

DAILY CURRENT AFFAIRS (15 September 2024)

TOPICS COVERED

1. M.P. to ban liquor, meat consumption in temple towns along Narmada
2. Gyanvapi has Vishwanath deity, says Adityanath
3. 'Sensitive material' delaying clearance of collegium's recommendations, govt. tells SC
4. Taj dome leaks; ASI says no damage, only seepage
5. Post-glacial ecosystems could help to slow down climate change, says decade-long study (GS Paper-III: Environment)
6. The golden fibre (GS Paper-III: Agriculture)
7. What are the issues faced by EPFO pensioners? (GS Paper-III: Social Security)
8. What rights are queer couples fighting for? (GS Paper-II)
9. Will Mission Mausam improve weather forecasts? (GS Paper-III: Basic Science)
10. The regulator at the centre of a storm (GS Paper-II: Governance)
11. Return of the hardliners (GS Paper-II: IR)
12. The challenger who fled (GS Paper-II: IR)
13. Smallpox vaccine moderately effective in preventing Mpox (GS Paper-III: Basic Science)
14. Study finds ozone pollution reduces tropical forest growth (GS Paper-III: Environment)
15. 'Buch invested in Chinese funds'

M.P. to ban liquor, meat consumption in temple towns along Narmada (15 September)

Decision part of steps to protect sanctity of river, says CM as he orders closure of liquor and meat shops in religious towns along route; Yadav neglecting Ujjain, should ban liquor there first: Cong.

- Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister Mohan Yadav ordered the closure of liquor and meat shops in religious towns along the Narmada river.
- The Narmada, starting from Amarkantak, is considered holy in Hinduism and has many significant religious sites.
- This decision was made in a Cabinet meeting focused on keeping the river clean and maintaining its flow.
- Yadav emphasized the importance of preserving the sanctity of Maa Narmada and mentioned that the ban will be reviewed in November.
- He noted that efforts to maintain the river's sanctity will be ongoing.
- Development in Amarkantak will be managed by a dedicated authority, prioritizing environmental protection.
- Future settlements should be located away from the river's origin, ensuring sewage does not enter the Narmada.
- The Cabinet discussed the river's significance, noting 21 districts, 68 tehsils, and numerous temples along its path.
- The Congress party supported the ban but criticized Yadav for not addressing liquor issues in Ujjain, his home city.
- They accused him of trying to mislead the public and referenced previous unfulfilled promises regarding river protection.

Gyanvapi has Vishwanath deity, says Adityanath (15 September)

- Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath stated that Gyanvapi, referred to by some as a mosque, is actually the Hindu deity Lord Vishwanath.
- He made these comments during an international seminar on the role of Nathpanth in creating a harmonious society at Deen Dayal Upadhyaya University in Gorakhpur.
- Adityanath highlighted the importance of saints and sages in uniting the nation.
- He also spoke about Adi Sankara, who established important religious and spiritual centers across India.

'Sensitive material' delaying clearance of collegium's recommendations, govt. tells SC (15 September)

- Attorney-General R. Venkataramani informed the Supreme Court that "sensitive material" is causing delays in approving the Collegium's recommendations for appointing Chief Justices to High Courts.

- He offered to provide this sensitive information and his suggestions in a sealed cover for the judges to review.
- The Chief Justice, D.Y. Chandrachud, accepted this and scheduled the next hearing for September 20.
- This discussion occurred during a hearing on a petition by advocate Harsh Vibhore Singhal, which requested a deadline for the government to approve judicial appointments.
- The petition argued that the government's delays undermine judicial independence and affect the constitutional order.
- It stated that these delays give the impression that outside interests are influencing judicial appointments.
- In a previous hearing, the Supreme Court emphasized that delays harm justice and create doubts about interference in the judicial process.

Elective oil import duty 27.5%, farmers will benefit: Chouhan (15 September)

Minister welcomes the decision to remove minimum export duty on Basmati rice and its reduction on onion from 40% to 20%; Consumer Affairs Ministry is selling onions at ₹35 a kg through various outlets in cities and e-commerce platforms

- Union Agriculture Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan praised the decision to raise the import duty on edible oils from zero to 20%, calling it beneficial for farmers.
- He also supported the removal of the minimum export duty on Basmati rice and the increase in basic duty on refined oil to 32.5%.
- Chouhan stated that these measures demonstrate the Modi government's commitment to farmers' welfare.
- With the new duties, the total effective duty on imported edible and refined oils will be 27.5%.
- He noted that these changes will help oilseed farmers, particularly soya bean and green gram farmers, by providing better prices for their crops.
- Farmers in Madhya Pradesh have been protesting low soya bean prices, prompting the Centre to advise the state to procure the crop at minimum support prices.
- Chouhan expects an increase in oilseed sowing during the Rabi season and better prices for mustard crops.
- He mentioned that soya bean production will increase, benefiting exports and related sectors.
- The removal of the minimum export duty on Basmati rice is expected to help farmers get fair prices and boost demand and exports.
- Recently, the government also reduced the export duty on onions from 40% to 20%, which will benefit onion farmers and increase exports.
- The Union Consumer Affairs Ministry announced a subsidized onion sale at ₹35 per kg to help control retail prices.
- They expanded onion sales to e-commerce platforms and other outlets to ensure affordability.
- The government is managing wholesale onion disposal in major cities like Delhi, Mumbai, and Chennai, with plans to extend this to more cities.
- With a buffer stock of 4.7 lakh tonnes of onions and increased kharif sowing, the government expects onion prices to remain stable in the coming months.

Taj dome leaks; ASI says no damage, only seepage (15 September)

- Water leakage has been reported at the Taj Mahal in Agra due to heavy rain over the past three days.
- The Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) confirmed that there was no damage to the heritage structure, though the garden nearby is submerged.
- Videos showing the flooded garden went viral on social media, raising public concern.
- ASI officials inspected the Taj Mahal using drone cameras and found leakage in the main dome, but it was due to seepage, with no actual damage detected.
- The ASI is monitoring whether the leakage is ongoing or occasional.
- The Taj Mahal is a UNESCO World Heritage Site and one of the Seven Wonders of the World.
- Social media users emphasized the need for better city planning and smarter architecture to protect heritage buildings from extreme weather.
- Local resident Ram Yadav noted that the flooding highlights the importance of planning cities to handle such weather challenges.
- Agra, located about 200 kilometers from Delhi, has been experiencing heavy rainfall since Thursday, causing flooding.

Post-glacial ecosystems could help to slow down climate change, says decade-long study (15 September)

- The retreat of glaciers is a clear sign of climate change, but it can also lead to the development of new ecosystems that may help mitigate climate change.

- A global study published in the journal Nature highlights that while deglaciation can accelerate climate change by decreasing surface reflectivity and releasing stored carbon, emerging ecosystems can slow it down.
- The study was led by Professor Gentile Francesco Ficetola from the University of Milan and Silvio Marta from Italy's Institute of Geosciences and Earth Resources, based on a decade of research.
- Researchers analyzed over 1,200 soil samples from nearly 50 glaciers worldwide, including contributions from Indian researchers who studied samples from the Gangotri and Bara Shigri glaciers.
- Initially, microorganisms like bacteria, protists, and algae colonize the barren land after glaciers retreat, making minerals available for other species.
- Within about ten years, hardy plants such as lichens, mosses, and grasses start to grow, enriching the soil and enabling more complex plant life and larger animals to thrive.
- With proper management, these newly developed areas can provide temporary habitats for species threatened by climate change.

The golden fibre (15 September)

One of the most important natural fibre and cash crops in India, jute is a biodegradable and environment-friendly alternative to plastic when it comes to packaging needs

- Jute, known as the golden fiber, is the second most important cash crop in India after cotton.
- India is the largest producer of jute in the world, with West Bengal, Assam, and Bihar as the main jute-growing states.
- About 14 million people depend on jute farming and trade for their livelihoods.
- In Assam, which is the second-largest jute producer, marginal and small farmers mainly cultivate jute, particularly in districts like Nagaon, Goalpara, Barpeta, and Darrang.
- Jute farming is labor-intensive, providing significant employment opportunities and benefits to local farmers.
- The jute crop can be harvested 100 to 150 days after planting, with the best quality fiber obtained if harvested at the pre-bud or bud stage, though this yields less.
- Harvesting involves cutting plants close to the ground with sickles; in flooded areas, the plants are uprooted.
- After harvesting, plants are left in the field for a few days to shed leaves, then tied into bundles, with the tops left to decompose.
- Retting, an important process for fiber quality, involves soaking the bundles in water and covering them with non-tannic weeds.
- This process is best done in slow-moving clean water at an optimal temperature of around 34 degrees Celsius.
- Once the fiber easily separates from the wood, retting is complete.
- With many countries reducing plastic use, jute bags are a biodegradable and environmentally friendly alternative to plastic bags.
- Jute has economic potential beyond traditional uses, contributing to products like paper, pulp, composites, and textiles.

What are the issues faced by EPFO pensioners? (15 September)

Have some of the problems eased with the government announcing that 78 lakh beneficiaries can pick up their pension from any bank, any branch from January 2025? What are some of their other demands? Is a raise in the minimum pension amount likely? What are the difficulties?

- Starting January 1, 2025, nearly 78 lakh Provident Fund pensioners in India will receive their pensions through any bank and branch under the Employees' Pension Scheme, 1995 (EPS-95).
- The Union Labour Ministry approved a Centralised Pension Payment System (CPPS) as part of the EPFO's IT modernization efforts.
- Currently, pensioners must transfer their Pension Payment Orders (PPO) when moving, leading to delays and complaints about payments.
- The new system will eliminate the need for pensioners to visit specific banks, allowing easier access to their pensions.
- The CPPS will also pave the way for an Aadhaar-based payment system, which will streamline verification processes and ensure immediate crediting of pensions.
- The EPFO anticipates significant cost reductions in pension disbursement with the new system.
- K.P. Babu from the Chennai EPF Pensioners' Welfare Association welcomed the development but expressed concerns about the implementation process.
- Many pensioners hoped for a unified pension scheme similar to what government employees have, combining features from both the Old and New Pension Schemes.
- Trade unions and MPs from various parties are urging the government to increase the minimum pension from ₹1,000 to higher amounts, with some associations seeking ₹9,000 plus allowances.
- A BJP MP previously requested a hike to ₹7,500 along with allowances, which had been assured consideration seven years ago.

What is the status of applications by PF pensioners and members for pension on higher wages?

- PF members and pensioners are worried about the processing of their applications for higher pensions after a Supreme Court ruling in November 2022.
- As of August 7, 2024, only 8,401 Pension Payment Orders (PPOs) were issued, with only two for retirees before September 1, 2014.
- Out of nearly 17.5 lakh online applications, about 1.5 lakh were rejected, and 89,235 applicants were sent demand notices for arrears.
- The Union government cites financial constraints for not increasing the minimum pension, despite annual increases in allocations for the EPS-95.
- The government's contribution to the Pension Scheme is 1.16% of employees' basic wages, plus budgetary support for minimum pensions.
- Contributions were approximately ₹8,785 crore for 2022-23 and are expected to rise to ₹10,950 crore for 2024-25.
- The EPFO has historically opposed pension on higher wages, claiming it is meant for economically weaker workers, and fears it would affect the sustainability of the Pension Fund.
- Despite concerns about sustainability, the fund has not faced cash flow issues, even with projected actuarial deficits.
- There are complaints that the EPFO is asking for very old documents from pensioners and employers, which is seen as unrealistic.
- The government should consider increasing contributions to the EPS-95 and raising the PF contribution ceiling from ₹15,000, set ten years ago.
- It should also implement an option for employees to invest in the EPF or NPS, as suggested by former Finance Minister Arun Jaitley in 2015.
- The exclusion of EPS-95 for employees joining after September 1, 2014, who earn above the ceiling should be removed, making pensions available to all employees.

What rights are queer couples fighting for? (15 September)

Why is the advisory to allow the LGBTQIA+ community to open joint bank accounts a small step towards easing their daily lives? Why is the community kept out of succession, inheritance, alimony, and maintenance? What did the SC rule on same-sex marriage in October 2023?

- A recent Finance Ministry advisory has started to address issues faced by queer couples who cannot legally marry.
- The advisory and an RBI circular state that LGBTQIA+ individuals can open joint bank accounts and nominate their partners as beneficiaries.
- Queer couples face significant challenges due to the lack of legal recognition for their unions.
- For instance, if one partner is hospitalized, the other may not have legal rights to make medical decisions.
- Supriyo Chakraborty expressed concerns about future caregiving rights when their parents are no longer around.
- Funeral rights can also be problematic; a man named Jebin had to go to court to attend his partner's funeral because the family refused to acknowledge their relationship.
- Everyday tasks become more complicated for queer couples, such as obtaining a ration card or being nominated for insurance benefits.
- They miss out on legal rights related to succession, inheritance, alimony, and maintenance.
- Their communications lack legal protection, which means they could be forced to testify against each other in court.
- They are unable to donate organs to one another or adopt a child together.
- Marriage provides access to essential legal rights, which goes beyond just social acceptance, highlighting the need for legal recognition of same-sex marriage.

What did the Supreme Court say?

- In its October 2023 judgment, the court did not recognize same-sex marriage, stating that it's a legislative issue, not judicial.
- The court emphasized that the Constitution protects the rights of all individuals, including queer couples, to enter into unions.
- It pointed out that the lack of recognition for queer unions leads to unequal treatment and denied entitlements.
- The Union government has committed to establishing a committee to define entitlements for queer couples, chaired by the Cabinet Secretary.
- This committee includes members from various ministries and has begun consulting with stakeholders, including the LGBTQIA+ community.
- The court directed the committee to consider allowing queer partners to be recognized as family for ration cards and medical decisions.
- It also mentioned the need to address jail visitation rights, access to deceased partners' bodies for last rites, and financial benefits like gratuity.

- Some banks had previously claimed to be inclusive, allowing queer couples to open joint accounts, but Mr. Chakraborty criticized this as mere marketing without proper staff training.
- Legal backing is now seen as essential for enforcing these rights.
- Further advisories from insurance regulators and other departments may help, but major changes in family and inheritance laws may require legislative action.
- Mr. Chakraborty noted that gaining rights may take time, as they will need to be pursued individually after the petition for same-sex marriage recognition was unsuccessful.

Will Mission Mausam improve weather forecasts? (15 September)

What is on the anvil to make accurate predictions? What is the challenge with weather modification plans?

- On September 11, the Cabinet approved a ₹2,000 crore program called Mission Mausam to upgrade atmospheric observation infrastructure.
- The program aims to enhance the tools used by the India Meteorological Department (IMD), the National Centre for Medium Range Weather Forecasting, and the Indian Institute of Tropical Meteorology.
- Objectives include improving monsoon forecasts, providing better air quality alerts, and warning about extreme weather events and cyclones.
- Key components will involve new radars, advanced satellite systems, supercomputers, and improved earth-system models.
- A Geographic Information System (GIS)-based automated Decision Support System will be developed for real-time data sharing.
- The Ministry of Earth Sciences (MoES) will lead the mission, aiming to install up to 60 weather radars, 15 wind profilers, and 15 radiosondes by 2026.
- These instruments will monitor wind speeds, atmospheric pressure, humidity, and temperature at various heights.
- This is not the first mission of its kind; the previous initiative was the "Monsoon Mission," launched in 2012.
- Historically, the IMD used statistical methods for monsoon forecasts, which were broad and often ineffective in predicting droughts or regional variations in monsoon performance.
- Droughts and floods often occur together, and previous weather models struggled to capture this complexity.
- The Monsoon Mission introduced a new approach to forecasting using high-performance supercomputers.
- Meteorologists simulate daily weather using physics equations to predict weather patterns over days, weeks, and months.
- These dynamical models have become standard for weather forecasts and climate studies, providing more accurate medium-range forecasts.
- The Monsoon Mission developed a flexible dynamical model that can be used for daily forecasts as well as seasonal predictions.
- This model can also be customized for specific weather events like heatwaves and cold waves.
- The new Mission Mausam builds on past efforts by acquiring more advanced equipment and proposes a novel plan for "weather management."
- Weather management includes techniques like cloud seeding, which involves spraying clouds with chemicals to alter their water-carrying capacity.
- The mission also aims to control lightning strikes, which are a significant cause of accidental deaths in India.
- To study this, a large "cloud chamber" will be set up at the Indian Institute of Tropical Meteorology (IITM).
- Weather modification research has been ongoing since the 1950s in India, with various experiments conducted.
- A key challenge in weather modification is ensuring that altered weather conditions do not affect unintended areas.
- Understanding these processes better is an important part of Mission Mausam

The regulator at the centre of a storm Madhabi Puri Buch (15 September)

The SEBI chief has been facing a barrage of allegations following U.S. short-seller Hindenburg Research's August 10 statement asserting improprieties tied to the Adani Group that forced her and her husband to state that their lives and finances were an 'open book'

- The Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI) regulates the securities market and aims to protect investors' interests.
- In February 2022, Madhabi Puri Buch became the first woman to head SEBI, taking over in March 2022.
- She has a background in investment banking, having previously led ICICI Securities and worked as a consultant for the New Development Bank.

- Less than a year into her role, she faced a significant challenge when Hindenburg Research accused the Adani Group of stock manipulation and accounting fraud in January 2023.
- Following these allegations, the stock prices of Adani Group companies dropped sharply, leading to significant investor losses and legal petitions for intervention.
- The Supreme Court ordered an investigation into SEBI's regulatory practices regarding the Adani Group.
- In May 2023, the appointed committee found no evidence of regulatory failure by SEBI in handling the allegations.
- The investigation had been ongoing since October 2020, looking into the ownership of 13 entities linked to the allegations but found no conclusive evidence of wrongdoing.
- On August 10, 2023, Hindenburg made new allegations against Ms. Buch, claiming conflicts of interest related to her investments in a Mauritius-based fund linked to the Adani Group.
- In response, Ms. Buch and her husband issued statements denying the allegations and asserting their transparency regarding financial matters.
- They emphasized that all required disclosures had been made to SEBI and expressed their willingness to share any financial documents with authorities.
- SEBI issued a statement on August 11 affirming that Ms. Buch had made all required disclosures about her securities holdings and had recused herself from matters with potential conflicts of interest.
- Sources within SEBI noted that Ms. Buch did not attempt to influence ongoing investigations.
- While she is known for being aggressive in her work approach, some colleagues recognize her personal integrity.
- Ms. Buch is facing internal discontent within SEBI, with some officers expressing concerns about mistrust and disrespect from leadership.
- There is a perception that she is facing a media trial and political attacks from the Opposition, which could undermine her position.
- Certain market players are opposed to SEBI's regulatory measures, which may contribute to calls for her removal.
- SEBI introduced new guidelines on September 9 requiring Foreign Portfolio Investors (FPIs) with significant investments in India to disclose detailed information about their ultimate beneficiaries.
- Non-compliance with this guideline could force FPIs to liquidate or adjust their holdings.
- Another proposal is in place to tighten guidelines on derivatives trading.
- There are suggestions for an independent review of the situation surrounding Ms. Buch to restore confidence in SEBI and clarify any issues related to her leadership.

The challenger who fled (15 September)

First starting of as a diplomat and then becoming the presidential candidate who fled to Spain after election results, Edmundo Gonzalez has had a tumultuous political journey

- Edmundo Gonzalez Urrutia arrived in Madrid with his wife on September 8, seeking asylum in Spain.
- He was the official presidential candidate for the Democratic Unity Platform in Venezuela's elections on July 28.
- Opposition parties claim he won the election, but the National Electoral Council declared President Nicolás Maduro the winner.
- Polls indicated Gonzalez had 65% support, while Maduro had between 14% and 31%.
- Countries like the U.S., U.K., and Spain do not recognize Maduro's victory.
- An arrest warrant was issued for Gonzalez, accusing him of conspiracy and document forgery.
- Born in 1949 in La Victoria, Venezuela, he had a modest upbringing and studied international relations.
- Gonzalez served in various diplomatic roles, including Ambassador to Algeria and Argentina during Hugo Chavez's presidency.
- His political career began in 2008, and he became president of the Democratic Unity Roundtable in 2021.
- He was selected as the opposition candidate in April after two popular leaders were barred from running.
- Gonzalez's calm demeanor and grandfatherly image appealed to the public, leading to a significant lead in polls against Maduro.
- His campaign focused on reducing inflation and restoring trust in government institutions.
- Early election results suggested a Gonzalez victory, but Maduro was declared the winner with 51% of the vote.
- Opposition leaders contest the results and demand transparency, leading to protests in Venezuela.
- Gonzalez sought asylum in Spain due to threats and pressure preventing his departure from Venezuela.
- On September 10, Spanish lawmakers debated recognizing Gonzalez as the election winner, while supporters gathered outside Parliament.
- His daughter conveyed a message from him, assuring supporters that the fight for their objectives would continue.

Return of the hardliners (15 September)

After Sheikh Hasina, it is the turn of Muhammad Yunus to indulge the hardline Islamists by including them in the Bangladesh government

- In Bangladesh, the absence of prominent female leaders has allowed Islamists to regain political influence.
- Caretaker government leader Muhammad Yunus appointed A.F.M. Khalid Hossain from the extremist group Hefazat-e-Islam as Adviser for Religious Affairs.
- Hefazat-e-Islam was formed in 2010 to oppose women's rights initiatives by Sheikh Hasina's government, particularly concerning property rights.
- The group, mainly composed of Sunni clerics, gained prominence through protests against women's policies and constitutional changes during military rule.
- Hefazat's founding was by Islamic scholar Shah Ahmad Shafi, aiming to establish an Islamic administration in Bangladesh.
- The group gained power after a violent protest in 2013 demanding harsh punishments for bloggers they accused of insulting Islam.
- Hefazat's agenda included strict dress codes, banning statues, and declaring Ahmadiyas as non-Muslims, leading to violent clashes with security forces.
- Despite their extremism, Hasina's government has accommodated Hefazat, including removing a statue from the Supreme Court and recognizing Quami madrasa degrees.
- In 2021, Hefazat protested against Indian Prime Minister Modi's visit, resulting in violent clashes and deaths.
- After Modi's visit, the Hasina government cracked down on Hefazat, arresting many of its leaders.
- Recently, Yunus's government has allied with Islamists, lifting bans on groups like Jamaat-e-Islami and granting bail to leaders of extremist organizations.
- Yunus met with Hefazat leaders, raising concerns in India, especially amid reports of attacks on Hindu communities.
- He downplayed the violence as political fallout, signaling a shift toward a hardline Islamist regime in Bangladesh.

Smallpox vaccine moderately elective in preventing Mpox (15 September)

- The modified vaccinia Ankara-Bavarian Nordic (MVA-BN) smallpox vaccine is moderately effective against Mpox infection.
- There have been no randomized clinical trials specifically for Mpox vaccination.
- Researchers used a method called target trial emulation to study the vaccine's effectiveness in real-world settings.
- They compared over 3,200 vaccinated men with an equal number of unvaccinated men.
- The study found that one dose of the MVA-BN vaccine has an estimated effectiveness of 58% in preventing Mpox infection.

Study finds ozone pollution reduces tropical forest growth (15 September)

- Ozone gas is negatively affecting the growth of tropical forests.
- This reduction in growth results in about 290 million tonnes of carbon not being captured each year.
- On average, ground-level ozone decreases yearly growth in tropical forests by 5.1%.
- The impact of ozone is stronger in certain regions.
- Researchers conducted experiments to assess how different tropical tree species respond to ozone.
- They used these findings in a computer model to study global vegetation.

'Buch invested in Chinese funds' (15 September)

Congress party alleges that the SEBI chief had first as a whole-time member and later as Chairperson also traded in listed securities worth ₹36.9 cr. while in possession of unpublished price sensitive information; claims she held foreign assets

- The Congress party is criticizing SEBI Chairperson Madhabi Puri Buch for alleged misconduct.
- They claim she traded in listed securities while having unpublished price-sensitive information.
- The party also alleges she invested in Chinese firms during a time of geopolitical tensions with China.
- These accusations came after Ms. Buch denied earlier claims, calling them false and motivated.
- Congress spokesperson Pawan Khera stated that from 2017 to 2023, Ms. Buch traded securities worth ₹36.9 crore, violating SEBI's conflict of interest rules.

- He also claimed she held foreign assets between 2017 and 2021.
- Khera detailed her investments in U.S. funds, including ETFs linked to Chinese markets.
- He expressed concern that someone in her position would invest in Chinese funds while political tensions exist.