



EC to remove same voter ID numbers across States

POLITY & GOVERNANCE

Irrespective of the EPIC number, electors can cast a vote only at their designated polling station... Any case of duplicate EPIC number will be rectified by allotting a unique EPIC number
ELECTION COMMISSION

Election fraud of EPIC proportions! Mamata Banerjee warned how BJP was hijacking democracy, and now EC's own admission proves her right
TRINAMOOL CONGRESS



The Election Commission (EC) addressed reports of identical voter ID numbers - Elector Photo Identity Card (EPIC) being issued to electors in different states. It clarified that while the numbers may appear the same, the other details such as demographic information, constituency, and polling booth would be different for each voter. The EC explained that the issue arose from a decentralized, manual system used before the shift to the ERONET platform, which resulted in duplicate EPIC numbers being assigned in different states. The EC assured that steps would be taken to rectify the situation and ensure that each voter receives a unique EPIC number. West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee had previously alleged that the BJP, with the EC's assistance, was adding voters from other states to West Bengal's voter list.

The electors from different States and Union Territories were allotted identical numbers/series by a decentralised and manual mechanism followed prior to shifting of the electoral roll database to the ERONET platform. ERONET is a Web-based platform developed for election officials, in multiple languages and scripts, to handle all processes pertaining to registration, migration, and deletion of names from the electoral rolls. The EC vowed to resolve the issue and update the ERONET 2.0 platform to prevent further duplication.

U.K., other nations will work on Ukraine deal: Starmer

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS



U.K. Prime Minister Keir Starmer announced that the U.K., in collaboration with France and possibly other countries, would work with Ukraine on a peace plan to end the conflict with Russia. This plan would then be presented to U.S. President Donald Trump. Starmer discussed this new approach with Trump, French President Emmanuel Macron, and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy. Following a tense exchange between Zelenskyy and Trump in the U.S., Zelenskyy received a warm welcome in London, where he met with Starmer before a summit with European leaders, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan, and NATO chief Mark Rutte.

After the summit, U.K. Prime Minister Keir Starmer outlined a four-step process for peace, which included continued aid to Ukraine, economic pressure on Russia, Ukraine's participation in negotiations, and strengthening Ukraine's defenses. A "coalition of the willing" would guarantee peace after a ceasefire, with some countries at the summit joining this coalition. Starmer emphasized that Europe must take the lead in peace efforts, with U.S. backing. He also acted as a mediator between Ukrainian President Zelenskyy and U.S. President Trump, following a tense meeting in the Oval Office. While Europe is cautious about Trump's motivations, Starmer expressed confidence in his desire for lasting peace. Despite past

tensions, Zelenskyy believes the U.S.-Ukraine relationship with Trump could be salvaged, with Trump focusing on ending the war quickly and Zelenskyy and Europe prioritizing a durable ceasefire.

Avoid splitting West: Meloni

Keir Starmer is one of at least three intermediaries between Ukraine and the U.S., alongside French President Emmanuel Macron and Italian Prime Minister Georgia Meloni, who has good relations with U.S. President Trump. Meloni, a conservative leader, did not publicly support Zelenskyy after the recent incident but has been a strong supporter of Ukraine since Russia's invasion. She proposed a meeting between Trump and European leaders during her meeting with Starmer.

Fraud charges: court orders FIR against ex-SEBI chief, 5 others

POLITY & GOVERNANCE

A special court has directed the Anti-Corruption Bureau (ACB) to register an FIR against former SEBI Chairperson Madhabi Puri Buch, three current SEBI members, and two BSE officials over alleged stock market fraud, regulatory violations, and corruption related to the 1994 listing of Cals Refineries Ltd. The court observed prima facie evidence of regulatory lapses and collusion, necessitating an investigation. The complaint, filed by legal reporter Sapan Shrivastava, accuses the officials of facilitating market manipulation and corporate fraud by allowing the listing of Cals Refineries without meeting SEBI's required norms. SEBI has said it will challenge the court's order. The company was suspended from trading in 2019.

SEBI to challenge order

SEBI and the BSE both responded to the court's order, expressing their dissatisfaction. SEBI stated it had not been given time to respond and had not received a notice, emphasizing that the officials named in the order were not in their current roles when Cals Refineries was listed. SEBI plans to challenge the order legally. The BSE called the application "frivolous and vexatious," noting that no notice was issued to them, and the named officials were not in their positions during the listing of Cals Refineries. Both institutions reaffirmed their commitment to regulatory compliance and transparency.

'Jobs rising but salaries not keeping pace with inflation'

ECONOMICS & DEVELOPMENT

NITI Aayog member Arvind Virmani stated that while employment in India is increasing, real wages for regular jobs have not kept up with inflation over the past seven years. He emphasized that India has an opportunity due to the global population and highlighted the need to improve teaching and training quality. Virmani referred to data from the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS), which shows that the worker-population ratio has been rising over the last seven years, indicating that the number of jobs is growing faster than the population. He dismissed claims that jobs are not increasing.

The PLFS Annual Report 2023-24 shows that India's worker-population ratio increased to 43.7% in 2023-24 from 34.7% in 2017-18. However, economist Arvind Virmani pointed out that real wages for regular salaried jobs have not kept up with inflation over the past seven years. He attributed this to a lack of skilled workers and stressed the need for better skilling programs. Virmani emphasized that both the central and state governments should focus on improving skills, particularly at the district level, as increasing skills would boost productivity and real wages.

EPFO claims huge liability in disbursing higher pension

ECONOMICS & DEVELOPMENT



The Employees Provident Fund Organisation (EPFO) expressed concerns that it may need to spend ₹1,86,920 crore to pay higher pensions to just 50% of the applicants. In a note to its Central Board of Trustees (CBT), the EPFO provided an incomplete actuarial analysis, which workers' representatives criticized, asking for a more detailed report. The EPFO stated that a comprehensive study can only be completed after processing all higher pension applications. Preliminary data from about 38,000 applicants revealed a deficit of ₹9,500 crore, and an initial estimate suggested a significant depletion of funds even for a 50% settlement of joint pension options.

The EPFO received 17.49 lakh applications for higher pensions, with 2.24 lakh not forwarded by employers, and 3.92 lakh referred back for missing information. As of February 14, the EPFO was examining 1.92 lakh applications and had issued 2,19,155 demand letters for additional payments. 74,811 pensioners and 41,285 current employees have deposited the required amounts. However, around 5.05 lakh applications were rejected. Pensioners' rights activists and trade unions criticized the EPFO, arguing that the Supreme Court's verdict requires higher pensions for eligible subscribers, and accused the EPFO of exaggerating liabilities to create unnecessary concerns. They also called for transparency on the additional amounts collected from workers.

Israel cuts off Gaza aid to pressure Hamas to accept new ceasefire deal

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Israel stopped all goods and supplies from entering the Gaza Strip and warned of "additional consequences" if Hamas does not accept a new proposal to extend the fragile ceasefire. Hamas accused Israel of attempting to undermine the truce, calling the aid cutoff a war crime and extortion. The first phase of the ceasefire, which involved increased humanitarian aid, expired on Saturday, and the second phase, involving hostages and a longer-term ceasefire, has not been negotiated. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu stated that fighting could resume if negotiations fail, emphasizing that Hamas must continue releasing hostages. The new proposal is described as a U.S. plan, but no comment has come from the U.S. yet.

In a first, private U.S. spacecraft lands upright on lunar surface

SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY

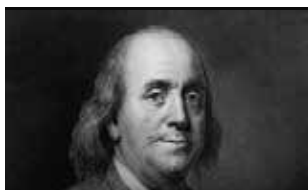


Firefly Aerospace's Blue Ghost Mission 1 successfully landed on the moon on Sunday, marking the second private mission to do so and the first to land upright. The spacecraft touched down near Mons Latreille in Mare Crisium at 3:34 a.m. ET. Mission control in Austin, Texas, celebrated the achievement, with CEO Jason Kim confirming its stability. The lander autonomously navigated rocky terrain before landing at just 2 mph. The mission, nicknamed "Ghost Riders in the Sky," is part of a NASA-industry partnership supporting the Artemis program to return astronauts to the moon.

Size of a hippopotamus

Firefly Aerospace's Blue Ghost lander, about the size of a hippopotamus, launched on January 15 aboard a SpaceX Falcon 9 rocket. During its 2.8 million-mile journey, it captured stunning images of Earth and the

Moon. The lander, which shared its launch with a Japanese mission set to land in May, carries 10 instruments, including a lunar soil analyzer and a radiation-tolerant computer. Designed to operate for 14 Earth days, it will capture high-definition images of a total eclipse on March 14 and record a lunar sunset on March 16, studying the mysterious lunar horizon glow first observed during Apollo missions.



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

—Benjamin Franklin

The student and the three language debate

POLITY & GOVERNANCE

The debate over the three-language formula in partisan politics has overlooked the most important stakeholder: the student. Public school students, who make up 55% of Tamil Nadu's school enrollment, lack access to supplemental learning resources like private school students. The key question is whether learning three languages is necessary for their competitiveness in the job market. While the National Education Policy (NEP) has many progressive aspects, it overlooks practical challenges in public education, particularly at the primary and secondary levels, with the three-language formula being a major concern.

A problematic hypothesis

The NEP's justification for compulsory three-language learning—enhancing cognitive abilities, job mobility, and national integration—is flawed. While language is essential for communication and knowledge acquisition, advancements in AI will reduce its significance in learning. Though language skills aid cognition, research suggests that a strong foundation in the mother tongue is more crucial than learning multiple languages. Practical communication skills develop naturally in professional settings. Meanwhile, primary education in Tamil Nadu remains poor, with 88% of third graders lacking basic literacy. Even top students struggle with English in higher education due to inadequate instruction in schools.

Focus on teaching and learning

Instead of adding a third language, efforts should focus on improving teaching quality and learning outcomes in primary and secondary education. With limited school hours, education should prioritize curiosity, critical thinking, and creativity over additional language learning. Finding qualified teachers for a third language in public schools is a challenge, and funding for additional teachers could strain infrastructure budgets. While language fosters cultural unity, it is not the primary means to achieve national integration. Ultimately, education should expand employment opportunities, ensuring Tamil Nadu's students can compete for the best opportunities locally, nationally, and globally.



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Multiple bullies at work, out to create a 'multipolar world'

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

U.S. President Donald Trump has refused to engage with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, highlighting the stakes for Ukraine. Political scientist John Mearsheimer, a Realist advocate, argues that the U.S.-led West provoked Russia into war. He contends that any peace deal with Putin would require Ukraine to abandon not just territory or NATO aspirations but also its democracy, as Russia sees a liberal Ukraine as an existential threat. When questioned about whether restricting Ukraine's democracy is imperialism, Mearsheimer framed it as great-power politics, emphasizing that smaller nations must consider the interests of powerful neighbors like Russia.

'Democracy is not realistic'

John Mearsheimer argues that democracy is unrealistic in a multipolar world, stating that Ukraine cannot freely choose its political system or foreign policy. Former U.S. President Donald Trump supports regime change in Ukraine, calling President Zelenskyy a "dictator" and suggesting peace is only possible if he steps down. Russia and its allies, like Belarus and Kazakhstan, have suppressed democratic movements, favoring authoritarian rule. Meanwhile, before Russia's 2022 invasion, President Joe Biden attempted to persuade Zelenskyy to flee, hoping to avoid prolonged conflict. Zelenskyy, however, refused, famously stating he needed "ammunition, not a ride."

The wider border of this project

Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin seek to reshape global politics by supporting authoritarian and far-right regimes. Trump's allies, including U.S. Vice President J.D. Vance and Elon Musk, have backed Europe's far-right AfD party, advocating for an EU aligned with Christian conservatism over liberal democracy. Hungarian PM Viktor Orbán has pushed for an "illiberal democracy" with Putin's support, and Trump appears to share that vision. Trump and Netanyahu have aligned with Putin, disregarding international law and human rights. The passage warns that a "multipolar world" driven by such leaders would empower bullies and undermine democratic values.

It is better late than never

An emerging illiberal global alliance, led by Trump, Putin, Netanyahu, Xi Jinping, Modi, Orbán, and European far-right leaders, poses a major threat to democracy, peace, and human rights. Dismissing this rise as a mere geopolitical shift between the West and the Rest is both morally and strategically dangerous. The author urges a strong defense of democratic values and universal human rights, emphasizing that those fighting for democracy in India should also support Ukraine's resistance against Putin-Trump-backed authoritarianism.

Toon trouble

POLITY & GOVERNANCE

The Ministry of Information and Broadcasting's order to remove a political cartoon featuring Prime Minister Narendra Modi from Vikatan Plus is unwarranted and may not have a legal basis. The cartoon depicted Modi in chains before U.S. President Donald Trump, criticizing his response to the deportation of Indian immigrants. Vikatan Plus plans to challenge the order legally, defending press freedom and expression. The government's move suppresses political commentary, and concerns grow as access to the magazine's website appears restricted through undisclosed orders or informal directives to web service providers.

While Section 69A of the IT Act allows content removal on specific grounds like public order or foreign relations, the secrecy surrounding the order is unjustified. The lack of an official denial about the website's inaccessibility raises concerns. The passage argues that political cartoons, as a form of expression, should be protected, especially when they do not threaten public order or diplomatic ties. The government is urged to reverse the order and use its blocking powers only for legitimate reasons, such as preventing hate speech or violence, rather than suppressing political criticism.



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INDIA'S TOP MOST CIVIL SERVANTS FOR COACHING

Centring care in India's economic policy

ECONOMICS & DEVELOPMENT

The 2025 Union Budget allocated a record ₹4.49 lakh crore to the Gender Budget, a 37.3% increase from FY24, comprising 8.86% of the total Budget. However, this rise is largely due to the inclusion of the PM Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana, rather than substantial investments in care infrastructure or new gender-responsive schemes. Despite the Economic Surveys recognizing care infrastructure as vital for women's empowerment, the Budget fails to allocate significant funds to strengthen India's care economy, continuing to overlook care work in economic planning.

Globally, women spend 17.8% of their time on unpaid care and domestic work (UCDW), with higher burdens in the Global South. In India, women bear 40% more of this burden than those in South Africa and China. Due to care responsibilities, 53% of Indian women remain outside the labour force, compared to just 1.1% of men. Poor and marginalized women face even greater challenges, juggling 17–19 hours of daily tasks, leading to severe "time poverty" and negatively impacting their well-being.

Feminist economists from the Global South highlight that unpaid work extends beyond household care to include farming, water and fuel collection, and cleaning. Due to limited infrastructure, women spend up to 73% of their time on such tasks, including nearly five hours daily collecting water, compared to 1.5 hours for men. Climate change worsens this burden, with water-related unpaid labour in India projected to cost \$1.4 billion by 2050 under high emissions. This issue arises from low public investment in care infrastructure and deep-rooted social norms assigning care work to women.

Solutions ahead

The Economic Survey 2023-24 emphasizes that public investment equal to 2% of GDP could create 11 million jobs while reducing the care burden. Applying the expanded 'Three R framework'—Recognise, Reduce, Redistribute, and Represent—can help make policies more effective. Recognizing the full scope of unpaid care and domestic work (UCDW) is crucial, and India's 2019 Time Use Survey was a key step in this direction, showing that women spend an average of seven hours daily on UCDW. However, conducting such surveys is costly, and integrating Time-use modules into existing household surveys could be a practical solution.

The second step in addressing unpaid care and domestic work (UCDW) is reducing the burden through time-saving technologies and improved access to affordable care infrastructure. The government has recognized service gaps by extending the Jal Jeevan Mission (JJM) until 2028 to achieve 100% potable water coverage. However, funding delays and underutilization hinder progress. While the scheme's Budget declined by 4.51% from last year's Budget Estimates (BE), it saw a 195% increase over Revised Estimates (RE), highlighting allocation-spending gaps. With less than half of villages having functional household tap connections, JJM needs better implementation and water sustainability measures.

Expanding childcare centres, eldercare support, and assistive technologies can reduce women's care burden and increase workforce participation. The third step in addressing unpaid care work is redistributing it from households to the State. The newly announced ₹1 lakh crore Urban Challenge Fund, with ₹10,000 crore allocated for FY 2025-26, can support this by financing up to 25% of urban redevelopment projects, including water and sanitation. By leveraging this fund, India can scale up care infrastructure pilots from the Smart Cities Mission, drawing inspiration from Bogotá's Care Blocks, which centralize caregiving services to reduce unpaid work and promote sustainable urban development.

Women's representation in decision-making is essential for gender-transformative policies, as their involvement significantly enhances policy effectiveness. Despite the government's emphasis on *Nari Shakti* as an economic driver, the current Budget fails to prioritize care work. To set a global example of a gender-sensitive economy, India needs a well-funded strategy that places care infrastructure at the core of inclusive growth, rather than treating it as an afterthought.

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