● POLITY   ● ECONOMICS   ● TECHNOLOGY   ● ECOLOGY

Israeli strikes across Gaza kill over 400 Palestinians

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Israel launched air strikes across Gaza early Tuesday, killing at least 400 Palestinians, mostly women and children, in the deadliest attack since the 17-month war began. The strikes shattered a ceasefire in place since January after Hamas refused Israeli demands to alter the agreement. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu declared the operation open-ended, with further escalation expected, and the military ordered evacuations in eastern Gaza, signalling potential ground operations.

The attack, occurring during Ramzan, raised concerns for around two dozen Israeli hostages still held by Hamas. A senior Hamas official accused Netanyahu of reigniting the war to protect his political standing, calling the strikes a "death sentence" for the hostages. Hamas reported four senior officials killed and showed no immediate retaliation, indicating hope for restoring the truce. The Hostages and Missing Families Forum condemned Israel's decision, accusing the government of abandoning the hostages. The White House supported Israel's actions.

EC relents, to hear pleas to upload booth-wise turnout

POLITY & GOVERNANCE

Case file

The demand for EC to publish booth-level voter turnout data follows other attempts to make the poll process more transparent. Here are the two sides:

Petitioners' stance

- Delay in publishing voter turnout data followed by a sharp spike in figures from polling percentages in the 2024 Lok Sabha election

- 'Wide discrepancy' between the count of voters at poll booths and the voter turnout published later on

- Suspicions of switching of electronic voting machines

EC affidavit in May 2024

- There was no 'legal mandate' to provide the data to any person other than candidates or their polling agents

- Form 17C to be shared only with candidates and their agents

- Turnout is being released through a voter turnout app, website, and press releases

The Supreme Court Bench headed by Chief Justice Sanjiv Khanna asked the Election Commission to meet petitioners and hear their demand to upload on its official website authenticated, scanned, and legible account of votes recorded booth-wise after each phase of polling. The Bench directed Lok Sabha member Mahua Moitra and representatives of the Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR) to make their representation before the EC in 10 days. The panel agreed to grant the petitioners a hearing to resolve the issues.

An affidavit filed by the EC in the Supreme Court in May 2024 had taken an uncompromising position against the public disclosure of turnout data. It had argued there was no such "legal mandate" to provide the data to any person other than candidates or polling agents. The ADR had primarily sought the uploading of scanned copies of Form 17C (account of votes recorded) after every phase of polling in the 2024 Lok Sabha polls. Rule 49S and Rule 56C (2) of the Conduct of Election Rules, 1961 require the Presiding Officer to prepare an account of votes recorded in Form 17C (Part I) format.

The NGO had alleged an inordinate delay in publishing voter turnout details followed by a sharp spike in figures from the initial voter turnout percentages released by the EC in the 2024 Lok Sabha election. The development, according to the ADR, had rung alarm bells about the authenticity of the polling data available in the public domain, and raised suspicions on whether the electronic voting machines were switched.

Telangana to hike reservation for SCs based on next Census data

POLITY & GOVERNANCE

The Telangana government plans to enhance SC reservations after the next Census data is released, Irrigation Minister N. Uttam Kumar Reddy announced in the Assembly. Reddy, who led the Cabinet panel on SC sub-categorisation, highlighted demands for increased quotas and reaffirmed the government's commitment to providing reservations proportional to the SC population. Currently set at 15% based on the 2011 Census, the SC population may have risen by 2-3%, with exact figures expected after the 2026 Census.

Putin agrees to pause strikes on Ukraine energy targets

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered a 30-day halt to strikes on Ukrainian energy infrastructure after a call with U.S. President Donald Trump. Putin set conditions for a broader truce, demanding Ukraine stop rearming and end mandatory mobilisation. He also questioned ceasefire monitoring. Russia and Ukraine will swap 175 prisoners each on Wednesday. Putin stated that ending Western military and intelligence support to Ukraine is crucial for resolving the conflict through political and diplomatic means.

High base effect

ECONOMICS & DEVELOPMENT

India's goods trade in February saw its sharpest decline in nearly two years, with exports falling 10.9% to $36.91 billion and imports dropping 16.3% to $50.96 billion. This led to the smallest trade deficit in 42 months at $14 billion. Experts attribute the decline partly to a high base effect and U.S. importers delaying orders due to upcoming reciprocal tariffs announced by President Trump. Despite diplomatic efforts by Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal, discussions with the U.S. yielded little progress beyond continuing free trade agreement (BTA) negotiations. The U.S., India's second-largest trading partner, accounted for $118.3 billion in trade last fiscal year and remains the only major trade partner with which India has a surplus. The tariff uncertainty has unsettled Indian exporters, even as Modi and Trump aim to boost bilateral trade to $500 billion by 2030.

India's imports dropped sharply in February, driven by a 62% fall in gold imports due to record-high domestic prices and a nearly 30% decline in oil imports as India diversified suppliers after new U.S. sanctions on Russian oil. Russia had grown to supply over 40% of India's crude by mid-2023. If the U.S. acts to neutralize its trade deficit with India, India's overall trade deficit could widen by 15%. To reduce reliance on the U.S., India is exploring trade diversification, with China and the U.K. as potential markets. While China has consistently contributed to about a third of India's trade deficit, the U.K. accounted for less than 3% last fiscal year, making ongoing free trade agreement negotiations with the U.K. a promising avenue to shift the trade balance in India's favour.

A change now

Defence Minister Rajnath Singh raised concerns over pro-Khalistani activities in the U.S. during a meeting with U.S. Director of National Intelligence Tulsi Gabbard, urging the designation of Sikhs For Justice (SFJ) as a foreign terrorist organisation due to its alleged ISI backing. Gabbard was in India for the annual Intelligence and Security Chiefs Conference, chaired by National Security Adviser Ajit Doval, held a day before the Raisina Dialogue, India's flagship foreign affairs conference.

Sikhs For Justice (SFJ), founded in 2007 by U.S.-based attorney Gurpatwant Singh Pannun, advocates for Khalistan, leading to its 2019 ban by India under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act. The resurgence of Khalistani separatism abroad has become a growing concern for India, especially after recent aggressive protests and strained diplomatic ties with Canada and the U.S. Allegations of Indian involvement in targeted killings of Khalistani sympathisers further heightened tensions. While the Biden administration pressured India, the Trump administration seems more receptive to India's concerns. India continues to push for action against separatist groups but must balance its efforts to avoid impacting its diaspora and diplomatic relations.

BSNL has been dialling the wrong consultant

In May 2024, reports of Bharat Sanchar Nigam Limited (BSNL) paying ₹132 crore to Boston Consulting Group (BCG) for a revival strategy, which included workforce reduction, sparked attention. This reflects a growing global trend of public sector reliance on external consultancy firms. While India's overall spending on such services is unclear, countries like France and Australia have spent over €1 billion and A$21 billion, respectively, on consultancy and external labour in recent years.

Need for scrutiny

The BSNL case highlights concerns over the growing influence of consultancy firms in the public sector, questioning the effectiveness of outsourcing strategic decision-making. A key critique is the lack of accountability — consultancies offer advice but face no consequences if their strategies fail, leaving taxpayers to bear the cost. This misalignment of incentives undermines the goal of achieving long-term improvements. Additionally, over-reliance on external consultants weakens the state's ability to innovate and manage its enterprises, creating a costly cycle of dependence on outside expertise.

Impact on state capacity, conflict of interest

The growing reliance on consultancy firms in the public sector has broader implications, eroding state capacity and creating a negative feedback loop where public officials lose skills and institutional knowledge, increasing dependence on external inputs. This trend undermines public sector legitimacy and gives rise to an unaccountable "parallel bureaucracy" of consultants who influence policy without democratic oversight. Conflicts of interest may arise as consultancies serve multiple clients across sectors, raising concerns about impartiality. Additionally, consultancy firms often apply profit-driven strategies that may clash with public sector objectives. For instance, BSNL's social mission of providing affordable telecom access to rural areas could be compromised by aggressive cost-cutting measures, shifting focus from public service to market efficiency.

What will work better

Mariana Mazzucato and Rosie Collington, in *The Big Con*, advocate for strengthening public sector institutions by investing in internal capabilities, recruiting talent, fostering innovation, and empowering employees to shape strategic direction. They argue that over-reliance on consultancies creates a cycle of dependency, undermining state autonomy. The BSNL-BCG case highlights the need to rethink the role of consultancy firms in public governance, emphasizing the importance of building internal expertise to ensure long-term effectiveness and accountability.

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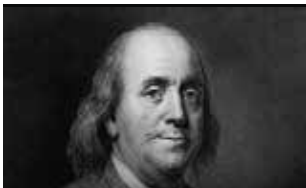
"If you invest more in your education, then you are likely to get more interest in it."

–Benjamin Franklin

Trump and the silencing of America's universities

The 1960s and 70s saw a shift in the humanities and social sciences, with rising counter-western narratives challenging white supremacy and promoting independence, democracy, and freedom. Seminal works like Discourse on Colonialism and Orientalism reshaped curricula, fostering inclusivity. However, the Trump regime has sought to suppress these discourses by defunding critical courses opposing right-wing ideology and clamping down on Palestinian students and their supporters, threatening the progress made in academic diversity and freedom.

The rise of the far right

Mr. Trump's administration targeted university programs promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), threatening academic freedom by defunding studies on race, gender, and marginalized communities. His far-right ideology aimed to silence critical thinking and suppress dissent, reminiscent of past struggles for inclusive narratives. Trump's nationalist policies, like the Muslim travel ban and U.S.-Mexico border wall, sparked widespread criticism, with university leaders condemning actions that undermined diversity and immigrant contributions. His presidency symbolized a shift toward ultra-nationalism, drawing parallels to historical movements challenging inequality and authoritarianism in academia.

Chill in the campus

Mr. Trump's policies have created a climate of fear on U.S. campuses, particularly targeting Palestinian sympathizers and stifling voices opposing injustice. His crackdown on pro-Palestinian students has led to intimidation, with some politicians advocating for the deportation of foreign students involved in protests. This suppression of dissent undermines free speech, diversity, and inclusivity in educational institutions. International students, fearing visa restrictions or deportation, are hesitant to speak out. The silencing of these voices poses a threat to democracy, human rights, and the open exchange of ideas, despite immigrants' significant contributions to America's progress.

Part of a narrative

Mr. Trump's anti-immigrant stance is part of a broader nationalist narrative opposing globalization, blaming it for American job losses. This ideology fuels right-wing movements globally, making the role of intellectuals crucial in challenging discriminatory policies and advocating progressive values. Scholars must mobilize public opinion and promote social justice, as universities serve as sanctuaries for marginalized voices and hubs for critical thinking. Trump's suppression of radical research and student activism is seen as a form of despotism, threatening not only U.S. democracy but also the global social order and human rights.

The dystopian side of Insta-commerce

In urban centers, labourers gather early at job markets, hoping for work from employers or middlemen (thekedaars), who negotiate the lowest wages to maximize profits. Desperation drives workers to accept poor terms in this supplier's market, where labour is essentially auctioned daily, with the lowest bid securing the job. The system highlights exploitation, as the thekedaars act as intermediaries squeezing workers for employer gain.

Doing dirty work virtually

The gig economy exploits workers by masking exploitation as "choice" through digital platforms. These platforms act as virtual middlemen, driving wages down and stripping workers of job security, fair conditions, and collective bargaining power. Workers, desperate for employment, are reduced to accepting gigs through apps controlled by algorithms that maximize corporate profits. This system hides the harsh realities of labour exploitation behind the convenience offered to consumers, presenting precarious work as a benevolent act of job creation.

The gig economy dehumanizes workers, reducing them to ratings and low wages while hiding their struggles behind consumer convenience. Services like "Insta Maids" exemplify this exploitation, offering house help for as little as ₹49 an hour. Workers endure harsh conditions and indignity, pushing back with powerful slogans like "We want rights, not ratings!" and "We are humans, not slaves!" demanding fair treatment and dignity.

Bill in cold storage

In India, gig workers pushed for legislation to secure social security, access to their data, grievance redress, and a platform for dialogue. Rajasthan passed a law, but its implementation stalled under the BJP. The Congress promised similar reforms in Karnataka and Telangana but faced opposition from powerful industry bodies like NASSCOM and CII. These groups argued that gig workers are "partners," not employees, and opposed rights like data access and protection from arbitrary termination. As a result, Karnataka delayed the bill, revealing the government's preference for corporate

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interests over workers' rights.

The founder of Urban Company, who signed a CII Unicorn Forum submission opposing gig worker protections in Karnataka, publicly promotes services like "Insta Maids" as advancing financial security and dignity for workers. This contradiction highlights the hypocrisy of founders who claim to support workers' rights while privately resisting legislation that would protect them. The passage calls for exposing this double standard and ending the exploitation of gig workers in platform-based jobs.

Kerala's drug menace is widespread and escalating

POLITY & GOVERNANCE

An alarming situation

Data for the years 2017 to 2022 were sourced from the NCRB and for the years 2023 and 2024 from the Rajya Sabha Q&A

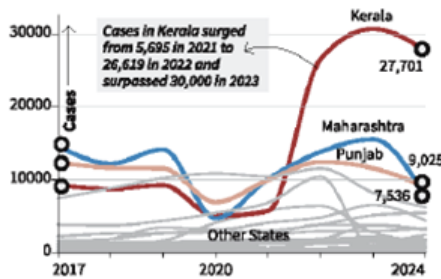**Chart 1:** Number of cases filed under the NDPS Act

Cases in Kerala surged from 5,695 in 2021 to 26,619 in 2022 and surpassed 30,000 in 2023

Kerala — 27,701
Maharashtra
Punjab — 9,025
— 7,536
Other States

Chart 2: Rate of cases filed under the NDPS Act in 2024

Kerala
With 78 cases per lakh people, Kerala stands as a stark outlier by a significant margin
MH   Punjab
Mizoram
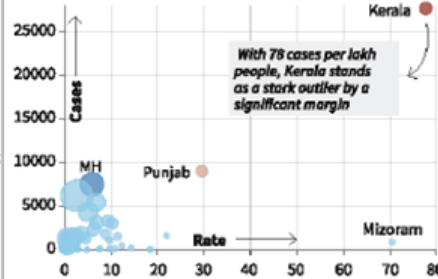
Chart 3A: Top districts for most cases of drug possession

State	District	Cases
Maharashtra	Mumbai	10264
Karnataka	Bengaluru	3457
Kerala	Malappuram	2724
Kerala	Ernakulam	2685
Kerala	Thiruvananthapuram Rural	1702
NP	Indore	1629
Kerala	Kollam	1584
Kerala	Kannur	1340
Kerala	Kottayam	1338
Kerala	Kasaragod	1299
Kerala	Wayanad	1278
Kerala	Kozhikode	1181
Kerala	Thiruvananthapuram	1173
Kerala	Alappuzha	1157
Kerala	Palakkad	1088
Kerala	Ernakulam Rural	1076
Kerala	Thrissur Rural	934
Tamil Nadu	Chennai	874
Kerala	Idukki	798
Kerala	Kollam Rural	754
Maharashtra	Mira Bhayandar	717
Kerala	Kozhikode Rural	696
UP	Ghaziabad	677
Punjab	Ludhiana	677
Punjab	Patiala	623

Chart 3B: Top districts for most cases of intent to traffic

State	District	Cases
Maharashtra	Mumbai	782
Punjab	Ferozepur	731
Punjab	Amritsar	671
TN	Cuddalore	667
Haryana	Sirsa	624
UP	Saharanpur	607
Punjab	Patiala	597
Karnataka	Bengaluru	570
UP	Barabanki	466
Punjab	Bathinda	449
Punjab	Moga	436
Punjab	Tarn Taran	432
Punjab	Muktsar	420
Punjab	Jalandhar Rural	399
Punjab	SAS Nagar	392
Punjab	Mansa	375
Assam	Nagaon	314
Punjab	Fazilka	300
J&K	Jammu	296
Punjab	Amritsar Rural	291
UP	Sonbhadra	291
Punjab	Jalandhar	285
Rajasthan	Hanumangarh	263
UP	Mathura	263
Rajasthan	Ganganagar	261

Over the past three years, there has been a sudden surge in drug abuse in Kerala, sparking widespread concern. In March, the Kerala High Court warned of the "poisonous fangs of the drug mafia", while the Governor met with university Vice-Chancellors to address student drug use. The State Higher Education Department launched a 'Love-a-Thon' campaign against substance abuse, and Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan urged new Sub-Inspectors to take a lead in combating the drug trade. Last month, the State Assembly suspended regular business to discuss the growing crisis.

The reactions are well-founded. **Chart 1** shows the State-wise number of cases filed under the Narcotics Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (NDPS) Act, 1985, between 2017 and 2024. The number of cases under the Act surged from 5,695 in 2021 to 26,619 in 2022 and surpassed 30,000 in 2023. In 2024, over 27,701 cases were recorded.

While drug abuse has long been a concern in Kerala and in States such as Punjab, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, and Uttar Pradesh, the recent spike is alarming. For instance, in 2023, Maharashtra, which had recorded the second-highest number of cases under the NDPS Act, recorded only half as many cases as Kerala. In 2024, the gap widened further, with Punjab recording the second-highest number of cases that year — yet only a third of Kerala's total. Several States appear to show a decline in cases in 2023 and 2024. This should be read with caution, as the latest data may be provisional.

Chart 2 highlights the severity of the crisis more clearly. It plots the number of cases filed under the NDPS Act in 2024 for every one lakh people in a State (case rate) on the horizontal axis. It plots the absolute number of cases on the vertical axis. The circle sizes correspond to population estimates for 2022. With 78 cases per lakh people, Kerala stands as a stark outlier by a significant margin. Punjab, the nearest major State in terms of case rate, recorded 30 cases per lakh people. Mizoram, too, suffers from a high case rate. No other State had a rate more than 25 cases per one lakh people.

Unlike other States, the problem is not limited to urban centres in Kerala. In fact, every district in Kerala recorded at least 500 cases under the NDPS Act in 2022 — a distinction unmatched by any other State.
For instance, in 2022, Mumbai district accounted for 80% of all NDPS Act cases in Maharashtra, while Bengaluru district made up 63% of Karnataka's total. In contrast, no single district in Kerala recorded more than 10% of the State's cases. This widespread distribution makes policing particularly challenging.

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The NDPS Act has two key provisions — one for possession of drugs for personal use and another for possession with intent to traffic. Notably, in Kerala, 94% of all the NDPS cases were filed for possession, while only 6% were related to trafficking in 2022. **Table 3A** ranks the top 25 districts with the highest cases of possession in 2022. It shows that 17 of them are in Kerala.

Notably, in **Table 3B**, which ranks the top 25 districts with the highest cases for intent to traffic, not a single district from Kerala features. However, 13 of them were in Punjab.

It is important to note that the districts mentioned in this analysis refer to police districts, which may not always align with administrative districts. In Kerala, for example, there are 20 police districts. While some are coterminous with administrative boundaries, others are smaller units.

What is happening in Balochistan?

POLITY & GOVERNANCE

On March 11, Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) militants hijacked a train with around 400 passengers between Quetta and Sibi, Pakistan, demanding the release of imprisoned comrades. After freeing women and children, they held the rest hostage. Pakistan refused to negotiate and launched a 24-hour military operation, resulting in 21 civilian and four Frontier Corps fatalities, though reports suggest higher losses. Following the incident, Pakistan's security forces faced intensified attacks across Balochistan.

A united insurgency

The train hijacking in Balochistan highlighted growing security concerns and fears of secession, which Pakistan's intelligence failed to detect. The incident revealed insurgents' enhanced operational capabilities, enduring a 24-hour stand-off against Special Forces. Additionally, militants effectively used social media to spread their narrative, showcasing their increasing tactical sophistication and improved coordination among Baloch insurgent groups.

Balochistan's society is rooted in tribal loyalties, but armed groups are seeing increased participation from middle-class, educated youth. The Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) is the most formidable group, declared a terrorist organization by Pakistan and the U.S. The Balochistan Liberation Front (BLF) has more support among southern youth, while the Baloch Republican Guards (BRG) operate in areas like Bolan and Quetta. Several groups, including the Sindhudesh Revolutionary Army (SRA), have united under the Baloch Raji Aajoi Sangar (BRAS) to launch coordinated attacks on Pakistan's military and intelligence infrastructure.

Concerns of the Baloch people

Balochistan has a history of insurgencies dating back to the 1950s, alongside a people's movement demanding better access to essentials like water, fair commodity prices, and protection for local fishermen. Recent protests, led by women, have opposed custodial killings and enforced disappearances. The Pakistani government frames the unrest as tribal power struggles, but Balochistan has long faced political and socio-economic neglect. Despite its rich natural resources, exploitation has not benefited locals, and many believe the province was forcibly incorporated into Pakistan in 1948, with military rule and centralised governance limiting political empowerment.

Massive infrastructure projects under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), like the Gwadar Port, were launched without proper consultation, sparking fears of demographic shifts that could marginalize the local Baloch population. Insurgent groups have protested CPEC, demanding China's withdrawal and targeting Chinese nationals in attacks, raising concerns in Beijing over Pakistan's ability to ensure security. Reports suggest China may consider deploying private security for its personnel. While China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) faces criticism for creating debt traps, CPEC — a key part of BRI — has become a target of ongoing violent resistance in Pakistan.

Regional complexities

The Baloch insurgency faces challenges due to unfavourable geopolitical conditions. Despite Balochistan's large landmass, its small population makes it easier for security forces to control the separatist movement. International support

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is lacking, as India cannot provide material aid due to the lack of a shared border. Additionally, Baloch nationalist ambitions include Iran's Sistan province, making Iran wary of supporting the movement. Rising security concerns have led Iran to conduct strikes in Balochistan, targeting groups it considers threats.

The U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan has strained Pakistan-Taliban relations, with border skirmishes and the Taliban refusing to recognize the Durand Line or curb the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). TTP activity has surged in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and Pakistan suspects growing ties between the TTP and Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA), posing a major threat on its western border. Meanwhile, Pakistan continues to focus security resources on its eastern border with India, as bilateral relations remain tense. The impact of the new Trump administration on Pakistan's unrest is uncertain.

Lack of popular support

Pakistan's unrest in Balochistan is tied to its domestic politics, where the military's mishandling of Imran Khan and the civilian leadership's reliance on military support have led to a legitimacy crisis. Meaningful negotiations seem unlikely. To ease tensions, Pakistan's leadership should decentralize power and share resource revenues with Balochistan; otherwise, the conflict will persist.

ED searches entities linked to Soros for FEMA violations

POLITY & GOVERNANCE

The Enforcement Directorate (ED) searched eight Bengaluru premises linked to entities allegedly associated with George Soros over suspected ₹ 25 crore violations under the Foreign Exchange Management Act (FEMA). The investigation revealed that the Open Society Institute (OSI), previously flagged by India's Home Ministry for "undesirable activities" in 2016, required prior approval to fund Indian NGOs. OSI's investment arm, Soros Economic Development Fund (SEDF), allegedly bypassed these restrictions by channelling funds into three Indian companies — Rootbridge Services Pvt Ltd (RSPL), Rootbridge Academy Pvt Ltd (RAPL), and ASAR Social Impact Advisors Pvt Ltd — under the guise of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) and consultancy fees between 2020-24. RSPL reportedly received ₹18.64 crore by issuing shares at inflated premiums, raising concerns of FDI norm violations.

Supreme Court to see if Lokpal has powers over judges

POLITY & GOVERNANCE

The Supreme Court, led by Justice B.R. Gavai, is set to examine whether judges of constitutional courts fall under the jurisdiction of the Lokpal, India's top anti-corruption body. This review follows a January 27 Lokpal order asserting its authority to investigate complaints against serving High Court judges, classifying them as public servants under the Lokpal and Lokayuktas Act, 2013. On February 20, the court stayed this order, calling it "very disturbing" and warning of its potential impact on judicial independence.

The Supreme Court's Special Bench is examining whether constitutional court judges are considered public servants under the Lokpal Act. Solicitor-General Tushar Mehta argued the inquiry should stay focused on this question, while senior advocate Kapil Sibal urged the court to also consider whether criminal complaints can be filed against judges in police stations. Mehta referred to the 1991 K. Veeraswami case, where the majority ruled that police could register FIRs against sitting High Court or Supreme Court judges under the Prevention of Corruption Act, extending this to any criminal case. The Lokpal, in its January 27 order, asserted that High Court judges fall under Section 14(1)(f) of the 2013 Act, dismissing claims of judicial immunity as "too naive."

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India takes 24th spot in free speech survey

The right to free speech

India, with a score of 62.6, was placed between South Africa (66.9) and Lebanon (61.8)

- Scandinavia dominated the top rankings, with Norway and Denmark finishing at the apex of the Future of the Free Speech Index
- Indonesia, Malaysia, and Pakistan showed the biggest improvements, though they remained at the lower end of the ranking
- Some authoritarian-leaning nations— such as Hungary (85.5) and Venezuela (81.8) — scored high
- The survey found that a majority of Indians consider it very important to speak freely without government censorship, but support for criticism of government policies was below the global average

A global survey by the U.S.-based think tank Future of Free Speech ranked India 24th out of 33 countries in support for free speech. The 2024 report highlighted a global decline in protecting controversial speech, with notable drops in democratic nations like the U.S., Israel, and Japan since 2021. Scandinavian countries topped the index, with Norway and Denmark scoring 87.9 and 87.0, respectively.

Disconnect flagged

India ranked 24th in support for free speech with a score of 62.6, between South Africa and Lebanon. While most Indians value speaking freely without government censorship, support for criticizing government policies was below the global average. Notably, 37% of Indians believed governments should prevent criticism of their policies — the highest among surveyed countries. Countries like Indonesia, Malaysia, and Pakistan showed improvement but remained low-ranked, while some authoritarian-leaning nations scored surprisingly high, indicating a disconnect between government actions and public attitudes.

Public sentiment

India shows a notable disconnect between public support for free speech and its actual protection, with democratic backsliding affecting political liberties. While only 3% of Danes and 5% of Brits support government control over criticism, 37% of Indians do. Despite many Indians believing free speech has improved, global observers suggest it has worsened. India, Hungary, and Venezuela stand out as countries where public support for free speech is high, but practical protection remains low.

# Kumbh showcased India's grandeur to world: Modi

Prime Minister Narendra Modi compared the recent Maha Kumbh at Prayagraj to historic events like the 1857 uprising and Gandhi's Dandi March, praising it as a testament to India's capabilities and cultural pride among youth. However, he did not mention the stampede deaths at Prayagraj and New Delhi Railway Station, prompting protests from the Opposition, with Rahul Gandhi demanding their inclusion in the statement.

'Stormed the Well'

Prime Minister Narendra Modi praised the Maha Kumbh at Prayagraj as a symbol of India's grandeur and spiritual resurgence, comparing it to historic events like the 1857 uprising and Gandhi's Dandi March. Opposition parties protested his omission of the recent stampede deaths, storming the Well and causing multiple adjournments in the Lok Sabha. The Speaker clarified that the Prime Minister's statement, made under a parliamentary rule, didn't require subsequent discussion.

'Spirit of unity'

Prime Minister Narendra Modi highlighted the Maha Kumbh's role in strengthening India's unity, calling it the event's most sacred outcome. He emphasized that India's profound "unity in diversity" overcomes divisive efforts and urged citizens to continue enriching this unique characteristic.
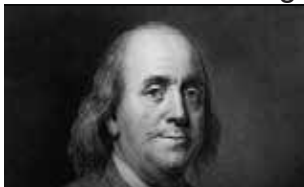
"If you invest more in your education, then you are likely to get more interest in it."

–Benjamin Franklin

Dhankhar to hold talks to decide on Opposition demand for EPIC debate

POLITY & GOVERNANCE

In the Rajya Sabha, Vice-President and Chairperson Jagdeep Dhankhar agreed to consult party leaders on the Opposition's demand for a debate on the duplication of elector photo identity card (EPIC) numbers. He rejected notices under Rule 267 from AAP MP Sanjay Singh and BJP MP Samik Bhattacharya, which sought to suspend regular business for discussions. Trinamool Congress MP Derek O'Brien urged a short debate on the EPIC issue, supported by DMK MP Tiruchi Siva, who also called for a discussion on the upcoming delimitation exercise. Mr. Dhankhar promised to revisit the matter after consultations. DMK floor leader Tiruchi Siva supported the call for a debate on the EPIC issue and additionally requested a discussion on the upcoming delimitation exercise. Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M.K. Stalin has argued that the exercise would unfairly reduce the representation of southern States in Parliament. Vice-President and Rajya Sabha Chairperson Jagdeep Dhankhar agreed to consult party leaders and revisit the matter soon.

Gokhale's demand

During Zero Hour, Trinamool MP Saket Gokhale called for posthumously awarding the Bharat Ratna to former Chief Election Commissioner T.N. Seshan, praising his fearless independence and reforms in the Election Commission. Gokhale criticized the current appointment process for Election Commissioners, claiming it lacks impartiality, as it excludes the Chief Justice of India and the Leader of the Opposition. He asserted that Seshan would not have approved of this system.

America First' doesn't mean 'America alone': Gabbard

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

At the Raisina Dialogue, U.S. Director of National Intelligence Tulsi Gabbard clarified that President Trump's "America First" policy shouldn't be mistaken for isolationism, drawing parallels with PM Modi's "India First" approach. She highlighted the importance of U.S.-India cooperation in tackling Indo-Pacific challenges and advancing shared goals. Gabbard expressed confidence in the continued growth of U.S.-India ties under Trump and Modi, emphasizing their shared values of peace, freedom, security, and prosperity.

'Commitment to peace'

At the Raisina Dialogue, Tulsi Gabbard highlighted the Indo-Pacific's strategic importance, calling it the geopolitical center of gravity for the 21st century and stressing the need for cooperation to ensure peace, stability, and prosperity. She criticized the tendency to attack leaders advocating for peace, citing Donald Trump's efforts to end the Russia-Ukraine war and prevent a potential World War III. Gabbard asserted that, despite criticism, Trump's election victory signalled strong public support for his peace-driven agenda.

Pact signed for using Parliament data for AI model: Minister

SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY

India's AI Mission has signed an MoU with Parliament to access its data for training an indigenous AI model, Union IT Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw announced at the Raisina Dialogue. He highlighted that 14,000 GPUs have been made available for this initiative and noted other data sources like Doordarshan and All India Radio. Vaishnaw stressed the importance of developing India's own large language models (LLMs), citing concerns over the long-term openness of existing models like OpenAI.

Plan rope in professors

Union IT Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw stated that India is collaborating with industry, professors, and start-ups to build its own large language model (LLM). Similar to the initiative that set up 100 labs to train students in 5G technology, a similar approach will be applied for AI. Vaishnaw added that India aims to develop GPU capabilities in the next three to five years, evaluating two instruction sets to guide this process. Despite global tariff wars and export controls, he emphasized India's focus on proprietary technology and highlighted the strong, trust-based tech partnership with the U.S.

WE AIM TO INSPIRE YOU

'Pak. should vacate Indian territory under its illegal, forcible occupation'

India criticized Pakistan, demanding it vacate Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK) after Islamabad accused India of terrorism and oppression in Jammu and Kashmir, following Prime Minister Modi's remarks about Pakistan's "hostility and betrayal" in past peace efforts. External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar highlighted PoK as the "longest standing illegal occupation" and criticized Western double standards in supporting Pakistan's military regimes while advocating democracy elsewhere. Pakistan dismissed Modi's comments as "misleading."

Chandrayaan-3 data says water ice easier to find on moon than believed

SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY
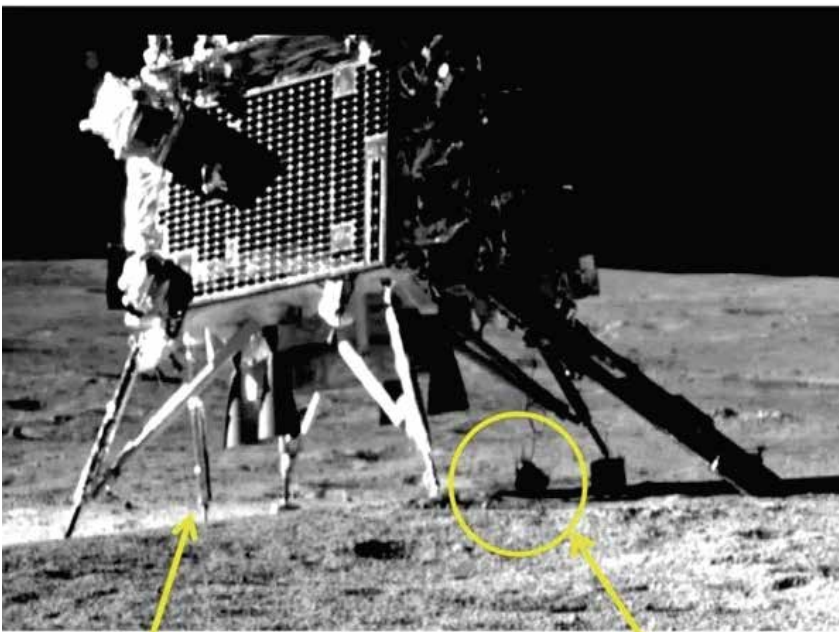
ChaSTE   ILSA

As countries plan long-term lunar missions, moon water is becoming crucial for astronauts' needs and as rocket fuel. Researchers from Ahmedabad's Physical Research Laboratory (PRL) discovered that easily accessible water ice on the moon is more widespread than previously thought, offering insights for future exploration and habitation.

Data from Vikram

A new study using Chandrayaan-3's ground-level data reveals key insights into the moon's surface and subsurface temperature variations, crucial for understanding water presence and astronaut survival. Led by PRL scientist K. Durga Prasad, the research explored temperatures up to 10 cm deep and was published on March 6 in *Communications Earth & Environment*.

Use of RTD sensors

Researchers used the Chandra's Surface Thermophysical Experiment (ChaSTE) on Chandrayaan-3's Vikram lander to measure lunar soil temperatures up to 10 cm deep at Shiv Shakti Point in the moon's south pole. ChaSTE deployed a thermal probe equipped with 10 high-accuracy platinum resistance temperature detectors (RTDs) to record temperature changes by detecting electrical resistance. Data was collected over 10 Earth days (August 24 – September 2, 2023) and analysed using a 3D thermophysical model developed by PRL.

The ground truth

The team found that temperatures at the lunar south pole site peaked at 82°C, higher than NASA's Lunar Reconnaissance Orbiter predictions, and dropped drastically to –181°C at night. This extreme temperature variation suggests the lunar surface at high latitudes may have unique thermophysical properties.

Significant change

The team attributed the higher daytime temperature at Shiv Shakti point to its sun-facing slope and found that lunar surface temperatures vary significantly even at metre scales. Their model showed that slopes tilted away from the sun by more than 14° could maintain lower temperatures, creating conditions for water ice to migrate and stabilize beneath the surface. These findings suggest that water ice may be accessible from more locations on the moon than previously thought.

First of its kind

The study presents the first in-situ temperature measurements from a high-latitude region on the moon, revealing that some higher latitude areas may offer conditions similar to the poles for water ice to accumulate at shallow depths. This makes exploration of these regions less challenging than the poles, benefiting future lunar missions. The team is now studying the moon's thermophysical properties to model water ice migration and stability, aiming to better understand its distribution across the lunar surface.

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