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BENGALURU**

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WEEKLY NEWS COMPILATION

A CRISP AND COMPREHENSIVE CURRENT AFFAIRS CAPSULE

MARCH WEEK 4

23-03-2026 TO 28-03-2026

**IRAN GRANTS
HORMUZ
PASSAGE
TO INDIA AND 4
OTHER NATIONS**

**NATIONAL COAL
GASIFICATION
MISSION**

**2014 NALSA VERSUS
UNION OF INDIA
VERDICT**

**CAPF-GENERAL
ADMINISTRATION
BILL**

**SC STATUS ONLY
FOR HINDUS,
BUDDHISTS, SIKHS**

❖ Will completely close Hormuz Strait: Iran after Trump's threat

Context: U.S. President had threatened to 'obliterate' Iran's power plants if Tehran did not fully reopen the Strait within 48 hours; hitting back, Iran's Parliament Speaker says critical infrastructure in West Asia could be 'irreversibly destroyed' if attacked

- The Iranian military threatened to completely shut down the strategic Strait of Hormuz and attack U.S. infrastructure, including energy facilities in the Gulf, if U.S. President Donald Trump acts on threats to target the country's power plants.
- Mr. Trump on Saturday threatened to "obliterate" Iran's power plants if Tehran did not fully reopen the Strait of Hormuz within 48 hours, suggesting a significant escalation barely a day after he talked about "winding down" the war, now in its fourth week.
- Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent said that the U.S. may need to "escalate" its attacks against Iran to be able to wind down the war. Asked if Mr. Trump was winding down or escalating the war, he said: "They're not mutually exclusive. Sometimes you have to escalate to de-escalate."
- The strait has been effectively closed since the start of the war, sparked by U.S.-Israeli bombardment of Iran. The conflict has since spread across West Asia, with Iran responding with attacks on Israel and U.S. interests in the region.
- "If the U.S.'s threats regarding Iran's power plants are carried out... the Strait of Hormuz will be completely closed, and it will not be reopened until our destroyed power plants are rebuilt," military's operational command Khatam Al-Anbiya said.
- Iran's Parliament Speaker Mohammad Baqer Ghalibaf wrote on X that critical infrastructure in West Asia could be "irreversibly destroyed" should Iranian power plants be attacked.
- The military command said it would also strike Israel's "power plants, energy, and information and communications technology (ICT) infrastructure", along with power plants in regional countries hosting U.S. bases and companies with U.S. shareholders.
- The Islamic Republic's power grid is deeply intertwined with its energy sector. Striking major plants could trigger blackouts, crippling everything from pumps and refineries to export terminals and military command centres. While some Gulf desert states such as Saudi Arabia, Oman and the UAE have access to more than one sea to draw water from for desalination, Qatar, Bahrain and Kuwait are crowded along the shoreline of the Gulf with no other coastline.
- Earlier in the day, Iranian media reports quoted Iran's representative to the U.N. maritime agency as saying that the Strait of Hormuz remains open to all shipping except vessels linked to "Iran's enemies". Ali Mousavi's comments came from an interview published on Friday by the Chinese news agency Xinhua, much before Mr. Trump's ultimatum.

- Meanwhile, Iran’s Parliament is mulling imposing tolls on shipping through the strait, with Speaker Ghalibaf saying maritime traffic would “not return to its pre-war status”.
- Traffic through the vital strait has been brought to a near-standstill since the start of the war, that has so far killed over 2,000 people. A relatively small number of vessels have been able to transit it — around 5% of its pre-war volume, according to analytics firm Kpler. Iranian forces have attacked multiple vessels, saying they failed to heed “warnings” against transiting the waterway.
- In recent days, Iran has allowed some vessels from countries it considers friendly to pass, while warning it would block ships from countries it says have joined the “aggression” against it.
- Meanwhile, the exiled son of Iran’s last shah Reza Pahlavi called on Mr. Trump and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to refrain from targeting Iran’s civilian infrastructure, because it “belongs to the Iranian people and to the future of a free Iran.”

❖ State to take all-party delegation to Centre seeking nod for Mahadayi basin projects

Context: The State government will take an all-party delegation of members of Parliament and other leaders to the Union government to seek clearance for Mahadayi basin projects, Satish Jarkiholi, Public Works Minister and Belagavi district in-charge Minister, said in Belagavi.

- “Kalasa and Banduri Nala projects are getting delayed owing to non clearance of our application by the National Wildlife Board. We have already got other clearances from the Centre. We have also prepared the detailed project reports. But we cannot start work until the NWB gives its assent. We therefore plan to urge the Department of Forests and Environment to clear our project proposals,” he said.
- Another delegation will go to Maharashtra to request release of additional water from its reservoirs to the Krishna. “We have lost about 2.5 to 3.5 tmcft of water owing to the damage to Gate No. 22 of the Hipparagi barrage. We will soon take a delegation to Maharashtra,” he said.

❖ KIA ranked 11th most punctual large airport in Feb.

Context: The Kempegowda International Airport (KIA) was ranked the 11th most punctual airport among large airports in February 2026, according to aviation analytics firm Cirium’s On-time Performance (OTP) monthly report for airlines and airports.

- The KIA, which has led the large airports category as the most punctual airport several times in the past, did not make it to the top 20 most on-time large airports list in January this year.
- According to the report, in February, KIA served 109 routes and recorded an on-time departure of 84.86%.

- The only other large Indian airport to feature in the February list was the Chennai International Airport, which secured the 10th position among the most punctual airports with an on-time departure of 85.23%.
- The Chennai airport served 67 routes. Harbin Taiping International Airport in China was the most punctual large airport, followed by Mexico City Benito Juárez International Airport, and Houston George Bush Intercontinental Airport in February.
- In the Cirium OTP Review 2025, KIA featured among the top 20 in the large airport category. The airport was ranked 11th with an on-time departure of 82.83%.
- The only other Indian airport to feature among the top 20 was the Chennai International Airport which bagged the 12th spot.

❖ India's dual dependence on West Asia for urea production

Context: Data indicate that the West Asian conflict threatens both domestic urea production and the stability of its global supply chain.

- The ongoing conflict in West Asia has disrupted global trade, leading to LPG shortages and a surge in crude oil prices. Data show that the crisis could also affect India's supply of Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG), putting at risk the production of urea, a key fertilizer in the country's majorly agrarian economy.
- The conflict has already started to impact India's urea supply. As of Sunday, industry sources told PTI that the country's urea plants are running at half capacity, with Petronet LNG Ltd, which operates India's largest liquefied natural gas receiving terminal, declaring force majeure amid disruptions to cargoes. The move triggered supply curtailments by state-owned gas distributors GAIL (India) Ltd, Indian Oil Corporation Ltd and Bharat Petroleum Corporation Ltd.
- India is heavily dependent on imports for its LNG supply, exposing many of its sectors to global shocks such as the U.S.-Israel attacks on Iran. Data show that in 2025, India bought more than 50% of its natural gas from the international market (Chart 1). In fact, India is the fourth largest buyer of natural gas in the world, with an imported supply of 261 lakh metric tonnes in 2025.
- A majority of these imports — more than 40% of it — are tied to long-term contracts with suppliers in Qatar (Chart 2). This supply may be in jeopardy as Qatar's LNG cargoes pass through the Strait of Hormuz, which has now become a central chokepoint in the Iran-Israel conflict. The UAE and Oman also ship LNG along this route, and both countries contribute to India's imported LNG supply. Overall, more than 60% of India's imported LNG could be affected by the closure of the Strait.
- In India, natural gas is primarily used to produce ammonia, which in turn is used to produce fertilizers. In FY26, about 30% of India's LNG supply was used for the production of fertilizers (Chart 3). Demand also comes from industry and gas-fired power and city gas networks which supply to households and vehicles.
- LNG is the main feedstock for the production of urea, which is the most widely used fertilizer in India. Many urea plants use naphtha or fuel oil — both derived from crude oil — as their main input. However, as urea production is a highly energy-intensive process, these plants have switched to natural gas, which produces fewer emissions.

- National urea consumption hit 387 lakh metric tonnes in 2025, following a decade of steady growth. While domestic production has also been increasing (India produced about 306 lakh metric tonnes of urea in 2025), it does not cover the country's demand. Due to this, India also relies on imports of urea.
- Data indicate that the West Asian conflict threatens both domestic urea production and the stability of its supply chain. In 2025, India's urea imports exceeded 2,300 lakh metric tonnes, with a staggering 71% of these imports coming from West Asia (Chart 4). This total comprises 45% from Oman and a combined 26% from Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE, all of which rely on the Strait of Hormuz for transit.
- Amidst this scenario, the Government of India issued the Natural Gas (Supply Regulation) Order, 2026, officially including the fertilizer sector in its priority list.
- The government also stated that as of March 10, India's urea reserves have reached 61.51 lakh metric tonnes, about 10 lakh more than last year, ahead of the Kharif sowing season. However, only time can tell if India's import dependence for both domestic production and global supply trade will weather the ongoing geopolitical instability.

❖ Modi sets new record with 8,931 days in public office

Context: Prime Minister Narendra Modi became the longest-serving head of a government in India, serving 8,931 days in office, first as the Chief Minister of Gujarat and now as the Prime Minister. He has surpassed former Sikkim Chief Minister Pawan Chamling's record of 8,930 days in office.

- Cabinet colleagues congratulated Mr. Modi, with Defence Minister Rajnath Singh lauding his "pure devotion to the nation and its people" and Home Minister Amit Shah terming it a "milestone rooted in service, hard work and unwavering commitment".
- "Modiji's decades of seva have shaped an era of their own. Whether it is giving the poor their rights, setting new landmarks in development or enhancing the nation's pride on global platforms, the Modi Era has transformed India unrecognisably," Mr. Shah said in a post on X.
- Highways Minister Nitin Gadkari said it "stands as a testament to enduring public trust and a lifelong mission devoted to Bharat's growth and progress".

❖ India watches closely as Gor visits Sri Lanka, Maldives

Context: United States Ambassador to India Sergio Gor's visit to Sri Lanka — his first visit in the region in his role as U.S. Special Envoy for South Asia — is a "quiet strategic signal", said experts, as it comes amid the war in West Asia, and U.S. action in the Indian Ocean.

- While the Narendra Modi government has made no comment about the visit, Mr. Gor met National Security Adviser Ajit Doval before embarking on the six-day (March 19-24) regional tour of Sri Lanka and the Maldives, and the government is understood to be watching its outcomes carefully.

- India's response to Mr. Gor's position contrasts with the last time the U.S. nominated a Special Envoy for the region. In 2009, when the Obama administration nominated Richard Holbrooke, the government had protested vociferously, calling a "broad mandate" for the envoy "risky" and "interfering", according to diplomatic cables released by Wikileaks in 2016, and the U.S. had backtracked, appointing him and subsequently Zalmay Khalilzad only as Special Representatives for Afghanistan and Pakistan (SRAPs).
- Prior to Mr. Gor, South Asia was dealt with bilaterally via U.S. Ambassadors in each capital, and by the Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia, a position currently occupied by S. Paul Kapur.
- This time around, Mr. Gor has a much broader mandate, with U.S. President Donald Trump appointing him as his Special Envoy to South and Central Asia in August 2025.
- Mr. Gor has already made visits to Central Asian capitals as Special Envoy, and also travelled to Bhutan last week, although that was in his capacity as Ambassador to Bhutan, where he is concurrently accredited. All eyes will be on whether Mr. Gor would travel next to Pakistan and Bangladesh, and whether his role as Special Envoy would also include any attempts to mediate between India and its neighbours, which it would oppose.
- In addition, experts and officials said Mr. Gor's visit is being tracked particularly as South Asia appears to be drawn in to the U.S.-Israel war with Iran, with a U.S. submarine bombing the Iranian ship IRIS Dena, and the latest Iranian strikes towards the U.S.-United Kingdom's Diego Garcia base.
- "Sergio Gor's visit to Colombo is best read as a quiet strategic signal rather than a substantive breakthrough: the United States is reasserting a calibrated presence in the Indian Ocean at a moment when tensions in [West Asia] are spilling into the maritime space," said former Foreign Secretary and Ambassador to the U.S. and China Nirupama Menon Rao, who pointed out that Sri Lanka had balanced the optics of the visit carefully.
- Visiting the Colombo Port, Mr. Gor said in a post that it was "clear how this critical hub connects South Asia to global markets — and why maritime security here matters". Sri Lankan President Anura Kumara Dissanayake also "briefed" Mr. Gor's delegation on the "ongoing conflict situation in the Middle East, as well as the challenges faced by the country in light of these developments". Mr. Gor's travel to Sri Lanka came two weeks after the Iranian ship IRIS Dena was torpedoed by a U.S. submarine close to Sri Lankan waters, and Mr. Dissanayake refused U.S. warplanes permission to land in Sri Lanka's Mattala airport during the war.
- Former Sri Lankan Foreign Secretary and Ambassador to the U.S. Prasad Kariyawasam said that the visit of Mr. Gor was a positive development.
- "It's very good that high-level contacts are maintained actively with the USA in the context of the war, given that U.S. is a leading maritime power in the Indian Ocean and that Iran is highly connected with Indian Ocean countries", Mr. Kariyawasam told The Hindu.

Context: Standing Committee led by DMK MP asks Food Ministry to strengthen its procurement planning and coordination with States to minimise the gap between estimated and actual procurement.

- Expressing concern that actual procurement of rice and wheat has consistently remained below estimates in recent years and below targets in States such as Bihar, Gujarat, Punjab, and Uttar Pradesh, the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Consumer Affairs, Food, and Public Distribution, headed by DMK MP Kanimozhi, has asked the Union Food Ministry to strengthen its procurement planning and coordination with States to minimise the gap between estimated and actual procurement of both the food grains.
- In a report on the Demands for Grants of the Department of Food and Public Distribution, the panel noted that since 2022-23, the procurement of wheat and rice had been less than 30% of the total production.
- “Moreover, actual procurement of wheat has been 76.71%, 71.35% and 87.29% of the estimate for the years 2023-24, 2024-25 and 2025-26 respectively. Similarly, the actual procurement of rice has been less than target since 2022-23,” the report revealed.
- During the kharif marketing season of 2024-25, the procurement of rice from Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, and Punjab was 25.60 lakh tonnes, 0.003 lakh tonnes, and 116.13 lakh tonnes against the target of 35 lakh tonnes, 5.29 lakh tonnes, and 124 lakh tonnes, respectively, the panel said.
- Similarly, during the rabi marketing season of 2025-26, the procurement of wheat was less than the target in the States of Bihar, Gujarat, Punjab, and Uttar Pradesh, it added.

Multiple factors at play

- The government told the panel that any fluctuation in estimated production and actual production resulted in variation in procurement. “Procurement depends on multiple factors like production, market surplus, minimum support price (MSP), prevailing market rates, demand-supply situation, and participation of private traders, etc., the government informed.
- Noting these factors, the panel asked the government to strengthen its procurement planning and coordination with the States to minimise the gap between estimated and actual procurement of wheat and rice.
- “While noting the Department’s submission that procurement levels are influenced by multiple factors, the Committee is concerned that actual procurement has consistently remained below estimates in recent years and below targets in several States,” the report said.
- The panel asked the Union government to review the methodology used for estimating procurement requirements, enhance real-time monitoring of production and market arrivals, and work closely with State governments — particularly in States where procurement has significantly fallen short of targets — to ensure that procurement operations are more realistic, responsive and effective. It asked the government to apprise it of the corrective measures taken on the suggestions.

❖ Details sought on inquiry, prosecution wings of the Lokpal

Context: A parliamentary committee has sought details of what is being done to fully operationalise the inquiry and prosecution wings of the Lokpal, over a decade after a law governing it was enacted.

- The law governing the anti-corruption ombudsman — The Lokpal and Lokayuktas Act 2013 — came into force on January 1, 2014. However, it began functioning only on March 27, 2019, following the appointment of its chairperson and members.
- To discharge its statutory functions, Section 11 of the Act obligates the Lokpal to constitute an inquiry wing to be led by a director of inquiry for conducting a preliminary inquiry into corruption-related offences.
- The Lokpal Act also has a provision for the constitution of a prosecution wing headed by the 'director of prosecution' for the prosecution of public servants.

Process ongoing

- In its latest report, the Department-related Parliamentary Standing Committee on Personnel, Public Grievances, Law and Justice noted that the appointment of the director of inquiry and staffing of the inquiry wing in accordance with the approved organogram is still in process.
- The committee, therefore, desires to be apprised of the present status of appointment of the director and the steps taken to operationalise the inquiry wing in its full statutory form, while ensuring coordination with existing investigative agencies, it said.
- The panel, in its 160th report, said the prosecution wing of the Lokpal had been formally constituted through an order dated June 6, 2025.
- The committee noted that, at present, matters relating to prosecution are being handled through the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI), which has its own prosecution mechanism.

❖ How agriPV can turn India's farms into dual-purpose powerhouses

Context: India's ambitious energy transition goals — to have 300 GW of installed solar capacity by 2030 and achieve net-zero emissions by 2070 — put land at a premium, and utility-scale solar projects require large tracts of land while agriculture is already under pressure from competing land use; agri-photovoltaics can ameliorate this conflict.

- In the 2026-27 Budget, the outlay for the PM-KUSUM scheme nearly doubled to ₹5,000 crore, signalling the government's renewed emphasis on increasing solar power production centred on India's farmers. Specifically, the scheme aims to provide energy and water security to farmers, enhance incomes, and decarbonise the farm sector through decentralised solar pumps and power plants.
- But as the scheme evolves, India also faces a question: how can solar be expanded on agricultural land without compromising food security?

- Agri-photovoltaics (agriPV) is emerging as a promising answer to this question. AgriPV integrates solar systems with farming, allowing farmers to generate electricity and cultivate crops on the same parcel of land. The panels are mounted at a suitable height to allow farm operations below, and are spaced between crop rows or integrated into greenhouses to minimise conflict between agricultural production and energy generation.

Selecting right crops

- The designs vary by crop and region. Elevated systems have panels mounted a few metres above ground to allow crops to grow below. Row-based systems have panels positioned between crop rows to minimise shading. Vertical systems use upright panels that can capture sunlight from both sides.
- Greenhouse-integrated systems feature solar panels on roofs or walls to maintain a controlled growing environment. The suitability of a design also depends on the local climate, irrigation practices, and the crop. So systematic and region-specific planning is essential to optimise both agricultural and energy yields.
- Careful crop selection is also key to the success of agriPV systems because the amount of sunlight available changes based on how solar panels are placed. Shade-tolerant crops generally perform well in partially shaded areas under solar panels while crops that need more sunlight grow better in the spaces between rows of panels.
- Crop selection also varies across India's diverse agro-climatic regions. For instance, suitable crop options include tomato, onion, garlic, turmeric, ginger, leafy vegetables, and tulsii in Madhya Pradesh, and ragi, jowar, grapes, tomato, potato, chillies, banana, and brinjal in Karnataka and Maharashtra — all of which can perform well in agriPV systems.
- Beyond technical considerations such as crop selection, the scalability of agriPV hinges on developing viable business models. Farmers can own and operate agriPV systems, use a portion of the electricity generated, and sell the surplus. With the help of Farmer Producer Organisations or cooperatives, multiple farmers can also aggregate land and collectively develop projects, enhancing their bargaining power and access to finance.
- Private developers could also lease farmland and share revenues or pay fixed rents to farmers. Alternatively, State governments or public agencies could develop agriPV systems to support local energy needs.

Why agriPV matters for India

- India's ambitious energy transition goals — to have 300 GW of installed solar capacity by 2030 and achieve net-zero emissions by 2070 — put land at a premium. Utility-scale solar projects require large tracts of land while agriculture is already under pressure from competing land uses.
- AgriPV can ameliorate this conflict. With more than half of India's land under agriculture, dual-use deployment is valuable. And in an economy that depends heavily on agriculture, the technology's appeal lies in both farmers diversifying their incomes and producing clean energy. Farmers can earn from selling electricity, leasing land or sharing revenues while continuing to cultivate.

- AgriPV also delivers environmental co-benefits. In certain agro-climatic conditions, partial shading can reduce evapotranspiration — the combined loss of water to the atmosphere through evaporation and plant transpiration — and soils retain more moisture, thus enhancing the overall water-use efficiency.
- Solar panels can also protect crops against extreme heat, rainfall, and hail. By lowering the farm's need for diesel, such systems can also support rural entrepreneurship and local economic growth. AgriPV can power ancillary services as well, including cold storage, food processing units, and chaff cutters, strengthening rural value chains. However, this requires clear governance frameworks, tariffs, and accessible finance.

Status in India

- There are around 50 pilot agriPV installations nationwide, with various panel-crop combinations and economic feasibility under evaluation. Recent policy discussions have also increasingly referenced agriPV but large-scale replication has yet to commence. Both policymakers and experts need more empirical evidence across agro-climatic zones to say which configurations, crop matrices, and financial frameworks are most suitable.
- The technology's large-scale adoption in India does face economic, regulatory, and institutional barriers. Elevated structures and specialised mounting systems significantly increase capital costs, well above those of conventional solar systems. A crop's responses to shading can vary and poorly designed systems may even reduce agricultural yields.
- System ownership between farmers and developers could also raise doubts, particularly if long-term land rights and revenue-sharing arrangements are not fully clear. Land classification, grid connectivity, and tariffs hinge on regulatory clarity and the lack of design benchmarks adds to investor uncertainty.

Policy pathways

- With the right policy support, agriPV has the potential to scale beyond pilot projects. Recent consultations on PM-KUSUM 2.0 have indicated that the government may include agriPV in a proposed 'National Agri-photovoltaics Mission' as a dedicated 10-GW component, with viability gap funding to offset the capital costs.
- Such measures could remarkably improve the bankability of agriPV projects and reduce the financial risk. Clearly recognising dual-use configurations within PM-KUSUM 2.0 could help align agriPV with farmer-centric solarisation. States can reinforce this by identifying suitable clusters, streamlining approvals, and integrating agriPV into farmer training and advisory programmes.
- As India rapidly advances in its energy transition, agriPV offers a pathway for renewable energy to complement agricultural productivity. Its inclusion under PM-KUSUM 2.0 could move it from scattered pilots to a more structured, scalable model, strengthening farmer incomes and easing land pressures.

❖ MPC: confirming new moons

Context: Last week, the Minor Planet Centre (MPC) announced 15 new moons had been found, four around Jupiter and 11 around Saturn. The Jovian moons were found by the U.S.-based Scott Sheppard and David Tholen and the Saturnian ones by a team led by Edward Ashton in Taiwan.

- The MPC is the world's primary repository for all observations of small bodies in the solar system. Located in Cambridge, Massachusetts, it operates at the Smithsonian Astrophysical Observatory under the International Astronomical Union, and plays a vital role in tracking asteroids, comets, and the moons of the outer planets.
- When astronomers discover a new object, they send their data to the MPC, where experts verify the observations and calculate the object's orbit. If the discovery is new, the MPC assigns it an official designation. This process ensures every known minor planet has a unique identity and a predictable path.
- One of the MPC's most critical jobs involves monitoring near-earth objects (NEOs). NEOs are space rocks that could potentially threaten the earth. With support from NASA's Planetary Defense Coordination Office, MPC maintains a large database that allows scientists to predict if and when a rock might come close to the earth.
- The MPC also facilitates communication within the global scientific community by publishing electronic circulars that alert researchers to new discoveries or interesting celestial events. These updates allow observatories worldwide to coordinate their efforts and gather more data quickly.

❖ Is compulsory voting feasible in the Indian context?

How can voter turnout be increased without making voting mandatory?

- The Election Commission has announced the poll schedule for five Assembly elections to be held in April-May 2026. In a separate hearing before the Supreme Court on a poll-related matter, the court raised questions regarding mandatory voting in elections.

What is the right to vote in India?

- Article 326 of the Constitution grants every citizen the right to vote without any discrimination. It provides that any citizen who is not less than 18 years old and is not otherwise disqualified under the Constitution or any law on certain grounds is entitled to be registered as a voter.
- Section 19 of the Representation of the People Act, 1950, requires a citizen to be at least 18 years old and ordinarily resident in a constituency to be registered as an elector. Section 62 of the Representation of the People Act, 1951, provides the right to vote to every person whose name is entered in the electoral roll of a constituency. In various cases, the Supreme Court has held that the right to vote is a statutory right.

Should voting be made compulsory?

- Voting is essential for a functional democracy, but it is neither a fundamental duty nor a legal duty in India. Proposals for compulsory voting have long been debated.

- The Dinesh Goswami Committee on electoral reforms, set up in 1990, did not favour compulsory voting, citing practical difficulties in implementation. Instead, it recommended improving voter participation through awareness campaigns.
- The Law Commission, in its 255th report (2015), discussed the issue in detail. Compulsory voting does result in increased voter turnout by an average of about 7%. Nevertheless, this increase in participation is a direct corollary of the severity and strict enforcement of penalties for not voting.
- Some democracies, such as Australia and several Latin American countries, have provisions for compulsory voting. In Australia, Argentina, and Brazil, voters may be fined if they fail to vote without valid reasons. In Peru, certain public goods and services are denied to non-voters.
- Penalising non-voters by imposing fines or restricting their access to government services is an extremely harsh measure that will not work in the Indian context. From a constitutional perspective, compulsory voting could be seen as violating the fundamental right to freedom of expression under Article 19(1).

What can be the way forward?

- Low voter turnout can result in candidates winning by securing a minority of the total votes in a constituency.
- However, as discussed in the Law Commission report, compulsory voting is neither desirable nor feasible in India. The solution lies in fostering enthusiasm amongst voters to exercise their right to vote through innovative campaigns, especially using social media.
- For migrant workers, stricter implementation of the statutory holiday on the day of polling, coupled with an increase in transport facilities by running special buses and trains, can effectively increase participation. With the advent of newer technologies, robust and secure methods acceptable to all stakeholders for remote voting should be considered.

❖ As West Asia war threatens gas supply, remembering a gas grid India never built

Context: India's push for the National Coal Gasification Mission to secure energy independence recalls a visionary 1955 proposal by Syed Husain Zaheer; initially dismissed by policymakers, Zaheer's plan for a national gas grid was vindicated by the 1973 global oil shock.

- The ongoing war in West Asia has plunged the world into a deep energy crisis. In India, the availability of domestic fuel, LPG, has been hit due to the disruption in supplies from the Persian Gulf.
- The global energy crisis is reminiscent of the Oil Shock of 1973, when members of the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) cut oil production and slashed exports to protest the U.S.'s support for Israel in the Yom Kippur War. India responded by exploring alternative sources of energy, offshore oilfields in Bombay High, and experimenting with new technologies.
- One technological option that found a second life this way was coal gasification.

- The idea of using gasified coal to meet some of India's fuel needs first emerged in 1955 when Syed Husain Zaheer, director of the Regional Research Laboratory Hyderabad (RRLH) — now the CSIR-Indian Institute of Chemical Technology (IICT) — and later director-general of CSIR, submitted a plan to Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru for a cross-country national gas grid.
- The plan envisaged the use of fuel gas produced from gasifying of coal and its supply through pipelines for domestic and industrial use. Zaheer believed fuel gas of high calorific value could be produced by completely gasifying non-caking fuels such as shale coal, lignite, and bituminous coal, all found in India.

'Town Gas Supply Scheme'

- The technology involved gasifying coal using high pressure to form hydrocarbons and using oxygen to maintain a high thermal efficiency. It started with converting the sulphur present in the coal to hydrogen sulphide (H₂S) and small amounts of carbonyl sulphide (COS). Sulphur compounds are then removed from the gas stream and the separated acid gas is further processed to recover elemental sulphur.
- The gas was further cleaned using water scrubbing to remove any remaining particulate matter.
- In the 1940s, coal gasification was used at a commercial scale to provide town gas for street lighting in Europe and the U.S. But the concept's techno-economic feasibility had yet to be established for Indian coal.
- Initially, Zaheer proposed a "Town Gas Supply Scheme" for Hyderabad based on gasifying coal found in the Singareni collieries and piping it to the city. If a gasification plant were established at Kothagudem, gas could be supplied not only to Hyderabad but also to towns along the 290-km-long route, per the plan. Based on surveys of fuel consumption, population and demand projections, family income, and fuel demand trends, Zaheer proposed a pressure gasification plant of 7.5 million cubic feet capacity, and suggested the gas pipeline could be laid along the railway track to facilitate easy maintenance and inspections.

Tough going

- To demonstrate the technology's feasibility, pilot studies were needed, which in turn required funding. Zaheer's idea did not find any takers in the Central government or the CSIR. On the energy front, the policy focus at the time was on finding petroleum reserves and the development of nuclear energy, besides harnessing hydroelectric power from large dams.
- So in 1961, Zaheer urged Nehru to make a policy decision to establish several plants for manufacturing town gas based on coal gasification in select coal belts and linking them through a countrywide grid. Nehru liked the plan and observed that it was "a modern and more economical method, and it will bring enormous relief to the railways".
- But the Ministry of Steel, Mines and Fuel pointed to the "infeasibility of the plan for transporting gas over long distances". The Planning Commission, the Coal Council, and the CSIR, as well, remained cold to the proposal and were reluctant to fund a pilot plant to test coal gasification.

- When Nehru appointed Zaheer the CSIR director-general in 1962, Zaheer got a chance to implement his idea to develop a pilot plant at RRLH. But the going was not easy as the plan required importing equipment. The wars of 1962 and 1965 did not help, delaying the procurement of machinery from Germany, and there was a massive cost overrun due to the devaluation of the rupee.
- The project came to a halt as soon as Zaheer's term ended in 1966. His successor, Atma Ram, formed a committee to review the project. The panel gave an adverse report saying "it would not be advisable to establish and operate the plant in a manner proposed by RRLH" and suggested that the imported equipment be disposed of.
- Back then, there was strong opposition to CSIR labs setting up pilot plants to demonstrate technologies they had developed. This was despite the RRLH having already been running a successful semi-commercial pilot plant on another coal technology: low temperature carbonisation. Following the RRLH model, the National Chemicals Laboratory in Pune and the Indian Institute of Petroleum in Dehradun erected pilot plants as well.

'Had we listened...'

- After several reviews and controversies, the coal gasification project at RRLH received the go-ahead in 1972 and the crates of imported machinery were opened seven years after they had landed in Hyderabad.
- The project also received an unexpected boost: the Oil Shock in October 1973. The shortage of petroleum products sent the government scurrying for alternative fuels, recognising that "in the perspective of the country's long-term energy requirements, consideration should be given to installing small to medium coal gasification plants to produce gas".
- "It is now abundantly clear that a coal-based energy strategy is the only realistic course for us," Prime Minister Indira Gandhi announced, recognising the past mistakes. In her inaugural speech at the Indian Science Congress session at Bhubaneswar in January 1977, she admitted, "Had we listened, in the early '60s, to Dr. Husain Zaheer's plea, and based our chemical feedstock policy not merely on oil but on the abundant coal reserves, we would have withstood the oil crisis with much less strain."
- However, by the time RRLH erected the coal gasification pilot plant, the technology had moved to the next level. The pilot plant was used as a test bed for research on the integrated gasification combined cycle (IGCC), in collaboration with Bharat Heavy Electricals Limited (BHEL), which commissioned the first such plant in 1985. Unlike coal gasification to produce town gas, IGCC combines gas production from coal with electricity generation. The syngas produced by gasifying coal was used to run a power plant generating electricity. Gas-fired turbines were used to produce electricity and the excess heat was routed to steam-driven turbines.

Second wind

- Although India began early with fuel R&D with national laboratories engaged in coal, petroleum, and geophysics research, the funding was suboptimal and projects lacked the necessary industrial linkages. Policymakers and competing interests failed to see the need for long-term research in this area.

- Interest in clean coal technologies has been revived as climate action has intensified. The National Coal Gasification Mission, which India launched in 2021, aims to gasify 100 million tonnes of coal by 2030. “The adoption of gasification technology in India will revolutionise the coal sector, reducing reliance on imports of natural gas, methanol, ammonia and other essential products,” according to a government statement.
- Massive investments to the tune of ₹85,000 crore have been committed to the Mission. Coal India Limited and BHEL also floated a new company, Bharat Coal Gasification & Chemicals Limited, in 2024 to work on clean coal technologies.



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Context: The Union government has indicated that it will bring an amendment Bill proposing a delimitation exercise based on the 2011 Census to ensure the implementation of the Women's Reservation Act, 2023, ahead of the 2029 Lok Sabha election.

- **Under the proposed amendments, the number of Lok Sabha seats will increase from 543 to 816, with 273 seats, 33%, reserved for women.** The amendments could be brought in the ongoing Budget Session or in a Special Session called for the purpose.

States' concern

- Though the draft of the amendments are yet to be circulated, it is understood by sources that care would be taken so that the existing proportion of seats will be maintained for all States, amid concerns that States that had showed success in population control programmes would lose out on representation vis a vis more populous States. Southern States had in particular expressed this concern. Overall, each State is likely to see a 50% rise in seats, but the pro rata basis would be maintained.

- **As per Article 82 of the Constitution, the next delimitation exercise was to be done based on the first Census after 2026, but these amendments could mean that the 2011 Census data will be applied and the remaking of constituencies can proceed without the current Census exercise being concluded. The proposals may include the expansion of State Assemblies as well.**

- The Act originally passed in September 2023 envisaged the conduct of the Decadal Census, followed by delimitation of seats. The 2021 Decadal Census, which got delayed because of COVID, beginning next month. As per the current timelines, implementation of the Act could be pushed beyond 2030. However, by bringing in fresh amendments, the government is now seeking to bring forward the implementation of the Act.
- Government managers, including Union Home Minister Amit Shah, met with leaders of several Opposition parties on Monday, including the Nationalist Congress Party (SP)'s Supriya Sule, YSR Congress Party's P.V. Midhun Reddy, the All India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen's Asaduddin Owaisi and the Shiv Sena (UBT)'s Arvind Sawant, among others. Trinamool Congress and the Left skipped the meeting.
- A separate meeting of NDA partners was held later on Monday evening. The government managers had consulted the Congress and Samajwadi Party earlier. The Congress will be holding a meeting of Opposition floor leaders on Tuesday morning to go through the proposals put forward by the government.
- "The amendments will require a two-thirds majority of both Houses, which is why extensive consultations are being held with the Opposition..." said a government source.

- **The Women's Reservation Act, 2023, known as the Constitution (106th Amendment) Act, 2023, mandates a 33% reservation for women in the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies.**

Context: The groundwater level in parts of Kolar has risen significantly under the K.C. Valley project, with water now available at depths of just 50 to 100 ft. compared to nearly 1,800 ft. earlier, said the Indian Institute of Science (IISc), adding that sustained monitoring since 2019 has found no adverse impact on water quality, public health, soil, crops, or livestock.

- During a project review meeting on Monday where government officials and Revenue Minister Krishna Byre Gowda were present, IISc officials said the project has significantly improved groundwater availability across Kolar and surrounding districts, with 144 lakes being replenished and wells in the region also showing increased water level.
- They said groundwater is being treated through a five-stage purification process, resulting in clean water that is free from odour and colour. Multiple rounds of research conducted by the IISc have found no traces of harmful metal elements in the water.
- The officials also noted that there had been no impact on human or animal health.
- “Crops such as fenugreek, cucumber, beetroot, tomato, and other flowering plants are being cultivated successfully, while soil quality has improved across the region,” the institute said, dismissing allegations of excessive nitrogen content in the soil, stating that there is no difference in soil quality between irrigated and non-irrigated ones.
- The institute said there is also an increase in bird populations and healthy aquatic life in lakes. IISc said surveys conducted three times among residents revealed no complaints, with many reporting improved access to water and better living conditions. Farmers’ livelihood had improved, and officials pointed out to increase in milk production. They also pointed out that instances of kidney stones among residents have reduced attributing it to access to cleaner water.
- While presenting the findings, IISc officials said several organisations have recommended that the K.C. Valley model be replicated across the country. However, concerns were raised during the meeting over the discharge of untreated sewage into lakes, particularly in parts of Chickballapur, where city sewage is reportedly being let directly into waterbodies.
- Mr. Gowda said such lapses by municipal authorities were giving the project a bad name and undermining its benefits. The Minister directed officials to take legal action against those responsible for allowing sewage inflow into lakes and criticised the civic authorities for failing to maintain water quality.
- Mr. Gowda instructed officials to monitor the health of fish and the quality of meat every six months.
- He proposed that IISc continue its research and monitoring of the project for the next five to 10 years. He also directed officials to prepare a plan, in coordination with the Bangalore Water Supply and Sewerage Board (BWSSB), to treat local sewage before discharging it into lakes.

Context: Nearly 9% of the total ransomware cases in India in 2025–26 were from Karnataka, according to the Centre of Excellence for Cybersecurity – Karnataka (CySecK) annual compendium report released.

- The report also stated that 4.3% of the total malware detections were from Karnataka.
- Bengaluru, too, witnessed cyberattacks that were four times higher than the previous year, according to the report.

Major recommendations

■ Each school to frame and enforce a digital use policy	■ Children to be taught consequences such as increased anxiety, stress and cyberbullying
■ Schools to constitute digital wellness committees	■ Parents to emphasise the value of family traditions that are device-free
■ Schools to celebrate 'digital detox weeks' or 'offline joy days'	■ Plans to develop age-appropriate devices; special child plan with audio-only phones, etc.
■ Schools to address, on priority, cases of cyberbullying or online harm	

Vulnerable sectors

- Among the most vulnerable sectors for cyberattacks are government departments, education, and healthcare, which, according to the report, collectively witnessed more than 6.8 million malware detections in Karnataka.
- CySecK is a flagship initiative by the State government through the Department of Electronics, IT, and BT, established in 2019 to drive cybersecurity innovation, research, and ecosystem development across Karnataka.
- CySecK held its annual cybersecurity conference on March 17.
- The report, published as part of the conference, outlines the State's cybersecurity landscape, key risks, and strategic priorities to strengthen digital resilience.

Major attacks

- The report also details major cybersecurity incidents in the State.
- The most significant was the Kaveri 2.0 Distributed Denial-of-Service (DDoS) attack in February 2025, which led to service disruption and an estimated ₹47.75 crore in daily revenue loss.
- DDoS attacks are launched to slow down or crash websites, servers, or networks, making them unavailable to genuine users.
- The second major incident was a ransomware attack on a private hospital that led to encrypted medical records and disruption in patient care. There were also telecom API data breaches, highlighting third-party security risks.
- "As digital adoption accelerates across governance, education, healthcare, finance, and industry, the state's exposure to cyber risks has increased significantly," the report noted.
- It also underscored that the growing reliance on digital infrastructure has widened the cyberattack surface across sectors and regions, including cloud platforms, digital payments, connected systems, and data-driven services.

Ignored area

- A senior police officer explained that in the backdrop of technological advancement, cybercrimes are widely discussed and reported, but cybersecurity is less talked about.
- However, Karnataka notified its cybersecurity policy as early as 2024, adopting a dual approach: strengthening government cybersecurity while fostering a robust public cybersecurity ecosystem.

- Aligning with the objectives of the policy, the Karnataka government has launched several initiatives, including CySecK. A major stride has been made by bringing cybersecurity under the Cyber Command Unit.
- CySecK plays this role by working across academia, government, industry, and startups to strengthen Karnataka's overall cybersecurity readiness.


❖ Draft policy on 'Responsible Digital Use Among Students' sets goals for parents, schools

Context: It recommends that schools include digital well-being and social media literacy in the curriculum.

- The draft policy for "Responsible Digital Use Among Students", released by the Department of Health and Family Welfare, has recommended that parents set structured routines with clear screen-time rules and prioritise privacy, safety, and open conversation with children on digital well-being.
- It recommended that schools incorporate digital well-being and social media literacy in their curriculum, besides implementing special programmes for digital detox and identifying early mental health red flags.
- The policy has been drafted in collaboration with the Karnataka State Mental Health Authority, NIMHANS, and the School Education Department, based on deliberations with stakeholders. It further recommended a set of "preventive, promotive, and responsive strategies for all schools to implement". "Parents should facilitate more peer interactions and conversations without screens, invite friends over for offline play, promote role play, group reading, or drama at home, and model face-to-face communication," the draft said.
- The government announced it would bring in a policy to restrict social media use among children below 16. The draft policy aims "to create a safe, balanced, and psychologically healthy digital environment for students".
- "Parents should define screen time limits (as per age), mandatory screen-free time during meals, sleep hours, and study periods, tech curfew all screens off 1 hour before bedtime," it recommended for parents, advocating marking digital free zones like bedroom, dining table, kitchen, bathroom, and motorised vehicle where no family members use technology. "Decide upon digital fasting time where no family members use any device," said the draft.
- On the responsibility of schools, the draft policy states, "Schools must incorporate digital well-being and social media literacy within the life skills, value education, and ICT (Information and Communication Technology) curriculum. Age-appropriate lessons on responsible digital behaviour, privacy, online safety, and screen-time balance should be taught regularly."

Who is at risk?

- Business and IT enterprises
- Government and public infrastructure



Critical sectors:
Healthcare, education, and research institutions

Citizens and small businesses (especially in Tier-2 and Tier-3 cities)

❖ 'U.S.-led Pax Silica is a step towards digital colonialism'

Context: Senior Congress MP Digvijaya Singh on Monday warned the Union government against joining Pax Silica, terming the U.S.-led project a step towards digital colonialism.

- The U.S.-led initiative is aimed at building resilient supply chains for critical minerals and Artificial Intelligence (AI) technologies. India joined the coalition in February 2026, during the AI Impact summit held in New Delhi.
- Raising the matter during Zero Hour in the Rajya Sabha on Monday, Mr. Singh asked the government to make the terms and conditions of the agreement public.

❖ Centre launches AI skilling drive with Google, YouTube

Context: Part of initiatives unveiled by Ashwini Vaishnaw to boost creative economy; a citizen creator platform, and in-built satellite tuners in television sets for access to DD Free Dish launched.

- Union Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw on Monday unveiled three new initiatives aimed at strengthening India's media, broadcasting, and digital sector and promoting the "orange economy", or the creative economy.
- The creative economy includes industries where economic value is generated primarily from creativity, culture, technology, and intellectual property.
- The three initiatives are named the National AI Skilling Initiative in partnership with Google and YouTube through the Indian Institute of Creative Technologies (IICT); MyWAVES, a citizen creator platform on WAVES OTT; and the rollout of advanced Electronic Programme Guide and in-built satellite tuners in television sets for enhancing access to DD Free Dish services.
- Key media and entertainment industry representatives, the head of YouTube India along with senior Ministry officials took part in the event.
- Underscoring Prime Minister Narendra Modi's vision of democratising technology, Mr. Vaishnaw said the initiatives will make technology more affordable and accessible. He said that with in-built satellite tuners and an advanced programme guide, citizens can now access content easily without additional equipment.
- He described MyWAVES as a powerful platform for content creators, enabling them to create, upload, and share content.
- Referring to the Union Budget announcements, he underlined the government's commitment to promoting the "orange economy" and supporting the creative sector.
- The Union Minister said under the National AI Skilling Initiative, being implemented with the support of YouTube, about 15,000 youth will be trained without levying any fee.
- He spoke about the "Creators' Corner" scheme and urged content creators to actively use Doordarshan and platforms such as MyWAVES to showcase India's rich culture and regional diversity.

- Speaking about the partnership’s impact, YouTube India managing director Gunjan Soni said: “We believe that AI has the potential to open up remarkable opportunities for India’s dynamic creative economy. Through our collaboration with the Ministry of Information & Broadcasting and IICT, we aim to equip creators and professionals with the skills required to master the tools of the future, leverage AI to tell more compelling stories... expand their reach to new audiences, and play a role in shaping the future of media.”
- The AI skilling programme will be conducted in two phases — Phase I from March 23 to June 30 2026, and Phase II from July to December 2026.
- The first phase will focus on foundational AI learning at scale through Google Career Certificates and Google Cloud Generative AI learning paths. Participants will undergo courses such as AI Essentials, Prompting Essentials, Introduction to Generative AI, and Generative AI Leader Path.
- The second phase will involve advanced, project-based specialisation for the creative industry. The curriculum will include modules on the art of storytelling, YouTube best practices, and advanced training using AI tools such as Gemini 3 and Vertex AI.

❖ Centre to amend the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act

Context: The Union government is likely to amend the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act in the ongoing session of Parliament session. One of the key changes proposed is the appointment of a “designated authority” to take over, manage or dispose of assets created out of foreign funds by an NGO or association, which has had its FCRA registration suspended, cancelled, or not renewed.

- Another proposed amendment is expanding the definition of “key functionary” of an NGO beyond an “office bearer/director” to include directors; partners; trustees; the karta (head) of a Hindu Undivided Family; office-bearers or members of the governing body or managing committee of a society, trust, trade union or association; and any other person who has control over or responsibility for the management or affairs of such an organisation.
- The amendment also proposes to make key functionaries liable for offences under the FCRA.
- Registration under the FCRA is mandatory for an NGO to receive foreign funds. Till now, the 2010 parent Act only had the provision to regulate the flow of foreign funds, and not the statutory framework to manage the assets created out of such funds.
- The Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Amendment Bill, 2026 also proposes to amend Section 43 of the parent Act, which will require any law enforcement agency or State government to seek prior approval of the Central government for initiation of investigation into FCRA-related complaints.
- The Statement of Objects and Reasons of the Bill circulated by Home Minister Amit Shah said that, at present, around 16,000 associations are registered under the FCRA and they receive around ₹22,000 crore annually.
- The Bill proposes to reduce the maximum imprisonment for FCRA offences from five years to one year. It also proposes fixed timelines for the utilisation of foreign funds received under the “prior permission” category, unlike the open-ended provision under the 2010 Act.

❖ Greater cooperation needed between India and Russia, says Jaishankar

Context: Against the backdrop of the war in West Asia, External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar on Monday said the “evolving multipolar order” calls for “greater cooperation” between India and Russia both bilaterally as well as multilaterally through groupings such as BRICS, SCO, G-20, and the United Nations.

- Mr. Jaishankar addressed a conference on India-Russia relations through video link and said Delhi-Moscow relations over the past decades helped in advancing “regional and global peace” and stability.
- Speaking at the same event, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said India-Russia ties had “major significance” against the backdrop of the U.S.-Israel war on Iran and said Russia was “looking forward” to hosting Prime Minister Narendra Modi for the India-Russia annual summit, 2026.
- “India, during its BRICS chairmanship with a ‘humanity first’ and ‘people-centric’ approach looks forward to closely working with Russia to address shared challenges in a balanced and inclusive manner,” Mr. Jaishankar said at the conference titled “India and Russia: Towards a New Bilateral Agenda”.

Special ties

- Talking about the “special and privileged strategic partnership” between India and Russia, Mr. Jaishankar said the relationship continued to “deepen” and reminded that during President Vladimir Putin’s December 2025 visit to New Delhi, the two sides signed multiple agreements on areas such as mobility of skilled professionals, health and food safety, maritime cooperation, fertilizers, customs, and commerce.
- “Over decades, our mutually beneficial cooperation has advanced regional and global peace, stability and progress,” said Mr. Jaishankar. He expressed India’s support for the Eurasian Economic Union Free Trade Agreement about which the two sides had expressed readiness during Mr. Putin’s last visit to India. He described Russia as the “foremost partner” of India in the field of civil nuclear energy and referred to the Kudankulam nuclear project as a “stellar example”.
- Mr. Lavrov said India “steadfastly pursues strategic autonomy” in the current world scenario. He said that around 96% of India-Russia trade was now conducted in national currencies and expressed Russian support for India’s BRICS chairship in 2026. He further said that bilateral relation between the two sides had “major significance” against the backdrop of the “acute military and political crisis in the Persian Gulf provoked by the United States and Israel”.

❖ SC gives Centre four weeks to respond to plea against ‘arbitrary’ hikes in airfares

Context: The Supreme Court gave the government a four-week leeway to respond to a petition highlighting the need for accountability in the civil aviation sector for “arbitrary” airfare hikes and cancellations, saying “there are bigger problems the government is handling now”, in an oblique reference to the potential blowbacks from the ongoing Iran-Israel conflict.

- When the case came up for hearing before a Bench headed by Justice Vikram Nath, the government counsel said a draft response was being circulated, but “certain international events” had arisen in the meanwhile. The Bench advised the counsel appearing for petitioner, S. Laxminarayanan, to agree to an adjournment and listed the case for April 27.
- The petition had sought regulatory intervention in the civil aviation sector to address fare fluctuation, fare transparency, and continuity of essential air services. It said the roller-coaster airfares resulted in denial of mobility and an unjust imposition of financial burden in violation of the Constitutional guarantees. “Air travel, being regulated by statute, cannot be subjected to predatory market mechanisms,” the petitioner submitted.
- It urged the court to direct the Centre and the Directorate General of Civil Aviation to employ their statutory authority to stabilise tariffs and enforce service obligations.
- The Airports Economic Regulatory Authority (AERA) had in February submitted a response claiming it had no role in the relief sought by the petitioner. AERA said its sole statutory objective was the regulation of tariffs and other charges for “aeronautical services” rendered at major airports.

❖ **Benchmark indices fall 2.5%, Nifty likely in ‘bear grip’**

Context: NSE cash volumes dip 7%, sectoral indices hammered by brutal declines in consumer durables, metals, realty, PSU banks; Rupee slips past 94, stabilises on likely RBI intervention.

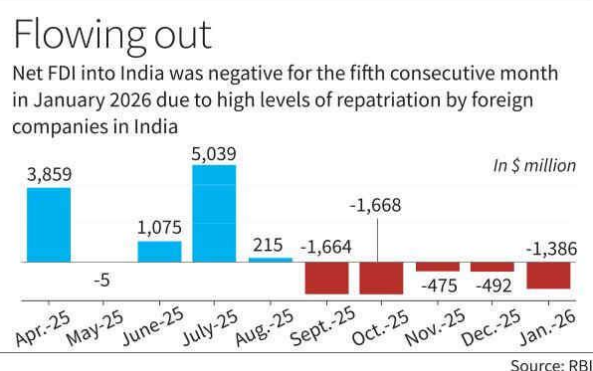
- Benchmark stock indices fell 2.5% on Monday owing to concerns over the ongoing West Asia conflict which has spiked crude prices, fuelling fears of high inflation.
- The BSE Sensex fell 2.46%, to 72,696 points. Mirroring the same sentiment, NSE Nifty 50 shed 600 points, or 2.6%, to 22,513 points, its lowest level since April 9, 2025.
- The 600-point fall signals “deeper bear mauling”, said Vinay Rajani, Senior Technical Research Analyst, HDFC Securities.
- “Nifty 50 opened 300 points lower and extended losses throughout the session, closing near the day’s low after registering a steep 15% correction from its all-time high of 26,373, now marching towards its 52-week low of 21,743,” he said.
- NSE cash volumes dipped marginally by 7% from the previous session, with HCL Tech, Power Grid, and ONGC emerging as the sole Nifty 50 gainers amid a sea of red; Titan, Shriram Finance, and Trent spearheaded the losses. All sectoral indices closed lower, hammered by brutal declines in consumer durables, metals, realty, financial services, and PSU banks.
- Hariprasad K., SEBI-registered Research Analyst and Founder, Livelong Wealth, said, “The intensity of the decline indicates that the recent fragility in global cues has now translated into broad-based selling pressure across domestic markets.”
- Midcaps and smallcaps bore the brunt of the rout, with Nifty Midcap 100 tumbling 3.9% and Nifty Smallcap 100 falling 3.94%, while market breadth cratered with the BSE advance-decline ratio shriveling to a dismal 0.16.
- “Nifty remains firmly in the bear grip, with every intraday recovery savagely sold off, particularly after breaching key support at 22,930,” Mr. Rajani said.

- The rupee on Monday hit a record intraday low of 94.11 against the U.S. dollar battered by fears of an escalating West Asia conflict that amplified the sell-off across Indian assets.
- Believed to be supported by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI), which sold dollars in the market to arrest the excess volatility, the Rupee stabilised at 93.53 against the previous close of 93.53, closing flat on the Clearing Corporation of India Ltd. spot market.
- “As long as disruptions persist over the next 2–3 weeks into mid-April, USD-INR could test the 96–97 zone in a worst-case scenario, with 95 and 96 acting as key resistance levels,” said Anindya Banerjee, Head of Commodity and Currency Research, Kotak Securities.

❖ Net FDI negative for fifth straight month

Context: Net FDI into India contracted for the fifth consecutive month in January 2026, with outflows exceeding inflows by nearly \$1.4 billion, a three-month high. The data shows this was because inflows into India fell nearly 7% while the amount repatriated out of the country nearly doubled.

- According to data released by the Reserve Bank of India on Monday as part of its monthly bulletin, the total amount of money entering India as direct investment, or gross FDI, stood at about \$5.7 billion in January 2026.
- This was 7% lower than in January last year, and only two-thirds of the amount that came in December 2025. The RBI, however, looked at a longer time period to draw some positive conclusions.
- “During April 2025 - January 2026, gross FDI inflows remained strong, higher than the corresponding period a year ago,” the central bank noted in its report. “Sector-wise, manufacturing received the highest share of equity inflows, followed by computer services, electricity and other energy, and financial services — these sectors together accounted for over 60% of total inflows.”
- With regard to outflows, the outward FDI by Indian companies increased by 5.4% in January 2026 to \$2.1 billion. This was, however, nearly 30% lower than the outward FDI in December 2025.
- “Around 75% of the outward FDI flows were directed to the U.S., Singapore, the UK, and the UAE during the [April 2025 - January 2026] period,” the RBI said. Repatriation and disinvestment by foreign companies doing business in India, on the other hand, increased by 97.3% to \$4.9 billion in January 2026. But this was nearly 18% lower than the amount in December 2025.
- As a result, net FDI stood at about -\$1.4 billion, the lowest since October 2025.
- The central bank noted that portfolio investments again flowed out more than they flowed in in March this year.



❖ Centre restores RoDTEP benefits for exporters

Context: The government has restored the complete benefits provided to exporters under the Remission of Duties and Taxes on Exported Products (RoDTEP) scheme. In a notification it said the rates and values applicable 22 this year and were reduced by 50% are now being restored to earlier levels from February 23 to March 31.

- According to GTRI, while the DGFT decision is welcome, the initial reduction is hard to justify as RoDTEP is not a subsidy.

❖ Lok Sabha sends Corporate Law Amendment Bill 2026 to JPC

Context: The government introduced the Corporate Laws (Amendment) Bill, 2026 in the Lok Sabha following which the House adopted a motion to send the proposed legislation to a Joint Parliamentary Committee (JPC) for detailed examination.

- The JPC will comprise members from both Houses of Parliament for detailed analysis and recommendations, Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman said while proposing the motion for JPC reference. The motion was adopted by a voice vote.
- The Bill seeks further amendments to the Limited Liability Partnership Act, 2008 and the Companies Act, 2013 to facilitate ease of doing business and address the gaps identified by the Company Law Committee in its 2022 report.
- The proposed amendments are expected to rationalise penalties, shift several minor procedural lapses from criminal liability to monetary penalties, and streamline regulatory processes to promote ease of doing business.
- The FM said the Bill was aimed at promoting ease of doing business and ease of living for corporates by decriminalising more provisions.

'Diluting provisions'

- When the Bill was introduced in Lok Sabha, Opposition members Manish Tewari (Congress), Saugata Roy (Trinamool Congress) and T. Sumathy (DMK) opposed the same claiming the legislation sought to dilute the provisions of law under which companies mandatorily had to pay 2% of profit towards corporate social responsibility (CSR).
- The FM refuted the claim and said that the Bill had been introduced after two years of deliberations and the apprehensions of the members were unfounded as the proposed legislation sought to amend only the criteria for net profit, not the entire clause related to CSR.
- Mr. Tewari also said since a Parliamentary Standing Committee on Corporate Affairs was already in place, the Bill must be sent there rather than setting up new JPC.
- Home Minister Amit Shah, intervening, said none of the Opposition members talked about referring the Bill to a panel and now, when the FM has herself sought it, they were arguing as to which panel the Bill should be sent.

Context: Conversion to any other religion will lead to complete loss of Scheduled Caste status, regardless of birth, says Supreme Court Bench as it invokes Clause 3 of Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order.

- The Supreme Court held in a judgment that a person professing any religion other than Hinduism, Buddhism, or Sikhism should not be considered a member of a Schedule Caste community.
- The court concluded that conversion to any other religion would result in “immediate and complete loss of Scheduled Caste status from the moment of conversion, regardless of birth”.
- A Bench of Justices Prashant Kumar Mishra and Manmohan invoked Clause 3 of the Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order, 1950, which mandates that “no person who professes a religion different from Hinduism shall be deemed to be a member of a Scheduled Caste”. The Sikh religion was added to the ambit of Clause 3 in 1956. The provision was further amended in 1990 to include persons professing Buddhism.
- “This bar under Clause 3 of the Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order, 1950 is categorical and absolute,” Justice Mishra, who authored the judgment, interpreted the 1950 Order.
- The court was hearing an appeal filed by Chinthada Anand, who was born a Hindu-Madiga (Scheduled Caste) but converted to Christianity to become a pastor.
- Mr. Anand had filed a case under the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act of 1989 after he alleged that he had suffered repeated attacks and caste slurs.
- The Andhra Pradesh High Court, in a decision in April last year, quashed the criminal proceedings on the ground that Mr. Anand could no longer claim protection under the 1989 Act as he professed Christianity and had been a pastor for about a decade. The High Court was of the view that the caste system was not recognised in Christianity.
- Confirming the High Court’s decision in the plea by Mr. Anand, the top court drew attention to the term “profess” in Clause 3 of the 1950 Order.
- “The term ‘profess’ connotes to publicly declare or practice a religion. The essence of the word lies in the open avowal of one’s religious beliefs in a manner discernible to the public at large. It is not merely a question of personal belief or private conviction, but requires an outward manifestation of one’s faith. It may be observed that Christianity, by its very theological foundation, does not recognise or incorporate the institution of caste,” Justice Mishra said.
- The top court said a convert who did not profess any of the three religions in Clause 3 of the 1950 Order could not claim any “statutory benefit, protection, reservation or entitlement” of a Scheduled Caste (SC) member. Justice Mishra said the bar admitted no exception. A person cannot simultaneously profess and practice a religion other than the ones specified in Clause 3 and claim membership of a Scheduled Caste at the same time, the court said.

- “A person who professes and practices such religion for personal, social and spiritual purposes cannot, in law, assert membership of a Scheduled Caste for the purpose of securing statutory benefits. The two positions are mutually exclusive and contrary to the Constitutional scheme,” Justice Mishra observed. A person claiming to have “re-converted” to Hinduism, Sikhism, or Buddhism must “cumulatively and conclusively establish” clear proof of his earlier caste; provide credible and unimpeachable evidence of bona fide reconversion to the original religion; and show satisfactory evidence that members of his original caste have accepted and assimilated him into the community. The court said renunciation of the new religion by the convert must be unequivocal. It should translate to the adoption and observance of the customs, usages, practices, rituals, and religious obligations of the original caste. Failure to establish even one condition renders the claim of re-conversion unsustainable, the court said.
- The judgment also dealt with the **Constitution (Scheduled Tribes) Order, 1950**, which did not prescribe religion-based exclusion as in the case of the Scheduled Caste community. Justice Mishra said a person could claim benefits under the Constitution (Scheduled Tribes) Order, 1950, only if he or she continued to belong to that particular tribe “in substance”.

❖ ‘State past its demographic peak, job quality is key’

Context: The median age for Karnataka, as per report, is 32; the highest is recorded by Kerala at 39

- Karnataka has entered a state of demographic transition where a large working-age population will no longer be enough to drive economic growth, and future gains will depend on how productively people are employed, the ‘State of Working India 2026’ report said.
- The report by Azim Premji University was released here on Tuesday. It examines how India’s school-to-work transition has evolved over the last 40 years.

Among ‘older’ States

- The report places Karnataka among relatively “older” Indian States, alongside Kerala and Tamil Nadu, where the share of the working-age population is no longer rising significantly. In economic terms, this means that the boost to growth that comes from a rising working-age population, the demographic dividend, has largely played out.
- According to the report, India is still young (with more young people entering the workforce currently), with a median age of 28, and accounts for a significant share of the world’s youth population. However, this window is narrowing quickly. The number of young people has already begun to decline, it said. The report highlights that the demographic dividend only translates into economic growth if there are enough jobs for people to take up. Without job creation, a large working-age population can just as easily become a burden.

Sharp contrasts

- The State-level picture shows sharp contrasts. While southern and western States such as Karnataka are ageing faster and must now depend on productivity gains, northern States like Uttar Pradesh and Bihar still have a growing youth population. The median age for Karnataka, as per the report, is 32. The highest is recorded by Kerala at 39, while Bihar has the lowest median age of 22.
- The report finds that younger States are not necessarily doing better at employing their youth. When it comes to overall employment, there is little difference between younger and older States. However, older and more industrialised States, including Karnataka, perform better in generating regular salaried jobs, which are typically more stable and better paid than casual or self-employment.
- The link between economic growth and job quality is crucial here, the report said. States such as Karnataka, Gujarat and Tamil Nadu, which have seen relatively stronger economic growth, also show a clearer rise in salaried employment among young people. In contrast, poorer States have struggled to convert growth into such jobs at the same pace.
- At the national level, the report traces how young Indians have moved between education and work over the past 40 years. Within education, enrollment among teenagers (15-19 years) has risen sharply since the 1980s, with girls nearly closing the gap with boys. More young people are staying in school longer, and more are entering higher education than before, the report said.

Employment story

- But the employment story is more uneven. Between 2004-05 and 2017-18, rising education levels meant fewer young people were working, as they stayed in school or college longer. Since 2017-18, however, this trend has reversed. Employment among youth has increased but partly because some are leaving education earlier.
- This shift is particularly visible among young men. Data shows a noticeable decline in the share of boys aged 15-19 in education in recent years, including in secondary and higher secondary levels. This decline began around the pandemic period and has not fully reversed, the report notes.

Young women

- Among young women, the trend is different. The recent rise in employment has come mainly from fewer women remaining outside both education and work, rather than from dropping out of education. However, female workforce participation remains a major concern. A large share of women in their early 20s are still neither studying nor employed, the report mentioned, pointing to persistent structural and social barriers.

Context: The Karnataka Minor Irrigation and Groundwater Development Department has successfully completed the State's first spring census. According to the census, 274 springs have been enumerated across 31 districts, with Belagavi reporting the highest number with 59.

Hot spring

- The census also noted that there is one hot spring at Bendru Theertha in Dakshina Kannada district.
- B.K. Pavithra, Secretary, Minor Irrigation and Groundwater Development Department, said that despite the logistical challenges posed by the monsoon, field enumerators leveraged a digital framework to successfully identify and document a total of 247 springs.
- Highlighting the regional distribution and ecological health of these waterbodies, he added: "Our data reveals that Belagavi district leads the State, reporting the highest number with 59 springs. Furthermore, a significant majority of these vital water sources remain active, with 144 springs classified as perennial and 114 as seasonal, while 16 have dried up over time."

Key rivers

- The census report has mapped the origins of key rivers to these springs, noting that the Cauvery originates at Talacauvery in Kodagu, the Hemavati at Javali in Chikkamagaluru, and the Sharavati at Ambutheertha in Shivamogga.
- This digitised data will now serve as a foundational database for future spring conservation, rejuvenation projects, groundwater management, and comprehensive water resource planning across Karnataka.
- Springs are natural outlets where groundwater flows to the surface through openings in the earth's crust. They typically occur when the water table intersects with the ground surface or when groundwater is forced out through fractures, faults, or permeable rock layers.

Western Ghats

- "The Western Ghats and Malnad region, including districts like Kodagu, Chikkamagaluru, Uttara Kannada, Dakshina Kannada, Belagavi, and Shivamogga, are primary hubs for spring formation due to high rainfall and favourable geological conditions. Owing to a unique hydrological feature, a hot spring in Bendru Theertha, is located in Dakshina Kannada district," the Karnataka Minor Irrigation and Groundwater Development Department added.
- The department has received a certificate of appreciation from the Union Ministry of Jal Shakti for its first spring census.

❖ Bill seeking to prevent transfer of teachers to non-teaching posts passed

Context: The Legislative Assembly on Tuesday passed the Karnataka State Civil Services (Regulation of Transfer of Teachers) Amendment Bill, 2026, aimed at prioritising the filling of critical posts, particularly in pre-university (PU) colleges.

- The Bill seeks to prevent the diversion of teachers to non-teaching roles and mandates that transfers be made first to identified critical posts. These include principals and lecturers in government PU colleges, and headmasters (HMs) and vice-principals in high schools.
- The legislation classifies critical posts into three categories. Category 1 covers posts other than HMs and vice-principals in Karnataka Public Schools, Adarsha Vidyalayas, and PM SHRI schools. Category 2 includes similar posts in other schools and PU colleges with more than 250 students, or as per enrolment norms set by the government. Category 3 comprises HMs and vice-principals in institutions under Categories 1 and 2.
- During the discussion, members across party lines emphasised the need to complete teacher transfers before the start of the academic year, increase recruitment, and ensure the availability of qualified teachers for English-medium education.

Land Donation Bill

- The House also passed the Karnataka Government Educational Institution (Protection and Regularisation) Bill, 2026.

❖ 'Only 5% of households received mandated 100 days of employment under MGNREGA'

Context: Even as the Congress government in Karnataka opposed any move to dilute the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) by the Centre, a report by the Comptroller and Auditor General of India (CAG) flagged several shortcomings in the scheme's implementation in the State.

- The CAG report, tabled in the Legislative Assembly on Tuesday for the period 2019–20 to 2023–24, noted that only 5% of households received the mandated 100 days of employment.
- Most households were provided just 1 to 30 days of work, while demand for employment did not exceed 48% of issued job cards during the audit period.

Contract management

- The report highlighted irregularities in contract management, stating that outsourcing contracts were extended without fresh tenders, leading to higher service charges. It also pointed to violations in recruitment, where contract staff were hired without adhering to reservation norms, resulting in inadequate representation of women, Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and persons with disabilities.
- Further, the audit found gaps in data systems, noting that NREGASoft lacked provisions to track employment demand and allocation for vulnerable groups such as nomadic tribes and HIV-positive individuals. Cross-verification with housing scheme records indicated their significant exclusion from the programme.

- Serious financial irregularities were flagged, including fraudulent payments for completed or non-existent housing works, payments to ineligible beneficiaries, and fabrication of records in projects such as solid waste management, check dams, and social forestry.

Pendency rate

- While ombudspersons had been appointed across districts, the report noted a high pendency rate of 59% in grievance disposal, with less than 20% of imposed penalties actually recovered.
- The audit observed a decline in wage expenditure during 2022–23 and 2023–24, underutilisation of funds under the material component, and inadmissible administrative expenditure of ₹32.78 crore. Additionally, Aadhaar mapping remained incomplete for 3.11 lakh workers out of 84.98 lakh active workers as of March 2024, with ₹35.10 crore worth of transactions pending due to rejected payments.
- The CAG observed irregularities such as printing of muster rolls without utilising NREGASoft and irregular payments on such manipulated muster rolls.
- The State government has urged the Centre to scrap the “Viksit Bharat–Guarantee for Rozgar Ajeevika Mission (Gramin)” and restore MGNREGA in its original form to safeguard employment and livelihoods for rural workers.

❖ Karnataka received less than 50% of funds allocated by Centre under JJM: Audit report

Context: Karnataka received less than 50% of the funds allocated by the Centre under the Jal Jeevan Mission (JJM), primarily due to poor utilisation of released funds, according to a report by the Comptroller and Auditor General of India (CAG).

- The report, tabled in the Legislative Assembly, for the period 2019-20 to 2023-24, noted that the State received ₹11,189.37 crore — about 45% of the total allocation of ₹24,819.48 crore.
- It attributed low fund utilisation to the reduced engagement of implementation support agencies. Spending on water quality monitoring and surveillance dropped sharply, from 50% in 2019-20 to just 2% in 2023-24, leading to infrastructure gaps such as inadequate water testing laboratories and equipment.
- The audit further highlighted negligible community participation, with only ₹22.75 crore mobilised against an expected ₹1,594.90 crore.
- Delays of three to nine months in submitting utilisation certificates and audited accounts contributed to the State not receiving the remaining central assistance.
- The findings are seen as a setback for the State government, which has been criticising the Union government for insufficient fund release under the scheme, implemented by the Rural Development and Panchayat Raj Department.
- Against a target of 72.14 lakh households, tap water connections were provided to 47.62 lakh households (66%) as of November 2024. The shortfall was attributed to delays in tendering, execution of works without ensuring land availability, and slow approvals, the report said.

❖ LS passes new transgender Bill as MPs stage walkout

Context: Amid an Opposition-led walkout, the Lok Sabha on Tuesday passed by voice vote the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Amendment Bill, 2026, which proposes to remove transgender people's right to self-determination of gender, and introduces a clause for examination by a medical board to determine their gender.

- The MPs who walked out of the House were from parties such as the Congress, Samajwadi Party, Trinamool Congress, DMK, Shiv Sena (UBT), Nationalist Congress Party, and the CPI(M). Congress whip Manickam Tagore said they walked out as they were “not satisfied with the reply” of the Minister on the Bill. Transgender rights groups, civil society leaders, and several prominent members of the community condemned the passing of the Bill as an “injustice”.
- Union Minister for Social Justice Virendra Kumar said the Bill sought to stop adults and children from being “forced or compelled” to become or present as transgender persons through hormone therapy or other interventions, and strengthened punishments for crimes against transgender persons. He said the Bill was aimed at empowering the transgender community.

❖ PSLV setbacks will help in learning, says ISRO chief

Context: Indian Space Research Organisation Chairman V. Narayanan on Tuesday said he did not consider the Polar Satellite Launch Vehicle (PSLV) C61 and C62 missions as failures, but as opportunities to learn.

- “Whenever there is a setback we don't consider it as a failure, but we consider it an opportunity to learn and strengthen our system,” Dr. Narayanan said while inaugurating the 11th biennial conference of the ISRO Pensioners' Association here.
- The PSLV-C61/EOS-09 was launched on May 18, 2025, but the mission could not be accomplished due to what the ISRO called at the time, “an observation in the third stage”. The PSLV-C62/EOS-N1 mission, launched on January this year, also had proved to be a disappointment following “an anomaly” at the end of the PS3 stage.
- Dr. Narayanan said the two PSLV flights had “marginally missed” their objectives. He recalled how the ISRO overcame the setback of first Satellite Launch Vehicle (SLV) mission in the late 1970s, which failed to achieve its goal, and went on to script a major milestone with its 100th launch from the Satish Dhawan Space Centre in Sriharikota on January 29, 2025.

❖ Days after SC allows withdrawal of care, Rana passes away

Context: Days after the Supreme Court passed a judgment — the first of its kind in the country — allowing withdrawal of clinically-assisted nutrition and hydration (CANH) to Harish Rana, who had been in a vegetative state for 13 years, he passed away at the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS), Delhi.

- The hospital, in a statement, said that Mr. Rana passed away at 4.10 p.m., adding that he was under the care of a dedicated team of doctors.
- The judgment had been welcomed by the family, who said that no parent wanted to “see their son suffer”.

- Mr. Rana was 32. He had sustained severe injuries and had 100% quadriplegic disability after a fall from the fourth floor of a building when he was a student in 2013. After his death, his family is learnt to have donated his corneas and heart valves.

❖ Assam floats tender for satellites to monitor floods

Context: Chief Minister Sarma announced the project in the 2025-26 State Budget; The procurement is for at least five satellites in low-earth orbit.

- Assam has become the first Indian State to float a tender for a group of earth-observation satellites that it says will strengthen disaster response along the flood-prone Brahmaputra valley and help survey the State's borders.
- The Assam Science Technology and Environment Council issued an Expression of Interest (EOI) on March 16 inviting private aerospace companies to design, build, launch, operate, and eventually transfer the satellites to State ownership. The mission has been named AssamSAT.
- Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma announced the project in the 2025-26 State Budget as a means to achieve what he has repeatedly described as an "infiltration-free Assam".
- Mr. Sarma has argued that conventional border fencing is inadequate for the State's chars, the seasonally inundated river islands along the Bangladesh border, and that real-time satellite monitoring is the sole practical alternative.
- The procurement is structured around at least five satellites in low-earth orbit. The brief EOI doesn't say whether the satellites will operate separately or together, in a constellation. Per the brief, qualifying parties can avail the full EOI for a fee of ₹30,000.
- Assuming it's a constellation, the satellites will be able to scan the same part of the ground once every few hours and map it at high resolution — a useful task for disaster response during floods, where the extent of waters can change within hours.
- The EOI also doesn't specify the sensors the satellites will carry. But since the State has cloudy weather for almost half the year, the satellites may carry synthetic aperture radars (SAR), whose gaze can pierce clouds and darkness.
- Currently, State disaster management agencies seeking satellite data must submit requests to the National Remote Sensing Centre, which will process and fulfill those requests.
- The State sits close to the Siliguri Corridor, a strip of land colloquially called the chicken's neck that physically connects the Northeast to the rest of India, and which State and Central security agencies have been preoccupied with monitoring.
- Mr. Sarma has also extended the satellite's mandate to include tracking drug-trafficking routes and monitoring poaching in the Kaziranga National Park.
- In 2024, NewSpace India, Ltd. cleared a private-sector earth observation constellation led by Dhruva Space and Pixxel.
- The plan combines small satellites carrying optical and hyperspectral sensors in low-earth orbit to deliver near real-time imagery for agriculture, disaster response, and national security users while being owned and operated by industry.

Context: China is conducting a vast undersea mapping and monitoring operation across the Pacific, Indian and Arctic oceans, building detailed knowledge of marine conditions that naval experts say would be crucial for waging submarine warfare against the United States and its allies.

- In one example, the Dong Fang Hong 3, a research vessel operated by Ocean University of China, spent 2024 and 2025 sailing back and forth in the seas near Taiwan and the U.S. stronghold of Guam, and around strategic stretches of the Indian Ocean, ship-tracking data reviewed by Reuters shows.
- In October 2024, it checked on a set of powerful Chinese ocean sensors capable of identifying undersea objects near Japan, according to Ocean University, and visited the same area again last May. And in March 2025, it criss-crossed the waters between Sri Lanka and Indonesia, covering approaches to the Malacca Strait, a critical chokepoint for maritime commerce.
- According to the university, the ship was carrying out mud surveys and climate research. But a scientific paper co-written by Ocean University academics shows it has also conducted extensive deep-sea mapping. Naval-warfare experts and U.S. Navy officials say the type of deep-sea data being collected by the Dong Fang Hong 3 – via mapping and placement of sensors in the ocean – is giving China a picture of the subsea conditions it would need to deploy its submarines more effectively and hunt down those of its adversaries.
- The Dong Fang Hong 3 isn't operating alone. It is part of a broader ocean mapping and monitoring operation involving dozens of research vessels and hundreds of sensors. In tracing this effort, Reuters examined Chinese government and university records, including journal articles and scientific studies, and analysed more than five years of movement by 42 research vessels active in the Pacific, Indian or Arctic oceans using a ship-tracking platform built by New Zealand company Starboard Maritime Intelligence.
- While the research has civilian purposes – some of the surveying covers fishing grounds or areas where China has mineral prospecting contracts – it also serves a military one, according to nine naval-warfare experts who reviewed Reuters' findings.
- To gather information about underwater terrain, research vessels map the sea floor while travelling back and forth in tight lines. The tracking data shows that type of movement by the vessels Reuters tracked across large sections of the Pacific, Indian and Arctic oceans.
- At least eight of the vessels Reuters tracked have conducted seabed mapping, while another 10 have carried equipment used for mapping, according to a review of Chinese state media articles, vessel descriptions published by Chinese universities, and press releases by government organisations.
- The vessels' survey data "would be potentially invaluable in preparation of the battlespace" for Chinese submarines, said Peter Scott, a former chief of Australia's submarine force. "Any military submariner worth his salt will put a great deal of effort into understanding the environment he's operating in."
- The ship-tracking data show that China's seabed-surveying effort is focused in part on militarily important waters around the Philippines, near Guam and Hawaii, and near U.S. military facilities on Wake atoll in the north Pacific.

- “The scale of what they’re doing is about more than just resources,” said Jennifer Parker, an adjunct professor of defence and security at the University of Western Australia and former Australian anti-submarine warfare officer. “If you look at the sheer extent of it, it’s very clear that they intend to have an expeditionary blue-water naval capability that also is built around submarine operations.”
- In testimony to a congressional commission this month, Rear Admiral Mike Brookes, the commander of the U.S. Office of Naval Intelligence, said China had dramatically expanded its surveying efforts, providing data that “enables submarine navigation, concealment, and positioning of seabed sensors or weapons”. He added that “potential military intelligence collection” by Chinese research vessels “represents a strategic concern”.
- America recently overhauled its own efforts to map and monitor the ocean, but it typically does so with military vessels that are allowed to turn off the tracking system monitored by civilian software. China’s civilian survey ships also sometimes disable tracking, meaning its campaign may go further than Reuters could determine. This is the first time the extent of China’s mapping and monitoring across the Pacific, Indian and Arctic oceans has been reported.



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❖ Govt. revamps UDAN scheme with changes in subsidy

Context: In a significant policy shift, the Centre has extended the subsidy period for airlines on select Tier-2 and Tier-3 routes from three to five years, after a large share of those routes fell into disuse. The shift comes under the modified UDAN scheme, approved by the Union Cabinet with a total outlay of ₹28,840 crore.

- The subsidy will also shift from a levy embedded in airfares to direct funding from the exchequer.
- Out of the total ₹28,840 crore outlay for the modified UDAN scheme, ₹10,043 crore is set aside for a subsidy to support airlines flying on regional routes over the next 10 years. A government official explained that airlines would receive subsidy support for specific routes for five years at a stretch. Under the earlier scheme design, these subsidies were not funded by the exchequer but through a Regional Connectivity Scheme (RCS) levy built into airfares on non-UDAN routes.
- Subsidies were also capped at three years to push airlines towards self-sustaining routes. However, a Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) report found that only 7% to 10% of these routes had remained viable beyond the subsidy period. As of February 2026, of the 663 routes launched under the UDAN scheme since 2017, 327 routes had been discontinued, according to data recently presented in Parliament by Minister of State for Civil Aviation Muralidhar Mohol. The data showed that 15 of the 95 airports revived under the scheme have also fallen into disuse.

❖ India raises clean-energy ambition with 60% non-fossil fuel power goal by 2035

Context: Updating its climate goals, India has pledged that by 2035, 60% of its installed electric capacity will comprise non-fossil sources. It also aims to reduce by 47% the intensity of emissions per unit of GDP from 2005 level and to increase its carbon sink to 3.5 billion tonnes — 4 billion tonnes.

- These targets make up its Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC), which are to be communicated to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC).
- “We will easily achieve these goals... [with] the speed with which we are expanding our non-fossil sources,” Union Information Technology Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw said at a briefing on Wednesday following a Cabinet meeting.
- As a signatory to the Paris Agreement, India was required to issue an updated NDC in 2025, which spells out its voluntary actions towards transitioning away from fossil fuel and improving energy-efficiency measures.
- At the 30th edition of the Conference of Parties in Belem, Brazil, in November last year, Environment Minister Bhupendra Yadav said that India would announce the NDC by the “year-end”.
- India’s current NDC, officially conveyed to the United Nations in August 2022, commits to the following by 2030: having 50% of its installed electric power from non-fossil

Green goals

The targets set for 2035 under the Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) are part of India's formal climate pledges under the Paris Agreement

Reduce emissions intensity of GDP by **47%** from 2005 level

Achieve **60%** installed electric power from non-fossil fuel energy resources

Create carbon sink of **3.5 to 4.0 billion tonnes** of CO₂ equivalent through forest and tree cover

As a signatory to the Paris Agreement, India was required to update its NDC by 2025 with actions towards curbing fossil fuel and improving energy efficiency

sources; reducing the intensity of emissions per unit of GDP by 44%; and increasing its carbon sink to at least 2.5 billion tonnes to 3 billion tonnes of CO₂ equivalent.

- The Conference of Parties, or CoP, is a body of nations that convenes annually to discuss climate issues and transition their economies away from fossil fuel. India and Argentina were the only two G-20 countries that had not announced a 2035 NDC as of December 31, 2025.
- A total of 128 parties, representing about 78% of global greenhouse gas emissions, had submitted new NDCs by that date. These included 21 Small Island Developing States, 19 Least Developed Countries, and 18 G-20 members.

Current commitments

- Currently, about 52% of India's installed electric capacity comes from non-fossil fuel sources — a target achieved well before the deadline — though only about 25% of the power generated is non-fossil. These sources include solar, wind, hydropower, biomass, and nuclear power. As of 2019, say official estimates, India has achieved an emissions intensity of 36% from 2005-2020.
- A carbon sink of 1.97 billion tonnes of CO₂ equivalent had already been created from 2005 to 2019. However, forest and tree cover accounts for about 24.6% of India's geographical area as of 2021, which is higher than the 21% in 2005, but still less than the national policy goal of 33%.

❖ India's first repository of major psychiatric disorders launched in Bengaluru

Context: The database, CALM-Brain, built on Indian patient data, will be made open source, opening it up for clinicians and researchers aiming to study neuropsychiatric disorders.

- Researchers at the Rohini Nilekani Centre for Brain and Mind (CBM), a partnership between the National Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences (NIMHANS) and the National Centre for Biological Sciences (NCBS) - TIFR, have developed CALM-Brain, a first-of-its-kind digital repository of data in India on brain structure and function from a range of psychiatric disorders.
- According to the researchers, the database, built on Indian patient data, will be made open source, thereby opening it up for clinicians and researchers aiming to study neuropsychiatric disorders and to better understand disease onset, progression and underlying biological changes leading to disease symptoms.
- This, they feel, could help transform the understanding of mental disorders and provide better diagnosis and plan personalised treatments for patients.
- CALM-Brain collects clinical, neuro-imaging, behavioural, genetic and other datasets on five disorders – addiction, bipolar disorder, dementia, obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) and schizophrenia.
- The dataset is also linked to a biorepository of stem cells, which can be used to perform biology research in psychiatry to understand the origins of such severe mental illnesses.

- Initiated in 2016 as part of the Accelerator program for Discovery in Brain disorders using Stem cells (ADBS project), jointly funded by the Department of Biotechnology and the Pratiksha Trust, the repository contains data of over 2,000 participants from 900 families.
- By studying such large numbers of families with both mental illness-affected and unaffected members, scientists hope to come up with robust methods of identifying key neurocognitive biomarkers. This could potentially help diagnose mental disorders at an early stage, when intervention is most likely to be effective and eventually help develop targeted therapy.
- “Given how complex the brain as an organ is and how our behavioural responses are continuously modulated based on prior experience and various physicochemical factors, only further fundamental research can help gain mechanistic insights to various psychiatric disorders. Large data sets being made available on both affected and unaffected individuals in a family would help us to accelerate discovery and develop more effective preventive and therapeutic interventions,” said L.S. Shashidhara, Director, NCBS.
- Prof. Y.C. Janardhan Reddy, CBM coordinator at CBM-NIMHANS, noted that the primary goal of the project was to identify biological markers of severe psychiatric illnesses, which cut across traditional diagnostic frameworks. “In addition, we will try to identify fundamental biological mechanisms of the disease and medication response,” Mr. Janardhan said.

Collaborative effort

- Rohini Nilekani, chairperson of the Rohini Nilekani Philanthropies (RNP), launched the repository on Wednesday.
- “A data repository like CALM-Brain can only come together through the collaborative effort of multiple people and institutions. This is a moment to recognise and celebrate the power of diverse stakeholders coming together,” said Ms. Nilekani.

❖ Bill to reintroduce ballot papers in local body polls passed in Council amid walkout

Context: A Bill seeking to reintroduce ballot papers in elections to local bodies in the State was passed in the Legislative Council on Wednesday, amid a walkout by the Opposition.

- Rural Development and Panchayat Raj Minister Priyank Kharge moved the Karnataka Gram Swaraj and Panchayat Raj (Amendment) Bill, 2026, which had earlier been passed by the Assembly, and urged the House to adopt it. The Bill proposes the use of ballot papers in place of electronic voting machines (EVMs) for elections to gram panchayats, taluk panchayats and zilla panchayats.
- The Bill also provides for stricter measures to curb electoral malpractices, including provisions for imprisonment ranging from six months to two years for offences such as booth capturing and voter intimidation.
- It further seeks to strengthen local governance by bringing unauthorised properties in rural areas under the tax net to improve the financial position of panchayats.

- Opposition members, including Leader of the Opposition Chalavadi Narayanaswamy and C. T. Ravi vehemently opposed the move, arguing that instead of reverting to ballot papers, efforts should be made to improve the existing EVM system in line with technological advancements. Terming the proposal “regressive”, the Opposition staged a walkout. The Bill was, however, passed by the House.
- The Council also passed the Karnataka State Civil Services (Regulation of Transfer of Teachers) (Amendment) Bill, 2026, aimed at simplifying and humanising the transfer process for teachers.
- Two other Bills — The Karnataka Government and Educational Institutions Lands (Protection and Regularisation) Bill, 2026 and Karnataka Jnana Bhandar Manuscripts and Digitisation Bill — were also passed after an extensive debate in the House.

❖ Cauvery basin to face dry spell until 2050, says study

Context: Cauvery faces potential decline of about 3.5% of its waters between 2026 and 2050, even as its northern counterparts brace for floods; researchers warn that water sharing could get tougher.

- While a warming climate is expected to significantly increase the flow of most major Indian rivers, the Cauvery basin stands out as an exception. The river faces a potential “near-term decline” of approximately 3.5% of its waters between 2026 and 2050, even as its northern counterparts brace for floods, according to a study by researchers at the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), Gandhinagar, published in the peer-reviewed journal Earth’s Future.
- Given the fraught history of Cauvery water sharing between Karnataka and Tamil Nadu, particularly in years of deficit rainfall, the study suggests that despite climate models projecting increased rainfall from global warming in India in the decades ahead, the Cauvery might not benefit. In such a situation, river interlinking projects, such as the proposed Godavari-Cauvery link project, might be necessary, the researchers say.
- The study finds that the Cauvery experienced a 28% decline in streamflow between 1951 and 2012, based on data from Kollegal which, one of the authors told The Hindu, “well represented” actual flows in the Cauvery.
- While the study is based on a modelling study and is reliant on an extrapolation, it attempts to reduce errors that can creep in from blindly applying climate models to predict the impact of global warming on Indian rainfall. To do that, the authors use a novel statistical framework and base their analysis on actual river flows between 1951 and 2012, measured at nine stations representing nine major river basins, and then extrapolates the data using a “constrained modelling” approach.
- The nine rivers are the Cauvery (measured at Kollegal), the Ganga (Farakka), Brahmaputra (Bahadurabad), Indus (Bhakra), Godavari (Polavaram), Krishna (Kurundwad), Mahanadi (Basantpur), Narmada (Mandleshwar), and Tapi (Burhanpur).

Worry lines

An IIT Gandhinagar study paints a grim picture

- Flows in the Cauvery basin are expected to decline in the ‘near-term’ (2026-2050) and rise only ‘negligibly’ from 2051
- The river will not benefit from the increased rainfall from global warming in the decades ahead
- River interlinking projects such as the proposed Godavari-Cauvery link could help



The Cauvery riverbed lies largely exposed at the Mukkombe dam in Tiruchi, Tamil Nadu. R. VENGADESH

- Decades of failed negotiations on water sharing between Karnataka and Tamil Nadu led to the establishment of the Cauvery Water Disputes Tribunal (CWDT) in 1990, which took 17 years to reach a final order in 2007. The tribunal calculated total available water at 740 thousand million cubic (tmc) feet in a normal year, and allocated shares accordingly. The 2018 Supreme Court verdict allocated 404.25 tmcft to Tamil Nadu and 284.75 tmcft to Karnataka, while also declaring the Cauvery a national asset.
- In 2023, Tamil Nadu requested 24,000 cusecs a day citing drought, but Karnataka refused, citing its water shortage, leading to protests in both States.

Water shortage

- Water challenges apart, the study highlights a persistent problem in climate science: while models agree that India will get warmer, they vary widely on exactly how much rain will fall. By applying observational constraints, the researchers identified that only 8 out of 22 models accurately captured the seasonality of the Indian monsoon.
- The source models used are the CMIP6 (Coupled Model Intercomparison Project Phase 6), which are the latest generation of global climate models used by scientists to project future climate change
- Unconstrained models show a 5% increase in the Cauvery in the near term, the researchers said, as well as a 25% increase in the Indus, 8% in the Ganga, and 16% in the Krishna. When projections were restricted to these ‘constrained’ or more reliable models, the certainty of a wetter future for most rivers increased, but the outlook for the Cauvery was grim, with the basin facing “near- and mid-term water shortages”.
- The researchers were led by Dipesh Singh Chuphal and Professor Vimal Mishra of IIT Gandhinagar. “Raw outputs have biases because of model resolution, simplified physics that global climate models use. To correct these biases and show future trends based on what is actually observed, we use constrained models,” Mr. Chuphal, the lead author of the study, told The Hindu. “As far as the Cauvery is concerned, it implies that water sharing could get tougher.”

❖ Rajya Sabha brushes aside objections by Opposition, starts debate on CAPF Bill

Context: Brushing aside the Opposition’s notices against the introduction of the Central Armed Police Forces (CAPF-General Administration) Bill, the Rajya Sabha on Wednesday started discussions on the legislation, moved by Union Minister of State for Home Nityanand Rai.

- Opposition members had moved six notices against its introduction.
- The Bill aims to regulate recruitment, deputation, promotion, and other service conditions for the paramilitary officers.
- Trinamool Congress MP Derek O’Brien termed the Bill anti-federal and alleged that States’ rights are being taken away. Congress MP Ajay Maken said the Bill is encroaching upon the rights of the judiciary. He said six Supreme Court judgments had stated there has been an injustice to paramilitary forces.
- DMK MP Tiruchi Siva said the Bill seeks to nullify historical judgments of the Supreme Court that the deputation of IPS officers in CAPFs will be done away with. He said the Centre’s stand was rejected by the apex court, and Parliament is being used to override the Supreme Court’s powers.

- Responding to charges, Mr. Rai said the Bill is under the ambit of the legislative competence and right of the Rajya Sabha. He said the concerns raised by the Opposition are baseless, and the Bill does not interfere with judicial rights, and it is on the service conditions of police officers in CAPFs.
- Parliamentary Affairs Minister Kiren Rijiju said the judiciary has been mandated to interpret the laws, to arbitrate and to pass judgments. “This nation is run with the spirit of the Constitution and the laws passed by Parliament of India and Assemblies. How can the legislative competence of this House be taken away...,” he said.
- Rejecting the notices, the Deputy Chairman put the introduction of the Bill to vote and invited Mr. Rai to introduce the Bill.
- Later, initiating the debate, Mr. Maken said the paramilitary forces play a key role in protecting democracy. “The Bill should have gone to a Parliamentary panel for scrutiny.”

❖ Immigration, visa issuance scheme gets 5-year extension

Context: The Union Cabinet has approved the continuation of the Immigration, Visa, Foreigners Registration & Tracking (IVFRT) scheme for a period of five years from April 1, 2026 till March 31, 2031 with a budget outlay of ₹1,800 crore, the government stated.

- The IVFRT platform seeks to interlink and optimise functions related to immigration, visa issuance and registration of foreigners in India. The core objective of the scheme started in 2010 is to modernise and upgrade immigration and visa services within a secure and integrated service delivery framework.
- “After the recent enactment of the Immigration and Foreigners Act, 2025 and its subsequent rules and order, it has become imperative to strengthen and modernise the Immigration, Visa, and Foreigners Registration & Tracking (IVFRT) system to effectively meet emerging requirements and future challenges in the domain of immigration control and foreigner management, including illegal migration,” the government stated.
- The scheme has covered 117 Immigration Posts, 15 Foreigners Regional Registration Officers (FRROs) and 854 Foreigners Registration Officers (FROs)/ Superintendents of Police (SPs)/ Deputy Commissioners of Police (DCPs) across the country.
- The IVFRT system has enabled a 100% contactless visa process with online appointment scheduling and payment facilities, leading to faster visa processing times with 91.24% of e-visa applications cleared within 72 hours during the past five years, it further stated.

❖ 2 resign from NCTP over TransgenderPersons Bill

Context: Soon after the Rajya Sabha passed the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Amendment Bill, 2026, which takes away the right to self-determination of gender, two members and community representatives resigned from their posts at the National Council for Transgender Persons (NCTP). They cited the amendment Bill which they called “a step backward for our fundamental rights to self-identification and dignity.”

- Kalki Subramaniam, member and Southern region representative, submitted her resignation to the Union Minister, stating that she cannot continue to hold a seat at a table where “collective voice has been silenced on a matter of such existential importance.” She said she will be filing a public interest litigation plea in the Supreme Court, with many others.
- Rituparna Neog, member and North East region representative, said, “I cannot be a part of something that refused to listen to the community,” she told The Hindu on Wednesday evening.

❖ Transgender Bill receives RS approval amid uproar

Context: DMK, Trinamool demanded the Bill be sent to a select committee of the House for scrutiny; Union Minister says it will ensure protection to persons who face discrimination due to biological issues.

- The Rajya Sabha passed the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Amendment Bill, a day after the Lok Sabha cleared the legislation. The Opposition had demanded the Bill should be sent to a select committee of the House for further scrutiny as it had provisions that would have an impact on the dignity of the third gender people.
- Union Social Justice and Empowerment Minister Virendra Kumar, countering the Opposition’s charges against the Bill, said it is an effort to take along all segments of the society together.
- The Minister said the Bill will ensure protection to only those who face discrimination due to biological issues and added that transgender people will continue to get legal recognition and protection.
- “The Narendra Modi government is committed to protecting all those people who are suffering due to biological reasons,” he said adding that transgender welfare boards have been set up in over 30 States. “This Bill will bring administrative clarity and protect rights of the transgender persons,” he said, adding: “This Bill is not merely a legal reform but a pathway to justice for those who have long faced social exclusion and discrimination due to their identity.”

Takes away rights: DMK

- DMK MP Tiruchi Siva argued that the amendments take away the right of self-identification and forces transgender persons to present themselves before a medical board for gender identification. “I am voicing for the people who cannot come to Parliament,” Mr. Siva said and demanded that the Bill must be sent to a select committee for consultation with all stakeholders, legal experts, civil society and transgender community.
- Trinamool Congress MP Saket Gokhale said that only 32,000 transgender persons out of their five lakh population (according to 2011 Census) have obtained certificates and identity cards so far under the existing Act. “They are afraid to come out in the first place,” he said.

Social bias: Trinamool

- Mr. Gokhale said that 31% of transgender people in India have attempted suicide and out of them, 50% were below the age of 20. “They are attempting suicide because of the discrimination that they are facing every day,” the Trinamool MP said adding that as if social discrimination was not enough, now the government is going to “start discriminating” against them.
- CPI(M) MP John Brittas said the new legislation is an exclusionary restrictive measure.
- “Recently, the Supreme Court-appointed committee conveyed to the government not to proceed with this piece of legislation. What happened to that? Why is it that the government is not considering the request of the Supreme Court-appointed committee?” Mr. Brittas asked.

❖ SC panel callsto scrap Billion genderchoice rights

Context: A Supreme Court-constituted Advisory Committee headed by former Delhi High Court judge Justice Asha Menon has sent a resolution to the Government of India, requesting that the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Amendment Bill, 2026, be withdrawn as the proposal to “deny self-identification” of gender went against the decision of the Supreme Court in the 2014 NALSA versus Union of India verdict.

- The Chairperson said that the amendment Bill had come as a “great shock” and would amount to a “tremendous setback” to efforts to mainstream transgender communities so far, The Hindu has learnt.
- The Bill proposes to remove a section that recognised transgender people’s “right to a self-perceived gender identity”, redefine a transgender person, and introduce the requirement of a medical board’s nod to acquire a transgender certificate and identity card. The Bill was passed by voice vote in the Lok Sabha on Tuesday, amid an Opposition-led walkout.

❖ Centre asks RBI to keep retail inflation target at 4% till 2031

Context: The Union government on Wednesday asked the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) to target retail inflation at 4% with a margin of 2% on either side for another five years ending March 2031.

- To control the price rise, the government in 2016 gave a mandate to the RBI to keep the retail inflation at 4% with a margin of 2% on either side for five years ending March 31, 2021. Subsequently, in March 2021, the government maintained the same target. This is the second time the government has retained the inflation target.
- The Union government, in consultation with the RBI, hereby notifies the inflation target for the period beginning April 1, 2026, and ending on March 31, 2031, a Gazette notification issued by the Department of Economic Affairs dated March 25 said. According to the notification, the inflation target is 4% with an upper tolerance level of 6% and a lower tolerance level of 2%. India adopted the inflation-targeting framework and formally tasked the central bank with it in 2016.

- In its first meeting in October 2016, the six-member Monetary Policy Committee was given the mandate to maintain annual inflation at 4% until March 31, 2021, with an upper tolerance of 6% and a lower threshold of 2%.

❖ FM defends Centre's right to levy cess, says Constitution allows it

Context: Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman emphatically reiterated the Centre's right to collect cesses and surcharges, saying the Constitution allowed it and the Centre would continue to use the provision.

- However, she added that over the last six years, the government had spent on the States 105% of what it had collected through cesses and surcharges. That is, its spending has exceeded its collections.
- She was replying to the Lok Sabha debate on the Finance Bill 2026, which was passed following the conclusion of her speech.
- "The Constitution makers knew what they are doing, and we all pay respects to them," she said, in response to comments by several MPs about the Centre's levy of cesses and surcharges that are not part of the divisible pool that is shareable with the States.

❖ UN condemns Iran strikes on Gulf, demands 'reparation'

Context: The UN Human Rights Council on Wednesday condemned Iran's "egregious attacks" on its Gulf neighbours and demanded full "reparation" for all victims of its strikes.

- The 47-member council backed a resolution brought by the six Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries and Jordan demanding Iran immediately "cease all unprovoked attacks".
- The resolution was adopted by consensus, though some countries, while backing the text, criticised its scope and the fact that it made no mention of Israel or the United States.

Context: Ships of India, China, Russia, Iraq, and Pak. can pass through the Strait, says Iran Foreign Minister, who thanks India, Sri Lanka for 'significant help'; 'sovereignty' established over waterway, he adds.

- India and four other “friendly nations” were allowed to move their ships through the Strait of Hormuz, Iran’s Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi has said, adding that Tehran has established its “sovereignty” over the waterway connecting the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman.
- He also thanked India and Sri Lanka for their “significant help” after an Iranian vessel, IRIS Dena, was sunk in a U.S. attack in the Indian Ocean during the conflict and said no talks were being held with Washington.
- “We permitted passage through the Strait of Hormuz for friendly nations including China, Russia, India, Iraq, and Pakistan,” Mr. Araghchi said in an interview with the Iran News Network that was broadcast on Wednesday night.
- “The Strait of Hormuz is located in the territorial waters of Iran and Oman, and Iran’s sovereignty is established there. After the war, we will also have new arrangements for passing through the Strait,” he said. “In the incident of the Dena ship, which was unfairly attacked without any warning, I must thank Sri Lanka and India for their significant help in transferring two other ships to a safe location,” he added.
- The Iranian frigate was attacked and sunk by a U.S. Navy submarine on March 4 off the coast of Sri Lanka in the Indian Ocean while returning from exercises in Visakhapatnam. At least 87 sailors were killed in the attack. IRIS Lavan and IRIS Bushehr, which also came to the region to take part in the drills, have now docked in Kochi and Sri Lanka’s Trincomalee, respectively.
- The Strait of Hormuz, through which more than a hundred ships passed daily before the war, has seen traffic plunge to single digits since the conflict began.
- At least four India-flagged ships — Jag Vasant, Pine Gas, Shivalik, and Nanda Devi — have transited the strait since the U.S. and Israel launched the war on Iran on February 28.
- Mr. Araghchi, who was Iran’s chief negotiator with the U.S. before the war, also said no talks were being held with the U.S. “I state firmly that there has been no negotiation with the U.S. However, in recent days, the American side has begun sending various messages through different intermediaries.. and we have responded by stating our positions. It is simply an exchange of messages through friends,” he said. “At present, our position is to continue resisting, continue defending our country. We have no intention of negotiating.”
- U.S. President Donald Trump, who “postponed” on Monday a threatened strike on Iran’s power infrastructure, has said Washington is in talks with Tehran. Pakistan’s Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar said “indirect talks” between the two sides are taking place through messages being relayed by Pakistan. “The U.S. has shared 15 points, being deliberated upon by Iran. Brotherly countries of Turkiye and Egypt, among others, are also extending their support to this initiative,” Mr. Dar wrote in a social media post.

- Mr. Trump said Iran should “better get serious soon” in talks, “before it’s too late, because once that happens, there is no turning back”. U.S. media have reported that the Pentagon is sending more troops to West Asia in preparation for a possible ground offensive against Iran.

❖ India mulls trade in West Asia with local currencies

Context: The Centre is “experimenting” with conducting trade with West Asian countries in local currencies in a bid to mitigate surging oil prices and depreciating rupee.

- Move aimed at mitigating the fiscal double-hit of surging oil prices and a depreciating rupee, according to two senior officials; another objective is to save on currency conversion costs
- The Centre is “experimenting” with conducting trade with the West Asian countries in local currencies, in a bid to mitigate the fiscal double-hit of surging oil prices and a depreciating rupee, according to two senior officials in the government. Another objective is to save on currency conversion costs.
- If this fructifies, it would mean India would be paying for about 80% of its oil imports using local currencies rather than the U.S. dollar. “India is working out a mechanism to pay for imports from the GCC [Gulf Cooperation Council] countries in local currencies,” a senior government official told The Hindu.

Triggers for alternatives

- The triggers for this move, he explained, were the upward spiral of oil prices and the downward spiral of the rupee.
- The price of the Indian basket of oil — which is a weighted average of the prices of various types of oil from Oman and Dubai and of Brent crude — stands at \$123.15 per barrel currently, as per government data. This is up from an average of \$69 per barrel in February 2026.
- Simultaneously, the rupee touched an all-time low of ₹94.1 against a dollar earlier this week, before settling slightly higher. The exchange rate was at about ₹91.3 per dollar before the Iran war broke out.
- A combination of these two factors has meant that Indian importers have had to pay much more for each import transaction conducted in the U.S. dollar, especially for oil.
- According to another official in the Ministry of Commerce and Industry, the other advantage India will see through such a local currency mechanism, is a drastic reduction in currency conversion charges.
- “It is an experiment on which we are working,” the second official said. “Primarily to save on the cost of currency conversion at several stages.
- Each conversion costs about 1-2% of the total transaction value, and so about 5-6% will be saved if we just deal in local currencies, which is a lot when it comes to high value transactions,” he added.
- India currently already pays for Russian oil using a combination of local currencies and dirhams. Russia accounted for 30.4% of India’s oil imports in the April 2025 to January 2026 period.

- The GCC countries account for another 49%.
- Moving away from using the dollar for such high value transactions might, however, attract American ire. The U.S. President Donald Trump has in the past threatened a 100% tariff on countries looking to adopt alternate currencies to the dollar.
- The U.S. Supreme Court's decision might have removed this threat, but Mr. Trump's determination to use tariffs as a compulsion tool remains.

❖ Audit finds gross financial irregularities in Dept. of Youth Empowerment and Sports

Context: The Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) of India has flagged gross financial irregularities in the functioning of the Department of Youth Empowerment and Sports (DYES) in Karnataka.

- The report, tabled in the Legislative Assembly on Thursday, noted that the proposed Karnataka Sports Act and related regulations have not been enacted even seven years after the State introduced a Comprehensive Sports Policy in 2018 aimed at building a transparent and inclusive sports ecosystem.
- According to the report, during 2019–20 to 2023–24, the Sports Authority of Karnataka (SAK) and the General Thimmayya National Academy of Adventure (GETHNAA) received grant-in-aid of ₹83.57 crore and ₹15.85 crore, respectively. However, utilisation certificates and audited expenditure statements for these funds were not submitted.
- The audit found that the department and GETHNAA disbursed cash awards and scholarships worth ₹11.47 crore, but supporting documents for payments amounting to ₹8.46 crore were not produced. In addition, irregular cash incentives totalling ₹4.54 crore were paid to 316 sportspersons in violation of scheme guidelines.
- Scrutiny of e-payment records further revealed that 62 payments shown as transferred to beneficiaries were instead credited to one of three bank accounts belonging to a person who was not a beneficiary.
- The CAG pointed to the poor development of sports infrastructure. As many as 57 works worth ₹45.64 crore remained incomplete, while four projects had not even commenced as of March 2024.
- The report observed overcrowding in sports hostels and an imbalance in the deployment of coaches, including the absence of athletics coaches in Bengaluru Urban district despite high enrolment, while available coaches in other districts remained underutilised.
- It noted that non-implementation of key preventive health services during 2018–23 resulted in the forfeiture of ₹39.84 crore in grants from the Employees' State Insurance Corporation (ESIC), depriving beneficiaries of essential preventive healthcare services.
- Further, digital health initiatives such as telemedicine and the Dhanwantri portal remained underutilised. Full payments were released to contractors without obtaining completion certificates or verifying the delivery and operational readiness of medical equipment, resulting in idle expenditure of ₹7.74 crore, the report said.

❖ **‘Govt. released grants to private varsities in violation of rules’ Jaishankar, French counterpart discuss Iran, Hormuz at G7 meet**

Context: The Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) of India has flagged irregular release of government grants to two engineering colleges in Karnataka — B.V. Bhoomareddy College of Engineering and Technology (BVBCET), Hubballi, and Sri Jayachamarajendra College of Engineering (SJCE), Mysuru — despite their affiliation to private universities.

‘Not entitled to aid’

- According to the report tabled in the Legislative Assembly on Thursday, the State government released grant-in-aid amounting to ₹146.23 crore to these institutions, in violation of provisions of the respective university Acts.
- During 2019–23 alone, BVBCET and SJCE received ₹50.30 crore and ₹95.93 crore, respectively.
- The grants were issued in contravention of Section 5 of the KLE Technological University Act, 2012, and the J.S.S. Science and Technology University Act, 2013, which mandate that private universities must be self-financing and are not entitled to State government aid.
- Despite this, the Commissioner of Collegiate and Technical Education continued to release funds periodically, the audit observed.

Both colleges ineligible

- The audit found both colleges ineligible for such grants. In the case of BVBCET, the government initially stopped funding in March 2023, citing statutory provisions, but later issued an order in February 2024 allowing grants to continue until the 2022–23 batch completes its course and permitting retrenchment of aided staff by 2025–26.
- For SJCE, Mysuru, directions were issued in November 2019 to continue grant support without specifying any timeline for phasing it out.
- The CAG noted that the Higher Education Department failed to recover ₹5.72 crore paid as salaries to faculty deputed for pursuing PhDs between 2017 and 2020 in government engineering colleges and polytechnics. Of the 19 faculty members, 15 failed to complete their doctoral programmes, with delays of up to 33 months.
- **As per Rule 61(3) of the Karnataka Civil Services Rules, such salary payments during deputation should be recovered in case of non-completion. However, no recovery was made, the report stated.**

❖ **Jaishankar, French counterpart discuss Iran, Hormuz at G7 meet**

Context: External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar arrived in France on a two-day visit to represent India as a partner country at the Foreign Ministers’ Meeting of the G7 (Group of Seven) advanced economies.

- The Minister held bilateral talks with his French counterpart Jean-Noël Barrot in Abbaye des-Vaux-de-Cernay on Thursday, which included an “in depth” discussion on West Asia as per the French government’s readout of the meeting.

- The two Ministers “agreed to continue their close coordination with a view to working jointly towards ensuring the security of the Strait of Hormuz,” the readout said. The meeting comes just after Israel claimed to have killed Iranian commander Alireza Tangsiri, who Israel said was directly responsible for the closing of the Strait.
- The participation of Mr. Jaishankar in the G7 meetings signified “the importance France attaches to closely associating India — currently holding the BRICS presidency — with its G7 presidency”, the French government said.

International links

- The Ministers welcomed Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s participation in the G7 Summit, scheduled for June 15-17 in Évian, France and underscored India’s contribution to the G7’s work on addressing major macroeconomic imbalances and improving international partnerships, as per the readout.
- Front and centre of the G7 agenda this week is the war in Iran and its impact on global energy and stock markets. Discussions on the Russia-Ukraine war and the reform of multilateralism are also on the cards.
- “We will work to bring about a new international order and to build a more balanced and fairer system, underpinned by a renewed multilateralism. Reforming global governance and combatting cross-cutting threats require a collective commitment which extends beyond G7 members alone,” Mr. Barrot said in a statement.

Bilateral talks

- Mr. Jaishankar also met bilaterally with the Foreign Ministers of Canada, Japan and South Korea. Talks with Canadian Foreign Minister Anita Anand focused on advancing the bilateral agenda and also dwelt on developments in West Asia, Mr. Jaishankar said on social media site X.
- At a session on global governance, Mr. Jaishankar emphasised the urgency of UN Security Council reforms. India and several other countries have been seeking a permanent seat on the body.
- The Minister also raised energy challenges and concerns around fertilizer supplies and food security impacting the Global South.
- Friday’s session on Iran will only be for G7 countries and a session on Ukraine will be in the G7 and Ukraine format.

❖ Lapses by Census officials invite prison term

Context: The Registrar General and Census Commissioner of India (RG&CCI) has written to States that if a Census official refuses to perform their duty or damages or destroys any Census document, they shall face up to three years of imprisonment.

- In a letter to the Chief Secretaries on March 17, Mritunjay Kumar Narayan said that for smooth conduct of Census operations, it is necessary that Census officers engaged in the conduct of houselisting, housing census, and population enumeration are informed of their specific duties under the Census Act. “Along with the duties, penalties have also been prescribed under Section 11 of the Census Act, 1948,” the letter said.
- The letter said that the enumerators must “conduct proper probing while maintaining a polite behaviour” during field visits.

❖ S-400 deliveries expedited as India enhances air defence

Context: India is set to receive the remaining two units of the S-400 air defence system from Russia this year, with one expected as early as next month and the final delivery scheduled for November.

- A senior official in the Ministry of Defence confirmed that India is in close coordination with its Russian counterparts to ensure timely delivery. The matter has been discussed at the highest levels.
- “Out of the remaining two S-400 systems, one will be delivered next month (April) and the last one by November,” the official said, adding that the timeline has been expedited after earlier delays caused by supply chain disruptions and the Russia–Ukraine war. Earlier, it was indicated that final deliveries could extend to 2027.
- India signed a \$5.43 billion deal with Russia in 2018 for five squadrons of the S-400 system. So far, three units have been inducted into service, with the remaining two now expected to be delivered within the stipulated timeframe.
- The issue of delivery timelines was discussed during a bilateral meeting between Defence Minister Rajnath Singh and his Russian counterpart Andrey Belousov, in June last year.

❖ President urged not to grant assent to Transgender Amendment Bill

Context: A day after the Rajya Sabha passed the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Amendment Bill, 2026, around 140 lawyers and women’s rights activists wrote to President Droupadi Murmu urging her not to grant assent to the Bill, pointing out “constitutional violations” in its provisions and “procedural infirmities” in the way it was passed.

- The letter was written by All-India Feminist Alliance (ALIFA), a pan-India collective of grassroots organisations, along with the National Alliance for Justice, Accountability and Rights (NAJAR), a forum of lawyers and legal professionals.
- The groups said in their letter that they were “extremely alarmed and distressed at the undue and unjustifiable haste” with which the Bill was passed in the Lok Sabha and the Rajya Sabha.
- They said that not taking public and stakeholder consultation violated the mandate of the Pre-Legislative Consultation Policy, 2014.
- Members of the National Council for Transgender Persons had said that they were not consulted. Soon after the Rajya Sabha passed it on Wednesday, two members and representatives submitted their resignations, the letter pointed out.
- The letter emphasised that in the National Legal Services Authority v. Union of India (2014) judgment, the Supreme Court held that the right to self-determination of gender is a fundamental right protected under Articles 14 and 19 of the Constitution.
- Further, they said the introduction of a medical board, whose recommendation is required to “examine” before issuance of a certificate of identity, also goes against the Supreme Court’s stance in NALSA, which rejected such a requirement, adding that this violates the “right to bodily integrity and privacy” as enshrined in the Constitution.

- By removing the guarantee of self-perceived identity, narrowing the definition of who qualifies as transgender, and introducing layers of medical and administrative scrutiny, transgender people, activists and allies, say that many will be erased and made invisible by the Bill.

❖ **Transgender rights activist resigns from NHRC body**

Context: Transgender rights activist Harish Iyer on Thursday resigned from the position of Advisor on the Core Group on LGBTQI+ issues at the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), in protest of the alleged failure of NHRC to stand for the LGBTQI+ community.

- He slammed the government and NHRC for not consulting the core group on any of the key issues before passing the Transgender Persons Amendment Bill, 2026, calling his association with NHRC ‘untenable’. “The NHRC cannot claim to be a “watchdog of human rights” while remaining perfectly content with this autocracy,” the resignation letter has stated.

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❖ 5 killed as avalanche strikes Zojila Pass

Context: Five persons were killed and as many injured after an avalanche hit the high-altitude Zojila Pass, which connects the Kashmir Valley with Ladakh.

- Officials said the avalanche, apparently triggered by bright sunlight, hit the Srinagar-Leh National Highway near Zero Point at the Zojila Pass in the afternoon, when several passenger vehicles were negotiating the snow-laden road. Eyewitnesses said a huge volume of snow came crashing down and buried some vehicles at an altitude of 3,580 metres.
- Initial reports suggested that one vehicle was thrown off the road in the impact of the avalanche and a number of vehicles were left stranded in the snow.
- However, the casualties were reported from three or four vehicles that went under the snow. The highway has been closed for traffic.
- “I have directed the Deputy Commissioner and Senior Superintendent of Police of Kargil to visit the spot and mobilise relief and rescue operations. All government agencies, including disaster relief forces and the Border Road Organisation, have been put on high alert,” said Ladakh Lieutenant-Governor Vinai Kumar Saxena. He said he was “personally monitoring the situation.”
- Union Minister Jitendra Singh said: “My sincere condolences to the bereaved families. All required assistance is being provided to the injured.”
- J&K Chief Minister Omar Abdullah also expressed deep sorrow over the tragic loss of lives.
- Khalil Ahmad Poswal, Senior Superintendent of Police, Ganderbal, said two more persons were feared trapped and rescue operations were on.

❖ India signs ₹858-cr. defence deals with Russian, U.S. firms

Context: The Ministry of Defence on Friday signed contracts worth ₹858 crore for the procurement of air defence systems for the Army and maintenance support for the Navy’s reconnaissance fleet, reinforcing India’s balanced defence partnerships with Russia and the United States.

- A contract worth ₹445 crore was signed with Russian agency JSC Rosoboronexport for the procurement of the Tunguska Air Defence Missile System for the Army. The deal was inked in the presence of Defence Secretary Rajesh Kumar Singh at Kartavya Bhavan. The system is expected to significantly enhance India’s multi-layered air defence capabilities against aerial threats such as aircraft, drones and cruise missiles, while further strengthening the Indo-Russian strategic defence partnership.
- In a parallel move, the Ministry signed a ₹413-crore contract with U.S. firm Boeing India Defense Private Limited for depot-level inspection of the Navy’s P-8I Long-Range Maritime Reconnaissance Aircraft under the ‘Buy Indian category with 100% Indigenous Content’.
- The contract will enable in-country maintenance, repair and overhaul (MRO) of the P-8I fleet, enhancing operational readiness, in line with the government’s Aatmanirbhar Bharat and Make in India push. The agreements underline India’s focus on strengthening combat capabilities.

❖ Stronger trade corridors and supply chains needed, says Jaishankar

Context: As the U.S.-Israel war against Iran approached the close of its fourth week, External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar discussed India and the Global South's concerns about food, fuel, and fertilizer shortages with his counterparts from the G-7 advanced economies and others, according to the Ministry of External Affairs. Mr. Jaishankar is on the second day of his visit to Vaux-de-Cernay, France, for the G-7 Foreign Ministers meeting.

- He spoke at two sessions, one on global governance, peacekeeping and humanitarian aid delivery, and a second session on the India Middle East Europe Economic Corridor. He stressed the importance of having resilient trade corridors, according to MEA spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal.
- “The uncertainties arising from the conflicts in West Asia only make a stronger case for more resilient trade corridors and supply chains,” Mr. Jaishankar said in a post on X. “At the same time, India’s FTAs with the European Union, EFTA [European Free Trade Association] members and UK have enhanced the utility of IMEC,” he added.
- “Underscored the importance of freedom of navigation for global economic security. As well as the threat of narco-terror linkages,” Mr. Jaishankar said.
- Energy and commodity markets have been reeling under the impact of the conflict in West Asia, with Iran controlling the transit of ships through the Strait of Hormuz.
- Responding to a question from The Hindu on whether India had protested the exclusion of South Africa from the upcoming G-7 Summit in June, or from the G-20 summit in December, Mr. Jaiswal said the matter was for the hosts to decide. South Africa has participated as an outreach country at G-7 meets, and is a member of the G-20.

❖ Amid conflict, India sends out invites for key BRICS meetings

Context: Hoping to forge an elusive consensus over the war in West Asia, New Delhi is going ahead with planning key meetings of BRICS countries this year in India, and has sent out invitations for the BRICS Foreign Ministers' Meeting to be held in May and the 18th BRICS Summit in September.

- According to officials and diplomats, the invitations to the 10-nation grouping that also includes Iran and the United Arab Emirates went out in mid-March. Both countries have rebuffed several attempts by India — the current Chair of BRICS — for a joint statement.
- Officials said it is unclear whether they will attend the meeting together, but “as of now” the BRICS Foreign Ministers' Meeting is due to be held in-person in mid-May.
- The summit, which could bring Russian President Vladimir Putin, Chinese President Xi Jinping and leaders from Brazil, South Africa, Egypt, Ethiopia, Indonesia, Iran and the UAE together in Delhi, is expected to be held on September 9-10.



India is set to host the BRICS Foreign Ministers' meet in May.

- “One of the key events on the political track, in addition to the traditional leaders’ meeting [in September], will be the BRICS Foreign Ministers’ Meeting, scheduled for May,” Russian government spokesperson Maria Zakharova told journalists in Moscow this week.
- “This will be a good opportunity for a thorough discussion of current issues on the international agenda, the role of BRICS in the world, and opportunities for joint action,” she said, responding to questions about how the grouping would tackle the war in West Asia.
- Diplomats have openly acknowledged difficulties in forging a statement that is agreeable to both Tehran and Abu Dhabi. “We have an ongoing conversation with BRICS members on the conflict in West Asia,” External Affairs Ministry spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal said at a media briefing on Friday.
- “As you’re aware, some of the BRICS members are also involved directly in the conflict... Because we have differing opinions, it has been difficult for us to forge a consensus on this particular conflict.”
- In June 2025, the BRICS then chaired by Brazil had managed to issue a strong statement when the U.S. and Israel jointly struck a number of Iranian nuclear sites, condemning the military strikes against Iran.

❖ G-7 allies press Rubio for clarity on American plans for Iran war

Context: G-7 allies were on Friday pressing U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio for clarity on American plans for Iran almost one month into the war in the West Asia, with concern also intensifying over the extent of cooperation between Russia and the Islamic republic.

- German Foreign Minister Johann Wadepful said the international community needed to collaborate even more closely now it was dealing with two wars — including the conflict sparked by Moscow’s invasion of Ukraine — in which Russia and Iran were cooperating.
- In contrast to usual protocol, and in a sign of the distance between the United States and its allies, there is to be no joint communique at the end of the meeting.
- The UK’s Foreign Minister Yvette Cooper urged a “swift resolution to this conflict that restores regional stability”.
- Mr. Rubio said earlier that it was in the “interest” of all G-7 nations to push for the reopening of the Strait of Hormuz.

-----All the best-----