



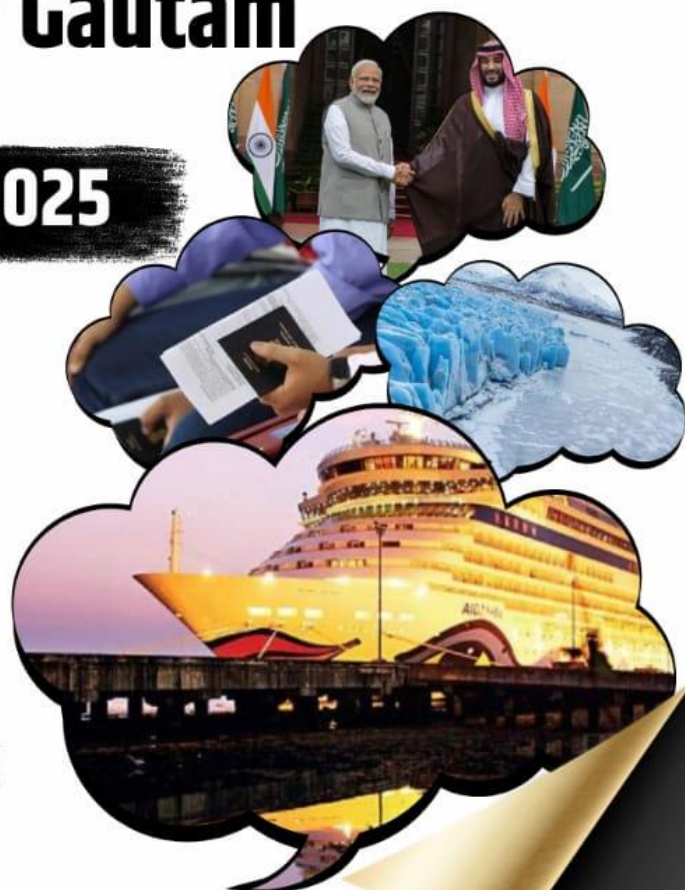
# Daily Current Affairs



## To The Point by Dhananjay Gautam

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## 1 Hindu Kush Himalaya Snow Update 2025: Alarming Decline in Snow Persistence

**Context:** According to a recent report by the **International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD)**, the **Hindu Kush Himalaya (HKH)** region has recorded its **third consecutive below-normal snow year** in 2025. This trend raises serious concerns for water security and ecosystem health across the region.



### Key Findings of the Report:

- **Snow Persistence Time Series:** Data was analyzed over a **23-year period (2003–2025)**, focusing on **snow persistence** from **November to March**.
- **Drastic Reductions in Major River Basins:**
  - **Ganga Basin:** **24.1% below normal** – **lowest** snow persistence in 23 years.
  - **Indus Basin:** **24.5% below normal**, a sharp drop from **+19.5% above normal** in 2020.
  - **Brahmaputra Basin:** Also showed **significant decline** in snow cover.
- **HKH Region-wide Snow Persistence:** Reached a **two-decade low** of **23.6%**.
- **Wider Impact in Southeast Asia:**
  - **Mekong Basin:** **51.9% decline**
  - **Salween Basin:** **48.3% decline**
  - **Tibetan Plateau:** **29.1% decline**

### Implications of Snow Deficit:

- **Reduced Meltwater:** Snowmelt is a **primary water source** for rivers in the HKH, contributing up to **23% of annual runoff**. Persistent snow deficit leads to **lower river flows** and **early-summer water stress**, especially **downstream**.
- **Threat to Water Security:** Almost **one-fourth of the world's population** relies on **HKH-fed river systems**.

### About the Hindu Kush Himalaya (HKH):

- **Geographic Spread:** Stretches **3,500 km** across **8 countries:** **Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, India, Nepal, Myanmar, and Pakistan.**
- **"Water Towers of Asia":** Birthplace of **10 major river systems:** **Amu Darya, Indus, Ganga, Brahmaputra, Irrawaddy, Salween, Mekong, Yangtze, Yellow River, and Tarim.**

### About ICIMOD:

- **Established:** 1983
- **Headquarters:** Kathmandu, Nepal
- **Type:** Intergovernmental knowledge and learning centre
- **Coverage:** Works for 8 regional member countries in the HKH
- **Role:** Conducts **research**, pilots solutions, supports **policy**, and **advocates** on global platforms.

### Way Ahead: Recommendations

### Policy and Infrastructure:

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- Improved water infrastructure
- Stronger drought preparedness
- Investment in water storage systems

### Technology and Forecasting:

- Advanced early warning systems
- Better seasonal forecasting models

### Environmental Measures:

- Reforestation with native species
- Snowfall zone protection policies

### Community and Cooperation:

- Local involvement in decision-making
- Stronger regional cooperation
- Integrated water management strategies

### Conclusion:

The declining trend in snow persistence across the Hindu Kush Himalaya is a **wake-up call** for the region. It calls for **science-led**, **community-driven**, and **cooperative** strategies to secure water resources, protect ecosystems, and ensure **climate resilience** for future generations.

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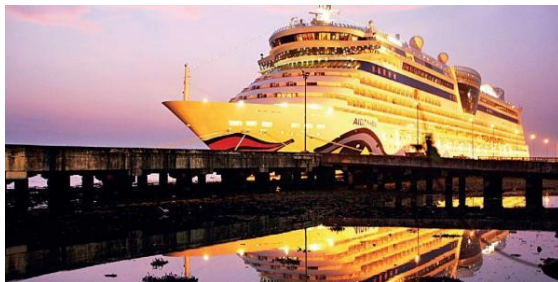


## 2 Cruise Tourism in India: Setting Sail Towards a Global Horizon

**Context:** India is capitalizing on its **extensive coastline** and **vast inland waterways** to harness the economic, cultural, and recreational potential of **cruise tourism**. With visionary government initiatives and infrastructural development, the country is poised to emerge as a major **cruise tourism hub**.

### What is Cruise Tourism?:

**Cruise Tourism** involves leisure travel on **cruise ships**, where both the **journey and the destination** create a unique, enriching experience.



- Includes **onboard activities** (entertainment, dining, wellness, etc.)
- Offers **offboard excursions** to explore local attractions and cultures
- Blends **luxury travel** with **experiential tourism**

### Segments under Cruise Tourism:

1. **Ocean Cruise Tourism** – Coastal and sea-based leisure voyages
2. **River Cruise Tourism** – Travel through **inland waterways and rivers**
3. **Expedition Cruises** – Remote and adventure-based voyages
4. **Luxury & Theme Cruises** – Special interest cruises focused on wellness, cuisine, heritage, etc.

### India's Potential in Cruise Tourism:

India's natural and infrastructural advantages place it in a strong position:

- **12 Major and 200 Minor Ports**
- Over **20,000 km of navigable waterways** connecting **~400 rivers**
- **1300+ Islands** and several **coastal & riverine states and UTs**
- Rich **cultural heritage, historic ports, and diverse ecosystems**

### River Cruise Tourism in India:

River cruise tourism is gaining momentum due to its **cultural depth** and **regional connectivity**.

### Key Features:

- **Short-distance travel** and **calm waters**
- Access to **interior villages, towns, and heritage sites**
- Offers **local cultural immersion** – festivals, cuisine, architecture

### Notable Examples:

- **MV Ganga Vilas (2023):**
  - World's longest river cruise
  - Covered **3,200 km** across **5 Indian states** and **Bangladesh**
  - Navigated through **27 river systems**
- **Kerala Houseboats:** Popular in **Alappuzha backwaters**, offering unique regional experiences

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## Steps Taken by the Indian Government:

### Cruise Bharat Mission (2024):

- Launched from **Mumbai Port**
- Aims to **double cruise passenger traffic by 2029**
- **4.71 lakh** cruise passengers recorded in FY 2023-24

### Maritime India Vision 2030:

- Blueprint to make India a **global cruise tourism player**
- Emphasis on **ocean and river cruise development**

### River Cruise Tourism Roadmap 2047:

- Released during **IWDC (Inland Waterways Development Council)**
- Focus on **4 strategic pillars**:
  1. **Infrastructure**
  2. **Integration**
  3. **Accessibility**
  4. **Policy Reforms**

### Concluding Remarks:

India's cruise tourism industry is navigating new waters with **strategic planning, rich natural assets, and strong policy backing**.

With a blend of **modern maritime vision** and **age-old cultural richness**, India is all set to anchor itself as a **vibrant global cruise destination** — both along its **coasts** and **rivers**.

## 3 India's First Fast-Breeder Nuclear Reactor Set for Commissioning by 2026

**Context:** India is set to mark a significant milestone in its nuclear journey with the upcoming commissioning of its **first Prototype Fast Breeder Reactor (PFBR)** at **Kalpakkam, Tamil Nadu**, expected by **2025-26**.

### What is a Fast Breeder Reactor?

A **Fast Breeder Reactor (FBR)** is a type of nuclear reactor that:

- **Generates more fuel than it consumes**, using **plutonium-239 (Pu-239)** and **uranium-238 (U-238)**.
- Aims to maximize energy extraction and fuel efficiency.
- Uses **liquid sodium as a coolant** and **plutonium-based Mixed Oxide (MOX) fuel**.



### Prototype Fast Breeder Reactor (PFBR) – Key Highlights:

Feature	Details
Developed by	Bharatiya Nabhikiya Vidyut Nigam Ltd. (BHAVINI)
Location	Kalpakkam, Tamil Nadu
Capacity	500 MW
Commissioning Timeline	2025-26
Fuel Used	Plutonium-based MOX fuel
Coolant	Liquid sodium
Nuclear Program Stage	Second stage of India's 3-stage nuclear strategy

### Functions and Purpose:

- **Recycles spent fuel** from **Pressurized Heavy Water Reactors (PHWRs)**.
- **Reduces radioactive waste** and enables a **closed nuclear fuel cycle**.
- Prepares ground for **thorium-based reactors** in the **third stage**.
- Enhances **fuel efficiency** and promotes **self-reliance in energy**.

### Why It Matters – Significance of the PFBR:

- Supports India's long-term goal of a **thorium-based nuclear program**.
- Enables **efficient fuel use** by generating more fuel than consumed.
- Essential for **energy security**, especially amid rising power demands.
- Aids in achieving **clean energy targets** by expanding nuclear power output.

### India's Nuclear Power Ambitions:

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Metric	Data
Current Installed Capacity	8.18 GW
Under Construction	7.30 GW
Target by 2031–32	22.48 GW
Contribution from BHAVINI (FBRs)	3.80 GW
Additional Plans	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>-15.40 GW from indigenous PHWRs</li><li>- 17.60 GW from Light Water Reactors (with foreign cooperation)</li><li>- Small Modular Reactors and Bharat Small Reactors in partnership with the private sector</li></ul>

### Did You Know?

- India has the **world's largest reserves of thorium**, making the **3-stage nuclear program** uniquely suited to its resources.
- The **closed fuel cycle** targeted by PFBRs helps **reuse spent fuel**, minimizing waste and improving sustainability.

### Conclusion & Way Forward

Despite earlier delays, the **Prototype Fast Breeder Reactor** is a **cornerstone of India's nuclear strategy**. It will:

- Propel India towards a **thorium-based, self-reliant energy future**.
- Establish a **sustainable nuclear cycle** with minimal waste.
- Reinforce India's role as a **global leader in innovative nuclear technology**.

## 4 India-Saudi Arabia Bilateral Relations

**Context:** During Prime Minister Narendra Modi's April 2025 visit to Jeddah, India and Saudi Arabia **signed six major MoUs**, deepening cooperation in energy, investment, digital infrastructure, and culture.

### Introduction:

India and Saudi Arabia enjoy a **multifaceted partnership**, grounded in centuries of historical ties, vibrant economic relations, and growing strategic cooperation. Amidst global shifts, **PM Modi's 2025 visit** has reaffirmed their **mutual commitment** to elevating the relationship to new heights.



### Historical Background:

- Ties date back centuries, based on **trade and people-to-people interactions**.
- Diplomatic relations formally established in **1947**.
- Key milestones:
  - **King Abdullah's visit (2006)**
  - **PM Modi's visits (2016, 2019, and 2025)**
- The 2019 visit led to the formation of a **Strategic Partnership Council**.

### Political Relations:

- Upgraded to **Strategic Partnership** status.
- Collaborate in multilateral forums: **G20, UN, OIC**.
- Support for a **multipolar world order** and regional peace initiatives.

### Economic and Trade Relations:

- **India:** 2nd largest trading partner of Saudi Arabia.
- **Saudi Arabia:** 5th largest partner of India.
- **Trade volume (FY 2023-24): USD 42.98 billion**
  - **Indian exports:** USD 11.56 billion
  - **Imports (mostly oil):** USD 31.42 billion
- India imports **~18% of its crude oil** from Saudi Arabia.
- Key Indian exports: **rice, machinery, textiles, chemicals, IT services**.

### Defence and Security Cooperation:

- Growing ties through:
  - **Joint naval drills** (Al-Mohed Al-Hindi)
  - **Counter-terrorism cooperation**
  - **Intelligence sharing**
- Common interests in **West Asian peace** and **Indian Ocean security**.

### Indian Diaspora in Saudi Arabia:





- **Over 2.4 million Indians** reside in Saudi Arabia — *the largest expatriate group*.
- Vital contributors to sectors like **healthcare, construction, and services**.
- **Hajj ties**: Over **1.75 lakh pilgrims** annually.

#### Cultural and Tourism Linkages:

- Boost from **Saudi Vision 2030**: encouraging cultural openness and tourism.
- Active **film, education, and tourism exchanges**.
- Emphasis on **people-to-people** and **youth-oriented collaborations**.

#### Key Outcomes of PM Modi's April 2025 Visit:

##### 1. Six MoUs Signed:

- **Energy**: Joint ventures in **oil, gas, green hydrogen, and renewables**.
- **Digital Infrastructure**: Build **Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI)** and promote **tech innovation**.
- **Investment**: **Saudi Sovereign Wealth Fund** to invest in **India's logistics, infrastructure, and energy corridors**.
- **Pharmaceuticals**: Better market access for Indian drugs in Saudi Arabia.
- **Fintech & Banking**: Simplified **banking for NRIs** and **collaborative fintech ecosystems**.
- **Culture & Tourism**: New frameworks under **Vision 2030** in **film, education, and heritage tourism**.

##### 2. Strategic Talks on Hajj & Labour Welfare:

- **Raised demand** for **higher Hajj quota**.
- **MoUs for labour protection**, dispute redressal, and improved working conditions for Indian workers.

##### 3. Expansion of Strategic Partnership Council:

- **New working groups** formed on:
  - **Defence technology**
  - **Space exploration**
  - **Semiconductor manufacturing**

#### Conclusion:

India–Saudi Arabia ties are evolving into a **strategic, economic, and cultural powerhouse partnership**. PM Modi's 2025 visit is a key step forward, building bridges of cooperation that support the shared vision of **peace, prosperity, and progress** in a multipolar world.

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## Tragedy in Paradise: Terror Strikes Pahalgam's Baisaran Valley

**Context:** In a devastating terror strike, 28 tourists lost their lives in Baisaran Valley, a breathtaking destination near Pahalgam, in the Anantnag district of Jammu and Kashmir.

This high-altitude area, accessible only by foot or horseback, proved difficult for emergency response teams to reach promptly. The Resistance Front (TRF), an ISI-backed proxy group of Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), has claimed responsibility for the deadly assault—making it the worst attack on civilians since the abrogation of Article 370 in 2019.



### Discovering Pahalgam: A Jewel in Kashmir's Crown:

Located around 90 km from Srinagar International Airport, Pahalgam is a beloved hill station nestled in the southern Kashmir Valley.

Known as the 'Valley of Shepherds', this region offers a serene retreat with:

- **Amarnath Cave Temple** – A sacred Hindu pilgrimage site
- **Aru Wildlife Sanctuary** – Home to rare species like the Himalayan brown bear and musk deer
- **Betaab Valley** – Named after the Bollywood classic *Betaab*
- **Tulian Lake** – A pristine alpine lake adored by trekking enthusiasts
- **Baisaran Valley** – Often called 'Mini Switzerland' for its scenic beauty

### Baisaran Valley: Kashmir's Hidden Treasure:

#### The Mini Switzerland of India:

- Just 5 km from Pahalgam, Baisaran is known for its lush green meadows, dense pine forests, and snow-capped mountain backdrops.
- This breathtaking location, accessible only via ponies or trekking, became the tragic site of the recent terrorist attack.

### A Trekker's Dream Destination:

Baisaran serves as a key camping point for trekkers en route to Tulian Lake. Its year-round appeal draws nature lovers, adventurers, and families seeking peace in the valley.

### Inside The Resistance Front (TRF):

#### Origins and Affiliations;

- Formed shortly after the abrogation of Article 370, the Resistance Front (TRF) is widely recognized as a proxy of Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT).
- The group has consolidated militants from various organizations, becoming a prominent terror outfit in the region.

### Declared a Terror Group:

- In January 2023, India's Ministry of Home Affairs designated TRF as a terrorist organization under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA).
- Authorities cited its use of online psychological warfare to radicalize youth and incite violence against the Indian state.

**Targets and Tactics:**

TRF has launched attacks aimed at **tourists, Kashmiri Pandits, and migrant laborers**, destabilizing the image of peace in the Kashmir Valley.

**Analysis: What the Pahalgam Attack Reveals****A Security Wake-Up Call:**

This **gruesome attack** is the **deadliest civilian tragedy** since the **2008 Mumbai attacks (26/11)**. It exposes not just internal security gaps but also **external provocations**—bringing global attention back to Kashmir.

**Tourism as a Target:**

Post-2019, increased tourism was seen as a **symbol of stability** in Jammu & Kashmir. This attack **shatters that image**, evoking the region's **painful legacy of violence** and threatening its **economic recovery** through tourism.

**Timing with Global Implications:**

The attack occurred during high-profile international engagements:

- **US Vice-President JD Vance** was on a visit to India
- **PM Modi** was engaged in diplomacy with **Saudi Arabia**

Such timing **mirrors past tactics** by terrorists aiming for maximum **global exposure**, including:

- **March 2000**: Massacre of 36 Sikhs in Anantnag before President **Bill Clinton's** India visit
- **May 2002**: **Kaluchak Massacre**, killing 23 civilians, during US envoy **Christina Rocca's** visit

**Provocative Rhetoric from Across the Border:**

The attack came shortly after **Pakistan's Army Chief, Gen. Asim Munir**, described **Kashmir** as Pakistan's **"jugular vein"**, echoing long-standing, inflammatory rhetoric.

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## 6 Tightening Student Visa Norms: A Growing Concern for Indian Aspirants

**Context:** A sharp decline in student visa approvals and a rise in visa revocations are affecting thousands of Indian students in the **United States** and **Australia**. These developments are disrupting educational pathways and **derailing career aspirations** for many.

### Key Concerns About Indian Student Visas:

1. **Steep Drop in Visa Issuance:** In February 2025, the US issued only **411 F-1 student visas** to Indian nationals—**down 30%** from 590 the previous year. This is notably higher than the **global average drop of 4.75%**, and greater than declines observed for countries like:



- **China** – 5.2%
- **Japan** – 9.6%
- **Vietnam** – 7.4%

Indian students also face **longer wait times**, averaging **58 days in Delhi**, compared to just **2–15 days** in East Asian capitals.

2. **Increase in Visa Revocations:** According to the **American Immigration Lawyers Association (AILA)**, **50% of all student visa revocations** in early 2025 involved **Indian nationals**. These were largely triggered by the US State Department's **AI-powered "Catch and Revoke" program**, which uses **social media and law enforcement databases**—raising serious concerns over **fairness and transparency**.

3. **Legal and Financial Burdens:** Students affected by revocations must navigate **complex legal pathways** to regain their **SEVIS status**.

This process often involves:

- **Expensive legal fees**
- **Loss of scholarships or jobs**
- **Missed academic semesters**

4. **Regional Profiling in Australia:** Australia has reportedly increased **visa scrutiny** for students from five Indian states: **Punjab, Haryana, Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh, and Bihar**—sparking concerns over **profiling** and **discriminatory practices**.

### Broader Implications for India:

1. **Weakening Soft Power:** India, being one of the largest exporters of international students, is seeing a **decline in its global academic influence**, particularly in crucial domains like **AI, biotechnology, and climate science**.

2. **Threat to Demographic Dividend:** With **65% of India's population under 35**, access to **global education** is key for **skill development**. Restrictive visa regimes threaten to stifle **productivity, innovation, and youth potential**.





3. **Risk to Remittances:** In 2024, India received a record **\$129.1 billion** in remittances—a figure partially driven by students abroad. Visa curbs could reduce **student migration**, thereby impacting this **economic lifeline**.
4. **SEVIS Status Removals:** Unlike visa revocations, **SEVIS removals** lead to **immediate consequences**:
  - **Loss of work authorization**
  - **Impact on dependent family members**
  - **Legal uncertainties** that especially affect **middle-class students** relying on **loans or savings**
5. **Shift in Talent Flow:** Indian students are now exploring **alternate destinations** like the **Nordic countries** and **South Korea**. This shift alters traditional **diaspora-building patterns**, particularly in **STEM fields** and **strategic industries**.
6. **Pressure on Indian Higher Education:** As **overseas options shrink**, there's an expected **surge in demand** for Indian institutions. This will put pressure on **Tier-I institutes** (IITs, IIMs, AIIMS) and drive urgency for reforms under **NEP 2020** to expand **quality education capacity**.

#### What Can Be Done?

1. **Leverage Diplomatic Channels:** India should invoke the **Vienna Convention on Consular Relations (1963)** more actively to protect **students' rights abroad**.
2. **Reform the Emigration Act, 1983:** Bring **student visa consultancies** under legal purview to enforce **registration, accountability, and penalties for fraudulent practices**.
3. **Establish an Emergency Support Fund:** Create an **Overseas Education Protection Fund (OEPF)** under the **Ministry of External Affairs** to aid students facing:
  - **Visa revocations**
  - **Tuition loss**
  - **Forced deportation**
4. **Strengthen Domestic Education Ecosystem:**
  - Promote **foreign universities** to set up campuses in India (e.g., **GIFT City**)
  - Support **joint-degree programs, MERUs, and international faculty exchange** under **NEP 2020**
5. **Launch a Digital Student Registry:** Introduce a **voluntary digital database** for Indian students abroad to enable:
  - **Real-time visa status tracking**
  - **Proactive embassy intervention**
  - **AI-based risk alerts, mirroring the US model**
6. **Regulate Education Consultants:** Strictly **audit and license consultancies** to prevent **misinformation**. Launch **government-backed awareness campaigns** listing **verified consultants** to protect students from scams.