

12 MAY 2024

## TOPICS COVERED

1. Study shows impact of climate change-linked hazard on women, children (GS Paper III: Environment, GS Paper II Society)
2. Punjabi poet Surjit Patar passes away at 79 in Ludhiana (State PCS)
3. Author Ruskin Bond awarded Sahitya Akademi Fellowship
4. Delhi Ridge (State PCS)
5. Slow burning lives (GS Paper III: Environment, GS Paper II Society)
6. The Karnataka HC ruling on EPF benefits (GS Paper III)
7. What are the rules on contesting seats? (GS Paper II: Polity)
8. How is India streamlining the pharma sector? (GS Paper III: Pharma Industry)

**The Delhi Ridge** is a prominent ridge and a crucial ecological feature located in the National Capital Territory of Delhi, India. It is an extension of the Aravalli Range, one of the oldest mountain ranges in the world, estimated to be 1.5 billion years old.

Here's a summary of the Delhi Ridge based on information from the Delhi Department of Forests and Wildlife:

- The ridge is part of the Aravalli Range, a geological formation estimated to be 1.5 billion years old.
- It stretches from the southeast at Tughlaqabad near the Bhatti mines, branching out in places and tapering off in the north near Wazirabad on the western bank of the Yamuna river, covering about 35 kilometers.
- The entire area of the ridge is roughly 8,000 hectares and is divided into four zones - Northern Ridge, Southern Ridge, Central Ridge, and South Central Ridge.
- **Ecological Significance:** The ridge acts as the "Lungs of Delhi", providing a vital green cover for the national capital and serving as a critical habitat for flora and fauna.

The ridge is home to a variety of plant and animal life, including over 400 species of plants, 100 species of birds, and 36 species of mammals. It is an important birding area and a refuge for animals like **leopards, hyenas, and jackals.**

The Delhi Ridge is not only an ecological hotspot but also houses several historical monuments and biodiversity parks, making it a popular spot for leisure and recreation.

## The Karnataka HC ruling on EPF benefits (12 May) (GS Paper II: Social Security Scheme for VS)

The Employees' Provident Fund Organisation (EPFO) is a **statutory body under the Ministry of Labour and Employment, Government of India.**

The EPFO came into being with the Employees Provident Fund ordinance that was passed in 1951-52.

### What does the EPFO do?

The EPFO administers various schemes for organized sector employees in India, including:

\* Employees' Provident Fund (EPF) Scheme: This scheme provides retirement savings for employees. Both the employer and the employee contribute 12% of the employee's basic salary towards the fund.

\* Employees' Pension Scheme (EPS): This scheme provides a pension to employees after retirement.

\* Employees' Deposit Linked Insurance (EDLI) Scheme: This scheme provides insurance coverage to employees in case of their death while in service.

- **Who is eligible for the EPFO schemes?**

Most employees working in establishments with 20 or more employees are eligible for the EPFO schemes. There are some exceptions, such as government employees and employees of certain public sector undertakings.

- **How can I access my EPF account?**

You can access your EPF account online using the Universal Account Number (UAN). The UAN is a unique identification number assigned to each employee covered under the EPFO schemes.

- The Karnataka High Court invalidated a 15-year-old amendment to the law allowing the inclusion of foreign workers in the Employees' Provident Fund (EPF).
- Specifically, it nullified the **special regulations for international workers outlined in paragraph 83 of the Employees' Provident Funds Scheme, 1952 (EPF Scheme), and paragraph 43A of the Employees' Pension Scheme, 1995 (EP Scheme).**
- The court deemed these provisions "unconstitutional and arbitrary."

**What are EPF benefits for foreign workers?**

- The Employees' Provident Funds and Miscellaneous Provisions Act, 1952, is a significant social security legislation in India.
- It regulates three main schemes: the **EPF Scheme, the EPS Scheme, and the Employees' Deposit-Linked Insurance Scheme, 1976.**
- These schemes are administered by **the Employees' Provident Fund Organisation (EPFO),** a statutory body.
- **Establishments with a minimum of 20 employees are required to register with the EPFO and make Provident Fund (PF) contributions for eligible employees.**
- In 2008, the Act was amended to include international workers or expatriates.
- According to the amendment, **international workers employed in India for a minimum period of six months must make PF contributions, which include 12% of their total salary, with a matching contribution from the employer.**
- **Unlike domestic counterparts, the wage ceiling of ₹15,000 per month for availing PF benefits does not apply to international workers.**
- **Withdrawal of PF accumulations by international workers based in India is permitted only upon retirement from service in the establishment at the age of 58 or upon retirement due to permanent incapacity for work, as per existing Social Security Agreements (SSAs).**

### What are Social Security Agreements?

- Social Security Agreements (SSAs) are bilateral instruments executed to protect the social security interests of workers posted in foreign countries.
- Indian employees posted abroad by their Indian employers typically continue to make social security contributions in India as per domestic law.
- They may also be required to make similar contributions under the host country's laws.
- However, due to restrictions on withdrawals and stipulations related to their duration of stay, such employees often do not benefit from PF contributions made outside India.
- SSAs are executed to avoid double coverage under the social security laws of both the domestic and host countries.
- India has SSAs with 21 countries to facilitate the coordination of social security benefits for Indian workers posted abroad.

### What does the ruling say?

- The primary aim of the 1952 Employees' Provident Funds and Miscellaneous Provisions Act was to offer retirement benefits to industrial workers as an alternative to pensions.
- However, the law was not intended to universally extend PF benefits to all employees regardless of their salary levels.
- Justice K.S. Hemalekha highlighted the disparity in PF contributions between Indian employees working abroad and foreign workers in India.
- She deemed this discrepancy unconstitutional, citing Article 14 of the Indian Constitution, which prohibits discrimination.
- The EPFO has responded by actively evaluating the situation and preparing an appeal.
- The EPFO is consulting with representatives of employers and employees to address concerns.

- The EPFO emphasizes the importance of Social Security Agreements (SSAs) with 21 countries in ensuring uninterrupted social security coverage for employees during international employment.
- These agreements promote international mobility and leverage India's demographic dividend.

### What are the implications?

- Pooja Ramchandani, partner at Shardul Amarchand Mangaldas, stated that while the Karnataka High Court's ruling may influence courts outside Karnataka, PF authorities can still enforce provisions in other states temporarily.
- This may require employers to continue provident fund compliances for international workers in certain regions.
- The issue is not whether international workers should receive PF benefits due to their limited employment period, but whether there is a rationale for treating foreign employees differently from Indian employees regarding contribution rates.
- Ramchandani suggested that India should consider amending laws to treat expats equally with domestic workers regarding PF benefits to attract foreign investments.
- The ruling may also impact India's existing Social Security Agreements (SSAs) with other countries.
- If the Karnataka High Court's judgment is upheld by the Supreme Court, India may need to amend laws to maintain reciprocal arrangements outlined in the SSAs.

## How is India streamlining the pharma sector?

(12 May)

Why has the drug regulator tweaked norms for exports? Where does India stand as a drugs manufacturer? Does the change follow allegations of sub-standard medicines being exported? Will a centralising authority help, with several important drugs set to go off the patent list?

- The Central Drugs Standard Control Organisation (CDSCO), India's drug regulator, has withdrawn the authority delegated to State licensing authorities.
- This authority pertained to issuing NOCs (no objection certificates) for manufacturing unapproved, banned, or new drugs meant for export.
- Previously, State licensing authorities could issue these NOCs.
- The CDSCO is now the sole authority responsible for issuing manufacturing licenses for drugs intended for export purposes.
- This decision comes amid concerns about India's pharmaceutical exports.
- There have been allegations of supplying substandard drugs from India, causing health issues in various countries.



- The move aims to centralize control over drug manufacturing for export and ensure quality standards are met.

### What is India's role in the pharma market?

- India ranks 3rd globally in drug and pharmaceutical production by volume.
- It exports pharmaceutical products to approximately 200 countries/territories.
- The Indian pharmaceutical industry supplies 62% of the global demand for vaccines.
- It is a leading supplier of vaccines such as DPT, BCG, and measles vaccines.
- Around 70% of WHO's vaccines, as per the essential immunization schedule, are sourced from India.
- The centralizing of the licensing authority for drug manufacturing is significant.
- This move is crucial as India prepares to benefit from drugs worth \$251 billion going off-patent in the coming decade.
- The pharmaceutical sector in India is expected to undergo significant changes between 2022 and 2030 due to drugs going off-patent.
- The expiry of patents presents an opportunity for the entry of generic products, leading to growth in the Indian generic drug market.
- India is focusing on self-reliance and needs to identify these drugs beforehand to implement strategies for their timely entry into the market.

### What are the challenges?

- India faces challenges in the pharmaceutical sector, including issues with intellectual property rights and lack of research and development.
- Understanding political, economic, sociocultural, technological, environmental, and legal factors is crucial for assessing opportunities and challenges in the pharmaceutical market.
- Adapting to changes in external factors, navigating regulatory requirements, leveraging technology advancements, and aligning strategies with industry needs are essential for success in the global market.

- Centralizing the issuance of NOCs for pharmaceutical exports is welcomed by industry experts like Raheel Shah, who believe it will formalize the industry, improve efficiency, and boost exports.
- The Indian government cancelled licenses of over 10 pharmaceutical companies for poor quality manufacturing after inspecting 76 firms across 20 states.
- Notices were issued to 26 companies for non-compliance with good manufacturing processes.
- The move aims to keep a strict watch on pharmaceutical manufacturing quality and streamline the application process for manufacturing licenses.
- The decision to centralize powers for NOCs is not sudden, as it addresses the tedious process of obtaining NOCs from local drug regulators, leading to delays.
- The centralization aims to facilitate the application process without significant impacts on cost or delays, as the power to issue licenses for drug exports was already delegated to states earlier.

## What are the rules on contesting seats? (12 May)

How many seats can a candidate contest? When were the guidelines amended?

- Congress leader Rahul Gandhi announced his decision to contest from Rae Bareilly in Uttar Pradesh after the Kerala election, where he is also a contestant from Wayanad.
- According to the Representation of the People Act (RPA), 1951, a candidate can contest from up to two constituencies but can hold only one seat if elected from both.
- Sub-section 33 (7) of the RPA, introduced in 1996, allows candidates to contest from two seats.
- However, Section 70 of the same Act states that a candidate can hold only one seat at a time, requiring a by-election if they win from two seats.
- Former Chief Election Commissioner N. Gopalaswami mentioned opposition to candidates contesting from multiple seats due to the need for frequent by-elections.
- Both the Election Commission of India and the Law Commission proposed further amendments to the RPA to limit candidates to contesting from one seat only.
- Gopalaswami noted the difficulty in implementing this change, as politicians are unlikely to support reducing the number of seats a candidate can contest.
- To contest in Assembly polls, a person must be a voter in that particular State, but for Lok Sabha elections, a person can be registered as a voter in any constituency in India.
- However, there are exceptions in Assam, Lakshadweep, and Sikkim, where specific residency requirements apply for contesting elections.

What is the minimum age to contest?

- The minimum age to contest Lok Sabha and Assembly elections is 25 years, while for Rajya Sabha and State Legislative Council, it's 30 years.
- There's no minimum educational qualification required to contest general elections in India.

- Candidates must be Indian citizens, registered voters in a constituency, and not convicted of any offense punishable by more than two years.
- Disqualification from being chosen as a member can occur if holding a profit office under the Government, declared of unsound mind by a court, an undischarged insolvent, not an Indian citizen, or having acquired foreign citizenship voluntarily.
- The Representation of the People Act (RPA) disqualifies a person convicted of any offense with a sentence of two years or more from contesting elections.
- Even if on bail after conviction with pending appeal disposal, the person is disqualified from contesting an election.
- Some serious offenses lead to disqualification upon any conviction, regardless of punishment.

Over the years, what are some of the changes undertaken by the ECI regarding candidates?

- The Election Commission of India (ECI) has amended rules for political party funding during elections.
- The new regulations include reducing the cash donation limit from ₹20,000 to ₹2,000.
- The Electoral Bond Scheme, introduced in January 2018 to allow anonymous contributions and limit cash usage, was scrapped by the Supreme Court in 2024.
- For the 2024 polls, the ECI has prohibited cash transportation in bank vehicles after sunset.
- The Commission is also monitoring non-scheduled chartered flights for movement of cash, liquor, and drugs.
- Jagdeep Chokkar, founder member of ADR, acknowledges interventions but states that parties have found ways to circumvent them.
- Former Chief Election Commissioner N. Gopalaswami notes that no law addresses the issue of candidates' use of muscle power, as criminal laws are enacted by politicians.
- However, he mentions the presence of central paramilitary forces has helped prevent practices like booth-capturing, a point disputed by Prof. Chokkar, who sees it as a concerning aspect in a democracy.

## Opening the gates of hell (12 May)

Despite international warnings and pleas, Benjamin Netanyahu, the Israeli Prime Minister, seems determined to invade the southern Gaza city where 1.5 million Palestinians, most of them refugees, are living in filthy overcrowded shelters, streets and beaches

- Pre-war population of Rafah: 170,000
- Current population of Rafah: Approximately 1.5 million
- Situation in Rafah: Described as a "gigantic refugee camp" due to overcrowding and poor living conditions

- Challenges faced in Rafah: Lack of basic amenities, overcrowded shelters, inadequate access to clean water and food
- History of Rafah: Involved in conflicts between Israel and Palestine since 1948 Arab-Israeli war
- Recent developments: Israel ordered evacuation of over 1 million Palestinians from northern Gaza
- Majority of Rafah's current population: Internally displaced Palestinians

## War and talks

- The situation in the Gaza war has intensified, with key developments unfolding:
- U.S. Warning: The U.S. cautioned Israel against launching a full-scale invasion of Rafah, fearing civilian casualties.
- Israeli Intentions: Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu insisted on proceeding with the invasion plan despite international pressure.
- Hostage Crisis: Israel faces pressure to rescue 128 hostages abducted by Hamas. Protests in Israel urge the government to negotiate with Hamas for their release.
- Ceasefire Talks: Israel and Hamas, mediated by the U.S., Egypt, and Qatar, have engaged in ceasefire discussions in Cairo.
- Ceasefire Proposal: Reports suggest a three-phase ceasefire plan involving the release of hostages, Palestinian prisoners, and a cessation of hostilities.
- Contentious Issues: Israel rejects Hamas demands to release hostages' bodies and demands a lasting ceasefire and IDF withdrawal from Gaza.
- Dilemma for Israel: Negotiating a ceasefire with Hamas risks legitimizing the group but could resolve the hostage crisis.
- U.S. Perspective: Initially, U.S. officials blamed Hamas for hindering a ceasefire, but Hamas later accepted a proposal from mediators.
- Israeli Rejection: Despite Hamas's acceptance, Israel rejected the proposal, emphasizing its refusal to end the Gaza war through a deal with Hamas.
- Israeli Determination: Despite international efforts, Israel remains resolute in its plan to attack Rafah, signaling a continued military approach to the conflict.

## Tensions with U.S.

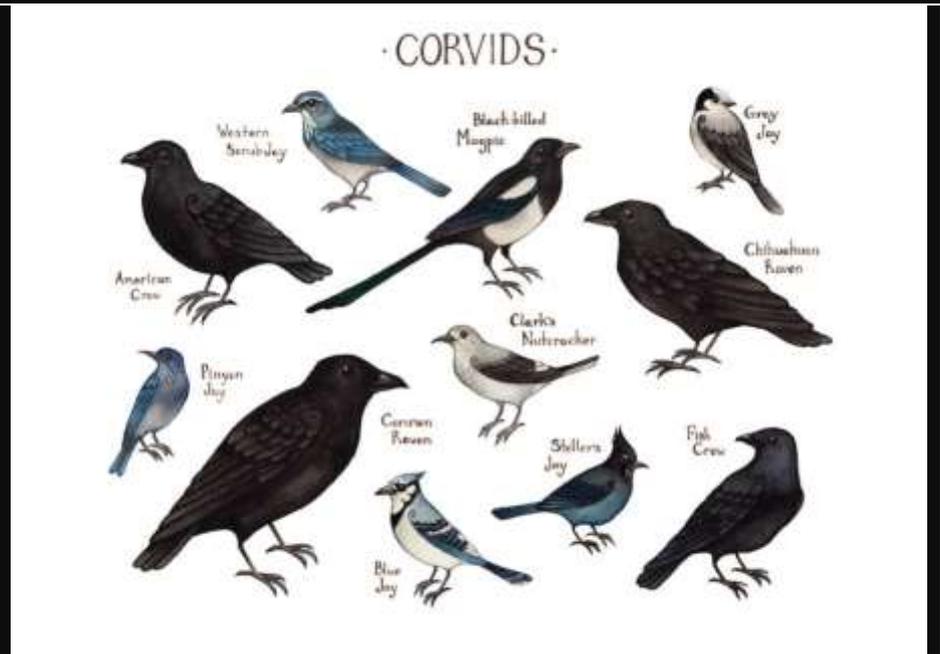
- Netanyahu planned a tough stance on Rafah.
- Biden warned against attacking Rafah without protecting civilians.
- UN warned of a humanitarian crisis if Rafah is attacked.
- Netanyahu faces a dilemma: cancel the attack and risk his government's collapse, or proceed and face international isolation and US tension.
- Netanyahu remains resolute, saying Israel will stand alone if needed.

## 30-year study links ultra-processed food to risk of early death

- Eating a lot of ultra-processed foods slightly increases the risk of death.
- The study, published in The BMJ, tracked 74,563 female nurses and 39,501 male health professionals for 30 years.
- They found that certain ultra-processed foods like ready-to-eat meat, sugary drinks, and highly processed breakfast foods are linked to higher risk.
- Not all ultra-processed foods need to be avoided, but limiting certain types can improve long-term health.
- Ultra-processed foods are linked to obesity, heart disease, diabetes, and bowel cancer.
- The study included people with no history of cancer, cardiovascular diseases, or diabetes.
- Participants provided health and lifestyle info every two years and filled out a detailed food questionnaire every four years.
- The study found 48,193 deaths over 34 years, including deaths from cancer, cardiovascular diseases, respiratory diseases, and neurodegenerative diseases.
- People who ate the most ultra-processed foods (about seven servings per day) had a 4% higher risk of total deaths and a 9% higher risk of other deaths compared to those who ate the least (about three servings per day).
- Specifically, those who ate more ultra-processed foods had an 8% higher risk of neurodegenerative deaths.
- However, there were no significant associations found for deaths due to cardiovascular diseases, cancer, or respiratory diseases.
- In simpler terms, those who ate more ultra-processed foods had a slightly higher risk of dying from various causes.
- For every 100,000 person years, the rate of death was 1,472 among those who ate the least ultra-processed foods and 1,536 among those who ate the most.
- The type of ultra-processed foods mattered: ready-to-eat meat, sugary drinks, dairy desserts, and processed breakfast foods showed the strongest links to higher risk of death.
- When considering overall dietary quality, the association between ultra-processed food intake and death was less significant, indicating that eating a healthy diet overall is more important for long-term health than just avoiding ultra-processed foods.

## The magpies of the Himalayas (12 May)

- Magpies belong to the Corvidae family, which includes crows, jays, and ravens.
- They are known for being noisy and curious birds and are often associated with omens in folklore worldwide.
- In some cultures, they are linked with witches.
- An English rhyme suggests that seeing a lone magpie brings bad luck.



- Despite superstitions, magpies are visually striking birds, especially in the Himalayas
- In the Himalayas, there are several species of blue magpies, known for their vibrant appearance.
- These include the gold-billed magpie, which lives at high altitudes, and the red-billed and blue magpies found at lower elevations where more people live.

## Trekking corridors

- The best places to see yellow and red-billed magpies are along the trekking route in Western Sikkim, starting from Yuksom at 1,780 meters and going up to the Goche La pass at about 4,700 meters.
- Along this route, you'll experience different types of forests, from tropical to sub-alpine, with diverse birdlife.
- Zoologists at Sikkim Government College have found over 250 bird species in this area, with about 60 birds visible or audible every five minutes at around 2,500 meters.
- The yellow-billed blue magpie, known for its long tail and distinct flight pattern, is frequently heard in this area.
- These magpies build their nests in rhododendron trees, using twigs and grass, and lay three to six eggs in May or June. Both parents take care of the young.
- The blue and red-billed magpies are similar but slightly smaller, with the blue magpie being more commonly seen around villages.
- As human activity increases in forests due to tourism, concerns arise about how well the birds can adapt.
- Rhododendron flowers attract tourists, and villagers sometimes rely on forest resources like firewood to support tourism.
- Sustainable tourism practices are hoped to ensure the conservation of the natural habitat and its wildlife, including the colorful magpies.