

Current Affairs - 15 January 2026

SECTION 17A UNDER SCRUTINY: SHIELDING HONEST OFFICERS VS UNMASKING THE CORRUPT

- Section 17A was introduced to prevent “policy paralysis” by protecting civil servants from investigative harassment over bona fide decisions.
- The concern was that fear of probes could deter officials from taking bold, necessary policy decisions.
- **Protecting the ‘Steel Frame’ of India**
 - Justice K V Viswanathan underscored the need for such protection, invoking Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel’s description of civil servants as the “Steel Frame of India.”
 - He warned that without safeguards, honest officers would adopt a risk-averse “play-it-safe” approach, ultimately harming national interests.
- **The Constitutional Flaw in Section 17A**
 - Justice Viswanathan acknowledged a key defect in the provision: the authority to grant or deny approval for investigations rests with the government itself, undermining the independence essential for corruption inquiries.
 - To preserve the provision’s constitutionality, Justice Viswanathan adopted a “**constructive approach.**”
 - He upheld the requirement of prior approval but ruled that decision-making must not be confined to the government alone.
 - Instead, complaints must be independently **screened by the Lokpal** at the Centre and **Lokayuktas** in the States.
- **How the Proposed Mechanism Works?**
 - Under this framework, when police seek approval to investigate, the government must forward the request to the Lokpal.
 - The Lokpal’s Inquiry Wing conducts a preliminary assessment, and if a prima facie case is found, the government is obliged to grant approval.



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Section 17A as a Shield for the Corrupt

- Justice B V Nagarathna held that **Section 17A** is contrary to the very objective of the Prevention of Corruption Act, 1988.
 - She argued that by blocking enquiries at the threshold, the provision effectively protects corrupt officials rather than safeguarding honest ones.
 - **Conflict of Interest in Government Approval**
 - She rejected the assumption that the government can act as an impartial authority in granting approval for investigations.
 - She highlighted the risks of policy bias and conflict of interest, especially where allegations involve senior officials or ministers, making impartial decision-making by subordinate officers unrealistic.
 - **Violation of the Right to Equality**
 - She found Section 17A **violative of Article 14**, as it grants protection only to officials involved in “recommendations or decisions.”
 - This, she said, unfairly discriminates against lower-level officials who perform clerical functions or record file notings and are denied similar safeguards.
 - **Rejection of Judicial Reconstruction**
 - Justice Nagarathna strongly disagreed with Justice Viswanathan’s effort to save the provision by routing approvals through the Lokpal.
 - She termed this “judicial legislation,” asserting that courts cannot rewrite statutes by replacing “Government” with “Lokpal.”
 - **‘Cart Before the Horse’ Argument**
 - She dismissed the government’s claim that Section 17A acts as a gatekeeper against frivolous complaints.
 - Without a preliminary police enquiry, she argued, it is impossible to assess whether allegations are genuine or baseless.
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KASHI-TAMIL SANGAMAM - CELEBRATING INDIA'S LIVING CIVILISATIONAL UNITY

- The Kashi-Tamil Sangamam, a flagship cultural initiative under the spirit of “Ek Bharat, Shreshtha Bharat”, highlights India’s **civilisational continuity**, **cultural unity** and people-to-people bonds.
- The Somnath Swabhiman Parv (1026–2026), marking 1,000 years since the first attack on Somnath, puts the Sangamam within India’s broader historical and cultural consciousness.

Background - Idea of Sangamam:

- Sangam in Indian ethos symbolises **confluence**, integration and unity amid diversity.
- The Kashi-Tamil Sangamam represents the **living unity** of India’s traditions while respecting regional uniqueness.
- **Kashi** (Varanasi), a civilisational and spiritual anchor for millennia, where people from all over have come in search of knowledge, meaning and Moksha, is a natural venue for such cultural integration.

Civilisational Linkages Between Kashi and Tamil Nadu:

- **Spiritual and cultural bonds - Kashi-Rameswaram axis:**
 - Baba Vishwanath (Kashi) and Rameswaram (Tamil Nadu) are key spiritual centres. Tenkasi in Tamil Nadu is known as Dakshin Kashi.
 - Saint Kumaraguruparar Swamigal strengthened spiritual and institutional ties between Kashi and Tamil Nadu.
- **Intellectual and nationalist connections:** Mahakavi Subramania Bharati found in Kashi a space for intellectual growth, spiritual awakening, and deepening nationalism and vision of a united India.

Evolution of the Kashi-Tamil Sangamam:

- **First edition (2022):** Participation of scholars, artisans, students, farmers, writers and professionals, who travelled to Kashi, Prayagraj and Ayodhya.

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- **Second edition (2023):** Greater use of technology to overcome language barriers. The aim was to introduce innovative formats and deeper engagement, so that the Sangamam continued to evolve while remaining rooted in its core spirit.
- **Third edition:** The focus was on Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS), expanding academic discussions, exhibitions and cultural interactions.
- **Fourth edition (2025):**
 - **Theme:** Tamil Karkalam (Learn Tamil)
 - Teachers from Tamil Nadu taught Tamil to students in Kashi, emphasising linguistic integration and cultural learning.

Key Highlights of the Fourth Edition:

- **Translation:** Of Tholkappiyam (ancient Tamil literary classic) into 4 Indian languages, and 6 foreign languages.
- **Sage Agastya Vehicle Expedition (SAVE):** From Tenkasi to Kashi, it included activities like eye camps, health awareness, digital literacy camps. Tribute to King Adi Veera Parakrama Pandiyan, symbol of cultural oneness
- **Other highlights:** Academic sessions at Banaras Hindu University (BHU), cultural exhibitions at Namoh Ghat, and high participation of Yuva Shakti (youth).

Role of Institutions and Governance:

- **Indian Railways** operated special trains for participants.
- Warm hospitality by people of Kashi and Uttar Pradesh.
- Strong administrative coordination ensuring a seamless experience.
- Valedictory function held at Rameswaram, attended by the Vice President of India, highlighting spiritual unity and national integration.

Conclusion:

- The Kashi–Tamil Sangamam exemplifies India’s living civilisational unity, where diversity is not erased but harmonised.
- By fostering cultural understanding, academic exchange and youth participation, it strengthens the foundations of national integration.

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AN EXPLORATION OF INDIA'S MINERALS DIPLOMACY

- India's clean energy transition is increasingly dependent on imported critical minerals and rare earths, making external **supply chains** vital, especially as China tightens export controls.
- Like other countries, India is seeking to diversify mineral trade partnerships, encourage responsible production, and build standards-based markets.
- To address both immediate needs and long-term resilience, India has adopted a **two-pronged approach**—securing overseas access while strengthening domestic capabilities.
- Over the past five years, New Delhi has pursued numerous bilateral and multilateral partnerships alongside domestic policy reforms, raising questions about their effectiveness and the need for recalibration.

Uneven Progress Across Critical Mineral Partnerships

- India's critical mineral partnerships have delivered mixed outcomes, with some countries emerging as more reliable and strategically aligned than others.

From Ore Access to Value-Chain Resilience

- Across regions, a clear lesson emerges: securing mineral ore alone is insufficient. The real vulnerability lies in processing.
- Without domestic refining and midstream capacity, India remains exposed to supply-chain disruptions.
- **Building Integrated, End-to-End Partnerships**
 - India needs integrated partnerships across the value chain:
 - **Upstream ore extraction:** Africa, Australia, Canada, Latin America
 - **Midstream processing of the mineral ores:** West Asia (the Gulf) and Japan
 - **Downstream technologies creation:** European Union and United States (batteries, recycling)
 - **Diversification hedge:** Russia

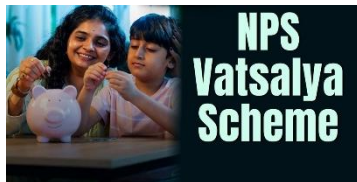
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- Technology, innovation, and on-ground project execution matter more than announcements.
- **Strategic Focus Before Expansion**
 - While cooperation with additional partners like South Korea and Indonesia is valuable, India must first sharpen a coherent strategy for existing partnerships to ensure results.
- **Strengthening the Domestic Foundation**
 - None of these efforts will succeed without a robust domestic framework for responsible mining.
 - Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) standards, transparency, and regulatory certainty are increasingly decisive in international partnerships.

The Way Forward

- India has built an extensive network of critical mineral partnerships. The next step is to deepen what works, recalibrate what doesn't, and anchor the strategy in processing capacity, technology leadership, and long-term certainty.

NPS VATSALYA SCHEME



- It is a **contributory savings** and long term financial security scheme **designed exclusively for minors**.
 - **Eligibility:** It is open to all **Indian citizens**, including NRI/OCI, below 18 years of age.
 - **Account Operation:** Account opened in the name of the minor and operated by the guardian
 - **Contribution:** Minimum initial and annual **contribution ₹250** and no maximum limit on contribution
 - The contribution can also be **gifted by relatives and friends**.
 - **Pension Fund Selection:** Guardian can choose **any one Pension Fund** registered with PFRDA



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- **Partial Withdrawal Provisions:** It is allowed after **completion of three years** from account opening
 - Up to **25% of own contributions** (excluding returns) is permitted for education, medical treatment and specified disabilities
 - It is allowed **twice before 18 years** and twice between 18-21 years, subject to conditions.

MOLECULAR CLOUD



- It is an **interstellar cloud of gas and dust** in which molecules can form, the most common of which is Hydrogen (H_2).
- **Properties of Molecular Cloud:**
 - These are characterized by **their low temperatures** (below 40 K, colder than liquid nitrogen) and **relatively high densities**.
 - **Size:** The size of these clouds can be from a **few light years up to 600 light years**. Their total mass can reach several million solar masses.
 - Molecular clouds with dimensions of more than about 15 light years are also called **giant molecular clouds**.
 - The complex interplay between three key forces, namely **gravity, magnetic fields, and turbulence**, determines how these clouds collapse to form stars.
 - The central regions of these clouds are **completely hidden from view by dust**.
 - They are the raw material of stars and planets. These clouds do not last for a very long time.
 - After the new stars are born, their solar winds blow away the remaining gas and dust.
- **Significance of Molecular Cloud:**
 - Molecular clouds are so important because they are the **raw material of stars and planets**.



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HENLEY PASSPORT INDEX



- It is a **popular ranking of global passports** that measures passport strength by the number of destinations that **holders can visit without a prior visa**.
- **Base:** The index ranks countries based on statistics provided by **the International Air Transport Association (IATA)**.
- **Significance:** The stronger the passport, the more countries its holders can enter without a prior visa, a privilege that reflects diplomatic ties, economic influence, and international trust.

Key Highlights of Henley Passport Index 2026:

- **India's passport** also saw improvement, climbing **five spots to 80th position**
 - The top three passports in the world come from Asia. **Singapore** ranks first, while **Japan** and **South Korea** are tied for second place.
 - **Afghanistan** is at the bottom of the list, ranked 101st, with visa-free access to 24 destinations.
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EXPORT PREPAREDNESS INDEX 2024



- It is a comprehensive **assessment of export readiness** across India's **States and Union Territories (UTs)**.
- It recognises the diversity of **subnational economic structures** and their critical role in advancing India's global trade ambitions.
- The **first edition of the EPI** was **published in August 2020** and this is the 4th edition.
- **Framework and Coverage:** It is structured **around four pillars**, further disaggregated into **13 sub-pillars and 70 indicators**. **Four Pillars are:**
 - Export Infrastructure (20% Weightage)



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- Business Ecosystem (40% Weightage)
 - Policy and Governance (20% Weightage)
 - Export Performance (20% Weightage)
 - **Classification of States and Union Territories:** States and UTs have been categorised into **Large States & Small States, North East States and Union Territories.**
 - Within each category, they are further classified as
 - **Leaders:** States/UTs demonstrating relatively high export preparedness
 - **Challengers:** States/UTs with moderate preparedness and scope for improvement
 - **Aspirers:** States/UTs at early stages of export ecosystem development
 - Under EPI 2024, the following States and UTs have emerged as leading performers in their respective categories:
 - **Leading Performers**
 - **Large States:** Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh
 - **Small States, North Eastern States & Union Territories:** Uttarakhand, Jammu and Kashmir, Nagaland, Dadra and Nagar Haveli & Daman and Diu, Goa.
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