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Current Affairs - 28 January 2026

MAHAKALESHWAR TEMPLE



Mahakaleshwar Temple

The Supreme Court recently did not entertain a petition challenging the practice of 'VIP darshan' at the famed Shri Mahakaleshwar temple in Ujjain, observing that the court is not meant to play the role of a gatekeeper on who enters a temple and when.

- It is a **Hindu temple** located on the banks of the River Shipra at **Ujjain in Madhya Pradesh**.
- It is dedicated to **Lord Shiva**. It is **one of the 12 Jyotirlingas** in India.
- The history of Mahakaleshwar Temple **dates back to ancient times**, with references to the temple found in various **Hindu scriptures and texts**.
 - The temple finds mention in the **Puranas**.
 - The renowned **poet Kalidas** also **mentioned** this temple in his creations.
- The **current structure** of the temple was **built in the 18th century** by the **Maratha ruler Ranoji Shinde**.
- However, the temple has been **destroyed and rebuilt several times** throughout history.
- **Architecture:**
 - The architecture of the temple shows the influence of **Maratha, Bhumija, and Chalukya styles** of structural design.
 - The temple complex is **spread over five levels**, one of which is underground.
 - The **Sabha Mandap (assembly hall)** and **Garbha Griha (sanctum sanctorum)** are adorned with **elaborate sculptures** depicting various Hindu deities and mythological scenes.
 - The sanctum **houses the Jyotirlinga**, which is the focal point of devotion and rituals.
 - The **grand spire (shikhara)**, intricately carved pillars, and ornate ceilings are proof of the exquisite craftsmanship.

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THE 'MOTHER OF ALL DEALS': INDIA-EU FTA

- India and the European Union are among the world's largest economies and long-standing trading partners.
- The EU is India's largest trading partner in goods, while India is a key market for EU exports and investments.
- Negotiations for a comprehensive trade agreement began in 2007 but faced repeated pauses due to differences over market access, regulatory standards, agriculture, automobiles, and services.
- Talks were revived in 2022 with a more pragmatic approach, leading to the conclusion of the FTA in January 2026 after nearly two decades.

Key Features of the India-EU Free Trade Agreement

- The India-EU FTA is one of the most ambitious trade agreements signed by India to date, covering goods, services, and investment-related issues.
- **Tariff Liberalisation Commitments**
 - The EU has agreed to remove tariffs on **99.5% of the items India exports to the region**, with most duties falling to zero immediately upon the agreement coming into force.
 - On India's side, tariff concessions have been offered on 97.5% of the traded value of EU exports, though with phased reductions for sensitive sectors.
 - This asymmetrical liberalisation reflects India's developmental concerns while ensuring substantial market access gains.

What India Gains from the Agreement?

- India secures tariff reductions across 97% of tariff lines, covering 99.5% of trade value.
- About 90.7% of India's exports will enjoy zero-duty access to the EU market from day one. Key beneficiaries include labour-intensive sectors such as textiles, apparel, leather and footwear, gems and jewellery, marine products, toys, sports goods, tea, coffee, and spices.

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What India Has Conceded?

- India has agreed to duty elimination or reduction on 92.1% of tariff lines, covering 97.5% of EU exports.
- Nearly half of these tariff lines will see immediate duty elimination, while others will be phased out over 5, 7, or 10 years.
- High-technology imports from the EU, such as machinery, electrical equipment, medical devices, pharmaceuticals, aircraft components, and precision instruments, are expected to reduce input costs for Indian industry and support manufacturing competitiveness.
- Sensitive sectors like dairy and certain agricultural products have been excluded from full liberalisation to protect farmers' livelihoods.
- Similarly, the EU has retained protections for products such as beef, sugar, rice, poultry, and milk powder.

Handling Sensitive and Contested Sectors

- Automobiles and wine were among the most contentious issues. A compromise was reached through quota-based systems.
- India agreed to lower import duties on European cars priced above Rs. 25 lakh from 110% to as low as 10%, subject to quotas and price-based categories.
- For wines, tariffs will be reduced from 150% to 20-30%, again under a quota mechanism.
- This approach balances consumer access and domestic industry protection.

Conclusion

- The India-EU Free Trade Agreement marks a watershed moment in India's trade diplomacy.
 - By opening markets while safeguarding sensitive sectors, the pact promises to boost exports, attract investment, generate employment, and deepen strategic ties between the two major economic blocs.
 - Its successful implementation could serve as a template for India's future trade agreements in an increasingly fragmented global trade environment.
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WHAT IS EURATOM?



Euratom

The European Union (EU) and India recently committed to promoting collaboration on the peaceful uses of nuclear energy under the India-Euratom agreement.

- The European Atomic Energy Community (Euratom) is an international organization established under the Treaty of Rome in 1957.
- Objective: To form a common market for the development of the peaceful uses of atomic energy.

Membership:

- The original members were Belgium, France, West Germany, Italy, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands.
 - It subsequently came to include all members of the European Union (EU).
 - Euratom regulates the European civil nuclear industry, which produces almost 30% of energy in the EU.
 - Euratom's work safeguards nuclear materials and technology, facilitates investment, research, and development, and ensures equal access to nuclear supplies, as well as the correct disposal of nuclear waste and the safety of operations.
 - It is governed by the Commission and Council, operating under the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice.
 - Its main instruments are the Euratom Supply Agency and its research and nuclear safeguard activities.
 - The EU has its own Joint Research Centre (JRC) in the nuclear field.
 - Euratom is involved in developing atomic fusion technology, which has the potential of delivering abundant sustainable energy in the future.
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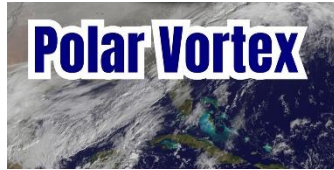
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WHAT IS THE DOOMSDAY CLOCK?



The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists recently moved the hands of the Doomsday Clock to 85 seconds to midnight, the closest the world has ever been to global catastrophe in its estimation.

- It is a **symbolic clock** adopted by atomic scientists to show **how close human beings are considered to be to a global catastrophe**, with **midnight standing for annihilation**, or “**doomsday**.”
- Metaphorically, the clock’s **minute hand moves closer to or farther from midnight**, depending on the **level of threat** thought to be **posed by nuclear weapons, climate change, or disruptive technologies**.

The clock was **created in 1947** by the **Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists (BAS)**, which was founded two years earlier.

Key Facts about Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists (BAS):

- It is a **nonprofit organization** that sought to **warn the public about the danger of nuclear weapons**.
 - The Bulletin was **founded by a group called the Atomic Scientists of Chicago in September 1945** at the University of Chicago.
 - Its **founding members and sponsors** were **scientists who had contributed to the development of the first atomic bombs** as part of the **Manhattan Project**, including physicists **Albert Einstein, J. Robert Oppenheimer, and Eugene Rabinowitch**.
 - Concerned about the devastating consequences of this new technology, the group published their first newsletter, the **Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists**, in **December 1945**.
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PANCHAM



PANCHAM – Panchayat Assistance and Messaging Chatbot.

- It is a digital tool developed in collaboration with UNICEF.
- **Aim:** It is a flagship digital initiative aimed at **empowering Panchayat Elected Representatives and Functionaries.**
- It is designed as a **digital companion for Panchayats**, providing timely and contextual guidance, simplified workflows, and **easy access to information** to support day-to-day governance and service delivery functions.

Features of PANCHAM:

- **Direct Connect:** It enables, for the first time, a **direct digital connect** between the **Government of India** and **Elected Representatives and Panchayat Functionaries** across the country.
- **Language Support:** It is integrated with **BHASHINI** and will support **22 Indian languages**, enabling Panchayat representatives to interact with the platform in their preferred local language.
- **Citizen Access:** **Citizens would be able to access PANCHAM** through a QR-code-based entry mechanism.
- It will **facilitate quicker decision-making**, faster resolution of field-level issues, and stronger feedback loops between the grassroots and decision-making centers.
- **Two way communications:** **PANCHAM facilitates two way communication** and officials can send feedback, ask questions, and flag local problems directly to the ministry.
- **Information Dissemination:** The Ministry would be able to **directly disseminate circulars**, advisories, key messages, and updates to Panchayat Elected Representatives and Functionaries.



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MODEL YOUTH GRAM SABHA



The Ministry of Panchayati Raj in collaboration with the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Tribal Affairs, is jointly organizing a National Award Ceremony to felicitate the winners of the Model Youth Gram Sabha.

- It is a **simulated forum** for **School Children** to participate in **mock Gram Sabha sessions**.
- **Purpose:** It is a pioneering initiative to strengthen Janbhagidari and **promote participatory local governance** by engaging students in simulated Gram Sabha sessions.
- It is an initiative **based on the Model UN** – an educational simulation of the United Nations – in schools across the country.
- It is an **initiative of the Ministry of Panchayati Raj**, in collaboration with the **Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Tribal Affairs**.
- **Implementation:** It is rolled out across the schools nationwide, including **Jawahar Navodaya Vidyalayas, Eklavya Model Residential Schools (EMRSs), and State Government Schools**.

Key Features of Model Youth Gram Sabha

- **Focus:** Students from **classes 9-12** will play the roles of sarpanch, ward members, and village-level officials, including village secretary, Anganwadi worker etc.
- They will hold mock meetings of the Gram Sabha, discuss various issues, and prepare the village budget and development plans.
- **Financial Support:** The Panchayati Raj Ministry also provide a **support of Rs 20,000 to each school** for holding the mock Gram Sabha.



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UGC'S NEW RULES ON CASTE-BASED DISCRIMINATION AND THE PUSHBACK

- The UGC has notified the University Grants Commission (Promotion of Equity in Higher Education Institutions) Regulations, 2026.
- The regulations aim to eradicate discrimination in higher education on grounds such as religion, race, gender, place of birth, caste, or disability.
- The particular focus is on protecting Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, socially and educationally backward classes, economically weaker sections, and persons with disabilities, while promoting equity and inclusion.
- These rules replace the earlier **2012 Promotion of Equity Regulations** and apply to all higher education institutions.
- They establish a **defined structure and procedure for filing and addressing complaints** related to discrimination within campuses.

How Will the New UGC Regulations Be Implemented?

- To operationalise the Promotion of Equity Regulations, 2026, the University Grants Commission has mandated a three-tier institutional mechanism in all higher education institutions.
- **Equal Opportunity Centre (EOC)**
 - Every institution must establish an Equal Opportunity Centre to oversee policies for disadvantaged groups.
 - The EOC will coordinate with district administration and police and facilitate legal aid when required.
 - It will comprise five faculty members, with no category-wise reservation mandated.
 - If a college lacks five faculty members, the university-level EOC of its affiliating university will perform these functions.



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- **Equity Committee**
 - The EOC will be supported by a 10-member Equity Committee, chaired by the head of the institution.
 - Five members must belong to reserved categories—OBCs, Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Persons with Disabilities, and women.
 - The committee must meet within 24 hours of receiving a complaint and submit its report within 15 days.
 - The head of the institution is required to initiate action within seven days of receiving the report.
- **Equity Squads and Helpline**
 - Institutions must constitute **Equity Squads** to maintain vigilance and prevent discrimination on campus.
 - These squads are expected to remain mobile and regularly visit vulnerable spots.
 - A 24-hour Equity Helpline must be set up to report discrimination.
 - Institutions are also required to appoint Equity Ambassadors, tasked with promoting awareness and acting as “torch bearers” of equity.

Controversy Over the New UGC Regulation

- Critics argue that the rules could lead to harassment of students from the general category and deepen caste-based divisions within campuses.
 - One of the main objections is the **absence of penalties for “false complaints of discrimination”**.
 - Critics claim that without such a provision, the regulations could be misused, while institutions may face punitive action for non-compliance.
 - They allege that the regulations are unfair to general category students and that they promote caste-based divisions, particularly within the OBC community, for political purposes.
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