

SC asks govt. to overhaul NEET-UG on a deadline

POLITY AND GOVERNANCE

A test for NEET

Here are a few recommendations of the Supreme Court:



- Data protection measures, periodic audits, surprise inspections of test centres, grievance redress mechanisms, foolproof logistics
- Standard operating procedure detailing specific timelines for registration of candidates, changes to preferred cities, sealing of OMR sheets

after handing them over to invigilators

- Comprehensive CCTV surveillance of test centres, including real-time monitoring
- Rigorous checks and balances at every stage from the setting of question papers to the declaration of the results
- Review of allotment of test centres



“The manner in which NTA organised the exam this year gives rise to serious concerns... NTA has sufficient resources at its disposal. It has adequate funding, time, and opportunities to organise exams such as the NEET without lapses of the kind that occurred this year.”

D.Y. Chandrachud
Chief Justice of India

The Supreme Court on Friday pronounced a scathing judgment calling out the “flip-flops” of the National Testing Agency (NTA) in the conduct of the National Eligibility-cum-Entrance Test, 2024 for admission to undergraduate medical courses, and put the government on a deadline to completely restructure the exam process.

The three-judge Bench, headed by the Chief Justice directed the Centre, acting through its High-Powered Committee headed by former ISRO Chairperson K. Radhakrishnan, to recommend and implement top-to-bottom overhauling of the test process, including rectifying “serious security lapses”, introduce data protection measures, periodic audits, surprise inspections of test centres, grievance redress mechanisms for students and fool-proof logistics while specifically highlighting how question papers were transported in e-rickshaws for the May 5 test.

The court directed the Radhakrishnan committee to submit its report to the Education Ministry by September 30. The Ministry has to take a decision on the committee's recommendations within a month thereafter and implement the plan of action. The government has to file a compliance report in the court.

The court pointed to how NTA initially gave 1,563 students grace marks after realising that they were allotted the wrong question paper, and then later decided to withdraw their scores and conduct a re-test.

Cong. moves privilege motion over Shah's speech on Wayanad

POLITY & GOVERNANCE

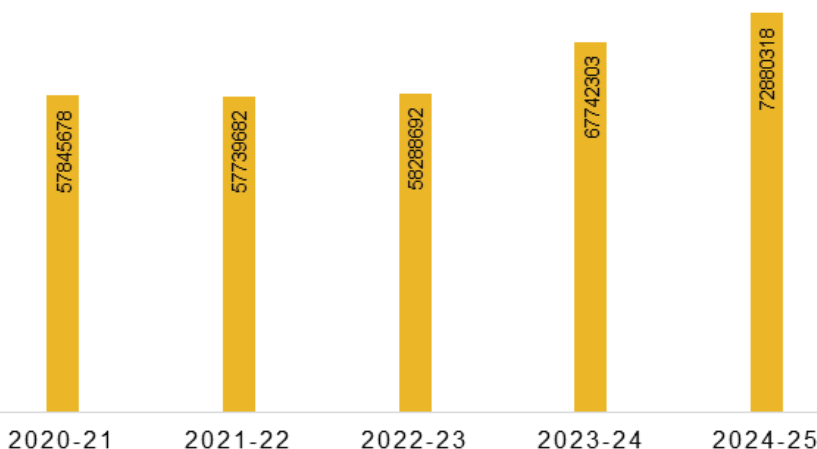
The Congress has moved a privilege motion in the Rajya Sabha against Home Minister Amit Shah for misleading the House on the landslides in Wayanad. Congress chief whip in the Rajya Sabha Jairam Ramesh wrote to Chairman of the Upper House Jagdeep Dhankhar citing Mr. Shah's "emphatic statements on early warnings issued by the Union government as false. He said privilege proceedings should be initiated against the Home Minister. Answering a calling attention motion, Mr. Shah had said that the first advance warning was sent to the State on July 23 and subsequent warnings were issued on July 24, 25 and 26. Nine NDRF teams were sent on July 23 to prepare for the impending tragedy, he had said.

The India Meteorological Department (IMD) issued weather warnings carrying an orange alert for Kerala for July 25 and a yellow "watch" alert for July 23, 24, 26 and 27. A yellow alert does not specifically call for action. The IMD had issued an orange alert for very heavy rainfall at isolated places over Kerala and Mahe on July 29 and a red alert for July 30 was issued after the landslides hit Wayanad.

72% of assesseees opted for new tax regime in 2023-24

ECONOMICS & DEVELOPMENT

ITRS FILED



Most of India's personal income-tax payers have moved to the simpler new tax regime in the financial year 2023-24. Approximately, 72 % of 7.28 crore filed for Assessment Year 2024-25 filed in the new tax regime compared to 2.01 crore ITRs filed in the old tax regime. Over 43.82% of ITRs were filed using the online utility available on the e-filing portal and the

balance have been filed using offline ITR utilities. The switchover has likely been expedited by significant changes in the new tax regime, making the new system “the default tax regime”, and slashing the tax rate slabs to five from six and raised the tax-free income limit to ₹ 3 lakh from ₹ 2.5 lakh. The Budget had also granted a hike in the tax rebate limit from ₹ 5 lakh to ₹ 7 lakh a year under the new tax regime, compared with ₹ 5 lakh a year applicable for the old tax regime.

With Budget 2024-25 raising the standard deduction to ₹75,000 from ₹50,000 and rejigging the tax slabs under the new regime again, there could be a greater impetus for taxpayers to opt out of the old regime. Nearly 58.6 lakh I-T returns were filed by first-time filers, a fair indication of widening of tax base. A little over 6.77 crore returns had been filed by the July 31 deadline last year, while total ITR filings were 8.61 crore. Taking the first-time filers into account, back-of-the-envelope calculations show that about 7.19 lakh taxpayers have not met the deadline this year.

From about 28 lakh filings on the portal on July 24, the number of ITRs filed soared to almost 70 lakh on July 31. The filing of ITRs peaked on July 31 [due date for salaried taxpayers and other non-tax audit cases] with over 69.92 lakh ITRs being filed on a single day and a highest per hour rate of 5.07 lakh recorded between 7 p.m. to 8 p.m. on July 31. The highest per second rate of ITR filings was 917, achieved on July 17 early morning, while the highest per minute rate of ITR filings was 9,367, at 8.08 p.m. on the deadline day. During the peak filing period, the e-filing portal successfully handled huge traffic, providing a seamless experience to taxpayers for filing of ITRs. On July 31, 2024 alone, successful logins stood at 3.2 crore.



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Quid pro quo via poll bonds are assumptions for now: SC

POLITY & GOVERNANCE

The Supreme Court on Friday refused to set up a Special Investigation Team (SIT) headed by a former top court judge to probe the allegations of “quid pro quo” among political parties, public servants, companies and even officers of law enforcement agencies revealed through data made public on electoral bonds. A three-judge Bench of Chief Justice of India D.Y. Chandrachud termed these allegations sheer “assumptions”. The Bench summarised the petitions, including one by NGOs Common Cause and Centre for Public Interest Litigation, were based on primarily two assumptions.

One, that there was prima facie quid pro quo whenever the date of purchase of electoral bonds and donation to a ruling political party was proximate to change in policy or award of contracts. Secondly, the involvement of officers of investigative agencies in the corruption and quid pro quo did not guarantee a fair probe.

‘Accessories to graft’

The petitioners had argued that officers of the Central Bureau of Investigation, Enforcement Directorate, and Income Tax Department “appear to have become accessories to corruption” and cited the coincidence of purchase of bonds by accused persons with the sudden fading away of hotly pursued criminal prosecutions. The court pointed out that the electoral bonds scheme was embodied within several enactments or amendments made by Parliament until it was found unconstitutional by a Constitution Bench in March.

The court asked the petitioners to first invoke the normal remedies available under the law of criminal procedure suspicious of an “element of criminality” in any individual instance of proximity between the purchase of bonds and government largesse. The petitioners could file writ petitions with the State High Court concerned under Article 226 if agencies refused to investigate or file a seemingly unfounded closure report. The Bench said any writ petition filed under Article 32 in the Supreme Court must be preceded by the invocation of normal remedies. The court found it both “premature” and “inappropriate” to constitute an SIT. It would be premature as there were other remedies available in law. Again, it would be inappropriate to order an apex court-monitored probe by an SIT now as this would postulate that the normal criminal remedies were not efficacious.



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Centre reissues draft notification on eco-sensitive areas in Western Ghats

ECOLOGY & ENVIRONMENT



The Union government has reissued a draft notification classifying parts of the Western Ghats in six States as Ecologically Sensitive Areas (ESAs) in the aftermath of the devastating landslide in Wayanad in Kerala. This will impose restrictions on economic activities such as quarrying, mining, and large infrastructure development in these areas.

The last time the draft was issued was in July 2022. Among other areas, it had proposed to declare 13 villages in

Wayanad, spanning the three taluks of Mananthavady, Sulthan Bathery, and Vythiri, as part of an ESA. Despite its six iterations, the draft notification is yet to become law as all six affected States — Gujarat, Maharashtra, Goa, Karnataka, Kerala, and Tamil Nadu — have objected to specific places that have been included in the ESA regions. The dominant sentiment in Kerala was that this notification will subsume agricultural plantations, curtail the State's hydroelectricity plans, and would lead to a migration crisis given the State's high population density.

The current draft, issued on July 31 and made public on Friday, is "open to comments" from the public for 60 days. While such notifications typically become law after that period, the Union government has historically refrained from doing so with regard to this particular notification given the severe public backlash that it has invited.

No consensus

A committee steered by ecologist Madhav Gadgil and mandated to examine the degree of protection needed in the Western Ghats recommended in 2011 that the entire region — spanning 1,29,000 square km — be declared as ecologically sensitive. Following consultations with residents, industrialists, and government officials, the Gadgil panel recommended the creation of three broad zones — ESA 1, ESA 2 and ESA 3 — with the first two inviting the strictest restrictions on economic activity. With the States unwilling to accept the recommendations, a second committee, led by former ISRO Chairman K. Kasturirangan, reconvened the exercise and halved the area of protected regions.

The committee also invited the States to draw up their own ESAs. Kerala was the first to do so. While there have been several meetings involving the Centre and the States that have spanned both the UPA and the NDA governments, it has been a challenge to arrive at a consensus ESA zone within the Western Ghats.

New panel

A separate committee has been formed to examine the concerns of the States and it was expected that a final notification would follow upon the recommendation of this committee. The committee, constituted in 2022, is mandated to balance “conservation aspects of the disaster-prone pristine ecosystem, and the rights, privileges, needs and developmental aspirations of the region”, but is yet to submit its report.

Supreme Court upholds validity of Tamil Nadu's Arunthathiyar quota law

POLITY & GOVERNANCE



A majority judgment of the Supreme Court on Thursday has backed the constitutional validity of a Tamil Nadu law that offered preferential treatment among the Scheduled Castes (SCs) to socially and educationally backward Arunthathiyars. A seven-judge Bench, headed by Chief Justice of India D.Y. Chandrachud, in a 6:1 ratio, held that sub-categorisation within a class was a Constitutional requirement to secure substantive equality.

The Tamil Nadu State Legislature had enacted the Tamil Nadu Arunthathiyars Reservation Act, 2009, to provide the Arunthathiyars reservation in appointments or posts in State services on a preferential basis among the SCs.

Listed castes

The Tamil Nadu Arunthathiyars Reservation Act, 2009 defined Arunthathiyars to include the castes — Arunthathiyar, Chakkiliyan, Madari, Madiga, Pagadi, Thoti, and Adi Andhra — from the list of 76 SCs notified by the President under Article 341 of the Constitution. Section 3 of the Act stipulated that 16 % of the seats reserved for the SCs in educational institutions should be offered to the Arunthathiyars, if available, having regard to the social and educational backwardness of the community. Section 4 makes a similar provision for the Arunthathiyars in the recruitment to government posts.

The batch of matters challenging the Tamil Nadu Act was tagged with a batch challenging a similar law in Punjab, which gave preference to Balmikis and Mazhabi Sikhs

among the SCs. A Constitution Bench of five judges referred the case to a Constitution Bench of seven judges in August 2020 for an authoritative pronouncement on the question whether States could sub-classify SCs “if the social positions of the constituents among the castes/groups is not comparable.”

Governor should be a bridge between Centre and State: PM

POLITY & GOVERNANCE



Prime Minister Narendra Modi addressing a two-day Conference of Governors inaugurated by President Droupadi Murmu at the Rashtrapati Bhavan urged the Governors to be an effective bridge between the Centre and the State governments. The post of Governor was an important institution that could play a crucial role in the welfare of the people within

the framework of the Constitution, particularly with reference to tribal areas.

President Murmu, Vice-President Jagdeep Dhankhar and Union Home Minister Amit Shah also addressed the inaugural session. In her opening remarks, Ms. Murmu said it was crucial for the smooth functioning of democracy that various Central agencies work with better coordination across all the States. As constitutional heads of their respective States, Governors should think how they can promote this coordination.

Ms. Murmu said the agenda for the conference included carefully chosen issues that were crucial in achieving national goals. The two-day conference will cover a wide range of issues that play a critical role in not only shaping the Centre-State relations but also promoting welfare schemes for common people.

The President said that deliberations of the conference would be an enriching experience for all participants and help them in their functioning. She expressed confidence that all Governors would continue to contribute to the service and welfare of the people, doing justice to the oath taken by them.

India selects 2 crew members for Axiom-4 mission to ISS

SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY



Indian astronaut-designates Group Captain Shubhanshu Shukla and Group Captain Prasanth Balakrishnan Nair have been shortlisted to go to the U.S. to train for the Axiom-4 mission to the International Space Station (ISS). The National Mission Assignment Board has recommended Group Captain Shukla as the prime mission pilot and Group Captain Nair as the back-up mission pilots for the mission. The Axiom-4 mission is the fourth private astronaut mission to the International Space Station.

“During the mission, the Gaganyatri will undertake selected scientific research and technology demonstration experiments on board the ISS as well as engage in space outreach activities. The experiences gained during this mission will be beneficial for the Indian Human Space Program and it will also strengthen human space flight cooperation between ISRO and NASA.”

Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO)

The India-U.S. joint statement during the state visit of Prime Minister Narendra Modi to the U.S. in June 2023 envisioned a joint ISRO-NASA effort to the ISS. The Human Space Flight Centre (HSFC) of the ISRO has entered into a Space Flight Agreement with the NASA-identified service provider Axiom Space Inc., U.S., for its upcoming Axiom-4 mission to the ISS towards the goal of mounting a joint ISRO-NASA effort. The Multilateral Crew Operations Panel would provide final approval for the assigned crew members to fly to the International Space Station. They will commence training for the mission from the first week of August.



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ICMR got ₹ 172 Cr. from Bharat Biotech for Covaxin: Nadda

POLITY & GOVERNANCE

The Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) has received ₹172 crore as royalty from Bharat Biotech International Ltd. for jointly developing Covaxin, an indigenously developed vaccine for COVID-19. The Union Government objected to the failure to list ICMR as a co-owner and co-inventor during the filing of the patent for Covaxin, Bharat Biotech had accepted its mistake and rectified it.

Covaxin was jointly developed by the ICMR, National Institute of Virology (NIV) and Bharat Biotech in two phases. The first phase jointly performed by ICMR and the NIV included isolation of the virus, and studying the challenges and related issues. e done by the ICMR and the NIV. The development of the vaccine was done by Bharat Biotech, which spent around ₹ 60 crore to that end. The ICMR performed Phase 3 clinical trial which involved funding 25 sites for screening and recruiting 25,800 participants.

Initially, when Bharat Biotech filed the patent application, it only included its own name. The Government objected to the patent filing. The filing was modified to include ICMR, National Institute of Virology, along with three scientists are co-owners and co-inventors of Covaxin.

India faces 'dilemma' amid rising Iran-Israel tensions over Ismail Haniyeh's killing

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS



The assassination of Mr. Haniyeh, the political chief of the Hamas that carried out the October 7 terror attacks in Israel, who was also Hamas's lead negotiator with Israel and other countries on a possible ceasefire deal and hostage release negotiations that have failed to fructify for months, is likely to put a pause on the peace process under way. The Ministry of

External Affairs has put out a travel advisory for Indians in Israel and Lebanon, and is likely to update travel advisories for other parts of the region.

India had sent Road Transport and Highways Minister Nitin Gadkari to Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian's inauguration. India condemned the October 7 attacks in Israel as terrorist acts, the government has not banned Hamas as a terror group, despite requests from Israel. On the other hand, the government has facilitated the transfer of at least 5,000 construction workers and plans for about 5,000 caregivers to travel to Israel to fill in for jobs where Palestinian workers were terminated after the October 7 attacks.

India is carefully considering its statements regarding regional tensions, balancing its critical security and military ties with Israel against its important economic interests in Iran. The ongoing conflicts may impact two key initiatives: the India-Middle East Europe Economic Corridor (IMEEC) and the development of Chabahar port in Iran. Although discussions on the IMEEC have occurred with partners like the UAE and Greece, the steering committee has not met in nearly a year due to regional tensions. Additionally, any conflict or U.S. sanctions could hinder India's plans for Chabahar port and affect connectivity to Afghanistan and Central Asia, as well as initiatives like the India-Israel-UAE-U.S. I2U2 and the International North South Transport Corridor with Russia.



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