

Weekly Current Affairs Update for IAS Exam



Planning Commission



Ministry of External Affairs



National Portal of India



The Hindu



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Business Line



The Economic Times

**News From:
16th to 22nd December 2013**

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NATIONAL PORTAL OF INDIA

A GLINT OF INDIA

(Courtesy: NATIONAL PORTAL OF INDIA)

Particulars	Description
Location	The Indian peninsula is separated from mainland Asia by the Himalayas. The Country is surrounded by the Bay of Bengal in the east, the Arabian Sea in the west, and the Indian Ocean to the south.
Geographic Coordinates	Lying entirely in the Northern Hemisphere, the Country extends between 8° 4' and 37° 6' latitudes north of the Equator, and 68° 7' and 97° 25' longitudes east of it.
Indian Standard Time	GMT + 05:30
Area	3.3 Million sq. km
Telephone Country Code	+91
Border Countries	Afghanistan and Pakistan to the north-west; China, Bhutan and Nepal to the north; Myanmar to the east; and Bangladesh to the east of West Bengal. Sri Lanka is separated from India by a narrow channel of sea, formed by Palk Strait and the Gulf of Mannar.
Coastline	7,517 km encompassing the mainland, Lakshadweep Islands, and the Andaman & Nicobar Islands.
Climate	The climate of India can broadly be classified as a tropical monsoon one. But, in spite of much of the northern part of India lying beyond the tropical zone, the entire country has a tropical climate marked by relatively high temperatures and dry winters. There are four seasons:
winter (December-February)	
summer (March-June)	
south-west monsoon season (June-September)	

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post monsoon season (October-November)	
Terrain	The mainland comprises of four regions, namely the great mountain zone, plains of the Ganga and the Indus, the desert region, and the southern peninsula.
Natural Resources	Coal, iron ore, manganese ore, mica, bauxite, petroleum, titanium ore, chromite, natural gas, magnesite, limestone, arable land, dolomite, barytes, kaolin, gypsum, apatite, phosphorite, steatite, fluorite, etc.
Natural Hazards	Monsoon floods, flash floods, earthquakes, droughts, and landslides.

Ministry of External affairs

India and the United Nations

(Courtesy: Ministry of External affairs)

India was among the original members of the United Nations that signed the Declaration by United Nations at Washington on 1 January 1942 and also participated in the historic UN Conference of International Organization at San Francisco from 25 April to 26 June 1945. As a founding member of the United Nations, India strongly supports the purposes and principles of the UN and has made significant contributions to implementing the goals of the Charter, and the evolution of the UN's specialized programs and agencies.

Historical perspective: Decolonization and Apartheid

Independent India viewed its membership at the United Nations as an important guarantee for maintaining international peace and security. India stood at the forefront during the UN's tumultuous years of struggle against colonialism and apartheid. India was the co-sponsor of the landmark 1960 Declaration on UN on Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples which proclaimed the need to unconditionally end colonialism in all its forms and manifestations. India was also elected the first chair of the Decolonization Committee (Committee of 24) where its ceaseless efforts to put an end to colonialism are well on record.

India was amongst the most outspoken critics of apartheid and racial discrimination in South Africa. In fact, India was the first country to raise the issue in the UN (in 1946) and played a leading role in the formation of a Sub-Committee against Apartheid set up by the General Assembly. When the Convention on Elimination of all forms of Racial Discrimination was adopted in 1965, India was among the earliest signatories.

India's status as a founding member of the Non-Aligned Movement and the Group of 77 cemented its position within the UN system as a leading advocate of the concerns and aspirations of developing countries and the creation of a more equitable international economic and political order.

Contemporary Priorities: UN reform, Sustainable Development, Counter Terrorism & Disarmament

India strongly believes that the United Nations and the norms of international relations that it has fostered remain the most efficacious means for tackling today's global challenges. India is steadfast in its efforts to work with the committee of Nations in the spirit of multilateralism to achieve comprehensive and equitable solutions to all problems facing us including development and poverty eradication, climate change, terrorism, piracy, disarmament, peace building and peacekeeping, human rights.

India is partnering with like-minded countries to ensure that the focus of the debate on sustainable development remains on poverty eradication and that RIO principles remain sacrosanct in the global discourse on shaping the post 2015 development agenda. India remains committed to addressing Climate

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Change through a comprehensive, equitable and balanced outcome based on the principles of equity and common but differentiated responsibilities.

India has been advocating "Zero tolerance" approach to terrorism in all its forms. With the objective of providing a comprehensible legal framework to counter terrorism India took the initiative to pilot a draft Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism (CCIT) in 1996 and continues to work for its early adoption.

The Horseshoe: the classical format for high level meeting of the UN Security Council Peacekeeping and disarmament are among the most unique pursuits of the UN because they embody the promise and innate potential of the organization to make the world a better place. India has a proud history of participation in UN peacekeeping operations dating back to the 1950s, having taken part in as many as 43 peacekeeping operations.

India remains the only State possessing nuclear weapons to call unambiguously for a Nuclear Weapons Convention to ban and eliminate nuclear weapons. India is committed to achieving a nuclear weapons-free world in a time-bound, universal, non-discriminatory, phased and verifiable manner as reflected in the Rajiv Gandhi Action Plan that was presented to the Special Session of General Assembly on Disarmament in 1998.

India is today at the forefront of efforts on UN reform, including expansion of the Security Council in both the permanent and nonpermanent categories to reflect contemporary realities.

Planning Commission of India

A BRIEF HISTORY OF PLANNING COMMISSION

(Courtesy: Planning Commission of India)

The Planning Commission was set up by a Resolution of the Government of India in March 1950 in pursuance of declared objectives of the Government to promote a rapid rise in the standard of living of the people by efficient exploitation of the resources of the country, increasing production and offering opportunities to all for employment in the service of the community. The Planning Commission was charged with the responsibility of making assessment of all resources of the country, augmenting deficient resources, formulating plans for the most effective and balanced utilization of resources and determining priorities. Jawaharlal Nehru was the first Chairman of the Planning Commission.

The first Five-year Plan was launched in 1951 and two subsequent five-year plans were formulated till 1965, when there was a break because of the Indo-Pakistan Conflict. Two successive years of drought, devaluation of the currency, a general rise in prices and erosion of resources disrupted the planning process and after three Annual Plans between 1966 and 1969, the fourth Five-year plan was started in 1969.

The Eighth Plan could not take off in 1990 due to the fast changing political situation at the Centre and the years 1990-91 and 1991-92 were treated as Annual Plans. The Eighth Plan was finally launched in 1992 after the initiation of structural adjustment policies.

For the first eight Plans the emphasis was on a growing public sector with massive investments in basic and heavy industries, but since the launch of the Ninth Plan in 1997, the emphasis on the public sector has become less pronounced and the current thinking on planning in the country, in general, is that it should increasingly be of an indicative nature.

NATIONAL EVENTS

India may end nannies for diplomats

- The US State Department sought to prevent tensions from escalating further as India went on the warpath over the shock arrest of its deputy consul Devyani Khobragade in New York.
- India has taken a muscular stand in summoning US Ambassador Nancy Powell, stripping US diplomats of identification cards that give them diplomatic benefits, and removing security barriers outside the US embassy in New Delhi.
- Under the 1963 Vienna Convention on Consular Relations, consular officials can still be arrested for acts committed outside of official job functions.
- India was outraged in Khobragade's case, as the young mother of two was jumped and handcuffed by US security officials when she was dropping her daughters to school. The arrest was handled with shocking insensitivity.
- India reviews nanny service Stung by the nanny scandal in New York, the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) is weighing in on whether to discourage diplomats from taking a constellation of help from nannies to cooks from India to America. "The diplomat's life is one big Catch 22..
- This is not the first time an Indian diplomat in the US has been charged with mistreating domestic helpers. Given the frequency of these cases, the thinking in the MEA is that the issue of taking domestic help abroad needs to be reviewed
- In 2011, Santosh Bhardwaj sued her employer India's then consul general in New York, Prabhu Dayal, accusing him of treating her like a slave, forcing her to work long hours for \$300 a month, confiscating her passport and making her sleep in a storage closet. Similarly, in 2012, an Indian maid won a \$1.5 million lawsuit against Neena Malhotra, a former press and culture counselor at the New York Consulate, for "barbaric treatment to her.
- As for Devyani Khobragade , New Delhi transferred the IFS officer to India's permanent mission in the United Nations from her present post of deputy consul-general in New York, giving the US an opportunity to grant her full diplomatic immunity.
- India is considering proposing an agreement to extend full diplomatic immunity to all personnel of the two countries under the Vienna Convention for Diplomatic Relations, regardless of whether they are posted at consulates or the embassy. Russia is said to have such an agreement with the United States.

Joint Coordination Committee for Jharkhand

- A Joint Coordination Committee has been put in place for smooth functioning of JMM-led alliance government in Jharkhand.
- Congress president Sonia Gandhi has agreed to the proposal for constituting the committee, which would be chaired by Union Minister Jairam Ramesh.
- The nine-member committee comprises top Congress, JMM and RJD leaders, including BK Hariprasad, Chief Minister Hemant Soren, Rajender Singh and Sanjay Singh Yadav.

Lokpal bill passed by the parliament

- Parliament passed the Lokpal bill with the Lok Sabha adopting the measure as amended by the Rajya Sabha after a short discussion, amid the din created by members for and against the bifurcation of Andhra Pradesh.
- Members from Samajwadi Party and Shiv Sena, opposed the bill and staged a walkout in protest, as their counterparts from other parties, including Congress vice-president Rahul Gandhi and the Leader of the Opposition Sushma Swaraj, supported the measure.
- Mr. Gandhi sought extension of the Winter Session to pass six more bills which were “part of the comprehensive anti- corruption framework” of the UPA government. “Lokpal bill alone is not enough to fight corruption. What we need is a comprehensive anti-corruption code. The UPA government has prepared anti-corruption framework.
- Noting that Lokpal bill was part of this comprehensive framework, he said the RTI law was the first on the UPA list. The others which remain pending are Prevention of Corruption amendment, right to citizens for time-bound delivery of goods and services, public procurement, foreign bribery, judicial accountability and the whistleblowers bills, Mr Gandhi said.
- Ms Swaraj supported the measure but attacked the Congress for clamouring to take credit for it, saying “the people of this country and the old man (Anna Hazare) who has undertaken fast several times deserve the credit.”
- Earlier, Speaker Meira Kumar allowed the bill, as amended by the Upper House, to be laid and taken up for consideration by Lok Sabha.

Communal Violence Bill

- Though several States have expressed opposition to the Prevention of Communal Violence Bill, the Union Cabinet gave its approval to it, paving the way for its introduction in the winter session of Parliament .
- Termed one of the key laws proposed by the UPA government, it has been pending for long. Union Home Minister Sushilkumar Shinde said extensive discussions were held on the Bill.

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- The Union Home Secretary recently held consultations with State Home Secretaries.
- Before the Union Cabinet gave its approval to the Prevention of Communal Violence Bill several State Home Secretaries had objected to the “anti-federal” provisions of the Bill.
- The Chief Ministers of Tamil Nadu, Gujarat and Odisha wrote to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh saying the proposed legislation was exclusively in the domain of the States and opposed the move to bring the Bill in Parliament.
- They also questioned the timing of the Bill ahead of the 2014 Lok Sabha elections and described the reworked draft as a “deliberate encroachment upon the jurisdiction of the States.” In fact, the BJP’s prime ministerial candidate, Narendra Modi, had described the bill as “a recipe for disaster.”
- The BJP has maintained that it will oppose the Bill on the ground that the measure will be a “threat to India’s communal harmony.”

Whistleblower bill

- The National Campaign for People’s Right to Information (NCPRI) has sought the simultaneous passage of the Lokpal Bill, the Grievance Redress Bill and the Whistleblower Protection Bill, contending that these laws formed a basket of inter-linked measures that constituted the much required accountability regime.
- The NCPRI released an open letter to all parties, among others, by Justice P.B. Sawant, Romila Thapar, Rajinder Sachar and Aruna Roy. Its central point was that the three laws offered separate remedies and were equally important from the perspective of the ordinary citizen.
- On the grievance redress legislation (The Right of Citizens to Time-bound Delivery of Goods and Services and Redressal of their Grievances Bill, 2011), the letter said the law would provide relief to ordinary citizens who felt harassed by the denial of access to services and entitlements under the various laws. “Bribes are demanded for the most ordinary services. Most of the grievances relate to matters as basic as food, water, education, electricity, roads, pensions, medicines and hospitals. These are not inconsequential, petty complaints. The denial of these most basic rights of the citizen undermines their dignity, life and livelihood.”
- On the whistleblower protection legislation (The Whistle-blowers Protection Bill, 2011), the letter said a whole decade had passed since the law was promised following the murder of whistleblower Satyendra Dubey on November 26, 2003.
- It pointed out that during this time, more than 40 RTI activists had been killed and thousands of others faced daily harassment as they pursued cases of corruption without any legal protection. The letter said the Bill was passed in the Lok Sabha two years ago and had been under consideration in the Rajya Sabha since then.

Centre file review petition of Section 377 ruling

- Within nine days of the Supreme Court judgment upholding Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, according to which homosexuality or unnatural sex between two consenting adults is illegal and an offence, the Centre moved the apex court seeking a review of its ruling.

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- In its review petition on Friday, the Centre said: “The judgment suffers from errors apparent on the face of the record, and is contrary to well-established principles of law laid down by the apex court enunciating the width and ambit of Fundamental Rights under Articles 14, 15 and 21 of the Constitution.
- ” The IPC, when enacted in 1860, was justified; but with the passage of time it became arbitrary and unreasonable, the petition added.
- “Section 377 IPC, insofar as it criminalises consensual sexual acts in private, falls foul of the principles of equality and liberty enshrined in our Constitution. Further, Section 377 which criminalises intercourse ‘against the order of nature’ is a reflection of outdated sodomy laws of the United Kingdom which were transplanted into India in 1860.

Ashok Ganguly questions SC Jurisdiction

- The former Supreme Court judge, Asok Ganguly, questioned the jurisdiction of the three-judge committee which probed sexual harassment charges levelled against him by a law intern, and used other technical grounds to defend himself.
- The Supreme Court panel, which rejected the defence, concluded that the law intern’s statement prima facie disclosed an act of “unwelcome verbal/non-verbal conduct of sexual nature.”
- The report shows that Justice Ganguly appeared before the committee, comprising Justices R.M. Lodha, H.L. Dattu and Ranjana Desai, on November 27.
- Justice Ganguly said he “strongly” denied the allegations of sexual harassment. But he argued that even accepting them to be true, the date of the alleged incident was December 24, 2012 and sought to defend himself on the ground that this was before the enactment of the Sexual Harassment (Prevention, Prohibition & Redressal) Act, 2013.
- He cited Article 20(1) of the Constitution under which “no person shall be convicted of any offence except for violation of a law in force at the time of the commission of the act charged as an offence.”
- The former judge also said the Visakha guidelines could not be applied to this case as “this court is not the workplace of either the intern or the judge concerned who retired.”

Four ex-Congress Chief Ministers,in Adarsh panel

- The report of the Adarsh Commission of Inquiry, tabled in the Maharashtra Assembly on Friday, has indicted four former Congress Chief Ministers, including Union Home Minister Sushilkumar Shinde, and two Nationalist Congress Party Ministers for extending political patronage to the controversial building project.
- The report, rejected by the Maharashtra Cabinet, names the former Chief Ministers, Ashok Chavan and the late Vilasrao Deshmukh.
- It also indicts Shivajirao Nilangekar Patil, who served as Revenue Minister when the building received clearances. Mr. Patil had also served as Chief Minister in the 1980s.

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- The scam, which broke in in 2010, rocked the political establishment. It was found that the building received many out-of-turn clearances from politicians, bureaucrats and defence officials. Many of them later got flats in the building.
- The report observed that as Chief Minister, Mr. Chavan granted 15 per cent extra floor space index (FSI) for the building, excluding a recreation ground from the plot. Earlier, as Revenue Minister, he, along with Mr. Deshmukh, had cleared reduction of an adjoining road to increase the space available for the Adarsh Society.

The Right to Information (Amendment) Bill, 2013

- The Department Related Parliamentary Standing Committee on Personnel, Public Grievances, Law and Justice has differed with the opinion of the Attorney General G.E Vahanvati over the proposed amendment to The Right to Information Act to exclude political parties as ‘public authorities’ and has held that the government was right in mooting the amendment.
- The Right to Information (Amendment) Bill, 2013 seeks to amend the Right to Information Act, 2005 order to nullify the June order of the full Bench of Central Information Commission that brought six national parties under the act’s ambit.
- In its report on the Bill, the committee contended that the CIC order was based on “misinterpretation of law.” The Bill, introduced in the last session of Parliament, was referred to the committee for closer examination.
- The parliamentary committee maintained that the aspects of transparency in financial matters of political parties were fully covered under existing laws and mechanisms. These include direction from Election Commission to the parties asking them to submit their accounts within 90 days after general election, inspection of accounts of candidate of political party and obtaining the same from the EC on payment of nominal charges, and declaration of assets and liabilities to the Ethics Committee of House by MPs.

Verdict on convicted lawmakers by SC to stay:

- The Supreme Court has refused to modify its verdict so as to hold that all the sitting MPs and MLAs, who stood convicted as on its judgement dated July 10, will also be disqualified.
- The court had earlier ruled that disqualification would be incurred only if members are convicted post its July 10 judgement.
- A plea for modification in its judgement was filed, pleading for extending the disqualification also to members who stood convicted in criminal cases as on July 10.
- A bench led by Justice A K Patnaik dismissed the application, saying the appropriate remedy for the petitioner was to file a review petition.
- The court also noted it had given due reasons why only those convicted after July 10 should incur disqualification under the Representation of People Act.

'Run for Unity'

- Gujarat Chief Minister and BJP prime ministerial candidate Narendra Modi recently flagged off a 'Run for Unity' marathon in Vadodara, as part of a massive outreach programme to collect iron for a 182 metre statue of Sardar Vallabhai Patel in the middle of the Narmada river.
- Indians paid tribute to veteran leader and freedom fighter Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel on his 63rd death anniversary by organizing "Run for Unity", recalling the legacy of India's 'Iron Man'.
- Underlining the need for people from different parts of India to unite in the effort to memorialise the contribution of Sardar Patel, Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi is preparing for the ambitious project to build a gigantic iron statue of the leader.

INTERNATIONAL

Tussle in oil rich South Sudan

- The death of three Indian UN peacekeepers has brought into sharp focus a power struggle, whose roots may lie not so much in an inter-ethnic contest for political ascendancy, but a larger tussle for the control and diversion of South Sudan's rich energy and mineral resources.
- The three soldiers were killed when fighting between forces loyal to President Salva Kiir and former Vice President Riek Machar spiralled, resulting in an attack on a UN peacekeeping base.
- The targeted UN stronghold in the town of Akobo is in Jonglei State whose capital Bor is already under the control of Mr. Machar's forces, making it an ideal base for a further advance.
- UN forces are protecting 14,000 civilians who have fled the fighting in Bor.
- More than 500 people have so far been killed amid fears that a civil war may be on the cards, riding on the growing animosities between the country's Dinka and Nuer ethnic groups.

Mikhail Khodorkovsky released from prison

- Mikhail Khodorkovsky, an oil tycoon and political opponent of Vladimir Putin, has been released from prison after being pardoned by the Russian President.
- Mr. Khodorkovsky, who has spent the last 10 years in prison on charges of fraud and tax evasion, left a prison colony in Russia's northwest near the Arctic Circle, on Friday morning, within an hour after the Kremlin published Mr. Putin's decree pardoning the 50-year-old businessman on "humanitarian" grounds.
- Mr. Putin said Mr. Khodorkovsky had cited his mother's worsening illness when asking for clemency.
- Russia's richest man and owner of the country's largest oil company was arrested in October 2003 and sentenced to eight years in prison. His company, Yukos, was dismantled and taken over by the state. In 2010 Mr. Khodorkovsky was tried again on charges of embezzlement and slapped with another prison term that would have kept him behind bars till August 2014.

Angela Merkel to continue as German chancellor

- Angela Merkel was overwhelmingly elected as German chancellor for a rare third term after she struck a hard-fought deal with her centre-left rivals to end months of political limbo in Europe's largest economy.
- Merkel's conservatives had secured a stunning third win in the September 22 elections but failed to grab an outright majority, forcing her to enter into lengthy coalition talks with the rival Social Democrats (SPD).

- With a whopping 504 of the 631 seats, 59-year-old Merkel's centre-right Christian Democrats Union (CDU) bloc and the SPD now hold a comfortable majority in the Bundestag, the lower house of parliament, under their hard-fought 'grand coalition' deal.
- Germany's first female chancellor was confirmed by 462 votes, with nine abstentions. For the vote, 621 members of parliament were present, of whom 150 voted against Merkel.
- Germany's tough stance on fiscal discipline is unlikely to change under the new coalition.
- The new government will be slightly to the left of the previous one, in which the CDU were in coalition with the market-oriented Free Democrats (FDP).

Future movement in Lebanon politics

- The Future Movement vowed to end what it termed Iran's "control" over Lebanon's political decision-making, pledging not to join a new government with Hezbollah unless the party withdrew from Syria and adhered to the Baabda Declaration.
- Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea also lambasted Hezbollah, blaming the party's military intervention in Syria for the rise of the takfiri movement in Lebanon.
- The Future Movement's tough stance was spelled out by MP Nuhad Mashnouq, who delivered a speech on behalf of former Prime Minister Saad Hariri, the head of the party, at a ceremony commemorating the late Pierre Sadek and Nassir Asaad, two pro-March 14 prominent media figures, held at Geagea's residence in Maarab, north of Beirut.
- Mashnouq urged all the Lebanese to rally behind this cause, saying his declaration was not merely directed to the March 14 coalition.
- Mashnouq blasted Hezbollah's involvement in the fighting in Syria alongside President Bashar Assad's forces, saying the group's intervention had brought takfiri factions to Lebanon.
- Lebanon has been rattled by a string of deadly car bombings in Beirut's southern suburbs and the northern city of Tripoli recently that killed nearly 80 people and wounded over 500, in incidents directly linked to the 32-month war in neighboring Syria. Last month's twin suicide bombings that targeted the Iranian Embassy, killing 30 people and wounding over 150, were also tied to the conflict in Syria and blamed on takfiri groups.
- Mashnouq reiterated the Future Movement's pledge not to join a national partnership government with Hezbollah before the party withdrew its fighters from Syria and abided by the Baabda Declaration.
- Mashnouq rejected Nasrallah's recent accusations that Saudi Arabia was behind the twin bombings that targeted the Iranian Embassy in Beirut. He said that while Saudi Arabia worked for Muslim and Arab unity, Iran was out to divide Muslims in order "to protect its aggression against the Arabs, not Israel."

- Geagea also blamed Hezbollah's role in Syria for the rise of Takfiri factions in Lebanon.

No SAS role in Princess Diana's death

- There is "no credible evidence" the SAS was involved in the deaths of Diana, Princess of Wales, and Dodi Al Fayed according to credible reports.
- The Met had received material in August about their deaths in a 1997 Paris car crash, which reports suggested related to claims the military was involved.
- But police said that having conducted a "scoping exercise" there was no basis to open a criminal investigation.
- A 2008 inquest found the couple had been unlawfully killed.
- The car crash in a Paris tunnel occurred partly due to the "gross negligence" of the driver, the inquest ruled.
- Reports in several British Sunday newspapers in August had suggested the new material had been passed to the police by an Army source.
- A statement from the Met said its assessment included "taking statements from a number of individuals and reviewing records".
- It said the investigating officers were given "unprecedented access" to Special Forces Directorate records.
- The statement continued: "Every reasonable line of enquiry was objectively pursued in order to fully evaluate any potential evidence.
- Princess Diana, the former wife of the Prince of Wales and the mother of princes William and Harry, was 36 when she died alongside Mr Al Fayed, 42.
- Henri Paul was driving when their hired Mercedes crashed into a pillar in Paris's Pont de l'Alma tunnel.
- The crash happened after the couple had left the Ritz Hotel and were pursued by paparazzi on motorbikes. Mr Al Fayed's bodyguard, Trevor Rees-Jones, was the only survivor.
- At the inquest into their deaths, the jury found the couple had been unlawfully killed and the deaths were the result of "gross negligence" on the part of Mr Paul and the paparazzi.
- The paparazzi pursuit, Mr Paul's drink-driving and a lack of seatbelts contributed to the deaths, the jury said.
- The inquest lasted more than three months and heard from 250 witnesses.

Moscow to help transfer Syria's toxic agents in one place

- Russia has decided to provide naval escorts to ships ferrying tonnes of material as part of a multinational exercise, involving the United States and its European allies as partners, to destroy Syria's stockpile of chemical weapons.
- Russia — which has played a leading role in convincing Syria to shed chemical arms — will render its assistance in two stages.
- Deputy Foreign Minister Gennady Gatilov told RIA Novosti news agency that Russia will provide material and technical support to first transport chemical agents on land to the Syrian port of Latakia.
- From the Syrian coast, the stockpile of around 500 tonnes will be moved along ships that are being mainly provided by the EU.

Clash in Thailand between royalists and the democrats

- In a world now accustomed to democratic upheavals, including the “Arab Spring” and the Saffron and Orange Revolutions, the weeks of political upheaval in Thailand stand out for one main peculiarity: Protesters massing on the streets here are demanding less democracy, not more.
- From their stage beneath the Democracy Monument, a Bangkok landmark, protesters cheer their campaign to replace Parliament with a “people's council” in which members are selected from various professions, rather than elected by voters.
- The embattled Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra has proposed new elections as a solution to the turmoil. But that is just what the protesters do not want.

INDIA AND THE WORLD

India-Japan maritime exercise

- India's indigenously built stealth frigate INS Satpura, the Guided Missile Destroyer INS Ranvijay and missile corvette INS Kuthar participated in the four-day first ever Japan-India Maritime Exercise (JIMEX) that was conducted in waters off the Indian coast in the Bay of Bengal from December 19.
- Japan participated in the exercise, which focussed on Maritime Security Cooperation, through its Japan Maritime Self Defence Force (JMSDF) that would be bringing in two Guided Missile destroyers, JS Ariake (with Commander Escort Division – 7 embarked), and JS Setogiri.
- The exercise comprised of harbour and sea phases of two days each that strived to enhance interoperability, thereby enabling the two navies to undertake operations in the sphere of maritime security in the future.
- India and Japan had agreed to conduct bilateral naval exercises during Defence Minister A.K. Antony's visit to Japan in November 2011 and the first such exercise was conducted off Japan in January 2012.

Iran backs deep-sea gas pipeline to India

- Iran is focusing on exporting natural gas to India along a deep-sea route — the move coinciding with the cancellation of a loan to Islamabad to build the Pakistani section of the Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline and the signing of the Geneva nuclear accord that could help relax sanctions against Tehran.
- India's South Asia Gas Enterprise Pvt. Ltd. (SAGE) had conducted feasibility studies for the multi-billion-dollar undersea pipeline, which could carry gas from Iran's giant South Pars gas field to India's west coast. Once operational, it could channel 31 million cubic meters of gas per day.
- Iran's interest in the India-centric project coincides with the cancellation of its \$500-million loan to Pakistan to build part of a pipeline to funnel natural gas.
- In boosting exports, the Iranians have identified countries which could be linked with cost-effective pipelines to receive gas, and others which will have to depend on LNG tankers.

ECONOMY

Tesco and TATA

- More than a year after the government allowed 51% foreign direct investment (FDI) in multi-brand retail, Britain's Tesco, the world's third largest retailer, is set to become the first foreign supermarket to foray into India's Rs 31 lakh crore (\$500 billion) retail sector.
- Tesco announced it had applied to the Foreign Investment Promotion Board (FIPB) to buy a 50% stake in Tata group's Trent Hypermarket, thus confirming months-long speculation about a possible multi-brand joint venture (JV) between the two.
- Trent operates the supermarket chain Star Bazaar. Subject to mandatory approvals, the Tata-Tesco joint venture would focus on Karnataka and Maharashtra.
- Tesco, reports said, wants to invest \$110 million (around Rs 682 crore) on its India foray, well above the stipulated minimum multi-brand retail FDI of \$100 million.
- Tesco had formed an alliance with the Tata group in 2008 for providing back-end support and for wholesale and franchise agreements.
- The British retailer now supplies around 80% of the goods to Tata's 16 Star Bazaar and Star Daily stores.
- The year has been a busy one for the Tata group led by Cyrus Mistry (pictured) what with partnerships with three global players. Apart from the latest one with Tesco, Tata had inked a deal with Malaysia's low-cost carrier AirAsia in February and the two are all set to launch a budget airline come 2014. In September, Tata tied up with Singapore Airlines for a 51:49 \$49 million (to be scaled up to \$100 million) JV to launch a full-service airline in India.

CERC norms

- CRISIL fears that power utilities' profits would be hit if power regulator's recent tariff norms are implemented in the present form. However, credit profiles of the firms will remain stable.
- "The Central Electricity Regulatory Commission's (CERC's) recent draft tariff guidelines for power utilities have potential, if implemented in the current form, to reduce aggregate annual profits of CRISIL-rated utilities by Rs.1,400 crore, or nearly 7 per cent of their profits in the last fiscal.
- The draft norms stipulate a change in the manner of reimbursement of tax, a stringent incentive structure, and stricter operating parameters. The adverse impact of these provisions is marginally offset by other benefits.

Spicejet, Tigerair sign agreement

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- SpiceJet Ltd and Tigerair, Singapore's largest budget airline signed a three-year interline agreement for greater connectivity between their carriers.
- SpiceJet is the first Indian low fare airline to establish such an arrangement with a foreign airline. This partnership will result in a major boost for tourism and business travel between the two countries.
- Starting from January 6, 2014, customers travelling on SpiceJet's domestic network from 14 Indian cities can have seamless connection through Hyderabad's Rajiv Gandhi International Airport onto Tigerair's Singapore-bound flights.
- Similarly starting from January 12, 2014, Tigerair customers from Singapore will also enjoy easy access to SpiceJet's wide domestic network, making their holiday and business travel more seamless.
- The airport will provide a free porter service to facilitate the collection and transfer of checked-in baggage for passengers travelling on connecting flights between the two airlines.

Inflation rate in November

- Costly vegetables, particularly potato and onion, pushed the November wholesale inflation to a 14-month high of 7.52 per cent, making it difficult for the Reserve Bank to ease key policy rate.
- Vegetable prices shot up by 95.25 per cent in November as compared to 78.38 per cent in the previous month.
- The overall inflation in the food segment comprising wheat, pulses, vegetables, milk, among others, was at 19.93 per cent, up from 18.19 per cent in October.
- The rise in WPI comes after the retail or consumer price inflation jumped to 11.24 per cent.
- Potato prices shot up by 26.71 per cent in November, as compared to a contraction in the previous month.
- The onions too were costly, but the price rise was low as compared to October. Onion inflation was at 190.34 per cent in November.
- The data further revealed that protein rich items like egg, meat and fish were costlier by 15.19 per cent while milk was dearer by 6.25 per cent in November.
- The WPI inflation for November 2013 is the highest since September 2012 when it was 8.1 per cent.

Companies to fund politics without taxes

- Companies have already begun to work out their exposure to political parties in the 2014 general elections.

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- Two corporate groups, Vedanta and Mahindra, have been first off the block to set up their electoral trust companies. The two entities — Janhit Electoral Trust and Mahindra Electoral Trust Company — were registered in August and December 2013, respectively, to make political donations, data bank of the ministry of corporate affairs shows.
- While Janhit Electoral Trust was set up on August 8 in Tamil Nadu by the Vedanta Group, Mahindra Electoral Trust Company was set up as recent as December 9 in Maharashtra by Mahindra & Mahindra, as per the ministry.
- Many other big corporate houses, including the Tata Group, are in the fray to register as electoral trust company to avail of the tax benefits for political donations. The companies are disbanding their existing trusts to form these new companies.
- These trusts will have to disclose the details of the amount contributed by them to any political party during the financial year.

RBI reference rates fixed

- The Reserve Bank of India fixed the reference rate of rupee against U.S. dollar at 62.3800 and the euro at 85.2945 as against 61.9176 and 85.2692 on Wednesday.
- In a press release issued by RBI, the exchange rates for the pound and yen against the rupee were quoted at 102.1535 and 59.98 per 100 yen, based on reference rates for the dollar and cross-currency quotes at noon.
- The reference rate is based on the noon rates of select banks here and the SDR-Rupee rate would be based on this rate.

RBI Rates Unchanged

- The Reserve Bank of India (RBI), kept the indicative policy rates (repo) and cash reserve ratio (CRR) unchanged. However, it said that it would act if inflation rates remain at stubbornly high levels.
- The RBI kept the repo rate at 7.75 per cent, and kept the CRR, which is the portion of the total deposits the banks have to keep with the central bank as a reserve, at the current level of 4 per cent. Repo rate is the short term rate at which banks borrow funds from the central bank.
- RBI Governor said that retail inflation measured by the consumer price index (CPI) has risen unrelentingly through the year so far, “pushed up by the unseasonal upturn in vegetable prices, double-digit housing inflation and elevated levels of inflation in the non-food and non-fuel categories.”
- Wholesale inflation has also gone up sharply from second quarter onwards, with upside pressures evident across all constituent components. “High inflation at both wholesale and retail levels risks entrenching inflation expectations at unacceptably elevated levels, posing a threat to growth and financial stability.”

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- The pick-up in real GDP growth in the second quarter of the current fiscal was driven largely by robust growth of agricultural activity, supported by an improvement in net exports, said Dr. Rajan, adding, the weakness in industrial activity, however, persisting into the third quarter, still lacklustre lead indicators of services and subdued domestic consumption demand suggest continuing headwinds to growth.

Sebi exempts govt

- Capital market regulator Sebi exempted the government from making an open offer to public shareholders for acquiring shares of Indian Overseas Bank after the Rs. 1,200 crore capital infusion that will raise its stake in the state-owned lender to 79 per cent.
- The government, promoter of IOB, holds 73.80 per cent stake in the bank. It has proposed to acquire nearly 23 crore additional shares of the bank by way of preferential allotment against the Rs. 1,200 crore infusion.
- Once the government purchases these shares, its stake in IOB will rise by little over 5 per cent to 79.01 per cent.
- As per the rules, when entities holding 25 per cent or more stake in a company acquire additional 5 per cent or more stake in the firm, they are required to make an open offer so as to provide an exit opportunity to the public shareholders.
- In an order, Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi) said that even after the proposed hike in government stake in IOB the minimum public shareholding level — which is 10 per cent for public sector units — would be maintained.
- In addition, the market regulator said there would be no change in the management control at IOB.

U.S. Federal Reserve

- The U.S. Federal Reserve plans to begin tapering its monetary policy of quantitative easing in January, announcing that it would pare purchases of government-backed bonds by 10 billion dollars to 75 billion dollars a month.
- If the job market continues to gradually improve and currently muted inflation does not slip toward deflation, the Fed will “likely reduce the pace of asset purchases in further measured steps at future meetings,” but bond buying is “not on a preset course.”
- The Fed expects to maintain current interest rates - set near zero since December 2008 - at least until unemployment falls below 6.5 per cent, as long as inflation does not exceed 2.5 per cent and longer-term inflation expectations are “well anchored.”
- The Fed’s monetary policy statement did not mention the budget deal, which passed the Senate minutes after Mr. Bernanke spoke and was headed to President Barack Obama to be signed into law.

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- The bond purchases have helped keep long-term interest rates low to encourage more borrowing and spending.
- The Fed's action comes after encouraging reports that show the economy is accelerating.
- The stock market is near all-time highs. Inflation remains below the Fed's target rate. And the House has passed a budget plan that seems likely to avert another government shutdown next year. The Senate is expected to follow suit.

Boeing 787 Dreamliner Aircraft

- Air India Ltd. has invited bids from leasing companies to sell seven additional Boeing 787 Dreamliner jets, and hire them back on monthly rentals as part of its strategy to raise cash.
- The national carrier currently operates 11 Dreamliner jets. It expects to take delivery of three more planes through February from Boeing Co., expanding the total fleet to 14, according to tender documents seen by The Wall Street Journal.
- Air India has already sold and leased back seven of the 11 Dreamliner jets it currently operates. The so-called sale-and-lease-back model of aircraft financing is common in the airline industry. When making bulk orders, airlines negotiate attractive deals with manufacturers, and some would later sell the aircraft at a premium to leasing companies, which would in turn rent the aircraft back to the airlines for fixed monthly payments.
- Air India--one of the first customers for the Dreamliner--ordered a total of 27 planes in January 2006. The carrier hopes to complete taking delivery of all the planes in 2016.
- Designed to carry 256 passengers, the Dreamliners have also opened up new destinations for Air India, such as Australia. It has also replaced older jets on its fleet on some international routes with the new planes.
- But the Dreamliners have also been mired by technical glitches. In January, lithium-ion batteries on 787s overheated in two separate incidents, prompting a global grounding for four months. Air India itself faced problems while operating the jet, including an overheating oven on a domestic flight in India, and the cracking of an outer windshield on a flight from New Delhi to Sydney.

'Made in India' cars

- In a sign of its growing stature in car manufacturing, India is emerging as an export hub of global auto firms not just for small cars but also for big cars such as mid-size sedans and utility vehicles (UVs).
- Export of big vehicles has been on the rise as an increasing number of global brands are now selling India-built sedans and UVs in other markets.
- During April-November 2013, exports of sedans reported a growth of 29 per cent at 77,987 units when compared with 60,512 units in a year-ago period. Share of big cars in total car exports has increased to 21 per cent from about nine per cent in March 2012.

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- Export of entry-level sedans (include Hyundai Accent, Maruti Swift Dzire and Toyota Etios sedan) and mid-size sedans (Nissan Sunny, Volkswagen Vento and Ford Fiesta, among others) grew by 28 per cent and 31 per cent, respectively, during the period.
- In 2012-13, exports of these vehicles more than doubled at 91,478 units when compared with 43,903 units in the previous year, according to statistics of Society of Indian Automobile Manufacturers (SIAM).
- Europe's largest car maker Volkswagen has also been selling 'Made in India' Vento across three continents. Recently it started shipping the cars to Mexico, which will become the single largest export market for Volkswagen India.
- Along with sedans, UVs are also scripting a success story with their exports increasing to 23,556 units from 4,793 units during April-November 2012 period. Currently, Renault is the largest UV exporter from India, followed by Ford and Mahindra & Mahindra.

Gold comes off all-time high, silver declines during 2013

- Gold prices slipped from its peak level and was poised to end 2013 below last year's closing price after the government increased customs duty to 10 per cent and imposed import restrictions to contain increasing demand for the precious metal.
- As of December 21, the price of 10 grams of gold had fallen Rs 840, or 2.76 per cent, from last year's close, while silver had lost Rs 13,630, or 23.57 per cent, per kg.
- The government took steps to curb imports of gold after concerns about the country's current account deficit (CAD). In the previous financial year, the CAD climbed to a record high of 4.8 per cent of GDP on the back of higher gold imports and slowing exports.
- Import duty on gold was increased to 6 per cent in January. Two more hikes followed -- to 8 per cent in June and to 10 per cent in August.
- The Reserve Bank of India, too, imposed restrictions on gold imports for banks, such as curbs on granting advances for the purchase of gold in any form, including primary gold, bullion, jewellery, coins, units of gold exchange traded funds and units of gold mutual funds.
- Finance Minister P Chidambaram appealed to citizens to refrain from buying gold and help the government's efforts to trim the widening CAD as the depreciating Indian currency continued to cause worries.
- The government's measures brought down gold prices although it remained out of reach for the common man.

ENVIRONMENT

Green Tribunal's powers challenged

- The National Green Tribunal's powers to take up cases about wildlife have been challenged. The question of the tribunal's jurisdiction has cropped up in a petition filed by an iron ore miner in Kohlapur, Maharashtra, asking for renewing his right to mine in a piece of land the government has said is a tiger corridor.
- The case pertains to a mine operating in a village that falls between the Sahyadri Tiger Reserve and Radhanagri Wildlife Sanctuary but the case could now take a greater significance, besides deciding the fate of the tract of land between the two tiger-bearing areas that the environment ministry said is a corridor used by tigers.
- The mine owner who applied for renewal of his lease to mine iron could not secure the forest clearance as the National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA) — the apex body of the government in charge of tiger conservation, under the environment ministry — said the lease fell in a wildlife corridor that needed protection.
- The green laws that the tribunal is empowered to adjudicate on does not cover the Wildlife Protection Act 1972, though the body is empowered to deal with issues pertaining to forest clearances under the Forest Conservation Act 1980, besides other regulations and legislations.

Gadgil Report

- Chairman of the Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel (WGEEP) Madhav Gadgil has said that he and other panel members will not keep quiet if the government decides to discard the panel's report in the wake of propaganda against it.
- Speaking on the panel's commitment to hearing people's proposals for the conservation of the Western Ghats, he said 25 grama panchayats in Maharashtra came up with their proposals.
- The WGEEP clearly recommended that the grama panchayats give proposals as to what developmental and conservation activities they wanted. The panel also proposed positive incentives for conservation activities including organic farming and protection of 'sarpa kavus' (sacred groves) in Kerala.
- Referring to the major differences between the Gadgil report and the Kasturirangan report, Prof. Gadgil said that while the former meticulously followed the mandate given to it and made recommendations that considered conservation of both land and water resource in totality, the latter speaks only of protecting areas of natural landscape.
- The Kasturirangan report completely ignored the original mandate given to the Gadgil committee, he stated. The Gadgil panel he headed wanted people's aspirations on conservation and development to be taken on board, while the Kasturirangan report questions the ability of the local community to take decisions on conservation issues. If the Kasturirangan panel report was accepted, the local community would be completely sidelined, he added.

The green network

- The Environment Monitoring Forum was conceived as a public forum where anyone with a genuine interest in ecology can pool in his/her efforts and ideas with the aim of spreading the message of environment protection. With Kochi as its base camp, the EMF (Environment Monitoring Forum) came into being with renowned journalist and social thinker, late P.V. Thampy, as its chief mentor. It was during the 90s that the EMF initiated a host of environment-related activities in the city.
- The Environment Monitoring Forum has always articulated that development should be streamlined with a steady focus on sustainability. And it expresses its views on such issues. By organising seminars, discussions and symposia, and publishing books such as Environment Hazards in Kerala— Problems and Remedies, the EMF kept discussions on the need for conversation alive. Published in the 90s, the book remains relevant even today owing to its predictive content. Interestingly, it was dedicated to the Periyar in an attempt to turn the spotlight on the river's rampant pollution.
- It was a litigation filed in public interest by the EMF that prompted the High Court of Kerala to issue an ordinance against inadequate methods adopted in handling bio-medical waste in the State. That decree made installation of incinerators mandatory in all hospitals in Kerala. Of late, members of the EMF have been campaigning in the social media for committed steps by the Kochi Metro Rail Limited to rebuild the green cover lost by the felling of trees along the arterial M.G. Road to pave way for the metro rail project.
- Through several of its initiatives, the Environment Monitoring Forum could bring about better awareness on ecology related issues at the regional level. Their attempt at honoring people who have meticulously contributed to environment protection has received much appreciation.

SCIENCE AND TECH

Thalassemia kit

- India launched a low-cost, indigenously-manufactured Thalassemia and Sickle Cell diagnostic kit that will simplify the identification of seven common beta-thalassemia mutations and two common abnormal haemoglobins common in India.
- This kit, tailor-made for the Indian population, can also be used for screening.
- The kit, to be made available at approximately Rs 400 in the public health facilities up to district levels, is expected to bring down the prices of the test in the open market where it costs up to Rs 15,000.

Mars orbiter

- After the trajectory of India's spacecraft to Mars was corrected on December 11, "everything is going well" and the orbiter "is well on course" towards the Red Planet, according to K. Radhakrishnan, Chairman, Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO).
- Since the Mars spacecraft had travelled more than four million km away, "there is a communication delay of 12 seconds" each way.
- Three more corrections of the orbiter's trajectory would be done when the ground controllers would command the eight, small thrusters on board the spacecraft to fire for setting right its trajectory so that the spacecraft is properly headed towards Mars. These course corrections would take place in April, August and September 2014.
- As of now, the ground controllers at the ISRO were communicating with the spacecraft, using the dish-antenna with a diameter of 18 metres. From April 2014, they would use the 32-metre antenna to keep a tab on it, Mr. Karnik said.
- After a prolonged firing of the spacecraft's propulsion system on December 1, the orbiter winged out of its earth-bound into a sun-centric orbit.

SPORTS

Delhi Waveriders

- Actor-turned-producer John Abraham has been signed by Hockey India League (HIL) franchise Delhi Waveriders as its co-owner recently.
- The franchise also appointed former national hockey coach Cedric D'Souza as their new coach for the second edition of the league which starts next month.
- The Hockey India League is scheduled from January 25 to February 15, with six teams competing against each other.

Fourth Indian bowler to claim 300 wickets

- Zaheer Khan got his 300th Test wicket under the African sun, when he dismissed Jacques Kallis in the first Test at the Wanderers Stadium.
- In a career spanning innumerable tours, plentiful wickets and countless desolate nights of coping with injury-induced self-doubt, Zaheer is back again in the African continent, refreshed, rejuvenated and ready to rattle batsmen with his potent mix of swing and pace.
- It has been a comeback to cherish and one that augurs well for M.S. Dhoni's men.
- That performance catapulted Zaheer onto the bigger leagues while also offering fresh hope to Indian cricket, tainted as it was after the match-fixing controversy.
- That series also brought to the fore another young and energetic talent — Yuvraj Singh — who had blasted an 84 in that match.

FIFA rankings

- World and European champions Spain top the final FIFA world rankings of the year for the sixth time in a row.
- Football world governing body's rankings show an unchanged top 10, with Spain leading going into World Cup year ahead of Germany and Argentina.
- Colombia, Portugal and Uruguay follow, with Italy, Switzerland, Netherlands and World Cup hosts Brazil completing the leading 10.
- The only changes in the top 30 see Bosnia—Herzegovina up two places to 19th, with France dropping a place to 20th while Mexico also slip a place to 21st. The highest climbers of 2013 are Ukraine, who moved up 29 places to 18th. Ukraine failed to qualify for the World Cup finals after

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going out in the play—offs against France — a 3—0 second—leg loss after a 2—0 home win their only defeat of the year

ICC Test rankings

- India's Cheteshwar Pujara slipped a rung to seventh in the batting list but R Ashwin remained steady at fifth in the bowling chart of the latest ICC Test rankings were issued .
- Apart from Pujara, Virat Kohli, who struck a hundred on the opening day of the first Test against South Africa, is the only other Indian in the top-20 of the batting list. He is unchanged at 20th.
- Among the bowlers, Pragyan Ojha moved up a spot to eighth. Ashwin, meanwhile, continued to hold the top position in the all-rounders' list.

Revised weight category in Rio Olympics

- India found itself at the wrong end of the reforms announced by wrestling's world governing body FILA. With the new rules, the country is staring at a nightmarish prospect of having to field just one of Sushil Kumar or Yogeshwar Dutt, both medal winners at London Olympics, for the Rio Games in 2016.
- FILA dropped a weight category in freestyle wrestling while rejigging the existing ones. Grapplers will now compete in 57 and 65kg categories instead of the 55, 60 and 66kg classes, like they did at the 2012 London Games.
- For India, its three top wrestlers compete in these three categories — Amit Kumar, who won silver at this year's world championships, in 55kg; London Olympics bronze medallist Yogeshwar in 60kg and double Olympic medallist Sushil in 66kg. The revised weight category in freestyle wrestling would be 57, 65, 74, 86, 97 and 125kgs. The changes will come into effect from January 1.
- It is expected that 20-year-old Amit, regarded as the best young talent in the country, will move his weight class from 55 to 57kg. Consequently, the toss up for the one remaining lightweight spot (65kg) is between Sushil and Yogeshwar.

Most Searched Sportsperson: Sachin Tendulkar

- India's cricket legend Sachin Tendulkar, who recently retired from all forms of the game, is the most searched sportsperson and also features among the top-10 most searched Indian personalities of 2013, according to Google.
- Besides Tendulkar, the other most searched sportspersons are athletic legend Milkha Singh, India cricket skipper Mahendra Singh Dhoni, Lionel Messi, Roger Federer, Sania Mirza, Rahul Dravid, Chris Gayle, Ravindra Jadeja and Saina Nehwal.
- In a survey carried out by Google India, the much scandalised 2013 Indian Premier League (IPL) is the second in the top trending list. This year's IPL was rocked with charges of spot-fixing and betting charges.

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- Dravid, who led Rajasthan Royals in the IPL, and India's Olympic bronze medallist Saina Nehwal also featured among the top-10 most searched news.

IN THE NEWS (PERSONS)

Sushma Singh

- The President Pranab Mukherjee administered the oath of office to former IAS officer Sushma Singh as Chief Information Commissioner at the Rashtrapati Bhawan.
- A panel comprising Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, Leader of the Opposition in Lok Sabha Sushma Swaraj, and Law Minister Kapil Sibal appointed Ms. Singh.
- Ms. Singh, who is the fifth Chief Information Commissioner of CIC, is the second woman to be appointed to the post after Deepak Sandhu.
- She had joined the CIC as Information Commissioner on September 23, 2009.
- Prior to joining the CIC, Ms. Singh served as Secretary to the Government of India in the Ministries of Information & Broadcasting, Panchyati Raj and the Development of the North East Region (DONER).
- Besides her, there are eight Information Commissioners — Rajiv Mathur, Vijai Sharma, Basant Seth, Yashovardhan Azad, Sharat Sabharwal, Manjula Prasher, M A Khan Yusufi and Prof Madabhushanam Sridhar Acharyulu.
- The CIC is mandated to resolve appeals and complaints filed by information seekers, under the Right to Information (RTI) Act, against government departments or public authorities.

Abdul Basit

- Pakistan appointed career diplomat Abdul Basit as its new High Commissioner to India. Basit, 55, was earlier tipped to take over as Foreign Secretary but the government recently made several changes in proposed appointments.
- The government initially zeroed in on Syed Ibne Abbas as the new envoy to New Delhi but changed its mind as officials felt he was too junior for the crucial posting. His last posting was as the envoy to Germany.
- Current High Commissioner Salman Bashir had been asked to continue in New Delhi for Punjab Chief Minister Shahbaz Sharif's visit to India last week.

Andy Murray

- Wimbledon champion Andy Murray has been voted the BBC's 60th Sports Personality of the Year, winning the accolade after becoming the first British man to lift the trophy at the All England Club in 77 years.

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- The 26-year-old Scot ended one of the longest droughts in British sport by beating Novak Djokovic in straight sets in July.

Krish Iyer

- Wal-Mart has roped in Krish Iyer, a veteran retailer with experience of setting up new ventures, for heading its India operations.
- Iyer, who was among the team that launched the first mall in India- Crossroads in central Mumbai – in late nineties, takes over from interim CEO Ramnik Naresy.
- Naresy has been re-appointed as senior vice-president, Walmart International.

M.N. Paloor

- Malayalam's modernist poet M.N. Paloor has won this year's Kendra Sahitya Akademi award for his biography 'Kadhyayillaathavante Kadha.'
- Eighty-two-year-old Paloor Madhavan Namboodiri is the author of some of the finest Malayalam poems of the latter half of the 20th century. He was honoured with the Kerala Sahithya Akademi award for his collection 'Kalikaalam.' His other major collections are 'Pedithondan,' 'Theerthayathra,' 'Bhangiyum Abhangiyum,' 'Sangamasangeetham,' 'Pachamanga' and 'Sarga Dhara.'
- Paloor, who currently lives in Kozhikode, was honoured with the Asan Prize for poetry in 2009.

Javed Akhtar

- Bollywood lyricist-scriptwriter Javed Akhtar, Hindi novelist Mridula Garg and renowned Bengali poet Subodh Sarkar are among those selected for this year's Sahitya Akademi Award.
- The Akademi said eight books of poetry, four essays, three novels, two short stories, two travelogues, an autobiography, a memoir and one play have been chosen for the coveted award.
- Akhtar has been chosen for "Lava", his compilation of 55 Urdu poems.
- The Awards are recommended by distinguished jury members, representing 22 Indian languages and approved by the Executive Board of the Akademi, which met today under the Chair of Sahitya Akademi President Vishwanath Prasad Tiwari.
- The award, a literary honour conferred to writers for their outstanding works in the field of literature, is scheduled to be conferred here on March 11 during the annual Akademi's Festival of Letters.
- Short story category award was bagged by Temsula Ao (English -- Laburnum for my head), Mohi-ud-Din Reshi (Kashmiri -- Aina Aatash).
- C N Ramachandran (Kannada -- Akyana-Vyakhyana), Tukaram Rama Shet (Konkani -- Manmotayam), Satish Kalasekar (Marathi -- Vachanaryachi Rojanishee) and Katyani Vidmahe (Telugu -- Sahityaakashmlo Sagam) bagged the award for their respective book of essays.

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- Makhonmani Mongsaba (Manipuri -- Chinglon Amadagi Amada) and Man Bhadhur Pradhan (Nepali --Manka Lahar Ra Raharharu) have been chosen for their travelogues.
- The bulk of the awards went to poets. Subodh Sarkar (Bengali -- Dwaipayan Hrader Dhare), Anil Boro (Bodo -- Delphini Onthai Mwdai Arw Gubun Gubun Khonthai) Sitaram Sapolia (Dogri -- Doha Satsai), Ambika Dutt (Rajasthani -- Aanthoyi Nahi Din Hal) Radhakant Thakur (Sanskrit -- Chaladuravani), Arjun Charan Hembram (Santhali— Chanda Bonga) and Namdev Tarachandani (Sindhi—Mansh—Nagari).
- Mridula Garg (Hindi -- Miljul Man), R N Joe D' Cruz (Tamil -- Korkai) and Manmohan (Punjabi -- Nirvaan) won it for novels.
- Sureshwar Jha (Maithili -- Sangharsh Aa Sehanta) won the award for memoir, M.N Paloor (Malayalam -- Kathayillathavante Katha) for autobiography and Bijoy Mishra (Odiya -- Banaprastha) for a play.

Sidharth Birla

- Chairman of Xpro India Ltd. Sidharth Birla, took over as the President of Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI) succeeding HSBC India Country Head Naina Lal Kidwai.
- Chairperson and MD of Bharat Hotels Jyotsna Suri has been elected Senior Vice-President, and Chairman of Ambuja Neotia group Harshavardhan Neotia Vice-President of FICCI after its 86 annual general meeting here.

Selected Editorials of Importance

Silence of the workplace

(Courtesy : Indian express)

By doing nothing, institutions foster hostile sexual environments

Once upon a time, facts amounting to sexual harassment did not socially "exist", let alone constitute a legal claim. Behaviour such as sexual innuendo, sexually offensive gestures, sexually explicit material, sexual expletives, hostile workplace environments, job-related decisions based on implied requests for sexual favours were, well, just the way things were — it was systemic in nature. These were common life experiences that our mothers, and perhaps their mothers, and yes, we too, simply "managed". When it did get legally recognised by the landmark Vishaka judgment in 1997, sexual harassment moved from the primitive language of "eve teasing", "outraging modesty", "light-hearted banter" to be framed in terms of a fundamental constitutional right to equality and dignity for women at work.

Vishaka envisaged that women might finally go to work with the legitimate expectation that their workplace would be free of any of the overt or implied sexual harms described above — that women would be accepted as colleagues and equals and not as sex objects in a context of unequal power. And that the responsibility for ensuring that women no longer have to dodge the offensive sexual proclivities of colleagues and bosses would lie with the employer or those in positions of responsibility. Or so it was thought.

Sixteen years later, those projecting themselves as the custodians of such basic and fundamental expectations, be it a Tehelka, the Supreme Court of India or even the state, have barely, if at all, complied with Vishaka. Had they done so, the law intern and the journalist would have entered a workplace that prioritised the prevention of workplace sexual harassment, encouraged its employees or members to speak up about it and cultivated an environment supportive of their claims. They would have been equipped with language that understood sexual harassment as a violation of constitutional equality at work and hailed leadership that promptly condemned sexually inappropriate behaviour (irrespective of the offender's status). As a last resort, they would have had access to a trained, skilled and capable complaints committee, with third party expertise, to hear their complaint empathetically and through an informed lens.

Counting tigers more accurately

(Courtesy : THE HINDU)

When the Ministry of Environment and Forests assessed the status of tigers, other predators and prey in India in 2006 and 2009, it wanted the exercise to become a robust baseline for future conservation programmes. The results published in 2010 claimed an improvement in estimated tiger numbers, at 1,706 individuals compared to 1,411 in 2006. Yet, there appeared to be a contradiction in this, as the geographical area occupied by the charismatic cat was reported to have decreased in some ranges, notably in some Central Indian States and parts of the Western Ghats. A fresh exercise to count the country's tigers led by the National Tiger Conservation Authority has now been launched. This is an important project, given that India hosts the most number of tigers in the wild. What is interesting is that a mere 10 per cent of the habitat today hosts 90 per cent of the reproducing populations of the big cat. It is this area that needs rigorous monitoring

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on an annual basis, and not a general count once in four years. Also, the methods used should be open to independent scientific scrutiny, perhaps by a consortium of scientific institutions. Conservation science has come up with credible ways to estimate the density and occupancy of tigers and needs to be used rigorously. The NTCA already has access to research strategies formulated by leading tiger scientists for a focussed monitoring protocol to track source populations of tigers — those that are crucial for the survival of the species. It should employ them fully.

One of the criticisms of the scheme to sample tiger densities — which cost about Rs.12 crore in 2006 according to published accounts — is that it is likely to ignore sharp and rapid declines in populations. The methodology being used since 2006, including camera traps is, of course, an improvement over the unscientific analysis of pugmarks employed for nearly three decades. But the monitoring should be a targeted annual exercise that yields good data to inform policy. At present, although a lot of information is generated for the entire tiger habitat, it does not yield insight into areas of high density. A scientific consortium approach may therefore prove rewarding. Karnataka, for instance, has benefited from involving top scientists in conservation. Given the limited scientific resources at the disposal of the Environment Ministry, and the large external pool of science-based conservation organisations, there should be no hesitation to broaden the scope of monitoring. It is equally important to involve local communities, choosing volunteers who can be trained and deployed along with scientific personnel.

Politics & Socialism

(Courtesy: The Statesman)

The country is going through a chaotic phase in the aftermath of the Assembly elections in five states, most particularly the result in Delhi. We will soon be going through a similar exercise when the Lok Sabha elections are held. The mainstream parties are expected to prove to the voters that they have honestly tried to abide by the mandate of the Constitution that envisages a Socialist Republic. And if the question is posed to the electorate, the answer, regretfully, will be in the negative.

Diehard pro-capitalist apologists in our social set-up try to laugh at this commitment by suggesting that the expression, Socialism, was not incorporated in the Constitution in 1950, but was inserted later through an amendment in 1975 and has no relevance in post-1990 India.

It is precisely the failure of the advocates of globalisation and opening up of the economy that is responsible for the country's present misery. Article 39(b) of the Constitution was always understood to mean that we have to endeavour to set up a socialist society. This has been explained specifically by Dr BR Ambedkar in reply to Professor KT Shah who wanted 'socialism' to be incorporated in the Constitution at the drafting stage. Dr Ambedkar, while expressing his inability to do so for technical reasons, explained that socialism as such had already been incorporated in the Directive Principles of State Policy. He said: "If these Directive Principles to which I have drawn attention are not socialistic in their direction and content, I fail to understand what more socialism can be. Therefore, my submission is that these socialist principles are already embodied in our Constitution and it is unnecessary to accept this amendment."

The same conclusion was repeated in 1983 by the Supreme Court ~ "Though the word 'socialism' was introduced into the Preamble by a late amendment of the Constitution that socialism has always been the goal is evident from the Directive Principles of State Policy. The amendment was only to emphasise the urgency." Logically, therefore, if the government fails to pursue the socialist path, it will be held guilty of violating its constitutional obligations.

The misplaced faith of those who still continue to believe that the development of the Indian economy can follow the false premise of globalization, ignores the warning given by respectable economists even of the

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USA. They have highlighted two ominous developments ~ one in the financial realm and the other relating to the real economy.

To talk against globalization in the well-cloistered confines of the government and corporate sector is almost regarded as treason. Let me quote Joseph Stiglitz, the Nobel Laureate economist who, in his book published in 2006, is very critical about the assumed benefits of globalization. He writes: "Globalization is neither socially benign nor has it been instrumental in reducing poverty. Globalization has been detrimental to the poor and other weaker sections of society. Globalization policies have been responsible for many ills of the global financial crisis and loss of employment as inefficient industries closed down under the pressure from international competition."

There is a lesson to be drawn from the economic crisis in the USA and Europe, specifically that the oligarchic financial institutions were chiefly responsible for the mess. Multinational banks, notably Citi bank and Goldman Sachs, are responsible for damaging the US economy because of their greed and profit-oriented policies. The rescue operation, carried out by the US Government and its Treasury department clearly exposes the orchestrated efficiency of the private sector over the public. The latest financial disaster in the USA relates to JP Morgan and Chase Bank, the largest in the country in terms of assets. They are facing multiple investigations and \$ 5.8. billion loss owing to wrong bets on credit derivatives. Some well-known American banks are suspected to have rigged interest rates or were involved in money-laundering. Ironically, the UPA government still feels that the unregulated entry of foreign banks into Indian markets is the primary benchmark of growth.

Almost on bended knees, the government invokes the assistance from foreign multinationals and apparently justifies it on the ground that we do not have sufficient financial resources for development and therefore need foreign capital. How mischievously wrong! According to the Commerce Minister, only about \$ 250 billion (approximately Rs 12 lakh crore) have been received over the past ten years. As against this, "the top 500 listed companies have enough cash to double India's power generation capacity of 200,000 MW or build over 40,000 km of six-lane highways every year (compared with the current 800 km), but are refusing to invest because of slow economic growth that has been aggravated by policy paralysis. At the end of fiscal year 31 March 2012, these companies were sitting on cash and cash equivalent ~ the legend investments that can easily be converted to cash ~ of over Rs 9.3 lakh crore or \$160 billion."

India is definitely not shining and this is clear from the Human Development Report released by the Planning Commission in October 2011. It reveals the widening gap between rich and poor. "In India, the distribution of assets is extremely unequal, with the top 5 per cent of the households possessing 38 per cent of the total assets and the bottom 60 per cent of households owning a mere 13 per cent". Just 66 resident billionaires in India control assets worth more than a fifth of the country's GDP. Capital at large is three times more concentrated than in the United States.

If the main parties continue to violate the mandate of the Constitution, they must reflect on Dr Ambedkar's words of caution while winding up the debate in the Constituent Assembly. The occasion was to approve the Constitution. He said: "We are going to enter a life of contradictions. In politics, we will have equality and in social and economic life, we will have inequality. We must remove this contradiction at the earliest possible moment or else those who suffer from inequality will blow up the structure of political democracy which this Assembly has so laboriously constructed." That warning, I submit, is as urgent as it is relevant in 2013.

MCQs

:: NATIONAL ::

Q 1.

- i) The Supreme Court has accepted a petition for disqualifying MPs and MLAs, convicted for criminal offences, without giving them the benefit of appeals pending in higher courts recently.
- ii) Section 8 says that a person convicted of the charge of any offence and sentenced to imprisonment under Sections 8 (1) (2) and (3) shall be disqualified from the date of conviction and shall remain so for six years after his release.

Which of the above statement/statements is/are true?

- a) only i
- b) only ii
- c) both i and ii
- d) neither i nor ii

Q 2.

- i) India is planning to go ahead with construction of the 330-MW Kishanganga hydro-electric project in Punjab after much delay due to controversies surrounding it.
- ii) The Election Commission has recommended to the Law Ministry to treat all paid news as an electoral offence since it had been causing “maximum damage” to the electoral process.

Which of the above statement/statements is/are true?

- a) only i
- b) only ii
- c) both i and ii
- d) neither i nor ii

:: INTERNATIONAL ::

Q 3.

- i) According to a new rule , EU citizens who enter the UK for work will be able to access welfare and out-of-work benefits only from three months after their arrival, instead of three weeks as was hitherto the case.
- ii) The Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) has finalized its plan for the destruction of Syria's stockpile of weapons and precursor chemicals, with the most toxic material to be destroyed at sea aboard a U.S. ship.

Which of the above statement/statements is/are true?

- a) only i
- b) only ii
- c) both i and ii
- d) neither i nor ii

Q 4.

- i) Russia has decided to provide naval escorts to ships ferrying tonnes of material as part of a multinational exercise, involving the United States and its European allies as partners, to destroy Syria's stockpile of chemical weapons.
- ii) Lack of absolute majority in the elections has led to Merkel's second 'grand coalition' with Social Democrats in Germany.

Which of the above statement/statements is/are false?

- a) only i
- b) only ii
- c) both i and ii
- d) neither i nor ii

:: ECONOMY ::

Q 5.

- i) The Standing Committee on Petroleum and Natural Gas has sought a review of the Rangarajan formula for gas pricing, saying that the price should be fixed after factoring in the domestic cost of production.
- ii) Repo rate is the long term rate at which central bank borrows funds from the commercial banks.

Which of the above statement/statements is/are true?

- a) only i
- b) only ii
- c) both i and ii
- d) neither i nor ii

Q 6.

- i) The Delhi airport is set to be the first airport in the country to see the world's largest commercial aircraft — the Airbus 380.
- ii) Quantitative Easing (QE) or the enhanced bond purchase programme was an unconventional mode of intervention by the Fed following the financial crisis of 2008 that led to a surge in liquidity.

Which of the above statement/statements is/are true?

- a) only i
- b) only ii
- c) both i and ii
- d) neither i nor ii

:: SCIENCE AND TECH ::

Q 7.

- i) GSLV-D5(the first flight to use Indian cryogenic stage) is to be launched at the Sriharikota space-port.
- ii) The spacecraft is supposed to carry the GSAT-14 advanced communication satellite into orbit, to be used for telecasting, among other things. Its mission life is 12 years.

Which of the above statement/statements is/are true?

- a) only i
- b) only ii
- c) both i and ii
- d) neither i nor ii

:: INDIA AND THE WORLD ::

Q 8.

- i) India's indigenously built stealth frigate INS Satpura, the Guided Missile Destroyer INS Ranvijay and missile corvette INS Kuthar would participate in the four-day first ever Japan-India Maritime Exercise (JIMEX) .
- ii) This exercise is to be conducted in waters off the Indian coast in the Arabian sea.

Which of the above statement/statements is/are true?

- a) only i
- b) only ii
- c) both i and ii
- d) neither i nor ii

:: ENVIRONMENT ::

Q 9.

- i) The objective of 'Climate Change Action Programme' is to build and support capacity at central and state level to assess impact of climate change on the vulnerable areas associated with risks.
- ii) In a bid to tackle global warming, a proposal has been mooted to launch a new scheme on climate change by implementing a slew of measures including setting up of an institute in the name of Indira Gandhi.

Which of the above statement/statements is/are NOT true?

- a) only i
- b) only ii
- c) both i and ii
- d) neither i nor ii

:: IN THE NEWS ::

Q 10.

- i) Sushma Singh is the new Chief Information Commissioner of India.
- ii) Pakistan has appointed Abdul Basit as its new High Commissioner to India

Which of the above statement/statements is/are NOT true?

- a) only i
- b) only ii
- c) both i and ii
- d) neither i nor ii

MCQs Answers

Ans 1: b

Ans 2: b

Ans 3: c

Ans 4: d

Ans 5: a


Ans 6: b

Ans 7: b

Ans 8: a

Ans 9: b

Ans 10: d



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