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Current Affairs - 17 August 2025

SARVOTTAM YUDH SEVA MEDAL



- It was **instituted on 26 Jun 1980** to recognize the distinguished service of the most exceptional order during **war/conflict/hostilities**.

Features of Sarvottam Yudh Seva Medal

- **Medal:** Circular in shape, 35 mm in diameter and fitted to a plain horizontal bar with standard fittings. The medal shall be of gold gilt.
- The medal shall have on its obverse the State Emblem and the inscriptions "**SARVOTTAM YUDH SEVA MEDAL**" (in English). On its reverse, it shall have a five pointed star.
- **Ribbon:** Golden colour with one red vertical stripe in the centre dividing it into two equal parts.
- **Bar:** If a recipient of the medal is subsequently awarded the medal again, every such further award shall be recognised by a Bar to be attached to the riband by which the medal is suspended.
- For every such Bar, a miniature insignia of a pattern approved by the Government shall be added to the riband when worn alone.

Personnel Eligible: All ranks of the Army, the Navy and the Air Force including those of Territorial Army Units, Auxiliary and Reserve Forces and other lawfully constituted Armed Forces when embodied.

- **And also Nursing officers** and other members of the Nursing Services in the Armed Forces.
- The medal may be awarded **posthumously**.



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US-RUSSIA ALASKA SUMMIT - FALLOUT AND STRATEGIC CONCERNS

- US President Donald Trump rated his summit with Russian President Vladimir Putin a **“10 out of 10,”** describing it as a warm and productive meeting.
- The US-Russia Alaska Summit, aimed at **exploring ways to end the ongoing war in Ukraine**, involves two leading nuclear powers, with **implications for global security**, NATO relations, and the Ukraine conflict.

Key Highlights of the US-Russia Alaska Summit:

- **Productive engagement but no agreement:**
 - Trump described discussions as **“extremely productive”**, while noting that a final deal is yet to be reached.
 - Both leaders acknowledged **progress on many issues** (specifics were not disclosed), and highlighted a possible trilateral meeting (US-Russia-Ukraine) under discussion.
- **Nuclear powers and geopolitics:**
 - Trump emphasized the importance of US-Russia relations as the **world’s top two nuclear powers**.
 - The summit reflects an effort to **reduce hostilities** and explore a peace settlement in Ukraine.
- **Trump’s position on Ukraine war:**
 - Trump claimed that the war would not have occurred if he had remained US President after 2020.
 - He suggested that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy should **“make a deal”** with Russia, reflecting a move beyond a ceasefire to discussions of a **comprehensive peace agreement**.
- **Putin’s statement:**
 - Putin agreed with Trump’s assertion that the Ukraine war could have been avoided under Trump’s leadership.



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- He expressed willingness to move forward on dialogue to **resolve the crisis**, and emphasized **improving US-Russia relations** and potential cooperation in high technology, Arctic, and outer space.

India's Strategic Dilemma Amid US-Russia Alaska Summit:

- **Trade tariffs and sanctions:**
 - **The 25% tariff** on Indian exports is part of Trump's pressure strategy on Russia.
 - **US Treasury warned of harsher sanctions**, with a proposed Bill authorizing up to 500% tariffs on states aiding Moscow's war economy.
 - **India's refined petroleum exports** to Europe (sourced from Russian crude) are also under scrutiny.
 - Trump claimed Russia "**lost India as an oil client**" due to tariffs—though Indian refiners deny US measures affect their buying decisions.
- **Energy security vs. geopolitics:**
 - Since 2022, India has become a **major buyer of discounted Russian crude** (Russia now accounts for 35-40% of India's total oil imports by volume), ensuring energy security but drawing **criticism from the West**.
 - The US tariffs have **indirectly tied India to the geopolitics** of the Ukraine war.
 - **If tariffs are enforced**, India may face a **trade-off** between cheap energy and export competitiveness.

Way Ahead for India:

- **Diplomatic tightrope:** Balancing ties with Russia (defense, energy) and the US (strategic partnership, Indo-Pacific).
 - **Growing partnership:** With the US and Europe (trade, technology, etc).
 - **Ray of hope:** The Indian government hopes Trump will delay or discard tariffs, pending Ukraine peace talks.
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NEW INCOME TAX BILL 2025 PASSED IN PARLIAMENT

- The **Income Tax Act, 1961** had become outdated after decades of numerous amendments, making the legislation **complex, lengthy, and difficult for citizens to understand**.
- The **Income Tax Bill, 2025** addresses these issues by **streamlining and simplifying the law**.
- It reduces the number of **chapters from 47 to 23** and **sections from 819 to 536**, cutting down on redundancy and confusion.
- The **first version of the Income Tax Bill 2025**, introduced in February, was ambitious but required deeper scrutiny due to its importance.
- To ensure fairness and robustness, it was referred to a **Select Committee** comprising MPs from across parties.
- The Committee submitted a **comprehensive report in July**, which retained much of the Bill's simplified language but also recommended several changes.
- To avoid confusion between multiple versions, the government decided to **withdraw the original Bill**, and incorporate all suggested changes into a single, updated draft.

Key Changes in the New Income Tax Bill 2025

- The **primary objective** of the new Income Tax Bill is simplification and rationalisation, not altering tax rates or slabs, which continue to be adjusted separately through the Union Budget.
- Provisions for **Minimum Alternate Tax (MAT)** and **Alternate Minimum Tax (AMT)** have now been separated into two distinct sub-sections, improving clarity.
- Taxpayers now have the **option to update their returns up to four years** from the end of the relevant assessment year, allowing mistakes to be corrected without penalty or extra tax liability.

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- Additionally, the period for which assessments can be reopened has been **reduced to five years**, ensuring greater certainty for taxpayers and preventing long-drawn scrutiny.
- **Introduction of “Tax Year”**
 - A new concept of “tax year”, defined as April 1 to March 31, has been introduced.
 - The law has been significantly streamlined:
 - Sections reduced from 819 (1961 Act) to 536.
 - Chapters reduced from 47 to 23.
 - Word count halved from 5.12 lakh to 2.6 lakh.
 - Tables and formulae increased to provide clarity (57 tables, 46 formulae).
- **Digital Provisions and Virtual Space**
 - The Bill retains the definition of “**virtual digital space**”, giving tax authorities powers during searches and seizures.
 - This includes email servers, social media accounts, online investments, cloud servers, and digital applications.
 - Finance Minister assured that SOPs will be issued to safeguard personal digital data seized during searches.

Concerns Over Expanded Search Powers

- While the new Income Tax Bill 2025 aims to simplify tax compliance, it also introduces provisions that raise serious privacy concerns.
 - Under the old Income Tax Act, 1961, officials could inspect electronic documents and physically break locks if access was denied.
 - The new law goes much further:
 - Taxpayers in control of electronic documents are now legally required to provide “**reasonable technical and other assistance**”, including **sharing passwords** of their systems.
 - Since the law does not restrict what kind of electronic information can be accessed, this could extend to **personal emails, social media accounts, and private data**.
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GOLDEN DOME



- It is a **ground- and space-based missile defense system** designed to safeguard the United States from advanced missile threats.
 - Golden Dome aims to **create a network of satellites to detect**, track and potentially intercept incoming missiles. The shield could deploy hundreds of satellites for missile detection and tracking.
 - It will protect the US from long-range missiles, including those launched from space or other continents, and will integrate with current defense systems.
 - **Key Features of the Golden Dome:**
 - **Space-Based Interceptors:** The system aims to deploy interceptors in space to detect and neutralize incoming missiles at various stages of their trajectory.
 - **Advanced Tracking Technologies:** Utilizing space-based radars and sensors, the Golden Dome will provide real-time tracking of missile threats.
 - **Laser Weapons:** The integration of laser technology is intended to enhance the system's capability to intercept and destroy missiles mid-flight.
 - Components of the Golden Dome will be drawn from existing American missile defence assets, including **Patriot missile batteries, THAAD (Terminal High Altitude Area Defence), Aegis Ballistic Missile Defence, and Ground-based Midcourse Defence (GMD).**
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CHALLENGES CONFRONTING THE ELECTION COMMISSION OF INDIA

- The Election Commission of India is a permanent constitutional body entrusted with the **superintendence, direction, and control** of elections to Parliament, state legislatures, and the offices of the President and Vice-President.
- Initially headed only by a **Chief Election Commissioner (CEC)**, it now comprises two additional Election Commissioners, forming a three-member body.



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- Its mandate is to ensure **free, fair, and impartial elections**, the cornerstone of Indian democracy.

The Appointment Controversy

- The **Chief Election Commissioner and Other Election Commissioners (Appointment, Conditions of Service and Term of Office) Act, 2023** reshaped the appointment process.
- The selection committee now includes the **Prime Minister, a Union Minister, and the Leader of the Opposition**.
- Opposition parties argue this structure compromises independence, as the government side holds a **2:1 majority**, raising fears of bias in appointments.

Allegations of Voter Roll Manipulation

- The EC has faced repeated accusations from Opposition parties:
 - **Maharashtra (2019-20)**: Allegations of lakhs of voters being added between Lok Sabha and Assembly polls.
 - **Haryana and Delhi**: Similar claims of manipulated voter lists before the Assembly elections.
 - **Karnataka (2024 Lok Sabha)**: INC alleged large-scale discrepancies in the Mahadevapura constituency, including duplicate and bulk registrations.
- These allegations have renewed calls for **machine-readable voter rolls**, which the EC has resisted, citing cybersecurity concerns, a stance earlier upheld by the SC.

The Bihar SIR and Supreme Court Intervention

- The EC's Special Intensive Revision in Bihar, announced in June 2025 ahead of Assembly polls, mandated voters to submit proof of birth and citizenship.
- This led to the deletion of **65 lakh names** from the electoral rolls, reducing Bihar's voter base from 7.89 crore to 7.24 crore.
- The SC, in an interim order, directed the EC to:
 - Publish booth-wise lists of deleted names.
 - Provide reasons for deletion (death, migration, duplication, etc.).

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- Accept Aadhaar as valid proof of identity.

Challenges of Migrant Voters

- India's internal migrant population continues to face barriers in exercising voting rights.
- Migrants must travel back to their registered constituencies, which imposes costs and reduces turnout.
- Experts stress the need for a **cheap, transparent, and secure system**, tailored to the realities of poor migrants, unlike models in advanced economies.

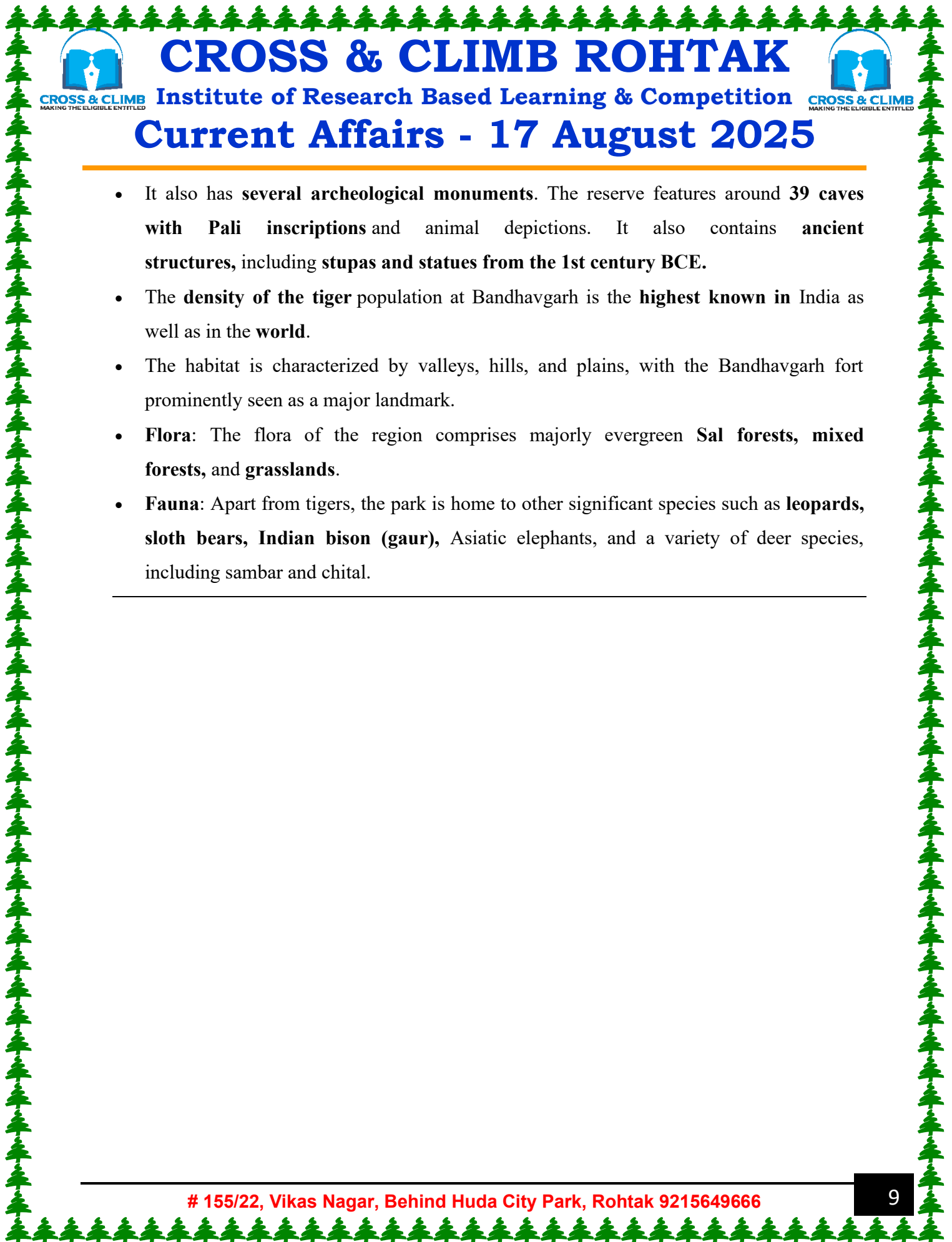
Broader Concerns for Electoral Integrity

- The unfolding events raise critical challenges for the EC:
 - **Ensuring Transparency** - Addressing claims of voter roll manipulation.
 - **Protecting Voter Rights** - Preventing mass exclusions while maintaining accuracy.
 - **Balancing Cybersecurity and Accessibility** - Providing machine-readable rolls without compromising data safety.
 - **Safeguarding Institutional Independence** - Resisting political influence in appointments and decision-making.
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BANDHAVGARH TIGER RESERVE



- It is nestled in the **Satpura and Vindhya mountain ranges** in the Umari district of **Madhya Pradesh**.
- It is spread over 1536 sq. km., which includes the 716 sq. km. core zone and 820 sq. km. of the buffer zone.
- The name “Bandhavgarh” is derived from the **ancient Bandhavgarh Fort**, which sits atop a hill in the park.
 - **According to legend**, the fort was gifted by Lord Rama to his brother **Lakshmana**, hence the name “Bandhavgarh” (**Brother’s Fort**).



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- It also has **several archeological monuments**. The reserve features around **39 caves with Pali inscriptions** and animal depictions. It also contains **ancient structures**, including **stupas and statues from the 1st century BCE**.
 - The **density of the tiger** population at Bandhavgarh is the **highest known in India** as well as in the **world**.
 - The habitat is characterized by valleys, hills, and plains, with the Bandhavgarh fort prominently seen as a major landmark.
 - **Flora**: The flora of the region comprises majorly evergreen **Sal forests, mixed forests, and grasslands**.
 - **Fauna**: Apart from tigers, the park is home to other significant species such as **leopards, sloth bears, Indian bison (gaur)**, Asiatic elephants, and a variety of deer species, including sambar and chital.
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