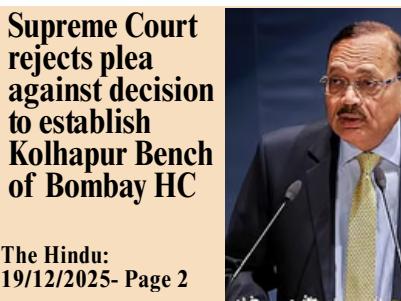
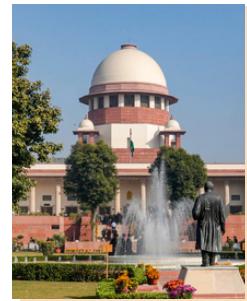




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India signs pact with Oman for duty-free exports; will also allow labour mobility

India has signed a Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) with Oman that gives India near-complete duty-free access to the Omani market and creates a structured framework for labour mobility between the two countries.

Oman will offer duty-free access on 98.95% of its tariff lines, covering 99.38% of India's exports to Oman, which is an unusually high level of tariff elimination for any trade agreement.

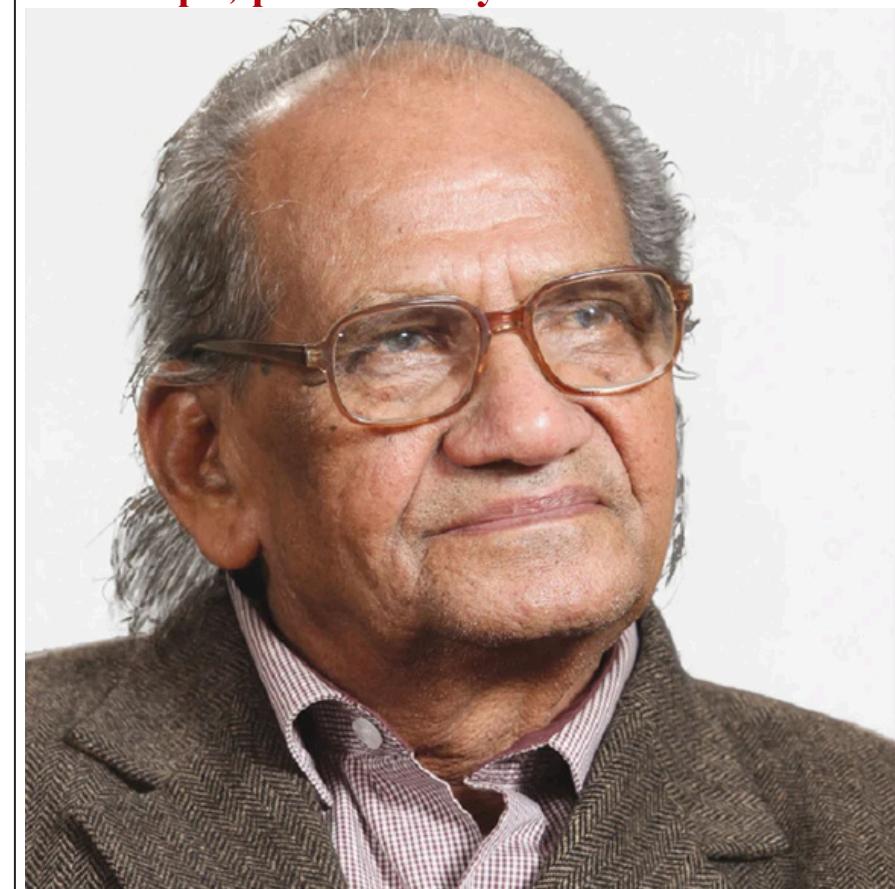
India, on the other hand, will eliminate tariffs on 77.79% of its tariff lines, representing 94.81% of Oman's exports to India, indicating asymmetric but still deep liberalisation in favour of Oman's export basket. The agreement aims to significantly boost bilateral trade beyond the current level of around 13 billion dollars, where India has a notable merchandise trade deficit with Oman (exports roughly 6.5 billion dollars versus higher imports). This is the first bilateral trade agreement India has signed with any country in the Gulf region since 2004, signalling a renewed push to lock in economic partnerships in West Asia amid shifting regional dynamics. The CEPA is framed as a key instrument to upgrade the India-Oman partnership to a "partnership in the 21st century with renewed faith and energy", aligning with India's broader outreach to the Gulf for energy security, investment and diaspora interests. For Oman, tying up with one of the fastest-growing large economies helps diversify away from oil, attract investment, and integrate deeper into Asian value chains, especially when global trade routes are being recalibrated. India has secured tariff benefits for a wide range of products where it has existing or latent competitiveness, including engineering goods, electricals, machinery, automobiles and auto components, textiles, garments, leather, gems and jewellery, and some categories of food products. This labour pillar is politically salient because Oman already hosts a large Indian diaspora.



The Tamil Nadu government has issued a comprehensive Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) to be followed for the conduct of jallikattu in 2026. The traditional bull-taming sport is conducted from January, during the Pongal festivities, till May. Under no circumstances shall jallikattu be permitted in places other than the ones notified by the government.

The SOP is to be followed by the district administration, officials of various government departments, organisers, and the participants. Requirements including video recording and documentation of the events, prior arrangements, creation of awareness among stakeholders on the need to comply with the rules, and detailed compliance reports after each event have also been specified in the SOP.

Ram V. Sutar, the legendary sculptor whose creations, including the Statue of Unity, defined the country's public art landscape, passes away.



202 Indians recruited into Russian forces since 2022: MEA

- The Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) informed Parliament that about 202 Indians are “believed to have been recruited into the Russian armed forces” since 2022, indicating incomplete but worrying data.
- Of these, 26 Indians are reported to have lost their lives, with at least two bodies already cremated in Russia, underscoring the human cost of this pattern of recruitment.
- Many of those involved are described as having been “illegally working or forced to work” with the Russian army, suggesting possible deception, coercion or misuse of visas rather than transparent, lawful enlistment.

Government engagement with Russia

- The MEA states that the Indian government is in “continuous engagement” with Russia to secure the safety, well-being and early discharge of all such Indian nationals from Russian military service.
- Despite earlier assurances from Moscow in 2024 that it would stop recruiting Indians, New Delhi acknowledges that Indians continue to be enlisted, implying that Russian commitments have not translated into full compliance on the ground.
- The Indian Embassy and consulates in Russia are said to be taking up individual cases with Russian authorities, but the persistence of new enlistments points to gaps either in enforcement in Russia or in India’s preventive mechanisms.

Consular action and repatriation of bodies

- The MEA notes that the Indian Mission in Russia has facilitated early discharge or safe return for 119 Indians so far; efforts are ongoing for the remaining individuals, though precise timelines are unclear.
- For those killed, the ministry details an elaborate repatriation protocol, including coordination with Russian authorities, DNA sampling of family members, and identification of mortal remains before transport to India.
- The embassy also arranges travel documentation and tickets “wherever required,” indicating that many affected families may lack resources or paperwork to manage repatriation on their own.
- Strategically, the episode complicates India’s careful balancing act on the Russia-Ukraine conflict: while maintaining strong ties with Moscow, New Delhi must also protect its citizens, press Russia to stop such enlistment, and be seen domestically as acting decisively against exploitation of Indian workers.

Supreme Court rejects plea against decision to establish Kolhapur Bench of Bombay HC

- A Bench of Justices Aravind Kumar and N.V. Anjaria dismissed a petition challenging the August 1 notification of the Bombay High Court (under Section 51(3) of the States Reorganisation Act, 1956) creating the Kolhapur Circuit Bench.
- The Court held that the decision is consistent with the constitutional vision of “bringing justice closer to the people” and lies within the domain of judicial administration, not something for routine judicial interference.

Scope of administrative discretion

- The judgment stresses that High Courts have discretion, within the legal framework and subject to Governor’s approval, to decide additional places of sitting, based on practical and regional needs.
- This discretion, when exercised on objective criteria such as accessibility, volume of litigation, feasibility and institutional capacity, will not be struck down merely because other districts or groups demand similar facilities.

Rejection of Article 14 challenge

- The petitioner argued that choosing Kolhapur over Pune and Solapur was arbitrary and offended Article 14 by discriminating between districts in Maharashtra.
- The Court clarified that Article 14 does not mandate absolute uniformity in administrative decisions; differential treatment based on rational factors like distance, caseload and convenience does not violate equality.

Access to justice rationale

- The Bench treated location of a High Court sitting as an exercise aimed at improving access to justice, inherently involving policy choices about where litigants can conveniently approach courts.
- In this case, the record showed that the districts proposed to be served by the Kolhapur Bench form a contiguous cluster that is geographically distant from the principal seat but for which Kolhapur is a central and convenient hub, making the decision objectively justifiable.

Implications for future challenges

- The Court underlined that the Constitution does not impose a duty on States or High Courts to address all regional demands for benches in an identical or simultaneous way, limiting the scope for similar petitions from other regions.
- By emphasising absence of any material suggesting mala fides or extraneous considerations, the ruling signals that unless challengers show clear arbitrariness or bad faith, courts will defer to High Court-Governor decisions on creating or locating benches.

Aerospace start-ups should shed 'classical approach' to innovation: former ISRO chief

Concerns about current competence

- Somanath says he is worried about the competence and capability to innovate among Indian start-ups and companies engaged in aerostructures, particularly in hardware.
- After surveying firms across the country, he feels many are simply doing what established aerostructure companies have long done, rather than demonstrating new capabilities or distinct technical depth.

Critique of the 'classical' approach

- He characterises the dominant mindset as a "classical approach" to design and development, implying incremental changes to existing aerospace structures rather than disruptive solutions.
- This continuation of traditional methods means that Indian start-ups risk becoming low-value subcontractors in global supply chains instead of becoming originators of new designs, materials, or processes.

Underuse of AI and advanced digital tools

- Somanath explicitly notes that integration of artificial intelligence into aerostructure design and testing is "not happening", indicating a lag in adopting data-driven and autonomous design paradigms that are now mainstream globally.
- He also points out the absence of meaningful progress on "digital twins" in India's aerostructures sector—virtual replicas of physical systems that allow rapid simulation, optimisation and fault prediction—despite frequent references to such concepts in conferences.

Gap between rhetoric and practice

- According to Somanath, many in the ecosystem talk about AI and digital twins, but he has not seen implementation at the scale that should logically have occurred by now given the hype.
- This gap suggests issues such as superficial adoption of buzzwords, limited R&D investment, lack of skilled manpower in computational engineering, and weak collaboration between academia, start-ups and established aerospace players.

Call for ecosystem-level introspection

- Somanath views conferences as opportunities not just to showcase successes but to frankly discuss limitations and why the promised transformation in aerostructure innovation is "not happening".
- His comments amount to a call for Indian aerospace start-ups to move beyond legacy design philosophies, deeply embed AI, simulation and digital-twin technologies, and build genuine, globally competitive intellectual property rather than incremental, service-style work.

Operation Sindoar highlighted India's air power edge: Rajnath

Operation Sindoar as capability demonstration

- Rajnath Singh describes Operation Sindoar as proof of India's high-impact, short-duration operational capability, underscoring the IAF's ability to deliver precise, time-bound strikes.
- He praises the courage, speed and precision with which the IAF destroyed terror camps, while also effectively handling Pakistan's "irresponsible actions" and missile launches that followed, portraying a narrative of decisive but controlled retaliation.

Air power, deterrence and public confidence

- The Minister stresses that the calm response of citizens during Pakistan's retaliatory missile attacks on Indian installations reflected increased public confidence in India's air defence preparedness.
- He urges Air Force Commanders to draw lessons from the operation and other recent conflicts so as to strengthen offensive and defensive capabilities vis-à-vis adversaries.

Technological transformation and future warfare

- Singh links Operation Sindoar to the character of 21st-century warfare, emphasising that cyber warfare, artificial intelligence, unmanned systems, satellite-based surveillance and space-enabled capabilities are reshaping conflict.
- He notes that precision-guided weapons, real-time intelligence and data-driven decision-making are now essential, placing expectations on the IAF to remain technologically advanced, operationally agile and strategically confident.

Lessons from global conflicts

- Reflecting on recent wars such as Russia–Ukraine and Israel–Hamas, he argues that air strikes like Balakot and Operation Sindoar have established air power as a decisive tool, especially when characterised by speed, surprise and clear strategic messaging.
- He calls on leadership to ensure that such air operations deliver messages aligned with India's diplomatic and military objectives, treating air power as both a tactical asset and a strategic signalling instrument.

Indigenous development and tri-service synergy

- Singh underlines the importance of indigenous jet engines and other homegrown defence systems, arguing that self-reliance will act as a force multiplier in future air campaigns.
- Referring to the Sudarshan Chakra concept announced by the Prime Minister, he frames Operation Sindoar as a symbol of tri-service synergy and promises continued government support to strengthening the overall security apparatus.

India and the Netherlands agree to expand security, defence cooperation

- India and the Netherlands have agreed to deepen and institutionalise their security and defence partnership, focusing on co-development, co-production and high-technology collaboration within a broader Indo-Pacific and strategic framework.

Meeting context and political signalling

- Defence Minister Rajnath Singh met Dutch Foreign Minister David van Weel in New Delhi and reaffirmed that defence cooperation is a “key pillar” of the India–Netherlands Strategic Partnership.
- The talks underscored both countries’ shared commitment to a “free, open, inclusive and rules-based Indo-Pacific”, aligning the bilateral agenda with wider regional balancing and maritime security narratives.

Priority areas in defence cooperation

- Discussions covered bilateral security and defence cooperation, giving priority to co-development and co-production of defence equipment, signalling an intent to move beyond buyer–seller dynamics.
- Both ministers highlighted the importance of connecting the defence industries of the two countries, particularly in “niche and emerging technologies”, where Dutch strengths in high-tech and Indian manufacturing capacity can be complementary.

Institutional framework and road-mapping

- A Letter of Intent on Defence Cooperation was exchanged to provide an institutional framework for advancing collaboration, indicating movement towards more structured, long-term engagement rather than ad hoc projects.
- The two sides agreed to explore a defence industrial road map focusing on technology collaboration, joint production and co-development of platforms and equipment, which could eventually translate into concrete joint ventures or R&D programmes.

Strategic and industrial implications

- By emphasising co-development and co-production, India aims to leverage Dutch technology and expertise to support its own defence indigenisation and export ambitions under the Atmanirbhar Bharat push.
- For the Netherlands, closer defence ties with a large Indo-Pacific power like India diversify its security partnerships and open industrial opportunities in one of the fastest-growing defence markets.

People-to-people and diaspora factor

- This notes that strong people-to-people ties form the “foundation” of the relationship, with the sizeable Indian diaspora in the Netherlands described as a “living bridge”.
- This social base can facilitate smoother business partnerships, technology flows and political goodwill, making it easier to operationalise the ambitious defence-industrial agenda outlined by the ministers.

‘India faces its greatest strategic challenge in Bangladesh since 1971’

Nature of the strategic challenge

- The Parliamentary Standing Committee on External Affairs, chaired by Shashi Tharoor, argues that the present challenge is subtler than 1971 but “probably graver, more serious”, involving a generational shift, political realignment and external influence.
- The report states that Bangladesh is witnessing a “shift” with the collapse of Awami League dominance, rise of youth-led nationalism, re-entry of Islamists, and intensifying Chinese and Pakistani influence, all of which could reorient Dhaka away from India.

Risk of losing strategic space

- The panel warns that if India fails to recalibrate its approach now, it risks not just losing strategic space in Dhaka but sliding “into irrelevance”, signalling concerns over erosion of India’s traditional primacy in Bangladesh’s strategic calculus.
- This assessment frames the situation as a turning point comparable in importance to 1971, but driven by political discontinuity and geopolitical competition rather than outright war or humanitarian crisis.

Hasina’s ouster and India’s dilemma

- The report covers India–Bangladesh relations since the fall of the Sheikh Hasina government on August 5, 2024, treating her ouster as the central inflection point in bilateral dynamics.
- It notes that giving refuge to Hasina in India has been a longstanding friction point with Bangladeshi authorities, who accuse her and her associates (using “personal communication devices” India has given access to) of fomenting trouble from Indian soil.

Panel’s view of India’s shelter decision

- Despite these accusations, the panel endorses India’s decision to provide Hasina refuge, calling it the “right decision” but emphasising that New Delhi must ensure she does not engage in political activity aimed at Bangladesh from Indian territory.
- This nuanced stance reflects an attempt to balance moral and historical obligations towards a long-time ally with the need to manage bilateral sensitivities and avoid being seen as interfering in Bangladesh’s internal politics.

Policy recalibration and engagement

- The report, citing detailed accounts of MEA interactions with Bangladeshi officials since August 2024, implies that India needs a carefully recalibrated strategy that engages emerging political actors beyond the Awami League without abandoning its old partners.
- It underlines that India must respond to heightened Chinese and Pakistani activity in Bangladesh through proactive diplomacy, economic integration and security cooperation, or else risk a long-term weakening of its eastern flank and neighbourhood policy.

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

NATIONAL

Retired judges don't want to sit as junior ad hoc judges: CJI

Chief Justice of India (CJI) Surya Kant's disclosure that many retired High Court judges are reluctant to accept appointments as ad hoc judges because they do not want to function as "junior" to sitting judges, even though such appointments are intended to ease massive case backlogs.

Background: mounting criminal case backlog

- The CJI notes that High Courts across India are overburdened, especially with criminal appeals, and that the National Judicial Data Grid shows nearly 38.9 lakh criminal cases pending in High Courts.
- Some High Courts are facing particularly acute stress, with pendency figures and vacancy levels especially high in Allahabad, Punjab and Haryana, and Patna, where criminal appeals are piling up.

Supreme Court's push for ad hoc judges

- Alarmed by this backlog, the Supreme Court in a January 2024 judgment under Article 224A empowered Chief Justices of High Courts, with state government approval, to appoint retired judges as ad hoc judges to hear old criminal appeals.
- This mechanism was meant as a focused, temporary solution: ad hoc judges would sit in special benches to clear arrears without affecting regular rosters or seniority structures among sitting judges.

Resistance from retired judges

- Despite the legal framework, the CJI says feedback from High Courts shows "hardly any retired judge" is willing to return as an ad hoc judge, primarily because they would have to sit as "junior" to their former colleagues.
- Many retired judges fear a loss of status or dignity if they return in a subordinate protocol position—such as sitting in smaller division benches or being ranked below judges who were previously their juniors.

Administrative and collegial dynamics

- Senior advocate K. Parasaran's earlier suggestion that retired judges could sit together as a separate bench of equal status has not been adopted; instead, the memorandum of procedure treats them like any other additional judge, reinforcing status anxieties.
- The CJI recounts that when he invited some retired judges to serve as ad hoc judges, they responded that they would prefer not to sit in a position that symbolically lowered their standing vis-à-vis juniors.

Structural implications for judicial reform

- This resistance undermines the Supreme Court's strategy to quickly reduce criminal case backlogs through the Article 224A route and highlights how institutional culture and notions of hierarchy can obstruct reform even when legal tools exist.
- The episode suggests that any serious attempt to use retired judges will need rethinking of protocol, remuneration, and status—perhaps by giving them dedicated courts, clear tenure protections, and symbolic parity—otherwise the judiciary may lose a potentially valuable resource for easing pendency.

Inside the DHRUV64 microprocessor



On December 15, the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MEITY) announced the launch of DHRUV64, an indigenous microprocessor that it said would strengthen the national indigenous processor pipeline. Its purported applications span the breadth of electronics to industrial automation.

- DHRUV64 is a fully indigenous 64-bit, dual-core, 1 GHz general-purpose microprocessor developed by C-DAC under MEITY's Microprocessor Development Programme.
- It is designed to be fast enough for operating systems yet efficient for embedded uses, aiming to reduce India's dependence on imported processor designs and supply chains.
- Because such chips underpin critical systems like telecom and industrial control, having domestic control over their design and update ecosystem is seen as vital for security and resilience against export controls or supply disruptions.
- DHRUV64's 64-bit, 1 GHz, dual-core design places it above simple sensor or appliance chips and capable of running modern operating systems, but well below cutting-edge consumer processors that have many more cores, higher speeds and integrated GPUs.
- Its realistic use-cases are in reliability-centric domains like telecom base stations, industrial control, routers and automotive modules, where peak performance is less critical than stable hardware-software integration.
- However, established global vendors already dominate these niches with mature products and ecosystems, so winning over even patriotic Indian manufacturers will require substantial further work for DHRUV64 to become commercially attractive.
- DIR-V is the Digital India RISC-V programme that seeks to develop a family of Indian microprocessors based on the open, modular RISC-V instruction set for industrial, military and consumer applications.
- RISC-V itself is a publicly available instruction set that anyone can use without licence fees, allowing different chips to share a common "base language" while being customised with extra features for specific tasks.
- Under DIR-V, THEJAS32 and THEJAS64 were the first two Indian RISC-V chips to be fabricated, with DHRUV64 as the third, though the government has not disclosed where DHRUV64 is manufactured, leaving questions about its supply chain.

Much about DHRUV64 remains unclear because the government's announcement lacks engineering detail.

- The performance claims are not backed by benchmarks, memory hierarchy details, I/O capabilities or performance-per-watt figures, and vague phrases like "modern architectural features" are not explained.
- The fabrication story is opaque: there is no information on which foundry is used, packaging, yields or reliability metrics, all of which are critical for telecom and automotive use.
- The description of the chip as "fully indigenous" is ambiguous, since it does not clarify which parts of the stack—instruction set, core design, SoC integration, toolchain, fabrication or key IP—are actually Indian-owned.
- The long-term roadmap is hazy: while next-generation DHANUSH (1.2-GHz quad-core, 28-nm) and DHANUSH+ (2-GHz quad-core, 14/16-nm) are mentioned, their current stage, timelines and integration with DHRUV64's ecosystem are not clearly laid out.

FM tables Securities Market Code Bill 2025 in Lok Sabha

Purpose and structure of the Bill

- The Bill seeks to unify three existing laws: the Securities Contracts (Regulation) Act 1956, the Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI) Act 1992, and the Depositories Act 1996, creating a single comprehensive code for the securities market.
- It follows up on an earlier Budget announcement to rationalise overlapping provisions and put in place a more coherent framework for investor protection, capital mobilisation, and market stability.

Key governance and institutional changes

- A major governance change is to reduce the number of SEBI board members by converting certain part-time members into full-time members; currently there are three whole-time members and three part-time members.
- The Bill also tightens conflict-of-interest rules by mandating that SEBI board members disclose direct or indirect interests before decisions are taken, with the aim of eliminating any appearance of bias.

Civil penalties and decriminalisation

- The draft converts “minor, procedural and technical” offences into civil violations, to “facilitate the ease of doing business” and reduce criminal prosecution for less serious lapses.
- At the same time, it introduces broader civil penalties and imprisonment for serious market abuse such as insider trading or dealing in non-public information, while carving out an exception for bona fide research and due diligence.

Criticisms and concerns raised in Parliament

- They worry that expanded search, seizure, and adjudication powers could be misused or create a chilling effect, even though the government insists the provisions are needed for deterrence and efficient enforcement.
- The government has referred the Bill to the Standing Committee on Finance for detailed scrutiny, signalling openness to modifications after expert and stakeholder feedback.
- By emphasising both investor protection and ease of doing business, the move reflects a broader strategy to project India as a well-regulated yet business-friendly capital market, even as debates continue over how much power securities regulators should wield.

CCI launches probe against IndiGo after plaints over disruptions

Competition Commission of India (CCI) has initiated a probe into IndiGo after receiving complaints about flight disruptions and possible abuse of its dominant position in the domestic aviation market.

Trigger and scope of CCI inquiry

- The CCI has taken cognisance of information filed against IndiGo in the backdrop of widespread disruptions across various routes in the aviation sector.
- After an initial assessment, the regulator decided to proceed to a formal inquiry under the Competition Act, 2002, though it has not yet disclosed how many complaints were received or the precise issues it will examine.

Nature of alleged misconduct

- A Bengaluru-based lawyer, one of the complainants, alleges “abuse of position” by IndiGo after his Delhi-Bengaluru flight was cancelled and the alternative tickets offered for December 7 were priced much higher.
- The implied charge is that IndiGo may be using its market power to profit from disruptions by forcing passengers onto costlier options, which could amount to exploitative conduct if proven.

Market dominance context

- This notes that IndiGo’s domestic market share has risen from nearly 42% in January 2019 to about 65.7%, aided by the collapse of rivals like Jet Airways and Go First.
- Air India, the second-largest player, has a market share of 25.7%, leaving IndiGo with a clear lead that strengthens the case for treating it as a dominant enterprise under competition law.

Operational disruptions and consumer impact

- IndiGo reportedly cancelled nearly 5,000 flights in the first nine days of December alone, affecting at least 12.5 lakh passengers, which magnifies the consumer harm dimension of any alleged anti-competitive behaviour.
- The scale of cancellations, combined with high rebooking fares, is what has prompted passengers to seek regulatory intervention rather than treating the issue as routine operational turbulence.

Regulatory and policy implications

- The inquiry signals growing willingness of the CCI to scrutinise not just pricing cartels but also unilateral conduct by dominant firms in sectors where competition has thinned out.
- Depending on findings, the case could set important precedents on how airlines must handle cancellations, pricing and consumer redress when they wield significant market power in an essential service like air travel.

How Oman trade deal adds heft to India's West Asia strategy?

Strategic context in West Asia

- India is signing the Oman deal amid rising trade restrictions from the US (carbon tariffs) and EU (non-tariff barriers), and as part of a broader push to secure more free trade agreements with friendly countries.
- The pact builds on earlier FTAs with the UAE and ongoing negotiations with other Gulf Cooperation Council members, reflecting New Delhi's strategy of using trade to anchor its presence in a region critical for energy and diaspora interests.

Current trade profile and asymmetries

- Bilateral trade with Oman has risen from about 3 billion dollars to 6 billion dollars over the past decade, but is heavily skewed towards India's energy imports such as petroleum and petrochemicals.
- India mainly exports machinery, aircraft parts, rice, iron and steel products, inorganic chemicals and plastics, while imports from Oman are dominated by bituminous substances, fertilisers, ores and some machinery.

Market access and tariff gains

- The Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) will eliminate or reduce duties on a wide range of goods, giving Indian exporters preferential access in sectors like engineering goods, chemicals, textiles, automobiles and food products.
- Omani imports into India also gain from tariff concessions, particularly in fertilisers and minerals, which could help India secure more stable supplies of critical raw materials.

Role in supply chains and diversification

- This notes that Oman's location and ports can act as a logistics hub linking India to both West Asia and Africa, complementing the existing UAE route and reducing over-dependence on any single Gulf partner.
- With Oman's relatively small local market, the real opportunity lies in using it as a platform for joint manufacturing, value addition and re-exports into the broader Middle East and African markets.

Services, investment and long-term impact

- Beyond goods, the CEPA targets services and investments, including cooperation in healthcare, tourism, education and financial services, as well as ease of movement for professionals.
- The Commerce Ministry expects the deal to boost India's exports by about 6.1 billion dollars, create additional jobs, and improve India's overall resilience against external trade shocks by locking in a reliable partner in a geopolitically sensitive region.

How China built 'Manhattan Project' to rival the West in AI chips

Strategic goal and prototype breakthrough

- In a high-security lab in Shenzhen, Chinese scientists have built a prototype lithography machine that could eventually manufacture advanced chips needed for AI, smartphones and weapons, aiming to overcome US-led restrictions that block access to leading-edge tools.
- Completed in early 2025, the prototype is still years from mass production and faces major technical challenges, but it represents a crucial step in Beijing's strategy to secure semiconductor self-sufficiency and reduce dependence on Western suppliers like ASML, TSMC and US chip designers.

Context: EUV chokepoint and US controls

- EUV lithography machines, dominated globally by Dutch firm ASML, are indispensable for making the most advanced chips and have become a central chokepoint in the US campaign to contain China's semiconductor rise.
- Washington has spent years persuading the Netherlands, Japan and others to restrict exports of such tools to China; these curbs have slowed China's access to state-of-the-art manufacturing, particularly for AI and military applications.

China's "Manhattan Project" structure

- Beijing's response has been to organise a massive state-driven programme that brings together veterans from ASML, Chinese research institutes, and national champions such as Huawei under the guidance of a central small-leading group.
- Two ASML veterans played pivotal roles in the breakthrough by helping Chinese teams replicate critical subsystems, while Huawei provided chip-design expertise, data-centre muscle and money; the effort operates under intense secrecy and security vetting.

Espionage, talent poaching and Western pushback

- Western governments and ASML have accused Chinese actors of trade-secret theft, unauthorised data access and aggressive recruitment of ASML staff, with one former engineer in China found liable for stealing source code and documents.
- In response, the US and Europe have tightened export-control enforcement, criminal prosecutions and screening of personnel movements, while privacy rules and non-disclosure agreements limit what ASML can publicly reveal about specific breaches.
- Nonetheless, any success would erode the West's leverage over AI-chip supply chains, give China more resilience against sanctions, and intensify techno-strategic competition, even as the project's reliance on secrecy and IP appropriation deepens distrust and the risk of further decoupling in semiconductor ecosystems.

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.

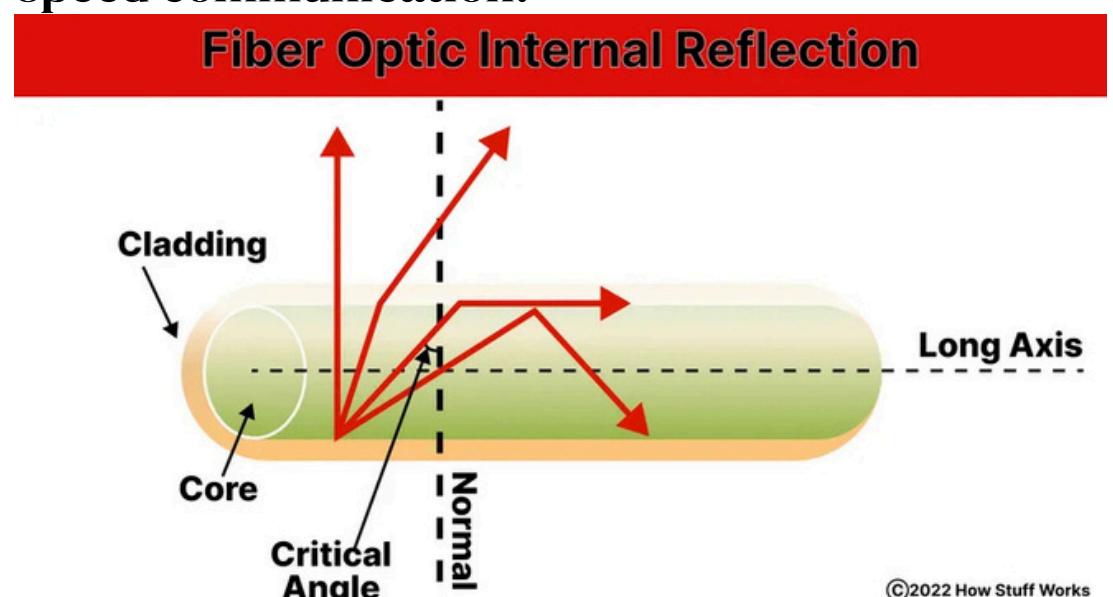
Q3. Ans b

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:



'Women directors make a mark in the Jeddah film festival'

Arab female film directors have helped change the landscape of Arab cinema in recent years, presenting stories that haven't been told before and claiming space in an industry in a region that rarely makes room for women to grow. Four influential female directors took part in this year's Red Sea Film Festival in Jeddah, paving the way for diverse narratives in Arab cinema. Palestinian American filmmaker Cherien Dabis premiered her new film, All That's Left of You, a multi-generational story tracing one family's experience from the 1948 Nakba, Arabic for catastrophe, the mass expulsion of Palestinians before and during the Arab-Israeli war that followed Israel's establishment, to 2022. Saudi filmmaker Shahad Ameen emerged as one of the standout voices at this year's festival. Her latest film, Hijra, won the Yusr Jury Prize, marking another milestone in her career. Zain Duraie premiered her first feature film, Sink, about a mother struggling with her mentally ill son, a subject often overlooked in Arab cinema. Amira Diab, a former financial investment professional based in Manhattan, directed two short films and collaborated with her husband on a series. The film resonated deeply with audiences for capturing the emotional duality of life in the Palestinian territories.

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