

**23 MAY 2024**

## **TOPICS COVERED**

- 1. 'Cambodia, Myanmar and Laos emerge as hub of organised financial crimes (GS Paper III: internal Security)**
- 2. A 'No-Limit' bromance that is not just a bilateral matter (GS Paper II: Global World Order)**
- 3. A vegetable triumvirate, inflation and the takeaway (GS Paper III: Inflation)**
- 4. The ICC has done well to move against Israel, Hamas leaders for Gaza crimes (GS Paper II: International Organizations)**
- 5. On concerns over voter turnout data (GS Paper II: Election)**

## **Kurmis enter poll fray in Jangalmahal to push for ST status (23 May)**

- The Kurmi community in West Bengal, under the Adivasi Kurmi Samaj, is demanding inclusion in the Scheduled Tribes (ST) list.
- Both the Trinamool Congress (TMC) and BJP have remained silent on the Kurmi community's demand.

- As a result, community members are contesting the Lok Sabha elections independently in West Bengal's Jangalmahal region.
- The Jangalmahal region comprises four Lok Sabha seats: Purulia, Jhargram, Medinipur, and Bankura.
- Kurmis constitute significant percentages of the population in these seats: 65% in Purulia, 42% in Jhargram, 17% in Medinipur, and 18% in Bankura.
- The demand for ST status for Kurmis is opposed by other tribes in the region, including Santhals, which could potentially lead to ethnic conflict.
- The Adivasi Kurmi Samaj has fielded candidates for each of these seats: Ajit Mahato from Purulia, Surya Singh Beshra from Jhargram, Kamalesh Mahato from Medinipur, and Surajit Singh Kurmali from Bankura.
- Ajit Mahato, the chief adviser, symbolically rode a buffalo while filing his nomination, citing caste discrimination by upper castes as the reason for this gesture.
- Ajit Mahato, a 70-year-old Kurmi leader, has become prominent by leading protests demanding the inclusion of Kurmis in the Scheduled Tribes (ST) list.
- He has organized blockades of national highways and railway lines in 2023 to press for the community's demand.
- Ajit Mahato believes there is no logical reason why Kurmis should not be included in the ST list, citing the revocation of Article 370 as an example of swift government action.
- He maintains equal distance from both BJP and TMC, emphasizing that Kurmis should not be enslaved by any political party.
- Ajit Mahato and the Adivasi Kurmi Samaj have decided to contest the polls independently to ensure Kurmi issues are not neglected.
- In the 2019 elections, BJP's Jyotirmoy Singh Mahato won the Purulia seat, but this year he faces competition from TMC's Santiram Mahato and Ajit Mahato.
- Ajit Mahato criticizes BJP for not fulfilling Kurmi demands despite receiving their votes in the last election.
- Barun Mahato, another Kurmi leader, is contesting as an Independent candidate from Jhargram in the Jangalmahal region.
- Jhargram is a reserved seat for Scheduled Tribe (ST) candidates, and Barun Mahato holds an ST certificate as he belongs to the Bedia community.
- Anup Mahato, a local Kurmi leader, emphasizes the importance of targeting political party vote banks to make their demands heard.
- A research group named AAMRA, studying Kurmis ethnographically and sociologically, notes that the community's demand has gained traction.
- The presence of Independent Kurmi candidates like Barun Mahato may influence the electoral balance in the region.

## Human drug with vet's label puts govt. body in a soup (23 May)

- Karnataka State Medical Supplies Corporation Ltd. (KSMSCL) purchased seven drugs intended for Animal Husbandry Veterinary Sciences (AHVS) Department.
- These drugs were mistakenly labelled as animal-use drugs, but they were supplied to Health Department hospitals for human use.
- Health Minister Dinesh Gundu Rao clarified that the drugs were not meant for animal use, despite the labelling error.
- KSMSCL officials termed it a "logo misprint" issue.
- As a precaution, KSMSCL has recalled 70% of the supplied drugs from hospitals.

### Panic among patients

- On January 5, Pushkar Pharma Ltd. supplied drugs to all KSMSCL warehouses in Karnataka.
- The drugs were labelled with the logo of the Animal Husbandry Veterinary Sciences (AHVS) Department, causing confusion.
- A KSMSCL official in Kodagu noticed the AHVS logo on the products and reported it to higher officials.
- Pushkar Pharma requested KSMSCL on January 18 to accept the stock despite the logo error.
- The pharmaceutical company assured that the drugs were safe for human use and offered to mask the AHVS logo at their own cost.
- Despite legal concerns, KSMSCL allowed Pushkar Pharma to mask the logo and imposed a 1% penalty on the purchase order value of ₹62.89 lakh as per tender conditions.

### Printing error

- KSMSCL Managing Director Chidananda S. Vatare clarified that the logo issue was a printing error.
- He stated that masking the logo did not violate the Drugs and Cosmetics Act.
- Mr. Vatare urged people not to panic, emphasizing that the products are safe for human use.
- The company provided product permission copies confirming that the drugs meet Indian Pharmacopoeia (IP) standards and are for human use.
- Analytical test reports of the products also verified their standard quality.
- While acknowledging the company's negligence, Mr. Vatare mentioned that the company confirmed in writing that these products were not supplied to the AHVS department.

# 'Cambodia, Myanmar and Laos emerge as hub of organised financial crimes'

**Vijaita Singh**

NEW DELHI

Nearly half of financial frauds targeting Indians originate from the three south-east Asian countries of Myanmar, Cambodia and Laos, and many web applications used to commit the frauds are written in Chinese language, thereby not ruling out the Chinese connection, Rajesh Kumar, Chief Executive Officer of the Indian Cyber Crime Coordination Centre, said on Wednesday.

Mr. Kumar said in the first four months of the year, Indians had lost over ₹1,776 crore in 89,054 cases of financial crimes such as digital arrest, stock market scams, investment scams and romance or dating scams and there had been a "spurt in the organ-



A total of 3.25 lakh mule bank accounts and 595 apps had been blocked. REUTERS

ised crime from south-east Asia." These complaints were received on the national cybercrime portal and not all of them were converted into First Information Reports.

A total of 3.25 lakh mule bank accounts, 595 apps and more than 3,000 URLs had been blocked in the past four months.

Additionally, 5.3 lakh SIM cards and 80,848 IMEI numbers had been suspended since July 2023 and 3,401 WhatsApp

groups had been taken down in the past two months.

The officer added that on May 20, many Indians working in a suspected scam compound in Sihanouk city, Cambodia protested against their employers. "Some of them join willingly and some are duped into joining these centres with the fake promise of data entry operator. They arrive on tourist visas in Thailand and due to ungoverned border and human traffickers, they end up in these compounds where they are made to work for long hours. Indians erupted in protest as they wanted their passports back, the Andhra Pradesh police are investigating the case and three recruiting agents have been arrested," Mr. Kumar said.

**'Cambodia, Myanmar and Laos emerge as hub of organised financial crimes' (23 May) (GS Paper III: Internal Security)**

- Rajesh Kumar, Chief Executive Officer of the Indian Cyber Crime Coordination Centre, stated that nearly half of financial frauds targeting Indians originate from Myanmar, Cambodia, and Laos.
- Many web applications used in these frauds are written in Chinese language, suggesting a possible Chinese connection.
- In the first four months of the year, Indians lost over ₹1,776 crore in 89,054 cases of financial crimes.
- Types of financial crimes reported include digital arrest scams, stock market scams, investment scams, and romance or dating scams.
- There has been a significant increase in organized crime originating from South-East Asia.
- These complaints were received through the national cybercrime portal, and not all of them were converted into First Information Reports (FIRs).
- In the past four months, a total of 3.25 lakh mule bank accounts, 595 apps, and more than 3,000 URLs were blocked.
- Since July 2023, 5.3 lakh SIM cards and 80,848 IMEI numbers were suspended.
- In the past two months, 3,401 WhatsApp groups were taken down.
- On May 20, Indians working in a suspected scam compound in Sihanouk city, Cambodia, protested against their employers.
- Some individuals join these centres willingly, while others are deceived with fake promises of data entry jobs.
- They typically arrive on tourist visas in Thailand and are trafficked to these centres due to unregulated borders and human traffickers.
- The Andhra Pradesh police are investigating the case, and three recruiting agents have been arrested.

# A 'No-Limit' bromance that is not just a bilateral matter

Having met each other over 40 times in the past 11 years, Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping are justified in calling each other "old friend". Yet, their Summit in Beijing (May 16-17, 2024), ostensibly to mark the 75th anniversary of bilateral diplomatic relations, stands out, arguably, as among their most consequential meetings. Given their geostrategic and geoeconomic hefts, their "no-limit" bromance is not just a bilateral matter. It concerns the world at large including India, which has a significant yin-yang relationship with both.

## The phases of Russia-China ties

Over the past two centuries, Russia-China relations have passed through at least five phases. During the 19th century, Czarist Russia took advantage of a weak China to expand to the Pacific, and the Soviet Union continued to hold these territories. A decade of "Comintern brotherhood" followed the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, but the bonhomie was upended by ideological and geopolitical differences, triggered, in part, by the Chinese attack on India, in 1962. Russia and China had armed clashes in 1969 over the Ussuri River border dispute.

The fourth phase commenced in 1972, with United States President Richard Nixon's dramatic visit to Beijing, aimed at weaning China from the Russia-led Eastern Bloc. In a paradigm shift, China tilted towards the West which supported Deng Xiaoping's "four modernisations", believing that "prosperity would make China a more liberal society". Despite China's violent suppression of the Tiananmen Square protests in 1989, the West continued to lavish China with investments, technology transfer, market access and diplomatic support over the next three decades, transforming China into the "World's Factory." Meanwhile, Moscow-Beijing ties withered as the Soviet Union imploded and the Russian Federation, its successor, shed most of its Central Asian Republics which became an arena for geo-political competition with China.

The current phase began in 2012, when China's growing assertiveness alarmed the U.S. into launching a "pivot Asia", unveiling hard-lined policies to stem China's rise and gradual economic decoupling. Growing friction with the West led China to return to Russia and the two famously declared after the Beijing Summit in February 2022 that their ties had "No Limits". Within weeks, Mr. Putin launched a "limited military operation" against Ukraine. The West responded angrily with hundreds of sanctions on Moscow to cripple Russia economically. This western blockade impelled Moscow further towards China which was also under economic pressure from the same quarters. Over the past two years, their convergence against the West has triggered a quantitative and qualitative surge in Russia-China ties. Their trade reached \$240



**Mahesh Sachdev**

is a former Indian Ambassador

The recent summit in Beijing between Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping has both short and long-term implications

billion in 2023, having grown 26% over 2022. Russia is now predominantly dependent on China as a market for its energy exports and a source of critical inputs, such as sanctioned items and those required to pursue its Ukraine war. Russia was the largest crude supplier to China with volume averaging 2.1 million barrels a day in 2023. However, despite decoupling attempts, China traded \$575 billion with the U.S. in 2023, more than twice its trade with Russia. In comparison, India's 2023-24 annual trade with the U.S. and China was \$118 billion each; it traded \$66 billion with Russia.

## The message in the joint statement

Against this backdrop, the 7,000-word Joint Statement issued after the Putin-Xi Summit was conspicuously silent on bilateral economic, financial and military ties. This taciturnity could have one of two diametrically opposite motives: it was either to avoid invoking western opprobrium and sanctions or to paper over their mutual disagreement. It is relevant to note that during a Beijing visit in April, U.S. Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken met President Xi to reportedly warn against helping Russia militarily. The joint statement also omits any India-specific issues, including the United Nations reforms, and confines treatment of Europe to a sanitised version of the Ukraine conflict.

In contrast, the text reserves the choicest invectives for the U.S., accusing it of pursuing "dual containment" (of both Russia and China, calling it "unconstructive and hostile") and an "Indo-Pacific Strategy" with "a negative impact on the peace and stability of the region". With its stark polarity, the Joint Statement is a clear sign that the two strategic partners have gone on an anti-U.S. offensive.

The Beijing Summit's likely impact needs analysis in both the short and long terms. In the short run, it may lead to intensified, albeit understated, bilateral cooperation, particularly in the supply of the dual-use materials needed by Russia for its Ukraine campaign. In return, China may seek better terms for Russian raw materials, mining rights in Siberia and access to Russian know-how on a range of critical technologies such as avionics, nuclear power and space. China may also seek greater Russian acquiescence for its dominance over Central Asia.

Beijing may even have cynical motives for quietly supporting Russia: the continuation of the Ukraine war keeps a beleaguered Russia dependent on China and the U.S. preoccupied with eastern Europe, giving China the freedom to bully Asia.

In the longer run, the summit may have an even more profound fallout. While China would want to continue its profitable economic engagements with both Russia and the West, the inherent contradictions may eventually make this pursuit untenable.

On May 17, the U.S. State Department spokesman curtly told China, "You cannot have it

both ways." The continued western pressure may force it to play the Russian card in a high-stakes global poker. This, coupled with the Middle Kingdom's incessant quest for global dominance, could usher in a new Cold War aimed mostly at creating a credible alternative to the U.S.-dominated post-Second World War global eco-political architecture. The early contours of the incipient China-driven global construct, such as BRICS, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, the 109-member Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the 147-country, \$1 trillion outlay Belt and Road Initiative are already in place and just need ramping up. It could thus presage the opening overture of a new global polarisation.

## The impact on India

The Beijing Summit would have far-reaching implications for India, presenting it with both challenges and opportunities. To begin with, India needs to carefully and objectively examine the depth and durability of the current phase of the ties between Russia and China, given their erratic past. Both have strong leaders, even as Russia's GDP is currently less than one-seventh of China's. This coupled with the Ukraine war and the sanctions makes Moscow less than an equal partner, perhaps for the first time in their bilateral history. Moscow's potential vulnerability to China's hegemony could concern India given its still overwhelming dependence on Russia for defence supplies particularly as it has border tensions with China. India being Russia's largest defence market, Moscow has an interest in retaining it. However, the reliability of Russian supplies may become subject to Chinese pressures.

While India has several reservations about the existing global architecture, it is by no means certain that Beijing's alternative would suit India better. New Delhi's best bet would perhaps be to press for a higher profile in the existing global order commensurate with India's size and potential.

In retrospect, during the last Cold War, India largely pursued the high moral ground often eschewing its core national interests. Instead of focusing on its socio-economic development and the realpolitik it required, it adopted a doctrinaire approach to Non-Alignment and Third World solidarity. The rest is history and those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it.

The incoming global polarisation is likely to be differently nuanced with greater flux, driven mostly by the geo-economics and quest for new technologies. Unlike the first Cold War, India is now a major global player with hard-earned "strategic autonomy" providing it with real options. India should leverage its strengths judiciously, and adopt a sharper and nimbler approach. As new opportunities dawn, it needs to be clear-headed about its core long-term national goals, adopt a commensurate strategy and pursue it with single-mindedness.

# A 'No-Limit' bromance that is not just a bilateral matter (23 May) (GS Paper II: IR: Global World Order)

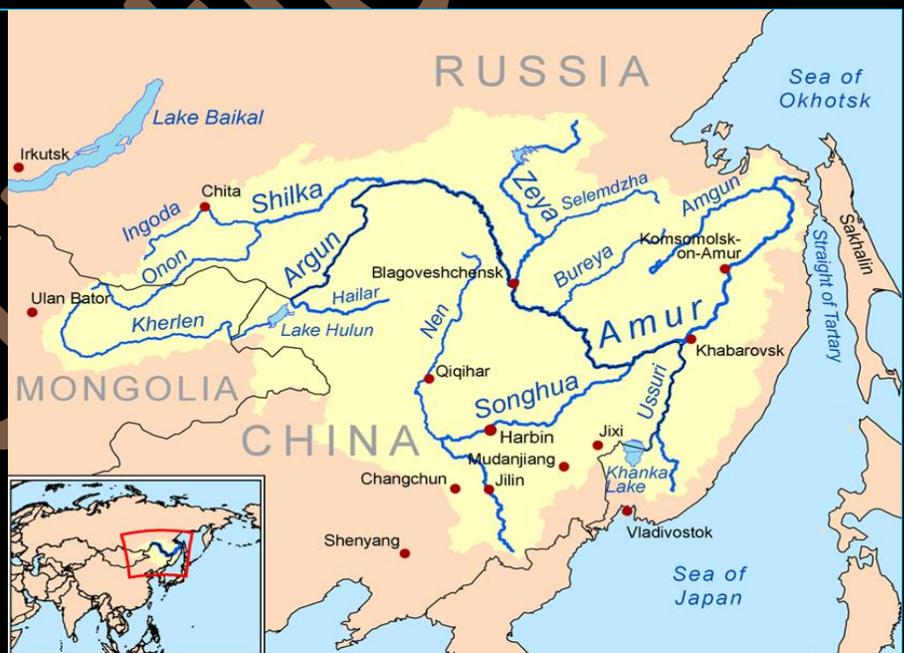
- Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping have met over 40 times in 11 years.
- They refer to each other as “old friend.”
- Their recent Summit in Beijing (May 16-17, 2024) marks the 75th anniversary of their diplomatic relations.
- This meeting is considered one of their most important due to their significant global influence.
- Their strong relationship impacts global affairs, including India's relations with both countries.

### The phases of Russia-China ties

- 19th Century: Czarist Russia exploited China's weakness to expand to the Pacific; the Soviet Union retained these territories.
- 1949-1962: Post-establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC), Russia and China enjoyed a decade of “Comintern brotherhood,” which ended due to ideological and geopolitical differences, partly due to China's attack on India in 1962.
- 1969: Russia and China clashed over the Ussuri River border dispute.

The Ussuri River forms part of the international border between Russia and the southeast region of Northeast China.

- **Location:** The Ussuri River is a northward-flowing tributary of the Amur River.
- **Current Status:** The border situation was resolved with the Sino-Soviet Border Agreement in 1991. Russia conceded ownership of most islands along the rivers to China, with the exception of Bolshoy Ussuriysky Island, which is shared by both countries.



- 1972: U.S. President Nixon's visit to Beijing aimed to shift China away from the Russia-led Eastern Bloc. China tilted towards the West, supported by investments and technology, transforming into the "World's Factory."
- 1989-1990s: Despite the Tiananmen Square crackdown, the West continued supporting China. Meanwhile, Moscow-Beijing relations weakened as the Soviet Union collapsed, and the Russian Federation faced geopolitical competition with China in Central Asia.
- 2012: The U.S. started focusing on Asia to counter China's growing power.

- February 2022: China and Russia declared their relationship had "No Limits" after a summit in Beijing.
- Ukraine Conflict: Putin launched a military operation in Ukraine, leading to Western sanctions on Russia. This pushed Russia closer to China.
- Economic Dependence: Russia became more reliant on China for selling energy and getting important supplies.

#### 2023 Trade:

- Russia and China traded \$240 billion, a 26% increase from 2022.
- Russia supplied China with 2.1 million barrels of oil per day.
- China still traded more with the U.S. (\$575 billion) than with Russia.

#### India's trade:

- With the U.S.: \$118 billion
- With China: \$118 billion
- With Russia: \$66 billion

#### The message in the joint statement

- The Joint Statement is 7,000 words long.
- It does not mention economic, financial, or military ties.
- Possible reasons for this silence:
  - To avoid Western backlash and sanctions.
  - To hide disagreements between Russia and China.
- U.S. Secretary of State Blinken met President Xi in April to warn against helping Russia militarily.
- The statement criticizes the U.S. for "dual containment" of Russia and China.
- It criticizes the U.S. "Indo-Pacific Strategy" as harmful to regional peace.
- The statement does not mention India-specific issues or detail the Ukraine conflict.
- Short-term impact:
  - Likely increase in bilateral cooperation, especially in supplying Russia with dual-use materials for the Ukraine war.
  - China may seek better terms for Russian raw materials, mining rights in Siberia, and access to critical technologies.
  - China may push for more Russian acceptance of its dominance in Central Asia.
- China's strategic motives:
  - Supporting Russia keeps Russia dependent on China.
  - A prolonged Ukraine war keeps the U.S. focused on Eastern Europe, allowing China more freedom to exert power in Asia.

- Long-term impact of the summit could be significant.
- China aims to maintain economic ties with both Russia and the West.
- Contradictions in this approach may become unsustainable.
- U.S. State Department told China it can't support both sides ("You cannot have it both ways").
- Continued Western pressure may push China to align more with Russia.
- China's quest for global dominance may lead to a new Cold War.
- **This new Cold War would aim to challenge the U.S.-dominated global order.**
- China already has initiatives like BRICS, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, and the Belt and Road Initiative.
- These initiatives could expand and increase global polarisation.

### The impact on India

- The Beijing Summit has significant implications for India, presenting challenges and opportunities.
- India should assess the strength and stability of Russia-China relations, given their unpredictable history.
- Russia's current economic weakness and the impact of the Ukraine war and sanctions make it less equal to China.
- Russia's potential vulnerability to China is concerning for India, especially due to its reliance on Russian defense supplies amid border tensions with China.
- India remains Russia's largest defense market, but the reliability of Russian supplies might be influenced by China.
- India is unsure if Beijing's alternative global order would be more beneficial than the current one.
- India should aim for a higher role in the existing global order reflecting its size and potential.
- Historically, India took a high moral stance during the Cold War, neglecting core national interests.
- The new global polarisation will likely focus on geo-economics and technological advancement.
- Unlike the past, India is now a significant global player with strategic autonomy.
- India should leverage its strengths, be clear about its long-term goals, and adopt a focused strategy.

# A vegetable triumvirate, inflation and the takeaway

Inflation is a critical indicator of an economy's health, reflecting the changes in the general price level and the cost of living. In India, the Consumer Price Index (CPI) is used to measure price inflation which is largely based on the **Laspeyre's price index** and measures the economy's cost of living. The **CPI basket comprises 299 items of which vegetables account for a weight of 6.04% in the total basket.**

Within vegetables, the three vegetables – **tomato, onion, and potato (TOP)** – hold a **weightage of 2.2% in the overall CPI basket for an average Indian household.** The significance of TOP goes beyond its numerical representation. These three commodities have historically played a pivotal role in influencing both food and beverages inflation as well as headline CPI figures. One notable fact is that the TOP group constitutes 3.6% of the total consumption basket in urban areas while it constitutes 5% of the total consumption basket in rural India for the bottom 5% of the consumption classes, respectively, as per the CPI basket classification.



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In FY2023-24, vegetable prices in India soared by about **15% (year-on-year)**. Vegetable prices have exhibited significant volatility, shifting dramatically from a fall of 0.7% in June to a substantial rise of 37.4% in July. Though vegetables have a weight of only 6% in the total CPI basket, their contribution to inflation was as high as about 30% in February and March 2024. Tomato prices soared by 202% in July 2023 and contributed to 18.1% of the total headline inflation despite the weight of tomatoes being only 0.6% in the CPI basket. During the same month, the contribution of vegetables to headline inflation was a high 31.9%, and of TOP was 17.2%.

## Price volatility

One of the striking features of TOP is its price volatility (*chart*). The coefficient of variation (CoV) of inflation is a key measure of volatility. The inflation volatility of TOP has been measured using the coefficient of variation (CoV) for the period January 2015 to March 2024, yielding a value of 5.2. It is significantly higher than the volatility of the vegetables sub-group (CoV=3.0), the food group (CoV=0.6) as well as the volatility of headline inflation (CoV=0.3). This exercise reveals that TOP's CoV surpasses not only the food and headline group but also the vegetables sub-group. This heightened volatility underscores the sensitivity of these commodities to market forces, weather fluctuations, and supply chain dynamics.

The *chart* shows the inflation trend for the three commodities, i.e., tomato, onion and potato, as well as for the constructed TOP group. The inflation rate for the TOP sub-group has remained quite volatile ranging from a minimum

value of -36.6% in September 2021 to 132.0% in December 2019 (The writer's calculation uses data from the National Statistical Office).

## Aiding the farmer

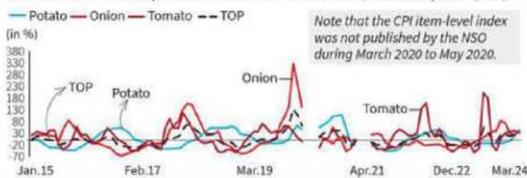
The volatility and importance of TOP in shaping inflation trends highlight the need for **effective policy interventions and a nuanced understanding of agricultural supply chains.** These are perishable crops and are subject to a number of biotic and abiotic stresses. As these crops do not have Minimum Support Price and are mostly sold to private traders by farmers, this volatility in prices also hurts farmers, the majority of whom are net buyers of these crops. The possible solutions to reduce the volatility of inflation for these crops include an **overhauling of agricultural value chains and improvement in the cold storage facilities, better prices for farmers to incentivise the production of the crops, and increased profitability in the cultivation that can be achieved by reducing the exorbitantly high input prices of fertilizers and pesticides used in the production of these crops.**

The **abrupt changes in lifting the export bans on onion ahead of the Maharashtra elections also show that we are still using short-term measures to deal with the price volatility in these crops as against measures that are demanded by the farmers.** The memorable Kisan Long March from Nashik to Mumbai in March 2023 and continuous protests by farmers have time and again raised the **demand for Minimum Support Prices for onion.** This demand seems to be continually ignored by the government.

*The views expressed are personal*

## Year on year inflation for tomato, onion and potato (January 2015 to March 2024)

The chart indicates sharp movements of inflation in tomato, onion and potato (TOP)



## A vegetable triumvirate, inflation and the takeaway (23 May)

- Inflation reflects changes in the general price level and cost of living.
- In India, the Consumer Price Index (CPI) measures inflation and cost of living.
- The CPI basket includes 299 items, with vegetables making up 6.04%.
- Tomatoes, onions, and potatoes (TOP) have a weightage of 2.2% in the overall CPI basket.
- TOP's significance extends beyond their numerical weight in influencing inflation.
- TOP constitutes 3.6% of the urban consumption basket and 5% of the rural consumption basket for the bottom 5%.
- In FY2023-24, vegetable prices in India increased by about 15% year-on-year.
- Vegetable prices showed significant volatility, dropping by 0.7% in June and rising by 37.4% in July.
- Despite vegetables being 6% of the CPI basket, they contributed up to 30% to inflation in February and March 2024.
- Tomato prices increased by 202% in July 2023, contributing 18.1% to total headline inflation, despite a 0.6% weight in the CPI basket.

- In July 2023, vegetables contributed 31.9% to headline inflation, and TOP contributed 17.2%.

### Price volatility

- TOP (tomatoes, onions, potatoes) are significant in measuring inflation in India.
- These commodities collectively have a weight of 2.2% in the CPI basket.
- They influence food and beverage inflation as well as headline CPI figures.
- In FY2023-24, vegetable prices in India rose by about 15% year-on-year.
- Tomato prices particularly surged by 202% in July 2023, contributing significantly to inflation.
- Despite their small weight of 6% in the CPI basket, vegetables contributed around 30% to inflation in early 2024.
- TOP commodities are more volatile in terms of price changes compared to other food groups.
- The coefficient of variation (CoV) for TOP inflation from January 2015 to March 2024 was 5.2.
- This CoV is higher than that of vegetables (CoV=3.0), food group (CoV=0.6), and headline inflation (CoV=0.3).
- TOP's price volatility is influenced by market forces, weather fluctuations, and supply chain dynamics.
- The inflation rate for the TOP sub-group has ranged widely, from -36.6% in September 2021 to 132.0% in December 2019.
- The chart illustrates the inflation trends for tomatoes, onions, potatoes, and the aggregated TOP group over time.

### Aiding the farmer

- The volatility and importance of tomatoes, onions, and potatoes (TOP) in shaping inflation trends highlight the need for effective policy interventions and a nuanced understanding of agricultural supply chains.
- These crops are perishable and are subject to various biotic (pests, diseases) and abiotic (weather) stresses.
- Unlike other crops, TOP do not have a Minimum Support Price (MSP) and are mostly sold to private traders by farmers.
- Price volatility in these crops hurts farmers, most of whom are net buyers of these commodities.
- Solutions to reduce inflation volatility include overhauling agricultural value chains, improving cold storage facilities, and ensuring better prices for farmers to incentivize production.
- Increasing profitability in cultivation requires reducing exorbitantly high input prices of fertilizers and pesticides used for these crops.

- The abrupt changes in export bans on onions ahead of elections in Maharashtra reflect short-term measures to deal with price volatility rather than sustainable solutions.
- Farmers have consistently demanded MSPs for onions, which has been ignored by the government despite protests like the Kisan Long March from Nashik to Mumbai in March 2023.

### Comparison between the Wholesale Price Index (WPI) and the Consumer Price Index (CPI)

#### 1. Meaning:

- WPI: It tracks the change in prices of goods sold in bulk by wholesalers.
- CPI: It monitors the change in prices paid by customers to retailers.

#### 2. Publisher of Index:

- WPI: Published by the Ministry of Commerce and Industry.
- CPI: Published by the National Statistical Office, Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, and Labour Bureau.

#### 3. Base Year:

- WPI: Base year is 2011-12.
- CPI: Base year is 2012.

#### 4. Frequency:

- WPI: Components like primary articles, energy products, and power are published weekly, while the overall index is monthly.
- CPI: Published on the 14th of every month.

#### 5. Source:

- WPI: Based on production values of items.
- CPI: Based on daily household expenditures.

#### 6. Measurement:

- WPI: Measured at the first stage of the transaction, involving wholesale dealers and manufacturers.
- CPI: Measured at the final stage of the transaction, where customers pay the price.

#### 7. Number of Items:

- WPI: Includes 697 items covering primary articles, fuel, and manufactured products.
- CPI: Covers 448 items in rural areas and 460 items in urban areas.

#### 8. Weightage of Item:

- WPI: Food group accounts for about 24.4% of total weight.
- CPI: Food group weighs about 39.06%.

#### 9. Service Status:

- WPI: Excludes services.
- CPI: Includes services like housing, education, and medical care.

#### 10. Commodities:

- WPI: Tracks items like minerals, basic metals, machinery, and manufacturing.

CPI: Monitors education, communications, housing, recreation, transportation, and beverages

## Setting the bar (23 May)

The ECI is too important an institution to be left to its own devices

- The Election Commission of India (ECI) has advised the BJP and Congress to refrain from raising divisive issues during election campaigns.
- The ECI's intervention comes after a history of disappointing the electorate due to perceived ineffectiveness, impartiality, and delayed actions.
- Members of the ECI are appointed through a partisan process by the executive, which is seen as contributing to its challenges.
- The ECI wrote to BJP President J.P. Nadda and Congress President Mallikarjun Kharge to urge their star campaigners to avoid statements that may divide society.
- The ECI's action follows complaints over Prime Minister Narendra Modi's speech in Banswara, Rajasthan, where he referred to Muslims in controversial terms.
- Abhijit Gangopadhyay, a former judge and BJP candidate from Tamluk, West Bengal, was recently censured and barred from campaigning for 24 hours due to remarks against Trinamool chief Mamata Banerjee.
- The Election Commission of India (ECI) has taken action against several political leaders, including YSRCP chief Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy, BRS chief K. Chandrashekar Rao, and BJP leaders Shobha Karandlaje and Dilip Ghosh.
- Complaints against Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath and Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma for alleged violations of the model code of conduct (MCC) are pending.
- These actions are meant to demonstrate impartiality, but there are concerns that the ECI may not be treating all cases equally.
- The ECI's actions are criticized for potentially stifling legitimate policy debates and disagreements during election campaigning.
- The integrity and credibility of the ECI are crucial for ensuring fair and legitimate elections in India.
- All stakeholders, including political parties and the judiciary, should prioritize reinforcing the independence of the ECI to maintain the integrity of Indian democracy.

## Justified balance (23 May)

The ICC has done well to move against Israel, Hamas leaders for Gaza crimes

- The International Criminal Court (ICC) has sought arrest warrants against leaders from both Hamas and Israel for war crimes committed since October 7.
- Hamas launched deadly attacks, killing over 1,500 Israelis and taking 245 hostages.
- Israel's military retaliation on Gaza resulted in over 35,000 deaths, predominantly women and children.
- The ICC's application for warrants will be decided by a Pre-Trial Chamber of ICC judges.
- Israel is concerned about the moral equivalence drawn by the prosecutor between a democracy and an armed group seeking to destroy it.

- The balance sought by ICC Prosecutor Karim A.A. Khan is supported by many, except Israel's staunch allies like the U.S. and others.
- Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Defence Minister Yoav Gallant are named alongside Hamas leaders for war crimes and crimes against humanity.
- The warrants are a significant step towards accountability for the conflict's atrocities.
- The ICC prosecutor has sought arrest warrants against Hamas and Israeli leaders for war crimes committed since October 7.
- Hamas is accused of serious crimes including extermination, murder, rape, torture, and hostage-taking.
- Israel's leaders are accused of starvation as a method of war, intentionally targeting civilians, and other offenses.
- Israel claims its actions are legitimate self-defense.
- There is skepticism about the effectiveness of ICC arrest warrants, citing previous warrants against leaders like Putin and al-Bashir.
- Issuing warrants may have diplomatic consequences as ICC member-countries are obligated to arrest and hand over suspects.
- Israel's isolation may increase, and the U.S.-Israeli stance on the Palestinian issue could harden.
- Israel and the U.S. are not ICC members, but this does not prevent warrants against their leaders.
- Netanyahu might use the warrants to strengthen his domestic political position.

- **The ICC (The International Criminal Court)** is the world's first permanent international tribunal that investigates and prosecutes individuals for the international crimes of genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes, and the crime of aggression.
- **Founding:** Established on July 1, 2002, by the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, an international treaty.
- **Jurisdiction:** The ICC investigates and prosecutes crimes committed after July 1, 2002, if a national court is unwilling or unable to do so.
- **Structure:**
  - **Assembly of States Parties:** Governs the ICC and consists of member states that ratified the Rome Statute.
  - **Organs of the Court:** Include the Presidency, Judicial Divisions, Office of the Prosecutor, and the Registry.
- **Cases:** The ICC is currently investigating and prosecuting cases related to genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes, and aggression in various countries around the world.
- **Headquarters:** Located in The Hague, Netherlands.
- **Leadership:**
  - Comprises the President and two Vice-Presidents.
  - The President, Tomoko Akane from Japan, took office on March 11, 2024, succeeding Piotr Hofmański.
  - Presidents are elected by fellow judges for a maximum of two, three-year terms.

# When control is disguised as reform (23 May)

## Recent Judicial Decisions:

- The Supreme Court made three significant decisions.
- It declared electoral bonds unconstitutional on February 15.
- On May 10, it granted interim bail to Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal.
- On May 15, it granted bail to Prabir Purkayastha, founder of NewsClick.

## Impact of the Decisions:

- These decisions challenge state actions and policies.
- They are seen as not favoring the interests of the ruling BJP party.
- The decisions are important for maintaining checks and balances in a democracy.

## Significance of the Decisions:

- They demonstrate the independence of institutions like the Supreme Court.
- The decisions are viewed positively for strengthening constitutional democracy.
- They break away from previous patterns where the Court was criticized for not being independent.

## Public Reaction and Perception:

- Many people see these decisions as unexpected but courageous.
- They come at a crucial time during elections.
- The decisions have been welcomed for standing up against state actions.

## Criticism of the Court:

- Legal experts and practitioners have previously criticized the Supreme Court.
- Criticism was for not being independent and sometimes aligning too closely with the executive.
- The recent decisions have surprised many in a positive way, showing a change in approach.

## A sustained campaign

- **Digital Media Impact:**
  - Public hearings on important topics, especially political ones, are immediately commented on online.
  - The Supreme Court and High Courts allow live tweeting and streaming, making proceedings more accessible.
  - Legal reporting platforms bring court proceedings into social media streams.

- **Emerging Trend of Abuse:**
  - There's a troubling rise in abuse directed at the judiciary.
  - Some view institutions like the judiciary as colonial remnants or rooted in western liberalism, conflicting with "new India's" social norms.
  - When this viewpoint is challenged, proponents seek to undermine the court's legitimacy.
- **Nature of Attacks:**
  - Digital campaigns exploit public frustration over delayed justice, concerns about judicial nepotism, and lack of diversity in higher judiciary.
  - They even invent conspiracies, suggesting a secret society of senior lawyers influencing the court.
  - These attacks claim to propose reforms but lack evidence and may aim to increase executive control.

#### **Study and Findings:**

- Joyojeet Pal and Sheyri Agarwal conducted a study based on data from X over four months.
- They observed spikes in comments on five specific days when the Chief Justice of India opposed the BJP-led government or its supporters.
- The study concluded that the Chief Justice's liberal judgments upset many right-leaning individuals.
- They highlighted that removing similarly liberal-leaning justices from the Supreme Court is seen as necessary by the political establishment to secure control.

#### **Digital Influence and Polarization:**

- Attacks on the judiciary are closely tied to digital influencers who strongly support the BJP.
- Many of these influencers are known to have official patronage.
- High-ranking advisors and cabinet ministers are actively participating in podcasts and YouTube interviews, advocating for judicial reforms and even the repeal of the Constitution.

#### **Criticism and Response:**

- Critics dismiss the study as biased, arguing that liberal and left-leaning users engage in similar practices.
- The study notes differences in how the Opposition and wider civil society conduct online campaigns, urging the Court to uphold its constitutional role.

### **Impact of Online Campaigns:**

- Each judgment and perceived mistake by the judiciary is ridiculed and delegitimized through coordinated online campaigns.
- For instance, the bail granted to the minor son of a builder involved in a fatal car crash was heavily criticized, branding the Indian judiciary as a joke.
- These campaigns ignore the roles of police and politicians in the initial handling of the case.

### **Long-term Strategy:**

- These drip campaigns are part of a larger strategy by organized partisans to push for direct control of the judiciary by the Prime Minister.

### **The way forward**

- **Role of Media:**
  - Television and social media have a significant impact on societal norms.
  - They influence public perception of judicial independence and reforms.
- **Challenges to Judiciary:**
  - There are serious threats to the independence of the judiciary.
  - Proposals disguised as judicial reforms need careful scrutiny.
  - Urgent and cautious action is required regarding issues like the collegium system.
- **Restoring Public Trust:**
  - Public trust is crucial for the judiciary.
  - It can be restored by improving service delivery and increasing diversity in appointments.
  - The judiciary needs to demonstrate its counter-majoritarian role.
- **Countering Online Threats:**
  - The judiciary and legal community must combat online threats.
  - This involves dispelling misinformation and exposing bad-faith propaganda.
  - They need to communicate clearly and honestly about the judicial process.
- **Recognizing Imperfections:**
  - Citizens should see the judiciary as an imperfect ally.

- It may sometimes neglect its duty, but it remains a guardian of constitutional rights.
- Civic vision should not be limited by the dominance of a powerful Prime Minister or political party.

## It's time to break the stalemate (23 May)

The Centre could suggest a road map for Telangana and Andhra to resolve issues

- Hyderabad will no longer be the shared capital of Telangana and Andhra Pradesh after June 2.
- Telangana's Chief Minister has instructed officials to take over more than 50 properties in Hyderabad currently held by Andhra Pradesh.
- These properties include prime locations like the Lake View Guest House.
- Andhra Pradesh is uncertain about its capital city and wants to keep possession of key buildings in Hyderabad until disputes with Telangana are resolved.
- Many Andhra Pradesh elected representatives have permanent homes in Hyderabad.
- If Telangana agrees, Andhra Pradesh will have to pay significant rents to retain these buildings.
- Telangana and Andhra Pradesh have unresolved issues regarding the apportionment of assets and liabilities of Schedule IX and X institutions.
- The interpretation of the Act by both states has led to a stalemate, with each accusing the other of taking a unilateral stand.
- Issues related to employees were resolved within two years of Telangana's formation, but disputes over assets, debts, and staff remain pending in court.
- The Union Home Ministry has intervened multiple times, clarifying definitions and issuing orders but not suggesting resolutions.
- The Ministry has encouraged the states to resolve issues through mutual agreement, which has been successful in some cases like the handover of the Secretariat building and apportionment of assets in New Delhi.
- The Central government has not fulfilled several assurances made to both Telangana and Andhra Pradesh under the Reorganisation Act.
- Assurances include the creation of new institutions like an integrated steel factory, an Indian Institute of Management, and an Information Technology Investment Region.
- Financial assistance for Telangana's development as mandated by the Act has also not been provided.
- Despite representations, a Central Tribal University was granted to Andhra Pradesh in 2019 and to Telangana in the following year.
- Section 93 of the Reorganisation Act mandates the Union government to take measures listed in Schedule XIII for the sustainable development of the successor states within 10 years, which has not been fully implemented.

- Senior officials handling State Reorganisation affairs attribute this to the Centre's indifferent attitude towards fulfilling its commitments.
- During his visit to New Delhi in January, Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister Mr. Reddy requested the Centre to ensure that his state makes payments to Telangana for using its assets, along with interest.
- He also asked the Home Ministry to focus on institutions not mentioned in the Reorganisation Act that Andhra Pradesh claims, allegedly in violation of the Act.
- A dispute resolution committee, comprising members from the Home Ministry and representatives from both states, has held more than 30 meetings but has not resolved the disputes.
- While some issues saw consensus between Telangana and Andhra Pradesh, they remained divided on several others, leading to a stalemate.
- A decade after the bifurcation, there is a call for the Central government to intervene and propose a roadmap to resolve the pending issues between the two states.

## The curious case of declining voters in the 2024 elections (23 May)

**In nearly one-third of all constituencies in the 2024 election, the total absolute number of voters declined vis-à-vis the 2019 election**

- In India, essential goods prices, population, GDP, agricultural production, and salaries of professionals typically increase every year in a growing economy.
- Exceptions to this trend, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, can cause a decline in GDP, population growth, or salaries in a specific year.
- The total number of voters participating in elections is expected to increase over a five-year election cycle due to India's growing population and the number of individuals reaching voting age.
- Rare demographic disasters resulting in higher death rates or people fleeing can affect voter turnout, but generally, the total number of voters should rise between two consecutive five-year election cycles.
- While voter turnout percentages can vary between elections, the actual number of voters tends to increase over time in India.
- In the 2024 election, approximately one-third of all constituencies in India saw a decrease in the absolute number of voters compared to the 2019 election.
- Analysis of 427 constituencies up to Phase 5 shows that in 115 constituencies (27%), fewer people voted in 2024 than in 2019.
- This decline in total voters is unprecedented in India's electoral history for such a large number of constituencies.

- Voter turnout percentage is often discussed, but it is not sufficient for comparing elections because it depends on the total number of electors on the rolls, which can vary significantly due to additions and deletions.
- The change in the total number of voters between elections is a more meaningful and intuitive measure for comparison.
- In the 2024 election until Phase 5, there were 505 million voters compared to 485 million in 2019, which is only a 4% increase.
- This contrasts sharply with the 12% increase observed in the same constituencies between 2014 and 2019.
- A significant finding is that in 115 constituencies, the total number of voters declined from 2019, which is unusual for a growing country like India.
- In previous elections, no constituencies experienced a decline in total voters in 2014, and only 19 did in 2019.
- Even when adjusting by removing small states and Union Territories, the finding remains consistent – about one-third of all constituencies saw a decline in total voters compared to 2019.
- Most of the constituencies with a decline in total voters are located in six states: Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, and Uttar Pradesh.
- The change in total voters in a constituency is influenced by the number of new eligible electors, the number of electors who have emigrated out, and the percentage of electors who come out to vote.
- It is unlikely that there was a significant drop in eligible electors or a sudden increase in emigration from these constituencies.
- None of these constituencies saw a decline in total voters in either the 2014 or 2019 elections compared to the previous election.
- The decline in the absolute number of voters in many constituencies compared to 2019 suggests an extreme decline in voter turnout.
- This raises questions about whether the reduced turnout was voluntary or implicitly coerced.
- If voluntary, what demographic or other explanations justify such a large and sudden drop in turnout in many constituencies that were won by the Opposition in 2019 or are expected to be competitive in 2024?
- The decline in voter turnout was not consistent across different phases of the elections; it fluctuated up and down.
- In the context of Indian elections, it is rare for constituencies to see a decline in the absolute number of voters between two five-year election cycles.
- However, nearly one-third of all constituencies experienced such a decline in 2024 compared to 2019.
- The Election Commission needs to explain this mysterious trend rather than relying on conjectures.

# On concerns over voter turnout data (23 May) (GS Paper II: Elections)

Why are Opposition leaders and civil society members demanding that Form 17C data, which contains the absolute number of votes polled in a booth, be published online? How has the Election Commission of India responded? Why has the Supreme Court's intervention been sought?

- The Supreme Court will hear a petition filed by the NGO Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR) on May 24.
- The petition seeks a direction to the Election Commission of India (ECI).
- The direction is to upload polling station-wise voter turnout data on its website.
- This should be done within 48 hours of the conclusion of polling for each phase of the Lok Sabha elections.

**What happened?**

- ADR has highlighted significant differences between initial voter turnout figures released by the ECI and the final voter percentages.
- These discrepancies have raised concerns about the authenticity of polling data and the potential for manipulation during the counting stage.
- On May 20, advocate Mehmood Pracha filed an intervention application in the case.
- He contested in the Rampur Lok Sabha constituency and alleged that the returning officer (RO) did not provide copies of Form 17C as required by the Conduct of Election Rules, 1961.
- A group of civil society members has written to the ECI, urging it to immediately disclose the authenticated record of voter turnout for every polling station on its website.
- The Supreme Court is scheduled to hear the petition filed by ADR on May 24.

**What is Form 17C?**

- According to the 1961 Rules, the Election Commission of India (ECI) maintains two forms that contain data on electors and votes polled: Forms 17A and 17C.
- Form 17A records details of every voter who casts their vote at a polling booth.
- Form 17C provides an account of all votes recorded, including identification numbers of the EVMs used, total number of assigned electors, voters listed in Form 17A, those who chose not to vote after signing, those not allowed to vote, and the total number of test votes and votes per EVM.
- Part I of Form 17C is crucial as it contains the identification numbers of EVMs used, total number of assigned electors, and other details relevant to the voting process.
- Part II of Form 17C contains the results of the counting process on the specified day.

- Candidates use Form 17C data to verify election results on counting day by comparing it with EVM counts.
- In case of discrepancies, candidates can file an election petition in the concerned High Court for resolution.

#### **Why is the ECI under the scanner?**

- The Election Commission of India (ECI) has not released the absolute number of votes polled in any constituency in the 2024 general election, unlike in 2019.
- Only voting percentages have been published, and those were delayed: the first phase data was released 11 days after polling, and the second phase data was released four days after polling.
- Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge wrote to INDIA bloc leaders raising serious doubts about the polling data released by the ECI.
- Kharge pointed out that the data released by the ECI does not mention crucial figures such as the votes polled in each Parliamentary and Assembly Constituency.
- He alleged that the credibility of the Election Commission was at an all-time low and expressed concern about the high increment in voting percentages between provisional and final data.
- The provisional polling percentages for the first and second phases showed increases of more than 5.5% and 5.74%, respectively, in the final published data.
- Kharge questioned why the ECI was not publishing the exact voter turnout data from each polling station when such information was already available with the polling agents of the candidates through Form 17C.
- TMC leader Mahua Moitra highlighted on social media how she was able to compile the number of voters in her constituency within 24 hours of polling and questioned why the ECI had failed to publish this information for previous polling phases.

#### **How has the ECI responded?**

- The Election Commission of India (ECI) responded to Mr. Kharge's allegations in a scathing letter, stating that it has no legal obligation to publish online the absolute number of votes polled in every polling station.
- The ECI emphasized that copies of Form 17C are immediately shared with polling agents present, ensuring transparency as candidates have exact voter turnout data in absolute numbers before the ECI.
- The ECI accused Mr. Kharge of attempting to create confusion, misdirection, and impediments in conducting free and fair polls.
- It highlighted how voters continue to vote after 6:00 pm due to long queues at polling stations, leading to variations in estimated data on polling day.

- In an affidavit filed before the Supreme Court, the ECI argued that disclosing Form 17C data could confuse voters, especially including postal ballot counts, potentially casting aspersions on the entire electoral process.
- The ECI questioned the motives of ADR, suggesting that the NGO's agenda is to perpetually create doubt in the minds of voters based on conspiracy theories.
- It referenced ADR's unsuccessful challenge in the EVM-VVPAT cross-verification case as part of its critique against the NGO.

#### What has the Supreme Court said?

- The Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR) has approached the Supreme Court seeking directions to the Election Commission of India (ECI).
- ADR wants the ECI to upload scanned, legible copies of Part I of Form 17C of all polling stations within 48 hours of the close of polling.
- The NGO also requested the publication of constituency and polling station-wise figures of voter turnout in absolute numbers.
- ADR expressed concerns over the inordinate delay in releasing final voter turnout data and the significant revision in voter turnout percentages.
- The petition highlighted that these issues have raised public suspicion regarding the correctness of the data, which needs to be addressed.
- Chief Justice of India (CJI) D.Y. Chandrachud, heading a three-judge Bench, asked the ECI's counsel why they don't upload the data when it is already available with the Returning Officer by the evening of polling day.

#### What do experts have to say?

- Anjali Bharadwaj, Director of Common Cause, criticized the ECI for not disclosing absolute numbers of voter turnouts and highlighted the unusually high increase in voter turnout percentages.
- She emphasized the importance of uploading scanned copies of Form 17C immediately after submission by the Presiding Officer to address transparency concerns.
- Jagdeep S. Chokkar, founder of ADR, countered the ECI's claim that access to Form 17C data by polling agents negates the need for online publication.
- Chokkar pointed out that smaller political parties and independents cannot afford to have polling agents in all booths, which makes it impossible for them to obtain Form 17C copies.
- Congress Rajya Sabha MP Shakti Singh Gohil supported this argument, stating that one constituency requires around 6,000 polling agents to obtain Form 17C copies, making it impractical for smaller parties and independents.

## Begusarai, a metaphor of a secular crisis (23 May)

**In the arena of caste competition, secularism could be an effective tactic; for the minorities it is a survival tool, and for the elite it is an ideology. Reconciling these differing perspectives is essential but difficult**

- Begusarai, Bihar, has been a stronghold of the Communist Party of India (CPI).
- Kanhaiya Kumar, former president of JNU Students Union, is the CPI candidate from Begusarai.
- He has gained national recognition for his resistance against Hindutva.
- His candidacy received widespread support, raising ₹70 lakh through crowdfunding for his campaign.
- Actors, academics, activists, and youth from across India campaigned for Kanhaiya Kumar.
- Kanhaiya Kumar represents the resistance to Hindutva, contrasting with Prime Minister Narendra Modi's association with it.
- The election in Begusarai carries symbolic significance beyond the candidates' fortunes.

#### **Collapse of binaries**

- In Begusarai, many supporters, including Bhumihaar caste members like Binod Singh, want Narendra Modi as Prime Minister and Kanhaiya Kumar as their MP.
- The BJP, CPI, and RJD are in a triangular contest in Begusarai.
- Kanhaiya Kumar (CPI) and Tanveer Hasan (RJD) oppose BJP's Hindutva politics.
- Tanveer Hasan, the RJD candidate, is supported by the Congress and other smaller parties representing Dalit and backward communities.
- Secularism and social justice are central to the politics in Begusarai, with a focus on caste-based interests.
- Historically, upper castes controlled Congress and excluded OBCs, which shifted with the rise of Hindutva.
- OBC politics led by leaders like Lalu Prasad and Mulayam Singh Yadav provided an alternative, gaining support from Muslims.
- The Muslim-OBC social combination, led by Yadavs, ended upper caste hegemony and marginalized the Congress party.
- Social justice parties opposed Hindutva due to its association with "Manuwaad" and upper caste dominance.
- Historically, upper castes allied with Muslims to exclude OBCs, but later abandoned Muslims for Hindutva.
- OBCs formed a lasting social coalition with Muslims, challenging Hindutva and gaining political power.
- Muslims were unwitting participants in this caste-based political competition.

**Progressive, oppressive**

- The elite, both vernacular and English, set the standards for secularism but were disconnected from caste dynamics in electoral politics.
- Leaders of the elite, including Nehruvians and Marxists, were predominantly upper caste, limiting their appeal among subalterns despite their good intentions.
- Bhumihars in Bihar politics have a complex history: prominent in the Communist movement but also associated with violent oppression through groups like the Ranveer Sena.
- The CPI's Bhumihar candidate won significant support in Begusarai in 2014, including from Dalits and OBCs, despite Bhumihar dominance in the party.
- Kanhaiya Kumar's candidacy has widened the CPI's appeal, attracting both 'Modi-Kanhaiya' voters and supporters of the CPI's politics.
- Muslim elites could negotiate with upper caste-controlled parties like Congress and backward caste parties like RJD and Samajwadi Party, but their influence is waning with the rise of Hindutva.
- Despite Hindutva's rise, Muslims continue to seek representation through parties like RJD and SP in Bihar and UP.
- Secularism for Muslims is often seen as a survival strategy in a Hindu-majority country, amid declining political representation and increasing focus on security.
- Muslims prioritize security over political representation, which Hindutva demands in exchange.
- If Muslims withdraw support from Muslim RJD candidates, it could weaken the secularism-social justice axis against Hindutva.
- OBCs and Dalits prefer Hindutva because it offers them representation, unlike a secular nationalistic project that often ignores their ambitions.
- Lower caste politics is primarily concerned with social justice, and their opposition to Hindutva stems from this perspective.
- Some lower caste leaders resent Muslim indifference to their struggles against Manuwaad (upper caste dominance).
- Hindutva 2.0 under Modi has capitalized on these dynamics by providing representation without significant political power.
- Progressive politics, including secularism, must address issues of representation for various social groups, including caste and religion.

### **The road ahead**

- Secularism serves as an effective tactic in the arena of caste competition.
- For minorities, secularism is a survival tool.
- For the elite, secularism is an ideology.
- Reconciling these different perspectives is challenging but essential.
- Secular politics must merge with social justice politics to be sustainable as an electoral platform.

- This merging requires negotiation between the self-interests of different social groups and the normative claims articulated by the elite.
- Although these perspectives have overlapping traits, they often have different accents and can harbor subterranean hostilities toward one another.
- Begusarai exemplifies the crisis of Indian secularism as a metaphor.

## RBI to transfer ₹2,10,874 cr. surplus to Centre for FY24 (23 May)

Union government nets windfall gain from central bank's record surplus transfer that is more than double the ₹87,416 crore transferred in FY23; transfer to aid fiscal consolidation, say economists

- The Reserve Bank of India's board approved the transfer of ₹2,10,874 crore as surplus to the Union government for the fiscal year 2023-24.
- This amount is more than double the ₹87,416 crore transferred in the previous fiscal year.
- The Contingent Risk Buffer (CRB) for 2023-24 has been increased to 6.50% from 6% in the previous year.
- The transferable surplus for 2023-24 was determined based on the Economic Capital Framework (ECF) adopted by the RBI on August 26, 2019, following recommendations from an Expert Committee.

### 'On track'

- Shreya Sodhani, Regional Economist at Barclays, commented on the fiscal consolidation program, stating it is on track.
- She mentioned that the final budget in July will provide more clarity.
- Sodhani noted that the higher dividend from the RBI was due to increased income from both domestic and foreign assets.
- This led to a higher quantum of profits being booked by the RBI.

## 'Gains from critical minerals drive unlikely before 2031' (23 May)

- India's quest to tap domestic reserves of critical minerals like lithium and cobalt may not yield full commercial benefits before 2031.
- This delay makes India's manufacturing plans vulnerable to supply shocks, as these minerals are crucial for the green energy transition.
- Currently, India is 100% import dependent on minerals like lithium, cobalt, and nickel.

- The government has started the process to auction 38 blocks of critical minerals to address this issue.
- ICRA stated that the quality and quantity of lithium resources discovered so far in India, including in Jammu and Kashmir, are inferior to those in key producing regions globally.

### China's dominance

- China dominates the processing and refining of critical minerals, controlling between 65% to 100% of the global capacity for battery-grade lithium, cobalt, manganese, and graphite.
- This dominance makes critical mineral supply chains vulnerable to supply shocks from key producing and processing regions, leading to elevated price volatility.
- Girishkumar Kadam, senior VP at ICRA, emphasized that efforts to increase domestic production of critical minerals are crucial for India's energy security.
- However, due to the preliminary stage of exploration for most domestic blocks being currently auctioned, the associated benefits are unlikely to fully accrue in the current decade.

## PRELIMS PRACTICE QUESTIONS:

**Question 1:** Consider the following statements regarding India's position on the International Criminal Court (ICC):

1. India is a member of the International Criminal Court and has ratified the Rome Statute.
2. India has concerns about the potential for the ICC to interfere in its domestic judicial system.
3. India's legal system includes provisions for prosecuting crimes such as genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity.

How many of the above statements is/are correct?

- a) Only one
- b) Only two
- c) All the three
- d) None

**Answer: c) 2 and 3 only**

**Explanation:**

Statement 1 is incorrect: India is not a member of the ICC and has not ratified the Rome Statute.

Statement 2 is correct: India has expressed concerns about the potential for the ICC to interfere in its domestic judicial system and national sovereignty.

Statement 3 is correct: India's legal system includes provisions for prosecuting crimes such as genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity through its national laws.

**Question 2:** Which of the following statements about the International Criminal Court (ICC) is correct?

- A) The ICC can prosecute individuals for crimes of genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity, but not for the crime of aggression.
- B) The ICC is a part of the United Nations.

**Answer: D) The Rome Statute is the treaty that established the ICC.**

**Explanation:**

- **Option A:** The ICC can indeed prosecute individuals for crimes of genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity, and the crime of aggression (the latter after the Kampala Amendments).

C) The ICC has universal jurisdiction and can prosecute any individual from any country.  
D) The Rome Statute is the treaty that established the ICC.

- **Option B:** The ICC is an independent international organization and is not a part of the United Nations, though it may cooperate with the UN.
- **Option C:** The ICC does not have universal jurisdiction. It can only prosecute individuals from member states or those referred by the United Nations Security Council, or if the crime was committed on the territory of a member state.
- **Option D:** Correct. The Rome Statute, adopted in 1998, is the treaty that established the ICC.

**Question 3:** Which of the following countries is not a member of the International Criminal Court (ICC)?

- A) India
- B) France
- C) Germany
- D) South Africa

**Answer: A)** India

**Explanation:**

**Option A:** Correct. India is not a member of the ICC. India has not signed or ratified the Rome Statute.

**Option B:** France is a member of the ICC. It has ratified the Rome Statute.

**Option C:** Germany is a member of the ICC. It has ratified the Rome Statute.

**Option D:** South Africa is a member of the ICC, although it has had a contentious relationship with the court and has expressed intentions to withdraw, it remains a member as of now.

**Question 4:** Consider the following statements regarding the Chief Justice of India (CJI):

1. The CJI is appointed by the President of India.
2. The CJI can serve a maximum term of five years.
3. The CJI can be removed from office by the President of India on grounds of proven misbehavior or incapacity.

Which of the above statements is/are correct?

- A) 1 and 2 only
- B) 1 and 3 only
- C) 2 and 3 only
- D) 1, 2, and 3

**Answer: B)** 1 and 3 only

**Explanation:**

**Statement 1:** Correct. The Chief Justice of India is appointed by the President of India.

**Statement 2:** Incorrect. There is no fixed term for the Chief Justice of India. The CJI serves until they reach the age of 65, which is the retirement age for Supreme Court judges.

**Statement 3:** Correct. The CJI can be removed from office by the President of India following an impeachment process in Parliament on grounds of proven misbehavior or incapacity.

**Question 5:** Consider the following statements:

1. The Chief Justice of India (CJI) is the head of the judiciary of India.
2. The CJI can appoint the judges of the Supreme Court of India.
3. The CJI plays a role in the appointment of the Chief Election Commissioner of India.

Which of the above statements is/are correct?

**Answer: A)** 1 only

**Explanation:**

**Statement 1:** Correct. The Chief Justice of India is the head of the judiciary of India and the Supreme Court.

**Statement 2:** Incorrect. The judges of the Supreme Court of India are appointed by the President of India. The CJI's role is advisory, usually heading the collegium that recommends appointments.

- A) 1 only
- B) 1 and 2 only
- C) 1 and 3 only
- D) 1, 2, and 3

**Question 6:** Which of the following statements correctly describe Form 17A and Form 17C in the context of Indian elections?

1. Form 17A is related to the voter list and is used at the polling station during voting.
2. Form 17C is signed by the Returning Officer after the completion of the vote counting process.
3. Form 17A includes details about the total number of votes polled and is used during the counting process.

Select the correct answer using the code given below:

- A) 1 only
- B) 1 and 2 only
- C) 2 and 3 only
- D) 1, 2, and 3

**Statement 3:** Incorrect. The Chief Justice of India does not play any role in the appointment of the Chief Election Commissioner of India. The Chief Election Commissioner is appointed by the President of India.

**Answer:** B) 1 and 2 only

**Explanation:**

**Statement 1:** Correct. Form 17A is indeed related to the voter list and is used at the polling station to maintain the record of voters who have cast their votes.

**Statement 2:** Correct. Form 17C is signed by the Returning Officer after the completion of the vote counting process, and it contains the account of votes recorded.

**Statement 3:** Incorrect. Form 17A does not include details about the total number of votes polled; it is used for recording the voters' names and their signatures/thumb impressions at the polling station. The total number of votes polled is recorded in other forms, including Form 17C, which is used after the counting process.

PatrioticP