

The background of the cover is a photograph of a rocket launch. A large orange and white rocket is ascending, with a satellite in the foreground. The satellite is white and cylindrical, with a small Indian tricolor flag on its side. The rocket is launching from a green field, and the sky is a mix of white and light blue. The image is framed by large, curved, overlapping shapes in shades of green and orange, which are part of the overall design.

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PRIVATE ROCKET PROSPECTS

Agnikul Cosmos's successful test of the 'Agnibaan' rocket marks a significant boost for India's private space sector and innovation.

On May 30, Agnikul Cosmos successfully tested its rocket 'Agnibaan' with the 'Suborbital Tech Demonstrator' (SOrTeD) mission, marking a significant milestone in India's private space sector. This fifth attempt saw a minimal version of the 14-tonne, two-stage launch vehicle powered by 3D-printed semi-cryogenic engines. Agnikul's success aligns with India's expanding market for small satellite launch services, currently led by ISRO's PSLV and soon, the Small Satellite Launch Vehicle. However, Agnikul needs to improve its communication of test flight parameters. The private sector's test flights, including Skyroot's 'Vikram' in 2022, signify more than commercial potential. ISRO's support and shared technical expertise have accelerated these missions, potentially spurring innovation in the sector. Notably, ISRO's development of carbon-carbon composite engine nozzles for the PSLV, increasing payload capacity by 15 kg, exemplifies cross-sector knowledge transfer. The government should foster frameworks for free-flowing knowledge, ensuring advancements in aerospace benefit broader scientific fields.



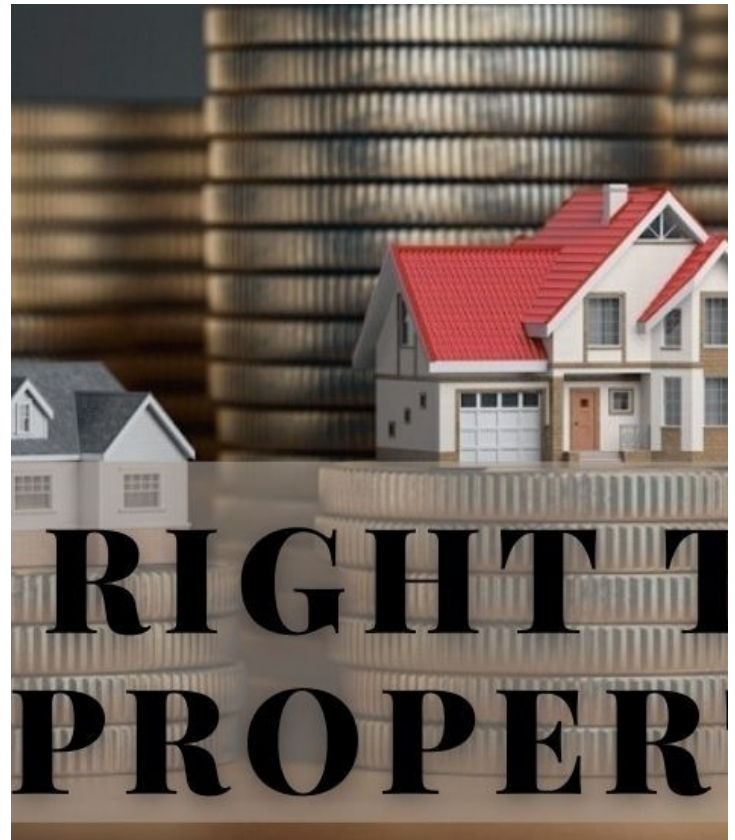
BABY TRAFFICKING PREVENTION

The recent bust of an inter-State baby smuggling racket by Telangana police highlights a serious socio-economic issue. This gang, operating across Delhi, Pune, Telangana, and Andhra Pradesh, was involved in 'purchasing' babies and selling them to childless couples. They charged between ₹1.80 lakh and ₹5.50 lakh per baby, earning commissions from ₹50,000 to ₹1 lakh. Poverty often forces biological parents to sell their newborns, while the high demand and long waiting times for legal adoption drive desperate couples to illegal means. Legal adoption processes can take two to four years, exacerbating the issue. The government's current efforts in apprehending such gangs are only short-term solutions. Long-term measures must address root causes like poverty alleviation, youth employment, awareness about adoption schemes, and streamlining bureaucratic processes. Ensuring the best interests of the child is crucial in curbing such illegal activities and preventing children from being treated as commodities in a black market.



PROPERTY COMPENSATION

The evolution and legal debates surrounding property rights and compensation in India, emphasizing the need for just and fair compensation.



The article discusses the evolution of property rights and compensation in India, focusing on key judicial and legislative developments. Initially, the Indian Constitution regarded the right to property as a fundamental right, sparking debates on compensation adequacy when property was acquired by the state. The conflict began with the *Bela Banerjee* case, where the Supreme Court mandated "just equivalent" compensation for deprivation of property under Articles 19(1)(f) and 31(2). To counter this, the Fourth Amendment in 1955 declared compensation non-justiciable. In 1971, the term "compensation" in Article 31(2) was replaced with "amount" to avoid judicial scrutiny, upheld by the Supreme Court in *Kesavananda Bharati*.

Post-1977 political changes led to the deletion of the right to property from the Constitution, reclassifying it under Article 300-A as a legal right. Justice K.K. Mathew emphasized that compensation's adequacy was inherently tied to social and economic considerations, relating to the directive principles and basic structure doctrine. Recent judgments, such as in the *Kolkata Municipal Corporation* case, reinforced the requirement for adequate compensation, reinstating the need for judicial review to ensure fairness and equity in property acquisition and compensation. The overarching theme is the ongoing balance between state authority and individual property rights, highlighting the fundamental need for just and fair compensation.

ECONOMIC ISSUES POST-ELECTION



The election results highlight the electorate's focus on economic issues like unemployment, low wages, and the need for social justice.

The recent Lok Sabha election results have surprised many, challenging exit polls and analysts' predictions. The focus on social justice, caste census, and economic issues seemed to sway voters. The electorate's message highlights economic challenges such as unemployment, low wages, inadequate livelihoods, and rising costs of essentials, which were allegedly neglected by the government.

The focus was on addressing these concerns, particularly in regions like Uttar Pradesh. Promises included expanding social and economic rights through better-funded employment schemes, universal pensions, and improved public services for health and education. Emphasis on youth, women, and workers' rights and economic dignity were central to the campaign. Two critical policy changes are proposed: ensuring basic social rights and creating jobs to meet young people's aspirations. Addressing these requires public employment expansion and supporting micro, small, and medium enterprises.

The article critiques the government's approach to welfare schemes, suggesting a shift towards human rights-based frameworks. Additionally, the revival of federalism is seen as essential, advocating for state governments to have more autonomy in public service delivery, reducing central interference.

RE-DEMOCRATISATION CHALLENGES

The recent Indian election marks a potential shift towards re-democratisation, emphasizing coalition governance and social justice.

The 18th Indian general election signifies the end of a political cycle, marked by the Bharatiya Janata Party losing its majority. Despite this, a complete shift in power dynamics has not occurred, and the political landscape shows signs of a re-democratisation process. For the past decade, political and economic power concentrated in a few hands, side-lining Parliament and federal institutions. This period saw increased identity politics and communal polarisation, often marginalising minorities. Although the current power structure remains largely intact, the need for coalition governance might alter the political scenario. The Election Commission's actions, alongside potential judicial decisions, could lead to changes in governance and policy enforcement. Historical parallels indicate that federalism and political inclusivity might be revitalised, partly due to the coalition pressures and judicial interventions.

Social justice initiatives and political mobilisations, driven by various regional and national leaders, focus on inclusion and equality. These efforts aim to counter previous policies that marginalized certain groups. Future political narratives and reforms will likely emphasise unity, diversity, and federalism, shaping a more inclusive political discourse and governance framework in India.



7-06-2024

MISGUIDED JUDGMENT



The Madhya Pradesh High Court's ruling on inter-faith marriage under the Special Marriage Act misinterprets the law, imposing personal religious norms on secular unions.

The Madhya Pradesh High Court's decision to deny protection to an inter-faith couple, citing the invalidity of their marriage under Muslim law, demonstrates a significant legal misinterpretation. The Special Marriage Act (SMA) of 1954 was established to enable inter-faith marriages without adhering to religious rituals. Despite this, the judge erroneously examined Muslim law to conclude that a Muslim cannot marry an "idolatress or fire-worshipper," deeming such a marriage irregular. The SMA should override personal laws in inter-faith marriages, making the judge's focus on religious validity irrelevant. The judge acknowledged that SMA marriages cannot be contested based on ritual non-performance but drew a flawed conclusion that invalid marriages under personal law remain invalid under the SMA. This interpretation misapplies a provision meant to prevent misuse of the SMA for marriages within prohibited relationships. The court's approach imposes religious law on secular marriages and undermines the SMA, potentially pushing individuals towards religious conversion to validate their marriages. Allowing this judgment to persist would weaken the SMA and obstruct efforts toward a uniform civil code, thereby privileging religious personal law over secular marriage laws.

GLOBAL PLASTICS TREATY

The Global Plastics Treaty aims to reduce plastic pollution by integrating and protecting informal waste workers' contributions and livelihoods.



As discussions continue for an international treaty on plastic pollution, it is vital to consider its support for informal recycling workers. According to the OECD, global plastic waste was 353 million tonnes in 2019, set to triple by 2060. Only 9% was recycled, with informal workers responsible for 85% of this. They reduce landfill use, lower waste management costs, and contribute to sustainability. Despite their contributions, informal waste workers face challenges such as privatization and exclusion from waste management policies. The UN estimates that inadequate collection services lead to significant plastic pollution. Effective inclusion of informal workers is crucial for waste reduction strategies.

The Global Plastics Treaty aims to establish a legally binding agreement to reduce plastic pollution, initiated in 2021 during the UN Environment Assembly in Nairobi. Ongoing negotiations emphasize the importance of involving informal waste workers to ensure social justice and equity. India advocates for integrating repair, reuse, and recycling without eliminating plastic use, highlighting the need for country-specific strategies. Recognizing the vital role of informal waste pickers is essential for the treaty's success, ensuring their perspectives and livelihoods are protected. This inclusive approach aims to create a sustainable future, leaving no one behind.



NEET CONTROVERSIES

NEET faces significant allegations and logistical challenges, prompting calls for thorough investigations and improved exam management.

In its decade-long implementation, NEET has faced significant issues, with recent allegations prompting the National Testing Agency (NTA) to form a committee to investigate the 2024 exam. About 1,500 students from six centres reported problems such as wrong question papers, torn OMR sheets, technical glitches, and delays, leading to incomplete exam times. Courts granted grace marks to affected students. Post-result analyses revealed improbably high scores, including some near-perfect scores. The NTA attributed these anomalies to court-mandated grace marks and an easier exam. Additionally, the exam faced allegations of question paper leaks and inaccuracies in official answer keys. These issues have led to calls from political parties and student groups for a third-party investigation and a retest. NEET, taken by nearly 23 lakh students annually, continues to encounter significant logistical and security challenges. Experts suggest that while errors in such a large-scale exam are inevitable, the NTA must enhance its efforts to prevent technical glitches and cheating. There are also calls for single-window counselling for admissions, reevaluating the zero-percentile benchmark for PG admissions, and strict regulation of fees in private medical colleges.

CLIMATE ACTION MILESTONE



The ITLOS advisory opinion reinforces state obligations to mitigate climate change impacts on marine environments under UNCLOS.

On May 21, 2024, the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea (ITLOS) delivered an advisory opinion on climate change, marking a significant milestone in international climate litigation. The advisory opinion was sought by the Commission of Small Island States on Climate Change and International Law (COSIS), focusing on the obligations of states under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) to mitigate climate change. The Tribunal confirmed that states have a duty to prevent, reduce, and control marine pollution from anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions, including carbon dioxide. The ITLOS opinion highlights that greenhouse gases have substantial effects on marine environments, such as ocean acidification and sea-level rise. This opinion reinforces the scientific consensus that human-induced carbon emissions significantly impact climate change.

The legal importance of this opinion lies in its emphasis on the principle of prevention or no harm rule, which requires states to avoid causing trans-boundary harm. The advisory opinion underscores the collective interest in addressing climate change and obligates states to take necessary measures to mitigate greenhouse gas emissions based on the best available science and international standards, such as those in the Paris Agreement and the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change. The ITLOS opinion is seen as a crucial step towards holding states accountable for their climate obligations, promoting a stronger global response to climate change.

India's Looming FINANCIAL CRISIS



India's rapid credit growth and excessive lending, driven by hype around digital infrastructure, risk leading to a financial crisis without a shift towards sustainable economic policies.

Rapid credit growth is often viewed as a pathway to prosperity but frequently leads to financial crises. Economist Robert Shiller describes this as **"irrational exuberance,"** a term echoed by economists Carmen Reinhart and Kenneth Rogoff. They argue that financial booms are often followed by crises, despite assurances that "this time is different." India currently mirrors this pattern, driven by hype around its digital infrastructure, which is expected to spur financial innovation and inclusion. However, this narrative has led to poorly regulated financial sectors and excessive lending. Recent reports by international and domestic bodies have praised robust growth in bank lending, yet this masks underlying risks.

The financial sector's focus on consumer lending over prudent investments has created a debt-ridden populace. This unsustainable borrowing, coupled with India's high household debt-service ratio, signals potential financial instability. The financial industry's unchecked growth and the government's failure to promote long-term economic stability exacerbate this issue. To avert a crisis, India needs policies that emphasize productivity-enhancing investments and avoid the pitfalls of excessive credit growth. This approach should balance economic growth with financial stability, ensuring sustainable development and preventing future economic downturns.

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

Banning films or books to prevent communal tension undermines democratic principles and freedom of expression.



The article discusses the importance of freedom of expression, particularly in the context of banning films and books. It criticizes the Karnataka government's decision to halt the release of the Hindi film "Hamare Baarah" due to potential communal tension, stating that such actions violate democratic principles. The Bombay High Court initially stayed the film's release but later lifted the ban after some dialogues were removed, emphasizing that certified films should not be subject to further scrutiny by law enforcement. The Supreme Court of India has upheld the stance that freedom of expression cannot be curtailed due to threats of violence, as noted in the 1989 judgment on the film "Ore Oru Gramathile." The article argues that while not all content should be endorsed, especially if it spreads hate or propaganda, it is crucial for society to counter such narratives through factual discourse rather than bans. The film "Hamare Baarah" is critiqued for perpetuating stereotypes about the Muslim community, which can fuel communal discord. The emphasis is on promoting a free and open society where diverse viewpoints are allowed, and sectarian propaganda is challenged constitutionally.

MIGRANT WORKERS' PLIGHT



A fire in a Kuwaiti labor camp reveals the dire conditions of Indian migrant workers, urging the Indian government to ensure better safety and welfare measures.

A fire in a labor camp in Kuwait, resulting in numerous casualties, highlights the precarious conditions of Indian migrant workers in the country. Many Indian migrants, lured by promises of better opportunities, face exploitation and hazardous living conditions. This incident underscores the need for the Indian government to take more proactive measures in safeguarding the rights and welfare of its citizens abroad. The tragedy has exposed the poor safety standards in the labor camps where many Indian workers live, calling for better enforcement of labor laws and improved living conditions. A stronger role for the Indian embassy in ensuring the welfare of its nationals is essential, alongside broader efforts to address the exploitation of migrant workers. International cooperation is necessary to protect their rights. The Indian government is urged to step up its efforts in ensuring humane working conditions and to take immediate action to prevent such tragedies in the future.



RISING FOOD INFLATION

Despite a slight dip in overall inflation, food prices continue to soar, especially impacting urban areas and the poor.

In May, India's provisional headline retail inflation slightly eased to a 12-month low of 4.75%, but food inflation remained high, causing significant concern. The Consumer Food Price Index showed food inflation at 8.69%, with urban areas experiencing a higher rate of 8.83%. Vegetables and pulses were the main drivers, with vegetable inflation above 27% for six consecutive months and key items like potatoes, tomatoes, and onions showing substantial price increases. Retail prices for these vegetables were significantly higher compared to the previous year, and wholesale prices indicated further potential increases. Cereals and products also saw price gains, with rice and wheat becoming more expensive by 13% and 5.7% year-on-year, respectively. Pulses experienced a price rise, with inflation rates for gram dal, tur, urad, and moong ranging from 8.5% to 27% compared to the previous year. Additionally, a 12% rainfall deficit since June 1 adds to concerns, despite an 'above normal' monsoon forecast. Given that food inflation disproportionately affects the poor, it is crucial for policymakers to remain vigilant and take effective measures to control these rising prices.



GLOBAL GENDER GAP

The Global Gender Gap report 2024 shows slow progress, with full parity projected to take 134 years.

The Global Gender Gap report 2024 by the World Economic Forum (WEF) reveals that the global gender gap is 68.5% closed, a marginal increase from 68.4% in 2023. At this rate, full parity will take 134 years. Iceland ranks first, closing over 90% of its gender gap. India has slipped to 129th out of 146 countries, closing 64.1% of its gap, with slight declines in education and political empowerment. India needs to close the 17.2 percentage point literacy rate gap between men and women and improve women's representation in Parliament, which has decreased to 13.6%. Despite slight improvements in economic participation, India's labour force participation rate remains low at 45.9%. Measures to bridge these gaps include preventing girls from dropping out of higher education, providing job skills, ensuring workplace safety, and promoting shared household responsibilities. The Women's Reservation Bill, 2023, which aims to reserve one-third of seats in the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies for women, is yet to come into effect. WEF Managing Director Saadia Zahidi emphasizes the need for governments to create conditions for businesses and civil society to collaborate on achieving gender parity as an economic necessity.

KAVACH DEPLOYMENT



The Indian Railways' delay in implementing the Kavach safety system is due to a lack of focus, not financial constraints, despite sufficient budget allocations for full deployment within a decade.

The article discusses the delay in deploying 'Kavach,' the Indian Railways' Automatic Train Protection (ATP) system, which could have potentially prevented accidents like the recent Sealdah-bound Kanchenjunga Express collision in Darjeeling. Despite the system's proven benefits in avoiding collisions, the progress of its implementation remains sluggish. Railway Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw attributes the delay to a lack of focus rather than financial constraints. The current pace of deployment, which started in 2016, is far behind schedule, with field trials completed only by 2018-19 and limited implementation since then.

The capital expenditure budget of Indian Railways has seen substantial increases, peaking at ₹2,52,000 crore in FY25. However, even allocating less than 2% of this budget annually could ensure full deployment of Kavach across all tracks and engines within a decade. The estimated cost to cover the entire railway network with Kavach is around ₹45,000 crore, yet the yearly investment needed is approximately ₹4,500 crore. The slow progress is evident from the fact that at the current rate, it would take 46 years to cover all tracks and 100 years for all engines.

Despite the urgent need and financial feasibility, the lack of focus continues to hinder the widespread implementation of this crucial safety system.



LEADER

OF THE OPPOSITION (LOP)

The 2024 election resulted in the largest Opposition in Lok Sabha's history, with over 234 seats.

The 2024 general election is historic, resulting in the largest Opposition in the Lok Sabha's history, with over 234 seats. The Opposition's size revived the debate on the Leader of the Opposition (LoP), who should have a minimum of 10% membership in the House as per Direction 121. The recognition and categorization of parliamentary parties for facilities in Parliament do not include the LoP's recognition.

The 1977 Act, defining the LoP's salary and allowances, identifies the leader of the largest Opposition party as the Leader. This role has gained significance in forming a shadow cabinet, which critiques government policies and offers alternatives. The LoP's larger size influences Parliament's dynamics, enhancing their role in legislative debates and policy scrutiny.

The 10th Schedule, enacted later, defines party categorization based on member strength. This change makes it crucial for the Opposition's leadership to secure substantial membership. Historically, leaders like Nehru engaged with Opposition leaders for robust governance.

In 2024, the diverse Opposition comprises various ideologies, with the LoP needing to unify these groups. Despite having no official state status since 1977, the LoP is pivotal in holding the government accountable and shaping policies. The larger Opposition's presence will likely lead to more rigorous scrutiny and debate, maintaining democratic checks and balances in the House.

FISHERIES DISPUTE

The recent fishing resumption off India's eastern coast led to a Sri Lankan sailor's death and highlighted the urgent need for renewed India-Sri Lanka negotiations to address the fisheries dispute and transition Tamil Nadu fishermen to sustainable practices.

The recent resumption of fishing off India's eastern coast has resulted in the death of a Sri Lankan sailor during an operation to chase away Indian trawlers near Jaffna. The Sri Lankan Navy impounded a trawler and apprehended 10 fishermen, prompting intervention requests for their release. Efforts are ongoing to secure the early release of 34 fishermen in remand and six serving sentences. This situation underscores the need for renewed negotiations between India and Sri Lanka to address the fisheries dispute, which has been exacerbated by the 1974 and 1976 maritime boundary agreements. While illegal crossings by Indian fishermen must cease, it is crucial to consider their livelihoods and the preservation of the marine ecosystem. Transitioning Tamil Nadu fishermen away from bottom trawling to alternative practices like deep sea fishing and marine farming is essential but challenging. The current deep sea fishing project by the Union and Tamil Nadu governments has underperformed, delivering only 61 vessels in seven years. It is suggested that the Union government align this project with a national program to increase vessel cost support, enhancing participation. Collaborative efforts between India, Sri Lanka, and local fishing communities are vital for resolving the dispute and protecting both economic and environmental interests.

GST COUNCIL MEETING

The GST Council's recent meeting led to significant reforms aimed at simplifying the tax regime and planning for future rationalization.



The Goods and Services Tax (GST) Council convened for the first time in nearly nine months, featuring 11 new State Ministers and a recalibrated NDA government. The agenda included clarifications, tweaks, forbearances, and procedural changes based on industry feedback. While deliberations on all accumulated issues could not be concluded, the Council plans to reconvene in August.

Notable outcomes include the exemption of hostel accommodation costing up to ₹20,000 per month from GST, along with railway services availed by passengers. A uniform 12% GST rate was approved for packing cartons, milk cans, and solar cookers, simplifying previous classification differences.

The Council decided to waive interest and penalties on tax dues for the first three years of GST, provided they are paid by March 2025. Pre-deposits for GST Appellate Tribunals were reduced, and a new form was introduced for correcting errors in previous returns. The anti-profiteering clause was ended, and phased biometric-based Aadhaar authentication for GST registrations was mandated.

The Council also plans to rationalize the multiple-rate GST structure from the 2021 plan. Simplifying and decluttering the seven-year-old tax regime remains a priority, with a focus on broader reforms beyond rate adjustments. The Council aims to provide a road map for exempting items like petroleum and electricity from GST, indicating potential future reforms.

TRADE TRAPEZE

ON INDIA'S EXPORTS

India's recent export rebound shows promise, but a rising trade deficit and challenges in key sectors highlight the need for enhanced government support and revitalized export schemes.



India's merchandise exports rebounded after a difficult 2023-24, where they fell by 3.1% to around \$437 billion. Recent months show positive trends, with exports increasing by 1.1% in April and 9.1% in May. The January to March quarter saw a 4.9% growth, reaching a seven-quarter high of over \$120 billion despite disruptions in the Red Sea route. Both exports and imports have risen in four of the last five months. The European Central Bank's recent interest rate cut has raised hopes for increased demand, but rising prices of industrial commodities and food items could dampen these expectations. The U.S. Federal Reserve has indicated only one rate cut this year.

In May, 20 of India's top 30 export items exceeded last year's figures, with sectors like apparel, man-made yarn, and engineering goods recovering. However, spice exports fell by 20.3%, and marine products continued to decline, affected by negative quality and workplace standards reports. May's import bill reached a seven-month high of \$61.9 billion, widening the trade deficit to \$23.8 billion, driven by a record \$13.2 billion deficit in petroleum products. Officials believe rising services exports and global investment inflows will offset the trade deficit. However, declining foreign direct investment inflows, cautious IT services earnings, and slow private investments pose challenges. To boost exports, the government needs to revitalize schemes and increase budgetary support for export initiatives.

G-7 OUTREACH SUMMIT

Italy hosted the G-7 Outreach Summit, inviting Global South nations to address energy issues and reassess the group's global relevance amidst current challenges.

The G-7 Outreach Summit, hosted by Italy's Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, welcomed leaders from 10 countries, including India's Prime Minister. The event aimed to move beyond the traditional "West vs the Rest" narrative by inviting Global South nations and BRICS members like Brazil, India, and the UAE, and addressing energy issues with seven African countries. Historically, the G-7, a coalition of the world's leading democracies, tackled global financial and development problems effectively. However, recent challenges such as manufacturing slowdowns, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the Russia-Ukraine conflict have diminished its impact, making its meetings appear less effective. The joint communiqué from the summit lacked decisive action plans and instead listed global issues. The G-7's support for Ukraine, calls for a Gaza ceasefire, and criticism of China's practices were notable but lacked concrete plans. Despite discussions on infrastructure projects, including the India-Middle East-Europe Corridor, the focus on execution was missing.

For India, attending the summit for the eleventh time, the event offered a platform for Modi to engage with global leaders. However, significant bilateral meetings with the U.S. and Canada did not occur. It emphasized democratic victories, technology's role in reducing inequalities, and the Global South's value. These discussions might be more effective in the G-20, prompting the G-7 to reassess its identity and purpose in the evolving global landscape.



JUSTICE K. CHANDRU

COMMITTEE REPORT ON CASTE DISCRIMINATION

Efforts to end caste discrimination in Tamil Nadu schools should go beyond concealing caste identities.



Efforts to end caste discrimination in Tamil Nadu schools must extend beyond concealing caste identities. The Justice K. Chandru Committee, formed after a violent attack on two Scheduled Caste siblings by dominant community schoolmates, recommended measures to mitigate caste-based tensions. Key suggestions include prohibiting students from wearing caste-identifiable wristbands, rings, or forehead marks, using caste-referenced bicycles, and bearing school names with caste appellations. The report also emphasizes maintaining students' caste confidentiality.

Recommendations also extend to establishing a Social Justice Monitoring Committee to revise curricula, ensuring inclusion of social justice topics, and revising B.Ed and Diploma syllabuses to foster inclusivity. However, the suggestion to replace school-based noon meal kitchens with centralized kitchens is considered impractical and regressive, as it might not address discrimination effectively and would deprive children of fresh meals.

The idea of creating a uniformed Social Justice Students Force is also viewed cautiously, with existing organizations like NCC, Scouts and Guides, and NSS deemed sufficient. Addressing broader social discrimination, including in children's environments and political misuse of caste identities, is crucial. True change requires village-level transformation and political commitment to transcend caste divisions for lasting harmony among school students.

HOOCH TRAGEDY

The Kallakurichi hooch tragedy in Tamil Nadu, caused by methanol-laced moonshine, highlights policy and enforcement failures, claiming 39 lives.

The hooch tragedy in Kallakurichi, Tamil Nadu, has claimed 39 lives, with many more in critical condition, due to the consumption of methanol-laced moonshine. This incident highlights significant policy and enforcement failures, as similar tragedies occurred in 2023 in nearby regions, where industrial methanol was diverted to illicit brewing. The availability of cheap hooch, driven by the high prices and exploitation at the Tamil Nadu State Marketing Corporation Limited (TASMAC) shops, attracted regular drinkers with irregular incomes to local brews. The Prohibition Enforcement Wing, responsible for curbing such trends, failed to act in time.

In response, the State government has taken action against district officials, formed an inquiry committee, and announced compensation for the victims' families. The CB-CID has initiated an investigation. Despite these measures, they come too late to prevent the tragedy. Methanol, a toxic substance even in small quantities, causes severe health issues and death. Although the State had previously controlled hooch deaths by selling low-cost liquor through TASMAC and regulating methanol supply, the Kallakurichi incident indicates a lapse in enforcement. The government must shut down the illicit brewing industry and enhance public health awareness about the dangers of consuming hooch to prevent future tragedies.



NTA

OVERHAUL NEEDED

The National Testing Agency faces intense scrutiny and requires significant reforms to restore credibility after multiple examination irregularities.

The National Testing Agency (NTA) is facing severe scrutiny after the abrupt cancellation of the UGC-NET exam, adding to its recent troubles with irregularities in NEET-UG and JEE. The Education Ministry, learning from past mistakes, acted swiftly on cybercrime inputs to cancel the UGC-NET and order a CBI probe, unlike its delayed response to NEET allegations. However, this provides little solace to over nine lakh affected candidates who invested heavily in preparation and travel.

The shift of the UGC-NET exam from offline (handled by CBSE) to online (by NTA) and back to offline this year raises concerns about security and transparency. Full disclosure and accountability are crucial for restoring the NTA's credibility. The government needs to consider a comprehensive overhaul of NTA's systems to prevent future issues like technical glitches, cheating, and paper leaks. The situation has sparked political debates, with some Opposition leaders suggesting dismantling the NTA and transferring exam responsibilities to states. While decentralization may help manage exams better, collaboration between the States and Centre is essential to restore the examination system's integrity and ensure the future of India's students and young voters.

RESERVATION QUOTA CEILING

The Patna High Court invalidated Bihar's decision to increase reservations beyond the 50% ceiling, citing lack of adequate justification for special circumstances.

The Patna High Court's recent judgment invalidates the Bihar government's decision to increase reservations for various communities in employment and education, maintaining the 50% ceiling on total reservations. The ruling struck down the enhancement of Backward Classes (BC) reservation from 12% to 18%, Extremely Backward Communities (EBC) from 18% to 25%, and Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes from 16% to 20% and 1% to 2%, respectively. This would have raised the total reservation to 65%. The court's decision aligns with judicial precedents that prohibit reservations exceeding 50%, thwarting Bihar's plan to use Caste Survey data to expand affirmative action. The court sided with petitioners arguing that 'adequate representation' doesn't equate to 'proportionate representation', as clarified in the Indra Sawhney verdict (1992).

The court rejected Bihar's argument that special circumstances warranted exceeding the quota ceiling. While Indra Sawhney allowed for such an exception in "extraordinary situations," the court determined that only geographical remoteness qualifies, thus denying Bihar's claim. The court found no thorough study supporting the enhanced reservation. Despite this, denying a backward state like Bihar the ability to expand social justice programs seems unjust. Although there may be a need to reevaluate the BC or EBC list based on recent progress, blocking all attempts to increase representation of historically deprived sections purely based on the quota ceiling is questionable.



SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Recent Supreme Court judgments emphasize a nature-centric, rights-based approach to sustainable development in the Indian Himalayan Region (IHR), addressing the conflict between economic growth and environmental conservation.



The Indian Himalayan Region (IHR), vital for India's water supply and ecosystem, faces a conflict between its development needs and the pursued economic model. Recent Supreme Court judgments highlight the need for a rights-based, nature-centric development approach in IHR, emphasizing sustainable growth for both people and nature. The Court's rulings, notably in the State of Telangana and Others vs. Mohd. Abdul Qasim case, stress respecting natural cycles and ecosystems.

However, the current development model, including hydropower projects and road expansion, threatens the IHR's delicate environment. A National Disaster Management Authority report underscores the risks of unplanned construction, leading to disasters like floods and landslides. Additionally, recent litigation on wildlife protection, specifically concerning the Great Indian Bustard, showcases the Court's commitment to biodiversity, reinforcing conservation efforts and recognizing the interdependence of ecological health and human rights.

The Court's integration of fundamental rights with environmental sustainability advocates for a balanced approach to development, considering both immediate and long-term ecological impacts. This perspective is essential for equitable, inclusive growth, ensuring communities adapt to climate challenges. The judgments call for a holistic view, integrating legal, policy, and scientific insights to mitigate disaster impacts, emphasizing a sustainable, resilient future for the IHR.