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Current Affairs - 22 December 2025

WHY ELEPHANT–TRAIN COLLISIONS PERSIST AND HOW THEY CAN BE PREVENTED

- India is home to over half of the world’s **Asian elephant population**, and train collisions have emerged as a major human-caused threat to their survival.
- Railway accidents are among the leading anthropogenic causes of elephant deaths in the country.
- **Alarming Mortality Data**
 - Between 2010 and 2020, at least 1,160 elephants died due to non-natural causes.
 - Electrocution was the biggest killer (741 deaths), followed by train hits (186 deaths).
 - Notably, electrocution is often linked to high-voltage overhead railway lines, indirectly tying rail infrastructure to multiple causes of death.
- **Night-Time Collisions and Behavioural Factors**
 - Studies show that most train–elephant collisions occur at night.
 - Male elephants are disproportionately affected, as they cross tracks more frequently, especially during crop-harvest seasons when they engage in crop-raiding, increasing exposure to railway lines.
- **Wildlife Crossing Structures: The Core Solution**
 - Well-designed wildlife crossing structures, combined with fencing, can reduce wildlife mortality by up to 98%.
 - These crossings form the backbone of effective mitigation strategies for roads and railways cutting through elephant landscapes.
- **Types of Crossings and Design Principles**
 - Crossings can be **underpasses** (beneath bridges or flyovers) or **overpasses** (over tunnels or green bridges).
 - The handbook recommends minimum heights of 6–7 metres, adjusted for crossing length, to ensure usage.



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- **Placement Based on Elephant Movement**
 - Where and how many crossings are built matters as much as design.
 - Camera traps and GPS telemetry are used to map elephant movement and identify collision hotspots.
 - These data guide the optimal placement of crossings.
- **Fencing as a Support Tool**
 - Strategic fencing along high-risk stretches prevents elephants from straying onto tracks and gently channels them toward designated crossings, enhancing the effectiveness of the entire mitigation system.

Using Technology to Prevent Elephant–Train Collisions

- **Role of Early-Warning Systems** - Alongside habitat avoidance and physical measures like crossings and fencing, technology-based early-warning systems are emerging as effective non-structural solutions to reduce elephant–train accidents by alerting train operators in advance.
 - **Types of Sensor-Based Technologies** - Early-warning systems can be locomotive-based or ground-based. Locomotive systems use Forward Looking Infrared (FLIR) cameras, capable of detecting obstructions up to 750 metres, even in poor visibility.
 - Ground-based systems deploy cameras, acoustic, or seismic sensors at known elephant crossing points.
 - **AI and Machine Learning as Game Changers** - Earlier, these systems were limited by massive data they generated and difficulties in distinguishing threats from false alarms.
 - Artificial intelligence and machine learning now allow faster, more accurate analysis, greatly improving reliability and response time.
 - **Indian Railways' Pilot Initiatives**
 - Indian Railways has begun deploying **AI-based early-warning systems**, though adoption remains limited.
 - Early results from these pilots have been encouraging, suggesting strong potential for wider implementation.
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THE BULLDOZED DEMOLITION OF MGNREGA

- The **Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA)**, enacted in 2005 during Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh's first tenure, marked a watershed in India's welfare policy.
- MGNREGA was conceived as a **demand-driven guarantee of employment**, obligating the State to provide work when demanded. This legal entitlement **empowered rural households**, particularly landless labourers, by **enhancing bargaining power and raising agricultural wages**.
- Its decentralised framework, aligned with the **73rd Constitutional Amendment**, entrusted **Gram Sabhas with planning, implementation, and social audits**, fostering transparency, accountability, and grassroots democracy.
- Over two decades, MGNREGA **reduced distress migration, strengthened wage security, and empowered Panchayati Raj institutions**.
- Its significance was most evident during the **COVID-19 pandemic**, when it served as a crucial lifeline alongside the National Food Security Act.
- Persistently high demand for work continues to underline its indispensability for sustaining rural livelihoods.

Demolition of MGNREGA in Stages

- **Undermining the Legal Guarantee**
 - The most damaging shift has been the **elimination of the legal guarantee of work**.
 - Employment is no longer an enforceable right but a **bureaucratic provision** controlled by the Union government.
 - The scheme's coverage is now restricted to rural areas **as notified at the Centre's discretion**, weakening its universal applicability.
 - Equally damaging is the replacement of **uncapped, demand-based funding** with pre-determined budgetary allocations.



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- **Financial Centralisation and the Burden on States**
 - The revision of the **cost-sharing ratio from 90:10 to 60:40** has transferred a significant financial burden to States.
 - Previously, strong central funding encouraged States to respond to demand without fiscal hesitation.
 - Under the new arrangement, **any expenditure beyond the Union's capped allocation must be borne entirely by States**, many of which already face acute financial stress.
 - This discourages States from providing employment, hollowing out the scheme from within.
 - The removal of **year-round employment**, through the identification of **60 no-work days during peak agricultural seasons**, further undermines labour security.
 - **From Decentralisation to Centralised Control**
 - MGNREGA's decentralised architecture was central to its success. **Gram Sabhas played a pivotal role in identifying, planning, and executing works**, embodying the constitutional vision of local self-governance.
 - This has now been replaced by a **top-down framework under the PM GatiShakti National Master Plan**, which prioritises Union-level objectives over local needs.
 - This shift represents **centralisation with a vengeance**, undermining federalism and democratic participation.
 - Claims of increasing guaranteed employment from **100 to 125 days** ring hollow. **Capped budgets, reduced State incentives, delayed payments, and technological barriers** make such expansion implausible.
 - These changes are consistent with a **decade-long strategy of weakening MGNREGA** through stagnant allocations and administrative throttling.
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WORLD ANTI-DOPING AGENCY



**world
anti-doping
agency**

- It was established in 1999 as an **international independent agency** to lead a collaborative worldwide **movement for doping-free sport**.
- **Role:** To **develop, harmonize and coordinate anti-doping rules** and policies across **all sports and countries**.
- Its activities include scientific and social science research; education; intelligence & investigations; development of anti-doping capacity; and monitoring of compliance with the World Anti-Doping Program.
- It is **funded equally** by the Olympic Movement and **Governments of the world**.
- **Headquarter:** Montreal, Canada.
- **Governance Structure of World Anti-Doping Agency**
 - **Foundation Board (Board):** It is the agency's **highest policy-making body** and is jointly composed of representatives of the Olympic Movement (the IOC, National Olympic Committees, International Sports Federations, and athletes) and **representatives of governments from all five continents**.
 - **Executive Committee (ExCo):** It looks after the management and **running of the agency**, including the performance of all its activities and the administration of its assets.

CHILLAI-KALAN



- It is the **40-day period of the harshest winter cold** in Kashmir region.
 - Chillai Kalan is a **Persian term** which means **“Major Cold”**.



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- The Chillai Kalan (big cold) usually begins on **December 21** and will end on January 30.
 - Chillai Kalan is followed by ‘**Chillai-Khurd**’ (small cold)– a 20-day period of moderate winter from January 31 to February 19, and the 10-day ‘**Chillai-Bacha**’ (baby cold), towards the fag end of the winter season from February 20 to March 2.
- **Cultural Significance:** According to **Persian tradition**, the night of 21st December is celebrated as **Shab-e Yalda**–“**Night of Birth**”, or **Shab-e Chelleh**. – “**Night of Forty**”.
- **Impacts of Chillai Kalan:**
 - During this time Kashmir Valley faces its **harshest phase of the winter season**, including widespread snowfall, sub-zero temperatures and intense cold waves.
 - Traditionally, heavy snowfall during **Chillai Kalan replenishes water reservoirs** in the higher reaches, sustaining rivers, streams and lakes during the summer months.

UNLOCKING THE POTENTIAL OF INDIA-AFRICA ECONOMIC TIES

- A key driver of India’s intensified focus on Africa is **rising uncertainty in traditional Western markets**.
- In FY24, around **40% of India’s exports were directed to the United States and the European Union**, exposing India to risks from economic slowdowns, protectionism, and policy volatility. Diversifying export destinations has therefore become imperative.
- **Africa, with its expanding population**, growing consumer markets, and industrial potential, **offers a viable alternative** for reducing dependence on the West.

Current Trade Dynamics and Comparative Disadvantages

- India is **Africa’s fourth-largest trading partner**, with bilateral trade nearing **\$100 billion**, yet its presence remains limited compared to China.
- **China’s trade with Africa exceeds \$200 billion**, accounting for over **21% of Africa’s imports**, with a strong concentration in high-value industrial goods such as machinery, electrical equipment, and semiconductors.



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A Five-Pillar Strategy for Deeper Engagement

- **Reducing Trade Barriers**
 - The **first pillar** focuses on **reducing trade barriers** through preferential trade agreements and comprehensive economic partnerships, particularly with African regional economic communities.
- **Value Added Manufacturing and Joint Ventures**
 - The **second pillar** emphasises **transitioning from low-value commodity exports to value-added manufacturing and joint ventures**.
 - Establishing manufacturing units in Africa offers Indian firms **dual advantages**.
- **Scaling Up Trade Finance**
 - The **third pillar** prioritises **scaling up trade finance and Lines of Credit**, especially to support micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs).
 - Measures such as **local currency trade, joint insurance pools, and improved credit access** could significantly enhance MSME engagement.
- **Infrastructure, Services, and Connectivity**
 - The **fourth pillar** focuses on **reducing freight and logistics costs** through investments in **port modernisation, hinterland connectivity, and India–Africa maritime corridors**.
 - Improved infrastructure is essential to making trade competitive and sustainable.
- **Digital Co-Operation and People to People Connect**
 - The **fifth pillar** stresses the importance of **services trade, digital connectivity, and people-to-people ties**.

Conclusion

- India's engagement with Africa must **move beyond transactional trade** toward long-term, sustainable partnerships.
 - As global supply chains realign and economic power becomes more distributed, Africa will remain central to India's global ambitions.
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INDIGO MELTDOWN AND REGULATORY CAPTURE IN INDIAN AVIATION

- The Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) proposed new Flight Duty Time Limitations (FDTL) in January 2024 to ensure adequate rest for pilots and enhance passenger safety.
- FDTL norms aim to **prevent pilot fatigue**, a globally recognised aviation safety risk.
- IndiGo allegedly ignored DGCA notifications, failed to recruit or train pilots, and continued aggressive scheduling.
- Pilot complaints were disregarded, and court cases were filed.
- DGCA repeatedly postponed implementation, allegedly favouring IndiGo.
- Final implementation was ordered only under court directions, effective July 1 and November 1 (in phased manner), nearly two years after proposal.

The IndiGo Meltdown:

- On December 5, over 1,000 IndiGo flights were **cancelled**. Thousands of passengers were stranded nationwide.
- The crisis exposed **operational fragility**, poor workforce planning, and regulatory complacency.

Market Structure and Monopoly Concerns:

- **Market capture:** IndiGo controls about **65%** of India's aviation market. Tata Group airlines (Air India) hold less than 30% market share.
- **Passenger volume:** It grew from 4 crore (2004) to 40 crore (2025), but airlines reduced from 8 to 2 major players.
- **Concerns:** This reflects **monopolisation** and regulatory capture, where regulators protect private profit over public interest.

Political Economy Angle:

- **Political donations:** Rs 58 crore by InterGlobe Aviation via electoral bonds (mainly to the ruling party).
- **Alleged nexus:** Between donations, regulatory leniency, and delayed safety compliance.



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- **Control over the pilot training:** Acquisition of Flight Simulation Technique Centre (FSTC) by Adani Group raised concerns about control over the pilot training ecosystem, especially given India's need for 30,000 pilots in 15 years.

Key Issues Highlighted Amid Indigo Meltdown:

- **Regulatory failure:** Selective enforcement of safety norms. Weak accountability of DGCA leadership.
- **Monopoly abuse:** Dominant market share enabling fare manipulation and safety compromises.
- **Passenger exploitation:** Removal of fare cap led to exorbitant prices (e.g., after the Odisha train accident, airlines reportedly charged as much as Rs 1,00,000 for a Chennai-Bhubaneswar ticket). Fare cap reimposed only after crisis (December 5).
- **Governance deficit:** Lack of an independent aviation regulator. Executive-controlled DGCA under Aircraft Act, 1934.

Way Forward:

- **Immediate measures:** Accountability of political and bureaucratic leadership. Independent DGCA inquiry with time-bound reporting. Financial penalties on IndiGo to fund passenger compensation.
 - **Legal and regulatory actions:**
 - **The Competition Act:** It empowers the government to impose penalties of up to 10% of the company's average turnover over the last three years. It empowers the government to impose a structural remedy to break up a monopoly.
 - **The Consumer Protection Act:** Initiate suo motu action to impose penalties.
 - **Redistribution** of airport slots to promote competition.
 - **Structural reforms:**
 - Establish an autonomous **Civil Aviation Authority (CAA)** through an Act of Parliament (as proposed in 2012), on the lines of the US FAA.
 - Parliamentary oversight via a **Joint Parliamentary Committee (JPC)** to examine regulatory lapses and political funding nexus.
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