

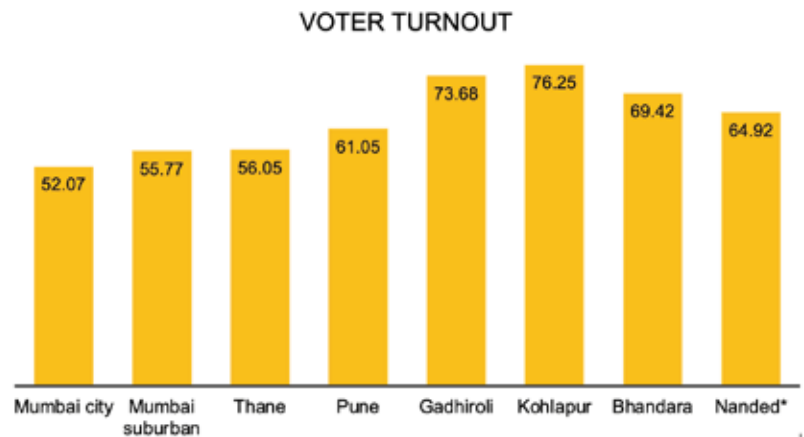


At 65 %, Maharashtra clocks better turnout than in 2019

POLITY & GOVERNANCE

CONTEXT: The Election Commission of India (ECI) estimated a voter turnout of 65.11 % in Maharashtra Assembly election on Wednesday. The turnout in the 2019 Maharashtra Assembly election was 61.6 %.

In Maharashtra Assembly elections, 4,136 candidates contested in 288 Assembly constituencies. Votes will be counted on November 23. Despite extensive voter outreach and ease-of-voting measures carried out by the Election Commission, urban centres like Mumbai and Thane reported low turnout on Wednesday.



Pollsters give an edge to BJP-led alliances in Maharashtra, Jharkhand

POLITY & GOVERNANCE

CONTEXT: Several exit polls on Wednesday gave a clear edge to the BJP-led alliances in the Assembly elections in Maharashtra and Jharkhand, while some projected that the Opposition Maha Vikas Aghadi (MVA) coalition may emerge on top in Maharashtra.

What exit polls say

Most pollsters predict a decisive victory for the Mahayuti in Maharashtra and an edge to the NDA in Jharkhand



POLLSTER	MAHARASHTRA (288 SEATS)			JHARKHAND (81 SEATS)		
	Mahayuti	MVA	Others*	NDA	INDIA	Others#
P-Marq	137-157	126-146	2-8	31-40	37-47	1-6
People's Pulse	175-195	85-112	7-12	44-53	25-37	5-9
Dainik Bhaskar	125-140	135-150	20-25	37-40	36-39	0-2

*Others include AIMIM, Vanchit Bahujan Aaghadi and Independents
#Others include BSP, JMKM, SP and Independents

In the 288-member Maharashtra Assembly, 145 is the majority mark, while it is 41 in the 81-member Jharkhand Assembly. The BJP-Shiv Sena-Nationalist Congress Party alliance is in power in Maharashtra, while the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha-Congress is ruling in Jharkhand.

In Maharashtra, the P-Marq exit polls predicted 137 - 157 seats, with 42 % vote share, for the ruling Mahayuti alliance and 126 - 146 seats, with 41 % vote share, for the MVA. The Matrize exit poll predicted 150 - 170 seats, with 48 % vote share, for the Mahayuti, and 110-130 seats, with 42 % vote share, for the MVA.

According to Electoral Edge, the MVA is likely to win 150 seats and the Mahayuti 118 seats, while others could bag 20 seats. Poll Diary predicted 122 - 186 seats for the Mahayuti, 69 - 121 for the MVA, and 10 - 27 seats for others, while Chanakya Strategies said the Mahayuti could come back to power with 152 - 160 seats, and the MVA would get 130 - 138 seats. Lokpoll gave the MVA 151-162 seats and the Mahayuti 115 - 128 seats.

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Calm returns, Imphal gets a curfew break

INTERNAL SECURITY

CONTEXT: A five-hour relaxation of curfew in three Imphal Valley districts of Manipur on Wednesday saw people dashing to the markets to buy essential items.

The curfew was relaxed from 5 a.m. to 10 a.m. in Imphal East, Imphal West, and Kakching districts after partial improvement in the law-and-order situation. The curfew was imposed for an indefinite period on November 16 after mobs went on the rampage vandalising, burning, or looting houses of some 15 MLAs, including Ministers.

Three women and three children abducted by armed extremists from a relief camp during an attack on the CRPF and the State police in Jiribam district on November 11 were later found dead. Ten extremists, who Kuki-Zo organisations claimed were “village volunteers”, were killed in the gunfight with the security forces after they attacked the camp.

Reports from Imphal said markets teemed with people, while there were long queues at petrol pumps. Dwindling stocks, primarily because of blockades and attacks on goods trucks, were a factor behind the rush. Mobile data services remained suspended in nine districts. The government, however, conditionally lifted the suspension of broadband services from Wednesday.

Imphal Valley, in the central part of the State, and Jiribam on the border with southern Assam’s Cachar district, were relatively quiet from Tuesday afternoon to Wednesday (November 20, 2024) morning. The efforts were on to rein in troublemakers with more paramilitary personnel coming in for security duty. Chief Minister Nongthombam Biren Singh said the perpetrators of the crime against women and children would be brought to justice. He also advised the Centre to crack down on Kuki-Zo armed organisations behind the renewed violence.

The chairperson of the Manipur Commission for Protection of Child Rights (MCPCR), Keisam Pradipkumar, has asked the members of the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights and the National Commission for Women to visit the conflict-scarred State. The unrest that began in May 2023 had reached critical levels violating ethical norms and international legal standards meant to safeguard civilians during armed conflicts. More than 25,000 children had been displaced by the violence, severely disrupting their education, health, and security.

The targeting of innocent children, helpless women, and the elderly is a grave violation of laws such as the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, constitutional safeguards, and international conventions including the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women. The Naga Women’s Union (NWU), the apex body of women belonging to all Naga tribes in Manipur, expressed sorrow over the “cold-blooded murders” of the six women and children in Jiribam’s Borobekra subdivision.

An overturning of Sri Lanka’s old political order

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

CONTEXT: The National People’s Power (NPP), led by Sri Lanka’s President Anura Kumara Dissanayake, has swept the Sri Lankan parliamentary polls with an astounding majority.

The NPP’s success in Sri Lanka’s September 2024 presidential election, marked by Mr. Dissanayake’s victory, stemmed from a keen understanding of public sentiment, meticulous planning, and a smart election strategy. As Asia’s oldest electoral democracy, Sri Lanka saw a dramatic political shift, with citizens granting the new government a strong mandate while decisively rejecting the existing political order.

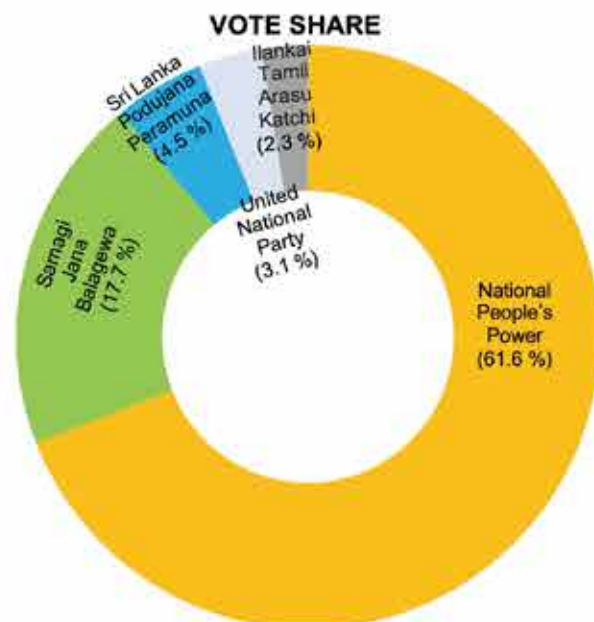


FIGURE: Pie chart representation of the share of the votes won by the political parties in the Sri Lanka Parliamentary elections.

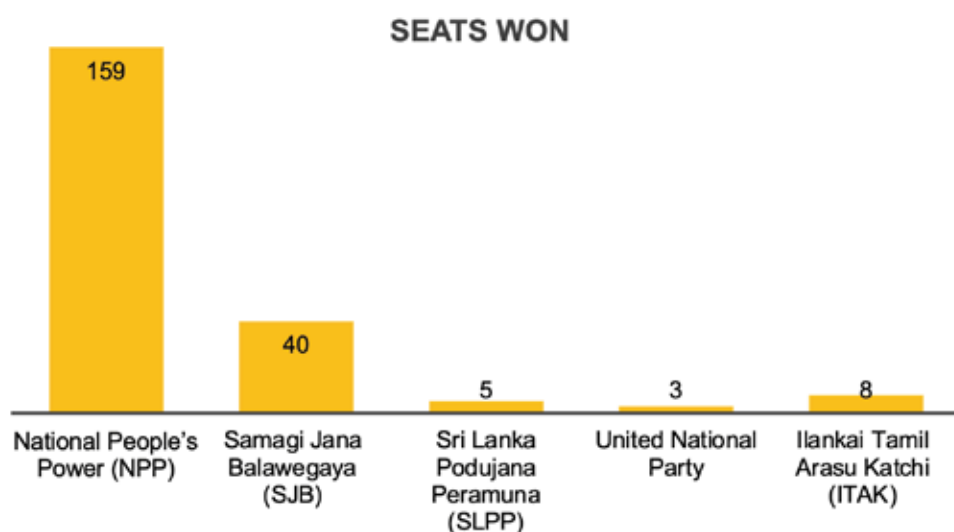


FIGURE: Column chart representation of the number of the seats won by the political parties in the Sri Lanka Parliamentary elections.

systemic change. Key questions now are whether they will end majoritarian policies, abolish the authoritarian executive presidency, and build an inclusive economy that departs from neoliberalism and its inequalities.

Tamil nationalist splintering

The NPP's political surge began before the presidential elections, but its unexpected victory in the Northern Province marks a historic shift. For the first time, a national party won both districts in a region dominated by Tamil nationalist politics, which has splintered recently. Efforts to project a "Tamil Common Candidate" in the presidential election, aimed at uniting Tamils and appealing to international actors, failed disastrously. This exposed the self-serving nature of Tamil nationalist leaders, evident in the record number of parties competing for limited seats in the north, further fracturing their support base. The decline of Tamil nationalist politics has been long overdue, following the decimation of Tamil political leadership by the LTTE and the reliance on diaspora funding. These parties focused on international lobbying rather than addressing the severe challenges of war-torn communities, including poverty, disrupted livelihoods, and youth despair. The NPP's victory signifies a shift, reflecting shared struggles between the north and the rest of the country. While Tamil elites claim diaspora remittances shielded communities from the economic crisis, these benefit only a small middle-class segment, leaving rural populations to face severe hardships. The NPP now bears the responsibility of addressing the long-standing grievances of ethnic minorities.

Space for change

The NPP has received a historic mandate to address Sri Lanka's unprecedented crisis. It has pledged to provide relief, eliminate corruption, abolish the executive presidency, repeal the PTA, and enact a new Constitution with its two-thirds parliamentary majority. The government must tackle pressing economic challenges and work towards political reconciliation after the civil war. However, global economic instability could exacerbate domestic issues. The NPP should heed the lessons of the 1970s United Front Government, which was defeated after a global downturn and economic retaliation by the West for its Non-Aligned Movement stance.

Sri Lanka is also now in unknown waters having defaulted on its external debt for the first time in its history. The straight jacket of an International Monetary Fund programme with severe austerity measures and debt restructuring privileging powerful creditors, particularly bondholders, allows little wiggle room. The bureaucracy entrenched in a pro-liberalisation state structure, may obstruct progress. The business elite in Colombo aligned to the West are nakedly extracting the working people and will be looking for every opportunity to undercut the new government.

Most of all, the global powers, whether it be India, China or the United States, from their vulture-like grabbing of Sri Lanka's strategic assets, are likely to torpedo this centre-left regime at the first opportunity to shift the country towards their own geopolitical interests. The island-nation and its people have gone through much turmoil during the past decades, and they should be given the space to find their own democratic way out of the crisis.

Sri Lanka's severe economic crisis has brought unprecedented political changes, dismantling the old political order that catered to elite, global, and diaspora interests. A historic electoral shift has reshaped the political landscape, demanding meaningful change. The NPP must meet public expectations or risk being overtaken by polarizing right-wing forces.

Historic shift

Sri Lanka's recent election parallels the 1977 election, when J.R. Jayewardene's UNP government gained power during a global economic downturn, introducing a new Constitution, a presidential system, and a liberalized economy. Similarly, Mr. Dissanayake and the JVP, after decades of struggle since their failed insurrection, have risen amid an economic depression and mass demands for

How does PM Vidyalaxmi differ from other schemes?

POLITY & GOVERNANCE

CONTEXT: On November 6, the Union Cabinet chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi approved a new Central Sector Scheme, PM Vidyalaxmi.

What does the scheme cover?

Prime Minister Vidyalaxmi has introduced a scheme offering collateral-free, guarantor-free loans for meritorious students pursuing higher education in 860 top institutions under the National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF). The scheme, benefiting up to 22 lakh students, includes a 3 % interest subvention on loans up to ₹ 10 lakh during the moratorium period for students with a family income of up to ₹ 8 lakh, covering one lakh students annually. Preference is given to students from government institutions in technical or professional courses. With an allocation of ₹ 3,600 Cr from 2024-25 to 2030-31, seven lakh fresh students are expected to benefit from this interest subvention.

What about past schemes?

PM Vidyalaxmi differs from previous central government schemes in the number of institutions eligible, mode of processing of loans, the income cap, and the amount of money to be disbursed. For example, students can apply for loans through the Vidyalaxmi portal, which simplifies loan applications and has links to all major public sector as well as private banks. It also facilitates the tracking of the loan status. Moreover, while previous schemes offered benefits to only low-income groups, the Vidyalaxmi scheme expands coverage to middle-income families, irrespective of other factors such as caste.

For earlier schemes, the eligible institutions needed to be accredited with the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) and the National Board of Accreditation (NBA). With 820 universities of NAAC and 15,501 colleges, along with 3,348 NBA institutions, the total was about 20,000 institutions. However, under Vidyalaxmi, only institutions with NIRF ranks are eligible. This means that the scheme will be applicable to all government and private institutions ranked within the top 100 in NIRF rankings in the overall list as well as all institutions in the category-specific and domain-specific lists. An institute has to register for the ranking as a prerequisite to feature in the rankings. While some institutions apply to a single category, some others apply for multiple categories and hence feature on more than one list.

What are the implications?

Rankings are now becoming more and more important with loan eligibility being conditional on them. As this scheme significantly reduces the number of eligible institutions, the stakes of performing well in higher education entrance tests just got higher. Banker Thomas Franco said that this makes it difficult for students who do not have excellent marks to avail the loan. Banks may charge higher rates of interest for other institutions or straight away reject them if they don't have a good rank.

Prime Minister proposes seven key pillars to strengthen ties between India, 'CARICOM'

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

CONTEXT: Prime Minister Narendra Modi proposed seven key pillars to strengthen ties between India and 'CARICOM' as he held talks with the Caribbean partner countries focusing on areas such as trade, technology and tourism among others. Mr. Modi, who arrived in Guyana on Wednesday — the first visit by an Indian head of the State in more than 50 years. Mr. Modi joined leaders from the Caribbean partner countries for the second India-CARICOM Summit here. They discussed ways to strengthen ties in areas such as economic cooperation, agriculture and food security, health and pharmaceuticals, and science and innovations. During the summit, Mr. Modi proposed seven key pillars to strengthen ties between India and 'CARICOM'.

Mr. Modi noted to promote five Ts — trade, technology, tourism, talent and tradition, an online portal could be made to connect the private sector and stakeholders of all countries. India moved ahead in the SME [small and medium enterprises] sector. India announced a grant of one million dollars for SME sectors during the India-CARICOM meeting last year.

CARICOM Heads of Government and the Prime Minister last met in 2019 on the margins of the 74th Session of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), where they discussed cooperation modalities in renewable energy and climate change through a \$150 million credit line from India. According to the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), there are around

3.2 lakh people of Indian origin in Guyana. The Prime Minister arrived here from Brazil where he attended the G-20 Summit and also met with global leaders, including U.S. President Joe Biden, French President Emmanuel Macron and U.K. Prime Minister Keir Starmer.

India, China agree to work on rebuilding mutual trust

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

CONTEXT: India and China agreed to work towards a road map for rebuilding mutual trust and understanding with Defence Minister Rajnath Singh calling for drawing lessons from the “unfortunate border clashes” of 2020 during talks with his Chinese counterpart Dong Jun.

Defence Minister Rajnath Singh and Chinese counterpart Dong Jun met in Vientiane, the capital city of Laos, weeks after Indian and Chinese militaries completed disengagement of troops from the two last face-off points in eastern Ladakh. The Singh-Dong meeting took place on the sidelines of a conclave of 10-nation ASEAN grouping and some of its dialogue partners. Both sides agreed to work together towards a road map for rebuilding mutual trust and understanding.

In the delegation-level talks, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh highlighted that amicable relations between India and China would have positive implications for global peace and prosperity. Defence Minister Rajnath Singh called for reflecting on the lessons learnt from the unfortunate border clashes of 2020, taking measures to prevent the recurrence of such events and safeguarding peace and tranquillity along the India-China border.

Defence Minister Rajnath Singh emphasised and looked forward to greater trust and confidence building between the two sides through de-escalation. Both sides agreed to work together towards a roadmap for rebuilding mutual trust and understanding.

Indian and Chinese militaries completed the disengagement exercise in Demchok and Depsang in eastern Ladakh late last month after the two sides reached an agreement following a series of negotiations to resolve the festering border row. The two sides also resumed patrolling activities in the two areas after a gap of almost four-and-a-half years. Mr. Singh began his three-day visit to Vientiane on Wednesday, primarily to attend a meeting of the ASEAN Defence Ministers’ Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus).

Justice Krishnakumar is new Chief Justice of Manipur High Court

POLITY & GOVERNANCE

CONTEXT: The President on Wednesday appointed Justice D. Krishnakumar Chief Justice of the Manipur High Court following the superannuation of the incumbent, Justice Siddharth Mridul.

Justice Mridul retires as the Chief Justice of the Manipur High Court on November 21. The Supreme Court Collegium headed by Chief Justice of India Sanjiv Khanna had recommended the name of Justice Krishnakumar from the Madras High Court on November 18. It was the collegium’s first resolution after Justice Khanna took over as the Chief Justice of India on November 11.

Justice Krishnakumar was appointed Madras High Court judge on April 7, 2016 and is due to retire on May 21, 2025. He is the senior-most puisne judge in his parent High Court and belongs to a backward community. As a lawyer, Justice Krishnakumar had extensive practice in civil, constitutional and service matters in the High Court, with specialisation in constitutional law. It took into consideration the fact that there was only one Chief Justice with the Madras High Court as the parent court in all the High Courts.



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INDIA'S TOP MOST CIVIL SERVANTS FOR COACHING

The long fight for accessibility, dignity in Indian prisons

POLITY & GOVERNANCE

CONTEXT: In the early 1980s, the Mulla Committee report on prison reforms was released, recommending extensive measures to improve prison conditions and administration.

Stuffed prisons, appalling conditions

In 1996, a Bengaluru's Central Jail inmate wrote to the Chief Justice of India about deplorable prison conditions. The Supreme Court of India in the Rama Murthy vs State of Karnataka directed the government to address key issues such as overcrowding, trial delays, torture, and neglect in prisons, in line with the Mulla Committee recommendations. Again, nearly three decades later, no substantial progress has been made, evident in the current state of prisons.

Indian prisons are severely overcrowded, housing 5.73 lakh inmates against a capacity of 4.36 lakh, with some facilities operating at over 200% capacity. Conditions are particularly dire for prisoners with disabilities, who often face abuse, violence, and neglect. Their special needs, including assistance with daily activities, are largely ignored. The lack of official data on such prisoners highlights the issue, though news reports frequently document their struggles. A notable case is Father Stan Swamy, who suffered from Parkinson's disease and was denied basic assistive tools like a straw and sipper, hindering his ability to eat and drink.

A 2018 audit of the Tihar, Rohini, and Mandoli jails in Delhi conducted by the Nipman Foundation highlighted accessibility gaps such as the unavailability of functional wheelchairs, inaccessible prison cells, toilets, mulaqat rooms, and recreational spaces, and water coolers located on floors which lacked accessible entries.

Rights that are only on paper

All prisoners in India have the right to equality, freedom and life and personal liberty, as enshrined in the Constitution, a principle upheld by the Supreme Court in multiple judgments. Notably, in Upendra Baxi vs State of U.P. (1983), the Court affirmed that prisoners have the right to live in humane conditions with dignity.

India is obligated under international covenants, such as the Nelson Mandela Rules (2015) and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, to safeguard the rights of prisoners with disabilities. These include providing reasonable accommodations and protecting them from abuse, violence, and inhumane treatment. These principles are enshrined in the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016, which mandates the prevention of exploitation and denial of basic needs. The denial of a straw and sipper to Father Stan Swamy, therefore, violated both international obligations and domestic law.

The Ministry of Home Affairs' Model Prison Manual (2016) also specifies dignified living conditions in prisons. In July 2024, the Ministry further issued the 'Accessibility Guidelines for MHA Specific Built Infrastructures & Associated Services for Police Stations, Prisons & Disaster Mitigation Centres' outlining detailed requirements to make prison facilities accessible. While the rights of prisoners with disabilities, both against abuse and for accessibility, appear promising on paper, they are seldom enforced like many other pieces of social welfare legislation in India.

A lack of political will

Society's indifference towards prisoner cruelty undermines efforts for prison reform, but the state must uphold the law and protect all prisoners, including those with disabilities. As prisons fall under State jurisdiction, State governments have a clear responsibility to ensure these rights are respected. The plight of prisoners like Prof. Saibaba should prompt authorities to reassess their attitudes and improve conditions for disabled prisoners.

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Should packaged food content be labelled?

POLITY & GOVERNANCE

CONTEXT: The fifth edition of the 'Global Access to Nutrition Index' published by Access to Nutrition Initiative (ATNi) a non-profit global foundation found leading Food and Beverage (F & B) companies, on average, sell products that are less healthy in low-and-middle income countries (LMICs) compared to what they sell in high-income countries (HICs). The report assessed 30 of the world's largest F & B manufacturers — 23 % of the global F & B market — on their performance to improve access to nutritious foods.

What were the report's findings?

The report analysed 52,414 products — including those from popular brands such as Nestle, Pepsico, Unilever, Coca-Cola and Hershey among others — using a health star rating system.

Under this system products are ranked out of 5 on their healthiness, with 5 being the best, and a score above 3.5 considered to be a healthier choice. The system assesses components of food considered to increase risk (energy, saturated fat, total sugars and sodium) and offsets these against components considered to decrease risk (protein, fibre and fruit, vegetable, nut and legume) to calculate a final score that is converted to a star rating. The ATNi report found that 'portfolio healthiness' was found to be lowest in LMICs, highlighting disparities in products offered across different markets. Food product healthiness in LMICs scored much lower — 1.8 on the system — than in HICs where it scored 2.3. Only 30 % of companies have demonstrated a strategy to price some of their 'healthier' products affordably for lower income consumers, the report found. It also found that in LMICs, micronutrient data were available for a smaller proportion of products as compared to those in HICs.

Is this the first time?

This is not the first instance of such a finding: in April this year, a report by Swiss NGO, Public Eye and the global coalition International Baby Food Action Network (IBFAN), found that Nestle's baby food products sold in India as well as in African and Latin American countries, had higher sugar content compared to the same products sold in European markets. While Nestle denied this, the Central government asked the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) to initiate "appropriate action" against Nestle.

Why is this of significance in India?

India is staring at a Non-Communicable Disease (NCD) burden of epic proportions — an estimated 10.13 crore Indians have diabetes, and as per National Family Health Survey 5 data, obesity stands at 24 % among women and 23 % among men. At the same time, undernutrition, anaemia and micronutrient deficiencies continue to remain pressing problems.

A large chunk of the NCD burden, experts say, has to do with diets changing over the past few decades and becoming unhealthier. Citing the Indian Council of Medical Research's (ICMR) dietary guidelines, published in April this year, the Economic Survey of India 2023-24 noted that 56.4 % of the total disease burden in India is due to unhealthy diets. The ICMR report had said the upsurge in the consumption of highly processed foods, laden with sugars and fat, coupled with reduced physical activity and limited access to diverse foods, exacerbate micronutrient deficiencies and overweight/obesity problems.

Another significant issue here is affordability: as per UN data over 50 % of Indians cannot afford a healthy diet. At the same time, Indian government data reveals that households' expenditure on processed food as a proportion of their food expenditure has risen, says development economist Dipa Sinha.

What about food package labelling?

India is a party to the World Health Assembly (WHA) resolutions, one of which is a resolution on marketing of foods and non-alcoholic beverages to children, highlighting the need to protect children from harmful marketing of junk foods. In 2017, India launched the National Multisectoral Action Plan for Prevention and Control of Common NCDs, 2017-22 (NMAP). However, there has been very little progress made to address front-of-pack labelling of food.

Activists have, for years, been pushing the government to bring in regulations for front-of-package labelling of foods that would indicate high sugar, fat and sodium content. A draft notification: Food Safety and Standards (Labelling & Display) Amendment Regulation 2022 has made no headway in two years. Labelling on the front of packaged food is effective: in Chile and Mexico for instance, the consumption of sugary beverages decreased after such mandatory labelling.

An analysis by NAPI of 43 advertisements of pre-packaged food products and their composition revealed that these foods were high in one or more nutrients of concern such as saturated fat etc. Policymakers and governments should

introduce mandatory policies. To date, voluntary efforts by companies have been insufficient to ensure widespread and strong nutrition-related performance.

Climate change is the biggest disruptor in aquaculture: FAO

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

CONTEXT: The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations has offered its technical expertise and knowledge to deal with the impact of climate change on the country's aquaculture and the fishing community engaged with it.

Manuel Barange, Director of the Fisheries and Aquaculture Division of the FAO urged for policy measures to help micro, small and medium players in the "blue economy" with the climate change. The oceans will produce less and the composition of the fish catches will also change. India has to adapt to the situation by taking measures such as changing fishing gears being used and marketing new varieties of fish so that the consumers have access to other breeds of fish than they are accustomed to.

India, Australia firm up renewable energy partnership

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

CONTEXT: India and Australia sealed an ambitious renewable energy partnership and set their eyes on a comprehensive economic cooperation agreement as Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Australian counterpart Anthony Albanese vowed to significantly ramp up overall bilateral ties.

At the second India-Australia annual conclave held on the sidelines of the G20 summit late on Tuesday, a raft of issues including ways to boost ties in areas of defence and security ties, mobility, science and technology and education figured prominently. The Renewable Energy Partnership (REP) would provide the framework for practical cooperation in priority areas such as solar energy, green hydrogen, energy storage, investments in related projects and allied areas.

At the bilateral summit, Mr. Albanese and Mr. Modi committed that both sides would work on new possibilities of cooperation in areas like defence industry, critical minerals, renewable energy, ship building, space and sports. The two prime ministers welcomed further work towards an "ambitious, balanced and mutually beneficial" Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement (CECA) to realise the full potential of the bilateral economic relationship. Both sides are keen to build on the momentum created by the Economic Cooperation and Trade Agreement (ECTA) which was signed in 2022.

Mr. Modi said work would be done for a mutually beneficial CECA and that Mr. Albanese committed to protect the interests of the Indian community in Australia, especially Indian students. After the implementation of 'ECTA', our mutual trade has increased by 40 % in the last two years. Mr. Modi also emphasised the need to resolve conflicts and tensions through dialogue and diplomacy.

Inflation spilling over, private capex lacklustre: RBI Bulletin

ECONOMICS AND DEVELOPMENT

CONTEXT: The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) in the November bulletin 'State of the Economy', penned by several RBI officials, including Deputy Governor Michael Debabrata Patra, termed October's 6.2 % inflation a 'sticker shock' reinforcing concerns about becoming complacent in the wake of the sub-4 % inflation prints in July and August.

Inflation is biting into urban consumption demand. Corporates' earnings and capex can undermine the prospects of the real economy, while asserting that festive demand has perked up growth hopes after the second quarter 'slack'. Apart from the sharp surge in the momentum of food prices, core inflation has edged up. There are early signs of second order effects or spill overs of high primary food prices - following the surge in prices of edible oils, inflation in respect of processed food prices is starting to see an uptick, terming the rise in household services costs a sign of higher living costs transmitting to wages.

The hardening of input costs across goods and services and their flow into selling prices needs to be watched carefully. It can undermine the prospects of the real economy, especially industry and exports, if allowed to run unchecked.

The slackening of the growth momentum in the second quarter, flagged by an article in the RBI bulletin last month, appears behind us, the latest article opined, but private investment remains a problem.

Private consumption is back to being the driver of domestic demand, although with mixed fortune. Footfalls in malls may be low but e-commerce is burgeoning with a variety of marketing strategies. FMCG and auto companies have been stepping up ad spends to revive demand. Rural India is emerging as a gold mine for e-commerce companies in this festival season, adding that a healthy Kharif crop could bolster this further.

Private investment is lacklustre as reflected in sequentially lower investment in fixed and non-current assets during July-September 2024 on account of subdued corporate earnings. Global growth is expected to be stable but below par amid “fragile confidence, and a possible lurch towards protectionism” that hinders a ‘full-on global recovery’. Anxieties run high about the possibility of adverse swings in trade and fiscal policies.

Planetary crisis puts children at risk: UNICEF report

POLITY & GOVERNANCE

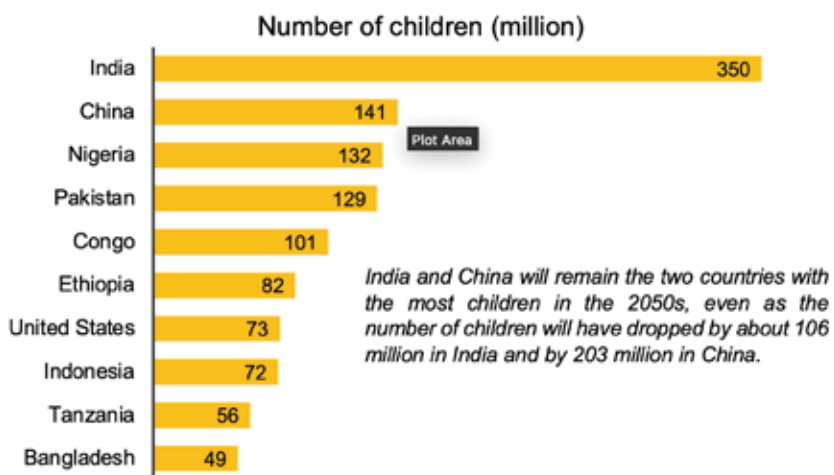


FIGURE: Bar chart representation of the number of children (millions). Source: UNICEF - The State of the World's Children, 2024.

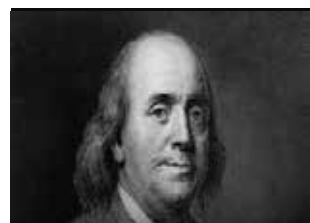
children; its impact on their respiratory health and development can last a lifetime. Rising temperatures increase mosquito populations, spreading diseases such as malaria, dengue and Zika. Floods contaminate water supplies, leading to waterborne diseases, which are a major cause of death for children under five years of age. Extreme weather limits food production and access, increasing children's risk of food insecurity. Climate-related disasters can also cause feelings of helplessness, trauma and anxiety in children, the report notes. Since 2022, 400 million students around the world have experienced school closures due to extreme weather. In addition to violating child rights, inhibiting learning stifles economic growth. Climate and environmental hazards also displace children from their homes.

Additionally, it notes that by the 2050s, the global child population is projected to stabilise at around 2.3 billion. However, this global figure obscures regional shifts where while South Asia will remain one of the regions with the largest child populations, it will be joined by eastern and southern Africa, as well as western and Central Africa.

On frontier technologies, the report notes that artificial intelligence, neurotechnology, next-generation renewable energy and vaccine breakthroughs could significantly improve childhood in the future. Digitalisation can empower children but it can also expose children to online risks, including sexual exploitation and abuse. It adds that over 95 % of people in high-income countries are connected to the Internet, compared with barely 26 % in low-income countries. Infrastructure limitations, high costs and permission barriers continue to impede progress. This digital exclusion threatens to exacerbate existing inequalities, especially in regions with rapidly growing child populations.

The UNICEF's State of the World's Children 2024 (SOWC-2024) report, released on Wednesday noted that an unprecedented planetary crisis with nearly half the world's children — about one billion — living in countries that face high risk of climate and environmental hazards. The report examines impact of three long-term global forces — demographic shifts, climate and environmental crises, and frontier technologies — which it claims will have a profound effect on children's lives between now and 2050. The report notes that climate destabilisation, biodiversity collapse and widespread pollution threats are intensifying globally.

From before their first breath, children's brains, lungs and immune systems are vulnerable to pollution and extreme weather. Air pollution is especially harmful to



“If you invest more in your education, then you are likely to get more interest in it.”

—Benjamin Franklin



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