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DownToEarth
FORTNIGHTLY ON POLITICS OF DEVELOPMENT,
ENVIRONMENT AND HEALTH

**Science
Reporter**



MK Yadav Sir

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African raptor population declines 88% in 40 years, many crossing IUCN threshold: Report

Context: Raptors in Africa have experienced a widespread decline of about 88% in the past 40 years, a new study revealed.

- The researchers studying 27 species in multiple regions of Africa found that 24 of them (89%) exceeded the decline threshold.

African Raptor

- **About:** A raptor is a bird of prey, that primarily hunt and feed on mammals, reptiles, amphibians, insects, rodents as well as other birds.
- **Characteristics:** A hooked beak, strong feet with sharp talons, excellent eyesight, and a carnivorous diet are all characteristics of raptors.
- **Threat:** Use Diclofenac, which is a non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drug. Deforestation, Shooting and Poisoning, and Habitat Loss and Degradation.
- **Significance**
 - Raptors eat a wide variety of vertebrates, making long-distance seed dissemination easier. This boosts seed yield and pest control indirectly.
 - Predators at the top of the food chain are known as indicator species because threats have the most dramatic impact on top predators.

Rise in child marriages in West Bengal

Why are girls getting married early despite receiving an education? Have the cash incentives for girls to study not been effective? What is the feedback from the districts? Is it a social problem or a political issue? What is the link between child marriage and poor maternal health?

EXPLAINER

Shikha Singh

The story so far
A recent study on child marriage in India published in the Lancet found the overall decrease in child marriage across the country but pointed out that four States, mainly Bihar (16.7%), West Bengal (15.2%), Uttar Pradesh (12.5%), and Maharashtra (8.2%) accounted for more than half of the total headcount burden of child marriages in girls.

What are the key findings?

The paper titled 'Prevalence of girl and boy child marriage across States and Union Territories in India, 1995-2023', a repeated cross-sectional study highlights that one in five girls are still married below legal age in India. The publication states that while some states have achieved dramatic decreases in prevalence and headcount for child marriage in girls, 'other states have struggled, such as West Bengal'.

"The largest absolute increase in headcount was observed in West Bengal, representing an increase of 12.3% in headcount (difference = 500,046). West Bengal saw the largest absolute increase with over 500,000 more girls getting married as children," the paper said. Child marriage, particularly girl child marriage, has posed a challenge for policy-makers in West Bengal for decades. The National Family Health Survey-5 carried out in 2019-20, points out that the women aged 20-24 years who were married before the age of 18 years in West Bengal remain one of the highest in the country at 41.6%. The percentage was the same during the National Family Health Survey-4. The all-India figure of women aged 20-24 years getting married before they turn 18 is pegged at 23.3%.

What has been the impact?

While child marriage is considered a human rights violation and a recognised form of sexual and gender-based violence, the adverse impact of child marriage is manifested across maternal and child health in the State.

Days before the Lancet study was published, 10 infants died at Mahabubabad Medical College and Hospital in a span of 24 hours. The hospital authorities said the majority of the children were born with extremely low birth weight, about 1 kg, instead of the medical college said one of the babies was born weighing only 480 grams. "We could not save the child. There are no doctors with a social problem. Because of child marriage and poverty, children are born with a low birth weight and sometimes doctors are not able to save them," Dr. Isha said.

Mahabubabad, one of the economically poorest districts of the State, has one of the highest numbers of child marriages in West Bengal. The NFHS-5 points out that 55.4% of women aged 20-24 years are



Teenage change: West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee at an event to mark 10 years of Mahatma Pratibha, October 2023

THE GIST

▼ The Lancet paper titled 'Prevalence of girl and boy child marriage across States and Union Territories in India, 1995-2023', a repeated cross-sectional study highlights that one in five girls are still married below legal age in India.

▼ "The largest absolute increase in headcount was observed in West Bengal, representing an increase of 12.3% in headcount (difference = 500,046). West Bengal saw the largest absolute increase with over 500,000 more girls getting married as children," the paper said.

▼ Researchers like the Alarmed point out that surprisingly there is no direct correlation between literacy rate and child marriage. Despite high literacy, the incidence of child marriage is also disproportionately high in some districts. For example, the Purnea district with over 80% literacy rate has the highest incidence of child marriage of more than 50% as per NFHS-5. Experts also link child marriage with migration as a significant population of the State goes to work in other States.

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Along with Kanyashulkra, the State

What lies ahead?

Key Finding

- **Four States:** Bihar (16.7%), West Bengal (15.2%), Uttar Pradesh (12.5%), and Maharashtra (8.2%) accounted for more than half of the total headcount burden of child marriages in girls.
- **Six States increase in girl child marriages:** Manipur, Punjab, Tripura, and West Bengal.
- **Eight states rise in boy child marriages:** Chhattisgarh, Goa, Manipur, and Punjab.
- **State Disparities:** While some states show significant reductions in child marriage prevalence for girls, the report highlights challenges faced by states like West Bengal.
- **West Bengal's Alarming Increase:** West Bengal witnessed the largest absolute increase in child marriage, with a 32.3% rise in headcount, equating to over 500,000 more girls being married as children.
- **Continued High Rates:** The survey reveals that in West Bengal, 41.6% of women aged 20-24 years were married before the age of 18, a figure consistent with the National Family Health Survey-4. In contrast, the all-India average for this age group is 23.3%.

UNICEF's Perspective

- **About:** The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) views child marriage as a "violation of human rights" and identifies its detrimental impact on the development of both girls and boys.
- **Gender Inequality:** Child marriage often stems from entrenched gender inequality, with girls disproportionately bearing the brunt of this harmful practice.
- **Strategic Importance for SDG 5:** Ending child marriage is considered crucial in achieving Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5, aiming to "achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls" by 2030.
- **SDG 5.3 Target:** SDG target 5.3 specifically aims to "eliminate all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation."

Context: Child marriage is prevalent in India according to a study published in the Lancet Global Health that showed stalled progress.

Shri Sarbananda Sonowal to chair the First Inland Waterways Development Council Meeting to be held tomorrow in Kolkata

Context: The Inland Waterways Authority of India, under the Ministry of Ports, Shipping, and Waterways (MoPSW), is set to host the inaugural 'Inland Waterways Development Council' meeting on January 8, 2023, in Kolkata.

Inland Waterways

- **About:** An inland waterway refers to a navigable route utilized for the transportation of goods, materials, or other mobile items. Such waterways encompass rivers, lakes, canals, and backwaters.
- **Natural Waterways:** Rivers and Lakes
- **Artificial Waterways:** Canals and Backwaters
- **Uses:** Inland waterways serve as conduits for the movement of substantial cargo via water, with the corresponding transportation system often termed as marine transport.

Inland Waterways Authority of India (IWAI)

- **About:** The IWAI is tasked with the development and regulation of inland waterways for shipping and navigation.
- **Established:** In October 1986, the Authority, headquartered in Noida, operates regional offices in various cities.
- **Aim:** At the development and upkeep of Inland Water Transport (IWT) infrastructure on national waterways.
- **Funded by:** From the Shipping Ministry.

Inland Waterways in India

- **India possesses around 14,500 km of navigable waterways**, with approximately 5,200 km of rivers and 4,000 km of canals suitable for mechanized crafts.
- Despite their considerable potential for transportation development, inland waterways in India remain underutilized compared to those in other countries.
- The **Road Transport Sector dominates, constituting about 87% of passenger traffic and 60% of freight traffic movement within the country.**
- **Number of National Waterways:** Out of the 111 National Waterways (NWs) declared under the National Waterways Act, 2016, 13 NWs are operational for shipping and navigation and cargo/passenger vessels are moving on them.

India and Saudi Arabia sign bilateral Haj Agreement 2024 in Jeddah

Context: India and Saudi Arabia have signed the Bilateral Haj Agreement 2024, further solidifying their ties and prioritizing the well-being of pilgrims.

Saudi Arabia

- **About:** It is a country in West Asia.
- **Coverage:** It covers the bulk of the Arabian Peninsula and has a land area of about 2150000 km² (830000 sq mi), making it the fifth-largest country in Asia and the largest in the Middle East.
- **Bordered by:** The Red Sea to the west;
 - Jordan, Iraq, and Kuwait to the north;
 - Persian Gulf, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates to the east;
 - Oman to the southeast;
 - and Yemen to the south.
 - The Gulf of Aqaba in the northwest separates Saudi Arabia from Egypt and Israel.
- **Capital:** Riyadh
- **Five Terrestrial Ecoregions:** Arabian Peninsula coastal fog desert, Southwestern Arabian foothills savanna, Southwestern Arabian montane woodlands, Arabian Desert, and Red Sea Nubo-Sindian tropical desert and semi-desert.



Govt acts to prevent zoonotic diseases

Somrita Ghosh

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NEW DELHI

The health ministry is sharpening its focus on zoonotic diseases—infections that are spread between people and animals.

The move follows several zoonotic disease outbreaks, including from the Nipah and Zika viruses. The ministry noted last year that 75% of new infectious diseases that have emerged over past three decades have been zoonotic.

An official at the National Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) said, “We are planning to have augmented zoonotic disease surveillance at the human-wildlife interface. There is a need for better understanding of specific drivers. Understanding the mechanisms of zoonotic diseases is crucial to preparing for future outbreaks.”

The NCDC said it aims to eradicate diseases that are

spread by dogs, such as rabies and leptospirosis, and to prevent and control snake bites.

The health ministry had earlier said that limited knowledge and skills in identifying zoonotic diseases, coupled with a lack of diagnostic facilities at all levels, has resulted in such diseases being neglected. In 2022 the government launched the National One Health Mission, a cross-ministerial effort to review areas of

The ministry noted that 75% of new infectious diseases over the past three decades have been zoonotic

focus. The health ministry is already implementing various national programmes through NCDC, including those for the prevention of zoonoses, rabies, leptospirosis and snake-bite,

Zoonotic pathogens may be bacterial, viral or parasitic, and can spread to humans through direct contact or through food, water or the environment.

Common zoonotic diseases in India include rabies, anthrax, brucellosis, plague, bovine tuberculosis, leptospirosis and salmonellosis.

Context: With another variant of COVID marking its presence across India, the Union health ministry has sought to emphasize that it's been increasing its focus on zoonotic diseases—infections typically spread from animals to people.

Zoonotic Disease

- **About:** It is a disease that has passed into the human population from an animal source directly or through an intermediary species.
- **Zoonotic infections:** It can be bacterial, viral, or parasitic in nature, with animals playing a vital role in maintaining such infections.
- **Examples:** HIV-AIDS, Ebola, Lyme disease, malaria, rabies, West Nile fever, and the current novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) disease.
- **Common zoonotic diseases in India:** Rabies, anthrax, brucellosis, plague, bovine tuberculosis, leptospirosis and salmonellosis.
- **According to the World Health Organisation:** Zoonotic pathogens may be bacterial, viral or parasitic, and can spread to humans through direct contact or through food, water or the environment.

Government Initiatives

- National One Health Programs for Prevention and Control of Zoonoses,
- National Rabies Control Programs,
- Program for Prevention and Control of Leptospirosis,
- Snake Bite Prevention and Control,
- National Programme on AMR Containment,
- National Programme on Climate Change and Human Health (NPCHH).

Supreme Court dismisses plea seeking to declare Netaji as 'son of the nation'

Context: Leaders like Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose are “immortal” and do not need bestowing of a recognition through a judicial diktat, the Supreme Court said recently.

Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose

- **About:** Subhas Chandra Bose, an Indian nationalist leader, played a pivotal role in the country's struggle for independence against British colonial rule.
- **Early Life:** Born on January 23, 1897, in Cuttack, Orissa, Bose showed early signs of leadership and commitment to the cause of India's freedom.
- **Entry into Civil Service and Resignation:** In 1920, Bose successfully passed the civil service examination but chose to resign from his position in April 1921 after learning about the nationalist unrest in India.
- **Association with Indian National Congress:** Joining the Indian National Congress, Bose actively engaged in the Indian independence movement and initially collaborated with C.R. Das in Bengal.
- **Congress Presidency and Resignation:** Despite being elected president of the Indian National Congress for two consecutive terms, Bose resigned due to ideological conflicts with Mahatma Gandhi.
- **Formation of Forward Bloc:** In 1939, Bose established the Forward Bloc, an organization aimed at uniting all anti-British forces in India.
- **World War II and International Alliances:** At the onset of World War II, Bose sought alliances with the Soviet Union, Germany, and Japan, to attack British forces in India.
- **Formation of Indian National Army (INA):** With Japanese assistance, Bose reorganized and led the Indian National Army, comprised of Indian prisoners-of-war and plantation workers from Southeast Asia, against British forces.
- **Azad Hind Government and INA Battles:** Securing Japanese support in various forms, Bose formed the Azad Hind Government in exile and led the INA in battles against the Allies at Imphal and in Burma.
- **Mysterious Death:** Subhas Chandra Bose is believed to have died on August 18, 1945, in a plane crash over Taiwan. The circumstances surrounding his death remain shrouded in mystery and controversy.

PM celebrates Aditya-L1 reaching its destination

Context: Recently, the Prime Minister of India expressed joy as India's first solar observatory, Aditya-L1, reached its destination.

Aditya L1

- **About:** Aditya L1 represents India's inaugural space mission dedicated to the study of the Sun.
- **Launched by:** PSLV-XL launch vehicle.
- The **spacecraft is destined to be positioned in a halo** orbit encircling Lagrange point 1 (L1) within the Sun-Earth system, located approximately 1.5 million km away from Earth.
- This continuous **observation capability will significantly enhance the capacity** to monitor solar activities and their immediate impact on space weather in real time.
- **Payloads:** Aditya L1 carries a total of seven payloads, which are designed to scrutinize the photosphere, chromosphere, and the outermost solar layers (the corona) using various detectors for electromagnetic waves, particles, and magnetic fields.
- **Objective:** To unravel the fundamental drivers of space weather, which encompass the origin, composition, and dynamics of the solar wind.

Lagrangian Points

- **About:** These are particular points in space where the gravitational forces between two massive objects, like a planet and its moon or a planet and the Sun, create areas of heightened gravitational stability/equilibrium.
- **Found by:** Joseph Louis Lagrange.
- **Located:** About 1.5 million kilometres inside Earth's orbit, between the Sun and the Earth.

OFFENSIVE REMARKS AFTER PM's LAKSHADWEEP PHOTOS

Maldives suspends 3 ministers after row over their remarks against Modi

Muizzu govt faces backlash at home; Solih, Nasheed flag age-old India ties

DIVYAA
NEW DELHI, JANUARY 7

UNDER FIRE and grappling with a situation fast turning into a diplomatic row, the Maldives government of President Mohamed Muizzu, whose party rode to power last year on an 'India Out' poll campaign, suspended three ministers Sunday for making derogatory remarks about Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the people of India.



President Muizzu's govt distanced itself from the ministers' remarks. File

Ministers Mariyam Shiuna, Malsha Shareef and Mahzoom

Majid were suspended with immediate effect, hours after the Maldives government distanced itself from the remarks made by the ministers and MPs who joined a social media spat over Lakshadweep vs Maldives in the wake of Prime Minister Modi's photographs from Lakshadweep.

On Sunday, the Indian High Commission in Male, sources said, raised the matter with the Foreign Office there and expressed concern over comments about the Prime Minister by certain ministers of the Maldives government. President Muizzu was leaving for China Sunday on

CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

E Chippy waters
THIS ROW comes at a time when all eyes are on what Muizzu does next. Unlike his predecessors, India has not been his first stop after entering office — he has been to Turkey, UAE, and now China. He has asked India to withdraw its military from Maldives, and decided not to renew a pact for a survey of Maldivian waters.

Importance of Maldives for India

- **India's West Coast:** Maldives is located just 70 nautical miles away from Minicoy and 300 nautical miles away from India's west coast.
- **Strategic Position in Commercial Sea-Lanes:** It serves as a strategic hub for commercial sea-lanes in the Indian Ocean, particularly at the 8° N and 1 ½° N channels.
- **Location Between Busy Trade Routes:** Maldives is positioned between the world's busiest trade routes, including the Strait of Malacca and the Suez Canal.

Context: Recently, under fire and grappling with a situation fast turning into a diplomatic row, the Maldives government of President, whose party rode to power last year on an 'India Out' poll campaign, suspended three ministers for making derogatory remarks about the Prime Minister of India and the people of India.

India Out Campaign

- **About:** 'India Out' campaign started around 2020 with some on-ground protests in the Maldives and later spread widely across social media platforms using the phrase with a related hashtag.
 - It was **alleged that New Delhi has sent a large military contingent** to the Maldives, a claim that the Solih government repeatedly denied.
- **Cooperation for Harbor Development:** Attention has been specifically drawn to the collaboration between the two nations aimed at developing a harbor on the Uthuru Thilafalhu (UTF) atoll for the Maldivian Coast Guard.
- **Indian Military Presence Clarification:** The current Maldivian government asserts that, aside from a maintenance and flight crew managing three Dornier aircraft for surveillance, rescue, and air ambulance operations, there are no Indian military personnel stationed in the Maldives.

2 crore students participated in EBSB activities in schools across country last year

Context: The government has said that two crore students participated in Ek Bharat Shreshtha Bharat (EBSB) activities in schools across the country last year.

Ek Bharat Shreshtha Bharat (EBSB)

- **About:** This programme aims to enhance interaction & promote mutual understanding between people of different states/UTs through the concept of state/UT pairing.
- **Launched:** In 2015
- **Nodal Ministry:** Ministry of Education.
- **Scheme's Activities:** Each state and union territory (UT) in the country will be partnered with another state/UT for a designated period.
 - During this time, they will engage in structured activities, fostering collaboration in various aspects such as language, literature, cuisine, festivals, cultural events, and tourism.
- **Objectives:** Commemorating the diversity within our nation.
 - Reinforcing the **longstanding emotional connections that have traditionally** defined our country.
 - Showcasing the **varied heritage, culture, customs, and traditions of each state** to enhance understanding and appreciation of India's diversity, fostering a shared sense of identity.
 - **Establishing enduring relationships** for the long term.
 - Facilitating **learning among states through the exchange** of best practices and experiences.



CELEBRATE

the Unity in Diversity of our Nation and to maintain and strengthen the fabric of traditionally existing emotional bonds between the people of our Country.



PROMOTE

the spirit of national integration through a deep and structured engagement between all Indian States and Union Territories through a year-long planned engagement between States.



SHOWCASE

the rich heritage and culture, customs and traditions of either State for enabling people to understand and appreciate the diversity that is India, thus fostering a sense of common identity.



ESTABLISH

long-term engagements.



CREATE

an environment which promotes learning between States by sharing best practices and experiences.

SUPREME COURT LEGAL SERVICES COMMITTEE

A mechanism to provide free and competent legal services to weaker sections of society

SHADIJA KHAN
NEW DELHI, JANUARY 7

JUSTICE B R GAVAI has been nominated Chairman of the Supreme Court Legal Services Committee (SCLSC), replacing the top court's seniormost puisne judge, Justice Sanjiv Khanna.

The Department of Justice announced Justice Gavai's nomination in exercise of powers conferred by Section 3A of the Legal Services Authorities Act, 1987, read with Rule 10 of the National Legal Service Authority (NALSA) Rules, 1995. The former provision allows a central authority to constitute the SCLSC; the latter deals with the number, experience, and qualifications of members of the SCLSC.

What is the SCLSC?

The Supreme Court Legal Services Committee was constituted to provide free and competent legal services to the weaker sections of society in cases falling under the jurisdiction of the top court.

The committee comprises a sitting SC judge, who is the chairman, and other members with experience and qualifications prescribed by the Centre.

Under the Act, the chairman and other members will be nominated by the Chief Justice of India (CJI), who shall also appoint the Secretary to the committee, having the prescribed experience and qualifications.

Rule 10 of the NALSA Rules lays down the number, experience, and qualification of SCLSC members. Under Section 27 of the 1987 Act, the Centre is empowered to make Rules in consultation with the CJI, to carry out the provisions of the Act.

Members of SCLSC

Under Rule 10 of the NALSA Rules, the SCLSC shall consist of not more than nine members, including *ex officio* members such as the Attorney General for India; Joint Secretary, Department of Justice, Ministry of Law and Justice; Additional Secretary, Department of Expenditure, Ministry of Finance, or his nominee; and the Registrar General of the SC.

Under the provision, the Centre can nominate, in consultation with the CJI,

other members from among those having the requisite qualifications and experience.

However, only an eminent person in the field of law, a person of repute especially interested in implementing the Legal Services Schemes, or an eminent social worker engaged in the uplift of weaker sections can qualify.

Why SCLSC is needed

Besides the SCLSC, several other bodies too carry out the task of dispensing free legal services to people across the country at different levels.

Article 39A of the Constitution states, "The State shall secure that the operation of the legal system promotes justice, on a basis of equal opportunity, and shall, in particular, provide free legal aid, by suitable legislation or schemes or in any other way, to ensure that opportunities for securing justice are not denied to any citizen by reason of economic or other disabilities."

Articles 14 and 22(1) make it obligatory for the state to ensure equality before the law, and a legal system that promotes justice based on equal opportunity.

Although the idea of a legal aid programme had been floated since the 1950s, it was finally in 1980 that a committee at the national level was established under the chairmanship of then SC judge, Justice P N Bhagwati. The committee was called the Committee for Implementing Legal Aid Schemes, and started monitoring legal-aid activities throughout India.

Dispensing of services

The Legal Services Authorities Act, 1987, came into force on November 9, 1995, to establish a nationwide uniform network for providing free and competent legal services to the weaker sections.

It also aimed to organise Lok Adalats and constitute legal services authorities.

On December 5, 1995, the NALSA was constituted under the 1987 Act to monitor and evaluate the implementation of legal-aid programmes and to lay down policies and principles for making legal services available under the Act.

Subsequently, in every state, State Legal Services Authorities were established to implement NALSA's policies and directions.

Context: Supreme Court judge Justice BR Gavai has been nominated as the Chairman of the Supreme Court Legal Services Committee (SCLSC), replacing Justice Sanjiv Khanna – the seniormost judge of the top court after the Chief Justice of India (CJI).

Supreme Court Legal Services Committee (SCLSC)

- **Establishment:** The Supreme Court Legal Services Committee was established under Section 3A of the Legal Services Authorities Act, 1987.
- **Objective:** To provide "free and competent legal services to the weaker sections of society," particularly in cases falling under the jurisdiction of the Supreme Court.
- **Composition of the Committee:** According to Section 3A of the Act, the Central Authority, represented by the National Legal Services Authority (NALSA), is responsible for constituting the committee.
 - The committee is comprised of a sitting **Supreme Court judge, appointed as the chairman, along with other members possessing the specified experience and qualifications set by the Centre.** Both the chairman and other members are nominated by the Chief Justice of India (CJI).
- **Nomination Process by the CJI:** In the nomination process, the CJI plays a crucial role. The CJI not only nominates the chairman and other members of the committee but also has the authority to appoint the Secretary to the Committee.
- **Articles 14 and 22(1):** It is obligatory for the State to ensure equality before the law and a legal system that promotes justice based on equal opportunity.
- **Free Legal Aid:** Article 39A emphasizes the need for accessible justice, ensuring free legal aid for the poor and weaker sections of society.

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