

National and International Weekly Current Affairs 18 to 24 December 2023

National News

The Chief Election Commissioner and Other Election Commissioners (Appointment, Conditions of Office, and Terms of Office) Bill, 2023 was passed by the Rajya Sabha.

- The Chief Election Commissioner and Other Election Commissioners (Appointment, Conditions of Office, and Terms of Office) Bill, 2023 was passed by the Rajya Sabha.
- The Bill lays out the process for naming the Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) and two Election Commissioners (ECs).
- The Election Commission of India (ECI), comprising the CEC and two ECs, is established under **Article 324 of the Constitution**.
- The President is authorized under the Constitution to nominate the CEC and ECs, subject to parliamentary approval.
- **In response to a PIL, the Supreme Court declared in March 2023 that there is a legislative vacuum regulating the nomination procedure.**
- The Supreme Court proposed a committee-based selection process that would include the Prime Minister, Chief Justice of India, and Leader of the Opposition.
- **Previously there was no separate committee of selecting the Election Commissioners.**

About

- The proposed law establishes an **organized framework with a search and selection committees, but it excludes the CJI from the process.**
- Individuals holding positions comparable to the rank of **Secretary to the Government of India shall be appointed as CECs and ECs.**
- **The Prime Minister, the Leader of the Opposition, and a Union Cabinet Minister recommended by the Prime Minister make up the selection committee.**
- The mechanism of the Bill differs from worldwide standards, with differences in selection processes in nations such as South Africa, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

- While the **Bill improves the selection process, it is criticized for favouring the existing administration.**
- Retaining the Chief Justice of India (CJI) on the selection committee, as indicated by the Supreme Court, might provide more independence.
- The Bill is expected to become law, and unanimous choices by **the selection committee may boost public trust in the Election Commission of India (ECI).**

LS passes Bills to replace British-era criminal laws

- The Lok Sabha passed three amended Bills that seek to repeal and replace criminal laws which date back to colonial times.
- This criminal law reform brings terrorism offences into a general crime law for the first time, drops the crime of sedition, and makes mob lynching punishable by death.

Key replacements

- The **Bharatiya Nyaya (Second) Sanhita Bill (BNSS) will replace the Indian Penal Code, 1860;**
- the **Bharatiya Sakshya (Second) Bill (BSS) will replace the Indian Evidence Act, 1872;** and
- The **Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha (Second) Sanhita Bill (BNSSS) replaced the Code of Criminal Procedure, 1898.**

Key points

- Indian Penal Code (IPC) is the **official criminal code of India** drafted in 1860 in the wake of the **first law commission established in 1834 under the Charter Act of 1833.**
- Code of Criminal Procedure (CrPC) **provides procedures for administering criminal law in India.** It was enacted in 1973 and became effective on 1 April 1974.
- The Indian Evidence Act, originally passed in India by the **Imperial Legislative Council in 1872**, during the British Raj, contains a set of rules and allied issues governing admissibility of evidence in the Indian courts of law.

Telecom Bill 2023

The Lok Sabha passed the **Telecom Bill, 2023**, which will replace existing laws, including the **138-year-old Indian Telegraph Act**.

Key points

- The Bill seeks to **reform and simplify the regulatory and licensing regime** for telecommunications and remove bottlenecks in creating telecom infrastructure.
- It also allows the **government to temporarily take control of telecom services** in the interest of national security and provide a non-auction route for the allocation of satellite spectrum.
- The Telecom Bill, 2023 **provides a mechanism to exercise the right of way for laying telecom infrastructure** in public as well as private property.

Lok Sabha passes Bill on CEC, EC appointment

- The Lok Sabha passed the **Chief Election Commissioner and Other Election Commissioners (Appointment, Conditions of Service and Term of Office) Bill, 2023**
- The Bill had been passed by the Rajya Sabha already.

About

- The Bill replaces the **Election Commission (Conditions of Service of Election Commissioners and Transaction of Business) Act, 1991**.
- It addresses the **appointment, salary, and removal of the CEC and ECs**
- The legislation aims to bring transparency to the appointment process, responding to a directive from the Supreme Court of India in the **Anoop Baranwal v Union of India case, 2023**.

Bill to replace the PRB Act

- Parliament passed the **Press and Registration of Periodicals Bill** to make the process of allotment of title and registration of periodicals simple through an online system without the requirement of physical interface.
- It replaces the **Press and Registration of Books Act, 1867**.

Maharashtra State News

Raigad Fort

- **Raigad Fort** lies in the **Sahyadri mountains** of Maharashtra, India,
- It is a powerful symbol of **Maratha pride** and resilience.
- It was built in the **17th century** by the legendary **Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj**
- This impregnable fortress **served as the capital of the Maratha Empire** for nearly three decades, witnessing the rise and glory of one of India's most celebrated rulers.

Foreign investors prefer Maharashtra

- **Maharashtra** remains the **top destination for foreign direct investment (FDI)** in India, attracting investments worth **₹28,868 crore** in the last **three months**.
- There is also an **anticipation** of investment of around **₹35,000 crore** in the Raigad district.

Elephanta Caves

- The **Elephanta Caves**, also known as **Gharapurichi Leni (Caves of Gharapuri)**, are a group of **rock-cut temples** located on **Elephanta Island**, off the coast of Mumbai
- These caves are **carved out of a single basalt rock face**
- **Elephanta caves** are a **UNESCO World Heritage Site**
- The caves are believed to have been **excavated between the 5th and 7th centuries CE**, during the reign of the **Kalachuri dynasty**.
- The caves are **dedicated to the Hindu god Shiva**, with various depictions of his forms and stories.

Paithani sarees

Paithani sarees are exquisite handloom silk sarees, woven with **intricate gold zari work**, originating from **Paithan**, a town in Maharashtra

- They are often called **"Queen of Silks"** for their regal splendor and **intricate weaving techniques**.
- These sarees are renowned for their **vibrant colors, and luxurious texture**, making them coveted possessions and prized heirlooms.
- These sarees are **traditionally woven with pure mulberry silk**

- The intricate zari (gold or silver thread) woven patterns showcasing birds, lotus flowers, paisleys, and geometric designs.

Chanakya Centre for Excellence

- The Maharashtra Tourism Development Corporation will build the 'Chanakya Centre for Excellence' at Karla, Lonavala.
- The centre will include amenities such as a convention hall, exhibition centre, adventure sports arena and waterpark, tent city, a 42 feet tall statue of Chanakya, a museum, and a wellness centre.
- This centre will showcase Arya Chanakya's political theory, economic thought, war strategies, lifestyle, and other philosophical ideas.

A new city called 'Third Mumbai'

- The MH state government has finalized a broad skeletal proposal for developing a new city called the 'Third Mumbai'.
- Aim is to provide better housing, infrastructure and robust transport facilities to the growing population of the Mumbai Metropolitan Region (MMR)
- The city is proposed around the Navi Mumbai International Airport
- It will be linked to Mumbai by the crucial connector Atal Bihari Vajpayee Sewri-Nhava Sheva Atal Setu, also known as Mumbai Trans Harbour Link (MTHL).

Kolhapur jaggery

- Kolhapur jaggery is a natural sweetener produced in the Kolhapur district of Maharashtra
- It has a unique taste, aroma, and health benefits.
- It earned the prestigious Geographical Indication (GI) tag in 2014
- It is made from organically grown sugarcane cultivated on the fertile banks of Panchganga and Krishna rivers.
- Sugarcane juice is boiled and clarified using natural agents like okra and lime, then concentrated and molded into blocks.
- It is rich in iron, calcium, phosphorus, potassium, and minerals.
- It has a source of antioxidants and aids digestion.

Lezim dance

- Lezim is a vibrant and energetic folk dance form originating from Maharashtra
- It is traditionally performed by women during festive occasions like Ganesh Chaturthi, Navratri, and weddings.
- The word "Lezim" is derived from the Marathi word "Lezimga," which means "to play."
- Lezim is performed by a group of women, typically ranging from 10 to 50 participants.
- The dance is accompanied by energetic drumming on dholkis (cylindrical drums) and sometimes tasha (kettledrums).
- The choreography involves synchronized steps, claps, and movements of the hands and arms.
- The dancers stand in two lines facing each other, creating a lively and visually engaging performance.
- Traditional lezim attire typically consists of colorful saris or ghagra-choli sets, adorned with ornaments like ghungroos (ankle bells).

Ajinkyatara Fort

- The Ajinkyatara Fort, also known as the Sinhagad Fort, stands sentinel atop a 2,130-foot-high peak in the Sahyadri mountain range near Pune, Maharashtra
- It was built in the 17th century by Shivaji,
- Ajinkyatara Fort played a crucial role in numerous battles.
- Its sturdy walls, fortified gates, and strategically placed cannons repelled several Mughal attacks, solidifying its status as a symbol of Maratha resistance.
- The fort changed hands multiple times throughout its history, witnessing the power struggles between the Marathas, Mughals, and British.

Shiv-Srushti project

- The Shiv-Srushti project in Chhatrapati Sambhaji Nagar (formerly Aurangabad) is an ambitious initiative aimed at creating a cultural and spiritual complex dedicated to Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj, the revered Maratha king.

The project encompasses:

1. **A grand temple:**
 - Dedicated to **Lord Shiva**, it will be a **replica of the iconic Somnath temple in Gujarat**.
2. **A museum:**
 - Housing **artifacts and exhibits** showcasing the life and **achievements of Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj and Maratha history**.
3. **Cultural center:**
 - Hosting **performing arts, exhibitions, and educational programs** promoting Maratha culture and heritage.
4. **Theme park:**
 - Featuring **rides and attractions** showcasing Maratha history and values.
5. **Open-air theater:**
 - For hosting cultural events and performances.

- The initiative has been **started at Mumbai-headquartered WR's Mumbai Division**.
- **Licensed Sahayaks (licensed porters)** play an **integral part in the railway system** in India and **add an important value in the overall train travel experience** of long-distance passengers.

Justice Shinde Committee submits report on Maratha reservation issue

- In a **significant development vis-a-vis the Maratha vs OBC reservation issue**, a committee was formed to **define the Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) for issuing Kunbi-Maratha and Maratha-Kunbi certificates based on old records**
- **Justice Sandeep Shinde (Retd)** headed the committee and has now submitted the report to the MH govt.

Note:

- **Kunbis are a sub-caste of Marathas** and are covered under **Other Backward Classes (OBCs)**.

Maharashtra to establish onion storage banks

- The **Maharashtra government** has announced that it will **establish onion storage banks** across the State and **use nuclear technology for irradiation** to extend the **freshness and shelf life** of the bulb crop.
- This **step was initiated to ensure that onion farmers don't suffer loss** due to price fluctuation and have well-equipped storage.
- Nuclear technology **involves using controlled doses of ionizing radiation** to make onions safe to eat by **killing harmful microorganisms** and extending their shelf life.

Defence Ministry signs deal for 6 next-gen OPVs for Coast Guard

- The **Defence Ministry** signed a **₹1,614.89 crore contract** with **Mazagon Dockyard Shipbuilders Limited (MDL)**, Mumbai.
- It is for **procurement of six next-generation Offshore Patrol Vessels (OPV)** for the **Indian Coast Guard (ICG)**.
- **Out of the six vessels** being procured, **four would replace the existing aging OPVs** and the other two would **augment the ICG fleet**.

Western Railway's 'Coolie No 1' initiative

- In a **unique initiative**, the **Western Railway (WR)** has launched an initiative - **'Coolie No 1'**
- It is aimed towards **mutual benefit of Licensed Sahayaks and passengers**.

9 overseas firms under ED's scanner in ₹6k cr bitcoin ponzi scam

- The Enforcement Directorate is investigating nine overseas firms, including those in Hong Kong and Estonia.
- These firms were allegedly used to divert funds from a bitcoin-based ponzi scheme operated by Variable Tech.
- The scheme collected 80,000 bitcoins and diverted funds worth INR 6,606 crore (\$915 million) through the nine firms to purchase properties abroad.
- The investigation has resulted in the provisional attachment of properties worth INR 69 crore.

New Covid-19 sub-variant JN.1 detected in Sindhudurg

- A 41-year-old man in Sindhudurg district, Maharashtra, has tested positive for the new COVID-19 sub-variant JN.1
- Recently, the World Health Organisation (WHO) has designated JN.1 as a 'variant of interest' due to its rapidly increasing spread.
- However, the global public health risk is considered 'low.'

Awareness can pave the way for the Ratnagiri nuclear energy project

- Dr. Mashelkar stated that in the present scenario, nuclear energy is essential for the nation, and more power plants need to be built.
- There have been no instances of harm caused by these plants anywhere in the country.
- Thus, if the government raises awareness among the citizens, nuclear energy projects such as the one in Ratnagiri can take hold.

'Banganga Beautification Project'

- The Banganga Beautification Project is a transformative initiative aimed at revitalizing the historic Banganga tank and its surrounding precinct in Mumbai
- Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) in collaboration with GSB Trust, a management organization of the tank is all set to give a makeover to the centuries-old

Banganga tank, located in Walkeshwar, Malabar Hill area.

- The project seeks to enhance the area's beauty, accessibility, and cultural vibrancy while preserving its rich heritage.
- It will also help to attract tourists and facilitate religious rituals.

US footwear opens a warehouse in Palava

- American footwear giant Sketchers has opened a national distribution centre in Mumbai as part of its expansion in the Indian market.
- The 6,00,000 sq ft facility at the Lodha Industrial and Logistics Park in Kalyan has been designed to streamline supply chain operations and can ship up to 60,000 units per day.

Maharashtra to alter minimum age to enter school to 3 yrs from 2024

- Admission norms in Maharashtra will be updated to align with the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020
- NEP mandates that children should be six years old when entering Class I
- In view of this, MH will alter the minimum age to enter school to 3 yrs.
- This updated policy is expected to be implemented for the 2024-25 academic year.

Person in News: Prabhakar Mande

- Prabhakar Mande, a veteran scholar in folklore, folk culture and literature, dies in Ahmednagar
- Mande hails from Chhatrapati Sambhaji Nagar
- He was conferred the Padma Shri in March 2023 for his enormous contribution.
- Mande had presented more than 25 research papers on different national and international platforms.

KIT hosts Smart India Hackathon

- The Kolhapur Institute of Technology (KIT) hosted the Smart India Hackathon with the help of AICTE Delhi, the defense ministry, the environment ministry, and the Ayush ministry.

- A team of students from the **Indore Institute of Science and Technology** grabbed the **first prize**.
- The **engineering students of the Indore-based college** developed a 'robust human target detection and acquisition' model.
- **Odisha-based Gandhi Institute of Engineering and Technology** bagged the **second prize** for 'deep learning for terrain recognition' model.

MH signs MoU for skill development

- An **MoU** was signed between the **Maharashtra State Skill Development Society**, the **Commissionerate of Skills, Employment, Entrepreneurship** and the **National Skill Development Corporation**
- It aims to **support Maharashtra International**, an international employment facility centre.

Silver crown belonging to Tulja Bhavani temple goes missing

- A **silver crown** that has been in the **Bhavani temple** since **before 2011** has been suspected to be **missing from Tulja Bhavani temple's treasury**.
- This silver crown was in **possession of Mahant Chilojibua**.
- Additionally, **other valuable antiquities such as silver jewelry, silver Trishul, and accessories made up of pearl and gold** have also gone missing from the temple treasury.

State News

Karnataka to reduce burden of school bags by 50%

- The Karnataka government has taken steps to reduce the burden of school bags by cutting 50% of textbooks for students of **classes I to X** from the **academic year 2024-25**
- Instead of providing textbooks once for the entire year, the state will give two books per year, divided into two parts, (**Summative Assessment**) **SA-1** and **SA-2**.

Key points

- In 2019, a committee comprising education experts, paediatricians, doctors, legal advisers, and officials of the **Department of State Education Research and Training**

(**DSERT**) conducted a study to reduce school bag burden.

- They concluded that the weight of school bags for students of class I to II could be in the **range of 1.5 to 2 kg**.
- For classes 3 to 5, the **proposed range was 2 to 3 kg**, for classes 6 to 8, the **proposed range was 3 to 4 kg**, and for classes 9 and 10, the recommendation was 4 to 5 kg.

Geological Survey of India opens first camp office in A.P

- The **Geological Survey of India (GSI)** opened its first camp office for **Andhra Pradesh in Vijayawada**.
- Andhra Pradesh is one of the mineral-rich States.
- The new office will **help maintain coordination with the State government** on matters related to mineral exploration.

Feeding Stations for oil spill-hit birds at creek in T.N

- After bird-life was badly hit by the recent Ennore oil spill, the TN state forest department has found close to 50 birds of different species completely 'painted' black with oil.
- Experts from the **Wildlife Trust of India (WTI)** and the **Besant Memorial Animal Dispensary (BMAD)** are planning to establish feeding stations for birds at the Ennore creek.

Key points

- TN State Department of Environment, Climate Change and Forests, the nodal agency for the oil spill clean-up, has roped in WTI to work with local volunteers and the Wildlife Warden, Chennai, **to assess how the affected birds could be rescued and rehabilitated**.
- The team is planning **to strategically set up 'cafeterias'** with nets to feed the birds with fresh fish and capture those that are sick.

International News

Along the border with Assam, Bhutan will built a sizable green

- Bhutan intends to construct a sizable "international city" that would span more **than 1,000 square kilometres** near its border with Assam.

- The concept was introduced as an **"economic corridor connecting South Asia with Southeast Asia via India's northeastern States"** by King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck of Bhutan.
- **The project includes the first railway line from India to Bhutan**, which will run to Gelephu and link to roads and border crossings into West Bengal and Assam.
- The goal of the Gelephu Smart city Project is to adhere to sustainability and environmental regulations while luring top-tier investment from carefully chosen foreign businesses.
- **The concept calls for the construction of Bhutan's second international airport, "zero emission" enterprises, and a "mindfulness city" with an emphasis on tourism and well-being.**
- To encourage foreign investment, Gelephu will function as a **"Special Administrative Region" governed by distinct legislation.**

Chief guest at the 2024 Republic Day celebrations

- **French President Emmanuel Macron** will be the chief guest at the 2024 Republic Day celebrations
- As Strategic Partners, India and France share a high degree of convergence on a range of regional and global issues.
- This year marks the **25th anniversary of the India-France Strategic Partnership**

China bans export of rare earth technologies

- China, **the world's top processor of rare earths**, banned the export of technology to extract and separate the strategic metals, as it overhauled a list of technologies deemed key to national security.
- **It also banned the export of production technology for rare earth metals** and alloy materials as well as technology to prepare some rare earth magnets.
- The move comes as Europe and the U.S. scramble to wean themselves off rare earths from China, which **accounts for 90% of global refined output.**
- Rare earths are a group of **17 metals used to make magnets for use in EVs and other electronics.**

Economy News

Green finance

- Green finance refers to the **financial arrangements** that are specific to the use for projects that are **environmentally sustainable or projects that adopt the aspects of climate change.**
- Environmentally sustainable projects include the production of energy from renewable sources like solar, wind, biogas, etc.; clean transportation that involves lower greenhouse gas emission; energy efficient projects like green building; waste management that includes recycling, efficient disposal and conversion to energy, etc.

Award news

International Hockey Federation(FIH) annual awards

- Indian men's hockey team midfielder **Hardik Singh** and women's side captain **Savita** won the **FIH Player of the Year and Goalkeeper of the Year (women) awards** respectively.
- This is Hardik's second big award after the **Hockey India Balbir Singh Sr Award** for Player of the Year 2022.
- This is Savita's third consecutive **FIH Women's Goalkeeper of the Year** award.

Sahitya Akademi Awards

Important awards

- **English language category: Neelum Saran Gour** for her novel **Requiem in Raga Janki**
- **In Hindi, writer Sanjeev** for his novel **Mujhe Pahachaano.**
- Mr. Rajasekaran for his novel **Neervazhi Padoom**

Award winners in news

- Mr. Sastry for his short story collection **Rameshwaram Kaakulu Marikonni Kathalu**
- Mr. Ramakrishnan for his literary study **Malayala Novelinte Deshakalngal.**
- Scholar Lakshmisha Tolpadi for his collection of essays **Mahabharatha Anusandhanada Bharathayatre** in Kannada.
- Bengali author **Swapnamay Chakrabarti** for his novel **Jaler Upar Pani.**
- Among the authors who will receive the honour for their poetry collections are **Vijay Verma** in

Dogri, Vinod Joshi in Gujarati, Manshoor Banihali in Kashmiri, Ashutosh Parida in Odia, and Arun Ranjan Mishra in Sanskrit.

Did you know?

- Sahitya Akademi Award is given to the most outstanding books of literary merit published in any of the major Indian languages recognised by the Akademi.
- The first Awards were given in 1955.
- Sahitya Akademi 'Yuva Puraskar' was instituted in 2011, it recognises young writers under the age of 35.

Female Athlete of the Year

- **U.S. gymnast Simone Biles** has been voted Associated Press' **Female Athlete of the Year** for a third time.
- Her triumphant return that included her record eighth U.S. national championship and a sixth world all-around gold made Biles the fourth woman in last 50 years to claim the honour for a third time **after tennis stars Serena Williams (five times), Chris Evert (four) and golfer Annika Sorenstam (three).**

Summits & Conferences News

Global Stocktake

- It refers to a proposed **five-year review of the impact of countries'** climate change actions.
- Under the Paris Agreement, every country must present a climate action plan in five-year cycles.
- The **first global stocktake was scheduled for 2023 under the Paris Agreement.**
- It will assess whether the net result of the climate actions being taken was consistent with the goal of keeping the increase in **global average temperature from pre-industrial times to within 2 degrees Celsius.**
- It will help the world determine whether it needs to do more — and how much more.
- It also recognises that money needs to be made available for **Loss and Damage and energy transition in developing countries.**

Schemes and Committee News

DevINE scheme

- The Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region (DoNER) convened a meeting with the Chief Ministers of the States in the region
- The meeting comes in the wake of a review by the Prime Ministers Office (PMO) that found that the scheme was yet to take off despite adequate funds.

About Prime Minister's Development Initiative for North East Region (PM-DevINE) Scheme

- It is a **Central Sector Scheme** with 100% central funding.
- It will be implemented by the Ministry of **Development of North Eastern Region (DoNER).**
- It will have an outlay of **Rs.6,600 crore** for the **four year period from 2022-23 to 2025-26.**
- The infrastructure projects will be funded in line with the priorities laid down under the **PM Gati Shakti program.**
- The objectives of PM-DevINE are to:
- Fund infrastructure convergently, in the spirit of PM Gati Shakti;
- Support social development projects based on felt needs of the NER;
- Enable livelihood activities for youth and women;
- Fill the development gaps in various sectors.

Palna Scheme

- The Women and Child Development Ministry **aims to establish 17,000 creches in anganwadis** across the country.
- The Ministry plans **to depute two additional creche workers** in each anganwadi.

Key points

- These initiatives are being taken under the **'Palna' scheme** to address the need for quality daycare facilities or creches for children of working women by providing a safe and secure environment for the nutritional, health and cognitive development of the children, thereby enabling more women among all socio-economic groups to take up gainful employment in the **organised and unorganised sector.**

- According to government data, **participation of women in the workforce has increased to 37% in 2022.**
- As of March 31, 2021, **13.87 lakh anganwadi and mini-anganwadi centres** are operational across the country.

Defense News

Offshore patrol vessels

The Defence Ministry signed a **₹1,614.89-crore contract with Mazagon Dockyard Shipbuilders, Mumbai** for procurement of six next-generation offshore patrol vessels for the Coast Guard.

Key points

- Of the six vessels being procured, four would replace the existing ageing vessels and the other two would augment the Coast Guard fleet
- These **modern and high-tech ships** will play a critical role in enhancing surveillance, law enforcement, search and rescue, maritime pollution response, and other important capabilities
- The vessels would be equipped with **multipurpose drones and AI capability.**

India receives price bids for 26 Rafale jets, 3 submarines

- India has received price bids from France for the purchase of **26 Rafale-M carrier-based fighters as well as three additional Scorpene-class conventional submarines.**
- The 26 jets are meant to fill the gap in the numbers till the indigenous Twin Engine Deck-Based Fighter is inducted into service.

Did you know?

- The Navy currently operates two aircraft carriers, the **INS Vikramaditya and the indigenously built INS Vikrant.**
- The major difference between the existing Scorpene-class and the new ones is their integrated combat system (ICS).
- The earlier submarines had systems from France, while the new ones will have indigenous ICS, with significant localised solutions provided by **Bharat Electronics Limited in collaboration with French suppliers.**

Ranks & Reports News

Demand for Coal is Expected to Drop by 2026

- Despite record production, global coal demand is **expected to fall by 2.3% by 2026.**
- According to the **IEA (International Energy Association)** analysis, the reduction is due to a shift toward renewable energy and plateauing demand in China.
- **India will continue to be a major driver of coal demand until 2026.**
- In 2023, global coal demand is expected to increase by **1.4%, surpassing 8.5 billion tons.**
- **Regional variations:** the EU and US forecast a 20% decline in demand, whereas India and **China expect an increase.**
- **Between 2024 and 2026, an El Nino to La Nina change is forecast, which will benefit hydroelectric generation.**

Factors contributing to the drop include :

- low-cost solar deployment and increased nuclear generation.
- China, which accounts for more than half of global coal use, predicts a drop in **2024 and a plateau in 2026.**
- Despite the drop, worldwide coal consumption is predicted to surpass 8 billion tons by 2026.
- **Coal demand is declining structurally as clean energy alternatives continue to expand.**

Unemployment: a concern for the state

- The recent breach of Parliament Security is a major occurrence in the last decade.
- **The assailants were either unemployed or dissatisfied with their current situation.**

About

- According to a review of employment-related statistics from the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE), things **got worse after the outbreak of Covid.**
- The percentage of the working-age population employed or actively looking for work is displayed in the Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR) report.
- Except for the pandemic years, India's overall LFPR in **FY23 was 39.5%, the lowest level since at least FY17.**
- It was **8.7% for women and 66% for males, the lowest percentages since at least FY17.**

- Therefore, even after the epidemic, a growing percentage of Indians in their working years were neither employed nor eager to look for jobs.

Data on Foreign tourist visits

- There has been a significant increase in the number of foreign tourists visiting India in 2023 with a footfall of 7.24 million till October compared with 6.44 million for the corresponding period in 2022.
- This is an increase of 55.6%
- The numbers though are still below the pre-pandemic levels.
- In 2018 and 2019, India saw 10.56 million and 10.93 million foreign tourist arrivals, respectively, which dipped to 2.74 million in 2020 and further to 1.52 million in 2021, majorly due to the COVID-induced lockdown.

Schemes for Financial assistance

- **Swadesh Darshan 2** is the flagship scheme of the **Ministry of Tourism** which provides financial assistance to the State governments and Union Territories and Central agencies for the development of tourism infrastructure at various destinations.
- The **Prasad (Pilgrimage Rejuvenation And Spiritual Augmentation Drive)** scheme focuses on developing and identifying pilgrimage sites across India to promote religious tourism.
- It aims to integrate pilgrimage destinations in a prioritised, planned and sustainable manner to provide a complete religious tourism experience.
- The growth of domestic tourism hugely depends on pilgrimage tourism.

E-bus penetration in India

- **CRISIL report** on E-bus penetration in India was released recently
- The share of electric buses in new bus sales across India is expected to double to 8% next fiscal from 4% in the last fiscal.
- It is driven by the central government's focus on decarbonising the public transport sector and favourable **total cost of ownership (TCO)** for an e-bus vis-à-vis buses run on other fuels

Key points

- Efforts were underway to deploy e-buses via tenders already awarded under the **Faster**

Adoption and Manufacturing of (Hybrid and) Electric Vehicles, or FAME, scheme and the National Electric Bus Programme (NEBP)

- Growth in e-buses is also supported by favourable ownership economics
- TCO for e-bus is estimated to be **15-20% lower than ICE and CNG bus**, over an estimated life span of 15 years with breakeven in 6-7 years.

Generative AI

- A report prepared by the global accounting/consulting firm, EY highlighted that by fully capitalising Gen AI technology and its applications across sectors, the country can **potentially add \$359-438 billion in FY2029-30** alone, reflecting a 5.9% to 7.2% increase over and above baseline GDP.
- Generative AI (Gen AI) has the potential to add a cumulative **\$1.2-1.5 trillion to India's GDP over seven years to 2030**
- Approximately **69% of the overall impact is expected** to be derived from sectors such as business, services, financial services, retail and healthcare.

India Skills Report

- India Skills Report is published by talent assessment agency **Wheebox in association with various agencies including All India Council for Technical Education, Confederation of Indian Industry and Association of Indian Universities.**

According to the report,

- **Kerala** has emerged as the most preferred State to work in the **India Skills Report 2024.**
- **Kochi and Thiruvananthapuram** have come second and fourth respectively among cities where both men and women prefer to work regardless of their age.
- Kerala also secured the second position in overall employability among the **18-21 age group** to reaffirm its status as a robust talent pool in the country.

For more - <https://wheebox.com/india-skills-report.htm>

Sports News

Fifth Fazza Dubai Para Badminton International 2023

- **Mansi Joshi and Thulasimathi Murugesan** emerged champions in women's doubles.
- Tokyo Paralympics champion **Pramod Bhagat** got two silver medals.

90th National billiards and snooker championships

Karnataka's **Natasha Chethan** won the sub-junior girls' snooker title in the 90th National billiards and snooker championships in Chennai.

Science and Technology News

The Era of CRISPR Therapeutics

- **Exagamglogene Autotemcel** was authorised by the **MHRA (U.K.)** to treat **sickle-cell disease and thalassemia**.
- It is one of the **first dual-approved CRISPR medicines**, having also received **FDA (United States)** approval for sickle-cell disease.
- **This marks the beginning of a new era for millions of people suffering from genetic blood diseases** such as thalassemia and sickle cell Anaemia.
- There are about a million thalassemia sufferers worldwide, with 100,000 requiring blood transfusions. **Around 20 million people are affected with sickle cell anaemia.**
- CRISPR technologies of the first generation are in use, with increasing efficacy and efficiency.
- **Base-editing, prime editing, and epigenetic impact modification are examples of emerging approaches.**
- Verve Therapeutics is experimenting with base editing to treat familial hypercholesterolemia.

Touchscreen

- A touchscreen is a surface that combines two functions: **to receive inputs for a computer (say, tapping on an app) and to display the output (launching the app).**
- Aside from smartphones, touchscreens are also found today on ATM machines, various household appliances (including TVs and AC panels), e-readers, billing systems, and electronic voting machines.

- The touchscreen was **invented by an engineer named E.A. Johnson at the Royal Radar Establishment in Malvern, U.K., in 1965**
- The two most common types of touchscreens are **capacitive and resistive**
- Of these, capacitive touchscreens are used in smartphones and other portable 'information appliances'.

NaMo app

- Prime Minister launched the **"Jan Man Survey" on the NaMo app** with exhaustive questions on the performance of his government and that of local representatives.
- The app is at the forefront of Mr. Modi's **digital interaction with people.**
- It has more than two crore subscribers.

Photoreception

- Photoreception is **activation of a biological process by light.**
- Most organisms, including humans, respond to light. Some animals react to light waves not perceived by humans.
- Vertebrates have **two types of photosensitive cells, rods and cones**, so called because of their shape.
- **The rods**, which are long and fat, contain large amounts of visual pigment and they mediate vision under dim illumination (scotopic vision).
- **The cone cells**, which are relatively small, mediate daylight vision (photopic vision) and colour sensation.
- The retinas of diurnal animals have localised areas with a high density of cone cells. (The eyes of most birds have two such areas.)
- In nocturnal animals, the retina is mainly made up of rod cells. **Rhodopsin, a photosensitive pigment** present in rods, is decolourised by photons (light particles) and slowly regenerated in the dark. This ensures better vision for them in dim light.

WHO prequalifies a malaria vaccine by Serum Institute

- The World Health Organization (WHO) added the **R21/Matrix-M malaria vaccine** to its list of prequalified vaccines.
- It is **developed by Oxford University and manufactured by Serum Institute of India.**

- In October 2023, the WHO had recommended its use for the prevention of malaria in children.
- The R21 vaccine is the **second malaria vaccine prequalified by the WHO.**

Key points

- The prequalification means larger access to vaccines as a key tool to prevent malaria in children, with it being a prerequisite for vaccine procurement by UNICEF and funding support for deployment by Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance.
- It added that both vaccines have been shown to be safe and effective in clinical trials, for preventing malaria in children.

Did you know?

- Malaria, a **mosquito-borne disease**, places a particularly high burden on children in the African region, where nearly half a million children die from the disease each year.
- In 2022, there were an **estimated 249 million malaria cases in the world**, and 6,08,000 malaria deaths across 85 countries.

Miscellaneous News

International Migrants Day

- International Migrants Day is celebrated on **18 December.**
- On this International Migrants Day, IOM **aims to position migration as one of the solutions to global challenges**, such as adapting to the impacts of climate change or providing better economic opportunities for communities.
- The theme for the 2023 is "**Act today for a better tomorrow for all: Improving the health of migrants to unleash the power of migration**"

First winter Arctic expedition

- The **Raman Research Institute (RRI)** is participating in the **first winter Indian expedition to the Arctic region.**
- The institute researchers would examine the characterisation of the radio frequency environment in the **Svalbard region of the Arctic in Norway.**
- The survey will **help astronomers assess the suitability of this uniquely located region** for carrying out precision astronomy measurements.

Key points

- India has been running its own research station, **Himadri, in Svalbard since 2008.**
- The winter expedition is a bid to maintain a year-long presence at the station.
- The month-long scientific expedition is being funded by the **Earth Sciences Ministry.**
- The **National Centre for Polar and Ocean Research, Goa**, is the nodal agency spearheading the expedition

JN.1 variant

- The Union Health Ministry has asked all States to maintain a constant vigilance over the COVID-19 situation in the country in view of the upcoming festive season and the recent surge in cases in some parts of the country.
- The alert comes following the detection of the country's first case of the new **JN.1 variant of COVID-19 in Kerala.**

No job quota for people with blood disorders

People with blood disorders such as **thalassemia, haemophilia and sickle cell disease** are **not eligible** for reservation in government jobs **under the Persons with Disabilities category.**

Key points

- The three diseases were included on the list of disabilities under the **Right to Persons with Disabilities Act of 2016**
- Under **Section 34** of the law, "**persons with blood disorders including Thalassemia are not eligible for reservation in jobs in government establishments**".
- A **4% quota in government jobs** was available for those with no vision and low vision; no hearing and low hearing; locomotor disability, including cerebral palsy; leprosy cured; dwarfism; muscular dystrophy; autism, and intellectual disability; acid attack victims; and others.

Volcano erupts in southwest Iceland

- A volcano erupted close to an Iceland power plant after weeks of intense seismic activity **southwest of Reykjavik.**
- The eruption was only 3-km from the evacuated **fishing port of Grindavik** on the **Reykjanes peninsula.**

NGC 2210

- The **densely packed globular cluster** is known as NGC 2210
- It is in the **Large Magellanic Cloud (LMC)**.
- The LMC is **about 157,000 light-years from earth**, and is a satellite galaxy of the Milky Way, meaning that the two galaxies are gravitationally bound.

Mohini Giri

Former chair of the **National Commission for Women and Padma Bhushan awardee** Dr. V. Mohini Giri passed away

About

- She was an **iconic women's rights activist**
- She founded the **Guild of Service in 1979**, which was dedicated to empowering women, underprivileged children and war widows.
- Dr. Giri was the **founder trustee of Women's Initiative for Peace in South Asia** and trustee of various organisations.

Namdapha flying squirrel

- A **nocturnal flying squirrel** has resurfaced in Arunachal Pradesh after going missing for 42 years.
- The **Namdapha flying squirrel (Biswamoyopterus biswasi)** was last described in 1981 based on a single individual found in the 1,985 sq. km. **Namdapha Tiger Reserve in Arunachal Pradesh's Changlang district.**

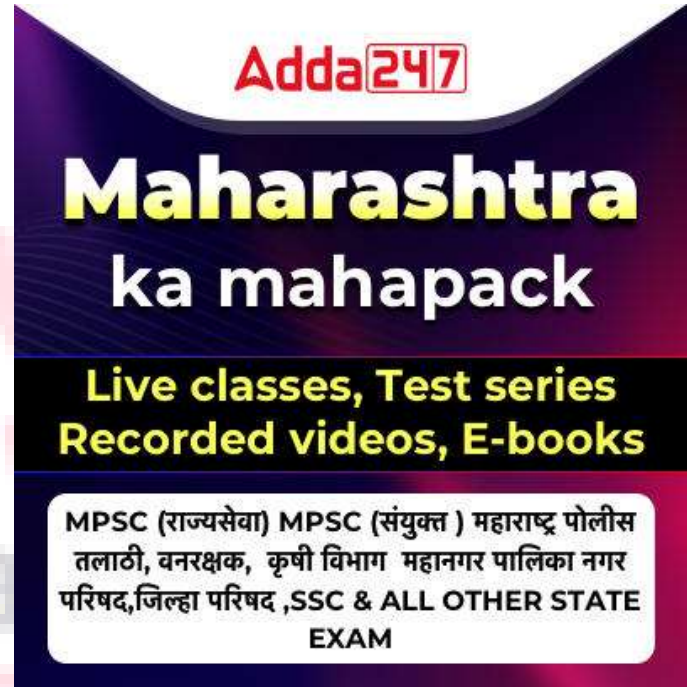
About Namdapha Flying Squirrel

- IUCN Status: **CR**
- Wildlife Protection Act Status: **Schedule II**
- Found in Arunachal Pradesh in the **Namdapha National Park**
- It is among the 25 "most wanted lost" species that are the focus of Global Wildlife Conservation's "Search for Lost Species" initiative.

One-stop health sector regulator

- The Central government is exploring **setting up a health sector regulator that will bring private and government health insurance schemes** under its purview to facilitate affordable insurance coverage for all

- The Ministries of Finance (MoF) and Health are in "initial discussions" over the need for a sector watchdog.
- Doctors' bodies have urged that private and government insurance be brought under a single regulator. Meaning, regulating government schemes like **Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana, the Central Government Health Scheme, Employees' State Insurance Corporation, etc.**



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