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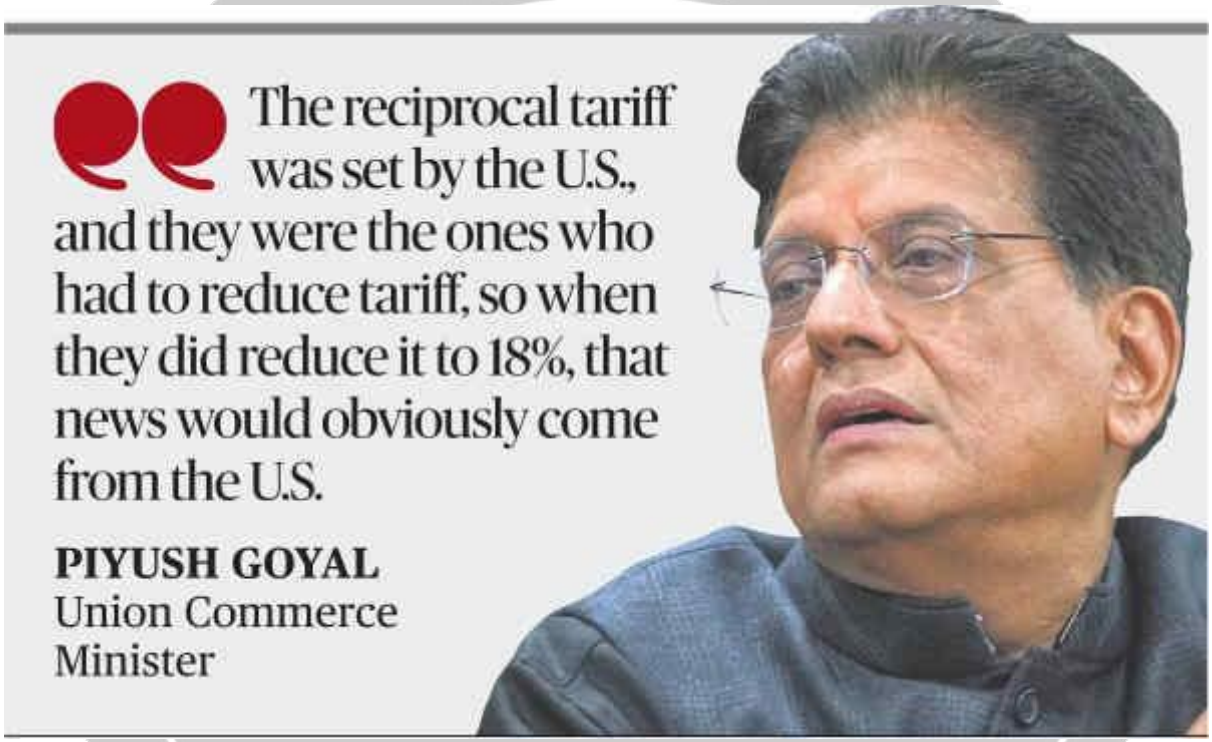
1. U.S. deal excludes sensitive sectors: Goyal

Why in the News?

India and the United States have announced a major bilateral trade deal following high-level negotiations between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the United States. U.S. President Donald Trump. Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal stated that the pact excludes sensitive sectors such as agriculture and dairy. At the same time, the U.S. has agreed to reduce reciprocal tariffs on Indian goods and remove penalty tariffs linked to India's Russian oil imports. The announcement has triggered political debate domestically and raised questions about the deal's structure, transparency, and long-term strategic implications.



Background

- India–U.S. trade relations have expanded significantly over the last two decades, evolving from limited engagement to a strategic economic partnership.
- Bilateral trade in goods and services has crossed $190 billion in recent years, making the U.S. one of India's largest trading partners.
- Persistent friction points have included tariffs, digital trade rules, intellectual property, market access, and agricultural subsidies.
- The U.S. had earlier imposed high "reciprocal" and penalty tariffs on Indian goods, affecting sectors such as marine exports, textiles, and engineering goods.
- India has historically treated agriculture and dairy as politically and socially sensitive sectors due to the livelihoods of millions of small farmers.
- Previous trade negotiations between the two countries stalled due to disagreements over market access, especially in agriculture, medical devices, and e-commerce.

Features

According to official statements and government sources, the emerging framework includes:

- Exclusion of Sensitive Sectors
- Agriculture and dairy are explicitly excluded from tariff concessions
- Protection of small farmers and domestic dairy cooperatives.
- Continuity with India's long-standing red lines in trade negotiations.

Tariff Reductions by the U.S.

- Reduction of U.S. reciprocal tariffs from 25% to 18%.
- Removal of an additional 25% penalty tariff imposed on India's Russian oil imports.
- Immediate relief to exporters in the marine, textiles, and manufacturing sectors.

Boost to Labour-Intensive Exports

The deal is expected to benefit:

- Textiles and apparel
- Leather and footwear
- Gems and jewellery
- Plastics and home décor
- Organic chemicals and machinery
- Aircraft components

These sectors employ large numbers of workers and align with India's manufacturing push.

Strategic Purchase Commitments

- Proposed imports worth $500 billion over five years.
- Focus on U.S. energy, technology, AI chips, and data centre infrastructure.
- Possible expansion of civil nuclear cooperation.

Political Messaging

- The government claims the deal is superior to those signed by neighbouring competitors.
- Framed as protecting domestic interests while expanding global opportunity.

Challenges and Concerns

- Transparency and Parliamentary Oversight
- Announcement via social media before a parliamentary statement raised concerns.
- Opposition questions about democratic accountability.
- Lack of a publicly available full text of the agreement.

Strategic Autonomy Risks

- U.S. pressure regarding Russian oil imports may constrain India's energy diplomacy.
- Potential long-term dependence on U.S. technology and energy supplies.

Domestic Sectoral Pressures

- Even excluded sectors may face indirect competition through standards or supply chains.
- MSMEs may struggle to compete with high-tech imports.

Geopolitical Signalling
- Alignment with U.S. trade priorities may complicate ties with Russia and other partners.
- Could affect India's balancing role in a multipolar world.

Implementation Complexity
- Technical detailing is still pending.
- Regulatory harmonisation and dispute settlement mechanisms unclear.

Way Forward
Full Disclosure and Debate
- Present the complete agreement in Parliament.
- Encourage bipartisan discussion to build long-term consensus.

Safeguard Clauses
- Insert strong review and safeguard mechanisms.
- Protect vulnerable domestic sectors from sudden import surges.

Diversified Trade Strategy
- Continue strengthening ties with the EU, ASEAN, and the Global South.
- Avoid overdependence on any single partner.

Domestic Capacity Building
- Upgrade manufacturing competitiveness.
- Invest in skilling, logistics, and export infrastructure.

Energy and Technology Balance
- Maintain diversified energy sources.
- Develop indigenous semiconductor and AI capabilities alongside imports.

Conclusion

The India–U.S. trade deal represents a significant recalibration of bilateral economic ties. By excluding agriculture and dairy, the government has attempted to protect politically sensitive sectors while securing tariff relief and export opportunities. However, questions around transparency, strategic autonomy, and long-term economic resilience remain.

2. Kerala to move ahead with first phase of RRTS

Why in the News?
Kerala has given in-principle approval to a 583-km Regional Rapid Transit System (RRTS) corridor from Thiruvananthapuram to Kasaragod, marking a major push toward high-speed regional mobility. The State will begin with Phase 1 (Travancore line: Thiruvananthapuram–Thrissur) and submit a formal proposal to the Union government for approvals. The move comes

amid delays and objections to the earlier SilverLine high-speed rail project and renewed debate over Centre–State cooperation in transport infrastructure.

Background

Kerala's transport infrastructure faces structural constraints:

- Linear geography with dense population along the coast
- High road congestion and slow rail speeds
- Limited scope for highway widening
- Rising commuter demand between major urban clusters

The State had earlier proposed the SilverLine semi-high-speed rail project, which faced:

- Environmental objections from the Centre
- Concerns over land acquisition
- Public protests in several districts
- Financing and ecological questions

Learning from that experience, the government has pivoted to an RRTS model similar to Delhi's regional rapid rail, focusing on elevated corridors and phased execution.

An RRTS is distinct from conventional rail:

- Designed for high-speed regional commuting (160–180 km/h)
- Dedicated tracks
- Metro-style frequency with intercity reach
- Transit-oriented urban development

Features

Scale and Alignment

- Total network: 583 km
- Route: Thiruvananthapuram → Kasaragod
- Spine of a statewide rapid transit grid

Phased Execution Plan

- Phase 1 (2027–2033): Thiruvananthapuram–Thrissur (284 km)
- Phase 2: Thrissur–Kozhikode
- Phase 3: Kozhikode–Kannur
- Phase 4: Kannur–Kasaragod

Target: Full statewide network in 12 years.

Integration with Urban Transit

- Interlinking with Thiruvananthapuram Metro
- Integration with Kochi Metro
- Future integration with the Kozhikode Metro
- Unified multimodal mobility network

Elevated Viaduct Design

- Mostly grade-separated elevated corridor
- Reduced land acquisition
- Lower environmental disruption
- Less interference with waterways
- Designed to reduce social opposition

Estimated Cost and Financing

- Project estimate: ₹1.92 lakh crore
- Proposed funding pattern:
    - 20% State government
    - 20% Union government
    - 60% international long-term loans

Future Expansion Vision

- Coimbatore via Palakkad
- Kanyakumari from Thiruvananthapuram
- Mangaluru from Kasaragod

Challenges

Financial Sustainability

- Massive capital requirement
- Debt burden risks
- Loan repayment pressures

- Fare affordability vs viability

Centre–State Coordination
- Mandatory central approvals required
- Political friction may delay execution
- Funding uncertainty from the Union side

Environmental Concerns
- Elevated design reduces impact but does not eliminate it
- Wetland and coastal ecosystem sensitivity

- Climate resilience requirements

Public Acceptance
- SilverLine protests show trust deficit
- Fear of displacement
- Concerns about urban redesign

Implementation Capacity
- Complex engineering across dense settlements
- Integration with existing rail and metro systems
- Long gestation timeline

Way Forward

Transparent Planning
- Public release of DPR findings
- Open environmental assessments
- Community consultations

Phased Financial Structuring
- Sovereign-backed multilateral loans
- PPP elements were viable
- Value capture financing via TOD

Strong Institutional Mechanism
- Dedicated RRTS authority
- Independent regulatory oversight
- Professional project management

Environmental Safeguards
- Climate-resilient infrastructure design
- Green corridors and compensatory afforestation
- Water flow preservation engineering

Centre–State Partnership Model

- Cooperative federal approach
- Shared political ownership
- Fast-track approval mechanisms

Conclusion

Kerala's proposed RRTS represents a strategic shift from a controversial high-speed rail model toward a more integrated, phased, and elevated rapid transit system. If executed effectively, it could transform commuting patterns, reduce congestion, and reshape regional economic geography. However, its success hinges on financial prudence, public trust, environmental sensitivity, and cooperative federalism.

3. SC has not upheld death penalty in 3 years: report

Why in the News?

India's death penalty jurisprudence is under renewed scrutiny after a report revealed that the Supreme Court of India has not confirmed a single death sentence in the last three years. The study, published by the Square Circle Clinic at NALSAR University of Law, shows a widening gap between trial courts awarding death penalties and higher courts overturning or commuting them - raising concerns about wrongful convictions and procedural lapses.

Background

India retains the death penalty under a narrow constitutional framework:

- Capital punishment is permitted but restricted by the "rarest of rare" doctrine
- This principle was laid down in Bachan Singh v. State of Punjab (1980)
- Courts must balance aggravating vs mitigating circumstances
- Sentencing must follow individualized, evidence-based evaluation

In recent decades:

- Judicial interpretation has steadily narrowed its application
- Emphasis has shifted toward reformative justice
- Sentencing guidelines have evolved to ensure fairness

The new report highlights how trial-level practices are diverging from higher judicial standards.

Findings

Massive Trial-Level Death Sentencing

- 1,310 death sentences handed down by Sessions Courts (2016–2025)
- 128 death sentences in 2025 alone

High Court Review Outcomes

- Only 8.31% of death sentences confirmed
- 285 acquittals

- 411 commutations

Supreme Court Trends
- Zero confirmations in 3 years

In 37 reviewed cases:
- 15 acquittals
- 14 commutations
- Remaining remanded

Death Row Population
- 574 prisoners on death row in 2025
  - 550 men
  - 24 women
- Average wait before acquittal: 5+ years
- Some exonerations after nearly a decade

Procedural Violations
Despite mandatory safeguards under:
- Manoj v. State of Madhya Pradesh
- Vasanta Sampat Dupare v. Union of India

Nearly 95% of 2025 death sentences were ignored:
- Psychological assessments
- Mitigation hearings
- Prison conduct reports
- Adequate sentencing preparation time

Emerging Judicial Alternative

- Growth of life imprisonment without parole
- Seen as a middle ground between death and ordinary life sentence

Risk of Wrongful Convictions
- High acquittal rate signals systemic trial errors
- Irreversibility of capital punishment magnifies harm

Sentencing Inconsistency
- Wide variation across the Sessions Courts
- Lack of uniform sentencing standards

Procedural Non-Compliance
- Ignoring Supreme Court safeguards
- Weak defence representation
- Rushed sentencing hearings

Psychological Trauma
- Prolonged death row incarceration
- Mental health impact of uncertainty

Institutional Credibility
- Public trust is affected by frequent reversals
- Perception of arbitrariness

Way Forward

Mandatory Sentencing Audits
- Independent review of all capital sentencing
- Compliance certification before confirmation

Specialized Capital Defence Units
- Trained legal aid teams
- Mitigation specialists and psychologists

Judicial Training
- Continuous education for Sessions judges
- Standardized sentencing protocols

Strengthened Legal Aid
- Adequate funding
- Early-stage defence preparation

Conclusion

The data reveal a structural contradiction: trial courts continue to impose death sentences frequently, while appellate courts increasingly reject them. This disconnect exposes deep weaknesses in the investigation, prosecution, and sentencing processes. The Supreme Court's reluctance to confirm executions reflects a shift toward caution - but the persistence of procedural violations suggests that reform must begin at the trial level.

4. Conservationists apprehensive of 'turtle trails' announced in Budget

Why in the news?

The Union Budget 2026–27 announced plans to develop "turtle trails" along key Olive Ridley turtle nesting sites in Odisha, Karnataka and Kerala to promote eco-tourism. The proposal has sparked concern among conservationists who fear that increased human presence, light pollution, and tourism infrastructure may disrupt fragile mass nesting habitats, particularly in Odisha - home to the world's largest Olive Ridley rookery.

Background

- The Olive Ridley sea turtle is listed as Vulnerable on the IUCN Red List and is protected under Schedule I of India's Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972.

- These turtles are known for a rare phenomenon called arribada - synchronised mass nesting - seen in only a few places globally (India, Costa Rica, Mexico).
-

Odisha hosts the largest mass nesting grounds in the world, primarily:

  - Gahirmatha Beach
  - Rushikulya River mouth
- Gahirmatha remains largely protected due to proximity to a missile testing range, limiting human entry.
- Rushikulya, however, has historically attracted tourists, leading to documented disturbances in nesting behaviour.
- In February 2025, nearly 7 lakh turtles nested in eight days — a record event highlighting the ecological importance of the site.

Mass nesting sites are extremely sensitive. Artificial light, noise, trampling, and vibrations can:

- Disorient nesting turtles
- Cause nesting abandonment
- Increase hatchling mortality
- Alter long-term nesting patterns

Features

- Creation of eco-tourism corridors branded as “turtle trails”
- Targeted at coastal states with nesting beaches
- Aimed at combining conservation awareness with tourism revenue
- Likely inclusion of visitor facilities, viewing platforms, guided trails, and interpretation centres
- Promoted under the larger framework of sustainable tourism

However, details on consultations with wildlife experts, environmental impact assessments, and carrying capacity studies remain unclear.

Challenges

Ecological Sensitivity

- Mass nesting beaches function as biologically critical zones
- Even controlled tourism introduces:
  - Light pollution
  - Sound disturbance
  - Physical habitat damage
- Nesting turtles are highly sensitive to human presence

Ecotourism Paradox

- “Eco-tourism” often becomes mass tourism in disguise
- Lessons from Chilika Lake show dolphin habitats disturbed by boat tourism
- Weak enforcement leads to commercialisation

Enforcement Gaps

- Existing conservation infrastructure is underutilised
- Speed boats procured for anti-poaching enforcement reportedly lie unused

- Staff shortages and weak monitoring reduce effectiveness

Lack of Scientific Consultation
- Conservationists report no structured consultation before the announcement
- Policy risks being top-down tourism-driven, not science-driven

Carrying Capacity Concerns
- No clarity on visitor limits
- Absence of strict zoning plans
- Risk of infrastructure creep along beaches

Way Forward

Declare Mass Nesting Zones as Strict No-Go Areas
- Adopt global best practices
- Buffer zones around nesting beaches
- Zero artificial light policies

Shift Tourism Away from Nesting Core
- Create off-site interpretation centres
- Use virtual reality, documentaries, and guided exhibitions
- Promote awareness without physical intrusion

Science-led Tourism Model
- Mandatory ecological impact assessments
- Independent expert committee oversight
- Seasonal access restrictions

Strengthen Enforcement First
- Repair and operationalise anti-poaching infrastructure
- Night patrols during nesting season
- Community-led monitoring

Community-Based Conservation
- Train local fishers as turtle guardians
- Provide livelihood incentives
- Promote conservation stewardship

Controlled Research Access Only
- Allow limited access for accredited researchers
- Strict protocols on lighting and movement

Conclusion

The Olive Ridley arribada is a globally rare ecological spectacle and a symbol of India's marine biodiversity leadership. While eco-tourism can raise awareness and support conservation funding, mass nesting beaches are not conventional tourism sites. They are fragile biological sanctuaries that demand restraint, scientific planning, and strict enforcement.

5. 84% waste-pickers from SC, ST, OBC groups: govt.

Why in the News?

The Union government has, for the first time, released nationwide enumeration data on waste-pickers, showing that 84.5% belong to SC, ST, and OBC communities. The data was tabled in Parliament under the NAMASTE Scheme, highlighting the strong caste dimension of informal sanitation labour and reviving debate on dignity, safety, and social justice in urban waste management.

Background

- Waste-picking in India has historically been tied to caste-based occupational hierarchies.
- Informal waste workers collect recyclable material from streets, dumps, and bins without formal employment protection.
- These workers face:
- Health hazards
- Social stigma
- Lack of protective gear
- Income insecurity

The NAMASTE scheme (National Action for Mechanised Sanitation Ecosystem) was launched to:

- Eliminate hazardous manual sanitation work
- Formalise sanitation labour
- Provide safety equipment and rehabilitation

Key data highlights:

- 1.52 lakh waste-pickers enumerated so far
- 60.3% SC, 13.7% OBC, 10.5% ST
- 48.7% women → gendered vulnerability
- Delhi and Goa are outliers where General category workers form a majority
- Enumeration also includes sewer and septic tank workers, who show an even stronger caste concentration

The findings reinforce long-standing sociological research linking sanitation work to caste marginalisation.

Features

- Conducted by Urban Local Bodies under the NAMASTE framework
- Formal profiling and validation of workers
- Recognition of informal waste-pickers
- Aim to provide:
    - Protective equipment
    - Skill training
    - Health insurance
    - Livelihood alternatives
- Expansion of scheme objectives to include waste-pickers, not just sewer workers
- Gender-disaggregated and caste-disaggregated data collection

This is one of the first official datasets mapping the social composition of urban waste labour.

Challenges

Persistence of Caste-based Occupations

- Sanitation work remains structurally tied to caste
- Intergenerational occupational trapping
- Social mobility remains limited

Informality and Legal Invisibility

- **Most waste-pickers lack:**
    - Contracts
    - Social security
    - Worker identity cards
- They remain outside labour protection frameworks

Occupational Health Risks

- Exposure to toxic waste, pathogens, and sharp objects
- Respiratory illness, infections, injuries
- No consistent access to health insurance

Gendered Vulnerability

- Nearly half the workforce is women
- Women face wage discrimination and harassment
- Double burden of unpaid domestic work

Weak Urban Governance

- Municipalities rely on informal labour without formal integration
- Privatisation of waste management can exclude existing workers
- Lack of rehabilitation pathways

Social Stigma

- Waste work is associated with untouchability norms
- Workers face discrimination in housing, schooling, and public spaces

Way Forward

Formal Recognition as Urban Workers

- Issue worker ID cards
- Integrate waste-pickers into municipal systems
- Recognise them as environmental service providers

Universal Social Security

- Health insurance coverage
- Pension and accident protection
- Linkage with welfare schemes

Mechanisation with Rehabilitation

- Mechanisation must not displace workers
- Provide skill training and alternate employment
- Worker-owned cooperatives

Caste-sensitive Policy Design

- Targeted social justice interventions
- Scholarships for children of sanitation workers
- Anti-discrimination enforcement

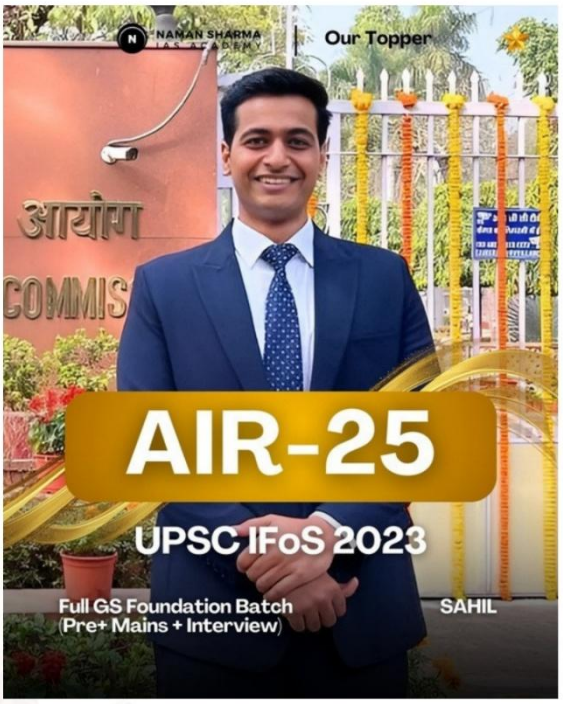
Gender-focused Support

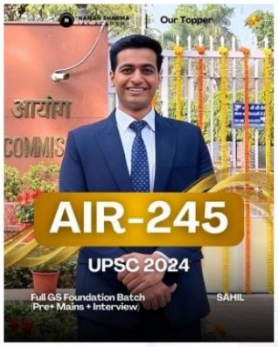
- Creches and childcare
- Equal pay safeguards
- Women-led cooperatives

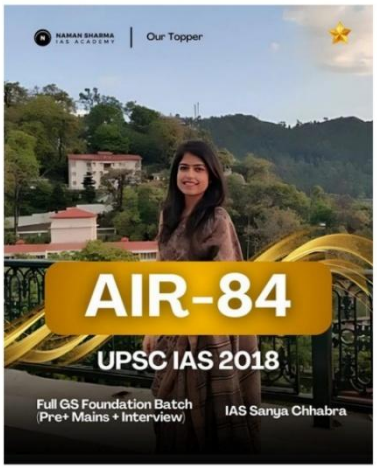
Conclusion

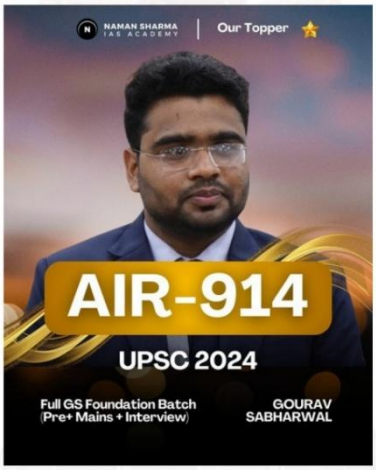
The new data is more than a statistical exercise — it exposes the deep structural link between caste and sanitation labour in urban India. Enumeration is an important first step, but recognition without transformation risks institutionalising inequality. The challenge is not only to protect workers, but to dismantle the social and economic conditions that confine marginalised communities to hazardous occupations.

Our Recent Toppers









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