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WHAT IS THE MOON BASE PROGRAMME?



NASA has formally invited India to join its Moon Base programme, which aims to establish a sustained human presence near the lunar South Pole.

- Moon Base Programme is one of NASA's most ambitious programmes, which aims to establish a sustained human presence near the lunar South Pole.
- Moon Base is humanity's first lunar outpost, a place where astronauts will live, work, and explore near the Moon's South Pole, an area that was first accessed by India's Chandrayaan-3 mission in August 2023.
 - The South Pole of the Moon is important because of water ice in permanently shadowed regions, its scientific value, and potentially useful lunar resources.
- Through a series of crewed and uncrewed missions, NASA and its partners will build the infrastructure needed to support a sustained human presence on the Moon, unlock new scientific discoveries, and prepare for future exploration of Mars.
- The Moon Base will be built step by step using a phased approach.
- Phase One (Now–2029): Gain Reliable Access, Experiment, and Learn:
 - Robotic missions will explore the lunar South Pole, demonstrate new technologies, and gather the knowledge needed to guide future development.
 - NASA will identify promising locations for future infrastructure, improve mission capabilities, and reduce risk before astronauts arrive.
- Phase Two (2029–2032): Build and Expand
 - Building on what is learned during Phase One, NASA will begin deploying the first infrastructure needed to support long-term operations on the Moon.
 - Early power systems, cargo transportation, logistics, and communications capabilities will expand humanity's footprint on the Moon and enable increasingly complex missions.

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- **Phase Three (2032 and Beyond): Live and Work on the Moon:**
 - With the Moon Base's foundational infrastructure in place, NASA will begin **assembling a permanent lunar outpost** where **astronauts can live and work** for extended periods.
 - Habitats, power systems, communications, transportation, and other critical capabilities will come together to **support an enduring human presence** near the Moon's South Pole.

SANCHAR MITRA SCHEME



- It envisions engaging the **Yuva Shakti- India's youth**, as catalysts for digital empowerment and societal outreach.
- It is aimed at **harnessing the energy and potential** of young students to spread awareness about safe digital behaviour.
- It is open to students from those technical institutes that have **active telecom, electronics, computers, cybersecurity**, or similar programs and have agreed to participate in the scheme.
- **Working:**
 - Under this scheme, **student volunteers, named as Sanchar Mitra**, will raise public awareness about mobile safety, telecom fraud prevention, and government digital initiatives.
 - They will **conduct outreach in communities**, schools, and public spaces to educate citizens on responsible and secure use of telecom services.
 - **Sanchar Mitras will receive necessary training** from experts and from the National Communications Academy-Technology (NCA-T).
 - The Sanchar Mitras will receive various training on subjects like **cybersecurity, emerging technologies** in the telecom sector, telecom policies and regulations, etc.

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- The scheme offers top performers:
 - Access, on a best-effort basis, to research and development (R&D) projects and telecom start-ups;
 - Involvement in policy and standards work;
 - Participation in field surveys and DoT initiatives;
 - Exposure to national conferences and events.
- The scheme has been implemented across all states/UTs through the **licensed service area (LSA) field offices of DoT.**
- **Nodal Ministry:** Department of Telecommunications (DoT), Ministry of Communications.

SAMRIDH PROGRAMME



- The **Startup Accelerator of MeitY for Product Innovation, Development, and Growth (SAMRIDH)** is a flagship programme of the **Ministry of Electronics & IT (MeitY).**
- **Aim:** It aims to **support existing and upcoming Accelerators** to select and accelerate potential **IT-based startups to scale.**
 - The program also focuses on accelerating the startups by providing customer and investors connect to international markets.
- **Target:** The program supports **300 tech Start-Ups in 3-year** duration with cohort size of 5-10 StartUps.
- **Financial Assistance:** It provides financial **support of ₹2 lakh per startup** to selected accelerators, along with matching funding to **startups up to a maximum of ₹40 lakh.**
- **Implementation:** It is being implemented by **MeitY Start-up Hub (MSH), Digital India Corporation (DIC).**
- **Nodal Ministry:** Ministry of Electronics & IT

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E20 ETHANOL BLENDING PUSH - BENEFITS, CONCERNS, AND THE ROAD AHEAD

- Ethanol is a biofuel produced from sugarcane, molasses, maize, damaged foodgrains, and surplus rice. When blended with petrol, it reduces dependence on imported crude oil.
- E20 refers to petrol containing 20% ethanol and 80% petrol. India's Ethanol Blended Petrol (EBP) Programme aims to cut crude imports, save foreign exchange, support farmers, and reduce emissions.
- The government's target was to produce 10-11 billion litres of ethanol so that 20% of petrol used in transport could come from domestically produced ethanol.
- The intention was to keep this money within the Indian economy rather than allowing it to flow out as foreign exchange through crude oil imports.

Growth of Ethanol Capacity

- India's distillery capacity has expanded sharply on the back of this policy push:
 - The country now has around 500 distilleries.
 - Combined capacity stands at 18-20 billion litres.
 - For the current ethanol year, which runs from November to October, oil companies have contracted to procure about 10.5 billion litres of ethanol.

Impact on Sugar and Food Security

- Sugarcane juice and B-heavy molasses would ordinarily go into sugar production and are now being diverted to ethanol. So far, this has not disrupted sugar availability.
- The closing stock of sugar in September 2025 was around 5 million tonnes, and a similar closing stock is expected this year. This suggests that diversion to ethanol has not affected sugar stocks.
- The risk, however, is not eliminated. In the event of monsoon failure, crop losses, or foodgrain shortages, the diversion of FCI rice, sugarcane juice, and B-heavy molasses to ethanol would come under stress, raising the possibility of corn imports.

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The Vehicle Compatibility Question

- **Newer Vehicles**
 - Vehicles bought after April 2023 are E20-ready. That is when the **Bharat Stage 6 Phase 2** (Real Driving Emissions) mandate took effect.
 - These vehicles were factory-engineered for E20 with ethanol-resistant elastomers, fluorinated fuel lines, upgraded pump seals, and recalibrated engine control units.
 - These roughly 70 million vehicles make up about 23% of India's active petrol fleet and face little cause for concern.
- **Legacy Vehicles**
 - The remaining 77%, nearly 240 million two-wheelers and cars built for E5 or E10, are the genuine worry.
 - Ethanol is a polar solvent that degrades older rubber compounds and plastics, hardening and cracking fuel hoses over time. It is also hygroscopic, meaning it absorbs atmospheric moisture.
 - In vehicles parked for long periods, the ethanol-water mixture separates and settles, forming an acidic layer that corrodes tanks, damages fuel pumps, and clogs filters with sludge.
 - Consumer surveys have found that 66% of pre-2023 owners reported mileage losses exceeding 10%, and 55% reported increased maintenance.

The Cost Debate

- Whether ethanol is actually cheaper than petrol is not straightforward.
- Oil marketing companies procure ethanol at around Rs. 70 per litre for blending, against a pump price of roughly Rs. 105 per litre for petrol.
- However, the base price of petrol, covering production, transportation, and OMC margins, is typically only 55-60% of the pump price, with the rest being taxes.
- On the surface, ethanol does not appear cheaper than petrol. But ethanol and petrol follow different costing and tax regimes, making it difficult to draw an independent conclusion on whether ethanol has genuinely helped keep prices down, as the government claims.

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UPI AT 10: INDIA'S PAYMENTS GIANT STANDS AT A CROSSROADS

UPI has completed 10 years since its launch, now accounting for **86% of all digital transactions** in India.

How UPI Came About

- The RBI's **2012 "vision document"** noted an average Indian made just **six non-cash transactions a year** — a figure unthinkable today.
- UPI was built by the RBI-regulated NPCI and the Indian Banks' Association, with groundwork starting in 2012-13.
- It launched as a pilot in April 2016 and went fully operational that August.
- By 2025-26, India recorded **28,174 crore digital transactions** — 86% via UPI, used by over 55 crore people through 703 participating entities.

Zero MDR: The Turning Point

- The **Nandan Nilekani-led High-Level Committee on Deepening of Digital Payments (2019)** recommended scrapping MDR for customers and small merchants, with government subsidy instead.
- From 2020, the government began subsidising UPI/RuPay transactions up to Rs 2,000, capped at 0.15% of transaction value, shared between banks and payment providers.
- COVID-19 pandemic then accelerated adoption sharply, as people avoided using cash.

The Case for Reintroducing MDR

- Industry voices argue zero MDR was right for driving initial adoption, but the next phase needs to create more value per transaction, including data-driven credit access for merchants and consumers.
- The industry is pushing for MDR of 0.3-0.6% on transactions above Rs 2,000 for large merchants.
- Such transactions form just 4% of person-to-merchant payments but account for 68% of total value — making them a viable revenue base without hurting small merchants or ordinary users.

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The Next Wave of Growth

- The finance ministry has said subsidies alone cannot sustain UPI's next growth phase.
- **Domestically**, growth is expected to come from rural and semi-urban areas.
- **Internationally**, NPCI is targeting **greater cross-border presence** — UPI already operates in nine countries (Bhutan, France, Mauritius, Nepal, Singapore, Sri Lanka, UAE, Qatar, Cambodia).

Conclusion

UPI's decade-long journey from a pilot project to handling 86% of India's digital transactions is a genuine success story of financial inclusion.

But sustaining this scale now demands a fairer cost-sharing model — one that funds future growth without compromising the accessibility that made UPI a global example.

A TIMELY RESET FOR THE FOOD SECURITY ACT

- India's food security debate entered a new phase. Data from latest household consumption survey show the share of households unable to afford National Institute of Nutrition (NIN) recommended diet **fell** from about 52% in 2011-12 to **25% in 23-24**.
- This is real progress, but crores of households still cannot afford a healthy diet.

The Problem with Flat Entitlements

- Currently, Priority Households get 5 kg of foodgrain per person monthly, while AAY households get a flat 35 kg regardless of size.
- This protects small, vulnerable families but disadvantages larger ones. A 7 member AAY household gets only 5 kg per person, and an eight-member household gets just 4.4 kg.
- The draft Bill proposes 7 kg per person, capped at 35 kg.

Who Loses, Who Gains

- This reform sounds fair on paper, but the numbers tell a different story. It would **cut support** for households with **one to four members** by **20% to 80%**, while leaving households of five or more unchanged.

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- Many smaller households include vulnerable individuals — an elderly person living alone, a widow, or a person with disability — who need protection, not reduced support.

Beyond Grain: The Nutrition Challenge

- Food security cannot mean cereal security alone. NFHS-6 data show **stunting** among children under five **fell from 35.5% to 29.3%**, but **wasting and underweight rates barely moved**.
- Only about 15% of children aged 6-23 months get a minimally adequate diet.
- Meanwhile, India faces a parallel crisis — the ICMR-INDIAB study estimated 101 million Indians had diabetes and 136 million had prediabetes in 2021.
- This is India's "**double burden of malnutrition**," where undernutrition and diet-related non-communicable diseases (NCDs) coexist.

A Balanced Way Forward

- The Public Distribution System (PDS) cannot deliver a complete healthy plate, but it can offer affordable, shelf-stable diversity — pulses, local rice, wheat, millets and healthy edible oils, supported by effective Minimum Support Price (MSP) procurement.
- This diversification should link the PDS with Anganwadi services and PM POSHAN school meals, offering eggs, milk or suitable alternatives where feasible.

Three Safeguards for Reform

- Preserve the 35 kg entitlement through a no-loss guarantee;
- Periodically review the adequacy of this ceiling for larger or more vulnerable households using solid evidence; and
- Finance dietary diversification separately, without reducing existing cereal entitlements.

Conclusion

- India's next food security reform must do more than move tonnes of grain — it must protect the vulnerable from hunger while addressing the deeper dietary roots of diabetes and other lifestyle diseases, ensuring every household eats enough, eats healthier, and receives its entitlement with true dignity.

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KEY FACTS ABOUT KURIL ISLANDS



- The Kuril Islands is an island group in the **Russian Far East** that forms the **boundary between the Pacific Ocean and the Sea of Okhotsk**.
- The archipelago, **administered as part of Sakhalin Oblast (Russia)**, extends for about 1,300 kilometers from the **Kamchatka Peninsula's (Russia) southern tip to Hokkaido's (Japan) northeastern corner**.
- The islands are divided into the Greater and Lesser Kuril Chains.
- These are part of the **Pacific Ring of Fire**
- The **climate** in the islands is severe, with **long, cold, snowy winters and cool, wet, foggy summers**.
- **Vegetation** ranges from **tundra on the northern islands to dense forest on the larger southern islands**.
- The principal centers are the **towns of Kurilsk on Iturup, the largest island, Severo-Kurilsk on Paramushir, and Yuzhno-Kurilsk on Kunashir**.
- Although **Russia administers all the Kuril Islands**, some islands are at the heart of the Russo-Japanese feud known as the Kuril Islands dispute.
- **Japan considers the four southernmost islands as part of its Northern Territories**.
- Tokyo claims that the disputed islands have been part of Japan since the early 19th century.
- As a result of this dispute, Russia and Japan have never formally concluded a peace treaty to end World War II.