



● POLITY

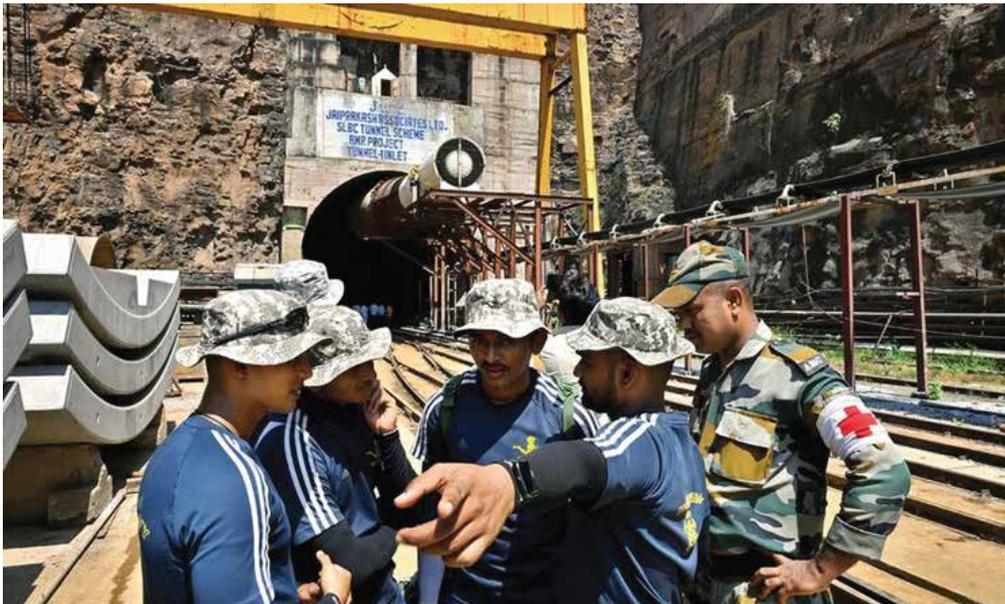
● ECONOMICS

● TECHNOLOGY

● ECOLOGY

Strife-hit Manipur put under President's Rule

DISASTER MANAGEMENT



Uncertainty persists over the safety of eight individuals trapped 14 km inside the under-construction Srisaillam Left Bank Canal (SLBC) tunnel in Telangana, 60 hours after a collapse. Despite continuous rescue efforts, teams face challenges crossing the final 150 meters due to debris, slush, and increasing water seepage. The tunnel-boring machine (TBM) is damaged, but it is unclear if the workers took shelter in its "safe container." Expert teams from IITs, L&T, and agencies involved in past tunnel rescues

have joined the Army, Navy, NDRF, SDRF, and NHIDCL in the operation. Efforts focus on debris removal and dewatering, using the TBM's conveyor belt as a ramp for access.

Talks with U.S. on mineral deal in its 'final stage': Ukraine

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Ukraine and the U.S. are finalizing an agreement granting Washington access to Ukrainian natural resources in exchange for U.S. support. Negotiations have faced tensions, with Kyiv seeking stronger guarantees while U.S. officials push for a deal. Deputy Prime Minister Olga Stefanishyna stated that most key details are settled. President Zelenskyy aims to secure security guarantees, while former U.S. President Trump has demanded access to rare minerals as compensation for past aid. Stefanishyna hopes the deal will be signed in Washington, demonstrating a long-term commitment.

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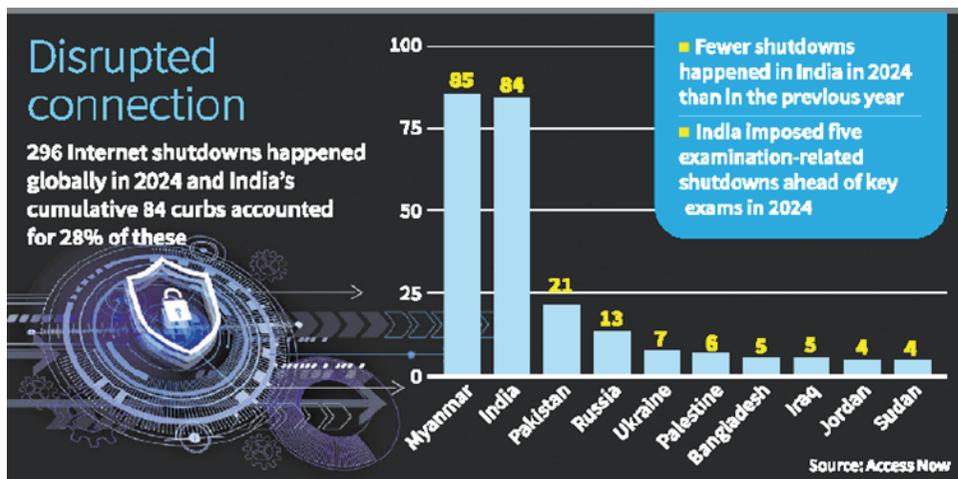
ED conducts searches across three States in ₹600-cr. crypto case

INTERNAL SECURITY

The Enforcement Directorate (ED) conducted searches in Delhi, Jaipur, and Mumbai over the alleged conversion of ₹600 crore in cryptocurrencies through Indian exchanges and subsequent fund transfers. The investigation is linked to Indian national Chirag Tomar, who is imprisoned in the U.S. for stealing over \$20 million via spoofed websites mimicking Coinbase. Fraudsters used search engine optimization to make fake websites appear as trusted ones, deceiving users into sharing login credentials. Victims, misled by false contact details, unknowingly contacted scam call centers, allowing fraudsters to transfer their cryptocurrency to controlled wallets.

Internet shutdowns highest in 2024 globally, India tops in government-ordered curbs

INTERNAL SECURITY



India had the second-highest number of internet shutdowns in 2024, with Myanmar experiencing one more disruption, according to Access Now. However, India's Union and State governments imposed the highest number of shutdowns. The total shutdowns in India decreased from the previous year, with 84 instances across 16 states and union territories. Manipur (21), Haryana (12), and Jammu & Kashmir (12) saw the most shutdowns. Globally, 296 shutdowns

occurred, with India accounting for 28% of them. Examination-related shutdowns, criticized as disproportionate, were imposed in Jharkhand, Assam, and Rajasthan to prevent cheating.

The RTI is now the 'right to deny information'

POLITY & GOVERNANCE

The introduction of the Right to Information (RTI) Act was a move that generated great hope among citizens since it recognised them to be the rulers of the nation. It empowered them to seek information from the government, with dignity and respect. It looked as if the 'swaraj' that they had missed would be delivered to them. The Act codified their fundamental right to information and was one of the best transparency laws in the world. It appeared that it would curb corruption and arbitrariness, with citizens being the vigilance monitors of their government. But, it must be conceded, it has fallen far short of our expectations and the state of our democracy is not better.

A gradual erosion

The RTI Act had created Information Commissions as the final appellate authorities to implement the law. Most of the posts of 'information commissioner' were taken up by retired bureaucrats. After working for decades as senior bureaucrats, it was difficult for them to hand over power to citizens and recognise that

they were the rightful owners of the government. No attempt was made to select people with a record in transparency. Many of them looked at these jobs as post-retirement sinecures and worked only for a few hours. While the national average of the disposal of cases by High Court judges is over 2,500 in a year, the national average of disposal of cases by the commissioners was less than this. Given the fact that the complexity of cases before commissions is far less than the cases before the High Courts, each commissioner should have been clearing at least over 5,000 cases in a year. While the law mandated a period of 30 days for the information to be provided and the same period for the first appellate authorities, it did not specify any time limit for the commissioners. Many commissions began to have pendency of over a year. The right to information was being converted into a right to history. Many ordinary citizens could not pursue the issue of what was now a denial of information. The penal provisions of the RTI Act were the teeth of the Act, but most information commissioners were reluctant to use them. The governments delayed appointing commissioners, which only increased the backlogs.

The clear message of various High Court judgments was that the exemptions listed under Section 8 of the RTI Act were restrictions on a citizen's fundamental right and had to be construed strictly as in the law. Parliament intended most information to be provided and crafted the exemptions carefully.

The entire approach to a citizen's right to information changed in August 2011 when the Supreme Court of India held in *Central Board of Secondary Education & Anr. vs Aditya Bandopadhyay & Ors*, in paragraph 33: "Some High Courts have held that section 8 of RTI Act is in the nature of an exception to section 3 which empowers the citizens with the right to information, which is a derivative from the freedom of speech; and that therefore section 8 should be construed strictly, literally and narrowly. This may not be the correct approach."

In paragraph 37 it made a comment without any evidence: "Indiscriminate and impractical demands or directions under RTI Act for disclosure of all and sundry information (unrelated to transparency and accountability in the functioning of public authorities and eradication of corruption) would be counterproductive as it will adversely affect the efficiency of the administration and result in the executive getting bogged down with the non-productive work of collecting and furnishing information. The Act should not be allowed to be misused or abused, to become a tool to obstruct the national development and integration, or to destroy the peace, tranquility and harmony among its citizens. Nor should it be converted into a tool of oppression or intimidation of honest officials striving to do their duty."

The subject of 'personal information'

The second major blow came with the judgment in *Girish Ramchandra Deshpande vs Cen. Information Commr. & Ors.*, in October 2012. A RTI applicant, Girish Ramchandra Deshpande, had sought copies of all memos, show cause notices and censure/punishment awarded to a public servant. A.B. Lute. He had also sought other details such as his movable and immovable properties and details of his investments, lending and borrowing from banks and other financial institutions.

This was denied claiming exemption under Section 8(1)(j). This section exempts "information which relates to personal information the disclosure of which has no relationship to any public activity or interest, or which would cause unwarranted invasion of the privacy of the individual unless the Central Public Information Officer ... is satisfied that the larger public interest justifies the disclosure of such information: Provided that the information, which cannot be denied to the Parliament or a State Legislature shall not be denied to any person."

A simple reading shows that under this clause, 'personal' can be denied if it has apparently no relationship to any public activity or interest; or the disclosure of the said information would cause unwarranted invasion of the privacy of the individual.

The Court did not rule on whether the information was an outcome of a public activity or if its disclosure would amount to an unwarranted invasion of the privacy of the individual. It denied the information by reading only the first seven words of the provision and saying it was 'personal information'. Most information can be linked to some person. Realising that it may be difficult for public information officers and other appellate authorities to decide on what constitutes privacy, Parliament gave a simple test in the proviso — that information which would not be denied to Parliament or legislature would not be denied to any person. This can only have one meaning. That anyone claiming that information would be denied to the citizen would make a subjective statement that he would deny the information to Parliament.

It is well settled that literal interpretation should be given to a statute if the same does not lead to absurdity. In *Nasiruddin and others vs Sita Ram Agarwal* (2003) 2 SCC 577, the Court has stated: "37. The court's jurisdiction to interpret a statute can be invoked when the same is ambiguous... It cannot re-write or recast legislation. It is also necessary to determine that there exists a presumption that the legislature has not used any superfluous words. It is well settled that the real intention of the legislation must be gathered from the language used."

Girish Ramchandra Deshpande amends the RTI Act and has been used as a precedent in six subsequent Court judgments and has become the gold standard to convert RTI into an RDI, or Right to Deny Information. The Digital Personal Data Protection Act takes a cue from this and amends the RTI Act itself. There are other cases in which words in the law have not been accorded their usual meanings.

A call to citizens

To ensure that the RTI fulfils its original promise we should go by the original Act and not allow any distortions. Citizens and the media must take up the responsibility to discuss and defend it. Otherwise, we will have a dilution of our fundamental right under Article 19(1)(a) of the Constitution of India.

Not business as usual

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

The pharmacy of the global South is facing a crisis of reputation. After cough syrups made by pharmaceutical companies based in India, which had unacceptable amounts of diethylene glycol and/or ethylene glycol, killed 66 children in Gambia, 65 children in Uzbekistan in 2022, and 12 children in Cameroon in 2023, and India-made eye drops contaminated by drug-resistant bacteria killed three persons and blinded eight in the U.S., again in 2023, the spotlight is back on Indian drug companies for all the wrong reasons. A BBC Eye investigation has brought to light the criminal actions of Aveo Pharmaceuticals, a Maharashtra-based company, which was manufacturing and exporting unapproved, highly addictive opioid drug combinations to West Africa. The "medicines" contain tapentadol, a powerful opioid, and carisoprodol, a highly addictive muscle relaxant. While the Indian drug regulator has approved tapentadol and carisoprodol as standalone drugs, the combination has no clearance. Even if the company's claim that the drug combination has been approved by the State drug authority turns out to be correct, it is still illegal as only the Central Drugs Standard Control Organization (CDSCO) can approve any novel fixed dose combination (FDC) drugs for safety and efficacy. It is only after this approval that State drug authorities can issue a manufacturing licence. The Health Ministry routinely banning FDCs is only because the State drug authorities ignore this provision in the law with impunity.

India questioned and denied the World Health Organization's report about the lethal cough syrup sent to Gambia, but in the latest case, CDSCO and the State regulatory authority swung into action even in the absence of any complaint by West African countries. The reason: the BBC investigation's irrefutable video evidence that the company was in the "business" of manufacturing and exporting the dangerous

combination drug despite knowing the harmful effects. The seizure of nearly 13 million “medicines” and 26 batches of active pharmaceutical ingredients of tapentadol and carisoprodol are clinching evidence for taking criminal action against the company. While the moves by the authorities — to issue a ‘stop activity’ order, withdraw the manufacturing licence and permission to export the drugs by any company, and a show cause notice — inspire some confidence, only stringent punishment can serve as a deterrent. Indian pharmaceutical companies are known in the global South for their high-quality generic drugs. It is for the drug regulator to ensure that India continues to be famous for this and not gain notoriety for producing and exporting deadly synthetic opioids as drugs. Manufacturing synthetic opioid drugs cannot be any pharmaceutical company’s “business”.

New direction

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Germany’s recent elections marked a major political shift, with the conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and its ally, the Christian Social Union, emerging as the largest bloc with 28.5% of the vote. The far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) doubled its share to 20.8%, while Chancellor Olaf Scholz’s Social Democrats (SPD) suffered one of their worst defeats at 16.1%. The country is facing economic contraction, deindustrialization, and growing far-right influence amid public dissatisfaction with immigration policies.

Friedrich Merz, the CDU leader, is now set to form a government, likely in coalition with the SPD, though securing stability will be challenging. His key priorities include reviving the struggling economy, addressing immigration concerns, and recalibrating Germany’s foreign policy, especially concerning the Ukraine war and European security. With Germany struggling after losing access to Russian gas, Merz must find a new diplomatic and economic strategy. A fresh approach to Russia, ending the Ukraine conflict, and ensuring Europe’s stability will be crucial for Germany’s long-term strength as a political and economic leader.

Why are pilots asking for more rest hours?

POLITY & GOVERNANCE



The Delhi High Court has ruled that the new relaxed duty and rest norms for pilots, introduced by the Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) in January 2024, will come into effect from July 1, 2025. This ruling follows a long legal battle by pilot unions against the stringent 2019 norms that increased permissible night flying, reduced rest periods, and allowed airlines special exemptions during unforeseen circumstances. Some contentious provisions, such as the new definition of night duty and limits on consecutive night flights, will be implemented by November 1, 2024.

The push for more rest comes amid rising fatigue concerns, as pilots face long duty hours, consecutive night shifts, and erratic schedules that disrupt their natural sleep cycles. Since COVID-19,

workload has increased significantly, with pilots often flying up to four landings a day, leading to physical and mental exhaustion. Factors such as high cockpit fatigue, unstable rosters, and strict airline policies have further exacerbated the issue. Despite global best practices allowing negotiations on rest limits, Indian pilots lack union recognition and must comply with DGCA's upper thresholds.

Airlines, however, argue that the new rules will increase operational costs, requiring them to hire more pilots, potentially leading to flight cancellations and fare hikes. While Air India claims to follow fatigue management protocols, IndiGo has not commented on its practices. The aviation industry faces financial pressures, with rising airport tariffs and aircraft leasing costs, and is looking to optimize pilot utilization amid growing demand. With India's aviation market rapidly expanding and over 1,000 aircraft on order, the demand for pilots is expected to rise, making pilot work conditions a critical issue for the future.

Indian tech industry revenue projected to grow 5.1% even as job loss concerns persist

ECOLOGY & ENVIRONMENT

Tepid growth

India's tech sector growth will likely be "measured yet positive"

- Revenue is expected to grow 5.1% to \$282.6 billion in 2025-26

- Domestic revenue will likely rise by 7% to \$58.2 billion; exports by 4.6%

- Two-thirds of CEOs say over 10% of tech spends will be on AI

Upskilling in niche and core tech areas will continue to remain of paramount importance for the industry

RAJESH NAMBIAR
NASSCOM President



Despite concerns over job reductions due to AI, NASSCOM has projected a 5.1% revenue growth for India's technology industry, reaching \$282.6 billion in FY 2025-26. Domestic revenue is expected to grow faster at 7% compared to export growth of 4.6%. IT services and engineering R&D will continue to dominate total revenue.

While growth remains strong, 55% of surveyed CEOs expect hiring to stay the same or decline, with two-thirds indicating that over 10% of tech spending will go toward AI. Industry leaders from Infosys and HCL emphasized the need for vigilance in adapting to AI-driven changes to remain competitive.

Maharashtra Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis highlighted the state's ambition to become an AI hub, contributing to its \$1 trillion economic goal. Meanwhile, Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw announced strong interest in India's tender for 10,000 GPUs, receiving orders for 18,000 units at competitive prices. He urged NASSCOM and the government to focus on maintaining industry competitiveness.



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