



VEDHIK

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IAS ACADEMY

The New Learning Mantra

FOREWORD

We, at Team Vedhik is happy to introduce a new initiative - "Daily Current Affairs_The Hindu" compilations to help you with UPSC Civil Services Examination preparation. We believe this initiative - "Daily Current Affairs_The Hindu" would help students, especially beginners save time and streamline their preparations with regard to Current Affairs. A content page and an Appendix has been added segregating and mapping the content to the syllabus.

It is an appreciable efforts by Vedhik IAS Academy helping aspirants of UPSC Civil Services Examinations. I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Dr. Babu Sebastian, former VC - MG University in extending all support to this endeavour. Finally I also extend my thanks to thank Ms. Shilpa Sasidharan and Mr. Shahul Hameed for their assistance in the preparing the compilations.

We welcome your valuable comments so that further improvement may be made in the forthcoming material. We look forward to feedback, comments and suggestions on how to improve and add value for students. Every care has been taken to avoid typing errors and if any reader comes across any such error, the authors shall feel obliged if they are informed at their Email ID.

CONTENTS

- News - India and UAE sign major trade agreement Part I
GSP 02 A
- News - India and UAE sign major trade agreement Part II
GSP 02 A
- News - Hong Kong to delay election of leader amid COVID surge
GSP 02 C
- News - Russia welcomes India's stand on eastern Ukraine situation
GSP 02 C
- Editorials - Wrong solution
GSP 02 E
- News -Wearing hijab not part of essential religious practice
GSP 02 E
- News - SC for mediation among States to settle Krishna
water dispute
GSP 02 G
- News - India needs a refugee and asylum law
GSP 02 M
- News - Great Backyard Bird Count begins in Mysuru
GSP 02 P

CONTENTS

- Editorials - Revisit the terms of use for this scholastic ABC
GSP 02 S
- News - LIC said to be ready to open \$8 billion IPO on March 11
GSP 03 A
- News - Vedanta to invest up to \$20 bn in semiconductor,
display units
GSP 03 A
- News - Ahmedabad-Mumbai bullet train is a priority, says Modi
GSP 03 D
- News - Hydrogen policy calls for more incentives experts
GSP 03 D
- News - New gecko from NE gets Army tag
GSP 03 P
- News - Easter attacks top officials acquitted
GSP 03 V
- News - I&B Ministry warns officials on data security
GSP 03 X

India, UAE sign major trade pact

KALLOL BHATTACHERJEE
NEW DELHI

India and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) signed a bilateral “comprehensive” trade pact on Friday.

Announcing the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA), the biggest trade pact of the last seven years, Prime Minister Narendra Modi welcomed investment from the Gulf country into Jammu and Kashmir and said the initiative would open new routes for regional trade and connectivity and advance “collective interests” of India, Israel, the UAE and the U.S.

Commerce and Industry Minister Piyush Goyal said the CEPA would have strong anti-dumping measures. “This agreement will herald a new age in our financial relations. Our trade in the next five years will increase from \$60 billion to \$100 billion,” said Mr. Modi, thanking the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, who participated in the summit virtually.

India and UAE sign major trade agreement

“Both our countries have been working with partners with similar ideas. I am confident that the grouping of ‘India-UAE-Israel-USA’ will advance our collective goals, especially in the fields of technology, innovation and finance,” Mr. Modi said.

During the virtual summit meeting, a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was signed between the International Financial Services Centers Authority (IFSCA), GIFT City and the

Abu Dhabi Global Market Financial Services Regulatory Authority (FSRA). Another MoU covered building of food corridors. “

The agreement is the first of the several such deals that India is currently negotiating with several countries across the world as part of the “post-pandemic recovery”. “It’s a complete and comprehensive agreement completed in the shortest possible time,” said Mr. Goyal.

CONTINUED ON ► PAGE 8

Hong Kong to delay election of leader amid COVID surge

It would take at least 2 months to stabilise the wave, says Lam

ANANTH KRISHNAN
HONG KONG

Hong Kong will delay its election of its next Chief Executive because of the current surge in COVID-19 cases that has overwhelmed the Chinese Special Administrative Region (SAR).

Current Chief Executive (CE) Carrie Lam said on Friday the selection of the next CE will be delayed by six weeks because of the current wave of cases, adding that it would take at least two months to stabilise the current surge and bring it under control.

The SAR on Friday continued to report thousands of new cases of the Omicron variant, reporting 3,629 confirmed cases and more than 7,600 preliminary positives, most of which will also likely be confirmed as positive cases. Hong Kong's hospitals are already at full capacity and authorities said this week at least 12,000 patients were awaiting admission. The central government in Beijing is sending assistance, mostly through neighbouring Guangdong province, including to help the SAR carry out mass testing. The



Carrie Lam

government said it is making plans to test every one of the SAR's more than 7 million residents in coming weeks to stamp out the outbreak.

Zero COVID-19 strategy

Mass testing, as well as continued international travel restrictions that have been in place for two years, are key elements of the "zero COVID" strategy followed in the mainland and in Hong Kong, which largely avoided a major second wave after the initial outbreak of COVID-19 but has now seen that strategy completely overwhelmed by the Omicron variant.

In the current wave since early January, the SAR has reported more than 25,000

cases and two dozen deaths, the first COVID-19 deaths in more than six months. The outbreak, observers said, may have damaged Ms. Lam's prospects for a second five-year term while Beijing hasn't indicated whether it would prefer her to continue or back another candidate. The CE is chosen by a 1,500-strong election committee.

Ms. Lam has not yet said whether she will stand for a second term, after five tumultuous years at the helm. Her term was marked by the 2019 pro-democracy protests that had called for direct elections to choose the CE, among other democratic reforms.

Ms. Lam also oversaw a pandemic response that had been initially successful in limiting the outbreak in Hong Kong, which has reported only a little over 200 deaths in 2020 and 2021, but has since been dogged by low vaccination rates among the elderly and a devastating Omicron wave that shows no signs of subsiding, all while Asia's financial hub still remains isolated from the world.

Russia welcomes India's stand on eastern Ukraine situation

Issue can be resolved only through diplomatic dialogue, says India at UNSC

DINAKAR PERI
NEW DELHI

The Russian Embassy here on Friday welcomed "India's balanced, principled and independent approach" in response to India's statement at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) welcoming the implementation of the Minsk agreements which, it said, provided a basis for a "negotiated and peaceful settlement of the situation in eastern Ukraine." Any steps that "increase tension may best be avoided by all sides", it stated.

Ukraine has accused Russia of ceasefire violations in the regions of Donetsk and Luhansk and using weapons prohibited by the Minsk agreements. It stated that their armed forces "strictly adhere to the Minsk agree-



Show of strength: A warship of the Russian Black Sea fleet during naval drills near the Crimean port of Sevastopol. ■ AFP

ments and norms of international humanitarian law".

Speaking at the UNSC on the implementation of the Minsk agreements on Ukraine, Permanent Representative of India to the UN T.S. Tirumurti, said, "The well-being of Indian nationals is of priority to us." Welcoming the efforts under way for the

implementation of the "Minsk agreements", including through the Trilateral Contact Group (TCG) and under the Normandy format, he urged all parties to continue to engage through all possible diplomatic channels and keep working towards the full implementation of the agreements.

"Any steps that increase tension may best be avoided by all sides in the larger interest of securing international peace and security. Quiet and constructive diplomacy is the need of the hour," he stated. "This issue can only be resolved through diplomatic dialogue."

Defensive actions: Kiev

Blaming Russia for the situation in the "temporarily occupied territories", Commander-in-Chief of the Ukraine armed forces Lt. Gen. Valeriy Zaluzhny said, "The armed forces of Ukraine strictly adhere to the Minsk agreements and norms of international humanitarian law, do not plan any offensive operations or shelling of civilians. Our actions are purely defensive."

Wrong solution

India must address urban-rural disparities,
and not use reservation as a panacea

The issue of reserving private sector jobs for people domiciled within the same State may face its first judicial test soon. The Supreme Court has asked the Punjab and Haryana High Court to decide within four weeks the validity of the Haryana law mandating 75% reservation for local candidates in private sector jobs that pay up to ₹30,000 a month. Even though the apex court set aside an interim stay order granted by the High Court, it was only doing so because the stay was granted without assigning reasons. It is a settled principle that legislation cannot be stayed unless there is a preliminary finding that it is unconstitutional or suffers from any glaring illegality. There are quite a few issues that arise when the State introduces a quota in the private sector, especially if it is based on a domicile norm. Andhra Pradesh and Jharkhand have also introduced such laws, while the ruling DMK in Tamil Nadu had promised 75% reservation in its election manifesto for last year's Assembly polls. Given the bleak employment situation in the backdrop of the reported loss of millions of jobs during the pandemic, it is no surprise that the leadership in every State seeks to find employment opportunities for its youth. In some States, employers may find it cheaper to use the services of those from a faraway State, while in others there may be an acute shortage of labour within the local population.

The first hurdle that a law such as the Haryana State Employment of Local Candidates Act will face is the constitutional bar on discrimination on the basis of place of birth or residence. Even though the Constitution allows the Government to prescribe a residential criterion for employment to public posts, it is doubtful whether such a measure can be extended to the private sector. In the Haryana case, it covers companies, societies, trusts, partnership firms and individual employers. The industry may feel aggrieved that the residential requirement may adversely affect the hiring of talent from outside Haryana. From an individual point of view, the law may impinge on the freedom of movement, the right to reside and settle in any part of the country, and the right to carry on any occupation. Of course, the Act provides for exemption to any employer if an adequate number of local candidates are not available in terms of skill, qualification and proficiency. And there is a sunset clause: the Act will cease to operate in 10 years. Beyond the question of legality, what is flagged by such developments is the state of the economy, especially the labour economy. Rapid urbanisation and the agrarian situation are behind large-scale migration in search of employment. The real issue to address is the widespread disparities between urban and rural areas, between advanced States and backward ones.

'Wearing hijab not part of essential religious practice'

It has to pass the test of constitutional morality and individual dignity: A-G tells Karnataka High Court

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT
BENGALURU

Contending that wearing hijab was not part of "essential religious practice" protected under the right to freedom of religion, Advocate-General Prabhuling K. Navadgi on Friday told the High Court of Karnataka that claims on wearing hijab would also have to "pass the test of constitutional morality and individual dignity as interpreted by the Supreme Court in the Sabarimala case".

Commencing his arguments on petitions filed by Muslim girl students questioning restriction on wearing hijabs in classrooms, Mr. Navadgi justified before a three-judge Bench, headed by Chief Justice Ritu Raj Awasthi, the February 5,



Strong pitch: Boys studying in Milagres College, Udupi, staying away from their classes supporting hijab-clad girls.

2022, Government Order, which had laid down guidelines on uniforms in schools and pre-university colleges.

Members of Legislative Assembly were being made chairpersons of the college development committees (CDCs) of the government

per-university colleges in the respective Assembly constituencies as per the Government Order issued in 2014, the A-G pointed out, while responding to the allegation made in the petition that Udupi MLA Raghupaghi Bhat was a "self-claimed chairper-

son" of the Government PU College for Girls, Udupi.

'Conscious decision'

He also pointed out to the Bench, also consisting of Justice Krishna S. Dixit and Justice Jaibunnisa M. Khazi, that the GO of February 25 had

only given autonomy to CDCs to prescribe uniforms while claiming that it was "a conscious decision" taken by the government as the issue of wearing hijab got escalated despite it [government] referring issue of uniform to a high-level committee.

SC for mediation among States to settle Krishna water dispute

Top court tells Telangana, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka to resolve the issue

LEGAL CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court on Friday asked if the States of Telangana, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka could amicably settle their quarrel over the allocation of the Krishna river water.

"Why don't you settle through mediation," Chief Justice of India N.V. Ramana asked senior advocate Shyam Diwan, appearing for Karnataka.

Mr. Diwan, however, said some of the questions involved in the case required adjudication and final determination. The senior lawyer urged the CJI, in a mentioning, to constitute a Bench soon. The CJI assured he would look into the request.



Water row: The court has been hearing the dispute over the allocation of Krishna water for the past two to three years.

On January 10, a Bench of Justices D.Y. Chandrachud and A.S. Bopanna, which was earlier assigned the case, had both recused. Justice Chandrachud is from Maharashtra and Justice Bopanna hailed from Karnataka.

Some of the lawyers had pointed out that the court was hearing the dispute for the past two to three years.

The Supreme Court hearing had seen verbal battles among the States, with Telangana submitting that there was no information

forthcoming from Karnataka for the past 14 years about how much Krishna River water it had diverted.

In turn, Karnataka had argued that a lot of water was going to waste, "flowing down into the ocean" and there was a need to harness it for irrigation and to replenish dry regions.

Karnataka had sought the vacation of a November 16, 2011 order of the Supreme Court which stopped the Centre from publishing in the Official Gazette the final order of the Krishna Water Disputes Tribunal II (KWDT) pronounced in December 2010, allocating the river water to Karnataka, erstwhile Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra.

India needs a refugee and asylum law

On refugee issues, it ought to be among the most admired nations and not one that has much to be ashamed of as now



SHASHI THAROOR

This month I introduced a Private Member's Bill in the Lok Sabha proposing the enactment of a Refugee and Asylum law. The Bill lays down comprehensive criteria for recognising asylum seekers and refugees and prescribes specific rights and duties accruing from such status. It was made necessary by our government's continuing disrespect for the international legal principle of non-refoulement – the cornerstone of refugee law, which states that no country should send a person to a place where he or she may face persecution – and even more, its betrayal of India's millennial traditions of asylum and hospitality to strangers.

A slew of examples

The Government has shamefully expelled to Myanmar two batches of Rohingya refugees in the face of a grave risk of persecution in the country they had fled. In conducting this act of "refoulement" in violation of international law, the Government revealed both religious bigotry (the refugees were Muslim) and intolerance. It has attempted to do the same with Chakmas in Arunachal Pradesh and Myanmar in Mizoram. Today, Afghan students stranded in India by the takeover of their country by the Taliban have not had their visas renewed, and could find themselves in a similar predicament.

My Bill would put an end to such arbitrary conduct by the authorities. The right to seek asylum in India would be available to all foreigners irrespective of their nationality, race, religion, or ethnicity, and a National Commission for Asylum would be constituted to receive and decide all such applications. The principle of non-refoulement is clearly affirmed, with no exceptions, though reasons have been specified for exclusion, expulsion, and revocation of

refugee status, to respect the Government's sovereign authority but limit its discretion.

When I use the word "refugee", of course, I do so in the internationally-accepted definition of the term, which embraces people who have fled their home countries and crossed an international border because of a well-founded fear of persecution in their home countries, on grounds of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion. This means that people who cross borders in quest of economic betterment, or because they are fleeing poverty, anarchy or environmental disaster, do not qualify as refugees. Nor do those who flee from one part of their home country to another because of war, conflict or fear of persecution.

India has been, and continues to be, a generous host to several persecuted communities, doing more than many countries, but is neither a signatory to the 1951 UN Refugee Convention, nor does it have a domestic asylum framework. This is ironic, given that our record on asylum goes back millennia, from the Jewish people who fled to India centuries before Christ after the demolition of their Jerusalem Temple by the Babylonians and then the Romans, to the Zoroastrians fleeing Islamic persecution in Persia, to Tibetans, Bangladeshis and Sri Lankan Tamils in more recent years, as well as streams of Nepalis, Afghans and the Rohingyas. (Indeed, so famed was our reputation as a land of asylum that a defeated Cleopatra thought of sending her son to the safety of India's west coast, before killing herself. Alas, her son made the fatal mistake of turning back midway to stake his claim to the throne, and met with a gory end, or he might have lived happily ever after in India!)

In fact, it is quite deeply embedded in the Indian psyche that nobody should ever have to face the predicament of being driven out of their home. Our great epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, both dwell at great length upon the injustice of the protagonists being forced into exile, and the no-



GETTY IMAGES/STOCKPHOTO

bility involved in extending support and succour to the exiles. And the fact that one of our most popular festivals, Deepavali, celebrates the homecoming of refugees after 14 years of exile, demonstrates fully how important the concept of home and the homeland is to an Indian.

Given this history, India ought to be a natural leader on the question of refugee rights on the world stage. However, our present actions and our lack of a legal framework does our heritage no credit, shames us in the eyes of the world, and fails to match up to our actual past track record.

No uniform law

In the absence of a uniform and comprehensive law to deal with asylum seekers, we lack a clear vision or policy on refugee management. We have a cocktail of laws such as the Foreigners Act, 1946, the Registration of Foreigners Act, 1939, the Passports Act (1967), the Extradition Act, 1962, the Citizenship Act, 1955 (including its controversial 2019 amendment) and the Foreigners Order, 1948 – all of which club all foreign individuals together as "aliens". Because India has neither subscribed to international conventions on the topic nor set up a domestic legislative framework to deal with refugees, their problems are dealt with in an ad hoc manner, and like other foreigners they always face the possibility of being deported.

When we speak of refugee protection, we often limit ourselves to just providing asylum. We need a proper framework to make sure that refugees can access basic public services, be able to legally seek jobs and livelihood opportunities for some source of income. The absence of such a framework

will make the refugees vulnerable to exploitation, especially human trafficking. In 2011 when India came out with a Standard Operating Procedure to provide Long Term Visas to asylum seekers, I had pointed out that in the absence of a law, the application of these notifications can be easily tampered with based on political and extraneous reasons. Our officials want the freedom to do as they please – for political or other reasons – without being confined by the limits of a law.

We can, and must, do better. India must enact a National Asylum Law, such as the one I have been demanding for years and presented to Parliament earlier this month. India currently hosts more than two lakh refugees but the Bharatiya Janata Party government's churlish attitude to the Rohingyas and other "inconvenient" refugees risks putting us in the global doghouse. My Bill, if enacted, will instead put India at the forefront of asylum management in the world. It will finally recognise India's long-standing and continuing commitment to humanitarian and democratic values while dealing with refugees.

It troubles me that a country with proud traditions and noble practices remains legally neither committed nor obliged to do anything for refugees, even if we behave humanely in practice. I think it is high time the Government reviewed its long-standing reluctance to sign up legally to what we have already been doing morally. International law involves no obligations that we have not already undertaken voluntarily; to refuse to enact a refugee law that matches the highest standards of the international conventions, out of an anxiety not to be "bound" to the wishes of the international community, is unworthy of a major country like India. After all, we are increasingly moving from being a subject of the international system, a rule-taker as it were, to a rule-maker within it.

Our judiciary has already shown the way forward on this: in 1996, the Supreme Court of India ruled that the state has to protect all human beings living in India, ir-

respective of nationality, since they enjoy the rights guaranteed by Articles 14, 20 and 21 of the Constitution to all, not just Indian citizens. Based on this premise, the Supreme Court stopped the forcible eviction of Chakma refugees who had entered Arunachal Pradesh in 1995, in the landmark NHRC vs State of Arunachal Pradesh case. The Court held that an application for asylum must be properly processed and till a decision is made whether to grant or refuse asylum, the state cannot forcibly evict an asylum seeker. At the same time, with different judges, come different approaches – as we have seen in the Rohingya case. The enactment and enumeration of refugee rights will reduce our dependence on judge-centric approaches – or even worse, the whims of Home Ministry bureaucrats, police officers and politicians.

Worthwhile aspiration

We should build on the Supreme Court's vision and pass my Bill, or something very like it. We should be among the most admired nations in the world, not one that, on refugee issues, has much to be ashamed of now. The problems of refugees worldwide are problems that demand global solidarity and international cooperation. India, as a pillar of the world community, as a significant pole in the emerging multipolar world, must play its own part, on its own soil as well as on the global stage, in this noble task. In so doing, we would uphold our own finest traditions and the highest standards of our democracy, as well as demonstrate once again that we are what we have long claimed to be: a good international citizen in an ever-closer knit and globalising world. This is a worthwhile aspiration for all of us who care about what India stands for, at home and in the world. If Mr. Modi's government wants to be a Vishwaguru, it should behave like one.

Shashi Tharoor, Member of Parliament (Congress) and author, served the United Nations refugee agency, the UNHCR, for 11 years (1978-89). He is the author of "The Battle of Belonging"

Great Backyard Bird Count begins in Mysuru

62 species identified at Kukkarahalli Lake

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT
MYSURU

The first day of the Great Backyard Bird Count (GBBC) in Mysuru, which kicked off on Friday, has reinforced the rich biodiversity of Kukkarahalli Lake and the imperatives of its conservation.

For, as many as 62 species of birds were found in the lake precincts which is located in the heart of the city and has emerged as a favourite spot for morning walkers in Mysuru.

A major lung space, environmentalists are constantly battling the authorities keen on promoting 'development' to the detriment of the lake and its ecosystem.

The GBBC is a global event



Annual event: Participants in the Great Backyard Bird Count exercise at Kukkarahalli Lake in Mysuru on Friday. ■ M.A. SRIRAM

entailing backyard bird count and is being held for four days across the world from February 18 to 21 and the data uploaded will be harnessed for conservation.

It is being coordinated in India by e-bird India and Birdcount-India.

Naturalists in Mysuru have organised the bird watching sessions from 7

a.m. to 10 a.m. at various locations.

Of the 62 species of birds identified on the first day, there were Bronze-winged Jacana (resident) in good numbers while the highlight was the presence of Indian pitta which is a migratory bird. There were 20 Eurasian moorhen and about 150 Painted stork. Wood sand-

piper - which is a migratory bird - was also identified apart from Gray heron and Black-crowned Night-Heron among others, according to Tanuja, an eco-educationist who is coordinating the event in Mysuru with Shylajesh, an avid bird watcher who takes interest in documenting the flora and fauna of Mysuru.

While the first day session was held at Kukkarahalli Lake on Friday, it will be conducted at Hebbala Lake on Saturday. The birds at Karanji Lake and Muganahundi Lake will be accounted for on Sunday while the exercise will cover Lingambudhi lake and Thippaiyana Kere on Monday, said Ms. Tanuja.

The exercise helps to provide a "snap shot" of the bird population and throws light on the ecosystem supporting it.

Revisit the terms of use for this scholastic ABC

The UGC's 'Academic Bank of Credits' scheme could induce more chaos than positive disruption in higher education



ANIKET SULE

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 has recommended a revamp of the higher education scene in India to make education more student-centric and multi-disciplinary. A new initiative stemming from this desire is an 'Academic Bank of Credits' (ABC) in higher education idea, which was notified recently by the University Grants Commission (UGC) for implementation. Theoretically, this idea can usher in positive disruption in the jaded higher education sector in the country. But, in reality, this disruption is more likely to usher in chaos.

Why ABC

The idea is very simple and appealing. Any undergraduate or postgraduate student can create an account in the ABC portal and store information of his/her completed courses (i.e., subjects/papers in old terminology) and grades obtained. These grades are stored for a period of five years. Thus, for example, if any student needs to get back to education after a break or has to relocate to another city, they can easily 'carry' forward their completed credits. But that is not all. As multiple institutes are connected to the ABC portal, one can be formally enrolled in university 'A' but can choose to do some courses from university 'B', some more from university 'C' and so on and all of these would count to-

wards the student's degree. In principle, I may be enrolled in a B.Sc. Physics course in a college in Mumbai but find that my college does not offer an elective course in nuclear physics. This is no problem at all. I can enrol myself in an equivalent course from another college in the same city or join online courses offered by other universities; I can even enrol myself in SWAYAM (a programme initiated by the Government of India) or the National Programme on Technology Enhanced Learning (NPTEL) and add these credits to my ABC. I could even choose an online elective course, say in Tamil literature or archaeology or pedagogy. Thus, education will truly become flexible and interdisciplinary, without forcing any single institute to float an unmanageable number of courses. Even if the student does not care about interdisciplinary electives, this flexibility will offer them a chance to enrol in a course and learn from teachers from some of the best institutes such as the Indian Institutes of Technology (IIT) or the Indian Institutes of Science Education and Research.

Now, the problems

However, there are a number of practical hurdles which could make this scheme unworkable. First, let us assume that an IIT offers an elective course which is going to be taught by a fabulous teacher. ABC regulations say that the institute should allow up to 20% supernumerary seats for students enrolling through the ABC scheme. That would mean 20 extra seats if there are 100 regular students. But there are 500 applications through the ABC scheme wanting to register for the course.



GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO

So, how does the host institute (the IIT in our example) make the selection of 20 out of 500? Would extra human resources be provided to handle all such requests for all elective courses offered each semester? The regulations are silent about this.

Massive Open Online Courses (MOOC) platforms such as SWAYAM and NPTEL are 'supposedly designed' for large enrolments. So, let us assume that we work out some mechanism to direct all the overflow of requests at the individual institute level to these MOOC platforms. So far we have not found any evidence in the public domain that these MOOC platforms can provide a reliable assessment of learning achievement if there is massive enrolment for a course. There would be some kind of assessment through Multiple Choice Question (MCQ)-based tests alright. But we should remember that one of the metrics for success of these courses is student performance in the final assessment. Thus, it would be in the interest of course coordinators to award scores liberally and paint a rosy picture. This is not a hypothetical fear. Some reputed institutes have already put in place guidelines to 'adjust' the score obtained by the students in MOOCs before it is accepted in the insti-

tute's records. Moreover, at a deeper level, can MCQ tests ever be an honest indicator of the learning that (actually) happened?

This also brings us to the next question. The ABC portal will accept courses from a large number of higher education institutes. The filtering criterion in the original regulation was that higher education institutes should have obtained an 'A' grade or higher in the latest round of National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) accreditation (that filter has been removed now). But anyone who has seen how NAAC accreditation works will laugh at this suggestion.

On 'excellence'

The NAAC process now tries to measure 'excellence' in education through clerical statistics and bookkeeping. Universities and colleges spend an inordinate amount of time to prepare record books to 'prove' compliance with NAAC quality criteria, the time which their faculty could have gainfully spent in improving teaching instead. As a result, there is a zoo of universities with vastly different teaching and research quality all clubbed under 'A or higher' grade by NAAC. If I am an average student in an IIT/IISER, I may find it tempting to opt out of a challenging course in my institute and use the ABC scheme to replace it with an equivalent course from another university where it would be far easier to obtain good grades. How would good institutes prevent this from happening?

Lastly, let us look at this scheme from the point of view of small colleges. The ABC scheme specifies that students can avail up to 70% of courses from other institutes

while being enrolled in a particular college. If students avail these credits outside the parent college they need not enrol for the corresponding in-house courses. As the number of teaching posts in any higher education institute are calculated on the basis of student enrolment numbers, what happens when a large fraction of students do not enrol for the courses offered by you? Mind you, this trend will not necessarily hold a mirror to the quality of teaching in smaller higher education institutes. If, as a student, I have a choice between learning the same course from a faculty of IIT/IISER versus learning it from an in-house teacher in a small higher education institute, I would not even care to find out if the in-house teacher in my higher education institute is a competent teacher. The brand name would be an attraction.

As a whole, this scheme has all the right and laudable intentions and would probably work well in a society with a more equitable distribution of resources. But in India, where the quality of education varies drastically from one institute to the next, this can lead to unmanageable academic and administrative issues in higher education institutes with brand names, and lead to a contraction in the number of teaching posts in smaller higher education institutes. With grade inflation being a real and imminent danger, the quality of degrees is bound to deteriorate. The UGC must rethink expeditiously how to implement this scheme.

Aniket Sule is Associate Professor, Homi Bhabha Centre for Science Education, HBCSE-TIFR, Mumbai. The views expressed are personal

LIC said to be ready to open \$8 billion IPO on March 11

Book set to initially open for anchor investors, say sources

REUTERS
SYDNEY/NEW DELHI

A public offering of shares by India's state-run Life Insurance Corp. (LIC), set to be the country's biggest yet at \$8 billion, is expected to open for anchor investors on March 11, three sources with direct knowledge of the matter told Reuters.

The book will open for bidding by other investors a couple of days later, the sources said.

LIC's initial public offering (IPO) is expected to obtain regulatory approval by the first week of March, after which an indicative marketing price band will be set, said the sources, declining to be named as the deal dis-



cussions are private.

LIC declined to comment. A finance ministry spokesperson did not immediately respond to a Reuters request seeking comment.

The insurer's IPO will be a test of the depth of capital markets in India, where equity deals worth more than a couple of billion dol-

lars are rare. The biggest IPO so far was worth \$2.5 billion by payments company Paytm last year.

LIC's offering will also sound investor appetite for new equity deals, with a number of Indian companies that listed last year trading below offer prices on concerns over valuations and looming interest rates increases by central banks.

The sources said the IPO's schedule could change, though for now the issuer was working to meet those timelines.

The government is rushing to complete the IPO by the end of March to meet its FY22 fiscal deficit target of 6.4% of GDP.

Vedanta to invest up to \$20 bn in semiconductor, display units

Display entity to start sales by 2024, chips will follow a year later: Hebbar

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
NEW DELHI

Indian conglomerate Vedanta has earmarked \$15 billion for its foray into the electronic chip and display manufacturing space, and plans to scale up the investment to as much as \$20 billion (about ₹1.5 lakh crore), a senior company official said.

It expects to roll out display units, for use in mobile phones and electronics devices, by 2024 and electronic chips from Indian manufacturing plants by 2025, Vedanta Group's global managing director of Display and Semiconductor Business Akarsh Hebbar told PTI on Friday. "Semiconductor is a



Money matters: Vedanta plans to invest \$10 bn in displays, and \$7 bn in chips that may also go up by \$3 bn. •REUTERS

long-term business. We are looking at about \$10 billion on display. Right now we are looking at \$7 billion in semiconductors that may also go up by another \$3 billion... First 10 years, we have en-

gaged to invest up to \$15 billion. We will evaluate further investment at a later stage."

He is also MD of Avanstare, which handles the display manufacturing business of the group. Vedanta

Group has applied for setting up a semiconductor plant and a display manufacturing unit under the Centre's incentive scheme. Mr. Hebbar said the firm expected to start commercial supply of electronic chips in the 28-nanometre category by 2025.

"We will focus on local demand but 25-30% may go for export," he said, adding that electronic components import in India was about \$100 billion, out of which semiconductors accounted for \$25 billion.

The group has signed an MoU with electronics manufacturer Foxconn to form a joint venture to make semiconductors in India.

Ahmedabad-Mumbai bullet train is a priority, says Modi

PM virtually inaugurates 2 railway lines connecting suburbs

STAFF REPORTER
MUMBAI

While dedicating to the nation two additional railway lines connecting the Thane and Diva suburbs in the Mumbai Metropolitan Region (MMR) via video conferencing, Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Friday did not miss the opportunity to remind the Maharashtra Chief Minister of the importance of the Ahmedabad-Mumbai bullet train, a project which has taken the backseat under Maharashtra's tripartite Maha Vikas Aghadi (MVA) government.

"Ahmedabad-Mumbai high speed rail is country's need and it will strengthen Mumbai's identity as the city of dreams. Completing this



Narendra Modi

project rapidly is our priority," Mr. Modi said.

Maharashtra Chief Minister Uddhav Thackeray and the MVA government have been constantly questioning the feasibility of the multi-thousand crore project, and it has even been alleged that the State government is not cooperating with the Centre on the project.

Mr. Modi also used the opportunity to campaign for

the upcoming civic polls in Mumbai and the MMR by counting his government's initiatives to improve the rail network in and around Mumbai.

Recalling the contribution of the metropolitan city of Mumbai in the progress of Independent India, Mr. Modi said that now the effort was to increase manifold Mumbai's capability in contributing to an "Aatmanirbhar Bharat". "That's why our special focus is on creating 21st century infrastructure for Mumbai," he said.

Thousands of crores of rupees were being invested in equipping Mumbai's suburban rail system with the latest technology, Mr. Modi said.

Hydrogen policy calls for more incentives: experts

Production target of 5 mn tonne set

JACOB KOSHY
NEW DELHI

The 'Green Hydrogen' policy announced by the government on Thursday incentivises producers of this form of power but only partially, say experts.

A notification by the Power Ministry on Thursday says that manufacturers of green hydrogen or ammonia may purchase renewable power from the power exchange or set up renewable energy capacity themselves or through any other developer anywhere. Interstate transmission charges will be waived for 25 years and they can also bank unconsumed renewable power, up to 30 days, with distribution company.

Hydrogen or ammonia is produced mostly by steam reformation with natural gas and sometimes by electrolysis, which is splitting water with electricity yielding hydrogen and oxygen. The power to execute both of these methods is sourced from hydrocarbons or natural gas. Green hydrogen results when the electricity is produced from a non-fossil fuel source such as solar or wind energy but this is currently uneconomical and the new policy aims to make this more viable.

The Centre has set itself a target of setting up a 5 million tonnes (mt) green hydrogen production by 2030. Because hydrogen only emits water as a residue when burnt, it is pitched as a potential substitute for fossil fuel.

Grid connectivity

The manufacturers of such hydrogen and the renewable energy plant would also be given connectivity to the grid on priority basis and they would also be allowed



An expert said that solar alone cannot be a green hydrogen producer.

to set up bunkers near ports for storing this green ammonia for export / use by shipping.

Close to 50-70% of the cost of green hydrogen results from input power costs of renewable energy, a substantial share being from open access charges. "The waiving off of central open access charges is a good first step in enabling lower cost distributed production of green hydrogen. However, States have their own open access charges ranging from 0.27 to 3.8 ₹ per unit (kWh), also depending on whether it is solar or wind. Therefore, a concerted effort is required to remove the disparity in these charges to avoid a distorted green hydrogen market," said Hemant Malya, Senior Programme Lead, Council on Energy, Environment and Water (CEEW).

To make 5 million tonnes of hydrogen a large amount of land, large infrastructure and money would be necessary to meet that target. "The reality is solar alone cannot be a sole green hydrogen producer as there are certain inherent limitations in power balancing calculations" said Nandan Kundetkar, Chief Science Officer and CEO of Femto Green Hydrogen Limited.

New gecko from NE gets Army tag

Two more species of the lizard named after the places of their occurrence

RAHUL KARMAKAR
GUWAHATI

A lizard new to science is wearing the Indian Army's tag.

A team of herpetologists have recorded a new species of bent-toed gecko from a wooded part of the Umroi Military Station in Meghalaya. Its scientific name is *Cryptodactylus exercitus* and English name is Indian Army's bent-toed gecko. *Exercitus* in Latin means army.

"The name was given to honour the Army for its services to the country. The military station where the bent-toed gecko was discovered was also a factor behind its



Distinct identity: The Indian Army's bent-toed gecko, recorded from a forest in Meghalaya. ■ SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

name," Jayaditya Purkayastha of green NGO Help Earth and one of the authors of a study on the gecko told *The Hindu* on Friday.

The finding of the study was published in the latest issue of the European Journal of Taxonomy. The paper recorded another new bent-

toed gecko, the *Cyrtodactylus siahaensis* named after Mizoram's Siaha district where it was found.

These lizard specialists had in a separate study recorded the *Cyrtodactylus lungleiensis*, a new species of bent-toed gecko named after Mizoram's Lunglei town.

Mr. Purkayastha said a team of researchers has been scanning the urban, rural and jungle areas across the northeast to uncover the herpetofaunal diversity of the region. India is now home to 40 species of the bent-toed gecko with the northeast accounting for 16 of them.

Easter attacks: top officials acquitted

Sri Lanka's former defence, police chiefs were accused of not acting on Indian intel

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
COLOMBO

Sri Lanka's High Court on Friday acquitted two top officials accused of "crimes against humanity" for failing to prevent the 2019 Easter Sunday bombings that killed 279 people.

The State had indicted the two men in November for failing to act on early warnings from an Indian intelligence agency that local jihadists were planning a string of suicide bombings in April 2019.

The three-judge panel dismissed all 855 charges against Hemasiri Fernando, then Secretary to the Ministry of Defence, as well as then Inspector General of Police Pujith Jayasundara.

A court official said the judges in a unanimous decision exonerated the suspects



Pujith Jayasundara, left, and Hemasiri Fernando, second from right, outside the High Court in Colombo on Friday. ■ AFP

and released them without calling defence witnesses.

The attacks, blamed on a homegrown Islamic extremist group, targeted three churches and three hotels in the capital and killed 279 people, including 45 foreigners, leaving more than 500 wounded.

Mr. Fernando and Mr.

Jayasundara were arrested in 2019 and held in custody for four months before being released on bail.

Mr. Jayasundara was the most senior police official to be arrested in the 155-year history of the force.

The then chief prosecutor Dappula de Livera had told the court that "negligence"

by the two officials amounted to "grave crimes against humanity" and laid murder charges against them.

The first Indian intelligence warning was given on April 4, nearly three weeks before the bombings. The Islamic State group said it had backed the attackers.

Local Muslim groups had also alerted police and intelligence units over the threat posed by radical cleric Zahrán Hashim, who led the suicide bombings.

Jayasundara and Fernando have testified to a parliamentary inquiry that then-president Maithripala Sirisena failed to follow established protocols in assessing national security threats ahead of the bombings. They also alleged that Sirisena did not take the threats seriously.

I&B Ministry warns officials on data security

‘Don’t share secret documents over the Internet’

DEVESH K. PANDEY
NEW DELHI

The Information and Broadcasting (I&B) Ministry has prohibited the sharing of top secret or secret documents by its officials over Internet. They have also been told not to use digital assistant devices such as Amazon’s Echo, Apple’s HomePod and Google Home in the office and turn off digital assistants, including Alexa and Siri, in their smartphones or watch-



The I&B Ministry flagged the use of private messaging platforms to share classified documents. ■ GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCK

es. The officials are required to deposit their smartphones outside the meeting room during discussions on classified issues, said the order that has been issued in view of the finding that a

large number of government officials use private messaging platforms like WhatsApp and Telegram for communication of classified information. The Ministry said such a practice violated the De-

partmental Security instructions and the National Information Security Policy Guidelines.

Accordingly, the Ministry has directed that top secret and secret documents be shared only in a closed network with the leased line connectivity where the Scientific Analysis Group (SAG) grade encryption mechanism is deployed. The SAG functions under the Defence Research & Development Organisation.

The order said that confidential and restricted information could be shared on Internet via networks having

a commercial Advanced Encryption Standard (AES) 256-bit mechanism. The Ministry has recommended the use of government email facility or government instant messaging platforms such as the Centre for Development of Advanced Computing’s Samvad and the National Informatics Centre’s Sandesh for communicating such information.

The Ministry cautioned that the classification of top secret or secret information should not be downgraded to “confidential” or “restricted” for the purpose of sharing it over Internet.

General Studies Paper I	
A	History of Indian culture will cover the salient aspects of art forms, literature and architecture from ancient to modern times;
B	Modern Indian history from about the middle of the eighteenth century until the present-significant events, personalities, issues;
C	Freedom struggle-its various stages and important contributors / contributions from different parts of the country;
D	Post-independence consolidation and reorganization within the country;
E	History of the world will include events from 18 th century such as industrial revolution, world wars, re-drawing of national boundaries, colonization, decolonization,
F	Political philosophies like communism, capitalism, socialism etc.-their forms and effect on the society
G	Salient features of Indian Society, Diversity of India;
H	Effects of globalization on Indian society;
I	Role of women and women's organization;
J	Social empowerment, communalism, regionalism & secularism
K	Salient features of world's physical geography;
L	Geographical features and their location- changes in critical geographical features (including water bodies and ice-caps) and in flora and fauna and the effects of such changes;
M	Important Geophysical phenomena such as earthquakes, Tsunami, Volcanic activity, cyclone etc.
N	Distribution of key natural resources across the world (including South Asia and the Indian subcontinent);
O	Factors responsible for the location of primary, secondary, and tertiary sector industries in various parts of the world (including India);
P	Population and associated issues;
Q	Urbanization, their problems and their remedies
General Studies Paper II	
A	India and its neighbourhood- relations;
B	Important International institutions, agencies and fora- their structure, mandate;
C	Effect of policies and politics of developed and developing countries on India's interests;
D	Bilateral, regional and global groupings and agreements involving India and/or affecting India's interests.
E	Indian Constitution, historical underpinnings, evolution, features, amendments, significant provisions and basic structure;
F	Comparison of the Indian Constitutional scheme with other countries;
G	Functions and responsibilities of the Union and the States, issues and challenges pertaining to the federal structure, devolution of powers and finances up to local levels and challenges therein; Inclusive growth and issues arising from it;
H	Parliament and State Legislatures - structure, functioning, conduct of business, powers & privileges and issues arising out of these;
I	Structure, organization and functioning of the executive and the judiciary, Ministries and Departments;

J	Separation of powers between various organs dispute redressal mechanisms and institutions;
K	Appointment to various Constitutional posts, powers, functions and responsibilities of various Constitutional bodies;
L	Statutory, regulatory and various quasi-judicial bodies;
M	Mechanisms, laws, institutions and bodies constituted for the protection and betterment of these vulnerable sections;
N	Salient features of the Representation of People's Act;
O	Important aspects of governance, transparency and accountability, e-governance- applications, models, successes, limitations, and potential;
P	Citizens charters, transparency & accountability and institutional and other measures;
Q	Issues relating to poverty and hunger,
R	Welfare schemes for vulnerable sections of the population by the Centre and States, Performance of these schemes;
S	Issues relating to development and management of social sector / services relating to education and human resources;
T	Issues relating to development and management of social sector / services relating to health
General Studies Paper III	
A	Indian Economy and issues relating to planning, mobilization of resources, growth, development and employment;
B	Effects of liberalization on the economy, changes in industrial policy and their effects on industrial growth;
C	Inclusive growth and issues arising from it;
D	Infrastructure Energy, Ports, Roads, Airports, Railways etc. Government budgeting;
E	Land reforms in India
F	Major crops, cropping patterns in various parts of the country, different types of irrigation and irrigation systems;
G	Storage, transport and marketing of agricultural produce and issues and related constraints;
H	e-technology in the aid of farmers; Technology Missions; Economics of Animal-Rearing.
I	Issues of buffer stocks and food security, Public Distribution System- objectives, functioning, limitations, revamping;
J	Food processing and related industries in India – scope and significance, location, upstream and downstream requirements, supply chain management;
K	Issues related to direct and indirect farm subsidies and minimum support prices
L	Awareness in the fields of IT, Space, Computers, robotics, nano-technology, bio-technology;
M	Indigenization of technology and developing new technology;
N	Developments and their applications and effects in everyday life;
O	Issues relating to intellectual property rights
P	Conservation, environmental pollution and degradation, environmental impact assessment
Q	Disaster and disaster management
R	Challenges to internal security through communication networks, role of media and social networking sites in internal security challenges, basics of cyber security;
S	Money-laundering and its prevention;

T	Various forces and their mandate;
U	Security challenges and their management in border areas;
V	Linkages of organized crime with terrorism;
W	Role of external state and non-state actors in creating challenges to internal security;
X	Linkages between development and spread of extremism.
General Studies Paper IV	
A	Ethics and Human Interface: Essence, determinants and consequences of Ethics in human actions;
B	Dimensions of ethics;
C	Ethics in private and public relationships. Human Values - lessons from the lives and teachings of great leaders, reformers and administrators;
D	Role of family, society and educational institutions in inculcating values.
E	Attitude: Content, structure, function; its influence and relation with thought and behaviour;
F	Moral and political attitudes;
G	Social influence and persuasion.
H	Aptitude and foundational values for Civil Service , integrity, impartiality and non-partisanship, objectivity, dedication to public service, empathy, tolerance and compassion towards the weaker sections.
I	Emotional intelligence-concepts, and their utilities and application in administration and governance.
J	Contributions of moral thinkers and philosophers from India and world.
K	Public/Civil service values and Ethics in Public administration: Status and problems;
L	Ethical concerns and dilemmas in government and private institutions;
M	Laws, rules, regulations and conscience as
N	sources of ethical guidance;
O	Accountability and ethical governance; strengthening of ethical and moral values in governance; ethical issues in international relations and funding;
P	Corporate governance.
Q	Probity in Governance: Concept of public service;
R	Philosophical basis of governance and probity;
S	Information sharing and transparency in government, Right to Information, Codes of Ethics, Codes of Conduct, Citizen's Charters, Work culture, Quality of service delivery, Utilization of public funds, challenges of corruption.
T	Case Studies on above issues.