



# IMPORTANT CURRENT AFFAIRS

FEBRUARY 2024

**FOR UPSC IAS & State Civil Services Exams in  
Himachal Pradesh, Punjab and Haryana**

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## INDIA'S CORE SECTOR GROWTH SLOWS

- India's eight key sectors witnessed a slowdown in output growth in December 2023, recording a 3.8% increase, the lowest in 14 months.
- This was down from 8.3% growth in the previous year, based on data available as of February 1, 2024.



### Key findings:

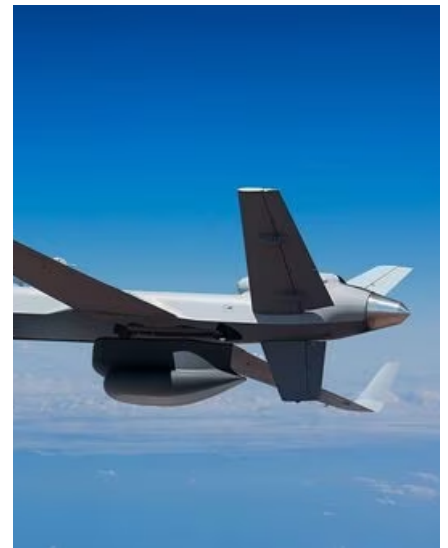
- Electricity: Production fell to its lowest level in eight months, growing at just 0.6%.
- Crude oil: Output declined by 1% for the second consecutive month, marking the biggest drop since June 2023.
- Coal: Despite the slowest year-over-year rise in six months (10.6%), production reached its highest level since April 2023.
- Refinery products & steel: Output witnessed their best levels since April, but growth rates slowed sharply (2.6% and 5.9%, respectively).
- Cement: Production bounced back after a November dip, growing by 1.3% and reaching its highest level since July.
- Fertiliser: Output grew at the fastest pace in seven months (5.8%) and reached its highest level since May.
- Natural gas: Growth slowed to its slowest rate in three months (6.6%)

### What's Core Sector Growth?

- The core of an economy is the capital base of the economy. India has eight core sectors including power, steel, refinery products, crude oil, coal, cement, natural gas, and fertilisers.
- These sectors affect the Indian economy and most other industries.
- Monthly Index of Eight Core Industries (ICI) is compiled and released by the Office of the Economic Adviser (OEA), Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade (DPIIT), and Ministry of Commerce & Industry before the IIP is released.

## MQ-9B ARMED DRONES

- Recently, the U.S. Congress formally notified of the possible sale of 31 MQ-9B high **altitude long endurance armed Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAV)** to India estimated to cost \$3.99 billion.
- The development comes amid reports of a hold over the deal by the U.S. Congress over the Pannun episode and concerns over India's "high-level" enquiry into the incident.



### What are MQ-9B Armed Drones?

- The MQ-9B drone is a variant of the **MQ-9 "Reaper"** which was used to launch a modified version of the Hellfire missile that eliminated al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri in the heart of Kabul.
- They can carry out a variety of roles, including **maritime surveillance, anti-submarine warfare and over-the-horizon targeting.**
- The high-altitude long-endurance (HALE) drones are capable of remaining airborne for over 35 hours and can carry four Hellfire missiles and around 450 kg of bombs.
- The MQ-9B has two variants: **SkyGuardian** and its sibling SeaGuardian. The Indian Navy has been operating the MQ-9B **Sea Guardian** since 2020.

### Need for MQ-9B for India

- **Border Security Enhancement:** India seeks MQ-9B drones for improved surveillance and strike capabilities along land and maritime borders.
- **Maritime Defense Against China:** MQ-9B crucial to counter Chinese submarines and warships in the Indian Ocean Region.
- **Counter-terrorism and Counter-insurgency Operations:** MQ-9B deployment is required for supporting counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency efforts in the country.
- **Strategic Edge and Risk Mitigation:** Acquisition provides India with a strategic advantage, enabling long-range surveillance and precision strikes without risking manned aircraft or pilots.
- **Strengthening US-India Defence Cooperation:** This deal will enhance defense ties with the US, a key partner in the Indo-Pacific region and reinforces India's position in the QUAD grouping.

## UTTARAKHAND'S UNIFORM CIVIL CODE

- Uttarakhand Assembly is likely to pass the State's **Uniform Civil Code (UCC) Bill during the February session.**
- State-appointed panel submitted a final report to the Uttarakhand Chief Minister.
- **Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat** also appoint committees for UCC formulation.

### What is UCC?

- UCC aims to create a **uniform set of laws for marriage, divorce, adoption, and inheritance.**
- It is rooted in **Article 44** of the Constitution under **Directive Principles of State Policy.**

### Historical Perspective and Constituent Assembly Debate

- Whether the provision should be included as a fundamental right or a directive principle was the subject of intense debate in the **Constituent Assembly.**
- Opponents, primarily Muslim members of the Constituent Assembly, feared that it would dilute the rights of religious minorities in India.
- The matter was finally settled by a **5:4 majority vote**, with the **Sub-Committee on Fundamental Rights headed by Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel** deciding that establishing a UCC should not fall within the scope of fundamental right

### Expected Changes in UCC Draft

- Focus on **gender equality, equal property share for Muslim women.**
- Revoke practices like **polygamy, iddat, and triple talaq.**
- **Minimum marriage age** remains the same.



### Supreme Court's Stance

- Over the years, the Supreme Court has deliberated upon the UCC in several judgments.
- **Shah Bano Begum case, 1985:** the Court called for UCC implementation.
- Such a demand was reiterated in subsequent cases such as **Sarla Mudgal v. Union of India (1995)**, and **John Vallamattom v. Union of India (2003)** among others.
- In 2019, in its **Jose Paulo Coutinho v. Maria Luiza Valentina Pereira** judgment, the Court hailed Goa as a "shining example" where "the uniform civil code is applicable to all, regardless of religion except while protecting certain limited rights" and accordingly urged for its pan-India implementation.

### Law Commission's Position

- **21st Law Commission in 2018:** UCC neither necessary nor desirable.
- **22nd Law Commission in 2022:** seeks views on UCC.

## PANCHAYATS IN INDIA

- According to a recent report, only 1% of panchayats' revenue is generated through taxes.
- Most of their revenue comes from the Centre and State as Grants, with 80% from the Central government and 15% from the State government.

### About Panchayats

- Panchayats act on three levels — gram sabhas, panchayat samithis, and zila parishads.
- They are responsible for a variety of tasks including agriculture, rural housing, water management, rural electrification, healthcare, and sanitation.
- In some cases, zila parishads are also responsible for maintaining schools, hospitals, dispensaries, and minor irrigation projects.



### Issues Faced by Panchayats

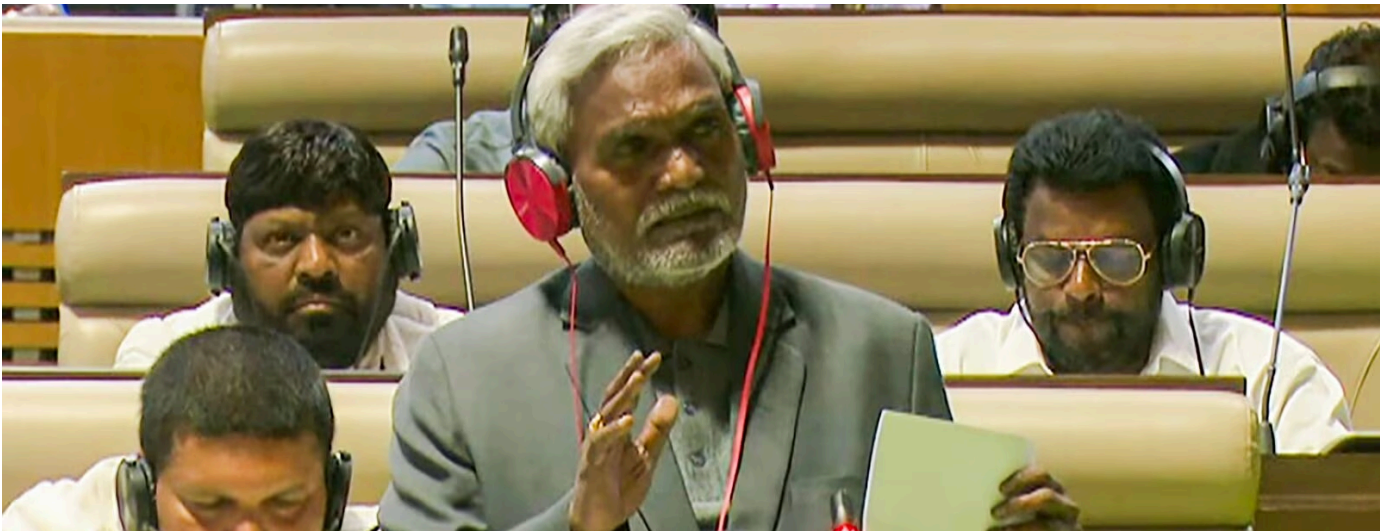
- According to news reports, due to dependence on the Centre and the State for their funds, most panchayats suffer from interference from the top two tiers of the system.
- In August last year, several panchayat heads protested in Chennai asking for independence of the Panchayati Raj.
- The Standing Committee on Rural Development and Panchayati Raj said in March last year that 19 out of 34 State/Union Territories did not receive any funds under the Rashtriya Gram Swaraj Abhiyan scheme in FY23.
- The programme was started for building capacity and training elected representatives.
- According to a Reserve Bank of India assessment, decentralization can be encouraged to give local officials and leaders more influence.

### Variations by State: Revenue

- States differ significantly in the average amount of money raised each panchayat.
- Kerala leads the way with more than ₹760 lakh per panchayat, closely followed by West Bengal at ₹57 lakh.
- In Andhra Pradesh, panchayat revenue receipts make up only 0.1% of the state's total revenue.
- Uttar Pradesh stands out with panchayats forming 2.5% of the state's own revenue, the highest among states.

## FLOOR TEST IN JHARKHAND

- The recently formed **Champai Soren government** successfully secured a vote of confidence on the floor of the **Jharkhand Assembly**.
- The trust vote follows the resignation of former **Chief Minister Hemant Soren**, who stepped down moments before the **Enforcement Directorate (ED)** arrested him on allegations of money laundering.



### What is a floor test?

- A floor test is primarily taken to know whether the executive enjoys the confidence of the legislature.
- It is a constitutional mechanism under which a Chief Minister appointed by the Governor can be asked to prove majority on the floor of the Legislative Assembly of the state.
- As per the Constitution, the Chief Minister is appointed by the Governor of the state.
- When a single party secures the majority of the seats in the house, the Governor appoints the leader of the party as the Chief Minister.
- In case the majority is questioned, the leader of the party which claims majority has to move a vote of confidence and prove majority among those present and voting.
- The Chief Minister has to resign if they fail to prove their majority in the house. This happens both in the parliament and the state legislative assemblies

### Governor's Powers

- Article 174 of the Constitution authorizes the Governor to summon, dissolve and prorogue the state legislative assembly.
- According to Article 175(2), the Governor can summon the House and call for a floor test to prove whether the government has the numbers.
- However, the Governor can exercise the above only as per Article 163 of the Constitution which says that the Governor acts on the aid and advice of the Council of Ministers headed by the Chief Minister.
- When the House is in session, it is the Speaker who can call for a floor test. But when the Assembly is not in session, the Governor's residuary powers under Article 163 allows him to call for a floor test.

## MALDIVES ACCELERATES PLAN TO LOWER DEPENDENCE ON INDIA

### Background:

- In January, controversial tweets by deputy ministers of the Maldives on Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Lakshadweep led to a diplomatic row between the two countries.



### The consequences of this row have been two-fold:

- The tweets sparked a call by some Indians on social media to boycott the Maldives.
- Meanwhile, Maldivian President Mohamed Muizzu strengthened ties with one of India's rivals, China.

### Tourist Inflow Statistics

#### Tourist Numbers in the first 35 days (2023 vs. 2024):

- Indian tourists declined from 21,460 to 16,895.
- Russian tourists also decreased from 26,305 to 22,577.
- However, Chinese tourists have swiftly filled this gap, resulting in an overall increase in tourist inflows.

### Impact on Indian Medical Tourism

- Generally, 20,000 to 40,000 medical tourists from the Maldives visit India annually for treatment.
- Maldives Government's health insurance scheme expanded to cover visits to the UAE and Thailand to diminish reliance on a select group of countries.
- This announcement coincided with the Maldivian President's return from China.

### Maldives' Economic Dependence on India

- Import Statistics from India:
- Over 95% of granite, 40% of steel, 30% of various products.
- Majority of staple foods, including rice, sugar, and flour.
- Tourism industry, from stay to food, heavily relies on Indian raw materials.

### Agreements with China

- Agricultural schemes to reduce dependence on one country for imported staple foods such as rice, sugar, and flour, by growing them locally.
- Construction of a 100-bed hospital with Chinese aid.

### Overall Impact:

- Diplomatic fallout is affecting not only tourism but also medical and economic ties between the two countries.
- The archipelago's key agreements with China after the fallout with India threatens this mutually beneficial relationship, and gives China more sway in the Indian Ocean region

# DISCOVERY OF 390-YEAR-OLD DEEPASTAMBHAM

- Recently, a 390-year-old Deepastambham (lamp post) was discovered on the edge of River Krishna in Nalgonda district of Telangana.
- **Discoverer:** Ashok Kumar of Public Research Institute for History, Archaeology & Heritage.
- **Structure:** 20-foot tall lamp post with hollows for lamps, accompanied by a small flat-roofed structure.



### Key Points

- The structure sheds light on trade ties in the region during the **early medieval period**.
- It is a Unique find in the **Krishna river valley**, with no known records of similar structures.

#### Uncommon in the Deccan:

- Lamp posts are rare in the Deccan region.
- Dhvajastambam (flag pole) is more common in temple architecture.
- It is in contrast with the prevalence of lamp posts in temples on the west coast, including Goa.

#### Possible Lighthouse Function:

- Due to its height, it is speculated to have served as a lighthouse on the riverine trade route.
- Enhancing navigation and trade activities along the river.

#### Political Context:

- The village is about 180 kilometres from Hyderabad which was ruled by the Qutb Shahi rulers at that time.
- European travellers, including the French diamond trader Tavernier who made five trips to the Hyderabad kingdom in the same period, describe land trade routes.

### Inscription Details

- Based on the inscription engraved on the lamp post near the ruined **Śiva temple**, the pillar can be dated to **June 1635**.
- It is written in **Telugu mixed with Tamil language**.
- It is dedicated to **Kasi Viswanatha**.
- The inscription was engraved by **Madiraju Narasayya of Yidupulapāti** and erected by **Polinedu, son of Vali Munulayya**.

# INDIA SUSPENDS FREE MOVEMENT REGIME WITH MYANMAR

- The Government of India has decided to scrap the **Free Movement Regime (FMR)** along the **Myanmar border**.
- The **Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA)** has recommended the immediate suspension of FMR.



### What is the Free Movement Regime between India and Myanmar?

- The FMR came into existence in **2018** as a part of India's **Act East policy**.
- It allows cross-border movement up to **16 km without a visa**.
- The agreement was brought to facilitate local border trade, improve access to education and healthcare for border residents, and strengthen diplomatic ties.
- Under the agreement, individuals were also allowed up to **two weeks** in the neighbouring country by getting a **one-year border pass**.

### Reasons for Suspension

- The FMR was abolished between India and Myanmar to ensure the **internal security** of the country and to maintain the **demographic structure** of India's North Eastern States

- The **Manipur CM** has often blamed the FMR for the ongoing ethnic violence between the tribal **Kuki-Zo and the Meitei communities** in the State.
- The **tribal Zo** people have a major presence in **Manipur and Mizoram**, as well as in parts of **Assam and Nagaland**, and adjoining areas of **Bangladesh and Myanmar**.
- Similarly, Nagas live in **Nagaland, Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh, and Assam**, as well as in neighbouring **Myanmar**.
- The Meitei groups also allege that **narcotics** are being smuggled into India taking advantage of the unfenced international border

### India-Myanmar Border

- India and Myanmar share a **1,643-km-long porous border** which is shared by multiple North Indian states like **Mizoram, Manipur, Nagaland, and Arunachal Pradesh**.
- All these states were under **FMR**.

## BHARAT RATNA FOR SWAMINATHAN, RAO, CHARAN SINGH

- Recently, the Prime Minister of India announced that **Bharat Ratna** is being conferred on former Prime Ministers PV Narasimha Rao and Chaudhary Charan Singh as well as agricultural scientist MS Swaminathan.



### Monkomb Sambasivan Swaminathan

- M. S. Swaminathan, 98, passed away last year. Called the '**Father of the Green Revolution**', he played a major role in the set of changes introduced in farming in the **1960s and '70s** that helped India achieve **food security**.
- Swaminathan, after witnessing the impacts of the **Bengal famine of 1943** during the Second World War, decided to devote his life to ensuring India had enough food.

### PV Narasimha Rao

- As a distinguished scholar and statesman, Narasimha Rao Garu served India extensively in various capacities. He is equally remembered for the work he did as **Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh, Union Minister, and as a Member of Parliament and Legislative Assembly for many years.**

- His visionary leadership was instrumental in making India **economically advanced**, laying a solid foundation for the country's prosperity and growth.
- Narasimha Rao Garu's tenure as Prime Minister was marked by significant measures that opened India to global markets, fostering a new era of **economic development**.

### Chaudhary Charan Singh

- Charan Singh was Uttar Pradesh's first non-Congress chief minister, and went on to become **Prime Minister of India in 1979**.
- Regarded as a '**champion of peasants**', he is credited with creating a new political class encompassing **farming communities** in North India with his influence felt even today.

## AVERAGE ANNUAL SITTING DAYS IN LS DOWN TO 55

- According to a statistical study of Parliament from June 2019 to February 2024 by the non-profit PRS Legislative Research, the 17th Lok Sabha, which concluded recently, sat only for 55 days on average in a year.



### Key Points

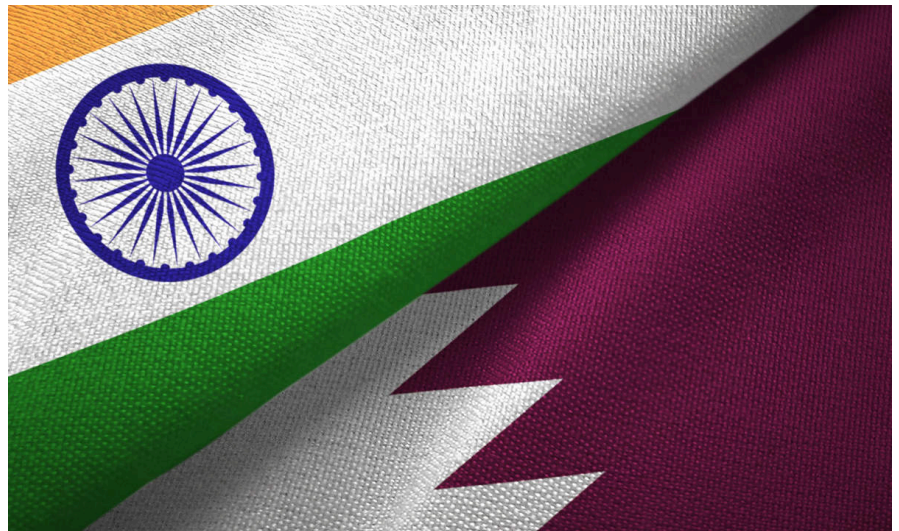
- The 17th Lok Sabha held **274** sittings.
- The four previous Lok Sabhas, all of which were dissolved before the stipulated five-year period, had fewer sittings.
- One of the explanations for the drop in sittings is the pandemic, though it does not explain why **11 out of the 15 sessions** held during this Lok Sabha were adjourned early, resulting in the cancellation of 40 scheduled sittings.
- Different reasons were cited for each cancellation. Out of the five years, Parliament sat for the lowest number of days — **33 in total — in 2020**.
- The 17th Lok Sabha was the first ever to function without a **Deputy Speaker**, a constitutionally mandated position.
- **Article 93** of the Constitution requires that the Lok Sabha elect a Speaker and a Deputy Speaker as soon as possible.

### Passing Bills

- According to the study, **58%** of Bills were passed within two weeks of their introduction. **The J&K Reorganisation Bill, 2019 and the Women's Reservation Bill, 2023** were passed within two days of their introduction.
- Thirty-five per cent of Bills were passed with less than an hour of discussion in Lok Sabha. The corresponding figure for Rajya Sabha was **34**.
- Only 16% of the Bills were referred to **Standing Committees for Parliamentary scrutiny**.
- In all, **729 Private Member Bills (PMB)** were introduced in the 17th Lok Sabha, which is higher than all the previous Lok Sabhas except the 16th. However, only two of them were discussed.
- In the same period, **705 PMBs** were introduced in Rajya Sabha, and 14 were discussed.
- Till date, only **14 PMBs** have been passed and received assent. None have been passed in both Houses since **1970**.

## 7 INDIANS WHO FACED DEATH ROW IN QATAR RETURN HOME

- **Eight Indian Navy veterans** who had been in Qatari custody were released recently in **Doha**.
- The development was followed by the announcement that the Prime Minister of India will visit Qatar on his way back home from the **United Arab Emirates** where he will pay a two-day visit.



### Diplomatic Ties

- The case of the eight Indian Navy veterans kept India-Qatar relations on tenterhooks as the matter became an issue of **diplomatic tug of war** and their cause of the arrest was never published.
- Despite this, **economic ties** have remained on track and the two sides signed a **\$78 billion LNG** deal that extended an existing agreement on supply of liquified natural gas till **2048**.
- Both the United Arab Emirates and Qatar hold around **3,000 Indian prisoners** in their prisons and the prisons in the **Gulf region** hold more than **half of the total Indian prisoners in foreign jails**.
- Qatar is a major supplier of **energy** to India and at least **eight lakh Indian workers** are employed in the Gulf country which continues to be a major source of **foreign remittances to the Indian economy**.

### About Qatar

- Qatar is a small country in **West Asia**.
- Qatar has one land border. The country borders **Saudi Arabia** to the **south**.
- **Capital**: Doha
- **Currency**: Qatari Riyal
- It is a high-income economy, backed by the world's **third-largest natural gas reserves** and **oil reserves**.

# SECURING FOREIGN ORGAN TRANSPLANTS

- Aimed at preventing any possible commercial dealings in organ or tissue transplantation of foreigners, the **Health Secretary** alerted the **Ministry of External Affairs** of possible violations and asked support to establish systems for monitoring the process.



- The Health Ministry said many foreign nationals were coming to India for various types of organ transplantation.
- They could be a prospective recipient or donor of organs and might be visiting on a medical/attendant visa.
- Now, a person of any age can register for receiving deceased donor organs.
- As per the data available with NOTTO, 15,561 organ transplants took place in the country in the calendar year 2022.

### Indian Policy

- India has now adopted the “One Nation, One Policy” for organ donation and transplantation.
- Under the policy, it has been decided to remove the requirement of domicile of the State for registration of patients requiring organ transplantation from deceased donors.
- Now such patients will be able to go to any State and register themselves for organ transplantation.
- As per the new government guidelines, the upper age limit of 65 years for eligibility for registration to receive deceased donor organs has been removed.

### National Organ and Tissue Transplant Organization (NOTTO)

- NOTTO is a National level organisation set up under the **Ministry of Health and Family Welfare**.
- It has following two divisions:
  1. National Human Organ and Tissue Removal and Storage Network
  2. National Biomaterial Centre.
- National Network division of NOTTO functions as the apex centre for all Indian activities for procurement, distribution and registry of organs and tissues donation and transplantation in the country

## VEDANTA STERLITE COPPER PLANT

- Recently, the Supreme Court proposed forming a “**non-partisan**” committee to objectively evaluate environmental concerns and to suggest additional conditions, if any, for reopening the **Vedanta Sterlite’s copper plant at Thoothukudi**.



### Key Points

- The copper smelting plant was permanently shut down on the orders of the Tamil Nadu government six years ago on grounds of **pollution**.
- The 2018 closure of the plant was preceded by nearly **30 years of local protests**, which had even led to an incident of police firing.
- Vedanta has moved the court against the closure.
- The Court said that in case the panel recommends re-opening, Vedanta cannot resume operations with the 2018 standards.
- It urged both the State and Vedanta to suggest modalities and domain experts for the panel by the next hearing.
- Copper is one of the few metals that occurs in **nature** in **directly usable metallic form** (native metals) and is an important **non-ferrous base metal** having wide industrial applications, ranging from defence, space programme, railways, power cables, mint, telecommunication cables, etc.
- India is **not self-sufficient** in the production of copper ore.
- In addition to domestic production of ore and concentrates, India imports copper concentrates for its smelters.
- Chile is the top copper producer in the world, with 27% of global copper production.

### About Copper

- Copper is a soft, malleable, and ductile metal with very high thermal and electrical conductivity.
- Copper Deposits mainly occur in Singhbhum district in Jharkhand, Balaghat district in Madhya Pradesh and Jhunjhunu and Alwar districts in Rajasthan.
- Minor Producers of Copper: Agnigundala in Guntur District (Andhra Pradesh), Chitradurg and Hasan districts (Karnataka) and South Arcot district (Tamil Nadu).

## GLOBAL PULSES CONFERENCE

- The **Global Pulses Conference** suggested that India augment production of pulses to meet the **nutritional requirements**.



### Key Points

- The Indian Government emphasised India's commitment to farmers by ensuring an **MSP** that guarantees a **50% profit** over the production cost.
- An impressive **60% growth** in pulses production over the last decade was revealed citing significant increases in MSP for various pulses, such as **117% for masoor**, **90% for moong**, **75% for chana dal**, and **60% for toor and urad**.

### Global Pulses Conference

- The Global Pulses Conference is an **annual** meeting of **pulses producers, processors and traders**.
- The 2024 conference is jointly organised by **National Agricultural Cooperative Marketing Federation of India Ltd. (NAFED)** and **the Global Pulse Confederation (GPC)**.
- It underscores the objective to position pulses as a **global dietary staple**.

### Pulses Production in India

- India is the **largest producer** (25% of global production), **consumer** (27% of world consumption) and **importer** (14%) of pulses in the world.
- **Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and Karnataka** are the top five pulses-producing states.
- India has achieved self-reliance in **chickpeas** and other pulses, with efforts ongoing to address minor deficiencies in **pigeon peas and black gram**.
- The government aims for **self-sufficiency** in pulses by **2027**, focusing on seed variety enhancement and expanding cultivation of tur and black gram.

## DAC ACCORDED AON FOR PROPOSAL WORTH ₹84,560 CRORE

- Recently, the **Defence Acquisition Council (DAC)** accorded **Acceptance of Necessity (AoN)**, the first step in the procurement process, for proposals worth **₹84,560 crore**.



### Key Points

- The proposals include some long-pending deals such as for **heavyweight torpedoes (HWT)** for the Navy's **Scorpene-class submarines** and **flight refueller aircraft (FRA)** for the **Indian Air Force (IAF)**.

### The overall acquisition projects also includes:

- New-generation anti-tank mines with seismic sensors and remote deactivation.
- Radars and air defence tactical control radar.
- Medium-range maritime reconnaissance and multi-mission maritime aircraft for Navy and Coast Guard.
- Software-defined radios for military communication.

### DAP 2020

- The procurement of a new generation of anti-tank mines having seismic sensors and the provision of remote deactivation with additional safety features has been approved under **Buy (Indigenously Designed, Developed and Manufactured category of Defence Acquisition Procedure (DAP) 2020**.

- The DAC has approved **amendments** in the **DAP 2020** with respect to **benchmarking and cost computation, payment schedule and procurement quantity**.
- The DAC also cleared the AoN for sustainment **support through repair replenishment for the 24 MH-60R multi-role helicopters** procured by the Navy from the U.S. under the foreign military sale route.

### Defence Acquisition Council

- The Defence Acquisition Council (DAC) is the **highest decision-making body** in the Defence Ministry for deciding on new policies and capital acquisitions for the **three services (Army, Navy and Air Force) and the Indian Coast Guard**.
- The **Minister of Defence** is the **Chairman of the Council**.
- It was formed, after the Group of Ministers recommendations on 'Reforming the National Security System', in 2001, post Kargil War.

# FIRST TIME IN INDIA': AFRICAN-MEDITERRANEAN WADER BIRD SPOTTED IN WARANGAL

### Key Points

- The spur-winged lapwing was spotted near Bhattupalle village by a team of birdwatchers participating in the Hyderabad Bird Race.
- The 14th edition of the Hyderabad Bird Race was organised by Deccan Birders together with HSBC.



### About Spur-Winged Lapwing

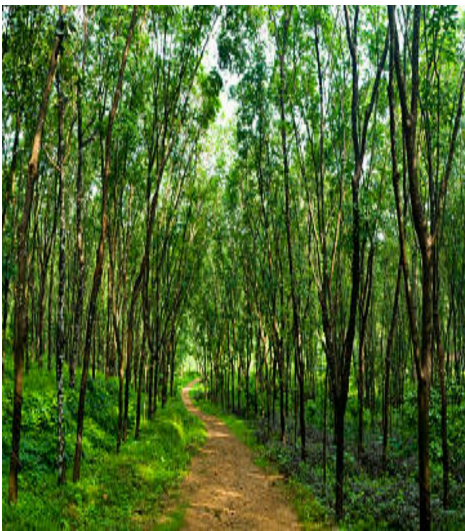
- **Scientific name:** Vanellus spinosus
- **Habitat:** It is native to **North Africa, the Middle East and Mediterranean regions**
- It has never been sighted in the Indian subcontinent.
- Its plumage is a striking combination of **black, white, and brown.**
- **IUCN Conservation Status:** Least Concern

### India Bird Races

- India Bird Races started in **2005 in Mumbai**, has spread to many cities and regions across India.
- The Bird Race is a one day event where birders search for birds from dawn to dusk.
- They also record as many species as possible while enjoying being outdoors and in company of other birders.

# SC TELLS CENTRAL GOVERNMENT TO USE DICTIONARY MEANING OF 'FOREST'

- Recently, the Supreme Court, in a significant order, directed that the term '**forest**' will maintain a "broad and all-encompassing" meaning for the time being.
- This directive includes incorporating **1.97 lakh square km of undeclared forest lands**.



### Key Points

- The order was passed by a three-judge Bench led by **Chief Justice of India D.Y. Chandrachud**.
- It addressed the petitions challenging the amendments introduced in 2023 to the **Forest (Conservation) Act, 1980**.
- The 1980 statute aimed to curb further deforestation and prevent ecological imbalance.
- The court directed the government to adhere to the "**dictionary meaning**" of 'forest' as established in a **1996** decision in the **T.N. Godavarman Thirumulpad case**.
- The expression 'forest' will encompass **lands recorded as forests in government records but is not confined to them**.
- The Union government is directed to require States and Union Territories, within two weeks, to submit "**comprehensive records**" of forest lands identified by their respective expert committees.

- The Bench further directed that the establishment of "**zoos or safaris**" by any government or authority should not be consented to without the final approval of the Supreme Court.

### Forest (Conservation) Act, 1980

- The Forest Conservation Act 1980 is an important legislation enacted by the Government of India to regulate the **diversion of forestland for non-forestry purposes**.
- The Act was passed in response to the growing concern over the **rapid depletion of India's forests**, which had serious environmental and ecological consequences.

## RULES THAT EDGE OUT WOMEN FROM JOBS DUE TO MARRIAGE ILLEGAL: SC

- Recently, the supreme court of india ruled that “the rules that bully women employees out of their jobs for getting married or having domestic issues amount to **“coarse gender discrimination”** and are **plainly unconstitutional**.



- Terminating employment because the woman has got married is a coarse case of gender discrimination and inequality.
- Acceptance of such patriarchal rule undermines **human dignity, right to non-discrimination and fair treatment**.
- Laws and regulations based on **gender-based bias** are constitutionally impermissible.
- The government had come in appeal against a decision of the Lucknow Bench of the Armed Forces Tribunal which had ruled in her favour.
- The court also recorded that the Army instruction concerned with the terms and conditions of service for the grant of permanent commissions in the Military Nursing Service was withdrawn in 1995.

### Key Points

- The observations were part of an order which upheld the rights of a woman permanent commissioned officer in the Military Nursing Service who was discharged for getting married.
- A Bench headed by Justice Sanjiv Khanna directed the Union Government to pay the former Lieutenant John ₹60 lakh in compensation within eight weeks as a full and final settlement of all her claims.

## INDIA-MIDDLE EAST-EUROPE CORRIDOR

- The Greek Prime Minister emphasised that despite the Israeli war in Gaza “destabilising” plans for the India-Middle East Economic Corridor (IMEC), India and Greece should persevere with the “peace project”.
- The Greek PM on his visit to India also inaugurated the annual Raisina Dialogue.



### What is the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) Project?

- The India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor is a planned economic corridor that aims to bolster economic development by fostering connectivity and economic integration between **Asia, the Persian Gulf and Europe**.
- It will consist of **Railroad, Ship-to-Rail networks and Road transport routes** extending across two corridors, that is,
- **The East Corridor** – connecting India to the Arabian Gulf,
- **The Northern Corridor** – connecting the Gulf to Europe.
- The IMEC corridor will also include an **electricity cable, a hydrogen pipeline and a high-speed data cable**.
- **Signatories of IMEC:** India, the US, Saudi Arabia, UAE, the European Union, Italy, France, and Germany.

### Ports to be Connected

- **India:** Mundra (Gujarat), Kandla (Gujarat), and Jawaharlal Nehru Port Trust (Navi Mumbai).
- **Middle East:** Fujairah, Jebel Ali, and Abu Dhabi in the UAE as well as Dammam and Ras Al Khair ports in Saudi Arabia.
- Railway line will connect Fujairah port (UAE) to Haifa port (Israel) via: Saudi Arabia (Ghuwaifat and Haradh) and Jordan.
- **Israel:** Haifa port.
- **Europe:** Piraeus port in Greece, Messina in South Italy, and Marseille in France

# WORLD'S RACE TO ERADICATE GUINEA WORM DISEASE NEARS THE FINISH LINE

- The world is on the brink of a public health triumph as it closes in on eradicating Guinea worm disease.



### Key Points

- There were more than **3.5 million cases** of this disease in the **1980s**, but according to the **World Health Organization's (WHO)** weekly epidemiological report, they dwindled to **14 cases in 2021, 13 in 2022, and just six in 2023**.
- At a time when medical advancements often headline with breakthrough vaccines and cures, the battle against Guinea worm disease stands out for its reliance on basic public health principles rather than high-tech interventions.
- There is neither a **drug** treatment for Guinea worm disease nor a **vaccine** to prevent it.
- **Symptoms:** intense pain, swelling, and sometimes secondary bacterial infections at the wound. Victims may experience fever, nausea, and vomiting.

### India and Guinea Worm Disease

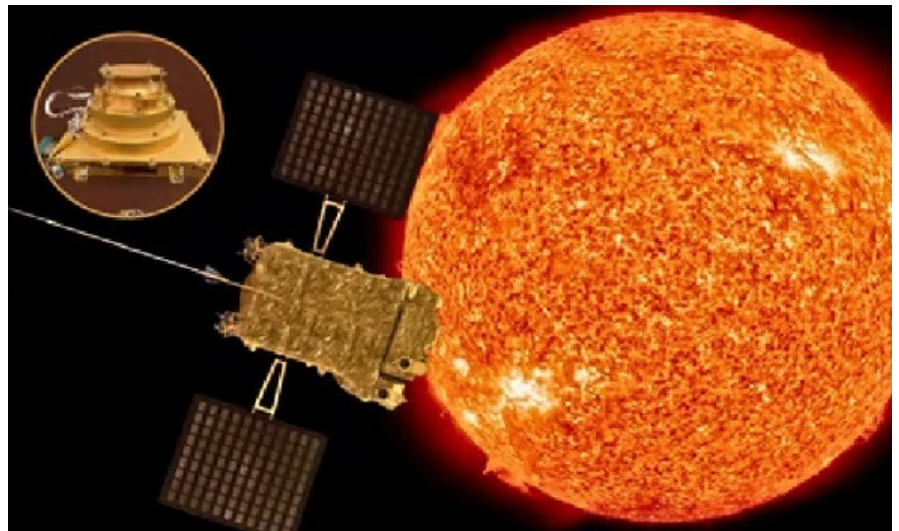
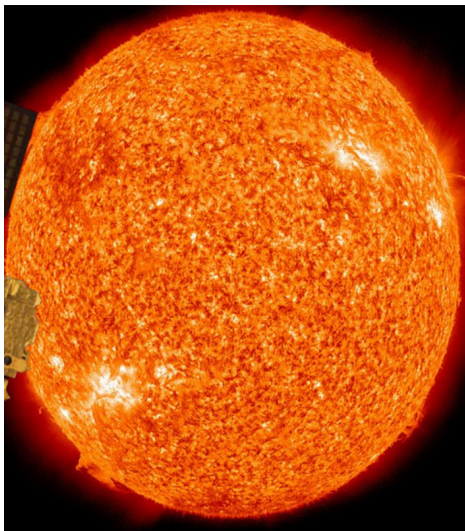
- India eliminated Guinea worm disease in the **1990s**, concluding a commendable chapter in the country's public health history through a rigorous campaign of surveillance, water safety interventions, and education.
- The government of India received **Guinea worm disease-free certification** from the **WHO** in **2000**.
- This accomplishment was the result of a collaboration between the **Indian government, local health workers, and international partners**.

### About

- Guinea worm disease, a **neglected tropical disease (NTD)**, is caused by the parasite **Dracunculus medinensis**.
- The disease affects poor communities in remote parts of **Africa** that do not have **safe water** to drink.

## PAPA DETECTS SOLAR WIND IMPACT OF CORONAL MASS EJECTIONS

- Recently, the Plasma Analyser Package for Aditya (PAPA) payload onboard the Aditya-L1 has detected the impact of coronal mass ejections (CMEs).
- Its advanced sensors have successfully detected the impact of CMEs.



### What is PAPA?

- PAPA is an **energy and mass analyser** designed for in-situ measurements of **solar wind electrons and ions** in the low energy range.
- It has two sensors:
  1. The **Solar Wind Electron Energy Probe (SWEEP)**, measuring electrons in the energy range of 10 eV to 3 keV), and
  2. The **Solar Wind Ion Composition Analyser (SWICAR)**, measuring ions in the energy range of 10 eV to 25 keV and mass range of 1-60 amu).
- The sensors are also equipped to measure the direction of arrival of solar wind particles.

### What are Coronal Mass Ejections?

- Coronal mass ejections (CMEs) are large expulsions of **plasma and magnetic field** from the sun's atmosphere – the **corona**.
- CMEs often occur along with **solar flares** (explosions on the Sun's surface), but they can also occur spontaneously.
- The frequency of CMEs varies with the **11 year solar cycle**. At solar minimum we observe about **one a week**. Near solar maximum we observe an average of **two to three CMEs per day**.
- CMEs disrupt the flow of the solar wind and cause disturbances that can damage systems near-Earth and on Earth's surface.

## ATTUKAL PONGALA

Recently, women celebrated the **Attukal Pongala** festival by making the ritual offering to the presiding deity of the **Attukal Bhagavathy temple**.



### About

- The Attukal Pongala held in **Attukal Temple, Thiruvananthapuram** is the largest congregation of women for a festival in the world.
- Pongala, which means '**to boil over**', is the ritual in which women prepare sweet **payasam** (a pudding made from rice, jaggery, coconut and plantains cooked together) and offer it to the **Goddess or 'Bhagavathy'**.
- The ritual can only be performed by **women** and the streets of the city are known to be jam-packed with faithful devotees during the time of the festival.
- The Goddess-fondly referred to as '**Attukalamma**' is said to be appeased by this ritual.
- The entire **Thiruvananthapuram** city lights up in festive fervour and the number of devotees has increased to the point that it has been recorded in the **Guinness World Book of Records**.

### Attukal Temple

- Attukal temple, located at the heart of Thiruvananthapuram city in **Attukal**, has **Goddess Bhadrakali (Kannaki)** as the main deity.
- Bhadrakali, according to Hindu mythology, is the **Goddess of prosperity and salvation**.
- The temple structure shows a confluence of traditional **Tamil and Kerala styles of architecture**.
- Beautifully carved figures of **Goddess Kali, Sree Parvathy, Lord Shiva and the ten incarnations of Lord Vishnu** are the other attractive sights at the temple.

## GRANT PERMANENT COMMISSION TO WOMEN: SC TO COAST GUARD

- Recently, the Supreme Court urged the Indian Coast Guard to ensure that **women are granted permanent commission**.
- The top court was hearing a plea filed by Indian Coast Guard officer **Priyanka Tyagi** seeking the grant of permanent commission to eligible women Short **Service Commission Officers** of the force.



### Key Points

- It had wondered whether the Centre was adopting a **“patriarchal approach”** despite judgments upholding permanent commissions to women officers in the armed forces.
- The Supreme Court had frowned on the government’s suggestion to allow **10% women permanent commission**, saying women were no **“lesser beings”**.

### Indian Coast Guard

- Established in **1977** with just **7 surface ships**, it now has an inventory of **158 ships and 78 aircraft in its fleet**.
- Now, the Indian Coast Guard has grown into the **world’s fourth-biggest Coast Guard**.
- The Coast Guard enjoys a very cordial and good relationship with the neighbouring countries.
- It is headquartered in **New Delhi**.

### Functions of the Indian Coast Guard

- A coast guard is in-charge of **organizing rescue missions, recruiting volunteers, conducting searches, stopping smuggling through marine channels and watching over our nation's boundaries**.
- The Indian Navy, the Department of Revenue (Customs), the Department of Fisheries, the Central Armed Police Forces, and the State Police Services all collaborate closely with the coast guard.

## SIMILIPAL TIGER RESERVE

- Concerned over the sizeable number of pseudo-melanistic tigers in its Similipal Tiger Reserve (STR), largely due to inbreeding, the Odisha government has written to the National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA) to consider introducing female tigers from other landscapes to the reserve.



### Key Points

- According to the **All Odisha Tiger Estimation (AOTE 2023-24) report**, which was released recently, 30 tigers were found in the State's forests.
- With **24 adult tigers**, the STR currently holds the largest share of the State's tiger population. It also houses all adult female tigers in the State.
- A total of **13 adult tigers** (seven females and six males) were found to be pseudo-melanistic in Similipal. No other wild habitat in the world has pseudo-melanistic tigers.

### Melanistic tigers

- According to a study conducted by multiple authors, approximately **37% of the tigers** in STR are **pseudo-melanistic** — a condition characterised by **wide, merged stripes**.
- Similipal's tigers are also found to move within an isolated habitat, although it has one of the largest tract of contiguous forest.

### Similipal Tiger Reserve

- Similipal derives its name from '**Simul**' (silk cotton) tree.
- It was formally designated a tiger reserve in 1956 and brought under **Project Tiger** in the year **1973**.
- It was declared a **biosphere reserve** by the Government of India in June, 1994.
- It has been part of the **UNESCO World Network of Biosphere Reserve** since **2009**.

## HYDROGEN FUEL CELL FERRY

Recently, the Prime Minister of India flagged off India's first indigenously built hydrogen fuel cell ferry boat in virtual mode.



### Key Points

- The vessel has been built at the **Cochin Shipyard**.
- The pilot vessel is a **24-metre catamaran** which can carry **50 passengers**.
- It also has a fully **air conditioned** space for passengers.
- It will make **urban mobility smooth and easy**.

### About Hydrogen Fuel Cell

- Hydrogen fuel cells are a **clean, reliable, quiet, and efficient** source of **high-quality electric power**.
- They use hydrogen as a fuel to drive an electrochemical process that produces electricity, with **water** and **heat** as the only by-products.

### Significance of Hydrogen Fuel Cell (HFC)

- **Zero-Emission Power:** HFCs produce no harmful emissions, eliminating the costs associated with handling and storing toxic materials like battery acid or diesel fuel. In fact, when fueled with pure hydrogen, the only by-products are heat and water, making our products a zero-emission, sustainable power source.
- **Robust Reliability:** Hydrogen fuel cell technology has proven itself against tough conditions, including cold environments as low as -40 degrees F/C, weather environments like hurricanes, deserts, and winter storms, and even the hardworking business environments of material handling warehouses.
- **Improved Efficiency:** Hydrogen fuel cells are generally between 40% to 60% energy efficient. Hydrogen fuel cell efficiency is put to work to improve warehouse productivity by up to 15% using fuel cell forklifts to extend the mileage range for electric vehicles.
- **Lower Operational Costs:** Compared to batteries and internal combustion generators, fuel cells save money. They eliminate the need to change, charge, and manage batteries, subsequently reducing labour, time, space, and peak power demands.