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Current Affairs - 28 December 2025

POWER LINES VS SURVIVAL: WHY THE SUPREME COURT STEPPED IN TO SAVE THE GREAT INDIAN BUSTARD

Recently, the Supreme Court of India delivered a landmark judgment to strengthen conservation of the Great Indian Bustard, focusing on preventing bird deaths caused by collisions with overhead power lines linked to renewable energy projects.

Acting on recommendations from an expert committee, the Court demarcated priority conservation areas for the **critically endangered species** and laid down a mechanism to reroute or manage overhead power lines in these zones.

Measures Ordered by the Supreme Court

- Acting on recommendations from an expert committee, the Supreme Court of India approved a package of measures across three pillars:
 - redrawing conservation zones;
 - voltage-based mitigation for power lines (rerouting or undergrounding);
 - creation of dedicated powerline corridors to reduce collision risk.
- **Revised Priority Conservation Areas**
 - **Rajasthan:** Priority areas expanded from 13,163 sq km to 14,013 sq km.
 - **Gujarat:** Priority areas increased from 500 sq km to 740 sq km.
 - These zones represent core habitats and breeding areas identified by the Rajasthan Forest Department and the Wildlife Institute of India (WII).
 - **Contestation:** Petitioners opposed the exclusion of 657 sq km (eastern Rasla–Degray Oran), arguing it is a vital wintering and stopover corridor between Pokhran and Desert National Park.
 - **Critical sites prioritised include:** Desert National Park; Salkha–Kuchri; Sanu–Mokla–Parewar; Pokhran Field Firing Range (PFFR) and its buffer/eastern periphery; Dholiya; Khetolai; and Chacha.



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- **Dedicated Powerline Corridors**
 - **Rajasthan:** New powerline corridors up to 5 km wide, placed ≥ 5 km south of Desert National Park, to carry rerouted overhead lines.
 - **Gujarat:** Dedicated corridors of 1–2 km width to evacuate power from wind/solar projects in coastal Kutch.
 - **Route optimisation mandate:** Where multiple green-energy pooling stations terminate at a common grid station, authorities must converge routes into a common stretch wherever feasible.
 - **Project Restrictions in Priority Areas**
 - No new overhead power lines within revised priority areas except via designated corridors (lines ≤ 11 kV exempt).
 - No new wind turbines in priority areas.
 - No new solar parks/plants > 2 MW, and no expansion of existing solar parks, within priority areas.
 - **Voltage-Based Mitigation (Undergrounding & Timelines)**
 - **Rajasthan:**
 - Immediate undergrounding of 80 km of 33 kV lines (of 104 km identified earlier).
 - All burying/rerouting to start immediately and finish before 2028.
 - **Gujarat:**
 - Immediate undergrounding of 79.2 km of 33 kV lines in priority areas.
 - 64.9 km of 66 kV lines earmarked for immediate undergrounding.
 - WII-identified 250 km of critical lines to be buried within 2 years.
 - **Bird Flight Diverters: Evidence-Based Pause**
 - The Court did not issue blanket directions on installing bird flight diverters.
 - Instead, it directed the committee to assess their effectiveness in reducing collision mortality and submit findings to the Centre.
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READING THE ECONOMY: WHAT INDIA'S LATEST SIGNALS REALLY SHOW

- The year began on a positive note for the Indian economy with a series of growth-supporting policy moves.
- In February, PM Modi and US President Trump announced plans to work towards a India–U.S. Bilateral Trade Agreement by the fall of 2025, raising expectations of improved trade and investment flows.
- The same month, Union Finance Minister presented Budget 2025, which **reduced income tax rates and slabs**, easing the tax burden for most taxpayers. The move was widely seen as a boost to **disposable incomes** and **consumer demand**.
- In September, the **GST Council simplified the indirect tax structure** by scrapping the 12% and 28% GST slabs and shifting most items to lower slabs—from 12% to 5%, and from 28% to 18%—helping reduce prices and improve consumption sentiment.
- Further, in November, the Centre announced the implementation of the **four Labour Codes**, expanding social security coverage to contract and gig workers and ensuring benefits such as higher minimum wages, strengthening worker welfare and formalisation.
- Overall, these measures signalled a policy push towards demand revival, tax rationalisation, and labour protection in 2025.

Trade Agreements That Strengthened India's Economic Outreach in 2025

- 2025 marked a strong year for India's trade diplomacy, with several major agreements concluded, implemented, or pushed close to completion.
- **India–UK Trade Deal:** The United Kingdom–India Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement, signed in July 2025, grants India duty-free access to most UK markets and improves mobility provisions for Indian professionals and workers.
- **India–EFTA Agreement Comes into Force:** The Trade and Economic Partnership Agreement (TEPA) with the European Free Trade Association—covering Switzerland, Norway, Iceland and Liechtenstein—entered into force on October 1, 2025.



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- Beyond trade concessions, EFTA countries committed \$100 billion in investments over 15 years, a target officials believe may be met earlier.
- **India–Oman CEPA:** In December, India signed a Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) with Oman, further expanding India’s footprint in West Asia.
- **India–New Zealand FTA:** India and New Zealand concluded negotiations on a free trade agreement, under which 100% of Indian exports will receive duty-free access, alongside a \$20 billion investment commitment over 15 years from New Zealand.
- **India–EU Talks Near Finish Line:** According to Piyush Goyal, negotiations with the European Union are in their final stages, though it remains uncertain whether a deal will be concluded before the end of 2025.
- Overall, 2025 underscored India’s push to diversify trade partners, secure market access, and attract long-term investment through ambitious trade agreements.

Outlook for the Indian Economy: Cautious Growth with Data Reforms Ahead

- The year ahead is expected to be a mixed phase for India’s economy.
 - On the downside, the Reserve Bank of India has projected 7.3% GDP growth for 2025–26, implying a notable **slowdown in the second half** of the year after strong growth averaging 8% in the first half.
 - In addition, **global trade tensions** and **tariff-related uncertainties** are likely to persist for several more months, weighing on exports and external demand.
 - On the positive side, India is set for a long-awaited **upgrade of key macroeconomic indicators**.
 - The base years and methodologies for GDP, the Index of Industrial Production (IIP), and the Consumer Price Index (CPI) will be revised.
 - These updates are expected to provide more accurate, contemporary, and reliable measurements of economic activity, inflation, and industrial performance.
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HEALTH FOR ALL IN INDIA: FUNDING GAPS AND SYSTEMIC CHALLENGES

- With a population of nearly 146 crore, India's public health system faces complex and overlapping challenges.
- The disease profile has shifted significantly over the last decade, marked by a sharp rise in **non-communicable diseases (NCDs)** such as diabetes, cardiovascular disorders and cancers, alongside the continued presence of infectious diseases like tuberculosis and emerging viral outbreaks.
- Climate change has further intensified health risks through heat stress, air pollution and extreme weather events, increasing morbidity and healthcare demand.
- At the same time, India's expanding pharmaceutical industry and growing role as a global medicine supplier have raised concerns over **drug quality regulation**, underscoring the need for stronger governance frameworks to protect public health.

Public Health Financing and Budgetary Constraints

- One of the most persistent bottlenecks in achieving Health for All is under-investment in healthcare.
- India's public health expenditure has consistently remained below 2% of GDP, despite the National Health Policy setting a target of 2.5% of GDP.
- For 2025-26, the Union health allocation stood at **99,859 crore**, representing an increase over the previous year but still insufficient to meet population-level needs.
- The funding stress has been exacerbated by external factors, including the withdrawal of certain international funding streams that previously supported programmes in HIV/AIDS, maternal health and population services.
- As a result, both Union and State governments have had to absorb additional fiscal pressure, often leading to uneven capacity across regions.

Infrastructure Gaps and Environmental Health Concerns

- Although post-pandemic investments improved diagnostic capacity and hospital bed availability, **infrastructure gaps** persist, particularly in rural and peri-urban areas.



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- The demand–supply mismatch is further worsened by severe **air pollution**, especially in northern India during the winter months.
- Poor air quality has reduced life expectancy, increased respiratory illnesses, and disproportionately affected children, elderly citizens and those with pre-existing conditions.
- Without sustained environmental health interventions and long-term urban air quality management, these health stressors risk overwhelming already stretched public health systems.

Tuberculosis Control and Antimicrobial Resistance

- India’s decision to advance its tuberculosis elimination target to **2025** has not yielded the desired outcomes.
- While diagnostic capacity has improved through indigenous molecular tools such as **TrueNat**, challenges persist due to inconsistent detection rates and the growing burden of **multidrug-resistant and extensively drug-resistant TB**.
- A related and more systemic threat is **antimicrobial resistance (AMR)**. Global surveillance data indicate that resistance levels in India are significantly higher than global averages, particularly for serious bacterial infections treated in hospital settings.
- Factors such as over-the-counter antibiotic access, self-medication, incomplete treatment courses, pharmaceutical waste contamination and weak regulatory enforcement continue to fuel AMR.
- Although policy frameworks exist, effective implementation remains uneven across States.

Pharmaceutical Quality and Regulatory Oversight

- Recent incidents involving **contaminated medicines** have exposed serious regulatory lapses within India’s pharmaceutical quality control ecosystem.
- Ensuring rigorous quality standards, strengthening drug regulators and enforcing accountability are essential for safeguarding public trust and advancing India’s ambition of being the “pharmacy of the world”.



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SHIPBUILDING FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE SCHEME



- It is aimed at **strengthening India's domestic shipbuilding capacity** and improving global competitiveness.

- **Time Period:** It will remain valid until 2036.
- **Nodal Ministry:** Ministry of Ports, Shipping & Waterways

Features of Shipbuilding Financial Assistance Scheme:

- **Financial Assistance:** The government will provide **financial assistance** depending on the vessel category.
- **Graded Support:** The scheme introduces **graded support for small normal, large normal and specialised vessels**, with stage-wise disbursement linked to defined milestones and backed by security instruments.
- **Shipbreaking Credit Note:** Under this, ship owners scrapping vessels at Indian yards will receive a credit equivalent to **40% of the scrap value**.
- It provides for the establishment of a **National Shipbuilding Mission** to ensure coordinated planning and execution of shipbuilding initiatives.

Funding:

- **Greenfield shipbuilding** clusters will receive **100% capital support** for common maritime and internal infrastructure through a **50:50 Centre-State special purpose vehicle**.
- **Brownfield expansion** will be eligible for **25%** capital assistance for brownfield infrastructure such as dry docks, shiplifts etc.
- **Credit Risk Coverage:** The scheme also includes a Credit Risk Coverage Framework, offering government-backed insurance for pre-shipment, post-shipment and vendor-default risks.



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PLASSER'S QUICK RELAYING SYSTEM



- It is a modern semi-mechanized system automatic machine used for quick railway track replacement.
- It aims to **speed up track renewal** while minimizing traffic disruption, enhancing safety, reliability, and maintenance efficiency.
- **Features of Plasser's Quick Relaying System:**
 - It consists of **self-propelled cranes** which move on an auxiliary track having the same centre line as that of track to be relayed.
 - These portal cranes are capable of self-loading and unloading **from Bogie Flat Wagons**.
- **Uses:** The system is widely **used for new track construction** as well as the modernisation of existing track infrastructure.
- **Benefits of the system:**

Renewal time: It helps longer track lengths to be renewed **within shorter traffic blocks**

Cost-Effective: It is cost effective, as it reduces manual labor and lifecycle maintenance costs.

WHAT IS THE REVAMPED DISTRIBUTION SECTOR SCHEME (RDSS)?



- It was launched by the **Ministry of Power**, Government of India to **transform the electricity distribution sector**.
- It is a **Reforms-based and Results-linked Scheme**.
- It seeks to **modernise India's power distribution sector through smart metering, network strengthening, and financial reforms**, with the goal of creating financially sustainable and operationally efficient DISCOMs.
- The Scheme has **two major components:**
 - **Part A: Financial support for Prepaid Smart Metering & System Metering and upgradation of the Distribution Infrastructure.**



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- **Part B: Training & Capacity Building** and other Enabling & Supporting Activities.
 - **Financial assistance to DISCOMs** is provided for upgradation of the Distribution Infrastructure and for Prepaid Smart Consumer Metering & System Metering **based on meeting pre-qualifying criteria and achieving basic minimum benchmark in reforms.**
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NITRATE



- It is a compound of **nitrogen and oxygen.**
 - It is naturally found in **air, soil and water.**
 - Plants and animals require nitrates for their **survival and growth**, and the human body also produces this compound.
 - **Applications of Nitrate:**
 - In industry, nitrate is used as **fertilizers for crops and lawns.**
 - It is used in **food preservation, certain pharmaceutical medications**, as well as the manufacture of munitions and explosives.
 - **Impact of Nitrate Contamination:**
 - It gets **into water from fertilizer in runoff**, manure from animal feeding operations and wastewater treatment plant discharge.
 - **Health:** Excessive nitrate in **groundwater causes methemoglobinemia**, reducing the ability of red blood cells to carry oxygen, particularly affecting infants and vulnerable populations.
 - **Environment:** Elevated nitrate levels in groundwater **can lead to algal blooms** in lakes and ponds, severely degrading aquatic ecosystems by **depleting oxygen** and harming biodiversity.
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