

## IMPORTANT NEWS

### Maldives Suspends Three Ministers Following Controversial Remarks Against PM Modi and Indians

#### Inside Story of the News:

Amidst growing tensions and the escalating potential for a diplomatic dispute, President Mohamed Muizzu's Maldives government, known for its 'India Out' electoral campaign, took swift action on Sunday by **immediately suspending three ministers—Mariyam Shiuna, Malsha Shareef, and Mahzoom Majid**.

- The government distanced itself from the ministers' comments, arising from a social media spat comparing Lakshadweep and Maldives after PM Modi's Lakshadweep visit.

#### Social Media Controversy:

- Maldivian social media users accused India of competing for tropical vacationers, triggering racist remarks against Indian tourists.
- The Maldives government took swift action against ministers involved and condemned the offensive statements.

#### Lakshadweep Overview:

- India's smallest Union Territory, Lakshadweep, comprises 36 islands covering 32 sq km.
- Kavaratti serves as the capital and is the sole town in the union territory.
- The population, predominantly Muslim, speaks Malayalam, except for Minicoy, where Mahl is spoken.
- Lakshadweep's economy relies on fishing, coconut cultivation, coir twisting, and emerging tourism.

#### Maldives' Tourism Dependency:

- Tourism constitutes over 28% of the Maldives' GDP, emphasizing its economic reliance on the industry.
- In 2023, Indian tourists formed the largest group, exceeding 200,000 travelers, followed by Russian and Chinese tourists.
- These developments underscore the delicate balance between diplomatic relations, regional comparisons, and the crucial role of tourism in the Maldives' economic landscape.

## Supreme Court Cancels Release of Convicts in the Bilkis Rape-Murder Case

### Inside Story of the News:

The Supreme Court has invalidated the remission granted by the Gujarat government to 11 convicts, currently released, in the Bilkis Bano case. The apex court has instructed these convicts to surrender to jail authorities within a two-week timeframe.

- Remission is the complete termination of a sentence at a reduced point.
  - It differs from furlough and parole, as it constitutes a reduction in sentence rather than a temporary break from prison life.
- **Article 72** grants the President the authority to pardon, reprieve, respite, or remit punishment.
  - This includes the power to suspend, remit, or commute the sentence for offenses under court martial, offenses against laws within the Union's executive power, and cases involving a death sentence.
- **Article 161** empowers Governors to grant pardons, reprieves, respites, remissions of punishment, or suspend, remit, or commute sentences.
- **Section 432** allows the 'appropriate government' to suspend or remit a sentence wholly or partly, with or without conditions.
- **Section 433** permits the commutation of any sentence to a lesser one by the appropriate government.
- This authority, vested in state governments, facilitates the premature release of prisoners.

### Bilkis Bano Case Overview:

- Bilkis Bano and her family were assaulted, resulting in her brutal gangrape and the murder of seven family members.
- The National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) and Supreme Court intervened, leading to a CBI investigation.
- Due to death threats, the trial was relocated from Gujarat to Mumbai, where charges were filed.
- In January 2008, a special CBI court in Mumbai sentenced the 11 accused to life imprisonment.
- In 2022, Radheshyam Shah, one of the convicts, sought early release after serving 15 years and four months.
  - This led to the Gujarat government's remission decision on August 15, 2022.
- Public outcry and opposition petitions followed.
  - This prompted Bilkis Bano to appeal to the Supreme Court for a review of the Gujarat government's decision.
- The current judgment responds to Bilkis Bano's review petition, nullifying the release under remission.
  - It also directs the convicts to surrender within two weeks.

## The Government Puts Project Tiger, Now 50, in a Difficult Situation

### Inside Story of the News:

Initiated in 1973, **Project Tiger marked the inception of Tiger Reserves in India**, elevating their status significantly.

- The Wildlife (Protection) Act (WLPA) of 1972 established 'National Parks' within notified forests.

### Project Tiger's Objectives:

- Project Tiger focuses on an exclusive tiger-centric agenda in core areas of reserves and an inclusive, people-oriented approach in the buffer zones.
- In response to concerns raised in 2005, a 5-member 'Tiger Task Force' was appointed,
- It leads to the establishment of the National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA) and a statutory category for Tiger Reserves in 2006.

### Success of Tiger Reserves:

- Tiger Reserves are now recognized globally as India's environmental success story.
  - They have expanded from 9 reserves in 1973 to 54 in 18 states, covering 78,135.9 sq. km, which constitutes 2.38% of India's land area.
- Critical Tiger Habitats (CTHs) encompass 42,913.37 sq. km, constituting 26% of the area under National Parks and Wildlife Sanctuaries.
- The Tiger Census 2022 reported a population of 3,167-3,925 tigers, growing at 6.1% annually, positioning India as home to 3/4th of the world's tigers.

### Challenges in Conservation:

- The 'fortress conservation' approach in buffer zones led to displacement of communities coexisting with tigers, contributing to a rise in man-wildlife conflicts.
- Legal provisions such as WLPA, Forest Rights Act (FRA), and Land Acquisition Act require consent and proper rehabilitation for relocation, but implementation falls short.

### Concerns and Future Outlook:

- Despite efforts, India's tiger landscape may become a hotspot for conflict due to increased tiger population, reserves, and corridors.
- Existing laws mandate voluntary and mutually agreed relocations, but practical implementation lacks adherence to the spirit of the legislation.
- Ensuring proper compensation and livelihoods for relocated communities, as outlined in the Land Acquisition Act, remains a challenge.
- The journey of Project Tiger reflects both achievements and challenges, highlighting the delicate balance required for effective wildlife conservation and human coexistence.

## PM Modi Visits Mumbai to Inaugurate Atal Setu, India's Longest Sea Bridge

### Inside Story of the News:

After more than seven years since its foundation was laid, **Prime Minister Narendra Modi is set to inaugurate the Mumbai Trans Harbour Link (MTHL)** during his day-long visit to Maharashtra on Friday. **The MTHL, spanning 22 kilometers, stands as the country's longest sea bridge.**

- The MTHL is a twin-carriageway six-lane bridge covering a length of 22 kilometers over the Thane Creek in the Arabian Sea.
- It links Sewri in the island city of Mumbai to Chirle in Raigad district on the mainland.
- Comprising a 16.5 km sea link and viaducts on land at both ends, totaling 5.5 km, the project aims to enhance connectivity in the Mumbai Metropolitan Region.
- This encompasses Mumbai, Thane, Palghar, and Raigad districts, thereby fostering economic development.
- Originally proposed in 1963 by Wilbur Smith Associates, an American construction consultancy firm, the project saw a revival in the late 90s, with the first tenders floated in 2006.
- In 2008, Reliance Infrastructure, led by Anil Ambani, emerged as the preferred bidder.
- They committed to build and recover the then Rs 6,000 crore bridge cost through a PPP model over a decade.
- However, Ambani withdrew from the project shortly thereafter.
- Prime Minister Modi laid the foundation stone in December 2016, and the deal and tendering were finalized in December 2017.
- Construction commenced in early 2018, with a total expenditure of Rs 21,200 crore, including a Rs 15,100 crore loan from JICA.
- The challenging marine portion construction required digging as deep as 47 meters into the seabed to provide a robust foundation for the bridge's massive girders and deck.
- Proximity to sensitive establishments like ONGC, JNPT, and BARC added complexity, necessitating precautions to avoid damage to underwater installations.
- The MTHL is anticipated to reduce travel time between Sewri and Chirle from the current 61 minutes to less than 16 minutes, alleviating congestion on the existing Vashi bridge route.
- Expected to enhance economic integration of Navi Mumbai with Mumbai, the project's benefits will extend to areas such as Panvel, Alibaug, Pune, and Goa.
- It will significantly improve connectivity to the Navi Mumbai International Airport, Mumbai Pune Expressway, Mumbai-Goa Highway, and the hinterland in general.
- Additionally, the MTHL will offer improved access to Jawaharlal Nehru Port, playing a pivotal role in regional connectivity and development.

## India to Host Global Conference on Pulses After 18 Years

### Inside Story of the News:

Various representatives of governments, as well as commercial and nonprofit organisations involved in the production and processing of pulses, will attend the Global Pulse Convention to be held in New Delhi in February.

- Pulses are annual leguminous crops yielding between one and 12 grains or seeds of variable size, shape and color within a pod, used for both food and feed.
- The term “pulses” is limited to crops harvested solely for dry grain, thereby excluding crops harvested green for food, which are classified as vegetable crops.

- Besides serving as an important source of protein for a large portion of the global population, pulses contribute to healthy soils and climate change mitigation through their nitrogen-fixing properties.
- Bengal Gram (Desi Chick Pea / Desi Chana), Pigeon Peas (Arhar / Toor / Red Gram), Green Beans (Moong Beans), Chick Peas (Kabuli Chana), Black Matpe (Urad / Mah / Black Gram), Red Kidney Beans (Rajma), Black Eyed Peas (Lobiya), Lentils (Masoor), White Peas (Matar) are major pulses grown and consumed in India.
- Pulse crops are cultivated in Kharif, Rabi and Zaid seasons of the Agricultural year. Rabi crops require mild cold climate during sowing period, during vegetative to pod development cold climate and during maturity / harvesting warm climate. Similarly, Kharif pulse crops require warm climate throughout their life from sowing to harvesting. Summer pulses are habitants of warm climate.
- Seed is required to pass many stages to produce seed like germination, seedling, vegetative, flowering, fruit setting, pod development and grain maturity / harvesting.
- India is the largest producer (25% of global production), consumer (27% of world consumption) and importer (14%) of pulses in the world. Pulses account for around 20 per cent of the area under foodgrains and contribute around 7-10 per cent of the total foodgrains production in the country.
- Though pulses are grown in both Kharif and Rabi seasons, Rabi pulses contribute more than 60 per cent of the total production.
- Gram is the most dominant pulse having a share of around 40 per cent in the total production followed by Tur/Arhar at 15 to 20 per cent and Urad/Black Matpe and Moong at around 8-10 per cent each.
- Department of Agriculture & Farmers Welfare is implementing National Food Security Mission (NFSM)-Pulse.
- It has been launched with the objectives of increasing production through area expansion and productivity enhancement.
- In order to increase the productivity potential of pulses crops in the country, the ICAR is undertaking basic and strategic research on these crops. The idea is to develop location-specific high yielding varieties and match production packages. During 2014-2023, 343 high yielding varieties/hybrids of Pulses have been notified for commercial cultivation in the country.

## Gujarat Unveils India's Oldest Living City

### Inside Story of the News:

An archaeological dig in Vadnagar, Gujarat, has brought to light **evidence of human habitation dating back to 1,400 BCE**, significantly bridging a historical gap in Indian archaeological records between 1,500 BCE and 500 BCE.

- The excavation was conducted by a collaborative team including scientists from IIT Kharagpur, the Archaeological Survey of India, Physical Research Laboratory, Jawaharlal Nehru University, and Deccan College.

- Funding for the study was provided by the Infosys Foundation and the Gujarat government's Directorate of Archaeology & Museums.
- The latter is actively involved in establishing India's first experiential digital museum in Vadnagar.
- The excavation spanned from 2016 to early 2023.
  - The discovery holds historical significance as it reveals a continuous human settlement in India over 5,500 years.
  - Additionally, it addresses a gap in the archaeological history between 1,500 BCE and 500 BCE.
- Notably, no records of an advanced city-like settlement existed before 500 BCE.
- The settlement's estimated age is around 1,400 BCE, aligning with the later phase of the post-urban Harappan period.
- This suggests cultural continuity in India for the past 5,500 years.
- It challenges the notion of a 'Dark Age' during the period between the collapse of the Indus Valley Civilization and the emergence of Iron Age and Mahajanapadas cities.
- The 'Dark Age' is historically considered the time between the decline of the Indus Valley Civilization (early 2nd millennium BCE) and the rise of Iron Age cities like Gandhar, Koshal, and Avanti (6th-5th century BCE).
- Artefacts discovered during the Vadnagar excavation include characteristic archaeological items and potteries.
- Additionally, the findings comprise objects made of copper, gold, silver, and iron, along with intricately designed bangles.
- The study suggests that the rise and fall of different kingdoms over 3,000 years and recurrent invasions by Central Asian warriors were influenced by climatic changes such as rainfall or droughts.
- Radiocarbon dating reveals a succession of rulers in Vadnagar, including
  - Indo-Greeks,
  - Indo-Scythians or Shakas (Kshatrapa kings),
  - Maitrakas (Gupta kingdom),
  - Rashtrakuta-Pratihara-Chawada kings,
  - Solanki kings (Chalukya rule),
  - Sultanate-Mughals, and
  - Gaekwad/British.
- The excavation team infers that cold arid or hyper-arid conditions could have triggered migration from uninhabitable central Asia.
- This offers insights into historical population movements in response to climatic variations.