

DAILY CURRENT AFFAIRS (21 August 2024)

TOPIC COVERED

1. SC forms task force to ensure doctors' safety
2. Polio case in Meghalaya is vaccine-derived, says official
3. After years of impasse, India, Malaysia raise strategic partnership, discuss entry to BRICS
4. India, Japan conduct '2+2' dialogue with focus on Indo-Pacific
5. Jupiter probe to stage first lunar-earth double fly-by manoeuvre
6. On the right path
7. Regressive move
8. On the ethanol blending programme

SC forms task force to ensure doctors' safety

Taking up a *suo motu* case over the rape and murder of a doctor, court asks task force to recommend security measures, safety audits, and enhanced police presence; it gives Centre a month to collate data from States and Union Territories on security and facilities at all government-run hospitals; top court asks CBI to submit its report tomorrow

Krishnadas Rajagopal
NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court on Tuesday constituted a **National Task Force** to work out the modalities of safety measures for medical professionals. The NTF will recommend security measures on hospital premises; infrastructure development, including separate restrooms; technological interventions to limit access to critical hospital areas; **CCTV cameras**; provision of **night transport**; counselling services; **crisis workshops**; **quarterly safety audits**; and **enhanced police presence in hospitals**.

A three-judge Bench, headed by Chief Justice of India D.Y. Chandrachud, explaining why the court

had taken *suo motu* cognisance of the rape and murder of a junior doctor at the State-run R.G. Kar Medical College and Hospital in Kolkata, said the **case laid bare the systemic failure in providing safety to medical professionals**.

The court said the "horrific" crime was the last straw and "the nation cannot wait for another rape and murder in order to bring in safety laws for medical professionals and doctors".

The Centre was given a month to collate data from States and Union Territories on security and infrastructure facilities at all government-run hospitals. This would include whether they have complied with the **Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and**



Doctors of RML Hospital watch a live-stream of the Supreme Court hearing in New Delhi on Tuesday. SHASHI SHEKHAR KASHYAP

Redressal) Act, 2013.

Surgeon Vice-Admiral Arti Sarin, Director General Medical Services (Navy); D. Nageshwar Reddy, Chairperson and Managing Director, Asian Institute of Gastroenterology and AIG Hospitals, Hyderabad; M. Srinivas, Director, All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS), Delhi; Pratima

Murthy, Director, National Institute of Mental Health and Neuro Sciences (NIMHANS), Bengaluru; Goverdhen Dutt Puri, Executive Director, AIIMS, Jodhpur; Saumitra Rawat, Chairperson, Institute of Surgical Gastroenterology and Member, Board of Management, Sir Ganga Ram Hospital, Delhi; Anita

Ex-principal booked on graft allegations

KOLKATA
The Kolkata Police has booked Sandip Ghosh, the former principal, on allegations of corruption and irregularities and sent him a notice to appear before the police allegedly for disclosing the identity of the victim. » **PAGE 4**

Saxena, Vice-Chancellor, Pandit B.D. Sharma Medical University, Rohtak; Pallavi Saple, Dean, Grant Medical College, Mumbai and Sir J.J. Group of Hospitals, Mumbai; and Padma Srivastav, former Professor, Neurology Department, AIIMS, Delhi, currently serving as Chairperson of Neurology,

Paras Health, have been appointed members of the NTF. The Cabinet Secretary; the Union Home and Family Welfare Secretaries; the Chairperson, National Medical Commission; and President, National Board of Examinations will function as its ex-officio members.

"There is a virtual absence of safety for doctors, especially young women doctors. They have 36-hour shifts. We need a national protocol for safe conditions of work for doctors and medical personnel... It is not that every time there is a rape and murder, the conscience of the nation is awakened. We need a protocol not just on paper, but to be actually implemented," Chief Justice Chandrachud said.

The Chief Justice said

women medical professionals were especially vulnerable to sexual assaults. Gender violence in the medical profession was a matter of very serious concern.

The Chief Justice reached out to the protesting doctors and medical staff to resume work, saying their concerns would be given the highest priority by the Supreme Court. The top court warned the West Bengal government against "unleashing" its might on protestors.

The Bench directed the CBI, which is currently in charge of the investigation into the crime on the orders of the Calcutta High Court, to submit its report on August 22.

REGRESSIVE MOVE
» **PAGE 8**

Vishakha and Others v. State of Rajasthan (1997)

- It is a landmark judgment by the **Supreme Court of India** that addressed the issue of sexual harassment at the workplace.
- The case arose from the tragic incident of a social worker, **Bhanwari Devi**, who was gang-raped in Rajasthan while attempting to prevent a child marriage.
- Her case highlighted the lack of legal protection and effective mechanisms to address sexual harassment and violence against women in workplaces.

Highlights of the Judgment:

1. Recognition of Sexual Harassment:

- The Supreme Court recognized sexual harassment as a violation of women's right to equality and their dignity. The court stated that sexual harassment is not merely a private issue but a societal and constitutional concern.

2. Guidelines Established:

- To prevent and address sexual harassment at the workplace, the Supreme Court laid down a set of guidelines known as the **Vishakha Guidelines**. These guidelines became the legal framework for protecting women in workplaces across India until a specific law was enacted.

Scope of the Guidelines:

- The Vishakha Guidelines defined what constitutes sexual harassment and outlined the responsibilities of employers in creating a safe working environment. They included provisions such as:
 - Establishment of a **Complaints Committee** at every workplace to address grievances related to sexual harassment.
 - Detailed **procedures for filing complaints** and the need for a fair inquiry into such complaints.
 - Measures that employers should take to prevent sexual harassment and ensure a secure working atmosphere for women.
- 3. **Impact on Legislation:**
 - The judgment was pivotal in leading to the enactment of the **Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013**, which formalized the Vishakha Guidelines into law.

- This legislation aimed to provide a safe work environment for women and defined procedures for addressing complaints.
4. **Constitutional Implications:**
- The Supreme Court anchored its judgment on various constitutional provisions, including Articles 14 (Right to Equality), 15 (Prohibition of discrimination), and 21 (Right to Life and Personal Liberty).
 - This established a nexus between constitutional rights and the need for protective measures against gender-based violence.

After backlash, Union govt. orders cancellation of lateral recruitment

Nistula Hebbar

NEW DELHI

Following a request from the Centre, the Union Public Service Commission (UPSC) on Tuesday cancelled the process of lateral recruitment of officials to middle and senior levels in the Union government.

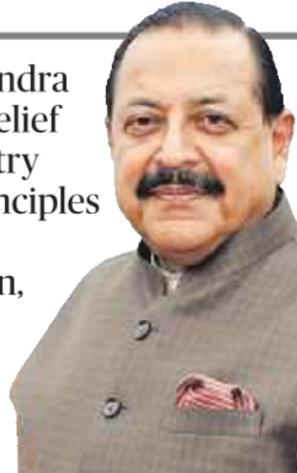
Two days ago, the commission invited applications for the recruitment of “specialists”, including from private sector, to 45 posts but this has been withdrawn as the government moved to cancel the recruitments, citing absence of reservation for the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward Classes. Union Minister of State for Personnel Jitendra Singh wrote to UPSC Chairperson Priti Sudan on Tuesday to withdraw the process.

This follows protests by



Prime Minister Narendra Modi is of the firm belief that the process of lateral entry must be aligned with the principles of equity and social justice enshrined in our Constitution, particularly concerning the provisions of reservations

MINISTER JITENDRA SINGH'S LETTER TO UPSC CHAIRPERSON



not just the Opposition but also the Lok Janshakti Party, a National Democratic Alliance partner, which declared that recruitment without quotas for SC and ST communities was “unacceptable”.

‘Transparent process’

Mr. Singh’s letter said that under the Modi government, what had been an ad-hoc process of lateral entry in the past was being made transparent, a depar-

ture from the situation during the previous Congress-led government.

His letter said that recruiting talent from outside the government had been a recommendation of the Second Administrative Reforms Commission set up by a Congress-led government in 2005 and the Sixth Pay Commission (2013), and under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, such entries had to be aligned with social justice.

Opposition parties welcome Centre’s decision

NEW DELHI

Opposition parties welcomed the move but said it was a sign of “weak” decision-making of the Modi government, that PM Modi could “no longer act unilaterally”. » [PAGE 5](#)

“Prime Minister Narendra Modi is of the firm belief that the process of lateral entry must be aligned with the principles of equity and social justice enshrined in our Constitution, particularly concerning the provisions of reservations. For the Hon’ble Prime Minister, reservation in employment is a cornerstone of our social justice framework, aimed at addressing historical injustices,” he wrote.

Polio case in Meghalaya is vaccine-derived, says official

Bindu Shajan Perappadan
Rahul Karmakar
NEW DELHI/GUWAHATI

A case of vaccine-derived polio is suspected in a two-year-old child at Tikrikilla in West Garo Hills district of Meghalaya. A senior Union Health Ministry official said on Tuesday that this was not a case of wild polio but an infection some people with low immunity acquired.

The World Health Organization declared India polio-free in 2014 after the last case of wild poliovirus in the country was reported in 2011.

Officials in West Garo Hills are on high alert after the emergence of the case. "The two-year-old child

'This is not a case of wild polio but an infection some people with low immunity acquire'

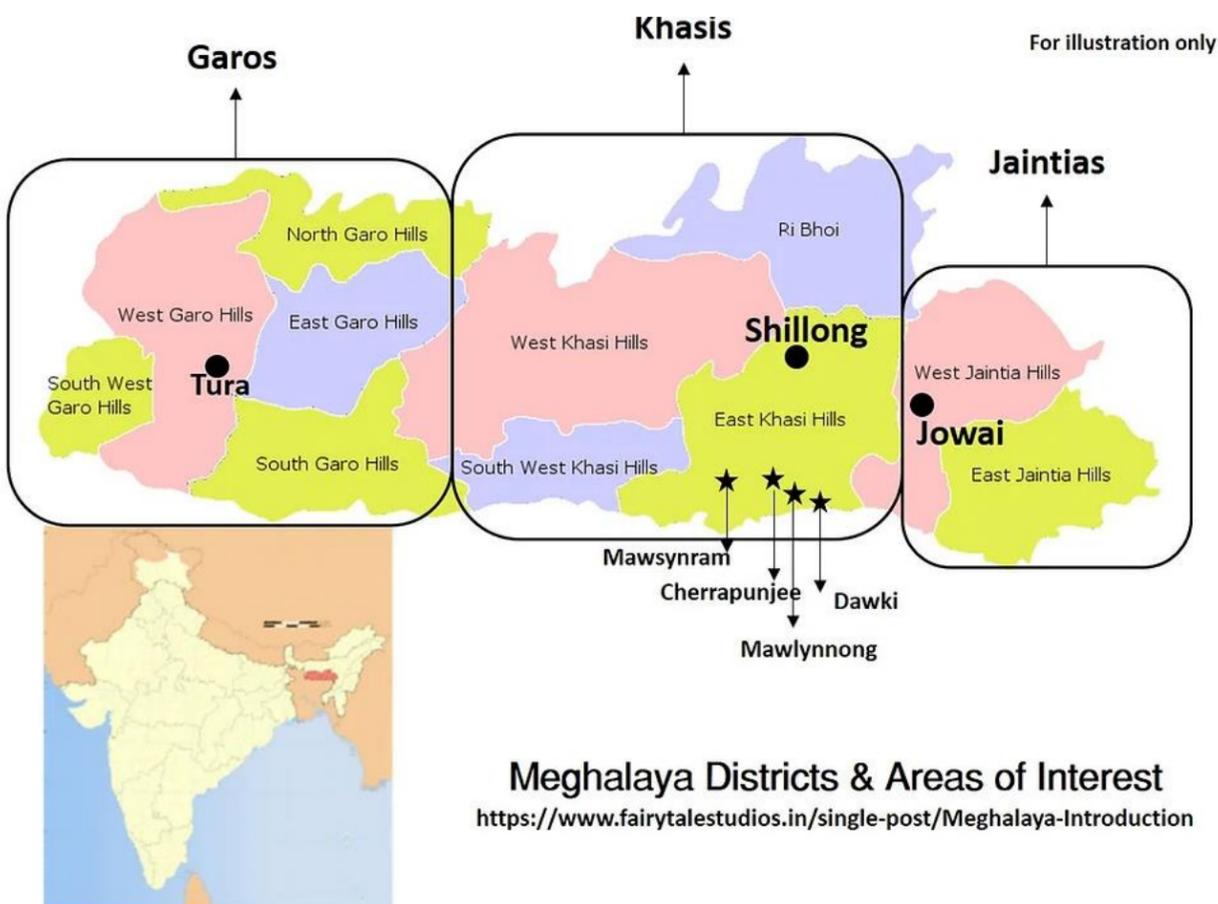
from Tikrikilla was found to have symptoms of poliomyelitis more than a week ago. The child was diagnosed with acute flaccid paralysis at a hospital in Assam's Goalpara," Chief Minister Conrad K. Sangma said. Health officials in the State said stool and other samples collected from the child were sent to testing centres in Kolkata and Mumbai run by the National Institute of Virology.

"We are still examining the issue. It is a very serious situation that will be

reviewed soon," Mr. Sangma told journalists in Shillong.

The oral polio vaccine (OPV) contains an attenuated or weakened form of the virus, which activates an immune response in the body. During this time, this vaccine-virus is also excreted. On rare occasions, an excreted vaccine-virus can continue to circulate for an extended period of time.

The longer it is allowed to survive, the more genetic changes it undergoes. In very rare instances, the vaccine-virus can genetically change into a form that can paralyse. This is what is known as a circulating vaccine-derived poliovirus (cVDPV), according to the WHO.



- Meghalaya, a state in northeastern India, is home to a rich diverse cultures and traditions.
- The three major tribes inhabiting Meghalaya are the **Khasi, Garo, and Jaintia**. Each tribe has its unique customs, beliefs, and way of life.

Khasi Tribe

- **Matrilineal Society:** The Khasi tribe is known for its **matrilineal system**, where descent and inheritance are traced through the mother's line.
- **Religion:** The Khasi people primarily follow traditional **animistic beliefs**, with a focus on nature worship and ancestor veneration.
- **Language:** Khasi is the primary language spoken by the Khasi people.
- **Traditional Occupations:** Agriculture, hunting, and gathering are traditional occupations.

Garo Tribe

- **Matrilineal System:** Similar to the Khasi, the Garo tribe follows a **matrilineal system**.
- **Religion:** The Garo people are predominantly Christian, although some still adhere to traditional **animistic beliefs**.

- **Language:** Garo is the primary language spoken by the Garo people.
- **Traditional Occupations:** Agriculture, particularly rice cultivation, is a major occupation.

Jaintia Tribe

- **Matrilineal System:** The Jaintia tribe follows a **matrilineal system**.
- **Religion:** The Jaintia people are predominantly Christian, although some adhere to traditional **animistic beliefs**.
- **Language:** Jaintia is the primary language spoken by the Jaintia people.
- **Traditional Occupations:** Agriculture, particularly rice cultivation, is a major occupation.

The Oral Polio Vaccine (OPV) is a type of vaccine that protects people from poliovirus, a virus that can cause paralysis.

- **What is OPV?**
 - The oral polio vaccine contains a **weakened form of the poliovirus**. This means the virus has been modified so that it can't cause disease but can still activate the body's immune system.
- **How Does It Work?**
 - When you take the vaccine, this weakened virus enters your body and stimulates your immune system to **produce defenses (antibodies)** against polio. This helps protect you from getting the disease if you encounter the actual virus in the future.
- **Excretion of the Vaccine-Virus:**
 - After vaccination, the weakened virus can be excreted through stools. This means that, for a short time, the vaccine-virus can spread in the community, especially if someone recently vaccinated does not practice proper hygiene.
- **Genetic Changes:**
 - Sometimes, the excreted vaccine-virus can survive in the environment, especially if it continues to be passed from person to person. The longer it survives, the more it can change genetically over time.
- **Circulating Vaccine-Derived Poliovirus (cVDPV):**
 - In very rare cases, these changes can lead to a situation where the vaccine-virus becomes capable of causing paralysis, similar to the original virus.
 - This variant is called a **circulating vaccine-derived poliovirus (cVDPV)**.
 - While this occurrence is extremely rare and closely monitored by health authorities, it highlights the need for continued vigilance and vaccination efforts.

After years of impasse, India, Malaysia raise strategic partnership, discuss entry to BRICS

Suhasini Haidar

NEW DELHI

India and Malaysia decided to upgrade ties to a "Comprehensive Strategic Partnership" on Tuesday, during talks between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, as part of a visit aimed at moving beyond several years of tensions over a number of issues.

The two leaders announced the decision to upgrade the 2010 Strategic Partnership, which had been made an "Enhanced Strategic Partnership" in 2015, along with a number of agreements and MoUs signed in their presence.

India would also work



Boosting ties: Narendra Modi and Anwar Ibrahim during a meeting at Hyderabad House in Delhi on Tuesday. SUSHIL KUMAR VERMA

with Malaysia on its request to join the BRICS grouping – one that Mr. Ibrahim has been pushing for, officials said. The two Prime Ministers also discussed geopolitical challenges, including the current conflicts and tensions

in the Indo-Pacific region.

"Malaysia is an important partner of India in ASEAN and the Indo-Pacific region," Mr. Modi said after the meeting. "We are committed to freedom of navigation and overflight in accordance with inter-

national laws. And, advocate peaceful resolution of all disputes," he added.

At the Indian Council for World Affairs, Mr. Ibrahim praised India's "unique, multi-aligned approach" and "astute and adept compartmentalisation of priorities and challenges".

'Resilient backbone'

"Whereas the Atlantic Ocean must bear the dark history of imperial expansion, gruesome colonisation, and chattel slavery and as the Pacific Ocean world is riddled with tensions and on the epicentre of the renewal of the Cold War, here in the Indian Ocean world we can create a stable and resilient backbone for the global econo-

my," he said.

Mr. Ibrahim's visit is the first by a Malaysian Prime Minister since 2018, after which ties soured over Malaysia's strong criticism of the Citizenship Amendment Act, the reorganisation of Jammu and Kashmir, India's demand for the extradition of controversial preacher Zakir Naik, as well as the COVID-19 pandemic when hundreds of Malaysians were detained in the lockdown in India.

Calling it "unfortunate" that ties have not progressed in the past few years, Mr. Ibrahim said it was important to note India and Malaysia's similarities as two "multicultural, multi-ethnic and multi-religious countries".

India, Japan conduct '2+2' dialogue with focus on Indo-Pacific

Two sides hold discussion on defence cooperation, significance of open Indo-Pacific; Rajnath says partnership is based on democratic values

Press Trust of India
NEW DELHI

The India-Japan partnership is set against a larger context of a free, open and rules-based Indo-Pacific and it will continue to grow, External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar said on Tuesday as both sides held a fresh edition of "2+2" dialogue amid China's increasing military muscle-flexing in the region.

The Japanese delegation at the talks in Delhi was headed by Foreign Minister Yoko Kamikawa and Defence Minister Minoru Kihara. Mr. Jaishankar and Defence Minister Rajnath Singh headed the Indian team.

"In the last decade, our relationship has assumed the form of a special strategic and global partnership. The logic of this evolution is our expanding interests and growing activities," Mr. Jaishankar said.

"As we both step forward into a more volatile



Japan's Minister of Defence Minoru Kihara receives the guard of honour in the presence of Rajnath Singh. SHASHI SHEKHAR KASHYAP

and unpredictable world, there is a need for reliable partners with whom there are substantial convergences," he said.

"As a result, we have consciously sought to facilitate each other's endeavours, comprehend each other's objectives, strengthen each other's positions and work with other nations of shared comfort," he added.

In his remarks, Mr. Singh said the India-Japan special strategic and global

partnership is based on democratic values and the rule of law.

He said India has set a goal of becoming a developed country by 2047 and building domestic defence capabilities is one of the significant aspects of this vision.

"The India-Japan partnership in the defence sector will be an important aspect to realise our goal. Let us make a vision for this partnership," the Defence Minister said.

Teesta River:

- The Teesta River originates from the **Teesta Glacier** located in the **Kanchenjunga mountain range** in **North Sikkim, India**. Specifically, the river starts at an elevation of about **7,300 meters (23,950 feet)** above sea level, where the Teesta Glacier feeds the river.
- **Course and Length:** After its origin, the Teesta flows approximately **315 kilometers (196 miles)**, cutting through the mountainous terrain of Sikkim before proceeding to West Bengal and eventually entering Bangladesh, where it joins the Brahmaputra River.

Jupiter probe to stage first lunar-earth double fly-by manoeuvre

Reuters

European scientists were due to attempt a first in orbital gymnastics late on August 19, tapping into the gravity of the earth in quick succession to guide the JUICE probe towards Jupiter in the **first-ever double slingshot manoeuvre**.

Just over a year after it was launched, the European Space Agency's Jupiter Icy Moons Explorer (JUICE) is returning towards the earth on August 19-20 and will **use the braking effect of its gravity to take a shortcut to Venus and onwards to Jupiter**.

In a novel double manoeuvre, the **Airbus-built JUICE probe will first use the gravity of the moon to swing towards the earth on exactly the right trajectory**.

That's risky because the slightest error at that stage would be amplified by the second part of the routine, which involves using the earth's gravity to slow down. Scientists warn that this could derail the **eight-year odyssey to reach Jupiter and its moons**.

"Inherently, this is a bit tricky, because you would need to correct any error, and you would need propellant for that," Nicolas Altobelli, JUICE Mission Manager, said in an interview.

Scientists have used the "gravity assist"

The fly-by will put JUICE on course to reach Jupiter in 2031 with the help of three further single gravity assists: Venus in 2025, and earth again in 2026 and 2029

method for decades to navigate the solar system while saving propellant.

It involves **brushing past a planet or moon and using the power of its gravity to speed up, slow down, or alter course**.

But this week's lunar-earth fly-by involves the first ever attempt to carry out two such manoeuvres back-to-back.

If successful, it will put JUICE on course to reach Jupiter and its three large ocean-bearing moons – **Callisto, Europa and Ganymede** – in 2031 with the help of **three further single gravity assists: Venus in 2025, and then the earth again in 2026 and 2029**.

ESA scientists had weighed several options for getting Juice to Jupiter without the unrealistically large rocket that would be needed to get it there without any gravity assistance at all.

Using the moon's gravity to change course allowed them to catch the earth in front of its orbit around the Sun, **which has the effect of slowing down the probe, whereas passing behind the planet would speed it up**, Altobelli said.

That in turn allowed ESA's planners to target Venus and take advantage of its exceptionally powerful slingshot effect.

"It's a very good configuration of the moon's position around the earth... So we are being opportunistic," Altobelli told Reuters.

Following up on **NASA's 1990s Galileo mission to Jupiter**, the ESA-led **JUICE mission will orbit the solar system's largest planet**, perform fly-bys of its three large icy moons, and finally orbit Ganymede to study its potential to support life.

"It means studying the conditions and understanding whether those moons could be a potential habitat, and could have conditions favourable for life as we know it," Altobelli said.

A ground plan for sustainable mass employment (21 August)

- The government announced five major employment-related schemes with a budget of ₹2 lakh crore over five years, aiming to create jobs and skill opportunities for 4.1 crore youth.
- The Economic Survey highlights the importance of job creation by the private sector, especially given lower taxes since 2019 and higher profits after the COVID-19 pandemic.
- The Prime Minister's employment package should be seen alongside other initiatives focused on human well-being.
- To create sustainable and dignified mass employment, it's important to acknowledge the issue of low wages, especially when there's an abundance of unskilled workers.
- The Periodic Labour Force Survey 2019-20 showed that a person earning ₹25,000 a month is in the top 10% of wage earners.
- Short-term skill programs have struggled to provide long-term job placements, often due to wages being too low for a dignified life in cities. Many workers return to their villages for other work.
- Successful employment and skill development are linked to continuous education and better opportunities. States like Tamil Nadu, Kerala, and Goa have higher per capita consumption and better human development indicators.
- States like Odisha, which focus on short-term skilling without robust education systems, have lower per capita consumption.
- Mass employment with dignity requires increasing productivity. While the private sector's role in job creation is crucial, the government also needs to ensure a minimum wage and provide high-quality public services.
- Public employment in India is much lower compared to most developed countries, indicating a need for the government to take more active steps in creating sustainable and dignified jobs.

Skilling needs

- Start by identifying local skilling needs through decentralized community action. Involve the community directly in State programs to ensure ownership and effectiveness.
- Use local organizations like gram sabhas in villages or basti samitis in urban areas to connect government programs with the people.
- Create a register of all individuals seeking employment or self-employment. Develop a personalized plan for each youth in collaboration with professionals at the local level.
- Employ well-educated professionals on a fixed-term basis at the local government level to ensure that outcomes are based on evidence. Use this approach to find suitable skill providers and employers.
- Base apprenticeship programs on strong community connections, leading to transformational outcomes.
- Integrate initiatives for education, health, skills, nutrition, livelihoods, and employment at the local government level with women's collectives. This approach ensures community accountability and effective outcomes.
- Employment improves when various human development indicators, such as education, health, and sanitation, are addressed together. Decentralized community action with untied funds can lead to better public services.
- Introduce vocational courses or certificate programs alongside undergraduate programs in all colleges. This approach, already practiced in some places, should be mandatory to improve employability.
- Standardize nursing and allied health-care professional courses across all States to meet international benchmarks. This standardization is crucial as the quality of institutions and courses currently varies greatly.
- There is a high demand for skilled nurses, geriatric caregivers, and health paramedics both in India and abroad. By standardizing these skills to international standards, we can better meet this demand.
- Establish community cadres of trained caregivers to run crèches, allowing women to work without worry. Current anganwadi services are insufficient for the number of infants. These caregivers, funded by local governments or women's collectives, can be modeled after the Community Resource Persons of the Rural Livelihood Mission.
- Expand and improve Industrial Training Institutes (ITIs) and polytechnics as key centers for skill development. Many of these institutions lack modern infrastructure, which is crucial for upskilling. These institutions should be autonomous, community-managed, and serve as hubs for feeder schools.
- Schools should create an equivalence framework that integrates academic and vocational education through credits and hours. Focus on improving vocational education in States and districts with limited infrastructure. Successful examples include Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra, where strong vocational institutions have supported manufacturing growth.
- Introduce enterprise and start-up skills in high schools. Schools should teach technology and entrepreneurship from the upper primary level onwards. Professionals visiting schools can help students learn about business processes and gain finishing skills, which can lead to employment or starting a business.
- Develop a co-sharing model of apprenticeships with industries on a large scale, particularly in manufacturing and services. Sharing the costs of skilling between the government and potential employers is more effective. Industry involvement in apprenticeships is crucial for success.

Capital loans and enterprises

- Simplify the process of obtaining working capital loans for women-led and first-generation enterprises to help them scale up.
- Lessons from successful women entrepreneurs in the Rural Livelihoods Mission highlight the challenges of accessing loans.
- Technology and innovations by the Reserve Bank Innovation Hub and the National Rural Livelihoods Mission can boost confidence in banks to lend more.
- Launch a universal skill accreditation program for institutions providing skills training.

- State and industry can co-sponsor candidates for these courses. Skill providers should undergo rigorous assessments before accreditation.
- Allocate 70% of Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) funds to the most water-scarce and deprived blocks, focusing on the poorest families.
- Use MGNREGA for income-generating activities like animal sheds and irrigation wells, improving livelihood security.
- Enhancing the skills of MGNREGA wage earners can lead to better productivity and wages, ensuring dignified lives in impoverished regions.
- Expand apprenticeships significantly to help more youth gain workplace experience.
- The focus should be on genuine skill acquisition rather than just providing a stipend.
- Government subsidies to employers should be linked to offering dignified wages after successful apprenticeships, promoting a higher quality of life and productivity in the workforce

West Asia crisis spells tough choices for China, Russia (21 August)

- The assassination of Ismail Haniyeh, chief of Hamas's Politburo, in Tehran in July has escalated tensions between Israel and Iran, bringing them close to a full-scale war.
- The region is anticipating a strong Iranian response, potentially more violent than earlier exchanges.
- Despite the rising tensions, Iran's key allies, Russia and China, have maintained a cautious and ambiguous stance.
- The ongoing conflict in Gaza has become part of a broader power struggle between the United States and its allies on one side, and a China-led group that includes Russia, Iran, and North Korea on the other.
- Iran has been central in this, providing military support to Russia and cheap oil to China.
- Russia and China have different, sometimes conflicting, goals in the region. If Iran gets deeply involved in a regional conflict, it may require additional support from both Moscow and Beijing.
- While Russia and China share a common goal of weakening U.S. influence in West Asia, they have individually developed their own influence strategies, which are more focused on their national interests rather than a collective approach.
- China has been diplomatically active, helping to normalize relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran, and hosting Palestinian factions like Hamas and Fatah.
- China views the Palestinian cause as a struggle against Western colonialism and generally supports Arab positions.
- Russia's situation is different, as it has been militarily involved in the Syrian conflict since 2015, supporting Bashar al-Assad's regime against threats like the Islamic State.
- Russia maintains military bases in Syria for strategic access to the Mediterranean, and alongside Iran, it has helped to secure Assad's regime, strengthening its influence in the region.

The issue of Iran's nuclearization

- Despite many areas of cooperation, China and Russia align with Western countries on one major issue: preventing Iran from becoming a nuclear-armed state.
- This concern is particularly strong now, as Iran is seen as close to achieving nuclear weapons capability.
- The recent election of Masoud Pezeshkian, a moderate President of Iran, and his appointment of some reformist figures, such as Abbas Araghchi as Foreign Minister, have raised hopes that nuclear negotiations might resume.
- However, this depends on various factors, including the outcome of the U.S. presidential elections.
- China prefers an Iranian leader who opposes the West and the U.S. but does not push to develop nuclear weapons, according to scholar Yun Sun.
- Russia is more aggressive than China in challenging Western power, using its intelligence and military in regions like western Africa and West Asia.
- Recent reports suggest Russian intelligence is helping the Houthis in Yemen to disrupt global trade, affecting U.S. and European interests.
- The U.S. is determined to maintain its small military presence in Syria and Iraq to keep its influence in the region. A withdrawal would be seen as surrendering a key area of power.
- For China and Russia, it is important that Iran avoids a traditional war with Israel, as conflict could destabilize their strategic plans.
- However, Iran may feel compelled to respond to the assassination of Haniyeh to avoid appearing weak, especially with pressure from its proxies like Hezbollah demanding a strong reaction.

On the right path (21 August)

Elections will address the yearning for substantive democracy in J&K

- The Election Commission of India (ECI) announced dates for elections in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), to be held in three phases between September 18 and October 1.
- This is important because there has been no elected State legislature in J&K since the abrogation of its special status and its reduction to a Union Territory.

- The lack of a functioning legislature, combined with the suppression of dissent through arrests of students, journalists, and others under laws like the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act and the Public Safety Act, has increased feelings of alienation among the people of J&K.
- The Supreme Court, in a judgment that upheld the abrogation of J&K's special status, also ordered that elections to the Legislative Assembly must be held by September 30, 2024. The ECI has followed this directive.
- Without an elected legislature, the people of J&K have lacked a platform to voice their concerns and have been eager for the chance to participate in elections.
- This is reflected in the higher voter turnout in local body and parliamentary elections since 2019, especially in the Kashmir Valley.

Regressive move

Reducing work hours of women is not the way to ensure their safety

The last thing that a rape and murder need are platitudes, and a predictably tiresome one is being peddled after the brutal killing of a woman doctor on duty at Kolkata's R.G. Kar Hospital on August 9. **One of the guidelines issued by the West Bengal government calls for minimising night duty for women.** How will this dictum – “wherever possible, night duty may be avoided for women to the extent possible” – secure safety at the workplace? This regressive move will only end up removing women from the workforce, instead of ensuring a stop to violence. **With the labour force participation rate for urban women in India, ages 15 and above, pegged at an abysmal 25.2% in April-June 2024,** according to the Periodic Labour Force Survey's quarterly bulletin, the governments at the Centre and States must ensure that **women, employed as health-care professionals, gig and factory workers, call centre staff, auto drivers, hotel duties and journalists, are able to work safely, anywhere, and at anytime.** Reducing their time at work will only lead to women losing jobs and their financial independence. The other guidelines, as part of the programme called **'Rattirer Shaathi (helpers of the night)', include the call for separate rest rooms and toilets for women, creating safe zones with CCTVs, and a special mobile phone app** – measures which should have been already in place.

The Supreme Court, taking *suo motu* cognizance of the Kolkata case, in its hearing on Tuesday announced a national task force to look into the safety of doctors and medical professionals. Gender violence should be a matter of serious concern in every sphere, not least the informal sector, where women are employed in large numbers. **The sweeping changes brought into the system after the 2012 Delhi rape, such as harsher laws and stringent punishment, have not been enough.** **The National Crime Records Bureau's (NCRB) annual report of 2022, the latest one available, shows that 4.45 lakh cases of crimes against women were registered,** which is equivalent to nearly 51 FIRs every hour. Protocols cannot be just on paper, the Chief Justice of India D.Y. Chandrachud said. In 2017, when the Court was confirming the death penalty of four men, who were accused in the 2012 Delhi rape, **Justice R. Banumathi** had said that **apart from effective implementation of laws, a change in the mindset of the society at large and creating awareness in the public on gender justice would go a long way to combat violence against women.** Campaigns led by women after the R.G. Kar rape, to “reclaim the night” in Kolkata and other parts of the country, should serve as wake-up calls to governments, and society, to do it right by women.

- In the last Assembly elections nearly a decade ago, the results were divided along communal lines, with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) winning most of the seats in Jammu, and the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), National Conference (NC), and Congress winning most of the seats in the Valley.
- A coalition government was formed between the PDP and BJP, but it was an unstable alliance that eventually failed. In the 2024 general election, the NC and Congress fought together as part of the INDIA bloc, and there is a possibility of these parties forming an alliance with smaller parties in the upcoming elections.
- It is important for parties that support the restoration of statehood and secular governance in J&K to unite.
- This is necessary not only for electoral success but also to ensure that the election focuses on civic issues and rights, rather than being divided along communal lines.
- An election centered on civic issues and rights could help bring peace to J&K, a region that has experienced fresh waves of terrorism in Jammu and south Kashmir.

Regressive move (21 August)

Reducing work hours of women is not the way to ensure their safety

- After the brutal killing of a woman doctor on duty at Kolkata's R.G. Kar Hospital, the West Bengal government suggested reducing night duty for women. This approach is seen as ineffective because it removes women from the workforce instead of addressing the issue of violence.
- The participation of urban women in the workforce in India is already low (25.2% for women aged 15 and above in April-June 2024). Instead of reducing their work hours, governments should focus on making workplaces safer for women, ensuring they can work safely at any time.
- The other guidelines proposed by the West Bengal government include creating separate restrooms and toilets for women, establishing safe zones with CCTVs, and introducing a special mobile app. These are measures that should have already been implemented.
- The Supreme Court, recognizing the seriousness of the issue, announced the formation of a national task force to improve the safety of doctors and medical professionals.
- Gender violence is a serious concern, especially in the informal sector where many women work. Despite harsher laws and punishments introduced after the 2012 Delhi rape case, violence against women remains high.
- The National Crime Records Bureau's 2022 report shows that 4.45 lakh cases of crimes against women were registered, which means almost 51 FIRs were filed every hour.
- The Supreme Court emphasized that safety protocols should not just exist on paper but must be effectively implemented.
- Beyond laws, a change in societal mindset and public awareness about gender justice is crucial to combat violence against women.
- Campaigns led by women, such as the "reclaim the night" protests after the R.G. Kar rape, highlight the need for governments and society to take meaningful action to protect women's rights and safety.

On the ethanol blending programme

India is on its way to achieve its target of blending 20% of petrol with ethanol by 2025-26. However, the food versus fuel equation continues to hang over the ethanol economy along with questions regarding fuel efficiency in existing vehicles

GS Paper III: Economy & Environment

ECONOMIC NOTES

M. Kalyanaraman

India is on its way to achieve its target of blending 20% of petrol with ethanol by 2025-26, going by the milestones on blending percentages crossed so far and the increase in ethanol production capacity.

However, the food versus fuel equation continues to hang over the ethanol economy as recent events have shown. For example, maize import has increased from April to June of this year compared to last year at a time when maize has been used to produce more fuel ethanol to compensate for restrictions on using sugarcane products. The industry, however, opines India has enough grain and sugar surpluses. Tarun Sawhney, Vice-Chairman and Managing Director, Triveni Engineering and Industries, says, "With big food stocks across the country, there is absolutely no concern about food security in the near future. I am concerned the supplies and stocks are so large that it could lead to wastage and spoiling," he said.

All the emphasis has been on first generation (1G) ethanol that is directly made from foodgrains and sugarcane. The government should diversify and move to 2G and 3G that are more benign in terms of impact on food security.

Status of ethanol production capacity

Twenty per cent by 2025-26 would mean producing some 1,000 crore litres of ethanol for blending with petrol. "We are now seeing 13% to 15% blending with a sharp increase since 2021," says Sourabh Banerjee, consultant on ethanol and biofuels. In 2021, the blending was around 8%. Deepak Ballani, director general of Indian Sugar and Bio-energy Manufacturers Association, says the sugar industry has invested some ₹40,000 crore in the last few years in capacity expansion. In just two years, 92 crore litre capacity was added.

The roadmap for achieving ethanol blending targets, prepared by the Niti Aayog, had laid down that the capacity of sugarcane-based distilleries would need to increase from 426 crore litres in 2021 to 760 crore litres in 2026, while grain-based distilleries' capacity should increase from 258 to 740 crore litres. In other words, a lot more of grain-based distilleries were to come up. Besides fuel ethanol, some 310 crore litres would be needed for making ethanol for consumable liquor as well as industrial uses. Taking stock in December 2023, the government said India's ethanol production capacity had already increased to 1,380 crore litres – some 875 crore litres capacity from sugarcane and 505 crore from foodgrains. This means the targeted total ethanol capacity is nearly achieved although with a greater sugarcane-based component.

Two interest subvention programmes for establishing new distilleries had facilitated the ramping up of ethanol generation capacity. Industry has been demanding, that to maintain momentum and create surplus capacity for other uses such as blending with diesel, these programmes should be extended and that Oil Marketing Companies (OMCs) should sign more long-term contracts with distilleries until the supply chain is well and truly formed.

Sugarcane gives rise to three main related products – sugarcane juice and syrup, B-heavy molasses and C-heavy molasses, in the order of decreasing sugar content. The first two would typically go to making sugar while the third will be used for ethanol production. In a bid to

Ethanol for blending

With the government restricting the use of B-heavy molasses and sugarcane juice for ethanol production from December 2023, grain-based ethanol production has increased to maintain blending percentages

Ethanol supplied to oil marketing companies

Supply-year	C-heavy molasses	B-heavy molasses	Sugarcane juice	Surplus rice	Damaged grains	Maize	Total in litre crore; blending % in brackets
2019-20	74	68	15	0	16	0	173 (5.00)
2020-21	39	183	39	2	39	0	302 (8.10)
2021-22	11	265	85	49	24	0	434 (10.02)
2022-23	6	235	128	74	32	32	506 (12.06)
2023-24*	39	95	56	0	76	135	401 (13.00)

Supply years are December-November, December to October for 2022-23 and November to October for 2023-24

*Data available only for November-June

Shortage: Sugar mill workers load harvested sugarcane on to a tractor trolley in Sangli district, in Maharashtra, in 2022. REUTERS



up fuel ethanol production, the government had started permitting the diversion of the first two away from sugar production to fuel ethanol. Ethanol pricing depends on the sugar content of the input. In 2022-23, 63% of fuel ethanol came from B-heavy molasses and 33% from molasses. In December, 2023, the government restricted the diversion of the first two over fears of falling sugar stocks.

Mr. Ballani, however, believes the restrictions will be removed this year. He says that out of a total production of 340 lakh tonnes of sugar in 2023-24, consumption was only 285 lakh tonnes. Some closing stock is therefore available for 2023-24, he says, adding that fears of depleting sugar surpluses are unfounded. Expanding sugarcane production will have to be sustained by higher water use. Souvik Bhattacharjya of The Earth Research Institute says to sustain 50% of 1,000 crore litres from sugarcane, 400 billion litres of water would be needed additionally. Expanding sugarcane cultivation would redirect irrigation water from essential food-grain crops, exacerbating concerns about agricultural sustainability, he says. To make up for the shortfall due to restrictions on B-heavy molasses, grain-based distilleries, mainly maize, have likely been operating at full capacity to keep up with the blending percentages this year.

Government policy is that maize as well as surplus rice and damaged grains will be used to feed grain-based distilleries.

India ranks as a major maize producer globally, but domestic consumption consistently outpaces production, says TERI's Bhattacharjya. Over the last few years, Indian maize imports have been hovering around 0.4 to 0.5 million tonnes a year. A rapid diversion to ethanol will drive up prices and negatively impact its major uses – the poultry sector by 47%, followed by livestock feed (13%) and starch (14%). At 3 to 4 tonnes per hectare, India's maize yield is much lower than other countries, he adds.

Commerce Ministry data show that in 2023-24, Indian maize (corn) imports were \$39 million. This year, from April to June, the import is already worth \$103

million. As per NITI Aayog's estimates, some 4.8 million hectares will have to be added to maize cultivation area to meet the 20% target, which is almost half of the typical maize cultivation area.

On fuel efficiency in automobiles

Ethanol will not only reduce greenhouse gas emissions, it will also prevent an estimated foreign exchange outgo of some \$4 billion per year, as per Maruti Suzuki company estimates, and bolster the rural economy by promoting the cultivation of various crops through an assured market. Many vehicle makers say the government deadline of E20 (20% ethanol and 80% gasoline) compliance is achievable, but questions remain over existing vehicles whose performance would be affected by higher ethanol content.

The NITI Aayog report notes that ethanol brought down fuel efficiency in vehicles not suited for ethanol by an average of 6%.

Many vehicle makers say they are in line with the government deadline of 2025. A Maruti Suzuki spokesperson told *The Hindu* that all Maruti vehicles have been compatible with E-20 fuel since April 2023. Existing vehicles may have to go for an engine retuning and change over to E20 supported material depending on what grade they are.

How different States view the policy

Meanwhile, the developing ethanol economy has impacted States differently. While the fuel ethanol pricing is the same across India, States determine the pricing of Extra Neutral Alcohol (ENA) that goes into making liquor for consumption and other uses. That pricing has been a decider for sugarcane-based distilleries in opting for highly pure fuel ethanol vis-a-vis ENA and other forms.

In Uttar Pradesh, the government reserves some 25% of the ethanol for ENA. Mr. Sawhney says that ENA is less attractive since it offers lower value. Ethanol made from molasses, especially B-heavy molasses, offers significantly higher value, he adds. U.P. is fully aligned with the central government's mission on ethanol, says Mr. Sawhney. U.P. is the single largest contributor to the ethanol

blending program nationwide, he adds. "Most of the distilleries especially in U.P., as well as new capacity coming up, are multi-fuel, allowing them to process both sugarcane juice and molasses, and grain, including rice and maize. For the upcoming year, it is anticipated that 55% of the national requirement of ethanol will be met from sugarcane and the balance 45% would be met by grain distilleries."

In Tamil Nadu, where liquor is a highly lucrative market for distilleries, fuel ethanol has not yet caught on as much. The State government procures and sells all the liquor. Liquor revenue is one-sixth of all government revenue.

An increase in sugarcane cultivation may not be possible because of water requirements, industry sources say. Broken rice may not be made available either. A highly placed government source said it would be bad politics in Tamil Nadu to supply rice, even broken rice, to ethanol since people will relate it to liquor and oppose. M. Ponnuswamy, Chairman and Managing director of Pon Pure Chemicals, advocates that the government should support maize cultivation as an alternative. "Maize is not water intensive. It degrades soil and cannot be the sole crop either. It can be used in rotation with sugarcane to ensure that soil fertility is not degraded," he says. Some half a dozen distilleries for fuel ethanol are on the drawing boards and at various stages of completion. Assuring feedstock supply can help to promote a non-sugarcane distillery base in the State.

Vishal Kamat, Chairman Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) Maharashtra, says in Maharashtra it is more profitable to make ENA and supply it for other uses such as manufacturing activities, fashion and medicine than for ethanol blending. "All segments besides liquor are experiencing good demand thanks to a booming economy. This said, if there is a steady contract for procurement in blending then fuel ethanol can be attractive since additional processing will not be required after purity is ensured," he said.

Many across the industry demand an increase in ethanol pricing.

THE GIST

The roadmap for achieving ethanol blending targets, prepared by the Niti Aayog, had laid down that the capacity of sugarcane-based distilleries would need to increase from 426 crore litres in 2021 to 760 crore litres in 2026, while grain-based distilleries' capacity should increase from 258 to 740 crore litres.

Ethanol will not only reduce greenhouse gas emissions, it will also prevent an estimated foreign exchange outgo of some \$4 billion per year, as per Maruti Suzuki company estimates, and bolster the rural economy by promoting the cultivation of various crops through an assured market.

Meanwhile, the developing ethanol economy has impacted States differently. While the fuel ethanol pricing is the same across India, States determine the pricing of Extra Neutral Alcohol (ENA) that goes into making liquor for consumption and other uses.