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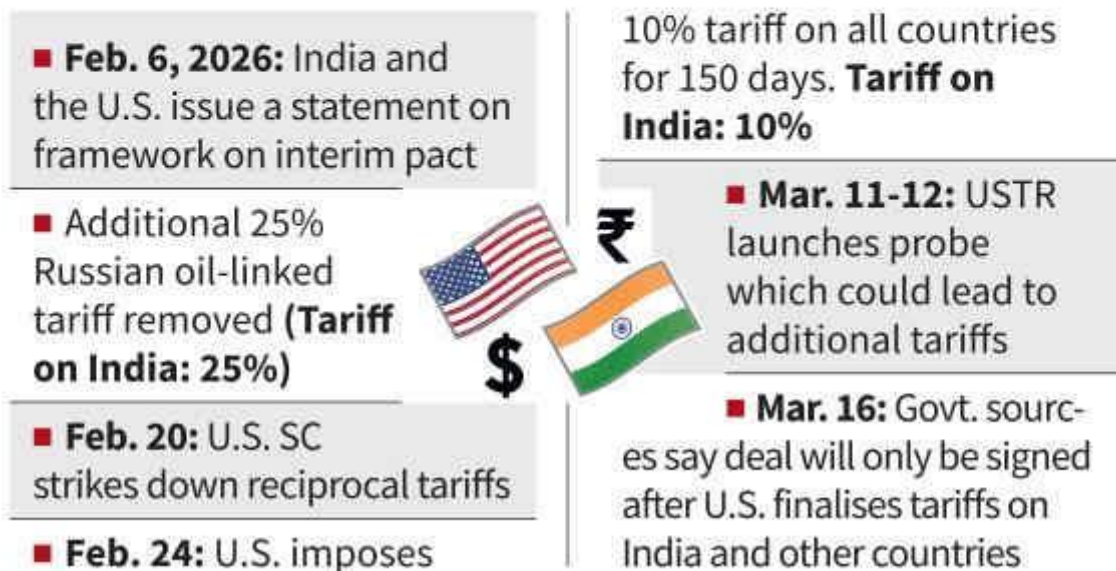
1. India to sign U.S. deal only after clarity on rates

Why in the news?

India has decided to postpone the signing of a bilateral trade deal with the U.S., despite a joint announcement in early February 2026 that the agreement would be finalised in March. The delay is attributed to a rapidly shifting U.S. tariff landscape, which has been upended by a Supreme Court ruling and new investigations, making the original terms of the deal uncertain.

Tariff travails

In 2025, U.S. imposed 25% reciprocal tariffs on India. An additional 25% linked to import of Russian oil was later imposed taking total tariffs to 50%. A timeline of events thereafter:



Background

- **The Announced Deal:** On February 2, 2026, India and the U.S. announced a trade deal. Under the framework, the U.S. was set to impose an 18% tariff on most Indian goods.
- **The Concession:** A key Indian win in this deal was the removal of 25% additional tariffs that the U.S. had previously imposed on certain Indian exports. These tariffs were originally linked to India's imports of Russian oil following the conflict in West Asia.
- **The U.S. Legal Shift:** The primary reason for the delay is a U.S. Supreme Court ruling on February 20, 2026. The court struck down President Trump's use of the International Emergency Economic Powers Act (IEEPA) to levy "reciprocal tariffs" on trade partners. This ruling invalidated the tariff structure under which the India-U.S. deal was negotiated.
- **The New U.S. Tariff Regime:** In response to the ruling, the U.S. pivoted. It imposed a universal 10% tariff on all trade partners under a different law (Section 122 of the Trade Act, 1974) for 150 days. Furthermore, on March 11-12, the U.S. launched two new investigations under Section 301 of the same Act, which could lead to additional, country-specific tariffs.

Challenge

The core challenge is the "moving target" of U.S. tariff policy. The deal India initially agreed to was based on a tariff structure that no longer legally exists. The new U.S. approach, combining a flat 10% tariff with the potential for additional Section 301 tariffs, creates massive uncertainty. India cannot sign a deal until it understands the final tariff rates it will face and, crucially, how those rates compare to those imposed on its competitors (like Vietnam or Bangladesh). Signing now risks locking India into a less competitive position if the U.S. eventually gives other countries better terms.

Way Forward

- **Wait for Clarity:** The Indian government's stated strategy is to wait until the U.S. finalises its "tariff architecture." India wants to see the final rates applied to all countries before finalising its own preferential rate.
- **Comparative Advantage:** New Delhi insists that any deal must be weighed against the tariff structure offered to competitors. The principle is simple: if India's competitors end up with a 22% tariff and India has 18%, India wins. But if competitors get 10% and India gets 18%, India loses.
- **Continued Engagement:** Despite the delay, Commerce Secretary Rajesh Agrawal emphasised that India is still actively engaged in negotiations with the U.S. to ensure the final agreement is "mutually beneficial."

Conclusion

The India-U.S. trade deal is in a state of flux, not due to a breakdown in bilateral relations, but because the entire legal framework for U.S. tariffs was dismantled by the Supreme Court. India is taking a cautious, pragmatic approach by hitting the pause button. It is waiting for the U.S. to settle its own internal trade policy before finalising a deal. This ensures that the agreement, once signed, secures the best possible market access for Indian goods relative to global competitors, rather than being based on a now-defunct tariff regime.

2. Naval warships escort Indian vessels from Gulf of Oman

Why in the news?

The Indian Navy has deployed warships to escort Indian-flagged merchant vessels through the Gulf of Oman following a significant escalation in maritime threats. This comes after the LPG carrier Jag Laadki narrowly escaped an attack while loading at the Fujairah terminal in the UAE. Three vessels-Shivalik, Nanda Devi, and Jag Laadki-have successfully been escorted to safety, highlighting the immediate danger to commercial shipping in the region.

Background

- **The Region:** The area of operations is the Gulf of Oman, located east of the strategic Strait of Hormuz. While much focus is often on the Persian Gulf west of the strait, the eastern waters have also become a flashpoint for attacks on shipping.
- **The Assets:** The Indian Navy is utilising assets deployed under Operation Sankalp. Launched in June 2019, this mission is specifically designed to safeguard Indian-flagged merchant vessels and protect national maritime interests in the volatile Gulf region. It has been active since the era of Houthi attacks in the Red Sea.

The Vessels:

- **Jag Laadki:** A crude oil carrier that loaded more than 80,000 tonnes of crude at Fujairah. It had a narrow escape as the terminal itself was attacked while it was berthed.
- **Shivalik:** An LPG carrier that reached Mundra Port on Monday, carrying 46,000 tonnes of cargo.
- **Nanda Devi:** Another LPG carrier is expected to arrive at Kandla port on Tuesday, carrying a similar amount.
- **Cumulative Impact:** Together, the three vessels are carrying 92,172 tonnes of LPG and crude, underscoring the strategic importance of securing these supply lines.



Challenge

The primary challenge is the persistent threat to Indian shipping assets and energy security. Official sources confirmed that 22 Indian-flagged ships are currently stranded west of the Strait of Hormuz, unable to transit safely without naval escort. While the government assures that domestic LPG supply to consumers remains uninterrupted, the situation puts immense pressure on supply chains. The Joint Secretary at the Ministry of Petroleum noted that cooking gas remains an "issue of concern," even though no distributor "dry out" has been reported.

Way Forward

- **Continued Escort:** The government has committed to continuing naval escorts for Indian merchant ships as long as the threat persists.
- **Prioritised Logistics:** At the administrative level, the Ministry of Shipping has arranged for priority berthing and expedited documentation at ports like Mundra and Kandla to ensure that once the ships arrive, the cargo is discharged and moved into the supply chain without delay.
- **Domestic Buffer:** To reduce reliance on risky imports, officials noted that domestic LPG production has increased by 36% since the supply maintenance order was issued, helping to cushion the impact of any potential disruption.

Conclusion

The Indian Navy's escort mission is a clear signal of New Delhi's commitment to protecting its economic assets and energy security in a highly volatile neighbourhood. The safe arrival of vessels like the Shivalik demonstrates operational success, but the fact that over 20 Indian ships remain stranded west of the Strait of Hormuz confirms that the crisis is far from over. By combining naval deterrence with logistical efficiency at home and boosting domestic production, India is adopting a multi-layered approach to navigate the immediate threat while shoring up long-term resilience.

3. ASI allows T.N. Archaeology Dept. to conduct excavations at Keeladi, seven other sites

Why in the news?

The Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) has finally granted permission to the Tamil Nadu State Department of Archaeology (TNSDA) to conduct excavations at eight historical sites across the state. This decision ends a prolonged delay that had threatened the excavation season, with the approval coming just in time for the fieldwork window, which runs from January to July. The most high-profile of these sites is Keeladi, where the 11th phase of excavations will now take place.

Background

- **The Request:** In July 2025, the TNSDA formally sought ASI's approval to excavate multiple sites. These excavations were initially announced in the Tamil Nadu Budget for 2025-26 by Finance Minister Thangam Thennarasu.
- **The Delay:** Despite the request being made last year, the approval was held up for several months. This created significant concern in Tamil Nadu, as the optimal time for archaeological fieldwork in the state is the first half of the year (January to July). The latter half is often disrupted by the monsoon, which can damage trenches and artefacts.
- **The Push:** The delay prompted high-level intervention. Chief Minister M.K. Stalin recently wrote to the Centre, urging immediate clearance, warning that further postponement would mean losing the entire working season.
- **The Approval:** Following the recommendation of an expert committee, the ASI's Exploration and Excavation Section granted permission on March 13, 2026, under the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains Rules, 1959.

The Sites

The TNSDA has been given the green light to excavate at eight locations:

1. Keeladi and its clusters (Sivaganga district)
2. Pattinamarudhur (Thoothukudi district)
3. Karivalamvanthanallur (Tenkasi district)
4. Manikollai (Cuddalore district)
5. Adichanur (Villupuram district)
6. Vellalore (Coimbatore district)
7. Telunganur-Mangadu (Salem district)
8. Nagapattinam

Challenge

The primary challenge is the loss of time. With the approval coming in mid-March, the excavation team has already lost over two months of the ideal working season. The window is now narrow, and the work will have to be executed at a rapid pace to achieve meaningful results before the monsoon sets in. There is also the underlying tension regarding the central-state dynamic in archaeological research, as state departments require ASI permission even to dig on state land, which can lead to bureaucratic delays.

Way Forward

The TNSDA will now mobilise its teams to begin work at the eight sites immediately. Given the compressed timeline, the focus will be on efficient planning and execution to maximise the yield from this season's digs. The 11th phase at Keeladi is particularly significant, as the site has been central to debates about the Sangam era and the Iron Age in South India. Archaeologists will be hoping to uncover more evidence that can help date the civilization and establish its cultural and trade linkages.

ASI allows T.N. Archaeology Dept. to conduct excavations at Keeladi, seven other sites

N. Sai Charan
CHENNAI

After a delay of several months, the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) has granted permission to the Tamil Nadu State Department of Archaeology (TNSDA) for conducting excavations at eight historical sites, including the 11th phase of excavations at Keeladi.

According to officials, the approval has been given for excavations at Keeladi and its clusters in Sivaganga district; Pattinamarudhur in Thoothukudi district; Karivalamvanthanallur in Tenkasi district; Manikollai in Cuddalore district; Adichanur in Villupuram district; Vellalore in Coimbatore district; Telunganur-Mangadu in Salem district; and Nagapattinam.

Following the recommendation of an expert



The approval has been given to conduct excavations at Keeladi and its clusters in Sivaganga district, among other sites. FILE PHOTO

committee, the Exploration and Excavation Section of the ASI granted the permission on March 13 under the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains Rules, 1959.

In July 2025, the TNSDA sought the ASI's approval for excavations at these sites, which were announced by Finance Minister Thangam Thennarasu in the Tamil Nadu Budget for

2025-26. Following delays, Tamil Nadu officials wrote to the ASI, as the excavation season runs from January to July in the State.

Centre's nod sought

Recently, Chief Minister M.K. Stalin also urged the Centre to grant the approval at the earliest, stating that the monsoon would disrupt fieldwork in the second half of the year.

Conclusion

The ASI's approval, though delayed, has unlocked a crucial archaeological season for Tamil Nadu. By granting permission for eight sites simultaneously, including the next phase at the famed Keeladi site, the state archaeology department has a massive opportunity to deepen our understanding of the region's ancient past. The coming months will be a race against time and weather, but they hold the potential for significant discoveries that could reshape historical narratives of the Indian subcontinent.

4. Crab in Silent Valley found displaying both male and female biological traits

Why in the News?

A tiny freshwater crab discovered in Kerala's Silent Valley National Park has made news because it is a gynandromorph, meaning it exhibits both male and female biological traits simultaneously. This condition has never before been reported in the Gecarcinucidae family of freshwater crabs, making it a first-of-its-kind discovery for this group. The findings have been published in the international journal *Crustaceana*.

Background

- **The Species:** The crab belongs to *Vela carli*, an endemic freshwater crab species found exclusively in the forests and streams of the Central Western Ghats.
- **The Phenomenon:** The condition is known as gynandromorphy, a rare biological phenomenon where an organism displays both male and female physical characteristics. In these crabs, the body exhibited male reproductive structures alongside female features like gonopores (the openings for reproduction).
- **The Discovery:** Researchers found three crabs with this dual-sex condition living in tree holes within the Silent Valley National Park.
- **The Research Team:** The study was conducted by K.S. Anoop Das and K.T. Fahis from MES Mampad College, in collaboration with scientist Sameer K. Pati and Purnima Kumari from the Zoological Survey of India.



Feature

The key feature of this news is its scientific rarity. While gynandromorphy has been documented in other marine and freshwater crab families, this marks the first recorded instance in the family Gecarcinucidae. This expands the scientific understanding of developmental biology and sexual differentiation within crustaceans, highlighting that such anomalies can occur even in highly specific and evolutionarily distinct lineages like those in the Western Ghats.

Challenge

The primary scientific challenge is understanding the cause and prevalence of this condition. The discovery raises several questions:

- Is this a random genetic mutation, a developmental anomaly, or a result of environmental factors within the Silent Valley ecosystem?
- How does this condition affect the crab's behavior, survival, and ability to reproduce?
- Are these three crabs isolated cases, or does gynandromorphy occur more frequently in *Vela carli* populations than previously unnoticed?

Way Forward

Moving forward, researchers will likely need to:

- **Conduct Further Study:** Initiate long-term monitoring of the *Vela carli* population in Silent Valley to determine if more gynandromorphs exist.
- **Genetic Analysis:** Perform detailed genetic and histological studies to understand the cellular mechanisms that caused this dual-sex development.
- **Ecological Impact Assessment:** Study the ecological role and breeding capabilities of these crabs to see if they contribute to the gene pool or if the condition renders them sterile.
- **Habitat Protection:** Continue to protect the fragile evergreen forest habitat of Silent Valley, as endemic species with rare biological traits are highly sensitive to environmental changes.

Conclusion

The discovery of a gynandromorphic crab in Silent Valley is a landmark finding for carcinology (the study of crabs) and evolutionary biology. It underscores the incredible biodiversity of the Western Ghats and proves that even in well-studied animal groups, nature can still present unique and surprising phenomena. This finding not only adds a new chapter to the study of the Gecarcinucidae family but also highlights the importance of conserving pristine habitats like Silent Valley, which continue to harbor such biological secrets.

5. Sahitya Akademi announces awards for 2025 in 24 languages

Why in the News?

The Sahitya Akademi has officially announced its prestigious literary awards for 2025 across 24 languages. The announcement is particularly newsworthy because it comes nearly three months after the process was abruptly halted following a directive from the Union Culture Ministry, which cited a need for the "restructuring" of the awards.

Background

- **The Institution:** The Sahitya Akademi (India's National Academy of Letters) is the country's central literary body, and its annual awards are among the highest recognitions for Indian writers.
- **The Delay:** The award process was originally scheduled for an announcement in December 2024. However, a last-minute directive from the Union Culture Ministry led to the cancellation of the press conference, putting the entire process on hold for several months.
- **The 2025 Awards:** Despite the delay, the Akademi has now named the winners in 24 languages. The list includes works in various genres, with eight books of poetry, four novels, six books of short stories, two essays, one work of literary criticism, one autobiography, and two memoirs being recognized.

Feature

The 2025 list features a diverse range of established and celebrated authors:

- **English:** Former diplomat Navtej Sarna won for his novel *Crimson Spring*.
- **Hindi:** Renowned writer Mamta Kalia was awarded for her memoir *Jeete Jee Allahabad*.
- **Tamil:** Sa Tamilselvan won in the literary criticism category for *Thamizh Sirukathaiyin Thadangal*.

Other Languages:

- Prasun Bandyopadhyay (Bengali) for *Shrestha Kabita*.
- Yogesh Vaidya (Gujarati) for *Bhattkhadaki*.
- Amresh Nugadoni (Kannada) for *Dada Seerisu Tande*.
- N. Prabhakaran (Malayalam) for *Maayamanushyar*.
- Raju Baviskar (Marathi) for *Kalyanilya Resha*.
- Jinder (Punjabi) for *Safety Kit*.
- Jitender Kumar Soni (Rajasthani) for *Bharkhama*.

Challenge

The central challenge highlighted by this news is the tension between institutional autonomy and government oversight. The three-month delay caused by the Ministry's intervention raises questions about the independence of cultural and literary bodies in India. The abrupt halt to the process created uncertainty for writers and raised concerns within the literary community about potential censorship or pressure, even though the awards were eventually announced without any reported changes to the selections.

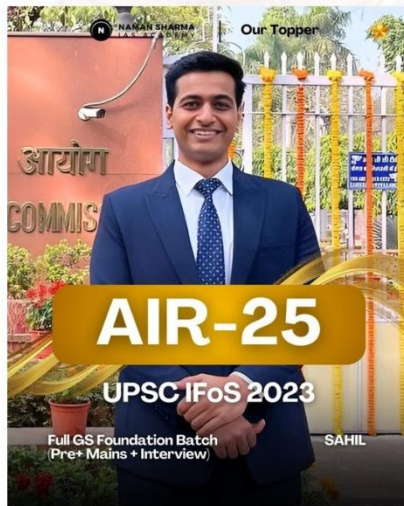
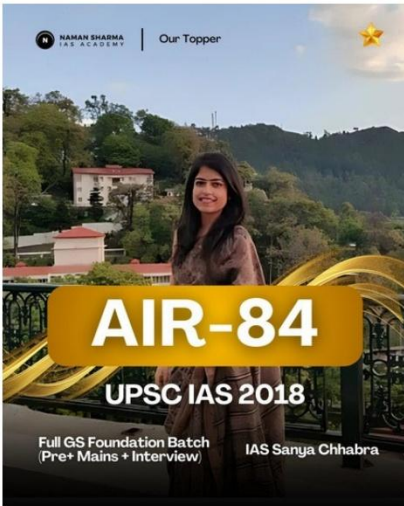
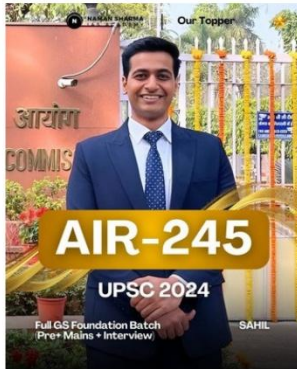
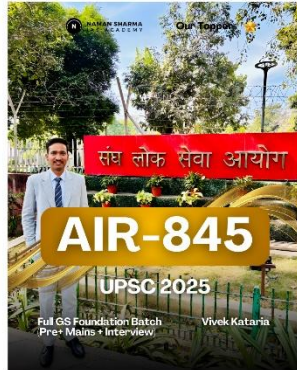
Way Forward

- **Clarity on "Restructuring":** To prevent future controversies, the government and the Akademi need to provide clarity on what the proposed "restructuring" of the awards entails and whether it will affect future selections.
- **Rebuilding Trust:** The Akademi must work to reassure the literary community that the award process remains free, fair, and independent of external pressures.
- **Smooth Conduct of Ceremony:** The immediate way forward is the successful conduct of the awards ceremony on March 31, where the winners will be felicitated with a copper plaque, a shawl, and a cash prize of ₹1 lakh.

Conclusion

The announcement of the Sahitya Akademi Awards 2025 brings a sense of resolution to a period of uncertainty. While the literary world celebrates the deserving winners, including Navtej Sarna and Mamta Kalia, the controversy surrounding the delay serves as a reminder of the delicate balance between government administration and the autonomy of cultural institutions. The event on March 31 will not only honor literary excellence but also hopefully mark the restoration of normalcy to one of India's most important literary traditions.

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