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1. Nitish sworn in as CM for 9th time: Seven things to know about the Bihar leader

Why in news?

JD(U) leader Nitish Kumar took oath as Bihar's Chief Minister for the ninth time, switching sides for the fifth time in little over 10 years.

As Nitish goes back to an alliance with a BJP he has vociferously criticised, and as the BJP accepts with open arms an ally it had aggressively attacked, here are seven things one should know about Nitish, the seemingly indispensable figure of Bihar politics.

1. Nitish first joined hands with the BJP back in 1996

Nitish was part of the socialist crop of leaders in Bihar who came to prominence during the JP Movement of 1974-75. He spent his first few years in politics in the shadow of the more charismatic Lalu Prasad Yadav and the firebrand George Fernandes. Fernandes and Nitish together formed the Samata Party in 1994. In an early display of political canniness, Nitish realised his party's interests would be best served by aligning with the NDA, which he did in 1996, winning the Lok Sabha seat from Barh. He also became the Bihar CM for a short seven days in 2000 with the NDA's support.

2. Resigned as Railway Minister on moral grounds

Nitish was the Union Minister for Railways and Minister for Surface Transport in Atal Bihari Vajpayee's NDA government. On August 2, 1999, two trains collided in Gaisal in West Bengal, killing around 285 people. Nitish resigned as minister, taking responsibility. His short tenure was praised for reforms like internet ticket booking facility and the tatkal system.

The same year, he was appointed the Union minister for agriculture, and in 2001, the Railway ministry was restored to him.

3. Walked out of the NDA after Modi was chosen PM candidate

Before the 2014 Lok Sabha elections, when it became clear that Gujarat CM Narendra Modi would be the NDA's PM face, Nitish walked out of the alliance, saying its leader should have a "clean and secular image".

4. Resigned after JD(U)'s poor performance

After the JD(U)'s Lok Sabha seats tally fell from 20 to 2 in 2014, Nitish resigned as CM, taking responsibility for the poor show. Briefly, Bihar had a Chief Minister other than Nitish — Jitan Ram Manjhi was appointed to the top post. However, months later, Manjhi was asked to resign, and when he refused to do so, was expelled from the JD(U). Nitish came back as Chief Minister.

5. His son stays away from politics

Like Nitish, his son Nishant Kumar is also an engineer. He, however, has stayed away from politics, a fact Nitish flaunts to highlight his difference from "dynastic" parties.

6. Why all parties want him

Despite his unreliable track record, there's a reason Nitish is welcomed back into any alliance he chooses to join. The RJD, despite its larger social base of loyal voters and the enduring popularity of Lalu Yadav, lacks Nitish's credentials of good governance and development. The BJP, even with its massive appeal on the national level, lacks a leader of stature in Bihar, and understands the value of Nitish's vote-bank of extremely backwards castes and beneficiaries of government welfare schemes.

7. More terms, but shorter tenure

While Nitish Kumar has been sworn in as Chief Minister nine times, many others have served as CM longer than he has, in fewer tenures. Nitish has been CM for over 17 years, but many, like Sikkim's Pawan Kumar Chamling (24 years), Odisha's Naveen Patnaik (23 years), Bengal's Jyoti Basu (23 years), have been in power for longer than he has.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Governance

Source: The Indian Express

2. Test tube rhinos

Why in news?

The death of the last male in 2018 made the extinction of the northern white rhino an inevitability. But already in 2015, a group of 20 scientists from five continents had launched an audacious and expensive project to rebuild the subspecies through in vitro fertilisation (IVF).

Last week, the scientists announced the first-ever rhino pregnancy achieved by transferring a lab-made rhino embryo into a surrogate mother. It took 13 attempts for the breakthrough with a southern white rhino, a closely-related subspecies that branched away from the northern whites about a million years ago.



The last two northern white rhinos, Najin and Fatu, live in the Ol Pejeta Conservancy in Kenya.

The international consortium of scientists, named BioRescue, is confident that the success can be replicated with 30 embryos of the northern white stored in liquid nitrogen. However, rebuilding a species is easier said than done.

Is it worth the money?

The Biorescue consortium, which is led by the Leibniz Institute for Zoo and Wildlife Research (Leibniz-IZW), is funded by the German government and several other public and private donors. Millions of dollars have been spent on the project that aims to make "the seemingly impossible a reality".

Questions have been asked on whether the project takes focus and resources away from other endangered species that could still be saved. Some critics have also questioned the purpose of rebuilding a northern white population without addressing the threats to its natural habitat, which may jeopardise its future in the wild all over again.

A victim of organised hunting for its horns, the northern white was officially declared extinct in the wild in 2008. In 2015, when Biosecure was launched, only three individuals survived in a Kenyan conservancy. The effort to rebuild the species was inspired by an obligation to try and undo the damage caused by the greed of humans.

Relevance: GS Prelims; Environment

Source: The Indian Express

3. RBI action against Paytm: probable causes, effects, and what happens to your money

Why in news?

In a huge blow to Paytm Payments Bank, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) barred it from offering all its core services—including accounts and wallets—from March, effectively crippling the company's business. While the action is technically not a cancellation of Paytm's license, it practically constricts the company's operations to a great extent.

Given the significant customer base of the Paytm—once the poster boy of India's fintech revolution—the RBI action could impact a large number of customers. To be sure, the central bank has allowed withdrawal or utilisation of balance amounts by customers "without any restrictions, up to their available balance".

Paytm Payments Bank has so far not commented on the RBI order.

What does the RBI direction say?

The central bank has barred Paytm Payments Bank from offering practically all of its key services—accepting deposits or top-ups in any customer account, prepaid instruments, wallets, FASTags, National Common Mobility Card (NCMC), etc. after February 29 in the wake of "persistent non-compliances and material supervisory concerns".

What likely led to the RBI action against Paytm?

Paytm Payments Bank has been facing RBI scrutiny since 2018. While the central bank did not specify the exact reasons for the latest action against Paytm, sources in the know said it could

be due to the RBI's concerns on KYC compliance and IT-related issues. The central bank is against allowing any institution or banking entity to expose depositors' money to such risks.

It is learnt that Paytm Payments Bank and its parent One97 Communications had also come under RBI scrutiny for purported lack of firewalls within the group and data access to China-based entities that were indirect shareholders in the payments bank through their stake in the parent company. The failure to address these concerns at multiple levels over an extended period led to the latest action by the RBI, it is learnt.

Although Antfin, an affiliate of Chinese conglomerate Alibaba, has been reducing its stake in One97 Communications, it still is a shareholder in the company. As of December 31, Antfin held 9.89 per cent stake in the company, as per stock exchange data. Given the frosty relationship between India and China over the past few years, Chinese investments in Indian companies have attracted intense scrutiny by Indian regulators.

RBI's earlier actions against Paytm

In October 2023, the RBI had slapped a fine of Rs 5.39 crore on Paytm Payments Bank due to deficiencies in regulatory compliance.

Prior to this, the central bank had made certain observations in 2018 about the processes the company followed to acquire new users, especially on KYC norms. The RBI also had concerns over the close relations between Paytm Payments Bank and its parent One97 Communications. Payments banks are required to maintain an arm's length distance from promoter group entities. Paytm parent firm One97 Communications held 49% stake in Paytm Payments Bank while 51% was held by Paytm founder Vijay Shekhar Sharma.

There were also allegations that the payments bank had failed to meet the Rs 100-crore net worth criteria and also exceeded the Rs 1-lakh deposit limit allowed per account for payments banks at the time.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Economics

Source: The Indian Express