

### THE NEW POST OFFICE BILL

#### Why in news?

- After being passed in the Rajya Sabha recently, the Post Office Bill, 2023 was brought to the Lok Sabha for consideration.
- The bill seeks to repeal the 125-year-old Indian Post Office Act of 1898.

#### The new Post Office Bill

- **Need**
  - There was need to consolidate and amend the law relating to Post Office in India, which today provides many services beyond simply mail delivery.
    - Mail delivery was the primary concern of the Indian Post Office Act of 1898.
  - The Post Office network today has become a vehicle for delivery of different citizen-centric services, which necessitated the repeal enactment of a new law.
- **Post officers can intercept any item**
  - Section 9 of the Bill allows the Centre to, by notification, empower any officer to intercept, open or detain any item.
  - This can be done in the interest of state security, friendly relations with foreign states, public order, emergency, public safety, or contravention of other laws.
- **Postal items to be handed over to customs authorities**
  - This provision also allows post officers to hand over postal items to customs authorities.
  - They can do so if these items are suspected to contain any prohibited item, or if such items are liable to duty.
- **The Post Office exempt from liability**
  - Section 10 says that the Post Office and its officers are not responsible if something goes wrong, like if there is a loss, the wrong delivery, a delay, or damage during any services provided by the Post Office.

- They are not liable for these issues, unless there are specific rules saying they are responsible for certain things.
- **Penalties and offences**
  - The 2023 Bill removes all penalties and offences under the 1898 Act.
  - For example, offences committed by post office officials such as misconduct, fraud, and theft, among others, have been deleted entirely.
  - At the same time, if anyone refuses or neglects to pay the charges for availing a service provided by the Post Office, such amount shall be recoverable as if it were an arrear of land revenue due from them.
- **Removes Centre's exclusivity**
  - The present Bill has removed Section 4 of the 1898 Act, which allowed the Centre the exclusive privilege of conveying by post, from one place to another, all letters.
    - Effectively, this exclusivity was already lost by the 1980s, with the rise of private courier services.
    - Neither the Post Office Act of 1898 nor the Indian Post Office Rules, 1933 had defined the term letter anywhere.
    - Hence, courier services bypassed the 1898 law by simply calling their couriers “documents” and “parcels”, rather than “letters.”
  - The 2023 Bill, for the first time, regulates private courier services by bringing it under its ambit.
  - While the government acknowledges its lack of exclusivity, it has also widened the ambit of the law in order to intercept and detain any postal article, as opposed to just letters.

## Criticism

- Several analysts have criticised the Bill, saying that despite promising to update the Colonial law, it keeps the most draconian provisions that it contained.
- It has eliminated the burden of accountability which a governmental enterprise like India Post ought constitutionally to shoulder.

## KERALA REPORTS NEW COVID-19 VARIANT JN.1 CASE

### Why in news?

- A case of JN.1, a sub-variant of COVID-19 that's currently spreading in the US and China, has been found in Kerala.
- It was found as part of the ongoing routine surveillance by INSACOG (Indian SARS-CoV-2 Genomics Consortium).

### Indian SARS-CoV-2 Genomics Consortium (INSACOG)

- **About**
  - INSACOG is a national multi-agency consortium of Genome Sequencing Laboratories (RGSs) laboratories.
  - It was established by the Government of India in December 2020 for genomic surveillance of SARS-CoV-2 in India.
  - Presently, there are 28 laboratories under this Consortium which monitor the genomic variations in SARS-CoV-2.
- **Jointly established by:**
  - MoH&FW, DBT, CSIR and ICMR
- **Objective**
  - To ascertain the status of Variants of Interest (VoI) and Variants of Concern (VoC) in the country
  - To establish sentinel surveillance and surge surveillance mechanisms for early detection of genomic variants and assist in formulating effective public health response
  - To determine the presence of genomic variants in samples collected during super-spreader events and in areas reporting increasing trend of cases/deaths etc.

### News Summary: Kerala reports new COVID-19 variant JN.1 case

- The sub-variant is not entirely new and has been detected in small numbers in many countries for several months now.

### About JN.1

- The sub-variant JN.1 is a close relative of the **2.86 variant, commonly referred to as Pirola.**
  - Pirola was on the watchlist of scientists as a variant of interest because of more than 39 mutations it carried on the spike protein as compared to its predecessor.
- It carries just one additional mutation in the spike protein as compared to its relative.
  - Mutations on the spike protein of Sars-CoV-2 are important because they are the ones that attach to receptors on human cells and allow the virus to enter it.

### Can this variant lead to an increase in cases?

- There were concerns that Pirola might be able to more effectively evade immunity and spread quickly. However, that hasn't happened.
- The US Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) says that the updated vaccines available have demonstrated the ability to effectively block Pirola infections.
- Hence, it is optimistic that the available vaccines will provide protection against JN.1 as well.
- Experts say that immunity from previous infections and immunisation with vaccines containing ancestral spike protein are likely to protect against newer variants as well.

### Are JN.1 cases on the rise?

- The WHO said that Pirola and its descendants accounted for 17 per cent of the Sars-CoV-2 sequences uploaded to the global database
- More than half of these sequences were that of JN.1 by the beginning of December.

## WHAT ARE SWARM DRONES?

The Indian Air Force (IAF) has chalked out the requirement for different mobile systems to counter threats in different operational scenarios, particularly those from multiple swarm drones.



### About Swarm Drones:

- SWARM stands for “Smart War-Fighting Array of Reconfigured Modules.”

- A Swarm Drone typically consists of multiple drones working in coordination, communicating with one another, and sharing information to achieve a common objective.
- These drones can be of the same or different types, ranging from small quadcopters to larger fixed-wing drones.
- The swarm's strength lies in its ability to function as a collective unit, leveraging swarm intelligence algorithms and advanced software to operate seamlessly and efficiently.
- These drones are equipped with Artificial Intelligence (AI) and can communicate with each other as well as with the control station.
- All the individual drones work in unison to complete tasks using distributed coordination, with each communication sent out by one drone providing the others with up-to-date information about their environment and roles in the mission.
- As their commands are based on real-time data, these swarms react quickly and precisely to changes in their surroundings.
- The swarm as a whole and individual drones can exercise great autonomy in seeking and engaging targets.

## SURAT DIAMOND BOURSE

Prime minister is set to inaugurate the world's largest corporate office hub, Surat Diamond Bourse.



### About Surat Diamond Bourse:

- It is located in Khajod village, near Surat.
- It is the world's largest corporate office hub, taking over the erstwhile top position of
- It will also be a global centre for trading both rough and polished diamonds as well as jewellery.
- Diamond buyers from all corners of the world will get a global platform to trade at the Surat Diamond Bourse.

- **Features:**
- It is built on 35.54 acres of land at a cost of Rs 3,400 crore.
- It is the **world's largest interconnected building**, as it houses over 4,500 interconnected offices.
- The megastructure **features 15 floors** in addition to **nine ground towers** with office space ranging from 300 sq ft to 1 lakh sq ft.
- There is a **central spine connecting the nine rectangular towers**.
- The bourse **will comprise** a state-of-the-art '**Customs Clearance House**' for Import-Export, a **jewellery mall** for retail jewellery business, and a **facility for International Banking and Safe Vaults**.
- It is the **country's largest customs clearance house**.
- The building has the capacity to house 4,200 traders from 175 countries who will come to Surat to buy polished diamonds.
- Despite its mega size, the bourse minimizes its environmental impact by **adhering to the principles of Panchtattva**, aligning with the five elements of nature.
- The building showcases a **cutting-edge rooftop solar energy project**, ensuring sustainability in common areas and **employing a radiant cooling system**.
- The **Indian Green Building Council (IGBC)** has awarded the building a **platinum rating**.

## WHAT IS RAIL KAUSHAL VIKAS YOJANA?

Railway Minister recently clarified that the over 26,000 candidates skilled under the “Rail Kaushal Vikas Yojana” until November 2023 will not receive preferential treatment for jobs within the Indian Railways.



### About Rail Kaushal Vikas Yojana:

- It was **launched by Indian Railways** in September 2021 with the noble objective of **providing technical skill training to youth** across various **industry-relevant trades**.

- Launched to **address the needs of candidates within the age bracket of 18 to 35**, the program was designed to equip them with the necessary skills for jobs across various sectors.
- **Key Features:**
- **Targeted Skill Development:**
- The program is designed to **address the specific skill gaps** prevalent in the job market.
- By **focusing on industry-relevant technical trades**, it seeks to equip participants with practical knowledge and hands-on experience crucial for technical jobs across industries.
- **Accessible Training Locations:** Recognizing the diversity and vast geographical spread of potential participants, the scheme ensures accessibility by establishing **training centers at various locations across the country**.
- **Age-Appropriate Training:** With a **specific emphasis on the age group of 18 to 35**, the program targets individuals at a crucial stage in their professional development.
- **Collaboration with Industry Experts:**
- To **ensure the relevance and effectiveness of the training** modules, the scheme involves collaboration with industry experts and professionals.
- This collaboration **enhances the quality** of the training and **aligns the program with the evolving requirements** and advancements in the industries.
- **Certification and Recognition:**
- **Successful completion of the program results in certifications** that are **recognized by the Railways**.
- These certifications serve as tangible proof of the participants' acquired skills and can enhance their employability in the job market.

## [BHARAT NEW CAR ASSESSMENT PROGRAMME \(BHARAT NCAP\)](#)



The first round of crash testing of the cars under the Bharat New Car Assessment Programme (Bharat NCAP) has been successfully completed recently.

## About Bharat New Car Assessment Programme (Bharat NCAP):

- It is an **indigenous star-rating system for crash testing cars**, under which vehicles will be assigned between one to five stars, **indicating their safety in a collision**.
- Bharat NCAP is an ambitious joint project between the **Government of India (GoI) and Global NCAP**, the regulatory body behind the safety crash test ratings.
- **Objective:** To help consumers make an informed decision before purchasing a car, thereby spurring demand for safer cars.
- Under the Bharat NCAP, cars voluntarily nominated by automobile manufacturers will be crash tested as per protocols laid down in the **Automotive Industry Standard (AIS) 197**.

### Applicability:

- The programme is applicable to **passenger vehicles with not more than eight seats in addition to the driver's seat**, with a gross vehicle weight not exceeding **3,500 kg**.
- **Only the base model** of a particular variant will be tested.
- Besides **internal combustion engine (ICE) models**, **CNG cars** as well as battery-powered **electric vehicles are eligible** to undergo the safety test.

### Assignment of rating:

- Vehicles tested under the Bharat NCAP are **evaluated across three critical safety domains: adult occupant protection, child occupant protection, and safety assist technologies**.
- The test program is based on the AIS-197 standards. The selected **test units will be sent to the nearest testing centre in coordination with the Central Institute of Road Transport (CIRT)**.
- Each car will go through **five key tests**: frontal impact, side impact, side pole impact, electronic stability control, and pedestrian-compliant front design.
- The tests will be **performed with crash dummies** and will also rate the safety features of cars.



- Following these tests, cars receive a rating of one to five stars, reflecting their safety performance.
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## NYHOLM PRIZE

Recently, Professor Savita Ladage from Mumbai received the Royal Society of Chemistry's Nyholm Prize for Education in recognition of her contributions to chemistry education.



### About Nyholm prize:

- It is awarded to inspirational, innovative and **dedicated individuals or teams** making a substantial and sustained impact **within education**.
  - It celebrates individuals working in primary, secondary, further education, and higher education, encompassing teachers, technicians, and more.
  - It recognises a major national or international research or innovation contribution to the field of **chemical science education**.
  - This prize was established to commemorate the life and work of **Sir Ronald Nyholm**, president of the Royal Society of Chemistry from 1968 to 1970.
  - It is **awarded annually**.
  - The prize alternates between being open to nominees both in the UK and Ireland and internationally, and open only to nominations from the UK and Ireland.
  - **For 2023**, the prize was open to nominees **based anywhere in the world**.
  - The winner(s) receives **£5000, a medal and a certificate**.
  - The winner(s) will complete a series of lectures or workshops in the UK.
  - The winner(s) will be chosen by the **Education Prize Committee**.
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