



Bihar special roll revision: Volunteers will help electors get govt documents, says EC

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
NEW DELHI, JULY 27

VOLUNTEERS WILL be deployed to help electors get the documents required from government departments to meet the submission deadline of September 1 as part of the ongoing Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls in Bihar, the Election Commission said on Sunday.

The EC's statement comes a day before the Supreme Court is set to hear a clutch of petitions challenging the SIR with opposition parties and civil society groups raising concerns over the potential disenfranchisement of existing electors.

According to the EC, the first phase of the drive, which started on June 25, came to an end on

EXPLAINED**Chasing paperwork**

THE EC'S push to draft volunteers comes in the backdrop of concerns raised by electors across poll-bound Bihar about difficulties faced by them in obtaining the documents mandated to enroll as voters. It comes a day before the SC is set to hear petitions challenging the SIR exercise in the state.

July 26 with the enumeration forms of 7.23 crore out of 7.89 crore registered electors of the

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BLOs' refrain: Many still not able to file one of 11 documents needed

SANTOSH SINGH
PATNA, JULY 27

ON SUNDAY, the Election Commission announced that volunteers will help electors obtain the official documents required to meet the submission deadline of September 1 in the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls in poll-bound Bihar.

They have their task cut out. *The Indian Express* spoke to a dozen BLOs from across the state — including from the capital Patna, Samastipur in North Bihar, Purnea in the Seemanchal region,



and Banka in South Bihar. After the month-long SIR exercise, their refrain: most of those who had to submit one of the 11 documents

GOVT & POLITICS**S.I.R AN EXERCISE TO DETERMINE CITIZENSHIP: OPP P6**

have not been able to do so. Consider:

■ A BLO from the Danapur Assembly constituency said: "Out of 1,200 voters who submitted enumeration forms in my booth, 550 were in the 2003 voters' list. Of the remaining 650 voters, only about 60 people

CONTINUED ON PAGE 2**DEBATE IN LS TODAY**

PM: Op Sindoor proved there is no safe haven for terrorists

At TN event, Modi speaks of India's military might, Chola empire legacy



Prime Minister Narendra Modi during a roadshow in Tamil Nadu's Ariyalur district on Sunday. **PTI** **RELATED REPORT, P5**

ARUN JANARDHANAN
CHENNAI, JULY 27

PRIME MINISTER Narendra Modi on Sunday said Operation Sindoor sent the world the unambiguous message that "there is no safe haven" for terrorists and other enemies of the country. The military operation, he said, ignited a "new awakening" and "new self-confidence".

The comments came a day before the Lok Sabha is scheduled to hold a 16-hour debate on the April 22 Pahalgam terror attack and the subsequent action

that the government took against terror infrastructure in Pakistan. The Rajya Sabha is set to discuss the matter on Tuesday.

"Operation Sindoor proved that for enemies of India, for terrorists, there is no safe haven. The world saw how India responds if someone attacks its security and sovereignty. When I came here from the helipad, the three to four kilometre distance suddenly became a roadshow, and everyone was praising Op Sindoor ... It has created a new awakening, a new self-confidence across the country," Modi said in his address

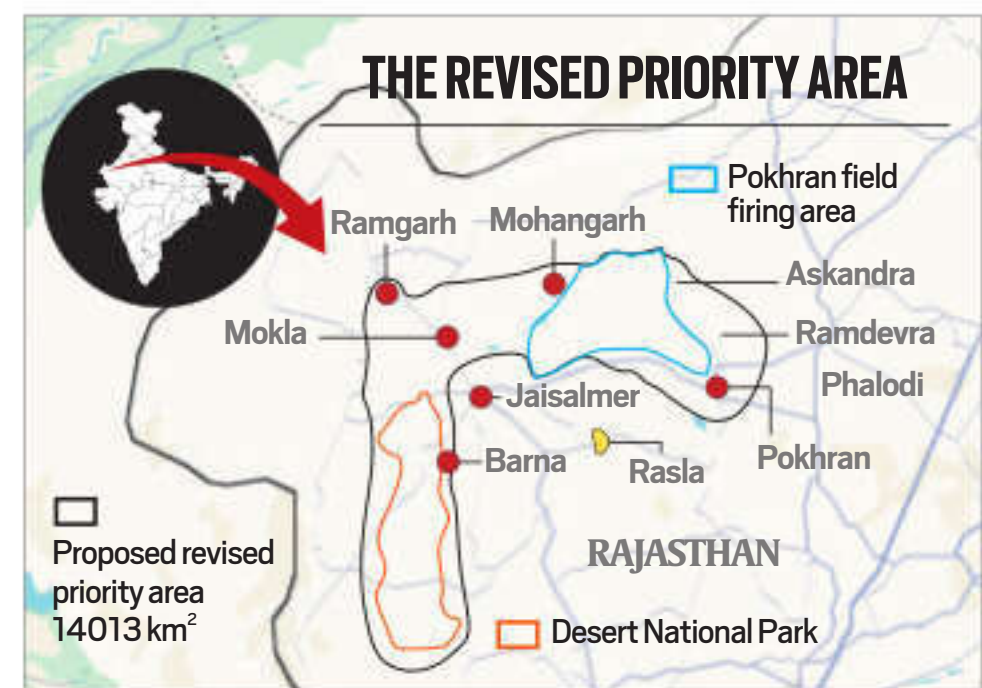
CONTINUED ON PAGE 2**INDIAN EXPRESS UPSC IAS EDITION HD 28~07~2025****-:FOR UPSC IAS ASPIRANTS:-****"AVOID POLITICAL & IRRELEVANT ARTICLES"****Please Try To Read This Completely in 40 Minutes If You****Can't So Then You Have To Increase Your Efforts****All the topics of this UPSC IAS Edition are directly or indirectly important for the prelims & main examination.****There are some topics which can be coded in answer writing of other topics in the main exam.**

SC-named panel proposes 'power corridors' through Bustard habitats

NIKHIL GHANEKAR
NEW DELHI, JULY 27

GIVING RELIEF to renewable energy companies from blanket restrictions on existing overhead power lines in habitats of the Great Indian Bustard (GIB), a Supreme Court appointed expert committee has proposed designated "power corridors" for transmission lines in Gujarat and Rajasthan, *The Indian Express* has learnt.

The committee has also

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'India can play role in Syria stability through friendship with Syrians, Kurds'

HARITHA SAVITHRI
BARCELONA, JULY 27

THE RECENT Israeli airstrikes in Damascus have heightened tensions among the many stakeholders in the region. As commander of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and one of the most senior leaders in the Kurds-led Democratic Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (DAANES), Kurdish leader General Mazloum Abdi is a key player in a region with a complex and unique set of security and governance challenges. While in-

terim president Ahmed al-Sharaa and the Damascus government have been asking the SDF to honour their March 10 deal by dissolving the outfit and fully integrating its fighters into the Syrian Arab Army, the SDF has been demanding a decentralised security arrangement that preserves its command structure. Besides decentralisation, the SDF had been seeking eth-

nic/religious rights (especially Kurdish recognition) and gender equality. Damascus, however, rejects these as infringements on state sovereignty. In an interview, Gen Abdi speaks about Syria post Assad, the sticking points in the deal with the Syrian government.

How has daily life for civilians in Syria changed since the fall of the Assad government?



General Abdi is a key player in a region with a complex and unique set of security and governance challenges. **AP**

The collapse of the Baath regime after 13 years was a development that all Syrians were happy about and a cause for celebration for all of us. At the same time, this moment has created a huge security and administrative vacuum. All areas of life in Syria were almost completely destroyed during the years of war. Basic necessities, such as water and electricity, are still very difficult to find. However, the positive thing is that now, with the lifting of some of the economic sanctions, there has been some relief and there is hope that our country can rebuild. There are

many difficulties and dangers in terms of security. The interim government is trying to gain control through a unilateral approach, but there are many violations and violence has increased. We have seen many suicide attacks in the big cities. The threat of ISIS and the ISIS movement has also increased.

What are the challenges in integrating the SDF into the Syrian army under the March 10 agreement? What role can DAANES play in Syria's future?

We attach great importance

to that memorandum of understanding. We are currently working to broaden and implement it. The experience of DAANES constitutes a positive model of governance for Syria. In the last more than 10 years, DAANES has been able to rebuild the region that had been destroyed during major battles with ISIS and re-establish security there. This is a very important issue that must be considered. After the collapse of the highly centralised and dictatorial regime of (former president) Bashar al-Assad, Syria now has a

CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

● EC on Bihar

state having been received within the deadline. Around 65 lakh names would be removed from the rolls as the electors were found to have either died or migrated permanently or registered in more than one place or untraceable, the EC said.

In Sunday's statement, the EC said 16 lakh forms had been filed online and over 13 lakh had been downloaded from its website and app.

According to the EC's June 24 order, all electors of Bihar had to submit enumeration forms by July 25 to make it to the draft roll to be published on August 1. From August 1 to September 1, the electors would have to submit documents, from a list of 11 specified by the EC in its order, to establish their eligibility. These documents would then be scrutinised and the final roll published on September 30, as per the schedule.

For those on the 2003 electoral roll, when the last intensive revision was done, the EC order says Join FREE Telegram Channel chat.whatsapp.com/HDvqPnxvwWb3Agy98nValQ

the extract of the roll would do. The 11 documents include caste certificate, matriculation/ educational certificate, passport and birth certificate, but not the widely held Aadhaar, Voter ID and ration card.

"Entire election machinery and volunteers are making special efforts to assist any elector, especially senior citizens, PwD [persons with disabilities] electors, and other vulnerable groups, in obtaining their documents. Volunteers will connect with all electors so that their documents can be obtained from government departments with minimum efforts of the elector," the EC said.

It added that once the draft roll is published on August 1, any elector and political party would have the opportunity till September 1 to file claims and objections to include any eligible elector who has been left out and remove any ineligible elector on the rolls.

The EC said that no name can be deleted from the draft roll without notice to the elector and the relevant order passed by the

Electoral Registration Officer (ERO) or Assistant ERO. "Any elector aggrieved by any decision of the ERO may appeal to the District Magistrate and the Chief Electoral Officer thereafter under Section 24 of the RP Act, 1950. Volunteers are also being trained in helping people to file appeals against any decision of ERO. A standard format for filing appeals is also being devised and will be widely circulated to allow people to file appeals easily," the EC said.

The EC said 22 lakh electors were found to be deceased. 36 lakh had permanently shifted or were not found by the Booth Level Officers (BLOs) and 7 lakh were enrolled in multiple places. "Exact status of these electors will be known after scrutiny of these forms by ERO/AERO by August 1, 2025. However, genuine electors can still be added back in electoral rolls during the claims and objection period from 1st August to 1st September 2025. The name of the electors found enrolled at multiple places in electoral rolls will be retained only at one place," it said.

FROM PAGE ONE

Op Sindoor

from the grounds adjoining the Brihadisvara Temple in the ancient Chola capital of Gangaikonda Cholapuram in Tamil Nadu's Ariyalur district. He was at the Aadi Thiruvathirai festival commemorating the birth anniversary of Chola emperor Rajendra I and 1,000 years of both his maritime expedition to Southeast Asia and the commencement of the temple's construction.

The PM spoke of the Indian military's might and the legacy of the Chola empire, linking the country's contemporary strength to its civilisational roots. He said the "names of emperors Raja Raja Chola and his son Rajendra Chola I are synonymous with India's identity and pride" and announced that grand statues of the

monarchs would be built in Tamil Nadu. These would become "modern pillars of our historic awakening", he added.

"The Chola emperors had woven India into a thread of cultural unity. Today, our government is carrying forward the same vision of the Chola era. Through initiatives such as the Kashi-Tamil Sangamam and the Saurashtra-Tamil Sangamam, we are strengthening these centuries-old bonds of unity," Modi said.

He said Rajendra Chola exemplified humility despite his achievements. "Today's New India embodies this same spirit: becoming stronger, yet rooted in values of global welfare and unity."

The PM released a commemorative coin honouring Rajendra Chola. Live renditions of Shaivite hymns and a performance by music maestro Ilaiyaraaja were also

part of the event. Modi paid homage to the Brihadisvara temple, which is a UNESCO World Heritage site. "I have prayed at this historic temple for the welfare of 140 crore Indians and the continued progress of India," he said while lauding its "exquisite architecture and sculptures".

Citing ancient Tamil administrative systems, Modi said, "Several people speak about the UK's Magna Carta while commenting on democracy. However, the Chola-era 'Kudavolai system' predated it." The electoral method, he said, existed "over 1,000 years ago". "The Chola kings significantly enhanced their diplomatic and trade relations with regions such as Sri Lanka, the Maldives, and Southeast Asia. It is just a coincidence that I returned from the Maldives yesterday, and today I am here."

● BLOs' refrain

have submitted forms with one of the 11 documents, mainly Class 10, residential and caste certificates. There has been intense pressure on us to get documents from such electors who have only submitted forms."

She said the BLOs were still accepting forms from some people. "We are told to accept them until Monday (July 28), as the first electoral draft would be published by August 1."

Asked if they had been asked to upload one of the 11 documents against the forms during the claims-and-objection phase between August 1 and September 1, she said: "We have heard about it, but there is no clear instruction on how to go about it and what if we do not get any documents from voters in that period."

■ A Banka Assembly seat BLO said: "My booth has about 1,300 voters. Over 500 of them are in the 2003 list. Of the remaining electors, only 50 people have submitted forms along with one of 11 documents. As my uploaded documents' percentage is very poor, I was asked to get at least 20-30% in the column on 'status of mandated 11 documents'. I am marking an exaggerated number, assuming I would be able to get the required documents at a later stage. EROs (Electoral Registration Officers) perhaps want to show a good percentage."

In the 13-column form needed to be filled up by the BLOs before the publication of the first draft of rolls, there is a break-up of details on the 2003 list voters, post-2003 voters with details on documents, numbers of deceased, permanently shifted, and re-

peated voters. There is also a column on "other documents".

The Banka BLO added his booth had uploaded over 80% of enumeration forms, as a section of migrant voters, mainly permanently shifted, had not turned up to fill up forms, online or offline.

■ A BLO from the Sarairanjan Assembly seat echoed similar views. "My area is dominated by Dalits and EBCs (Extremely Backward Classes). Of 900 voters in my booth, only 400 are in the 2003 rolls. But, only 25 persons have submitted caste or residential certificates so far. Most of them don't have documents. Some have been waiting for residential certificates. I am even spending money from my pocket for getting photocopies of the 2003 roll entries for its voters," he said.

■ A BLO from Purnea's Srinagar block said: "It is very difficult to get forms attached with one of the 11 documents. My booth has about 1,000 voters, half of which were on the 2003 list. Despite my area having a better educational status, only 100 people have submitted either Class 10 Board or residential certificates." He added, "I doubt whether even one extra month's time to submit the mandated documents could change things much."

■ A BLO in Balrampur block of Katihar said: "Of 990 electors in my polling booth, about 425 were on the 2003 list. Only about 150 people submitted forms with one of 11 documents, mostly Class 10 board certificates, including from madarsa board, family registers and passports. About 85 people, either dead or permanently shifted were deleted from the list."

■ In the Araria block of Araria district, a BLO said: "My booth had

950 voters, including 450 on the 2003 list. About 250 people submitted forms with documents such as residential certificates, passports and land papers. About 220 submitted enumeration forms with other documents. Thirty people, dead or permanently shifted, were dropped from the list."

■ A BLO from Kishanganj said: "Out of about 1,100 voters in my booth, 550 are on the 2003 voters' list. About 250 people submitted their forms with one of 11 documents including Class 10 board certificates and passports. Only 36 voters, dead or permanently shifted, were deleted from the list."

■ A BLO from Tarapur in Munger said: "Out of 770 voters, 650 filled their forms with or without documents. About 220 were on the 2003 list, and 120 more submitted forms with one of the documents needed, mostly residential and Class 10 certificates. Thirty people, dead or permanently shifted, had to be dropped from the list for publication of the first draft."

■ A BLO from Sasaram Nagar Nigam in Rohtas said: "Out of 1,240 voters, about 440 are on the 2003 voters' list. About 150 have submitted their enumeration forms with one of 11 documents."

■ In Bhagwanpur (Kaimur), a BLO said: "The total number of voters in my booth is 1,470, including 500 on the 2003 list. A total of 1,296 forms were submitted but only 20 had one of the 11 documents attached."

■ A BLO in Darbhanga's Keoti said: "Out of 1,110 voters, 515 are on the 2003 list. About 425 submitted forms with one of 11 documents."

● Bustard habitats

revised the boundaries of GIB conservation zones. In Rajasthan and Gujarat, it has proposed a "revised priority area" of 14,013 sq km (up from 13,163 sq km) and 740 sq km (up from 500 sq km), respectively. These priority areas are meant for focused conservation and protection of the GIB.

The corridors proposed by the seven-member committee will be 5 km wide in Rajasthan and between 1 and 2 km wide across two separate zones in Gujarat. One member of the committee, however, is learnt to have submitted a dissent note.

The estimated population of the large bird — once considered a candidate for national bird — is below 150. Owing to its poor vision, the GIB is at high risk of injury and death due to collisions with power lines. In addition to these collisions, GIB populations have plummeted over the years due to hunting, predation and habitat loss.

In March 2024, a Supreme Court bench headed by Justice D Y Chandrachud had recalled a 2021 SC order that required all power lines in GIB habitats to be buried underground, following concerns about the technical and economic feasibility of such a move. It then tasked the expert committee with prescribing measures to mitigate GIB deaths from power lines while balancing conservation goals with mushrooming renewable energy development in these two states.

The committee has proposed a set of mitigation measures and restrictions based on zonal priorities: ■ Existing power lines in Bustard habitats to be dealt with based on voltage.

■ Immediate burying of certain lines identified by the SC in key GIB habitats.

■ Lines of 220 kV and above be assessed individually for possible mitigation.

■ In some cases, rerouting lines outside proposed power corridors to reduce risk of GIB collisions. For instance, in Gujarat, 79 km of lines have been identified for burial or rerouting outside the revised priority area.

■ No new overhead power lines, wind turbines, solar plants over 2 MW, or expansion of existing plants in priority areas of Gujarat and Rajasthan. Only power lines of 11 kV (kilovolt) and lower capacities will be permitted — and strictly through designated power corridors.

■ No restrictions on laying new power lines outside the priority areas.

Sources said the idea behind creating power corridors is to ensure that birds, especially in high-risk habitats like Jaisalmer and Kutch, aren't forced to repeatedly

navigate through a maze of criss-crossing power lines. These areas are densely dotted with transmission and distribution lines.

Another important mandate of the panel was to review the boundaries of the Bustard's habitat. In March 2024, SC had accepted a classification of GIB habitat into three categories: priority areas (13,163 sq km), where the birds are known to live and breed regularly; additional important areas (5,977 sq km), which also matter but are less frequently used; and, potential areas (78,580 sq km), or large open landscapes where the birds might thrive. These zones were mapped using field surveys and satellite tracking data collected by Wildlife Institute of India and the Rajasthan Forest Department since 2014.

After reviewing the data, the committee decided to retain 13,163 sq km of priority area in Rajasthan. From the 5,977 sq km marked as additional, it has recommended including just 850 sq km. An area of 14,013 sq km is thus proposed as "revised priority area" for Bustards in Rajasthan. The remaining additional important area was excluded due to fewer GIB sightings and its importance for expected power transmission needs.

The focus in Rajasthan will be on Desert National Park, Salkha-Kuchri area, Sanu-Mokla-Parewar, Pokhran Field Firing Range (PFFR), buffer areas of Ramdevra and the eastern periphery of PFFR, Dholiya, Khetolai, and Chacha. In Gujarat, the committee retained the priority area of 500 sq km and has proposed a consolidated revised priority area of 740 sq km.

Wildlife biologist Sumit Dookia, faculty at Guru Gobind Singh Indraprastha University, Delhi, and Honorary Scientific Advisor to the ERDS Foundation said the area excluded in Rajasthan has Bustard presence. "GIBs use the additional important areas in the non-breeding season in the old enclosed area in Rasla. Two known GIB deaths have been documented from here. Just adjoining to this enclosure is a big Shree Degray Mata Oran (Deemed Forest) and every year 5-10 GIBs visit these areas."

Submitting a dissent note, one member of the panel, Devesh Gadhavi, Deputy Director, The Corbett Foundation, is learnt to have submitted that all existing overhead power lines of 33 kV and above within the revised priority area should either be buried underground or rerouted through power corridors or outside priority areas altogether.

The committee has recommended undergrounding of 80 km of 33 kV lines in Rajasthan and 79 km in Gujarat's Kutch, along with mitigation for other lines through rerouting or insulation.

named, said she had been practising for nearly 15 years, and had earlier been with the Punjab AG's office.

While an Additional AG in

India T S Thakur and Justice Kurian Joseph said: "For a fair and objective system of appointment, there ought to be a fair and realistic assessment of the requirement. For

succeed in the challenge to an office of Advocate General just by saying he is politically affiliated with some party... That cannot be a disqualification".

● 'Syria stability'

greater chance of moving towards democracy and a decentralised system. A society like Syria can only ensure democracy with a decentralised system. We accepted the integration of the SDF with the Syrian army in the memorandum of understanding signed on March 10. Now we must work on the details so that stability in the country is not disrupted and no one takes advantage of the security gaps. But the emphasis must be on the clear path of integration of all other groups into the Syrian army, the army must have a national identity and its role must be to defend the entire Syrian people. In other words, it must not be subordinated to any other interests. I believe that to ensure stability in Syria, we need democratic institutions that represent and protect the will of all Syrian constituents.

in Syria have continued in recent months. How can Syria ensure inclusive governance to prevent ethnic and religious tensions, particularly amid recent instability in Deir ez-Zor, Alawite areas, and Druze regions?

These conflicts and wars are the result of the policies pursued by the interim government so far. Syria is a diverse country. In order to maintain stability, the rights of all groups and identities must be protected and their place in decision-making processes must be ensured. For example, the government can establish regional councils through elections and these councils can manage the affairs of their regions. Also, most importantly, the security forces and the army must not become parties to these ethnic and religious wars.

In light of Kurdish leader Abdullah Öcalan's recent call

for peace and the consequent decision of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK, a decades-old organisation of which Öcalan is co-founder) to disband, how do you foresee this affecting the struggle of the Kurdish people in Syria?

Mr. Öcalan's call was historic and has earned a lot of support. Ending the war and violence against the Kurdish people in Turkey will open new paths for the Kurds as a whole. After this call, a ceasefire was established in North and East Syria and the Turkish state's attacks against us stopped. Therefore, tensions have decreased considerably. This will open the way for the Kurds to take part in the construction of a new democratic Syria.

Turkey views the SDF as an extension of the PKK. With the PKK disbanding, do you expect Turkey to change its stance towards the SDF and

the DAANES?

This is a matter related to Turkey's internal politics. In my eyes, the SDF and the DAANES have never constituted a security threat to Turkey. On the contrary, we liberated Turkey's border from ISIS and ensured stability on the border. If Turkey recognises the rights of the Kurds within the Republic of Turkey, the same must apply to Syria.

What is the level of international support that would most effectively help sustain these counter-terrorism efforts?

The support of the international coalition has been a key factor in the fight against ISIS. Today, continued support from the international coalition is needed to ensure that this success is sustained. We are concerned that ISIS will exploit the security vacuum in Syria and expand its organisation. So far, the security situation in the DAANES is more stable than in the

rest of Syria. However, ISIS activities have increased recently throughout Syria.

What part might Asian nations such as India play in the region's future?

Many countries have troops here in the bases of the international coalition and support our forces. These countries can also play a positive role in the political process and support the Syrian people's efforts for building a peaceful and democratic future in their homeland. Countries such as India and other Asian countries can play an important friendly role and be active in the reconstruction process in Syria. India has always had an important role in West Asia. It can now play an important role in the stability of the region through its friendship with the Syrian people and the Kurdish people.

Haritha Savithri is a Barcelona-based Malayalam writer and freelance journalist

Toxic elements that could cause cancer in Delhi’s dust, soil: Study

EXPRESSNEWS SERVICE
NEW DELHI, JULY 27

TOXIC ELEMENTS are present in the soil and dust on the roads of Delhi, with the potential to cause cancer and other serious ailments, a new study has revealed.

The study, funded by the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR), was conducted in collaboration with researchers from Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) and Australia’s University of New South Wales (UNSW) in Sydney.

It analysed roadside soil and dust samples collected from 33 places in the Capital.

The analysis, conducted at UNSW, revealed high levels of antimony, a chemical element, in the soil and dust. Antimony exposure is touted as a potential carcinogenic risk factor.

Dr Manoj Pratap Singh from JNU, the principal investigator behind the study, said children are at high risk of developing cancer owing to the toxic element exposure.

“At the present rate of exposure, such toxic elements can cause over 1.8 lakh cancer cases in men, more than 2.1 lakh cancer cases in women, and over 21,000 cancer cases in children,” he added. Dr Singh further said that children have higher daily exposure to rare earth elements (REE)

than adults.

“Their neurodevelopment is highly susceptible to REE exposure. It is associated with a decrease in IQ level and memory loss,” he added. The toxic elements can enter the body by ingestion or swallowing soil and dust particles, which is common among children, he explained.

“This study revealed that children in Delhi are intake over 1 milligram of toxic and non-toxic metals every day through roadside soil and dust,” Dr Singh said, adding that the toxins may enter the human body via a dermal route and cause various diseases, including diabetes mellitus and gestational diabetes mellitus. Inhalation of

dust can also be a pathway for the toxic elements to enter the body, said Dr Singh.

On why Delhi roads have high antimony content, Dr Singh said that the frequent use of brakes in vehicles can cause the toxic chemical element to be released in the environment in the form of fine particles. Research has also revealed that burning fossil fuels on a large scale contributes to the accumulation of toxic elements, he added. He further said that the study has confirmed the presence of a dangerous metal, lead, in the toxic elements present in Delhi’s soil and dust.

Dr Singh said Cerium (Ce) content was found to be the highest

in roadside soil and road dust among the REEs analysed for the study. A Ce compound is used in catalytic converters of vehicles for the complete combustion of fuel, and is emitted from exhaust in the form of fine particles.

“Fifteen elements were identified from a priority list of the upper 275 toxic substances based on various parameters, including toxicity for human exposure.. These are — arsenic (1), lead (2), cadmium (7), chromium VI (17), beryllium (43), nickel (57), zinc (75), chromium (78), uranium (97), copper (118), barium (134), manganese (140), selenium (146), aluminum (183) and vanadium (200),” he added.

Before Magna Carta, Cholas had ‘ballot pots’: What is the ancient voting system PM lauded?

ARUN JANARDHANAN
CHENNAI, JULY 27

STANDING BEFORE the thousand-year-old stone temple built by Rajendra Chola I, Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Sunday said the Chola empire carried forward India's ancient democratic traditions. "Historians talk about Britain's Magna Carta in the name of democracy," he said, referring to the 1215 English charter. "But many centuries ago, elections were held in the Chola Empire through a democratic method."

Long before the Enlightenment in Europe birthed the ideals of representative governance, the Cholas had etched out rules for local self-rule, literally inscribed into stone. The inscriptions of Uttaramerur, a village in present-day Kanchipuram district, offer some of the world's earliest surviving evidence of a formal electoral system.

As chronicled by KANilakanta Sastri in The Cholas (1935), the Chola administrative framework was built on two foundational units: the Sabha for Brahmin settlements and the Ur for non-Brahmin villages. These were not symbolic councils but elected bodies with real powers over revenue, irrigation, temple management, and even justice. "It was democracy at the grassroots — built into the fabric of Tamil civic life," Sastri wrote in Chapter VIII, "Local Self-Government".

But what made the system particularly striking was the method of voting, a process called the Kudavolai system or "ballot pot" election. Under this method, as detailed in the Uttaramerur Inscriptions documented in Epigraphia Indica Vol. XXII (1933–34), the names of eligible candidates were inscribed on palm leaves and placed inside a pot. A young boy, typically chosen for his impartiality, would draw the lot in full public view. This randomised draw was not a game of chance but a civic ritual rooted in transparency, fairness, and collective consent.

While many historians say it as one designed to combine divine will and civic integrity, essentially to ensure that power was not monopolised by dynastic elites, eligibility criteria under the system were strict. Candidates had to own tax-paying land, be between 35 and 70 years old, possess knowledge of Vedic texts or administration, and have no record of crime or domestic abuse. Debt defaulters, alcoholics, and close relatives of sitting members were disqualified. "The disqualifications were perhaps even more revealing than the qualifications, laying out a moral vision of public service," Sastri wrote.

Accountability was embedded. Annual audits were mandatory. Misappropriation of funds or dereliction of duty could lead to disqualification from future office, a radical mechanism even by modern standards. Inscription no. 24 from Epigraphia Indica details the dismissal of a treasury officer over embezzlement, followed by a fine. These weren't isolated experiments. As Anirudh Kanisetti notes in Lords of the Earth and Sea (Penguin, 2023), the Chola model of statecraft relied heavily on decentralised administrative systems. By empowering merchant guilds such as the Manigramam and Ayyavole, and sustaining local assemblies, the Cholas expanded both trade and legitimacy. "Imperial rule," Kanisetti wrote, "was constructed not just through conquest, but by engineering sustainable civic systems".

This is the vision Modi looked to tap into when he said, "We hear about kings who brought gold, silver, and livestock after conquests. But Rajendra Chola brought Gangajal", a reference to the emperor's symbolic act of bringing Ganga water to his new capital, Gangaikonda Cholaapuram, in 1025 CE. The act, memorialised in copper plates (as cited in Sastri's The Cholas), was described as building a "liquid pillar of victory (ganga-jalamayam jayastambham)", merging military triumph with ritual statecraft.

However, the Chola system was far from egalitarian in the modern sense. It excluded women, labourers, and landless groups. But as historian Tansen Sen wrote in The Military Campaigns of Rajendra Chola, the Cholas were masters of strategic signalling, not just through naval conquests but in governance structures that prefigured electoral thought.



PM Narendra Modi at Brihadeeswara Temple, at Gangaikonda Cholapuram on Sunday. PTI

enue, irrigation, temple management, and even justice. "It was democracy at the grassroots — built into the fabric of Tamil civic life," Sastri wrote in Chapter VIII, "Local Self-Government".

But what made the system particularly striking was the method of voting, a process called the Kudavolai system or "ballot pot" election. Under this method, as detailed in the Uttaramerur Inscriptions documented in Epigraphia Indica Vol. XXII (1933–34), the names of eligible candidates were inscribed on palm leaves and placed inside a pot. A young boy, typically chosen for his impartiality, would draw the lot in full public view. This randomised draw was not a game of chance but a civic ritual rooted in transparency, fairness, and collective consent.

While many historians say it as one designed to combine divine will and civic integrity, essentially to ensure that power was not monopolised by dynastic elites, eligibility criteria under the system were strict. Candidates had to own tax-paying land, be between 35 and 70 years old, possess knowledge of Vedic texts or administration, and have no record of crime or domestic abuse. Debt defaulters, alcoholics, and close relatives of sitting members were disqualified. "The disqualifications were perhaps even more revealing than the qualifications, laying out a moral vision of public service," Sastri wrote.

Accountability was embedded. Annual audits were mandatory. Misappropriation of funds or dereliction of duty could lead to disqualification from future office, a radical mechanism even by modern standards. Inscription no. 24 from Epigraphia Indica details the dismissal of a treasury officer over embezzlement, followed by a fine. These weren't isolated experiments. As Anirudh Kanisetti notes in Lords of the Earth and Sea (Penguin, 2023), the Chola model of statecraft relied heavily on decentralised administrative systems. By empowering merchant guilds such as the Manigramam and Ayyavole, and sustaining local assemblies, the Cholas expanded both trade and legitimacy. "Imperial rule," Kanisetti wrote, "was constructed not just through conquest, but by engineering sustainable civic systems".

This is the vision Modi looked to tap into when he said, "We hear about kings who brought gold, silver, and livestock after conquests. But Rajendra Chola brought Gangajal", a reference to the emperor's symbolic act of bringing Ganga water to his new capital, Gangaikonda Cholaapuram, in 1025 CE. The act, memorialised in copper plates (as cited in Sastri's The Cholas), was described as building a "liquid pillar of victory (ganga-jalamayam jayastambham)", merging military triumph with ritual statecraft.

However, the Chola system was far from egalitarian in the modern sense. It excluded women, labourers, and landless groups. But as historian Tansen Sen wrote in The Military Campaigns of Rajendra Chola, the Cholas were masters of strategic signalling, not just through naval conquests but in governance structures that prefigured electoral thought.

As India seeks more cheetahs, a flurry of diplomacy in Africa

ANAND MOHAN J
BHOPAL, JULY 27

OVER THE past two years, India has been working its diplomatic channels with Botswana, South Africa and Kenya as it navigates a complex set of negotiations to replenish its African cheetah population.

Senior members of the National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA) have said that talks with South Africa, a key source country, have slowed down following the formation of a new political coalition after general elections there last year. At the same time, Botswana has formally committed to sending four cheetahs, and discussions are underway to finalise timelines. In Kenya, negotiations remain broad, centred on long-term collaboration rather than immediate translocation.

As many as 20 cheetahs have already been brought to India as part of the country's ambitious translocation plans. Of these, eight were brought from Namibia in 2022 and 12 from South Africa in early 2023. They were all brought to Kuno National Park in Madhya Pradesh.

In April this year, the Madhya Pradesh government announced that eight new cheetahs would be brought from Botswana and that the first four would arrive by May. That is yet to happen.

A senior official from the National Tiger Conservation



20 cheetahs brought to India from Africa since 2022

Authority (NTCA) said, "We have sought an engagement to work out the logistics. Our High Commission is coordinating to arrive at dates of mutual convenience. The Union Minister concerned has been working on speeding up negotiations with the other countries."

Records of Cheetah Project Steering Committee meetings show that as early as December 13, 2023, the committee was apprised that "steps have been taken for bringing further cheetahs from Kenya, Tanzania, Sudan, and other range countries as well." However, the NTCA has clarified that as of now, there is "no arrangement with Sudan or Tanzania".

As for South Africa, with the translocation of 12 cheetahs having already taken place in 2023, experts from the country have been closely associated with India's Cheetah Project. However, the changes in government in the country have led to delays in further discussions to bring more cheetahs to India, officials said.

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"In South Africa, there has been a significant change in the government since the last engagement. Hence, the processes are taking time. The new government is going through the nuances and understanding the project," a senior NTCA official. In 2024, the ruling African National Congress lost its outright majority, which it had enjoyed for over 30 years, and has been in a shaky coalition with the Democratic Alliance that is under threat of collapse over sharp divisions between the two parties.

As per the steering committee's meeting records from December 4, 2024, committee adviser S P Yadav said that "bringing cheetahs from South Africa may take time beyond three months since negotiations are underway".

"Cheetahs from Kuno National Park need to be translocated to the Gandhisagar Wildlife Sanctuary for fostering housekeeping practices. The fresh lot from South Africa are to be housed in Kuno," Yadav told the committee.

The DIG of the NTCA, Dr Vaibhav C Mathur, had in this meeting apprised the committee that a high-level delegation had visited Kenya "for sourcing of cheetahs" and that action was underway "for dialogue with governments of Botswana and South Africa on sourcing of cheetahs".

On February 19 this year, the State Chief Wildlife Warden, Shubharanjan Sen, again suggested to the committee that the

cheetahs in Kuno be transported in order to "bring new cheetahs from South Africa".

Mathur had apprised the committee that there was a "deadlock with South Africa" and that officials were trying to address it. Mathur also told the committee that an MoU with Kenya would be signed in the first week of March.

Unlike with Botswana, discussions with Kenya have remained "generic and overarching", with the focus more on "capacity building for their staff, use of technology for protection, and similar collaborative efforts," an NTCA official said.

The chairman of the Cheetah Project Steering Committee, Dr Rajesh Gopal, said, "We are yet to get a fresh stock. In the last steering committee meeting, the Government of India informed us that discussions are ongoing. Several countries are being explored — we haven't narrowed it down to one yet. There are options on the table."

Madhya Pradesh wildlife officials are also involved in on-ground diplomacy. A senior state forest department officer, who was part of a delegation to South Africa, said, "We have visited South Africa and held discussions with their team. We will soon issue an update after the NTCA delegation clears some issues... There are new officials and we are getting them up to speed with our preparations in Gandhisagar and our success with the project."

India's 1st hydrogen-powered train nears reality as Railways successfully tests coach

DHEERAJ MISHRA
NEW DELHI, JULY 27

INDIAN RAILWAYS has successfully tested the first hydrogen-powered coach or driving-power car earlier this week at its Integral Coach Factory (ICF) in Chennai, a key milestone in the its quest to build India's first hydrogen-powered train as only a few railways in the world have tried it, with a bulk of the projects still in the trial phase. Hydrogen is a cleaner fuel and will reduce dependence on fossil fuels with Railways one of the key players in India's mission to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. The ICF project will increase the share of renewable energy in its energy mix.

Officials said the project is in its final stage with tests of various equipment being conducted before the hydrogen-powered trains enter commercial service.

What's the project?

The Northern Railway zone undertook this project, costing around ₹136 crore, which began in 2020-21 and comprises two



India's first hydrogen-powered coach at ICF, Chennai.

major components. First, the conversion of two conventional 1600-HP diesel power cars into hydrogen fuel cell-powered traction system, and second, setting up a hydrogen storage and fuelling facility at Jind in Haryana, with a storage capacity of 3,000 kg of the clean fuel.

The primary design, validation, and testing is being undertaken by Indian Railways' Research Design & Standards Organisation (RDSO). A senior Railway Ministry official said that the hydrogen train project was conceptualised for conversion of

a 10-coach diesel-electric multiple unit (DEMU) into a hydrogen-powered multiple unit, with two 1600-HP cars. With a train length of 10 coaches, it can carry more than 2,600 passengers.

How will it work?

Hydrogen fuel technology is still an emerging field in the Railways. There are many challenges and safety concerns as hydrogen, the lightest element, is highly flammable, apart from being colourless, odourless and tasteless. As the project involves the retro-fitment of two diesel-

powered cars into hydrogen fuel cell-powered cars, each power car will carry 220 kg of hydrogen, stored in specially designed cylinders at 350 bar pressure.

The mounting structure of hydrogen cylinders and fuel cells is critical and for that rounds of testing are ongoing.

Given the characteristics of the gas, officials said that to minimise the risk, Railways have done computational fluid dynamics (CFD) studies, wherein the worst cases of hydrogen leak and other failure modes are considered with continuous monitoring.

Fuelling facility

At the fuelling and storage facility in Jind, the storage capacity has been divided into two separate spaces — 2,320 kg at low pressure and 680 kg at high pressure.

The facility will be operated and maintained in accordance with the standards and specification of Petroleum Explosives Safety Organisation (PESO), a nodal agency under the Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade (DPIIT).



The IndianEXPRESS

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CARRY IT FORWARD

India-UK trade pact is marked by a confident approach of export proactiveness rather than import defensiveness

NOW THAT THE India-UK Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA) has been sealed, the focus shifts to the more challenging deal with the US. A major stumbling block to inking even an interim free trade agreement before US President Donald Trump's August 1 deadline — to either sign or face so-called reciprocal tariffs of up to 26 per cent — is agriculture. India does not want to open up its market for American soyabean, corn (maize), ethanol and dairy products. What this defensive stance misses is the potential loss from the fact that India's agricultural exports to the US, at \$6.2 billion in 2024, exceeded its imports of \$2.4 billion. A 26 per cent tariff will definitely hurt Indian seafood exports to the US that alone was valued at \$2.5 billion. That loss would be a gain for the likes of Ecuador and Chile, slapped with only the 10 per cent baseline tariff.

On the other hand, the fear of US farm imports is more about perception than reality. Take dairy, where the US isn't as big an exporter of milk powder, butter and cheese as New Zealand and the European Union. Or soyabean, where India imported over \$5 billion worth of its oil during 2024-25. The bulk of that was from Argentina and Brazil, with the US share at just \$126.3 million. The US is, no doubt, cost competitive in corn and the world's biggest producer as well as exporter. But corn is basically a feed grain, also increasingly being used as a biofuel feedstock. Allowing imports would benefit India's dairy and poultry farmers grappling with rising feed costs, aggravated by the diversion of corn for fuel ethanol production. The sheer demand growth makes corn imports by India inevitable, whether from the US or elsewhere.

India needs a farm trade policy based not on import protection, but expanding and diversifying its exports. That happened during 2003-04 to 2013-14, when the country's agriculture exports soared from \$7.5 billion to \$43.3 billion and new markets were created in products from basmati rice and buffalo meat to frozen shrimps, guar gum meal, chilly and seed spices. Since then, exports have hardly grown to about \$52 billion in 2024-25. Even worse have been shipment curbs — on rice, wheat, sugar or onion — clamped at the slightest indication of domestic supply shortfalls. CETA has been a refreshing departure, with India successfully negotiating duty-free access for its exports of seafood, processed foods, spices, fruit and vegetables to the UK, while simultaneously offering to cut tariffs on imports of whisky, chocolates, soft drinks and salmon from the latter. A similar confident approach of export proactiveness rather than import defensiveness is required in deals with other countries — the US included.

A WELCOME NUDGE

ICJ verdict on climate obligations, though not binding, could push rich countries to do more to check global warming

LAST WEEK, THE International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruled that countries are "obliged" to "prevent harm from climate change". The Court was responding to a UN General Assembly request, triggered by a resolution backed by small island states, for an "advisory" to "ensure protection of the environment" from GHG emissions. In a process that stretched over two years, the ICJ consulted experts, including those from the IPCC, as well as representatives of nations and blocs such as the Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries, to affirm that "limiting global warming to 1.5 degrees C should be considered the primary temperature goal for nations" and that they are obliged to make "adequate contributions" to achieve this target. The advisory is not binding on governments, but it could breathe new life into the flailing global climate change negotiations. It could also have significant implications for environmental jurisprudence, enabling vulnerable groups and nations to push for stronger climate action.

Ten years after the Paris Pact set the roadmap for climate action, numerous inclement weather events all over the world have shone unflattering light on the absence of a collective resolve to decarbonise the world economy. The UN's annual climate meet has taken important decisions to compensate countries for loss and damages due to global warming-induced disasters. Yet, these meetings continue to be held hostage by decades-long differences over who should contribute how much to the mitigation efforts. Last year's UNFCCC meet at Baku, billed as the finance CoP, was a particular disappointment. Leaders of most major economies failed to turn up, and less than two months after the summit, the US President pulled his country out of the Paris Climate Pact for the second time in less than 10 years. The US did not face any legal challenge for pulling out of the treaty, and developed countries have, by and large, got away with not meeting their financial obligations. The ICJ advisory has not spelt out any consequences for defaulters. However, its strong endorsement of compensation to countries that suffer climate damage could trigger a wave of litigation for damages. In recent years, developed nations have reluctantly acknowledged that vulnerable countries require assistance to deal with climate disasters, but they have rejected any suggestion for reparations. The ICJ's opinion could move the needle forward.

The top UN court has also affirmed the salience of the principle of "common but differentiated responsibilities". As rich countries increasingly put pressure on emerging economies, such as India, to assume more global warming mitigation responsibilities, this founding tenet of climate negotiations has come under increasing strain. The ICJ advisory should jolt the historically high emitters and nudge them to fulfil their climate commitments.



JAHANGIR AZIZ

Be uncertainty-ready

Unpredictability around US tariffs will not be over after August 1 — and trade deals with America may not help

ments on the appeal on July 31.

All the universal, reciprocal, and fentanyl-related tariffs are based on IEEPA. The tariffs unaffected are the Section 301 tariffs on China imposed under Trump 1.0 and extended by the Biden administration, and the global sectoral tariffs on aluminum, autos and auto parts, copper, and steel that were imposed under Section 232.

It is unclear how the appeals court will rule. But regardless of the decision, either party is likely to move the case to the Supreme Court. If the tariffs under IEEPA are eventually disallowed by the US Supreme Court, the government will shift to other options. Tariffs are central to this administration's economic agenda and will thus be pursued. Unlike those under IEEPA, the tariffs under the other options are more cumbersome, limited in scope, and significantly more resource intensive. But they can be implemented in a compressed time frame if the administration so desires.

A potential sequence of such actions could be the following. Use Section 122 to impose tariffs of 15 per cent for 150 days on all countries (justified to address balance of payments needs or to prevent a significant depreciation of the dollar). At the same time, ratchet up the tariffs on China that were imposed under Section 301 in Trade War 1.0 by both the Trump and Biden administrations.

Keep tariffs on steel and aluminum at 50 per cent (as on copper) and raise that on autos from 25 per cent to 50 per cent. Hasten the ongoing Section 232 (sector specific on grounds on national economic security) investigations into semiconductors, pharmaceuticals, and lumber to bring these under the tariff net of 25 per cent — 50 per cent.

Use Section 338 to impose tariffs on countries that are deemed to discriminate specifically against US commercial interests (such as digital services taxes by Australia, the EU, Canada, India, and others, although the taxes are imposed on

other countries too).

Complete Section 301 investigations on large trading partners (some are ongoing, for example, on the EU and Brazil). These investigations are resource intensive as they need to first identify the specific policy of a trading partner that is the basis of "unfair competition" and then quantify the "harm" that such policies impose on US consumers for each product and for each country. The tariff rate needs to be commensurate with the harm caused and, thus, differ, from product to product for each country. Finally, roll all tariffs under Sections 301 and 232.

As one can imagine, this is an arduous and uncertain process. However, the direction of travel is more certain — the average effective tariff rate is likely to settle close to 20 per cent. Needless to say, the country- and product-specific impact of Sections 301 and 232 tariffs could be vastly different than under IEEPA.

Markets so far have largely shrugged off the announced new tariffs. This is understandable given the quick deescalation after the strong market and corporate reaction to the Liberation Day tariffs; the possibility that the August 1 deadline is postponed; and the eventual negotiated tariff rates could be different from those announced.

However, a court ruling on IEEPA could well turn both the August 1 deadline and the trade deals moot, including potentially that with India. If the basis of these deals, that is, IEEPA, is no longer admissible, then we are headed for renegotiations with tariffs under sections 301 and 232. These could be starkly different than those that are being negotiated now.

The uncertainty around US tariffs will not be over after August 1, even with signed trade deals. US courts might well upset the best laid plans of mice and men. Continued uncertainty is the only certainty.

The writer is Chief Emerging Markets Economist, J P Morgan. Views are personal

The creativity curriculum

As we journey towards Viksit Bharat 2047, our greatest strength will be in our capacity to imagine, narrate, and innovate. Let’s build an India where every child is a creator



SMRITI IRANI

IN MY JOURNEY across the television screen, the political trail, transformative classrooms, the rattling loom, among other evolving contexts, I've seen one truth hold steady — our power lies in our imagination, curiosity, creativity and innovation. India's creative economy is projected to reach \$80 billion by 2026, according to a report published recently. "Creative Economy" is not just a smart phrase but holds the potential for building creative-cultural assets. It can operate as a strategic lever of inclusive growth. I want to bring together two powerful perspectives — education and entrepreneurship, and classrooms and creators. Together, they present India's development frontier with strong, inclusive opportunities. The question, therefore, arises: How quickly can our institutions prepare young minds with the skills and confidence to help them participate in the creative economy?

A recent survey-backed report, 'Shaping Education to nurture the \$80 billion Creative Economy', by a leading Indian management consulting firm, states that only 9 per cent of students across 22 states demonstrate strong readiness in design thinking, research and real-world problem-solving. These are 21st-century skills and core competencies of the creative economy. In a world where AI can code but not create, these gaps matter.

The NEP 2020 calls for embedding 21st-century skills — critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and communication — into the curriculum. But we must go further. With the CBSE now mandating art-integrated learning from Grades I–X, and the Rs 400 crore Indian Institute of Creative Technologies (IICT) launching in Mumbai, the blueprint is emerging.

Creativity cannot be part-time, and in that sense, it cannot be extracurricular. It is time to mainstream creative entrepreneurial mindset training — through maker spaces, startup labs, and design sprints. Let creativity be assessed not just in art rooms, but in business models, digital portfolios and social impact. Bring it midstream in the curriculum. The Report also highlights how international boards such as the International Baccalaureate (IB) are more successful in developing core competencies of the creative economy in school students compared to Indian boards.

India's creative force is exploding — not just in metros, but in village courtyards, small-town lanes, and local community centres. With affordable tech and deep cultural roots, over 100 million Indians — farmers, weavers and local experts — have become digital creators. The creator economy has now surpassed the \$500 million mark, powered not by polished panache but by raw authenticity! Its revolutionary power shatters barriers: In Rajasthan, women resurrect and champion vanishing oral histories through vibrant smartphone films. In Bihar, Bhojpuri creators fill the education gaps left by tradi-



C R Sasikumar

tional systems. They aren't just telling stories — they are telling "their" stories and fuelling a grassroots movement, rooted in language, identity and local pride.

We saw this raw, vernacular creative surge reshaping how India speaks, learns and leads in the recent launch of India's first public streaming platform, WAVES OTT, owned by Prasar Bharati. WAVES OTT accomplishes what commercial giants may not — by elevating daily creators, it is making local content and storytelling part of the national conversations. In today's India, the most powerful public messaging isn't top-down; it's created, uploaded, and amplified from the ground up. WAVES is not a passive pipeline of content; it is a democratic bridge. It confers institutional legitimacy on creators emerging from villages and towns and provides them with an equal opportunity to stream their content. Small-time films, established content producers, influencers, and student films can all showcase their content alongside each other.

In classrooms across India, teachers are turning into creators, and students into solopreneurs. Khan Sir from Patna — armed with chalk, wit, and a camera — educates millions through YouTube. Meanwhile, Bengaluru's Parikrma Foundation builds storytelling, theatre, and filmmaking into everyday learning. In Maharashtra, 17-year-old Shraddha Garad launched her own digital embroidery tutorial channel during the pandemic, is now selling patterns online and mentoring younger girls in her village — a student, a creator, and an entrepreneur rolled into one.

These aren't outliers — they are early signals of a systemic shift. Our policy must now respond with speed and scale. Imagine government-backed media labs and creator in-

India's creative force is exploding — not just in metros, but in village courtyards, small-town lanes, and local community centres. With affordable tech and deep cultural roots, over 100 million Indians — farmers, weavers, and local experts — have become digital creators. The creator economy has now surpassed the \$500 million mark, powered not by polished panache but by raw authenticity! Its revolutionary power shatters barriers.

cubators in every district —where students prototype campaigns, narrate local stories, and learn digital production as a life skill. But this transformation won't happen in silos. Ministries like MoE, MSDE and I&B must converge — blending skilling with storytelling, curriculum with creator capital. In a Viksit Bharat, literacy isn't just about reading and writing — it's about creating, pitching, and publishing.

Yet, the true power of the creative economy will be unlocked not only from scale but in its social resonance. In communities where institutions are slow or absent, creators are stepping in — bridging information gaps, shifting norms and activating public awareness in real time. In Odisha, tribal teenagers use Odiya rap videos to teach climate-resilient farming — reaching over 5,00,000 farmers, where traditional extension systems have fallen short (UNICEF, 2024). In Kerala, ASHA workers produce short-form health content in Malayalam, doubling engagement on TB awareness compared to state-led clinic outreach. Vernacular influencers, across platforms, have driven more than 70 million views on subjects like menstrual health, child nutrition, and vaccinations — topics too often left out of mainstream media.

As we journey towards Viksit Bharat 2047, our greatest strength will not be in factories or code — but in our capacity to imagine, narrate, and innovate. In a world shaped by algorithms, India's currency is creativity — and its potential is limitless. Let's build an India where every child is a creator, and every creator is a force for economic, cultural, and social transformation. That is the India we must shape.

The writer is a former Union Minister

Trump, EU chief strike trade deal: 15% tariffs on all imports to US

Equal levies also on EU purchases of US energy, military equipment

ANDREW GRAY & ANDREA SHALAL TURNBERRY, JULY 27

THE UNITED States has struck a framework trade deal with Europe, U.S. President Donald Trump announced on Sunday, averting a spiralling row between two allies who account for almost a third of global trade. The deal, that includes a 15% tariff on EU goods entering the U.S. and significant EU purchases of U.S. energy and military equipment, will bring welcome clarity for EU companies. However, the baseline tariff of 15% will be seen by many in Europe as a poor outcome compared to the initial European ambition of a zero-for-zero tariff deal, although it is better than the threatened 30% rate.

The announcement came after European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen travelled to Scotland for talks with US President Donald Trump to push a hard-fought deal over the line. Trump, who is seeking to reorder the global economy and reduce decades-old US trade deficits, has so far reeled in agreements with Britain, Japan, Indonesia and Vietnam, although his administration has failed to deliver on a promise of “90 deals in 90 days.”

Trump has periodically railed against the European Union saying it was “formed to screw the

EXPLAINED
Likely to affect auto imports

BRINGING DOWN the tariff on European auto exports was a sticking point for the Europeans, especially Germany, the largest E.U. economy. A 15 percent tariff on European auto exports will help level the playing field between European companies and Japanese auto exporters, which have the same tariff rate. However, it raises the pressure on other major auto exporting countries, including South Korea, Canada and Mexico, who face higher tariff rates at 25%.

United States” on trade. His main bugbear is the U.S. merchandise trade deficit with the EU, which in 2024 reached \$235 billion, according to U.S. Census Bureau data. The EU points to the U.S. surplus in services, which it says partially redresses the balance. Without an agreement, the EU had said it was prepared to retaliate with tariffs on hundreds of American products, ranging from beef and auto parts to beer and Boeing airplanes. **REUTERS WITH AP INPUTS** Join FREE Telegram Channel chat.whatsapp.com/HDvqPnxvwWb3Agy98nValQ

Thailand, Cambodia leaders to meet in Malaysia for discussions to end conflict

ASSOCIATED PRESS BANGKOK, JULY 27

THAI AND Cambodian leaders will meet in Malaysia for talks to end hostilities, a spokesperson for the Thai prime minister's office said Sunday.

This comes following pressure from US President Donald Trump to end a deadly border dispute, now in its fourth day, which has killed at least 35 people and displaced more than 218,000.

Jirayu Huangsap said Acting Prime Minister Phumtham Wechayachai will attend Monday's talks in response to an invitation from Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim “to discuss peace efforts in the region.” Anwar has been acting in his capacity as this year's chair of the 10-member ASEAN. Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Manet late Sunday night on



A refugee camp in Wat Phnom Kamboar, Cambodia, Sunday

cuss peace efforts in the region.” Anwar has been acting in his capacity as this year's chair of the 10-member ASEAN. Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Manet late Sunday night on

INDIA-US TRADE DEAL

Digital taxes: CommerceMin advised not to accept ‘unilaterally framed obligation’

RAVIDUTTAMISHRA
NEW DELHI, JULY 27

LEGAL ADVISERS to the Commerce and Industry Ministry have suggested that Indian negotiators dealing with their US counterparts should not accept Washington's proposal that prohibits India from reintroducing equalisation levy-style taxes, such as the 'Google tax', in the future, a person aware of the negotiations told *The Indian Express*.

The advice was offered on the grounds that the provisions drafted by the US did not state that both parties should refrain from applying digital taxes on each other. Rather, they sought a legal commitment only from the Indian side and were seen as a "unilaterally framed obligation", the source said.

While the US offers a range of digital services in India and American tech companies have long lobbied against any taxes on such services, India also exports a wide range of digital services to

EXPLAINED

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One-sided demand

PROVISIONS DRAFTED by the US did not state that both parties should refrain from applying digital taxes on each other. Rather, they have sought a legal commitment only from the Indian side.

the US — particularly in the IT sector — generating the majority share of its total services exports earnings from the US market.

Another concern raised with the government was that agreeing to such unilateral provisions could set a risky precedent for future trade negotiations, where similar demands could be made by other trading partners during talks with New Delhi, thereby complicating future negotiations.

In a move to assuage US concerns about India being a high-tariff nation, the Central government

in March proposed abolishing the equalisation levy on online advertisements as part of the amendments to the Finance Bill, 2025.

An equalisation levy is a measure to 'equalise' the tax treatment of resident and non-resident e-commerce companies. As part of the 35 amendments to the Finance Bill, 2025, the Centre proposed removing the 6 per cent equalisation levy (EL) it charges on digital ads, effective from 1 April 2025. A query emailed to the Commerce and Industry Ministry remained unanswered till press time.

"Digital taxation is typically discussed outside the framework of a trade agreement. It is a nation's sovereign right to decide on such matters, and India should reserve that right. Bringing it under the scope of a trade agreement weakens your position. We need to examine the digital trade chapters of the US and Australia, which India must study carefully. Australia has provided the US with a carve-out that allows for protections for US services. We also need to secure our IT/ITeS and technol-

ogy exports from taxation in the US, our largest market" Arpita Mukherjee, professor at Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations (ICRIER) said.

Notably the US has forced Indonesia to several steep terms on digital trade.

"Indonesia will provide certainty regarding the ability to transfer personal data out of its territory to the United States. Indonesia has committed to eliminate existing HTS tariff lines on "intangible products" and suspend related requirements on import declarations; to support a permanent moratorium on customs duties on electronic transmissions at the WTO immediately and without conditions," a White House statement read.

The United States Trade Representative (USTR), in its report on non-tariff barriers, had earlier cited the 6 per cent equalisation levy as a discriminatory measure against US firms.

FULL REPORT ON
www.indianexpress.com

China's mega dam on Brahmaputra, and concerns in India

DIVYAA

NEW DELHI, JULY 27

CHINA ON July 19 formally began the construction of a massive dam on the Brahmaputra river, close to the border with Arunachal Pradesh. The \$167.8-billion hydropower project, with a generation capacity of 60,000 MW, will be the world's largest upon completion.

Since being announced in 2021, the project has raised concerns in India and Bangladesh about the impact it may have on the flow of the river.

Concerns in Arunachal

The dam on the Yarlung Zangbo, as the Brahmaputra is known in Tibet, is being built at the "Great Bend", where the river makes a U-turn in Medog county before entering India at Gelling in Arunachal Pradesh. The river is called Siang in Arunachal Pradesh.

A week before the dam's groundbreaking ceremony, Arunachal Pradesh Chief Minister Pema Khandu told *PTI* that it was a potential "water bomb" and an "existential threat". He said if China "suddenly release

water, our entire Siang belt would be destroyed... In the long run... Siang and Brahmaputra rivers could dry up considerably".

Other experts too have flagged the risk of flooding due to the intentional or unintentional operation of reservoirs in Tibet, and unforeseen events such as dam failure, landslides, or earthquakes. Tibet is a seismically active zone, and the region where the dam is coming up is considered to be earthquake-prone and ecologically fragile.

EXPLAINED GLOBAL

View from Assam

The Brahmaputra is the life-line of Assam, fundamental to its economy, and central to its history, culture, and ecology. Any significant disruption in the flow of the river in the state will have far-reaching consequences.

But Assam CM Himanta Biswa Sarma on July 21 said that he was "not immediately worried because Brahmaputra... is not dependent on a single source [of water]." It gets most of its waters from Bhutan, Arunachal Pradesh, and rainwater in Assam, Sarma said.

On June 2, he had posted on X that "the Brahmaputra is not a river India depends on upstream", and that "China contributes only ~30-35% of the Brahmaputra's total flow".



In the unlikely event of China reducing water flow, "it may actually help India mitigate the annual floods in Assam", he had said.

The Indian response

While it has issued no official reaction after the July 19 ceremony, New Delhi has long been monitoring Chinese infrastructure interventions on the river. In January, Ministry of External Affairs spokesperson Randhir

Jaiswal said: "As a lower riparian state with established user rights to the waters of the river, we have consistently expressed... our views and concerns to the Chinese side over mega projects on rivers in their territory."

On July 23, Guo Jiakin, spokesperson for the Chinese Foreign Ministry, told reporters that the project was "fully within China's sovereignty". "China is engaged in cooperation with downstream countries on sharing hy-

drological data, flood prevention and disaster reduction," he said.

Ashok Kantha, a former Indian Ambassador to China, had previously told *The Indian Express* that the project, with its "very large reservoir, in a very difficult area" was "very risky, dangerous, and irresponsible". India, Kantha had said, needed to raise its concerns with China "forcefully".

India is engaged with China in a series of confidence-building measures after Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri announced last October that the two sides had reached an agreement "on patrolling arrangements along the Line of Actual Control, leading to disengagement and a resolution of the issues that had arisen in these areas in 2020".

Mitigation measures

At the heart of India's concerns, as articulated by CM Khandu, lies the fear that China may seek to weaponise the dam project at some stage, perhaps to build pressure on behalf of Pakistan during a future conflict.

India should make scientific calculations about the Chinese dam project and build its own capability to preempt any deliberate action in the future, said Uttam Sinha, senior fellow at the Manohar Parrikar Institute for Join FREE Telegram Channel chat.whatsapp.com/HDvqPnxvwWb3Agy98nValQ

Defence Studies and Analyses.

Water experts Naresh K Mathur and Debarshree Dasgupta had previously written in *The Indian Express* that as a mitigation strategy, India could plan storage on rivers of the Brahmaputra system to absorb potential variations in flows.

The storage of the Upper Siang project in Arunachal Pradesh, with its 300-metre-high dam, can serve as a buffer against variations in the flow of the river. But progress has been slowed by local resistance against the potential adverse environmental impact of the dam.

Sinha said there is a need to build more inland channels to carry the flow of excess water. The National Water Development Authority has proposed two links to connect the Brahmaputra and its tributaries to the Ganga basin with the aim of transferring surplus water to water-scarce regions.

Experts have also stressed on the need to utilise diplomatic channels to seek detailed hydrological and project-related data from China in order to assess downstream impact.

India should also have conversations with other low riparian neighbours — Bhutan, Bangladesh and even Myanmar — on developing a coordinated protocol for advance warning and disaster preparedness.

EXPLAINED GLOBAL

Israel, Palestine & the West

As Israel, with American support, continues to batter Gaza, there is a growing rift in the world — including in the West — with regards to Israel & Palestine. But it is unclear what this will amount to on the ground



BASHIR ALI ABBAS

WITH THE humanitarian crisis in Gaza growing more alarming, Israel Sunday said it would halt military operations for 10 hours a day in parts of Gaza and allow new aid corridors.

Days before, Israel and the United States had withdrawn from ceasefire negotiations with Hamas, citing the Palestinian group's lack of "good faith". The following day, on Friday, French President Emmanuel Macron announced his country would declare its recognition of a Palestinian state at the United Nations in September, drawing criticism from both the US and Israel.

On July 21, 25 countries including Italy, Canada, UK, Japan, France and the EU had asserted that "the war in Gaza must end now". In recent days, multiple Western leaders, including Macron, UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer, Canadian PM Mark Carney, and Australian PM Anthony Albanese have strongly criticised Israel's actions in Gaza.

These developments represent a global rift — including in the West — when it comes to Israel and Palestine. It is yet to be seen what this will mean on the ground.

Israel's war on Gaza

Over the past month, Israel's approach to Gaza has turned more decisive. With the US withdrawing from the ceasefire negotiations, Israel appears to have a *carte blanche* both for its maximalist military objective of eliminating Hamas and its maximalist political objective of a permanent occupation of Gaza.

A chorus of Israeli ministers, like Itamar Ben-Gvir, continue to call for Palestinians to "leave" Gaza. Defence Minister Israel Katz has laid out Israel's immediate plans for the Strip. This includes building a "humanitarian city" on the ruins of Rafah where 600,000 Palestinians would initially be "moved" and



Palestinians carry flour unloaded from a humanitarian aid convoy on Sunday. AP

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ing rift in the global order vis-à-vis Israel and Palestine.

■ The US and Israel reject any push for a Palestinian state. The alliance of the two stakeholders with the greatest ability to affect changes on the ground has held firm even as global pressures on Israel increase.

■ Several Western states, such as Canada, UK, and Germany, however, are seemingly breaking from the US-Israel alliance. While they do back Israel's immediate objectives, they also remain committed to potentially implementing the two-state solution.

Note, however, that these countries also retain their broader support for Israeli interests. Macron, for instance, called for a demilitarised Palestinian state — which would effectively deny Palestinians full sovereignty.

■ The Global South and Arab states seek an immediate end to Israel's current war in Gaza and an inclusive, negotiated two-state solution to the original dispute. However, most of these states have markedly limited abilities to actually shape events on the ground, and Arab states remain disinclined to undertake punitive economic or military measures against Israel.

Status of two-state solution

Broadly, despite the failure of the Oslo Accords of 1995, most states have stood by the two-state solution as the only achievable outcome — even as Israel progressively re-

moves the physical contours of a future Palestinian state and has killed Palestinians at record rates each day since October 2023.

A day before ceasefire talks broke down, the Israeli Knesset passed a non-binding resolution calling for Israel to annex the West Bank. Another Knesset resolution a year ago had rejected the possibility of allowing a sovereign Palestinian state. In June, Israel approved 22 new Jewish settlements in the West Bank.

Most of Israel's West Bank settlements are deemed illegal by the UN and a majority of its member states, including India. That Israeli ministers also look to re-settle Homesh and Sa-Nur in the Northern West Bank, evacuated along with the settlements in Gaza in 2005, is indicative of Israel's concerted push to leverage the war to expand its illegal occupation of Palestinian territories.

It is thus notable that France and Saudi Arabia are set to co-chair an international conference on the two-state solution at the UN from July 28. While a ministerial-level conference on the two-state solution was held at the UN in September 2024, Israel's war of attrition, combined with forced mass starvation, has sparked a renewed push to explore methods to advance the solution.

However, unlike earlier global pushes for a Palestinian state alongside Israel according to pre-1967 borders, the current international effort arguably occurs with the US and Israel being the least amenable. Even as questions over the reform of the Palestinian Authority (restricted to the West Bank since 2007) can be addressed, the question of Hamas' future remains a dead-end.

The upcoming international conference will bolster support for Palestinian statehood (recognised by 147 of the UN's 193 member states) but the degree to which participating states can influence Israeli actions remains unclear. It remains to be seen if the conference propels states to undertake punitive measures of any nature and scale against Israel, failing which Tel Aviv has little incentive to cease hostilities and territorial expansion, especially with continuing US support.

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