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1. Global energy concerns mount as Iran hits ships

Why in the News?

The article is news due to a significant and dangerous escalation of the conflict involving Iran. **Key events pushing this into the headlines include:**

- **Direct Attacks on Civilian Infrastructure:** Iran attacked a commercial ship (the Mayuree Naree) in the Strait of Hormuz and launched drones near Dubai International Airport.
- **Expanding Geographic Scope:** The conflict is no longer isolated but now directly involves vital international shipping lanes, the UAE, and sees retaliatory strikes on Iran.
- **Global Energy Security:** With Iran effectively disrupting traffic in the Strait of Hormuz (through which 20% of global oil passes), there is a direct threat to global oil supplies, causing price volatility.
- **International Response:** The International Energy Agency's (IEA) unprecedented move to release 400 million barrels of oil reserves highlights the severity of the perceived energy risk.



Background

The current crisis is the latest phase in a long-standing shadow war between Iran and its allies (like Hezbollah) on one side, and Israel and the United States on the other. The immediate trigger mentioned in the article is "intense American airstrikes targeting Iranian Navy assets and the port city of Bandar Abbas." In response, Iran has escalated its strategy of "squeezing the oil-rich region" by targeting commercial shipping and Gulf Arab nations' infrastructure. This tactic aims to inflict global economic pain to force the U.S. and Israel to cease their strikes. The conflict has also opened a front in Lebanon, with Israel striking Hezbollah targets.

Features

- **Attack on Indian-Bound Vessel:** The Thai cargo ship Mayuree Naree, en route to Kandla (Gujarat), was hit in the Strait of Hormuz. Three crew members are missing, and 20

were rescued. The Indian government officially "deplored" the targeting of commercial shipping.

- **Targeting of Civilian and Economic Hubs:**
 - Dubai: Two Iranian drones struck near Dubai International Airport, wounding four people.
 - Saudi Arabia & Kuwait: Intercepted drones and missiles targeting oil fields and military bases.
 - Threat to Finance: Iran explicitly threatened to target financial institutions across West Asia, putting hubs like Dubai, Saudi Arabia, and Bahrain at risk.
- **Oil Market Shock:** Despite prices being below Monday's peaks, they remain 20% higher than before the conflict began. The IEA's 400-million-barrel reserve release is the largest in history.
- **Wider Conflict:** Israel renewed airstrikes on Tehran and Hezbollah targets in Lebanon, causing fires and injuries in Beirut.

Challenges

- **Ensuring Safety of Indian Citizens and Assets:** India has a massive stake in the region, from its citizens working there to its oil imports and trade routes. The attack on an India-bound ship and the threat to financial hubs pose a direct challenge to New Delhi's diplomatic and protective capabilities.
- **Protecting Global Energy Supplies:** The Strait of Hormuz is a critical chokepoint. Iran's effective blockade and the potential mining of the strait pose a challenge that could cripple the global economy. Clearing mines, if laid, could take weeks.
- **Preventing a Wider Regional War:** The conflict is rapidly expanding beyond a bilateral issue. With the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait now under direct or indirect attack, there is a significant challenge in preventing the entire West Asian region from being engulfed in war.
- **Humanitarian Cost:** The attacks on commercial ships endanger the "precious lives" of innocent civilian sailors from multiple nations, including India.

Way Forward

- **De-escalation and Diplomacy:** The immediate need is for international pressure on all parties to de-escalate. The Indian government's statement, deploring the targeting of commercial shipping and calling for an end to endangering civilians, is a crucial part of this diplomatic chorus.
- **Securing Shipping Lanes:** The international community, likely through naval coalitions, must work to ensure the safety of navigation in the Strait of Hormuz and the Persian Gulf. India, given its interests, may need to enhance its maritime surveillance and coordination in the region.
- **Managing Economic Fallout:** Coordinated action like the IEA's reserve release is vital to stabilise markets. Nations must also explore diversifying energy sources in the short term to mitigate supply shocks.
- **Protecting Nationals:** Countries with significant diaspora in the Gulf, like India, must remain on high alert, issuing advisories and preparing contingency plans for their citizens.

Conclusion

The events described mark a perilous escalation where the conflict has moved from targeted military exchanges to directly attacking global commerce and civilian infrastructure. By hitting a ship in the Strait of Hormuz and threatening financial centres like Dubai, Iran has globalised the crisis. The international community now faces the urgent task of containing the conflict to prevent a full-scale regional war that would devastate the global economy, disrupt energy supplies, and endanger

countless lives. India's direct stake in this conflict is now undeniable, necessitating a proactive and robust diplomatic and protective response.

2. SC upholds 'right to die' for man in vegetative state

Why in the News?

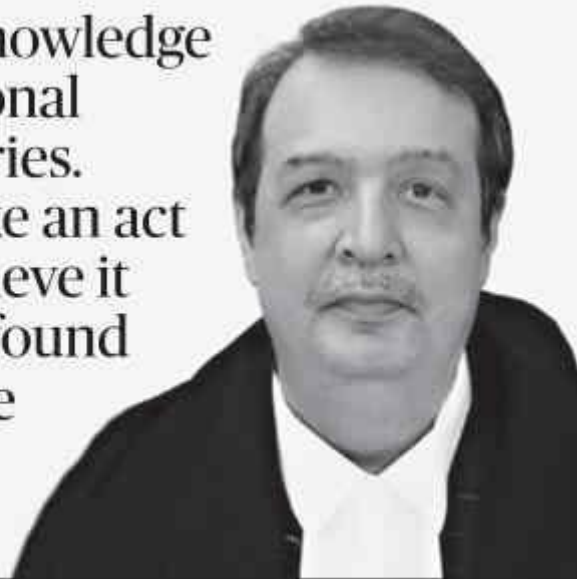
The Supreme Court's judgment is in the news because it represents a landmark moment in India's legal and medical history. It is significant for the following reasons:

- **First Implementation of 2018 Guidelines:** This is the first time the Supreme Court has actually applied its own 2018 Constitution Bench judgment that recognised "passive euthanasia" and laid down guidelines for it.
- **Upholding the Right to Die with Dignity:** The court affirmed that the right to life under Article 21 includes the right to die with dignity, specifically allowing the withdrawal of life-sustaining treatment for a person in a persistent vegetative state (PVS).
- **Human Interest Element:** The case involves a 32-year-old man, Harish Rana, who has been in a vegetative state for 13 years, and his family's agonising decision to seek permission to let him "leave with dignity."



We want to acknowledge the deep emotional weight this decision carries. This decision can feel like an act of surrender, but we believe it is, in truth, an act of profound compassion and courage

J.B. PARDIWALA
Supreme Court judge



Background

Harish Rana suffered severe head injuries and 100% quadriplegic disability after a fall from a building in 2013. For nearly 13 years, he has been in a persistent vegetative state, kept alive through Clinically Assisted Nutrition and Hydration (CANH). His family, who have cared for him throughout, approached the Supreme Court seeking permission to withdraw this life support. The legal framework for this request was established by a 2018 Constitution Bench judgment of the Supreme Court, which recognised "passive euthanasia" (withdrawing life support) and laid down guidelines for it. This case is the first practical test of those guidelines.

Features

- **The Judgment:** A Bench of Justices J.B. Pardiwala and K.V. Viswanathan allowed the withdrawal of CANH for Harish Rana.
- **Compassionate Language:** The court delivered the judgment with deep empathy for the family, acknowledging their "profound compassion and courage" and stating that allowing Harish to "leave with dignity" reflects their "selfless love." The court noted that the family only resorted to legal action after reaching "a point of no return."
- **Role of AIIMS:** The court directed AIIMS Delhi to shift Harish Rana from his residence to their palliative care centre to oversee the process.
- **Focus on Palliative Care:** The judgment firmly linked the withdrawal of life support to a "well-structured, tailored, robust and articulated palliative care plan." It emphasised that the patient must be looked after sensitively, with dignity as the foremost concern.

Challenges

- **Ethical and Moral Dilemmas:** Cases like these force society to confront difficult questions about the sanctity of life versus the right to die with dignity. For families, the emotional weight of such a decision is immense, as acknowledged by the court.
- **Lack of Clear Legal Framework:** While the 2018 judgment provided guidelines, India still lacks a comprehensive law on euthanasia and advance medical directives. Each case may currently require legal scrutiny, which can be a long and painful process for families.
- **Medical and Palliative Care Infrastructure:** The judgment's emphasis on palliative care highlights a significant challenge: India's healthcare system has limited palliative care facilities and expertise. Ensuring that patients in similar situations receive sensitive, dignified end-of-life care is a major hurdle.
- **Defining "Point of No Return":** Determining medically and legally when a patient has reached a "point of no return" where withdrawal of life support is ethical remains a complex challenge requiring collaboration between doctors, families, and the judiciary.

Way Forward

- **Enacting Comprehensive Legislation:** There is a need for Parliament to enact a clear and compassionate law on passive euthanasia and advance medical directives to provide a statutory framework, reducing the need for families to approach the Supreme Court in every case.
- **Strengthening Palliative Care:** The government must invest in expanding palliative care infrastructure, training medical professionals, and creating protocols for end-of-life care across the country, as emphasised by the court.
- **Public Awareness:** It is crucial to create societal awareness about the legal and medical options available, including the concept of living wills and the right to die with dignity, to empower individuals and families to make informed decisions.
- **Clear Medical Protocols:** Medical councils should work to establish clear, standardised protocols for determining PVS and for the process of withdrawing life support, ensuring consistency and ethical rigour.

Conclusion

This Supreme Court judgment is a profound and humane step in affirming that the right to life includes the right to a dignified death. By allowing Harish Rana's family to withdraw life support, the court has not only implemented a 2018 legal principle but has also shown deep compassion for a family's decade-long ordeal. The judgment rightly links the act of "letting go" with the provision of sensitive palliative care. However, it also underscores the urgent need for India to develop a robust legal and medical framework for end-of-life decisions, ensuring that the dignity of every individual is protected until the very end.

3. Treasure evaluation panel estimates gold found in Gadag to be over 500 years old

Why in the News?

The discovery is in the news because of the historical and archaeological significance of the treasure found in Lakkundi, a village already renowned for its ancient heritage. The **key reasons for its newsworthiness are:**

- **Historical Age:** A government-appointed expert committee has officially estimated the gold ornaments to be 500-600 years old, dating them back to the Vijayanagara Empire.
- **Artistic and Cultural Value:** The ornaments are not merely old gold; they feature distinct motifs like lion faces and keertimukha (face of glory), which were not used by the common public and were likely meant for temple offerings, specifically to a female deity.
- **Significant Financial Worth:** While the scrap value of the 466 grams of gold is around ₹80 lakh, the committee has stated that their ancient origin makes them ten times more valuable, highlighting their significance as antiquities rather than just bullion.



Background

On January 10, workers were excavating land to lay the foundation for a new house belonging to the Ritti family in Lakkundi village, Gadag taluk. At a depth of about five feet, they discovered a copper container (charige/tambige) filled with gold ornaments. Prajwal Ritti, who first noticed the find, and his family immediately handed the treasure over to the local administration. Following this, the Karnataka government constituted a five-member Treasure Evaluation Committee, led by archaeologist H.S. Krishna Murthy, to assess the age and nature of the artefacts.

Features

- **The Discovery:** A copper vessel containing approximately 466 grams of gold ornaments was unearthed during house construction.
- **Estimation of Age:** The committee, after verifying the size and design, estimated the ornaments to be from the Vijayanagara Empire period, making them 500-600 years old.
- **Distinctive Design:** The ornaments feature motifs such as lion faces and keertimukha. The experts noted that such designs were not meant for common use but were likely crafted for offering to a female deity in a temple.
- **Composition and Value:** The gold ornaments are inlaid with pearls, emeralds, and blue sapphires. The committee estimated the current market value of the gold alone at ₹80 lakh, but declared the total value to be ten times that amount (approximately ₹8 crore) due to their antiquity and historical significance.

Challenges

- **Preservation and Conservation:** The primary challenge for the archaeological department will be to properly conserve these delicate 500-year-old ornaments, ensuring they do not deteriorate further.
- **Legal and Ownership Questions:** Treasure trove laws will likely come into play. The legal process will need to determine the final disposition of the treasure—whether it will be kept by the state, returned to the finders (the Ritti family), or housed in a museum.
- **Lack of Specialised Museums:** There is a challenge in displaying such unique artefacts in a way that tells their story. Lakkundi itself is a historical treasure trove (known for its temples and stepwells), and this find underscores the need for a local museum to house and interpret such discoveries for the public and researchers.
- **Preventing Similar Unreported Finds:** This incident highlights the possibility that many historical artefacts lie buried and are discovered accidentally. Ensuring that future finders, like the Ritti family, are encouraged to report them rather than sell them illegally is an ongoing challenge.

Way Forward

- **Official Documentation and Publication:** The Treasure Evaluation Committee should publish a detailed report with photographs and analysis of the ornaments for the benefit of historians, art scholars, and the public.
- **Museum Display:** The government should consider displaying these unique artefacts in a museum. Given Lakkundi's historical importance, establishing a site museum there would be the most appropriate way to showcase the treasure in its geographical and historical context.
- **Reward and Recognition for Finders:** The honest act of Prajwal Ritti and his family in handing over the treasure to the administration should be formally recognised and rewarded, as per the law. This sets a positive precedent for others.
- **Public Awareness:** Creating awareness about the Treasure Trove Act and the importance of reporting historical finds can help protect the nation's rich cultural heritage.

Conclusion

The discovery of the 500-year-old gold ornaments in Lakkundi is a remarkable window into the region's glorious past during the Vijayanagara Empire. The ornaments' unique designs, intended for a deity, offer valuable insight into the artistic and religious practices of the time. The honest response of the Ritti family and the swift action of the state government in forming an evaluation committee are commendable. The challenge now lies in preserving, studying, and displaying this treasure in a manner that honours its historical and cultural significance, ensuring that this accidental find enriches the collective heritage of Karnataka and India for generations to come.

4. New EPS rules leave out the clause on higher pension

Why in the News?

The Employees' Provident Fund Organisation (EPFO) Central Board of Trustees' approval of the new Employees' Pension Scheme (EPS), 2026, is significant news because it directly impacts the future pensions of millions of organised sector workers in India. The key point of contention and newsworthiness is the omission of a clause related to higher pension on salaries exceeding the statutory wage ceiling. This comes just a few years after a Supreme Court verdict in 2022 that had provided a window for employees to claim such higher pensions under the old scheme, making its absence in the new rules a major point of debate.

Background

The Employees' Pension Scheme (EPS) of 1995 has historically had a wage ceiling (currently ₹15,000 per month) on which pension contributions are calculated. In 2014, an amendment introduced Paragraph 11(4), which gave employers and employees a one-time, one-year window to jointly opt for a pension on actual, higher salaries by contributing more. However, due to administrative confusion and interpretation issues regarding the deadline, many eligible employees could not apply. This led to litigation, culminating in a Supreme Court verdict in November 2022 that allowed affected employees an extended window to apply for a higher pension. The current development is driven by the need to align the EPS with the new Code on Social Security, 2020, which came into force in late 2023, necessitating a complete overhaul of the old 1995 scheme.



Features

- **Omission of the Higher Pension Clause:** The new EPS-2026 draft has omitted Paragraph 11(4), the clause that provided the option for pension on higher salaries. The EPFO Board has officially termed this clause "obsolete."

- **Retention in Provident Fund Rules:** Interestingly, while the Pension Scheme omits the clause, the accompanying new Employees Provident Funds Scheme rules (Para 9(iv)) retain a provision. It allows an employee and employer to make a joint request for the employee to contribute to the provident fund from wages exceeding the ceiling.
- **Voluntary Contributions:** Paragraph 19 of the new rules allows for "additional voluntary contribution" by employees, but crucially, employers are under "no obligation" to match this.
- **Supreme Court Compliance:** The article notes the implementation status of the 2022 Supreme Court order under the old scheme. Of the 15.24 lakh applications received, most have been processed, with around 1.24 lakh applicants already receiving pension payment orders for higher pensions.

Challenges

- **Conflict with Judicial Precedent:** The biggest challenge is the apparent disconnect between the new rules and the spirit of the Supreme Court's 2022 judgment. While the court created a pathway for higher pensions under the old scheme, the new scheme seems to close that door entirely for future contributions.
- **Actuarial Deficit Concerns:** The EPFO has historically argued that allowing higher pensions for all high-wage earners creates a "reverse subsidy" (where lower-wage earners subsidise higher-wage earners) and puts an unsustainable strain on the pension fund's actuarial balance. This remains a core challenge in designing a financially viable scheme.
- **Confusion for Employees:** The mixed messaging, omitting the clause from the pension scheme but retaining a similar option in the provident fund rules, is likely to cause confusion among employees about their actual ability to secure a higher pension in the future.
- **Employer Discretion:** The new voluntary contribution clause, where employers are not obligated to match funds, places the entire burden of saving for a higher pension on the employee, which may not be feasible for many.

Way Forward

- **Clarity from the Government:** The government and EPFO must issue clear clarifications on how employees can secure higher pensions under the new EPS-2026, especially given the retained provision in the PF rules. The distinction between PF contributions (which are lump-sum savings) and pension contributions (which provide a monthly income) must be explained.
- **Judicial Scrutiny:** Given the sensitive nature of social security and the recent Supreme Court intervention, the omission of the clause may face legal challenges. The government must be prepared to defend the financial rationale behind the new structure.
- **Stakeholder Consultations:** The government should engage with trade unions and employer organisations to build a consensus on a sustainable model for higher pensions that protects both the workers' future and the fund's health.
- **Transparent Communication:** A massive awareness campaign is needed to educate the workforce about their options, rights, and the long-term implications of their contribution choices under the new scheme.

Conclusion

The approval of the EPS-2026 marks a significant overhaul of India's social security framework for organised workers. However, the omission of the clause allowing for pension on higher salaries, so soon after the Supreme Court affirmed this right for many, creates a complex and potentially contentious situation. While the government's intent may be to ensure the financial sustainability of the pension fund by avoiding an "anomaly" of reverse subsidy, it must balance this with the legitimate

aspirations of employees for a dignified retirement. The coming months will require careful navigation, transparent communication, and possibly legal clarification to ensure that the new scheme is both financially sound and socially just.

5. Holding up half the sky on India's farms

Why in the News?

The issue of women farmers in India has gained renewed attention following the celebration of International Women's Day (March 8) and the declaration of the International Year of the Woman Farmer by the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO). The occasion highlighted the critical yet undervalued role of women in India's agricultural economy, particularly the lack of recognition, low wages, and limited ownership of productive assets despite their large participation in farming and allied activities.



Background

Agriculture remains the backbone of rural livelihoods in India, employing a significant share of the workforce. Women have historically been involved in agricultural activities such as crop cultivation, livestock rearing, and wage labour, often alongside household responsibilities. However, women's contribution has largely remained invisible in official statistics due to the informal nature of rural work. Activities such as animal care, fodder collection, post-harvest processing, and farm management are often considered part of household work rather than economic activity. Recent labour force surveys show a rise in rural women's workforce participation from 35% in 2011-12 to 46.5% in 2023-24, yet this figure remains below global averages. The rise is primarily driven by self-employment in agriculture, reflecting limited opportunities for regular wage employment.

Features

Large Presence of Women in Agriculture

- Women constitute nearly half of India's agricultural workforce, with about 117.6 million women working in agriculture in 2023-24.

Dominance of Self-Employment

- A major proportion of women workers are self-employed farmers or unpaid family workers, rising from 60% in 2011-12 to 73% in 2023-24.

Significant Role in Crop Cultivation

- Village-level surveys show that women contribute one-third to more than half of the labour used in crop cultivation, depending on the region.

Central Role in Livestock Sector

- Livestock rearing is one of the fastest-growing agricultural sectors, and women perform most of the daily tasks, such as feeding, cleaning, and milking animals.

Increasing Feminisation of Agricultural Labour

- Women agricultural workers now exceed male workers in hired agricultural labour, indicating a structural shift in rural labour markets.

Challenges

Undercounting of Women Workers

- Official surveys often fail to capture women's work because much of it is home-based, seasonal, unpaid, or mixed with domestic responsibilities.

Low and Stagnant Wages

- Women agricultural workers typically earn significantly lower wages than men, often below ₹300 per day in many regions.

Gender Wage Gap

- In several areas, women's wages are less than half of male wages, highlighting persistent gender discrimination in rural labour markets.

Limited Land Ownership

- Only around 10% of rural women own agricultural land, restricting their access to credit, government schemes, and decision-making power.

Low Earnings from Livestock Activities

- Although women dominate livestock work, the implicit earnings from animal rearing are extremely low, sometimes around ₹100 per day.

Lack of Social Protection

- Most women agricultural workers remain outside formal labour protections, insurance coverage, and institutional support systems.

Way Forward

Improve Data Collection

- Gender-disaggregated data on agricultural labour and family labour should be collected to accurately capture women's economic contribution.

Promote Land Rights for Women

- Policies should encourage joint land titles and inheritance rights for women farmers to improve access to credit and government schemes.

Ensure Equal Wages

- Strict implementation of equal wage laws and minimum wage standards is necessary to reduce the gender wage gap.

Strengthen Institutional Support

- Women farmers should receive better access to credit, agricultural extension services, training, and technology.

Expand Social Security

- Extending health insurance, pension schemes, and labour protections to women agricultural workers would improve their economic security.

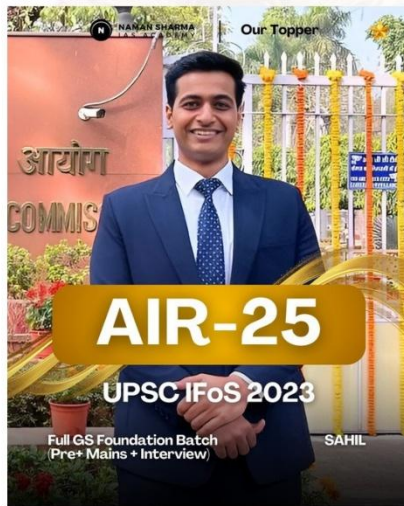
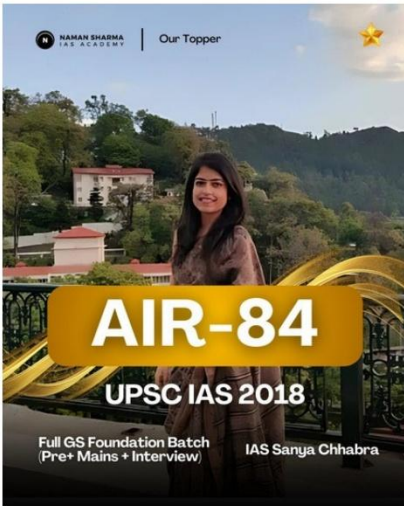
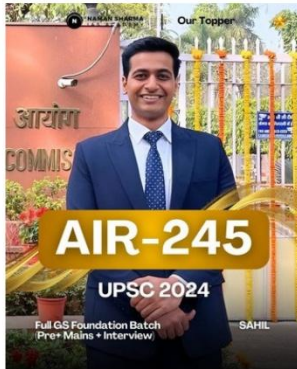
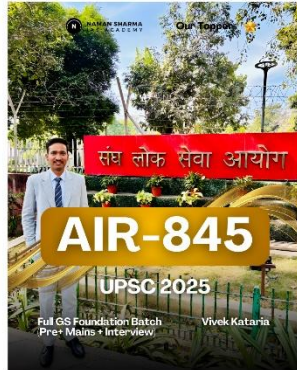
Recognise Women as Farmers

- Policy frameworks should formally recognise women as "farmers" rather than merely agricultural labourers or helpers, ensuring they benefit from agricultural schemes.

Conclusion

Women play a central role in sustaining India's agricultural economy, contributing significantly to crop cultivation, livestock management, and rural labour markets. Despite this vital role, they remain undervalued, underpaid, and undercounted. Ensuring gender equality in agriculture through better recognition, fair wages, asset ownership, and institutional support is essential for inclusive rural development and sustainable agricultural growth in India.

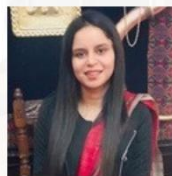
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