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Mar-2026

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- Epstein Files Bombshell
- India's Mega Pacts with US, EU, and Asia Sealed



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Domestically, “Vande Mataram Revived: Govt Rolls Out National Song Protocols Nationwide” invites reflection on constitutional values, cultural identity, and governance. In the sphere of education and institutional autonomy, “SC Halts UGC Equity Rules: Relief for Colleges, What’s Next?” raises important questions about the balance between reform and judicial oversight.

Trade and economic diplomacy take center stage in “US Trade Deal Safeguards: India Shields Farmers from Import Flood,” while global economic uncertainty is examined through “SCOTUS Slaps Down Trump Tariffs: Global Trade War Averted?” and “Trump’s Trade War 2.0: US Standoff Rattles Global Allies.” These developments emphasize the interconnected nature of policy decisions and global markets. Meanwhile, “Epstein Files Bombshell: Leaked Docs Ignite Worldwide Political Firestorm” highlights the complex relationship between law, accountability, media, and politics in the modern era.

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## Polity & Governance

### Places of Worship Act: The legal battle, explained

#### Background of the 1991 Law

The Places of Worship Act, 1991 was passed to keep the religious status of all places of worship the same as on August 15, 1947. It stops any change in their religion or character after that date.

It also bars courts from hearing new suits or matters about changing the religious character of these places.

#### Why the Law Is Being Challenged

The petition argues that the Centre did not have the power to make this law because matters like “pilgrimage” and “public order” are state subjects under the Indian Constitution. It says the law takes away the right to go to court, which is a fundamental right. The cut-off date of August 15, 1947 is claimed to be arbitrary and unfair to communities whose places of worship were altered before that date.

#### What the Supreme Court Has Done So Far

The Supreme Court of India has stopped courts nationwide from registering new suits or issuing final orders in cases involving the Act until the constitutional challenge is decided. This pause applies to cases that were already pending as well as new ones. The Court has also said that no effective interim orders (like surveys by the ASI) should be passed until it resolves the matter.

- Recent Court Action: A plea about the Ajmer Sharif Dargah and claims it was once a Hindu temple was dismissed, but the Court said it will enforce its existing directions strictly.
- Arguments in Support of the Act: Supporters say the law helps protect secularism and prevent historic conflicts from resurfacing. It was referenced in the 2019 Ayodhya verdict as an important tool for national unity.
- Current Status: The Supreme Court has not yet decided the constitutional question about whether the Act itself is valid. The case continues.

#### In Simple Terms

A law from 1991 prevents changes to the religious identity of worship places as they were on India's Independence Day. People argue it is unconstitutional and blocks justice. The Supreme Court has paused legal actions under the law until it settles this bigger question.

### Supreme Court Allows Virtual Hearings

The Supreme Court of India permitted lawyers to appear via video conferencing from 16 to 20 February 2026 due to anticipated traffic congestion around the court's precincts during the AI Impact Summit in New Delhi. The Supreme Court's decision was made based on a request from the Supreme Court Bar Association and a circular issued by the Registry. Virtual hearings are optional, and all benches will operate in a hybrid mode (physical + virtual). Similarly, the Delhi High Court allowed virtual appearances for lawyers and litigants from 16 to 23 February 2026, considering the AI Summit and Bar Council of Delhi elections held close to the court premises.

#### Why This Is Significant

##### Access to Justice & Digital Courts

The allowance of virtual hearings reflects the rising acceptance of technology in judicial processes, improving access to justice for lawyers and litigants during extraordinary events. Virtual and hybrid court proceedings reduce dependency on physical presence, especially during emergencies, high traffic events, or public safety concerns like heavy congestion or poor air quality.

##### AI Impact Summit Context

The AI Impact Summit (16–20 Feb 2026) at Bharat Mandapam, New Delhi is a major global event bringing together policymakers, industry leaders, and innovators in artificial intelligence (AI). Security and traffic measures around

the summit have been intensified, including deployment of large police contingents, to manage congestion and public safety.

### Judicial Reforms & Virtual Hearings

Virtual hearings became common in India after the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to hybrid modes of court functioning nationwide. Courts have developed standard operating procedures (SOPs) and infrastructure for video conferencing to support smooth digital proceedings.

### PMO Shifts to Seva Teerth

The Prime Minister's Office (PMO) has officially relocated from the historic South Block — its base since India's independence in 1947 — to a newly constructed administrative complex called Seva Teerth in New Delhi as part of the Central Vista Redevelopment Project. This marks the first shift of the PMO's location in 78 years and ends an era of decision-making centred in the British-era colonial buildings.

#### Key features of the move:

Seva Teerth will house the Prime Minister's Office, alongside the Cabinet Secretariat and the National Security Council Secretariat (NSCS) under one integrated campus, replacing scattered offices across multiple locations. The complex is equipped with digitally integrated workspaces, smart access systems, and built to 4-Star GRIHA environmental standards for sustainability. Adjacent Kartavya Bhavan-1 & 2 will accommodate several key ministries, enabling improved inter-ministerial coordination and efficient governance. The iconic South Block and North Block buildings, which once housed major ministries like Defence and External Affairs, will be repurposed into the 'Yuge Yugeen Bharat National Museum' to showcase India's civilisational history.

#### Central Vista Redevelopment Project:

A flagship urban redevelopment initiative aimed at modernising the administrative and parliamentary precincts in New Delhi, including the construction of a new Parliament building, Common Central Secretariat buildings like Seva Teerth, and public spaces. This project was announced in 2019 to improve governance infrastructure in India.

#### Significance of South and North Block:

South Block and North Block are iconic British-era buildings designed by architect Sir Herbert Baker and completed in 1931; they served as the core of India's administrative power houses since Independence. Originally, South Block has been the location of the PMO, Defence Ministry and External Affairs Ministry, while North Block housed the Finance and Home ministries.

### Comprehensive Guidelines on National Song Vande Mataram

#### What's New?

The Union Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) has issued detailed guidelines for the rendition of India's National Song, Vande Mataram at official and public functions.

Whenever Vande Mataram is performed together with the National Anthem (Jana Gana Mana), the national song must be sung or played first. The guidelines mandate that all six stanzas of the original composition by Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay must be rendered — restoring the full version.

#### Key Protocols & Occasions

##### Official Ceremonies

##### To be sung/played on occasions such as:

Arrival and departure of the President and Governors at state functions

##### Unfurling of the National Flag

Civil investitures and award ceremonies

Before and after President's address on state media (All India Radio & Television)

##### Schools & Public Events

Schools are encouraged to begin the day with the national song to foster respect for national symbols. The song is also to be sung at government-organised public events with decorum.

**Standing Protocol**

Persons present must stand at attention when Vande Mataram is played or sung.

Exception: Standing is not required if the song is played as part of a newsreel or documentary in cinemas or screenings.

**Details of the Official Version**

The official rendition comprises all six stanzas of Vande Mataram, returned to its original form, covering approximately 3 minutes and 10 seconds in duration.

**Historical & Contextual Background**

**About Vande Mataram**

- Written by Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay in the late 19th century in his novel Anandamath.
- It was adopted as the National Song of India by the Constituent Assembly in 1950, distinct from the National Anthem (Jana Gana Mana).
- The full six stanzas were not commonly used historically; only the first two were sung at many formal functions.

**Significance in Freedom Movement**

Vande Mataram was a rallying cry in the Swadeshi Movement against British rule and symbolised patriotic fervour. (General historical fact)

Its reinstatement reflects emphasis on national heritage and cultural identity in state protocols.

**Legal & Protocol Status**

Unlike the National Anthem, the national song does not yet have explicit constitutional or statutory protection, though the MHA’s guidelines give it formal ceremonial status at official events. The Prevention of Insults to National Honour Act, 1971 currently applies explicitly to the National Anthem, but not to Vande Mataram.

**Industrial Relations Code (Amendment) Bill, 2026**

The Industrial Relations Code (Amendment) Bill, 2026 was introduced in the Lok Sabha by the Union Minister of Labour & Employment. The Bill aims to provide legal clarity regarding the repeal and continuity of labour laws subsumed under the Industrial Relations Code, 2020.

**Objective of the Amendment**

- To remove any ambiguity regarding the legal status of repealed labour laws.
- To strengthen the “savings clause” under Section 104 of the Industrial Relations Code, 2020.
- To prevent future litigation or legal disputes over the repeal of previous Acts.
- To ensure a smooth transition from old labour laws to the new Code framework.

Acts Repealed Under Industrial Relations Code, 2020

The 2020 Code subsumed and replaced:

- Trade Unions Act, 1926
- Industrial Employment (Standing Orders) Act, 1946
- Industrial Disputes Act, 1947
- The Amendment Bill reinforces that these repeals are legally valid and operational.

**About Industrial Relations Code, 2020**

- One of the four Labour Codes passed by Parliament.
- Aims to consolidate and modernise India’s labour laws.
- Focuses on: Trade unions, Industrial disputes, Conditions of employment, Retrenchment and lay-offs

**Four Labour Codes in India**

India consolidated 29 Central Labour Laws into four codes:

- Code on Wages, 2019
- Industrial Relations Code, 2020
- Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions Code, 2020
- Code on Social Security, 2020

**Multiple Private Members' Bills to Address Key Public Issues**

The Rajya Sabha (Upper House of Parliament) discussed several Private Members' Legislative Bills during its private member business session.

**What Are Private Members' Bills?**

- These are bills introduced by MPs who are not ministers.
- They address a wide range of public and social issues, although they rarely become law.

**Important Bills Introduced or Moved**

- Airline Passengers' Rights Bill
- Moved by an MP from Shiv Sena (UBT).
- Aims to establish rights and protections for airline passengers.

**Educational Consultancies Regulation Bill**

- Introduced by A A Rahim of CPI (M).
- Seeks to regulate educational consultancies and protect students from unfair practices.

**Small Claims Court Bill**

- Moved by Sanjay Seth of the BJP.
- Proposes creation of simplified courts for resolving small financial disputes efficiently.

**Critical Infrastructure (Resilience, Protection and Accountability) Bill, 2026**

Introduced by Independent MP Kartikeya Sharma. Seeks to identify and protect important infrastructure and hold responsible parties accountable for failures that cause loss of life or damage. Aims to treat deaths due to negligent infrastructure projects as serious criminal offenses.

**Shakti Samman (Pay Equity for Women) Bill, 2026**

- Also introduced by Kartikeya Sharma.
- Seeks to close the gender pay gap through an AI-based portal and job evaluation standards.
- Proposes a National Authority for Pay Parity of Women to enforce fair pay and eliminate discrimination.

**Why These Bills Matter**

- They aim to address real issues affecting everyday citizens — from travel rights and education reforms to infrastructure safety and women's equal pay.
- Discussion of such bills highlights issues that MPs consider important, even if these bills do not immediately become law.

**Baggage Rules 2026**

**What Are the New Baggage Rules, 2026**

The Government of India has notified the Baggage Rules, 2026 and issued new Customs Baggage (Declaration and Processing) Regulations, 2026. These rules apply to people travelling to and from India and aim to make airport baggage procedures easier and faster.

**Why the New Rules Were Made**

The new rules will reduce paperwork at customs. They will increase transparency and speed up baggage clearance for passengers. They reflect changing economic conditions, more people travelling and higher passenger expectations.

**Key Changes for Passengers**

**Duty-Free Allowance**

- The duty-free limit for passengers bringing goods into India has been raised from ₹50,000 to ₹75,000.
- This means goods worth up to ₹75,000 can be brought in without paying customs duty.
- For foreign tourists, the duty-free limit is now ₹25,000.

**Electronic and Advance Declaration**

Passengers can now declare their baggage electronically before arriving at customs. This helps save time at the airport and speeds up processing.

**One Laptop Duty-Free: Passengers above 18 years of age are allowed to bring one laptop without paying duty.**

Temporary Imports and Re-Imports: Items taken abroad and later brought back will have simpler procedures under the new rules. Pets Allowed Duty-Free: Travellers can now bring pets duty-free, following the prescribed conditions.

**Special Allowances**

- Jewellery: New rules include clear provisions for bringing jewellery without duty under certain conditions.
- Transfer of Residence: People moving their residence to India will get clear and improved benefits for bringing goods and personal items.

**Expected Benefits**

- The changes are expected to make customs clearance smoother and faster for international passengers.
- Less verification and easier procedures will help both Indian residents and foreign tourists.

**UGC 2026 Equity Regulations Stayed by Supreme Court**

The Supreme Court of India has temporarily stopped the University Grants Commission (UGC) Promotion of Equity in Higher Education Institutions Regulations, 2026 from being implemented. The Court said the 2012 UGC equity rules will continue until further orders. The stay order was passed by a Bench headed by Chief Justice Surya Kant and Justice Joymalya Bagchi, who also issued notices to the Centre and the UGC.

**Background of the New UGC Equity Regulations (2026)**

The University Grants Commission (UGC) notified the Promotion of Equity in Higher Education Institutions Regulations, 2026. These rules were meant to prevent discrimination in universities and colleges, especially related to caste-based discrimination. The regulations proposed new definitions, complaint mechanisms, and disciplinary procedures to deal with discrimination cases on campuses. They were intended to replace the existing UGC Equity Regulations of 2012. Once notified, the 2026 rules were to be implemented immediately across higher education institutions.

**Why Were the New UGC Regulations Challenged?**

- Vague Definition of Discrimination
- Petitioners argued that the definition of caste-based discrimination was unclear and too broad.
- They feared that normal academic decisions (like evaluation, discipline, or attendance rules) could be misinterpreted as discrimination.

**Scope for Misuse**

- Critics claimed the regulations were capable of misuse because complaints could be filed without clear safeguards.
- There was concern that false or motivated complaints could harm teachers, administrators, and institutions.

**Alleged Bias Against Certain Groups**

- The rules were accused of being one-sided, allegedly favouring certain social groups.
- Petitioners said the framework could exclude general category students from effective grievance redressal.

**Constitutional Concerns**

- The challengers argued that the regulations might violate the principle of equality before law under the Constitution.
- They claimed the rules could create social division instead of promoting harmony on campuses.

**Replacing Existing Rules Without Review**

- The 2012 regulations were already in force and functioning.
- Petitioners argued that the new rules were introduced without sufficient consultation or review of the old system's performance.

**Why the Supreme Court Intervened**

- The Supreme Court found that some provisions of the 2026 regulations were prima facie vague and problematic.
- The Court felt that allowing them to operate could have serious social consequences.
- Therefore, it stayed the 2026 regulations and ordered that the 2012 rules will continue until the matter is fully examined.

### Also in Focus

### Rape vs Attempt to Rape: Legal Distinction Explained in Chhattisgarh High Court Ruling

#### What Happened in the Case?

A Chhattisgarh High Court decision changed the conviction in a 20-year-old rape case from a rape conviction to attempt to rape. The decision was made on February 16, 2026 by a High Court bench.

#### Background of the Case

The case originally arose from a 2004 incident in Dhamtari district of Chhattisgarh. The survivor said a man forcibly took her to his house, undressed both, and sexually assaulted her. In 2005, a trial court convicted the accused of rape under the Indian Penal Code and sentenced him to seven years' imprisonment, along with six months for wrongful confinement.

#### Key Legal Question: Penetration and Rape

- Under the law as it existed in 2004, rape required proof of penetration of the penis into the vagina to be legally recognised as rape.
- The High Court ruled that ejaculation or genital contact without proved penetration did not satisfy the legal definition of rape at that time.
- Because of this, the court said the evidence did not conclusively prove the essential element of rape.

#### Contradictions in Evidence

The court closely examined the survivor's testimony and found contradictions regarding whether penetration actually occurred. Medical evidence showed that the hymen was intact, and the doctor could not give a definite opinion on rape, only suggesting possible partial penetration. Because the evidence did not clearly prove penetration, the High Court said the offence could not be treated as completed rape.

#### What the High Court Decided

The High Court set aside the rape conviction and modified it to attempt to commit rape. The sentence was reduced from seven years to three years and six months' rigorous imprisonment. The court also upheld a separate conviction for wrongful confinement.

#### Why This Decision Matters

The verdict has sparked widespread debate and criticism because many believe the legal focus on technical definitions of 'penetration' overlooks the serious nature of non-consensual sexual violence.

Some legal experts argue the ruling reflects strict application of old laws rather than modern understanding of assault.

#### Relevant Legal Provisions (Articles/Sections Related to the Case)

Section 375, Indian Penal Code (IPC) – Defines rape (as per the pre-2013 law applicable to the 2004 incident, where penetration was essential). Section 376, IPC – Punishment for rape. Section 511, IPC – Punishment for attempting to commit offences (applied when conviction modified to attempt to rape). Section 342, IPC – Punishment for wrongful confinement (also upheld in the case).

#### Constitutional Provisions (Contextual Relevance)

Article 136 – Special Leave Petition (if the matter is challenged before the Supreme Court). Article 21 – Right to life and personal liberty (includes dignity and fair trial principles).

#### Way Forward:

Ensure clear and strong legal definitions of sexual offences. Adopt a survivor-centric and trauma-sensitive judicial approach. Improve investigation and forensic evidence collection. Provide regular gender-sensitisation training for judges and police. Ensure speedy trials in sexual offence cases.

### Supreme Court to Clarify Appeal Rights in Cheque Bounce Acquittals

The Supreme Court of India is examining a legal question about cheque bounce cases. The question is: Can a complainant appeal an acquittal (a “not guilty” decision) by a trial court without first getting permission (leave) from a higher court?

#### Background: Cheque Bounce Cases

A cheque gets “bounced” when a bank refuses to pay the amount written on it, usually because of insufficient funds or other valid bank reasons. Cheque bounce cases are covered under Section 138 of the Negotiable Instruments Act, 1881 (NI Act), making bounced cheques a criminal offence.

#### What Happened in the Supreme Court?

The Supreme Court referred the matter to a larger bench to decide whether complainants can directly file an appeal after acquittal. The key question: Does a complainant have to first seek “leave to appeal” (permission) from the High Court, or can they appeal as a right without prior permission?

#### Conflicting Past Legal Positions

Previous Supreme Court rulings (2013 and 2015) said that in complaint cases, the complainant must seek special leave to appeal before the High Court. But a 2025 decision (*Celestium Financial vs A Gnanasekaran*) said that a complainant who is also a “victim” under the Code of Criminal Procedure (CrPC) can appeal directly under Section 372 without seeking leave first.

#### Legal Provisions Involved

##### Section 372, CrPC:

Normally no appeal lies against an acquittal unless the law allows it. But it gives a “victim” the right to appeal against an acquittal or inadequate compensation.

##### Section 378(4), CrPC:

Says that in complaint cases (like cheque bounce), the complainant must get leave from the High Court to appeal against acquittals.

##### CrPC Section 2(wa):

Defines “victim” to include a person who suffered any loss or injury, including financial loss — which makes the complainant in a cheque bounce case a “victim” if loss can be proved.

#### Core Legal Question

- Should a complainant in a cheque bounce case be treated as a “victim” under CrPC and allowed to appeal without permission?
- Or must they first seek leave under Section 378(4) before filing an appeal?
- The Supreme Court is trying to clarify this conflict.

#### Why This Matters

##### If the complainant can appeal directly:

It becomes easier to challenge an acquittal. Cases may be reviewed on merit without the hurdle of seeking leave first.

##### If permission is required:

Complainants must satisfy the High Court that there was an error in the acquittal before the appeal is heard, which is a higher threshold.

### RERA In Trouble? Why Supreme Court Warned It Can Be Shut Down

#### What Happened

The Supreme Court of India made a strong remark that the RERA (Real Estate Regulatory Authority) might be shut down if it does not protect homebuyers as intended.

#### Why the Court Is Angry

The court said RERA has failed to do anything meaningful beyond helping defaulting builders rather than safeguarding homebuyers' interests.

It suggested that if the authority only benefits builders and not buyers, it defeats the purpose of the law.

**Which Case Was Being Heard**

These remarks were made while the Supreme Court was hearing a case involving the Himachal Pradesh RERA.

**What the Law Was Meant To Do**

The RERA Act, 2016 was created to:

- Regulate and promote the real estate sector
- Make property sales efficient and transparent
- Protect the interests of homebuyers
- Provide a speedy dispute resolution system and appeal process for buyers.

**Criticism of RERA's Functioning**

Homebuyers and courts have noted problems like:

- Delays in resolving cases
- Weak enforcement of orders
- Lack of transparency in some states
- Regulators sometimes fail to publish annual performance reports.
- Many complain that while RERA can issue orders, it sometimes lacks power to fully enforce them.

**What the Court Said Could Happen**

The Supreme Court did not formally abolish RERA but warned that if it continues to fail, its existence might be reconsidered or even ended.

**Why This Matters**

- The remarks highlight serious concerns about how RERA functions across states.
- It may push the government and regulators to fix gaps, improve performance, and ensure the law effectively protects homebuyers.

**Uttarakhand Implements UCC (Amendment) Ordinance, 2026**

The Uttarakhand Government has promulgated the Uniform Civil Code (Amendment) Ordinance, 2026 for the state's Uniform Civil Code (UCC) Act, 2024, with immediate effect after the Governor's approval under Article 213 of the Constitution.

**Purpose of the Amendment:**

- To bring procedural, administrative and penal reforms to the Uniform Civil Code, making it easier to implement and more transparent.
- To strengthen implementation, ensure equality, protect children's rights, and promote women's empowerment.

**Background Context:**

- The Uniform Civil Code (UCC) was first implemented in Uttarakhand on January 27, 2025, making it the first state in India to operationalise a UCC.
- UCC replaces multiple personal laws based on religion with a common civil law for all citizens covering marriage, divorce, inheritance, adoption, and live-in relationships.
- The day is observed annually as "UCC Day" across the state.

**Key Procedural & Administrative Reforms under the UCC:**

- Digitisation of Civil Services – Nearly 100% of marriage registrations are now completed online; video statements for spouses and witnesses can be uploaded remotely.
- Faster Processing – Marriage certificates are issued on average within five days.
- Over 5 lakh applications have been processed in one year, including marriage and live-in relationship registrations.
- Uniform grounds and streamlined procedures for divorce and inheritance brought under single civil law.

**Penal & Penalisation Reforms (Amendment Focus):**

The amendment ordinance makes penal provisions clearer to deter fraud, concealment of identity and coercion in marriage and live-in relations. Strengthens appellate mechanisms and registration-related powers.

#### Constitutional Basis:

- Article 44 of the Indian Constitution directs the State to “endeavour to secure for citizens a Uniform Civil Code throughout the territory of India.” The Uttarakhand UCC is a state-level initiative inspired by this directive principle.

#### Significance of UCC:

- Aims to abolish discriminatory practices such as polygamy, triple talaq, halala and unequal property rights.
- Promotes gender justice and social harmony by applying a common law for all religions.

### Hindu concept of joint family alien to Muslim law

#### What Case Was About

A Muslim woman in Gujarat asked the court for a share in her deceased father’s properties in Vadodara (Akota and Tandalja). She claimed she was entitled to this share even though there was a family settlement (agreement) from 1983 that gave her and her sister a fixed amount instead of property.

#### What the Gujarat High Court Decided

The Gujarat High Court rejected her claim. The court said the Muslim woman cannot claim “ancestral property” under Hindu law concepts, because those concepts apply only in Hindu inheritance law, not in Muslim personal law.

#### Why the Claim Was Rejected

##### 1. Different Laws for Different Religions

Under Hindu law, the idea of a joint family and ancestral property exists — where property passes down through generations as one undivided family. But under Muslim personal law, the idea of a joint family does not exist. Each person owns property individually, and inheritance is dealt with only after death, based on religious succession rules.

##### 2. Individual Ownership in Muslim Law

In Muslim law, property ownership is personal, and one family member’s acquisition does not automatically benefit all relatives. Rights to succeed (inherit) arise only when a person dies — there is no automatic ancestral share by birth.

##### 3. Long Delay and Family Settlement

The woman had waited many years (37 years) before filing her claim. The court noted she did not challenge the original family settlement from 1983, which had already settled her and her sister’s rights for a fixed amount.

#### Legal Principle Applied

The High Court said that using Hindu law ideas (like joint family or ancestral property) does not apply when people are governed by Muslim personal law. The judgment referred to the established principle that Muslim law treats property succession individually, without recognizing joint family or coparcenary rights.

#### Why This Matters

The case shows that inheritance rights depend on the personal laws of each religion in India. It highlights how Hindu and Muslim inheritance principles differ, especially in property rights and family relations. It also underscores the importance of challenging old family settlements on time, if a person believes they were unfair.

**"Success is not final; failure is not fatal: It is the courage to continue that counts."**

## International Relations & Events

### Epstein Files Controversy

#### What Are the Epstein Files?

The “Epstein Files” are a massive set of documents released by the United States Department of Justice related to convicted sex offender Jeffrey Epstein. These files include millions of pages of emails, reports, images and videos connected to investigations into his crimes. The release was done under the Epstein Files Transparency Act, a US law forcing authorities to make these documents public. The files contain communications between Epstein and wealthy or powerful individuals across several countries, sparking global interest and controversy.

#### Who Was Jeffrey Epstein?

Jeffrey Epstein was an American financier who was convicted in 2008 for sexual offences involving minors but escaped severe punishment through a controversial plea deal. He was arrested again in 2019 on charges including sex trafficking of minors but died by suicide in a Manhattan jail before trial proceedings ended.

#### Why The Latest Release Matters

The January 2026 tranche of documents is the largest so far, containing over 3 million pages and 2,000 videos, covering emails, messages, interviews, images and court records. Among this material are communications involving influential global figures from countries such as India, the UK, Australia, Norway and Slovakia.

#### Political Impact in India

The release triggered heated debate in Indian politics, especially after a purported email in the files referenced Narendra Modi, relating to his 2017 official visit to Israel.

The Ministry of External Affairs of India strongly rejected that reference, calling it the “trashy ruminations of a convicted criminal” and dismissing all such allegations.

The controversy was amplified by political parties: some opposition leaders shared the document online and demanded accountability, while ruling party figures accused them of spreading misinformation.

In some cases, petitions have even reached the Supreme Court of India, seeking a monitored investigation into the claims arising from the Epstein Files.

**Note:** Some reports said a reference to Narendra Modi appeared in material linked to Jeffrey Epstein, but there is no proof of wrongdoing, and the Indian government has strongly rejected the claim.

#### Broader Global Reactions

Outside India, the files have also created political turbulence. In the UK, revelations about diplomatic appointments tied to individuals close to Epstein led to criticism of leaders like Keir Starmer and challenges within political parties. Other countries, such as Norway, faced scrutiny connected to royal family members and interactions mentioned in the files.

#### What the Files Contain

The released documents include emails between Epstein and business leaders, political figures, academics and celebrities, many of which are unverified and draft messages that do not itself prove wrongdoing by the named individuals. Some recovered email content suggests efforts by individuals like Anil Ambani to use Epstein’s connections to arrange political and business meetings, though these are subject to verification.

#### Key Issues At Play

**Redaction failures:** Some released files had insufficient privacy protections, exposing sensitive personal information.

**Global politics:** The files have been used by opposition parties in several countries to challenge governments or demand investigations.

Public discourse on accountability: The publication has reignited discussions about how societies handle allegations against powerful individuals when documents emerge without context or verification.

**Important Terms Explained**

1. Epstein Files: A large collection of official and private documents related to Jeffrey Epstein’s legal cases, released under legal mandate.
2. Epstein Files Transparency Act: A US law requiring the release of previously sealed documents connected to Epstein’s investigations.
3. Redaction: The process of obscuring or removing sensitive information from documents before release.
4. Sex Trafficking: A criminal offence involving the exploitation of individuals, especially minors, for sexual purposes.

**Conclusion**

The global release of the Epstein Files has stirred political debate far beyond the United States, as unverified communications linked to powerful figures have surfaced. While some governments and leaders have categorically rejected allegations, the disclosures continue to fuel political narratives, legal petitions and public scrutiny in multiple countries.



**What is the Two-State Solution?**

The two-state solution is a proposed peace plan to end the long-standing conflict between Israel and Palestine. It suggests creating two independent countries — one called Israel for Jewish people and another called Palestine for Palestinian people — living side by side in peace and security. It is the most widely recognised diplomatic framework that many countries and international organisations support to resolve the dispute.

**Historical Background**

The idea began after World War II, as Britain prepared to end its control over Palestine, and the United Nations proposed dividing the land into separate Jewish and Arab states in 1947 (UN Partition Plan). Israel was established in 1948 after that plan, but no Palestinian state was formed at that time. The conflict over land and rights began and has continued for decades. In the 1967 Six-Day War, Israel occupied the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and Gaza Strip, areas Palestinians claim for their future state.

**Key Agreements and Attempts**

The Oslo Accords (1990s) were a major step towards the two-state idea. Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) agreed on creating Palestinian self-rule in parts of the West Bank and Gaza and envisaged a future Palestinian state through negotiations. The agreements also established the Palestinian Authority (PA) to govern parts of the territories.

#### **Main Issues Addressed by the Two-State Solution**

**Borders:** The future borders would largely follow the lines before the 1967 war, possibly with land swaps to reflect changes on the ground.

**Jerusalem:** Both Israelis and Palestinians view Jerusalem as their capital, making this one of the toughest disputes to resolve.

**Refugees:** Palestinians insist on the right of return for those who were displaced or fled in past conflicts, which Israel opposes.

**Security:** Israel wants strong security guarantees to prevent attacks, while Palestinians want full sovereignty over their state.

#### **Why It Is Challenging to Implement**

**Settlement Expansion:** The growth of Israeli settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem is seen by many as reducing the land available for a viable Palestinian state, undermining the idea of two separate states. Israel's recent policy changes in the West Bank, which critics say extend Israeli control and weaken Palestinian governance, have been described by some officials as creating "de facto sovereignty" and reducing the feasibility of an independent Palestinian state. **Lack of Trust and Violence:** Ongoing violence, mutual distrust, and political divisions make negotiations difficult and reduce optimism about reaching a lasting agreement.

#### **International and Regional Support**

Many countries and organisations — including the United Nations, European Union, and Arab League nations — support a negotiated two-state solution for lasting peace.

Some countries have also recognised a Palestinian state, which supporters say reinforces the political basis for two states.

Nations like India have repeatedly backed a negotiated two-state solution, calling for peaceful dialogue and mutual recognition of Israel and Palestine.

#### **Why It Matters**

The two-state solution is seen by many diplomats as the best way to secure peace, justice, and stability for both peoples after decades of conflict. Without a clear agreement, the conflict continues to affect lives, regional relations, and global diplomacy.

#### **Important Terms Explained**

1. **Two-State Solution:** A peace framework proposing separate, fully independent states for Israelis and Palestinians.
2. **West Bank:** A territory occupied by Israel since 1967, claimed by Palestinians for their state.
3. **Gaza Strip:** A coastal Palestinian territory also part of the proposed Palestinian state.
4. **Oslo Accords:** Agreements in the 1990s that began a formal peace process and established limited Palestinian self-rule.
5. **Palestinian Authority (PA):** The interim governing body for parts of the West Bank and Gaza under the Oslo framework.
6. **Settlements:** Israeli communities built in the occupied West Bank and East Jerusalem, considered illegal under international law but disputed by Israel.

#### **Conclusion**

The two-state solution remains the most widely accepted international framework to solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but achieving it has been difficult due to disagreements over borders, security, Jerusalem, refugees, and settlement expansion.

### Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Visit to Israel

India's Prime Minister embarked on a two-day official State visit to Israel from 25–26 February 2026 to deepen bilateral cooperation and elevate the India-Israel partnership to a “special strategic partnership”, underscoring expanding ties in defence, technology, trade and strategic cooperation.

#### Agenda of the Visit

- **Strategic & Defence Cooperation:** The visit focuses on strengthening defence and security cooperation, including enhanced military technology collaboration and possible joint production in defence systems.
- **Technology & Innovation:** Talks cover cooperation in technology sectors such as artificial intelligence, quantum computing, and cybersecurity.
- **Economic and Trade Ties:** Discussion aims to further expand trade, investment and economic cooperation, including using the ongoing India-Israel FTA negotiations to boost economic links.
- **Agriculture & Water Management:** India and Israel will explore collaborations in agricultural innovation and water technology — sectors where Israel has global expertise.
- **People-to-People and Cultural Diplomacy:** The visit includes interactions with the Indian diaspora and visits to symbolic sites like Yad Vashem — the World Holocaust Remembrance Centre.

#### Significance of the Visit

- **Elevating Bilateral Ties:** The relationship — first upgraded to a strategic partnership during Modi's 2017 visit — is being taken further, possibly to a “special strategic partnership”, reflecting shared interests in security and economy.
- **Geopolitical Context:** The visit comes amid volatile regional security dynamics in the Middle East and aims to balance India's strong ties with both Israel and Arab nations.
- **Trade Importance:** India is Israel's second-largest trading partner in Asia, with bilateral trade valued at over USD 3.6 billion in 2025.
- **Diplomatic Balancing:** India's foreign policy continues to balance strategic cooperation with Israel while maintaining historical support for the Palestinian cause.

### India, United States Sign Pax Silica Declaration

#### What Is the Pax Silica Declaration?

The Pax Silica Declaration is a United States-led strategic initiative focused on building secure and resilient supply chains for artificial intelligence, semiconductors, and critical minerals. It aims to reduce global reliance on potentially adversarial sources and strengthen trusted technology networks.

#### India Joins the Pax Silica Alliance

India formally signed the Pax Silica Declaration at the India AI Impact Summit 2026 held in New Delhi.

The declaration was signed by Union Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw and US Under Secretary for Economic Affairs Jacob Helberg in the presence of the US Ambassador to India, Sergio Gor.

#### Purpose and Focus of the Alliance

The alliance aims to build a trusted technology ecosystem by securing:

Critical minerals needed for modern technology, Advanced semiconductors (chips), and AI infrastructure that supports innovation and economic growth. It seeks to encourage joint investments, identify supply-chain risks, and ensure secure access to essential technological resources.

#### Strategic Importance for India

India's entry is seen as strategic and essential to strengthening global tech cooperation with the United States and other allied partners. Joining the alliance may help India secure long-term access to chips and critical raw materials, boosting its semiconductor and electronics sectors. The pact is also viewed as a way to enhance economic security by building resilient technology supply chains.

#### Global Context of Pax Silica

Pax Silica was launched in December 2025 with several initial partner countries, including Australia, Japan, Israel, and others. India's inclusion brings it into a larger coalition aimed at trusted tech partnerships among democratic nations.

**India-UK & Northern Ireland Social Security Agreement (2026)**

India has signed a Social Security Agreement (SSA) with the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland to avoid double social security contributions for employees on temporary assignments in each other's country.

**Key Provisions of the Agreement**

- Exemption from double social security contributions for up to 36 months (3 years).
- Employees will contribute only to their home country's social security system during temporary postings.
- A Certificate of Coverage (CoC) must be obtained from the competent authority (in India, EPFO) to claim exemption.
- The agreement operates on the principle of reciprocity for workers of both countries.
- It will come into force along with the broader India-UK Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA/FTA) framework.

**What are Social Security Contributions?**

- Social security contributions are mandatory payments made by employers and employees to fund: Pension benefits, Disability and survivor benefits, Health insurance & Unemployment benefits
- In India, social security is mainly administered by the Employees' Provident Fund Organisation (EPFO) under the Ministry of Labour & Employment.
- In the UK, contributions are known as National Insurance Contributions (NICs).

**Need for the Agreement**

Earlier, Indian professionals in the UK had to contribute to both EPF (India) and NIC (UK). Many short-term employees could not qualify for UK pension benefits despite contributing. This resulted in financial burden and reduced competitiveness for Indian service providers.

**Significance for India**

Boosts mobility of skilled professionals, especially in IT, finance, engineering, and consultancy sectors. Reduces cost for Indian companies sending employees abroad. Strengthens bilateral economic ties under the India-UK trade partnership. Improves ease of doing business in cross-border services.

**Additional Facts**

India has signed similar Social Security Agreements (SSAs) with countries like Germany, France, Belgium, Switzerland, Denmark, South Korea, and the Netherlands.

SSAs generally include two major principles:

- Avoidance of double contribution
- Totalisation of benefits (combining contribution periods in both countries for pension eligibility)
- EPFO was established under the Employees' Provident Funds and Miscellaneous Provisions Act, 1952.

**British PM Keir Starmer's China visit**

British Prime Minister Keir Starmer concluded his official visit to China after a three-day trip. The visit aimed to strengthen trade and investment ties and bring stability to previously strained UK-China relations.

**Major Trade and Investment Agreements**

The UK and China secured £2.2 billion in export deals during the visit. Agreements worth about £2.3 billion in market access pacts over the next five years were also clinched. In addition, hundreds of millions of pounds of new investments were confirmed as part of the outcomes.

**Expanded Market Access**

The deals are expected to expand market access for UK firms in multiple sectors including:

- Services, Agriculture, Food and retail, Sport & Life sciences

**Additional Outcomes Highlighted by Other Reports**

- China agreed to halve tariffs on UK Scotch whisky imports, which could boost the UK industry’s competitiveness.
- A visa-free travel arrangement for British citizens for up to 30 days in China was agreed, aimed at boosting business and cultural exchanges.
- Several foreign companies, including toy manufacturer Pop Mart, pledged investments and new UK operations.

**India-EU Free Trade Agreement (FTA)**

European Council President António Costa and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen visited India from 25–27 January 2026 as Chief Guests for the 77th Republic Day celebrations and to co-chair the 16th EU-India Summit with Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

**Key Outcomes:**

- **India-EU Free Trade Agreement (FTA):** A historic India-EU Free Trade Agreement was concluded during the visit. It has been hailed as a “mother of all deals” — expected to significantly boost bilateral trade between India and the EU, covering a combined market of nearly 2 billion people and a large share of global GDP.
- **Strategic Partnership Agenda:** Both sides adopted “Towards 2030: A Joint India-European Union Comprehensive Strategic Agenda” — an overarching framework to guide the strategic partnership across multiple domains.
- **Economic & Financial Cooperation:** MoU between the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) and the European Securities and Market Authority (ESMA) to deepen financial regulatory cooperation. Administrative arrangement on advanced electronic signatures and seals to facilitate secure digital transactions.
- **Security and Defence:** A Security and Defence Partnership was established, and negotiations were launched on an India-EU Security of Information Agreement to enhance cooperation in defence, security, and information sharing.
- **Mobility & Skill Cooperation:** A Comprehensive Framework on Cooperation on Mobility (Skilling and Mobility) was agreed along with plans for a European Union pilot Legal Gateway Office in India to boost legal mobility and skill exchanges.
- **Disaster Management & Emergency Response:** An administrative arrangement was signed between India’s National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) and the EU’s Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (DG-ECHO) to improve collaboration on disaster risk management and emergency response.
- **Joint Projects:** Agreement to jointly implement projects on digital innovation & skills, solar solutions for women farmers, early warning systems, and sustainable energy transitions in Africa and Small Island Developing States.

**Innovation, Science & Green Energy:**

Renewal of the India-EU Agreement on Scientific & Technological Cooperation (2025–2030). Exploratory talks launched for India’s association with the Horizon Europe Programme (EU’s research and innovation framework). Establishment of a Green Hydrogen Task Force focusing on clean energy cooperation.

**Additional Key Facts**

- **First EU Leaders as Chief Guests:** This visit marked the first time leaders of the European Union were Chief Guests at India’s Republic Day Parade — highlighting the growing importance of the India-EU relationship.
- **Largest Trade Deal after Long Negotiations:** The India-EU Free Trade Agreement concluded during the visit ends nearly two decades of negotiations, aiming to boost market access and cut tariffs on a wide range of goods and services between India and the EU.
- **Strategic Economic Partner:** In 2024–25, bilateral trade between India and the EU was approximately \$136 billion, making the EU India’s largest goods trading partner — underscoring the economic weight of this partnership.
- **People-to-People Ties:** Over 930,000 Indians reside in EU countries, and more than 6,000 Indian students have benefitted from Erasmus Mundus scholarships, reflecting strong educational and cultural ties.

**Venezuela approves amnesty bill**

The Venezuelan legislature (parliament) approved an amnesty bill that could lead to the release of many people imprisoned for political reasons. The bill was signed into law by Acting President Delcy Rodríguez after being approved by lawmakers. This move is seen as a major change in policy, especially because the government had denied holding political prisoners for many years.

**Who Could Be Freed?**

**Groups That May Benefit**

The law may lead to the release of hundreds of people jailed for political motivations.

It is expected to benefit many groups such as:

- Opposition politicians
- Activists and human rights defenders
- Journalists and lawyers
- These are individuals who have been detained over the past two to three decades for opposing the government.

**What the Law Covers**

- It grants general amnesty for political offenses linked to events from 1999 to recent years.
- It applies to offences that may have happened during protests or political conflicts.
- The law also lets some people abroad apply for amnesty through lawyers, without returning to Venezuela immediately.

**Who Is NOT Covered**

The law does not apply to people convicted of serious crimes, including:

- Murder
- Drug trafficking
- Corruption
- Human rights violations
- Others involving armed attacks or foreign intervention against Venezuela
- Because of these exclusions, some people still remain in jail.

**What is an Amnesty Law?**

Meaning: An Amnesty Law is a law passed by a government that forgives certain crimes and removes legal punishment for specific individuals or groups.

**Basic Theory Behind Amnesty**

**Amnesty is usually used:**

- To reduce political tension
- To promote national unity or reconciliation
- After conflicts, protests, civil wars, or political crises
- During a change of government
- It is a political and legal tool to restore peace.

**Key Features**

- It is granted by the government or parliament.
- It usually applies to a group of people, not just one person.
- It often covers political offences.
- Serious crimes like murder, terrorism, or corruption are usually excluded.

**Venezuela**

- Capital: Caracas
- Currency: Venezuelan bolivar
- Continent: South America
- President: Delcy Rodríguez (acting)

**'Third Category' of UNSC Membership**

India has rejected a proposal to create a third category of membership in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). The proposal suggested a new type of seat with longer terms and eligibility for re-election. India called this idea a ploy to delay meaningful UNSC reforms.

**Where Did This Take Place?**

The rejection was made during the Intergovernmental Negotiations (IGN) on UNSC reform at the United Nations. India’s Deputy Permanent Representative Yojna Patel spoke on behalf of India.

**Why Was the Proposal Rejected?**

India said the third category is a “red herring” that would stall reform progress for decades. It argued the idea does not address the structural imbalance in the Council. India insisted that expanding permanent and non-permanent categories is the right way to reform the UNSC.

**Who Proposed the Third Category?**

The idea came mainly from the Uniting for Consensus (UfC) group, led by Italy and including Pakistan. This group opposes expanding the permanent member category and suggested Fixed Regional Seats instead.

**What Do Reform-Oriented Groups Say?**

The Group of 4 (G4) – consisting of India, Japan, Germany, and Brazil – supports expanding permanent and non-permanent seats. The L. 69 group of developing countries also opposed the third category, calling it incomplete reform.

**What’s Netanyahu’s planned ‘hexagon’ alliance?**

**What Is the ‘Hexagon of Alliances’?**

Benjamin Netanyahu has proposed a new regional framework called the “hexagon of alliances.” The idea is to bring together six groups of countries that share similar views on regional security and challenges. The term “hexagon” refers to the idea of six sides or partners working together.

**Which Countries Are Included?**

Netanyahu mentioned core participants such as Israel, India, Greece, and Cyprus. He also spoke of other unnamed Arab, African, and Asian countries joining the group. However, no government has officially agreed to this plan yet.

**Why Has It Been Proposed?**

Netanyahu says the alliance is meant to counter “radical axes” — what he describes as groups or states aligned against Israel’s interests, including Iran’s influence. He frames the pact as a way to build economic, diplomatic, and security cooperation among member countries. He says this alliance would complement Israel’s ties with the United States, not replace them.

**Political and Strategic Context**

The proposal comes amid ongoing tensions and conflicts in the Middle East, including pressure on Israel from regional rivals. It was shared publicly as Narendra Modi prepared to visit Israel, signaling closer ties between India and Israel. Critics say the idea may be more symbolic than formal, and some see it as unlikely to become a binding alliance.

**Is New ‘EXILE Act’ targets H-1B visas?**

**What Is Happening**

A new bill called the EXILE Act has been introduced in the U. S. Congress that aims to end the H-1B visa programme in the United States. The bill was introduced by Republican Representative Greg Steube of Florida.

**What the EXILE Act Proposes**

The EXILE Act stands for Ending Exploitative Imported Labour Exemptions Act. It seeks to amend the U. S. Immigration and Nationality Act to terminate the H-1B visa programme by around 2027. Under this bill, new H-1B visas would eventually be stopped once the programme ends.

**Why the Bill Was Introduced**

The lawmaker sponsoring the bill argues that the H-1B system has been misused by companies to hire cheaper foreign labour, hurting American workers and job opportunities. Supporters of the bill say that it is meant to prioritise U. S. citizens for jobs and protect domestic employment.

**About the H-1B Visa Programme**

The H-1B visa allows U. S. employers to hire foreign professionals in specialized roles like technology, engineering, and healthcare. A large number of H-1B visa holders are from India or China, with Indians accounting for over 70 % of approved petitions in recent years.

**Current Policy Context**

The EXILE Act comes when the U. S. is already tightening immigration policies, including stricter visa checks and higher fees. These changes have created uncertainty among foreign workers, including Indian professionals.

**Why This Matters**

If passed, the EXILE Act could limit future H-1B work opportunities for foreign professionals, especially from India. The debate highlights tension between protecting local jobs and meeting demand for skilled foreign labour in the U. S.

**Way Forward**

- **Balanced Reform of H-1B System:** The U. S. can improve rules to prevent misuse while still allowing skilled foreign professionals needed by industries like technology and healthcare.
- **Protect Both Workers:** Policies should protect American jobs and also ensure fair opportunities for global talent, instead of completely ending the programme.
- **Increase Skill-Based Selection:** Giving priority to high-skill, high-salary applicants can reduce concerns about cheap labour and improve productivity.
- **Stronger Monitoring of Companies:** Proper checks on employers can stop wage undercutting and exploitation of foreign workers.
- **India-U. S. Cooperation:** India and the U. S. can work together on mobility agreements, skill partnerships, and alternative visa pathways to support professionals.
- **Encouraging Domestic Skill Development:** The U. S. can invest more in training its own workforce, reducing long-term dependence on foreign visas.

**Also in Focus**

**India and Kenya sign Implementation Framework Agreement for DigiLocker pilot project in Kenya**

India and Kenya signed an Implementation Framework Agreement for a pilot project on DigiLocker technology. The agreement was signed in Nairobi, Kenya. It was signed by Ashwini Vaishnav from India and Eugene Wamalwa from Kenya.

**What Is DigiLocker?**

DigiLocker is India’s secure digital document platform that lets people store and share official documents online. It helps reduce the use of paper documents and makes verification easier and faster. Kenya will pilot this system to test how it works locally.

**Purpose of the Pilot Project**

- To digitise important certificates and official records in Kenya using the DigiLocker system.
- To make it easier for people to store and access documents securely online.
- To improve efficiency and reduce fraud related to physical documents.

**How the Project Benefits Kenya**

Helps Kenyan citizens and institutions store digital versions of personal and official documents. Makes it easier for government agencies, universities, and employers to verify documents digitally. Encourages a paperless system that saves time and cost.

**Kenya**

- Capital: Nairobi
- Currency: Kenyan Shilling
- Official languages: Swahili, English
- President: William Ruto

**FCI-WFP MoU to Supply Rice for Global Hunger Relief**

The Food Corporation of India (FCI) signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) to supply 2 lakh metric tonnes of rice to support global humanitarian hunger relief efforts.

**Duration and Terms**

The MoU is valid for five years from the date of signing and can be extended by mutual consent. The rice supplied may include up to 25 % broken rice, which is acceptable for humanitarian distribution. Pricing will be negotiated annually; currently, the price is fixed at ₹2,800 per quintal up to 31 March 2026.

**Why This Matters for Global Food Security**

The partnership strengthens global efforts toward SDG-2: Zero Hunger, which aims to end hunger, achieve food security, and improved nutrition by 2030.

India's rice supply contribution helps WFP reach vulnerable populations in conflict zones, disaster-affected areas, and regions experiencing food insecurity. India is one of the largest producers and exporters of rice in the world, enhancing its role in both domestic and global food systems.

**India-WFP Collaboration History**

India and WFP have worked together since the 1960s, transitioning from direct food distribution support to technical & logistical partnerships to improve food assistance efficiency.

**India-Nepal Updated Mutual Legal Assistance Agreement in Criminal Matters**

India and Nepal have signed an updated Mutual Legal Assistance Agreement in criminal matters to strengthen cooperation in investigations, evidence sharing, and legal proceedings between the two countries.

**Purpose of the agreement**

The agreement creates a formal legal framework that allows both countries to exchange information, support prosecution, and work together against cross-border crimes such as human trafficking, drug smuggling, organised crime, money laundering, and terrorism financing.

**Why the agreement is important**

The updated pact will make cooperation between law-enforcement and judicial authorities faster and more structured. It will improve the effectiveness of criminal investigations that involve both countries and strengthen the overall rule of law and justice delivery system.

**Historical background**

Earlier cooperation mechanisms between the two neighbours were outdated and limited in scope. The new agreement replaces older informal arrangements and modernises legal coordination to match present-day security and crime challenges.

**Concept of Mutual Legal Assistance**

A Mutual Legal Assistance Agreement is a legal arrangement between countries that allows them to share evidence and information, assist in criminal investigations, and ensure that offenders cannot escape justice by crossing international borders.

**Nepal**

- Capital: Kathmandu
- President: Ram Chandra Poudel
- Prime minister: Sushila Karki
- Currency: Nepalese Rupee

## India–France Exchange 21 Agreements in Defence, Energy & Critical Minerals

Narendra Modi and Emmanuel Macron agreed to elevate India–France bilateral ties to a “Special Global Strategic Partnership” and exchanged 21 agreements and documents covering defence, energy, critical minerals, technology, innovation, and other key sectors during Macron’s state visit to India.

### Key Agreements and Outcomes

#### 1. Defence & Security Cooperation

Both countries renewed the Defence Cooperation Agreement and agreed on reciprocal deployment of officers between the Indian Army and French Land Forces to strengthen interoperability and military linkages. A joint venture between BEL and Safran to produce HAMMER missiles in India was announced, enhancing defence manufacturing capabilities. The H125 helicopter final assembly line in Karnataka was virtually inaugurated, strengthening India’s aerospace industrial base under joint collaboration.

#### 2. Energy & Critical Minerals Cooperation

India and France signed a Joint Declaration of Intent on cooperation in critical minerals, aiming to collaborate on exploration, extraction, processing, and recycling of rare earths and essential minerals crucial for defence, green economy, and tech sectors. A Letter of Intent to establish a Centre on Advanced Materials between India’s Department of Science and Technology and CNRS was agreed to bolster research.

#### 3. Technology, Innovation & Startups

The India–France Year of Innovation 2026 and India–France Innovation Network were launched to deepen cooperation in science, startups, research, digital sciences, and AI in health. Agreements were signed to set up Indo-French Centres for digital technology and AI in healthcare, promoting joint R&D and innovation ecosystems.

#### 4. Other Strategic Cooperation

An annual Foreign Ministers Dialogue was established to regularly review the implementation of the newly elevated partnership and guide strategic coordination.

The Protocol on the Double Tax Avoidance Agreement (DTAA) will be amended to boost bilateral investment and economic cooperation. MoUs were signed for start-up ecosystem cooperation, skilling in aeronautics, health research centres, and advanced materials technology.

### Significance for India’s Strategic Goals

#### Strengthening Defence & Strategic Autonomy

The enhanced defence ties with France — a key European partner — support India’s military modernization and Make in India initiatives, contributing to strategic autonomy and defence industrial base strengthening. Collaborations like the BEL–Safran joint venture and helicopter manufacturing in India help reduce foreign dependency and foster indigenous capabilities.

#### Critical Minerals & Energy Security

With global supply chains for critical minerals like lithium, cobalt, nickel, and rare earths under pressure due to geopolitical risks, international cooperation with France supports diversified, resilient supply chains and technology sharing. Critical minerals are fundamental for renewable energy, electric mobility, emerging technologies, and defence manufacturing — making such collaborations central to India’s future energy and industrial strategies.

#### Global Tech & Innovation Leadership

Initiatives such as Indo-French AI and digital science centres align with India’s ambitions under Digital India, AI integration in public services, and global tech diplomacy. The partnership enhances knowledge exchange, research, and high-skill job creation.

#### France

- Capital: Paris
- Currency: Euro
- President: Emmanuel Macron
- Official language: French

### India & Greece decide to expand their respective indigenous defence industries through partnership under Agenda 2030

India and Greece agreed to work together to grow their own defence industries. This means they want to make more defence equipment in their own countries, while helping each other.

#### Partnership Between Two Big Plans

India has a plan called "Aatmanirbhar Bharat" (which means being self-reliant in defence). Greece has a defence reform plan called "Agenda 2030." Both countries will team up these plans to help their defence industries grow together.

#### Agreement Signed

**Joint Declaration of Intent:** Leaders of India and Greece signed an agreement to increase defence cooperation. This agreement is the first step to make a five-year plan for joint defence work.

**Military Cooperation Plan:** Both sides exchanged a plan for military cooperation for the year 2026. This plan sets out how their armies, navies and air forces will work together.

#### Focus on Peace and Security

**Talks on Regional Peace:** The defence ministers discussed peace and security in the region. They emphasized shared goals like stability and safety. **Maritime Cooperation:** Greece will place an International Liaison Officer at India's Information Fusion Centre-Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR) in Gurugram. This helps both countries share important sea and security information.

#### Why This Matters

This step shows that India and Greece are growing closer as partners in defence and security. By working together, both countries can improve their defence technology, create more jobs, and strengthen their industries.

#### Greece

- Capital: Athens
- President: Konstantinos Tasoulas
- Prime Minister: Kyriakos Mitsotakis
- Currency: Euro (€)

### India-Seychelles Agreements Signed to Boost Cooperation in Health, Security, Digital Technology, and Economic Development

India and Seychelles signed several agreements and MoUs during the state visit of Seychelles President Patrick Herminie to New Delhi. The leaders also adopted a Joint Vision for Sustainability, Economic Growth and Security (SESEL) to guide future cooperation.

#### Special Economic Package

India announced a \$175 million Special Economic Package to support Seychelles' development. This package will help in social housing, e-mobility, vocational training, health, defence and maritime security.

#### Key Areas of Cooperation

1. Health and Public Services: Agreements were signed for health sector support and cooperation.
2. Digital and Technology: MoUs include digital transformation and technical collaborations.
3. Maritime and Security: Cooperation agreements cover maritime security, ocean science, and hydrography. India will support maritime surveillance and security to ensure a safe Indian Ocean region.
4. Training and Capacity Building: India will help train Seychelles civil servants and build skills.
5. Meteorology and Research: Agreements include scientific collaborations between meteorological departments.

#### Why This Matters

The agreements show a strong and growing partnership between India and Seychelles. The cooperation covers economic growth, security, technology, environment, and jobs. It reflects shared priorities in development and regional stability in the Indian Ocean.

#### Seychelles

- Capital: Victoria
- Currency: Seychellois Rupee
- President: Patrick Herminie
- Vice-President: Sebastien Pillay

**India–Malaysia Sign 11 Agreements; UPI-PayNet Link to Ease Remittances**

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi concluded a two-day official visit to Malaysia, strengthening the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership with Malaysian PM Anwar Ibrahim through multiple cooperation agreements.

**Key Bilateral Agreements**

Total 11 MoUs & Pacts Signed to deepen cooperation in areas like trade, defence, digital economy, disaster management, vocational training, health, semiconductors, and security.

**NPCI International Payments Ltd (NIPL) – PayNet Linkage:**

India’s Unified Payments Interface (UPI) to be linked with Malaysia’s PayNet system to facilitate cross-border digital payments and remittances. Will help tourists, workers, and businesses make easier, low-cost transactions between the two countries.

**Trade Settlement in Local Currencies:**

Reserve Bank of India and Bank Negara Malaysia to advance discussions on trade settlement using Indian Rupee and Malaysian Ringgit, reducing dependence on USD. First Indian Consulate in Kota Kinabalu: Malaysia agreed to open the first Indian consulate in the state of Sabah.

**Strategic Priorities & Cooperation Areas**

- Priority Sectors Covered: Trade, infrastructure, clean energy, agriculture, education, healthcare, tourism, maritime security, and emerging tech (AI, semiconductors).
- Security Cooperation: Enhanced collaboration on counter-terrorism, radicalisation, terror financing, and maritime security. Both nations reaffirmed zero tolerance against terrorism.
- Transnational Crime: Agreements to share intelligence and knowledge to counter organised crime effectively.

**UPI & International Digital Payments**

- UPI: India’s real-time payments system managed by NPCI processes billions of transactions domestically; international linkages with countries like Malaysia mark the expansion of India’s digital finance footprint.
- Project Nexus: A multi-country initiative under the Bank for International Settlements linking digital payment systems across ASEAN and beyond — with India, Malaysia, Singapore, etc. participating.

**India–Malaysia Bilateral Relations: Overview**

- Historical ties: Diplomatic relations established in 1957; elevated to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2024.
- Trade Volume: India–Malaysia trade was around US\$19 billion (2025), with aspirations to increase further.
- Trade in Local Currency: Both countries emphasise settlement in INR and MYR to facilitate commerce and reduce forex risks.
- Key exports/Imports: Malaysia exports palm oil, electronics goods; India exports machinery, chemicals, textiles.

**India–Bhutan to Further Strengthen Ties in Power Sector**

India and Bhutan agreed to enhance cooperation in the power sector during a meeting between Bhutan’s Minister of Energy & Natural Resources, Lyonpo Gem Tshering, and India’s Union Minister of Power, Manohar Lal in New Delhi.

- Why it matters: Both countries discussed optimising commercial output from the Punatsangchhu-II Hydroelectric Project (1020 MW) and accelerating the commissioning of Punatsangchhu-I Hydroelectric Project (1200 MW), which are central to their hydropower cooperation. They also reviewed transmission infrastructure planning up to 2040.

- Longstanding Power Partnership: India–Bhutan hydropower cooperation dates back to the 1960s, with the bilateral Agreement on Cooperation in the Field of Hydroelectric Power signed in 2006, formalising joint efforts in power generation.

**Major Hydropower Projects Completed:**

- Through India-Bhutan cooperation, several major projects have been developed, boosting Bhutan’s energy capacity and export potential:
  1. Chukha HEP (336 MW)
  2. Kurichhu HEP (60 MW)
  3. Tala HEP (1020 MW)
  4. Mangdechhu HEP (720 MW)
- These projects together add over 2,100 MW and have helped increase Bhutan’s installed capacity significantly.

**Punatsangchhu-II HEP & Energy Exports:**

The ongoing Punatsangchhu-II project (1020 MW) is a cornerstone of cooperation; once all units are commissioned, Bhutan’s total installed power capacity could rise to around 3,465 MW, boosting exports, especially to India.

- Economic & Strategic Benefits: Hydropower is Bhutan’s largest export item, contributing substantially to its GDP and revenue, while India benefits from clean and renewable energy imports and improved energy security.
- Renewable & Clean Energy Focus: Beyond hydropower, both nations have expressed interest in cooperation on renewable energy sources such as solar, wind, biomass, green hydrogen, and energy storage, reflecting a diversified energy partnership.
- Financial Support: India has extended significant financial assistance for Bhutan’s development, including a Rs 4,000 crore Line of Credit (LoC) for hydropower and related infrastructure, which reinforces energy collaboration and regional connectivity.

**Bhutan**

- Capital: Thimphu
- Currencies: Bhutanese Ngultrum
- Official language: Dzongkha
- King: Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck
- Prime Minister: Tshering Tobgay

**India pulls out of Russian-backed Mali lithium project over security risks**

India has decided to withdraw from a lithium exploration project in Mali that was backed by Russia’s Rosatom. The decision was made because of serious security concerns in Mali.

**Why India pulled out**

Mali is politically unstable with rising militant attacks, especially by groups linked to al Qaeda, making it unsafe for foreign projects. Western countries have also warned their citizens to leave Mali due to security risks. India did not want to risk losing its investment in a dangerous situation.

**Who was involved**

The project in Mali was backed by Russia’s state nuclear company Rosatom. Indian state firms Khanij Bidesh India Ltd (KABIL) and NLC India Ltd were part of the plan.

**Importance of lithium for India**

Lithium is a critical mineral used in batteries for electric vehicles and other green technologies. India is focused on securing lithium supplies because it is expanding electric vehicle use and aiming to reduce carbon emissions.

**What India will do now**

Instead of Mali, India is seeking lithium deals in more stable countries like Argentina, Australia and Chile. In 2024, KABIL signed a lithium exploration pact with an Argentinian state firm, showing India’s effort to secure critical minerals.

**Security and investment balance**

India’s move shows it is prioritising safety and protection of funds over risky overseas mineral projects.

### Canada Agree to Strengthen Cooperation on National Security, Law Enforcement & Cybersecurity

During a high-level security dialogue in Ottawa between India's National Security Adviser (NSA) Ajit Doval and his Canadian counterpart Nathalie Drouin, India and Canada agreed on a shared work plan to enhance bilateral cooperation on national security, law enforcement, and cybersecurity.

#### Key Highlights

1. Shared Work Plan on Security Cooperation: India and Canada agreed to formulate a shared work plan to guide cooperation on national security, law enforcement, and cybersecurity, enabling practical collaboration on mutual priorities.
2. Establishment of Liaison Officers: Both countries will appoint security and law-enforcement liaison officers in each other's territory to streamline communication and improve timely information sharing on threats like drug trafficking, organised crime, and cyber threats.
3. Focus on Cybersecurity Cooperation: The two sides committed to formalising cooperation on cybersecurity policy and enhancing information exchange on cyber threats in line with domestic laws and international obligations.
4. Other Priority Areas: Discussions also covered cooperation on issues such as fraud prevention and immigration enforcement, ensuring efforts are consistent with legal frameworks in both countries.
5. Regular Security Dialogue: The agreement was part of a regular bilateral security dialogue, reflecting ongoing efforts to rebuild institutional security links after past diplomatic tensions.

#### Background of India–Canada Relations

India–Canada relations experienced strain after diplomatic tensions in 2023 over the killing of Khalistani separatist Hardeep Singh Nijjar in Canada, which India denied; both sides have since taken steps to normalise ties.

Restoring full diplomatic engagement included returning high commissioners in both capitals and resuming high-level dialogues.

#### Transnational Security Challenges

Fentanyl and precursors: Canada faces a severe public health crisis due to fentanyl-related overdoses; cooperation with India helps curb illegal drug flows across borders. Transnational organised crime: Liaison mechanisms improve joint responses to criminal networks operating across jurisdictions.

#### Cybersecurity Frameworks

India's National Cyber Security Policy (2013) aims to protect critical information infrastructure and facilitate information sharing to counter cyber attacks. The National Cyber Coordination Centre (NCCC) in India coordinates real-time responses to cyber threats; cooperation with Canada can support shared threat intelligence. Canada is a signatory to the Budapest Convention on Cybercrime which provides a legal framework for international cooperation in cybercrime investigations.

#### Security Cooperation Mechanisms

Liaison officers act as points of contact between national agencies, facilitating direct communication and coordination on urgent threats. Cybersecurity cooperation includes sharing best practices, threat data, and coordinated responses to cyber incidents.

### Rankings & Indexes

#### Bangladesh Ranks 13th Lowest in World on Corruption Index

Bangladesh has been ranked 13th lowest in the world in the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI)-2025. This index measures how corrupt a country's public sector is perceived to be. A lower numerical rank in the CPI means higher perceived corruption compared to other countries. The findings were released by Transparency International, a global anti-corruption organisation.

#### What the Corruption Perceptions Index Is

The Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) is published every year by Transparency International. It ranks countries based on how corrupt their public sectors are considered by experts and business people. The index uses a score (from 0 to 100) — where 0 means highly corrupt and 100 means very clean.

#### Where Bangladesh Stands

In the latest 2025 index, Bangladesh was placed 13th lowest among the countries surveyed. This indicates that many people believe corruption in its public institutions is widespread and the perception of corruption is comparatively high.

#### Top 5 Least Corrupt Countries

- Denmark – Ranked 1st with the highest transparency and strong public institutions.
- Finland – Known for clean governance and strong rule of law.
- New Zealand – High accountability and low misuse of public power.
- Norway – Transparent administration and effective anti-corruption systems.
- Singapore – Strict laws and efficient governance reduce corruption.

#### Bottom 5 Most Corrupt Countries

- South Sudan – Ranked lowest due to conflict, weak institutions, and poor governance.
- Somalia – Long-term instability and fragile state structures.
- Venezuela – Political crisis and weak accountability mechanisms.
- Syria – Ongoing conflict and institutional breakdown.
- Yemen – War and governance collapse leading to high corruption perception.

#### India's Rank in the Corruption Perceptions Index 2025:

India is ranked 91st out of 182 countries and territories on the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) 2025 with a score of 39 out of 100, showing a slight improvement from its previous position.

### India Improves Its Global Passport Ranking But Loses Visa-Free Access to Two Nations

India has moved up 10 places in the 2026 Henley Passport Index, rising to 75th position from 85th in 2025, indicating improved global mobility relative to other countries. However, despite this rise, Indian passport holders now have visa-free access to 56 countries, which is one fewer than before and represents the loss of visa-free entry to two nations compared to 2025.

#### About the Henley Passport Index

The Henley Passport Index, published by Henley & Partners, ranks 199 passports against 227 destinations based on travel freedom. It assigns a passport a “score” by counting destinations that allow visa-free entry, visa-on-arrival, visitor’s permit at border, or basic electronic travel authorisation without prior embassy approval. Passports are then ranked globally based on total score.

#### Why India Lost Visa-Free Access

##### India lost visa-free access to Iran and Bolivia:

Iran suspended its visa-free entry for ordinary Indian passport holders in November 2025, reportedly after cases involving fraud and trafficking that targeted Indian travellers. This meant Indians had to obtain a visa before departure. Bolivia changed its policy from visa-on-arrival to an e-visa system, requiring Indians to apply online and obtain approval before travel, which disqualifies it from being counted as visa-free under the Index methodology. Despite these losses, The Gambia was added back to India’s visa-free list by February 2026, bringing the total accessible destinations to 56.

#### India's Travel Freedom at a Glance

- 2026 ranking: 75th place
- Visa-free destinations: 56
- 2025 ranking: 85th place
- Visa-free access in 2025: 57 destinations
- Highest historical rank: 71st (in 2006)

These shifts show that global mobility is relative—a passport can move up in rank even if the number of visa-free countries decreases, because other countries may lose more access in the same period.

**Global Context of Passport Strength**

The most powerful passports globally — such as Singapore, Japan, and South Korea — offer visa-free or visa-on-arrival access to well over 180 destinations, illustrating wide international travel freedom. India's rank among South Asian neighbours like Pakistan (roughly 100+) or Bangladesh (95th) shows a more moderate travel freedom compared to some peers.

**Pakistan Ranked 150th in Index of Economic Freedom 2025**

Pakistan has been ranked 150th out of 184 economies in the 2025 Index of Economic Freedom published by the Heritage Institute, with an overall score of 49.1 out of 100. The country's economy is classified as "repressed" in the index, indicating limited economic freedom and structural challenges.

**About the Index of Economic Freedom**

The Index of Economic Freedom is compiled annually by the Heritage Institute (Heritage Foundation), a US think tank, measuring the extent of economic freedom in countries globally. It evaluates 12 components grouped under key pillars such as Rule of Law, Government Size, Regulatory Efficiency, and Open Markets. Countries are classified into five categories: Free, Mostly Free, Moderately Free, Mostly Unfree, and Repressed, based on their score out of 100.

Top 5 countries in the 2025 Index of Economic Freedom published by the Heritage Foundation:

- Singapore — Ranked 1st with the highest economic freedom score globally.
- Switzerland — Ranked 2nd with strong institutional and market freedoms.
- Ireland — Ranked 3rd, benefiting from pro-business and open market policies.
- Taiwan — Ranked 4th, noted for high scores in regulatory efficiency and trade freedom.
- Luxembourg — Ranked 5th with strong economic freedom indicators.

**Components of Economic Freedom:**

The 12 indicators include property rights, government integrity, judicial effectiveness, tax burden, government spending, fiscal health, business freedom, labour freedom, monetary freedom, trade freedom, investment freedom, and financial freedom. Higher scores indicate greater freedom and more market-oriented economies.

**Classification of Economies:**

- Free: Best economic environment with strong protections and open markets.
- Mostly Free: High degree of economic freedom with some constraints.
- Moderately Free: Balanced environment with notable restrictions.
- Mostly Unfree: Large, pervasive government involvement.
- Repressed: Limited economic liberty — Pakistan falls under this category.

**Comparison with India's Ranking:**

In the 2025 index, India is ranked around 128th with a score near 53, falling under the "mostly unfree" category, indicating slightly better economic freedom than Pakistan.

**Pakistan Remains Lowest-Ranked Country in South Asia for Literacy: FAFEN Report****What the Report Says**

Pakistan has the lowest literacy rate in South Asia, with only 63% of people aged 10 years and above able to read and write. The ranking is based on a review by the Free and Fair Election Network (FAFEN) using official survey data. The review used data and compared Pakistan with other South Asian countries using World Bank literacy figures. Literacy improved only modestly from 60% in 2018–19 to 63% in 2024–25, showing slow progress.

**Gender Differences**

- Male literacy in Pakistan is 73%.
- Female literacy is much lower at 54%, highlighting a significant gender gap.

**In Short**

- A recent FAFEN review shows that only about 6 out of 10 Pakistanis (aged 10 and above) can read and write.

- Pakistan remains at the bottom among South Asian countries in literacy, despite some improvement over time.
- Women and certain provinces (like Balochistan) have much lower literacy rates than men and other regions.
- The findings point to problems in education access, quality, and affordability that must be solved for better future prospects.

**Name of the Report: Free and Fair Election Network (FAFEN)**

Top Countries in South Asia for Literacy (Highest Rates):

1. Maldives – ~98% literacy (highest in South Asia)
2. Sri Lanka – ~93% literacy
3. India – ~87% literacy
4. Bangladesh – ~79% literacy
5. Nepal – ~68% literacy
6. Bhutan – ~65% literacy (higher than Pakistan but among the lower group)
7. Pakistan – ~63% (lowest in South Asia)

**UN Report: Afghanistan Ranks Third Globally for Landmine and Explosive Remnant Casualties**

The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) says Afghanistan is the third most affected country in the world in terms of people injured or killed by landmines and unexploded ordnance left from past wars. These are bombs and explosive devices that did not explode when they were originally used, but remain dangerous for civilians today.

**Who Is Most Affected**

Children are the worst affected, making up about 80 percent of all casualties. Many are injured or killed while playing or unknowingly touching explosive devices. This shows how dangerous these remnants are, especially for young people who may mistake them for toys.

**Why Afghanistan Has This Problem**

- Decades of conflict — from the Soviet war in the 1980s to the more recent civil war and insurgencies — have left large areas contaminated with landmines and unexploded bombs.
- Around 3.3 million people live close to contaminated areas, meaning they are at constant risk of encountering explosive hazards.

**Efforts to Reduce the Danger**

- UNAMA says de-mining teams work every day to remove explosives from the ground.
- Awareness campaigns are also run to teach people not to touch suspicious objects and to report them to authorities.
- However, more financial support is needed so that organisations can clear more land and prevent further casualties.
- Top 5 countries with the highest casualties caused by landmines and explosive remnants of war, as per Landmine Monitor 2024 report:
  1. Myanmar – Highest number of casualties (over 1,000)
  2. Syria – Second-highest (933 casualties)
  3. Afghanistan – Third-highest (651 casualties)
  4. Ukraine – Fourth-highest (580 casualties)
  5. Yemen – Fifth-highest (499 casualties)

**Why these reports are published**

- To highlight the human cost of landmines
- To identify the most affected countries and regions
- To support de-mining and clearance efforts
- To mobilise international funding and aid
- To promote civilian safety and awareness
- To monitor compliance with global agreements
- To inform policy and decision-making

**India climbs to 38th rank in global innovation index 2025 from 66th in 2019**

India has achieved a major milestone by securing the 38th position in the Global Innovation Index (GII) 2025, improving sharply from 66th rank in 2019. This reflects India's steady progress in innovation, technology, and research over the last few years.

**About the Global Innovation Index**

- The Global Innovation Index is published annually by the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO), a specialised agency of the United Nations.
- It ranks countries based on their innovation capacity and performance, covering areas such as research, technology, startups, infrastructure, and intellectual property.
- The 2025 index covers around 139 economies worldwide.

**Reasons Behind India's Improvement**

- Strong government focus on innovation-driven growth.
- Support to manufacturing and technology through initiatives like the Production Linked Incentive (PLI) Scheme.
- Increased investment in startups, research, and emerging technologies.
- Growth of innovation hubs in major cities.

**Strong Intellectual Property Performance**

- India's global standing in intellectual property filings:
- 4th in trademarks
- 6th in patents
- 7th in industrial designs
- This highlights India's growing ability to create and protect new ideas.

**Top 10 Countries in Global Innovation Index 2025**

1. Switzerland
2. Sweden
3. United States
4. South Korea
5. Singapore
6. United Kingdom
7. Finland
8. Netherlands
9. Denmark
10. China

**Why This Matters**

India's rise from 66th to 38th rank shows consistent improvement in innovation policies, industrial growth, and technology development. While there is still room to grow, the progress signals India's strengthening position in the global innovation landscape.

**WIPO**

- Formation: 14 July 1967
- Type: United Nations specialised agency
- Headquarters: Geneva, Switzerland
- Membership: 194 member states
- Director General: Daren Tang
- Parent organization: United Nations Economic and Social Council

**Economy & Trade**

**India and US strike long-delayed trade deal**

US President Donald Trump has decided to reduce reciprocal tariffs on Indian goods from 50% to 18%. This decision has brought relief to India, though full details of the agreement are still unclear.

**Why Were Tariffs Increased Earlier**

- In August last year, the US raised tariffs on Indian goods from 25% to 50%.
- Trump said this was because India was buying discounted Russian oil, which he claimed was helping Russia in the Ukraine war.
- As a result, Indian exports to the US suffered badly.
- What Trump Claimed After Talking to PM Modi
- India agreed to stop buying Russian oil.
- India would buy more oil and goods from the US, and possibly Venezuela.
- India has not officially confirmed these claims.

**Impact of High Tariffs on India**

- India ended up paying the highest tariffs in the world.
- Exports to the US fell sharply, especially in: Textiles, Seafood & Jewellery
- These sectors are labour-intensive, so jobs were also affected.

**Why the Tariff Cut Matters**

- The new 18% tariff puts India on par with Asian peers like:
- Vietnam, Thailand, Bangladesh
- This improves India’s position as a manufacturing alternative to China.

**Experts say India still has advantages like:**

- Low labour costs
- Political stability
- Large domestic market

**Concerns and Caution**

- Trade experts warned that:
- No clarity yet on which products are covered.
- No clear timeline.
- Uncertainty over claims of zero tariffs and zero non-tariff barriers, especially in agriculture.
- Experts also questioned Trump’s claim that India would buy \$500 billion worth of US goods, as current imports are far lower.
- Analysts stressed that without a joint written agreement, this should be seen as a political signal, not a final deal.

**Broader Trade Strategy of India**

**Due to US tariff pressure, India:**

- Fast-tracked trade deals with other partners.
- Diversified export markets.
- Recently, India signed a major trade deal with the EU, cutting tariffs on 80–90% of goods.
- This was India’s ninth free trade agreement in four years.

**Geopolitical Angle**

- After US tariffs, India, China and Russia grew closer.
- India and China called themselves “partners, not rivals”.
- Leaders of India, China and Russia showed unity at global forums.
- India also strengthened ties with Russia through high-level meetings.

**What Lies Ahead**

- Both India and the US see this as only the first step.
- More negotiations and phases are expected in the coming months.

### How India Plans to Shield Farmers in the US Trade Pact

#### What the Trade Deal Is

India and the United States have announced a framework for an interim trade agreement to boost trade between the two largest democracies. The deal aims to reduce tariffs on many goods, opening new opportunities for Indian exports. However, agriculture and related sectors have remained a highly sensitive point in negotiations.

#### Protection for Agriculture and Farmers

The Indian government has fully protected most key agricultural and dairy products such as wheat, rice, maize, soyabean, poultry, milk, cheese, ethanol, tobacco, certain vegetables, and meat from tariff concessions under the deal. This protection is meant to safeguard the livelihoods of small and marginal farmers who depend on these sectors. India has not opened its domestic agriculture market to large-scale imports from the US, ensuring that farmers do not face sudden competition from foreign products. Union ministers have repeatedly stated that the interests of both small and large farmers are fully secure under the deal.

#### Why these Protections Matter

Agriculture and allied activities employ hundreds of millions of Indians and are a backbone of the rural economy. Indian farmers face different conditions compared to foreign producers — limited mechanisation, higher labour intensity, and lower overall subsidies. There are fears that cheap or heavily subsidised US farm imports could destabilise local prices and harm Indian producers if not properly guarded against.

#### How India Shielded Sensitive Sectors

The agreement uses tools like tariff rate quotas to ensure that access for sensitive products is limited and does not impact farmers negatively. No duty concessions have been provided on sensitive items like key grains and dairy — meaning American imports cannot enter these segments at reduced tariff levels under the interim deal.

#### Benefits and Export Opportunities

While protecting farmers, the deal offers zero or reduced tariffs on many non-farm exports like textiles, smartphones, pharmaceuticals, spices, coffee, and processed foods — helping Indian exporters compete globally. Reduced tariffs can benefit cotton growers, spice producers, and MSMEs (micro, small and medium enterprises) by expanding markets abroad.

#### Political and Social Response

Some farmer groups and political leaders have protested, arguing the deal could still threaten agriculture if any market access opens for American farm products. Protests and a nationwide Bharat Bandh called by the Samyukt Kisan Morcha (SKM) reflect farmer anxieties over transparency and long-term impact. Opposition leaders have labelled the deal “anti-farmer” and demanded clearer safeguards and consultations before finalisation.

#### Key Terms Explained

1. **Tariff:** A tax on imported goods. Reducing tariffs can make foreign products cheaper, while keeping high tariffs protects domestic producers.
2. **Interim Trade Agreement:** A temporary framework that outlines trade terms before a full-scale deal is finalised.
3. **Sensitive Sectors:** Products or industries (like agriculture and dairy) that need special protection due to their importance for livelihoods and food security.
4. **Tariff Rate Quota:** A mechanism that allows limited imports of a product at a lower tariff while protecting the domestic market beyond that limit.
5. **MSME:** Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises — a sector critical for jobs and exports in India.

#### Conclusion

The India–US interim trade pact is designed to boost bilateral trade while prioritising the protection of farmers and sensitive agricultural sectors. It combines expanded market access for several Indian export sectors with strong safeguards for critical farm goods, aiming to balance economic growth with social and rural stability.

**US to Remove Additional 25% Duty on Indian Goods from February, 2026**

The United States Government announced that it will remove the additional 25 per cent tariff previously imposed on Indian goods. The move follows an interim trade framework agreed upon between India and the United States, aimed at strengthening bilateral economic ties and reducing trade barriers.

**Key Points of the Development**

- **Tariff Removal:** The United States will eliminate the additional 25 per cent levy on Indian imports. This surcharge was imposed in August 2025 as part of elevated duties linked to geopolitical and trade tensions.
- **Context of Previous Duties:** The extra 25 per cent tariff had been added on top of a reciprocal 25 per cent duty, leading to effectively up to 50 per cent tariffs on many Indian export goods entering the US market. This had weighed on Indian exporters.
- **India’s Commitments:** The tariff rollback follows India’s commitment to stop directly or indirectly importing Russian oil and an agreement to expand defence cooperation with the United States over the next decade.
- **Interim Trade Framework:** The United States and India also announced a framework for an interim trade deal, with the US reducing tariffs on many Indian goods and India agreeing to lower barriers on US industrial and agricultural imports. This is seen as a precursor to a comprehensive bilateral trade agreement (BTA).
- **Impact on Tariff Levels:** Under this interim framework, overall tariffs on Indian exports to the US are targeted to be reduced to about 18 per cent, down from near or over 50 per cent previously in some categories.

**US Supreme Court Blocks Trump’s Global Tariffs**

- **Background: Supreme Court Strikes Down Earlier Tariffs**
- The Supreme Court of the United States ruled that former US President Donald Trump had no authority to impose sweeping global tariffs.
- The verdict was delivered in a 6–3 majority decision.
- The Court said only the US Congress has the constitutional power to impose broad taxes and tariffs.

**Why Were the Tariffs Declared Invalid?**

**Use of Emergency Law (IEEPA)**

Trump had used the International Emergency Economic Powers Act (IEEPA) of 1977 to justify global tariffs. The Court ruled that this law does not give the President power to impose wide-ranging import taxes. The judgment reinforced the principle of separation of powers in the US Constitution.

**Who Challenged the Tariffs?**

A group of small American businesses filed the case. The legal challenge was led by Neal Katyal, an Indian-origin American lawyer and former Acting Solicitor General of the US. He argued that the tariffs were unconstitutional and exceeded presidential authority. After the verdict, he said the ruling protects the rule of law and limits executive power.

**Trump’s Response: New 10% Global Tariff**

After the court setback, Trump quickly announced a new tariff plan.

**Law Used This Time: Trade Act of 1974 (Section 122)**

Trump invoked Section 122 of the Trade Act of 1974.

This law allows the President to impose a temporary tariff of up to 15% for 150 days without full congressional approval. Under this provision, a 10% tariff has been imposed on most imports.

**Key Features of the New Tariff Plan**

- A 10% tariff on imports from all countries.
- It will remain in effect for about five months (around 150 days).

- It is in addition to existing tariffs already in place.
- The new tariff came into effect from February 24, 2026.

**Impact on Global Trade**

Imported goods in the US may become more expensive. American consumers could face higher prices. Exporting countries, including India, may be affected unless future negotiations change the terms. The move increases uncertainty in global trade relations.

**Why This Development Is Important**

Shows that even after a legal defeat, trade actions can continue under different laws. Highlights the ongoing debate between executive power and congressional authority in the US. Has major implications for US trade policy and international economic relations.

**Project Vault: \$12 Billion US Strategic Critical Minerals Reserve**

US President Donald Trump announced a new initiative called “Project Vault.” It aims to create the first-ever strategic stockpile of critical minerals important for industry and technology.

**What Is “Project Vault”**

Project Vault is a plan to build a Strategic Critical Minerals Reserve in the United States. This reserve will store essential minerals used in modern manufacturing. It is designed to help protect US industries from supply disruptions.

**Why These Minerals Matter**

- Critical minerals are needed to make many advanced products including:
  - Electric vehicles and batteries
  - Smartphones and computers
  - Aircraft components and defence systems
  - Renewable energy technology

**Why the US Is Doing This**

- The US sources many of these minerals from China, which dominates global production and processing.
- Project Vault is meant to reduce dependence on China and make supply chains more secure.
- It will help protect American manufacturers during shortages or price swings.

**Funding and Structure**

- The initiative will be supported with about \$12 billion in funding.
- \$10 billion from a loan by the US Export-Import (EXIM) Bank.
- About \$1.7 billion from private companies.
- It involves public-private partnerships with industry players.

**How It Will Work**

- Minerals like gallium, cobalt, rare earths, lithium, etc. will be procured and stored.
- This supply can be used during market disruptions or emergencies.
- The stockpile is similar in concept to the Strategic Petroleum Reserve, but for minerals instead of oil.

**Expected Benefits**

- Stronger supply chain security for key industries.
- Less risk of shortages affecting manufacturing.
- Reduced dependence on foreign sources, especially China.

**Why It Matters**

- Project Vault is seen as a major step in securing future supplies of minerals that are critical for economic and strategic industries.

**Understanding the Value of Gold**

**Why Gold Is Gaining Attention**

Gold prices have soared sharply in recent years, quadrupling over the past decade, attracting strong interest from investors worldwide. This rise comes amid economic uncertainty, inflation concerns, and geopolitical tensions, which usually push investors toward safe assets like gold.

**Current Price Levels and Historic Highs**

Gold continues to trade at near-record or record levels globally, boosting the overall value of gold reserves held by countries, financial institutions, and investors.

As prices rise, the worth of existing gold holdings increases significantly even without adding more physical gold.

**The gold price in different countries**

The spot price of gold is generally the same, but local taxes and rates can cause variations.

Country	Price in local currency (as of Feb 9, 2025 per ounce)	Gold bullion coin/bar
United States	\$4,965	Gold Eagle 
Brazil	R\$25,904	Bullion bar 
United Kingdom	£3,646	Britannia 
Russia	₽381,682	St. George the Victorious 
China	¥34,402	Gold Panda 
UAE	10,599 AED	Bullion bar 
India	₹508,288	Bullion bar 
Nigeria	₦6,771,489	Bullion bar 
South Africa	R79,413	Kruggerand 
Australia	AU\$7,079	Gold Kangaroo 

**How is the value of gold measured?**

Gold is measured in terms of weight in troy ounces and karats for purity.

**Weight**

One troy ounce = 31.1035gm

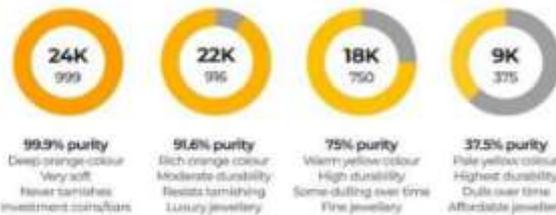


At \$5,000 per troy ounce, 1gm of gold is worth about \$160, and a standard 400-troy-ounce (12.4kg) gold bar costs \$2m



**Purity**

Gold purity is measured in karats, with pure gold at 24 karats and lower karats obtained by mixing cheaper metals, like silver, copper or zinc



**What Drives Gold Prices**

**Safe-Haven Demand:** During times of global instability — caused by geopolitical conflicts, rising inflation, or market volatility — investors prefer gold because it retains value better than many other assets.

**Central Bank Buying:** Many central banks are increasing their gold reserves to diversify away from traditional currencies like the US dollar.

**Currency Diversification:** Countries are reducing their reliance on singular reserve currencies and using gold to spread risk.

**Monetary and Economic Policies:** Changes in interest rates, inflation expectations, and monetary easing strategies also influence gold demand and price.

**Central Banks and Gold Reserves**

Central banks are among the biggest buyers of gold, reflecting a strategic shift in how countries manage their foreign exchange reserves.

This shift is partly due to concerns about currency stability and weakness in the US dollar, making gold a preferred reserve asset.

Holding gold helps governments diversify risk and strengthen financial security during global economic stresses.

**Gold's Role in the Global Financial System**

Gold serves multiple roles:

- **Store of Value:** Investors use gold to protect wealth when other markets weaken.
- **Safe-Haven Asset:** In times of geopolitical or economic uncertainty, gold demand rises as people seek stability.
- **Reserve Asset:** Central banks hold gold as part of their official reserves to diversify and hedge against currency risks.

**Geopolitical and Economic Influences**



Ongoing global tensions and trade issues have increased investor caution, leading more buyers toward gold. When major economies face inflation or slower growth, gold becomes relatively more attractive compared to riskier assets like stocks or bonds.

**Outlook and Future Trends**

Many analysts and financial institutions expect gold prices to remain strong or continue rising due to sustained central bank demand, geopolitical tensions, and diversification away from major currencies.

Some forecasts suggest that gold could reach even higher prices by late 2026 and beyond if current trends hold.

**Important Terms Explained**

1. **Gold Price:** The current market rate at which gold is bought and sold, usually quoted in US dollars per ounce.
2. **Global Reserves:** The stock of gold held by central banks and governments as part of their foreign exchange reserves.
3. **Safe-Haven Asset:** An investment expected to retain or increase in value during times of market turbulence.
4. **De-dollarisation:** The process by which countries reduce reliance on the US dollar in their financial reserves.
5. **Inflation Hedge:** An asset like gold that protects against loss of purchasing power when inflation rises.

**Conclusion**

Gold’s value has surged due to a combination of global economic uncertainty, rising inflation, and strategic reserve diversification by central banks. Its role as a safe haven and store of value continues to make it a critical financial asset globally.

**AgriStack — India’s Next Big Digital Push After UPI**

The Government of India is planning to expand its digital infrastructure in the agriculture sector through a unified platform called AgriStack, which is being described as “next upi for agriculture.” AgriStack aims to create digital identity and data layers for farmers to improve access to credit, insurance, subsidies, market linkages and farm services by integrating data from various sources into a single ecosystem. The idea is to leverage digital public infrastructure (DPI) already successful in areas like payments (e. g. , UPI) and welfare delivery. (Source: Indian Express)

**What is AgriStack?**

AgriStack is an evolving concept of an open, interoperable agricultural data platform intended to aggregate and link farmer profiles, land records, soil health, crop patterns, weather data, credit histories, input usage, insurance policies and market prices. It functions as a Digital Public Good (DPG) that can be accessed securely by farmers, governments, banks, insurers and agritech service providers.

**Why the Need for AgriStack?**

- **Fragmented Data:** Agricultural data in India is scattered across multiple departments (e. g. , agriculture, revenue, irrigation), schemes and states, leading to inefficiencies and limited insights for policymaking.
- **Access to Finance:** Small farmers often face challenges in securing credit due to lack of verified data; AgriStack’s unified platform can enable data-driven credit assessments and reduce reliance on informal lenders.
- **Targeted Subsidy Delivery:** By linking beneficiaries’ digital identities to agricultural services and subsidies, the Government can improve efficiency, transparency and leak-proof delivery of welfare measures.
- **Market Efficiency:** Connected data can create market linkages, helping farmers access real-time price information, buyers and supply chains through digital marketplaces.

**Components & Technical Structure**

- **Farmers’ Digital Identity:** A unique digital profile for every farmer linked with Aadhaar, bank account, land records and cropping history.
- **Geo-Tagged Farm Data:** Satellite and sensor data linked to precise farm locations.
- **Data Exchange Layer:** Secure API-based interoperability enabling services (credit, insurance, input supply) without data silos.

- **Open APIs & Third-Party Integrations:** Enables startups, agritech firms and financial institutions to build services on top of AgriStack.

**Potential Benefits**

- **Enhanced Financial Inclusion:** Banks and NBFCs can use reliable datasets for credit scoring, potentially lowering interest costs and reducing credit risks.
- **Insurance Penetration:** Agri-insurance providers can tailor crop and weather insurance products based on historical yield, soil quality and weather patterns.
- **Improved Policy Design:** Real-time data analytics can help the government design evidence-based policies such as minimum support price (MSP) reforms, crop diversification strategies and risk mitigation plans.

**Challenges & Concerns**

- **Data Privacy:** Central to AgriStack is massive collection of personal and land data, raising questions about data protection, privacy, consent mechanisms and misuse risks.
- **Digital Divide:** Small, marginal and resource-poor farmers may face barriers in adoption due to limited connectivity, low digital literacy and access issues.
- **Implementation Variability:** India’s federal structure and varying state capacity could lead to inconsistencies in rollout and data standardisation.
- **Regulatory Framework:** Although initiatives like UPI are backed by regulatory oversight, AgriStack needs a robust legal framework for data governance and rights.

**Power Gap Index**

The Economic Survey of India 2025–26 has cited the Power Gap Index for the first time to evaluate the country’s strategic influence and potential. This index suggests that India is not fully utilising its strategic potential despite strong economic, demographic, and military fundamentals.

**What Is the Power Gap Index?**

The Power Gap Index is an indicator developed by the Australia-based Lowy Institute. It measures the difference between a country’s actual global influence and what its economic and demographic strength suggests it should have. A higher positive score means a country’s influence exceeds expectations; a negative score means it lags behind.

**What the Index Shows for India**

The Economic Survey notes that India’s Power Gap Index score is negative, indicating that the country is performing below its strategic capability. In simple terms, India’s global economic strength, population size, and strategic capacity are not fully translating into global influence.

**Why This Matters**

The Survey used the Power Gap Index to highlight that India’s global influence could be greater if the country plays a more assertive role internationally. This has implications for geopolitics, diplomacy, trade negotiations, and national security, especially in a rapidly changing global order.

**Economic Context of the Survey**

Although the Indian economy is growing steadily and is projected to expand between 6.8% and 7.2% in 2026-27, challenges in translating economic strength into strategic power remain.

The Survey described this situation as a “paradox”, where India’s macroeconomic success coexists with global conditions that don’t fully reflect that success in terms of influence.

**What the Survey Suggests Going Forward**

- To close the “power gap,” the Survey calls for enhanced strategic engagement, stronger global presence, and more assertive policies in areas such as trade, technology, and diplomacy.
- It emphasises that India’s potential influence should match its economic and demographic size.

**GM crops**

**What Are GM Crops?**

GM (Genetically Modified) crops are plants whose DNA has been changed using genetic engineering to give them specific traits, like resisting pests or tolerating weed-killers. Examples of traits include pest resistance, herbicide tolerance, and improved nutrition.

Common GM crops globally include soybean, maize (corn), cotton, and canola.

**Why GM Crops Are in Focus in the Trade Deal**

The India-US trade deal has revived debate on GM crops because some US agricultural products dominate global supply chains with GM variants. Products such as soybean oil, dried distillers' grains (DDGS), and sorghum draw attention because they may be linked to GM crops in the US.

**India's Position on GM Crop Imports**

India remains cautious about GM crop imports under the deal. It has not allowed most GM food crop imports and has strict regulations on them. The only GM crop allowed for cultivation in India so far has been Bt cotton. India's concern is that allowing GM products could affect food safety, biodiversity, and export markets that prefer GM-free products.

**Why This Matters to Farmers**

Farmer groups and industry bodies fear that importing GM-linked products, even as animal feed, could hurt local growers of crops like soybean and maize. They argue that such imports could put pressure on domestic prices and reduce the demand for locally grown crops. There are also broader worries that GM imports might weaken India's "non-GM" export advantage in markets such as the EU, where many buyers prefer non-GM products.

**Trade Deal's Limits on GM Items**

So far, under the interim trade framework, India has avoided opening its market to major GM crops like corn and soybeans. The focus is mostly on limited imports like animal feed by-products (e. g. , DDGS) and soybean oil, but these are subject to quotas and duty controls. Sensitive staples such as rice, wheat, dairy, poultry, and sugar have been kept out of trade concessions to protect farmers.

**Why This Is Important**

The issue of GM crops in a trade deal is significant because it affects food security, farmer incomes, and export competitiveness. It also highlights policy differences between countries that widely use GM technology (like the US) and those that are cautious about it (like India).

**Way Forward**

Follow science-based safety rules for GM crop decisions.

Protect farmers' income and prices before allowing imports. Ensure clear GM food labeling for consumer choice.

Allow only limited, monitored imports where necessary. Promote Indian biotech research for resilient crops.

Balance trade growth with food security and biodiversity.

**'Bharat Taxi' — India's First Cooperative Ride-Hailing Service**

Union Home and Cooperation Minister Amit Shah launched 'Bharat Taxi', India's first cooperative-led ride-hailing platform in New Delhi.

**Who Is Behind It?**

- The service is operated by Sahakar Taxi Cooperative Limited, registered under the Multi-State Cooperative Societies Act, 2002, and was established on 6 June 2025.
- It is backed by major cooperative institutions including NCDC, IFFCO, Amul, KRIBHCO, NAFED, NDDB, NCEL and NABARD.

**Key Features of Bharat Taxi:**

- Cooperative Model: Drivers, known as Sarathis, are co-owners and share profits, rather than being paid as gig workers.
- Zero Commission & Surge-Free Pricing: Drivers retain their earnings; there is no traditional commission or surge pricing like in private apps.
- Driver Social Security: Offers health insurance, accident insurance, retirement savings and support systems.

- **Freedom to Work Across Platforms:** There are no exclusivity clauses, allowing drivers to work on other apps too.
- **Safety & Support:** Includes emergency assistance, verified ride data, multilingual support and collaboration with police for security.
- **Women Empowerment:** The “Bike Didi” initiative has enrolled over 150 women drivers.

**Pilot and Expansion Plans:**

- A pilot phase was run in Delhi-NCR and Gujarat from late 2025 with growing user adoption and driver registrations.
- The service aims to expand to all Indian states and cities within two years.

**Cooperative Sector in India:**

- The cooperative movement in India supports collective ownership, shared governance, and equitable distribution of profits. Examples include Amul and cooperative banks.
- Bharat Taxi aligns with the Government’s vision of “Sahkar se Samridhi” (Prosperity through Cooperation) and highlights the role of cooperatives in digital and gig economies.

**Mobility Sector Context:**

- Ride-hailing services like Ola and Uber have dominated the market with commission-based models. Bharat Taxi introduces a home-grown alternative focusing on driver welfare and fair earnings.
- Cooperative platforms aim to reduce dependence on foreign investment-based models, improve price transparency, and enhance service affordability.

**Economic & Social Impact:**

- By offering up to 30% cheaper fares, the service supports affordable urban mobility while putting profit in the hands of drivers.
- Integration with national digital public infrastructure (e. g. , identity and payment systems) could enhance efficiency and user experience.

**US–Bangladesh Reciprocal Trade Pact**

The United States and Bangladesh signed a Reciprocal Trade Agreement in Washington, USA. The deal was signed by US Trade Representative Jamieson Greer for the US and Bangladesh Commerce Adviser Sheikh Bashir Uddin with others for Bangladesh.

**What This Deal Does**

The agreement reduces trade barriers and tariffs between the two countries. It gives better market access to exporters from both nations. It is the first such reciprocal trade pact for the US with a South Asian country.

**Tariff Changes (Taxes on Imports)**

The US lowered its tariff on Bangladeshi exports to 19%, down from the earlier 20%. Bangladesh and the US agreed to apply lower tariffs on each other’s products, making trade cheaper.

- **Benefits for Bangladesh:** Bangladeshi exporters, especially in garments and textiles, are expected to gain from lower tariff costs.
- **Benefits for the United States:** The US will get greater access to Bangladesh’s market for industrial and agricultural products like machinery, dairy, and soy.

**Why This Pact Matters**

The agreement marks a new level of economic cooperation between the US and Bangladesh. Lower tariffs help make goods cheaper to export and import on both sides. It may increase trade, create jobs, and strengthen economic ties.

**What is Reciprocal Trade Agreement?**

A Reciprocal Trade Agreement is a trade deal where two countries give each other equal or mutual benefits, such as lower tariffs, better market access, and fewer trade barriers.

Note: The deal comes after around nine months of negotiation between the two countries.

## India and France Sign to Revise DTAC

During the recent visit of the French President to India, India and France signed an Amending Protocol to update the India-France Double Taxation Avoidance Convention (DTAC), originally signed in 1992. The protocol was inked by Ravi Agrawal, Chairperson of the Central Board of Direct Taxes (CBDT), and Thierry Mathou, Ambassador of France to India, on behalf of their respective governments.

### Key Changes Introduced by the Amending Protocol

#### Capital Gains Taxation Rights

The amended pact grants full taxing rights on capital gains from the sale of shares to the country where the company is a resident, replacing earlier ambiguous provisions and aligning with global norms. This clarifies which jurisdiction has primary taxing authority.

#### Revised Dividend Tax Structure

The protocol replaces the uniform 10% dividend tax rate with a two-tier structure:

- 5% for shareholders holding at least 10% of capital
- 15% for other shareholders
- This revision aims to balance tax incentives for larger investors while ensuring equitable tax treatment.

#### Removal of Most-Favoured-Nation (MFN) Clause

The Most-Favoured-Nation clause has been deleted from the treaty, ending longstanding interpretational disputes over automatic entitlement to better tax terms offered to third countries.

#### Other Technical Updates

The definition of 'Fees for Technical Services' has been aligned with the India-U.S. DTAC. The scope of Permanent Establishment (PE) is expanded to include Service PE (services performed beyond thresholds). Exchange of Information provisions are updated, and a new Article on Assistance in Collection of Taxes is introduced, strengthening administrative cooperation.

Applicable provisions of the BEPS (Base Erosion and Profit Shifting) Multilateral Instrument (MLI) are incorporated into the treaty framework.

#### Significance of the Amendment

**Greater Tax Certainty:** The updated DTAC provides clearer rules on taxation of cross-border income, reducing ambiguity for investors and taxpayers.

**Boost to Economic Cooperation:** The reforms aim to strengthen bilateral economic ties, enhance the flow of investments, technology and personnel, and align the tax framework with international standards.

**Business Environment Improvement:** Improved clarity on tax rights and updated definitions are expected to encourage foreign direct investment (FDI) and facilitate ease of doing business between both nations.

#### What is a Double Taxation Avoidance Convention (DTAC)?

A DTAC is a bilateral treaty designed to avoid taxing the same income twice in two jurisdictions — the source country and the residence country — thereby preventing double taxation of individuals and businesses. DTACs promote cross-border trade and investment by providing clear tax rules and reducing fiscal barriers.

#### Most-Favoured-Nation (MFN) Clause – Meaning

The MFN clause ensures that if one country grants tax benefits to a third country in a future treaty (e.g., lower withholding tax rates), the other party can automatically claim the same benefits. Its removal in the India-France DTAC means benefits must now be explicitly stated in the treaty and cannot be claimed automatically based on other agreements.

#### BEPS (Base Erosion and Profit Shifting) Context

BEPS refers to tax planning strategies used by multinational enterprises to shift profits to low- or no-tax jurisdictions, eroding tax bases of other countries.

Incorporating BEPS standards into DTACs helps curb aggressive tax avoidance, enhances transparency, and aligns treaties with OECD-led global tax reforms.

## India-Canada Energy Cooperation

India and Canada agreed to strengthen bilateral energy cooperation in January 2026. The agreement was announced during India Energy Week 2026 held in Goa.

- **Launch of Ministerial Dialogue:** The India–Canada Ministerial Energy Dialogue was formally launched to institutionalise senior-level cooperation.
- **Diversified Energy Trade:** Both sides agreed to deepen bilateral energy trade, including the supply of Canadian LNG, LPG and crude oil to India, and refined petroleum products from India to Canada.
- **Strategic Context:** The meeting followed directions given by the Prime Ministers of India and Canada at the G7 Summit in June 2025 to restart working-level engagements.
- **Energy Security & Supply Chains:** Both countries highlighted the importance of energy security, resilient supply chains, and diversified energy sources for economic growth.
- **First Canadian Minister at IEW:** The event marked the first time a Canadian Cabinet Minister participated in India Energy Week.

#### **About India–Canada Energy Cooperation:**

Canada aims to become a global energy superpower with focus on both conventional and clean energy exports and diversification from traditional markets. India is the world’s third-largest oil consumer, fourth-largest LNG importer and third-largest LPG consumer, and is expected to account for over one-third of global energy demand growth over the next two decades. The renewed partnership addresses energy security, affordability and sustainability, including cooperation in renewable energy technologies and clean energy supply chains.

#### **Trade & Strategic Implications:**

- Two-way goods trade between India and Canada stood at US\$13.3 billion in 2024, with potential to grow further through expanded energy and mineral ties.
- India is exploring critical minerals cooperation with Canada for minerals like lithium and cobalt, vital for EV batteries, renewables and defence technologies.
- The agreement also opens avenues for cooperation in clean technologies such as hydrogen, biofuels, battery storage and energy supply chain resilience.

#### **International Relations Angle:**

- This energy cooperation forms part of broader India–Canada efforts to reset and strengthen diplomatic and economic ties after past tensions, reflecting pragmatic diplomacy and mutual interests in Asia’s growing energy markets.
- Engagements like these help India diversify its energy import sources beyond the Middle East and Qatar, where it sources most crude and LNG today.

#### **Also in Focus**

#### **RBI–ESMA MoU on Central Counterparties**

The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) and the European Securities and Markets Authority (ESMA) signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) for cooperation and exchange of information related to Central Counterparties (CCPs). This new MoU replaces the earlier agreement from 28 February 2017, reflecting updated regulatory alignment. It establishes a framework for ESMA to rely on RBI’s supervisory and regulatory activities while ensuring the financial stability of the European Union (EU). The pact demonstrates the importance of cross-border cooperation in international financial clearing and settlement systems. As a result, the Clearing Corporation of India Ltd (CCIL) and other Indian CCPs can re-apply for recognition under the European Market Infrastructure Regulation (EMIR), enabling EU clearing members to clear and settle trades more efficiently. The agreement ends a two-year regulatory standoff over oversight of India’s clearing infrastructures and paves the way for stronger India–EU financial market integration.

#### **About CCPs and Their Functions**

Central Counterparties (CCPs) act as intermediaries between buyers and sellers in financial markets, guaranteeing trade settlement and reducing counterparty risk in transactions. CCPs perform clearing and settlement—ensuring a trade is executed even if one party defaults.

**Importance of EMIR Recognition**

Under the European Market Infrastructure Regulation (EMIR), a third-country CCP must be recognised by ESMA to operate with EU financial institutions. Without recognition, EU banks face higher capital charges and restricted access to foreign clearing houses, increasing transaction costs.

**About ESMA**

- The European Securities and Markets Authority is the financial markets regulator of the European Union, ensuring fair and stable financial markets across member states.
- ESMA supervises markets under frameworks like MiFID II (Markets in Financial Instruments Directive) and EMIR (European Market Infrastructure Regulation).

**Strategic Significance for India**

- Enhanced cooperation improves India’s financial connectivity with the EU, one of its major trading partners.
- It supports India’s objective of global financial integration and investor confidence.
- Facilitates cross-border clearing efficiency for foreign investors in Indian financial markets.

**US President Donald Trump signs executive order to impose tariffs on countries trading with Iran**

US President Donald Trump signed an executive order that creates a mechanism to impose tariffs on countries that trade with Iran. The move is part of Washington’s efforts to exert economic pressure on Tehran and reinforce its national security and foreign policy objectives.

**What Are the Tariffs About?**

The order allows the United States to levy additional tariffs — for example up to 25% — on imports from countries that directly or indirectly buy goods or services from Iran. This tariff would apply to products imported into the US from those countries.

**Why Is the US Doing This?**

The US government says Iran poses a threat to its national security, foreign policy, and economy — and the tariffs are part of a broader strategy to curb Iran’s influence. The executive order continues a national emergency designation related to Iran.

**How Will It Work?**

The Secretary of Commerce and Secretary of State will determine which countries are trading with Iran and decide how much tariff to impose. The order gives these officials the power to make rules and guidance to implement the tariff system.

**What Could Be the Impact?**

Countries with strong trade ties to Iran — such as China, Turkey, UAE, Iraq, and India — may face higher tariffs on goods they export to the US if they continue trading with Iran. Higher tariffs could make their exported goods more expensive, potentially affecting global trade relations.

**India and Gulf Cooperation Council Sign Terms of Reference to Start Free Trade Agreement Talks**

India and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) signed the Terms of Reference (ToR) to begin formal talks on a Free Trade Agreement (FTA). The ToR sets the scope and framework for how the FTA negotiations will proceed.

**Who Are the GCC Members**

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) includes six countries: Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates (UAE), Qatar, Kuwait, Oman & Bahrain

**Why This Is Important**

**Restarting Long-Stalled Talks**

Talks for an India-GCC FTA were first explored more than two decades ago. Earlier negotiations were held in 2006 and 2008 but then paused.

**Signing the ToR restarts the process and formally begins the negotiation phase.**

#### **Boosting Trade and Investments**

The FTA is expected to strengthen economic and strategic ties between India and the Gulf region. It can increase trade, investment, and cooperation in sectors like food processing, infrastructure, petrochemicals, and technology.

### **IDFC First Bank Detects ₹590 Crore Fraud in Haryana Government Accounts, Triggers Market Turmoil**

IDFC First Bank has disclosed a suspected ₹590-crore fraud involving unauthorised and irregular transactions in accounts held by Haryana government entities at its Chandigarh branch, triggering regulatory action, internal probes, and a sharp fall in the bank's share price.

#### **Incident Overview**

The irregularities were first noticed when a Haryana government department requested closure and transfer of funds, revealing a discrepancy between the balance shown by the bank and the amount claimed by the government. Similar mismatches were later found in other Haryana government accounts maintained with the same branch, prompting further investigation. The total amount under reconciliation is estimated at approximately ₹590 crore, though the exact impact will be determined after claim validation, recoveries, and legal processes.

#### **Bank's Response & Actions Taken**

The bank has suspended four employees believed to be involved and has filed a police complaint to initiate criminal proceedings. It has informed the banking regulator, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI), and initiated disciplinary, civil and criminal actions against the individuals and external parties involved. IDFC First Bank has appointed an independent external agency (KPMG) to conduct a forensic audit to uncover the mechanics of the alleged fraud and strengthen internal controls. 'Recall requests' have been sent to other banks to lien-mark balances in accounts suspected of receiving misappropriated funds, as part of recovery efforts.

#### **Regulatory and Market Impact**

The Haryana government has de-empanelled IDFC First Bank for government business, instructing its departments to close accounts with the lender until further notice. Despite the sharp stock fall, the RBI has stated that there is no systemic risk to the banking sector arising from this isolated incident, aiming to reassure markets and depositors about the health of the financial system.

#### **Significance of the Incident**

The alleged fraud amount (~₹590 crore) exceeds the bank's recent quarterly net profit of ₹503 crore, raising important questions on corporate governance, risk management, and internal controls within banks. The case highlights the vulnerability of government and public-sector accounts when internal control lapses occur, underscoring the need for robust reconciliation practices. Regulatory scrutiny and independent audit outcomes are expected to provide insights into preventing similar incidents in the future.

#### **About Banking Frauds & Internal Controls**

A banking fraud involves deliberate misappropriation/misuse of funds by internal or external agents. Strong internal controls, segregation of duties, and regular audits are essential to safeguard fiduciary assets.

Forensic audits help identify the cause and extent of financial irregularities and recommend systemic improvements.

#### **About RBI's Systemic Risk Assessment**

The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) monitors the stability of the banking system and assesses whether a bank's issue poses a threat to overall financial stability. A finding of "no systemic risk" indicates confidence that the problem is isolated and does not threaten sector-wide operations.

#### **Bank Governance and Market Confidence**

Financial irregularities at a bank often lead to sharp share price volatility, reflecting investor sentiment and confidence. Regulatory oversight, transparent disclosures, and corrective actions are critical to restoring trust.

### **Launch of India's First CBDC-based Public Distribution System (PDS) in Gujarat**

Union Home Minister Amit Shah inaugurated India's first Central Bank Digital Currency (CBDC)-based Public Distribution System (PDS) in Gandhinagar, Gujarat on 15 February 2026. The initiative uses the Reserve Bank of India (RBI)-authorized digital currency (e-₹) as digital tokens to transfer PDS subsidies transparently to beneficiaries' digital wallets.

Gujarat is the first state to implement this pilot, covering over 26,000 families in Ahmedabad, Surat, Anand, and Valsad. Beneficiaries will access ration entitlements using QR codes or Aadhaar-based OTPs.

An 'Annapurthi Grain ATM' that dispenses up to 25 kg of grain in 35 seconds was also unveiled.

#### **Key Features of the CBDC-based PDS Pilot**

- **Digital Token Wallets:** Beneficiaries get tokens specifying item, quantity, and price.
- **Transparency & Efficiency:** The digital system aims to reduce corruption and leakages in PDS by creating real-time tracking of subsidy distribution.
- **No Intermediaries:** Direct digital credit reduces intermediary involvement and enhances accountability.

#### **Educational Significance**

##### **What is CBDC?**

Central Bank Digital Currency (CBDC) is the digital form of a country's fiat currency, issued and regulated by the central bank (in India, the RBI). It is legal tender but exists only in digital form and can be stored in digital wallets.

##### **Benefits of CBDC**

- **Transparency:** Digital ledger enables traceable transactions, reducing fraud.
- **Financial Inclusion:** Provides access to digital currency without the need for a bank account.
- **Reduced Costs:** Less reliance on physical cash saves printing and handling costs.
- **Real-Time Transfers:** Instant delivery of subsidies or payments.

##### **Other Relevant Developments**

- **Expansion Plans:** The CBDC-PDS model is slated for extension to Union Territories such as Chandigarh, Puducherry, Dadra & Nagar Haveli soon.
- **National Rollout:** Experts estimate wider implementation could occur within 3–4 years as technical and operational readiness improves.
- **Digital India Link:** This initiative aligns with the Digital India programme aimed at modernizing government services via technology.

**"There are two types of people who will tell you that you cannot make a difference in this world: those who are afraid to try and those who are afraid you will succeed."**

## Defence & Security

### National Counter-Terrorism Policy & Strategy "PRAHAAR"

The Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) has unveiled India's first comprehensive National Counter-Terrorism Policy and Strategy titled PRAHAAR (Policy for Response Against Hostile Activities and Radicalism). The new strategy provides a structured and proactive framework to address evolving terrorist threats in India with a focus on prevention, coordinated response and resilience.

#### What Is PRAHAAR?

PRAHAAR is a national doctrine that guides India's counter-terrorism efforts through a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach. The acronym PRAHAAR stands for the core elements of the strategy:

- Prevention of terror attacks to protect Indian citizens and interests
- Responses that are swift and proportionate
- Aggregating internal capacities for synergy
- Human rights and rule-of-law based mitigation
- Attenuating conditions enabling terrorism
- Aligning international counter-terror efforts
- Recovery and resilience through societal support

#### Main Objectives & Strategic Focus

According to the policy document and expert sources, the key objectives include:

- Preventing terror attacks before they occur, based on real-time intelligence and proactive measures.
- Swift, proportionate and coordinated responses to terrorist activities.
- Strengthening inter-agency coordination among central, state and local enforcement bodies.
- Mitigating radicalisation and extremist ideologies including through community engagement.
- Denying terrorists access to funds, weapons and safe havens domestically and internationally.
- Promoting recovery and resilience in affected communities using public-private partnerships.

#### Key Features of the Policy

##### Intelligence-Led & Proactive Approach

PRAHAAR emphasises an intelligence-first doctrine, where the Multi Agency Centre (MAC) and the Joint Task Force on Intelligence (JTFI) under the Intelligence Bureau (IB) serve as central nodes for real-time intelligence sharing and coordinated action across agencies.

##### Whole-of-Government & Whole-of-Society Strategy

The policy promotes integrated action involving:

- Central and state police forces
- Special units such as the National Investigation Agency (NIA) and National Security Guard (NSG)
- Civil society organisations, community and religious leaders
- Public-private partnerships to build resilience and reduce radicalisation risks.

##### International Cooperation

PRAHAAR reinforces India's commitment to global counter-terror efforts by:

- Strengthening bilateral and multilateral cooperation, including Mutual Legal Assistance Treaties (MLATs) and extradition agreements.
- Engaging diplomatically to designate terrorists at the United Nations.

##### Addressing Emerging & High-Tech Threats

The policy recognises evolving terror threats, including:

- Misuse of drones and robotics for smuggling or attacks
- Cyber-radicalisation, encrypted communications and dark web operations
- Use of crypto wallets for terror financing
- CBRNED threats (Chemical, Biological, Radiological, Nuclear, Explosive and Digital) as emerging risks.

**Human Rights & Rule of Law**

India's counter-terror strategy under PRAHAAR firmly anchors actions within the framework of human rights and the rule of law, ensuring that security operations and legal processes uphold international norms and safeguards.

**National Security Context**

- Zero-Tolerance Policy: India maintains a zero-tolerance stance against terrorism in all forms and rejects any justification for violence based on religion, ethnicity, nationality or ideology.
- The strategy codifies decades of India's experience in combating terrorism and aims to institutionalise a long-term, technology-driven counter-terror posture.
- PRAHAAR reflects a decisive shift from reactive policies to proactive, anticipatory threat mitigation in national security doctrine.

**Multinational CTF-154 Task Force**

The Indian Navy has taken charge of Combined Task Force 154 (CTF-154), a multinational naval training group. This takeover took place on 11 February 2026 at the Combined Maritime Forces (CMF) headquarters in Manama, Bahrain. Commodore Milind M. Mokashi, Shaurya Chakra, from the Indian Navy, became the new commander of CTF-154, replacing the outgoing commander from the Italian Navy.

**About CTF-154**

CTF-154 is part of the Combined Maritime Forces (CMF) — a large international naval partnership of around 47 nations working together to improve safety at sea. It focuses on training and building skills of member countries' naval personnel. This includes areas like maritime awareness, maritime law, rescue operations, and leadership. CTF-154 was created in May 2023 and hosts training events across the Middle East.

**Why this matters**

This is the first time the Indian Navy has ever led a CMF task force, marking an important step in India's role in global maritime security. It shows trust from other nations in India's naval skill and leadership.

**What CTF-154 does**

The task force helps navies from many countries train together so they can handle shared challenges at sea. Training covers ship tracking, law enforcement at sea, maritime rescue, and leadership skills.

**Bigger picture**

CTF-154 is one of several CMF task forces. Others focus on maritime security, anti-piracy, and security in key sea regions. Leading this force strengthens India's international cooperation and role in keeping major sea routes safe.

**Rs 3. 25 Lakh Crore Deal to Procure 114 Rafale Fighter Jets**

The Defence Acquisition Council (DAC), chaired by Rajnath Singh, has approved the Acceptance of Necessity (AoN) for the procurement of 114 Rafale multi-role fighter aircraft from Dassault Aviation under a government-to-government agreement with France at an estimated cost of ₹3. 25 lakh crore (about \$40 billion) — potentially India's largest defence deal to date. The acquisition is for the Indian Air Force whose squadron strength has fallen below authorised levels.

**How it will be executed:**

18 jets to be acquired in fly-away condition from France, with deliveries starting after contract finalisation. The remaining jets are to be manufactured in India in collaboration with domestic partners as part of the Make in India initiative, with significant indigenous content in production.

- Strategic timing: The approval comes just before French President Emmanuel Macron's official visit to India in mid-February, highlighting the strategic defence partnership between India and France.
- Broader procurement: The DAC also approved the acquisition of other defence systems (e. g. , Boeing P-8I maritime patrol aircraft) and missiles under proposals totalling around ₹3. 60 lakh crore.

**Rafale Fighter Jet:**

The Rafale is a twin-engine, canard-delta wing, multi-role combat aircraft capable of air superiority, ground support, reconnaissance and nuclear deterrence missions. It is considered a 4.5-generation fighter with advanced avionics, weapons systems and electronic warfare capabilities.

**India's Indigenous Helicopter Production**

Adani Defence & Aerospace (part of Adani Group) and Italy's Leonardo (a global aerospace and defence company) signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to build a complete helicopter manufacturing ecosystem in India — from design and production to training and maintenance.

**Why This Partnership Matters**

**Meet Growing Helicopter Demand**

India's armed forces are expected to need more than 1,000 helicopters over the next decade. The collaboration focuses on models like Leonardo's AW169M and AW109 TrekkerM helicopters.

**Boost Self-Reliance (Aatmanirbhar Bharat)**

Instead of importing helicopters, India aims to manufacture them locally, reducing dependence on foreign supply. The partnership supports the government's "Make in India" and Aatmanirbhar Bharat goals by building capabilities within the country.

**Build Full Helicopter Ecosystem in India**

**The agreement includes:**

Local design and manufacturing of helicopter parts and final assembly. Maintenance, Repair and Overhaul (MRO) facilities in India so helicopters can be serviced locally. Pilot training infrastructure to train Indian pilots on these platforms. Potential extension to civil aviation (non-military helicopter use) later.

**Benefits for India**

- **Economic and Job Growth:** The ecosystem is expected to create thousands of skilled jobs in engineering, manufacturing, logistics, and support services.
- **Stronger Defence Capabilities:** Having helicopters built and supported in India will make the defence forces more ready and self-sufficient.
- **Technology Transfer and Expertise Sharing:** Leonardo brings advanced helicopter design and technology. Partnering with Adani leverages Indian infrastructure and industry experience.

**Leonardo:**

- **Industry:** Aerospace · Defence
- **Founded:** 1948
- **Headquarters:** Rome, Italy
- **Chairman:** Stefano Pontecorvo
- **CEO & General Manager:** Roberto Cingolani

**Also in Focus**

**VOC Port Authority Becomes India's First Port to Initiate Anti-Drone Security System**

V. O. Chidambaranar Port Authority has begun implementing a modern anti-drone security system, making it India's first port to do so. This step aims to strengthen maritime and coastal security at the port.

**Why Is This Important?**

- Ports are critical infrastructure, handling trade, imports and exports.
- Unauthorized drones can pose security risks like spying, smuggling, or attacks on port facilities.
- The new system will help detect, track and neutralise suspicious drones.

**What Does the Anti-Drone System Include?**

- It combines Radio Frequency (RF) and radar-based technologies.

- Key equipment includes:
- Drone detectors,
- Drone detection radar,
- Man-pack jammer devices.
- The system offers 360-degree protection around the port and can cover up to 5 km.

#### **Who Installed the System?**

- The system was set up by the V. O. Chidambaran Port Authority in partnership with Central Electronics Limited (CEL), a government company.
- The project agreement was signed by senior officials from the port and CEL.

#### **When Will It Be Fully Ready?**

- The anti-drone system is planned to be fully operational within the next three months.

### **India Shortlists Tata, L&T-BEL, and Bharat Forge-Led Groups for Fighter Jet Development**

India's Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) has shortlisted three Indian industry contenders — Tata Advanced Systems Ltd, a consortium of Larsen & Toubro with Bharat Electronics Ltd, and a consortium led by Bharat Forge (with BEML Ltd and Data Patterns) — to design and develop prototypes for India's indigenous fifth-generation Advanced Medium Combat Aircraft (AMCA) programme. This selection follows a screening of seven bidders and marks a major step in India's push for advanced aerospace manufacturing.

#### **About the Advanced Medium Combat Aircraft (AMCA) Programme**

The AMCA is envisioned as a fifth-generation stealth fighter — a single-seat, twin-engine aircraft with stealth coatings, internal weapons bays, and advanced avionics, aimed at achieving high manoeuvrability and low detectability. The aircraft is designed to strengthen the Indian Air Force's (IAF) capabilities and reduce dependence on foreign suppliers for cutting-edge combat jets. If successful, India would join a selective group of countries operating indigenous fifth-generation fighters such as the F-22 and F-35 (USA), J-20 (China), and Su-57 (Russia).

#### **Significance of Private Sector Participation**

The shortlisting of major Indian private sector firms for the AMCA prototype phase reflects a policy shift towards leveraging industry expertise and scaling up defence manufacturing under 'Make in India' and 'Atmanirbhar Bharat' initiatives. This marks a departure from traditional reliance on public sector units such as Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL) — which has not been shortlisted at this stage due to eligibility criteria and high order books — making this a historic move in India's defence production ecosystem.

#### **Project Timeline and Scope**

The shortlisted industry groups will receive government funding support to build and test prototype models of the AMCA, before full manufacturing rights are granted. The first prototypes are slated for development over the next several years, with induction of operational jets into the IAF expected by 2035 or later. Earlier defence ministry sources noted an indicative budget of ₹15,000 crore for prototype development alone.

#### **Wider Strategic and Defence Context**

Strengthening indigenous fighter development is part of India's broader modernisation of its armed forces, which also includes acquisition of 114 Rafale fighter jets from France and additional P-8I maritime patrol aircraft for the Indian Navy. India's Air Force is striving to increase operational readiness and maintain technological parity in the region amidst evolving security scenarios. The AMCA project is a key pillar in achieving defence self-reliance, aligning with other initiatives like developing domestic fighter jet engine capabilities and integrating private industry in high-end aerospace manufacturing.

### **India, Russia in talks on joint production of Su-57 fighter jets: Report**

India and Russia are in discussions to explore the possibility of jointly producing the Russian Su-57E fifth-generation fighter jet in India. This was stated by Vadim Badekha, CEO of United Aircraft Corporation (UAC) of Russia, during the Wings India 2026 air show in Hyderabad.

**About the Su-57 Fighter Jet**

- The Su-57 is a fifth-generation stealth fighter jet developed by Russia, designed to perform air superiority and multirole combat missions.
- Russia is offering not only the supply of the aircraft but also the possibility of setting up production in India and technology support for India's own fighter programme.

**What the Talks Involve**

- The discussions focus on licenced and joint production of the Su-57E in India, using facilities such as those already producing Russian aircraft.
- Russia has proposed that Indian industry and systems be included in the production process.
- The negotiations are described as being in an advanced technical stage, although formal agreements have not yet been announced.

**Wider Context and Defence Implications**

- India has long-standing defence ties with Russia, which includes licensed production of fighter jets like the Su-30MKI at Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL).
- Earlier technical assessments by Russian teams suggested HAL has about 50% capacity required for Su-57 production, but upgrades would be needed for full manufacturing.
- Talks on this topic come as India also continues to pursue its indigenous Advanced Medium Combat Aircraft (AMCA) project and considers multiple options for modernising its air force.

**Why This Matters**

- If agreed, joint production of the Su-57 in India could significantly boost India's defence industrial base and reduce dependence on foreign imports.
- The collaboration could potentially transfer advanced fighter technology and help India build complex aerospace capabilities.
- It may also provide a bridge to future fifth-generation aircraft development while India's own AMCA project progresses.

**US and Philippines Reaffirm Defence Pact and Strengthen Security Ties**

The United States and the Philippines reaffirmed their bilateral defence alliance and pledged to deepen cooperation on military, economic, and maritime security matters during high-level talks in Manila. The reaffirmation underscores the enduring partnership between the two countries and comes amid rising regional tensions in the Indo-Pacific, particularly around the South China Sea.

**Mutual Defence Treaty (MDT) and Historical Context**

The security partnership between the U. S. and the Philippines is anchored in the Mutual Defence Treaty (MDT) signed in 1951, which obligates both nations to assist each other in case of an external armed attack on either government's armed forces, aircraft, or public vessels. This treaty is one of the longest-standing mutual defence agreements in Asia and has served as the foundation for continued military cooperation and strategic alignment between Manila and Washington.

**Key Areas of Cooperation and Commitments**

- Both sides agreed to enhance military interoperability, joint exercises, and joint patrols to deter potential threats, especially in contested maritime areas.
- The leaders emphasised the need for continued economic and defence collaboration to bolster regional peace and stability.
- They also discussed and expressed mutual concern over China's activities in strategic waterways such as the South China Sea, reiterating support for a free, open, and rules-based Indo-Pacific.

**Strategic Significance in Regional Security**

The reaffirmation comes at a time of heightened geopolitical tensions in the Indo-Pacific region, with a focus on freedom of navigation, territorial integrity, and respect for international law in maritime domains.

The U. S. and the Philippines have also reiterated the importance of maintaining peace across the Taiwan Strait, a key flashpoint with wider implications for regional security.

**Enhanced Defence Cooperation Instruments**

**In addition to the MDT:**

The Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) (2014) allows the U. S. to rotate troops and military assets into the Philippines, improving response capability and interoperability while respecting Philippine sovereignty (no permanent bases are established). The Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) (1999) facilitates legal procedures, administrative processing, and duty arrangements for U. S. military personnel temporarily in the Philippines.

**Defence Exercises of the Month**

**Vayu Shakti**

**What is Exercise Vayu Shakti?**

Exercise Vayu Shakti is a major combat drill conducted by the Indian Air Force. It will be held on 27 February 2026 at the Pokhran Air-to-Ground Range in Rajasthan, with rehearsal on 24 February 2026.

**Why the exercise is important**

The drill will showcase the success of Operation Sindoor and demonstrate the Air Force’s strong control over national airspace. It reflects the ability of the Air Force to carry out precise strikes and coordinated operations with ground forces.

**Key demonstrations during the exercise**

Precision targeting, joint operations with the Indian Army, and multi-domain warfare capability will be displayed. Humanitarian assistance and disaster relief roles such as rescue, evacuation, and rapid airlift will also be shown. Advanced systems including loitering munitions, Akash missiles, SpyDer air defence, and anti-drone technologies will be featured.

**Participation and assets involved**

More than 120 defence assets will take part in the exercise. These include dozens of fighter aircraft, helicopters, and transport aircraft. Fighter platforms such as Rafale, Sukhoi, Mirage-2000, MiG-29, Jaguar, and LCA Tejas will participate.

**Connection with Operation Sindoor**

The exercise will highlight the operational success and precision capability demonstrated during Operation Sindoor. It sends a clear message of zero tolerance toward threats and terrorism.

**KHANJAR**

The 13th edition of the India–Kyrgyzstan Joint Military Exercise “Khanjar” began on 4 February 2026 at Misamari in Sonitpur district, Assam, and will be conducted until 17 February 2026.

- Purpose: The bilateral exercise aims to enhance interoperability between the Special Forces of India and Kyrgyzstan, with a focus on joint operations in urban warfare and counter-terrorism scenarios under the United Nations mandate.
- Venue: The drill is being held at Misamari, Assam — reflecting India’s role in hosting the exercise in 2026.

**History & Significance:**

- Exercise Khanjar was initiated in 2011 and has since become an annual joint training event between India and Kyrgyzstan, reflecting deepening defence ties.
- The exercise is usually held alternately in India and Kyrgyzstan, showcasing mutual commitment to defence cooperation.
- Previous Edition: The 12th edition (Khanjar-XII) was held in March 2025 in Tokmok, Kyrgyzstan.
- Training Focus: The training modules typically include urban warfare, counter-terrorism operations, close-quarter battle, building intervention, and tactical coordination drills under a United Nations mandate framework.

- **Special Forces Involvement:** Previous editions have seen participation by Indian Parachute Regiment (Special Forces) and the Kyrgyz Scorpion Brigade, demonstrating high-intensity special operations training.

**Why the exercise was started**

- **Counter-terrorism cooperation:** Both countries face threats from terrorism, extremism, and radicalisation, especially emanating from Afghanistan and surrounding regions. The exercise focuses on joint counter-terrorism operations in mountainous and urban terrain.
- **Strategic engagement in Central Asia:** For India, Central Asia is strategically important due to its proximity to Afghanistan, Eurasia, and major energy routes. Military cooperation with Kyrgyzstan helps India maintain a security presence and partnerships in the region.
- **Defence diplomacy and trust-building:** Joint exercises enhance mutual trust, interoperability, and understanding between armed forces, strengthening long-term defence relations.

**SAREX**

South Korea and Japan have agreed to resume their bilateral naval search and rescue exercises (SAREX) after a nine-year hiatus, as part of efforts to enhance military cooperation and mutual understanding. The agreement was reached during talks between South Korean Defence Minister Ahn Gyu-back and Japanese Defence Minister Shinjiro Koizumi at Yokosuka, Japan.

- **Purpose of exercises:** The naval search and rescue exercises (SAREX) involve coordinated maritime drills by both nations’ naval forces to practise responses to ship distress incidents and humanitarian rescue operations at sea.

**Background on SAREX and Cooperation**

- **Inception and history:** The Korea-Japan naval SAREX began in 1999 and was held regularly until 2017 before being suspended due to deteriorating bilateral relations. It was conducted ten times before the hiatus.
- **Why it stopped:** Bilateral military exchanges were halted after the 2018 radar lock-on dispute, where a Japanese aircraft and a South Korean warship had a contentious encounter, straining defence cooperation.

**Significance of resumption:**

- Resuming SAREX reflects warming defence ties between Seoul and Tokyo amid broader regional security concerns, especially threats from North Korea’s missile and nuclear programmes.
- It also strengthens interoperability and trust between the Republic of Korea Navy (ROKN) and Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF).

**Broader context of defence cooperation:**

- South Korea and Japan have recently agreed to upgrade defence cooperation, including collaboration on advanced technologies like artificial intelligence and unmanned systems.
- Both countries are part of the American–Japanese–Korean trilateral security framework, which aims to enhance collective defence and regional stability in the Indo-Pacific.

**MILAN 2026**

Rajnath Singh will officially open MILAN 2026, a major multilateral naval exercise, at the Samudrika Auditorium in Visakhapatnam. This event brings together navies from around 70 countries.

**Where and When**

The exercise is held in Visakhapatnam (Andhra Pradesh) at the Indian Navy’s Eastern Naval Command base. The harbour activities started before the inauguration, and the sea phase will run from February 21 to February 25, 2026.

**What Happens in MILAN 2026**

The exercise includes harbour and sea phases focusing on teamwork among different navies.

Participating navies will practise drills in:

- Anti-submarine warfare
- Air defence operations

- Search-and-rescue missions
- The aim is to improve interoperability and cooperation among friendly naval forces.

**Supporting Events**

Before the formal opening, a two-day international maritime seminar will take place for officers and delegates. A MILAN Village was also set up to welcome foreign participants with cultural events and interaction spaces.

**History and Growth**

MILAN started in 1995 with a few regional navies and has grown into one of the world’s significant naval exercises. Past editions were held mainly in the Andaman & Nicobar Islands, but it moved to Visakhapatnam because of better facilities. The 2026 edition with 70 countries is one of the largest ever.

**Purpose and Significance**

MILAN 2026 aims to build strong professional ties with friendly nations’ navies. It helps share best practices in naval operations and expands cooperation at sea. The event supports India’s vision of regional maritime security and partnership.

**Dharma Guardian**

The 7th edition of the annual Joint Military Exercise “Dharma Guardian” between India and Japan commenced on 24 February 2026 at the Foreign Training Node in Chaubattia, Uttarakhand. The exercise will run till 9 March 2026, bringing together troops from both nations to enhance defence cooperation and operational interoperability.

**Key Objectives of the Exercise:**

- To enhance interoperability between the Indian Army and Japan Ground Self-Defense Force (JGSDF).
- To strengthen combined capabilities for joint operations in semi-urban environments.
- To refine joint planning, tactical drills, and execution of complex military tasks.

**Participating Forces:**

- A collective 120-member contingent from each country.
- The Indian side is represented by troops from the Ladakh Scouts regiment.
- The Japan side is represented by personnel from the 32nd Infantry Regiment of the JGSDF.

**Major Training Activities Included:**

- Establishment of a Temporary Operating Base and Mobile Vehicle Check Posts.
- Development of an Intelligence, Surveillance & Reconnaissance (ISR) grid.
- Conduct of cordon and search operations, heliborne missions, and house intervention drills.

**Strategic Importance:**

- “Dharma Guardian” is held alternately in India and Japan and is a significant pillar of defence cooperation between the two forces.
- It contributes to regional security and reinforces the India-Japan Special Strategic and Global Partnership.
- The exercise underlines the commitment of both nations to joint counter-terrorism and urban combat readiness strategies.

**About “Dharma Guardian”:**

- It is a bilateral army exercise first conducted in 2018 to foster interoperability and mutual understanding between India and Japan’s land forces.
- The exercise includes joint operational planning, simulated combat scenarios, and exchange of modern tactical practices.

**Vajra Prahar**

The 16th edition of the Joint Special Forces Exercise “Vajra Prahar” between India and United States began on 24 February 2026 at the Special Forces Training School, Bakloh, Himachal Pradesh. It will continue till 16 March 2026.

**Purpose of the Exercise:**

- Strengthen military cooperation and strategic partnership between India and the US.
- Enhance interoperability and joint operational readiness of special forces units.
- Facilitate exchange of special operations tactics, techniques and procedures (TTPs).

**Participants:**

- The Indian contingent comprises 45 personnel drawn from Indian Army Special Forces.
- The US side is represented by 12 personnel from US Army Special Forces (Green Berets).

**Training Focus:**

- Rigorous physical conditioning and joint mission planning.
- Coordinated tactical drills in mountainous terrain.
- Sharing of best practices and operational experiences.

**Historical and Strategic Context:**

- First held in 2010, the Vajra Prahar series is a bilateral special forces exercise aimed at deepening defence cooperation.
- The previous (15th) edition took place in Idaho, USA in November 2024.
- This exercise highlights the growing military partnership between India and the United States amidst evolving regional security dynamics.

**"Successful people do what unsuccessful people are not willing to do. Don't wish it were easier; wish you were better."**

## Environment & Ecology

### Great Nicobar Mega Project

The National Green Tribunal (NGT) has dismissed petitions challenging the environmental clearance granted to the Great Nicobar mega infrastructure project, stating it found “no good ground to interfere” as “adequate safeguards” were included in the clearance conditions. The decision came from a six-member special bench led by Justice Prakash Shrivastava.

#### About the Project

The project, valued around ₹80,000-₹90,000 crore, is planned on Great Nicobar Island, spanning about 166 sq km of land.

It includes:

- Transshipment port
- Integrated township
- Dual-use (civil & military) airport
- 450-MVA gas & solar power plant

#### NGT's Key Reasoning

- The NGT bench said the environmental clearance (EC) already provided had adequate mitigation conditions for ecological impacts.
- It noted the strategic importance of the project in national interest, especially given the island's location near the Malacca Strait — a key global shipping route.
- The Tribunal observed that previously constituted expert committees had examined concerns raised and found no violations of crucial norms like the Island Coastal Regulation Zone (ICRZ).

#### Environmental and Ecological Context

Great Nicobar Island is part of the Sundaland biodiversity hotspot, one of the world's richest areas for endemic flora and fauna. The mega project requires diversion of over 130 sq km of forest land and may entail felling nearly one million trees, raising concerns about biodiversity loss.

#### Impact on Indigenous Communities

The island is home to tribal groups such as the Nicobarese and the Shompen, classified among Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) in India. Critics have warned the project could disrupt traditional lifestyles, cultural practices and access to forest resources.

#### Legal and Policy Framework

Environmental clearance is governed by India's Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) process, which assesses ecological, social and economic impacts before approving major projects. The Island Coastal Regulation Zone (ICRZ), 2019 protects sensitive coastal ecosystems; any violation can be legally challenged if identified. The Great Nicobar case reflects ongoing debates over balancing development needs with environmental protection and tribal rights — a recurring theme in environmental governance in India.

### Haryana's Jungle Safari Project

The Supreme Court of India has put the Government of Haryana's ambitious Jungle Safari Project on hold because of continuing uncertainty over the legal definition of the “Aravalli Range” — one of India's most ecologically sensitive regions. The project was proposed in the foothills of the Aravalli Range in Gurugram and Nuh districts of Haryana.

#### What is the Jungle Safari Project?

Conceptualised in 2021–22, the Jungle Safari (also known as the Aravalli Zoo Safari) aimed to create one of the world's largest safari parks on the Aravalli foothills, covering about 3,000–3,500 acres after revision from the



- Like Patna Bird Sanctuary, it faces environmental threats from invasive species and human disturbances, with ongoing restoration and monitoring efforts.

**India’s Ramsar Story**

- Total Ramsar Sites (2026): 98 — significant growth from 26 sites in 2014 (≈ 276% increase).
- Ramsar sites help safeguard wetlands that are ecologically important for biodiversity, water regulation, climate resilience, and migratory species corridors.
- World Wetlands Day: Celebrated annually on February 2 to raise awareness about wetland conservation globally.

**Pangolin Hunting in Nagaland**

The United Sangtam Likhum Pumji (USLP), the apex tribal body of the Sangtam Naga community, has passed a resolution **\*\*banning the hunting of pangolins within its jurisdiction in Nagaland, marking a major community-led initiative to protect this endangered mammal and curb illegal wildlife trafficking.**

- **Pangolin Species & Threats:** Pangolins, often called “scaly anteaters”, are among the most trafficked mammals globally because of high demand for their scales and meat in illegal wildlife trade, despite no proven medicinal value. Both the Indian Pangolin (*Manis crassicaudata*) and the Chinese Pangolin (*Manis pentadactyla*) are threatened species.
- **Conservation Project & Partners:** The ban is part of the Countering Pangolin Trafficking Project, led by the Wildlife Trust of India (WTI) and supported by the Wildlife Conservation Network’s Pangolin Crisis Fund in collaboration with the forest departments of Nagaland and neighbouring Manipur, to tackle illegal wildlife trade.
- **Community Governance & Wildlife Protection Act:** Nagaland operates under Article 371A of the Indian Constitution, granting its indigenous communities autonomy over land, forests, and customary laws. Hence, community-led conservation resolutions carry significant weight alongside national laws like the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972, which bans hunting of listed wildlife species.
- **Biodiversity Hotspot:** Nagaland lies in the Indo-Myanmar biodiversity hotspot, one of the richest ecosystems in the world, home to diverse flora and fauna but also vulnerable to poaching and illegal trade due to porous border areas.
- **Role of Indigenous Communities:** Traditional village councils and tribal bodies in Nagaland play a central role in natural resource management and have increasingly supported wildlife conservation, complementing government policies and enforcement efforts.

**Assam Flood & Riverbank Erosion Management**

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) has approved additional financing of USD 182 million to strengthen flood management and riverbank erosion control in Assam, focusing on vulnerable areas along the Brahmaputra River. This loan is part of the ongoing Climate Resilient Brahmaputra Integrated Flood and Riverbank Erosion Risk Management Project originally approved in October 2023.

**Key Features of the Expanded Project**

- **Additional Financing:** USD 182 million (approx ₹1,500+ crore at current exchange rates).
- **Total Project Size:** Around USD 487 million after including previous ADB support and state contributions.

**Why Assam Needs This Project**

Assam’s Brahmaputra Basin is highly prone to annual floods and extreme riverbank erosion, causing loss of life, agricultural land, infrastructure damage, and displacement. Historical data suggests that since major tectonic shifts (e. g. , 1950 Assam earthquake), the river has widened, intensifying erosion and flood events. Enhancing climate resilience is critical as climate change increases the frequency and severity of extreme rainfall and flooding.

## Social Issues & Schemes

### Meri Rasoi Yojna

The Bhagwant Mann-led Punjab government has announced the launch of the 'Meri Rasoi Yojna', under which 40 lakh families registered under the National Food Security Act (NFSA)/Smart Ration Card scheme will receive free quarterly food kits starting April 2026.

The scheme aims to address food and nutrition insecurity for economically weaker households across the state.

#### Scheme Components & Distribution Plan

Eligible beneficiaries (blue card holders under NFSA) will receive food kits every quarter (April, June, October, December) starting April 2026.

#### Each quarterly kit will contain:

- 2 kg chana/pulses (dal)
- 2 kg sugar
- 1 kg iodised salt
- 200 g turmeric powder
- 1 litre mustard oil

These kits will be in addition to subsidised wheat already provided under NFSA.

#### Implementation Mechanism

Markfed (Punjab State Cooperative Supply & Marketing Federation) will act as the nodal agency for assembling the food kits. The Food and Civil Supplies Department will oversee distribution and quality control, ensuring kits are delivered free of cost and meet standards. Strict quality checks will be conducted periodically to maintain the nutritional value of the food items.

#### Financial Commitment

The scheme has an estimated outlay of approximately ₹950 crore to support procurement and distribution of food kits across the state.

#### About the National Food Security Act (NFSA), 2013

The NFSA aims to provide food and nutritional security by ensuring access to adequate quantity and quality of food at affordable prices through public distribution systems (PDS). Under NFSA, up to 75% of the rural population and 50% of the urban population are entitled to subsidised grains (primarily rice and wheat) through ration cards. The scheme also includes maternity entitlements and special provisions for children, pregnant women and lactating mothers to reduce malnutrition.

### PM RAHAT Scheme

Prime Minister Narendra Modi launched the PM RAHAT (Road Accident Victim Hospitalisation and Assured Treatment) Scheme to provide cashless emergency medical treatment to road accident victims across India.

- Objective: To ensure timely and affordable emergency medical care for road accident victims and reduce fatalities due to delayed treatment.
- Coverage: Eligible victims will receive cashless treatment up to ₹1.5 lakh per accident for a period of seven days from the date of the accident.

#### Stabilisation Care:

Up to 24 hours for non-life-threatening injuries. Up to 48 hours for life-threatening cases. Implementation: Linked with Emergency Response Support System (ERSS 112) for fast hospital admission and digital authentication, integrating eDAR and TMS 2.0 platforms for seamless coordination between police, hospitals, and authorities.

- Reimbursement: Payments to hospitals will be made through the Motor Vehicle Accident Fund (MVAFF); in insured vehicle cases, insurers contribute, while the government covers hit-and-run or uninsured cases.

- **Timely Payment:** Approved claims are to be settled by the state health agency within 10 days to ensure financial certainty for hospitals.
- **Grievance Redressal:** District-level mechanism through Road Safety Committees chaired by District Magistrates.

**Points to Remember**

- **Cashless Treatment:** Medical care provided without upfront payment by the patient, directly billed to the scheme.
- **Golden Hour:** The first 60 minutes after a traumatic injury, critical for saving lives with prompt medical treatment.
- **Emergency Response Support System (ERSS 112):** A pan-India integrated emergency number linking accident reporting and hospital access.
- **Motor Vehicle Accident Fund (MVAf):** Dedicated fund to reimburse hospitals for treating accident victims under this scheme.

**Four Major Schemes from New Seva Teerth Office**

Prime Minister Narendra Modi inaugurated the government’s new administrative complex Seva Teerth – which now houses the Prime Minister’s Office (PMO), National Security Council Secretariat and Cabinet Secretariat – and, on his first day there, approved four major schemes targeting women, farmers, accident care and startups.

**Four Key Decisions Approved**

1. **Launch of PM RAHAT Scheme:** Provides cashless emergency treatment up to ₹1.5 lakh to road accident victims to reduce loss of life due to financial delays or lack of immediate care. Aims at strengthening emergency healthcare coverage for all sections of society.
2. **Expansion of Lakhpati Didi Initiative:** Target of Lakhpati Didis (women earning ₹1 lakh or more annually through self-help groups) doubled from 3 crore to 6 crore by March 2029. A major step in promoting women’s economic empowerment and rural self-employment.
3. **Agriculture Infrastructure Fund Boosted:** The allocation under the Agriculture Infrastructure Fund has been increased from ₹1 lakh crore to ₹2 lakh crore. Supports creation of storage, logistics, processing and post-harvest management infrastructure for farmers.
4. **Startup India Fund of Funds 2.0:** Approved a ₹10,000 crore corpus to fund early-stage startups, especially in deep tech, innovation and advanced manufacturing. Seeks to boost entrepreneurship and job creation among youth.

**Seva Teerth – New PMO Complex**

Seva Teerth marks a key modernization step in administrative governance, bringing major offices together under one roof for better coordination and efficiency. The name reflects the government’s focus on “Seva” (public service).

**About the Schemes**

- **PM RAHAT:** Aligns with India’s push to improve emergency care and universal health coverage.
- **Lakhpati Didi:** Supports the government’s rural livelihood and women-led micro enterprise goals.
- **Agriculture Infrastructure Fund:** Part of long-term efforts to strengthen farm value chains and reduce post-harvest losses.
- **Startup India Fund:** Enhances India’s position as a global startup hub, encouraging innovation ecosystem growth.

**Chief Minister Skill Development Scheme**

The Delhi Cabinet, led by Chief Minister Rekha Gupta, has approved the “Chief Minister Skill Development Scheme” aimed at empowering artisans and traditional workers in sectors such as khadi, handloom, cottage industries, and the unorganised sector.

**Who it aims to benefit:**

Primary beneficiaries include tailors, embroiderers, potters, carpenters, cobblers, basket makers, bamboo artisans, weavers and other traditional craftsmen and women, especially those registered on the e-Shram portal.

**Implementation & Training:**

To be implemented through the Delhi Khadi and Village Industries Board (DKVIB). Includes 96 hours (12 days) of structured skill training, with a two-day Entrepreneurship Development Programme (EDP). Training batches will be 35–45 participants to ensure individual focus.

**Financial Support:**

Beneficiaries receive a stipend of ₹4,800 (₹400/day) plus ₹100/day for meals during training. They are also provided essential toolkits, including foot-operated sewing machines where needed.

**Market Linkage & Certification:**

Each participant’s profile and product details will be onboarded digitally via e-catalogues on the Open Network for Digital Commerce (ONDC) platform for broader market access, including international markets.

Scheme includes Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) to formally certify artisanal skills, and assistance for MSME/Udyam registration, branding support, and access to credit facilities.

**Budget Allocation:**

For 2025–26, 3,728 beneficiaries will be trained with an approved outlay of ₹8.95 crore. A larger outlay of ₹57.50 crore is proposed for 2026–27 to scale up the scheme.

**Kerala to replace NPS with Assured Pension Scheme**

The Kerala government has decided to replace the National Pension System (NPS) for state government employees with a new Assured Pension Scheme. This was announced by Finance Minister K. N. Balagopal while presenting the Kerala State Budget 2026-27 in the Assembly. Employees who want to stay in NPS can continue under it; switching to the new pension plan will be optional.

**What the Assured Pension Scheme Means**

- Under the new scheme, retired government employees will receive up to 50% of their last drawn basic salary as pension.
- Dearness Relief (DR) will also be included in the pension amount.
- A system will be set up to manage contributions from both the government and employees.
- Detailed guidelines are expected to be issued by April 1, 2026.

**Other Major Announcements in the Kerala Budget**

- Kerala’s budget has allocated ₹14,500 crore for welfare pensions and social security programs.
- A 12th Pay Revision Commission will be formed; its report is expected within three months.
- All pending Dearness Allowance (DA) and Dearness Relief (DR) arrears for employees and pensioners will be cleared in two instalments — with February and March salaries.
- House Building Advance for government staff will be reinstated.

**Reactions and Context**

- The budget includes popular welfare measures like wage hikes for ASHA and Anganwadi workers and increases in other social security benefits.
- Opposition leaders criticised the budget as being designed to influence the upcoming Assembly elections, calling it unrealistic given Kerala’s financial situation.

**Kerala**

- Formation: 1 November 1956
- Capital: Thiruvananthapuram
- Districts: 14
- Governor: Rajendra Arlekar
- Chief Minister: Pinarayi Vijayan
- Chief Secretary: A. Jayathilak

### Namo Laxmi Scheme

The Gujarat government announced that it will allocate ₹1,250 crore in the 2025–26 academic year to support more than 12 lakh girl students under the Namolaxmi Scheme — a financial assistance initiative aimed at reducing school dropout rates after primary education by supporting girls through secondary (Class IX–X) and higher secondary (Class XI–XII) schooling.

#### Objective:

To ensure that financial constraints do not become a barrier for girls continuing their education beyond primary schooling and to promote female literacy, health, nutrition, and empowerment in the state.

#### Key provisions of the scheme:

- Total aid per student: Up to ₹50,000 over four years (Classes IX–XII).
- For Classes IX–X: Total assistance of ₹20,000, including:
  - ₹500 per month for 10 months each year (₹5,000 per year)
  - ₹10,000 bonus upon passing the Class X board exams.
- For Classes XI–XII: Total assistance of ₹30,000, including:
  - ₹750 per month for 10 months each year
  - ₹15,000 bonus after clearing Class XII board exams.
- Eligibility: Girls who have completed primary schooling and are enrolled in recognised schools (Gujarat Secondary and Higher Secondary Education Board or CBSE), with priority for families with annual income up to ₹6 lakh (for private school students).
- The scheme supplements (does not replace) other government scholarships — beneficiaries of other scholarships can also avail of Namolaxmi benefits.

#### Origin and Budget Context:

- The Namolaxmi Scheme was announced as part of the Gujarat Budget 2025–26, where the state government allocated ₹1,250 crore specifically for this initiative to strengthen girls' education.

### Tulbul Navigation Project

#### What Is the Tulbul Navigation Project?

The Tulbul Navigation Project is a navigation lock-cum-control structure proposed at the outlet of Wular Lake on the Jhelum River in north Jammu and Kashmir.

Its purpose is to regulate water flow so that the river maintains enough depth for year-round navigation (boat movement), especially during dry winter months.

The barrage was also expected to help in flood control, sediment management and downstream power generation.

#### History of the Project

The idea was first conceived in the early 1980s, and work began in 1984. However, construction was suspended in 1987/1988 after continued objections from Indus Waters Treaty (IWT) partner Pakistan that the structure could violate the treaty. Because of this, the project remained stalled for nearly four decades.

#### What the Project Would Do

It would control outflow from Wular Lake to ensure the Jhelum River has sufficient depth throughout the year for boats. This can promote river transport and tourism, improve hydroelectric power production downstream, and assist water management in the Kashmir Valley. Regulated water release could also help reduce sediment build-up and improve overall river health.

#### Why It Was Stalled

Pakistan argued that building such a structure may violate the IWT, which regulates how India and Pakistan share the waters of the Indus river system.

Islamabad believed the Tulbul structure could act like a storage facility and affect downstream water flows, which are largely allocated to Pakistan under the treaty.

India, however, contended that the project involved non-consumptive use like navigation, which is permitted under the IWT, and that Pakistan could not show real harm from the project.

#### **Recent Developments**

Following the suspension of the Indus Waters Treaty by India in April 2025 after the Pahalgam terror attack, the government of Jammu & Kashmir has renewed efforts to revive the Tulbul project. Chief Minister Omar Abdullah has stated that his government is working with the Centre to restart the project after decades of delay. He says the treaty's abeyance opens the opportunity to move forward, with the aim of benefiting the region's navigation, hydropower, and water management needs.

#### **How It Relates to the Indus Waters Treaty (IWT)**

The Indus Waters Treaty of 1960 divides the rivers of the Indus basin between India and Pakistan. India controls the eastern rivers (Beas, Ravi, Sutlej) and Pakistan controls the western rivers (Indus, Jhelum, Chenab), with limited rights for India on the western rivers for non-consumptive usage. India has often maintained that the Tulbul project fits within those rights, but Pakistan's objections stalled progress for years. The recent suspension of the treaty has changed the diplomatic context.

#### **Why the Tulbul Project Matters**

Revival of the project could unlock river navigation in J&K, introduce boat transport and tourism, and support local economic growth. It could improve downstream hydropower generation and enhance water management in the Jhelum basin. The project has symbolic importance as a long-awaited regional development effort that has been constrained by international water politics.

**"The ones who are crazy enough to think they can change the world, are the ones that do."**

## Science & Technology

### Comprehensive Carbon-Trading Programme

India is finalising implementation of its first-ever comprehensive carbon-trading programme, marking a major step in the nation's climate policy framework to monitor and trade carbon emissions among industrial entities for the FY 2025-26 period. The programme has begun issuance of emission targets for participating industries and prepares for credits issuance and trading later in 2026.

#### Key Features of the Carbon-Trading Scheme

##### Programme Structure:

The scheme includes a mandatory compliance component covering 800 units in nine sectors and a voluntary offset component. Carbon credits will be issued and traded separately across these components.

##### Notification and Coverage:

Emission targets were issued for around 490 units across seven sectors through notifications issued by the Bureau of Energy Efficiency (BEE) in October 2025 and January 2026. This initial group covers about 20 % of India's industrial emissions.

##### Exclusions in Phase-I:

- Steel and fertiliser sectors — major industrial emitters — have not yet received emission targets, delaying their inclusion.
- The power sector, India's biggest polluter, is not part of the first phase.

##### Timeline:

The first compliance cycle will run until 31 March 2026, followed by verification and assessment phases. Carbon credits are expected to be issued by October 2026, and trading is likely between November 2026 and January 2027.

##### Price Setting:

Carbon cost targets have been designed to keep prices around USD 10 per tonne of CO<sub>2</sub>, balancing industry competitiveness and climate incentives.

### BIRAC–RDI Fund

#### What is the BIRAC–RDI Fund?

The Government of India has launched the first national call for the ₹2,000 crore BIRAC–RDI Fund. This fund is part of the larger ₹1 lakh crore Research, Development and Innovation (RDI) initiative under the Anusandhan National Research Foundation (ANRF), aimed at boosting science and technology research across the country.

#### Why the Fund Was Created

The purpose of the BIRAC–RDI Fund is to help turn research into real products and industrial solutions — especially in cutting-edge areas like biotechnology. It aims to bridge the gap between lab discoveries and large-scale manufacturing, supporting ideas that are promising but may be too risky for private investors alone.

#### Who Will Manage It

The fund will be managed by the Biotechnology Industry Research Assistance Council (BIRAC). BIRAC has been appointed as a “second-level fund manager” to deploy the financing, meaning it will decide which projects and companies get support.

#### How the Fund Will Work

The ₹2,000 crore will be spent over up to five years, with the option to increase the amount in the future. It will support technologies at higher stages of development — from mid-level prototype testing to readiness for market entry (usually between Technology Readiness Level 4 to 9). Funding will be given through tools such as equity, convertible instruments, and long-term debt, helping both research organisations and startups scale up.

**Who Can Apply for Support**

Startups, small and medium enterprises (SMEs), industry partners, and research organisations working on high-impact biotech ideas can apply. The first call for proposals is open now, and the deadline for Phase 1 applications is March 31, 2026.

**Why It Matters for India**

The fund signals a major push in biotechnology as a future growth engine for the Indian economy. India's biotech startup ecosystem has grown from about 50 companies in 2014 to over 11,000 by 2026. The bioeconomy has expanded rapidly, reaching tens of billions of dollars in value, and the government aims to reach even higher targets in the coming decade. This move positions India as a global contender in life sciences, biomanufacturing, and new-age technologies.

**Long-Term Vision**

Officials say the fund will help industrialise Indian research, not just encourage academic studies. It also supports emerging areas such as bioenergy, bioindustrial manufacturing, biopharma, advanced computation, and even space biotech, expanding India's scientific and industrial capabilities.

**India's first electric air taxi**

The ePlane Company, a startup incubated at IIT Madras, has joined hands with NVIDIA to work on India's first electric air taxi called the e200x.

**What Technology Will Be Used?**

ePlane will use NVIDIA Omniverse to create a digital twin of the e200x aircraft. A digital twin is a virtual model that copies the real aircraft's behaviour in computer simulations. Using this, engineers can test flight physics, sensors, and autonomous systems safely in a virtual world. The aircraft will also include NVIDIA IGX, a powerful onboard computer system to run critical flight software and sensors.

**Goal of the Project**

The partnership is part of building urban air mobility solutions to reduce city traffic and offer faster, cleaner travel options.

**Overall Impact**

The collaboration brings advanced simulation tools and AI computing into India's deep-tech aviation field. It positions ePlane as a leader in electric air taxi development using digital simulation technology.

**NVIDIA**

- CEO: Jensen Huang
- Founded: 5 April 1993
- Headquarters: California, United States
- President: Jensen Huang

**Indigenous Tetanus & Adult Diphtheria (Td) Vaccine**

Union Health Minister J. P. Nadda officially launched an indigenously made tetanus and adult diphtheria (Td) vaccine. The launch took place at the Central Research Institute (CRI) in Kasauli, Himachal Pradesh.

**Name of the Vaccine Launched**

The vaccine launched is the Tetanus and Adult Diphtheria (Td) Vaccine. It replaces the earlier Tetanus Toxoid (TT) Vaccine, which protected only against tetanus.

**Why this launch is important**

This vaccine marks a major step in strengthening public health infrastructure in India. It supports the government's goal of making India self-reliant (Atmanirbhar Bharat) in health and medicines.

**What the vaccine does**

The Td vaccine protects against tetanus and diphtheria — two serious infectious diseases. It is now included in India's Universal Immunization Programme (UIP) to help protect people of all ages.

**Production and supply**

The Central Research Institute (CRI) will supply about 55 lakh (5.5 million) doses of the vaccine under the UIP by April 2026. Production is expected to grow further in the coming years.

**Australia-India Strategic Research Fund**

India and Australia have finalised five joint research projects under Round 16 of the Australia-India Strategic Research Fund (AISRF), reinforcing bilateral cooperation in science, technology and innovation.

**Key Areas Covered by the Projects:**

The five projects span strategic and future-oriented domains including:

1. Critical minerals processing
2. Quantum technologies
3. Advanced manufacturing
4. Climate-resilient agriculture
5. Cellular immunotherapy (health and biotech)

**About Australia-India Strategic Research Fund (AISRF)**

AISRF is a bilateral research partnership between the Government of Australia and the Government of India, established in 2006 to promote collaborative scientific research and innovation. It is Australia's largest bilateral science and research programme, and by 2026 it marks its 20th anniversary. The Fund supports collaborative research grants, researcher fellowships, personnel exchanges and joint innovation initiatives between Indian and Australian institutions.

**SAHI & BODH for Health AI Ecosystem**

The Jagat Prakash Nadda, Union Minister for Health and Family Welfare, announced the launch of two major national initiatives — SAHI (Strategy for Artificial Intelligence in Healthcare for India) and BODH (Benchmarking Open Data Platform for Health AI) at the India AI Summit 2026 held at Bharat Mandapam, New Delhi. These initiatives aim to strengthen India's health sector through responsible and evidence-based adoption of Artificial Intelligence (AI).

**SAHI – Strategy for Artificial Intelligence in Healthcare for India**

- Purpose: Serves as a national policy and governance framework to guide the ethical, safe, inclusive and evidence-based deployment of AI in healthcare.
- Scope: Includes guidelines for data stewardship, validation, deployment, governance and monitoring of AI tools across health systems.
- Goal: To help States and healthcare institutions adopt AI in ways that align with public health priorities and strengthen healthcare delivery.

**BODH – Benchmarking Open Data Platform for Health AI**

- Developed by: Indian Institute of Technology Kanpur (IIT Kanpur) in collaboration with the National Health Authority.
- Function: A privacy-preserving benchmarking platform that evaluates health AI models using diverse real-world data without sharing underlying datasets.
- As a Digital Public Good under the Ayushman Bharat Digital Mission, it aims to enhance trust, transparency and quality assurance in AI health solutions.

**India AI Summit 2026**

The India AI Summit is a key government platform focusing on the potential and impact of Artificial Intelligence for national development, including governance, industry, health, education and agriculture.

It brings together policymakers, technologists, researchers, and industry leaders to discuss AI adoption across sectors.

**Digital Public Goods**

A Digital Public Good is an open-source tool, data set, standard, or digital platform that adheres to privacy, security and interoperability standards and contributes to sustainable development. Frameworks like BODH align with global efforts (e. g. , WHO Digital Health guidelines) to foster responsible AI in public health.

**AI Governance and Ethics**

SAHI reflects growing government focus on AI governance frameworks that include principles like accountability, transparency, fairness, privacy protection and beneficial AI deployment. Similar governance structures are part of international initiatives like the OECD AI Principles and UNESCO’s Recommendation on the Ethics of AI.

**Agni-III Intermediate-Range Ballistic Missile**

India successfully conducted the test-firing of the Agni-III intermediate-range ballistic missile (IRBM) from the Integrated Test Range (ITR), Chandipur, Odisha. The launch was carried out under the supervision of the Strategic Forces Command (SFC) and validated all operational and technical parameters of the missile system.

**Key Highlights of the Test**

- The test demonstrated the operational readiness and reliability of the Agni-III missile.
- It strengthens India’s strategic deterrence capability.
- The missile system was monitored by advanced range instrumentation, radar and telemetry systems.

**About Agni-III Missile**

- Type: Intermediate-Range Ballistic Missile (IRBM)
- Range: ~3,000–3,500 km
- Stages: Two-stage, solid-fuel powered
- Payload Capability: Nuclear and conventional warheads
- Guidance System: Inertial Navigation System (INS) with high accuracy
- Operator: Strategic Forces Command
- Developer: Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO)

**Strategic Importance**

- Agni-III forms a crucial part of India’s land-based nuclear deterrent.
- It enhances India’s capability to deter threats across the extended strategic neighbourhood.
- The missile supports India’s nuclear doctrine of Credible Minimum Deterrence and No First Use (NFU).

**Integrated Test Range (ITR), Odisha**

- Located at Chandipur, Odisha.
- Managed by DRDO.
- Used for testing missiles, rockets, UAVs and defence systems.

**Agni Missile Series – Quick Overview**

- Agni-I: Short-range ballistic missile
- Agni-II: Medium-range ballistic missile
- Agni-III: Intermediate-range ballistic missile
- Agni-IV & Agni-V: Long-range / Intercontinental class missiles

**NEONSAT-1A**

South Korea has successfully launched a nanosatellite into orbit as part of its plan to build a satellite constellation for Earth observation by 2027. The launch was confirmed by the Korea AeroSpace Administration (KASA).

**About the Satellite and Launch**

- The satellite is named NEONSAT-1A, an Earth observation nanosatellite designed to monitor the Korean Peninsula and nearby regions.
- It was launched aboard the Electron rocket of the US space company Rocket Lab.
- The launch took place from the Mahia Launch Complex in New Zealand.

**Purpose of the Constellation Project**

- The NEONSAT-1A is the second of 11 nanosatellites planned to form the full constellation.
- Once complete, this satellite network will help monitor natural disasters, take high-resolution Earth images, and improve observation capability for South Korea.
- The project involves multiple institutions including KAIST (Korea Advanced Institute of Science and Technology) and others contributing to design and engineering.
- It is funded by the Korean government's Ministry of Science and ICT (MSIT).

#### Previous Launch and Future Plans

- The first satellite in the project, NEONSAT-1, had been launched previously in April 2024.
- The constellation will not be complete yet with this launch alone — more satellites are to follow as part of the plan up to 2027.

### AI-Designed Virus “Evo-Φ2147”

Scientists have used artificial intelligence (AI) to design and create a completely new virus (named Evo-Φ2147) in a laboratory. This virus does not exist in nature and was made using machine learning algorithms rather than traditional evolutionary processes.

#### Where & Who?

- The research was conducted by scientists at Stanford University and the Arc Institute in Palo Alto, California, USA.

#### Key Outcomes:

- The AI generated 285 unique viral genomes inspired by bacteriophage templates.
- Out of these, 16 viruses effectively infected and killed Escherichia coli (E. coli) bacteria in lab tests.
- The most effective designs worked about 25% faster at infecting bacteria than their natural counterparts.

#### How was it done?

- Scientists used an advanced AI system trained on trillions of DNA base pairs to create the virus genomes. They then assembled these genomes in the lab using a rapid, high-precision method.

#### Additional Key Facts:

- What are bacteriophages? Bacteriophages are viruses that infect bacteria. They are widely studied for their ability to kill harmful bacteria and are considered potential alternatives to antibiotics, especially against antibiotic-resistant infections.
- Why is this significant for medicine? The ability to design viruses with AI can accelerate phage therapy development, offering new ways to treat bacterial infections that no longer respond to conventional antibiotics.
- Science and AI intersection: This breakthrough reflects the expanding role of generative AI in biological research, where AI models can now generate entire functional genetic sequences rather than just analyze data.
- Biosecurity and ethical concerns: While Evo-Φ2147 targets bacteria and is not harmful to humans, scientists and experts stress the need for strict biosecurity regulations and ethical oversight to prevent misuse or accidental creation of dangerous pathogens.
- Dual-use technology risk: AI systems capable of designing biological sequences pose dual-use risks—meaning such technology could be repurposed for harmful outcomes if not properly regulated, necessitating stronger biosecurity frameworks. Contemporary research warns that existing safeguards might not be sufficient.

### Also in Focus

### Bhabha, Cold War, nuclear technology, 1955: Dos and don't for India in AI

#### Why Compare AI with the 1955 Nuclear Strategy?

India is hosting a big AI summit in New Delhi. It draws a lesson from India's experience with nuclear technology during the Cold War (1955) to guide how India should handle AI today.

**What Happened in 1955 at Geneva?**

In 1955, Dr Homi J. Bhabha led India at the first UN Conference on the Peaceful Uses of Atomic Energy in Geneva. India pushed for cooperation and peaceful access to nuclear technology for developing nations. Bhabha wanted India to build its own scientific strength and cooperate internationally.

**Lesson from the Nuclear Era**

India grew nuclear knowledge at home while also seeking global partnerships.

Later, India lost momentum in nuclear exports because it did not maintain focus and strategic clarity. This history shows that relying only on goodwill or universal cooperation does not guarantee success.

**What India Must Do for AI**

The article suggests three key actions:

- Boost National AI Strength
- Increase computing infrastructure.
- Expand research and training.
- Clear and supportive rules for AI growth.

**Partner with Advanced Nations**

Continue collaboration with the United States and other tech leaders. Keep ties open with multiple countries, not just one group.

**Shape Global AI Rules Meaningfully**

Take an active role in global governance debates. Base India's contributions on practical experience, not only ideals.

**Don't Repeat Past Mistakes**

India should avoid confusion between global ideals and national interests. The aim should be to build strong domestic AI capability first, then use it to benefit both India and the wider world. Success in domestic development can help other developing nations too.

**In Simple Terms**

The Cold War nuclear story teaches that strength at home + smart global cooperation = success. India's future in AI depends on growing its own skills and tech, partnering wisely abroad, and helping shape fair AI rules globally.

**AI, Automation and the "SaaSpocalypse" in India's IT Sector**

With rapid advancements in artificial intelligence (AI) and automation, India's large information technology (IT) and business process management (BPM) sectors are facing concerns over job losses and structural disruption. The term "SaaSpocalypse" has emerged to describe the potential widespread elimination of jobs, especially routine coding and repetitive tasks, as AI-driven tools and platforms replace traditional labour. The debate highlights economic opportunities and social risks linked to AI adoption.

**Key Concepts Explained****Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Automation**

AI refers to computer systems capable of performing tasks that normally require human intelligence, such as learning, problem-solving and decision-making. Automation means the use of technology to perform tasks without human intervention. AI-powered automation can range from simple rule-based tasks to advanced cognitive functions. In the IT sector, these include automated code writing, testing, customer support bots, and AI-driven data analysis.

**SaaSpocalypse**

A portmanteau of SaaS (Software as a Service) and apocalypse, referring to fears that scalable AI and cloud-based software tools could eradicate large numbers of IT jobs. It encompasses the idea that the widespread adoption of AI tools (e. g. , generative AI) could make many routine IT functions obsolete.

**Why It Matters for India's IT Sector****Employment Structure**

India's IT and BPM industries employ millions of workers, especially in erstwhile growth hubs like Bengaluru, Hyderabad, and Pune. A large proportion of this workforce is engaged in routine and repetitive tasks—precisely the functions most vulnerable to AI automation.

**Economic Contribution**

The IT sector is a major contributor to India's GDP and export earnings, with software services exports generating around one-third of total service exports. It supports ancillary sectors like real estate, hospitality and transportation through indirect employment effects.

**Opportunities Amid Risks**

**AI as a Job Creator:** Even as AI displaces some roles, it creates new jobs requiring higher-order skills in AI research, data science, cybersecurity, cloud computing and system architecture. **Upskilling and reskilling initiatives** are crucial to help the workforce transition into future roles. **Global Competitiveness:** AI integration can enhance productivity, reduce costs and improve service quality, strengthening India's position in global IT markets.

**Challenges & Policy Implications**

**Skill Mismatch:** A gap exists between current workforce skills and those needed for AI-driven jobs, necessitating education reform, industry-academic collaboration, and large-scale training programmes. **Income Inequality:** Automation may disproportionately affect entry-level jobs, increasing income inequality and exacerbating social vulnerabilities if not properly managed. **Regulatory and Ethical Frameworks:** Governments and industry bodies must address ethical concerns, data privacy, and accountability mechanisms for AI deployment.

**Government & Institutional Responses (India)**

- **National AI Strategy:** India's national AI policy emphasises inclusive AI adoption, focusing on health, agriculture, education and governance while balancing workforce transition.

### What are 'e-nose' and 'e-tongue' techs being deployed at Tirumala temple?

**New Food Testing Lab at Tirumala**

The Andhra Pradesh government is setting up a modern food testing laboratory at the Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanams to ensure the quality of food served to devotees. The project cost is about ₹25 crore.

**Why the Lab Is Needed**

The move follows concerns about adulterated ghee and ingredients used in preparing prasadam (sacred food offerings). The lab aims to strengthen food safety, restore public confidence, and monitor quality more effectively.

**Advanced Technology: E-Nose and E-Tongue**

The lab will be equipped with electronic nose (e-nose) and electronic tongue (e-tongue) machines. These machines are sensor-based tools that check food smell and taste profiles to detect impurities or quality changes. E-nose analyses aroma and volatile compounds, while e-tongue examines taste-related chemical components. Both systems use pattern-recognition software to compare samples with standard quality profiles.

**How They Work**

E-nose uses gas sensors that identify volatile organic compounds to flag bad smell or contamination. E-tongue uses electrochemical sensors that react to chemicals affecting taste. Data from both devices is processed by computers using statistical and AI models to classify food quality. Together, they help detect adulteration or spoilage faster than traditional lab tests.

**What Will Be Tested**

The lab will examine around 60 raw materials used in prasadam, including ghee, dry fruits, spices, sugar, and more. It can also test water and finished prasadam for pesticide residues, microbes, heavy metals, and other contaminants. The facility will use about 50 sophisticated instruments and trained staff for day-to-day testing.

**When It Will Start**

The food testing lab is nearly complete, with operations expected to begin next month. The e-nose and e-tongue machines are likely to be installed and fully functional by May 2026.

**Benefits of These Technologies**

These systems help check food quality quickly and automatically without human tasting. They can act as early screening tools to catch quality issues before foods are served. The technology adds accuracy and speed to routine quality monitoring at the temple.

## Culture & History

### Cherry Blossom Festival

#### Cherry Blossom Festival Cancelled Near Mount Fuji

Japan has cancelled the annual cherry blossom festival at Arakurayama Sengen Park for 2026. Officials said the decision came because of tourist misconduct and overtourism issues.

#### Where and What the Festival Was

The festival was held for more than 10 years in Fujiyoshida, near Mount Fuji. It attracted hundreds of thousands of visitors every spring to see cherry blossoms and scenic views.

#### Why It Was Cancelled

Local residents complained about disruptive tourist behaviour.

Officials reported issues like:

- Littering and garbage left behind by visitors.
- Trespassing on private properties.
- Tourists entering private homes or walking in restricted areas.
- The local government said these problems threatened residents' peace and daily life.

#### Impact of Overtourism

Mount Fuji and the festival location became extremely popular, partly due to social media and easier travel. Large crowds caused traffic congestion and safety concerns, especially for local children and communities.

#### What Happens Now

While the official festival will not take place, Arakurayama Sengen Park and cherry blossoms will still be visible to visitors during spring. Local authorities may implement crowd management measures like extra security, temporary toilets, and parking to manage visitors.

#### Way Forward:

- Control crowds: Fix visitor limits and use advance booking during peak season.
- Strict enforcement: Impose heavy fines for littering, trespassing, and rule-breaking.
- Awareness drives: Educate tourists about local culture and responsible behaviour.
- Better facilities: Add more toilets, dustbins, parking, and security staff.
- Protect locals: Ensure tourism does not disturb residents' daily life.

### Indian Language Inscriptions in Egypt's Valley of the Kings

In a remarkable archaeological find, researchers have documented inscriptions in Tamil-Brahmi, Sanskrit and Prakrit inside rock-cut tombs at the Valley of the Kings in Egypt. These inscriptions, dating from the 1st to the 3rd century CE, include Indian personal names etched alongside Greek graffiti — indicating the presence of Indian travellers far inland from the Red Sea trade hubs during the early centuries of the Common Era.

#### Historical and Cultural Context

- Valley of the Kings: A part of the Theban Necropolis near Luxor, the Valley was the principal burial complex of Egyptian royalty from c. 16th to 11th century BCE. Recognised as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, it contains tombs with elaborate hieroglyphs and burial artifacts.
- The Inscriptions: Nearly 30 inscriptions were recorded in Tamil-Brahmi, Sanskrit and Prakrit — languages/scripts originating in the Indian subcontinent. Examples include names such as Cikai Korran and Kopān, suggestive of South Indian (Tamil) and northwestern Indian origins.

#### Scripts Explained

- Tamil-Brahmi: An early form of Tamil script derived from the Brahmi alphabet, used from as early as the 3rd century BCE, providing crucial evidence of early literacy in South India.

- Sanskrit & Prakrit: Classical and Middle Indic languages, widely used across ancient India and Central Asia for literature, commerce and religious texts.

**Significance of the Finding**

**Indo-Roman Trade Links**

The inscriptions support evidence of extensive Indo-Roman maritime commerce in the early centuries CE.

Classical Roman authors like Pliny the Elder and Ptolemy mentioned Indian imports such as spices, textiles, ivory and gemstones to the Mediterranean markets. Indian exports likely reached Egyptian ports like Berenike and then spread inland through travellers or merchants.

**Cultural Mobility**

Presence of Indian names alongside Greek graffiti suggests multi-directional travel — not merely trade but possibly cultural exchange and pilgrimage. Illustrates how Indian traders and visitors were integrated into broader cosmopolitan networks of the ancient world.

**Broader Implications for History and Archaeology**

**Ancient Globalisation:** The find demonstrates that ancient globalisation was not limited to goods but included ideas, language contact, and personal mobility across continents. **Reassessment of Indian Interaction:** Evidence challenges older views that India’s early external contacts were limited to land borders; instead, it highlights far-reaching maritime and inland connections.

**Renaming of Kerala to Keralam**

The Union Cabinet of India has approved the proposal to change the official name of the State of Kerala to “Keralam”. This decision initiates the constitutional process for renaming the state.

**Constitutional process:**

- The Cabinet has cleared the Kerala (Alteration of Name) Bill, 2026.
- The President of India will first refer this Bill to the Kerala Legislative Assembly for their opinion, as mandated under Article 3 of the Indian Constitution.
- After the Assembly’s views, the Bill will be introduced in the Parliament for approval.
- Once passed by Parliament and assented to by the President, the name change will be formally effected in the First Schedule of the Constitution.

**Reason for the change:**

- The name Keralam aligns with the state’s original Malayalam pronunciation and cultural identity.
- The Kerala Legislative Assembly had earlier passed a resolution supporting this change, first in August 2023, and again in June 2024 with technical modifications as suggested by the Union Home Ministry.
- Proponents say Keralam reflects the linguistic heritage and history of the Malayalam-speaking people.

**Political and contextual significance:**

- The name change comes ahead of the Kerala Assembly elections in 2026, making it a politically significant decision.
- The decision has garnered broad bipartisan support within Kerala, including backing from leaders across political lines who argue it honors cultural roots.

**Article 3 of the Constitution:**

- Empowers Parliament to create new states, alter areas, boundaries or names of existing states, but only after the state legislature’s views are received.
- The President must refer the Bill to the state legislature for its opinion before introducing it in Parliament.

**First Schedule of the Constitution:**

- Lists all states and union territories in India by their official names.
- Any change to state names requires amendment to this part of the Constitution.

**2026 British Academy Film Awards (BAFTAs)**

The 79th British Academy Film Awards (BAFTAs) were held at the Royal Festival Hall in London, recognising excellence in global cinema for films released in the previous year. The ceremony was hosted by Alan Cumming and featured a diverse set of winners across film, acting, technical and special achievement categories.

#### Major Winners and Highlights

- Best Film & Best Director: *One Battle After Another* emerged as the biggest winner of the evening, receiving six awards including Best Film, Best Director (Paul Thomas Anderson), Best Adapted Screenplay, Best Cinematography, Best Editing, and Best Supporting Actor (Sean Penn).
- Best Leading Actor: Robert Aramayo won for *I Swear*, also receiving the EE Rising Star Award (public-voted).
- Best Leading Actress & Outstanding British Film: Jessie Buckley won Leading Actress for *Hamnet*, which also won Outstanding British Film.
- Best Supporting Actress & Best Original Screenplay: *Sinners* earned three awards for Best Supporting Actress (Wunmi Mosaku), Best Original Score, and Best Original Screenplay (Ryan Coogler).

#### Technical and Other Film Categories:

*Frankenstein* won for Best Costume Design, Makeup & Hair, and Production Design. *Mr Nobody Against Putin* was named Best Documentary. *Sentimental Value* won Film Not in the English Language. *Zootropolis 2* won Best Animated Film.

- Outstanding Debut: *My Father's Shadow* won Outstanding Debut by a British writer, director or producer.
- Children's & Family Film: The Manipuri film *Boong* won Best Children's & Family Film, marking a historic win for Indian regional cinema at the BAFTAs.
- Special Awards: The BAFTA Fellowship — the Academy's highest accolade — was awarded to Dame Donna Langley for her exceptional contribution to cinema, while Clare Binns received the Outstanding British Contribution to Cinema Award.

#### Additional Useful Facts

- BAFTA Awards: The British Academy Film Awards are among the most prestigious international film honours, presented annually by the British Academy of Film and Television Arts to recognise outstanding achievements in film, television and games. They are often considered a key precursor to the Academy Awards (Oscars).
- EE Rising Star Award: This category is the only BAFTA award voted by the public, aimed at recognising up-and-coming actors and performers.

### Bhavya Bharat Bhushan Awards 2026

During the Isha Mahashivratri 2026 celebrations at the Isha Yoga Centre in Coimbatore, spiritual leader Sadhguru launched the Bhavya Bharat Bhushan Awards, a new national honour recognising outstanding contributions to India's progress across multiple domains. The awards were presented by Rajnath Singh, India's Defence Minister, to eminent achievers in science, arts, culture, sports, defence and community development. The event blended spiritual tradition with national recognition.

#### About the Bhavya Bharat Bhushan Award

The Bhavya Bharat Bhushan Award is a newly instituted honour designed to celebrate individuals whose lifelong work and dedication have significantly contributed to India's development and cultural richness. It seeks to reinforce the idea that nation-building is driven by the people, not just policies or geography.

#### Occasion & Cultural Context

These awards were presented during Mahashivratri, a major Hindu festival dedicated to Lord Shiva, celebrated annually with spiritual gatherings across India.

#### Notable Awardees

##### Some distinguished awardees include:

- Saina Nehwal – Olympic medallist and one of India's top badminton icons.
- Dr. S. K. Kiran Kumar – former Chairman of the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO), recognised for decades of work in India's space programme.
- Eminent cultural figures such as N. Rajam (violin maestro) and Alarmel Valli (classical dancer).

- **Defence Recognition:** A special tribute was paid to the Indian Armed Forces for their leadership and service excellence in Operation Sindoor (a security operation), with recognitions given to units such as the Western Air Command, Southern Command, and Western Naval Command.
- **Broader Significance:** The award highlights the interconnected nature of national progress, underscoring that culture, science, sports and defence together contribute to the idea of a “Bhavya Bharat” (a grand and strong India).

### Global Teacher Prize 2026

Indian teacher and educator Rouble Nagi won the Global Teacher Prize 2026, a prestigious global teaching award worth \$1 million. She received the award at the World Government Summit 2026 held in Dubai, United Arab Emirates. The award was presented by Sheikh Hamdan bin Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Crown Prince of Dubai.

#### Why She Was Honoured

Rouble Nagi was recognised for using creative art and education to teach children. She transformed neglected walls into educational murals that teach reading, writing, arithmetic, public health, and environmental awareness. Her work focuses on reaching disadvantaged and out-of-school children.

#### Plans for Prize Money

Rouble Nagi plans to use the \$1 million prize to build an institute offering free vocational training and digital literacy, aimed at helping underprivileged youth.

#### About the Global Teacher Prize

- The Global Teacher Prize is presented by GEMS Education, organised with the Varkey Foundation and UNESCO.
- It recognises exceptional educators worldwide for outstanding contributions to teaching and learning.

### Soldier of Humanity Award

Her Majesty Gyalyum Ashi Dorji Wangmo Wangchuck, the Queen Mother of Bhutan, has been awarded the 22nd Upendra Nath Brahma ‘Soldier of Humanity’ Award 2025 for her outstanding humanitarian service, compassionate leadership, and lifelong efforts toward social welfare and inclusive development. The award ceremony was organised at the Jwhlwao Nileswar Brahma Auditorium of Bodoland University in Kokrajhar, Assam. The honour was presented by Assam Governor Lakshman Prasad Acharya, who appreciated her dedication to human dignity, cultural preservation, and social justice.

#### About the ‘Soldier of Humanity’ Award

The Upendra Nath Brahma Trust (UNBT) instituted the Upendra Nath Brahma ‘Soldier of Humanity’ Award in 2004 to honour individuals who embody the values of sacrifice, courage, human dignity, and service to humanity, inspired by ‘Bodofa’ Upendra Nath Brahma — a visionary leader of the Bodo community. The award includes a citation, memento, traditional Bodo ceremonial items (Aronai, Dokhna, etc. ), and a cash prize (e. g. , ₹2 lakh) symbolising recognition of sustained humanitarian effort. Queen Mother Dorji Wangmo Wangchuck is the second foreign national to receive this prestigious honour, illustrating the award’s increasing international relevance.

#### About Queen Mother Dorji Wangmo Wangchuck

Dorji Wangmo Wangchuck was born on 10 June 1955 and is the Queen Mother of Bhutan as the first wife of former King Jigme Singye Wangchuck. She is globally respected for her humanitarian vision, particularly as the Founding President of the Tarayana Foundation — an organisation focusing on holistic rural development, poverty alleviation, women’s empowerment, education, health services, and cultural preservation across Bhutan’s remote regions. Her initiatives reflect Bhutan’s development philosophy, including the concept of Gross National Happiness (GNH) — a model prioritising well-being over purely economic growth — which aligns with humanitarian and sustainable development goals. (General contextual fact)

### Crafoord Prize

Veerabhadran Ramanathan, an Indian-origin climate scientist, has won the Crafoord Prize in Geosciences, 2026. The prize was awarded by the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences. The Crafoord Prize is often called the “Nobel of Geosciences” because of its prestige.

#### Why He Was Awarded

Ramanathan received the award for decades of research on climate change. His work focused on super-pollutants and atmospheric brown clouds, which have changed scientific understanding of global warming. In 1975, while working at NASA, he discovered that chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) trap heat up to 10,000 times more than carbon dioxide.

#### Impact of His Work

His research transformed climate science and highlighted the role of pollutants beyond CO<sub>2</sub>. The findings helped form key international agreements like the Montreal Protocol, which reduced harmful emissions.

#### Background and Education

Ramanathan was born in Madurai and grew up in Chennai, India. He started his career as an engineer and later studied at Annamalai University and the Indian Institute of Science. He is now Distinguished Professor Emeritus at the Scripps Institution of Oceanography, University of California, San Diego.

#### Work Beyond Science

Ramanathan also worked on the Indian Ocean Experiment (INDOEX), which documented atmospheric brown clouds over South Asia. His studies linked air pollution to weakening of the Indian monsoon and faster melting of Himalayan glaciers. He has advised global leaders and even the Vatican on climate ethics.

#### About the Crafoord Prize

The award includes a gold medal and about 8 million Swedish kronor (around USD 900,000). It will be presented during Crafoord Days in Stockholm and Lund in May 2026.

### 68th Annual Grammy Awards

The 68th Annual Grammy Awards began at the Crypto.com Arena in Los Angeles, USA on February 1, 2026. The awards recognise the best music recordings, compositions and artists from the eligibility period (Aug 31, 2024 – Aug 30, 2025).

#### Host and Ceremony Format

Hosted by comedian Trevor Noah for the sixth and final time. Broadcast live on CBS Television Network and available to stream on Paramount+.

#### Top Nominees and Contenders

Kendrick Lamar led the nominations with nine nods. Lady Gaga followed with seven nominations.

#### Historic Wins & Highlights

Bad Bunny made history by becoming the first Latin artist to win Album of the Year. Billie Eilish won Song of the Year and used her acceptance speech to advocate for immigrant rights, earning major audience support. Olivia Dean was named Best New Artist. Kendrick Lamar was one of the night's biggest winners, securing multiple awards including Record of the Year and Best Rap Album.

#### New Categories and Musical Recognition

This edition introduced new award categories, reflecting changes and growth in the industry, including awards like Best Traditional Country Album and Best Album Cover.

#### Additional Notes

Music films and special projects also won prestigious awards, including recognition for work by Steven Spielberg and the Dalai Lama. Emerging and lesser-known artists, across genres, won first-time Grammys, indicating the wide range of talent celebrated.

**Republic Day Parade 2026 Awards**

- The Government of India has officially announced the Republic Day Parade 2026 Awards, recognising outstanding tableaux and marching contingents showcased on Kartavya Path, New Delhi.
- These awards aim to promote national integration, cultural diversity, discipline, and creativity, which are core objectives of the annual Republic Day celebrations.

**Evaluation and Selection Process**

- The tableaux and contingents were evaluated by a jury of experts based on:
  - Relevance to the national theme
  - Visual presentation and innovation
  - Cultural and social storytelling
  - Overall public impact
- In addition to jury awards, a Popular Choice category was included, where citizens voted via the MyGov portal, strengthening public participation in governance.

**Best Tableaux Awards – States & Union Territories**

**First Prize**

- Maharashtra won first place for its tableau titled
- “Ganeshotsav: A Symbol of Aatmanirbharta”
- The tableau highlighted:
  - Community-led cultural traditions
  - Indigenous craftsmanship
  - The spirit of Aatmanirbhar Bharat
- Ganeshotsav was projected as a symbol of self-reliance and social unity.

**Second Prize**

- Jammu & Kashmir secured second place with
- “Handicrafts and Folk Dances of J&K”
- The tableau showcased:
  - Traditional handicrafts such as carpets, shawls, and woodwork
  - Rich folk dance traditions
- It underlined cultural revival and heritage preservation in the Union Territory.

**Third Prize**

- Kerala won third place for
- “Water Metro & 100% Digital Literacy”
- The tableau focused on:
  - Sustainable urban transport through Water Metro
  - Kerala’s achievement in universal digital literacy
- It linked technology, inclusiveness, and environmental sustainability.

**Best Marching Contingents**

- The Indian Navy impressed judges with:
  - Exceptional discipline and coordination
  - Professional military presentation

**Delhi Police was also recognised for:**

- Precision marching
- Demonstration of internal security preparedness

**Additional Key Facts:**

- Republic Day Parade is held annually on 26 January to commemorate the adoption of the Indian Constitution in 1950.
- Kartavya Path (earlier Rajpath) symbolises the shift from colonial legacy to citizen-centric governance.

**Tableaux are presented by:**

- States & Union Territories

- Central Ministries and Departments
- MyGov portal was launched in 2014 to promote citizen engagement in policy and governance.
- Cultural tableaux often serve as a soft-power tool to promote India's unity in diversity.

**Jeevan Raksha Padak Series of Awards**

The President of India approved the conferment of Jeevan Raksha Padak Series of Awards – 2025 on 30 persons for meritorious acts of humanity in saving lives. The list includes Sarvottam Jeevan Raksha Padak (6), Uttam Jeevan Raksha Padak (6), and Jeevan Raksha Padak (18) awardees. Six awardees received the honour posthumously.

**Categories of Jeevan Raksha Padak Awards**

**1. Sarvottam Jeevan Raksha Padak (6 Awards)**

- Awarded for most conspicuous courage and self-sacrifice in saving life.

**2025 recipients include:**

- Shri Manohar Singh Chouhan (Posthumous), Madhya Pradesh
- Shri Rajendra Prasad Mishra, Madhya Pradesh
- Shri P S Gowrisankar Raja (Posthumous), Tamil Nadu
- Naik Ashutosh Biswas (Posthumous), Ministry of Defence
- Shri Deepak Kumar (Posthumous), Ministry of Defence
- Naib Subedar Manjeet (Posthumous), Ministry of Defence.

**2. Uttam Jeevan Raksha Padak (6 Awards)**

- Awarded for exceptional courage and prompt action in life-saving situations.
- 2025 recipients include: Shri Sumit Yadav (Delhi), Shri Wasim Ahmad Ganie (J&K), Shri Mohammed Shamil C (Kerala), Shri Joseph Lalnunmawia (Mizoram), Shri Saumyaranjan Behera (MoD), and Sepoy Shwensinlo Semp (Posthumous, MoD).

**3. Jeevan Raksha Padak (18 Awards)**

- Awarded for considerable courage in saving human life.
- Includes recipients from Andaman & Nicobar Islands, Andhra Pradesh, Jammu & Kashmir, Kerala, Lakshadweep, Maharashtra, Mizoram, Punjab, Border Roads Organization and Ministry of Defence.

**About the Jeevan Raksha Padak Series**

- Purpose: These awards recognise courageous acts of human nature in saving lives during accidents, natural disasters, emergencies or other dangerous situations.
- Eligibility: Open to persons of all walks of life, including civilians, government officials and defence personnel.

**Categories:**

- Sarvottam Jeevan Raksha Padak: Highest category for maximum bravery.
- Uttam Jeevan Raksha Padak: Second category for exceptional courage.
- Jeevan Raksha Padak: Third category for notable bravery.
- The awards are presented as a medal, certificate signed by the Union Home Minister, and a lump-sum monetary allowance.
- The award may be conferred posthumously if the bravery act resulted in the sacrifice of the rescuer.

**Also in Focus**

**Rashtrapati Bhavan Unveils Bust of C. Rajagopalachari, Replacing Lutyens' Statue**

President Droupadi Murmu unveiled the bust of C. Rajagopalachari at Rashtrapati Bhavan, replacing the bust of Edwin Lutyens, the British architect who designed Rashtrapati Bhavan. The bust of C. Rajagopalachari has been installed at the Grand Open Staircase near Ashok Mandap, replacing the bust of Sir Edwin Lutyens that stood there

for decades. President Murmu stated that the change is part of steps to shed vestiges of the colonial mindset and to honour Indian culture, heritage and freedom-fighters.

#### **About Chakravarti Rajagopalachari**

Born: December 1878, Rajagopalachari was an Indian freedom fighter, jurist and statesman.

He was a close associate of Mahatma Gandhi and participated in major movements including the Non-Cooperation Movement and Civil Disobedience Movement. Rajagopalachari became the first and only Indian Governor-General of independent India (1948–50) before the post was abolished when India became a republic. He also served as Chief Minister of Madras State and was awarded the Bharat Ratna in 1954 for his contributions to public life.

#### **About Edwin Lutyens and the Colonial Context**

Sir Edwin Lutyens was a renowned British architect who, along with Sir Herbert Baker, designed major parts of New Delhi, including Rashtrapati Bhavan, India Gate, North Block and South Block. His work symbolised British imperial architecture in India. The replacement of his bust is seen as part of an effort to shift focus from colonial symbols to Indian heritage in national institutions.

#### **Decolonisation in India's Public Memory**

India has recently undertaken various steps to recontextualise colonial symbols, such as:

- Removal or replacement of colonial-era statues and portraits in national institutions,
- Renaming of public spaces and cultural initiatives highlighting Indian historical figures.

### **UNESCO Announces Emergency Assistance Package for Vietnam**

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has announced an emergency assistance package worth approximately US\$740,000 to help Vietnam protect its cultural heritage and sustain education in areas severely affected by natural disasters. This package was announced on January 23, 2026, in response to a series of destructive typhoons (Wipha, Bualoi and Matmo) that struck Vietnam in November 2025.

#### **Purpose of Assistance**

The assistance aims to safeguard cultural heritage assets that were damaged by flooding and storms, including World Heritage Sites in Hue and Hoi An, by conducting technical assessments and emergency protection measures. It also focuses on sustaining education by restoring safe learning spaces, replacing essential school equipment, and providing psychosocial support to students and teachers, especially in vulnerable and ethnic minority communities in provinces like Cao Bang and Lang Son. With support from partner funding (e. g. , Japan), UNESCO will also promote disaster risk reduction and early warning systems to enhance school safety and long-term resilience.

#### **Why This Support Matters**

The typhoons impacted nearly 10,000 schools, damaged hundreds of thousands of homes, and caused significant loss of life and property across Vietnam, making cultural and educational recovery a priority. UNESCO's package reflects the organisation's role in linking culture, education, and disaster resilience, reinforcing global efforts to protect heritage and ensure uninterrupted learning.

**People who succeed have momentum. The more they succeed, the more they want to succeed, and the more they find a way to succeed.**

**Persons in News**

**Appointments of the Month**

Sr. No	Person Name	Appointed For / Post	Department / Organisation	Brief Description
1	Rob Jetten	Prime Minister	Netherlands Government	Became the youngest Prime Minister of the Netherlands at age 38 after coalition formation.
2	Suresh Agarwal	MD & CEO (Designate)	M&M–Manulife Life Insurance JV	Named to head the proposed 50:50 life insurance joint venture, subject to regulatory approval.
3	Sanae Takaichi	Prime Minister (Reappointed)	Government of Japan	Reappointed after LDP's supermajority win in snap general elections.
4	Tarique Rahman	Prime Minister (Set to Take Oath)	Government of Bangladesh	Elected BNP Parliamentary Party leader after landslide victory in 2026 elections.
5	Mia Mottley	Prime Minister (Third Term)	Government of Barbados	Won third consecutive term; her party secured all 30 parliamentary seats.
6	Puneet Agrawal	Ambassador to Thailand	Ministry of External Affairs, India	Appointed as India's next Ambassador to the Kingdom of Thailand.
7	Commodore Andy Dowling	Resident Defence Advisor	New Zealand High Commission, India	First Resident Defence Advisor appointed by New Zealand to India.
8	Kenta Kon	Chief Executive Officer (CEO)	Toyota Motor Corporation	Appointed CEO effective April 1, 2026, as part of leadership reshuffle.
9	Soraya Aghaei Hajiagha	Member	International Olympic Committee (IOC)	First Iranian female elected to IOC during the 145th IOC Session.
10	Yumnam Khemchand Singh	Chief Minister	Government of Manipur, India	Sworn in after revocation of President's Rule in Manipur.
11	Air Marshal Inderpal Singh Walia	AOC-in-C, Eastern Air Command	Indian Air Force	Assumed charge as head of Eastern Air Command on 1 February 2026.
12	Dame Sarah Mullally	Archbishop of Canterbury	Church of England	First woman to lead the Church of England in its 1,400-year history.
13	Sheikh Joaan bin Hamad Al Thani	President	Olympic Council of Asia (OCA)	Elected as new OCA President following resignation of Raja Randhir Singh.
14	Anand Srinivasan	Chief Commercial Officer (CCO)	Akasa Air	Took over as CCO after resignation of Praveen Iyer.
15	Peter Burrill	Interim Chief Financial Officer (CFO)	Standard Chartered Bank	Appointed interim CFO following resignation of Diego De Giorgi.

**Obituaries of the Month**

Sr. No.	Person Name	Field Related	Description
1	Mukul Roy	Indian Politics	Former Union Railway Minister and senior TMC leader; passed away at 71 due to cardiac arrest in Kolkata.
2	Ricky A. J. Syngkon	Indian Politics	Lok Sabha MP from Shillong (VPP); died at 54 after collapsing during a football game.
3	Jesse Jackson	Civil Rights & US Politics	Prominent US civil rights leader and two-time presidential candidate; died at 84.
4	Frederick Wiseman	Documentary Filmmaking	Influential American documentary filmmaker; passed away at 96.
5	Ramesh Shukla	Photography	UAE's "Royal Photographer" who documented the nation's formation; died at 87.
6	Geeta Patnaik	Music (Odia Playback Singing)	Veteran Odia singer known for film and classical songs; passed away at 73.
7	Sarla Maheshwari	Journalism & Broadcasting	Veteran Doordarshan news anchor; died at 71 in New Delhi.
8	James Van Der Beek	Film & Television Acting	American actor known for "Dawson's Creek"; died at 48 after cancer battle.
9	Catherine O'Hara	Film & Television Acting	Canadian-American actress known for "Home Alone" and "Schitt's Creek"; passed away at 71.
10	Michael Nobbs	Hockey (Player & Coach)	Former Australian hockey player and ex-India coach; died at 72.
11	Ajit Pawar	Indian Politics	Maharashtra Deputy Chief Minister; died in a plane crash near Baramati.
12	I. S. Bindra	Cricket Administration	Former BCCI President; key figure in Indian cricket's global rise; died at 84.
13	Mark Tully	Journalism & Broadcasting	Veteran BBC journalist known as the "voice of India"; passed away at 90.

**The real test is not whether you avoid this failure, because you won't. It's whether you let it harden or shame you into inaction, or whether you learn from it; whether you choose to persevere.**

## Sports

### Magnus Carlsen Wins 2026 FIDE Freestyle Chess World Championship

Magnus Carlsen of Norway clinched the title at the 2026 FIDE Freestyle Chess World Championship, at Weissenhaus, Germany. Carlsen defeated Fabiano Caruana of the USA in the final to become the champion.

#### What Is FIDE Freestyle Chess World Championship?

The FIDE Freestyle Chess World Championship is an official world championship in the Freestyle Chess format, also referred to as Chess960 or Fischer Random Chess, where the starting arrangement of pieces is randomized to encourage creativity and reduce reliance on memorised openings. The 2026 edition was the first officially recognised FIDE Freestyle Chess World Championship jointly organised by FIDE (the International Chess Federation) and Freestyle Chess Operations.

#### Tournament Format and Results

The event featured a play-in open to titled players followed by a final with eight top grandmasters competing over several days. After topping the group and semifinal stages, Carlsen reached the final and secured the world title with a crucial win in the third game and a decisive draw in the fourth game. Nodirbek Abdusattorov (Uzbekistan) finished third, and both he and Caruana qualified alongside Carlsen for the 2027 championship.

#### Significance of the Victory

This title is considered a major world championship in chess, and it adds to Carlsen's extraordinary record, bringing his total world titles across various formats to 21 — including classical, rapid, and blitz championships. The win came in a format that places a premium on adaptability and creativity, broadening Carlsen's legacy beyond standard time-control chess events.

#### Notable Participants and Performances

- Fabiano Caruana (USA) — Runner-up and one of the world's top chess grandmasters.
- Nodirbek Abdusattorov (UZB) — Secured third place after winning the bronze match.
- Vincent Keymer (GER) — Competed strongly in the tournament.
- Other notable players included Hans Niemann (USA) and Levon Aronian (ARM).

### Winter Olympics 2026 — Johannes Høsflot Klæbo's Historic Ninth Gold Medal

Johannes Høsflot Klæbo won his record-breaking ninth Olympic gold medal in cross-country skiing at the 2026 Winter Olympics held at Milano Cortina, Italy. He achieved this milestone by anchoring Norway's victory in the men's 4 × 7.5 km relay at the Tesero Cross-Country Ski Stadium. This ninth gold puts him ahead of all athletes in Winter Olympics history.

#### Historic Achievement

Klæbo's ninth Olympic gold is a new Winter Olympic record, making him the most decorated male Winter Olympian in terms of gold medals. He surpassed legendary Norwegian winter athletes Marit Bjørgen, Bjørn Dæhlie, and Ole Einar Bjørndalen, who each held eight gold medals.

#### Performance at 2026 Winter Olympics

Klæbo won four gold medals at the Milan-Cortina 2026 Games, including in the 10 km freestyle, 20 km skiathlon, individual sprint, and the relay event. The Norwegian team clocked 1:04:24.5 in the relay, finishing 22.2 seconds ahead of France and 47.9 seconds ahead of Italy.

#### Career Highlights

Klæbo previously won three gold medals at the 2018 Pyeongchang Olympics and two gold medals at the 2022 Beijing Olympics. His versatility across sprint, distance, and relay events underscores his dominance in cross-country skiing.

**Karnataka Wins National T20 Blind Cricket Title in Thrilling Super Over**

Karnataka won the Nagesh Trophy by defeating Delhi in a dramatic Super Over finish. The final was played on 13 February 2026 at Tau Devi Lal Stadium, Gurugram. Karnataka chased Delhi's total and, after the match ended in a tie, secured victory by scoring 11 runs against Delhi's 10 in the Super Over.

**What is the Nagesh Trophy?**

It is India's national T20 cricket tournament for visually impaired (blind) players. The competition is organised by the Cricket Association for the Blind in India, promoting inclusive and competitive cricket across the country.

**Top Performers and Awards**

Sunil Ramesh was named Player of the Match for his match-winning century. Sanjay Kumar Shah, Rambir Singh, and Sunil Ramesh received Players of the Series honours for consistent performance throughout the tournament.

**Prizes and Recognition**

The champion Karnataka team received a prize of ₹1,50,000. The Delhi runners-up earned ₹1,25,000, reflecting growing support and professional recognition for blind cricket.

**India Clinches SAFF U-19 Women's Championship Title**

India defeated Bangladesh 4-0 in the final to win the SAFF U-19 Women's Championship title. India's U-17 women's team represented the country, gaining experience for upcoming continental competition.

Purpose of Participation: India fielded its U-17 women's national team at the U-19 championship to prepare for the AFC U-17 Women's Asian Cup later in 2026.

- Venue: Pokhara Rangasala Stadium, Nepal.
- Tournament Organiser: South Asian Football Federation (SAFF), the governing body for football in South Asia under the Asian Football Confederation (AFC). (General football knowledge)

**About SAFF:**

SAFF stands for the South Asian Football Federation, comprising seven member nations: India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bhutan and the Maldives.

SAFF organizes various age-group and senior tournaments, including the SAFF Championship, SAFF U-19, SAFF U-17, and SAFF Women's Championship. These regional tournaments are crucial for nurturing talent and improving competitive experience among South Asian teams.

- Formation: 1997
- Headquarters: Dhaka, Bangladesh
- President: Kazi Salahuddin
- Vice President: Sundar Narshing Joshi
- General Secretary: Purushottam Kattel

**Services Clinch 8th Santosh Trophy Title**

The Services football team defeated Kerala 1-0 after extra time to win their eighth Santosh Trophy title at the Dhakuakhana Football Stadium in Assam.

**Champion & Runner-up**

- Champions: Services team (eighth title)
- Runners-up: Kerala football team
- Venue: Dhakuakhana Football Stadium, Assam
- Edition: 79th National Football Championship (Santosh Trophy)
- Historical Context: This was only the second time Services and Kerala met in the Santosh Trophy final; the previous final encounter was in the 2012-13 edition in Kochi, won by Services via penalty shoot-out.

- Previous Titles: Services were also champions in 2023–24, defeating Goa 1-0 in the final at Yupia, Arunachal Pradesh.

**About the Santosh Trophy**

The Santosh Trophy is a national state-level football championship in India, contesting among state teams and institutional teams (e. g. , Services, Railways). It was first held in 1941, named after Sir Manmatha Nath Roy Chowdhary of Santosh.

- Most titles: West Bengal has the most Santosh Trophy wins.

**India Clinches Record Sixth ICC Under-19 Cricket World Cup Title**

India won the ICC Under-19 Men’s Cricket World Cup 2026, defeating England Under-19 by 100 runs in the final held at Harare Sports Club, Zimbabwe, marking their sixth title in the tournament’s history. India posted a commanding total of 411/9 in their 50 overs, powered by a record-breaking 175 from Vaibhav Sooryavanshi off just 80 balls—the highest individual score in an Under-19 World Cup final. In reply, England were bowled out for 311 runs in 40. 2 overs. India won the match by a margin of 100 runs, a dominant performance in the final.

**ICC Under-19 Cricket World Cup**

- Administrator: International Cricket Council
- First edition: 1988 Australia
- Latest edition: 2026 Zimbabwe, Namibia
- Number of teams: 16
- Current champion: India (6th title)
- Most successful: India (6 titles)
- Most runs: Eoin Morgan (606) (Ireland )
- Most wickets: Wesley Madhevere (28) (Zimbabwe) & Kwena Maphaka (28) (South Africa)

**RCB Win Second WPL Title as Smriti Mandhana and Georgia Voll Lead Record Chase Against Delhi Capitals**

Royal Challengers Bengaluru (RCB) beat Delhi Capitals (DC) by six wickets in the WPL 2026 final at Vadodara. DC scored 203/4 in 20 overs, a strong total in a final. RCB chased 204 in 19. 4 overs, completing the highest successful run chase in a WPL final. This win gave RCB their second WPL title and made them the first franchise to hold both IPL and WPL trophies at the same time.

**Awards Presented at the Ceremony**

**Team Awards**

- Winners: Royal Challengers Bengaluru Women — ₹6 crore prize.
- Runners-up: Delhi Capitals Women — ₹3 crore prize.

**Individual Awards**

- Each individual award carried a cash prize (commonly ₹5 lakh) as part of the presentation after the final.
- Player of the Match (Final): Smriti Mandhana (RCB) — for her match-winning 87.
- Orange Cap (Most Runs in Tournament): Smriti Mandhana (RCB) — 377 runs.
- Purple Cap (Most Wickets in Tournament): Sophie Devine (Gujarat Giants) — 17 wickets.
- Most Valuable Player (MVP) of the Season: Sophie Devine (Gujarat Giants).
- Emerging Player of the Season: Nandini Sharma (DC).
- Super Striker of the Season: Grace Harris (RCB) — highest strike rate.
- Most Dot Balls in the Tournament: Lauren Bell (RCB).
- Catch of the Season: Lucy Hamilton (DC).
- Best Strike Rate (Season): Grace Harris (RCB).
- Most Sixes in Tournament (Special): Harmanpreet Kaur (Mumbai Indians).
- Fair Play Award: Mumbai Indians.

**WPL**

- Administrator: Board of Control for Cricket in India
- Headquarters: Mumbai, India
- Format: T20
- First edition: 2023
- Latest edition: 2026
- Current champion: Royal Challengers Bengaluru (2nd title)
- Most successful: Royal Challengers Bengaluru (2 titles) & Mumbai Indians (2 titles)
- Most runs: Nat Sciver-Brunt (1,348) (England)
- Most wickets: Amelia Kerr (54) (New Zealand)

**Mirabai Chanu Smashes Three National Records at National Weightlifting Championships 2026**

The National Weightlifting Championships 2026 witnessed a stellar performance by Olympic silver medallist Mirabai Chanu, who smashed three national records in the women’s 48 kg category. Competing in Modinagar, Uttar Pradesh, she set new records in snatch, clean & jerk, and total lift, reaffirming her dominance in Indian weightlifting.

**National Records Set**

- Total Lift: 205 kg — new national record.
- Snatch: 89 kg — new national record.
- Clean & Jerk: 116 kg — new national record.
- These lifts improved her previous combined best by 6 kg compared to her 199 kg lift at the 2022 World Championships.

**Gold Medal**

- Chanu’s total lift of 205 kg secured her the gold medal in the women’s 48kg category at the event.

**Carlos Alcaraz Wins 2026 Australian Open, Becomes Youngest Career Grand Slam Champion**

Carlos Alcaraz (Spain) won the men’s singles title at the 2026 Australian Open by defeating Novak Djokovic (Serbia) in the final at Rod Laver Arena, Melbourne Park, Australia. It was Alcaraz’s first Australian Open title and his 7th Grand Slam singles title overall. At 22 years and 272 days, Alcaraz became the youngest man in the Open Era to complete a Career Grand Slam (winning all four major singles titles). Alcaraz ended Djokovic’s undefeated record in Australian Open finals (10–0) at Melbourne Park.

**Historical Context:**

Only nine men in tennis history have completed a Career Grand Slam (winning all four majors), including legends like Rod Laver, Andre Agassi, Roger Federer, Rafael Nadal, Novak Djokovic, and now Carlos Alcaraz. The Australian Open is the first of the four Grand Slam tournaments of the tennis calendar year, played annually in January–February in Melbourne.

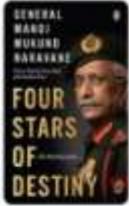
**Australian Open 2026**

- Edition: 114th
- Category: Grand Slam
- Prize money: A\$111,500,000
- Location: Melbourne, Victoria, Australia
- Champions 2026:
- Men's singles: Carlos Alcaraz (Spain)
- Women's singles: Elena Rybakina (Kazakhstan)
- Men's doubles: Christian Harrison / Neal Skupski
- Women's doubles: Elise Mertens / Zhang Shuai
- Mixed doubles: Olivia Gadecki / John Peers

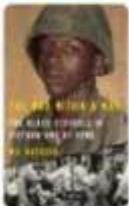
**Important Days for Exams**

Day	Observed/Celebrated As	Motto/Importance
01-Mar	Zero Discrimination Day	Save lives: Decriminalise
03- Mar	World Wildlife Day	Medicinal and Aromatic Plants: Conserving Health, Heritage and Livelihoods
04- Mar	National Safety Day	Nurture young minds - Develop safety culture
08- Mar	International Women's Day	Give To Gain
10- Mar	CISF Raising Day	To mark the establishment of CISF on 10 March 1969
14- Mar	International Day of Action for Rivers	Our Rivers, our Future
15- Mar	World Consumer Rights Day	Safe Products, Confident Consumers
18- Mar	Ordnance Factory Day	To mark the establishment of India's oldest Ordnance Factory at Cossipore of Kolkata on 18th March 1802.
20- Mar	International Day of Happiness	Mindful • Grateful • Kind
21- Mar	International Day of Forests	Forests and Economies
22- Mar	World Water Day	Water & Gender
23- Mar	World Meteorological Day	Observing Today, Protecting Tomorrow
24- Mar	World Tuberculosis (TB) Day	Yes! We Can End TB: Commit, Invest, Deliver
27- Mar	World Theatre Day	To generate awareness about the importance of theatre arts

### Books & Authors



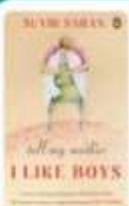
**Book:** Four Stars of Destiny: An Autobiography  
**Author:** General Manoj Mukund Naravane  
**About:** It outlines reforms required to strengthen the Armed Forces and prepare them for emerging twenty-first-century security challenges more effectively ahead.



**Book:** The War Within a War  
**Author:** Wil Haygood  
**About:** Explores African American soldiers' experiences in Vietnam, racism within the military, and the parallel civil rights struggle unfolding at home.



**Book:** Rebellion in Verse  
**Author:** Raghavan Srinivasan  
**About:** Raghavan Srinivasan shows how Tamil Bhakti poets used devotional verse to challenge caste hierarchies, religious authority, and reshape spiritual life.

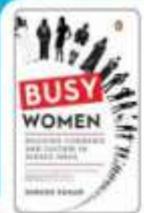


**Book:** Tell My Mother I Like Boys  
**Author:** Suvir Saran  
**About:** A simple memoir by Suvir Saran about growing up, understanding his sexuality, dealing with family expectations, and finding acceptance and peace.

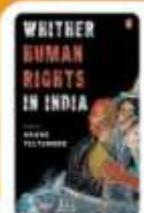


**Book:** Tatyasaheb  
**Author:** Harish Damodaran  
**About:** Traces an entrepreneur's life to reveal Bombay's commercial history, social change, and business networks shaping the city's modern economic identity.

### Books & Authors



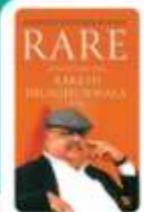
**Book:** Busy Women  
**Author:** Shinjini Kumar  
**About:** Examines how women's unpaid household labour and professional work remain undervalued, urging societal recognition and equitable support for women's contributions.



**Book:** Whither Human Rights in India  
**Author:** Anand Teltumbde  
**About:** Explains how human rights and freedoms in India are slowly weakening, especially for poor and marginalised people, due to politics and state actions.



**Book:** The Oak And The Larch  
**Author:** Sophie Pinkham  
**About:** Shows how forests shaped Russia's culture and power, using trees as a lens to explore its history, literature, empire, and identity.



**Book:** RARE  
**Author:** Nandini Vijayaraghavan  
**About:** Shows Rakesh Jhunjhunwala's investing philosophy, practical financial wisdom, and disciplined strategies beyond quick tips for smart, patient wealth building.



**Book:** Designed to Win  
**Author:** S. Devarajan  
**About:** The book narrates how Tata Elxsi transformed from near bankruptcy into a design-led global tech leader through strategy, innovation, and focused niche growth.

## Union Budget 2026-27 Highlights

On 1 February 2026, the Finance Minister, Smt. Nirmala Sitharaman, presented the Union Budget 2026-27 in Parliament. This Budget is the first to be prepared in Kartavya Bhawan and focuses on growth, citizens' aspirations, and inclusive development.

### 1. Main Goals (Kartavyas)

The Budget is inspired by three big goals:

1. Grow the economy faster by improving productivity and making India stronger in the face of global changes.
2. Support people's aspirations by building their capabilities and opportunities.
3. Ensure inclusive growth so that every family, region, community, and sector benefits.

### 2. Budget Numbers (Estimates)

- Total receipts (without borrowing): ₹36.5 lakh crore
- Total spending: ₹53.5 lakh crore
- Centre's net tax revenue: ₹28.7 lakh crore
- Gross market borrowing: ₹17.2 lakh crore
- Net market borrowing (after repayment): ₹11.7 lakh crore
- Fiscal deficit: 4.3% of GDP
- Debt-to-GDP ratio: 55.6% (lower than last year)

### 3. First Kartavya — Growth & Strategic Development

This section includes major government plans to strengthen industries, jobs, and infrastructure:

#### A. Strengthening Manufacturing

The Budget aims to scale up manufacturing in 7 strategic sectors:

- Biopharma SHAKTI: ₹10,000 crore over 5 years to make India a global biopharma hub. New National Institutes of Pharmaceutical Education and Research (NIPERs) and accredited clinical trial sites will be developed.
- India Semiconductor Mission 2.0: To make semiconductor equipment and technology in India.
- Electronics Components: Budget increased to ₹40,000 crore.
- Rare Earth Corridors: To boost mining and manufacturing in mineral-rich states.
- Chemical Parks: Three parks to support chemicals manufacturing.
- Capital Goods: New tool rooms and schemes to improve construction and infrastructure equipment production.
- Container Manufacturing: A dedicated ₹10,000 crore scheme over 5 years.

#### B. Textile Sector Plan

The Budget introduces an Integrated Textile Programme which includes:

- National Fibre Scheme for self-reliance in natural and new fibres.
- Textile Expansion & Employment Scheme to modernise clusters.
- Mega Textile Parks for technical textiles.
- Mahatma Gandhi Gram Swaraj initiative to support khadi, handloom, and handicrafts.

#### C. Legacy Industrial Clusters

A scheme to revive 200 old industrial clusters for better competitiveness.

#### D. Support for Small and Medium Businesses

- A ₹10,000 crore SME Growth Fund to nurture future champion companies.
- ₹2,000 crore added to the Self-Reliant India Fund for micro enterprises.
- Professional bodies will help train business advisors in smaller towns.

**4. Infrastructure Push**

The government significantly increased infrastructure spending:

- Public capital expenditure for FY 2026-27 set at ₹12.2 lakh crore.
- An Infrastructure Risk Guarantee Fund will support private developers.
- REITs (Real Estate Investment Trusts) will help recycle government real estate assets.

**New Connectivity Projects**

- Dedicated Freight Corridor: From Dankuni (East) to Surat (West) for faster cargo movement.
- 20 New National Waterways to improve inland transport.
- Boat repair facilities at Varanasi and Patna.
- Coastal Cargo Promotion Scheme to increase shipping share from 6% to 12% by 2047.
- Support for seaplane manufacturing and operations to enhance connectivity and tourism.

**5. Energy & City Development**

₹20,000 crore allocated over 5 years for Carbon Capture, Utilisation and Storage (CCUS) technology.

₹5,000 crore per city economic region over 5 years to develop urban areas with reform-linked financing.

Seven High-Speed Rail corridors will be built to connect major cities.

**6. Governance and Financial Reforms**

- A High Level Committee on Banking for Viksit Bharat will review the banking sector.
- Restructuring of Power Finance Corporation and Rural Electrification Corporation for better efficiency.
- Foreign investment rules (FEMA) will be reviewed to make them easier and modern.
- Municipal bonds: ₹100 crore incentive for bonds above ₹1,000 crore by big cities.

**7. Second Kartavya — People's Aspirations & Capacity Building**

The Budget includes many measures to support people with skills, jobs, health, and services:

**Health & Medical Services**

- 100,000 new Allied Health Professionals will be added over 5 years.
- Five Regional Medical Hubs to promote medical tourism.
- Three new All India Institutes of Ayurveda will be established.

**Education, Culture & Tourism**

- Orange Economy support: AVGC labs in 15,000 schools and 500 colleges.
- Five University Townships near industrial zones.
- Girls' hostels will be built in every district.
- Tourism support includes upskilling guides and a National Destination Digital Knowledge Grid.
- 15 historical sites to be developed as cultural destinations.

**Sports**

A new Khelo India Mission will be launched to strengthen sports infrastructure and talent.

**8. Third Kartavya — Inclusive Growth ("Sabka Sath, Sabka Vikas")****A. Agriculture & Farmer Support**

- Projects for 500 reservoirs and Amrit Sarovars for integrated agriculture support.
- Support for high-value crops like coconut, sandalwood, cocoa and cashew in coastal areas.
- Bharat-VISTAAR: a multilingual AI tool to help farmers access agri information and technology.

**B. Empowering Persons with Disabilities**

Divyangjan Kaushal Yojana will help persons with disabilities find jobs in IT, AVGC, hospitality, and F&B sectors.

**C. Mental Health**

NIMHANS-2 will be set up in North India, and existing institutes will be upgraded.

**D. Regional Development**

- East Coast Industrial Corridor with a strong node at Durgapur.
- Five tourism destinations in the Northeast and 4,000 e-buses for sustainable travel.
- Buddhist Circuit development in Northeast states.

**9. Support for States**

₹1.4 lakh crore provided as Finance Commission Grants to states for FY 2026-27, following the 16th Finance Commission recommendations.

**10. Tax & Customs Proposals (Simplified)**

**Direct Taxes**

- New Income Tax Act, 2025 will start from April 2026 for easier compliance.
- Changes to penalty rules aim to reduce litigation and make tax filing simpler.
- Interest received from motor accident claims will be exempt from income tax.
- TCS on overseas tour packages and remittances for education/medical will be lowered to 2%.
- Safe harbour rules for IT services expanded with a 15.5% margin and higher thresholds.
- Non-residents providing cloud services from India will get tax holiday till 2047.
- MAT (Minimum Alternate Tax) reduced to 14% and made final tax.

**Indirect Taxes & Customs**

- Customs duty simplification to support manufacturing of steel, energy and critical minerals.
- Many exemptions introduced (e.g., lithium-ion battery parts, aircraft parts).
- Duty rate on goods imported for personal use cut from 20% to 10%.
- Exemption on 17 medicines and duty-free imports for certain rare disease treatments.

**Customs Facilitation**

- Customs clearance will be faster and simpler through improved digital systems by April 2026.
- The Customs Integrated System (CIS) will be launched in 2 years for all trade processes.

**Export Promotion**

- Fish caught in Indian waters or high seas will be treated as export without duty.
- The ₹10 lakh cap on courier exports per consignment is removed to help small businesses reach global markets.

**Ease of Travel & Taxpayer Relief**

- International baggage rules will be updated to match modern travel needs.
- Honest taxpayers can settle disputes by paying an additional amount instead of penalties.

**"The only limit to our realization of tomorrow will be our doubts of today."**

## Economic Survey Highlights

### What Is the Economic Survey 2026?

The Economic Survey 2025-26 (commonly called Economic Survey 2026) is an annual analytical report of the Government of India that reviews the country's economic performance over the past year, assesses macroeconomic developments, and outlines future prospects and policy priorities. It sets the stage for the Union Budget 2026–27 by providing data-driven insights and forecasts on growth, inflation, sectoral performance, fiscal trends, and structural challenges.

### Who drafts the Economic Survey each year?

The Survey is prepared by the Economic Division of the Department of Economic Affairs, Ministry of Finance, under the guidance of the Chief Economic Advisor (CEA). A team of government economists and statisticians compiles and analyses economic data to prepare this authoritative document.

### When is the Economic Survey released and how is it presented?

The Survey is traditionally presented in Parliament just before the Union Budget—in 2026 it was tabled on 29 January 2026 by the Union Finance Minister during the Budget Session. It is formally laid before the Lok Sabha (Lower House of Parliament) as a pre-budget document to inform lawmakers, analysts, and the public about the economy's current state.

### What is the significance of the Economic Survey 2026?

The Survey matters because it:

- **Reviews performance:** Assesses India's economic progress, challenges, and resilience over the past year.
- **Informs policymaking:** Provides evidence and projections that guide Budget formulation and policy decisions.
- **Signals direction:** Highlights structural reforms, risks, and strategic priorities.
- **Shapes public debate:** Offers insights for academics, investors, business leaders, and media on key economic trends.

### In what way is the Economic Survey 2026 connected to the Union Budget 2026?

The Economic Survey acts as a diagnostic and analytical precursor to the Union Budget. Its assessment of economic growth, fiscal trends, inflation, and sectoral performance helps shape budget estimates, revenue targets, spending priorities, and reform measures in the Union Budget 2026–27. Policymakers use its projections and recommendations to align fiscal strategy with economic goals.

### The Economic Landscape Through the Survey

#### 1) State of the Economy

- India's economy grew 7.4% in FY26.
- Gross Value Added (GVA) increased by 7.3%.
- India remained the fastest-growing major economy for the 4th consecutive year.
- The services sector grew 9.3% in H1 FY26 and is estimated at 9.1% for the full year.

#### 2) Fiscal Developments

- Central government revenue rose to 9.2% of GDP in FY25.
- Income tax filers increased from 6.9 crore (FY22) to 9.2 crore (FY25).

- GST collections touched ₹17.4 lakh crore (April–December 2025), growing 6.7% year-on-year.
- Effective capital expenditure increased to about 4% of GDP.
- General government debt reduced by 7.1 percentage points compared to 2020.

### 3) Monetary and Financial Sector

- Banks' Gross NPAs fell to 2.2%, while Net NPAs declined to 0.5%.
- 55.02 crore Jan Dhan accounts were opened, including 36.63 crore rural accounts.
- Demat accounts crossed 21.6 crore.
- India now has over 12 crore unique investors, with about 25% women investors.

### 4) External Sector

- India's share in global merchandise exports rose from 1% to 1.8%.
- Services exports reached a record USD 387.6 billion.
- India received USD 135.4 billion in remittances, the highest globally.
- Foreign exchange reserves stood at USD 701.4 billion, covering around 11 months of imports.

### 5) Inflation

Average domestic inflation remained low at 1.7% during April–December 2025.

### 6) Agriculture and Food

- Foodgrain production increased to 3,577.3 lakh metric tonnes, up by 254.3 LMT.
- Over ₹4.09 lakh crore was released to farmers under the PM-KISAN scheme.

### 7) Industry, Manufacturing & PLI

- Manufacturing GVA grew by 7.72% in Q1 FY26 and 9.13% in Q2 FY26.
- Production-Linked Incentive (PLI) schemes attracted over ₹2.0 lakh crore in actual investment.
- The India Semiconductor Mission saw investments worth ₹1.60 lakh crore across 10 projects.

### 8) Infrastructure

- High-speed highway corridors expanded from 550 km to 5,364 km.
- About 3,500 km of railway lines were added.
- 99.1% of railway routes were electrified.
- India became the 3rd largest domestic aviation market with 164 operational airports.

### 9) Renewable Energy & Technology

- India ranked 3rd globally in renewable energy capacity and solar power.
- Through the SpaDeX mission, India became the 4th country to achieve autonomous satellite docking.

### 10) Education, Health & Human Development

- India now has 23 IITs, 21 IIMs, and 20 AIIMS, including 2 international IIT campuses.
- Maternal and child mortality rates recorded significant declines across the country.

### 11) Employment, Labour & Social Progress

- Over 31 crore workers registered on the e-Shram portal, of which 54% are women.
- The National Career Service portal listed more than 2.8 crore job vacancies.
- The Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) fell sharply from 55.3% (2005-06) to 11.28% (2022-23).

### 12) Strategic Vision – Disciplined Swadeshi

- Focus on reducing dependence in critical sectors through targeted indigenisation.
- Emphasis on building high-impact and cost-effective manufacturing capabilities.
- Long-term goal: move from self-reliance to strategic indispensability in global markets.

## Global Research Conferences to Watch in 2026: Business, Technology, Engineering, Medicine & Science

### Business Conferences

- **International Conference on Advances in Business Management and E-Business**
  - Venue/City: Paris, France
  - Date (2026): 25th - 26th March 2026
  - Registration Deadline: 15th Mar 2026
  - Website/Link: <https://theiier.org/Conference/26773/ICABMeB/>
- **Convergence India Expo 2026 (ICT & Telecom-Business)**
  - Venue/City: New Delhi, India
  - Date (2026): 23-25 March 2026
  - Registration Deadline:
  - Website/Link: <https://www.convergenceindia.org/>
- **IndiaSoft – International IT Exhibition & Conference**
  - Venue/City: Bharat Mandapam, New Delhi, India
  - Date (2026): 23–25 March 2026
  - Registration Deadline:
  - Website/Link: <https://indiasoft.org/>

### Engineering Conferences

- **7th Asia Conference on Renewable Energy and Environmental Engineering (AREEE 2026)**
  - Venue/City: Singapore, Singapore
  - Date (2026): 28–30 Mar
  - Registration Deadline: March 5, 2026
  - Website/Link: <https://www.areee.org/>
- **International Conference on Contemporary Engineering & Technology (ICCET 2026)**
  - Venue/City: Chennai, India
  - Date (2026): 22–23 Mar
  - Registration Deadline:
  - Website/Link: <https://iccet.in>
- **13th International Conference on Industrial Engineering and Applications (ICIEA 2026)**

- Venue/City: Kyoto, Japan
- Date (2026): 09–12 Apr
- Registration Deadline:
- Website/Link: <https://www.iciea.org/>
- **17th International Conference on Mechatronic Technology (ICMET 2026)**
  - Venue/City: Osaka, Japan
  - Date (2026): April 28-30, 2026.
  - Registration Deadline: March 15, 2026
  - Website/Link: <https://www.icmet.ac.cn/>
- **10th International Conference on Civil Engineering (ICOCE 2026)**
  - Venue/City: Singapore, Singapore
  - Date (2026): 28–30 Mar
  - Registration Deadline:
  - Website/Link: <https://www.icoce.org/>
- **International Conference on Recent Challenges in Engineering & Technology (ICRCET 2026)**
  - Venue/City: Bengaluru, India
  - Date (2026): 22–23 Apr
  - Registration Deadline:
  - Website/Link: <https://icrcet.org>
- **i3CE 2026: ASCE International Conference on Computing in Civil Engineering**
  - Venue/City: Incheon (Songdo Convensia), South Korea
  - Date (2026): 14–17 Jun
  - Registration Deadline: 19 May, 2026
  - Website/Link: <https://www.i3ce2026.com>

#### Medical Conferences

- **3<sup>rd</sup> International Conference on Cardiology and Cardiovascular Innovations (Cardio-2026)**
  - Venue/City: Vienna, Austria
  - Date (2026): July 21 -22
  - Registration Deadline:
  - Website/Link: <https://cardiology-conference.org/>

- **4th Cell & Gene Therapy Research & Development Congress: Asia**
  - Venue/City: Seoul, South Korea
  - Date (2026): 9-10th April
  - Registration Deadline:
  - Website/Link: <https://global-engage.com/product/cell-gene-therapy-asia/#venue-image-slider-event>

#### Sciences Conferences

- **World Conference on Computational Science and Technology (WcCST-2026)**
  - Venue/City: Chandigarh University, Mohali, Punjab, India
  - Date (2026): 26–27 Mar
  - Registration Deadline:
  - Website/Link: <https://www.cuchd.in/conference/WcCST-26/>
- **International Soft Matter Conference (ISMC 2026)**
  - Venue/City: BITS Pilani – K K Birla Campus, Goa, India
  - Date (2026): 25–29 May
  - Registration Deadline:
  - Website/Link: <https://ge.iitm.ac.in/ismc2026>
- **ICMSEM 2026: International Conference on Materials Science, Engineering and Manufacturing**
  - Venue/City: UK, UK
  - Date (2026): July 27-29
  - Registration Deadline:
  - Website/Link: <https://www.icmsem.org/news-39.html>

## Scholarship in Focus – The UK

### Chevening Scholarship for Indian Students

*Your Practical Guide to the UK's Premier International Leadership Funding*

If you are an Indian student dreaming of a Master's degree in the UK, you already know that being academically qualified is just the first step. The real challenge is the cost. Tuition fees at universities like LSE, Oxford, or UCL can range from £15,000 to £30,000 for a single year — and that is before you factor in living costs, visa fees, flights, and the Immigration Health Surcharge. All told, self-funding a one-year UK Master's can cost around ₹40–55 lakh. That is where the Chevening Scholarship comes in.

Funded by the UK's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) and supported by the British Council, Chevening is the UK Government's flagship international scholarship. It's not a partial grant or a fee waiver — it's a full financial package that covers tuition, living costs, flights, visa fees, and more. For the right candidate, it is one of the most complete scholarships available anywhere in the world.

#### What Is the Chevening Scholarship?

Chevening is administered by the Chevening Secretariat on behalf of the FCDO. Each year, it selects outstanding individuals from over 160 countries to pursue a one-year Master's degree at any eligible UK university — from Oxford and Cambridge to Manchester, Edinburgh, and Birmingham. You choose your institution based on academic fit, not cost.

Unlike purely academic scholarships, Chevening places equal weight on leadership potential and professional experience. It is designed to identify future leaders, policymakers, entrepreneurs, researchers, and changemakers. Chevening alumni—a global network of over 50,000 people—hold influential roles in governments, businesses, and civil societies worldwide, making joining this community as vital as the degree itself. Some notable Indian alumni include Piyush Goyal (Union Minister of Commerce & Industry), Amitabh Kant (India's G20 Sherpa; former CEO, NITI Aayog), Anupriya Patel (Minister of State for Commerce & Industry), T. V. Narendran (Global CEO & MD, Tata Steel), and Girija Vaidyanathan (former Chief Secretary, Tamil Nadu).

Applications open each year in August and close in early October. The scholarship covers only full-time, one-year Master's programmes starting in the September/October intake. Always check the official Chevening website for the most up-to-date eligibility criteria and deadlines for your intake year.

#### Am I Eligible?

Before you start writing essays and gathering documents, make sure your profile meets Chevening's baseline requirements. Only around 3% of applicants are selected, and failing to meet any single criterion will disqualify an otherwise strong application.

#### Citizenship

You must be an Indian citizen. Applicants with British or dual British citizenship are ineligible (with rare exceptions). You must also not have previously received a UK Government-funded scholarship for study in the UK, including a prior Chevening award.

#### Academic Qualification

You need a bachelor's degree equivalent to a UK upper second-class honours (2:1). Chevening does not fund undergraduate degrees, PhD programmes, part-time courses, or mid-year (spring) intake programmes. Your chosen course must be a full-time, one-year Master's starting in September/October.

### Work Experience

This is Chevening's most distinctive requirement. You must have accumulated at least 2,800 hours of work experience — roughly two years of full-time employment — earned after completing your undergraduate degree. Experience gained before or during your undergraduate studies does not count. This threshold must be met in full by the application deadline. If you graduated after October 2023, you may not have enough time to qualify for the current cycle.

### English Language Proficiency

Since UK Master's programmes are taught in English, you'll need to provide proof of your language ability. Common accepted scores are:

- IELTS Academic: Overall 6.5, with no individual band below 6.0 (many universities require 7.0)
- TOEFL iBT: 90–100, depending on the institution
- PTE Academic: 58 minimum (varies by institution)

Always check the specific language requirements for each of your three chosen programmes, as thresholds vary.

### University Offer

You must apply to exactly three eligible UK Master's programmes. By a secondary deadline within the Chevening timeline, you need at least one unconditional offer from one of those three universities. Without this, your application cannot move to the selection stage.

### Return Commitment

Chevening scholars must return to India for a minimum of two years after completing their studies. This is a binding condition of the scholarship — not just a formality. It reflects Chevening's core mission: investing in future leaders who will create impact at home.

### What Does the Scholarship Cover?

Chevening offers one of the most comprehensive financial packages for a one-year UK Master's, typically valued between £32,000 and £52,000 (approximately ₹34–56 lakh), depending on your university and its location.

### Tuition Fees

Chevening pays your full tuition fees directly to your UK university — you never handle this transaction. Whether your programme costs £15,000 or £28,000, it's fully covered. Some courses (including certain MBAs) are subject to a tuition fee cap, and scholars are responsible for any amount above that ceiling.

### Monthly Living Stipend

- London-based students: £1,347 per month (~₹1,44,100)
- Outside London: approximately £1,236–1,260 per month

The stipend is paid monthly into your UK bank account and is intended to cover rent, food, transport, and personal expenses. Outside London, it affords a comfortable student lifestyle. In London, disciplined budgeting is essential.

### Additional Benefits

- Return economy airfare from India to the UK, booked and paid by Chevening
- Arrival allowance (~£1,200–1,300) to cover deposits and initial setup costs
- Departure allowance (~£1,200–1,300) paid in your final month
- Visa fee reimbursement — including the UK student visa fee (~£490) and the Immigration Health Surcharge (~£470+). You pay these upfront and are reimbursed, so keep all receipts
- Travel grant for attending official Chevening events and networking sessions

Your Immigration Health Surcharge also gives you full access to the NHS for your entire scholarship year — covering GP visits, emergency care, and hospital treatment at no additional cost. Dental and optical care are not fully covered, so factor these into your personal budget.

## How Do I Apply? A Step-by-Step Overview

### Step 1: Confirm Your Eligibility

Before registering, verify every criterion: Indian citizenship, at least 2,800 hours of post-graduation work experience by the application deadline, a qualifying undergraduate degree, and a genuine plan to return to India for two years.

### Step 2: Apply to Three UK Universities

Research and shortlist three eligible UK Master's programmes that align with your career goals. Apply to each independently through their admissions portals. You must secure at least one unconditional offer by Chevening's secondary documents deadline.

### Step 3: Register on the Chevening Portal

The portal opens around August each year. Complete the online registration and pass the built-in eligibility checker. You'll receive a confirmation email with a unique access code — store this carefully, as you'll need it every time you log back in.

### Step 4: Complete the Application Form

The form covers personal details, immigration information, education history, work history, your three chosen programmes, and the details of two referees. The system automatically calculates your work hours from the dates you enter.

### Step 5: Write Your Four Essays

Your essays carry more weight than your academic record. Each one must include specific examples with measurable outcomes — not vague statements about potential or ambition. Use the STAR method (Situation, Task, Action, Result) to structure your answers. Generic essays are the most common reason for rejection.

### Step 6: Submit Before the October Deadline

The portal closes in early October, typically at 12:00 UTC. Late applications are not accepted under any circumstances. Save your progress frequently — the system logs you out after 15 minutes of inactivity.

### Step 7: Interview (If Shortlisted)

Shortlisted candidates are invited for interviews, typically held between February and April. Panels will probe your leadership experiences, career goals, motivation for studying in the UK, and your plans to return to India. Your essays form the foundation of this conversation, so know them thoroughly.

### Step 8: Award and Pre-Departure

Successful candidates receive award letters in June. You'll then confirm your university enrolment, attend a mandatory pre-departure event, process your UK student visa, and book flights through Chevening's travel agency. Bring personal buffer funds of at least £1,500–2,000 (~₹1,60,500–2,14,000) to cover the first few weeks before your stipend arrives.

### Document Checklist

Chevening's initial application does not require document uploads, but shortlisted candidates must produce accurate documents quickly. Prepare these in advance:

- Valid passport (must cover the entire scholarship period)
- Undergraduate degree certificate and official academic transcripts
- CV/résumé covering education, work experience, and extracurricular involvement
- Work experience documentation (employment certificates, appointment letters, or payslips from each post-graduation role, clearly showing start and end dates)
- Two reference letters (referees upload these directly to the portal when requested)
- English language proficiency certificate (IELTS, TOEFL, or PTE) meeting each university's requirements
- University offer letters (at least one unconditional offer by the secondary deadline)
- Four pre-drafted Chevening essays, carefully edited before pasting into the application form

### Tips for First-Time Applicants

#### Start Planning 12 Months Early

The portal opens in August, but your preparation should begin a full year ahead. Identify your target UK programmes, verify your work experience hours, choose your referees, and draft your essays well in advance. Last-minute preparation consistently produces generic applications that don't survive the first round.

#### Treat Your Essays as Your Strongest Asset

Every sentence in your essays must serve a purpose. Avoid sweeping claims — demonstrate impact with specific examples, numbers, and outcomes. An essay that says "I led a team of 12 engineers to deliver a project three weeks ahead of schedule, saving ₹18 lakh" is far stronger than "I have strong leadership skills and a passion for engineering."

#### Choose Your Three Courses Strategically

Each programme you apply to should coherently align with your career narrative and your essays. For example, if your goal is health policy reform but your three chosen courses cover unrelated fields, selection panels will question your preparation. Coherence between your essays, your background, and your course choices matters.

#### Pick Referees Who Know Your Leadership

Chevening selects leaders, not just high achievers. A referee who can speak to your initiative, professional contributions, and impact will serve you far better than one who can only comment on your grades. Share your CV and essay drafts with your referees so their letters reinforce — rather than contradict — your application narrative.

#### Demonstrate a Credible Return Plan

Chevening invests in future Indian leaders, not in candidates planning to build careers in the UK. Your essays must reflect a genuine, well-considered plan to return and create specific, meaningful impact. Name the sector you'll work in, the gap your UK education addresses, and the change you intend to drive.

### Frequently Asked Questions

### Is Chevening available for Indian students?

Yes. India is a Chevening-eligible country, and Indian students are among the largest groups of Chevening scholars globally.

### Can I apply for a Bachelor's degree or PhD?

No. Chevening exclusively funds one-year, full-time Master's programmes starting in the September/October intake.

### Can I be unemployed when I apply?

Yes. You don't need to be currently employed. The only requirement is that you've already accumulated at least 2,800 hours of post-graduation work experience by the application deadline.

### Can Chevening be combined with other funding?

You must disclose any additional funding. Chevening generally requires that it remain your primary funding source. Always consult the official guidelines before accepting secondary funding.

### A Final Word

Every year, highly qualified Indian professionals rule themselves out of Chevening before even applying — because they've never managed a formal team, or their work feels too niche, or they don't see themselves as the kind of "leader" a government scholarship would select. This fundamentally misunderstands what Chevening is looking for.

Chevening's definition of leadership is intentionally broad. It includes the engineer who pushed through a sustainable construction practice against institutional resistance, the teacher who rebuilt a rural school curriculum from scratch, the journalist who gave voice to a story that changed policy, and the public health worker who mobilised a community during a crisis. If you've influenced outcomes, built relationships, and created genuine impact — Chevening is designed for you.

With the next application portal opening in August 2026 for the 2027–28 intake, Indian professionals who are planning ahead should begin identifying their target UK programmes, drafting their essays, and selecting their referees now. For candidates who invest in purposeful, honest, well-prepared applications, Chevening is not an unreachable dream — it's a structured, transparent pathway to a world-class education and a lifelong global network.

### Useful Links

- Official Chevening website: [www.chevening.org](http://www.chevening.org)
- India-specific guidance: [www.chevening.org/scholarship/india](http://www.chevening.org/scholarship/india)
- The British Council in India is also a point of contact for applicants seeking guidance on the process

## Scholarship in Focus - India

### Dr. Manmohan Singh Scholarship

*A Practical Student Guide to Cambridge's Premier India-Focused Doctoral Funding*

For many Indian scholars, the idea of pursuing a PhD at the University of Cambridge represents the pinnacle of academic aspiration, yet the financial realities of studying abroad often place this dream beyond reach. The Dr. Manmohan Singh Scholarship exists to ensure that financial limitations do not stand between talent and opportunity. Cambridge is one of the world's top universities, and the cost of studying there as an international student can be daunting — tuition alone can exceed £25,000 per year, with living costs adding another £12,000–15,000. Over three years, that's close to ₹1 crore. This scholarship is designed to cover those costs entirely.

The scholarship is funded by Rolls-Royce India, the BP Foundation, and the Tata Group. It is primarily administered by St John's College, Cambridge, with the British Council serving as an on-the-ground partner and facilitator for Indian applicants. It supports Indian students pursuing a PhD or MPhil at St John's College — one of the university's oldest and most prestigious colleges. It is named in honour of Dr. Manmohan Singh, former Prime Minister of India, renowned economist, and St John's College alumnus, who graduated with a First in Economics in 1957.

#### What Is This Scholarship?

The Dr. Manmohan Singh Scholarship is a full-cost doctoral funding award for exceptional Indian students. It was created to honour Dr. Singh's legacy and to support outstanding Indian researchers in pursuing doctoral study at Cambridge in fields connected to India's development priorities.

A key point to remember: this is not a general Cambridge scholarship. It is specific to St John's College. You must list St John's as your first-choice college on your Cambridge graduate application — no exceptions. Typically, only 1 scholarship is awarded per year (occasionally a few), making this one of the most competitive doctoral awards available to Indian students. The scholarship can be renewed annually for up to three academic years, as long as you are making good academic progress.

#### Am I Eligible?

Before you spend time on the application, make sure you meet every one of the following criteria:

##### Nationality and Residency

You must be an Indian national with a valid Indian passport. In most cycles, you also need to be living in India at the time of application. The scholarship is meant to bring India-based researchers to Cambridge, not to support those already studying abroad.

##### Age

You must generally be under 35 years old as of 31 December of the year your course begins (some cycles use 31 January — always check the official notice for your intake year).

##### Academic Qualifications

You need a Master's degree (such as an MPhil, MTech, MSc, or equivalent) from a recognised Indian university in a field related to your proposed research. Competitive applicants typically have first-class or distinction-level results at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels.

### Eligible Fields of Study

Your research must fall within one of these three areas:

- Science and Technology — including aerospace, marine engineering, energy, computer science, and applied sciences
- Economics — including development economics, public policy, and quantitative social science
- Social Sciences — including sociology, politics, and international relations

If your subject sits at the edge of these areas, contact St John's College directly to confirm eligibility.

### College and Admission Requirement

You must apply for a full-time PhD or MPhil at Cambridge and choose St John's College as your first preference. You also need to have received at least a conditional offer of admission from Cambridge before finalising your scholarship application. The two processes run in sequence — Cambridge admission first, then the scholarship.

### What Does the Scholarship Cover?

#### Tuition Fees

The scholarship covers full tuition fees for up to three academic years. For international students, these can exceed £25,000 per year. You don't need to pay this yourself — it is paid directly to the university.

#### Monthly Stipend

A monthly living stipend is provided to cover housing, food, transport, and day-to-day expenses. The total annual package (tuition plus living costs combined) has historically been estimated at around £35,000 (approximately ₹37,40,000), though the official figure is described as variable — your actual stipend amount will be confirmed in your award letter.

#### Additional Benefits

- Return economy-class airfare between India and the UK
- UK student visa application fee
- Annual renewal for up to three years (subject to satisfactory academic progress)

Note: The scholarship does not cover costs for dependants. If you plan to bring family members, their expenses are your responsibility.

### How to Apply: Step by Step

#### 1. Identify your research area and potential supervisor

Start by pinpointing a specific research question and finding a Cambridge faculty member who could supervise your work. Email two or three potential supervisors with a short research summary and your academic CV. This step is expected and necessary.

#### 2. Apply to the University of Cambridge

Submit your Cambridge graduate application, making sure to select St John's College as your first-choice college. Include your research proposal, references, and transcripts before the programme deadline.

#### 3. Receive your Cambridge admission offer

Wait for a conditional or unconditional offer from Cambridge. The scholarship application opens only after your admission is confirmed.

**4. Complete the scholarship application**

Once admitted, fill in the scholarship application via the St John's College and British Council-linked portal. This includes a statement of purpose, academic records, references, and proof of admission. Keep the acknowledgement email you receive — it is your official record.

**5. Shortlisting and interview**

Shortlisted candidates are called for an online interview. Expect questions about your research, why you chose St John's, and your long-term academic goals. Prepare thoroughly.

**6. Award notification and pre-departure**

Results are typically announced by June. If selected, you'll receive a formal award letter from St John's College. You then finalise your enrollment, apply for a UK student visa, and book your travel. Most programmes start in September or October.

**Key Dates**

These are typical timelines, always verify exact dates from the official St John's College and British Council notifications for your year:

Milestone	Typical Timing
Cambridge PhD application deadline	Varies by department; often October–January
Scholarship application deadline	Around 15 January
Interviews	April – June
Results announcement	By June
Programme start date	September / October

*Disclaimer: Timings, age cutoffs, and the exact number of awards may vary slightly by year; always confirm details on the official St John's College and British Council notifications for your intake.*

**Documents You'll Need**

Start collecting these early — some take time to arrange:

- Valid Indian passport
- Master's degree certificate and official transcripts
- Undergraduate degree certificate and transcripts
- CV covering your education, research experience, publications, and any professional roles
- Statement of purpose tailored to the scholarship (explaining your research, your choice of St John's, and your long-term goals)
- Research proposal for your PhD (research question, methodology, significance, expected contribution)
- Two academic reference letters from professors or senior researchers who know your work well
- Proof of Cambridge admission (conditional or unconditional offer letter)

- Any publications, academic awards, or research outputs

All documents must be in English. If any were originally issued in another language, certified translations are required.

#### Tips for a Strong Application

- **Contact a supervisor before applying to Cambridge.** Cambridge PhD admissions are heavily supervisor-driven. Reaching out to two or three potential supervisors before submitting your application significantly improves your chances. Keep your email concise and research-focused.
- **Choose St John's deliberately.** Many Indian students apply to Cambridge without carefully thinking about college preference. For this scholarship, St John's must be your first choice from the start — you cannot change it later, and it is a hard eligibility condition.
- **Treat your research proposal as your most important document.** It must show originality, academic rigour, and feasibility. Don't be vague. Identify a specific gap in the existing literature, explain why it matters, and describe how you'll address it. Get feedback from your Master's supervisor before submitting.
- **Start at least 12–18 months before your intended start date.** Between supervisor outreach, reference collection, proposal writing, and the application itself, the process is long. Starting late almost always results in a rushed, weaker application.
- **Choose referees who know your research well.** A strong reference letter speaks directly to your research ability, not just your grades. Provide your referees with your CV, proposal, and statement of purpose well in advance.
- **Show the broader impact of your research.** The scholarship's funders — Rolls-Royce India, the BP Foundation, and the Tata Group — care about science, technology, energy, and economic development. In your statement and interview, articulate why your research matters and how it connects to larger challenges.

#### Frequently Asked Questions

**Is this scholarship only for St John's College?**

Yes. If you are admitted to any other Cambridge college, this scholarship does not apply.

**Can I apply if I'm currently outside India?**

Most cycles require you to be an Indian national residing in India at the time of application. Check the official call for your cycle to be sure.

**Is this scholarship for Master's students?**

No. It supports doctoral-level study (PhD and MPhil) only — not undergraduate or taught Master's programmes.

**How many scholarships are awarded each year?**

Typically, only 1 scholarship is awarded per cycle, though this can occasionally vary. Most sources describe it as 1 highly competitive award per year, so treat the competition accordingly.

**Is it renewable?**

Yes, for up to three academic years — but renewal is not automatic. You need satisfactory academic progress and supervisor endorsement each year.

#### Can I hold another scholarship alongside this one?

Possibly, but any supplementary funding must be disclosed and approved by St John's College. Do not accept additional funding without checking first.

#### What if I don't have a Cambridge offer by the deadline?

In most cases, you cannot be considered without at least a conditional offer. Contact St John's College directly if your situation is unclear.

#### A Final Word

It's understandable to feel like institutions such as Cambridge were built for a different kind of student. The Dr. Manmohan Singh Scholarship exists to challenge that assumption. Dr. Singh himself arrived at St John's from Amritsar as a young economist and graduated with one of the highest distinctions the college awards. The scholarship in his name is a commitment to making that journey possible again for India's best researchers. Only around 1 scholar (occasionally a few more) is selected each year from a country of 1.4 billion people. But the criteria are transparent, the process is merit-based, and the path is clear: secure your Cambridge admission, choose St John's, build a strong research proposal, and apply.

#### Where to Get Help

For official eligibility details and application forms, visit the St John's College, Cambridge website. The British Council India offices in New Delhi, Mumbai, Chennai, and Kolkata can help with application guidance and document requirements as the scholarship's India-side facilitator. For questions about finding a supervisor or departmental admission requirements, contact the relevant Cambridge faculty or department through their graduate admissions pages.

Keep copies of all documents and correspondence throughout the process. The acknowledgement email from St John's College is your official confirmation of submission — do not lose it.



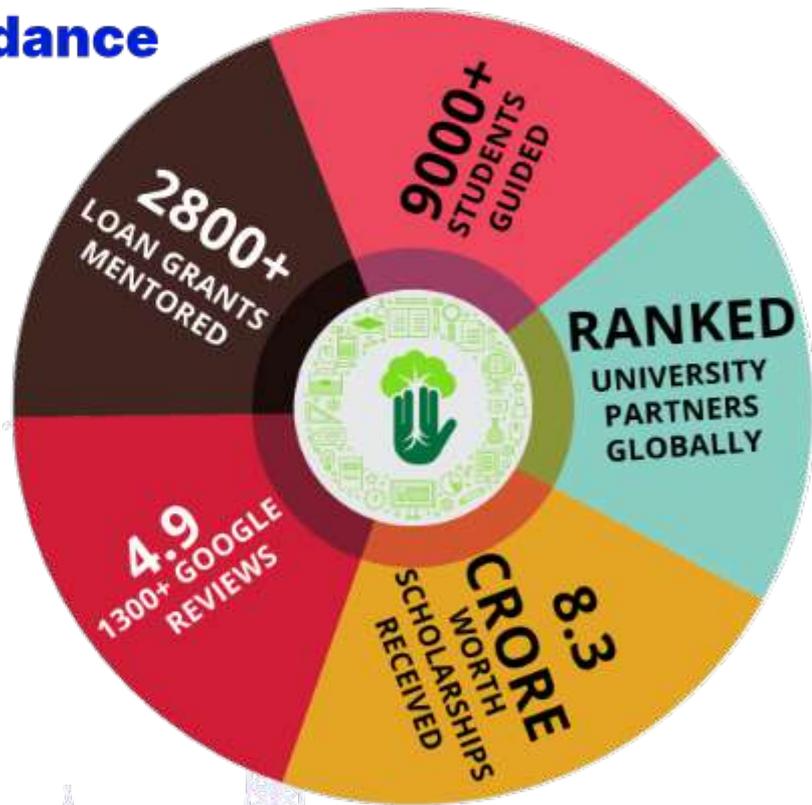
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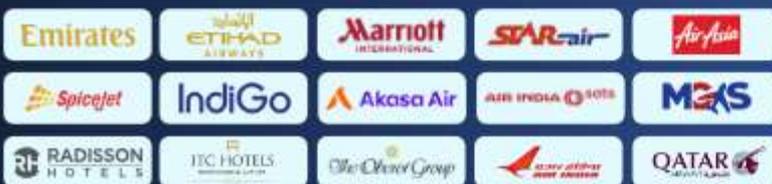
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