

18 May 2024

TOPICS COVERED

1. Why delay in uploading turnout data on the website, SC asks EC (GS Paper II: Polity)

2. Nearly 6 million trees disappeared from farmlands: study (GS Paper III: Environment)

3. After the civil war, the stifling impasse in Sri Lanka (GS paper II: IR)

4. India should not tailor its ties with Iran to U.S. foreign policy changes. (GS Paper II: IR)

After the civil war, the stifling impasse in Sri Lanka

A decade-and-a-half cannot heal the deep wounds from a protracted civil war. Tens of thousands of people perished across Sri Lanka's north and east even as it witnessed enormous destruction. Concerns of truth, accountability and justice linger, while questions of past and future political choices loom large. In this context, the emergence of a new generation should at the very least begin to change the social, economic, and political landscape of a war-torn region. However, economic reconstruction has hardly progressed, with subsequent crises setting back development further. **Politics remains polarised and fraught without a political settlement.** The social aspirations of the Tamil middle class remain wedded to somehow joining the diaspora, even as the working people living in the island's north and east remain destitute with few options. How does one explain this post-war impasse? And, what is the way out for Sri Lanka's war-torn people?

Derailed reconstruction

Trains that were not seen by generations in the north resumed a decade ago. Banks and supermarkets were built along the carpeted roads, even as plush hotels opened for tourists and the Tamil diaspora began visiting Jaffna town. Yet, beneath this seeming prosperity, just a few miles into the countryside, the travails of the masses were evident in their desperation for stable livelihoods. Just as some rural communities began overcoming these challenges, when their fields, home gardens and coconut trees began bearing fruit, Sri Lanka descended into chaos again.

The **Easter terror bombings** of April 2019 shook the country, followed by the **COVID-19 pandemic and now the economic crisis**, the worst since Sri Lanka's Independence. For a population that was surfacing from the dredges of war and dispossession, and turning its focus towards the education of its children and the employment of its youth, the current moment signals the loss of another generation.

Economic misery is seen nation-wide, as is outmigration with the long circling lines outside the passport office. For the deprived and the landless among the war-torn people, migration is out of question, economic opportunities are next to nil, and hunger is the new normal. Yet, there is no one to listen to them, much less to provide them support. Sinking in its crises, now **compounded by International Monetary Fund-prescribed austerity measures**, the state has abandoned them.

The myth of reviving the war-torn regions with the Tamil diaspora's deep pockets stands exposed by the meagre flow of investment funds. The **international donor development projects** that focused on infrastructure after the war have **hardly revived the local economy**. In fact, individualised assistance by non-government



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The future of the Tamil people is dependent on forging a new vision for themselves and the entire country, based on equality and freedom

organisations has only disempowered families and trapped them in dependence. **Many families, especially women, have been pushed into predatory microfinance debt.**

Tamil politics across the spectrum has been negligent about the concerns of local livelihoods, as they are beholden to their class and social interests, **with one foot in the Tamil diaspora.** Politicians who talk big on accountability, especially to international actors, hardly engage with ordinary people. They peddle the myth of diaspora remittances sustaining war-affected communities, when, in reality, such remittances only reach a very small segment of the urban Tamil middle class.

Polarisation and the minorities

For the economic and political trajectory in the North and East after the war, it is the Rajapaksa regime that must take much of the blame for its **tingoistic war victory celebration, a continued militarisation and the vulgar projection of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism.** That said, it is unfortunate that Tamil nationalist politics continues to mirror its Sinhala counterpart in its self-sustenance through **a polarising discourse.** Little has changed in its dominant clamour for Tamil rights, as it harks back to the rhetoric of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, basks in enfeebling victimhood, and an unending faith in the international community. The regular post-war pilgrimages to the **UN Human Rights Council** by the political actors, social allies in civil society, and the virulent sections of the Tamil diaspora, conjure bombastic hopes in the Tamil public sphere. For them, this so-called accountability process is predicated on delivering international intervention.

In the meantime, **political actors in the South and the North have hardly built social and economic bridges between the communities towards political reconciliation.** **Devolution of power to the regions and power-sharing at the centre have been repeatedly dumped for political expediency by those wielding power in Colombo.** Indeed, that was the case with regime change in 2015, when a major opening towards a political settlement was lost in the rivalry between then President Maithripala Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe. The persisting **intransigence** of the national leadership, along with the **takeover of lands owned by the Tamil and Muslim minorities by the state, and ongoing attacks on memorialisation of the war dead** reflect a grim reality.

There was the historic opportunity with the election of the first Northern Provincial Council in 2013, but it ended its tenure with utter disgrace in 2018, where the Tamil nationalist leadership had nothing to show even in terms of political or economic vision for its constituencies. **The racism and arrogance of the political elite in Colombo and the hollowness of the Tamil political leadership** have been the bane of Sri Lankan

politics. Within the North and the East, Tamil-Muslim relations remain strained. The **Northern Muslims evicted in an act of ethnic cleansing by the LTTE in October 1990 have hardly been reintegrated into Jaffna.** The **Hill Country Tamils of Indian origin, or Malaiyaha Tamils, who were displaced from the plantations to the North during successive pogroms, and following their disenfranchisement, found little solidarity in the North.** They became bonded labour, then the cannon fodder for the civil war, and many to this day remain landless or settled in land unsuitable for agriculture. **Caste oppression in Jaffna is now reconsolidating by stealth around the temples funded by the Tamil diaspora, while some groups are attempting Hindutva-styled communal mobilisations.**

Future of the Tamil people

Reflecting on the misery and dispossession of our people today, one is reminded of the powerful words of the Tamil leftist, V. Karalasingham. In his book titled, *The Way Out for the Tamil speaking people*, he had the following to say in 1963, just 15 years after Independence.

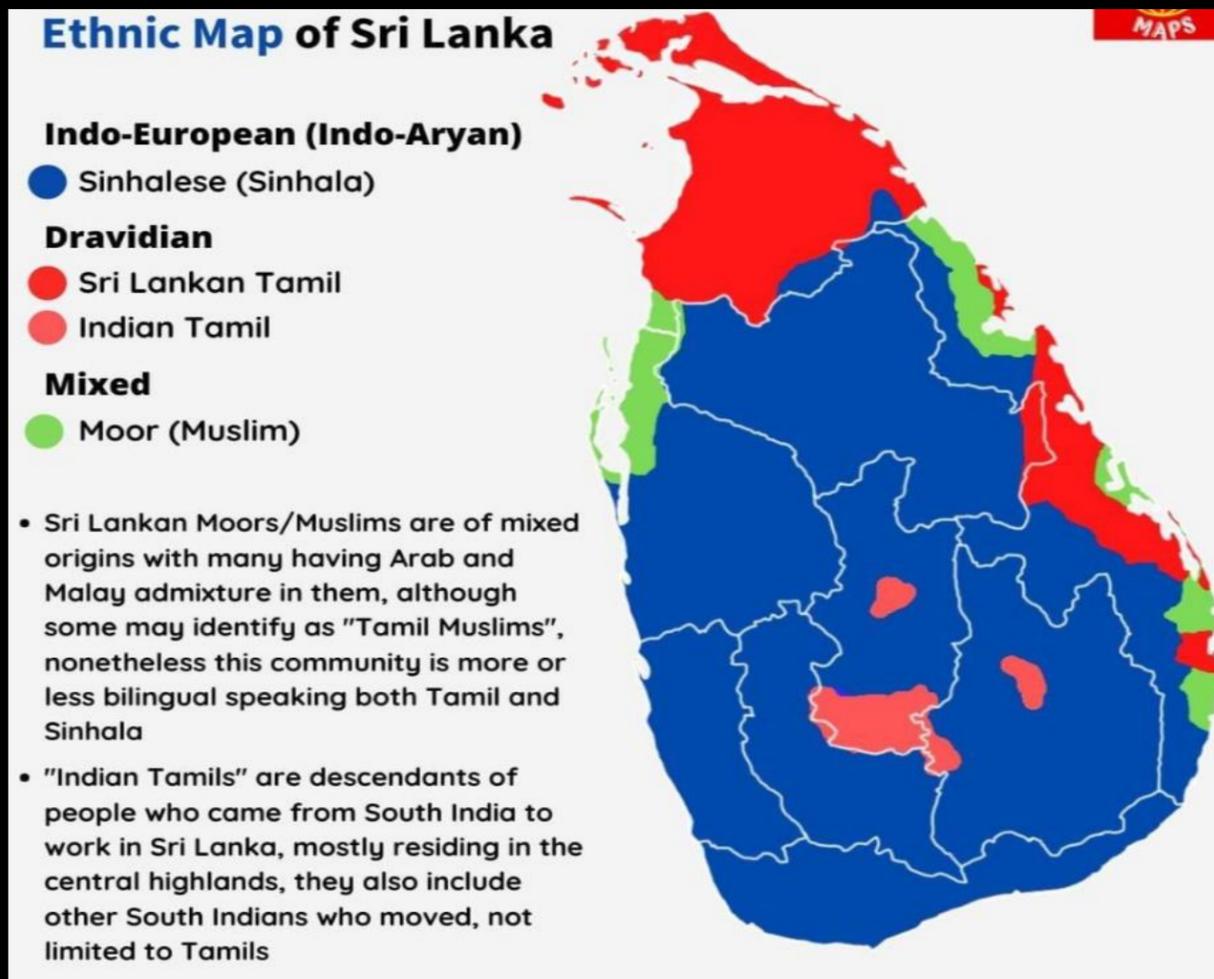
"We now come against a strange paradox. The Tamil speaking people have been led in the last decade by an apparently resolute leadership guided by the best intentions receiving not merely the widest support of the people but also their enthusiastic cooperation and yet the Tamil speaking people find themselves at the lowest ebb in their history. Despite all their efforts the people have suffered one defeat after another, one humiliation after another. How is one to explain the yawning gulf between the strivings of the people and the virtually hopeless impasse in which they find themselves?"

No one would have imagined six decades ago, how much worse the situation of the Tamil people could become, and to what decrepit depths Tamil politics could descend. **The future of the Tamil people is dependent on rejecting bankrupt Tamil nationalism and forging a new vision for themselves and the entire country.**

In the great revolt of 2022 or the 'Aragalaya', where Sri Lankans from different ethnic and religious backgrounds came together to chase away a President, who had claimed the status of a supreme war hero and custodian of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism, there is inspiration for what our country can be.

Despite the authoritarian and economic repression today, the years ahead could take us on a different path, **charted by the struggles for social and economic justice confronting the most formidable economic crisis in close to a century.** The Tamil people must rethink their strategies, depart from the isolationist and suicidal politics that has reduced them to historical irrelevance, and join forces with all the peoples to determine not just their own future but also the democratic future of the country, based on equality and freedom.

After the civil war, the stifling impasse in Sri Lanka (18 May)



- The civil war in Sri Lanka ended 15 years ago, but its effects are still deeply felt.
- Many people died, and there was significant destruction, especially in the north and east of the country.
- Issues of truth, justice, and accountability from the war are still unresolved.
- Political choices from the past and for the future are still debated.
- A new generation has the potential to bring change, but progress is slow.
- Economic reconstruction is struggling and has been further hindered by additional crises.
- Politics in Sri Lanka remains divided and unstable, with no clear political solution in sight.
- Many middle-class Tamils aspire to leave the country and join the diaspora.
- People in the north and east, especially the working class, remain poor with limited opportunities.
- The current situation is a post-war stalemate, and finding a way forward for Sri Lanka's affected people is challenging.

Derailed reconstruction

- Trains returned to the north of Sri Lanka 10 years ago.
- Banks, supermarkets, and plush hotels were built, attracting tourists and the Tamil diaspora.
- Despite these developments, rural areas remained in poverty with people struggling for stable jobs.
- Some rural communities started to recover as their farms and gardens began to prosper.
- Sri Lanka then faced multiple crises:
 - Easter terror bombings in April 2019.
 - The COVID-19 pandemic.
 - The worst economic crisis since independence.
- These crises hindered progress for people who were starting to focus on education and youth employment.
- Economic hardship is widespread, with many people trying to leave the country.
- For those who are deprived and landless, migration is not an option, and economic opportunities are scarce, leading to widespread hunger.
- The state, overwhelmed by its crises and implementing austerity measures from the International Monetary Fund, has neglected these struggling communities.
- The idea that the Tamil diaspora would significantly invest in war-torn regions is a myth.
- Investments from the Tamil diaspora have been minimal.
- International donor projects focusing on infrastructure have not revived the local economy.
- Assistance from non-government organizations has led to dependence rather than empowerment.
- Many families, especially women, are burdened with predatory microfinance debt.
- Tamil politics neglects local livelihood issues and is influenced by class and social interests, often tied to the diaspora.
- Politicians emphasize accountability to international actors but rarely engage with ordinary people.
- The myth that diaspora remittances support war-affected communities is false; they mostly benefit a small urban Tamil middle class.

Polarisation and the minorities

- The Rajapaksa regime is largely blamed for the negative economic and political situation in the North and East post-war.
- Celebrated war victory in a jingoistic manner.

- Continued militarization.
- Promoted Sinhala Buddhist nationalism.
- Tamil nationalist politics mirrors Sinhala politics by being self-sustaining through polarizing discourse.
- Focuses on Tamil rights with rhetoric similar to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).
- Emphasizes victimhood and relies heavily on the international community.
- Regularly appeals to the UN Human Rights Council, creating unrealistic hopes for international intervention.
- Political actors in both the North and South have failed to build social and economic connections for reconciliation.
- Power devolution and sharing have been neglected for political convenience by leaders in Colombo.
- A significant opportunity for political settlement was missed in 2015 due to rivalry between President Maithripala Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe.
- The national leadership's stubbornness, state takeover of lands owned by Tamil and Muslim minorities, and ongoing attacks on war memorials reflect a bleak situation.
- The Northern Provincial Council was elected in 2013, but ended in 2018 without any significant political or economic achievements.
- The political elite in Colombo have been racist and arrogant.
- The Tamil political leadership has been ineffective and lacked vision.
- Relations between Tamils and Muslims in the North and East are strained.
- Northern Muslims expelled by the LTTE in 1990 have not been reintegrated into Jaffna.
- Hill Country Tamils (Malaiyaha Tamils), displaced during pogroms and disenfranchisement, found little support in the North.
- They faced bonded labor and were used as cannon fodder during the civil war.
- Many remain landless or live on unsuitable land for agriculture.
- Caste oppression in Jaffna is resurging, often around temples funded by the Tamil diaspora.
- Some groups are trying to mobilize communities in a manner similar to Hindutva (a form of Hindu nationalism).

Future of the Tamil people

- Reflecting on the current suffering of the Tamil people brings to mind the words of Tamil leftist V. Karalasingham from 1963.
- He noted the paradox of strong leadership and support but continued defeats and humiliation for Tamil people.
- Despite efforts, the Tamil people found themselves in a hopeless situation.
- Six decades later, the situation has worsened for the Tamil people.
- Tamil politics has declined, and the future depends on rejecting failed Tamil nationalism.
- A new vision for the Tamil people and the country is needed.
- The 2022 "Aragalaya" revolt showed unity among Sri Lankans from different backgrounds, offering hope for the country's future.
- Despite current authoritarianism and economic repression, future struggles for social and economic justice could lead to positive change.
- The Tamil people must rethink their strategies, move away from isolationist politics, and work with others for a democratic future based on equality and freedom.

The hyperpoliticisation of Indian higher education (18 May)

- Indian higher education has always been influenced by politics.
- Politicians started colleges and universities to advance their careers and gain support.
- Governments placed new institutions in politically beneficial locations.
- Institutions were established to meet voters' socio-cultural demands.
- Naming and renaming universities were influenced by politics.
- Academic appointments and promotions were sometimes based on non-merit factors.
- Academic freedom was not always strictly followed in undergraduate colleges.
- Teachers were cautious about what they taught or wrote.
- Universities generally adhered to international norms of academic freedom.
- Professors could teach, research, publish, and speak freely.
- Universities faced occasional political interference but had relative autonomy in promoting faculty.

Fundamental political change

- Indian higher education has become fundamentally politicized.
- This politicization is a serious threat to academic institutions, the academic profession, and intellectual life.
- These trends reflect broader illiberal trends in society.
- India is not alone in experiencing these developments.
- The rest of the world, including potential academic partners, will eventually notice this decline.
- This could impact their decisions, especially as India aims to join the top levels of global higher education.

Examples of change

- Rahul Gandhi criticized politically appointed vice chancellors and received backlash.
- The BJP has been appointing politically pliable vice chancellors with little higher education experience.
- These appointees are reshaping universities with politically allied faculty.
- This direct interference in academia is unprecedented in India's post-independence history.

- Non-BJP state governments are trying to remove centrally-appointed State Governors as chancellors to control vice chancellor appointments.
- Academic freedom is under attack, leading to widespread self-censorship.
- Senior academics are afraid to publish work that might cause problems with state authorities or pro-BJP media.
- Universities have failed to protect professors who publish controversial material.
- Pratap Bhanu Mehta resigned from Ashoka University in 2021, citing risks to the university from his public writing on constitutional values.
- Respected independent journals are now off-limits due to pressure.
- This pressure is even affecting the top echelons of India's academic system.
- Professor Sameena Dalwai of O.P. Jindal Global University faced an online smear campaign orchestrated by right-wing groups, leading to a police complaint against her.
- Campus politicization has involved students as well.
- Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS) suspended a PhD student for alleged "anti-national activities," which the Progressive Students Forum claimed was due to participating in a protest against government policies.
- Traditional campus politics continues, but rightist organizations like Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad are more active, even at traditionally leftist universities like Jawaharlal Nehru University.
- Students are now reporting professors to campus administrators if they disagree with the content of their classes, sometimes resulting in disciplinary actions against faculty members.

The implications

- The current trends pose serious risks to Indian higher education and civic life.
- An independent and free academic sector is crucial for any society.
- Academic professionals must have the freedom to conduct research, publish their findings, and speak out in their areas of expertise.
- This freedom is essential not only in STEM fields (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) but also in the "soft sciences."
- In India, many top intellectuals and analysts are based in universities, emphasizing the importance of academic freedom.
- As India aims to establish world-class universities and collaborate with top global institutions, academic freedom and autonomy are essential prerequisites.

Dangers of divisiveness (18 May)

Pitting citizens of the North against southern parties is a hazardous ploy

- The Indian general election campaign is winding down, with polling completed in 379 out of 543 constituencies after the fourth phase.
- There is a noticeable gap between the concerns of voters and the focus of campaign rhetoric.
- Prime Minister Narendra Modi, a key figure in the BJP, avoids discussing his government's 10-year record or addressing primary voter concerns like job creation, inflation, and development.
- Instead, Modi focuses on attacking the Opposition using a mix of truths, half-truths, and non sequiturs.
- Modi uses television and social media to divert attention from important issues by making controversial remarks against Muslims and using dog whistles to appeal to Hindutva supporters.
- Other parties, including the Congress led by Rahul Gandhi, also bring up identity issues like caste politics, though not as aggressively.
- Modi and his colleagues have intensified their use of harsh and abusive language (vituperation) as a campaign tactic, accusing the SP and Congress of not condemning abusive language directed at people of Uttar Pradesh and "sanatana dharma" (Hinduism).
- Some northern parties in the INDIA bloc have disagreed publicly with DMK leader Udhayanidhi Stalin's comments on "sanatana dharma."
- These parties emphasize social justice and criticize the caste hierarchy.
- Despite differences, these parties unite on issues of federalism and social justice.
- Linguistic nationalism, such as the role of English as a link language, is a common concern in these coalitions.
- Modi should focus on discussing the differences in how BJP and INDIA bloc tackle socio-economic issues.
- Instead, Modi uses half-truths to provoke the Hindi heartland against southern parties.
- There is increasing economic integration between the north and south, with many northern citizens migrating south for jobs.
- Recently, BJP inducted Manish Kashyap, a YouTube content creator jailed in Tamil Nadu for spreading false news about Bihari migrants being attacked.
- Such actions promote divisive politics, which is detrimental to India as a whole.

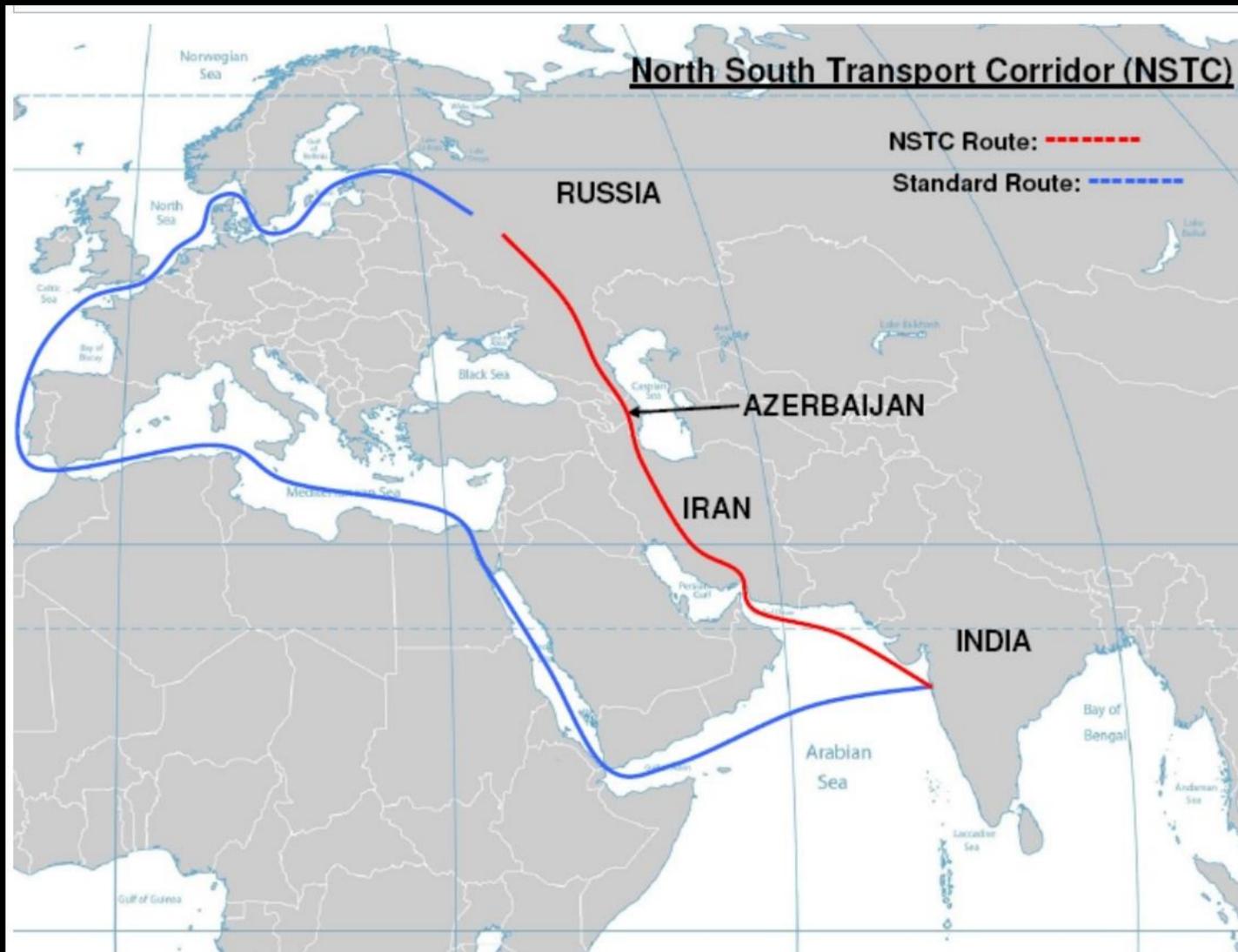
Stay invested

India should not tailor its ties with Iran to U.S. foreign policy changes

By signing a 10-year agreement with Iran to develop and operate the Chabahar port, India has taken its infrastructure and trade partnership with the Islamic Republic to the next level despite tensions in West Asia. India will invest \$120 million and offer a credit facility of \$250 million to further develop the terminal it operates in Chabahar's Shahid Beheshti port and related projects. However, after the deal was signed, the U.S. State Department said entities considering business deals with Iran "need to be aware that they are opening themselves up to and the potential risk of sanctions". In the past, American sanctions on Iran had delayed the project. Conceived in 2003, the project did not take off for years after the U.S. and the UN imposed sanctions on Tehran over its nuclear programme. India signed a memorandum of understanding in 2015 after Washington eased sanctions on Iran following that year's nuclear agreement, and in 2016, the contract was executed during Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Iran visit. The U.S.'s unilateral withdrawal from the nuclear deal in 2018 and reimposition of sanctions on Iran raised questions on India's continued cooperation with Tehran. But India managed to win a carve-out from U.S. sanctions that allowed it to operate the port through ad hoc measures.

The Chabahar port is critical for India's connectivity plans. First, it offers an alternative route to Afghanistan and Central Asia by bypassing Pakistan, allowing better trade with Central Asia. And, Chabahar is expected to be connected to the International North-South Transport Corridor (NSTC), bringing India closer to Europe through Iran, Azerbaijan and Russia. An alternative to the Suez route, a fully operational NSTC would reduce the time and money spent on inter-continental trade. The port, roughly 200 km from Pakistan's Gwadar, where China is developing a port as part of its BRI, would also help India expand its geopolitical influence in Central Asia. But the U.S. seems to have taken a narrow view of the project over its hostility with Iran. America's interests in the region have also changed. In 2018, when U.S. forces were backing the Islamic Republic government in Afghanistan, it gave a sanctions waiver to India as Kabul also stood to benefit from the port project. Today, U.S. troops are out of Afghanistan, the Taliban has replaced the Islamic Republic, and the U.S.'s focus is on containing Iran. India, in the past, had taken U-turns in its Iran engagement depending on the policy changes in Washington DC. It should not do that any more. It should stay invested in Chabahar and seek to improve its trade and connectivity projects with Central Asia, which is essential for India's continued rise.

Stay invested (18 May)



India should not tailor its ties with Iran to U.S. foreign policy changes

- India signed a 10-year agreement with Iran to develop and operate the Chabahar port.
 - The agreement aims to enhance India's infrastructure and trade partnership with Iran, despite tensions in West Asia.
 - India will invest \$120 million and offer a credit facility of \$250 million to develop the port and related projects.
 - The U.S. State Department warned that entities engaging in business deals with Iran could face sanctions.
 - Previous American sanctions delayed the Chabahar project, which began in 2003 but stalled due to sanctions related to Iran's nuclear program.
 - India signed a memorandum of understanding in 2015 after the U.S. eased sanctions on Iran following a nuclear agreement.
 - The final contract was executed in 2016 during Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Iran.
 - The U.S. withdrew from the nuclear deal in 2018 and reimposed sanctions on Iran, posing challenges for India's cooperation with Tehran.
 - India secured a waiver from U.S. sanctions, allowing it to continue operating the Chabahar port through ad hoc measures.
- **Importance of Chabahar Port:**
 - Chabahar port is critical for India's connectivity plans, providing an alternative route to Afghanistan and Central Asia bypassing Pakistan.
 - It allows for enhanced trade with Central Asia, reducing dependency on Pakistan for regional connectivity.
 - **Connection to International North-South Transport Corridor (NSTC):**
 - Chabahar port is expected to connect to the NSTC, linking India to Europe via Iran, Azerbaijan, and Russia.
 - The NSTC offers an alternative to the Suez route, potentially reducing time and costs for intercontinental trade.
 - **Geopolitical Significance:**
 - Chabahar port is located about 200 km from Gwadar port in Pakistan, where China is developing infrastructure under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).
 - It helps India expand its geopolitical influence in Central Asia, offering a counterbalance to China's influence in the region.
 - **U.S. Perspective and Changes:**
 - The United States has been critical of the Chabahar project due to its conflict with Iran.
 - Initially, the U.S. supported the project by granting India a sanctions waiver in 2018 when it was allied with the Islamic Republic government in Afghanistan.
 - However, U.S. interests have shifted since then, with a focus now on containing Iran and withdrawing troops from Afghanistan after the Taliban replaced the Islamic Republic government.
 - **India's Engagement with Chabahar:**
 - India has historically adjusted its engagement with Iran based on U.S. policy changes.
 - It is now important for India to maintain its commitment to the Chabahar project to strengthen trade and connectivity with Central Asia.
 - This connectivity is crucial for India's continued economic growth and geopolitical influence in the region.

MAINS PRACTICE QUESTION:

Question: Evaluate the significance of the International North-South Transport Corridor (NSTC) in relation to the Chabahar port. (250 Words/15 Mark)

The International North-South Transport Corridor (NSTC) and the Chabahar port together represent a strategic confluence of infrastructure and geopolitical aspirations for India. By signing a 10-year agreement with Iran to develop and operate the Chabahar port, India has not only enhanced its trade partnership with Iran but also underscored the critical role of the NSTC in its broader connectivity strategy. This development comes amid complex geopolitical dynamics, particularly involving U.S. sanctions on Iran, which have historically impeded progress.

Significance of Chabahar Port in India's Connectivity Plans

The Chabahar port is pivotal for India's strategic connectivity, offering a direct route to Afghanistan and Central Asia, thus bypassing Pakistan.

This bypass is significant to:

- **Enhance Trade Routes:** By facilitating a direct route, Chabahar enables better trade and economic ties with Central Asia, a region rich in energy resources and trade potential.
- **Geopolitical Influence:** Located approximately 200 km from Pakistan's Gwadar port, which is developed by China as part of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Chabahar provides India a counterbalance to Chinese influence in the region.

NSTC as Strategic Complement to Chabahar

The NSTC is an ambitious multi-modal transportation network connecting India to Europe via Iran, Azerbaijan, and Russia, providing an alternative to the traditional Suez Canal route. The significance of the NSTC in relation to Chabahar is multi-faceted:

- **Time and Cost Efficiency:** The NSTC, once fully operational, is expected to reduce both time and cost of intercontinental trade. This efficiency is crucial for India's trade logistics and economic strategy.
- **Broader Connectivity:** By linking Chabahar to the NSTC, India can integrate the port into a larger network that extends to Europe, enhancing its trade routes and reducing dependency on more congested and politically unstable routes.
- **Economic Integration:** The NSTC will facilitate economic integration with Central Asia and beyond, thereby boosting India's trade volume and economic footprint in these regions.

Geopolitical and Economic Implications

- The U.S.'s reimposition of sanctions on Iran in 2018 and its warning to entities engaging with Iran highlight the delicate geopolitical balance India must maintain. Despite these sanctions, India secured a carve-out to continue operations at Chabahar, underscoring the port's strategic importance.
- The withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan and the shift in U.S. focus towards containing Iran have altered regional dynamics. This change necessitates a stable and autonomous Indian foreign policy in West Asia, anchored by consistent engagement with Iran.
- Continued investment in Chabahar and the NSTC ensures that India remains a pivotal player in regional trade and connectivity. It also enhances India's ability to support regional stability and economic development in Afghanistan and Central Asia.

India's strategic investment in the Chabahar port and its integration with the NSTC is a forward-looking approach to enhance its geopolitical influence and economic integration in Central Asia and beyond. Despite the challenges posed by U.S. sanctions and shifting geopolitical landscapes, India's commitment to this project underscores its long-term vision for regional connectivity and strategic autonomy. The Chabahar port and NSTC together are not just infrastructural projects but are central to India's rise as a significant economic and geopolitical power in the region.

The burning hills of Uttarakhand (18 May)

Five people were killed in May in forest fires that have been raging in Uttarakhand since last November. The forest department attributes the fires to out-migration, high-tension wires, and the abundance of pine trees, while the State government has said in the Supreme Court that the fires are completely manmade.

- Gyanu Chalaune and his wife Basanti moved from Nepal to Uttarakhand for a better life and education for their children.
- They were collecting resin from chir pine trees in Sunrakot village, Almora district, Uttarakhand.
- On May 2, they witnessed their friend Deepak Pujara engulfed in flames while working in the forest.
- They tried to help Pujara and his wife Tara, but all four suffered severe burns.
- Unfortunately, all four victims succumbed to their injuries in the hospital.

- Ramesh Bakuni, the contractor they worked for, was devastated and struggled to break the news to Chalaune's children, who were close to him.
- The children are now under the care of their uncle in Nepal.
- Five people have died and four were injured in forest fires in Uttarakhand this year alone.
- Since November 2023, there have been 1,038 forest fire incidents, burning 1,385.5 hectares of forest land.
- Uttarakhand has a recorded forest area covering 71.05% of its geographical area, making forest fires a significant concern.
- Forest fires are considered "annual affairs" in the hills by authorities, but they have severe consequences for those whose livelihoods depend on the forests.
- The fires have a profound impact on the local ecology and the lives of people who live and work in the mountains.
- The incident underscores the dangers faced by those working in the forests and the devastating impact of forest fires on local communities.
- It highlights the need for better fire prevention and management strategies to protect both the forests and the lives of people who depend on them.

Flame of the forest

- A booklet on the Uttarakhand forest department website identifies several reasons for forest fires in the region.
- It cites increasing migration of people to other states, which has left the hills barren.
- High-tension wires and the abundance of highly inflammable chir pine trees are also major causes of forest fires.
- The booklet mentions that the current academic curriculum doesn't educate youth on environmental issues, making them ill-prepared to tackle forest fires.
- Older generations, who mostly live in the hills, are also unable to climb the hills to control the fires.
- The Ujjawala scheme, which provides cooking gas, has reduced the need for villagers to collect wood from the forests for cooking, which used to be a factor in forest fires.
- Dhananjai Mohan, in charge of the Head of Forest Force in Uttarakhand, attributes the faster spread of fires to drier surfaces caused by excessive dry spells and less snowfall this year.
- Uttarakhand has 3,94,383.84 hectares of chir pine forests, which constitute 15% of the state's tree varieties.
- Forest fires are exacerbated when villagers burn stubble in the fields, as villages and forests are closely interspersed.
- Other causes of forest fires include discarded burning cigarettes and intentional fires set to clear land for fodder growth, according to the forest department website.

Dousing fires for a mango drink, biscuits

- **Date:** May 6th
- **Location:** Sitlakheth, Almora, Kumaon Himalayas, Uttarakhand
- **Environmental Condition:**
 - The hills are covered in smog, obscuring the view of the green trees.
 - Trees are blackened and covered in ash from burnt pine leaves.
 - Instead of cool air, the mountains are radiating heat.
- **Efforts of Women:**
 - Around 20 women from Sitlakheth and Bhakar villages put out a forest fire.
 - They used green bushes to extinguish the flames, working for 10 hours.
- **Group Name:** 'Jungle Ke Dost (friends of forests)'
 - Led by Gajendra Pathak, a local pharmacist.
- **Rewards:**
 - Women received a 125ml tetra pack of Frooti and biscuits.
 - These were tied to their sarees to take home for their children.
- **Urgency:**
 - Indumati, a housewife, wanted to return home urgently to feed her six-month-old child.
- **Transportation:**
 - Pathak arranged for a passing Jeep to take the women back home.
- **Tools:**
 - Forest ranger Manoj Lohani provided gardening rakes to clear the forest line.
 - This was to prevent further fires.
- **Recognition of Women's Efforts:**
 - Gajendra Pathak praises the women of 'Jungle Ke Dost' for saving the greenery.
 - Feels sad that the government cannot do more for them.
 - Advocates for life insurance for people who help in mitigating forest fires.

- **Gender Dynamics in Firefighting:**
- Debuli Devi mentions that men are responsible for starting forest fires.
- Suggests men wouldn't be able to extinguish fires they themselves start.
- **Efforts Across Uttarakhand:**
- Sunil Rawat from Patwa Dagar village has helped extinguish over 20 forest fires since April 19.
- States that villagers across the state support the forest department in controlling fires.
- **Role of Forest Department:**
- Chandra Shekhar Joshi, District Forest Officer of Nainital, mentions a proposal for remuneration for villagers who help fight fires.
- Nainital district has around 300 forest fire watchers, half of whom are women.
- **Forest Management in Uttarakhand:**
- Uttarakhand has a recorded forest area of 38,000 sq km.
- Forest department manages 26.5 lakh ha of reserved forests where human intervention is banned.
- Van panchayats manage 7.32 lakh ha of forest area.
- Reserved forests have seen more damage compared to areas managed by van panchayats.
- **Government Response:**
- State government announced insurance cover of ₹3 lakh for 4,000 forest department contract employees after recent fires.

Playing politics

- **Uttarakhand Government's Statement:**
 - Uttarakhand government informed the Supreme Court on May 8 that all forest fires in the state were manmade.
 - 388 criminal cases were registered across the state against those responsible for setting forests on fire.
 - Most cases involved attempts to burn stubble, which escalated due to strong winds.
- **Clarification on Media Reports:**
 - Government submitted a 380-page interim status report stating that media reports claiming 40% of Uttarakhand was burning were misleading.
 - Only 0.1% of forest cover was affected by fires, according to the report.
- **Government Response and Measures:**
 - State Disaster Response Force and National Disaster Response Force were deployed to handle forest fires.
 - Indian Air Force used Bambi Buckets to extinguish flames by dropping large volumes of water.
- **Forest Fire Mitigation Project:**
 - Uttarakhand Forest Fire Mitigation Project 2023-28, pending with the Central government, was mentioned in the report.
- **Forest Fire History and Emergency Situation:**
 - The report emphasized that forest fires were not new in Uttarakhand and there was no current "emergency" situation.
- **Government's Approach:**
- The government is exploring cloud seeding in collaboration with IIT Roorkee to increase precipitation and trigger rainfall.
- The Supreme Court dismissed cloud seeding as a solution to forest fires, stating it's not effective.
- **Forest Fire Incidents:**
- Despite government claims of controlling forest fires after rains, fires continued to rage. On May 17 alone, 11 forest fires were reported.
- **Supreme Court's Response:**
- The Supreme Court expressed satisfaction with the measures taken by the State government to tackle forest fires.
- The case was adjourned to September 2024.
- **State Government Measures:**
- The government used the entire Compensatory Afforestation Fund for firefighting and fire prevention.
- Vacant posts at the field level in the forest department were being filled.
- **Political Context:**
- The Congress party criticized the BJP-led State government during its Lok Sabha election campaign for not effectively managing the forest fires.
- Chief Minister Pushkar Singh Dhami and Forest Minister Subodh Uniyal were accused of being absent from the state during the fires, busy campaigning in other states.
- **Government Action After Campaigning:**
- After completing their campaign trips, Chief Minister Dhami instructed officials to charge those responsible for setting forest fires with the Gangster Act and the Uttarakhand Public and Private Property Damage Recovery Act, 2024.

Where solutions lie

- **Chir Pine Tree's Importance:**
 - Pathak believes the chir pine tree is unfairly blamed for forest fires despite its multiple uses.
 - It provides timber, fuel wood, leaves for decoration, and bark for charcoal, resin, and coal tar.

- These products are used locally and sold for income.
- **Electricity Generation from Pine Needles:**
 - The state has a concept to generate electricity from pine needles.
 - However, the low price offered for collecting these needles has not been effective.
- **Pirul Lao-Paise Pao Scheme:**
 - CM Dhami launched a scheme where the state purchases pine leaves at ₹50 per kg, higher than the previous rate of ₹3 per kg.
- **Community Participation and ANR Technique:**
 - Pathak suggests increasing community participation to mitigate forest fires.
 - He advocates for adopting the Assisted Natural Regeneration (ANR) technique statewide.
 - ANR involves facilitating the natural regeneration of degraded lands with indigenous species at a lower cost than tree planting.
- **Government's Tree Planting Initiative:**
 - Pathak criticizes the government's tree planting initiative, saying it's not even 10% effective compared to the total saplings planted.
- **Importance of Fire Lines:**
 - Establishing fire lines across mountains is crucial for fire mitigation, according to Pathak.
 - **Communal Tensions Sparked by Forest Fires:**
 - A video emerged showing young men celebrating while fires raged in the background.
 - Accusations were made against Muslims for setting the fires as revenge for government policies.
 - The government introduced a Uniform Civil Code and conducted an anti-encroachment drive in Haldwani in February, which sparked riots.
 - The men arrested were from Bihar and recorded the video to gain popularity on Instagram.
 - **Concerns About Environmental Impact:**
 - Hemant Dhyani from Ganga Avahan expressed concerns about the environmental impact of recurring forest fires.
 - Forest fires weaken the mountains and soil, which can lead to flash floods during rain.
 - Loose soil fails to retain water, impacting groundwater rejuvenation, and can cause landslides due to loose boulders.
 - **Capability of the Forest Department:**
 - Ravi Chopra, an environmentalist, criticized the Uttarakhand forest department's capabilities to control forest fires.
 - He believes that empowering and involving local people is crucial to effectively mitigate forest fires.

The happy, hopeful coffee farmers of Karnataka (28 May)

- **Context:**
 - Sanketh Appaiah, a coffee planter near Madikeri in north Kodagu, Karnataka, bought a new SUV due to rising coffee prices.
 - Coffee prices are currently at a 15-year high globally, benefiting coffee growers in Karnataka.
- **Impact of High Coffee Prices:**
 - Appaiah owns an 8-acre Robusta coffee plantation and was able to fulfill his dream of buying a new SUV.
 - Many coffee planters, after a decade of low prices, are investing in assets like land, apartments, houses, and vehicles.
- **Financial Trends:**
 - A cooperative bank in Kodagu received 800 vehicle loan applications in a single day in April.
 - Farmers are repaying their loans on time, which is attributed to the increase in Coffee prices.
- **Coffee Production in India:**
 - Karnataka contributes 71% to India's total Coffee production.
 - Kerala follows with 21%, and Tamil Nadu contributes 5%.

Some farmers holding on to produce

- **Coffee Price Surge:**
 - Abubakr Ahmad, a Coffee trader in Gonikoppa, Kodagu, mentions that the price of a 50-kilo bag of Robusta beans has increased to nearly ₹11,000.
 - This year's prices are significantly higher compared to the average of ₹3,000 to ₹4,000 per 50-kilo bag seen since 2008.
- **Market Trends:**
 - Many Coffee growers have sold their produce due to the high prices, while some large-scale planters are holding onto their Coffee in anticipation of further price increases.
 - There has been a slight drop in Coffee prices over the last two weeks after the recent surge.

- **Global Demand and Production:**

- K.G. Jagadeesha, CEO of the Coffee Board, attributes the price increase to low production in Brazil, the world's leading Coffee exporter.
- Despite poor yields, Coffee production in India is expected to reach 3.54 lakh tonnes this year, slightly higher than last year's production of 3.52 lakh tonnes.

Remembering boom times

- **Impact of Price Increase in 1990s:**

- Coffee prices increased significantly in the 1990s, bringing about lifestyle changes for Coffee growers in Karnataka's coffee-growing districts of Hassan, Chikkamagaluru, and Kodagu.
- Many Coffee growers purchased brand new cars and invested in building houses in Hassan, Chikkamagaluru, and other cities to provide better schooling for their children.
- Modern amenities were introduced in rural farmhouses, and growers began shifting to cities while traveling to their estates periodically.
- The introduction of the free-sale quota (FSQ) in 1992 allowed growers to sell their Coffee harvest independently, marking a shift from selling to the Coffee Board.

- **Current Scenario:**

- In 2024, farmers in Hassan and Chikkamagaluru, where Arabica is primarily grown, have not benefited as much from the recent price increase compared to Kodagu, where Robusta is the main variety.
- Robusta prices have surged to nearly ₹11,000 per 50-kilo bag, while Arabica prices have not seen a similar increase.

Small farmers still suffer

- **Reflections on Current Coffee Prices:**

- Coffee growers are reminded of the 1990s due to the current high prices, but they caution that it might be a bubble and advise fellow farmers to be cautious.
- They emphasize that rising prices should be balanced against increasing production costs.
- Growers in Hassan and Chikkamagaluru districts believe that the current price increase should have occurred earlier to sustainably support the coffee sector.
- Surendra T.P., a coffee grower and director of the Karnataka Growers' Federation, suggests that the current prices should have been achieved in the early 2000s for healthy growth.

- **Challenges for Small and Medium Growers:**

- The recent price increase has not benefitted small and medium coffee growers significantly.
- Most of the coffee harvest (around 80%) is sold by the end of February, when prices were around ₹6,500 per bag of 50 kg. The price crossed ₹8,000 per bag later.
- Growers are compelled to sell their produce early in the season due to financial commitments at the end of the financial year.
- Early selling is necessary to clear loans and maintain a good credit rating.

Price has gone up, but so has input cost

- **Impact of Rising Input Costs:**

- Despite the current high coffee prices, growers are concerned about the escalating input costs.
- Surendra T.P. highlights that the increase in coffee prices over the years has not kept pace with the rise in prices of essential items like petrol and diesel.
- In the 1990s, Robusta coffee was priced around ₹3,000 per 50 kg and briefly reached ₹10,000, whereas petrol was ₹14.75 per litre and diesel ₹10 per litre. The comparison shows a significant disparity in price increases.

- **Challenges with Labour and Insurance:**

- Labour costs have increased, and coffee growers pay more than what workers receive under MGNREGA (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act).
- Coffee plantations are not covered under crop insurance, and compensation during droughts or floods is insufficient considering the investment made by growers.

- **Impact of Natural Disasters:**

- Prakash Ponnanna from Virajpet, Kodagu, notes that large-scale coffee growers can manage drought impacts with water management measures, but smaller growers suffer significantly.

- Despite Kodagu being a hilly district with the Cauvery River, severe drought and water shortages are affecting coffee production, which requires irrigation.
- The production next year is expected to decrease due to inadequate water, negating the benefits of the current price increase.

Labour shortage and other worries

- **Challenges in the Last 10 Years:**
 - Coffee growers have struggled with low prices and high production costs.
 - Labour shortages and crop diseases have made these challenges worse.
 - Many small and marginal growers have stopped growing coffee and switched to real estate, tourism, or more profitable crops like areca nut, black pepper, and avocado.
- **Labour Shortage Issues:**
 - This year, there was a severe shortage of labour for coffee picking.
 - Labourers from north Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, and parts of Mysuru have stopped coming due to better job opportunities in cities, especially in construction.
 - In recent years, workers from Assam helped fill the labour gap, but they didn't come this year due to the general elections.
 - The shortage meant that coffee berries fell to the ground unharvested, causing losses for growers.
- **Impact on Growers:**
 - Muthappa M.N., a planter in Virajpet, is frustrated because despite coffee prices rising recently, he won't benefit due to labour shortages and unharvested crops.
- **Man-Elephant Conflict Issues:** Farmers in Kodagu, Hassan, and Chikkamagaluru have been facing serious issues due to man-elephant conflict. The elephant menace has caused constant worry in the community. Most victims of elephant attacks are plantation workers, and in Kodagu alone, six people have died in elephant attacks on coffee estates since January. Elephants frequently damage hundreds of coffee plants whenever they pass through an estate.
- **Concerns of Coffee Planters:** Manoj Mandappa, a coffee planter from Siddapura in Kodagu, expressed frustration that authorities have not effectively addressed the issue of elephants destroying crops. Despite the challenges with elephants, growers like Appaiah are currently happy with the surge in coffee prices. Appaiah believes that if coffee prices remain high and crops are good in the coming years, small planters can look forward to better days. Higher prices allow them to make personal investments like buying cars or houses and improve their plantations by increasing fertilizer application from once to twice a year.

Coffee plantations are large agricultural estates where coffee plants are cultivated for the production of coffee beans.

- **Location:**
 - Coffee is primarily grown in tropical and subtropical regions around the world.
 - Major coffee-growing regions Central and South America, Africa and The Middle East and Southeast Asia. These regions are all located along the equatorial zone between the Tropic of Cancer and the Tropic of Capricorn, widely known as the "Bean Belt".
- **Species:**
 - The two main cultivated species are Arabica (*Coffea arabica*) and Robusta (*Coffea canephora*).
 - Arabica beans are known for higher quality and flavor complexity, but they are more delicate.
 - Robusta beans are more resilient and have higher caffeine content, making them more tolerant of various growing conditions.
- **Growing Conditions:**
 - Coffee plants require well-drained, slightly acidic soil.
 - They thrive in areas with moderate to high rainfall.
 - Coffee plants prefer temperatures that are warm during the day and cooler at night.
 - Some plantations use shade trees to provide the ideal microclimate, mimicking natural forest environments.
- **Harvesting:**
 - Coffee cherries, which contain the beans, are hand-picked when they are ripe.
 - Harvesting can be selective (picking only the ripe cherries) or strip-picked (harvesting all cherries at once).
- **Processing:**
 - After harvesting, coffee cherries undergo processing to extract the beans.
 - Processing methods include:
 - **Wet Processing:** Cherries are pulped and fermented to remove the pulp before drying.
 - **Dry Processing:** Cherries are dried with the pulp intact and then removed later.
 - **Semi-washed Processing:** A hybrid method involving elements of both wet and dry processing.
 - The chosen processing method affects the flavor profile of the coffee beans.

Manufacturing in India needs more sophistication: FM (17 May)

Nirmala Sitharaman said India's demographic dividend with the lowest dependency ratio will bolster consumption; highlights opportunities

- **Speaker:** Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman
- **Event:** Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) annual business summit
- **Key Points:**
 - Indian manufacturing needs to develop more sophisticated products.
 - The government will support manufacturing growth with policies.
 - Emphasizes India's goal to increase its share in global manufacturing and value chains.
 - Highlights that increasing manufacturing will make India more self-reliant.
- **Global Investment in India:**
 - 65% of U.S. and European executives plan to increase manufacturing investments in India.
 - They aim to reduce their dependence on China.
- **Market Opportunities:**
 - India could have trillions of dollars in business opportunities by 2031.
 - Consumer market expected to reach \$2.9 trillion; food spending to rise to \$1.4 trillion; financial services expected to grow to \$670 billion.
 - These sectors could create another \$1.39 trillion in opportunities.
 - Urges India to capitalize on these opportunities by focusing on manufacturing and enhancing global value chains.

'Ramping up skilling'

- **Skilling Initiative:** India is focusing on ramping up skilling efforts to leverage the demographic dividend, which will last for the next 30 years.
- **Low Dependency Ratio:** India's historically low dependency ratio is expected to increase consumption, benefiting the economy.
- **Investment Opportunities:** There are significant opportunities for investments and expansion plans to drive faster economic growth.
- **Healthy Balance Sheets:** Both bank and corporate balance sheets are in good health.
- **Factors Contributing to Growth:** Attributes India's consistent high growth to policy stability, absence of policy reversals, and corruption-free decision-making.
- **Legislative Facilitation:** Highlights facilitation in legislative and legal frameworks based on industry feedback.
- **Public-Private Partnership:** Views the private sector as a partner in development and the government as a facilitator.
- **Future Government Engagement:** Expresses confidence in Prime Minister Narendra Modi returning with a good majority. Plans for a focused engagement with the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) after the government is formed to discuss the July budget, which will be the full-year budget.

China-Russia partnership is not directed against anyone (18 May)

An emerging multipolar world is now taking shape before our eyes, says Russian President Vladimir Putin as he concludes his two-day visit to China; he praises talks with Xi as substantive

Russian President Vladimir Putin concluded a two-day visit to China on Friday.

- **Purpose:** Emphasized the growing strategic ties between Russia and China.
- **Personal Relationship:** Highlighted his close personal relationship with Chinese leader Xi Jinping.
- **Alternative to U.S. Influence:** Both leaders aimed to present an alternative to U.S. global influence.
- **Bilateral Trade:** Praised the growth in bilateral trade during his visit.
- **Visit Highlights:** Toured the China-Russia Expo in Harbin, a northeastern city of China.
- **Engagement with Students:** Met with students at the Harbin Institute of Technology, known for its close ties with the People's Liberation Army.
- **Historical Ties:** Harbin was once home to many Russian expatriates and retains some of that history in its architecture, such as the St. Sophia Cathedral.
- Vladimir Putin spoke to reporters after concluding talks with Chinese leader Xi Jinping.
- **Talks with Xi Jinping:** Described the talks as substantive and mentioned spending almost the entire day with Xi Jinping and other officials in Beijing the previous day.
- **Partnership:** Emphasized that the partnership between China and Russia is not directed against any specific country, likely referring to the West.

- **Aim:** Stated that the partnership is aimed at creating better conditions for the development of both countries and improving the well-being of their people.

Rebuke for U.S.

- **Vladimir Putin's Statement:** He made comments directed at the US and others who are critical of the Moscow-Beijing relationship.
- **Multipolar World:** Putin referred to an "emerging multipolar world" that is currently developing.
- **Monopoly on Decision-Making:** He criticized those who seek to maintain their monopoly on decision-making in global affairs.
- **Natural Process:** Putin emphasized the need for allowing this multipolar development to occur naturally.

Kharkiv

- **Location and Size:**
 - Kharkiv, also known as Kharkov, is the second-largest city in Ukraine.
 - It is located in the northeast of Ukraine.
 - Kharkiv is the largest city in the historic region of Sloboda Ukraine.
- **Current Situation:**
 - As of November 2022, Russian forces occupy only a small portion of land in the Kharkiv Oblast.
 - Kharkiv itself is not part of Russia; it remains under Ukrainian control.
 - The city and its surrounding area are experiencing conflict due to the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine.

Species Name: Iberian lynx (*Lynx pardinus*)

- Iberian lynx are found only in two small areas of Peninsula, west of the Pyrenees mountains. Despite been detected in Portugal since the 1990's
- Listed as "Endangered" on the IUCN Red List
- **Physical Description:**
 - Smaller than Eurasian lynx
 - Short, reddish-brown coat with dark spots
 - Prominent black ear tufts and facial "ruff"
 - Long legs and short, black-tipped tail
 - Males weigh between 7-16 kg, larger than
- **Habitat:**
 - Prefers dense Mediterranean forests with areas for hunting
- **Diet:**
 - Primarily carnivorous
 - Mainly feeds on European rabbits
- **Threats:**
 - Habitat loss from agriculture, development, and infrastructure
 - Decline in rabbit populations due to disease
- **Conservation Efforts:**
 - Habitat restoration projects
 - Captive breeding programs
 - Populations have been slowly increasing due to these efforts
- **Importance:**
 - Vital part of the Iberian Peninsula's ecosystem
 - Conservation efforts are critical for the lynx's survival



southwest Spain on the Iberian extensive surveys, they have not

females

scrubland for cover and open

Quema river in Villamanrique, Spain,

Seasonal River: It's possible the Quema River is a seasonal stream that only flows during heavy rain and isn't permanently marked on maps.

There is an image on Alamy showing pilgrims crossing a river named Quema on their way to El Rocio, near Villamanrique de la Condesa . It's important to note that this could be a seasonal stream or a local name variation.



PatrioticCLAS