

## GS Paper I - History

# ASI allows T.N. Archaeology Dept. to conduct excavations at Keeladi, seven other sites

**N. Sai Charan**

CHENNAI

After a delay of several months, the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) has granted permission to the Tamil Nadu State Department of Archaeology (TNSDA) for conducting excavations at eight historical sites, including the 11th phase of excavations at Keeladi.

According to officials, the approval has been given for excavations at Keeladi and its clusters in Sivaganga district; Pattinamarudhur in Thoothukudi district; Karivalamvanthanallur in Tenkasi district; Manikollai in Cuddalore district; Adichanur in Villupuram district; Vellalore in Coimbatore district; Telunganur-Mangadu in Salem district; and Nagapattinam.

Following the recommendation of an expert



The approval has been given to conduct excavations at Keeladi and its clusters in Sivaganga district, among other sites. FILE PHOTO

committee, the Exploration and Excavation Section of the ASI granted the permission on March 13 under the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains Rules, 1959.

In July 2025, the TNSDA sought the ASI's approval for excavations at these sites, which were announced by State Finance Minister Thangam Thennarasu in the Tamil Nadu Bud-

get for 2025-26. Following delays, State officials wrote to the ASI, as the excavation season runs from January to July in the State.

### Centre's nod sought

Recently, Chief Minister M.K. Stalin also urged the Centre to grant the approval at the earliest, stating that the monsoon would disrupt fieldwork in the second half of the year.

# LDF seeks third term, UDF readies to end 10-year drought; BJP a bystander

A good outing in the 2025 local body polls has energised the UDF that seeks to deny the LDF a hat-trick in Kerala; amid welfare promises, the West Asia war may dominate political discourse; the BJP hopes to make a mark, having won a Lok Sabha seat and the Thiruvananthapuram corporation

**IN FOCUS**

**G. Anand**  
THIRUVANANTHAPURAM

The battle lines in Kerala for the 2026 Assembly election have been drawn, and the impending poll campaign may have the makings of a close race.

The ruling Left Democratic Front (LDF), weighed down by 10 years of incumbency, is seeking to defy the odds and return to power for a third consecutive term. It is also battling dissidents.

Out of power for two consecutive terms, the polls pose an existential threat to the Congress-led United Democratic Front (UDF). However, a remarkable performance in the 2025 local body elections has put a spring in the UDF's step.

The BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) draws strength from its show in the 2024 Lok Sabha election and it helming the prestigious Thiruvananthapuram Municipal Corporation. The BJP seeks to end what it perceives as the "bane of LDF-UDF revolving door politics".

**Gulf conflict**

The polls will be fought under the shadow of the West Asia war and the economic uncertainty caused by looming fuel shortages. The families of an estimated 3.5 million Keralites em-

## Mapping Kerala's elections

Kerala's 2026 Assembly election is shaping into a three-front contest, with LDF seeking a third term as UDF resurgence and BJP's ambitions reshape the polls

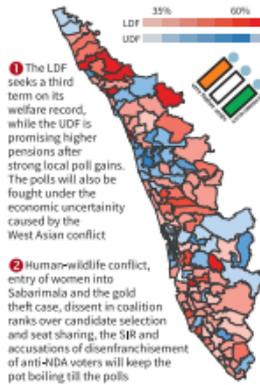


A worker arranging poll materials of different political parties at a store in Thiruvananthapuram. NIPRA/HARSHAN

The map shows region-wise breakup of Kerala's electoral constituencies, according to CSDS classifications

- Malabar: 48 seats
- Cochin: 44 seats
- Travancore: 48 seats

The map shows alliance-wise results of Kerala's 2021 Assembly election results. The darker the shade, the higher the vote share (in %)



1 The LDF seeks a third term on its welfare record, while the UDF is promising higher pensions after strong local poll gains. The polls will also be fought under the economic uncertainty caused by the West Asian conflict

2 Human-wildlife conflict, entry of women into Sabarimala and the gold theft case, dissent in coalition ranks over candidate selection and seat sharing, the SIR and accusations of disenfranchisement of anti-NDA voters will keep the pot boiling till the polls

**Party-wise results-2021**

Party	Seats
CPI(M)	62
CPI	17
KC(IN)	5
JDS	2
NCP	2
INL	1
LJD	1
NSC	1
KC(B)	1
C(S)	1
JMK	1
IND	5
INC	21
IUML	15
KEC	2
KC(J)	1
RMPI	1
IND	1
LDF	59
UDF	41

ployed in West Asian countries comprise a significant section of the electorate. The conflict, including the attacks on Gaza, may also influence, in some measure, the voting behaviour of the Muslim community in the State, who comprise an estimated 26.56% of the population as per the 2011 Census.

The LDF and UDF calculus seems centred on the conjecture that the BJP's strong showing in at least 30 Assembly seats in the 2024 Lok Sabha election and its performance in several State elections might push the Muslim community towards the traditional fronts.

The LDF will bank on its track record in social welfare and development. As many as 62 lakh voters, chiefly the elderly, widows, persons with disabilities, and agricultural labourers, draw a monthly pension of ₹2,000. The UDF has sought to outmatch the LDF by promising to hike the dole to ₹3,000 if voted to power.

The BJP believes that the LDF's social welfare pitch alone will not sway the middle-class voters. Both the BJP and the UDF will put to intense scrutiny the LDF's claims of large-scale investment, critical infrastructure development, job creation, limiting inflation,

improving public health-care and providing free housing.

Several undercurrents could influence the outcome of this election. The LDF and the Congress fear that the BJP's inroads into the influential Nair and Ezhava Hindu communities could dent their respective strongholds.

The BJP's overtures to Christians, particularly to Church-backed settler farmers in the hill districts, have influenced the LDF and the UDF's strategising. Human-wildlife conflict, entry of women into Sabarimala and the gold theft case, dissent in coalition ranks over candidate selec-

tion and seat sharing, the SIR and accusations of disenfranchisement of anti-NDA voters will keep the pot boiling till the polls.

**Key contests**

The State is also bracing for high-profile contests. Kerala Pradesh Congress Committee president Sunny Joseph is likely to face former Health Minister K. K. Shailaja in Peravoor in Kannur.

BJP State president Rajeev Chandrasekhar is contesting against CPI(M) State Committee member and Education Minister V. Sivankutty in Nemom, Thiruvananthapuram.

Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan and Leader of the

Opposition V. D. Satheesan are contesting from Dharmadam (Kannur) and Paravur (Ernakulam), respectively.

Former Union Minister V. Muraleedharan will take on CPI(M) State committee member and former Devaswom Minister Kadakampally Surendran in Kazhakkootam Assembly constituency in Thiruvananthapuram.

Former Minister G. Sudhakaran, who left the CPI (M) after being denied a seat citing age and term limit, is contesting against CPI(M) MLA H. Salam, in Ambalappuzha, with UDF support. Kerala Congress (M) chairperson Jose K. Mani is contesting from Pala in Kottayam, a seat long held by his father, the late K. M. Mani, but where Mr. Jose was defeated by the UDF's Mani C. Kappan in 2021.

CPI(M) Kannur district secretariat member T. K. Govindan is contesting as an Independent from Taliparamba constituency, accusing the CPI(M) State secretary M. V. Govindan of nepotism. Senior CPI(M) leader and Mr. M. V. Govindan's wife, P. K. Shyamala, is the LDF candidate in the Assembly segment. Former Kerala BJP president K. Surendran is contesting from Manjeswaram in Kasaragod, where he lost in 2016 and 2021.

The Assembly election for 140 seats in the State will be held on April 9, with counting on May 4.

# India to sign U.S. deal only after clarity on tariff rates

Any India-U.S. deal must be weighed against tariff structure and comparative advantage, says official; Commerce Secretary, however, maintains India remains engaged with U.S. on trade deal

**T.C.A. Sharad Raghavan**  
NEW DELHI

India will sign a trade deal with the U.S. only after the country settles its “tariff architecture” and clarifies country-wise tariff rate, sources in the government have said.

“Any deal that we finalise and sign has to be seen against the tariff structure or comparative advantage that India gets in the U.S. market,” a senior official in the Ministry of Commerce said. “The U.S. is working on trying to recreate a tariff architecture globally. If they are able to finalise that, at that juncture it would be right to sign the deal,” the official said.

This comes against the backdrop of two trade-related investigations the U.S. is carrying out that

## Tariff travails

In 2025, U.S. imposed 25% reciprocal tariffs on India. An additional 25% linked to import of Russian oil was later imposed taking total tariffs to 50%. A timeline of events thereafter:

■ **Feb. 6, 2026:** India and the U.S. issue a statement on framework on interim pact

■ Additional 25% Russian oil-linked tariff removed (**Tariff on India: 25%**)

■ **Feb. 20:** U.S. SC strikes down reciprocal tariffs

■ **Feb. 24:** U.S. imposes

10% tariff on all countries for 150 days. **Tariff on India: 10%**

■ **Mar. 11-12:** USTR launches probe which could lead to additional tariffs

■ **Mar. 16:** Govt. sources say deal will only be signed after U.S. finalises tariffs on India and other countries



could potentially see additional tariffs being levied on a number of countries, including India.

Meanwhile, Commerce Secretary Rajesh Agrawal said that India remains engaged with the U.S. on a trade deal.

“Pursuant to the U.S. Su-

preme Court judgment dated February 20, 2026 invalidating reciprocal tariffs, the reciprocal tariffs are no longer in force,” Mr. Agrawal told presspersons on Monday. “The U.S. government has issued Executive Orders imposing 10% tariffs pursuant to Section

## India's trade deficit stands at \$4 billion in Feb.

NEW DELHI

India's trade balance stood at a deficit of about \$4 billion in February compared with a surplus of \$2.7 billion a year earlier due in large part to merchandise exports staying flat while imports of both merchandise and services grew significantly during the month. » **PAGE 11**

122 of the Trade Act, 1974 on certain products from all countries,” he added. “India remains engaged with the U.S. side for a mutually beneficial trade agreement,” he said.

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## India to sign U.S. deal after clarity on tariffs

India and the U.S. announced a trade deal on February 2 and a joint statement on the finalisation of a framework for the deal was released on February 7. Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal had said that the deal would be signed in March.

The U.S. Supreme Court on February 20 ruled against the validity of U.S. President Donald Trump's use of the International Emergency Economic Powers Act (IEEPA) to levy reciprocal tariffs on America's trade partners. It is after this that the U.S. imposed the 10% tariffs on all its trade partners under Section 122 of the Trade Act, 1974. These tariffs are in force for a period of 150 days from February 24.

"The U.S. deal was to be signed in March. When we said this, at that time the Supreme Court judgement on IEEPA tariffs had not come," the official explained. "Now with the Supreme Court judgement on IEEPA tariffs, the tariffs per se don't exist." Under the framework announced by the two countries, the U.S. was to impose an 18% tariff on India. Now, the new rate will depend on the rates the U.S. imposes on India's competitors.

"Depending on how their tariff architecture settles, that will determine where India will land," the official said. "In case all others are at 19% and above then India will remain at 18%. But if others come down, then India will also come down."

### On Russian oil

Mr. Agrawal also highlighted that the U.S.' removal of tariffs on India is linked to its import of Russian oil. "On February 7, 2026, the 25% additional ad-valorem tariffs imposed by the U.S. on certain Indian exports citing India's imports of Russian oil were removed," Mr. Agrawal noted. "We can say that we are buying Russian oil and there has been an increased buying of Russian oil in the current month because of the challenges we are facing."

## Belém as a test of a new model of forest finance

The climate summit that was held in Belém, Brazil in November 2025, refocused renewed global attention to a difficult but unavoidable truth: protecting tropical forests requires more than ambitious pledges – it requires a fundamental shift in who holds power over those forests. **As world leaders gathered in the Amazon city, the signature initiative was Brazil's Tropical Forest Forever Facility (TFFF), or a finance mechanism presented as a paradigm shift in global conservation.** Yet, amid the flurry of announcements and diplomacy, persistent tensions revealed that major challenges remain around participation, equity and accountability.

### The difference

The TFFF proposes to compensate countries for maintaining standing forests, not just for avoiding deforestation. As reported, the Fund has already secured more than \$5.5 billion in initial commitments, including a \$3 billion pledge from Norway. Unlike many past funds, it is not structured purely as a donation vehicle. **Rather, it is set up to generate returns and reward long-term forest conservation. Critically, at least 20% of its performance-based payments are reserved for indigenous peoples and local communities, whose daily stewardship plays an outsized role in keeping forests intact.**

This allocation is not symbolic. According to the Rainforest Foundation US, indigenous and local communities were deeply involved in co-designing the facility. Across months of global consultations, more than 400 community leaders shared their perspectives. The model offers something new: not only financial support but also formal decision-making power. Yet, important gaps remain. For instance, indigenous representatives do not have voting rights on the main governing bodies of the Fund, raising questions about how genuinely inclusive decision-making will be.

Even as the TFFF proposes this inclusive architecture, many civil society groups have



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The real test is whether it will protect the communities protecting the forest

voiced their strong criticism. The Global Forest Coalition (GFC) described the fund as “colonialistic”, arguing that it benefits intermediaries rather than forest peoples. Its worry was about a mechanism built around market logic and financial returns that may not address the root structural causes of deforestation, such as agribusiness expansion, oil and mining projects, and large infrastructure, all of which continue to drive forest loss. According to the GFC, rewarding standing forests without curbing exploitative activities risks creating a superficial conservation narrative.

Compounding this, some critics argue that the payment rate, around \$4 a hectare in earlier proposals, is inadequate given the manifold ecosystem services that forests provide. There is a risk that national governments could absorb most of the funds, while communities on the ground may see little benefit. The success of the TFFF, therefore, depends not just on its size but on strong delivery mechanisms and rigorous, locally accountable institutions.

### Conservation overlooks power imbalances

Amid these debates, Brazil has taken steps to buttress access. On the sidelines of COP30, it announced a dedicated digital platform to help forest countries navigate TFFF eligibility. **The platform, developed with partners such as the UNDP, FAO, WWF and the Global Alliance of Territorial Communities (GATC), promises technical assistance, capacity building and peer collaboration. It is stated that independence from the TFFF's governing structures is meant to prevent conflict of interest while focusing on inclusion and knowledge sharing.**

This structure matters because forest conservation has long overlooked deep power imbalances. **For many indigenous groups, protecting the Amazon is not just an environmental fight but also a struggle for survival. This was clear at COP30, where indigenous protesters entered the venue**

**demanding territorial rights, insisting that their land cannot be treated as a commodity. Many felt excluded from decisions that directly affect their homes.**

Land rights remain central to this debate. Ahead of COP30, the Forest and Climate Leaders' Partnership (FCLP) renewed its Forest and Land Tenure Pledge, committing \$1.8 billion from 2026 to 2030 to support indigenous, local and Afro-descendant communities. The pledge was a key part of the Belém agenda, reflecting scientific warnings that the Amazon's future remains at risk without secure land rights.

Civil society groups also stressed that climate justice and nature protection cannot be separated. **Conservation International called COP30 a chance to secure long-term funding for the Amazon, supporting forest protection, community governance and sustainable livelihoods. They warned that sidelining indigenous leadership weakens both climate action and human rights.**

Yet, financing alone cannot counter pressures from infrastructure, agribusiness and extractive industries. The protests in Belém showed that money means little without real shifts in power. Without strong accountability, funds risk flowing to intermediaries while local communities continue to face land loss and displacement.

### Beyond the money

The TFFF's launch in Belém is a major step, but its credibility depends on whether it actually transfers power to forest communities rather than reinforcing old hierarchies. For indigenous peoples, forests are home and survival. The real challenge is in ensuring that finance reaches them in forms they control, turning promises into lasting protection. A future of genuine conservation will depend on whether global finance strengthens community rights instead of replicating old patterns of exclusion.

*The views expressed are personal*

# Cries grow louder for scrapping of Bill to redefine trans people

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NEW DELHI

The Union government's proposed legislation to withdraw transgender people's right to "self-perceived gender identity" and redefine who a "transgender person" is, has led to student protests and public meetings within the transgender community in across cities such as New Delhi, Pune, Hyderabad and Kolkata, calling for the government to withdraw the Bill and protect the right to self-perceived gender identity.

This has come even as spontaneously formed coalitions of civil society groups, lawyers, doctors, activists, and other professionals in cities such as Guwahati, Chennai, Varanasi, Bengaluru, and several others are planning campaigns to write to MPs, organising awareness and support group meetings, and strategising over how to register their opposition to the proposed legislation. A public petition has also been initiated online, calling for the withdrawal of the Bill, gathering over 13,000 signatures as on Monday evening.

On Friday, Social Justice Minister Virendra Kumar introduced the **Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Amendment Bill, 2026**, proposing widespread amendments to the law enacted in 2019.

At the Indian Women's Press Corps in New Delhi, a similar coalition of lawyers, activists, and rights organi-

**Activists across many cities argued that the government was 'taking back' a right recognised in 2014**

sations came together for a press meet, calling the amendments "discriminatory and unjust", arguing that the government was "snatching back" a right recognised in 2014.

In the 2014-NALSA judgment, the Supreme Court had laid down the law that the right to self-identification of gender fell under the ambit of personal liberty, a fundamental right guaranteed under Article 21 of the Constitution. Devansh, a transman who was on the panel for the coalition, said, "After a long fight, in 2014, the government gave us the recognition. With that, we moved ahead with our lives, took very important decisions such as starting the process of gender-affirming surgery, and getting transgender cards made. We came out to the world that we are transgender. Where are we supposed to go now?"

In Karnataka, people came together under the banner of the Karnataka State Gender and Sexuality Minorities Coalition for a press conference in Bengaluru. The coalition also issued an open letter to Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Monday, saying, "Passing this amendment will put in jeopardy the rights of thousands and millions of persons who are currently recognised as transgender."

# 'Couple being happy not a reason to quash child marriage case'

**The Hindu Bureau**

BENGALURU

A criminal case registered under the provisions of the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006, cannot be quashed merely because the couple at present are living happily, the Karnataka High Court has said.

"Criminal liability is measured at the moment of commission, not neutralised by the subsequent domestic peace. To accept otherwise would be to convert penal law into a matter of retrospective validation through sentiment. Parents who ought to bless their daughters with encouragement, education and empowerment, instead bless them with premature ma-

trimony," the court sternly observed.

"If such conduct were to receive judicial indulgence, the eradication of child marriage would remain an illusive aspiration," the court further said.

Justice M. Nagaprasanna made these observations while refusing to quash a case registered in 2021 under provisions of the Act against the groom, who was 27 at the time of marriage, his parents, and parents of the minor girl, who was 16 at the time.

The court said that when a marriage was solemnised in a temple, both the temple authorities and the officiating priest may fall within the ambit of liability under the Act.

## **Beginning and end**

### **The state must allow its citizens the right to die with dignity**

**T**he incontrovertible nature of both life and death makes them fiendishly difficult to legislate or adjudicate. Interfering with the very elemental beginning and end points of life must seem daunting. Nothing else can explain the long dalliance that laws have had with euthanasia to facilitate the intentional ending of a life, globally. In India, last week, the Supreme Court, in a landmark decision, approved the withdrawal of life support, including artificial nutrition and hydration, for Harish Rana, who went into a persistent vegetative state (PVS) following a head injury over 12 years ago. Invoking the constitutional idea of dignity, the Court observed that it would not be compatible with temporarily keeping alive a terminally ill patient who is brain dead or in a PVS, only because it is possible to leverage technological advancements to do so. This forces a life of indignity: patients endure a slow, agonising death. As the end of life approaches, a loss of control over human faculties denudes life of its meaning, it added. **The Court went on to expand the right to live with dignity under Article 21 to encompass the right to die with dignity. In India, in the absence of legislation on the subject, the courts have consistently had to engage with the euthanasia question over the years. The Smt. Gian Kaur vs The State Of Punjab (1996) case might have set off the trend, but the debate entered the public realm with the Aruna Shanbaug petition in 2011. The Court, in this instance, did not allow for euthanasia as the nurses caring for her demurred, but went on to lay down guidelines for withdrawing or the withholding of medical treatment or medical support to allow for natural death. In 2018, a Supreme Court Constitution Bench held that the right to die with dignity is a fundamental right.**

Besides benefitting Harish Rana in the instant case, the judgment will undoubtedly make it easy for terminally ill patients and their families 'to let go'. As technology advances in leaps and bounds, more life-preserving hacks will become available to all who are able to pay for them but could erode the patient's dignity. The judgment is intended to introduce compassion into end-of-life care for patients with unalterable medical conditions. The concept of a living will, a legal document empowering individuals to state their preferences for medical treatment in situations where they become incapacitated, vegetative or are unable to communicate, again endorsed by the Court, must also be popularised. In the grey zones, it is the law that can give people the courage to take the right call.

# Importance of sex education in academia

**S**exuality, intimacy, and mental health are closely linked yet heavily stigmatised, resulting in a culture of silence; shame and fear surrounding sex and intimacy can exacerbate mental health issues. The WHO has stated that "immense suffering can occur when people lack bodily autonomy, control over their fertility or the freedom to experience safe, consensual and satisfying sexual relationships". In 2024, the Supreme Court emphasised the need for comprehensive sex education programmes in order to promote open discussions about intimacy and sexual health.

As German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) fellows between Germany and India, the authors' classroom experiences of teaching about the diversity of human sexualities, in both contexts, found that there is a need to resist and challenge the marginalisation, invalidation and disenfranchisement of lived intimacies in higher educational institutions. Deeply ingrained social stigmas, silence and taboos about intimate relationships are perpetuated in academia, evidenced by the miniscule number of courses and discussions on the topic. Academia often promotes a culture of resistance, fear and anxiety over informed exchange and empowering discourse, particularly in the light of increasing student suicides in India. By prioritising a biomedical approach as well as majoritarian norms, higher educational spaces disregard the dimension of pleasure and the impact of socio-cultural and oppressive factors on intimate experiences.

## Lack of proper vocabulary

In India, the mental health curriculum is often found to be heteronormative and cisgendered without accounting for sexual marginalisation and human diversity. 'Sexuality' is limited to heterosexual dysfunctions, erasing



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By creating diversity-aware and compassionate learning environments, students can develop the tools to navigate contemporary challenges and create a more inclusive, equitable, and just world

topics such as consent and sexual politics, framing it as a medical issue alone. Complex lived realities and the structural violence faced by queer people are erased, inhibiting the development of cultural and structural competence required for effective clinical practice. As a consequence, sexual minorities often experience institutional discrimination and inadequacies in the provision of support when they access counselling services. With psychologists being increasingly appointed in universities to deal with suicide and mental health problems in India, such ethical and epistemic gaps fail to reckon with oppressive institutional contexts. It diminishes the capacity of mental health professionals to initiate transformative structural change oriented on sexuality, gender and relationship equality.

## Exercises to open up

Addressing sensitive topics such as mental health, violence, and intimacy in higher educational settings comes with particular challenges. A workshop and film screening that took place at the University of Münster in Germany featuring a filmmaker who uses unconventional pornography as a form of sex education highlighted some of the difficulties. While appreciating the effort to tackle the issue, students found themselves uneasy during the discussion. Was it appropriate to open up about one's own experiences, or was it safer to maintain a detached, impersonal, and abstract tone, as is often expected in academic settings?

The authors' interactions with students in India and Germany highlighted the importance of creating safer and accountable spaces when teaching sensitive topics. To achieve this, innovative approaches at the beginning of each class can help. Instead of diving straight into theory and methodology, icebreaker exercises and small-group discussions encourage students to share their

personal perspectives on topics. By answering questions like 'What does intimacy mean to you?', students can connect the course material to their own lives and experiences. Such an approach emphasises the need for instructors to foster a classroom environment that builds trust, rapport, and open communication among participants.

## Inclusive classrooms

Education should harness the diversity within classrooms and transcend mere knowledge transfer and workforce training, aiming instead to cultivate critical thinking and awareness. This is particularly urgent in today's context, where anti-democratic movements seek to erase and marginalise the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals, promoting a narrow and exclusionary view of sexuality and intimacy. Furthermore, it is crucial to address the growing mental health concerns affecting young people, who face immense pressure from family expectations, societal demands, and the weight of multiple global crises. In 2025, the Supreme Court sought responses from the government on integrating transgender-inclusive comprehensive sexuality education into school curricula. In the same year, the Court issued pan-India guidelines to address suicide and mental health issues among students in which gender and sexual orientation figured as reasons for discrimination at higher educational institutions. By creating diversity-aware and compassionate learning environments, students can develop the tools to navigate contemporary challenges and create a more inclusive, equitable, and just world. Fostering allyship and care communities within educational institutions should take precedence over short-term fixes such as hiring more mental health professionals or facilitating isolated events or workshops, without creating a sustained conversation or support system.

# Naval warships escort Indian vessels from the Gulf of Oman

Three warships escort *Shivalik*, *Nanda Devi*, *Jag Laadki*; warships operating under Operation Sankalp, a mission aimed at safeguarding merchant shipping, protecting India's maritime interests

**Saurabh Trivedi**  
**Saptaparno Ghosh**  
NEW DELHI

**T**he Indian Navy has deployed warships to escort Indian-flagged merchant vessels transiting through the Persian Gulf region, according to official sources.

Three Indian Navy ships have escorted the Indian-flagged merchant ships *Shivalik*, *Nanda Devi*, and *Jag Laadki* from the Gulf of Oman after they crossed the Strait of Hormuz. The warships ensured the safe transit of vessels through vulnerable waters.

Though the conflict has been intense in the Persian Gulf west of Strait of Hormuz, the Gulf of Oman, east of the strait, has also seen attacks. *Jag Laadki*, carrying more than 80,000 tonnes of crude oil, left Fujairah terminal in the UAE on Sunday. The vessel had a narrow escape when the terminal was attacked while it was loading.

Sources said that naval ship escort to Indian merchant ships will continue to be provided. Some 22 Indian-flagged ships are still stranded west of the strait.



**Safe arrival:** LPG carrier *Shivalik* reached the Mundra Port on Monday. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

While officials declined to disclose the names of the naval ships involved, a senior official confirmed that the warships were operating in the region under Operation Sankalp, a mission aimed at safeguarding merchant shipping and protecting India's maritime interests in the region.

Launched in June 2019, Operation Sankalp ensures the safe passage of Indian-flagged vessels through critical sea lanes, and saw action, including during the Houthi attacks.

Meanwhile, LPG carrier *Shivalik* reached the Mundra Port on Monday evening, the government con-

firmed. Earlier in the day, Rajesh Kumar Sinha, Special Secretary at the Shipping Ministry, told reporters in an inter-ministerial briefing that priority berthing and documentation to ensure there was no delay in discharging the cargo.

*Nanda Devi*, another LPG carrier, is expected to reach Kandla port on Tuesday. Individually, the vessels are holding 46,000 tonnes of cargo, cumulatively, 92,172 tonnes. "Seafarers on board are all safe and would reach tomorrow at Mundra port," Mr. Sinha said. *Jag Laadki* will

be arriving at the Mundra Port on Tuesday.

He said there was "no congestion reported at any of the major ports" with export-bound containers at the Jawaharlal Nehru Port Authority having reduced to about 3,900 from 5,600.

Addressing reporters at the same briefing, Sujata Sharma, Joint Secretary at the Petroleum and Natural Gas Ministry, said that cooking gas continued to be an "issue of concern" though supply of LPG to domestic consumers continued uninterrupted. No dry out had been reported among distributors, she added.

Separately, in response to a query, the senior official informed that domestic LPG production had increased 36% since the supply maintenance order.

Responding to queries about U.S. President Donald Trump seeking countries send warships to guard passage of vessels from the Strait of Hormuz, Randhir Jaiswal, spokesperson at the External Affairs Ministry, said the issue had not been taken up in any bilateral setting.

# *One Battle After Another* wins Oscar, in coronation for Paul Thomas Anderson

**Associated Press**  
LOS ANGELES

Paul Thomas Anderson's *One Battle After Another* was crowned best picture at the 98th Academy Awards, handing Hollywood's top honour to a comic, multi-generational American saga of political resistance.

The ceremony on Sunday, which also saw Michael B. Jordan win best actor and *Sinners* cinematographer Autumn Durald Arkapaw make Oscar history as the first female director of photography to win the award, was a long-incoming coronation for Mr. Anderson, a San Fernando Valley native who made his first short at age 18 and has been one of America's most lionised filmmakers for decades. Before Sunday, Mr. Anderson had never won an Os-



Director Paul Thomas Anderson and cast members of *One Battle After Another* pose after winning the Oscar on Sunday. AFP

car. But *One Battle After Another*, the favourite coming in, won six Oscars, including best director and best adapted screenplay for Mr. Anderson, the Oscars' first trophy for best casting and best supporting actor for an absent Sean Penn.

"I wrote this movie for my kids to say sorry for the housekeeping mess that we left in this world – we're handing off to them,"

said Mr. Anderson while accepting the screenplay trophy. "But also with the encouragement that they will be the generation that hopefully brings us some common sense and decency."

Ryan Coogler's *Jim Crow-set, blues-soaked* vampire tale *Sinners*, which came in with a record 16 nominations, also landed some big and even historic wins. Mr. Coogler,

the widely loved filmmaker, won the first Oscar in an unblemished career that started out with Mr. Jordan in 2013's *Fruitvale Station*.

Ms. Arkapaw was also the first Black person to win for best cinematography. Only the fourth female cinematographer ever nominated, her win was a long-incoming triumph for women behind the camera.

"I really want all the women in room to stand up," said Ms. Arkapaw. "Because I don't feel like I get here without you guys."

Jessie Buckley won best actress for her performance as Agnes Shakespeare in *Hamnet*, making her the first Irish performer to ever win in the category.

Amy Madigan won best supporting actress for her performance in the horror thriller *Weapons*.

## GS Paper III - Environment

# Crabs found with mixed-sex traits in Kerala

**Aathira Haridas**  
KOCHI

A tiny crab displaying both male and female biological traits on the same body has been discovered in the Western Ghats.

Discovered from the forests of the Silent Valley National Park, this freshwater crab belongs to the species *Vela carli* and is both male and female at the same time.

The dual-sex condition

was observed in three crabs found in tree holes in Silent Valley.

*Vela carli* is an endemic freshwater crab found only in the forests and streams of the Central Western Ghats.

### First such case

The study documents the first instance of gynandromorphy (a rare condition in which individuals exhibit both male and female characteristics) in *Vela car-*



This trait has never been reported in the *Gecarcinucidae* family. REPRESENTATIONAL IMAGE

*li*. This phenomenon is rare in crustaceans and has

never before been reported in the freshwater crab family *Gecarcinucidae*, according to the researchers.

The study was carried out by K.S. Anoop Das and K.T. Fahis from the Centre for Conservation Ecology, MES Mampad College, in collaboration with scientist and crab specialist Sameer K. Pati and Purnima Kumari from the Zoological Survey of India.

Their findings were recently published in the in-

ternational journal *Crustaceana*. Mr. Das, Head and Assistant Professor at the Centre, said that while gynandromorphy has been documented in several marine and freshwater crab families, it has not been reported in the family *Gecarcinucidae*.

"The bodies of the crabs displayed male reproductive structures, while other parts showcased female features, including gonopores," said Mr. Das.

## GS Paper III - Economy

# Economic stagnation, job mismatch behind 'distress migration' from Punjab, say experts

**Vikas Vasudeva**  
CHANDIGARH

Even as Punjab's Economic Survey 2025-26 noted that a combination of "pull" and "push" factors is behind brain drain from the State, experts argue that Punjab is witnessing 'distress migration' owing to the continued failure of the political leadership to address the root causes pushing people to leave.

"Better standards of living in developed economies such as Canada, the U.S., Australia, and the U.K. remain the biggest pull factor attracting youth with high aspirations," stated the survey tabled in the Assembly on March 8.

"On the other hand, a rising number of push factors are also at play. Lack of employment opportunities

### Several studies show that unemployment, corruption, and fear of drug addiction, are among key drivers of migration

that suit the aspirations and qualifications of Punjabis is one of the leading reasons. This is substantiated by the fact that of the total 1,22,842 applicants registered with the State's Unemployment Bureau in 2025 (as of 30th September), 58% were unskilled and 42% categorised as skilled," the survey stated.

It added that as agricultural growth has reached a plateau, several children of farmers are migrating abroad in search of jobs.

Ranjit Singh Ghuman, Professor of Eminence

(Economics) at Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar, pointed out that the Economic Survey has correctly identified unemployment, mismatch between youths' aspirations and the availability of jobs, and shrinking employment opportunities in agriculture as key drivers of migration.

"Recent studies in Punjab show that unemployment, corruption, a bad politico-administrative system, fear of drug addiction, and social insecurity are the major push factors behind migration of youth," he told *The Hindu*.

### 'Lack of political will'

"Unfortunately, the political leadership seems to lack the will to resurrect Punjab and instil a sense of confidence in the people's psyche. The Punjab govern-

ment must come out of denial mode and correct growth fundamentals, create an enabling environment for growth and employment, and address the basic reasons behind migration," he said.

Lakhwinder Singh, a visiting professor at the Institute for Human Development, New Delhi, said Punjab's gross fixed capital formation as a percentage of GSDP has been falling since the mid-1980s due to lack of capital investment.

"Given the structure and slow growth of economy, employment elasticity is low. A lack of employment opportunities has created hopelessness among the youth. The second reason is the deteriorating quality of existing employment in both public and private sectors," he said.

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Management  
Committees have been  
established in India, strengthening  
community participation in biodiversity  
governance and benefit-sharing  
mechanisms, the first report on the  
implementation of the Nagoya Protocol  
has said. PTI

COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

# Are 40 out of 100 children malnourished in Gujarat?

Data indicates that the statement is true and that there is a higher burden of malnutrition among the tribal communities of the State

**DATA POINT**

**Devvyanshi Bihani**

In March 12, child malnutrition in Gujarat became the subject of a debate in the Legislative Assembly. During a discussion on the budgetary demands of the Women and Child Development Department, Congress MLA Jignesh Mevani stated that, "despite..BJP government ...[having] more than 150 seats and 28 years of rule, only one figure comes on record, that 40 out of 100 children are malnourished. A very large section of them are tribals."

Women and Child Development Minister Manisha Vakil responded that the Opposition was relying on figures from the National Family Health Survey (NFHS 2019-21) and asked members to "update your knowledge". Ms. Vakil told the Assembly that, according to the Poshan Tracker system, "only 11.4% of children in Gujarat" were malnourished as of January 2026.

**Different methods**

The Poshan Tracker and the NFHS cannot be directly compared as they use different methods. The NFHS is a sample-based household survey conducted on a representative population, while the Poshan Tracker is a real-time monitoring system under Mission Poshan 2.0 that records growth data for children registered at *anganwadi* centres. "There are several issues in using Poshan Tracker data to counter NFHS figures. Poshan Tracker is supposed to be a complete census of children attending or at least enrolled at *anganwadis*, we do not know how complete the information is. NFHS data on the other hand is supposed to be representative of the entire population (including children who do not go to *anganwadis*)," said Economist Reetika Khera. The two datasets cover different populations and use different methods and

their figures are not strictly comparable.

"We do not know to what extent one can take Poshan Tracker data at face value. *Anganwadi* workers are under pressure to keep data entry on the Tracker updated and they experience all kinds of issues with the app and connectivity, so often they just enter some data, which may or may not reflect the child's actual weight and height," she added.

The latest publicly available Poshan Tracker data is for July 2025, and provides separate figures for stunting (low height for age), wasting (low weight for height) and underweight (low weight for age) rather than a single combined malnutrition percentage. It shows that about 32.7% of children were stunted, 7.2% were wasted and 18.4% were underweight in Gujarat (Chart 1). Among 36 States and Union Territories, the State ranks 21st in stunting and 31st in both wasting and underweight, placing it in the poorest performers bracket among States in key malnutrition indicators.

Poshan Tracker data for July 2025 shows that several States in central and eastern India rank near the bottom on these indicators. Bihar (9.3%), Chhattisgarh (7.7%) and Madhya Pradesh (8.1%) are among the worst performers in wasting, while Madhya Pradesh (24.8%) records the highest proportion of underweight children. In the case of stunting, Uttar Pradesh (48.8%) has the highest prevalence, followed by Jharkhand, Assam, Bihar and Madhya Pradesh, each with more than 42% of children found to be stunted. In contrast, States such as Goa, Sikkim, Manipur, Himachal Pradesh and Tamil Nadu rank among the better performers, reporting lower levels of stunting, wasting and underweight.

**Verifying the claim**  
NFHS-5 (2019-21) is the latest round of the nationally representa-

five survey on health and nutrition released so far, as the results for NFHS-6 (scheduled for 2023-24) are yet to be published.

In NFHS-5, 39% of children under the age of five in Gujarat were stunted, 25.1% were wasted, and 39.7% were underweight. NFHS does not report a single overall malnutrition percentage and these indicators are widely used to assess child malnutrition. The corresponding national averages were 36% for stunting, 19.3% for wasting and 32.1% for underweight (Chart 2). Stunting and underweight levels are both close to 40%, so the statement that around "40 out of 100 children" are malnourished is consistent with NFHS findings, depending on which indicator is used.

Mr. Mevani also said that "a large proportion of them belonged to tribal communities." District level figures based on NFHS-5 show that several of the worst performing districts are among those identified as tribal districts by the Tribal Development Department of the Gujarat government (Table 3).

In the case of stunting, four of the five worst affected districts: Dahod (55.3% stunted), Chhota Udaipur (48.6%), Narmada (47.2%) and Panchmahal (47.1%) are tribal districts. Wasting shows a similar pattern, with The Dangs (40.9% wasted), Tapi (36.6%), Panchmahal (35.7%) and Sabarkantha (33.1%) also ranking among the highest, all of them tribal districts. In the case of underweight, all five of the worst affected districts are tribal districts: The Dangs (53.1% underweight), Dahod (53%), Narmada (52.8%), Panchmahal (51.9%) and Tapi (51.8%).

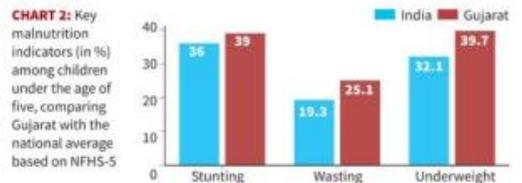
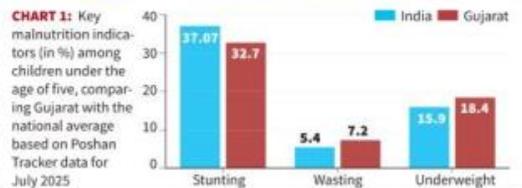
The claim that about 40% of children in Gujarat are malnourished is thus supported by NFHS-5 data, which shows that stunting and underweight levels are close to the claim. District level data also shows that several of the worst affected districts are tribal districts, pointing to a higher burden of malnutrition in tribal communities.

## Scale of malnutrition

The data for the charts was sourced from the National Family Health Survey-5 (2019-21) and Rajya Sabha Question and Answers



**Nutrition check:** A caretaker weighing a young child at an *anganwadi* in Gujarat. VIJAY SONEJI



**TABLE 3:** Key malnutrition indicators (in %) among children under the age of five, across selected districts of Gujarat based on NFHS-5 with all the districts included identified as tribal districts

District	Stunted	Wasted	Underweight
Dahod	55.3	27.8	53
Chhota Udaipur	48.6	28.4	48.1
Narmada	47.2	23	52.8
Panchmahal	47.1	35.7	51.9
Aravali	47.1	29	47.2
Tapi	41.7	36.6	51.8
Bharuch	40.9	24.5	45.5
Banaskantha	39	25.5	44.1
Valsad	37.8	23.2	34.8
The Dangs	37.6	40.9	53.1
Sabarkantha	37	33.1	41
Navsari	36.8	29	43.6
Surat	36.1	26	32.5