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The Shompen people, a vulnerable tribal group of the Nicobar islands. FILE PHOTO

# Empower the guardians of the earth, do not rob them

A unilateral decision to establish three wildlife sanctuaries in southern Nicobar will deprive the indigenous peoples of their ancestral territories. For millennia, these historically isolated indigenes have relied on these islands as resource reservoirs for sustenance and protected them

**Ajay Saini**  
**Manish Chandi**

*The ₹72,000-crore mega infrastructure project on Great Nicobar will now also have an international cruise terminal and a shipbreaking yard, as proposed by the Union Shipping Ministry. In this article, dated April 22, 2024, Ajay Saini and Manish Chandi talk about the rights of the indigenous communities over the little islands of the Andaman and Nicobar archipelago and how they have been able to protect and preserve the area's ecological balance.*

**I**n the southern expanse of the Andaman and Nicobar archipelago, off the shores of Little Nicobar, lie seven tiny islands. Classified as “uninhabited” in the government’s records, these islets are nonetheless integral to the indigenous communities of the region. Two, officially called Meroë and Menchal, are known as Piruii and Pingayak, respectively, to the Payuh, the indigenous southern Nicobarese peoples, who hold traditional rights over these and other islets.

For millennia, these historically isolated indigenes have relied on these islands as resource reservoirs for sustenance and protected them. Menchal is revered, used, and protected under the spiritual realm called Pingayak (a spirit that is believed to reside on the island), prohibiting the overexploitation of resources or any undue harm to its ecosystem. Similarly, Meroë is believed to be the abode of a legendary islander community. Here, too, spiritual belief systems influence how the islanders use and protect natural resources.

Meroë and Menchal are managed by community elders as guardians and

specific individual caretakers. They ensure the protection of the island’s resources and sustainability. In today’s world, this phenomenon goes by the name of “conservation” and “sustainable use”, among other terms and phrases.

## Conservation colonialism

In May 2022, in complete disregard of the indigenous land ownership and management systems, the Andaman and Nicobar (A&N) administration issued three public notices, announcing its intention to create three wildlife sanctuaries: a coral sanctuary at Meroë Island, a megapode sanctuary at Menchal Island, and a leatherback turtle sanctuary on Little Nicobar Island.

In mid-July, the A&N administration issued an order asserting that it did not receive any claims or objections from any individual regarding the land and marine areas within the three proposed sanctuaries; that no individual enjoys any rights within the boundaries of the proposed sanctuaries. And, that there will be “restriction on the people of neighbouring area to enter into these islands... in the national interest.”

Approximately 1,200 southern Nicobarese inhabit Patai Takaru (Great Nicobar Island), and Patai t-bhi (Little Nicobar Island), holding traditional rights over both inhabited and ostensibly “uninhabited” islands. Yet, the A&N administration neither consulted nor informed the southern Nicobarese of its plans.

Despite verbal supplications and a letter in August 2022 from the Little & Great Nicobar Tribal Council that expressed the community’s concerns to the A&N administration and the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate

Change, the A&N administration proceeded to issue official notifications in October 2022, designating the whole of Meroë (2.73 square kilometres, including the surrounding marine area) and Menchal (1.29 sq. km), along with a 13.75 sq. km area (including 6.67 sq. km. of water area within the baseline system) on Little Nicobar (140 sq. km), as wildlife sanctuaries.

## Masking an ecological disaster

The selection of Meroë and Menchal Islands as conservation reserves for coral reefs and Megapode birds is arbitrary. Menchal does not have more than a pair or two of the endemic Megapode birds. Similarly, questions arise regarding the actual diversity and abundance of corals on Meroë Island.

Notably, the announcement of wildlife sanctuaries coincided with growing scrutiny and criticism from experts over the denotification of the Galathea Bay Wildlife Sanctuary for a ₹72,000-crore mega project on Great Nicobar, a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve.

Establishing exclusionary conservation areas in a region, which is already a paradise for biodiversity, stems from the fact that the champions of the mega project are aware of the extensive environmental and social damage that the project will entail. It will devastate about eight to 10 lakh evergreen forest trees, smother and gouge out scores of coral reefs found along Galathea Bay, destroy the nesting site for the globally endangered Leatherback sea turtle species, devastate hundreds of nesting mounds of Nicobar Megapodes, and kill as many crocodiles.

Furthermore, it will prevent the indigenous Great Nicobar islanders from

returning to their pre-tsunami homeland where they husbanded pigs and chicken, cultivated coconut and betel nut trees, and lived simple and gregarious lives. Most importantly, it will uproot three or more settlements of the Shompen (a ‘Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group’) and permanently destroy their foraging and hunting grounds.

The unilateral decision to establish wildlife sanctuaries disregards the islands’ profound significance to the indigenous population.

Their ancestral lands are unjustly perceived as “no-man’s-land” to appease conservationists, investors, public opinion, and more.

## Support earth’s guardians

Globally, governments blatantly violate indigenous people’s rights by evicting them from their ancestral lands, often under the guise of development, national interest, conservation projects, among others. Approximately 476 million indigenous peoples, constitute about 6% of the global population. Indigenous territories cover roughly 22% of the planet’s land surface and harbour 80% of its biodiversity.

Indigenous peoples are the original guardians of our earth. The world must learn from their wisdom. Reason and justice dictate that in southern Nicobar, we should support and empower the islanders to continue to steward their ancestral territories, rather than robbing them of their lands, resources, lifeways, and worldviews.

*Ajay Saini teaches at the Indian Institute of Technology Delhi. Manish Chandi is an independent researcher with over two decades of research experience in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands*

# Implications of China's mega-dam project

Do all riparian countries have major water infrastructure projects planned in the river basin of the Brahmaputra? What are China's and India's plans and how will they affect communities living alongside the river basin? How important are Tibet's river systems to the Himalayan bioregion?

## EXPLAINER

Mirza Zulfiqar Rahman

### The story so far:

The ambitious plan to build a mega-hydropower dam across the Brahmaputra at the Great Bend region of the Medog county in the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) in China, has been in the drawing boards of Chinese hydrocracy for decades. The clearest signalling of this effect happened in 2020 when this project was included in China's 14th Five-Year Plan. Its approval was granted on December 25, 2024. India, Bhutan and Bangladesh will have serious downstream implications of this 60 GW hyper-dam built upstream by China.

### Where is this project?

The Brahmaputra is a transboundary Himalayan river basin spanning four riparian countries. China is the uppermost riparian nation with the river system originating in the TAR, where it is known as the Yarlung Zangbo (or Tsangpo). India and Bhutan are lower riparian nations in relation to China and middle riparian countries in relation to Bangladesh. It is from Bangladesh, which is the lowermost riparian nation, that the river drains into the Bay of Bengal. All riparian countries have major water infrastructure projects planned in the river basin, such as hydropower dams, embankments meant for river control, irrigation dams and barrages.

### Is the Brahmaputra river basin trapped within nation-states?

Transboundary river systems are often likened by nation-states to 'taps', which they think can be closed or opened through hydraulic interventions such as dams within their respective nation-states. The Brahmaputra river system has been the site of planned and ongoing mega-dams projects by China, India and Bhutan, all contributing to an intense geopolitical power projection in the river basin. Mega-dams on rivers systems are seen as important sovereignty markers; symbols of nation-state control over natural features. Highly dramatised terms such as 'water wars' are part of the geopolitical vocabulary and upstream hydropower dams are viewed as 'water bombs' by lower riparian nations, as in the case of the Medog dam project. China sits pretty at the top of Asia's water tower, with complete control over Tibet's rivers and significant material, technological and discursive capabilities to deploy unilateral hydropower development.

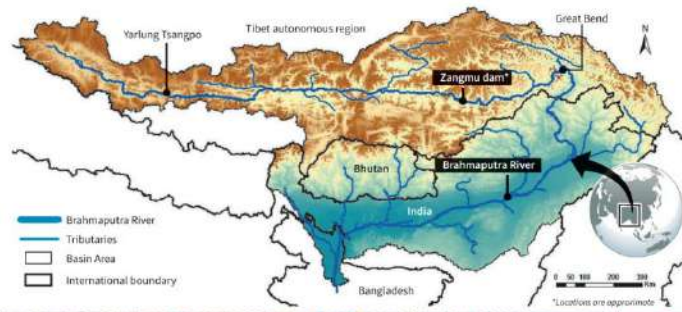
The Chinese hydrocracy has gone forward with mega-hydropower developments such as the Three Gorges Dam on the Yangtze river and the Zangmu Dam on the Yarlung Zangbo, commissioned in 2015, with its top political leadership firmly backing these interventions as state symbols.

### What are the risks for communities inhabiting the Brahmaputra river basin?

The communities living along the river system have adapted as the river has shaped and shifted over centuries. However, with interventions such as mega-hydropower dams by China, India and Bhutan, communities cannot use their traditional knowledge about the river system meaningfully, as the pace and occurrence of disasters have magnified. The upstream communities in Tibet as well as the downstream communities in India, Bhutan and

## Taming the 'rogue' river

The Brahmaputra is a transboundary Himalayan river basin spanning four riparian countries. This map shows its flow from the Tibetan Autonomous Region in China through Bhutan and India into Bangladesh.



**Power play:** Zangmu was the first hydropower project on China's Brahmaputra (Yarlung Tsangpo) to become operational, in 2014. PICTURE: TWITTER

Source: Non-decisions are also decisions: power interplay between Bangladesh and India over the Brahmaputra River (DOI: 10.1016/j.gsc.2024.103475)

Bangladesh have to live under the shadow of mega-hydropower dams with adverse consequences to their traditional lands and livelihood. The perennial flow of the Brahmaputra in downstream areas in India and Bangladesh depends on the flow of the Yarlung Zangbo. The blocking of that perennial flow, in order to maintain headwaters to operate a mega-hydropower dam of the magnitude that China is planning at the Great Bend, will have catastrophic consequences on surface water levels, and to overall monsoon patterns and groundwater systems of the river basin. This will affect downstream agrarian communities and the sensitive ecology of the overall Himalayan bioregion/ecoregion.

### What explains the hydropower dam-building race in the Brahmaputra river basin?

There is a face-off between China and India on the Yarlung Zangbo-Brahmaputra river course. China has announced the biggest hydropower project at the Great Bend while India has announced its largest dam project, at Upper Siang. Bhutan has been planning and building several medium to small dams, which have raised concerns in downstream India and Bangladesh. None of the riparian countries of the Brahmaputra river basin have signed the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Non-navigational Uses of International Watercourses of 2014, and hence first user-rights on river systems are non-enforceable. China and India have an Expert Level Mechanism (ELM) since

2006, to discuss outstanding issues and share hydrological data, but do not have a comprehensive bilateral treaty to govern shared transboundary rivers. The outstanding land boundary dispute between China and India is weaved into the intense securitisation of the Brahmaputra river basin, which makes it an active site for strategic posturing by both countries.

A bioregional/ecoregional frame of protecting the Himalayas may help desecuritize Brahmaputra river basin.

### What next?

A recent academic book by some Australian researchers titled *Rivers of the Asian Highlands: from Deep Time to the Climate Crisis*, puts forward important deep time (deep time means geological time; billions of years) perspectives to Himalayan river systems. The book juxtaposes a wider planetary thinking to emerge against the backdrop of narrow technocratic decision-making to build mega-dams within nation-states.

Tibet's river systems are important to the Earth's cryosphere, comprising permafrost and glaciers, and major climate systems directing climate and precipitation pathways such as the monsoon. Glacial Lake Outburst Floods (GLOFs) have increased in the Himalayas with climate change events, exemplified by the Chungthang Dam collapse in Sikkim during October 2023, which caused widespread devastation to life and property to downstream communities. The dams across the Himalayas aim at territorialising river systems, breaking

their natural life cycles. This affects agro-pastoral communities, biodiversity, living biota in rivers and wetland systems. The Brahmaputra river basin will turn into an active risk-scape if all these planned dams are built eventually.

An accurate sense of history will help contextualise the site of the Medog dam being built by China. One of the greatest earthquakes of modern times, the 1950 Medog Earthquake, or the Assam-Tibet Earthquake, which transformed the riparian landscape, had its epicenter at Medog in Tibet. The earthquake had disastrous effects downstream in Assam and Bangladesh, with the landscape until now trapped in an unending cycle of annual catastrophic floods.

Philip Ball in his book titled *Water Kingdoms: A Secret History of China* describes the Yarlung Zangbo being viewed in Chinese history as a 'river gone rogue' as it turns sharply from its west to east route at the Great Bend, to turn south to enter India, with other major rivers in China running from west to east. While China is going ahead with building mega-dams in Tibet to correct this geographical anomaly by disciplining a 'rogue river', India can assume an important riparian leadership role for regional river systems by not mirroring what China does. A dam for a dam will make the entire Himalayan riparian/climatic systems run dry and turn it into a disaster-scape for its communities.

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## THE GIST

The Brahmaputra is a transboundary Himalayan river basin spanning four riparian countries. China is the uppermost riparian nation with the river system originating in the TAR, where it is known as the Yarlung Zangbo.

There is a face-off between China and India on the Yarlung Zangbo-Brahmaputra river course. China has announced the biggest hydropower project at the Great Bend while India has announced its largest dam project, at Upper Siang.

The dams across the Himalayas aim at territorialising river systems, breaking their natural life cycles. This affects agro-pastoral communities, biodiversity, living biota in rivers and wetland systems.

# India needs to prioritise preventive care

India is facing a healthcare crisis that is growing both in scope and cost. We face an alarming dichotomy today: while life expectancy of Indians is expected to increase further, many are facing disease burden earlier. As the country sees an alarming rise in non-communicable diseases (NCDs) such as heart disease, stroke, diabetes, and cancer, the financial burden on individuals and the healthcare system continues to escalate.

NCDs accounted for about 65% of all deaths in 2022, up from about 50% in 2010-13, as per the National Family Health Survey-5. The prevalence of risk factors for NCDs is worryingly high. One in four adult men are hypertensive. One in eight are diabetic. Further, breast, lung, and cervical cancer are on the rise, with the median age of diagnosis occurring earlier than global averages.

Millions of people who are facing these conditions could have been managed better, at often lower costs, had they been diagnosed earlier. In this context, shifting the focus from reactive treatment to proactive prevention is crucial, not only to improve health outcomes but also to control the ever-increasing healthcare expenses.

## A growing economic burden

The Union Budget for 2024 allocated ₹87,657 crore to the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, marking a 13% increase from the previous year. While this is a step forward, experts agree that this allocation remains insufficient given the scale of India's health challenges.

The National Health Accounts show the total current health expenditure estimate in 2021-22 as ₹7.9 lakh crore, growing at a rate more than overall inflation. The share of household health expenditure, including insurance contributions, while decreasing over time, still drives nearly 50%+ of the spend. This remains one of the highest globally.



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By prioritising preventive care over reactive treatments, India can pave the way for a healthier and more economically resilient future.

The World Health Organization (WHO) projects that the economic burden of NCDs in India will surpass ₹280 lakh crore by 2030 – a cost equivalent to ₹2 lakh per household. This escalating cost, driven by rising healthcare expenses and productivity losses, poses a severe threat to financial stability, particularly for middle and lower-income families.

Regular screenings, especially for high-risk individuals, could significantly reduce the incidence of serious, life-threatening and debilitating conditions and its resultant cascading economic and social effects. In a large hospital network, for every 1,000 people screened, at least three people are identified for pre-emptive cardiac or cancer interventions.

Targeted but periodic screening investigations for individuals such as mammograms for breast cancer, pap smears for cervical cancer, X-ray or low-dose computed tomography for lung cancer, ultrasound for liver disease, echo cardiography and treadmill stress test for heart disease beyond the physical vitals and blood tests enable early intervention.

Unfortunately, comprehensive health checks (which can cost anywhere between ₹8,000 and ₹15,000 in metro cities today) are perceived as expensive. If the government were to enable a step change in preventive health services adoption, it could significantly reduce the overall financial burden on individuals and the healthcare system.

Tax incentives, subsidised screenings, and public awareness are key policy tools that can enable this. As part of the Finance Act, 2013, the Union government made efforts to encourage preventive healthcare by offering a ₹5,000 tax deduction under Section 80D of the Income Tax Act for health checks. However, this amount has remained stagnant for the last decade, despite the 12-14% estimated healthcare inflation rate and the rising cost of healthcare services. Thus, it would be

prudent for our policymakers to consider revising the tax deduction limit to at least ₹15,000 in the Union Budget for 2025-26. This would incentivise more individuals to undergo preventive health checks, potentially saving the nation several thousand of crores in future healthcare costs. The incremental tax foregone to the exchequer from such a measure is estimated to be less than ₹5,000 crore, a worthy investment towards improving the health of the nation.

## The path forward

We need to prioritise preventive care to mitigate the increasing economic and financial burden of chronic diseases. A three-pronged approach can potentially drive a change in the adoption of preventive health services.

First, we need to strengthen early intervention capabilities through the Ayushman Health and Wellness Centres, including capturing trends effectively and enabling risk-driven targeted screening using AI-enabled imaging modalities to offer lower cost screenings at-scale.

Second, we need to improve the adoption of screening at private centres by encouraging insurers and private health providers to offer a subsidised minimum screening programme for every individual between 40-60 years. For example, for women after the age of 40, a mammogram is necessary annually or once in two years, based on her risk factors. Exploring part funding through allocations from proceeds from the healthcare cess or the proposed 35% GST slab on tobacco and sugar products can help reduce funding needs.

Finally, the increase in tax deduction limit can further incentivise people to complete comprehensive health checks.

By prioritising preventive care over reactive treatments, India can pave the way for a healthier and more economically resilient future.

# No secret affair

## Deliberations on draft Digital Personal Data Protection Rules, 2025, must be open

**T**he draft Digital Personal Data Protection Rules, 2025, is a long overdue advance in the direction of enforcing the fundamental right to informational privacy for Indians, affirmed by the Supreme Court of India in the landmark case, *Justice K.S. Puttaswamy vs. Union of India* (2017). The Digital Personal Data Protection Act, which these draft rules seek to enforce, was passed in Parliament over a year ago. This seven-year wait has most likely not been without costs for the privacy of the data of Indians, as it coincided with a period that saw a rapid growth in digitisation. The proposed rules offer direction on how online services will be required to: communicate the purposes of their data collection to users; safeguard children's data online; establish the Data Protection Board of India (DPBI); set the standards for government agencies to follow to be exempt from the Act's provisions, and spell out the procedures to be observed if personal data is breached by a data fiduciary. The concerns regarding the proposed DPBI's institutional design have not been resolved by these proposed Rules, and it may not be realistic to expect such an outcome from subordinate legislation.

It is regrettable that the government continues to cloak the rule-making process of a critical policy such as this in secrecy. Since the Justice B.N. Srikrishna committee was convened to draft the first Bill for data protection, the government has consistently declined to place recommendations from stakeholders in the public domain, and has foreclosed such disclosure for these draft rules as well. For legislation where the stakes are high for individual users as well as for large technology firms, an open deliberative process is essential. It can only be facilitated when industry associations and the general public can find equal footing by being equal participants with transparency into each other's viewpoints during the consultation process. In the short and medium term, it is essential for the government to proceed with these principles in mind, while never departing from the key aims of any data protection law: minimising data collection, promoting disclosures, penalising neglect in protecting user data, and discouraging surveillance practices, both by the private sector and the government. This process must also play out in a timely fashion, as Indians have been waiting far too long to finally obtain the rights that were affirmed for them in 2017. Else, people's confidence in the government's seriousness about protecting their data from government agencies as well as private enterprises would be shaken.



# The outlook for India in the year ahead

India is at a pivotal moment in its history. It is among the leading nations in the world when it comes to economic growth and political stability. India today projects an atmosphere of peace, which is seemingly out of place in a world that is undergoing a profound shift in its economic and geo-political landscape. India is today privy to the rise of new economic and political groupings.

The year 2024 was a period of pronounced political uncertainty across the globe. Much of the world was a mute witness to the multiple and concurrent conflicts that threaten peace and stability today. This is specially true of Europe and West Asia.

One major tragedy still unfolding is Gaza, which has few parallels, while the ongoing Ukraine conflict contains the seeds of a much wider conflict in the future. India has, however, managed to steer itself successfully within this geo-political landscape.

## A year of new troubles

This may, however, be too good to last. The year 2025 seems poised to bring in a host of fresh troubles that will require deft handling on the part of India's policymakers. At this time, it might, hence, be wise for India's leaders to heed the message contained in an ancient Chinese saying that says 'the wind sweeping through the tower heralds a rising storm in the mountain'.

I begin by assessing the situation with India's largest neighbour, China. Much is being made of the recent border negotiations and an apparent disengagement at the Line of Actual Control in Ladakh. This was followed by the first formal meeting between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and China's President Xi Jinping meeting in five years, as well as the resumption of the Special Representatives' talks on border issues. Wiser heads would know that disengagement does not mean 'dispute resolution'. The border conflict still remains alive and unchanged. Far more needs to be done to reach any kind of détente. India, hence, cannot afford to 'take its eye off the ball'.

Meanwhile, China has, of late, taken a series of steps to strengthen security cooperation with nations of the Global South, which are aimed at outflanking India. It recently facilitated reconciliation talks that were held in Beijing among various Palestine factions. In September last year, China and African nations jointly agreed to progress the China-sponsored Global Security Initiative (GSI) and deepen cooperation in areas such as counter terrorism, disaster management and public health.

China also managed to steal a march over India during the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation Summit held in Pakistan in October. It took full



**M.K. Narayanan**

a former Director, Intelligence Bureau, a former National Security Adviser, and a former Governor of West Bengal

While 2024 saw political uncertainty across the globe, 2025 will require deft handling by India's policymakers

advantage of the absence of the Indian Prime Minister at the Summit to mute India's voice at a forum that is perceived as being anti-West. Mr. Xi again took full advantage of the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation Summit, in Peru in November, to strengthen ties with 'traditional enemy', Japan.

Japanese Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba has since agreed with Mr. Xi to promote a 'mutually beneficial relationship ...based on common strategic interests'.

## The churn in South and West Asia

It is in India's traditional area of influence, viz., South Asia, however, that the biggest churn is taking place – or has already taken place. Questions have been raised after the ouster of the Sheikh Hasina regime in Bangladesh as to whether India indeed has a proper 'neighbourhood policy'. Today, India appears almost isolated in the region and with the eclipse of Ms. Hasina and the emergence of a caretaker regime (which is openly hostile to India), India appears friendless.

Both Nepal and Sri Lanka today appear to look like 'fair weather friends' – at least in so far as the present is concerned. Where the Maldives stands, is indeed a subject to debate. Pakistan has always been inimical to India, and Afghanistan today does not seem to figure prominently in India's calculations. Bhutan, under the present King, does not display the same warmth towards India, appearing more intent on balancing relations with China. Across the South Asia region, therefore, how the roll of the dice would turn out is a matter of speculation.

Far more problematic though could well be the impact of the current churn in West Asia, more specifically, the developments in Syria of late. The ouster of the Assad regime in Syria is certain to have a cataclysmic impact on that part of the world. In turn, it will have relevance for countries in the wider region as well, including India. How India deals with the situation resulting from the collapse of the erstwhile Bashar al-Assad regime, and the takeover of the reins by a Sunni group, the 'Hayat Tahir al Shams (HTS)' is unclear. Its leader, who carried the nom-de-guerre Abu Mohammed al Julani, has since reverted to his real name, Ahmed Hussain al Sharaa. The HTS leader was previously linked to al Qaeda, and even briefly flirted with the Islamic State (ISIS), but is today displaying a more moderate outlook. It may, however, be too early to determine what the outlook for Syria is, and for the region as a whole under the new dispensation.

The HTS was able to wage a successful offensive against the Assad regime largely because it could identify with the Sunni majority in Syria, in contrast to the Assad regime that had,

of late, become more reliant on Russia and Iran to maintain its hold over the country. From India's viewpoint, the Assad family (belonging to Syria's Alawite group, a minority sect of Shia Islam) was initially viewed as a stabilising force in the Gulf region, especially during the difficult days that rocked parts of West Asia in the wake of the Arab Spring. India, home to a Shia and Sunni population, had greatly welcomed this. More recently, many of these perceptions had altered.

The implications of a Sunni regime in Syria are certain to be widespread. One by one, elements of the so-called 'axis of resistance' are being dismantled. On the other hand Israel, despite its pogrom in Gaza, seems to be gaining the upper hand in West Asia. Which side has gained the most, given recent developments in Syria, is not yet fully clear, but quite evidently, Iran has been a loser – and it might well result in Iran's influence across West Asia declining. It may also no longer be the same revolutionary force in West Asia, that it was perceived to be following the 1979 revolution in Iran. The Ayatollahs in Iran are also set to face a major setback, and a major churn in Iran cannot be ruled out. The Shia world as a whole would, thus, be the overall loser, and militias such as the Hezbollah could well be cut to size.

Implicitly, the pro-Palestine movement would be adversely affected and Palestine may not persist as a live issue. Global jihad could also face a deathblow.

The biggest gainers will in all likelihood be Israel and Türkiye. Russia's influence has suffered with the fall of the Assad regime. But given Russia's relations with Türkiye's strongman, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and the pragmatic approach taken by Russian President Vladimir Putin, Russia could well retrieve the situation.

## Do not rule out the digital threat

In conclusion, it needs to be mentioned that notwithstanding the developments in the geo-political arena, it is the digital threat that is set to achieve a quantum leap during 2025. The situation warrants careful assessment and sending out of a dire warning about the dangers present in the digital arena. Some of this was evident during the latter part of 2024, but this is likely to grow exponentially during 2025. Convergence among technologies is threatening national infrastructure in a manner that had never previously been envisaged. According to data available with Agencies, there was a dramatic rise in cyber attacks occurring in India in the recent period. Almost all major companies and Government institutions were hit by denial of service and ransomware attacks. All this is set to increase in geometrical progression during 2025 and the following years.



## Govt. launches 'Panchayat Se Parliament 2.0' for women

Lok Sabha Speaker Om Birla will on Monday inaugurate "Panchayat Se Parliament 2.0" which seeks to give insight into the Constitution and parliamentary procedures to over 500 women representatives from Panchayati Raj institutions from across the country. Organised to commemorate the 150th birth anniversary of tribal icon Birsa Munda, the programme will have workshops and sessions, a guided tour of the new Parliament House, Pradhanmantri Sangrahalaya, and Rashtrapati Bhavan for the participants, offering them a deeper understanding of India's legislative process and the functioning of democratic institutions. PTI



# Four-lane Banihal bypass opens in J&K's Ramban

The 2.35-km stretch, strategically located on NH-44, will boost 'national security logistics' and tourism, significantly reduce travel time for vehicles headed to Kashmir Valley, says Nitin Gadkari

**The Hindu Bureau**  
SRINAGAR

Union Transport and Highways Minister Nitin Gadkari on Sunday described the completion of the Banihal bypass in Jammu and Kashmir's Ramban district as a milestone in strengthening "national security logistics" and enhancing "tourism prospects of the region".

Taking to X, Mr. Gadkari announced the completion of the four-lane 2.35-km stretch to Banihal town, built at a cost of ₹224.44 crore. Strategically located on the Ramban-Banihal section of National Highway 44, it effectively addresses the persistent bottlenecks caused by roadside markets and shops, Mr. Gadkari said.

He said two-lane traffic will be allowed initially and four-lane traffic permitted after "junction development" within 15 days.

The Minister said this critical infrastructure ensured unhindered traffic flow, significantly reducing travel time and congestion for both tourists and defence vehicles, *en route* to



**Smooth ride:** The newly constructed four-lane 2.35-km bypass to Banihal town in Jammu and Kashmir's Ramban district on Sunday. ANI

the Kashmir Valley. "Beyond improving regional connectivity, the bypass strengthens national security logistics and enhances tourism prospects in the region," he said.

NH-44 is a major highway in India. The longest in the country, it stretches from Srinagar in the north to Kanniyakumari in the south.

The Centre has embarked on a major mission in J&K to ensure that the NH-44 remains an all-

weather road connecting the Kashmir Valley with the rest of the country. Travel time on the 290-km-long Jammu-Srinagar National Highway, which is part of NH-44, has reduced from nine hours to around six hours after significant upgrades such as tunnels.

However, the highway passing through the tough mountains of Ramban district posed a major challenge in the face of sloping ridges and congested roads, especially in

the Banihal area. Multiple tunnels, including the critical Marog-Digdol and Digdol-Khuni-Nallah, are in the final stages to ensure seamless traffic on the highway. The upgrade of the 32-km stretch between Ramban and Banihal, which is under way, will reduce travel time between Srinagar and Jammu, making the Kashmir Valley very easy to reach. National Conference MLA Banihal Sajjad Shaheen inaugurated the 2.35-km stretch.



# 'Proof of continuities exists between Indus and cultures that developed later'

**N. Sai Charan**  
CHENNAI

Clear evidence of continuities can be seen between the Indus and cultures that developed later, not only in Tamil Nadu but across south Asia. These are crucial in understanding the long-standing cultural legacy of the Indus Valley Civilisation, Gregg Jamison, Professor of Anthropology at the University of Wisconsin, the U.S, said on Sunday.

Mr. Jamison is in Chennai to participate in the three-day International Conference on the centenary of the discovery of the Indus Valley Civilisation, organised by the State Department of Archaeology and Roja Muthiah Research Library.

Mr. Jamison, whose primary research focussed on how Indus seals were made and used, told *The Hindu* that the seals were made for a very long period. Inscriptions could be seen on many of them. "The continuities [between the Indus and the cultures that developed later] are also important for



**Celebrating a milestone:** CM M.K. Stalin and other dignitaries at the inauguration of the International Conference on the centenary of the discovery of the Indus Valley Civilisation on Sunday. R. RAGU

us to focus on changes, because all cultures are dynamic and change over time. When we look at a long time frame, we can see those continuities, which are necessary to understand culture and tradition," he said.

Emphasising the need to decipher the Indus script, Mr. Jamison said: "Several scholars from Tamil Nadu and other parts of India had done extensive work on this area. It is important to keep coming up with new ideas and testing them with archaeological evidence, until it [the script] is deciphered..."

He further said that international conferences,

such as the one in Chennai, were invaluable in bringing together scholars and students to discuss new approaches to study the Indus Valley Civilisation and celebrate its legacy.

Echoing his views, and calling the event a historic moment, former bureaucrat and Indus researcher R. Balakrishnan said, "I wholeheartedly welcome this initiative of celebrating the centenary of the discovery of the Indus Valley Civilisation in Tamil Nadu. Conferences of this kind create a scope for discussion among scholars, researchers and other enthusiasts to share their ideas..." The answer to the

questions on what is the need for a statue of Sir John Marshall in Tamil Nadu, and why the State government announced a \$1-million prize for deciphering the Indus Valley Script lies in understanding that the legacy of the civilisation was not just restricted to a few places. "It plays a crucial role in the history of the Indian subcontinent...", he added.

No other contemporary civilisation of the Indus Valley had such a sophisticated lifestyle.

"There were no temples, no pyramids and no palaces at the Indus Valley. But there were garbage bins, a proper drainage system, well-planned streets in a grid pattern, granary, private bathing areas, and wells," Mr. Balakrishnan said.

Referring to his paper, *The 'High-West: Low-East' Dichotomy of Indus Cities: A Dravidian Paradigm*, Mr. Balakrishnan said Sangam literature had polysemous terms, 'Mel/Merku' and 'Keezh/Kizhakku', to refer to the cardinal directions of west and east, respectively.



# Personal data protection rules: Centre promises adequate time for compliance

**The Hindu Bureau**  
NEW DELHI

The draft Digital Personal Data Protection Rules seek to protect citizens' rights in accordance with the Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023, while achieving the "right balance between regulation and innovation", said a note issued by the Union government on Sunday. Adequate time will be given to all stakeholders, from small enterprises to large corporates, for the smooth transition to achieve compliance, it added.

As provided, the Data Protection Board itself will function as a digital office and will be "born digital", with a digital platform and app to enable citizens to approach it digitally and have their complaints adjudicated without their physical presence.

People can share their feedback on the draft rules through the MyGov portal at the link <https://innovateindia.mygov.in/dpdp-rules-2025> till February 18. An official said there would be a structured interaction for feedback. "In addition,



The Data Protection Board itself will be 'born digital', with a digital platform and app for easy access. GETTY IMAGES

structured interaction for feedback with identified stakeholders, such as civil society, industry and government organisations, would also be organised to gather feedback. All feedback/comments will be taken into consideration while finalising the rules," the official from the Information and Broadcasting Ministry said. The final rules as notified will be placed before Parliament.

Stating that adequate time will be given to all entities to adapt their systems to meet the requirements, the official said processing of digital data on the basis of consent given before the new law came into force

was permitted. Such processing could continue while citizens were given notice of it so that they could exercise their rights under the law.

"While clear obligations have been cast on 'data fiduciaries' to protect personal data in accordance with the law, prescriptions have been kept to a minimum and compliance burden has been kept low by enabling compliance through digital means. While the entities will prepare themselves for compliance with the law during the period given for adapting their systems, widespread awareness initiatives will be undertaken to edu-

cate the citizens about their rights on their personal data," the official said.

Under the rules, digital platforms will have to inform and take the consent of people in a language of their choice – either in English or in any of the 22 Indian languages listed in the Constitution. They will have to notify their users of the online links using which they may exercise their rights for withdrawing their consent, obtaining information regarding processing of their data, updating and erasing their data, grievance redress, nomination, and making a complaint to the Data Protection Board.

The Act and the draft rules do not mandate that all personal data has to be stored within India. However, they provide that transfer of personal data outside India may be restricted for certain classes. The draft rules envisage a committee that may recommend restriction on such transfer by a significant data fiduciary with respect to specified personal data, the government said.



# Jharkhand's Republic Day tableau to showcase State's tributes to Ratan Tata

**Press Trust of India**

RANCHI

In its Republic Day tableau in New Delhi this year, Jharkhand will showcase the State's tributes to Late Ratan Tata, industrialist and one of the architects of the nation's first steel city - Jamshedpur.

Jharkhand will be among 15 States and Union Territories to showcase their tableaux at the Republic Day celebrations in the national capital on January 26.

The State has made meticulous preparations to represent its rich heritage, cultural diversity, and developmental strides on the national stage, a statement from the State government said.

"This year's tableau from Jharkhand will showcase the state's tributes to the late industrialist Ratan Tata, a key figure in the state's industrial growth, while also highlighting the state's vibrant culture, traditional dances, and the growing empowerment of women through education. The tableau's design has been lauded for its creativity and relevance during the selection pro-



Jharkhand's tableau during the Republic Day in 2023. FILE PHOTO

cess," the statement said.

In previous years, Jharkhand's tableaux had focused on other aspects of the State's identity.

Last year, the tableau celebrated the State's renowned tassar silk, while the 2023 tableau featured the famed Baba Baidyanath Temple in Deoghar.

The Centre invited proposals from all states and union territories, with a multi-stage selection process determining the final 15 participants for the Republic Day parade, the statement said adding, Jharkhand's tableau design received widespread appreciation during this process.

The selected states are required to complete their tableaux by January 19,

2025, with a full-dress rehearsal scheduled for January 23.

Late Ratan Tata's contributions are considered significant towards shaping Jharkhand, a backward region that became a State in 2000. Named after Tata Group's founding father Jamsetji Nusserwanji Tata, it was the timeless vision of late Ratan Tata that propelled Jamshedpur's growth and put it on the global map.

He first visited Jamshedpur in 1963 to look into how Tata Steel, now a global conglomerate, works. He then visited the city in 1965 to hone his pilot skills.

Ratan Tata, who had become the chairman of Tata Steel in 1993, died on October 9 last year.

# Defence deals in last leg ahead of PM's Paris visit

Modi has been invited to visit AI summit in France on February 10 and 11; deals to include purchase of 26 Rafale-M fighter jets, three Scorpene-class conventional submarines government-to-government deals worth over \$10 billion likely to be placed for approval before the Cabinet Committee on Security in the next couple of weeks, sources say

**Dinakar Peri**  
NEW DELHI

Two large defence deals in the pipeline between India and France are being finalised, amid expectations that Prime Minister Narendra Modi will visit Paris in February for the Artificial Intelligence Summit to be hosted by French President Emmanuel Macron.

The deals, together worth over \$10 billion, will include the purchase of 26 Rafale-M fighter jets for the Indian Navy's aircraft carriers, and three additional Scorpene-class conventional submarines. The two deals are expected to be put before the Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS) for approval in the

next couple of weeks, sources said. "The expectation is that PM Modi will visit Paris to attend the AI Summit and will also have a bilateral component. So both sides are working to tie up the two deals which are in the final stages of conclusion," an informed source said. This was also independently confirmed by other sources.

The French President's office has already announced that Mr. Modi has been invited for the Artificial Intelligence Summit on February 10 and 11.

France says the meet will focus on actions to ensure that the global AI sector can drive beneficial outcomes. The summit will address five primary themes - Public Interest AI, Future of Work, Innova-

**Shopping list**  
As Prime Minister Narendra Modi is expected to be in Paris in February, India is looking to seal arms deals

**WHAT THE COUNTRY WANTS?**

- 26 Rafale-M fighter jets for the Navy's aircraft carriers
- Three more Scorpene-class conventional submarines
- The two deals are expected to be put before the Cabinet Committee on Security for approval soon

It is just matter of completing the formalities of the acquisition process and we expect that if not this month, next month, hopefully, this [Scorpene submarines] and Rafale-M deals should be signed

Navy chief Admiral **DINESH K. TRIPATHI** in December

India needs the naval version of the Rafale for INS Vikrant

tion and Culture, Trust in AI, and Global governance of AI.

In response to a question at his annual press conference last month, Na-

vy chief Admiral Dinesh K. Tripathi said that both deals are in the final stage and could be completed next month. "It is just a matter of completing the

formalities of the acquisition process and we expect that if not this month, next month, hopefully, this [Scorpene submarine] and the Rafale-M deal should be signed," he had said.

On the Rafale-M deal, the Navy chief had said it was "one level short of taking it to the CCS (Cabinet Committee on Security)" for clearance, which will be followed by the signing of the contract. As it is a government-to-government deal, it is expected to be implemented quickly.

The deal for three Scorpene submarines is a repeat order to the Mazagon Dock Shipbuilders Limited, which is building them in partnership with the Naval Group of France. Of the six submarines from the earlier contract, five have

been inducted.

The last one, *Vagsheer*, is set to be commissioned on January 15 in Mumbai, in the presence of Mr. Modi, along with two other frontline platforms.

On July 13, 2023, as Mr. Modi was enroute to Paris, the Defence Acquisition Council chaired by Defence Minister Rajnath Singh accorded the Acceptance of Necessity for the procurement of 26 Rafale-M fighters and three additional Scorpene-class diesel-electric submarines.

#### Critical for Naval needs

The Rafale purchase includes 22 single seater Rafale-M jets and four twin-seater Rafale trainers, which are not carrier compatible. The 26 jets are meant to fill a critical gap

until the indigenous twin engine deck-based fighter, still under development, is ready to be inducted into service. The Navy currently operates two aircraft carriers: INS Vikramaditya procured from Russia, and the indigenously built INS Vikrant which was commissioned in September 2022.

The additional Scorpene are a critical requirement for the Navy as it grapples with an ageing fleet and the huge delay in the procurement of six advanced submarines under Project-751 which is now awaiting a final decision between Germany and Spain. As reported by *The Hindu* earlier, the first of three Scorpene submarines is likely to be delivered in 2031.

