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## With PM in Jordan, Jaishankar in Israel, India reiterates its position on West Asian conflicts

India is using simultaneous high-level visits to Jordan, Israel and Ethiopia to project a consistent stance on West Asian conflicts while deepening bilateral partnerships and positioning itself as a constructive, non-aligned actor focused on reconstruction, counter-terrorism and diplomacy. India is "reiterating" rather than revising its long-held positions: support for peace and stability in West Asia, rejection of terrorism, backing for a two-state solution and preference for dialogue-based conflict resolution.



Modi's meetings in Amman focus on India-Jordan collaboration for post-war reconstruction in Syria, especially in railways and "next-generation infrastructure", signalling India's intent to be an economic reconstruction partner, not a military actor, in the Syrian theatre. The India-Jordan Business Forum and Modi's praise for King Abdullah's "positive and active role" in regional affairs reflect an attempt to anchor India's West Asia role in partnership with a relatively moderate Arab monarchy that engages all sides, including on the Palestinian question. In Israel, Jaishankar's remarks on "zero tolerance" for terrorism and his condemnation of attacks such as the Bondi beach incident align India closely with Israeli concerns on security while keeping the focus on terrorism rather than endorsing any particular military campaign. This presents India's West Asia policy as a calibrated balance: economic and reconstruction engagement with Arab states, strategic and technological cooperation with Israel, and a diplomatic narrative centred on de-escalation, development and counter-terrorism. This balancing serves multiple objectives: protecting India's large diaspora and energy interests in the Gulf, maintaining defence and technology links with Israel, and sustaining India's image in the Global South as a supporter of Palestinian rights and international law.



The Centre on Tuesday introduced the Viksit Bharat Guarantee for Rozgar and Ajeevika Mission (Gramin) (VB-G RAM G) Bill, 2025, which seeks to replace the two-decade-old Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), amid Opposition protests.



Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy says proposals being negotiated with U.S. officials to end the fighting with Russia in the nearly 4-year-old conflict could be finalised within days, after which American envoys will present them to the Kremlin. A draft peace plan discussed with the U.S. during talks in Berlin on Monday is "very workable", Mr. Zelenskyy told presspersons hours after the discussions. The proposal for security guarantees will be based on Western help in keeping the Ukrainian army strong, an official from a NATO nation said.

## NATIONAL

# ISRO releases RESPOND Basket, invites proposals

### Nature and purpose of RESPOND Basket 2025

- The RESPOND Basket 2025 is a curated list of research problem statements that align with ISRO's current and future mission requirements, representing its most urgent and important R&D challenges.
- These problems are identified by ISRO and Department of Space centres/units to directly support upcoming programmes such as a national space station, advanced lunar missions, human spaceflight continuations, planetary exploration and next-generation satellite systems.

### Emphasis on academia-ISRO collaboration

- The Basket is embedded within ISRO's long-running RESPOND programme, whose core objective is to build strong links with premier academic and R&D institutions, enhance their research base and generate skilled human resources for the space programme.
- ISRO scientists delivered detailed technical talks on the listed research topics during ISRO-Academia Day, giving faculty deeper insight into mission requirements, expected outcomes and feasible collaboration models, which should improve proposal quality and alignment.

### Strategic research themes and problem focus

- The Basket clusters problems around emerging and high-priority areas—such as quantum technologies, advanced materials and structures for launch vehicles, remote sensing innovations, satellite communication systems, AI-enabled space applications and space sustainability—showing where ISRO expects technology bottlenecks.
- By labelling these topics as the “most important research problems” for the organisation, ISRO is signalling to universities where funding and long-term research opportunities will be concentrated, effectively shaping national space-science and engineering agendas.

### Participation, proposals and process

- The Basket invites submissions from scientists and faculty members in recognised universities, institutes and autonomous R&D bodies; students by themselves are not eligible, but can work under faculty-led projects, reinforcing institutional rather than individual engagement.
- Proposals must be submitted through ISRO's I-GRASP portal by January 31, 2026, which standardises application, evaluation and tracking and reflects a maturing, more transparent interface between ISRO and the research community.
- The initiative deepens a decades-old RESPOND model in which ISRO funds and mentors externally executed projects, helping academia build labs, tools and expertise that can later be absorbed into operational missions or commercial spin-offs.
- For India's space sector, this creates a pipeline of mission-ready technologies and trained researchers beyond ISRO's internal workforce, supporting ambitions like a Bharatiya Antariksh Station and human lunar missions while diffusing space-technology capacity across the country.

# Study affirms Kerala's rich butterfly diversity in the Western Ghats region

- The monograph “The Butterflies (Lepidoptera, Rhopalocera) of Kerala: Status and Distribution” shows that Kerala's butterfly fauna spans six families, dominated by Nymphalidae (97 species), Lycaenidae (96) and Hesperiidae (82), with additional species from Papilionidae, Pieridae and Riodinidae.
- This positions Kerala as the Indian State with the highest documented butterfly richness in the Western Ghats belt, reinforcing the region's global status as a biodiversity hotspot and underlining the State's conservation responsibility; hosting 328 species and accounting for almost the entire butterfly diversity recorded from this biodiversity hotspot (337 species), including 41 species endemic to the Western Ghats.
- The study records 22 butterfly species from Kerala in the IUCN Red List, though most are classified as “Least Concern” and only two as “Near Threatened,” indicating relatively few globally threatened taxa but a need for continued monitoring.
- It also notes that 70 species occurring in Kerala are protected under India's Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972; only four enjoy the highest Schedule I protection, while the majority fall under Schedule II, suggesting scope to reassess threat categories as habitats face growing pressure.
- The research team, led by Kalesh Sadasivan, documents 36 migratory butterfly species that use Kerala as a key corridor for seasonal movements, highlighting the State's importance not just for resident diversity but for broader landscape-level connectivity across the Western Ghats.
- Such migratory flows imply that land-use change, pesticide use or habitat fragmentation in Kerala can have cascading impacts on butterfly populations across multiple States along the mountain chain.

### Methodology and data contributions

- One of the most significant contributions of the monograph is an extensive larval host-plant checklist with over 1,800 feeding records, including more than 350 new field observations and nearly 800 plant species, making it one of India's largest region-specific datasets for butterfly-plant interactions.
- This fine-grained ecological information is crucial for habitat management: conserving host plants in forests, plantations and agro-ecosystems becomes as important as protecting adult nectar sources if breeding populations are to be maintained.

### Policy and conservation implications

- By consolidating taxonomy, distribution, conservation status and host-plant use, the monograph provides a baseline for State-level red-listing, identification of critical butterfly habitats, and integration of butterfly indicators into Western Ghats conservation planning.
- For Kerala, the findings argue for stronger protection of Western Ghats forests, better management of ecotourism, and butterfly-friendly practices in agriculture and plantation landscapes, so that high species richness and endemism are not eroded by habitat loss and climate change.

## 878 infiltrators held from Myanmar border in two years, govt. tells LS

- Data placed in the Lok Sabha by the Ministry of Home Affairs show that between 2014 and November 30, 2025, annual arrests along the Myanmar border fluctuated sharply, with low double-digit figures in earlier years and a sharp spike to 437 in 2025, indicating a recent surge linked to post-coup instability in Myanmar and Manipur's unrest.
- Despite this, only 9.2 km of the 1,643-km India-Myanmar boundary has been fenced so far, underscoring how terrain, politics and the earlier Free Movement Regime (FMR) have constrained hard-bordering efforts compared with the India-Pakistan and India-Bangladesh frontiers, which are more than 90% and about 79% fenced respectively.

### Changes to the Free Movement Regime

- In response to violence in Manipur, Home Minister Amit Shah announced that the entire India-Myanmar border will be fenced and that the FMR—allowing tribes within 16 km on either side to cross without visas—would be scrapped, signalling a decisive shift from ethnographic openness to security-centric control.
- A revised framework implemented from December 2024 shrank the FMR zone from 16 km to 10 km and brought movement under a pass-and-biometrics system at designated gates, trying to retain limited cross-border community linkage while tightening state surveillance and accountability.

### Gate-based regulation and biometrics

- This notes that up to 43 border gates are to be operationalised, with 22 already functioning, where exit and entry are channelled through border passes and biometric capture, marking a transition from porous village-level crossings to controlled points similar to international check-posts but on a smaller scale.
- This gate-based regime aims to separate legitimate short-distance movement (for kinship, markets and health care) from clandestine crossings, yet it also raises concerns for border communities whose traditional mobility and livelihoods depended on flexible access to forests, fields and relatives across the line.

### Infiltration trends from Bangladesh

- Parallel data for the India-Bangladesh border show much higher absolute numbers: arrests of infiltrators were 2,525 in 2024 and 2,556 in 2025, with annual figures between 2014 and 2023 also running into the hundreds or low thousands, confirming this frontier as India's primary migration-pressure line even after decades of fencing.
- With 4,096.7 km of border length and 79.08% already fenced, New Delhi's strategy relies heavily on physical barriers and intensive patrolling, yet the persistent volume of arrests suggests that economic drivers, social networks and riverine gaps still create strong incentives and opportunities for irregular crossings.

## Rashtrapati Bhavan displays portraits of all 21 Param Vir Chakra awardees

Rashtrapati Bhavan has created a new gallery, the "Param Vir Dirgha", in which portraits of all 21 Param Vir Chakra awardees are now displayed, replacing 96 portraits of British Aide-de-Camps and symbolically shifting the presidential estate's visual narrative from colonial elites to Indian war heroes.

- Param Vir Chakra is India's highest military honour, conferred for exceptional valour, courage and self-sacrifice in war, and that permanently exhibiting all awardees in Rashtrapati Bhavan is meant to honour soldiers who laid down their lives in defence of the nation.
- Officials describe the initiative as a step towards "shedding the colonial mindset" and embracing India's culture, heritage and "timeless traditions", casting the gallery as part of a broader project of civil-military nation-building rather than a purely commemorative display.

### Educative and cultural objectives

- The gallery is framed as an educational space that will help visitors learn about the stories of Param Vir Chakra recipients and draw inspiration from their "unconquerable spirit", turning Rashtrapati Bhavan into a more accessible site of public military memory.
- The government link this to efforts to restore pride in "sanatan values" and to foreground Indian instruments and cultural motifs in national ceremonies, suggesting an integration of martial heroism with a particular civilisational narrative.

### Decolonial renaming and linked initiatives

- This situates the gallery within a series of decolonisation measures, noting changes such as renaming Rajpath to Kartavya Path and redesigning ceremonial events like the 2022 Republic Day Beating Retreat with Indian musical arrangements instead of colonial-era tunes.
- It highlights parallel steps in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, where Ross Island, Neil Island and Havelock Island were renamed Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose Dweep, Shaheed Dweep and Swaraj Dweep respectively, and where Port Blair's main park has been renamed and several islands named after Param Vir awardees, underscoring a strategy of inscribing nationalist memory onto physical geography.

### Political messaging and legacy

- By unveiling the gallery on Vijay Diwas, in the presence of senior military leadership, the presidency ties the 1971 victory narrative to the broader lineage of supreme sacrifice represented by Param Vir awardees, reinforcing the armed forces' central role in India's post-colonial identity.
- The piece closes by quoting officials who say these actions collectively aim at "dismantling colonial legacies", indicating that cultural decolonisation—through iconography, renaming and ceremonial reform—has become a key plank of the Centre's political messaging about a confident, sovereign republic rewriting its symbols in its own image.

# Indian Army receives final batch of Apache helicopters

Indian Army has received the final batch of three AH-64E Apache attack helicopters from the United States, completing a six-helicopter fleet that will form the core of its dedicated Apache squadron at 451 Army Aviation Squadron in Jodhpur, Rajasthan.

- These helicopters are part of a 600-million-dollar contract signed in February 2020; the first three were delivered in July 2025 and the last three arrived in December 2025 after a delay of about 15 months from the original delivery schedule of May 2024, mainly due to global supply-chain disruptions.
- The latest batch landed at Hindon Air Force Station in Ghaziabad aboard an Antonov-124 transport aircraft and will be inducted into service after assembly, joint inspections and other formalities, illustrating the complex logistics of high-end defence imports.

## Deployment and operational role

- All six Apaches will be stationed at Jodhpur, close to the western front, where their range, sensors and weapons are optimised for desert warfare and rapid response against armoured formations and fortified positions along the India-Pakistan border.
- The squadron, raised in March 2024 but waiting for aircraft because of delays, is intended to give the Army its own heavy attack-helicopter capability rather than depending solely on Indian Air Force assets, strengthening the Army Aviation Corps' autonomy in land-battle planning.
- The AH-64E Apache is described as one of the world's most advanced multi-role combat helicopters, equipped with modern sensors, network-centric avionics, a 30-mm cannon, rockets and precision-guided Hellfire missiles, and capable of anti-armour, close air support, and limited air-to-air missions.
- Integrating Apaches with indigenous platforms like the LCH "Prachand" allows the Army to field a tiered attack-helicopter mix: Apaches for heavy, high-value targets in plains and deserts, and lighter LCHs for high-altitude operations, thereby refining doctrines for joint air-land manoeuvre.
- This notes that the final deliveries followed a phone conversation between Defence Minister Rajnath Singh and US Defence Secretary Pete Hegseth, where both sides reviewed defence cooperation, underscoring how big-ticket platforms are embedded in the broader India-US strategic partnership.
- Completion of the Apache induction signals progress in modernising the Army's aviation arm despite global supply-chain headwinds and may pave the way for future negotiations on expanding the Apache fleet or co-development of helicopter technologies, even as India simultaneously pushes for greater indigenisation in combat aviation.

# EC publishes draft voter list for five States, U.T.s

- Election Commission has published draft electoral rolls for West Bengal, Rajasthan, Goa, Puducherry and Lakshadweep under the ongoing Special Intensive Revision (SIR), with over 58 lakh names removed in West Bengal alone and significant deletions in the other four jurisdictions.

## Scale and pattern of deletions

- Across the five units, more than 1.02 crore existing entries have been removed, reflecting a 7.6% net reduction in their combined electorates; West Bengal accounts for the largest share, with its roll shrinking from about 7.66 crore to 7.08 crore voters after 58.08 lakh deletions.
- In Rajasthan, around 41–42 lakh names have been deleted, in Goa about 10 lakh, in Puducherry a little over 1 lakh, and in Lakshadweep nearly 1,500, indicating that the SIR has been used as a sweeping clean-up exercise across diverse political and demographic contexts.

## Reasons cited for removal

- The deletions are attributed mainly to standard electoral-roll hygiene categories: deceased voters, those who have shifted residence or been absent, duplicates enrolled at multiple places, and entries that cannot be mapped or traced to valid addresses.
- For example, in West Bengal more than 24 lakh of those deleted are classified as deceased, nearly 20 lakh as shifted or absent, about 12 lakh as missing or untraceable, and over 1.38 lakh as duplicate entries, showing that the EC is leaning heavily on field verification and enumeration forms to justify removals.

## Inclusion, verification and appeal process

- The EC notes that voters who submitted enumeration forms during the SIR have been included in the draft rolls, and that lists of absent-shifted/deceased/duplicate electors have been separately published to enable scrutiny by parties and citizens.
- Claims and objections can be filed from December 16, 2025 to January 15, 2026, with Electoral Registration Officers mandated to hear and dispose of these cases and verify enumeration forms up to February 7, before final rolls are published on February 14, 2026, using January 1, 2026 as the qualifying date.

## Political and governance context

- West Bengal is due for assembly elections in early 2026, so a reduction of over 58 lakh voters—unprecedented in scale—has immediate political implications, especially where deletions are concentrated in specific constituencies or social groups; parties are expected to scrutinise the lists and mobilise objections where they allege wrongful exclusion.
- The SIR 2.0 exercise, conducted pan-India, is framed by the EC as a move to improve the "health" and accuracy of electoral rolls, but the magnitude and timing of deletions, particularly in politically sensitive states, will likely intensify debates on whether the revision process is sufficiently transparent, evenly implemented and insulated from partisan pressures.

**PRELIMS CORNER :**

**1. He was a saint & social reformer of Medieval India who founded Gaudiya Vaishnavism. He popularised 'Sankirtan' or public singing of God's name and opposed the inequalities of the caste system. Which one of the following personalities is described above?**

- (a) Vallabhacharya
- (b) Vidyaranya
- (c) Nimbarka
- (d) Chaitanya Mahaprabhu

**2. The Tehran Convention, 2006 is an overarching legal instrument for the environmental protection of which one of the following water bodies?**

- (a) Red Sea
- (b) South China Sea
- (c) Caspian Sea
- (d) Arabian Sea

**3. Which of the following is Brunei's only land neighbour?**

- (a) Thailand
- (b) Malaysia
- (c) Indonesia
- (d) Vietnam

**4. Optical fibre cables work on the principle of:**

- (a) Doppler Effect
- (b) Photoelectric Effect
- (c) Quantum Tunnelling
- (d) Total Internal Reflection

**DETAILED ANSWER KEY IN THE CIVIL SERVICE CHRONICLE PAGE**

## Inhalable microplastics, a hidden toxin worsening the air in our cities

A new class of pollutants—"inhalable microplastics" less than 10 micrometres in size—has quietly become a significant contributor to India's already severe urban air-quality crisis, adding toxic and long-lived particles to the familiar PM2.5 and PM10 burden.

- A multi-city study led by IISER Kolkata measured inhalable microplastics at human breathing height in crowded markets in Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata and Chennai, finding that these particles now constitute up to about 5% of urban particulate pollution.
- Average concentrations across all four cities were around 8.8 micrograms per cubic metre, implying that a typical city resident may inhale roughly 132 micrograms of plastic daily, with Kolkata and Delhi showing the highest levels and Mumbai and Chennai significantly lower due to coastal meteorology and dispersion.

**Spatial, temporal and source patterns**

- Inhalable microplastic levels spike during winter evenings—about 74% higher than non-winter evenings—because of temperature inversions, calm winds and higher pollution, showing that microplastics are tightly coupled with seasonal smog dynamics.
- Eleven plastic types were detected, dominated by fibres and fragments from overlooked sources such as synthetic clothing, polyester textiles, packaging dust, tyre and brake wear, footwear abrasion and poorly managed plastic waste, indicating that everyday consumer habits and traffic are key drivers.
- More worrying, the plastics act as "Trojan horses" that carry toxic co-pollutants—heavy metals like lead and cadmium, endocrine-disrupting chemicals such as diethyl phthalates, and even microbes—so inhalation exposes people not just to inert plastic but to a cocktail of carcinogens and hormone-disrupting agents.
- The extreme smallness of these particles means they can bypass upper-airway defences, lodge deep in the lungs and potentially enter the bloodstream, compounding existing risks of asthma, COPD and cardiovascular disease from PM2.5.

**Vulnerable groups and equity concerns**

- The study's focus on busy markets underscores that hawkers, shop workers, traffic police and labourers spending long hours outdoors in congested zones face far higher microplastic doses than affluent residents who spend more time indoors, adding an occupational and class dimension to the risk.
- Children, whose lungs and immune systems are still developing, and people with pre-existing respiratory or cardiac conditions are flagged as particularly vulnerable to chronic microplastic exposure combined with traditional air pollutants.

**Policy gaps and suggested responses**

- India's air-quality regime and Graded Response Action Plans focus on PM2.5, PM10 and gaseous pollutants, but do not monitor or regulate microplastics, meaning a rapidly growing pollutant remains invisible in law and in routine measurement.
- This calls for integrating microplastics into national air-quality standards, tightening plastic and tyre regulations, improving waste segregation and recycling, and redesigning urban spaces and transport to cut sources like traffic abrasion and open waste burning—otherwise microplastics will become a persistent, century-scale addition to India's urban pollution burden.

## Rupee breaches 91 level, turns weakest Asian currency in '25

Rupee briefly breached 91 against the US dollar in intra-day trade before closing at 90.93, cementing its status as Asia's weakest currency in 2025 and one of the poorest performers globally despite India's strong growth and low inflation profile.

### Immediate market dynamics

- The rupee has slid from around 90 to above 91 over the last ten trading sessions, losing about 1% in just five sessions and over 6% in calendar 2025, reflecting a sharp acceleration in depreciation rather than a slow drift.
- Traders attribute the latest leg of weakness to an unwinding of the "carry trade" and broad risk aversion across emerging-market assets, with pressure spilling over from equities and bonds into currencies, commodities and even crypto, suggesting a wider global risk-off environment.

### Drivers of rupee weakness

- Currency strategists cited three main domestic-external factors: persistent foreign portfolio outflows, India's record-high merchandise trade deficit, and uncertainty over the stalled India-US trade deal and punitive US tariffs that are depressing exports and capital inflows.
- Additional technical pressures have come from importers' heavy hedging, maturity of offshore forwards and a less supportive capital account, leaving the rupee more exposed even as other Asian currencies such as the Thai baht have appreciated this year.

### RBI stance and policy calculus

- Experts in the article argue that the Reserve Bank of India has so far limited itself to smoothing volatility rather than defending any specific level, intervening only intermittently through state-owned banks and tolerating gradual depreciation as long as moves are not disorderly.
- With GDP growth robust and CPI inflation unusually low—well below the 4% target band—policymakers are seen as "comfortable" allowing some rupee weakness because imported-inflation pass-through is muted, and a more competitive currency can offset tariff shocks and support exports.

### Risks of over-depreciation

- Economists nevertheless warn that excessive or rapid depreciation would raise the rupee cost of crude oil and other imports, widen the current-account deficit and increase the burden of servicing external commercial borrowings, which could eventually force more aggressive RBI intervention.
- This notes that, beyond a point, a very weak rupee also unsettles investor sentiment, fuels perceptions of macro vulnerability and complicates monetary-policy transmission, so authorities must balance the benefits of competitiveness against the dangers of instability and imported inflation.

## Lok Sabha passes Bill on 100% FDI in insurance

- Lok Sabha has passed the Sabka Bima Sabki Raksha (Amendment of Insurance Laws) Bill, 2025, which raises the foreign direct investment cap in Indian insurance companies from 74% to 100% and simultaneously strengthens the regulatory and policyholder-protection framework.

### Objectives and expected benefits

- Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman argues that allowing 100% FDI will unlock substantial new capital inflows, support further growth without stoking inflation, and enable insurers to design more innovative products and expand coverage, especially in under-penetrated segments.
- The reform is framed as part of a broader effort to deepen India's insurance market, reduce reliance on domestic joint-venture partners, and allow Indian-registered insurers to venture abroad while maintaining regulation under Indian law.

### Key provisions on investment and reinsurance

- The FDI limit in Indian insurance companies is raised to 100%, subject to conditions such as investing the entire premium income in India and retaining at least one top-management position (chairman, MD or CEO) for an Indian citizen, which serves as a governance safeguard.
- For foreign reinsurance branches, the minimum Net Owned Fund requirement is cut from ₹5,000 crore to ₹1,000 crore, aimed at attracting more global reinsurers, diversifying risk-bearing capacity and creating a level playing field domestically.

### Stronger powers for IRDAI and penalties

- The Bill empowers the Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority of India (IRDAI) to "disgorge wrongful gains" made by insurers or intermediaries from mis-selling, excess commissions or other violations, bringing its enforcement toolkit closer to that of SEBI.
- Maximum monetary penalties on insurers and intermediaries are significantly enhanced—up to around ₹10 crore for serious violations, compared with the earlier ₹1 crore ceiling—and the cap on commission in insurance intermediaries' cases is rationalised to curb excessive payouts and improve compliance culture.

### Governance, competition and policyholder impact

- By simplifying approvals (for example, raising the threshold for prior regulatory consent on share transfers from 1% to 5%) and creating one-time registration for intermediaries, the legislation seeks to reduce red tape and improve ease of doing business while keeping firms within a unified regulatory net.
- Supporters, including industry leaders quoted in the article, see the package as a "landmark reform" that will bring more players, technology and product diversity into the market and, through stronger oversight and disgorgement powers, better protect policyholders against mis-conduct even as ownership becomes more global.

## Bangladesh electoral scheduling amid political unrest casts a cloud of doubt

Bangladesh's Election Commission has finally set 12 February 2026 as the date for the 13th parliamentary election and a simultaneous referendum on the "July Charter", but the pervasive political violence, mistrust and institutional weakness mean the schedule has not generated the usual pre-poll enthusiasm and instead "casts a cloud of doubt" over whether the vote can be genuinely free and fair.

- It notes that Bangladesh has seen repeated attacks on Awami League supporters and minority communities since Sheikh Hasina's ouster in August 2024, raising fears that militant groups and partisan thugs could disrupt campaigning, suppress turnout and exacerbate communal tensions around the polls.
- Within the interim government's own supporters, there is unease that the tight schedule and unresolved violence could benefit better-organised forces like the BNP, whose alliance has expanded its nominations and appears to be positioning itself as the main beneficiary of anti-Hasina and anti-junta sentiment.
- The EC tries to project readiness—printing pink ballot papers, extending office hours for nomination processing, deploying over 90,000 security personnel and 175,000 polling officials—but critics question whether a body that was itself reconstituted by the interim government can withstand partisan pressure and ensure even-handed enforcement of rules.
- The simultaneous constitutional referendum adds complexity: voters are being asked to decide on far-reaching reforms in the July Charter—curbing executive powers, strengthening the judiciary and reshaping security institutions—at a time when many say they barely understand the proposals or have access to independent information.
- Human-rights organisations point out that, despite some easing of media censorship, Bangladesh still faces rampant mob violence, harassment of journalists and attacks on minorities, so unless these underlying issues are addressed quickly, the February 2026 polls risk becoming another contested, low-legitimacy exercise rather than the democratic reset many Bangladeshis hoped for when Hasina fell.
- citizens acknowledge the importance of finally holding elections but express scepticism that promises of neutrality, security and institutional reform will be honoured, reflecting a deep trust deficit after years of manipulated polls and crackdowns.

## Residents of a Myanmar town await 'junta-run' polls in the shadow of civil war

### Militarised context of the election

- Nawngkhio was captured by a rebel alliance during Operation 1027 and then retaken by the army in a pre-election offensive, leaving homes destroyed and the town ringed by military and police checkpoints where residents are photographed and their IDs scrutinised, reinforcing the sense of occupation rather than normalcy.
- The junta portrays the phased election—starting 28 December in about one-third of townships—as a route back to civilian rule, but many locals and observers see it as a calculated attempt to consolidate territorial gains, legitimise military control and divide opposition forces that still hold large swathes of the countryside.

### Voter attitudes and everyday fear

- Interviews from Nawngkhio show residents saying "we are not interested, but we will go to vote", signalling that participation is driven by fear of repercussions and a desire not to stand out, rather than enthusiasm for any party or belief that the poll will end the conflict.
- People remain traumatised by recent fighting and possible renewed clashes between junta troops and ethnic armed organisations such as the Ta'ang National Liberation Army, and many worry that the presence of campaign events and polling stations could invite fresh attacks.

### Hollowed-out party system

- The National League for Democracy, which won a landslide in 2020, has been dissolved under junta electoral laws, its leaders jailed or forced underground, while dozens of other parties have been banned, meaning only military-approved or collaborationist parties can contest.
- In Nawngkhio, even candidates who once served in the army present themselves as conciliatory figures promising "peace" and local development, but voters are sceptical, describing the choice as between pro-junta factions rather than between the junta and genuine opposition.

### Wider civil-war landscape

- This situates Nawngkhio's experience within a broader battlefield map where ethnic minority armed groups and People's Defence Forces continue to control or contest much of rural Myanmar, and where many constituencies have been deemed too insecure for any polling at all.
- Human-rights groups have already labelled the nationwide exercise a "fraudulent claim for credibility", noting mass political imprisonment, media repression and ongoing war crimes, and urging foreign governments not to treat the polls as a step toward legitimate transition.

# Prelims Corner: Explanations

## Q1. Ans d

Chaitanya Mahaprabhu was Bengal's most prominent Vaishnava saint. He popularised Krishna-bhakti in many parts of Eastern India. The advent of Chaitanya marks the shifting of the focus of the Bengal Vaishnava bhakti from devotional literary compositions to a full-fledged reform movement with a broad social base. Chaitanya disregarded all distinctions of caste, creed and sex to give a popular base to Krishna-bhakti. His followers belonged to all castes and communities. One of his favourite disciples was Haridas, who was a Muslim. He popularised the sankirtan (group devotional songs accompanied by ecstatic dancing). Chaitanya's exposition of Rasalila is one of his most profound contributions to Indian philosophy.



## Q2. Ans c

The Tehran Convention (formally the Framework Convention for the Protection of the Marine Environment of the Caspian Sea), which entered into force in 2006, is the overarching legal instrument for the environmental protection of the Caspian Sea. It is the first legally binding regional agreement signed by all five Caspian littoral states: the Republic of Azerbaijan, the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Republic of Kazakhstan, the Russian Federation, and Turkmenistan. The Caspian Sea is a unique natural reservoir on our planet. It is a land locked water body located between two major parts of the Eurasian continent. Economic activities in the Caspian Sea include oil production, fishing, and shipping.

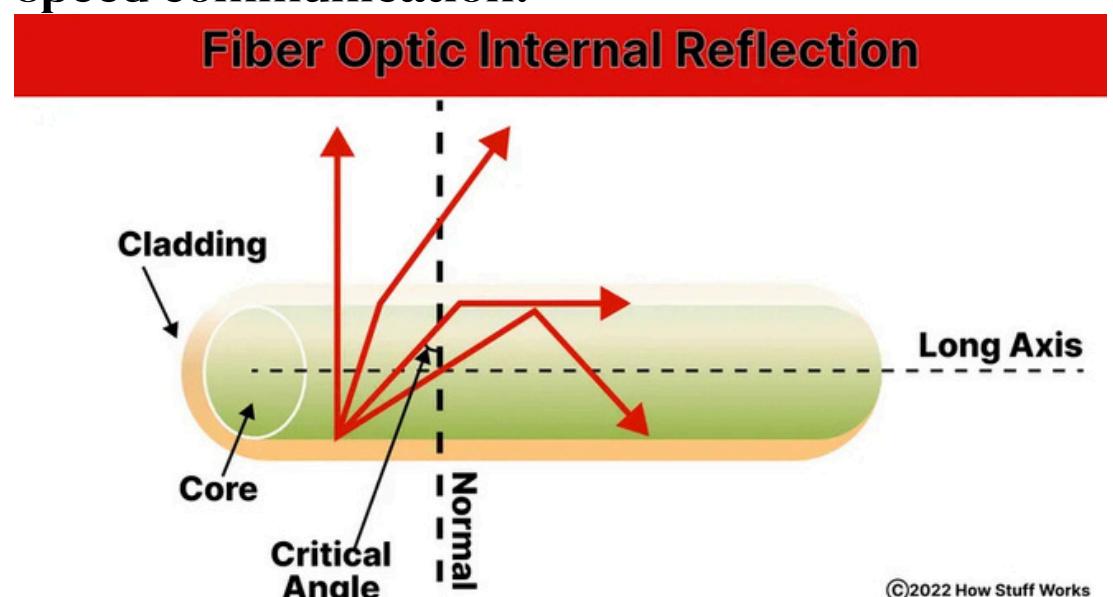
## Q3. Ans b

Brunei is a sovereign state located on the northern coast of the island of Borneo in Southeast Asia. It is bordered by the South China Sea to the north and is completely surrounded by the Malaysian state of Sarawak on all other land sides. Brunei consists of two disconnected territories that occupy a total land area of 2,226 square miles and are separated by the state of Sarawak. The segment to the west is significantly larger than the part on to the east and is home to the nation's capital of Bandar Seri Begawan. The nation gained its independence from the British in 1984.



## Q4. Ans d

Optical fibre cables work on the principle of Total Internal Reflection (TIR), where light signals, converted from digital data, bounce repeatedly within the fibre's core (a glass/plastic strand) by striking the boundary with the surrounding cladding at angles greater than the critical angle, allowing data transmission over long distances with minimal loss. This principle ensures that light signals, carrying vast amounts of data, stay trapped and travel efficiently from one end to the other, making fibre optics a superior choice for high-speed communication.



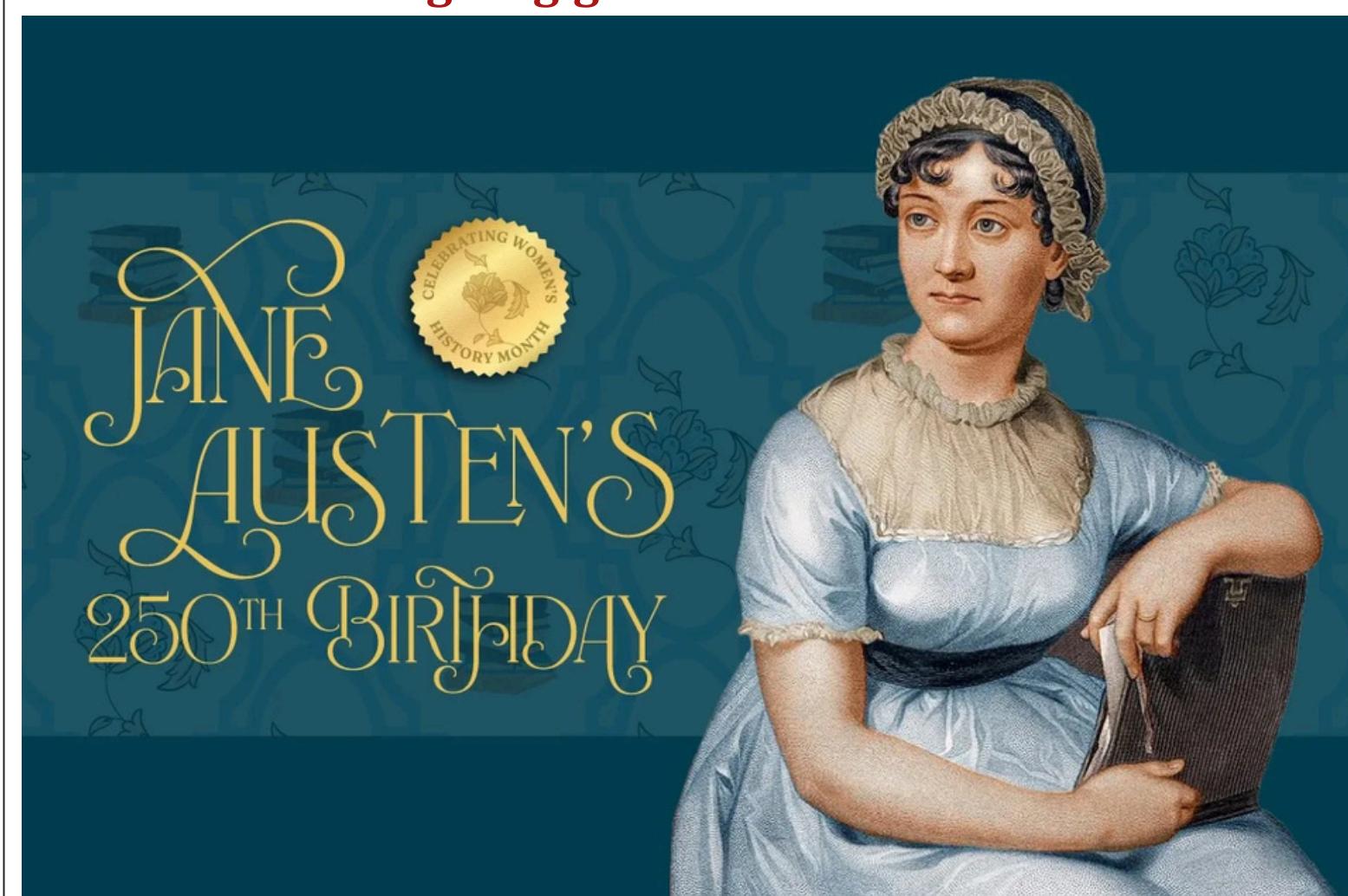
## Case Study:



### 'Waiting to die': the toxic trade of recycling in Vietnam's 'craft' villages

Crouched between mountains of discarded plastic, Lanh strips the labels off bottles of Coke, Evian and local Vietnamese drinks so they can be melted into tiny pellets for reuse. More waste arrives daily, piling up along the roads and rivers of Xa Cau, one of hundreds of "craft" recycling villages encircling Vietnam's capital Hanoi where waste is sorted, shredded and melted. The villages present a paradox: they enable reuse of some of the 1.8 million tonnes of plastic waste Vietnam produces each year, and allow employees to earn much-needed wages. But recycling is done with few regulations, pollutes the environment and threatens the health of those involved, both workers and experts. It is a conundrum facing many fast-growing economies, where plastic use and disposal has outpaced the government's ability to collect, sort and recycle. And in 2008, the life expectancy for residents of the villages was found to be a full decade shorter than the national average, according to the Environment Ministry. But there is also no shortage of workers, keen for the economic lifeline recycling provides.

**Jane Austen's 250th birth anniversary!**  
200 years after her death, she remains "universally acknowledged" for the strength of her themes and insight into human behaviour. Austen's enduring appeal is linked to her precise craft: tight point of view, calibrated pacing, sparkling dialogue, and the way conversation drives both character and plot. Austen's heroines are portrayed as intelligent, self-aware women negotiating constraints with wit, irony, and practical common sense rather than grand rebellion. This balance of emotional vulnerability with clear judgement makes them relatable across generations, while also allowing Austen to expose foolishness, vanity, and social pretension. Even though her heroines operate within patriarchal limits, Austen quietly foregrounds women's agency, desires, and economic precarity, making the novels resonate with ongoing gender debates.



**It is very unfair to judge any body's conduct, without an intimate knowledge of their situation.**

– Jane Austen

