



# PIB, THE HINDU Newspaper and Editorial Current Affairs

Posted at: 08/05/2019

## **SC turns down Opposition plea for increased VVPAT verification**

### **Why in news?**

The Supreme Court dismissed a plea by 21 Opposition parties, led by Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister N. Chandrababu Naidu, to review its judgment rejecting 50% random physical verification of Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs) using Voter-Verified Paper Audit Trail (VVPAT).

### **For Fool-proof polls:**

- On April 8, a Bench led by Chief Justice Ranjan Gogoi had directed the Election Commission of India (ECI) to increase physical counting of VVPAT slips to five random EVMs in each Assembly segment/constituency.
- Before this April verdict, ECI Guideline 16.6 required physical counting of only one EVM in every Assembly segment/constituency.
- Its April verdict, the court had assured the petitioners, would ensure a 'fool-proof' Lok Sabha polls 2019.
- We asked for 50%, but we can settle for 33% or 25% verification. My Lords had agreed with our plea in principle, but increased the counting from one VVPAT to only five. My Lords had said 50% was not 'viable' at this point of time during the Lok Sabha elections," Mr. Sanghvi submitted.
- Hearing this, Chief Justice Gogoi straightway responded, "We decline to review our order". The court dismissed the review plea
- The Opposition had found the Supreme Court's April 8 verdict a far shot from what it wanted VVPAT verification in 50% or 125 polling

booths in each constituency.

- The physical scrutiny of slips in five EVMs has increased the VVPAT verification percentage from .44% to less than 2%.

### **Mercy of programmers:**

- The review plea contended that Indian democracy could not be left to the mercy of EVM programmers. It pointed to large-scale tampering and selective malfunctioning of EVMs in the Lok Sabha polls of 2019 so far.
  - The earlier judgment had refused delve into the issue of integrity of the EVMs.
  - Instead, the court was more keen on the logistics of physical verification in its April 8 judgment. It had said the VVPAT verification of five EVMs, rather than in 125 polling booths, was far more “viable at this point of time” in the Lok Sabha election season
  - It had added that verification of five EVMs would not be a drain on the EC’s infrastructural resources and manpower as the Opposition’s idea would have been. Neither would counting VVPAT slips of five EVMs take any substantial amount of time, the court had explained.
  - The ECI had said a 50% random physical verification of VVPATs would delay the Lok Sabha poll results by six days.
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## **Have right to copy of Bobde panel report**

### **Why in news?**

If Chief Justice of India Ranjan Gogoi is given a copy of the ‘confidential’ inquiry report, I should be provided with one too, the former Supreme Court staffer wrote to the in-house panel, which found “no substance” in her sexual harassment allegations against the CJI.

### **Right to equality:**

- I have a right to know how, why and on what basis have your Lordships found my complaint to have ‘no substance’,” the complainant urged the Justice S.A. Bobde-led in-house committee.

- The complainant conveyed her shock to the three judges on the committee about how they found no substance in her allegations against the CJI despite filing a detailed affidavit with ample corroborative evidence.
- Copies of the report has been provided to Chief Justice Gogoi and Justice Arun Mishra, the fourth senior most judge in the Supreme Court.
- She said it was “rather strange that the complainant in a case of sexual harassment is not to be provided with a copy of the report which finds her complaint to be without substance”.

### **Woman’s woes:**

- She said the committee has found her allegations to be of no substance without bothering to let her know the reasons for their decision.
- The **Sexual Harassment of Women at the Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013**, in Section 13 provides that both parties have a right to receive a copy of the report.
- Not providing a copy to the complainant while holding her complaint to be unfounded would be a violation of the principles of natural justice and a complete travesty of justice,” her letter said.
- She said the Supreme Court is relying on a judgment which pre-dates the Right to Information (RTI) Act of 2005, which mandates the fundamental right to information.
- A short statement released by the Secretary General of the SC on Monday referred to its **2003 judgment in Indira Jaising versus Supreme Court of India** to justify its decision that in-house procedural rules do not permit the contents of the inquiry report to be made public.

### **Report that cleared CJI must be released:**

- Former Central Information Commissioner Sridhar Acharyulu has called for the public release of the report of the Supreme Court’s in-house inquiry committee, which cleared the Chief Justice of India Ranjan Gogoi of sexual harassment allegations raised by a former woman employee of the court.
- This is a very important issue of transparency and good governance in judiciary,” Mr. Acharyulu said. “Not only must justice be done, it must

also be seen to be done.”

- On Monday, the three-member committee gave a clean chit to Justice Gogoi, saying it “found no substance” in the allegations.
- The court later cited the verdict in a 2003 case of Indira Jaising vs Supreme Court of India to hold that the report “is not liable to be made public.”

### **Concerns:**

- Apart from issues of principles of natural justice, Mr. Acharyulu said the committee’s verdict raised several concerns about information rights as well.
  - Especially when the committee is convinced that there was no substance in allegation, it has a duty to give reasons for their decision and to convince the people in general about the correctness of their conclusion.
  - As per Indira Jaising order, the enquiry into Mysore incident was informal and only to gather some information from colleague judges, but in this case, it is a statutorily mandated inquiry and it is not opinion collection or information gathering.
  - The CJI in this case was not seeking views of peer judges, but three judges constituted a committee to inquire into an allegation against the CJI.
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## **Odisha’s wildlife sanctuaries ravaged by Fani**

### **Why in news?**

Cyclone Fani, packing wind gusts of up to 240 kmph, rendered not only millions of people homeless as it tore along India’s east coast last week, but also dealt a body blow to wildlife and forest resources in the region.

### **Damaged wildlife:**

- On May 3, the storm swept across several wildlife sanctuaries as it crossed the Odisha coastline.
- Once a treat to drive along the tree-lined Marine Drive road that

bisects **the Balukhand Wildlife Sanctuary** adjacent to the Bay of Bengal between Puri and Konark, the sanctuary has been reduced to a wasteland with hardly any tree left untouched by Fani, according to wildlife officials.

- As per eye estimate, the cyclone that tore apart the sanctuary, damaged nearly 55 lakh trees, mostly casuarinas.
- As many as 20% trees were uprooted, while the rest were found bent from the middle. It has left 400 spotted deer homeless.

### **No carcasses found:**

- Apart from **spotted deer**, the sanctuary spread over an area of 87 sq km is home to **wild boar, jackals, striped hyenas, wolves and mongooses**.
  - While the DFO asserted that no carcasses of spotted deer had been sighted, it was hard to imagine that the animals had actually escaped the cyclone's fury.
  - Refreshingly, prior to Fani's landfall, the wildlife division had made announcements requesting people not to harm spotted deer if they strayed into human habitations.
  - In Bhubaneswar, the cyclone had uprooted decades-old trees inside the **Nandankanan Zoological Park**.
  - Several animal enclosures too had been affected. Authorities have shut down the zoo for an indefinite period, keeping in mind the safety of visitors.
  - **Chandaka Wildlife Sanctuary**, which is close by, was hard hit too. Thousands of trees lay uprooted in the sanctuary and authorities are attempting to assess the extent of damage.
  - Hundreds of monkeys have now entered residential colonies in the periphery of Bhubaneswar following the loss of habitat due to trees being uprooted. There have been instances of monkeys attacking people after remaining starved for days.
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## **U.S. to propose hike in H-1B application fee**

### **Why in news?**

The U.S. plans to hike the H-1B visa application fee to increase funding for the expansion of an apprentice programme, Labour Secretary Alexander Acosta has told American lawmakers, a move that would impose additional financial burden on Indian IT companies.

### **Changes:**

- Testifying before a Congressional committee on the annual budget of the Department of Labor for the fiscal year 2020 beginning October 1, 2019, he said that the Labour Department has also made changes to the H-1B application forms to ensure greater transparency and better protect American workers from employers seeking to misuse the programme.
  - Mr. Acosta, however, did not give details of the proposed increase. But given past experience, Indian IT companies, which account for a large number of H-1B applications, are likely to face additional financial burden because of this.
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## **India has overly restrictive market barriers**

### **Why in news?**

While the U.S. is India's largest export destination, India is only the 13th largest for the U.S. due to "overly restrictive market access barriers," U.S. Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross said.

### **Rapid growth:**

- India is already the world's third largest economy, and by 2030, it will become the world's largest consumer market because of the rapid growth of the middle class, Mr. Ross said, while speaking at the Trade Winds conference organised in the national capital.
- Yet, today, **India is only the U.S.'s 13th largest export market**, due to overly restrictive market access barriers," he added.
- Meanwhile, the U.S. is India's largest export market, accounting for something like 20% of the total. There is a real imbalance.



- Mr. Ross went on to say that while American technology and expertise can play an important role to meet India's developmental needs, U.S. companies faced significant market access barriers in India.
- These include **both tariff and non-tariff barriers**, as well as multiple practices and regulations that disadvantage foreign companies, he said.
- India's average applied tariff rate of 13.8%, and that remains the highest of any major world economy. The very highest.
- It has, for example, a 60% tariff on automobiles; it has a 50% on motorcycles; and 150% on alcoholic beverages, Mr. Ross added, highlighting a stress point U.S. President Donald Trump had mentioned several times
- The U.S. Commerce Secretary said that the U.S. was working with the Indian government and the private sector to address the market access issues through the U.S.-India Commercial Dialogue, and the recently re-convened U.S.-India CEO Forum.
- Our goal is to eliminate barriers to U.S. companies, operating here, including data-localisation restrictions that actually weaken data security and increase the cost of doing business," Mr. Ross said.

### **Price controls:**

- Other obstacles include price controls on medical devices and pharmaceuticals, and restrictive tariffs on electronics and telecommunications products," he added.
- Mr. Ross, on Monday, reportedly said that the U.S. would not be able to sell oil to India at lower rates because oil is owned by private players and the U.S. government would not be able to force them to offer concessionary rates.

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## **Govt. refutes report on discom debt levels**

### **Why in news?**

The government has refuted reports that debt levels of power distribution companies (discom) have reached the levels they were at

before the Ujjwal Discom Assurance Yojana (UDAY).

### **Government Stand:**

- The UDAY scheme implemented in 2015 was **aimed at reducing discom debt levels and improving their efficiency.**
  - CRISIL released a report saying that discom debt was set to increase **to pre-UDAY levels of Rs. 2.6 lakh crore by the end of this financial year.**
  - Pre-UDAY debt levels of 16 UDAY states with comprehensive MoUs were to the tune of around Rs. 3.24 lakh crore,” the Ministry of Power said in a statement.
  - Therefore, the prediction that discom debt at around Rs. 2.6 lakh crore would reach pre-UDAY levels is not correct.
  - The Ministry added that the CRISIL analysis perhaps did not take into account the fact that almost about Rs. 85,000 crores of debt was yet to be converted into grants or equity by the participating states as per the UDAY plan.
  - A deeper analysis of discom debt would reveal a tighter fiscal management by discoms,” the government added in the statement.
  - Discoms have managed their finances with around Rs. 40,000 crores less than what was expected under UDAY.”
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## **Road accidents still cause most deaths**

### **Why in news?**

Road accidents are the leading cause of death among people in the 5-29 age-group worldwide with more than **1.35 million lives lost each year and 50 million sustaining injuries**, according to a World Health Organisation (WHO) report released during the on-going global road safety week.

### **India the Topper:**

- But what makes matters worse for India is the fact that since 2008 we



have maintained our dubious distinction of being world number one in road crash deaths.

- In 2015, India became a signatory to the **Brasilia Declaration on Road Safety**, where we committed to **halving road crash deaths by 2020**.
- Forget about halving, we may not even have acknowledged the full scale of the problem in India,” said Piyush Tewari, founder, Save LIFE Foundation.

### Questions data:

- He said that as per the data released by the Indian government, **road crashes kill close to 1,50,000 people each year**.
- However, the WHO global status report on road safety had challenged the numbers and stated that India might be losing over 2,99,000 people each year.
- Road crashes have emerged as the single biggest killer of people in the age group of 15-45. We are in the midst of a major pandemic and the need of the hour is strong political will and leadership to address the issue.
- Simply blaming individual drivers will not help when the existing systems in which they are forced to operate are outdated and rotten.
- Meanwhile, the reasons listed for this trend include **rapid urbanisation, poor safety, lack of enforcement, distracted, influence of drugs or alcohol, speeding and a failure to wear seat-belts or helmets**, according to experts.

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## **Fall armyworm threat to crops in Adilabad**

### **Why in news?**

Agriculture scientists and environmentalists predict that the deadly pest, **fall armyworm** (FAW), could turn out to be a scourge for farmers in former undivided Adilabad district in the coming crop seasons.

### **About FAW:**

- The pestilence, which had primarily attacked **maize crop** in Nirmal and Adilabad districts, had damaged crop to the extent of 90% in some cases and is expected to attack even cotton and soyabean crops.
- It is better to take precautionary and preventive measures before the commencement of sowing in kharif this year.
- Go in for deep ploughing to expose more soil to the sun and avoid staggered sowing.
- If an entire village goes in for sowing within a short time frame, the growth of crop would be uniform and the distribution of the pest will be uniform too, which reduces the crop damage. Also, maize should not be sown until at least 50 mm of rainfall is recorded during the season.
- The scientist also suggested sowing of treated maize seeds and inter-cropping with red gram and use of pheromone traps.

### **Control Methods:**

- There is need for documenting the methods that farmers in Mahbubnagar and Ranga Reddy districts and in some places in Karnataka had used to control FAW.
- Also, instead of using the deadly pesticides recommended for its control without carrying any research, farmers should go in for local solutions.
- In the last season agriculture scientists had deployed some methods of damage-control in maize crop which is cultivated in about 20,000 hectares in erstwhile Adilabad.
- One of the methods, suggested by Food and Agriculture Organisation, was the use of sand and lime mixture in the whorls of the maize plants.

