

19 JULY 2024

TOPICS COVERED

1. LS poll result a moral, political defeat for BJP: Yogendra Yadav (GS Paper-II: Election)
2. Over 800 elephants died in Kerala in 8 years
3. Two new Supreme Court judges take oath of office
4. India and a case for strategic autonomy (GS Paper-II: Foreign Policy)
5. The issue with tree planting schemes (GS Paper-III: Environment)
6. Trade tact (GS Paper-III: Economy)
7. Does India have enough laws to combat superstition? (GS Paper-I: Society)
8. What is the role of the Finance Commission? (GS Paper-II: Constitutional Bodies)
9. How do Assam's Foreigners Tribunals function?

## LS poll result a moral, political defeat for BJP: Yogendra Yadav

India is a textbook case of competitive authoritarianism, it has moved much beyond 'flawed democracy', says political analyst at ACJ event

GS Paper II:  
Election

CHENNAI

The 2024 Lok Sabha election result was a moral and political defeat for the Bharatiya Janata Party and a personal defeat for Prime Minister Narendra Modi, said Yogendra Yadav, political analyst and national convener of Bharat Jodo Abhiyan, here on Thursday.

Speaking on the topic "Are we back to democratic politics? Reading the implications of Verdict 2024" at the Asian College of Journalism, Mr. Yadav said, "Mr. Modi not only hoped but expected the BJP to get more than 325 seats and the NDA to get more than 375 seats. Anything below 303 seats would be a moral defeat and below 272 would be a political defeat for the BJP and below 250 would be a personal defeat for Mr. Modi. The election result has been a moral, political and personal defeat for the BJP and Mr. Modi," he said.

"In order to describe most countries in the world, we have to call them 'competitive authoritarianism', in which the government holds elections, which are structured in a way as to give the ruling party a structural advantage and there is very little democracy outside elections. India was a textbook



Yogendra Yadav at the ACJ event in Chennai. R. RAVINDRAN

example of competitive authoritarianism. We have moved much beyond a flawed democracy. In the last 10 years we have become a mix of competitive authoritarianism and non-theological majoritarianism, which does not officially declare itself a theological country but for all practical purposes follows majoritarianism... We were very rapidly sliding towards a full blown 21st Century-style authoritarianism and *de facto* Hindu rashtra. The first Republic of India inaugurated on January 26, 1950 had come to an end around 2019," Mr. Yadav said.

He also said "this was not an election but a plebiscite". "It was about getting public approval on dis-

mantling our Republic. This election was not about the BJP or the NDA. It was about the Supreme Leader [Mr. Modi] seeking unconditional approval for his regime... But people refused to treat this as a plebiscite. They refused the invitation to a perpetual state of siege, anxiety and frenzy, where we would give up every other consideration except Mr. Modi," he said.

"Since this was a controlled election, money, media and the Modi myth did work and they managed to salvage the BJP's numbers, unlike the 1977 general election," he said and added, "We are in the no man's land between the First and the Second Republic of India."

"The battle to reclaim the Constitution and democracy should be combined with a social radical agenda. This moment in history offers one of the rare opportunities to combine social and political agenda," he added.

Sashi Kumar, Chairman, Asian College of Journalism, introduced Mr. Yadav. The Hindu Group Publishing Private Limited Directors N. Ram and N. Murali, CPI(M) Polit Bureau member G. Ramakrishnan, senior journalists, scholars from various fields, faculty members and students participated.

## LS poll result a moral, political defeat for BJP: Yogendra Yadav (19 July)

India is a textbook case of competitive authoritarianism, it has moved much beyond 'flawed democracy', says political analyst at ACJ event

- Yogendra Yadav described the 2024 Lok Sabha election results as a significant defeat for the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and Prime Minister Narendra Modi.
- He noted that Modi expected the BJP to win over 325 seats and the NDA to secure more than 375 seats. Winning below 303 seats would be a moral defeat, below 272 a political defeat, and below 250 a personal defeat for Modi.
- Yadav argued that India has shifted from a flawed democracy towards a mix of competitive authoritarianism and majoritarianism.
- He claimed that India was sliding towards full-blown 21st-century-style authoritarianism and a *de facto* Hindu rashtra.
- According to Yadav, the First Republic of India, inaugurated in 1950, effectively ended around 2019.
- Yadav described the 2024 election as a plebiscite aimed at gaining public approval for dismantling the Republic.
- He claimed it was not about the BJP or NDA but about Modi seeking unconditional support for his regime.
- Yadav noted that despite a controlled election environment with significant influence from money, media, and the Modi myth, the BJP's numbers were salvaged but not overwhelming.
- He compared the current political state to being in "no man's land" between the First and Second Republic of India.
- Yadav emphasized the need to combine the fight for the Constitution and democracy with a social radical agenda, viewing this as a unique historical opportunity.

SC orders interim release of YouTuber 'Savukku' Shankar (19 July)

- The Supreme Court ordered the release of YouTuber A. Shankar, also known as 'Savukku' Shankar, who had been detained under the Goondas Act for two months.
- Shankar's detention was challenged by his mother, represented by senior advocates, who appealed to the Supreme Court.
- The Supreme Court highlighted Shankar's right to personal liberty and ordered his release until the Madras High Court decides on the legality of his detention.
- The court urged the High Court to hear the case quickly and not take Shankar's liberty lightly.
- Tamil Nadu's lawyer agreed to request the High Court to expedite the hearing.
- The Supreme Court had previously noted that preventive detention is a serious matter and questioned whether Shankar posed a threat to national security.
- Tamil Nadu's lawyer described Shankar as a "habitual offender" who made derogatory comments about women police.
- The Supreme Court emphasized that justice must be genuinely administered and not just be a formality.

## Assam model helps slash child marriage by 81%: report (19 July)

- A report released on World Day for International Justice highlights Assam's approach to handling child marriage cases.
- The report, titled 'Towards Justice: Ending Child Marriage,' praises Assam's legal intervention as a model for other states.
- Assam's legal strategy reduced child marriages by 81% in 20 districts between 2021-22 and 2023-24.
- The approach was effective in ending child marriages in 30% of villages and reducing cases in 40% of villages studied.
- The report notes that with a 92% backlog in trial courts, it might take India 19 years to clear all child marriage cases.

# दिल्ली से भी बेहतर आपके शहर गोरखपुर में

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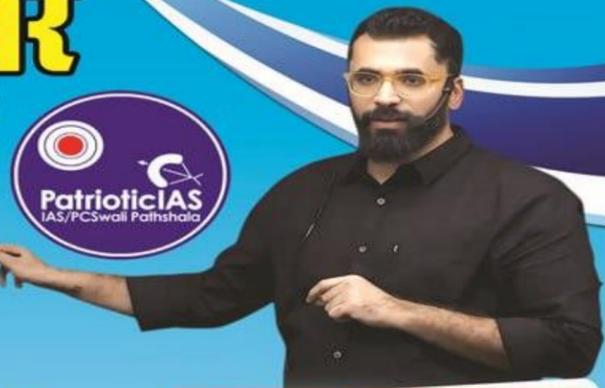
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## Over 800 elephants died in Kerala in 8 years

**Sarath Babu George**  
THIRUVANANTHAPURAM

Kerala's forests recorded 845 elephant deaths between 2015 and 2023, with studies indicating an increasing trend in the death rate over time.

The findings were given in the report of an elephant population estimation undertaken in the State's four elephant reserves.

An analysis also highlights a stark trend: younger elephants, particularly those under 10 years of age, face the highest risk of mortality, with an alarming rate of approximately 40%. This increase in deaths among calves has been attributed to elephant **Endotheliotropic Herpesviruses - Haemorrhagic Disease (EEHV-HD)**,



**Alarming note:** The report said that calves faced a higher risk of death from **Haemorrhagic Disease, a viral infection**. PTI

that coexists with elephants.

### Immunity in herds

The Forest Department has cited a recent study in Sri Lanka that shed light on the potential mitigating factors. Calves in larger herds exhibit better survival

al rates due to shared immunity. Exposure to various strains within larger herds enables calves to develop antibodies that effectively combat EEHV-HD, thus enhancing their chances of survival.

The population estimation report underscores

the need to restore natural habitats and check the fragmentation of elephant herds to prevent EEHV-HD from becoming a major threat to the survival of Asian elephants in the region. Elephant herd sizes are found to shrink significantly in sub-optimal habitats where fodder availability is severely constrained.

### Current threats

The document observes that elephants have been facing increasing vulnerability due to shrinking habitats and rising fragmentation exacerbated by climate change. Key factors contributing to their susceptibility include declining population sizes, sensitivity to high temperatures, competition from invasive plant species disrupting their food

sources, and heightened sensitivity to diseases.

It also reports that several critical variables influencing elephant distribution patterns, including land-use changes, water balance in the climate, temperature fluctuations, and disturbances are induced by human activities.

Recognising the need for a systematic approach to understand and mitigate elephant deaths, the study has recommended a structured protocol akin to Tamil Nadu's Elephant Death Audit Framework (EDAF). The proposed framework would facilitate comprehensive investigations into the causes of elephant deaths, that would help to identify patterns, assess threats, and implement targeted conservation measures effectively.

## No ticket, no party posts: BJP in Bengal has failed to engage Muslim community (19 July)

- Suwendu Adhikari, Leader of the Opposition in West Bengal, suggested the BJP should stop using the slogan "Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas" and disband its Minority Morcha because Muslims did not vote for the party in the recent Lok Sabha election.
- His comments sparked criticism and embarrassment for the BJP, which maintains its commitment to the slogan despite not receiving Muslim votes.
- Adhikari's remarks indicate dissatisfaction with the BJP's election performance and reflect broader issues in West Bengal politics where Muslims are often seen as a vote bank.
- The BJP's strategy in West Bengal has focused on excluding Muslims and polarizing Hindus, with controversial policies like the Citizenship (Amendment) Act and fears of a National Register of Citizens causing concern among Muslims.
- The party has not included Muslim leaders in key positions or provided tickets to Muslim candidates, contributing to its failure to gain support from the community.
- Even in areas where Muslims are the majority, like Malda Dakshin, Muslims have voted for other parties, showing dissatisfaction with both the BJP and Trinamool Congress.
- Despite being in power for 13 years, the Trinamool Congress has not significantly improved the economic status of Muslims, who make up 27% of West Bengal's population.

## Cong. raises demand for minimum wage of ₹400 nationwide (19 July)

- The Congress party is calling for a nationwide minimum wage of ₹400 a day ahead of the Union Budget on July 23.
- Congress general secretary Jairam Ramesh highlighted a "decline in real wages," noting that workers' purchasing power is lower today than it was 10 years ago.
- According to the Labour Bureau's Wage Rate Index, real wages for laborers have been stagnant from 2014 to 2023 and have declined between 2019 and 2024.
- Data from the Agriculture Ministry shows that real wages for agricultural laborers grew at 6.8% per year under former Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh, but declined by -1.3% per year under Prime Minister Narendra Modi.
- The Congress attributes the drop in real wages to slow wage growth and high inflation.
- In its manifesto, the Congress had promised a nationwide minimum wage of ₹400 a day to address stagnant wages.
- Ramesh criticized the current Prime Minister's efforts and stated that the Union Budget is an opportunity to implement the Congress's proposed "real 400-plus" wage.

## Two new Supreme Court judges take oath of office (19 July)

- Chief Justice of India D.Y. Chandrachud swore in Justices N. Kotiswar Singh and R. Mahadevan as Supreme Court judges on Thursday.
- Their appointment brings the Supreme Court back to its full strength of 34 judges after nearly three months.
- These new appointments fill vacancies left by the retirements of Justice Aniruddha Bose in April and Justice A.S. Bopanna in May.
- The Supreme Court Collegium recommended Justices Singh and Mahadevan on July 11, and the government approved the appointments on July 16.
- Justice N. Kotiswar Singh, the first Supreme Court judge from Manipur, was previously Chief Justice of the High Court for Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh.
- His appointment provides representation to the Northeast, particularly Manipur.

- Justice R. Mahadevan, who was ranked third among serving judges of the Madras High Court, was chosen to provide representation to the backward community.
- The Collegium also recently recommended Justice K.R. Shriram for appointment as Chief Justice of the Madras High Court.

# Vasco da Gama's toxic legacy is now a 'pandemic' that kills 8 million globally

Tobacco has profound and multifaceted effects on the body, contributing to a range of issues, including cancers, respiratory diseases, cardiovascular problems, and conditions such as diabetes, infertility, a weakened immune system, and complications in pregnancy. Its consumption can also lead to severe addiction due to the presence of nicotine

## GS Paper III: Disease burden

**W**hat does the voyage of Vasco da Gama have to do with a commodity that is the cause of much grief and ill health across the world? The answer, in a word, is tobacco, but the story is as follows: on July 8, 1497, began the historic voyage of Vasco da Gama. This journey reshaped global maritime routes and left an indelible mark on trade and culture. Among the myriad exchanges catalysed by this era of exploration was the introduction and dissemination of tobacco, a commodity that has since impacted societies profoundly and multifacetedly.

Tobacco has a pernicious effect on the human body, contributing to a range of health issues including various cancers (lung, mouth, throat, oesophagus, pancreas, and bladder), respiratory diseases (chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, emphysema, chronic bronchitis), cardiovascular problems (heart disease, stroke, hypertension), and other conditions such as diabetes, infertility, a weakened immune system, and complications in pregnancy. Its consumption can lead to severe addiction due to the presence of nicotine, a highly addictive substance. The pervasive nature of tobacco consumption and its severe health consequences make it a global public health crisis that requires urgent and coordinated action.

Despite its "Pan Indian" use, tobacco, originally cultivated by Native Americans, was brought to Europe in the 16th Century and, soon after, introduced to South Asia by European traders and colonisers. The Portuguese, followed by the Dutch and the British, were instrumental in spreading tobacco use. Tobacco quickly embedded itself into the cultural and social fabric of South Asian societies. Yet, it is essential to remember that smoking was alien to Indian ethos and culture. Despite the linguistic diversity in India, with as many as five linguistic families (thousands of languages), none of the Indian languages have a native or original word for "tobacco". The exception in Dravidian languages is due to the functionality – or description-related coinage – for "tobacco," and there is no literary evidence about the use of tobacco before the European arrival.

Surprisingly, the economic dimensions of the tobacco menace have not been subject to debate since the colonial era. There has not been a robust enough critique of the British Raj for tobacco. Indeed, it isn't the Kohinoor that should symbolise European exploitation, but the countless lives lost to smoking that should be the true emblem of colonial greed. The introduction of tobacco in India has left a lasting legacy of addiction and disease.



An exhibit on the impact of tobacco consumption set up by a hospital in Mumbai. FILE PHOTO

## Ethical and revenue considerations

Tobacco, being a drought-tolerant, hardy crop, is economically significant to the underprivileged. Today, tobacco accounts for 2% of India's agri-exports and employs more than 45 million people. The industry is a major source of revenue through taxation and exports exceeding ₹22000 crore. However, this benefit comes at a tremendous human and financial cost. The total economic cost of smoking in India, including health expenditure and productivity losses, amounts to ₹1.82 trillion annually.

Tobacco use is responsible for over 1.2 million deaths in India each year, with smoking-related diseases accounting for the majority. Tobacco is a significant contributor to the country's cancer burden, with 27% of all cancers in India attributable to tobacco use. This aspect of colonial legacy – where tobacco was a tool of economic gain for colonial powers but a source of health devastation for local populations – deserves more attention in historical discourse.

## Stacking up priorities

The contemporary landscape of tobacco research in India is marked by a conflict of priorities between two premier institutions: the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) and the Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR). The ICMR advocates for the elimination of tobacco to mitigate its public health impact, and investing in research and policies aimed at reducing tobacco use. In stark contrast, the ICAR focuses on increasing tobacco crop yields and employing modern genetic techniques to enhance the productivity of tobacco farmers. ICAR's Central Tobacco Research Institute (CTRI) in Rajahmundry is at the forefront of this research. The



Vasco da Gama's journey reshaped global maritime routes and left an indelible mark on trade and culture. Among the myriad exchanges catalysed by this era was the introduction of tobacco

organisation interest is to enhance tobacco productivity and commerce while ensuring the sustainability and quality of tobacco leaves and seeds. This is in conflict with ICMR's aspirations for a tobacco-free India, creating a significant policy and ethical dilemma.

However, the law is quite clear. Article 21 of the Indian Constitution guarantees the right to life and personal liberty, including the right to health, as an integral part of this fundamental right. Furthermore, the Directive Principles of State Policy (DPSP) under Articles 39(e), 39(f), 41, 42, and 47 mandate the state to work towards improving public health, ensuring social justice, and raising the standard of living. These provisions compel the state to prioritise the health and well-being of its citizens over the economic benefits of tobacco farming.

## Will CRISPR make a difference?

In scientific innovation, gene editing technique CRISPR (clustered regularly interspaced short palindromic repeats) presents a potential solution to the tobacco epidemic. Researchers are using CRISPR to develop genetically-modified tobacco plants that are less harmful or harmless. This technology could potentially alter the nicotine content and other harmful substances in tobacco leaves, providing a safer alternative for consumers.

Recent studies have shown promise in using CRISPR to knock out specific genes in tobacco plants, thereby reducing nicotine content significantly. For example, targeting the transcription factor genes *ERF199* and *ERF189* resulted in an ultra-low-nicotine phenotype, with nicotine levels reaching only 2-5% of wild-type levels. Knocking out the *QPT2* gene drastically reduced nicotine production but caused severe growth inhibition, making it unsuitable for agricultural use.

Additionally, targeting all six members of the *BBL* gene family reduced foliar nicotine levels by up to 94%. These developments highlight the potential for CRISPR to create tobacco lines with dramatically reduced nicotine content. However, further characterisation is needed to ensure these modifications do not negatively impact other important agronomic traits. The collaboration between ICMR and ICAR is crucial. By working together, these institutions can develop tobacco crops that reduce health risks while maintaining economic viability.

## Surrogate advertising

The tobacco industry has shown remarkable resilience and ingenuity in circumventing regulations to curb its influence. Despite stringent advertising bans under the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC), the tobacco lobby has employed surrogate advertising to promote its products. This involves using brand names on non-tobacco products, sponsoring events, and promoting tobacco-related imagery in media and entertainment. Such tactics undermine public health efforts and perpetuate tobacco consumption.

There is a popular misconception that "epidemic" and "pandemic" apply exclusively to infectious diseases. However, tobacco consumption perfectly fits the existing definition of a pandemic. A pandemic is characterised by its widespread prevalence, severe consequences, and the ability to affect a significant portion of the population across multiple countries. Tobacco use meets these criteria, causing over 8 million deaths worldwide annually and affecting millions more through chronic diseases and disabilities.

The scale and severity of tobacco-related diseases, coupled with its pervasive presence across the globe, justify the classification of tobacco consumption as a pandemic.

This perspective could galvanise international efforts and resources to combat tobacco use more effectively, treating it with the urgency and coordinated action typically reserved for infectious disease outbreaks.

(Dr. C. Aravinda is an academic and public health physician. aravindaaiimsjr10@hotmail.com)

## THE GIST

Originally cultivated by Native Americans, tobacco, was introduced to South Asia by European traders. They were instrumental in spreading tobacco use in the region though smoking was alien to Indian ethos and culture

The cultivation of tobacco yields over ₹22000 crore. However, this comes at a tremendous human and financial cost. The total economic cost of smoking in India, including health expenditures and productivity losses, amounts to ₹1.82 trillion annually

Tobacco consumption perfectly fits the definition of a pandemic. It causes over 8 million deaths worldwide annually and affects millions more through chronic diseases. The scale and severity of tobacco-related diseases, justify classification as a pandemic

# India and a case for strategic autonomy

GS Paper II: Foreign Policy

On July 11, 2024, two days after Prime Minister Narendra Modi had concluded his first visit to Moscow since Russia invaded Ukraine on February 24, 2022, Eric Garcetti, the United States Ambassador to India, said, “In times of conflict there is no such thing as strategic autonomy; we will, in crisis moments, need to know each other.” When Mr. Modi was in Russia, on the eve of a North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) summit in Washington, the Joe Biden administration had expressed its “concerns” publicly. “We have expressed those [concerns] privately, directly to the Indian government and continue to do so,” a U.S. State Department spokesperson said.

President Joe Biden’s National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan joined the debate on July 13 by telling MSNBC that “a bet on Russia as a long-term, reliable partner is not a good bet... Russia would side with China over India any day of the week”. There were reports in the U.S. media that U.S. officials had asked New Delhi to postpone Mr. Modi’s Moscow visit as the NATO summit was to begin on July 9, but India decided to go ahead with the plan, which “disturbed” the Biden administration.

## Stress points, historical overview

While the overall trajectory of the strategic partnership between India and the U.S. seems steady, stress points have appeared in the relationship in recent years. Of these, the most consequential was India’s refusal to toe the western line *vis-à-vis* Russia on the Ukraine war. While the U.S. and its allies imposed economic sanctions on Russia and supplied weapons worth billions of dollars to Ukraine to fight the invading troops, India maintained its strategic partnership with Moscow, expanded its energy cooperation and refused to condemn the invasion at international fora, even as it called for bringing the war to an end and show respect towards the territorial sovereignty and integrity of all countries. For India, this was a neutral position, but in the West, this was seen as economic support for the Russian President Vladimir “Putin’s war”. This caused wrinkles in the India-U.S. partnership, which has widened over the past two and a half years. The public comments by top U.S. officials earlier this month were the sharpest manifestation of the persisting stress points.

Ambassador Garcetti’s comment that strategic autonomy is meaningless during the time of crises goes against the very premise of strategic autonomy. A simple definition of the concept is that countries should be able to make decisions that best serve their national interests, irrespective of the pulls and pressures from other parties. There are two elements in this concept. The first is the inherent conviction that a nation is capable of taking decisions that serve its interests. The second is that the nation should have the will



Stanly Johnny

India’s partners in the West must understand that New Delhi wants the international system to be more representative in line with geopolitical realities

and the resources to take those decisions even in the face of high pressure. So, if India is not able to take autonomous foreign policy decisions during the times of “conflict” and “crisis moments”, as Mr. Garcetti has said, it is not exercising its strategic autonomy.

All Indian governments since Independence have followed strategic autonomy in one form or the other, whether it is called non-alignment, multi-alignment, multi-directional foreign policy or strategic autonomy. And they did not follow this as a dogma but as a foreign policy approach to the country’s interests in a choppy international system. A conventional understanding about India’s foreign policy was that it was too idealistic in the initial years to understand the currents of power politics. But non-alignment and Asian solidarity, as envisaged by Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and others, helped India, a newly decolonised republic that was born into a bipolar global order, mobilise voices in the Third World and stay out of both blocs and pursue its interests and those of the newly decolonised countries. This gave both a moral footing and pragmatic levers to India’s foreign policy.

India initially stayed equidistant to both the capitalist and the communist blocs. But after the U.S. formed new treaty alliances in Asia (Pakistan became a member of both the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization, or SEATO and the Central Treaty Organization, or CENTO) and China moved closer towards the U.S. after breaking up with the Soviet Union, India began building stronger ties with Moscow, but without forfeiting its strategic autonomy. And when the Soviet Union and the communist bloc collapsed by 1991, India chose greater integration with the global economy and closer strategic partnership with the West.

## Great power rivalry

From India’s point of view, the global order is again changing. The U.S. remains the world’s most powerful country but the world order is no longer unipolar. China, already the world’s second largest economy, is rising as a strong competitor to America’s global primacy. Russia is challenging the western security architecture in Europe, militarily. In West Asia, a shadow war between Israel, an American ally, and Iran, a close Russian strategic partner, is heating up. In an anarchic order, India wants to strike a balance between great powers without joining any alliance system. And for this, maintaining its strategic autonomy is essential.

The Russia policy is a case in point. While energy ties with Russia are largely opportunistic and driven by cheap prices (India’s crude imports from Russia jumped from \$2.4 billion in 2021-22 to \$46.5 billion in 2023-24), the defence partnership is structural. Russia is the source of over 40% of India’s defence imports, and 86% of the Indian military’s equipment is of Russian

origin. This cannot be undone overnight. Russia is also an important partner in continental Asia where India works with Eurasian powers for economic progress, connectivity and tackling security challenges.

To be sure, Russia’s deepening ties with China alter the essence of India’s historical partnership with Moscow. But it is also an opportunity to recast the India-Russian partnership as a more equal bilateral partnership – during the Cold War it was heavily lopsided – where both sides would be mindful of each other’s sensitivities. India would not like to see Russia, cut off from the West, going completely into the Chinese embrace, and Moscow would like to have multiple options rather than putting all its eggs in one basket of the ‘Middle Kingdom’. If India were part of any alliance systems, such as Germany, for example, which had to silently accept the destruction of the Nord Stream pipeline which it part owns, India would not have the strategic space to pursue its partnership with Russia, while staying a closer partner of the West. Here, autonomy plays a major part.

## Positive-sum game

The U.S. need not see this as an unfriendly foreign policy choice. India is not a disruptive, revisionist power. It supports a multilateral global order, and that is because it wants the international system to be more representative in line with the geopolitical realities of the present. The world is already multipolar, economically, but a similar transition has not taken place in its power dynamics. India wants to improve the system where its voice, and that of the Global South, would be heard with greater interest. For New Delhi, strategic autonomy does not call for isolationism. It calls for greater engagement with different power centres rooted in informed national interest. Theorists of strategic autonomy do not look at foreign policy as a zero-sum game, where one party gains something at the expense of others. For them, it is a positive-sum game, where everyone gains. For example, India’s energy trade with Moscow made sure that Russian crude kept flowing into the market, helping steady global oil prices. Its close cooperation with Russia can also act as a speed breaker in Moscow’s quasi-alliance with China, which the West sees as the only “revisionist” power that has the capability to rewrite the existing global order.

Unfortunately, India’s partners in the West, who are agitated over New Delhi’s Russia ties and its emphasis on strategic autonomy, do not appreciate the bigger picture. This is the unipolar mentality – you are either with us or against us. This approach was not quite successful even during the unipolar era, as the two-decade-long war against terror would testify. How is it going to work, post-unipolarity?

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## India and a case for strategic autonomy (19 July)

- On July 11, 2024, after Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s visit to Moscow, Eric Garcetti, the U.S. Ambassador to India, commented on the lack of strategic autonomy during conflicts, highlighting the need for mutual understanding in crisis moments.
- Modi’s visit to Russia occurred just before a NATO summit in Washington.
- The U.S. Biden administration publicly expressed concerns about Modi’s visit and communicated these concerns privately to the Indian government.
- On July 13, President Joe Biden’s National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan remarked that Russia would prioritize China over India, suggesting Russia is not a reliable long-term partner.
- Reports indicated that U.S. officials requested India to postpone Modi’s Moscow visit due to the upcoming NATO summit, but India proceeded with the visit, causing discomfort to the Biden administration.
- Despite the strong strategic partnership between India and the U.S., stress points have emerged, particularly due to India’s stance on the Ukraine war.
- India maintained its strategic partnership with Russia, expanded energy cooperation, and did not condemn the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which the West interpreted as economic support for Russia.
- These actions have caused tensions in the India-U.S. partnership, with recent public comments by U.S. officials highlighting ongoing stress points.
- Ambassador Garcetti’s comment that strategic autonomy is meaningless during crises contradicts the idea of strategic autonomy.

- Strategic autonomy means countries should make decisions that best serve their national interests, regardless of external pressures.
- This concept includes the belief that a nation can make such decisions and has the will and resources to do so even under high pressure.
- If India can't make autonomous foreign policy decisions during crises, it is not exercising its strategic autonomy.
- Since Independence, all Indian governments have followed strategic autonomy, whether termed non-alignment, multi-alignment, multi-directional foreign policy, or strategic autonomy.
- India's approach is not dogmatic but a way to navigate its interests in an unpredictable international system.
- Initially, India's foreign policy was seen as idealistic, focusing on non-alignment and Asian solidarity, helping mobilize voices in the Third World and staying out of both the capitalist and communist blocs.
- India's policy provided both moral footing and pragmatic levers in the global order.
- India remained equidistant from the capitalist and communist blocs but built stronger ties with Moscow when the U.S. formed alliances in Asia and China aligned with the U.S.
- India maintained its strategic autonomy and, after the Soviet collapse in 1991, chose greater integration with the global economy and closer strategic partnerships with the West.

### Great power rivalry

- The global order is changing: the U.S. remains powerful, but the world is no longer unipolar.
- China, the world's second-largest economy, is rising as a competitor to the U.S.
- Russia is challenging the western security structure in Europe.
- In West Asia, a shadow war between U.S. ally Israel and Russia's strategic partner Iran is intensifying.
- India aims to balance relations with great powers without joining any alliances, maintaining strategic autonomy.
- India's Russia policy shows this approach.
- India's energy ties with Russia are opportunistic due to cheap prices (crude imports from Russia rose from \$2.4 billion in 2021-22 to \$46.5 billion in 2023-24).
- The defence partnership with Russia is structural; over 40% of India's defence imports come from Russia, and 86% of Indian military equipment is of Russian origin.
- This reliance on Russia cannot be changed overnight.
- Russia is a key partner in continental Asia for economic progress, connectivity, and security.
- Russia's closer ties with China alter India's historical partnership with Moscow but present an opportunity for a more equal bilateral partnership.
- India does not want Russia to align entirely with China, and Russia prefers multiple options over relying solely on China.
- If India joined alliance systems like Germany, it would lose the strategic space to maintain its partnership with Russia while staying close to the West.
- Strategic autonomy allows India to pursue its unique partnerships without being constrained by alliances.

### Positive-sum game

- The U.S. need not see India's strategic autonomy as unfriendly.
- India supports a multilateral global order to reflect current geopolitical realities.
- The world is economically multipolar, but power dynamics haven't transitioned similarly.
- India wants a system where its voice and that of the Global South are heard more.
- Strategic autonomy for India means greater engagement with various power centers based on national interest.
- Strategic autonomy is seen as a positive-sum game, not zero-sum; everyone can gain.
- India's energy trade with Russia helps stabilize global oil prices.
- Close cooperation with Russia can moderate Moscow's alliance with China, which is seen as a revisionist power.
- Western partners, upset with India's Russia ties and emphasis on strategic autonomy, fail to see the bigger picture.
- The "you are either with us or against us" mentality was ineffective even during the unipolar era and is less likely to work post-unipolarity.

#### Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO)

- **Formation:** Established in 1954 in Manila, Philippines.
- **Members:** Australia, France, New Zealand, Pakistan, Philippines, Thailand, the United Kingdom, and the United States.
- **Purpose:** Created as a regional defense pact to prevent the spread of communism in Southeast Asia, particularly following the fall of Vietnam to the North Vietnamese communist forces. It was a Cold War response to the rise of communist influence in the region.
- **Key Actions:**
  - Provided military and economic aid to member states.
  - Held joint military exercises and training programs.
  - Condemned communist activities in the region.
- **Dissolution:** Disbanded in 1977 due to internal disputes and the changing political landscape. The decline of communist threat, the Vietnam War, and the emergence of new regional alliances played a role in its demise.

#### Central Treaty Organization (CENTO)

- **Formation:** Established in 1955 in Baghdad, Iraq.
- **Members:** Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, Turkey, and the United Kingdom. (The United States was a strong supporter but not a formal member.)
- **Purpose:** Aimed at containing the Soviet Union's influence in the Middle East and Central Asia. It was also a response to the Warsaw Pact, the communist military alliance established by the Soviet Union.
- **Key Actions:**
  - Conducted joint military exercises and training programs.
  - Shared intelligence on Soviet activities.
  - Promoted economic cooperation among member states.

- **Dissolution: Disbanded in 1979 due to internal conflicts, the rise of Islamic nationalism, and the changing geopolitical landscape. The Iranian Revolution and the growing tensions between member states, particularly between Iran and Iraq, led to its demise.**

07/19/2024 19<sup>th</sup> July 2024

MAINS PRACTICE QUESTION

GS Paper II: International Relations

**Question:** Analyze the challenges faced by India in maintaining its strategic autonomy in the face of growing US pressure on its relationship with Russia. How can India navigate this complex geopolitical landscape? (250 words/15 Marks)

## The issue with tree planting schemes

GS Paper III: Environment

The exploitation of forest resources due to uncontrolled and unsustainable practices has degraded forest landscapes. The World Bank estimates that the world has lost about 10 million square kilometres of forests since the start of the 20th century. The emphasis on forest restoration approaches to bring such degraded ecosystems back to their earlier state was the main purpose of declaring the decade of 2021-2030 as a Decade of Ecosystem Restoration by the United Nations. This targeted the restoration of 350 million hectares of degraded land to generate \$9 trillion in ecosystem services and sequester an additional 13 gigatons-26 gigatons of greenhouse gases from the atmosphere.

As one of the proven methods to support and sustain biodiversity, tree planting is an undisputed, most appealing and popular approach, and with spectacular potential, to address climate-related crises and other environmental challenges. This includes biological carbon sequestration as a mechanism to store and remove carbon dioxide from the atmosphere. This is one reason to consider a mass-scale drive of tree planting as a silver bullet to tackle the challenges of climate change globally, by governmental and non-governmental organisations including individuals. Keeping this indispensable role of trees in maintaining the ecological balance, the then Indian Agriculture Minister, K.M. Munshi, launched the Van Mahotsava ('festival of trees') programme in July 1950. Since then, India has been religiously celebrating this programme of tree planting, annually, in the first week of July. To some extent, these efforts have been successful not only in motivating people but also in bringing tangible results that include improving the forest area.

### Fancy drives, catchy slogans

In recent years there has been a spurt in tree planting in the name of special drives by various agencies, including governments, which is a welcome sign for environmental conservation.



**Mohan Chandra Pargaien**

a former Indian Forest Service officer, Hyderabad, Telangana

In tackling the many problems, adequate finances, active community participation and technical considerations need to be prioritised

With catchy slogans, glamorous drives and headline-grabbing campaigns, these programmes of tree planting, both globally and at a national level, have attracted huge media attention and the involvement of people including various organisations to fulfil their objectives. Be it a single day of a planting drive in various Indian States, the "One Trillion Project" of the World Economic Forum, the "Great Green Wall of China", the "10 Billion Tree Tsunami" of Pakistan or the "Bonn Challenge" to restore 150 million hectares of degraded and deforested landscapes by 2020 and 350 million hectares by 2030, many of these drives may seem welcome. But they have been criticised for limited community participation, a lack of adequate post-planting measures and for promoting monoculture, thereby proving less effective for carbon sequestration and biodiversity development.

### The problem with such drives

The neglect of ecology and locality with little involvement of people in various tree planting programmes has been a major concern of environmentalists and scientists in recent years. In a study led by Joseph Veldman it was found that except for deforested areas, tree planting in certain locations such as grasslands and animal habitat destroys plant and animal habitats and can damage ecosystems, increase wildfire intensity and exacerbate global warming. Similarly, William Bond and colleagues, in their study, expressed scepticism in considering grasslands as deforested and degraded lands for selecting them for tree planting by rehabilitation; these lands are highly productive and biodiverse, supporting many livestock and people.

Planting saplings alone does not fulfil the multifarious expectations unless we have provision for adequate post-planting measures and monitoring of tree growth – which we hardly find in the majority of tree-planting drives, more specifically in those programmes which are not supported by the government. Contrary to popular belief, tree planting only is not a

cost-effective climate solution when compared to another more rewarding approach of restoration and other alternative low-cost approach such as tree islands which involves planting in small patches or islands.

### India's challenges

In 2023, in a joint address with United States President Joe Biden, the Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, said at the White House that 'India is the only G20 country that has fulfilled its commitments under the Paris Agreement'. And in a written reply in the Rajya Sabha, in February 2024, the Union Minister of State for Environment, Forest and Climate Change, Ashwini Kumar Choubey, said that 'India has achieved an additional carbon sink of 1.97 billion tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> equivalent'. In India, nearly 10 million hectares of its forests are under encroachment, nearly 27.5 crore of people are dependent on forests for subsistence and nearly 5.7 million hectares of forest land have been lost for non-forestry purposes since Independence. These are challenges that pose problems for India's initiatives to restore 26 million hectares of degraded forests by 2030 and to improve forest cover using steps that include tree planting.

India's remarkable policy changes, in recent times, to tackle the challenges of forestry and restoration approaches are also being affected by these inherent problems. In the background of the criticism of mass planting drives, we need to introspect these strategies, giving much required space to adequate finances, active community participation and technical considerations. These have not been given priority. Along with public awareness campaigns, social media, and incentivised community participation, such reoriented interventions and strategies can help to bring changes in the ecological systems of our forests, and with increasing numbers, also help to create resilient forests that have diverse capacities and capabilities.

*The views expressed are personal*

## The issue with tree planting schemes (19 July)

- Uncontrolled exploitation has degraded forest landscapes.
- The World Bank estimates a loss of 10 million square kilometers of forests since the 20th century.
- The UN declared 2021-2030 the Decade of Ecosystem Restoration to restore 350 million hectares of degraded land.
- Restoration aims to generate \$9 trillion in ecosystem services and sequester 13-26 gigatons of greenhouse gases.
- Tree planting supports biodiversity, addresses climate crises, and stores carbon dioxide.
- Tree planting is seen as a crucial method to tackle climate change globally.
- India's Van Mahotsava program, launched in 1950, promotes annual tree planting in the first week of July.
- Recent tree planting drives by governments and organizations have gained media attention and public involvement.
- Notable drives include the World Economic Forum's "One Trillion Project," China's "Great Green Wall," Pakistan's "10 Billion Tree Tsunami," and the "Bonn Challenge."
- Despite positive intentions, these drives are criticized for limited community participation, inadequate post-planting care, and promoting monoculture, reducing effectiveness for carbon sequestration and biodiversity.

### The problem with such drives

- Recent tree planting programs lack ecological consideration and local involvement, causing concern among environmentalists and scientists.
- Joseph Veldman's study found that planting trees in grasslands and animal habitats can destroy ecosystems, increase wildfire intensity, and exacerbate global warming.
- William Bond's study showed that grasslands are productive and biodiverse, supporting livestock and people, and should not be targeted for tree planting.
- Planting saplings alone is insufficient without adequate post-planting measures and monitoring, which are often lacking.

- Tree planting is not always a cost-effective climate solution compared to restoration and alternative low-cost approaches like tree islands.
- India faces significant challenges with nearly 10 million hectares of forests under encroachment, 27.5 crore people dependent on forests, and 5.7 million hectares of forest land lost since Independence.
- India aims to restore 26 million hectares of degraded forests by 2030 and improve forest cover through tree planting.
- Recent policy changes face challenges due to existing problems, and mass planting drives need to be reevaluated.
- Emphasis should be on adequate finances, community participation, and technical considerations.
- Public awareness campaigns, social media, and incentivized community participation can help create resilient and diverse forests.

#### World Economic Forum (WEF) - UPSC Notes

##### Introduction:

- International non-governmental organization (NGO), think tank, and lobbying group based in Geneva, Switzerland.
- Founded in 1971 by Klaus Schwab.
- Aims to "improve the state of the world" by engaging leaders from business, politics, academia, and civil society.

##### Membership and Funding:

- Funded by 1,000 member companies, typically global enterprises with over \$5 billion turnover.
- Also receives public subsidies.

##### Mission and Philosophy:

- Promotes globalization and believes in collaborative governance by a self-selected coalition of multinational corporations, governments, and CSOs.
- Views global crises as opportunities to push its agenda through initiatives like the "Great Reset" and "Global Redesign".

##### Activities and Events:

- Annual Meeting in Davos:
  - Held in January, brings together 3,000 members and participants (business leaders, politicians, economists, celebrities, journalists) for 5 days.
  - Discuss global issues across 500 sessions.
- Regional Conferences: Convened throughout the year.
- Reports: Publishes research and reports on various global issues.
- Sector-specific initiatives: Engages members in projects and collaborations across various industries.

##### Criticisms:

- **Corporate Capture:** Accused of being dominated by multinational corporations, influencing global policy and institutions.
- **Whitewashing Initiatives:** Criticized for promoting neoliberal economic policies that benefit corporations and the wealthy.
- **Public Costs:** High security costs for Davos meeting, borne by Swiss taxpayers.
- **Transparency:** Lack of transparency in decision-making processes, membership criteria, and finances.
- **Environmental Impact:** Large carbon footprint due to travel and infrastructure associated with Davos meeting.

Question: India's ranking in the 'Ease of Doing Business Index' is sometimes seen in the news. (UPSC 2016)

Which of the following has declared that ranking?

- Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)
- World Economic Forum
- World Bank
- World Trade Organization (WTO)

## Questionable intent (19 July)

### Maharashtra Bill to tackle extremism liable to widespread misuse

- The Maharashtra government proposed a Bill to tackle left-wing extremism, which is considered unnecessary and possibly unconstitutional.
- Existing laws are adequate to handle extremism, and left-wing extremism is limited in the State.
- The Bill seems to target lawyers, dissenters, and human rights activists working for the marginalized.
- The Bill may violate constitutional provisions as it uses broad terms that could cover harmless individuals and organizations.
- The term 'urban Naxal' is central to the law but isn't explicitly mentioned in the Bill.
- The Bill's justification includes claims of Maoist safe-houses and urban dens and asserts existing laws are inadequate.
- Many provisions in the Bill overlap with the central Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act.
- The Bill's provisions for declaring organizations unlawful are too vague and broad, potentially covering any organized protest.
- 'Unlawful activity' includes actions that interfere with law administration, which could encompass protests against police actions or injustices.
- Penalties include up to seven years in jail for unlawful activities and up to three years for promoting a meeting of an unlawful organization.
- The government can seize properties where unlawful activities occur and take over money and assets.
- The Bill is expected to lapse as the Assembly session may have ended, but its intent might persist in future regimes.

## Trade tact (19 July)

### More support and greater certainty in trade policy can bolster exports

- India's goods exports increased for the third consecutive month in June, growing by 2.55% to \$35.2 billion.
- Imports rose by 5% to \$56.2 billion, down from May's peak of nearly \$62 billion.
- The trade deficit increased by 9.4% from last June but slightly decreased from the previous month.
- The oil deficit, which was a record \$13 billion in May, narrowed to \$10 billion.
- Petroleum exports fell by 18.3% to \$5.5 billion, with a similar decrease from May.
- Oil import volumes increased sharply by 19.6% in June, indicating higher domestic demand.
- Overall oil imports rose by over 23% in the April to June quarter, with global prices about 9% higher than last year.
- The oil deficit makes up nearly half of the first quarter trade deficit of \$62 billion, a 10.9% increase from last year.
- Gold imports fell by 38.7% in June to \$3.06 billion, the lowest in 2024-25, while silver imports surged by 377%.
- The government needs to investigate disruptions in India's bullion market due to concessional duty imports through the GIFT City under the free trade pact with the UAE.
- Gems and jewellery exports have been declining for seven consecutive months and need attention.
- The import bill, excluding oil and gold, rose by about 3% this year, with growth accelerating to 7% in June, indicating a recovery in domestic demand.
- India's trade policy should focus on boosting exports rather than checking the deficit, as a growing deficit is seen as a natural result of faster economic growth.
- At least 19 of India's top 30 export sectors grew in May and June, up from 13 in April.
- Decreasing global inflation and potential interest rate cuts can increase demand, and the IMF has raised trade volume growth expectations to 3% in 2024 from 0.3% last year.
- To fully capitalize on this opportunity and create more jobs, the government must provide adequate resources and stability for exporters.
- Sudden policy changes, such as the recent scrapping of the interest equalisation scheme for all but smaller firms, should be avoided.

## Does India have enough laws to combat superstition?

GS Paper I: Society



**Alok Prasanna Kumar**

Co-Founder and Lead of Vidhi Karnataka



**Avinash Patil**

President of the Maharashtra Andhashraddha Nirmulan Samiti

PARLEY

The recent stampede at a religious congregation in Hathras, Uttar Pradesh, resulting in more than 120 deaths, has reignited the debate on whether India has adequate legislation to address exploitative religious and superstitious practices. Experts have advocated for a national law akin to existing legislation in Maharashtra and Karnataka to effectively address superstition, black magic, witch-hunting, and other inhuman practices. Does India have enough laws to combat superstitious practices? Avinash Patil and Alok Prasanna Kumar discuss the question in a conversation moderated by Aaratrika Bhaumik. Edited excerpts:

**Is there a need for a national anti-superstition law or are the existing State laws and criminal law provisions adequate?**

**Avinash Patil:** For the last two decades, my organisation has been demanding the enactment of a central law to combat superstitious practices. The existing criminal law statutes do not have any dedicated provisions targeting such practices. As a result, police authorities are often reluctant to register cases against the fraudulent activities of godmen. **While the Drugs and Magic Remedies (Objectionable Advertisements) Act, 1954, exists, it contains numerous loopholes.** Therefore, a law, modelled on the Maharashtra and Karnataka State laws, must be implemented nationwide.

**Alok Prasanna:** If we were to take the example of the Karnataka law, a common criticism is its broad definitions of 'evil practices'. This ambiguity can make it difficult to distinguish religious beliefs from superstitions. For instance, is making donations to one's church or temple exploitative and thus an evil practice? State governments are often more attuned to the needs and traditions of the local population. Given India's diversity, a national law might impose sweeping generalisations that could inadvertently empower already dominant communities. Thus, State-specific laws are preferable because they can better accommodate local practices and realities.

**A common criticism against the State laws is that they employ expansive and vague definitions, allowing enforcing authorities subjective and potentially discriminatory powers. Do you share these concerns?**

**Alok Prasanna:** There will never be one



Relatives mourn the death of stampede victims in Hathras district, Uttar Pradesh. REUTERS

commonly acceptable definition of what a superstition is. For me, it is about instilling a sense of fear and being forced to undertake degrading practices. Take, for example, the **snana ritual in Karnataka where Dalits are made to roll over the leftover food eaten by Brahmins to attain punya.** There should, however, be more restrictive definitions to curb any misuse by linking the practice to some specific harm caused to the concerned individual. Nonetheless, there will always be scope for grey areas, which we have to be open to debating.

**Avinash Patil:** Following the enactment of a national legislation, individual States can introduce specific amendments addressing local concerns to enhance the law's effectiveness. These amendments can also include additional clauses to refine and narrow down definitions.

**Mr. Patil, based on your experience, what are the challenges in implementing these laws at the grassroots level?**

**Avinash Patil:** There is an acute lack of sensitisation when it comes to law-enforcement agencies. **Police officers are often constrained by cultural sensibilities and biases which prevent them from addressing these issues with a scientific bent of mind.** Significant effort is required to persuade the police to file FIRs in such cases, and even when they do, investigations are often compromised by political influence, leading to low conviction rates. Moreover, caste discrimination is a facet of superstitious beliefs that often goes unnoticed. This underscores the importance of conducting training programmes for all echelons of the police force since they are typically the first responders.



There is an acute lack of sensitisation when it comes to law-enforcement agencies. Police officers are often constrained by cultural sensibilities and biases which prevent them from addressing these issues with a scientific bent of mind.

AVINASH PATIL

**Mr. Kumar, many oppose such laws due to their potential conflict with the fundamental right to profess one's religion under Article 25 of the Constitution. How can we strike a balance between protecting the public interest and ensuring that these laws withstand constitutional scrutiny?**

**Alok Prasanna:** Article 25 permits reasonable restrictions on the grounds of public order, morality, and health. Justice Arnould's opinion in the Maharaja Libel case before the Bombay High Court encapsulates this wonderfully – "that what is morally wrong cannot be theologically right". So, you cannot say that your religious belief permits you to do something that is morally unconscionable. Thus, practices that are inherently exploitative will also fall foul of other fundamental rights, including the right to life and the protection against untouchability.

**Is it important for these laws to prioritise restorative measures instead of just being punitive in nature? For instance, studies have shown that victims of witch-hunting in States such as Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, and Maharashtra frequently endure social ostracisation, which severely limits their access to essential resources and services.**

**Avinash Patil:** Yes, the laws must focus on restorative justice. However, there is a notable lack of political resolve when it comes to implementing social security measures for victims of such crimes. Witch-hunting persists as a serious problem in tribal districts, where women from socially and economically disadvantaged communities are often targeted. **Despite tribal communities constituting about 8% of India's population, dedicated welfare schemes for victims of witch-hunting are conspicuously absent.** To address this disparity, comprehensive training programmes are essential for key stakeholders such as public health workers, schoolteachers, and district magistrates. This would enable them to effectively support and provide redress for victims seeking assistance. Additionally,

establishing a victim compensation fund is essential to meet the immediate and long-term needs of victims affected by such practices.

**Alok Prasanna:** Even though the Constitution has come into existence, we still have a very colonial state. Authorities are adept at arresting and prosecuting individuals when instructed, but they often struggle when tasked with providing restorative justice. Ideally, implementing such mechanisms would require a fundamental rethinking of how the Indian state operates. It is also important to ensure that these laws are not weaponised against the Adivasi communities. At the core of many issues related to witch-hunting are property disputes. There is a prevalent fear that women inheriting property may contravene community norms, so a conspiracy is hatched to attack them.

**Are laws enough to curb superstitions? What more can be done especially since cultural sensibilities tend to pose a significant hurdle in framing or implementing such laws?**

**Alok Prasanna:** There is an interesting phenomenon unfolding across the country where people are increasingly retreating into the arms of godmen, spanning across religions. It is important to reflect on why people no longer feel a sense of protection from the state or their own community, prompting them to seek refuge in blind faith. Consider the case of Bhole Baba, a former police constable who claims to be the voice of some divine being. His congregation attracted not just a small group, but lakhs of people. This suggests a larger societal issue beyond isolated incidents of misguided faith. I think that is what worries me more and we must investigate what is the deeper cause.

**Avinash Patil:** **Many people believe that such superstitious beliefs are for their own good, which enables godmen to deceive them.** There is a widespread tendency to seek solace in spirituality at the cost of rationality. It is crucial to **move beyond this mindset and embrace scientific temperament in our daily lives.** We have forgotten to question, which reflects a failure of our education system and state institutions. It is high time that state authorities abide by their constitutional duty to promote rational thinking and scientific practices.



To listen to the full interview  
Scan the code or go to the link  
[www.thehindu.com](http://www.thehindu.com)

## Does India have enough laws to combat superstition? (19 July)

- A stampede at a religious event in Hathras, Uttar Pradesh, caused over 120 deaths.
- This incident has raised the question of whether India has enough laws to combat exploitative religious and superstitious practices.
- Experts suggest a national law like those in Maharashtra and Karnataka to address superstitions, black magic, and inhuman practices.
- Avinash Patil argues for a central law to combat superstitious practices, as existing laws do not specifically target such practices, and police are reluctant to act against fraudulent godmen.
- The Drugs and Magic Remedies (Objectionable Advertisements) Act, 1954, has many loopholes.

- Alok Prasanna believes state-specific laws are better because they can accommodate local practices and realities, whereas a national law might impose generalizations and empower dominant communities.
- Critics say state laws have broad definitions of 'evil practices,' leading to subjective and potentially discriminatory enforcement.
- Alok Prasanna acknowledges the difficulty in defining superstition but emphasizes the need for restrictive definitions to prevent misuse and ensure the law targets practices causing specific harm.
- There will always be grey areas in defining superstition, which should be open to debate.
- National legislation can be followed by state-specific amendments to address local concerns and refine definitions.
- Implementation challenges include a lack of sensitization among law enforcement, cultural biases, and political influence affecting investigations.
- Caste discrimination linked to superstitious beliefs often goes unnoticed, highlighting the need for police training.
- Article 25 of the Constitution allows reasonable restrictions on religious practices for public order, morality, and health.
- Practices that are morally wrong cannot be justified by religion and violate other fundamental rights.
- Laws should focus on restorative justice rather than just punishment.
- Victims of witch-hunting often face social ostracization, limiting access to resources and services.
- Political will is lacking for implementing social security measures for victims.
- Comprehensive training programs for public health workers, schoolteachers, and district magistrates are essential.
- Establishing a victim compensation fund is necessary to support immediate and long-term needs of victims.
- Despite the Constitution, India's state apparatus remains colonial in nature.
- Authorities are efficient in arrests and prosecutions but struggle with restorative justice.
- Implementing restorative mechanisms requires rethinking state operations.
- Laws should not be used against Adivasi communities; witch-hunting often stems from property disputes, especially against women inheriting property.
- Cultural sensibilities pose challenges in framing and implementing laws against superstitions.
- People are increasingly turning to godmen for protection, indicating a lack of trust in the state and community.
- Bhole Baba's example shows a deeper societal issue beyond individual faith.
- Many believe superstitions benefit them, enabling godmen to exploit them.
- There is a need to embrace scientific thinking and rationality.
- The education system and state institutions have failed to promote questioning and rational thought.
- Authorities must fulfill their constitutional duty to promote scientific temperament and rational practices.

# What is the role of the Finance Commission?

How is horizontal devolution of taxes between States decided? For how long do the recommendations of the Commission last? Why do States complain that the Centre does not give them an ample share of the tax revenue? From where do States get their funds?

GS Paper II: Constitutional Bodies

## EXPLAINER

Prashanth Perumal

### The story so far:

The sixteenth Finance Commission headed by former Niti Aayog Vice-Chairman Arvind Panagariya has begun its work by inviting suggestions from the public on the mandate set for it by the Centre. The latest Finance Commission, which consists of five members including the chairman, was constituted in December last year and is expected to submit its recommendations by October, 2025. Its recommendations will be valid for five years starting from April 1, 2026.

### What is the Finance Commission?

The Finance Commission is a constitutional body that recommends how tax revenues collected by the Central government should be distributed among the Centre and various States in the country. The Centre, however, is not legally bound to implement the suggestions made by the Finance Commission. The Commission is reconstituted typically every five years and usually takes a couple of years to make its recommendations to the Centre.

### How does the Commission decide?

The Finance Commission decides what proportion of the Centre's net tax revenue goes to the States overall (vertical devolution) and how this share for the States is distributed among various States (horizontal devolution). The horizontal devolution of funds between States is usually decided based on a formula created by the Commission that takes into account a State's population, fertility level, income level, geography, etc. The vertical devolution of funds, however, is not based on any such objective formula. Nevertheless, the last few Finance Commissions have recommended greater vertical devolution of tax revenues to States. The 13th, 14th and 15th Finance



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Commissions recommended that the Centre share 32%, 42% and 41% of funds, respectively, from the divisible pool with States. It should be noted that the Centre may also aid States through additional grants for certain schemes that are jointly funded by the Centre and the States.

The 16th Financial Commission is also expected to recommend ways to augment the revenues of local bodies such as panchayats and municipalities. It should be noted that, as of 2015, only about 3% of public spending in India happened at the local body level, as compared to other countries such as China where over half of public spending happened at the level of the local bodies.

### Why is there friction between the Centre and States?

The Centre and the States have been at loggerheads over the issue of sharing tax

revenues for a while now. The Centre collects major taxes such as the income tax, the corporate tax, and the goods and services tax (GST) while the States primarily rely on taxes collected from the sale of goods such as liquor and fuels that are beyond the ambit of GST. The States, however, are responsible for the delivery of many services to citizens, including education, healthcare and the police. This has led to complaints that the Centre has reduced the power of the States to collect taxes and that it does not give enough funds to the States to match with the scale of their responsibilities.

### What are the disagreements?

The States and Centre often disagree on what percentage of the total tax proceeds should go to the States and about the actual delivery of these funds.

States argue that they should receive

more funds than what is recommended by the Finance Commission as they have greater responsibilities to fulfil than the Centre. They also point out that the Centre does not even share the amount of funds recommended by the Finance Commissions, which they believe is already too low. For example, according to analysts, the Centre has devolved an average of only 38% of funds from the divisible pool to the States under the current Fifteenth Finance Commission as against the Commission's actual recommendation of 41%.

Further, States have complaints about what portion of the Centre's overall tax revenues should be considered as part of the divisible pool out of which the States are funded. It is believed that cesses and surcharges, which do not come under the divisible pool and hence not shared with the States, can constitute as much as 28% of the Centre's overall tax revenues in some years, causing significant revenue loss for States. So, the increased devolution of funds from the divisible pool, as recommended by successive Finance Commissions, may be offset by rising cess and surcharge collections. In fact, it is estimated that if cesses and surcharges that go to the Centre are also taken into account, the share of States in the Centre's overall tax revenues may fall to as low as 32% under the 15th Finance Commission.

More developed States such as Karnataka and Tamil Nadu have also complained that they receive less money from the Centre than what they contribute as taxes. Tamil Nadu, for example, received only 29 paise for each rupee that the State contributed to the Centre's exchequer while Bihar gets more than ₹7 for each rupee it contributes. In other words, it is argued that more developed States with better governance are being penalised by the Centre to help States with poor governance. Some critics also believe that the Finance Commission, whose members are appointed by the Centre, may not be fully independent and immune from political influence.

## THE GIST

The sixteenth Finance Commission headed by former Niti Aayog Vice-Chairman Arvind Panagariya has begun its work by inviting suggestions from the public on the mandate set for it by the Centre.

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Commissions recommended that the Centre share 32%, 42% and 41% of funds, respectively, from the divisible pool with States. It should be noted that the Centre may also aid States through additional grants for certain schemes that are jointly funded by the Centre and the States.

The 16th Financial Commission is also expected to recommend ways to augment the revenues of local bodies such as panchayats and municipalities. It should be noted that, as of 2015, only about 3% of public spending in India happened at the local body level, as compared to other countries such as China where over half of public spending happened at the level of the local bodies.

### Why is there friction between the Centre and States?

The Centre and the States have been at loggerheads over the issue of sharing tax

revenues for a while now. The Centre collects major taxes such as the income tax, the corporate tax, and the goods and services tax (GST) while the States primarily rely on taxes collected from the sale of goods such as liquor and fuels that are beyond the ambit of GST. The States, however, are responsible for the delivery of many services to citizens, including education, healthcare and the police. This has led to complaints that the Centre has reduced the power of the States to collect taxes and that it does not give enough funds to the States to match with the scale of their responsibilities.

### What are the disagreements?

The States and Centre often disagree on what percentage of the total tax proceeds should go to the States and about the actual delivery of these funds.

States argue that they should receive

more funds than what is recommended by the Finance Commission as they have greater responsibilities to fulfil than the Centre. They also point out that the Centre does not even share the amount of funds recommended by the Finance Commissions, which they believe is already too low. For example, according to analysts, the Centre has devolved an average of only 38% of funds from the divisible pool to the States under the current Fifteenth Finance Commission as against the Commission's actual recommendation of 41%.

Further, States have complaints about what portion of the Centre's overall tax revenues should be considered as part of the divisible pool out of which the States are funded. It is believed that cesses and surcharges, which do not come under the divisible pool and hence not shared with the States, can constitute as much as 28% of the Centre's overall tax revenues in some years, causing significant revenue loss for States. So, the increased devolution of funds from the divisible pool, as recommended by successive Finance Commissions, may be offset by rising cess and surcharge collections. In fact, it is estimated that if cesses and surcharges that go to the Centre are also taken into account, the share of States in the Centre's overall tax revenues may fall to as low as 32% under the 15th Finance Commission.

More developed States such as Karnataka and Tamil Nadu have also complained that they receive less money from the Centre than what they contribute as taxes. Tamil Nadu, for example, received only 29 paise for each rupee that the State contributed to the Centre's exchequer while Bihar gets more than ₹7 for each rupee it contributes. In other words, it is argued that more developed States with better governance are being penalised by the Centre to help States with poor governance. Some critics also believe that the Finance Commission, whose members are appointed by the Centre, may not be fully independent and immune from political influence.

## THE GIST

The sixteenth Finance Commission headed by former Niti Aayog Vice-Chairman Arvind Panagariya has begun its work by inviting suggestions from the public on the mandate set for it by the Centre.

States argue that they should receive more funds than what is recommended by the Finance Commission as they have greater responsibilities to fulfil than the Centre. They also point out that the Centre does not even share the amount of funds recommended by the Finance Commissions, which they believe is already too low.

More developed States such as Karnataka and Tamil Nadu have also complained that they receive less money from the Centre than what they contribute as taxes.

## What is the role of the Finance Commission? (19 July)

How is horizontal devolution of taxes between States decided? For how long do the recommendations of the Commission last? Why do States complain that the Centre does not give them an ample share of the tax revenue? From where do States get their funds?

- The Sixteenth Finance Commission, led by former Niti Aayog Vice-Chairman Arvind Panagariya, has started its work and is seeking public suggestions on its mandate.
- This Finance Commission was formed in December last year and is expected to submit recommendations by October 2025, which will be valid for five years starting April 1, 2026.
- The Finance Commission is a constitutional body that recommends how the Central government's tax revenues should be distributed between the Centre and the States.
- The Centre is not legally bound to follow the Finance Commission's recommendations.
- The Commission is typically reconstituted every five years and takes a couple of years to make its recommendations.
- The Commission decides the proportion of the Centre's net tax revenue that goes to the States (vertical devolution) and how this share is distributed among various States (horizontal devolution).
- Horizontal devolution is based on a formula that considers factors like a State's population, fertility level, income level, and geography.
- Vertical devolution does not follow an objective formula.
- Recent Finance Commissions have recommended increasing the share of tax revenues for States: the 13th, 14th, and 15th Finance Commissions recommended 32%, 42%, and 41% respectively.
- The Centre can also provide additional grants to States for certain jointly funded schemes.
- The Sixteenth Finance Commission is also expected to suggest ways to increase revenues for local bodies like panchayats and municipalities.
- As of 2015, only about 3% of public spending in India occurred at the local body level, compared to over half in countries like China.

### Why is there friction between the Centre and States?

- The Centre and the States have been in conflict over the sharing of tax revenues.
- The Centre collects major taxes like income tax, corporate tax, and GST.
- States primarily rely on taxes from the sale of goods like liquor and fuels, which are not included in GST.
- States are responsible for providing many services to citizens, including education, healthcare, and policing.
- There are complaints that the Centre has reduced the States' power to collect taxes.

- States argue they do not receive enough funds from the Centre to fulfill their responsibilities adequately.

#### What are the disagreements?

- States and Centre often disagree on the percentage of total tax proceeds that should go to the States and the actual delivery of these funds.
- States argue they should receive more funds than recommended by the Finance Commission due to their greater responsibilities.
- States claim the Centre does not share even the recommended amount, which they believe is too low.
- Analysts say the Centre has devolved an average of 38% of funds to States under the current Fifteenth Finance Commission, against the recommendation of 41%.
- States also dispute what portion of the Centre's overall tax revenues should be part of the divisible pool.
- Cesses and surcharges, which are not shared with States, can make up 28% of the Centre's tax revenues, causing revenue loss for States.
- The increased devolution of funds may be offset by rising collections of cesses and surcharges.
- If cesses and surcharges are included, the share of States in the Centre's overall tax revenues may fall to 32% under the 15th Finance Commission.
- More developed States like Karnataka and Tamil Nadu complain they receive less money from the Centre than what they contribute as taxes.
- Tamil Nadu, for example, receives only 29 paise for each rupee it contributes, while Bihar gets more than ₹7 for each rupee it contributes.
- It is argued that developed States with better governance are penalised to help States with poor governance.
- Some critics believe the Finance Commission, appointed by the Centre, may not be fully independent and immune from political influence.

**Question: Consider the following: (UPSC 2023)**

1. Demographic performance
2. Forest and ecology
3. Governance reforms
4. Stable government
5. Tax and fiscal efforts

For the horizontal tax devolution, the Fifteenth Finance Commission used how many of the above as criteria other than population area and income distance?

- (a) Only two
- (b) Only three
- (c) Only four
- (d) All five

#### ANSWER AND EXPLANATION

Based on principles of need, equity and performance, overall devolution formula is as follows.

Criteria Weight (%)

1. Population - 15.0
2. Area - 15.0
3. Forest & ecology - 10
4. Income distance - 45
5. Tax & fiscal efforts - 2.5
6. Demographic performance - 12.5

# How do Assam's Foreigners Tribunals function?

How do these tribunals decide whether a person is Indian or not? Does the Border police play a role?

**Rahul Karmakar**

**The story so far:**

On July 5, the Assam government asked the Border wing of the State's police not to forward cases of non-Muslims who entered India illegally before 2014 to the Foreigners Tribunals (FTs). This was in keeping with the Citizenship (Amendment) Act of 2019 that provides a citizenship application window for non-Muslims – Hindus, Sikhs, Christians, Parsis, Jains, and Buddhists – who allegedly fled persecution in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Pakistan.

**How did the FTs come about?**

The FTs are quasi-judicial bodies formed through the Foreigners (Tribunals) Order of 1964 under Section 3 of the Foreigners' Act of 1946, to let local authorities in a State refer a person suspected to be a foreigner to tribunals. The FTs are currently exclusive to Assam as cases of "illegal immigrants" are dealt with

according to the Foreigners' Act in other States. Each FT is headed by a member drawn from judges, advocates, and civil servants with judicial experience. The Ministry of Home Affairs told Parliament in 2021 that there are 300 FTs in Assam but the website of the State's Home and Political Department says that only 100 FTs are currently functioning, beginning with 11 established before the Illegal Migrants (Determination by Tribunals) Act of 1983 was scrapped in 2005.

**What is the role of the Border police?**

The Assam Police Border Organisation was established as a part of the State police's Special Branch in 1962 under the Prevention of Infiltration of Pakistani (PIP) scheme. The organisation was made an independent wing in 1974 and is now headed by the Special Director General of Police (Border). After the liberation war of Bangladesh, the PIP scheme was renamed Prevention of Infiltration of Foreigners or PIF scheme. The Centre has sanctioned the posts of 3,153 out of the 4,037

personnel of this wing under the PIF scheme while 884 are sanctioned by the Assam government. The members of this wing are tasked with detecting and deporting illegal foreigners, patrolling the India-Bangladesh border with the Border Security Force, maintaining a second line of defence to check the entry of illegal foreigners, and monitoring people "settled in riverine and char (sandbar) areas". This is apart from referring people of suspicious citizenship to the FTs to decide whether they are Indian or not based on documents. Cases of 'D' or doubtful voters can also be referred to an FT by the Election Commission of India and people excluded from the complete draft of the National Register of Citizens (NRC) released in August 2019 can appeal to the FT concerned to prove their citizenship. Some 19.06 lakh out of 3.3 crore applicants were excluded from the NRC, whose process has been on hold.

**How does an FT function?**

According to the 1964 order, an FT has

the powers of a civil court in certain matters such as summoning and enforcing the attendance of any person and examining him or her on oath and requiring the production of any document. A tribunal is required to serve a notice in English or the official language of the State to a person alleged to be a foreigner within 10 days of receiving the reference from the authority concerned. Such a person has 10 days to reply to the notice and another 10 days to produce evidence in support of his or her case. An FT has to dispose of a case within 60 days of reference. If the person fails to provide any proof of citizenship, the FT can send him or her to a detention centre, now called transit camp, for deportation later.

**Why are some FT orders under fire?**

On July 11, the Supreme Court set aside an FT order declaring Rahim Ali, a deceased farmer, a foreigner 12 years ago. The apex court called the order a "grave miscarriage of justice" while pointing out that the Foreigners' Act does not empower the authorities to pick people at random and demand that they prove their citizenship. In September 2018, an FT member in central Assam's Morigaon observed that foreigners' cases have assumed the form of an industry where everyone involved is "trying to mint money by any means". The member also noted that notices are "hung up on some trees or electric pole" without the suspected non-citizens unaware of such a case against them.

## THE GIST

On July 5, the Assam government asked the Border wing of the State's police not to forward cases of non-Muslims who entered India illegally before 2014 to the Foreigners Tribunals (FTs).

According to the 1964 order, an FT has the powers of a civil court in certain matters such as summoning and enforcing the attendance of any person and examining him or her on oath and requiring the production of any document.

The Assam Police Border Organisation was established as a part of the State police's Special Branch in 1962 under the Prevention of Infiltration of Pakistani (PIP) scheme.

## How do Assam's Foreigners Tribunals function? (19 July)

How do these tribunals decide whether a person is Indian or not? Does the Border police play a role?

- On July 5, Assam asked its Border police not to send cases of non-Muslims who entered India illegally before 2014 to the Foreigners Tribunals (FTs).
- This decision aligns with the Citizenship (Amendment) Act of 2019, which allows non-Muslims fleeing persecution from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Pakistan to apply for citizenship.
- FTs were established by the Foreigners (Tribunals) Order of 1964 under the Foreigners' Act of 1946.
- FTs are unique to Assam; other states handle illegal immigration cases under the Foreigners' Act.
- FTs are led by members with judicial experience, including judges, advocates, and civil servants.
- In Assam, there are reportedly 300 FTs, but only 100 are currently functioning.
- The Assam Police Border Organisation was set up in 1962 to prevent infiltration from Pakistan and later renamed to prevent foreign infiltration.
- The organisation, now a separate wing of the Assam police, is led by the Special Director General of Police (Border).
- It has 3,153 posts sanctioned by the Centre and 884 by the Assam government.
- Its duties include detecting and deporting illegal foreigners, patrolling the India-Bangladesh border with the Border Security Force, and monitoring people in riverine and sandbar areas.
- The organisation also refers people suspected of being foreigners to the FTs for verification of their citizenship.
- Doubtful voters ('D' voters) and individuals excluded from the National Register of Citizens (NRC) can appeal to the FTs to prove their citizenship.
- Out of 3.3 crore NRC applicants, 19.06 lakh were excluded from the complete draft released in August 2019, and the NRC process is currently on hold.

**How does an FT function ?**

- Foreigners Tribunals (FTs) have powers similar to civil courts for handling cases of suspected foreigners.
- They must issue a notice within 10 days, give 10 days for a response, and decide the case within 60 days.
- If a person cannot prove citizenship, they can be sent to a transit camp for deportation.
- Recent issues with FTs:
  - The Supreme Court overturned an FT decision that wrongly labeled a deceased farmer as a foreigner.
  - The Court criticized FTs for improperly demanding proof of citizenship.
  - An FT member noted problems like corruption and improper notice posting, causing people to be unaware of their cases.

## Flare-up in vegetable prices stalls overall disinflationary trend (19 July)

RBI officials say view that food price shocks are transitory is not borne out by past year's experience - too long for a shock to be called 'transitory'

- Consumer price inflation increased to 5.1% in June from 4.8% in May due to a rise in vegetable prices.
- This increase in inflation was driven by a 133 basis points (bps) positive momentum, which outweighed a 106 bps favorable base effect.
- Food inflation rose to 8.4% in June from 7.9% in May, driven by a strong price momentum.
- Vegetable prices saw a double-digit increase, while de-flation in LPG prices continued.
- The decrease in prices for edible oils and fats slowed down, and fuel prices remained stable with a de-flation of -3.7%.

- Past experiences show that food price shocks are not temporary but persistent, affecting overall inflation despite efforts to lower core and fuel inflation.

## Smoothen administration of tax for the growth of capital markets (19 July)

- The capital markets are experiencing a positive and bullish trend.
- Retail investor participation has surged dramatically, with demat accounts increasing from 40 million in 2020 to 160 million today.
- The rise in demat accounts is largely due to the easy digital onboarding process introduced during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Monthly new investor accounts have jumped from 300,000 to 4 million, with 4.2 million new accounts opened last month alone.
- The retail investor base has grown from 40 million to 163 million in four years, with projections to reach 300 million in the next three to four years.
- This growth is contributing to a significant increase in household financial savings being invested in the market.
- SEBI's initiatives have made investing easier and more cost-effective for retail investors, boosting capital formation.
- This influx of capital is expected to drive substantial economic growth, fueled by entrepreneurs creating goods and services that consumers demand.

### 'Flood of equity'

- Since 2020, there has been a significant increase in equity investment, addressing the previous lack of funding for entrepreneurial ventures.
- Recent New Fund Offer (NFO) infusions amount to ₹40,000 crore, with monthly inflows averaging ₹75,000 to ₹80,000 crore, leading to an annual influx of ₹9 to ₹10 lakh crore.
- This boost in equity is stimulating entrepreneurial activity and creating a positive outlook for economic development.
- Entrepreneurs in India now have vast opportunities in a market of 1.5 billion people, supported by global equity investment and easier access to bank loans.
- The capital surge represents a structural change, not just a short-term trend, with potential long-term benefits for the economy, similar to how redirecting river waters can lead to agricultural growth.
- India is on the verge of an entrepreneurship revolution if this influx of capital is effectively managed.

### Investment flood

- SEBI is effectively managing the influx of investment, ensuring orderly money flow and attracting substantial investments to India's well-regulated market.
- The government needs to craft policies that strategically leverage this capital influx.
- Savers are now willing to take equity risks instead of seeking traditional 6-7% interest, reflecting a significant shift in investment behavior.
- The upcoming Budget is expected to address this transformation and shape relevant policies.
- India should harness its capital markets strategically, particularly to compete with global players like China.
- The focus should be on improving tax administration and removing bureaucratic hurdles to foster growth and efficiency.
- India's robust market infrastructure is a competitive advantage that should be leveraged to benefit the nation.
- Capital markets have the potential to be as significant for India as software exports, attracting smaller neighboring countries to utilize the market.
- To become the capital market hub for the subcontinent, India must eliminate administrative obstacles and create a conducive environment for investors and entrepreneurs.

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