerated Degree Programme (ADP):

- Students opting for ADP can complete their degree faster by earning additional credits starting in their chosen semester.
- The curriculum and credit requirements remain the same as a standard **three- or four-year UG programme**.
- **Completion Time:**
 - A **three-year UG programme** can be completed in **five semesters** (instead of six).
 - A **four-year UG programme** can be completed in **six or seven semesters** (instead of eight).

Extended Degree Programme (EDP):

- The EDP allows students to take a lighter academic load, earning fewer credits per semester.
- This flexibility enables them to take longer to complete their degree without compromising academic standards.

Recognition:

Both ADPs and EDPs are regarded as equivalent to standard-duration degrees by **government departments, private organisations, and recruiting agencies** like the UPSC and State Service Commissions.

How Will ADPs and EDPs Be Implemented?

1. **Eligibility and Selection:**
 - Students must choose ADP or EDP by the end of the **first or second semester**.
 - HEIs will establish committees to evaluate and approve applications for these programmes.
2. **Capacity:**
 - Up to **10% of the sanctioned intake** can opt for ADP in each institution.
 - There is **no cap** on the number of students who can enrol in EDP.
3. **Timeline:**
 - HEIs may start offering ADPs and EDPs from the **2025-26 academic year**.
 - Participation is voluntary for institutions.

Significance of ADPs and EDPs:

For Students:

- **ADP:** Empowers high-performing students to **fast-track** their education, enabling them to join the workforce or pursue higher studies sooner.
- **EDP:** Offers flexibility for students needing **extra time** to balance academics with personal or professional commitments.

Alignment with NEP 2020:

- The initiative reflects the vision of the **National Credit Framework (NCrF)** under the **National Education Policy (NEP) 2020**, fostering **personalised learning** and **academic flexibility**.

This progressive step by the UGC is set to transform the Indian education system, making it more **flexible, inclusive**, and aligned with the diverse needs of students.

SC Mandates Prior Sanction to Prosecute Public Servants under PMLA

Context: In a landmark ruling on **November 6, 2023**, the **Supreme Court of India** mandated that the **Enforcement Directorate (ED)** must obtain prior sanction before prosecuting public servants under the **Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA)** if the alleged offenses are linked to their **official duties**.

**About the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA), 2002:**

Enacted in **2003**, the **PMLA** aims to combat money laundering in India. It has three primary objectives:

- **Prevent and control money laundering.**
- **Confiscate and seize properties** obtained from laundered money.
- Address any other issues related to **money laundering**.

Key Provisions of the Act:

1. **Definition of Money Laundering (Section 3):** Any act where a person knowingly assists, participates, or is involved in processing **proceeds of crime** to project them as untainted property.
2. **Responsibilities of Financial Entities:** Obligation for **banks, financial institutions**, and intermediaries to verify and maintain transaction records.
3. **Powers of the Enforcement Directorate (ED):**
 - Investigate money laundering offenses.
 - Attach properties involved in money laundering.
4. **Adjudicating Authority and Appellate Tribunal:**
 - Resolve disputes related to property attachment and confiscation.
5. **Special Courts:** Designated courts to try offenses under the PMLA.
6. **International Cooperation:** The Act enables agreements with other countries to enforce its provisions globally.

News Summary:**The Supreme Court Ruling:**

The SC upheld a **2019 Telangana High Court judgment** that overturned charges against IAS officers **Bibhu Prasad Acharya** and **Adityanath Das** in a money laundering case linked to former Andhra Pradesh CM **Jagan Mohan Reddy**.

- The court emphasized the necessity of **prior sanction** for public servants under **Section 197 of the Criminal Procedure Code (CrPC)** when offenses relate to their **official duties**.

Key Points from the Ruling:

- **Prior Sanction Provision (CrPC Section 197):**
 - Prohibits courts from taking cognizance of offenses by public servants in their official capacity **without government approval**.
 - Exceptions: Certain serious offenses like **rape, trafficking**, and **sexual harassment** do not require prior sanction.
- **Compatibility with PMLA:**
 - **Section 65 of the PMLA** aligns with CrPC provisions, ensuring cases against public servants adhere to the requirement for sanction.

Impact on High-Profile Cases:

1. **Arvind Kejriwal (Excise Policy Scam):** Challenged the cognizance of an **ED chargesheet**, citing the absence of prior sanction.
2. **P. Chidambaram (Aircel-Maxis Case):** Successfully argued for a stay on trial proceedings due to lack of government approval.

Implications of the Ruling**For Public Servants:**

- Protects honest officials from **frivolous prosecutions** while ensuring accountability for misconduct.

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For Investigative Agencies:

- Delays in prosecution as **government sanction** becomes a mandatory requirement.
- Risk of overturned convictions if sanction requirements are not met.

Understanding Money Laundering

Money laundering is the process of disguising the **illicit origin of funds** derived from criminal activities, such as:

- **Drug trafficking**
- **Corruption**
- **Terrorism financing**
- **Embezzlement**

What is Hawala?

Hawala is an informal system for transferring money without physical movement. It relies on **trust-based networks**, requires no documentation, and ensures **anonymity**, making it a favored method for illegal transactions.

This landmark ruling underscores the delicate balance between ensuring accountability for corruption and protecting public servants from undue harassment, setting a significant precedent for future cases under the PMLA.



Ajmer Sharif Dargah: A Spiritual and Cultural Treasure of Rajasthan

Context: An **Ajmer court** recently admitted a **petition** calling for a survey of the Ajmer Sharif Dargah, the revered shrine of **Sufi saint Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti**. The petition claims the dargah was built on the remnants of **Hindu and Jain temples**.

Historical Background of Ajmer;**Origins of the City:**

- Ajmer, historically known as **Ajaymeru**, was the **capital of the Chauhan Rajputs** who ruled parts of modern-day **Rajasthan, Haryana, Delhi, and Uttar Pradesh** between the 7th and 12th centuries.
- The city was founded by **Ajaydeva** in the mid-12th century.

The Ghurid Invasion:

- In **1192**, Ajmer was attacked by **Muhammad of Ghor**, following the **defeat of Prithviraj Chauhan** at the Second Battle of Tarain.
- According to **Har Bilas Sarda**, a historian, the **Ghurid army looted the city** and destroyed many temples.
- Despite allegations, Sarda does not explicitly claim that the dargah was constructed on a demolished temple site.

Revival Under the Mughals:

- After centuries of decline, Ajmer was revitalized under **Mughal Emperor Akbar's reign (1556–1605)**.

The Evolution of Ajmer Sharif Dargah:**The Beginning:**

- **Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti** was laid to rest in **1236** in a modest cell where he had lived.
- For over 200 years, no formal structure marked his grave.

First Constructions by the Khaljis:

- In the **1460s**, **Sultan Mahmud Khan Khalji of Malwa** and his son **Ghiyasuddin** built the first permanent mausoleum and the **Buland Darwaza**.
- The gateway, featuring intricate carvings, is believed to have used materials from a **demolished Jain temple**.

Mughal Contributions:

- The shrine saw substantial development under the Mughals:
 - **Humayun** added the iconic **white marble dome** in 1532.
 - **Akbar**, a devoted follower of the Chishti saints, built the **Akbari Masjid** in the 1570s.
 - **Jahangir** installed a gold railing around the tomb in 1616.
 - **Shah Jahan** expanded the complex further, blending Mughal grandeur with spiritual significance.

Architectural Brilliance of Ajmer Sharif Dargah:**An Architectural Masterpiece:**

- The dargah is an exceptional example of **Indo-Islamic architecture**, showcasing a blend of **white marble** and intricate **silver and gold work**.
- The **Nizam Gate**, donated by the **Nizam of Hyderabad**, exemplifies the saint's widespread reverence.

Key Features:

- The **tomb** is enclosed in a silver railing and surrounded by a **marble screen**.
- The **prayer room**, built by **Chimni Begum**, Shah Jahan's daughter, is a serene space reserved for women.

Spiritual Importance of Ajmer Sharif Dargah:**A Beacon of Unity:**



- As one of India's holiest Muslim shrines, the dargah embodies **religious harmony and inclusivity**, attracting visitors of all faiths.
- Devotees, including **celebrities and politicians**, visit to seek blessings and solace.

The Urs Festival:

- The annual **Urs festival**, commemorating the saint's death anniversary, is the dargah's most significant event.
- It features:
 - **Qawwali performances**
 - **Special prayers**
 - Offerings of **chaddars** at the tomb.
- Thousands of devotees from across the globe gather to celebrate this spiritual occasion.

Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti and the Chishti Order

The Life of Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti

- Born in **1141** in **Sistan (Persia)**, Moinuddin began his spiritual journey after becoming an orphan at 14.
- He studied theology, philosophy, and ethics in renowned seminaries in **Bukhara and Samarkand**.
- Moinuddin traveled extensively, meeting his mentor **Khwaja Usman Harooni** and being initiated into the **Chishti order**.

Arrival in Ajmer:

- In **1191**, Moinuddin settled in Ajmer, where his simple lifestyle and compassion earned him the title **Gharib Nawaz (Friend of the Poor)**.
- His teachings emphasized **tolerance and selflessness**, influencing followers across the Indian subcontinent.

The Chishti Order:

- The **Chishti Sufi order**, introduced to India by Moinuddin Chishti, embraced local traditions and emphasized **devotion over orthodoxy**.
- It laid the foundation for a spiritual movement that encouraged inclusivity and interfaith harmony.

Conclusion:

The **Ajmer Sharif Dargah** is more than a shrine; it is a testament to **spiritual devotion, architectural brilliance**, and the enduring legacy of **Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti**. Its universal appeal transcends religious boundaries, making it a symbol of unity and peace in India's cultural and spiritual tapestry.

Exercise CINBAX: A New Chapter in India-Cambodia Defence Cooperation

Context: The first edition of the Joint Table Top Exercise CINBAX has commenced at the Foreign Training Node, Pune. This significant event marks a new milestone in defence collaboration between India and Cambodia.

What is Exercise CINBAX?

India-Cambodia Partnership:

- Exercise CINBAX is a joint planning exercise between the Indian Army and the Cambodian Army.
- Both contingents consist of personnel from Cambodia's Army and an Infantry Brigade of the Indian Army.



Primary Objectives

- The exercise aims to simulate and plan joint Counter-Terrorism (CT) operations under Chapter VII of the United Nations Charter.
- It fosters discussions on establishing a Joint Training Task Force for Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR) operations.

Focus Areas of CINBAX:

Core Operational Themes:

The exercise addresses critical aspects of modern warfare and peacekeeping operations, including:

- Information Operations
- Cyber and Hybrid Warfare
- Logistics and Casualty Management
- Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) Operations

Showcasing Indigenous Defence:

- A dedicated segment will exhibit Indian-origin weapons and equipment, emphasizing the country's progress in 'Atmanirbharta' (self-reliance) and indigenous defence production capabilities.

Structure of the Exercise:

Three Phases

The exercise unfolds over three distinct phases:

1. **Phase I:**
 - Orientation and preparation of participants for Counter-Terrorism operations during UN peacekeeping missions.
2. **Phase II:**
 - Execution of Table Top exercises, simulating scenarios to test operational strategies.
3. **Phase III:**
 - Finalization of plans and comprehensive reviews.
 - Discussions on situation-based tactics and refinement of joint operational procedures.

Significance of Exercise CINBAX:

Enhancing Interoperability:

- The exercise aims to strengthen trust, camaraderie, and interoperability between the armed forces of India and Cambodia.

Strategic and Tactical Gains:

- Participants gain practical insights into Counter-Terrorism strategies through thematic training sessions and simulated wargame discussions.

Promoting Regional Stability:

- By focusing on CT operations, cybersecurity, and HADR, the exercise contributes to building regional peacekeeping capacities and addressing emerging security challenges.

The inaugural edition of Exercise CINBAX sets the stage for a stronger India-Cambodia defence partnership and reaffirms India's commitment to fostering regional stability and peacekeeping capabilities on a global scale.

RS-28 Sarmat: Russia's New Era of Nuclear Power

Context: Russia is set to deploy the **RS-28 Sarmat**, an advanced **intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM)**, known in the West as "**Satan 2**". This missile is designed to replace older systems, marking a significant step forward in Russia's nuclear capabilities.

What is the RS-28 Sarmat?**A Powerful New ICBM:**

The **RS-28 Sarmat** is a **liquid-fueled** intercontinental ballistic missile developed by Russia, named after the **Sarmatian people** who lived during the **4th and 5th centuries BC**. In Western military circles, it is often referred to as "**Satan 2**" due to its formidable power and capabilities.

Key Features of the RS-28 Sarmat:**Massive Range and Size:**

- **Range:** The RS-28 has an impressive range of **18,000 km**, making it capable of targeting almost any location on Earth.
- **Weight and Size:** The missile weighs around **208.1 metric tons** and is **35.3 meters** long with a **3-meter diameter**. It is classified as a "**heavy**" ICBM due to its sheer size and power.

Payload Capacity:

- The **Sarmat** is capable of carrying a **10-ton payload**, offering incredible flexibility in the type of warheads it can deploy.
- It can carry **up to 10 heavy nuclear warheads, 16 smaller warheads**, or a combination of warheads and **countermeasures** to evade enemy interception.
- The missile is also designed to carry **hypersonic boost-glide vehicles**, further enhancing its ability to overcome modern missile defense systems.

Advanced Evasion Techniques:

One of the most significant features of the **RS-28 Sarmat** is its ability to **evade anti-missile defense systems**. It achieves this by having a **short initial boost phase**, making it difficult for enemy surveillance systems to track the missile as it launches.

Why is RS-28 Sarmat Important?**A New Era of Strategic Deterrence:**

The deployment of the **RS-28 Sarmat** significantly enhances Russia's **nuclear deterrent** capability, making it a powerful tool for national defense and strategic power projection. With its immense payload and evasion capabilities, it is poised to be a key element of Russia's defense strategy for decades to come.

A Replacement for Older Missiles:

The **RS-28 Sarmat** is designed to replace older, aging **Russian ICBMs**, providing the country with a more modern, more powerful, and more reliable system to ensure its nuclear deterrence is maintained at the highest levels.

The **RS-28 Sarmat** represents a major leap forward in **missile technology** and **nuclear defense**, solidifying Russia's position in the global strategic arena.



Trump Threatens 100% Tariffs on BRICS Over Dollar Replacement Plans

Context: Recently, former U.S. President Donald Trump issued a stern warning to the **BRICS nations** (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa), threatening to impose **100% tariffs** if they proceed with plans to replace the **US dollar** as the global reserve currency. His statement underscores the geopolitical tensions surrounding moves to **de-dollarize the global economy**.

**Why the Push to Replace the US Dollar?****1. Weaponization of the Dollar**

- The U.S. has increasingly leveraged its **financial dominance** as a geopolitical tool, imposing sanctions and restricting countries like **Iran** and **Russia** from systems like **SWIFT** (Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication).
- This raises fears that the dollar is being used as a weapon against sovereign nations.

2. Reducing US Dependency

- The **US dollar** dominates global currency markets, accounting for **88% of forex turnover** (BIS 2022).
- Over-reliance on the dollar makes nations vulnerable to **US monetary policies**, which primarily benefit the American economy but can destabilize other economies, especially when **interest rates rise**.

3. Ensuring Economic Sovereignty

- Nations seek to shield their economies from **dollar-induced fluctuations** and **US political pressure** by exploring alternatives.

4. Enhancing Trade Efficiency

- **Local currencies** and alternatives like China's **yuan** or regional payment systems reduce **transaction costs** and bypass the dollar.

5. Multipolar Financial Order

- With the rise of **China, India, and Brazil**, emerging economies advocate for a decentralized financial system reflecting today's **multipolar world**.

6. US Debt and Inflation Concerns

- Growing **US debt** and **inflationary pressures** undermine confidence in the dollar's long-term stability.

7. Lessons from China-Russia Trade

- Over **90%** of their **\$240 billion bilateral trade** in 2023 was conducted in **roubles** and **yuan**, demonstrating the benefits of bypassing the dollar.

India's Push for Rupee Internationalization**What Is Rupee Internationalization?**

- It involves increasing the use of the **Indian Rupee (INR)** in **cross-border transactions** and making it a widely accepted currency for **global trade and investments**.

Steps Taken by India:

- In **July 2022**, the **RBI** introduced mechanisms for settling international trade in **rupees**.
- By **December 2022**, India executed its first trade settlement in **rupees** with Russia.
- Banks from over **19 countries**, including **Germany, UAE, and Malaysia**, now settle transactions in **INR**.

Challenges:

- The rupee constitutes only **1.6% of global forex turnover**, far below the **4%** needed to be recognized as an international currency.
- **Trade imbalance** with Russia leads to excess rupee reserves being underutilized, forcing Russia to invest them in Indian **stocks** and **bonds**.



Trump's Threat: Risks and Implications

What Could Happen?

- Imposing **100% tariffs** on BRICS nations might backfire by shifting imports to third countries, increasing costs for **American consumers** without boosting U.S. manufacturing.
- The U.S. remains less competitive in **labour-intensive goods** due to higher domestic production costs, making tariffs an ineffective strategy.

India's Strategic Balancing Act:

Diplomatic Engagement

India must clarify to the U.S. that its diversification of trade mechanisms ensures **financial stability** and is not intended as a hostile move against the dollar.

Leadership in BRICS

To safeguard its interests, India should:

- Promote the internationalization of its **digital currency (CBDC)**.
- Expand platforms like **UPI** for cross-border transactions.
- Ensure BRICS initiatives do not disproportionately favor **China**, given its economic dominance.

Conclusion

The **US dollar** continues to dominate global finance, but the push for diversification signals a shift toward a more decentralized system. For India, the key lies in maintaining a balance between its **BRICS commitments** and its **strategic ties** with the U.S., ensuring a fair and multipolar financial framework.



40 Years of Bhopal Gas Tragedy: Reflecting on India's Preparedness

Context: Four decades after the catastrophic **Bhopal Gas Tragedy**, the legacy of environmental and public health challenges persists. Toxic waste from the **Union Carbide India Limited (UCIL)** site continues to contaminate **soil and water**, causing long-term ecological and human health damage.

Lingering Challenges:**India's Expanding Chemical Industry:**

- Despite the lessons from 1984, **India's chemical sector** has grown to become the **sixth largest in the world**.
- From 2020 to 2023, the country witnessed **29 major chemical accidents**, including high-profile incidents like the **Vizag Gas Leak (2020)** and the **Ammonia Gas Leak in Chennai (2024)**, leading to significant loss of life and property.

**Toxic Chemicals in Use:**

- **Methyl Isocyanate (MIC)**, the gas responsible for the Bhopal disaster, is still in use across India.
- MIC's toxicity makes even brief exposure hazardous, causing **respiratory distress, skin damage, and long-term health issues**.
- Unregulated agricultural chemicals like **DDT** continue to threaten **human health and environmental safety**.

Fragmented Regulations:

- India's chemical safety framework is fragmented, lacking the robustness of international laws like the **US Toxic Substances Control Act (TSCA)** or the **EU's REACH regulation**.

Reasons Behind Persistent Disasters:

1. **Focus on Economic Growth:** The push for rapid industrialization often comes at the cost of **safety standards and environmental safeguards**.
2. **Weak Regulatory Oversight:** Insufficient **resources, technical expertise, and political will** hinder enforcement of existing safety laws.
3. **Industry Influence:** **Powerful lobbying groups** resist stricter regulations, prioritizing profits over public safety.
4. **Public Awareness Gap:** Limited understanding of chemical hazards reduces **public pressure** on industries and policymakers to prioritize safety measures.

Steps Taken to Prevent Future Disasters:

1. **Strengthened Legal Framework:** India has implemented laws like the **Explosives Act (1884)**, **Chemical Accidents (Emergency Planning, Preparedness, and Response) Rules (1996)**, and the **Environment Protection Act (1986)** to regulate hazardous industries.
2. **National Green Tribunal (NGT):** The NGT provides a platform for addressing **environmental violations**, including industrial accidents, and ensuring accountability.
3. **NDMA Guidelines:** The **National Disaster Management Authority** emphasizes **inspection systems, emergency preparedness, and community awareness programs** to mitigate risks.

The Way Ahead:

1. **Comprehensive Chemical Policy:** India urgently needs a **unified chemical policy** that aligns with international standards, ensuring **safe handling and storage** of hazardous substances.
2. **Corporate Accountability:** Industries must adopt **stringent safety protocols**, invest in **risk management**, and comply with **environmental standards**.
3. **Victim Rehabilitation:** Long-term **healthcare, compensation, and livelihood support** for affected communities are critical to addressing the human cost of industrial disasters.
4. **Environmental Safeguards:** Toxic waste must be **safely disposed of** to prevent lasting damage to ecosystems.

Conclusion:

Forty years after the **Bhopal Gas Tragedy**, the need for stronger **regulations, corporate responsibility, and community awareness** remains urgent. By addressing systemic issues, India can ensure a safer future, protecting both its people and its environment from the devastating impact of industrial accidents.

[Download Our Application](#)



Pro-Active Governance and Timely Implementation (PRAGATI)

Context: The **Pro-Active Governance and Timely Implementation (PRAGATI)** platform has emerged as a revolutionary tool for improving the delivery of infrastructure projects in India. Recently, a report by **Oxford University's Saïd Business School** and the **Gates Foundation** highlighted PRAGATI's significant impact on governance and project implementation.



What is the PRAGATI Platform?

A Multi-Modal Solution:

PRAGATI is a **multi-purpose and multi-modal platform** designed to address the **grievances of the common man** while monitoring and reviewing major **government programmes and projects**, including those flagged by state governments.

Core Objectives:

- Promote **e-transparency** and **e-accountability**.
- Enable **real-time interaction** and exchange of information among key stakeholders.
- Strengthen **cooperative federalism** by involving both Central and State officials in decision-making.

Launch and Development:

- Introduced on **March 25, 2015**, PRAGATI was developed **in-house by the PMO team** with support from the **National Informatics Center (NIC)**.
- It leverages cutting-edge technologies like **digital data management**, **video conferencing**, and **geospatial technology**.

Key Features of PRAGATI:

1. Three-Tier System:

PRAGATI operates as a three-tier structure involving:

- The **Prime Minister's Office (PMO)**.
- **Secretaries of the Government of India**.
- **Chief Secretaries of the States**.

2. Monthly PRAGATI Day:

- The Prime Minister conducts a review session on the **fourth Wednesday of every month**, termed as **PRAGATI Day**.
- Issues from **public grievances**, **ongoing programmes**, and **pending projects** are discussed using live data and visuals.

3. Robust Integration:

- PRAGATI integrates with existing systems like:
 - **CPGRAMS** for public grievances.
 - **Project Monitoring Group (PMG)** for project tracking.
 - **Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation** databases.

4. Streamlined Workflow:

- Issues are uploaded **seven days prior to PRAGATI Day** for review by the relevant officials.
- **Union Government Secretaries** and **Chief Secretaries** provide updates within **three days**, ensuring the PM has the latest insights.

How PRAGATI Works:

Download Our Application



Freedom UPSC with Dhananjay Gautam



- 1. Issue Identification:** Grievances and pending projects are flagged from various databases, correspondence, and public feedback.
- 2. Data Review:** Officials upload updates and visuals to the system by **Monday** preceding the review.
- 3. Final Preparations:** On **Tuesday**, the PMO team reviews all inputs, ensuring the Prime Minister has a clear picture of each flagged issue.
- 4. PM Interaction:** The PM conducts live video discussions with Central and State officials, reviewing projects and grievances with comprehensive data and geospatial visuals.

Unique Features:

- **Real-Time Monitoring:** Allows dynamic oversight of projects.
- **Transparency:** Enhances public confidence through **e-accountability**.
- **Cooperative Federalism:** Strengthens coordination between Central and State governments.

Conclusion:

The **PRAGATI platform** represents a paradigm shift in governance, blending **technology** with **leadership** to address issues proactively and effectively. By fostering **collaboration**, **transparency**, and **timely implementation**, PRAGATI continues to set benchmarks for modern governance in India.



**Asia-Oceania Meteorological Satellite Users' Conference (AOMSUC)**

Context: The Asia-Oceania Meteorological Satellite Users' Conference (AOMSUC) is a premier event for meteorologists, earth scientists, satellite operators, and students. First held in Beijing, China, in 2010, it has grown into a significant platform for scientific exchange and collaboration across the Asia-Oceania region and beyond.

AOMSUC 2024: Hosted by India

This year, the conference is organized by the India Meteorological Department (IMD) and the Ministry of Earth Sciences (MoES). The event includes:

- **High-quality oral and poster presentations.**
- **Panel discussions** on critical meteorological topics.
- **Training workshops** on utilizing satellite data for meteorology and climate studies.

Key Objectives of AOMSUC:

1. **Promote Satellite Observations:** Highlight the vital role of **satellite observations** in understanding and predicting weather and climate patterns.
2. **Advance Remote Sensing Science:** Encourage innovations in **satellite remote sensing technologies** and their applications in meteorology and climatology.
3. **Foster Collaboration:** Provide a platform for interaction between **satellite operators and users**, enhancing mutual understanding and collaboration.
4. **Inform the Global Community:** Share updates on the **current status and future plans** of international space programs, ensuring transparency and global engagement.
5. **Develop New Technologies:** Drive the development of cutting-edge technologies for **weather satellite sensing**, pushing the boundaries of what is possible.
6. **Engage Young Scientists:** Inspire and involve the next generation of scientists by providing opportunities for participation and learning.

Why is AOMSUC Important?

- **Enhances Data Utilization:** Helps optimize the use of satellite data for weather prediction and disaster management.
- **Promotes Regional Cooperation:** Strengthens ties between Asia-Oceania nations in addressing shared meteorological challenges.
- **Drives Innovation:** Encourages advancements in satellite technology and its applications.

Conclusion:

The Asia-Oceania Meteorological Satellite Users' Conference is more than just an event—it's a platform for innovation, collaboration, and education. By promoting **satellite science** and fostering international partnerships, AOMSUC continues to play a crucial role in advancing global meteorological and climatological capabilities.



Asia-Oceania Meteorological
Satellite Users' Conference
(AOMSUC-14) New Delhi, India

India's Fight Against HIV: A Remarkable Journey of Progress and Hope

Context: On **World AIDS Day**, the Union Health Minister emphasized India's notable success in combating the **HIV epidemic**, showcasing significant declines in **new infections** and **AIDS-related deaths**. These achievements highlight the nation's commitment to prevention, treatment, and awareness campaigns.

**Understanding HIV and AIDS:****What is HIV?**

Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) is a **lentivirus**, a subtype of retrovirus, responsible for HIV infection. If untreated, it progresses to **Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS)**, a life-threatening condition marked by immune system failure.

Types of HIV:

1. **HIV-1:**
 - The most prevalent type globally.
 - Divided into four groups: **M (Major)**, **N**, **O (Outlier)**, and **P**.
 - **Group M** accounts for 90% of cases worldwide.
2. **HIV-2:**
 - Found mainly in **West Africa** but also in **India** and **Europe**.
 - Originates from the **simian immunodeficiency virus** in monkeys.
 - Categorized into eight groups (A to H).

Transmission:

HIV spreads through **blood, breast milk, vaginal fluids, semen, or pre-ejaculate**. It exists as free particles or within infected immune cells in bodily fluids.

Without Treatment:

The survival period for someone with HIV is **9 to 11 years**, depending on the subtype.

India's Approach to HIV Treatment:**Antiretroviral Therapy (ART):**

- ART involves a combination of drugs to manage HIV infections.
- **Key Benefits:**
 - Suppresses HIV replication and reduces the viral load.
 - Strengthens the immune system and improves the quality of life.
 - Reduces the risk of transmission and prevents progression to AIDS.
 - Enables **viral load suppression**, making HIV undetectable in the bloodstream.

India's Free ART Program:**Under the National AIDS Control Program (NACP):**

- Over **680 ART centres** and **1,200 Link ART centres** are operational.
- As of 2024, **88% of identified HIV-positive individuals** are on ART.
- Led to a **79% decline in AIDS-related deaths** since 2010.

TLD (Tenofovir Disoproxil Fumarate, Lamivudine, Dolutegravir):

A single-pill antiretroviral treatment used as the first line of defence against HIV.

Innovative HIV Drug: Lenacapavir:

- **Lenacapavir**, a twice-yearly injectable drug, has demonstrated **100% effectiveness** in preventing HIV infections in a recent study.
- Developed by **Gilead**, it is sold under the brand name **Sunlenca** for treating HIV in the **US, Canada, Europe**, and other regions.
- Plans are underway to secure authorization for its use in **HIV prevention**.



Challenges of Global Access:

- Generic versions are limited to **120 poorer countries**, excluding most of **Latin America**, where HIV rates are rising.
- Advocacy groups stress the importance of equitable access, especially for marginalized populations like **sex workers** and **young women**.

India's Achievements in HIV Management:

- Steady decline in **new HIV infections**.
- Proactive measures in **awareness** and **treatment programs**.
- Leveraging **innovative therapies** and strengthening healthcare systems.

The Road Ahead:

- Expand access to **groundbreaking treatments** like lenacapavir.
- Enhance **healthcare equity** to ensure no region is left behind.
- Strengthen global collaborations to fight HIV on a united front.

India's success story in combating HIV stands as a testament to the power of **dedicated public health initiatives** and **community engagement**. By building on these achievements, the nation continues to pave the way toward a **future free of HIV and AIDS**.



Coastal Shipping Bill, 2024: A New Era for India's Maritime Trade

Context: The Coastal Shipping Bill, 2024, recently introduced in the Lok Sabha, aims to **consolidate** and **amend** the laws governing coastal shipping in India. This comprehensive legislation is designed to **standardize regulations, boost domestic participation,** and enhance **connectivity** in the coastal trade sector. The bill is a vital step in unlocking the vast potential of **coastal shipping** in India, given the country's extensive coastline of approximately **7,500 km** and its strategic location along key global shipping routes.

**Key Highlights of the Coastal Shipping Bill, 2024:**

- 1. Prohibition of Unlicensed Coastal Trade:** The bill mandates the **prohibition of trade** in coastal waters by foreign vessels unless they hold a **valid license** issued by Indian authorities.
- 2. Inclusion of Inland Vessels:** The legislation **permits inland vessels** to engage in coastal trading, thereby expanding the scope of domestic shipping operations.
- 3. National Coastal and Inland Shipping Strategic Plan:** The bill calls for the creation of a **National Strategic Plan** aimed at the **development** and **promotion** of coastal shipping, ensuring sustainable growth for the sector.
- 4. National Database for Coastal Shipping:** A **National Database** will be established to ensure **transparency** in coastal shipping procedures and improve **information sharing** across stakeholders.
- 5. Licensing and Regulation of Chartered Vessels**
 - The **Director-General** will be empowered to issue licenses for chartered vessels, considering critical factors like **citizenship of crew** and **vessel construction requirements**.
 - **Fair hearing provisions** will ensure that no license is suspended or revoked without a reasonable opportunity for defense.
- 6. Offenses and Penalties**
 - Provisions for the **compounding of certain offenses** and the **imposition of penalties** by the principal officer have been included.
 - The Director-General will also have the authority to call for **specific information** in relation to certain shipping matters.

Coastal Shipping Industry in India:

Coastal shipping refers to the movement of **goods and passengers** along the **Indian coastline**, within **territorial waters** extending up to **12 nautical miles** from the baseline. The industry plays a crucial role in facilitating trade, reducing congestion on roads and railways, and contributing to **economic growth**.

Regulation of Coastal Shipping in India

- The **Directorate General of Shipping**, under the **Ministry of Ports, Shipping, and Waterways**, is the primary authority overseeing coastal shipping regulations in India.
- The **Coastal Regulation Zone (CRZ) regulations** govern activities in coastal areas, ensuring **environmental protection** while allowing for maritime operations.
- India's **cabotage policy** limits the operations of **foreign-flagged vessels** for the transport of goods within the country's territorial waters, promoting the growth of the domestic shipping industry.
- **Tariffs and charges** related to major ports are regulated by the **Tariff Authority for Major Ports (TAMP)**, which ensures fair pricing for services involved in coastal shipping.

Looking Ahead: Impact of the Coastal Shipping Bill, 2024:

With the introduction of the **Coastal Shipping Bill**, India is poised to enhance the **efficiency** and **sustainability** of its maritime trade, ultimately driving economic growth. By fostering **domestic participation**, enhancing **infrastructure**, and promoting **transparency**, the bill will shape the future of **coastal shipping** in India, ensuring the sector plays a pivotal role in the nation's global trade network.



India Strengthens Horticulture with \$98 Million ADB Agreement

Context: The Government of India has partnered with the Asian Development Bank (ADB), securing a \$98 million loan aimed at enhancing the productivity and quality of India's horticulture sector. The initiative will focus on providing **certified disease-free planting materials** to farmers, ultimately boosting **crop yield, quality, and climate resilience**.

Key Highlights of the Loan Agreement:

Implementation Framework:

- The project will be executed by the **Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare** through the **National Horticulture Board (NHB)** and the **Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR)**.
- It aligns with India's **Atmanirbhar Clean Plant Programme (CPP)**, focusing on **plant health management**.

Core Objectives:

1. Establish **clean plant centers** with cutting-edge diagnostic laboratories and trained professionals to provide **disease-free planting materials**.
2. Develop a **regulatory framework** and institutional mechanisms for effective implementation of the CPP in horticulture.
3. Launch a **certification scheme** for private nurseries to ensure high-quality planting materials.
4. Enhance farmers' ability to **adapt to climate change** by addressing challenges like **rising temperatures, pests, and disease behavior**.

India's Horticulture Sector: An Overview

Current Trends in Production:

- **2023-24 estimates** indicate a total horticulture production of **352.23 million tonnes**, reflecting a **0.91% decline** compared to 2022-23.
- Notable increases in the production of **fruits, honey, flowers, spices, and aromatic plants**, but a decline in **vegetable yields**.
- India is the **world's second-largest producer** of fruits, vegetables, tea, sugarcane, and several other key agricultural commodities.

Economic Contributions:

- The horticulture sector generates **employment** for millions, especially in **rural areas**.
- Supports allied industries like **food processing, packaging, and transportation**, contributing significantly to the **Indian economy**.

Key Government Initiatives in Horticulture:

1. **Mission for Integrated Development of Horticulture (MIDH):** A centrally sponsored scheme since **2014-15**, promoting **holistic development** of horticulture, covering a wide range of crops and plants.
2. **National Horticulture Mission (NHM):** Launched in **2005**, the mission focuses on **increasing production**, ensuring **nutritional security**, and improving **farmer incomes**.
3. **Horticulture Cluster Development Programme (HCDP):** Encourages **regional specialization** and **integrated development** of horticulture clusters to enhance **exports** and global competitiveness.
4. **Soil Health Card Scheme:** Provides **soil testing** and **crop-specific nutrient recommendations**, helping farmers improve **yields** while reducing **input costs**.
5. **Horticulture Mission for North East and Himalayan States (HMNEH):** Targets the unique horticultural needs of the **North East and Himalayan regions**, promoting **sustainable farming** and **region-specific crops**.





Challenges Facing the Sector:

- **Post-harvest losses** due to inadequate **infrastructure, cold storage, and transport facilities.**
- Limited **market access** and pricing challenges, affecting farmers' profitability.
- Addressing **environmental sustainability** remains critical for long-term growth.

Future Prospects:

The future of India's horticulture sector appears promising, driven by **rising domestic and global demand** for high-quality produce.

- **Continued government support**, technological innovation, and strategic investments will propel growth.
- By addressing current challenges and harnessing its potential, India can solidify its position as a **global leader** in horticulture, significantly contributing to **economic growth** and **food security.**





Banking Laws Amendment Bill, 2024: Key Changes and Highlights

Context: The **Banking Laws (Amendment) Bill, 2024**, was passed by the **Lok Sabha** on **December 3, 2024**, making it the first major legislative achievement of the Winter Session after a prolonged deadlock.

- Introduced by **Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman**, the Bill was passed through a **voice vote**.

Introduction:

The **Banking Laws (Amendment) Bill, 2024**, introduced on **August 9, 2024**, aims to **modernize banking laws** and enhance **efficiency** in the financial sector. It proposes amendments to:

- The **Reserve Bank of India (RBI) Act, 1934**
- The **Banking Regulation Act, 1949**
- The **State Bank of India Act, 1955**
- The **Banking Companies (Acquisition and Transfer of Undertakings) Acts, 1970 and 1980**

Key Provisions and Amendments:

1. Redefining "Fortnight" for Cash Reserves:

- Current Definition:** A fortnight is from **Saturday to the second following Friday** (14 days).
- New Definition:**
 - 1st to the 15th** of each month, or
 - 16th to the last day** of the month.
- Impact:** Alters the way scheduled and non-scheduled banks maintain their **cash reserves** with the RBI.

2. Extended Tenure for Co-operative Bank Directors:

- Existing Rule:** Directors (excluding chairman or whole-time directors) can serve a maximum of **8 consecutive years**.
- Amendment:** Increases tenure to **10 consecutive years** for co-operative bank directors.

3. Relaxation for Common Directors in Co-operative Banks:

- Current Rule:** Directors cannot serve on the board of multiple banks except when appointed by the RBI.
- Amendment:** Allows directors of **central co-operative banks** to serve on the boards of **state co-operative banks** where they are members.

4. Increased Threshold for "Substantial Interest":

- Existing Rule:** Substantial interest is defined as holding shares worth more than 5 lakh or **10% of a company's paid-up capital**.
- New Rule:** Raises the threshold to **2 crore**, with flexibility for government modifications through notifications.

5. Expanded Nomination Rules for Deposits and Lockers:

- Current Provision:** Single or joint deposit holders can appoint **one nominee**.
- New Provision:**
 - Up to **four nominees** allowed.
 - For **deposits**, nominees can be named **simultaneously** or **successively**, with proportional shares in simultaneous cases.
 - For **lockers and articles**, priority is based on the order of nomination.

6. Broader Scope for Unclaimed Amounts:

- Current Rule:** Unclaimed dividends are transferred to the **Investor Education and Protection Fund (IEPF)** after **seven years**.
- Amendment:**
 - Includes **shares with unclaimed dividends** for seven years.
 - Covers **unpaid interest or redemption amounts** on bonds for seven years.





- Allows claimants to retrieve **funds or shares** transferred to the IEPF.

7. Bank Autonomy in Auditor Remuneration:

- **Existing Rule:** The RBI, with central government consultation, decides auditors' fees.
- **Amendment:** Banks gain the power to **independently set auditor remuneration**.

Key Takeaways:

The **Banking Laws (Amendment) Bill, 2024**, introduces transformative changes aimed at strengthening the **banking sector**, streamlining governance, and safeguarding customer interests.

- **Modernized Framework:** Simplifies rules for **cash reserves, director tenures, and substantial interest thresholds**.
- **Customer-Centric Provisions:** Expands options for **nominations** and improves handling of **unclaimed funds**.
- **Empowered Banking System:** Enhances autonomy in auditor fee decisions and strengthens **co-operative banking** governance.

This landmark Bill is poised to **revolutionize India's banking landscape**, ensuring a **modern, resilient, and efficient financial system** for all stakeholders.





Evaluating India's Production-Linked Incentive (PLI) Scheme

Context: While the **Production-Linked Incentive (PLI) Scheme** has delivered promising results in some sectors, others are struggling to meet targets. This has led to **ongoing reviews** and potential adjustments to improve its overall impact.

What is the PLI Scheme?

About the Scheme:

Launched in **March 2020**, the **PLI Scheme** aims to strengthen **India's domestic manufacturing sector** and integrate it into the **global supply chain**.

Objective:

The scheme covers **14 critical sectors with a dual focus:**

- **Creating significant employment opportunities.**
- **Driving industrial capital expenditure (capex).**

How Does It Work?

- Companies receive **financial incentives** based on **incremental sales** of goods manufactured in India.
- These incentives promote:
 - **Investment in advanced manufacturing technologies.**
 - **Upgraded production facilities.**
 - **Enhanced production capacity.**

How Is It Different from Traditional Subsidies?

1. **Limited Sector Focus:** Targets sectors with maximum potential for investment and rapid scalability.
2. **Time-Bound Investments:** Requires companies to commit to **pre-determined investment levels** and **production timelines**, distinguishing it from conventional subsidies.
3. **Technology-Driven:** Prioritizes emerging technologies like **advanced chemistry cell batteries** and **electronic products** that can be commercialized at scale.

Evaluating the PLI Scheme: Progress, Challenges, and Potential:

Mixed Progress Across Sectors:

1. **Underperforming Sectors:**
 - **Textiles, solar modules, IT hardware, automobiles, advanced chemical cells (ACC), and specialty steel** have shown slower progress, particularly in generating employment.
 - Many of these sectors faced challenges in building **domestic manufacturing infrastructure** from scratch.
2. **Success Stories:**
 - **Food processing** and **mobile phone manufacturing** have surpassed expectations.
 - For instance, **smartphone exports** reached **\$15 billion** in 2023-24, driven by companies like **Apple**, which expanded its assembly operations in India.

Challenges and Emerging Benefits:

Key Challenges:

- **Infrastructure Gaps:** Several sectors require long lead times (1.5–3 years) to set up manufacturing facilities, such as solar modules and ACC.
- **Stringent Eligibility Criteria:** Reliance on imported machinery and high tariffs have deterred many companies.
- **Slow Commissioning:** Time-consuming processes delay benefits realization.

Emerging Benefits:

- **Ripple Effects:** Large-scale mobile manufacturers like **Apple** have catalyzed the growth of ancillary industries, creating opportunities for **smaller suppliers**.
 - For example, Apple now sources components from **14 Indian suppliers**, up from zero before the PLI scheme.



**Economic Boost:**

- The scheme is expected to drive **3-3.5 lakh crore** in industrial capex over its tenure.
- This would account for **8-10%** of India's total capital expenditure in key sectors over the next **3-4 years**.

Critical Perspectives:

Critics highlight that while the scheme incentivizes investment, it may not guarantee **long-term competitiveness** once financial incentives end.

Way Forward:**1. Sectoral Adjustments:**

- Recently, the outlay for **IT hardware** was revised upward.
- Similar adjustments are under consideration for **textiles** and **drones**.

2. Potential Revisions:

- Loosening **eligibility criteria** to attract more participants.
- Linking incentives to **employment generation** for sectors showing slower progress.

Conclusion:

The PLI Scheme has demonstrated its potential to boost India's manufacturing sector but faces **challenges** in underperforming industries. Addressing structural issues and fine-tuning policies are essential to achieving the scheme's goals of **industrial growth**, **job creation**, and **global competitiveness**. With continuous **stakeholder engagement** and strategic adjustments, the PLI Scheme can become a cornerstone of **India's manufacturing renaissance**, paving the way for a stronger, more resilient economy.

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Celebrating 10 Years of the Ministry of Ayush

Context: The **Ministry of Ayush**, established in **2014**, has completed a decade of fostering India's traditional medicine systems. It was created to **revive and promote ancient systems of medicine**, ensuring their relevance in modern healthcare.

**The Journey of Ayush:**

- The Ministry of Ayush evolved from the **Department of Indian Systems of Medicine and Homoeopathy (1995)**, later renamed as the **Department of Ayush (2003)**.
- **Ayush** is an acronym representing India's traditional medical systems: **Ayurveda, Yoga & Naturopathy, Unani, Siddha, and Homeopathy**.

Major Achievements of the Ministry of Ayush:**1. Expanding Infrastructure:**

- Established **3,844 Ayush hospitals** nationwide, bringing holistic healthcare closer to communities.
- Set up **3 state-of-the-art satellite centers of Ayush National Institutes** in Delhi, Goa, and Ghaziabad.

2. Embracing Technology: Launched **digital initiatives** like **Ayush Grid** and **e-Sanjeevani telemedicine**, enabling quality healthcare access in **remote regions**.

3. Strengthening Global Presence:

- Signed **Donor Agreements with WHO** and partnerships like the **Ayurveda Agreement with Malaysia**.
- Introduced the **Ayush Visa** for wellness tourism, emphasizing India's vision of global health.
- Established the **WHO Global Traditional Medicine Centre in Jamnagar**, promoting traditional medicine on an international scale.
- **UNGA recognition: June 21st** (Summer Solstice) was declared the **International Day of Yoga in 2014**, celebrating India's gift to global wellness.

4. Economic Milestones:

- The **Ayush market** expanded exponentially from **USD 2.85 billion in 2014** to **USD 43.4 billion in 2023**.
- **Exports of Ayush products doubled** from **USD 1.09 billion to USD 2.16 billion**, showcasing India's growing influence in traditional medicine.

Challenges Faced by Ayush:

- **Scientific Validation:** Limited research and evidence supporting Ayush treatments.
- **Education Standards:** Need for quality training for practitioners.
- **Integration with Modern Medicine:** Bridging gaps with allopathic practices remains a challenge.
- **Awareness:** Limited public knowledge about Ayush benefits and practices.

Key Initiatives Promoting Ayush:

- 1. National Ayush Mission (2014):** A **Centrally Sponsored Scheme** to strengthen Ayush systems through improved healthcare infrastructure and services.
- 2. Encouraging Investments:** Allowed **100% Foreign Direct Investment (FDI)** in the Ayush sector, boosting its global appeal.
- 3. Ensuring Quality Education:** Set up the **National Commission for Indian System of Medicine** to establish and maintain **high standards in Ayush education**.
- 4. AYURGYAN Scheme:** Launched to enhance **capacity development** and expand expertise in the Ayush healthcare sector.

A Decade of Growth and Potential:

In just **10 years**, the **Ministry of Ayush** has transformed India's traditional medicine systems, making them globally recognized and economically significant. By addressing challenges and focusing on scientific integration, Ayush is poised to redefine healthcare for generations to come, blending **ancient wisdom with modern innovation**.



How Land Degradation is Threatening Earth's Ability to Sustain Humanity

Context: A recent **United Nations report** has spotlighted the alarming problem of **land degradation**, which is steadily eroding Earth's capacity to support human life. Every year, **1 million square kilometers of land** are degraded, with a cumulative impact on **15 million square kilometers**—an area larger than **Antarctica**.

Insights from the UN Report:

The report, jointly published by the **UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD)** and Germany's **Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research**, highlights:

- **Hotspots of land degradation** in **South Asia**, **northern China**, the **United States High Plains**, **California**, and the **Mediterranean region**.
- Approximately **one-third of humanity** resides in drylands, with **three-quarters of Africa** affected.
- **Low-income countries** bear a disproportionate burden due to limited resources to combat and adapt to land degradation.



What is Land Degradation?

The **UNCCD** defines land degradation as the **reduction in biological or economic productivity** of land caused by unsustainable land-use practices, deforestation, overgrazing, and other pressures.

Key Causes of Land Degradation:

1. Unsustainable Agricultural Practices:

- Overuse of **chemical fertilizers and pesticides**.
- Poor **irrigation techniques** and **deforestation**.
- **Overgrazing** that strips land of vegetation.

2. Climate Change:

- **Extreme weather events** such as floods and droughts intensify soil erosion.
- Rising **temperatures** and altered precipitation patterns disrupt land recovery.

3. Urbanization:

- Expanding cities destroy natural habitats, leading to **biodiversity loss** and land degradation.
- Increased pollution further impacts soil health.

Impact of Land Degradation:

1. **Threat to Food Security:** Degraded land reduces **agricultural productivity**, leading to malnutrition and scarcity of food.
2. **Spread of Diseases:** Poor land management results in contaminated water sources, spreading **waterborne diseases**.
3. **Accelerated Climate Change:**
 - Degraded ecosystems like forests absorb **20% less carbon dioxide** than a decade ago, worsening global warming.
 - Degraded soils release stored **carbon** and **nitrous oxide**, further escalating climate challenges.
4. **Ecosystem Collapse:** Reduced biodiversity and weakened ecosystems diminish the Earth's ability to sustain life.

Global Statistics on Land Degradation:

- Nearly **2 billion hectares** of land are degraded, impacting **1.5 billion people**.
- In **India**, **96.4 million hectares** are affected by desertification and land degradation.

Steps to Combat Desertification:

1. National Afforestation Programme (NAP):

- Focused on restoring degraded forests with **people's participation**.
- Treated **37,110 hectares** of land between 2018 and 2021 with an investment of ₹157.78 crore.

2. Green India Mission (GIM):

- Aims to **protect and restore forests** in India.

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- Over 594.28 crore has been utilized to create **117,503 hectares of plantations** across 15 states and one Union Territory.
3. **National Mission on Himalayan Studies (NMHS)**
- Supports **land reclamation, soil conservation, and watershed management.**
 - Allocated 10.84 crore for research and sustainable practices over three years.
4. **Integrated Watershed Management Programme (IWMP): Implements rainwater harvesting, pasture development, and soil conservation to manage degraded rain-fed lands effectively.**

The Way Forward:

The fight against **land degradation** requires urgent action, including:

- Promoting **sustainable farming practices** and afforestation.
- Enhancing **global cooperation** to share technology and best practices.
- Integrating **land restoration efforts** with climate action to build resilience.

By addressing this critical issue, we can restore the Earth's capacity to sustain life, protect ecosystems, and ensure a healthy future for generations to come.





Supreme Court Flags Concerns Over Voter Limit Increase

Context: In a recent observation, Chief Justice Sanjiv Khanna emphasized the importance of ensuring **accessible voting** for all citizens, asserting that "**no voter should be turned down.**"

Election Commission's Decision Sparks Debate:

The **Election Commission of India (ECI)** recently increased the **maximum voter limit** per polling station to **1,500 voters**, replacing the earlier limits of **1,200 (rural)** and **1,400 (urban)** voters.

Concerns Raised:

A petition challenging this decision highlights the potential drawbacks, including:

- **Overcrowding** at polling stations.
- **Extended wait times**, possibly deterring voters.
- Insufficient data to justify the increase, as the decision was not supported by an **updated census**.

Voting Capacity Analysis:

- A voter takes approximately **90 seconds** to cast their vote.
- On average, a polling station accommodates **45 voters per hour**.
- Over an 11-hour voting day, the maximum capacity reaches **495 voters**, or **660 with maximum efficiency**, far short of the revised 1,500-voter limit.

Legal Framework for Polling Stations:

The **Representation of People Act, 1951** mandates the Election Commission to ensure a **sufficient number of polling stations** per constituency.

Key Guidelines:

- Polling stations must be located within **2 kilometers** of voters, barring exceptions like remote or hilly areas.
- This ensures ease of access and encourages voter participation.

Initiatives to Boost Voter Turnout:

1. Systematic Voters' Education and Electoral Participation (SVEEP):

- Focuses on **awareness campaigns** and voter education.
- Aims to enhance turnout by addressing accessibility and logistical challenges.

2. Voter Helpline App:

- Offers **real-time information** on polling stations.
- Simplifies the process for voters, ensuring better accessibility.

Looking Ahead:

While the ECI's decision aims to optimize resources, concerns about **overcrowding** and **disenfranchisement** require careful consideration. Balancing **efficiency** with **voter accessibility** is essential to uphold the democratic process. The Supreme Court's intervention could lead to vital reforms ensuring every citizen's right to vote is both preserved and facilitated.





Is the Caste Census a Necessary Tool for India?

Context: The idea of a **caste census** has reignited debates across India, with supporters advocating it as a way to allocate resources, reservations, and policy benefits equitably. However, **historical records** and the **complex realities** of caste dynamics in modern India pose significant challenges to its feasibility and utility.

Historical Background of Caste Census in India:

Colonial Beginnings:

- **1871-72 Census:** Marked the first caste census, exposing **arbitrary and inconsistent classifications**.
- **1931 Census:** Identified **4,147 castes** but underscored **inaccuracies** as communities often claimed **different caste identities** across regions.

Post-Independence Complexities: The **Socio-Economic and Caste Census (SECC) 2011** revealed **46.7 lakh caste categories**, riddled with **8.2 crore errors**, highlighting the **complexities of caste classifications**.

Challenges in Conducting a Caste Census:

1. Caste Mobility and Misclassification

- **Upward Mobility:** Communities may claim **higher caste affiliations** for social prestige.
- **Downward Mobility:** Some opt for **lower caste identities** to benefit from **reservations**.
- **Similar-Sounding Castes:** Confusion arises due to **identical surnames**, e.g., 'Dhanak,' 'Dhanuk,' and 'Dhanka' in Rajasthan.

2. **Enumerator Bias:** Enumerators often rely on **assumptions based on surnames** rather than directly asking sensitive caste-related questions.

3. **Data Accuracy:** Even recent efforts, such as the **Bihar Caste Census 2022**, exposed **inconsistencies**, undermining the reliability of the data collected.

Proportional Representation: Is It Practical?

The Idea of Proportional Representation:

- Reserved seats are distributed based on caste populations (e.g., **27% reservation for OBCs**).

Why It's Impractical:

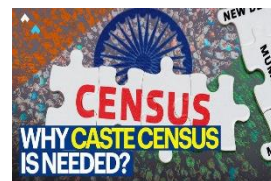
- India's **1.4 billion population** includes over **6,000 castes**, with an average caste size of **2.3 lakh**.
- Smaller castes, e.g., those with only **10,000 members**, would require **1.4 lakh vacancies** to ensure representation—**unfeasible** in recruitment systems like UPSC.

Impacts of a Caste Census:

1. **Policy Implementation:** While intended to promote **equitable distribution of resources**, complexities in caste data could deepen **social divisions**.
2. **Marginalization of Smaller Castes:** Minor castes may face **exclusion**, as their smaller populations might not justify meaningful representation.
3. **Administrative and Financial Strain:** Conducting a caste census would require **significant logistical resources**, potentially diverting attention from **key developmental priorities**.

Conclusion:

The **caste census** stems from a desire to ensure **equity**, but its **execution challenges**, **data reliability issues**, and **risk of social fragmentation** raise questions about its practicality. Rather than relying solely on caste data, **alternative approaches** focusing on **socio-economic upliftment** and **inclusive development** may offer more sustainable solutions for India's diverse population.



Understanding the Akal Takht's Role and Its Ties with the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD)

Context: Recently, **Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) President Sukhbir Singh Badal** was attacked near the **Golden Temple**, though he remained unharmed. Badal, already recovering from a fractured foot, was also handed a **religious punishment** by the **Akal Takht** for alleged misconduct during the SAD government (2007-2017). Several former cabinet members are similarly serving atonement by performing tasks like cleaning utensils and bathrooms.



What is the Akal Takht?

Establishment of the Akal Takht:

The **Akal Takht** was founded in **1606** by the sixth Sikh Guru, **Guru Hargobind**, following the martyrdom of his father, **Guru Arjan Dev**, at the hands of the Mughals.

- It is located directly opposite the **Harmandir Sahib (Golden Temple)**.
- The Guru issued the first **Hukamnama (edict)** from this platform, urging Sikhs to contribute **horses and weapons** for the community's defense.

The Dual Significance: Miri and Piri:

- Guru Hargobind introduced two swords symbolizing **Miri (temporal power)** and **Piri (spiritual authority)**.
- The slightly shorter sword for **Miri** represented the **primacy of spiritual over temporal power**.

A Symbol of Defiance:

- The **12-foot-high platform** of the Akal Takht stood as a direct challenge to Mughal Emperor Jahangir's **11-foot-high throne**, symbolizing Sikh defiance against oppression.

Evolution of the Akal Takht After Guru Gobind Singh:

- During periods of persecution, the Akal Takht became a **rallying point for Sikhs**, especially after the execution of **Banda Singh Bahadur** in 1716.
- **Sarbat Khalsa gatherings** were held here during **Baisakhi** and **Diwali** to make critical decisions for the community.
- The tradition of the Sarbat Khalsa continued into the **19th century**, with **Maharaja Ranjit Singh** holding one of the last assemblies in 1805.

Appointment of the Akal Takht Jathedar:

Early Practices:

Initially, the **Sarbat Khalsa** appointed the Jathedar during annual gatherings.

Changes During British Rule:

Under colonial rule, the appointment process was influenced by **pro-British leaders** through the **Darbar Sahib committee**.

Role of the SGPC:

- With the passage of the **Sikh Gurdwaras Act, 1925**, the responsibility shifted to the **Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC)**.
- Today, the SGPC oversees gurdwaras across **Punjab, Himachal Pradesh, and Chandigarh**.

The Role and Authority of the Akal Takht Jathedar:

Supreme Religious Authority:

The **Jathedar of the Akal Takht** is the **highest temporal and spiritual authority** in Sikhism, responsible for guiding the community on key matters.

Power and Jurisdiction:

- The Jathedar can **summon any Sikh** for trial and issue **religious punishments (tankhah)** to instill humility and remove ego.
- The position demands a person who is **baptized**, knowledgeable in **Sikh history**, and free of moral shortcomings.



Historical Demonstration of Authority:

The Akal Takht's directives have never been openly defied. Notably, **Maharaja Ranjit Singh** accepted public punishment at the Akal Takht for moral transgressions.

The Relationship Between SAD and SGPC:

Shared Roots:

- Both the SGPC and SAD originated during the **Gurdwara Reform Movement of 1920**.
- The **SGPC** was established to manage Sikh shrines, while the **SAD** acted as its enforcement arm, combating corrupt priests and British interference.

Three Pillars of Sikh Politics:

- The **Akal Takht**, **SGPC**, and **SAD** form the **three pillars of Sikh politics**.
- Controlling the SGPC, which appoints the Akal Takht Jathedar, provides the SAD with significant influence.

Akali Influence Over SGPC:

- The SAD dominated the SGPC during the **1960s and 1970s** and maintained control even during Punjab's period of unrest in the **1980s**.
- Critics argue that the absence of SGPC elections since **2011** has helped the SAD retain its dominance.

SAD's Influence on Jathedar Decisions:

The **SAD's control over the SGPC** has often led to allegations of **political interference** in the decisions of the Akal Takht Jathedar.

Conclusion:

The **Akal Takht** remains central to **Sikh governance and spirituality**, symbolizing defiance and moral authority. However, its relationship with the **SGPC and SAD** highlights the intersection of religion and politics, raising questions about the independence of Sikh institutions.

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India's Trade Potential in a Changing Global Landscape

Context: India's trade dynamics are at a critical juncture as **global disruptions** and **geopolitical shifts** reshape the international economic order. The **NITI Aayog's Trade Watch Report** offers valuable insights into India's trade prospects, hurdles, and areas of untapped potential, especially in the context of the **US-China trade tensions** and the evolving **China Plus One strategy**.



Key Insights from NITI Aayog's Trade Watch Report:

Challenges in Leveraging the 'China Plus One' Strategy:

- India has achieved **limited success** in attracting multinational corporations looking to reduce their reliance on China.
- **Southeast Asian nations** like Vietnam, Thailand, Malaysia, and Cambodia outperformed India due to:
 - **Cheaper labor costs**
 - **Simplified tax regimes**
 - **Lower tariffs**
 - Proactive engagement in **Free Trade Agreements (FTAs)**

Global Trade Fragmentation:

- The **US export restrictions** on Chinese goods have intensified trade fragmentation.
- India faces stiff competition from **Thailand and Malaysia** in sectors like **electrical machinery**.

Geopolitical Realignments and India's Opportunities:

US-China Trade War: A Mixed Opportunity:

- The escalating trade conflict between the US and China offers **potential benefits** for India, particularly in:
 - High-tech materials
 - Alternative supply chains
- **US Restrictions:** Targeted export controls on cutting-edge materials to China.
- **China's Retaliation:** Imposed bans on critical raw materials like **gallium** and **germanium**.

India's current share in 70% of global trade is **less than 1%**, showcasing significant **untapped potential**.

Strengthening India-US Trade Relations:

The **US remains India's largest trading partner**, presenting ample opportunities to expand in **goods and services sectors**.

Sectoral Challenges and Policy Recommendations:

Iron and Steel Industry Under Pressure:

- A **33% decline** in India's **iron and steel exports** during Q1 FY25 was driven by weak domestic demand and oversupply in China.
- **EU's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM):**
 - Tariffs of **20–35%** could reduce India's export competitiveness.
 - **Compliance costs** related to emissions reporting may further strain exporters.

Balancing Tariff Policies:

- The government's proposed **25% hike on steel import duties** has raised concerns about reduced competition and higher costs for domestic consumers.
- Policymakers must balance **pragmatic protectionism** with **free trade principles**, especially when dealing with opaque practices in global markets.

Recent Policy Initiatives to Boost Trade:

Schemes Supporting Exporters:

1. **Interest Equalisation Scheme:** Offers cheaper rupee credit to MSME exporters for pre-shipment and post-shipment activities.



2. **Remission of Duties and Taxes on Exported Products (RoDTEP):** Ensures exporters are reimbursed for unrefunded duties and taxes on exported goods.
3. **Export Promotion Capital Goods (EPCG):** Facilitates **duty-free imports** of capital goods to enhance domestic production capacity.

Advances in Trade Facilitation:

- India achieved a **93.55% score** in the 2023 UNESCAP Global Survey on **Digital and Sustainable Trade Facilitation**, surpassing several developed nations like France and Germany.

Collaborative Platforms and International Engagement:

- **Trade Connect e-Platform:** A digital one-stop solution for MSME exporters offering real-time updates and access to global markets.
- **ASEAN-India Trade Talks:** Addressed issues like market access, rules of origin, and trade remedies.

Future Pathways for Growth:**Impact of US Trade Policies:**

- General US tariffs (e.g., **10%**) are unlikely to harm India significantly.
- High tariffs on Chinese goods (up to **60%**) could create opportunities for Indian exporters to capture new markets.

Diversifying Markets and Products:

India needs to explore **new regions** and **innovative products** to enhance its share in global trade. Proactive **policy measures** and **infrastructure reforms** could position India as a neutral and competitive economy amid global tensions.

Conclusion:

India's trade potential lies at the intersection of **challenges and opportunities**. While competitors like Vietnam have benefited more from the **China Plus One strategy**, India's strategic advantages remain underutilized in many sectors.

To capitalize on the current disruptions in global trade, India must adopt:

- **Dynamic policies** to attract foreign investments.
- **Robust trade facilitation mechanisms** to support exporters.
- **Diversified trade partnerships** to mitigate geopolitical risks.

With the right reforms, India can rise as a **global trade leader** amidst the evolving economic landscape.



South Africa Takes the Helm of G20 and B20

Context: South Africa has officially assumed the **Presidency of the G20** and is now leading the **Business 20 (B20)**, the G20's designated platform for private sector engagement.

Theme for South Africa's Leadership:

The theme for South Africa's presidency is **"Solidarity, Equality, and Sustainability."**

This theme emphasizes:

- **Inclusive economic growth**
- **Sustainable global trade practices**
- Addressing **climate challenges**
- Fostering **equality in agricultural development**

About G20

What is the G20?

The **G20** is an informal assembly of **19 countries** and two regional bodies:

- **African Union**
- **European Union**

Key Statistics

- Represents **two-thirds** of the global population
- Accounts for:
 - **85% of global GDP**
 - **80% of global investment**
 - **Over 75% of global trade**

G20 Member Nations:

- **Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada, China, France, Germany, India, Indonesia, Italy, Japan, Republic of Korea, Mexico, Russia, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, Turkey, United Kingdom, and the United States.**

Structure and Presidency Rotation:

- The G20 has **no permanent secretariat or headquarters.**
- The presidency **rotates annually**, ensuring **regional balance** over time.
- The 19 member countries are divided into **five groups**, each with a maximum of four countries.
- The presidency rotates among these groups, with a new country taking charge each year.

Troika System:

The **Troika** ensures continuity and consistency in the G20's agenda.

- The **current presidency** collaborates with the **previous and next presidencies.**

About B20

What is B20?

The **Business 20 (B20)** serves as the official platform for engaging the private sector within the G20 framework.

- **Established:** 2010
- **Participants:** Companies and business organizations

Core Focus Areas:

The B20 develops policy recommendations on:

- **Trade and innovation**
- **Sustainable development**
- **Digital transformation**
- **Climate change**





These recommendations are submitted to **G20 leaders** during their summits, influencing the global economic agenda.

B20 Leadership:

- Each year, the G20 Presidency appoints:
 - A **B20 Chair**
 - A **B20 Sherpa**
 - A **B20 Secretariat** to support coordination and execution.

South Africa's Role in Global Leadership:

South Africa's leadership in the G20 and B20 marks a critical opportunity to:

- Champion **solidarity and sustainability** on a global scale.
- Bridge the gap between **developing and developed economies**.
- Drive actionable policies to tackle climate challenges and promote inclusive growth.

By steering these influential platforms, South Africa is positioned to shape the future of **global economic governance** and **sustainable trade practices**.



Saudi Arabia's Ambitious Quest to Green Its Deserts

Context: Saudi Arabia is embarking on a bold mission to combat **drought, desertification**, and the growing environmental challenges of its arid landscape. Through substantial investments in **green technology** and regional collaboration, the kingdom aims to transform its deserts into flourishing ecosystems. Saudi Arabia is also set to host the **United Nations COP16 conference**, spotlighting its efforts to address climate and environmental issues. However, concerns over **greenwashing** cast a shadow on the kingdom's initiatives.

**Understanding Greenwashing:****What is Greenwashing?**

Greenwashing refers to actions by organizations, governments, or companies that create the **illusion of environmental sustainability** without delivering real, impactful changes.

- Often a **marketing tactic**, it portrays projects as eco-friendly, masking continued practices that harm the environment.
- Examples include vague claims like “eco-friendly” or “sustainable” products without transparent certifications or evidence.

Why Critics are Concerned:

Saudi Arabia's green initiatives face scrutiny for focusing on high-profile projects that critics argue may lack sufficient depth or scale to meaningfully counterbalance the nation's continued dependence on **oil-based revenues**.

The Middle East Green Initiative (MGI):**What is MGI?**

The **Middle East Green Initiative (MGI)** is Saudi Arabia's flagship regional effort to combat **climate change** and promote sustainability across the Middle East.

Key Goals:

- **Planting 10 billion trees** to combat desertification and enhance carbon capture.
- **Rehabilitating 74 million hectares** of degraded land, restoring ecosystems to support biodiversity.
- Building regional collaboration to align with **global climate targets**.

Saudi Arabia's Commitments:**To ensure success, the kingdom has:**

- Announced the establishment of a **dedicated MGI Secretariat** to oversee and accelerate projects.
- Pledged **\$2.5 billion** to fund MGI initiatives and improve governance.

Can Saudi Arabia Lead a Green Revolution?**Opportunities:**

- Hosting **COP16** highlights Saudi Arabia's desire to be at the forefront of climate action.
- Investments in **tree planting, land rehabilitation**, and **green technology** have the potential to address desertification and improve regional climate resilience.

Challenges:

- **Greenwashing Concerns:** Critics argue that many projects prioritize optics over meaningful environmental impact.
- **Dependence on Oil:** Saudi Arabia remains one of the largest oil exporters globally, creating a contradiction in its green efforts.
- **Scale and Feasibility:** Transforming desert landscapes requires massive investments, long-term commitment, and global collaboration, all of which are daunting challenges.

Conclusion:

Saudi Arabia's ambition to green its deserts reflects a desire to lead the fight against **climate change** while redefining its environmental image.

However, for the efforts to gain credibility, the kingdom must ensure that its **initiatives deliver measurable results** beyond symbolic actions. By addressing **greenwashing concerns** and reducing its reliance on oil, Saudi Arabia could set a **global example** of how to balance economic growth with environmental sustainability.

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Supreme Court Directs Uniform Compliance of the POSH Act

Context: The Supreme Court of India has issued directions to all States and Union Territories for the effective implementation of the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013 (POSH Act). These directions aim to ensure uniformity and accountability in the implementation of the law across the country.



Key Directions Issued by the Supreme Court:

- Notification of District Officers:** The Appropriate Government is instructed to notify District Officers for each district, who will be responsible for overseeing the implementation of the POSH Act. Their key duties include:
 - Ensuring the constitution of Internal Complaints Committees (ICCs) in all organizations within the district.
 - The Internal Complaints Committee (under Section 4 of the POSH Act) must be set up by every employer. This committee is tasked with receiving complaints, conducting inquiries, and recommending actions.
- Constitution of Local Committees:** Under Section 6 of the POSH Act, every district must establish a Local Committee to address complaints of sexual harassment, particularly in cases where:
 - An organization has fewer than 10 workers and is unable to form an Internal Complaints Committee.
 - The complaint is against the employer.
- Designation of Nodal Officers:** Each Block, Taluka, or Tehsil in rural or tribal areas, and municipalities in urban areas must appoint a Nodal Officer. The Nodal Officer will be responsible for ensuring that the POSH Act is being effectively implemented at the grassroots level.
- Jurisdiction of the Local Committee:** The Local Committee's jurisdiction will cover the area of the concerned district, ensuring that complaints are dealt with at the local level.
- Introduction of SHeBox:** Every state is encouraged to consider establishing a SHeBox, an electronic platform for the registration of sexual harassment complaints. The Sexual Harassment electronic Box (SHe-Box) will provide a single-window access for women to register their complaints of sexual harassment, ensuring ease of access and confidentiality.

Key Provisions of the POSH Act, 2013:

- Definition of Sexual Harassment:** The POSH Act defines sexual harassment broadly to include all forms of harassment, such as:
 - Physical contact
 - Demands for sexual favours
 - Sexually coloured remarks
 - Displaying pornography
 - Any other unwelcome physical, verbal, or non-verbal sexual conduct
- Applicability:** The POSH Act applies to all workplaces, covering:
 - Government and private sector organizations
 - Hospitals
 - Non-governmental organizations



- **Employer-provided transport**
- **Residential spaces** visited during employment
- **Complaint Committees:** The Act mandates the establishment of two types of committees:
 - **Internal Complaints Committees (ICCs)** in organizations.
 - **Local Committees** for cases where ICCs are not constituted or when complaints are against the employer.

Conclusion:

The **Supreme Court's directions** serve as a reminder of the importance of **preventing sexual harassment** in workplaces and ensuring a **safe environment** for women. By mandating the constitution of **Internal and Local Committees**, **designating Nodal Officers**, and encouraging the use of the **SHeBox**, the Court has strengthened the framework for **complaint redressal**. This marks a critical step toward enforcing **gender equality** and protecting the rights of women in India.



Bharatiya Vayuyan Vidheyak 2024: Revolutionizing India's Aviation Laws

Context: The Bharatiya Vayuyan Vidheyak (BBV) 2024, which replaces the outdated Aircraft Act, 1934, represents a major reform in India's aviation regulations. The bill has been passed by the Rajya Sabha, following its earlier clearance in the Lok Sabha in August 2024.

This legislation aims to modernize aviation laws and improve the ease of doing business in the sector. The move comes after suggestions from the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) to align India's aviation laws with global standards.

Key Features of the Bharatiya Vayuyan Vidheyak 2024:

1. Establishment of Three Key Authorities:

- **Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA):** Responsible for regulatory functions and safety oversight.
- **Bureau of Civil Aviation Security (BCAS):** Handles aviation security.
- **Aircraft Accidents Investigation Bureau (AAIB):** Investigates aircraft accidents.

Government: Supervision: The central government retains supervisory powers over these bodies, including the ability to issue directions and review their decisions.

Appeals: All appeals against decisions by the DGCA or BCAS will lie with the central government, with no further recourse.

2. Aircraft Design Regulation:

- The bill retains existing provisions for regulating the manufacture, use, and operation of aircraft.
- **New powers:** It introduces the regulation of aircraft design, enhancing India's aviation safety standards.

3. Expanded Rule-Making Powers:

- **Existing Powers Retained:**
 - Regulating aircraft activities, licensing, and certification.
 - Implementing the 1944 International Civil Aviation Convention.
- **New Powers Added:**
 - Regulating radio telephone operator certificates and licenses under the International Telecommunication Convention.

4. Stricter Offences and Penalties:

- **Punishable Offences:** Violations such as carrying prohibited goods, endangering public safety, and disobeying DGCA/BCAS directions are punishable by up to two years' imprisonment, a fine of 1 crore, or both.
- **Enhanced Penalties:** Activities like dumping rubbish near airports can lead to penalties of up to three years' imprisonment or 1 crore fine.
- **Civil and Criminal Penalties:** Discretionary penalties include fines of up to 1 crore and imprisonment of up to two years.

5. Adjudication and Appeal Mechanism:

- The bill retains the appointment of adjudicating officers by the central government to impose penalties.
- Introduces a **Second Appellate Officer** to allow further appeals beyond the **First Appellate Officer**, ensuring a more comprehensive adjudication process.

Criticisms of the Bharatiya Vayuyan Vidheyak:

1. Lack of Autonomy for the DGCA:

- Unlike independent regulators in sectors like telecom, electricity, and insurance, the DGCA functions as a government department.
- The Director General's qualifications, selection process, and tenure are not clearly defined, raising concerns about operational independence.





2. Limited Appeal Mechanism:

Appeals against decisions by authorities such as the DGCA or BCAS are restricted to the **Union Government**, which may undermine the perception of professionalism and independence.

3. Arbitrator Appointment for Compensation:

- The government has the power to appoint arbitrators for determining compensation.
- Critics argue this violates **Article 14 of the Constitution**, as the **Supreme Court** has ruled that unilaterally appointed arbitrators compromise fairness.

4. Overreach of Government Discretion:

- The central government has significant discretion to **define criminal penalties**, which could infringe on the **principle of separation of powers**.

5. Concerns Over Inclusivity:

- The bill's **Hindi title** has sparked criticism for being exclusionary, as **60% of India's population** does not speak Hindi. Analysts argue that a more inclusive title is necessary for a diverse country like India.

Implications for India's Aviation Sector:

The **Bharatiya Vayuyan Vidheyak 2024** is a bold step towards modernizing India's aviation laws. While it addresses many **contemporary challenges** and aligns India's aviation sector with global standards, concerns about **regulatory independence**, **government overreach**, and **inclusivity** must be resolved for its effective implementation.

This legislation has the potential to position India as a global aviation hub while safeguarding public safety and fostering innovation in the sector.

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Rising Potato Prices in Odisha: Reasons, Trends, and Impacts

Context: The Odisha government has attributed the surge in potato prices to the West Bengal government's restrictions on shipments.

- **Odisha**, which depends on potato imports, is facing an extended period of high prices due to these limitations.
- West Bengal, a **key supplier**, reduced shipments to safeguard its own markets amidst rising prices.



Agro-Climatic Conditions for Potato Cultivation:

Ideal Climate for Growth:

- **Temperature:** Best growth occurs between **18–29°C** during the day and **13–18°C** at night.
- **Tuber Formation:** Optimal at **20°C**; temperatures over **30°C** can halt tuber development.
- **Sunlight:** At least **six hours of daily sunlight** is necessary, though excessive shade can reduce yields.

Soil Preferences:

- Loose, well-drained **loamy or sandy loam soils**, rich in organic matter, are ideal.
- **pH Range:** Potatoes thrive in soils with a pH of **5.2 to 6.4**.
- Avoid **saline or alkaline soils**.

India's Potato Production: A Global Leader:

India's Global Rank:

- **Second-largest producer worldwide**, after China.

Growth Over the Years:

Between 1991-92 and 2020-21:

- **Cultivation Area:** Increased from **11 to 22 lakh hectares**.
- **Production:** Tripled, from **181.95 to 561.72 lakh metric tonnes**.
- **Productivity:** Improved by over 50%, reaching **25 metric tonnes per hectare**.

Primary Potato Cultivation Seasons and States:

- **Rabi Season (Winter-Spring):** Main potato-growing period.
- **Top Producers (2021-22):**
 - **Uttar Pradesh:** 161 lakh metric tonnes.
 - **West Bengal:** 124 lakh metric tonnes (jointly contributing 50% of national production).
- **Kharif Cultivation:** Limited to **Uttarakhand, Karnataka, Himachal Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, and Maharashtra**.

Trends in Potato Prices:

Seasonal Fluctuations:

- **Winter-Spring (Rabi Crop Arrival):** Prices generally dip.
- **Late Summer and Monsoon:** Prices rise significantly.

2024 Price Trends:

In 2024, potato prices have remained **consistently high nationwide**, including Odisha.

- **Retail Prices (December 3, 2024):**
 - Average: ₹**38.08 per kg**.
 - **4.90% higher** than last month.
 - **55.49% higher** than the previous year.
- **Wholesale Prices (December 3, 2024):**
 - Average: ₹**3,120.99 per quintal**.
 - **5.24% higher** than last month.
 - **69.63% higher** than the previous year.

Economic Impact:



- Potatoes contribute **0.98%** to the Consumer Price Index (CPI) and **0.28%** to the Wholesale Price Index (WPI).
- The volatility affects consumers and industries like **hotels, restaurants, and catering (HoReCa)**.

Reasons for the Surge in Potato Prices:

1. Decline in Production:

- **2023-24 Production Drop:**
 - Total production decreased by **5.6%**, from **601 lakh metric tonnes** (2022-23) to **567 lakh metric tonnes**.
- **Top Producers Affected:**
 - **Uttar Pradesh:** Production reduced by **10 lakh tonnes**, from **201.3 to 191.7 lakh tonnes**.
 - **West Bengal:** Sharper decline, falling **15 lakh tonnes**, from **145 to 130 lakh tonnes**.

2. Shrinking Cultivation Area:

- Cultivation area fell slightly from **23.32 to 23.22 lakh hectares** due to **low prices in the previous year**, discouraging farmers.

Odisha's Heavy Dependence on Potato Imports:

Limited Local Production:

Odisha's agro-climatic conditions are **unsuitable** for large-scale potato farming due to temperatures exceeding the ideal range of **15°C–25°C**.

Reliance on West Bengal

- West Bengal typically sends **150–200 truckloads of potatoes daily** to Odisha and Chhattisgarh.
- Restrictions on shipments have created **artificial scarcity** in Odisha, exacerbating the price hike.

In Summary:

The **rising potato prices in Odisha** highlight the state's dependence on imports and underline the challenges of a fluctuating supply chain. Efforts to enhance **local potato cultivation**, diversify sources, and strengthen supply chains are crucial to ensuring **price stability** in the future.

The 80-Pillar Assembly Hall of Kumhrar and Mauryan Architecture

Context: The Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) has initiated an excavation project to uncover the **80-pillar assembly hall** at Kumhrar, a prominent **Mauryan archaeological site in Patna**.

- This endeavor aims to reignite **global interest in the Mauryan Empire's** remarkable contributions to **art and architecture**.



Key Facts About the 80-Pillar Assembly Hall:

Historical Importance:

- The **80-Pillar Assembly Hall** is linked to the **Mauryan Empire (321–185 BCE)**, one of ancient India's greatest dynasties.
- Emperor Ashoka (268–232 BCE)** is believed to have convened the **3rd Buddhist Council** here, an event that unified the **Buddhist sangha** and spread **Dhamma (Buddhist teachings)** globally.
- The site emphasizes **Pataliputra's** (Mauryan capital) role as a **political and cultural hub**.

Architectural Significance:

- The hall featured **80 sandstone pillars** supporting a **wooden roof and floor**.
- Materials like **sandstone and wood** were transported via the **Sone-Ganga river route**, showcasing advanced resource management.

Archaeological Discoveries:

- First Excavation (1912–1915):**
 - Discovered **one intact pillar, 80 pillar pits**, and stone fragments.
 - Evidence of **thick ash layers** indicated destruction, possibly during the **Indo-Greek or Huna invasions**.
- Second Excavation (1961–1965):**
 - Unearthed **four additional pillars**.

Preservation Challenges and Reopening Efforts:

- Rising **water levels** submerged parts of the site, prompting the ASI to **cover it with soil (2004–2005)** for conservation.
- Reopening Plans:**
 - ASI is exposing **6–7 pillars** to assess impacts of **humidity and groundwater**, with guidance from the **Central Ground Water Board**.
 - Full reopening will depend on recommendations from an **expert committee**, balancing preservation with public access.

Key Highlights of Mauryan Art and Architecture:

Architectural Types:

- Court Art:**
 - Designed for **political and religious purposes**.
- Popular Art:**
 - Widely accessible and influenced by **local traditions**.

Mauryan Court Art:

Palaces:

- Greek historian **Megasthenes** described Mauryan palaces as **magnificent creations**, while Chinese traveler **Fa Hien** called them **god-gifted monuments**.
- Chandragupta Maurya's palace** was inspired by **Achaemenid palaces in Persepolis** and built primarily with **wood**.
- Notable examples: **Ashoka's palace at Kumhrar** and **Chandragupta's palace**.

Pillars:

- Mauryan pillars** were **tall, monolithic, and free-standing**, made from **Chunar sandstone**.



- **Ashoka's pillars**, with their polished finish, featured **animal capitals** (lions, bulls) symbolizing state power.
- Inscribed with **Buddhist teachings** in **Pali, Prakrit, Greek, and Aramaic**.
- Structure:
 1. **Shaft** (monolithic).
 2. **Capital** (lotus- or bell-shaped).
 3. **Abacus**.
 4. **Capital figure**.

Stupas:

- Represented **Buddhist principles**, featuring elements like a **hemispherical mound (anda)** and a **central pillar with umbrellas (chhatra)**.
- **Core material:** Unburnt brick; **outer layer:** Burnt bricks and plaster.
- Examples:
 - **Sanchi Stupa (Madhya Pradesh):** The most famous Ashokan stupa.
 - **Piprahwa Stupa (Uttar Pradesh):** The oldest.

Mauryan Popular Art:

Cave Architecture:

- Used as **viharas** by Jain and Buddhist monks.
- Known for their **polished interiors** and **decorative gateways**.
- Example: **Barabar Caves (Bihar)**, created by Ashoka for the **Ajivika sect**.

Sculptures: Yaksha and Yakshi figures were revered across **Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism**.

- Examples:
 - **Lohanipur Yaksha** (male figure torso).
 - **Didargunj Yakshi (Patna)**.

Pottery: Known as **Northern Black Polished Ware (NBPW)**, featuring **black paint and a lustrous finish**.

Mauryan Dynasty: Key Rulers:

1. Chandragupta Maurya (321–297 BCE):

- Founder of the Mauryan Empire.
- Overthrew the **Nanda dynasty** and expanded the empire.
- Formed a treaty with **Seleucus Nicator**, gaining territories.
- Adopted Jainism later in life.

2. Bindusara (298–272 BCE):

- Expanded the empire to the Deccan.
- Known as **Amitraghata (slayer of enemies)**.

3. Ashoka (272–232 BCE):

- Renounced violence after the **Kalinga War**.
- Spread **Buddhism globally**, organized the **3rd Buddhist Council**, and promoted **Dhamma**.

4. Decline of the Mauryan Empire: Last ruler, **Brihadratha**, was assassinated by **Pushyamitra Shunga**, marking the end of the Mauryan dynasty in **185 BCE**.

Archaeological Survey of India (ASI): Custodians of History:

- The ASI operates under the **Union Ministry of Culture** to protect monuments and archaeological sites.
- Founded in **1861** by **Alexander Cunningham**, the **Father of Indian Archaeology**.
- Key Responsibilities:
 - Conducting **excavations, surveys, and site preservation**.
 - Governed by the **AMASR Act, 1958**.

The **80-Pillar Assembly Hall at Kumhrar** stands as a testament to the **Mauryan Empire's architectural brilliance** and its significant contributions to **India's cultural heritage**. The ongoing excavation by the ASI promises to uncover deeper insights into this ancient marvel.

International Advisory Body for Submarine Cable Resilience

Context: A new **International Advisory Body for Submarine Cable Resilience** has been launched to address the challenges faced by **submarine cable infrastructure** and ensure its continued **resilience**. These cables are crucial for supporting the **global digital economy**.

About the Advisory Body:

Joint Initiative:

- The body was jointly launched by the **International Telecommunication Union (ITU)** and the **International Cable Protection Committee (ICPC)**.
- It aims to fortify the **resilience of submarine cables**, which serve as the backbone of global communication networks.



Membership:

- The body includes **40 members** from across the world, comprising:
 - **Ministers,**
 - **Heads of regulatory authorities,** and
 - **Senior telecommunications experts.**
- The diverse membership ensures a **global perspective** on cable resilience.
- Members convene **bi-annually** to discuss **policies, infrastructure, and best practices**.

Functions of the Advisory Body:

- Promoting Best Practices:**
 - Works with **governments and industries** to enhance **submarine cable resilience**.
 - Aims to minimize **risks of damage** and ensure **quick repairs** and deployments.
- Providing Strategic Guidance:**
 - Offers insights into tackling challenges such as:
 - Increasing **data traffic,**
 - **Aging infrastructure,** and
 - Rising **environmental threats** to cables.
- Addressing Stakeholder Needs:**
 - Focuses on the livelihoods of communities dependent on **submarine cables**.
 - Supports those responsible for **deploying, maintaining, and protecting** this critical infrastructure.

Significance of Submarine Cables:

- Submarine cables are the **lifelines of global communication**, carrying **98% of international data traffic**.
- Their resilience is vital to supporting industries like **finance, healthcare, and technology**.

About the International Cable Protection Committee (ICPC):

- **Founded in 1958**, the ICPC is a global organization uniting **governments and private stakeholders** in the submarine cable industry.
- It acts as a platform for exchanging:
 - **Technical expertise,**
 - **Legal frameworks,** and
 - **Environmental strategies.**
- The ICPC's mission is to ensure the **security and sustainability of undersea cables**.

Conclusion: The creation of the **International Advisory Body for Submarine Cable Resilience** highlights the growing recognition of submarine cables as **critical infrastructure**. By fostering **global cooperation** and promoting **best practices**, the initiative is set to safeguard these essential systems against future challenges, ensuring their reliability in the **digital age**.

Anna Chakra and SCAN Portal: Revolutionizing India's Public Distribution System

Context: The Union government has launched the **Anna Chakra** and the **Subsidy Claim Application for NFSA (SCAN) Portal**, marking a significant step toward modernizing the **Public Distribution System (PDS)** and streamlining **subsidy claim processes**.

What is Anna Chakra?

The **Anna Chakra** is an innovative system developed by the **Department of Food and Public Distribution** in collaboration with the **World Food Programme (WFP)** and **IIT Delhi's Foundation for Innovation and Technology Transfer (FITT)**. It aims to optimize the entire **food grain supply chain** involving farmers, transporters, warehouses, and Fair Price Shops (FPS).



Key Features of Anna Chakra:

- Route Optimization:**
 - Employs advanced algorithms to identify the most efficient transportation routes, reducing **time and costs**.
- Integrated Logistics Platforms:**
 - Linked with the **Freight Operations Information System (FOIS)** of the Railways.
 - Part of the **PM Gati Shakti platform**, mapping the geo-locations of FPSs and warehouses.
- Environmental Impact:**
 - Cuts down on transportation-related emissions, contributing to a **reduced carbon footprint** and **sustainable development**.

What is the SCAN Portal?

The **Subsidy Claim Application for NFSA (SCAN) Portal** simplifies and accelerates the process of **subsidy claims** under the **National Food Security Act (NFSA)**.

Key Features of SCAN Portal

- Single-Window Submission:**
 - Offers a unified platform for states to submit claims efficiently.
- Automated Workflow:**
 - Streamlines scrutiny, approval, and settlement of claims using **rule-based automation**.
- Real-Time Monitoring:**
 - Ensures transparency and minimizes delays in fund disbursal.

Other Government Initiatives for Food Security:

- Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana (PMGKAY):**
 - Provides **5 kg of free wheat or rice** per person monthly.
 - Initially launched during the **COVID-19 pandemic** and extended for **five years** from January 2024.
- Antyodaya Anna Yojana (AAY):**
 - Supplies **35 kg of grains** per household monthly at subsidized rates (**₹3/kg for rice, ₹2/kg for wheat**).
- Integrated Management of Public Distribution System (IM-PDS):**
 - Enables **One Nation One Ration Card (ONORC)**, ensuring food grain access across India, especially for **migrant workers**.
- Decentralized Procurement (DCP) Scheme:**
 - Encourages states to **procure and distribute food grains**, reducing logistics costs and improving localized food security.

Challenges in the Public Distribution System:

- Food Grain Diversion:**
 - A large share of food grains is leaked or diverted to the black market.



2. **Errors in Inclusion and Exclusion:**

- Non-eligible households often benefit, while genuine beneficiaries are excluded due to identification flaws.

3. **Corruption at Fair Price Shops (FPS):**

- Issues like **under-weighting, poor-quality grains, and overcharging** undermine the system's credibility.

4. **Inadequate Warehousing:**

- Poor storage facilities lead to **spoilage and wastage** of grains.

Way Forward:

1. **Strengthen Infrastructure:**

- Expand storage and transportation facilities to support the system's growing scale.

2. **Adopt Advanced Technology:**

- Use **artificial intelligence** and **blockchain** for real-time monitoring and eliminating inefficiencies.

3. **Promote Sustainability:**

- Introduce **green logistics** and energy-efficient transport solutions to reduce the environmental impact.

By integrating **Anna Chakra** and the **SCAN Portal**, the government is not only addressing long-standing issues within the **PDS** but also paving the way for a more **efficient, transparent, and sustainable food distribution system**.

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ISRO Launches PSLV-C59 Rocket with ESA's Proba-3 Satellite

Context: The PSLV-C59 rocket, carrying the Proba-3 spacecraft, was successfully launched as a dedicated commercial mission by NewSpace India Limited (NSIL). This mission highlights India's increasing capabilities in space technology and solidifies its growing influence in the global space community.



About the Proba-3 Mission: A World-First in Precision Formation Flying:

Mission Objective:

The primary objective of the Proba-3 mission is to observe the Sun's corona using precision formation flying, a world-first achievement in space exploration.

Key Spacecraft:

The mission uses two specialized spacecraft:

1. **Coronagraph:** Designed to study the Sun's corona.
2. **Oculter:** Positioned to block the Sun and create artificial eclipses, enhancing the quality of observation.

Benefits for India's Space Program:

1. **Strengthening Global Market Presence:** India currently holds 2-3% of the global space economy and has significant potential for further growth. The success of such missions increases India's competitive edge, positioning it as a leader in space exploration.
2. **Economic Growth & Job Creation:** The rise in commercial space launches and the development of space technologies has the potential to significantly contribute to India's economic growth. In 2022, India earned over \$279 million from foreign satellite launches, boosting the national economy and creating jobs.
3. **Technological Advancements:** Collaborating on advanced projects like Proba-3 fosters technological growth, allowing India to strengthen its role in the global space industry while making significant strides in space research.
4. **Strategic Importance:** India's expanding space capabilities play a key role in enhancing the nation's strategic autonomy and its participation in international space exploration.

Key Initiatives Driving India's Space Future:

1. **IN-SPACe (Indian National Space Promotion and Authorization Center):** This regulatory body is crucial in promoting private sector participation in India's space sector, providing a platform for innovative ventures.
2. **Indian Space Policy 2023:** The Indian Space Policy 2023 aims to liberalize the space sector further, encouraging private investment, fostering innovation, and allowing new players to thrive in the space ecosystem.
3. **Startups & SSLV (Small Satellite Launch Vehicle):** The rise of private space startups and the development of the SSLV demonstrates India's commitment to building a vibrant and competitive space ecosystem, supporting both public and private sector involvement.

India's PSLV-C59 launch with the Proba-3 satellite underscores the nation's growing prominence in the global space sector. As India continues to expand its technological reach, participate in international collaborations, and open doors to private innovation, it is positioning itself as a leader in space exploration for the future.