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Daily News Feed

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NMDC unveils ₹70,000 crore capex plan

N. Ravi Kumar
HYDERABAD

State-owned miner NMDC will invest more than ₹.70,000 crore over the next five years on augmenting production to 100 million tonnes, building evacuation infrastructure and transforming the digital ecosystem.

“This is not business as usual, 100 million tonnes by 2030 is a priority effort for NMDC, a once in a lifetime opportunity towards building a global mining powerhouse,” CMD (additional charge) Amitava Mukherjee told a vendors’ meet hosted by the iron ore producer in Hyderabad on Tuesday. “We are looking at a capital expenditure of approximately ₹70,000 crore,” he added.

The company promised ease of doing business and in return, solicited speed and quality of the highest order from the partners, NMDC said on the meeting in which besides Mr. Mukherjee, Director (Commercial) V. Suresh, Director (Technical) Vinay Kumar and senior officials interacted with contractors, consultants and vendors.

NMDC, which had clocked a record 45 million tonne iron ore output last fiscal, has drawn up roadmap to achieve the plan to more than double the production by the decade.

The company is exploring feasibility of partnerships for specific expansion projects to reach the



Amitava Mukherjee

ambitious 100 MT target by 2030, its top brass said. It aims to leverage private sector expertise, share the capital investment and establish long-term operational efficiencies.

Towards ramping up production infrastructure by 2029-30 it is proposing to invest ₹30,872 crore, a chunk of it on the mines in Bachel and those of joint venture NCL; for rail evacuation infrastructure ₹5,863 crore; ₹18,059 crore on slurry pipeline projects; ₹4,438 crore on township infrastructure and almost ₹11,200 on miscellaneous works, bulk of which pertains to evacuation plans.

The projects it intends to pursue on a partnership mode include construction of a ₹800 crore corporate office and residential complex in Patancheru, on the outskirts of Hyderabad for which tenders are likely to be floated by November.

“Our partners should take this early head start, make financial arrangements, build up their resource base, deliver on timelines, and bring nothing but the best to NMDC,” Mr. Mukherjee said.



PM throws open National Games



Let the games begin: PM Modi and Uttarakhand CM Dhami at the opening ceremony. PTI

Press Trust of India

DEHRADUN

A modest but colourful opening ceremony showcasing Uttarakhand's religious heritage and bio-diversity kicked off the 38th National Games here on Tuesday with guest of honour Prime Minister Narendra Modi reiterating his commitment to bring the 2036 Olympics to India during his address.

Around 10,000 athletes are gearing up to compete for podium finishes across 32 disciplines in the Games that will run till February 14.

Seven cities

Events will be held across seven cities of the hill state with Dehradun being the main venue.

Around 450 gold medals, and a similar number of silver and bronze medals are at stake.

Modi declared the Games open after the teams marched in and he was presented the flame at the ceremony.

Earlier, Modi arrived at

the stadium riding on a decked-up golf cart along with Uttarakhand Chief Minister Pushkar Singh Dhami.

An estimated 25,000 spectators packed the Rajiv Gandhi International Cricket Stadium despite the chilly weather to catch the ceremony live.

The PM had also opened the last two editions of the Games in 2022 (Gujarat) and 2023 (Goa).

Indian Olympic Association President P.T. Usha and Commonwealth Games Federation chief Chris Jenkins were also in attendance at the ceremony.

Uttarakhand's own Lakshya Sen, a world championships medal-winning shuttler, brought the Games torch and handed it over to Modi, who placed it in its designated place.

Most of the established sporting stars of the country such as javelin thrower Neeraj Chopra, shuttler P.V. Sindhu, shooter Manu Bhaker are giving it a miss, leaving the stage for other athletes to make a mark.



Tata Projects to finish work on Micron's \$2.75-bn chip unit by Dec.

Press Trust of India

SANAND

Tata Projects on Tuesday said that the construction work on the U.S.-based chip firm Micron Technology's semiconductor assembly and test facility at Sanand, near Ahmedabad will be over by December.

While 60% of work on India's first semiconductor plant has already been completed, the balance will be finished by the end of this year, said Amit Agrawal, project director with Tata Projects.

The facility is coming up in almost 50 acre of area at Sanand industrial area. Construction began in July last year. This semiconductor Assembly, Testing, Marking and Packaging (ATMP) facility is being constructed by Tata Projects for Micron.

"An ATMP facility is essentially a backend fab facility where testing, packaging and marking of semiconductors are carried out. This is perhaps the largest back-end semiconductor fab unit in the world. So far, 60% of work has been completed on Phase-1 with the help of a total workforce of 3,500," Mr. Agrawal told reporters.

"We will hand over this facility to Micron by December after finishing civil, mechanical, electrical and plumbing work along with engineering-related tasks. The final call to commence the plant will be taken by Micron," he said.



INBRIEF



SU-57, F-35 fighter jets to join Aero India event next month

Fifth generation fighter jets of Russia and the U.S. are set to enthral the crowds at the Yelahanka Air Force station, Bengaluru, during Aero India next month. Their combined presence in Indian air space comes amid a deep crisis in the Indian Air Force with major delays in fighter inductions and the induction of the under development indigenous fifth generation fighter atleast a decade away. While sources confirmed that the Su-57 (in picture) will perform manoeuvres over the Air Force Station, it has been learnt that the two F-35s are likely to be on static display and unlikely to perform.



ISRO set for a historic 100th launch from Sriharikota

The GSLV-F15 mission will lift off in the early hours of Wednesday; the first launch, SLV-3 E10, had taken place in August 1979 when former President Abdul Kalam was the Director of the mission

Hemanth C.S.
BENGALURU

The Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) will in the early hours of Wednesday oversee the historic 100th launch from the Satish Dhawan Space Centre (SDSC) in Sriharikota with the GSLV-F15 mission.

The first launch, on August 10, 1979, was the experimental flight of Satellite Launch Vehicle-3 (SLV-3 E10) carrying the Rohini Technology Payload, which was only partially successful, according to the space agency. Former President of India A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, who was then with the ISRO, was the Director of the mission. Dr. Kalam and the ISRO officials recovered from the setback and tasted success with the SLV-3E2 a year later, on July 18, 1980, as the Rohini satellite, RS-1, was placed in orbit.

After this, the ISRO launched two more SLV missions; four Augmented Satellite Launch Vehicle (ASLV) missions; 62 missions from its workhorse, the Polar Satellite Launch Vehicle (PSLV); 16 Geosynchronous Satellite Launch



Aiming high: The GSLV-F15 mission seeks to place NVS-02, a navigation satellite, into a geosynchronous transfer orbit. X/@ISRO

Vehicle (GSLV) missions; seven Launch Vehicle Mark 3 (LMV3) missions; three Small Satellite Launch Vehicle (SSLV) missions; one Reusable Launch Vehicle (RLV) mission; one Test Vehicle Abort Mission; and one Pad Abort Test (PAT) as part of the Gaganyaan programme.

The location of the spaceport on the east coast was decided upon by the founding members of the Indian space programme due to its unique features. "Features like a good launch azimuth corridor for various missions, nearness to the equator (benef-

iting eastward launches) and large uninhabited area for a safety zone have made Sriharikota the ideal location for the spaceport," the SDSC has stated on selecting this location.

Landmark missions

Among its landmark missions were India's lunar missions, including the PSLV-C11/Chandrayaan-1 in 2008, the GSLV-Mk III - M1/Chandrayaan-2 in 2019, and the LVM3 M4/Chandrayaan-3 in 2023, which made India the first country to touchdown in the polar region of the moon.

The PSLV-C25/Mars Or-



Features like a good launch azimuth corridor, nearness to the equator and large uninhabited area have made Sriharikota ideal location for the spaceport

ISRO

biter Mission in 2013 was another important launch as it was India's first interplanetary mission, and the PSLV-C57/Aditya-L1 in 2023 was India's first mission to study the sun.

Another watershed moment was the launch of the PSLV-C37/ Cartosat-2 series in 2017. During this mission, the ISRO launched a record 104 satellites in a single flight – this was a record till 2021, when it was broken by the SpaceX Falcon 9 that launched 143 satellites.

It has not been all rosy for the space agency, and the launch pad as there have also been multiple failures, including the GSLV-F02/ INSAT-4C in 2006, GSLV-D3/ GSAT-4 and GSLV-F06/ GSAT-5P in 2010, and the GSLV-F10/ EOS-03.

Avadi Ordnance clothing unit sends its first defence export to Suriname

The Hindu Bureau
CHENNAI

The Ordnance Clothing Factory (OCF), Avadi, a unit of Defence PSU Troop Comforts Limited, under the Ministry of Defence, in Tiruvallur district, Tamil Nadu, executed India's first defence export order to the Republic of Suriname on Tuesday.

"These military uniforms are offered by Ministry of Defence (Government of India) to the Ministry of Defence (Suriname) to strengthen the diplomatic relationship between the two countries," said B.S. Reddy, General Manager of Indian Ordnance Factories Service.

The shipment includes about 4,500 Army uniforms valued at ₹1.71 crore



New venture: The export of defence dress materials to Suriname being flagged off by B.S. Reddy on Tuesday. S.R. RAGHUNATHAN

which will be sent as a goodwill gesture.

The uniforms are expected to reach the Republic of Suriname's port within 60-70 days. Through this, OCF is hopeful of receiving actual orders worth ₹5 crore from Suriname.

"This is made-in-India, tested-in-India uniforms and we are confident that we will receive a bigger order, given our excellent quality," he added.

On the occasion, M. Jaya Singh, Public Relations officer of Ministry of Defence commented, "To further

strengthen international relationships between countries, the Central government aims to achieve an export target worth of ₹50,000 crores by 2029, and OCF Avadi will also play a major part in this initiative."

OCF Avadi has been mainly involved in manufacturing various defence products including bullet resistant jackets (BRJ), helmets, vests, BRJ for canines, bomb suppression blankets, ballistic briefcases, etc.

"Many of our products are receiving positive responses from various State governments including Tamil Nadu, Puducherry, Kerala, Uttarakhand, Punjab, Odisha as well as the National Police Academy," said Mr. Reddy.



Substantive equality in child marriage laws

In *Sanjay Chaudhary v. Guddan* (2024), the Allahabad High Court annulled the marriage of a couple, who got married when the man was 12 and the woman was nine, under the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act (PCMA), 2006. While the man had filed a petition for divorce when he was 20 years, 10 months and 28 days old, he later amended his plea for nullification of the marriage under Section 3 of the PCMA. This allows any party who got married as a child to seek annulment of the marriage as long as the petition is filed within two years of attaining majority.

Artificial differentiation

While 'child' in PCMA means a girl below 18 years and a boy below 21 years of age, under the Majority Act, 1875, majority is attained on completing the age of 18 years, without any distinction between men and women. A literal reading of the provisions of the PCMA thus suggests that both male and female parties can seek annulment before they attain 20 years of age. The question that arises is whether the male party can annul the marriage at 23 years or 20 years, due to the gender-based difference in the minimum age of marriage.

In 2011, the Madras High Court in *T. Sivakumar v. The Inspector of Police* held that a literal interpretation will create an unfair disadvantage for males married at 20 who, despite being married below the legal age, would not be able to annul their marriage, and thus interpreted the age limit for annulment for males to be 23. Now, the Allahabad High Court in *Sanjay Chaudhary* has countered this by reasoning that male parties entering into a marriage after attaining 18 years cannot claim ignorance of law or incapacity, as a male above 18 years is criminalised under PCMA for marrying a female child. The Allahabad High Court noted that the difference in the minimum age of marriage stems from patriarchal



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Men are given more time than women to exit a child marriage. This calls for a uniform age of marriage at 18, not 21

notions that expect men to be older and financially responsible in a marriage, while women are perceived as secondary partners and child-bearers. It opined that having the same age limit, i.e., within 20 years of age, to file a nullity petition is aligned with the principle of gender equality.

Despite these observations, the Allahabad High Court felt bound by the Supreme Court's observation in *Independent Thought v. Union of India* (2017), which mentioned that men could file annulment petitions till the age of 23 years. Consequently, the Allahabad High Court annulled the child marriage, and the wife, aggrieved by this ruling, has appealed before the Supreme Court. While the Supreme Court will decide the age limit for boys and men to file nullity petitions under the PCMA, the High Court's reasoning strikes at gendered assumptions that may require re-examining the legal age for marriage.

In *Independent Thought*, the issue before the Supreme Court was the constitutionality of the marital rape exception in respect of wives below 18 years, and not the age limit for filing a nullity petition under the PCMA. Its observation that "a male child can get the marriage annulled before attaining the age of 23 years" was made without examining in detail annulment under the PCMA. This interpretation results in a substantive unfair disadvantage, giving males more time than females to exit a child marriage, leaving wives unprotected and disproportionately affected, which undermines the central objective of the PCMA to protect and advance the status of women.

A case for no difference

This case exemplifies the need for a uniform age of marriage in India, but raising it to 21, as was proposed in the now-lapsed Prohibition of Child Marriage (Amendment) Bill, 2021, to delay pregnancy and marriage, and advance women's education and

health, will do more harm than good. Indian laws recognise 18 as the age at which all major civil and political rights take effect such as voting, buying and selling property, and entering into contracts, among others. To delay the civil right to enter into marriage and blur the distinction between adults and children would deprive adults between 18-21 years of their right to life, liberty, decisional autonomy, privacy, and dignity. A 2024 study by Enfold Proactive Health Trust and Civic Data Lab, based on 174 PCMA judgments from three States, revealed that 49.4% of these marriages were self-initiated, with the girls' families lodging complaints in 80% of these cases as opposed to families reporting it in only 30.9% of arranged or forced marriages. Raising the age of marriage will further extend state and parental control over the agency of women to be with a partner of their choice. It will also place them at greater risk of deprivation of social protection and health services as they may fear criminal repercussions if their child marriage is reported. It will result in more arrests, detention, breakdown of families, and institutionalisation of young people, at a significant socio-economic and health cost, and overburden the criminal justice system. Gender equality and improved health maternal outcomes can be better achieved through less restrictive and more substantive alternatives such as access to free and compulsory education till 18 years, social security schemes, barrier free access to health services, and comprehensive sexuality education.

An opportunity

This is an opportunity to examine the injustice in women's access to annulment arising from different minimum ages for marriage, consider an increase in the time limit for seeking annulment, and prescribe 18 as the uniform age of marriage for all genders.

The Budget pipeline and India's foreign policy ambitions

When the Union Budget is presented every year, most of the public attention often centres on taxation, infrastructure, and defence. In this, however, the budget for India's Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) deserves closer scrutiny. Last year, the MEA budget saw a rare 23% spike, up from the modest 4% annual increase between 2017 and 2023. Despite efficient Budget utilisation, exceeding 96% of the revised estimates, the MEA remains one of the least-funded Ministries. The MEA's allocation not only reflects the government's foreign policy priorities but also its capacity to deliver on its global ambitions and commitments.

The vision of a 'Viksit Bharat' by 2047 hinges on sustained global partnerships. Here, India is positioning itself as a global leader: from leading the Global South; strengthening ties with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations; enhancing regional connectivity, engaging with the Quad (India, Australia, Japan and the U.S.) and creating institutions such as the International Solar Alliance and the Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure.

Impact on plans

Partner countries also expect more from India, requiring a stronger MEA. Countries anticipate timely project delivery, financial support, and diplomatic follow-through. Yet, the MEA's current budget – just 0.4% of India's overall expenditure – falls short to deliver on these plans. In 2022, the Parliamentary Standing Committee on External Affairs suggested raising this to 1% of the total budget. While such an increase (approximately 63%) seems unlikely, even a gradual increase to 0.6% or 0.8% would signal intent.

Two areas demand greater budgetary resources to beef up India's diplomatic clout: economic tools for regional integration and cooperation, and the MEA's institutional capacity



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The Ministry of External Affairs remains one of the least-funded Ministries, in turn affecting India's diplomatic outreach

by expanding human resources and research expertise. India's regional connectivity faced new challenges in 2024, including Bangladesh's regime change, Myanmar's instability, strained ties with Nepal, and the Maldives' "India Out" stance. But visits by Sri Lanka's President and Bhutan's Prime Minister bolstered commitments in cross-border projects. Sustaining momentum under the 'Neighbourhood First' policy requires economic support, amid China's growing influence. Enhanced financial backing is crucial for advancing connectivity initiatives in South Asia.

Foreign aid and shifts

Budgetary trends reveal nuanced shifts. India's aid to foreign countries declined by 10% in 2024-25, while loans to foreign governments, increased by 29%. Approximately 50% of India's grants is directed to its neighbourhood. Bhutan remained the largest recipient of Indian aid, reflecting historical ties and a new impetus on energy interdependence, including hydropower development and sub-regional grid connectivity. Aid to Bangladesh declined from ₹200 crore in 2023-24 to ₹120 crore in 2024-25, while Sri Lanka saw a 63% increase in budgetary allocation.

A notable shift is the move from outright grants to lines of credit (LoCs), with 45% of the LoCs directed to the neighbourhood, Bangladesh being the largest recipient at \$7.86 billion. While LoCs enable sustainable infrastructure financing, they also demand robust disbursement and oversight mechanisms, stretching India's diplomatic machinery.

Another critical indicator is MEA resources to build institutional capacity. These are less visible but critical catalysts to enable long-term growth, including through a stronger Indian Foreign Service (IFS), supported by an expert research ecosystem.

While the MEA's training budget saw a 30%

increase in 2024-25, overall capacity-building allocations remain insufficient. The IFS remains a chronically understaffed diplomatic corps. Coordination challenges, delayed expansion plans, and limited lateral entry efforts hinder progress.

Last year's MEA budget allocation for its foreign missions, training programmes, and cultural diplomacy grew by only 7% but key academic institutions such as Nalanda University and South Asian University experienced cuts of 20% and 22%, respectively. While the MEA has invested massively in convening international conferences and dialogues to foster India's image as a bridging and argumentative power, it must also find more budgetary resources to support policy-relevant and evidence-based research at Indian universities and think tanks.

Need for declassification, digitisation

According to the External Affairs Minister, S. Jaishankar, "Track 1 has been consistently ahead of Track 2 when it comes to diplomacy, foreign policy, and keeping up with the world." If this is the reality, and "needs change" as the Minister beckoned, the MEA could lead by example by allocating specific resources in the next Budget to accelerate the declassification and the digitisation of hundreds of thousands of its records. Public e-access will help scholars map India's rich diplomatic history, contest deeply-held myths and get a better grasp of the underappreciated context and constraints that regulate Track 1 decision-making. And in turn, such Track 2 research may also help current MEA decision-makers to learn from past successes and failures, avoid reinventing the wheel, and articulate India's uniqueness based on the power of historical record, rather than mere political proclamation.

The views expressed are personal



QUESTION CORNER

What is the corpse flower?

The Hindu Bureau



On January 24, a rare plant known as the corpse flower bloomed in Sydney, Australia, for the first time in more than a decade. A similar flower bloomed

in New York in the U.S. on the same day.

In both instances, the plant emitted an odour likened to rotting flesh, delighting hundreds who queued for a whiff.

For the past week, curiosity seekers have been visiting the Sydney specimen, nicknamed “Putricia”, at the Royal Botanic Garden. The Brooklyn Botanical Garden in New York dubbed its plant “Smelliot”.

The two flowers are *Amorphophallus titanum* and *Amorphophallus gigas*. In each case, the oversize flower features fluted crimson petals and can measure more than a metre across with a pointed centre stalk that can top 3 metres. The plant typically doesn't bloom more than once every few years and lasts only about a day. A specimen has not bloomed in Sydney since 2010. The plant emits the foul odour to attract carrion insects for pollination. These insects feed on the rich concentration of organic compounds in decomposing matter, thus the name. As the sheath enclosing the stalk



The ‘corpse flower’ seen at the Royal Botanical Gardens in Sydney, Australia. REUTERS

opens, the stalk heats up to 37° C and periodically releases compounds like dimethyl trisulphide, isovaleric acid, and indole, which are responsible for the smell.

The emissions peak at evening and night, when carrion insects are most active, and their smell is discernible even a few hundred metres away.

(With agency inputs)



For feedback and suggestions

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Replace regular table salt with lower-sodium salt substitutes that contain potassium: WHO

Ramya Kannan
CHENNAI

The World Health Organization (WHO) released a set of guidelines on Sunday recommending use of lower-sodium salt substitutes.

While the international body had already strongly recommended reducing sodium intake to less than 2 grams a day, it has proposed a set of guidelines to replace regular table salt with lower-sodium salt substitutes that contain potassium. This recommendation is for adults (not pregnant women or children), and excludes individuals with kidney impairments or with other circumstances or conditions that might compromise potassium excretion.

The emphasis on salt – with so many recommendations on how much to consume and its constitution – is because of the



Crucial change: Reducing salt consumption can help maintain cardiovascular health and prevent strokes. GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO

huge impact it has on human physiology. Sodium (contained in salt) and water travel together in the human body, explains Priya Chockalingam, founder, Cardiac Wellness Institute, Chennai. Salt forces the body to retain water, so eating too much salt means more water in the blood vessels, raising blood pressure. Reducing salt consumption, therefore, reduces the load on the system, by significantly decreasing the volume in the

blood, thus impacting directly, positively on blood pressure. This will have an ameliorative effect on cardiovascular health and prevent strokes.

Effective way

Globally, each year, eight million deaths are associated with poor diets, and of these, 1.9 million are attributable to high sodium intake. There is enough evidence to stridently endorse reducing salt as an effective way to reduce

noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) such as cardiovascular diseases (CVDs) and chronic kidney disease by lowering blood pressure. It also lowers the risks of other conditions associated with high sodium intake, such as gastric cancer, the guideline says.

It provides evidence-informed guidance on the use of lower-sodium salt substitutes, in which NaCl (sodium chloride) is partially replaced with KCl (potassium chloride) for household consumption of table salt, but not in packaged foods, or foods consumed outside of home. The recommendations are to be employed by policymakers, programme managers, health professionals among other stakeholders, to promote reduction of sodium intake.

Vivekanand Jha, executive director, The George Institute for Global Health

in India, says this guideline is very significant for India, given the propensity to add extra salt to everything. This is an appreciable effort to change behaviour, he says.

“Instead of targeting individuals with messages about reducing salt, it makes sense to change what is available to them at a population level, in this case, low sodium salt, and make it affordable to all,” Prof. Jha explains. He adds that the WHO guidelines clearly keep out persons who might have to be on a low potassium diet. Regular salt may still be available for them.

Dr. Priya, while endorsing efforts to reduce salt consumption, particularly given the culture in India, also flags the issue of putting people with possibly undetected kidney disease, on a potassium-enhanced salt alternative.



Women's groups seek Budget that will boost inclusive workforce

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

Women's organisations and civil society members feel that increasing female workforce participation through employment-linked incentives, flexible work hours, and providing supportive infrastructure, including work site creches, should be a priority in the Union Budget.

Even as the women's groups lauded the increase in the 'gender budget' component of the previous budget, as well as special schemes, including the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana and Namoo Drone Didi for financial empowerment for women, they said the unique needs of women and girls, particularly in skilling and livelihoods, as well as investments in the care economy, should be addressed.

"The increased gender budget allocation, reaching ₹3 lakh crore in FY25, reflects a strong commitment to women's welfare. Looking forward, we need to focus on enhancing women's workforce participation through employment-linked incentives and flexible work policies," Ritvika Naidu, director, Prabhu Naidu Private Limited, an organisation working with rural women in Maharashtra.

She said that supporting infrastructure, including workplace crèches, public transport, and equal pay initiatives, can enable women to thrive.

As of 2023, the female

Unique needs of women, particularly in skilling and livelihoods, should be addressed

labour force participation rate (LFPR) in India was 32.7%. This is the percentage of women aged 15 and older who are economically active.

While increase in 'gender budgeting' reflects a growing recognition of the importance of mainstreaming of women-led development, there is a need to address the unique requirements of women and girls, particularly in skilling and livelihoods, Sowjanya Kanuri, director, ACT For Women, which works on increasing women's workforce participation, said.

Quality of jobs

"Even as female labour force participation rises, it is a pivotal moment for the 2025-26 budget to focus on the quality of women's jobs and ensure that they are able to access decent and dignified employment, particularly through investments in the care economy," Ms. Kanuri said.

Neera Nundy, partner and co-founder of Dasra India, expressed optimism that the budget would provide favourable policies and enhanced tax incentives in the upcoming Union budget to unlock greater domestic capital from families, individuals, and corporates.



Choice of secular inheritance law should apply to all faiths, says CJI

Krishnadas Rajagopal
NEW DELHI

Chief Justice of India Sanjiv Khanna on Tuesday orally observed that the freedom to become a non-believer and choose to be governed by secular inheritance laws of the country must apply across faiths.

The Chief Justice's observation came while hearing a petition filed by a Kerala-based woman, Safiya P.M., who said that though born a Muslim, she was now a non-believer and wished to be governed by secular statutes like the Indian Succession Act rather than the Sharia law.

"If it is to apply to one faith, it must apply to all faiths," Chief Justice Khanna, who was heading the Bench comprising Justices Sanjay Kumar and K.V. Viswanathan, said.

The CJI, at one point, observed that "under the Hindu Succession Act, if you convert, your inheritance is taken away... if you convert, you lose your right of inheritance".

Solicitor-General Tushar Mehta, appearing for the Union of India, said



Chief Justice of India Sanjiv Khanna's observation came while hearing a petition filed by a Kerala-based woman. FILE PHOTO

one could still inherit through a Will irrespective of the restrictions in the Hindu Succession Act.

However, the Chief Justice said there were also situations of intestate successions and even the Joint Hindu Family property.

'Give time for response'

Mr. Mehta agreed that the petition posed an interesting question and the Union government must be given time to file a considered response in the form of a counter-affidavit.

Chief Justice Khanna indicated that if the petition succeeded, changes in official forms would have to be considered. "Where [in a

form] you have to mention your religion, the option not to mention one's religion must be there or it ought to be waivable," the CJI said

Justice Viswanathan indicated such an option could be categorised as a "private right".

Advocate Prashant Padmanabhan, appearing for Ms. Safiya, said his client would inherit only one-third portion of her father's property under the Muslim law. She had an autistic brother who she had to take care of.

At this point, the Chief Justice questioned whether Ms. Shafiya's father, who was governed by the Mus-

lim law, would face restrictions at his end to bequeath his entire property to her.

Mr. Padmanabhan argued that a person who left her faith should not incur any disability or a disqualification in matters of inheritance or other important civil rights. He invoked the fundamental postulate of secularism "which treats all religions on an even platform and allows to each individual the fullest liberty to believe or not to believe".

Ms. Safiya said that a person who left faith in Islam would be ousted from community and was not entitled to any inheritance right in parental property.

The petition noted that the legal vacuum would leave the petitioner with no recourse to succeed to her parental property even if she officially got a no-religion, no-caste certificate from an authority. This state of affairs was a direct violation of the fundamental right to believe (or not to believe) in a religion under Article 25 of the Constitution, Mr. Padmanabhan argued.

Study shows post-COVID learning recovery, but many concerns remain

Maitri Porocha
NEW DELHI

After a prolonged decline due to learning loss during COVID-19, the latest Annual Status of Education Report (ASER), 2024 reveals that there has been recovery in foundational literacy and numeracy (FLN) learning among school students.

A total of 6,49,491 children aged between three and 16 across 605 rural villages participated in the survey. Using the 2011 census frame, 30 villages were randomly selected from each district, and 20 households from each village. Children between five and 16 years of age were as-

essed for basic reading and arithmetic skills.

While the percentage of Class 3 students enrolled in government schools who were at least able to read a Class 2 text stood at 20.9% in 2018, this figure had dropped to 16.3% in 2022, and has now increased to 23.4% in 2024. Despite the recovery, the survey reveals that 76.6% of the Class 3 students were unable to read a Class 2 text. The reading tasks were disseminated in 19 languages.

When Class 5 students were given the same Class 2 text, one in two students were unable to read it. According to previous iterations of the survey, in 2018, 44.2% of the fifth graders

were able to read it, which declined to 38.5% in 2022, and in 2024 this more or less plateaued again at 44.8%. By the time the students reach Class 8, the survey reveals that 67.5% were able to read a Class 2 level text.

The report states that children's basic arithmetic levels – recognising numbers, conducting numerical subtraction for two digits with borrowing, and solving division problems consisting of three digits by one digit – have shown a substantial improvement in both government and private schools.

Even as there are improvements, with 33.7% of all third graders being able

Assessing reading levels

The table shows the percentage of children in Classes 3 and 5 able to read a Class 2 text in government schools

Class 3: % children reading at Class 2 level



Class 5: % reading at Class 2 level



SOURCE: ASER/RURAL/2024

to do a subtraction, 66.3% were unable to do so according to latest 2024 data.

For Class 5 children, the proportion of students who can do a numerical division has improved from 27.9% in 2018, rose to 30.7% in 2024, but a majority of the fifth graders are unable to perform the numerical divisions.

Percentage point improvement in States such as Himachal Pradesh and Bihar was less at 4 to 5.9 percentage points, as compared with States such as Odisha, Haryana, West Bengal, and Jharkhand, which showed more improvement at 6 to 9.9 percentage points. States such as Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Tamilnadu, Sikkim and Mizoram showed the most improvements in reading levels with 10 percentage points or more.

In Class 8, basic arithmetic levels remain almost similar to earlier levels, from 44.1% in 2018 to 45.8% in 2024. The assessment method has re-

mained the same since 2007, the report clarifies.

"There is improvement in learning levels as schools are receiving directives, training and materials or funds related to strengthening FLN for early grades in primary schools," the report said.

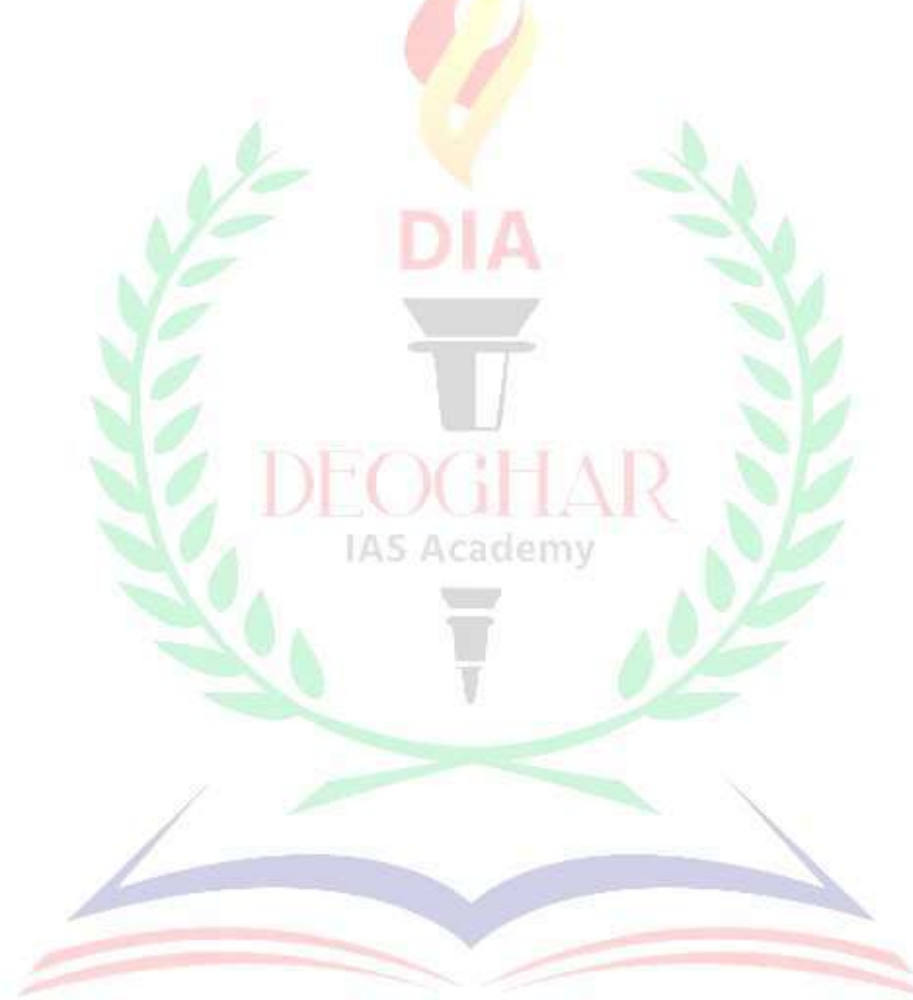
Access to smartphones

In the age group of 14 to 16, 89% children stated that they have access to smartphones at home, but 82% reported using it. 31.4% of those who reported there is a smartphone at home, own it.

Those children who said they used a smartphone, 57% used it for education related matters and 76%

said they browse social media on the phone. 76.9% of 14 to 16-year-olds could set an alarm, 79.3% of could browse for information and 87% students could find a video on a specific topic, and of all who found it 92.1% could share it on WhatsApp or Telegram with their friends and family.

When it came to accessing safety features on phone – boys' awareness of safety features was higher than girls, the report notes. "62% knew how to block or report a profile, 55.2% knew how to make a profile private, and 57.7% knew how to change a password," the report mentions.



Modi likely to visit U.S. to deepen strategic relations, says Trump

U.S. President Trump, however, adds a new dimension to the relationship soon after holding a phone call with the Prime Minister, calling for putting 'America first' in trade relations with major economies by imposing tariffs on 'outside countries'

Kalol Bhattacharjee
NEW DELHI

Priime Minister Narendra Modi is likely to visit Washington DC in February, U.S. President Donald Trump has said.

In an announcement that came hours after Mr. Trump and Mr. Modi spoke over the phone on Monday, the White House called for a "fair bilateral trading relationship", and indicated that India would host the leaders of the Quadrilateral grouping in the coming months.

"The two leaders discussed expanding and deepening cooperation. They also discussed a range of regional issues, including security in the Indo-Pacific, the Middle East, and Europe. The President em-



Coming closer: The White House says the two leaders discussed expanding and deepening cooperation. REUTERS

phasised the importance of increasing its procurement of America-made security equipment and moving toward a fair bilateral trading relationship," the White House statement said.

"The leaders discussed plans for Mr. Modi to visit the White House, under-

scoring the strength of the friendship and strategic ties between our nations. Both leaders emphasised their commitment to advance the U.S.-India strategic partnership and the Indo-Pacific Quad partnership, with India hosting Quad leaders for the first time later this year," the

press note said.

Mr. Modi on Monday said he had a telephone conversation with Mr. Trump and had agreed to work for "global peace" and "security". "Congratulated him [Mr. Trump] on his historic second term. We are committed to a mutually beneficial and trusted partnership," the Prime Minister said.

However, President Trump added a new dimension to the relationship soon after holding the telephone call with Mr. Modi, with the call for putting "America first" in trade relation with major economies. "We are going to put tariffs on outside countries," Mr. Trump told a gathering of House Republicans in Florida.

"Well... they mean us harm, but they basically

want to make their country good. China is a tremendous tariff-maker, and India, Brazil, and so many other countries. (But) we are not going to let that happen any longer... because we are going to put America first," Mr. Trump said. The Trump administration held the Quad Foreign Ministers' meeting on January 21 following the swearing-in ceremony in Washington DC that was attended by External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar.

The leadership summit of the Quad grouping is expected in the coming months which will be held in India this time. The Trump administration has zeroed in on immigration, H1B visas and tariffs that are of great relevance to India's interest in its relations with Washington DC.



The impact of classifying denotified tribes

How many denotified, semi-nomadic, and nomadic tribes have been comprehensively categorised by the Anthropological Survey of India and Tribal Research Institutes? What will be the impact on SC, ST and OBC reservations? How many communities were classified for the first time ever?

EXPLAINER

Abhinav Lakshman

The story so far:

The Anthropological Survey of India (AnSI) and Tribal Research Institutes (TRI) across the country have for the first time comprehensively categorised 268 denotified, semi-nomadic, and nomadic tribes that were thought to have never been classified before. After a three-year study, the AnSI and TRIs have recommended the inclusion of 179 of these communities in the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and Other Backward Classes lists. At least 85 of these communities are being recommended for a classification for the first time ever. The study also found that 63 communities that had never been classified were "not traceable" anymore – meaning that they had likely assimilated into larger communities, changed their names, or migrated to other States.

Why was the study needed?

Ever since the Criminal Tribes Act of 1924 was repealed in August 1949, after which communities notified as "criminal" had been denotified, successive commissions have tried to classify these communities, starting with the First Backward Classes Commission headed by Kaka Kalelkar.

Since then, the Lokur Committee (1965), the Mandal Commission (1980), the Renke Commission (2008), and the Idate Commission (2017) have tried to classify such tribes across the country. However, they have fallen short of being able to identify all such communities.

The last Commission tasked with this was the one headed by Bhiku Ramji Idate, which submitted its report in December 2017. In this report, it had listed a total of over 1,200 denotified, semi-nomadic, and nomadic tribes across the country, apart from which, it said there were 267 communities that had never been classified. The Idate Commission's report



Official recognition: Members of the Adi tribe in Siang, Arunachal Pradesh on January 28, 2011

had noted that previous commissions had never been able to classify these communities, recommending strongly that the classification work be completed as soon as possible. To this end, the Prime Minister's Office constituted a Special Committee in February 2019, headed by the Vice Chairperson of the NITI Aayog, consisting of Mr. Idate, Dr. J.K. Bajaj of the Centre for Policy Studies, and the Director-General of the AnSI as members. This Committee gave the work of classification to the AnSI and TRIs, which began work on the project in February 2020, submitting a report in August 2023.

What is the need for categorisation?

The Parliamentary Standing Committee on Social Justice and Empowerment had in a December 2022 report said that it had repeatedly flagged the government's

"inability to take necessary action" on the speedy categorisation of these communities. "Delay in locating them would increase their suffering and they would not be able to get benefits of the prevailing schemes meant for the welfare of SC/STs," the House panel said.

S. Narayan, Professor Emeritus at the Institute of Social Sciences in New Delhi pointed out that the issue with wrong categorisation began with some of the first Censuses ever conducted by colonial administrations. "There were many instances of tribes being classified as castes and vice versa. Many of it may have had political considerations behind it and this continued after independence as well." He added that while the act of including communities in SC, ST, OBC lists may be political, when one applies an anthropological lens to it, the

classifications are bound to be different.

Further, community activists and experts like Dr. B.K. Lodhi, who also assisted the Idate Commission in its work, said that in the absence of a complete list of denotified, semi-nomadic, and nomadic communities across the country, it has been very difficult to organise the communities and its peoples. "Some are classified as SC, ST, OBC, some of this is also incorrect. And beyond this, there are hundreds that have not been classified."

What will be the impact?

Now that almost all denotified, nomadic, and semi-nomadic tribes are closer to being classified than ever before, one impact has been political. Community activists across U.P., Haryana, Madhya Pradesh, and Gujarat are pushing hard to question the premise of classifying these communities as SC, ST, and OBC altogether, with an eye on reservations.

Within the Development and Welfare Board for De-notified, Nomadic and Semi-Nomadic Communities, there are now two strands of thoughts. One calls for the completion of the classification process so that all denotified, nomadic, and semi-nomadic tribes get benefits meant for them as per the classification of SC, ST, or OBC, including that of reservation. The other calls for creating a separate classification altogether – for denotified tribes in the form of a Schedule in the Constitution. Secondly, depending on what action the government takes on the recommendations on this study, it will make it easier for State governments to initiate the process of inclusion if they so decide to do it.

What next?

While the AnSI and TRIs have completed the ethnographic study, this report remains with the Special Committee headed by the Vice-Chairperson of the NITI Aayog. Officials have said that this committee is now "scrutinising" the recommendations and will soon prepare a final report, on which the Government will take a call.

THE GIST

Ever since the Criminal Tribes Act of 1924 was repealed in August 1949, after which communities notified as "criminal" had been denotified, successive commissions have tried to classify these communities.

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