

1st Aug, 2025

1. China's mega dam on Brahmaputra & concerns in India

Introduction

China formally began construction of a massive dam on the Brahmaputra river close to the border with Arunachal Pradesh.

The \$167.8 billion hydropower project, which will be the world's largest when it is completed, has been talked about for long, and has raised concerns in India and Bangladesh about the impact it may have on the flow of the river.



Concerns in Arunachal

The dam on the Yarlung Zangbo (or Tsangpo), as the Brahmaputra is known in Tibet, is being built at the "Great Bend", where the river makes a U-turn in Medog county before entering India at Gelling in Arunachal Pradesh. The river is called Siang in Arunachal Pradesh.

The dam, which China announced in 2021, will have a generation capacity of 60,000 MW, three times that of the Three Gorges Dam on the Yangtze, which is currently the world's biggest hydropower station.

Concerns in India

Experts have flagged the risk of flooding due to the intentional or unintentional operation of reservoirs in Tibet, as well as unforeseen events such as dam failure, landslides, or earthquakes.

Tibet is a seismically active zone where the Indian tectonic plate collides with the Eurasian plate, and the region where the dam is coming up is considered to be earthquake-prone and ecologically extremely fragile.

The Brahmaputra is the lifeline of Assam, fundamental to its economy, and central to its history, culture, and ecology. Any significant disruption in the flow of the river in the state will have far-reaching consequences.

The Indian response

In January, Ministry of External Affairs spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal had said: “As a lower riparian state with established user rights to the waters of the river, we have consistently expressed...our views and concerns to the Chinese side over mega projects on rivers in their territory.

“These have been reiterated, along with the need for transparency and consultation with downstream countries, following the latest report [on the Medog county project]. The Chinese side has been urged to ensure that the interests of downstream states of the Brahmaputra are not harmed by activities in upstream areas.”

Mitigation measures

1. At the heart of India’s concerns lies the fear that China may seek to weaponise the dam project at some stage, perhaps to build pressure on behalf of Pakistan after India suspended the Indus Waters Treaty in the aftermath of the terror attack in Pahalgam in April.

Water experts argue that as a mitigation strategy, India could plan storage on rivers of the Brahmaputra system to absorb potential variations in flows (periods of flooding and reduced flows).

The Upper Siang project in Arunachal Pradesh, with its 300-metre-high dam, is seen as important not just for its formidable hydropower potential, but also as a strategic imperative in view of the Chinese projects in Tibet. The dam’s storage can serve as a buffer against variations in the flow of the river.

However, progress on the project has been slowed by local resistance against the potential adverse environmental impact of the dam.

2. There is a need to build more inland channels to carry the flow of excess water in the future. The National Water Development Authority has proposed two links to connect the Brahmaputra and its tributaries to the Ganga basin with the aim of transferring surplus water to water-scarce regions.

3. Experts have also stressed on the need to utilise diplomatic channels to seek detailed hydrological and project-related data from China in order to assess downstream impacts on a continuous basis.

4. India should also have conversations with other low riparian neighbours — Bhutan, Bangladesh and even Myanmar — on developing a coordinated protocol for advance warning and disaster preparedness.

2. The rift in Western world over Gaza, and its possible impact

Global positions on Palestine

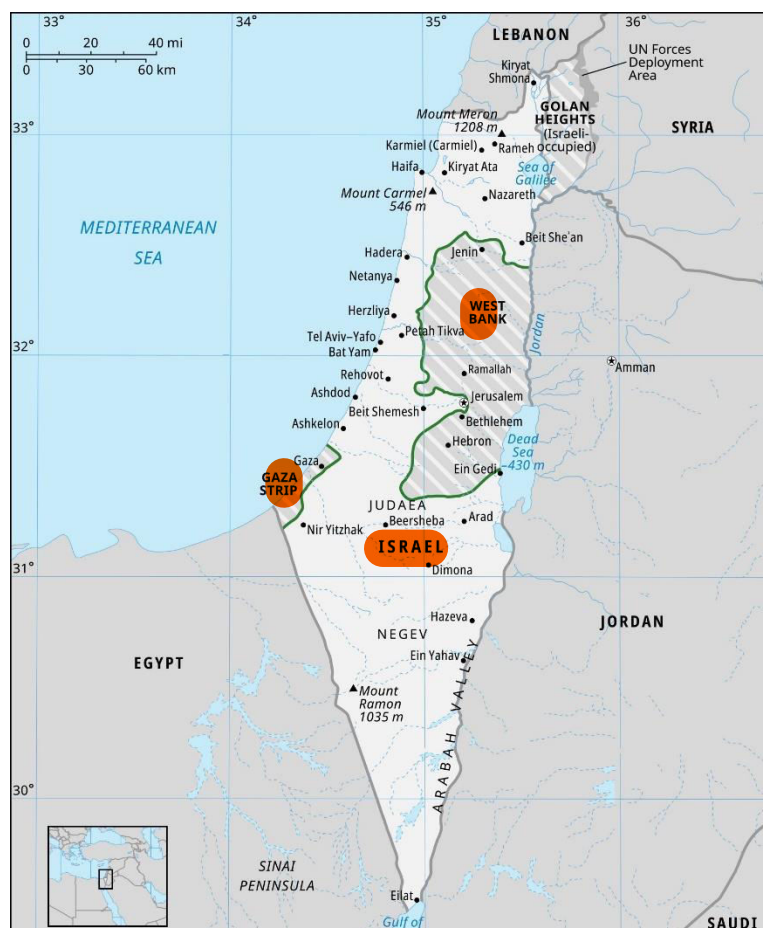
The French decision to recognise Palestinian statehood is representative of a growing rift in the global order vis-à-vis Israel and Palestine.

* The US and Israel reject any push for a Palestinian state. The alliance of the two stakeholders with the greatest ability to affect changes on the ground has held firm even as global pressures on Israel increase.

* Several Western states, such as Canada, UK, and Germany, however, are seemingly breaking from the US-Israel alliance. While they do back Israel’s immediate objectives, they also remain committed to potentially implementing the two-state solution.

Note, however, that these countries also retain their broader support for Israeli interests. French President Macron, for instance, called for a demilitarised Palestinian state — which would effectively deny Palestinians full sovereignty.

* The **Global South and Arab states** seek an immediate end to Israel's current war in Gaza and an inclusive, negotiated **two-state solution** to the original dispute. However, most of these states have markedly limited abilities to actually shape events on the ground, and Arab states remain disinclined to undertake punitive economic or military measures against Israel.



Status of two-state solution

Broadly, despite the **failure of the Oslo Accords of 1995**, most states have stood by the **two-state solution** as the only achievable outcome — even as Israel progressively removes the physical contours of a future Palestinian state and has killed Palestinians at record rates each day since October 2023.

A day before ceasefire talks broke down, the **Israeli Knesset** passed a non-binding resolution calling for Israel to annex the West Bank. Another Knesset resolution a year ago had rejected the possibility of allowing a sovereign Palestinian state. In June, Israel approved 22 new Jewish settlements in the West Bank.

Most of **Israel's West Bank settlements** are deemed illegal by the UN and a majority of its

member states, including India. That Israeli ministers also look to re-settle Homesh and Sa-Nur in the Northern West Bank, evacuated along with the settlements in Gaza in 2005, is indicative of Israel's concerted push to leverage the war to expand its illegal occupation of Palestinian territories.

International conference on the two-state solution

It is thus notable that **France and Saudi Arabia** are set to co-chair an international conference on the **two-state solution** at the UN from July 28. While a **ministerial-level conference on the two-state solution** was held at the UN in September 2024, Israel's war of attrition, combined with forced mass starvation, has sparked a renewed push to explore methods to advance the solution.

However, **unlike earlier global pushes for a Palestinian state alongside Israel according to pre-1967 borders**, the **current international effort** arguably occurs with the US and Israel being the least amenable. Even as questions over the reform of the Palestinian Authority (restricted to the West Bank since 2007) can be addressed, the **question of Hamas' future remains a dead-end.**

The upcoming international conference will bolster support for **Palestinian statehood (recognised by 147 of the UN's 193 member states)** but the degree to which participating states can influence Israeli actions remains unclear. It remains to be seen if the conference propels states to undertake punitive measures of any nature and scale against Israel, failing which Tel Aviv has little incentive to cease hostilities and territorial expansion, especially with continuing US support.

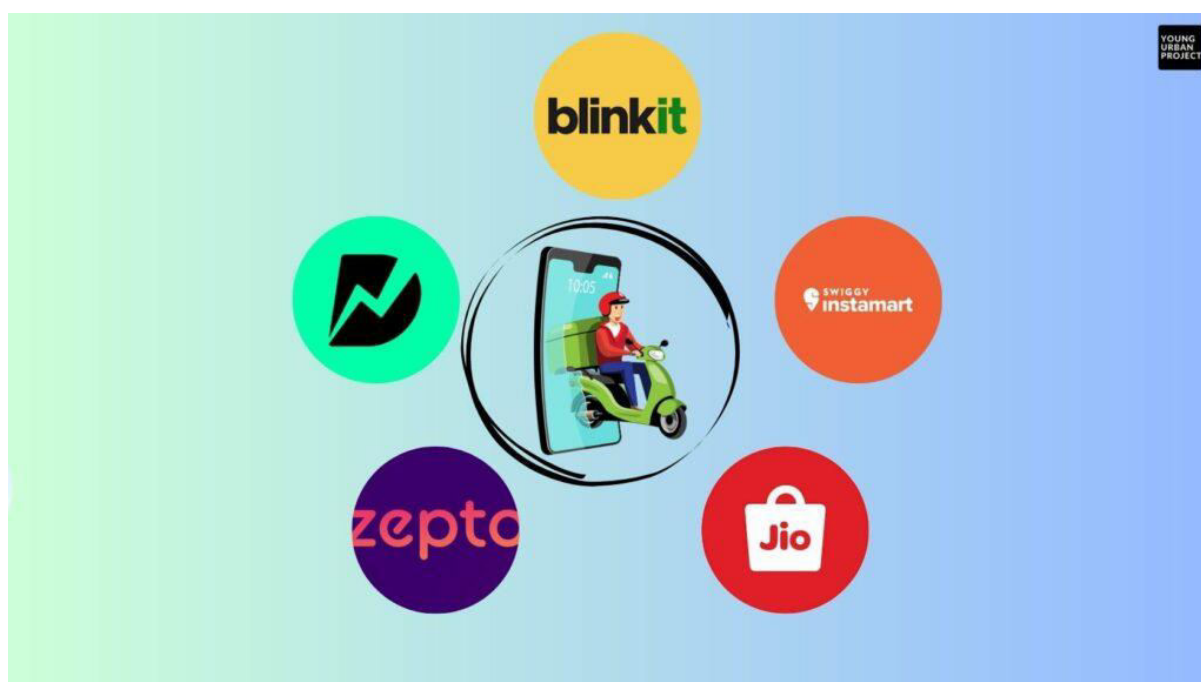
3. Blinkit, Zepto, Swiggy: A brief history of **quick commerce**, its rise, impact, and possible future in India

Introduction

Blinkit, the quick commerce (q-commerce) arm of technology firm Eternal Ltd, **outpaced its food delivery unit Zomato in net order value in the first quarter (April-June) of 2025-26**, the company reported this week.

Higher investments in the q-commerce segment, however, pulled down the company's consolidated net profit by 90% year-on-year to Rs 25 crore. Eternal's shares rose after the results were announced.

How do **q-commerce platforms** such as **Blinkit, Zepto, Swiggy Instamart**, and the recently-launched **Amazon Now work**, and what is their business model?



What is q-commerce, and how does the company ensure that goods ordered on its platform reach customers quickly?

Quick commerce (q-commerce) refers to the **rapid delivery of goods ordered online, usually between 10 minutes and 30 minutes.**

For q-commerce to work effectively, **firms must invest in opening and efficiently stocking so-called "dark stores", which are stocked like standard retail stores but are used only as storage and are not open to the public.** Dark stores are critical working infrastructure that make expedited fulfillment feasible in the area of operation of the q-commerce firm.

Next, the firms must implement effective order management systems, and for the relevant information to be processed properly and directed to the closest dark store.

At the store, the order details are automated using a dispatch software that swiftly redirects them to the warehouse staff and delivery personnel. Then, orders are delivered using transport vehicles (primarily two-wheelers such as motorcycles or electric e-scooters) to the customer's address using the most time-efficient routes.

When and how did q-commerce start in India and grow to its current stage?

In 2013, grocery-delivery app **Grofers** was founded in Gurgaon by entrepreneurs Albinder Dhindsa and Saurabh Kumar. Soon afterward, Grofers announced 90-minute deliveries, rapidly connecting kirana stores to consumers. Towards the end of 2015, Grofers was getting almost 30,000 orders per day, and the company had received \$120 million in funding from investors such as Softbank and Yuri Milner.

In 2016, as competition emerged from other online grocers such as Dunzo, and having experienced a period of relative drought in sales, Grofers decided to adopt an inventory-led model. The company ended 2017 with an annual revenue run-rate of approximately Rs 1,000 crore, with sales having tripled from February to November of that year.

In FY 2019, Grofers' revenue had skyrocketed to Rs 2,500 crore. Then, during the COVID-19 pandemic, an even quicker model for q-commerce emerged: under-30-minute deliveries. By the end of 2021, **Grofers had changed its name to Blinkit** and was fulfilling over 125,000 orders daily.

Over the next couple of years, the Indian q-commerce business grew rapidly. In 2024, the q-commerce industry boasted a market size of approximately \$6.1 billion, thanks in part to changes in consumer preferences and behaviour brought about by the pandemic, and the entry of other players such as Zepto, Swiggy Instamart, and Flipkart Minutes.

How has q-commerce changed the grocery-shopping space in India?

More than 20 million people are currently estimated to be **placing orders** on q-commerce portals annually in India. **Blinkit is the largest player**, accounting for more than 40% of the q-commerce market share.

On its website, Blinkit says Blinkit is present in 100+ cities, and more than 16 million customers use the app every month. The three largest q-commerce companies in India — Blinkit, Zepto, and Swiggy Instamart — together receive approximately 4.3 million orders every day.

The industry has been disruptive, most notably in decreasing the dependence of customers on the estimated 13 million kirana stores across the country.

According to a survey by Datum Intelligence, q-commerce has reduced consumers' spending on kirana stores by around \$1.28 billion, with 46% of respondents expressing a partial or major shift in expenditure.

Approximately 200,000 kirana stores have been **forced to shut down** due to pressure on their businesses from q-commerce, according to the trade body All India Consumer Products Distributors Federation (AICPDF).

In towns and cities across India, these **local stores with their smaller budgets and tight margins find it difficult to compete** with well-funded q-commerce companies that offer rapid home deliveries at competitive prices and over long hours of the day. The shrinking of traditional kirana stores and the disappearance of jobs in that sector present a difficult policy challenge.

And are the quick commerce companies themselves doing well?

Despite the boom, **no major q-commerce player has truly reached profitability** – even though most remain optimistic of being able to do so in the near future.

The challenges to the model arise due to a few reasons: q-commerce companies have **high operational costs that consist of maintaining and managing a large number of dark stores, thousands of delivery personnel and staff, and large-scale, functional software**. These costs have continued to increase as q-commerce companies have rapidly expanded their footprint.

A large number of customers buy only a few items at a time – usually essentials such as milk and bread, chips, cold drinks, instant noodles, party supplies, etc. – and **low average order values (AOVs)**, ranging from Rs 500-600, make profiting from most deliveries a challenge.

There is also **fierce competition in the market among a handful of q-commerce companies** that are constantly trying to one-up one another, which makes it difficult for them to make decisions based solely on profits.

Concerns have been raised over the **safety and security of the gig workers who often work without adequate legal protection and social security**, and face **risks of accidents and injury trying to deliver orders within short times**.

In the end, despite the popularity of q-commerce and the great convenience that it offers to customers, it faces a range of stresses and challenges, and the profitability and sustainability of this model over the longer term remains an open question.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Economics

Source: Indian Express

4. **Criminalising adolescent sex will undermine the aim of the POCSO Act**

Introduction

The **key objective** of the **Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, 2012** is the **protection of children**, but over the past few years, **courts around the country and rights activists have called for some exemptions**.

Noticing a trend that adolescents, **above 15 years but under 18, in voluntary relationships** and having **consensual sex** were **often being persecuted**, the courts sought a review.



Arguments

In that backdrop, senior advocate Indira Jaising's written submission to the Supreme Court that consensual sex between teenagers aged 16-18 years must not be criminalised is a welcome move.

Her brief challenged the designation of 18 years as the age of consent. She said the only solution lies in declaring that sex between consenting adolescents between the age of 16, an almost universal age of sexual maturity, and 18, is not a form of 'abuse'. Ms. Jaising called for this exception to be read into the POCSO Act and Section 63 (sexual offences), of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS). "Such an exception would preserve the protective intent of the statute while preventing its misuse against adolescent relationships that are not exploitative in nature," she said.

View of Law Commission

In a 2023 report, the Law Commission had said that it was against changing the age of consent. It advised "guided judicial discretion" instead, while sentencing in cases that involve children between 16 and 18 years in a voluntary, consensual relationship.

Legal Provisions

Under the POCSO Act and under several provisions of the Indian Penal Code and the BNS, whoever commits a penetrative sexual assault on a child — who is anyone below 18 years — can face stringent punishment under Section 6 of the POCSO Act, Section 9 of the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006, and provisions of the IPC and BNS.

Final Position

A 16-year-old is considered a "child" under Section 2(d) of the POCSO Act and hence her consent does not matter. But caveats have to be put in place so that the broad intent of the law is adhered to, as the Madras High Court suggested in 2021, in Vijayalakshmi vs State Rep. The High Court said the age difference in consensual relationships should not be more than five years to ensure that a girl of an impressionable age is not taken advantage of by an older person.

Educating adolescents about the law on sexual offences and its consequences is a must too. Criminalising normal adolescent behaviour is not the way to protect against non-consensual, exploitative sexual offences.

2nd August

1. The West must follow France in recognising Palestinian statehood

France recognises Palestinian Statehood

France's decision to recognise Palestinian statehood, in coming September, reflects President Emmanuel Macron's deep frustration with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu over the ongoing war on Gaza, as well as his willingness to adopt a more pro-active and constructive approach towards finding a durable solution.

Global Stand

Of the 193 members of the UN, 147, including India, China and Russia, have already recognised the Palestinian state. But powerful western nations, with close ties to Israel, have always stopped short of granting official recognition even if professing support for a two-state solution.

But this position began to shift after the Gaza war in October 2023, with more European countries taking formal steps towards its recognition. Last year, Spain, Ireland, Norway and Slovenia recognised Palestine's independence. If Mr. Macron follows through, France will be the first G-7 member nation to do so.



Such a move may not have an immediate, direct impact on the peace process. That more western European countries are now ready to take irreversible measures in favour of Palestinian statehood, ignoring strong opposition from Tel Aviv and Washington, marks a clear change in sentiment towards one of the modern world's most contentious conflicts.

Timing of announcement

Mr. Macron's announcement comes at a critical juncture for the Palestinians. The war has devastated the enclave with confirmed deaths reaching 60,000 in 21 months — roughly 2.5% of its total population. In the West Bank, settler violence has displaced tens of thousands of Palestinians. Israeli Ministers have openly threatened to ethnically cleanse Gaza and annex the West Bank. Images of starving and malnourished children, which came out of Gaza last week, have jolted global conscience. Even Israel's closest allies, including Britain, Canada and France, issued a rare joint statement, urging Mr. Netanyahu to "immediately end the humanitarian catastrophe".

Need of Hour

Under mounting pressure, Israel has announced 'tactical pauses' in its attacks. But this is far from sufficient. What Gaza urgently needs is a complete end to the bombings and shelling, and the full opening of its borders to humanitarian aid. Given that pressure is the only language Israel appears to understand, and with the Donald Trump presidency showing no willingness to apply it, Europe must do more. Efforts to end the war, which in terms of mass killings, devastation and displacement is comparable to the 1948-49 Nakba, must be accompanied by initiatives to ensure that such a catastrophe is never repeated.

There should be concrete measures from the international community to pursue a durable political solution, which is the two-state solution. The first step in that direction is the recognition of Palestinian

independence and statehood. France has promised to join, though belatedly, most member-countries of the UN in the statehood push. Other nations in the West must follow.

2. Was there a security breach at the crypto exchange CoinDCX?

The story so far

On July 19, the crypto exchange CoinDCX updated users that one of its internal accounts had been “compromised.” The company’s executives reassured panicked investors and traders that their assets were safe and that access to their crypto would not be cut off. Despite assurances, many CoinDCX customers moved to withdraw their assets, perceiving the event could turn into something like the WazirX hack last year.

How are the CoinDCX and WazirX hacks different?

Just a little over a year ago, on July 18, 2024, WazirX was targeted by North Korean cyber-thieves, leading to the loss of assets worth over \$230 million. This was far greater than the losses reported by CoinDCX; WazirX customers’ assets were directly affected by this breach.



After much delay and confusion, WazirX blocked users’ access to their crypto for an indefinite period of time and acknowledged significant losses. By contrast, CoinDCX has stressed that it is business as usual for the exchange, noting on X that its annual revenue exceeds ₹1,100 crore.

WazirX customers demanded that the company use its own profits or funds to cover losses, but the company said this was not possible, citing an ownership dispute with the international crypto exchange Binance. WazirX users have not been able to access their locked up crypto for over a year.

Both WazirX and CoinDCX were criticised for delays in informing their customers about their respective hacks.

What is the lesson for crypto investors in India?

Investors in India should remember that crypto trading is a largely unregulated activity in the country; even users of centralised, FIU-registered exchanges can expect little to no support from the Indian authorities in case of a crisis such as a security breach.

Expert explained that if users want full control of their coins, they should consider self-custody options like an offline, hardware cold wallet they directly control. Even here, due diligence is required in order to buy only trusted hardware wallets from legitimate sellers.

Expert highlighted that when crypto prices go up, there is also a rise in attacks against both exchanges and customers.

“There is an old adage in the cryptocurrency space that says: “not your keys, not your crypto/coins”. As long as users store their cryptocurrency on an exchange, those coins don’t necessarily belong to them because the exchange could ban their account or an exchange hack could lead to the loss of coins,” explained expert.

3. Grassland bird census in Kaziranga: What was special about this survey, which PM Modi talked about

Introduction



In his Mann ki Baat radio programme, Prime Minister Narendra Modi highlighted a “first-ever grassland bird census” in Assam’s Kaziranga National Park and the technology used for this.

What is this “bird census”, what was the methodology involved, and what are the concerns surrounding grassland birds?

What was the bird census in Kaziranga?

Between March 18 and May 25, a survey to record the grassland bird population in Kaziranga National Park was undertaken by a team of forest officials, scientists, and conservationists.

It all began when a doctoral student Chiranjib Bora, who is studying the threatened grassland bird Black-breasted parrotbill, received the INSPIRE fellowship from the central government’s Department of Science & Technology, along with acoustic monitoring tools to

conduct his research.

He and the Kaziranga authorities then decided to use the tools to count all grassland bird species in the national park, 70% of which is covered by grasslands.

The survey prioritised 10 species that are either globally threatened or endemic to the Brahmaputra floodplains: Bengal Florican, Swamp Francolin, Finn’s Weaver, Swamp Grass Babbler, Jerdon’s Babbler, Slender-billed Babbler, Black-breasted Parrotbill, Marsh Babbler, Bristled Grassbird, and Indian Grassbird. Including these, it recorded a total of 43 grassland bird species, including 1 Critically Endangered, 2 Endangered, and 6 Vulnerable species, according to the IUCN Red List.

What was the methodology and why was it unique?

According to Kaziranga National Park Director Dr. Sonali Ghosh, the use of passive acoustic recording monitoring was the highlight of the survey. “Surveying these small, shy, and highly camouflaged birds is very difficult using traditional methods like visual counting. So, the acoustic recorders were placed in tall trees near grasslands during the breeding season of the birds, between March and May. This is the season when they are very vocal, calling out for mates and with males defending territory. The instruments recorded all the birds singing in the landscape,” she said.

Bora said that different tools were then used to identify the birds based on the recordings.

“After recording for three consecutive days, we removed the recorders and analysed those sound files. If the sound was not identifiable, we used software to create a spectrogram, which is a graphical representation of the sound, to aid us in identifying. We also used a tool called Birdnet, which uses machine learning to try and identify species by bird song. We covered 29 locations in the national park using six recorders,” he said.

What is the significance of the findings?

Dr. Ghosh called grassland birds “an indicator of good health” of an ecosystem, likening them to indicators such as BMI for human health. “The presence of these birds tells us that the habitat is healthy,” she said.

The national park authorities have been particularly excited by the discovery of a breeding colony of the endangered Finn’s Weaver, which is endemic to the Brahmaputra flood plain.

“They nest on the tops of trees but till now, we had not known where they had been nesting. During the survey we found a colony of over 85 nests in Kaziranga,” she said.

What are the threats to the habitats of grassland birds?

Bora said that in the past four decades, Assam has lost around 70% of its grasslands.

“There are anthropogenic factors such as overgrazing and clearing of grasslands for cultivation. But there is also a natural phenomenon called ecological succession, which is basically an instinct for grasslands to gradually transition to forests. Among the 10 species we had prioritized, three are endemic to the grasslands of the North East, which means that if they vanish from here, they become extinct,” he said.

Climate change also contributes to these concerns. “It is a cause of worry. If we look at some species, for instance, the Bengal florican, we used to see a lot more of them, but this time we could detect only one or two. Further study can tell us if the decline is influenced by climate change or other factors,” said Dr. Ghosh.

4. PM Modi talks of Amrit Bharat Station Scheme in Tamil Nadu: What is this initiative, who benefits

Introduction

During his recent visit to Tamil Nadu, Prime Minister Narendra Modi stated that the country’s railway infrastructure has entered a new era of modernisation. While addressing a public rally in Thoothukudi on Saturday (July 26), Modi said, “Tamil Nadu is a major center of the modernisation campaign of railway infrastructure. Our government is redeveloping 77 stations in Tamil Nadu under the Amrit Bharat Station Scheme.”

Launched in 2022, the Amrit Bharat Station Scheme (ABSS) aims at development and upgradation of stations over the Indian Railways network. The ABSS has a long-term vision that involves creating master plans, promoting multimodal connectivity, better station accessibility for passengers, etc.



Why was the Amrit Bharat Station Scheme launched?

The Amrit Bharat Station Scheme was launched to make railway stations cleaner, more comfortable and future-ready. After the revamp, the railway stations are supposed to have better circulating areas, waiting halls, toilets, lifts, escalators, free Wi-Fi, executive lounges, nominated spaces for business meetings, landscaping, etc.

These facilities are to be developed keeping in view the necessity at each station.

How many railway stations are covered under the Amrit Bharat Station Scheme?

The Ministry of Railways is executing the Amrit Bharat Station Scheme in a phased manner. Under the ABSS, over 1,300 stations have been identified for development.

In May, PM Modi inaugurated 103 redeveloped railway stations, situated in 86 districts across 18 states and Union Territories. These stations have been developed at a cost of over Rs 1,100 crore.

3rd August

1. India, Qatar battle for hosting 2036 Olympics: Promise vs readiness, Global South vs Middle East, major economy vs diplomatic hub

Introduction

Qatar announced its bid to host the 2036 Olympics last week. With this announcement, it is now official.

India, which has been working on its bid for close to two years, has competition in a race that also includes Turkey, Indonesia, Hungary, and Germany, which want to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the 1936 Olympics, among others.



The International Olympic Committee (IOC) has paused the host selection process as it reviews the current rules. Picking a host nation for the Olympics has never been a straightforward process. So, to say that one country has an edge over the other will be premature.

Claims

While Qatar claims its bid aligns with the 'National Vision 2030', India has said the 2036 Olympics are in line with the country's 'Viksit Bharat 2047 Vision'.

Both haven't shied away from making bold claims to transform the respective nations' sporting ecosystem, shape the future and wield regional influence.

Qatar bank on 'readiness' of venues, hosting experience

They do not say it in as many words, but Qatar implies that they can host the Olympics now if it comes to that. Readiness, bolstered by the controversial yet successful 2022 FIFA World Cup, is their big bid plank.

On the infrastructure front, Qatar has claimed that '95 per cent of Olympic venues are already in place and tested at the highest level'. They dip into their previous hosting experience, underlining the 18 World Championships they have hosted in the last 20 years to promise a successful delivery of the Olympics. They hosted the Asian Games in 2006 and will hold them once again in 2030.

India developing Olympics Infrastructure at fast pace

In Ahmedabad, which was officially presented as the candidate city in a meeting with the IOC earlier this month, the pace of infrastructure building — being done from scratch — has increased rapidly in the last few months as the authorities begin work to construct the Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel Enclave, which is likely to be the major hub.

In its promise to deliver the Games seamlessly, India has bid — or is in the process of bidding — multiple international tournaments over the next few years to gain hosting experience. This includes the 2030 Commonwealth Games, which is almost certain to be held in Ahmedabad, the 2027 women's volleyball world championship and the 2028 World U20 Athletics Championships, among others. This year, Ahmedabad will host the Commonwealth Weightlifting Championship and the Asian Swimming Championship.

Regional play

Qatar has also reaffirmed that if it were to be awarded the 2036 Games, 'it would mark the **first Olympic and Paralympic Games ever held in the Middle East and North Africa**'. "This milestone would allow Qatar to present a distinctive Arab model for the Games – one rooted in diversity and openness, built on a foundation of sustainable legacy and the power of sport to inspire hope and peace. It would also strengthen regional representation and showcase the potential of Arab youth on the global stage.

India, meanwhile, has said hosting the Olympics would speak of the '**aspirations of the Global South**' and, in the letter of intent to the IOC, spoke about the 'transformative economic, social and cultural impact in wider SAARC nations in South Asia'.

Economy and diplomacy

Qatar is banking on its growing reputation of being a **global diplomacy hub**. In their pitch, the Gulf nation has said 'this bid is a natural extension of our diplomatic legacy, inviting the world to connect in an environment of peace and mutual respect.'

India, on the other hand, has impressed upon the IOC that it is the '**only major economy yet to host the Games**.' "And while we recognise that is not the sole reason to award a Games, it is a stark reflection of our region's need for the types of sport and social benefits that only the Olympic Games can provide," the letter of intent stated.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; International Issues

Source: Indian Express

2. Gazans are starving, falling sick, and dying. Why has the UN not declared a 'famine' in the war-torn land yet?

The story so far

Till Sunday (July 27), aid into the Palestinian enclave was being **routed only through the Israeli-American Gaza Humanitarian Foundation (GHF)**. However, **around 900 Gazans** in the recent weeks have been **killed at the GHF aid sites while trying to gather food**, according to the UN human rights office, OHCHR.

On Sunday, amid increasing criticism of the humanitarian situation, **Israel said it would halt military operations for 10 hours a day in parts of Gaza and allow new aid corridors**. However, even as alarm over the crisis in Gaza is rising, officially, famine is yet to be declared in the battered enclave.

What does it take for a famine to be declared?

The **Integrated Food Security Phase Classification, or IPC**, states that the **formal declaration of a famine comes with caution**. Set up in 2004, the IPC is the leading international authority on food crises, which includes over a dozen UN agencies, aid groups, governments and other bodies.

The IPC was **developed during a food emergency in Somalia by the Famine Early Warning Systems Network (FEWS NET) along with global partners**. It is **coordinated by the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation in Rome**.

FEWS NET, meanwhile, was established in 1985, in response to famines in East and West Africa when US aid officials realised the need for a way to monitor global hunger. It was founded by the US Agency for International Development (USAID) to collect and analyse data from at-risk areas on a monthly-basis.

The IPC defines famine as an extreme deprivation of food. “Starvation, death, destitution and extremely critical levels of acute malnutrition are or will likely be evident,” as described in the IPC Famine Classification processes.

Gazans are starving, falling sick, and dying. Why has the UN not declared a ‘famine’ in the war-torn land yet?

A famine, as per the IPC, can be declared when all of the following three conditions are confirmed:

- 20% of households have an extreme lack of food, or are essentially starving.
- At least 30% of children (six months to five years old) suffer from acute malnutrition or wasting, meaning they’re too thin for their height.
- At least two people or four children under five per 10,000 are dying everyday due to starvation or the interaction of malnutrition and disease.



Even though the IPC remains the “primary mechanism” utilised by the international community to determine whether a country is in the grip of a famine, it is often the UN, along with government institutions and multiple other high-level representatives, who possess the authority to declare a famine in an area.

Why does the declaration of famine matter?

The IPC’s classification system acts as a powerful tool in informing, alerting, and mobilising the world before a crisis gets out of hand. Declaring a famine could scale up the global humanitarian response to Gaza.

A few countries where the IPC has recently declared famines are Somalia in 2011, South Sudan in 2017 and 2020, and in parts of Sudan’s western Darfur region in 2024.

What is the status of Gaza?

IPC’s analyses released on May 12 expected close to 71,000 children under the age of five to be acutely malnourished over the following 11 months (that is, April 2025-March 2026) in Gaza. Of these, 14,100 cases were expected to be severe. Moreover, nearly 17,000 pregnant and breastfeeding women would also require treatment for acute malnutrition during this period.

IPC categorises hunger crisis on a five-point scale: Phase 1 (Acceptable or, Normal), Phase 2 (Alert or, Stressed), Phase 3 (Serious or, Crisis), Phase 4 (Critical or, Emergency), and Phase 5 (Extremely Critical, Catastrophe or, Famine).

Between May to September-end, the IPC projected the whole territory of Gaza to be classified under Emergency (IPC Phase 4), with the entire population expected to face Crisis or worse levels of acute food insecurity (IPC Phase 3 or above).

This includes 470,000 people (22 per cent of the population) in Catastrophe (IPC Phase 5), over a million people (54 per cent) in Emergency (IPC Phase 4) and the remaining half million (24 per cent) in Crisis (IPC Phase 3).

Also, in Gaza, there persists an impossibility to gather accurate data, with limited access to the territory for experts, and completely damaged infrastructure and care and monitoring networks.

The Commissioner-General for the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees (UNRWA), Philippe Lazzarini, last Thursday posted on X that one in every five children is malnourished in Gaza City.

Lazzarini said most UNRWA workers are surviving on a meagre bowl of lentils each day, leading many of them to faint from hunger at work.

He also pointed out that UNRWA has 6,000 trucks of food and medical supplies in Jordan and Egypt, which he demanded be immediately let through.

“Families are no longer coping. They are breaking down, unable to survive. Their existence is threatened,” he said. “Allow humanitarian partners to bring unrestricted and uninterrupted humanitarian assistance to Gaza.”

Are there no aid trucks entering Gaza now?

The food crisis in Gaza intensified early March this year, when Israel completely cut off all supplies to the 2.3 million residents of the Gaza Strip, demanding Palestinian militant group Hamas to release all the remaining hostages.

In May, when the blockade was lifted after 11 weeks, Israel allowed limited UN deliveries to resume, and over 400 Palestinians were killed as they tried to reach the aid sites.

Since then, Israel has allowed in around 4,500 trucks from the UN and other aid groups, to distribute, among other things, 2,500 tonnes of baby food and high-calorie special food for children, Israel's Foreign Ministry stated last week.

Amid increased international pressure, the Israeli military Saturday night began to airdrop aid into the Strip. These included seven packages of aid containing flour, sugar and canned food, the Israel Defence Forces stated over a Telegram post on Sunday.

On Saturday, Israel said that over 250 trucks carrying aid from the UN and other organizations entered Gaza this week. This is much lesser than the about 600 trucks that entered Gaza per day when the ceasefire was in place until March.

The Israeli military also said on Saturday that it would establish humanitarian corridors for United Nations convoys, but refrained from providing further details

3. Five years of National Education Policy: Taking stock of the transition

Introduction

It is five years since the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 — the country's third such policy since Independence — was cleared by the Union Cabinet. The NEP promised a sweeping reset of both school and higher education.

Some of that vision has made its way into classrooms. But a lot remains on paper, slowed



by state-Centre frictions, or held up by institutional delays.

What has worked

1. School curriculum is changing, slowly: The 10+2 system has been replaced with a new structure — foundational (pre-primary to class 2), preparatory (classes 3-5), middle (6-8), and secondary (9-12). In 2023, the National Curriculum Framework for School Education (NCFSE) laid out the learning outcomes and competencies for each stage.

NCERT has produced new textbooks for classes 1-8 based on this framework. Social science, for example, is now taught as a single book covering history, geography, political science, and economics, replacing separate textbooks for each subject. New books for classes 9-12 are expected next.

2. First steps of early childhood learning: The NEP aims to make pre-primary learning universal by 2030.

Delhi, Karnataka, and Kerala will soon enforce the minimum age of six for class 1 entry. 2023-24 data show a fall in class 1 enrolments to 1.87 crore from the 2.16 crore of previous year, likely due to this age cutoff. About 73% of those enrolled had attended some form of preschool. The big hurdles are better training for Anganwadi workers, and improving infrastructure and teaching quality in early education centres.

3. National focus for foundational skills: NIPUN Bharat, launched in 2021, seeks to ensure every child can read and do basic math by the end of class 3. A recent government survey found average scores were 64% for language and 60% for math — a start, but well short of universal proficiency.

4. Credit-based flexibility starts to take shape: The NEP suggested the Academic Bank of Credits (ABC). This, and a National Credit Framework (NCrF) have been developed. UGC rules published in 2021 allowed students to earn and store credits digitally, even across institutions, making it possible to move between courses or exit and re-enter. The system allows students to earn a certificate after one year, a diploma after two, or complete a four-year multidisciplinary degree.

The NCrF brings similar flexibility to school students, where learning hours (including skill-based ones) translate into credits. CBSE invited schools to be part of an NCrF pilot last year.

5. Common test for college entry: The Common University Entrance Test (CUET), introduced in 2022, is now a key route to undergraduate admissions. NEP 2020 had suggested that multiple college entrance exams should be replaced with a single national test.

6. Indian campuses abroad and vice versa: IIT Madras, IIT Delhi, and IIM Ahmedabad have set up international campuses in Zanzibar, Abu Dhabi, and Dubai respectively. University of Southampton recently opened in India, after two other foreign universities at GIFT City, Gujarat. Another 12 foreign universities are in the process of being approved under UGC regulations, plus two more at GIFT City, Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan said earlier this month.

What's in progress

1. Changes in board exams: The NEP envisages less high-stakes board exams. Starting 2026, CBSE plans to allow class 10 students to sit for board exams twice a year. Karnataka has experimented with this; other boards are waiting to see how it plays out.

The NEP idea of offering all subjects at two levels (standard and higher) is limited to class 10 math, which CBSE introduced in 2019-20.

2. Holistic report cards, so far on paper: PARAKH, a unit under NCERT, has developed progress cards that go beyond marks, and include peer and self-assessment. But some school boards are yet to make the shift.

3. Slow progress for four-year UG degrees: Central universities are rolling out NEP's idea of four-year undergraduate degrees with multiple exit options, and Kerala has followed. But in many places, colleges don't yet have the faculty or infrastructure.

4. Mother tongue in classrooms: NEP encourages the use of mother tongue as the medium of instruction till at least class 5. CBSE has asked schools to begin this from pre-primary to class 2, with classes 3-5 retaining the option of staying or switching. NCERT is working on textbooks in more Indian languages.

What's stuck and why

1. Three-language formula remains a sticking point: NEP proposes three languages in school, at least two of them Indian. But Tamil Nadu, which follows a Tamil-English model, sees this as an attempt to impose Hindi.

2. Teacher education overhaul hasn't happened: The National Curriculum Framework for Teacher Education, due in 2021, is yet to be released. The four-year integrated B.Ed course has been announced under the Integrated Teacher Education Programme (ITEP), but colleges offering existing programmes like Bachelor of Elementary Education (B.El.Ed) are pushing back.

3. UGC's proposed successor delayed: A 2018 draft bill proposed scrapping the UGC Act and replacing it with an umbrella Higher Education Commission of India (HECI). NEP formalised the idea — HECI would handle regulation, funding, accreditation, and academic standards across higher education, excluding medical and legal. But the Education Ministry is still in the process of drafting the Bill.

4. No breakfast in schools yet: NEP recommends breakfast along with midday meals. But in 2021, the Finance Ministry rejected the Education Ministry's proposal to add breakfast for pre-primary and elementary classes.

5. Policy divide between Centre and states: Some states have pushed back against key NEP provisions. Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and West Bengal have refused to sign MoUs with the Centre to set up PM-SHRI schools, citing clauses that require full adoption of NEP.

Tamil Nadu opposes both the three-language formula and four-year UG structure. Kerala and Tamil Nadu argue that since education is on the Concurrent List, the Centre cannot mandate these changes unilaterally.

The Centre has withheld Samagra Shiksha funds from these states, saying the money is tied to NEP-linked reforms. Tamil Nadu has challenged the freeze in the Supreme Court.

Karnataka, which introduced and scrapped the four-year UG model, is working on its own state education policy, an election promise made by the Congress in 2023.

4. Teenager Divya outlasts Humpy, emerges India's first women's World Cup winner

Introduction

Indian chess recorded yet another great moment, as Divya Deshmukh won the women's World Cup in the Georgian city of Batumi.

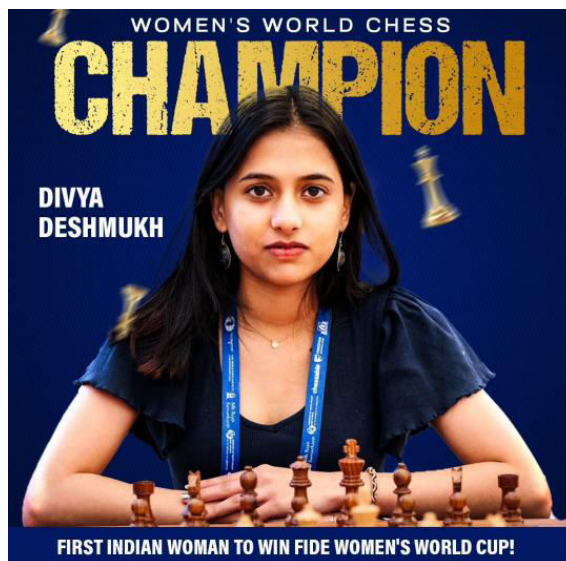
In the final, the 19-year-old defeated fellow-Indian Koneru Humpy in the tiebreakers.

While Humpy contesting the final wasn't much of a surprise — she is the World No. 5 and has been one of the best female players for the last couple of decades — not many would have anticipated Divya's stunning show. But, given her obvious talent and the way she has been playing for the past two years, it didn't come as a big surprise.

By winning the World Cup, one of the biggest events organised by the world chess governing body FIDE, Divya also achieved another significant milestone.

India's 88th GM

She became India's 88th Grandmaster and is only the fourth Indian woman after Humpy, D. Harika and R. Vaishali to get that coveted title. Last year, Divya had won the World junior championship at Gandhinagar with a dominant display. She also played a key role in India's historic gold in the Chess Olympiad at Budapest. India was the top seed there, though.



At the World Cup, the Indian women exceeded expectations, with four of them making it to the quarterfinals.

Emulating Anand

Only one Indian had won the World Cup before: Viswanathan Anand in Hyderabad, 2002.

By reaching the final, Divya and Humpy also booked tickets for the Candidates tournament, the qualifying event for the World championship.

Last year, five Indians, — three men and two women — featured in the Candidates at Toronto. D. Gukesh won the open event, and went on to become, at 18, the youngest World champion in history by dethroning Ding Liren of China in an exciting finale in Singapore.

4th August

1. How flash floods are affecting India

Introduction

More than 100 people dead in Himachal Pradesh this month. At least 373 killed in Kerala's Wayanad in late July 2024. Five soldiers lost their lives in Ladakh in June 2024. Dozens dead in Sikkim in October 2023.

Although these events took place in different parts of the country, they had one common trigger: flash floods. Every year, more than 5,000 people die, and significant damage is sustained by infrastructure, agricultural land, and the environment due to these sudden floods, which are caused by extreme rainfall. To make matters worse, with rising global temperatures, there has been an increase in the frequency of flash floods. For instance, between 2020 and 2022, the number of flash flood events increased from 132 to 184, according to the Union Ministry of Jal Shakti's written reply in the Lok Sabha in 2023.

Despite the increasing threat posed by flash floods, there has been insufficient research to identify areas that are most vulnerable to this extreme weather event. This has posed a challenge in implementing adaptation strategies such as early warning systems.

A new study by researchers based at the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT)- Gandhinagar has tried to address this gap. Published in the journal Nature Hazards on July 13, the study, 'Drivers of flash floods in the Indian sub-continental river basins', has found that flash floods are mainly centred in the Himalayas, the west coast, and Central India.

FLASH FLOOD HOTSPOTS IN INDIA

Researchers analysed sub-basins (part of large river basins) to identify flash flood hotspots

EXTREMELY PRONE: Sub-basins in Brahmaputra, Narmada, Tapi, Mahanadi, Brahmani, and West Coast River basins	
HIGHLY SUSCEPTIBLE: Parts of the Godavari, Ganga, Mahi, and Indus River basins	
Note: Flash flood susceptibility varies widely within the major river basins	

It has also revealed that several regions in the country have become more vulnerable to flash floods than before, due to soaring temperatures.

Driving factors of flash floods

According to the study, only 25% of the flash floods that occur in India are directly caused by extreme precipitation. The rest of them are a result of a combination of extreme rainfall and the condition of the soil before precipitation.

If the ground is already wet before a heavy rainfall event, chances are the soil would be saturated or near saturated, which can lead to instant runoff. This increases the risk of flash floods.

The study also notes that an extreme rainfall event leads to immediate flash floods (within six hours) only 23% of the time. Usually, it is the prolonged (multi-day) low-intensity and high-intensity rainfall which results in these floods.

At the most vulnerable regions, other factors also contribute to flash flood events. For instance, in the west coast and Central India, flash floods are driven by the high flashiness of sub-basins (part of large river basins). This means that their water levels quickly reach the peak after a heavy rainfall event. Prevailing soil conditions play a crucial role in how rapidly water infiltrates a sub-basin.

In the Himalayas, geomorphological factors — such as steep slopes, and high relief (when a landscape has a significant difference between a high point and a low point) — contribute to flash floods.

“Flash flood susceptibility varies widely within the major river basins. For instance, the sub-basins located in the Himalayan regions and the southern parts of the Ganga River basin are highly prone to flash floods, whereas the sub-basins in the central regions of the Ganga River basin exhibit low flash flood susceptibility. This variation in flash flood susceptibility underscores the influence of terrain and climatic factors on flood risk within different parts of the same river basin,” the study said.

Role of climate change

With rising global temperatures, extreme weather events such as flash floods are increasing in frequency and intensity across the world. That is because for every 1 degree Celsius rise in average temperature, the atmosphere can hold about 7% more moisture, leading to more intense precipitation, which exacerbates the risk of flash floods.

In India, between 1981 and 2020, the yearly frequency of extreme precipitation events doubled during the pre-monsoon season. Extreme rainfall during the monsoon, post-monsoon, and winter seasons has increased by 56%, 40%, and 12.5% respectively, according to the study. Note that more than 75% of the total flash flood events that occurred between 1980 and 2018 took place during the monsoon season (June-September).

There has been a notable increase in flash flood events since 1995, with most of them occurring in the Brahmaputra River basin, followed by the Ganga and Krishna River basins, the study said.

What needs to be done?

The findings indicate that authorities need to adopt region-specific adaptation strategies, which are based on factors such as topography and soil conditions, and not just extreme rainfall events. This can help in developing better early warning systems, targeted disaster preparedness, and long-term adaptation plans, according to the researchers.

Authorities also need to identify new potential flash flood hotspots and take measures like building climate-resilient infrastructure to limit the impact of the extreme weather event.

With rising temperatures and changing rainfall patterns, there is a requirement to enhance land-use and flood planning as well.

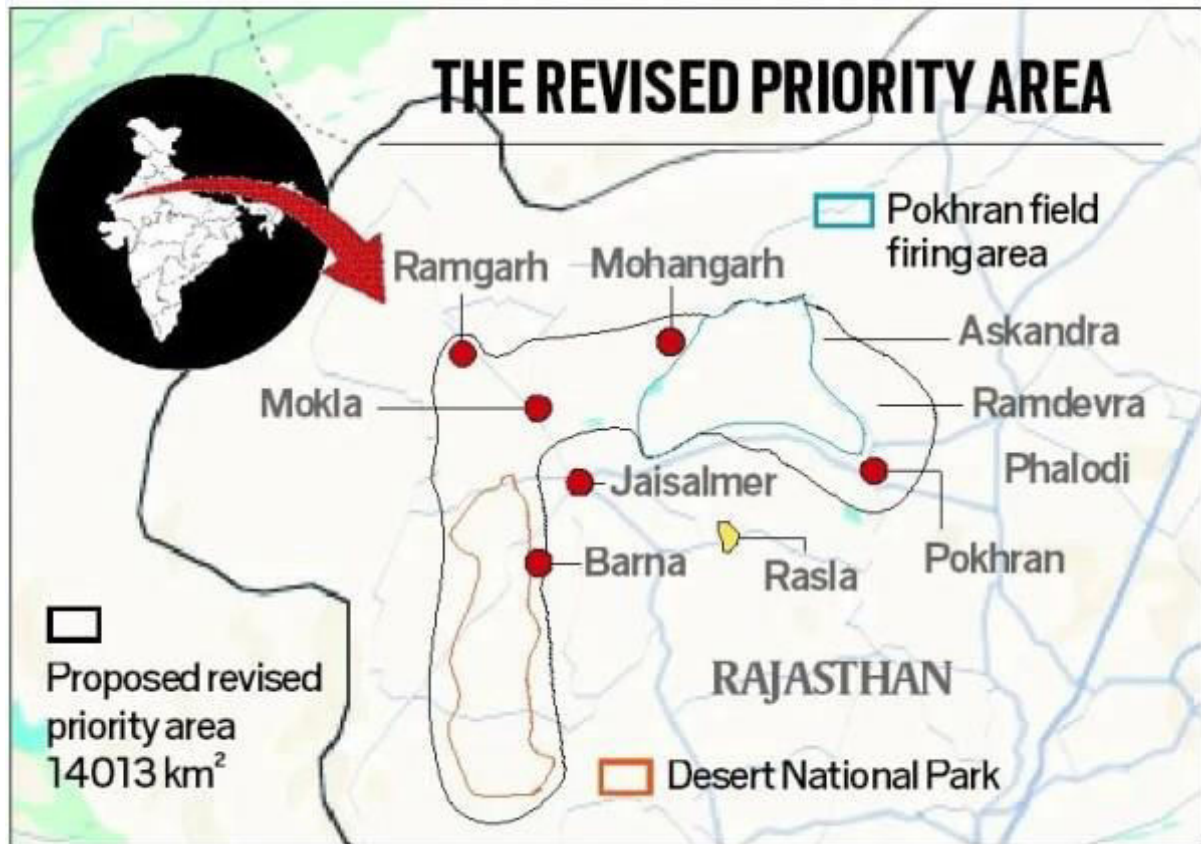
Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Disaster Management

Source: Indian Express

2. Why an SC-appointed panel is battling for ‘power corridors’ for the Great Indian Bustard in Rajasthan and Gujarat

Introduction

A committee appointed by the Supreme Court has proposed dedicated corridors for renewable power lines in Rajasthan and Gujarat in order to protect the Great Indian Bustard (GIB). The committee has suggested that existing lines should be rerouted, and some stretches should be sent underground.



The seven-member committee was set up in March 2024 to suggest steps for the conservation of the critically endangered bird while balancing it with the growth of renewable energy infrastructure in its habitat.

The committee has submitted its recommendations to the Supreme Court, which will take them up next month.

Power lines and GIB habitat

The matter before the top court seeks to bring the GIB and Lesser Florican back from the brink, and to protect them from the danger of collisions with power lines, which contributes to the decline of their population.

Fewer than 150 GIB individuals survive in the wild. Over the years, its population has declined due to hunting, habitat loss, and poaching of their eggs by humans, as well as the preying on their eggs by predators. The birds also have a naturally low rate of reproduction.

Over the past decade, the expansion of renewable energy projects in the bustard habitat has increased the threat. The birds' poor frontal vision and heavy bodies result in their crashing fatally into power transmission lines. The Wildlife Institute of India (WII) has estimated that the deaths of even 4-5 birds by electrocution every year can lead to the extinction of the GIB within 20 years.

Committee and its mandate

In an order passed on March 21, 2024, a three-judge SC Bench led by then Chief Justice of India D Y Chandrachud modified an April 2021 order of the court that had imposed blanket directions to bury overhead power lines underground in more than 80,000 sq km in Rajasthan and Gujarat.

Both orders were passed in a long-running petition filed by retired bureaucrat M K Ranjitsinh, who has sought protection for GIBs from power lines.

In its 2024 order, the SC noted that the area in which the undergrounding of lines had been directed had great potential for wind and solar energy, which if allowed to remain untapped, would require more coal for power generation.

The Bench said the decision to send overhead lines underground fell in the realm of environmental policy, and tasked the expert committee with finding a balance between conservation of the GIB and plans for renewable energy development.

Specifically, it asked the panel to determine the “scope, feasibility, and extent” of overhead and underground power lines in GIB priority areas, and to suggest GIB conservation measures. It also asked the committee to engage with stakeholders including environmental bodies, wildlife biologists, local communities, and the energy industry.

Committee’s suggestions

In its 2024 order, the SC had recorded the reasons for the Centre’s reservations on the large-scale burying of power lines: taking higher voltage lines, especially 60 kV and more, underground would constrain their maintenance, and could lead to transmission losses, reduce efficiency, and pose safety hazards.

The committee is learnt to have proposed “power corridors” in Rajasthan and Gujarat through which most lines to evacuate power from existing and planned renewable energy projects would pass, reducing the criss-crossing of lines.

It has also proposed that some stretches of existing lines, based on their voltage and proximity to prime GIB habitats or the threats they pose to the birds, should be rerouted via this designated corridor.

These stretches are proposed to be identified by a joint committee of the forest department of the state concerned, the Central Electricity Authority, and WII, based on ecological and technical feasibility.

It is learnt that in Rajasthan, the corridor has been proposed to the south of the Desert National Park to provide east-west connectivity across the ‘priority area’, which is earmarked for focused conservation of the GIB. The width of the power corridor has been kept at 5 km. Power projects are planned to the west of the bustard priority area.

In Gujarat, two powerline corridors have been proposed – one will aid evacuation of power from wind farms in the Kutch coastal belt; the other is meant for a critical high-voltage 400 kV power line planned in the northern part of the Kutch GIB habitat.

Other mitigation measures

Other measures such as insulating high voltage lines and burying specific sections underground have been proposed.

The committee selected some lines based on the SC's 2021 order and has ordered to bury them underground on an urgent basis. In Rajasthan, 80 km of lines near bustard enclosures and sites of past bustard deaths have been identified for immediate undergrounding. Certain sections in Gujarat too have been identified for undergrounding, insulation, or rerouting.

The SC had recorded three types of GIB habitat areas – priority areas, potential areas and additional important areas – based on reports of Wildlife Institute of India and state forest departments.

The committee has proposed a revised priority area of 14,013 sq km in Rajasthan – retaining the original 13,163-sq-km priority area and adding 850 sq km from the 5,977 sq km of 'additional important areas'. The remaining area has been excluded, given fewer GIB sightings and its importance for future transmission of power.

In Gujarat, the committee has proposed a revised priority area of 740 sq km – up from the existing 500 sq km of priority area. It has proposed that northern parts of priority areas should be excluded due to the fragmentation of the GIB habitat.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Environment & Biodiversity

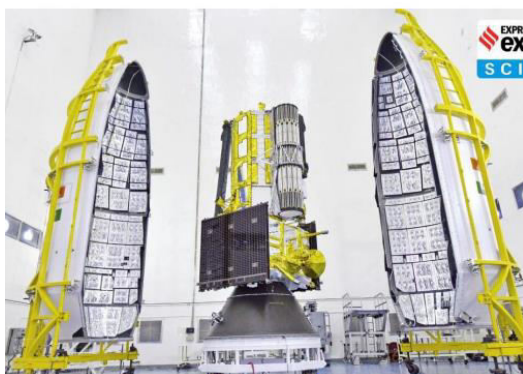
Source: Indian Express

3. Why the launch of NASA-ISRO joint satellite NISAR matters

Introduction

Earth observation satellites are fairly common these days, with countries routinely deploying them in space for a variety of purposes. But the satellite that the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) is going to launch on Wednesday evening is anything but routine. It is a satellite that has been in the making for more than one and a half decades. And it is the first time that ISRO and its US counterpart, NASA (National Aeronautics and Space Administration), have jointly built a satellite, which is why it has got the name NISAR (NASA-ISRO Synthetic Aperture Radar).

Why the launch of NASA-ISRO joint satellite NISAR matters



NISAR is special for several other reasons. Once deployed, it will be the most powerful Earth observation satellite in space, producing data and high-resolution images that will facilitate research in a variety of fields. It is the first satellite to be mounted with two Synthetic Aperture Radars (SARs), operating in different frequency bands, a technological feat that has made it immensely powerful and useful. It also happens to be the most expensive satellite ever.

Double SARs

NISAR's uniqueness is the two SARs that it is fitted with. Radars — the familiar large dish-shaped antennas — are instruments that send out signals in the non-visible spectrum of electromagnetic waves, typically microwaves or radio waves, and collect the signals that bounce back from objects. The returning signals are then analysed to glean a variety of information about the object, like its distance from the radar, its velocity if it is moving, and composition, texture or other properties of the object. In general, the larger the size of the dish antenna, the greater the amount of information collected from returning signals.

Imaging radars use the returning signals to create an image of the object. SARs are a special kind of imaging radar that are deployed in space where large dish-like radars, similar to those installed on the ground, cannot be sent. SARs make up for this limitation with sophisticated technologies and algorithms to mimic the power and resolution of large ground-based radars.

NISAR's antenna of 12-metre diameter, for example, is capable of producing images whose resolution would be comparable to those produced by a simple ground-based antenna 20 km in diameter, according to information put out by NASA.

A number of SAR-mounted satellites are currently deployed in space. ISRO's RISAT (Radar Imaging Satellites) series of satellites, which have now been renamed to the EOS series, carry SAR. Some of ISRO's other Earth observation satellites, like Cartosat or Oceansat, do not use SAR.

Unprecedented imagery

The power of NISAR comes from two SARs, one operating in the L-band frequency and the other in the S-band. Together, they are designed to capture complementary sets of images for the same location at the same time, thereby providing such a detailed view of the Earth that has not been possible before. Both the L-band and S-band radars can see through clouds, smoke, rain or fog, thus getting an unfiltered view of the Earth across all weathers and through day and night.

Their different wavelengths then enable them to capture different kinds of details on the surface. The L-band SAR, which uses higher wavelength microwaves, can better penetrate tree cover or vegetation, and even sand or ice. It is, therefore, able to capture minute details of surface undulations, and can see through dense forest cover, for example, to map the ground below and measure tree trunk biomass, which is very useful for estimating carbon stock.

The S-band SAR, which has a shorter wavelength, is unable to go much deeper, but is good for capturing the larger features, such as crop fields or water bodies. It can observe crops like soybean, corn, sugarcane and provide information on their different growth and maturity stages. This observation will especially focus on India.

Whereas, the L-band SAR will help observe tall trees and thick forests, with observation focus on regions along the Western US, the Amazon rainforest, Antarctica, Greenland and northern Alaska. Working together, the S-band radar can get good details of tree canopy cover, while the L-band SAR can penetrate below to map what is hidden underneath. This gives a very comprehensive picture of the area being watched.

This kind of imagery is not possible by integrating data from S-band and L-band SARs on two separate satellites, for example. The satellites would not be looking at the same place simultaneously, and the changes that happen in between their observations would be missed. On NISAR, the two SARs are designed to work synchronously and complement each other. The satellite will generate 80 TB of data every day, which is three times more than any other existing Earth observation system.

Putting two SARs on the same satellite was a major engineering challenge, which was the main reason for NISAR taking a long time to get ready. The two radars require their specific hardware, and integrating their signal processing capabilities without one of them interfering with the other needed sophisticated engineering.

India-US collaboration

It also drove up the costs significantly. That is the reason why a collaboration between two leading space agencies made sense. The L-band SAR, the 12-metre antenna, and many other components and systems, including GPS control, have come from NASA, while ISRO has contributed the S-band SAR,

the rocket and spacecraft and its sub-systems, and will carry out the launch. Both NASA and ISRO will handle the mission operations from their respective ground stations. In terms of total investment, NASA has contributed about \$1.16 billion, while ISRO has pitched in with \$90 million.

The concept for a NISAR-like mission emerged in 2007 when a US committee had recommended a space mission to study how changes in land, ice or vegetation cover were taking place. The mission was supposed to carry out surface deformation monitoring to facilitate studies of earthquakes, landslides and volcanoes, apart from making observations that will help the study of climate change, global carbon cycle, changes in vegetation, biomass and ice-cover.

NASA began working on the project in 2008. ISRO came into the picture four years later, when it identified science studies and applications that were complementary to the primary objective of the mission. NASA and ISRO had collaborated earlier — there was a NASA payload on ISRO's Chandrayaan-1 — but never jointly developed or executed a space mission. The two agencies signed a deal on NISAR in 2014, and have been engaged in developing this mission since then.

The NISAR launch comes at a time when the two countries have stepped into a more strategic partnership on space. India has signed on to the Artemis Accords, a sort of US-led alliance on space exploration that is closely linked to NASA's Artemis programme seeking a return of humans to the Moon. NASA and ISRO have also worked out a strategic framework for human spaceflight cooperation, one of the first outcomes of which was the participation of Shubhansu Shukla in the NASA-facilitated Axiom-4 private mission to the International Space Station.

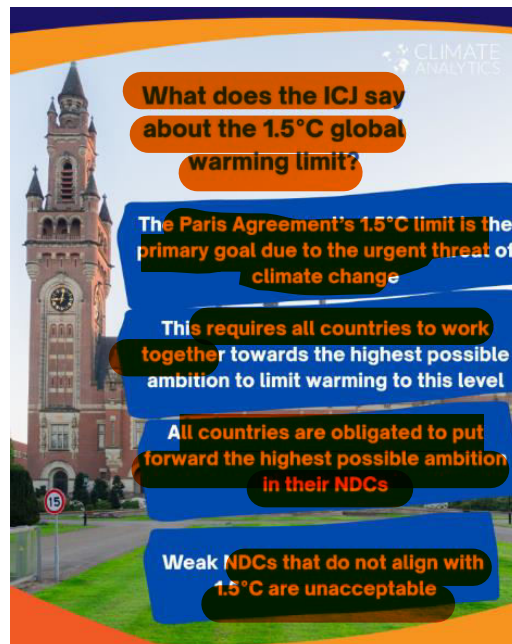
4. What did the ICJ say on climate obligations?

Introduction

The advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) on the obligations of countries to reduce anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions, and the legal consequences of the harm occasioned by their failure to meet these obligations, on July 23 has been the subject of much discussion. While it is a welcome affirmation of the multilateral climate regime at a time when the U.S appears to have damaged it through its withdrawal from the Paris Agreement, it also raises questions on, inter alia, its interpretation of the temperature goals of the Paris Agreement and its occlusion of the development imperatives of the global South.

How has it upheld the case for the global South?

The ICJ's opinion has several elements that the global South, including India, should be able to welcome. First, the Court has emphasised the significance of the totality of the climate regime, including the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the Kyoto Protocol and the Paris Agreement. This is in sharp contrast to the view of developed countries that have argued for sidelining the Convention and dismissing the Protocol, stating that the Paris Agreement had become the sole binding instrument of the multilateral climate regime. Across several paragraphs in its opinion, the Court has set out how the obligations of countries, especially those of developed nations, flow from various articles of the UNFCCC, particularly the provision of extending climate finance, technology transfer and capacity building to developing countries by



developed nations. In underlining the foundational role of the UNFCCC, the Court has also reiterated the significance of the Convention's Annex-I and Annex-II, noting that the developed countries listed therein will continue to have additional obligations compared to the rest of the world. This is a firm rebuff, not only to the governments of the global North, but also to a vocal section of climate academia, that had proclaimed the end of Annex-based differentiation since the Paris accord was signed.

In yet another affirmation of the global South's perspective, the ICJ opinion identifies the principle of Common But Differentiated Responsibilities and Respective Capabilities (CBDR&RC), drawing on Article 3 of the Convention, as the "core guiding principle for determining the implementation of the climate change treaties". Further in para 152, it affirms universality to the CBDR&RC principle, noting that it "guides the interpretation of obligations under international environmental law beyond its express articulation in different treaties", opening up the possibility for extending the principle to arenas like biodiversity.

Additionally, the ICJ's opinion notes the qualification to differentiation between developed and developing nations introduced by the Paris Agreement with the addition of the phrase, "and in the light of national circumstances" to the term CBDR&RC. The Court views the qualification as a nuance which points out that what constitutes a 'developed' or 'developing' nations is not static. This will undoubtedly be a bone of contention in further interpretations of this opinion.

What about the temperature goal?

While these reaffirmations of the fundamental principles and values of the climate regime are noteworthy there is also much in the opinion that conforms to the narrative that developed countries, allied with some of the small island states and a range of vulnerable developing countries, have attempted to build over the years in interpreting the Paris Agreement.

The opinion insists that the temperature target for limiting global warming as in Article 2.1 (a) of the Paris Agreement, no longer holds in defining the obligation of states. Article 2.1 clearly designates "well below 2 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels" as the primary goal, while "pursuing efforts to limit the temperature increase to 1.5 degrees C."

However, the Court argues that two paras from decisions of the 26th and 28th Conference of Parties of the UNFCCC, in which Parties have expressed agreement with the need to pursue efforts to limit temperature increase to 1.5 degrees Celsius, constitute an agreement among Parties to rewrite the temperature goal of the Paris Agreement itself. Hence, the opinion concludes, Parties' mitigation efforts must be aligned with collectively achieving the 1.5 degrees Celsius goal and not the range provided in the Agreement. This is a strange conclusion considering that the 1.5 degrees Celsius threshold is likely to be passed in a very few years. Nor does the opinion engage itself with the consequences of the breach of the 1.5 degrees Celsius goal. Even to lay opinion, it appears very odd that decisions taken in implementing an agreement should be interpreted as modifying the terms of the agreement itself.

Much of the Court's enthusiasm for the 1.5 degrees Celsius target appears to stem from uncritical cherry-picking of a few headline statements from the Sixth Assessment Cycle reports (AR6) of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). The Court has not considered it necessary that the IPCC reports themselves should be subject to scrutiny through the lens of equity. This is evident when it uncritically cites the IPCC's global target of GHG emissions reduction of 43% below 2020 levels by 2030 and 65% by 2035 for limiting temperature rise to 1.5 degrees Celsius. The recently concluded annual climate meeting of the UNFCCC held at Bonn, Germany, itself has now acknowledged the lack of equity and CBDR&RC in such projections.

Has the Court broken new ground on enforcing obligations?

Despite the extensive discussion on the obligations of states, in the context of climate laws and more generally in international law, the **opinion does not articulate a more stringent framework of enforcement**. In direct continuity with the established interpretation of the Paris Agreement by the global North, it holds that the provision of means of implementation as well as domestic mitigation action are only obligations of conduct (this means a duty which is to be performed towards achieving an outcome rather than guaranteeing the outcome itself). Only procedural aspects of the Paris Agreement, such as the timely and periodic submission of Nationally Determined Contributions are held to constitute stronger obligations of result. The opinion argues that even as obligations of conduct, the requirements on countries to meet their commitments can be sufficiently stringent. However, it depends on suitable courts with the requisite jurisdiction to enforce them and is contingent on the circumstances of every individual case.

At best, the Court's opinion may be welcomed for reiterating the original intent of the Paris Agreement, in the face of the growing reluctance of developed nations to meet their obligations, but it breaks no significant new ground in this regard. Given the lack of appetite for climate action in the global North, and their opposition to even these weak obligations, the reiteration by the Court is undoubtedly of some value.

What are some of the gaps in the opinion?

The **most striking lacuna** in the opinion is its **near-total sidelining** of the **twin challenge that global warming poses to the development of the global South**, that is extensively discussed even in the IPCC. On the one hand southern nations will be increasingly unable to meet their **energy needs for rapid poverty eradication and sustainable growth in the absence of adequate carbon space**, while on the other hand low-carbon development requires **finance and technology on a scale that remains out of reach**.

As Judge Xue Hanqin notes, in concluding her separate opinion, "the Advisory Opinion fails to point out that, for peoples and individuals of the present and future generations affected by the adverse effects of climate change, the ultimate solution to guarantee them a clean, healthy and sustainable climate lies in a supportive and open international economic system that would lead to sustainable economic growth and development in all states based on international co-operation between developed and developing states."

With the opinion falling short on these two key issues for the global South, its **qualification that equity and CBDR&RC would introduce no new obligations but only guide the interpretation and implementation of climate treaties**, should be a matter of concern for developing countries. Much of the enthusiasm in global civil society for the opinion, stems from the prospect of **further litigation at the national or regional level, with the opinion allowing the possibility that affected countries such as small island states could claim reparation or compensation**. However, the opinion also makes clear that these would require independently establishing attribution, "wrongfulness" and causation regarding the actions of Parties held responsible for harm, though it opens the door to their more expansive interpretation.

On the issue of concerted global climate action though, and at the climate negotiations, it is unlikely that the advisory opinion would substantially move the needle, reproducing existing fault lines rather than overcoming them. As several of the separate opinions from various judges themselves indicate, the opinion may represent a missed opportunity rather than a game-changing intervention in the global climate discourse.

5th August

1. Why Kamchatka in Russia is especially vulnerable to massive earthquakes

Kamchatka Earthquake Explained



The earthquake off the coast of Russia's Kamchatka peninsula that has triggered tsunami warnings in Japan and the west coast of the United States and evacuations in Hawaii is one of the largest on record.

The 8.8 magnitude quake is the world's biggest since the 2011 earthquake off the coast of Japan that generated a 50-foot tsunami wave and led to the Fukushima

nuclear plant disaster. (More on the 'magnitude' of an earthquake below)

Kamchatka, an especially vulnerable region

A number of mega earthquakes have originated in the region around Kamchatka peninsula, a 1,250-km-long piece of land in Russia's far east that juts into the northern Pacific Ocean. Major earthquakes were recorded in 2020, 2006, 1959, 1952, and 1923, almost all of which also caused tsunamis. There are also records of earthquake-tsunamis in 1841 and 1737, even though not many details of those events survive.

Plate tectonics of the Kamchatka region

The southern portion of the peninsula sits above the area where the Pacific plate is subducting, or sliding below, the Okhotsk microplate to its north. Off the coast of Kamchatka, on the ocean floor lies the Kuril-Kamchatka Trench, formed as a result of this subduction. The trench is estimated to be almost 10 km deep at its deepest point.

These tectonic activities make the region seismically very volatile. As the Pacific plate moves under the Okhotsk plate at a rate of approximately 86 mm per year, ruptures along the megathrust boundary trigger periodic earthquakes and North Pacific Ocean tsunamis.

Part of the Pacific Ocean Ring of Fire

The Kamchatka peninsula region is part of the so-called Ring of Fire, which runs along the edges of the Pacific Ocean, which sees frequent and intense volcanic and seismic activity.

The Ring of Fire is shaped like a semicircle or horseshoe, and stretches for nearly 40,250 kilometres, tracing the meeting points of numerous tectonic plates, including the Eurasian, North American, Juan de Fuca, Cocos, Caribbean, Nazca, Antarctic, Indian, Australian, Philippine, and other smaller plates, which all encircle the large Pacific Plate.

The Ring touches more than 15 countries including the US, Indonesia, Mexico, Japan, Canada, Guatemala, Russia, Chile, Peru, and the Philippines.

What lies beneath in the Ring of Fire

The Ring of Fire witnesses so many earthquakes due to constant processes of tectonic plates sliding past, colliding into, or moving above or below each other. As noted above, it is seismic activity of this kind that triggered the July 30 Kamchatka earthquake and consequent tsunami.

As the edges of these tectonic plates are quite rough, they get stuck with one another, while the rest of the plate keeps moving. An earthquake occurs when the plate has moved far enough and the edges unstuck on one of the faults.

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The existence of volcanoes in the Ring of Fire is also due to the movement of tectonic plates. Many of these volcanoes have been formed through subduction, which, as explained above, is the process by which a heavier plate slides under the lighter plate as they collide, creating a deep trench.

Measuring the magnitude of an earthquake

The 8.8 magnitude earthquake of Wednesday qualifies as a “great” earthquake (of magnitude more than 8), only one of which is generally expected in the world in a year. It is the sixth-largest earthquake on the record, according to the US Geological Survey (USGS).

For an increase of 1 (whole number) in the magnitude of an earthquake, the seismic energy that is released increases by about 31.6 times, says USGS. This means that the 8.8 magnitude earthquake of Wednesday produces 31.6 times greater energy than an earthquake of magnitude 7.8 would have produced.

For perspective, the earthquake that struck central Myanmar this March, killing around 1,700 people, was of 7.7 magnitude. The strongest earthquake ever recorded was of magnitude 9.5, which struck off the coast of Chile in 1960, and killed more than 1,600 people, according to USGS.

The ‘magnitude’ is a quantitative measure of the scale of an earthquake. This differs from ‘intensity’, which is a qualitative measure of the shaking at a given location.

The motion of the ground during an earthquake is measured by an instrument called seismograph. The device is mounted on the Earth’s surface, so that when the ground shakes, the entire unit shakes with it, except for the mass on a spring. The recording device on the mass records the relative motion between itself and the rest of the instrument, according to USGS.

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2. Communal agenda is behind the arrest of nuns for human trafficking

What is the issue?

The arrest of two Catholic nuns by the Chhattisgarh police on charges of human trafficking and forced conversion is another instance of growing religion-related harassment. Keralite Sisters Preeti Mary and Vandana Francis, from the order of the Assisi Sisters of Mary Immaculate, were escorting three tribal girls to an Agra convent for jobs when they were apprehended from Durg railway station on July 25 after a Bajrang Dal member filed a complaint. They have been booked under Section 4 of the Chhattisgarh Freedom of Religion Act, 1968 (conversion) and Section 143 of the BNS (trafficking).



Different views

While Chief Minister Vishnu Deo Sai insisted that the nuns were engaging in “human trafficking and conversion... through inducement”, the kin of the girls have since clarified that there was no forceful conversion and they had given their consent to be taken to Agra. The arrests have led to condemnation across the political spectrum against communal vigilantism. Leaders across political lines have protested. Ruling Left Democratic Front and Opposition United Democratic Front MPs from Kerala held dharnas outside Parliament, and the Catholic Church, through its official mouthpiece, Deepika, and other church organisations too denounced the arrests.

Past instances

This is not the first time that a proselytisation row has erupted involving Christian missionaries. Last year marked 25 years of the brutal killing of Australian missionary Graham Staines and his two minor sons in Odisha. Despite the fact that the Constitution provides citizens the right to practise and propagate the religion of their choice, several States, including U.P., M.P., Chhattisgarh, Rajasthan, Arunachal Pradesh, Jharkhand and Odisha, have misused provisions of anti-conversion laws that were intended only to prevent conversion through force or fraud or allurement. These laws are often used to criminalise interfaith marriages by labelling conversion by marriage as unlawful.

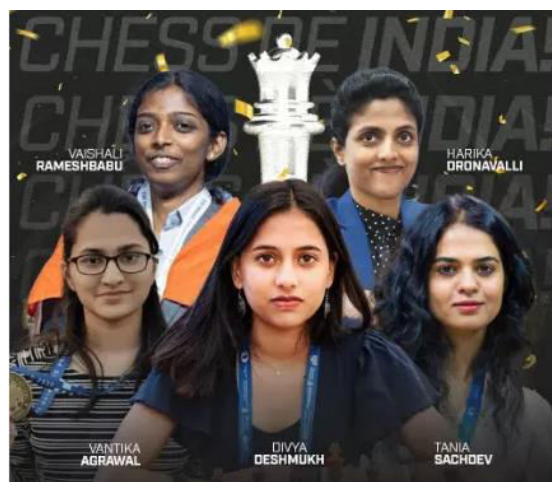
Religion based conflicts

In tribal-dominated regions such as Jharkhand, there is another tension brewing between Adivasis and both Christian tribals and Hindus. While Hindutva groups with the RSS's backing are exhorting tribals to wake up to their Hindu roots, tribal outfits are resisting this and demanding a separate Sarna religious code. Tribal outfits allege that the Hindu groups are doing the same thing as Christian missionaries to subsume their distinct culture. In Chhattisgarh, which has around a 2% Christian population according to the 2011 Census, there is also a debate on whether tribals who are converting to Christianity should be delisted from the Scheduled Tribes. In such a churn, the onus is on political, religious and social organisations to focus on economic development, jobs and welfare. Government machineries should be used to enforce rights, guaranteed by the Constitution, not violate them.

3. Indian women are catching up with the men in world chess

Rising performance of women

Divya Deshmukh's astonishing performance at the women's chess World Cup has put the limelight back on Indian chess, yet again. Rarely does a week pass without an Indian player achieving a significant feat in some corner of the world. Still, what Divya did at Batumi, Georgia, on Monday, deserves attention. The 19-year-old from Nagpur won one of the most prestigious tournaments, coming through a gruelling knockout competition, outwitting rivals much stronger and more experienced. She had started out as the 15th seed.



That she defeated another Indian, the fourth-seeded Koneru Humpy and reigning World rapid chess champion, in the final, underlined the country's domination of the event. Two other Indians, D. Harika and R. Vaishali, had also advanced to the quarterfinals.

Comparison with men chess

The great show in Georgia does not make India a superpower in women's chess, though. That honour belongs to China, home to the last three women's World champions. Though the Indian women, like the men, won the Chess Olympiad last year at Budapest, China has more depth. India may now boast the world's best young talent among men, in the form of World champion D. Gukesh, World No. 4 R. Praggnanandhaa and No. 5 Arjun Erigaisi among others, but the bench in women's chess is not all that strong.

Women Chess status

Divya's — and India's — stunning success should no doubt inspire young girls to take up chess as a career. The huge media attention that Divya has received — she has been featured on the front pages of newspapers, became breaking news on TV and got plenty of traction online — could encourage even more parents to make their daughters learn chess. And India needs more girls to move the pieces on the chessboard. Though the current Indian lineup looks good enough to retain the Olympiad gold next year, it is imperative that the country needs to spot and nurture fresh young talent. There are a few players such as Vantika Agrawal and B. Savitha Shri, but in the world's top 100, there are only eight Indians, while China has 14, including the top three.

What needs to be done?

India's chess administrators have to make some long-term plans for women's chess, and should implement them quickly. After identifying a fairly large group of promising girls, they need to be properly trained and provided excellent coaches. Only few families can afford the highly expensive trainers and the travel to Europe, from where the Indian players usually make their norms for their Grandmaster or International Master titles. There should also be more such tournaments in India.

4. Canada could join UK, France in recognising Palestine: The significance

Introduction

Canada announced on Wednesday (July 30) that it would formally recognise Palestine in the United Nations General Assembly in September. The statement comes after Britain made a similar announcement on July 29, with its recognition conditional on a ceasefire. France and Malta have also said it will recognise Palestine.

Canada to recognise Palestine state in September, following France & UK

Source: CHIN | 31 July 2025 | Picture: Collected



Palestine is facing a severe humanitarian crisis that has led to massive starvation. Canada Prime Minister Mark Carney has blamed this on Israel's refusal to give international organisations control of aid in Gaza. UK's Keir Starmer, meanwhile, said the UK would support Palestinian statehood in September unless Israel halts its military campaign, abandons annexation plans in the West Bank, and engages in peace efforts to establish a two-state solution. This decision marks a major shift in UK foreign policy.

As many as 147 out of 193 UN member countries recognise the state of Palestine at present. The 80th session of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA 80) will open on September 9, in the US.

What does statehood mean for Palestine?

For Palestine, achieving statehood would mean international recognition as an independent and sovereign country. Currently, Palestine holds the status of a "Permanent Observer State" at the United Nations. This allows Palestine to participate in debates and UN sessions but not to vote on resolutions.

To become a full UN Member State, Palestine would need a recommendation from the UN Security Council, followed by a two-thirds majority vote in the General Assembly. However, any of the five permanent members (P5) of the Security Council (US, UK, France, Russia, and China) can veto the application.

A US veto blocked Palestine's last bid for full UN membership in April 2024. While the 2012 upgrade to observer status was seen as progress, full recognition would give Palestine greater diplomatic and legal standing in international affairs and further its pursuit of a two-state solution.

How many states recognise Palestine as of 2025?

As of March 2025, 147 out of the 193 UN member states (roughly 75%) recognise the State of Palestine. The recognition movement gained momentum following the intensification of the situation in Gaza and growing international outrage over the humanitarian crisis.

In 2024, a group of UN experts urged all member nations to recognise Palestine in a bid to bring about a ceasefire in Gaza. This had come a week after Spain, Norway, and Ireland recognised Palestine.

Most nations in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East (including India) have long recognised Palestine. In contrast, several Western countries have not. The United States, Japan, South Korea, and Australia are among those that still withhold formal recognition.

In Europe, while France and the UK recently announced they will recognise Palestine in September in hopes of promoting peace, countries like Belgium and Germany are yet to do so.

In a post on X, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu responded to the U.K.'s decision, saying: "Starmer rewards Hamas's monstrous terrorism & punishes its victims."

Despite this opposition, the growing number of recognitions signals a shift in global opinion, with many countries increasingly aligning with the call for Palestinian statehood as a step toward resolving the conflict.

Why is the UK's recognition of Palestinian statehood important?

The UK's decision to recognise Palestine as a state holds immense political and symbolic importance as it marks a significant shift in British foreign policy. The UK would become the second G7 nation (after France) to recognise Palestine, followed by Canada being the third, putting additional diplomatic pressure on Israel.

The timing also matters. The announcement comes in the wake of public outrage over the humanitarian crisis in Gaza, with images of starving children sparking global condemnation. By linking statehood recognition to a ceasefire and progress toward peace, the UK is using its diplomatic clout to incentivise negotiations.

Britain's historical role adds further weight to this decision. The 1917 Balfour Declaration, in which Britain supported the establishment of a "national home for the Jewish people" in Palestine, played a key role in shaping the modern Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Many Palestinians view the declaration as the beginning of their displacement and suffering, culminating in the Nakba of 1948.

If the UK proceeds with recognition, the United States would become the only permanent member of the UN Security Council (P5) not to do so. That isolation could further challenge the US's position as an "impartial mediator" in Middle Eastern peace talks.

6th August

1. How Trump's 25% tariffs announcement could impact future India-US trade negotiations

Tariffs on Indian imports 2025

US President Donald Trump's announcement of a 25 per cent tariff on Indian imports, along with a penalty for procuring military equipment and energy from Russia, comes barely a day before the intended deadline to conclude agreements. It has key consequences.

One, it puts India at a disadvantage in comparison to competitors. Two, it put the onus back on the Indian side to fast-track its negotiations for an interim deal with the US. Indications are that the outer limit for a deal, currently pegged at around October from New Delhi's perspective, might need to be brought forward.

What Do Trump's 25% Tariffs Mean For India?



China angle

What complicates the equation for India is that the Chinese are at an advanced stage of negotiations towards a deal, which could have a favourable tariff rate and potential waivers on secondary tariffs, which include the tariff on account of Russian oil imports and the proposed 10 per cent BRICS tariff.

Though Trump did not specify the rate of penalty for India on account of Russian oil and defence imports, earlier statements made by Trump indicate that it could be to the tune of 100 per cent.

This way, India stands to potentially lose the US tariff advantage vis-a-vis China at least till the time a deal is struck, even if Beijing, too, faces the same penalty for importing from Russia. Beijing does stand to have a first-mover advantage as it has already wrapped up its negotiations ahead of India with the US. A final China deal, however, is still elusive.

However, some experts said that Trump's charges regarding non-tariff barriers by India are unlikely to stand up to scrutiny as India's tariffs are WTO compliant.

At par with many other nations

Think tank Global Trade Research Initiative (GTRI) said that by refusing to cross its red lines, particularly on agriculture, India has helped avoid "the trap of a one-sided deal". "India's tariffs are WTO-compliant, non-tariff barriers are common globally, and discounted Russian oil has helped India manage inflation during global volatility...India is not alone; over 90 countries face similar US pressure. A deal may still emerge, but only on fair terms. For now, India's principled stand has avoided the trap of a one-sided deal, and that's a success," GTRI said in a statement.

Trump had cut short a deadline for Moscow to make progress toward a Ukraine war peace deal or see its oil customers slapped with secondary tariffs of 100 per cent in 10-12 days. "So I think anyone who buys sanctioned Russian oil should be ready for this," US Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent had said.

China's stand

Chinese officials had responded saying China was a sovereign nation with energy needs, and oil purchases would be based on the country's internal policies, Bessent said. "The Chinese take their

sovereignty very seriously. We don't want to impede on their sovereignty, so they would like to pay a 100 per cent tariff," Bessent said.

China is the largest buyer of Russian oil, at about 2 million barrels per day, followed by India (just under 2 million a day) and Turkey. China had agreed to cut tariffs on US goods to 10 per cent from 125 per cent in May, while the US had agreed to lower tariffs on Chinese goods to 30 per cent from 145 per cent.

Deadline for tariff crossed

The Trump administration had set a deadline of August 1 to wrap up agreements with the US President having threatened tariffs of up to 25 per cent on Indian imports if the elusive bilateral trade agreement between the two countries is not in place by that date.

"They are going to pay 25 per cent," Trump had said on Tuesday. US Trade Representative Jamieson Greer had told CNBC on Monday that the trade agreement with India would need more discussion between the two countries.

Trump had, in April, set the tariff on Indian goods imported into the US at 26 per cent on April 2, before pausing his so-called "reciprocal" levies.

India deal

Given how talks between Indian and US negotiators have proceeded, an interim deal still seems distant and is unlikely to be clinched before September, with October a possible outer deadline.

Indications are a sixth round of talks between the two negotiating teams will take discussions forward in August.

For New Delhi, a tariff of 25 per cent is bad news, but something that policy circles seem to have already factored in. This rate essentially means going back to nearly the reciprocal tariff level, which was 26 per cent.

However, the penalty implies an additional setback for India. The resolve from the Indian side would be to push the interim deal in the meantime, to ensure that Indian goods manage a discounted headline tariff, as has been wrangled by other countries that have struck a deal over the last couple of weeks.

Without the BRICS levy and the penalty, India's 25 per cent compares reasonably well with countries such as Indonesia (19 per cent) and Vietnam (20-40 per cent) that have wrapped up deals, and could have had an advantage over the current levels of tariffs faced by China (30-34 per cent) and Bangladesh (35 per cent).

The equation changes when the additional levies are factored in, especially the one triggered by Russian purchase. There is no clarity yet on how that will be applied.

Once the interim deal is clinched, if the final US headline tariff on India ends up between 10 per cent and 15 per cent, the tariff points offered to the UK and Japan, respectively, New Delhi would have reasons to be satisfied.

The advantage starts to taper off once the tariff goes over 15 per cent and inches up closer to 20 per cent, as was offered to Vietnam. A trans-shipment clause, of the kind slapped on Vietnam which levies an additional 20 per cent tariff, could be a problem for India too, given that a lot of Indian exports

have inputs and intermediate goods in sectors such as pharma, engineering goods and electronics coming in from outside, including China.

Also, New Delhi will be closely looking for clarity on the final American duty offer on China, given its belief that Trump will maintain a tariff differential.

US and Chinese officials wrapped up two days of discussions in Stockholm on Tuesday, with no breakthrough announced. After the talks, China's top trade negotiator Li Chenggang declared that the two sides agreed to push for an extension of a 90-day tariff truce struck in mid-May, without specifying when and for how long this extension kicks in.

For Indian negotiators, extra tariffs on steel and aluminium, over and above the baseline, is an added complication, alongside the proposed BRICS tariff. Trump's insistence on zero duty access to the Indian markets, like in its deals with Vietnam and Indonesia, is also a problem for India.

New Delhi is, however, willing to offer concessions on high-value purchases that the US is keen to package as part of its tariff-setting exercise, like the way it got the EU and Japan to sign up for a commitment on investments and purchases of American goods. India may be open to purchasing three big-ticket items from the US: defence equipment, natural gas imports and nuclear reactors.

On specific sectors such as auto or consumer non-durables, India is likely to follow a quota system that progressively opens up market access over a span of multiple years, like it did in the UK deal signed last week.

Once the official level discussions wrap up by mid-August, there is a sense that a final call on the deal could come down to a conversation between the two leaders, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Trump.

This is especially so since it is Trump who is the trade negotiator-in-chief. For India, the best-case scenario would be to get a deal of some sort now, and then build on that in the future negotiations that could run into 2026, experts said. With Trump announcing the tariffs and penalties on India, that phone call could come in earlier.

Exporters struggle

Meanwhile, as the uncertainty continues, India's exporters are struggling to navigate the way forward because buyers in the US are not clear as to what the final tariff will be, and are consequently holding back orders.

The higher tariffs that the US has imposed on China means a number of Chinese manufacturers are now also rerouting shipments to Europe at throwaway prices, which is impacting India's exports to the EU as well. India, like other countries, had frontloaded shipments ahead of the reciprocal tariff deadline for the ongoing Spring-Summer season, but there is now a question mark over the orders for the Fall-Winter season from October to March.

The higher-than-anticipated US tariff rate could also dent India's growth prospects, economists said.

"When the US had initially imposed tariffs, we had lowered our forecast of India's GDP expansion to 6.2% for FY2026, presuming a tepid rise in exports and a delay in private capex. The tariff (and penalty) now proposed by the US is higher than what we had anticipated, and is therefore likely to pose a headwind to India's GDP growth. The extent of the downside will depend on the size of the penalties imposed," Aditi Nayar, Chief Economist, ICRA said

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Economics

Source: Indian Express

2. Why hotels in Mussoorie have to now register guests on a Govt portal

Introduction

Why hotels in Mussoorie
have to now register guests
on a Govt portal



Owners of hotels, guesthouses, and homestays in Mussoorie will now have to register their guests on an Internet portal run by the Uttarakhand Department of Tourism as part of measures to ensure that the fragile ecology of the region is not burdened beyond its 'carrying capacity' – which refers to the maximum number of individuals an ecosystem or specific area can sustainably support without degrading natural resources or causing significant environmental damage.

This directive is part of a suite of 19 preventive and remedial measures recommended in a 2023 report by a committee appointed by the National Green Tribunal (NGT) to protect the environment of the popular Himalayan tourist destination. On May 8, the tribunal

took note of the action taken based on the report in an affidavit by the state government, and pressed on the state to expedite the implementation of these steps.

Process of registration

"Registration of tourists should be done according to the carrying capacity of the area, especially the available parking space, guest room availability, etc. Tourists can be charged for visiting the Mussoorie area, and the payment can be utilised for managing waste and cleanliness," the 2023 report had said.

After dragging its feet for some time, the state Tourism Department began trials on the registration of tourists, which was one of the 19 recommendations, on Wednesday. A meeting was convened to apprise owners of hotels and homestays of the NGT order, district tourism development officer Brijendra Pandey said.

"We have given a live demo to the managers and owners on how to register their units in the system and fill in the data of the tourists. This registration will be carried out in real time when visitors check in," Pandey said.

Rising tourism pressure

Tourist arrivals in Mussoorie, which is around 320 km from Delhi and well connected by road and rail (till Dehradun), have been increasing steadily. From an estimated 1.5 lakh visitors in 1958, the number of tourists reached 3 lakh in 1966, and 8.5 lakh by 2000. In 2019, the last year before the Covid-19 pandemic, more than 30 lakh tourists visited the hill station.

These numbers have put great pressure on Mussoorie's physical infrastructure. As of 2023, the registered accommodation in the area included 303 hotels, 201 homestays, and six dharamshalas. All public and private parking together had space for only 1,240 vehicles, and the committee had suggested in 2023 that the number of tourist vehicles should be limited to this number.

The 2011 Census recorded the resident population of Mussoorie at 30,118. The 2023 report estimated this number would increase by 23% by 2037 and 52% by 2052. The hill station already suffers from a **shortage of water** – the 7.69 million litres per day supply from six pumping stations and six gravity sources by the Mussoorie Nagar Palika has to be augmented by water from the Yamuna Water Supply Scheme.

Fragile mountain zone

The hill station, located at an altitude of 2,005 metres above sea level in the foothills of the Garhwal Himalayas, is in **Seismic Zone IV**, one step below the most active Zone V.

A 2007 study had concluded that the highly jointed, fractured, and weathered carbonate rock mass, and the steep slopes and high water percolation into them, create ideal conditions for slope instability in the area.

Many buildings stand on slopes steeper than 40 degrees, and many are taller than the 12-metre height that is permissible under the Uttarakhand Building By-Laws and Regulation, 2001.

The NGT had earlier cited a **report by the Lal Bahadur Shastri National Academy of Administration on Mussoorie's carrying capacity in 2001**, which had **concluded that no further constructions were viable**. Dr Vikram Gupta, Scientist F at Wadia Institute of Himalayan Geology in Dehradun, had backed this finding, saying that the **limestone in Mussoorie was weak with microcracks**.

In 2023, following the **Joshimath land subsidence incident**, the **NGT had flagged similar risks to Mussoorie and surrounding areas**.

“Over-concretisation leads to landslides. The proposed tunnel below Mussoorie is dangerous. So is the proposed ropeway from Dehradun to Mussoorie. The ropeway and tunnel have damaged Joshimath. Traffic congestion adds to the burden on the mountain's road. Excessive building activities are beyond the capacity of Mussoorie,” it had said.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Environment & Biodiversity

Source: Indian Express

3. Special NIA court acquits all 7 accused in Malegaon bomb blast after 17 years

What did court say?

Almost 17 years after a bomb blast **killed six people** in the Maharashtra town of Malegaon, a **special court acquitted all seven accused, including former BJP MP Pragya Singh Thakur and Lieutenant Colonel Prasad Shrikant Purohit**, saying that the **prosecution had failed to prove its case**.

The judge said it was hard to establish the prosecution's claims of a conspiracy between the accused, adding that there was **no evidence to prove claims that an organisation named Abhinav Bharat, founded by Ms. Thakur and Colonel Purohit, had used funds it generated to execute the bomb blast**.

Malegaon blast



It was on September 29, 2008 — during the holy month of Ramzan and a day before the start of Navratri — that a bomb explosion rocked a Muslim-dominated area of Malegaon at around 9.35 p.m. The blast was allegedly caused by an improvised explosive device (IED) fitted to an LML Freedom motorcycle (MH 15 P 4572).

A case was first registered at the Azad Nagar Police Station and later taken over by the Anti-Terrorism Squad (ATS). As the probe intensified, the provisions of two stringent anti-terror and anti-gangster laws — the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act, 1967 (UAPA) and Maharashtra Control of Organised Crime Act, 1999 (MCOCA) — were invoked.

The ATS alleged that the blast was part of a wider criminal conspiracy orchestrated by members of Abhinav Bharat, termed as an “organised crime syndicate” active since 2003.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Governance

Source: The Hindu

4. What the ICJ ruling means for the Kyoto Protocol

Introduction

While defining the obligations of countries in the global fight against climate change, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) made a crucial clarification regarding the 1997 Kyoto Protocol and its validity in a landmark ruling last week. The ICJ has said the Kyoto Protocol not only continues to remain in force, but is also legally relevant, and that countries remain under a legal obligation to comply with its provisions.

The ICJ ruling is the first time that an authoritative assertion has been made on the legal status of the Kyoto Protocol in the post-Paris Agreement period. The common understanding so far has been that the Kyoto Protocol was replaced and superseded by the 2015 Paris Agreement. In other words, the Kyoto Protocol had ceased to exist, or at least became non-operational or defunct, once the Paris Agreement came into effect in 2016, or at the most when the Kyoto Protocol's second commitment period ended in 2020.

But the Kyoto Protocol was never terminated or abrogated by any process. The ICJ has now clarified that it continues to remain in force and has the status of international law.

What was the Kyoto Protocol?

The Kyoto Protocol, which was finalised in 1997 and came into effect in 2005, was the first legal instrument under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). The agreement sought to operationalise the provisions of the UNFCCC through specific climate actions from countries. It assigned specific targets to rich and developed countries to reduce their emissions in particular time frames, called commitment periods.

Developing countries did not have any such targets, and were encouraged to take “nationally appropriate” actions to help the fight against climate change. This was in keeping with the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities (CBDR-RC), one of the foundational tenets of international climate law. This principle, in effect, says while the whole world has a responsibility to take actions against climate change, the bulk of the responsibility lies with rich and developed countries. That is because these countries accounted for the overwhelming majority of the greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions in the last 150 years, which have caused climate change.

IMPLICATIONS FOR GLOBAL CLIMATE GOVERNANCE		
Treaty	Key Nature	Legal Status (Post-ICJ)
UNFCCC (1992)	Foundational climate framework	Still in force
Kyoto Protocol	Binding emission cuts for developed nations	Remains valid and applicable
Paris Agreement	Voluntary, universal commitments	Complementary, not replacement

The Kyoto Protocol's first commitment period ran from 2008 to 2012, and the second from 2012 to 2020. Developed countries, a group of about 40 mentioned by name in Annex-I of the UNFCCC, had to reduce their GHG emissions by assigned amounts during these periods from baseline values in 1990. These countries also had to provide finance and technology to developing countries to help them

tackle climate change, in accordance with the provisions of the UNFCCC.

Why was the validity of the Kyoto Protocol questioned?

The United States did not ratify the Kyoto Protocol. As a result, the world's largest emitter, both in current terms at that time and historically, did not have any obligation to reduce its emissions. Several other countries, such as Canada and Japan, either walked out of the Kyoto Protocol at a later stage, or refused to accept binding targets for the second commitment period.

Developed countries argued that climate objectives could not be achieved if large emitters, such as China, did not contribute to the effort. China, classified as a developing country in the UNFCCC, overtook the US as the world's largest emitter of GHGs by the mid-2000s. However, it did not have any obligation to reduce its emissions.

This argument led to efforts to create another legal climate agreement that would ensure the participation of every country. It took the form of the Paris Agreement. Unlike the Kyoto Protocol, this agreement did not assign emission reduction targets to any country. Rather, countries themselves had to decide what climate actions they would take. This was called nationally-determined contributions (NDCs). So, while the Kyoto Protocol was top-down, the Paris Agreement took a bottom-up approach.

The Paris Agreement did not supersede or terminate the Kyoto Protocol. But a third commitment period for the Kyoto Protocol, beyond 2020, was never defined.

After the Kyoto Protocol's second commitment period ended, the understanding was that it would exist alongside the Paris Agreement for a few years. However, its legal status after 2020 was not very clear. Since it was not terminated, it continued to exist but was not understood to have any relevance.

What does the ICJ ruling mean for the Kyoto Protocol?

The ICJ has ruled that the Kyoto Protocol remains in force, and countries party to it still have to fulfil their legal obligations under its provisions.

"The Court considers that the lack of agreement on a further commitment period under the Kyoto Protocol after the adoption of the Paris Agreement does not mean that the Kyoto Protocol has been terminated. The Kyoto Protocol, therefore, remains part of the applicable law," the ICJ said.

The international court has also ruled that **non-compliance with the provisions of the Kyoto Protocol would constitute an internationally wrongful act.**

“[T]he absence of a new commitment period does not deprive the Kyoto Protocol of its legal effect. The Kyoto Protocol remains in force... non-compliance with emission reduction commitments by a State may constitute an internationally wrongful act,” the ICJ said.

The ruling has clarified that compliance with the targets of the first commitment period is still open for assessment. Note that not all countries have fulfilled their relatively modest emissions reduction targets in the first commitment period.

“While there is no active commitment period at present, the treaty remains in force and relevant, including as a means for assessing the compliance of parties with their commitments during the first commitment period,” the ICJ said.

The **ICJ ruling came after it was asked by the UN General Assembly to give its advisory opinion on the obligations of countries to protect the climate system, and the legal consequences of not fulfilling them.** To give its ruling, the court examined the provisions of the three climate treaties — the 1994 UNFCCC, the Kyoto Protocol, and the Paris Agreement — and several other environment-related international laws that have a bearing on the climate system.

Although the **ICJ** has held that **countries are under a legal obligation to take steps to reduce GHG emissions and can be held liable to pay compensation if they fail to do so, the ruling is not binding on countries.** That is because it is an **advisory opinion**. However, the ruling opens up the possibility of increased climate litigation, seeking greater accountability from countries to take more effective climate actions.

5. Mining in Uttarakhand’s Bageshwar increasing landslides risk: What a govt-commissioned report has flagged



The **Bageshwar region is located in seismic zone V, at the highest risk of earthquakes.**

Soapstone mining in Uttarakhand's Bageshwar is leading to ground deformations, cracks, land subsidence (sinking), and rockslides, a report submitted to the National Green Tribunal last week has flagged.

The report was prepared by a committee set up by the state government.

The Bageshwar region is located in seismic zone V — at the highest risk of earthquakes — and the activities are making it prone to landslides. The report highlighted that the steep excavation practices, lack of adequate slope support, dumping of material into water sources, and encroaching into agricultural and residential areas have compounded the risk.

Mining in Uttarakhand

In Bageshwar, there are 169 mines excavating soapstone and magnesite; in Pithoragarh, there are 28 mines for these two minerals; Chamoli has eight for soapstone; and there is one in Uttarkashi for silica sand.

Soapstone is a metamorphic rock made of talc, a naturally occurring mineral, and is used in construction and design for countertops, sinks, hearths, and sculptures. Talc is used in cosmetics, pharmaceuticals, and other industries. According to the Indian Bureau of Mines, the states of Rajasthan (57%) and Uttarakhand (25%) boast substantial reserves of soapstone in India.

The committee and observations

The report has been prepared by experts from Geological Survey of India, Uttarakhand Landslide Mitigation and Management Center, and Indian Institute of Remote Sensing, among others.

On January 10, the Uttarakhand High Court had banned mining in Bageshwar after concerns were raised that houses had developed cracks and water resources were drying up due to land subsidence (sinking of land due to underground material movement) in some villages.

The committee, set up subsequently, was tasked with submitting a detailed geological scientific survey report, based on which, a revised and more stringent mining policy would be formulated.

It surveyed 61 soapstone mines in tehsils of Bageshwar, Kanda, and Dugnakuri. The committee was also to look into whether mining activities are being conducted within the designated lease boundaries.

The committee's findings link the mining activities to landslides, ground cracks, and sinkholes. At one of the mines, a landslide scar had developed within the mine dump.

The committee has noted retrogressive debris slides around the mine's perimeter, which has been attributed to the removal of material for mining. At another mine, 50-meter-long linear ground cracks have been identified, the figures with satellite imagery show.

The report said the erosion will undercut the slopes, increasing the vulnerability of the surrounding areas to landslides.

Regarding subsidence in the area, the report warned that it could further expand, and as the excavated material is being dumped downhill, it could result in the blockage of streams on lower slopes. At another mine, subsidence was assessed to have posed an immediate danger to the pipeline, as any breach could lead to water infiltration into the subsidence zone, making it extremely prone to landslides, the report said.

The impacts of mine pits have also been observed away from the pits. Subsidence was seen about 100 meters up slope, some distance away from a mine.

The report attaches Google Earth imagery showing a mine that did not exist in August 2014. However, after the mining activities began, it triggered a landslide in March 2019. By February 2021, the imagery shows the landslide had retrogressed, causing the overburden material to flow along the landslide zone and merge with the downslope mine.

The activities were also observed to potentially deplete groundwater levels. The committee observed that the unplanned dumping of overburden material from the mine into the surface drainage system is causing blockages and affecting water quality. In the event of a cloudburst, the **blocked drainage system may exacerbate flooding risks, and lead to severe damage to downslope areas.**

The mining operations were found to have violated prescribed bench heights and even the reclamation efforts being made might not prevent slope instability and debris flow, the report said. Bench height is the vertical distance between two adjacent benches or platforms within the mining pit.

Recommendations

Apart from sustainable mining practices, the **committee has recommended a geo-referenced database of the lease boundaries for each mine to assess risks related to mining in the district. A slope stability analysis was also recommended to determine the appropriate bench height for safe mining and regular on-site monitoring along with slope monitoring.**

6. **Comedian Matt Rife is now 'legal guardian' of the haunted Annabelle doll: What does it mean?**



Matt Rife (on the right) and Elton Casteo are the legal guardians of the Annabelle doll.

American comedian Matt Rife and YouTuber Elton Casteo became the **legal guardians of the infamous Annabelle doll, which is believed to be haunted,** last week.

The development came after Dan Rivera, a paranormal investigator, died on July 13 in a Pennsylvania hotel while bringing the doll on a national tour in the United States. Rivera was taking the doll on tour on behalf of the New England Society for Psychic Research (NESPR), a group founded by the late paranormal investigators Ed and Lorraine Warren.

The Annabelle doll is housed in the Warren Occult Museum, also founded by the Warrens. Rife and Casteel have bought the museum, and become the legal guardians of around 750 “haunted artefacts” kept there. However, they legally do not own these items.

Why do Rife and Casteel not legally own [the artefacts](#)? What does being a legal guardian mean? Can inanimate objects have a legal guardian? Here is a look.

But first, what is the Annabelle doll?

Annabelle is a Raggedy Ann doll that is believed to have been gifted to a nursing student in 1968. The student brought it to her apartment, which she shared with a roommate.

The student and her roommate subsequently “noticed strange occurrences with the doll” before a psychic medium told them it was “inhabited by the spirit of a young girl named Annabelle,” according to the website of the NESPR.

“The two roommates tried to accept the doll’s spirit and please it only to have it reciprocate maliciousness and violent intent,” the NESPR said.

Eventually, the doll came into the possession of the Warrens, who kept it on display in their museum in Monroe, Connecticut.

Can inanimate objects have guardians?

The term ‘legal guardian’ is typically used in personal law to refer to someone who acts on behalf of another person who is unable to act for themselves, like a minor or a person with a disability.

By this definition, inanimate objects do not qualify for guardianship. As they have no rights or needs of their own. However, people are often appointed as caretakers for objects that hold cultural, emotional or symbolic value, thus borrowing the language of guardianship.

Why do Rife and Casteel not legally own the Annabelle doll?

The Warren Occult Museum is a private collection of the Warrens, and was shut down in 2019 due to zoning issues. Its artefacts do not fall under any historical preservation scheme as of now.

In a statement to TODAY.com, NESPR Director Tony Spera, son-in-law of Ed and Lorraine Warren, clarified that while Rife and Casteel purchased the home, he and his wife Judy Spera remain the owners of the artefacts.

“All of the artefacts, including the infamous Annabelle doll, are owned by Judy and myself... We have no plans to ever ‘sell’ the artefacts,” Spera said.

Under property law, real property, such as land or a building, is distinct from personal property, which includes movable items such as artefacts. In the absence of an agreement that transfers the ownership of such personal property, the new owners act as custodians or caretakers of such items under a private agreement.

Rife and Caste's statement as being legal guardians of the items in the museum underpins their responsibility for how these items are stored, displayed or treated.

Which objects need a guardian or caretaker?

Museums, government departments and private collectors may sometimes hold items they don't technically 'own' but are responsible for preserving or protecting. In these cases, the term used is that of a 'custodian' or a 'trustee'.

In India, heritage is governed by laws like the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains Act, 1958 and the Antiquities and Art Treasures Act 1972. These laws regulate how monuments and artefacts must be handled. Under the 1958 Act, the Director General of the Archaeological Survey of India is the official legal guardian of all protected monuments. Their job is to ensure that these sites are preserved and not damaged or misused.

In the US, similar obligations exist under the National Historic Preservation Act and the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act. Institutions holding items of cultural or religious significance are required to consult communities, such as the Native American tribes, before displaying or transferring those objects.

Moreover, ownership or representation is sometimes extended to non-human entities to establish clear responsibility. In India, temple deities are treated as juristic persons that can hold legal rights and have a representative to appear in court. The person who manages the deity's affairs, called a shebait, is expected to act in the deity's interest, much like a guardian would for a human.

In the entertainment domain, the rights to represent, use, or adapt fictional characters are typically managed by rights holders such as their creators. Families or companies act as stewards of these fictional works. This includes ensuring that the character's image is not misused or misrepresented. This usually comes under the intellectual property rights.

For instance, after the death of the Japanese creator of Astro Boy, Osamu Tezuka, his estate now manages the characters' appearances and licensing through Tezuka Productions. This responsibility can not be framed as guardianship but reflects a similar idea that someone must take care of what the character symbolises.

7. India-Philippines relations elevated to level of strategic partnership, says PM Modi

India and the Philippines have decided to boost their defence and maritime links, begin direct flights, and start negotiating a new trade deal as they upgrade their ties to the level of a "strategic partnership", Prime Minister Narendra Modi said on Tuesday.

Welcoming visiting Filipino President Ferdinand Romualdez Marcos Jr., Mr. Modi said that as both countries support "freedom of navigation", cooperation in the maritime domain is "natural and essential." The two sides also announced the commencement of talks for a preferential trade agreement.

"We have been consistently working together in areas such as humanitarian assistance, disaster relief, and search and rescue operations. Today, as the President is visiting India, three Indian naval ships are, for the very first time, participating in a naval exercise in the Philippines. India's hydrography ship is also a part of this important engagement," the Prime Minister said. He also expressed his "sincere gratitude" to the government of the Philippines for condemning the terror attack in Pahalgam on April 22.

The Prime Minister discussed regional and global issues with the Filipino President, and hinted at India's position on the disputes in the South China Sea.

"We remain committed to peace, security, prosperity, and a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific region. We support freedom of navigation in accordance with international law," he said.

Mr. Modi described the Philippines as an "important partner" in India's Act East Policy. "I am happy to share that we have decided to upgrade our ties to a strategic partnership. We have also prepared a detailed action plan to turn this partnership's potential into outcomes," he said. The Prime Minister also announced that direct flights between India and the Philippines will begin this year, while India will extend a free e-tourist visa facility to Filipino nationals for a period of one year, starting August 2025.

Defence cooperation

The two countries agreed on a number of defence-related mechanisms including the finalisation of the Terms of Reference between their armies, navies and air forces.

These agreements will cover "capacity building, joint maritime activities, exchange of training programmes between our officials, and all standard elements when we talk about defence cooperation", according to P. Kumaran, Secretary (East) of the Ministry of External Affairs. The two countries also agreed on the Terms of Reference for enhanced maritime cooperation between the Indian Coast Guard and the Philippine Coast Guard.

Mr. Kumaran also reiterated India's position on the South China Sea. "We consider the South China Sea as a part of the global commons. We support freedom of navigation and overflight in the region, and legitimate commerce through the waters of the South China Sea. India has an abiding interest in peace and stability in the region and our position is based on the UN Convention of the Law of the Seas, 1982," he said.

India and the Philippines sealed a treaty on mutual legal assistance in criminal matters and another treaty on the transfer of sentenced persons.

India announced that it will extend its support to a pilot project to set up the infrastructure needed for the Philippines Sovereign Data Cloud. India also invited the Philippines to participate in its Information Fusion Centre for the Indian Ocean Region.

8. Maharashtra to file petition for elephant Madhuri's return

Maharashtra Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis on Tuesday said the State government will file a review petition in the Supreme Court to bring back the 36-year-old elephant Mahadevi, popularly known as Madhuri, from NGO Vantara's wildlife rehabilitation facility in Jamnagar, Gujarat.

Vantara is the brainchild of Anant Ambani, son of industrialist Mukesh Ambani.

Speaking to presspersons after chairing a review meeting on the issue, the Chief Minister said, "We will explore all the legal measures available to bring her back."

The move comes amid widespread protests across western Maharashtra's Kolhapur and Sangli districts, where thousands of villagers have signed petitions and participated in silent marches to express their anger against transferring the elephant from a local Jain Mutt on July 30, following a

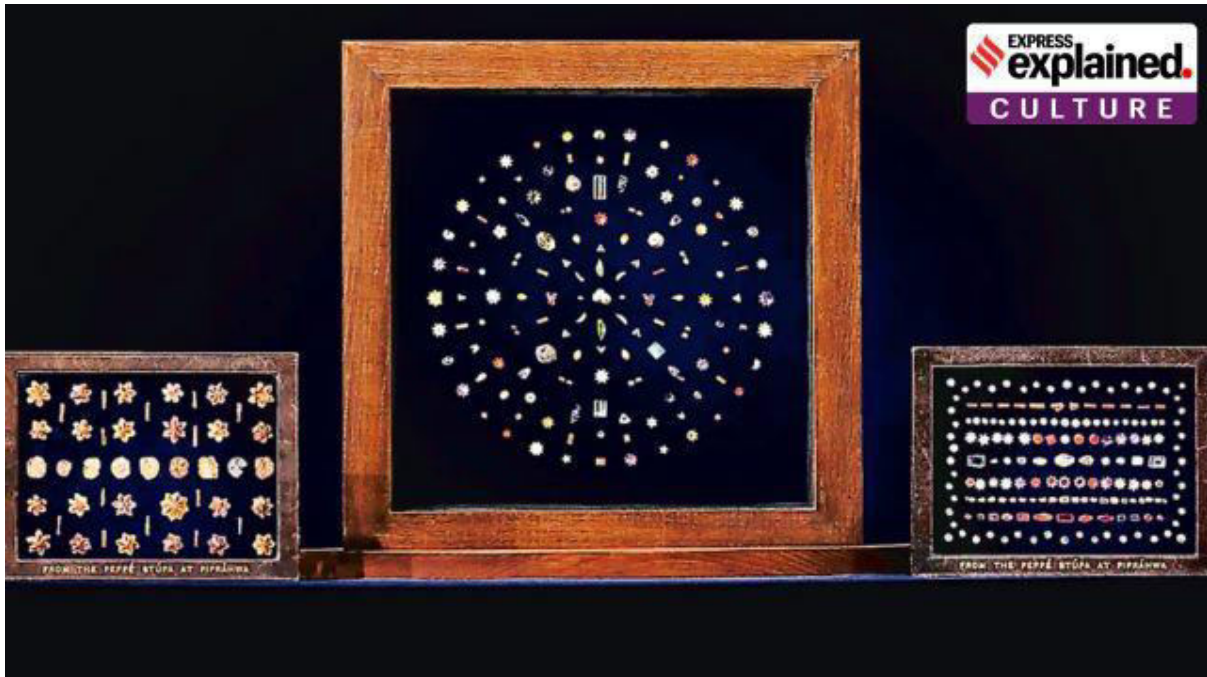
judgment by the Bombay High Court upholding a Supreme Court order to rehabilitate the “ailing” elephant to Vantara based on a petition by the People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA). Former MP Raju Shetti, who led a protest march in Kolhapur on Sunday, accused the non-profit organisation of “stealing our elephants”.

Meanwhile, in Kolhapur, large hoardings have cropped up in almost every locality, rallying for the elephant’s return. The billboards put up by residents and local outfits have been signed by area residents.

7th August

1. Public-private partnership: How Piprahwa Gems returned to India

Introduction



The Piprahwa Gems, Buddhist relics which in 1898 were taken by an Englishman from their resting place in India, have been brought back to the country, the Ministry of Culture announced on Wednesday. This return was made possible by “an exemplary case of public-private partnership”.

The collection

In May, a collection of 349 gemstones came up for auction at Sotheby's Hong Kong. These were a part of a larger collection of antiquities unearthed in 1898 by William Claxton Peppé, an English estate manager, at a Buddhist stupa in Piprahwa, a village in UP's Siddharthnagar district, near the border of Nepal.

Viceroy Elgin donated the sacred bones and ashes in the collection, believed to be of Lord Buddha himself, to Siamese King Rama V. Much of the remaining collection, including caskets, a coffer, and various jewels, were sent to the Imperial Museum (now Indian Museum) in Kolkata, where they remain till date.

But a part of the collection was passed down for generations in the Peppé family. In 2013, they came in possession of Chris Peppé who decided to put the antiquities up for auction. Sotheby's listed an estimated selling price of over \$100 million.

Pressure from New Delhi

On May 5, the Ministry of Culture served a legal notice to Sotheby's and the Peppé family, demanding the “immediate cessation” of the auction, and repatriation of the relics to India. The Archaeological Survey of India too requested the Consulate General of Hong Kong to immediately stop the auction.

Pressure from New Delhi prompted Sotheby's to halt the auction, originally slated for May 7. But India's legal claim over the Piprawaha gems fell in a grey area. This is because the relics were excavated by Peppé on land allocated to him by the British government, and privately held for 127 years by his

family, making it difficult to prove the illegality of their possession. Also, the gemstones were taken out of India long before India's Antiquities and Art Treasures Act, 1972 came into being.

Nonetheless, New Delhi kept pressure up on Sotheby's, the UK, and the Peppé family. The Ministry asked the Financial Investigation Unit to coordinate with its counterpart in Hong Kong to highlight the alleged illegality of the auction and ensure compliance with international laws.

Godrej facilitates return

In the end, the collection of 349 gemstones was acquired by Indian industrialist Pirojsha Godrej for an undisclosed amount. While unconventional, this allowed the government to not have to make a commercial transaction for the antiquities, which would have raised ethical issues.

Godrej has agreed to loan a "large portion" of the collection to the National Museum for a period of five years, and display the entire collection for three months upon its arrival, Shekhawat said.

2. Operation Mahadev: photos from encounter site in 2024 helped identify terrorists

Introduction

The three Pahalgam terrorists who were killed during Operation Mahadev on July 28 were identified and tracked with the help of photographs recovered from a mobile phone seized by the security forces after an encounter in south Kashmir in 2024, a senior government official said.

The phone contained several pictures of the three Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) terrorists identified as Suleman, alias Faizal Jatt, Hamza Afghani, and Zibran posing with guns and ammunition.

Hid in Dachigam forest

The photographs were then matched with the accounts of eyewitnesses present at the Baisaran meadow on April 22 and a search was launched for them in the Dachigam forest, around 20 km from Srinagar, where they were hiding after the terror attack.

The terrorists were using a long-range wireless module to communicate, and its signals helped the intelligence agencies track their location. The device was likely assembled, and has been sent for forensic examination, the official said.

Home Minister Amit Shah informed the Lok Sabha on July 29 that indigenous technology was used to track the three terrorists in the Dachigam forest. The Minister said that on May 22, the Intelligence Bureau (IB) received information about the presence of terrorists in the Dachigam area through human intelligence. He said, "Continuous efforts were made by the IB and the Army from May 22 to July 22 to confirm the information with an equipment made by our agencies to capture ultra signals in Dachigam."

"All three are Pakistanis," the official said.



The official added that the terrorists were sighted multiple times in the forest but they always managed to get away. Security forces combed the forests and monitored areas close to streams and rivers as the terrorists came there to fetch water.

As reported by The Hindu, a group of 20-25 hardened terrorists from Pakistan infiltrated around three years ago and are said to be operating in the forest and mountains across Pir Panjal in Jammu and the forests in south Kashmir.

In 2024, the foreign terrorists split into two groups, one led by Suleman who was killed during Operation Mahadev on July 28 and the other group led by another Pakistani identified as Musa. Since 2021, around 135 security personnel have been killed in Jammu and Kashmir likely by the same group.

“After Operation Mahadev, we have received crucial information about the other foreign terrorists and we have launched operations to track them down,” said the official.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Internal Security

Source: The Hindu

3. How a new project plans to curb rhino poaching through radioactive isotope injections

Introduction



A South African university launched an anti-poaching campaign on Thursday (July 31) with a unique approach – injecting radioactive isotopes into rhino horns. It claimed that the method is harmless for the rhinos and allows customs agents to detect trafficked horns.

After six years of intense research and testing, the University of the Witwatersrand, supported by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), formally launched the Rhisotope Project. Five rhinos were administered radioactive isotope injections in the Waterberg Biosphere Reserve.

The university hopes the initiative will mark the start of mass treatment of South Africa’s declining rhino population.

How the isotope tagging works

According to the IAEA, radioactive isotopes or radioisotopes are the unstable form of an element that emit radiation to transform into a more stable form. The radiation can be traced, and typically causes changes in the substance it falls upon.

Through a non-invasive procedure, rhino horns are tagged with low doses of radioactive isotopes, allowing for their ready detection by radiation portal monitors (RPMs) already deployed at borders, ports, and airports worldwide to identify unauthorised nuclear materials.

To test this system, the researchers used 3D-printed rhino horns with identical shielding properties to real keratin, which is the substance that makes up rhino horn. According to the university, the tests confirmed that individual horns could be detected inside full 40-foot shipping containers.

The procedure, according to the researchers, has proven to show no harm to the rhinos themselves, while making the horn “useless” and “poisonous” to humans.

“We have demonstrated, beyond scientific doubt, that the process is completely safe for the animal and effective in making the horn detectable through international customs nuclear security systems,” James Larkin, the project’s Chief Scientific Officer, told the Associated Press.

The university also announced the results of the pilot phase undertaken last June, when it injected radioisotopes into 20 rhinos at the Waterberg Biosphere in Waterberg, Limpopo, about 250 kilometres north of Johannesburg in South Africa. A team from Ghent University, Belgium, monitored the health and conducted cytological examinations on 15 treated rhinos, comparing these results with five untreated animals.

The team used the biological dosimetry technique to culture blood samples and examined the formation of micronuclei in white blood cells, which indicates cellular damage. They found no such damage to the 20 rhinos in the pilot phase.

“This has been an international collaboration of like-minded individuals who are trying to make a real difference to this poaching crisis,” Larkin added. “We started with the question – what if radiation could protect rather than harm, by turning rhino horns into traceable markers that stop poachers before they trade? After two years of digital modelling, safety testing and detection simulations, we’re ready to roll out a solution that could truly reduce rhino poaching.”

The scale of the poaching crisis

According to the International Union for Conservation of Nature, the global rhino population was estimated to be about 500,000 at the start of the 20th century. It has since dwindled to 27,000, owing to the burgeoning demand for rhino horns. These horns are trafficked to Asian markets where they are used in traditional medicine, and also as a status symbol.

South Africa, home to the world’s largest rhino population, had lost over 10,000 rhinos to poaching over the last decade, with 103 losses reported by the South African Ministry of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment in the first quarter of this year.

While the project itself is not a cure-all or silver bullet to curb poaching, the researchers hope it will prove to be a great deterrent. It would certainly prove to be less disruptive to rhino behaviour compared to dehorning, in which rhinos’ horns are removed to deter poaching. While a 2024 study published in the Science journal showed that dehorning rhinos reduced poaching by 78 per cent over seven years on eight reserves, another study the previous year established that this measure impacted their ability to socialise with their peers and noted reductions in the sizes of their home ranges.

The researchers are now looking to recreate the success of this project in protecting other endangered species, such as elephants or pangolins.

4. From sacred tradition to shutdown: The history and end of Mumbai’s Kabutarkhanas

Introduction



The Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) on Saturday initiated action against the Dadar Kabutarkhana, pulling large plastic sheets across the city's most iconic pigeon feeding spot, to comply with a Bombay High Court order following a ban on feeding pigeons at kabutarkhanas across the city.

Feeding pigeons is a contentious topic in Mumbai and a practice that has been ongoing for centuries. Here's a look at the history of kabutarkhanas and pigeon feeding in the city and why it has become so controversial.

Why are pigeons fed in Mumbai?

In many Indian cultures, feeding pigeons is considered an act of piety and is believed to bring blessings from ancestors. Offering food to pigeons is said to satisfy the souls of deceased ancestors and relieve any ancestral affliction. This practice is considered especially effective on new moon days (Amavasya).

There is also a belief in some cultures where pigeons are seen as messengers between earthly and the spiritual realms, feeding them helps open one's awareness to spiritual energies, fostering a greater connection with the divine.

In Jainism, feeding pigeons is a form of jeev daya or compassion for living beings, one of the central tenets of Jain ethics. Many Jain families and temples organise regular pigeon feeding, often near temples or trust-run kabutarkhanas. The Dadar Kabutarkhana is one such feeding spot that was set up by a Jain temple.

The history of pigeon feeding in Bombay

The large number of Gujarati and Jain merchants in erstwhile Bombay meant that kabutarkhanas could be found in major corners of the city. Their presence also contributed to the city's high pigeon population, a fact noted even in the early 20th century.

"They are attracted to Bombay by two things: plentiful house accommodation and the benevolence of pious Hindoo grain merchants," wrote Edward Hamilton Aitken in his 1909 book *The Common Birds of Bombay*, elaborating on the reason for the city's large pigeon population.

Early organised pigeon feeding took the form of parabadis, large, ornate birdhouses, often reaching seven meters higher, usually made of wood and elaborately carved and painted. These were roofed, house-like structures raised on platforms to keep them out of reach of cats and dogs. Grain was regularly placed on these platforms to feed the birds, usually pigeons.

Larger versions of these were called kabutriyas or kabutarkhanas, ornate structures constructed with funds donated by the local community. Devout individuals would regularly leave grain and water in the kabutriya for the birds.

Kabutarkhanas evolved as charitable spaces, where community members could donate grain and fulfill their religious duty, explaining the proximity of many of these structures to temples and other religious sites.

Today, Mumbai has over 50 kabutarkhanas, primarily located in the city proper, with a few in the suburban areas. One of the oldest and most renowned is the Dadar Kabutarkhana, operated by the Dadar Kabutarkhana Trust.

In 1944, the Bombay Municipality issued a letter to the Jain Temple in Dadar permitting the construction of a traffic island to allow bird feeding. This was in response to a letter from the Jain Temple requesting permission to set up an enclosure to protect pigeons that flocked near the temple and were at risk of being run over by cars.

When did concerns about pigeons arise in Mumbai?

While pigeon feeding was widely accepted in erstwhile Bombay, concerns began to emerge in the mid-90s, with the proliferation of medical studies linking pigeon droppings to respiratory ailments.

Subsequently, complaints regarding pigeon feeding gained traction in Mumbai, with citizens reporting respiratory issues related to the high concentration of pigeons.

In 2013, a BMC engineer died after reportedly being thrown off his motorcycle when a pigeon struck him near the kabutarkhana at Grant Road on June 30. Following the incident, the local corporator removed grain-sellers from the street. Two days later, the then BMC Law Committee Chairman, Makrand Narvekar, proposed relocating kabutarkhanas to less crowded areas. However, the proposal never resulted in concrete action.

Since 2014, several kabutarkhanas in the city have been removed, and individuals caught feeding pigeons have been fined by the BMC.

What marked the end for Kabutarkhanas?

On July 3, 2025, during a Maharashtra Legislative Council session, Minister Uday Samant (on behalf of Deputy Chief Minister Eknath Shinde) announced the immediate closure of 51 kabutarkhanas in Mumbai, citing respiratory health risks from pigeon droppings and feathers. Subsequent to this announcement the BMC commenced a citywide enforcement drive fining those found feeding pigeons and shutting down Kabutarkhanas in the city.

On July 15, the Bombay High Court, while noting that the rights of humans and animals must be balanced, declined to pass an interim order permitting pigeon feeding twice a day. However, the Court directed that no heritage kabutarkhanas should be demolished until further orders.

A division bench of Justices Girish S. Kulkarni and Arif S. Doctor was hearing a writ petition filed by animal rights activist Pallavi Sachin Patil, along with Sneha Deepak Visaria and Savita Mahajan, seeking to restrain the BMC from demolishing kabutarkhanas and to ensure that citizens were not prevented from feeding pigeons.

On July 31, the Bombay High Court directed the BMC to lodge FIRs against individuals “illegally” and in a “defiant manner” feeding pigeons at Dadar (West) and other kabutarkhanas, despite the ban and the HC’s refusal to grant interim relief in earlier hearings.

On Saturday Mumbai’s most iconic pigeon feeding spot was finally shut down and covered in thick sheets of grey tarpaulin.

5. After Pakistan and Israel, Cambodia offers Nobel nomination to Trump: How does it work?



Claiming that US President Donald Trump had “ended conflicts”, including those between India and Pakistan, and Thailand and Cambodia, White House Press Secretary Karoline Leavitt has said it was “well past time” that he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

During a press briefing on Thursday (July 31), Leavitt said Trump brokered, on average, about one peace deal or ceasefire per month during his six months in office since January. This is not the first time that Trump supporters have made such calls, even as his track record is debatable, at best. For one, New Delhi has countered his repeated claims of mediation.

Still, that has not stopped the likes of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, and the governments of Pakistan and Cambodia, from saying they would nominate him. In early July, Netanyahu met Trump and handed him a copy of the letter which he had sent to the Norwegian Nobel Committee.

The government of Pakistan also said it had nominated him, praising his “pivotal leadership” during the conflict with India following the Pahalgam attacks and Operation Sindoor. Cambodia’s Deputy Prime Minister also announced his country’s plans to do so, after a recent conflict with Thailand. So, how exactly does a country actually nominate another world leader for the prize, whose previous nominees include Mahatma Gandhi and, briefly, Adolf Hitler? Is there an eligibility criterion? And would it be unusual for a US President to win the honour?

Could a nation nominate Trump for the Nobel Peace Prize?

Theoretically, yes, depending on the outcomes of the nomination process.

The first stage for any category of the Nobel Prize involves nominations. A range of people — university professors, former Nobel winners in that category, etc. — are deemed eligible by the respective Nobel Committee to submit a nomination for that award. The Norwegian Nobel Committee, which is

responsible for awarding the Peace Prize, consists of five individuals appointed by the Norwegian parliament, who are often politicians.

Heads of state and members of national assemblies and national governments can send nominations for the Peace Prize. The nominations are sifted through to make a list of valid nominations. For instance, Swedish Parliamentarian and Social Democrat, Erik Brandt, sent a letter to the Norwegian Nobel Committee, nominating Adolf Hitler for the Nobel Peace Prize in 1939. However, it was meant to be ironic and eventually withdrawn.

The Nobel committee then creates a shortlist, external consultants research those candidates, and the committee finally makes its choice after discussions. The entire process takes eight months, and the full list of nominees is made public 50 years after the submission.

Can anyone be nominated for the Nobel Prize?

Officially, the Nobel website states that the will of Alfred Nobel, the inventor who instituted the prize, mentioned a broad criterion. The prize was to be awarded to the person “who shall have done the most or the best work for fraternity between nations, for the abolition or reduction of standing armies and for the holding and promotion of peace congresses”.

Over time, the definition of peace has included areas such as gender equality and non-proliferation of nuclear weapons.

Have US Presidents won the Nobel Peace Prize earlier?

Yes. In 1906, Theodore Roosevelt received the Peace Prize for having negotiated peace in the Russo-Japanese war in 1904-05, becoming the first US President to be honoured with the award.

Woodrow Wilson won in 1920, for his efforts in ending the First World War and helping in creating the League of Nations, which was the precursor to the United Nations. Jimmy Carter won in 2002, for working to find “peaceful solutions to international conflicts, advancing democracy and human rights, and promoting economic and social development.”

US Vice President Al Gore (during Bill Clinton’s tenure) was awarded in 2007, for his efforts to obtain and spread knowledge about climate change.

The next year, then US President Barack Obama won the prize in a controversial decision, as he had yet to complete even a year of his presidency. The official citation said it was “for his extraordinary efforts to strengthen international diplomacy and cooperation between peoples”.

Obama himself acknowledged the elephant in the room during his winning speech, saying, “I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge the considerable controversy that your generous decision has generated. In part, this is because I am at the beginning, and not the end, of my labours on the world stage. Compared to some of the giants of history who’ve received this prize... my accomplishments are slight.”

In Trump’s case, he has frequently lamented not being awarded the prize, and world leaders hoping to develop a deeper relationship with the United States have picked up on the concern. Last month, as leaders of five African nations — Gabon, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mauritania and Senegal — met Trump in Washington to discuss a trade deal, they spoke positively about the possibility of a nomination.

6. Victims of assault must be encouraged to testify without fear

Powerful perpetrators are rarely made accountable for their actions, and in that backdrop, the conviction and life sentencing of Prajwal Revanna, former Janata Dal (Secular) Member of Parliament and grandson of former Prime Minister H.D. Deve Gowda, for a heinous crime comes as a relief. This is the first of the four cases of rape and sexual harassment against the 34-year-old Gowda scion. The former Member of Parliament had raped a 48-year-old domestic worker twice at the family's homes in Hassan and Bengaluru in 2021, and recorded it on his mobile phone. In April 2024, ahead of the general election, explicit clips of his sexual misdemeanours were leaked through pen drives strewn across public places in Hassan, the Gowda home town. In the videos, Revanna's face is not visible, only the women's, a gross violation of their safety and privacy. The former help and other women came forward with their complaints but their agony was far from over. Using political muscle, and aided by his parents, former Minister H.D. Revanna and Bhavani Revanna, he did his best to arm twist the system, threatening a survivor, trying to stop her from testifying. But a Special Investigation Team (SIT) worked with alacrity and he was finally arrested in May 2024. The SIT filed the first charge sheet in August 2024.

The video, where the domestic worker is seen pleading with Prajwal Revanna to spare her, DNA analysis and her testimony formed key evidence in the trial which began in May this year. The Special Court of Sessions to hear criminal cases against former and present Members of Parliament and MLAs pronounced the verdict on August 1. The speedy trial and conviction will give hope to other survivors battling for justice in sexual assault cases. The court convicted Revanna on all charges framed against him, including under Sections 376(2)(n) (repeated rape on the same woman), 506 (criminal intimidation), 201 (disappearance of evidence) of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) and 66E (violation of privacy) of the Information Technology Act, 2000. Section 376(2) of the IPC states that a person convicted under it "shall be punished with rigorous imprisonment for a term which shall not be less than 10 years, but which may extend to imprisonment for life...." Often, even when multiple complaints are raised, leaders with political clout get away. The laws are in place. All that the government machinery needs to do is act swiftly and sensitively, and create a safe space so that survivors of sexual abuse can come forward without fear.

7. Jharkhand's ex-CM and tribal leader Shibu Soren dies

Shibu Soren (1944-2025)

Former Jharkhand Chief Minister and Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM) co-founder Shibu Soren passed away in Delhi on Monday. He was 81.

Mr. Soren had been undergoing treatment for kidney-related problems at the Sir Ganga Ram Hospital in Delhi for more than a month. His son, Jharkhand Chief Minister Hemant Soren, announced the death in a post on social media platform X.

"Respected Dishom Guruji has left us all... I have become *shunya* [zero] today," Mr. Hemant said. Accompanied by his wife Kalpana Soren, Mr. Hemant broke down as party workers raised slogans hailing his father, who played a key role in the creation of Jharkhand.

Talking to presspersons in Delhi, Mr. Hemant described his father as a "great man".

"He was like a protective shade for Jharkhand and the tribals. That shade has left us today. We will always remember him," the Chief Minister said, adding that Mr. Soren's legacy would live on.

Mr. Soren was born on January 11, 1944 in Nemra village of undivided Bihar, which now comes under Ramgarh district of Jharkhand.

He co-founded the JMM along with A.K. Roy and Binod Bihari Mahto in 1973. The JMM soon became the primary political voice for the demand for a separate tribal State and got support across the Chotanagpur and Santhal Pargana regions.

He served as Chief Minister of Jharkhand three times, but never completed a full term. He was elected several times to the Lok Sabha from Dumka. As a key figure in the United Progressive Alliance government, he also served as Union Coal Minister.

Leaders cutting across party lines paid tribute to Mr. Soren. President Droupadi Murmu, Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha Rahul Gandhi, and Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge visited the Sir Ganga Ram Hospital and paid tributes to the veteran tribal leader.

Ms. Murmu said his demise was a big loss in the space of social justice. “He championed the cause of tribal identity and formation of the State of Jharkhand,” she said on X.

Condoling the death, Mr. Modi said in a post: “Shri Shibu Soren Ji was a grassroots leader who rose through the ranks of public life with unwavering dedication to the people. He was particularly passionate about empowering tribal communities, the poor and downtrodden.”

“A strong voice of the tribal society, Sorenji fought for their rights and interests throughout his life. His role in the creation of Jharkhand will always be remembered,” Mr. Gandhi said.

Union Home Minister Amit Shah, Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M.K. Stalin, Kerala Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan, Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar, and Meghalaya Chief Minister Conrad K. Sangma condoled the death.

Paying tribute to Mr. Soren, Jharkhand’s first Chief Minister and the current Leader of the Opposition in the State Assembly Babulal Marandi said his journey was filled with struggle. “He was a social reformer and BJP always respected him,” Mr. Marandi said.

Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) chief Lalu Prasad and his son Tejashwi Yadav, who is the Leader of the Opposition in the Bihar Assembly, said his demise would be an irreparable loss for politics in Jharkhand. “We have been friends and worked together,” Mr. Prasad said.

The Jharkhand government has declared three-day State mourning from August 4 to 6.

His last rites would be performed in his native village Nemra on Tuesday. Mr. Soren is survived by wife Rupri Soren, sons Hemant Soren and Basant Soren, and daughter Anjali Soren.

8. Why CBI closed case against former AAP Delhi Minister Satyendar Jain: No criminal activity or loss to govt



The main accusation was that Jain and PWD officials had ignored standard hiring practices followed by the government, altered the scope of work, and manipulated the process to favour an agency.

A Delhi court on Monday (August 4) accepted a closure report filed by the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) in a case against Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) leader and former Delhi Public Works Department (PWD) Minister Satyendar Jain relating to alleged irregularities in hiring in the Department. This was one of the first major corruption cases filed against any senior leader of the AAP.

In its closure report, the CBI, after carrying out investigations for almost four years, said that it had found “no criminal activity or wrongful loss to the government” in the case.

Accepting the report, Special Judge Dig Vinay Singh of Rouse Avenue court who was hearing the case said: “...When CBI could not find any evidence of criminal conspiracy, abuse of power, pecuniary gain, or wrongful loss to the government exchequer, and the alleged acts are at most administrative irregularities, no offence under Section 13(1)(d) of the Prevention of Corruption Act or criminal conspiracy is established.”

What was the case against Satyendar Jain?

The case was related to alleged corruption in the hiring of a 17-member creative team for the PWD for various projects. An FIR was registered on May 29, 2019 after a complaint by the Delhi government’s Directorate of Vigilance, which alleged that professionals were engaged in the PWD in violation of rules, and that payments were made from unrelated project funds.

The complaint said that the outsourcing of professionals for PWD projects was “allegedly irregular and lacked proper approvals from the relevant Finance Department”. The hiring “bypassed standard recruitment procedures”, and expenses were charged to unrelated projects, it said.

The main accusation was that Jain and PWD officials had ignored standard hiring practices followed by the government, altered the scope of work, and manipulated the process to favour an agency named M/s Soni Detective & Allied Services Private Limited.

After the FIR was registered, the CBI examined various aspects relating to the hiring such as the justification and need for hiring these professionals, the transparency (or lack of it) behind the recruitment process, approvals and use of project funds, whether any personal gain was involved, and whether legal and procedural norms were followed.

And what did the investigation find?

Following the investigation, the CBI concluded that the need to hire professionals was justified. It found that the hiring process had begun with an advertisement that attracted 1,700 applications for the jobs, and that the selections were based on merit.

Those who were hired were paid between Rs 50,000 and Rs 1.95 lakh per month, which the CBI said was “justified remuneration” that “aligned with the regular earnings” of other PWD architects.

The CBI had also stated that the hiring of professionals was necessary due to urgent departmental needs and that no payments beyond approved limits had been made.

“The total investigation found no criminal activity or wrongful loss to the government... No evidence of quid pro quo or conspiracy has emerged, and the acts of public servants do not constitute fraudulent conduct,” it said.

The CBI also said that the agency was hired through a transparent tender advertised in newspapers, and no complaints of irregularities were received from the losing bidder.

The CBI investigation concluded that the key reasons for requiring professionals stemmed from a note written by officers to the Minister back in September 2015, in which they had flagged the absence of in-house expertise and a large number of vacancies.

Also, several key infrastructure projects such as smart schools, hospitals, clinics, and road redesigns were pending.

The CBI noted that at the time the hirings took place, there were close to 50% vacancies in the posts of architects, and major infrastructure projects had to be executed in a time-bound manner by the Delhi government.

The “highly qualified candidates” who were hired managed 82 projects, including mohalla clinics, flyovers and elevated corridors, and anganwadis, the CBI said.

The CBI concluded that there were no irregularities in recruitment, and no one had made any pecuniary gains.

What other cases does Jain face?

Jain is facing two other cases: one relating to alleged disproportionate assets, another relating to alleged corruption in a Rs 571 crore project to install CCTV cameras in Delhi.

DA CASE: Jain is accused of amassing assets disproportionate to his known sources of income to the extent of approximately Rs 1.62 crore between February 14, 2015 and May 31, 2017 while functioning as a public servant.

CCTV CASE: In March this year, the Delhi government’s Anti Corruption Branch (ACB) booked Jain for allegedly accepting a bribe of Rs 7 crore to waive a penalty of Rs 16 crore imposed on Bharat Electronics Limited (BEL) which was installing CCTVs cameras in Delhi.

Both cases are being heard in Delhi's Rouse Avenue court. Charges are yet to be framed in either of the two cases.

9. Explained: Trump's additional 25% tariff on India brings tariffs on India to 50%, highest tariffs worldwide



The Trump administration on Wednesday (August 6) announced it would impose 25% as additional tariffs on India, taking the total tariffs on Indian goods to 50%, over continued Indian imports of Russian oil. The tariffs will become effective within 21 days of the signing of the order, meaning by August 27.

President Donald Trump signed an emergency executive order titled “Addressing Threats to the US by the Russian Federation”, in which he invoked his constitutional powers to claim that Russia and Russian products posed an “unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security and foreign policy of the United States”. He singled out India for its continued imports of Russian oil directly or indirectly.

India now faces the highest tariffs in the world, alongside fellow BRICS member Brazil. Notably China, a major Russian trading partner, has not been mentioned in the order.

The Indian Ministry of External Affairs vowed to take “all actions necessary to protect its national interests”, and called the move “unfair, unjustified and unreasonable”.

Last month, Trump announced 25% tariffs on Indian imports. He threatened additional tariffs this week, writing on Monday: “India is not only buying massive amounts of Russian Oil, they are then, for much of the Oil purchased, selling it on the Open Market for big profits. They don’t care how many people in Ukraine are being killed by the Russian War Machine.”

The Indian Ministry of External Affairs issued a strong response on Monday, calling out the US and the European Union for their continued imports of Russian oil even after the Russia-Ukraine War commenced in 2022.

According to a *Reuters* report, a “mix of political misjudgment, missed signals and bitterness” was responsible for the breakdown in bilateral trade talks, which was previously expected to yield a trade deal, with an announcement by the US President well before August 1.

In recent weeks, Trump has changed his position on the Russia-Ukraine War and threatened sanctions on Russia and its trading partners, including India.

Indian imports of Russian oil

India is the third-largest importer and consumer of oil in the world, importing about 1.75 million barrels per day of Russian oil in January-June this year, *Reuters* reported last month. Two private refiners, Reliance Industries and Nayara Energy, accounted for half of these imports under their existing trade deals.

Russia had been India’s top supplier of oil to India over this period, comprising 35% of India’s oil supplies. In contrast, the US was the fifth-largest oil supplier.

According to the *Reuters* report, India expanded its imports of Russian oil at discounted rates after Western nations imposed sanctions in 2022.

In FY 2024-25, overall trade between India and Russia was valued at \$68.7 billion, over 5.8 times higher than the pre-pandemic trade, according to the Indian embassy in Moscow. India exported goods worth \$4.88 billion, chiefly agriproducts, chemical products, pharmaceuticals and iron and steel. In return, India imported goods worth \$63.84 billion from Russia, chiefly oil and petroleum products, fertilisers and machinery. The two nations aim for a bilateral trade of \$100 billion by 2030.

India’s relations with the US

Trump has long maintained that India unfairly taxes the US, and said in February that India “does not treat the US right”.

This is significant given the volume of trade between the two nations – the US is India’s largest trading partner, while India is the US’s 10th-largest trading partner. Data from the US Trade Representative (USTR) shows that the US ran a trade deficit of \$45.7 billion with India in 2024, an increase of 5.4% over 2023.

US Goods Trade with India	Trade 2024 in (\$ billion)	Increase over 2023 (\$ bn)	Increase over 2023 (%)
Exports	41.8	1.4	3.4
Imports	87.4	3.7	4.5
Trade Deficit	45.7	2.4	5.4

Trump imposed 26% in “reciprocal tariffs” on India as part of his Liberation Day tariff announcement, which became effective on April 5. According to the White House, India charges a 70% tariff on passenger vehicle imports, 10-20% on networking switches and routers and 50% on rice in the husk. However, they were paused on April 9, along with duties on several other countries, excluding China.

The 25% tariffs on US imports of steel and aluminium would significantly hurt India. *The Indian Express* in March reported that the US is the largest market for Indian aluminium, with its exports amounting to \$946 million in FY2024. These exports had exceeded \$1 billion in the previous two financial years, and were up from just \$350 million in 2016-17, around the time Trump first became President. Similarly, the US was also the largest market for Indian iron and steel articles, with Indian exports valued at \$2.8 billion in FY2024.

10. What caused Uttarkashi flash floods: Heavy rainfall, rugged topography



Uttarkashi flash floods 2025: Flash floods and mudslides hit Dharali village, Uttarkashi.

Uttarkashi flash floods 2025

At least four people died after flash floods and mudslides swept through Dharali village in Uttarkashi district, Uttarakhand, on Tuesday afternoon. Several buildings, shops, and hotels were damaged.

Flash floods are not uncommon in the upper hilly areas of Uttarakhand as they are often triggered by a cloudburst — a localised but intense rainfall activity. However, a cloudburst, in a technical sense, did not lead to flash floods on Tuesday, though most parts of the state received heavy rainfall over the past three days.

The primary reason is the topography of the area, where heavy rainfall often results in landslides, sending mud and concrete into the rivers. These materials flow down with great force, accumulating momentum on the way, leading to flash floods downstream.

What is the topography of Uttarkashi?

Uttarkashi district is located at a high elevation ranging between 800 and 6,900 metres above mean sea level. Large geographical areas are covered with snow throughout the year, and there are glaciers in many parts of the district.

It has the upper reaches of the Ganga and Yamuna rivers, and contains their snowbound source region near Gangotri and Yamunotri respectively.

There are also a series of high ridges, perennial rivers, and valleys in Uttarkashi. The rugged topography of the district features sharp undulations due to high mountains, narrow valleys, and deep gorges.

The land slopes steadily towards the southwest, where the elevation in some valleys dips sharply — by as much as 800 metres.

How much rainfall does Uttarkashi receive annually?

Since a large part of the district is situated on the southern slope of the Himalayas, monsoon currents generally penetrate through deeply trenched valleys. Rainfall is at its maximum during the southwest monsoon season (June to September), particularly in the southern part of the district.

Uttarkashi receives about 1,289 mm of rain on average in a year. Past records show that the highest annual rainfall of 2,436 mm (189 per cent above normal) was recorded in 1969. July is the district's wettest month, during which it receives about 312 mm of rain on average.

The district is prone to thunderstorms, which occur frequently in the hilly areas.

What led to flash floods on Tuesday?

The topography, combined with the continuous rainfall over the past few days, probably created the perfect scenario for triggering mudslides, debris slides and flash floods as experienced on Tuesday.

The increase in rainfall intensity owing to climate change has added to the pressure on glaciers and snow accumulated during the winter months. As a result, the deglaciation rate in the area has accelerated.

Rainfall of any intensity, if continuous, recorded over such high altitudes where Uttarkashi is located, can be disastrous. That is because this region is built on layers of mudslides over the past several centuries.

Uttarkashi district is situated along the southern Himalayan slope, where there is limited vegetation and no significant obstruction. Mild triggers such as rainfall or earthquakes can cause loose moraine and soil to easily slither downhill, swallowing homes and roads along its path.

Why was this rain not a 'cloudburst'?

A cloudburst has a very specific definition: Rainfall of 100 mm or more in an hour over a roughly 10 km x 10 km area is classified as a cloudburst event, according to the India Meteorological Department (IMD).

IMD's 24-hour rainfall data as of 8.30 am on Tuesday said Uttarkashi had received 2.7 mm. Also, between 8.30 am and 4.30 pm, rainfall across various meteorological stations in Uttarkashi was well below the threshold defined for a cloudburst, IMD data show.

There has been heavier rainfall in other parts of Uttarakhand over the last three days. For instance, the 24-hour rainfall recorded over the plains of Haridwar was 300 mm on Tuesday.

11. Loan fraud case: ED investigation against Anil Ambani



Anil Ambani at the ED office in Delhi, on Tuesday, August 5, 2025.

Five years after he was questioned in the Yes Bank loan fraud case, industrialist Anil Ambani is once again under the scrutiny of investigative agencies. On July 24, the Enforcement Directorate (ED) raided premises linked to his companies in connection with a Rs 17,000 crore alleged money laundering investigation. Anil Ambani appeared before ED investigators on Tuesday.

The ED action came some days after the State Bank of India classified the loan account of one of his companies as fraudulent, and markets regulator Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI) issued an order detailing a systematic diversion of funds.

ED's investigation

The investigation flows from FIRs registered earlier by the CBI and inputs from institutions including SEBI, National Housing Bank (NHB), and Bank of Baroda, and covers several Reliance Anil Dhirubhai Ambani Group companies including Reliance Infrastructure, Reliance Power, Reliance Communications, and Reliance Home Finance Ltd (RHFL).

The ED suspects a scheme of loan fraud and diversion of funds involving thousands of crores. Loans extended by RHFL and Reliance Commercial Finance Ltd were allegedly routed to group companies and shell firms, bypassing norms and creating a false impression of loan performance through evergreening.

According to the preliminary investigation:

- * A Rs 3,000 crore loan from Yes Bank (2017-19) was allegedly diverted soon after disbursal. In some cases, the loan was sanctioned before due diligence, and backdated documentation was used.
- * Loans were allegedly onward lent on the day of sanction, often to firms with common addresses and directors.
- * "C Company", an undisclosed related party, was used to route funds without disclosure. Reliance Infrastructure allegedly diverted Rs 10,000 crore in this way.

Story continues below this ad

- * The group allegedly took a haircut of Rs 5,480 crore, receiving only Rs 4 crore in cash and the rest in inactive power distribution companies, with no chance of recovery.

ED actions so far

The July 24 searches covered 35 premises, including 50 companies and 25 individuals, including senior Reliance Group officials.

On August 5, Anil Ambani is learnt to have told the ED that he had no knowledge of several of the alleged fraudulent transactions and loan disbursements, and asked for a week's time to verify the details. The agency has written to a dozen banks including SBI, Axis Bank, ICICI Bank, and HDFC Bank, asking for details of due diligence on loans sanctioned to his companies, including RHFL and Reliance Communications.

On August 4, Partha Sarathi Biswal, managing director of Biswal Tradelink Pvt Ltd (BTPL), was arrested for allegedly arranging fake bank guarantees worth Rs 68.2 crore that were provided by Reliance Power for a Solar Energy Corporation of India (SECI) tender.

The ED is also examining the role of Yes Bank officials and probing possible quid pro quo. Under the scanner is a Rs 2,850 crore investment by Reliance Mutual Fund in AT-1 bonds of Yes Bank.

SBI loan fraud case

On June 13, SBI, in accordance with the Reserve Bank of India's directions on fraud risk management, classified Reliance Communications, along with promoter director Anil Ambani, as "fraud". The bank is in the process of lodging a complaint with the CBI.

SBI's credit exposure in RCom includes fund-based principal outstanding amount of Rs 2,227.64 crore along with accrued interest and expenses with effect from August 26, 2016, and non-fund-based bank guarantee of Rs 786.52 crore.

The loan was declared fraudulent on the ground that the company had used the funds in violation of "agreed terms", and due to "irregularities observed in the conduct of the account of Reliance Communications".

RCom has said that it is undergoing a corporate insolvency resolution process, and has earlier reported outstanding debt of Rs 40,400 crore. The company has said that the loans referred to by SBI pertain to the period before the insolvency resolution process, and are required to be resolved through the process.

SEBI's findings

In a strong order earlier this year, SEBI laid out how RHFL and its key executives, including Anil Ambani, allegedly orchestrated a fraud on public investors and shareholders.

* Rs 12,487 crore in loans were disbursed to 47 shell companies (Potentially Indirectly Linked Entities) between FY17 and FY19.

* Many of these companies shared common addresses, directors, or email domains with Anil Ambani group firms.

* Deviations from credit policies were routine: loans disbursed on the day of application, backdated sanction memos, incomplete documentation, no security creation.

* Loans were allegedly routed to repay earlier loans — an evergreening loop that misrepresented financial health.

* A forensic audit by Grant Thornton found that in many cases, the funds ended up back with group companies like Reliance Capital, Reliance Infra, and Reliance Big Entertainment.

* SEBI said the GPCL (General Purpose Corporate Loan) scheme was a facade for diversion. It restrained Anil Ambani and top company executives from accessing the securities market, pending further proceedings.

Anil Ambani's troubles

The developments have come as Anil Ambani was trying to rebuild after years of financial and reputational setbacks.

His troubles began soon after the high-profile split with brother Mukesh Ambani. Companies such as Reliance Communications, Reliance Capital, and Reliance Power collapsed under financial strain — RCom shut down operations in 2019 with liabilities exceeding Rs 46,000 crore.

The downfall was marked by defaults, insolvency proceedings, and regulatory actions, including a five-year SEBI ban on Anil Ambani for allegedly orchestrating a scheme to siphon off funds.

His troubles extended to defence and infrastructure ventures. Reliance Naval failed to deliver key defence contracts and entered bankruptcy. Other high-profile ventures like Dassault Reliance Aerospace played only modest roles in India's defence sector. Anil Ambani stepped down from several board positions, and group assets were either sold or restructured through insolvency proceedings.

A slow turnaround began in 2022. The group pivoted to clean energy, infrastructure, and defence manufacturing. Reliance Power achieved zero debt, and new defence partnerships were forged with European companies.

12. Why Sylheti is not a 'Bangladeshi language'



Sylheti script. (Source Wikipedia)

Amid a roiling controversy triggered by a Delhi Police letter seemingly referring to Bengali as the "Bangladeshi national language," a social media post by BJP leader Amit Malviya has sparked an outcry in Assam's Barak Valley.

In his defence of the letter, Malviya claimed it was referring to “a set of dialects, syntax, and speech patterns that are distinctly different from the Bangla spoken in India”, and gave the example of “Sylheti” as being “nearly incomprehensible to Indian Bengalis”.

What is Sylheti? What is the history of its speakers? And why have Malviya’s comments touched a raw nerve in Assam?

Dialect or language?

Sylheti is spoken on both sides of the border, in the Sylhet Division of Bangladesh as well as the Barak Valley Division of southern Assam. There is also a sizable presence of Sylheti-speakers in neighbouring Meghalaya and Tripura.

“Every language has dialects and Bengali has several of them,” said Joydeep Biswas, who teaches economics in Cachar College.

The primary argument for referring to Sylheti as a dialect of Bengali — and not a language in its own right — is mutual intelligibility, that is, speakers of both tongues understand each other. However, there is significant scholarly disagreement on the matter.

“The claim of mutual intelligibility by some speakers of both Sylheti and Bengali may be more an effect of the speakers’ exposure to both languages,” linguists Candide Simard, Sarah M Dopierala, and E Marie Thaut wrote in ‘Introducing the Sylheti language and its speakers’ (2020).

“Sylheti-speaking areas of Bangladesh and India are characterised by diglossia, where standard Bengali is the language of education and literacy and Sylheti is the vernacular variety used in everyday interactions,” the linguists wrote.



Speakers on both sides of the border nonetheless have a strong affinity to the Bengali language, and often identify as Bengali themselves.

“Families such as mine also speak Sylheti. But I identify my linguistic identity as Bengali because Sylheti is a dialect. Even if non-Sylhetis do not understand Sylheti, that doesn’t take away the [Bengali] linguistic identity of the Sylheti people,” Biswas said.

Tapodhir Bhattacharjee, a former vice-chancellor of Assam University Silchar and a Bengali literary theorist, said that the primary difference between the Sylheti dialect and standardised Bengali is phonetical, while the two are almost identical in morphology and syntax.

While Bhattacharjee recognises that there was once a Sylhet-Nagri script — the existence of a unique system of writing is often seen as a marker of a language — he refers to it as an “esoteric script”.

“It was never a common script used by all. It came into existence in the late medieval ages in Muslim society due to Persian influence. It was mostly used by Sufi fakirs in texts to express their mystic approach towards the Almighty,” he said.

Sylhet, Partition & migration

Historian Ashfaque Hossain refers to Sylhet as historically being “a frontier of Bengal”.

The present-day Sylhet Division in Bangladesh, comprising the districts of Habibganj, Sunamganj, Sylhet, and Moulvibazar, was made a part of Assam soon after it was split from Bengal in 1874.

“Although vast in area, this new province [Assam], with its population of 2.4 million, had a low revenue potential... To make it financially viable... [the British] decided in September 1874 to annex the Bengali-speaking and populous district of Sylhet. With its population of 1.7 million, Sylhet had been historically an integral part of Bengal,” Hossain wrote in ‘The Making and Unmaking of Assam-Bengal Borders and the Sylhet Referendum’ (2013).

Geographically contiguous with Cachar in the Bengali-majority Barak Valley, between 1874 and 1947, Sylhet witnessed a sustained churn over the question of whether it should be a part of Assam or Bengal. “On one side, this was a matter of Bengali versus Assamese, and on the other, Hindu versus Muslim,” Hossain wrote.

Historian Anindita Dasgupta wrote in ‘Remembering Sylhet: A Forgotten Story of India’s 1947 Partition’, “... the Hindus of Sylhet demanded for a return to the more “advanced” Bengal, whereas the Muslims by and large preferred to remain in Assam where its leaders, along with the Assamese Muslims, found a more powerful political voice...”

But come 1947, this situation reversed. Now the Hindus of Sylhet demanded to remain in Assam, and hence India, while the Muslims sought to join East Pakistan. This culminated in a controversial referendum on July 6 and 7, 1947 which sealed the fate of the region: 2,39,619 of the valid votes were for joining East Pakistan and 1,84,041 were for remaining in India.

When the official border was finally revealed in August, a part of Sylhet, comprising present-day Sribhumi (formerly Karimganj) district in the Barak Valley, remained in Indian Assam. In the initial years after Partition, a wave of Hindu Sylheti refugees settled in this region.

The story of Sylheti migration to parts of present-day Assam, Meghalaya and Tripura, however, is even older. Dasgupta wrote about “Sylheti Hindu bhodroluk” who were “economic migrants” across the region.

“Sylheti middle-class economic migrants to the Brahmaputra Valley and Cachar areas were a population in motion in colonial Assam, moving back and forth, many with simultaneous homes in both Sylhet and the Brahmaputra Valley districts and Cachar since the late nineteenth century,” she wrote in ‘Denial and resistance: Sylheti Partition ‘refugees’ in Assam’ (2001).

The Census of 1901 noted that “Sylhetis who are good clerks and are enterprising traders are found, in small numbers, in most of the districts of the province [Assam]”. There was thus a significant population of Sylhetis in what is now India well before East Pakistan, let alone Bangladesh, was even imagined.

Outrage in Barak Valley

The Hindu Bengalis of the Barak Valley are one of the strongest support bases for the BJP in Assam.

Malviya’s claim of the dialect being “a shorthand for the linguistic markers used to profile illegal immigrants from Bangladesh” has thus drawn strong reactions not only from the BJP’s political opponents in the Barak Valley but from within the party.

“Even today, at least three MPs and several state legislators across Assam and Tripura speak Sylheti natively... Over 7 million people in Northeast India — across Barak Valley, parts of Meghalaya and Tripura — speak Sylheti. They are proud Indian and Bengalis. To dismiss their language as something foreign, or ‘non-Bengali,’ is to rub salt in the wounds of a people already scarred by Partition,” prominent BJP leader and former Silchar MP Rajdeep Roy posted on X.

13. In 12 years, 5 billion starfish ‘wasted away’ from a mysterious disease: How culprit was finally found



Starfish perform a vital function in the marine ecosystem, maintaining a stable food chain. (Photo: Wikimedia Commons)

Twelve years after a mysterious disease started killing off starfish in droves — more than 5 billion are estimated to have died since 2013 — scientists have found the culprit to be a bacterium.

The starfish, or sea stars, of various species were dying off a wasting disease, in which their limbs fell off and their bodies melted away to leave just a pile of gunk. The epidemic was found along the Pacific coast of North America, all the way from the freezing waters off Alaska to the warmer shores of Mexico.

Till a few years ago, scientists believed a virus was causing the outbreak. However, a study published in the journal Nature on August 5 said the starfish were falling victim to *Vibrio pectenicida*, which is related to the bacteria that causes cholera in humans.

Why was this epidemic a cause for major concern, and how has the bacterium responsible finally been found?

The problem

The wasting disease was impacting whole populations of starfish, but the worst affected were sunflower sea stars, which lost almost 90 per cent of their population.

Starfish perform a vital function in the marine ecosystem, maintaining a stable food chain. When billions of starfish died, the population of sea urchins, which they feed on, exploded. These sea urchins started eating away whole forests of kelp, a seaweed other marine animals thrive on and which helps sequester carbon.

How did scientists find the bacterium responsible?

It was a long process. While studies earlier focused on a virus type called the densovirus, it was later found to occur naturally in some starfish.

Also, some studies were examining the tissue samples of the dead starfish, when the bacterium was in fact present in the coelomic fluid, the equivalent of starfish blood.

The breakthrough came at the Hakai Institute in British Columbia, Canada, where scientists raised sunflower sea stars in the labs, and then began exposing them to the infected starfish in various ways, like bringing them physically in contact with diseased body parts or injecting mixtures from such parts. It was found that injections passed on the infection, but not when their contents had been treated with heat. In effect, boiling was killing off the cause of the disease, pointing to a bacterium.

The scientists then examined the coelomic fluid of both healthy and infected starfish. Dr Alyssa Gehmanopens, co-author of the study, was quoted by the UK's National History Museum as saying, "When we compared the coelomic fluid of exposed and healthy sea stars, there was basically one thing different: *Vibrio*. We all had chills. We thought, 'That's it. We have it. That's what causes wasting'."

However, they conducted further confirmatory tests, by injecting the bacterium in healthy starfish, and examining sea water before and after an outbreak.

How will this finding help?

Understanding the cause of a disease is of course the first step to treating it. Scientists will now see if starfish in the sea can be given probiotics to fight off the bacteria, and if *Vibrio*-resistant starfish can be grown in labs and introduced into the wild, among other measures.

Is there need for caution?

Yes. "It's absolutely critical not to jump the gun...It's really, really hard to do these type of experiments, and particularly the interpretation of it is somewhat difficult," Cornell marine biologist Ian Hewson

told The Washington Post. He pointed out that the study was carried out on only one type of starfish, and also injecting a starfish in a lab may throw up different results from what actually happens in the ocean.

To add to this, the environment in an ocean is highly changeable, unlike the controlled surroundings of a lab.

14. Judicial overreach

The Supreme Court's remarks on Rahul Gandhi threaten democratic dissent

The Supreme Court of India's recent handling of defamation charges against Congress leader Rahul Gandhi marks a troubling shift from established norms of free speech and jurisprudence on constitutional protections for political discourse. This became clear when the Bench led by Justice Dipankar Datta, while staying the proceedings on Mr. Gandhi's remarks on the Galwan clash in 2020, made problematic oral observations. Among others, Justice Datta said that had Mr. Gandhi been a "true Indian", he would not have said what he did.

The Court's primary function is to adjudicate on questions of law and constitutional principle rather than to prescribe standards of national loyalty. In a democracy, surely a 'true Indian' is one who fearlessly pursues the truth and holds the government accountable — not one who accepts official narratives without question. Mr. Gandhi's commentary, in which he questioned the government's border policies and drew attention to credible reports of Chinese intrusions, also fell well within the legitimate ambit of Opposition politics. This critiquing does not, and must not be seen to, undermine the nation. Such criticism is protected by the principles of free speech and is indispensable for a healthy public discourse. The Court's remarks, by implying otherwise, risk chilling legitimate dissent and setting an inimical precedent for future Opposition conduct.

Equally, Mr. Gandhi's statements regarding Chinese occupation of Indian territory and confrontations are not without backing in public and governmental sources. Open-source satellite imagery, parliamentary discussions, and journalistic reports have documented the aftermath of the Galwan Valley clash, including new Chinese activities along the Line of Actual Control (LAC). A parliamentary committee report has acknowledged the loss of access to certain patrol points in eastern Ladakh. Military officials and independent analysts have corroborated, at various times, the ongoing disputes and loss of patrolling rights over substantial stretches of territory, including parts of Ladakh's Galwan and Depsang areas. Local residents are also unable to access grazing lands.

The loss of about 2,000 square kilometres, cited by Mr. Gandhi, is also based on estimates by independent defence experts studying China's LAC transgressions. The general thrust of Mr. Gandhi's remarks — i.e., China has altered the status quo to India's disadvantage and that the government's public statements have not always aligned with ground realities — is supported by public evidence. Thus, the Court must resist the temptation to offer moral or patriotic judgments and instead direct its considerable energies to the rigorous and impartial adjudication of legal questions. Only by adhering to this principle can the Court reinforce its legitimacy and protect the tenets of free and open public debate.

15. What is the potential of biochar?

The story so far

With the Indian carbon market set to be launched in 2026, CO2 removal technologies such as biochar are expected to play a crucial role. Biochar is a type of charcoal rich in carbon and is produced from agricultural residue and organic municipal solid waste. It offers a sustainable alternative to manage

waste and capture carbon. However, to truly serve as a scalable pathway for negative emissions across sectors, biochar requires participation and support from multiple stakeholders.

What is biochar's potential?

India generates over 600 million metric tonnes of agricultural residue and over 60 million tonnes of municipal solid waste every year. A significant portion of both is burnt openly or dumped in landfills, leading to air pollution from particulate matter and greenhouse gases such as methane, nitrous oxide, and CO₂.

By using 30% to 50% of surplus waste, India can produce 15-26 million tonnes of biochar and remove 0.1 gigatonnes of CO₂-equivalent annually. Byproducts of biochar production, such as syngas (20-30 million tonnes) and bio-oil (24-40 million tonnes), can generate additional electricity and fuels. Theoretically, utilising syngas could generate around 8-13 TWh of power, equivalent to 0.5-0.7% of India's annual electricity generation, replacing 0.4-0.7 million tonnes of coal per year. Bio-oil can likewise potentially offset 12-19 million tonnes (or 8%) of diesel or kerosene production annually, leading to lower crude oil imports and reducing more than 2% of India's total fossil-fuel-based emissions.

How can biochar be a carbon sink?

Biochar can hold carbon in the soil for 100-1,000 years due to its strong and stable characteristics, making it an effective long-term carbon sink. Its application across different sectors provides scalable opportunities for reducing emissions.

In agriculture, applying biochar can improve water retention, particularly in semi-dry and nutrient-depleted soils. This, in turn, can abate nitrous oxide emissions by 30-50%. Notably, nitrous oxide is a greenhouse gas with 273-times the warming potential of CO₂, making its mitigation a crucial benefit of biochar.

Biochar can also enhance soil organic carbon, helping restore degraded soils.

In carbon capture applications, modified biochar can adsorb CO₂ from industrial exhaust gases. However, its carbon removal efficiency is currently lower than that of conventional methods.

In the construction sector, biochar can be explored as a low-carbon alternative to building materials. Adding 2-5% of biochar to concrete can improve mechanical strength, increase heat resistance by 20%, and capture 115 kg of CO₂ per cubic metre, making building materials a stable carbon sink.

In wastewater treatment, biochar offers a low-cost and effective option to reduce pollution. India generates more than 70 billion litres of wastewater every day, of which 72% is left untreated. A kilogram of biochar, along with other substances, can treat 200-500 litres of wastewater, implying a biochar demand potential of 2.5-6.3 million tonnes.

What hinders biochar's application?

Despite its theoretically substantial potential to capture carbon, biochar remains underrepresented in carbon credit systems due to the absence of standardised feedstock markets and consistent carbon accounting methods, which undermine investor confidence.

While research confirms biochar's technical feasibility for applications across sectors, deployments are hindered by barriers such as limited resources, evolving technologies, market uncertainties, and insufficient policy support. Viable business models are yet to emerge for large-scale adoption. Market development is further constrained by limited awareness among stakeholders, weak 'monitoring,

reporting, verification' frameworks, and a lack of coordination across areas such as agriculture, energy, and climate policy.

To enable large-scale adoption, sustained support for R&D is essential to create region-specific feedstock standards and to optimise biomass utilisation rates based on agro-climatic zones and crop types. Further, biochar should be systematically integrated into existing and upcoming frameworks, including crop residue management schemes, bioenergy initiatives in both urban and rural contexts, and state-level climate strategies under the State Action Plans on Climate Change. Recognising biochar as a verifiable carbon removal pathway within the Indian carbon market will generate additional income for investors and farmers through carbon credits. Deploying biochar production equipment at the village level has the potential to create approximately 5.2 lakh rural jobs, linking climate action with inclusive economic development. The additional benefits of biochar, such as better soil health, lower fertilizer requirement (by 10-20%), and higher crop yield (by 10-25%), should be systematically integrated into policy and market frameworks to fully realise its potential.

In sum, although biochar is not a silver bullet, it offers a science-backed multisectoral pathway for India to achieve its climate and development goals.